



29th
ASIA-PACIFIC
ROUNDTABLE

**Strengthening Mutual Confidence and
Promoting Maritime Cooperation**

Zhou Bo

THE APR SERIES
E-Monograph

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**INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC AND
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Strengthening Mutual Confidence and Promoting Maritime Cooperation

I would like to discuss China's maritime interests and elaborate on its development — how it has to probably protect these interests and cooperate with other relevant countries. Conventional wisdom says that 70 per cent of the world's surface is ocean. 90 per cent of world's trade is actually carried by sea and half of it goes through the oceanic area in Asia. Evidently, China is one of the largest land countries with 9.6 million square kilometers of land. China can also be considered as a maritime nation; it has an oceanic territory of 3 million square kilometers and 18,000 kilometers of coastline. Indeed, China's current overseas interests would be equivalent to those of a medium-sized European country. And this raises a question: How could China project its forces to protect all these interests?

A few years ago, the “going out” strategy of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was much debated. Now, China finds itself in almost every part of the world doing various things. The PLA's missions overseas include humanitarian disaster relief, counter-piracy, peacekeeping, providing water to the Maldives, and evacuating foreigners from war-torn Yemen. In 2013, China's president Xi Jinping proposed the “One Belt, One Road” initiative. So much debate has been going on about the so-called strategic implications or China's real motive behind this initiative. Undeniably, China would have some strategic influence as a result of the proposal. However, China's priority is purely economic and it is not in the position of a donor to offer anything to anybody. The initiative must be executed in a cooperative way with the involvement of other countries.

Essentially, I believe that maritime disputes consist of two categories — territorial sovereignty and sea boundary delimitation. There are pros and cons to having the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Because of the UNCLOS, states enjoy the benefits of an exclusive economic zone (EEZ). In fact, approximately 38 per cent of world's oceans are covered by the EEZ. What does this suggest? It simply suggests that maritime disputes are unavoidable because of our overlapping EEZ. Besides, 50 per cent of maritime territorial boundaries are not demarcated. Unresolved disputes, on land or at sea, are issues that we have had to live with throughout the history of humankind. They are nothing extraordinary. In East Asia, every country seems to be having problems with each other. Hence I believe it is unfair to especially highlight China's disputes with other countries.

Nevertheless, how could we possibly resolve China's maritime disputes with other countries? Basically, dispute resolution can be achieved through two means — direct negotiation or the International Court of Justice (ICJ). There are two examples of resolving disputes through the ICJ. One was between Singapore and Malaysia, and another between Indonesia and Malaysia. Going to the ICJ is certainly one justifiable way of resolving these disputes, but in most cases, problems are resolved through friendly discussions or consultations. And here are two Chinese proposals: (i) mutual understanding and mutual accommodation; and (ii) shelving differences and making joint exploration. Through mutual understanding and mutual accommodation, China has successfully resolved 90 per cent of its border disputes with its neighbouring countries. Disputes concerning the Sino-Indian and Sino-Bhutanese borders have yet to be resolved.

The Chinese have not achieved much on the second proposal, although they are still discussing with the Vietnamese on how they could possibly carry out joint exploration at sea. China seems to have

succeeded to a certain extent with its joint agreement of oil exploration with Brunei. Recently, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang put forward a dual-track approach to the South China Sea issue. The first track is not new; in essence, it is a repetition of what has been mentioned in the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) — to resolve disputes with countries directly concerned through consultations and negotiations. However, the second track has something particularly relevant to Southeast Asian countries — to carry out joint efforts to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea.

Much has been said on one of the fundamental principles of international maritime law, namely the freedom of navigation. Article 58 of UNCLOS recognises the rights of all states to enjoy the freedoms of navigation in the EEZ — this point is often stressed by the United States. Yet, according to paragraph 3 of article 58, in exercising their rights and performing their duties, states shall have due regard to the rights and duties of the coastal state. I would like to point out that China is not the only country that would oppose foreign military reconnaissance and surveillance in China's EEZ. More than 20 countries share the same opinion as China in opposing foreign military reconnaissance and surveillance in their EEZs, including Brazil, India, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Indeed it seems most ironic that President Modi would discuss about the freedom of navigation of the South China Sea with President Obama.

How could we possibly strengthen our cooperation in the maritime domain? To be sure, we are not short of the relevant mechanisms such as the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Additionally, I would like to make mention of some of China's bilateral cooperation with other countries. In 2014, a memorandum of understanding was successfully concluded between China and the

United States on the Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters. Moreover, direct telephone links have been established between China and Russia, China and the United States, and China and the Republic of Korea. Direct talks have also been conducted between China and Indonesia. Currently, China stands ready to establish a hotline between China and the ASEAN countries. China is willing to be the first country to negotiate such a hotline with ASEAN.

We are certainly grateful to the United States for inviting us to attend RIMPAC 2014. Looking back at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2014, one may have the impression that China and the United States were really at loggerheads. Nonetheless, people were discoursing about how the two countries could cooperate in the RIMPAC exercise at behind-the-scenes talks. The Sino-US relationship is essentially characterised by vulnerability and resilience. The aircraft collision in 2001 is an example of this relationship. In the incident, China released the US crew within 12 days, after skillful diplomatic manoeuvre. Furthermore, the United States apologised twice. Undeniably, we have reached a certain degree of maturity in major power relations.

China has also established a three billion yuan China-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation Fund for maritime projects. The funds can be used for anything related to maritime economy, environment, fishery, salvage and communication at sea. All ASEAN countries could make a proposal on how they would like to make use of the funds. Clearly, dispute is only a small portion of our bilateral relationship with ASEAN countries; the bigger part is cooperation, not only on disputes but also in other areas.

Finally, what does China want? China seeks to be loved rather than awed, let alone feared. The Chinese navy has escorted about 6,000 ships in the Gulf of Aden and in the waters along the Somali coast. Counter piracy is an unprecedented experience for the Chinese navy.

For the first time in its history, China is operating far away from its own coast for non-combat missions. Moreover, half of the ships are foreign ships. The Chinese navy has, from the very beginning, tried hard to blend two things together — China’s national interests, and China’s international responsibilities. We have not only escorted our own ships, but have spent half of the time escorting 3,000 ships, which were not part of our mission or mandate. We are concerned about providing public security goods to the international community. These efforts point to this: China is not aggressive, China is not assertive, and China wants to be loved by the international community.

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**Senior Colonel Zhou Bo**

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Senior Colonel Zhou Bo started his military service in 1979 and has served in various posts in the Guangzhou Air Force Regional Command and the Foreign Affairs Office (FAO), Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China. Previous appointments include: Deputy Director General of West Asia and Africa Bureau; Deputy Director General of General Planning Bureau, FAO; and Chinese Defense Attaché to the Republic of Namibia. He is now Director of the Centre for International Security Cooperation in the FAO. Senior Colonel Zhou Bo is an undergraduate of Air Force Engineering College (1979–1983) and a postgraduate of St Edmund College, Cambridge University (1996–1997). He was Visiting Fellow at the Land Warfare Studies Centre of the Australian Army in 1999.





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