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C TWO DOUBLE I: INDIAN NAVY'S STRATEGY TO FACE THE COVID-19 CHALLENGE

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Response of the Indian Navy towards mitigating the challenges posed by COVID-19 is predicated on the commitment, courage, imagination and ingenuity (C Two, Double I) of its personnel. The priorities of the Force in times of real, imminent and unprecedented danger rest on three pillars of keeping its personnel safe, assist the Nation and its larger community, all the while maintaining operational readiness.

The COVID-19 pandemic has really spread very rapidly across the Globe with devastating results, both, in terms of loss of human lives and virtually complete disruption of economic activity. The direct and indirect implications of both these calamitous fall outs of this raging biological entity indeed pose existential threat to the entire human race in terms of wide ranging mortality, poverty, hunger and extreme destitution. Different countries across the Globe have tried to adopt varying strategies to contain its spread, with an eventual aim of rolling back its effects with as less damage as possible, so as to bring back a sense of normalcy. These measures of course, depend on factors like

the mode of governance, perception of political leadership with respect to the threat this virus presents, extent of inter-connectedness into global economic activities, demographics, state of social and economic development, willingness of the masses to repose faith in the Government, among others.

There are indeed certain common measures and guidelines issued by world bodies like the World Health Organisation (WHO) to address this challenge. However the countries have to choose the best way forward on the basis of factors mentioned above, in addition to specific positions they find themselves in. The Indian leadership has proactively decided to take early preventive measures coupled with capacity building of its health care machinery, in order to face this challenge and limit its adverse impact on its population to the extent possible. The Indian Armed Forces have also arisen to the occasion, as part of the 'whole of Government' approach.

Indian Navy's Strategy to address COVID-19 Challenge

The Navy however, faces certain service specific operational and administrative peculiarities which entail additional measures to be adopted for comprehensive safety from this threat. It is well known that the navies with a mandate to go in the harm's way have ships and submarines packed with weapons, sensors and ammunition in a very enclosed limited space. Unlike cruise ships which are meant for comfort of passengers, the personnel on board warships and submarines man and operate these equipment in close proximity, with physical comfort assuming secondary considerations. Since these platforms are capable of blue water operations, they often remain at sea for prolonged duration. Thus the two basic tenets of preventing a COVID-19 like contagion – of maintaining physical distancing and avoiding prolonged contact with each other – are well nigh impossible for most of the crew. KP Sanjeev Kumar, in his blog emphasises these limitations on naval platforms quite comprehensively by also mentioning a very appropriate catch phrase "*Frontline units cannot work from home.*"¹

The Indian Navy has thus, chalked out its own strategy which is generally in consonance with the national approach, and is in fact complimentary to the national effort for the most part. Admiral Karambir Singh, Chief of the Naval Staff, gave a brief but concise insight into this strategy while recently addressing his men via electronic medium,² wherein he sought commitment, courage, imagination and ingenuity from the naval personnel for fighting against this unseen enemy. While lauding his men for their unstinted and

unquestioned duty to the Service in the times of this national peril, he laid out three distinct priorities for the Indian Navy. The three-pronged strategy involves keeping the Force free from this pandemic; assisting the proximate community and the Nation in mitigating its impact; and maintaining operational readiness to address conventional and non-conventional national security threats in and from the maritime domain. Each of these measures is discussed in some detail in subsequent paragraphs.

Keep the Force free from Corona Virus

This is the first and foremost challenge facing the Navy. “*The care givers*” in the words of the Indian Chief of the Naval Staff “*cannot become care seekers*” in such trying times. The Indian Navy’s ships and submarines, being frontline combat force, have to be protected from this epidemic at all costs. The much publicised case of US Navy’s nuclear powered aircraft carrier ‘Theodore Roosevelt’ falling prey to COVID-19, thus compromising its operational readiness and causing needless national embarrassment, is instructive in this regard. The Indian Navy faces a three-directional challenge in meeting this objective.

The first relates to ensuring that absolutely no personnel residing onboard the naval ships and submarines get exposed to the causes of corona spread. This is relatively easy and can be achieved by minimizing their contact with the outside world. The second and more difficult challenge is to ensure that personnel serving in naval platforms who are routinely in contact with their families, associates, shore-based organisations as also commute through unprotected environment to and from their workplace, do not get infected and further carry this infection onboard. This would require proactive isolation protocol ashore for such personnel, repeated counselling about the importance of their health and well being, sanitisation prior to joining their workplace and random tests to eliminate chances of their getting infected and spreading the same onboard despite preventive measures. Further, health of crew of ships scheduled to sail in next 4-5 days would be continually monitored to ensure that the ship leaves its base port with nil chances of infection.

Having achieved success in the first two measures – though there would never be a foolproof guarantee to that effect – the third measure would be to ensure that the crew of units at sea remains free of this contagion while

they are deployed to fulfill their operational roles. It is posited that though platforms at sea are absolutely insulated from events on land including the viral pandemic under discussion, they cannot remain at sea indefinitely. The ships and submarines have to call at foreign ports for replenishing their stores, rations, fuel; as also for rest and recreation of the crew, particularly during long duration operational deployments away from own shores.

It is reported that the crew of US Navy carrier 'Theodore Roosevelt' started falling ill about 10 days after having berthed at Da Nang Port of Vietnam, and were suspected to have picked up the infection from there. Since the Indian Navy ships also continue to be 'mission deployed' in the Indian Ocean – though not at the scale of US Navy ships – it is imperative that their crew do not go through the experience faced by the US Navy ships. Towards that end, the Indian Navy has decided to replenish and refuel its 'blue water' deployed warships using its replenishment ships, so as to obviate the need for these warships to call at foreign ports. The Navy has also called off all scheduled foreign port visits.³ This would naturally eliminate the chances of the ships' crew contracting the Corona virus.

While the frontline naval units are the first safeguarding priority, sanitisation of critical support infrastructure ashore, isolation of other shore units, safety of families of naval personnel would play an equally important role in ensuring navy-wide well being and high morale.

Contribute towards National anti-Pandemic effort

Standing assets of the Indian Navy spread across the Country, like its hospitals, dockyards and store houses; its self contained capacity to address natural and man-made disasters; and the ingenuity and innovativeness of its trained work force; is all being synergistically utilised to contribute towards the national effort to control and contain this epidemic. A few examples of such preparedness and contribution are mentioned here. The Naval Material Organisation at Ghatkopar in Mumbai set up a quarantine facility for the Indian nationals who were evacuated from Iran. The facility received 44 persons for COVID-19 monitoring in mid-March 2020, and cared for them till 11 April 2020.⁴

The naval dockyards also provided unique and innovative engineering solutions for tiding over acute shortage equipment related to the management of COVID-19 patients, two of which are mentioned here. Naval

Dockyard, Mumbai indigenously designed and developed an infra-red temperature monitoring gun.⁵ Another innovation by engineers from Naval Dockyard, Visakhapatnam related to manufacture of multi-feed oxygen manifolds for enabling oxygen supply to six patients at a time, thus creating a huge jump in the critical care capacity of hospitals managing COVID-19 patients.⁶

Naval aircraft have been pressed into service for rapid transportation of medical teams and stores on as required basis by the civil administrative authorities. One such mission airlifted masks in bulk from Delhi to Goa using Indian Navy's IL-38 aircraft, while another involved a Dornier aircraft ferrying doctors from Goa to Pune and back.⁷ Certain naval helicopters have also been modified to airlift COVID inflicted patients and are kept ready for usage at short notice.

Kochi based Southern Naval command developed a battle-field Nursing Assistants (BFNA) capsule, and conducted a BFNA course for more than 300 naval personnel from other branches as also non-uniformed personnel, in order to increase preparedness and ensure capacity building to meet future disease management challenges, should this epidemic assume larger proportions.⁸ In addition, naval establishments have been regularly running community kitchens and distributing essential survival rations to the poorer and under-privileged sections of society in localities in their vicinity.

Maintain Operational Readiness to Address National Security

While the Nation grapples with this health emergency and the Indian Navy continues to contribute wholeheartedly to the national effort to mitigate this crisis, it being the 'Armed Force of the Union' cannot let itself be distracted from its primary task of ensuring the security of the Country, particularly in and from the maritime domain. A case in point is the Indian Army's robust response to continued ceasefire violations and attempts to infiltrate terrorists across the border in Jammu and Kashmir, even during the times of this medical crisis.

Spread of COVID-19 into close confines of a naval ship or submarine can have catastrophic impact on operational readiness; as such infected units – howsoever powerful or well armed – would no longer be able to carry out their assigned missions. The live and present example is that of the US Navy's nuclear powered aircraft carrier 'Theodore Roosevelt', which remains

berthed alongside in Guam with more than 500 sailors testing positive for COVID-19 and more than 3600 sailors are being observed in quarantine ashore.⁹ It is quite apparent that the powerful carrier's mission profile for the Western Pacific Ocean – worked out by the US Navy on the basis of its national security considerations – which was linked to its deployment in the area stands severely curtailed. The then Acting Secretary of the US Navy, Thomas Modly went to the extent of stating that “ *....it raised concerns about the operational capabilities and operational security of the ship that could have emboldened our adversaries to seek advantage...*”, while giving detailed justification for unceremonious and abrupt removal of the ship's Commanding Officer.¹⁰

The above turn of events in the US Navy amply illustrate the national security implications on account of operational readiness of naval units getting affected by something so unrelated as the corona virus. Same lessons would in fact, hold true for all navies, including the Indian Navy. As far as the Current epidemic is concerned, Six amphibious ships loaded with medical teams and pre-packaged modular HADR loads we kept on standby for assistance at Visakhapatnam, Kochi and Mumbai to send relief supplies to coastal regions and islands; as well as respond to any requests from neighbouring countries like Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Five medical teams were also on standby for deployment in other neighbouring countries.¹¹

Final Words

The Indian Naval ships, whether ‘mission deployed,’ or sailing for operational tasks closer home, or getting ready to transport men, material, ration or medical equipment to and across coastal states and neighbouring countries, have to maintain total operational readiness at this time of Global health crisis. This should in fact, be the foremost agenda of the Navy, which in itself, is closely related to the other two priorities mentioned above. Then, and only then, would the Indian Navy be able to discharge its duty to the Nation in the most optimal manner.

¹KP Sanjeev Kumar, ‘Decoding Admiral KB SINGH’S message to Indian Navy during COVID-19,’ 11 April 2020. See <https://kaypius.com/2020/04/11/decoding-admiral-kb-singhs-message-to-indian-navy-during-covid-19/>

² Indian Navy website, 'Chief of the Naval Staff Message to IN Personnel/ Community on COVID-19,' 07 April 2020. See <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/chief-naval-staff-message-personnel-community-covid-19-07-apr-20>

³ Pradip R Sagar, 'COVID-19: Navy to replenish warships at sea to stop port calls,' 01 April 2020. See <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2020/04/01/covid-19-navy-to-replenish-warships-at-sea-to-stop-port-calls.html>

⁴ Ministry of Defence Press Release, '44 Evacuees Return Home from Naval Quarantine Camp at Ghatkopar Mumbai,' 13 April 2020. See <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1613832>.

⁵ India Today, 'Fight against coronavirus: Navy develops infrared-based temperature sensor,' 02 April 2020,. See <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/fight-against-coronavirus-indian-navy-develops-handheld-infrared-based-temperature-sensor-1662401-2020-04-02>

⁶ India Today, 'Covid-19: Naval dockyard manufactures innovative portable multi-feed oxygen manifold,' 31 March 2020. See <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/covid-19-naval-dockyard-manufactures-innovative-portable-multi-feed-oxygen-manifold-1661553-2020-03-31>

⁷ Times News Network, 'Indian Navy helps rush face masks for health care providers in Goa,' 27 March 2020. See <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/goa/indian-navy-helps-rush-face-masks-for-health-care-providers-in-go/a/articleshows/74851244.cms>

⁸ Press Information Bureau, 'Southern Naval Command Designs Training Capsule for Non Medical Personnel,' 04 April 2020. See <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=201006>

⁹ Ryan Browne, CNN, '550 crew members of USS Theodore Roosevelt have tested positive for Covid-19,' 11 April 2020. See https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-04-11-20/h_a41eb059ac4f69725676833a83c45357

¹⁰ US Navy's official website, 'Statement from SECNAV on Relief of CO aboard USS Theodore Roosevelt,' 02 April 2020. See https://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=112537

¹¹ Economic Times, 'Warships on standby, IAF transport fleet activated in wake of coronavirus pandemic,' 02 April 2020. See <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/warships-on-standby-iaf-transport-fleet-activated/articleshows/74937546.cms>

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