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India's Military Modernization and the Changing US-China Power Balance

BY SATORU NAGAO

There is almost a deliberate tendency to dismiss, neglect, or ignore India's ongoing military modernization, in stark contrast to the international focus on China's evolving military capacity. This oversight of India's military development is a mistake.

The Indian Air Force has plans to procure more than 800 fighter airplanes in the next two decades, and the army is currently in the process of purchasing 2,000 new tanks and 3,000 artillery pieces.

In addition, 45 warships—including two aircraft carriers and one nuclear submarine—are currently under construction for commission within the next decade, with another 49 naval vessels under consideration for construction.

Compared with Japan—the world's sixth largest defense spender—India will procure three times the number of fighter aircraft, more than double the number of tanks, four times the number of artillery pieces, and nearly the same number of warships within the next two decades.

It is high time that policy makers and analysts took heed of the upcoming impact of India's military modernization on the military balance of power in Asia.

At the end of the Cold War, the US Navy had 15 aircraft carriers, 230 “big surface combatant” vessels with a full load displacement of more than 3,000 tons, and 127 submarines, all of which except one were nuclear powered. However, by 2012, these numbers had been reduced to 11 aircraft carriers, 110 surface combatant ships and 72 nuclear powered submarines.

It is anticipated that in 2013 the US Navy will retire one aircraft carrier along with nine surface combat vessels, and the all-nuclear submarine fleet will increase by only one. The overall result is that US naval power projection capabilities are declining, and in theory, declining power leads to a power vacuum.

China, on the other hand, has been modernizing and investing heavily in the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) over the same time period. Currently, the PLAN has a total of 37 “big surface combatant” ships, up from 16 in 1990. With plans to become a “Blue-Water Navy,” the PLAN has made considerable strides, specifically with the launch of China's first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, in 2012.

In addition, the PLAN nuclear submarine force has been modernized significantly, and currently numbers ten vessels, up from five in 1990.

Satoru Nagao, Research Fellow at the Ocean Policy Research Foundation based in Tokyo, Japan, explains that “Upon closer examination, it is clear that India will be an influential security partner for the United States in shaping the US-China power balance throughout Asia, but especially in Southeast Asia.”



“The United States, Japan, and also Australia, should coordinate and cooperate with India in addressing the security concerns of Southeast Asian countries.”

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As a result, and in an attempt to correct the military balance in Asia, countries around China have also started to modernize their military capacities, specifically within the realm of naval assets. Japan announced in 2010 that it will increase its submarine fleet from 18 to 24.

Vietnam ordered six new Russian Kilo class submarines in 2009, Malaysia procured two submarines in 2009 and Singapore has increased its fleet from four to five. Likewise, Indonesia plans to overhaul its underwater fleet, going from two in 2012 to twelve by 2024.

Thailand and the Philippines have both announced plans to develop their own small submarine fleets and Australia, in its 2009 Defense White Paper, announced that it would double its submarine fleet from six to twelve by the mid 2030s. The fact that China's neighboring countries are investing in increasing their submarine capacities is one sign of a regional arms race.

In both theory and reality, one can conclude that China's assertiveness in regional waters is a reflection of the power shift in Asia. In response, the United States needs regional allies and partners to fill any potential power imbalance with China. Former US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and Professor Joseph Nye of Harvard University highlighted in their 2012 report *The US-Japan Alliance* that the United States needs a “strong Japan.”

However, the United States also needs a strong India. Japan and India, together, are obvious candidates to fill the evolving power vacuum in Asia as a result of China's rise. Therefore, it is in the interests of the United States to pursue strong and proactive engagement with both countries.

India's potential military role in Southeast Asia is crucial for three reasons. First, India, as a result of its geographical location, has historically been very engaged with Southeast Asia for both political and economic interests as espoused by the Chola Empire's (848-1279 CE) maritime ventures into Southeast Asia.

Second, as outlined above, India is increasing its naval power projection capacity. Since 1990, India has increased its number of “big surface combatant” ships from 14 to 21, with plans to further increase this number to 27 by 2013, thus enabling it to project power throughout the Indian Ocean and into Southeast Asia. There are also plans for India to acquire three aircraft carriers and four or five nuclear submarines within the next two decades.

Third, India continues to develop its military connections with countries in Southeast Asia. When Thailand procured its aircraft carrier in 1997, India helped train the ship's crew, and today, India is assisting in the training of Vietnamese submarine crews. Similarly, the Singaporean Air Force exercises in Indian airspace and the Indian Air Force trains Malaysian pilots to operate Su-30 fighter jets.

In addition, Indonesia is planning to buy the *BrahMos* supersonic cruise missile which is being jointly developed by India and Russia. These examples are all indications that Southeast Asian countries trust India as a security provider.

Upon closer examination, it is clear that India will be an influential security partner for the United States in shaping the US-China power balance throughout Asia, but especially in Southeast Asia. The United States, Japan, and also Australia, should coordinate and cooperate with India in addressing the security concerns of Southeast Asian countries.