

# THE INDIAN END OF THE TELESCOPE

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## India and Its Navy

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**F**or thirty years of the Cold War, 1955 to 1985, the United States viewed India as a strategic protégé of the Soviet Union. From the mid-1980s onward, this perception altered. As its economic liberalisation gathered headway, India began to be seen as attractive for U.S. investment. By the 1990s, interaction had

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increased sufficiently to commence discussions on confidence-building measures. After India's nuclear tests in 1998, both sides engaged in a candid dialogue in an attempt to understand and come to terms with each other's core sensitivities. Since then there has been renewed American interest in India and the Indian Navy.

This article presents an overview of the factors that have driven the Indian Navy's development. It also discusses some of the perceptions that other nations have of the Indian Navy and explains how the Navy's development fits into a wider strategic perspective.<sup>1</sup>

## THE INDIAN NAVY'S DEVELOPMENT UNTIL 1971

When India became independent from colonial rule in 1947, after a struggle of nearly a century, it chose not to align with either of the East-West power blocs that were then taking shape. It did decide, however, to become a member of the British Commonwealth. At that time, Britain had a strategic concept for the defence of

the Commonwealth against communism. In pursuance of that concept, the navies of India and other Commonwealth countries were offered reconditioned Second World War warships from Britain's reserve fleet, vessels that were surplus to British requirements.

It was clear that the only way to remedy swiftly the after-effects of the division of the prepartition navy between India and Pakistan was to continue the British connection and obtain whatever was offered and affordable. India acquired a cruiser, some destroyers, and several smaller ships. Over the next few years, India placed orders in Britain for eight new frigates and initiated steps for the creation of a naval air arm and a submarine arm. It also decided to resume construction of warships, starting with frigates. Indian warship-building expertise had languished over the century since the transition from wooden to steel hulls.

By 1962, eight new frigates (mostly antisubmarine), a reconditioned aircraft carrier, and a second cruiser had arrived. Evaluations were still in progress regarding the frigate to be built in India (with European collaboration). There had been no progress on the submarine arm; antisubmarine exercises were being seriously constrained by a lack of submarines with which surface ships could exercise.

At the same time, a boundary dispute with China erupted into hostilities on the northern mountain borders. Indian ground forces suffered serious reverses. The United States responded positively to India's request for urgent military assistance. Pakistan, being an ally of the United States, felt discomfited and, acting on the dictum that "your enemy's enemy can be your friend," sought closer relations with China and to a lesser extent with the Soviet Union, the two countries that the Central Treaty Organization and Southeast Asia Treaty Organization were meant to contain. China responded positively, initiating thereby the Pakistan-China geostrategic alignment in the Indian subcontinent.

The postmortem on the military reverses of 1962 led to the formulation of India's first five-year defence plan. Its basic features were the immediate augmentation of the Army and the Air Force. The Navy, which had played no significant role in the conflict, was to continue its programme of replacing its old ships with newer ones. The Army, entrusted with the defence of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands since 1945, when Japan evacuated them, was relieved of that duty in 1962 by the Navy, to enable the Army to focus on the borders with China. Britain agreed to train a few crews to man a submarine, so as to provide antisubmarine training.

During 1964 defence delegations visited the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain to explore ways of meeting the immediate requirements of India's defence plan. As regards the Navy, the U.S. response was to refer India to its traditional supplier, the United Kingdom. Britain, in turn, regretted that

since it was pruning its own navy, it would not be able to meet India's requirements either for the latest types of destroyers and submarines that the Indian navy wanted or to extend financial support to build in Britain the modern submarines to start India's submarine arm. An agreement was, however, signed for the construction in India, with British collaboration, of two British-designed *Leander*-class frigates. The Soviet Union, in contrast, offered to give the Indian Navy whatever it sought.

Meanwhile, the regional maritime threat was increasing. In 1964, pursuant to the acquisition from the Soviet Union of a large fleet from 1958 onward, there was a sharp rise in Indonesian bellicosity, and intrusions by that nation in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands increased.

In 1965 hostilities erupted with Pakistan on two occasions. In the spring of 1965, Pakistani tanks (received from the United States as part of its military assistance programme) intruded into Indian territory in the Rann of Kutch. The

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memoirs of senior Pakistani officers reveal that the deployment of American-supplied armour in Kutch had two objectives. The first was to entice Indian armour away from northern India, where an attack on Kashmir was

planned for later in the year, and the second was to see how strongly the United States would protest Pakistan's use of tanks it had provided, in clear violation of Pakistan's commitment. The United States did protest, but it was ignored.

The second attack commenced in August. Intruders from Pakistan infiltrated Kashmir to sabotage vital installations, in the expectation of a spontaneous uprising by the local people. There was no uprising. The intruders were apprehended and the plan was revealed. The Indian Army controlled the situation, and Pakistani morale collapsed. To restore spirits, the Pakistani Army itself crossed the international border into Kashmir on 1 September. The Indian Air Force halted the Pakistani tank columns despite fierce battles overhead between the two air forces. Pursuant to India's clear warning to Pakistan, given years earlier and often repeated thereafter, that "crossing the international border would invite strong retaliation," the Indian Army launched a counterattack on 6 September and advanced toward Lahore, in the Punjab. In response, the Pakistani land forces withdrew from Kashmir and headed for the Punjab. Land and air battles continued until a cease-fire was declared on 23 September.

The Indian fleet had been deployed in the east, in the Bay of Bengal, in August to deter any Indonesian naval intrusions in support of Pakistan. On 1 September, when the Pakistani Army crossed into Kashmir, the Indian fleet was ordered



west to Mumbai (formerly Bombay), in the Arabian Sea. The fleet's ships were of varying vintage and had disparate speeds; they arrived in Mumbai in ones and twos from 7 September onward. Meanwhile, in reaction to the Indian Army's thrust into the Punjab, on the night of 7–8 December Pakistan sent its flotilla to carry out a bombardment of the coastal temple town of Dwarka, about two hundred miles south of the main naval base at Karachi, then return to its patrol area off Karachi,

where it remained for the rest of the war. When the Indian fleet had refueled and reprovisioned at Mumbai, it sailed to a patrol area off Saurashtra to deter further intrusions. Except for a large number of attacks against underwater contacts suspected to be the submarine that the United States had given Pakistan in 1964, no encounter occurred before the cease-fire.

After the cease-fire there was considerable unhappiness within the Indian Navy. It had made no meaningful contribution to the war, and it had been unable to avenge the bombardment of Dwarka. Only later did it become generally known that the Indian government had directed the Navy to take no aggressive action at sea; the government had wanted to confine the scope of the fighting to land and air operations. It also became known that Indonesia had despatched a Russian-built submarine and some missile boats to assist the Pakistani Navy, though by the time they arrived the cease-fire had been declared.

The events of 1965 indicated that the Navy would have to plan for concurrent operations in the Bay of Bengal in the east and the Arabian Sea in the west. This assessment, which coincided with still-pending plans of preceding years, precipitated several decisions. First, a new fleet would have to be created for the Bay of Bengal. This Eastern Fleet would have to be supported by a new dockyard and new logistic depots on the east coast of India. The naval presence in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands would have to be increased, and maintenance facilities

created so that patrol vessels would not have to undertake the long passage to the mainland. Further, India decided to accept the pending offer of the Soviet Union to meet the Indian Navy's requirements for the latest ships and submarines; the new units would be based in the Bay of Bengal to counter Indonesian adventurism. Finally, in order to deter attacks on coastal ports, like that on Dwarka, Soviet missile boats of the type that had been supplied to the Indonesian and Egyptian navies were to be evaluated.

Between 1966 and 1971, most of these decisions were implemented. Five submarine chasers, two landing ships, five patrol boats, four submarines, a submarine depot ship, a submarine rescue vessel, and eight missile boats were acquired from Russia. Construction commenced of a new dockyard in Vishakhapatnam, where all Soviet-supplied vessels would be based, maintained, and refitted; all ships of Western origin were to be based at Mumbai. This arrangement was necessary to meet the Cold War concerns of the Soviet Union regarding the leakage of its technology to the West, and also that of Britain (which had licensed the construction of *Leander*-class frigates in Mumbai) regarding the same to the East.

In March 1971, political ferment in East Pakistan (East Bengal) erupted into a struggle for secession from West Pakistan. Pakistan imposed martial law and ruthlessly suppressed the uprising. A subsequent commission headed by a judge of the Pakistan supreme court found that the Pakistani Army had resorted to genocide in an attempt to obliterate the aspirations of the people of East Bengal for independence. The major impact on India of this "internal affair" of Pakistan was a flood of refugees. Within a matter of months, over nine million Bengalis were living in refugee camps in India. Infuriated East Bengalis, burning to avenge the brutalities they had suffered and the destruction of their homes, began guerrilla activity against Pakistan.

For India, the situation became extremely difficult. The demographic composition of Indian border districts was changing to an extent that was politically unacceptable. Hawkish elements in India began calling for military action to stop the genocide and create conditions under which the refugees could go back. The Army was unprepared for military operations in the east. Appeals to the international community yielded generous humanitarian aid for the refugees but no answer to the problem of how and when the refugees could be made to feel safe enough to return to their homes in East Pakistan. The Indian armed forces anticipated a Pakistani intrusion into India to eliminate the camps from which the guerrillas operated; the Army prepared to counter such an attack. The problem was complicated by Pakistan's declared strategy that "the defence of East Pakistan lay in the west," meaning that an attack by West Pakistan on India's western border would relieve Indian military pressure in the east. The situation was compounded by the likelihood of China's aiding Pakistan by forcing India

to position troops to counter a Chinese threat on India's northeast frontier, where hostilities had occurred earlier in 1962, thereby forcing India to plan for hostilities on three fronts—the west, the east, and the northeast. This geostrategic contingency was offset in August when India and the Soviet Union signed a twenty-year treaty of friendship.

Between August and November there were several false alarms, but on 3 December 1971 the Pakistani Air Force attacked Indian airfields on the western border and initiated the war. Naval operations had an important role in the fourteen days of fighting that ensued; they marked the beginning of India's regional maritime eminence.

In the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Navy's aircraft carrier and frigates enforced contraband control and choked off all resupply from seaward. Pakistan's U.S.-supplied submarine, which had been deployed in the east to seek and sink

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the Indian aircraft carrier, exploded and sank near the entrance to Vishakhapatnam harbour whilst trying to avoid an Indian warship.

The United States became apprehensive that should Pakistan's armed forces in the east collapse, India would

transfer its forces from there to attack West Pakistan, which was an ally in the Central Treaty Organization. As a gesture of solidarity, on 10 September 1971 an American task force headed by the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier *Enterprise* was despatched from the Gulf of Tonkin toward the Bay of Bengal. On 6 and 13 December, the Soviet Navy despatched two groups of nuclear-missile-armed ships from Vladivostok; they trailed U.S. Task Force 74 in the Indian Ocean from 18 December until 7 January 1972.<sup>2</sup>

During the war, the Indian missile boats in the Arabian Sea had been divided into two groups. One was deployed on the Saurashtra coast to attack ships off Karachi and to deter hit-and-run raids like the one that had occurred in 1965. The second group was assigned to the task force deployed in the Arabian Sea to enforce contraband control and attack Karachi from the southwest. The first Indian missile boat attack occurred on 4–5 December, from the south; it sank a destroyer and a coastal minesweeper. As a precaution, the Pakistani flotilla withdrew inside Karachi Harbour on 7 December. The second missile boat attack, which was made on 8–9 December from the southwest, hit the Pakistani Navy's tanker in the anchorage outside Karachi and set the oil storage tanks of Karachi on fire. Shipping traffic to and from Karachi ceased.

The Indian submarines were deployed off Pakistan's coast but did not encounter any warship targets. On 9 December a Pakistani submarine of the French *Daphne* class deployed off Saurashtra sank one of the two Indian antisubmarine

frigates that had been despatched to nudge it to seaward and safeguard the forces assembling for the next missile attack. After the Pakistani forces in the east surrendered on 16 December, India offered Pakistan a cease-fire in the west, which Pakistan accepted on 17 December. East Pakistan became the independent state of Bangladesh, and millions of Bengali refugees returned from India in early 1972.

Fascinating vignettes of the complex geostrategic factors at work during this war can be found in the memoirs of President Richard Nixon, Dr. Henry Kissinger (his security advisor), Anatoly Dobrynin (then Soviet ambassador in Washington), and Admiral Elmo Zumwalt (then Chief of Naval Operations), and in the newspaper columns of Jack Anderson regarding the deliberations of the American government's decision-making body known as the Washington Special Action Group.

### THE INDIAN NAVY'S DEVELOPMENT SINCE 1971

The Navy learned several lessons during the 1971 war that have governed its development in the thirty-one years since. The first was the need to maximise antisubmarine capability. The Navy has now acquired long, medium, and short-range antisubmarine aircraft (Tu-142s and Il-38s from Russia and Dorniers from Germany), antisubmarine helicopters (Sea Kings from Britain and Kamovs from Russia), hunter-killer submarines (from Germany), and, from diverse sources, longer-range sonars, torpedoes, and antisubmarine rockets for surface ships.

A second lesson was the importance of defences against missiles fired from land, submarines, ships, and aircraft, for which several measures were necessary. There had to be at least one more aircraft carrier, with aircraft capable of attacking missile-carrying platforms before they could launch their missiles. In addition, warships required electronic warfare equipment, antimissile missiles, and high-rate-of-fire guns for point defence.

Third, older ships and submarines had to be replaced—by indigenous construction to the maximum extent possible, but in the meantime from abroad. A number were obtained from the Soviet Union, beginning in 1976, including Kashin-class destroyers, Nanuchka missile boats, minesweepers, and a tanker. Destroyers, frigates, corvettes, and missile boats were built indigenously but with Russian weapons; domestically built ships without Soviet systems included amphibious vessels, a fleet tanker, offshore patrol vessels, survey ships, and patrol craft. In the 1980s the Navy acquired from Britain a secondhand aircraft carrier and vertical-takeoff-and-landing aircraft. All these surface ships replaced predecessors with in-service lives of about fifteen years for minor vessels and twenty-five years for principal warships. Plans for a more modern aircraft carrier are still under examination. As regards submarines, Soviet Kilo-class boats replaced the Foxtrots. Four German conventional hunter-killer types were

acquired, two built in Germany and two in India; plans are presently in hand to resume submarine construction in India.

Fourth, it was learned that refit and repair facilities had to be augmented and kept in step with the latest equipment fitted in ships, submarines, and aircraft.

The final lesson was that the Western and Eastern Fleets had to be kept trained for a modest but straightforward role—to deter aggression from seaward by posing a threat of punitive damage.

The three decades since the 1971 war have seen the development of the Indian Navy. Some have felt that the growth of the Navy has been slow, stunted by a lack of funds (because of preoccupation with the Army and Air Force) and by a lack

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of political and bureaucratic interest in maritime matters. Such views, however, are not borne out by the facts.<sup>3</sup> Whilst this may have been said of particular five-year

plans and provided grist for animated debate in professional circles, it is not tenable in a longer perspective. The Navy's growth has indeed been slow, but primarily as a necessary result of the long-term effects of certain decisions taken on major issues. An example is the resolve to become self-reliant and constantly innovative—it takes years to develop the expertise and capacity needed for building the wide range of equipment that goes into modern ships and submarines. The Navy is also determined to procure the best that is available worldwide, integrating it with whatever equipment can be developed locally, and installing it in customised indigenous hulls. Similarly, a conscious choice has been made to forgo series production of major warships in favor of continuous improvement to technological capability, despite the penalties with respect to time, cost, and nonstandardisation. Further, weapon and ship production is to be accompanied by the timely creation of modern facilities and depots to maintain a small but technologically contemporary navy. Lastly, the equipment suites of the Indian Coast Guard and the Navy are being harmonised to minimise, wherever possible, the Navy's coastal responsibilities during war.

For a developing navy, such far-reaching decisions are noteworthy, considering the budgets that were available in the last few decades. That the Navy has been able to adhere to these plans is all the more remarkable in that it has had to survive the rigorous financial scrutiny that is characteristic of democratic governance.

#### HOW OTHERS VIEW THE GROWTH OF THE INDIAN NAVY

During the Cold War, it was widely accepted that India would become embroiled in no confrontations except as part of United Nations peacekeeping operations, of which the Navy's deployment to Somalia was an example. In those years, ships of

all navies happily visited Indian ports, and Indian ships showed the flag in other ports of the world. Except for the tasks of transporting the Army to Sri Lanka and back, and helping to snuff out the attempted coup in the Maldives (both operations having been carried out at the invitation of the respective governments), India and its navy seldom appeared on the strategic radar screens of the West.

In the years since the end of the Cold War, and particularly after India's nuclear tests in 1998, there has been an increased interest in both India and its naval capabilities, as can be seen in Western writings:

India now has neither an interest in challenging the system nor the means to do so, except marginally on nuclear issues, but it remains determined not to permit others to foreclose the possibility that it too may some day aspire to great-power status.<sup>4</sup>

The strategic environment of Asia is characterized by the presence of three great continental powers—China, India, and Russia.<sup>5</sup>

Neither China nor India will have a true blue-water navy over the next five years—although they will both seek to extend their naval influence, and therefore their strategic ambitions will overlap in Southeast Asia.<sup>6</sup>

Whether Asia remains a peaceful region will largely depend upon the struggle for power and influence between the major powers: China, Japan, India, Russia, and the United States. It is not in the interests of the United States or of its allies to see the region dominated by any one Asian power or by a concert of them. . . . As China's influence in Asia grows, India—which wants to be accepted as a major power—will seek to compete with China. Until recently, India's poor economic performance, its preoccupation with Pakistan, and earlier its alliance with the former Soviet Union served to limit its interest elsewhere in Asia. But the Indian economy now seems to be set on a path of reform and is growing strongly. The military balance on the subcontinent now firmly favors India, and with each year that passes its superior economic performance will improve its military advantage. India, therefore, will be able to lift its strategic horizons.<sup>7</sup>

Chinese policy is no longer driven by a felt need to counter reactively the growth of Indian power. Well prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, Beijing and New Delhi were already exploring the modalities of a more stable relationship. . . . The larger challenge for Beijing will be to pursue a more fully developed concept of future Sino-Indian relations that acknowledges India's primacy in the regional balance of

power, while still providing Pakistan the wherewithal to maintain autonomy from a presumptive Indian sphere of influence.<sup>8</sup>

It will be many decades before India offers us bases, if it ever does.<sup>9</sup>

A number of “rationales” for a closer relationship with India:

- India is a strategic counterweight to China.
- India is the more “moderate,” or “reachable one” regarding the burgeoning nuclear standoff with Pakistan.
- India is a democracy in a region that has few others.
- India is taking a distant backseat to China in attracting FDI [foreign direct investment] and U.S. government attention, thus precipitating behaviors designed to get Washington to “notice it” more.
- India’s naval buildup signals that it can play a serious stabilising or destabilising role in the all-important maritime sea lines of communication between the Middle East and Southeast Asia.
- India is the obvious kingpin power in South Asia.
- India, like China, is too big to ignore; but, unlike China, there is no sense of an emergent peer-competitor relationship.
- India, like the U.S., is a former British colony, so there are good historical reasons for closer ties.
- India’s burgeoning role as a computer powerhouse in the global IT [information technology] economy, and the surprisingly large role of Indian expatriates in the U.S. IT sector, both inevitably lead to greater influence for India and Indian-Americans in U.S. foreign policy decision making.<sup>10</sup>

The above perceptions are reasonable assessments of possibilities. Several other constructs could be equally reasonable. What would perhaps be especially helpful is to conclude with an Indian point of view.

### THE INDIAN VIEW

India’s achievements since independence, such as they are, are the products of two groups of factors. The first includes the sympathetic understanding of India’s formidable developmental problems, as well as generous financial and technical assistance extended by the United States, the Soviet Union, Europe, Japan, and the oil-producing countries. The second comprises the ingenuity, innovativeness, and capacity for hard work that are so characteristic of the Indian people in finding solutions appropriate to Indian conditions. If India is

seen today as a country that is politically, economically, and militarily strong, it should also be remembered that in these fifty years or so, India has invariably exercised exemplary restraint in times of crisis.

With this background, a number of realities about India may help to provide a framework for viewing the nation and its actions in the years ahead. India has never had, and does not now have, overseas territories or global national security interests requiring military capabilities. Nonetheless, India is a vast, well endowed subcontinent with sufficient indigenous resources to sustain its population at a tolerable level of welfare. Inevitably—and India is very conscious of the fact—its size, economic strength, strategic depth, and population cause smaller neighbours to look upon it as a hegemon. Accordingly, India is always cautious to ensure that no action can be misinterpreted by hypersensitive neighbours as hegemonistic. It also realises that building mutual confidence takes decades.

Despite four unsought wars and prolonged spells of bloody terrorism, India firmly believes that the only way to settle disputes is bilaterally across the negotiating table, however long it may take. The observation (attributed to George F. Kennan) that “you have no idea how much it contributes to the general politeness and pleasantness of diplomacy when you have a little quiet armed force in the background” finds echoes in the *Arthashastra*, a classic Indian treatise on statecraft written in the third century B.C. Nonetheless, in the field of global politics, India has steadfastly met all its financial, peacekeeping, and developmental commitments to the United Nations. Indian peacekeeping contingents have received universal praise from the time of the truce in Korea in 1952 to their present deployment in Africa.

India has supported from the outset the United Nations resolution of 1971 that the Indian Ocean be a zone of peace. Today, thirty-one years later, when so much of the world’s oil supplies are transiting the Indian Ocean, it is even more in the common interest that this ocean remain peaceful and that its sea-lanes remain free of tension. For its part, India does not see that ocean as an “Indian Lake” and has never used this expression.

Finally, there is no fundamental clash of interest between India and the United States, regionally or globally. Both share a heritage of being large, multi-ethnic, and democratic countries. Both share a particular interest in ensuring free and unthreatened navigation in the sea-lanes that carry oil to India and the rest of the world. India’s draft nuclear doctrine has been officially opened to public debate. Its main elements are “no first use” and credible retaliatory capability. As and when the doctrine is finalised, the Indian Navy will prepare to provide the seaborne component of retaliation.

## NOTES

1. Certain phrases have been avoided because they convey different meanings in different contexts. For example, "sea control," "sea denial," and "power projection" as applicable to the American and Soviet navies during the Cold War would have different connotations in the present century for a small navy like India's.
2. For a discussion of these events, see Kenneth R. McGruther, "The Role of Perception in Naval Diplomacy," *Naval War College Review*, September–October 1974, pp. 3–20.
3. For the evidence see the recent official history of the Indian Navy, G. M. Hiranandani, *Transition to Triumph* (New Delhi: Director Personnel Services, Naval Headquarters, 2000; Hartford, Wis.: Spantech and Lancer, 2000).
4. Percival Bronson, review of *International Order and the Future of World Politics*, by T. V. Paul and John A. Hall, *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 2000, p. 154.
5. Paul Dibb, "Strategic Trends: Asia at a Crossroads," *Naval War College Review*, Winter 2001, p. 23.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
8. Jonathan D. Pollack, "China and Asia's Nuclear Future," in *Bridging the Nonproliferation Divide: The United States and India*, ed. Francine R. Frankel (Lanham, Md.: Univ. Press of America, 1995), p. 108.
9. Stephen Peter Rosen, "Strategic Traditions for the Asia-Pacific Region," *Naval War College Review*, Winter 2001, p. 21.
10. Assembled from Thomas P. M. Barnett with Bradd Hayes, "Asian Energy Futures: Decision Event Report I," Decision Strategies Department [DSD] Report 00-6, rev. ed. (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College, Center for Naval Warfare Studies, April 2001), and "Foreign Direct Investment: Decision Event Report II," DSD Report 01-2 (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College, Center for Naval Warfare Studies, May 2001). The reports are part of the NewRuleSets.Project, a four-part series of "decision events" held in 2000 and early 2001 to explore various aspects of the globalized economy and their implications for U.S. national security. The project was sponsored by eSpeed/Cantor Fitzgerald, with offices in New York City.