SEMAPHORE

RAN ENGAGEMENT WITH CHINA

During the banquet Admiral Fu Jize emphasised that he brought specific greetings from the Commander in Chief of the PLA-N who expressed a wish for mutual co-operation and friendship between our two navies and stressed the requirement for the PLA-N to learn from friendly navies. I responded in kind and expressed greetings and good wishes from the Chief of Naval Staff to the evident appreciation of the Chinese.

Commander LM Sulman, RAN
Commanding Officer HMAS *Swan*, 1981[1]

In September 1981 HMAS *Swan* (III) became the first Royal Australian Navy (RAN) ship to pay a port call to China in 32 years, and the first ever to formally visit the People's Republic of China (PRC). This visit marked an important point in Australia's relationship with the PRC and was a logical outcome of the diplomatic contacts that were initiated some ten years earlier. Ship visits and naval exercises have helped to develop the current friendly relationship between the RAN and the People's Liberation Army - Navy (PLA-N).

China is not only the largest and most populous nation in our region, it is a strong economic and military power as well as one of our largest trading partners. Whereas it is clear that Australia's relationship with China over the coming decades will impact on our immediate and long-term prosperity, many observers may be less aware of the cooperative dynamic that emerged during the later part of the 20th century.

Although the early British settlement in Australia relied upon the seaborne trade of Chinese goods, and Chinese immigrants made significant contributions to local wealth in the 19th century, it was essentially the European settler community which made up the Australian nation in 1901. The 'White Australia' policy and similarly restrictive legislation established a mindset which saw many of our northern neighbours labelled as potential adversaries rather than friends. Much has changed since those times. Immigration has changed the face of our nation and Australians no longer see themselves as primarily 'European'. Over time our focus has shifted significantly towards the Asia-Pacific region. Today our shared goals and interests help to promote regional cooperation and development.

The Australian Navy, acting as a flexible instrument of Australian foreign policy, has had repeated involvement with China, with the Boxer Uprising 1900-01 witnessing the first interaction.[2] After years of foreign exploitation, the political climate in China at the beginning of the 20th century had taken on a distinctly anti-Western tenor. Western cultural penetration had significant impact upon traditional life and as a result tens of thousands of Chinese people rose up in opposition to the foreign presence. The major powers, including the British, were called upon to respond to the crisis, and the Australian colonies were eager to contribute. The Australian naval contribution included 500 'bluejackets' from Victoria and New South Wales formed into a naval brigade, and the cruiser *Protector* provided by South Australia. Although the uprising saw some limited action between Australian sailors and Chinese soldiers, the Australian naval forces were mostly used in the constabulary role, providing logistic support, protecting trade and policing the Chinese coastal regions.

Commemorative Cover issued for the visit of Australian warships to the Chinese port of Qingdao in 1997 (RAN)

The RAN had relatively little involvement with China in the lead up to and during World War I. Acting as an ally, the Japanese Navy seized the German possessions in China and effectively controlled sea communications in the north Pacific region. During the interwar period contacts were similarly infrequent, but in 1925 HMAS *Brisbane* was seconded to the British China Squadron based at Hong Kong to gain greater fleet experience. When fighting broke out at nearby Canton, some concerns were expressed by opposition members in Parliament that *Brisbane* might be called upon to suppress rioting Chinese workers. The cruiser's ship's company, however, maintained only essential naval and military services and was not employed on civil duties ashore.

Although deployed in most oceans of the world during World War II, only in the final few months of the conflict did the RAN have any further involvement with China. Forming part of the British Pacific Fleet, RAN vessels participated in operations around the island of Taiwan and off the coast of Japanese-occupied China. With the end of the war, Australian corvettes based at Hong Kong also took part in minesweeping operations and anti-piracy patrols in surrounding waters.

The RAN also operated in Chinese waters during 1949, the last year of the Chinese Civil War. The destroyer HMAS *Warramunga*, the only Commonwealth warship, then operating in Japan, was offered by the Government for 'mercy purposes only'. Most dramatically, *Warramunga* was on standby for the evacuation of British citizens from Nanking when it was involved in the rescue of 35 people after a collision between two Chinese ships at the mouth of the Yangtze River. In the early morning of 28 January, the destroyer's crew struggled for hours to rescue oil-covered survivors from near-freezing water. For their brave actions, the crew of *Warramunga* were thanked in a letter from Chinese authorities passed through Navy Office: '… all the people of China are greatly influenced by your righteous deed when they hear the story'.[3]

The RAN entered the Korean War in 1950 as part of Australia's commitment to the United Nations. The RAN contribution included the newly acquired aircraft carrier HMAS *Sydney* (III) and a series of destroyer and frigate deployments. As the Korean War unfolded Australian forces found themselves fighting the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Tensions once again peaked with the RAN involvement in the Vietnam War between 1965-72, as the Soviet Union and China backed the military efforts of the North Vietnamese. But as Australia withdrew from Vietnam, our focus began to change from conflict to engagement.

In June 1971 Gough Whitlam, the then Australian opposition leader, led a Labor Party delegation to China, and the following year now as Prime Minister, he pursued a policy that soon led to the formal diplomatic recognition of the PRC. This event saw a significant thaw in Sino-Australian relations, and since that time, China and Australia have experienced a 'rapprochement'. As the PRC has played an increasing role in regional and international affairs, the opportunity for interaction and engagement has also grown.

A practical demonstration of this new beginning occurred from 3-7 September 1981, when *Swan* remained alongside at Yangtze Jiang Jetty at Shanghai. *Swan's* Commanding Officer praised the Chinese officials and military personnel who made every effort to welcome the Australian officers and sailors. In this first official exchange between the PLA-N and the RAN, much was done to promote awareness and understanding of each navy. This involved inspections of shipyards and *Swan,* and even an exchange of verbal histories.

Despite regular ship visits to Hong Kong and deployments to the East China Sea, RAN visits to mainland Chinese ports still remained relatively rare. The flagship *Stalwart* (II)*,* in company with *Yarra* (II) and *Stuart* (II) visited Shanghai during September 1984. But in 1989 Australia established an arms embargo and prohibited ship visits following the June Fourth Incident (Tiananmen Square protest). Although these measures were lifted in 1992 it was not until September 1997 that HMA Ships *Newcastle, Perth* and *Success* paid a successful visit to the mainland Chinese port of Qingdao. Since 1997 visits have become much more frequent, not the least because Hong Kong reverted to Chinese sovereign control on 1 July 1997.

Dancing lions greet the crew of Harbin *at Sydney Harbour* (RAN)

RAN warships are the largest and most visible elements of Australian military hardware to regularly visit foreign nations. A display of openness such as a ship inspection can do much to engender trust and cooperation. For example, the visit to Australia in 1998 of the PLA-N destroyer *Qingdao*, training ship *Shichang* and replenishment ship *Nancang* provided an opportunity for senior level navy to navy talks as well as for mingling between PLA-N and RAN personnel and various cultural exchanges.

Another example of confidence building through naval interaction arose during the Australian Federation celebrations held in October 2001. Although the 11 September attacks on the United States meant the event was scaled down, among the ships present were the PLA-N warships *Yichang* and *Taicang* under the command of Rear Admiral Yang Fucheng.[4] The official welcome was conducted by the Maritime Commander, Rear Admiral Geoff Smith, with a performance by 'dancing lions' from the Australian Chinese community and music by the RAN Band. The atmosphere was just as amicable in 2007 when the destroyer *Harbin* and replenishment ship *Hongzhu* made another goodwill visit to Australia.[5]

As the Chinese economy grows, so too will the quantity of its imports and exports. This is especially pertinent to Australia due to the vast amount of our trade that flows to and from China, almost all of which travels by sea. In 2006-07 mainland China imported some $28.7 billion in Australian merchandise and resources and exported $26.2 billion of its own products to Australia.[6] Deepening levels of economic inter-dependence are likely to continue, reinforcing the interest both Australia and China share in protecting vital trade routes to fuel their future prosperity.

Navy to navy engagement will likely similarly increase. The unique nature of the maritime environment and naval operations means that it is generally much easier for navies to communicate and work together than it is for land or air forces. The regular conduct of bi-lateral and multi-lateral exercises helps develop this interoperability and maintain the human networks which ultimately make it work. As confidence and familiarity increases, the relationship between navies evolves; from simple diplomatic exchanges, through to cooperation in passage exercises, and then potentially to conducting combined exercises and operations. Protection of merchant shipping and keeping the global sea lines of communication open are two examples of the many maritime interests which Australia and China share.

Partly in order to protect these interests, the PLA-N is already modernising its fleet. However, maintenance of these goals also requires the PRC to foster productive and transparent relationships with those nations adjoining its trade routes, especially those in Southeast Asia.[7] The 'rise of China' is seen by some as a potential threat to stability in the region due mainly to the large degree of influence it would be able to exude. Others believe that a 're-emerged China', assuming a more prominent and decisive place in world affairs, should be welcomed; its full acceptance into the international system becoming an essential stepping stone to greater cooperation, trust and transparency.

Continued and expanding naval engagement, not just between the RAN and the PLA-N but with all navies operating in the Asia-Pacific region, is a major contributor to future regional security. Engagement with China, based on transparency and reciprocity, is an important facet of Defence policy and one which the RAN remains more than capable of fulfilling.

1. HMAS *Swan*, *Report of Proceedings*, September, 1981.
2. B Nicholls, *Bluejackets and Boxers*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1986.
3. ST Whyte, *HMAS Warramunga's History; 1942 – 1959*, research notes, 1987, pp. 142-3. [held by SPC-A].
4. G Davis, 'Chinese ships meet with dancing lions', *Navy News*, 15 October 2001, pp. 1, 5, & 29.
5. 'China relationship strengthened', *Navy News*, 18 October 2007, p. 3.
6. Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics, *BITRE Australian Transport Statistics, June 2008*, Australian Government, 2008, p. 8, <www.bitre.gov.au/publications/39/Files/ATS_2008 .pdf> (2 July 2008).
7. J Zemin, 'Towards a good-neighbourly partnership of mutual trust oriented to the 21st Century', <wcm.fmprc.gov.cn/zdjn/eng/zywj/t 270546.htm> (20 June 2008).