

Strategic Direction of the Chinese Navy: Capability and Intent Assessment by Kamlesh K. Agnihotri, New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2015, pp. 205, Rs 764

*Joshy M. Paul**

Rarely do naval practitioners combine capability and strategy cogently. They are good at explaining technical terminology and its applicability, but insufficient in expounding strategy and analysis. They consider capability in terms of war-oriented applicability, rather than the intention, motivation and strategic outreach of such capability. But if a naval practitioner focuses on strategy and its commensurate capability, he can relatively predict the impact of such capability. At the same time, if the book is about China, then most Indian analysts opt to rely on American analysts who are Mandarin experts and have access to first-hand information from the government sources. However, for an Indian analyst, it will be a cumbersome effort to analyse the Chinese Navy and its capabilities as the Americans do. The book, *Strategic Direction of the Chinese Navy: Capability and Intent Assessment*, by Kamlesh K. Agnihotri, who researched for half a decade on Chinese Navy at a premier maritime think tank in New Delhi, is a rare blend of analysis of capability and strategy of the Chinese Navy for a wider audience.

Since India has been preoccupied with the long-standing land border dispute with China, our effort to understand China has been through the prism of strategic deterrence on the land theatre. On the maritime front, China has been a distant nation and its strategic priority is the

* The reviewer is Assistant Professor in Department of International Studies, School of Law, Christ University, Bangalore.



Western Pacific. Beijing's primary interest is to deter Taiwan from being an independent nation with the support of the United States (US). However, in recent times, China has acquired strategic stability vis-à-vis the US in the Western Pacific, expanded its assertiveness from the East China Sea to the South China Sea, and is now seeking a 'legitimate' stakeholder presence in the Indian Ocean region. All this has contributed to the need for a detailed analysis about the maritime strategy of China, not only for Indian experts but the world at large.

China's naval strategy has three stages corresponding to three periods. Prior to the mid-1980s, it was 'near-coast defence' strategy, which was rooted in Mao's 'peoples war', and the role of maritime forces was to assist land-based defence by providing counter-amphibious-landing operations to thwart the invading forces from driving straight inland. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy (PLAN) was also responsible for defending naval bases, harbours and the coastal airfields to prevent the enemy from paralysing the PLA Army defence with one stroke. Chinese naval force structure during the 1950s and 1960s was aimed at fulfilling this mission only, and therefore the force consisted of minesweepers and torpedoes, guns and missile boats, supplemented by a few Soviet-made light destroyers and frigates and land-based, short-range navy bombers, and also Soviet-designed, conventionally powered Romeo-class (Type 033) submarines (SS). Envisioning a larger international profile for China, Mao, in his later period, emphasised the need for nuclear submarines which would project China's 'national identity'. However, it was Li Huaqing, Vice Chair of the Central Military Commission during the 1980s, who spearheaded Chinese naval modernisation and changed the role of PLAN from a coastal defence force to implement the strategy of 'near-seas active defence', which covers much larger sea areas and requires much more substantial naval capability, and then to the advancement of a 'far-seas operations' strategy which was developed by the mid-2000s. As a result, PLAN became a 'strategic service' which could operate more independently and have its own geographical bounds of operation—a clear departure from near-coast defence. Under this strategy, PLAN has developed and acquired capabilities for capturing and maintaining sea control in the primary operational direction of the near seas within the required time; for establishing effective control of major sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in the near seas within the necessary time; for operating effectively in the near seas; and for nuclear retaliation. Although 'far-seas operation' strategy is still in limbo,

China is developing capabilities to achieve that purpose once the 'near-seas active defence' strategy materialises fully. Its larger aim is to become a 'legitimate' stakeholder in the Indian Ocean region with power-projection capabilities. Agnihotri's book will, in such circumstances, help us to understand China's capability to match its intention.

The book has six core chapters, and each explains the Chinese Navy's various wings and its power-projection strategy as well as its forays into the Indian Ocean, though briefly, and its implications for India. Agnihotri says that the Chinese Navy has got huge dividends from the economic growth the country has achieved during past three decades. Compared with the inward-looking continent-oriented strategy of Mao, the far-sighted foreign policy vision of Deng Xiaoping has helped the navy enormously, which has been achieved through good-neighbourly atmosphere. He further argues that the naval modernisation augmented in the 1980s has been part of a progressive doctrinal shift from the continental to the maritime domain and to address the security needs of the nation. The naval modernisation has been enabled by creating maritime infrastructure with appropriate policy guidelines from the top and has focused on developing shipbuilding, port development and lately, deep-sea scientific research base. Importantly, all Chinese leaders who came after Deng continued his policy of providing support to naval modernisation and considered it as a major national priority.

The book provides detailed descriptions of the organisational structure of PLAN. It states the organisational and force allocation for each fleet—North, East and South—giving distinct indication of its orientation and role. The primary role of the North Sea Fleet is to provide second-strike capability as a strategic deterrent in the Pacific Ocean, and also to take care of Japan. One of the East Sea Fleet's primary missions is to undertake amphibious landings on Taiwan. The South Sea Fleet is currently the largest and most modern of the three and its operational area is South China Sea along with providing support for PLAN's expanded role into the Indian Ocean region.

The second chapter of the book explains the surface forces: its capability, role and missions. Since Chinese Navy is in an evolutionary phase for power-projection capabilities, it has only one aircraft carrier, while its inventory is focused on destroyers, frigates, amphibious vessels and fast-attack missile crafts. China's primary aim is to deter the US' advancement to its shores at faraway locations, and such capabilities would serve that objective. Similarly, none of the regional countries with

which it has been involved in territorial disputes have modern navies, except Japan, but Tokyo is inferior to China in terms of sheer numbers. Its lone aircraft carrier, Liaoning, has been utilised for training purposes only, although it conducted 10 sea trials within one year after it was commissioned. Agnihotri says that the Chinese military media boasted the efficiency of systems planted in the carrier, claiming that multiple fighter jets completed take-off and landing on the aircraft carrier at short intervals with great success (p. 37). At the same time, the Chinese carrier programme is constrained in terms of building, operating and maintaining a carrier force as a means of comprehensive 'power projection', he argues. The biggest difficulty the Chinese aircraft carrier will be facing is regarding the sophisticated support system while in operation at faraway seas (p. 42). Even if China possesses two or three 60,000 tonne conventional propulsion STOVAR (Short Take off But Arrested Recovery) carriers modelled on Liaoning with integral air complement, their combat capabilities will be substantially lower than the US carrier strike groups. In that case, they could possibly perform roles like SLOC protection, overseas deployment to crisis locations for countering non-traditional threats, exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and territorial claim enforcement, humanitarian aid and disaster relief and limited role in delaying the US response during the Taiwan Strait contingency.

China has had a relatively advanced submarines fleet in its inventory, especially in the nuclear armoury, says Agnihotri. Given China's declaratory policy of 'no first use of nuclear weapons at any time and in any circumstances', nuclear submarines provide a swift, sure and survivable response capability. The advanced Jin-class SSBNs, armed with JL-2 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), are intended to provide real strategic deterrent vis-à-vis the US. Submarines could play an important role in China's 'second-strike' nuclear retaliation. Submarines could also play an important role in the Indian Ocean region for power-projection.

One of the chapters explains modernisation of PLAN: its history, drivers, budget allocation at different stages and salient aspects of naval modernisation. The modernisation is aimed at enhancing strategic reach and pushing its maritime defence perimeter seaward, and is well supported by the growing economy and consequent increase in Chinese defence budget. The current trajectory has been decommissioning older ships and inducting modern units. In its modernisation programme, China is pursuing a two-pronged approach: acquisition of advanced

technology-based strategic assets and force multipliers; and indigenous development and production of platforms and weapon systems (p. 80). For instance, the percentage of modern units in the Chinese submarine force increased from less than 10 per cent in 2004 to about 50 percent in 2009; and that of surface combatants increased from the same quantum in 2004 to more than 25 percent in 2009. However, the book has only a few paragraphs about the perception of other countries, especially the US and Japan, about China's modernisation. This requires a specific analysis as they are the two potential immediate targets of the Chinese naval modernisation programme.

Agnihotri argues that China may not be able to 'project power' in an all-encompassing manner with even three medium-sized aircraft carriers and their supporting assets in the near future. He says that although there is a growing emphasis by Chinese scholars about setting up bases in the Indian Ocean region, there are not enough strategic locations nor are the littoral countries willing offer to offer any. As a result, the Chinese leadership has resorted to engage diplomatically with the littoral countries. Agnihotri emphasises that the sustained presence of the PLAN ships in the Indian Ocean, particularly in the Arabian Sea, will result in limiting the availability of maritime space for the Indian Navy and curtail its area of influence. This will also boost the morale of India's inimical neighbours, albeit notionally, he asserts.

Though comprehensive, the book lacks a comparison with other regional navies, especially of the US, which has the 'pivot' strategy of 60/40 naval presence in the Western Pacific. On the whole, however, it is a good reference book for China watchers.