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CHINESE NAVY COURTS MYANMAR FOR ITS NEW MISSION

Dr Puyam Rakesh Singh
Research Associate, CAPS

A deeper analysis of China's security environment requires a closer look at security threats and its national interests in both the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Of the two Oceans, the Pacific Ocean is vital to safeguard China's eastern coastal heartland. On the other hand, the Indian Ocean is crucial for China's economic development. It provides the major sea routes for import and export of resources and commodities. Specifically, China's energy security calls for maritime security. In order to safeguard its national interests beyond the territorial boundary, China is modernising its navy. In addition, Myanmar being a littoral state, China is making its presence there through port calls and naval exercises.

Naval cooperation began to take shape in the late 1980s. But military ties deepened further by the mid-1990s. In 1996, an agreement on military cooperation for training of naval and air force personnel and exchange of intelligence was signed. Though military ties have deepened over

the years, the new century has seen new vitality as China transforms its strategy. In his inaugural address to the Chinese Communist Party's Central Military Commission (CMC) in December 2004, President Hu Jintao assigned a new mission for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the new century to pursue and safeguard the national interests beyond the geographical borders.¹ With expansion of economic interests, the role of the PLA is to safeguard the maritime interests by securing the sea lines of communications (SLOCs) for uninterrupted supply of natural resources and access to global markets.² It is informed by China's strategy to go beyond 'offshore defence' with expanding national interests.

Affirming the changing dynamics in naval cooperation, Rear Admiral Li Tiemin of the Naval Command College of the Chinese Navy paid a visit to Myanmar in June 2006 followed by a reciprocal visit in July 2010 by Vice Admiral Nyan Tun of the Myanmar Navy. During the



discussions, China assured Myanmar support in its military modernisation. Following the exchanges, two PLA Navy warships of the Fifth Escort Task Group made a five day port call at Thilawa Port after anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. It was the first Chinese navy's port call made in Myanmar.

After signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on defence cooperation in 2011, an agreement on military cooperation was signed in September 2012. It is worthwhile to note that China made a three-point proposal on military ties. Besides, Myanmar military delegations visited Dalian, Guangzhou and Shanghai naval base. In 2013, as part of the China-ASEAN Maritime Consultation Mechanism, Chinese search and rescue ship, MV Haixun 01 paid a goodwill visit. In the same year, Chinese hospital ship 'Ark Peace' arrived at Thilawa Port. In May 2014, Chinese naval training ship 'Zheng He' and missile frigate 'Wei Fang' made port calls and conducted joint exercises during the five day visit. Several Chinese naval cadets participated in the high-sea training programme. While high-sea training will support China's ambition of 'Blue-water navy', such exchanges are meant to build trust and soften the neighbouring nations' threat perception of China's increasing naval capability and presence.

Lying along the strategic Strait of Malacca, Myanmar can play a key role in China's maritime trade and security policies. With the Indian Ocean playing a major role in China's economic

interests, securing the key SLOCs is vital to China's economic reform and development. Meanwhile, Myanmar is also strengthening her naval capability. Its navy conducted a combined fleet exercise codenamed 'Sea Shield 2014' in waters near Coco Island. Besides, Myanmar has extended the runway of Coco Island airport which is strategically situated near the Andaman Islands. A greater synergy between naval cooperation and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road could yield better ground for the PLA Navy in the Indian Ocean. Above all, Beijing is constructing a military logistics support base in Djibouti.³ The change of attitude towards overseas base in Beijing's strategy is worthy of analysis.

In terms of military equipments, the China Shipbuilding Trading Corporation (CSTC) had exported naval crafts such as patrol boats and landing crafts to Myanmar.⁴ Moreover, China assisted in personnel training and construction of naval shipbuilding yards.⁵ At present, China supplies hulls, equipments and technical knowledge for indigenous production and upgrade as Myanmar naval shipyards are now capable of building corvettes, coastal patrol craft, fast attack craft and gunboats.

To realise the Chinese Dream and the Dream of a Strong Military, China has enhanced its naval presence in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean through anti-piracy operations and port calls. On September 30, 2016, a Chinese

naval fleet comprising Xiangtan and Zhoushan of the 23rd Escort Task Group made a port call at the Thilawa Port. It reflects China's intention to make such naval exchanges with Myanmar more frequent in future. During the five-day visit, they conducted joint naval exercises and exchanges in different fields. In a recent meeting, the two countries have agreed to cooperate in training and defence industry.⁶ They also discussed the regional security and the South China Sea dispute. Though Myanmar has not openly supported China's position in the South China Sea issue, Chinese influence keeps Myanmar away from forces inimical to China's interests. Thus, it can be inferred that China is enhancing naval cooperation with Myanmar and modernising its navy simultaneously.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ David Lai, "The coming of a prosperous China with strong military power," in Zhiquan Zhu, ed., *The People's Republic of China Today: Internal and External Challenges*, (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2011), pp. 358-60.

² Ibid., p. 358.

³ Ankit Panda, "Confirmed: Construction Begins on China's First Overseas Military Base in Djibouti," *The Diplomat*, February 29, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/02/confirmed-construction-begins-on-chinas-first-overseas-military-base-in-djibouti/>, accessed on October 16, 2016.

⁴ Evans S. Medeiros and Bates Gill, *Chinese Arms Exports: Policy, Players and Process*, (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2000), p. 51.

⁵ Koh S. L. Collin (2012), "Political 'New Dawn' in Myanmar: Implications and Future Prospects for the Myanmar Navy", *Journal of Defense Studies & Resource Management*, June 24, 2012, doi: 10.4172/2324-9315.1000e104, <http://www.scitechnol.com/2324-9315/2324-9315-1-e104.php>, accessed on February 4, 2013.

⁶ "China, Myanmar vow to deepen military cooperation," *Xinhuanet*, May 25, 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-05/25/c_135387054_2.htm, accessed on October 5, 2016.