

## Joint Naval Exercises: Overdue Change of Course

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During the fifties and early sixties, our navy used to be a regular participant in the annual Joint Naval Exercises of as much as four to six weeks duration in and off Trincomalee. So was Royal Navy, a prominent ally of the USA and Pakistan with whom we had already fought a war. There was no hue and cry either in our Parliament or media. In 1977, at the height of Big Power rivalry in the Indian Ocean, then Janata Government, whole-heartedly approved a fairly large-scale Joint Naval Exercise with major Units - including an aircraft-carrier - of Royal Australian Navy - a very close ally of the USA - and Royal New Zealand Navy - both co-members with the USA of ANZUS Pact. Major Units of our Navy including Vikrant took part. The author, then commanding a squadron of Leanders which took part in the Joint Naval Exercises, does not recall airing of any misgiving of any sort by Shri George Fernandes, then a key Cabinet Minister. In recent months our Navy has carried out Joint naval exercises not only with the navies of some Indian Ocean littoral states but as importantly with the British and French Navies. All these, like previous Joint Naval Exercises, did not result in rush of blood to the heads of opposition members of our Parliament, spear-headed by Shri Fernandes who tried, fortunately in vain, to pressurise the Government to cancel the planned Indo- U S Joint Naval Exercises. The less than two days' exercises are behind us. But, in the overall security interests of our country in post cold war era, it is crucial, in the context of tone, tenor and substance of the Rajya Sabha debate on 6 May 1992, to clear the ignorance and misperceptions about holding meaningful Joint Naval Exercises. Issues involved are both political and naval.

End of cold war and break-up of erstwhile Soviet Union have ushered in a period of transition and uncertainty. Profiles of a new world order will gradually be shaped during the next two decades. Bipolarity lies buried; and the fact that USA had to finance the Gulf war through international contributions is a clear signal that there is a limit to USA's ability to unilaterally lead the world. Although uncertainty surrounds the possible emergence of a European super state under Franco - German leadership, future of Russia, military policy of economic super power that Japan has become, rise of China and India during the coming decades as major powers, signs are unmistakable that the world is moving towards multipolarity. Management of a multipolar world will be more complex than the erstwhile bi-polar world. In such a

world, non-alignment loses its virtues of simplicity and effectiveness. Pragmatism demands that India develop meaningful relationships - economic, political, diplomatic and military - with both USA and emergent major powers.

It also needs to be recognised that economic, ethnic, sub-nationalist and religious forces, hitherto hidden from the eyes of the world are already showing signs of replacing communism as the main ideological force. Low intensity conflicts, proxy wars and terrorism have become very much an important part of security agenda of world nations. India has special problems in this regard.

We have much to thank the USA for her support to our stand on Kashmir, her criticism of Pakistan for aiding militants in Kashmir and Punjab and behind-the-scene pressure on International Monetary Fund and World Bank for grant of massive loans to us to save our economy from the brink of bankruptcy and enable us to embark on the road to economic recovery and growth. India and the USA - world's most populous and largest democracies - share faith in open societies, secularism, unity and integrity of nations and crucial importance of keeping sea lines of communication open. During his recent visit to Washington, our Defence Minister described Indo-US relations as being "excellent". This might be the end we both want to achieve from the present state of our relationship being in "good shape" as put by Dick Cheney.

Of course, we have differences. But in the kind of world we are living in to-day, International Relations, as aptly put by Ambassador Abid Hussein, is a mixture of sunshine and shadows. This applies not only to Indo-US relations but also in the bi-lateral relations of USA and her long-standing allies like Japan and Western Europe. Pragmatism demands that as a potential major power, we extend areas of sunshine with USA and other emerging major powers and desist from magnifying differences and mislead public opinion by making passionate and fiery speeches reminiscent of an era gone by.

In the all-important task of extending areas of sunshine, Navy-to-Navy relations, as will be explained later, assumes special importance. This is specially so in the case of USN which continues to be a major instrument of US state policy.

Because of the unique nature of demands, challenges, opportunities and romance of the seas, navies of the world speak a language with distinctive words, phrases, style of expression, develop a commonality of minds, manners, customs and skills - call it common culture if your will. As a result,

Navy-to-Navy relations tend to transcend geographical boundaries. This phenomenon provides coastal states whom the oceans have made neighbours, a fertile soil to build friendship on. Joint Naval Exercises are, in addition to other forms of naval co-operation, therefore, an important instrument of State policy.

These exercises take place on the High Seas - "a wide Common" as described by Admiral Mahan. Hence, the accusation by some opposition stalwarts during the Rajya Sabha discussions on 6 May 1992, of compromising territorial integrity and even sovereignty, is at best ignorant and at worst an attempt at disinformation to mislead public opinion. In fact, joint exercises in international waters away from the public eye, are infinitely preferable to Joint exercises on land involving presence of foreign troops on own territory, as a confidence building measure.

In the Rajya Shabha, Joint Naval Exercises were criticised as being contrary to the desired policy of self-reliance. Self reliance cannot be considered as an end-in-itself. It is a means to an end. The bottom line is to have a navy, manned by highly trained and motivated personnel, which optimally exploits the available hardware to fulfil missions entrusted to it. Within limitations of resources, we have set up adequate training facilities including training simulators ashore. For afloat training, our annual practice allowances for fuel, ammunition and missiles are, if anything, generous. Training exercises in ascending hierarchy of complexity are carried out. None-the-less, a "purdah" approach to training for naval missions, suffers from serious disabilities.

First, in the absence of international exposure and competition, we do not really know what our strengths and weaknesses are with regard to operational planning, training and hence combat worthiness. Since there is no prize for runners-up in a war, confidence in our ability to come on top when chips are down, is essential for safeguarding national security.

Secondly, in the context of all important deterrence, internationally recognised professionalism of a navy, bestows on the nation inestimable political and diplomatic advantages. Flag-showing visits to foreign ports - though important - are not enough. Real test is at sea. Therefore, realistic and meaningful Joint Naval Exercises offer both challenges and opportunity.

Thirdly, Joint exercises with foreign and internationally renowned navies such as USN, RN and French Navy provide a unique opportunity to assess the effectiveness of hardware of participating navies including our own. This assessment, objectively discussed and analysed, would provide invaluable inputs in identifying areas of modernisation and making good deficiencies.

Joint Naval Exercises could be low keyed having the primary aim of fostering good relations. Participating units will be exercised in simple day-time manoeuvres, station-keeping and basic seamanship drills at sea. But, if the aim, in the words of Shri Sharad Pawar in our Parliament on 6 May 92 was to expose our Navy to "advanced tactics and techniques" of a Super power Navy, such exercises have to be much larger in scope and complexity, include operations on, under and above the seas, and hence would have to be of longer duration than the recent two-day exercises with the US Navy.

This brings up the issue of possible compromise of technical parameters of acoustic and electro-magnetic sensors, thereby facilitating counter-measures to deny their usage. Electronic and acoustic intelligence-gathering by spy satellites, special electronics surveillance aircraft, ships, non-combat ships, submarines and sea-bed acoustic sensors, are high on the agenda of peacetime missions of major naval powers with USA leading the field. Gulf War demonstrated extensive use of such intelligence. But, intelligence, by itself, does not win wars. Deceptive and safety measures, active and passive, exist. Properly trained personnel and innovative tactics do nullify the effects of enemy electronic counter-measures and jamming to the extent that we are not totally denied the use of our sensors and weapons. Also jamming is not an end-in-itself. In spite of its extensive use during the Gulf War against ill-trained Iraqis which gave no battle, as much as 70% of 90,000 tons of explosives including precision guided missiles, missed targets. The greatest single factor in a conflict is not so-called "force multipliers" but highly trained professional manpower under expert tactical leadership. Joint Naval Exercises with major navies would help us considerably in achieving that standard of professionalism.

As we stand to gain professionally so do other major navies we have exercised with including US Navy. Undoubtedly, US Navy is world's largest and technologically most sophisticated Navy. But, it does not necessarily follow that it is also the most professional. Japan in World War II, had an awesome Navy. Yet, she lost the war due to faulty strategy and serious tactical mistakes.

Since World War II, U S Navy's professionalism has not really been tested as Royal Navy was during the Falklands War and Indian Navy in 1971. US Navy has been pitted against Coastal states with insignificant navies and hence enjoyed virtual immunity at sea. On the other hand, analysis of published reports of incidents and accidents at sea -- Pueblo to Vincennes through the Stark would emphasise the need for further improvement in grass-root professionalism like Bridge work, Bridge-Combat information Centre (CIC) interface, state of readiness in sensitive areas of deployment, rules of engage-

ment, damage limitation etc. There is, therefore, considerable scope for exchange of expertise and lessons between Indian Navy and its partners, including USN, in joint Naval Exercises. If USN did not believe that it stands to gain in professionalism - particularly after observing consistently high standard of professionalism amongst senior Indian Naval Officers who have been graduating from US Naval War College - senior US Naval officers in recent years, would not have been sending feelers to senior Indian Naval Officers for staging Joint Indo-US Naval exercises.

Another fact of significance is that USA, as stated by Shri Sharad Pawar on the floor of the House of Elders, proposed the joint exercises to be held in the Pacific. In recent months, Australia has made similar proposals. Thus, two major Pacific nations would like Indian Navy to play an important role in preserving security in Asia - Pacific region. Partnership with ASEAN navies will lead to a concert of naval powers which will be an important factor of stability in the management of emerging and complex multi-polar world.

Summing up, in post cold war era, bipolarity is giving way to multipolarity. In the complex task of management of a world of several major powers and ethnic contradictions, non-alignment has lost its relevance. As a potential major power, India should develop pragmatic relationship with other major powers - existing and emerging - with special reference to Asia-Pacific region. USA's proposal to hold Indo-US Joint Naval Exercises in the Pacific, is significant.

Further, low intensity conflicts, proxy wars and terrorism have become high on the security agenda of nations including ours. We share faith in open societies, rule of the law, with USA whose support to our stand on Kashmir and Punjab, serve our core national interests. So does her behind-the scene support in procuring massive assistance from IMF and World Bank for our economic recovery. There is also congruence of views in keeping sea lines of communication open in Asia-Pacific region. Differences and disagreements will be there. That is what International Relations is all about.

For the sake of expanding friendly relations and our national security, Joint Naval Exercises assume significance. Common culture amongst navies, tend to transcend geographical boundaries. Conducted in international waters away from public gaze, sensitivity about sovereignty etc become non-issues. Joint Naval Exercises do not run counter to our policy of self-reliance; in fact, it strengthens it by testing it against international competition, enhances professional reputation and hence deterrent value of our navy and as importantly provides valuable inputs for identifying areas for modernisation.

Joint Naval exercises could either be token in nature or high-keyed. To derive maximum benefits - professional and political - exercises with major navies should be of the latter category. Since, peace time intelligence gathering by diverse means is an important peacetime mission of all navies, the possibility of compromises of sensors and weapons should not be over stated. Tactical and material counter measures - active and passive - exist to counter effort to deny use of electro-magnetic sensors. That Iraqis failed in this regard during the Gulf War was because they were ill trained and unprofessional. Whilst intelligence continues to be a principle of war, the most important one still is, highly trained, motivated professional manpower under astute tactical leadership. High-key Joint Naval Exercises address this vital requirement.

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