



# Building a More Secure Maritime Asia

Chunhao Lou\*

*In the past several years, maritime Asia has witnessed increasing security challenges, and this trend may persist in the near future. There are several underlying dynamics, including a geopolitical power game, lack of maritime governance and competition for maritime resources. However, in this globalised world, countries become quite interdependent and competition/confrontation is not the favourable policy choice. All countries share common interests in maintaining a stable maritime order, safeguarding the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and developing a maritime economy. With China a rising maritime power, Chinese maritime policy has become important for Asia. Though incurring some misperception and misunderstanding, China will stick to its peaceful development strategy and try to foster a “harmonious ocean”, instead of resorting to the so-called “Neo-Mahanian Doctrine”. In achieving this, China will adopt an increasingly cooperative maritime policy, with the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative supplementing the effort.*

Maritime Asia’s security challenges can be divided into traditional and nontraditional ones. Traditional refers to interstate and high-political security threats such as the big power game for maritime order, maritime territorial disputes, armed conflicts, etc. The nontraditional challenges cover threats like maritime terrorism, piracy, transborder

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\*Dr. Chunhao Lou is an associate research professor and assistant director at the Institute of Maritime Studies, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), Beijing. His research focus is on the Indian Ocean, South China Sea and South Asia. The views contained in this article are those of the author, and he can be reached at [louchunhao@cicir.ac.cn](mailto:louchunhao@cicir.ac.cn)

crimes, environmental degradation, etc. To some extent, these two categories are interconnected. For example, Japan acquired an overseas military base in Djibouti in the name of countering piracy, but Japan can also use it for strategic leverage. Compared with the nontraditional ones, the traditional maritime security challenges invite more attention. These threats can produce strategic mistrust but are more difficult to compromise.

During the past few years, the traditional security challenges in maritime Asia have invited global attention. Maritime disputes, including in the East China Sea (ECS) and South China Sea (SCS), are becoming global flashpoints and have an uncertain future. Moreover, the territorial disputes have become more “internationalised” and have escalated into strategic competition among big powers. The US rebalancing strategy will extend from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Asia-Pacific, with Southeast Asia as the linchpin. Three resident powers, China, Japan and India, are investing heavily in developing their maritime power to protect their overseas interests. Although direct military confrontation is improbable in the near future, underestimation of potential rivalry invites danger.

### **Enduring Disputes, Simmering Tensions**

During the past few years, tensions around ECS and SCS disputes have grown. From a Chinese perspective, the disputes are generally manageable, but are inching towards a direction of confrontation. Nevertheless, countries should carefully monitor the developing trends, and need to stay away from indulging in the blame game.

One danger is that all concerned parties have sped up military buildup related to the maritime disputes. In order to safeguard national interests, China is investing more resources in naval modernisation and coast guard buildup. Considering its long coastline and complex security situation, Chinese military modernisation is within reasonable scope. Japan, though under the American security umbrella, stepped up its military presence in its southwestern offshore islands. Recently, the Abe administration introduced security bills despite domestic opposition. Regional claimants of the SCS have also implemented ambitious defense plans, have increased defense spending, and are planning to acquire advanced anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) weapons, alluring extra-regional powers’ military presence, etc.

The most dangerous factor is the US military engagement in the region. In the ECS, the US and Japan signed “The Guidelines for US–Japan Defense Cooperation”,

stressing seamless and global defense cooperation. In the SCS, the US inked the “Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement” with the Philippines, and has partially lifted weapons sales to Vietnam. The US has also conducted bilateral and multilateral military exercises with regional allies and partners. Besides consolidating its regional alliance system, the US has conducted military operations in disputed areas directly. Recently, the Pentagon sent the USS Lassen within 12 nautical miles of Chinese-controlled islands, and called for Japan’s joint patrol in the SCS.

All countries are entitled to develop military power in accordance with national interests, but in ECS and SCS disputes, all concerned parties tend to exaggerate the competitor’s threats and hence are falling into the trap of a security dilemma. Though it is improbable that a large-scale war would break out, low-intensity conflicts cannot be ruled out.

The second danger is the high level of mistrust among people. People-to-people contacts lay the foundation for country-to-country relationships. But, due to the territorial disputes in the ECS and SCS, public opinion towards adverse claimants is simmering with anger and frustration. Instead of cooling down nationalism, some countries have manipulated maritime disputes to arouse nationalism for their domestic political agendas. Facing domestic opposition against security bills, the Abe administration played up Chinese gas development in the ECS and exaggerated that Chinese oil rigs may serve as military outposts. The Philippine and Vietnamese governments also play the “China threat” card for their domestic agendas.

The manipulation of public opinion has caused serious damage to people-to-people trust. According to a Pew Research Center poll released in July 2014, 93% of Filipinos, 85% of Japanese and 84% of Vietnamese are concerned that territorial disputes will lead to military conflict, and the citizens of these three countries view China as the top security threat.<sup>1</sup> The sovereignty issue is always connected with national pride and image, and therefore leaves little room for compromise. Moreover, since the public can get information, sometimes misleading and agitating, through various channels such as social media, it is quite difficult for governments to guide public opinion. It should be acknowledged that the ECS and SCS disputes have been exaggerated by misleading and biased media reports in all concerned countries. Thus, the mistrust among people is likely to have long-term negative impact on government policies.

The third danger is the involvement of nonclaimants, and their interference makes the situation more complex. The US criticised Chinese activities in the ECS and SCS as breaching the status quo in a coercive way, but overlooked the operations of other

claimants. Other countries like Australia and India have also expressed concerns over the disputes. The engagement of outsiders makes the situation more complex and dangerous. On one hand, China may feel it is treated discriminatorily; considering the fact that China suffered one hundred years of humiliation because of Western colonists' gunboat diplomacy, it is vigilant of security threats from the sea. The involvement of extra-regional powers reminds China of the historical security threats from the sea which make China feel cornered by the US-led "chain strategy". On the other hand, regional claimants will make use of extra-regional powers' support to challenge China. It is widely argued in China that the US "emboldens" or "instigates" regional claimants to challenge Chinese sovereignty. Some have even labeled the US a "backstage manipulator". Obviously, extra-regional powers' engagement sends the wrong signals to concerned parties, with the US military engagement as a pointed example.

## **Evolving into Strategic Competition**

After several years of growing tensions around the ECS and SCS, the territorial disputes have evolved from regional disputes over rocks and islands to strategic competition for maritime order. Particularly due to the increasing involvement of extra-regional players, this trend has become more certain. It might be the most enduring and fundamental challenge for regional security.

Simultaneously with the rising tensions of ECS and SCS disputes, big powers have advanced ambitious blueprints for maritime power. The maritime power is the crux for the US Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy. By 2020, approximately 60% of US Navy ships and aircraft will be stationed in Indo-Asia-Pacific. In *Forward, Engaged, Ready: A Cooperative Strategy for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Seapower*, published in March, 2015, the US stressed that "seapower has been and will continue to be the critical foundation of national power and prosperity and international prestige for the United States of America".<sup>2</sup>

China is also moving away from traditional obsession with land power and is emphasising maritime power. China declared the aim of "building maritime power" in the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) report 2012, set up the National Oceanic Council and China Coast Guard in early 2013 and proposed the Maritime Silk Road MSR initiative in late 2013. In July 2013, CPC's Politburo chose "maritime power" as the topic for its study session. The most eye-catching policy is that China began to protect its maritime interests firmly. In this power game, Chinese policy arouses other powers' suspicion and is labeled as "neo-

mahanian”. There is a perception of a widening gap between China and other parties.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. argued that “China’s naval expansion presents challenges when it employs force or intimidation against other sovereign nations to assert territorial claims”.<sup>4</sup> Under the guidance of this perception, the US keeps on rounding up support to *contain* or *shape* the Chinese growing maritime power.

India has also sped up its transition from a “brown water” to a “blue water” navy, and its foreign policy has a stronger maritime impetus. Prime Minister Modi chose the aircraft carrier for his first visit to the armed forces, declared the “Act East Policy” and strengthened maritime defense cooperation with the US and Japan. In fact, “until recently the principal concern for India has been the Indian Ocean . . . . Yet in recent years, India has begun to make regular naval forays into the Pacific Ocean”.<sup>5</sup> India has been wary of Chinese naval activity in the Indian Ocean, and has reservations about the MSR. It is widely believed that Chinese submarines’ docking at Colombo in 2013 angered India, and the new Sri Lankan government has declared that it would not allow Chinese submarines to dock in its ports. The United States applauded India as a net security provider and stressed strategic cooperation in the wide Indo-Pacific region, including “safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea”.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, Japan has become more actively engaged in overseas security issues under the banner of “active pacifism”, and has strengthened its maritime security cooperation with “like-minded states”. Japan, being staunch on ECS disputes, played the SCS card with the excuse of maintaining the safety of the sea lines of communication (SLOCs). Since 2013, though as a nonclaimant, Japan criticised Chinese SCS policy fiercely in international forums and has increased its military engagement in SCS.

## Impetus for Cooperation

Nevertheless, there is still scope for multilateral cooperation in addressing these challenges, as all concerned powers and littoral countries share common interests in maritime security and stability. No state can afford direct confrontation with other states without bearing extensive costs. Even though the US enjoys military dominance and an alliance system, it is unwise for the US to have enduring strategic competition or confrontation with China. Just as one US scholar argued,

*the heated rhetoric [between China and US on the South China Sea dispute]... threatens to drive United States–China relations in a far more adversarial, zero-sum direction and destabilize the region. To allow a dispute over a few rocks and islands in a corner of the Asia-Pacific region to derail a vital relationship critical to both regional and global peace and prosperity is the height of folly.<sup>7</sup>*

Objective and comprehensive understanding of Chinese maritime policy is particularly important. China has always been labeled as “assertive”, “coercive” or even “aggressive”, but neutral and detailed analysis shows that other claimants must be blamed as “provocative”. In the ECS, the Japanese government’s purchase of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in September 2012 led to a deterioration of the bilateral relationship. In the SCS, the Philippine government sent a naval frigate, instead of civilian law enforcement vessels, and arrested Chinese civilian fishermen near Huangyan Dao/Minzhu Jiao/Scarborough Reef, which led to a severe standoff.

Moreover, Chinese seaward policy has strong trade and energy motives, with its open economy heavily interdependent with outside world. Ninety percent of Chinese foreign trade is via sea routes. Though China has endeavoured to diversify oil imports, develop renewable energy and build alternative routes on land, it is widely believed that Chinese oil imports via sea will continue to rise in the foreseeable future.

The main task for the Chinese government is to achieve a sustainable and inclusive economic development towards the Two Centenary Goals – i.e. to build a moderately prosperous society in all respects by the time the CPC celebrates its centenary in 2021 – and to turn China into a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious by the time the People’s Republic of China (PRC) celebrates its centenary in 2049. Thus, Chinese foreign policy will continue to adopt the following tracks: stick to the good-neighbour policy to maintain a stable neighbourhood, manage a new type of relationship of powers to avoid direct conflict with the US, promote economic cooperation, etc. The tensions around ECS and SCS disputes are not favourable to Chinese national interests and will definitely not aid Chinese policy choice. Of course, this does not mean that other countries can make use of Chinese goodwill to impose on Chinese sovereignty.

On the other hand, there is a convergence of interest in addressing nontraditional security threats, including piracy, maritime terrorism, maritime crimes, etc. The vast ocean provides unlawful groups a natural shelter to transport weapons, move forces, raise funds, commit crimes and avoid government crackdown. The most serious case is the Mumbai terrorist attack in 2008. According to figures released by the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in

Asia (ReCAAP) and the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), piracy in Southeast Asian waters has witnessed an increase during the past few years. Transnational crimes cover mainly economically motivated activities such as illegal trafficking and smuggling, and nonviolent security challenges include marine environmental pollution, overexploitation of fisheries, etc.

Compared with traditional security threats, all concerned countries share convergent interests in addressing nontraditional security challenges. These shared interests, such as good governance, safety of SLOCs and ecological protection, are endangered by these threats and no country can address these alone. Just as Indian former National Security Adviser Menon pointed out,

*the threats to energy flows in the Indian Ocean come not from the major powers [such as India, the USA, China or Japan], all of whom have a shared interest in keeping these sea lanes working. The immediate threats come from local instability and problems in the choke points and certain littorals, particularly the Straits of Hormuz and the Horn of Africa.*<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, if these challenges are not addressed on time, these may escalate and interconnect with traditional challenges. For example, the competition for fishery resources has contributed to the ECS and SCS disputes. Thus, multilateral cooperation, instead of unilateral activity, is needed to tackle the transboundary, nontraditional security challenges. Although regional and extra-regional countries have taken some measures to address these threats, they still lag behind. And this kind of cooperation is helpful to foster closer interdependence and a community of shared interest.

## Towards a More Secure Maritime Asia

China is committed to promote multilateral maritime cooperation, cool down the territorial disputes, provide more public goods and maintain regional stability and security. After all, a more secure maritime Asia is in China's interest. Some key words are as follows:

1. *Strategic Trust*: One hand alone cannot clap, and concerned parties should refrain from the blame game and security dilemmas. All concerned parties should not only clarify their policy intentions and make policy understood by the others, but should also draw the red lines. For example, China needs to provide a detailed explanation of the MSR, and the US should stick to a neutral stand on maritime disputes. China and the US have put maritime cooperation within the bilateral Strategic and Economic Dialogue; China and India have also agreed to launch a maritime dialogue. It is time for the concerned parties to publicise their maritime strategies or white papers.

2. *Crisis Management*: Although the disputes may not be solved in the near future, all concerned claimants should join efforts to cool down the tension. Here, we may learn from the experience of China and India's management of a border dispute. The experience can be summarised as: put aside the dispute and push forward cooperation in other fields; maintain stability through a special dialogue mechanism; "flag dialogue" by ground forces; do not be guided by media reports or nationalism, etc.

3. *Blue Economy*: China, Japan, India, Indonesia and Vietnam have all mapped out an ambitious blueprint for developing a blue economy. Connectivity of development strategies is needed for building a community of common destiny. While pushing forward the MSR initiative, China emphasised cooperation of the ocean economy as an important component. China has successfully organised the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Ocean-related Ministerial Meeting and Year of Sino-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Maritime Cooperation. In the future, efforts should be to make use of each others' advantages to further cooperation. Community of common interests will lead to community of common destiny.

4. *Security Cooperation*: Except for interfering with interstate disputes, concerned parties should cooperate in addressing nontraditional security challenges. Multilateral mechanisms should become more open and inclusive; for example, China and the US should attain membership of Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). Moreover, we should push forward the "naval diplomacy" and cooperation amongst coast guards.

## **Conclusion**

The strategic significance of maritime Asia for regional and global peace and prosperity will continue to grow in the foreseeable future. However, judging from the ground situations in the past few years', maritime Asia faces many challenges for regional peace and security. For nontraditional security challenges, poor governance in some littoral states gives birth to piracy, terrorism, transnational crimes, etc. The demographic pressure, environmental changes and factional conflicts are making the situation worse. For traditional security challenges, strategic suspicion among regional powers tends to escalate regional disputes into overall competition. This is partly due to a lack of governance, such as the lack of a mechanism for crisis management.

Nevertheless, peace and development are the enduring themes of the current times. All countries share convergent interests in maintaining peace and a secure maritime Asia. The United States, as a status quo power, is committed to maintain the

current generally peaceful order. Regional countries are heavily dependent on the safety and security of SLOCs, and the development of a “blue economy”. Thus, all countries should make efforts toward “good governance” of maritime Asia.

Some progress has been made during the past few years. One of the most significant achievements is that China and the US signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) On the Rules of Behavior for the Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters in November 2014, and completed new annexes on air-to-air safety and crisis communications in September 2015. The other opportunity is the Chinese development-oriented 21<sup>st</sup>-century MSR initiative, which will have positive overspilling effects on maritime security. To sum up, a peaceful, cooperative and harmonious ocean benefits everyone, and all countries should willingly contribute towards this effort.

## Notes

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7. Michael Swaine, “America’s Security Role in the South China Sea,” Testimony Before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, July 23, 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/07/23/america-s-security-role-in-south-china-sea/idv9> (accessed August 1, 2015).
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