

# Joint naval exercise: SEATO in new format?

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AUSTRALIA, India, Japan, Singapore and the USA held a joint Naval Exercise in the Bay of Bengal in the first week of September 2007. Naval exercises are held around the world all around the year as part of normal defense activities by nations to train their armed forces. But this particular naval exercise has a different significance. This is probably the turning point in India's foreign and defense policies that may have very far-reaching effect on the overall global power equation. This naval exercise undoubtedly represents a major shift in India's strategic security perceptions. Actually, it signals India's entry into the "Quadrilateral Initiative," a new strategic security combine in which it joins as a key member in the security triad of Australia, Japan and the US. Presumably, Singapore's participation as an add-on in the exercise signifies the finer dimensions of this initiative.

The "Malabar CY 07-2" as the naval exercise was code-named was held in the Bay of Bengal in the first week of September 2007. The exercise involved three carrier groups. The US as the biggest naval power in the Indian Ocean had the maximum representation. Its fleet of 13 ships included two aircraft carriers - the nuclear powered USS Nimitz, and the USS Kitty Hawk, a nuclear submarine USS Chicago, two guided-missile cruisers, and six guided-missile destroyers. The participation of the Indian Navy, the second biggest navy in the region, included the only aircraft carrier INS Virat, two destroyers, a submarine, a missile frigate, four corvettes, and a tanker. Indian naval maritime reconnaissance aircraft and shore based IAF fighters

also participated in the exercise. The Japanese maritime self-defense forces had two naval craft. Australia had sent a frigate and a tanker while Singapore was represented by one of the most modern frigates. The size of representation of naval powers in the exercise was indicative of their relative dominance in strategic security arrangements in this part of the Indian Ocean.

Australia, Japan and the USA have a strategic alliance in the Asia-Pacific region, dominating the seas up to Malacca Strait. In the mid-fifties during the height of 'Cold War' period the US and her allies formed SEATO (South East Asian Treaty Organisation). SEATO was designed to be a Southeast Asian version of NATO. The membership of SEATO reflected a mid-1950's combination of "out of area" powers and "in area" pro-western nations. France, the UK, and the USA represented the strongest Western powers. Australia, Thailand, the Philippines, and New Zealand represented the pro-western nations in the Southeast Asia. Pakistan was included not only because East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) was geographically close to Southeast Asia, but possibly because Pakistan was a member of the pro-Western alliance, CENTO (Central Treaty Organisation). Thus the pro-Western, anti-communist military alliances of the Middle East and Southeast Asia were linked by the membership of Pakistan.

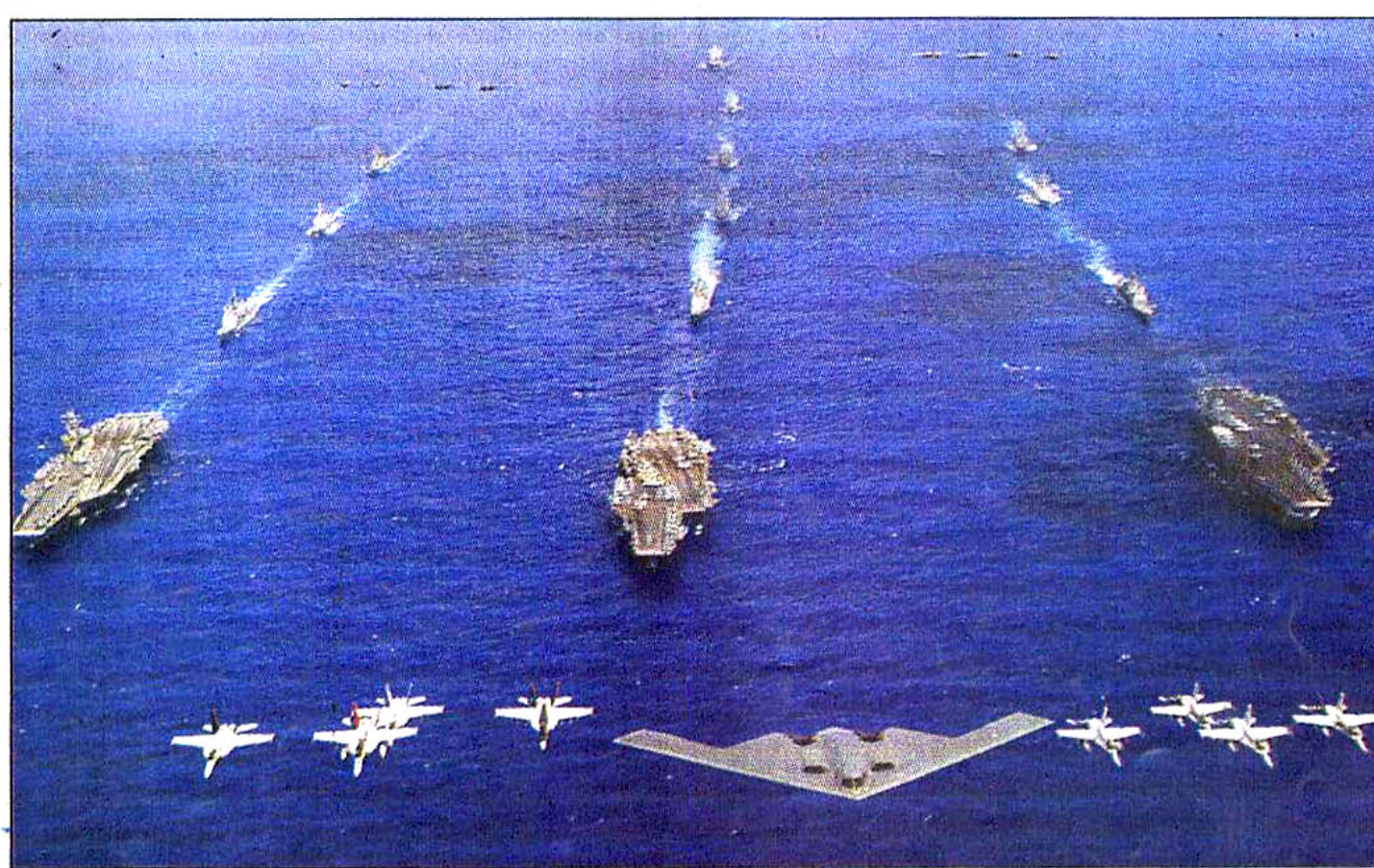
SEATO was created as part of the "Truman Doctrine" of creating anti-communist bilateral and collective security treaties. These treaties were intended to create alliances that would contain communist power. This policy was considered to have been largely developed by American diplomat

and Soviet expert George F. Kennan. President Eisenhower's Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was the primary force behind the creation of SEATO, which expanded the concept of anti-communist collective security to Southeast Asia.

Right after independence India formulated a foreign policy, which was clearly keeping itself away from the cold war politics. India under Nehru's leadership played a leading role in charting a path away from the two power blocks. India opposed the creation of these military alliances and kept following a policy of neutralism. Since independence in 1947, the US had been trying to get India in their power equation. But it was Nehru's subtle maneuvering that kept India away from the Cold War rivalry and yet got desired support from the USA in time of crisis. The Indo-US relationship came to its lowest ebb during 1971 Bangladesh Crisis. With the passage of time things have changed.

Today India is in a buoyant mood and more self-assured, fortified by its noticeable economic progress and sustained rates of high growth. This has prompted the Indian elites and strategic analysts to project India as a Key Global Power. They also perceive that it can only be made possible by assistance from the United States and hence there is a need to have an intense strategic partnership or commitment to United States global strategic policies.

The dramatic improvement in the Indo-US defense relation is a major factor in the 'Quad initiative'. On June 28, 2005 India and the US signed the "New Framework for India-US Defense Relationship" formalising a long design for enhanced level of cooperation in military to military relations and in



defense industrial and technological relationship. The historic Indo-US agreement on civilian nuclear cooperation signed by President Bush and Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh in March 2006 paved the way for closer interaction at the policy making level. India had been resisting the US soundings on joining the trilateral Asia-Pacific initiative. With the Indo-US nuclear deal nearing fruition, during his visit to Tokyo in December 2006 Prime Minister Manmohan Singh agreed to India's

participation in a security dialogue on regional issues with the triad.

The joint naval exercise of India, Japan, and the US off Japan's eastern coast held in April 2007 was presumably a curtain raiser for the things to come. This was signalled in the statement issued on May 1, 2007 by the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, Japanese Foreign Minister Tarō Aso and Defense Minister Fumio Kyuma. Its objective was to get India to play a major role in the

strategic setting of the region. This was followed by a first-ever official level quadrilateral exploratory talks between India and the three nations held on the sidelines of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) security policy meeting in Manila on May 24-25, 2007. To cap it all, President Bush, Australian Prime Minister John Howard and Japanese Premier Shinzo Abe focussed on how to promote engagement with India when they met on the sidelines of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)

summit in Sydney.

The whole exercise of involving India in the Quad initiative has increased the suspicion of China and other nations of the region. Are the four nations ganging up against China, as was the case in the mid-fifties? The nations of the region have reasons to feel so because the Quad's "Asian arc of freedom" (as Japan described it) covers areas starting from the Japan Sea to the eastern coast of Africa. China is particularly perturbed. In June 2007, Chinese President Hu Jintao

sought clarification on the issue from Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at the G8 summit in Germany. The Chinese issued diplomatic memos to the members of the Quad seeking more information on the initiative. All the four nations have been soft-peddling the strategic aspect of the alliance, as they do not want to explain the initiative not as a military grouping but only "looking at issues of common interest." But there is no doubt that with the entry of India as the fourth member in an existing strategic security arrangement of three close Western allies, the strategic setting in the Asia Pacific region has changed.

Even a cursory analysis of the Malabar 2007 exercise, will show that this was no exercise to improve only interoperability between nations. Situations like dissimilar air combat, interception of shore-based aircraft and air defense of warships had been planned for the mock battle during the exercise. The main exercise revolved around smaller missions like assaulting shore-based targets, launching amphibious operations, and vessel searching and seizing.

The aims of the exercise clearly indicate that the alliance is designed to intervene even in smaller nations. China is not the same China of the 1950's; similarly the strategic scenario has also undergone substantial change. The most alarming aspect of this alliance is the binding of a strategic relationship between the US and India, which may revive the Cold War era military tensions in the region. Bangladesh has to keep a careful watch on the further developments in this field. India has a track record of military adventurism starting from 1948.

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## China quiet on Myanmar turmoil



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

AS many as 100,000 anti-government protesters led by a phalanx of Buddhist monks marched on 24th September through Yangon, the largest crowd to demonstrate in Myanmar's biggest city since the 1988 pro-democracy uprising was brutally crushed by the military.

It was the latest in a series of protests that began on August 19 as a movement against economic hardship in the Southeast Asian country after the government sharply raised fuel prices. But arrests and intimidation kept demonstrations small and scattered until the monks entered the fray.

After a few days of calm and restraint, the military leaders cracked on the protesters, and according to a report nine are dead including a Japanese photo journalist.

While the US and Europe have been agitated to see brutal force being used on peaceful monks and unarmed ordinary people, China reportedly asked both the parties to exercise restraint and invoked one of its main planks of foreign policy, non-interference in another country's internal

matters. WHY IS THE RESPONSE FROM US AND CHINA SO DIFFERENT?

It is because there exists at the subterranean level a power game that has been going on in the region for some years and Myanmar has been linked to this game for strategic reasons.

The success or failure of Myanmar's "safran" revolution has to be viewed in a larger context of political power play in Asia Pacific.

Some of the aspects of power game deserve mention:

We must recognise that China's emergence as a global power is being resisted by the US and its allies. The US considers China not a "strategic partner" but a "strategic competitor".

India and Japan have become close to the US, and China perceives that they are being used by the US to contain China in the Asia Pacific region. China feels encircled by allies of the US.

Given the above environment, Myanmar's strategic location and its geopolitical importance is not lost on China. China reaches to the Indian Ocean through Myanmar.

The Opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi is known to be close

to both India and Japan. She spent her childhood in India and as an adult spent some time in Japan for her research work. She can speak Japanese with ease.

Both India and Japan are democratic country and if Suu Kyi comes to power, obviously under her leadership Myanmar will be closer to India and Japan, rather than to China. This scenario does not suit China in the context of US's confrontational policy toward it.

It is reasonable to conclude China does not wish to see Myanmar fall under the influence of India and Japan for strategic reasons.

China has to effectively counter this power play injected by the US. Therefore China has become close economically with ASEAN including Myanmar. Many commentators say that China has replaced US in this region for economic and security matters. It is noted that in two forums in the region--ASEAN +3 and the East Asia Summit, China is a member while the US is not.

Former US Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage in early September said that China was establishing greater leadership in the Asia-Pacific region

because the White House was so pre-occupied with Iraq that it was neglecting Asia.

He reportedly said, "In every measure China is making real hay right throughout Asia. It is not that we're ignoring Asia a little bit, we're ignoring totally." He was critical of Dr. Rice who missed the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting in Laos in 2005 and again earlier this year in Manila.

Besides the power game in the region, there are other factors for China to be quiet and silent spectator to the political upheaval in Myanmar.

First, Myanmar shares a long land border with China and whatever occurs in Myanmar has an effect in China. China wants stability in the neighbours and stability is more important than democracy.

Josef Silverstein, a political scientist and author of several books reportedly said that it would not be in China's interest to have civil unrest in Myanmar. China is eager to have a peaceful Myanmar in order to complete roads and railroads, to develop mines and integrating Myanmar's economy with its own.

Second, Beijing confronted the same predicament as in 1989: how to prevent a social explosion and preserve its rule? Deng Xiaoping and the hardliners eventually ordered the 1989 massacre in Tiananmen Square of student demonstrators.

Third, China, which is counting on Myanmar's vast oil and gas reserves to help fuel its booming economy and earlier this year China blocked a UN Security Council Resolution on Myanmar's human rights record saying it was not the right forum.

Fourth, if the "safran" revolution is successful, it may destabilise Tibet and Xinjiang regions of China.

The political development or reforms in Myanmar has been inextricably linked with power game of big powers. So long China remains the "oxygen" of the regime in Myanmar, commentators say that there will be no basic change in the ruling power of the country. The leaders may tinker with the concept of democracy but a government under the opposition leader Suu Kyi is ruled out in the foreseeable future.

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## Hope for democracy fading in Myanmar

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UN Envoy Ibrahim Gambari, who arrived in Myanmar on September 30, has met the rulers and the democratic icon Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of the founding father Bojo Aung San. Gambari is not really in a strong bargaining position now, for the indications are that the democratic forces are losing the battle on the streets under extreme pressure applied by the government. The NLD, a democratic platform of over thirty splinter groups headed by Noble Laureate Suu Kyi was not a very well organized political platform but people hang on to the straws for freedom and democracy.

After a month of demonstration that started against the unprecedented price hike of cooking gas in August, the military government of Myanmar headed by 74-year-old five stars General Than Shwe is clamping down the usual harsh way. Five monasteries including the biggest Shwedagon (golden) pagoda in the city centre and the more important Sule pagoda in densely populated downtown Yangon have been sealed. Mandalay, the commercial hub of central Burma is also under barricade. In a predominantly Buddhist society monks have a very special place, when they join the march on the street people have a greater opportunity to express their mind in the closed society. With the bullets fired that killed between government-confessed ten to rumored two hundred, including a Japanese Photo Journalist, it is suppression by force; how politically disorganized and unarmed civilians-monks can take the heat is difficult to ascertain.

It appears to be another attempt in a smaller scale of '88 to keep the hope for democracy alive. Establishing democracy in a country that had only one elected prime minister since independence in 1948 and nearly half a century of continuous military rule will be a demanding achievement.

If the Buddhist monks are in life long pursuit of self-denial to achieve Nirvana (ultimate freedom from everything worldly), why do they come on the streets to demonstrate on the price hike and other day-to-day difficulties of the people? Monks have no worldly belonging; they are a large population that do not work for a living, come out in procession to collect the offerings of the people in cooked food and other edibles once every morning. People came under extreme hardship due to unprecedented price hike of essentials; donations for the monks have been degrading both in quality and quantity. Such is the basic drive of hunger that even the reverent monks on self-denial can get upset without adequate food. The demonstration by the people and monks combined is the expression of people on the continued economic

mismanagement and political deprivation.

But the government of Myanmar had their experience in suppressing people's anger in the harshest way. Back in 1988, a peaceful movement that turned rowdy nearly destroyed the government. Combat hardened forces were brought into the capital from the jungle and thousands died in the shootout. I was told by one of the lamenting leaders of the NLD (National League for Democracy) that, in one spot alone on the road along Inlay Lake, not far from American Ambassador's house, over three hundred students of Rangoon University were killed. After it was shut down in '88, the Rangoon University remained closed until the end of '96. The Burmese army is known to be more trigger-happy than tolerant. Locally known as "Tamada", the army has made great sacrifices to preserve the Union against onslaught of the powerfully armed insurgents of nationalities. Decades of continuous fighting in the hills made them hardy. They gained state power through a coup under General Ne Win in 1962 and retained it ever since.

General Than Shwe is of a demure personality, a great survivor in the roulette for more than two decades following the retirement of Ne Win. Unlike British India, Myanmar did not have strong democratic institutions or mass participation of people while acquiring independence. Armed struggle by powerful nationalities like Shans, Kachins, Mons and Kayahs for independence since '58 ushered the dominance of military. After earning the freedom

under Bojo Aung San the military is psychologically attuned such that they have a moral responsibility to preserve it. Peaceful transition to civilian rule will be much easier when the military agrees or exhausts itself in power struggle. Tamada is showing no inclination of the sort at the moment. People are angry but afraid - they are struggling for life so they don't join the demonstration" said Thet, a taxi driver/university graduate.

General Maung Aye, the 69 year number two in the hierarchy is a hardliner than Gen Shwe who earned his name fighting in the hills against national armies and communists. Although the military is not really popular, never the less they have a tight grip on the civil administration. When one sees the democratic forces in disarray, it is difficult to predict the future course in spite of sacrifices. The international environment has not helped the situation very much. Americans and the European Union are the loudest in condemning the military regime but the further tightened economic and diplomatic sanctions are mere rhetoric.

The internal democratic forces are no match for the guns; much is demanded by the neighboring and international stakeholders with varying interests.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in his latest statement hoped that all parties concerned with Myanmar unrest resume stability through peaceful means, promote domestic reconciliation and achieve democracy and development. Neighboring China, with long borders and strategic interest, has bailed out and bolstered the regime

since '88 in economic, political and diplomatic fields. Under pressure from the west, China is asking for peaceful resolution of the problems. The rulers of Myanmar are also seeking immediate peace; resolution of conflict can come later in their own way and time. India paid a heavy price for siding with the democratic forces in '88 and ever since made relentless effort to gain some influence. Indian dream of Asian road and railway link to ASEAN through landlocked eastern provinces is in its advanced stage now. Only the other day it has successfully concluded an oil and gas exploration deal to invest 75 million dollars. India is conspicuously maintaining a low profile on the recent troubles. ASEAN had never been strong on democracy and human rights but more on business; it already has lots of businesses and investments in Myanmar. In spite of economic sanctions and displeasures, under the famous advocacy and constructive engagement of elder statesman Lee Kuan Yee of Singapore, Myanmar had been admitted into the ASEAN umbrella. Many western countries have substantially increased investments in Myanmar especially in oil and gas exploration.

All these international and external factors make the future course of democracy unpredictable. When the conflicting international forces are likely to neutralize each other it may be safely assumed that ultimately the people will have to determine the future of democracy in Myanmar.

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