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Myanmar's Evolving Maritime Security Landscape

By Rajni Gamage

Synopsis

While the ongoing conflict in Rakhine State means Myanmar's security concerns remain primarily land-based, it may have varying implications for Myanmar's maritime security cooperation in the region.

Commentary

TRADITIONAL SECURITY concerns such as the defence of sovereignty and territorial integrity have driven Myanmar's naval modernisation ambitions since the turn of the century. Such insecurities peaked in 2008 following a clash with the Bangladesh Navy over disputed maritime borders in the Bay of Bengal. While the amicable resolution of this dispute through arbitration by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea has made Myanmar's anxieties less acute, this category of threats continues to dominate Myanmar's strategic calculus on the seas.

In fact, there have been numerous land border clashes between Myanmar and Bangladesh subsequent to the resolution of the maritime border dispute. Such skirmishes have triggered a gradual build-up of forces along the boundary and involved limited forms of bilateral naval posturing. Bangladesh's submarine acquisitions from China in late 2016 have further added vigour to Myanmar's naval modernisation efforts. However, it is important to understand that since the overarching national security focus is insular, naval modernisation takes a back seat to the demands of the army.

Emerging Non-traditional Maritime Security Threats

Ongoing domestic instability has exacerbated two key non-traditional maritime security issues for Myanmar: boat refugees and arms smuggling.

Boat refugees

The events unfolding in Rakhine and the mass exodus of asylum seekers via land and sea is foremost a humanitarian issue, but with serious security implications as well. Asylum seekers from Bangladesh and Myanmar who sailed via the Bay of Bengal for refuge in Southeast Asian countries and were stranded in the Andaman Sea first grabbed international headlines in May and June 2015. Late last month at least 46 were killed when a vessel en route to Bangladesh capsized.

Arms smuggling

Myanmar and regional states are well aware of the nexus between vulnerable asylum seekers at sea and the trafficking of humans, arms and drugs. Arms smuggling is a serious problem for Myanmar, as the border area between Bangladesh and Myanmar is a sanctuary for arms smugglers, mainly due to its extensive coastline and weak maritime surveillance capabilities.

Smugglers ship various types of small arms from Thailand and other Southeast Asian states and transit through these waters to sell them to insurgents in India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. The ongoing Rakhine crisis has provided an opening for Islamist militant groups to rally support for their cause. Against a backdrop of a fast-growing ISIS presence in South and Southeast Asia, arms trafficking has become a greater threat to Myanmar's national security.

Implications for Maritime Security Cooperation

Myanmar's maritime security outreach has been mostly at the bilateral level, although it does participate in multilateral maritime security initiatives with ASEAN such as through the BIMSTEC, IONS and the MILAN naval exercises. This outreach was initially met with enthusiasm by regional and extra-regional powers, who see enormous economic and strategic significance in a 'normalised' Myanmar, given the growing geoeconomic importance of the Indo-Pacific.

For Myanmar, this engagement is more reflective of a desire to be recognised as a constructive player in regional security rather than a conscious policy of securing regional waters and associated Sealines of Communication (SLOCs).

India, which has a long maritime boundary with Myanmar, is among its major maritime security partners. The Bay of Bengal is a key geostrategic area, especially in response to China's increasing inroads, and this is reflected in India's recent 'Act East' policy. Among India's topmost security concerns is Pakistani intelligence agencies recruiting fighters from the persecuted Rohingya population in Myanmar and Bangladeshi refugee camps and attacking Indian targets.

India's attitude has been to engage Myanmar during the Rohingya crisis – in September 2017, Prime Minister Modi made his first bilateral visit to Myanmar, where 11 agreements were signed, including on maritime security cooperation.

China's Interest in Myanmar

China too has high stakes in Myanmar's strategic location, having invested significantly in Myanmar's maritime infrastructure development. In May, it was reported that China's CITIC Group proposed taking a stake worth up to 85% in the US\$7.3 billion deep sea port in Kyaukpyu, in Rakhine state. In September, Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasised China's support for Myanmar's efforts to protect its national security.

Given Myanmar's strategic importance to these two rising Asian powers, it is expected that they will continue to engage Myanmar in the maritime security realm, regardless of the Rohingya crisis. This is likely to provide Myanmar some cushion against international backlash on the Rohingya issue, as well as ensure its continued inclusion in the slate of regional maritime security exercises.

Internal instability, however, could yet damage Myanmar's maritime security prospects with key ASEAN partners. An Informal ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting (IAMM) was held in September, but no concrete action plan was set with regard to the ongoing situation or potential influx of asylum seekers. While ASEAN is coming under fire for its inaction on the Rohingya crisis, it is unlikely this will damage Myanmar's participation in regional maritime security exercises.

In August, for instance, Myanmar participated for the first time in the Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training (Seacat) exercises co-hosted by Singapore and the United States. However, with ASEAN being criticised openly on its non-interventionist stance by some of its Muslim members (notably Malaysia), it seems likely that Myanmar's maritime security relations with certain ASEAN states will be damaged.

The ongoing crisis has perhaps impacted prospects for maritime security cooperation with key Western states the most. The United Kingdom has suspended its fledgling officer training programme, and the US too dropped plans to expand training for Myanmar's military in areas like maritime security and combating human trafficking.

For decision-makers in Myanmar, the perceived danger of international pressure over the Rohingya crisis leading to a seaborne military intervention by foreign powers is very real. Similar deep-seated worries over external aggression were all too evident following Cyclone Nargis, when the French government threatened to push for a UN Resolution and intervene militarily on humanitarian grounds following Yangon inhibiting the delivery of external aid to affected communities. All these concerns are likely to factor into Myanmar's maritime strategic planning.

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