

## India ahoy

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In recent weeks, Chinese destroyers and submarines have appeared in force in waters near Japan, their helicopters twice buzzing Japanese vessels at reckless proximity. With such provocations, China is shunning calls for cooperation at sea, flagging a determination to go it alone in the way it uses its rapidly growing naval prowess.

The question then becomes, what, if anything, is anyone going to do about it? Japan would seem to be a logical counterweight to China's rising naval power. Yet Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama is unwilling to take full advantage of his country's maritime weight. Tokyo has maintained its anti-piracy presence in the Gulf of Aden, but it has abandoned its at-sea refueling mission in support of coalition operations in Afghanistan. Calls to widen the activities of Japan's highly capable navy will meet inertia and resistance. And to be fair to Mr. Hatoyama, the problem isn't him alone. His country seems increasingly to boast a national political climate that substitutes melancholy for strategy.

Fortunately, while Japan hesitates, another Asian power is building the ability to check China's military inroads: India.

The Indian navy is growing in potency, reach and stated ambition. A 2007 doctrine declared an overriding goal of safeguarding energy imports vital for India's development. This implies at a minimum playing a greater role in the Indian Ocean. Indeed, in pursuing such self-interest, India says it offers a service for all trading nations by protecting the sea lanes from the Strait of Hormuz to the Strait of Malacca.

Indian strategists have long regarded an Indian Ocean sphere of influence and constabulary responsibility as a natural inheritance from the Raj. But only now is their country building the requisite heft and friendships. Delhi is developing a modernized fleet of about 150 ships, to be centered on at least two aircraft carriers. The navy's share of the defense budget is gradually rising, though at 15%, it is still inordinately low. Its purchase of the amphibious transport dock USS Trenton—renamed INS Jalashwa—has increased its ability to move troops by sea. New-generation destroyers, frigates and submarines are entering service. P-8 Poseidon surveillance and submarine-hunting planes bought from the United States will lead to a picture of ocean traffic which India could share in real time with Washington and its allies. There is also progress, albeit unsteady, toward the submarine-launched nuclear deterrent India seeks against China.

India already is proving its commitment to ensuring security in its extended ocean neighborhood. It used its navy to help Sri Lanka and other neighbors after the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, working alongside democratic partners Australia, Japan and the U.S. Indian warships have also guarded American vessels in the Malacca Strait, protected multilateral summits in Mozambique, helped Mauritius monitor its waters, interdicted a suspect North Korean cargo ship, and rescued Indians and other South Asians from war-torn Lebanon. They have confronted piracy (with, if anything, an excess of force; they sank a Thai trawler being used by pirates) and coordinated patrols with Indonesia. India's navy is engaging nations as diverse as Singapore, South Africa, Japan, France, Russia and Oman.

The big question, however, still is China. With deep reliance on seaborne energy supplies and trade, and the world's fourth-largest merchant fleet, it was inconceivable that China would forever outsource all its sea-lane security. Yet China's growing role in India's region worries New Delhi's defense planners. Of late they have seen China cultivating Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Burma and Bangladesh with arms sales, energy deals and port projects that might not stay civilian. Some Chinese scholars now openly suggest their country needs military bases abroad.

Further complicating matters, the pirates of Somalia give China perfect reason for an

indefinite naval presence to India's west. The suddenness of that deployment, in December 2008, caught New Delhi off guard. In recent months China has stolen another march by volunteering for a lead role in patrol-sharing talks with Western navies.

This calls for a response from India, though precisely what is a matter of debate. One smart option would be to make careful offers of closer ties to China to avert any build-up in tensions. The minister of state for defense, Pallam Raju, has volunteered Indian protection for Chinese oil shipments, plus an expansion of the minimalist naval engagement between the two powers. New Delhi would be well advised to maintain this momentum. As chief regional power, it would be foolish to squander the opportunity to set the terms of cooperation in the Indian Ocean while China's capabilities there remain far short of its suspected ambitions.

More broadly, India would benefit from strengthening more filaments of its naval web. Practical cooperation could be built with Australia, an advanced naval power that shares India's oceanic geography and political values. Trilateral patrols involving Australia and Indonesia would make compelling strategic sense. South Korea wants a greater global role, has its own anti-piracy mission underway and, along with a China-wary Vietnam, is ripe for Indian partnership. New Delhi could show more leadership in trying to work with Pakistan, for a start by persuading Islamabad to join an Indian-initiated conference of the region's admirals, due to gather in Abu Dhabi on May 10.

It makes perfect sense that a rising mega-state located at the center of a major body of water would aspire to be an indispensable naval power. India's challenge now is to look beyond its old land-based frustrations—like Kashmir and Pakistan—so that it can fulfil its vital maritime vision.

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