

China's naval base in Pakistan Revealed – China's New Global Game

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Tue, 12/06/2016 - 09:26

Paper No. 6203

Dated 06-Dec-2016

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Talking to *The Express Tribune* (Nov 25, 2016) Pakistani naval officers revealed that Chinese naval ships would be deployed at the Gwadar Sea Port to safeguard the port and trade under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

A special squadron of four to six ships would be deployed, comprising of both Chinese and Pakistani navies. The ambit of this combined naval force is not only the protection on Gwadar Port, which is designated as a defence entity, but also ensuring security of maritime trade emanating from Pakistan which will have Chinese interests. The Arabian Sea to the African coast, and of course, the Gulf would be its area of operation.

Pakistani naval officers also told the *Tribune* that the role of maritime forces in Pakistan had expanded since the operationalization of Gwadar Port and accelerated development of the CPEC. Gwadar is a Chinese-built and almost Chinese-owned operation. China has a lease of 40 years for operating this port and a Chinese state-owned company with military links is in charge. A decade back, with international focus on this project, the Chinese and the Pakistanis decided to hand over the running of Gwadar Port to a Singapore Company. Many including in India argued that the port had no military plans behind it, since it was being operated by a company, belonging to a third country which was neutral on these issues.

There was enough evidence in 2000-2001 to point to the fact that Gwadar deep sea port was being constructed for China-Pakistan strategic purposes, but government shot these down. In India, the policy was to watch China but not upset or provoke China. This means experts in the Indian government were discouraged to pursue these China related issues.

That China had planned to enter the Indian Ocean by around 2012 became evident from their naval planning and activities, and articles by Chinese maritime experts.

In fact, the Indian government should have been alerted in the early 1990s, when the director of General Logistics Department (GLD), of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), Zhou Nanqi presented a policy paper to the Central Military Commission and the communist party's Political Bureau, titled "**Indian Ocean is not India's Ocean**". The paper got leaked to a foreign news agency.

In the mid-1990s China drew up a strategy to win over poorer nations in the Indian Ocean littorals, by giving them military and economic assistance (as outright aid or at 'friendship' prices) and political support. The aim was to isolate India in the Indian Ocean region. Pakistan, as always, was the fulcrum.

The Maldives was an immediate target. Between 1997 and 2001, the Maldives received a series of high level visits from China, which included Politburo Standing Committee member Li Ruihuan, Chief of General Staff of the PLA, the Quanyu and Premier Zhu Rongji.

It is another matter that the Maldives is unlikely to afford such facilities to China and get into a situation which it cannot handle internationally. It also faces serious threat from climate change, and experts have projected that this island country can go under water by 2040.

The fact is that China had indicated for a long time its intention of setting up military bases in the Indian Ocean. By 2010-11 Chinese military officers and experts began speaking and writing on the subject. Knowing how the Chinese media and professional journals operate under the party and state laws, these expositions could not be allowed unless sponsored by the authorities.

They were probing to see the reactions from the countries of the region, especially India, and from the United States, which has huge security and economic interests in this region. China would have gone ahead with its plans anyway, but may have done it after consultation with stakeholders. But they found an open field.

China is broadening its basing targets but it may fall short. It was sanguine about a naval-military base in Myanmar when the military was in total power. With Myanmar moving towards democracy and a civilian government, led by opposition NLD which is asserting decisions gradually, a Chinese base in Myanmar seems to be no longer in the horizon.

The 'military base network in the Indian Ocean Region' blueprint at the moment includes Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Seychelles, the other already mentioned and Djibouti.

China has already acquired berthing, servicing and replenishment facilities in Djibouti. The reason cited by China is that their anti-piracy

fleet requires these facilities in this piracy-infested waters; to safeguard international sea lanes of communication; not only for the protection of Chinese shipping but for all.

A deeper look into this argument is called for. During the recent visit (Nov. 25) of the vice-chairman of the CMC, Fan Changlong, to Djibouti, an inspection of “sailors and soldiers” on a Chinese command ship, currently in Djibouti, was carried out by him. Steps are already afoot to place soldiers in this country. This may be followed by stationing fixed wing aircraft for support role.

The discussion Chan had with the president and prime-minister of Djibouti, as reported (China Radio International, Nov. 25, 2016) reveal a quest for a much wider relationship in other fields, including military. Is this base going to be China’s arrow-head in the eastern coast of the African continent?

China’s commercial and economic (including oil) needs are growing at a rapid pace. Will Chinese troops be employed to intervene deeper into Africa if the need arises?

China had penetrated with discussions and some action for similar facilities in the Seychelles. Experts believe Chinese reconnaissance aircraft may be deployed there.

The previous president of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapaksa strongly favoured Chinese presence in the country, received aid from China, to counter India. China docked a nuclear submarine in Colombo Port in September 2014 and a diesel-powered attack submarine in November 2014. Due to strong reservations conveyed by India, such visits have not recurred.

Mr. Maithripala Sirisena, current Sri Lankan president, has balanced the situation between India and Sri Lanka. A former prime minister, Dudley Senanayake had warned his successor, that if Colombo gave base facilities to China in Trincomalee, the next India-China war would be fought in Sri Lanka.

It would be pertinent to mention that China is building the Lotus Tower in Colombo. The massive tower is funded by Chinese Exim Bank (estimated to cost US \$ 103 million). Two Chinese companies are involved in the construction of defence electronic systems, and public security related to responding to international terrorism.

The involvement of these two Chinese state-owned corporations (China National Electronic Import and Export Corporation and China Aerospace Long March International Trade Corporation) in this civilian project raises serious security concerns in neighbouring countries, like India, and in the Indian Ocean region. The tower has the signature of a listening post. (See SAAG Paper No. 5911, dated 10 April, 2015).

Bangladesh is a slightly different case. China has been in quest of construction of a deep sea port on Bangladesh’s eastern coast. The

government led by Prime Minister Sk Hasina is very alert to the geopolitics of the region. A deep sea port is required for the nation's economic development, a goal in which she has made significant success (but more needs to be done). China's strategic plan in Bangladesh will be really successful if and when the Bangladesh-Myanmar-India-China road corridor is built. China is unlikely to get an agreement from Sk. Hasina – unlike the agreement they got from Pakistan for Gwadar.

From a narrower perspective, China decided to reduce its dependence on the Malacca Strait for its vital import of gas and oil. First, the route is more expensive and second, the strait can be blockaded during a military crisis. The oil and gas pipelines from Myanmar's east coast to China's Yunnan province was a chosen alternative. That work is still in progress. The other route was building a transport corridor from western China's Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region, through Pakistan, to Gwadar Port (now known as CPEC). This route is partially functional.

The larger perspective, which was being worked on quietly with periodic addition of plans and strategies culminated in President Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream". By 2049, the 100th year of the People's Republic of China, the country will be rejuvenated to its old glory, and become a fully developed country. It may seem ambitious, but very possible.

Around 2002, there was a discussion among experts in Chinese think tanks about influence overseas. One conclusion was that China must have influence from the Gulf to the Asia Pacific region (the East Line and West Line). The debate in public died down, but China's actions since then have followed that path.

The "One Belt One Road" (OBOR) appears to be at least partially based on those strategies, of which the CPEC is a very important part.

China's military modernization is aimed at power projection and to secure growing or rapidly expanding interests across the world. Hence the emphasis on rapid modernization of the navy.

The strategy is to make China the Central Kingdom, with tributaries who bow down to Beijing. It wants to divide the globe between itself and the United States – a bi-polar system. The two will compete in a proposed world order reflected in the concept of a "new type of relationship among great powers". It does not consider Russia a great power any longer.

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