

A Report – On the Visit of USI Delegation to the Fourth Trilateral Dialogue Held at Taipei (Taiwan)

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Background

In pursuance of ongoing annual trilateral dialogue between United Service Institution of India (USI), Okazaki Institute of Japan (OIJ) and Taiwan Strategy Research Association (TSRA), the fourth dialogue on ‘Regional Security’ was hosted at Taipei from 24-26 April 2008 by TSRA. The trilateral dialogue between these Institutions was initiated in 2005 to discuss issues of common security concerns to ensure better understanding on shared perspectives. Previous three editions of the dialogue were held at Taipei, New Delhi and Tokyo respectively. Apart from delegations from the three participating countries, there were also two observers; Mr. Richard Fisher, Senior Fellow, Asian Military Affairs, International Assessment and Strategy Centre, the USA and Mr Gaurav Sodhi from the Centre for Independent Studies, Sydney, Australia.

The USI Delegation was led by Air Marshal VK Bhatia, PVSM, AVSM, Vrc & Bar (Retd), and comprised Vice Admiral Raman Puri, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd), Mr Prashant Aggarwal, IFS and Brigadier Arun Sahgal (Retd), Deputy Director (Research) – the last two from the Centre for Strategic Studies and Simulation, USI.

This edition of the dialogue focussed on four important themes - ‘Development of Asia- Pacific Security Environment and Cross Strait Relationship’, ‘Politico-military Relationship of PLA’, ‘Non-Traditional Security Issues: The Maritime Dimension’ and ‘The Future Development of Trilateral Strategic Dialogue: from TSRS (Trilateral Strategic Dialogue on Regional Security) to MAPSC (Multi-lateral Asia-Pacific Security Conference).

Deliberations

Session I of the dialogue dealt with ‘Development of Asia-Pacific Security Environment and Cross Strait Relationship’. The **Taiwanese delegates** pointed out that Ma Ying-jeou of Kuomintang (KMT) had won presidential elections by a large margin, and the main reason behind incumbent Democratic Peoples Party’s (DPP) defeat was its pro--independence stance that led to strained Cross Strait relations with the mainland China and economic downturn over the last few years. Main planks on which Ma won were, intimate Cross Strait relationship and common market with mainland China. KMT in its foreign policy paper had criticised eight years of ‘Scorched Earth Policy’ of DPP that had left Taiwan, utterly isolated within the international community. KMT promised to adopt ‘flexible diplomacy’ to end nation’s diplomatic isolation and improve Cross Strait relations based on ‘1992 Consensus’ and ‘Mutual Non-Denial’ framework. Ma had criticised former President Chen Shui-bian for turning Taiwan into an ‘international troublemaker’ by pursuing de jure independence and vowed to normalise Taiwan’s trade relations with the Mainland China. Espousing flexible diplomacy, new government stressed that this would be based on principles of sovereignty, economic strength, pragmatism, equality and dignity, and offered to begin negotiations with the other side of the Taiwan Strait in search of a mutually beneficial equilibrium to prevent confrontation between both sides and squandering of resources.

However, majority public opinion in Taiwan appeared more for status quo than an accelerated China appeasement policy; thus, forcing the new government to carry out mid-stream course correction in their foreign policy by declaring adherence to a ‘three No’s’ policy of ‘No unification’, ‘No independence’ and ‘No use of force’. This may have also been done to assuage the feelings of the USA and Japan, who while endorsing a ‘One-China’ policy, favoured continuation of status-quo till democratic ideologies on both sides of the ‘Strait’ matured. It, however, needs to be underscored that post visit there has been a deepening of contact between the mainland China and Taipei, resulting in enhanced flights and increase in tourism. Above does not mean that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is not concerned; at policy level there is concern about the fact that Taiwan despite these initiatives remains a front line entity in the US East Asian policy.

The Japanese Perspective

The Japanese side assessed political changes in Taiwan and prospects for future USA-China relations from the

perspective of their effects on Japan. Based on Ma's public commitments and statements, they felt that he would aspire for reopening political dialogue with China using appeasement, to not only reduce tense situation in Taiwan Strait but considerably improve it through endorsement of 'One-China' policy. However, on the issue of unification or independence, the Japanese felt that status-quo would be maintained through his 'three No's' policy. On economic issues however, a more robust economic posture including revival via 'common market' of Taiwan and the mainland China and aggressive opening-up of Taiwan economy to mainland China was perceived. With regards to the UN membership, they felt that given 'no independence' being part of his 'three No's' policy, Ma would go slow on it. As far as defence preparedness was concerned, preference for keeping defence expenditure at three per cent of the GDP was proffered. While the Japanese delegates were sanguine that the new government would continue a policy of arms purchases from the USA, despite opposition from China; however, it would not be allowed to grow into an arms race in the region. On other hand, whether Beijing would respond to the call for removing ballistic missiles targeting Taiwan, was seen as a fluctuating variable.

The Japanese were concerned that Taiwan under Ma would be more pro-China as compared to Japan or the USA. However, Ma was expected to maintain a good relationship with the USA, judging by his profile as a Harvard University graduate. With Japan, Ma was seen to be unyielding in political sphere but would strive for deeper ties in economic and cultural areas. This assessment was based on Ma's statement that he would not change position of holding fast to territories and sovereignty as reflected in the issues such as Senkaku islands and perception of history, but at same time, he was enthusiastic about strengthening relationship with Japan by concluding Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and expansive mutual exchange of students.

While evaluating Beijing's reaction, the Japanese felt that China had welcomed KMT's return to power with positive implications for China, given reduced possibilities of Taiwan's independence and UN membership. They visualised easing of tensions with Ma in power and in view of his stated emphasis on improving Cross Strait relations. However, there was likely to be little change in China's basic policy towards Taiwan which remained centred on 'peaceful unification' and 'political solution' under 'one state, two systems'. The Japanese were of the view that Beijing, with its anti-secession law in place could use force, if required. This was seen as a remote possibility in the near future particularly as China remained confident of 'peaceful unification' in the long term. Towards this, the delegation noted that China was already slowly nudging Taiwan towards unification by applying pressure tactics such as, compressing Taiwan's international space, directing political, military and juridical pressure on Taiwan, together with indirect pressures on Taiwan by strengthening relations with the USA and Japan and, by embracing Taiwan gradually into the Sino-economic zone.

The delegation asserted that Japan's fundamental stance on Taiwan issue continued to be reflected in Japan-China joint statement dating back to September 1972, which provided that Japan understands and respects 'One-China' that China promotes; yet Japan did not consent to this joint statement. As for the possession of Taiwan, Japanese perception was that Japan abandoned Taiwan in accordance with San Francisco Peace Treaty, but was not in a position to state, to where Taiwan should revert. However, notwithstanding stated position, Japan was resigned to 'One-China' policy and, along with the USA, wanted to see a peaceful resolution to the Cross Strait issue. Here again, in consonance with the US policy, Japan would like status quo to be maintained till Cross Strait ideologies and political systems converged to uniformly embrace democratic values and ethos which had been so well adopted by Taiwan ; and which, both countries know, may not happen in the foreseeable future.

The above attitude underscored the Japanese apprehensions on possible future unification of Taiwan with the mainland China. There were two main reasons for this. Firstly, China's annexation of a highly developed and prosperous Taiwan, in future, would increase its national strength dramatically. Secondly, with Taiwan no longer providing a maritime buffer to Japan, scope of Chinese naval activities would increase as Peoples Liberation Army (Navy) (PLAN) would gain wide access to western Pacific Ocean and because of this China would have an advantage over Japan by dominating Japan's sea lanes of communication (SLOC). This could also lead to degradation in the credibility of the USA in the region, as China's influence would be enhanced substantially. Another but unstated nuance was Japan being forced to review its pacifist policy and once again becoming a front line state in a regional conflict scenario.

Perspectives on the USA

From the Chinese viewpoint, the USA was preventing a peaceful unification of China and Taiwan and China viewed the USA-Taiwan Relations Act and the US military power and arms exports to Taiwan based on it, and the Japan-US Security Treaty as greatest hindrances to reunification. That was a major reason why China was feverishly

modernising its armed forces. For the PLA it was its 'noble mission' to block dissolution of the homeland. Immediate target of PLA's buildup and modernisation was to create military power potential to dissuade, such armed forces as that of the USA, to come to the assistance of Taiwan in the event of use of force by China for re-unification.

Fundamentals of the US policies towards Taiwan were governed by 'One-China' policy, three communiqués and Taiwan Relations Act. The USA had welcomed and encouraged Cross- Strait dialogue as a process which contributed to reduction of tension and to an environment conducive to eventual peaceful resolution of outstanding differences between both sides. The USA believed that differences between Taipei and Beijing ought to be resolved by people on both sides of the Strait themselves and had consistently stated that its abiding interest was that the process be peaceful. It was clear that the USA opposed any unilateral decision that would change status-quo and that the matters related to Taiwan's future must be solved peacefully and in a manner which was acceptable in its entirety to Taiwan. In this the USA would endeavour to maintain a balance between China and Taiwan. However, in case of use of force by China against Taiwan, the USA would get involved.

President Bush had welcomed Ma's election as "power of Taiwan's democracy." He saw new opportunity for China and Taiwan to resolve their differences peacefully through direct dialogue. However, while he welcomed relaxation of tension in Taiwan Strait, it was argued that the USA would hope the new Ma administration too, would maintain China-Taiwan military balance for the sake of stability of the 'Strait'. Against this backdrop, the USA was pleased with Ma's policy of spending three per cent of Taiwan's GDP on defence and its continuing purchase of arms from them.

The Indian Perspective

Indian delegation had discussed South Asian, Central Asian and Asia-Pacific politico-security issues with other delegations, with emphasis on China, given its prominence in all three regions. Feedback received was of cautious optimism amidst a general backdrop of improving bilateral relations but occasional pin-pricks could not be ignored. Emerging grand strategy of China in South Asian context was that of limiting India. This was being achieved by keeping boundary issue alive as a strategic lever. China was also engaged in reducing Indian leverage in its neighbourhood through trade and infrastructure concessions, port building and through military sales - what was termed as an attempt to create a 'String of Pearls' for strategic encirclement of India.

A perspective also emerged that improvement in cross strait relations or future unification would have serious strategic impact on India with unresolved boundary issue and the challenge posed by simultaneous growth of two major players in constrained Asian landscape. Taiwanese side alluded to reports of redeployment of forces from the Eastern theatre towards Tibet and opposite Myanmar in such an eventuality.

Session II of the dialogue dealt with 'Political-Military Relationship of PLA' and saw a near unanimity of perceptions between all three sides. Relationship between Politburo (PB) of Communist Party of China (CPC) and Central Military Commission (CMC) was essentially seen as reflection of status of civil-military relations in China as this relationship had undergone evolution. In revolutionary era, Red Army was merely an armed instrument of CPC, to be used to achieve Communist Party's military and strategic ends. Control of the Army was always in the hands of CPC and the Red Army was never allowed to dominate CPC. With three decades of reforms and growing professionalism of the PLA, Party-Army relationship had evolved into more of a civil-military relationship.

Structure of power in China was largely based on three pillars: CPC, State apparatus and the PLA. In 1954, the Chinese constitution stipulated that command of the PLA lay with the State apparatus - with the PRC President - then Chairman Mao. In 1959, Mao relinquished the post of President to Liu Shaoqi. However, to regain his dwindling control over CPC, the Cultural Revolution was launched. During this period, as per the 1975 and 1978 constitutions, the command of PLA reverted to Chairman of CPC (Chairman Mao). Deng Xiaoping had launched a decade long reform process after becoming Chairman CMC in 1981. The 1982 Constitution reverted command of PLA to PRC President. During this period, State CMC was also created in order to formalise the role of military within government structure. China, therefore, had two CMCs - Party and State. To ensure integrity of command, membership of both Party CMC and State CMC was the same. Theoretically, Party CMC was elected by CPCs' Central Committee, and State CMC by National Peoples' Congress (NPC). In some ways, State CMC was weaker in position and actual strength lay with Party CMC.

The highest party body, PB Standing Committee consisted only of civilians, and the highest body pertaining to military matters (CMC) was overwhelmingly manned by military persons, and there was a clear trend towards further

separation of civil and military power. It is difficult to say, however, if this separation was being driven by a need, felt for a professional PLA – to meet the challenges of information centred, technologically advanced, asymmetric warfare, or whether it was increasing professionalism of the PLA that was leading to this separation.

It is also important to note that in emerging civil leadership (4th generation), there was hardly any experience of military matters. Among the so called future 5th generation leaders, it is only Xi Jinping who has served as mishu (personal secretary) of the Defence Minister from 1979-82. In the past, many in CPC's civil posts were retired PLA officers, or some civil leaders who could gain familiarity with work of military by working as Political Commissars, or by cultivating close links with the military. This does not appear to be the case for new civil leadership of China.

Interestingly, in the Chinese System, state apparatus is not a party to military decision making in the CMC. This is largely due to the fact that the head of the state apparatus, Chinese Premier (currently Wen Jiabao) is not a CMC member. Though Minister of National Defence (MND), who is a member of State Council, is a member of the CMC, the fact remains that the operational command and control of the PLA lies with Party CMC, and not with MND. In China, MND only has a role of liaising with foreign militaries and governments. This peculiar structure has meant that only the President remained a high level link between highest civil leadership and highest military leadership (He is also Chairman of the National Security Leading Small Group (LSG), Foreign Affairs LSG and Taiwan LSG – all of which had PLA membership).

Thus, a top only decision making, not involving state apparatus and little horizontal communication, risked resulting in lack of coordination among various agencies. It is felt that this ambiguity could be dangerous for highly charged, or escalating situations, as it could lead to miscalculation by any side involved. In such situations, Chinese foreign ministry was not necessarily going to be in the loop, as was illustrated by the example of anti-satellite (ASAT) test. China conducted ASAT test on 11 January 2007. Apparently Foreign Ministry was in dark, because it kept denying the Test until the USA went public with its knowledge of ASAT on 17 January. Chinese Foreign ministry finally acknowledged it only on 23 January. This incident raised questions regarding functioning of decision making process in China, systems for a coordinated response strategy, crisis management, managing international perceptions of China's strategic moves and so on.

Finally, unique structure of military decision making in China could lead to a situation where one individual, who was not head of the government, could still have command and control of the PLA by virtue of remaining Chairman of the CMC. This had happened twice in the past, when both Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin did not step down from the post of CMC Chairman after stepping down from their other political posts. These were unique circumstances when PRC President was not CMC Chairman, meaning that no one in the Chinese Government had command and control over the PLA.

In the present era, with strong emphasis on collective leadership, this was not likely to happen. Earlier when there was one supreme leader like Deng Xiaoping who also had extremely good links with PLA, this arrangement could work. However, it was not certain if such an arrangement would continue to work in present time when President was more of a 'First' among 'Equals'. Clearer delineation and bifurcation of civil and military affairs, continued professionalisation of the PLA, cross-linking at high level, and a perceived ignorance of military matters would all have a direct, though perhaps unintended outcome of lessening of civil control over military. How this would be managed remains to be seen.

Session III of the dialogue dealt with 'Non-Traditional Threats to Security: Maritime Dimension'. In this session too there was a near congruity of perspectives as far as an understanding of maritime threats and opportunities today was concerned, particularly in respect of the Asia-Pacific region. All three sides were agreed on the fact that while Maritime environment presented a valuable resource base with discovery of oil and minerals, fisheries and cheapest mode of transport for global trade, the earlier perceptions of seemingly endless abundance had given way to consciousness of scarcity with its attendant implications for maritime law and security resulting in a shift from freedom of seas to greater control and regulation. This has brought about increased sovereignty claims over ocean spaces and has been legally sanctified after United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III) leading to increased disputes relating to maritime sovereignty claims.

There were two distinct schools of thought. In Japanese perspective sea lanes through Malacca - Singapore Strait, South China Sea and East China Sea were regional life lines of the North East Asian countries and in a sense 'Achilles Heel' of the world economy. In their view, trans regional connectivity of SLOCs make for what is sometimes called "Broad Sea Lane" or inter regional dimension for their security. In their perspective, the above viewpoint creates

necessity for regional maritime cooperation from the perspective of SLOC security. They highlighted, within the above context, common basic values between India - Japan - the USA and Taiwan, together with the need for collaboration between Indian Ocean Region and Oceania South Pacific Region

The Japanese side highlighting the importance of the Indian Ocean Region emphasised the need to convert this major economic and security artery from an arc of instability to inseparability i.e. coordination and cooperation effort to connect the two economically dynamic regions. Impetus for such a cooperation from the Japanese perspective is provided by growing mutual bilateral relations between India, the USA and Japan. It was argued that such a multilateral Maritime Security Coalition could develop into Broad Maritime Security Cooperation with other democratic maritime power groups.

The Indian side on other hand focussed on good maritime governance to deal with growing challenges of piracy and terrorism. Maintaining that dealing with these challenges was the responsibility of coastal states it emphasised that this, first and foremost, required focus on securing of littorals. Furthermore, non traditional threats were inseparable from international security concerns and coexist with maritime sovereignty, offshore infrastructure etc. Highlighting growing vulnerabilities, the Indian side discussed new challenges at sea to include restricted operational space at ports and other locations, opaque and amorphous maritime environment, lax governance and poor security, and focussed on the need to replicate land capabilities at sea to deal with the challenges of Low Intensity Maritime Environment. In terms of changing tactics; hijacking of speedboats to collide with oil tankers or Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) carriers; using boats as platforms for dispersal of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) agents; using vessels as tools of disruption at critical choke points; and use of IEDs, submersibles, high-speed boats, and mini submarines was emphasised.

As a strategy to deal with this threat the Indian side highlighted changes in focus ‘from the land to the sea’ as against the old notion of just ‘at sea’. Towards this they emphasised on degrading the land capabilities of the asymmetric actors. An effective strategy, the Indian delegation highlighted, required political will, institutional synergies, operational endurance and cooperative threat engagement strategies.

Conclusion

The salient points that emerged during discussions in the various sessions of the fourth dialogue were:-

- (a) While participating countries were at ease with economic growth of China, worrisome fact was the unprecedented defence modernisation programmes and rapidly growing military might of China.
 - (b) Of special concern was the build up of maritime and aerospace power of China.
 - (c) Both Taiwan and Japan were especially keen on creating a maritime security alliance of democratic countries in Asia-Pacific region including the USA, Australia, India and Singapore.
 - (d) In pursuance of the above aims, to enlarge existing trilateral strategic dialogue to multilateral Asia-Pacific Security Conference.
- The dialogue once again provided a forum for deliberating upon issues of common concern and understanding of different perspectives. An important aspect of the ‘Trilateral Dialogue’ is that it provides an understanding of South and East Asian perspectives which in a way contributes to its uniqueness.

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