

US, Japan and India flex naval muscle in the Pacific

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The US, Japan and India held their first-ever joint naval exercise near the Boso Peninsula in central Japan on April 16. Four destroyers from Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Force, three warships from the Indian Navy and two Aegis-equipped destroyers from the US Navy took part in the six-hour long drill, which reportedly sought to improve communications and coordination, and test interoperability.

In fact, while relatively small-scale and limited, the exercise sent a potent political message by underscoring the Bush administration's efforts to forge closer military ties to curb China's growing influence in the region. Of course, all the participants denied the drill was aimed against China, but the very denials show that is exactly what is on everyone's minds.

A spokesperson in New Delhi declared that India should be seen as a neutral power, rather than "projected as a counterweight to China or being part of any grand strategy to contain China". Japan's vice foreign minister, Shotaro Yachi, emphasised that the drill was "not directed at any third country but a goodwill exercise aimed at boosting the friendly relationship among the three countries as well as improving maritime technique".

India's involvement in such a drill is significant; coming just two months after US Vice President Dick Cheney had raised the idea of forming a US-led "quadrilateral" security alliance with Japan, Australia and India during a visit in February to Tokyo and Sydney. Australia and Japan signed a joint security declaration in March to strengthen military ties.

To woo India as a strategic ally, the Bush administration signed an Indo-US nuclear deal last year. The accord gives New Delhi an exceptional status by allowing it access to nuclear technology and fuel without having signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation

Treaty and dismantled its arsenal of nuclear weapons.

While the US intention is to cultivate India as a counterweight to China, India wants to use the nuclear deal to realise its ambitions to become the dominant regional power. Sections of the Indian ruling elite fear that too close an alignment with the US will antagonise China, as well as India's traditional ally Russia, and undermine Indian economic interests.

Beijing and Moscow have granted New Delhi observer status at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, opening up the prospect of allowing India to tap into gas and oil reserves in Central Asia. The US, on the other hand, has strongly opposed Indian plans for a key gas pipeline from Iran via Pakistan.

India's careful balancing act was on display on April 16. While participating in the joint exercise, the Indian navy sent two guided-missile destroyers—the INS Rana and INS Ranjit—to join Chinese warships at Qingdao in the Yellow Sea for a five-day exercise to cement its "strategic partnership" with Beijing. All five Indian vessels also took part in an "anti-terror" manoeuvre with the Russian navy this week in the Sea of Japan.

India and China, two rapidly rising economic powers, are competing for regional influence. Beijing has responded to US efforts at encirclement by expanding its own military capabilities, including its navy's ability to protect vital oil and trade routes to the Middle East, Europe and Africa. It has defence arrangements with Burma, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Seychelles, Mauritius, Madagascar and India's archrival Pakistan. New Delhi regards this as an unwelcome intrusion into what it claims as a sphere of influence.

In Sri Lanka's south-eastern city of Hambantota, Beijing has recently signed a contract to build a major container port, a bunkering system, an oil refinery, an

airport and other facilities, at a cost of up to \$US1 billion and largely financed by the Chinese government. While not part of the deal, the Chinese navy may potentially have access to the port.

According to an *Asia Times Online* article on March 17: “The Hambantota port project is the latest in a series of steps that China has taken in recent years to consolidate its access to the Indian Ocean and to secure sea lanes through which its energy supplies are transported. It has adopted what analysts describe as a ‘string of pearls’ strategy, building strategic relationships with countries along sea lanes from the Middle East to the South China Sea.”

The most significant “pearl” is the Gwadar port in Pakistan. *Asia Times* explained: “China’s massive involvement in the Gwadar project—it has provided most of its funding and technical expertise—has provided Beijing with a ‘listening post’ from where it can monitor US naval activity in the Persian Gulf, Indian activity in the Arabian Sea, and future US-Indian maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean.”

To the east of India, China has been developing naval facilities in Bangladesh. Beijing has been also upgrading radar, refit and refuelling facilities at bases in Sittwe, Coco, Hianggyi, Khaukphyu, Mergui and Zadetkyi Kyun, situated in Burma, Thailand and Cambodia, which are in close proximity to the strategic Strait of Malacca.

Sections of India’s political and military establishment are deeply troubled by China’s “intrusion” into its backyard. At the very least, the Indian navy’s involvement in a joint naval exercise with the US and Japan, not far from China’s coastline, is designed as a warning to Beijing that it can establish closer ties with the US and its allies if China threatens Indian interests.

Although Australia did not participate in the joint naval exercise in Japan, Beijing’s economic and diplomatic penetration into the South Pacific has raised similar concerns in Canberra. Prime Minister John Howard has already strengthened defence ties with the US and Japan, and embarked on his own aggressive strategy of direct intervention in East Timor and Solomon Islands. At the same time, Canberra is concerned to protect Australia’s highly profitable exports of raw materials to China.

The formation of a “quadrilateral” defence alliance is

far from certain. While taking part in the joint naval exercise, Japan is trying to patch up relations with China in order to open more economic opportunities for Japanese business. As for India, a formal alliance with the US remains uncertain. Not only has New Delhi refused to back down on its planned gas pipeline with Iran and Pakistan, but is also raising objections to aspects of US Congressional legislation ratifying the nuclear deal between the two countries.



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