
Is China Preparing to Establish Indian Ocean Theatre Command at Gwadar?

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China is conscious of the fact that projection of power requires dynamic maritime strategy and robust naval capabilities. China knows that unless it is able to secure its interests in the Indian Ocean it will be difficult to sustain economic growth. The land link to the Indian Ocean through China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) are important links to gain access to ports in the Indian Ocean but they are not a replacement to the strategic sea lines of communication (SLOC). Land links provide additional connectivity for economic benefits, but land links do not facilitate projection of power to secure vital strategic interests in the vast Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Under such circumstances, what is the alternative available to China to maintain its presence in the Indian Ocean? To secure vital strategic interests in the IOR, China is working on a robust port strategy to maintain a permanent presence in the Indian Ocean. Such a strategy will create a security dilemma for India especially with Chinese built ports coming up in the immediate neighbourhood of India including Chittagong in

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Bangladesh, Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Kyaupkyu in Myanmar, Malacca in Malaysia and Mombasa in Kenya.¹

Why is China more than eager to maintain its presence in the Indian Ocean Region? China has three strategic challenges: First, to secure and maintain uninterrupted movement of its commercial fleet along the Indian Ocean SLOCs; second, to keep choke points open and; third, to project power if its maritime interests are threatened or compromised. The main worry of China is to keep its SLOCs in the Indian Ocean open and secured since 40 per cent of China's overseas trade and 80 per cent of its total imports are through the Indian Ocean.² China's apprehensions arise from the fact that at any point in time there are over 120 warships of extra-regional powers deployed in the Indian Ocean in support of various missions. Till now the region, by and large, has remained peaceful albeit under contestation.³ This competition is likely to increase with extra-regional powers displaying greater interest in the region for trade and energy security.

China's Port Strategy in the Indian Ocean Region

Why China is suddenly rushing to the Indian Ocean and acquiring overseas ports simultaneously with a naval build-up of historical proportions?⁴ China wants the world to believe that its increased interest in the Indian Ocean is due to rising commerce and trade with IOR rim countries and the threat of non-state actors to the SLOCs. But in reality, it seems that China's efforts are directed to securitise the Maritime Silk Route. As a result, some of these ports could ultimately become strategic strong points for China to maintain its maritime footprints in the IOR. According to the Chinese Ministry of Transportation, as of 2018, Chinese companies have participated in the construction and operation of a total of 42 ports in 34 countries under the Silk Road scheme.⁵ The construction and operation of the majority of these ports in the Indian Ocean by the Chinese companies obviously is a cause of concern to India and many

other countries. In fact, overseas military bases are considered an utmost necessity of China's global power dream. The world has already witnessed how China through debt trap strategy has acquired few strategic ports that could ultimately become maritime strong points to project power in the Northern Indian Ocean. There are reports that China is likely to establish replenishment, berthing and maintenance bases in foreign countries through mutually beneficial and friendly consultations.⁶

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy defines five functions of overseas military bases: projection of power for war, diplomatic signal, changed politico-military ideology, building relationships and providing facilities for training.⁷ In pursuance of maritime ambition to project power, it is important for PLA Navy to maintain a permanent presence in the IOR because China need ports to provide logistic support to its fleet and military missions overseas. China has not denied the possibility of the creation of "Overseas Strategic Support Bases"⁸ for replenishment of logistics, berthing and maintenance of its fleets operating beyond the shores. According to Sun Degang, Associate Research Fellow at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, China's port projects along the Indian Ocean will be a comprehensive test of China's economic capabilities, risk prevention and the ability to set the international agenda.⁹

Along with the port strategy, China has already begun establishing military bases with Djibouti being the first in line of many ports/bases that may be in the pipeline in future. In addition, China has intelligence sharing agreements with several countries in the region, including reportedly Bangladesh (2018), and presumably Pakistan, though it is not clear whether these are limited to counter-terrorism threats or include maritime domain information sharing.¹⁰ China has also sold two submarines to Bangladesh recently and there could be a possibility that China may be seeking maritime intelligence through these two submarines as well. Kyaukpyu a port that is developed by China in Myanmar is also the starting point of a pipeline that could send LNG and oil to China.¹¹

This port is also important for China to maintain its presence in the Bay of Bengal that till recently was considered an exclusive domain of India. Besides, Sri Lanka's Hambantota port has been taken over by China on lease for 99 years extendable to another 99 years.

Of all, strategically Gwadar is the most significant port for China, just 400 km from the important Hormuz Strait, through which 40 per cent of Chinese imported crude oil flows.¹² Though Pakistan has stated that the lease of Gwadar to China is purely for commercial purposes but deep-sea port at Gwadar is being prepared for dual purposes. The annual traffic has indicated that Gwadar Port is not commercially viable with limited vessel traffic. The facade of China and Pakistan was exposed when Chinese military sources had spoken about deploying Navy Marines at Gwadar and Djibouti to defend Chinese interests overseas.¹³ Considering its strategic location and land link to Tibet, Gwadar is considered a strategic strong point of China in the IOR.

China's Long Term Objective

In 2011, China was forced to evacuate 36,000 Chinese nationals from Libya that resulted in abandoning projects worth US\$ 20 billion. The Libyan fiasco gave China a lesson that it cannot risk such a large number of its citizens and billions of dollar investment to threat from states and non-state actors. At the same time, such a huge investment need security so that the losses can be prevented/reduced. By 2030, China could have 10 million of its nationals overseas (from the current strength of 5.5 million as of date), and US\$ 1,000 billion in investment abroad.¹⁴ The current expansion plan of construction of ports and subsequent conversion of these ports into military bases is irrefutable and has long term implications for security calculus in the IOR. The flip side of port strategy is that there will be more bases of China to target in the Indian Ocean itself. Thus China cannot leave such a large number of assets exposed to threats from state and non-

state actors, as a result at some point in time, China would certainly need a security umbrella in the IOR with fully functional command and control headquarters.

The query that demands attention: Can China establish command and control over these ports and military bases from mainland China or it would need an advance headquarters in the Indian Ocean to exercise direct control over these bases and fleets operating in the IOR? Overseas logistic support and maritime operations are complex thus there is a need to maintain some command and control elements in IOR so that the fleets and military bases do not operate independently of each other. Moreover, there is a need to coordinate with host countries and other nations using international water for logistic support, change of crew, dealing with maritime confrontation and application of force if compelled and not to forget addressing certain sovereignty protocols. Given the circumstances, PLA Navy may find it difficult to exercise command and control from the mainland. Thus sooner or later China would require maritime advance Headquarters or IOR Theatre Command positioned at one of the IOR Rim countries.

The options for such a strategic headquarters in Gwadar, Hambantota and Djibouti cannot be ruled out. The possibility of establishing it on the African East coast is low since it is not in close proximity or astride important SLOCs in the IOR. Though Hambantota is close to Malacca Strait and SLOCs but Sri Lanka may be a hesitant host. Similarly, Djibouti is sandwiched in the narrow Red Sea neither connected by land link nor astride SLOCs in the Indian Ocean with little influence over the Strait of Hormuz. While Kyaukpyu port is connected to the land link but with little or no influence over the strategic SLOCs in the IOR.

In the overall assessment, Gwadar appears to be a strategic strong point that offers China all the required advantages needed for a possible command and control headquarters. More importantly, Pakistan is a willing host and a strategic partner. Gwadar has the land link, a port

for dual purposes and infrastructure for basing large headquarters on the shore. In addition, it is astride strategic SLOCs that not only can protect energy security and commercial fleet but can also disrupt the supply of crude oil to adversaries if push comes to shove. The development of Gwadar airport provides China third dimensional capabilities for maritime operations.

Options for India to Build Capabilities in IOR

The advantage at this stage is certainly with India as a resident maritime power in the Indian Ocean. But this advantage will slip away if capabilities to consolidate maritime domination is not done in time. There may be a desire to have minimum of three aircraft carrier groups for sea denial and projection of power, but same may not be possible given the resources being made available to the defence forces. India must first fill the doctrinal gap in its strategy as a resident power in the Indian Ocean. Once grand strategy for the Indian Ocean is put in place, the structure of theatre command, capabilities required to be a dominant maritime power and interoperability issues with extra-regional powers will fall into place. Notwithstanding the above, some of the issues that need urgent attention are given in the succeeding paragraphs.

Conversion of few strategic islands as unsinkable aircraft carriers may be a good option, to begin with, while developing comprehensive maritime capabilities will take a long time. Though building islands as comprehensive military bases is not a replacement to the aircraft carriers because islands are fixed and cannot project power in desired areas, but to a great extent, it can provide logistic support, sea surveillance and maritime air cover to the fleets operating on high seas. The strategic location of Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshadweep offer India with great advantage to operate air and naval assets to dominate strategic SLOCs. In addition, India needs to hasten up other offshore radar and port facilities in IOR, especially in Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles.

There is a debate whether sea denial and sea control will work in the Indian Ocean where major sea traffic is in high seas which are considered global common? What is the alternative? Basic capabilities that India should develop is sea surveillance to affect anti-access or sea control. Since in the case of a prolonged conflict, sea control would allow credible power projection and maritime trade blockade (against Pakistan) and trade intervention (against China).¹⁵ Sea control operations need an integrated approach and robust maritime capabilities.

It is always not necessary to compete for ship to ship capabilities when other instruments of force are available. There is a need for India to develop non-kinetic and hybrid warfare capabilities because that will ultimately reduce the use of conventional forces in foreseeable future. Though non-kinetic and hybrid capabilities are not a replacement to the conventional maritime forces but they can enable and reduce the use of conventional forces to a great degree. Non-kinetic and hybrid warfare is as much applicable to maritime operations as in the case of land and air operations.

Cultivation of naval cooperation is vital against revisionist rising global power like China. India alone cannot deal with rising footprints of China in the IOR. Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IORARC) was a good idea but it has remained only a gathering for yearly ritual and has not moved forward to work out a consensus on security, use of ports by extra-regional powers to prevent militarisation of IOR. The QUAD is one option but inadequate to cover entire Indo-Pacific; however, India could operationalise logistical agreements with France and the other IOR rim countries and vice versa. In addition, there is a need for India to forge cooperative alliance with rim countries to use the facilities for surveillance, logistics and intelligence sharing.

Most of the island nations in the Indian Ocean are economically fragile with little inherent capabilities to deal with traditional and non-traditional threats. In the light of the foregoing, India should endeavour to become a net security provider especially to the island nations &

IOR Rim countries against non-traditional threats. Even measures like building ocean surveillance capabilities can help smaller nations to protect their exclusive economic zones and prevention of crime on high seas. South Asia is disaster-prone and economically poor countries are not in a position to develop exclusive capabilities for effective Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). India can assist in HADR and dealing with organised crime on the high sea. India thus needs to project soft power to develop bilateral relations and capabilities. If India does not step in, China would and that will not be in the interest of India.

Conclusion

It is a complex issue to manage multiple bases away from the mainland especially when there are threats and vulnerabilities from states and non-state actors. Wang Tianze, Qi Wenzhe, and Hai Jun, all analysts at the Institute of Military Transportation of the PLA, Ground Forces argue that: “to protect our ever-growing overseas interests, we will progressively establish in Pakistan, United Arab Emirates, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Singapore, Indonesia, Kenya and other countries a logistical network based on various means, buying, renting, cooperating, to construct our overseas bases or overseas protection hubs”.¹⁶ The establishment of military bases is a foregone conclusion, but what is of interest is how soon China will locate their advanced headquarters/IOR Theatre Command in any of the rim countries?

Xue Guifang and Zheng Hao, who argue that efforts are needed to “build an international environment that will accept China’s construction of overseas bases.”¹⁷ Today China is not shy to accept that places of strategic nature acquired or managed by China in the IOR could be converted into military bases for protection of trade, personnel and investment. What is of interest to India is how fast can we lay down a maritime grand strategy and how fast India can build capabilities so that its interests are not compromised.

Notes

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