

# FOR CHINA, MARITIME AWAKENING CAME IN LAST CENTURY. IN INDIA, IT IS LONG OVERDUE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

In the September 2020 edition of its annual report on China, the US Department of Defence (DoD) makes the stunning announcement that the PLA Navy (PLAN) is the largest in the world. With an overall battle-force of 350 ships and submarines, including 130 major surface combatants, PLAN has overtaken the US Navy, with its strength of 293 ships. China has never bothered to provide a rationale for its ever-increasing military muscle, and a bewildered neighbourhood wonders what it portends, especially in the light of its recent adventurism in the Himalayas.

The PLA Navy has not grown overnight, and remains the clearest manifestation of the grand-strategic vision of China's political leadership. Factors that bear on its growing strength may include China's 14,500 km littoral, which is more than double India's, its objective of "reunifying" Taiwan and its irredentist maritime claims, in the South and East China Seas. An expansionist state which seeks eventual parity with the US, China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative and the Maritime Silk Route also provide the perfect camouflage for its grandiose maritime strategy.

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India, on the other hand, remains a quintessential "status quo" power and has sought military force-levels adequate only to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Notwithstanding the low budgetary priority accorded to it, the Indian Navy (IN), has built itself into a modern and capable three-dimensional force, rated by other navies as professionally "up to NATO standards" and eagerly sought as a partner, both for exercises, and for maintaining "good order at sea."

Although technology and professional competence are the yardsticks for combat-effectiveness, numbers do matter, and with the IN at sixth or seventh in the international pecking order, there is obviously a significant disparity between the PLAN and IN. Given the growing gap between the two economies, it would be foolhardy for India to attempt an arms-race with China, but investing in maritime power would pay dividends in the long-run.

Faced with a difficult situation today, it is incumbent upon India, as a significant regional power and a democracy, to stand up to its hegemonic neighbour. Regardless of economic asymmetry, India does have the military capability to inflict unacceptable pain in retaliation for any Chinese adventurism; certainly in the mountains, but also at sea.

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However, as the nation cheers the army's tactical moves in Ladakh, there are misgivings about a strategic void in New Delhi. In this context, the above US DoD report deserves close examination by our "decision-making elite" as well as military leadership; because it shows that politicians — as much in a democracy like the US, as in a totalitarian state like China — accord the highest importance to national security. It bears reflection as to why India has remained an exception to this rule.

The US Congress believes that effective strategy-making defines national interests, objectives, and policies, along with the defence capabilities (and budgetary support) necessary to deter threats. The process provides a shared vision for all agencies and a common playbook to react in times of crisis. Starting with the US National Security Strategy, to be rendered by the president, US Congress demands quadrennial reviews — matching the presidential tenure — by the Departments of Defence, State, Homeland Security and the Intelligence Community.

Where China is concerned, its political leadership has, since 1995, been issuing a defence white paper (DWP) every two years. The 11 DWPs issued so far — all public documents — clearly articulate China's vital interests as well as national security aims, objectives and challenges. Topics of discussion include force-levels and defence expenditure, the PLA's progressively changing roles and re-organisation as well as its newly inducted equipment and platforms.

While the US template may be an “overkill”, India has erred egregiously by its disregard for national security. No government has formulated a strategy or doctrine so far; nor has Parliament ever demanded a defence review or sought a white paper. As a direct consequence, “surprise” and “intelligence failure” have become a leitmotif in most of India's post-independence conflicts. Our defence-planning has remained ad-hoc and under-funded and every crisis evokes confused and fumbling responses, including panic arms purchases.

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Another important lesson that emerges from the US DoD document relates to China's “maritime awakening” in the latter part of the last century. While the PLAN owes much to visionary Admiral Liu Huaqing, its commander during the 1980s, it could not have achieved its present status without the Communist Party providing steadfast political support. Every Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) from Deng Xiaoping onwards, has backed the phased growth of China's navy, from an inconsequential coastal-force, to a substantive blue-water navy. The CMC leadership having astutely grasped the reality that “maritime power” is much more than just a “fighting-navy”, China is, today, the world leader in ship-building and its merchant marine ranks No 1 in the world. It also fields the largest coast-guard that protects the world's biggest fishing fleet. Chinese ports rank amongst the best world-wide.

As we watch the situation in Ladakh unfold, it becomes increasingly obvious that not only is a military resolution improbable, but a “hot-war” may be unaffordable for both nuclear-armed countries. The answer lies in extended negotiations at the highest political and diplomatic levels. As the weaker power, India also needs to resort to “power-balancing” and seeking like-minded friends and partners to send out a message of deterrence. India's attraction as a partner for the US, Japan or Australia, lies, not in its powerful army or professional air force, but in its navy's reach and ability to project maritime power.

In the approaching era of fiscal stringency, a sharper focus on its neglected maritime domain would garner immense benefits for India, and not just in terms of enhanced maritime-security. Giving a boost to shipbuilding, expanding the merchant fleet, modernising ports and mechanising fisheries would have a long-term impact on the economy, through growth of ancillary industries, skilling of youth and massive generation of employment — all contributing to “Atma Nirbharta”.

***This article first appeared in the print edition on September 15, 2020 under the title ‘A Maritime Awakening’. The writer is a retired chief of naval staff***

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