

Cooperation Among Maritime Security Forces: Imperatives for India and Southeast Asia

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Abstract

The end of the Cold War witnessed a realignment of equations amongst states to adapt to the changed world order. Within its 'Look East' policy, India initiated an economic engagement with its extended eastern neighbourhood to generate political trust and eventually forge multi-faceted bonds. Due to the salience of Southeast Asia in geo-strategic terms, cooperation among maritime security forces has lately become imperative to respond to transnational security threats and realise common politico-strategic objectives. It is therefore important to identify the complementarities in that direction and explore avenues for cooperation in terms of coordinated operations. Such engagement would serve not only to enhance interoperability, but also further strengthen confidence at the political level and hence among the maritime forces.

Introduction

An astute observer would not regard *South Asia* and *Southeast Asia* as separate sub-regions - many strategic analysts find 'Southern Asia' as a more valid classification. The Indian subcontinent is geographically severed from the rest of Asia more due to mountain ranges in the North rather than seas in the South. In fact, the Southeast Asian countries are themselves dispersed by maritime configuration and yet have developed intense interdependence. History bears testimony that with sailing as the primary means of contact in earlier times, India acted as a trading bridge between East Asia and westwards. The process witnessed much exchange of political ideas, culture, religion, art and language across the watery medium. In context of the present times, however, regional subdivisions are a matter of mere nomenclature and historic affiliations seem irrelevant. The post-Cold War redistribution of states' geo-strategic interests has necessitated

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new equations. Among the principal driving factors today are economics and the attendant need for internal stability and security against non-traditional threats.

India's *Look East* policy initiated in the early 1990s envisaged multifaceted bonds with Southeast Asia. Initially driven by economic incentives, it has yielded many dividends including the generation of political trust. Security cooperation ought to be a logical corollary to the process. The sub-region, geo-strategically located at the crossroads of global sea-borne trade and energy flows, consists of predominantly maritime states with growing reliance on the oceans for economic development. India is a credible naval power in the neighbourhood with expanding stakes towards the East and a normative commitment towards regional stability. Thus, *prima facie*, there lies a convergence in terms of maritime security issues, wherein navies and coast guards could translate the complementarities into purposeful security cooperation.

National security doctrines are essentially based on integrated responses and these incorporate joint-service operations and even non-military disciplines. Notwithstanding, naval power, by virtue of its inherent attributes, is generally self-contained not only to deal with security challenges across the maritime 'spectrum of conflict', but also to realise geo-strategic objectives beyond these. This stems from the wide range of options that it offers to its government, ie. while its versatility enables transposition of roles ranging from 'military' to 'constabulary' and from 'diplomatic' to 'benign', its attributes of reach, sustenance and presence in international waters enable power-projection in a calibrated manner.

The Backdrop

Till the early 1980s, India had a 'continental' security agenda and was constrained within South Asia due to economic reasons and a mindset oriented towards landward threats. The Southeast Asian states thus perceived India's approach towards the sub-region as being 'non-committal'. This perception was reinforced by India's ambivalence since the 1960s to specific proposals for defence cooperation.¹ Later in the 1980s, India did configure its mindset and militarily capabilities towards 'regional security'. But this was ineffective due to the Cold War polarisation, the doubtful 'credibility' of India's non-alignment and the wariness of its newly acquired power-projection capabilities.

In the 1990s, India showcased its benign intentions with *Look East* policy and naval diplomacy. Cognisant of its security role in the Asia-Pacific, it was admitted to ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996, and in October 2003, it signed the *Treaty of Amity and Cooperation* (TAC) with the Southeast Asian states. While

Singapore has been the key to India's engagement with the sub-region and Vietnam an old friend, the new millennium has witnessed strengthening of political ties with other Southeast Asian states too. While India's earlier ambivalence to Southeast Asia may be dismissed as 'missed opportunities', India now needs to spell out its stakes in the sub-region and clearly articulate as to how it can contribute towards regional security.

The paper undertakes a comparison of maritime security 'landscapes' of India and Southeast Asia. It first aims to deduce the common security imperatives. Thereafter, taking into account the naval capabilities of states, it identifies the areas of convergence, wherefrom flow the areas for cooperation within the established 'role of navies'.²

Southeast Asia

Maritime Stakes and Security Challenges

Non-Traditional Threats:

The Southeast Asian states have embarked upon an export-led development. This makes the sea-lines crucial for trade and energy flows. However *Jammah Islamiyah*, the *Al Qaeda* offshoot in the sub-region, is active in many states and has been instigating separatist groups like *Free Aceh Movement* (Indonesia) and *Abu Sayyaf* (Philippines) to resort to terrorism. Owing to the suitability of geographical environs, it is feared that terrorism may shift into the maritime realm. If so, terrorists could then exploit the vulnerabilities of global trade and shipping,³ and disrupt the sea-lines passing through the 'neurological' choke points. They could even carry out seaward attacks on hub-ports. The Malacca Straits is a vital waterway. Only 1.2 nautical mile wide at its narrowest and 22 m deep at its shallowest, it is widely believed to be the most threatened. Some recent events indicate the peril – in March 2003, when the Indonesian tanker *Dewi Madrim* was hijacked in the Malacca Straits, material gain was not the apparent motive. The hijackers steered the ship for an hour and then left with some equipment and technical documents⁴ – possibly a preparation for a 'maritime 9/11'.

While the rampant maritime crimes in the sub-regional waters are manifestations of centrifugal tendencies in many states, these also provide nourishment to prevailing instabilities. Besides drug trafficking and gunrunning, the sub-region has been infamous due to piracy since historic times. The hopes of some security specialists that the December 2004 *Tsunami* may have meted out a body blow to piracy

have proved unfounded – there have been a series of violent attacks in the Malacca Straits within a month since March 2005.⁵ Hijacking of ships loaded with dangerous cargo for maritime attacks has therefore become a real threat. These waters provide ample shelter to the criminals due to the numerous islands with hidden alcoves and high density of shipping, local boats and fishing craft. Other crimes like human smuggling via the sea and illegal fishing are also committed with impunity and constitute security threats in themselves.

In July 2004, the Malacca Straits littorals instituted coordinated patrols, termed MALSINDO. However, severe resource constraints dilute the efficacy of the arrangement. Besides, the contiguity of territorial seas in the Malacca Straits hinders law-enforcement since criminals often escape into the adjacent state's waters. Due to the sensitivity of the littorals over the issue of 'sovereignty', MALSINDO does not provide for 'hot-pursuit'. The recent spate of pirate attacks indicate that the coordinated patrol arrangement has not even been effective as a deterrent.⁶

The China Factor:

The reliance of Southeast Asian states on seas for living and non-living resources is also growing. In 1994, when the *United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Seas, 1982* (UNCLOS-3) came into force, it bestowed extensive Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) to states. The rapid depletion of land resources, extrapolation of future needs and concentration of resources in the regional seas has led to disputes over maritime boundaries. Skirmishes over mid-sea islands have already been triggered since sovereignty over these islands implies control of vast areas of ocean space for economic exploitation. What imperils the region is the potential of localised military assertion of these claims to flare up into a large-scale conflict.

While intra-sub-regional disputes exist, those with China are a cause for greater concern. China has often resorted to force to assert its claims in South China Sea; it clashed with Vietnam in 1974 over *Crescent Islands*, again in 1988 over *Johnson Reef* and with Philippines in 1995 over *Mischief Reef*. A close look reveals that it has always seized the opportunity when the balance of power was tilted in its favour - in 1974, South Vietnam was abandoned by the USA; in 1988, the Soviet support to Vietnam was on the ebb; and by 1995, the US military had withdrawn its bases in the Philippines. China has lately developed significant economic stakes in ASEAN and is engaging these states through regional fora. Although such interactions within the ARF may reduce tensions, China still needs to satiate its long-term strategic interests in terms of the sea-lines, fishing grounds and energy resources in the South China Sea.

While it is too early to assert that China' *would* resort to a military solution to its claims, the manner in which it has kept its option open is nevertheless a cause for worry among states. China deems its maritime claims as "non-negotiable" issues⁷ and rejects any ARF role in mediation. Its November 2002 signature on the 'code of conduct' for disputed areas is devoid of substance since it is a 'non-binding' political declaration. China has also embarked upon a major naval modernization. Apparently, for first phase of its plan up to 2015 (called "green water active defence"), the priority is East China Sea/Taiwan followed by the South China Sea. For this, it has envisaged acquisition of modern submarines and anti-ship missiles in sea-denial role. Aircraft carriers are not the current priority since these would cause apprehensions among Southeast Asian states and besides, would be very vulnerable in the South China Sea due to the many 'unfriendly' air bases dotting its periphery. The imperative for air dominance here is being met through the many long-range Sukhoi Su-27 aircraft in maritime strike role. Operating from the southern tip of Hainan (Sanya, the permanent SU-27 airbase)⁸ and the forward base in *Paracels* (Xisha), the aircraft can effectively operate up to the southern-most part of the Spratlys (Zengmu Atoll) without aerial refuelling.

How would China secure its own energy sea-lines⁹ in the event of a maritime conflict in the South China Sea? A set of plans caters for this contingency too - a grid of energy 'shunts' bypassing Malacca Strait and South China Sea. One oil pipeline is to be constructed from Sittwe (Myanmar's deep-water port) to China and another across the Isthmus of Kra (Thailand).¹⁰

While China's current focus on East China Sea is reinforced by the November 2004 intrusion of a Chinese nuclear submarine in Japanese territorial waters off Okinawa,¹¹ its positioning of an oil drilling rig in disputed waters off *Paracels* in the same month¹² and its shooting of Vietnamese fishermen in January 2005 in Gulf of Tonkin¹³ are pointers towards Beijing's unease over the stalemate in 'its dominion', viz. the South China Sea. If its claims here were to materialize, Chinese territory will be within 500 km of Singapore Strait and only 60 km off Malaysia. This would gravely undermine sub-regional security. The desire among regional states for a balance of power is thus, not surprising.

Capabilities of Maritime Forces:

Despite a predominantly maritime configuration, most Southeast Asian states Asia have not invested significantly in building up naval capabilities. During Cold War, some states directly enjoyed the protection of major powers, while the others perceived the power balance as an assurance of maritime security. Besides, much

of the defence spending went towards land and air forces since the states either encountered landward threats (in case of the continental states) or were imperilled by internal instabilities. The following summary of the navies of key states reflects the current inadequacies.¹⁴

Only Singapore has been an exception to the above. Due to its strategic vulnerability, economic prosperity and access to western technology, it has maintained a relatively potent navy. Its 51-ship navy includes four submarines and is backed by force-multipliers such as C⁴ISR systems and E-2C Hawkeye Airborne Early Warning (AEW) aircraft. After the induction of six *Formidable*-class (*La Fayette*) stealth frigates from France commencing 2007, the Royal Singapore Navy (RSN) is expected to be highly capable of sea-control. Considering the limited EEZ, its current holding of patrol vessels (including those with the Police Coast Guard) are also adequate.

The relative numerical superiority of Indonesia's naval assets is misleading. Serious budgetary constraints have led to block obsolescence of platforms and shortage of spares. In 2004, it was reported that only 30 of its 117 warships were operational,¹⁵ while more than 300 vessels are required for patrolling vast maritime areas around its 17,000 islands. Indonesia's concerns of being unable to hold on to some of its far-flung islands are therefore not unfounded.¹⁶ Plans are in place to acquire about 60 new patrol vessels, four sea-lift platforms and two new submarines over the next decade, but funding may be a problem.

Malaysia has a modest 54-ship navy with a few MPAs. Most of its warships constitute patrol vessels/minor combatants that are relatively old. A major naval modernisation is currently underway that envisages state-of-the-art acquisitions, including six *Kedah*-class large patrol vessels, land-based air-surveillance platforms and two *Scorpene* submarines. 20 of its old patrol craft have been transferred to MMEA (its coast guard, constituted in 2002). However, these vessels are unsuitable to patrol the outer regions of the EEZ around its 1,007 islands and are therefore presently tasked to enforce law only within 50 nm of the coast.¹⁷ Other than in the Malacca Straits, Malaysia is also required to secure the waters off its eastern Sabah state to curb separatist spill-over from the Philippines, thereby stretching its resources.¹⁸

Myanmar's only major naval combatants are the three new 1200-ton corvettes built at a Rangoon shipyard and inducted in 2003-04. All other vessels displace less than 500 tons. Only about 30 patrol vessels/attack craft are relatively new, some of which are tied down in supporting the army's counterinsurgency operations. The intensified hydrocarbon exploration activity in the EEZ has added

to the task of countering illegal fishermen from neighbouring littorals. Therefore, further augmentation of patrol assets can be expected if funds are made available.

The Philippines has one of the weakest maritime forces in the region due to its frail economy. Effectively, the only major naval combatants are the three 763-ton *Jacinto*-class corvettes. Even these do not carry helicopters and have no Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) capability. There are numerous patrol vessels (including with the Coast Guard), but many of these are old and unsuitable due to their limited speed and endurance.

Thailand has had easy access to hardware, both from the West and China. Its 129-ship navy comprises of a well-balanced mix of platforms, which also includes a light aircraft carrier and adequate land-based AEW/MPA. However, possibly due to financial constraints, the aircraft carrier rarely goes to sea. Also, the force-levels have been static in the past few years and plans to acquire submarines have not yet materialised. In the future, the Royal Thai Navy (RTN) aims for blue-water capability, with its primary focus on the Andaman Sea region.

The Vietnamese navy is small, the only major combatants being the five *Petya*-class corvettes and very few MPAs. Most vessels are of Soviet origin, many of them similar to those in the Indian Navy (only, older versions). Though Vietnam is economically constrained even to procure spares for its aging vessels, it may acquire a few ex-Russian *Parchim*-class light frigates. Together with the Coast Guard (formed in 1998), the navy has many small patrol vessels but considering Vietnam's extensive EEZ and maritime disputes with China, these are clearly inadequate.

The above translate into the fact that most sub-regional states' surveillance capabilities (including land-based air assets) are grossly inadequate, particularly considering their high EEZ-to-land ratios and the dense shipping/fishing in proximate waters. Earlier, smaller patrol ships were preferred since these were manoeuvrable and suitable for shallow waters. However, after entry into force of the UNCLOS-3, these were found lacking in endurance and integral-air capability, even to counter low-intensity threats in the extended ocean space.

The sub-regional navies are ill-equipped to deter China, even collectively. In a conflict, if China employs its submarines to choke the straits leading to South China Sea, it could bottle-up their minimal resistance. Other than the RSN, most sub-regional navies do not have adequate ASW capabilities. Besides, these relatively shallow waters are unfavourable for detection of submarines. China could also employ its potent offensive mine warfare capability. Most straits are exclusively under Indonesia's jurisdiction, whose only mine-countermeasure (MCM) assets

are the two inadequately maintained *Tripatite*-class vessels.¹⁹ Singapore's *Landsort*-class and Malaysia's *Lerici*-class MCM vessels are capable but numerically inadequate to meet the threat, including from terrorists who may mine the choke points.

Though many navies have plans in place to augment force levels, these would take years to materialize even if funds are available. It would take even longer to match them with crucial qualitative factors like infrastructure, organisation, doctrines, training and logistics.

Role of Other External Powers:

Other than China, the USA and other 'peripheral' naval powers have significant stakes in Southeast Asia. Also, their *collective* influence in sub-regional security matrix is sought by most Southeast Asian states for reasons of power balance. One may therefore expect durable symbiotic security bonds to have evolved; paradoxically however, this has not been the case.

United States of America:

Post-Cold War, the USA did not consider any Southeast Asian state assertive enough in politico-military terms to contribute towards balancing China. The US focus thus shifted away from the sub-region, a point supported, *inter alia*, by Southeast Asia not figuring in Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) and the lack of US involvement in the Mischief reef incident or the East-Timor crisis.

Today, though the sub-region is currently the "second front" in the war on terror, the US 'heavy-handed' military approach to terrorism and 'monolithic' view of Islam²⁰ are not considered as 'constructive'. Its April 2004 *Regional Maritime Security Initiative* (RMSI) in Malacca Straits was also perceived to be driven by the need to 'control' the vital waterway and choke the transit of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)²¹, rather than to assist littorals to combat maritime crimes in a holistic manner. *Considering that the USA's global 'responsibilities' attenuate a long-term commitment to Southeast Asia, Washington may be amenable to security arrangements involving India to secure its vital interests in the sub-region, viz. sea-line security²² and market stability.*

Australia:

Besides straddling vital sea-lines for naval and commercial mobility,²³ Southeast Asia has always provided Australia the strategic 'defence-in-depth' for its security.

This 'Maritime Citadel' approach²⁴ manifests itself even today to counter non-traditional threats. In December 2004, Australia declared a 'peace-time' exclusion zone of 1000 nm around its coast for mandatory identification for all vessels. This has invited protests from its neighbours including Indonesia, since it contravenes the Laws of the Sea.²⁵

Post-Cold War, Australia rushed to forge new security bonds in the sub-region to augment its existing *Five-Power Defence Agreement* (FPDA) with Malaysia and Singapore. This caused apprehensions, but its proactive stance and especially its leadership role during the 1999 East-Timor crises demonstrated a commitment to the sub-region. However, the perception of Australia's pro-West character since the beginning of the 20th century²⁶ has led to Islamic fundamentalists targeting its interests. This severely constrains it to assist the sub-region in maintaining internal stability. Also, Australia has not signed the TAC and has been threatening pre-emptive strikes on terrorists in neighbouring states.²⁷ As per a study by a leading Australian think-tank, its interests converge with that of India to combat non-state maritime threats in Southeast Asia.²⁸

Japan:

In addition to being considered a prerequisite for its global status, Japan's proactive role in Southeast Asia is vital for economic interests, especially since the sub-region is the 'source'²⁹ and 'transit' of its energy lifeline. Primarily due to this reason, it is averse to Chinese domination in the South China Sea.

Despite its potent maritime forces however, Japan has been unable to support the states in resolving sovereignty claims therein, either through mediation or by balancing China's growing military strength.³⁰ This is due to, firstly, its own intense contentions with China over maritime claims in East China Sea and secondly, the constraint posed by Article 9 of Japanese Constitution, which does not permit its military to have a 'collective security' arrangement. Due to the latter reason, Japan has also been unable to assist the sub-region to secure the sea-lines against non-traditional threats - its November 1999 proposal for a 'regional coast-guard',³¹ was considered 'unviable' and thus turned down by the concerned sub-regional states. Japan could not even provide monetary aid to Indonesia and Malaysia to purchase patrol boats since its Constitution also bans military aid.³² Japan's commitment to Southeast Asia has thus been limited to financial and technological assistance for navigational safety and prevention of pollution.³³ Therefore, considering its reciprocal sea-line security arrangement with India since the *Alondra Rainbow* incident of 1999,³⁴ Japan has good reason to back India's role in Southeast Asia.

Japan is now actively considering a Constitutional review to break free from the 'legal handicap', including in terms of collective-security. This would make Japan more militarily assertive and enable it to safeguard its vital security interests in Southeast Asia. Even if the review materialises at a later date, there lies an immense potential for a complementary relationship between Japanese and Indian maritime forces in Southeast Asia.

India's Eastern Seaboard

Maritime Stakes and Security Challenges

India's maritime stakes in the East essentially comprises of the following: -

- Sea-lines for trade and energy flows,
- Living and non-living resources within the extensive maritime zones,
- Interests related to the Andaman and Nicobar (A&N) islands, and
- Good order at sea.

India's sea-borne trade to the East is growing rapidly, e.g. with China, it increased from USD 1bn in 1998 to 13.6bn in 2005. The figure is expected to be 20bn in 2008 (a 20-fold increase in 10 years). Indo-ASEAN trade grew from 7bn in 1997 to 13bn in 2004 and expected to be 30bn by 2007 (increase by 4.3 times in 10 years). With South Korea the figure is currently 5bn (2004) and growing at a similar rate. About 70 percent of India's energy is imported via the sea from West Asia. Following the stepped-up efforts to diversify the sources for long-term energy security, a substantial quantity oil and gas would be sourced/shipped from the East, probably Russia (Sakhalin), Vietnam, Indonesia and Myanmar. Much of it would traverse the eastern sea-lines to reach India.

The Bay of Bengal itself holds an immense wealth of natural resources. The 2002 and June 2005 discoveries of huge gas reserves in the Krishna-Godavari basin off Andhra Pradesh coast adds to the known potential of India's maritime zones in terms of untapped fish stocks and seabed minerals. The A&N island chain itself confers a vast additional EEZ to India (30 percent of the total EEZ) and also have substantial hydrocarbon reserves.

The A&N chain is a strategic asset for other reasons too – it acts as a frontier for sea-line security and extends India's security perimeter by more than 700 nm. However, the island chain is also highly vulnerable. Other than by a possible extra-regional intervention, the islands are threatened by a possible spillover of nearby centrifugal instabilities, especially in Aceh. The undulating topography and dense

vegetation of these Islands could also be used as a temporary refuge to regroup. These have also been attracting illegal immigrants and fishermen from neighbouring littorals.

Good order at sea is necessary to counter maritime crimes in general, and particularly, to deal with separatist movements in India's north-eastern states. These movements are fuelled by drug trafficking and gunrunning and are linked to similar insurgencies in Myanmar and Sri Lanka. The eastern 'core' of drug production lies in the 'Golden Triangle' comprising Myanmar, Thailand and Laos. The drugs reach western markets on ships owned by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The cash generated is used to buy weapons in Cambodia, which are shipped from clandestine arms markets in Thailand to the coasts of Bangladesh and northwest Myanmar through the Andaman Sea. From here, the arms reach the militants in India's northeast through various land routes. Piracy has been menacing shipping; the number of attacks off the eastern sea-board of Indian sub-continent (22 in the year 2004) being significantly higher than those off its western sea-board (10).³⁵ The *LTTE Sea Tigers* are also known to resort to hijackings to further their political ambitions and bear the potential of a future threat as a non-state navy.

India does not perceive a conventional military threat from an immediate neighbour in its East. However, a pliable state could be used by an extra-regional power as a conduit to challenge India's vital interests. China has been assisting Myanmar to construct five ports from *Sittwe* in the north to *Victoria Point* in the south, a radar station, an airstrip and naval base in *Great Cocos* and a 800-mile *Irrawady* road-river link connecting China to the Bay of Bengal.³⁶ China's intended foray into the Indian Ocean may be driven by the security of its energy 'lifelines'. But India's concerns stem from the possibility of China's nuclear submarines, missile-craft and strike aircraft using these bases/facilities to threaten India's eastern ports, sea-lines and even the A&N Islands. The *Irrawady*-route could provide China the necessary logistics in case of a clash in the future. Chinese espionage in these waters in guise of 'fishing' has been on the rise, as indicated by the October 2004 seizure of trawler *Yu Man Shing* off the A&N Islands. It is unlikely that its predominantly Chinese crew ventured as far as 2000 nautical miles for 'illegal fishing'. Intelligence collection and possibly, oceanographic survey for submarine operations is a more plausible explanation.³⁷

The Bay of Bengal is also highly susceptible to nature's fury. While the December 2004 Tsunami was unprecedented, cyclones here are as frequent as two to four in a year³⁸ causing much devastation in the sea and littoral.

Capabilities of Maritime Forces

The naval and coast guard assets based at Visakhapatnam, Chennai, Kolkata, Paradip and Port Blair serve the security imperatives of India's eastern seaboard. While Visakhapatnam is the principal naval base and headquarters of Eastern Naval Command, Chennai and Port Blair house the regional headquarters of Coast Guard. Port Blair has also been hosting the biennial congregation of littoral navies called *Milan* since 1995.

Securing the extensive linear spread of the 572 widely scattered islands of the A&N chain is an arduous task and progressive strengthening of defences is in progress.³⁹ While the institution of the unified A&N Command in October 2001 was an important milestone, maritime surveillance has improved significantly, particularly since the acquisition of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) in 2002. These Israeli UAVs also proved useful to locate the Tsunami victims.⁴⁰ However, adequate defence and deterrence also requires urgent consideration. ASW, air-defence and anti-ship missile-capable platforms need to be based in the Islands after developing the necessary support infrastructure.

With its well-balanced mix of platforms, professional manpower and highly evolved organisation/infrastructure, the Indian Navy constitutes a credible expression of India's maritime power. It is highly capable of undertaking diverse missions that range from high to low intensity operations, and from peacekeeping operations to disaster relief. India's Maritime Doctrine lays down the need for collective security through multilateral cooperation.⁴¹ During joint exercises, the US military officials are reported to have expressed their appreciation of the "highly superior skills, training techniques and doctrines of Indian military establishment" and encouraged Singapore to benefit from it.⁴²

The Navy is also renowned for its Hydrographic Department (INHD) that uses the latest technology onboard its eight survey ships. Under the aegis of International Hydrographic Organisation, INHD formed the North Indian Ocean Hydrographic Commission in 2002 for fostering regional cooperation in this field.

The Indian Coast Guard has considerable expertise in handling oil-spills. Its Tier 2 pollution-response capability (up to 10,000 tons) is being upgraded to Tier 3 (more than 10,000 tons). Pollution-response centres have been established at Mumbai, Chennai and Port Blair and three specialised 2000-ton vessels are being inducted, two of which are earmarked for the eastern seaboard.

India's defence industrial base is one of the largest in developing world and

many naval projects have fructified. These include ASW sensors and systems linked to fire control, communications and electronic-warfare. *BrahMos* anti-ship missile and *Dhruv* Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH) are among the latest with immense export potential. Although domestic warship building may not measure up to world-class standards, it has its characteristic advantages due to low labour costs and availability of steel. However, competitiveness needs to be further enhanced by improving efficiency through modernisation of major shipyards, which is in progress.

Common Security Imperatives

The ‘distillate’ of the aforesaid comparison leads to the common maritime-security imperatives and the associated role of navies (discussed later). Six categories of challenges in the maritime domain are discernable:

- The concept of ‘balance of power’ continues to be relevant as the *sine qua non* for nations to meet strategic ends. This would require navies to project politico-military power. Connected to this are the disputes amongst states over maritime claims that have already been triggered. While not yet prioritised, the issues are expected to resurface and navies would be tasked to preserve national interests.
- Mercantile shipping/sea-lines bear vital economic stakes for nations’ development. These need to be secured against piracy and the imminent threat of maritime terrorism.
- Many of the maritime crimes (piracy, contraband/human smuggling) nourish separatist movements. It is necessary to check them through area-sanitization and intelligence.
- Surveillance is also required to secure natural resources (and related assets/ infrastructure) within the maritime zones.
- Disasters due to natural phenomena/human errors imperil human lives, infrastructure, sea-borne trade and the environment. These have to be responded to.

In December 2004, a high-panel tasked to recommend UN reforms submitted its report. Its thrust was on the need for “collective security” to counter the new global “threats without boundaries”.⁴³ One may therefore also expect an increasing role of navies in the future for coalitions under UN mandate, including at a regional level, to project military power across the oceans.

The functional scope of maritime forces has thus increased manifold in terms of both the ocean space and diversity of threats. Despite the ongoing quantitative and qualitative augmentation, it would be impossible for them individually to cope with the expanded swath of respective responsibilities - the answer lies in coordination among regional maritime forces.

The Way Ahead

Politico-Strategic Role

The politico-military involvement of external powers is important to Southeast Asia to offset the influence of a potential regional hegemon. However, the politico-military clout of a state would invariably emanate from its naval strength, particularly within the predominantly maritime environs of the region. A potent navy could be consequential in military-strategy terms – its mere presence (at the right time and place) would lead to it being factored into the adversary's strategic calculations and if perceived credible, may even pose an effective deterrent with attendant strategic dividends. Such 'presence' could be maintained even as navies perform other roles (discussed later) or carry out exercises.

The security calculi of both India and Southeast Asia have significant overlaps in terms of China. On the one hand, China's domination of the sub-region and even its overbearing military presence in the South China Sea (if its maritime claims were to materialise) would be undesirable for India since this would facilitate China's power-projection into the Bay of Bengal. On the other hand, its presence in Bay of Bengal may be perceived to be detrimental to Southeast Asia's interests since this would enable Beijing to straddle the strategic Malacca Straits.

Myanmar is presently overly dependent on China. This *could* lead to a *quid pro quo* – China use of Myanmar's facilities in the Bay of Bengal in a manner inimical to India's interests. Hence, India needs to strengthen political bonds with Myanmar and increase its naval presence in northern Bay of Bengal. Some measures have been initiated, including India's supply of defence hardware and joint naval exercises since 2003. India has also sought access for Indian Naval ships in Myanmar ports for operational refuelling⁴⁴ - a step in the right direction, which needs to be pursued. Coordinated patrols with Myanmar navy along the common maritime boundary would also enable naval presence.

Diplomatic Role

During warship visits to foreign ports, naval congregations (e.g. Fleet Reviews

and *Milan*) or even while being employed for other missions, a navy serves as a diplomatic instrument. The transnational ‘visibility’ of a state’s military might bring forth many dividends, especially if accompanied by assistance or reassurance to foreign countries. Along with showcasing the nation, ‘naval diplomacy’ also brings about a better appreciation of its security concerns and contributes towards building political trust. Such diplomacy (in terms of transparency and attendant confidence building) with the eastern maritime neighbours would be more necessary for India in the future when its military defences in the A&N islands are further strengthened. The Indian Navy could well consider organising a mini regional Fleet Review at Port Blair.

To further the diplomatic role, other available ‘tools’ also need to be used in conjunction such as cooperation in training, defence industry and hydrography. Such interactions have tremendous ability to mould perceptions and even enhance interoperability in the long run. In the area of training, some reciprocal arrangements already exist. Besides, Indian facilities are being used by a few Southeast Asian countries that are constrained spatially or in terms of infrastructure. The Indian Navy has had a ‘head-start’ in many fields, e.g. it has been operating aircraft carriers and submarines since early/mid 1960’s. One key asset of Indian training often overlooked is its English language base - the common language for all mariners.

In defence industry, joint ventures and cooperation in maintenance/repair could also be explored in addition to hardware exports. Southeast Asia is expected to be actively acquiring ships like Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPV), Fast Attack Craft (FAC) and amphibious ships, which also constitute the forte of Indian warship building. Even if joint projects could take off, it would lead to export-earnings and simplification/long-term savings in equipment-standardization, training, logistics and maintenance. Prospects for joint ventures are brighter now that foreign companies are allowed to hold up to 26 percent of equity in Indian defence corporations. While India has been providing spare-parts to the Vietnamese Navy for its Soviet-origin vessels, extending Indian Navy’s refit, repair and upgradation assistance could also be considered. India’s HAL and Israeli IAI are jointly exploring the possibility of exports of the *Advanced Light helicopter* (ALH) to Malaysia and Vietnam.⁴⁵ It is also reported that Malaysia and Singapore have made inquiries regarding the *BrahMos* missile.⁴⁶ Indian shipbuilding however must cut down cost/delays to improve competitiveness. It is also necessary to showcase India’s indigenous warships and weapons. This could be done during port calls and through Shipyards/DRDO exhibitions during occasions such as *Milan*.

Hydrographic cooperation ought to have been a norm among littorals, which is not so due to relevance of the data for naval operations. It is however feasible

when political trust is generated. The Indian Navy has undertaken two surveys for Indonesia and Vietnam has evinced interest in such cooperation. Joint surveys and production of nautical charts are mutually beneficial for marine safety and delineation of maritime zones. Currently, the latter is of more relevance in terms of UNCLOS-3, since coastal states are required to submit claims for continental shelf claims by May 2009 with the supporting hydrographic data.

Constabulary Role

Much of the overall response to the non-traditional maritime threats in the region would be based upon national efforts and the will to comply with global legal instruments. However, to preserve good order at sea, cooperation among maritime forces is a vital complement, especially since these threats are trans-national and have direct security, economic or environmental implications for all littorals. Besides, these are indirect linkages among separatist movements, such as in terms of: -

- Growing nexus, e.g. LTTE's assistance to separatists in Southeast Asia for drug trafficking. For greater monetary returns, the LTTE could even provide training and expertise to them, especially considering the fact that it has been training separatists in India's north-east.⁴⁷
- Ideological influence, e.g. the possible emulation of the *Sea Tigers*' highly successful attack tactics by other separatists. An interesting case is the similarity between *Abu Sayyaf* and India's northeast separatists in the means to obtain arms/drugs. Both have been using 'island-hopping' tactics - the former has been receiving its shipments from Borneo through Jolo and Basilan islands, while the latter from Southeast Asia through intervening islands of A&N chain. It may be difficult to discern a tangible link, but one deduction is clear - maritime forces must also 'exchange notes'.

Good order at sea is also linked to national interests in its maritime zones in terms of living and non-living ocean resources. Exploration and exploitation is expected to intensify in the near future when the littorals are granted continental shelf claims beyond the EEZ. This would necessitate greater domain awareness for conservation of marine eco-systems, prevention of illegal exploitation and protection of offshore installations/scientific research vessels.

News reports since the July 2004 ARF meet indicate that the Southeast Asian and other regional littorals are favourably disposed towards integrating India into suitable maritime security arrangements.⁴⁸ In fact, some progress has since been made – India is a part of both the Asia Maritime Security Initiative

(AMARSECTIVE-2004) of June 2004 and the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy (ReCAAP) in Asia of November 2004.⁴⁹ Coordinated patrols with Indonesia are being conducted in Andaman Sea since 2002⁵⁰ and extension of scope is being considered now to combat terrorism.⁵¹ Similar patrols with Thailand are likely to commence soon.⁵² With the aim of sanitizing the entire Andaman Sea, such an arrangement needs to be established with Myanmar too. To choke drugs/arms-flow to separatists, interdiction operations can help, especially if backed by intelligence-sharing as during *Operation Poorab* when specific information was provided by Myanmar.⁵³ While it is well known that capacities of Malacca Straits littorals are overstretched to secure the waterway, the Indian Navy has the wherewithal to assist them by extending its responsibility southwards of the six-degree channel. While Indonesia and Malaysia are apprehensive of a US operational role in the Straits through its *Regional Maritime Security Initiative* (RMSI), all littorals may be amenable to an option involving India.⁵⁴

Benign Role

It is difficult to say whether ‘presence’ facilitates navies to discharge their benign role of responding to maritime disasters or vice versa. What is however beyond doubt is that this role has been incorporated into the *raison d’être* of its navies. Besides making the littorals aware that their vulnerabilities lie beyond cyclones, the *Tsunami* disaster of December 2004 proved the versatility of navies. Within a matter of a few hours, Indian warships were converted into floating hospitals, heading to provide succour to neighbouring littorals and on completion of mission, reverted back to their normal duties within a similar time frame. For navies, disaster management responses like Search-and-Rescue, sealift of humanitarian aid, pollution control, diving and salvage operations, etc. have thus become ‘reflex actions’. However, their effectiveness is pivoted on ‘immediacy’, flowing out of real-time information exchange, rapid deployment of assets and coordination of relief activities.

Joint Exercises

For all the above roles, ‘seamless’ coordination among maritime forces necessitates offsetting diversities in terms of platform, equipment, doctrine and language. In other words, it requires interoperability in terms of communications, procedures and rules of engagement. This is a challenge that has to be addressed by joint exercises. The Indian Navy has been exercising regularly since 1993 with the RSN. While the initial focus was on ASW, one such exercise with expanded

scope and complexity was conducted from February 24 to March 05, 2005 in the South China Sea.⁵⁵ However, those with other navies have been infrequent – with Indonesian Navy in 1989, 1991 and 2000, and with the Malaysian and Vietnamese navies, only once each in 1995 and 2000 respectively. India has also been organising passage-exercises for littoral navies off Port Blair as a culminating event of *Milan*. Since 2001, India is even being included in the Western Pacific multilateral exercises such as the 16-navy MCM and Diving exercises. Indian policy makes need to be alive to this need for greater interaction with other navies since apart from fostering the necessary ‘comfort-level’ and interoperability, such joint exercises would also help the Indian Navy to keep abreast of new tactical and technological trends.

Conclusion

Do India and the Southeast Asian states have common security concerns? Not if one considers the terrestrial threats, which may be distinctive to each one. However, as brought out in the paper, there are significant overlaps in the maritime domain and the efforts of maritime security forces could be coordinated to achieve these common objectives. “...our Navy’s international maritime cooperation initiatives should be tailored to the needs of the individual country and its strategic alignments, as also the capability of its navy”, opines Admiral Arun Prakash, the Indian Naval Chief.⁵⁶ As an extension of this, India would also need to cooperate with the more-capable navies in the sub-region to assist the lesser-endowed ‘new’ navies in ‘capacity-building’. This would be in India’s security interest since capable navies in Southeast Asia would be ‘bulwarks’ to counter any extra-regional threat to its vital maritime interests, as much as these would help in warding off the non-traditional security threats in ‘Southern Asia’.

Forging of such security bonds would not be very difficult in case of India and its maritime neighbours in the East now that the necessary political trust has been generated through economic and other exchanges. Such bonds would serve to further strengthen political confidence through the diplomatic role of navies – in a self-sustaining cycle. The recent *Tsunami* reinforced the need for benign cooperation among maritime forces. In the aftermath of the disaster, Philip Bowring opined in a leading newspaper, “... (the devastation could lead to) the recognition of common destinies between South and Southeast Asia (and) bring home to (the latter’s) governments the merit of treating India as a friendly neighbour rather than distant and estranged relative”.⁵⁷

Though cooperative arrangements on the operational level could be initiated bilaterally, the ‘lodestar’ should be a web of such bonds, eventually making way

for a multilateral set-up to respond to not only local threats, but also elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific through peace-support and humanitarian missions.

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