



E-ISSN: 2706-8927
P-ISSN: 2706-8919
IJAAS 2019; 1(2): 119-124
Received: 10-08-2019
Accepted: 19-09-2019

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Indian Ocean and china's maritime policy

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Abstract

Indian Ocean has been a focus of new great game among global and regional powers to bring it under their respective influences. Security of the sea is perceived as a mere extension of land activities but this concept has been changed because of the growing dependence on the sea. Waterways have become more important as we moved into globalized world with standing the geo-strategic, economic, and military factors. Undoubtedly, economic growth has placed a considerable emphasis on trade, sea born export and import but maritime affairs have to be seen in wider context. Over the past two decades, growing economy, dependence on the outer resources and market accessibilities have forced to China to secure sea routes from Persian-gulf to Myanmar and then to South China Sea via Indian Ocean. Openings up of new energy resources in Central Asia and in and around Caspian Sea have added another dimension in China's interests in Indian Ocean region. Within this framework, purpose of this paper is to study China's maritime policy and its indulgence to promote its interests fundamentally clashing with India's preponderance and the US strategic interests.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, maritime powers, geo-strategic interests, conflicts, security

Introduction

Indian Ocean, the world third largest ocean and the only one to be named after nation, washes the shore of Asia, Africa, Antarctica and Australia, lying mainly in Southern hemisphere. With an area of 75 million square Kms., comprising 56 nations and stretching across 7 times zones, 1/3 of populations touching 25% of the land mass. The ocean has geo-political and geo-strategic significance because the major sea routes connecting Middle East, Africa, Asia, East Asia with Europe and America with vital strategic choke points for security and important access to waterways in the ocean as Suez canal, Babel Mandeb (Djibouti-Yemen), Strait of Hormuz (Iran-Oman) and strait of Malacca (Indonesia and Malaysia).

The pattern of maritime security and interests can be analysed through the constituent nations whose shore touch the Indian Ocean extended from the South Africa in the west to Strait of Malacca in the East. Geo-political interests and clashes may thus arise over several issues like resources, trade and commerce, security of states, maritime boundaries among the super powers, regional and extra- regional powers in the Indian Ocean Region. The main concern is the importance of maritime sphere of influence and balance of power. Attempts by the super powers and regional powers to influence the geo-strategic environment in their favours and local responses led these nations in the region to seek alliances and strategic partnership to legitimize their role. The establishment of Indian Ocean as the Zone of Peace was an attempt to get rid of imperialist struggle and great powers rivalries that had gone for centuries. But the traditional factors of international politics are still regulating the political order of Indian Ocean. The power vacuum left by the British after more than a century of dominance has been filled by the United States. During the cold war, USSR also posed challenges to western dominance despite its limited resources. France continues to maintain a standing naval force in the South Western part of the Indian Ocean. Japan, India and China all have been indulging in manoeuvres to promote their interest, and fundamentally threaten the preponderance of the US in Indian Ocean.

End of cold war does not end the conflicts in the Indian Ocean but has increased the possibility of clash of interests and conflicts. The US strategic dominance in the Indian Ocean is a fact but the concept of the region itself has been transformed since the collapse of the USSR. The US fifth fleet, based off Bahrain, indicates a significant increase in the American political and military commitment to the region. The establishment of US bases in South East Asia gives it opportunity to overseas security arrangement and crucial aspects of

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American military power. The production of oil in the gulf countries and gradually shifting focus of it in Central Asia may further extend interests to the east of the gulf. The US lead security multilateralism in the Asia Pacific region is actually a holding operation to manage the current flux in the political environment of the region. It seeks to engage China- the emerging dominant power of Asia in a border security framework and constrain its political ambitions. The emergences of new oil and energy resources in Central Asia, in and around Caspian Sea have introduced an interesting but unpredictable dimension to the future conflict in Indian Ocean region.

China's Maritime Policy

Historically, China has been a land power but over the past two decades, it has been increasingly depending on resources and markets accessibility only via maritime routes. China is contending with both traditional and non-traditional threats-including its hegemonic and strategic rivals- the US and India and other establishing factors. Though the Chinese experts recognize that naval power is no longer the source of global dominance as it was in days of Alfred Mahan. China still feels a need for hard power. China's increasing interests in maritime security enunciated in the Mahan's view which called for strengthening the capabilities for winning both command of the sea and command of the air. It was evident, followed by the statement of Admiral Wu Shengli, the commander of PLAN who proclaimed that "China is an ocean Nation". Hu Jintao, the President of China added to this by emphasizing the need for a strong modern navy ^[1].

China has long nursed hopes to extend its reach into the Indian Ocean to pursue its diverse interests

- First, to secure the Sea Line of Communication for its very substantial commerce across the Indian Ocean.
- Second, it seeks to secure farther waterways, such as the Strait of Malacca, through its access to the Indian Ocean in order to have uninterrupted energy supplies.
- Third, it wants to be able to neutralize any potential hostile action to choke off its energy shipments across the Indian Ocean or the Strait of Malacca.

Maritime policy of any country is combination of economic, military, political and geo- strategy exerted through an ability to use the sea or deny its use to others. Traditionally, countries have been trying to control use-of-sea activities for their welfare and to promote for their very interests. So, The Chinese maritime policy in Indian Ocean is also revolved around the following factors:

- Economic developments comprise with energy security, trade and commerce.
- China's policy of String of Pearls.
- China's one Belt one Route policy.
- Modernization of PLA Navy.
- China's Strategic alliances with South Asian states that are vital in helping and providing greater access to and from the Indian Ocean. Since 1992, China's military and naval alliances with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar shows its growing maritime interests in and around Indian Ocean.

Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC)

Free passage through sea lines and their security stretching from China's coastlines to the Indian Ocean is very significant to China. China's trade, energy and oil acquisition ^[2] transporting through the Indian Ocean to the Strait of Malacca and other navigational chokepoints from the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia are defining its strategic interests and security of Sea Lines of Communications in Indian ocean, South China sea and the Caspian Sea regions. Ninety five percent of the oil used in China is transported by sea and 80% of that shipped through the Strait of Malacca. Malacca Strait is along the China's sea borne oil life line but beyond the reach of Chinese navy. Thus, vulnerability of SLOC is perceived as a geopolitical risk and Chinese means of protecting these sea routes is extremely limited.

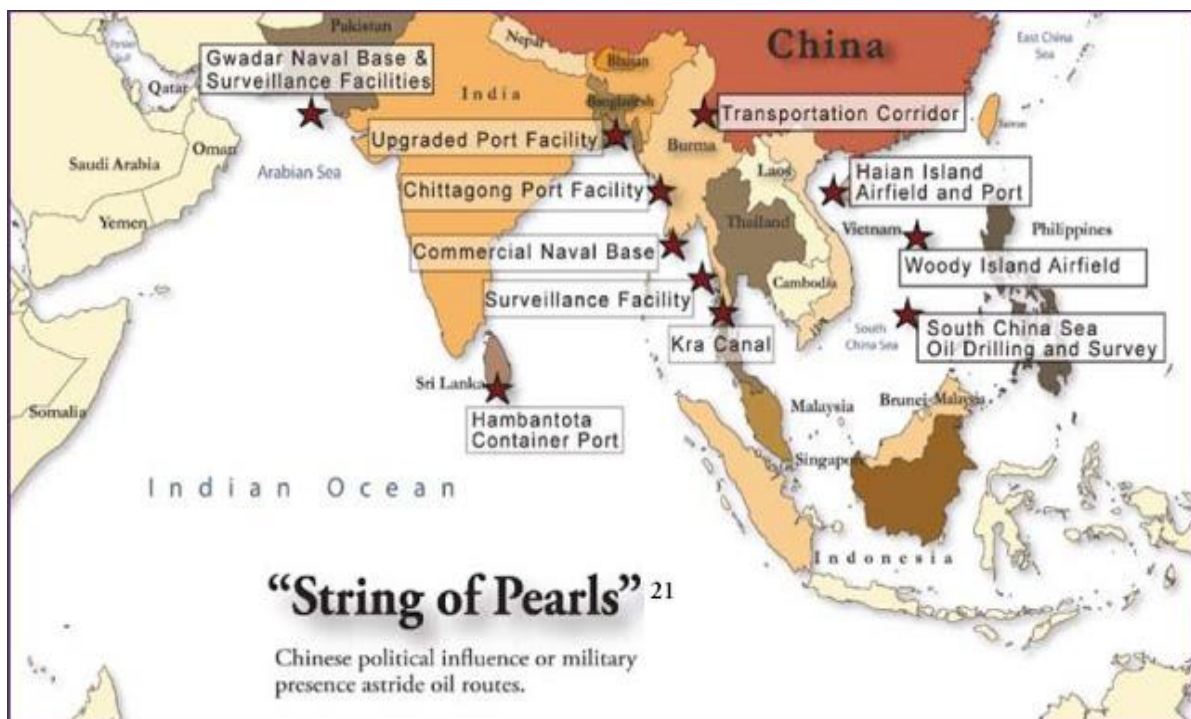
String of Pearls Policy

China's maritime policy and pattern of behavior in the Indian Ocean Region has many facets and can be explained through the concept of "The String of Pearls" in its geographical context. China's growing interest and influence along the string of pearls primarily driven by the need to secure sea lanes of communication for its energy supplies and trade. It is also presenting a complex strategic situation that could impact the future direction of China's relationship in the region. The Pearls extend from the coast of mainland China through the littorals of the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca, across the Indian Ocean and on to the littoral of the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf.

Interestingly, the notion of a string of pearls swiftly took an aura of legitimacy with the analysts and official incorporating it into every discourse both in the US and abroad. It has become a common parlance among Indian sea power analysts. But the term derives more inferences the US observers have drawn from Chinese activities in the region than from a coherent national strategy codified in Chinese doctrine, strategies commentary or official statements. The String of Pearls are the bases and seaports scattered along the sea routes linking the Middle East with Coastal China, augmented by diplomatic ties with the states in the region. Each pearl in the string of pearls is cause of the Chinese geopolitical significance or military presence. In the Hainan Island, Sanaya is a pearl with Chinese Submarines Naval base facilities. An upgraded air strip on Woody Island, located in the Parcel Archipelago 300 nautical miles East of Vietnam, is another pearl. A container shipping facility in Taiwan especially along the String of Pearls is an area where China can make strategic advances to extend power and gain influence. The maritime frontier beyond Taiwan, especially along the String of Pearls, China is making strategic advances to expend its power and influence through Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar though they are stand out of its geographical proximity. China is building naval port and refuelling stations at Sittwe in Myanmar, Chittagong in Bangladesh, Hambantotta in Sri Lanka and Gwadar Port of Pakistan are the strategic pearls of its policy. China's plan to cut a canal across Thailand's Kra Isthmus and monitoring station in Maldives close to its sea lanes also promoting maritime interests.

¹ S. Gopal, China and Indian Ocean: Zone of Peace Area of the Future Conflicts? Shadow Warrior, C3S Paper No.711 dated Jan.12,2011.

² Oil and Gas Emergency Policy, China 2012 update International Energy Agency Statistics.



For long Myanmar has been the primary focus for China which is not only a bridgehead to Indian ocean but also a powerhouse of energy –natural gas, in its own right. Myanmar offered China smooth access to the Indian Ocean, as the former’s northeastern Shan Plateau provides an easy route for South western China to the valley of Irrawaddy River. This route has been the favored corridor for moving goods and people between South Western China and Bay of Bengal region for two millennia. In 1990s, China financed the building of a road network that connected China’s Yunnan region with Myanmar. China contributed to the

construction of rail, road and river networks in Myanmar, which linked China to Myanmar’s Coast. At the same time, China is working to improve Myanmar’s harbors modernize its naval facilities and constructing new naval base, airtime telecommunications. China has also constructed MS and surveillance facilities on Myanmar’s littoral and beyond. One such facility was situated just opposite of India’s port Blair on Andaman Island near the Strait of Malacca. Pakistan’s strategic significance as a naval power is not less for China. China together with Islamabad has built a deepsea port in Gwadar along the Arabian Sea coast. By

gaining control of Gwadar port formally on Feb. 19, 2013, China has made its entry in the Indian Ocean directly. China is now projecting power by enhancing its air and naval capabilities to make land forces reach the intended areas of operations. This will serve Chinese ends. First, it will ensure safe shipping for China's oil or energy supplies from the Persian Gulf. Second, in the event of any hostile action to block its energy supplies through the Persian Gulf, the Gwadar Port will serve as a safe alternative supply route. Third, it will eventually become the substitute passage for

Persian Gulf and Strait of Malacca where China is totally dependent upon the goodwill of the United States and its allies who police it. Fourth, as the Gwadar port is opposite the strait of Hormuz, through which bulk of the world's energy resources especially Japanese fuel imports, it will provide China strategic lever to retaliate in case its shipments are obstructed elsewhere. Last, the Port will provide China a strategic foothold in Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean and enhance its influence against India and deepen its influence and alliances with South Asian states.



China is also building a vast network of roads and rail links running from Gwadar to primary Naval base in Karachi. The coastal highway will connect Pakistan to Western China, including its Muslims majority autonomous region of Xinjiang, through Karakoram Highway. Oil reserves in Baluchistan is also most precious for China's energy strategy, however China wants its shipment from Central Asia and the Middle East especially natural gas from Turkmenistan, Qatar and Kuwait transported to Gwadar then piped or trucked to western China through Karakoram Highway (KKH).

China's maritime policy has also beckoned to Bangladesh because of its proximity with Myanmar and the immense reserves of natural gas which are more than twice the volume of Pakistan. There are ambitious plans of China constructing of a highway linking Bangladesh with China through Myanmar, Kunming to Chittagong in Bangladesh via Mandalay in Myanmar so that the gas resources can be easily accessible to China.

As other South Asian States, Sri Lanka occupies a strategically important heft of the Indian Ocean stretching from the Middle east to South East Asia. The Chinese are building highway, developing two power plants and constructing a new port in Sri Lanka's Hambantota. China's strategy to build a port mean to acquire a naval base near the crucial Indian Ocean and that carry energy supplies from the

Middle East. C. Raja Mohan points out, China has started building a circle of roads and ports connections in India's Neighboring countries and it has begun to eye a role in Indian Ocean as its thrust for natural resources makes it more important to secure the sea lanes.

One Belt One Route Policy

China has also acquired geo-political leverage in the western Indian Ocean from Eastern Africa, gulf to the Southern Asia to share maritime security. China adopted one belt one route policy related with the string of pearls strategy to push India and balance its interests in Indian Ocean. One belt and one route are the China 's plan with a policy of connectivity in the sub region cooperating and aligning with local states for commercial ports, military agreement and securing bases in Eastern Africa, Middle East and South East Asia. This have added Chinese and Indian rivalries in the Indian Ocean. China has established comprehensive strategic partnerships with Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, as well as strategic partnerships with Djibouti, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, and Turkey. Coinciding with the expansion of the BRI, this flurry of diplomatic activity indicates that Chinese leaders increasingly perceive the Middle East as important to their political and strategic goals.



Fig 1: Planned Routes for the Belt and Road Initiative

China's One Belt and One Route initiative is also related with its Vision and Action on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (2015). It is a part of its foreign policy that aims at connecting China to States across Eurasia, Africa and Asia across the Indian Ocean. China's main purpose is to facilitate political coordination and connectivity, unimpeded trades and financial integrations. These political motives provide a road figure for the development strategies to promote international economic cooperation. Central to this is the 1+2+3 cooperation pattern. With 1 representing energy as a core interest; 2 infrastructures, construction as well as trade and investment and 3 nuclear energy satellites and new energy sources^[3].

Regional co-operation is the most practical way to safeguard China's interest in the Indian Ocean. As a part of its strategy, China has adopted soft power diplomacy—an accommodative attitude through friendship and good neighbourliness. China pursued an approach to gain influence in the region through massive economic and military aids, signing friendship pacts, building ports, investments, development packages and diplomatic gesture. As a result, China has become most favourable power than India despite the authoritarian nature of its domestic politics and have gained access to the Indian Ocean through its relationships with Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

For China, Bangladesh is a doorway into India's turbulent north-eastern region Arunachal Pradesh on which China lays claim. In its ethnic conflict between Sinhalese and Tamil, China boldly supported Sri Lanka politically and militarily and shielded Sri Lanka significantly by keeping the Tamils-Sinhalese crisis off the agenda at the UN. Beijing even had managed to prevent the Security Council from discussing the situation. Most notably, China's quiet assertion in India's background has put Sri Lankan government in a position to not only play off against India but also ignore complaints from outside Asia about human

rights violations in the war. All these states are bridging China's presence in the Indian Ocean turning its disadvantage of geographical distance into advantage and taking edge over India. Similarly, China is moving closer to those countries in South China Sea region that contest its claims to the Paracel and Spratly Island in South China Sea. Most importantly, Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines and Vietnam are rival claimants to the Spratly (Nansha) Island.

Conclusions and Observations

China's maritime policy, beyond its periphery, is more than a regional strategy to reduce the regional influence of major powers—India and the US. China's String of Pearls policy will continue to grow China's strength and stature and will help to contain and encircle India and thereby limit the growing influence of Indian navy in the region. Military alliances, great power security guarantees and balance of power are still a dominant political order in Indian ocean. In terms of threats to its maritime policy, Chinese policy makers have three major worries. First, any disruptions in supply of oil to China from Persian Gulf, Central Asia and Africa could trigger serious energy shortages and sharp price spikes would have severe adverse effects on the Chinese economy. Second, in an event of a confrontation, Japan and the USA might attempt to stop China vital oil supplies particularly over Taiwan issue. Third, China is concerned about the growing presence of US as well as increasing Indian-US naval cooperation in the Indian Ocean.

China and India, largest regional powers, are likely to clash at some point in the future as both are developed economies and search for outlets. This may not lead to war in the classical sense but an economic conflict with a maritime dimension, resources sharing, markets access and globalization of national interests will give rise to increasing tension. The importance of Indian Ocean will continue and China will continue to promote its strategic interests through bilateral and multilateral alliances on the basis of economic and military assistance to the South Asian States and at the same time undermine to Indian relationship with these countries. Securing beachheads in the Indian Ocean represents a precursor to a more vigorous future strategy in

³ Jonathan Fulton, China's Challenge to US Dominance in the Middle East, Italian Institute of international Political Studies, April 13, 2018.

the region. China is focused on achieving practical strategic objectives and maintains favourable relations with even rogue states that have reputations of behaviour objectionable to the world community.

Malacca strait dilemma is an illusion. There is no risk of congestion; even the risk of piracy, terrorist attack and accident in the strait is low. The possibility of blockade or destroying is nil and if in case it blocks, it would not take long time to clearance operation and it could be pass through Sudan and Lombok.

If conflict broke out in Taiwan Strait, Malacca strait or even if the US impose a total blockade, the Chinese economy would not be affected badly as the proponents of the Malacca Dilemma maintain that China's energy supplies could not be completely cut off. The Politics of oil and energy security is likely to have a powerful impact on the strategic dynamics of Indian Ocean. Most significantly, energy security could bring about a new strategic interdependence between Eastern and western parts of Asia.

China's policy to radiate influence into the Indian Ocean Region will hinge its ability to secure waters near home. To quote from Berry Posen, "Beijing must first put to sea forces able to mount a contested zone against the US and perhaps allied forces attempted to intervene in a cross-strait contingency"⁴. China's attempts to amass hard power embodied in PLA Navy expediency forces, stationed along the string of pearls in Indian Ocean region, will encounter an Indian accustomed to predominance against all comes. If Beijing can hope to mount a contested zone of its own against US navy, India can hope to mount a contested zone of its own against PLA Navy. While tremendous difficulties beset New Delhi, the Indian Navy will continue to enjoy local superiority over its prospective Chinese competition for some time to come.

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⁴ You ji, A new Era for Chinese naval Expansion, *China Brief*, vol. issue-5, 2006.