

INTERNATIONAL FLEET REVIEW (IFR) SERIES

India and China - Time to Evolve Maritime Confidence Building Measures

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Fleet Review – An Enabler for Confidence Building

In February 2001, the Indian Navy had organized the International Fleet Review (IFR) at Mumbai. Given the theme 'Bridges of Friendship', the event was meant to commemorate the completion of India's fifty years of being a Republic. Significantly, China declined to participate in the event. On the other hand, close on its heels, two PLA Navy warships, including the flag ship, visited Karachi in connection with the 50th anniversary celebrations of Pakistan-China relations; in the process, sending out a clear message to New Delhi.

However, much has changed since 2001. Indian Naval Ships *Mumbai* and *Ranvir* participated in PLA Navy's IFR at Qingdao in 2009. INS *Shivalik* was also scheduled to represent the Indian Navy in IFR at Qingdao in April 2014. However, the fleet review was cancelled citing the 'special situation' over the missing Malaysian airliner. The ship, however, participated in the PASSEX post Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS). On the other hand, China has confirmed its participation in the Indian IFR scheduled to be held in Visakhapatnam in February 2016. This would, therefore, be the first time that the PLA Navy will take part in the event.¹

Participation in fleet reviews is one of the numerous ways in which the maritime Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) could be strengthened between the two navies. This paper highlights the imperatives of evolving credible maritime CBMs between India and China. It also makes recommendations on the possible CBMs that can be evolved between the two navies towards enabling better operating mechanisms in the Indian Ocean Region and the South China Sea.

India and China – An Uneasy Relationship

India and China share a 4,057 km border along the Himalayas and have a legacy of border dispute, which remains unresolved till date. Both countries have differing interpretations of history and geography in support of their respective positions.

India's claim to the barren and windswept Aksai Chin plateau rests on what the Chinese term an arbitrary extension of the border by the British in 1939, a move largely made to create a buffer between Xinjiang, which had turned into a Soviet protectorate, and British India. On the other hand, in China, the obsequious courtiers of the Qing (Manchu) dynasty were not averse to some cartographic innovativeness of their own.² Further, the present Dalai Lama formally staked a claim in 1947 over Tawang in the newly independent India.

From India's point of view, China continues to be in occupation of large areas of sovereign Indian territory. In Aksai Chin, China is in control of approximately 38,000 sq. km. of Indian territory since the mid-1950s. In addition, Pakistan illegally ceded 5,180 sq. km. of Indian territory in the Shaksgam Valley of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, north of the Siachin Glacier, to China in 1963 under a boundary agreement that India does not recognize. Further, China continues to stake its claim to about 96,000 sq. km. of Indian territory in Arunachal Pradesh.³

Post 1962 war, thaw at the political level came starting with the 1979 visit by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, India's Foreign Minister. The visit of Rajiv Gandhi to China in December 1988 marked the resumption of political dialogue at the highest level. A Joint Working Group (JWG) was established on the boundary

issue, to seek a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable solution; as also a Joint Economic Group (JEG) on economic and commercial issues.⁴

The Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA) inked between India and China on 23 Oct 2013 facilitates establishment of a hotline between the military headquarters of the two countries, besides border personnel in all sectors receiving a broad directive not to tail each other's' patrols along the disputed borders.⁵ This and other CBMs, mostly in the terrestrial domain, instituted over time, have ensured relative peace and tranquillity along the border.

The land border dispute, however, remains unresolved, due to competing claims and counterclaims by the two countries, despite eighteen rounds of talks, last of which were concluded at New Delhi in March 2015. During the talks, India and China discussed putting in place additional CBMs.⁶

Enhanced Maritime Interaction of the Indian Navy and the PLA Navy

In 2011, an Indian Naval Warship (INS *Airavat*), sailing from Vietnamese port of Nha Trang towards Hai Phong, at a distance of 45 nautical miles from the Vietnamese coast in the South China Sea, was contacted on open radio channel by a caller identifying himself as the 'Chinese Navy' stating that "you are entering Chinese waters".⁷ Even though the veracity of the radio call could not be established, it is the hype that the minor incident created, which is of significance. On the other hand, a visit by a Chinese submarine to Sri Lanka in 2014, followed by Karachi in May 2015, also set the bells ringing in the Indian media. Further, Indian and foreign media are extensively reporting on 'the increased tempo of Chinese submarines operating close to the Ten Degree channel, which separates the Andaman from the Nicobar group of islands'.⁸

In broader terms, the two sets of Chinese submarine forays into the Indian Ocean (Colombo and Karachi) are likely to be 'trial balloons' for regular operational deployments of Chinese submarines in the region.⁹ On a similar note, China feels that the Indian warships are expected to be deployed in the South China Sea on a regular basis.

China has been steadily building strategic relationships from Middle East to Southern China with investment initiatives at Gwadar (Pakistan), Chittagong (Bangladesh), Sittwe (Myanmar), and Hambantota (Sri Lanka). On the other hand, India has legitimate stakes for protecting its trade to and from Russia, Japan, China, South Korea, and Southeast Asian nations and energy flow from Sakhalin (Russia) and Vietnam. Enhanced economic interests in East and Southeast Asia, are also pushing India for greater engagement with these nations. In this context, India's 'Act East Policy' appears to be meeting China's 'Maritime Silk Road' in the South China Sea.¹⁰

Presence of Chinese Navy in the Indian Ocean and the Indian Navy in the South China Sea is, therefore, a foregone conclusion. The economic and security imperatives further mandate that such presence would increase in the near future. This interaction of the two navies, as the trends indicate, would be competitive. Each navy, must therefore, get accustomed to the other's presence in their 'supposed backyard'. Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) in the Indian Ocean Region and South China Sea would, therefore, be in order.¹¹

During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to China, both nations agreed on increasing bilateral naval cooperation. "The two sides will exchange visits of naval ships and hold PASSEX [passing exercises] and SAR [search and rescue] exercises," said the joint statement issued during the visit.¹²

The Need for Maritime CBMs

The need for maritime CBMs cannot be over emphasized. The collision of US EP-3 Reconnaissance plane and Chinese F-8 fighter jet near Hainan Island in April 2001 and collision of a Chinese submarine with a US Destroyer's towed array sonar in June 2009 are cases which point towards the potential risks involved when the two navies operate in close vicinity. A miscalculation or misunderstanding in such cases could also result in a deadly exchange of fire, leading to further military escalation precipitating a major political crisis.¹³

Whilst a number of CBMs have been established between India and China since 1988, these mostly pertain to the contested terrestrial domain only. This was reasonably justified as two navies hardly encountered each other on the high seas. However, with increased Chinese and Indian deployments in the Indian Ocean and South/ East China Seas respectively, there is an accentuated need to evolve Maritime CBMs to address the situation arising out of increased encounters between the PLA Navy and the Indian Navy.

Recommendations – Evolving Maritime CBMs

Both the navies could establish a formal consultation mechanism comprising annual meetings and working groups to strengthen maritime safety and cooperation in the region. Such mechanism would aid in promoting common understanding regarding activities undertaken by their respective maritime forces when operating in accordance with international law. The Joint Working Groups could discuss agenda items, as agreed upon by consensus, such as measures to promote safe maritime practices and establish mutual trust as search and rescue, communications procedures when ships encounter each other, interpretation of the rules of the nautical road and avoidance of accidents-at-sea.

The Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for unexpected encounters at sea has been adopted between US, China, Japan and about 20 other countries (including India) under the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES). Both the navies could evolve mutual understanding to follow these SOPs, especially those governing situations arising out of unexpected encounters between ships, submarines and aircraft and also regulations regarding tracking of warships, submarines and aircraft.

India and China could establish a mechanism of prior notification/intimation of maritime research activities. This would enhance transparency regarding naval presence in the region. Accidental use of weapon at sea could often lead to escalation of such incidents beyond proportions. Implementation of reporting processes of such incidents and formulation of requisite procedures to

avoid escalation of conflicts arising out of accidental/ unintended/ unauthorized use of weapons would, therefore, be in order and may be implemented between the two navies.

A visit by an Indian ship in South China Sea creates enormous buzz in the Chinese media and likewise, visit by Chinese ships in the Indian Ocean leads to unnecessary speculations in the Indian media. Prior notification of maritime exercises in East/ South China Sea and Indian Ocean by the Indian Navy and PLA Navy respectively would go a long way in building trust between the two navies.

Often, most small incidents, that have potential to flare up in due course, could easily be addressed if naval commanders could exchange information over telephone. Establishment of hotline between the two navies, over dedicated INMARSAT lines, would be a simple, yet an extremely effective step towards preventing escalation of conflicts at sea.

The Indian Navy and PLA Navy, being credible maritime powers in the region, could contribute through collaborative efforts in combating piracy and maritime terrorism. Also, cooperative engagements towards provisioning of Common Goods at Sea, such as Human Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), Search and Rescue (SAR), drug and human trafficking, illegal immigration and environment protection, would be of immense value for the entire region.

Each time India participates in bilateral maritime exercises with countries such as the US, Japan or Australia, there are concerns flagged by Beijing over the issue. On the contrary, Indian Navy and PLA Navy should regularly participate in bilateral exercises with each other for better coordination and understanding. Conduct of combined maritime exercises on an annual basis between the two navies would, therefore, be a positive step towards building confidence.

Port visits by PLA Navy ships in the Indian Ocean littorals and by Indian Navy ships in South East/East Asia are often viewed with suspicion by the two countries. Regular visits by ships and submarines in each other's port on a regular basis would preclude such skepticism. For instance, the PLA Navy submarines that visited Sri Lanka and later Karachi, wouldn't have created a flutter if they had also visited an Indian port. On the other hand, Indian ships and

submarines visiting Vietnam or Japan would not raise many eyebrows, if they visit the Chinese ports also.

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