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China and Its Navy: Drifting Towards Normality?

By Geoffrey Till

Synopsis

The proposed establishment of a Chinese naval base at Djibouti suggests that China is after all developing a normal major navy able to operate far outside its immediate area. Whether this should be seen as alarming will depend on what China does with it.

Commentary

THE RECENT disclosure that the PLA Navy intends to set up a 'base' in Djibouti, for operations off Somalia and beyond, has come as something of a surprise, for two reasons. Firstly, until quite recently, the idea of any country setting up a base on foreign soil seemed to have gone out of fashion, because of their cost, their political vulnerability and, normally, their very limited value in situations of serious conflict unless considerable resources are invested in their defence.

Fixed bases which cannot be adequately defended, for whatever reason, become strategic liabilities, just as was Singapore in 1942. For this reason today's navies – led by the US Navy - have instead invested in 'sea-basing' – building a sophisticated fleet of supply ships that increase their capacity to operate independently from the sea.

Places not Bases

Yet, the Russians have built up in Latakia in Syria what looks like and is often called a base, while both the French and the British have done so in Bahrain. But these are not major centres of military power like Singapore was supposed to be; instead they host planning staffs, store fuel and other supplies, offer a chance for ship

maintenance and minor repairs and, sometimes provide rest and recuperations for sailors. They are better described as 'places' rather than bases.

Nonetheless they enhance a navy's capacity to operate more cost-effectively but only in situations that are well short of conflict with other navies or military forces. This will almost certainly apply to the new bases that China seems to be building in the South China Sea.

Secondly, the announcement represents a clear departure from Beijing's previous line that the setting up of foreign bases was an inherently destabilising business that was historically associated with Western-style imperialism and of no interest for a China intent only on the defence of its near seas interests and its own 'peaceful rise'. Instead, the announcement seems to be simply yet more evidence confirming that China is slowly drifting away from its narrative of maritime exceptionalism and steadily becoming a normal naval power.

In this, it is following the earlier trajectory set by the Soviet Union, which in the 1920s and 1930s rejected classic conceptions of seapower as being technologically obsolete, unsuited to Russia's strategic needs and ideologically objectionable. And yet when conditions improved under Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev, Russia built a fleet that looked more and more like any other major navy, adopted those same classic conceptions (if 'with Russian characteristics') and through the negotiations leading up to the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea in 1982 its legal assumptions increasingly converged with those of its apparent adversaries.

Far Seas Operations

China's establishment of shore-based facilities in support of its distant water operations reinforces the impression that we are seeing another example of the same process. Already, observers have noted the growth of the Chinese navy's capability for 'far seas' operations, most obviously with their steady development of carrier aviation and increased investment in multi-mission destroyers and amphibious and logistic supply ships.

Like Russia, China first denounced aircraft carriers for decades but is now building them. The PLA Navy's deployments into the Indian ocean and beyond, only partly in support of their increasingly effective contribution to the multinational counter-piracy effort off Somalia, points in the same direction.

Their admission of a willingness to engage in 'reciprocal' military operations in the EEZs of Japan and the United States and restrained reaction to the recent Subi reef incident even suggest that something of a rethink about some their long-standing legal assumptions may be in process as well. If true, this latter would not be at all surprising, given the traditional interest that great maritime powers have always had in the freedom of the seas.

Even if this transition is taking place, we should expect it to be neither fast nor clear. Like any other country, China has built up its own version of past events and derived from this a narrative that shapes its response to the present and the future. This 'exceptionalist' conception of its history is accompanied by a strong sense of its own

benign intentions and seems to point merely to the need for a navy designed for strong but narrow conceptions of national self-defence, but for very limited active engagement in the wider world.

Major shifts in such assumptions are uncomfortable and difficult to accomplish – there will be resistance in some quarters, contradictions, confusions and surprises. To outside observers, the changes may well seem imperceptible until it finally becomes clear that the supertanker is indeed on a different course.

A Normal Seapower

But if all this turns out to be true, and China does in effect become a ‘normal seapower’ what would it mean, and how should the rest of the world react? Alongside the obvious similarity with the Soviet case, there is one major difference – namely that China is an active participant and stakeholder in the smooth running of the international sea-based trading system in a way that the Soviet Union, with its faltering and largely autarchic economy was not. Neither, today, is there anything like the ideological rivalry characteristic of the Cold war.

Accordingly the rise of China as a normal maritime power may prove more of an opportunity to be welcomed than a strategic threat to be feared - provided it contributes to the defence of the global system against the many threats it faces. In this it is not so much the steady accretion in China’s capacity to operate out of area that matters but more what Beijing in the end does with it.

Professor Geoffrey Till is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow with the Maritime Security Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School for International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg