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Joint Naval Exercises: A Post-Malabar-2007 Appraisal for India

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As part of the burgeoning Indo-US relationship, the two Malabar-2007 joint naval exercises have been unprecedented in many ways. The Malabar exercises were conceived and have been conducted since 1992, as a purely bilateral event. The Malabar exercises of April 2007 held in the western Pacific first took Japan into its fold and then in September 2007 was further expanded in scope and participation to include Australia and Singapore as well. This turned it into a mammoth war-game in Bay of Bengal involving 26 warships from five nations, and encompassing virtually every facet of naval operations.

Malabar-2007 has also for the first time generated a lot of international interest. Considering the participation of India – a nation that prides itself on its ‘non-aligned’ credentials – it has raised many questions: Are such exercises the precursors to the formation of a military alliance in Asia, thereby signifying the beginnings of a new Cold War? Within the Indian polity itself, a section has questioned India’s “independent foreign policy” and cast doubts on whether the joint exercises like Malabar are underpinned by legitimate security imperatives? These add on to the existing doubts of some policymakers in India: Do naval forces derive tangible ‘operational’ benefits out of these exercises? Or are these merely diplomatic ventures? This commentary is an attempt to address these issues.

The Rationale for Security Bonds

At the outset, it is necessary to examine the underlying imperatives for India to build cooperative security ties with other nations. As India develops economically as a nation-state

committed to improving the socioeconomic conditions of its people, its stakes are being identified increasingly with the maritime domain. Stability in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and tranquility in its waters are closely and directly linked to all its interests encompassed within the concept of national security. Besides, India’s sea-borne trade, has expanded geographically far beyond this region. However, shipping and other activity in the Asian waters continue to be beset by maritime crimes. Although the overall incidents of piracy are declining, it has now expanded spatially in the IOR and involves greater violence and coordination among miscreants. This has led to a fear of terrorists shifting their operations to the sea, particularly to maritime choke-points like the Straits of Malacca and the Hormuz Strait, and the hub-ports that serve global trade. To make matters worse, the vulnerability of shipping and ports is increasing with the growing mercantile traffic and tonnage of vessels. Besides, organized crimes like drug-trafficking and smuggling of weapons have continued to nourish terrorism and internal instabilities in states. The insurgents in Myanmar and India’s northeastern provinces, for example, are known to be receiving their small-arms and explosives from Cambodia/Thailand via the sea-routes of Bay of Bengal. Owing to humanitarian considerations, India also has a normative responsibility to respond to natural disasters and marine accidents in the region.

The capacity of India’s maritime security forces – its navy and coast guard – is clearly inadequate to cater to the abovementioned interests and responsibilities, even within the IOR. Considering the inherent attributes of the ocean-realm, operating ‘solo’ is impossible even for a state like the US possessing a power-projection navy. The recent

proposal of the US naval chief for combining the resources of regional states into a “thousand-ship navy” to meet common security challenges is pertinent in this regard. India is also, still a developing country with severe resource-constraints, where decision-making for financial allocation to maritime forces is often retarded by the ‘guns versus butter’ conundrum. This can be considered as the primary rationale for New Delhi’s efforts to seek security bonds with major naval powers, grounded in a clear convergence of legitimate interests among partners. Joint exercises are the essential means to this end, since these enable them to achieve ‘inter-operability’ so that their assets can be used in a complementary manner to respond to common adversities and contingencies. Such necessity is best exemplified by the collective disaster relief operations undertaken by the navies of Australia, India, Japan and the US in the aftermath of the December 2004 Tsunami in the Indian Ocean.

Of course, security bonds may also be seen to be backed by a strategic rationale. A major naval power operating in Indian Ocean in an inimical manner could potentially impinge on India’s vital interests, its territorial integrity, or even threaten its survival as a nation-state. The posture adopted by the US carrier battle group in Bay of Bengal during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war will be a constant reminder to the nation of the possibility of political coercion. Similarly, while China’s compulsion to safeguard its vital interests in Indian Ocean is

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undoubtedly legitimate, it is known to be making efforts to cultivate strategic ‘nodes’ of influence in the IOR, which is being referred to as its “string-of-pearls” strategy. This may be perceived in New Delhi as a move that bears an adversarial intent, particularly when irritants persist in the Sino-Indian

relationship. Even though the potential threat may manifest only in the long-term, perhaps in decades, India will need to prepare for it today owing to the long lead-time necessary to build naval capabilities. Joint exercises could thus be seen as an effort at capacity-building of naval forces, and also a ‘hedge’ against major powers whose interests may be in contradiction with ones own in the future.

An Appraisal of the Malabar Exercises

The Indian and US navies have been conducting Malabar joint exercises since 1992, but this became a regular event only from 2002. Malabar-2002 was pitched at a fairly basic level, involving manoeuvres, communication drills, underway replenishment and exchange of personnel. The scope was expanded for the exercises that followed in 2003 and 2004 to include helicopter cross-deck landings, submarine operations and anti-submarine warfare (ASW). The exercises also involved two American long-range maritime patrol (LRMP)/ASW aircraft. By 2005, Malabar had become a high-level and complex exercise involving aircraft-carrier operations. Malabar-2006 was the first time that a complete US expeditionary strike group also participated in a large-scale joint amphibious exercise.

The two Malabar-2007 exercises have been conducted on a substantially larger scale, not only in terms of their greater ‘operational’ scope, but also due to their multinational nature. Also, all exercises have hitherto been conducted off India’s western seaboard (the exercises are in fact named after India’s western Malabar Coast). The exercise area chosen for the second Malabar-2007 is instructive. The exercise was held 350 km south-west of Andaman Islands, close to the international sea-routes leading to the Malacca Straits. This indicates that the primary purpose of the exercise was to develop synergy for protecting sea-lines through counterterrorism and anti-piracy missions.

Since 2003, the Malabar exercises have invariably included vessel board search and seizure (VBSS) operations. These ship-interdiction exercises are integral to the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), which seeks to counter the illegal transportation of weapons of mass destruction

(WMD). While the proliferation of nuclear/radiological, chemical and biological weapons to non-state actors is among the foremost global security concerns today, it is particularly relevant in Indian context. These exercises could be seen as a means to increase India's policy options if it decides to join the PSI.

Broadly, such exercises aim to achieve 'interoperability' in terms of both 'procedures' and 'technological compatibility.' The process of achieving these objectives itself accrues substantial dividends. For all participants, it translates into widening the awareness horizon in terms of the doctrines, best practices and drills of other navies, which have evolved over decades in different security scenarios. In addition, the motivational and training value of such exercises cannot be ignored. Such events induce the 'man behind the machine' to 'stretch' himself to the limit and put his endurance to the test.

These exercises also help nations to fill capability 'voids' of their maritime forces. To meet its security needs, India continues to rely upon countries with an advanced defence technology base for a major part of its military hardware. For its navy, this is an opportunity to ascertain the parameters of potential acquisitions and assess their worthiness in a near-real 'combat' scenario, rather than in a 'conditioned' environment created to demonstrate their 'best' performances. For example, the participation of the US P-3C Orion LRMP aircraft in joint exercises since 2003 would have provided a fine chance to the Indian Navy to observe the aircraft in operation, just when India began to look for replacements for its aging Russian-origin LRMP aircraft. Another example is the use of American CENTRIX secure communication system by Indian warships. This is likely to have provided valuable insights to the Indian Navy, particularly considering its efforts to implement the concept of network-centric-operations (NCO) through projects like NEWN (Navy Enterprise Wide Network).

These exercises also help to assess the effectiveness and reliability of own weapon systems. For example, the participation of a US nuclear submarine (SSN) in joint-exercises since 2003 may have provided some useful data on the performance of Indian sonars against SSNs in Indian waters, just as it would have been useful for

the US anti-submarine platforms to practice detecting the much quieter diesel submarines of the Indian Navy, considering that the US Navy operates without such boats.

Malabar-2007 is the manifestation of a growing security relationship among major powers with a convergent worldview, and hence, its military-strategic import cannot be discounted. The necessity and an unstated additional aim of these exercises were probably to pose a 'strategic deterrence' to China. The fact that Malabar-2007 attracted the attention of, not only the Chinese political leadership, but also that of the Chinese media, is an indicator that Malabar-2007 may have succeeded in achieving this objective as well.

These exercises also provide an opportunity to a navy to learn more about the platforms and equipment acquisitions planned for the future. Operating with the American SSN may thus have been fruitful for Indian Navy considering India's impending acquisition of the Akula-class SSN from Russia. An earlier instance relates to India's deal with the US in October 2005 to purchase the large amphibious vessel, a Landing Platform Dock (LPD) named USS Trenton - the LPD was inducted in 2007 as the INS Jalashwa. Considering that the Indian Navy had no experience in operating such vessels, Malabar-2006 was extremely useful. Operating with USS Boxer (Landing Helicopter Dock) during the exercise helped it to imbibe the procedures relating to launching and recovery of several helicopters and landing craft carried by the vessel.

Malabar-2007 has been the first occasion when the combined order-of-battle (ORBAT) comprised of three aircraft-carriers – the USS Nimitz, the USS Kitty Hawk and the INS Viraat. With Indian maritime doctrine envisaging at least two operational carriers at any given time, there may be a need for the Indian Navy to operate these carriers together, wherein coordination is critical since the aircraft are being controlled by different carrier-platforms. The coordinated carrier operations among the three carriers during Malabar-2007 may have provided some valuable experience to

India in this direction.

Undoubtedly, Malabar and other such joint exercises have a large diplomatic content. But then, national governments also expect their navies to function as instruments of foreign policy. Based on the intrinsic attributes of naval power, and the medium wherein it operates, the politico-diplomatic role of naval power has been acknowledged worldwide since historic times. These exercises would therefore, have made a positive contribution towards India's efforts to reinforce its political ties with its co-participants.

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