

INDIA SHOULD DEPLOY NAVAL POWER TO ACQUIRE LEVERAGE OVER CHINA

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This would send a calibrated signal to Beijing that New Delhi could tilt the power balance in areas of Chinese vulnerability

My argument in these pages over the past month has been that India cannot deter Chinese expansionism in the Himalayas unless we show credible capacity to hurt China's interests elsewhere in its contested neighbourhood where it is vulnerable. After the skirmishes of the past couple of months, Indian and Chinese troops are in a process of disengagement in eastern Ladakh, but we should not be surprised if China refuses to go back to the pre-April 2020 position. New Delhi should not accept anything short of that, but Beijing will count on our political leadership's reluctance to escalate military tensions to get away with its gains. Only when New Delhi shows a willingness to use India's capability to tilt the balance away from China in theatres that Beijing considers core to its interests will its leaders be more amenable to maintaining the status quo along our land frontiers.

Meanwhile, the situation in China's maritime neighbourhood has gotten very dangerous. Not only has the United States bolstered its naval presence with three aircraft carrier groups in the greater South China Sea region, it has changed its official position from being neutral on maritime territorial disputes to weighing in on the side of China's rivals. US Navy ships have stepped up freedom-of-navigation operations in defiance of Beijing's warnings. Earlier this month, China conducted military exercises in the disputed Paracel archipelago that is claimed by Vietnam. Chinese and US naval ships and aircraft are frequently coming dangerously close to each other, in a maritime version of the pushing and shoving that happened between Chinese and Indian troops in the Himalayas. The US move comes after Chinese vessels sank a Vietnamese fishing boat, harassed a Malaysian drillship, and intruded into an Indonesian EEZ, all in the space of the past few months.

This puts Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines and Vietnam—among the other claimants in the South China Sea disputes—in a greater quandary. These Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) states are too weak to be able to resist Chinese expansionism on their own, and like the idea of US military presence as a counterweight. At the same time, they worry that a US-China confrontation could escalate into a conflict that they do not want. While they would like to arrive at a negotiated maritime code of conduct with Beijing, they can neither count on the support of their fellow Asean members, nor on China climbing down from its maximalist positions. Only Vietnam appears to be determined to resist—diplomatically, possibly at international courts and perhaps even militarily, if it comes to that.

If China clashes with Vietnam (or the Philippines, although it's less likely), the US could enter the conflict on behalf of the latter. If on the other hand, matters escalate between Chinese and US forces, all other claimants will be compelled to make choices they would rather avoid.

So these are dangerous waters. And I advocate fishing in them.

New Delhi's official position on the South China Sea is that "India supports freedom of navigation, over flight and unimpeded commerce, based on the principles of international law". In addition to advocating peaceful solutions to disputes, India "urges all parties to show utmost respect for the [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea]." It is time for actions that

give meaning to these well-crafted words. The Indian navy's muscles should be strengthened for operations east of the Malacca Strait.

Sea power can be used flexibly to send calibrated signals to Beijing without necessarily having to cross its lines. At the least threatening level, New Delhi should increase the frequency and duration of naval deployments in the region, expanding the types of naval assets so deployed. Vessels on such deployments should regularly call at friendly ports of South East Asian countries, including Timor-Leste, and have frequent rendezvous with ships of the US, Japan, Australia, Vietnam, Singapore and Indonesia, away from disputed waters.

Stronger signals can be sent by sending the navy on longer voyages to Japanese and Russian ports, especially if the routes are planned for saying a "Hi, Hello" to the Taiwanese along the way. Such voyages offer New Delhi forms of diplomatic leverage that it currently does not have with Beijing.

At the most provocative end, Indian naval ships can participate in freedom-of-navigation operations in the South China Sea to explicitly uphold international law and reject expansive China's nine-dash line claims. This requires extremely close political and military cooperation with the US, Japan and Australia; which is another reason why New Delhi should no longer keep the Australian navy out of the multilateral Malabar exercises.

Sea power is an important part of the answer to India's China question. Yet, looking at our defence budgets, it does not appear so. As retired rear admiral Sudarshan Shrikhande argues in a recent paper, "The Indian Navy needs much better fiscal support to become far more effective in power-projection, sea control and sea denial. This would give it the range of options to use its several tools across these missions when conflict is nigh and at the minimum, the Indo-Pacific is the canvas for fighting the fight." As long as the defence establishment in New Delhi dogmatically believes that its scope of strategy is limited to our long land boundary, we will continue to ignore sea power and under-invest in the navy. If we accept that our interests span the Indo-Pacific, and this broader theatre offers us opportunities to better manage China, then it follows that we must use and strengthen our navy.

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