

China's Energy Diplomacy and Changing Contours of Security Structure in the Indian Ocean: New Scramble for Sea Power

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Introduction

Architecting international economy through global trade, competitiveness to expand sphere of influence and military posturing have consequently heightened the strategic value of the Indian Ocean. As a result, the security structure in the Indian Ocean is reaching at the brink of sharp transformation with the proliferating demand for Sea Power. By turning words of 19th Century American naval strategist Alfred Mahan into reality, the Indian Ocean has come on the forefront on the geopolitical map of the world as a major 'game changer' in allotting power to different contestants.¹ The Indian Ocean Region (IOR), world's third largest water body has garnered mounted importance from the geopolitical and economic point of view for the last two decades.² The tectonic shift in the race for wielding power from the Atlantic Ocean to the Asia-Pacific, more certainly to the Indian Ocean involving emerging actors besides the traditional ones has vivified this scenario. The Indian Ocean has emerged as a centre theatre for the challenges of the 21st Century.³ The existing interest of the traditional powers in the region exhibits the continual geo-strategic vitality of the region for the world. It provides critical sea trade routes that connect the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia with the broader Asian continent to the east and Europe to the west. Some most important strategic chokepoints of the world that drives more than 50 per cent of the world's maritime oil trade figure in this region.⁴ Some 36 million barrels per day – equivalent to about 40 per cent of the world's oil supply and 64 per cent of oil trade travel through the entryways into and out of the Indian Ocean, including the Straits of Malacca, Hormuz and the Bab-el-Mandeb.⁵ Today, almost 90,000 vessels in the world's commercial fleet transport 9.84 billion tonnes per year. This represents an almost four-fold increase in the volume of commercial shipping since 1970.⁶

On the security realm, the non-traditional security challenges like terrorism, piracy, smuggling activities, possession of weapons of mass destruction, environmental crisis etc. are some matters of stern concern which draw collective attention of the major powers. There are seven key chokepoints in the IOR: the Lombok Strait, the Sunda Strait, the Malacca Straits, the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, Mozambique Channel, and the Bab-el-Mandeb. If these strategically vital key points fall under wrong hands, the future of the IOR will be encountering uncertainty having a crippling effect on dependent economies.⁷

The present Sino-Indian neo-rivalry on the Ocean waters has triggered various questions marking new contours of power equations. The strategic dynamic is changing with the emergence of China and India rising as naval powers at a moment of relative American decline.⁸ Undoubtedly, a powerful China in any manner can potentially jeopardise India's strategic interests and national security. To abate China's growing influence, India strictly needs to revive its maritime policy while introducing slight modifications in its foreign policy as well with the aim of consolidating its alignment with the littoral states.

India's Historical Maritime Imperatives and Policy

Our present is unconditionally attached with the remnants of our history. Historical archives unveil that the inception of the golden phase of Indian seafaring is marked with the very dawn of the Indus Valley Civilization. India was much affluent and secure when she was chiefly connected to the world through 'Sea'. India has evolved as a vibrant and rich maritime culture over the centuries. Indian maritime performance has traditionally been extended from Gujarat's coastline (*Lothal*) in the west to the *Kalinga* in the east. Ancient Indian civilisation had recorded activities like building ships, navigating the sea and monopolising international trade both by sea and land. The unfortunate fact is that our maritime history is not documented in a requisite manner. The available literature pertaining to maritime records is largely written by western historians. Admiral Arun Prakash, former Chief of the Indian Navy summarises this phenomenon as "one of the reasons for our maritime blindness is that as a nation we have been indifferent to the reading as well as writing of history; both our own and that of others. Whatever little history we do study, has been recorded by western historians who have made full use of the literary license to give it the slant that they wished to".⁹

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister had concluded – owing to the history, *"We cannot afford to be weak at sea. History has shown that whoever controls the Indian Ocean has, in the first instance, India's sea-borne trade at her mercy and in the second, India's very independence itself"*.¹⁰ India has since claimed the Indian Ocean as India's ocean and considers its legitimate role in the security of the Ocean region. Following its *Monroe Doctrine*, it strictly discourages the ingression of the external powers in the Indian Ocean.¹¹ India has played a much active role in the Indian Ocean since the mid-1980s. When it is a matter of security in the Indian Ocean, India considers no 'ifs and buts'.

During 1983 political crisis in Mauritius, India although didn't intervene militarily to prevent a feared coup but on the contour of security facilitated a political solution to the crisis favouring large numbers of Indo-Mauritians that was termed as '*Operation Lal Dora*'. This had validated India's special role in the region.¹² India's security role in Seychelles in 1986 crystallised over its response during a series of coup attempts made against President Rene led by the Seychelles Minister of Defence, Ogilvy Berlouis. Proving its might and intent to establish peace, India had executed '*Operation Flowers are Blooming*' in Seychelles, when on a request by then-President Rene, Indian Prime minister Rajiv Gandhi instructed the then Indian Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Tahlilani, to dispatch the frigate INS *Vindhyagiri* to avert a coup.

Under the Prime Ministership of Rajiv Gandhi in 1988, the Indian forces were despatched to the Maldives following '*Operation Cactus*' to foil a coup targeting the then President of Maldives, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom sponsored by Sri Lankan Tamil militants on behalf of the Maldivian businessman Abdulla Luthufi. That was possibly the first time when India learnt what 'out-of-area contingencies' were all about and secured itself as a predominant regional power.

During '*Operation Rahat*' in 2015, India showed exemplary bravery and magnanimity. The Indian Government spared no efforts in evacuating Indians from Yemen as fighting raged between the Houthi rebels and the Yemeni Government supported by aerial bombardment from the Saudi-led coalition. India's effort was so effective that over 26 countries including the US and UK had requested for Indian assistance in evacuating their citizens from Yemen. Operations undertaken by India to establish peace in the IOR are tabulated below:-

Classical Attempts by India to Establish Peace in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

Peace Maker Country	Country in Crisis	Year of Operation	Operations
India	Mauritius	1983	Operation Lal Dora
India	Seychelles	1986	Operation are Blooming
India	Sri Lanka	1987	Operation Pawan
India	Maldives	1988	Operation Cactus
India	Yemen	2015	Operation Rahat

What Fuels Sino-Indian Tension

The ascent of two continental powers, India and China following their swelled economies and military modernisation has triggered a new wave of power projection in the modern history of the Indian Ocean.¹³ Discord and tension between India and China has been registered traditionally beyond the borders and the existing confrontation doesn't manifest any new episode of anonymity in the history of Sino-Indian relations. Importantly, their augmented competition is redefining the old power equations in the Indian Ocean while expressing their huge strategic interests. According to James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, India and China's quests for energy security, as well as their great-power aspirations have somehow obligated the two countries "to redirect their gazes from land to the seas".

As India claims the Indian Ocean as India's Ocean, an overriding China in the IOR is predictably becoming a futuristic threat for India. In 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had pronounced that Indian Ocean is at the top policy priorities of India. Chinese Peoples' Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) signals the landing of a serious naval power in the world by launching the Shandong or CV-001A, the first 70,000-tonne indigenously produced aircraft carrier likely to be operational by 2020. Notably, President Xi Jinping has launched defence reforms which are taking away resources from land to air and naval power. Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean and the larger Pacific is on the increase in an unprecedented way and a blue water navy is seemingly a prerequisite for Chinese ambitions.¹⁴ The PLAN is emerging as a serious challenger and, therefore, forcing India to re-build its naval muscle. It is not a matter of surprise that India is investing in ramping up its naval power. Indian Navy has drawn explicit aspirations for the Indian Ocean with the support of the Government. Unlike China, India has been operating an aircraft carrier since 1961, but delays and shoddy planning continue to mar Indian aspirations to be a prominent power in the region. India's first indigenous aircraft carrier, the 40,000-tonne INS *Vikrant*, was launched in 2013, but its commissioning has been delayed to

2020.¹⁵



Source: The Economic Times, April 2017

India has so far ripened its geographical dividends by constructing traditional proximity with other nations in the IOR. India enjoys cordial and progressive relations with the littoral states of the Indian Ocean; primarily with Mauritius, that is also known as 'Little India' because of the substantive presence of Indian diaspora (nearly 68 percent) and considerably a closest ally of India in the Indian Ocean.¹⁶ Above all, India is geographically located at the Ocean's centre and privileged by having island territories. Despite this geo-strategic advantage, India is feeling the heat of China's naval expansionism.

Containment of India has been "China's Great Game".¹⁷ It is a considered view that strategically, China retains interest in the IOR for geo-economic (energy security) and geopolitical (restraining India) objectives. After executing its 'String of Pearls' strategy through ports development projects in Gwadar, Hambantota, Myanmar and Bangladesh, it is further planning to encircle India by wooing other littoral states in the region.¹⁸ In case of Sri Lanka, Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is roughly five times that of India's investment. Other island nations like Mauritius and Seychelles are setting new instances of receiving affluent Line of Credits (LoCs) from China. Seychelles and Mauritius are regarded as ideal locations for China as a lot of its oil shipments from the Gulf region and its containers containing manufactured goods destined for Europe and America passes through this region.

India's maritime strategy fundamentally stresses over the build-up of its naval-infrastructure which includes a six fold strategy of increasing its naval spending, strengthening its infrastructure, increasing its naval capabilities, active maritime diplomacy, naval exercises in the Indian Ocean and keeping open the choke points. To materialise its maritime objectives, India had introduced the "Maritime Agenda 2010-2020" (MA-20) that has limited impact because of its singular emphasis on ports and harbours leaving behind entire arrangement of infrastructure in the 'maritime domain'.¹⁹ According to *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)* report, whereas China's military expenditure figure for 2002-11 increased by 170 per cent, India's increased by 59 per cent merely. India does not appear to be capable of advocating a 'containment-cum-counter-encirclement' policy against China in the Asia-Pacific or in the Indian Ocean. Indian Navy has to be made capable of ensuring India's strategic interests in the IOR and for this a sound national security strategy has to be enumerated.

China's maritime strategy, 'Maritime Silk Road (MSR)' founded by President Xi Jinping demonstrates China's Indian Ocean strategy of building an empire of Chinese built ports, initially as economic projects leading gradually to achieving strategic and military ends. Beyond that China is striving to gain mining rights in the central IOR which will eventually become an excuse for its naval presence in the area.

China is extremely vulnerable owing to dependence upon IOR sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) that are straddled by India and pass through narrow choke points at the northwest and northeast corners.²⁰ Since 2014, Chinese intelligence-gathering ships and submersibles have begun making regular forays into the Indian Ocean. Notably, China has also held its first military exercise encompassing the eastern Indian Ocean - until now such exercises have been only in the Pacific.²¹ According to a Pentagon report China initiated the building up of Djibouti base in early 2016, near the US special-operations outpost, Camp Lemonnier. In the similar vein, Marine General Thomas Waldhauser, Chief of US Africa Command, said "you would have to characterise it as a military base. It's a first for them and they've never had an overseas base".²² C Raja Mohan, the Director of Carnegie India states, "Bases is going to be the name of the game in the Indian Ocean, and that game is going to be pretty attractive." Experts believe that whether or not China is willing to show its intent to secure its permanent presence in the IOR so far, a semi-permanent presence of China in the region is not a matter of

denial, counting on its extraordinary power projection and renewed ties with the littorals in the region.²³ In turn, India will have to brace up for a new era of rivalry in the Indian Ocean.



Source: International Maritime Bureau

Strategic Matrix Positioning US as a Chief Defender

China is seen as a collective threat to India and the US especially when it is found denouncing the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in the South China Sea. Traditional dominance of the US, regular claim of India over the Indian Ocean and atop overarching influence of China in the Indian Ocean in the 21st Century has formed a strategic triangle in the region. In a meeting of Indo-US Defence Joint Working Group held in 2007 at New Delhi, it was reported that both sides discussed the rapidly increasing Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean. During former US President Barack Obama's visit to India in 2015, a joint statement was issued, where particular attention was drawn to peaceful resolution of maritime territorial disputes and "freedom of navigation", with specific reference to the South China Sea.²⁴ The US appears incoherent in this context as the policy is missing and so far it has been unwilling in determining the extent of importance it needs to give to the IOR.²⁵

On 13 Dec 2011, Chinese Defence Minister had officially announced that Seychelles had welcomed the Chinese Navy to establish facilities in order to resupply and recuperate international ships during escort missions. This had undoubtedly attracted worldwide media attention. As Diego Garcia is merely 600 km away from Seychelles in terms of geography, the US also expressed its deep concerns over this development besides India. However, it has been observed that the US is becoming less interested in policing the Indian Ocean.

The US warships are being transferred to the Pacific region. The most startling evidence that the US is out of the on-going game was the emergence of the Somali pirates between 2005 and 2011. Notably, a superpower like the US could be expected to handle it with a flick of the wrist. Instead, it was Indian and other navies that had to beat the pirates back.²⁶

This sort of reluctant attitude can contribute to fostering power of China while boosting its strategic intents. A collective and active approach involving the US and India is desirable and urgently needed rather than undertaking indigenous actions to defeat the growing footprints of China. Constant and close surveillance over the footprints of China in the region is necessary to

check its strategic psyche. Interestingly, the US had recently sent a naval warship near an artificial island in the South China Sea as part of the first “freedom of navigation” operation under President Trump, a move China has denounced in the name of challenging its sovereignty in the region.

The US appears to be showing its inclination for India to emerge as a ‘Net Security Provider’ in the region. Such a move turning into reality can possibly give India an unparalleled leverage and somehow may prove fruitful for the interest of the US as well by shrinking the existing role of China in the IOR. In the backdrop of gradual wane of the power of the US Navy, India seems well positioned to be the principal net security provider in the region.²⁷ But, to attain this objective India solemnly needs to walk further. India, who regards the Indian Ocean as its ‘backyard’ or major ‘sphere of influence’ is imbued by large geo-strategic interests. However, India at the moment is not capable of staging its requisite potential against China’s ‘containment-cum-counter-encirclement’ policy directed towards India in the Asia-Pacific or in the Indian Ocean.²⁸ India needs to strategically reconstruct its internal and external might for ensuring her strategic interests.

Conclusion

The US Quadrennial Defense Review wrote about India’s emerging role as a ‘net provider of security in the Indian Ocean’. India’s desired role of being the net provider of security in the IOR can only be sustained by growth in India’s maritime capability. A strong shipbuilding (both warship and commercial ships) and shipping infrastructure is imperative for enhancing the maritime capacity of any country. If India strategically aims to exercise predominant influence in the IOR it needs to adopt an aggressive policy of engagement with the island nations of the region on an urgent basis. With regard to China, India wants to maintain (and not lose) its privileged diplomatic-security links with Indian Ocean States. It should seek to maintain clear military superiority over the Chinese Navy in the IOR. As Raja Menon puts it; ‘just because we cannot [globally] compete with China does not mean we do not defend our interests in the Indian Ocean where we wish to attain naval supremacy’. Therefore, to secure its long-term strategic and national interests India should consolidate its position through internal balancing in terms of further upgrading its naval assets and external balancing by deepening ties with the island nations and in other sense with the US. By undertaking such mechanisms India can affirm the security of its strategic interests while attaining grand objective of establishing peace, tranquility and stability in the region.

Endnotes

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