

EMERGING DYNAMICS BETWEEN INTERNATIONAL NAVIES

Countries like China and India that are heavily dependent on the energy imports from the Middle East and Africa had no choice but to deploy warships in the High Risk Area (HRA). At a strategic level, this deployment in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) opened up new vistas for China which has maintained a continued presence of two PLA Navy units since 2008. In addition to building up huge data bases in terms of their observation in all dimensions including cyber, the PLA Navy is in a better position to achieve a blue water navy status. This is corroborated by the fact that China has gone ahead with its plan to build a naval base in Djibouti which will aid its missions in the IOR.

Troubled waters have different connotations in different regions. This paper seeks to examine three different areas of great importance for maritime security and stability in the coming decades. The areas in question are the West Arabian Sea, Western Pacific and the Palk Bay respectively.

First, an examination of the developments in the West Arabian Sea. It was piracy off the Somali coast till the end of last decade that challenged the ship's crew, owners, law enforcement agencies and other stakeholders. The number of hostages had crossed the four digits bringing despair to seafarers and their families. The huge sums paid as ransom for securing the release of pirated vessels served as incentive to those who had made piracy a lucrative business.

The alarming trends compelled coordinated anti-piracy measures to be initiated by the navies of the world and special measures were adopted by way of allowing armed guards on board brought this menace under control. The cooperative mechanisms included the shore based elements such as the UK MTO based in Dubai and the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres (MRCC) in the region that would assist in responding to reported incidents of piracy.

While the sustained efforts of the global community have brought things under control off the east coast of Africa, the scourge of piracy has made its presence felt in the Straits of Malacca and also in the South China Sea as per the annual and periodic reports made were public by the Piracy Reporting Centre (PRC) and

the Regional Cooperative Agreement on Armed Piracy and Robbery (ReCAAP) agency operating from Singapore. The anti-piracy missions also had many spin offs for the navies that operated in the area. Few of the takeaways of significance are covered below.

Sea Control Format

In the contest of cooperation with the regional navies, it is important to note that groups such as the CMF operated under the rotational command concept thus allowing even the Pakistani Navy to exercise this role and in the process gain both tactically and technically. The navies of the world operated in groups as in the Combined Maritime Force (CMF), NATO and





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the EU Navfor under *Operation Atlanta*. But many other navies did not necessarily operate under any grouping but were deployed by maritime nations who were keen to protect their ships engaged in trade and commerce. The nature of operations has enabled many of the participating nations to understand the challenges when operating in company with dissimilar platforms and operating procedures.

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New Lessons

At the tactical level, it is also important to note how the dynamics of engagement at sea was transformed with the deployment of armed guards who paid a key role in bringing a semblance of order along with the deployment of naval units. There were also incidents such as the *Enrica Lexie* where innocent lives were lost due to mistaken identity of fishermen who were presumed to

be pirates. Likewise, the case of MV Seaman Guard Ohio brought out the unlawful deployment of floating vessels in the controlled waters of India exposing the country to dangers of terrorism through the sea routes *aka* Mumbai terror attack.

Chinese Expansionism

Second, the troubled waters in the context of South China Sea have a different connotation as it is related to the aggressive behaviour of China which bases its claim of nearly eighty per cent plus of the entire SCS based on historical claims and seeks to contain the entire area within the 'nine dash line'. This has been contested by Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia where the EEZs are overlapping. China has used extensive dredging of the contested areas around the rocks and reefs to change the cartography and build artificial Islands that houses military garrisons, runways and use both offensive and defensive means.

This has changed the nature of contest in the troubled waters where the expectation of hydro carbons is very high. The contesting nations therefore are very keen to reinforce their claims to the EEZ which are overlapping mainly because of the Chinese nine dash line. The Permanent Court of Arbitration has found fault with the Chinese claims and has given a verdict, in favour of the Philippines which went to PCA against the expansionist designs of China. China has rejected the award outright and has indicated that it does not honour the verdict

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thus setting a bad precedent in international conduct. While it was initially the US naval units that started patrolling the contested areas, the Philippines joined the patrols subsequently. Signalling the beginning of a cold war in the Pacific, the Russians have decided to join hands with China thus vitiating the atmosphere.

China-Japan Confrontation

Coming to another stretch of troubled waters in East China Sea in the Pacific, Japan has a long standing dispute about Senkaku Islands and the purchase of four Islands from a private person by the Japanese Government has brought in new challenges. The Chinese fishermen have been fishing aggressively in the contested areas around the islands and this has escalated tensions between the two nations who are resorting to use of force to stake their claims. The recent announcement of Japan to join the patrols has added to the tensions in the region. The sea and air patrols which bring different naval platforms into the troubled waters have the potential to escalate beyond a point if not properly handled by all the players in the area.

The emerging dynamics between the regional navies of the world and the navies of the extra-regional players who have long term strategic interests in the Pacific have a destabilising effect and needs careful handling by all the stakeholders. The increasing tensions in the Western Pacific are both due to the aggressive designs of China and also the recalibration of the American policy to reorient its thrust to the Pacific. This is seen as an effort to contain China which is aspiring to be a superpower. The smaller neighbours who are also members of ASEAN have not been able to even make a joint declaration against China post the verdict issued by the PCA.

Joint Patrols

This is largely due to the economic leverages obtained by China which has invested heavily by way of

Foreign Direct Investments and trade agreements. The accrual of benefits from these investments and initiatives benefit China disproportionately in comparison with the smaller economies of the region. The smaller nations are not capable of defending their maritime interests due to the overwhelming superiority of the PLA Navy and are compelled to look at the US and other powers including Japan and India to bring about some balance in the region. The joint patrol by the US along with the smaller navies is one such initiative to take on the aggressive designs of China which is not in a mood to yield any quarter even though the PCA has issued strictures about the environmental degradation caused due to the indiscriminate dredging to carve out islands and build military installations. From the Indian point of view, the developments in the South China Sea are of great concern. With its legitimate stakes in the free and unfettered passage of its merchandise to and from East Asia, India has publicly supported the concept of freedom of navigation and over flight. However, consistent with its philosophy of pursuing strategic autonomy, it has consciously avoided joining the joint patrols in the contested areas.

Palk Bay Contratemps

Finally, closer home, the troubled waters in the context of Palk Bay have everything to do with fisheries, livelihood and security. Here again, the historical rights of fishermen from Tamil Nadu in Palk Bay has been contested by the Tamil fishermen across the Bay after the demarcation of the international maritime border line (IMBL) was undertaken in 1974 by ceding Kacchativu which has rich fishing grounds around it. The fishermen from India have been using mechanised trawlers and have denuded the fishing grounds on the western side of the IMBL and have indiscriminately poached in Sri Lankan waters. The intruding fishermen from India are apprehended by the Sri Lankan Navy along with the boats and it has added to





the political competition between the State and the Central Governments which look at fishermen as vote banks and hence indulge in the blame game.

The trilateral defence treaty that has been signed and operative between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives has not been able to help matters in the region as the navies and the Coast Guards have very little role when there is such large scale intrusion from one side to the other. While many solutions have been suggested, no headway has been made in terms of finding permanent practical solutions to the complex situation on both sides of the divide.

Options for India

In conclusion, it can safely be said that the challenges in the areas discussed above are related to; first, getting the better of the adversary by fair or unfair means when it comes to territory; second, about seeking to dominate the maritime domain in the areas of interest as in South China Sea/East China Sea and third, to deal with a potential adversary at a strategic level to thwart his ambitions. In this case, it is obvious that the actions of the US Navy on its own steam or in collusion with others is related to challenging China an emerging power which seeks to displace the US as the number one global power. In all such discussions, it is important to examine the options for India an emerging naval power.

As far as the SCS is concerned, the present policy of strongly supporting the provisions of the UNCLOS for freedom of navigation and over flight is adequate. The decision to not participate in the joint patrols in the SCS around disputed areas is a sound one and promotes the traditional policy of pursuance of strategic autonomy. What is important to note is that with more and more players including Russia and Japan joining the fray in the SCS, China will be compelled to remain within the confines of the SCS trying to protect what it seeks to claim. This to a degree will dent the Indian Ocean ambitions of China which is eyeing the large expanse of ocean from Australia to Africa for serving its economic and strategic interests.



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The anti-piracy missions have brought the PLA Navy to West Arabian Sea and China will continue to be a relevant extra-regional player in the coming decades. While the footprints are being expanded through the Maritime Silk Route, the creation of a naval base in Djibouti will ensure that China has military options for the future. India will need to up the ante by engaging with other stakeholders in the IOR. It also has to engage with countries of Africa.

The challenges closer home related to fisheries dispute is a sensitive one and requires home grown solutions aided by the Tamil fishermen and the NGOs who need to be encouraged to find long lasting solutions. India also has to work closely with all the immediate maritime neighbours to ensure that its short term and long term interests are protected. 

