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The PLAN reaches the Atlantic Assessing Chinese Navy's recent naval exercises

By Loro Horta

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On September 11 the Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) carried out its first-ever naval exercises in the Atlantic. These exercises were carried almost simultaneously with exercises in the Indian Ocean as far as the coast of Sydney and increasing naval activity in the South China Sea. Given the number of exercises and the wide geographical area covered, what do these recent naval manoeuvres indicate about the PLAN?

ON JULY 24 two Chinese naval vessels left their base in Sanya at Hainan island for an 87-day tour covering 23,000 nautical miles. The two vessels, the 5,850 tonne missile-guided destroyer *Guangzhou* and the supply ship *Weishanhu*, visited St Petersburg in Russia, Portsmouth in Britain, Cadiz in Spain and Toulon in southern France. The vessels' presence in St Petersburg was purely a diplomatic port call with no exercises being conducted between the PLAN and its Russian counterpart. From Russia the Chinese vessels sailed to Portsmouth where the PLAN conducted its first- ever naval exercises in the north Atlantic. The PLAN and the Royal Navy conducted search and rescue exercises; rescue of damage ships; communication operations including light communications and ultra-high frequency telecommunication; change of formations and joint fleet formations search. The British aircraft carrier *Ark Royal* took part in the exercises, giving the PLAN a unique opportunity to see an air carrier in action and learn valuable lessons for its own aircraft ambitions.

Mediterranean voyage

The PLAN ships conducted their first-ever joint exercises with the Spanish navy on September 19 in the Mediterranean near the Spanish city of Cadiz. The exercise involved the Spanish frigate *Reina Sofia* and a patrol vessel with a focus on search and rescue missions. The Chinese vessels got the warmest welcome in France where they berthed for five days and participated in various cultural and social events. At the end of the trip high-ranking French officials pledged to boost cooperation between the two navies to enhance ties between their two nations. This was the second naval exercise carried out between the two countries, with the first taking place in March 2004 in the South China Sea involving two French vessels and two PLAN ships -- a guided missile destroyer and the supply ship *Hongze*. France has also provided China in the 1980s with license rights to produce many of the helicopters used by the Chinese military such as the Z-9 and Z-11 utility helicopters and their maritime variants used by the PLAN.

When Chinese ships were still on manoeuvres with the British Royal Navy in the North Atlantic, ships from the North China Sea Fleet departed Quindao to Australia for a series of trilateral exercises with the Australian and New Zealand navies off the coast of New South Wales. According to the Peoples

Daily the three navies were to conduct communication drills, fleet formation manoeuvres and communication exercises. The exercise is expected to run for two days and is the first-ever between the three navies. As with other previous exercises the PLAN deployed a missile destroyer and a supply ship.

Since July the South China Sea fleet has also been active in conducting its own exercises and aggressive patrols in the disputed Spratly Islands. On July 11 PLAN ships opened fire on Vietnamese fishing vessels for allegedly violating Chinese territorial waters.

Significance of China's exercises

PLAN exercises in European waters marked the first- ever naval manoeuvres conducted by China outside Asian waters. It shows the PLAN's desire to demonstrate its increasing ability, at least for the purposes of exercises, and to operate far from its traditional areas of operation. The exercises also allowed the Chinese to practise valuable skills in global navigation, resupply at sea, distant communications and to accustom its men and officers to long periods of operations in the high seas. This show of ability has been going on for the last six years. In 2001 two Chinese vessels, a destroyer and a supply ship, visited Europe for the first time, although in this first-ever adventure outside Asian waters no exercises were carried out. This first trip was followed less than a year later by the PLAN's most daring endeavour to date -- a circumnavigation of the globe in 132 days that started in May of that year. Once again one missile destroyer, the Qingdao and a supply ship, made up the Chinese naval deployment. Between September 2002 and August 2007 the Chinese navy conducted various exercises and visits to Asian ports in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar and South Korea.

In light of the trend, the recent exercises conducted with European navies are part of the PLAN's effort to improve its operating capabilities in the high seas. It is no coincidence that all the Chinese vessels deployed so far constituted a combat element and a logistics one -- a clear indication of the PLAN'S goal to expand its range of operations. Another element that emerges from these exercises is that the PLAN's more modern vessels, such as the missile-guided destroyer Qingdao, have participated in more than one such long range voyages making the crew of the PLAN's most modern ships also their most experienced ones. The exercises in Europe, Australia and the activities in the South China Sea also demonstrate the PLAN's ability to coordinate various operations simultaneously, and spread across a geographical expanse. While it is unclear what level of coordination the various naval units have with the PLAN'S central headquarters while in operation, such exercises can only in the long run improve the PLAN's command and coordination skills. Further, the exercises in European and Australian waters allowed China to get acquainted with operating procedures of major Western navies who share many common tactical, operational and doctrinal procedures with the American navy.

Finally, the exercises in European waters allowed China a controversy-free environment to practise its naval skills. Due to the existing regional rivalries, major exercises in the Asian region tend to raise suspicion concerning the nature and target of the exercises. Europe and the southern waters of Australia, far way from Asia's main choke points, such as the Malacca Straits, and other points of tension, such as the Spratlys, offer the PLAN the perfect environment to sharpen its skills without raising much attention. So far the PLAN has avoided any major exercises in the West Pacific due to the high concentration of US naval forces in the area and the potential for unnecessary tensions that such move may create.

Conclusion: An emerging sea-change?

The ongoing naval exercises by the Chinese navy go well beyond the purposes of naval diplomacy and indicate a crescendo in the PLAN'S operations outside the region. It demonstrates the PLAN'S increasing confidence and professionalism and its desire to become a true blue water navy. In the

coming years, Asia and the world should expect more of such activities, not only from China, but also from Asia's other major naval powers such as India and Japan. Five centuries ago the arrival of the Portuguese in Asia marked the rise of European power throughout the world. Today the arrival of Asian war ships in European waters may mark the beginning of an increasingly Asian presence in an otherwise Western-dominated world order.

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