



INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES

China in the Indian Ocean: Evolving Doctrines, Presence and Implications

Speakers: Vice Adm. Pradeep Chauhan, Vice Adm. Anil Chopra, Cmde. Gopal Suri & Amb. Nalin Surie

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The discussion began with a presentation by Commodore Suri highlighting the scope of China's involvement in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). He talked about China's interests, objectives and strategy, and activities in the IOR. China's main interests stems from its requirements and imports of natural resources and trade from and via this region. The IOR has many vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and international shipping lanes (ISLs). A major chunk of international trade transits this area and provides a life line to the Chinese economy and state. China's energy and economic security is very dependent on an open and accessible Indo-Pacific. China's concerns and strategic involvement are further accentuated by a perception that India wants to dominate the IOR and that the United States wants to preserve its hegemony in the region. China's objectives consists of energy security and therefore it seeks unimpeded access to the IOR.

China also seems to have a stake in the regional security architecture of the IOR. It aims to achieve all this by establishing a strategic presence in the region by building infrastructure across the area and forging linkages with nations in the IOR. China's modus operandi in this regard is targeting under-developed countries with large and attractive infrastructure deals, arms transfers and loans. This becomes a kind of debt to equity model. China also has a desire to undertake deep sea exploration in the south-western Indian Ocean for resources and dual-use data collection.

Regarding Chinese maritime activity in the IOR there has been a gradual rise that could be observed. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has been undertaking anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden since 2008. There have been deployments and visits to ports in the IOR like Karachi of Pakistan and Colombo of Sri Lanka. There have been submarine deployments in the IOR by the PLAN, allegedly testing the bathymetries and thermocline qualities of the waters. The PLAN has deployed both conventional diesel-electric submarines along with nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs) in the IOR which have reportedly made port

calls in the IOR. The PLAN had also carried out a few humanitarian assistance/disaster response (HADR) missions in the IOR like the search for MH370. The PLAN had also carried out non-combatant evacuation (NEO) operations in Yemen since the civil war began. China's network of upcoming and established bases/ports from Djibouti, Africa to Sittwe, Myanmar brings to light what has been called the 'String of Pearls'. Also Chinese weapons sales constitute a major chunk of arms imports for many IOR states like Pakistan, Thailand, Bangladesh, etc. These arms imports include everything from air-independent propulsion (AIP) enabled diesel-electric submarines to unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

China's 21st century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) was mentioned which has three distinct routes – 1) China-IOR-Mediterranean 2) China-Oceania-South Pacific and 3) China-Artic-Europe. The MSR had goals like cooperation in marine resources and industry, maritime connectivity, participation in the Arctic and scientific research. It also includes certain tenets of maritime security such as joint search and rescue (SAR), prevention and management of marine disasters and maritime law enforcement. As mentioned earlier Chinese ports and bases were situated along critical ISLs and constitute long-term leases with development rights, not to mention that many ports are in close proximity to each other which put their economic/trade intentions in doubt. Most Chinese investments in the IOR have been in the energy sector. The flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has led to the development of Gwadar as a major deep water port and a maritime hub. India's objections to CPEC arise more from sovereignty issues and the opaqueness of certain aspects of it. There is also a lot of trade imbalances that favours Chinese firms over native ones.

Vice Admiral Chauhan then began by explaining the main underpinnings behind China's thrust towards the IOR which include domestic and economic stability concerns. He said that a significant portion of the Chinese economy was dependent upon external trade. Sea-borne transit is the most efficient way for China to ensure this continued trade which includes access and transportation of resources in faraway places. In 2017, \$307 billion worth of Chinese trade was sea-borne. The question remained, however, that if nations became more accommodative then would China become more or less assertive? The lack of pushback to China only further aggravates its actions due to its empire-vassal complex since ancient times. Even though the Obama administration had gone to a great extent to placate China under Xi Jinping it would be foolish to think that China's expansionist goals stop at the South China Sea. The geographic space between China and India coincide in the IOR and this is the US' next line of defence.

An ambiguity and weakness in India-US cooperation lies in the division of operational authority between the three US military theatre commands in the IOR – Africa Command (AFRICOM), Central Command (CENTCOM) and Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) – as they have different areas of responsibility. China had also taken lease over an important outpost in the IOR near a critical SLOC at Feydhoofoinlu Atoll in the Maldives for just \$4 million for 50 years. Its other upcoming ports in Namibia, Djibouti and Tanzania are all meant for the purpose of transporting copper and other natural resources from Africa to China for China's industrial requirements. China and Sri Lanka also have a proposed joint satellite ground station at Kandy, Sri Lanka. Admiral Chauhan posed the question that is China surrounding India to which he replied in the negative. But whether India is getting surrounded by China to which the response was affirmative.

The speaker then moved onto certain constructive engagements being tried to balance China which he earmarked as the NAMO Strategy. It consists of: International North-South Transport Corridor, Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, Project MAUSAM, Free and Open Indo-Pacific and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region). This brought to attention certain political, conceptual and executive constructs that have been tried for the Indo-Pacific such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), Indian Ocean Regional Association (IORA) and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

The final speaker Vice Admiral Anil Chopra gave his remarks by adopting a little less alarming and conciliatory approach. He began by saying that the Chinese naval strength is strong but not strong enough to maintain a significant force level and readiness in the IOR. Chinese outposts in the IOR and Africa are “places”, not “bases” he said. Navies are expensive and only financially well-off nations could maintain them. Navies operate on different principles than ground and air forces as navies are constantly deployed, often far from home shores. This leads to great logistical dilemmas. China would face this problem in the IOR as its ships would require a long logistical chain across thousands of miles via the territorial waters of other nations. Its outposts in the IOR are not fine enough to serve as resupply, refuelling and rearmament bases. Furthermore the PLAN suffers from a lack of combat experience and training. The PLAN’s strength cannot be gauged by the number of ships or hulls but has to be judged by its power projection and combat readiness capability. The British Royal Navy during the heydays of imperialism projected global power from just four ports – Portsmouth, Jamaica, Trincomalee, and Singapore. Chinese ports in close proximities in the IOR do not serve its geopolitical agenda and for now are just places from where it can observe critical SLOCs. It was also further pointed out that President Hu Jintao had greatly modernized and improved the PLAN but Xi Jinping has ruined it by rushing naval modernization efforts without a logistical and economic lifeline to support sustained deployments.

A point of discussion was raised regarding PLAN submarine operations in the IOR on anti-piracy missions and if the waters in the North Arabian Sea are good for submarine operations. It was pointed out in no uncertain terms that using submarines for anti-piracy was ludicrous and an excuse to deploy them in the IOR. It was also stated that the North Arabian Sea gives no particular advantages to submarines. Another point raised was the viability of a regional security complex in the IOR to which it was said that a regional security apparatus was not in India’s interests as they are more suited to smaller nations. A final point raised was elaboration on Chinese “offshore waters defence” and “open seas protection” strategy to which the speakers said that it mostly involves a transition from coastal defence to a merging with protecting vital SLOCs.

This report has been prepared by Saurav Sarkar, Research Assistant, ICS