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Riding Two Horses At Once: Wither The Indian Navy?

By Geoffrey Till

Synopsis

The International Fleet Review recently held at the Indian port of Vishakhapatnam was a display of togetherness amongst the world's navies and at the same time a striking demonstration of India's naval aspirations. India's naval revival will be significant for the emerging strategic seascape in the Indo-Pacific area.

Commentary

THE INTERNATIONAL fleet review held at Vishakhapatnam on India's east coast in February 2016 was a spectacular affair with over 70 warships on display and representation from 50 other navies.

Like most fleet reviews it was naval diplomacy in action - a mixture of political theatre and strategic messaging. Designed as an expanded version of the Indian 'Bridges of Friendship' International Fleet Review of 2001, this review took *United through Oceans* as the major theme.

Naval togetherness

Naval togetherness and the need for cooperation against common threats like piracy and terrorism were constantly emphasised throughout the review. Intermingled with the Indian ships and submarines were ships from 21 navies, including France's impressive FS *Provence* a FREMM multi-mission frigate, two Jiangkai II multirole frigates from China, JS *Matsuyuki* a guided missile destroyer from Japan, the Iranian IS *Alvand* a light frigate, the Ticonderoga-class cruiser USS *Antietam* and the UK's HMS *Defender* a Type 45 air defence destroyer.

The natural fraternity of the seas was vividly portrayed not just by the assembled armada, but also by constant meetings of navy chiefs, the grand international parade along Beach Road and a spectacular closing band concert. To judge by the friendly naval interactions seen everywhere at every level, India's biggest ever maritime event achieved this objective alongside its other aims.

Troubled times

That it had other aims can hardly be doubted. First and foremost of this secondary messaging was of a navy unmistakably recovering from a bad few years. The navy's earlier acquisition plans have been much delayed, and its budget sometimes underspent (a situation hard for any navy to take).

As a result, depressing gaps have appeared in key aspects of the fleet such as its atrophied submarine force and major shortages in naval helicopters. A string of accidents including the tragic loss of the newly refurbished Kilo class submarine INS *Sindhurakshak* in August 2013 led to the resignation of a former Chief of Navy, Admiral D.K. Joshi in February 2014.

Worse, the Indian Navy has seen itself overtaken by China's PLA Navy in some key indicators of naval power, a perception reinforced by the recent appearance of Chinese SSNs in nearby Sri Lanka. The low point though was what the Indians call 26/11, the terrible sea-borne attack on Mumbai in 2008 by members of the Pakistani terrorist group, Lashkar-e-Taiba, which cruelly exposed the deficiencies in India's coastal defences at that time.

Secondary messaging - naval revival

The second message and unstated theme of the review was that those troubled times were now over. Although the Indian Navy's new nuclear propelled submarine, the INS *Arihant* was not present (an absence that attracted some press comment) there was plenty of evidence of a much more confident navy, with modern ships like the INS *Kolkata* guided missile destroyer and the ASW frigate INS *Kamorta* much in evidence.

Prime Minister Modi's emphasis on 'Make in India' was constantly reinforced by reference to how many of the ships on display were modern and indigenously produced. The biggest impression for many though was made by the Navy's two carriers, the entirely refurbished ex-Russian INS *Vikramaditya* and the INS *Viraat*, the world's oldest carrier first laid down in 1944. These two ships staged an impressive offshore air display in a mock battle at the end of the review.

But as so often in the practice of naval diplomacy, it was the ships that were not there, that were waiting over the horizon, which had the most obvious message for the world. This included the INS *Arihant* and the rest of a revived submarine programme, and over 40 units currently being built in Indian shipyards in one of the world's most ambitious building programmes.

This includes another two aircraft carriers, the first of these to replace the old *Viraat*

and the second at 65,000 tons, rumoured to be called the INS *Vishal*, equipped possibly with a very advanced electro-magnetic aircraft launching system (EMALS) in conjunction with the Americans and even nuclear propulsion. By being able to build their own carriers the Indians are joining a very exclusive club.

Holding the review at the up-and-coming port of Vizag (as it is colloquially known) was significant too. The homeport of the Eastern Fleet since 1968, it is the only port to operate nuclear-propelled vessels – and it faces east, thereby contributing to India's 'Look (and Act) East' foreign policy.

India clearly wants to be a rule-shaper, not just a rule-follower. In this, one of the Indian Navy's trickier issues is indeed to remind China that India is a naval power that needs to be taken very seriously whilst at the same time reassuring the other smaller navies of the Indian Ocean region that its prospective naval resurgence will not represent a threat to them.

Continued Problems?

None of this of course means that India's challenges are all over. While improving, India's level of 'jointery' - cooperation between the military services - still remains poor. Reforming the defence acquisition process and the country's dysfunctional defence bureaucracy will be as hard as it is necessary; even the much vaunted INS *Kolkata* and INS *Kamorta* were much delayed and seriously over-budget.

India has also to grapple with problem of striking an equitable and workable balance between foreign manufacturers and domestic producers, both private and state-funded. But the priority attached to this naval revival is higher than it has been for years.

The Navy in its newly released doctrine *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, has a vision of what it wants to be, and to judge by this review, at least a reasonable chance of achieving it. But how that naval revival will be perceived by the other maritime stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific remains to be seen.

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