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Report – Webtalk

**“Evolving Strategic Environment in the
Western Indian Ocean and Significance of
AMAN Exercise 2021”**

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The Arms Control and Disarmament Centre (ACDC) at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) organised a Web Talk on “Evolving Strategic Environment in the Western Indian Ocean and Significance of AMAN Exercise 2021,” by Vice Admiral (R) Iftikhar Ahmed Rao HI (M) on Wednesday, February 10, 2021.

Malik Qasim Mustafa, Director ACDC, in his introductory remarks said that the web talk has been organised to mark the beginning of the AMAN maritime Exercise 2021, an initiative of the Pakistan Navy of holding biennial multinational maritime exercises in 2007. Since then, AMAN Exercise has become a major international naval event which is evident from its growing number of participants. More than 45 countries are going to participate in this year’s exercise including the US, Russian and Chinese navies. With a motto of “Together for Peace,” “AMAN 2021” is aimed at promoting peace and cooperation and countering evolving maritime challenges including non-traditional and common security threats like piracy, arms and drug trafficking, human smuggling, terrorism and climate change. In this regard, Pakistan Navy has always contributed towards regional maritime security and through the AMAN exercise, it wanted to promote its role as a bridge between other regional navies.

He said that ACDC has organised this Web Talk on “Evolving Strategic Environment in the Western Indian Ocean and Significance of AMAN EXERCISE 2021,” to explore: the significance of evolving geopolitical environment in the Western Indian Ocean Region (WIOR); how the region is becoming a strategic pivot for the tri-polar contest among the US, China and India and what is the relevance of the Pakistan Navy’s AMAN Exercise in this context?

Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General ISSI, in his welcome remarks said that AMAN exercise has now become an institutional affair contributing to regional and extra-regional efforts to combat piracy, human and drug trafficking. It aims to contribute to peace and security through economic prosperity and by bringing regional navies together. Having large navies like the US, Russia China is a testament to the importance of bringing these countries for a cooperative effort.

Vice Admiral (R) Iftikhar Ahmed Rao HI (M) began by emphasising the importance of the WOIR, which contains the most important sea lanes for world trade. The north-western part of the Indian Ocean is the most significant due to the global oil trade which passes through the gulf

route. The region also contains some of the most important choke points in the world which, if blocked, would affect the world economy greatly. The Strait of Hormuz, Bab-ul-Mandab, Suez route and Cape route all pass through this region.

Vice Admiral Rao talked about the importance of the WIOR to Pakistan and how it could benefit from the development of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which would give a much shorter route for China and the Central Asian Republics to reach this region. China has now replaced the US as the biggest importer of oil from the gulf region, from where it imports 8.4 million barrels per day.

He highlighted the current big power competition in the region, between the US and China, with India playing the role of a wannabe big power. The US Maritime Strategy 2015 signalled a shift in the US interest by renaming the 'Asia Pacific' region to the 'Indo-Asia Pacific' region. There has also been an increase in the US deployment in the region, confirming the significance of the region for the US. China's primary national defence strategy remains to safeguard its maritime rights and interests, as well as their overseas interests. The Indian Maritime Doctrine of 2004 stated that the key to controlling the Indian Ocean region lies in controlling the choke points, which could be used as a bargaining chip in the international power game. He stated that India's hegemonic designs in the region are clear.

Vice Admiral Rao highlighted that states have many maritime interests and challenges in common, such as freedom of navigation, safe flow of commerce, protection against criminal activities, deterrence against terrorism and protection of the oceans' resources. Since many of the threats are transnational or global, they require a collaborative approach, something which was displayed during the Somalian piracy era. These maritime challenges go beyond the narrow concept of interstate conflict and so the concept of collaborative maritime security has gained pre-eminence. The US Maritime Strategy says that no one nation has the resources required to ensure maritime security at sea, meaning that a collaborative approach is the only answer.

Vice Admiral Rao also talked about Pakistan Navy's efforts in the post 9/11 period, including joining the Coalition Maritime Campaign Plan (CMCP) and Task Force-150 (TF-150) in 2004 and then commanding TF-150 in 2006. Pakistan's AMAN Exercise started in 2007 and, in 2009,

Pakistan joined the Counter-Piracy Task Force 151. Among all participating navies, Pakistan Navy has the highest occupancy time, which has never fallen below 80 per cent.

He emphasised that the AMAN series exercises are very important and a commendable effort in promoting peace and security at sea. It is not aimed at any country, rather at common threats to peace and security at sea and in the region. It is inclusive, not exclusive and all countries are welcome to participate. The AMAN exercises, along with the International Maritime Conference, have played a role in portraying a positive image of Pakistan, as well as sending a solidarity message against miscreants. The exercise provides a platform for inter-operability in Navies of regional and international peace-loving countries to operate together and learn from each other's experiences.

Discussion:

Q: Why is Iran not part of AMAN21 exercises?

A: Pakistan and Iran have good relations. The Iranian ships visit Pakistan and vice versa and they take part in training exercises. However, with international navies taking part as the US in the AMAN21, Iran has its reservations.

Q: What are the implications for such a large number of navies of the world coming together, for our maritime strategies? Also, with the increasing Indian foray into the United States Central Command (CENTCOM), what implications does this have for Pakistan's strategy?

A: participating navies have different operating and communicating procedures. In such exercises, their unique practices and experience are exchanged and there is an opportunity to learn from other navies. Best practices of all navies are shared and provide learning for all navies. These exercises are meant for security against common threats. They are not aimed at a particular threat of a group of countries.

Also, Pakistan is part of Task Force 150 and 151. India despite efforts and desire was not made part of. This is the achievement of Pakistan's diplomacy. But what the US chooses to make India part of vis-à-vis CENTCOM, Pakistan cannot dictate.

Q: Would you like to comment on the concept of QUAD-led Asian NATO and its implications for the region?

A: We do not want to be part of it because it is aimed against China that is not in our national interest. Until and unless the objectives of QUAD are broadened and the focus on China is shifted there is no question of being part of it.

Q: How do you see the participation of Russia in the AMAN21 exercise?

A: It is an important diplomatic win for Pakistan. It is a very positive sign for Pak-Russia relations and also a signal for India.

Q: What measures Pakistan should take to counter the Indian blue water navy ambitions especially in light of the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) and US-India Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA)?

A: India has hegemonic designs and a large economy. They are spending a lot on their navy. India is planning to have 3 aircraft carrier. While Pakistan cannot afford aircraft carriers and it does not need them. An aircraft carrier is an aggressive offensive platform that supports the Indian aggressive designs. Pakistan does not have any aggressive designs against anyone. Also, there is no need for Pakistan to compete with India weapon to weapon and platform to platform.

Q: India is preventing Pakistan's entry into the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Why were we not there initially?

A: IORA was created by India. The constitution said that entry into it will be through consensus. Thus, Pakistan was never permitted to be part of it. Pakistan tried to become a part and Australia tried to make Pakistan a part to no avail.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman BoG ISSI, said that in today's maritime domain security and economic interests are interlinked. He emphasised the need for cooperative security and the need to learn from other navies. He said that Pakistan needs to build up its naval capacity, especially with fast-evolving doctrines and technologies in the region and around the world. Thus, Pakistan must cooperate with friendly countries to learn and to build its naval

capacity. He also stressed the need to develop expertise in maritime security law. He lauded the AMAN21 exercise that would be of global importance and benefit.

PICTURES OF THE EVENT

