

ICS Special Lecture

Strategic Assessment of the Chinese Navy: Capability and Intent Assessment

Speaker: Kamlesh K. Agnihotri, Commander, Indian Navy's Maritime Warfare Centre in the Eastern Naval Command, Visakhapatnam

Chair: Prof. Alka Acharya, Director, ICS

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Insights into prevailing doctrines – a new direction

The flexing of the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) muscle against its US backed Japanese counterpart during the course of the Senkaku islands dispute was the latest in the 'game of chicken' that has developed between the Chinese Navy and her neighbours since the 2000s. Written in the wake of the challenge posed by the Chinese Navy to the supremacy of the US Navy, Commander Kamlesh K Agnihotri's latest work titled, *'Strategic Assessment of the Chinese Navy: Capability and Intent Assessment'* involves a thorough analysis of the capability of the modernised capacity building of the PLAN force starting from its surface forces, the aircraft carrier programme, the submarine force and its naval aviation wing.

At the outset, the speaker acknowledged that a large portion of his documentation on the PLAN was based on American sources, reflecting also the deficiency of academic interest in India. The presentation highlighted two important points. Firstly, the Chinese Navy's doctrines, tactics and procedures emanate from the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) overall 'active defence' strategy, with 'offshore defence' strategy as its naval component. Owing to the need for operations in distant waters, this strategy has been termed as the 'far seas' strategy. Moving away from a traditional security scenario including national defense and a quick reaction to a potential threat from Taiwan, the PLAN has come to appreciate its non-traditional role that now includes protection of the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs), evacuation of Chinese citizens, anti-piracy operations and friendly exchanges with other naval forces. According to the Chinese Defence White Paper of 2013, the non-traditional role also involves supporting national and economic development.

So, how did this strategy translate into the consequent modernisation and to maritime activities? According to Agnihotri, there were two distinct imperatives: securing maritime interests and endeavours, and the need of a growing power to find a larger operating space in striving for global presence. The latter however ushers in new vulnerabilities resulting from overstretching. In fact, this overstretch has begun to affect the performance of the US Navy. These two imperatives have compelled China to undertake a large scale capacity building

exercise for her navy for effective long distance operations. Another measure has included increasing the stakes in the civilian maritime activities to indicate both presence and purpose.

Capacity Building

The speed in which China acquired the former Soviet carrier converted it into its modern avatar, the 'Liaoning', was not even half as impressive as the speed in which the PLAN managed to conduct carrier based operations. A serious challenge for any budding navy, the Chinese Navy has shown itself as being adept in handling carrier based operations much faster than the western and Russian navies. In naval terms, argued Agnihotri, this could be considered a stepping stone for expansion of the carrier fleet into the nuclear domain.

Delving further into the area of capacity building, Agnihotri impressed upon his audience China's ability to commission 17 naval platforms in 2013 alone. At the same time, he was highly critical of the bureaucratic hurdles pertaining to the commissioning of Indian ships that generally take years to produce tangible assets. Lending further credence to China's shipbuilding might, the speaker acknowledged that as already about 40 vessels with the involvement of six Chinese shipyards were waiting in line to be commissioned as of 2014.

Expansive Maneuvers

The speaker began this session of his talk by asking what does such a modernised capacity in shipbuilding amount to in practical terms? With a doctrine of 'far seas' strategy acting as a guiding principle, the Chinese navy has grown active and adventurous in pushing well beyond its traditional domains as an outcome of an increased capacity. Agnihotri mentioned about China's expansive naval maneuvers to the Indian Ocean region and the Western Pacific region. Although participation in joint military exercises, friendly visits to ports, and joint patrols are common in both spheres, what sets them apart is the anti-piracy escort missions and the perception of the 'string of pearls' as a force multiplier in the case of the former. Whereas in the latter, the show of strength with regard to territorial disputes and the undertaking of multiple voyages to multiple destinations by increasingly larger forces are causes for alarm to the US navy. Indeed, the Chinese state media and the PLAN displayed strong military symbolism when they harped on the fact that the PLAN had 'breached' the first Pacific island chain.

Conclusion

Agnihotri concluded by highlighting the maritime implications for India and the dynamics for the Indian Ocean region. Surveillance of Indian naval activity as well as that of the India's booming missile industry along the Bay of Bengal, compounded with Chinese naval activity in proximity to India's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) can only imply a shoring of the operational preparedness of the PLAN. While the presence and purpose of Chinese interests in several port cities along the South Asian and South East Asian coastline has been under hot debate for the last five years, what cannot easily be dismissed is the increase in Chinese interests within what was traditionally considered as the security domain of the Indian navy

under the guise of innocuous foreign investments or the recent 'Maritime Silk Route' Initiative. This is bound to impact on the operational patterns of the Indian navy.

The burgeoning ties between the PLAN and that of China's all-weather friend, Pakistan, is a matter of concern as Chinese naval assets in the Arabian Sea could provide tacit or active co-operation during a period of heightened tension and constrict the movement of the Indian navy within this strategic region.

Discussion

in the ensuing discussion the Chair, Alka Acharya opened up the discussion by asking the speaker to put in perspective the maritime capabilities of the Chinese navy in comparison to the much touted naval might of India. Agnihotri responded that though the Indian Navy has possessed a definite and clear cut qualitative edge over its Chinese counterpart, this gap has now given way to parity in favour of the Chinese navy. However, at present, the inability to secure an operational base in the Indian Ocean region is a particular hindrance to the operations of the Chinese navy. Agnihotri was unequivocal in assessing that the present capability of the Chinese navy is not sufficient to project aggressive intentions in the Indian Ocean, which is so far away from its home waters.

Another member of the audience pursued a line of questioning that would have definitely astounded any naval veteran. While ruling out fleet on fleet actions that were an essential components of the Second World War, Agnihotri was questioned about the wisdom of increased capacity building in the age of increasing cyber and electronic warfare capabilities. Even imperial Germany's fleet expansion, which was a force for the Royal navy to reckon with, was economically very draining for the German empire much before the culmination of the First World War. Under these circumstances does the growth of the PLAN hold symbolic value or strategic value considering that the old tactic of blockade and total protection of SLOCs is ineffective? This line of questioning was carried further by another member of the audience by citing the example of the absence of the US navy in the Iraqi and Libyan theatres which was rendered almost moot. To counter this argument Agnihotri cited the Chinese line that the PLAN is an extension of the strategic force of the country and with seventeen ships being produced in a year its navy is being geared to operate in a broad spectrum of challenges in peacetime. Anti-piracy operations in the Red Sea and surveillance of the Syrian and Iraqi situation in the Mediterranean are examples of this.

Another line of questioning pursued the debate surrounding the qualitative edge of the Chinese shipbuilding capacity particularly with a background to the fact that China's projected shipbuilding capabilities were simply imported and that most Chinese shipyards are in the red in lieu of the drastic decline in the shipbuilding industry. Agnihotri chose to reply to this line of questioning by highlighting the robustness of the Chinese shipyards in the production of several ships even during the lean period. He claimed that by 2020, the Chinese navy would achieve parity with the Indian navy in the Indian Ocean region with regard to number of naval assets. Already, the range of their surface to air missiles are nearly double of those possessed by the Indian navy's arsenal. Along with this, Chinese navigational and

communication systems are indigenous and possess a qualitative advantage over that of the Indian navy. The potential for transfer of technology and government reared competition between private and public players , unlike the hostility among ship builders in India, is definitely an advantage when it comes to commissioning newer and technologically advanced ships within the set time frame.

Report prepared by Oliver Nelson Gonsalves, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

About the Speaker

Commander Kamlesh K Agnihotri is a qualified Gunnery and Missile specialist, and is presently working at the Indian Navy's Maritime Warfare Centre in the Eastern Naval Command, Visakhapatnam. He commanded a ship at the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. He has also qualified as a Remote Sensing and Photogrammetry expert. He has previously been appointed in the China Desk of the Army Headquarters, New Delhi; and worked as a Research Fellow at the China cell of the National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi. He has authored several articles and commentaries on security issues related to China. He has co-edited two books titled '*Security Challenges Along the Indian Ocean Littoral: Indian and US Perspectives*' (2011) and '*Technological Developments in the Maritime Domain and their Strategic Implications in the Indian Ocean Region*' (2013).

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