International Maritime Conference Report

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Date: 8 March 2016

The International Maritime Conference on the theme ‘Partnering Together for a Secure Maritime Future’ was held at Vishakhapatnam on the 07-08 February 2016 on the occasion of the International Fleet Review (IFR) 2016 hosted by India. The Conference was organised by the Indian Navy in partnership with the National Maritime Foundation (NMF). The participants included Chief of Naval Operations, senior serving and retired military and civilian officials from India and abroad, delegation heads of participating countries, and a large section of strategic and scholarly community.

Inaugural Session

In his opening remarks Admiral DK Joshi (Retd), Chairman NMF, stated that the oceans are the oldest global commons and have shaped human endeavours. In the era of interdependence and global interconnectedness, the seas are a major medium for conduct of trade and commerce and the maritime domain has witnessed a renewed focus by the global community. It was pointed out that maritime forces not
only preserve the national interests, but contribute to global peace, prosperity and stability. In the twenty-first century with the shift of the global strategic centre of gravity to the East, often described as the Indo-Pacific region, the maritime domain is being perceived from two perspectives, i.e. as a ‘continuum of prosperity’ and ‘an arc of instability’. In his remarks Admiral Joshi raised three key issues: a) balancing state-centric and international roles for the maritime forces; b) finding common denominators on which consensus for larger maritime cooperation can be achieved; and c) models, institutions and strategies that would help in this quest.

The Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral RK Dhowan delivered the Theme Address. He emphasised that the seas are not only a medium for trade and transportation, but also a significant repository of natural and mineral resources and therefore require national commitments to protect and secure maritime interests. In this context, the navies and other maritime enforcement/management agencies remain the prime instruments available to the State for upholding national maritime interests. However, challenges within the maritime domain are becoming increasingly transnational in nature which requires a cooperative approach at both regional and global level. This brings the spotlight on the issue of partnership among countries at political, diplomatic, economic and maritime-military levels. Further, there is a need to strengthen the existing maritime cooperative instruments like the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and widening its scope for a synergistic response.

In his Keynote Address, Shri Manohar Parrikar, the honourable Raksha Mantri, pointed out that the availability of resources on land is under continued pressure of overuse and climate change. This led to the oceans and seas to emerge as the centre of global strategic discourse. India’s strategic position in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and its strong and long cherished oceanic legacy makes it an important maritime stakeholder at the regional and global affairs. As the ambit of challenges expand, the Indian maritime thought as also the material capabilities of the Indian Navy have expanded. In a changed economic scenario marked by globalisation, increasing dependence on sea-based resources and sharpening of maritime disputes,
there is a need to revisit the existing cooperative structure and mechanisms so that these remain relevant not only for today but well into the future.

**Discussion Session I: “The Importance of Oceans and Navies in Global Geo-Strategic Matrix”**

Admiral Madhvendra Singh (Retd), former Chief of the Naval Staff, and the chairperson introduced the speakers and the theme for the Session I.

Prof Ye Hailin from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), Beijing in his paper titled “South China Sea Dispute: Perceptions and Misperceptions among the Players” argued about the evolution and recent developments in the South China Sea (SCS) disputes and provided an analysis of the motivations guiding the behaviour of various parties (China, the Philippines, Vietnam and the US). It was stated that Vietnam has adopted an ‘opportunistic strategy’ which remains restricted by external and internal environment. On the other hand, the Philippines has taken diplomatic and legal path. Even though not a direct party in the SCS disputes, the US aspirations were portrayed as those of a ‘norm setter’ and somewhat ‘interventionist’. It was emphasised that ASEAN, despite its concerns over the SCS issue, remains fragmented. While the majority of countries involved in the SCS dispute have stressed the importance of maintaining peace and stability in the region, the hardening of their position, policies and strategies has resulted in a situation where competitive issues were given greater emphasis instead of cooperative solutions. Given the existing overlap in respective outlooks, the situation in SCS could deteriorate with possible risk of unintended/accidental escalation.

Admiral Anup Singh from India in his paper titled “No Way but the “Hi” Way”, eluded to the importance of enhanced maritime cooperation in the post-Cold War period. He highlighted that ‘non’ and ‘neo’-traditional challenges have adversely affected the security and stability of the maritime environment resulting in a complex governance issue. In this regard it was suggested that all maritime states should strive for ocean regime building and make effective use of existing mechanisms to generate trust, use maritime forces both individually and in concert to counter
transnational threats and challenges. In addition, capacity-building and capability-
enhancement initiatives are needed to be taken up. Cooperation and enhanced
interactions at bilateral and multilateral fora were identified as the best possible
avenues for a secure global maritime environment.

Rear Admiral Antoine Beaussant from France in his presentation titled
“Maritime Security and Navies: The Future Challenges in the Indian Ocean”
highlighted the geostrategic importance of oceans and the navies. The speaker
stressed that the oceans have become increasingly important for the national and
overall human development. It was underlined that navies need not be seen as pure
military tools but should be employed for a number of political, diplomatic,
constabulary and benign functions through optimal strategies. Besides national
issues, seas and oceans are also the space, where critical vulnerabilities have become
acute due to political instability ashore and breach of good public order. It was
posited that the growing interactions at sea and the progressive changes in the
international balance of power would mandate renewed attention for dialogue and
synergistic actions through bilateral and multilateral frameworks. A multi-layered
and inclusive cooperative architecture based on a comprehensive common approach
was identified as the way forward to defend the ‘freedom of the seas’.

Rear Admiral James Goldrick (Retd) from Australia presented a paper titled
“Towards a New Maritime Strategy for Medium Powers: Defining the Challenges for
the Medium Power Navy”. He pointed out that the real challenge lay in the
management of state and non-states threats and challenges. The challenges of
terrorism, rise of China, economic resurgence of Asia, tensions between Russia and
Western Europe and the uncertainties facing the United States are complemented by
issues of resource depletion, inadequacies in global commons governance, climate
change and environmental degradation. In this regard, the speaker proposed that
while the utility of force remains relevant; however, medium maritime powers should
find new ways to manage the full span of their interests and devise novel approaches
to capital resource allocation at a time when such resources would be constrained. It
was opined that the roles of navies need to be better understood as part of a
comprehensive approach for countering potential maritime threats. In particular, the
relationship that navies need to maintain with other national and international agencies and concerned elements of a government need more clear definition and articulation.

Professor Renfrew Christie from South Africa deliberated on the subject of “Maritime Cooperation and Building Bridges between Maritime Neighbours and Partners”. It was highlighted that the imperatives of global growth would demand peace and ‘extended’ as well as ‘expanded’ commercial activities at sea, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. Towards this end, cooperation among the more developed and capable navies is considered an inescapable necessity. The speaker opined that in the absence of a secure maritime environment in the Indo-Pacific region enforced by strong and collaborating navies, the future may remain Hobbesian. It was further argued that the navies of the region remain under-equipped and under-resourced to deal with the myriad of regional challenges even from conventional and sub-conventional prisms. Further, he proposed that for achieving the larger global and regional human developmental needs, there was a pressing need for comprehensive maritime co-operation between India, China and Africa, where half of the world’s population would live in 2050. The Indo-Pacific region must be capable of defending its own oceans, and should not be averse to go in the harm’s way, if required. For an enduring freedom of sea-borne and sea-based economy and commerce, significant investment would be required in the shore-based industry, human resource development, logistics, dockyards and naval facilities in addition to sustained shipbuilding. The speaker stressed that the important stakeholders may have to reconcile themselves to ‘collaborative naval hegemony’ for the overall aim, which is peace and prosperity.

Rear Admiral K Raja Menon (Retd) from India in his paper titled as “Globalisation, International Liberalism and the Maritime Cooperation Nexus” traced the importance of non-military importance of naval forces. He highlighted that the world is witnessing a rise in political liberalism through democratic impulses and called for participatory governance. Further, empirical historical evidence suggests that the use or threat of use of force has rarely led to enduring peace and stable world order. By juxtaposing these trends with Kantian democratic peace
paradigm, he highlighted that it would be obvious that international cooperation in the maritime domain would hold the key to an equitable international order. He further pointed out that it is time for soft power approach by the navies and it could be used to achieve geopolitical goals short of wars which would ensure national, regional, and global security and help preserve the international (and open) character of the oceanic commons. He also argued that the significance of strengthening international frameworks such as the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the significance of outreach efforts such as the IFR for developing a robust architecture for ocean regime building and cooperative maritime governance is critical.

The session was followed by discussions and two issues merit attention. First, all nations with similar interests and stakes must work together for larger good, and second, strategic rivalries among major players would be inimical for stable maritime order. There was a consensus among the participants as well the audience that multilateral fora are an important mechanism for a secure and stable maritime environment.

**Discussion Session II: “Regional Perceptions and Approaches for Maritime Cooperative Engagements”**

Ambassador KV Bhagirath, Secretary General of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) chaired Session II.

Prof Eichii Katahara from Japan spoke on the role of Japan in the security of the Indo-Pacific region. The three main issues discussed by the speaker were: first, the factors contributing to maritime security order in the international society; second Japan's perceptions of maritime security issues; and third, Japan's role in ensuring maritime security in the twenty-first century Indo-Pacific region. The speaker highlighted that balance of power, international law, diplomacy, war and the role of great powers are the main drivers for maintaining order at sea. Japan's immediate periphery remains complex with China, Russia, and North Korea being nuclear armed. Japan also faced other challenges like China's increasingly assertive
posturing in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, the volatile situations in the Middle East and Africa, and the looming non-traditional security threats like natural disasters, cyber threats and piracy. All these account for a greater role for the Japan Self Defence Forces (SDF) and the Japanese Coast Guard. The prospect of a strategic rivalry between China and the US in the region is also a cause of concern for Japan. In this regard, Japan’s security policy has seen significant changes since the 1990s with the establishment of first National Security Council (NSC) in December 2013 with near concurrent announcement of first ever National Security Strategy (NSS) and updated National Defence Program Guidelines (NDPG). In April 2015, Japan and the US adopted new guidelines for US-Japan Defence Cooperation. The speaker also laid out some strategic imperatives for Japan in the maritime domain which include - increasing Japan’s defence and maritime safety capabilities; strengthening alliance mechanism with the US besides enhancing cooperation with other partners like India, Republic of Korea, ASEAN, EU, enhanced Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) with strengthening of links with regional organisations such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus), etc.

Lt General Dan Leaf stressed on the role of the oceans and navies in the geo-strategic mix. In his view, not long back, during the era of the Cold War, the threat of a nuclear holocaust seemed very real, but the times have changed. The advent of globalisation, interconnectedness, and interdependence has brought revised salience to the role of cooperation. The modern nations realise that perceptions like ‘domination by one country’ is a bygone idea, and cooperation is the way to achieve national interests, even if competition seems to be an obvious choice. The key to maritime security cooperation lie in training and adherence to internationally accepted rules, procedures and norms which are essential for bilateral and multilateral cooperation. The other medium for maritime security cooperation is ‘shared domain awareness’. This may be difficult both in technological and philosophical terms, but still needs to be achieved. Besides shared domain awareness, communication at the tactical level is also very important to prevent incidents at sea. The speaker did not completely dismiss the existence of frictions or the possibility of an arms race, but pointed out that the navies of the modern world
have a moderating influence. He highlighted the successful story of a complicated maritime boundary dispute that was resolved between India, Bangladesh and Myanmar through arbitration which is a positive pointer for others involved in similar complex situations.

Professor Geoffrey Till from the United Kingdom spoke on ‘Cooperative Maritime Engagement in the Indo-Pacific region’. He noted that the word ‘maritime engagement’ has both cooperative and competitive connotations. In the globalized world, all countries are inter-dependent and engaged, and thus there is a need for encouraging cooperative engagements. Against this background, the speaker pointed out to three closely interconnected dimensions of engagement in the Indo-Pacific region - ‘substantive’ (what they engage about); ‘behavioural’ (how they engage); and ‘institutional’ (where they engage). ‘Substantive’ engagement is sometimes referred to as ‘grand strategy’ and is about the ends a government seeks to achieve. In the Indo-Pacific region, though there are issues of common interests, but alongside are conflicting interests like the South China Sea and the East China Sea dispute, tensions between India and Pakistan, the two Koreas and others. This leads to the second dimension of engagement, which is the ‘behavioural’ dimension where strategies, ways, and means come into play at operational and tactical levels. At the operational level, one shared concern of the conflicting countries is to ensure safe trade through the International Shipping Lanes (ISL). At the tactical level, constructive engagement entails measures to prevent incidents at sea that can be achieved through unconditional dialogue, and hi-level diplomatic engagements. In this regard, the speaker stressed two aspects – first, the need to manage ‘nationalistic’ tendencies and second, the importance of transparency and clarity. The last dimension of engagement, i.e., ‘institutional’ remains equally crucial; though all regional and sub-regional institutions may not have been great success stories, but still remains a much recommended approach for strengthened engagement.

First Admiral Amarulla Octavian from Indonesia brought to light Indonesia’s ‘Perspective and Approach on Asia’s Regional Maritime Cooperative Engagements’. The speaker began by pointing out that Indonesia is an archipelagic country connecting the Indian and the Pacific Oceans and remains conscious about the
security of the maritime domain. The IOR is characterised by a range of conflicts, home to a number of fragile states, and seen by some as a zone of strategic contention between India and China. Alongside, in the Western Pacific, maritime disputes in the South China Sea and the East China Sea have escalated as also the strategic rivalry between the US and China. The speaker thereafter drew upon the sociological view of competition, conflict and cooperation and its application to international relations. In his view, competition and conflict are dissociative whereas cooperation is an associative process. There are existing mechanisms of cooperation in the Indo–Pacific region like the ASEAN, EAS, ADMM Plus, ASEAN Maritime Forum, WPNS, Malacca Straits Patrol (MSP), IORA, IONS and the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS). The speaker stressed on the need for strengthening and in some case reinvigorating, these institutional mechanism for greater effectiveness. Further, arbitration, conciliation and adherence to international rules and norms for armed conflict like the San Remo Manual remain appropriate means for limiting/de-escalating conflict situations.

Prof Ataur Rahman from Bangladesh deliberated on the subject of “Opportunities and Challenges of Building Partnerships in the Bay of Bengal (BoB) Region”. In his view, the BoB acts as an economic lifeline to the littoral as well as extended maritime neighbourhood encompassing the entire Indo-Pacific region. The BoB not only witnesses strategic competition among the major powers, but it is home to other threats like piracy, terrorism, illegal fishing, human trafficking and most importantly migration and climate change. The speaker in his presentation brought out the potential areas of cooperation in this region by overcoming the exaggerated sensitivities attached to national boundaries, sovereignty and territoriality. The speaker emphasised that India’s role in establishing partnership in BOB region is very crucial, as the littoral countries view it as a generous power, its contribution to improved MDA is significant, and its amenability to dispute resolution is seen in a positive light. For enhanced cooperation in BoB, an ocean centric regionalism was proposed which can be achieved by building cooperation in the domain of sharing Common Public Goods like the marine resources, sustainable development of oceanic resources, or in other words blue economy. Such a concept could also be effective in functional areas like climate induced migration, Search and Rescue and
Humanitarian Assistance Disaster Relief (HADR) operations. He highlighted the role of regional institutions like the IORA in building partnerships in the BoB region. He also stressed on the desirability of an Indian presence in this region, but not a very dominant one. He ended by highlighting that India should take the stewardship for evolving a cooperative and collaborative maritime security effort in the region.

The main focus of the debate after the seminar was to find ways and means to enhance cooperation and partnership in the Indo-Pacific region. In his concluding remarks, the chair stressed the positive role played by the IORA in the Indo-Pacific region. IORA includes in its ambit seven dialogue partners who are advanced economies and have a stake in this region, and this multilateral mechanism could play a crucial role in regional stability.

**Concluding Session**

The Valedictory Address was delivered by Vice Admiral Satish Soni, Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief Eastern Naval Command. He highlighted that the maritime cooperation has emerged as an area of great importance and considered the International Fleet Review as an apt example where soft, benign and diplomatic role of navies have gained prominence over the traditional hard roles. However, cooperative mechanisms have not been easy to implement in the Indo-Pacific region. There has also been an increase in the level of cooperation through bilateral, multilateral summits, exchange of arms and defence technology, joint naval exercises and port visits. Despite this, there were tensions and sense of insecurity. He further highlighted the importance of the role of arbitration in resolving maritime disputes and stressed the need to update and strengthen international treaties. He further propounded that the major stakeholders must enable the smaller nations to contribute towards maritime security. The speaker posited that the IFR 16 has played its part in furthering the cause of constructive maritime engagement and promoting maritime security.
The Conference proceedings were brought to a close by the vote of thanks by Dr Vijay Sakhuja, Director NMF who once again emphasised the need for nations and navies to explore and evolve novel paradigm for collective maritime security.