

China's maritime strategy & India's security dilemma

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ABSTRACT

The Indian ocean Region or if talked in a holistic way, the Indo-pacific region has now emerged as a new theatre of major power rivalry due to in the post-card man era : due to its significant and untapped resources which naturally seeks the Global attention. The People's Republic of China has emerged as one of the significant power in the 21st century bath strategically as well as economically. Beijing is now trying to assent its power in the IOR.

While China has very candidly assented that its growing activity in the IOR is in order to protect its national security interests, her activities in the region is seemed as a threat to the New Delhi. This article discussed the recent Chinese activities in IOR in order to promote & protect its national interest and energy security and the counter with the security dilemma.

1. Introduction

China's hectic maritime manoeuvring and disconcerting strategic manipulations in the Indian Ocean is causing grave security threat to India's commercial marine and vulnerable naval interest especially in the ecologically rich, Bay of Bengal islands like Andaman & Nicobar. In the wake of the recent developments involving Chinas growing surveillance of the Indian ocean region which has been substantiated by the reported presence of a tender submarine belonging to the PLAN in vicinity of Nicobar Island. This submarine was detected by the recently established Andaman & Nicobar Command, which are a tangible and an ostensible clue of the consolidated presence of the Chinese Naval fleet across the Indian Ocean region.

To offset the Chinese move to encircle India, India & Japan have agreed to come to the negotiating table for upgrading civil infrastructure in the Andaman & Nicobar island located in the close vicinity of strategically important Indian Archipelago and the submission of a Japanese proposal to build a 15 MW Diesel Power plant on south Andaman Island is now a right step in the right earnest.

Beijing's (PLAN) has nevertheless denied the alleged accusation of the Indian defence minister that China is furtively trying to establish its Naval supremacy in the Asia pacific region and has reiterated its adherence to the principle of peaceful coexistence and policy of mutual respect for national sovereignty. On the contrary it is much more evident that its growing activity in Indian Ocean is motivated by its hidden desire to establish a new regional geomorphic and demographic equation in the entire Asia-Pacific region including Tibet, Burma, Philippines and Malaccan Peninsula which smacks of Chinese hegemony. Though China's communist regime vehemently endorses China's peaceful resurgence, but the evolving of a strategic network of naval outpost and expansion of its naval prowess which is marked by its ever increasing offshore defence fire power & offensive strike capabilities which will transform Chinese Navy with the distinction of second largest Naval fleet by 2030. The People 's Republic of China's new

military doctrine focuses its venture to modernise its armed forces and acquisition of advanced operational preparedness.

Its modernisation plan in the sharp & vigilant eyes of the PLAN includes acquisition of new & more sophisticated submarines, air carriers, frigates and destroyers which has culminated into an envious figure of 415 warships in 15 yrs.

The most imperative priority for Beijing is the protection of its SLOC's (Sea line of communication) as nearly 50% of China's oil imports transits from the straits of Hormuz while 87% of its oil import is transited from Malacca strait in South East Asia.

China since 2012 has been relentlessly trying to expand its maritime power in order to safeguard its strategic & economic interests under the leadership of former President Hu Jin Tao which was followed equally by President Xi Jinping who launched the Maritime Silk Road Initiative encompassing a wider integration level between China, Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region.

While China tries to project Chinese foray in the Indian Ocean region & South East Asia as a purely commercial venture, but India's defence analysts and think tanks believe that China's venture some tactics such as expansion of its strategic out posts could be employed to militarise the region to mitigate/thwart the risk of any substantial disruption of its supply lines in South East Asia or in the Indian Ocean region. But this may lead to creation of regional imbalance of power in the foreseeable future.

2. Security Apprehensions for India

The growing proliferation of Chinese military bases and Naval fleet in the Indian Ocean could lead to spurt in the level of non-challenge and animosity between India and China which may lead to militarisation of the Area especially South East Asia region in Indian ocean.

Lately Beijings blatant move to forge closer friendly relations with littoral countries like Maldives, mauritius, Madagascar,

Srilanka etc. endorses strongly about Chinese non-too non-sense policy of rewriting the power equation in the geographically and commercially vital Indian ocean region. It has in no uncertain terms underscored China’s attempt to expand its naval presence and consolidate the navigational strength and cementing its diplomatic relations with non-too significant countries that are ready to provide bases & support, which is vital to enhance the level of protection of critical SLOC’s. New Delhi in order to neutralise the aggressive presence of the PLAN in the region has allocated massive funds for expansion of its Naval forces and upgrading its capabilities upto 200 ships which includes six indigenously built nuclear powered submarine, Ins Arihant by 2027.

On the other hand India has adopted a prudent stance by maintaining a cordial relationship with Washington which may prove a close & reliable ally to India and a formidable enemy for China.

3. China’s Power Projection in the Western Indian Ocean

The People’s Liberation Army Navy’s (PLAN) together with Indian Navy participated in an operation to free the Tuvalu-flagged OS 35 bulk carrier in the Gulf of Aden which was part of a anti piracy operation of Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) 24th task force. In the recent past China has shown a marked increase in its naval presence & activity both covertly & overtly which has exalted India’s concern about potential military encirclement tactics of PLAN to Scuttle India’s maritime advancement & interests both from military and commercial point of view.

As a matter of fact both India and China maintain a much stronger Naval presence in the Indian Ocean but the balance is now tilting towards China.

Chinese President Xi Jinping inaugurated in 2013 the strategic – “One belt, one Road” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” programme that encompasses from the South China Sea across the Indian Ocean to the Eastern Mediterranean.

This gives clear warning signal to both India & U.S. regarding China Naval aspirations and its expansionist and colonial outlook.

These two initiatives will no doubt help china to proliferate and augment its economic and maritime interests and strengthen its navigational capability. Interestingly Chinas 2015 military strategy white paper clearly outlines that PLAN has chalked an ambitious project to protect its maritime routes and communication links with a clear cut motive to establish China as a maritime super power. The white paper in no uncertain terms has reiterated China’s commitment to participate in anti-piracy Escort missions in the Gulf of Aden and gradually intensify its role in International peace keeping force and drive.

4. China’s Naval Expansion in the Western Indian Ocean

Chinese ambition to become a military superpower transcends the continental boundary which became evidently clear when PLAN made its first visit to the Western Indian Ocean in 2000 AD with part anchoring in Tanzania & South Africa in 2002, the PLAN undertook a round the world cruise with two ships passing through the Suez Canal including a port halt at Alexandria, Egypt. After a 8 years lull, the PLAN again came in anti piracy campaign in Gulf of Aden and since then 25 PLAN task force comprising usually of 2 combat ships have patrolled regularly in the Gulf of Aden. Those ships have made more than 60 port calls to Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, India, Kenya Kuwait, Morocco, Mozambique, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, etc.



Fig.1: MSR (String of Pearls) and PLAN expansion in IOR

Though the initial goal of PLAN task force was to provide protection to Chinese shipping from sporadic attacks by the pirates in the Gulf region but now its main objective is to

safeguard Chinese security interests in the Gulf region and to provide active naval support to its commercial liners.

In 2014, China deployed for the first time a submarine with an anti piracy task force and subsequently a nuclear powered submarine to the Gulf of Aden operation. China in 2016 started constructing a permanent logistical facility in Djibouti for the purpose of providing tactical & logistic support to its anti piracy task force although majority of Anti Chinese observers view (including Commander of U.S. African Command) this facility in Djibouti as a military base. In its long term strategic plan, in the garb of 'Maritime Detente' policy China plans to deploy about 20,000 to 1,00,000 marine corps to protect its maritime interests and to harness its commercial exploits (marine wealth).

Admiral Harry Harris Jr. Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command warned that China's only aircraft carrier – the Liaoning which has so far been venturing in South China Sea may enter the Indian Ocean. Although it is short of top operating capacity unlike those of U.S. Aircraft Carriers.

Harris has boosted Indian Defence analysts morale as he has admitted that Indian Navy's expertise in operating Aircraft Carriers is superior than that of PLAN.

China is pursuing or rather sceptical commercial ports construction drive along the rim of Indian ocean in Myanmar, Pakistan, Srilanka, Djibouti and Tanzania which gives rise to fears and apprehension about Chinas ultimate objectives which may crystallise in the way of converting these commercial ports as Military bases.

Though China has very often denied the allegations of perpetuating Chinese hegemony in Indian ocean through relentless expansion of its Naval fleet, logistic support to its

commercial lines and increasing vigilance and surveillance activity in west pacific and Indian Ocean but, the huge investment of 186 million dollars made by state owned COSCO, China's largest shipping company to operate and manage the Suez Canal container terminal at port Saed and the subsequent investment of 219 million dollar to construct a quay there and another 1 billion dollars & to build a key at At-Adabiya at the Southern Entrance to the Canal are clear indications about Chinese intentions.

The obvious objective behind such huge investment is to secure reliable access for Chinese Commercial liners from the Indian Ocean and Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea.

Signing of a 15 year contract with the International Sea bed Authority to prospect for seabed polymetallic sulphide in a 10,000 sq. kilometre zone just south of Madagascar confirms China's growing desire to become a global super power both in terms of gaining commercial and strategic stranglehold on major trade routes and oceanic zones.

In the light of prevailing scenario in the Southern Pacific and Indian Ocean region, it is high time India should chalk out a long term strategy to tackle the Chinese onslaught which it can do by forging closer diplomatic and military ties with his close and trusted friendly nations like U.S., Russia, France and alike and supplementing its logistic and tactical support also.

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