

DELHI NEEDS TO ENGAGE WITH MOSCOW ON THE UNFOLDING SINO-RUSSIAN NAVAL PARTNERSHIP

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Russia

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Russia, long seen as marginal to the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean, is rejoining the major power scrum in the contested littoral. Three recent events highlight Russia's growing strategic interest in the Indian Ocean and should compel Delhi to think of its consequences for India's own regional strategy.

Last week, *Perekop*, a training vessel of the Russian Navy, arrived at the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka. Late last month two, Russian long-distance "Black Jack" nuclear bombers flew to South Africa. This is the first time these aircraft have been deployed to Africa.

This week, the Russian and the Chinese are conducting a trilateral naval exercise with South Africa in the strategic waters off the Cape of Good Hope. Called, Moris, this is the first time that the three countries (India's partners in the BRICS forum along with Brazil) are doing such a joint exercise. The exercise reflects the growing weight of China and Russia in South Africa's security calculus and Pretoria's growing political distance from the West. Meanwhile, Iran has said that it plans to hold joint naval drills with Russia and China in the turbulent waters of the Persian Gulf.

Until now, Delhi's discourse on the Indian Ocean has been focused on the growing competition with China, whose maritime profile has been growing in the littoral. This, in turn, has led to the rapid expansion of India's naval cooperation with the United States and Japan, as well as with its regional partners like Indonesia, Singapore and other [ASEAN](#) countries in the east, many nations in the Gulf as well as the east coast of Africa.

More recently, India has also been developing a partnership with France, a resident power in the littoral and a traditional security provider in the Western Indian Ocean and Africa. India would also want to develop similar intensive engagement with Britain and the European Union.

Russia's return to the Indian Ocean is relatively recent. It must also be seen as a part of its new strategic activism in the Middle East and Africa. Five decades ago, as a rising Soviet Russia sought to enter the Indian Ocean littoral amidst the British withdrawal from the east of Suez, it set off concerns in the region about being sucked into the superpower rivalry.

The region's calls for a zone of peace in the Indian Ocean went nowhere as the US quickly replaced Britain as the main security provider in the littoral. The Soviet Union too expanded its strategic footprint the Indian Ocean during the 1970s and 1980s. But the collapse of the Soviet Union disrupted Moscow's Indian Ocean trajectory.

As it returns to the Indian Ocean, many fundamental constraints remain on Russia's ambitions. Russia is a vast continental state and its limited access to the sea remains vulnerable to exploitation by its adversaries. The unfreezing Arctic will present new opportunities for Russia, but most of them are for the long-term. Russia is also constrained by its limited economic

resources. China, Japan, Europe and the US bring far greater economic weight to bear upon the region. The Indian Ocean is certainly not at the top of Moscow's maritime priorities.

Yet, Russian President Vladimir Putin, has demonstrated the political will and strategic acumen to make the best of a weak hand. While Russia might never dominate the Indian Ocean, it certainly has the capacity to shape the strategic outcomes in the region.

For one, Moscow is one of the world's major arms exporters and has turned that into an effective leverage in the Indian Ocean region. Second, the success of Russia's military intervention in Syria in saving the Bashar al Assad regime has got the attention of many countries in the littoral struggling to cope with civil wars. The recent reports on Russia's growing security role — including the use of hybrid forces — in the Central African Republic, Libya and Mozambique are a testimony to this.

Third, Russia is using its new security role in the region to gain privileged military access. Although it does not have a naval base in the Indian Ocean, acquiring one is probably a high priority. Meanwhile, Russia has stepped up its naval diplomacy in the region, making regular visits to ports in the region and deepening special relationships that it already has with countries like India.

Fourth, as a permanent member, Russia also offers diplomatic protection for many regimes in the UNSC against Western pressures on such issues as human rights. Moscow's strong support to the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs is of great value to many African nations. Finally, Russian energy and mineral companies do offer important options for resource development in many parts of the littoral.

On the face of it, Russian activism in the Indian Ocean should be a welcome addition to the emerging multipolarity in the region. But, there are challenges that are not adequately debated in Delhi. Moscow's deepening tensions with the West and growing strategic embrace of Beijing do pose problems for India's own strategy.

The impact of Russia's conflict with the US has come into public view in the case of Delhi's purchase of [S-400](#) missiles from Moscow and the consequent threat of Washington's sanctions. But there is far less focus on the implications of the emerging Sino-Russian naval and maritime partnership.

Over the last few years, China and Russia have conducted impressive naval manoeuvres in the Western Pacific, the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean. The joint exercise with South Africa this week brings the unfolding Sino-Russian naval partnership closer home to India. Delhi needs an early and intensive dialogue with Moscow on its Indian Ocean collaboration with China.

This article first appeared in the print edition on November 26 under the title 'Russia returns to Indian Ocean'. The writer is director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore and contributing editor on international affairs, [The Indian Express](#).

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