

COOPERATION IN INDIAN OCEAN: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Galle Dialogue, December 14, 2012

The oceans connect the nations of the world, even those countries that are land locked. Because the maritime domain—the world's oceans, seas, bays, estuaries, islands, coastal areas, littorals, and the airspace above them—support 90 percent of the world's trade, it carries the life blood of a global system that links every country on earth. Covering three-quarters of the planet, the Oceans make neighbours of people around the world.

Geoffrey Till, Sea Power : A guide for the 21st Century, Routledge, 2009 p. 329

1. I thank the organisers for inviting me to such an important symposium and share my perspective with you all. As a think tank, IDSA, the institute I come from, is known for its independent approach and before I start, I would like to enter the caveat that the views I express here are my own and in no way reflect the views of my institute or the Indian state.
2. In my presentation I will try to acquaint you with the analyses that are being made by strategic analysts on the theme of cooperation in Indian Ocean and try to offer some alternative thinking on the subject.
3. Strategic thinking never occurs in isolation. It is as dynamic as the thinking on “national interest”. A nation's interests and its approach to international politics change in tune with transformations in the global political and security landscape. The contours of geopolitics change in accordance with the changes in the global balance of power.
4. We must all recognize that the shape of global security architecture is changing very fast. The fulcrum of global politics now rests in Asia around two rising powers, i.e., China and India. Such enormous power transition from trans-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific inevitably raises concerns and anxieties about the impact of such changes on the stability of the world power system. Maritime security is only a subset of global and national security. Therefore, it is affected by these changes taking place at the global level.
5. In the maritime domain, there has been a dramatic shift in focus from the Atlantic-Pacific to Indo-Pacific. We hear the term Indo-Pacific more and more in recent months and years. There is greater acceptance in the US than ever before about India emerging as a “net security provider” in the Indian Ocean and beyond. Interestingly, not long ago both of them considered each other as strategic adversaries.
6. As perceptions are changing so are their estimations of each other. So much so that certain influential analysts in the US are talking about Indian Ocean being the centre-stage of global politics and the need for the US to think of coordinating its efforts with India to evolve a culture of cooperation rather than employ strategies to dominate the ocean. Some others forecast the gloom and apprehend that India and China will relapse into a “dynamic great-power rivalry” and the US should play the role of a stabilizer than a dominant power. The US policy of “pivot” and “rebalancing” in the Pacific is also having its effect in complicating the discourse related to power politics in the Indian Ocean.

7. Against this backdrop, there has been a growing interest in security thinking around Indian Ocean and India's role in it, especially since the Tsunami of 2004, closer contact between the US and India and the Mumbai attacks. Let me now touch briefly on Indian approach and then move onto the existing cooperative endeavours in the Indian Ocean.

Indian Ocean Region

8. Indian Ocean has tremendous geo-strategic importance. It is a lifeline of international trade and links the Atlantic with the Pacific Oceans and critical for global economic prosperity.

9. The extended IOR including the Asia-Pacific has critical significance for India's security and economic prosperity. As far as India's mercantile trade is concerned almost 90 per cent of it by volume and 77 per cent of it by value is carried by sea. India has a coastline of over 7,500 kilometres and if one includes the chain of the Lakshadweep and Minicoy Islands to the west and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to the east covering more than 600 islands, India is 10 nautical miles away from Myanmar and its southernmost tip is barely 90 nautical miles off from Indonesia. India has more than 2.5 million square kms of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and it has been allowed mining rights under UNCLOS in areas about the 2,000 km off from its southernmost tip. Hence protection of its maritime frontiers remains one of the most important priorities of Indian security and foreign policy.

Understanding Indian Approach

10. Let us first come to the Indian understanding of the Indian Ocean. It is interesting to note that most analysts, some of them grudgingly so, acknowledge the preponderance of India in Indian Ocean, even if they would argue it is not India's Ocean.

11. One of the earliest strategic analysts known for his knowledge and understanding of Indian history, K M Panniker, wrote in the early 1940s, before India achieved its independence, that "the peninsular character of the country and the essential dependence of its trade on maritime traffic" would give Indian Ocean a preponderant influence on its destiny, and "the economic life of India will be completely at the mercy of the power which controls the seas". He also held that "India never lost her independence till she lost the command of the sea in the first decade of the sixteenth century", and thus the future of India would depend not on its land frontiers but "on the oceanic expanse which washes the three sides of India".

12. Because of its critical dependence on the Indian Ocean for its trade and commerce, its natural situational advantages, its maritime potential, and robust presence, there is a view in India that India should and must aspire to "emerge as the leader with an overarching influence in the region" and be "the catalyst for peace, stability and tranquillity". Therefore, maritime security is receiving ever greater attention in Indian strategic thinking as India is aspiring for great power status.

13. Driven by an awareness that smaller countries in the region expect India to ensure some measure of stability in the Indian Ocean region (IOR), Indian Navy holds that "ensuring good order at sea" is its

“legitimate duty”. In order to ensure this, apart from strengthening its own capabilities, India is also seeking to strengthen its cooperative security relationship with the littoral states in the IOR.

14. One of the vision documents of the Indian Navy states that it is “determined to create and sustain a three dimensional, technology-enabled and networked force capable of safeguarding [its] maritime interests on the high seas and projecting [its] power across the littoral”. Thus, there has been an emphasis on developing relationships with small states at or near the key points of entry into the Indian Ocean. The real challenge for India in the coming years, however, will be to maintain the perception of India as a benign and non-hegemonic power in the IOR, as it moves towards expanding its influence.

15. The fear of extra-regional power displacing Indian influence acts as another locomotive for India’s policy of maritime engagement with the littoral states. One of the Naval Strategy documents in 2007 stated clearly that there was a critical need for Indian Navy “to wean the littoral states of our immediate neighbourhood away from the increasingly pervasive influence of states hostile to Indian interests. The effects of our past inactivity in this area, which enabled some countries to exert their influence in our maritime neighbourhood, need to be reversed”.

16. India recognises that most countries in the region excepting a few lack the resources and expertise to address the challenges posed by inadequate maritime infrastructure and capabilities. In the south west IOR, India is getting increasingly engaged in a host of areas which include in economic, developmental and educational fields. Indian Navy has been on goodwill visits to many countries, and India has been involved in capacity building exercises, donated fast attack crafts, aircrafts, surveillance radar systems, imparted training to security forces, occasionally patrolled the EEZ of some countries, and enhanced security cooperation through formal cooperative security agreements.

17. India is concerned about the asymmetric threats in the shape of maritime terrorism, piracy and drug trafficking, and maritime security issues have become a strategic priority for India in recent years. After Mumbai attacks India is investing a lot in safeguarding its territories and adjacent waters against seaborne threats.

18. India has emphasised on maritime freedoms and stayed engaged with countries in various sub-regions of IOR, whether it is in the Malacca Straits or the Gulf of Aden to coordinate anti-piracy actions. Even if it is not part of the US-led Djibouti-based Combined Task Force 150 (CTF-150), or CTF-151 (comprising roughly 15 vessels from the US, four European countries, Canada, and Pakistan) which conducts patrols around the Gulf of Aden, it has escorted navies of other countries in the region on a number of occasions.

19. India has expressed its willingness to make its contribution, “as a responsible member of the international community, for the evolution of an open, transparent and inclusive maritime security architecture that will ensure the protection and preservation of maritime freedoms.” It believes in processes of dialogue and consensus-building under accepted International Law to evolve measures to deal with issues related to maritime security. India has pledged “to maintain regular dialogue” with the countries of the IOR and strengthen forums like the IOR-ARC, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and the Galle dialogue and to promote cooperation among the IOR and rim countries. It has

participated in and sought to promote regional cooperation through forums like IOR-ARC which aims at forging durable partnerships amongst countries in the region and tap the existing potential for cooperation amongst Indian Ocean countries in the area of trade and investment, tourism, fisheries and maritime resources, shipping, preservation of bio-diversity, and maritime security.

20. At the leadership level it has been expressed again and again that India champions and advocates adherence to international regimes that govern maritime freedoms, even while asserting its national sovereignty where it is applicable. As the Indian Defence Minister stated in the Shangrilla Dialogue recently, in an era of globalisation and interdependence, “the balance between the rights of states and the freedoms of the larger global community is vital for international trade and global security”.

Cooperation in IOR at large

21. While we are emphasizing the need for cooperation to deal with common maritime threats, we must recognize the cooperation taking place in the IOR to act against maritime threats wherever and whenever it is necessary. In various sub-regions of the IOR substantial efforts are being undertaken to bring countries together to ensure maritime security.

22. The United States, for example, through its relatively new Africa Command (AFRICOM) has taken initiatives to engage African nations and enable them towards the stated goals of building up security preparedness, training and law enforcement capacity with a strong maritime flavour. In 2008, the US Navy (USN) launched the Africa Partnership Station (APS) whose stated aim has been to ‘strengthen maritime security capacity through maritime training, collaboration, infrastructure building, and cross-border cooperation’. Under APS, US is undertaking training of maritime professionals, maritime infrastructure, maritime domain awareness, and maritime response capability with ‘both a regional and comprehensive approach’. The areas in which training is being imparted include law at sea, port security, maritime interdiction operations, small boat maintenance, medical training etc.

23. In 2010, the Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) of AFRICOM established a maritime centre of excellence in Mombasa, Kenya, to provide maritime training to African states. Under this a programme has been initiated to provide small boats, automatic identification systems, and surface search radars to Djibouti, Mozambique, Kenya, Tanzania, the Seychelles, Mauritius, and Comoros was being undertaken by the command. In the Seychelles, the US has positioned MQ-9 ‘Reaper’ Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) and P 3C Orion aircraft, supposedly for anti-piracy surveillance.

24. The European Union is engaged in the south West Indian Ocean in the field of maritime security, through the activities of naval task force ‘EUNAVFOR Somalia’, and its Operation Atalanta, which has been in operation since December 2008, ‘to contribute to security of the World Food Programme and towards the deterrence, prevention and repression of acts of piracy and armed robbery off the Somali coast and Gulf of Aden’. France maintains a small maritime base and a Foreign Legion Detachment on Mayotte and assists neighbouring Comoros in defence training.

25. Southern African Development Community (SADC) in its 31st summit, held in the Angolan capital Luanda in August 2011, approved a new regional maritime security strategy that is likely to provide an

enhanced leadership role to South Africa in the SADC, due to its superior naval resources. The new strategy was formulated in response to various developments, such as the growing piracy threat in SADC waters, especially along the coast of southern Somalia up to northern Mozambique, overfishing and illegal fishing in SADC waters, dumping of toxic waste, illegal migration and human trafficking through sea routes. South Africa has responded to the threat in the region by deploying a Valour class frigate and other assets to the Mozambique Channel, on a round-the-clock basis.

26. The maritime security cooperation in the Malacca straits as well as talks of India, Sri Lanka and Maldives cooperating in this domain to secure southern Indian Ocean indicate that there is enough efforts being undertaken at sub-regional levels to ensure security cooperation in the IOR.

27. In spite of all this, there is a prognosis that changing global power equations and an inevitable India-China power rivalry in the IOR may be potential inhibitors disturbing the rhythm and pace of efforts aimed at cooperation in the region. There is also a view that the cooperation that we see on the ground is governed by an underlying balance-of-power principle, which leads to misgivings about intentions and orientations of different countries who may otherwise have perfectly legitimate interests in the region. It is in this context let me dwell on the China factor for a while.

China Factor

28. I must preface the discussion by saying that China's interests and concerns about protecting its overwhelming sea-borne critical trade are perfectly legitimate. As China's trade and commerce depend heavily on maritime traffic in recent years there has been a visible Chinese interest in establishing security and strategic relationship with many IOR littoral countries. As Mahan had once said the power to protect one's merchant vessels is the most determining factor in world history.

29. However, this has caused some concerns among countries in the region and beyond primarily because of lack of enough communication from the Chinese side justifying their cooperation with some of the IOR states. China, like India, has stayed away from the task forces participated by some of the countries to secure the sea lanes of communication in the wake of the threat of piracy from the Somalian pirates. It is instead building up partnership in its own way and trying to ensure safety and security of its vessels.

30. It is interesting in this context to look at the strategic discourse in China about Indian Ocean and India's role in it. It is often forgotten that China has developed a community of strategic experts in its own way who are becoming increasingly vocal and influential in Chinese policy making circles. Most of these Chinese analysts, even if they would argue in favour of Asian or Chinese cultural or civilizational exceptionalism, are steeped in the realpolitik tradition of the West.

31. If their analyses about Indian Ocean are to be seen in the right perspective, most of them "discern a troubling trend toward intense competition and zero-sum interactions in the Indian Ocean". Such analyses repeated *ad nauseum* over the years could have a *nocebo* effect and become, as they say, self-fulfilling prophecies. Unfortunately, there is a tendency to misinterpret, misquote and selectively

misread history to demonstrate India's perceived aggressive posture in the IOR. It is a classic example of see-what-you-want-to-see syndrome. Let me sample some of these observations.

32. First of all Chinese scholarship has uncritically accepted the wrongly quoted Mahanian views about Indian Ocean. Recently, an Asian scholar based in the West (Dr.Toshi Yoshihara)analyzing Chinese writings on Indian Ocean states that in China Mahan is quoted as having said "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the Seven Seas. In the 21st century the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters." Interestingly, he found out after due research that even if Mahan was projected as being prescient about Indian Ocean emerging as a theatre of strategic competition, he never said it. He traces it to a write up on Soviet plans of entering into Indian Ocean in an Italian news magazine in August 1970, which used this wrong quote. This was translated by an American journal and then quoted by an Australian scholar. This passage was adopted by China as an authentic quote in 1976, when it was translated into Chinese by Shanghai Peoples' Press. This excerpt, interestingly quite, found its way into a popular Chinese journal in 1996 and has influenced Chinese perceptions about Indian Ocean and led to unfounded anxieties as well as forward action which has in turn affected the security dynamics of the IOR.

33. The jump from Mahan to K M Panniker has been rather natural. Panniker's exhortations in the early 1940s to Indian leaders to sustain India's natural preponderance have been followed very closely by Chinese scholars and used to demonstrate India's intentions to dominate IOR. Panniker's following quote has been often used in this connection:

"If a steel ring can be created around India with air and naval bases at suitable points and if within the area so ringed, a navy can be created strong enough to defend its home waters, then the waters vital to India's security and prosperity can be protected and converted into an area of safety."

34. Fed by Mahanian prescience and Indian emphasis on sustaining its preponderance in IOR, the Chinese analyses have looked at non-threatening and defensive character of India's naval strategy as a possible threat to China's trade and commerce in future.

35. Such strategic pessimism leads analysts in China (Che Lin) to aver that,

"China's national security and peaceful development demand that the Indian Ocean be incorporated into the nation's security strategy because China's trade, investment, energy, religion, territory, and territorial seas are intimately linked to the Indian Ocean."

36. Some others (Lo Chunhao and Zhang Mingming)would write that

"Problems arising from the United States, Japan, and the South China Sea that impact the security of the western Pacific region are difficult to resolve in the short term. As such, the Indian Ocean will be an important passage for breaking through the U.S. military's Pacific island chain and for solving the Malacca dilemma. It will also be the ideal choice for marching seaward and a laboratory for constructing a blue-water navy."

37. There are others who have written about India's natural drive to dominate Indian Ocean.

“Because mountain ranges separate the South Asian region from the rest of the Asian continent and because of complex regional dynamics, the space for India’s landward development is limited. By contrast, its central location in the Indian Ocean has led India to eye covetously the world’s many important navigational routes. Consequently, becoming the hegemon of the Indian Ocean is a core objective of its great power strategy.” (Hu Wei)

“India has leveraged its expansive territory, massive population, and bountiful resources to become a great power in the Indian Ocean region. In addition, innate geographical and historical connections between India and its neighbouring coastal states have instilled a sense of belonging to and a sense of ownership over the Indian Ocean region that far exceed that of other great powers. This sentiment has gone so far as to form the view that the Indian Ocean is 'India's ocean' and that other great powers would not be permitted to control this vast sea area.”

38. Chinese strategic analysts look at India’s military posture (establishment of joint command in 2001) on its Andaman and Nicobar Islands as a potential challenge to China’s maritime ambitions. One analyst holds that located close to the Malacca Straits, Andaman Nicobar islands is like an “unsinkable super-carrier” (Ma Ying). Another scholar writes:

“By virtue of its advantageous geopolitical position, India has taken a lead in enhancing its control over the western exit of the Malacca Strait between the Malaya Peninsula and the Sumatra Island. The 244 islands that form the Andaman-Nicobar Islands are like an “iron chain” tightly locking this strategic waterway. The player brandishing this “iron chain” is India.” (Liu Jianzhong)

India’s increased military deployments there [the Andaman-Nicobar Islands] play the role of a “guardian” over the Malacca Strait and eastern Indian Ocean to resist the so-called “Chinese infiltration of the Indian Ocean.” In peacetime India can strictly monitor the transit of our warships and merchant vessels. In wartime involving China or other Asian countries, the Indian navy can quickly seal off the Malacca Strait and other passages entering the Indian Ocean from the east. (Shi Chunlin)

39. We have also heard about the string of pearls and Indian anxieties about Chinese incursion into what India regards as its natural area of influence.

40. Against this backdrop, it is difficult to say whether Chinese decision makers influence or get influenced by the thinking of the analysts. However, there is a possibility that such exaggerated view of India’s capability and intentions may lead to unpredictable and unnecessary reactions by either country in future jeopardizing the security of the region. As two pre-eminent powers in the region, the two countries hold the key to peace and stability in the entire IOR. Only mutual trust and confidence between these countries will ensure an era of peace and prosperity in the region. In forums like this, therefore, it is necessary to clear doubts about each other’s intentions, concede space to each other where required, be sensitive towards each other’s interests and concerns, and build mutual understanding. Only then can we see a better tomorrow for the IOR.