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## Into the wide blue yonder

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Asia's main powers are building up their navies. Is this the start of an arms race?b]

IN THE 15th century China possessed a mighty navy of “treasure fleets”. They sailed as far as Africa and the Persian Gulf, spreading China's economic and political influence across several continents. Had this naval expansion continued, some scholars say, China could have dominated the world. But successive emperors turned the nation inwards on itself, seafaring was banned and the country's great shipyards were closed. In Asia as elsewhere, it is America that rules the waves—its naval might is still needed, for example, to help defend the Malacca Strait, route for much of the region's oil and other trade.

Today a resurgent, confident and globalising China is rebuilding its naval strength. Like India, its rising Asian rival, it already has an impressive army. But both countries are finding that rapid economic growth is providing the money to realise long-cherished dreams of building ocean-going “blue-water” navies that can project power far from their home shores.

In the past two years China's navy has acquired new destroyers, frigates and submarines, some home-built, some (including its most advanced kit) Russian. A recent study by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) concluded that China was also close to beginning the production of aircraft-carriers, which would give it the ability to project airpower over great distances. China has long wanted to create a force capable of thwarting the intervention of America's Pacific fleet in any war over Taiwan. But it is also increasingly keen to protect its supplies of fuel and raw materials from threats such as piracy and terrorism.

America has particular worries about a naval base China is building on Hainan island, from where its vessels will have easy access to South-East Asia's shipping lanes—most importantly the Malacca Strait. The Indians are afraid that China's reason for building ports in Myanmar, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and conducting naval exercises with Pakistan, is to extend its dominance into the Indian Ocean. Thousands of Chinese-flagged merchant ships now cross the ocean each year, giving China plenty of justification for increasing its naval presence. India, in turn, is pushing into the South China Sea, and seeking port facilities in Vietnam.

India shares China's concern that, as trade volumes and energy consumption soar, its security is vulnerable to any disruption of sea traffic. The flagships of its new blue-water navy will be three aircraft-carriers—the same number as Britain. The first of two Indian-built carriers is now under construction, with a launch date of 2010. A third, bought second-hand from Russia, is suffering delays and disputes over its refitting.

Tim Huxley of the IISS says that with so much attention focused on China and India, the naval expansion of other Asian countries is often overlooked. Yet several, especially South Korea, are also building long-range naval capabilities. Besides new submarines and destroyers, the South Koreans, like the Japanese, are commissioning helicopter-carriers.

Is this an arms race? As Asia's defence ministers and military chiefs gathered in Singapore last weekend for their main annual summit, the Shangri-La Dialogue (organised by the IISS), the conclusion of most analysts seemed to be: not yet. A classic arms race, says Mr Huxley, consists of two main countries that have one dominating dispute. Asia is different. Instead, it has the makings of a pair of opposing alliances. A “quad” group (India, America, Australia and Japan) plus Singapore now conduct naval manoeuvres together. So do China and Pakistan. But China and India seem keen to avoid provoking each other. Indeed, they are seeking to build good relations between their navies.

Military chiefs at the summit insisted they were not seeking an arms race and gave various justifications for all their new warships. Rather implausibly, China and others insisted they were mainly to ward off pirates and terrorists. South Korea's defence minister, Lee Sang-hee, said North Korea's navy threatened its maritime supply lines. As if to prove him right, on May 30th the North test-fired three ship-to-ship missiles in the Yellow Sea.

Disaster relief is also commonly cited as a reason to have a bigger navy. Within days of Myanmar's cyclone, three existing blue-water navies—those of America, France and Britain—had ships off the country's coast, laden with supplies. South Korea's and Japan's new helicopter carriers could also one day be useful for moving troops in United Nations peacekeeping operations.

So there are plenty of ways for Asian powers to use their navies co-operatively. Equally, plenty of disputes might more easily escalate into war if the countries concerned had the naval strength to wage it. The potentially oil-rich Spratly and Paracel Islands, for example, are claimed in whole or part by six countries. In 1988 more than 70 Vietnamese sailors died in a naval battle with China in the Spratlys. Dozens of Koreans died in battles over a disputed sea border in 1999 and 2002.

Even without any ill intent, accidents will happen at sea. France's defence minister, Hervé Morin, worries about all the

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new submarines that will soon be lurking in the region's shallow and crowded shipping lanes. If one went missing, or suffered a collision, there is a danger of this being misconstrued as hostile action. He argues that to prevent minor incidents escalating in this way, Asian countries need to invest a lot more time in discussions of regional security and do more to replace mutual suspicion with co-operation and confidence-building. If not, Asia's cautious naval build-up could indeed mutate into a classic, old-fashioned arms race.

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