



MAKING WAVES

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Acknowledgement: 'Making Waves' is a compilation of maritime news and news analyses drawn from national and international online sources. Drawn directly from original sources, minor editorial amendments are made by specialists on maritime affairs. It is intended for academic research, and not for commercial use. NMF expresses its gratitude to all sources of information, which are cited in this publication.



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Nigerian pirates abduct five Seafarers from Freighter

Moroccan media report that the general cargo vessel *Oya 1* (ex name *Celia*) was boarded by pirates in the Gulf of Guinea on the night of July 29. The attackers reportedly abducted two Moroccan officers, Ahmed Janani and Abdelkader Benhala, and three other crewmembers. The ICC IMB Piracy Reporting Centre confirmed that the Nigerian Navy responded to an attack on a general cargo ship 15 nm southwest of Bonny Island at about the same time. IMB said that it was reported that some crew members were missing, and that the Nigerian Navy towed the vessel into port for an investigation.

Nigeria pushes back on maritime piracy

The Nigerian Navy recently extended a surge operation to counter attacks on merchant shipping in the Gulf of Guinea, which spiked last year with multiple hijackings and kidnappings. The service's chief of staff, Vice Adm. Iboke-Ete Ibas, said that the Nigerian Navy had reduced the count of successful piracy incidents by 90 percent year-on-year for the period from January through June. "This improvement in security situation within Nigeria's offshore maritime domain is attributable to the intensive patrols and efforts of Operation Tsare Teku," he said. "The Nigerian Navy remains absolutely committed to creating a secure and enabling maritime environment for economic activities to thrive toward national growth," The waters off Nigeria continue to lead for maritime kidnappings, with 31 crewmembers abducted in the year to date, according to the IMB. The Gulf of Guinea also leads for armed attacks on vessels. Nigeria's legislature has taken note: the leader of the Nigerian house of representatives, Yakubu Dogara, recently introduced a bill to increase funding for anti-piracy operations. "The increasing level of attacks and violence in the gulf of Guinea have given Nigeria and other countries in the sub-region very damaging and negative image," he told Nigeria's The Cable. "The major component of this bill is the creation of the maritime security fund . that will empower the Navy to secure our waters as part of its primary responsibility."

Source: www.maritime-executive.com, 02 August 2017

Government plans to raise a police force to guard India's Coastline

-Rajesh Ahuja

The government is planning to raise a new police force exclusively to guard India's 7,000km-long coastline, which is porous and has allowed terrorists to cause mayhem on the mainland as was done during the 2008 Mumbai terror attack. According to the home ministry, the force would be under the control of the central government and named Coastal Border Police Force. "The proposal to raise the new force was discussed at a meeting called for review of all issues of all central paramilitary forces," a home ministry spokesman said on Thursday after the meeting.

At present, the Indian Navy is responsible for maritime security while the Coast Guard secures territorial waters. Surrounded by water on three sides, India doesn't have a force to guard its coastline. This vulnerability was exploited when 10 Pakistani Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorists took the sea route to Mumbai and held India's financial capital hostage for three days, killing 164 people.

In 1993, arms and explosives for the Mumbai serial blasts, too, were came through sea. After the 2008 Mumbai attack, more than 170 coastal police stations have come up, equipped with boats, cars and motorcycles to guard the coastline. The proposal for the coastal force was still at an early stage and was being worked on, a home ministry official, who attended the meeting chaired by minister Rajnath Singh, said. "Half of the officer cadre of the new force will drawn from the India Police Service and the rest will initially come from other paramilitary forces on deputation," the official said. Terror is not the only concern. Several vital installations such as Kalpakkam atomic power station in Tamil Nadu and oil rigs, were built along the coastline. The new force would help guard them better, he said.

Source: www.hindustantimes.com, 03 August 2017

Terror on the seas

- Andrin Raj

The Sea Lanes of Communication, or the maritime milieu, has been referred to as "ground zero" of the asymmetric security threats, such as piracy, terrorism and organised crime. The low intensity of maritime operation capabilities of asymmetric non-state actors has emerged over the years and has created a platform for maritime

security threats. Historically, maritime terrorism is rare and it constituted about three per cent of international security threats over the past decades. The reason is that operations at sea require specialist skills, equipment and resources. These issues constrain terrorists tactically and, hence, prevent them from carrying out operations at sea.

However, there is indication that terrorist groups are setting their focus on vulnerable targets at sea and port areas. There is a growing concern, although fixed land targets have offered higher visibility and greater ease of success globally. Over the years, terrorist groups have been aware of the vulnerability of the maritime domain and the shipping and maritime infrastructure. How then does maritime terrorism play a role in transnational security threats? Maritime terrorism has not been linked to piracy as transnational threats are usually considered “criminal” in the eyes of the law. These international criminal activities, however, could be used to fund and finance terrorism. The overlapping nature is misunderstood by the international community. For example, the Abu Sayyaf group in the southern Philippines has a credible maritime capability. Abu Sayyaf has a long history of maritime tradition and we have seen its operations taking place in Southeast Asia, from hijacking, kidnappings, human trafficking to the smuggling of illicit goods and weapons. Abu Sayyaf operates on two accounts: one as a terrorist organisation and the other as an economic force multiplier. The “kidnap-for-ransom” strategy employed over the years, the many hijackings of vessels and the Marawi siege are evidence of its terrorist modus operandi. Abu Sayyaf has been the only terrorist group in the region to actually hijack vessels in Southeast Asia and has vast operational expertise. Terrorist operations require huge amounts of money and, as such, by following the trail of transnational criminal activities, it may lead us to the terrorists themselves. Al-Qaeda has been involved in the drug smuggling in Southeast Asia as it depends on the illicit weapons deal in the Sulu arms trade, money laundering and the sale of blood diamonds from Africa.

So, how is maritime piracy associated with transnational threats?

Piracy overlays seamlessly into the criminal activity of organized crime. The maritime domain provides much exploitation and ripe opportunities for piracy and transnational activities. Although maritime terrorism and transnational activities do not seem to justify their means, piracy does. Piracy as the organized crime has been operational for decades.

The Liberation Tamil Tigers of Elam was operating a fleet of cargo carrying weapons from the east to the west, passing unnoticed through the Straits of Malacca. The exploitation of maritime laws and secrecy using flags of convenience allowed the crimes to flourish. These and other criminal activities have seen millions of dollars of cargo, kidnappings and phantom ships used for transnational crimes, such as drug and human trafficking, go beyond the eyes of security agencies in ports. This kind of piracy goes beyond the regular piracy of muggings and robberies at sea. They are usually the small fries that make small headlines and not the real security threats that run beyond the radar.

It is imperative that by analysing the two, one can determine that high-end piracy and terrorism are associated with crime syndicates. With this, we can streamline that the links between terrorism and piracy are very well groomed together and they create a self-mechanism for a support-structure system. Drug trafficking has overtaken the less lucrative smuggling and, therefore, piracy will be a venture for international terrorist groups to work with. If piracy remains another transnational threat, it will continue to get the same attention as other transnational crimes get, or until another 9/11 takes place.

Will this be too late for measures to be taken?

The global maritime domain is vulnerable. The international community must address calls for continued collaborative action against transnational security crimes. Oceans are beyond sovereign control, as such, the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea continue to be vulnerable to terrorist attacks. The complicity of the state actors in addressing transnational threats is ineffective and surveillance of these threats is minimal. Conditions now lead to more adroit exploitations of the maritime environment. The growth of off-shore industries and the increase of resources have shifted to the waters, making them targets of maritime threats from terrorism. Maritime attacks offer alternative means to terrorist groups. These can lead to large-scale economic destabilisation, mass casualties and environmental damage. These groups have also infiltrated the governments of some states into selling their sovereignty so as to create state of convenience for themselves. Corruption is no longer simply greasing the wheels of commerce. It has become more dangerous when mixed with terrorism, piracy and transnational crimes. The threat is so real that it rules some states. Corruption also facilitates the entry into the financial sector, where some states may depend on dirty money and, thus, the chain becomes harder to curtail.

Where do we go from here? There are preventive measures that have been in place but are they relevant to the threats posed by transnational groups in support of terrorism and piracy? With the implementing measures to secure the waters, the essential tool for governments is to degrade the land capabilities of these groups. The biblical cord at sea has a strong bond with the facilities on land or events at shore. These threats to the maritime domain must be curtailed and focused on land where it all begins. Counter measures need to be addressed on land instead at sea. The reliance on corrupt officials and the ability to launder the proceeds are therefore their vulnerabilities. Terrorists, pirates and transnational criminal groups need a place to live and they have found weak states to solicit their business and operations.

Source: www.nst.com.my, 14 August 2017

Developing Submarine Force critical for countering Chinese Threat in Indian Ocean: Report

Using the pretext of it playing the stellar role in countering the pirates in Gulf of Aden, China's People's Liberation Army-Navy has escalated its presence in the Indian Ocean. The recently launched Beijing's naval base in Djibouti validates the edge which China holds in the Indian Ocean, especially in its western-end. Considering the friction in Sino-Indian bilateral ties, experts opine, New Delhi should expedite its submarine programme to counter the Chinese presence in the joint water body.

The commissioning of INS Kalvari later this month is expected to provide an impetus to India's underwater arsenal. The first of the six French-made Scorpene submarines, costing nearly \$3.7 billion, is considered to be a milestone in improving the depleted naval fleet of India. New Delhi has approximately 15 submarines in the Indian Ocean, one-fourth of China, which has approximately 60, *Bloomberg* reported. Analysts claim that even the commissioning of six Scorpene submarines might fail to deter China, whose naval strength may increase to 69-78 submarines by 2020, as per the data released by Pentagon. On the other hand, India may still struggle to increase its fleet to 20 attack submarines by the same year. "The lack of long-term planning and procurement commitment in defense acquisition plans can be considered tantamount to negligence (by the government)," said Pushan Das, research fellow at Observer Research Foundation, while speaking to *Bloomberg*.

Apart from the low numbers, the quality of Indian submarines also raises a doubt over the military preparations, the report said. Since 1996, the number of diesel-electric

vessels has dwindled from 21 to 13, with most of them nearing the end of their operational lives. In a bid to avoid their expiry, the vessels were refitted to extend their operational utility by 2025. On July 21, Ministry of Defence initiated the programme to procure six diesel submarines. Information requests were sent to six major global manufacturers, including Sweden's Saab AB, Germany's ThyssenKrupp, Madrid-based Navantia SA and a Russian-Italian joint venture – Russia Rubin Design Bureau, among others. The project is estimated to cost roughly Rs 500 billion.

However, defence expert K V Kuber opines that India requires to rely more on 'Made in India' submarines, as procuring from abroad would cause unprecedented delay in commissioning the required naval vessel. "Even if we go for a global tender to meet the urgent requirements of the Indian Navy, we would still be years away from acquiring them," he told *Bloomberg*. Apart from the attack submarines, New Delhi is also expected to develop underwater nuclear deterrence. In 2016, the government had commissioned nuclear-powered submarine, which could strike using ballistic missiles. Currently, the Indian Navy is using one nuclear-powered submarine, which was leased from Russia in 2012 for 10 years. On the contrary, China has four nuclear-powered submarines which could fire ballistic missiles. Despite lagging behind in terms of naval arsenal, India may still pose a credible challenge to Beijing for two reasons – its geographic position and growing strategic ties with the United States of America. According to David Brewster, a senior research fellow at the Australian National University in Canberra, "simple geography" gives India an unprecedented edge in the Indian ocean. On India's strategic ties with US, Brewster said, "You have to understand China is probably decades away from being able to seriously challenge India there, especially while the United States is present."

Source: www.india.com, 04 August 2017

India to get INS Kalvari, one of World's stealthiest Submarines, amid mounting China Threat

- Kukil Bora

Indian Navy is just weeks away before it gets one of the world's stealthiest submarines: the INS Kalvari, the first of the six French-made Scorpene-class submarines on order. The commissioning of the attack submarine later this month comes at a time when India races to upgrade its underwater force as China is rapidly expanding its military presence in the Indian Ocean. The INS Kalvari is part of the Rs. 23,652 crore (\$3.7

billion) "Project-75" awarded in 2005 to the state-owned defence shipyard Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Ltd. in Mumbai and France's Naval Group. Subhash Bhamre, the minister of state in the Ministry of Defence, said in July that the first of the six submarines under construction in the shipyard was scheduled to be delivered in August while the second submarine, INS Khanderi, would be delivered in December.

Launched in October 2015, the INS Kalvari is named after a deep-sea tiger shark. The submarine, which is equipped with a superior stealth technology compared to previous diesel-electric submarines, can launch massive attacks through torpedoes as well as tube launched anti-ship missiles both on the surface of the water and beneath. In May, the INS Kalvari test-fired an underwater torpedo missile for the first time. The INS Kalvari and other Scorpene-class submarines "can undertake multifarious types of missions typically undertaken by any modern submarine," including "Anti-Surface warfare, Anti-Submarine warfare, Intelligence gathering, Mine Laying, Area Surveillance" and so on, according to the Indian Navy.

India is vulnerable to underwater attack

Due to the Indian Navy's failure to replace retired submarines, the country's underwater fleet has decreased to 13 conventional submarines from 21 since 1996. China, on the other hand, has nearly 60 submarines, including five nuclear-powered attack submarines and 54 diesel-powered attack submarines. According to the Pentagon, the number is expected to grow to between 69 and 78 by 2020. India, however, is gradually upgrading its submarine force, and the six Scorpene-class submarines are just the start for the country. In February 2015, the Indian government approved the construction of six nuclear-powered attack submarines. Last month, the country also initiated another project, worth about 70,000 crore (\$10.9 billion), to build six more diesel submarines. India is also reportedly developing an underwater nuclear deterrence. The country's first nuclear-powered submarine, which is part of a program to build at least three such vessels, was commissioned in 2016. The other nuclear-powered submarine was leased from Russia for 10 years in 2012.

However, for effective deterrence against China and Pakistan, the Indian Navy reportedly needs to have at least 18 diesel-electric submarines, six nuclear-powered attack submarines (called SSNs) and four nuclear-powered submarines with long-range nuclear-tipped missiles (SSBNs).

China is not a 'serious threat' yet

The Indian effort to modernise and significantly increase the size of its own submarine fleet is mainly driven by China's increasing naval activity in the Indian Ocean. The opening of China's first naval base in Djibouti at the western end of the Indian Ocean in July and regular visits by the PLA Navy to the port of Karachi in Pakistan have also raised concerns among Indian planners amid a border dispute stand-off between India and China in Bhutan. Despite China's constant attempts to grow its regional capabilities, some analysts still believe that China is still years away from posing a serious threat to India in the Indian Ocean, thanks to a geographical advantage.

To enter the Indian Ocean, the Chinese Navy needs to pass through the Strait of Malacca, a narrow stretch of water between the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian island of Sumatra. This is an area, which is constantly under observation by the Indian surveillance planes deployed to Andaman & Nicobar Islands. "Simple geography gives India a huge strategic advantage in the Indian Ocean," David Brewster, a senior research fellow with the National Security College at the Australian National University in Canberra, told Bloomberg. "And although China has been sending in submarines, you have to understand they are probably decades away from being able to seriously challenge India there, especially while the United States is present."

Source: www.ibtimes.co.in, 04 August 2017

With 26/11 attacks in mind, Centre clears Rs 32K crore plan to bolster Coast Guard

- Rajat Pandit,

The government has approved a 31,748 crore "definitive five-year action programme" for the Coast Guard, which is the defence ministry's smallest armed force after the Army, IAF and Navy but whose role has become crucial ever since the 26/11 terror strikes in Mumbai in 2008. Sources said the action plan to bolster the force-levels of Coast Guard in terms of offshore patrol vessels, boats, helicopters, aircraft and critical operational infrastructure was cleared at a meeting chaired by defence secretary Sanjay Mitra earlier this month. The aim is to make the Coast Guard a 175-ship and 110-aircraft force by 2022 to plug operational gaps and strengthen its capabilities to safeguard coastal security, island territories, offshore assets and marine environment as well as undertake anti-piracy, anti-smuggling, oil-spill and pollution-control operations.

India has a 7,516-km coastline, with 1,382 islands and a sprawling Exclusive Economic Zone of 2.01 million sq km, which will go up to almost 3 million sq km after delimitation of the Continental Shelf. But the Coast Guard currently has 130 "surface units" in the shape of 60 ships (offshore patrol vessels, fast patrol vessels and pollution-control vessels), 18 hovercrafts, and 52 smaller interceptor boats/crafts. The "air units", in turn, are limited to 39 Dornier maritime surveillance .. aircraft, 19 Chetak choppers and four Dhruv advanced light helicopters. The action plan intends to "consolidate the progress" made by the Coast Guard, which is currently headed by Rajendra Singh as the director-general, after the 26/11 strikes punched gaping holes in the country's coastal security architecture. "The force already has 65 ships and interceptor crafts/boats under construction. Moreover, the acquisition of 30 helicopters for over 5,000 crore is also underway," said a source. While 16 indigenous Dhruv choppers have already been ordered from Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd, the procurement of 14 twin-engine EC-725 tactical choppers, which can carry up to 30 passengers, from Airbus is in the final stages of approval now. With Coast Guard also looking for six more maritime multi-mission surveillance aircraft, the force will also get five more air stations/enclaves to add to the nine such establishments already present. "The existing 42 stations (20 were sanctioned after 26/11), under the five regional headquarters at Gandhinagar, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata and Port Blair, will also be fully-developed and made 'smart' with better infrastructure," said the source. "Coast Guard has taken a conscious decision to stabilize its geographic spread in order to also focus on development of critical operational infrastructure like jetties for ships and hangers for aircraft," he added.

With an existing manpower of around 1,600 officers, 9,000 uniformed personnel and 1,200 civilians, the Coast Guard primarily has a non-military maritime security charter, except during war when it conjoins with the Navy for national defence operations. The force, however, now also acts as the "lead intelligence agency for coastal and sea borders". The 26/11 Mumbai carnage, after all, had exposed the lack of "critical connectivity" between intelligence agencies and security agencies. Since then, the Navy and Coast Guard have dramatically cranked up their maritime vigil. Several other measures, ranging from Phase-I of the coastal surveillance radar network to the naval NC3I (national command, control, communication and intelligence) network have been implemented. But much more needs to be done.

Source: economictimes.indiatimes.com, 16 August 2017

Malaysia deploys first Warship to new Naval Base near disputed Island

- Prashanth Parameswaran

On August 10, Malaysia deployed the first ship to a new maritime base it had opened in Middle Rocks near Pedra Branca, an outlying island now under the jurisdiction of neighboring Singapore but which Kuala Lumpur still believes is part of its territory. The development was read as just the latest move that Malaysia has taken to reinforce its seriousness in preserving the country's sovereignty just as the government gears up for the next general election. As I noted last week, on August 1, Malaysia had publicly unveiled the new Abu Bakar Maritime Base, built on the Malaysian-owned Middle Rocks – which consists of two clusters of rocks and lies just one kilometer away from Pedra Branca. The facility, which comprises two buildings around 316.6 meters apart, including a jetty, a lighthouse, and a helicopter landing pad, was billed as part of an effort to safeguard Malaysia's sovereignty and conducting marine scientific research. Even though the facility had actually been completed almost a year ago and will likely do very little to affect either the actual outcome of Malaysia's bid for a revision of the Pedra Branca ruling back in 2008 or the general military balance at play between the two countries, some had worried about further complications being added to a historically rocky bilateral relationship

On Thursday, the first Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) ship berthed at Abu Bakar Maritime Base ten days after its unveiling. The arrival of KD *Perdana*, a 47-meter long fast-attack craft that can carry a crew of up to 30 and was first commissioned over four decades ago, was confirmed by Malaysia's navy chief Admiral Ahmad Kamarulzaman Ahmad Badaruddin, who issued a congratulatory message to the crew over Twitter. No further details were publicly disclosed on the *Perdana's* arrival as well as what we might expect regarding similar developments in the near future related to Abu Bakar Maritime Base. But the navy chief told *The Straits Times* that the *Perdana*, though not permanently positioned at the base, would still frequent it and carry out patrols in the area with other vessels to ensure maritime security. In May, the *Perdana* was involved in an incident where a communication breakdown led to it losing contact with a boarding team boat carrying nine sailors that had been launched to check on foreign fishing vessels suspected of illegal activities. The sailors were eventually found by a Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) Beechcraft aircraft about 90 miles off of the east coast of Kuantan following a search mission.

Source: thediplomat.com, 15 August 2017



Iranian Drone Plane forces U.S. fighter to take 'evasive action,' U.S. Navy says

The U.S. Navy says an Iranian drone flew within 30 meters of one of its jets on August 8 as the U.S. aircraft was trying to land on an aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf. U.S. Naval Forces Central Command spokesman Bill Urban said the encounter occurred in international airspace as the U.S. F/A-18E Super Hornet fighter bomber was preparing to land on the USS Nimitz aircraft carrier. "The dangerous maneuver by the QOM-1 in the known vicinity of fixed-wing flight operations and at coincident altitude with operating aircraft created a collision hazard and is not in keeping with international maritime customs and laws," Urban said. Urban said it was the 13th "unsafe and unprofessional" interaction by U.S. and Iranian maritime forces during 2017.

He said the U.S. fighter bomber had to take "evasive action" to maneuver out of the way of the drone. In July, a U.S. Navy patrol ship fired warning shots at an Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) boat in the Persian Gulf as it approached the U.S. warship.

Source: www.rferl.org, 08 August 2017

'Unsafe and Unprofessional': Iranian Drone flies close to U.S. ship for the second time in a week

-Jennifer Calfas

An Iranian drone flew in "an unsafe and unprofessional" way near a U.S. aircraft carrier in international waters on Sunday — the second time in a week such flyby has happened in a week. The drone flew several times past the USS Nimitz as it was in international waters in the Persian Gulf, Lieutenant Ian McConnaughey, a Navy spokesperson in the Middle East, said, according to the *Washington Post*. The unmanned aerial vehicle came within 1,000 feet of a U.S. aircraft after the U.S. made several radio calls to it, he said. The Iranian UAV, McConnaughey said, "created a dangerous situation with the potential for collision, and is not in keeping with international maritime customs and laws," McConnaughey said, according to the *Post*. A representative for the USS Nimitz did not immediately respond to request

for comment. A similar incident occurred when an Iranian QOM-1 drone nearly collided with an aircraft as it approached the Nimitz, the Navy said on Aug. 8. Similarly, the U.S. attempted to establish communication with the drone before it came within 100 feet of the F/A-18E Super Hornet aircraft. The maneuvers made by the drone were also described by the Navy as "unsafe and unprofessional," as well as "dangerous." There have now been 14 circumstances in 2017 in which unsafe interactions between the U.S. and Iranian maritime forces have occurred, the Navy said.

Source: time.com, 14 August 2017

Mooring trials scheduled for China's first indigenous Aircraft Carrier

China intends to conduct mooring trials for its first domestically constructed aircraft carrier in September, says Hu Wenming, the general director of the carrier's construction. Dalian Shipbuilder had launched the aircraft carrier for sea trials in April. Known as the Type 001A, the carrier is derived from the Soviet-era Kuznetsov-class carrier Varyag, which China bought in an incomplete state in the late 1990s through a privately-owned Hong Kong-based business. The Varyag was then completed and fitted in China. It was launched as the Liaoning, which the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) declared as "combat ready" in November 2016. The Type 001A inherits the Liaoning's short take-off but arrested recovery (STOVAR) aircraft launch layout, but Chinese media sources claim that the Type 001A can carry additional aircraft. Regarding the Type 001A, Hu Wenming told the People's Daily Online that 412 entities, including state-owned corporations, private companies and research and development agencies, were involved in the development and production of the Type 001A.

Domestic inputs constitute 77.4% of the Type 001A content. In September 2016, satellite imagery indicate that China is testing Shenyang J-15 carrier-borne fighters modified for catapult-assisted take-off but arrested recovery (CATOBAR) flight decks in anticipation of China's third carrier, the Type 002. Aircraft carrier development and production constitutes a major portion of Beijing's plan of enhancing the PLAN for better addressing China's regional naval threats and interests.

In the lead-up to inducting aircraft carriers, the PLAN has largely modernized its surface fleet with multi-mission frigates and destroyers, such as the Type 054A and Type 052B/C/D, respectively. The mainstay of the PLAN's patrol and anti-submarine

warfare (ASW) force now comprises of Type 056 corvettes. The PLAN has also expanded its amphibious deployment capabilities through the induction of Type 071 landing platform/docks (LPD) and Type 072 landing ship/dock (LSD). It has also built a modern land-based air arm comprising of various fixed-wing fighter aircraft as well as ASW and surveillance aircraft. In parallel with aircraft carriers, the PLAN surface fleet will see the addition of large anti-air warfare (AAW)-capable multi-mission destroyers, such as the 10,000-ton Type 055.

Source: quwa.org, 08 August 2017

Sri Lankan Navy commissions India-built Patrol Vessel

An Indian-built Advanced Offshore Patrol Vessel (AOPV) has been commissioned by the Sri Lankan navy at a ceremony in Colombo harbour. Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena launched the country's newest acquisition-- "SLNS Sayurala"-- earlier this week at the ceremony at the Eastern Container Terminal of the Port of Colombo. Flag Officer Commander in Chief Southern Naval Command-Indian Navy, Vice Admiral A.R. Karve, attended the event. Constructed by the Goa Shipyard Limited (GSL) in India, it is the first-ever brand new AOPV purchased from a foreign ship builder, custom-made for the specific requirements of the Sri Lankan Navy. A Ministry of Defence release said that it is the largest vessel of its kind to be acquired by the Navy. With a length of 105.7 metre and width of 13.6 metre, the vessel has a displacement of 2,350 tonnes. The GSL built the AOPV under an agreement signed on February 2014 and it was handed over to the Sri Lankan Navy on July 22. In addition to SLNS Sayurala, Sri Lanka intends to acquire three more OPVs in accordance with SLN maritime strategy 2025, the Island newspaper reported. The Goa Shipyard Limited is also building a second AOPV for Sri Lanka and it will be joining the country's fleet next year. SLNS Sayurala will go on its first mission later this month.

Source: economictimes.indiatimes.com, 05 August 2017

Indian Defence Ministry Panel recommends PAK-FA involvement

The Hindustan Times reports that Indian Ministry of Defence (MoD) panel has recommended that New Delhi participate in the Sukhoi Su-57 – i.e. T-50 PAK-FA (or custom FGFA for India) –stealth fighter program as a co-development and co-production partner. The panel is reportedly headed by retired Indian Air Force (IAF) Air Marshal Simhakutty Varthaman, who did not disclose the panel's findings, but

confirmed that its function was complete. The panel was raised in February with the mandate to examine the feasibility of the PAK-FA. The Su-57/PAK-FA is a heavyweight twin-engine fighter design. It is powered by 117S turbofans, which are also the engines of the Sukhoi Su-35. Among the Su-57's marquee features is its low radar cross-section (RCS) airframe, which aims to reduce its detectability on radar. One of the reported challenges surrounding the PAK-FA has been cost. Speaking to Defense News, an IAF official stated that Moscow had set an "unaffordable price for the aircraft," adding that "India is not in a position to pay this kind of money, and the aircraft project appears to be lost." From New Delhi's perspective, it appears that the high costs of the PAK-FA are borne from the platform's design still not meeting IAF requirements, such as a lack of certifiable active electronically-scanned array radar and Moscow's own lack of interest in the program.

In July, Russian defence industry analysts and observers have told IHS Jane's that the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) was not pushing for the PAK-FA as the platform does not offer a substantive improvement in value over the Sukhoi Su-35, one of the VKS' emerging mainstay fighter platforms. United Aircraft Corporation (UAC) stated (via TASS News Agency) that development of the T-50 PAK-FA is scheduled for completion in 2019. UAC will deliver a "pre-production batch" of the fighters, at which point UAC expects the VKS to begin issuing orders. However, analysts are unconvinced that the VKS will acquire more than 60 of the launch Su-57 variant. These two elements, i.e. incomplete technology/subsystems and no domestic orders at launch, leave the PAK-FA as an expensive and uncertain proposition for prospective customers, including India, which has a spate of competing priorities – such as an Indian Navy requirement for 57 carrier-borne fighters and IAF requirement for new single-engine fighters – to manage in the short and medium-terms. India also has a homegrown next-generation fighter program in the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA). Although some have recommended investing in the PAK-FA to secure vital expertise and technology for the AMCA, the IAF and IN's apparent inclination to Western fighters could enable India to acquire analogous collaborative support from Dassault, Airbus and/or Saab instead. In fact, New Delhi can potentially leverage its IAF and IN bids to supporting the AMCA.

Source: quwa.org, 06 August 2017

Russia, India to train Naval, Air Blockade during joint exercises Indra-2017

According to the press service of Russia's Eastern Military District, ships from the Russian and Indian navies will practice creating a partial naval and air blockade of the simulated enemy during the Indra-2017 military exercises. Ships from the Russian and Indian navies will practice creating a partial naval and air blockade of the simulated enemy during the Indra-2017 joint military exercises, the press service of Russia's Eastern Military District said Monday. "When the practical part of the exercise is held, the ships of [Russia's] Pacific Fleet and the Indian Navy will fulfill the tasks of organizing joint air defense at the sea crossing and creating a partial naval and air blockade of the simulated enemy," the statement said. The naval portion of the Indra-2017 exercises will take place in the Peter the Great Gulf and at the Klerk range in Primorsky Territory in the Russian Far East. The crews will practice escorting ships, creating humanitarian corridors, transferring various cargoes on the move, and detaining and inspecting ships that are conventionally captured by pirates.

In addition, a search will be carried out for a submarine of a simulated enemy and a counter-offensive naval battle. Practice for landing and occupation of the coastline with the use of assault landing ships is also expected. Pilots of naval aircraft will conduct helicopter exercises, specifically focusing on landing on the deck. The press service noted that artillery fire at air, sea and coastal targets will be conducted. The exercise will be completed with three destroyers, a large anti-submarine ship, a supply vessel, a diesel submarine from both sides. This year, Russian-Indian exercises will be held for the first time in all-encompassing format. Instead of separate naval, air and anti-terrorist exercises conducted in 2016, a single exercise will be carried out involving the Pacific Fleet, and personnel, weaponry and equipment of air and ground units of Russia's Eastern Military District.

Source: idrw.org, 07 August 2017

US Navy reports another tense encounter with an Iran drone

An unarmed Iranian drone shadowed a U.S. aircraft carrier at night and came close enough to F-18 fighter jets to put the lives of American pilots at risk, the Navy said Tuesday, reporting the second such tense encounter within a week. Iran's Revolutionary Guard said the U.S. safety concerns were unfounded. The Iranian

Sadegh drone flew without any warning lights on Sunday night while shadowing the USS Nimitz, said Lt. Ian McConnaughey, a spokesman for the Bahrain-based 5th Fleet. The drone did not respond to repeated radio calls and came within 1,000 feet (300 metres) of U.S. fighters, he said. That “created a dangerous situation with the potential for collision and is not in keeping with international maritime customs and laws,” Lt. McConnaughey said in a statement. The drone was unarmed, the lieutenant said, though that model can carry missiles. Iran’s Revolutionary Guard issued a statement early Tuesday saying their drones are guided “accurately and professionally,” dismissing the U.S. Navy’s concerns as “unfounded.” In a similar encounter Aug. 8, the Navy said an Iranian drone came within 100 feet (30 metres) of an F-18 preparing to land on the Nimitz. Iranian vessels and U.S. warships have also had tense encounters in recent months. President Donald Trump has threatened to renegotiate the nuclear deal struck by his predecessor amid new sanctions targeting Iran over its ballistic missile tests.

So far this year, the Navy has recorded 14 instances of what it describes as “unsafe and/or unprofessional” interactions with Iranian forces. It recorded 35 in 2016 and 23 in 2015. The incidents at sea almost always involved the Revolutionary Guard, a paramilitary force that reports only to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Some analysts believe the incidents are meant in part to squeeze moderate President Hassan Rouhani’s administration after the 2015 nuclear deal. Of the incidents at sea last year, the worst involved Iranian forces capturing and holding overnight 10 U.S. sailors who strayed into the Islamic Republic’s territorial waters. Iranian forces in turn accuse the U.S. Navy of unprofessional behavior, especially in the Strait of Hormuz, the mouth of the Persian Gulf, through which a third of all oil traded by sea passes.

Source: www.thehindu.com, 15 August 2017

'China is not Father Christmas': India's concern about Beijing's expansion grows after a new Port deal

-Christopher Woody

China's growing influence in its near abroad has stirred concern among its neighbors, none more so than India. New Delhi regards Beijing's expansion - through military and commercial agreements alike - warily, particularly China's recent agreement on a 99-year lease to operate a strategically located deep-water port at the southern tip of Sri Lanka, a small island nation just south of the Indian mainland. Sri Lanka started building the Hambantota port about five years ago, relying on heavy Chinese investment but planning to operate the facility itself. Ambitions for the port have foundered, however, and Colombo struck a billion-dollar deal with Beijing for a 70% stake in a joint venture with Sri Lanka's port authority. The lease also gives China control over 15,000 acres of land near the port for development of an industrial zone. China's latest investment extends the country's One Belt, One Road initiative, which includes overland and maritime routes as well as economic and industrial agreements linking China to 68 countries constituting about 60% of the world's population and around one-third of global GDP. It will also go toward debt relief for Sri Lanka, which owes China \$8 billion, more than 12% of the country's \$65 billion outstanding debt. But the Hambantota deal has been met with concern both inside and outside Sri Lanka. At home, Sri Lankans - labor unions and other activists in particular - continue to protest what is seen as growing Chinese influence in their country. Those opposed to the deal have called the Hambantota project a "Chinese colony" - an early January protest at an event marking the start of construction at the port ended with 21 people injured and 52 arrested. The opposition parliamentary coalition have also protested the deal. Colombo has revised the deal, splitting control of port operations, but worry persists. "The concern is not about the investment coming in," Nasal Rajapaksa, an opposition parliament member and son of the former president (who oversaw much of the growth of Sri Lanka's debts to China), told Al Jazeera at the end of July. "I'm saying the Sri Lankan government should have negotiated a better deal for Sri Lanka."

India has also objected, seeing the Chinese presence in Sri Lanka as part of Beijing's effort to expand into the Indian Ocean, of a piece with Chinese-run and

financed facilities in places like, Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Djibouti. The Hambantota port deal "ties into what India has said about the Belt and Road initiative, that many of these ventures are not being entered into by China by looking at their financial liability," K.C. Singh, former secretary at the Indian ministry of external affairs, told Al Jazeera. Colombo has also made agreements with New Delhi to mollify the latter's concern about Hambantota, including the condition that no Chinese military vessel come to the port without permission.

But, Singh said, "this is going to be a standing example for the other countries to watch, because China is not Father Christmas, handing out dollar bills. They want return on the money, and they want the money to come within a certain, certified period." "Is it a model then for future extension of the Chinese strategic footprint? When ... countries can't return the money, then you grab territory?" Singh said. "So that will be something that India will be concerned about, and I'm sure it will be raised in Colombo." Einar Tangen, an Al Jazeera political analyst and banker who advises the Chinese government, said if India - which boycotted a Chinese meeting on the One Belt, One Road initiative earlier this year - has concerns about China's activities it should "come to the table." "We should separate the passive-aggressive ideas about China's expansions and concentrate more on what exactly the world needs," Tangen said. "Isn't it about time that leaders sat down and tried to work" out disputes.

One Belt, One Road

US interest in Asia, under the guise of President Barack Obama's "Asia pivot," has receded in some places as Chinese interest has grown. Beijing's deal-making in Myanmar, for example, comes as President Donald Trump has shown little interest in guiding that country out of war. The Trump administration is also considering a tougher stance toward Pakistan, even as China has signed \$55 billion in deals with the South Asian country, locking the two into what looks to be a long-term relationship. India, which has a long and often contentious relationship with Pakistan, has objected to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor because it cuts through an area claimed by New Delhi. Heavy Chinese investment in Gwadar, an Pakistani port on the Indian Ocean being run and expanded by a Chinese company, stirs concerns similar to those about Hambantota.

China has tried to avoid the appearance of military-oriented deal-making with the One Belt, One Road initiative - Beijing refers to the port facility recently opened in Djibouti as a "logistics facility" - emphasizing instead economic and infrastructure deals,

though such deals still bind the countries involved to Beijing closely. "The Chinese are winning the perceptions game, whatever the reality. That then leads to political outcomes, because people see the inevitability of China's rise and China's power," Ely Ratner of the Council on Foreign Relations told The Wall Street Journal. If China's projects in Sri Lanka are peaceful and benefit the latter country, "sure, it's very good," said Singh, the former Indian diplomat. "But at the moment, that's not the impression that India has. We find that China is jostling for strategic space." The US, India, and Japan - all of whom took part in the massive Malabar 2017 naval exercise in the Indian Ocean this summer - have all reportedly objected to the potential Chinese military activities at Hambantota, and New Delhi condemned the docking of a Chinese submarine at Colombo in 2014. China's subs, and its naval activity in the Indian Ocean in general, are a particular concern for India .

The conflict 'will not be limited'

Protracted tensions in the Himalayas, where Indian and Chinese forces have squared off in a border dispute since mid-summer, offer an example of how the Indian Ocean could become ground zero for any Sino-Indian conflict. "Certainly, it will be detrimental for both, but if Beijing escalates [the conflict], it will not be limited. Perhaps, it may extend to the maritime domain as well," Dr. Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy, research associate at the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore, told the South China Morning Post. Indian military expansion on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands also give it a strategically valuable position in relation to the Malacca Straits, a choke point through which China gets over 80% of its oil imports . "Since 2010, India has also upgraded two airstrips on the [Andaman and Nicobar] islands to serve fighters and reconnaissance aircraft," Naval expert Li Jie, who is based in Beijing, told the Post . "All these moves pave the way for India to be able to blockade Chinese military and commercial ships from entering the Indian Ocean in the event of a naval conflict between the two countries."

Source: www.businessinsider.in, 14 August 2017

Cargo traffic at 12 major ports up 4% to 222 MT in April-July

The country's 12 major ports saw their cargo traffic go up by 4.13 per cent to 221.95 million tonnes (MT) in April-July period of the ongoing fiscal, riding on the back of surge in demand, according to data from ports' body IPA. These top ports, under the

administrative control of the Centre, had handled 213.15 MT cargo in the April-July period of the last fiscal. Increased demand from sectors like iron ore, petroleum oil and lubricants (POL) and containers led to higher movement of cargo during the last four months, according to the Indian Ports Association (IPA). Iron ore traffic volumes moved up 32.28 per cent to 15.61 MT during April-July as against 11.80 MT in the same period a year ago, while those of POL rose 10.40 per cent to 75.18 MT. Container traffic rose 6.16 per cent to 44.06 MT. The Kandla port handled the highest traffic volume at 36.10 MT during April-July this year, followed by the Paradip port at 32.93 MT and JNPT at 21.84 MT, data showed. Volume of sea-borne cargo is essentially in the nature of derived demand and mainly shaped by levels and changes in both global and domestic activity. India has 12 major ports, namely Kandla, Mumbai, JNPT, Mormugao, New Mangalore, Cochin, Chennai, Ennore, V O Chidambaranar, Visakhapatnam, Paradip and Kolkata (including Haldia), which handle approximately 61 per cent of the country's total cargo traffic.

Source: economictimes.indiatimes.com, 07 August 2017

India, Iran call for early operationalization of Chabahar Port

India and Iran have expressed commitment for early completion and operationalisation of Chabahar Port besides strengthening bilateral ties. Road Transport, Highways and Shipping Minister Nitin Gadkari was on a two-day visit to Tehran on August 5 and 6 to represent India at the inauguration and oath taking ceremony of Hassan Rouhani as the President of Iran for a second term where he also held discussions with Iranian officials on wide ranging issues including Chabahar Port and proposed rail link between Chabahar and Zahedan. "In the meetings, both sides positively assessed the progress in implementation of the decisions taken during the Indian Prime Minister's visit to Iran last year, including the progress of Chabahar Port. Both sides reiterated their commitment to complete and operationalise the port at the earliest," Ministry of Shipping said in a statement today.

Besides meeting Mr Rouhani, Mr Gadkari also called on the first Vice President E Jahangiri and highlighted the issue of activation of contract of Chabahar Port development and conveyed to him that India Ports Global Limited (IPGL) has finalised procurement of critical equipment such as Rail Mounted Gantry Crane and is close to finalising orders relating to Rubber Tyre Mobile Crane, MT Container Handlers, Truck

and Tractor Trailers Containers and related equipment. The statement also said he has conveyed India's readiness to aid Iran in taking up operations in Chabahar Port during the interim period between the actual activation of contract. He requested the Iranian side for an early submission of loan application for Chabahar Port Development to Exim Bank of India so that the contract agreement between the two countries can be activated. The Iranian side earlier had requested India to provide up to 150 million dollar credit and had made it a condition for activation of the Chabahar Port contract. The application for loan to Exim Bank of India is still awaited. "Later, Gadkari met Abbas Akhouni, the Iranian Minister for Roads and Urban Development, and conveyed to him the latest update on procurement of equipment for the two terminals - multipurpose and container - that are covered under Chabahar Port Agreement," the statement said. He also requested Mr Akhouni that in the interest of supporting operations of Chabahar Port, the Iranian side should consider waiving the condition of submission of loan application as it was taking time. The Iranian side assured that the application shall be presented to Exim Bank of India early.

The Foreign Investment Promotion and Protection Act (FIPPA) application was also presented by the MD, IPGL to the Iranian authorities in the presence of Mr Gadkari and Mr Akhouni. India has opened an office of IPGL in Tehran. The statement said in his meeting with Mr Akhouni, Mr Gadkari stressed upon the need for marketing of the Chabahar Port to attract cargo. "He said, Iran and India should jointly organise a workshop at Chabahar for this purpose at an early date. Mr Gadkari also emphasized the need to develop rail connectivity from Chabahar to Zahedan, and said that the MoU with India in this regard may be extended," it said. The issue of ratification of the trilateral Transit Agreement between India, Iran and Afghanistan was also discussed. While India and Afghanistan have signed the agreement, Iran is yet to do the same.

Source: www.ndtv.com, 07 August 2017

High tax regime, lack of long-term funds hurting Shipping Industry

-P Manoj

India's rich maritime tradition — long coastline, supplier of quality seafarers to the global shipping industry, a big market of 1.2 billion people — has not reflected in the numbers it should ideally have. In 1947, the gross registered tonnage (GRT) of Indian ships was 0.19 million tonnes. Seventy years on, India has 1,348 ships with a GRT of 12.268 million tonnes and a dead weight tonnage of 18.534 million tonnes. Of this, state-run Shipping Corporation of India alone accounts for 5.98 million DWT or 33

per cent of India's total DWT. Gross Registered Tonnage (GRT) is the volume of space within the hull and enclosed space above the deck of a merchant ship which are available for cargo, stores, fuel, passengers and crew. DWT refers to the carrying capacity of a ship in tonnes. High taxation, lack of cargo support and long-term funds at lower rates have hampered India's push to increase its GRT by as much as four times to more than 40 million by 2020.

Tonnage tax

The biggest dose of reform for the Indian shipping industry came in 2004 when the Central government introduced the tonnage tax, a levy based on the cargo carrying capacity of ships, reducing the tax incidence of fleet owners to less than 2 per cent compared to the traditional corporate tax structure of over 30 per cent. Though, the tonnage tax brought Indian shipping industry on par with its global counterparts, the local fleet owners were for many years saddled with dozen other taxes that reduced the competitiveness of Indian ships.

By the time these issues were sorted out, the industry has been hit by fresh turbulence with the introduction of the Goods and Services TAX (GST). The share of the country's overseas trade carried on Indian ships has dropped to less than 8 per cent from about 40 per cent in the late 1980s. "We are nowhere in shipping," says TV Shanbhag, former chief controller of chartering in the Ministry of Shipping. "With the exception of Shipping Corporation of India and Great Eastern Shipping, where are the ship owners in India," he asks. Except Shipping Corporation, no Indian shipping company has an oil super tanker or a very large crude carrier on its fleet. "These are the indicators," Shanbhag, who headed the government's ship chartering wing Transchart for ten years between 1995 and 2005, said.

Shanbhag puts the blame for the lacklustre performance of the local shipping industry to "policy decisions mainly on taxation". India allows 100 per cent FDI in shipping, yet not a single global ship-owner has invested in India so far. On the contrary, Indian fleet owners have started flagging their ships outside India in tax-friendly jurisdictions. This was earlier done by opening subsidiaries abroad. The government has now allowed them to register ships outside through a mechanism called "Indian Controlled Tonnage" without the need to open subsidiaries abroad.

Source: www.thehindubusinessline.com, 14 August 2017

Cuba signs agreement with major US Port to boost trade

The Port Authorities of Cuba and Houston, Texas have signed a “friendship and commercial cooperation” agreement. “This is an opportunity to continue trade in agricultural products between the United States and Cuba,” Houston Port Authority Commercial Director Ricky W. Kunz said after signing the agreement with Cuban officials. Though US President Donald Trump said Cuba must first meet international human rights standards before normal trading between the two nations could begin, Cuba and Houston — the country’s busiest international trade port — saw a valuable and convenient economic opportunity. “Due to the proximity of our coasts, all the international maritime traffic passes by them on the direct southeastern trade lines,” Kunz said. “It’s important for them to do business with the ports of the United States and we will continue to develop them.”

The Cuban Ministry of Transportation said in a press release that the agreement “demonstrates the willingness of the US port maritime sector to strengthen trade relations, friendship and cooperation with Cuba based on mutual respect.” The agreement generally seeks to facilitate and promote trade, generate new business and foster a “closer” bilateral relationship between two nations who have had a historically frigid relationship. The agreement also provides for the exchange of studies and information to improve and increase level of market research, joint marketing activities, training and technological exchange. It’s the eighth agreement signed by Cuba with United States ports, other of which are located in Florida and Virginia. “Texas is a state that is rich in agricultural, livestock, industrial development and Cuba is interested, like them, in negotiating and developing a prosperous and sustainable commercial exchange. We are headed toward that,” José Prado, the Director General of the Maritime Administration in Cuba, said.

Source: panampost.com, 03 August 2017



MARINE ENVIRONMENT



Second garbage patch the size of Texas discovered in Pacific Ocean

Scientists on a recent six-month expedition have discovered the presence of a second garbage patch in the South Pacific, and are saying that the plastic vortex could be bigger than the state of Texas. Charles Moore set sail with a group of volunteer researchers in November 2016 to look at plastic pollution off the coast of Chile. It was during their research that the team discovered the large amount of plastic floating in the South Pacific, measuring an estimated million square kilometers, or 1.5 times the size of Texas. The plastic is gathered and trapped in one of the known gyres in the ocean – these are areas with circulating ocean currents – and it is difficult to remove the bits of plastic due to its size. Rather than the plastic trash that most would think of, such as six-pack soda rings or plastic bags, instead the plastic found in this part of the ocean are apparently smaller than grains of rice, ResearchGate reported. "We found a few larger items, occasionally a buoy and some fishing gear, but most of it was broken into bits," Moore told the publication. He guessed that there are millions of plastic particles per square kilometer in this newly discovered patch.

A pollution researcher told the publication that the microplastics are difficult to clean up due to their size, and that it is easiest to prevent them from getting in the ocean than it would be to get rid of them once they're in the gyre. "This cloud of microplastics extends both vertically and horizontally," said marine pollution scientist Marcus Eriksen. "It's more like smog than a patch." Henderson Island is located in the same area as this garbage patch, and as National Geographic pointed out, it was covered in approximately 38 million pieces of trash, which is in keeping with Moore's finding in the ocean. Moore, incidentally, is the person who discovered the first garbage patch in the North Pacific in 1997. This latest research trip concluded in May, and Moore said he is now processing the samples of plastic that his team has collected.

Source: www.sfgate.com, 03 August 2017

Reducing Plastic Pollution especially important at the shore

Beach concerts have become an established part of the summer fun at the Jersey Shore. Unfortunately, they've also become litter pollution events at a point of maximum harm adjacent to the ocean. Wherever people are out and about these days, they've got plenty of plastic convenience items — drink cups, covers and straws, bottled water, food containers, single-use creamers, stirrers ... all carried in a plastic bag. So when 50,000 people attend a show on the beach, there's going to be lots of plastic poised to pollute the ocean.

Some day people may develop better habits such as using paper and cardboard convenience items instead and taking more responsibility for their trash. Meanwhile, Atlantic City and other shore towns need to put trash cans throughout concert crowds and ensure that the trash gets taken away — not moved into the ocean by wind and tide. Once that's adequately addressed, adding recycling would be a plus. Recycling was the first major effort to address plastic waste. In the half century that it was getting established, however, the plastic problem outgrew efforts to counter it. Annual plastic production has soared from 15 million tons in the mid-'60s to well over 300 million tons today, says the World Economic Forum. And 95 percent of plastic packaging is used just once before becoming waste. When plastic gets into the ocean, it takes a toll on marine mammals, fish and birds. Probably the saddest job of the Marine Mammal Stranding Center in Brigantine is determining that a whale, dolphin, sea turtle or other creature has been killed by a plastic bag, straw or other human litter. Beaches awash in plastic trash are visible and disturbing. Worse are the concentrations of plastic trash, formed by rotating currents, that cover about a third of all ocean surfaces, according to the Center for Biological Diversity.

Now environmental scientists and organizations realize the problem is much larger and more systemic. Microplastics — bits smaller than 5mm either made that size or reduced to that by items breaking up — are flowing into waterways and causing problems poorly understood or simply unseen. One form is plastic microbeads, smaller than sand and used to increase the effectiveness of products such as shower gel, toothpaste and makeup. A 2015 report in *Environmental Science & Technology* found the U.S. alone put 8 trillion microbeads into waterways every day. That year a federal law banned their use in personal-care products, but that left lots of other uses and many other nations without restrictions on microbeads.

Most plastics resist combining with water, oxygen or anything else that would help them biodegrade, so they persist for decades. Some do, however, leach chemicals

called endocrine disruptors that can affect the hormones of living things. Evidence is mounting that this could be a major problem that's just beginning.

For example, a French experiment with oysters found that when they ingested microplastics from sea water, their ability to reproduce was cut almost in half. The females' eggs were fewer and smaller, and male oysters produced slower-swimming sperm.

In February, the United Nations Environment Programme launched its Clean Seas Campaign, seeking to eliminate the use of microplastics and greatly reduce single-use plastic to save the oceans from irreversible damage. It is urging nations to follow the U.S. lead and ban them from personal-care items, ban or tax single-use bags, and dramatically reduce other disposable plastics by 2022. Visitors to and residents at the Jersey Shore should follow some of the UN recommendations themselves, such as choosing reusable bags over plastic ones, supporting legislation to reduce marine litter, and keeping beaches and shorelines clean. Disposable plastics might seem convenient now, but at the current rate there will be more plastic than fish in the sea by 2050. That won't just be inconvenient, but harmful to life on Earth, including the human kind.

Source: www.pressofatlanticcity.com, 03 August 2017

Hong Kong Government struggles to clean up mess as palm oil spill spreads

Hong Kong is struggling to contain the spread of a major palm oil spill, closing two more beaches on Tuesday, as experts warned that the fallout was unpredictable because of a lack of information. After days of silence, environmental officials confirmed a ship collision southwest of the city last Thursday had spilled 1,000 tonnes of oil into the sea, but could neither give a more precise location nor provide any details as to who the vessels belonged to and who should be held responsible. While officials said preliminary laboratory tests indicated little to no trace of oil in water from the affected area, local beaches were swamped with globs of rancid oil. Environmental groups were worried the lack of detailed information on the spill and the difficulty in cleaning up the mess would amplify the environmental damage.

Thirteen beaches have been closed since Sunday in the wake of the collision between two vessels – one of them a container ship carrying 9,000 tonnes of palm oil. Although

Hong Kong government departments so far have scooped up more than 93 tonnes of the white, gelatinous, lard-like pieces of crystallised oil, more of it is washing up on southwestern coastlines and now spreading to the east. Guangdong authorities had cleaned up 38 tonnes of palm oil as of Monday.

Dog owners warned to beware of spilled palm oil washing up on Hong Kong beaches

That did not dissuade tourists and beach-goers from heading into the water in Stanley and Repulse Bay, despite the red flags raised by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, which also closed Deep Water Bay Beach and Turtle Cove Beach in Southern District on Tuesday. Undersecretary for the Environment Tse Chin-wan inspected clean-up work at two beaches on Lamma Island on Tuesday morning, where he told the media the vessels had collided “a few tens of miles” southwest of Hong Kong. He revealed that a container from the cargo ship was punctured and lost 1,000 tonnes of palm oil. Tse estimated that about 200 tonnes of the oil was still polluting Hong Kong’s beaches and shorelines and would take more time to clean up.

While the city was alerted about the spill only on Saturday, Tse said this was not considered too late as the notification mechanism in place between Hong Kong, Macau and Guangdong required one party to give the others a heads-up only if the spill was expected to affect the environment of another jurisdiction. Undersecretary for the Environment Tse Chin-wan inspected clean-up work at two beaches on Lamma Island on Tuesday morning, where he told the media the vessels had collided “a few tens of miles” southwest of Hong Kong. He revealed that a container from the cargo ship was punctured and lost 1,000 tonnes of palm oil. Tse estimated that about 200 tonnes of the oil was still polluting Hong Kong’s beaches and shorelines and would take more time to clean up. While the city was alerted about the spill only on Saturday, Tse said this was not considered too late as the notification mechanism in place between Hong Kong, Macau and Guangdong required one party to give the others a heads-up only if the spill was expected to affect the environment of another jurisdiction.

Questions over two-day delay on notice of palm oil spill that left 11 Hong Kong beaches closed

Ken Ching See-ho, head of the Eco-Education and Resources Centre, called on the government to follow up and seek compensation for the environmental damage. “We don’t know the cause of the collision. Was there negligence on the part of the [vessel] operators? We don’t know. Do they have a responsibility to help in the clean-up? Right

now, we don't even know the name of the ship involved," Ching said on a local radio programme. He noted that clean-up efforts had been extremely difficult due to the sheer volume and the softness and stickiness of the "tofu-like" oil globs in the heat. "It's definitely much harder than cleaning up the plastic pellets [in 2012]," Ching said. "Even if we get 10 times more volunteers, I'm afraid we won't clean it all up by this week." He added that the decaying oil could trigger the growth of algae and fuel red tides when water temperatures start to warm up next week. In July 2012, seven containers fell off a cargo ship when a typhoon hit Hong Kong. Six were loaded with 150 tonnes of plastic pellets, which washed up on local beaches, sparking concern for marine life.

Dr Lincoln Fok, an environmental scientist at Education University specialising in marine pollution and hydrology, said ocean currents were very complicated and hard to predict. It would be difficult to estimate the movement and dispersal of the spill without data modelling, he said. But Gary Stokes of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society said the pollutants, like most marine rubbish flushed out from the Pearl River estuary, would have been "whipped back" onto Hong Kong's southern shores by the summer's southwest winds.

Source: www.scmp.com, 08 August 2017

Five steps to cut waste plastics entering the Oceans by two-thirds

The introduction of a deposit return scheme for plastic bottles is among the measures which could cut marine pollution in the UK by two-thirds, according to independent charity, the Green Alliance. The introduction of a deposit return scheme for plastic bottles is among the measures which could cut marine pollution in the UK by two thirds, according to independent charity, the Green Alliance. The organisation noted that while the steps taken so far, including the 5p charge on single use plastic bags, have reduced marine debris by around 2%, much more still needs to be done. The plastic bag charge was said to address 1% of the plastic that enters the sea. Plastic pollution has serious implications for the fishing and tourism industries, and to human health. Keeping it from getting into the ocean is the most effective means of protecting the sea and people.

In a speech to WWF in July, Environment Secretary Michael Gove promised to tackle marine plastic litter as part of a renewed waste and resources strategy. Green Alliance

said that while Gove's announcement that microbeads will be banned from rinse-off products later this year is a step forward, it will tackle less than 1% of the problem.

According to the organisation, other methods, which use buoys to remove litter from the open oceans, only tackle floating debris and so could only remove 2% of the plastic that gets into the sea. This is because most plastic sinks below the ocean surface or is ingested by animals.

However, deposit return schemes are already widely implemented abroad and have been very successful (nearly 100% of plastics bottles are returned for recycling in Germany). Such schemes also provide access to more high quality plastics for recycling, preventing them from going to landfill, incineration or finding their way into the environment. Alongside a deposit return scheme, four other actions which the Green Alliance said would reduce the UK's contribution to plastic pollution in the sea by nearly two thirds in total include:

- Enforce Operation Clean Sweep to cut pollution from plastic pellets or 'nurdles' used as raw material in industrial processes (9% of plastic pollution)
- Enforce existing maritime waste dumping bans, using techniques similar to those used by Norway to enforce its fish discards ban (11% of plastic pollution)
- Upgrade wastewater treatment plants with sand filters to retain the microplastic fibres shed from synthetic clothes when they are washed (9% of plastic pollution)
- Expand the UK's ban on microbeads to all products, not just rinse-off products (1% of plastic pollution).

"It's depressing to visit a beach that is covered with plastic, and downright scary to learn that the seafood you are eating might be contaminated by plastic pollution," said Dustin Benton, acting policy director for Green Alliance. "The popularity of the microbeads ban and plastic bag charge shows the public is up for tackling these problems." "The government should listen, introduce a bottle deposit scheme, and enforce rules on sources of industrial waste. These simple steps would address two thirds of the UK's marine plastic problem," concluded Benton.

Source: waste-management-world.com, 08 August 2017

Marine noise pollution stresses and confuses fish

The fish also showed signs of being confused when they encountered a potential predator while exposed to these underwater noises. When researchers played recordings of piling sounds and mimicked an approaching predator, the seabass made more turns and failed to move away from the predator. When exposed to drilling sounds the sea bass actively avoided these areas, spending more time in what the research team called the 'safe zone'. The fish also took longer to recover from exposure to the underwater sounds. Lead researcher Ilaria Spiga explained: "Over the last few decades, the sea has become a very noisy place. The effects we saw were subtle changes, which may well have the potential to disrupt the seabass's ability to remain 'in tune' with its environment. "Sea bass, along with other bony fishes, rely on a characteristic 'startle and response' mechanism to get away from predators. Exposure to underwater noises can make it harder for fishes to detect and react to predators. It could also impair their own ability to detect food. "Man-made marine noise could potentially have an adverse effect on reproduction also. If fishes actively avoid areas where these sounds are present it could prevent them from entering spawning grounds, or affect communication between individuals."

The researchers played recordings of drilling from the English Channel made during the installation of a new tidal barrage, while the sound of piling was taken from the construction of a new lifeboat station at Swansea Bay. The piling was characterised by intense pulses of low frequency sound whereas the drilling was continuous noise. Both piling and drilling sounds overlap with the hearing range of sea bass and many other species of fish of 100 -- 1000 Hz. Offshore construction, shipping, and even some onshore activities can all add to ambient noise levels underwater. Although noise is recognised as a pollutant by the European Union's Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), currently only applications for larger or more complex projects have to be registered with the UK government's Marine Noise Registry.

Now, the research team are calling for this to be expanded by proposing limits on the length of time that underwater drilling and piling can take place, or replacing piling with drilling, to give fish time to recover from the physiological changes that these noises induce.

Source: www.sciencedaily.com, 10 August 2017

Corrosion performance of blended cement concrete in Marine Environment

Blended cement is widely used in critical structures mainly because of its enhanced corrosion resistance. But how does the material behave in marine environment? This has been investigated in a long-term study by Indian researchers. The paper presents the long term corrosion performance of Portland pozzolana cement (PPC) and Portland slag cement (PSC) concrete under the three marine exposure conditions atmospheric zone (AZ), immersion zone (IZ) and splash zone (SZ). As exposure station the Offshore Platform Marine Electrochemistry Center (OPMEC) in Tuticorin, India, was selected.

Comparison with OPC concrete

The concrete cubes were exposed over the period of 10 years and their physicochemical properties such as compressive strength, alkalinity, free chloride content and sulphate content, bio-fouling attachment and electrochemical properties like, AC-impedance and potentiodynamic polarization were carried out and the results obtained were compared with Ordinary Portland Cement (OPC) concrete.

Higher corrosion resistance

It was observed that strength and alkalinity of the blended cement concretes were relatively equal to that of OPC concrete. In addition, the pH values of the blended cement concretes are above the threshold limit recommended for depassivation. The resistance to chloride ion penetration was significantly reduced for blended cement concretes and also exhibited very high amount of bio-fouling attachment. The electrochemical studies revealed that the blended cement concretes are having higher corrosion resistance in all three exposure zones. From the results it is observed that the blended cement concretes are highly recommended for aggressive marine environments rather than OPC concrete.

Source: www.european-coatings.com/, 14 August 2017

The plastic plague: Can our oceans be saved from Environmental ruin?

The Great Pacific Garbage Patch has become the stuff of legend. This hotspot of marine waste, created by the spiral currents of the North Pacific Gyre, has been described as a floating trash island the size of Russia. But when filmmaker Jo Ruxton visited the location, she found clear blue water, and a deep-rooted problem. Location and currents of the North Pacific Gyre. "If you were diving, it looked like you had just jumped out of a plane," says Ruxton. "But our nets were coming up completely choked with plastic pieces." The pieces were small enough to mingle with plankton, the tiny organisms at the base of the food web that support many fish and whale species. Researchers have found 750,000 microplastic pieces per square kilometer in the Garbage Patch, and the marine life is riddled with them. "This was much more insidious than a huge mountain of trash which could be physically removed," says Ruxton. "You can't remove all the tiny pieces." Ruxton visited the site while producing the film "A Plastic Ocean," in association with NGO Plastic Oceans, which documents the impact of half a century of rampant plastic pollution. Around eight million tons of plastic enter the marine environment each year, and the figure is set to rise. The Ellen Macarthur Foundation estimates that 311 million tons of plastic were produced in 2014, which will double within 20 years, and projects that there will be more plastic than fish in the oceans by 2050.

Plastic is a remarkably durable material, with a potential lifespan of centuries. It does not biodegrade, but photodegrades under sunlight, breaking down into smaller and smaller pieces, which attract toxins and heavy metals as they travel on the tides. Plastic is pulled together in the powerful, circling currents of gyres, but it is also found in Arctic ice, washing up on remote islands, and infesting tourist destinations. Jo Ruxton wants to see greater responsibilities placed on plastic producers, such as in Germany where strict recycling quotas forced companies to use less plastic. Similar quotas will soon be introduced across the European Union. But the filmmaker is encouraged by the increased focus on the issue in recent years, and is confident that greater public awareness can have a significant impact. "If people realize how easy it is to make changes, and if they understand the consequences of not doing so, they want to change," she says. Ruxton stresses that time is short. If the culture does not change imminently, more communities will face a grim fate. "We're at a tipping point," she says. "I see Tuvalu as a snapshot of the future for all of us if we don't get this addiction under control."

Source: www.wfsb.com, 16 August 2017

Fish confusing plastic debris in ocean for food, study finds

Behavioural evidence suggests marine organisms are not just ingesting microplastics by accident but actively seeking them out as food. Fish may be actively seeking out plastic debris in the oceans as the tiny pieces appear to smell similar to their natural prey, new research suggests. The fish confuse plastic for an edible substance because microplastics in the oceans pick up a covering of biological material, such as algae, that mimics the smell of food, according to the study published on Wednesday in the journal *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*. Scientists presented schools of wild-caught anchovies with plastic debris taken from the oceans, and with clean pieces of plastic that had never been in the ocean. The anchovies responded to the odours of the ocean debris in the same way as they do to the odours of the food they seek. The scientists said this was the first behavioural evidence that the chemical signature of plastic debris was attractive to a marine organism, and reinforces other work suggesting the odour could be significant. The finding demonstrates an additional danger of plastic in the oceans, as it suggests that fish are not just ingesting the tiny pieces by accident, but actively seeking them out.

Matthew Savoca, of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and lead author of the study, told the Guardian: “When plastic floats at sea its surface gets colonised by algae within days or weeks, a process known as biofouling. Previous research has shown that this algae produces and emits DMS, an algal based compound that certain marine animals use to find food. [The research shows] plastic may be more deceptive to fish than previously thought. If plastic both looks and smells like food, it is more difficult for animals like fish to distinguish it as not food.”

Plastic debris in the oceans, ranging from the microscopic to large visible pieces, is recognised as a growing problem as it does not readily degrade and hundreds of thousands of tonnes are dumped in the sea annually. Larger pieces have been found in the intestines of whales and seabirds, where they are thought to be potentially fatal, while the smallest pieces have been detected in the guts of even juvenile fish and molluscs. Numerous species of fish eaten by humans have been found to contain plastic, and the effect of eating these on human health is still unknown. Efforts to reduce marine plastic have so far had little effect: microbeads widely used in cosmetics and other products have been banned in the US, the UK and other countries, but they only solve part of the problem, which is mainly caused by dumping of plastic rubbish. There could be more plastic than fish in the sea by 2050, campaigners have warned.

Scientists have struggled to understand exactly how the massive increase in plastics may be affecting the behaviour of fish and marine ecosystems, and how to contain the problem. A previous paper published in the journal Science that alleged juvenile fish were attracted to microplastics “like teenagers after junk food” was withdrawn earlier this year after controversy. The scientists involved in that paper, who have no relation to the authors of today’s study, were suspected of having exaggerated their data or failed to carry out the purported experiments properly. The new paper did not draw on that publication.

Source: www.theguardian.com, 16 August 2017



Strategic salience of Andaman and Nicobar Islands: Economic and Military dimensions

-Pranay VK

Introduction

Accounting for 30 per cent of India's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI) in the Bay of Bengal have been acknowledged as a distinctive strategic asset only in the 21st century. ¹ Now labelled the 'unsinkable aircraft carrier', the islands provide India with a springboard to expand its strategic frontiers to its maritime east. By virtue of this change in outlook, the islands have figured more vividly in geopolitical discourse than ever before.² Prior to this shift in thought, the islands were considered to be more of a liability in India's security apparatus than an integral component of its larger national strategy. Post 1950 and prior to the turn of the new millennium, the ANI was governed by a policy characterised by 'benign neglect' and 'masterly inactivity'³, owing to its distance from the mainland, for the most part.

The eastern 'frontier'—as has been the recurring terminology used in the past—consists primarily of India's eastern extremities—the ANI included. The very notion that India's eastern-most reaches are mere territorial frontiers is a problematic one. It indicates a gross underestimation of the strategic value of these regions and the misplaced notion that India's territorial and strategic frontiers are one and the same. Consequently, the islands of Andaman and Nicobar, along with the eight north-eastern states, being part of this classification, have lagged behind their counterparts on the mainland in many respects. Thus, it is essential to distinguish between the two to gauge the extent to which the ANI allows India to expand its strategic frontiers well beyond the confines of its geographical territory.

For a long time, the national effort to capitalise on the islands seemed optimistic, at best. Despite its proximity to the Strait of Malacca, the world's busiest shipping lane and possibly its most integral chokepoint, and playing host to the 2 Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC), India's first and only integrated command, the islands were scarcely referred to as a viable strategic asset.

Ever since the establishment of the ANC at Port Blair in 2001, however, India's approach on the utilisation and role of the ANI in its national strategy has been steadily shifting. The islands have witnessed a greater degree of governmental focus and rate of development, both, in the military domain as well as the commercial, in the last couple of years. This shift in approach is essential for India to better secure its sea trade passing through the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) near the Strait of Malacca and to maintain its maritime pre-eminence in its vicinity. Additionally, the ANI has been identified as a vital military asset in light of China's recent forays into the IOR. China's supposed activity on Coco Islands, a set of islands not far from the ANI, in particular, have been subject to much debate and discussion.

The Andaman and Nicobar islands have received additions and upgradations to its air-based and naval capabilities in the last decade or so. While such developments are sure to help, the ANI possesses great potential, much of which is yet to be incorporated into India's overarching strategic calculus. This paper aims to analyse possible security and economic dividends of developing the ANI as an asset of great national strategic importance, keeping in mind the prevailing geopolitical, socioeconomic and cultural realities.

Geographical Salience: Linking Security and Economics

The ANI's geographical orientation is perhaps its most standout characteristic. Located in close proximity to the busiest maritime chokepoint in the world and possessing a vast North-South spread spanning about 800 kilometres⁴, it provides India with a range of security-related and economic options. Traffic passing in and out of the Strait of Malacca routinely circumvent Great Nicobar and enter the 200-kilometre-wide Six Degree Channel⁵, while a smaller portion uses the Ten Degree Channel that separates the Andaman Islands from those of Nicobar. Such geographical traits and their subsequent economic pay-offs provide India with a platform and the impetus to maintain a certain degree of oversight and domain awareness in order to better secure its interests in the region.

Island territories provide nations with a variety of possibilities. From a military standpoint, they often serve as natural fortification against approaching hostile maritime assets while also doubling up as warning and surveillance posts.⁶ This, coupled with the presence of the integrated command in the case of the Andaman and Nicobar islands, should provide for a legitimate defensive counter against most traditional and non-traditional confrontational actions in the region, leading to the

notion of the islands being India's very own 'island chain. Such a theorisation would imply that the ANI stands to play an integral role in India's power projection and forward posturing to its east, owing to its far-flung geographical location and thus, the logistical convenience it would provide. Although an island chain theorisation in this context might seem far-fetched at this point, China's aggressive progression in the maritime realm might make it inevitable.

The geographical contiguity of the islands to countries such as Myanmar, Indonesia and Thailand further cement its strategic versatility. Landfall Island, the northernmost island in the chain is a mere 40 kilometres from the Coco Islands of Myanmar, while Indira Point, near Campbell Bay, is about 165 kilometres from Aceh in Indonesia.⁷ Such statistics are especially important in the context of the Act East Policy adopted by India in 2014. For instance, Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum has given it the impetus to intensify its synergy with India in matters maritime, with the ANI being projected as a region with an integral role to play in the same. Better connectivity between the islands and the littorals of the Andaman Sea would in turn improve trade and thus, economic relations—a key aim of the AEP. Likewise, the ANI presents India with a vast canvas for convergence of interests between India and South East Asian nations.

Historically, India's threat perception has forced it to remain pre-occupied with its continental north. This has resulted in it prioritising its land-based interests over maritime opportunity—a view that is possibly apparent in the lack of a more concrete maritime dimension to the AEP. Should there be a standard operating procedure while acting east using the seas, the Andaman and Nicobar must play a central role. That being said, the Indian Navy, in particular, has played a key role in maritime diplomacy and strengthening ties between navies of the South East Asian littoral, with the ANI playing the role of host on multiple occasions. India continues to participate in bilateral and multilateral exercises to improve inter-operability while also promoting the diplomatic dimension of India's regional maritime interests through frequent port visits, operational training and capacity-building, among other things.

Developing strong maritime ties with the South East Asian littorals is key to India playing the role of a net-security provider in the IOR, as envisioned by its most recent naval strategy document titled, *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security 4 Strategy*.⁹ This status is perhaps intrinsic in the fact that India enjoys a central position in the IOR and possesses a unique asset such as the ANI so close to the Strait of Malacca that sees over 75,000 container vessels¹⁰—carrying essential global

resources—passing through each year. In line with such a designation, India has been open to improving cooperation with nations involved in the Malacca Strait Patrol (MSP) in order to ensure security of passage between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.

In addition to tackling non-traditional threats such as maritime terrorism, piracy, drug smuggling, gun running and illegal migration, navies of the countries in the vicinity of the Strait of Malacca are well aware of Chinese forays into the Indian Ocean Region. Furthermore, much has been written about China's presumed hostile activities on Myanmar's Coco Islands and the threats they pose for India and its maritime predominance in the region. Irrespective of the validity of such allegations, India must remain cognizant of all its options. One such option that has been discussed in some detail is that of using the ANI to enforce a naval blockade upon China at the north-western mouth of the Strait of Malacca if and when required.

Thus, the Andaman and Nicobar islands are an apt representation of the convergence between geography, economics and security. Being inextricably linked variables, it is impossible to talk of either of them in complete isolation. With geography favouring India to such a large extent in relation to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, it is up to the political leadership to work with the armed forces to capitalise on this good fortune and add further impetus to India's maritime aspirations in and around India's maritime east.

The ANI in Transition

A lot can be learnt about the Andaman and Nicobar islands from its history. Vivid pictures of the complex ethno-cultural and socio-military background of the islands have been drawn up in the past. The islands have come a long way since the Japanese and British occupation during and prior to the 1900s. There was a time during the independence struggle when the ANI was considered to be merely a penal colony for British-deemed outcasts sent in from the mainland. Post 1950, when the islands came under the jurisdiction of the Indian government, they were governed by apolicy characterised by 'benign neglect' and 'masterly inactivity. This, perhaps, formed the basis of the lack of inclusion of the ANI in India's military and economic strategy in the latter half of the 20th century.

The turn of the millennium brought about a shift in strategic thought with regard to the Andaman and Nicobar islands. In 2001, for example, the India set up the Andaman

and Nicobar Command at Port Blair, a move that was deemed to be of great strategic value especially in the context of the islands' geographical location. New Delhi seemed taken with the idea of a joint command comprising all three wings of the Indian armed forces, despite opposition from each service. ¹² However, the theoretical value of such a move notwithstanding, the ANC was and possibly has continued to remain caught up in matters financial and administrative.

In relative terms, the Andaman and Nicobar islands are currently a much more integral part of India's strategic calculus. It is nearly impossible to talk about India's maritime security architecture in exclusion of the ANI. The islands have gone from being a territory that required assistance to secure itself, to a land of many possibilities that is now a key component of the security apparatus in the region. India has steadily gone about increasing and improving its military assets on the islands in the recent past, in light of traditional as well as non-traditional threats emanating from the sea. China, as discussed, continues to aggressively wade into the maritime realm and the IOR in particular, while non-traditional threats emanating from piracy, maritime terrorism, drug smuggling, gun and running are a constant menace.

Of the total land area of the islands, only about 6 per cent is open to human habitation and development, while only 38 of the 572 islands and islets in the chain are inhabited. Such numbers stand in stark contrast to the fact that the islands comprise 30 percent of India's total EEZ. Such figures not only signify a considerable loss in revenue but also present a security dilemma. It is a known fact that the uninhabited islands, islets and rocks of the ANI pose as safe havens for pirates and illegal migrants from countries such as Bangladesh and Myanmar. However, the nonuse of such a large percentage of the land is justified. The Andaman and Nicobar islands boast of vast forest cover and are home to a number of indigenous tribes such as the Jarawas and the Sentinelese that are in dire need of state protection. Governmental measures have, thus, been taken to ensure the autonomy of these tribes and the protection of the forest cover through restricted public access and developmental activities by the government on the islands.

Despite such restraints, the ANI is steadily developing into a seat for economic growth and tourism. There has been talk of transforming the islands into a transshipment hub, much like Singapore, to attract greater sea-based container traffic.¹⁴ With greater traffic comes a bigger need for security. The onus would fall upon the 6 ANC and its various assets for constant patrols and security provisions along the Six Degree Channel, the Ten Degree Channel as well as the Preparis Channel, north of the

Andaman's. India has taken steps in the right direction with upgradations to its airstrips and ports, deployment of key naval and air assets, and the launch of its very own floating dock for ship-building and repairs, among other things.

However, for the ANI to truly become a global hub for trade and transshipment, India must focus on issues such as inter-island connectivity and civilian infrastructure. Such moves would further generate jobs and promote tourism and, thus, bring about a rise in revenue. With India accepting Japanese investment on the islands, the economic stakes have only risen. For a comprehensive understanding of the logistics and planning that go into improving inter-island connectivity, it would do India good to initiate conversations with island states such as Indonesia and Fiji, for instance. Indonesia's model for inter-island connectivity, in particular, although not directly applicable, should provide a sound base for development. An improvement in this respect would enable the ANI to establish itself as a prime tourist destination. This would only further concretise the security imperative of the ANC.

Conclusion

The 21st century has witnessed the resurgence of India's maritime legacy, with the ANI having played and continuing to play an integral role in the larger scheme of things. The islands are no longer limited to playing the role of an outpost on India's eastern territorial frontier. Today, they represent a platform for the nation to extend its strategic frontiers and achieve its aspirations of becoming a blue economy. They offer the nation a wide range of military strategic options by virtue of its geographical location and traits, so as to secure its trade and EEZs, and maintain its pre-eminence in the IOR. However, there is much left to do in terms of fulfilling its potential as an economic and military asset. There is a growing need for improved inter-island connectivity, civilian infrastructure and further military assets on the islands, amongst pre-requisites to protect and preserve the environment and its indigenous inhabitants. While this is certainly a dilemma no state would like to face, it is not that development and environment protection need to be mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, India seems to be gradually heading in the right direction in terms of utilising the islands for its strategic gain while attempting to remain cognizant of any environmental ramifications. The ANI is truly a unique point of convergence between geography, security and economics that India must strive to further develop and capitalise upon.

Source: www.maritimeindia.org, 03 August 2017

China, Vietnam meeting canceled amid South China Sea tensions

A scheduled meeting between the foreign ministers of China and Vietnam was cancelled on the sidelines of a regional gathering, Chinese embassy officials said, amid growing tension between the two countries over the South China Sea. Vietnam had held out for language that noted concern about island-building and criticised militarisation in South China Sea in the communique on Sunday from foreign ministers of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Vietnam has emerged as the most vocal opponent of China's claims in the waterway, where more than \$3 trillion in cargo pass every year. The Chinese embassy officials gave no reason for the cancellation of the meeting scheduled for Monday in Manila between China's Wang Yi and Vietnam's Pham Binh Minh.

A Chinese foreign ministry official said they had "already met". Vietnam's foreign ministry did not respond immediately to a request for comment. State media in Vietnam said the ministers had held a "pull aside" meeting and exchanged views. It showed pictures of them shaking hands. Although the language in the ASEAN communique reflected that in previous years, some countries pursuing deeper business ties with Beijing, such as Cambodia and the Philippines, had argued for dropping it. Beijing is sensitive to even a veiled reference by ASEAN to its reclamation of seven reefs and its military installations in the South China Sea, which it claims in almost its entirety despite the competing claims of five other countries. Tension has risen since June, when Vietnam infuriated China by drilling for oil and gas in an offshore block that Beijing disputes. The exploration was suspended after diplomatic protests from China. After the ASEAN meeting, China's foreign minister had called out "some countries" who voiced concern over island reclamation. Wang said that China had not carried out reclamation for two years. "At this time, if you ask who is carrying out reclamation, it is definitely not China - perhaps it is the country that brings up the issue that is doing it," he added. Satellite images have shown that Vietnam has carried out reclamation work in two sites in the disputed seas in recent years.

On Tuesday, the state-run China Daily cited unnamed sources as saying Vietnam had tried to hype up the reclamation issue in the communique, pointing out that Vietnam has accelerated its land reclamation in the South China Sea. "Undoubtedly, what Vietnam has done is the trick of a thief crying 'stop thief,'" the paper quoted one of the sources as saying. Australia, Japan and the United States on Monday urged Southeast Asia and China to ensure that a South China Sea code of conduct they have committed to draw up will be legally binding and said they strongly opposed "coercive unilateral actions". China has strongly opposed what it calls interference by countries outside the

region in the South China Sea issue. Meeting Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono on the sidelines of a regional security forum in Manila on Monday, Wang urged Japan to respect the efforts of China and ASEAN countries and play a more constructive role for regional peace and stability. "Don't always make trouble behind the backs of other countries and provoke quarrels," the ministry cited Wang as saying.

Source: uk.reuters.com, 08 August 2017

Southeast Asian Nations feud over China Sea claims

Southeast Asian nations were battling Sunday to find a compromise on how to deal with Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea, with Cambodia lobbying hard for Beijing, diplomats said. Foreign ministers from the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) failed to release a joint statement as scheduled on Saturday evening, and tense follow-up negotiations the next morning could still not end the stand-off, two diplomats involved in the talks told AFP. China claims nearly all of the South China Sea, including waters approaching the coasts of ASEAN members Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei. The tense talks came after Vietnam, which also claims parts of the strategically vital sea, insisted that tough language be inserted into the statement expressing concern over Chinese land reclamation in the contested waters.

Cambodia, one of China's strongest allies within ASEAN, had firmly resisted, according to the diplomats involved in the talks in the Philippine capital, as well as an excerpt of proposed Cambodian resolution obtained by AFP on Sunday. "Vietnam is adamant and China is effectively using Cambodia to champion its interests," one of the diplomats said. "But the Philippines is trying very hard to broker compromise language." China has in recent years expanded its presence in the sea by building artificial islands, which are capable of holding military bases. Tensions over the sea have long vexed ASEAN, which operates on a consensus basis but has had to balance the interests of rival claimants and those more aligned to China. While senior officials pressed on with negotiations on the sea dispute Sunday, ASEAN foreign ministers went into a round of separate meetings with their counterparts from China, the United States and other Asia-Pacific nations. ASEAN and China were due to approve a framework for a code of conduct in Manila on Sunday on how to deal with sea dispute. Analysts have cautioned not to place too much significance on the agreement on a framework. They say it comes 15 years after negotiations on the issue

first began, and China has used that time to cement its claims with the artificial islands, while an actual code likely remained many years away. Diplomats said they were still hoping the joint ASEAN statement meant to be released on Saturday would be agreed on before all the other meetings hosted by the bloc ended on Tuesday.

Source: www.ndtv.com, 06 August 2017

China is mocking Trump's over-the-top “fire and fury” comment on North Korea

President Trump warned North Korea on Tuesday that the US would counter its nuclear threats with “fire and fury.” That didn’t sit particularly well with the Chinese government. On Wednesday, Xinhua, Beijing’s official state news agency, published an editorial slamming Trump’s comments. Though it didn’t actually mention the president’s name, the wording left no doubt about whom the editorial was referring to. “The bottom line on the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula is that there must not be any armed conflict there,” read the editorial. “There is no room for any related party to play with fire on the issue.” At the same time, the editorial called on North Korea to stop its threatening rhetoric. On Monday, the North warned the United States that it would respond with nuclear weapons if the US attacked. “Should the US pounce upon the DPRK with military force at last, the DPRK is ready to teach the US a severe lesson with its strategic nuclear force,” North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho said, using the acronym for the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, North Korea’s formal name.

This isn’t the first time the Chinese government has used its Xinhua news agency to make a dig at Trump. Just last week, Xinhua published another editorial that referred to Trump’s incessant Twitter habit as “emotional venting.” “Trump is quite a personality, and he likes to tweet,” said the editorial, translated by the New York Times. “But emotional venting cannot become a guiding policy for solving the nuclear issue on the peninsula,” referring to the Korean Peninsula.

China wants open dialogue, not conflict, with North Korea

China is North Korea’s closest and most important diplomatic and economic partner, accounting for 90 percent of North Korea’s total trade. This year, China’s overall trade with North Korea actually increased, even after China stopped importing North Korean coal in February. That’s partly why Trump believed China could strong-arm

North Korea into halting its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. But China can't solve the nuclear crisis on its own — a fact that's become clear to the Trump administration. Just last week, Trump bashed China on Twitter for not doing more to curb North Korea's nuclear program. "I am very disappointed in China," Trump tweeted. "They do NOTHING for us with North Korea, just talk. We will no longer allow this to continue."

So why can't China rein in North Korea? Vox's Alex Ward explained three reasons:

First, China uses North Korea as a buffer. If the Koreas were to unify, which remains an extremely thin possibility right now, then for at least some period, American troops would be stationed in a country that borders China. For Beijing, that's a no-no.

Second, should the Kim regime fall, the whole country would fall with it. Having that kind of instability, with millions of refugees flocking to the border, would not make the Chinese government happy. After all, China prides itself on stability in all its forms.

Finally, having America, Japan, and South Korea worried about North Korea takes the focus off China. China has many objectives in the region, and having its adversaries' heads turned as it makes moves in the South China Sea and elsewhere is helpful to its cause.

China is thus advocating for open dialogue rather than armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Wednesday's Xinhua editorial called for a return to the stalled six-party talks, negotiations started in 2003 involving China, the United States, North and South Korea, Japan, and Russia around North Korea's nuclear program. "Reality has shown that tough tit-for-tat confrontations can lead nowhere, and that only dialogue can help address reasonable security concerns of the related parties for a solution acceptable to all, ensure denuclearization on the peninsula and bring a lasting peace to the entire region," read the editorial. China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, also recently emphasized the goal of opening dialogue with North Korea at a meeting of regional foreign ministers in Manila. At this point, it's unclear whether the talks will resume anytime soon. But it seems like China is trying to make them a reality.

Source: www.vox.com, 09 August 2017

PM Modi, Trump agree to enhance peace across Indo-Pacific Region

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Donald Trump have agreed to enhance peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region by establishing a new two-by-two ministerial dialogue, which would elevate their strategic consultations, the White House said today. PM Modi spoke with Mr Trump last night to greet him on the eve of India's Independence Day. During the phone call, Trump welcomed the first-ever shipment of American crude oil to India, which will begin this month from Texas.

He pledged that the US would continue to be a reliable and long-term supplier of energy to India, the White House said in a readout of the phone call between the two leaders. "The leaders resolved to enhance peace and stability across the Indo-Pacific region by establishing a new two-by-two ministerial dialogue that will elevate their strategic consultations," the White House said, without giving details of the mechanism. As the leaders of two of the world's largest and fastest-growing major economies, Mr Trump and PM Modi looked forward to the Global Entrepreneurship Summit in India this November, the White House said, adding that Trump has asked his daughter and advisor Ivanka Trump to lead the US summit delegation. "Prime Minister Modi thanked President Trump for his strong leadership uniting the world against the North Korean menace," it added. Mr Trump had recently warned North Korea that it would face "fire and fury" if it attacked the United States, while the North threatened to test-fire its missiles over Japan and towards the US Pacific island of Guam.

Source: www.ndtv.com, 16 August 2017

Will guns blaze on India-China border to resolve the Doklam stalemate?

War clouds hang ominously low over the Himalayas as India and China refuse to budge in a dangerous territorial spat at their tri-junction with Bhutan – a small nation sandwiched between two giants battling for supremacy. As the stand-off at Doklam between the world's two most populated and nuclear-armed adversaries with a long history of bad blood defies a diplomatic solution, strategic analysts are divided over who's right who's wrong, chances of the stand-off degenerating into a full-blown war and the likely victor or vanquished. Sourabh Gupta, a Senior Fellow at the Institute of China-America Studies in Washington, says that by interfering in a Chinese road construction project, India has violated China's territorial integrity. "As a precondition for any dialogue, India must vacate its trespass unconditionally. Having engaged in a high-risk venture, the onus resides on India to devise the conditions of its exit. To this

end, India must directly confront the tangled legalities of the situation.” New Delhi insists that its army came to Bhutan’s rescue on Thimpu’s request after People’s Liberation Army (PLA) entered Bhutan’s territory overlooking the “Chicken’s Neck” – a corridor connecting India’s mainland to the remote northeast – that’s extremely vulnerable to Chinese attack.

Defense obligations

However, Gupta refuses to buy India’s justification, stating that “not even the mighty US military extends defense obligations to disputed territories that its allies do not exercise control over – let alone intervene on their behalf. He added that “India has got itself into a fine mess in Doklam; it’s time to get out and let China and Bhutan work it out.” As Beijing and New Delhi dig their heels in, pro-India foreign policy expert C. Raja Mohan is predicting that “there will be no happy ending for this confrontation” as India is determined not to blink first come what may.

Mohan bluntly said: “Beijing might be terribly wrong in presuming that India would simply fold up under pressure. China appears to have been carried away by the success of its recent coercive diplomacy in East Asia and the South China Sea. But India has the capacity to absorb pressures from Beijing.” “With limited economic interdependence with China, Delhi can bear the costs of a severed commercial relationship. If India could turn its back on the dominant powers of the West for many decades during the Cold War, it could do so with China again.”

Readying for war

As the stand-off enters the third month, the air is rife with reports of China and India readying for war. While India’s Defense Minister Arun Jaitley told Parliament that the country “is prepared to take on any eventuality”, an unnamed Chinese military commander told *South China Morning Post* newspaper: “We will deploy aircraft and strategic missiles to paralyse Indian mountain divisions in the Himalayas on our border. Indian troops will probably hold out for no more than a week”. But the Hong Kong-based English daily also quoted Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedi, an expert at the National University of Singapore, saying: “Any Chinese military adventurism will get a fitting reply from the Indian military. If Beijing escalates the conflict, it might extend to the maritime domain as well.”

In the event of a full-scale war, besides battles on land, the navies of India and China are bound to clash in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. As 80 percent of China's energy imports travel through the Indian Ocean, sea battles are a foregone conclusion if the two countries eventually go to war. While China's Defense and Foreign Ministries – not to speak of the state media – are resorting to insulting, offensive and diplomatic language, India hasn't stooped low. But India's restraint could well stem from its shocking state of war readiness – a fact borne out by the latest report of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) stating that India doesn't have sufficient ammunition to even fight a 10-day long war.

Source: english.alarabiya.net, 14 August 2017

The US and North Korea: Peace in the Asia-Pacific???

- Fidel V. Ramos

During the past two weeks, events on the international scene, particularly within the Asia-Pacific arena, provided an uncanny (but welcome) reprise of FVR's younger days which led this columnist to ask, "Does history really repeat itself???" In answer, allow us to share with our readers some personal landmarks along life's journey. Indeed, history does in this particular episode – but, hopefully, will not repeat the destruction and suffering brought about by World War II. This past week, the US and North Korea, through their heated rhetoric and provocative actions, have dominated the global limelight. The NoKors, on one hand, have deftly shifted the onus of their death-dealing nuclear threats to a likely and accessible military target – the US stronghold of Guam which is America's westernmost frontier, at the Philippines' doorstep. Even the landmark ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Summit and Meeting of the Dialogue Partners (which includes the heavyweights: US, China, Japan, Russia, and EU) were overshadowed by the intensity of the US-NoKor exchange, in spite of the official statement that: "Rising tensions on the Korean peninsula stemming from long-range missile tests by North Korea... 'seriously threaten peace, security, and stability in the region and the world. In this regard, we strongly urge the DPRK to immediately comply fully with its obligations under all relevant UN Security Council resolutions,' it said, referring to North Korea by its official name." (Channelnewsasia.com, 05 August 2017).

"Hitch-hiking" across the Pacific, 1946

FVR'S interest in Guam dates back to July 1946 when he first passed through that war-devastated island on the first leg of a long journey from Manila to New York. He was on his way to The US Military Academy at West Point as the first Filipino cadet after WWII, having won that one coveted "Pensionado" (scholarship) slot through competitive exams. That trip took 12 days, with no airlines yet in operation, but only US Air Force bucket-seat C-47s which had to island-hop due to their limited range. Literally, he "hitch-hiked on a space-available" basis on US military cargo planes.

In 1946, Guam was a community of Quonset huts and tent installations, like most US military camps in the Philippines after liberation. Over the years since then, FVR was able to visit or transit through Guam, the last being in June, 2005, or 12 years ago as the guest of honor at the Philippine Independence Day celebration in Agaña, the capital.

Ironically, but fittingly, the US government in Guam accorded special honor with a handsome monument to eminent Filipinos like Apolinario Mabini and 57 other revolutionary heroes who were exiled there in 1901 – having refused to take the oath of allegiance to the US. Mabini et al. were detained in Agaña's Asan seaside district where he wrote *La Revolucion Filipina*, his seminal work recording Filipino struggles towards independence and nationhood. Much like thousands of Filipino pioneers in Guam and the Marianas, Mabini and his compatriots endured hardships in a foreign land in the middle of the vast Pacific, far away from their loved ones.

Unsinkable Guam: U.S. forward defense

It was an eye-opener for me to see at that time Guam's visible progress evidenced by new hotels and shopping centers. Amidst the anxieties of global recession, particularly the failure on the mainland of well-known American corporate giants, the people of Guam – even if they had not been spared the impacts of The US meltdown – continued to be cautiously optimistic. Of its then 170,000 population, 45% were of Filipino ancestry who constituted a swing-vote in territorial politics. Two significant factors were cited for their hopeful outlook:

- (1) Ongoing build-up of Guam as the new forward platform for US military power in the Pacific, Indian Ocean, Arabian Gulf, and beyond – as far as Africa.
- (2) Anticipation of change and hope for a better future represented by the consolidation of US military forces in the Pacific.

Very quietly, with little fanfare, the US was building up Guam as the key to its “forward defense” strategy to project American military power in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean. Considered an “unsinkable aircraft carrier,” as the Subic Naval Base used to be known, Guam hosts the Apra Naval Base and Andersen Air Force Base – now major components of the US Pacific Command (PACOM). Compared to the traditional homeports of the US in California or Hawaii, basing military forces on Guam results in much shortened transit times to Asia and beyond. The distance from Guam to Manila is 1,700 miles – which is two days sailing for a carrier battle group. But from San Diego, Manila is nine days away, while from Honolulu it takes seven days sailing. According to analysts, the 1,300 miles between North Korea and Guam is well within the range of its latest nuke-armed ICBM.

At that time, naval visionary Alfred Thayer Mahan and his disciples (who included Theodore Roosevelt, then Assistant Navy Secretary and future US President) regarded the projection of American power into the Western Pacific and East Asia as crucial to US “forward defense” – and a powerful expression of America’s “Manifest Destiny” as a global power. Guam’s importance as a strategic outpost has been clear to American political leaders and military strategists since the 1890’s.

America’s manifest destiny

Mahan started from the assumption that America’s Atlantic Coast was well-protected by friendly Europeans (the British and French), and that east Asia and the inner group of islands enclosing the China Sea – Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Borneo and Sumatra – were occupied by peoples alien to the Americans ethnically, culturally, and politically. And so, it was most likely that an invasion of the American mainland would emanate from the Pacific.

Mahan and Roosevelt also argued that if America were to overcome the tyranny of distance – and gain the capability to deploy US power westward – vitally needed was a string of coaling stations between California and East Asia where its warships could re-supply. Hence, Washington annexed Midway, Pago-Pago, and other islands. Through Roosevelt’s influence, the US acquired Guam and the Philippines in the Treaty of Paris which ended the Spanish-American War of 1898.

And, sure enough, Mahan’s forecast of a deadly threat to America coming from the Pacific became reality just four decades afterward.

In December 1941, Japan, feeling beleaguered, launched a pre-emptive strike against America – destroying the pacific fleet at pearl harbor and occupying the Philippines and Guam, before us forces stopped Japan’s drive short of midway.

Focal point of U.S. power

As a result of these developments, Guam’s overall value to American deployments towards Asia and the Middle East has tremendously increased. Guam – more than Honolulu – has become America’s farther secure base from which to implement its strategy of “forward defense” outward from the pacific. Not only has the island become the site of important bases of the US Pacific Command. Washington has almost completed the process of making Guam the linchpin of its overall strategy to insure dominance in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean. Already, the build-up in Guam over the next ten years is being billed as the largest of the US military.

Indeed, Guam is extremely critical to any American need to respond quickly to any sizeable natural disaster, civilian emergency or military crisis anywhere in Asia and all the way to East Africa – at a time when the US will continue to be regarded by the global community as the “guardian of freedom.”

Geopolitical scenario, 120 years later

Now, more than a century later, Mahan’s geopolitical blueprint still serves present-day pentagon doctrine. In East Asia, the U.S. clings to air and land bases in South Korea. Moreover, it has existing mutual defense treaties with Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Australia, and the Philippines, and maintains a foothold in Singapore.

Tensions are still palpable in the Korean Peninsula (where Pyongyang now possesses an ICBM-nuclear capability), even if regional anxieties may have diminished with the warming up between Beijing and Taipei on opposite sides of the Taiwan straits. In the Indian Ocean and in Southeast Asia’s strategic sea lanes with the oil-regions of West Asia and the Middle East, the navies of India, China, Japan and Russia have been active in showing their flags. Today, it is eyeball-to-eyeball between U.S. President Donald Trump and Nokor Leader Kim Jong-Un. With such a heightened state of tension, it won’t be easy for either side or the entire Asia-Pacific for that matter to return back to a state of normalcy.

Source: news.mb.com.ph, 12 August 2017

Chinese Navy eyes Indian Ocean as part of PLA's plan to extend its reach

- Pla Ship Yulin

China's Navy wants to join hands with India to maintain security of the Indian Ocean, amid growing concerns in New Delhi over the increasing presence of the PLA fleet in India's backyard. Throwing open its strategic South Sea Fleet (SSF) base in the coastal city of Zhanjiang to a group of Indian journalists for the first time, People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) officials say the Indian Ocean is a common place for the international community. "It is my opinion China and India can make joint contributions to the safety and security of the Indian Ocean," Capt Liang Tianjun, Deputy Chief of General Office of China's SSF said. His remarks came as China's Navy embarked on a massive expansion to extend its global reach. Liang also explained the growing forays of the Chinese warships and submarines into the Indian Ocean, where China for the first time established a naval base at Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. Defending the first Chinese overseas naval base against criticism that it would amplify China's growing influence, he said it will act as a logistics centre and support anti-piracy, UN peacekeeping operations and humanitarian relief missions in the region. The Djibouti base will also provide a resting place for Chinese navy personnel, he said.

But analysts feel the opening of the first Chinese military base abroad was in tune with PLAN's ambitions to expand its global reach amidst China's growing economic and political footprint. "The Indian Ocean is a vast ocean. It is common place for the international community to contribute to the peace and stability in the region," Liang said. Interacting with the Indian media on the decks of the PLAN's frigate Yulin about Chinese growing presence at the Indian Ocean much to the disquiet of India, he said China's military is defensive in nature and not offensive.

At the same time, he made it clear that China would never "intrude into other countries" but would also not "be obstructed by other countries". "All my major weapons are not toys," he said as he gave a guided tour of the sophisticated frigate which was commissioned in 2010. Liang also gave a detailed account of the armaments on board the stealth vessel that includes medium-range air defence missiles and various anti-submarine rockets. Denying any specific significance and context in inviting the Indian media delegation, whose visit is sponsored by the official All China Journalists Association (ACJA), he said it was part of regular exchanges with various countries. The sprawling base on the coast of the South China Sea is one of the three major bases of PLAN, which now is poised to expand in a major way.

Interestingly, the Sanya naval base of the PLAN on Hainan Island — where a large chunk of China’s submarine force, including nuclear submarines, are based — also comes under the SSF which has 70,000 personnel in its ranks. It has 300 naval ships, a fleet of bombers, Offshore Patrol Vessels, Nuclear and non-nuclear submarines. The role of the Chinese Navy is increasing as China’s 2.3 million strong Army, the world’s largest, announced plans to downsize its strength of its troops to under a million. Under the new plan, the PLA will increase the numbers of other services including the Navy and missile forces. Both Navy and the missile forces were expected to get the lion share of the annual defence budget which last year amounted to \$ 152 billion, second only to the US. The SSF is also responsible for keeping an eye on the resource-rich South China Sea where China is having maritime disputes with countries like the Philippines and Vietnam. China claims almost all of the South China Sea and is currently building multiple artificial islands in the area to control them as more than half of the world’s annual cargo fleet passes through it. Asked to comment on the challenges faced by the PLAN in the South China Sea, especially from the US Navy, commanding officer of Yulin Capt Hu Luyang said it was okay for the American navy to patrol the area in the international waters.

However, if they encroach upon Chinese maritime areas, “we will not tolerate such behaviour,” he added. His comments came amidst reports from Washington that a US Navy destroyer carried out a “freedom of navigation operation” yesterday, coming within 12 nautical miles of an artificial island built up by China in the South China Sea.

Source: indianexpress.com, 11 August 2017