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GEO-POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INDIAN OCEAN

NEETU SINGH

Maritime domain constitutes an important component in foreign policy consideration of all nations – littoral and non-littoral. Maritime domain consists of all waterways including seas and oceans, which are useful for transport, extraction of living and non-living resources and security. While littoral states try to protect and maximize the advantages of maritime domain to serve their national interests, the non-littoral states endeavour to ensure the freedom of and access to maritime domain for the same reasons. The maritime domain has been important for long time due to cheap transport, ocean resources and national security, but it has assumed added significance in the era of globalization where international trade and investment have emerged as a viable mode for economic growth and development. Thus, the scope and range of maritime security has shifted from the concerns of geopolitics to geo-economics. The geo-economics refers to relations between geopolitical factors and economic development. The relationship is two-dimensional – either it refers to economic consequences of geopolitical developments or it refers to geopolitical consequences of economic development and change. Since the political and military conflicts are not tenable in the present time, the economic power and capability have emerged as the most important components of national power.

Noted political scientist Samuel Huntington considered economic power as the most important source of power of nations in a world in which military conflicts among major states is not likely to happen. In such conditions, the economic power will be increasingly important in determining the primacy or subordination of states. Paul Kennedy also remarked that the outcomes of major Great Power wars confirm that the victory has always gone to the side with the greatest material resources. However, the economic capability of a nation in the era of globalization, among other things, is dependent on the security of trade and investment as well as secured availability of resources from diverse sources.

The geo-political significance of the Indian Ocean stems from the fact that it is a centre piece in the wider Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The combination of economic growth and slowdown, military expansion, increasing demand for natural resources, demographics combined with the geo-political situation, increased presence of nuclear capable actors and variances in regional structures of governance, highlights the geo-political significance of this area.

Major points that merit attention are: -

- The Indian Ocean is third largest water body of the world that has vital sea lanes of communication crisscrossing it and which feeds Asia's largest economies. Around 80 per cent of the world's seaborne oil trade passes through the choke points of this ocean and therefore it literally connects the east to the west.
- The varying system of governance in the area determines the outline of the regional security architecture. The relations between nations both intra and extra regional shapes the complex matrix that define the overall architecture. Changes in political thought processes and any alteration in relations could alter the security scenario of the region.
- There has been a gradual to an accelerated expansion of maritime forces and their capabilities in the region. The growing presence of extra regional powers and nuclear capable nations has further altered the existing security framework. This is affecting the existing military balance and the impending imbalance could create a new architecture that could affect the prevailing security scenario.
- The economic upsurge of some nations and stagnation/slowdown of others is throwing up challenges that could affect the regional and international markets. The lack of intra-regional trade as compared to the extra-regional trade has limited the relations between nations in the region. Added to it is the growing competition and race for exploiting available natural resources, which could bring in new challenges to the region in times to come.

GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION AND ECONOMICS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

The geostrategic and geopolitical importance of the Indian Ocean Region has been understood by many great maritime historians. During the Cold War the United States was the preeminent maritime power and the USSR the preeminent land power. Lack of maritime capability eventually became a losing point for the USSR where the U.S. dominated the global commons. Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan stated the importance of sea power by highlighting six elements of geography (access to sea routes), physical conformation (ports), extent of territory, population, character of the people, and character of government. Mahan's maritime concepts were so influential in the field of maritime studies that most of the contemporary maritime security architectures are designed around these concepts.

The 21st century Indian Ocean receives attention from state and non-state actors. According to Robert Kaplan "The Indian Ocean unified the oceans and it connects the world from Africa to far East." Mariners use sea lanes for transportation, and today the Indian Ocean holds some of the most important sea lines of communication in the world. There are regional and extra-regional

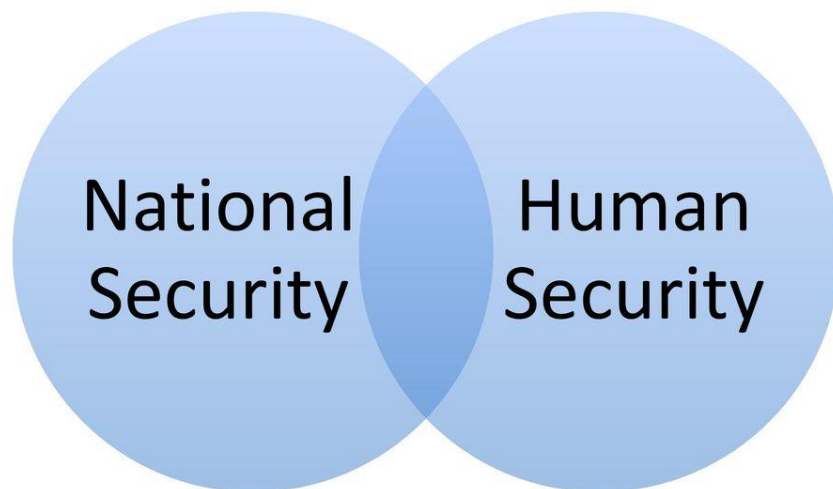
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states operating in the IO. Extra regional countries such as the U.S., China, Japan, and Russia are keen to have some presence in the IO. They are interested in projecting sea power beyond their locale to garner economic and political sustainability in the world arena, and where the IO is a major arena of competition.

The Concept of Sea Power

Establishing preeminent sea power is a key geopolitical strategy successfully implemented by great maritime empires such as England. The famous professor for international relations, Barry Buzan, names five sectors of security that are namely military, political, economic, societal, and environmental. Maritime security lies over all these five sectors of security. Maritime historians such as Admiral Mahan, Julian Corbett, and modern maritime experts such as Robert Kaplan and U.S. Navy Admiral Michael Mullen are well-recognized persons who often talk about the value of maritime power. Admiral Mullen points out that “Where the old maritime strategy focused on sea control, the new one must recognize that the economic tide of all nations rises not when the sea are controlled by one, but rather when they are made safe and free for all.”

Two Paradigms of Security

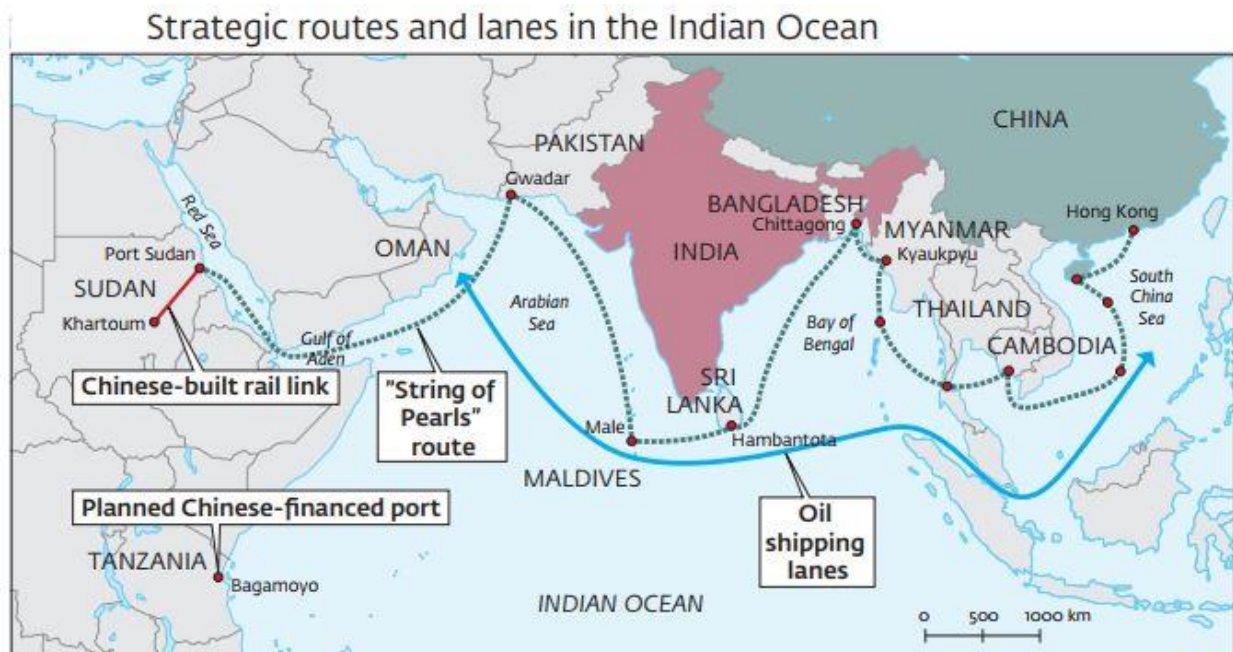


Sea power is a larger concept than the field of maritime warfare. Humanity uses the sea for many reasons and these reasons are well-connected to each other. As historian Geoff Till puts it, the “Sea can be used as a resource, medium of transportation, medium of information and medium

of dominion.” In history great civilizations founded primarily on maritime power were termed “thalassocracies,” which literally translates to “sea power.” Establishing sea power is directly helpful to strengthening a variety of national policies as it is the collective effect of the military and civil maritime capabilities of a country. Therefore, regional and extra-regional users in the IO are interested in protecting their sea power via both civil and military maritime capabilities.

Geostrategic and Geopolitical Significance of the Indian Ocean

Geopolitics has been defined as a struggle for power and national power can be evaluated in part by showing the interrelationships between geostrategic positioning, the relative economic and technological capabilities of states, international public opinion, international law and morality, international government and diplomacy, and the regional and global balance of power. Geostrategy is required to deal with geopolitical problems and is the sum of the efforts to influence and act through these factors. With developing economies and growing energy requirements, users in the IO are struggling for power and this behavior influences the stability of the IO.



This is the container age of maritime trade. Bulk cargos are transported through chokepoints in the IO and through main ports such as Gawdar, Chabahar, Hambanthota, Colombo, Mumbai, and Chittagong. These major ports have given significance to IO nations and made them maritime

influencers in their own right. There are also nearby flashpoints that can cause spillover effects in the IO with existing situations in Yemen, Somalia, and Iran. Therefore, security in this region is very important for the global economy and must be secured from Middle East turbulence. The countries in the IO are mostly in the developing stage and handling the third largest ocean in the world becomes a huge challenge for them. Therefore, extra-regional countries pay close attention to this region in an effort to influence stability.

Economic Resources

According to the recent geophysical findings, the shelf areas of the coast of Indonesia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf territories are the rich store house of mineral wealth like crude oil, tin, gold, uranium etc. Besides this many parts of the Indian Ocean's continental shelf are the rich sea-food store houses which have acquired greater economic and strategic value in recent years.

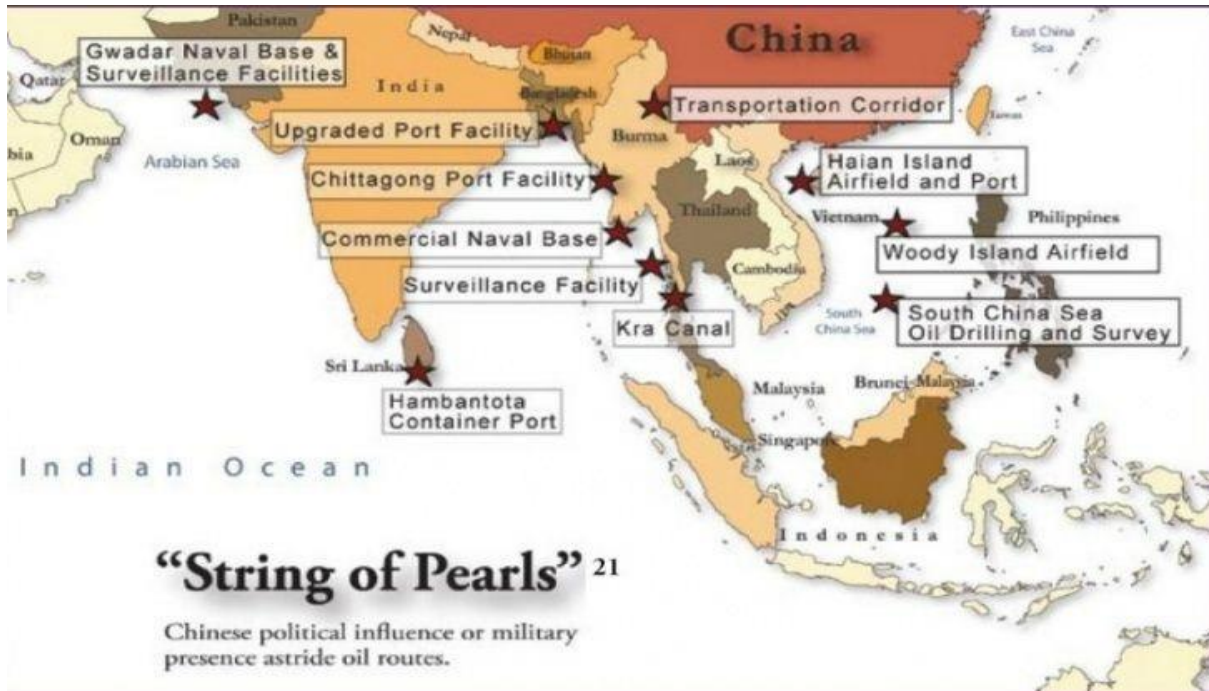
- The Indian Ocean region is well-endowed with **economic resources**. Agriculture forms the backbone of the region's economy. The region is a vast store house of agricultural raw materials industrial nations of the world. The region exports 77.3 per cent of natural rubber, 76.2 per cent of tea, 42 per cent of wool, 26.7 per cent of cotton lint and 19 per cent of coffee, are mostly cash crops and are in great demand in the developed countries. These are used as materials for the industries of the European countries.
- Besides these agricultural products, the countries of the Indian Ocean region are rich store house of the mineral wealth. The region produces 80.7% of the world's gold, 56.6% of tin, 32.5% of antimony, 32.5% of crude petroleum, 28.5% per cent of manganese, 25.2% of nickel, 18.5% bauxite and 18% of lead, 31.2% of iron ore and 12 per cent of the zinc production of the world. The South African region is important for iron-ore, copper, gold, lead and manganese; West Asia is important for petroleum and its products; the South Asia is significant in the production of iron ore, coal, bauxite, manganese, mica and natural gas; the South-East Asian region is important for bauxite, gold, tin, tungsten and zinc; and the Australian region has sizeable production of several minerals.
- The Ocean floor also contains manganese nodules (areal coverage 10 million sq. km), phosphorite nodules, phosphate, barium sulphate, copper, cobalt, iron ore, bauxite, sulphur, silicon, titanium, sodium, potassium, chromium, monazite, limonite, magnetite and garnet. The manganese nodules are scattered on the ocean floor at depths ranging from 2m to 6100 m although their best quality is found in the water depths of more than 4,000 m.

- The manganese nodules contain manganese (about 25%), iron (18 per cent), cobalt, copper, nickel and 22 other elements, all valuable for industrial use. The continental shelf area of the ocean is rich in mineral oil. Offshore drilling is yielding good results in the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal area of the ocean.
- The Ocean is also rich in fish and marine resources which may provide protein rich essential food to teeming millions. Presently less than 10 per cent of the fish resources of the region are utilised leaving ample room for their scientific planning and management

Extra-Regional Powers in the Indian Ocean Region

There are 35 Littoral States and 12 landlocked countries, and altogether 47 countries in the Indian Ocean Rim (RIM). Apart from that, many extra regional countries such as China, U.S., Japan, and Russia are dependent on the IO and working to expand their influence. China is interested in the Maritime Silk Route (MSR), and according to Kaplan, China is expanding vertically while India expands horizontally in their maritime power projection. The U.S. sphere of interest is spreading from the Western Pacific to greater maritime Asia in the 21st century, and recently renamed its Pacific Command to Indo-Pacific Command in recognition of the growing importance of the IO. However, there are not any notable maritime power rivalries from within IO nations themselves. Countries are well aware of security in chokepoints, sea lanes, and strategic waterways. Trade security is the major substantial security factor in their developing economies. Therefore, countries are reluctant to disturb in good order at sea.

India, the U.S., and China are main power blocks in IO and they are with the intention of extending their maritime power in pursuit of their national interest. When looking into the balance of power in IO, China seeks maritime expansionism through the South China Sea to IO. The U.S. is more allied with India in present day context than earlier times. According to Morgenthau alliances are a necessary function of the balance of power, when nations competing with each other have three choices in order to maintain and improve their relative power positions. They can increase their own power, they can add to their own power through the power of other nations, or they can withhold the power of the other partner nations of the adversary. Small states like Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Seychelles have to be considerate of their alliances with great powers as they are players in a larger competition.



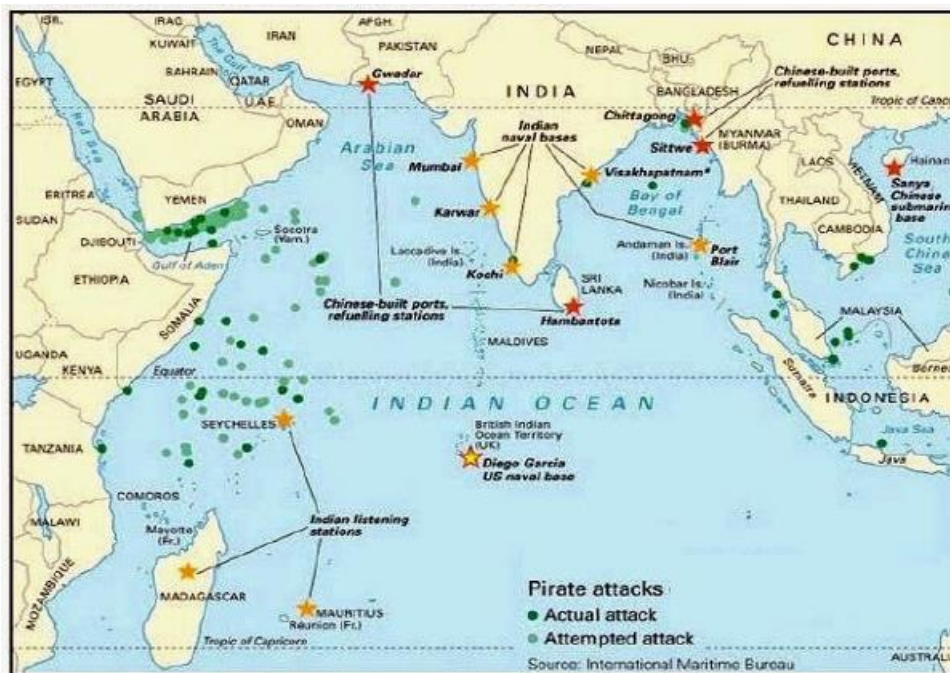
When linking this setup into the IO, China and the U.S. are competing with each other and India is also competing with China. China has its own issues with the South China Sea and the security dilemma in Malacca Strait especially affects her. Therefore, aligning with Myanmar and Bangladesh is important to China to transport energy if any rivalry worsens. Further, they have notable interests in the ports of Hambantota, Gwadar, and Chabahar. The U.S. on the other hand has common interests with India. India has its own maritime strategy involving relationships with the smaller states like Sri Lanka and the Maldives. The recent past visit of two Chinese submarines to port Colombo was heavily criticized by Indians as a challenge to maritime security. The evolving nature of IO alliances could be further strengthened by the construction of oil pipelines for refueling and oil transportation in deep sea ports by India and China in Chabahar in Iran and Gawadr in Pakistan, respectively.

The Chabahar and Gwadar ports are strategically important to both India and China for their maritime expansion. India along with Japan introduced the Growth Corridor, which links Africa to Asia and Far East. Sri Lanka, for example, is situated along both the SLOCs for the Growth Corridor and One Belt One Road. Therefore, smaller littoral state like Sri Lanka have to open up trade to many parties to receive the benefits from competing trade routes and economic projects.

Maritime Security Threats and Challenges in the Indian Ocean Region

Threats and challenges to the IO maritime domain can be divided into two major areas of traditional and non-traditional security threats. Both littoral and extra-regional states have to play a vital role to prevent the maritime domain from threats and challenges.

Interstate conflicts are rarely found in this region. With the economic expansionism, countries cannot neglect the threats of piracy, illegal fishing, maritime terrorism, maritime pollution, irregular migration by sea, illegal narcotic drugs, and small arms trafficking by sea. These threats may have traditional implications for extra-regional maritime users. As an example, small numbers of Somalian pirates are able to create a perception of threat to the entire maritime trade in the IO. Countries had to utilize their resources to counter this threat in a sustained and multilateral fashion. They had to have interdependencies to face this issue without considering individual rivalries.



Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing is another important issue. IUU fishing can also add economic power to actors that also perpetuate maritime terrorism, human trafficking, and illegal migration at sea. Countries like Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and

Myanmar are highly notable victim countries for human smuggling. Sri Lanka is considered a major source country on this issue. Suitable Maritime Domain Awareness mechanisms would be the possible solution to mitigate these threats in the IO. Diplomatic and multilateral solutions are the most viable action on this issue and again countries have to use conference diplomacy to peacefully engage in these types of challenges.

Conclusion

The IO is the third largest ocean in the world and for the balance of power extra-regional actors always wish to display their presence in this region. Therefore, geo-strategic and geo-political competitions in this region are inevitable. Regional and extra regional countries are much more concerned with China's maritime expansionism in particular. China is especially interested in becoming a modern maritime civilization. This is evidenced by its constructions of harbors in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Myanmar. This has generated vulnerability to their balance of power and traditional regional relationships. Due to the economic advantages they littoral are reluctant to create any rivalries. However, their own game of survival is inevitable.

Security is an important factor for a nation state. To be survivable in the international arena nation states have to concern themselves with energy and trade security. Therefore, the nation state has to give much more concern for their maritime security in a world whose globalization is being fed by the world's oceans. IO strategic waterways have taken special attention in maritime trade. Oil trade is flowing from the Middle East to Asia and elsewhere via these IO chokepoints and sea routes. Their protection is the responsibility of all.

GENESIS OF INDIA'S MARITIME STRATEGY

The notion of maritime security is no longer confined to political security of a nation but it is also concerned with the security of its trade, investment and availability of resources, which are the basis of economic growth and prosperity. The more a nation is dependent on maritime domain for these essentials of economic growth, the more is the concern for maritime security. India's maritime strategy is largely centered around the Indian Ocean Region and its littoral states, which contain a third of world's population, 25 percent of global land mass, and about 40 percent of world's oil and gas resources. There is a perceptible change in the perception of India's maritime interests since the middle of last decade. It says, 'The Indian Navy maintained its personnel and equipments in a high state of preparedness due to continued presence of multinational maritime forces in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) resulting in a fast pace of activities in the area. As a consequence to the change in the perception of India's maritime security have become more pronounced.



India's maritime strategy is largely contained in the three documents released by the Integrated Headquarters of Ministry of Defense (Navy), Government of India: Indian Maritime Doctrine. Thus in a span of five years in the last decade, the role and strategic position of Indian Navy was updated and expanded three times. This demonstrates the growing significance of Indian Navy in the grand strategy of India in the post-cold globalized world. It should be noted at the outset that India's maritime strategy is an integral part of India's changing foreign policy, India's defense perception and present and projected role of India in the global affairs. With the background of post-cold war global and regional environment and increasing pace of globalization, India introduced far-reaching changes in her economic and foreign policies to adjust with the changing circumstances. India put in place a liberalized economic regime to facilitate greater external trade and investment in tune with the global economic developments. Similarly, Indian foreign policy witnessed a paradigm shift to face the challenges of post-cold war global environment, with apprehension of unipolar moment. Under the Look East Policy launched by India in 1991, a new

phase of economic engagements with ASEAN and East Asian states was initiated, which brought India and China face to face in another strategically significant region of the globe. In the era of globalization, India renewed her similar trade and economic engagements with Africa and newly emerged region of Central Asia. Among other things, expansion of two-way trade and investment and ensuring supply of energy resources have been the major aspects of India's external engagements in last two decades.

These consequences influenced perception of India's maritime interests as well as her maritime security. The new maritime strategy of India should be seen and analyzed in this background. Thus, at present, the notion of maritime security is no more confined to the security of naval vessels, ports and ocean facilities. In the era of globalization and burgeoning international trade and rising dangers of climate change the scope and importance of maritime security is enhanced beyond imagination. Now, it encompasses three dimensions: political, economic and humanitarian.

Political dimension covers the security of India's sea coast against external aggression against state and non-state actors like terrorists and other organized criminal activities. It also includes the power projection and strategic advantage in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) from Gulf of Aden to the Strait of Malacca. Its economic dimension has two vital components: security of Sea Lines of Communications (SLOC) for trade and investment; and exploitation of living and non-living resources. The humanitarian consideration of maritime security is concerned with the protection of environmental degradation in the seas and oceans, arresting the effects of climate change and management of ocean based disasters including security and conduct of relief operations.

Both India and China are dependent on international trade and availability of external resources, particularly energy resources to maintain the momentum of their economic growth. And maritime security is a sine qua non of transaction of trade and availability of resources. India has attained a growth rate of nearly 8-9 percent in last two decades and is being considered as a leading emerging economy of the globe. Maritime security has to play a crucial role in sustaining the momentum of this growth. Besides the economic maritime interests, the political and security interests of India are equally important. India's island territories, situated on her Eastern and Western seaboard are at considerable distance away from mainland. In order to ensure their sustained development, umbilical linkages with the mainland and maritime security protection are essential pre-requisites of her maritime security. India's offshore assets within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 2.02 million sq km, fisheries and deep sea interests, major and minor harbors and the overall seaward security of long coastline and island territories are other vital aspects of India's maritime security.

Changing Role of Indian Navy

With the changing nature of India's maritime interests both in terms of geographical space and range of activities, the role of Indian navy has also undergone sea change. As per the latest version of Indian Maritime Doctrine (2009), the operational area of Indian navy ranges from the Gulf of Aden in the West to the Strait of Malacca in the East. Thus, it covers the entire spread of Indian Ocean. It is no more confined to protection of India's territorial waters or Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Earlier, Indian Navy played a limited role in military conflicts in comparison to air and land forces. But now under the new military doctrine, India's naval forces are assigned full range of operations ranging from 'high intensity war fighting at one end to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operation at the other end'.

- **Under Military role**, the Indian Navy is assigned the achievement of the following objectives: Deterrence against war or intervention; Decisive military victory in case of war; Security of India's territorial integrity, citizens and offshore assets from sea-born threat; Safeguarding India's mercantile marine and maritime trade; and Safeguarding India's national interests and maritime security. In order to achieve these objectives, Indian Navy is expected to perform various tasks like surveillance, marine strike, anti-submarine operations, anti-surface operations, anti-air operations, amphibious operations, information operations, electronic warfare, special operations, electronic warfare, special operations, mine warfare, VBSS (visit, board, search and seizure), and harbour defence.
- The second role of Indian Navy is the conduct of **naval diplomacy**, which 'entails the use of naval forces in support of foreign policy objectives to build bridges of friendship and strengthen international cooperation on the one hand, and to signal capability and intent to deter potential adversary on the other. The fundamental purpose of Navy's diplomatic role is to favourably shape the maritime environment in the furtherance of national interests in tune with the foreign policy and national security objectives. Under her diplomatic role, the Navy is expected to achieve the following objectives: strengthening political relations and goodwill, strengthening defence relations with friendly states; displaying credible defence posture and capability; strengthening maritime security in IOR; and promoting regional and global stability. For the realization of these objectives, the navy has to perform a number of tasks such as overseas deployments, two-way port visits, technical and logistical assistance, training and patrols, bilateral and multilateral exercises, peace enforcement and peace keeping etc

- The constabulary role of Indian Navy is concerned with the protection and promotion of **India's maritime security**. Throughout the globe, this role of navies has become significant in view of the increasing incidence of maritime crimes like piracy, maritime terrorism and trafficking. With the establishment of Indian Coast Guard in February 1987, the security of coastal regions and maritime zones of India was transferred to Indian Coast Guard, but following the November 26 Mumbai terrorist attack, Indian navy was assigned under the Indian Military Doctrine of 2009, the overall responsibility of security of coastal areas in close coordination with Indian Coast Guard, state marine police, central/state governments and port authorities. Thus, Indian Navy has been given responsibility to undertake brown water operations to safeguard coastal regions along with her earlier role as blue water navy. The constabulary role of Indian Navy has three objectives: coastal defence; security of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ); and maintaining a good order at sea. This involves the task of anti-piracy, anti-trafficking, anti-poaching and counter infiltration. There are two piracy prone areas in Indian Ocean: Gulf of Aden and Malacca Strait. Though the incidence of piracy has considerably reduced in and around Strait of Malacca due to joint patrolling and effective deployment of navies in this region, the piracy in the Gulf of Aden region off Somali Coast continues to be a matter of concern for India and other countries.
- The fourth dimension of Navy's areas of operation, as envisaged in new maritime doctrine is her benign role. It is called so because in this role violence does not play any role in the operation of naval forces. Benign operations of Navy include **humanitarian aid, disaster relief, Search and Rescue, salvage operations, hydrographic surveys** etc. In the benign role, Navy is expected to achieve two-fold objectives: promoting civil safety and security in the Indian Ocean Region and projecting India's soft power image. During tsunami disaster, Indian navy played an important role in relief and rescue operation in littoral states of Indian Ocean. With 70 percent of the world's known natural disasters occurring in the south and South-East Asia, the benign role of Indian Navy is likely to increase in future. It should be noted that the benign role of Indian Navy was a part of her diplomatic role under the first Strategic Defence review undertaken in 1998 but it was assigned a distinct task under the Maritime Doctrine of 2009. The 1998 Strategic Defence Review identified the four roles of Indian Navy: Providing economic and energy security in the Indian Ocean; making forward presence; conducting naval diplomacy; and ensuring sea-based deterrence in the Indian Ocean.

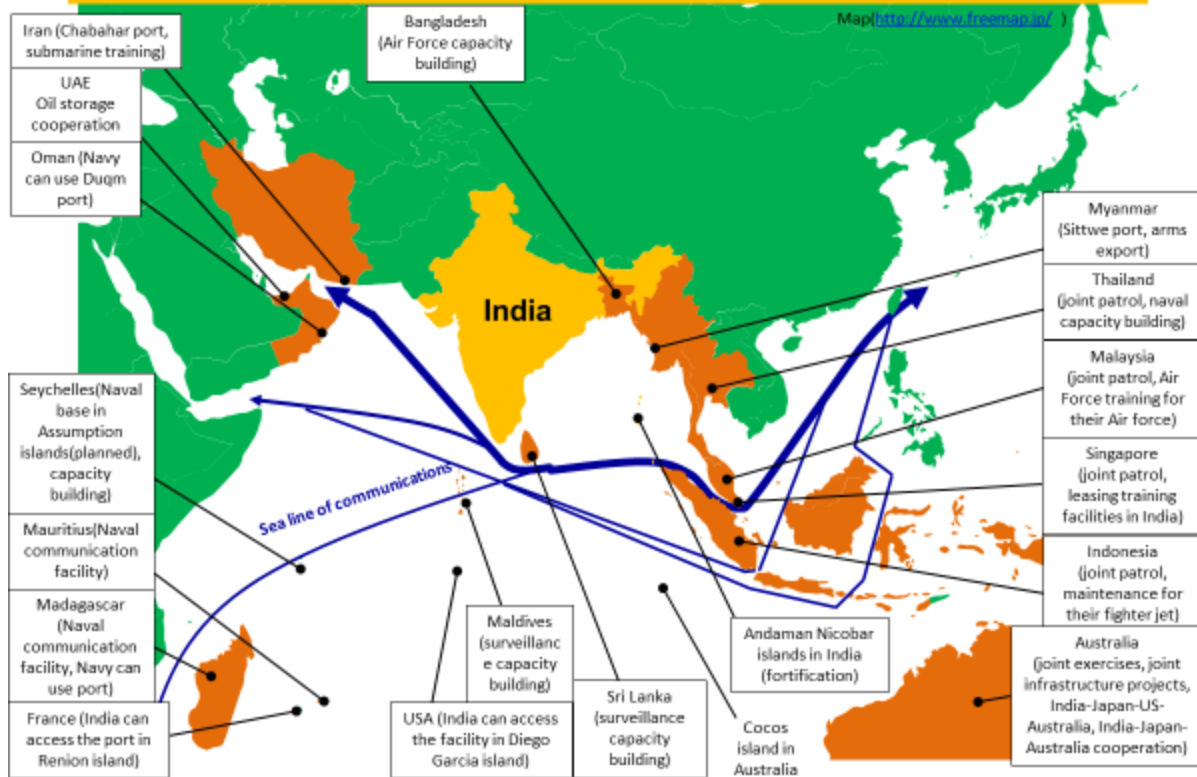
The **four-fold role of Indian Navy** envisaged under the updated Indian Maritime Strategy, reflects India's aspirations and expectations as a rising nation in the post-cold war globalized world, riddled with many uncertainties and competition among nations at various levels. This is for the first time in the maritime history of India since independence that India has clearly laid down a coherent maritime strategy not only to deal with the present maritime challenges in the changing world but also to chart out a new course for India in future global affairs. The maritime strategy addresses the geo-political as well as geo-strategic concerns of India in tune with her foreign policy and national interests. In the past military conflicts with Pakistan and China, navy played only a subsidiary role and it was allocated less financial resources in comparison to other two forces. However, this is no more the case now, thanks to the changing profile of India's national interests in the present context. Indian Navy has come to assume a new role both in terms of geographical reach and varied operational contents. Power projection and securing India's vital economic and strategic interests in the IOR from Gulf of Aden to the Strait of Malacca are the highlights of new role of Indian Navy.

Challenges of Indian's Maritime Security

'The Indian Navy has been playing a maritime leadership role in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) due to its multidimensional role capabilities and active presence in the region. The Indian Navy faces an operating environment of ferment due to variety of factors which include geo-politics, geo-economics, emerging technologies, changing nature of asymmetric threat and continuously evolving capabilities in our maritime neighborhood. Consequently, the Indian Navy's force planning is designed to address likely threats and opportunities, with the overall aim of protecting our national maritime interests.'

In comparison to size and modernization of Indian Navy, her responsibilities have increased manifold. In the aftermath of Mumbai terror attack, the Navy was also given the overall responsibility of protection and security of coastal regions of India , which was hitherto performed by the Indian Coast Guard. With increasing incidences of maritime crimes like piracy, human and drug trafficking, maritime terrorism and the other organized crimes, the constabulary functions of Indian Navy have increased manifold. This is in addition to more important assignments of security of Indian territorial waters and Sea Lines of Communications (SLOC). The benign and diplomatic functions of Navy are other significant activities which consume considerable resources. Thus, there appears to be a significant deficit between the capabilities of navy and the tasks and responsibilities it is assigned to perform. Perhaps, because of this fact, some scholars have termed Indian maritime doctrine as 'aspirational and advocacy' in nature rather than being pragmatic.

India's activities in the Indian Ocean



The strategic challenges in the implementation of India's Maritime strategy are equally daunting. The strategic challenges involve the issues of power projection, influence and competition among nations in the Indian Ocean Region

China's Strategic Dilemma in the Indian Ocean

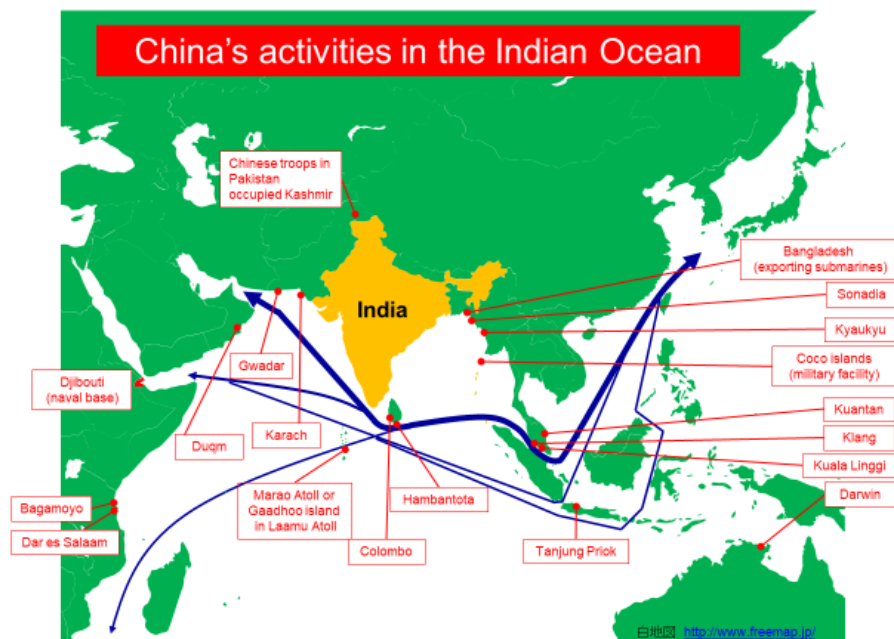
China is facing a growing strategic dilemma in the Indian Ocean. The balance of power in the Indian Ocean is changing, driven by the erosion of the longstanding US strategic predominance and the rise of China and India as major powers. Many analysts see a significant danger of an increasing strategic contest between China and India in the Indian Ocean as they jostle for influence and position in ways reminiscent of US-Soviet rivalry during the Cold War. China's strategic relationship with the United States in the Indian Ocean is relatively stable. But China faces considerable long term geostrategic disadvantages in the Indian Ocean as compared with India and has few options available to mitigate those disadvantages.

China's overwhelming strategic imperative in the Indian Ocean is the protection of its vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs) across the Indian Ocean. The most important of these SLOCs extends from the Strait of Hormuz around the Indian subcontinent into the Bay of Bengal and through the Straits of Malacca. China not only faces the 'Malacca Dilemma' in Southeast Asia but also a 'Hormuz Dilemma' in the Persian Gulf. Indeed, China's SLOCs across the entire Indian Ocean are highly vulnerable to threats from state and non-state actors.

China's strategic vulnerability is a function of geography. The Indian Ocean is a largely enclosed ocean, with few entry points and vast distances between. This creates a strategic premium for those powers that are able to control the so-called 'chokepoints' and deny their rivals access to key ports. China currently has no ability to exert control over any of these chokepoints and nor has it any regular naval presence in any of the ports between. China's vulnerability is reinforced by the scarcity of overland transport connections to the Indian Ocean.

In strategic jargon, the Indian Ocean represents 'exterior lines' for China and 'interior lines' for India. The Indian subcontinent dominates the entire northern Indian Ocean, giving India considerable advantages, including short lines of communication to its own bases and resources. China has corresponding disadvantages, including the need to deploy its naval forces to the Indian Ocean through narrow and dangerous chokepoints and then cope with very uncertain logistical support when it arrives. The Indian Ocean is one area where India holds a clear military advantage over China.

China is trying to mitigate its vulnerabilities in several ways: through building capabilities to project limited naval and air power into the Indian Ocean; through gaining greater access for its naval vessels to Indian Ocean ports; by developing overland transportation links to the Indian Ocean; and by developing closer economic and political relationships with key states in the region.



But these can only partially mitigate China's fundamental strategic disadvantages.

China is pursuing a major naval expansion program and its theoretical naval capabilities now exceed India's. But China's ability to project naval power, particularly in the Indian Ocean, remains limited. Although the PLA Navy has made small anti-piracy deployments in the Arabian Sea, these deployments have not transformed it into a true blue water navy. China's power in the Indian Ocean is constrained by the long distance from Chinese ports and air bases, the need to deploy through narrow chokepoints and the lack of support facilities.

Some claim that that China is seeking to mitigate its vulnerabilities through the 'String of Pearls' strategy in which the PLA Navy will develop bases or gain access to facilities across the northern Indian Ocean. But there is considerable doubt whether 'Pearls' such as Gwadar (in Pakistan), Hambantota (in Sri Lanka) or Kyaukpyu (in Myanmar) would make good naval bases for China. Converting them into naval bases would require major investments and their exposed position would make them difficult to defend. Nor would a permanent Chinese naval presence at these ports prevent the interdiction of Chinese energy supplies. To properly mitigate its vulnerabilities in the Indian Ocean, China would need to be able to defend the entire length of its SLOCs from the Persian Gulf to the Malacca Straits.

Others believe that China may instead pursue a 'places not bases' strategy, involving flexible arrangements that would give the Chinese military access to critical infrastructure in times of crisis. This would avoid the high political costs that would likely be associated with establishing a permanent naval presence in the Indian Ocean, but to be useful it would need to provide Beijing with reasonable certainty that facilities would be available to the PLA Navy in the event of an acute crisis or conflict. While Beijing's new 'Maritime Silk Route' initiative could involve such arrangements, there is no evidence yet that this is the case.

China is also seeking to mitigate its strategic vulnerability through developing new overland connections to the Indian Ocean through Myanmar and Pakistan. This includes pipelines between Kyaukpyu in Myanmar and China's southern Yunnan province, and the planned BCIM project, that would involve building a road and manufacturing corridor from Kunming to Calcutta. China is also developing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor between Gwadar and Kashgar in the western Chinese province of Xinjiang. These projects are part of Beijing's 'bridgehead strategy' of turning Yunnan and Xinjiang provinces into gateways for economic engagement with the Indian Ocean. The projects, if completed, would likely have considerable implications for China's role in the region. But these new connections would themselves be vulnerable to interdiction and the extent to which they would mitigate China's overall strategic vulnerabilities is overstated.

China has also had only limited success in building security relationships in the region. China's economic influence is certainly growing throughout the Indian Ocean in line with its rise as a world economic power. China is a source of arms for some states in the region, while others sometime play the 'China card' to hedge or extract concessions. But there is as yet little indication that these relationships are being translated into substantive and enduring security relationships. Indeed, China has suffered several significant setbacks in recent years. Despite having a close political and economic relationship for many years, Myanmar is distancing itself from China and now is regarded as a significant political risk. Recent indications that Sri Lanka might grant China access to military facilities have also been reversed under Sri Lanka's newly-elected government. Pakistan remains China's principal partner and de facto ally in the region. While Pakistan has indicated its readiness to host Chinese naval facilities at the port of Gwadar, Beijing is moving cautiously in developing any military presence there.

Overall, China's ability to mitigate its fundamental strategic vulnerability in the Indian Ocean is limited. For the foreseeable future, China is likely to have only a very limited ability to project power into the Indian Ocean. The development of China's putative 'Pearls' and tenuous overland transport links would do little to mitigate these vulnerabilities. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive how China could ultimately protect the entirety of its Indian Ocean SLOCs from India in the event of conflict between the two.

There is little evidence that China could realistically gain a strategic advantage over India in the Indian Ocean in the foreseeable future, at least in the maritime realm. But it does not mean that there is not a very keen contest for influence between India and China in the Indian Ocean: for India to maintain its geostrategic advantages over China in that theatre, and for China to partially mitigate its disadvantages. This is currently being played out in a jostle for influence between India and China throughout the region.

With this, both India and China, with their economic rise in last 20 years, have also emerged as main players in the IOR. In fact, in comparison to US, both India and China have more vital economic and strategic interests at stake in the Indian Ocean. In order to maintain the momentum of their growing economies, both India and China require safe conduct of international trade, new avenues of investment and secured supply of natural resources. For this, the safety and security of SLOC is a vital concern for both. In addition, the influence in the IOR is also vital for their security. India's Look East Policy and new Naval Doctrine both are designed to enhance Indian engagement in South-East Asia, a region which China considers her natural area of influence.
