

Indian Ocean: New power game in the offing?

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In the ancient Sanskrit literature the Indian Ocean is known as Ratnakara meaning "the maker (creator) of jewels." The real relevance of this name is being understood in this twenty-first century, as the high strategic value of this vast ocean is making it a theatre of maritime dominance of the Asian powers. Today's jewels certainly are trade, influence and power, a *raison d'être* for these developing countries to modernize and expand their maritime strength and broaden their sphere of strategic influence.

The Indian Ocean provides major sea routes connecting the Middle East, Africa, and East Asia with Europe and the Americas. It carries a particularly heavy traffic of petroleum and petroleum products from the oil fields of the Persian Gulf and Indonesia. Large reserves of hydrocarbons are being tapped in the offshore areas of Saudi Arabia, Iran, India, and Western Australia. An estimated 40% of the world's offshore oil production comes from the Indian Ocean. The ocean's importance as a transit route between Asia and Africa has made it a scene of conflict. Because of its size, however, no nation had successfully dominated most of it until the early 1800s when the United Kingdom controlled much of the surrounding land.

The global power gravitas is clearly shifting towards Asia, while the strategic landscape in the region remains marked diversity of conflict. With phenomenal rise of China and India, the Indian Ocean will matter more as these key players enter into a great-power rivalry in these waters as the whole Indian Ocean seaboard, including Africa's eastern shores, becomes a vast web of energy trade. Triggered by economic growth and strategic perception (shaped by the history and strategic culture), both China and India are investing in extensive military modernization and expansion. These are evidenced by their efforts to build up maritime strength with a view to attain supremacy in the Indian Ocean.

China has a very different name for this ocean. They call it Xiyang (Western Ocean). In 2009, for the first time, official Chinese state media quoted Defense Minister Liang Guanglie stating China's intention to build aircraft carriers. For China, building aircraft carriers is all about underlining China's rise in the international system. The argument is that all great powers build strong navies. And nothing demonstrates the maritime power of a nation more than an aircraft carrier. An aircraft carrier is a warship designed with a primary mission of deploying and recovering aircraft, acting as a seagoing airbase. Aircraft carriers thus allow a naval force to project air power great distances without having to depend on local bases for staging aircraft operations.

The enthusiasts of sea-power in China insist that without aircraft carriers, China will be unable to secure its growing interests far from the national shores and defend its massive sea-borne trade from threats. They highlight the fact that China is the only major power in the world today without a carrier capability. This year China has a defence budget of \$70 billion, and a large share is to go to the navy rendering it the fastest growing arm of Chinese military.

Meanwhile, the Indian navy has already begun a comprehensive program to acquire power-projection platforms ranging from aircraft carriers to landing-platform dock ships. According to a leading international think tank, over the next decade the Indian navy plans a fleet of 140-145 vessels, of which half will be designed ocean-going. India is enthusiastic about strengthening its maritime capability with an ambition to establish its supremacy. Robert D. Kaplan, a noted expert on Indian Ocean Region, is of the opinion that "India is seeking to increase its influence from the Plateau of Iran to the Gulf of Thailand - an expansion west and east meant to span the zone of influence of the Raj's viceroys."

The indigenous aircraft carrier with a tonnage of 37,500, designed by the Indian Navy, can operate Russian MIG-

29K, Ka31 helicopters and indigenous Light Combat Aircraft fighters. It will have two runways for takeoff and one for landing, and can accommodate up to 30 fighter aircraft. It is expected to be completed by 2011 and put into use by the Navy by 2014. The biggest warship to be ever built in India, all with home-made steel, the carrier will be about five times larger than the 6,700 tonne Delhi class of destroyers, the largest warships made by India.

The carrier will also be equipped with home-made long-range surface-to-air missile system with multi-function radar and close-in weapon system, according to navy officials. With a length of 260 meters and a breadth of 60 meters, the warship will be propelled by two shafts, each coupled to two LM2500 gas turbines developing a total power of 80 megawatt, sufficient to attain speeds over 28 knots, said the officials.

The project started in 2002 with the designing but was launched into fast track in 2006 when the construction of the warship building blocks began in Kochi.

India purchased the INS Viraat aircraft carrier from British Royal Navy in 1986, and thus became the only nation in Asia operating such a warship. Indian strategic experts view it as "a quest for sea supremacy". Indian policymakers are of the opinion that "the indigenous aircraft carrier will make the Indian Navy strong and self-reliant." As Indian economy grows, the country's gas, oil and other commodity imports are climbing rapidly.

The Indian Ocean is bounded on the north by Asia (including the Indian subcontinent, after which it is named); on the west by Africa; on the east by Indochina, the Sunda Islands, and Australia; and on the south by the Southern Ocean (or, traditionally, by Antarctica).

Major powers will concentrate on the Indian Ocean region given its strategic and economic significance. A new power game in the region is of a high probability and this may have a significant destabilizing impact on the regional



states. The regional states should keep in mind that this region is vital to the regional and global economy. The international community should also encourage peaceful settlement of the maritime disputes.

Bangladesh faces the Indian Ocean through the Bay of Bengal. For Bangladesh access to the oceans via Bay of Bengal is of utmost strategic importance. The recent development in Myanmar is a matter of concern for Bangladesh. The spat with Yangon in November 2008 over a rig placed by Myanmar for exploration purposes in territorial waters claimed by Bangladesh was a "wake up call" for Dhaka. The media has reported the Bangladesh navy as having a ten year plan to upgrade itself into a "three dimensional force", which is

very logical. The Myanmar navy has grown enormously since 1988. Now it seeks blue water capability. Further modernization is only a matter of time. In this context Bangladesh must seriously assess and develop its own maritime capability to match the reality. The rapidly evolving strategic scenario in the Indian Ocean Region is something that Bangladesh should take into serious consideration. In Bangladesh, there is a surprising lack of research in maritime issues. We cannot defend our national interest vis-à-vis maritime boundary and exploration of oceanic resources unless we know the ocean well.

The Indian Ocean is gradually being militarised by many littoral states. The peacetime functions of the navy of many coastal countries have changed consid-

erably. It is not confined to defence of territories. The navies patrol the distant waters to keep safe the sea-lanes for transportation of oil from the Middle East to Far East and promotion of trade. Bangladesh needs to monitor and consider how to play a role in the area of security of the Indian Ocean.

Whoever controls Indian Ocean controls Asia. Though some experts reject any possibility of a large scale confrontation as the economic cost will be too high for both of the countries to bear. Militarization of the Indian Ocean may not be the disease but a symptom which will influence the future of not only Asia but also the rest of the world.

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Sonadia deep sea port and regional connectivity



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THE depth of water at the berthing/anchorage area of Chittagong Port is less than 10 meter. Normally, mother vessels of present generation require 16-18 meter depth of water to berth safely. Next generation vessels (within a decade) will require 21 meter and future generation of mother vessels may require 24 meter depth of water. As such, while improving the berthing facility of Chittagong sea port, we should cater for mother vessels of the future generation. In that case the depth of water at the berthing area of deep sea port should be not less than 24 meter.

In the 1990s, the Sultanate of Oman built one such port at Salalah but since the depth of water at the berthing area of the said port is barely 16 meter they have to carry out regular dredging off and on to get the required depth of water to accommodate present generation mother vessels. In 2002 layout drawing, the characteristics and drawbacks of the newly built Salalah Port were sent to the Bangladesh Ministry of Shipping.

In the jetty, Oman installed computerized modern cranes (Chinese, made with German technology) which from distance can pull crates weighing more than 65 ton and at its own, as directed by the computer, place the cargo in a lane fixed for its group. Total manpower to handle such a huge port is 303 people and at a

given time with casual manpower, barely 350 people remain engaged in the port. In 2001 when the late Abdus Samad Azad visited the port he immediately pointed out the need for trained manpower to operate the port.

It is said that the depth of water at Sonadia, the newly selected deep sea port site, is about 14-16 meter, which may be adequate for mother vessels of the present generation but not for vessels of the next. If required we should make a platform/bridge/floating jetty to go up to the place where we can get the required depth of 24 meter. If not we may look for alternative sites too. South of Mongla, Patuakhali, Bhola, Hatia and Sandwip are probable sites for a deep sea port.

Apart from the required depth, wherever we establish deep sea port it must be made sure that the handling time at the port should be prompt and that no time is wasted in berthing and in unloading cargo. As such the functioning of the port (from entry, berthing to loading/unloading and storage and clearing all types of cargoes including human traffic) should be computerized. On the other hand the sea/waters at the berthing area of deep sea port should be calm so that vessels could berth easily and safely. On this point we need experienced expertise to guide the whole project.

From time immemorial Sandwip has been a sea port and even today its channel may provide a suitable site.

By now the concerned authority must have carried out detailed survey (hydrological as well as seismic) of the probable sites. To make it more attractive if possible a suitable area near the deep sea port site could be developed as a tourist spot and sports avenue, which should be well connected by air also.

The inter connectivity by road, rail (including fast moving electric train), water ways and by air has to be built as per world standards, meeting all the parameters. We must not compromise any of the parameters nor should we be penny wise pound foolish. Road and rail communication network should be built in such a way that these could accommodate fast moving heavy vehicles as well as containers/lorries and side by side railway line to accommodate broad gauge bogies of Electric Railway. The roads leading to sea port should be as straight as possible and should be of minimum six to eight lanes. Besides, all the other required facilities should be developed. Electricity, gas, online banking (including convertible currency), vehicle and maintenance parking, one stop mall with accommodation and food and email facilities should be developed.

One such proposed highway could be built from Kaligonj/Shayamnagar to Bakhergonj to Daulatkhani to (through bridge over the Shahbajpur River) to Ramgati/Majdee to Sitakunda and along sea shore to Maheshkhali/Sonadia (like a marine

drive). Alternatively, it may be Ramgati to (bridge over Sandwip channel) Sandwip (a probable deep sea port site) or even Shayamnagar to Lalmohon to Hatia (another probable new deep sea port-site, if it is so selected).

Right from Shayamnagar, on both sides of the highway, there should be canals with sluice gates. It is expected that its height should be 30 feet. At the same time, if salty water as well as flood water could be controlled then a sizeable land could be recovered for cultivation. The local people would be interested to build the road voluntarily as it happened with Mahuri embankment; and with human endeavour we should be able to build the road in the quickest possible time. Road side shelters could be built so that people, at the time of tornado, tidal waves or flash flood, could avail them to live in temporarily.

Other roads like from Sylhet, Kulaura, Comilla, Mymensingh, Panchaghar, Parbatipur, Rajshahi, Hilli, Sona Majsid, Jessore/Benapole, etc, which are in existence leading to Cox's Bazaar/ Maheshkhali/Teknaf would need improvement only.

Once connectivity is developed it will benefit Bangladesh and the surrounding land locked countries and with the available facilities automatically investors would be attracted to invest either as joint venture or independent projects. On both counts Bangladesh will be benefited along with India, Myanmar, China, Nepal and Bhutan in particular. Connectivity will enhance mutual understandings besides commercial dealings.

Once we build the highways within the country and regional connectivity along with deep sea port we may strive hard to build a canal like Panama at the Betung area of south Thailand after gaining confidence of the Asean countries, particularly Singapore. The canal will ensure shortest route to the Pacific Ocean by connecting the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean. In this type of project Japan will be greatly interested.

Regional connectivity needs regional understandings. For that we must carry out heart to heart talk with India in particular, to establish regional commercial management committee under a regional regulating commission, having proper representatives from concerned countries including China. This type of endeavor will ultimately lead to one economic zone with one currency like the EU. Transit pass will suffice to initially allow cargoes and human traffic rather than formal visa.

From Bangladesh's point of view, the sea demarcation with India and Myanmar in particular should also be settled immediately, preferably by amicable settlement.

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Border tension rises between India and China

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CHINA and India face contested border issues. India argues that China occupies 38,000 square kilometres of its territory in the western Himalayan region, while China claims much of the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which is 90,000 square kilometres.

The McMahon Line boundary dispute is at the heart of relations between China and India. The disputed border follows the "McMahon Line" drawn up in 1914 when the British ruled India. Beijing does not recognize this demarcation and claims a large portion of the Indian side of the border.

A slow forward move towards the McMahon Line was begun on the ground, to establish a new de facto boundary. The McMahon Line was then forgotten until about 1935 when the British government decided to publish the documents in the 1937 edition of Aitchison's Collection of Treaties.

For China, the McMahon Line stands as a symbol of imperialist aggression on the country. The dispute on Arunachal Pradesh is China's most intractable border issue with India.

Because the gap between China and India is wide, it is difficult for both nations to reach consensus. The area of this disputed region is three times that of Taiwan and it is flat and rich in water and forest resources.

The NEFA (North East Frontier Agency) was created in 1954. On 7 November 1959, Chou En-lai proposed that both sides should withdraw their troops twenty kilometres from the McMahon Line.

The issue was quiet during the decade of cordial Sino-Indian relations, but erupted again during the Sino-Indian War of 1962. During the 1962 war, China captured most of the NEFA. However, China soon declared victory and voluntarily withdrew back to the McMahon Line.

During Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to India in April 2005, the two sides signed an agreement on political settlement of the boundary issue, setting guidelines and principles. In the agreement, China and India affirmed their readiness to seek a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable solution to the boundary issue through equal and friendly negotiations. Twelve rounds of talks have been held before and after 28 years of negotiations, the two sides have never even agreed on a military line separating the two armies.

India's national security adviser M.K. Narayanan and Chinese state councillor Dai Bingguo resumed the talks on 7th August 2009 after a year's gap, focusing on narrowing down differences along their border.

The August talks were plagued by the traditional mistrust since the 1962 brief war, and in recent months, allegations of China's interference in India's strategic matters clouded the talks.

Meanwhile, India's foreign policy establishment was rattled by recent Indian media reports that a think-tank linked to the Chinese military had called for India to be split into 30 independent states. The paper said that if China "takes a little action, the so-called great Indian federation can be broken up". This would be in China's interests and lead to more prosperity in the region, it said, according to reports.

The Indian Government took the article so seriously it issued a statement saying the two

countries had agreed to "resolve outstanding issues, including the boundary question, through peaceful dialogue and consultations, and with mutual sensitivity to each other's concerns".

Feathers were also ruffled in Delhi in recent weeks when the Indian media said Google satellite maps mysteriously showed the names of several towns in Arunachal Pradesh in Mandarin, not English or Hindi, making it appear the region was part of China.

There was further tension two months ago when Beijing objected to a \$US60 million (\$71.3 million) Asian Development Bank loan to India for a project in the territory China claims.

Against the background, there are fears that a stand-off between India and China over Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh could seriously damage ties between the Asian giants. Strategic experts in New Delhi warn that tensions in the remote border region are on the rise.

Of late, Chinese patrolling of the 3,500-km (2,200-mile) border, particularly along Arunachal Pradesh state, which Beijing claims as its territory, has also been markedly assertive Indian officials said.

In June the Governor of Arunachal Pradesh and former army Indian chief, retired general J.J. Singh, said up to 30,000 new troops would be deployed in the region. In June a state-run newspaper in China accused India of "unwise military moves" along the Arunachal Pradesh border.

The reaction in Chinese official media to India's troop deployment has been reportedly strong. An editorial in the Global Times said China would never compromise on the border dispute and asked India to consider if it could afford the consequences of a conflict with China.

New Delhi saw all this as an increasing assertiveness as part of Beijing's overall "Rising China" strategy. "The Chinese government is trying to say that the public opinion in China is in favour of a more assertive stand towards India," B. Raman, former head of RAW (Research and Analysis Wing), said. Others say it is a warning from China that India must back down from its military posturing.

"Any doubts that the Indian foreign policy establishment might have had about the threat posed by China have evaporated in recent months" says Brahma Chellaney, professor of strategic studies at Delhi's Centre for Policy Research.

About rising tension between India and China as a result of a buildup of Indian and Chinese troops in a disputed, mountainous Himalayan border region, it is reported the State Department has urged both sides to keep the situation calm.

China and India have long-standing misgivings about their strategic intents against each other. Beijing fears India's deepening ties with the US are a part to contain China, while New Delhi perceives Beijing's increasing influence on Myanmar and Pakistan a threat to its backyard.

The tension between India and China, if continues, tends to destabilize South Asia and pre-empt the conditions for economic integration, for interconnectivity through multimodal transport and for increasing prosperity in the region.

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