China: Second Aircraft Carrier Base in Hainan- What it means for India?

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It is a known fact that the first aircraft carrier base of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is located at Dalian, in Liaoning province; the carrier ‘Liaoning’ was commissioned into China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy on September 25, 2012.

Open information emanating from China now confirms the completion of construction of a second aircraft carrier base at Sanya, off Hainan Island. These events need examination from a broader perspective as they have potentials to generate questions of geo-political importance as in the following - how to contextualize the events in terms of changes happening in China’s naval strategy? What could be the likely implications of such changes for the military situation in the Asia- Pacific region which remains affected by an acute territorial contest between China and other nations in South and East China seas? How these changes will impact on India’s sphere of influence, especially the Indian Ocean Region? What follows is an attempt to find answers to these questions.

At the outset, it would be necessary to flag key aspects already noticed on the Sanya base. Catching attention is a revealing signed article (August 4, 2015) in the flagship news paper of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the People’s Daily. Entitled “The reasons behind China’s decision to build Second aircraft carrier base in Hainan”[1], it quoted the Chinese language Kanwa Defense Review of Canada as saying (July 2015) that the construction of the 700 meters long base, marking the longest carrier berths in the world, was completed in November 2014 and that it can dock large ships on both sides. From this, one gets a sense that the Sanya base at the same time can accommodate two carriers.

The article reproduced three reasons given by a scholar in China for the decision of authorities to build the country’s second aircraft carrier base in Hainan Island- Hainan’s strategic location, its defense facilities and the effectiveness of deploying guided missile nuclear submarines. Explaining the first, the scholar pointed out that Hainan navy base is comparatively close to the three strategically important straits -- Malacca Strait, Lombok Strait and Sunda Strait, making it easier for composition of China’s naval fleet and that the base can protect
China’s comparatively weak oil passage to ensure its economic development. Should Japan and the United States blockade the “first island chain” (stretching from Okinawa to Taiwan), China’s ships could still reach the Indian Ocean and southern Pacific via the South China Sea. Preserving access to the South China Sea thus allows China to protect its “weak” transportation channels for imported oil. A base at Hainan thus lets China concentrate its naval forces at a strategically important location where U.S. military force is relatively weak.

On the second, the scholar said that Hainan Island has quite advanced defense facilities created after years of development, providing enough support to the naval base. In particular, Hainan houses J-11B fighter jets, which can respond to U.S. P8-A surveillance flights over the South China Sea.

On the third, the scholar stated that Hainan base is good for the effectiveness of navy’s nuclear force in operating in China’s deeper waters and wider rims. That was why China has in recent years has deployed guided missile nuclear submarines in the South China Sea (separate reports[2] mentioned that the Hainan base is close to the existing Yulin nuclear submarine base. At least one Type-093 Shang-class nuclear submarine is reportedly based in Yulin). He added that nuclear submarines require protection from anti-submarine warfare; the geography of the Hainan base provides good cover. Because Hainan is a geographically desirable base for nuclear submarines, it makes sense to place a carrier base nearby to provide additional protection from anti-submarine warfare.

Building of two aircraft carrier bases should be correlated to the current changes in the PRC’s naval strategy. The document “China’s Military Strategy” (May 26, 2015) (hereinafter called the Document) signified these changes by observing that the “the traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests. It is necessary for China to develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests.” It envisaged ‘gradual’ shift of China’s naval focus from “offshore waters defense” to the combination of “offshore waters defense” and “open seas protection” and stressed on building a ‘modern maritime military force structure commensurate with the country’s national security and development interests’ and on preparing for a Maritime Military Struggle (Maritime PMS).

In elaboration, Chinese officials[3] are arguing that “as China continues to rise, it has enormous interests around the globe that need protection, including investments, trade, energy, imports and the surging presence of Chinese living abroad and that “Open Seas Protection” is a sign of China’s spreading economic and diplomatic footprint abroad. The Document alleged that “some external countries” for “meddling in South China Sea”, implying that China’s naval strategy will concentrate on resisting US naval domination in the region.
South China Sea is not the only area of naval priority for the PRC. Its objectives are broader. China’s intentions to abandon its long held policies and project its naval power projection far from its coast line, say Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, are clearly discernible in the Document. One can see China’s desire in its measures already taken to artificially create islands in the South China Sea, negotiate for a naval base in Djibouti and undertake anti-piracy naval missions in the Gulf of Aden and dispatch of naval vessels to Yemen, to evacuate stranded Chinese and other foreign nationals.

To realize its intentions, China is increasing its naval capabilities. It is upgrading its destroyers and frigates to range further; it has tested 056 stealth frigates and brought into service of China’s first air craft carrier; the second one is now coming up in Sanya base. It is developing Anti-Ship Ballistic Missiles, Anti-Ship cruise missiles, submarines, both conventional and nuclear, amphibious ships, and maritime surveillance capabilities.

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is crucial for 70% of world petroleum shipments. It accounts for half the world’s container traffic. More than three quarters of China’s oil transits through the IOR. China is evolving its perceptions on the IOR accordingly, which needs a careful analysis, particularly against the background of the newly allotted “open seas protection” for the Chinese Navy. It has to be admitted that till now China’s focus continues to be on the Pacific and not on the IOR. But changes in the perceptions of Beijing on the IOR are gradually unfolding at a time when the need to protect the Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCS) along the Indian Ocean, providing for the country’s energy imports, is becoming vital for the PRC. The current thinking at various levels in China is that (a) the peace and stability of the IOR should be maintained through carrying out ‘maritime security cooperation’ with the navies of various countries, especially seeking to establish a maritime security ‘code of conduct’ between them (Chinese delegate’s speech, Galle, Sri Lanka, December 13, 2012), (b) its interests will be driven only by commercial, and not military, objectives (Blue Book of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, released in June 2013), (c) China cannot afford to challenge either the United States or India in the IOR [4] and (d) China recognizes India’s special role in stabilizing the strategic Indian Ocean region, but region is not India’s “backyard”.[5]

Under these perceptions, China is pursuing an aggressive soft power diplomacy, which has begun to also shape the IOR strategic environment. The PRC has extended to IOR nations large loans on generous repayment terms and invested in major infrastructure projects such as the building of roads, dams, ports, power plants, and railways, besides offering military assistance; this has led to its gaining influence in the IOR littorals. In strategic terms, China’s main aim in the IOR is to effectively secure the SLOCS with choke points such as the Malacca Straits in view, for which its policy now is to rely on naval support. A relevant subject in this regard is the much talked about “String of Pearls” strategy of China aiming to build a network of base agreements with countries along the SLOCS from Hainan Island to Africa: Bangladesh, Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. There were some unconfirmed reports[6] in the past about China’s plans to form a separate Indian Ocean fleet with Sanya as headquarters in addition to the three existing ones (the North Sea, East Sea, and South Sea Fleets), so that it can project naval power into the surrounding IOR. This may need further watch.

The developing China’s IOR strategy should be of great interest to India. It would be very much essential for India to note and act on China’s plans to involve its Navy in “open seas protection”. The IOR is certain to emerge as one of the key areas for China’s securing of its ‘overseas
interests’; it already figures prominently in President Xi Jinping’s Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative which looks to address China’s quest for energy security and regional integration. New Delhi already seems to have become skeptical about the MSR initiative which it views of facilitating China’s strategic reach to the IOR nations; especially it disapproves the proposal for China-Pakistan Economic corridor, which passes through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. Also India may not miss the strategic implication to it of China’s operation of naval vessels including submarines in the IOR. The submarine issue has already received India’s attention.[7] India has predicted intense rivalry between the Indian and Chinese navies as the “implicit focus” of the Chinese Navy appears to be on undermining the Indian Navy’s edge “to control highly sensitive sea lines of communication”. Potentials for an India-China rivalry in the IOR look therefore substantial.

India should also recognize the negative fallout from the PLA Navy’s “open seas protection” role with respect to its Act East policy. The rising tensions in South China Sea (SCS) may not be conducive to India’s promotion of its economic interests in the SCS region. India has only a limited capacity to directly influence events in that region; moreover, Beijing is wary of any pro-active role by India in that region. New Delhi may therefore have to rely on its diplomatic options to bring down tensions in the SCS.

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