

INTERNATIONAL FLEET REVIEW (IFR) SERIES

International Fleet Reviews: Showcasing India's Naval Orientation

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“From the Arctic to the Antarctic and from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean, the sea is one. Because the sea poses a common challenge, those who traversed it depended on each other and developed a special bond. Seafarers of the world, represented by their Navies, have taken a leading role in bringing nations together and one such occasion is a Fleet Review.”¹

Admiral Madhvendra Singh (2001)

Former Indian Navy Chief

In 2001, India hosted the first International Fleet Review (IFR) to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Republic of India wherein 29 navies from around the world participated. With the theme of ‘Bridges of Friendship’, IFR 2001 projected “India’s new relevance in the post-Cold War period”.² Nearly a decade and a half later, the Indian Navy is hosting the second IFR on the theme of ‘United through Oceans’. The event is scheduled for February 2016 off Visakhapatnam on India’s Eastern seaboard.

It is held that the origin of the Fleet Review stems from the British practice of mobilizing the fleet prior to a war or for a show of strength to discourage potential adversaries.³ The practice of reviewing the ships by the reigning monarch or the sovereign head dates back to the 15th century. Since the 19th century, there has been a reduction in the hard power connotation attached to fleet reviews as they are often held for commemorative and celebratory purposes.⁴ Most fleet reviews today are occasions that perform the crucial historical function of revisiting certain past events in the history of the country. The 2001 IFR organized by India commemorating the golden jubilee of the republic and the UK commemorating 200 years of the Battle of Trafalgar in 2005 are among the many examples.

Fleet Reviews today are held where military maritime capabilities are paraded to showcase growing sea power. Depending on one's perception, the IFR is, thus, variously considered as an "exalted mission", "jingoistic hyperbole", and a symbol of "proactive pacifism".⁵

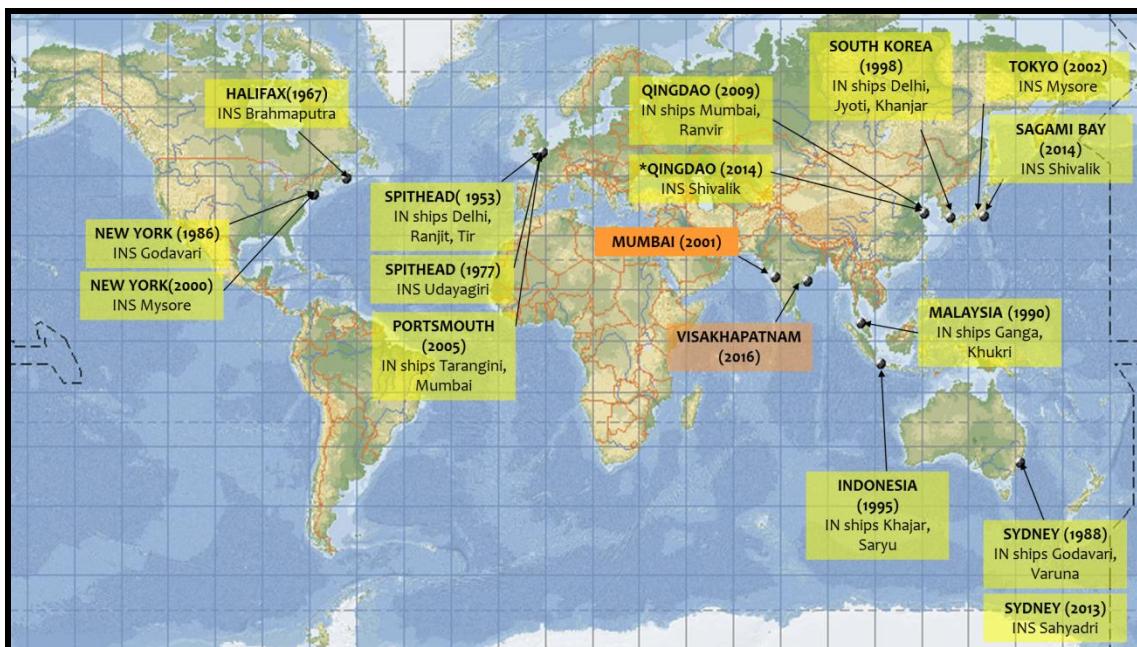


Figure 1: India's Participation in IFRs ⁶

In the past, the Indian Navy (IN) has participated in various fleet reviews around the world as illustrated in figure 1. The IN participated in the first fleet review in June 1953 at Spithead. It was conducted by the UK on the occasion of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. Following this, in June 1967, the Navy was a part of one of the largest fleet reviews conducted by Canada to mark the 100th anniversary of the

Confederation at Halifax.⁷ INS *Brahmaputra* was among 40 warships from 16 countries to participate in the centennial celebrations. The Indian Navy took part in the commemorative review marking the silver jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II in 1977, with the participation of frigate INS *Udayagiri*. This was an historic event since it marked the end of the customary practice of holding a review for coronations and royal jubilees.⁸ The inability of the British to muster a fleet for the golden and diamond jubilee of the reigning monarch was due to the declining capabilities of the Royal Navy.⁹

India's participation in IFR was limited to the commonwealth countries until it was invited by the USA to attend the fleet review conducted in July 1986 on the occasion of the bicentenary celebrations of the Statue of Liberty. This was indicative of global power, especially the USA recognizing India's emergence as a credible naval power.¹⁰ This was also a sign of rapprochement between the world's oldest and largest democracies that were then generally referred to as being 'estranged'.¹¹

In the first four decades of India's independence, the participation in fleet reviews abroad was limited to one per decade. Until the initiation of Look East Policy in 1991, India's IFR engagements were also limited to the western navies. However, this underwent a change with India's expanding maritime interests and power.

The 1990s marked the rise of India and China as two economically resurgent nations that gained global attention. Though dubbed as a counterweight to China's growing strategic influence in the region, the Look East policy was envisioned to enhance India's economic cooperation with the Southeast Asian nations. With the shift in India's strategic focus, there has been a greater involvement with Southeast Asia as attested by India's participation in the IFR commemorating 50 years of the Royal Malaysian Navy in 1990, followed by the participation in the IFR at Jakarta celebrating 50 years of Indonesian Independence in 1995. India was also a participant in the 1998 IFR celebrating the 50th anniversary of South Korea, and attended the IFR at Sydney in 1988 and 2013.¹²

India and Japan have a long history of security cooperation and defence ties. India has participated twice in IFRs organized by Japan—in 2002 and in 2015. Prior to the 2002 IFR conducted in Tokyo, the two countries had established a "Global

Partnership in the 21st Century” in 2000 and, in 2001, held the first edition of the ongoing “Comprehensive Security Dialogue”.¹³

Capacity and Outreach

A newly independent India was surrounded by a volatile international political environment in the Cold War era. The need to address socio-economic quotients at home kept India away from joining the conglomeration of states under the leadership of the USA and the USSR. Thus, India’s foreign policy was aimed at fostering friendship with all nations based on the principle of non-alignment. India remained non-aligned despite many of its neighbours joining either of the two superpower blocks.

Military aid in the form of the naval assets of independent India came from the British. The cost cutting in the Royal Navy in the 1970s had its effects on India as demonstrated by a decline in the supply of naval equipment and vessels by Britain. Unable to meet the technological demands of a rapidly growing Indian Navy, British supplies ceded the way for naval acquisition from the erstwhile USSR.¹⁴ Growing acquisitions coupled with indigenous capabilities have seen India’s naval capacity grow to reasonable proportions in the 1980s. However, significant price escalations and the international political order due to the disintegration of Soviet Union generated some turmoil for naval acquisition. Despite a marked reduction in naval buildup with Soviet assistance in the 1980s, this period is epochal as it coincides with the Indian Navy’s rise to an eminent power in South Asia.¹⁵ By this time, innovations by indigenous ship designers and builders, along with the ability to integrate technology from diverse origins, put India on a path of greater self-sufficiency in naval capabilities.

There have been instances where more than one vessel has participated in reviews abroad. During the first fleet review attended by India in 1953, IN ships *Delhi*, *Ranjit* and *Tir* participated in the event. *INS Godavari* and *STS Varuna* took part in the Australian IFR in 1988. *INS Ganga* and *INS Khukri* participated in the 1990 Malaysia IFR; *INS Khanjar* and *INS Saryu* in Indonesia in 1995; IN ships *Delhi*, *Jyoti* and *Khanjar* in South Korea in 1998 and IN ships *Taragini* and *Mumbai* in UK in 2005.

INS Godavari, the first guided missile frigate with innovations and integrated technology, participated in the 1986 IFR held in the USA. In the post-Cold War period, *INS Mysore*, a guided missile destroyer, took part in the 2000 IFR at New York. The Delhi-class destroyer *INS Mumbai* and Rajput class *INS Ranvir* attended the 2009 review at Qingdao.¹⁶ *INS Shivalik*, a homemade stealth frigate, joined the club of seven ships sent by 10 nations to attend the IFR at Qingdao in 2014¹⁷. It is important to note that these vessels are indigenously constructed and symbolized India's larger quest for self-reliance for defence needs.

IFR and Diplomacy

Invitation and participation in any IFR are symbolic of politico-strategic concerns and the relations among countries. This is evident by the exclusion of Japan by China from the 2014 IFR in Qingdao where People's Liberation Army - Navy (PLAN) did not extend an invitation to the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force. Analysts view that this was due to the row between China and Japan over the sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands, a group of East China Sea Islets.¹⁸ US support for Japan was expressed, and it was reported that the USA may not send its ships to participate in the IFR.

The trajectory of IFR engagement between India and the USA, and India and China also support this proposition. Relations between India and the USA had been considered volatile, hostile, and estranged during the peak of the Cold War, especially following the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation.¹⁹ The USA was apprehensive of India's growing military capabilities and, given this background, it is remarkable that India was invited to join its fleet review.

China did not participate in the 2001 IFR, and it is believed that this may have been because India did not invite Pakistan to the event. However, India participated in the first IFR hosted by China in 2009, indicating a growing willingness to cooperate.²⁰ The year 2014 was declared as a "Year of Friendly Exchanges" between the two countries, and India took part in the exercise connected to the Qingdao IFR hosted by China to commemorate the 65th anniversary of the founding of the PLA-N.²¹ Even though the MH370 crash led to the cancellation of the Qingdao IFR, two maritime events were hosted by China: the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) in which India was an observer member, and elementary passage exercises.

India reciprocated by extending an invitation to China to participate in the 2016 IFR. These engagements—which have led to the participation in IFR—can be seen as a culmination of cooperative efforts that started in the mid-2000s between the two countries.

Conclusion

While the mechanics of the IFR have remained the same, the rationale behind the practice has undergone a change—from being a purely militaristic activity it has become one of symbolism, commemoration, and international cooperation. Departing from the historical objective of mobilizing the fleet for war, building global maritime partnerships has become an important facet of national outreach during the IFR. Such events foster good relations while also serving as a platform for the display of naval might. Emerging defence capabilities and expanding naval aspiration can generate concerns and competition on the maritime military front and the IFR is one tool to allay such concerns and fears, besides promoting cooperation amongst the seafaring community.²²

Navies remain an important instrument of diplomacy, and events such as the IFR are reflective of their multidimensional and multi-functional relevance as against a purely military and traditional security orientation.

While nations focus on security driven maritime strategies and while their maritime interests are defined by geography, the IFR goes a step further in exhibiting the vital interests of the nations. Former president K. R. Narayanan remarked on the occasion of 2001 IFR that the Oceans no longer divide the world but unite it. “The concept of indivisible seas is today a political, economic and strategic reality”, and IFRs are the most appropriate events that cement this reality.²³

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