



Australian, Indian, Japanese and US navies participated in the exercise Malabar 2020, November 2020 (US Navy/ Elliot Schaudt)

A maritime awakening to uphold norms of international conduct

On the 18th of October 2018, president Xi Jinping gave a speech for the 19th national congress of the Chinese Communist Party that indicated China’s intention to change the existing world order. Based on China’s glorious past, Confucianism and its success in creating ‘Socialism with Chinese characteristics’ in the post-war decades, he extrapolated China’s course on a timeline to 2049, the year that the Peoples Republic of China will celebrate its 100th birthday.

The China Dream

Xi Jinping’s ‘China Dream’ visualizes the country as leader of the world, after having displaced the USA from that position, and in control of the new world order, which will conform to its own standards.

The Chinese 5-year, 10-year and 15-year plans announced since that speech fit in seamlessly with that grand strategy. If Xi’s dream comes true, the world will look completely different. An autocratic China, as the world’s most powerful nation, will be in a position to change the rules of international law, and exercise control over

international institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the World Trade Organization (WTO) including GATT, the World Health Organization (WHO) and many others. There are few indications that the rest of the world is taking effective action to prevent such a development, which would clearly be detrimental to their well-being, economic prosperity and independence.

A presentation, ultimo October 2020, of its five-year plan bears witness to the fact that China, under Xi, is very much on schedule to meet the objectives of its

Grand Strategy. An economically booming China, having eliminated domestic poverty, is bringing sharp focus on the Belt and Road Initiative. In this frame China is heavily investing all over the world, taking interests in exploitation of strategic commodities and infrastructure, thereby moving these nations into dependency and a tributary status. At the same time, there is enhanced emphasis on the development of technologies related to information transmission and storage, 5G, the Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence and so on.

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All this will serve to boost China’s influence on the global playing field, by increasing its participation in building national infrastructure and creating unavoidable dependencies, world wide. The continuing build-up of Chinese armed forces, ordered by Xi, is meant to not only underpin his Grand Strategy, but also to support China’s territorial and other claims in its neighbourhood, and world-wide.

China’s Transgressions

While it is beyond debate that China has the right to develop itself as it sees fit, that freedom ends where it violates the integrity and rights of other nations, as defined by international law, and the universal standards regarding human rights. Our specific concerns, here, relate to:

- China’s forcible annexation of Tibet in 1950, its trespasses and claims on India’s territories, its claims on the Japanese Senkaku Islands, its illegal creation of artificial islands, based on fraudulent territorial claims in the South China Sea and its open threats to a democratic Taiwan. The continuing industrial-espionage and meticulously organized technology theft, worldwide hacking of websites, and clandestine attempts to influencing democratic processes with false information.
- Illegal and unreported fishing on a largescale, in the Western Indian Ocean around Madagascar and up to the eastern shores of Africa.
- China’s total disregard of the globally accepted Declaration of Human Rights. Ethnic and political tensions are reported to be simmering in non-Han majority areas like Tibet, Sinkiang, Mongolia, and Manchuria. Reports have emerged, of detention camps, across Xinjiang, in which about a million Muslim Uighurs are held, for political indoctrination. Autonomous Hong Kong, already in the throes of a pro-democracy movement, has seen a sharp rise in protests over new extradition laws, inviting harsh police reprisals.

China argues that issues related to human right and ethnic tensions are domestic affairs and other nations should mind their own business. But nations which do care about human dignity have a commonly felt

responsibility to raise these issues, especially if China is going to be a dominant power in the ‘new World Order.’ China’s deceitful claims on the South China Sea and the illegal construction of artificial islands, with military fortifications, have presented an unsuspecting world with a ‘fait accompli’. This was unacceptable and should never have been allowed to stand. Moreover, by its disdainful

rejection of the 2016 verdict of the UN Court of Arbitration, on its dispute with the Philippines, China has shown that it is not a law-abiding nation. While the Philippine Foreign Secretary Locsin

has declared the Court’s ruling to be non-negotiable, in September 2020, the UK, France and Germany issued a coordinated ‘note verbale’ to the UN, rejecting Beijing’s South China Sea claims and upholding the Court’s verdict.

Response of Western Democracies

One of the more painful lessons of history is that appeasement or even tolerance of those who violate international rules and agreements has invariably proved counterproductive, if not dangerous. This was amply proved by Hitler’s betrayal of British PM Neville Chamberlain’s naïve trust in the prelude to WW II. It is therefore time for us to shake off our complacency vis-à-vis China and think about restoring international order wherever it is violated. It is clear that this can only be achieved by resolute diplomacy, backed by hard and soft power, as well as a credible economic strategy.

The USA, during the Trump presidency, scored many ‘own-goals’ which seriously undermined its position as world leader. Europe was shocked when America decided to move away from its alliance oriented foreign policies and shed its commitment to these alliances. Realizing how vulnerable it was, Europe then sought stronger foreign policy coordination and a restoration of meaningful defense forces. With a new administration in place, it would be reasonable to expect, from the USA, a more rational approach to foreign policy, cognizant of multilateralism and steering away from protectionism. Hopefully, in the offing is a rededication to NATO from the USA as well as from Europe.

Europe, in spite of having attained the potential of an ‘economic superpower,’ has so far failed to evolve a coherent policy framework that will synergize its economic, political and military power. Hard power has been neglected to such an extent, over the last three decades, that Europe is barely able to, politically and military, keep interlopers away from its borders. While it has flourished economically, the lack of hard power makes Europe a ‘giant with feet of clay’ – albeit the past four years have seen some reawakening. In Europe, just as in America, there is growing awareness of the need for nations to cooperate in resisting China’s seemingly unlimited ambition to change the worldorder, so detrimental to all of us.

Most major nations, with a stake in the current world-order, share deep concerns about China's long-term intentions. There is, undeniably, a convergence of strategic interests between the US, NATO, Europe and a number of Indo-Pacific powers, which are in the 'front-line' as far as China's unfettered ambitions on land as well as at sea are concerned. There is a strong case for European powers to align with the USA and NATO partners, while reaching out to nations like India, Japan and Australia, in order to consolidate democratic forces, which have a vital stake in upholding principles like respect for territorial integrity, adherence to existing international law and free and independent development, rooted in the present world order.

Having assessed the situation through a European prism, let us see how it is viewed from the eastern-hemisphere.

A View from the East

The Indo-Pacific is home to the world's most populous nation (China) as well as the world's biggest democracy (India), and includes over half of the earth's population. Seven of the world's largest armies and six of its nine nuclear weapon states reside in the Indo-Pacific. Pre-COVIDS 19, the Indo-Pacific included not only the world's three largest economies – USA, China, and Japan – but also six of the fastest-growing ones. Nine of the world's busiest sea-ports are in the region, and 60 percent of global maritime trade transits through Asia, a great deal of it via the South China Sea. All this is made possible by free and open communication via the mediums of air, sea, land and cyber-space, that constitute the 'global commons.' The US unhesitatingly acknowledges that the Indo-Pacific is the "single most consequential region for its future." Even distant Europe has now been compelled, by the

'Given the military asymmetry between China and India, and the active China-Pakistan nexus, India's attention has been focused on the maritime domain, where it has many advantages'

growing salience of this region, to get involved in shaping of the Indo-Pacific international order. Consequently, after France and the Netherlands, Germany has become the third European country to release an 'Indo-Pacific Strategy'. The shift of politico-economic focus from the Euro-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific is of considerable significance to regional nations like India, which are overwhelmingly dependent on the sealanes for trade and energy and seek regional peace and tranquility.

China's geopolitical motives

Against this backdrop, it is important to examine the geopolitical rationale underpinning China's grand strategy, which seeks an expanded economic, political and military presence right across the Indo-Pacific. The 'Chinese characteristics' of this strategy are symbolized by the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI); in which the 'Belt' refers to Chinese ambitions on land and the 'Road,' to the 'Maritime Silk Road,' its seaward component.

This logic is rooted in a proposition put forth by English geographer Halford Mackinder's in 1904. Mackinder, known as the 'father of geopolitics', had pronounced that the 400-year era of sea power was over, and the future of global power lay not in Mahanian grandfleets dominating the global sea lanes, but in control of the vast land mass of 'Eurasia' which he called the 'World Island'. Mackinder marshaled geopolitics to argue that *'he who rules the World-Island commands the world.'*

In Mackinder's day, Eurasia was dominated by Imperial Russia, which was succeeded by the Soviet Union. But today, it is China, which is integrating Asia with Europe through its internal network of high-speed railways, energy pipelines and fibre-optic cables. Having followed Mackinder's prescription on land, China has also learnt from Admiral Mahan's wisdom; as evident from the ambitious Maritime Silk Road with its huge economic and security implications, cutting a swath across the Indo-Pacific, and penetrating Africa.

China's collective memory links its 'century of humiliation' to European domination of the seas. Maritime power has been considered by its leadership, not only as protection against foreign hegemony, but also as a potent instrument for attainment of political goals. China's grandstrategy is, therefore, underpinned by a huge build-up of maritime power – comprising a merchant fleet, a coast-guard, a maritimemilitia, a fishing fleet and a shipbuilding industry. Each of these elements of maritime power are the biggest in the world. China's growing naval fleet has overtaken the US Navy in numbers, and is expected to match it in capability in the foreseeable future.



The Dutch strategy towards China, 2019

India's China Dilemma

As far as Sino-Indian problems are concerned, they go back to the 1950s when China annexed Tibet, and made itself India's contiguous neighbour, with a 4000 km long border. The 1962 Sino-Indian War resolved nothing and created the anomaly of the so-called 'line of actual control' (LAC) instead of a mutually agreed international boundary. For many decades after 1962, the disputed LAC saw relative calm, but the past few years have seen a progressive rise in Chinese belligerence and border transgressions; culminating in the April 2020 attempt to unilaterally alter the LAC through massive military deployment.

A decade earlier, China had announced its revanchist agenda via the 'nine-dash line' in the South China Sea. Having weathered the COVIDS-19 pandemic with relatively little economic impact, it has reaffirmed this agenda by its actions in the South China Sea, and the Indian Ocean as well as in the Himalayas. An economically strong, expansionist, and militaristic state, China will use the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative not only to expand its sphere of influence via 'debt diplomacy,' but also to camouflage its grandiose maritime strategy which aims at dominance of the Indo-Pacific.

Given the military asymmetry between China and India, and the active China-Pakistan nexus, India's attention has been focused on the maritime domain, where India has many advantages. The waters of the Indian Ocean see over 120,000 merchantmen in transit, annually; carrying cargo worth a trillion dollars. Since these vessels carry



'As far as Sino-Indian problems are concerned, they go back to the 1950s when China annexed Tibet'. Indian prime minister Narendra Modi meets with Chinese president Xi Jinping (www.flickr.com)

90%-95% of China's and India's vital seaborne trade and energy traffic, the sea-lanes represent a vital 'jugular vein' which is vulnerable to naval interdiction/interference.

A Maritime Power Deficit?

The Indian Navy (IN), in spite of fiscal constraints, has emerged as a compact but professional and competent force, and India's fortuitous maritime geography will enable it to dominate both the Bay of Bengal as well as the Arabian Sea. We must, however, bear in mind that China's PLA Navy (PLAN) is underpinned by a powerful economy and supported by an efficient and prolific shipbuilding industry. The IN is not so fortunate and lags behind the PLAN, in numbers as well as capabilities, due to India's industrial and technological handicaps.

In the approaching era, a sharper focus on its neglected maritime domain would garner immense benefits for India. Such a focus would not only enhance India's maritime-security, vis-à-vis China, but also give a badly-needed boost to shipbuilding, expansion of the merchant fleet, modernization of ports and mechanization of fisheries. Collectively, this would have a huge beneficial impact on the economy, through growth of ancillary industries, skilling of youth and massive generation of employment - all contributing to its strategic objective of attaining self-reliance.

The Need for Power-balancing

As the economically and militarily weaker power, India also needs to resort to 'power-balancing' and seeking like-minded friends and partners to send out a message of deterrence to China. India's attraction as a partner lies not only in its powerful army and professional air force, but in its economic potential as well as its navy's reach and ability to project maritime power. It is often forgotten that India also happens to be a nuclear-weapon state with a three-dimensional deterrent in place.

The mid-1990s saw the navies of India and the US start a professional relationship, which has blossomed over the past 25 years, into a firm bond, via the annual naval exercise named 'Malabar.' Starting as an Indo-US bilateral, the exercise was expanded to accommodate Japan in 2015 and Australia in 2020. Thus, today, the participants of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or 'Quad' and of Exercise Malabar are common: US, India, Japan and Australia. Over the past decade, India's ties with the US have also been strengthened by the purchase of military hardware worth over US \$ 20 billion. This has breached a sixty-year long tradition of India sourcing weapons exclusively from the USSR/Russia.

Given China's predicted trajectory as an economic and military superpower, it is becoming clear that Beijing is unlikely to moderate its hegemonic approach or start showing respect for existing international norms. Today, the 'heat' is being felt mainly in China's neighbourhood, but tomorrow, this belligerence is likely to be experienced world-wide. Therefore, in order to restrain China's aggressive tendencies, there is need for nations to come



Ships of the Indian navy, from top to bottom: INS Ranjit (D53), INS Jyoti (A58) and INS Mysore (D60) (www.indiannavy.nic.in via commons.wikimedia.org)

together to show their solidarity and determination in a common cause.

An Indo-Pacific-European Concord?

It is in this context, that Indian strategists have been suggesting the formation of a broad-based 'Indo-Pacific Concord,' of like-minded democracies as an association with a maritime security charter, which has no offensive or provocative connotations. While the core of such a concord, already exists in the Malabar/Quad paradigm, it is obvious that the broader the base of such an organization, the more influence and authority it will be able to exert. While Indo-Pacific nations like Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines are logical candidates, a strong European representation will strengthen this association, immeasurably, both within and outside the UN.

So far, amongst European nations, it is only France which considers itself an Indian Ocean power, and maintains a permanent naval presence in this region. Perhaps it is time for the rest of Europe to consider the pros and cons of a more active participation in Indo-Pacific affairs. Apart from ensuring that international laws and norms

of behaviour are upheld, and peace prevails in the Indo-Pacific, such an association would have immense benefits in terms of economic, trade and technology partnerships, stretching across the globe.

Admiral (Retd) Arun Prakash served as Chief of the Indian Naval Staff, while Rear Admiral (JG) (Retd) Pieter Kok served as Commander of the Dutch Surface Fleet, Chief of Military Intelligence and Defense Attaché in Washington DC. Both authors were classmates in the Naval Command College course of the US Naval War College in Newport Rhode Island, in 1989-90. This article is written in a personal capacity.

Scan de code voor een kort (promotie)filmpje over de Chinese marine.

