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Rebalancing with India: Safeguarding the Indo-Pacific Maritime Region

By Sarosh Bana

Synopsis

The Indian Navy's foray into the Western Pacific is a demonstration of New Delhi's Look East-Act East policy. It also responds to President Obama's overture to India for a strategic partnership in balancing the rise of China.

Commentary

THE INDIAN Navy's Eastern Fleet deployment of an armada into the Western Pacific last May for a period of two and a half months is a demonstration of the reach and commitment of the Look East-Act East policy of the Indian government led by Narendra Modi. Addressing the US Congress on 8 June 2016, Prime Minister Modi responded to US President Obama's overture to India for a strategic partnership in balancing the rise of China, affirming that strong links between the two democracies could anchor peace, prosperity and stability from Asia to Africa and from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. This can also help ensure security of the sealanes of commerce and freedom of navigation on seas.

The allusion was clearly to China which is also keen on furthering its interest in the Indian Ocean Region under the framework of its Maritime Silk Route that entails development of a "string of pearls" or ports essentially encircling India and a logistics base in Djibouti.

Chinese Shadowing of Malabar

The two and a half months deployment to the South and East China Seas involved the participation of two guided missile stealth frigates, fleet support ship and an indigenous missile corvette in the joint Malabar naval exercise in the Western Pacific

with a US aircraft carrier and Japanese warships. The harbour phase of the exercise, designed to enhance dynamic cooperation among the participant navies, was held from 10 to 13 June at the US Fleet Activities Sasebo naval base in southern Japan, while the sea phase of Malabar 2016 was held from 14 to 17 June in the Pacific Ocean.

The IN affirmed that in addition to showing the flag in this “region of vital strategic importance to India” its Eastern Fleet Squadron will also make port calls at Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, Subic Bay in the Philippines, Busan in South Korea, Port Klang in Malaysia and Vladivostok in Russia, apart from Sasebo in Japan. This deployment will also conduct PASSEX, Passing exercise, with each of the host navies, with the aim to strengthen bilateral ties and enhance interoperability.

The Malabar has been conducted almost yearly since 1992 by the Indian Navy and US Navy, alternately off India and in the Western Pacific, but the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force became a partner from the 19th edition of the joint drills held last year off India’s eastern seaboard. China expressed “concern” at Japan’s involvement in Malabar in 2015 and again when the combatants of the IN, JMSDF and USN held their sea phase of Malabar 2016 in a part of the Pacific which Beijing regards as its territorial waters. A Chinese surveillance ship tailed the 100,000-tonne US aircraft carrier John C Stennis.

Perceived to be equipped with a high technology radio signal gathering and processing system, the surveillance ship of the PLA that shadowed the Malabar exercise was the same Dongdiao class (Type 815) vessel that had trailed RIMPAC 2014, the largest maritime warfare exercise held annually around Hawaii and southern California by the US Pacific fleet.

Ironically, China, on the invitation of the US had participated for the first time that year in this multinational event that had been conducted since 1971, sending a missile destroyer, missile frigate, supply ship and hospital ship.

Chinese officials maintained that their scout vessel was within its right to operate in the region. By conceding, and not impeding, Beijing’s right to conduct electronic surveillance from within Hawaii’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ), the US was seeking reciprocity from China so as to dissuade it from obstructing vessels in waters off its coast.

China’s military posturing challenges the US; it sees US pivot as an attempt to curb Chinese influence across the region. China has nevertheless confirmed its participation in RIMPAC 2016, the 25th edition taking place from 30 June to 4 August, involving 45 ships, five submarines, more than 200 aircraft and 25,000 personnel from 27 nations. RIMPAC provides training opportunities that help foster collaboration in ensuring security of the maritime commons.

China is intent on raising its profile to buttress its suzerainty over the sea lines of communication (SLOC) that are critical for the entire Asia-Pacific community. It is towards this end that it has been creating and militarising the reefs in the South China Sea to further its access to marine resources and also extending its blue water presence through the establishment of a major surface fleet and nuclear submarine

base on Hainan island, and through deploying precision cruise and advanced ballistic missiles that can target all US bases and naval forces in the region.

US Seeks Indian Support for Rebalance

India's long coastline of 7,600 kms abuts on the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean, with its island enclaves Andaman & Nicobar closer to Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia than to the Indian mainland. With 66 percent of global oil, 50 percent of global container traffic, and 33 percent of global cargo trade passing through the IOR, which stretches from the Persian Gulf to the Malacca Straits, the IN is tasked with securing the sea lines for global maritime movement.

New Delhi is mindful of Washington's keenness to marshal India as the power that can tilt the strategic balance by checking Beijing's maritime assertion. Ultimately all three countries will define the strategic dimension of their maritime influence.

The US, which has been a Pacific power for centuries, has enunciated a rebalance of its maritime assets that will relocate 60 percent of the US naval fleet, up from 50 percent today, to the Asia Pacific region by 2020. It is within its rebalance initiative that the US looks to Indian support, both political and military. Both sides have underscored the strategic significance of their defence ties and also highlighted the growing strategic convergence between the US rebalance and India's Look East-Act East policy which seeks to intensify New Delhi's role in an Asia that is in the epicentre of the historic transformation of the world today.

Role of Indian Ocean Rim Association

In this regard, Indonesia's chairmanship of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) for two years from last October assumes significance as this world's largest archipelago of 17,508 islands and a population of 257 million pledges to enhance regionalism across the littoral. For the third time this year, on 17 June, the Indonesian navy challenged Chinese fishing trawlers operating within the 200-nm EEZ surrounding the Natuna Islands. Though the Natunas are located at the edge of the South China Sea nearly 2,000 km from the Chinese mainland, China's foreign ministry views the area as "traditional Chinese fishing grounds", pointing out that the two countries have "overlapping claims for maritime rights and interests" in these waters.

With Indonesian President Joko Widodo declaring his country a "global maritime axis" at the crossroads of the Indian and Pacific oceans, Jakarta is affirming its strategic maritime position as the cornerstone of its foreign policy.

Established in 1997, IORA comprises 21 coastal states bordering the Indian Ocean, including India, and lists China and the US amongst its seven dialogue partners. Indonesia will need to leverage its leadership to bring a consensual focus within the grouping that has a charter rambling across 'maritime safety and security', 'disaster risk management', 'trade and investment facilitation', 'academic, science, technology', 'fisheries management', 'tourism and cultural exchange', and even 'gender empowerment' and 'blue economy development'.

It will need to raise the perception that the Indo-Asia-Pacific is big enough for all.

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