



India-China Naval Competition in the Indian Ocean

Abhijit Singh

Head, Maritime Policy Initiative, ORF/Observer Research Foundation, India

When India's navy chief, Admiral Sunil Lanba, addressed a press conference in New Delhi on the occasion of Navy Day earlier this month, the spotlight was squarely on emerging naval dynamics in the Indian Ocean.¹ A majority of queries by journalists presented at the interaction concerned India's moves to combat China's growing presence in littoral-South Asia.

Admiral Lanba observed that while Chinese naval activity in the Indian Ocean has indeed expanded significantly, the balance-of-regional power remains very much in India's favour. With a planned upgrade in inventory, including 56 new ships and submarines, the Indian navy, he observed is demonstrating new resolve to be a net security provider in the Indian Ocean region, committed to combating the spectrum of traditional and non-traditional threats. While PLAN has plans to become a superpower by 2050, he noted, the Indian navy is intent on being a "world-class navy with 200 ships and 500 aircraft."²

The navy chief's expression of confidence in the Indian navy's capabilities is

¹ "To counter China, Indian Navy to have 56 new ships, submarines", *The Tribune*, December 4, 2018 at <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/to-counter-china-indian-navy-to-have-56-new-ships-submarines/692718.html>

² Ibid.

indeed heartening, serving to assure the public and policymakers alike. However, there is no mistaking the growing sense of unease in India's security establishment over China expanding footprint in the Indian Ocean. China's maritime initiatives in South Asia are generating apprehension in India's maritime community, where many believe Chinese naval forays have shrunk New Delhi's space for operational maneuver in a strategic backwater.³ Not only is China making inroads into India's traditional sphere of influence, but Beijing is leveraging its naval anti-piracy deployments for geopolitical gains, promoting partnerships with regional states, advancing a benevolent-China narrative.

More importantly, China is positioning itself as a security player in the Indian Ocean. It is odd, say Indian observers, that the PLAN's anti-piracy contingents now comprise guided-missile frigates, advanced destroyers, and special operations forces – suited more for high-impact “presence operations” than anti-piracy missions.⁴ Since the inauguration of China's first overseas facility in Djibouti, the PLAN's bid for strategic access in the Indian Ocean's critical littorals has been amply evident. Amid rising speculation that of the six aircraft carriers that Beijing plans to operate in the future two would be deployed in the Indian Ocean, Indian experts are worried about delays in India's aircraft carrier project.⁵ While China is on track to commission its second flattop, the Type 001A, by 2020 (with a third aircraft carrier, the Type 002, under construction in Shanghai), India's indigenous aircraft carrier (IAC-1) has been beset with chronic delays. Reportedly, plans for the IAC-2 have been placed on the backburner following steadily declining budgets, technological hurdles, and enduring holdups by the Ministry of Defence.⁶

³ Abhijit Singh, “Decoding Chinese submarine ‘sightings’ in South Asia, eroding New Delhi’s strategic primacy”, *Times of India*, Nov15, 2018 at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/decoding-chinese-submarine-sightings-in-south-asia-eroding-new-delhis-strategic-primacy/articleshow/66631063.cms>

⁴ Ankit Panda, “China Burnishes Anti-Piracy Credentials Without Clarifying Possible Use of Lethal Force”, *The Diplomat*, May 08, 2018 at <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/china-burnishes-anti-piracy-credentials-without-clarifying-possible-use-of-lethal-force/>

⁵ “New threat in Indian Ocean: China to build at least six aircraft carriers”, *Economic Times*, July 14, 2018 at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/new-threat-in-indian-ocean-china-to-build-at-least-six-aircraft-carriers/articleshow/58298250.cms>

⁶ Rahul Bedi, “Plans for India’s second indigenous aircraft carrier continue to stall”, *Janes* 360, July 9, 2018, <https://www.janes.com/article/81624/plans-for-india-s-second-indigenous-aircraft-carrier-continue-to-st>

For New Delhi, the more significant challenge comes from Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean. In recent years, Chinese anti-piracy contingents have invariably been accompanied by a PLAN submarine.⁷ In the garb of counter-piracy operations, Chinese submarines have gathered critical information about the Indian Ocean's operating environment, spending an inordinately long time scouring the South Asian seas. Far from performing an anti-piracy function, Indian analysts suspect, PLAN subs mark far-seas presence, projecting strategic influence in South Asia. Chinese naval deployments in the Indian Ocean, in fact, seem to complement Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative projects in Pakistan and Sri Lanka in whose Exclusive Economic Zones, PLAN subs have often been sighted.

To be sure, the Indian navy has devoted considerable resource and effort in keeping tracking Chinese submarines, regularly pressing the P-8I and other surveillance assets to the task. New Delhi's plans to develop the Andaman and Nicobar command as a strategic outpost are in part aimed at better situational awareness about PLAN presence in the near-littorals. The deployment of a PLAN submarine in July 2017, at the height of the month-long Doklam crisis, so upset New Delhi that India's naval leadership felt compelled to order permanent surveillance of the Indian Ocean's critical sea-lanes and chokepoints by 'mission-ready' warships.⁸

Geopolitically, New Delhi has sought to follow an innovative approach by acting in close concert with friendly states. In an attempt to balance China, India has drawn closer Indo-Pacific democracies, expanding naval engagement with the US, Japan, and Australia. The trilateral India-US-Japan Malabar exercises have grown in scope and complexity with the addition of more combat drills, and military ties with Australia have expanded (even if Delhi remains reluctant to invite the latter to join multilateral naval drills).⁹

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⁷ "Odd that China has submarines in Indian Ocean for anti-piracy ops: Navy chief", *The Hindustan Times*, December 1, 2017, at

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/odd-that-china-has-submarines-in-indian-ocean-for-anti-piracy-ops-navy-chief/story-eUwmKlcyYOWIGrZckvvoHJ.html>

⁸Dinaker Peri, "Navy steps up patrolling of Indian Ocean Region", *The Hindu*, November 5, 2017, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/navy-steps-up-patrolling-of-indian-ocean-region/article19984925.ece>

⁹ Adarsh Verma, "The Malabar Exercises: An Appraisal", *IDS*, July 18, 2017 at

Indian analysts believe that despite Beijing's effort to create land-based routes for energy transportation, a vast majority of Chinese oil and gas shipments will continue to transit over the Indian Ocean, suggesting a continuing Malacca dilemma.¹⁰ As a corollary, China is likely to leverage PLAN presence in the IOR to restrain the Indian Navy's space for operational maneuvers. Already China's efforts to modernize the Pakistan navy – with an offer of eight Yuan-class submarines and four type-54A frigates – highlights a strengthening Pakistan-China nexus, motivated seemingly by a desire to counter the Indian navy in the Indian Ocean.¹¹

From an Indian point of view, Chinese port facilities in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Male and full-fledged bases at Djibouti and Gwadar could only be meant to establish a near-continuous naval presence in India's strategic neighbourhood. Indeed, the PLAN has an interest in displacing the US in the Pacific and IOR as the dominant naval power. Furthermore, the PLAN has been ramping up assertive posturing and military infrastructure building in the South China Sea.

Importantly, China is being smart with its influence projection in the Indian Ocean. Chinese warships have so far not threatened Indian interests, desisting from any over challenges to India's sovereignty in its territorial waters.¹² Beijing has limited its Indian Ocean ventures to BRI partner states, eager to benefit from Beijing's economic and military assistance.

However, in New Delhi, there is no escaping the sense of a 'slow-choke' of Indian equities in the Indian Ocean. As things stand, the Indian navy is intent on emphasizing its preeminent status in the Indian Ocean. The sheer magnitude of the task is evident from the pattern and periodicity of extra-regional deployments in the IOR, leading senior Indian officials to acknowledge the Chinese navy is here to stay in the Indian Ocean.

https://idsa.in/idsacomments/the-malabar-exercises_averma_180717

¹⁰ Vice Admiral Shekhar Sinha (Retd), “Changing paradigms in the IOR present new challenges to the Indian Navy”, *Force India*, at

<http://forceindia.net/guest-column/guest-column-shekhar-sinha/in-our-own-interest/>

¹¹ “Pakistan Signs Contract For Type 054a Frigates From China”, *Quwa*, June 02, 2018 at <https://quwa.org/2018/06/02/pakistan-signs-contract-for-type-054a-frigates-from-china-2/>

¹² Abhijit Singh, “Powerplay in the Indo-Pacific region”, *Live Mint*, July 20, 2017 at

<https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/YLTJRierevnhWvDNsDsLJM/Malabar-naval-exercise-Powerplay-in-the-IndoPacific-region.html>

While New Delhi has been reluctant to raise the alarm about China's strategic naval presence in the Indian Ocean - in keeping with the “Wuhan-spirit”¹³ - Indian naval planners know the PLAN is unlikely to cease its activities in maritime-South Asia. India's eroding leverage in South Asia, however, could well be the trigger for an Indian counter-strategy in the Indian Ocean.

¹³ “What happened to ‘Wuhan spirit’?”, *The Deccan Herald*, November 7, 2018 at <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/second-edit/what-happened-wuhan-spirit-701963.html>

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Institute of International Relations @ National Chengchi University

No.64, Wanshou Rd., Wenshan District
Taipei City, 116, Republic of China (Taiwan)
<http://iir.nccu.edu.tw>

Center for Southeast Asian Studies @ National Chengchi University

No.64, Wanshou Rd., Wenshan District
Taipei City, 116, Republic of China (Taiwan)
<http://iir.nccu.edu.tw>

Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies @ FLAME University

Gat No. 1270, Lavale, Off. Pune Bangalore Highway,
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