

China and Pakistan Join Forces Under the Sea

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While attention has been on the simmering tensions in the East and South China Seas lately, a small event took place in the East China Sea off the coast of Shanghai. Pakistan Navy (PN) guided missile frigate *Shamsheer* and fleet replenishment vessel *Nasr* drilled with a pair of PLA Navy Type-054A *Jiangkai II* frigates, *Xuzhou* and *Yangzhou* from December 31 to January 1.

According to Chinese reports, the fast-paced, high-intensity exercise involved day and night maneuvers including joint escort, counter-piracy and live-firing. This constitutes a logical progression from the limited scope when this bilateral exercise first began in 2003 as a simple search-and-rescue drill. The objectives of these exercises are to hone interoperability between the two navies, while affording PN personnel the opportunity to get acquainted with Chinese technologies.

What was new in this latest iteration, however, was the inclusion of an anti-submarine warfare (ASW) component for the first time. *Shamsheer*, *Xuzhou* and *Yangzhou* cooperatively tracked a simulated submarine threats in the exercises. The ships relied on close communication, information-sharing and passive sonar techniques to triangulate the position of the suspected 'enemy' submarine, eventually striking it with a simulated ASW torpedo by one of the Chinese frigates.

This exercise marks yet another milestone for Sino-Pakistani naval cooperation. Commodore Bilal Abdul Nasir, Commander 25th Destroyer Squadron who led the PN flotilla, called the exercises "very significant" as they sought to enhance interoperability and cohesion between the two navies, adding euphemistically that "the time-tested relations, which are often referred as higher than the Himalayas, deeper than oceans, sweeter than honey, and stronger than steel, are testimonies to the strong bonding between the two countries and their people."

Just how deep is the Sino-Pakistani naval relationship?

China – “Wild Card” in the Indo-Pakistani Naval Asymmetry

Pakistan has often been touted by Beijing as its foremost "all-weather friend." The bilateral naval relationship is justifiably the most developed China has cultivated with a foreign state. The 2003 exercise was actually the first joint training exercise the PLA Navy ever conducted with a foreign counterpart. Its presence at the inaugural PN-hosted AMAN series exercise in the Arabian Sea in 2007 was also the PLA Navy's first-ever participation in a foreign multinational naval exercise.

While Pakistan facilitated the building of Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean, Beijing also opened valuable inroads for PN to undertake broader regional initiatives. Notably, China helped gain observer status for Pakistan in the Western Pacific Naval Symposium in 2014, the same time PN participated in the PLA Navy-hosted Multilateral Maritime Exercise. In return for getting Islamabad's facilitation in building its Indian Ocean naval presence, China provided immense aid to Pakistan's development and materiel for its navy.

However, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), revolving around the Gwadar deep-sea port on the restive Pakistani province of Balochistan, remains a controversial project. Top Islamabad policy elites sought to promote CPEC as a flagship project that promises long-awaited economic invigoration for the country. But this project is not without controversy; it not only impinges directly upon the pre-existing Indo-Pakistan terrestrial disputes (especially since the CPEC route will also pass through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir), but also invites domestic skepticism within the South Asian country as to the extent of benefits for people in the province.

As such, Gwadar is viewed by both local and outside skeptics as more of a pawn in Beijing's grand plan to entrench its Indian Ocean naval presence. Islamabad, it must be said, did not shirk from this expressed intent. "We have asked our Chinese brothers to please build a naval base at Gwadar," Pakistan Defense Minister Chaudhary Ahmad Mukhtar told the *Financial Times* in May 2011, confirming that the request was conveyed to China during the visit by Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani to Beijing. Meanwhile, a senior Pakistani official was quoted as saying that "the naval base is something we hope will allow Chinese vessels to regularly visit in [the] future and also use the place for repair and maintenance of their fleet in the [Indian Ocean region]."

In fact, Pakistan has long sought to facilitate the enhancement of Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean, by tapping its strategic geographical location in the Arabian Sea and long coastline. "We can provide facilities, ports, logistics, maintenance among other things (to Chinese navy)," a PN official remarked. Obviously, doing so helps Islamabad stave off the pressure from India, with whom the former has long perceived a naval force imbalance, especially in the undersea arena as New Delhi seeks to enhance its submarine capabilities.

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