

## Sino-Indian Strategic Competition in the Indian Ocean Region and Future of China's Maritime Interests

Sheikh Imran Nasir and Muhammad Zeeshan Munir<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*Indian Ocean is the third largest body of water on earth and has gained increased strategic importance in recent times due to its geographical proximity with some of the most important SLOCs and Straits. The instigator behind the tussle between China and India in the IOR is a race for economic gains. Stakeholders on both sides think that these economic gains can be instrumental for growth and progress. Extra-regional powers are also active here which has exacerbated conventional, non-conventional and nuclear threats in the IOR. India has emerged as a bogeyman of Western powers who intend to choke China's supply of fuel and raw materials passing through the Indian Ocean Region. Around eighty percent of India's trade is seaborne while eighty four percent of China's trade passes through the Straits of Malacca. Both these states are vying to control the maritime passageways. This has resulted in a strategic competition with nuclear dimension adding to the qualms. The operationalization of nuclear submarines in IOR has a long-term strategic impact which is bound to alter the security*

---

<sup>1</sup>Mr. Sheikh Imran Nasir is an M. Phil Scholar at the Department of Strategic Studies, NDU, Islamabad; and Mr. Muhammad Zeeshan Munir is a Lawyer and a Visiting Faculty at Bahria University, Islamabad.

*dynamics of this region forever. An assessment of the capabilities of both China and India indicate that Beijing might emerge as a dominant naval power in IOR.*

**Key Words:** Strategic Interests, Nuclear Threat, SLOCs & Straits, Security Dynamics

## **Introduction**

Indian Ocean is the third largest water body on earth and has gained increased strategic importance in recent times due to its geographical proximity with some of the most vital Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) and Straits. It holds 16.8 percent of proven global oil reserves and 27.9 percent of proven natural gas reserves. Moreover, Indian Ocean economies account for almost 35.5 percent of global iron production and 17.8 percent of gold production.<sup>2</sup> It washes the shores of the regions that produce more than 40 percent of the world's petroleum. With such strategic and economic importance, the IOR indeed is at the forefront of international politics.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, India's rising profile in the IOR and its capacity to flex muscle beyond its immediate shores has fundamentally altered the security dynamics and balance of power in this region. In the considered opinion of most thinkers,<sup>4</sup> if India has to acquire its due status in the comity of nations, it has to craft a maritime doctrine with the vision to control vital SLOCs and Straits in the Indian Ocean from a position of strength. Likewise, the economic dividends of having control over trade routes compel all

---

<sup>2</sup>Donald L. Berlin, "India in the Indian ocean," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 59, no. 2 (2006), 58-89.

<sup>3</sup>Leszek Buszynski, "Emerging Naval Rivalry in East Asia and the Indian Ocean: Implications for Australia." *Security Challenges*, Vol. 5, no. 3(2009), 73-93.

<sup>4</sup>John. Pike, "Indian Maritime Doctrine," GlobalSecurity.org (2016), available at: <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/india/in-navy-doctrine.htm> (Accessed on April 5, 2020).

the global and regional actors to take their share of the pie and resultantly become more proactive in this region.

The instigator behind the tussle between China and India in the IOR is most probably a race for economic gains.<sup>5</sup> Both believe that this economic potential can ultimately lead to excessive economic growth and incredible progress. Extra-regional forces (ERF) such as the US, UK and France<sup>6</sup> are also active in the IOR which has exacerbated conventional, non-conventional and nuclear threats in this region. India, in its quest for dominance has willingly emerged as bogeyman of Western powers and intends to choke China's supply of fuel and raw materials passing through the Indian Ocean Region.<sup>7</sup>

Around eighty percent of India's trade is seaborne which highlights the importance of the Indian Ocean SLOCs for it. Meanwhile, eighty four percent of China's trade passes through the Straits of Malacca (dominated by the US and India) which in turn highlights why it is sensitive about any threat to freedom of navigation.<sup>8</sup> Both these states are vying to control the maritime passageways in the IOR which has resulted in a strategic competition adding a more alarming nuclear dimension to it. The operationalization of nuclear submarines in the IOR has a long-term strategic impact which is bound to change the security dynamics of this region forever.

Mahan's assertion that 'maritime supremacy in the IOR would

---

<sup>5</sup>T. N. Srinivasan, "China and India: Economic Performance, Competition and Cooperation: An update," *Journal of Asian Economics*, Vol. 15, no. 4 (2004), 613-636.

<sup>6</sup>"Role of Extra Regional Powers in the Indian Ocean Region," *UKEssays* (1970), available at: <https://www.ukessays.com/essays/history/role-of-extra-regional-powers-in-the-indian-ocean-region-history-essay.php> (Accessed on April 23 2020).

<sup>7</sup>Gurpreet S.Khurana, "China's 'String of Pearls' in the Indian Ocean and Its Security Implications," *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 32, no. 1 (2008), 1-39.

<sup>8</sup>Hashimoto Shinya et. al, "Concentration and Distribution of Butyltin Compounds in a Heavy tanker Route in the Strait of Malacca and in Tokyo Bay," *Marine Environmental Research*, Vol. 45, no. 2 (1998), 169-177.

enhance the stature of a state as a dominant global power'<sup>9</sup> has led to an unprecedented militarization of this region. The operationalization of an Indian nuclear submarine in 2016, forced all the Indian Ocean littoral states to acquire more pronounced maritime orientation which exacerbated strategic competition in the region. Sea-based rivalries would result in greater instability in the maritime domain and in case of the Indian Ocean it would affect almost the entire world.<sup>10</sup>

Historically, only big five (the US, UK, France, Russia, and China) had placed the possible deployment stations for their SSBNs in their grand strategic designs in times of need. However, with the regional nuclear actors now coming into play, the strategic security matrix in IOR is bound to change forever. In this context, this paper examines the repercussions of Sino-Indian competition in the IOR on regional strategic stability and how this would impact the future of China's maritime interests in this region.

## **1. New Delhi's Antagonism: A Catalyst for Sino-Indian Rivalry in the IOR**

The Sino-Indian competition in the IOR has intensified in recent years with massive military and civilian infrastructure being developed by both nations. New Delhi's deep-rooted suspicions about Beijing's increasing footprints in the IOR has precipitated this strategic competition. This requires a detailed analysis of underlying causes and practical manifestation of this rivalry.

---

<sup>9</sup>"Indian Ocean: The Key to India's 'Look East Policy'," *Economic Times*, March 20, 2015, available at: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/et-commentary/indian-ocean-the-key-to-indias-look-east-policy/> (Accessed on February 8, 2020).

<sup>10</sup>M. I. Qadir, "Emerging Paradigm of the Indian Ocean: Arihant's Prowl and its Regional Implications," *ISSI*, Vol. 37, no.4(2017), 65-80, available at: <http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/4-SS M Ihsan and Saif-ur-ehman No-4 2017.pdf> (Accessed on March 21, 2020).

**a. Reasons for New Delhi's Animosity towards China**

Indian strategists have always considered the Indian Ocean as 'truly Indian' where other powers must not be allowed to gain naval dominance.<sup>11</sup> However, in the past, Indian naval buildup was not prioritized. According to Greg Kennedy & Harsh V Pant,<sup>12</sup> despite a general understanding among the Indian political elites that it was the littoral dominance by the European powers that led to their colonial ascendancy in the Indian heartland, the focus on land frontiers led to the dominance of the Indian Army in the national security discourse. According to them, Indian Navy's Maritime Security Strategy Document released in October 2015,<sup>13</sup> presents insight into the future trajectory of the Indian Navy in the IOR which seeks dominance over other regional players. They further argue that the Indian Navy would eventually like to emerge as a world-class blue water force equipped to meet regional challenges and threats and to safeguard its maritime interests. Both contend that India views China as a threat, towards its maritime ambitions in the IOR. India in recent years has carried out strategic alignment towards the US which is opposed to its historic neutral posturing in global affairs in order to counter the perceived threat emanating from China.<sup>14</sup>

India's budding strategic alliance with the US has resulted in a complicated relationship between Beijing and New Delhi which encompasses cooperation and coexistence on one hand and

---

<sup>11</sup>C. Raja Mohan, "India and the Changing Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean." *Maritime Affairs*, Vol. 6, no. 2(2010), 1-12.

<sup>12</sup>Greg Kennedy and Harsh V. Pant, "Indian Navy's Maritime Security Strategy: An Assessment," *Maritime Perspectives*, National Maritime Foundation (2016), available at: <https://maritimeindia.org/View%20Profile/636062334274606879.pdf> (Accessed on January 18, 2020).

<sup>13</sup>"Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy," available at <http://indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian-Maritime;-Doctrine-2009-Updated-12Feb16.pdf> (Accessed on March 14, 2020).

<sup>14</sup>C. Raja Mohan, *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012).

competition on the other hand. Although the volume of trade between these two countries has grown exponentially in recent years, China's growing relationship with the regional countries is viewed with great suspicion in New Delhi as being directed against itself.<sup>15</sup> China's increasing naval footprint in the IOR, prime being the CPEC project which will provide it with unprecedented access directly in the middle of the IOR via the Arabian Sea, has become a principle security concern for India. It has driven India towards forging increased cooperation with the US, Japan and Australia.<sup>16</sup>

The catalyst behind Sino-Indian competition is New Delhi's assumption of Beijing being a threat to its might in the Indian Ocean. When the capabilities of two countries are microscopically analyzed, one may conclude that China is at an advantage as compared to India on many grounds.<sup>17</sup> The only edge that India possesses is its location in the Indian Ocean. Consequently, India is quite concerned about any challenge in this region as it wants to maintain and cash this edge on the international political environment.<sup>18</sup> China is a direct challenge to this strategic edge in the Indian Ocean. However, any limited armed conflict between the two can pose a threat to China's economy and trade. This possibility has made the Chinese Strategists carve a policy to address this threat.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>Sidra Tariq, "Sino-Indian Security Dilemma in the Indian Ocean: Revisiting the 'String of Pearls' Strategy," *Regional Studies*, Vol. 34, no. 3(2016), 3-28.

<sup>16</sup>David Brewster, "Murky Waters, Dangerous Currents: India, Pakistan, China and the Coming Nuclearisation of the Indian Ocean," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vol. 11, no. 2 (2015), E2-E4.

<sup>17</sup>David Brewster, "Beyond the 'String of Pearls': is there really a Sino-Indian security dilemma in the Indian Ocean?" *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vol. 10, no. 2 (2014), 133-149.

<sup>18</sup>C Raja Mohan, "Revealed: India's Master Plan for the Indian Ocean," *National Interest*, Vol. 26 (2015), available at: <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/revealed-indias-masterplan-the-indian-ocean-13198> (Accessed on May 12, 2020).

<sup>19</sup>"Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving People's Republic of China," Office of the US Secretary of Defense (2016), available at: <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2016%20China%20Military%20Power%20Report.pdf> (Accessed on September 20, 2019).

Indian attitude in the IOR is also guided by its strategic culture. The Indian Strategic Culture under the current government is guided by the extremist *Hindutva* ideology at the behest of militant organizations such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Some analysts such as Ali Ahmad<sup>20</sup> believe that the RSS is not only dictating the Indian security agenda but is also directing it. RSS ideology is based on *Hindu* supremacy and hence it calls for India to view any threat with greater suspicion and deal with it aggressively.

Ali Ahmad also contends that in addition to *Hindutva* ideology, India's strategic culture is also strongly influenced by Chanakya's philosophy. Around early 1990s, Western scholars attempted to decipher India's strategic culture and concluded that India does not have any indigenous culture of strategic thought and its foreign policy is conducted by the Western cultural imports such as Machiavelli, Clausewitz and Thucydides etc. However, since the turn of the century, renewed scholarship on India unearthed strong evidence that India does possess a potent strategic thought, primarily in the form of classical statecraft text '*Arthashastra*'. Chanakya, also known as Kautilya or Vishnugupta, authored this political and strategic treatise around 2nd century BC.<sup>21</sup> In *Arthashastra*, Chanakya expounds his thoughts on variety of subjects ranging from economics and politics to the welfare of people and state. His classical text is widely known for his thoughts on statecraft and strategy.

---

<sup>20</sup>Ali Ahmed, *India: A Strategic Alternative* (Gogal: Cinnamon Teal Publishing, 2017), available at: [http://www.academia.edu/35647729/India\\_a\\_StraTegic\\_alTernaTive](http://www.academia.edu/35647729/India_a_StraTegic_alTernaTive) (Accessed on April 9, 2020).

<sup>21</sup>"Chanakya's Arthashastra Relevant to Understand Strategic Culture: Shivshankar Menon," *India Today*, October 9, 2013, available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/north/story/chanakya-arthashastra-relevant-to-understand-strategic-culture-shivshankar-menon-213738-2013-10-09> (Accessed on February 18, 2020).

John H. Gill has also strived to shed light on India's strategic thinking process.<sup>22</sup> He posits that India's security orientation has traditionally been regional, focused on internal unrest and external threats across contested land borders with Pakistan and China, seen as to be detrimental for maritime concerns and expeditionary options. China's military expansionism, Sino-Pakistan cooperation, evolving regional nuclear dynamics, and other factors, however, are altering the strategic environment. He contends that three traditions: "Fatalism, activism and moralism" have throughout dominated the Indian strategic vision respectively.<sup>23</sup>

The analysis of New Delhi's apprehensions over the rise of China and the strategic culture being pursued by the current government is enough to understand the causes of India's antagonism towards China. China seems to be only responding to India's aggressive actions (that have been covered in the later part of this paper) in the Indian Ocean. One of the prime objectives of China is to ensure the security of its fossil fuel supplies and SLOCs passing through the Indian Ocean. However, New Delhi's increasingly belligerent posture is forcing Beijing to enhance its naval capabilities and its presence in the IOR, in addition to an ever expanding maritime infrastructure.<sup>24</sup> China is now pursuing its famous Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), whereby it intends to construct physical infrastructure where its ships and containers carrying precious raw materials will dock. China has entered into a contract with various nations to make this a reality. India perceives this

---

<sup>22</sup>John H. Gill, "Challenges for India's Military Strategy: Matching Capabilities to Ambitions?" in *Understanding Strategic Cultures in the Asia-Pacific* (Washington: The National Bureau of Research, 2016), 32-47.

<sup>23</sup>Michael J. Green and Andrew Shearer, "Defining US Indian Ocean strategy," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 35, no. 2 (2012), 175-189.

<sup>24</sup>Jae-Hyung Lee, "China's Expanding Maritime Ambitions in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 24, no. 3 (2002), 549-568.

initiative as its encirclement and hence the Sino-Indian rivalry is being converted into a competition.<sup>25</sup>

### **b. Practical Manifestation of Sino-Indian Competition in the IOR**

As soon as China announced its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which encompasses both overland and maritime routes, India perceived it as a threat to its interests in the IOR. This led New Delhi to strengthen its relationship with the regional countries especially Seychelles', Mauritius, Sri Lanka, and Maldives; placed along the proposed Maritime Silk Road.<sup>26</sup> These countries have witnessed a surge in Chinese investments which has led to an unprecedented Chinese influence over them. This investment encompasses the construction of airports, roads, and seaports<sup>27</sup> to support future trade facilities and naval operations.

India, in order to mitigate Chinese influence has geared up its efforts to woo Sri Lanka and Maldives with capacity building assistance. It is following both competing and cooperative policies in order to mitigate risks and maximize gains. New Delhi intends to incorporate these two states into a joint framework of maritime security by conducting joint naval exercises. India and Maldives entered into a joint defence corporation agreement in 2009, whereby the former would provide enhanced maritime surveillance capabilities to the latter. India extended this corporation to Sri Lanka and now Maldives, Sri Lanka and India conduct a trilateral maritime exercise called *Dosti*.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup>Harsh V. Pant, "India in the Indian Ocean: growing mismatch between ambitions and capabilities," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 82, no. 2 (2009), 279-297.

<sup>26</sup>James Manor and Gerald Segal, "Causes of Conflict: Sri Lanka and Indian Ocean Strategy," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 25, no. 12 (1985), 1165-1185.

<sup>27</sup>C. Raja Mohan, "India and the Changing Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean," *Maritime Affairs*, Vol. 6, no. 2 (2010), 1-12.

<sup>28</sup>"Annual Report 2014-15," Ministry of External Affairs, Govt. of India (2015), 11, available at: <https://www.aicte-india.org/downloads/annual%20report%202014-15.pdf#toolbar=0> (Accessed on March 23, 2020).

Seychelles and Mauritius, the two strategically important nations of the IOR have also seen a surge in Chinese investments. To counter Chinese influence in these two countries, India is enhancing its naval corporation with them too. Indian Navy has been enhancing the reconnaissance capabilities of these nations by providing them fast attack craft, maritime reconnaissance aircraft and coastal surveillance radar systems.<sup>29</sup> PM Modi has labeled this assistance as based on 'equality and reciprocity' to secure the vital maritime SLOCs passing through the Indian Ocean.<sup>30</sup> China has also offered incentives to these small island nations which have led to a new 'battle for influence' between China and India.

India now considers itself a rising power in the Indian Ocean and has taken steps to get involved in extra-regional affairs especially the South China Sea which has exacerbated tensions between India and China. In 2007, India and Vietnam declared a strategic partnership which consisted of technical cooperation and protection of SLOCs in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.<sup>31</sup> Ever since this announcement of partnership India has been meddling in the South China Sea which China considers as its backyard. Beijing has issued a warning to India over its undue interference in the South China Sea on several occasions, but the latter has blatantly refused to pay heed to these warnings.

India's key strategic regions are the Andaman and Nicobar Islands which provide the Indian Navy a prime location to keep an eye on the Indian Ocean. Back in 2001, a command was established in Port Blair.

---

<sup>29</sup>David Brewster, "India and China at Sea: A Contest of Status and Legitimacy in the Indian Ocean," *Asia Policy*, no. 22 (2016), 4-10, available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24905133> (Accessed on March 14, 2020).

<sup>30</sup>Evan Braden Montgomery, "Competitive Strategies against Continental Powers: The Geopolitics of Sino-Indian-American Relations," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 36, no. 1 (2013), 76-100.

<sup>31</sup>David Brewster, "An Indian sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean?" *Security Challenges*, Vol. 6, no. 3 (2010), 1-20.

In 2012, the Indian military established its southernmost base at INS Baaz in Campbell Bay, making it the third naval air station established in the Andaman and Nicobar islands. Campbell Bay is strategically vital as it is only 224 kilometers away from the Indonesian coastline. Adm. Nirval Verma, former Chief of the Indian Naval Staff, while addressing the inauguration ceremony, discussed the significance of the base and said that it will not only serve as a commanding presence in the Bay of Bengal, but will be a potential window to East and Southeast Asia. In December 2015, ex-Adm. R.K. Dhowan, Chief of Naval Staff, stated that strategically, Andaman and Nicobar are significant with regard to monitoring China's development of Gwadar port in Pakistan and its formation of a base in Djibouti.<sup>32</sup> India has deployed two Boeing P-8I patrol aircraft in Andaman and Nicobar Islands for reconnaissance.

China is not oblivious to India's maritime deployments in the IOR. China sees itself as a balancer to ERF present in Asia-Pacific and the IOR. China prioritizes cooperation over competition, but the belligerent posture of its foes has pressurized it to expand its navy. The world has seen the development and progress of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) from becoming coastal guards to a force to reckon with. The current twin spike maritime strategy aims to first, prevent military forces of an adversary from entering an area (anti-access or A2); and second, ensure effective operations within an area (area denial or AD). The last twenty years or so have seen PLAN making progress by leaps and bounds culminating into a blue water force<sup>33</sup> in a true sense. It has modernized naval weaponry and ammunition with Russia's assistance. Moscow has also assisted Beijing in developing SLBMs and conventional and nuclear submarines. The coming years will see the Chinese preoccupation with developing naval arsenal. This will help

---

<sup>32</sup>Mohan Malik, "India Balances China," *Asian Politics & Policy*, Vol. 4, no. 3 (2012), 345-376.

<sup>33</sup>Chengxin Pan, "The Indo-Pacific and Geopolitical Anxieties about China's Rise in the Asian Regional Order," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 68, no. 4 (2014), 453-469.

China emerge as a powerful navy at both the regional and global levels. China now has two fully functioning aircraft carriers that have multiplied its naval prowess and outreach.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless an unprecedented arms race in the IOR has exacerbated the Sino-Indian rivalry in this region.

## **2. India's Maritime Strategy: A Steppingstone for the Sino-Indian Competition in the IOR**

India's strategic culture and its ongoing competition with China in the IOR has shaped its current maritime strategy which has been formulated with a paramount focus on the vital regions such as, the Gulf of Aden, the Persian Gulf, and Straits of Malacca. India's so-called Sapphires Strategy has been knitted around the vital areas of islands of Mauritius, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Seychelles. Arguably, New Delhi wishes the world to see it as a country that has gained a lot in terms of strategic scoring in the Indian Ocean and possess the capacity to act as a balancing actor against China in the region and beyond. Historically, the Cape of Good Hope has remained a pivotal sea route. Its importance has only multiplied with the passage of time. Furthermore, India is dependent on the Gulf States for fossil fuel imports, a major factor that drives its naval strategy. It maintains cordial relations with Iran and is involved in the development of the port of Chabahar with an aim to gain a foothold at the mouth of Persian Gulf in addition to ensuring uninterrupted fuel supply. The Gulf region is an area of interest for the US as well which aligns with the Indian interest. Similarly, India has maintained relations with the Maldives islands which are at the heart of SLOC and the IOR. With its special agreement with the Maldives, India has been given access to

---

<sup>34</sup>"China Launches 2nd Aircraft Carrier, to Be Deployed in South China Sea," *The Times of India*, December 17, 2019, available at: [https://timesofindia.com/world/china/china-launches-2nd-aircraft-carrier-to-be-deployed-in-south-china-sea/articleshow/72851484.cms](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/china-launches-2nd-aircraft-carrier-to-be-deployed-in-south-china-sea/articleshow/72851484.cms) (Accessed on February 7, 2020).

the Southern runways of Maldives, giving it a security edge in East Asia and the Middle East.<sup>35</sup>

India's ambitious maritime strategy doesn't stop here. It has special designs to make its presence felt in the South China Sea via the Malacca Strait. However, these ambitions of New Delhi have brought it at loggerheads with the regional powers such as Malaysia, which opposes joint security patrols with India. New Delhi has bolstered its diplomatic efforts to sync its interests with South East Asian states which have animosity with China in the South China Sea. Prime Minister Narendra Modi undertook multiple high-level visits to these countries but has so far failed to woo these nations.<sup>36</sup> However, this has not prevented India from undertaking aggressive naval patrolling around the Straits of Malacca.

The Indian maritime strategy can be summed up as follows:

- i. Greater emphasis on showing resolve for securing mainland and Island territories for defending maritime interests.
- ii. Continuation of security cooperation with regional partners especially island states.
- iii. Strive to constitute multilateral cooperative maritime security in the Indian Ocean, with India at its core.
- iv. Work towards sustainable economic development in the IOR spearheaded by India.
- v. Implementation of the Indian Ocean policy of engagement with major powers in the IOR. This shows the Indian resolve for achieving a great power status.

---

<sup>35</sup>Donald L. Berlin, "India in the Indian ocean," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 59, no. 2 (2006), 58-89.

<sup>36</sup>Rajesh M. Basrur, "Nuclear weapons and Indian strategic culture," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 38, no. 2 (2001), 181-198.

This maritime doctrine<sup>37</sup> is characterized by the dream of dominating the IOR. India has enhanced its security and economic partnership with the US owing to their shared animosity against Beijing. India has also taken steps to nuclearize the Indian Ocean which is central to its naval doctrine in the IOR.<sup>38</sup>

### 3. Brewing Sino-Indian Rivalry and its Implications

As a consequence of incessant Sino-Indian competition in the IOR, the once peaceful region has been witnessing nuclearization altering the regional security dynamics. Both China and India have embarked upon one of the largest naval buildups during peace time with nuclear submarines providing second-strike capabilities being central to this buildup. This is being done to gain dominance over the other. Details of respective naval buildups and its implications have been discussed in detail under the next heading.

#### a. Conventional and Nuclear Capabilities of the Indian Navy

India has been developing blue water navy and is investing heavily in the up gradation of its fleet. It is constructing new aircraft carriers, frigates, cruisers, destroyers, and nuclear submarines.<sup>39</sup> As of 2019, the Indian Navy has a strength of 88,117 personnel and a large fleet consisting of two aircraft carriers; one amphibious transport dock; nine landing ship tanks; 20 frigates; 10 destroyers; one nuclear-powered submarine and 14 conventionally powered submarines; 25 corvettes; 7 minesweeping vessels; 47 patrol vessels; four fleet tankers and various auxiliary vessels. New Delhi desires to drastically increase its naval forces by 2022 and attain a respectable figure of 200 naval ships to

---

<sup>37</sup>James R Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "India's 'Monroe Doctrine' and Asia's Maritime Future," *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 32, no. 6 (2008), 997-1011.

<sup>38</sup>Rajesh M. Basur, "Nuclear weapons and Indian strategic culture," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 38, no. 2 (2001): 181-198.

<sup>39</sup>James R. Holmes, Toshi Yoshihara and Andrew C. Winner, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-first Century* (Routledge, 2009).

become the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest fleet in the world after the US and emerging China. To operationalize its indigenously built Ballistic Missile Submarine (Ship, Submersible, Ballistic, Nuclear - SSBN), India embarked upon leasing three nuclear attack submarines from Russia in the late 1990s. These Charlie and Akula class submarines have provided the Indian crew a sufficient hands-on experience to handle such sophisticated platforms out at the sea.

India is currently in the process of acquiring stealth destroyers, anti-submarine corvettes and stealth frigates from the US, UK and France. India is also in the process of acquiring advanced role helicopters from Russia which include Kamov-28 and 31 helicopters to deploy from its aircraft carriers. India already possesses two aircraft carriers – the Russian origin INS Vikramaditya, in service since 2013, and erstwhile INS Viraat. India is also constructing INS Vikrant, which was due for induction by 2018-19 however; the project is delayed due to technical reasons. Additionally, it has plans for the development of the larger INS Vishal for which the US has agreed to provide state of the art launching system along with F-18 Hornets. India has also purchased advanced submarine hunting and early warning aircraft from the US; the legendary P8i's. New Delhi has ordered several more of these aircrafts which is set to enhance India's reconnaissance and submarine hunting capabilities in the Indian Ocean Region.

According to Greg Kennedy & Harsh V Pant,<sup>40</sup> New Delhi intends to create a ground combatant branch of its navy and reform it on lines of the US marines who play a vital role in its military operations across the globe. It has inducted 4 Landing Platform Docs (LPD) to join the amphibious warfare fleet. These platforms will enable IN to transport

---

<sup>40</sup>Greg Kennedy and Harsh V. Pant, "Indian Navy's Maritime Security Strategy: An Assessment," *Maritime Perspectives*, National Maritime Foundation(2016), available at: <https://maritimeindia.org/View%20Profile/636062334274606879.pdf> (Accessed on January 18, 2020).

battle tanks, heavy trucks, Armored Personnel Vehicles (APV), and other heavy machinery to the theater of operations with ease. These amphibious capabilities will give it a clear edge over its rivals in the IOR.

Most importantly, the deployment of nuclear submarines with nuclear capable missiles across the swath of the Indian Ocean provides India the much-desired capability of influencing events ashore with much ease and impunity. The strategic outreach both in space and time will undermine the thresholds of other regional actors in the IOR. With the project strength of six SSBNs in its fleet along with many more SSNs (the nuclear attack submarines), the Indian Navy will enjoy the distinct advantage in a conflict scenario over any adversary. This shall compound the threat matrix of other aspirants and shall be pivotal for future research and discussion.

#### **b. Chinese Naval and Nuclear Assets in the IOR**

China is sensitive about its near abroad and is quite assertive about its territorial interests. Unification of Taiwan and dispute in the South China Sea has given rise to the need for a strong Chinese naval force capable of influencing outcomes in this region. China's paramount maritime interest is energy security in the IOR since it is one of the largest petroleum consuming countries in the world. Most of these energy supplies come via sea routes and any disruption in energy supplies is bound to impede its economic development. Maritime trade and protection of SLOC's is another major interest of Beijing.<sup>41</sup>

China started building a 'Blue Water' Navy in the early 1980's and made a strenuous effort to modernize and expand naval power to transform itself into a truly global power, capable of projecting influence way beyond its shores and affecting events on land from the sea. It has inducted aircraft carriers, new battleships, cruisers,

---

<sup>41</sup>John J. Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's challenge to US power in Asia," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, no. 4 (2010), 381-396.

submarines, and has over the years developed anti-access and area denial capabilities. However, despite investing billions of dollars in its naval forces, People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) still suffers from somewhat curtailed power projection in the Indian Ocean Region due to lack of logistical support and difficulty in accessing naval chokepoints such as Straits of Malacca which are strategically important to China.<sup>42</sup>

PLAN as mentioned above, has so far not adopted an offensive posture in IOR. Its naval presence in this region only became apparent after the frequent pirate attacks on merchant shipping at the Horn of Africa in 2008. China deployed three warships to counter this menace.<sup>43</sup> This in turn led to a series of successful deployments from which China gained invaluable experience. China has been pragmatic in its approach and in addition to its military might it has also developed economic ties with the littoral states in the IOR. This gradual ingress in the Indian Ocean by the PLAN coupled with massive economic investments in the regional states has irked India.

China's relationship with the regional countries such as Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Bangladesh has elevated its influence in the IOR to a large extent. Prior to 2008, PLAN's area of operation was limited to its near-abroad i.e. coastal waters, the South China Sea, the East China Sea and the Western Pacific. PLAN is now actively involved in enhancing the naval capacities of these navies by training personnel and providing technical and logistical support. China is also actively building listening posts across the IOR and has become the third largest arms supplier on the globe which has increased its

---

<sup>42</sup>Gurpreet S Khurana, "China's 'String of Pearls' in the Indian Ocean and Its Security Implications," *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 32, no. 1 (2008), 1-39.

<sup>43</sup>Lee Jae-Hyung, "China's Expanding Maritime Ambitions in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 24, no. 3(2002), 549-568.

clout and reached beyond its sphere of immediate influence.<sup>44</sup>

Since 2008, the PLAN has deployed more than 25 escort missions in its anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden and beyond. The normal deployment period of such escort missions is two to four months in which almost 800 convoys were escorted by PLAN. By the virtue of these anti-piracy missions, PLAN elements visited several extra-regional countries e.g. round-the-world trip calling at ports in Europe, Scandinavia, the US, Pacific, and South East Asia before heading home, a deployment of about ten months. Such missions have helped its personnel master the art of convoy operations.<sup>45</sup> More so, it has provided China with much needed global visibility amongst the comity of nations where many states may be willing to enhance ties with China due to shifting global order.

The anti-piracy missions of PLAN have enabled it to carry out combat deployments and exercises with regional countries. During these operations, PLAN deployed intelligence-gathering ships too, considerably boosting China's knowledge of other seas in general and those in the IOR in particular. PLAN also deployed its Shang Class submarines for anti-piracy missions that sailed through strategic Straits of Malacca and near the Strait of Hormuz enhancing the experience of its crews. PLAN is a regular participant in the annual Aman series of multinational exercises conducted by the Pakistan Navy.<sup>46</sup> These exercises have ensured a high degree of interoperability with other navies of the world and have also given PLAN the required exposure to generate scenarios for future combat. To cover for its strategic logistic needs China negotiated an agreement with Djibouti for the

---

<sup>44</sup>James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "China and the United States in the Indian Ocean: An Emerging Strategic Triangle?" *Naval War College Review*, vol. 61, no. 3 (2008), 40-60.

<sup>45</sup>David Zweig and Bi Jianhai, "China's Global Hunt for Energy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, no. 5(2005), 25-38.

<sup>46</sup>Abu Afnan, "Together for Peace: Multinational Maritime Exercise Aman 2019," *Defence Journal*, Vol. 22, no. 8 (2019), 85-90.

construction of a naval base. If materialized, this base will serve as a forward outpost for PLAN assets to conduct constant surveillance and secure vital SLOC's.<sup>47</sup> India's SSBN program may have serious repercussions for China and has forced it to respond in kind. This program has the potential to jeopardize the strategic stability in the region and ultimately induce a new vector for crisis instability.

**c. Some Emerging Implications of Sino-Indian Strategic Rivalry in the IOR**

Emerging implications of Sino-Indian rivalry and nuclearization of the IOR include the following:

- China-India competition is expanding into the Indian Ocean Region and as a result is more maritime-focused than in the past. This has the potential to spur further development of naval assets on both sides that could have implications for respective naval procurement and regional posture.
- The geographic expansion of strategic competition between China and India is increasing strategic linkages between East Asia and South Asia and the Indian Ocean, making the broader Indo-Pacific region more linked.
- There may be growing competition for energy and other resources across the IOR which could have an impact on global markets.
- Snowballing effect of this competition with China may drive India to further develop its relationship with the United States and other regional partners in the Indo-Pacific, such as Australia, Japan, and others.
- This competition may also offer opportunities to the Indian Ocean littoral states to play China and India against each other to extract

---

<sup>47</sup>Zhang Wenmu, "Sea Power and China's Strategic Choices," *China Security*, Vol. 2, no. 2(2006).

foreign aid, military assistance, expanded trade and investment, and other advantages.

- The expansion of India's and China's naval capabilities and presence and increased engagement with regional states may relatively diminish the strategic posture of the United States in the IOR.
- The emerging strategic rivalry between India and China is set to exacerbate their already strained relations.

#### **4. Future of China's Maritime Interests in the IOR**

China has been increasing its footprint in the IOR in recent decades and intends to exploit the economic and maritime potential of this region to the fullest. However, New Delhi's aggressive posture towards Beijing has raised question on the future of China's maritime interests in the IOR. Various key factors which will determine the future of China's maritime interests in the IOR are as follows:

- a. First and foremost, factor is the safety of China's SLOC's in the IOR. Beijing is well aware of multifaceted threats facing its SLOC's and has taken practical steps to mitigate these threats. China has embarked upon a massive campaign to develop infrastructural setup in the IOR. Once completed, this will enable China to maintain a firm foothold in the Indian Ocean. This in turn will enable it to secure not only its SLOC's but also counter threats to its economic interests in the region.
- b. The second major factor determining the future of Chinese maritime interests in the IOR is its maritime capability. The naval buildup of China indicates that Beijing is more than willing to invest heavily in its naval assets. It has not only been training its personnel but also inducting state of the art weaponry in its naval arsenal. China is well aware of the Indian naval buildup

and the US' efforts to prop up New Delhi's anti-China policy. Beijing has entered into economic cum military agreements with various regional states which will in the near future enable it to balance the Indo-US nexus in this region. As a matter of fact China will not be able to attain outright hegemony in the IOR but it will maintain a balance that will enable it to meet its policy objectives inside the IOR.

- c. Future of China's maritime interests in the IOR also depends on its will to support its allies inside this region. Rivalry between Iran and the US and the burgeoning Saudi-Iran split will also determine the future course of events in this region. So far, China has not challenged the US hegemony in the IOR and has been using its economic muscle to make inroads in this region. This strategy has won China many allies in this region. They have been either victims of the US military aggression or economic sanctions in the past. Meanwhile, China is also willing to provide weaponry to potential buyers which will enable it to further understand the military dynamics in the region.
  
- d. Sino-Pakistan friendship, which is often referred to as higher than the mountains and deeper than the oceans, will also be central to the Chinese maritime interests and its future in the IOR. Pakistan has been a victim of Indian aggression and state sponsored terrorism. Pakistan is now focusing on its maritime sector to address its economic woes. The current government is more than willing to exploit the economic potential of the IOR which has brought it in line with the Chinese ambitions in the region. The common Indian animosity towards China and Pakistan has given yet another reason to these two to work together and counter the threat posed by India. Chinese investments in Gwadar will not only make the port city an economic hub, hence mitigating Pakistan's economic woes, it

will also provide safe and shorter routes for the Chinese goods to reach the Middle East and beyond.

If China maintains a neutral and non-confrontational posture in the IOR, its maritime interests in the region will be protected. It will not only emerge as a major economic powerhouse in the region but also a military power, thanks to its physical infrastructure which will, in the future, house its ships and submarines. It is no secret that the US power is waning in the region.<sup>48</sup> The US intends to use India as its bogeyman to keep Chinese expansion under check. However, the US seems to be overstretched and its economic and military prowess is dwindling. It can support India to a certain extent but will not go all out to protect Indian interests. India has its own problems. It is not internally stable with active insurgencies in almost a quarter of India. Indian economy is also under stress and India's desire to strengthen its navy depends upon its economy. On the other hand, China's economy is growing, and it is much more stable than India. These factors indicate that China may prevail in this race for establishing a permanent presence in the IOR and exploiting the economic potential of this region to the fullest.

## Conclusion

India has been vying to secure its position in the IOR and has nuclearized this rather peaceful region. China has become skeptical of this situation and therefore a cold war between the two is continuing. The nuclearization of this region has taken the Sino-Indian rivalry in the IOR to the next level. Tensions between the two states have exacerbated which is facilitated by the presence of extra-regional forces that will surely benefit from the Sino-Indian rivalry. Nuclear threat in the IOR has also put smaller states on edge that are now

---

<sup>48</sup>Lee. Jae-Hyung, "China's Expanding Maritime Ambitions in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 24, no. 3 (2002), 549-568.

scrambling to secure their interests. This has led to an undeclared arms race in the region eventually benefitting the extra-regional forces, who are some of the largest arms exporters on the globe. For the last several decades, China has pursued a policy of non-aggression and aims to achieve its objectives peacefully by using its economic muscle. India, on the other hand, is using hard power to secure its interests in the IOR. This has unfortunately forced China to change its approach while dealing with this region and hence putting the world at the risk of nuclear Armageddon. A comparison of capabilities of both states indicates that China will be the dominant naval power in the IOR if it meets the criteria mentioned in this paper. Realism posits that state can go to any extent to secure their interests. This is plainly visible in the Indian Ocean Region.