

Admiral Arun Prakash on COOPERATION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION



Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman (centre) with Admiral Sunil Lanba on her left at the Naval War College, Goa, during the first Goa Maritime Conclave

RE-VISITING NAVAL FORCE STRUCTURES*

The countries represented at the Goa Maritime Conclave range from city-states and island-nations to archipelagos and sub-continents. We may follow diverse methods of governance and even differ in political beliefs, but the waters of the great ocean that wash our shores form a powerful glue that binds us together. For centuries, the Indian Ocean, called *Bahr al Hind* by the Arabs, has carried religions, cultures, languages, traditions, and people, across thousands of miles; creating relationships that transcend nationality.

Historically, India, because of its central geographic location, has been privileged to play a catalytic role in this process of synthesis and churning. Even as our nations prosper on the rising tide of economics, our destinies remain inter-twined and it is important for us to stay engaged on security issues of mutual interest. It is, therefore, apt that the first Session of this Conclave should focus on 'naval force structures' in the context of an evolving maritime scenario.

While examining a navy's force paradigm, one has to consider the strategic environment as well as national interests, and the strategy that has been crafted to safeguard them. However, before embarking on a discussion of these factors, let me indulge in a brief historical 'flashback.'

Historical Flashback

The discovery of sea routes across the Indian Ocean in the late 15th century, by the Portuguese, made it, for the next five hundred years, virtually a European monopoly, where trading nations, paying scant heed to Asian civilisations, cultures and races, engaged in a relentless quest for spice and specie.

As we look back, let us note that while colonialism may have become extinct, realpolitik continues to flourish, and there are hegemonic states, whose thirst for territory and resources as well as ambition for dominance can lead to intimidation of smaller nations; from whom they seek deference. We became victims of colonialism because we lacked the vision and will to unite against interlopers who came by sea. Nations of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) need to make common cause in the interests of security and ensure that we do not allow neo-colonialism to repeat history.

Another regrettable fall-out of our colonial past is relegation of the IOR to a strategic backwater. In the post-colonial era, blame for the IOR not acquiring its own identity must be accepted by all of us, who live on its shores. Not only has the level of intra-regional political interaction and trade

remained low, but we have invariably gone beyond the IOR to seek partners.

Let us also note that the MEA has remained a passive bystander in the ongoing debate about the suitability of terms like 'Indo-Pacific' and 'Indo-Asia-Pacific' to replace 'Asia-Pacific'. Since this discourse is rooted in conflicting external geo-political interests, we need to tread with caution and ensure that the coherence of the IOR is not impacted adversely.

Having taken note of the past; let me highlight some salient aspects of our current geo-strategic environment.

The Geo-Strategic Environment

The juxtaposition of three nuclear-armed neighbours; i.e. India, China and Pakistan, has created some unique deterrence-related issues in the maritime domain. At the strategic level, we must reconcile ourselves to the presence, in our waters, of nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarines which represent the seaborne leg of respective deterrents. With the unilateral introduction of tactical nuclear weapons, into the equation, by Pakistan, we may also have to countenance their appearance at sea.

In the conventional domain, too, there is instability in the IOR; due to historical animosities, territorial disputes, or plain