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Indian Ocean Conference 2016 in Singapore: India's Soft Power on Display

By Lee Cordner

Synopsis

Enacting India's Act East policy was central to a high profile India-hosted Conference on the Indian Ocean held in Singapore. India's intent to be the major power in the Indian Ocean employing an essentially soft power approach was on display.

Commentary

AN INAUGURAL Indian Ocean Conference 2016 (IOC 2016) was arranged and hosted by the New Delhi-based India Foundation at the Shangri-La Hotel, Singapore on 1-2 September 2016. The event was conducted in association with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) as the Singapore 'co-host'. The Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies and the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka were also listed as associates. It was announced during IOC 2016 that a further conference would be held in Sri Lanka in 2017.

The IOC 2016 brochure stated the intent was to "convene critical states and principal maritime partners in the Indian Ocean Region" to discuss "issues impinging on region-wide national security and national development, through the tri-prism of Geo-Strategic, Geo-Economic and the Geo-Cultural". The focus was "maritime affairs" with an intent to "outreach... to the diplomatic core, industry and entrepreneurs, the media... the fraternity of religious, spiritual and thought-leaders" in promoting the "syncretic strengths of religions, cultures and civilisation antecedence, weaving mutual affinities between India and the ASEAN community". Three conference 'sub-themes' were "Security Dimensions of the IOR: Perspectives and Approaches to Maritime Competition, Maritime Diplomacy and Maritime Development"; "Blue Economy and National Development in the IOR: Trade, Transit and Technology, for

Socio-Economic Prosperity”; and “Acculturation in the IOR: Culture, Tradition and Civilisation in Maritime Commons Development”.

India’s Strategic Intent

IOC 2016 was carefully orchestrated to tangibly promote the Modi Government’s ‘Act East policy’ that has succeeded India’s earlier ‘Look East policy’. The India Foundation is a think tank closely aligned with the BJP-RSS Government of India. The event was the beneficiary of significant Indian Government support and clearly reflected official strategic intent. The Indian Minister of State for External Affairs, MJ Akbar acted as the Principal Host throughout; the Indian Minister of External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj addressed the Conference via video link; and Indian Minister of Roads, Transport and Highways, Nitin Gadkari and Foreign Secretary, Dr S. Jaishankar made separate speeches during the opening session.

As announced in the conference brochure, the principal target of IOC 2016 was ASEAN with an unstated theme of enhancing India’s profile as a major regional power. A core purpose of IOC 2016 was to demonstrate to other regional major powers, primarily China, India’s substantial historical and contemporary connections and influence in Southeast Asia; India intends to proactively develop, promote and leverage those relationships. A similar message was no doubt intended for Indian domestic audiences, fostering growing Indian nationalism, as the Modi Government encourages economic development and attempts to enhance India’s international status.

Notably, IOC 2016 was held the day before Prime Minister Narendra Modi embarked upon a visit to Vietnam, where he signed cooperative strategic and other agreements. PM Modi then continued his foray east to attend the G20 Summit in Hangzhou, China, in conjunction with other major world leaders, followed by the East Asia Summit (EAS) hosted by ASEAN Chair Laos in Vientiane. An intense period of India’s engagement with regional states to the east of the South Asian sub continent was evident.

Display of Indian Soft Power

IOC 2016 was a lavishly mounted, well-funded event designed to enhance India’s profile as the major power in the Indian Ocean. It drew together significant political leaders and academics from South Asia and several ASEAN countries in explicit support of India’s ‘Act East’ engagement. Participation of the Sri Lankan Prime Minister, Mr Ranil Wickremesinghe, along with ministers from India, Singapore, Vietnam, Japan, Malaysia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Mauritius and Bangladesh plus former political office holders from other countries in the region attested to India’s rising influence.

Very high profile involvement from Sri Lanka and Bangladesh could have been intended to send a strong signal to China, although the notable lack of representation from ASEAN states that are close to China, like Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos, was equally evident. Both Japan and the United States sent high-level representation: Japan was by Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Nobuo Kishi while the US Assistant Secretary for Central Asia and South Asia, Nisha Biswal, and the

US Navy representative resident in Singapore, Rear Admiral Donald Gabrielson (speaking on behalf of Commander in Chief, US Pacific Command), made up the American presence.

IOC 2016 was held over two days with the first day devoted to four parallel “Pre-Conference Workshops”. These were titled “Comity” where the focus was on maritime security and the need for enhanced cooperation in the eastern Indian Ocean; “Commerce (Trade)”; “Commerce (Investments)”; and “Culture”. The fundamental theme and central message from the main conference on day two, where numerous ministers spoke, was to emphasise India’s deep and long-standing, historically significant cultural and economic ties with Southeast Asia while highlighting India’s support for regional maritime security. India was presented as a valued, non-threatening partner and trusted friend; a distinction from China’s increasingly assertive profile in the region.

Chinese Involvement & Other Participants

Notably but not surprisingly was the limited Chinese involvement in IOC 2016. The only official Chinese representative was Dr Wang Xiaowei who is the Director of the Beijing-based China Association for International Friendly Contacts. There was a Taiwanese representative: Dr Hung Mao-tien, President and Board Chairman of the Institute for National Policy Research in Taipei. Dr Wang appeared as a last-minute surprise speaker at the Pre-Conference Comity Workshop that focussed upon maritime security.

Notable was the low level of Australian participation in IOC 2016. Only the Australian High Commissioner to Singapore and a maritime security expert academic were included as speakers in Pre-Conference Workshops, with no Australian representation on the podium on day two.

France sent a special adviser of the DG for International Relations in the Ministry of Defence in Paris. Well-known British writer Patrick French and another expert commentator Bertil Lintner (now based in Thailand) were participants in the Pre-Conference workshops. The large turnout of former top Indian diplomats and bureaucrats who travelled especially for the conference was well noted by the other attendees at IOC 2016.

Overall, IOC 2016 reinforced India’s intentions to be a significant actor in the Indian Ocean/western Pacific as a reliable, non-aggressive partner promoting strong and mutually beneficial ethnic, cultural and economic ties, with an essential regional security agenda. The eloquent address from the rambunctious Shashi Tharoor and the valedictory address from Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, founder of Art of Living Foundation, served to accentuate peaceful and spiritual connections and intent between India and its eastern neighbours. This was a highly nuanced display of India’s soft power.

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