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China's Maritime Strategy and India: Consonance and Discord

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So far, the neighbourly interactions between China and India have largely occurred across their land frontiers. But as rising major powers with expanding interests, both are increasingly expanding their strategic frontiers seawards. This will lead to increasing maritime interactions between the two countries. Till about two decades ago, China's navy was a coastal force, but it is undergoing a major transformation towards building a distant power-projection capability. Lately, some of its Indian Ocean missions – all unprecedented in their own way – have caught the attention of the world. China–India relations have witnessed extreme highs and lows in history. Does the increasing Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean thus forebode a concordant note, or would it usher conflict between the two? The answer is not easy; it is based on individual perceptions and extrapolation of events; or at best, on the cursory assessments of the media. To be prepared for the future challenges and to tailor their strategy, Indian policymakers must have a clearer idea. Furthermore, the contours of China–India relationship would shape the security environment in the Indo-Pacific region in a major way. Hence, what China–India maritime interface portends is also important to all regional countries/stake-holders. This paper facilitates such understanding. Through an assessment of China's maritime strategy, it presents some scenarios of consonance and discord, as possible outcomes of future China–India maritime interface.

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Over the past couple of decades, China and India have emerged as *reckonable* global powers. Attendant to the growth of their national power has been an intensification of their interactions at bilateral and multilateral levels. In the global discourse, the two countries have often capitalised on the opportunities of geopolitical convergence. But also evident has been their competition and rivalry, as may be expected from two powers rising simultaneously in the same region. Events also indicate various forms of politico-diplomatic dissonance between the two, which flow from historic contentions infused into the new challenges of neighbourly relations and the dynamics of the contemporary geopolitical environment. In the coming years, added factors are likely to shape China–India relations, notably their enhanced stakes in the emerging global order and the growing power asymmetry in favour of China.

Sharing a common land border, the neighbourly interactions between China and India have hitherto been limited to the terrestrial domain. The strategic orientations of the two have also been largely continental. But as ascendant major powers with geographically expanding interests, they are increasingly turning their attention to the maritime realm. Undeniably, therefore, the coming years could witness greater China–India interactions in this part of the global commons. Herein lies a key imponderable: What does their maritime interface portend for the two countries, and for the region at large? At best, the two could harmonise their national interests and strategies through cooperative maritime endeavours, thereby contributing to regional security, while also catalysing bilateral confidence-building.

The worst is not inconceivable – a perceived irreconcilability of interests leading to an armed conflict that spills over to the sea. Commodore Bhaskar does not discount such a scenario, indicating ''the possibility of the two Asian giants finding themselves in a military confrontation over contested territory, or some other compelling national interest consideration [that] brings the maritime domain into sharp focus for both states''. Though in overall terms, he adds, ''[between] China and India in the IOR, neither conflict nor cooperation [is] preordained.''[1] Much would depend upon how the policymakers in the two countries anticipate developments and potential scenarios, before they can reconcile conflicting interests and shape the strategic environment to meet their national objectives.

India would need to continually assess the possible future outcomes of China–India maritime interactions. A preliminary assessment is attempted in this paper. It aims to identify the areas of consonance and discord by examining the relevant facets of China's maritime strategy, and how these bear on India's vital interests.[2]

Areas of Maritime Interest

India's areas of maritime interest are stated in its maritime strategy document. While its primary area lies in the northern Indian Ocean (IO), the secondary area extends into the southern IO and the Western Pacific (WP).[3] In case of China, these areas are not clearly articulated, but could be deduced. China's primary focus clearly lies in the WP. This was first articulated in 1985 when its maritime strategy was re-oriented from ''static coastal defence'' to ''active offshore defence.'' Plans were also drawn up to develop the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in accordance with the ''island-chains'' in the WP. The broad aim was to make the PLAN capable of operations up to the first island-chain by 2000, and up to the second island-chain by 2020.[4]

More recently, Chinese writings have begun to reflect Beijing's enhanced emphasis on the IO as well. In 2003, for example, in their article published in *Guafang Bao*, Jiang Hong and Wei Yuejiang depict the first island-chain, normally thought of as stretching from Japan to Sumatra, as extending further southwards all the way to Diego Garcia.[5] China's strategic interest in the IO is empirically corroborated by the PLAN's anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden since December 2008 (China's first ever naval mission beyond the WP);[6] and the deployment of its hospital-ship *Daishandao* to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in 2010 (China's first ever overseas medical mission).[7] Importantly, however, China's strategic intent for establishing a ''geopolitical'' presence in the IO is not of recent origin. In his book written in 2005, the late Dr K. Subramanyam recalls that as far back as in 1994, China had plans to deploy its navy in the Indian Ocean ''in the early years of the 21st century''.[8] If so, the piracy off Somalia provided the opportunity that the Chinese may have been looking for. It may thus be inferred that the IO is China's secondary area of maritime interest. Therefore, the zones of maritime interest of China and India broadly overlap, albeit with differences of strategic emphasis.

The Consonance

China and India are two of the fastest growing economies of Asia. It is thus natural for the countries to possess similar maritime and overseas interests. This section examines the strategic convergences that emerge from these common interests.

Security of International Shipping Lanes

China's approach of export-led development makes the security of international shipping lanes (ISLs) essential for its sea-borne trade, and particularly for its energy imports. China's current import dependence of 50% is expected to reach 78% by 2030.[9] In terms of maritime geography, China is fortunate to be bestowed with an extensive shoreline and large maritime jurisdiction. But its growing energy deficiency leads to a major adversity, viz. its location relative to the distribution of global hydrocarbon reserves. About 80% of its oil imports are sourced from West Asia and Africa. This geographic constraint manifests not only in terms of the large distances from energy sources, but more so due to the embayed nature of IO – with choke points on both ends – through which its tankers must transit. Until a few years ago, piracy was a major concern in the Southeast Asian straits, but now manifests at the western choke-points, leading to the PLAN's anti-piracy deployment.

All India's sea-borne trade must *ipso facto* transit the IO. In terms of the security of energy transportation, India's maritime geography is relatively favourable, but its current oil-import dependence is as much as 75%, which is expected to reach 90% by 2030.[10] The PLAN and Indian Navy (IN) could coordinate their anti-piracy operations through information-sharing. The IN's rescue of the Chinese-owned bulk carrier MV *Full City* in May 2011 is a notable incentive.[11]

In June 2011, MV *Suez*, carrying 6 Indian seafarers, was attacked by pirates off Somalia. The only Indian warship on patrol at the time could not react since it was escorting two other merchantmen with 21 Indians on board. This led to frantic calls to other navies in the area.[12] A prior agreement between navies can save time to respond to piracy, or even other maritime threats. The incident later flared up into an Indo-Pak naval skirmish. A standing agreement would also reduce the possibility of IN–PLAN skirmishes, which are highly possible in the future. (This issue is examined later.) The two navies may also geographically realign the counter-piracy presence for

optimum effect. In this context, China's efforts at shared awareness and deconfliction (SHADE) to assign specific areas of responsibility to the navies deployed the Gulf of Aden may be viewed as a 'constructive.'[13] (Though this proposal was opposed by some navies which perceived it as motivated by China's vested interests.)

Stability Operations

Another area of strategic convergence is regional stability. While ensuring this is their "normative" responsibility as major powers, China and India have specific stakes. The regional countries are sources of natural resources for their growing industrialisation needs and market destination for their exports. The safety of their nationals living here is another consideration. In particular, Africa is a major destination of their economic investments and infrastructure projects. Their growing workforce in African countries would place increasing demands on the two governments for their security.

Over the past decade, China has laid much emphasis on enhancing its naval capabilities for "stability operations"[14] like humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). Its inability to contribute to the multi-national tsunami-relief operations in 2005 reinforced the imperative. China's induction of major sealift platforms and the overseas hospital-ship mission indicate China's strategic re-orientation. The Mediterranean deployment of PLA warships for the evacuation of Chinese nationals from Libya is also notable.[15] Since 2006, China's Defence White Papers have also laid stress on developing capabilities for military operations other than war (MOOTW)[16] such as UN peacekeeping, non-combatant evacuation and HADR. The IN has also been frequently involved in such out of area contingency (OOAC) missions such as UN peacekeeping in Somalia (1992–1994), tsunami-relief (2004–2005) and Lebanon non-combatant evacuation (2006).

China's anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden is ostensibly driven by another strategic imperative. It must safeguard its energy[17] and economic stakes in eastern Africa, particularly given the possibility of a US/NATO intervention in the unstable Somalia in the future. Beijing's initiative towards a UN-mandated response to piracy and stabilising Somalia seems to be part of this strategy.[18] If so, this is consonant with India's own interests in terms of a multilateral approach to regional stability. India has also been calling for "conduct of the naval operations (against piracy) under the UN."[19]

A major contingency may make it compelling for the PLAN and IN to coordinate their operations. Gabe Collins and Andrew Erickson foresee that the PLAN's anti-piracy and Libya evacuation missions "...may actually incentivize Chinese cooperation [with other navies] against non-traditional security threats because ... it is a concrete demonstration of capabilities that will likely make it harder for China to free ride during future crises that require multilateral responses."[20] Such combined missions require operational compatibility between the navies, particularly in terms of operating procedures, rules of engagement and communications. An increased interaction between the PLAN and IN will be necessary to achieve this, which may lead to trust-building, which is presently a major 'void' in China–India relations.

In the broadest sense, therefore, there exists significant China–India strategic convergence in the maritime domain. However, it is necessary to examine China's strategic objectives holistically. China's objectives driving its anti-piracy mission are **not merely** protection of its trade and seafarers, or even stability in Somalia to safeguard its energy/economic stakes (as mentioned earlier). Similarly, its HADR missions are not driven by its quest for regional stability **alone**. A more comprehensive assessment leads to areas of discord.

The Discord

"Territorial Consolidation"

Within the broad similarity of China–India maritime interests there lies a notable difference. China's interests bear a strong 'territorial' character, which flows from its revisionist policy and national objective of "territorial consolidation." China has lately been more emphatic in asserting its maritime territorial claims in the WP, using both political[21] and military[22] means. As its assertive stance becomes more forceful, in tandem with the growth of its naval power, it could even lead to an armed conflict in the WP involving the United States. This may not affect India directly, but would have significant indirect effects flowing from regional instability and curtailed freedom of navigation. Besides, China's strategic (energy) imports make the IO integral to its maritime strategy for the WP, with more attendant implications (examined later).

Energy 'Shunt' Pipelines

China's dependence on the IO for its energy transit represents a major strategic vulnerability.[23] The US and Indian naval superiority in the IO severely constrains China's use of the military option to meet its maritime territorial objectives in the WP. Symptomatic of this anxiety is the term ''Malacca Dilemma'' used to describe President Hu Jintao's anxiety in his statement of November 2003, ''Some big powers have tried to control and meddle in the Strait of Malacca shipping lanes ... [We need] a new strategy ... to ensure energy security.''[24]

China's ''new strategy'' is based on the conviction that maritime geography is not an ''independent variable.'' It can be altered through overland energy pipelines to bypass the Southeast Asian choke-points. These projects include Sittwe (Myanmar), Gwadar (Pakistan), Chittagong (Bangladesh) and Kra (Thailand).[25]

At present, the Sittwe–Ruili pipeline and its associated oil port at Kyaukpyu under construction are most relevant.[26] The pipeline will transport not only the West Asian and African crude, but also natural gas from Myanmar offshore. When these fructify by 2013, the Chinese tanker traffic near India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands would grow substantially. This would facilitate Chinese intelligence-collection against India. The adverse ecological implication of the enhanced tanker movement is another issue. China may also push Myanmar to grant it naval access to protect its energy infrastructure and shipping assets, with more severe implications for India.

Naval Presence in Indian Ocean

Pipelines are unlikely to reduce China's strategic vulnerability substantially since these will be overwhelmed by the growth in its oil demand.[27] Besides, these can only bypass the Southeast Asian straits, not the rest of the IO. This led to the second prong of China's strategy to alter its maritime geography, viz. deployment of its naval forces in the IO. For this, Chinese analysts suggested diverse plans. One was to expand the ''strategic defensive perimeter'' of its South Sea Fleet for ''high-seas defence operations.''[28] Another was to develop a dedicated flotilla for the IO.[29] Such forward naval presence would also cater for other contingencies, besides providing a valuable experience to the PLAN.

A permanent Chinese naval presence in the IO is likely to be accompanied with regular PLAN exercises in Indian maritime zones. Given the nuances of UNCLOS[30]

being subject to conflicting interpretations, this would lead to the potential for skirmishes with the IN. As history tells us, the fundamental interest of a major maritime power, viz. 'freedom of navigation', usually conflicts with that of the coastal state, viz. 'security.'[31] In the many naval skirmishes in the WP, the United States has been the maritime power and China the coastal state, which is wary of US military surveys[32] and intelligence collection in its maritime zones. In the context of China's naval presence in the IO, India would be at the 'receiving end' as a coastal state. It would be naïve to expect the PLAN to be sensitive to India's security concerns when operating in Indian maritime zones, particularly considering that the Chinese analysts have been chary of India's "Indian Ocean control strategy ... at the expense of China."[33] As China's maritime power grows, it is likely to turn more assertive in terms of freedom of navigation. Furthermore, PLAN units could potentially intervene in disagreements between India and its neighbours over maritime boundary demarcation and exploitation of maritime resources/fishing rights. This could lead to instability.

A PLAN–IN skirmish may also occur beyond Indian maritime zones. In February 2009, Chinese newspapers reported a stand-off between an Indian submarine and Chinese warships involved in anti-piracy operations off Somalia.[34] India denied the report, and the incident may not have ever occurred.[35] But such skirmishes are highly possible in the future when the two navies increasingly operate together in the same area. Such scenarios may also manifest if PLAN units undertake intelligence gathering/military surveys against India on the pretext of supporting exploration of maritime resources, either hydrocarbon exploration in the maritime zones of India's neighbours or seabed mining elsewhere in the IO. It is pertinent to mention that in July 2011 China secured the permit of the International Seabed Authority (ISA) to undertake deep seabed mining in the south-west IO.[36]

Asymmetric Naval Strategy

China's permanent naval presence in the IO is likely to manifest along with an unconventional trait of its naval strategy – the employment of non-naval vessels. It is well known that the state-owned China Overseas Shipping Company (COSCO) has close links with the PLA. The Chinese call COSCO the fifth arm of the PLAN, and its ships are often referred to as "*zhanjian*" (warships). These merchantmen could be used even in peacetime for diverse naval missions ranging from intelligence-gathering

in Indian maritime zones to replenishing PLAN warships and towing acoustic jammers. China has also used fishing vessels to harass US naval vessels in the WP. In March 2009, five Chinese fishing vessels swarmed the USNS *Impeccable*, an unarmed US ocean surveillance vessel.[37]

Distant Power Projection[38]

The PLAN is inducting distant power-projection platforms like carriers, nuclear submarines (SSN) and expeditionary sealift/airlift. A US report states that the "PLAN is at the forefront of efforts to extend operational reach beyond China's regional waters ... [as indicated by its] investment in platforms such as SSNs and aircraft carrier."[39] Much of such capability is unlikely to be deployed beyond the WP for at least a couple of decades. Nonetheless, the SSNs armed with land-attack cruise missiles (LACM) are of high relevance for India. Their deployment in the IO would open a seaward flank for India's national defence to worry about. An insight into China's strategic culture is pertinent. While the Chinese believe that their country is pacifist and non-expansionist, strategic offensive and even pre-emptive attacks are legitimised as "self-defence counterattack" (*ziwei fanji*). The term has been used justify all wars initiated by China, including with India in 1962.[40]

Over the next decade or so, China would seek to realise its maritime territorial "core" objectives in the WP, through use of force if necessary. Whatever be the means used and the final settlement of the contentions, once the PLAN is liberated of its present compulsions in the WP, its emphasis on power projection in the IO is likely to intensify, assuming of course that China's economy is not hit too badly in case of a war.

China may also use its capability for maritime power projection as a tool for *coercion* against India to resolve bilateral issues in its favour. The Taiwan Straits crisis of 1996 is instructive. China undertook the missile tests in response to the Taiwan president's visit to the United States to deliver a lecture on Taiwan's democratisation experience.[41] Likewise, if an Indian move is perceived by China as political support for the Tibetan cause, or a military intrusion into its territory, PLAN units in the IO may resort to coercive signalling. Even if this never occurs, the mere presence of Chinese power-projection platforms in its maritime 'underbelly' would surely limit India's policy options and alternatives.

China may also use its maritime power-projection capability for politico-military interventions in unstable littoral states in the IO, which would impinge on India's

interests in the state and upset the regional balance of power. An altered balance in China's favour would enhance its strategic leverage against India. India's concerns on this account are reflected in the US diplomatic cable from New Delhi dated April 2009, which was recently released by Wikileaks. Carrying the concerns of India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), it said that ''the US [muted] response to the [USNS] *Impeccable* [incident] fed into China's efforts to create an impression of power that might be used to coerce other [Asian] nations.''[42] In the coming years, the United States may continue to uphold its alliance commitments in the WP, as the US Defence Secretary reaffirmed at Shangri La Dialogue in 2011.[43] But its economic constraints and reduced strategic imperatives in Afghanistan and Iraq may lead to its reduced naval presence in the IO. This would embolden China further to coerce the IOR littorals.

Nuclear Weapons Threat

Although Chinese SSBNs can target India from the WP, the possibility of their deployment in the IO for nuclear signalling/coercion cannot be discounted. Christopher McConnaughy says that ''Whether or not China would actually launch JL-2 SLBMs [against the US] from the Indian Ocean, its SSBNs might operate there, and elsewhere, simply to complicate US ballistic-missile defence and tie up more anti-submarine assets''. He adds that ''[through such deployment], China may [also] choose to demonstrate its nuclear deterrent to India''.[44] China's shorter-range submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) (6000–8000 km) with lesser time of flight would be ideal against India to minimise India's reaction time. Although New Delhi will certainly have to reckon with the threat of China's land- and aircraft-based nuclear weapons from the north, the presence of the various southerly vectors of the sea-based nuclear threat (ranging from south-west to south-east) will severely complicate India's ballistic missile defence (BMD).

Furthermore, in case of a China–India armed conflict, the Chinese SSNs in the IO would attempt to track the Indian SSBNs right from their home bases to their deployment areas. If they succeed in neutralising the SSBNs, this would seriously mitigate India's sea-based nuclear deterrence, and thus perhaps, even its second-strike capability itself. If so, China could easily force India into a political submission.

'String of Pearls'

For the deployment of the PLAN's non-nuclear platforms in the IO, a major challenge would be their sustenance. Although China has traditionally avoided overseas bases, the compulsions of naval force sustenance during anti-piracy mission have led to an internal debate on continuance of this stance.[45] The Wikileaks release of the US diplomatic cable from New Delhi (mentioned earlier) also carried the concerns of the MEA over the China's possible intentions to set up bases along the African coast in the name of fighting pirates.[46]

It appears that China would not ''seek bases'' in a traditional sense, but to establish access to dual-use docking facilities in IO ports through a standing implicit agreement with the host government. In peacetime, the facilities may be used regularly by Chinese commercial ships, and visited occasionally by warships to familiarise the crew. These dormant ''sleeper facilities'' may be optimised for use by the PLAN during crises, with navy-specific infrastructure comprising maritime air-basing, and technical and depot facilities, including limited stockpiles of spare parts and ammunition.[47] Considering that an adversary is likely to disrupt Chinese oil imports at the earliest during their west-to-east transit across the IO, China would prefer to site these facilities in the littoral countries of the western IOR. The potential countries stretch from Pakistan and Oman in the north-west IOR to Mozambique[48] and Seychelles in south-west. From India's view-point, if the PLAN obtains access to even a single such facility in the IOR, the adverse security implications of China's naval presence in IO will increase manifold.

'Soft Power' Strategy

China's emphasis on maritime HADR and MOOTW missions looks to be primarily a part of China's national 'soft power' strategy to propagate influence. James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara also note that ''China's 'soft-power' strategy seems to be based on the premise that a nation can store up international goodwill by supplying 'international public goods' like maritime security, which benefit all nations with a stake in the international order.''[49] China's quest to join the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)[50] and its escort of UN World Food Programme ships[51] are likely elements of this strategy. An analysis by Richard Weitz on China's anti-piracy mission is notable. He says that (on completing one year of the mission), ''none of the

Chinese warships on patrol thus far appear to have engaged in large-scale combat with the pirates, raising the interesting question of what rules of engagement the Chinese flotilla follows.''[52] Evidently, the rules are stringent to avoid errors leading to adverse international image.

Ashley Tellis says, ''India's emerging economic strength and its geo-physical location make it relevant to China's long-term security ... India could become a major regional rival for influence in Central and Southeast Asia and in the Persian Gulf.''[53] While the primary areas of interest of the two countries are distinct, both are competing for influence beyond these areas into their secondary areas, leading to overlapping spheres of influence. Given their adversarial past, the moves of each may be perceived by the other as an intrusion into its 'backyard.'

Conclusion

In context of India, both 'consonant' and 'discordant' notes of China's maritime strategy co-exist. Also, 'discord' outweighs 'concord' in numerical terms. However, since China's naval presence in the IO is relatively nascent the possible outcomes are nearly balanced in terms of their probability of occurrence. While preparedness and deterrence would remain the key pillars of India's maritime strategy, this presents an opportunity to create incentives for maritime cooperation. The window of opportunity would recede as rapidly as China increases its national power in relation to India, and firms up its naval presence in the IO.

Notes

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