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INDO – PACIFIC REGIONAL DIALOGUE
27 FEB 18

1. Shri Nitin Gadkari, Hon'ble Minister for Shipping, Road Transport and Highways, Smt Nirmala Sitharaman, Hon'ble Minister for Defence, Mr. Stephen Lovegrove, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Defence, UK, Admiral RC Wijegunaratne, Chief of Defence Staff, Sri Lanka, your excellencies and esteemed members of Diplomatic corps, Admiral RK Dhowan, Chairman, National Maritime Foundation, Flag Officers, esteemed veterans, distinguished personalities from the industry and academia, overseas participants, friends from the media, Officers, ladies and gentlemen. A very Good morning to all of you.

2. It gives me immense pleasure today to see the participation of a large number of experts from diverse fields in this dialogue. It is indeed an honour to speak to such an audience. Any policy that is evolved through rigorous academic effort would always stand a better chance of success. It is with this intention that the Indian Navy wholeheartedly integrates itself with the endeavours of the National Maritime Foundation. Today, we are indeed proud to host the 'Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue' in partnership with the NMF.

3. My compliments to the Chairman and the Director NMF and their entire team who have worked closely with the Navy to give shape to this dialogue.

4. Ladies and Gentlemen, a quick look at the history reveals that nations in the Indo-Pacific have come a long way since the end of World War II and the era of colonisation. Several countries in this region have emerged as global powerhouses in manufacturing as well as service sectors and together contribute to about 50 % of global GDP. Today, three of the world's top ten economies and militaries are from this region. And aspirations all around are only rising.

5. Such spectacular development could not have been possible in an insulated environment. International trade remains the prime mover of economic progress. In case of the Indo-Pacific, about 80 % of the trade originating from here is actually extra-regional. This region is also a vital source of hydrocarbons and other natural resources, which power the growth engines around the world. Evidently, developments in this region have far-reaching implications across the globe and everyone is keenly watching the behaviours of both 'the established' and 'the aspiring'.

6. Ladies and gentlemen, certain challenges are inherent in any forward movement. In the context of the forward march of emerging powers in the Indo-Pacific, I would like to flag a few significant challenges and then draw out opportunities for all stakeholders.

7. All of us are aware that access to resources and markets is critical to economic development. Everyone would also appreciate that natural resources are limited and market expansions are also not easy to come by. Globalisation, in geographic terms, means that 'the established' and 'the aspiring' would need to share this limited 'space'. Unfortunately, this kind of 'sharing' is not something that happens without friction. In my understanding, mitigating this friction would remain the primary challenge in the foreseeable future.

8. In order to address this issue of peaceful management of international interactions, modern nation states voluntarily committed themselves to certain governing frameworks. Most of these regulatory frameworks evolved through consultative process under the umbrella of the United Nations. The process was, of course, led by the Bipolar order that evolved post World War II. The global order did become Unipolar in many ways after the disintegration of USSR. However, the 'rule of law' largely prevailed. Today, it is slowly becoming apparent that the pursuit of individual interests by new aspirants is increasingly coming in conflict with these widely accepted rules. This has exposed the fragility of modern international governing structures. Many analysts have attributed this to the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world order. Restoring the collective faith in a 'rules based order', irrespective of who leads that order, is therefore, the second challenge that I would like to flag.

9. The recent churning of global order has also prompted many nations to pursue aggressive international cooperation to seek new alignments in support of their respective national interests. However, with multiple states pursuing parallel ambitions, the cooperation agenda is getting coloured by competition. Cooperation between two states on a particular issue may also have an indirect negative bearing on a third. This has perhaps led to 'competitive cooperation', if I may use the term. Such trend needs to be watched carefully for its implications on the overall balance of power.

10. A close look at this trend of competitive cooperation also reveals an underlying duality of several bilateral relations. Globalisation and the resultant economic interdependence has given this peculiar attribute to several international interactions. While nations are amenable to partnerships in areas which are

beneficial to both, fierce competition may exist concurrently in areas where actions of one negatively impinge upon the interests of the other. Managing such duality of concurrent cooperation and competition is certainly a major challenge for policy makers.

11. Another concern that needs to be addressed is transparency of intent. Political, economic and military cooperation between two states to promote development and security would always be welcome. However, when such transactional activities take place between two economically and militarily unequal partners, the weaker nations must be watchful of any hidden intent under the garb of cooperation. India's overseas interactions have always been based on the sound principles of sovereignty, equality and mutual respect. However, opaqueness of intent on the part of certain powerful nations may gradually jeopardise the very sovereignty of the weaker partner and is, therefore, another challenge of modern times that we should be prepared to deal with.

12. Ladies and gentlemen, while I have flagged a few macro level challenges here, an optimist would always look at them as opportunities. However, turning challenges into opportunities is only possible for those who are willing to shoulder greater responsibilities.

13. At the recently concluded Raisina Dialogue, our External Affairs Minister, Ms Sushma Swaraj, amply articulated India's positive intent in such endeavour and I quote

“This is really a world in transition. For the foreseeable future, it appears that nations with growing capabilities and larger awareness will have to step forward and bear more responsibility”.

14. Ladies and Gentlemen, well-being of our respective populations would invariably remain the foremost universal priority for all of us. This concept of well-being has several associated aspects. For now, I would like to focus on the economic well-being and a sense of security. These are at the core of the very idea of 'well-being'. Therefore, I would like to highlight opportunities which have a direct bearing on these two aspects of well-being.

15. With a substantially large continental land mass, strategically significant maritime geography, abundant natural resources and a large volume of skilled workforce, the economic opportunities for India and its partners are immense. The market potential of a growing India is already well acknowledged. The Government of India has taken several new initiatives to unleash the true potential of these core strengths. This opens up several trade and investment opportunities for our

international partners who would concurrently benefit from the growth of Indian economy.

16. You will agree with me that international trade cannot flourish unless it is backed by robust physical connectivity. To this end, India has already made significant progress in several regional connectivity projects. The India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway and the Kaladaan multi-modal project are expanding eastwards. The proposed extension of this project to Cambodia and Vietnam will further consolidate India-ASEAN connectivity. The Chabahar Port Project in Iran has opened up trade routes westwards well into Central Asia. In partnership with Japan, India has also articulated its vision for Asia-Africa Growth Corridor and several steps are being taken to realise this vision. Projects of such magnitude demand collaborative international efforts and present a plethora of opportunities for public and private enterprise, both domestic and international.

17. While land and air connectivity is certainly important, there is no denying the fact that the maritime medium remains the preferred highway for international trade. With growing volumes of energy and trade flow, this medium will be even more critical to sustain the upward growth trajectory of trans-national trade. Accordingly, a significant amount of collaborative efforts are focussed on enhancing maritime connectivity. This is ably supported domestically by the ambitious Sagarmala project aimed at port led development through capacity enhancement of ports and back end connectivity to industrial centres.

18. The upward curve of economic ambitions also puts severe demands on natural resources. As we inch closer to the limits of continental sources of energy and other natural resources, there is an increasing focus on exploring sea based resources. Ladies and Gentlemen, in our pursuit of economic ambitions we must not lose sight of our responsibilities towards future generations. It is our responsibility that the growth remains sustainable and does not unduly harm the very environment that we live in. Adherence to the tenets of 'Blue Economy' would guide us towards such an effort. Significant opportunities have been identified in this relatively new field. This subject was deliberated at length during the Annual Maritime Power Conference conducted by the NMF last year. We would be reviewing the progress made in this very important maritime field and I am hopeful that the participants will draw correct lessons from the deliberations here.

19. Ladies and Gentlemen, I will now turn to the second aspect of 'well-being', which is the sense of security. Growth can foster only in an environment conducive for peaceful international transactions. With specific reference to Indo-Pacific, the

building blocks of regional stability primarily mutual trust, transparency of intent and respect for sovereignty appear to be under stress. Evidently such environment directly impinges upon regional security dynamics. Predominance of the maritime domain in the regional context highlights maritime security even further. Therefore, I would like to use this opportunity to outline the broad contours of our outlook towards regional maritime security.

20. Being the primary manifestation of maritime military power of a nation at the heart of Indian Ocean, we in the Indian Navy are deeply conscious of our responsibilities towards ensuring that good order and a sense of security prevails in the region. Today, our ships and aircraft are deployed across the length and breadth of Indo-Pacific almost round the clock. Such presence not only re-assures seafarers of safety from all kinds of non-traditional threats but also keeps traditional threats at bay. The span of our deployments has also proved to be of great value when the Indian Navy emerged as the 'first responder' during many natural calamities in the region and beyond. Our capability to execute large scale non-combatant evacuation from far-flung war-torn countries brought relief to thousands of civilians irrespective of nationalities. Such track record has earned the Indian Navy the repute of being the net security provider in the Indian Ocean region. We would continue to put in sustained efforts in pursuit of our own national interests and those of our friendly maritime nations.

21. While the capability development and maritime posture of the Indian Navy is oriented towards preserving our stated maritime interests, we are acutely aware that a larger sense of maritime security can only be achieved through cooperative and participative regional security architecture. To this end, we have always strived to coordinate our efforts with all regional and extra-regional stakeholders, with genuine respect for the concepts of sovereignty, equality and universal good. This sentiment is repeatedly echoed at the highest levels through articulation of the philosophy of SAGAR, meaning the ocean, which stands for 'Security And Growth for All in the Region'. India's maritime cooperation initiatives are precisely based on such an outlook.

22. Going beyond traditional activities of maritime cooperation, there exist tremendous scope for broadening the scope of international maritime cooperation. We have already executed several information sharing agreements with our international partners and are looking forward to expanding this grid further. In today's highly digitised world, immense potential also exists for cooperation in the Space and Cyber Security domains. We remain committed to working together in these evolving fields.

Cues for the Panellists

23. Ladies and Gentlemen, you will all agree that the pursuit of a stable Indo-Pacific requires 'cooperation and collaboration to be enhanced, connectivity to be optimised and competition to be managed so that it does not escalate into conflict. In this context, I would like to share some questions that often come to my mind. The panellists and participants of this dialogue may take these questions forward over the next two days.

(a) First - There is an abundance of institutional mechanisms and equally robust policy framework for governance of the oceans across the globe. What is missing is perhaps voluntary compliance. What can we do to persuade occasional defaulters to desist from such tendencies?

(b) Second - Indians by nature believe in complementary rather than competitive transactions. It is our strength and not a weakness. How can we propagate this thought so that unilateralism makes way for cooperative development and coercion makes way for collaboration?

(c) Third - In the recent times, national leaders across the Indo-Pacific have displayed a distinct maritime inclination in their respective policy priorities. Such convergence of views among national leadership across this region can be taken forward by the respective maritime agencies to translate words into action. In this regard, I would like to urge the participants to aim at 'Policy coordination' as the end result of dialogue.

24. I am confident that several such issues will be deliberated upon at length during the course of this Dialogue and I wish all participants very fruitful discussions.

25. I would, once again like to thank the organising committee for their painstaking efforts in putting together such a fine event and all the eminent panellists for being here to share their expertise with all the participants.

26. On behalf of all the proud men and women in whites, I extend my best wishes to all of you present here.

Thank you.