

The Indian Navy's 'China' dilemma

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The Indian navy's premier warship, *INS Shivalik*, has just completed a maritime exercise at Qingdao with the PLA-N and the navies of six other countries, including Pakistan. China's invitation to India to participate in its first ever multilateral maritime exercises, held alongside the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) is an important landmark and, not surprisingly, it has drawn considerable attention with some views expressing it as "a new phase" in India-China maritime relations.

Media reports pointed to the intricate nature of the drills the Chinese had asked the *Shivalik* to participate in – an anti-hijacking exercise which also involved participation by a Chinese special forces unit; the 'genuine' curiosity on the part of senior PLA-N officers to know more about the Indian naval ship; and a Chinese Admiral's admiration of the authority vested in the *Shivalik*'s Captain who sailed without escort ships or supervising staff ('unimaginable' in China's military culture). So encouraging, in fact, has the Indian ship's Qingdao visit been that the Indian navy has apparently conveyed its willingness to hold another exercise with the PLA-N this year – curiously, at the same time as it would be holding the Malabar exercises, an event that will involve the presence of the Japanese navy.

These developments, counter-intuitive they are to the competitive 'logic' of the India-China maritime relationship, raise questions about the operational objectives and broader strategic calculations at play on both sides. Are the Indian navy and the PLA-N in the process of recasting their relationship in more cooperative terms? Can there be an effective operational synergy on substantive issues of maritime security? And what, if any, are the long-term ramifications of the underlying strategic shifts?

To begin, it is important to see the evolving India-China maritime dynamic as part of a strategic complex. By itself, a country's invitation to another to participate in a multilateral naval exercise does not symbolise operational outreach. Maritime forces often come together for a regional or collective cause, and the Indian navy and PLA-N are known to have collaborated in combating Somali piracy. Navies that supposedly share an indifferent relationship, however, rarely invite each other to participate in high-level multilateral drill in their coastal waters; which is what makes *Shivalik*'s recent Pacific sojourn interesting.

The naval exercise at Qingdao, however, doesn't detract from the fact that the India-China maritime relationship is essentially an uneasy one - each side is uncomfortable with the other's presence in its own theatre of nautical influence, but both recognise the other's dominance in their respective maritime 'backyards'. Both India and China deem it obligatory to make the right noises about maritime cooperation, but acknowledge the underlying competitive elements of the relationship. New Delhi last year formed a trilateral grouping with Maldives and Sri Lanka, in a seeming bid to underline its credentials as the premier security provider in the Indian Ocean. It also began a dialogue with Indonesia and Australia to do more for the security of the Indian Ocean – a euphemism, some would say, for minimising the role of extraterritorial powers. China, meanwhile, raised Indian anxieties by holding exercises with the Pakistan navy in the Arabian Ocean, and suggestions of Indian Ocean bases.

Curiously, during the 17th round of Special Representative Talks in February this year, Beijing surprised New Delhi by proposing a grand maritime project called the 'Maritime Silk Road' (MSR). While the Indian envoy avoided a taking stand on the proposal, his willingness to endorse a 'structured maritime dialogue' led China to portray his reaction to the MSR as being 'positive'. Interestingly, only two weeks earlier when the PLA-N held a much-publicized PLA-N exercise on the eastern edge of the Indian Ocean (marked by the first deployment of the *Changbaishan*, China's largest landing-ship), New Delhi chose to ignore it, almost as if the occurrence were unworthy of official reaction.

There is a growing sense that a confluence of circumstances has compelled India into accommodating China's maritime interests in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). In part, this is on account of New Delhi's inability to stem the flow of China's political influence into the region. In equal measure, if not more, it is attributable to the scale of Beijing's regional maritime ambitions. New Delhi has been overwhelmed by the enormity of China's maritime vision involving not just the Maritime Silk Route, but also the 'New Silk Road Project' - an economic initiative to develop regions along an ancient route connecting Western China with South and Central Asia. Beijing is categorical that each project has clear and substantial benefits for its partners in the Indian Ocean Region. The financial payoffs, however, entail a high strategic cost that impinges on regional maritime security.

The MSR is said to involve the construction of ports, logistical stations, storage facilities and free-trade zones. Its underlying principle is the leveraging of Chinese soft power, but more importantly, it enables China to project itself as a 'benevolent entity'. The idea, apparently, is to use the project's commercial returns to establish China's legitimate interests in the Indian Ocean. The benefits it offers - including a proposal for a 'maritime cooperation fund' announced by Chinese Premier Li Kechiang last year - only makes it harder for regional states to desist from signing up.

Interestingly, when President Xi Jinping's first made the proposal during his visit to Southeast Asia in October 2013, the MSR was meant to foster cooperation and goodwill between China and the ASEAN countries. China's subsequent outreach to Sri Lanka and

India, inviting them to join the project, revealed a broader vision spanning the entire Indo-Pacific region.

The promotional pitch of “shared economic gains” doesn't disguise the proposal's real purpose: ensuring the security of Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean and Pacific. With its vast investments and resource interests in Africa, Beijing needs a secure Chinese SLOC from the East African coast, to the Southern coast of China. By default, if not by design, the MSR could end up setting up Chinese logistical hubs and naval facilities in the Indian Ocean, thereby raising Indian anxieties.

India's changed maritime perspective *vis-à-vis* China reflects an objective consideration of these new realities. China's growing economic relationship with individual IOR states, the considerable financial and diplomatic investment in Asia and Africa, and the vast infrastructure projects under construction, render an enduring PLA-N presence in the Indian Ocean, a near inevitability. More crucially for India, Beijing's considerable logistical and technological competence is matched by a commensurate political will and military strength to realize its grand vision.

Following the MH 370 incident, China has been the most active and engaged participant in the search effort, with over eleven naval and Coast Guard ships scouring vast tracts of the Southern Indian Ocean. As its maritime competencies grow, China's navy is bound to play a bigger role in the security of the Indian Ocean.

Not surprisingly, India's naval planners seem to have chosen to make a prudent compromise by dampening the naval competition, and upping the engagement with the PLA-N. Their main challenge, however, will be to continually hedge against China's maritime thrust in the IOR without provoking conflict. In its quest for strategic accommodation with the PLA-N, the Indian navy will doubtless be aware of the need to strengthen its existing partnerships and preserve its stature as the preeminent power in the Indian Ocean.

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