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India's Strategy for Countering China's Increased Influence in the Indian Ocean

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Abstract

This paper examines China's increased influence in the Indian Ocean, and India's strategy to counter that influence and re-establish its profile in the region. It notes that India and China are both dependent on sea lines of communication (SLOCs) through the Indian Ocean for secure energy routes and the free movement of trade to ensure their continued economic development. However, it asserts that China's development of the so-called 'pearl' ports in the Indian Ocean and its *de facto* alliance with Pakistan has created a security dilemma for India.

Faced with what it perceives as geostrategic encirclement, the paper argues that India must ensure the choke points in the Indian Ocean region remain open and free, providing the conditions for its continued economic growth. To achieve this objective, the paper concludes that India needs to constructively engage with China. However, it also needs to develop a range of countermeasures, including enhancing its military capability for sea control and building closer relationships with those states which have a common interest in ensuring freedom of navigation within and through the Indian Ocean.

India's Strategy for Countering China's Increased Influence in the Indian Ocean¹

Introduction

China's continued economic development is dependent on secure routes for energy supplies and the movement of its trade through the Indian Ocean region. In order to mitigate this vulnerability, China has acquired a 'blue-water' navy and developed a number of military and civilian seaports in the Indian Ocean region, enabling it to exercise increased maritime influence on the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) within and through the region. This strategy, of developing a series of ports accessible by its navy, has been referred to by Western security commentators as the geopolitical theory of 'String of Pearls'.²

According to Gurpreet Khurana, an increased Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean and possible military use of these so-called 'pearls' suggest that China's military-strategic intentions include the geographic encirclement of India.³ India imports 70 per cent of its oil and gas energy requirements and depends on free access to sea routes for its trade to ensure its continued economic development.⁴ Against the background of the 1962 war with China, as well as continued border disputes with China and Pakistan along its northern border (and conscious of the expanding strategic relationship between China and Pakistan), Khurana contends that India understandably feels compelled to counter China's growing maritime influence and safeguard its maritime interests in the Indian Ocean.⁵

This article analyses China's rising influence in the Indian Ocean, the need for India to safeguard its interests in the Indian Ocean, and India's strategy to re-establish its profile in the Indian Ocean. It contends that one of the key conditions for India's continued economic growth is that the choke points in the Indian Ocean region must remain free and open to international trade. The article concludes that while constructively engaging with China, India must further develop its naval capabilities for sea control and engage with other major powers in the Indian Ocean to achieve this objective.

China's influence in the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean is strategically important to China because of its economic stakes in the region. China imports 82 per cent of its energy requirements, in the form of oil and gas, through the Indian Ocean.⁶ Thirty per cent of its sea trade, worth some US\$300 billion each year, is shipped through the Indian Ocean.⁷ China is also a manufacturing hub and is dependent on open trade routes with African and Indian Ocean littoral states for the supply of raw materials and minerals, and for the marketing of its products to those regions.

Niclas Weimar contends that the 'legitimacy and political fate of the Communist Party is closely linked to China's continuous economic development, which in turn is dependent on uninterrupted access to crucial energy recourses'.⁸ As almost all of China's trade and energy imports pass through the Malacca Strait, it assumes a strategic importance to China as a choke point in the Indian Ocean because of its potential vulnerability to interdiction. Hu Jintao, former president of China, called this vulnerability the 'Malacca Dilemma', with a leading Chinese newspaper declaring at the time that 'it is no exaggeration to say that whoever controls the Strait of Malacca will also have a stranglehold on the energy route of China'.⁹

Security analysts cite this perceived vulnerability—and the security of SLOCs through the Indian Ocean more generally—as the reason behind China's substantial naval expansion in recent years.¹⁰ David Shambaugh similarly contends that 'it is therefore no surprise that Chinese strategists also began viewing the Persian Gulf, the principal source of their energy imports, as the westward extent of their (grand) strategic frontier'.¹¹

As part of this strategy, China has developed a number of facilities in the Indian Ocean region and connected them by land routes to its hinterland to secure its energy flows and reduce its dependence on the SLOCs. A deep-sea port has been developed at Gwadar in Pakistan, together with an oil refinery complex, which is being connected by a road-pipeline project with Xinjiang province in China.¹² Similarly, ports at Sittwe and Kyaukphu in Myanmar, connected to Yunan in China by a rail-road-waterway-

pipeline, now account for 10 per cent of China's energy demands.¹³ Finally, a canal system across the Kra Isthmus in Thailand is planned to cater for 20 per cent of the energy flows to China.

To increase its strategic reach in the Indian Ocean, China has also developed additional ports with naval access facilities at Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Marao in the Maldives, and Kyaukpaya, Hianggyi, Great Coco, Mergui and Zadetkyi in Myanmar.¹⁴ The development of these 'String of Pearls' ports may be a legitimate reflection of Chinese commercial interests. However, they clearly could also be used as logistic bases to support Chinese naval forces in the Indian Ocean. Indeed, David Brewster has asserted that the probable aim of these developments is either part of a plan for the maritime encirclement of India, or is otherwise intended to keep India strategically preoccupied in South Asia.¹⁵

Along similar lines, Jagannath Panda asserts that Beijing's approach encompasses security, commercial, economic, geo-political and strategic considerations aimed at checking India's authority in the Indian Ocean region while promoting its own influence.¹⁶ Admiral Arun Prakash, former Indian Chief of Naval Staff, contends that this has resulted in significant risks for competition and even a clash between China and India for control over the same strategic space—the Indian Ocean.¹⁷ Given that the overall naval capabilities of China now exceed India's in both qualitative and quantitative terms—and considering the long lead time required by India to counter these developments—Khurana contends that India cannot help but see this as having a strong bearing on its security calculi in its own backyard.¹⁸

India's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean

The highly-influential K.M. Panikkar, pioneer Indian geopolitician, argued more than 60 years ago that 'since India's future was dependent on the Indian Ocean, then the Indian Ocean must therefore remain truly Indian'.¹⁹ Even earlier, in the 16th century, Portuguese Governor Alfonso Albuquerque had opined that 'control of key choke points extending from the Horn of Africa to the Cape of Good Hope and the Malacca Strait was essential to prevent an inimical power from making an entry in the Indian Ocean'.²⁰

Yet post-independence, and until the end of the Cold War, India curtailed its influence to within the Indian sub-continent, along the lines of what has been called 'India's Monroe Doctrine', thus limiting its influence to South Asia.²¹ C. Raja Mohan contends that the Cold War isolated India from its Indian Ocean neighbours in defence terms.²² However, after 1991, India took a different approach and adopted a new forward-looking policy, along with economic liberalisation. This policy included enlarging India's political, diplomatic and economic spheres, and forging defence contacts in the Indian Ocean region and beyond. For the first time, India's 'Look East' policy focused on Southeast Asia, not least to shore up India's ability to compete geopolitically with a rising China.²³

Like China, India has major diplomatic, economic and military interests at stake in Asian waters. Crucial to India's economic growth is its 70 per cent dependency on imported oil and gas for energy needs coming by sea, which is expected to increase to 95 per cent by 2025.²⁴ A number of security analysts have asserted that energy security needs to be India's primary strategic concern for the next 25 years, and that India must take urgent steps to address these needs.²⁵ More broadly, 77 per cent of India's trade, by value, transits through the Indian Ocean.²⁶ India's trade with Indian Ocean littoral states grew exponentially in the last decade and, from 8th position in 2001, India catapulted to the 4th largest trading partner in the Indian Ocean region by 2007.²⁷

In recognition of the importance of maritime trade, India's 2004 maritime military strategy declared that 'control of the choke points could be useful as a bargaining chip in the international power game, where the currency of military power remains a stark reality'.²⁸ Because of the nation's peninsular character and geographical position, the Indian Ocean will always have a preponderant influence over India's destiny. That view is shared by contemporary policy makers in New Delhi, translating to the assessment that India's security will be best guaranteed by broadening its security focus and achieving a position of influence in the larger region that encompasses the Indian Ocean.²⁹

India's vulnerabilities in the Indian Ocean

China is not an Indian Ocean littoral state. Yet its naval ships are regularly spotted in the Indian Ocean. While international waters can obviously be used by any nation, China's military use of the so-called 'pearl' ports of Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka could threaten the security of Indian trade and energy supplies through the Indian Ocean in times of conflict. According to Brewster, there is no doubt that such ports, developed by China and located in countries which have not always shared amicable relations with India, could be used during a military contingency.³⁰

As early as 1993, General Zhao Nanqi, director of the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences had asserted that 'we are not prepared to let the Indian Ocean become India's Ocean'.³¹ Since then, China's lack of transparency in the execution of its diplomacy and statecraft only strengthens India's belief of the unpredictability of China's actions in the Indian Ocean region.³² Compounding India's concern is the history of unresolved border disputes between India and China along the Himalayas, as well as the *de facto* strategic alliance between China and Pakistan, including involvement with nuclear proliferation.³³

While China consistently maintains that it has no territorial or hegemonic ambitions, Robert Kaplan asserts that China effectively has achieved the encirclement of India: from the north across the Himalayas; from the west through its alliance with Pakistan; and from the south using its 'String of Pearls' in the Indian Ocean region.³⁴ To counter this threat, Admiral Arun Prakash, former Indian Chief of Naval Staff, contends that 'India's options ... are stark: boost military muscle and stand upon its own; or strike alliances with willing partners'.³⁵

India's counter-strategy options

Brewster contends that the challenge for India in responding to China's expanding presence and influence in the Indian Ocean region is how to maintain overwhelming geographic advantage without unnecessarily provoking China to take actions that would be to India's detriment.³⁶ To address this challenge, Khurana has suggested that India's counter strategy should be a mix of engagement, diplomatic measures and military dissuasion.³⁷

Engagement

In the first instance, India needs to actively engage China and build the relationship based on mutual interdependencies. Pallam Raju, India's Deputy Defence Minister, has suggested that India might assist China in providing maritime security to Chinese ships in the Indian Ocean so as to address their legitimate security concerns.³⁸ Along similar lines, Shiv Shankar Menon, then Indian National Security Adviser, proposed in 2009 the development of a joint cooperative arrangement in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific involving major Asian powers and the US, with a caveat of China accepting India's special role in the Indian Ocean.³⁹

Mani Shankar Aiyar, former Indian Petroleum Minister, suggested in 2005 that an envisaged gas pipeline from Iran to Pakistan should be extended into India and then onward to China.⁴⁰ He argued that as China is India's largest trading partner, with annual trade exceeding US\$70 billion, the proposal would provide further opportunities for creating interdependencies and avoiding competition. While all these proposals seem sensible, none has yet come to fruition. Indeed, given the broader strategic rivalry between the two countries, progress would require considerable pragmatic pushing by the senior leadership of both countries, which seems unlikely to occur, at least in the foreseeable future.

Diplomatic measures

For India, achieving closer diplomatic and economic relations with the Indian Ocean littoral states and other major powers has assumed added importance. Particularly after 9/11, India's strategic 'tilt' towards the US, abetted by the rise of China, has been an important policy shift with major security ramifications.⁴¹ The Bush Administration announced in 2005 that it would 'help India become a major world power in the 21st century', adding that 'we understand fully the implications, including the military implications of that statement'.⁴²

The annual *Malabar* exercise between India and the US, first held in 1992, is a pointer towards closer maritime cooperation to build interoperability and ensure the security of the Indian Ocean. In 2007, the exercise was broadened to include Japan, Australia and Singapore, with Japan again participating in 2009, 2014 and 2015.⁴³ The expanded grouping in 2007 drew complaints from Beijing, despite assurances from then US Navy's Pacific Commander Timothy Keating that the exercise was not aimed at forming a quadrilateral front against China, and that 'there is no effort on our part or any of these other countries ... to isolate China or put Beijing in a closet'.⁴⁴

On a separate diplomatic front, improving relations with Vietnam—based on common concerns over a rising China—could broaden India's 'Look East' policy, although suggestions that it might include Indian naval vessels using Vietnamese port facilities, as a 'tit-for-tat' for Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean, may be counterproductive in terms of constructive engagement with China.⁴⁵ Finally, furthering economic ties with other Indian Ocean littoral states could assist in developing leverages that would make them less inclined to facilitate Chinese access. More widely, if India developed cooperative security relationships with the larger littoral states of South Africa, Indonesia and Australia, it would achieve another of its aims of furthering its strategic reach.

Military dissuasion

At the same time, India needs to expand its power-projection capability to counter the increasing Chinese naval capability in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Navy's force structure is already being changed with an emphasis on sea control capabilities. According to Admiral Suresh Mehta, former naval chief, India aims to exercise selective sea control of the Indian Ocean by 2022, through the establishment of maritime task forces built around three aircraft carriers and a fleet of over 160 ships.⁴⁶ The introduction into service of the nuclear-powered *Arihant* submarines (currently under sea trials), capable of delivering nuclear-armed missiles, will add a nuclear deterrent component to the maritime force.

To improve the effectiveness of its maritime assets in the Indian Ocean region, India also needs to enhance its surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, especially around choke points. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands chain, 125 kilometres west of the Malacca Strait, serves as the sub-continent's protective screen on its eastern flank, and must be exploited as such. The mandate of the newly-formed tri-Service command in the archipelago, with nuclear submarines under command, and with mutual support from India's east coast forces, includes 'ensuring that the eastern approaches to the Indian Ocean comprising the three straits—Malacca, Lombok and Sunda—remain free from threats for shipping'.⁴⁷

Similarly in the west, the naval port of Chahbahar in Iran, which was renovated by India with the possibility of future Indian naval access in mind, assumes significance as it is located 150 kilometres west of the port of Gwadar in Pakistan.⁴⁸ Apart from dominating the Gulf of Hormuz, through which 35 per cent of the world's oil transits from the Persian Gulf, Indian access to Chahbahar could facilitate the interdiction of any naval forces operating from Gwadar.⁴⁹ To expand its influence over the south-western part of the Indian Ocean, Brewster has argued that India should also establish surveillance and naval facilities in Mauritius, Madagascar, Seychelles and Mozambique.⁵⁰ Finally, to complete the picture and enhance its influence over the central portion of the Indian Ocean, India should exploit the naval and air bases in the Maldives to which it already has military access.

Conclusion

India and China are both dependent on SLOCs through the Indian Ocean for secure energy routes and the free movement of trade to ensure their continued economic development. The potential geostrategic encirclement of India, through a combination of so-called 'pearl' ports in the Indian Ocean and China's *de facto* alliance with Pakistan, creates a security dilemma for India. To secure itself against this possibility, India must ensure that the choke points in the Indian Ocean region remain open and free, ensuring the conditions for its continued economic growth.

To achieve this objective, India needs to develop a range of countermeasures, including enhancing its military capability for sea control in the Indian Ocean and building alliances with willing partners to deal with such a contingency. Continued economic development and internal stability are also prerequisites for the successful execution of India's strategy to counter China's expanding influence in the Indian Ocean region. Additionally, India must further develop its 'Look East' policy to achieve multilateral cohesion and

leverage with Southeast Asian nations and other key stakeholders in the broader Indo-Pacific region. India must also pragmatically develop a closer relationship with the US, which has a common interest in ensuring that the SLOCs in the Indian Ocean remain open and free.

A key question is whether such actions by India will provoke a reaction from China. To counter this possibility, India needs to engage China in multilateral arrangements aimed at jointly ensuring the security of the Indian Ocean's SLOCs. This should go some way towards addressing China's legitimate concerns about guaranteeing the security of its wider economic interests in the region, while allowing India to maintain—and continue to develop—its important maritime influence in the Indian Ocean.

Notes

- ¹ This is an edited version of a paper, titled 'India's Strategy for Countering Chinese Dominance of the Indian Ocean', submitted by the author while attending the Defence and Strategic Studies Course at the Centre for Defence Studies at the Australian Defence College in 2015.
- ² The term was first used in a 2005 report titled 'Energy Futures in Asia' prepared for the US Secretary of Defence by the private consultants, Booz-Allen-Hamilton: see David Brewster, 'An Indian Sphere of Influence in the Indian Ocean', *Security Challenges*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Spring 2010, p. 5.
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