

# Chinese Submarines for Bangladesh: Overt Chinese Presence in India's Backyard

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## Introduction

The news of the finalisation of the deal for the procurement of two Chinese submarines by Bangladesh in December 2013 has been received with scepticism by Indian policy-makers. The pertinent question is regarding the necessity and significance for Bangladesh to have its own submarine fleet. Bangladesh does not face any plausible threat to its national security from either India or Myanmar, its immediate neighbours, and procurement of submarines, an underwater stealth weapon, is bound to be a source of concern for its neighbours. The second and more pertinent worrying factor are the steady Chinese inroads into India's neighbourhood aimed at marginalising India and reducing its influence with its immediate neighbours.

## Bangladeshi Aspirations

Though India was instrumental in the liberation of Bangladesh, the relations between both nations have been lukewarm for a long period of time. Bangladesh's relationship with India has been hamstrung by the ideological contestation between the two main political parties in Bangladesh and the popular sentiments that were whipped up against any efforts to have a better relationship with India<sup>1</sup>. Bangladesh is surrounded by India from three sides and its relationship with India is bound to have an effect on its security and foreign policy. Its insecurity stems

from the sheer size of India and its armed forces even though India has always had a friendly approach and has never displayed an aggressive mindset at the border. Bangladesh has always denied the illegal migration of its people to India, which is a major source of ethnic imbalance in northeast India and gave impetus to insurgent movements in Assam and Tripura. It has been used as a conduit for supply of arms to the insurgents and has also harboured insurgent groups and their leaders. Bangladesh is also involved in a maritime boundary dispute with India regarding delineation of the exclusive economic zone and views India's stance as an deliberate act to undermine its maritime interests.

**The pertinent question is regarding the necessity and significance for Bangladesh to have its own submarine fleet.**

The increasing radicalisation of the society, perennial issue of refugees, especially in northeast India, differences in perceptions and claims regarding the exclusive economic zone are some of the irritants which have led to lows in bilateral relations for a considerable period of time. Relations have improved since the Sheikh Hasina led government came to power in 2009, followed by the visit of Indian Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh to Dacca in September 2010. With Sheikh Hasina's Awami League back in power in Bangladesh, the coming years are likely to witness stable relations between the two countries.

Bangladesh has recently started modernising its armed forces having signed a \$ 1 billion deal with Russia for MI-17 helicopters, combat trainer aircraft, armoured personnel carriers and other armaments<sup>2</sup>. It has also emerged as the second biggest Chinese arms importer having imported arms worth \$350 million in 2013<sup>3</sup>. Potential oil and gas finds and its maritime disputes with India and Myanmar in the Bay of Bengal have motivated Bangladesh to upgrade its Navy. Though the present Bangladesh Navy is essentially a brown water variety, the creation of a submarine arm will provide it considerable resource in its armoury. The diesel-electric powered submarines contracted for \$ 203 million belong to the Chinese Ming class (Type 035)<sup>4</sup>. Each submarine will carry a crew of 57 and will be armed with 18 passive homing torpedoes, capable of attacking a surface target at a distance of 15 km.<sup>5</sup> The submarines are likely to be delivered by 2019 and will be located at the new submarine base planned at Kutubdia island near Cox's Bazaar on the southern coast. In addition, China is also providing two old frigates free of cost, though the refurbishment cost will have to be paid by Bangladesh.

## **Chinese Encirclement**

China has been making steady inroads into India's neighbourhood and weaning away the neighbouring nations by providing financial assistance and military hardware. The first instance was establishment of an electronic listening post in the early 1990s on the Coco Island off the coast of Myanmar. China also assisted Myanmar to upgrade its military equipment and infrastructure, notably by the construction of a \$2.5 billion, 2,500-km-long gas pipeline<sup>6</sup> which became operational in October 2013. China is also constructing the Stilwell road<sup>7</sup> upto Pangsau pass along Arunachal Pradesh. It has financed and constructed the Gwadar port on the Makran coast in western Pakistan which not only gives Pakistan an additional deep water port but also, most importantly, a key Chinese presence near the vital oil supply route through the Gulf of Hormuz. Chinese companies have financed and constructed the Hambantota port with an investment of \$500 million on the southern tip of Sri Lanka, giving China a key presence along the oil transportation routes. China is also making inroads into Nepal with assistance in improvement of the road network, construction of military hospitals and a rail network to Kathmandu.

## **Ramifications for India**

The Indian Navy's Eastern Fleet is located at Vishakhapatnam, almost 476 nautical miles from the southern fringes of West Bengal. There is no viable naval presence at any other location except Port Blair which is even further away and has only patrolling vessels. Indian planners will now have to conceptualise a long-term plan to develop infrastructure along the eastern coast in the form of deep sea ports, augmentation of existing airfields and construction of supporting buildings to safeguard a seemingly secure border. As Pakistan was always considered the primary threat, the bulk of the Navy's resources are located at Mumbai and Karwar. With this new development, some resources may have to be relocated on the eastern coast as a show of force. The Indian Navy is planning to develop Sagar island, located at the mouth of the river Hoogly into a deep sea port along with location of a missile coastal battery. Acquisition of land is also in progress to develop an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) base at Behala airfield near Kolkata<sup>8</sup>.

## **Assessment**

Though acquisition of two submarines and expansion of the naval fleet by Bangladesh is just an irritant for Indian naval operations, its connotation in terms of closer Chinese-Bangladesh military cooperation and future Chinese presence

is significant. With Indian missile testing ranges at Balasore and Chandipur at Sea in Odisha located 275 nautical miles away from the planned naval base at Kutubdia island, any Chinese presence in the garb of training or any other activity can be detrimental to Indian interests as testing of key missiles or other defence prototypes can be monitored. The base can also be used in the coming years for joint training or ports of call, giving Chinese ships a legitimate entry near Indian territorial waters. The Indian Navy has to develop infrastructure in West Bengal and Odisha and plan to reposition a few of its assets to offset any foreseeable Chinese activity.

**The concern is the grand strategy of China in weaning away a majority of the countries in India's periphery with its financial clout.**

It is a natural aspiration of any country to have well equipped armed forces and Bangladesh is following the well trodden path. The concern is the grand strategy of China as it has slowly weaned away a majority of the countries in India's periphery with its financial clout by giving substantial aid in infrastructure projects and providing military hardware, and this approach is aimed at isolating India within its own neighbourhood. The Chinese assistance to these nations has enabled China to develop long standing strategic ties with an aim to safeguard its energy interests and security objectives<sup>9</sup>. A pronounced thrust into the Indian Ocean is an assertion of its maritime aspirations, and Pakistan and, to an extent, Bangladesh, are China's proxies in extending its naval power projection beyond its national ports<sup>10</sup>.

Indian foreign policy-makers must share the culpability for permitting such a state of affairs to arise due to their indifferent attitude towards the sensitivities of our neighbours. The lack of a cohesive political, diplomatic and military policy on India's part made it easier for the Chinese to successfully exploit the vulnerabilities of many of India's neighbours. It is well known that Sri Lanka had approached India for construction of Hambantota port before seeking Chinese assistance. The skewed domestic compulsions and dithering political decision-making apparatus at that juncture had led to indecision on India's part, ultimately paving the way for Chinese companies to invest in Sri Lanka. Even as China has steadily engaged India's neighbours, the Indian thought process towards China reflects a defensive mindset, which may be interpreted as appeasement and acceptance of Chinese designs. During the 2012 Brazil, Russia, India, China, Singapore (BRICS) Summit in New Delhi, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reiterated that India will not participate in any strategy aimed at containing China.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

Cordial relations with its neighbours will be beneficial to India's security. All concerns have to be addressed in a holistic manner. Hostile neighbours or those with shifting loyalties can be detrimental to peaceful coexistence. Indian planners must draw up a comprehensive national doctrine to have a well defined approach towards neighbours and act decisively on engaging them. Lack of a cohesive approach may result in uncertainties in bilateral relations and the coming generations may have to pay a heavy price for frittering away opportunities due to domestic compulsions or political inaction.

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**N.B.** The views expressed in this article are those of the author in his personal capacity and do not carry any official endorsement.

## Notes

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2. <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/375750/039bangladesh-finalises-deals-china-2.html>
3. Shiekh Shariar Zaman, "Bangladesh Comes Second in Chinese Arms Purchase Last Year". Available at <http://www.dhakatribune.com/safety/2013/nov/12/bangladesh-comes-second-chinese-arms-purchase-last-year>, accessed on January 06, 2014.
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5. <http://archive.is/JeD7Z>
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