



## **CHALLENGES TO INDIA'S NEW MARITIME SECURITY STRATEGY IN THE RUSSIAN ERA**

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### **Introduction**

India has stepped up its efforts to cooperate on security issues in general and on maritime security in particular with its island neighbours in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). At the core of this lies the initiative to build a trilateral maritime arrangement with Sri Lanka and the Maldives. It is in this larger context that the second National Security Advisors' (NSAs) meeting took place in Colombo in July 2013. On the one hand the agenda was to create a closer functional operative on maritime security and to assist in capacity build-up; at the unstated level it also sought to partially allay concerns about the growing strategic influence of the Chinese and Pakistanis on these islands.

Security agendas have now become more comprehensive and holistic and this perception has, to an extent, permeated to the Indian bureaucracy. Complementary to this, there exists a notion of cooperative security that is based largely on regional systems and lays emphasis on cooperative approaches and the usage of modern technology. This is significant in the vast oceanic spaces that are relatively unpoliced, giving rise to serious maritime challenges in the IOR. However, this approach calls for reorganisation and prioritisation of national objectives and harmonisation of policies across territorial boundaries. Cooperation among regional organisations is therefore a force multiplier and is often most desirable. With India playing the role of security provider for the entire region, cooperative approaches assume salience. Hence, the effort to bring friendly countries within its maritime security framework has been the impetus for the trilateral meeting.

Credit must also be given to India's Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Robin Dhowan for articulating a proactive strategy for the navy's expanding roles and responsibilities in the Indian Ocean over the next ten years. This is evident from the recent official publication of India's comprehensively revised maritime security strategy *Ensuring Secure Seas*, although it is currently still under restricted distribution. This change is in contrast to the 2007 maritime strategy which it replaces, which was relatively conservative.

## **India's Geo-strategic Environment**

The Indian peninsula juts out over 1,000 miles into the Indian Ocean, and her geo-physical configuration makes her as dependant on the seas as any island nation. This predicates the profound influence that this ocean, the only one named after a country, will have on India's security environment. KM Panikkar summed it up neatly, half a century ago, in these words: "while to other countries-the Indian Ocean is only one of the important oceanic areas, to India it is a vital sea. Her lifelines are concentrated in that area; her freedom is dependant on the freedom of the sea-lanes."

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR), at whose focal point India is located, has some unique general features, of which we must take note before examining specific issues :-

Amongst 56 nations of the IOR, some of the fastest growing economies of the world co-exist with some of the poorest. Many of the countries are afflicted with serious problems of backwardness, fundamentalism and insurgency. Most of them are under military dictatorship or authoritarian rule.

This region is the largest repository of the world's hydrocarbon resources, and apart from producing the most rubber, tin, tea and jute, is well endowed with strategic materials like uranium, tungsten, cobalt, gold and diamonds.

The region is home to 1/3rd of the world's population which is regularly struck by 70 per cent of the planet's natural disasters.

Most of the post-Cold War conflicts have taken place in this region. Today, the global epicentre of terrorism as well as nuclear and missile proliferation exist right next door to us.

Areas of the IOR like the Horn of Africa and the Malacca Straits are rife with incidents of piracy, gun-running, drug-trafficking and hijacking.

### **Security of Energy and Trade**

India's own dependence on the seas, and her geographic location astride major shipping routes of the world place a dual responsibility on her. Not only does India have to safeguard the maritime interests vital to her own security and economic well-being, but she must, as an obligation to the larger world community, ensure the free flow of vital hydrocarbons and commerce through the IOR sea lanes.

India, with a merchant fleet of 760 ships totaling 8.6 million tons GRT, ranks 15th amongst seafaring nations. This fleet, operating out of 12 major and 184 minor Indian ports can carry a little less than a sixth of our seaborne trade, and has much scope for expansion.

As far as our foreign trade is concerned, I reiterate three oft quoted facts to emphasise the role of the sea:-

Of our foreign trade, more than 75 per cent by value, and over 97 per cent by volume is carried by merchant ships.

Our exports were US \$ 100 billion in 2006. These are slated to cross US \$ 200 billion in the next five years.

India's share of total world trade has been hovering around just one per cent. The government is aiming to double it by 2009.

### **Strategy in Peacetime Conditions**

Let us start by quoting a passage from the first version of the US Maritime Strategy promulgated by the CNO Admiral James Watkins in 1986. It says "Sea power is said to be relevant across the spectrum of conflict, from routine operations in peacetime to the provision of the most survivable component of a nation's forces for deterring strategic nuclear war. The maritime strategy provides a framework for considering all uses of maritime power. Amongst the greatest services we can provide to the nation is to operate in peacetime and in crises in a way that will deter war."

Our Maritime Doctrine has clearly outlined the four basic missions assigned to the Indian Navy, which span the full spectrum of conflict, and these are: military, diplomatic, constabulary, and benign roles. Of these, the diplomatic, constabulary, and benign roles are undertaken in peacetime, and shall receive priority in discussion. However, from the wartime military role, let us de-link deterrence, which happens to be a peacetime function, and discuss it first of all in different forms.

### **Strategic Deterrence**

Having crossed the nuclear rubicon in 1998, we are committed to maintaining a minimum credible deterrent under a self imposed condition of 'No First Use' (NFU). Having also gone public with a nuclear doctrine, there is no room for second thoughts now, because our adversaries have designed their strategic forces and crafted their nuclear posture based on our declarations.

India's Nuclear Doctrine clearly envisages, and is based on a deterrent in the form of a "triad" with land-based, aircraft-borne, and submarine launched weapons. Of this triad, we only have the first two in our inventory at present. Nuclear weapons are not meant for war fighting, and achieve deterrence by convincing the enemy of the futility of a nuclear first

strike, because the response would be so devastating that it would render the strike meaningless.

### **Conventional Deterrence**

Nuclear weapons are not meant for the purpose of fighting wars, and every soldier, sailor and airman would do well to remember that these are actually political tools to be used only for sending a message of deterrence, compellence, or coercion to an adversary. But such a situation should arise only when persuasion or dissuasion by all other means has been tried without success, and herein lies the need for conventional deterrence.

The main objective of a peacetime strategy is to deter conflict, and ensure peace and stability in our areas of interest. This is best done by maintaining a preponderance in maritime capability; the idea being to never leave friends as well as adversaries or potential adversaries in doubt about India's superiority at sea. In this context, it is important to convey a clear and unambiguous message to all concerned, so that there is no room for misunderstandings. A message to convey reassurance or deterrence can have many nuances, and the three main elements are :-

### **Diplomatic Role**

"Gunboat diplomacy", used to be considered one of the less pleasant coercive tactics used by colonial powers in the heyday of imperialism. Today, however, maritime diplomacy obviously has no such connotation, because navies are now being increasingly used to build bridges, to foster mutual trust and confidence, to create partnerships through inter-operability and to render assistance, if required. Of course, post-Cold War they are also being increasingly used to project power across the littoral of third world nations.

For our maritime strategy, this role has two-fold importance. Firstly, the navy can discharge its peacetime functions in a far more efficient manner, if we have an atmosphere of cooperation with our neighbours and we have friendly ports and airfields available to our units. Secondly, in times of crisis or war too, operations proceed much more smoothly, if the environment has already been shaped, and a certain level of comfort established. This aspect emerged clearly during both the tsunami relief and the Lebanon refugee evacuation operations. However, this role would acquire true significance only, if it forms an integral part of the nation's overall diplomatic initiatives, and the political establishment as well as the MEA learn how to use the navy as an instrument of state policy. On its part, the IN has accorded the highest priority to what it calls "International Maritime Cooperation" and has

created structures, schemes and financial heads to pursue it vigorously. Friendly IOR neighbours, on their part have offered us refuelling and re-supply facilities in a number of ports.

### **Constabulary Role**

The constabulary role in our context, must be seen in two dimensions; ensuring good order at sea, and managing Low Intensity Maritime Operations (LIMO). As mentioned a little while ago, a combination of factors and an unfortunate convergence of interests, make the high seas a fertile ground for criminal organisations and terrorist activities. So when we speak of threats to "good order" at sea, it encompasses the full gamut of lawlessness: from piracy, hijacking and trafficking in arms, drugs and humans to smuggling of Weapons of Mass Destruction. In our own context, the effective sealing of land routes from Pakistan has forced clandestine traffic into the sea, and opened a new window of vulnerability all along our western seaboard. Therefore, while good order at sea is certainly an internal security imperative for India, it is also an important bilateral and international maritime obligation.

LIMO involves countering non-state entities using the sea for unlawful purposes or indulging in violent activities against states. In this context, we have a tangible threat from our west where terrorism breeds unfettered with state support, and is likely to spill over into the sea. To the south, the Sea Tiger wing of the LTTE which has attained proficiency in maritime operations, operates at our door step.

The Service has to tread with a degree of caution in the constabulary role because it is very easy to become excessively involved in low end or "brown water" operations, to the detriment of the navy's prime tasks which lie in the "blue waters" or the high seas. With the creation of the Indian Coast Guard in 1978, most law enforcement aspects of the constabulary role within the Maritime Zones of India have been assigned to them. The navy needs to stand behind its sister maritime Service and render support and assistance, when required.

### **Benign Role**

The navy is the repository of certain capabilities and specialist knowledge which are instrumental in the discharge of its benign role. This role involves tasks such as humanitarian aid, disaster relief, search and rescue diving assistance, salvage and hydrographic surveys, and is essentially defined by the complete absence of force or violence in its execution.

## **Strategy in war**

Dwelling at some length on the navy's peacetime strategy, because peace fortunately prevails about 90 per cent time. But we have to remember that the prevalence of peace is an indicator that deterrence is working. Should deterrence fail, war will surely follow, and war is what navies train and prepare for. An essential element of this preparation for war is the evolution of a new maritime strategy. Apart from the other imperatives that we have discussed earlier, this evolutionary process has been accelerated by economic, geo-political and technological developments that have come about in the recent past.

## **Evolution of the Strategy**

### **Growing civil-military convergence**

This strategy is marked by a critical development, the growing civil-military consensus on the importance of the sea for India's prosperity and security. There were seniors who refused to accept a blurring of lines between civilian and military issues at sea. This was most forcibly apparent when ten Pakistan-based Lashker-e-Taiba terrorists used the sea route to travel from Karachi to carry out the Mumbai terror attacks of 26-28 November 2008. In its aftermath the then Congress-led UPA government carried out an overhaul of coastal security and, in February 2009, formally gave the navy an expanded responsibility for the overall maritime security of the country, including coastal and offshore security. This was an unprecedented responsibility for an armed service whose role in relation to government had largely been limited to assistance to civilian authority.

Economic factors also lie behind the civil-military convergence over maritime security. With higher economic growth fuelled by greater energy consumption, India is dependent on the Indian Ocean for both trade and energy. Over 90% of India's foreign trade by volume and 70% in value terms is seaborne, accounting for 42% of India's GDP. Its oil imports have increased to nearly 80% of total demand. Most major international shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean are located close to India's island territories.

### **Modi's Indian Ocean policy**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has set the Indian Ocean as a foreign-policy priority, with maritime dominance apparently the goal as India seeks to counter China's expansionist policies and confront maritime terrorism.

Modi's first visit outside Delhi after his swearing-in ceremony was to go aboard the Indian aircraft carrier *Vikramaditya* off Goa in June 2014 and induct this powerful warship

into the navy. In March 2015, Modi unveiled a four-part framework for the Indian Ocean, focusing on: defending India's interests and maritime territory (in particular countering terrorism); deepening economic and security cooperation with maritime neighbours and island states; promoting collective action for peace and security; and seeking a more integrated and cooperative future for sustainable development. For the first time, Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar formally released the navy's official strategy at the Naval Commanders Conference in New Delhi on 26 October 2015. Earlier this week, Modi held the first combined commanders conference aboard the *Vikramaditya*, 40 nautical miles off the Kochi coast in the Arabian Sea.

## **India's approach to Asia Pacific**

### **The Policy Balancers**

Several political, security, economic and socio-cultural factors are at play making Asia Pacific a highly dynamic region. India needs to have a long term strategy to make use of the opportunities arising in the Asia-Pacific while keeping in view the security challenges. The Asia-Pacific is marked by the following key trends: rise of China; the rebalancing strategy of the US; a regional architecture underpinned by centrality of ASEAN; the growing importance of the Indian Ocean region and maritime issues; the growing salience of non-traditional security threats. This policy brief discusses some of the key trends in the Asia Pacific and sets out a long-term approach for India so as to maximise its security and developmental opportunities.

### **Rise of China**

China's rise has created a flux. An economic giant, with a GDP of USD 7.3 trillion (2011-World Bank) & an annual military expenditure of Yuan 650 billion (approx USD 103 billion) in 2012, China has overtaken Japan in economic and military terms and may overtake the US' economy in the next 10-20 years depending upon the growth rate differential between the two countries.

China's rise is altering the balance of power globally & regionally. The confidence in China's peaceful rise and peaceful development has been seriously dented due to rising tensions in South China Sea and in East China Sea. The new leadership is nationalistic & sharply focused on China's 'core' interests.

China's rapid military modernisation and projection of its power beyond immediate neighbourhood and in the West Pacific, has raised apprehensions among its neighbours. It has

developed a powerful navy – with aircraft carriers, submarines, anti-ship missiles – which is rivalling that of Japan and the US. China is following Anti Access Anti-Denial (A2D) strategy to deter the US from entering the island chain in the area of Chinese influence.

The rising tide of nationalism in China has caused anxieties among neighbours. China's formulations on 'core' interests with attendant focus on sovereignty, has created doubts in the minds of the neighbouring countries about China's intentions. China regards the South China Sea as its internal waters. This will have major impact not only in the neighbourhood but also for international shipping.

On the flip side, it must also be recognized that China's rise has also benefited the neighbours, particularly in the economic field. For most countries, China is number one trading partner. China-ASEAN trade is \$ 380 billion. The ASEAN economies have got integrated with that of China. People-to-people contacts between China and its neighbours have also deepened with greater connectivity, openness and transparency.

China is getting integrated with the regional architectures. This has increased China's role in regional stability. For instance, China has an FTA with ASEAN. The ASEAN countries are part of a global supply chain which passes through China to global markets. Thus the economic and social interdependence has increased. China is participating in RCEP negotiations. RECP will bring about a higher level of economic integration between the ASEAN, China, Japan, Australia and India.

The future is uncertain. China's economic performance is suspect and riddled with many problems. How long will China maintain its growth and what will be the impact of the slow-down of Chinese economy in the region will be worth studying? China presents a complex picture. The talk of containment of China is problematic given the growing interdependence between China and most major economies of the region.

### **US rebalancing strategy**

The US has been a key player in the security and economic architecture of the region. The biggest challenge before the US is to adjust to the rise of China. Having got entrapped in the highly expensive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and having been affected by the economic slowdown, the US is in a perilous condition. The US has been compelled to reduce its defence budget due to lack of resources.

Many analysts believe that the US is declining vis-à-vis China although it will remain a military and economic power in the foreseeable future. The US also has the ability to



bounce back due to its vast capabilities in innovation. Yet, according to some conjectures China will overtake the US as number one economy in the next two decades. That will be an important psychological moment for the world.

### **Readjustment of Other Nations**

#### **Japan**

Japan is getting revitalised. Prime Minister Abe is determined to restore Japan's primacy. Japan's New Defence Policy guidelines indicate that Japan is likely to devote increasing attention to recrafting its military strategy and enhancing its defence postures. China's assertiveness and North Korea's nuclear programme are serious security concerns for Japan. In the altered scenarios, Japan is focusing on India as a security partner. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Japan got worldwide headlines as it signalled deepening of India-Japan strategic and security partnership. Prime Minister Abe is reported to have proposed "a strategy whereby Australia, India, Japan and the US state of Hawaii form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the Western Pacific... I am prepared to invest to the greater possible extent, Japan's capabilities in this security diamond." The Indian Prime Minister spoke of India and Japan as "natural and indispensable partners for...a peaceful, stable, cooperative and prosperous future for the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean regions." Clearly, India-Japan relations are important in the context of peace and stability in Asia Pacific.

#### **Australia**

It would be useful to see how Australia is adjusting to the rise of China. Australia sees opportunities for itself in the so-called "Asian Century". It welcomes the rise of China and accepts its military growth as "natural". Australia is pulling out all stops to deepen its relations with China at every level. At the same time, Australia is also hedging against China by building its own defence capabilities and supporting US rebalancing & pivoting to the Asia Pacific. It is seeking partnerships with India, Japan and South Korea. In particular, Australia takes note of India's growing strategic weight in the region and assigns special importance to India in the context of "Indo-Pacific". It regards Indian and Pacific oceans as "one strategic arch". India needs to deepen its relations with Australia, particularly in the context of Australia's emergence as a major supplier of coal and possibly uranium in the future. Australia is also helping India in education and skill developments.

## **South Korea**

South Korea faces a volatile security environment, particularly in the context of North Korea's nuclear and missile programme and its unpredictable behaviour. South Koreans pay major emphasis on the protection of the sea lanes of communication in the East Asian region and seek cooperation with India in this regard. They also take note of Chinese hegemonic outlook in the region. While maintaining close ties with India, the Cheonan incident and Yeon Pyieng Island shelling in 2010 have highlighted the increasing military trend in that area. The RoKs realise heavily on international maritime lanes and shipping. In recent track-2 level discussions, South Koreans have underscored desirability of a cooperative mechanism and dialogue between RoK and the Indian navy; institutionalising an official bilateral mechanism for planning and coordination of maritime issues on the lines of an annual maritime dialogue. The South Koreans also want maritime cooperation with India such as joint naval exercises.

## **Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and Singapore**

In terms of trade linkages the Dawei port offers numerous opportunities. During the Thai Prime Minister India and Thailand agreed to develop Chennai-Dawei corridor project. Dawei is a city in southeastern Myanmar and is capital of Tanintharyi Region. Myanmar government has already approved plans to develop a large port and industrial estate in Dawei with the Italian-Thai Development Public Company Limited (ITD) as a major contractor. The entire project estimated to be at least US\$58 billion. In November 2010, ITD signed a 60-year framework agreement with the Myanmar Port Authority to build a port and industrial estate on 250 square kilometres of land in Dawei. This is likely to transform Thailand into a major transit hub within the East-West Economic Corridor. Japan is also keen to invest in the Dawei project. India must invest in Dawei project as also work on the Chennai-Dawei corridor. People-to-people connectivity needs to be improved. But this will require liberations of the visa regime between India & ASEAN countries.

India needs to pay special attention to Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and Singapore on bilateral level. These countries can help India in raising Indian regional profile. Additionally, India needs to focus on Indian Ocean issues and those of Ocean governance. India needs to take active role in the shaping of the agenda of IOR-ARC. In recent times the Australians and the Japanese have talked about the concept of Indo-Pacific.

### **Kenya, Oman, Tanzania or Mauritius**

As a part of this, India also called for a common maritime security regime in the IOR in the latest Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) conference in early July. China remains only a periphery dialogue partner to the IOR-ARC and not a full member, while other strategically important nations such as Seychelles, Mauritius and Thailand are members. This quiet but calculated regional cooperative approach to maritime security plays into the long-term strategy of India. If India can assert itself as the regional head for maritime security, it can pressure China who will become increasingly dependent on energy resources either based in or traversing the IOR bound for China. The agreement incorporates Sri Lanka and the Maldives into Indian identification and tracking systems as well as provides regular messaging regarding the lines of communication. Shared cooperation on Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) expands the radius of monitoring 200 nautical miles past the coast of Sri Lanka and the Maldives for India. While the agreement may not specifically give access or preferential treatment of other country's EEZs to India, maintaining a stake in them will afford them critical information and monitoring advantages. As previously mentioned, any potential expansion to East African or Gulf nations could have similar benefits.

### **Andaman and Nicobar Islands**

Andaman and Nicobar Islands should be brought into the framework of India-ASEAN relations. Giving due consideration to the concerns of the tribes, it is possible to develop some of the islands, particularly, in Nicobar, for tourism. Nicobari youth are keen to take to modernism. Scholarships for A&N youth could be provided to make them a stakeholder.

### **Opportunities for India in Asia Pacific**

The PM's visit to Japan in May 2013 has been commented upon widely. Strong strategic relationship with Japan is in India's favour. India has strategic partnerships with the US, Japan, South Korea and Australia. These countries want to have closer security cooperation particularly in the maritime sector. India-Japan-US trilateral dialogue should focus on Asia-Pacific issues including security cooperation. These partnerships would promote stability in the region. China should realise that India has legitimate interests in the region.

What should be India's long term strategy in Asia-Pacific? With the shift of centre of gravity to the Asia-Pacific region, India must seek a role in the shaping of political,

economic, social and security process in the region. Not doing so could adversely affect India's interests. India's strategy should be to seek deeper engagement & economic integration with the Asia-Pacific region. India should be particularly engaged in the security dialogues and processes in the region. India enjoys high credibility in ASEAN and East Asia. India and ASEAN have raised their partnership to strategic level. The challenge is to deepen it further.

The ASEAN-India Commemorate Summit Vision Statement has identified a number of projects for cooperation in the fields of political and security, economic, socio-cultural and developmental, connectivity in regional architecture. Earlier, the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Report (2013) had identified even a larger spread of projects for cooperation. Thus, there is no dearth of ideas. However, what is required is the identification of resources, establishment of institutional framework, monitoring mechanisms, coordination etc. to ensure a timely implementation of these projects.

The next big trend in ASEAN region will be ASEAN economic union & RCEP. This will open up opportunities for India. The success of ASEAN-India cooperation will depend upon how rapidly the two sides move towards economic integration through FTA in services and in future through RCEP. India has yet to weigh the costs & benefits of joining the RCEP. The connectivity between ASEAN and India has been talked about for a long time but the progress has been slow. Similarly, the regional cooperation, particularly within the framework of BIMSTEC and Ganga-Mekong Cooperation, the Trilateral Highway etc. has also been slow. The two sides need to focus on implementation issues.

The Vision Statement talks about security cooperation between India and ASEAN. An institutional framework needs to be set up for this purpose. For instance, the India-Japan security statement of 2008 could be adopted for India-ASEAN security dialogue and cooperation. This will help set up a broad-based security dialogue between the Indian and ASEAN institutions. India-ASEAN counter-terrorism dialogue should be stepped up & information sharing should be facilitated. Mutual legal assistance treaties and extradition treaties should be set up. Maritime security dialogue should be initiated also explore confidence building measures to preclude unwarranted naval standoffs.

### **The String of Pearls**

The String of Pearls theory is a geopolitical theory regarding potential Chinese intentions in the Indian Ocean region. It refers to the network of Chinese military and

commercial facilities and relationships along its sea lines of communication, which extend from the Chinese mainland to Port Sudan. The sea lines run through several major maritime choke points such as the Strait of Mandeb, the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz and the Lombok Strait, as well as other strategic maritime centers in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives and Somalia. The term as a geopolitical concept was first used in an internal United States Department of Defense report titled "Energy Futures in Asia". The term has never been used by official Chinese government sources, but is often used in the Indian media.

The emergence of the String of Pearls is indicative of China's growing geopolitical influence through concerted efforts to increase access to ports and airfields, expand and modernize military forces, and foster stronger diplomatic relationships with trading partners. The Chinese government insists that China's burgeoning naval strategy is entirely peaceful in nature and designed solely for the protection of regional trade interests. An analysis by *The Economist* also found the Chinese moves to be commercial in nature. Although it has been claimed that China's actions are creating a security dilemma between China and India in the Indian Ocean, this has been questioned by some analysts who point to China's fundamental strategic vulnerabilities.

### **Conclusion**

Smaller Indian Ocean countries are clearly deriving benefits from India's expanding naval and maritime capabilities. They are grateful for India's crisis response operations, while India's capacity building efforts are improving these countries' maritime forces, thereby advancing regional security and deepening bilateral relationships with New Delhi. Inevitably, India's predominance in the region will complicate some of these countries' policy stances, as has been seen in Maldives and Sri Lanka. Smaller neighbors will continue to resist pressure to choose between security partners, preferring instead to benefit from the variety of options presented by the United States, European countries, China, and Japan, among others. On balance, however, these smaller countries have firmly entrenched political-military ties with India, which can be expected to continue to improve as India works to further develop its capabilities in the Indian Ocean. A recent (January 2014) naval drill in China conducted by a three-ship Chinese navy squadron has received wide attention in the world media. The country's largest amphibious Chinese landing ship – Changbaishan – along with two destroyers took part in it. The choice of Lombok Strait near Indonesia as the drill location has

been significant as by doing so, Beijing has confirmed that its navy is paying close attention to operating in the East Indian Ocean. It has to be admitted that the PRC's strategic focus continues to be on the Pacific and not on the Indian Ocean region. It would however be a folly to ignore the gradually unfolding changes in the Beijing's perceptions of the IOR's strategic importance; they are indeed pointers to the future.

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