

**As the major Asian powers of China and India build up their naval capacity and other regional states augment their maritime forces, there is a growing need to build cooperation so as to avoid inadvertent ‘incidents’ or conflict**

## **Naval Power in the Indian Ocean: Rivalry or Cooperation**



By Amitav Acharya, Senior Fellow,  
Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada

March 4, 2010

In a recent essay in *Foreign Affairs*, entitled “Center Stage for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Power Plays in the Indian Ocean,” noted American journalist and writer Robert Kaplan posits the scenario of a maritime Great Game in the Indian Ocean between India and China. A summary of his views reads: “Already the world’s preeminent energy and trade interstate seaway, the Indian Ocean will matter even more as India and China enter into a dynamic great-power rivalry in these waters.”

If this is true, then the countries most affected will be the Southeast Asian states of ASEAN. It is they who will be caught between the tussle of the two Asian giants. As an old Southeast Asian saying goes, “When elephants fight, it is the grass which suffers.”

Of course such a struggle between India and China is by no means a foregone conclusion. In many respects, Kaplan’s thesis sounds like the maritime equivalent of the late Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations.” India and China, and indeed all the naval powers of the Asia Pacific, have compelling reasons to cooperate, or to avoid outright confrontation even if they compete for influence. But there is little question that naval developments in the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific are an important matter for ASEAN navies.

There is little question that the navies of India and China, or for that matter of Japan and of ASEAN member states, are undertaking a significant modernization of their capabilities. China, historically a continental power, has a very ambitious naval modernization program. The People’s Liberation Army Navy is focusing on increasing its mobile maritime troops, information warfare and joint operations capacity to acquire a true blue-water capability. According to Western naval experts, China seeks to exercise sea control over the first island chain, about 200 nautical miles from the mainland, while beyond that, it seeks a “sea denial” strategy. China is rapidly building up its ocean surveillance strategy to detect approaching naval forces and to attack them using land-based aircraft and submarines. Some American defence experts believe China’s goal is to deny the US access to the region, so it can be free to settle its maritime disputes on its own terms. They are also concerned that a China that has the ability to deter US aid to Taiwan under attack, and can also deny US assistance to South Korea or Japan.

India sees itself as the geographic pivot of the Indian Ocean. India will acquire its second aircraft carrier in 2012, from Russia and expects to have another locally built aircraft carrier

by 2015. Its own home-built nuclear submarine was launched in July 2009 and will be commissioned in 2012.

Japan's maritime strategy stresses improving its sea control capability in the Sea of Japan, East China Sea and Philippine Sea. Its maritime strategy has expanded to include a variety of roles: missile defence, sea control, counter-proliferation, disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, and possible contingencies involving North Korea and the Taiwan Strait. Japan makes no secret of its concerns about the Chinese military build-up, especially Beijing's "string of pearls" strategy, or its acquisition of access to ports and military facilities along the sea lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean, including in Myanmar and Pakistan. Indeed, a major goal of the growing Japan-India naval cooperation, such as their joint security statement of October 2008, is intended to counterbalance the Chinese string of pearls strategy.

While Australia's navy does not have a large number of ships or large naval platforms aside from frigates, and no nuclear submarines, it has some unique advantages in surveillance, networking and over-the-horizon radar capability. Australia's future capabilities will be geared toward the rising naval power of China, and to increase interoperability with the US navy (along with Japan and India).

Last but not the least, the United States: the world's preeminent naval power is concerned about China's naval build-up. It seeks to ensure that the growing naval power of China does not coerce regional states into making concessions to China that are not in their interest, or to settle the Taiwan issue by force, or to use force in its maritime territorial disputes with East and Southeast Asian nations. The conventional wisdom among strategists has been that Asian security is best served by China remaining a continental power while the US dominates the seas. But this is changing as Chinese naval power grows.

Returning to the question of an India-China naval rivalry, it could be argued that no matter how much they tried, India and China, whether individually or between themselves, cannot dominate East Asian and Indian Ocean waters. The US will remain the dominant maritime power in the region, and it seems determined to maintain its dominance. Japan is also a formidable naval force and Australia, with its newly announced defence build-up, will acquire a credible power projection capability. The question of Asian naval dominance would thus depend on the interaction among several players, not just China and India.

Navies in Southeast Asia have not been mere bystanders in the great naval game among the principal powers of the Asia-Pacific. For example, the Indonesian navy is buying four Dutch-built missile corvettes and is in the market for two submarines. Malaysia is buying two diesel-electric Scorpene attack submarines built by a Franco-Spanish company. Singapore is acquiring two Archer class submarine from Sweden to augment its small but powerful fleet that alone among regional navies possess stealth frigates (six of them).

The question arises, does the naval build-up by Asian countries pose a threat to regional stability? To answer this question, it is important to understand why the naval build-up has taken place. It is simplistic to view the naval build-up in Asia as a quest for regional

dominance by two rising powers. There are some obvious other explanations that do not imply power politics.

The Asian naval build-up predated the rise of India and China. Many Asian powers have a history of naval power. Although China is a land power, and is central to the geopolitical heartland, Asia, especially East and Southeast Asia is a predominantly a maritime region. Seaborne trade accounts for overwhelming proportion of trade and for the economic well being of nations like Japan, China, India, Australia, South Korea and the ASEAN states. Since the Law of the Sea was adopted, the question of exploitation of maritime resources has come to the fore.

During the Cold War, the armed forces of the Asian states had a primarily counter-insurgency orientation. But with the defeat of communist movements, and winding down of some of the separatist movements, like those in East Timor and Aceh for Indonesia, the focus has shifted to conventional warfare. Hence the emphasis on naval and air forces in the region.

The 9/11 attacks and the incidence of piracy have also contributed to the rationale for the Asian naval modernization. A perceived nexus between terrorists and pirates in East and Southeast Asian waters, although somewhat overstated, has created a sense of urgency among regional governments to develop naval capabilities. Moreover, in recent years Asian navies are increasingly facing demands to meet a host of non-traditional security threats -- drug trafficking, energy insecurity, and illegal migration, among others. The rise in oil prices and energy security concerns are also a catalyst for the regional naval build-up.

Does this mean we should not worry about the naval build-up, or leave it to the great powers to balance each other. Definitely not. The naval relationships in the region need to be proactively managed for several reasons.

Like any element of armed forces, rapid and unexplained build-up of navies can cause misunderstanding and misperception among nations. It can divert scarce resources from other areas, including measures needed to address non-traditional or comprehensive security threats, such as poverty, pandemics and environmental degradation. Moreover, growing navies create the possibility of accidental engagement, or what experts call "incidents-at-sea." There are some recent examples involving the naval forces of China and the US. Earlier this year, there were media reports of a near clash between Malaysian and Indonesian naval ships in the oil rich area of Ambalat.

Hence, the regional community must take steps to ensure that the naval build-up does not become destabilizing. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation should and can be undertaken to prevent an all out naval arms race, avoid incidents-at-sea, and improve safety and security of our common sea lines of communications. Since 9/11, the US has initiated a number of maritime security measures, including multilateral action, such as International Ship and Port Security (ISPS). But there is a need for regional action in Southeast Asia to supplement these global measures. ASEAN navies cooperate more with outside powers than among themselves. This should change.

Already, there are some encouraging examples of cooperation. Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore have been running coordinated patrols in the Straits of Malacca for several years. This has been supplemented by a joint aerial surveillance system called the “eye-in-the-sky.” Thailand became the fourth ASEAN country to join the Malacca Straits Patrols (MSP).

The response of the Asian navies, including Japanese, Indian, Singaporean and Malaysian navies, as well as those from the US, Australia and Europe, to the December 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami was a striking example of international naval cooperation in support of a common goal. The US naval role in this disaster did much to reverse the anti-Americanism in Indonesia, even before the election of President Barack Obama. This augurs well for future cooperation among navies in meeting non-traditional and human security challenges.

Another positive development is that China has made some progress in naval transparency. It has published defence white papers that offer information, although limited, on its military posture and capabilities, participated in joint naval exercises, held wide ranging bilateral and multilateral defence consultations, and increased its participation in international peacekeeping and regional disaster relief operations. China’s attitude toward maritime cooperation is no grand scheme but functional cooperation, under two conditions: no US dominance and no compromise of sovereignty.

There have been many instances of bilateral and multilateral interaction among Asian navies. For example, the Indian Navy conducts coordinated patrols, called *Milan*, with the navies of Indonesia and Thailand, to curb smuggling and drug trafficking. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) sponsored by the India navy in 2008 brought together the navy chiefs of 29 countries, including several ASEAN members, but not including China.

Then there is the long-established Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) organized by the US Pacific Fleet, with a proposal now to link the WPNS with IONS. And the US navy is mooting the idea of the Thousand Ship Navy Global Maritime Partnership, which envisages a global maritime alliance geared to safety, security and humanitarian missions, but not necessarily led by the US.

Southeast Asia is taking its own steps to increase maritime cooperation. In 2007, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore launched the Cooperative Mechanisms for the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, with the purpose of encouraging user states to cooperate with the three nations on a voluntary basis. This initiative is geared to improving maritime safety and environmental protection, although it does not yet cover maritime security in the straits. Another example is the Japanese-initiated Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships, or ReCAAP, which has led to the setting up of an Information Sharing Centre in Singapore.

More can be done. There are continuing efforts to conclude an “incidents-at-sea” agreement between the US and China. ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) should play a role and undertake the conclusion of a similar agreement on prevention of incidents-

at-sea in Southeast Asian waters. Such an agreement could cover all the navies operating in Southeast Asian waters, not just ASEAN navies.

Canada's naval role in Asia Pacific and in the India Ocean so far has been limited and where it has been involved, its focus has been quite specific. The Canadian Navy has had vessels in and around the Arabian Sea and Northern Indian Ocean for much of the past decade involved in counter-terrorism and counter piracy actions. It has also participated in several multi-nation exercises in the Pacific. However, focus on the Pacific and Indian Oceans has been limited by the concentration of defence attention – and budget -- on Canadian operations in Afghanistan. Compounding this has been the policy priority of the government on developing Canada's naval resources in the Arctic – its three-oceans policy. Combined with Ottawa's apparent general lack of interest in having its voice heard in Asia, it is unlikely Canada will play much role, beyond its usual rhetoric, in developing naval cooperation in the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans.

One is not quite sure yet if the 21<sup>st</sup> century will belong to the Pacific or the Indian Ocean. No matter which body of water becomes the strategic fulcrum of the world -- and it could well be both -- navies of the Asian countries will have a vital role to play in maintaining its security and safety. The navies of Canada and ASEAN countries could play the role of honest broker between the navies of powerful states, engaging them and the navies of Japan, US and Australia, in a variety of cooperative activities, including fighting non-traditional threats.