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Chinese Navy in Eastern Indian Ocean: Implications for Delhi and Jakarta

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The Chinese Navy's combat exercises in the waters adjacent to Indonesia at the end of January 2014 underline Beijing's assertion of its maritime rights backed by a capacity to project force far beyond its shores. These exercises also highlight the urgency of strong maritime security cooperation between India and Indonesia that have traditionally claimed a special interest in the promotion of peace and stability in the Eastern Indian Ocean.

Delhi and Jakarta have incrementally expanded their military engagement over the last few years. The two nations will need to step up the pace, intensity and scope of their maritime cooperation as the Chinese Navy becomes a force to reckon with in the Eastern Indian Ocean.

The three-ship Chinese naval squadron that sailed into the Eastern Indian Ocean comprised a large amphibious ship and two destroyers. The amphibious warship, *Changbaishan*, is a

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landing platform dock displacing 20,000 tons and can deploy hundreds of marines far from China's shores.

Together with the two destroyers accompanying it, *Wuhan* (6,500 tons) and *Haikou* (7,000 tons), the squadron was an unambiguous demonstration of China's emerging blue water capabilities. Three decades after modern China's warships first showed up in the Indian Ocean, with port calls in Colombo and Karachi, Beijing now has very different naval capabilities to show off and more expansive strategic objectives to pursue.

Since the end of 2008, the Chinese Navy has conducted anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. This activity has been widely hailed as a testimony to Beijing's new commitment to global public goods. Naval analysts around the world, however, also recognised that the Chinese Navy's sustained presence in the Western Indian Ocean reflects Beijing's new capacity to carry out "far sea operations". Piracy in the Gulf provided a perfectly legitimate context to demonstrate China's new naval clout.

In the last few years, it had appeared that the intense focus on its maritime territorial claims in South and East China Seas might lead to down-grading the importance of the Indian Ocean in Beijing's strategic calculus. China's latest naval exercises in the Eastern Indian Ocean challenge many of these assumptions.

After travelling down the South China Sea from Hainan, the squadron transited south through the Sunda Strait separating Indonesia's Sumatra and Java Islands. It then headed east and went back up north through the Lombok Straits separating the islands of Bali and Lombok. It travelled further up north through the Makassar Straits that divide the Indonesian islands of Borneo and Sulawesi and then into the Western Pacific. As it moved through different straits of the archipelago-state of Indonesia, the Chinese Navy conducted a variety of combat exercises.

The path traced by the Chinese naval squadron underlines the futility of viewing the Eastern Indian Ocean, South China Sea and the East China Sea as separate and unconnected theatres. China has huge and growing stakes in the Indian Ocean for its imports of a large quantity of natural resources, including energy and minerals. Securing the sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean remains as important a strategic objective for China as the assertion of its territorial claims in the Western Pacific.

If the Indian and Pacific Oceans form a single continuum, it is quite clear that the South China Sea and Eastern Indian Ocean form the core of this expansive strategic theatre. This is precisely where the maritime interests of India and Indonesia converge. In sailing through Sunda, Lombok and Makassar Straits, the Chinese Navy is exercising its legitimate right to “innocent passage” of its warships through the various international straits that divide the multiple islands of Indonesia.

India has in recent years paid a lot of strategic attention to issues of maritime security in the Straits of Malacca which is the main sea channel between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It must now devote equal attention to Sunda and Lombok Straits that are alternative passages between the two oceans.

Even more important is a framework for deeper maritime collaboration with Indonesia, which forms the bedrock of ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and serves as the land-bridge between the two oceans. For nearly a decade now Delhi and Jakarta have talked up the imperative of security and strategic cooperation between the two nations. A broad framework for defence cooperation has codified in a memorandum of understanding.

This defence engagement is not entirely new. It is in fact a revival of the defence cooperation that was launched between the two countries immediately after their independence in the middle of the last century. As they drifted politically apart in the 1960s, the two nations became distant neighbours despite many shared maritime interests.

Renewed maritime engagement between India and Indonesia has included biannual joint patrols west of the Malacca Straits. The two navies have now reportedly decided to elevate this joint patrol to the level of a joint naval exercise which could be a precursor to more substantive operational cooperation between the two navies.

Delhi and Jakarta have also signalled their interest in maritime security dialogue with third parties. A trilateral strategic dialogue with Australia has begun to gain some traction and could open the door for similar cooperation with other regional powers like Japan.

The potential areas for immediate action, in bilateral as well as trilateral settings, are maritime domain awareness, naval intelligence sharing, providing access to each other’s naval facilities, and improving the capacity of smaller states in the Indian Ocean.

India and Indonesia have no interest in framing their naval collaboration in terms of countering China's maritime rise. Both Delhi and Jakarta are determined to sustain current productive engagement with China. In both the capitals, there is a strong empathy for the notions of independent foreign policy and non-alignment.

The two countries must indeed recognise the legitimate interests of China in the Indian Ocean and the protection of its vital sea lines of communication. China is building the naval capabilities to protect its interests. India and Indonesia must do the same, by expanding their national capabilities, deepening bilateral naval cooperation and promoting plurilateral and multilateral frameworks for maritime security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

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