

PAKISTAN NAVAL PARTICIPATION – INTERNATIONAL MARITIME EXERCISE (IMX 22) – ENHANCE PROFESSIONALISM

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IMX 22 is an 18-day biennial naval exercise from 31 January to 17 February 2022, the event led by U.S. Naval Forces Central Command. It combines with exercise Cutlass Express (CE) led by U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa in East African coastal regions and the West Indian Ocean. CE is linked to U.S. Central Command's IMX 22 to counter malign influence, aggression, and activity along overlapping command seams and maritime regions. This is the first time both major exercises are taking place at the same time in a different region to improve coordination. The aim of IMX-22 is to maintain freedom of navigation and free flow of commerce throughout the region's diverse maritime canvas. The combined training includes 9,000 personnel and up to 50 ships from more than 60 countries and international organizations operating across the Arabian Gulf, Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, Gulf of Oman, and North Indian Ocean. The region is comprised of 20 countries and includes three critical choke points at the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, and the Strait of Bab-al-Mandeb at the southern tip of Yemen. The major countries apart from Pakistan are the USA, UK, Saudi Arabia, UAE, France, Egypt, India, Turkey, Israel, Yemen, etc. Pakistan has been honored to act as Deputy Commander for this exercise.

In my point of view, the other purpose of this exercise is to contain China, hinder or block China Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) especially BRI /CPEC. The exercise area includes the China trading routes. Therefore, it is an opportunity for the Pakistan Navy to formulate a strategy to safeguard its shore, especially the Maritime Component of CPEC by participating in IMX 22.

The main feature of this exercise is the participation of 80 Unmanned systems from 10 countries. Unmanned surface, subsurface, and aerial platforms using AI systems that are under trial will be used for the first time in a major exercise. This indicates the future trend of naval warfare, and we need to have good knowledge about these systems so that Pakistan Navy can update doctrine/tactics to utilize and counter these platforms.

It is worth mentioning Pakistan Navy has vast experience of conducting a multinational exercise like Aman which is held in alternate years, 45 countries took part in the last Aman exercise held in 2021. Pakistan Navy also commanded CTF 50, CTF 151 many times since 2005.

Israel and Indian Navies are also participating in IMX 22. The inclusion of Israel does not mean that Pakistan's historical stance on Israel has been changed. Pakistan Navy will operate in the Arabian Sea and Israel Navy will operate in the Red Sea. It will give an opportunity to Pakistan Navy to observe, if possible, how the Israel Navy work, their professional standards. As per great Chinese Sun Tzu (a Chinese general, military strategist, writer, and philosopher of 500 BC), "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor

yourself, you will succumb in every battle". The Indian Navy is also taking part and Pakistan Navy did the wise decision by participating in IMX 22 and not allowing India or Israel to push us in isolation. Even the US, China, and Russian Navy take part in AMAN exercise held under Pakistan Navy in Feb 2021. In January 2022, Iran, China, and the Russian Navy took part in exercises in the Gulf of Oman organized by the Iranian Navy. Since Navies are international forces, it is normal to exercise-friendly countries whenever an opportunity arises.

Pakistan Navy always maintains and improves the highest standard of professionalism. IMX 22 gives an opportunity to exercise with other leading navies of the world with unmanned platforms. In IMX-22, Pakistan Navy will also get to know the operational capabilities of the world's topmost navies like the US, UK, France, Canadian, etc. This a unique exercise which is divided into five regions (Arabian Gulf, Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, Gulf of Oman, and North Indian Ocean), 80 unmanned systems and participation of 60 countries will enhance the professional capabilities of the Pakistan Navy.

Pakistan Navy, as the world's 9th powerful and versatile sea force, has an outstanding career record. Pakistan Navy does not operate in isolation, once you exercise with other navies, there is a sense of competition, learning new procedures, which improves the overall professional standards. In the last two decades, Pakistan Navy has reorganized and reformed itself on the lines of major and strategic, and naval powers, which was only achieved in conducting Aman Exercises, participation in CTF 50, and exercising with other navies in their seas. Participating in IMX 22 is a serious attempt to protect and project Pakistan's interests in an evolving geopolitical environment.

The writer is associated with the National Institute of Maritime Affairs. The views expressed are his own