

Maritime Security Cooperation

The Code of Unplanned Encounters at Sea agreement reached at the PLA-Navy-hosted regional symposium By Pan Xiaoqiao



A SEA OF OPINIONS: Delegates from the 25 member and observer countries gather in Qingdao, east China's Shandong Province, for the 14th Annual Conference of WPNS

A group of more than 140 delegates, consisting of naval chiefs and representatives from 25 member and observer countries, attended the 14th Annual Conference of the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) in east China's coastal city of Qingdao on April 22 and 23. Centering on the theme of "cooperation, trust and win-win," delegates at the one-and-a-half-day meeting reviewed the work of WPNS-sponsored seminars and other activities over the past year and deliberated on maritime regulations, among other discussions and exchanges in the West Pacific region.

Established in 1988, WPNS aims to enhance collaboration and the ability to operate together among the navies of West Pacific rim nations, so as to push forward pragmatic cooperation and better safeguard regional maritime security. WPNS is the only naval forum that holds regular multilateral

dialogues and conducts cooperative activities in the region.

In the face of ever-growing transnational asymmetric threats in the maritime domain such as piracy, terrorism, drugs and arms smuggling, as well as human trafficking, interoperability among navies has become increasingly important and a cooperative and collaborative maritime security approach is the only way forward.

After more than 20 years' development, the number of WPNS countries has increased to 21 from its original 12 and WPNS is also influencing countries lying outside the Pacific region. Over the years, WPNS has emerged as one of the most important maritime security cooperation mechanisms. It possesses the potential to curb maritime challenges and to resolve major issues through cooperation in the maritime domain.

It was the first time that China, one of

WPNS' 12 founding members, had hosted the biennial symposium. As Admiral Wu Shengli, Commander in Chief of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy, pointed out in his keynote speech, it's important to continue deepening cooperation under the framework of the WPNS.

According to Wu, it's crucial to overcome the "zero-sum" mindset and work to create a tolerant and friendly environment. It's also necessary to foster high-level strategic communication and increase maritime interaction, thereby strengthening mutual trust. The region should try to reach a win-win result where security and development goes hand in hand, with all sides jointly working for peace, obligations and the future. As the WPNS keeps growing and expanding, the cooperative action might well be referred to as the Pacific Naval Symposium.

These proposals and concepts are widely recognized by members and observer countries attending the WPNS annual conference.

"Through this symposium, we can achieve the expected goals of improving understanding and trust between various navies, and further deepening maritime pragmatic cooperation," said Admiral Wu.

"It makes all the difference in the world to get all of the nations in the West Pacific together, and to meet and decide on how we are going [to draft] a foundational document for behavior, for our cooperation, for unexpected encounters and to get together and vote to accept that. It's a big step forward," said Admiral Jonathan Greenert, U.S. Chief of Naval Operations, discussing the significance of the symposium.

As one of the founding members, China has itself been actively engaged in relevant activities at various levels, participating in the formulation and amending of relevant technical documents and regulations. The active participation of the PLA Navy will greatly help to push forward the development of WPNS and also the formation of a more extensive, fair and equal Asia-Pacific maritime security framework in addition to an

effective cooperation mechanism, contributing to the establishment of a harmonious maritime relationship among countries. The 14th annual conference of WPNS is an important symbolic event in the Chinese navy's efforts to promote multilateral maritime security cooperation.

A big step forward

One significant achievement from this symposium was the creation of a new naval code of conduct, called CUES—the Code of Unplanned Encounters at Sea—which aims to avoid dangerous situations among navies in the Pacific Rim.

As is quoted from the first version of CUES, “WPNS navies that choose to adopt CUES for naval cooperation do so on a voluntary and non-binding basis,” which implies that the CUES document is not legally binding, but instead is an agreement upon which the participating nations have a standardized protocol of safety procedures, basic communications and basic maneuvering instructions to follow for naval ships and aircraft in cases of unplanned encounters at sea.

For years, the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions (COLREG), which was signed in London in 1972, has been used as a code to prevent ships from colliding in international waters. China agreed to abide by this code in 1980. It defines how ships should “greet” each other on the high seas and in waters that are connected to the high seas and those which allow ships general access.

Generally speaking, naval ships patrolling the sea should also abide by the COLREG. However, compared to ordinary vessels, warships are unique in certain aspects. For example, warships are equipped with some special military facilities and sometimes one warship might be driven by “curiosity” to approach another one. It thus appears to be particularly important to formulate a detailed code for warships to follow, so as to reduce accidents resulting from miscalculations.

The code will further navy-to-navy exchanges between WPNS members, provide guidelines on how to effectively manage maritime crises, and help avoid incidents of interference and collisions in international waters, said Zhang Junshe, research fellow with the Naval Military Studies Research Institute of the PLA.

This new naval code of conduct is the first substantial principle reached in the history of the WPNS. After many years of discussions and debates, the consensus has reflected mem-

bers' willingness to reduce miscalculations and improve management of potential dangers at sea. Officers from member countries spoke highly of CUES as an example of increasing naval cooperation between countries.

Admiral Wu described the agreement as a milestone document that is “highly significant to navies in the region in promoting communication and reducing misjudgment and misunderstanding.”

There is concern among Pacific nations that a serious altercation may arise from an accident or miscommunication between the many international vessels now patrolling the Pacific.

Last December, a U.S. guided missile cruiser *USS Cowpens* barely missed a collision with a Chinese warship escorting the *Liaoning* aircraft carrier.

“With a document like this, we can avoid those incidents in the future,” Admiral Greenert said in a short media interaction in Qingdao. “It’s important, first of all—every country matters—so to get every country that is involved and that has a stake in the economy out here and in the security, to sit down and agree to a foundational document. It’s really important. Without that foundation, you can’t get started.”

“The endorsement of CUES is an example where regular high-level collaborative and cooperative interactions between navies in pursuit of practical outcomes can enhance the security of global maritime commons,” said Vice Admiral Ray Griggs, Chief of the Royal Australian Navy.

The document CUES was first proposed by New Zealand and Australia among others in the 1990s and was formally announced at the WPNS in 2000.

As an enthusiastic proponent of CUES, Australia has been working very actively over the years to get this document approved. “The CUES provides an unclassified and simple means for ships to communicate with each other using common messages. This common communications protocol will avoid confusion and as a result improve safety on the high seas. The adoption is a big step forward for all navies operating in the Western Pacific,” Vice Admiral Griggs told *Beijing Review*.

Admiral Enrique Larrañaga Martin, Commander in Chief of the Chilean Navy, said to *Beijing Review*. “CUES is a big step when you are at sea. Although it’s not legally binding, it’s also useful for ships and navies. It’s an excellent way to enhance cooperation among the ships. When on the sea, we meet ships from different countries and these procedures regulate what

we have to do and how we communicate with other ships and how we work together. Here, this document marks exactly what you have to do.”

“I am very happy to have the approval of the code of conduct. It will greatly contribute to the safety of navigation around this area,” said Katsutoshi Kawano, Chief of Staff for Japan’s Maritime Self-Defense Forces, during a short media interview in Qingdao.

Safeguarding Peace


The hosting of WPNS by the PLA Navy shows China’s determination to work toward the development of harmonious maritime relationships and also the Chinese Navy’s sincere desire to deepen professional communication and pragmatic cooperation with other navies.

In recent years, the Chinese Navy has actively fulfilled its international obligations. So far, 17 batches of taskforces have been sent to the Gulf of Aden and waters off Somalia to carry out anti-piracy escort missions. The PLA Navy’s hospital ship and medical teams actively became involved in disaster relief operations and aid missions in the central area hit by Typhoon *Haiyan* in the Philippines last November. Chinese naval ships are also escorting vessels in the transport of Syria’s chemical weapons for destruction. In the search and rescue efforts for the missing Malaysia Airlines MH370 aircraft, the Chinese Navy has deployed nine ships and six helicopters.

Apart from the WPNS, the PLA Navy has been an active participant in other multilateral maritime forums including the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting-Plus Expert Working Group on Maritime Security and was recently admitted as an observer to the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium.

All of the aforementioned activities provide strong evidence that the ever-growing PLA Navy is a crucial force in promoting maritime security and harmony, rather than a threat to anyone. China is actively fulfilling its role as a responsible power in the international arena.

As an important international maritime cooperation forum, WPNS offers a platform for countries bordering the Pacific to sit down and solve maritime conflicts and disputes in a peaceful manner, which also shows that the Chinese Navy is ready to coordinate with navies of other countries to jointly safeguard regional and global peace and stability. ■

 panxiaojiao@bjreview.com