

Traditional Threats to India's Maritime Security: An Analysis

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Abstract

India is having long coastline along with this India is located at the strategically important position in the Indian Ocean. Indian Ocean holds significant strategic position in the world for its vital sea-lanes of communication and its energy rich regions. Turbulences in our neighborhood, poses serious security challenges in front of us. As a result, the security situation in the subcontinent becomes fluid and these challenges have potential to deteriorate into a conflictual scenario. An important challenge for India is that even as the immediate territorial challenges in Ladakh and Kashmir we have to manage, a conflictual security environment in the Indian Ocean also. India's core security interest, therefore, is to come up with multiple threat-specific solutions that safeguard its core interests in the near-to-medium terms both in the continental and maritime domains.

Key Words: Indian Ocean Region, Traditional security and Sea-lanes of communication

Introduction

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR), in the 21st century has emerged as a center of power politics due to its geostrategic significance. The significance of any region can be defined by its strategic position and the power plays that dominates the region. Indeed, over the years the region has been witnessing both cooperation and competition among the major powers. Indian ocean is endowed with natural resources, and in order to exploit these natural resources, major powers are competing with one another. This competition has led to a militarization of in Indian ocean and in turn this militarization is causing unstable environment and posing threat to littoral countries. India being a maritime state having long coastline of 7,516.6 km. and 1382 islands and islets located at the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, at the head of the Indian Ocean.

(http://niti.gov.in/writereaddata/files/document_publication/IslandsDev.) As KM Panikkar had once said, it is the geographical position of India that changes the character of the Indian Ocean. He further said that India's connection with the Indian Ocean is, therefore, an advantageous one and history has witnessed to the fact that whenever India has ignored this huge body of water, it has lost its freedom, as was seen during the time of colonisation by the European powers. These developments give a significant lesson in Indian history, those who enslaved India by land routes were eventually

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assimilated into Indian society, whereas those who conquered by sea served as colonial masters. (Pannikar 1945:10) The Indian Ocean has a long history of conveying India's unfamiliar exchange with recorded proof extending back to the many centuries Before Common Era (BCE). (Pannikar 1945:09) So, it is important from the security point of view that India has to survive and protect its long cost from threats emerged from the Sea.

Having identified the significance to protect the marine boundary of India, firstly, we can now seek to define the meaning of traditional security, identify issues that rise to the level of security concern, and to define non-traditional security. The second task is to differentiate the traditional and non-traditional security issues. There have been significant changes in the way to deal with the comprehension of the topic of Security. In the traditional understanding of security, the state stayed the primary unit of enquiry and its military capacities make its survival. In any case, this has changed as of now and the significance of security has now increased which includes economic, climate, and cultural measurements in spite of the military angle. The main objective of security has shifted from the state to the citizens. (McSweeney *Bill 1999: 45*)

The realist concern is focused primarily on threats of a military nature against the state from external sources. Domestic developments may be sufficiently threatening to the viability or stability of the state, but the realist's concern tends to be directed at external threats. (Jackson, and Sorensen 2010:5) The realist also tends to emphasize military response and non-military coercive countermeasures such as political and economic sanctions, against the sources of such threats. In the following discussion use of the term traditional security is to refer to those threats that the realist typically considers as threats to national security. (Bajpai K 2000:19)

In contrast, the liberal approach regarding security includes not only the protection of the foundations of the state against external threats but also other types of values and threats. Among the values of concern to the liberal are human rights, individual and communal identity, individual's spiritual growth, the material well-being of individuals and communities, social and cultural viability of ethnic and national groups, individual and public health, environmental protection, and sustainable development. (Owen 2021:5) This is not the only way to define traditional security versus non-traditional security, but it is simple and useful line to draw.

The realist and liberal approaches are not the only way to draw line between traditional and non-traditional security. One may employ some time frame to distinguish between traditional and non-traditional security concerns. A society may consider as traditional those issues that have existed for some time and around which it has formed certain views and expectations. Non-traditional security issues emerge when some members of the society view more recent concerns as threatening their fundamental values. Other members of the society may not share the same degree of concern over those issues and may in fact oppose elevating those issues to the level of security. ([https://archive.unu.edu/ona/seminars/securityinasia/akaha.](https://archive.unu.edu/ona/seminars/securityinasia/akaha))

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Traditional Maritime Threats

Traditional security is associated with the threats generating from outside the state and threats emerged from the intra-state conflict. In other words, a threat that is imposed by a state to another state causing danger and instability towards a particular state and its sovereignty is a traditional threat. Traditional maritime security threats include freedom of navigation at territorial water and high sea, conducting naval activities, protection from direct threats to the territorial integrity of a country, such as an armed attack from a military vessel, intrusion and trespassing over territorial waters, and territorial water claims by other countries, threats to sea-lanes of communications (SLOC) and military presence and competition in a maritime region which could shift the balance of power (https://www.un.org/oceancapacity/sites/www.un.org.oceancapacity/files/ha_1011_vietnam)

Traditional Maritime Security Threats to India

IO holds significant strategic position in the world for its vital SLOCs and its energy rich regions. Thus, Alfred Mahan said "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia, the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters." (Ghosh 2001: 4) Now, almost a century later the quote remains relevant as ever with world powers to put out all of its stops in the IOR. As the centre of gravity of global geo-politics has shifted from the Atlantic to the IO, the IOR has become the strategic heartland of the 21st century. Today, the IO has emerged as an area of extraordinary potential for natural resources, and accounts for almost half of the world's container traffic and furthermore 33% of the world's oceanic oil shipments goes through this region which makes it vital to outside powers and to the littorals and makes it an area of conflict over political and economic interests of regional and extra regional powers.

In the wake of conflicting interests of major actors of the contemporary world, the great power game is now unfolding in the IO. To secure respective interests, each and every nation state is designing multi-dimensional strategies and deploying their navies in this Ocean. (Akbar 2015:39)

The growing interest of major powers of the world in the Indian ocean region is also posing threat to India from maritime security perspective. As Chinese militarisation in the IOR either directly or indirectly giving rise to conflict. (Suri 2017: 85) China's expansion is growing in the region through the policy of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Maritime Silk Route (MSR) and String of Pearls, which intended to connect ports and important choke point of IO. (<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/09/14/south-asia-and-the-indian-ocean-region-an-indian-perspective/>.)

According to China, the main supply route (MSR) involves the development of maritime nodes that will help to enhance trade and sea-connectivity and assist substantially in the development of local economies although it could well turn out to be detrimental to India's geopolitical interests in the IOR. As Beijing becomes more involved in building infrastructure in the Indian Ocean, it will play a big role in the security and governance of the IOR, which could pose a challenge to India's stature as a

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security provider in the region and also adversely affecting New Delhi's strategic purchase in its primary area of interest. (Singh2014:5)

China's shipping network, maritime trade and huge investment in building infrastructure in many countries around the subcontinent has geopolitically encircled India, driving towards the articulation of the doctrine of String of Pearls. The String of Pearls theory tries to draw out China's plans to exert and extend its sphere of influence through a series of investments in infrastructure development projects, port projects, loans so on, and so forth in the IOR. (Agarwal 2020:6) China is enhancing military presence at Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, Chittagong in Bangladesh, Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, Gwadar port in Pakistan, and Ihavanddhippolhu Atoll in Maldives. Which is posing a major challenge to India's geostrategic interest. (Singh Mandip 2016: 4) China is poised for encircle India from Indian ocean region with a naval base in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, situated at the strategic strait of Bab - al- Mandeb, between the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. In 2014 when China and Djibouti signed a Defence and Security Agreement, paved the path for the establishment of China's permanent military presence in Djibouti. In order to protect domestic facilities and critical points, the Chinese have installed more naval power to consolidate their maritime economic and trade interests.¹⁷ These activities have permitted the Chinese naval presence to foray into the Indian Ocean which is considered to be India's backwaters. (<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/09/14/south-asia-and-the-indian-ocean-region-an-indian-perspective/>.)

In order to make Indian Ocean open, inclusive, dominance free and protect one's interests and tackle Chinese assertive and domineering presence India has taken certain steps such as the Necklace of Diamonds through which it is building Duqm Port in Oman, Changi Naval Base in Singapore, the Assumption Islands in Seychelles and Chabahar Port in Iran. (Bubna 2020: 4) India considers synergy-based cooperation with its regional countries on a case- by-case basis. India has not expressed support and the Indian government has come up with a counter proposal in the form of Project Mausam. (Singh 2019:65) India has been deepening its engagements in Djibouti. The President of India, Ram Nath Kovind in 2017 visited Djibouti. It is an Indian Ocean littoral, and due to its geographical location, it has immense geo-strategic importance to India. (Padmaja 2017:3)The present India-China rivalry and China's increasing military presence in the IOR pave the way to a bigger threat than that in Line of Actual Control (LAC).(<https://theprint.in/opinion/india-has-a-bigger-worry-than-lac-china-now-expanding-military-footprint-in-indian-ocean/439934/>.)

Simultaneously, the aftermath of the Hambantota Port has come as a shocker to many countries in the region. Also, this has sent out a signal to countries regarding the drawbacks of inducing Chinese investments into their countries. As China catches up on clearing out their deficiencies, it is important that India and its other partners closely monitor the Chinese activities in the region as well as provide a viable alternative to Chinese economic assistance to the developing countries in the IOR. India through its vision of SAGAR has generated a lot of goodwill among smaller nations. Therefore, in

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order to tackle the Chinese threat, it will require a collective effort from all the countries in the region to ensure security and economic growth. In the future, regional forums like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) would require to play a critical role to balance the Chinese presence in the region. (Ghosh 2001: 5)

So far as, American naval presence in Indian Ocean is concerned, India faces a dilemma. India's strategic experts perceives the American naval presence in the Indian Ocean a necessity, but only to some extent. (Singh 2021:3) The American naval presence in the Indian Ocean has major implications for the Indian Navy. Although it is not realistic to envisage a conflict between the two, the potential for the employment of US naval forces in a coercive manner short of war, for political purposes, cannot be ignored. Not surprisingly, such applications of force have been termed gunboat diplomacy. Among the armed forces, naval forces are ideally suited to this role, in view of the unique nature of the medium upon which they traverse their inherent mobility and flexibility. This is also not an unprecedented development. During the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war, a carrier task force of the US Seventh Fleet set off for the Bay of Bengal from the South China Sea on 10th December 1971, in what came to be known as an expressive form of Gunboat Diplomacy. (Ghosh 2001:6)

The island of Diego Garcia became a vital US base and a significant reason for India's categorisation of the Indian Ocean as militarised. Since the British Government withdrew from its posts east of Suez from 1970. Prior to that, in the early 1960s, Washington had started talks with London about the establishment of a shared defence facility on Diego Garcia. India has not supported the US over Diego Garcia, which can be identified as constrained nature of India-US military cooperation in the WIO (Western Indian Ocean), a space where Indian and US strategic objectives do not properly align.(Weigold 2020: 82)Especially, India does not recognise American naval operations in the Middle East aimed at pressurising Iran. With increasing maritime interests in the Persian Gulf, India is eager to consolidate naval relations with all regional countries, including Iran. New Delhi can't get itself to deploy naval assets to a US facility used to facilitate anti-Iran Naval Operations. ([https://greatgameindia.com/indian-ocean-naval-base-diego-garcia-launchpad-to-attack-iran/.](https://greatgameindia.com/indian-ocean-naval-base-diego-garcia-launchpad-to-attack-iran/))

The recent stand-off between India and the United States (US) following the Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP) conducted by the American Navy without the prior consent of India highlighted a long-standing crevice in their bilateral friendship. The dispute centres around differences in their interpretation of the legal framework prescribed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which was introduced to guide conflicts and relations on issues relating to the use of the ocean and its resources. (<https://www.statecraft.com/article/us-freedom-of-navigation-operation-in-india-s-eez-what-does-international-law-say>)

Although, US presence is important for containing China but its naval establishments in Indian Ocean in various aspects could damage India's position as a net security and proffered security provider in the IO. An extended American naval presence in South Asia could even accelerate power competition

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in the IO, damaging India's prospects in the neighbourhood. India is trying to maintain the right balance of U.S. military presence in the Indian Ocean littorals. (Singh 2021:40)

The Pakistani Navy constitutes the primary military threat to India's maritime security. Although it is much smaller in size than the Indian Navy, it is a fast-modernizing force with critical qualitative superiority in missile and armed maritime strike aircraft. The commissioning of its three new French Agosta 90-B diesel-electric submarines from 1999 to 2002, and the re-organization of its American P-3C Orion maritime strike aircraft, will enable it to play a critical sea denial role against the Indian Navy. The Orion aircraft enables the Pakistani naval air force to cover the entire western coast of India up to the southern tip of the peninsula. The Orion could even target surface warships deployed as far away as the Indian Navy's Eastern Command at Vishakhapatnam. The risk of an Indo-Pakistan conventional naval war is low at present, in view of the nuclear weapon capabilities of both countries. It is simply not in the interests of either country to engage in a conventional war at sea which could lead to the use of nuclear weapons on land. However, Indian principal naval combatants such as submarines, destroyers and frigates, are required to be deployed to deter the use of Pakistani naval combatants, if such a contingency arises. (Chaudhury1998: 136)

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is recognised the vital corridor of BRI, heightened Pakistan's strategic position because it adores distinct geographical rewards in the region and connects South Asia with Central Asia. Pakistan being a connection point of South Asia, Central Asia, China, and the Persian Gulf, it occupies a crucial place for all adjacent regions. Its geostrategic importance stems from its location at Asia's crossroads at three, West, Central, and South. (Khetran 2016: 61)

The Gwadar Port will give China shortest route to the Indian Ocean by the Arabian Sea. With this action, Pakistan is strategically and geo-politically significant country in the region. Furthermore, the port is said to be advantageous for other hinterland neighbouring states with natural resources by having the opportunity to transport their resources to the port and the rest of the world. In 2015, the port was opened and became a significant part of BRI. By 2018, the Gwadar port, as well as highways and railway networks connecting Pakistan and China, became a huge economic factor contributing to the BRI. (Rahman 2021: 122)

India sees the Gwadar port as a naval base of China, which may likely to be developed into a strategic homeport, naval base will fortify with nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers in upcoming time. Analyst perceives Chinese presence in Gwadar as a major setback to the Indian strategy of dominating the regional choke points. The Indian naval power has been transforming from a littoral naval power to the major blue waters naval power in the Indian Ocean Region. (Rahman 2021: 145)

The IO provides Russia with the only ice-free sea lane between the eastern and western parts of its country. Russia can enter the IO through its two outlets such as Black Sea and the Pacific Ocean and

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can influence policies of this region. The protection of these vital SLOCs is of paramount importance to Russian strategy in the Indian Ocean. Russia arguably has multiple interests in the region and some of them are essential to its national security, so Russia can continue to influence and invest on different stakeholders in the IOR. Moreover, the rivalry between US and Russia will make unstable environment in the region and that will affect the shipment through SLOCs. China, Iran and Russia have planned to conduct their first joint trilateral naval exercise in the Indian Ocean at the end of 2021 or early 2022. From a geopolitical view, it is remarkable that Russia is taking interest in the region at the time when the Sino-Russian strategic ties have increased significantly, which is heading towards a greater trade and defence collaboration. China and Russia have independently strengthened their maritime cooperation. From Indian perspective, these recent strategic developments in the relations of Sino-Russia provides a bittersweet taste of regional geopolitics. Russia's interests in the Indian Ocean have indeed increased but not quite in the way India's maritime spectators had perceived. ([https://www.orfonline.org/research/russias-engagement-in-the-indian-ocean-59324/.](https://www.orfonline.org/research/russias-engagement-in-the-indian-ocean-59324/))

The French Navy also maintains considerable presence in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea areas. France has a strong interest of navigation along the sea routes surrounding the Horn of Africa. Besides, France has trade interest with the Indian Ocean countries, France is also engaged in a big arms business with the littoral states. (Akbar 2015:30) The security of France's territories and citizens in the Indian Ocean is another primary reason for its continued regional involvement. France's Indian Ocean territories are home to approximately one million people, mostly located on the islands of La Reunion and Mayotte. The most obvious and most likely repercussions of increased French involvement in the Indian Ocean region is further competition from India, China and other developing countries to consolidate their influence in the region. This will particularly be the case if France further uses its cultural ties and military capabilities to cement its regional influence. France's tactics will help to keep its influence strong. (Paiva 2011:04)

Japan's interest in the IO stems from the fact that Japan is a great industrial and trading nation. Japan imports large quantity of oil and raw materials for its industries from middle east countries. The vast and growing trade uses the IO to a large extent. Trade routes in the IO are therefore important for Japan. However, there is no indication at present of any vigorous attempt to extend Japanese political influence in the Indian Ocean. Japan regularly participates in naval exercises in the IOR. India - Japan maritime bilateral exercises (JIMEX) commenced in January 2012 with especial focus on maritime security cooperation. It is conducted biennially between the Indian navy and Japanese maritime self-defence force (JMSDF). The QUAD, founded by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007, was resuscitated in 2017 after a gap of nine years. A comprehensive joint maritime security policy with a focus on the Indian Ocean and South Asia and one that addresses the concerns of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue Nations (QUAD) in the region. These nations include India, Japan, Australia and US. This QUAD (Maniyar 2020:06) can be spearheaded by India, given its unique geographical position in

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the realm of South Asia and the Indo-Pacific, and Japan stands much to gain from this as a member of the QUAD.

Conclusion

Indian Ocean is critically important to India. The 21st century is a maritime century; therefore, the significance of the oceans would be enhanced all over. For India, Indian Ocean becomes important more than ever before. It has gained prominence in recent years, primarily due to the recognition of the vital role of Indian Ocean in the India's economic growth. While there is significant growth in China's influence in the IOR which is a matter of concern to India's maritime security. To mitigate the threats of expansionist China, India is tackling the problem through counter majors and started developing cordial relations with IOR countries. The concept of Quadrilateral dialogue (QUAD) emerged to reduce the influence of China in the Indo-Pacific region. Lately, the navies of Australia, India, Japan, and the America held their biggest naval drills, sending warships, submarines and aircraft to the Indian Ocean, the move is seen by analyst as the four countries seriousness in countering China's military and political influence in the Indo-Pacific region. So, India has multiple concerns about China and one of them are to counter the revisionist power China's Indian Ocean ambitions.

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