

## **Trafalgar and Tsushima: Relevance for India**

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The one-armed picture of Lord Nelson, perhaps the most celebrated and eulogised of British seafarers, is synonymous with the victory at Trafalgar and the bicentennial celebrations of this famous sea battle began on June 28 with an International Fleet Review in the Solent off south England. India apart, the 35 participating navies include the French and Spanish navies who were defeated by Nelson's superior skills in that decisive battle on October 21, 1805.

2005 is a maritime year of multiple import. Apart from the bicentennial of Trafalgar, it also marks the centennial of the 1905 Russo-Japan War that is symbolised by the Tsushima Strait battle, which marked the emergence of Japan as a credible military power. And lower down the temporal scale, this year also marks the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of Second World War and the maritime dimension of that six-year saga has many naval punctuations that straddle the Atlantic, the Pacific and the Indian Oceans.

Trafalgar, Tsushima and the transmutation of naval power in the 21st century has a certain resonance with the emerging global strategic systemic and the choices that India has to make at the national level and the concomitant extrapolation to the Indian Navy. This aspect acquires greater salience in the run-up to the Prime Minister's visit to Washington in mid-July and the proposed scope of the India-US military relationship.

It is a tenet of security studies that great power status has always moved in tandem with credible naval/maritime capability and that the British Empire – on which the sun never set – was predicated on the Royal Navy (RN) keeping control of relevant oceanic areas and vital choke points. While popular perception associates the RN with 'sodomy and rum' – in reality, for over a century, the RN provided the muscle to ensure that the global mercantile dynamism of the period was facilitated by a safe and low threat environment at sea. The non-state pirating, plundering and slave trafficking that was rampant at the time was brought under firm check – albeit with the appropriate *realpolitik* underpinning – and gradually

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*Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Apr-Jun 2005

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a consensus emerged among the major powers about how good order at sea would be maintained so that the burgeoning rhythms of trade, commerce and colonialism could be sustained.

Reviewing the long cycle of history, naval historians aver that the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is similar to that of the 18th in that the principal threat from sea, of the anterior period was neutralised or disappeared. The current analogy is that with the end of the Cold War, major navies now have to re-tool and justify their platforms and budgetary support to sceptical national treasury mandarins. Countries like India did not have to worry about the ultimate nuclear Armageddon at sea, for in the Cold War decades the primary maritime focus was the Atlantic-Pacific combine where nuclear submarines and aircraft carrier battle groups stalked each other for months on end.

The anomalous Cold War is now relegated to history and with it the probability of major naval battles *a la* Trafalgar and Tsushima. The more likely and visible maritime threat is of the low intensity conflict-maritime terrorism (LIC-MT) variant. Even the world's most powerful navy is not immune to such threats as the October 2000 terrorist attack on *USS Cole* demonstrated. More recently, the 9/11 experience in the US and the related WMD anxiety has heightened these fears and the exigency of non-state disruption of the global maritime mercantile and energy rhythms is the dreaded worst-case scenario.

Thus, navies represent the lower end of national strategic capability. But, yet another tenet of international relations is that there is a dominant constituency in the long cycle of history wherein nations that have the appropriate capability evolve a matrix of strategic equipoise. Hence in the colonial period, while the European powers beginning with Iberia (Portugal and Spain) battled among themselves, a consensus was arrived at to consolidate European supremacy – till it was challenged by the US at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Currently, the US leads the pack of comprehensive naval capability – strategic deterrent, trans-border ordnance delivery, multiple ocean surveillance and sustained presence with troop-lift capability – and no other nation can aspire to this profile in the near future. Global maritime strategic focus in its spatial scope has shifted from the Cold War combine of the Atlantic-Pacific to the Pacific-Indian Ocean and the relevant Asian navies are yet to evolve an appropriate multilateral framework. The major credible naval powers in the Asian matrix are Japan, China and India and while Tokyo is already part of the US military alliance and Beijing is yet to assert its naval muscle, Delhi by virtue of its existential characteristics is the most relevant naval power in the Indian Ocean.

For India, its nascent nuclear weapon capability and the modest but proven naval profile represent two ends of the national strategic quiver and it is imperative that they are husbanded with rectitude and perceived as being part of the global strategic management grid. Consequently, the tacit acceptance of India's nuclear status and aspirations by the US augurs well and hopefully this will be further cemented during the PM's July visit. It is the naval dimension that still lacks the appropriate politico-military underpinning and a recall of the historical trajectory is instructive.

The core partnership or alliance of every long cycle of history, since the advent of the sail to nuclear propulsion has been largely naval/maritime. As Modelski and Thompson point out in their authoritative survey *Sea Power in Global Politics*: "The primary cases are the Portuguese-Spanish working arrangement for the 'division' of the world (1494) and subsequently, for controlling access to it through coordinated naval patrol measures from the 1520s onwards; the Anglo-Dutch alliance in two global wars, and finally the Anglo-American 'special relationship' of the 20th century cemented in the Second World War."

The global strategic systemic is currently in a state of flux and the US predicament in Iraq, the trans-Atlantic tension, intra Europe dissonance, the footprint of terrorism and China's 'peaceful rise' are all case in point. India has to evolve a calibrated approach in defining its own relevance to this turbulent systemic and it merits repetition that linear extrapolations from history are invalid. However, it is nobody's case that India become militarily 'aligned' with the US or confront China in Asia.

What is necessary is that India 'align' its strategic military capabilities with its inexorable and abiding national interests. While the nuclear determinant will continue to be nettlesome – given the sensitivities that other nations still harbour (as senior US officials who visited Delhi on the eve of the PM's Washington visit have indicated) – the naval dimension is a doable activity at the India-US bilateral level. The military subaltern of the Cold War is no longer valid and Delhi will not forget the purple prose invective preferred by Nixon-Kissinger during 1971 that has just come to light as part of the release of archival material.

But the essence of Trafalgar in 1805 is not so much Nelson's daring victory as the astute manner in which a military advantage was converted into an abiding facilitator of the British national interest. Japan misread the tea leaves in 1905 and India would do well to introspect over this niche of salty history.

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