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Asian Maritime Power in the 21st Century

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Asian Maritime Power in the 21st Century

Strategic Transactions
China, India and Southeast Asia

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Vijay Sakhuja
2010

INTRODUCTION

The rise of Asian power and its transformed strategic profile in the 21st century is predicated on the robust economic performance of several countries in the region. Globalization and rapid economic development of these Asian countries has induced a new sense of confidence which is reflected in their strategic profile and standing in the West-led global order. In Asia, China and India are states with a long civilizational history of pre-eminence, and are now embarking on the process of economic-industrial transformation reflected in the trajectories of their phenomenal and sustained economic growth, socio-economic development, and strategic transformation. Their ability to adapt to the needs of a modern society has resulted in a powerful and resilient capacity to absorb the western institutional processes and indices of national power. These processes and indices have been gradually assimilated in their unique socio-cultural-political-strategic matrices.

The maritime history of the world shows that states have relied on maritime power for a full realization of their power potential. The Minoans, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Indians and Chinese have all exhibited a strong proclivity to maritime power that had expeditionary roles factored in them even as they launched their mercantile trade criss-crossing the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean and Asian waters through Southeast Asia as far as China. The quest for new lands and the necessity to trade with the affluent East encouraged the colonial powers such as the Portuguese, Dutch, British and French to invest significantly in maritime power. These colonial powers came to adorn the Asian littorals with forts and factories to support the domestic demands and in the process built strong maritime foundations.

The rise of Asian maritime power in the 21st century is now featuring the dynamic and determined rise of China and India. Their maritime rejuvenation is premised on high economic growth, burgeoning maritime trade, a promising maritime science and technology base, evolving military-industrial-technological transformation driven by the ongoing information

revolution and a desire to build a robust maritime military capability. Further, the development of their industrial complex has led to several indigenously developed technologies aimed at self reliance to avoid overdependence on external sources of military hardware. Significantly, the Asian maritime power emerges amidst the overarching supremacy of the West, an emergence ironically brought about by globalization and liberal economic paradigm of global interdependence that has been introduced to the world by the United States-led West. China and India are poised to be the anchors of globalization in the Asia Pacific and could chart the course of globalization for the region.

Maritime power in its scope could be classified in the broad typology of “benign” and “coercive”. The constituents of maritime power have been time immemorial, however navies over the years have defined their roles and missions in accordance with the politico-military milieu that conditioned the purposes of maritime power. Maritime power could also be envisaged as the vanguard of globalization. As states become more and more interdependent for their growth and prosperity, the salience and criticality of maritime infrastructure is clearly visible among those that seek to build their economic power. Maritime power is thus the “externalized” essence of national security strategy and its indivisibility is quite important and cannot be ignored.

There is a complex relationship between the state and the sea that is based on the degree of seaborne trade, the merchant marine, shipbuilding capability, and the ability to exploit living and non-living resources. Maritime transformation as evident in technological developments and in the 1982 United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) nautical regime has also been an important consideration in a state’s maritime power. Under the UNCLOS states can claim Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) and continental shelf and develop technological capability to exploit offshore resources.

Trade and naval power constitute the twin pillars of the globalized state’s reliance on the sea for its economic growth. The reliance of the state on its navy essentially arises from its dependence on the sea and the ability of the naval force to secure sea lanes for maritime trade and its ability to secure its littoral, extended littoral-continental shelf and the EEZ. In essence, the role of the navies is to secure the national maritime interest.

In that context, this study aims to determine the growth of Asian maritime power in the 21st century centred on China and India. Given that Southeast Asia is the convergent maritime hub of the dynamics of China and India that is reminiscent of the ancient times, the study examines the nature of maritime transactions among China, India and Southeast Asia. The increasing sensitivities about safety of sea lanes, forward presence of navies, and naval

nuclear developments in China and India are issues of significant concern to Southeast Asian countries.

There are at least five important reasons for this study. First, Asia maritime history confirms that China, India and Southeast Asia made a seminal contribution and played a significant part in Asian prosperity in the pre-colonial history of the region. In fact, Asian seas had facilitated movement of people, cultures, and trade otherwise constrained by difficult and challenging overland geography. Traders from China, India, Southeast Asia, Rome, Greece and Persia sailed through Asian waters and engaged in a flourishing maritime enterprise resulting in interdependence. Importantly, a sophisticated maritime trading system emerged in Asia that contributed not only to the growth of Asia but was linked with other trading systems in the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean.

The rise of Asian maritime power in the 21st century emerges against the backdrop of this ancient legacy that goes back to the far-sighted maritime vision of the Song and Ming Dynasties of China, the Chola Kings in India and the Srivijaya Empire in Southeast Asia. Asia's maritime power declined as the key countries engaged in several internecine feuds and wars which was indeed the reason for the colonial domination in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

Second, in the 21st century, China, India and several Southeast Asian countries have experienced substantial growth in their maritime power. The 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century is indeed an important period for the rediscovery of maritime power in the Asian context. Impressive economic growth rates, increased trade, high energy demands, recognition of the importance of security of sea lanes, and the safety of marine resources in the EEZ have led to the modernization of their navies. Other catalysts have been the need for modernization to overcome years of military obsolescence, and the imperatives to secure littorals against asymmetric challenges.

Third, the study is important from the perspective of the strategic cultures of China, India and Southeast Asia. These draw their political theory and statecraft from the respective ancient schools of thought epitomized in the eras of their antiquity and golden ages that had firm maritime foundations, i.e. *Shih* (Sun Tzu), *Mandala* (Kautilya) and *Mandala-Negara*, a Hindu-Buddhist cosmological thought.

Fourth, the growth of maritime power of China, India and Southeast Asia is also impelled to develop security strategies to preclude the littoral dominance by the extra-regional powers that have well-developed access and basing strategies in Asia. Of particular consequence for China, India and Southeast Asia are Japan, a leading maritime power in Asia, and the United

States, the pre-eminent maritime-naval power engaged in the region through alliances, partnerships, security arrangements and economic engagements.

Fifth, during the past six decades, conflict has been the characteristic in China–India and China–Southeast Asia relations. In 1951, China annexed Tibet leading to mounting nervousness in New Delhi about the permanent stationing of the Chinese military on its northern borders. The capture of Aksai Chin in 1962 (claimed by India as part of Jammu and Kashmir), the border dispute involving 90,000 square kilometres in Arunachal Pradesh, and the extensive military infrastructure built in Tibet also impacted on Indian security and added to uneasiness in New Delhi. The situation worsened in 1963 when Pakistan ceded more than 5,000 square kilometres of territory in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (POK) to China that culminated in the construction of the Karakoram Friendship Highway. Indian threat perceptions are well grounded in China's nuclear capability, and New Delhi's efforts at redressing the nuclear asymmetry have led Beijing to help Pakistan acquire nuclear weapons, and build significant conventional capability, including military infrastructure developments, thus complicating India's security calculations. Similarly, China is actively engaged in a competition for influence in South Asia among the small states, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. In response, India is building relations with the United States which China views as the only global competitor and Japan, the other Asian power, a balancing strategy by India. Given Indian and Chinese economic growth, neither side is willing to accommodate the other and be the junior partner.

Competing territorial claims in the South China Sea emerge as a serious source of interstate tension in China–Southeast Asia relations. The six claimants (China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Brunei) except Brunei have sought to consolidate their claims by occupying islets, stationing forces on them and building sophisticated military infrastructure. Overlapping territorial claims led to serious friction between China and the Philippines and China and Vietnam during the 1970s and 1990s, while bilateral and multilateral efforts to ease tensions have so far met with mixed success. Although these political disputes remain intractable, the logic of economic engagement generates interdependence among China and Southeast Asian countries.

Also of significance is China's rationale to secure and monitor its critical oil jugular through the Straits of Malacca. China's real strategic intent would be to nurture a long-term relationship with Southeast Asian countries, particularly the Straits of Malacca littorals, to counter extra-regional military powers that seek naval presence in the area through access and basing arrangements. So far China has projected its benign intent in the region but as it leverages its

political, economic and military power, it will be in a position to pursue its geostrategic and geoeconomic interests more assertively. An adept diplomacy by China disguised to influence Southeast Asian countries to view China's rise as benign and non-threatening appears to have paid off. China has engaged in multilateralism, security dialogues and economic engagements but in the end, its ever-increasing political, economic and military power has the potential to upset regional security.

In the past, several scholars and experts have written on the diverse facets of maritime power of China and India¹ and offered some interesting insights into the Asian understanding of maritime power. The present study seeks to examine Asian maritime power in the 21st century and argues that China and India are engaged in building their power potential based on maritime power as a key component. Also, China and India draw their political theory and statecraft from the respective schools of thought rooted in their antiquity. It is hoped that this study will contribute to a greater understanding of the maritime ambitions of China and India, and how this instrument of power is employed in the overall building of their power potential and the resultant impact on Southeast Asia.

The study is based on an analysis of qualitative and empirical data accrued from varied sources. An attempt has been made to discuss maritime infrastructure, naval equipment and capabilities, the impact of information technologies on maritime power, and the maritime environment in India and China. Several primary sources like official government publications, white papers and interviews with practitioners and naval planners have supported the study. Likewise, visits to maritime infrastructure (ports, shipyards and dockyards) in India have provided a rich source of data. It was not possible to visit China during the study. However, an earlier visit to Chinese and Taiwanese naval bases, shipyards, ports, and recent interaction with Chinese maritime specialists during Track II and informal meetings provided valuable data for the study. Inputs for this study include the author's meetings with the Chinese, Taiwanese, Southeast Asian and Indian practitioners and experts including naval commanders-in-chief. These meetings provided important perspectives in terms of strategic thinking in China, India and Southeast Asia and the China threat as perceived by the Asians.

It is true that a realistic assessment of maritime power is an extraordinarily complex empirical problem given that the input elements of maritime power are both objective and subjective, i.e. it is possible to quantify and size up the military strength, economic potential and technological capability, but an assessment of intangible factors such as national will, motivations and intentions is indeed a complex mathematical problem. In this study, an

attempt has been made to determine the maritime power of China and India as systematically as possible. The study has relied on Ray S. Cline's formula for calculating the power of nations.² Based on this, the study created a mathematical equation to determine the maritime power of a nation. This model is suitable because it encompasses the changes in the nautical regime brought about by UNCLOS III and the impact of information technology on the maritime power of a state.

The study has been divided into seven chapters. These chapters in turn look at maritime power comparatively, i.e. they discuss various constituents of maritime power in both the Chinese and Indian context. The chapters seek to identify developments in maritime power and bring to the fore the commitment of the respective governments to build maritime power. An attempt is also made to understand the contemporary Asian maritime thought through the prism of ancient political theory and statecraft, given that there is a symbiotic relationship between the state and the navies.

Chapter 1 examines the concept of maritime power (sea power) as it has evolved over the years in Britain, the United States, Soviet Union/Russia, Japan, China and India. It analyses the writings of several maritime strategists, academics and practitioners, and argues that the constituents of maritime power have undergone a change with UNCLOS III and the ongoing revolution brought about by information technology. It develops an input/output model and a mathematical equation for computing the maritime power of a state. It also highlights how states have used their maritime power to safeguard their national interests.

Chapter 2 establishes a link between geography and maritime power. It argues that the two are closely linked to each other and are vital determinants in a country's march towards becoming a maritime power. The chapter examines in detail the maritime geography of China and India.

Chapter 3 analyses Chinese and Indian naval strategy, force structure and capabilities to achieve strategic objectives set by the leadership. It argues that both countries are building their naval muscle to preclude littoral dominance by external powers as well as to project power in their respective areas of maritime interest that overlap in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.

Chapter 4 examines the economic components of maritime power. It examines shipbuilding, shipping, port infrastructure and the fishing industry of China and India. It shows that both countries have intensified their efforts to build maritime infrastructure to harness the wealth available from the sea.

Chapter 5 examines the political component of maritime power. It argues that there is continuity from the past with regard to the use of navies for

coercion and gunboat diplomacy. Importantly, the navies and the coastguards are the only instrument of the state that can be legally deployed in peace or war anywhere on the seas for political purposes. Both China and India have used their navies for diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region.

Chapter 6 examines the impact of information-based technologies on the growth of maritime power in China and India. Both countries have kept abreast of developments in information warfare and are slowly adapting to changes brought about by the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). The chapter also highlights critical deficiencies in the RMA capabilities of China and India.

Finally, Chapter 7 traces the ancient maritime exchanges between China and India and the impacts of these interactions on Southeast Asia. The chapter argues that in their strategic conduct, China, India and Southeast Asia draw liberally from their ancient practice of international relations and that there are a number of positive as well as negative political, economic and military consequences of the rejuvenated maritime power of China and India on Southeast Asia.

Notes

1. David G. Muller, Jr., *China as a Maritime Power* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1983); Gang Deng, *Maritime Sector, Institutions, and Sea Power of Premodern China* (Westport: Greenwood, 1999); Bernard D. Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea: China's Navy Enters the Twenty-first Century* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001); Srikanth Kondapalli, *China's Naval Power* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2001); John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *China's Strategic Seapower: The Politics of Force Modernization in the Nuclear Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); G.V.C. Naidu, *Indian Navy and South East Asia* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2000); K. Raja Menon, *Maritime Strategy and Continental Wars* (London: Frank Cass, 2000); Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Frank Cass, 2004); Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, *Asia Looks Seaward: Power and Maritime Strategy* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 2008).
2. Ray S. Cline, *World Power Trends and U.S. Foreign Policy for the 1980's* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1980), p. 27. Cline put forth a formula to determine the power of nations for planning American defence and foreign policy.