

India, China and the Pirates

An agreement between China, India and Japan to coordinate over combating piracy in the Gulf of Aden is an encouraging sign of military cooperation. But it's no panacea.

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March 06, 2012



Image Credit: U.S. Navy

Relations between India and China look increasingly to be running along two parallel tracks – one of cooperation, the other competition.

While New Delhi and Beijing keep a wary eye on each other's activities along the border, there's growing engagement at the highest political and diplomatic levels. For example, Indian External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna **made a three-day visit to China last month**, meeting key Chinese leaders ahead of the BRICS summit to be hosted by India in April. As *The Hindu* newspaper reported at the time, "China appears to have laid out the red carpet for Mr. Krishna, arranging four high-level meetings for the minister in one day – a rare occurrence, according to diplomats."

Krishna held talks with Chinese Communist Party Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang and State Councillor Dai Bingguo, a meeting that followed Dai's trip to India the previous month. Dai is China's Special Representative on the boundary talks, and the two countries took a major confidence building step in January, **setting up an institutionalized border mechanism** that "allows for real time contact between the two countries' foreign offices in the event of a border intrusion by either side."

But high level visits apart, and **despite a history of recent diplomatic pin-pricks**, Beijing and New Delhi are also quietly cooperating on a number of key global issues, reflected in their common stands on climate change and anti-piracy operations.

At the start of this year, **India, China and Japan quietly entered into a mutual arrangement to share their naval assets** in the Gulf of Aden for anti-piracy operations. According to an Indian Navy press release: "A Counter Piracy Shared Awareness and De-confliction (SHADE) meeting was established by Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) at Bahrain in 2011, so that the forces deployed for anti-piracy operations could exchange piracy related information over the internet."

Under the agreement, India, China and Japan decided to share information about their warship movements and escort schedules in the Gulf of Aden. By putting in place this cooperative mechanism, the three Asian giants are hoping to optimize the use of their

naval forces to safely escort merchant ships in the piracy-infested corridor.

“Earlier, the convoys [of India, Japan and China] would be bunched almost together in a short time frame leaving the Gulf of Aden without protection for a large part of the day,” Indian Navy Assistant Chief of Naval Staff Rear Adm. Monty Khanna said during a briefing in New Delhi last month. Khanna **said that in contrast, the three countries have** now “evolved a mechanism under which it will be ensured that there is enough gap between the Indian, Chinese and the Japanese convoys and they are well-displaced” to be able to escort a greater number of ships in a day.

Since 2008, India has had at least one warship stationed in the Gulf of Aden at any given time, compared to the three vessels reportedly fielded by the Chinese Navy. Japan’s deployment has varied. But with all three economies heavily dependent on keeping the sea lanes safe (the Indian Ministry of Shipping has estimated that Indian imports through the Gulf of Aden route are valued at \$50 billion, while exports are worth \$60 billion), it was clear that an agreement was necessary to ensure the slow flow of goods.