

P-8I: A Ground for India-Australia Cooperation?

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The US is already looking to catch up with Russia and gradually upstage the latter in becoming not only the biggest arms supplier to India but a disciplined one in that. The successful and timely delivery by Boeing of the P-8I maritime surveillance, reconnaissance and anti-submarine aircraft to India in May this year is only a case in point. As the first of the eight P-8Is is delivered, it is considered to be a shot in the arm of India's maritime surveillance, reconnaissance and anti-submarine warfare. India has ordered eight P-8Is in a mega deal in January 2009 for \$2.1 billion.

The P-8I's induction, when complete, will provide a bulwark against the depleting Indian submarine strength in the Indian Ocean, which it is reckoned, will be at its lowest operational strength in the next 5-10 years that the Indian submarine history has seen. India's desire to modernise its submarine capabilities has been done in by inordinate delays in submarine project like the P75 and an ageing submarine fleet.

It is expected that two more P-8Is will be delivered to India by the end of 2013 and the rest five by 2015. It appears India's need for an expanded maritime surveillance and anti-submarine capability has been answered by just the right kind of aircraft in the P-8I.

The P-8I fleet will be placed at INS Rajali in Tamil Nadu. INS Rajali is an Indian naval air station located near Arakkonam in Tamil Nadu in southern India. INS Rajali may have been a historical place carrying World War II history but the completely new strategic significance it has gained apropos its proximity to the Indian Ocean ramps up the case for a positioning of the P-8I fleet there. A blueprint drawn for the future positioning of the entire fleet of the P-8I in INS Rajali (at least 12 of them by the year 2017) will reveal that both in terms of its reach and precision, India's maritime surveillance and anti-submarine capabilities will be matched by very few countries; an elusive and much needed edge.

The P-8I can travel at a speed of 490 knots per hour and has a range of more than 1200 nautical miles. This covers most of Southeast Asia along with the entire Indian coast. Add to this, the mid-air refuelling capability of the P-8I which means that it can have longer duration and distance in the air. It should not be missed here that both the currently operational Russian maritime patrol and anti-submarine aircraft by India placed in INS Rajali, the Tupolev Tu-142 and the Ilyusin Il-38SD do not have these capabilities. For one, there is a generational leap in the P-8I from both the Russian

aircraft. Secondly, India had imported eight Tu-142MKs which were downgraded from their original technological standards. The Ilyusin Il-38SD even after technological up gradation and retrofitting lags behind the P-8I markedly.

Come 2015, India-Australia Cooperation in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific will be a transit route for 70-80% of the global trade. Freedom of navigation, piracy-free trade and above all a code of conduct in the high seas will be as important to India as to other stake holders, if not more. If India indeed desires to take a leadership role in the Indo-Pacific and the Indian Ocean, nothing can be more opportune than a chance that presents India with the possibility of securing the common interests of not just the Indian Ocean Region but the Indo-Pacific with a leadership role in an effective maritime security. Cooperation with Australia on maritime surveillance can be a great beginner. The Defence White Paper (WP 2013) of Australia has enough evidence to suggest that in Australia, India should find a willing partner for this project.

The P-8I aircraft of India finds a clear mention in the latest WP 2013 of Australia and not without reasons. It is well known that Australia too has Boeing's Poseidon (P-8A) maritime surveillance aircraft. The two Boeing variants, India's P-8I and Australia's P-8A can cooperate in working together to ensure an effective maritime surveillance and reconnaissance of the future Indo-Pacific corridor. More importantly, India can do this without entering into a strategic alliance with Australia.

Technology, speed and its far reach make the P-8I one of the most effective aircraft in maritime surveillance and anti-submarine warfare. Its mid-air refuelling capabilities is believed to provide an unprecedented reach and role for the Indian Air Force. The aircraft presents India with an unprecedented opportunity to extend its agenda of coastal security to incorporate the maritime security interests of the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific. The question is whether India will bite the bullet in taking a leadership role in the Indian Ocean first, followed by the Indo-Pacific?

Australia, in its WP 2013 mentions India as a 'global power' which will influence the 'key trends' in the Indian Ocean. As Australia looks for a 'broader Indo-Pacific region' it looks forward to cooperate with India in maritime surveillance of the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific. Australia has also proposed a strategic partnership with India in the Indian Ocean.

Through its WP 2013 Australia has shown a deep desire to work with India in maintaining maritime security and imposing a 'code of conduct' in the Indo-Pacific, lest the still upcoming region turns into another South China Sea where disputes rule the roost.

Should India use the P-8I to its ultimate potential, for the first time it would appear that how India uses an aircraft could have a significant bearing on the politico-strategic formulation leading to a prospective security structure in the Indo-Pacific in which India will play a vital role. Restricting the P-8I for just securing the coastal security of India will not just be shying away from a leadership role but also reflective of the age old woolly attitude of India towards security initiatives; regional or global.

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