

Indian Ocean : Emerging Chinese Aspirations, Importance of A & N Islands and the Way Ahead for India

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Introduction

Phrases such as ‘Clash of Civilizations’, the ‘Commies vs the West’, etc provide a spatial view of critical trends in world politics¹. A study of the world map is essential to understand the impact technological advances have made on mankind over the ages. Encouraged and facilitated by globalisation, it also provides an insight into the breaking of ideological barriers today. However, some countries continue to remain unaffected by the current economic trends. These are countries where the ‘time for change has arrived’ but the political leadership has not measured upto the challenges. Geography dictates that such countries get harnessed to meet the ‘needs of tomorrow’. The advent of the internet and globalisation has ensured that politics may not be kept distanced from geographical realities for long.

Under these circumstances, where can we see the beginning of the future? In America, Africa, Europe or Asia? Or, would it be one of the oceans? The ongoing ‘Clash of Civilizations’, currently termed as the Global War on Terror (GWOT), is making the contours of the future around the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The IOR encompasses the entire arc of Islam from the Sahara to the Indonesian archipelago². Millions of muslims; inhabit this region. This issue is also related to the ability of one of the warring factions to move the war onto the territory of the other, in order to keep the home fires burning. History has many examples of this, e.g. Alexander’s conquests and Napoleon’s march into Russia. Similarly, currently the Western world is engaged in shifting the war away from the European mainland into Asia.

The rapid economic growth of India and China has been taken note of routinely. However, ramifications of China’s equally notable military growth does not seem to be getting the attention it deserves. China’s aspiration to be a great world power, as well as quest for energy security, has compelled her ‘to redirect her gaze from land to the seas’. The fact that China is focussing on fast track development of sea power indicates, how much more self-confident she feels on land. This is how the map of the Indian Ocean exposes the contours of power politics in the initial years of the 21st century. This would be the gateway to the world in future.

Energy, India and Indian Ocean

As per historian Felipe Fernandez Armesto sea routes, generally, matter more than land routes; for they carry more goods, more economically. Today, 90 per cent of global commerce and about 65 per cent of all oil travels by sea. The Indian Ocean accounts for half of the world’s container traffic. Moreover, 70 per cent of petroleum products pass along the Indian Ocean through the world’s principal oil shipping lanes, including the Gulfs of Aden and Oman, Babel Mandeb and the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca.³ Forty per cent of the world trade passes through the Straits of Malacca; which alone accounts for a similar percentage of all traded crude in the world today.

China’s demand for crude oil doubled between 1995 and 2005 and would double again in the coming 10 years or so. Today, on an average more than 80 per cent of oil and oil products bound for China cross the Indian Ocean and pass through the Straits of Malacca.

India on the other hand is soon going to become the world’s fourth-largest energy consumer, after USA, China, and Japan. Today, India is dependent on oil for roughly 33 per cent of her energy needs, 65 per cent of which is imported. Apart from coal from Africa, Indonesia and Australia, India bound ships in future will also be carrying increasingly large quantities of liquefied natural gas (LNG) across the seas from Southern Africa as also from Qatar, Malaysia and Indonesia.⁴ The Indian Ocean, thus becomes a vast web of energy trade, stretching from the Straits of Hormuz to Malacca Straits, across to the Gulf of Thailand – this expanse should ideally span India’s ‘Zone of Influence’.

Chinese Aspirations in the IOR

Recently, the Chinese President Hu Jintao has voiced China’s “Malacca dilemma.” Geographically and historically, China is a land power. However, over the past two decades, she has found herself to be increasingly dependent on resources and markets accessible only via maritime routes.⁵ The Chinese hope to eventually partly bypass the Straits of Malacca by transporting oil and other energy products via roads, pipelines and from ports in the Indian Ocean into the heart of China. With this aim, China has made inroads into five of her neighbouring countries in the North West.

One reason why Beijing wants to integrate Taiwan into her dominion is to redirect her naval energies away from the Straits of Taiwan into the Indian Ocean. Towards this end, China wants to build a naval base in Aden, in addition to the ones in Gwadar and Pasni in Pakistan; a fuelling station at Hambantota, in Sri Lanka; a container facility with extensive naval and commercial access in Chittagong, Bangladesh; apart from developing Sittwe in Myanmar. Beijing also operates a surveillance facility on Coco Islands, deep in the Bay of Bengal.⁶ The Chinese also envisage a canal

across the Isthmus of Kra, in Thailand, to link the Indian Ocean with China's Pacific coast; a project on the scale of the Panama Canal and one that will transfer Asia's balance of power in China's favour. This explains her current expanding torrents to the West.

Zhao Nanqi, former DG of General Logistics Department of the People's Liberation Army 1993 had said "We can no longer accept the Indian Ocean as an ocean only of the Indians". China has been steadily working towards this goal. Sometime in the next decade, China's Navy (PLAN) may have more warships than the USA. She would have more aircraft carriers, JF 17 fighter jets, a proven Main Battle Tank, a potent Rapid Reaction Force (RRF) capability and an amphibious and expeditionary force – all organised into 'Theatre Commands' rather than the present Military Regions.

There is nothing unlawful about the rise of China's military power. As the country's economic interests expand, so will her military, and particularly the Navy, to guard these interests. The British did this in the 19th Century and so did the USA, subsequently. Similar is the case with China. The first proclamation of Zhao Nanqi in 1993 was reiterated in 2005, during a commemoration of Zheng He, a Ming dynasty explorer and admiral who plied the seas from China to Africa, in the early 15th Century. This celebration signals China's belief that these seas have always been part of her 'Zone of Influence'. Her next change of guard is scheduled for 2015 when her aircraft carriers(s) get commissioned. So where do we go from here?

Indian Islands and Indian Ocean

We should logically go back to our 'Zone of Interest' in the Indian Ocean, for this is the area of the 'Confluence of Interests.' An area where major Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) congregate, there is immense marine and natural wealth apart from the wholesome island territories of Lakshadweep, Andaman and Nicobar. The islands of Lakshadweep are about 200 nm (310 kms) to the West of the Indian sea board, whereas the 572 islands of Andaman and Nicobar, are located 700 nm (1200 kms) to the East. These islands push the India's reach far into the East. In this regard they stand to be India's national strategic assets. On the other hand their proximity to Southeast Asia yields immense dividends. This proximity facilitates engagement of the extended neighbourhood through politico-military-diplomatic means which enable confidence building and fostering inter-operability for joint operations. This singular issue helps India in safe keeping of domains, through moderation with subregional and extra regional powers, with a direct bearing on her 'zone of interest'. This issue is also linked to India's Look East Policy.

The archipelago of Andaman and Nicobar are an extension of the Arakan Yoma submarine mountain range. The northern most part i.e. Landfall Island is only 30 nm from Myanmar's Coco Islands and the Southern tip (Indira Point) is separated by the Six Degree Channel of about 86 nm from Aceh in Indonesia.

The lie of the ground of these islands extends North to South for about 470 nm. Thus, the island chain acts as a frontier securing vital SLOCs since it creates a series of choke points: The Preparis Channel in the North, the Ten Degree channel between the Andaman and Nicobar Island groups, and the Six degree Channel to the South. The former two waterways are used infrequently by commercial shipping. However, the entire global shipping passing through the Malacca Straits must cross the Six Degree Channel. The Southern part of the island chain is, therefore, geographically well placed to play a larger role.

This island chain is the centrality in the Bay of Bengal as its vast longitudinal spread helps India in ensuring greater domain assertiveness as also for countering rapid proliferation of non traditional maritime threats in the area, and is the bedrock for maintaining good order at sea.

Glimpse of the future IOR and It's Linkages to Andaman and Nicobar Islands

Before moving further it is necessary to first limit the scope of this analysis. It is unlikely that warfare would break out among members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).⁷ China in a stand-alone mode, with her current and near term naval assets coupled with global interdependency of the day, is unlikely to have complete hegemony in IOR. Accordingly, our focus areas should be built upon cooperation, to counter extra regional and transnational threats, rather than to prevent inter-state conflict. 'Cooperation' thus is the key for security and simultaneous development for India, China and the ASEAN. Now, if this is the crux, then the islands of Andaman and Nicobar gain added strategic importance for the Indian subcontinent. They have the potential of catapulting India, as a well placed emerging geopolitical leader in the region.

Contemporary global environment is driven by economic and export led development. China has become more dependent on SLOCs as her trade has increased and she needs to import her energy requirements.⁸ For India too, the SLOCs are of vital importance. India already is one of the big energy consumers in the world. With a rapidly growing economy, her demand for fossil fuel will only grow. India needs to step up efforts to diversify her energy sources for long-term energy security. In addition to the current supplies from the West, some quantity of oil and gas will also have to be sourced from the East. In other words, given India's rising trade and energy stakes, the importance of Eastern SLOCs and southeast Asian straits would grow significantly. Therein lies another paradigm of the strategic importance of the geographical location of Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

The Way Ahead for India

While India is still debating the strategic and economic potential of these islands, and how they help in extending the Indian reach into the ASEAN countries, China has already set the cat amongst the pigeons. She has started engaging the ASEAN countries by way of methods evolved over “Regional Confidence Building” and “Defence Forums”. Taking advantage of the ongoing diversion related to the GWOT and the ongoing global financial crisis, her recent overture of “soft power campaign” in the ASEAN countries seems to have outshined all the players in the strategic, diplomatic and commercial march. China has very recently infused a package of US \$ 10 billion as an “investment fund” in addition to a promise of US \$ 15 billion as “line of credit” over the next three to five years for the ‘needy’ ASEAN countries. In addition to this aid in the southeast, she has also announced a US \$ 10 billion support package for the financially distressed former Soviet republics as well as equal investments in Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan indicating her desire to shape events across Eurasia.

China’s ‘First Chain of Islands’ strategy which looks at dominating the Philippines and Borneo, is a reality. Her second Chain starts in the North at Bonin Islands, moves southwards through the Marianas, Guam and Carolina Islands. Towards this end, her submarine, ship upgradation and aircraft carrier programmes are well under way. China is seeking to achieve a power projection capability in support of her ‘Second Island Chain’ strategy by 2020. The next stage is from 2020 to 2050 during which the Chinese power projection is likely to expand into the IOR or towards the ‘Third Island Chain’.

The Third Chain is of course, an extrapolation of the Chinese trend, for the present. China is unlikely to go to war with her littorals or with India. There is too much at stake in today’s globalised world for everyone, and, therefore, there is a need to build a comprehensive security environment which is nurtured by faith and mutual cooperation. In this context, the concern is not simply cooperation but ‘Operationalised Security Cooperation’. Cooperation, in its broad sense, occurs when states, in order to realise their own goals, modify policies to meet preferences of other states. ‘Operationlised Security Cooperation’ is a specific type and degree of cooperation in which policies addressing common threats are carried out by officials without immediate or direct supervision from strategic level authorities. Consultation between ministries of various states is an example of ‘cooperation’; assessment and intelligence briefing by combined teams of analysts is an example in the realms of ‘operationalised cooperation’. In maritime environment, international staff consultations exemplify cooperation. Taking this further, it can be said that a ‘Search and Rescue Mission’ can be considered as an example of a loose ‘operationlised cooperation’. However, a scheduled combined and formal ‘Law Enforcement Patrol’ between two or more states in a given region would be an ideal example of ‘Operationalised Security Cooperation’. Presently, India does have such an understanding with a number of her Indian Ocean Littorals, but much more is required to be done.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding all of the above, maritime security cooperation is by no means preordained. A host of wild cards could impel the players in the region towards a more forceful security doctrine.⁹ But that is another story. For the present the IOR and the seas around are witnessing an intriguing historical anomaly; simultaneous rise of two self made powers against the backdrop of the US domination over the global commons. China is already way ahead on her path with great advances in her rank and file in league with her national aims and ambitions. India probably, needs a new push to realise that it requires to have a ‘strategic re-think’ of shifting gears from almost neutral to high; as also from land to the seas. And in the seas, on to the islands of Andaman and Nicobar. Even at the cost of repetition, I would like to emphasise that the development of full maritime potential of these islands will undoubtedly give a boost to India’s ‘Look East Policy’.

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