

America's Expectation versus India's Expediency: India as a Regional 'Net Security Provider'

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During the 'Raisina Dialogue' held in March 2016 at New Delhi, Admiral Harry Harris, the Commander of United States (US) Pacific Command (CINCPAC) referred to the first ever tri-lateral (Australia, Japan and India) ¹ ministerial discussions held in September 2015, which had addressed "maritime security – including freedom of navigation patrols", and proposed "expanding this tri-lateral to a quadrilateral venue", also involving the US.² Later, while addressing questions, the crux of his message was that the high level of 'inter-operability' achieved during complex India-US *Malabar* exercises should not be an end into itself, but translated into "coordinated operations".³ The US Admiral thus prodded India – albeit implicitly – to undertake 'coordinated freedom of navigation patrols' in the South China Sea (SCS). Evidently, such patrols could be used to restrain China's growing military assertiveness in the SCS, and the process of legal norm-building in its favour in the maritime-territorial disputes with the other littoral countries of the SCS.

India has consistently upheld the US position in terms of being non-party to the SCS disputes, dispute-resolution through the well-established norms of international law, and freedom of navigation in international waters, including in the SCS. Nonetheless, the Indian Defence Minister Mr Manohar Parrikar lost little time to clarify India's position, saying that "As of now, India has never taken part in any joint patrol; we only do joint exercises. The question of joint patrol does not arise."⁴

The case indicates an 'apparent' mismatch between the US expectation from India, and what New Delhi is willing to deliver to its 'strategic partner'. This could be contextualized and explained through analytical insight into the salient policy pronouncements from either side. The most instructive among these are those articulating India's role as a 'net security provider' in Asia. This essay aims to analyse

such role to understand the ‘aberration’ in the otherwise healthy trajectory of India-US strategic relationship contemporary times, thereby enabling a better comprehension of the Indian perspective, and its compelling strategic and foreign policy considerations.

America’s Articulation

The ‘net security provider’ concept emerged during the 2009 ‘Shangri La Dialogue’, when the then US Secretary of Defence Mr Robert Gates stated,

“When it comes to India, we have seen a watershed in our relations – cooperation that would have been unthinkable in the recent past... In coming years, we look to India to be a partner and net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond.”⁵

This sentiment of the USA was thereafter reiterated on various occasions – both formally and otherwise – including in the 2010 US ‘Quadrennial Defense Review’ (QDR). The statement in QDR-10 predicted,

“India’s military capabilities are rapidly improving through increased defense acquisitions, and they now include long-range maritime surveillance, maritime interdiction and patrolling, air interdiction, and strategic airlift. India has already established its worldwide military influence through counterpiracy, peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief efforts. As its military capabilities grow, India will contribute to Asia as a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond.”⁶

India’s Articulation

The Indian political leadership and policymakers clearly supported the proposed role for India in principle. Addressing the top brass of the Indian Navy and the Defence Ministry in 2011, the then Indian Defence Minister Mr AK Antony emphatically assured India's maritime neighbours of an “unstinted support for their security and economic prosperity”, and stated the Indian Navy has been:

“mandated to be a net security provider to island nations in the Indian Ocean Region... most of the major international shipping lanes are located along our

island territories. This bestows on us the ability to be a potent and stabilising force in the region”.⁷

More recently, in 2013, the then Prime Minister of India, Dr Manmohan Singh said,

“We have...sought to assume our responsibility for stability in the Indian Ocean Region. We are well positioned... to become a net provider of security in our immediate region and beyond.”⁸

These seminal articulations represent a valuable take-off point for the analysis on India’s projected role as a ‘Net Security Provider’, which – for the sake of objectivity – is divided into three parts, with each one analysing a specific fact of India’s broader national-strategic imperative for it to fulfil such role. These aspects are Geographical Area; Capacity and Capability; and Cultural Ethos.

Geographical Area

Primary Area of Interest

Notably, by virtue of its geographic location and peninsular disposition, India’s most critical national interests are closely connected with events in the Indian Ocean, broadly in its northern part; and more specifically in the areas categorized in the Indian Maritime-Security Strategy, 2015 (IMSS-15) as the ‘primary areas of maritime interest’.⁹

In nearly all articulations on India’s role as a ‘net security provider’ – both Indian and American – whereas the ‘Indian Ocean’ is the ‘common thread’, the phrase “...and beyond” has never been specifically defined. Arguably, the phrase would refer more accurately to the Persian Gulf or Red Sea that are India’s ‘primary areas of maritime interest’, rather than the SCS that – notwithstanding India’s increasing economic and strategic stakes here – is the ‘secondary area of maritime interest’. (Such classification does not, however, undermine the criticality of the SCS for India’s vital interests). In this context, India’s Professor Mahapatra aptly enquires:

“If India and the U.S. have not contemplated similar kind of patrol in Indian Ocean, what could justify India and U.S. patrolling waters of South China Sea?”¹⁰

Geo-Strategic Frontiers

As a related though distinct concept of ‘Geo-Strategic Frontiers’ is also relevant here. As part of a country’s military-strategic calculus, it refers to the geographical boundaries necessary for it to achieve ‘strategic depth’ against a potential State adversary. The recent analyses by American analysts such as the one by Professor James Holmes on ‘Get Ready, India: China’s Navy is Pushing West’¹¹ (towards the Indian Ocean) is indeed instructive for India, and adds to the trends that were noted and analysed in India beginning nearly a decade ago.¹² However, it is unlikely that India would need to extend its strategic depth vis-à-vis China eastwards beyond the Southeast Asian straits. Notably, these maritime choke-points constitute a major strategic challenge for the PLA Navy itself.

The ‘Geo-Strategic Frontiers’ of a country are also contingent upon the ‘capacity’ and ‘capability’ its own and friendly military forces to be able to influence events in the area within the said frontiers. This aspect is addressed below.

Capacity and Capability¹³

In 2012, the IDSA undertook a study on Out of Area Contingency (OOAC) missions by Indian armed forces. The study deduced that:

“the reach of current air and sealift capabilities means that, realistically speaking, India can conduct OOAC operations only within the Indian Ocean region (IOR).”¹⁴

Even while India’s strategic sealift and airlift capacities are being augmented, the aforesaid finding of the study is likely to remain valid in the foreseeable future. The same is true for India’s ability for other forms of maritime power projection.

The new Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS-15) aptly emphasises on the term ‘net security’, rather than ‘net provider (of security)’. Further, it pegs India’s role as a ‘net security provider’ to the question of ‘capability’. Accordingly, it defines the term ‘net security’ as:

“a state of actual security available in an area, upon balancing prevailing threats, inherent risks and rising challenges in a maritime environment, against the ability to monitor, contain and counter all of these.”¹⁵

The analysis of IMMS-15 clearly indicates that the Indian Navy seeks to contribute to maritime security and stability in its primary and secondary areas of interest, broadly constituting the entire swath of the Indo-Pacific region. For doing so, it is not only developing its own capabilities for distant operations, but is also providing ‘capacity building’ and ‘capability enhancement’ assistance to friendly countries of the region. However, since the November 2008 seaborne terrorist attacks against Mumbai, the sub-conventional threats to India’s coastal and offshore security will continue to pose major challenges for the Navy to deftly balance its force accretion and modernisation between the two competing imperatives of ‘blue water’ and ‘brown water’ operations.¹⁶

Cultural Ethos

As stated above, IMSS-15 dwells upon India’s regional role as a “provider of net security” rather than a ‘net provider of security’. Ostensibly, an additional aim is to dispel any notion that India seeks to act as a hegemonic power or a ‘policeman’ in the region. Such intent flows from India’s cultural ethos and is closely linked to its evolution as a modern nation-State.

Another facet of cultural ethos is the pride that Indians identify themselves with based on their civilizational genesis, something more profound and deep-seated than the concept of ‘nationalism’. Together with the afore-mentioned non-hegemonic stance, this facet manifests in India’s long-standing policy of not involving itself in coalition military operations, except those mandated by the United Nations. This policy also manifests in the operational domain. Unless operating under the UN flag, Indian military forces are averse to undertaking ‘joint’ operations (like joint patrols), since such operations would involve placing Indian forces under foreign Command and Control (C²). The Indian Defence Minister’s negation of the possibility of ‘joint (naval) patrols’ may be seen in this context.

Notwithstanding, the statement by the US CINCPAC at the Raisina Dialogue deserves more attention than it has received. He proposed turning India-US “joint (naval) exercises” into “coordinated (naval) operations”. His preference for the term

‘coordinated’ rather than ‘joint’ is noteworthy. While in common English parlance, the two terms may be considered synonymous, the difference is significant in ‘operational’ terms. Whereas a ‘joint’ operation involves a unified C² of military forces, in a ‘coordinated’ operation, the forces maintain their respective national C² structures. In the past, the Indian Navy has indeed undertaken ‘coordinated’ operations with the US Navy on various occasions. The examples are the 2002 Escort Mission of US High-Value ships in the Malacca Straits and the 2004-05 Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) mission in the aftermath the Indian Ocean Tsunami. Even during the more recent anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden involving escort of merchant vessels, the Indian Navy coordinated its operations with the US-led coalition naval forces, as well as with the other navies deployed for the mission. The notable commonality among these operations, however, was that these were all conducted in the Indian Ocean (or its contiguous straits).

Concluding Remarks

The subtext of the US-India Joint Statement of January 2015 on “our diversified bilateral strategic partnership”¹⁷ clearly indicates the broader strategic convergence and the fact that India needs the strategic partnership of America as much as the other way around. However, occasional dissonance in the bilateral relationship cannot be ignored. Notwithstanding the diplomatic ‘refrain’ as a natural occurrence between two major democracies, the dissonance cannot be slighted, particularly in the light of the emerging regional security environment. Also, the discord may not lie in Indian’s longstanding foreign policy tenet of ‘Strategic Autonomy’ (or ‘Non-Alignment 2.0’), as it is usually touted to be. As in case of a few other facets of the bilateral relationship, the occasional discord mostly manifests at the functional level. In context of India-US military strategic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, the aberrations at this level could be addressed by bridging national policymaking with strategy formulation of the military forces.

Given the ‘overstretch’ of America’s maritime-military resources, and its increasing contribution to the Indian Navy’s ‘capacity building’ and ‘capability enhancement’ over the years, its expectation for India to provide for regional security and stability in the maritime-configured Indo-Pacific region is not misplaced. At the operational level too, the US expectation for India to convert ‘joint’ naval exercises into ‘coordinated’ operations may be justifiable. However, it seems that India’s

broader strategic imperatives in terms of the three key facets of Geographical Area, Capacity and Capability, and Cultural Ethos are not in consonance with such expectations, at least not yet.

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¹³ The ‘capacity’ of a military force refers to its wherewithal in the limited context of its hardware. ‘Capability’ refers to the ability of the force in a more comprehensive sense encompassing not only its physical capacity, but also the conceptual and human components. For details, see Gurpreet S Khurana. *Porthole: Geopolitical, Strategic and Maritime Terms and Concepts* (Pentagon, New Delhi: 2016), pp.30-31

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