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CHINESE NAVAL VESSELS VISIT NEW ZEALAND: WIDER IMPLICATIONS

The October 2013 visit of three Chinese Peoples' Liberation Army (Navy) vessels to New Zealand on a defence diplomacy and navy-to-navy training voyage is a reminder that security links with China have moved in parallel with the moves in the economic relationship. They are also an indication of the wider changes in the security atmosphere within the Asia-Pacific region.

New Zealand and China signed a bilateral free trade agreement in 2008. Since then two-way trade has increased threefold and China has become New Zealand's largest trading partner. The prognosis for continued expansion of trade volumes and value is positive.

While the security links have not developed at the same speed and do not hold the same position as relationships with the traditional western powers, they are nonetheless significant given the disquiet in some regional circles over China's military ambitions. Over the same period as the trade relationship has developed, New Zealand has hosted senior military officials, including in 2010 the Vice-Chairman of China's Central Military Commission, has had vessels from the Royal New Zealand Navy visit Chinese ports on 'defence diplomacy' missions and conducted small-scale naval exercises with elements of China's fleet almost every year, and has hosted ship visits by China to New Zealand. In 2012 for the first time New Zealand Defence Force health personnel and counterparts from China's Peoples' Liberation Army (with colleagues from the Australian Defence Force also) worked together building linkages around humanitarian assistance and disaster relief activities.

Taken together these activities have several implications;

- They demonstrate that China is taking more and more active role in military relationships, testing the waters with 'easy' relationships and easy topics. China already participates in regional multilateral defence policy meetings such as those of the ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meetings (plus) and in regional military discussions through, for example, the Western Pacific Naval Symposium series of meetings. In time, we will see China participating in more mainstream multilateral military training

activities, such as the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) naval exercises (scheduled to happen in 2014, but limited through US law to 'non security-threatening' activities). No doubt, in the much longer-term, China will participate in land and air exercises across the full spectrum of military activities.

- They indicate that China is going to be as assertive in military security relationships as it is in economic relationships, which makes sense for what will be the major regional power. This development will be positive for the region. China's international economic activities are managed broadly by the rules and norms of the international trading system through the World Trade Organisation and various regional relationships, and this management has worked. The military security sector does not have the body of rules developed for trade, other than the general precepts of the UN Charter and the rules of the ASEAN developed Treaty of Amity and Cooperation to which China adheres along with most of the rest of the region. As China works in the multilateral security sphere it will have to accept the norms (not yet robust rules) that have developed in this area. Ultimately China will attempt to shape the present norms and any future rules. The more exposure China has to the present system, the easier this will be for all participants. This does not mean, of course, that there will be no changes to current processes and norms. It does mean that they are unlikely to be dramatic or completely at variance with current norms.

One implication, for which there is no evidence but over which there is much anxiety, is that China's growing relationship with New Zealand in both economic and military matters will eventually force New Zealand (and other countries in a similar position) to reassess its relationship with the west in general and with the United States in particular. The argument is that because the US is the guarantor of security for all regional democracies, yet China is the largest or second largest trading partner for those countries, there will inevitably come a time when countries have to choose between military security and trade. Most commonly this is posited over conflict between the US and China either over Taiwan or over disputed territories in which the US supports, for example, Japan against China and conflict ensues. Other countries, it is asserted, would have to take sides.

The argument rests on the assumption that states will go to war to resolve political differences, and history holds many examples of that occurring. The argument assumes an ungoverned region in which each state is seeking for its own self-interest and in which that self-interest is defined without much reference to other states and their interests and likely reactions. The Asia-Pacific is now more-or-less a 'governed' region. There are developing rules and norms that lessen the likelihood of conflict at all, and certainly of sustained conflict. So long as those norms and rules are upheld and strengthened the likelihood of having to make a choice between supporting the US militarily or China because of economic ties is likely to be a false framing of the issue.

China is a major power in the region and will only get stronger, economically and militarily. It is in New Zealand's interests to maintain and develop close links across the full range of state-to-state contacts. Even though New Zealand is not the only country developing these relationships with China, New Zealand should seek the advantages (similar to those in the economic relationship) of being the 'first mover', and if not the first mover then certainly an early mover. It is equally in the interests of other regional states to develop the same wide and deep relationships with China and of China to develop the relationships across the region.

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