

China's Maritime Ambitions in The Indian Ocean: India's Wake-Up call

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China's over-riding maritime ambition in the Indian Ocean is to displace India's predominance in the "Indian Ocean" and convert this vast maritime expanse into a "Chinese Ocean" and this attempt currently has acquired sharper and predictable contours as enshrined in the latest China Military Strategy Document 2015.

China's brinkmanship and military aggression in the East China Sea and the South China Sea is 'small change' in its maritime strategic moves to give effect to its switching the emphasis of its Grand Strategy from a Land –Centric Orientation Strategy 'to a predominant 'Ocean-Centric Orientation Strategy'. The centre-piece of this strategic switch is China's ambition to convert the 'Indian Ocean' to a 'Chinese Ocean'.

Implicit in the above are not narrow aims of limiting India's naval ambitions but also the larger game of China's "Strategic Diminution" of India as its prime geopolitical objective. Indian Ocean is also the chequerboard on which China intends to play its larger game of emerging as a superpower.

Sequentially, Chinese stepping stones in this direction were the implementation of its 'String of Pearls' as the opening move; followed by its active involvement in Anti-piracy naval operations off the coast of Somalia and Gulf of Aden with a veneer of projecting an image of a benign stakeholder in international maritime security; followed by its wooing of Sri Lanka, Maldives and Seychelles to gain naval footholds; and now it's so called 'Maritime Silk Road' initiative which with benign labelling as a benign commercial development initiative of invited countries is nothing but a deep-rooted maritime domination strategy of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.

In China's ambitions to convert the Indian Ocean into a 'Chinese Ocean', the lead major accomplice role has been assigned by China to

Pakistan. China has assigned two major roles to Pakistan in this direction. The first focuses on Pakistan facilitating the Chinese development of the strategically located Gwadar Port on Baluchistan's Makran Coast in close vicinity of the Hormuz Straits as a virtually exclusive Chinese Navy facility, though currently touted as a commercial venture.

Gwadar Port is crucial for China for two major reasons and both primarily strategic requirements for China. In the maritime dimension, Gwadar provides a Forward Operating Base for the Chinese Navy warships and submarines in its relation to China's Indian Ocean ambitions.

Gwadar Port now is the maritime terminal of the China's flagship strategic enslavement of Pakistan through the \$46 billion China-Pakistan Economic (CPEC) Corridor Project linking Gwadar with Kashgar in China's restive Xinjiang periphery. It would enable China to overcome the 'Malacca Dilemma' in terms of its energy security lifelines.

China's second role being assigned to Pakistan is to keep Indian Navy's Western Fleet from exercising sea-control of the Arabian Sea by building-up Pakistan Navy's submarine fleet as a focussed Chinese attention. China's agreement signed recently to supply Pakistan Navy with eight submarines is a pointer. By implication, China's intentions are to build-up the Pakistan Navy as a potent fleet to protect China's energy lifelines in the Arabian Sea against the contingency of interdiction by the Indian Navy.

The China Threat to convert the Indian Ocean to a "Chinese Ocean" should be a "Wakeup Call" for the Indian policy establishment, and the unfolding Chinese naval strategy requires fast-track Indian responses. The following steps by the Indian policy establishment need immediate implementation and direction at the highest levels:

- India has announced its intentions for a 200 ship Indian Navy. Announcement of intentions is not enough. Budgetary support for immediate implementation of expansion plans and prodding the lethargic Ministry of Defence bureaucracy and the shipyards under its control requires a jump-start kick.
- The 200 ship Indian Navy expansion should be exclusively of warships and submarines and not fudged-up with figures of logistics ships and patrol crafts. India's submarine fleet today, by Ministry of Defence neglect, has suffered a mortal blow.
- India's offshore islands both in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea are upgraded into major naval bases, along with maritime offensive air-power and surveillance capabilities.
- Imperatives exist for the creation of a Southern Fleet of a sizeable Aircraft Carrier Group comprising an Aircraft Carrier, warships component of destroyers and frigates and submarines. It should be exclusively tasked for operational duties in the Indian Ocean Region, South of Sri Lanka.
- Imperatives also exist for a separate and dedicated Naval Task Force for operations in the Eastern approaches to the Indian Ocean, including South China Sea.

The United States, Japan, South East Asia and Europe have a convergence of strategic interests with India in ensuring that the Indian

Ocean's maritime control does not pass into Chinese hands. This is a big strategic asset or gain for India; but India cannot adopt a aid-back approach but work assiduously to ensure that the active support of these countries is capitalised upon.

Concluding, it needs to be emphasised that India's naval plans to checkmate China's attempts to interfere with India's naval dominance of the Indian Ocean, necessarily, need to incorporate two essential components. The first is an 'offensive spirit' arising from a fast-tracked Indian Navy expansion which would dissuade China from undermining India's Indian Ocean strategic interests. Secondly, stressed by me in TV discussions also is that to keep the Indian Ocean as truly "Indian Ocean", India would require the United States to underwrite India's naval strategy as an indisputable component, along with Europe and Japan who have significant stakes in the Indian Ocean security and have traditionally conceded as a strategic concept that the Indian Ocean maritime security should be managed and be in India's hands.

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