

China-India Maritime Rivalry

By Cdr Gurpreet S Khurana

Issue: Vol. 23.4

Introduction

In the Post-Cold War Era re-distribution of power, the balance is clearly shifting to Asia. This is primarily due to the increasing comprehensive National Power (CNP) of China and India. But as they graduate to the global level, the two countries would need to contend with each other within the region. Besides, their adversarial potential due to the many outstanding security issues cannot be ignored. Whether these translate into a conflict would depend upon how Beijing and New Delhi manage their relationship in the coming years, but as of now the potential is sufficient to fuel strategic rivalry.

Asia is a predominantly maritime-configured region. Much of China-India interactions would thus relate to the seas or the littoral areas. The two countries do not share a maritime boundary, but this does not matter. As emerging powers, their vital security interests have been dilating from their immediate peripheries to regional extremities (and even beyond). In other words, while their immediate security imperatives lie in the western Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean respectively; their strategic spheres have begun to overlap in both areas. This is leading them to stretch their maritime-strategic 'footprint' across the entire Asian region. It is logical therefore, for its effects to be felt in the geo-strategic sub-region of Southeast Asia, which lies midway in the 'India-China rivalry-arc' extending from north-western Pacific to the Arabian Sea.

China-India Maritime-Strategic 'Rivalry Arc' in Asia

Such rivalry is however low-keyed. It figures neither in China-India politico-diplomatic interactions, nor in official policy articulations. It is nonetheless highly discernable to any keen observer. This article attempts to bring out some of its nuances. It deals with the issue by segregating its geographical scope into three parts - the north-eastern Indian Ocean, the Malacca Straits and the South China Sea.



North-eastern Indian Ocean

This area is important for India's supreme national security interest of 'survival'. For China, it is vital transit route for energy imports sourced from West Asia and Africa. This makes China highly vulnerable in case of a Sino-Indian military conflict. Such strategic vulnerability also restricts Beijing to use force to satiate its strategic objectives in the western Pacific like Taiwan. China could however mitigate this vulnerability through its naval presence in the area. Such presence would also enable Beijing to wield a strategic-leverage against New Delhi to resolve the outstanding issues, and to meet its military objectives in case of a conflict with India.

Since the late-1980s, China has provided much defence assistance to Myanmar. It has built naval facilities, radars and signal-intelligence (SIGINT) posts all along the Myanmar coast and in Coco Islands, which lie barely 18 km north of India's Andaman Islands. Various news-reports since then indicated that Chinese military personnel were stationed in Myanmar and were using these facilities to collect sensitive information on India. While these reports could never be backed by hard evidence, the potential could not be ignored either. In the future, it is also possible for these facilities to be used by China as refuelling halts for its naval forces, or maybe even as full-fledged forward bases. The *volte face* in India's policy towards Myanmar since early-1990s has undoubtedly succeeded. Besides benign assurances from Myanmar, bilateral defence ties have strengthened in a way hitherto unimaginable. The most notable event in this direction was Myanmar Navy's participation in *Milan-2006* at Port Blair,¹ which involved a historic first-ever visit of a Myanmar warship to any foreign port. Myanmar has even offered Indian naval officials to visit the "suspicious" sites. However, Myanmar's armed forces continue to be heavily dependent on the Chinese military establishment. As recently as in June 2008, a Chinese naval team visited Coco Island upgrade its military facilities.² The threat to India would persist until such dependence exists.

In April 2008, India and Myanmar signed Kaladan river transportation agreement that involves India's upgradation of Myanmar's Sittwe port. It has also made a proposal to build a deep-water port in Dawei.³ Though driven by imperatives of economic development/trade-connectivity, these could also be considered as New Delhi's move to monitor Chinese activities in Myanmar's littoral areas. However, owing to Chinese pressure, Myanmar did not permit India to be the sole

operator of Sittwe port. Instead of BOT (Build, Operate and Transfer) desired by India, the agreement was eventually signed on the basis of BTU (Build, Transfer and Use).

China-India rivalry has also emerged over exploration rights and access to Myanmar's energy resources. The Chinese companies have always managed to grab a larger share of the contracts, either through their stronger influence in Myanmar, or by exploiting India's weaknesses. When in 2005, India was awarded its first offshore block A-1, Bangladesh agreed to let India obtain pipeline access to the gas through its territory. But it later became non-committal, imposing unrelated conditions that were unacceptable to India. The delay in India's firming up an alternate route/plan compelled Myanmar (or gave it an excuse) to decide in 2007 to supply the entire gas to China through a pipeline to be laid from Sittwe to Kunming.⁴ To a layman, this would be baffling because the shortest distance from the gas-field to China is three times more than that to India.

Another Indian response to China's presence in the area has been institution of the integrated Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) at Port Blair in 2001. It caused anxieties in Beijing with regard to security of its energy shipments, and particularly so in 2002 when Indian Navy (IN) sea and air units under the ANC commenced coordinated patrols with Indonesian Navy along the maritime boundary. The patrol-axis was coincident with the 6-degree channel that lies between India's Great Nicobar Island and Indonesia's Sumatra Island, and where China's shipping is highly vulnerable. In 2005, India began conducting similar patrols with Thailand in the Andaman Sea. Although the patrols were primarily directed against maritime crimes, these also served to restrict Chinese activities in the area. Beijing concerns may further heighten with the ongoing upgradation of ANC's defence capabilities. The plans include building naval bases, aircraft facilities, networked radar stations and even fixed underwater sensors at various locations of the island-chain the extends from Narcondum and East Island in the north to Indira Point in the south overlooking the 6-degree channel.⁵ From the Indian stand-point, such capability augmentation is imperative to maintain good order in the extensive maritime zones of the far-flung island chain, though of course, the imperative to deter China is also likely to have been the key driver. As the ANC upgradation plans materialize, it would also be necessary for India to enhance its naval engagement with its maritime-neighbours of Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Thailand & Myanmar) for confidence-building through transparency. This may intensify China-India rivalry.

Malacca Straits

China's strategic energy supplies are most vulnerable in Malacca Straits, the key maritime 'choke-point' passage between Indian and Pacific oceans. India is also a Straits' 'user',⁶ but more importantly, its security is closely linked to events in this waterway that is contiguous to India's maritime zones. It is therefore critically necessary for India to be aware of the west-bound movement of naval vessels (particularly Chinese) across this, and other Southeast Asian straits.

Much of the waterway is forms the territorial waters of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. These littorals thus wield the onus of security here. Asserting their sovereignty repeatedly,

Indonesia and Malaysia have made it difficult for major powers to resort to *direct* naval ‘jostling’ in the Straits. China-India rivalry is nonetheless continuing in subtle and *indirect* ways.

The developments in India’s Andaman and Nicobar, as mentioned earlier, are increasing India’s potential to undertake military missions in Malacca straits, much to the discomfort of China. Chinese analysts note these developments as “revealing India’s growing desire to be ‘keeper’ of the Strait”.⁷ In September 2007, India participated in the five-nation *Malabar-07-2*, which was the largest-ever naval exercise yet in the Indian Ocean. While its objective was stated to be “anti-piracy”, the choice of exercise area close to Malacca straits was sufficient to alarm China. A notable participation was that of Singapore. Beijing sent a *démarche* to all participants. The exercise was reported by the media as a “message” to China, who had conducted a high-level army exercise *Peace Mission 2007* just a month earlier within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The exercise involved 6,500 troops, but as in case of *Malabar-07-2*, its stated aim was to counter ‘low-intensity’ threats.

Ostensibly, the two countries are also taking incremental steps to project naval power in MS. In April 2002, the Indian Navy launched an escort-mission for US high-value ships in MS (*Op Sagittarius*).⁸ Barely a month later, Chinese warships conducted an anti-piracy exercise in these waters while on a west-bound transit passage.⁹

The other means are more subtle. China and India have been making efforts to seek politico-diplomatic influence among the Straits-littorals. Such influence would be invaluable in strategic terms. For example, it would reassure Beijing that in case of a conflict, these littorals would not permit China’s adversaries to interdict its strategic imports. From the Indian perspective, such influence may lead these countries to cooperate in providing New Delhi information on China’s west-bound naval shipping. In the tussle for influence, both countries have been employing various means, including defence cooperation. Ostensibly, China seems to have aptly gauged that Malaysia is in the ‘driving seat’ among the three littorals with regard to security of Malacca straits. This is logical since it is also the most affected by the prevailing maritime crimes in the waterway. This has led Beijing to make conscious efforts to engage Kuala Lumpur through various means, including through sales of military hardware. In Sep 2005, China signed a Defence MoU with Malaysia - the first of its kind with any Southeast Asian country.¹⁰ There are indicators that China’s endeavours have been succeeding. In 2003, the Malaysian Prime Minister amply displayed a pro-China tilt by totally dismissing China’s military threat to Southeast Asia.¹¹

India has also used its navy for politico-diplomatic engagement of the littorals. Notable was the first-ever deployment of its aircraft carrier INS *Viraat* beyond Malacca straits in 2005. The carrier undertook ‘goodwill’ visits to Port Klang (Malaysia) followed by Singapore and Jakarta (Indonesia).¹² A few months earlier, the Indian Navy had conducted a large-scale disaster-relief operation following the Indian Ocean *Tsunami*. China was ‘conspicuous’ by its absence in this relief operation. Not to be left behind, it not only provided relief supplies to the affected littorals worth US\$60.46 million, but also made sure that its aid was the largest of all donors and publicly announced later that it had set a ‘record’.¹³

South China Sea

China's has outstanding maritime-territorial disputes with many Southeast Asian countries in the hydrocarbon-rich South China Sea (SCS). Since the turn of the century, Beijing has been projecting a benign posture to these countries through measures like the 2002 signing of a 'non-binding' China-ASEAN 'Declaration on Conduct of Parties in SCS'¹⁴ and the 2005 agreement with Vietnam and the Philippines for joint exploration of hydrocarbons in disputed areas.¹⁵

Notwithstanding several confidence-building measures (CBMs), military tensions have persisted until as recently as November 2007, when Chinese military exercises in the disputed Parcel Islands led Vietnam to lodge a protest.¹⁶ A month later, India was also sucked into this. Beijing declared that the exploration rights for blocks 127 and 128 (near Parcel Islands) given by Vietnam to ONGC *Videsh* was 'illegal', and issued a *démarche* to New Delhi.¹⁷ It implies that while Vietnam is permitted to explore for resources under China-Vietnam joint-exploration agreement, it cannot seek financial/technological assistance from India. This is not only symptomatic of China's rivalry with India, but also indicative of China's lack of sincerity to proceed to the next step after joint exploration with Vietnam & the Philippines, viz. production and sharing the resources. Such moves may further strengthen India-Southeast Asia strategic convergence.

China has lately increased its defence interactions with IOR-littorals and even major powers through exercises and warship visits. It has however been unwilling to make its military intentions transparent to the Southeast Asian littorals of western Pacific. The only exceptions are the Malacca Straits' littorals: Malaysia and to some extent, Indonesia (for reasons mentioned earlier). Evidently, Beijing's benign stance towards South-east Asia is a transient imperative until it achieves Taiwan's "reunification". Shen Dingli, a well-known Chinese strategic analyst indicated that "Once the Taiwan front is closed, we may turn to the South China Sea".¹⁸ It is also evident that the organisational 'centre of gravity' of Chinese naval power is shifting towards its South Sea Fleet (SSF). This is best exemplified by the latest revelations with regard to the expanse of China's new naval base in Hainan, with an extensive underground acreage allocated for berthing up to as many as 20 submarines.¹⁹ China is also building expeditionary capabilities for the SSF. This has led the Southeast Asian countries to seek strategic relationships with other powers. Amitav Acharya says that "India factors in this approach ... (as Southeast Asia's) countervailing strategy to future Chinese geopolitical assertiveness".²⁰

On its part, India has thus been steadily increasing its naval forays into the western Pacific. In 2000, India conducted a naval exercise in South China Sea with Vietnam. Although it was a low-level unstructured exercise, it represented an important milestone. It was India's first-ever exercise in South China Sea that demonstrated India's increasing naval reach. It invited China's protest.²¹ The 2005 SIMBEX was also conducted in South China Sea. In Apr-May 2007, the Indian Navy participated in a series of exercises in the western Pacific.

Events in South China Sea have a strong bearing on China's security. For India, the South China Sea area is important for security of its trade and even energy imports, but is not as critical as it is to China. What then is India's motivation in the South China Sea? In a seminar held at Chengdu soon after the 2005 SIMBEX, Colonel Pan Zheng from China's National Defence

University (NDU) called it India's "*revenge* for China's engagement of its South Asian neighbours".²² Conceding the constraints of English grammar to a Chinese officer, he may be right. You Ji, a Chinese origin expert on the Chinese navy even says, "most analysts would see India's 'Look-east' policy from the hidden position India has taken to support some of the claimants".²³ The validity of this argument cannot possibly be ascertained in the 'public domain'.

It could nonetheless be stated that from the Indian perspective, 'forward presence' is a crucial national security imperative to achieve 'domain awareness' in areas of strategic interest, at both strategic and operational levels.²⁴ More importantly, given the high probability of China's inimical military-strategic intent in the Indian Ocean, Indian 'presence' in South China Sea becomes critical for 'strategic deterrence' against Beijing. *India's Maritime-Military Strategy* endorses this by stating, "While the option of formal alliances...is not available...we can however reach out to our maritime partners or collaborate with friendly nations to build deterrence."²⁵

Conclusion

The underpinnings of China-India maritime-strategic rivalry are not difficult to discern. China's approach is clearly driven by strong strategic imperatives in the Indian Ocean Region, which would necessitate fielding of its military power projection capabilities into Indian Ocean in the coming decades. However, given the competitive and even adversarial potential of China-India relations, in these waters, it expects to find itself pitted against India's potent naval power, possibly even in concert with the US.

For India on the other hand, it is critically important to balance China's rising power. By not doing so, India's own increasingly eminent role as a regional power would be dwarfed. This would also have serious ramifications for India's supreme national security interests. For example, this would make it impossible for New Delhi to negotiate the border dispute on equal terms with Beijing.

India's strategic 'footprint' in the maritime space adjoining Southeast Asia has been more discernable through its navy's politico-diplomatic role as an instrument of foreign policy. On the other hand, China has largely restrained its naval interactions with Southeast Asia, indicating that it wants to keep its military options open to settle its lingering maritime-territorial disputes. Instead, it has been resorting to establishing geo-political influence through use of all other facets of its national power, such as economic, defence-sales, and so on. This would enable Beijing to buy time until it satiates its foremost strategic objective in terms of Taiwan, and at the same time, lay the foundations for its military power-projection southwards, and eventually into the Indian Ocean.

Notes

1. Annual Report 2005-06, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, p. 12
2. Indrani Bagchi, 'China eyeing base', Times of India, 9 August 2008, p. 13

3. 'Myanmar, India finalizing River Transportation Project', Xinhua, 28 August 2007, FBIS/ World News Connection at <http://wnc.dialog.com/>
4. The 30-year MoU to supply gas to China from 2009 onwards was signed June 2008.
5. Prasun Sengupta, 'Looking East', Force, 11 May 2007
6. About 30% of India's trade transits the Malacca Straits. This proportion is increasing.
7. Zhang Xuegang, 'Southeast Asia and Energy: Gateway to Stability', China Security, Vol 3(2), Spring 2007, p. 21
8. Annual Report 2003-04, Ministry of Defence, Govt. of India, p. 26
9. 'PLA Navy Fleet Conducts Anti-pirate Exercises at Malacca Straits', People's Daily, 29 May 2002, at
10. http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200205/29/eng20020529_96696.shtml See, 'PRC Defence Minister Chi Haotian Meets Malaysian
11. Armed Forces Chief', Xinhua, 8 June 2000; 'China, Malaysia To Further Ties Between Armed Forces' Xinhua, 2 September 2005; 'China, Malaysia To Step Up Defence Cooperation', Xinhua, 26 May 2006; Andrei Chang and Khoo Jin Kiat, 'Malaysia Considers Importing HY6 Ground to Air Missiles', Kanwa Defence Review, 31 July 2007, FBIS/ World News Connection at <http://wnc.dialog.com/>
12. 'Southeast Asia Need Not Fear China's Economic, Military Power: Malaysian PM', Hong Kong AFP, 18 September 2003, FBIS/ World News Connection at <http://wnc.dialog.com/> 'Viraat to Showcase India's Might', Deccan Herald, 15 July 2005, FBIS/ World News Connection at <http://wnc.dialog.com/>
13. 'China's Aid to Tsunami Victims Sets Record: Official', Gov.cn (Chinese government's official web portal), January 18, 2006, at http://www.gov.cn/misc/2006-01/18/content_162616.htm
14. 'China-proposed new security idea at ARF worries US, West', The Nation, 12 August 2002, FBIS/ World News Connection at <http://wnc.dialog.com/>
15. 'China, Philippines, Vietnam Sign Joint South China Sea Survey Accord', AFP, 14 March 2005, FBIS/ World News Connection at <http://wnc.dialog.com/>
16. For details, see Jeff Chen and Andrei Chag, 'Deterrence Capability of Vietnam Against Hainan Island', Kanwa Asian Defence Review, 12 August 2008, FBIS/ World News Connection at <http://wnc.dialog.com/>
17. Anupama Airy, 'ONGC's Vietnam foray illegal, says China', The Financial Express, 2 December 2007, at <http://www.financialexpress.com/news/ONGCs-Vietnam-foray-illegal-says-China/246000/>
18. Craig Smith, 'China Reshaping Military to Toughen its Muscle in the Region', New York Times, 16 October 2002, cited in Amitav Acharya, 'Seeking Security in the Dragon's Shadow: China and Southeast Asia in the Emerging Asian Order', IDSS (Singapore) Paper No. 44, March 2003, pp.1213
19. Andrei Chang, 'South East Asian Countries Concerned About Expansion of PLA South Sea Fleet', Kanwa Asian Defence Review, 2 July 2008, FBIS/ World News Connection at <http://wnc.dialog.com/>
20. Amitav Acharya, 'Seeking Security in the Dragon's Shadow: China and Southeast Asia in the Emerging Asian Order', IDSS (Singapore) Paper No. 44, March 2003, p. 20
21. 'China Objects to Indian Navy's Presence in South China Sea', Indian Express, 14 October 2000, FBIS-SAP20001014000051.

22. Based on author's interaction with PLA Colonel Pan Zheng during a seminar on "Energy Security" conducted by SAWCCAD at Sichuan University, Chengdu (China) in June 2005.
23. Interview with Dr You Ji, University of New South Wales, 12 August 2008 (Dr You Ji is a Chinese origin expert on the PLA Navy).
24. "Freedom to use the seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy", Integrated HQ MoD (Navy), May 2007, pp. 61-65.
25. "Freedom to use the seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy", Integrated HQ MoD (Navy), May 2007, p.77.

April 9th, 2009.

<http://www.indiandefencereview.com/2009/04/china-india-maritime-rivalry.html>