

INTERNATIONAL FLEET REVIEW (IFR) SERIES

Beyond Altruism: The ‘Unstated’ Signals during Fleet Reviews

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The Indian Navy will be holding its second International Fleet Review (IFR) in February 2016 and this important event showcasing India’s global maritime outreach is being held at Visakhapatnam, the headquarters of Eastern Naval Command. As is the case with similar international maritime engagements, the theme of this event ‘United through the Oceans’ is predicated on fostering global cooperation and synergistic collaboration. Such themes are the norm for similar events being organized by other countries that are usually celebratory or commemorative in nature. To cite, the first IFR by the Indian Navy in 2001 at Mumbai on the theme of ‘Bridges of Friendship’ was a celebration of 50 years of India as a republic.

Traditionally, assemblage of warships for ‘fleet reviews’ - where the majority of the navy takes part or ‘review of the fleet’ when the naval power of specific geography is on display, were a prelude to war or an explicit show of force to deter adventurism by a potential adversary. Despite emphasizing historical recall or global cooperation in contemporary context, such displays of naval (or sea power) are also meant to convey strategic signals, politico-diplomatic intent and military posture that transcends mere symbolism and cooperative postulations. The reason for such ‘implied’ signalling arise from the proposition of a relatively ‘permissive’ regime that prevails in the world’s oldest commons where power, politics, force, technology and, not in the least, the geography remain an integral part of the larger logic of the seas.

This article examines some of these ‘covert’ pointers that remain ‘below the horizon’ during international fleet reviews which are meant for both internal and external audiences.

The first important signal that the host nation wishes to put across through IFR is the importance of naval and maritime context in national strategic calculus. More often than not, events at sea especially those far from home waters are not given due weight as compared to continental issues. Such a trend is not unusual since land-centric interests come with the quantifiable and emotive ‘home and hearth’ connotations whereas the seas in general, make ‘esoteric contribution’ to national well-being and uninterrupted progress of multifarious national activities, well beyond the perceptible horizon.¹ This historical trend is of particular relevance for India where its relations with two of the largest territorial neighbours, China and Pakistan, remains complex whereas it enjoys a favourable maritime neighbourhood facilitated by a balanced and strong navy. Events such as IFR help in reinforcing the military maritime narrative to national security discourse by bringing home the ‘opportunity costs’ of multidimensional naval capacity and capabilities. Recent emphasis on maritime themes by the national leadership and strategic community is also a sign of an emerging ‘globalist approach’ to international relations where India is seen a key player. For the domestic audience, IFR are a platform to display the extended reach and capabilities of ‘maritime military forces’ besides a message to the international community that ‘use or threat of force’ remains an option for safeguarding national interests, however far flung these maybe.

Another important message through IFRs is to reiterate the host nation’s ‘arrival’ on the maritime stage and by extension, an indirect signal that it is no longer a ‘rule follower’ but aspires to be a ‘rule maker and shaper’ of the security environment at sea. IFR in 2016 is meant to emphasize that India is an important stakeholder in the sub-regional, regional and, global maritime dynamics. This is evident from Indian Navy’s recently released Maritime Security Strategy (MSS) titled ‘*Ensuring Secure Seas*’ where it is stated that one of the key result area is to “...contribute to shaping a favourable and positive maritime environment, to enhance security therein....promote security and stability at sea, and enhance cooperation, mutual understanding and interoperability...”.² This indicates that India and the

Indian Navy is ready to assume a lead role in the emerging global maritime security architecture, regime building and ocean governance efforts. This axiom is further amplified where the strategy document brings out the tenets of “peace, stability and security” undergirding the net maritime security paradigm, an aspect to which the Indian Navy attaches pronounced importance, in the times to come.³

A further signal meant to be conveyed through the February 2016 IFR is about the geography of strategic salience. More often than not, extant and rising powers have attempted an alignment between their geo-political and geo-strategic imperatives to critical geographies in question by focussing strategic capital through politico-diplomatic engagements, enhanced economic linkages and military potential, either to retain *status quo* or seek more space for manoeuvre.⁴ As mentioned earlier, the 2001 IFR was held at Mumbai on India’s western seaboard whereas the second IFR will be held on the east coast. The geographies of both the IFRs are evidence of a ‘balanced posture and equal importance’ that the Indian Navy attaches to the Indian Ocean and beyond and its ‘primary and secondary areas of interest’ that have expanded significantly since the 2007 Maritime Military Strategy. In the 2015 strategy document, these ‘areas of interest’ encompass the entire seascape from the West African littoral to the Central Pacific in the East.⁵ This is suggestive of a tack to the emerging construct of Indo-Pacific from the hitherto traditional primacy accorded to the Indian Ocean.⁶ In equal measure, the holding of IFR on eastern seaboard reinforces the transition from ‘Look East’ to ‘Act East’ policy where the content of such engagements have now acquired ‘strategic undertones’ from the earlier economic orientation of mid-1990s.⁷

Fleet reviews serve as a platform for demonstrating national and not just naval technology quotients. The proposition by a British historian, chronicling the rise of Royal Navy, that an ocean going ship, be it of commercial or military character, represents the epitome of human imagination and diverse technologies still holds true.⁸ The diversity in hull forms ranging from traditional to novel and exotic, means of propulsion from sail to nuclear, platform management techniques that are becoming increasingly networked with the variety, range and effects of naval weapons and sensors are a few important areas representing disparate technologies for creating operationally relevant capabilities at sea. The IFR will also be an

occasion to demonstrate Indian Navy's mantra of a builder's navy. The Navy has used such occasions to display indigenous warship-building capabilities in distant waters while participating in such events abroad. To cite, INS Shayadri, the latest indigenous multi-mission frigate with advanced stealth features participated in the October 2015 IFR at Sagami Bay, Japan.⁹ This trend is particularly visible since the mid-1980s when INS Godavari participated in 1984 IFR at the US. This warship was truly the first indigenously designed warship where an interesting mix of western and eastern origin technologies were integrated. The significant improvements in naval design and construction were used to symbolise national technological advancements when the ship graced the cover of *The Time* magazine in April 1989, on the theme of "*Super India: The Next Military Power*".

IFR is also an event to symbolise changes in politico-diplomatic relationships. The participation of INS Godavari in the 1984 IFR at New York mentioned earlier, was a sign of emerging rapprochement in the Indo-US relationship which had remained adversarial and 'estranged' during the Cold War era especially after the 1971 India-Pakistan conflict.¹⁰ The participation or non-participation in fleet reviews can also be a useful bellwether for measuring the current trajectory of international relationships. For example, China did not invite Japan for the 2014 IFR at Qingdao (later cancelled due to MH 370 crash) due to the ongoing tensions over the Senkaku/Diayou Islands. The media reports at that time had suggested that the US would not participate on such selectivity by the Chinese side.¹¹ The fact that People's Liberation Army (Navy) [PLAN] did not take part in the October 2015 IFR at Tokyo indicates that the Sino-Japanese relations continue to remain constrained.¹² While the Chinese Navy was not represented at the 2001 IFR at Mumbai, it would be participating in the 2016 edition at Visakhapatnam. It is pertinent to mention that the Indian Navy had participated in the 2009 and 2014 International Fleet Reviews hosted by China. Further, both countries are part of independent grouping engaged in anti-piracy patrols off the Horn of Africa (HoA). These trends are suggestive of Beijing's perception that the Indian Ocean is a strategically relevant maritime space and India is an important stakeholder in the region that it needs to engage. The participation of other major naval powers in the 2016 IFR like Australia, France, Japan, Russia, South Africa, UK and the US in addition to the majority of Indian Ocean navies is proof that these nations find

favour with India' maritime strategic outreach efforts and consider the Indian Ocean as an important maritime space.

Empirically, all the great and rising powers have an oceanic outlook or at least have attempted to be one. This can be seen from the Greek Thalassocracies, Phoenicians and the Romans in the ancient times to the Portugal, Spain, Dutch and the British thereafter. The rise of the US and the erstwhile Soviet Navy in the post-Cold War context and the recent significant naval capability accretion by China as well as India point to the proposition that all players with rising strategic aspirations have paid close attention to the maritime dimension of international security. As argued elsewhere, the maritime domain provides for demonstration of technology, reach, capability, capacity and intent by the permissive character of oceanic commons.¹³ The multidimensional and cross-domain options afforded by the seas have been historically used to convey strategic signals about the politico-diplomatic and military-security posture through outreaches such as the IFR. While the overt message during such events has invariably remained about fostering cooperation and providing global goods, the 'not so obvious' aspects of power, geo-politics, shared maritime interests but different approaches and, geography would remain irrevocably linked. This axiom is a rhythm of history and is not likely to change in the foreseeable future.

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Notes and References

¹K Raja Menon, *Maritime Strategy and Continental Wars*, (London: Frank Cass, 1998), p. 37.

²Integrated Headquarters of Ministry of Defence (Navy), *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, 2015, p. 11. The concept is explained at Chapter 5, pp. 78-101.

³Ibid, p. 81.

⁴Jakub J Grygiel, *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), pp. 23-24.

⁵Ibid, p. 32, 34-35.

⁶Ibid, p. ii.

⁷For the drivers necessitating changes from Look East to Act East policy see, Ministry of External Affairs, "Opening Statement by Prime Minister at the 12th India-ASEAN Summit", 12 November 2014, <http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24230/Opening+Statement+by+Prime+Minister+at+the+12th+IndiaASEAN+Summit+Nay+Pyi+Taw+Myanmar>, (accessed 20 December 2015).

⁸William Laird Clowes cited in Geoffrey Jules Marcus, *Heart of Oak: A Survey of British Sea Power in the Georgian Era*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 10.

⁹"Indian Naval Ship in Japan to Participate in Fleet Review", *New Indian Express*, 15 October 2015, <http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/Indian-Naval-Ship-in-Japan-to-Participate-in-Fleet-Review/2015/10/15/article3080135.ece>, (accessed 20 December 2015).

¹⁰Dennis Kux, *India and the United States: Estranged Democracies, 1941-1991* (Washington: NDU Press, 1992), pp. 303-312.

¹¹"U.S. to skip China fleet review after Japan shunned", *The Reuters*, 04 April 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-military-idUSBREA3307C20140404>, (accessed 31 December 2015).

¹²"Japan's Fleet Review: Abe Boards US Warship for First Time Ever", Franz-Stefan Gady, *The Diplomat*, 20 October 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/japans-fleet-review-abe-boards-us-warship-for-first-time-ever/>, (accessed 03 January 2016).

¹³For a detailed exposition on this theme, see George Modelski and William R Thompson, *Seapower in Global Politics, 1494-1993*, (Plymouth: Macmillan Press, 1988).