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Session II: Maritime Ambitions and Maritime Security

Dr. Valérie Niquet

Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique

Paris, France

SWP

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4
10719 Berlin
Phone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org

Asian navies' modernization: the factors and consequences of modernization

Asia, from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean is the theater of a regional naval power increase both in terms of capabilities and in terms of doctrinal evolution. This power increase is part of the global development of military capabilities in the region where power projection capabilities are becoming a proclaimed ambition, if only a burgeoning reality. This of course increases the risks of regional and global destabilization with consequences, both at the economic and strategic level, far away from the Asian shores.

Moreover, this naval capabilities development takes place in a profoundly complex regional system, where the economic dimension, characterized by growing interdependence and interconnection, does not fully coincide with the strategic dimension. A region where in addition, "new risks" do indeed coincide with very "lively" older risks founded on ideological divide, bilateral rivalries and power policy in Asia.

Asian seas: a linking space....

This Asian naval field of communication borders respectively the second and third economies in the world, China and Japan. Plus India with a growth of 9 % in 2009 in spite of the economic crisis, and increasingly global economic interests. Across this maritime space, we find 80 % of the oil supply to Japan and to China, delivered from the Middle East and Africa through the Indonesian straights. But also more than one third of the world trade.

Organized around the Chinese workshop at the centre of this trade hub, Asia today is the primary engine of world growth and its global weight increased after the economic crisis of 2008.

The importance of merchant fleets in the region reflects this dynamism. The first is Japan, with 3720 boats (173 millions tons, 80% sous pavillon de complaisance); China comes 4th in the world with 3500 boats but only 93 millions tons, (42% sous pavillon de complaisance), Korea 6th (47 mt), HK 8th, Taiwan 11th and Singapore 12th.¹

This Asian maritime space is thus a zone of intensive contacts and communications, reflecting increasing economic regionalisation and globalization, with however a poor level of institutionalization of security mechanisms. Formats do exist, but their proliferation testifies more to regional rivalries than to cooperation and reflects the division of regional actors.

¹ UNCTAD Review of Maritime Transport 2009, UNCTAD, 12-08-2009.

... With a low level of institutionalization

In this context of rather weak institutionalization of security mechanisms, we have also a proliferation of naval cooperation initiatives, more often reflecting the diversity of interests and intra or extra regional rivalries, rather than a real spirit of cooperation and confidence building. These initiatives are characterized by either a lack of consensus (PSI), or a limited scope (cost guard initiative between Japan, South Korea and Japan).

These initiatives, often suspected of lacking in transparency regarding their real motivations and objectives, are also subject to a veiled - or not so veiled - leadership rivalry, a reflexion of strategic instability in the region. Bilateral maneuvers, even when they only concern exercises of sea rescue, can also be interpreted as “demonstrations of force” towards a potential adversary rather than exercises in naval diplomacy.

In fact in the region, cooperation does work when it answers specific objectives, and respect strict non-interference principles, as in South Asia with the Malacca straight security initiative against terrorism.

A diverse typology of risks

This is a region however, where you find the conjunction of a large typology of risks and unresolved tensions, a conceptual context still characterized for most countries by balance of power, zero sum games and realism, and big powers with growing military capabilities and international influence inside or outside the UN security council.

There is a mixture of « traditional » and « new » risks, from territorial conflicts inherited or not from Second World War, cold war or the independences processes, to humanitarian and environmental risks, piracy, proliferation, traffics etc.

At the junction between strategic and economic interests, incidents concerning off shore energy resources and fishing rights have been on the increase in 2009, with a preoccupying blur between civilian and military ships in a kind of « proxy naval war » using civilian means to exercise coercion and pressure. This is the case in South China Sea, where Chinese boats boarded twenty Vietnamese fishing boats in 2009 and, on June 23, off the coast of Indonesia, where former Chinese warships, under the Fisheries Administration confronted with guns an Indonesian fishing boat.

The last and most preoccupying tension occurred around the Senkaku/Diaoyutai archipelago, where the Chinese captain of a fishing boat, apparently rammed twice into Japanese Coastguards boats in the perimeter of 12 NM around the Senkaku. Coming after a growing level of Chinese naval gesticulation in the East China Sea,

in 2009 and 2010, this led to a major crisis with Japan, and destroyed in a few weeks a lot of goodwill in the region regarding the “peaceful rise” of China.

The modernization of Asian navies: common and specific factors

It is in this complex, fragile and tense strategic context that the development of naval capabilities in Asia takes place. This development answers factors both common to most countries in the region and ones that are more specific.

Among common factors there is:

The desire to acquire markers of power such as naval power, which sign the extension, or globalization of the global influence of regional actors. This factor is reinforced by the existence of “rival couples” (China-India, China-Japan, Singapore-Malaysia).

In the case of the PRC, this factor is all the more important as the grandeur of the Chinese Empire has been vanquished, in the XIXth century, by the humiliating naval superiority of western powers. Moreover, as, at the beginning of the XXth century, Japan, on the contrary, soon excelled in naval power, the first non-European power to defeat on the sea a western power, Russia, less than 30 years after the Meiji restoration. For the PRC leadership there may be a dimension of historical revenge that must also be taken into account.

Globalization of exchanges and economic interests, and a growing dependency on sea lanes of communication is another common factor, and an argument, for interest groups in favour of the development and modernization of naval capabilities.

Last but not least, the participation to multilateral military operations other than wars (MOOTW) (PKO, War against terror in a non-combatant position in the case of Japan, anti piracy, natural disasters etc.) constitutes a third common factor in the development of naval capabilities.

However, beyond these common factors, the modernization of Asian navies meets specific logics that are for a larger part organized around the pivot of the rise of military and naval capabilities of the People's Republic of China. This leads to a phenomenon of actions and reactions that feeds the building of Asian navies and the pace of doctrinal developments at regional level. A phenomenon whose repercussions extend far beyond the area.

People’s Republic of China

The development of maritime capacity in the People's Republic of China serves several logics, including the following:

The defence of its interests on and overseas. I will only mention oil dependency, China today imports around 50 % of its oil, mostly from the middle-East and Africa, across the Indian Ocean, the Malacca straight and the South China Sea. In relation to this dependency, one of the scenarios envisioned by the PLA would be a possible blockade of its oil imports, vital in times of war, in case of a conflict with Taiwan. This new dependency and growing interests overseas has been an argument in favour of the acquisition of an aircraft carrier, even though the ultimate motive might be more prestige and regional status than necessity.

The increased willingness to implement its maritime territorial claims and put into effect the 1992 law on territorial sea and contiguous zones of the PRC, which mentions in its article 2 Taiwan and adjacent islands, but also all the islands in the China sea. After a rather long period of appeasement, we saw tensions rising again in 2009. In March 2009, China for the first time declared that the South China Sea was part of its “core interest”, thus strongly reasserting its rights and its willingness to implement them.

Beijing has most certainly been disappointed by the strong signs of reengagement in the Asia pacific given by Washington in the last few months. Maneuvers organized with South Korea off the Korean peninsula, joint rescue exercises with Vietnam both involving the US aircraft carrier were perceived as direct challenges to China's claims in the region.

- The expression of power struggles for regional leadership with India and Japan in particular. This is particularly so vis-à-vis Japan, which can boast of a strong naval tradition and, for the time being, the strongest navy in Asia, at least in qualitative terms.

- The gradual acquisition, in the context of Sino-Taiwanese conflict of a significant deterrent and anti access capability vis-à-vis the United States. It is significant that, before the joint US Korean manoeuvres to answer the Cheonan incident, the PRC sent through retired military personnel strong signals to try to “sanctuaries” the Yellow sea.

In terms of capabilities, China recently built a new submarines base in Hainan and is also apparently trying to develop an ASBM capability, based on the DF 21. A recent article in the Global Times mentioned that “China ought to convince the International community of its reliable carrier killing capabilities.”²

China's ambitions are considerable, with clearly stated objectives, a new doctrine of "offshore defense" (*yuan yang fang*) and the expansion of the scope of the concept of "Core national interest" (*guojia hexin liyi*). Capabilities are in constant progression, (Aircraft carrier projects, landing platforms, submarines etc.) in scope with the economic development of the PRC, and the average annual 15 %

² South China Morning Post, 19-09-2010.

growth of its military budget starting in 1990, even if the results are still rather limited.

This development of the CCP naval capabilities and ambitions, expressed without restraint, particularly since the financial and economic crisis of 2008, which resulted in a new Chinese self-confidence and assertiveness, causes chain reactions throughout area.

Japan

Faced with the rise of the PRC, and despite constitutional constraints and the "pacifist" tropism of at least part of the new DPJ administration, Japan strengthens its naval capabilities. For the first time since 1976, the number of submarines, largely mobilized in surveillance missions against the Soviet Union during the Cold War, will be increased from 66 to 78 in 2020, with probably the same goal of "controlling" the passage of Chinese submarines from the China Sea to the Pacific Ocean.³

In 2009, the PRC caused incidents with the Japan Coast Guards off Okinawa and the Senkaku archipelago (Diaoyutai), and, despite ongoing negotiations on the gas fields, the theater of the East China Sea remains extremely sensitive as demonstrated by the last spat of disputes and escalation of tensions.

The objective to build the capabilities to defend remote islands, possible objects of targeted action on the part of the PRC, and to ensure national sovereignty over the entire maritime area of Japan is now clearly expressed and Japan, even mentioned the possibility to build a corps of Marines to meet this mission.⁴

However, the main result of rising tensions with China in 2010 has been a strengthening of the alliance with the United States despite the unresolved question of the US military bases in Okinawa.

Republic of Korea

The development of the naval capabilities of the Republic of Korea also responds to a double logic of conflict with the North, as recalled by the sinking of the Cheonan in March 2010, but also of uneasiness vis-à-vis the PRC's military and strategic development. Indeed, Beijing's strategy of interdiction of the "Yellow Sea", which also borders the coasts of Korea, and the support to the North Korean regime, is profoundly destabilizing. As in response to that strategy, Seoul recently mentioned the issue of Ieoe islets, or rocks, located in this area.

³ Robert Kaplan, « While the US is distracted China Develops Sea Power », 26-09-2010, Washington Post.

⁴ Asahi Shimbun, 06-09-2010.

The development of the Korean Navy takes part in the context of the alliance with the United States, reinforced as in the case of Japan by a growing anxiety concerning the PRC's ambitions in the region, and the establishment of a missile defence system oriented against the North Korean threat but also against the threat - at least potentially - posed by the PRC.

South-East Asia

In Southeast Asia, the logic of modernization of naval capabilities is also double. Faced with the rise of China, the ASEAN countries have long struggled to unite around a common position.

But the rise of Chinese ambitions in the South China Sea, and the development of its projection capabilities have contributed to a change of perception and position, and is one of the factors of south-east Asian fleet modernization programs and the submarines have become over the recent year one of the privileged vectors of the naval forces of the region. These submarine forces being well adapted to patrol in shallow waters, strewn with narrow routes. Vietnam for instance decided to buy six Russian kilo submarines to strengthen its defence capacity. Malaysia bought two submarines from France and Indonesia might be interested in doing the same.

At the sub-regional level, bilateral rivalries are also a factor. As is the need to meet the missions of fighting against the "new" risks of terrorism, traffics and piracy.

South Asia

This double-sided logic can also be found in India, vis-à-vis the PRC, with a strong will, on the part of New Delhi, to assert India's interests in the Indian Ocean, and its suspicion of China's increasing role in the region. And vis-à-vis Pakistan of course, another close ally of the PRC.

India, whose surface fleet now exceeds the capacity of China, observed with interest the participation of China in the operations against piracy off the Somali coast, and the rise of the Chinese navy's projection capabilities and proclaimed ambitions.

New Delhi, also notes with concern the growing commercial and military presence of China in South Asia, and China's active participation in the construction of ports in Burma and Pakistan but also in Sri Lanka, the famous "pearl necklace" extending from the Pacific ports to the shores of Africa and even Europe with strong Chinese interests and investments in Le Pirée.

In this context, India's position has changed dramatically over the past twenty years, particularly vis-à-vis Western countries and the United States.

A major « external actor » the United States

The United States, and the seventh fleet, must of course be regarded as "Asian" naval power in their own right because of the weight they represent and the essential role they play in the current and future balance of the region. This crucial balancing role has been taken into account by the Obama administration which expressed its will to “be back” in Asia in 2009, reinforced by the secretary of State, Hillary Clinton speech in Hanoi at the Asean ARF meeting of July 2010, after a few months of growing naval tensions with China.

At this meeting, Hillary Clinton proclaimed the United States « national interest » in free navigation in the South China Sea and, more importantly received the backing of 11 south East Asian nations.

To further demonstrate this willingness to assume its responsibility to its allies and as a stabilizing factor, US naval gesticulation in the region increased, with common manoeuvres organized with South Korea, Vietnam in the South China Sea and soon with Japan.

In terms of capabilities of course, Washington remains the leading naval power in Asia, organized around its network of bases and alliances and the projection capabilities of the seventh Fleet. In that sense, one of the major destabilizing factor in the region would be for the US to overemphasize China's actual military power, particularly naval power, to the point of taking the risk of disengagement, thus giving rise to a feeling of abandonment among its allies and of over confidence in the PRC.

To this « balancing » mission one must add of course for the US the persistent factors of the risks of terrorism and proliferation of WMD, and the implementation of the PSI with the successful operation against Myanmar and North Korea in 2009.

Conclusion

As a conclusion I would say that, even with limited capabilities to act, Europe cannot watch from the outside, or, as one would say in Asia, from the top of the mountain on the other side of the river, while the tigers fight. The EU also has a direct interest in freedom of navigation on the sea and a consensual interpretation of the United Nations Conventions on the Law of Sea (UNCLOS).

Thus, our first and foremost obligation would be to clearly express a collective support for the United States and there allies in Asia on this very sensitive issue,

in order to contribute to an immediate control of any risks of escalation of tensions.

In this framework, France of course, as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, and with part of its territory at the margin of this region in Oceania, remains resolutely committed to the prevention of any kind of crisis, environmental, humanitarian or more conventional, in Asia.