

“Milan” Naval Exercise: India’s Naval Diplomacy towards to Indo-Pacific Region

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Abstract— India has a large area of more than 3 million square km in the Indian Peninsula and more than 1000 island territories. It has more than 7000 km of coastline having maritime boundaries. Therefore, India feels it needs to securitise its huge costal and maritime boundaries. This leads, in turn, to a requirement to create a strong navy with the capacity to the maintain peace and stability in whole Indo-Pacific Region. As a fifth largest navy of the world, India’s Navy judge its potential and improve its capabilities through regularly organise the Multilateral Naval Exercises named Milan since 1995. “MILAN” is a Hindi Word that means meeting also referred as a part of naval diplomacy of India to Indo-Pacific. "Milan is a biennial conglomeration of Asia-Pacific maritime navies, to foster bonds of 'friendship across the seas' and share views on common maritime issues. One of the important things is that Milan is a non-military forum, so it does not seek to create a security bloc. It also signifies interaction, and mutual understanding between the navies and It’s more of a socio-cultural engagement. Milan is part of India’s reengagement with Indo-Pacific Region as a part of "Look East" policy, which launched in 1991 as a result of India's two decades-long effort to focus its diplomatic, economic and military energies eastward. Milan is a good initiative by Indian Navy for the multilateral engagement and an example of progress in increasing maritime cooperation between the India, and South-east Asian countries. The MILAN aims at fostering bonds of 'Friendship Across the Seas' and sharing views on common maritime issues and also actively promote India's tourism as well. The aim of this exercise is to foster cooperation in the areas of common interest and safeguard SLOC’s (sea lanes of communication) from poaching, piracy and terrorist activities, promote interoperability to the extent possible and engage in joint search and rescue and humanitarian operations. The Milan exercise with a primary focus on how these Navies can work together to mount humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations in times of need.

Keywords— Milan, Naval, Diplomacy and Indo-Pacific Region

I. INTRODUCTION

MILAN is a Hindi Word that mean meeting. It signifies interaction and mutual understanding. It is a biennial gathering of regional navies that is hosted by the Indian Navy. "Milan basically is a biennial conglomeration of Asia-Pacific maritime navies, to foster bonds of 'friendship across the seas' and share views on common maritime issues. Milan is

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organised by the Indian Defence Force as a meeting of Asia-Pacific navies to discuss regional maritime security. Also, the format of Milan exercise with primary focus on how these Navies can work together to mount humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations in times of need, also conducted a table top exercise to counter current challenges in the form of piracy, gun and drug running and illegal immigration was appreciated by foreign participants . Milan is part of India’s reengagement with Southeast Asia and also it is part of India's two decades-long effort to focus its diplomatic, economic and military energies eastward as part of its "Look East" policy . Joint Military exercises (JNE) have been a key means by which India has asserted its presence in the region. JNE also assumes immense importance in promoting bilateral/multilateral cooperation. They are conducted in international waters, away from the public gaze, where sensitive issues such as violation of sovereignty. JNE help to dispel concern over India's naval build-up programme and expansion of power projection capabilities. Such concerns were made known to India from the mid-1980s by some littoral states of the Indian Ocean, including Australia. The interactions provided by the exercises both at sea and port create transparency regarding the activities and responsibilities of the Indian Navy. JNE are perceived to help instill, as well as build upon, a military dimension to bilateral political relationships as well as signify India's interest in peace and stability in the Indian Ocean.

Since 1991, India has periodically held joint naval exercises with Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia in the Indian Ocean. As a result, India’s engagement with Southeast Asia has not been limited to economics. In subsequent years, it has undertaken bilateral exercises with Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines. In 1995, this military engagement matured into the annual Milan series of naval maneuvers that India conducts with ASEAN nations in the Bay of Bengal . So, far Eight MILANs have been held, in the years 1995, 1997, 1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2010 and 2014. India has been conducting joint naval exercises with Singapore (SIMBEX) since 1993; all except one in 2005 have been in the Indian Ocean. India has conducted joint naval exercises with the United States (MALABAR) since 1992. While India has also conducted joint naval exercises with Singapore (SIMBEX) since 1993 and with Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia as part of the Search and Rescue Operations (SAREX) since 1997⁵.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Indian Ocean region is the birthplace of maritime civilization. During colonial era it was a playground of rich industrial nations. Given the spiraling demand of energy from India, China and Japan and its bulk of source in Arab peninsula, the security of sea lines of communications is causing arms buildup in the region. Indian Ocean is like a big lake with number of choke points. The important choke points disruption of which may block energy life lines are Strait of Malacca, Strait of Hormuz, Lombok and Sunda Straits. Strait of Malacca crosses 9.4 million barrels per day. Approx 50,000 ships carrying one third of the world's trade annually pass through Malacca Strait. The economies of Japan, China and South East Asian countries depend on free flow of oil from here. The closure of Strait of Hormuz will cut off Gulf supplies to East altogether and will also affect western countries considerably.

India's interests and stakes in the region have persisted since the ancient historical period when Indian economic, commercial, social, cultural interests and trade were active with Southeast Asia. In the ancient historical period the contending influence of China and India has been sustained through the various maritime expeditions, settlement and voyages and they have continued through to the present period. With the rise of China and the assertive military and strategic modernization overdrive and China's aggressive strategies of attempting to "box" India in South Asia through multimodal economic and military strategies has resulted in the Indian counterpoise of economic engagement. Desiring a way to create strategic political and economic ties with individual nations in Southeast Asia while simultaneously developing closer ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Prime Minister P.V. Rao launched the "Look East" policy in 1991. Through LEP for ASEAN members, India provides an alternative that allows them to reduce their economic dependence on both China and Japan. In the Post-Cold War it became imperative for India to dispel fears about its military expansion in an otherwise traditionally no hostile ASEAN region. Also, Southeast Asia itself witnessed a sea change in the political atmosphere. India has shown increasing capability to impact the Asia-Pacific security architecture. While still not a key player in the region, neither is it marginal. Its enhanced attention to the eastern command is aimed at providing muscle to its effort to become a major player in shaping the emerging Asian order.

III. INDIA'S NAVAL DIPLOMACY

The Milan multilateral naval exercise was a part of naval diplomacy of India to Indian Ocean Rim countries. Milan is good platform or initiative by Indian navy force for the multilateral engagement and an example of progress in increasing maritime cooperation between the India, IOR-ARC Rim countries and Southeast Asian. Through Milan naval exercise, participant country navies conduct the joint anti-piracy patrols in the Malacca Straits. The establishment of

joint maritime centers (JMCs) at important ports and near ocean choke points would prove to be a milestone towards this type of maritime cooperation.

As Amitav Acharya argues, the ASEAN countries "recognize India's role as a possible counterweight to any potential future threat from China." Lee Kuan Yew, Southeast Delhi's Pacific Ambition Asia's elder statesman, has described India as "a useful balance to China's heft" in the region, while Malaysia's Foreign Minister has discreetly suggested that the South Asian power was "strategically located to provide [Southeast Asian nations] the necessary umbrella as a big country." More bluntly, veteran Singaporean diplomat K. Kesavapany has noted that ASEAN countries "envisage India as acting as a counter-balance to a possibly over dominant China in the future," while Meidyatama Suryodiningrat, the editor of the Jakarta Post, has called on India to "become a psychological deterrent to China's increasing influence and gradual domination of this region."

The Indian Navy has also announced plans to bolster its forces deployed in the east, which officials connect to India's broader eastward focus, noting that "the naval fleet in east India has long legs and, with the government's emphasis on the 'Look East' policy, we are strengthening the east now. To facilitate power projection into the Asia-Pacific, the Indian Navy is upgrading its base network. A second naval base on India's eastern shore is being constructed near Vizag, 30 miles south of the existing Eastern Naval Command HQ. India has also dispatched its vessels on forward presence missions designed to "show the flag" in the South China Sea and beyond. In support of such operations, Indian ships, including the aircraft carrier INS Viraat have made high-profile port calls in major cities such as Manila, Jakarta, Singapore and Saigon.

In addition, bilateral and multilateral exercises involving search-and-rescue drills, exchanges of information, anti-submarine warfare, advanced mine countermeasures and anti-terror tactics have been held between regional navies from time to time. Unfortunately no such institutionalized set-up exists for the IOR navies, although there is extensive sharing of operational expertise and intelligence regarding transnational crime (except piracy, which is covered by the pirate reporting centers). Performance in the company of foreign navies enhances the professional reputation of the Indian Navy. Joint exercises with advanced navies such as US, France and UK, are beneficial in enhancing operational effectiveness, interoperability and identifying areas for modernisation. However, it is also important to lay equal stress on bilateral and multilateral exercises with the navies of the region. This would enable the regional navies to gain professionally as India looks to gain from advanced navies. Towards this, the Indian Navy has been conducting in the Andaman Islands an exercise called Milan, biannually since 1995 which is aimed at cementing ties with neighbors. Naval ships of the regional navies have participated in this exercise at Port Blair. This needs to continue for the protection of mutual

security interests. This would also stem extra-regional influences and manipulations. The agenda of common interests is long. On the strategic plane, these include; protecting sea lanes for trade and energy security; improving and coordinating responses to natural disasters and climate change; and countering terrorism and jihadist ideology in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Southeast Asia. Engagement looks set to deepen across these fronts, including in sincere dialogue among defence and security agencies. At sea, operationally-focused talks and exercises take place between navies that see each other as partners of choice. The Defence White Paper of Australia released in May 2009, entitled "Defending Australia in Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2030", has its importance from India's point of view as well. The paper recognizes importance of US in Australia's strategic planning. It says, "the government's judgment is that strategic stability in the region is best underpinned by the continued presence of the United States through its network of alliances and security partnerships, including with Japan, the republic of Korea, India and Australia..."⁹.

IV. MILAN NAVAL EXERCISES

The first Milan naval exercise was held in 1995. This is first edition of naval exercise which organized by the Indian navy at port Blair. In February 1995, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore and Sri Lanka participated with their warships. In 1995, military engagement which starts in 1991 by Indian navy matured into the annual Milan series of naval maneuvers that India conducts with ASEAN nations in the Bay of Bengal.

The second naval multilateral naval exercise was held in two years later of first exercise, in February 1997, eleven warships from seven countries (Malaysia and Bangladesh were the new entrants) were present at Port Blair. Exercise MILAN which has been running since 1995 and is organized by the Indian Defense Force as a meeting of Asia-Pacific navies to discuss regional maritime security.

The third series of Milan exercise was held in 1999. The Indian navy took a first step in organizing this Milan on the west coast at Kochi. The event is organized in the first one on the west coast. This event is attended by the navies of Thailand, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Singapore. In addition, delegation from Thailand and Indonesia also attended. The event was major success and helped foster and strengthen the bonds of friendship and culture ties while developing professional relationships between the navies.

The fourth Milan exercise which was held in Feb 2003, Warships and naval delegates from several nations (Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Singapore) participated in the event. The exercise will also include limited war games by ships from participating countries, discussions by experts on subjects like the marine environment, disaster response and security sea-lane communication, and several festivals.

The fifth edition of MILAN exercise was held in 2006. Naval forces from nine Asia-Pacific countries will join the

exercise. At first, the exercise was scheduled for January 2005, however, it was forced to put off due to the tsunami disaster hit in December 2004. At Milan 06, the biggest international naval exercise being organised by the Indian Navy off the Andaman coast - protecting Merchant Navy vessels plying through the 400 nautical mile strait will top the agenda. Naval personnel from several South East Asian countries participated in the naval exercises organized at Port Blair, in the Andaman and Nicobar islands. The most notable event in this direction was Myanmar Navy's participation in Milan 2006 at Port Blair, which involved a historic first-ever visits of a Myanmar warship to any foreign port. Myanmar has even offered Indian naval officials to visit the "suspicious" sites. Milan 2006 also witnessed Myanmar shed its 'self-imposed maritime isolation' and dispatch UMS Anawyahta to Port Blair to participate in the event. In Milan 2006, the Australian Navy, which had declined to join such exercises in the past, will also join the exercise for the first time.

In 2008 MILAN multinational exercise took place from 18 - 23 January at Port Blair in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The event was characterized by the largest participation to date, with several ASEAN member countries attending. This underscores the growing significance of this exercise within the context of the Indian Navy's "Look East" policy and naval interactions to this effect. In addition to Indian naval vessels, eight naval vessels from Australia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Myanmar, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand participated in the exercise. Naval delegations from Brunei, Malaysia, New Zealand and Vietnam arrived by air. This year's event marked the first time that an Australian ship deployed to the exercise along with the participation of Brunei, New Zealand and Vietnam. MILAN has grown from a small congregation of five nations to nine during 2006 to 11 nations and 16 ships in 2008

Seventh edition of Milan exercise was held in previous year 2010, India will host the largest four-day naval war-game, Milan-2010, involving 12 nations in the Asia Pacific region from Thursday, in which means to counter terror threats to coastal and island territories would be debated keeping in mind the attacks in Mumbai. Naval ships from Australia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand, with representatives from Navies of Brunei, Philippines, Vietnam and New Zealand would join the exercise.

The eight version of Milan exercise was conducted at Port Blair in Andaman Sea in 2014. Seventeen Nations, including India, had come together in MILAN 2014 making it the biggest edition since its inception in 1995. The six day event started on 04th Feb and the past few days have seen the maritime forces of these nations come closer professionally and culturally cementing friendship and building confidence in interoperability. The list of participating nations in MILAN 2014 included Australia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Myanmar, New Zealand, Philippines, Seychelles, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Thailand. It was the first time that countries from

the western IOR participated including two African nations Kenya and Tanzania; island nations of Mauritius, Maldives and Seychelles. It was also the first time that Philippines and Cambodia participated.

V. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF MILAN

- The aim of this exercise is to foster understanding and cooperation in the areas of common interest and safeguard SLOC's from poaching, piracy and terrorist activities.
- Promote interoperability to the extent possible and engage in joint search and rescue and humanitarian operations.
- Milan is a non-military forum. It's more of a socio-cultural engagement. Ravi Ranjan Choudhary
- Milan aims at fostering bonds of 'Friendship across the Seas' and sharing views on common maritime issues.
- Naval Interaction between the navies: Bilateral and Multi lateral in joint naval exercises; fleet reviews; and port visits.
- Naval Soft Power: Training naval personnel, hydrographic services, and humanitarian relief and rescue operations.
- Naval Conferences: Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), etc.

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