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USS Theodore Roosevelt Incident amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic & its Implications on the Indian Army



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Introduction

USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN 71 or TR) is a Nimitz Class Nuclear Powered Aircraft Carrier which departed from the San Diego Naval base at the end of Jan 2020 with approximately 5000 sailors aboard. Captain Brett Crozier was in command of the ship. Rear Admiral Stuart P Baker was commander of the Carrier Strike Group and Captain Crozier's immediate senior in chain of command. The aircraft carrier was sailing accompanied by its strike group on a deployment to the western Pacific region. The aim of the paper is to analyse the events leading upto the outbreak of the COVID-19 aboard the USS TR and implications of such an event in the context of the Indian Army.

US Geopolitics in the Western Pacific Region

This part provides an insight into the importance the US gives to the region from the strategic, security and economical point of view.

Key Points

- The US leadership was expected to exercise more prudence before deploying the USS TR in the Western Pacific amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Leadership in the right earnest at every level of command, be it civilian or military, is imperative to gain and retain the confidence of men and women in uniform who will fight alongside to win wars.
- Military and civilian leaders alike are expected to take decisions concerning the safety and security of the nation with due diligence.
- The security forces of any country are considered the last bastion to protect its integrity against external aggression as well as internal strife. The leadership and personnel under command must work in unison to show a common front.
- Nations and its defence forces all across the world are expected to withstand national crisis situations with great sense of responsibility and capacity by commanders in chain to effectively deal with practical problems of varying complexities and identify independent solutions by being decisive in decision-making.



•**US Presence in the Western Pacific.** The US over the years has been adept at Out of Area Contingency operations by deploying its forces across continents. The western Pacific being of strategic importance, the US government has been maintaining presence of its Navy by virtue of port calls to friendly foreign countries. It has been promoting its commitment to a “Free & Open Pacific” by deploying its ships to foreign ports and undertaking “Freedom of Navigation Operations”.

•**US Bilateral Relations with the Littoral States in the Western Pacific**

- **Vietnam.** The Danang port call was planned as part of 25 years of normalisation of US - Vietnam diplomatic relations. The US department of defence and state department appreciated the USS TRs port call in Danang as a strategic opportunity to further strengthen and reinforce its relations with Vietnam.
- **Philippines.** In recent times US - Philippines bilateral relations having been deteriorated. US considered the Danang port call important to maintain its presence and show of strength in the Philippines neighbourhood.
- **China.** Due to China’s assertiveness in the SCS and declaration of its Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), the US considers its presence in the region of paramount importance to stem the rise of dragon in the western Pacific. China increased its military activities in Spratly Islands in the SCS, a territory claimed by both China and Vietnam.

•**Effectiveness of Port Calls.** It is a matter of debate whether the port calls as part of the US deployment missions in the western Pacific are an effective deterrent against assertive countries like China/ North Korea or a diplomatic and political aim to resolution of tensions in the region.

Covid-19 Outbreak on Board the USS Theodore Roosevelt

This part analyses the thought process of the US planning hierarchy involving the Pentagon and the State Department to undertake the deployment of the USS TR in the Western pacific amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. It also dwells upon the efficacy of the ships medical infrastructure to effectively deal with the pandemic and the subsequent outbreak of COVID-19 on board the ship.



•**US Carrier Strike Group Preparations against COVID-19.** The USS TR set sail along with other battle ships at the end of January 2020 when WHO declared COVID-19 a Pandemic. A “Special Preventive Medical Unit” which was aboard the carrier strike group, however did not have adequate amount of COVID-19 test kits. The ships did not possess the ability to conduct diagnostic testing for COVID-19. As per Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) depending on location of the ships, specimens can be sent for testing to the nearest shore based laboratories. The arrangement could incur delayed response to specimens of particularly asymptomatic sailors depending upon the *inter-se* distance of the ship from the port with COVID-19 testing labs. The time difference could however be reduced based upon aerial evacuation of patients and samples to the shore based laboratories.

•**Port Calls Necessity Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic.** On 26 February 20, the then US President Trump declared that 15 cases of the virus in the US would be cured within a few days’ time.¹ It is appreciated that the US planning hierarchy involving the Pentagon and the State Department did not want to contradict their supreme commander’s thoughts on timely containment of the virus. They therefore did not act with responsibility to disseminate instructions to the USS TR which was ready to depart for its scheduled port call to Danang, Vietnam amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Acting Navy Secretary, Thomas Modly instructed the 7th Fleet ships to spend at least 14 days between port visits in an attempt to arrest the spread of the virus. The Pentagon and State Department proceeded with the port call due to the following reasons:-

- **Uncertainty due to COVID-19 Pandemic.** During uncertainties militaries tend to adhere to SOPs to execute operations. The USS TRs port call was timed to commemorate the 25th anniversary of diplomatic relations between US and Vietnam.
- **Fissures in US - Vietnam Relations.** In the event of the port call being cancelled, US top brass were apprehensive about the further deterioration of US - Vietnam relations as Vietnam’s 19 member politburo had already given their consent to the port call.²
- **Rest & Recoup of Sailors on Board.** The USS TR comprises of approx 5000 sailors on board who operate 24x7 under physically tough and mentally challenging conditions. Port visits once a month are a morale booster for sailors deployed at sea over protracted periods.



- **COVID-19 Outbreak on Board USS TR.** The USS TR arrived at Danang on 05 March 20. All sailors who disembarked were instructed to undergo temperature screening for COVID-19 symptoms on their return to the ship. On 08 March 20, individuals including two British nationals were tested positive for the virus. The ship departed the port on 09 March 2020 for Guam and on 22 March 2020, USS TR reported its first case after a sailor was diagnosed with the virus. In the subsequent days as more number of sailors started testing positive, they were medically evacuated off the ship. The ship was anchored at Guam, an island in Philippines on 27 Mar 2020. Eight sailors were sent to Naval Hospital, Guam for treatment.

Fissures in US Military & Civil Command Chain

This part introspects on the sensitive nature of cooperation between the US civilian and military leadership.

- **Consensus on Plan of Action.** The Commanding Officer (CO) of the ship, Captain Crozier had strongly recommended to his senior commander for quicker evacuation of sailors from the ship to avoid spread of the virus in the confined space. He recommended to retain 10% strength on the ship to ensure functioning of the Nuclear Reactor, weapon & electronic systems and regular sanitisation of the ship. Crozier and his superior commanders were however, at variance in the plan of action to be implemented. Rear Admiral Stuart Baker, commander of the carrier strike group and Admiral John Aquilino, commander of the US Pacific fleet preferred medication of sailors and social distancing on board the ship. The senior officers were more concerned about “the carrier being rendered out of action and jeopardising the msn”. Mark Esper, Defence Secretary in a statement to CBS news on 31 Mar 2020 assured that the evacuation of the ship was not necessary.³
- **Capt Crozier’s Letter dated 30 March 2020.** The CO of the ship sent an unclassified (UNCLAS) memo through UNCLAS email to 20-30 Navy people including his staff and leaders inside and outside his chain of command. He remarked “The spread of the disease is ongoing and accelerating. Decisive action is required. We are not at war. Sailors need not die”. Captain Crozier assumingly forwarded the letter to UNCLAS sources as his repeated requests for quicker evacuation of sailors from the ship were not being attended to. The Navy Secretary



responded that the US government requires more time to arrange for beds in hospitals & hotels in Guam to accommodate thousands of sailors disembarking from the ship.

- **Civil Naval Secretary Relieves Captain Crozier from Command of Ship.** Thomas Modly, Naval Secretary stated that “Captain Crozier had allowed the complexity of his challenge with the COVID-19 outbreak overwhelm his ability to act professionally when acting professionally was what needed most at that time”. He further remarked that Captain Crozier was relieved from his duties as “He demonstrated extremely poor judgement in the midst of a crisis”.⁴ He opines that Captain Crozier’s actions led to the following:-
 - Unnecessarily worried the families by stating that the plans were not in place to address the concerns.
 - Concerns raised about operational capability and operational security of the USS TR which could have emboldened US adversaries to take advantage of.
 - Undermined the chain of command who were trying their optimum best to render requisite aid to the ship as early as possible.
- **Extant Rift between Civilian Commander’s and the Military Commander’s.** A parallel could be drawn with 2017 incidents wherein USS Fitzgerald, a Destroyer & USS John McCain collided at different locations with merchant ships that killed seven and 10 sailors respectively. The Naval command had highlighted urgent requirement of ship maintenance and rest to overworked sailors who were operating 24x7 for protracted periods. On basis of Court of Inquiry, it took the Navy 24 days (Fitzgerald incident) and 41 days (John McCain incident) to relieve the Commanding Officers of their command. Questions are being raised by Republicans and veterans about the urgency which was exhibited by civilian Naval Secretary Modly to relieve Captain Crozier of the command of USS TR on 02 Apr 2020 barely two days after he forwarded the letter to 20-30 people on 30 March 2020. Admiral Mike Mullen (Retired) is of the opinion that relieving Captain Crozier of his command was a really bad decision due to the following:-
 - It undermines the authority of the military commanders who are trying to take care of their troops.
 - It significantly negatively impacts the willingness of commanders to speak truth to the power.



Implications of such an Incident in the Context of the Indian Army

This part highlights the nuances of varied facets of a commander and his command. These are essential to be analysed and understood in the context of the Indian Army. The essential facets of a commander and his command are highlighted in the succeeding paragraphs.

- **Knowing Your Command.** The Indian Army should be well prepared and commanders in chain should possess an in-depth knowledge of their command. The leadership should possess an in depth knowledge of the personality traits of men under command, their professional acumen and past experience before assigning them on different missions in various terrain and operations of war.
- **Decisiveness.** Even after deploying the USS TR in the western Pacific, commander's in chain displayed indecisiveness in allowing the ship to make a port call at Danang inspite of occurrences of positive cases in Vietnam. All stake holders including the Capitol Hill, State Department including the Defence Secretary, CNS, Chief of the US Pacific Command & Commander Strike Group could not adopt a firm decision on cancelling the Danang port call. Observing 25 years of US - Vietnam cordial friendly relations outweighed the safety and security of approximately 5000 sailors on board the ship. Although India maintains cordial relations with many countries its Foreign Policy, however the military commanders should be able to prioritise things and be able to take concrete decisions keeping diplomatic relations aside.
- **Speed of Decision.** Captain Crozier was swift in instructing his sailors to be back on the ship on 09 March 2020 as soon as cases of virus spread in Vietnam became known. However, inspite of repeated requests by the CO on quick evacuation of sailors from the ship, the commanders in chain took time in evacuating sailors at Guam. After receipt of the news of the first case on 22 March 20, aerial evacuation of symptomatic and asymptomatic crew to medical facilities at shores could have arrested the spread of the virus on board the ship by the time it docked pier side at Guam on 27 March 20. Commanders in chain should have catered for medical facilities, hotels and quarantine facilities at Guam as it was the next port call after Danang. The Indian Army operates in varied kinds of warfare viz, conventional, sub conventional, cyber, Information Warfare & Hybrid Warfare. Speed of Decision of commander's in chain is of paramount importance to maintain moral ascendancy over our adversary and achieve success.



- **Power of Expression.** Captain Crozier repeatedly conveyed to all commanders on the gravity of situation after the first sailor showed symptoms on board on 22 March 20. Commanders in the Indian Army even at the unit and the sub unit level should possess the confidence and courage for correct, truthful and timely reporting of incidents to higher commanders. It would enable the higher commanders adept with better knowledge and experience to undertake a holistic view of the situation and act decisively.
- **Situational Awareness.** The movement of a carrier strike group with a sizeable number of battle ships comprising thousands of sailors and war machinery does merit detailed and deliberate planning and preparation on the route and timelines through the western Pacific. Situational awareness of the pandemic on behalf of the commanders in chain merited either postponing the deployment or avoiding port calls to countries with positive cases of the virus. The Indian Army should possess a very high degree of situational awareness against external aggression and internal situation in order to be proactive in dealing with any contingency and not be reactive.
- **Contingency Planning (Resourcefulness).** On 22 Mar 2020 there was a sudden outbreak of the virus on USS TR. The ships medical infrastructure was not in place to effectively deal with sudden spurt in cases. Deployment of approximately 5000 crew on board the ship merited the commanders in chain to have war gamed all contingencies. Over 100 sailors were affected by the disease in a short span between 22 March 20 and 27 March 20 by the time the ship docked at Guam. Aerial evacuation of initial patients to Guam with adequate medical infrastructure in place could have avoided spread of the virus on board the ship. Adequate arrangements should have been in place to cater for minimum 50% strength to be immediately evacuated to hospitals, hotels and quarantine locations on the ship reaching Guam. Social distancing by balance of the crew on board the confined ship would have given the commanders some time to administer medication on board. The Indian Army should assess its existing billeting capability and medical infrastructure in the form of available permanent infrastructure and also establish camps in various locations as quarantine facilities against this Biological threat in being. This would obviate over-crowding at these medical facilities, maintain social distancing norms and also keep the medical staff/ frontline workers safe from infection while rendering treatment during such pandemics.



- **Commander-Men Relations.** The USS TR incident has brought in close perspective the intimate commander-men relationship between a unit commander operating on ground alongside his command and that of a senior commander with his command. Captain Crozier appreciated the gravity of the situation and repeatedly requested his commanders for immediate evacuation of the ship. He was more accountable towards the safety and security of men and material under his command. In spite of the Naval Secretary office having told him about the efforts of the senior hierarchy in early resolution of the problem, on 01 April 2020 he conveyed to Thomas Modly, the Naval Secretary “Sir, we are getting a lot more cases. I felt it was time to send out a signal flare”. The CO of the ship hinted out to an Save Our Souls (SOS) call as operational efficiency of the manpower on board the ship was dwindling by the day. Senior military commanders by virtue of them having commanded troops as unit commanders were expected to better appreciate the gravity of the situation and with firmness and conviction to support their junior unit commander. Senior commanders in the US command chain displayed cold feet in recognizing the need to protect the vulnerable crew on board the ship. The Indian Army has numerous instances of close knit officer men relations during various operations of war, be it Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw meeting troops at the frontline during the 1971 war or Captain Vikram Batra leading his troops from front in frontline a quest for “Yeh Dil Maange More” in capture of Point 4875 during Kargil War, 1999. The USS TR incident highlights the need for all Indian Army commanders to remain more responsible towards their command, maintain a close knit professional relationship with troops which will retain their trust in their commanders professional ability during all operations of war.
- **Faith in Senior Leadership.** It is evident through this incident about the lack of faith Captain Crozier had in his senior commanders of acting quickly and decisively towards early resolution of the crisis. In spite of the first case being detected on 22 March 2020 on board the carrier only eight sailors were evacuated to Naval Hospital, Guam on 27 March 2020. The Indian Army is suffering from critical weapon and equipment deficiency. The same was recouped to strengthen the operational readiness during “Operation Zafran” in 2019 primarily due to the senior leadership having projected the operationally imperative requirement to higher Headquarters to achieve optimum battle efficiency. Operation Zafran reinforces faith of all ranks in their senior leadership coming to the fore during such times.



- **Security of Information.** Captain Crozier forwarded the memo through UNCLAS mail and to personal outside the chain of command which is not befitting his rank and position he held. In spite of the delay in evacuation of the ship, the CO should have restricted his grievances only to his chain of command irrespective of the circumstances. In today's age of Hybrid Warfare including Information Warfare and Psychological Warfare, the adversary would exploit such information to his advantage which could be detrimental to the safety and security of any country. The Indian Army promulgates a number of instructions and advisories on maintaining information security of men and material. Security of information is of paramount importance considering the challenges on our borders against external aggression and internal threats from inimical elements.
- **Reasoning Ability.** Commanders in chain were not able to appropriately reason out the delay to the CO of the ship for quick evacuation of sailors due to which Captain Crozier forwarded the mail through a UNCLAS medium to civilian personnel. Military commanders also could not convince their civilian counterparts to abort the port call to Danang and prevent occurrence of the outbreak of COVID-19 on board the USS TR. Due to limited medical infrastructure and resources being used at their optimum capability the Indian Armed forces categorize medical evacuation of casualties as priority I, II and III. Due to the above, troops of the Indian Armed Forces are educated and trained on the existing medical evacuation chain by the senior leadership so as to render immediate first aid in the Golden Hour, viz. the first hour of an individual suffering from a medical ailment so as to increase the chances of survival during critical situations and also maintain combat efficiency of troops on the battlefield.
- **Discipline.** The Captain on being relieved of his command on 02 April 20, disembarked the ship quietly without making any antagonistic statements to the crew against senior commanders. It demonstrates that Captain Crozier is a disciplined service personnel who followed his commanders orders without questioning the veracity of command. The Naval Secretary, Thomas Modly was heckled by sailors when he accused their CO being too naïve or foolish. Although the reaction of the sailors was unwarranted being trained and disciplined soldiers it was probably due to the respect and love for their Captain who had been removed from his command when he was fighting for their safety and security. The crew inspite of being aggrieved, should have presented a written memo to the Naval Secretary highlighting the extant crisis and further request the civilian commander to act with purpose.



Discipline is the backbone of the Indian Army as it is discipline which has been inculcated in all ranks towards discharging all duties. All ranks in the organization follow a given chain of command starting from the sub unit commander to the unit commander and subsequently the higher formation commander to address their grievances.

- **Attitude towards Others.** Senior military and civilian commanders were unable to align their thoughts with that of the crew on board and appreciate their justifiable difficulties due to which they could not render help in a proper way. The Naval Secretary, Thomas Modly only addressed crew on board without even touring the ship or the Naval Hospital in Guam to ascertain the well-being of the sailors. The flight of the Naval Secretary cost the US exchequer \$ 2, 43,000 (Two lakhs forty three thousand) which did not yield any gains as the civilian commander could not gain the confidence of his men but was rather heckled during his address. Captain Crozier was directly under command of his military commanders but neither of them took appropriate charge of the situation due to which the Naval Secretary relieved the CO of his command. This shows indifferent attitude of senior commanders towards their command. Senior military commanders and politicians alike of our country have often visited troops on the battlefield during the 1965, 1971 war, the Siachen Base Camp, troops deployed along the Line of Control and the counter insurgency/ counter terrorist operations area which have always been a morale booster for troops.
- **Liveliness.** Captain Crozier was unable to keep himself buoyant and maintained a cheerful atmosphere in the challenging situation which would have overwhelmed his ability to act professionally and led to disclosing the situation in the civil domain. It is imperative that all unit, sub unit and senior commanders in the Indian Army possess liveliness in their personality as we undertake varied types of operations in some of the most hostile weather and treacherous terrain. Soldiers look forward to the commanders to maintain a healthy working environment and discharge their duties to the best of their abilities even under challenging situation.

Conclusion

The Indian Army since its inception has performed outstandingly well across the world in varied kinds of terrain and operations due to the rich traditions and ethos imbibed by all ranks. Incidents akin to the USS TR if occur in the Indian Army is expected to be dealt with a great sense of responsibility and capacity by commanders in chain to effectively deal with



practical problems of varying complexity and find out independent solutions by being decisive and make quick decisions.

Commanders in chain should possess the ability to be able to adjust to the environment and cooperate willingly in harmony with others in the organisation towards achieving the ultimate National goal of protecting our country from external aggression as well as internal disturbances.

End Notes

¹ Bradley Peniston, "The Battle of USS Theodore Roosevelt: a Timeline", *Defense One*, 07 April 2020. Accessible at <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2020/04/timeline-battle-uss-theodore-roosevelt/164408/>. Accessed on 17 Dec 2020.

² Christopher Sharman, "Even Coronavirus Couldn't Stop the 2nd US Carrier Visit to Vietnam", *The Diplomat*, 11 March 2020. Accessible at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/even-coronavirus-couldnt-stop-the-2nd-us-carrier-visit-to-vietnam/>. Accessed on 17 Dec 2020.

³ N. 1.

⁴ N.1.

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