



SPEECH

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ADDRESS BY THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE NAVY, CHIEF OF NAVY, REAR-ADMIRAL LAI CHUNG HAN, AT THE 15TH ASIA PACIFIC SUBMARINE CONFERENCE OPENING CEREMONY AT PAN PACIFIC HOTEL, ON 19 MAY 15 AT 1800HRS

Welcome and Pleasantries

1. Admiral Howard, distinguished colleagues, submariners and friends. Let me begin by extending a very warm welcome to all participants from the Asia Pacific and beyond to Singapore for the 15th Asia Pacific Submarine Conference (APSC). I greatly value the comments by Admiral Howard and I am delighted that you have come all this way to Singapore to attend IMDEX as well as to co-open today's event. Indeed, the Republic of Singapore Navy is very pleased and very proud to co-host this year's conference with the United States Navy (USN).

The Value of APSC

2. Since 2001, the APSC has established itself as a major forum for enhancing collaboration and promoting discussions in submarine rescue. It is not by chance that after 15 years, we continue to provide immense value to the Asia-Pacific submarine community. In fact, this year sees the highest attendance with 23 navies and organisations, with senior representatives as well. And I believe this underscores the importance we place on what we do in enhancing submarine rescue in our region and beyond.

3. Over the years, we built up trust and worked towards being ready and responsive to potential submarine incidents in the region. And our efforts have borne fruit. We have put in place structures to mobilise resources quickly, identifying staging ports, enabled cross-platform sharing of systems and training, and we continue to share best practices and learn from each other. All of this was possible only through committed leadership, strong participation, and the extensive networks we share.

4. This year, we intend to carry on the good work and to build on previous discussions and strengthen mutual understanding and to take multilateral submarine rescue cooperation to the next bound.

5. What is the next bound? Despite our best efforts, submarine rescue will always be reactive. While we may be efficient and quick in bringing resources to bear in a submarine incident, it would still be a race against time. The next bound, I believe, is to move from a reactive to a preventive state of readiness. Specifically, to enhance submarine operational safety and proactively minimise the risk of incidents.

Frameworks for Submarine Operational Safety

6. NATO's system is a good example of a regional framework to enhance submarine operational safety. Essentially, it is a preventive system of water space management through the appointment of a Submarine Movement Advisory Authority (SMAA) to de-conflict underwater activities. And to add on, the additional assurance provided by the establishment of endorsed procedures and standards by NATO's International Submarine Escape and Rescue Liaison Office, or ISMERLO.

7. A similar framework that is balanced with preventive and reactive measures would have particularly high value in our region, where surface traffic is heavy and the waters shallow. For example, in the South China Sea and Strait of Malacca, some waters are so shallow there is insufficient depth to separate submarines operating in the same water column, and this is more akin to a two-dimensional space rather than a three-dimensional space for submarines. Coupled with the increasing number of submarines expected in the region, my concern is that it may not be a matter of whether, but when, a submarine-related incident may occur. So in my mind, there is an urgent need to establish a broader framework beyond existing bilateral agreements on submarine rescue. We need a framework to address gaps in procedures, capabilities, and standards.

8. I made reference to NATO earlier and NATO as we know, of course, is a treaty alliance and that provides a very strong basis for multilateral water space management. I think we look at our region - that is probably a bridge too far for now. But that should not stop us from taking small steps. Small steps to begin to establish a regional framework for submarine operational safety. I would like to suggest to participants of the APSC that this is another area that we want to consider in our deliberations and discussions tomorrow and the day after.

Information Exchange

9. What would make up such a framework? Perhaps the first element would be to have better information exchange. I don't mean exchanging information about submarines positions and movements because that can be a little sensitive. But surely, we could exchange information that would enhance the safety of submerged navigation. Information like real-time movements of deep sea oil rigs, very large crude carriers, and fishing vessels with impediments in the water. And such an effort could be supported by the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) at the Changi Command and Control Centre through a dedicated Submarine Safety Information Portal (SSIP). Such a centralised, multi-input, wide-reaching information platform would also be critical in coordinating submarine rescue assets – such as the identification of Vessels of Opportunity (VOOs). Additionally, International Liaison

Officers at the IFC could also act as a conduit to facilitate access or resources for submarine rescue. And our Multinational Operations and Exercises Centre (MOEC) has the ready IT and C2 infrastructure to support rescue operations planning and control if required. So that it the first cut - better information exchange.

Sharing Best Practices

10. The second element I think would be the sharing of best practices – something that we already do at APSC. But beyond submarine rescue, we can also share best practices, certification and training, so that individually, our navies and submarine operators can be safer. Today we have a whole series of activities, exercises that promote the sharing of best practices and I would encourage that to continue and to increase.

Establishing Common Standards

11. The third element I think in the setting of common standards. We could leverage on established material safety standards such as the USN's SUBSAFE¹ regime to ensure that submarines are at the best technical condition for safe operations. And this is similar to what we already do through the Standardization Agreement (STANAG) 1297 standards and other material certification bodies, to facilitate compatibility and enhance interoperability.

Submarine Code of Conduct

12. And fourthly, if we dare and if there is enough mutual trust and confidence: to consider a Code of Conduct for submarine operations or underwater *Rules of the Road*. While a submarine would not expect to meet another submarine unexpectedly underwater, there is a remote possibility but one that we cannot dismiss in confined and congested waters. And in those scenarios, a simple *Rules of the Road* for the underwater domain would help avert catastrophic incidents.

13. These are four basic elements that we could consider in building such a regional framework for submarine operational safety. And I really appreciate the story that Admiral Howard shared with us earlier. The question of course when you think about such a regional framework is who should be included. And I think the example you gave - the lessons of history is extremely constructive. We must include submarine operators in our region so that we individually and collectively, can be safer.

Conclusion

14. In conclusion, there is much for all of you to look forward and accomplish during the conference. I hope that, in line with this year's theme, you will take the opportunity to renew old ties, build trust and forge partnerships. I also hope that in the midst of your professional engagements, you find some time to enjoy the sights that Singapore has to offer.

¹ Submarine Safety Program

15. I wish all of you an enriching and fulfilling time, and I declare the 15th Asia Pacific Submarine Conference, open. Thank you.

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