

Geo-strategic Importance of Indian Ocean: Clash of Interests between China and India

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ABSTRACT

Indian Ocean owns a unique location. In the present era, states are hungry of energy to make their economies boost and are vigilant about the routes through which trade is conducted. India and China want to retain their control over the Indian Ocean. Both states are doing economic, military and infrastructure efforts to assert influence in Indian Ocean Region. The growing ties of China with neighboring states drag India in difficulty and India is getting worried about China's growth in its backyard. To contain China, India is making informal defense, military alliances with USA, Japan, Russia and Australia. This game of influence indulges China-India in a rift. This competition can disturb whole South Asia region as small states are used as cards by China and India to balance each other. The International players are looking the situation with hawk eyes as they cannot see any disruption in their trade routes. The paper will unfold the power politics between China and India through the spectrum of Balance of Power perspective that by what means both the states are endeavoring to neutralize each other's influence.

Key Words: Geo-strategic, Indian Ocean, China, India, Clash, Interests

Introduction

The Indian Ocean being the third largest water body in the world, it stands out as a unique ocean due to its geo-strategic location, size and global economic activities. It virtually covers 20 per cent of world water that is surrounded by Asia in its North, Africa in its West, Indo China in its East and Antarctica in its South. It is spanning over an area of 68,556 square kilometers. The name Indian Ocean is derived due to its covered area mainly in the Indian Subcontinent. Due to the globalized world, Indian Ocean has gained vital importance for the nations to strengthen their economies and to neutralize their rival states in maritime and naval competition. Indian Ocean has gained incredible status over the years because of its choke points. Due to these choke points the world's economic and political concentration has been shifted towards Indian Ocean Region. This ocean has rich energy resources that increased its importance among the major players of

the world. China and India are in a continuous search of energy resources for boosting their economies. These energy resources are being transported through the secure lanes of Indian Ocean. China's prevailing influence and India's growing influence have escalated the ocean strategic worth. Both regional powers are competing in this region to uphold and exert their influence. (Fatima, 2015)

The Indian Ocean includes important marginal seas like the Andaman Sea, Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, Flora Sea, Sea of Zanj, Great Australian Bight, Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, Java Sea, Mozambique Channel, Red Sea, Persian Gulf, Savu Sea, Timor Sea and many other water bodies. Its strategic location at the door of Persian Gulf is significant for those nations whose economic and strategic interest requires sound trading routes in and out of Persian Gulf. (Briney, 2017)

It is becoming significant due to its Sea Lines of Communication that are Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Malacca, Bab-el- Mandeb, The Sunda and Lombok Strait, Mozambique, Ten Degree and Six Degree Channels. Any disturbance in flow of trade through these Sea Lines of Communication can produce devastating impacts on the economies of the neighboring and littoral states that's why India and China are paying focus on Indian Ocean Region. Protection of sea routes have become the obsession of many states (Donald.L.Berlin, 2015)

India is geographically located at the middle of Indian Ocean. It is the fourth largest economy and their 70 per cent economy depends on energy resources which are imported from Persian Gulf via Indian Ocean. It is highly dependent on the resources of Indian Ocean like fishing, mineral resources. It shares a coastline of 75,000 square kilometers with Indian Ocean. The Ocean has become the foremost priority for India's apex institutions and India's policy will be important in determining the strategic future of the Indian Ocean Region. (Jaishankar, 2016)

Indian Ocean is becoming increasingly important for China to protect its economy and addressing its security concern. It is formulating a policy to counter 'Rising India' and to establish an equilibrium in the Indian Ocean Rim. The increasing interest of China in the zone is mainly because of Sino-India rivalry factor. It is trying to enhance its naval development and maritime infrastructure. It has made relationship with the shore line states of the Indian Ocean region in order to counter India's rising influence which is often referred as 'string of pearls'. (Cheng, 2010)

The infrastructure development of China in the region and militarization in the sea lanes is becoming threat for India and USA as much of world oil is passing through these lanes. Just like India, China wants to protect its Shipping routes and does not want to take risk to leave South China Sea and Western Pacific linking it to Indian Ocean. The Ocean would be a source of security competition between potential states in the coming years. (Bennett, 2017)

Formation of Indian Ocean

The initiation and crafting of Indian Ocean is the result of the continuous changing in the geography which basically shaped the current land and its water

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distributions. The major phenomenon in this context is 'Plate Tectonic Theory'. The core clue of this theory was that the modern continents formed a single landmass in the past. It also explains that how it is caused by the land drift resulting in concerned scattering and sprinkle of all the lands and or countries about 100 million years ago. The Indian Ocean was merged with South Atlantic Ocean and these two were separated into current form about years ago. The continuous movement of earth plates gave advantage that the disintegration and collapse of single Gondwana into Antarctic Australia and India to their present day position.

The severe fluctuations and variations under the surface of the Earth would result in the apartheid of Madagascar from the landmass of Africa and island constellations of Indonesia from the mainland Asia.

Indian Ocean is being influenced by climatic variations and from outside the incredible impact comes from monsoon. This fact was admitted from 99 conformations specifying the climatic role of Indian Ocean on Sea Surface Temperature (SST) in the region. The year 1997 is consider as much odd year for Indian Ocean and its countries. For example highest rainfall was measured in East Africa in the month of October and November. Similarly the flooding situation in Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and Uganda causes human loss and displacement of hundreds of people. On the other adjacent of Indian Ocean, Indonesia faced many problems and desolate fires was broke out and gone out of control on many islands. All these climatic irregularities were caused by infrequent conditions of tropical environment and worse climate of Indian Ocean.

Climatic condition of Indian Ocean is mainly concerning the Indian Ocean Rim alongside the coast of Asia, Africa and Australia all fall under the tropical region. Indian Ocean is allocated into the southern and northern hemispheres so we can get the two kinds of dominant systems like the southern division has the trivial and less severe wind system mean the northern equatorial temperature is subjugated by the monsoon system. The monsoon system endorsed in Indian Ocean makes it unique from Pacific and Atlantic Ocean. The monsoon winds are present around the year with different directions and strength in the different part of the region. In recent years the climatic conditions are very inconsistent as earlier supposed.

Most importantly the Indian Ocean is closely bound with the north to the Asian Continent that averting and thwarting the northward heat to export and just permitting the weak air ventilation of Indian Ocean thermocline from the northern side. Further discussing the Asian Continent which strongly used to motivate the monsoon winds to produce the large cyclic variations or discrepancies in ocean and many of them also used to show the annual problems like the Somali Current and the Southwest, Northeast Monsoon or the current from the south of India and Sri Lanka.

Indian Ocean is lacking in the strong equatorial easterlies so the consequence of this rising division the Indian Ocean air circulations is being secured over the maritime continent. As a result we can say that there is no such climatic logical

equatorial changing in the eastern ocean instead the upwelling or burst happens in the Northern hemisphere in the northwest Africa or in Arabian peninsula the east and west tip of India in the southern Hemisphere besides with the northern edge of southeast trades. (Friedrich A. Schoot, 2009)

Geo-strategic significance of Indian Ocean

The oceans have always been a source of transporting goods in the world. For centuries Indian Ocean has connected East with the West. The dependence of countries on international trade is adding to the strategic status of Indian Ocean. The Sea Lines of Communication are the arteries through which international trade circulates. The most oil-rich region of the world Middle East borders Indian Ocean are enhancing its significance. The important factor elevating the attention in Indian Ocean Region is Indo China affairs which is generally describe by the term as ‘rise of India’ and ‘rise of China’. India has fear of China’s entry in Indian Ocean and concerned about encirclement by China. (Fernando, 2015)

As the Indian Ocean is considering as the most important water body not only in contemporary world but also from the historical time period due to their significant geographical settings or its major eater seas which becomes the main focusing point for the major states and for the regional states as well. As the Indian Ocean is standing on the third number of world water bodies and with their important geography and its marginal seas it gets the world states attention and with its unique straits people started the trade activities and live around the sea.

The Indian Ocean also have the marginal seas as in its north are the inland Red sea and Persian Gulf. In its northwest is the Arabian Sea and in its northeast is the Andaman Sea. The large gulfs of Aden and Oman are located to the northwest, the Bay of Bengal is to the northeast, and the Great Australian Bight is off the southern coast of Australia. As the major water bodies also the hub of many civilizations similarly the Indian Ocean also experience the many civilizations which developed along the shore of its water and developed themselves and survive with the different trade activities. (Joseph R. Morgan, 2016)

As far as the geographical significance is concerned we cannot ignore or undermine the geographical setting of the Indian Ocean as this ocean is being settle under its major six choke points and these choke points also much crucial for the shipping trading that is being used by the other major states. These vital global shipping routes and choke points of Indian Ocean are as follows:

- Strait of Hormuz
- Strait of Malacca
- Bab-el-Mandeb
- The Sunda and Lombok straits
- Mozambique Channel
- Ten Degree and Six Degree Channels

Clash of Interests between China and India

Relations between China and India in Post-Cold War

The Sino- India relations have witnessed transformation over the years. The largest Asian's economy Beijing finds a big market in India and engaged in trade, high-level political visits, cooperation for antiterrorism efforts and also busy in bilateral meetings. Both states have jointly announced the Shared Vision of 21st century in 2008. The vision wishes to promote Sino- India strategic cooperation and do joint efforts to promote the peace and solidity in the world.

Shifting from normalization to deliberate partnership

The relations were distracted in 1998 after the nuclear tests which were conducted by India and Indian justified its action by claiming that it feels threat from China. After such statement by India the Chinese reaction was offensive and started diplomatic campaign against India. The relations were disabled. The relations were progressed in 2003 after official visit by India to China and both have agreed to make their relations better for cooperation on strategic matters. During 2006 a five point policy was accepted by both states that include promises on

- Trade
- Energy
- Investments
- Educational exchange
- Cultural links

To promote border trade they opened Nathu La Pass that was closed since 1962 border clash. They also cooperated in defense area and developing confidence building measures. The visit of Indian Defense Minister in 2006 was a landmark in their defense cooperation. The signing of Memorandum of Understanding on defense cooperation showed the intents of both states to build institution for bilateral military cooperation.

The two states actively involved in efforts to strengthen bilateral relations, as they have common interests and issues for global trade. Both promoted multipolar world and disagree for unilateralism. Regardless of all efforts China- India are having doubts of each other. (Mukherjee, 2010).

China maritime strategy

Since the mid of 2000s China to mark her influence from South China Sea to Indo-Pacific Region pursuing 'two ocean' policy. This strategy has two levels. One is to develop far-sea operations and second is the construction of Maritime Silk Road of 21st century.

Far sea operations

The manifestation of 'Far Sea Operations' is reflecting by the deployments of Chinese Navy in Indo-Pacific region. It has shifted its strategy to ocean-centric in order to secure energy needs and make its consistent existence. In Eastern part of the ocean China cruise missiles destroyers Haikou is combating for anti-piracy. Chinese surveillance vessels were forwarded in July 2017 to monitor the exercises conducted at Bay of Bengal by India, USA and Japan. The growing oceanic existence of China in Indian Ocean is view as maritime encirclement to counter match land encirclement of India.

In August 2017 China conducted fire drill in waters of western side. Chinese destroyer Changchun, guided fire missile Jingzhou and supply vessel Chaohu were tested. It was official stated that the strikes are conducted to test against the surface ships of foe. Although name of adversary was not declared but it was considered as against the Indian Navy. The power projection was further extended after the launch of 'logistics facility' at Djibouti and conducted marine drills. (Scott, 2017)

Maritime Silk Road project

Maritime Silk Road was introduced in 2013 by China. It has two main components. First is to revive the ancient Silk route and second component is maritime port developments. China showed its dream to connect to the world. It is also called as 'One Belt One Road' initiatives. The 'belt' refers to the reconstruction of Silk Route and 'road' refers to the route via ocean lanes. It involves the geo-economic, geopolitical and maritime interests of China. It is considered as the largest project of this century. By this project China has engaged 70 states of Asia, Africa and Europe. This project will connect China with these countries via railways, roads and shipping lanes.

The project has the aim to interlink ports and nodes points passing via ocean. It will raise the Chinese participation in trade activities and increase the number of merchant ships of China. It would also raise the naval presence of China. This vision is also of reflection of 'String of Pearls'.

India has reservations over Maritime Silk Road. It avoided to participate in the Belt and Road Forum held in 2017. India is doubtful of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPCE) which is supposed to pass through disputed area of Kashmir. Maritime Silk Road encompass India and it is viewed as another way use by China to encircle India. (Ma, 2018).

Counter measures of India

India is aware of China's influence and potential efforts of China to mark its role in the waters of Indian Ocean. China consider that Indian Ocean is not India's sea likewise India claim South China Sea not only China's sea and has increased activities there. To counter the Chinese 'String of Pearls' policy India is taking

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same measures and these measures can be termed as 'Iron Curtain' against China. India alone cannot counter Beijing that's why India is taking help of other giant states like USA, Japan, Australia to play their part and even included small nations in this game.

Look east policy

The 'Look East Policy' was introduced as a major foreign policy step in 1990s. It was advanced in 1991 by Narashima Rao government. The vision behind this policy is to pay attention on states on East-Asia which includes Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Brunei. The policy aims to make political and economic contacts with East-Asia states and achieve trade opportunities and increase investment options. Another aim was to enjoy the strategic benefits and defense links with these nations. (Haokip, 2014).

Look East Policy from last two decades got more attention and got the official status and mentioned in all papers issued by ministries. It was renamed as 'Act East Policy' in 2014 after change of government. Although it has been evolved with time as initial concern was on East-Asia states but currently India included whole East and West Asia. It intended to improve links with 'tiger economies' of Asia. The basic rational of this policy is following:

- India has strategic interests and supposed to be achieved via expanding India Navy.
- Reviving India's relations with East-Asian nation due to China factor.
- Taking notice of the vulnerable north-east region for economic interests.

India's struggle to execute look east policy

The present government of India shows its commitment to continue this policy. This evolves many engagements at bilateral and multilateral levels. India has included some new states in this strategy like South Korea, Singapore, Mauritius and Japan which were initially not considered. Japan is among the top investors in India. The growing relations with Japan are generated due to the firm fear of China.

Vietnam-India ties also give signal of India's commitment with this policy. They have signed defense pacts which include sell of cruise missile. Vietnam has allowed Indian Navy to make base on the Nha Trang near South China Sea. Furthermore India is investing and developing ties with the states to encompass economic integration and security.

Naval orientation of India

The Indian Navy is going to play an important role in the geo-political and security environment of Indo-Pacific Region. To achieve its geostrategic goal, Indian Navy

has to play its part that's why New Delhi is modernizing and growing its Navy. The significant key points of Indian Navy modernization are:

- To secure the coastal lines of country.
- To preserve the regional interests of India.
- To save the supply lines which are used for Indian trade.

India in order to achieve these goals heavily spending on Indian Navy, expanding infrastructure, increases deployment in Indian Ocean Rim and conducting joint naval exercises. (Khurana, 2017)

The maritime shift in the policy of India is because of the growing trade of it. After 1992 the intent of New Delhi for integration and globalization has led a dramatic change in its policy. The total trade of India in 1991-1992 was just six per cent but by 2011-2012 it has raised to 52 per cent. According to reports 90 per cent of volume of its trade is conducted via oceanic routes. Such economic growth has pushed it to maritime strategy.

Freedom to use seas

In 2007 India officially issued a paper entitling maritime policy 'Freedom to use Seas'. It included the freedom for trade, free navigation and sail the sea. It reflected the major maritime interests of India in waters. In 2008 India Navy conducted anti-piracy operations in Gulf of Aden to protect Indian shipping and saving the lives of officers on sea-faring duties. In 2011 Ministry of Shipping made changes in this strategy and new orientation exposed the obstacles that Indian Navy was facing and gave plan ship building, port handling and increase trade and commerce. After the change of regime in 2014 Prime Minister Narendra Modi changed the defense and maritime policies and showed his strong will to influence Indo-Pacific region by acting on 'Act East Policy'. (Mohan, 2016)

India is increasing its capacity by acquiring modern vessels. It is spending on Indian Navy consisting of 14-18 per cent of total budget. The modernization is basically replacing old technology with new ones. It has nine landing ship tanks, 14 frigates, one nuclear power submarines, a large fleet with two aircraft carriers, 47 patrol vessels, four fleet tankers and many auxiliary vessels. These developments are posing strategic implications on the regional states of Indian Ocean Rim. These trends giving rise to new competition among the regional players like India and China. This competition is also evolving the role of external powers and enhancing the security dilemma in this region. The growing strategic partnership of India-USA can be considered as a counter alliance against the China-Pak relations. This is disturbing strategic balance of this area. India is materializing and nuclearizing itself against the Chinese 'String of Pearls' doctrine. (Khalid, 2017)

Comparison of China- India naval combatants

| Type of Combatants | China | India |
|-----------------------------|-------|-------|
| Corvettes and Missile Boats | 106 | 25 |
| Amphibious Ships | 56 | 9 |
| Frigates | 52 | 14 |
| Mine Warfare | 42 | 6 |
| Destroyers | 26 | 11 |

Source: ISIS Military Balance 2018

Conclusion

Indian Ocean is gaining focus of major states. China and India consider themselves as key players of this region. Beijing is playing its cards by military investments, infrastructure projects and security relations with the nearest states and trying to shape out a major role for itself in regional and global affairs. Its plans in Indian Ocean adding to the apprehensions of New Delhi and both are pushing themselves to deter each other. These two Asian Powers giving a new shape to the power distribution in Asian region. This game of developing bases all around is also attracting other players to involve as USA is concerned about growing role of China in this way. So India is used by other major powers to make anti-Chinese coalition. China and India did not challenge each other openly but states can't be sure about each other's intentions. They always feel uncertainty by the actions of their enemies. The relations of China and India are of ambiguity as they perceive each action by one as against other. They are revolving around security dilemma and unable to find the intent of other. India and China are trying to make their relations goods via diplomacy but China taken as biggest worries after Pakistan.

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