

CHINA'S EXPANDING MARITIME AMBITION & GROWING NAVAL POWER

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Symbolic gestures are most often a mix of intent and ambition. China's recent success in its bid for a bloc for exploration and exploitation of minerals and natural resources on the Indian Ocean sea-bed is at once an expression of intent, self-confidence and ambition. It additionally introduces an element of a sense of 'ownership' to its presence in the Indian Ocean.

China's long-standing bid to secure a presence in the Indian Ocean has not been deterred by the recent escalating tension in the East China and South China Seas, where China remains keen on establishing its dominance. Beijing first unambiguously expressed confidence that its Navy had such capability in May 2009. That year a senior officer of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), told the visiting US Admiral Keating, ostensibly half jocularly, that: 'as we develop our aircraft carriers why don't we reach an agreement, you and I. You take Hawaii East, we'll take Hawaii West and the Indian Ocean. We'll share information and we'll save you all the trouble of developing your naval forces west of Hawaii'. The proposal articulated long-held Chinese aspirations.

It reinforced China's effort of December 2008, when a PLAN flotilla unilaterally sailed to conduct anti-piracy operations off the Gulf of Aden in the Indian Ocean. PLAN ships have remained in the Indian Ocean ever since, displaying their capacity for extended stays and carrying out limited operations. Chinese Admirals subsequently voiced the need for China to have bases abroad. In December 2009, Paris-educated Rear Admiral Yin Zhou suggested that China establish a permanent base in the Gulf of Aden to support its anti-piracy operations. The proposal was posted on the Chinese Defence Ministry website. Rear Admiral Yin Zhou justified the proposal saying that supplying

and maintaining the fleet off Somalia was challenging without such a base. The idea has been supported in China's official media and web forums.

China has been steadily developing its maritime capability since the early 1980s. The primary objective has been to deter and delay 'hostile' navies from disrupting any potential military operations against Taiwan, or China's attempts to 'recover' claimed territories in the South China Sea. China's naval modernization accordingly focussed on building submarines, in addition to surface ships. It currently has over seventy submarines including the recently added indigenously-built nuclear-powered submarines. It accelerated construction of advanced guided missile frigates, guided missile destroyers and attack submarines. It unveiled the *Dong Feng 21D* (DF-21) anti-Ship Ballistic Missile (ASBM) capable of hitting moving targets and aircraft carriers. Hinting at the effective deployment of this capability, China's strategic missile force, namely the Second Artillery, carried out exercises when Beijing felt under pressure because the US and South Korea held their largest ever joint naval exercises

in the Yellow Sea in early 2010. Later, in July 2011, *People's Liberation Army* (PLA) Chief of General Staff, Chen Bingde, for the first time publicly disclosed that the *Dong Feng 21D* anti-Ship Ballistic Missile (ASBM) had a range of 2700-kms.

Plans were scaled-up once Beijing felt it was ready for a larger role, including in distant waters, and it commenced building an aircraft carrier. Many of the vessels necessary for forming a carrier group already exist in the PLAN. In January 2007 Huang Qiang, spokesman for the Commission of Science, Technology, and Industry for National Defense, reported that China

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possessed the capability to build an aircraft carrier. Then, in November 2008, Gen. Qian Lihua, director of the Ministry of Defense Foreign Affairs Office, declared that the world should not be surprised if China built an aircraft carrier. After the deployment of two Chinese destroyers to the Somali coast for anti-piracy operations in December 2008, China's Ministry of Defense spokesman, Huang Xueping, reported that China would now "seriously consider" construction of an aircraft carrier.

On April 6, 2011, photographs of the 70,500-ton, 990-foot aircraft carrier were posted on Chinese websites. The photographs clearly depicted the armaments fitted on board, which included Type 1030 30mm CIWS guns and FL-3000N missiles systems (all 18 cell varieties) for defensive weapons and APAR and Sea Eagle Radar sensors being fitted with an Optical Landing System. The photographs revealed that the aircraft carrier, possibly to be named '*Shi Lang*', the name of an ancient Chinese Admiral who conquered Taiwan, was then seventy percent complete and could carry out sea trials by the end of the year. The aircraft carrier actually conducted five days of sea trials from August 10, 2011. Another indicator that the aircraft carrier was nearly ready was the appointment of 50-year old PLAN Captain Li Xiaoyan, an experienced navy, army and air force commander who has studied how to command an aircraft carrier. Presently holding the rank of Senior Colonel, Li Xiaoyan was assigned in December 2010 to Dalian, where the aircraft carrier '*Varyag*' is berthed. China's *Dongfang Zaobao* reported that the aircraft carrier will see service in the East, North and South China Seas.

According to official Chinese media reports Li Xiaoyan was chosen as commander of China's first aircraft carrier because of his well-rounded tri-service military experience. Born in 1961 in Changchun City of Jilin Province in northeastern China, Li first joined the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) where he received aviation training at the Second Aviation Preparatory School in 1979. He later attended Russia's Kuznetsov Naval Academy for advanced command studies in March 1996.

Indicative of the plans to build more aircraft carriers—three aircraft

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carrier groups are expected to be inducted into service within the next five years—Bai Yaoping, another naval aviation pilot and course-mate of Li Xiaoyan, was on July 4, 2011, appointed Vice President of the Dalian Naval School to train the new generation of PLA Navy commanders. Li Xiaoyan and Bai Yaoping were among the ten outstanding pilots picked for training in the first and only 'pilot warship captain class' held at the Guangzhou Warship Academy in 1987.

Approval by the 162-member, Jamaica-based International Seabed Authority, of China's application for exploration of a 10,000 square kilometer polymetallic sulphide ore deposit bloc on the Indian Ocean sea-bed, is an important step. It confirms Beijing's plans to extend its influence on a long-term basis in to the Indian Ocean. It simultaneously expands the scope of China's search for scarce and much needed mineral and natural resources from the land to the ocean floor. China joins three other entities to be awarded such a contract, the others being two companies in Tonga and Nauru for the Pacific Ocean and the Russian government for the mid-Atlantic ridge. The venture, which also gives China a modicum of 'ownership' in the Indian Ocean, will permit China to map the sea-bed and identify suitable spots including for mining gold, silver, lead, zinc and copper. The bid was filed consequent to the discovery of clues by a Chinese government-sponsored expedition team in 2005 that an enormous belt of polymetallic sulphides existed.

China's application to the International Seabed Authority clearly signals its desire to maintain a long-term presence in the Indian Ocean. Mineral exploration activity, which will take a long time once it commences, will require Chinese scientific research and supply vessels to regularly ply the sea lanes to the designated spot. It will entail regular visits by PLAN vessels. Giving an idea of the envisaged time-frame, Han Xiqiu, a researcher with China's State Oceanic Administration's Second Institute of Oceanography based in Hangzhou, Zhejiang, said that mining activities will not start 'until we have solved the environmental issues. We may need to wait for years, if not decades'.

The bid simultaneously brings into focus China's underwater research and warfare capability. It is one of

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the few nations with deep-sea exploration capabilities and recently sent its first manned deep-sea submarine, the '*Jiaolong*' to a depth of 5,057 metres in the Pacific Ocean. The deep-sea rift south of Madagascar, which is the area where China has been awarded the bloc by the International Seabed Authority, reaches a depth of 3,000 metres. Plans are to test the '*Jiaolong*' to a depth of 7,000 metres next year.

While the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) will continue to receive the major share of the country's defence allocations, maritime defence capability will be augmented by additional budgetary infusions to the Ocean and Fisheries Administration, provincial maritime administrations and to shipyards. The management of territorial waters in China is dispersed among the fisheries, customs, maritime, border armed police and other departments. In 2008, the State Council defined the charter of the State Oceanic Administration of China as to: "protect national maritime rights and interests according to law ... in the waters under the jurisdiction of regular rights of law-enforcement system, cruise, investigate illegal activities." Ocean surveillance is under the three 'Sea Corps' commands of the State Oceanic Administration of China. Together they have more than 120 law enforcement vessels of different types and a number of law enforcement aircraft. The 'Global Times' disclosed in July that the number of vessels with the State Oceanic Administration will increase to 350 by 2015 and 520 by 2020. Meanwhile, Chinese military analysts have called for a unified maritime force. An article in *Jiefangjun Bao* (July 27, 2011) stated that 'presently the People's Republic of China is facing a very grim situation in the protection of its rights and interests of the seas. More than half of the three million sq kms of waters that should fall under China's jurisdictions according to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea are under demarcation disputes with peripheral countries. Large numbers of China's islands have been invaded and occupied and China's oil, gas and fishery resources have often been plundered...China's maritime law enforcement forces are scattered among the oceanic, maritime safety, fishery administration, custom, border defense and other departments...China should build a team of highly efficient and practical maritime law enforcement forces as soon as possible'.

In addition to the emphasis on the construction of new and more advanced missiles, ships and submarines, Beijing

has been quietly focusing R&D efforts on strengthening its undersea warfare capability.

There has been unwavering focus on the design, development and manufacture of Unmanned Underwater Vessels (UUV). Of the countries in the region China already has the largest submarine fleet. The UUVs would be part of China's asymmetric subterranean warfare strategy. The UUV programme was initiated as part of the secret "863" Programme. US analyst Richard Fisher stated in a report that in 1996, China revealed a UUV featuring artificial intelligence and automatic controls which could reach a depth of 6,000 metres. It was developed with Russian assistance. A new unmanned patrol-cum-surveillance vessel was unveiled by China at the Zhuhai show in 2006. This vessel was described as useful for long-range reconnaissance, communication relay, electronic interference, target strike, submarine mines search, anti-submarine combat etc. In 2007, the official Chinese Television channel telecast visuals of a PLA Navy minesweeper using a UUV for counter mine operations. UUVs have a variety of potential applications and can be used to effectively hamper an adversary's operations.

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Possible uses of UUVs envisage using them in the mode that Chinese military literature favours, namely the "swarming concept". Lyle Goldstein of the China Maritime Studies Institute of the US Naval War College has assessed that the UUVs could be used in "swarms" as part of an undersea network that could be deployed for sensing, shooting or as communication relay stations. They would also be low cost.

China has designated a number of specialized institutes to work on UUVs, which suggests that it has invested a considerable quantum of funds along with the necessary research and development (R&D) effort in the project. The 702nd Research Institute of the China Shipbuilding Industry, Shipbuilding Engineering Institute of Harbin Engineering University and the Institute of Underwater Engineering of Shanghai's Jiao Tong University are among the research institutes involved in the design, development and manufacture of the UUVs. The Shenyang Institute of Automation Robotics Laboratory developed the Hairen-I remote-controlled undersea robot. Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics developed the SPC-3 Robotfish UUV while Tianjin University fabricated glider-type UUVs. The Ningbo Jiayang Machine Company has manufactured and offered for sale a 'Mini Unmanned Submarine' of 3,000 m length with a maximum speed of 3M/s and which can reach a

depth of 300 feet. The company advertises it as useful for 'lifesaving, military, engineering and cruise'. It is very probable that Chinese researchers have been working on advanced guidance systems for the UUVs so that they could be effectively used in maritime undersea warfare. Their usage would initially be in the Taiwan Strait and the waters surrounding the Spratlys and Paracels but, as their quality and capabilities improve, they can be used in more distant waters including the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean. This effort to develop UUVs meshes neatly with China's policy of strengthening its asymmetric offensive military capability.


In the context of the South China and East China Seas, which are the central areas of rivalry, China has been systematically preparing a legal basis for its claims by legislating laws and flourishing ancient maps to reinforce its claims to sovereignty. On the sidelines of the Fourth Session of the Eleventh National People's Congress (March 5-13, 2011) held in Beijing, Liu Cigui, head of China's State Oceanic Administration, disclosed that an "island census is aimed at clarifying the total number, area and resources data of the country's islands". China had promulgated and put into effect a 'Law on Island Protection' on March 1, 2010, which Liu Cigui described as being "conducive to better island protection and the management of uninhabited islands". China last conducted an 'island census' in the 1980s which revealed that the country had over 6,500 uninhabited islands accounting for 93.8 per cent of the total. The Twelfth Five Year Plan's (2011-2015) section on socio-economic development, approved by this NPC session, elaborated on accelerating the planning and development of the Xisha (Paracels) and Nansha (Spratlys) archipelagos and adjacent waters. The stated objective is to enhance the protection of the Paracels and Spratly archipelagos, promote tourism and construct fishery logistics facilities in the Paracels. There

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has been separate indication that China is pushing ahead with plans to develop its claimed maritime area. During the release of China's Marine Development Report 2010, Sun Zhihui, Director of the State Oceanography Bureau, said that China had 'entered a new phase in marine development and will need to formulate a new strategy and policy'. The report also disclosed that the total value of China's marine products in 2009 had reached Yuan 3196.4 billion.

Beijing's long-term naval plans were spelt out by PLAN Commander Wu Shengli in an interview with CCTV shortly before the Navy Review in Qingdao in 2009. He announced that PLAN had been directed to place 'preparations for maritime military struggle on the top of the national security and military strategy'. He added that China will seek to develop 'technology heavy' forces based around the aircraft carrier, implying an emphasis on power projection including aimed at land-based targets. Though following Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to the US earlier this year the level of rhetoric has dropped, the PLAN's build up and activities confirm that Beijing intends, in due course, to 'recover' sovereignty over major parts of the South China Sea and establish its dominance in maritime territories of its interest. The present decade is likely to witness more instances of China asserting its maritime territorial sovereignty especially in the South China and East China Seas, leading to heightened tension in the region.

The potential sale of advanced UUVs to Pakistan will add another dimension to India's maritime security threat. India's military and security establishment need to take serious note. Major lapses like the undetected and unchallenged arrival of three ships, two of them large and one carrying over 25 people, on to India's western shores after traversing 2,320 nautical miles, can no longer be allowed.



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