

ALL OUT AT SEA: ON INDIA'S ENGAGEMENTS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

India is setting a high tempo of naval operations in Asia. In recent weeks, a series of bilateral exercises with regional navies in the Indian Ocean have demonstrated the Indian Navy's resolve to preserve operational leverage in India's near seas. In April, in their biggest and most complex exercise, Indian and Australian warships held drills in the Bay of Bengal. This was followed by a much-publicised anti-submarine exercise [with the U.S. Navy near Diego Garcia](#). Last week, the Indian Navy [held a joint exercise 'Varuna'](#) with the French Navy off the coast of Goa and Karwar. even as two Indian warships participated in a 'group sail' with warships from Japan, the Philippines and the United States on return from a fleet review in Qingdao.

For many, the trigger for India's newfound zeal at sea is the rapid expansion of China's naval footprint in the Indian Ocean. Beyond commercial investments in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, China has established a military outpost in Djibouti, a key link in Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Reports suggest the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is planning an expansion of its logistics base for non-peacekeeping missions, raising the possibility of an operational overlap with the Indian Navy's areas of interest. As some see it, Djibouti portends a future where China would control key nodes skirting important shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean, allowing the PLA's Navy (PLAN) to dominate the security dynamic.

Australian Navy frigate's Chennai visit part of Canberra's 'East Asian deployment'

Meanwhile, South Asian navies have been making their presence felt in the seas of the subcontinent. In a quest for regional prominence, Sri Lanka has positioned itself as a facilitator of joint regional endeavours, expanding engagement with Pacific powers which includes the Royal Australian Navy and the U.S. Navy. With China's assistance, Pakistan too is becoming an increasingly potent actor in the northern Indian Ocean, a key region of Indian interest. Beijing has also been instrumental in strengthening the navies of Bangladesh and Myanmar, both increasingly active participants in regional security initiatives. In these circumstances, India has had little option but to intensify its own naval engagements in South Asia.

Widely acknowledged as the most capable regional maritime force, the Indian Navy has played a prominent role in the fight against non-traditional challenges in the Indian Ocean. While its contribution to the counter-piracy mission off the coast of Somalia, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (including in cyclone-hit Mozambique) has been substantial, a paucity of assets and capacity has forced the Navy to seek partners willing to invest resources in joint security endeavours.

Partnerships are vital to the Indian Navy's other key undertaking: deterring Chinese undersea deployments in South Asia. For New Delhi, China's expanding submarine forays in the Indian Ocean indicate Beijing's strategic ambitions in India's neighbourhood. Experts reckon PLAN has been studying the operating environment in the Indian Ocean in a larger endeavour to develop capabilities for sustained operations in the littorals. As a result, the Indian Navy's recent bilateral exercises have focussed on under-sea surveillance and anti-submarine warfare.

To be sure, sightings of Chinese submarine sightings have decreased, which has led some to conclude that Beijing is moving to scale down its maritime operations in the Indian Ocean. After a 'reset' of sorts in ties following the Wuhan summit last year, some observers believe India and

China are on a collaborative path. New Delhi's silence on China's continuing aggression in the South China Sea, and Indian warships being sent for the Chinese fleet review in Qingdao (in April) do suggest a conciliatory stance. Yet, reduced visibility of Chinese submarines does not necessarily prove absence. The truth, as some point out, is that PLAN is on a quest to master undersea 'quieting' technologies and its new submarines are stealthier than ever. The reason they are not being frequently sighted is because Chinese submarines are quieter and craftier than earlier.

For its part, China has been downplaying its strategic interests in South Asia. It is concerned that too much talk about its growing naval power could prove detrimental to the cause of promoting the BRI. Alarm at the recent BRI summit over Chinese 'debt traps' has led Beijing to revise some infrastructure projects. India's refusal to participate in the BRI may have also prompted China to rethink its economic and military strategies in the Indian Ocean.

Even so, Beijing hasn't indicated any change of plan in West Asia and the east coast of Africa, where most of China's energy and resource shipments originate. Chinese investments in port infrastructure in Kenya, Sudan, Tanzania and Mozambique have grown at a steady pace, even as PLAN has sought to expand its presence in the western Indian Ocean. In response, India has moved to deepen its own regional engagement, seeking naval logistical access to French bases in Reunion and Djibouti, where the second phase of 'Varuna' will be held later this month.

Yet, India's Indian Ocean focus makes for an essentially defensive posture. Notwithstanding improvements in bilateral and trilateral naval engagements, it hasn't succeeded in leveraging partnerships for strategic gains. With India's political leadership reluctant to militarise the Quadrilateral grouping or to expand naval operations in the Western Pacific, the power-equation with China remains skewed in favour of the latter.

For all its rhetoric surrounding the 'free and open Indo-Pacific', New Delhi is yet to take a stand on a 'rules-based order' in littoral-Asia. A wariness for sustained operations in China's Pacific backyard has rendered the Indian Navy's regional strategy a mere 'risk management' tactic, with limited approach to shape events in littoral-Asia.

Abhijit Singh is a former naval officer. He heads the Maritime Policy Initiative at the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi

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