In My View: The Indian Navy And The Pivot

Shishir Upadhyaya
THE INDIAN NAVY AND THE PIVOT

Sir:

Apropos the article by Harsh V. Pant and Yogesh Joshi titled “The American ‘Pivot’ and the Indian Navy: It’s Hedging All the Way,” in the Winter 2015 Naval War College Review. The authors argue that India has been overly cautious in demonstrating its support to the U.S. “pivot strategy,” based on the lack of any visible response by the Indian Navy in the region.

In my view, India’s primary interests lie in the Indian Ocean and India’s defence relations with the regional littorals in the West Pacific are driven by their own interests in the safety and security of their maritime trade in the Indian Ocean, rather than by India’s interests in the Pacific. A case in point is Japan, which receives almost all of its oil imports through the Indian Ocean. It would therefore be inaccurate to view the extant level of India’s navy-to-navy relations with Japan and Australia as a sign of India’s interest in the Pacific or a measure of India’s contribution to the American “pivot” in the Indo-Pacific. I think that task will always remain for the regional littorals, including Australia, Japan, Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam, to back the U.S. Navy in the region or their respective areas of interest. Emergent navies, such as the Indian Navy, like to engage with other modern navies, such as the USN, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, or the Royal Australian Navy, for various reasons, including “bench-marking” of their operating standards, learning and emulating best practices, or keeping pace with the latest technologies, besides developing a comfortable level of operational interoperability that could be put to use in time of crisis.

The emergence of the Indian Navy as a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean does, however, support the American “pivot,” since by easing its operational burden in the Indian Ocean region it allows the USN, as well as other Pacific navies, to focus assets in the Pacific theatre. Moreover, notwithstanding the extant level of naval exercises, the Indian Navy, as highlighted by the authors, has over the years built close trust and interoperability with the USN. This is more
important than the nature of exercises per se, a fact underscored in the 2007 U.S. “Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower,” which aimed at developing cooperative partnerships with like-minded nations over time, because in moments of crises, “[while] forces can surge when necessary . . . trust and cooperation cannot be surged.”

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