

China's Growing Influence in Indian Ocean Region : Analysis And Implications

Dr. Sanjay Kumar

Asso. Prof., Deptt. of Defence Studies, Meerut College, Meerut (U.P.)

Abstract

Mainland China has increased its activities in the Indian Ocean region (IOR) by investing in local states, building ports and infrastructure, and acquiring energy resources. This paper analyses the impact of these activities on overall regional stability and security, as also impact on relevant regional players, especially India. The paper starts with the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean and delves into the history of the geo-political scenario obtaining in South East Asia and the geographical context. It analyses the developments with respect to modernization of PLA Navy, China's space and air capability and the strategic expansion of PLA Navy into IOR.

Keywords

Aero-Space, Indian Ocean Region, Norco-Terrorism, PLA Navy, Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, Sukhoi, Suez Canal

Reference to this paper
should be made as follows:

Dr. Sanjay Kumar,

*China's Growing Influence
in Indian Ocean Region :
Analysis And Implications ,*

RJPP 2018, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp.

94-104, Article No. 12

Received on 26/03/2018

Approved on 31/03/2018

Online available at :

[http://anubooks.com/
?page_id=2004](http://anubooks.com/?page_id=2004)

Introduction

Over the past few decades, both China and India have emerged as major regional powers, in fact even *reckonable* global powers. This has also been accompanied by their increased interactions at bilateral and multilateral levels. It is true that the two countries have often capitalized on the opportunities of geo-political convergence. But their competition and rivalry too, are increasingly evident. Events also indicate various forms of politico-diplomatic dissonance between the two, which flow from historic contentions as also the contemporary geo-political environment. In the coming years the growing power asymmetry in favor of China and stakes of both countries in the emerging global order are also likely to influence Sino-India relations.

While existence of a common land border has largely shaped and limited Sino-Indian interactions to the terrestrial domain thus far, Chinese attention is increasingly turning to the maritime realm. In fact there has been a discernible strengthening of the PLA Navy and the PLA Air Force to win command of the sea and air, as also to carry out strategic counter-strikes, as evident from study of China's Defence White Papers from 2004 onwards.

Strategic Importance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

As the third-largest body of water in the world, containing vital sea-lanes that help feed some of Asia's major economies, the significance of the Indian Ocean has long been known. According to the *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, more than 80 percent of the world's seaborne trade in oil transits through Indian Ocean choke points, with 40 percent passing through the Strait of Hormuz, 35 percent through the Strait of Malacca and 8 percent through the Bab el-Mandab Strait¹.

The highest tonnage of global maritime trade and vital hydrocarbons transit through the Indian Ocean, with about 100,000 ships plying its waters annually. In such a scenario, China, and also the rest of the world, appreciates the utmost need to secure these vital Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs).

As a result, some of the world's major powers have deployed substantial military forces in the Indian Ocean region. For example, in addition to maintaining expeditionary forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US 5th Fleet is headquartered in Bahrain, and uses the island of Diego Garcia as a major naval aviation base and logistics hub for its Indian Ocean operations².

China's aggressive soft power diplomacy is seen to be one of the important elements in shaping the Indian Ocean strategic environment in recent times. By providing large loans on generous repayment terms, investing in major infrastructure projects

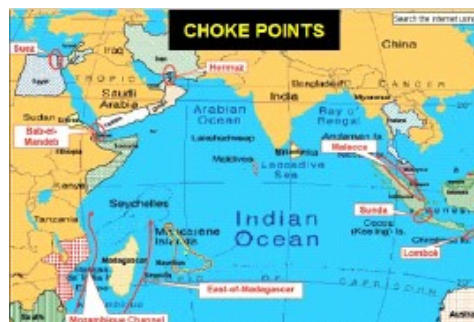
such as the building of roads, dams, ports, power plants and railways, and offering military assistance and political support in the UN Security Council through its veto powers, China has secured considerable influence among countries in the Indian Ocean region and in Straits of Malacca, Lombok, Mandeb and Sunda in South-east Asia³.

Choke Points and their Impact on Trade and Energy Transport:

The marine geography of the IOR highlights the importance of major chokepoints. Securing SLOCs is vital, as they are crucial for trade, energy security and thus the economy as a whole. Given the rapidly multiplying demand for energy, it is inevitable that countries such as Japan, India and China will remain sensitive to the security of SLOCs and choke points of the region. Prominent choke points of the Indian Ocean are described in brief description⁴:-

(a) **The Suez Canal.** The Suez Canal is an artificial sea-level water channel, connecting the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea. Owned and maintained by the Suez Canal Authority, it may be used “in time of war as in time of peace, by every vessel of commerce or of war, without distinction of flag⁵.”

(b) **The Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb.** Bab el-Mandab acts as a strategic link between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, via the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. In 2006, an estimated 3.3 million barrels of oil passed through the strait per day, out of a world total of about 43 million barrels per day moved by tankers⁶.



(c) **The Strait of Hormuz.** The Strait of Hormuz is a strait between the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf. It is the only sea passage from the Persian Gulf to the open ocean and is one of the world’s most strategically important choke points.

(d) **Mozambique Channel.** The Mozambique Channel is an arm of the Indian Ocean located between Madagascar and Mozambique.

(e) **Strait of Malacca.** The Strait of Malacca is a narrow stretch of water between the Peninsula and Sumatra, Indonesia.

(f) **Strait of Sunda.** The Sunda Strait connects the Java Sea to the Indian Ocean. However, since the Northern end is relatively shallow with hazardous currents, its usage is restricted and deep-draught ships do not normally prefer the Strait.

(g) **Strait of Lombok.** The Lombok Strait connects the Java Sea to the Indian Ocean, and runs between the Indonesian islands of Lombok and Bali. It is thus favored by large vessel over 100,000 DWT. Most ships transiting the Lombok Strait also pass through the Makassar Strait, which is more suited for submarines and large ships⁷.

From India's perspective it becomes imperative to contain Chinese influence in the IOR and ensure protection of both military and economic interests.

Modernization of PLA Navy

Historically, PLA Navy has not been a strong contemporary force. The PLA Navy has been stressing upon improving its capabilities for integrated offshore operations, strategic deterrence and strategic counterattacks⁸.

Three primary objectives are perceived to be behind the PLA Navy's modernization programme. The first can be attributed to the conflict potential within the Taiwan Strait. The second related issue may be the perception of an increased threat posed by the significant US naval presence in the Pacific Ocean. The third factor is the desirability to develop a 'blue water' fleet and secure its SLOCs, particularly those passing through the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.

The PLA Navy is pursuing a two-pronged programme, viz acquisition of advanced technology based strategic assets indigenous development and production of platforms and weapon systems. Amphibious warfare capabilities are also being augmented by way of significant equipment upgrades, including induction of new amphibious tanks, Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs) and the air cushion landing craft probably 'Zubr' class air cushion landing crafts (LCAC) from Russia.

The doctrine, tactics and procedures of the PLA Navy all emanate from a combined PLA's military strategy of "Active Defence". The "offshore Defence" strategy⁹ is the naval component of the "active Defence" strategic guidelines which directs the PLA Navy to "defend the country's maritime rights, interests and security, safeguard its economic development and serve its peaceful diplomacy¹⁰" by engaging in maritime operations in its off shore area.

Aero-Space Capabilities

China is investing heavily into developing her aerospace capabilities. By 2020 China can reasonably be expected to have the following aerospace capability¹¹:

a. More than 1,000 fourth generation multirole tactical aircraft and a start on

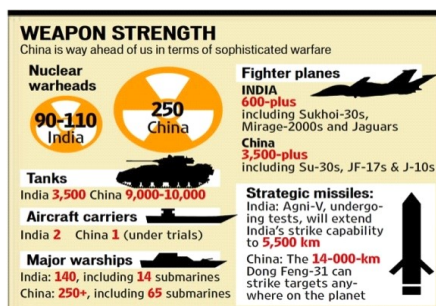
deploying two fifth generation tactical aircraft and a fully panoply of modern weapons, with increasingly long range, to go with them.

b. A modern IADS Integrated Air Defence System (IADS) covering the most important regions of China and extending to cover the Taiwan Strait and possibly much of Taiwan.

c. A large force of long-range precision-guided ballistic and cruise missiles, including a substantial force of antiballistic missiles and precision-guided ballistic missiles able to cover the seas around China and threaten Naval bases as far as 5000 Km away.



d. A significant (possibly major) anti-satellite capability and potentially a significant capacity for space warfare.



e. A manned space capability that will approach, if not surpass, the capabilities of the mature American Apollo system and quite possibly both manned and unmanned shuttles.

The Chinese have undertaken a comprehensive development program of aerospace. They are clearly pursuing methodical and rapid modernization of their air, air defence, missile, and space capabilities.

String of Pearls - Power Projection & Distrust

The String of Pearls is therefore a euphemism for strategic encirclement

through a network of Chinese facilities (military and commercial) and relationships along its sea-lanes of communication and will provide China with forward presence and military bases along the SLOCs from China to the Persian Gulf in the Middle East.

The First Pearl is generally considered to be the Hainan Island in South China, where a massive underground submarine and warship base has been built, because of its strategic location in the South China Sea¹². The Second Pearl is the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka. China is underwriting a US\$1.2 billion package for the facility. China's investment in this area will increase significantly as it apparently has interest in oil drilling in North East Sri Lanka. The Third Pearl is located at the Chittagong port in Bangladesh. The Gwadar port comes with a naval base and it is chosen because of its strategic value in the 240 Km distance from the Straits of Hormuz.

For both Pakistan and China, the Gwadar port offers a number of port key benefits. It is seen as having the potential of hedging against a potential Indian blockade of the port of Karachi, which currently handles 90% of Pakistani seaborne trade.

The emergence of the String of Pearls is indicative of China's growing geopolitical influence through concerted efforts to obtain access to ports and airfields, expand and modernize military forces, and foster stronger diplomatic relationships with trading partners¹³. The Indian Navy will have to factor in the presence of Chinese naval ships in the Indian backyard while planning operations, missions and exercises¹⁴.

ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS:

China's Perspective

As the fastest growing Asian country, China has specifically focused on economic development in the last three decades as the bedrock of its intrinsic national strength. This growth model is naturally energy intensive. China's oil demand has been growing at more than 5% over the last decade. In its December report, the IEA estimated Chinese oil demand at 10.19 million bpd in 2013, up 370,000 bpd from 2012¹⁵. The uninterrupted, safe and guaranteed supply of oil and gas has therefore become a serious issue for the Chinese leadership. President Hu Jintao, during a Central Party economic work committee meeting in 2003, reportedly raised Chinese energy security concerns by stating that more than 80% of Chinese imported oil has to pass through the Malacca Strait, and that China must actively adopt measures to ensure the security of its energy imports. This concern popularly came to be known as the "Malacca Strait Dilemma"¹⁶.

The safe transportation of energy from their sources in the Persian Gulf and

West Africa is therefore of the biggest concern to China. Though the incidents of piracy, robbery and maritime terrorism in South East Asian waters have been controlled to a large extent by the anti-piracy measures initiated by the littoral countries, the prospect of a rise in such incidents is always lurking.

The Chinese Navy's field activities now include its participation in the joint anti-piracy patrols off the coast of Somalia in 2011 and its ship to ship replenishment exercise in Eastern Indian Ocean in December 2013 as well as the 'counter-piracy, search, rescue and damage control drill', carried out in January 2014 by a three-ship Chinese navy squadron¹⁷. In the last mentioned, the largest amphibious Chinese landing ship – Changbaishan – along with two destroyers took part.. Chinese official view on the drill is to observe it as a part of 'annually held naval combat exercises in the South China Sea, the West Pacific Ocean and the East Indian Ocean to test the combat ability of naval ships¹⁸'.

Regional and Extra Regional Players

Three broad categories of countries are involved in the struggle for dominance in the Indian Ocean¹⁹. These are as follows:-

(a) **The Big Players:** These countries seek preponderance or influence across the entirety of the Indian Ocean. Possibly the U.S. India and China, have the resources and the will to compete at this level.

(b) **Regional players:** These countries seek influence mainly in the part of the Indian Ocean that is most relevant to their interests. They include South Korea, Japan, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Iran, Israel, Russia, South Africa and the United Kingdom.

(c) **Passive players:** These countries are not in a position to exert influence. Instead, they will be courted by the larger powers, as part of the latter's strategic reach. These states include Bangladesh, Djibouti, Madagascar, Maldives, Mauritius, Mozambique, Myanmar, Oman, the Seychelles, Somalia, Sri Lanka, and Yemen. Remote islands and overseas territories in the Indian Ocean could also become important²⁰.

India's Way Forward

Considering Chinese ambitions, India has to make a sagacious move to retain the traditional influence in Indian Ocean island states. The foremost task for Indian policy makers is to augment the economic and trade cooperation with these island states. China's trade with majority of these nations has increased manifold in recent years with only modest escalation in the same time frame by India²¹. India also has to necessarily shed the impression that all decision-making and follow-up action is hopelessly mired in bureaucracy.

There is requirement to enhance and coordinate economic and defiance cooperation among the IOR littorals through an active regional forum/ sub regional groupings or by rejuvenating the Indian Ocean Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC)²².

Strong bonds with the neglected East African countries are critically important. It is also imperative for India to develop an 'East Africa policy' if it has to have an enduring presence in island states of the Western Indian Ocean.

India needs to aggressively pursue a focused diplomatic campaign to counter Chinese influence in the IOR. Certain facets in these regards are as follows: -

(a) **Cashing on Anti-China Sentiments.** China is seen as the 'big brother' in the region, whereas India is viewed more benignly. The anti-China sentiment must be built upon and India can act as a conduit / anti- Chinese sentiments. It will be a befitting response to the perceived Chinese strategic encirclement of India ('*String of Pearls*').

(b) **Counter Diplomacy.** To counter Chinese inroads into Pakistan, India needs to cultivate relationships with nations that have strong anti-China views. Historically, China has not enjoyed good relations with Japan, Vietnam and South Korea. India could exploit its strengths to build closer ties with these countries, which in turn would also benefit India.

(c) **Indo-US Ties.** Given its naval strength, only the U.S. has the capacity to contain or even confront China in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, should there be an occasion. Therefore, India needs to leverage its unique geographical position and economic status to forge a nuanced relationship with the U.S.

(d) **India's relation with ASEAN.** Indian interests in South East Asia are critical for its need for resources and energy security. India needs to keep closer ties with ASEAN countries to counter balance Chinese advances. South East Asia starts from India's North East. Its development would incrementally help India in improving its ties with South East Asia. The Look East Policy (LEP) needs to be pursued even more vigorously now.

(e) **Andaman & Nicobar Islands.** Keeping its strategic importance in view, India should plan on development of A & N Islands into a container trans-shipment port as the distance to International Shipping Lines is least compared to any other port in India.

India needs to build up adequate military capabilities to deter the threat from China. India's growing military muscle in region in terms of creating infrastructure and capabilities, joint exercises and training is a step towards creating a balance. Following points may be considered: -

- (a) **Domination of Choke Points**. India should dominate choke points viz Malacca, Sunda, Lombok etc. It should develop surveillance and intelligence capabilities and position nuclear submarines suitably to be able to react in a shorter time frame.
- (b) **Capability Building**. Greater focus and commitment is needed for development of infrastructure in the border areas and acquisition of various wars fighting equipment's. In this regard capital acquisition process be simplified and there should be prompt decision making in addition to suitable increase in the capital defence budget.
- (c) **Defence Cooperation**. We need to collaborate with foreign nations in terms of maritime reconnaissance and conduct of joint exercises in the IOR to send visible signals to the environment regarding our capabilities and intentions.
- (d) **Sea Power**. Focused approach for infrastructure development in terms of building/ acquisition of aircraft carriers, maritime reconnaissance capabilities and space based surveillance and communication, is required to be able to monitor and deter China from any misadventure.
- (e) **C4ISR Capabilities**. We need C4ISR capabilities at the national level to have more coordinated and synergetic response to any adverse situation.
- (f) **Enhancing Cyber Warfare Capabilities**. Our Cyber Warfare capability needs to be enhanced to protect our networks and systems.
- (g) **Coast Guard for Coastal Security**. We need to enhance the capabilities of the Coast Guard for the coastal security so that Navy can be suitably equipped and trained for the blue water mandate.
- (h) **Guard against Chinese Capabilities**. The Chinese follow Sun Tzu's philosophy; hence we need to monitor their capabilities and not be guided by their intentions, which can change any time. We need to train and collaborate accordingly.
- (j) **Monitoring platforms** We need to have listening stations on A&N islands and also ship based ocean-going platforms for obtaining signal intelligence of activities in the IOR.

Conclusion

History is littered with conflicts, explained as the inevitable clash between nations amid a change in the balance of power. In fact, it is rare that conflict does not occur as a result of power shifts. If forecasts are correct, China is soon to enter another revolutionary phase of her development, which will affect international relations.

At the heart of this transformation is the plan to urbanize some 400 million Chinese people by 2030²³. The demand upon resources to support the infrastructure required

to host the number of people in cities will dwarf current demands. It is estimated that energy consumption alone in a city is three and a half times that of rural habitation. This will place significant stress upon China's scarce resources, the global environment and make the security of energy from the Middle East and Africa of the utmost sovereign importance. It also helps to explain the voracious nature with which Chinese global energy and resource acquisition is being pursued and protected, as far as maritime security in the Indian Ocean is concerned.

The challenge for India is to create the necessary balance of power in its geo-strategic environment in order to concentrate on economic, technological and military matters indispensable to its emergence as a true great power.

Though China has many competitive edges, India too has significant edges especially in terms of her geographical location, world image and potential for strategic partnerships as well as demographic dividend that can be made use of to overcome the Chinese challenge. Conversely, China's disadvantage needs to be leveraged by India along with like-minded countries.

References

- . Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe, *Why the Indian Ocean Matters*, The Diplomat, **02 Mar 2011**
- . Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe, *Why the Indian Ocean Matters*, The Diplomat, **02 Mar 2011**
- . Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe, *Why the Indian Ocean Matters*, The Diplomat, **02 Mar 2011**
- . Matt Rosenberg, "Chokepoints", <http://geography.about.com/library/weekly/aa052597.htm>
- . Article 1 of the Constantinople Convention of the Suez Canal.
- . [World Oil Transit Chokepoints](#), Energy Information Administration, US Department of Energy.
- . Gus Lubin, "A Brief Tour Of The 7 Oil Chokepoints That Are Crucial To The World Economy", Business Insider, **05 Feb 2011**.
- . China White Paper on National Defense **2008**, <http://www.informationdissemination.net/2009/01/china-white-paper-on-national-defense.html> accessed on **21 Feb 2014**
- . See "Chinese Navy to Stick to Defensive Strategy" *Xinhua*, April 23, 2009, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-04/23/content_11239423.htm

- http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-04/23/content_11239423.htm ibid
- . Lt Col Thomas R McCabe, USAFA (Retd), "China's Air and Space Revolution, Michel Paper 10, Michel Institute Press", **Apr 2013**
- . Paal, Douglas H, "Beware the South China Sea", [The Diplomat](#), **15 July 2011**.
- . Wikipedia, ibid
- . Cdr KK Agnihotri, "Chinese Quest for a Naval Base in the Indian Ocean – Possible Options for China", Maritime Affairs, National Maritime Foundation, **08 Feb 2010**.
- . <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/01/20/china-oil-demand-idUKL3N0KQ2ZW20140120>, UPDATE 3-China's **2013** oil demand sees slowest rise in at least 22 years
- . See You Ji, "Dealing with the Malacca Dilemma: China's Effort to Protect its Energy Supply", *Strategic Analysis*, **31 no. 3, p. 468**.
- . D. S. Rajan, The Unfolding China's Indian Ocean Strategy, Paper No.5646, South Asia Analysis Group, **12 Feb 2014**
- . D.S. Rajan, ibid
- . <http://usnwc.libguides.com/content.php?pid=129699&sid=1112676>, accessed on **22 Feb 2014**
- . See Business Monitor International, 10 Mar 2010. <http://usnwc.libguides.com/content.php?pid=129699&sid=1112676>
- . Amit Kumar, "China's Island Strategy in the Indian Ocean: Breaching India's Sphere of Influence", http://www.observerindia.com/cms/sites/orfonline/modules/analysis/attachments/influence_1253251335478.pdf
- . Amit Kumar, ibid.
- . Jamie Hatcher, "China's Growing Indian Ocean Maritime Interests: Sowing the Seeds of Conflict?" *Sea Power Center*, Australia, **October 13, No 2**.