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Leading Combined Forces Maritime Operations: Starting Small, Growing Big

By Bernard Miranda

Synopsis

As the Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) embarks on its fourth command deployment of the Combined Task Force 151 (CTF 151) in Bahrain this week, its successful participation in CTF 151 since 2009 is worth recounting. There is obvious value in continuing to lead such operations.

Commentary

THE REPUBLIC of Singapore Navy (RSN) prepares to embark very soon on yet another command deployment in in the Gulf of Aden – its fourth leading role in a multi-national task force.

Having performed the Scene-of-Action Commander (SAC) role several times before, the RSN was requested in 2009 by the Bahrain-based Commander Combined Maritime Forces (CCMF) to lead the multi-national Combined Task Force 151 (CTF151). That was to begin in January-April 2010. Since then, the RSN has done two more successful commands and will be embarking on its fourth command deployment before the end of March 2016.

Gaining Confidence, Building Credibility

The RSN's first international deployment to the Middle East area came after the Iraq War of 2003, when Singapore joined multi-national reconstruction efforts by initially deploying one Landing Ship Tank to protect Iraq's Al-Basra oil terminal in the North Arabian Gulf (NAG) from maritime terrorist attacks.

The RSN's professionalism as a protection unit, observable efforts put into

technology, and mission readiness were apparent to the on-scene leadership and other participating navies. The proposed SAC role required approval, which was obtained promptly, from the national chain-of-command – testimony to the strong confidence in the force's readiness.

The *Resolution* Task Group of 2004 fulfilled the SAC role effectively, and this continued for the subsequent three deployments through to 2008, always achieving efficiency and mission success which built the RSN's credibility to undertake even heavier responsibilities. After five NAG missions, it became necessary to focus on an area of more pressing concern; piracy incidents off Somalia were increasing alarmingly with many ships being hijacked for ransom. This necessitated greater international effort to tackle this threat.

The RSN once again rose to the call: In 2009 it deployed the *Persistence* Task Group, together with two helicopters, to conduct patrols in the Gulf of Aden (GoA), in particular the Internationally Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC). This deployment also coincided with the Maersk Alabama incident, during which the Task Group coordinated CTF151 operations in the IRTC-GoA.

That deployment opened the opportunity for Singapore to gain credibility in leading operations and it was subsequently offered CTF151 command. Work then began in earnest to form the first multi-national combined Command team for deployment in 2010.

Concept Development

Three basic questions in concept development needed to be addressed: first, where to operate from (ashore or at sea); second who to bring; and third how to achieve mission success?

To the first question, while shore-based operations would facilitate a bigger team, better and more stable (and seamless connectivity within) command and control systems, at-sea deployment brought the command team to the forefront of action, allow easier face-to-face interactions and in line with what was being practised by the other Task Force Commanders. The approach taken therefore was to have most of the small Command team at sea (onboard the US Navy destroyer *Farragut*) with a smaller shore liaison team at the Bahrain-based CCMF Headquarters.

To the second question, the natural choices were to invite like-minded nations with established longstanding relationships, one of the littoral nations' representatives to facilitate better communications, and representatives from the next-to-command nation. Following a series of invitations and discussions the team comprised representatives from Singapore, France, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Saudi Arabia and the United States.

Shortly into the deployment, Australia and Singapore also exchanged liaison officers to enhance stronger linkages between CTF150 and CTF151, which were operating in the same area for different tasks.

To the final question, team-building and preparation constituted key components. A

common vision was developed - "to be the Command team of choice" - during a combined team-building session held in Singapore a month prior. Lines of Operations were also developed: building relationships; enhancing linkages with partners; engaging stakeholders; and response assurance.

Assimilating, Operating and Delivering Results

Assimilating with the host platform with different nations and diverse cultures was a concern that needed to be addressed. It was important to establish a host-and-guest relationship and adapt to different practices, which cannot be taken for granted and required planning and effort to avoid cross-cultural tensions.

Before attachment to the *Farragut*, the key ship staffs and command team were put in contact to work through all administrative and cultural issues, most of which were resolvable and where it was not adjustments were made. Recreational and social events also forged the teams into one cohesive unit.

Another key factor was to ensure seamless command transition due to time shortage and no room for mistakes during ongoing operations; any lapse in coordination and directions could adversely affect mission safety and success. An advance team was deployed to the incumbent Commander's command ship and another small team was placed ashore to prepare for smooth command transition.

When the main body reported into theatre, thorough final briefings and preparations were conducted with the outgoing and incoming teams before the assumption of command. Into the operations, assimilation was quicker-paced as operations started almost immediately.

Reflection

As a maritime nation, this mission brought Singapore to an equal level of responsible commitment against common threats and demonstrated its ability to lead, thereby enhancing interstate relations and bolstered the country's credibility in the international arena.

In particular, the Singapore Armed Forces demonstrated its ability to lead a multi-national team and command CTF151 in a faraway, complex security environment. The team built synergy amongst itself and the host platform and did not cower to other more established forces.

On a personal note, the desire to lead after many years of perseverance brought great satisfaction and sense of accomplishment. The smooth command transition to the ROK Navy, subsequent sharing with other like-minded navies all added to the persistent effort in this international endeavour.

As the fourth RSN CTF embarks on the 151 mission, one should wish them success. While the number of piracy incidents has reduced significantly due to the naval presence, best management practices and use of privately-contracted security teams, the operational experience and honourable tasks of preventing suffering and possible loss of lives make the mission worthwhile.

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