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Factors Fuelling China's Expanding Maritime Operations

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CHIETIGJ BAJPAEE, JUL 10 2012

China's security interests have traditionally been oriented toward the continental rather than the maritime domain given the plethora of threats that have historically emanated from its northern and western land borders. In this context, the navy has played second-fiddle to the army with the former pursuing relatively modest maritime security interests such as supporting land-based operations as well as practicing sea-denial capabilities aimed at deterring US intervention in a conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

However, recent years have witnessed an expansion of Beijing's maritime security interests given the strategic importance of regional waterways as transit points crucial to China's growing trade and resource imports, which have made concerns over possible disruptions along maritime chokepoints more threatening to Beijing. For instance, some 90 percent of China's total trade and 80 percent of its oil imports transit the South China Sea.[i] China has also shown a growing interest in accessing offshore resources to fuel its economy. The South China Sea for example, is estimated to hold some seven billion barrels of oil and 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.[ii]

This has led China to adopt an increasingly assertive role in the maritime domain, with implications for the freedom of navigation, regional security, and the evolution of the regional security architecture.

This article frames China's recent tensions over maritime territorial disputes as part of the country's ongoing strategic reorientation from the continental to maritime domain. This reorientation has been reflected in the growth of historical narratives that emphasize the country's naval traditions, and in the development of naval platforms that have strengthened the country's sea-denial, sea-control and naval power projection capabilities. The unique nature of regional disputes in the maritime domain has further fuelled China's role in the recent escalation of maritime tensions. These include the presence of multiple levels of interaction between states in the maritime domain, the growing internationalisation of maritime territorial disputes, and regional norms of interaction that emphasize minimal institutionalisation. The article concludes by noting the potential for regional cooperation among local powers given their shared interests in maintaining freedom of navigation and protecting the 'global commons', especially as Beijing's maritime security interests become less geographically-bounded.

Territorial Maritime Disputes

The persistence of a number of longstanding maritime territorial disputes between Beijing and many of its neighbors demonstrates China's proclivity to 'rock the boat' in the maritime domain and go against its traditional preference for maintaining a low profile in its international relations.[iii] China's regional maritime territorial disputes include contesting the sovereignty over: the Daiyutai/ Senkaku islands with Japan; the Suyan/ Leodo Reef with South Korea; the Reed/ Recto Bank and the Scarborough Shoal with the Philippines; the Paracel Islands with Vietnam; and portions of the Spratly Islands with the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei. In this context, while the Chinese navy presently plays a secondary role over contested regional maritime territories compared its paramilitary and civilian institutions, the growing strategic significance of the maritime domain will lead to a more prominent role for the PLA Navy (PLAN) in these disputes over time.

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Doctrinal shifts

Complementing China's growing maritime security interests, the country has also witnessed a renewal of historical narratives that elevate the importance of its maritime traditions. For instance, China has moved beyond the so-called "near-coast defense" to "near-seas active defence" and increasingly into the realm of "far-sea operations". [iv] The Chinese government has also emphasized the need to prepare for "local wars," alluding to resolving the plethora of maritime territorial disputes that scatter the region.[v] There has also been a renewed focus in China on the naval voyages of Zheng He during the Ming Dynasty in the 15th century and proponents of expanding the country's naval power, such as the former naval chief, Admiral Liu Huaqing. These developments have demonstrated a concerted effort by Beijing to elevate the strategic importance of the country's naval traditions.[vi]

Growing Capabilities

Beyond rhetoric, China has also demonstrated ambitious plans for the development and acquisition of naval platforms aimed at strengthening the country's sea-denial, sea-control and naval power projection capabilities. Notably, the navy's 'anti-access, area-denial' capabilities have improved as China has modernized its sub-surface submarine fleet. China's indigenously developed Type 071 amphibious assault vessel has also strengthened the PLAN's growing capability to support expeditionary operations.[vii]

To accommodate its expanding naval ambitions, China is in the process of establishing a fourth fleet in Sanya that some reports say will ultimately consist of 2-3 aircraft carrier battle groups.[viii] This fleet, which is indicative of China's growing maritime interests in the South China Sea and beyond, will complement the North Sea Fleet based in Qingdao, the East Sea Fleet in Ningbo and South Sea Fleet based in Zhanjiang.[ix] These expanded capabilities have manifested themselves in demonstrations of China's growing projection of power beyond its traditional sphere of interest around the first and second "island chains".[x] These include its first naval exercises in the Pacific Ocean in 2011, which followed closely on the footsteps of the Navy's revolving three-ship deployment in support of anti-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean since 2009.[xi]

To be sure, much of the hype surrounding the country's naval capabilities has been exaggerated, such as the outcry that followed China's launch of its first aircraft carrier—the refitted former Soviet carrier, the Varyag—which held its first sea trials in August 2011. [xii] This platform remains of limited strategic value in the absence of a full carrier battle group to support its operations. Moreover, the likely candidate for carrier-based aircraft, the J-15, is still under development and the Navy also lacks an offshore depot to support long-range operations.[xiii] Nonetheless, despite the operational vulnerability of aircraft carriers amid the proliferation of sea-denial platforms such as submarines and improved surveillance platforms, any state seeking to project power beyond its immediate region and exercise sea-control will require a carrier group capability. In this respect, China's ambition to construct additional indigenously developed carriers is indicative of the future outward trajectory of China's naval power.[xiv]

Related to this, according to a recent report by the Congressionally-mandated US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, more often than not the international community has underestimated the pace of China's military modernization. This has illustrated by the Yuan-class diesel electric submarine that was launched in 2004, the development of the Dongfeng-21D anti-ship ballistic missile in 2010, and the test flight of the prototype of China's fifth generation stealth fighter, the J-20 in 2011.[xv] The under-estimation of the country's military modernization initiatives has been fuelled by the opacity of China's defence decision-making apparatus and defense-industrial sector.

To be sure, China's expanding military capabilities do not necessarily preclude the possibility of cooperation in the maritime domain. China's rhetoric of maintaining "Harmonious Seas" and pursuing "new historic missions" through engaging in military operations other than war (MOOTW) suggest that Beijing's potential for cooperation in the maritime domain could grow as its maritime security interests move further from its coastline and become less geographically-bounded. [xvi] This is illustrated by the country's anti-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean, during which China co-chaired the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) meetings in 2010 that provides overall coordination for the multi-nation naval operations in the region.[xvii] The PLAN has also escorted non-Chinese

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vessels, including UN World Food Program convoys, through the Gulf of Aden.[xviii] The induction of one of the world's largest hospital ships, the Peace Ark in 2008, as well as the deployment of a Chinese missile frigate to the Mediterranean Sea in early 2011 to support the evacuation of Chinese nationals from Libya, is further evidence of the Chinese navy's growing humanitarian response capabilities. [xix] Such operations are likely to become increasingly commonplace given the growing outbound investment of Chinese companies, particularly in unstable parts of the world.

Regional factors

Beyond China's growing maritime capabilities and interests, several regional-level factors rooted in the unique nature of disputes in Asia's maritime domain have also acted as a catalyst for the escalation of China's recent maritime tensions. First, sovereignty in the maritime domain is more fluid or fungible than continental territory. This creates more room to maneuver in addressing maritime territorial disputes compared to disputed land borders, which can be more permanently occupied. Moreover, the players in the maritime domain are also more diverse. They include the navy, coastguard, local police, fishing communities, provincial, state or city-level authorities, and a plethora of government ministries. These multiple levels of interaction between states increase the opportunity for inter-state collaboration, but also fuel the possibility for misunderstanding, especially when sub-state groups and different levels of government send conflicting international signals and pursue conflicting interests.

With respect to China, there are some eleven government agencies with overlapping jurisdictions over the maritime domain, the most active of which are the Bureau of Fisheries Administration and China Marine Surveillance. It is worth noting, however, that both of these agencies have limited foreign policy experience. [xx] In some cases these multiple levels of interaction serve China's strategic interests by allowing it to project power and strengthen claims over disputed waters while remaining under the threshold of a full-scale military and political stand-off. It also allows Beijing to claim that belligerent actions are being carried out by autonomous actors rather than sanctioned by the central government in Beijing. For instance, Chinese fishing communities have come to play a prominent role as triggers of recent tensions with Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines, which were sparked by so-called 'rogue' vessels straying into disputed waters.

Second, the recent escalation of tensions in the maritime domain has been fuelled by the growing internationalization of maritime territorial disputes in the region. The most visible sign of this has been the proliferation of joint naval exercises between claimant and non-claimant stakeholders of regional maritime territorial disputes. For instance, India and Japan held their first bilateral naval exercises in June.[xxi] This followed closely on the heels of the first-ever joint naval exercise between China and Russia, which was held in mid-April in the Yellow Sea under the aegis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and coincided with the Balikatan military exercises between the United States and the Philippines off the coast of Palawan in the South China Sea.[xxii]

In recent memory, the most notable instance of an extra-territorial power overtly expanding its involvement in regional maritime affairs was when Hillary Clinton declared that the U.S. viewed the peaceful resolution of disputes in the South China Sea as a 'national interest'. [xxiii] This has been complemented by a renewed US commitment to allies facing maritime tensions with China, namely Japan and the Philippines, and rapprochements with other states maintaining precarious relations with China, such as Vietnam.[xxiv] This takes place amid the backdrop of the United States 'rebalancing' (formerly referred to as 'pivot') towards the Asia-Pacific region, which has already resulted in the establishment of new Marine rotations in Australia and the declared intention of deploying advanced littoral combat ships to Singapore. [xxv]

More generally, the U.S. is seeking to develop a regional posture capable of implementing the much-touted AirSea Battle Concept, the U.S. Navy and Air Force's response to China's "anti-access/area denial" strategy. These initiatives and others aim to further embed the United States into the maritime security dynamic of the region while challenging China's growing assertiveness in the maritime domain.

The United States is not the only major power stepping into the fray of these regional maritime territorial disputes. Japan has concluded agreements with the Philippines and Vietnam aimed at enhancing bilateral defence

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cooperation in the maritime domain, while Indian Navy vessels have gained permanent berthing rights at Nha Trang port in Vietnam. [xxvi] Vietnam has also ordered Kilo-class submarines and other naval platforms from Russia and received training from India in underwater warfare.[xxvii] Several countries have also sought to attract international oil companies to engage in exploration activities in disputed territories as a means to legitimize their claims.

These developments have angered China, which prefers to negotiate disputes in bilateral, non-institutionalized settings. Indeed, there has been no shortage of indications that China intends to vigorously contest extra-regional navies meddling in the affairs of the region. For instance, in July 2011 an Indian Navy vessel returning from a port call to Vietnam reportedly received radio contact from the Chinese Navy demanding that the vessel depart disputed waters in the South China Sea.[xxviii] Beijing has also opposed Vietnam granting exploration rights in offshore blocks located in disputed waters to foreign companies like Russia's Gazprom, Indian ONGC Videsh, and the US-based Exxonmobil.[xxix]

Finally, maritime cooperation is held hostage to regional norms of interaction that emphasize minimal institutionalization. The eight-point guidelines reached at the 18th ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in July 2011 are a step in the right direction toward operationalizing the 2002 'Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea'. [xxx] However, both the 2011 guidelines and 2002 declaration have failed to quell the war of words and sporadic skirmishes in the South China Sea amid the absence of a legally-binding code of conduct and any specific reference to the geographic scope of the agreement, including China's controversial 'nine-dotted line' claim. Sustainable cooperation in the maritime domain will also be contingent on confidence-building measures that transcend the maritime security sphere and address the root causes behind mutual mistrust. For instance, the Malacca Straits Patrols in Southeast Asia played a prominent role in quelling the piracy threat in the South China Sea. However, this functional cooperation was built upon pre-existing confidence-building mechanisms forged between regional powers through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

With respect to China, while the country has taken a leadership role in several security forums related to continental territory, including the SCO and the six-party talks on the Korean Peninsula, Beijing has generally played a marginal role in addressing maritime security issues. Instead, most maritime security initiatives have either been driven by ASEAN (e.g. Malacca Straits Patrols), the United States (Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), Container Security Initiative (CSI), International Ship and Port Security Facility Security (ISPS) Code) or other regional powers such as Japan (Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combatting Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP)).

Maritime Concert?

During the Cold War China's major inter-state conflicts were largely continental, rooted in national liberation struggles, ideological battles, and protecting sovereignty and territorial integrity (e.g. the Korean War (1950-53), Sino-Indian War (1962), Vietnam War (1968-75), Sino-Russian border conflict (1969) and Sino-Vietnamese border conflict (1979)). While ideational objectives related to sovereignty, protecting 'spheres of influence' and acquiring 'Great Power' status remain important to China, in the post-Cold War period material factors are increasingly emerging as catalysts for conflict. This includes the growing strategic significance of the maritime domain as an economic lifeline to China, as reflected in its growing dependence on foreign commodities and trade that is overwhelmingly transported by sea.

To be sure, for the foreseeable future China will lack the intent and capability to exercise unilateral maritime dominance over the Asia-Pacific while the United States remains the region's predominant military power and 'sea-based balancer'. [xxxi] As China remains focused on internal growth, development and the consolidation of political power, China's quest for maritime influence is likely to be confined to the realm of rhetoric, military modernization, and posturing in the form of naval exercises.

Ultimately, China and other regional powers have a shared interest in maintaining freedom of navigation, given the strategic importance of major waterways as transit points for their foreign trade and resource imports. To that end, these powers have a shared interest in having a coordinated approach toward combating non-traditional security

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threats, including maritime piracy, terrorism and arms, narcotics and people trafficking. Regional powers also have a shared interest in developing a stronger capacity to respond to natural disasters. In this context, China's proposal for the creation of a maritime cooperation fund for disputed territories and revelations that China, India and Japan are coordinating their anti-piracy patrols in the Indian Ocean within the framework of the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) mechanism demonstrates the potential for regional cooperation in the maritime domain.[xxxii] In the absence of such initiatives the maritime domain has the potential to emerge as a theatre of major power conflict in Asia rather than becoming a realm of cooperation to protect the 'global commons'.

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