

India's Naval Development and Interests of other Powers in the Indian Ocean Region

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Introduction

In words of Alfred Mahan “*whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia, the destiny of world will be decided on its waters*”.¹ What Mahan stated in 1890 is proving true now. Indian Ocean has emerged as the central arena of competition in international politics in the last three decades. Strategic location of the region in terms of power, and importance of its Sea Lanes of Communication make it a place of increasingly greater interests for the regional and extra regional powers.² The geostrategic competition, in the recent years, in the region has driven its littoral states to increase their military power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Given the strategic outlook of the region, India is the regional player which has made significant strides in the last decade or so and has invested heavily in building its naval force. With induction of the S-2 nuclear powered submarine, INS *Arihant*, and aircraft carriers in its fleet, India is well on its way to transform its navy from a brown water navy also to a blue water navy. These acquisitions provide it the power to play a more active role in the region. The rapid development of the Indian navy allows it to balance its power with contending regional players, especially China which is also enhancing its naval capability. In order to become a major naval force in the region, with its ‘String of Pearls’ policy, China is making inroads in the region predominantly for economic interests.

India is pursuing its own ‘Look East’ policy to neutralize Chinese influence. This strategic Indian move has not only created serious challenges for Pakistan but has also disrupted the strategic balance between the two countries. This paper attempts to assess the Indian blue water naval capabilities and its growing influence in the IOR where national interests of many regional powers particularly China, India, US, and Pakistan converge.

Economic and Strategic Importance of Indian Ocean

Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean in the world with an area of 73,556,000 square kilometer covering approximately 20% of the world's water. It is bounded to the west and northwest by the East African Coast and Arabian Peninsula respectively. On its northern border lies Indian subcontinent and to the east Thailand, the Malay Peninsula, Indonesia, and Australia. Indian Ocean encompasses seas and gulfs in the surroundings like Andaman Sea, Laccadive Sea, Arabian Sea, Red Sea, Gulfs of Aden and Oman, located in the west of the Pacific Ocean. Strategically Indian Ocean is the convergence point of all the significant maritime routes.

There are several explanations and reasons for the increasing competition, in recent years, between regional and extra-regional powers for dominance over the IOR. These reasons pertain to geostrategic and geo-economic factors. The world is facing a new and unprecedented pattern of economic growth and shift of international market interests to Asia and Africa. The market shift is likely to be dominated by China in the next few decades and has caused more flow of goods within IOR and through it to the rest of the world.

The increasing energy needs of countries like China, Japan and India are also an important factor that has raised the geo-economic and geostrategic importance of the Indian Ocean because major exporters and importers of oil are located on the periphery of the Indian Ocean. According to a UN estimate, more than 80% of world's oil transits through Indian Ocean. During 2009 total seaborne trade from Northern Indian Ocean to European ports was worth \$1,159 billion. According to World Bank report of 2010, IOR share is presently only \$6 trillion out of a total world GDP of \$63 trillion but this may increase exponentially as the economies of Indian Ocean littoral states particularly that of China and India grow further. More importantly bulks of this trade comprise oil that is needed for sustaining and growth of economies of many Western and South East Asian countries. Annually seaborne oil trade amounts to 2/3 of total world trade. Half of the seaborne container traffic and world's 1/3 of seaborne bulk cargo transit through Indian Ocean. It is also reported that annually 100,000 ships pass through Indian Ocean.³ Australia and India alone accounted for nearly 40% of total GDP in the IOR, while their GDP combined with those of Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan,

Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa and Thailand make up almost 90% of the entire region's GDP.⁴

The maritime economic potential of Indian Ocean is also of great importance. More than 58% of identified world oil reserves and world's 46% of natural gas reserves are located in the IOR states.⁵ Indian Ocean's continental shelves are mineral rich which include nickel, cobalt, iron, manganese, gold and huge copper reserves.

It is crucial for Pakistan's to maintain a significant power to keep its sea lanes open as more than 90% of its trade takes place from sea. Losing control of these strategic routes may lead to economic strangulation of Pakistan. Apart from this, Afghanistan which is landlocked and trades majority of its goods through Pakistani ports reportedly has a 1 trillion dollar worth of mineral reserves.⁶ Along with this ISAF drawdown in 2014 will necessitate the movement of most of military equipment through sea which raises the importance of the Indian Ocean further for a short period.

Marine life perhaps offers just as much, if not more, economic value than the mineral resources that surround it in Indian Ocean. Indian Ocean states account for a considerable percentage of world fisheries. Only the East Indian Ocean produces 45% of the world's fish which amounts to 7 million tons yearly. Overall Indian Ocean total fish production increased dramatically from 861,000 tons in 1950 to 10.2 million tons in 2006.⁷

In Indian Ocean there are some significant choke points. These are of immense strategic importance for movement of ships and oil tankers. These points have a strong potential to control and manage the flow of the maritime traffic in Indian Ocean. In the north west of the Indian Ocean are *Suez Canal*, *Strait of Hormuz* and *Bab-al-Mandab*. In the south west *Mozambique Channel* provides opening to South African littoral states to the Indian Ocean and *Strait of Lombok*, *Sunda*, and *Malacca* open into the Ocean from the south east. Oil and gas is also transferred through some pipelines located in the region. *Sumed* pipeline which passes through Egypt connecting Suez Canal with Mediterranean Sea has the capacity of transporting 2.4 million barrels of oil per day.⁸

Strait of Hormuz, which connects Persian Gulf with Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman, is located between Oman and Iran. It is world's most important choke point because 17 million barrels of oil per day (bbl/d) flow out through it, which is 35% of all seaborne traded oil. More than 85% of crude oil is exported through this strait to Asian states like China, India and Japan.⁹

Strait of Malacca located between Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore connects Pacific Ocean and South China Sea with Indian Ocean. This is the shortest route for oil transiting from Strait of *Hormuz* to countries like China, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia and Australia. More than 60,000 vessels move through this strait yearly. China is also building a pipeline through Myanmar which will be operational this year. This pipeline is laid so as to bypass the Strait of *Malacca* and will ensure a safer alternative to China for vital oil supplies. An estimated 440,000bbl/d of oil will flow through this pipeline.¹⁰ Pipeline will also reduce the cost and time taken by oil tankers travelling through Strait of *Malacca*.

There is also an ongoing struggle for power in the South China Sea, over some islands whose ownership is claimed by China, and Japan, as well as Philippines. China has recently declared an air defence zone over disputed islands. Responding to this challenge US has announced tens of millions of dollars in new security assistance to Vietnam and the Philippines.¹¹

India's Strategic Objective in IOR

The Indian maritime strategy is fundamentally based on controlling the significant islands, choke points, and trade routes in the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. It has to project the Indian power beyond its shores and protect the Sea Lanes of Communication and take care of emerging threats. Operations of the Indian navy are divided in four groups, military, diplomatic, coastal and non-military activities, termed benign operations. Under the military operations India aims to control the region and contain the contending power, contest other powers in the open sea and coastal regions. Moreover the presence of naval force during peace time projects deterrence in nuclear and conventional sense across the regions. On the regional level, keeping in view emerging navies of China, Japan and Pakistan, Indian navy is tasked to operate against them for their containment and make the Indian Ocean truly Indian by controlling and guarding IOR.

As far as diplomatic tasks are concerned Indian navy is to take international naval exercises and non-military operations. It is to maintain presence in the high seas, gaining the political leverage, flag showing and making partnerships with the naval forces of other countries. However, under the constabulary role Indian navy is projected as an instrument of keeping order in the sea. It is to carry out non-military operations to safeguard the sea routes for trade, protecting the resources of the world oceans and securing the legal, political and economic stability. Furthermore it is to support the maritime operations against terrorism, piracy, drug smuggling and illegal migrations.¹²

The benign role of the Indian navy is based on the propagation of the soft power. Creating beneficial international environment, positive image of India and spreading cultural and political values of India in other countries. Under this task Indian navy will also support the study of oceans and thus adding to the knowledge of using and exploiting sea resources at home. Non-military operations are also used for the humanitarian assistance and relief missions.¹³

The Indian drive for blue water navy goes back to 1990 when India took the policy decision to revamp its navy in terms of technology and fire power. This ambitious work was started during the period of Prime Minister Vajpayee (1998) and has been continued by Mr. Manmohan Singh after him.¹⁴ The Indian Maritime Capabilities Perspective Plan (MCP) which was formulated in 2005 has identified two major objectives for the Indian navy, one; playing a blue water operational role and second fighting the threats in the coastal region.¹⁵

Indian navy's development was possible by huge increase in the defense expenditure of Indian navy. During 1997-2001 it was 7% of total Indian defence budget which rose up to 18% in 2002-2007.¹⁶ This percentage further rose up to 19% of total defense expenditure (US\$ 37.4 billion) for 2013-2014.¹⁷ When the plan is fully implemented Indian navy would have the ability to operate 200 miles from the home shores, which in other words means ability to operate in open seas and deep oceans. Politically, the blue water naval capability is seen as the projection of a states' naval power.¹⁸

In 2001, at first Indian naval power was show cased when aircraft carrier *INS Viraat* headed a contingent of 55 ships. Indian Chief of Naval Staff Arun Prakash

had stated on that occasion “today the Indian navy has weapons of formidable range and our naval forces are deployed across vast distances from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal and the farthest reaches of the Indian Ocean”.¹⁹

Consistent upgradation and additional acquisition has made the Indian navy world's fifth largest, and the largest navy in the region.²⁰ The induction of *Arihant* nuclear power submarine and aircraft carrier *INS Vikramaditya* acquired from *Russia*, formerly the *Adm. Gorshkov*, has become another step towards making it a formidable naval power. *Arihant* which is going to become operational at the end of 2014, after one more year of sea trials, will provide India with the second strike capability. The *INS Vikramaditya* which was operationalized in November, 2013 will enhance the fire power of Indian navy as within two years after its induction it will be equipped with long range surface-to-air missile (SAM) and closed-in weapon system (CIWS) to guard itself against an aerial attack. It has the capability of carrying thirty fighter jets and helicopters and can remain in sea for about 45 days.²¹

Furthermore India's locally build two aircraft carriers, *Vikrant* which is expected to become operational by 2017²², and *Vishal* in 2019 will make Indian a country with three aircraft carriers in its fleet.²³ China is building its second aircraft carrier and plans to have at least four such aircraft carriers. Building of second aircraft carrier by China will take 6 years hence it will be operational in 2020.²⁴ Given these timelines, India will be ahead of China till then. At present only US has more than one aircraft carrier.²⁵

Indian navy, keeping in view, the importance of the naval aviation, approved the purchase of the Boeing P8I maritime patrol aircraft from US and anti-submarine aircrafts from Russia. Eight of these have already been parked at the INS Dega airfield. This air station is under the Eastern Naval Command and the expansion of the air assets means increasing of Indian power in Bay of Bengal. P8I aircraft will replace the Soviet-made Tu-142 M aircraft and play a vital role in naval surveillance in the region. Beside such developments, Indian navy, with the help of India Space Research Organization added a dedicated communication satellite for the sole purpose of naval use. Data transfer, communication and networking of the navy can be handled by this satellite which will further strengthen the Indian navy.²⁶

On the conventional level, Indian navy is left with only 13 aging diesel-electric submarines and out of these eleven are more than twenty years old. However, there are two projects for submarine building in progress which will be operational in 2017-18.²⁷ Submarines are of vital importance for the security of the Sea Lanes of Communications on which the Indian trade is heavily dependent. Moreover Indian navy successfully test fired *Brahmos* supersonic cruise missiles underwater. The platform for the test however was static. There is no such submarine presently in their inventory which could be used for launching *Brahmos*. Although, *Arihant* nuclear powered submarine can be used for launching this missile but to develop this launching capability time would be a crucial element.²⁸

Geopolitics of Indian Ocean

Geopolitically, Indian Ocean is becoming a place of interest for the other powers as well particularly, US, China, and Japan. Tension is rising with the activities of many regional and extra regional players in this region. The contending powers have their own interests and strategic goals. US being the major extra-regional power in the Indian Ocean aims to protect the Sea Lanes of Communication of its trade, to meet the challenges of the War on Terror (WOT) and its policy of rebalancing in Asia Pacific region. US covers the areas with its fleets stationed across various regions, like 5th Fleet on the western part of the Indian Ocean, 6th fleet closely available from the Mediterranean Sea and 7th fleet from western Pacific. US presence in Indian and Pacific Oceans is primarily to maintain balance of power in the region and guard its strategic trade route. Its formidable force presence ensures that no power is able to challenge it, and its interests in the region are well protected.

In order to achieve its goals US is also pursuing a policy of strategic collaboration with countries like India and Japan. India, although opposes US involvement in the region publicity but at tactical level co-operates with it as it gives India not only a chance to project itself as a responsible stakeholder in the region but also helps in recognition of India's role in maintaining security in the IOR. Moreover, India has border disputes and economic competition with China and Pakistan in the region. Indian cooperation with US creates an environment which would enable it to seek US support against its adversaries in future.

China at present is not much interested in the domination of the region but wants to ensure sufficient capability to protect its energy supply routes, and trade through Indian Ocean. China claims rights in 200 nautical miles EEZ and on various islands in the South and East China Sea. This has created tension in the region as China's maritime traffic most of the time passes through Indian Ocean and US naval forces are stationed in South and East China Sea, asserting themselves through an alliance with Japan and Philippines.²⁹ Japan is also expanding and modernizing its naval forces and equipment.³⁰ Recently Japan has launched its third helicopter carrier "*the Izumo*" which is considered an aircraft carrier and has drawn attention of Chinese strategist. Other regional countries are conscious of these developments. They oppose such moves to protect their own interests.³¹

Presence of Indian navy in the IOR and its consistent growth are becoming a point of concern for the regional countries, particularly China and Pakistan. This leads to tensions in the region, as all three are nuclear weapon states, and the other two have territorial disputes with India.

China's oil consumption has been doubled between 1995 and 2005, and is projected to double again by 2026. China will import 7.3 million barrels of oil per day, i.e. half of Saudi Arabia's anticipated production by 2020. Over 85% of oil and petroleum products to China go through the Malacca Strait. Keeping open this strait, therefore, is of great significance for China's growth.

Currently China is working on building indigenous aircraft carriers, together with this China has launched a refurbished aircraft carrier, *Liaoning*, which was purchased from Ukraine in 1998. Moreover the Chinese maritime 'String of Pearls' policy meant for extending its power beyond its shores, and securing the sea lines for Chinese trade and energy resources is becoming a major challenge for the Indian navy. According to the Chinese strategy the pearls are Gwader Port of Pakistan, Chittagong in Bangladesh, Sittwe, Kyaukpyu and Yangon in Myanmar and Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Chinese bases in the Paracel Islands and Hainan.³² Last year China and Pakistan organized joint naval exercises in the region to project their power.

India is countering Chinese strategy of 'Strings of Pearls' with its 'Look East Policy'. This policy came into limelight during 1990 but it has received much

attention from Indian strategists in recent years. According to this policy India is to make friendly relations with its neighbors and other countries of Southeast Asia to neutralize the growing Chinese power in the region.

India is also following its own strings of 'pearls policy' and has its own string of pearls in the region which includes naval bases in the continental shelf, bases in Union Islands, and facilities in the form of partnerships with Seychelles, Mauritius, Madagascar and Oman. India is countering China-Pakistan partnership by strengthening economic and political relations with Hanoi. China is also concerned because of growing relation between India and Vietnam. In addition to such developments, US is exploiting Indian rivalry with China for its own interests. US is using soft deterrent policy against China by helping India become a major obstacle for China.³³

Challenges for Pakistan

With ongoing developments in the Indian navy, challenges have emerged for Pakistan. There are three lanes of communications which support Pakistan's seaborne trade. These are Red Sea, Persian Gulf and Mediterranean Sea. Naval blockade of Pakistan's ports can seriously hamper the trade, economy, and war potential of Pakistan within a short period of time.³⁴ The entire scenario can lead to economic strangulation of the country.

Moreover, induction of INS *Arihant* in Indian navy is a major point of concern for Pakistan. This submarine will play a vital role in India's deterrent capabilities as it completes the last leg of its nuclear deterrent triad. Possession of a nuclear capable submarine will make it possible for India to strike Pakistan with nuclear tipped ballistic missiles deep from the sea, at the same time ensuring survivability of its nuclear force. This development is not only disturbing the strategic balance between the two countries but is also leading to the arms race in South Asia.³⁵

Keeping in view the economic and security environment in the region, Pakistan is left with few viable options. In 2008, Pakistan's Chief of Naval Staff had stated that the country has the capability to deploy the strategic weapons in sea. The statement does not elaborate whether Pakistan has attained SLBM capability. It is however, speculated that Pakistan navy is working on the capability to launch

nuclear ballistic missiles from the conventional submarines. The cruise missiles like sea version of *Babar* are being considered for use from the submarines. This is not a new concept as in case of Israel, *Dolphin* class submarines are believed to have been modified for launching nuclear tipped ballistic missiles.

Pakistan's shorter coast line and smaller size of its navy as compared to that of India, does not preclude it from having a strategic and tactical perspective for its security. This preparedness of Pakistan's navy gives it the power to deal with the likely perceived threats.³⁶ The Indian navy already owns a massive fleet of aircraft which is being further expanded and also intends to purchase 4th and 5th generation aircrafts. Indian navy has 24 corvettes with 10 destroyers while Pakistan only maintains one. India has got 10 mine warfare vessels but Pakistan owns only 3 of them but the number of frigates is matching.³⁷

However, Pakistan has assigned two squadrons of Air force and another 12 aircraft are placed under navy's control for the protection of its 1,046km miles long coastline. In terms of strategic significance, Pakistan's purchases are more sophisticated. Pakistan navy has 7 anti-submarine aircraft while India has only 4 of them. Pakistan navy depends highly on the frigates and submarines for defending its shores.³⁸ Pakistan's *Khalid* class attack submarines or *Agosta 90B* are of French origin. Pakistan has three classes of submarines namely, *the Khalid*, *Saad* and *Hamza*. *Agosta 90B* submarine has superior SUBTICS combat system and AIP (air independent propulsion) for better submarine endurance in the sea. Its SUBTICS combat system allows the submarine to determine the tactical situations in an efficient manner. This makes Pakistan the only county in the IOR to have submarines with such technology. It is considered that within a short period of time *Khalid* class submarines could be modified to carry nuclear tipped ballistic missiles.³⁹

Furthermore, Pakistan navy has replaced P-3C Orion long range maritime patrol aircraft which were destroyed in a terrorists attack some time back. This patrol aircraft is highly efficient in the surveillance and reconnaissance task with a proven record during the Cold War. Pakistan acquired these aircraft for the first time in 1991 but at present these aircraft with further upgradation and additional features have become cutting edge equipment in Pakistan navy's inventory.⁴⁰

The differences between Indian and Pakistani navies in terms of number of ships and other equipment are huge, but Pakistan plans to manage and counter threats from sea by sophistication and modernization of its navy in terms of weaponry and sustainability. The difference in the lengths of coast lines between the two countries also makes it easy for Pakistan to defend it.⁴¹

Conclusion

Although India's plan for acquiring blue water navy dates back to 1990 but its implementation started after almost a decade in 1999. The Indian Maritime Military Strategy took a new shape in 2004 and 2005 with making public of the MCPP. The plan is based on the maritime dimension - A naval vision which sets missions for the future of Indian navy. This concept is revised in other version of this document in 2007 giving a road map for the Indian navy attaining the freedom to use seas.⁴²

The Indian maritime document is actually formulized on the strategic concepts of the US naval thinker Admiral Mahan, who advised US President Theodore Roosevelt to exploit naval power as in his opinion, the control of the oceans led a state to the major power status.⁴³ Mahan advocated that US navy should control the Pacific Ocean which could give the US geopolitical and geo-economic edge over other powers. According to Mahan "the convergence there of so many ships...will constitute a centre of commerce, inter-oceanic encounters" between states. It will be "one whose approaches will be watched jealously, and whose relations to the other centers of the Pacific by the [maritime] lines joining it to them must be examined carefully".⁴⁴ India is keen to take such leverage by dominating IOR. The control over this region will allow India to strengthen its security, give it diplomatic prestige, and exploit greater economic opportunities.⁴⁵

Following its large scale naval acquisition and the 'Look East policy' Indian navy is emerging as a true blue water navy in the region. This uplift of Indian navy is not only acting as a military force multiplier but also acts as a tool for furthering its foreign and defense policy goals. On one hand it is allowing India to checkmate the Chinese influence in the region and on the other hand it is destabilizing the strategic balance with Pakistan. The mutual disputes and insecurity of Pakistan will beef up arms race between the countries and thus it will lead to naval build up in the region.

In an interview Pakistan's naval chief Admiral Asif Sandila stated "the strategic dimension of India's naval build-up is a cause of concern not only for us but for the entire IOR". Looking at the naval equipment acquisition it is estimated that by the end of 2025, India will be having almost 30 conventional submarines in its naval force. The advent of nuclear submarines in Indian Ocean will have negative impact in the region which has already grown volatile.

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Endnotes

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