

THE LARGER MESSAGE TO NEW DELHI FROM THE RED SEA

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January 24, 2024 12:16 am | Updated 02:05 am IST

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A China PLA warship | Photo Credit: Getty Images

The arrival of the Indo-Pacific marked India's great break out from the unfriendly continental theatre, hemmed in by China and Pakistan and constrained by the vagaries of geopolitics on most of the remaining land borders. But is this ocean of opportunity, quite literally so, steadily becoming yet another theatre of conflict, competition and containment?

The Houthi terror attacks on MV Chem Pluto, an oil and chemical tanker, on its way to the New Mangalore port from the Al Jubail port in Saudi Arabia, and MV Sai Baba, a Gabon-owned, Indian-flagged crude oil tanker, with predominantly Indian crew forced India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar to rush to Tehran to persuade the principal Houthi sponsor to help cease the attacks. India's military response to the Red sea situation has also been swift: the Indian Navy deployed the guided missile destroyers, INS Mormugao, INS Kochi and INS Kolkata in the broader region.

The Houthi attack on commercial ships in the Red Sea and the fragility of order and stability in the Indo-Pacific, a direct result of Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, is also a reminder of the rough weather ahead in the Indo-Pacific in general and India's maritime space in particular. For India, the Houthi challenge may soon pass, given New Delhi's ties with Tehran. And yet, beyond the action-reaction mode, there is a larger question we must ponder. Does India have a maritime grand strategy that goes beyond occasional fire-fighting, naval exercises with friendly nations and a snail-pace increase of the budget allocation for the Indian Navy? What indeed is India's long-term vision for the Indo-Pacific?

New Delhi for sure has made a big, and welcome, shift in its grand strategy — from its continental obsession to maritime theatre. This is India's opening to the world at a time when its land borders are becoming increasingly testy allowing little access for the country to trade with and transit to the rest of the world. But, New Delhi's maritime turn also presents a major challenge, elements of which are becoming increasingly apparent.

India's new two front challenge is not Pakistan and China posing a nutcracker situation for India, but a combination of its continental and maritime challenges.

Having an aggressive and rising China attempting to contain India on its continental and

maritime fronts is a classic two-front situation. While India has been allowing itself to be obsessed with the Line of Control with Pakistan in the west, defending the Line of Actual Control with China in the north, and picking needless quarrels with its neighbours, Beijing was quietly building its empire of influence in the eastern, southern and western oceanic planks. For decades, Beijing (by arming Pakistan) ensured that India is boxed in in South Asia, ignoring the China challenge. By the time New Delhi put its unresolved conflicts with Pakistan in cold storage and shifted gears to the China challenge on the LAC, the game had already gotten bigger.

While the People's Liberation Army keeps up the pressure on the LAC, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has been increasing its presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) at an alarming rate. Consider the following. To begin with, take note of the stupendous growth of the Chinese Navy which is perhaps the largest in the world today: according to one account, it has "an overall battle force of over 370 ships and submarines, including more than 140 major surface combatants". This number is expected to jump to 435 ships by 2030. By way of comparison, the Indian Navy today has 132 warships.

Take a look at China's push for overseas military bases. Beijing today has a military base in Djibouti. Growing Chinese activities in Pakistan's Gwadar and Sri Lanka's Hambantota should worry Indian strategists, even if they are not yet military bases. In Myanmar, the Kyaukpyu port which China is constructing will enable PLAN to inch closer to the Indian Navy in the Bay of Bengal — a maritime space India hereto enjoyed unrivalled. Beijing is reportedly expanding an artificial island in Maldives and the China-Maldives strategic partnership is bound to increase due to tensions between Male and New Delhi. One had the visit of the anti-India Maldivian President to China recently. China is also exploring strategic investment options in the Seychelles, and is also building a naval base in Ream, Cambodia. The small Indian Ocean island nation of Comoros is the latest to join China's fan club in the Indo-Pacific.

The emerging picture is this: from the Horn of Africa (Djibouti) to Myanmar, Sri Lanka, the Seychelles, the Maldives in the Indian Ocean to Gwadar in the Arabian Sea, China's actions will amount to a containment of India in the Indo-Pacific. Read these developments alongside China's expanding outreach to the global South, its port building efforts around the world, and strengthening of relations with West Asia and Africa.

Two things stand out. First, India's assessment about China's strategy to contain India in the continental space in South Asia is not a misplaced one, but is definitely an insufficient one. China is parallelly attempting to contain India in the larger maritime theatre as well.

Second, Beijing's attempt is to influence, among others, those spaces and countries that India has historically engaged with. While the IOR was India's traditional sphere of influence until the Chinese came in with goodies, the far-off regions such as Africa had historical, cultural and political links with India. In that sense, it appears to be a zero sum game — China's gain is India's loss.

So what should India do? To begin with, India should use the growing global attention on the Indo-Pacific which is easily the most consequential geopolitical construct of our times. The good news is that the Indian Ocean is too important for the rest of the world to let China take over. If China poses a challenge to India's regional security and interests in the broader IOR, it also poses a challenge to the commercial and security interests of the United States and its allies.

Every major country is today interested in the Indo-Pacific and its future trajectory as is India, which provides an opportunity for New Delhi to make coalitions with like-minded countries especially at a time Beijing has little great power backing in the maritime theatre. Second, India cannot balance against the growing Chinese power in the Indian Ocean all by itself. India

occupies a pivotal location in the Indo-Pacific moment just as it is the heart of the Chinese attempts to create an empire of influence. Creating, and enhancing, partnerships with like-minded countries is perhaps an important way forward.

Even more importantly, perhaps, New Delhi must invest in a cohesive and well thought-out Indo-Pacific strategy that goes beyond noble intentions and nobler declarations. While Quad and Malabar are useful initiatives, they are at best a modest response to a grand futuristic challenge that is unfolding quickly. For sure, New Delhi already has several pieces of what could constitute the elements of a maritime grand strategy, but they need to be put together in a purposeful and cohesive manner.

The Red Sea situation will fade away eventually, but India's new two-front situation will become more and more apparent in the years to come. In that sense, New Delhi's decision not to join the U.S.-led 'Operation Prosperity Guardian' may have been the right choice for now, but in the longer run, its ability to meet the China challenge without being part of collective efforts would be limited.

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