

Pacific Seapower: Challenges and Opportunities for Regional Actors in the Indo-Pacific *A Report on the Proceedings of Sixth Biennial Maritime Security Challenges Conference*

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Amidst reports of increased naval buildup and aggressive clashes between national maritime law enforcement vessels, the Indo-Pacific region has risen to the forefront of the world's attention as the next potential conflict zone. Particular emphasis is placed on the maritime dimensions of the region, perhaps more so than in any other of the world's regions. But are the current maritime dynamics in the Indo-Pacific any more unique than in other parts of the world? This question was raised by Dr. James Boutilier, the Special Advisor for International Engagement to the Commander of Maritime Forces Pacific, during the recent Maritime Security Challenges 2014 (MSC14) conference that took place in Victoria, BC, from 6-9 October. This was a question that fully encompassed the spirit of the discussions that occurred between the nearly 200 delegates from 22 different nations who attended the event, and one that fits in well with the conference's theme of "Pacific Seapower."

The international character of the event was testament to the growing awareness amongst regional countries that cooperative mechanisms for managing tensions and responding to various security issues are needed. Moreover, the important role that navies, coast guards, and governments play in improving mutual understanding was made explicit. But the conference theme of "Pacific Seapower" reflected two intertwined elements that complicate, or at the very least, circumscribe relations between states and maritime institutions: the nature of "seapower" and the geographic scope of the region. Assessed together, MSC14 highlighted the necessity of greater integrating what former US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has called "civilian instruments of national security" into current seapower theories. In so doing, a greater number of actors can find more opportunities to cooperate and contribute to improving regional maritime security.

On Seapower

Firstly, what is seapower, and how might it have changed? Literature that addresses the use of the seas for political objectives has been around in various guises throughout recorded history. However, much has changed since the time of scholars such as Alfred Thayer Mahan, when maritime strategy was almost strictly naval and concentrated on the great battle fleets at sea. Although Mahan and contemporaries like Sir Julian Corbett fully recognized the role of navies in defending seaborne trade, their appreciation of this remained firmly entrenched at the individual nation-state level. What truly makes 21st century seapower unique is the globalization of economic activities, where nearly all nations are connected by their mutual dependence on a shared economic system. Dr. Geoffrey Till of King's College London and the United Kingdom Defence Academy reminded delegates during the MSC14 proceedings that the "supranational" position of the global trade system makes its maintenance a priority for all nations. Should any link in this web be broken, the effects would be felt by all participants. The Indo-Pacific region is a critical part of this whole system. Dr. Claude Comtois, from the Université de Montréal, highlighted the concentration of this network in the region while discussing the future dynamics of the commercial shipping industry. As he pointed out, China alone is home to seven of the world's ten busiest container ports, and is expanding them to accommodate ever-larger vessels. With ships from Asian ports crossing the globe via the Panama and Suez canals, any disturbance to maritime security in Asia will have global effects. Complicating matters is that this system is not just confined to the physical assets of ships and ports, but crosses various domains, including the political, legal, and environmental. Although defending this system has become a - if not *the* - primary objective of navies and coast guards around the world, the nature of the system means that the ability to gain and maintain influence in maritime matters can be possessed by other national and international institutions apart from those that have armed vessels; as we will see, the advent and reinforcement of stronger international law has meant that

states without strong traditional seapower capabilities can act through other channels to secure their maritime interests

On Geography

The global span of this vast system means no country is immune from its effects, as highlighted by retired Lieutenant General Dan Leaf, Director of the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS). However, those around the Pacific Rim are arguably more sensitive to and have greater influence on the dynamics of the maritime realm than those in other areas of the world. Not only is East Asia home to the majority of the world's largest shipping companies and shipbuilders, its resident navies and coast guards have also received a substantial amount of increased investment in recent years. Ranging from Indonesia's trimaran stealth missile boats to Japan's flat-top helicopter-carrying destroyers to India's and China's refurbished ex-Soviet aircraft carriers, the region sees some of the world's most vigorous naval procurement programs. Along with ongoing disputes over islands and undersea natural resources, sometimes along some of the world's most heavily-trafficked shipping lanes, it is clear that the maritime realm features prominently in the Pacific.

Restricting the scope of our concerns to just the Pacific basin, however, would discount the deep interconnectedness of the region with the adjacent Indian Ocean; the two cannot be assessed separately from each other, if they can indeed be separated from the world as a whole. The sea lines of communication (SLOCs) that carry vital seaborne products - in particular, oil and natural gas - stretch from the Middle East to northeast Asia via the Indian Ocean and continue across the Pacific to North and South American shores. From India's extensive shipbuilding projects and efforts to augment its bilateral relations with partners throughout the region and into Southeast Asia to China's interest in establishing friendly ports along the ocean's vital SLOCs, as well as the ongoing maritime piracy issue off Somalia and Indonesia, there are clear connections

between what is happening in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. Once we recognize the importance of viewing this “Indo-Pacific” region as a whole its characteristic vastness multiplies exponentially.

Securing this massive geographical space is a task of such a scale that not even the dominant United States Navy is capable of addressing it. No single nation has the capacity to take sole guardianship over the global system, which, despite an outward appearance of stability, remains rife with disputes and disagreements. Therefore, it becomes necessary for countries to pool their resources together for the common cause. Yet, it is one thing to call for cooperation, and quite another thing entirely to make it happen. Disputes arise from all manner of things, including the classic problem of “the tragedy of the commons”, which is represented at sea by the competing fundamental concepts of *mare liberum* and *mare clausum*. Such concepts continue to be potent stumbling blocks to effective cooperation even today. Despite the pessimism arising from the presence of such a debate, Vice-Admiral Mark Norman, Commander of the Royal Canadian Navy, reminded us that even fundamental disagreements like these can (and have) been ameliorated by international arrangements that reach a compromise between diametrically opposing views.

Challenges to Improving Maritime Security

Challenges abound in ensuring that sufficient maritime capacity exists among all participants to maintain maritime security and bolster this international system. From having the political will to extend cooperative overtures to being able to build the fleets necessary for maintaining maritime domain awareness (MDA), many obstacles exist to improving good order at sea.

Perhaps one of the greatest barriers to improved relations between states is, as Dr. Don Emmerson from Stanford University put it, the lack of introspection and empathy on the part of relevant parties. Recognizing and overcoming such barriers, as both Dr. Justin Nankivell and Lt. Gen. Leaf from the APCSS noted, has resulted in many positive developments in South Asia. For example, disputes have been successfully

resolved between India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar based upon the rule-of-law. Lt. Gen. Leaf's suggestion that countries need to stop "mortgaging their future" - that is, placing too much emphasis on addressing past disputes instead of working to improve the future - may offer further ways for improving maritime security in Asia. However, it is clear that straightforward outcomes remain unlikely in the South China Sea. The People's Republic of China, as a rising power, is challenging the established US-led hegemony and the legal system it views as the foundation of that predominance. China is, as Dr. Till noted, "preoccupied" with maritime disputes with its neighbours. Trying to assert itself as a great power, it is using methods like ramming other countries' ships and transforming reefs into islands (albeit not the first of the claimants to do so, according to Dr. Dong Wang of Peking University) to set up *de facto* ownership of disputed islands and waters. Although China publically advocates for a peaceful resolution through negotiations, as Dr. Nong Hong from the Institute for South China Sea Studies claimed, it seemed clear from discussions that many observers do not share the same interpretation. But a country is not, as Dr. Till described, a "black box" with a homogenous approach to disputes and conflicts. No matter what political system it has, public opinion plays - directly or indirectly - a large role in government policy. To truly improve mutual understanding, parties need to recognize this feature of states and the institutions within them; hence Dr. Emmerson's call for empathy. This will partly require, however, that states become more open about their inner workings and motives; Dr. Emmerson suggested that China's opaque nature in this regard has left observers with little choice but to conclude that it is purposefully pursuing a three-part strategy based on ambiguity, activity, and delay. This approach decreases trust and is detrimental to improving interstate relations, even as China and its representatives claim that the country is interested in reaching cooperative solutions to its various maritime disputes.

Difficulties in achieving successful cooperation go beyond recognizing the true motives and goals within individual states. There is also the issue of regionalism. A sense of regional identity is crucial, argued

Commodore Lee Cordner of the University of Adelaide, to a common integrated approach towards addressing issues. The lack of a regional maritime security architecture means that countries have no institutional apparatus through which they can cooperate, and any such attempts must be made on an *ad hoc* basis. One possible solution in Southeast Asia would be to employ existing intergovernmental organizations; Ramli Nik, from the National Defense University of Malaysia, suggested that ASEAN may be the proper forum, even though it does not currently have a security mandate. Moreover, ASEAN members have chafed at the idea of adding security issues to the organization's portfolio. Although states in the region have had successes in bilateral cooperation and dispute resolutions, further and deeper ties hinge upon recognizing common and converging interests - the greatest of which is the stability of the international seaborne trade system mentioned earlier. But Ambassador Dr. Hasjim Djalal of Indonesia, who was intimately involved in ASEAN's creation, suggested that other such common interests may not be at all obvious to identify, resulting in prolonged animosity and over-emphasis on individual, national-level gains. Further complications arise due to some non-ASEAN powers preferring to negotiate with ASEAN states on a one-on-one basis. An outsider that successfully engages ASEAN states in such a manner prevents the latter from presenting a united front on shared dispute issues, strengthening the relative position of the former.

Ways Forward?

We should not, however, take an overly pessimistic view of the future Indo-Pacific maritime security environment. After all, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) was successfully concluded between nearly all countries and remains well-respected by its signatories. The role UNCLOS has played in resolving maritime disputes over resources and territory cannot be overstated. Managing to reach a balance between *mare liberum* and *mare clausum* that allows states to have control over maritime resources without hindering the free flow of global trade is a very impressive achievement. But as noted by Lyston Lea of

the US National Maritime Intelligence - Integration Office, there are ambiguous sections in UNCLOS that hold significant potential for misinterpretation. UNCLOS' articles allow for more than one state to be the scientifically legitimate owner of a given maritime territory - in such a case, it is up to the claimants to arrive at an agreeable arrangement either through bilateral negotiations or UN arbitration. Another possible solution would be to bring in non-claimant states to the negotiating table. Dr. Emmerson made the point that of the \$5.3 trillion of seaborne trade transiting the South China Sea annually, \$1.2 trillion is related to the United States. With a clear interest in ensuring the stability of the region, yet without any direct stake in the territorial and resource disputes, it would seem the US has a natural role as a mediator. However, the problem with an increased role for an outsider nation is that it clashes with the desire for greater influence by local and regional actors, who may see outside nations as a threat.

One solution may be for more peripheral - but still relevant - players to be involved. Chilean Navy Rear Admiral Undurraga reminded us about "the tyranny of distance", especially in a space as vast as the Pacific; nonetheless, the nature of 21st century seapower allows countries to play a prominent maritime role despite difficulties in maintaining physical forward presence. Canada and Chile, for example, sit on the far eastern edge of the Pacific, but have strong interests in ensuring stability in Asia's maritime space. Being much smaller powers compared to the United States, they may be more suitable for taking on a mediation role without being viewed as a threat. In turn, this is one way for medium and small powers to have a form of greater seapower without depending on an economically-prohibitive large navy. Consistent participation in international fora and maritime exercises can increase national prestige and weight in negotiations. It is important to keep in mind, however, that this still requires a modicum of physical presence at sea, even if it is to a lesser extent than traditional manifestations of influence at sea.

Regardless of their size and location, all nations have the opportunity to contribute to maritime security in the Indo-Pacific; the more nations that are involved, the safer the region's SLOCs. Even small nations which are geographically removed from the region have a role to play in employing seapower - in its many forms - in the area. While resource and territorial disputes can be difficult to resolve given the function they serve in nationalist rhetoric, other issues of maritime security are less contentious and provides opportunities for cooperative action. Dr. Jeffrey Hornung of APCSS highlighted the threats that piracy and climate change pose to the Indian Ocean region. Though piracy, especially off the coast of Somalia, and the threat that rising sea levels pose to coastal states like Bangladesh are far removed from the South China Sea and its disputes, their proximity to SLOCs leading to Southeast Asia make them relevant issues for that region's actors. Such issues are examples of areas of common interest where parties can come together to build a greater sense of regionalism and cooperation that could be leveraged for benefits in other, previously more contentious, areas. Conventional navies are not necessarily the best choice for addressing such issues, allowing powers that lack such a capability to contribute in other ways. However, as Cmdre. Corder suggested, the gradual nature of threats like climate change could make it difficult to for them act as a catalyst for immediate cooperation.

Another possible path forward would be for countries to more fully appreciate the benefits of adhering to UNCLOS or UNCLOS-like multilateral arrangements. Dr. James Kraska of the US Naval War College noted that while UNCLOS permits archipelagic states, such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia, to determine the limits of their territorial seas and other zones of maritime jurisdiction by using straight baselines, such a method is not as applicable to states with substantial contiguous coastlines such as Vietnam, Taiwan, and China. This means that even if China were to take formal ownership over key islands in the South China Sea in the area encompassed by the so-called "Nine-Dash Line", those islands could not be used as the bases for a

straight baseline claims over the rest of the South China Sea. Instead, China could follow the example set by the Philippines, which abandoned ambitious claims in favor of more conservative baselines through the use of UNCLOS, to step back from the claims contained in the Nine-Dash Line in order to facilitate regional dispute resolution. As Mr. Alexander Metelitsa of the US Energy Information Administration pointed out, the South China Sea itself is likely a relatively poor source of hydrocarbon resources, with only enough proven energy reserves to sustain Chinese consumption for three years. For a Chinese observer, this would seem to reduce any incentive to become embroiled in a potential regional conflict over hydrocarbon resources. Indeed, it may well be the case that all the animosity China is receiving for pushing the Nine-Dash Line policy far outweighs any resource and economic benefits it may gain from the difference between UNCLOS and Nine-Dash Line boundaries. It may be the case, keeping in mind Dr. Till's warning about seeing countries as "black boxes", that China's insistence on the Nine-Dash Line is influenced more by nationalist fervour amongst some members of the Chinese leadership and population than a logical foreign policy. Certainly, gaining the trust and goodwill of its South China Sea neighbours, by alternatively more strictly adhering to UNCLOS articles, could also provide substantial economic and political benefits without the ill-will.

Maritime Forces, Shipbuilding, and Procurement

While legal or diplomatic resolutions to boundary disputes are the preferable method of conflict resolution by all parties involved, they are only one part of the equation. Having the will to establish a positive political and legal environment for preserving the seaborne system is one thing, but having the ships and aircraft to monitor and enforce arrangements is quite another. "The nexus of ambition", as retired Commodore Kelly Williams called naval procurement, is a complicated balance between national resources and naval requirements. As countries like Canada seek to recapitalize their maritime assets, whether navy or coast guard, the basic question of whether the ships should be built domestically or purchased from abroad is

a common one. Retired Vice-Admiral Peter Cairns, representing the Shipbuilding Association of Canada, argued that although building ships overseas may have short-term benefits - like supposedly smaller up-front building costs - such a plan would be detrimental in the long-term. One example he provided is that offshore shipbuilding would result in reduced possibilities for in-service support within the country: with much of a ship's through-life costs coming from post-construction maintenance and upgrades, a domestic ability to provide in-service support would create and sustain many high-value jobs for decades. Rear Admiral Rowan Moffitt offered his agreement based on the Australian experience; citing Australia's FFG-7 and ANZAC-class frigates as examples, he noted that, although the first ship-of-class cost more and took longer than budgeted, subsequent vessels in the series have tended to be delivered on-time and on-schedule. Thus, although expectations were pessimistic at the outset, the eventual outcome proved to be quite favourable. Providing an engineer's perspective, Mr. Harry Kim of Seaspan Vancouver Shipyards challenged critics of Canada's National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy (NSPS) who try to compare Canada's newly-modernized shipyards with ones on the other side of the Pacific. While Asian yards specialize in building hundreds of similar hulls for multiple customers, Canadian and many Western yards generally receive only short-run orders from a single governmental customer. This reduces opportunities for economies of scale, resulting in naturally higher costs. However, Mr. Kim highlighted how new shipyards can narrow the price gap between mass production and specialized construction by giving greater consideration to construction and maintenance processes that leverage modern automated techniques when deciding on various aspects of the ships' designs. In sum, as RAdm. Moffitt noted, politicians often seek a silver bullet that would somehow deliver good ships on time and on budget from the get-go, but the reality is that success requires a high degree of up-front financial and physical investment in yards; the optimal outcome of an effective, on-budget and on-time ship may not become evident until much further along in the procurement process.

The changing dynamics in shipbuilding are reflected in naval technology as well. Seen as a blessing and a curse, the promise of new technologies are balanced by uncertainty over their costs and actual performance. The unceasing race for ever-more advanced technology has been a challenge for shipbuilding programs, and program planners are recommended to leave fast-moving technological details to the last possible moment in order to take advantage of the most recent developments. Retired Rear-Admiral Richard Greenwood, a former engineer in the RCN, viewed technology as a march of ever mounting expense aimed at discovering cost-saving paradigm shifts that rarely occur and are nearly impossible to predict. In other words, the increasing levels of investment in new technology is done in the hopes of arriving at some revolutionary breakthrough that will allow navies to do much more with a lot less. But until that breakthrough occurs, keeping pace with and developing new technology will continue to be a highly expensive element of shipbuilding. The concept of modularity, as employed on the USN's Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) and in various vessel classes in the Royal Danish Navy, may be considered one such shift. However, this shift comes with its own challenges, argued former LCS program executive officer retired Rear Admiral (Lower Half) Jim Murdoch. Though there are cost savings associated with a modular approach, it also means sailors now need to be well-versed in a greater number of roles. Technology is only as good as the sailors using it, and any new development must be focused on effective crewing arrangements. VAdm. Mark Norman provided an operational perspective on such arrangements: instead of a navy having more hulls, a ship can simply swap its crew while keeping the vessel stationed overseas, thus reducing downtime spent on transit. Speaking from an historical perspective, Dr. Milan Vego of the US Naval War College also warned against overemphasizing technology: although it has altered the character of war throughout time, the nature of war remains constant.

Despite these challenges, navies around the Indo-Pacific region have been undertaking extensive and intensive modernization and procurement programs. Examples include India's *Arihant*-class ballistic missile

submarine, China's growing fleet of modern guided missile frigates and destroyers, and the large helicopter carriers of the South Korean, Japanese, and Australian navies. Many observers see this regional naval buildup as a negative indicator, a sign of destabilization that takes countries down a path to conflict and war. However, Dr. Till asserted that this may not necessarily be the case. It is not what navies have that is important, so much as what they choose to *do* with these new assets. Nations can no longer hope to be isolated in autarkic existence, and any disturbance to the uninterrupted flow of goods and resources through the oceans needs to be addressed by the world's sea powers. Maritime security is about defending interests common to the global community at large and navies play a substantial role in this respect. In light of this, Dr. Till suggested that the Pacific naval buildup may in fact be a positive outcome that results in a *more* stable environment through which global commerce can proceed. Indeed, national representatives like Amb. Dr. Djalal hoped this is how their country's naval investments are perceived.

But to paraphrase RAdm. Moffitt, is that what navies are for? Are they simply to establish a safe environment for commercial shipping, defending them from threats like piracy or carrying out search-and-rescue in the event of accidents and disasters? Or would such missions be better suited for constabulary maritime forces like coast guards? Dr. Till is quite clear on this: while navies certainly do undertake maritime security tasks, those are not what they are for. Warships are built for war, and the ultimate threat to the global maritime system is interstate war. Thus, navies should be prepared firstly to prevent and deter such conflict from occurring before becoming concerned with "softer" maritime security issues. This contrasts with Admiral Nirmal Verma, High Commissioner to Canada and former Indian Navy Chief of Naval Staff, who commented that just as you do not need an axe to swat a mosquito, neither do you need an air-warfare destroyer for anti-piracy missions.

All of this brings us back to the issue of shipbuilding: what do we build? To answer this, it is necessary for a country to first decide on the role of its navy. A sound policy-strategy-operations-tactics match needs to be carried out before any force structure is decided upon. As RAdm. Moffitt pointed out, it may be tempting to simply replace aging ships with newer versions of the same, but this does not necessarily result in the most suitable fleet for the nation's security policy objectives; "the nexus of ambition" may not produce the appropriate outcome. If a navy expects to carry out maritime security tasks in distant SLOCs alongside international partners, perhaps it should invest in a long-endurance, but minimally-armed, coast guard cutter-type vessels, whereas a navy expected to defend the country against a nearby aggressor(s) would be better served by heavily-armed coastal sea-denial forces. A country's geographic position also plays an important role in how the new fleet should be configured. In Indonesia, for example, submarines are used for maritime domain awareness in its eastern waters, which are much deeper and well-suited for undersea operations. The western reaches of its archipelago, however, are much shallower and are the responsibility of the country's coast guard surface vessels. Recognizing strategic needs and geographic realities allows a country to avoid wasting resources on unsuitable platforms.

Conclusion

The problems and disputes facing maritime nations in the Indo-Pacific region are many and varied. While complicated relations may lead powerful nations to try and assert their rights through force, the world has become far too connected to take the risks that this may entail. Fora like the Maritime Security Challenges conference series show that countries are eager to embrace cooperative arrangements to ensure this system remains stable and viable. As Chilean RAdm. Undurruga pointed out, globalization is not a voluntary force. Every coastal nation, no matter how large or small, has a duty to contribute to maintaining good order at sea.

Nowhere is that more important than in the Indo-Pacific, where the maritime realm and its issues weigh heavily on the minds of decision-makers.

While the best possible resolutions to disputes are those done through legal processes and the rule of law, states must still prepare to counter a wide range of contingencies. Countering traditional threats such as interstate warfare should remain the primary function of navies as they move forward and build the fleets of the future. This should not deflect, however, from their more frequent secondary duties, such as search-and-rescue or counter-piracy operations.

Answering the question posed by Dr. Boutilier in the beginning of this report, it can be safely said that although seapower in the Indo-Pacific is not qualitatively different from other maritime regions, it is definitely much more prevalent and much more concentrated, both in terms of what nations put into it and what they get out of it. Whether it is naval procurement or leveraging UNCLOS articles, more countries are employing the full range of what constitutes seapower in the 21st century. Seapower, although an evolving concept, still retains many of its past characteristics. As US Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Harry Harris reminded us, navies are there to be ready to respond to aggression at a moment's notice. But at the same time, their most common mission is to maintain the system of global commerce and shipping. A comprehensive approach to effective seapower in the 21st century must, as in the past, master the paradox of being a war-fighting entity whose most important mission is maintaining peace and the stability of the global system. Going forward, navies, governments, industry and academia must develop an explicit maritime strategy that holistically strikes a balance between the role of maritime forces in war and in peace. Underlying this strategy must be a theory of seapower that fully recognizes its complex characteristics in today's world - hulls and airframes, to be certain, but also an ever increasing emphasis on laws and relations between not just countries, but their populations as well. Twenty-first century seapower must speak to and be understood by not only admirals and

politicians, but the average citizen. Understanding breeds cooperation, and with cooperation comes peace and prosperity. This path is only possible if participants from all levels of society appreciate the role they and others play within the maritime-centric global system. As Amb. Dr. Djalal concluded, “those who cooperate on maritime issues will benefit themselves, benefit all, and save the world.”