

## China's 'Out of Area' Naval Deployments: Issues and Implications for India

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China had been developing its maritime and naval power to secure its sea-lanes and providing stiff competition to other maritime nations in the region. China's 'out of area naval deployments' are well sustained by Pakistan and Sri Lanka that enjoy strong ties with China and depend on Chinese economic assistance and investments. In addition both countries have enduring political relationship with China since the 1970s.

Maritime trade and building of naval access for future deployment of its military power are intertwined in China's quest for economic and strategic dominance in the Indian Ocean region. China's 'out of area' naval deployments include Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, both developed by China and, port facilities in Myanmar that had been in development for over a decade. Significantly, China's out of area deployments are supported by land access.

China's primary area of naval operations comprise its North Sea, East Sea, and South Sea Fleets with their assortment of surface vessels, submarines, naval aviation fleet with nuclear submarines. Deployed along the Chinese littoral, PLA Navy hosts nearly ten major naval bases that are linked to the South China Sea, East China Sea and the Yellow Sea.

China's three-island strategy is based on the conceptualization of its maritime domain as *jinan* (in-shore) to *jinhai* (offshore). China's envisages three concentric rings in its maritime strategy of sea-control /denial ensuring the security of its shipping lanes.

The first island chain stretches from Ryuku Islands to Taiwan to Philippines in the time scale. The slated time for development of Chinese naval capabilities relevant to this area was 2000-2010. The second island chain envelops the area from Japan's Ogasawa-gunto Islands to the Mariana Islands (East Pacific) slated for achievement in 2010-2020/25; the third Island chain envelop runs beyond Hawaii into the West Pacific beyond the time scale (2025-2049).

The westward focus of this maritime plan would imply that the Chinese forays into the Indian Ocean region and the Northern Arabian Sea-East Africa littorals would be quite likely in the period of 2010-2020/25.

## Rationale for the Out of Area Deployments

China's rationale for its 'out of area deployments' cite concerns about securing maritime including energy supplies from West Asia to Chinese ports through the pirate infested shipping routes in the Indian Ocean. In response to these concerns, China has deployed two of their state-of-the art warships in the region supported by a refurbishment supply vessel. It has deployed Type 052B Wuhan Luyang class missile destroyer a.k.a Destroyer 169 (7,000 tons). The Wuhan is the flagship for the South Sea Fleet with superior C4ISR systems, specializing in sea control missions such as anti-submarine warfare. The second vessel is the Type 052C Lanzhou class destroyer Haikou Destroyer 171 (7,500 tons) equipped with Chinese *Aegis* systems capable of area air defence. The Weishanhu Refurbishing ship 887 is the PLAN's largest and newest logistical vessel (22,000 tons) designed for long-range logistical missions. These ships form the core components of an ocean-going flotilla that are now in forward presence in the region. This deployment represents the high-end of Chinese naval capability that are tailored to contain low-end asymmetric threats at sea. Are these naval platforms only intended to deal with unconventional maritime asymmetric threats or are they in place for gaining operational endurance and terrain familiarity for other naval missions?

## Implications for India

China's 'out of area' naval deployments are solidly supported by the newly developing access in Gwadar and Hambantota. China's naval access at Gwadar aids future deployments of Chinese nuclear attack submarines on India's western seaboard. These submarines are armed with Land attack Cruise missiles and anti-ship missiles. Gwadar offers Pakistan an insurance of Chinese forward presence with surface and subsurface assets bearing potent missile attack power. China's supply of JF-17 multirole combat aircraft to Pakistan enhances its possible maritime strike and interdiction roles off Gwadar.

An enlarged Chinese naval presence could be sustained in Gwadar as PLA-Navy warships and submarines with LACM / ASCM capabilities could operate with the Pakistani Navy frigates and submarines in coordinated naval operations creating a threat for India's western seaboard.

Furthermore, the Gwadar access could be turned into an offensive power projection that could potentially deny forward naval presence with reports that the Chinese could possibly deploy their TEL (Truck- erector-transporter) loaded CSS-5 antiship ballistic missile (ASBM) in Gwadar. The CSS-5 ASBM could provide the base with a *perimeter defence with anti-ship missiles. Potentially the CSS-5 could target the entire span of the Arabian Sea from Gwadar endangering Indian and other naval and civilian shipping in the region.*

A second offshore support to the Chinese 'out of area deployments' could come from Hambantota in Sri Lanka. Hambantota could act as a vital base of electronic and signals intelligence operations in the Indian Ocean. It sits astride the densest commercial maritime traffic as well as Indian, US, Japanese naval movements in the

region. Hambantota could also offer berthing facilities to a limited forward presence of the future PLA-Navy's Indian Ocean Task force. The prospective PLA-N carrier centric task force could be an assortment of surface warships and nuclear submarines intended to secure the energy sea-lanes stretching from Persian Gulf across the East African coast to its long journey in the Indian Ocean to China.

China's 'out-of-area deployments' have the possibility of being converted to a forward naval presence for benign, constabulary naval missions combating the asymmetric threats such as piracy in the maritime commons in the region. This deployment could as well provide a credible threat potential with coercive power and naval compellence against India when teamed up with Pakistan.

China's expanding maritime and naval footprint indicates that commercial and strategic interests would have to be secured an accompanying development in their naval capability. China's concerted development of capabilities in the naval domain augmented along with its aerospace and cyber operational domains would transform China's capabilities in the 'long march' to global pre-eminence.

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