

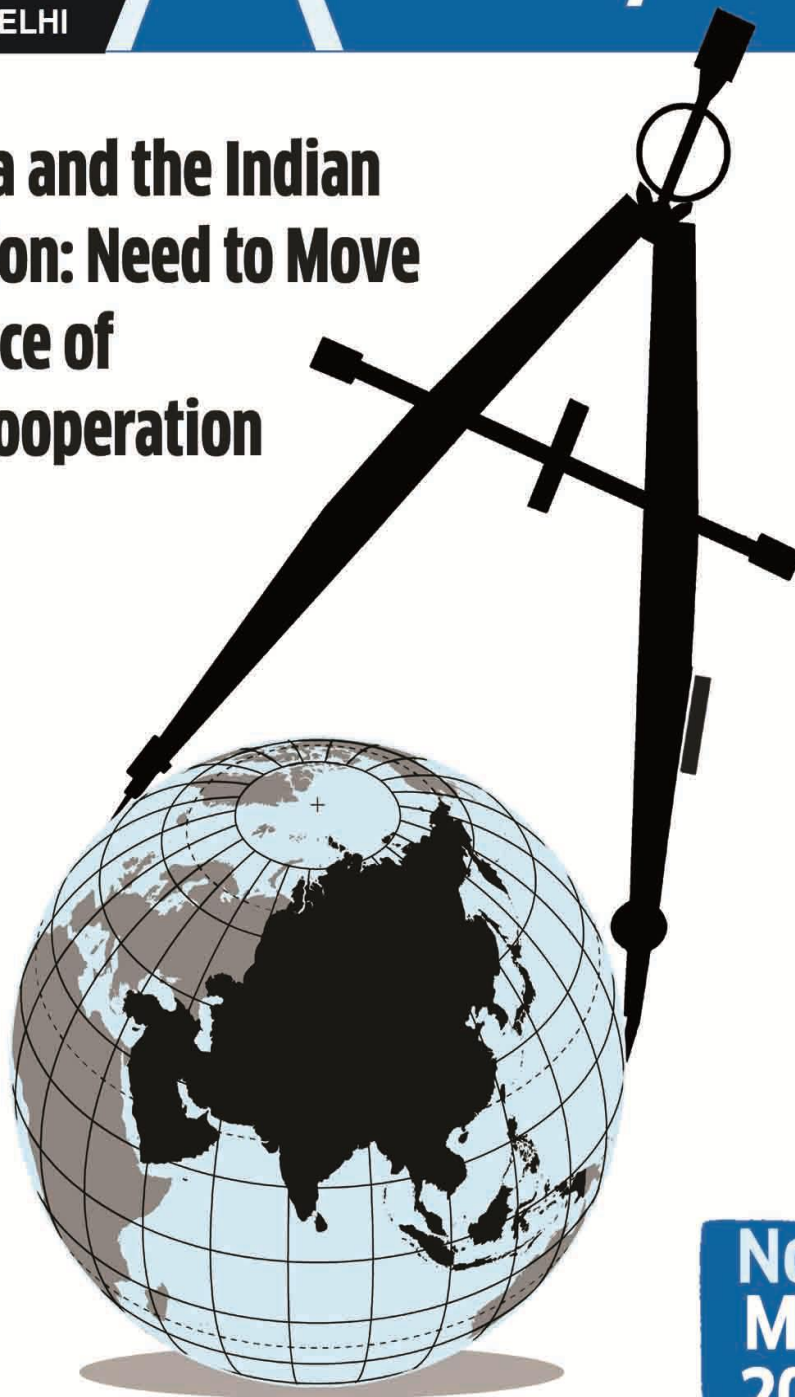
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China, India and the Indian Ocean Region: Need to Move from Balance of Power to Cooperation



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China, India and the Indian Ocean Region: Need to Move from Balance of Power to Cooperation

India's response to the 'rise' of China in the IOR could greatly benefit from the insights from International Relations (IR) theories of realism and social constructivism. The realist view holds that China is locked in a zero-sum power struggle with United States of which the (Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is a part. It considers China's policy towards India as duplicitous, primarily because it sees China's pursuit of cooperation with India even as it continues to support Pakistan as an effort to diffuse Indian opposition to the rise of China in the IOR while at the same time balancing India with Pakistan in order to contain India's own rise. On the other hand, the social constructivist view holds that China has been socialized into the positive-sum thinking of cooperative security through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which has included the Indian Ocean in its discussions of maritime cooperation. This perspective entails a sharing of each other's security concerns through social interaction within international institutions, resulting in a willingness to approach security problems in a cooperative spirit.

Indian concerns have been oft discussed: China's alleged 'string of pearls' strategy, efforts to co-chair the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) meetings on piracy off Somalia, seabed exploration in the southwest Indian Ocean, alleged 'base' in the Seychelles, and possible participation in oil prospecting in the Gulf of Mannar off Sri Lanka, and are all easily comprehensible from the realist perspective. This would tend to regard the cooperative aspect of the China-India relationship in the maritime domain cynically. However social constructivists, with their argument that a cooperative security discourse can constrain the behaviour of even those who use it instrumentally by making it normatively difficult for them to propose and pursue realpolitik courses of action, would take

the substantial discussion of, and efforts toward, China-India maritime cooperation much more seriously.

In April 2009 the Chinese Navy conveyed to the Indian Navy a request to be associated with the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) as an observer. At the time, when informed of this request, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) had refused to accede to it. However, at present the following reasons can be advanced for giving China observer status in IONS:

- IONS should be inclusive;
- Given the large volume of China's trade that passes through the Indian Ocean and the energy flows that fuel its industry, China can be said to have legitimate security concerns for her sea lanes in the IOR;
- China's presence at the IONS, even as an observer, would enable them to hear at first hand the IONS countries' concerns relating to China;
- In any case, the People's Liberation Army -Navy is operating across the Indian Ocean pursuing its anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.

Given the emphasis placed on 'cooperation', 'inclusiveness' and 'common understanding' in its mandate, and the inspiration that it draws from ARF, IONS can be instrumental in providing an environment conducive to socializing China into cooperative security in the IOR.

In February 2012 China's Defense Ministry announced that China, India and Japan will start coordinating their international naval escort activities in the Gulf of Aden. They will develop an integrated escort schedule on a quarterly basis. The schedule-making process will be led by a 'reference country' every quarter. The 'reference country' will propose a schedule and the other countries will formulate their own schedules accordingly. This type of coordination is

expected to increase the efficiency of escort operations and improve the safeguarding of international navigation. Earlier the convoys of China, India and Japan had been bunched together in a short time span. The new mechanism will ensure that there is sufficient gap between the Chinese, Indian and Japanese convoys so that they can escort a greater number of ships in a day. This new arrangement can be expected to lead to greater information sharing and ship visits, which can result in higher 'comfort levels' developing among the naval forces involved, facilitating the socialization of China into maritime security cooperation through operational coordination.

China's initiatives in maritime cooperation against piracy and India's positive role in escorting ships off the Horn of Africa have been duly acknowledged in most strategic discourses. Some more forays in this direction could build some momentum towards Sino-Indian cooperation:

- Resupply facilities from India's western coast for Chinese ships deployed to the Gulf of Aden. The problems arising from the difference in our systems and language would be addressed if such a facility was available at a nearby port.
- Working level joint exercises involving India, China and Japan to smoothen the drills and procedures for fighting piracy.
- The extension of the "Mechanism on Coordination and Consultation on Border Affairs" formulated during 15th round of border talks to maritime affairs. This will be a significant addition to confidence building measures.

The institutionalization of such a mechanism for maritime issues would be a positive development when China and India have concerns about each other in the IOR. A multi-ministerial meeting between India and China on this mechanism is supposed to have taken place at Beijing in mid-March 2012. Information on the outcome of this meeting would have a salutary impact on public perceptions within both countries.

Since March 2011 media accounts highlighted how China has been pursuing unilateral gains in

the South China Sea, where it has been reportedly harassing Vietnamese and Philippine vessels as well as the Indian Navy Ship (INS) Airawat, and attempting new constructions on unoccupied geographical features in direct violation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DoC).

The strategic community has viewed these developments as a vindication of the realist view. From this perspective a prudent course of action for India would be to hedge against an assertive China by cooperating with the US. However in doing so two points need to be kept in mind. One is that India should be wary of a possible US strategy of using India to balance against China, submitting to which could compromise India's strategic autonomy and maneuverability. The other is that the reality is more complex than realism would have it. Consequently, some more thought and effort must be spared to explore the constructivist ideas. Recent research findings within the social constructivist frameworks, points out that as a result of socialization in the ARF, bureaucrats from the Asia Department of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs have begun genuinely articulating a discourse on cooperative security which emphasizes multilateralism over unilateralism, and positive-sum win-win situations over zero-sum power struggles.

This discourse has been extended to the maritime domain, including the IOR, through the concept of 'harmonious oceans' which emphasizes international maritime security cooperation. Furthermore, it also points out that China may have been further socialized into international maritime cooperation through operational coordination in the Gulf of Aden. Therefore, it is vitally important that Indian policy makers keep in mind that engaging China through IONS, and the recently initiated operational coordination of Chinese, Indian and Japanese naval escorts in the Gulf of Aden, may provide crucial opportunities for socializing China into cooperative security in the IOR. Faced with a China that is being assertive and cooperative at the same time, Indian policy makers should formulate a suitably nuanced response.



**No. 1 November 2011 : Postponement of the 15th Special Representative-level Talks:
Possible Causes and Implications**