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**STRENGTHENING COMPREHENSIVE AND
COOPERATIVE SECURITY IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC**

“Enhancing Maritime Security”

*Enhancing Maritime Security in the Asia Pacific
Region*

by

**Vijay Sakhuja, PhD
Director of Research
Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA)
India**

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Enhancing Maritime Security in the Asia Pacific Region

** Vijay Sakhuja, PhD*

The Asia-Pacific Region is witnessing rapid transformation driven by systemic changes sweeping through the region. At one level, economic interdependence through a network of Free Trade Agreements (FTA) has knit the region effectively and connected it with the global trading system. This has attracted major economies of the world to the region through trade and investments. At another level, security issues are gaining primacy driven by the challenges posed by asymmetric and transnational threats that could potentially undermine the economic vitality of the Asia Pacific region.

In the above construct, maritime security has emerged as a critical issue of concern. This is so because regional economic growth is largely driven by the maritime-based trading system that is intricately connected to the global trading system. Significantly, this maritime-based trading system is threatened by a host of asymmetric threats and challenges. But at the same time, these threats and challenges have emerged as catalysts for a new synergy of networking among the regional and extra regional states. In essence, states are developing among themselves new capacities of cooperative and convergent security. The preference for cooperative and convergent approaches to security is also built on the premise that regional economic development would be a potential source of regional stability. At another level, the evolving strategic vision of the Asian navies envisages a credible defensive posture and a visible desire to build robust maritime military capability. Thus, the evolving maritime environment offers a generous mix of both promise and peril for states.

This paper attempts to explore vistas for enhancing maritime security in the region. It examines the threats and challenges posed by violent non-state actors, the proliferation and the transit of weapons of mass destruction, the adversarial impacts of

climate change and the doctrinal and transformational issues sweeping across the regional navies. The paper also highlights the existing multilateral/trilateral/bilateral maritime security initiatives and identifies issues that require cooperative structures.

Regional Maritime Prism

The Asia Pacific Region is a large littoral space, which abounds an enormous promise for maritime economy. The sea serves as a significant provider of food and employment to the people and the sea-lanes serve as the umbilical cord of the regional economy. The littorals are witness to burgeoning industrial and manufacturing activity, extensive maritime infrastructure built around shipbuilding, shipping and ports to facilitate trade, and a skilled human resource to support economic development. Further, the littoral and the hinterland are linked through a transportation network built around roads, rail and inland waterways which facilitate long haul bulk and containerised cargo traffic thus creating a seamless supply chain.

The region has also emerged in geo-strategic significance as the densest shipping route linking Asia with the global trading system that has immense economic and strategic implications. China, India, Japan. South Korea and the ASEAN countries represent a very significant share of their economy that moves over the seas resulting in the primacy of the safety and security of the security of Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) in their strategic calculations.

Interestingly, sea based commerce is also the Achilles heel of regional economic growth due to the risks and vulnerabilities in the maritime supply chains that may result from disruption that could be both natural and manmade, both at sea and in the littorals. The littoral and the extended zone into the EEZ is fraught with a wide spectrum of

maritime asymmetric threats with increasing incidence of piracy, maritime terrorism, drugs and arms smuggling, and illegal human migration.

Further, the 1982 United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the post-Cold war strategic milieu has provided the stimuli for the adversarial postures and actions among the regional countries. States with boundary disputes and contested EEZs are building robust military maritime capabilities to exercise sovereignty over their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) and protect national interests. The extra-regional naval presence in the form of a variety of platforms including aircraft carriers, expeditionary vessels, surface warships and submarines including nuclear propelled platforms from Britain, France, Russia and the US are of concern to regional powers. Besides, the alliance templates including access and basing agreements condition regional geo-strategic prism prompting states to build littoral defenses and maximize anti-access measures.

Although the regional countries have espoused resolution of disputes through dialogue with accents of cooperative and convergent security, there still remain suspicions among regional countries about extra regional naval presence because of their historical experiences of subjugation and colonization that came 'from the sea'. Consequently, Asia Pacific countries appear to have given a higher priority to their navies than armies and air forces. There is a general trend in the region to buildup the navies by acquiring new hardware with offensive capabilities. However, most of the regional states would still prefer a favourable and amicable balance of power for peace and stability in the region and prevent any trends towards an arms race.

The regional countries must also respond to the formidable challenge that emerges from the covert proliferation of nuclear technologies and its maritime-based transit. This places enormous responsibilities of surveillance and monitoring of the sea-borne trade and movement of platforms engaged in transporting weapons of mass destructions.

At another level, the Asia Pacific countries must also contend with the adversarial impacts of climate induced security challenges involving illegal migration, increased frequency of cyclones and typhoons necessitating Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) response.

Asymmetric Threats and Challenges

The Asia Pacific littorals and the extended zone of the EEZ are fraught with asymmetric threats arising from piracy, maritime terrorism, gunrunning and drug smuggling. The nexus between pirates and terrorists is debatable, but arms smuggling and their supplies to terrorists and insurgent groups have been quite strong.

Till very recently, sea piracy in the Straits of Malacca (60,000 vessels transit the Strait annually) had invited international concern and the littoral states i.e. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore came under intense international pressure to ensure the safety of merchant traffic transiting the Strait. A series of proactive counter piracy measures including surveillance and reconnaissance of the Strait through coordinated sea and air patrols, intelligence sharing and security enhancement have dramatically improved the situation in the Strait. Today the center of gravity of sea piracy has shifted to the Gulf of Aden and the coast of Somalia and several Asian navies are currently deployed in support of international efforts to counter piracy.

There are at least six known terrorist groups in Asia with maritime capability; Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka (recently decimated by the Sri Lankan military), Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Bangladesh with strong links with other groups in Asia, Jemmiah Islamiah (JI) in Southeast Asia, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Abu Sayaf Group (ASG) in the Philippines and LeT in Pakistan. The Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI) based in Bangladesh has used the sea route to transport arms from surreptitious sources in Southeast Asia and support insurgent groups in Northeast India.

These groups have employed sophisticated tactics and challenged conventional military forces. They have successfully used the air and sea mediums to make forays and recorded successful attacks against ships and coastal infrastructure. Attacks through the subsurface medium using mini submarines, submersible platforms, use of sea mines (Limpet mines) and saboteurs is also quite popular and at least one groups has recorded some spectacular successes. In recent times, increased maritime security convergence through a series of maritime arrangements among Asia Pacific countries has significantly reduced the threat of piracy and terrorism.

Maritime Transit of Weapons of Mass Destruction

It is generally agreed that proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), related materials and technology undermine security. The international community has concluded that it is the duty of all states to institute stringent measures to prevent the flow of WMDs. At the multinational levels, the need for appropriate initiatives and responses to counter proliferation has been recognized. In that context, the imperative to stem the flow of the WMDs by the sea route has gained critical salience.

In the past there have been numerous cases of smuggling of WMD materials by ships and in some cases there have been successful interceptions made. For instance, in June 1999 the Indian authorities intercepted the North Korean freighter *Kuwolsan* transporting knocked down components of the *Nodong* Missiles, seizure in December 2002 by Spanish forces of *So San* carrying North Korean missiles to Yemen, interception of the German-owned vessel *BBC China*, in October 2003, and several other similar incidents. The "BBC China" incident was instrumental in the unscrambling of the A.Q. Kahn network and led to Libya's decision to eliminate its WMD and longer range missile programs.

These interceptions had exposed the vulnerability of maritime trade and prompted the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) wherein it was decided to interdict vehicles for transportation (aircraft, ships and land based transport) thus giving interdiction a prominence over more traditional nonproliferation efforts. Besides, the fear of threat of use of WMDs by non-state actors acted as a catalyst for the PSI. The PSI is built around information sharing, joint naval exercises, and training and has found favour among a number of Asia Pacific countries barring a few.

The advent of terrorism at sea coupled with proliferation of weapons of mass destruction has added a new dimension of maritime security. Traditional maritime law and the UNCLOS have provision to combating piracy, slave trade, drug smuggling and other illegal acts at sea, but the threat of non state actors was not anticipated and hence no provision was made to challenge the power of non state actors.

Regional Naval Buildup

The recent economic downturn had adversely impacted the global economy and there were visible signs of the slowing down of global GDP. Notwithstanding that Asia's overall defense spending continues to grow and could account for 32% of global military spending by 2016, or US \$480 billion, up from 24% in 2007 unlike North America, the biggest spender in 2007 with 39% of the world arms market would account for 29% or \$435 billion.¹ Further, Asian military spending will be led by China (from US \$120 billion in 2007 to \$255 billion by 2016) and India (about US \$100 billion for procurement in the next five years).

As far as naval spending is concerned, the Asia Pacific region would lead the global naval acquisition with China, India, Japan and South Korea expected to invest nearly US\$60 billion over the next five years. This figure is projected to reach US\$108 billion over the next decade and US\$173 billion over the period to 2030.² Further, several Asian navies are moving toward 'third-generation status' built around a balanced naval force capable of operating in a complex battlefield environment.

China's economic growth has its portent consequences on military and strategic modernization. There are visible signs of Chinese military buildup and it is leveraging economic power to develop a powerful navy built around nuclear submarines, modern surface vessels, and could soon be operating aircraft carriers. Likewise, Indian naval buildup pivoting on two-carrier task force and a growing submarine inventory including nuclear submarines has attracted attention of several Asia Pacific countries.

Submarines are significant constituent of the emerging Asia Pacific naval order of battle. The regional navies see several benefits in acquiring these platforms that could serve

as force multipliers as also anti access platforms centered on credible conventional deterrence against extra regional naval forces. Besides the traditional submarine operating navies such as China, India and Japan, several Southeast Asian navies are fast joining the club and could potentially lead to an arms race.

Climate Change and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief

There are several observable impacts of Climate Change that are consistent with predictions and scenarios such as melting of polar ice cap, rise of sea water levels, coastal flooding resulting in inundation of cities, and increased frequency of natural disasters causing large movements of people seeking shelter. It is estimated that the total value of coastal assets exposed to climate change would increase from US\$3,000 billion in 2005 to US \$35,000 billion by the 2070s, nearly ten times the current levels and rising to roughly 9% of projected annual GDP in this period.³ According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a large part of the coastal cities will be submerged if sea level rises. As a consequence of that, it is feared that large coastal areas will be inundated resulting in shifted coastlines or low lying island territories submerged resulting in legal tensions over territorial claims between states.

Projected Climate Change will impact on national economies that are highly dependant on maritime trade. Being critical nodes of global trade, port cities are large industrial and population centers and would be exposed to adverse impacts of coastal flooding. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report “Ranking of the World's Cities Most Exposed to Coastal Flooding Today and in the Future” has estimated that the total value of coastal assets exposed to climate change would increase from US\$3000 billion in 2005 to US \$35000 billion by the 2070s, nearly

ten times the current levels and rising to roughly 9 percent of projected annual GDP in this period. The report further notes that the top 10 cities of the world in terms of population exposure to climate change are Kolkata, Mumbai, Dhaka, Guangzhou, Ho Chi Minh City, Shanghai, Bangkok, Rangoon, Miami and Hai Phòng. Interestingly, except Miami, all other cities are located in Asia.

This brings us to the issue of human migration. A Greenpeace report “Blue Alert: Climate Migrants in South Asia – Estimates and Solutions”, suggests that, nearly 75 million people in Bangladesh could be homeless at the turn of the century and are likely to seek shelter. It is plausible that several of them could take the sea route and head towards safer ground across Asia. For instance, a large number of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and Myanmar reached the Andaman & Nicobar islands in the Bay of Bengal after they had been set adrift in the sea. Such contingencies could be more frequently in occurrence in the future and would entail maritime operations in the humanitarian spectrum.

Although climate change has created new challenges for the states, it has opened opportunities for maritime cooperation paving way for growth in cooperation and preventing climate change induced conflict escalation in climate change hot spots.

Maritime Multilateralism

It has been acknowledged that a secure maritime environment can never be achieved by the efforts of a single country; it requires mutual understanding and cooperation of all the countries in the region. For that, it is necessary to share the common values on the benefits of regional maritime cooperation to be enjoyed by the whole maritime community.

The Asia Pacific navies have so far exhibited a desire to develop institutional approaches to addressing problems relating to maritime security and has resulted in cooperation and dialogue among the member states. In evidence are a host of maritime multilateral initiatives such as the APEC Counter-Terrorism Task Force and Secure Trade in the APEC Region (STAR), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Anti-Piracy (ReCAAP), the Malacca Straits Security Initiative (MSSI), the MALSINDO (Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia) and Eyes in the Sky (EIS) initiatives, FPDA Defence Chiefs' Conference (FDCC), CSCAP (Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific) Working Group on Maritime Cooperation and a large number of bilateral and trilateral maritime security arrangements.

Several government and industry initiatives focusing on security of supply chains have been also been introduced to insulate supply chains to make them more safe, secure and protected against disruptions. These include International Ship & Port Security Code (ISPS), Container Security Initiative (CSI), and Customs & Trade Partnership against Terrorism (C-TPAT) and several other initiatives and regulations. The main purpose of the above initiatives is to reduce the likelihood of maritime-vectored terrorism.

Concluding Remarks

In summation, the regional maritime dynamics in the Asia Pacific region in the twenty-first century contains elements of both the competitive and the cooperative strategies. The asymmetry of military capabilities is an inherent feature of the regional maritime order and is further complicated by the formidable capabilities of the extra-regional navies who are present in the region through a host of politico-military alliances

and arrangements. China, India, Japan, South Korea and some ASEAN countries dominate the structural balance of naval power in the region and others navies are striving to develop modest countervailing capabilities.

However, the growing naval capabilities in the Asia Pacific countries can be leveraged in response to common security concerns, such as SLOC security, EEZ protection, humanitarian and disaster relief, and addressing issues of asymmetric threats. Therefore, in net assessment, the prospect of the regional maritime balance is predicated on the twin forces of competitive and cooperative dynamics of maritime security.

¹ “Asia to Take Lead in Arms Spending”, Bangkok Post, March 5, 2009. Also see “Asia Set for Defence Spending Spree”, Asian Defence Industry Monitor, March 6, 2009.

² Ibid.

³ R.J Nicholls, S.Hanson, C.Herweijer, N Patmore, S Hallegatte, Jan Corfee-Morlot, Jean Chateau and R Muir-Wood, “Ranking of the World’s Cities Most Exposed to Coastal Flooding Today and in the Future” Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007.