



EMERGING ISSUES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN; IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean Region has come into focus in the recent times, due to its natural resources, sea lanes of communication, increasing trade and maritime activities. It has also received its share of notoriety due to the growing conflicts, maritime security risks, choke points, piracy, human trafficking, illegal fishing and human trafficking. Presence of great powers in the ocean waters, both littoral and non-littoral, has made the region volatile in the last decade. Recent developments in the Indian Ocean waters and region have also contributed to bigger security concerns for the Indian government, making it rethink its security setup in the IOR and adopt strategies to protect its vast coastline and sovereignty.

Keywords: *IOR, oil, maritime security, piracy, narcotics, natural resources, littorals and non-littorals, China, international cooperation.*

Introduction

The Indian Ocean covers about 68.5 million square kilometers of the total surface of earth. It is bounded by landmass on three sides. Defining the exact boundaries of the Indian Ocean is a difficult task and has been a long-standing source of disagreement for hydrological experts. It is the third largest ocean in the world after the Pacific and Atlantic Ocean. The Indian Ocean is comprised of 36 key states and 20 peripheral states (Luke and O'Loughlin, 2010).

Arising from relative obscurity during the cold war period, in the recent times this region has become a hot bed of activities involving littoral and non-littoral states due to its abundant natural energy resources and vital trade links spanning throughout Asia, Africa and Europe. The Indian Ocean region is home to approximately 2.4 billion people residing in the littoral states surrounding the ocean. It is also home to two of the world most populous nations, viz; India and China, though China is not a part of the Indian Ocean region, but still exerts considerable influence in the Indian Ocean region through its policy of construction of ports at various harbors in the Indian Ocean. The littorals in the IOR differ in size, population, governance, economic development, level of poverty and so on. So also, it is marked by

presence of myriad religions, race, languages, ethnicities, cultures etc. This diversity makes the region unique and at the same time it is also a cause of conflicts among the region's members. (Michel and Sticklor, 2010). The IOR now features more prominently in the geopolitical interests and commercial calculations of extra-regional powers such as the US, the European Union nations, Japan, and China, regional states and non-state actors also increasingly influence regional and global affairs.

Natural resources in the IOR

The Indian Ocean Region's littoral states contain more than two-thirds of the world's known oil reserves, 35 per cent of the world's gas reserves, 60 per cent of uranium, 40 per cent of gold, 80 per cent of all diamond deposits and a large variety of other mineral substances. These natural resources have created a great degree of wealth in some key Indian Ocean Region states, while others have either been lacking in resources, or, for socio-historical reasons, have been unable to capitalise on such potential sources of wealth, largely due to conflict or poor governance. The Indian Ocean Region contains a huge diversity of economies. The figures for the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the Indian Ocean's key states vary enormously from India's estimated 2010 GDP of US\$1,367.2 billion and that of Australia at US\$1,192.9 billion – twelfth and thirteenth-largest in the world, respectively (Leighton G. Luke, 2010).

Critical Issues

Given the vast amount of natural energy resources in the Indian Ocean and in the adjoining littoral states, no wonder that the global powers have shifted their attention towards this region in the last decade. The Indian Ocean region was relatively neglected by the global powers during the cold war, but has started gaining prominence due to the huge oil reserves, minerals and other natural resources in the region. This region has also become strategically important due to the presence of 'choke points' i.e.; Strait of Malacca, Strait of Hormuz and the Ba-el-Mandeb Strait through which thousands of ships carry cargo and other materials annually across the globe. Apart from these there are other 'choke points' such as Lombok Strait, Sunda Strait which are also important sea lanes.

Due to the enormous growth in trade and economic activities in the region, increased competition among big and small, littoral and non-littoral states, conflict of interest among the states as well as increased presence of non-state actors have created a volatile situation in the region. The changing geo-political situation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in the last decades, has acted as a stimulus for the littoral nations to look seaward.

Over the years, safety and security of ships and goods has become a major concern for the states in the Indian Ocean due to the rise in piracy. Maintaining stability in the region is a core

issue for many states with the increase in smuggling of weapons and emergence of Islamic militants in some of the states. As mentioned earlier the region comprises of states differing in almost all aspects like governance, economic development, population, culture, religious groups, linguistic barriers and so on. Whilst, the IOR is the ‘centre of gravity’ in the world’s geopolitical stage, its littorals are primarily nations with developing maritime security forces that are still in different stages of capability enhancement and capability building.

In order to understand the threat in the IOR, it becomes pertinent to grasp the emerging issues and uncertainties in the Indian Ocean. Increase in the cases of piracy and armed robberies, growing presence of Chinese naval ships and its attempt to dominate the region, maritime security, maritime terrorism, smuggling and human trafficking, infiltration, illegal migration and straying of fishermen beyond the maritime boundary have become a cause of grave concern and security threat to the littorals of the IOR.

Resources in the Indian Ocean Region

The Indian Ocean harbors an array of non-energy renewable and non-renewable resources. Various political, technological, and environmental factors affect the economic potential for developing these resources. The most commercially viable industries are fisheries and minerals.

India received exclusive rights to explore polymetallic nodules in the Central Indian Ocean basin in 1987. Since then, it has explored four million square miles and established two mine sites. To be commercially attractive, nodule deposits must have a content of nickel and copper of at least 2.25 percent and a nodule density of 10 kg per square meter.

Petroleum exists in abundance in the IOR. Crude oil and natural gas remain unquestionably the most important raw material exports from the region. In short, the global economy would not function without them. When viewed in an aggregated sense, the total oil and gas reserves held by IOR states as a percentage of the entire world’s proven reserves are impressive: IOR states have more than 58 percent of the world’s proven reserves and more than 46 percent of gas reserves. When one considers these facts and the inescapable importance of the SLOCs in the Indian Ocean connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa for the conveyance of petroleum, the significance of the IOR to the rest of the world is startling.

China’s expansionist policy

The expansionist policies of China no longer come as a surprise. All its activities in the recent times in the OR have strongly pointed to its ambition to become a hegemon and a potential superpower. It has been acquiring naval facilities along the crucial choke-points in the Indian Ocean not only to serve its economic interests but also to enhance its strategic presence in the

region. China's growing dependence on maritime space and resources is reflected in the Chinese aspiration to expand its influence and to ultimately dominate the strategic environment of the Indian Ocean region.

After dramatically increasing its military expenditure over the last several years, in 2010 China has raised it by only 7.5 percent, marking the first time in nearly 21 years that the rate of increase has fallen below double digits. While there are a number of factors behind this, the Chinese government has used this to announce its pacific intent, underlining that it has always tried to limit military spending and set defence spending at a reasonable level. China's foreign policy thinkers and political establishment have long sought to convince the world that Beijing's rise is meant to be a peaceful one, that China has no expansionist intentions, that it will be a different kind of great power. Still, the Chinese thrust into the Indian Ocean is gradually becoming more pronounced. (Drysdale, 2011). But all these pronouncements by Chinese leaders belie its actions. It has gone on an over spree to acquire ports and building other infrastructure projects at strategic locations across the Indian Ocean Region. The Gwadar port in Pakistan, development of Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, container port facility in Chittagong, listening post and electronic intelligence gathering facilities on the islands in the Bay of Bengal, military agreement with Cambodia etc. indicate its intention to play a dominating role in the IOR. Some scholars term these acquisitions and construction of ports and other facilities from the middle east to the south China Sea and particularly surrounding India as China's strategy of 'string of pearls', which primarily is aimed at containing the rise and growth of Indian Naval supremacy in the Indian Ocean. China has also increased its naval presence and activities near and around the important Choke Points in the Indian Ocean, which are historically marred with number of contentious issues among the littoral states.

Illicit Trafficking by Sea (small arms and narcotics)

The unrestrained spread and the associated illicit trafficking of small arms and light weapons is not a new phenomenon in itself, but has attained a new dimension with the end of the Cold War. The South and South-East Asian regions are particularly vulnerable to the scourge of small arms trafficking. The Indian Ocean Region has witnessed an alarming growth in the illicit trade and transport of narcotics, weapons and people happening in the Indian Ocean across continents. There is a massive array of sea transportation available (liner and tramp) servicing all of the necessary sites of demand and consumption; and, the environment within which this activity occurs is vast and, for all intents and purposes, largely insecure, including lengthy tracts of unpatrolled coastline. While the trafficking of narcotics, weapons, and people continue

to be of greatest concern, the smuggling of oil, cigarettes, charcoal, khat, endangered species, and other contraband is also commonplace. (Burns, 2010).

Drug production impacting Indian Ocean states takes place in two main regions: the “Golden Crescent”, comprising illicit opium production areas in Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan; and the “Golden Triangle”, the second largest opium production region in the world, covering Myanmar, Thailand and Laos. While heroin produced in the Golden Crescent is trafficked through the Southern Route, drug production in the Golden Triangle has shifted to methamphetamines, including Yaba, a highly addictive pill that combines methamphetamines and caffeine. (UNODC)

Opioids produced in Central Asian nations is loaded onto dhows and transported through the Arabian Sea towards both West and East. In the East, they transit through South Asian countries, including India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, to then reach further destinations. This is known as the Southern Route, a well-establish maritime path for opioids smuggling in the Indian Ocean region.

Piracy

As the most heavily travelled and high-value sea routes in the world, the points of confluence of sea lanes in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea have become attractive hunting grounds for pirates. Small-scale piracy—based on the capture of ships and cargo over the past few years near the Horn of Africa and the Strait of Malacca—has been supplanted by capture and ransom activities against lightly crewed vessels with high-value cargoes traveling from the Persian Gulf and the Suez Canal, even as piracy in the eastern Indian Ocean has declined. (As of April 23, 2010, there were 143 acts against shipping worldwide, with 51 off the coast of Somalia. Of these, there were 13 hijackings, of which 11 were off the Somalia coast, while 158 of 173 hostages worldwide were taken off Somalia).

Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported fishing

The increasing sophistication of fishing systems has allowed modern fishing vessels and fleets to enter a fishery and quickly harvest available resources before moving on to other grounds. Many poor developing states have limited resources to invest in coast guards capable of patrolling their EEZ and enforcing fishery regulations. This situation has left these countries’ offshore resources vulnerable to illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, with major economic losses both to the state and to local fishing industries. IUU fishing has proven even more problematic for fisheries that straddle the EEZ and the high seas, or fisheries that migrate across national boundaries. IUU fishing not only undermines human security by also adversely affects the economy and food security of the region.

IUU fishing resulted in loss of government revenue, loss of employment for fishers, and a reduction of employment for other fishing sector jobs, and, to a lesser extent, decreases in food security and trust in government. In most Indian Ocean countries, illegally caught fish is not landed, let alone processed, in the country in whose waters it was caught. (UNODC)

Human Trafficking

According to the UN Trafficking Protocol, human trafficking involves three elements:

- deceptive or fraudulent recruitment;
- facilitated movement to the place of exploitation; and
- exploitation at the destination.

There are numerous source countries for illicitly trafficked people in the IOR with the associated dangers of loss of life at sea and abuses of trafficked persons by organized criminals. Two main maritime flows stand out; From the southern Red Sea and Horn of Africa to the southern Arabian Peninsula, and from the Asian subcontinent to the eastern Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf.

As per the UN report on human trafficking through the sea's the key source countries from where human trafficking starts are Bangladesh, Comoros, Madagascar, Maldives, Myanmar, Sudan, Tanzania to name a few. Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Yemen have been identified as the primary destination regions/ countries/ports where the trafficked individuals are taken via Djibouti, Somalia, Eritrea and port Sudan, Sudan in fishing vessels, Container vessels, dhows, general cargo vessels. Mumbai, Chennai in India, Mombasa in Kenya, Salalah in Oman and few other ports are the transshipment points.

Implications for India

India enjoys a unique position in the Indian Ocean due to its location, size and history. Surrounded by water body on its three sides, India has a coastline of 7,516.6 km. bordering the mainland and the islands with Bay of Bengal in the East, the Indian Ocean on the South and the Arabian Sea on the West. There are nine States viz. Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal and four Union Territories viz. Daman & Diu, Lakshadweep, Puducherry and Andaman & Nicobar Islands situated on the coast. It has multiple advantages and is also vulnerable to the conflicts and activities in the Indian Ocean. The focus of the Indian establishment has been predominantly towards its western and northern borders since independence as it fought three wars with Pakistan's, is fighting continuous proxy war supported by Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) and had a war with China. Due to its continuous engagement with the two hostile neighbours on the northern side, its vast coast line in the east, west and south has remained relatively neglected.

During the last decade, the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean Region has undergone tremendous change and it has become pertinent for India to become actively involved in the activities taking place in its neighborhood on the other side to protect its borders, its national interest and sovereignty.

India's unique location in the Indian Ocean coupled with a large coastline makes it prone to _____ any natural or manmade activity in the IOR, adversely affecting its security and status in the Indian Ocean. The economic dependence of India on the Ocean is tremendous. Nearly 95 percent of India's trade by volume and 68 percent of trade by value is done via the Indian Ocean. 80 percent of the crude oil requirement is fulfilled by the ocean through oil tankers sailing in the ocean. India is also dependent significantly on the resources of the Indian Ocean. In 1987, India received exclusive rights to explore the central Indian Ocean and has since explored four million square miles and established two mining sites. It can be understood by the fact that, between 1962- 2010, maritime exports have grown 55 times in volume.

Growing piracy, narcotics trade in the waters, gun running, human trafficking, presence of super powers, China's quest for dominance in the Ocean will have immediate and adverse effect on India. Rise of extremist's organisations, militant Islamic groups and their destabilizing activities within the country has put the government on edge. The terrorist attacks on the Indian soil in 2008 proved that terror organisations are capable of using soil, air and water routes for carrying out their violent acts. In 2008 the terrorist belonging to the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba organisation landed on the Indian soil on inflatable speedboats on the colaba sea shore in Mumbai and carried out coordinated attacks killing hundreds of innocent Indian and Foreign nationals. It exposed the vulnerability of our coastline and the threat to our country. Smuggling of arms coupled with narcotics has become a growing menace for the entire IOR. This emergence of narco-terrorism poses a grave threat not only to India but to large part of the Indian Ocean littoral states. Arms are smuggled into Indian territory via the long and at places porous coastline, which end up with the extremist organisations inside India. Illegal fishing and exploitation of natural resources is another danger faced by the Indian authorities within its nautical borders. Fishing boats from neighbouring states like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh have been noticed and captured in the Indian waters.

The biggest threat which India perceives is from the growing presence of Chinese PLAN (Peoples Liberation Army Navy). Though China is not a littoral of The Indian Ocean, still it has its naval ships in the Indian Ocean waters. It claims it as PLAN's "far sea defense" (or *yuanyang fangyu*) strategy (FSDS), presumably to enhance its economic interests, to protect its transportation routes and the safety of major sea-lanes. (Burns, 2010). But, its partnership

with the Indian ocean littoral states in the recent years in the form of construction, financing of ports and infrastructure projects at strategic locations have created grave concerns in the Indian security establishment. Its policy of 'string of pearls' in the Indian Ocean is evidently to encircle India and dominate the Indian Ocean. Many Chinese policy makers have tried to dismiss it as China's efforts to protect its shipments and trade, but the ever-increasing number of Chinese warships tell a different story. India has border disputes with China on its northern frontiers and has fought Chinese aggression in 1962. The increasing activities of the PLAN clearly suggest its nefarious design to dominate the Indian Ocean waters, contain India and become a regional hegemon.

Apart from the presence of China's PLAN in the Indian Ocean, another worrisome trend is the amplified role of the navies of non-littoral global powers, i.e.; the US, UK and France. The very substantial US naval presence in the region has been necessitated for several key reasons, including: ensuring the freedom of navigation for vital crude exports from the region; conducting military operations during the wars in the Persian Gulf; monitoring Iranian military deployments and deterring Iranian aggression; and undertaking maritime security operations (MSO), which include counter-terrorist, counter-trafficking, and counter-piracy missions. The US Fifth Fleet is based in Bahrain, which is also used by the British Royal Navy.) Aside from those countries mentioned above, the following states have had (or still have) warships and other maritime assets in the IOR: Canada, China, EU/Europe (Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden), Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, and Turkey. Additionally, the European Union initiated its own dedicated counter-piracy force—the EU's Naval Force Somalia (EU NAVFOR), Operation Atlanta—in December 2008.

The presence of large number of littoral and non-littoral actors and their small and large warships in pursuit of securing their varied interests, it is an only a matter of time and the contest to dominate the region when the Indian Ocean can become an active theatre of war.

Conclusion

The security environment in the Indian Ocean is being challenged from several directions. The region is plagued with piracy, drug smuggling, gun running, human trafficking and illegal migration, coupled with the growing quest of global and regional powers to control the waters. Efforts have been made by states to address these problems and there has been an encouraging response from states but only as part of a bilateral agenda. Only a few issues such as "search and rescue" and "piracy" have been taken up on a multilateral basis. There is a need to encourage bilateral naval and coast guard exercises/patrols aimed at improving transparency,

establishing common procedures to address problems related to maritime disorder, search and rescue at sea, and support protection of the marine environment. This, in turn, would contribute to stability in the region.

The Indian Navy is assisted by the Indian Coast Guard, State Marine Police, and other Central and State agencies for the coastal defence of the nation, and controls all Navy - Coast Guard joint operations. The Indian Navy supports the Indian Coast Guard within the maritime zones as required, and provides presence, including surveillance and patrol, on the high seas beyond the EEZ.

India needs to strengthen its ties with the littoral states in the form of bilateral and multilateral agreements, coalitions and CBM's to secure peace and stability in the region. Playing a more proactive role in establishing itself as a major player in the region is foremost in order to protect its economic interests in the region, secure its trade routes and safeguard its coastlines. India cannot alone counter the threat posed from varied sources. Furthermore, it has to join forces with the major powers in the region and extra regional powers to counter the growth and influence of the Chinese PLAN in the Indian Ocean.

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