

ISAS Brief

No. 97 – Date: 6 February 2009

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Sino-Indian Naval ‘Encounter’ in the Gulf of Aden: Mitigating Sino-Indian Maritime Rivalry

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We might never get to piece together the full story behind the alleged first-ever stand-off between the Chinese and Indian navies in the Gulf of Aden last month. What we do know, however, is significant enough to reveal the profound changes in the military orientation of China and India, and the growing risks of their naval rivalry.

In a report this week, Hong Kong’s *South China Morning Post*, quoting mainland Chinese media, publicised what it called a naval stand-off in the Gulf of Aden with an Indian submarine.² When they detected the Indian submarine tracking a Chinese anti-piracy mission, Chinese destroyers and an anti-submarine helicopter forced the Indian vessel to surface and retreat.

If the Chinese navy seemed to embellish the encounter as a major triumph, the Indian side simply dismissed the reports as untrue. India’s naval headquarters in New Delhi denied that any of its submarines had surfaced in the Gulf of Aden and insisted that “nobody can force anybody to surface in international waters”.³

Like most other navies, India was not going to confirm or deny the operational movement of its submarines. This does not necessarily mean India was not involved in the incident. Senior naval officials in New Delhi, however, confirmed that its ships routinely monitor the movement of ships in the waterways of the Indian Ocean. China does the same thing surely in the East and South China seas. In 2006, the United States Navy had reported that a Chinese submarine had come up close to its aircraft carrier, *USS Kitty Hawk*.

Since it was the first major deployment of Chinese warships in the Indian Ocean, the Indian Navy had every incentive to get a full measure of them. It is also a fact that many other navies operate in the Indian Ocean, and some of which, like that of the United States, do have an interest in monitoring the Chinese naval operations in the Indian Ocean.

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² Chow Chung-yan, “Chinese navy sees off Indian sub”, *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), 4 February 2009, p. 1.

³ Rajat Pandit, “Indian sub stalked China warships”, *Times of India* (New Delhi), 5 February 2009, p. 1.

The veracity of the presumed encounter between the Chinese and Indian navies is less important than the fact that it reportedly took place in the Gulf of Aden. The Chinese and Indian navies were not playing cat and mouse games in the territorial waters of either nation but rather were circling each other in waters far away from their shores.

The very deployment of their navies off the African coast underlines the growing military muscle of China and India, and the new political will in Beijing and New Delhi to show it off. Traditionally, the principal objective of the Chinese and Indian military forces has been territorial defence. Beijing and New Delhi never tire of affirming that they will use military force only in self-defence and never in pursuit of larger foreign policy objectives. To be sure, India was among the early and consistent contributors to international peacekeeping missions since the 1950s. New Delhi was determined to limit its participation to those operations that were approved by the United Nations. China avoided participating in United Nations peacekeeping operations for many decades. It has reversed that policy in recent years and has taken to United Nations military operations with some enthusiasm.

As the United Nations authorised the world's navies to take on the Somali pirates, Beijing and New Delhi sensed a major opportunity to project their power with full international legitimacy. New Delhi was quick to move into the Gulf of Aden in November 2008 and its sinking of a ship controlled by the pirates drew worldwide attention to its impressive naval power and its willingness to use it. China followed soon by despatching its own naval mission to the Gulf of Aden in January 2009.

As rising powers, the anti-piracy operations off the African coast were a blessing for both countries in projecting themselves as responsible stakeholders in the maintenance of regional security order and in contributing to the collective good in the maritime domain.

The Chinese foray into the Indian Ocean and the reported naval encounter has revealed the profound mutual maritime distrust between Beijing and New Delhi. In the last few years, Beijing had warily watched the rapid expansion of India's military diplomacy and its frequent and impressive bilateral and multilateral naval exercises in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

The five-nation naval exercises, convened by India in September 2007, which included the United States, Japan, Australia and Singapore, drew considerable flak from Beijing. India, in turn, has been anxious about Beijing's plans to develop maritime infrastructure in the South Asian waters. As China built a port at Gwadar in Pakistan and sought similar project contracts in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, India has convinced itself of the potential threats from the so-called 'string of pearls' strategy in the Indian Ocean attributed to Beijing.

If China is not prepared to accept the Indian Ocean as an exclusive sphere for Indian influence, New Delhi is not ready to sign off on the proposition that the South China Sea is Beijing's lake. Given the overlap between their presumed spheres of influence, the mutual distrust is deep-seated and could be the source of a prolonged maritime contestation.

China and India are also locked into a security dynamic where one nation's pursuit of what it considers a legitimate interest is seen as threatening by the other. Take for example, Beijing's fears of being choked off at the Malacca Straits and its perceived need to develop alternative supply routes for energy and mineral resources through South Asian ports linked to transportation corridors heading into China.

As Beijing raises its profile in the South Asian waters, India inevitably sees it as part of a Chinese strategy of encirclement. Beijing, on the other hand, has seen India's expanding naval engagement with the United States, Japan, and the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as part of an effort to build an 'Asian NATO'⁴ against China.

As we look ahead, could China and India mitigate, if not avoid, a costly and dangerous maritime rivalry in the Indian and Pacific Oceans?

For one, China and India need to recognise that it is impossible in this modern globalising world to sustain exclusive spheres of influence. Put simply, neither can promulgate a Monroe Doctrine of the kind the United States declared against the European powers in the 19th century.

Second, Beijing and New Delhi must acknowledge that the prosperity of their billion-plus populations is tied inextricably to their national ability to access energy and mineral resources in distant lands and ensure their safe transportation to the homeland across major sea lanes.

Third, as they build larger navies with longer reach, Chinese and Indian maritime forces are likely to bump into each other in many high seas. To avoid unseemly and unwanted incidents, Beijing and New Delhi need to develop a series of confidence-building measures at sea of the kind that Washington and Moscow negotiated during the Cold War.

Fourth, as their reliance on naval power increases, Beijing and New Delhi might be compelled to seek facilities and access arrangements in other countries. The emphasis on forward presence, without transparency on strategic intentions, could turn their bid for political influence in littoral states into a nasty competition.

Five, China and India need to talk a lot more to each other about their respective national security strategies at the highest levels in their establishments. Although there are some mechanisms for a strategic dialogue between the two nations, and frequent military exchanges, there is strong tendency in both capitals to bury mutual suspicion in tall talk about friendship and cooperation. Continual and honest exchanges about deeply held differences are critical for limiting the scope and consequences of the unfolding Sino-Indian rivalry.

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⁴ NATO refers to North Atlantic Treaty Organization.