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The Unfolding China's Indian Ocean Strategy

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“ The Greater Indian Ocean region stretching eastward from the Horn of Africa past the Arabian Peninsula, the Iranian plateau and the Indian subcontinent, all the way to the Indonesian archipelago and beyond, will be the centre of global conflicts, because most international business supply will be conducted through this route. Most important of all, it is in this region the interests and influence of India, China and the United States are beginning to overlap and intersect. It is here the 21st century's global power dynamics will be revealed..... two key players in this region are India and China- India moving east and west while China to the South”- Robert Kaplan, in “Monsoon- the Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power”, 21 November 2010.

2. The quote above undoubtedly leads to a pertinent question – in what way the policy makers in the three potentially big players in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), are now preparing to meet the long term projections made in Kaplan's obviously accurate prognosis? In other words, what is the nature of current IOR strategies of these powers and what will be their geo-strategic implications?

3. Taking the case of People's Republic of China (PRC) , it cannot be denied that the PRC's strategic focus till now continues to be on the Pacific and not on the Indian Ocean region. It would however be a folly to ignore the gradually unfolding changes in the perceptions of Beijing on the IOR's strategic importance; they are indeed pointers to the future. As for now, Beijing's principal interest seems to lie in the need to protect the Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs) along the Indian Ocean, vital for the country's energy imports. While this is being so, official-level articulations on China's IOR views are gradually gaining intensity, which may culminate in China's coming out with a comprehensive Indian Ocean doctrine ultimately.

4. It is not difficult to trace the connection between the changing Chinese perceptions on the IOR and the steady emergence of maritime

security interests, marking a new trend since the end of cold war, as a key element of China's overall national security strategy. To help achieving the declared goal of turning the country as a fully modernised one by middle of the century, the PRC has evolved an overall strategic approach encompassing the requirements of land, maritime, economy and energy security. Out of these, the criticality of maritime aspect has risen as a result of the compulsions which China began to experience for getting access to all strategic resources and protecting critical sea lanes transporting energy supplies from abroad, in the overall interest of its development. As corollary, the PRC's naval objectives have undergone a shift – from that of conducting coastal defence activities to offshore defence and ultimately to far sea defence. A case in point is the stress noticed in China's latest Defence White Paper (2013) on “protecting national maritime rights and interests” and “armed forces providing reliable support for China's interests overseas”. It is clear that the PRC intends to expand the capabilities of its Navy, especially to operate abroad; this indeed marks a new stage in China's development which has come into being due to the increasing needs being felt by a rising China to secure its growing global interests.

5. China is now turning its security policies into action. The PRC's ongoing naval modernisation efforts are gaining momentum which confirm Beijing's intentions to expand the country's naval capabilities so as to operate in waters far beyond its borders. Against the roles allotted to it to defeat invasion from sea, defend territorial sovereignty and protect maritime rights, the PLA Navy is upgrading its destroyers and frigates to range further. Testing of 056 stealth frigate and the entry into service of China's first air craft carrier, need to be seen in this context. In a nutshell, China's naval capabilities are increasing day by day thanks to its ongoing modernization programme in developing Anti- Ship Ballistic Missiles, Anti-Ship cruise missiles, submarines, both conventional and nuclear, amphibious ships, land based air craft, unmanned aerial vehicles, Electro-magnetic pulse weapons and maritime surveillance. It is believed that naval modernization can lead to China's projection of power into the first island chain (Taiwan) and even upto the second island chain (Guam) , hurting American interests. The establishment of Yalong naval base near Sanya may have strategic implications for military balance in Asia-Pacific region (Carlyle A. Thayer, paper to international workshop on South China Sea , Ho Chi Minh city, 18-21 November 2012).

6. The Chinese Navy's field activities now include its participation in the joint anti-piracy patrols off the coast of Somalia in 2011 and its ship to ship replenishment exercise in Eastern Indian Ocean in December 2013 as well as the ‘counter-piracy, search, rescue and damage control drill’, carried out in January 2014 by a three-ship Chinese navy squadron. In the last mentioned, the largest amphibious Chinese landing ship – Changbaishan – along with two destroyers took part. The choice of Lombok Strait near Indonesia, as drill location has been significant as by doing so, Beijing seems to have opened up a new route from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean, other than the usual one used for drills through the Malacca Strait. Interesting are Chinese official observations being noticed that the drill is a part of ‘annually held naval combat exercises in the South China Sea, the West Pacific Ocean and the East Indian Ocean to test the combat ability of naval ships’.

7. China's actions in deploying attack submarines in the Indian Ocean, is receiving India's attention. Noting this development, an Indian official document, titled ‘Indian Navy: Perceived Threats to Subsurface Deterrent Capability and Preparedness’, prepared by the Integrated Defence Staff in New Delhi predicted intense rivalry between the Indian and Chinese navies in the next three years as the “implicit focus” of

the Chinese Navy appears to be on undermining the Indian Navy's edge "to control highly sensitive sea lines of communication (" China's submarines in Indian Ocean worry Indian Navy", Alfred Wilhelm Meier, China Daily Mail , 7 April 2013, <http://chinadailymail.com/2013/04/07/chinas-submarines-in-indian-ocean-w...> [1]).

8. The first firm signal that maritime security interests dominate China's thinking on the IOR came through a statement (Galle, Sri Lanka, 13 December 2012) made by Vice Admiral Su Zhiqian, Commander of the East China Sea Fleet of the Chinese Navy. It laid stress on the 'freedom and safety of the navigation in the Indian Ocean' acting as a crucial factor in global economy and declared that the Chinese navy will actively maintain the peace and stability of the Indian Ocean through carrying out 'maritime security cooperation' with the navies of various countries, especially seeking to establish a maritime security 'code of conduct' between them under the 'premise of respect for each country's sovereignty and maritime interests' ("Chinese Navy to Actively Maintain Peace and Stability of Indian Ocean", China Military Online, 15 December 2012).

9. One can see the next signal in the Blue Book of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) released in June 2013. It had chapters on India's "Look East Policy" and the "U.S-India axis of relation in Indian Ocean region". As a document of an authoritative Chinese think tank, it appears as policy indicators. The Blue Book observed that "In the past, China's Indian Ocean strategy was based on 'moderation' and 'maintaining the status quo', but the changing dynamics of international relations necessitates China play a more proactive role in affairs of the region". It frankly admitted that Beijing presently is not having any Indian Ocean strategy unlike U.S. and India who were following a well-defined "Look East" policy and the "pivot" or "rebalancing" strategy respectively. Adding that In absence of a strategy , China's development prospects would severely be hit, it observed, "With changes in the relations among countries in the Indian Ocean Region and in the international situation, China's diplomacy should also change , but Beijing's interests will be driven only by commercial, and not military, objectives". The document asked China to deepen economic ties with the nations in the IOR while cautioning that if China, United States and India do not constructively engage each other, the Indian Ocean can end up as an ocean of conflict and trouble. As the CASS publication predicted, no single or regional power including Russia, China, Australia and India, can control the Indian Ocean by itself in the future and after jostling among powers, a fragile balance of power might be reached in the region. It acknowledged that the rise of China was worrying the littoral states of IOR, particularly India. "The 'China threat theory' proposed by Western countries and the illusory 'string of pearls strategy was being projected as a new assertiveness of Beijing, it pointed out.

10. Further signals include observations on the US role in the IOR being made by Chinese academicians close to the official hierarchy. A study said that after the end of the cold war, the US became the leading force in the Indian Ocean and began its military forward deployment there. In recent years, with the rising of the strategic position of the Indian Ocean, the US put forward the “Indo-Pacific” concept and strengthened its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean, such as maintaining its dominant position, protecting the safety of sea lines of communication and continuing to control strategic chokepoints, etc. Driven by ideology and economic factors, the US has obtained hegemony in the Indian Ocean via military deployment and institutional arrangements, (“U.S. Indian Ocean Strategy”, Pacific Journal, June 2013, Sun Xianpu, Yunnan University, Kunming).

11. Other Influential Chinese scholars have assessed that at present, in the Indian Ocean region, there is a ‘no alliance, no adversary’ situation of ‘flexible balance; this may however change and China should respond by seeking ‘greater space’ for it in the Indian Ocean region (Chen Iijun and Xu Juan, “Flexible Balance and Economic Strategies of China, the US and India in Indian ocean”, South Asia Studies, Volume 4/12, 15 July 2013).

12. Chinese analysts have also commented in the IOR strategy of India. The launch of India’s first indigenous aircraft carrier Vikrant on 12 August 2013 has been viewed them as reflecting India’s “ambition to dominate the Indian Ocean” and heralding a greater Indian presence in the Pacific. The experts alleged that the US wants to push India to integrate into its system to contain China and encourages India to intervene in Asia-Pacific affairs under the “Indo-Pacific” concept, but India prefers balancing China naturally by ensuring peaceful and fruitful competition and has no intention of becoming a regional test balloon by going against China (Fu Xiaoqiang, a scholar at the China Institute for Contemporary International Relations – CICIR, China Daily, 12 August 2013).

13. Among subsequent commentaries on the IOR made by influential Chinese academicians, an article of a leading state-controlled Chinese think tank, look very significant. The write-up declared that China’s strategic focus is the Pacific rather than the Indian Ocean and the PRC lags far behind the US in terms of maritime power and does not enjoy India’s geographic advantages. It asserted that China follows a naval strategy aimed at ensuring a ‘harmonious sea’ through capacity building and international cooperation, viewing the region surrounding the Indian Ocean as a vital energy and trade route, not a battlefield for power struggle. China’s seaward policy is strongly influenced by trade and energy motives, and its open economy is becoming more interdependent with the outside world, particularly the Indian Ocean.

14. The article added that Chinese involvement in building infrastructure in the Indian Ocean region littorals is part of the PRC’s economy-oriented ‘Going Global’ strategy. Interpreting India’s views on the Indian Ocean region as a sum-up of senses of crisis and destiny, it says that as for crisis, Indian politicians and strategists pay great attention to the linkages between Indian Ocean and India’s national security and as for destiny, India’s unique geographic location forms the cornerstone of India’s aspiration to dominate Indian Ocean or even to transform Indian Ocean into India’s Ocean. Contrasting India’s position with that of the US , the article found that the US seeks to be a hegemonic maritime power that is not only dominant in the Atlantic or Pacific, but also in the Indian Ocean. Although it stresses the importance of a

cooperative maritime strategy, the US is still trying to maintain its status as a pre-eminent maritime power. In accordance with the shift of the world power balance, the US will seek to sustain its strong presence in the Indian Ocean.

15. In conclusion, the article said that although confrontations and conflicts between China, US and India have been predicted in this region, particularly with the rise of China's maritime power, their different strategic goals may lead to different results. It added that given the China's policy aims, intent and capability, the PRC cannot afford to challenge either the United States or India. But with the rapid growth of its economic and military power, India is likely to adopt a more assertive maritime presence in the Indian Ocean. Thus, considering that the US wants to maintain its maritime dominance, an India–US potential power struggle in the Indian Ocean is more likely to characterize the Indian Ocean region landscape than the 'China threat' ("Power Politics in the Indian Ocean: Don't Exaggerate the China Threat", 24 October 2013, Chun Hao Lou, Assistant Director at the Institute of Maritime Studies, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations –CICIR, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/10/24/power-politics-in-the-indian-oce...> [2]).

16. The data given above, give enough hints to the likely shape of China's future Indian Ocean Region (IOR) strategy. Given below is an estimate of the same and possible regional consequences of responses of other two important involved powers like the US and India.

(a) China's priority will always be on protecting its energy security interests, by way of securing the Sea Lanes of Communications, spreading from the Gulf to the South China Sea. In the short and middle terms, realising its existing inferior position compared to US maritime power and India's strategic advantage in the IOR, China may persist with its 'harmonious sea' approach. It will shun a military approach and push for 'constructive engagement' in the IOR between three powers – the US, China and India, and concentrate on achieving 'greater space' in the IOR by way of promoting maritime security cooperation with the Indian Ocean littorals. In long terms, China, under perceived conditions of continuance of India's domination and the US strong presence in the IOR, may intend to project its own power into the region to bring about a balance to the situation. Beijing may actively work for creating alternative energy supply routes, safe from the US and Indian challenges.

(b) China's current fears that the US is trying to contain the PRC by roping in Indian Ocean littorals, under an 'Indo-Pacific' framework, may always influence Chinese strategic thinking. In this context, one can expect China's increased efforts to woo these littorals through economic and other means so as to keep them away from the US influence. Its drive to build infrastructure in IOR littorals as part of its 'going global' strategy, is already setting the trend in this regard.

(c) On India, influencing China's strategy in a long term, will be the thought figuring in the Chinese analyses so far noticed- India , with its regional economic and political power rising, may become more assertive in the IOR. At the same time, China tends to believe that India will always maintain its strategic autonomy vis-à-vis other nations and will not gang up with the latter, particularly the US, against the PRC's interests. Wooing India will therefore be China's long term endeavour; the PRC's "Look west" strategy accords primacy to and rebalance ties with India (being publicised through highly placed Chinese scholars like Wang Jisi).

17. Indian response to China's Indian Ocean strategy is manifesting in its stepped up efforts to improve bilateral ties with Indian Ocean littorals. Significant is New Delhi's participation in the multilateral fora like the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) and the Indian Ocean Naval symposium. The US is reportedly under invitation to join the IOR-ARC.

18. Washington's interest in the IOR centres round three imperatives for the US- Securing Indian Ocean for international commerce, avoiding regional conflict on issues of strategic choke points in the IOR- Strait of Hormuz and the Malacca strait, and dealing with Sino-Indian competition in the IOR ("Defining U.S. Indian Ocean Strategy" , The Washington Quarterly, published by Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington). The Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR) 2010 of the US Department of Defence had the goals of ensuring open access to the IOR to be achieved through a more integrated approach across civil and military organisations. The Department's document " Strategic Choices and Management Review" (July 2013) stressed the need for US to develop an Indian Ocean policy on the basis of building coalitions with regional allies like Australia, Japan and the Philippines and partners like Vietnam and India. The QDR for 2014 is yet to be made public. The US is currently promoting an "Indo-Pacific" concept as part of its approach towards the IOR; this means differently to each of the countries concerned. New Delhi views the concept in the background of India's 'geographical, historical and political 'necessity. It displays wariness to China's expanding engagement in the region. For China, the concept marks creation of a highway connecting Indian and Pacific Oceans which can play a role in transporting much-needed resources. But it is suspicious of US intentions to use the concept for containing China. On its part, Washington aims to achieve through implementing the concept, the freedom of navigation and reassurance to allies and partners. Australia sees the concept as benevolent one to improve ties with regional nations (<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/01/09/Different-visions-of-the-...> [3])

19. To sum up, the geo-strategic conditions in the IOR are still developing. The current trends being seen indicating that the three main powers involved – India, China and the US, have their own priorities, with potentials for clash, may not be conducive to the establishment of regional peace and prosperity , a dream of all concerned nations.

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