



# GREAT WALL AT SEA - STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES FOR INDIA

*Cdr Sanjay Sachdeva*

## **China's Maritime Focus and its Effects**

A credible sea power is an essential requirement of any country aspiring to be a key player in the world affairs. With the world's largest army and fastest growing economy, China is now building a large and modern navy to assure its status as a superpower. The recent conflicts in the world, economic potential of the seas, need for energy security, booming sea borne trade and national aspirations have resulted in China pursuing a long-term strategy to extend its national power through

the medium of the sea. In 1993, the PLA military strategy was revised to 'limited local wars under high tech conditions' based on the characteristics of modern warfare and lessons learnt from Gulf War. Under this new military strategic concept, the PLA Navy commenced focusing on acquiring modern technology. In the recent past, realising the importance of Revolution in Military Affairs and Information Warfare, the twenty first century PLA Navy has started gearing up for 'a future war under high-tech conditions'<sup>1</sup>. Thus, a quest to have a great wall at sea has already begun, and this wall has the

potential to upset the strategic balance in the world and influence our maritime interests.

If China is able to sustain past growth rates, its economy could expand to almost \$6.4 trillion by 2025. This would permit China to increase its defence budget to approximately \$29.9 billion, double the figure for 2002. The PLA Navy is allocated 24% share of the defence budget as against 15% for Indian Navy.<sup>3</sup> Despite recent marginal increase in the Indian Navy's share, growth of the two navies at present rate would continue to shift the balance of power towards the PLA Navy.

### China's Strategy in the Indian Ocean

China's strategy in the Indian Ocean has been clearly influenced by her need for oil and relations with the United States. Over the past few decades, China has slowly but steadily increased her influence in the region. Many analysts view this increasing influence of China in India's neighbourhood as the strategic encirclement of India. China's growing influence in Myanmar, Bangladesh and Thailand on the eastern seaboard and strengthening ties with Middle East countries and Africa, compounded by close liaison with Pakistan corroborates this view. However, to a dispassionate observer, this encirclement may appear more of a geographical issue than an

evil design. After all, India sits astride Indian Ocean and energy starved China would obviously like to have good relations with the Indian Ocean littorals through which most of her oil traverses. In the same vein, our relations with China are also on an up swing and we have found substantial convergence of economic interests and views on international affairs. To quote Chinese President Hu Jintao, 'India and China are not strategic adversaries but partners'. However, one cannot afford to ignore the dynamics of international relations and we need to be prepared in all respects to protect our interest .

### Force Levels

The PLA Navy has a sizeable force level and is focussed on becoming a navy with true blue water capabilities. Despite it acknowledging merit in numbers, the provision of high-end technology for naval assets has taken precedence. By 2010, the PLA Navy will probably number approximately seventy modern surface combatants, two ballistic-missile submarines and twenty to thirty modern attack submarines<sup>4</sup>. China, more than makes up for absence of a carrier, in her immediate area of operations, with PLA Navy Air Force, a force central to China's concept of maritime air power. There are strong indicators of China's pursuits to have an aircraft carrier in her order

Combatant	Active (Reserve)	Building( Planned)
SSBN 1	2 (2)	
SSB 1	-	
SSN 4	2(3)	
SSG 16	10(1)	
Patrol submarine	41 (10)	-
Destroyers	25	4
Frigates	45	3
LSTs 26	2	
Fleet Replenishment Ships	4	2



of battle. The major combatants of PLA Navy are tabulated below: -

### **Strategic Imperatives for India Cooperative Maritime Security**

Cooperative Maritime Security is security with, rather than against, the adversary. It replaces preparing to counter threats as the centerpiece of security planning, with preventing such threats<sup>7</sup>. The Indian Navy and PLA Navy can join hands to address non-military security issues, such as sea pollution and piracy. The Indian Navy can also escort the Chinese ships in the Indian Ocean region. It would bring maritime stability and build mutual trust, thereby preventing conflict of our national interests

### **Credible Naval Power**

It is imperative that India maintains a strong and potent Navy proportionate to her national interests. The Indian Navy should be able to assure national security; that is to safeguard our interests in the EEZ, as well as protect our trade. Presently, the PLA Navy might not be able to maintain a credible naval force in the Indian Ocean, but it is a realistic possibility in the years to come. The focus areas for the Indian Navy should include nuclear submarines, more potent aircraft carrier (preferably one on either coast) and state of art surveillance capabilities, in all three dimensions.

### **Military Alliances**

India has traditionally been against military alliances. There is a need to review this policy. Unilateral security is no longer effective, because states are becoming too interdependent economically, politically and militarily<sup>8</sup>. The changing world order and emergence of China has opened doors for future alliances. Purely from military point of view, an alliance, overt or covert, with or without China, has a great potential to reduce the implications of growth and modernisation of PLA Navy. These alliances would also permit us to avoid an 'Arms Race'

with China.

### **Judicious Planning**

The Chinese economy is presently much stronger than our economy and has greater potential to invest in military infrastructure. We need to be careful and avoid any 'Arms Race' in numbers lest we commit resources beyond our capabilities. At the same time, we need to maintain sufficient force level to resist any Chinese aggression on our maritime frontiers. Judicious planning and foresight should govern our force structure, so that we can pitch our strength against adversary's weaknesses.

### **Strengthening Andaman and Nicobar**

The Andaman and Nicobar islands are most vulnerable against a Chinese offensive. Threat from the PLA Navy can best be countered by interdicting the forces posing threat, coming through the Straits of Malacca or other eastern approaches to the Indian ocean<sup>9</sup>. It would ensure neutralising the threat away from our mainland and would offset any coalition with Pakistan Navy to a great extent. However, for such an interdiction to be a practical proposition, the infrastructure at Andaman and Nicobar needs to be able to support a large Naval Task Force. A strong Andaman and Nicobar Command would also assist in extending our sphere of influence in the South China Sea.

### **Move East Policy**

China has adopted a 'Look West' policy, to play a bigger role in the world for political reasons.<sup>10</sup> India's 'Look East' policy, primarily dictated by economic reasons, has inadvertently brought a balance in our mutual relations with China. We need to enlarge our policy of 'Look East' to 'Move East'. This would provide us opportunities to operate together with other regional navies and bring our area of operation closer to Chinese shores. We could also endeavour to have more joint exercises with the PLA Navy. In the process, our increased presence in



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the area would allow us to monitor the region more closely and provide a counter weight to growing presence of the PLA Navy in the Indian Ocean.

### **Counter Encirclement**

The so-called strategic encirclement of India by China needs to be countered. We might not be able to match the Chinese investment in the region, but overall we should have sufficient hold in the region to ensure that China does not get any blanket clearance for operations from the territory of littorals. SriLanka and Myanmar are two countries, where diplomatic and economic initiatives may still tilt the balance in our favour. The PLA Navy was nowhere near Srilanka after the Tsunami disaster, whereas, the Indian Navy was practically knocking at their doorstep before the tide receded. Depending on the threat perception, we would need to be proactive and create opportunities to break the Chinese *Chakravhyuh*

### **Conclusion**

The PLA Navy is being re-conceptulised from an inward looking defensive force to an outward

looking Blue Water Navy. The economic prowess and the recent emphasis by China in building a strong and modern navy are favourable to the growth of PLA Navy. Though, the access to sensitive technology is still limited, China is making all out efforts to modernise PLA Navy. Therefore, it is appreciated that the twenty first century PLA Navy would be a very potent and powerful force akin to a great wall at sea.

China's interests in the Indian Ocean are essentially governed by energy security considerations. Given the rate of growth of PLA Navy, the Indian Ocean would be under its sphere of influence in not too a distant future. This could have an adverse impact on our maritime interests. We therefore, need to integrate instruments of our national power to ensure a safe and secure environment in the region. A well thought out strategy and its correct implementation would be able to avoid a conflict and, if the situation so demands, to settle it on favourable terms. Therefore, it is necessary to continue building a closer cooperative relationship with China while retaining adequate defence capability within a policy framework of 'cooperate and insure".

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Cdr Sanjay Sachdeva (03812 N) was commissioned into the Navy on 01 Jul 1991. A specialist in Navigation and Direction, the officer did Staff Course at DSSC, Wellington in 2005-2006. He is presently commanding INS Nashak*

### PIRATES OF THE ARABIAN

*A seaman meets a pirate in a bar, and talk turns to their adventures on the sea. The seaman notes that the pirate has a peg-leg, a hook, and an eye patch.*

*The seaman asks, "So, how did you end up with the peg-leg?" The pirate replies, "We were in a storm at sea, and I was swept overboard into a school of sharks. Just as my men were pulling me out a shark bit my leg off".*

*"Wow!" said the seaman "What about your hook?" "Well", replied the pirate. "We were boarding an enemy ship and were battling the other sailors with swords. One of the enemies cut my hand off".*

*"Incredible" remarked the seaman "How did you get the eye patch" "A seagull dropping fell into my eye" replied the pirate.*

*"You lost your eye to a seagull dropping?" the sailor asked incredulously. "Well." said the pirate, "it was my first day with my hook".*

*Contributed by Lt KS Bali*

