

India's Maritime Space Tomorrow: Reviewing Indian Maritime Projection in Relation to Chinese Naval Ascendancy

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Abstract

The recent developments in Afghanistan must serve to at once quell all thoughts in our minds that Asia is a vital national interest to the West. While it does not favor the US-led World Order to have an ascendant China rise to dominance and consolidate its influence in Asia and in the China Seas, risking war with China over Central Asia is not an immediate or strategic security interest for the West. The Seas, however, have a different value attached to it. Meanwhile, India finds the regional Balance of Power rapidly changing and favoring China as it is surrounded geographically and strategically by either China or Chinese allies. Politically translated economic projects like the Belt and Road initiative and CPEC, the collapse of favorable stability in Afghanistan and a crucial vulnerability in the Siliguri corridor have left the Indian Ocean as the only domain at the moment, where India has some time to catch up to an ascendant Chinese presence from the East. While power projection through aircraft carriers is at a rough parity, submarines, asymmetrical vessels and simultaneous land harassment through Tibet and Kashmir provides China a significant edge in any major armed conflict with India. This produces a dilemma to Indian strategists on how to deal with the inevitable encirclement. The purpose of this paper is to use a theoretical approach to try and holistically understand the phenomena we are seeing today and why it is almost inevitable for naval powers to behave a certain way. Worthy of exploration are the shifting power dynamics in the Indo-pacific, its correlation to developments in Central Asia, and how India must strategically address a rising China.

Keywords: Balance of Power, Strategy, Geopolitics, World Order, Indo-Pacific

The Invasive Dragon

Before explorations of geopolitical circumstances are sought, it is important to observe the historical foundations upon which a state's foreign and military policy is based on. To understand Chinese actions, one must also understand the Chinese mindset. China's strategic core interest is

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to protect its Han heartland and to prevent the repetition of the humiliation it suffered under the Japanese and European powers, ie, sea powers. A weak navy allowed the invasion of China by foreigners' multiple times, the most recent memories being the Opium wars and the "rape of Nanjing" in 1937. This damage to Chinese pride, is called "century of humiliation". The only way to prevent this is to acquire sufficient buffer spaces between the heartland and other powers and to develop a strong navy to not only defend the homeland but also project power and prevent unwanted incursions. A reclamation of this lost pride and the creation of a strong Chinese military at all costs to prevent further humiliations is at the heart of Chinese foreign policy. China's economic rise has been described as Fuxing Hao which translates to "Renaissance". This is not surprising as it was this vision and this promise to the people, which enabled Xi Jinping to successfully purge the military and the Politburo and CCP from corrupt yet powerful officials. It is this promise of rejuvenation and a reclamation of lost Chinese pride that has helped Xi cling on to power as he slowly moved away from the Western philosophy of Marxism and openly embraced Nationalism. After all, he is quoted to have said, Communism in China, was, "communism with Chinese characteristics".

Another recent yet logical interest would be to maintain a firm grip over Tibet not only as a buffer territory but to seize the water sources of the Brahmaputra and other Himalayan rivers. China, having a population of a little over that of India, and being an industrial and an increasing military power, needs a lot of water – water which Tibet can supply. However, the river sources being shared among some of the most populous places of the world, namely, China, India and Bangladesh, is likely to create severe contentions in the future.

Xi Jinping's goal is to centralize power and loyalty of the military to the CCP and to evoke the nationalism and patriotism of the Chinese peoples. He did this through the military reforms of 2015, where he disbanded close to 300,000 army soldiers in favor of increasing naval capabilities. This strong navy has influenced US policy towards the Pacific coast and now the USA is forced to plan attacks only outside the first-island chain of Taiwan, Japan. This is because China has developed extremely capable Anti-aircraft and anti-ship missiles and submarines and a strong coastal fleet. Although it must be noted that while China is gaining parity in Naval technology as many other World powers, this does not directly translate into combat experience.

The necessity of a strong navy was only reinforced after the 1996 Taiwan crisis where the People's Republic of China fired missiles near the coasts of Taiwan under the guise of missile tests. The USA immediately sent two aircraft carriers to the straits which stunned the Chinese military establishment. This experience brought back memories of the opium wars and the price paid of having a weak navy. This was one of the focal points that reinforced the need to develop a strong coastal defense. In 2012-2015, the ambiguous maritime borders have been continuously redrawn as China has taken over more than 3000 acres of land in the South China Sea. These bases act as Natural aircraft carriers allowing China further strike capability on hostile navies. With these interests kept in mind, China's constant aggression in the South China Sea must not be seen as separated from any historical reasons for securitization. The question of Taiwan and the first island chain, given China's history, is always a source of strategic insecurity, providing an explanation to the ascendant Chinese navy.

Beyond the strategic sphere, China's interests are also economic. Without a guarantee of Chinese predominance in the Pacific and the String of Pearls, the Belt and Road initiative not only provides inroads into European markets, but also provides for the potential control of ports and military bases in Pakistan and Iran and Africa, with involvement in as many as 46 ports in Africa.

The Shift East

The events in Asia, with the Belt and Road initiative and the recent fall of Kabul, must all be taken into consideration in a broader sense with events developing in the Indo-Pacific as well, with the development of the Quad, AUKUS and several minilateral agreements involving India, Australia and France and other countries. The USA, having enjoyed unipolarity and a plethora of military installations in the Middle East and a few in Asia, now sees its influence receding. While these are not strategically important for a consumer state like the USA, the integration of China into global supply chains, and its increasing influence in Central Asia and its power posturing in the South China Sea can be a sign of both receding "western" influence and increasing Chinese assertion. The Belt and Road initiative, a Taliban-run Afghanistan, CPEC and the new 25-year strategic agreement between China and Iran have placed Asia, at least in theory, in China's hands economically and diplomatically. The balance of power is shifting and it is shifting eastwards.

Amid the center of gravity moving towards the east, there is a lot of uncertainty although the trends, especially viewed under realist and neorealist lens do not offer a very comforting picture. While the USA enjoyed unipolar great power status after the fall of the USSR, the rise of China over the years, the failed liberal-democratic experiments in the Middle East and the recent Kabul withdrawal, have increased the multipolar status of the world order. The USA still enjoys predominance in terms of naval power in the seas even though Asia has shifted towards Eastern regional powers. The rising power of China in Asia has had many scholars fear about the emergence of what Graham Allison calls the “Thucydides’ Trap” where the rise of a new power threatens the status-quo power threatening war. As in the Peloponnesian war, where a predominant Sparta feared the rise of Athens and its own replacement, it heightened tensions and was at a point where small triggering events could set in motion extreme repercussions which had unintended consequencesⁱ.

The structural stress created by the rise of China will seriously challenge the existing order, especially the regional one in Asia and the global order at sea. According to the neorealist tradition, states are wired to view other states with suspicion as they all exist in an anarchic structure. This will cause any changes in the structure, especially growth and power to be viewed with caution. This explains why the USA was and is very unsettled about China’s meteoric rise and its rapid acquisition of weapons and weapon platforms.

China has two significant traps to avoid an escalation to armed conflict in the region as the balance of power slowly changes in the Indo Pacific and Asia. The two being the Thucydides trap and the Kindleberger trap.

This Thucydides’ trap theory states that a rising power will inevitably challenge the dominance of an existing hegemon, and the latter’s fear of that prospect can trigger competitive dynamics ultimately leading to confrontation, even war. China states that it does not pose a threat to any country and that it will never seek hegemony or expansion, “no matter what stage of development it reaches”. Graham Allison argues that unless China is willing to scale back its ambitions or Washington can accept being number two in the Pacific, a trade conflict, cyberattack or accident at sea could soon escalate into all-out war. China harbors a deep-seated desire to displace the US as the dominant power in Asia.

The Kindleberger trap on the other hand, is the result of a lack of Chinese involvement in the Global setting. It was coined by Joseph Nye and derived from the historian Charles Kindleberger. Both the Kindleberger and the Thucydides traps highlight the danger inherent in the shifting balance-of-power. The difference between them is that rather than focus on the threats from a strong aspirant power, the Kindleberger trap attributes the failure of the international system to the under-provision of global public goods. Kindleberger argued that the chaotic and disastrous nature of the 1930s was caused by the failure of the USA to assume the international responsibilities that came with the mantle of the largest global power that it took from Britain. This term can be used to explain the challenges faced by the current global governance regime. As the USA seems to be retreating from international commitment, the international community is turning to China. Though China seems interested in playing this role, it has to overcome significant capacity gaps: small amounts for foreign aid, a lack of soft power, domestic political economy challenges etc.

China is definitely not isolationist; in fact, it even pursues public goods such as building trade routes and infrastructure in poorer Central Asian and African nations. However, China is also known to acquire land and material through debt traps and specifically create neorealist structural stresses through encirclement of rivals like India through contentious land like Ladakh and Baltistan. This undercuts the argument that these projects are benign and only intended as public goods.

The Indo-Pacific

Through lease agreements and diplomatic victories and promises of financial credit and infrastructure, China has managed to get the diplomatic support of a lot of African states and many Central Asian states and Pakistan. While there is still a long way to go for many of these projects to be completed, especially in Central Asia, China has an economic and diplomatic grip on these countries that India does not. The Indo-Pacific, however, is not as definitely decided over, regarding whose influence it will be under, over the next few years or decades. While China does have diplomatic commitments of cooperation from Pakistan and a potential agreement with Iran to provide ports to help project power in the Arabian Sea, this is still far from being realized in reality. Regarding the Pacific, the presence of US' allies like Japan, Philippines, Taiwan and India and the American fleet itself, makes its breakthrough into the Pacific a far-fetched dream for the time-being.

The Indo-Pacific region is not just important economically with its Straits of Malacca and the Strait of Hormuz, the Indian Ocean region, the South China sea are important politically as regions where the sovereignty of India and China respectively is to be projected. With Australia becoming an increasingly important player in the region with the potential of acquiring nuclear submarines under AUKUS, and being part of many minilateral security initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, the balance of power is slowly shifting against China in the Pacific as is to be expected. While this, in the future could arguably be contentious for India which could find itself surrounded by predominant Anglophile navies, for the short term, Chinese projection into the Pacific does not seem obvious, which would mean that Chinese efforts in Central Asia will be intensified. These efforts would not just be intended towards making China further embedded through infrastructure and trade into Asia, but also increasing the chances of Chinese naval projection into the Indo-Pacific bypassing the First Island chain in the South China Sea. The dream of its naval predominance is a distant dream, but we must expect intensified efforts in Central Asia, especially in Afghanistan, Pakistan and a possible shift of Iran towards Chinese investments.

While containing China in the South China Sea would be the West's immediate interest to prevent a major naval challenger in the Eastern Hemisphere, a strong Indian naval presence in the Indian Ocean would not only serve India's current security situation but also serve India's long-term interests by having an autonomous and assertive navy and undisputed control of the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea with significant Blue Water projection capabilities. While India does not seek absolute command of the seas as proposed by Mahanian thought, it will need to prepare for the possibility of a challenging blue water navy in its own water by forging its own strong blue water force with the possibility of regional power projection. Both China and India, while initially Mahanian in their outlook in that they sought complete control of their neighboring seas through knockout decisive battles, have now taken a much more Corebettian view of the matter, admitting, as did Clausewitz, about the primacy of politics and not a uniform "naval strategy" as Mahan did. This has led the Chinese to prioritize what is called "offshore balancing", from the previous strategy of just needing a navy to protect and defend the mainland. This primarily includes projecting power over what China claims to be its territories within the famous nine-dash line, Taiwan and to prevent the USA from intervening in any of these territories. Secondly, it involves dominating China's immediate neighborhood and extending its presence in offshore bases in Sri Lanka, Djibouti and in the near future, potentially in Gwadar and Chabahar. The political goals for

a rising China would be to balance unfavorable power shifts in vital trade choke points and to prevent US' intervention in places it deems its own, even if not by decisive battles, through temporary control of the sea and area-denial.

While Chinese maritime policy officially states that “stability maintenance” would be there, it has also unilaterally rejected any cooperation to the international arbitration about Philippine’s rights over its islands in the South China Sea, which must be an indicator, that China, being the rising power is completely willing to side-step and even ignore the international community when it comes to pursuing what it sees as its core interestsⁱⁱ. While every nation would be prone to pursuing its national interest if it has the means to, this is also typical of a rising power resisting norms placed on it by the status-quo power, in this case, that power being the USA and its own post-World War Two world order.

The change in the balance of power in Asia after the fall of Kabul was immediately met with the Quadilateral security dialogue (Quad) meeting not a month later. This was done simultaneously with the announcement of the AUKUS trilateral agreement between the UK, USA and Australia. While both the Quad and AUKUS are not explicitly alliances or institutions postured against China, reading between the lines must not be a difficult task. Comparing the two, amidst many other minilateral arrangements of cooperation, there is an increasing trend of networks that are posturing to balance against Chinese maritime strength in the Indo Pacific. The Straits of Malacca is crucial for India. After the post-globalization boom India had in economic and technological growth, trade is of primary importance to India and the security of these trade routes against hostile players is vital to maintain and improve the standard of living in India. Over 50% of India’s trade passes through the Malacca straits and any instability in the region, whether due to Chinese aggression or an increase in security tensions, would be critically damaging to Indian tradeⁱⁱⁱ. For these reasons alone, India has a significant geopolitical stake in the Indo-Pacific. The preservation of and growth of the internal economy depends on these sea lanes being open and accessible.

While the Quad is more of a cooperative institution and dialogue not explicitly for security reasons alone, the AUKUS is a purely security-based apparatus to strengthen the position of the USA and its allies in the Indo-Pacific. Under the AUKUS, the USA and UK would help Australia acquire nuclear submarines which would be a significant boost to Australian power projection when these

submarines are functional. While India currently has one functional aircraft carrier and will soon have one more, it does not have a significant blue water rival in the region. Chinese access to the seas depends on breaking out of the First island chain with conventional power which would put it first in conflict with the US and its allies like Japan and South Korea. While this would harm Indian trade, this would not pose an immediate threat to Indian maritime shipping. While the Belt and Road initiative and CPEC threatens to increase Chinese maritime projection flanking India, considering the stagnation of Silk Road infrastructure projects in Central Asia and Pakistan, this seems to be hyperbolic to be called an immediate maritime threat either. India's focus at the moment must be to increase not only its border security on land with the recent developments in Afghanistan, but also focus and invest in increasing its own blue water capabilities. The AUKUS, in the long term, would significantly increase the Anglophilic blue water projection, apart from the American navy in the Indo Pacific. While maintaining a firm grip over its own maritime space from significant rivals, a strong blue water navy would also deter Chinese aims of thinking of maritime projection in the Indian Ocean or the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea. India must also prepare for the possibility of asymmetrical warfare such as maritime harassment and commerce raiding as China is known for doing in the South China Sea in the fishing zones of the Philippines.

These changes on the Continent and the oceans must be viewed holistically to acquire a clear view on the structural stresses and the changing balance of power in the Eastern hemisphere. A continued observance of these phenomena should help policy makers come up with comprehensive yet holistic approaches to strategize military, economic and diplomatic maneuvers so as to not only stabilize and secure India's national interests, but also try and avoid, at least minimize war, which if occurred, would be not only difficult for China to manage, but have India fighting on two terrains and multiple fronts geographically. Knowing and understanding Chinese political identity in international politics helps put individual events either along the LAC, or diplomatic rows in the South China Sea. These help us recognize a state that has as its purpose, not just a sense of political growth and hence assertion, but also an insecurity derived from historical experience that fuels this need for assertion and expansion and a securing of their fertile heartland in the Eastern coast. The Chinese have understood that these historical threats, the ones that were the most humiliating rather, have occurred because the Chinese lacked the naval might they possess today.

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