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Multilateral Naval Diplomacy: Indo-Pacific Navies Exercising More Together?

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Synopsis

Multilateral naval diplomacy is on the rise in the Indo-Pacific. Motivated by fame, friendship, and fear, this rise may not necessarily contribute toward greater regional stability.

Commentary

A GLANCE at recent international exercises and fleet reviews in the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Indo-Pacific) suggests a growing desire for multilateral naval diplomacy. The Indian Navy-led MILAN exercise held in the Bay of Bengal saw its largest number of participants last year. In 2014, the Indonesian Navy (TNI-AL) hosted the first multilateral naval Exercise KOMODO in the South China Sea that drew participants from 18 countries.

The 2014 RIMPAC exercise in Hawaii also saw the first participation from the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and Royal Brunei Navy (RBN). Ranging from naval exercises to international fleet reviews and disaster relief operations, there seemingly is a growing appetite for multilateral naval diplomacy.

What's naval diplomacy?

Underpinned by growing economic power, countries in the Indo-Pacific continue to build and modernise their navies. More warships and naval expenditure mean greater opportunity to engage in 'naval diplomacy' - the use of naval force to support foreign policy. In its multilateral form, naval diplomacy involves more than two navies at one time. Activities of naval diplomacy can range from port 'goodwill visits' and disaster relief operations to counter-piracy and assertions of sovereignty in disputed waters.

The latter activity can be called 'gunboat diplomacy,' described by James Cable as 'the use of threat of limited naval force, other than as an act of war.' Participation in multilateral naval diplomacy can thus generally convey mixed political messages of fame, friendship, and fear.

Fame

Navies participate in multilateral naval diplomacy because they want to show or demonstrate their might and pride to their peers. A warship can be as much a fighting instrument as it is a national symbol. During the Age of Sail, warships often symbolised the glory of European monarchs, such as the British HMS *Sovereign of the Seas*, or the French *Soleil Royal*. In contemporary parlance, fame may partly account for Indian and Chinese ambitions to indigenously build and develop aircraft carriers.

Similarly, Malaysia's and Indonesia's drives for naval modernisation are partially motivated by their desires to become a 'world class navy' with new acquisitions of frigates and submarines. Displaying might and pride through multilateral naval diplomacy can consequentially create a 'demonstration effect' for a navy to be aware of one's own weaknesses and/or superior capabilities compared to other navies. This can provide the incentive for capability-improvement, such as through increases in naval expenditure or acquisitions of new platforms.

Friendship

Apart from gaining fame, participation in multilateral naval diplomacy is aimed to win friends. Naval diplomacy can demonstrate the cooperative dimension of navies and dispel trust deficits. Naval cooperation can be both a means and end in itself to build, and show existing, trust between navies, such as evident in fleet reviews. As expressed by Royal Australian Navy Admiral Ray Griggs, fleet reviews 'were once about messaging someone's might...Today it actually sends a very different message...That message is about cooperation and collaboration.'

Friendship can simultaneously improve interoperability between navies. Transnational threats like piracy or natural disasters require not only a whole-of-government, but across-governmental approach. By exercising or working together to tackle transnational threats, navies can learn lessons and establish a pattern of expectations from one another. When a contingency arises, such as a tsunami or hijacked tanker, navies know what to expect from each other in order to mount a collective response effectively. For example, in response to the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, the US Navy alone sent twenty-five ships for the relief operation.

Fear

Notwithstanding its peaceful purposes, participation in multilateral naval diplomacy can belie intentions. For one, 'coalition-building' naval diplomacy can display resolve to deter foes, such as through joint exercises. While strengthening alliances or partnerships, multilateral naval exercises can send a wrong signal to a third party. For example, perceiving a containment, China protested against the 2007 MALABAR exercise involving the US, India, Singapore, and Australia.

By the same token, naval exercises are a way to collect intelligence on a potential adversary. Being a participant in the 2014 RIMPAC exercise didn't stop China from sending a surveillance ship to spy on the exercise held in the vicinity of Hawaii.

On the other hand, fear can motivate 'crisis management' naval diplomacy. Naval skirmishes in response to maritime territorial and boundary disputes are a potential of miscalculation and misunderstanding. States fear that competitive naval assertions of sovereignty in disputed waters could precipitate protracted crises, if not inadvertent conflict. Realising this danger, members of the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) recently agreed on the Codes for Unplanned Encounter at Sea (CUES).

A similar motive is also behind the establishment of naval 'hotlines' to allow naval commanders to maintain direct, secure, and continuous communications with each other. For example, the Vietnamese Navy has established several hotlines with navies from neighbouring countries to defuse tensions and avert crises in the South China Sea disputes.

Greater stability?

Despite their increasing salience, a big question lingers on whether multilateral naval diplomacy actually contributes toward greater regional stability. Not only can naval diplomacy build trust and enhance interoperability, but it can also conceal malign intent.

Joint exercises with one's allies and partners may be misconstrued by others feeling targeted by such alliances and partnerships. Naval codes of conduct, like CUES, demonstrate not only fear of inadvertent conflict, but equally signal a deteriorating political climate.

Finally, naval coalition-building efforts can reassure allies and partners, but it may make others feel alienated further. The efficacy of naval diplomacy will, however, remain. At the least, participation in multilateral naval diplomacy allows deeper insights into how naval counterparts (allies, friends, or potential foes) think and behave.

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