



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

64/17

CHINA TO BUILD A STRONGER NAVY

Dr. Puyam Rakesh Singh
Associate Fellow, CAPS

A strong military for a strong country is the mantra in China under President Xi Jinping. Thus China is working towards building a powerful navy as part of its military modernisation and reform. This year China has achieved some successes in converting this dream into a reality. Though China has a long way to go to become a maritime power some developments in 2017 reflect the changing strategic goal of the PLA Navy. The foundation is being laid. It includes the launch of the first indigenously built aircraft carrier and Type 055 missile destroyer and establishment of a naval support base in Djibouti.

After launching the first indigenously built aircraft carrier in April 2017, China has launched a new generation missile destroyer in June this year. The Type 055 destroyer with relatively advanced anti-air, anti-missile, anti-ship and anti-submarine capabilities will be part of China's new carrier battle group. At present, China's most advanced destroyer in service is the Type 052D. The 10,000-tonne ship is part of China's naval build-up to have blue water navy and power projection in the open seas. Moreover,

the Djibouti naval support base has been put into operation in July this year.¹

Meanwhile, China is using its lone aircraft carrier Liaoning for training of personnel, and testing of aircraft and other equipment for building future carrier strike groups. Most importantly, Liaoning has been conducting coordination training with the vessels in the battlegroup formation. In addition, PLA Navy destroyers, frigates and comprehensive supply ships have been undergoing various open seas training at regular intervals. These developments underscore the strategic goal of the PLA Navy to enhance strategic deterrence by shifting its focus from "offshore waters defense" to the combination of "offshore waters defense" with "open seas protection."²

Safeguarding China's 'overseas interests' has required reform of the Chinese armed forces. At present, China is planning to downsize the Army and increase the number of troops in the PLA Navy.³ Building a larger and powerful navy is a priority under the ongoing military reform programme. As part of the military reform,

1

Beijing has plans to increase the size of the Marine Corps from 20,000 to 100,000 personnel to enhance its capabilities to secure its maritime and other overseas interests.⁴

China wants the concerned countries to get used to the presence of Chinese Navy in the India Ocean as Beijing takes measures to protect its overseas interests.⁵In addition to military drills in the Western Pacific Ocean and participation in the Indian Ocean anti-piracy operations, Chinese Navy has entered the Baltic Sea for the first time since its inception. In fact, the 'Joint Sea 2017' exercises conducted by the navies of Russia and China in the Baltic Sea have brought the PLA Navy to the doorstep of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces.⁶

Moreover, in July 2017, a Chinese naval fleet visited Piraeus Port in Greece and conducted joint exercises with the Greek Navy. China COSCO Shipping Corporation had bought a huge stake in the port taking advantage of the debt-crisis in Greece. It has strengthened China's foothold in the Mediterranean Sea region as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. Furthermore, another Chinese ocean-going task group conducted an anti-piracy drill with Italian Navy in waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea on July 14, 2017. Besides, the Chinese naval vessels also conducted live-fire exercises in the international waters. China's naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea is likely to be integrated into the Belt and Road Initiative. The Vision for Maritime Cooperation

under the Belt and Road Initiative proposes to build the China-Indian Ocean-Africa-Mediterranean Sea Blue Economic Passage and the Piraeus port is categorically mentioned in the blue print of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.⁷

Increasing capabilities and outreach of the Chinese Navy have been used to convey the message to other maritime players that China will conduct activities near the coasts of other countries in exercise of the freedom of navigation. When countries such as the US, Japan and Australia are asking China to respect the freedom of navigation and over-flight in the international waters, China sent a spy ship to observe Talisman Sabre exercises conducted by the US and Australia this month. Interestingly, China's Defence Ministry stated that Chinese Navy and Air Force are exercising the same rights in the international waters.⁸ Similarly, flying over the Miyako Strait for drills in the Western Pacific Ocean has been termed "legal and appropriate".⁹ Japan was conveyed the same message by China.¹⁰

In India's neighbourhood, Sri Lankan Cabinet has approved the agreement on Hambantota port phase II in July this year. Moreover, Maldives has leased Feydhoo Finolhu Island for 50 years at a cost of about \$4 million. Earlier, Chinese submarines had made port calls at Colombo port in Sri Lanka and Karachi port in Pakistan. Besides, China is selling submarines to

Pakistan, Bangladesh and Thailand which share maritime boundary with India. In addition to port construction projects China's increasing influence in the Indian Ocean would enhance defence cooperation between China and the coastal states. The security dynamics is complicated as China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean has strategic implications. The competition for regional supremacy is on the rise. This is likely to escalate as China modernises its navy to deal with overseas challenges and establishes itself as a maritime power.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹China sets up base in Djibouti, *The People's Daily*, July 11, 2017, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0711/c90786-9240304.html>.

² China's Military Strategy, *China Daily*, May 26, 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/26/content_20820628.htm.

³Reform to downsize PLA Army, boost navy numbers, July 12, 2017, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0712/c90786-9240616.html>.

⁴Minnie Chan, As overseas ambitions expand, China plans 400 percent increase to marine corps numbers, sources say, *South China Morning Post*, March 13, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2078245/overseas-ambitions-expand-china-plans-400pc-increase>.

⁵Sun Wenyu, "Concerned nations should get used to China's naval presence in Indian Ocean: expert," *The People's Daily Online*, July 18, 2017, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0718/c90000-9243240.html>.

⁶ Curtis Stone, Chinese warships in heart of Europe rattle the Western powers out of their security dream, *People's Daily Online*, July 26, 2017,

<http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0726/c90000-9246747.html>.

⁷Full text of the Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative, June 20, 2017, http://english.gov.cn/archive/publications/2017/06/20/content_281475691873460.htm, accessed on July 28, 2017.

⁸Yang Sheng, China's navy has freedom of navigation in non-sovereign international maritime regions: Defense Ministry, *Global Times*, July 24, 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1057736.shtml>.

⁹Shan Jie, Japan should 'get used to' military exercises: defense ministry, *Global Times*, July 15, 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1056389.shtml>.

¹⁰Zhang Zhihao, Japan should 'get used to' Chinese military in strait, *China Daily*, July 15, 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-07/15/content_30122046.htm.