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CHINA'S NEW INDIAN OCEAN STRATEGY AND POSSIBLE INDIAN NAVY RESPONSES

Lt Cdr Rindu Babu

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Exercise Solo Flight

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Lt Cdr Rindu Babu

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INTRODUCTION

The Chinese naval foray into Indian Ocean Region in the form of increased Submarine presence, surface ships and research vessels have triggered several warnings and has raised many questions among Indian security experts¹. Whilst it can be argued that the increased naval presence is a natural byproduct of a rising national power, expanding its military operations to match its interests abroad, these activities pose a direct threat to India's dominance in the Indian Ocean Region. Given, the presence of Chinese Naval assets in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is going to be new normal in future, it will be in India's interests to maintain status quo in the security situation while monitoring Chinese activities closely and not let it escalate. This paper examines China's new maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean and possible options available to India/ Indian Navy to counter the growing Chinese presence in Indian Ocean Region.

India can successfully manage Chinese expansion into Indian Ocean by non-polarizing Indian Ocean Region (IOR), enhanced regional co-operation with littoral states through Naval Diplomacy and by projecting *Indian Navy (IN)* as the 'net security provider' of the region. A strong Navy with wide range of capabilities is absolutely critical in defending India's interests in IOR. At the same time, India needs to constructively engage with China, in security co-operations and maintain a rule based security environment whilst addressing China's security concerns about Sea lanes of Communication (SLOCs) passing through Indian Ocean.

¹Zack Cooper, "Security Implications of China's Military Presence in the Indian Ocean", Centre for International Studies and Strategic Briefs, March 2018

CHINA'S INDIAN OCEAN STRATEGY

China's primary strategic imperative in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is the protection of its SLOCs. China, the largest Crude Oil importer² needs uninterrupted Oil supply for its sustained economic development without which its economy would literally shut down. The growing energy dependence of the country is predicted to double by 2030. The bulk of China's oil supplies from Africa and Middle East, which constitute more than 82% of their energy needs are shipped through Indian Ocean which are vulnerable to interdiction by potential rivals³. This perceived vulnerability is one of the reasons for Chinese Naval expansion in recent years⁴. Apart from Oil, a major share of Chinese trade shipments also pass through these waters of Indian Ocean. China's security interest in the IOR is now leading to a greater naval presence in the region.

After consolidating its dominance in South China Sea, China is looking to widen its footprint westwards in Indian Ocean Region in accordance with its new updated 2015 defense strategy 'Frontier Defense'⁵. As per the new strategy, China has revealed its intentions to protect the critical supply routes of IOR by forward naval presence and long range power projection. The latest defense strategy is particularly important as it departs from its traditional strategy of Army based homeland defense to a broad based Maritime defense on the Pacific as well as Indian Ocean fronts which are evident from 2015 White paper on China's Military strategy:

“The seas and oceans bear on the enduring peace, lasting stability and sustainable development of China. The traditional mentality that land outweighs the sea must

² Russell Clyde, “China crude oil import data show winners and losers from rebalancing”, Reuters, 02 Oct 2017.

³ Buszynski Leszek, “Emerging Naval Rivalry in East Asia and the Indian Ocean: Implications for Australia”, Australian Defense College, Security Challenges Vol 5 No.3 2009, page 73.

⁴ Col Sanjive Sokinda, “India's Strategy for countering China's increased influence in the Indian Ocean”, Australian Defense college, Oct 2015.

⁵ Li You, “China's emerging Indo Pacific Naval strategy”, Asia Policy July 2016.

be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests. It is necessary for China to develop a modern maritime military force...for building itself into a maritime power. The traditional mentality that land outweighs the sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests.”⁶

Chinese naval ships, submarines and research vessels have been increasingly deployed in the Indian Ocean in the pretext of anti-piracy operations and oceanographic research. It is estimated that at least fourteen Chinese ships and two submarines are deployed in IOR at any given time. Interestingly, China justifies the submarine deployments, to be in support of anti-piracy operations, while submarines are known to have no role to counter piracy⁷. The Chinese move towards IOR would essentially require creation of supporting infrastructures and logistics bases to sustain their operations.

During the last decade, China has actively leveraged its economic diplomacy to establish numerous ports and basing facilities across the Indian Ocean states such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Maldives, Bangladesh and Pakistan, which are often referred to as ‘String of Pearls’ due to their geographical locations encircling India. These bases which were opened under the aegis of ‘Belt and Road Initiative’⁸ project serves dual purposes of trade as well as supporting forward

⁶ Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), “China’s Military Strategy” (Beijing, May 2015) u http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/26/content_20820628.html

⁷ “Odd that China has submarines in Indian Ocean for anti-piracy ops: Navy chief”, Hindustan Times, 01 Dec 2017.

⁸ The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a development strategy proposed by the Chinese government that focuses on connectivity and cooperation between Eurasian countries, primarily the People's Republic of China (PRC), the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the ocean-going Maritime Silk Road (MSR). (Wikipedia)

presence and power projection⁹. The flag will always follow trade and infrastructure. The likelihood of these logistical bases being converted into full fledged military bases in future cannot be undermined as was the case in South China Sea's artificial islands. In 2010, China sent a hospital ship on overseas deployment starting at Djibouti and ending at Chittagong, Bangladesh and providing medical services to local countries enroute and thus spreading soft power¹⁰. In 2014, a Chinese submarine docked at Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital, setting off alarms about China's expanding military footprint. Following strong protests from India, Sri Lanka rejected China's request to dock one of its submarines in Colombo in early 2017¹¹. Recently, the Hambantota Port developed by China in Sri Lanka which was purely for commercial purposes, to be run jointly by both countries has been completely taken over by China, as it was becoming unprofitable for Sri Lanka to pay off the debts¹². Unlike Colombo, where Sri Lanka's navy is headquartered, Hambantota is more isolated and could offer Chinese vessels greater independence. It needs to be seen how long Sri Lanka can keep the Chinese dragon away from developing a military base at Hambantota.

Although China does not consider India as a major threat in India Ocean, the increasing Indo-US strategic defense cooperation is becoming an important factor in their Indian Ocean strategy¹³. China feels threatened by a US-backed naval blockade by Indian Navy in the Indian Ocean Region in case of any conflict with the US. The Chinese Navy has opened its first overseas military base at Djibouti, where 10,000 troops will be deployed in due course of time.

⁹ Scott David, "Chinese Maritime Strategy for the Indian Ocean, Center for International Maritime Security", 28 Nov 2017.

¹⁰ Izuyama Mari, "Security in the Indian Ocean Region: Regional response to China's growing Influence", East Asian Strategic Review 2017.

¹¹ Shihar Aneez and Ranga Sirilal, "Sri Lanka rejects Chinese request for submarine visit", Reuters, 11 May 2011.

¹² Panda Ankit, "Sri Lanka Formally Hands Over Hambantota Port to Chinese Firms on 99-Year Lease", The Diplomat, 11 Dec 2017.

¹³ Brewster David, "India and China: A contest of Status and Legitimacy in the Indian Ocean", Asia Policy July 2016.

The base reportedly will enable China to better support its patrols in waters off Somalia and Yemen and carry out its international humanitarian obligations¹⁴. However, this is seen as a strong Chinese foothold in the Indian Ocean region supporting its Blue Water Operations far away from home waters and closer to US bases in the region, undermining US dominance. The ripple effects are already visible as the US recently alleged that two C-130 pilots were injured by a high-grade laser attack from the Chinese base in Djibouti¹⁵.

INDIAN PERCEPTION OF CHINESE MARITIME ACTIVITIES IN IOR

India considers itself to be the natural regional power among the Indian Ocean states due to its size and geographical location and perceives, the presence of extra-regional naval powers especially China as illegitimate¹⁶. The increased Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean and nuclear submarine forays right up to northern Arabian sea poses a direct security threat to Indian sovereignty. Apart from this, the bitter history of strained relations with China and its increasing proximity to Pakistan in economic and military cooperation is forcing India to take a cynical view on the Chinese Naval Operations in IOR. China has built a port in Gwadar, Pakistan and has engaged in modernizing Pakistan's maritime defense capabilities which have further threatened India's interests in the region. The mistrust on China's intentions has worsened over the last few years with 83% of Indian Security experts seeing China as a threat¹⁷. Due to excessive security concerns, India holds a negative attitude towards Chinese initiatives such as 'Belt and Road initiative' and has not committed to join any of these projects despite a strong push from China.

¹⁴ Reuters, "China formally opens first overseas military base in Djibouti", 01 Aug 2017

¹⁵ Reuters, "US complains to China after laser incidents in Djibouti", 03 May 2018.

¹⁶ Brewster David, "India and China: A contest of Status and Legitimacy in the Indian Ocean", Asia Policy July 2016.

¹⁷ Medcalf Rory, "The Western Indo-Pacific: India, China, and the Terms of Engagement", Asia Policy, July 2016.

Like China, India also has major economic and diplomatic interests in the Indian Ocean. Majority of India's energy needs and sea trade which are two key drivers of economic growth is served through the Indian Ocean. India is greatly concerned about PLAN's counter-piracy operations which it believes could possibly be a pretext to gain strategic 'toe-hold'. These concerns proved correct when PLA (Navy) started deploying nuclear submarines for anti-piracy operations, a grossly disproportional and out of place strategy¹⁸. The growing insecurities have prompted India for closer security cooperation with countries which share same concerns about China such as USA, Australia, Japan and Singapore.

India has historically maintained a good relationship with Indian Ocean littoral states like Maldives, Mauritius, Sri Lanka and Seychelles. However, recent reports indicate China has already established strong economic and strategic ties with Maldives and Sri Lanka with an objective to dilute India's role and influence over those states¹⁹. The Chinese influence is further eroding India's role as the security and stability provider of the region. Recently, Maldives threatened to return two rotary-wing aircraft provided by India on gratis, which is widely believed to be under the influence of China²⁰.

COMPARISON OF NAVAL STRENGTH

The Chinese Navy is nearly four times bigger than Indian Navy and the gap is only going to increase in near future with their massive naval expansion plan. China has superiority in surface ships, naval aircraft and submarines. The only area where they lagged behind India was in developing aircraft carriers. However, with their current carrier building program, China is

¹⁸ Izuyama Mari, "Security in the Indian Ocean Region: Regional response to China's growing Influence", East Asian Strategic Review 2017.

¹⁹ Jain BM, "India's Security Concerns in the Indian Ocean Region: A Critical Analysis", Future directions International, 04 Apr 2017.

²⁰ FirstPost, "Maldives returns helicopter gifted by India: A look at how ties between the two nations have deteriorated in 2018", 04 Apr 2018.

expected to field six carriers surpassing India by a huge margin²¹. Although the numbers are in China's favor, geographically India has a huge advantage in Indian Ocean Region. While Chinese vessels have to pass through a number of choke points to access the Indian Ocean and rely on limited and uncertain logistical support, India has easy and free access to the region with the availability of a huge number of support bases in the region. The Chinese Navy has a big disadvantage in the air dimension, due to lack of ship-based air cover, and the distance involved in land-based maritime reconnaissance capability²². However, with the planned induction of six aircraft carriers, China is expected to close this capability gap in near future.

OPTIONS FOR INDIA TO COUNTER CHINESE EXPANSION IN IOR

Despite the challenges posed by China, India should not resort to narrow policy responses aimed at excluding China from the Indian Ocean or obstructing its interests in IOR as it would be highly unsustainable. India faces a huge disparity in terms of resources, but is well compensated by the geographical advantage in the Indian Ocean. The best tool available to implement India's national interests in the Indian Ocean is the *Indian Navy*. The realization that China might eclipse India in its own backyard has prompted India to take many positive steps in the last few years, to counter Chinese influence²³.

India needs to build strong naval power projection capability in the Indian Ocean Region. India's current ship building program aims to achieve a fleet of 160 ships by 2022²⁴. With this fleet, the IN should be able to dominate the challenges posed by the Chinese Fleet in IOR in the near future. More than mere numerical addition, the Indian Navy should concentrate on

²¹ Ronald O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress", Congressional Research Service, 25 April 2018.

²² Parmar SS, "Is China a threat to the Indian Navy or does India has the advantage by being able to control China's sea lines of communication?", Institute for Defence studies and analyses, India,

²³ Abhijit Singh, "India Strategic Imperatives in the Asian Commons", Asia Policy, July 2016

²⁴ Holmes James, "Indian Naval strategy in the twenty-first century".Routledge, 2009, P83-99.

acquiring high-end technologies and weaponry to enhance operational effectiveness. Smart and precision weapons are required to give teeth to Indian Naval power projection capability. With close cooperation with the US and other like-minded nations, IN should invest in developing a credible anti-submarine capability, especially Air-ASW capability. This would ensure credible deterrence to the Chinese submarines foraging into IOR. The nuclear submarine and the aircraft carrier building programs will give Indian Navy a huge boost in the near future albeit it cannot match the numerical advantage of PLA Navy.

To maintain a strategic advantage over China, India needs to strengthen its surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities and develop a strong network of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) in the Indian Ocean, especially near the choke points. With the recent acquisition P-8I Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) for long range anti Submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare and Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) operations, the Indian Navy has extended its reach several thousand kilometers into sea²⁵. However, with a limited number of P8Is and underdeveloped military facilities in Andaman Nicobar Islands continuous surveillance of IOR is still not feasible. The opening of new Naval Air Base, Indian Naval Ship Baaz in the strategic Island of Nicobar is a positive step towards enhancing surveillance capabilities near major Choke points of IOR. India should also consider the establishment of fixed underwater submarine detection systems near the Choke points of Bay of Bengal as deterrence against movement of submarines into Indian Ocean Region. Japan has reportedly offered assistance to set up underwater detection systems south of Andaman and Nicobar Islands²⁶. India has also taken initial steps for possible collaboration with the United States for Maritime domain information sharing to track and monitor the movement of Chinese vessels in the Indian Ocean. Tracking and

²⁵ Baruah Darshana M, “Expanding India’s Maritime Domain Awareness in the Indian Ocean”, Asia Policy, July 2016.

²⁶ Abhijit Singh, “India Strategic Imperatives in the Asian Commons”, Asia Policy, June 2016.

monitoring all Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean by India will put China on back foot whilst providing transparency for effective decision making.

India has increased its naval presence in IOR with over 15 ships patrolling various choke points at any given time²⁷. The Indian Navy Chief, Admiral Sunil Lanba, stressed on the importance of 'mission-based deployment' involving ships, aircraft and submarines beyond the immediate neighborhood for providing sustained presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) during a Naval Conference in 2017²⁸. Indian Navy should also consider strengthening Andaman and Nicobar Command which are closer to major choke points in IOR, by shifting an increased number of ships and surveillance aircraft to these Islands. More focus is required to develop the smaller naval detachments in Andaman and Nicobar group of islands into formidable maritime hubs for sustained naval operations. This will help to achieve more transparency over Chinese activities in IOR.

Enhanced regional cooperation and naval diplomacy must be implemented to gain a firm foothold in the littoral states of Indian Ocean. It is very important to maintain constant security ties and engagements with the littoral IOR states like Mauritius, Maldives Seychelles and Sri Lanka to avoid a possible scenario of a security vacuum and allow China to fill this vacuum. China has promised millions of dollars in developmental assistance to these countries which India can hardly match²⁹. However, India can still stay relevant by constant security engagements and projecting Indian Navy as the Net security provider in the region. The 2015 Maritime Security Strategy doctrine published by Indian Navy positioned "Net Security" as the core of the strategy for shaping a favorable maritime environment in the IOR³⁰. In becoming a

²⁷ Straitstimes, "India increases its presence in the Indian Ocean, with an eye on China", 08 Nov 2017.

²⁸ The Pioneer, "Navy to Increase Indian Ocean Presence to Counter China", 28 Oct 2017.

²⁹ Raja Menon, "India's response to China's Naval Presence in the Indian Ocean", Asia Policy, July 2016.

³⁰ "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy", Indian Navy Maritime Security Strategy,

net security provider, Indian Navy must be careful not to become a Maritime policeman of the region but instead concentrate on key aspects such as presence and rapid response, maritime engagement, capacity building and capability enhancement, developing regional MDA, Maritime security operations, EEZ surveillance and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)/ Non – Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO). The trilateral Naval agreement between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives and partial integration of Maritime Surveillance systems in 2014 helped Indian Navy to keep these countries closer its fold and at the same time improved the surveillance capabilities in the region³¹. India has been expanding its naval aid and assistance to smaller Indian Ocean island states—including sending a high-end patrol vessel to Mauritius in February 2014 and two advanced light helicopters to Maldives. In 2015, India also signed agreements to develop infrastructure on remote islands in both Mauritius (Agaléga) and Seychelles (Assumption), which would, among other things, enhance the capabilities of the regional defense forces³². In 2014, India resolved the long-pending maritime border dispute with Bangladesh and sought a historic improvement in the relations³³. These efforts need to be sustained to build a cohesive regional support and not allow external powers to create a divide in the region.

India must be very careful in not polarizing the Indian Ocean Region in the global power struggle between USA and China. According to ShivShankar Menon, the former National Security Advisor of India, for India, "the danger is that we must not be drawn into choosing sides or becoming a pawn of either side in their game." In his opinion, India would have to deal with China independently and that the United States should not be trusted as a source of geopolitical

October 2015.

³¹ Rajeev Sharma, "Counter-terrorism, piracy high on radars of India, Sri Lanka, Maldives", First Post, 09 Mar 2014.

³² Abhijit Singh, "India Strategic Imperatives in the Asian Commons", Asia Policy, July 2016.

³³ Raja Mohan, "Beyond the Boundary: Modi's new Agenda in Bangladesh", Indian Express, 08 May 2015.

balance³⁴. At the same time India should also take initiatives in building security cooperation with a range of Indian Ocean going powers such as United States, Japan, France, Australia, Singapore and Indonesia. Indian Navy carries out a number of bilateral exercises with these countries in the IOR and has done away with major multilateral exercises to maintain clear balance between cooperation and non polarizing IOR. This approach provides adequate hedging against Chinese threat without deteriorating the security situation in the region.

Amid all the partnership building, engagement directly with China should not be neglected. Given the overall naval capabilities of China exceed India's both in terms of quality and quantity, it would be in best interest of Indian Navy to engage in bilateral maritime security dialogue to develop elements of cooperation to find a convergence of interests in the maritime sphere. According to ShivShankar Menon, the Indian Navy has to engage in a Sino-Indian maritime dialogue to develop a "rule-based open, inclusive, balanced and flexible security architecture that is desirable for Asia-Pacific region"³⁵. With the increased interaction between the forces at sea, these dialogues would offer a protocol for avoiding incidents at sea especially with the submarines. These engagements should be aimed at reducing Chinese insecurities in IOR, and could also include friendly port visits and refueling and replenishments visits for Chinese ships operating in IOR for anti Piracy operations or any other constabulary operations.

CONCLUSION

China's expansion in the Indian Ocean and its new maritime strategy has generated a lot of attention in the recent years. India and China depend heavily on SLOCs of Indian Ocean for

³⁴ Shivshankar Menon, "India's National Security" (presentation, Ananta Aspen Centre, New Delhi, 05 March, 2014).

³⁵ Chaudhuri Pramit Pal, "New Delhi at Sea: The China Factor in the Indian Ocean Policy of the Modi and Singh Governments", Asia Policy July 2016.

energy and trade security and for sustained economic development. The geostrategic encirclement of India, through a combination of 'String of pearl' ports in the Indian Ocean and alliance with Pakistan, creates a security dilemma for India. Although China exceedingly outnumbered India in military power, India enjoys dominance in Indian Ocean Region due to its geographical advantage.

India needs to take proactive steps to contain Chinese expansion in the Indian Ocean. Indian Navy is the best tool in the current scenario to safeguard Indian interests in IOR. Increase in Naval budget and modernization of Navy to equip it to be ready for modern day war is the first step. India needs to constructively engage with China in bilateral arrangements aimed at jointly securing the Indian Ocean SLOCs, as any maritime confrontation would not be in best interest of both countries. India also needs to engage with other major Ocean going powers in the region such as USA, Japan, Australia and Singapore in security cooperation whilst at the same time take extra care of not Polarizing Indian Ocean. Indian Navy could be projected as the Net Security provider in the region accommodating interests of all stakeholders in the process and also addressing the security concerns of China. Regional cooperation and Naval diplomacy with littoral states of IOR help in cementing the legitimacy of India's operations in the IOR. India can effectively counter the Chinese expansion policy in IOR by careful planning and forethought as the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean has neither become destabilizingly defensive nor dangerously dominant.

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