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The Dilemma of Naval Modernisation in East Asia

By Sukjoon Yoon

Synopsis

Recent maritime conflicts and disputes are occurring amid the increasingly rapid modernisation of naval power by East Asian states. The consequences of this modernisation are as still uncertain, but will it lead to a naval arms race or to enhanced naval cooperation?

Commentary

NAVAL MODERNISATION in East Asia reflects the negative historical legacies of the region as well as modern-day rivalries, resulting in an action-reaction phenomenon. As a result, the whole region faces a strategic dilemma: how to accommodate the power shift between a rising China and a declining America?

Third-party involvement in disputed territories is also a concern, and such tensions have lately been worsening. This appears to be due to continuing intractable problems resulting in more aggressive posturing. As a result, this may in turn affect naval development priorities and the standing orders of naval fleets, and ultimately the introduction of different naval acquisition policies.

New trends in naval modernisation

While the concept of sea power had long been shaped by Mahan's classic strategy of building a dominant naval fleet, there has been a new approach following the end of the Cold War. This new approach focuses on striking the best balance among the demands of ambition, capability and affordability so as to create a discrete task fleet. The qualitative capabilities of a naval force determine its ability to conduct particular types of naval warfare, missions or tasks. Such capabilities are central to the expression of maritime power in East Asia.

Thus, western experts were surprised how quickly the Chinese Navy was able to construct a naval task fleet. Simultaneously, middle-power navies, such as Japan, India, South Korea and Australia have emerged as significant players in the Asian theatre by implementing a range of naval modernisation programmes and acquisitions.

The final, overriding concept for naval modernisation is affordability. Major powers with stakes in East Asia would like to project their capability in the region but even they cannot afford everything they want to do. The gap between ambition and affordability is most noticeable in the case of the US. To generate the necessary resources for the progressive and sustained modernisation of their naval power, regional countries on their part have their 'defence burden' which they must carry by sustaining their economic vitality.

Naval arms race or enhanced naval cooperation?

Naval modernisation in East Asia might lead either to a naval arms race or enhanced naval cooperation. Pessimists anticipate that robust naval modernisation, together with improved naval force projection capabilities, will result in a serious destabilisation. Optimists, however, expect that the naval modernisation of East Asia will lead to naval cooperation, given the financial constraints and the changing strategic situation. Neither outcome can be reliably predicted.

International naval cooperation requiring joint or combined solutions must be facilitated, while stand-alone capabilities are retained for national security purposes. Some assume that the modernisation of the naval powers of East Asia will be driven by severe threats and confrontations. Thus, they expect an escalation of the naval competition between the US and China, China and Japan, South Korea and Japan, Indonesia and Malaysia, and India and Pakistan. This assessment is based on the assumption that rival naval powers will strive to fill capability gaps, seeking regional supremacy so that naval modernisation will address both hard and soft maritime threats, including post-Cold-War military tensions, boundary disputes, piracy, and illegal fisheries.

Many commentators take Sino-American rivalry for maritime hegemony as the principal driver of naval modernisation in East Asia; others believe the maritime threat from China's rise has been overestimated. The Chinese Navy has rapidly constructed a wide variety of ships, submarines and aircraft as well as asymmetric forces and weapons systems. The new US defence strategy of January 2012, however, mandates the minimum essential forward deployment of US naval forces to East Asia, and supports regional naval modernisation.

Both sides of the argument conclude that the primary emphasis should be on the build-up of naval force projection capabilities, irrespective of existing confidence-building measures.

Leaving pessimism aside, it is also possible that modernisation will lead ultimately to enhance naval cooperation, with the establishment of a common regional maritime security structure. Among the factors influencing such an outcome include the fact that naval forces are continuously decreasing in scale; the prohibitive cost of building blue-water operational assets; and the need for alliances and sharing of advanced military technology with other navies to cope with new threats.

Despite initially manifesting as an arms race, it seems naval modernisation will likely lead to naval cooperation before long. Although East Asian nations are reacting to the naval capacity building of their competitors and potential enemies, no realistic threat can result from naval modernisation in the near future. The Chinese Navy would require 10-20 years to acquire truly competitive capabilities to rival the US Navy's, with an explicit capacity to project force from the seas to the land. Given the state of its defence industry, which is over-politicised, under-capitalised, and technologically outdated, China could only achieve this goal by significant investment in advanced naval science and technology, which will take time.

Where will it end?

Taking into account the future maritime issues, the sophistication of military science and technology, and the economic capabilities of the East Asian nations, it seems probable that they will ultimately moderate the naval modernisation process, moving toward naval cooperation and de-emphasising the current naval arms race. It may be too early to determine whether the modernisation will have any significant negative impacts.

Though the prospect of such consequences should not be exaggerated, we should not forget that the momentum of naval modernisation could give rise to destabilising political, strategic and institutional misunderstandings, which might spill over into Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, or even the Indian Ocean.

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