

The Dynamics of Maritime Partnership in the Indo-Asia-Pacific Region

Paper for Galle Dialogue 2016

Atlas Elek/Colombo:HC/APR

Geoffrey Till

Partnership is a form of cooperative engagement, but what does this actually mean? 'Engagement' is a neutral word which covers a range of contingencies. At one end it applies to two people 'engaged' to be married and at the other to military forces seeking to destroy each other. It clearly has both cooperative and competitive connotations, the former conducive to peace, the latter potentially leading to conflict and this certainly applies to Indo-Asia-Pacific Region. The requirement then is for cooperative engagement to be encouraged and competitive engagement discouraged.

There seem to be three closely inter-connected dimensions to maritime engagement in the Indo-Pacific - substantive ('what they engage about') behavioural ('how they engage') and institutional ('where they engage'). In all three dimensions the more cooperative the engagement the better the chance of peace and prosperity in any particular region.

Maritime Engagement: the Substantive Policy Angle

Almost by definition substantive engagement is a matter of what is sometimes, if misleadingly, known as 'grand strategy'; it is about the interaction of national policy objectives, about the 'ends' that governments seek to attain. In the Indo-Pacific Region there is an encouraging supply of substantive issues which naturally tend to draw the nations together into collaborative relationships, but there are also some decidedly negative ones.

Perceptions of Need

The most obvious perhaps is the growth of maritime economic interdependency – Globalisation- implying the developing and common need to defend the sea-based trading system on which the peace, prosperity and regime survival of all nations depends. Any disruption of the safe and timely passage of merchant ships on which the system depends would adversely affect everyone. Dealing with threats to it is an essentially cooperative endeavour. That's why the international counter-piracy

mission off Somalia has been such a benign development, and also why such maritime cooperation should be encouraged more widely.

Much the same can be said about the increasingly recognised need to combat the illegal trade in drugs, the trafficking of human beings and of course global warming and to guard against their consequences for the stability of the system. All these are likewise in the common interest and painfully obvious to everyone.

However there is an emerging problem here. Globalisation was supposed to usher in an age of peace and prosperity by giving everyone a stake in success and interest in the efficiency and security of the world trading system whether as consumers looking for reduced costs of living, commodity suppliers or makers of components used by other manufacturing countries. The more countries trade together, its advocates said, the less they fight. Further this meant the world's navies had to work together to defend the trading system against such threats as piracy, and other forms of transnational crimes at sea, instability and natural disasters ashore and inter-state conflict. Navies it was argued were now entering a new era of cooperation at sea.

The South Korean shipping firm Hanjin based its plans on the widespread assumption that international trade would keep on growing and had to file for bankruptcy when it became clear that trade was not in fact expanding. In the second quarter of 2016 it in fact fell by 0.8%, amidst lower consumption and investment. As a result, many of the world's 20 million containers and the ships to transport them were not needed.¹ Free trade seems in trouble, as the World Trade Organisation's most recent talks failed, and the Trans Pacific Partnership founders. China like other major economies is now making more of what it consumes and consumes more of what it makes, and globalisation is becoming unpopular in the developed world for favouring the haves rather than the have nots, and new restrictions are being put into place. The asymmetric effect of these restrictions will increase tension between states.²

Loss of faith in Globalisation which its advocates think brings us all together in peace and prosperity, reduces poverty. But neo-liberalism has benefitted capital much more than labour and so has led to much great social inequality.³ In turn this

¹ NY Times, 'World Trade falls as globalisation costs bite,' *Staits Times*, 1 Nov 2016.

² Reuters, 'Trade tensions mount between Beijing and Berlin' *Straits Times* 1 Nov 2016.

³ Martin Jacques, 'The Death of Neoliberalism and the Crisis in Western Politics' *The Observer* 21 Aug 2016. See also the massively successful Thomas Piketty' *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* which attacks the system's economic effectiveness.

has sparked a rise in populist anti-globalisation sentiment from Donald Trump in the US, to Jeremy Corbyn and the Brexit vote in the UK and Syriza in Greece. In the 2016 US presidential election even Hillary Clinton backed away from her previous support for the Trans-Pacific partnership.⁴

If this is true, then it might reduce the incentives for navies to cooperate in defence of the system against the many things that threaten it.

But against that, the spread of international terrorism also represents a common threat, since it increasingly appears that nowhere is safe, and that instability in one part of the world may adversely affect any or all of the others. Although different nations clearly have differing priorities in responding to such threats there is much substantive agreement about the need to contain them, and where there is a significant maritime element to the problem, for their navies to work together.

This is true both of predictable and unpredictable contingencies. The campaign against the illegal trade in drugs for example is most unlikely to be completely 'won' in the foreseeable future, if ever. That makes it a permanent fixture in the contingencies that navies do and will have to meet. Disasters, on the other hand, are much less predictable especially in time, place and nature. Preparing for them calls for the kind of advance and collective planning which means that when disasters strike, navies will be able to exploit the habits of fraternity to cooperate when, how and where needed.

The planning and implementation of responses to such challenges to the system have to be continuous. This not only helps preserve the system it also improves relations between maritime states. Their navies cooperate better, operationally and tactically. Strategically and politically such multinational naval action against common threats reinforces international togetherness. It mitigates tensions and helps put other things into proportion.

But there are other 'things' - issues where national policy interests clash and where national action at sea - or maritime engagement - quickly becomes competitive, and sometimes dangerously so. The current levels of tension in the East and South China seas illustrate the point. It would be naïve to ignore the future possibility of dangerously increasing tensions between India and Pakistan, between the US and China, between the two Koreas, Japan and China and so on. In such a

⁴ Dan Roberts, Clinton turns against the global economy as Americans count cost of trade deals' *The Observer* 21 Aug 2016

maritime area as the Indo-Asia-Pacific region, it is hardly surprising that many of these issues should themselves be maritime. For this reason, naval planners throughout the region feel they have a duty to 'engage' in worst case analysis, and to produce as strong a force as they can in order to minimise strategic risk. Inevitably this produces security dilemmas where one country's defensive measures seem to justify its neighbours responses in an endless chain of action and reaction leading to a retreat from collaborative engagement and a slide into heightened tensions and destabilising arms-racing. The complex relationship between the nuclear deterrent policies of India and Pakistan is one very obvious example of this.

Some of these problems are intractable. They are unlikely to be resolved in the foreseeable future. In the meantime, they have to be lived with and managed. To do this the protagonists need to keep talking and the existence of permanent procedures and institutions in which they can do so will help a lot.

Maritime Engagement : the Behavioural Angle

With this we step from the grand-strategic level of national policy where objectives or 'ends' are defined down to the operational levels where strategy, ways and means come into play. This is less a matter of policy, more one of ways and means – of strategy in other words, at all levels. Some engagement behaviours contribute to, rather than make more difficult, stable and acceptably harmonious relationships at sea and elsewhere – but others do not. It should be helpful, then, to consider behavioural engagement at two levels – the operational (ways) and the tactical (means).

The Operational Level: It seems important operationally to insulate other areas of policy agreement and cooperation from the potentially toxic effect of longstanding disputes as much as possible. The alternative 'cross-wiring' approach is often unhelpful as has been demonstrated by some actions in the South and East China Sea disputes. In general all parties to these disputes have a common interest in a cooperative economic context that is produced by a shared interest in the effective workings of the sea-based trading system. But this was damaged when China succumbed to the temptation to make use of its economic levers of power when dealing with Japan over the East China Sea by making access to its rare earth minerals difficult **some time ago**⁵, or suddenly discovering there was something wrong with Philippine bananas at the time of the squabble over Scarborough shoal. These acts turned economic dependency into political leverage and violated the *seikei*

⁵ Michael Mazarr 'Rivalry's New Face,' *Survival* Vol 54 No 4 Aug-Sep 2012, 83-106.

bunri principle in Japan's post-war foreign policy of separating politics and economics in the conduct of international relations.

These actions reduced the compensatory effect of close economic relationships in otherwise difficult times, and secondly raise security concerns about allowing such economic dependencies to develop in the first place. Instead, it would be in China's interest and in everyone else's too to *encourage* economic interdependency on the basis of the old argument of the Manchester School that the more nations trade together, generally the less they **fight**.⁶

This experience rebounded on China in several ways. Firstly, it encouraged Japan to seek other sources of these rare earth minerals and for countries like Vietnam and India to develop them. These burgeoning economic relationships, encouraged a further coming together of these countries politically in ways that were almost certainly unwelcome in Beijing. Secondly such experience has had its effect on attitudes towards China's One Belt, One Road project (OBOR). OBOR the Chinese say and the 21st Century maritime silk Road should not be seen as a tool of geopolitics; instead, it is an opportunity, not a **threat**.⁷ Thus Premier Li Keqiang:

We stand ready to work with other countries to boost economic growth, deepen international cooperation and promote world peace through developing the ocean, and we strive to build a peaceful, cooperative and harmonious **ocean**.⁸

But the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road *could* have at least some 'hegemonic' connotations (just as did the famous voyages of the 15th Century so often regarded as a model of non-confrontational maritime **endeavour**).⁹ Even though it is clearly preferable to the deliberate use of force in the operational pursuit of policy objectives, economic leverage of this kind while tactically effective often turns out to operationally unwise in the long run.

Interestingly, though, there still remains the question of how regional countries should respond to the engagement issues involved in the grand economic-political-strategic OBOR project. One obvious temptation for countries with their

⁶ There are exceptions of course, since economic rationality is not the only driver of human behaviour. See MSR Soundings draft fro refs gere

⁷ Liu Xiaoming, (Chinese Ambassador to London) 'Take the new Silk Road as an opportunity not a threat,' *Financial Times*, 24 May 2015.

⁸ Quoted Liu Cigui, 'Reflections on maritime Partnership: Building the 21st Century maritime Silk Road' (Beijing: China Institute of International Studies, 15 Sep 2014).

⁹ Geoff Wade, 'The Pre-Modern East Asian Maritime Realm' in in Satish Chandra and Humanshu Prabha Ray, *The Sea, Identity and History: From the Bay of Bengal to the South China Sea* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2013) p 102.

doubts about the operational consequences for them of this project would be to have nothing to do with it, to refuse to engage in other words. This would probably be unwise. There is a strong alternative argument that suggests cautious engagement would be the best way of finding out what the project actually means, to ensure that the economics make sense and that as much as possible the dependencies go both ways in a manner which makes it more difficult for any of the parties to exploit them strategically. If it does bind the countries involved more closely together, and if the Manchester School is right, its long-term consequence might well be generally benign.

The Tactical Level. Tactical engagement – the means - is clearly important too for this is often where accidents happen and when unintended consequences follow. Tactical actions at sea which endanger life and violate the basic rules of the road have a high risk of being counter-productive. It may be better to direct high pressure water at the bridge and communications equipment of the other side in some stand-off at sea than to shoot at him but it is still inherently dangerous. It could easily result in the victim either at sea or ashore losing control of the situation and doing something escalatory. It will often poison relationships afterwards as well, affecting the perceptions and assumptions that the parties have of each other. In perilous situations (as potentially all situations at sea are) control and restraint should be at a premium and competition in risk-taking frowned upon.

The wisdom of making the tactical engagement as constructive as possible applies just as much to talks about methods of controlling incidents at sea. Cooperation in formal talks and informal exchanges over the establishment of hotlines or talks on the avoidance of incidents at sea should, for example surely *not* be suspended when things get difficult. Logically this is just when such measures are at their most important. Participating in such negotiations and the effective implementation of their outcomes should surely be regarded as the natural default position, rather than a reward or punishment for the other side's behaviour. Thus it is good to see the normal processes of naval togetherness between China and the US continuing despite their recent frictions over the South China Sea. Clearly, making such negotiated arrangements work in practice is critical too. Unless there is actually some responsible person on the other end of a hotline set up after much debate, such arrangements are likely to do more harm than good.

More broadly, exactly the same might be said about the recent meeting of Presidents Xi, and Park and Mr Abe.¹⁰ Such an exchange does not mean that the islands of the East China Sea, or the historic antipathies that divide these countries have gone away, merely that they do not preclude and indeed may well be mitigated by routine and generally reassuring exchanges. The Joint Declaration for Peace and Cooperation in Northeast Asia, for example, that followed the summit identified the three leader's desire to work towards greater economic integration as a way of defusing otherwise fraught relationships.

Here though, there is an increasing domestic problem that all countries face in one way or another, namely that of the nationalistic netizen. Whatever their political colour, governments around the world are getting increasingly sensitive to the influence of the social media. For reasons which defy the logic of the Manchester School, xenophobic and strongly nationalist groups seem to be emerging in many countries of the region, as indeed elsewhere as both political shocks of 2016 – Brexit and the election of President Trump- have demonstrated . For them, the security of island possessions, say, is increasingly seen as a performance indicator of the effectiveness, even the legitimacy, of government. At a time when governments everywhere are struggling to provide essential and affordable services to rising populations and expanding middle classes this is a dangerous development since it could narrow the political establishment's room to manoeuvre and, worse still, encourage politicians to 'play to the gallery' in such disputes as a matter of political expediency designed perhaps to compensate for failures elsewhere.¹¹ Clearly, it would be much better if they did not do that and instead engaged seriously in the management if not resolution of international problems.

An open debate about the legitimacy, intentions and role of 'outsiders' in local seas (whether it be the US and India in the East and South China Seas or China in the Indian Ocean) could well usefully shine a torch in dark places. Thus India generally concerned about China's naval growing presence in the Indian ocean area and alarmed about the surprise appearance of a PLA Navy SSN in a Chinese operated section of a Sri Lankan port has specifically warned: 'What we are beginning to see is the unfolding of China's desire to be a maritime power...If a submarine docks in a port where a submarine has never docked before from that

¹⁰ Chang My Choon, 'China, S.Korea, Japan take big step to normalise ties' *The Straits Times*, 2 Nov 2015; 'Trilateral summit a promising step' *The Straits Times* 7 Nov 2015.

¹¹ Jiang Zongqiang and Hu Xin, 'China's dilemma: Populists could hijack policy response' *The Straits Times*, 3 Dec 2015.

country, it cannot be a development without repercussions'.¹² In similar vein, the announcement in November 2016 that China intends to create a 'naval base' in Djibouti re-awakened fears that China was indeed in the process of setting up its much-discussed 'string of pearls' across the Indian Ocean in defence of its general trading interests in and across the area. Given that for years China has roundly condemned the establishment of such foreign bases as inherently aggressive, this reversal of view has, rightly or wrongly, caused some alarm in Delhi and elsewhere.

13

Closely linked to this is the issue of transparency and clarity, which together tend to reduce the misperceptions and miscalculations that historically have so bedevilled international relations in the past. This is particularly important in an age of instantaneous and all too often inaccurate news coverage. The Subi reef affair is an example of a problem aggravated by confusing, and maybe confused, political messaging. There is a tactical case for studied ambiguity since it preserves options for an uncertain future and avoids the necessity for choice between the policy positions of the various internal stakeholders. But the strategic dangers of this in the age of the social media and the all too common construction of dangerously misleading national 'narratives' are clearly considerable and make the management and resolution of local problems more difficult.

The same is true of naval planners whose problem in preparing for the future means having to peer, as they always have to, 'through a glass darkly.' The more obscure one country's naval preparations are, the more likely are its neighbours and rivals to over-compensate in their responses. Accordingly, as much transparency as the situation allows should surely be the norm. This kind of tactical engagement can be implemented through a variety of means, though the production of publicly available doctrine, staff college exchanges, multinational naval exercises, credible and meaningful naval policy papers and so forth. It is often remarked that because they all confront the common dangers of a sometimes hostile sea there is a natural fraternity amongst sailors. Since to know is often to understand, the more they interact, the better the state of international relations. Moreover the greater the habits of cooperation the more effectively can they respond in common to urgent events like catastrophic events and other such threats to the international system, that are clearly beyond the power of individual nations to resolve.

¹² A senior Indian Foreign Ministry official quoted in Niharika Mandhana, 'Modi Heads to China As Asian Alliances Shift, *Wall Street Journal* 15 May 2015

¹³ Christopher D Yung, "'Not an Idea We have to shun,'" Chinese Overseas basing Requirements in the 21st Century' (Washington; NDU, INSS Perspective 7) Oct 2014.

Maritime Engagement: The Institutional Angle

Finally, there is the institutional dimension to maritime engagement. It helps if countries interested in improving their relationships have some neutral place in which to explore the possibilities. Likewise it helps if their emerging agreements get solidified in the creation of abiding places and procedures which both demonstrate the achievement of some degree of agreement and offer opportunities to improve it in the future. Accordingly it would seem to make sense for states wishing to advance the cooperative cause to engage positively with as many partners and in as many sea-related institutions as their resources and interests allow.

Such a policy has its critics however. It is easy for realists looking at any particular institution to pick on its limitations. For example, ASEAN and the family of institutions it has set up, are criticised for being little more than talking shops which have 'little real impact on the region's strategic challenges, such as major shifts in the balance of power, skewed distributions of economic weight, political and cultural homogeneity, territorial disputes and anaemic security institutionalism.' Asia reportedly has at least 100 Track 1 channels for security dialogue and more than 200 Track 2 unofficial equivalents.¹⁴ Even so, it has failed to operationalise the 2002 Declaration of Conduct on the South China sea and ASEAN's failings over the response to Hurricane Haiyan in the Philippines or the search for MH 370 have been much commented upon. This would seem to lend strength to the view that institutions are only as effective as their members wish them to be and are better seen as a *consequence* of stability and improving relationships than a cause of them.

A 'multi-alignment' policy then, may look as though it produces nothing more than an alphabet soup of competing and autarchic institutions, but nonetheless, getting as widely and as diversely engaged as possible has several advantages for constructive engagement. Firstly, this diversity usefully observes the reality that the Indo-pacific region area is far more diverse than, say Western and Central Europe in its 'command multilateralism.' But, secondly, even in Europe a group of established nations with centuries of interactions behind them and a recent history where they were in concert against what they considered a common threat – the Soviet Union - have found it necessary to set up alternate system and institutions to cope with alternate challenges. Thus when responding to the Paris attacks of November 2015, France decided to invoke Article 42-7 of the European Union's

¹⁴ William Choong, *The Ties That Divide* (London: Routledge for the IISS, 2014) p 120.

Lisbon Treaty rather than Article 5 of the NATO treaty. It did this, believing that 42-7 allowed it to seek a more flexible, tailored and specific response from its alliance partners. For its part, NATO also has been adjusting itself to face a more complex future and has shown surprising institutional resilience over the years, and is now in the process of setting up forces more capable of rapid response to unexpected situations.¹⁵ Hence the value of complementary NATO and EU approaches to the piracy problem off Somalia.

Thirdly, a plurality of sea-related institutions allows for the breadth of issues that are now embraced within the apparently limitless concept of maritime security to be dealt with. These issues include the maintenance of maritime domain awareness, dealing with piracy and other forms of maritime crime, environmental issues, search and rescue, humanitarian relief operations, incident and crisis management processes and so on. It is generally encouraging to see the extent to which multilateral institutions designed to encourage discourse on maritime matters steadily growing in number and ambition. An interesting recent development was the decision of the East Asia Summit of November 2015 to enhance the importance of the East Asia Maritime Forum.¹⁶

Fourthly, institutional diversity provides a means by which smaller and weaker states can preserve their interests in a world otherwise dominated by the great and powerful. Nor does this approach necessarily compete with the current fashion of setting up regional security partnerships of one sort or another as a means by which smaller nations can guard against the danger of being given 'a good ignoring.'

Fifthly and finally, as Churchill once said, "jaw, jaw is better than war, war." One of the key differences between the situation now when compared to that before the First and Second World Wars, which were likewise periods of economic strain in which the international order was changing with some countries rising and others falling, was that today's processes take place within a constellation of debate and discourse about maritime cooperation. This kind of constructive maritime engagement, in other words, has its undoubted limitations but it is still infinitely preferable to the alternative and for that reason the setting up of this Galle Dialogue deserves to be warmly welcomed, not least as it contributes to a

¹⁵ Julian E. Barnes, 'NATO security role faces reassessment' *Wall Street Journal*, 20 Nov 2015.

¹⁶ Available at <http://www.asean.org/images/2015/November/10th-EAS-Outcome/EAS%20Statement%20on%20Enhancing%20Regional%20Maritime%20Cooperation%20-%20FINAL%202022%20November%202015.pdf>.

schedule of varied exercises in naval togetherness that increasingly seems continuous and routine – just, of course, as it should be.