

## **Evolving dynamics in Indian Ocean Region and Indian Posturing**

Dr Probal Ghosh

Asia is a diverse and a multihued continent. A dynamic area, it is host to a number of declared and un-declared nuclear weapon states this raises the potential for accidental or deliberate usage of nuclear weapons considerably. The sheer profusion of the 'nuclear haves' and the aspiring nuclear states is a clear indication of the deep desire of the populous Asian states to play a more prominent role either at the global or at the regional level. In effect the jostle for power dominance in the Asian region is an evolving and an accentuated process with many players in the fray.

After all it is a continent rich in resources with an energy resource pool extending from West Asia to the Central Asia. It has a talented and populous human resource pool and economic bastions in China, Japan and India. Apart from these positive aspects, regressive factors like rising religious fundamentalism, drug/human smuggling, and piracy also vie for prominence. These multi-faceted aspects have helped in shifting the global focus from the West to the East, more specifically from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean region, South China Seas and adjoining areas. Thus, there exists a perception that events in Asia and the Indian Ocean will determine the course of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A similar jostle for power is playing out in the Indian Ocean region (IOR), that has always been an "active" ocean and is now perceived to be the centre of gravity of the strategic world. Thus, fulfilling the prophetic words that are often attributed to AT Mahan "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia, the destiny of the world would be decided on its waters".

The current period is similar to the one in the Sixties when the British were leaving their primacy of the Indian Ocean in the hands of the next Superpower, the United States. However, at that time, the degree of strategic uncertainty was considerably lesser and the only undecided issue was the construct of the regional architecture that would evolve under US pre-eminence. Today, faced with the underlying power struggle, the primacy of powers has yet to be decided leading to a complex and a dynamic situation. This struggle is a consequence of a change

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brought about by an “imperial overstretch” of US forces and a commonly perceived erosion of US influence. Thus, in geostrategic terms, there is growing participation of major players in the field, seeking primacy along with that of the US. The main players today are India and China (an extra-littoral power) with Australia, Indonesia and South Africa playing the influential role of king-maker.

The third largest ocean in the world, the Indian Ocean, is the hub of activities ranging from commerce and trade transportation, energy transfers to political turbulence in states in its rim. The current accent on economic globalization has brought additional maritime security concerns as most of the regional trade is seaborne. Consequently with increased levels of maritime trade through SLOCs, (Sea Lines of Communication) the associated maritime crime and threats like piracy, terrorism etc have also increased.

Unfortunately, despite sharing a common historical linkage of colonial subjugation, maritime threats and an increasing dependence on sea borne trade - the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has witnessed minimal maritime bonding between its littorals. While maritime commonalities should have encouraged a strong sense of supra-regional cohesion and an IOR identity, unfortunately this has not happened and issues connected to the sea have not got the importance they deserve.

The lack of cohesion is largely due to the vastly dissimilar maritime capabilities and capacities of the IOR littoral states, as well as their differing maritime priorities. Maritime concerns and issues that are of importance to one State may not necessarily hold the same significance for others – thus bringing into focus the differing “Hierarchy of Relevance” for each littoral.

As this area witnesses a subterraneous jostle for power and strategic leveraging capability resulting in an unequalled complexity and fluidity in the hierarchal equations. Adding to this dynamic complexity, US have been encouraging India (a resident IOR power) to assume the primary role of a “balancer of power” in the region<sup>1</sup>. This in a situation where there is a natural

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<sup>1</sup> This has been conveyed to India in numerous formal and informal occasions. Recently speaking Speaking at the Anna Centenary Library in Chennai, India, on July 20 2011 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said - India is ‘not simply emerging, but has emerged’ as a global power, and it should play a leading role in the future of the Asia-Pacific region as well as Central and South Asia,- as cited in Stephen Kauffman, “ Clinton Says India’s Leadership Is Important for All Asia” available in

reluctance on the part of India to play this role to become the net provider of security in the region.

This reluctance probably arises out of a lack of operational and available maritime assets to adequately cover the entire Indian Ocean and partly due to lack of political will and narrow traditional mindsets. An exceptionally sensitive foreign policy- wary of any criticism being labeled as a “hegemon” is another factor underscoring this aspect. .

As a direct consequence of the above the most important relationship that has a bearing on the dynamics of the IOR is the one that is played between New Delhi, Washington and Beijing. Even though two out of these three centres lie outside the geographical ambit of the region, given their regional presence – their role is definitive in defining the IOR politics.

While there has been an effort by the US and allied western powers to ‘use’ India as a balancer and a hedge power against the rise of Beijing- a notion rejected by Indian authorities- there is a thought in Beijing that the rise of India may actually be detrimental for both US and Beijing !<sup>2</sup> ,

### **Strategic Transitions of India**

India has evolved considerably during the past few decades especially with respect to its posturing in the Indian Ocean and it is important to evaluate these transitions in view of the current situation. Partly this steady shift has been the result of the growing confidence of the Indian State and partly due to a growth in its national (maritime ) capacity apart from a dynamic geo political situation in the region which has been conducive to India’s ‘rise’.

It is important to reflect that during Mrs Indira Gandhi’s period at the helm, India was always in pursuit of “strategic autonomy” and “self reliance” which formed the basis of its foreign policy. However, with a globalizing and an interdependent world – the current discourse for India has changed considerably. No longer is it in India’s interest to follow the mantra of “self reliance” and “autonomy is for weak powers trying to insulate themselves..”<sup>3</sup> Thus there exists a change in the thought processes from being a mere rule follower to a more assertive maker of guidelines.

Another significant change in the Indian thought process has been that of projecting its power and protection of its maritime territory. Earlier India’s naval strategy was centered on its ability

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<http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2011/07/20110720141544nehpets0.5934107.html#ixzz1mi10ATh6>

<sup>2</sup> C Raja Mohan, “India and the Changing Geo Politics of the Indian Ocean” Maritime Affairs. Vol 6No.2. P4

<sup>3</sup> Ibid p.6

to defend its territorial waters extending from its vast coast line of nearly 7500 kms and the accompanying Exclusive Economic Zone. But with the expansion of India's maritime interests – as expressed by various Prime Ministers from time to time – has seen an increase in the geographical ambit ranging from “Aden to Malacca's “ and now “Suez to South China seas”. This has been evidenced on ground by frequent flag showing visits of Indian naval ships to ports in the region and varied operations like anti piracy patrols, SLOC patrols, diaspora repatriation, providing security etc in distant reaches of the region.

Since power projection is a direct function of the acquired expeditionary capabilities of the State, the Indian Navy's ability to operate in distant waters has increased considerably. The naval inventory has tailored itself to this challenge while its accompanying logistical support of “forward basing” has not kept the desired pace. Notwithstanding this gap between inventory and infrastructural support there is a significant change of mindset in the policy makers which has ‘evolved ‘from mere defence of territorial waters to that of power projection.

Given the expanding security perimeter of the Indian interests, India is deeply committed to the concepts of freedom of navigation and an obligation to secure the global commons. The maritime strategy is also named “Freedom of the seas”. This aspect however stands in contrast to the expansive territorial claims of the Chinese in the South China seas (a core interest of the Chinese) in which nearly 80% of the seas are being claimed giving rise to serious sovereignty and subsequently navigational issues. This is one of the main factors along with the rising instability of the region that has prompted India to take interest in the entire region.

Lastly – shedding its isolationist profile the Indian Navy has come a long way since it “evolved in isolation”. The Navy has held exercises with all major maritime nations in the region while providing the impetus for an Indian Ocean maritime initiative – Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). An implication of this effort is often overlooked amidst the din of the strategic overtones of this particular regional initiative. Earlier India was required to “join” in the bandwagon of superpowers and its numerous initiatives – currently India is keen that other (littorals) join its bandwagon – for the benefit of common good.

### **The Regional Maritime Initiative – IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium),**

After reviewing the current maritime challenges in the Indian Ocean region and the requirement of coordinating efforts on maritime security issues, the Indian Navy decided emerge on its own

and to take on the role of a lead facilitator in setting up a regional forum of navies of the **Indian Ocean Region**. Assuming the role of an “unobtrusive fulcrum”, the forum termed as IONS aimed at bringing the IOR littoral navies together for active discussions on matters of common maritime interest. The inaugural event and the accompanying seminar was held in 2008 at New Delhi and was attended by 27 Chiefs of Navies (or Coast Guards where there is no Navy). It was inaugurated by the Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh, at an impressive event. Following deliberations at the seminar and the conclave, the focus of IONS that emerged highlighted the following objectives:

1. To promote a shared understanding of issues and concerns relevant to the IOR, which bear upon maritime security.
2. To strengthen the capability of all nation-states of the IOR to address present and anticipated challenges to maritime security and stability.
3. To establish and promote a variety of trans-national, maritime, consultative and cooperative mechanisms, designed to address and mitigate maritime security-concerns of the region.
4. To develop interoperability in terms of doctrines, strategies, procedures, organisational and logistic systems, and, operational processes, so as to promote the provision of speedy, responsive, and effective Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster-Relief (HADR) throughout the IOR.

Described as “21<sup>st</sup> Century’s very first significant maritime security initiative...”,<sup>4</sup> IONS has laudable objectives and has evolved considerably during the last few years. Unfortunately, it has also lost steam in the ensuing years due to varied reasons including that of a change in personalities. However the second biennial meeting held under the Chairmanship of UAE has promised to invigorate the initiative and hence realize its true potential of providing a maritime security forum somewhat on the lines of the WPNS (Western Pacific Naval Symposium).

### **Indian response to String of Pearls policy**

One of the primary actors of the power struggle in the Indian Ocean and the Asian continent has been China, which has been making forays into the IOR – an area that is considered the strategic background of India. Not surprisingly this has raised hackles amongst Indian security planners, a concern reinforced by the well known String of Pearls policy of encirclement adopted by the

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<sup>4</sup> Adm Sureesh Mehta Chief of Naval Staff, speaking on “India’s Maritime Diplomacy and International Security “ on Apr 18-20 at the First IISS Citi India Global Forum, New Delhi. Adm Mehta was the Indian Naval Chief during IONS 2008.

Chinese that has prompted India to undertake counter-measures albeit in a reactive manner. While the Chinese have made inroads into Pakistan (Gwadar), Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Indian Ocean Islands and Bangladesh, India has, in a belated fashion, been trying to cast its net wide-well beyond the region. It is actively pursuing a multi-pronged response strategy which seeks to neutralize Chinese influence in its immediate neighbourhood by simultaneously courting states on its periphery, many of which are apprehensive of the creeping Chinese aggressiveness. Thus, in many ways the Indians are enhancing relationships with the countries in the perimeter of China by playing against the traditional and historical mindset of the Chinese emphasis of securing their Middle Kingdom by having a peaceful periphery.

Consequently, the volatile N. E. Asia is an area of Indian focus. As a means of counter balancing the maverick North Korea supported by China, India has made it a point to enhance its relations with South Korea. After having invited the South Korean President as a Chief Guest for the 2010 Republic Day celebrations and elevating the bilateral relation to a “strategic partnership”, the Indian Defence Minister ‘signed’ two defence related Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs ) in September 2010 during his visit to Seoul<sup>5</sup>. But more importantly, he held discussions on a bilateral nuclear treaty that would raise the level of cooperation to new heights. At the maritime level, the presence of Indian Navy in IOR is seen by South Korean as a positive sign whose dependence on maritime trade passing the region is enormous.

Japan, with its enormous financial clout, an advanced military force and a presently unweaponised nuclear capability, is undoubtedly a major power point of this region. With its traditional and inherent suspicion of the Chinese, Japan, has naturally moved closer to India having elevated its relation to a “strategic partnership”<sup>6</sup>. This was further enhanced in substance with the Japanese agreeing, in principle, to a nuclear deal with India which would enable the Japanese companies to participate in the civil nuclear energy sector in India notwithstanding the devastating Fukushima incident . Additionally, the current 2 plus 2 format dialogue – held for the first time beyond US and Australia (and traditional allies) would ensure that the security

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<sup>5</sup> The first MoU was respect to exchange of defence personnel for education training etc. The second MoU was signed by the Chief Controller of DRDO for cooperating on defence technology. Both were signed in Sept 2010.

<sup>6</sup> 2008 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, is a significant milestone in building Asian power stability. The joint declaration was modelled on Japan's 2007 defence-cooperation accord with Australia - the only country with which Tokyo has a security-cooperation declaration. India is the third country to sign a security pact with Japan. The other two other countries are United States and Australia

and relationship becomes a lot stronger. The proposed joint action against piracy also provides an impetus to the two countries to enhance cooperation and interoperability.

The Vietnamese have an innate distrust of the Chinese. Hence this rapidly rising nation is a lynchpin in India's counter encirclement policy and is being cultivated with many defence related offers as well as infrastructural ones. With ONGC Videsh actively involved in exploring seas around Vietnam and India's stand "against" China at the ARF meeting on the South China Sea imbroglio, many believe the incident of the Indian Naval ship Airavat being challenged after making a port call at Nha Trang<sup>7</sup> in Vietnam was a fallout of these developments. India is eager to help in training Vietnamese army officers in jungle warfare and counter-insurgency and additionally cooperate in anti-piracy operations.

As part of its Look East policy, India has also made focused attempts at enhancing its politico military relations with Singapore (with which it has strong ties in almost every field, especially defence), Indonesia and Philippines.

The development of the Sri Lankan port of Hambantota by the Chinese<sup>8</sup> had earlier raised hackles amongst the Indian security community as it was viewed as yet another "pearl" in the string. However, in an effort to assuage Indian feelings, the Sri Lankans have taken the unique step of allowing India to open a consulate in Hambantota as well as in Jaffna. This may neutralize the perceived China bias as far as Hambantota is concerned but probably India did not bargain for the other "threat" that may arise from the \$450 million agreement, signed in September 2010, for the expansion of Colombo port by the Chinese company China Merchants Holdings and the local company, Aitiken Spence. India on the other hand, has extensive defence ties with Sri Lanka which have been re invigorated following the demise of the LTTE.

Myanmar's current 'civilian rulers' have in some ways deviated from the footsteps of the earlier military junta (State Peace and Order Restoration Council (SPDC)) in the country's linkages with China. The news of the suspension of the Myitsone Dam project being undertaken by the

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<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed treatment see Probal Ghosh, "Can India Ignore signs of Chinese Assertiveness?" at <http://www.orfonline.org/cms/sites/orfonline/modules/analysis/AnalysisDetail.html?cmaid=25555&mmacmaid=25556> 03 Sep 2011

<sup>8</sup> Construction commenced on 15 January 2008 by [China Harbour Engineering Company](#) and [Sinohydro Corporation](#). Cost of first phase is \$360 million and \$76.5 million for the bunker terminal. 85% of the funding is provided by the Chinese Government and the remaining 15% by the Sri Lanka Ports Authority. First Phase completed five months ahead of schedule and became operational on November 2010 The planned second phase will include a container terminal and is expected to be completed by 2014.

Chinese is significant step in this direction.<sup>9</sup> However, the news of Chinese help in modernization of the Akhyab (Kyuak Phyu) deep sea port, along with Hanggyi and Mergui and infrastructural projects in the hinterland, has proved to be alarming for Indian strategists given the geographical proximity of Myanmar to India. India's counter response has been to woo the Myanmar aggressively. A point that was proved when SPDC Chairman Senior General Than Shwe, came calling in July 2010 and signed five documents, highlighting a paradigm shift in Indo-Myanmar relations. This was followed by the visit of the Myanmar President U Tien Sien in October 2011 with a large delegation of 69 top businessmen and also policymakers to New Delhi. Three MoUs were signed during this visit.

Bangladesh is another country that has in recent times given a fillip to its relation with India. Besides signing five deals, three of which are security related India has offered a credit line of \$1billion for a range of projects, the largest credit package ever received by Bangladesh in recent times. Bangladesh, on its part, has asked China to utilize Chittagong harbour for commercial purposes three months **after** making a similar offer to India.

The Indian Ocean islands, courted by the Chinese have also been beneficiaries of Indian largesse. India is helping Seychelles to carry out maritime surveillance. The Indian Defence Minister, during a recent visit, promised three (one Dornier aircraft and two Chetaks helicopters) aircrafts to Seychelles for maritime surveillance to counter the growing asymmetric threats (mainly piracy) arising from the maritime domain.

After persistent efforts by the Chinese to get a toe hold in Maldives, India has reportedly agreed to help Male to set up a network of ground radars in all the 26 atolls and link them with the Indian military surveillance systems. This would effectively negate any hope of the Chinese in developing a forward base in any of the islands.

Moving further westward, India has been strengthening its economic, security and diplomatic relations with Iran - one of the regional power centres in the area despite its recent "standoff"

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<sup>9</sup> See Thomas Fuller, Myanmar Backs Down, Suspending Dam Project, 30 Sep 2011, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/01/world/asia/myanmar-suspends-construction-of-controversial-dam.html>. The project had been strongly opposed by the locals and Aung Suu Kyii.

with western powers on its building and “showing off” its nuclear facilities.<sup>10</sup> India has taken up the building of infrastructural projects in Iran and a series of agreements have been signed to this effect. These include enhancement of facilities at a number of ports, a road linking Iran to Afghanistan and beyond, development of a new port complex at Charharbagh (in Iran) along with a road linking it to Afghanistan. In addition, Indian help is also forthcoming in connecting Zajanj on the Iran Afghan border to Delaram and all major cities of Afghanistan, finally to be linked to Central Asian republics. India remains one of the few influential friends of Iran that is able to ward off Western influences of enforcing strict sanctions against that country. Unfortunately, for the Indian strategist, China is also one of the few friends of Iran that continues to withstand Western pressure to penalize Iran for its nuclear programme.

Paradoxically, while China wants to enlarge its footprints in the Indian Ocean ostensibly to provide protection to its valuable SLOCs, in the South China seas region, it lays claims to more than 80% of the region effectively nullifying the freedom of navigation for the SLOCs of the littorals in the region. !! Hence while neutralizing Chinese “pearls” is one aspect of the Indian response, as a quid pro quo to the Chinese forays into IOR, the Indian Navy has been operating in the South China Seas (sometimes with the Chinese Navy themselves), thus proving that the South China Seas is not the exclusive domain of the Chinese.

## **Conclusion**

It may be concluded that the jostle for power that is being played out in the Asian continent is also being played out in the Indian Ocean with added complexities and dynamics. Many countries are vying for primacy along with that of the US. Hence, in this background the Delhi, Beijing, Washington triangle is probably the most important relationship in the region.

However, the complexity to the entire debate has been added with India refusing to take on the overt role of a balancer of power in the region despite encouragement from US and its allies.

The Chinese (an out of area power) on the other hand, is advancing its role in the region with tenacity of purpose causing concern amongst the littorals and other states operating in the region. Ironically, while China wants to enlarge its footprints in the IOR ostensibly to provide protection to its valuable SLOCs and energy lifelines originating from West Asia, in the South

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<sup>10</sup> See “Ahmadinejad orders Iran to build four more nuclear research reactors” At [http://www.nypost.com/p/news/international/ahmadinejad\\_loads\\_homemade\\_nuclear\\_nF6Fav2ysOmr7coBNcvaZJ#ixzz1mis7la00](http://www.nypost.com/p/news/international/ahmadinejad_loads_homemade_nuclear_nF6Fav2ysOmr7coBNcvaZJ#ixzz1mis7la00)

China seas region, it lays claims to more than 80% of the region effectively nullifying the freedom of navigation for the SLOCs of the littorals in the region.

In addition the Chinese attempts at encircling India in a 'string of pearls', has larger consequences prompting, India's counter encirclement response with a wider approach and arc. It seeks to encircle China and neutralize its influence, giving a novel dimension to an emerging new great game in the region.

(3923 words)