The Indian Navy and India's Overseas Citizens: Operations Sukoon and Rahat

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The primary role of any government is to safeguard its people at home and abroad. India has a significant number of its citizens living in different parts of the world. The security of these overseas citizens is a moral obligation of India. But there are instances when this obligation to security has been inadequate. One such instance involved a dhow, the *MV Bhakti Sagar* with 21 Indians on board, which was hijacked by Somali pirates near the Gulf of Aden in February 2006.[1] The Indian Navy (IN) had the destroyer *INS Mumbai* in the vicinity. The government refused to act on the incident despite IN's willingness to perform a rescue operation. India was unsure of its legitimacy in the area, and feared the backlash of West Asian countries and North Africa.[2] The failure to honour its values drew criticism, and the incident proved to be a timely reminder to the government to contribute more to the cause of the safety of its citizens. The Non-combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) performed thereafter by the IN has been instrumental in trying to set the priorities straight.

This issue brief aims at providing a background to successful Non-combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO), namely Operation *Sukoon* and Operation *Rahat*, undertaken by the IN. The dynamics associated with such operations are explained, which include such issues as the Indian citizens in the region, a reactive-proactive approach, and India's soft power.

Non-combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO)

The Indian Maritime Doctrine (2009) notes,

There are increasing numbers of Indian citizens who work and reside in various parts of the world. They are important contributors to the progress of their countries of residence as well as to India. In view of insecurity and instability in some parts of the world, Indian citizens there may require to be evacuated under arrangements and control of the Government of India, which could be done by civil or military means, by land, air or sea. The IN may be tasked with undertaking such Non-combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO).[3]

Operation *Sukoon* and Operation *Rahat* are two such operations that have been widely acclaimed the world over. It is imperative to have an overview of these two operations that highlight the versatile role the IN has played in securing India's overseas citizens.

Operation Sukoon

Operation *Sukoon* was orchestrated by the IN to evacuate Indian nationals, along with Sri Lankan, Nepalese and few Lebanese nationals, who were caught in the conflict in Lebanon during the 2006 Lebanon War. The conflict between Israel and the Hezbollah militants intensified, with Israel taking the route of a military offensive. Around 12,000 Indians and a few hundred foreign nationals were left stranded needing help, of which around 2000 were believed to be in the conflict zone.

At around the same time, four Indian warships were in the Mediterranean Sea returning from a 'goodwill' trip to Greece. The naval task force consisting of the destroyer *INS Mumbai*, the frigates *INS Brahmaputra* and *INS Betwa*, and the fleet tanker *INS Shakti* were directed to help the distressed people. The task force was successful in evacuating 2,280 Indian citizens and personnel from friendly countries.[4] Operation *Sukoon* of IN was recognised as a landmark achievement, and drew accolades from around the world for its ability to provide succour.[5]

Operation Rahat

In March 2015, the Yemeni crisis began to unravel after the military intervention by the Royal Saudi Air Force led a coalition of Arab states against the Shiite Houthi rebels in Yemen. The ground situation in the region took a turn for the worse when the Houthi rebels toppled the government of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. Thousands of Indians found themselves in a precarious situation, having ignored the initial advisories given out by the India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) to avoid travel, and to vacate Yemen.[6] Upon directives by the government, the Indian Armed Forces carried out the civilian evacuation mission known as Operation *Rahat*.

The IN deployed the patrol vessel *INS Sumitra*, the destroyer *INS Mumbai*, the frigate *INS Tarkash* and two ferries belonging to Lakshadweep—the *MV Kavaratti* and the *MV Coral*—to carry out the evacuation operation. The operation also involved the deployment of C-17 aircraft of the Indian Air Force (IAF) and Air India flights to airlift people. The combined efforts led to the evacuation of 5,600 people, including 4,640 Indians and 960 foreign nationals from 41 countries.[7] The readiness shown by the Indian forces at such a time of distress did not go unnoticed, and was applauded on the successful completion of the mission.

Dynamics of Naval Role in Securing Overseas Citizens

The success of Operations *Sukoon* and Operation *Rahat* has set the benchmark for the role that the IN could play in providing humanitarian assistance. Understanding what makes them stand out from one another essentially helps one understand the incorporation of the navy as a contributing factor to the overall security of overseas citizens. An analysis of the dynamic aspects of these missions reveals the cornerstones of India's commitment to overseas citizens.

The first aspect is the number of Indian citizens in the region. It is estimated that more than 6 million Indians work in West Asian countries. They are the source of huge remittance flows into India which stood at around 30.8 per cent of the total US$ 72 billion in 2015.[8] India receives the largest share—around 12 per cent—of total

world remittances, which amounts to nearly 4 per cent of the country's GDP.[9] This is a reflection of the increased involvement of Indians overseas, contributing to the overall growth of the region as well as of their home country, considering the fact that the remittances grew from around US$ 2.1 billion in 1991 to US$ 24 billion in 2006.[10]

The successive governments at the centre did not fail to notice this upward shift in capital inflows—one that was relatively hassle free and steadier than the much hyped Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). These remittances also exceeded India's earnings from high technology exports.[11] Operation *Sukoon* and Operation *Rahat* carried out by the IN should be understood in the context of the government accepting these facts. For far too long, the safety of Indians in the region has seldom received the kind amount of attention it receives in other parts of the world. There was a growing realisation that India could not afford to ignore either its people or the region since it would prove to be detrimental to its economy in the long run.

The second aspect is the reactive-proactive approach followed by India. India has always been criticised for its lack of initiative in maintaining the security of its overseas citizens caught in conflicts. This was evident in the execution of Operation *Sukoon* in July 2006. Although the operation has been termed a success, there was ample scope for the better execution of the operation. Undoubtedly, the IN played a crucial role in the success of the mission. But it happened only as a reactive measure—that is, after the conflict had reached an alarming level at Lebanon. The government responded to the situation after receiving significant pressure from the state governments to rescue their people. India was fortunate to have Indian navy warships returning from Greece in the vicinity. However, the reaction time was questionable since the warships had ended their goodwill trip to Greece on 13th July and had left Mediterranean Sea when the government directive to the IN came four days later—that is, on 17th July.[12]

However, there has been a gradual transition from age old reactive methods to a more proactive approach. Operation *Rahat* carried out in April 2015 is a testament to such a shift. It redefined the Indian approach to complex situations. The crisis that broke out in Yemen in late March 2015 did not come as a surprise to India as it anticipated the changing circumstances and factors in the region. Even before

deploying the IN to rescue its people, the government warned Indians living in the region of the possible repercussions of the conflict. The number of evacuated people in Operation *Rahat* was in stark contrast to those in Operation *Sukoon*. While Operation *Rahat* saw a total of 4,640 Indians being evacuated—barring the few who chose to stay back in Yemen—Operation *Sukoon* saw only 2,280 people of the total 12000 Indians in the region being rescued. The remaining 10,000 were left stranded, looking for help.[13] The execution of Operation *Rahat* was efficient as the IN was able to complete its part of the mission before the conflict turned into a full-fledged war. This proactive approach acted as a reassurance mechanism which was aimed not only at providing humanitarian assistance but also at maintaining regional security and stability when faced with such dire situations.

The third aspect—and perhaps the most vital—is India's soft power which has emerged as the very crux of India's global strategy in the 21st century. Soft power is aimed at influencing another nation's behaviour by attraction, agenda-setting, and legitimacy.[14] This soft power could be observed in India's approach during the execution of Operation *Rahat*. The government used the services of the IN and war veterans as soft power tools to resolve standoffs in the region through dialogue for the safe evacuation of Indians.

India has always tried to avoid conflicts and, at times, even seemed reluctant to assume leadership roles while trying to solve them. The priorities of the government were hardly at par with those of the IN. In matters of the security of overseas citizens, the IN had a very limited role to play. But since the onset of the new millennium, the signs of symmetry among the two have started to show promise. The government seems to believe that the IN could indeed be used as an instrument of soft power in securing its citizens as well as in pursuit of India's regional and global interests.[15]

It is often said that during the exercise of naval power in conflicts, the main problem is the lack of political skill on land rather than the lack of professional quality at sea.[16] Operation *Rahat* executed in April 2015 reflects a changed strategy on India's part. It concentrated on assuming a central position while negotiating the safe evacuation of Indians. Also, considering the fact that requests to rescue several

hundred foreign nationals were made by their respective home governments, the onus was on India to make use of the opportunity to project itself as a capable, efficient, and disciplined power in the global world. The government's decision to send the Minister of State for Overseas Indian Affairs General V. K. Singh as a soft power mascot to negotiate with local forces and oversee the operations[17] worked wonders in realising the success of the mission.

Conclusion

In the wake of the growing security threats to overseas citizens, India has a moral responsibility to ensure their safety. What one can observe from the success of the above NEO is that there is now a better correlation among various stakeholders in the Indian government. Operation *Rahat* was a monumental success because the MEA, the Ministry of Defence (MoD), and the IN worked in absolute synchronisation, and with real-time information.[18]

India's willingness to confront global challenges has contributed to a positive image even among those countries that have, traditionally, been giving it the cold shoulder in the past. The IN has been an influential factor in changing perceptions. In the recent past, the IN has played a significant role in maintaining interests that are of economic, political, and military importance to the government. Given the multiple role that the IN could play, it is important to make full use of its potential to ensure better environment for the safety of Indians living overseas.

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Notes

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Indian Maritime Doctrine, Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy), New Delhi, August 2009, p. 115.

[4] Ibid.

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Zachary Keck, 'The Hard Side of Soft Power', *The Diplomat*, 24 July 2013, available at http://thediplomat.com/2013/07/the-hard-side-of-soft-power/ (accessed May 14, 2017)

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