

Indo-US Joint Naval Patrol – Plausible Proposal or Rhetoric

Author: Dinesh Yadav *

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Speaking at the Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi on 02 March 2016, Admiral Harry B Harris, Commander, United States Pacific Command, exhorted that the 'Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD)' between India, Japan, Australia and the United States be re-initiated. He further urged India and US to be "ambitious together" and along with Japan, Australia and other like-minded nations 'aspire to patrol together anywhere international law allows.' The Admiral, however, did not specify as to where such patrols could be envisaged to be conducted.

The statement on 'Joint Patrol' by Admiral Harris has been made in the backdrop of numerous media reports starting early February 2016, wherein, it was reported that the issue of joint naval patrols had been discussed between the US and India and specifically added that these could include the disputed South China Sea. Pentagon then clarified that the two countries had not taken any decision on conducting joint naval patrols, but stressed that the two countries were exploring ways to expand their defence ties.

Beijing reactions were on expected lines; the press release on the issue stated that "Conducting joint naval patrols with Washington in the South China Sea will do nothing but showing its hostility against Beijing and devastate their strategic mutual trust..." India, on the other hand, clarified that it was not launching joint patrols with the US in the South China Sea.

India and US have ramped up their military ties in recent years. The maritime exercise between the two navies, MALABAR, has been conducted annually since 1992, in which Japan became a permanent partner in October 2015. In the run-up to MALABAR 2015, in July 2015, Washington had advocated for permanently

expanding the scope of MALABAR exercise. In addition, in September 2015, Australia also pushed for its inclusion in the exercise, as was done in 2007.

Among the three countries envisioned to be involved with the US in the MALABAR exercise at the operational level and the QSD on the strategic level, only India would have reservations as it would continue to zealously protect its ability to forge an independent foreign policy. Also, the risks and benefits involved in such a Dialogue, which Beijing might consider as inimical to its interest, would be totally different for India than for the other countries involved. It would, therefore, be fair to argue that, solely based on India's response on the issue, future editions of MALABAR could also involve Australia; and also, the QSD, involving the US, India, Japan and Australia, may re-assert in the near future. Admiral Harris' advocacy about the QSD could, therefore, hold well in the near future.

In respect of the Joint Patrol by the US Navy and the Indian Navy in the South China Sea, as was reported in the media, and in general, as advocated by Admiral Harris, it would be of essence to note that the Indian Navy has never carried out joint patrols with any other country. New Delhi currently follows the policy of only joining an international military effort under the United Nations flag. Accordingly, Indian Navy conducts its anti-piracy operations also independently and has not joined any multi-nation effort in this regard.

Joint Naval Patrol mandates unified Command and Control mechanism. This would, thereby, imply that the naval assets of the concerned countries partaking the joint patrol would be placed under the command of the unified Commander, a proposition that New Delhi would not be comfortable with, as has been exemplified by India's position on Joint Anti Piracy Operations. Traditionally, New Delhi has always zealously guarded its strategic autonomy and, therefore, has been averse to military alliances or even joint operations. Joint patrols involving the Indian Navy, therefore, cannot be envisaged in the near future, unless New Delhi revises its long standing policy on the issue.

Coordinated Patrols, on the other hand, are undertaken by the Indian Navy with several regional navies for enhancing maritime security. Such Patrols, as per the Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS 2015), are conducted in respective waters, on either side of the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL), by naval ships

and aircraft in a coordinated manner, for instance, the Indo-Thai Coordinated Patrol in the Andaman Sea.

As has been highlighted above, the scope of Coordinated Patrols, as defined in the IMSS 2015, is limited to India's maritime neighbours and conducted in respective waters of the concerned countries. Indo-US Coordinated Naval Patrols, accordingly, do not qualify for the Coordinated Patrol, as defined in the IMSS 2015. The two navies, however, as advocated by the US Pacific Commander, could undertake Coordinated Patrols, in their common area of interest, for instance, in the pirate infested region near the Horn of Africa, earmarking their respective areas of responsibilities. It would be interesting to note that the Indian Navy coordinates its 'Escort Missions' in the Gulf of Aden with the other navies operating in the area, including the Combined Task Force (CTF) 151. The scope of Coordinated Patrols, as exemplified in the IMSS 2015, would then need to be accordingly amended to allow Coordinated Patrol between these two navies.

Coming to the South China Sea, India has legitimate stakes for protecting its trade to and from Russia, Japan, China, South Korea, and Southeast Asian nations and energy flow from Sakhalin (Russia) and Vietnam, quite similar to the Chinese economic and strategic interests in the Indian Ocean Region. The presence of the Indian Navy in the South China Sea is as much a foregone conclusion as is the presence of the Chinese navy in the Indian Ocean. Each navy, in coming times, must therefore, get accustomed to the other's presence in their 'supposed backyard'.

Although, India is not party to the contested claims in the South China Sea, it has always advocated freedom of navigation and overflight in the waterway. Further, India has never taken sides in the South China Sea dispute and has been urging the stakeholder countries to resolve the dispute in a peaceful manner in accordance with international law.

Since there are no immediate threats to its interests in the South China Sea, Coordinated Patrols, involving the Indian Navy in the South China Sea, as speculated in some sections of the media, appears to be farfetched at this juncture. However, should a common threat develops; the Indian Navy could keep its option open to undertake Coordinated Patrols in international waters in order to safeguard its interests.

*Commander Dinesh Yadav is a Research Fellow at the National Maritime Foundation (NMF), New Delhi. The views expressed are his own and do not reflect the official policy or position of the NMF, the Indian Navy or the Government of India. He can be reached at dinesh8y@yahoo.com.