

ISAS Brief

No. 103 – Date: 16 April 2009

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



Sino-Indian Naval Engagement

C. Raja Mohan¹

The Indian Naval Chief Admiral Sureesh Mehta's visit to China next week opens the door for the construction of an enduring maritime security dialogue between the two rising powers of Asia.

Admiral Mehta will participate in the first international fleet review being held in Qingdao port to mark the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese navy. India is one of the 15 nations that are sending naval ships to participate in these celebrations. Admiral Mehta is also expected to speak at a symposium on "Harmonious Seas" to be organised by the People's Liberation Army's Navy (PLAN).

According to media reports, four of the 40-odd international ships joining the fleet review will be Indian. Chinese and Indian warships have been calling at each other's ports for a while as part of an agreed programme on military confidence-building measures. However, next week's interaction at Qingdao is probably the most significant between the two navies.

At the fleet review, the PLAN is expected to put up an impressive display of its expanding maritime muscle. Having come a long way since 1949, the PLAN has every reason to be proud of its recent achievements. The PLAN was formed on 23 April 1949 when nine warships and 17 boats defected from the nationalist forces to the communists.

As in the case in India, the navy in China was treated as a stepchild by the political leadership. Given the unremitting focus of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), after the revolution, on consolidating China's new land borders, it was inevitable that there was insufficient focus on maritime capabilities.

China's neglect of the maritime space is now a thing of the past. As China becomes the world's second largest economy and a political force to reckon with on the global stage, a strong navy is now seen in Beijing as an absolute necessity. The CCP leadership today believes that maritime power projection is an inevitable and natural adjunct to China's new status as a great power.

¹ C. Raja Mohan is a Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University. This paper was prepared as part of an ongoing consultancy project for the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. Professor Raja Mohan can be contacted at iscrmohan@ntu.edu.sg or crmohan53@gmail.com.

President Hu Jintao has taken a special interest in boosting China's naval strength. His call at the end of 2006 to build a 'blue water' navy has become the guiding principle for the PLAN. President Hu had declared that China 'should strive to build a powerful navy that responds to the needs of PLAN's historic mission in this new century'.

As a result of China's rapid economic growth in the last two decades, financial resources are no longer a constraint in Beijing for the rapid modernisation of the naval forces which, by nature, are capital intensive.

As the CCP and the Chinese State Council lavish resources on raising the nation's maritime profile, the missions of the PLAN too have rapidly evolved. From the 1950s to the end of the 1970s, the main task of the PLAN was to conduct inshore defensive operations. Since the 1980s, the Chinese navy has moved towards offshore defensive operations.

In the 21st Century, Chinese media reports say, PLAN will strive to 'improve its capabilities for integrated offshore operations, strategic deterrence and strategic counter-attacks, and to gradually develop its ability to engage others in cooperation in distant waters and countering non-traditional security threats'. Translated, it means that the PLAN is no longer a weak coastal defence force. It has offensive capabilities to contest the domination of more powerful navies like that of the United States in specific areas and conditions. It wants to have an invulnerable nuclear deterrent by deploying more of its atomic arsenal at sea, having its ships in far away seas and joining other navies in addressing the collective maritime security threats.

The newly acquired Chinese capabilities to operate far from its shores and the political will in Beijing to leverage its maritime clout have been amply demonstrated by the despatch of Chinese ships in early 2009 to protect the sea-lanes in the pirate-infested waters of the Gulf of Aden and the Somali coast.

It is not a surprise that China's plans for naval modernisation and its growing presence in the Indian Ocean have raised eyebrows within the Indian strategic community. Some old fears in New Delhi about Beijing's intention to 'encircle India' have now been projected onto the maritime domain.

China's expanding aid to and investments in the smaller island states of the Indian Ocean and its construction of new ports in the smaller South Asian nations has rung alarm bells in New Delhi. This anxious discourse in New Delhi feeds into the international perceptions of growing Sino-Indian rivalry and its extension into the Indian and Pacific Oceans. India's deepening defence and naval cooperation with the United States has also tended to reinforce the view that the maritime interests of China and India are now antagonistic.

The Indian navy, however, has taken a far more pragmatic and sensible view of China's growing naval capabilities and its new interest in the Indian Ocean. The Indian navy is secure in the sense of its own growing capabilities and it is aware of the significant limitations on the PLAN's ability to maintain a permanent presence in the Indian Ocean.

As Admiral Mehta heads to Qingdao to participate in the fleet review next week, he knows that the Chinese Navy too is concerned about India's maritime forays into the South China Sea. Just as the Chinese navy sends a second group of ships to Gulf of Aden this month to relieve the units that had set sail in January 2009, the Indian navy is on its second major

expedition into the Pacific Ocean. The last time it showed up in these waters was during the summer months of 2007.

After conducting bilateral exercises with Singapore last month, the Indian warships have moved into the Pacific Ocean. Among the flotilla's wide-ranging interaction in the region is a trilateral naval exercise with United States and Japanese ships.

It is not difficult to see that the drivers behind the maritime strategies of China and India are very similar. Both are increasingly reliant on imported natural resources (energy and mineral) to sustain the high economic growth rates at home. Both have an interest in ensuring the reliable supply of these resources across many seas. Beijing and New Delhi also recognise the importance of looking beyond their traditional maritime zones of interest.

China's economic and political interests are no longer limited to the South China Sea – they have begun to encompass the waters of the Indian Ocean. The Indian expansion is in the opposite direction – from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. As the footprints of the two expanding Asian navies begin to overlap, the need for a continuous bilateral engagement on maritime issues has become more important than ever. The Sino-Indian naval interaction needs to graduate beyond port calls, occasional high-level military exchanges and simple exercises. It needs to focus on understanding each other's maritime motivations.

In Beijing and New Delhi, the naval leaderships have emerged as the most outward-looking and sophisticated spokesmen of their nations' ambitious world views. In Qingdao then, Admiral Mehta will have an opportunity to lay the foundations for a sustained high-level strategic dialogue between the world's emerging maritime powers.

oooOOOooo