

China's Island Strategy in the Indian Ocean: Breaching India's Sphere of Influence

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Apprehensive of China's growing influence in its backyard, India is looking forward to strengthening its economic and military cooperation with island states in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The recent visit of Indian Defence Minister A. K. Antony to the Maldives is significant step. The visit was intended to enhance India's influence in this strategically important corridor. Although the immediate explanation for enhanced defence cooperation was to build military assets in the Maldives to guard against terrorists and pirates, India's military positioning in a nation of 1,192 tiny islands could also be seen as an attempt to extend its naval footprint in IOR as well as augmentation of its military deterrence against China.

There are other valid reasons forcing New Delhi to keep a close watch over its southern periphery. Maldives shares religious and cultural ties with Pakistan -- a bonding which India would not desire to be cultivated into a stronger politico-military partnership which might prove hostile to Indian interests in this region.¹ Growing links between Jihadis of Maldives and Pakistan in recent years is another cause of discomfort for India. After some recent reports of such linkages, there is renewed concern about the use of the Indian Ocean islands as a possible launching pad for attacks against India. In recent years, many Maldivian nationals have been drawn to Pakistan to join the Lashkar-e-Taiba and other Islamic terrorist groups.² Another cause of concern is the emerging trilateral ties between China, Maldives and Pakistan. According to some reports, Pakistan had played a key role in pushing the Maldivian government to finalising the Marao deal with China.

The China-India jostle for influence in Maldives is not all new. It began some years back with the Chinese seeking to establish base on one of the largest islands of the archipelago. Beijing managed to persuade the Abdul Gayoom government to let it establish a naval base in Marao, one of the largest of the 1,192 coral islands grouped into atolls that comprise Maldives. Although China claims that its bases are only for securing energy supplies, India perceives such presence in its southern neighbourhood as part of Beijing's policy to encircle India as also keep Indian Navy's growth under check. The presence of Chinese nuclear submarines in its strategic periphery has created some unease in New Delhi.

Growing Chinese influence in Sri Lanka

Besides Maldives, China is enhancing its clout in other important IOR island states too. Chinese efforts are on to build or enhance their strategic influence in Sri Lanka, Mauritius and Seychelles. By exploring ways and means to bring Sri Lanka into its strategic ambit, Beijing is making all out efforts to enhance its level of engagement

¹ Sudha Ramachandran, Maldives: Tiny Islands, Big Intrigue," *Asia Times Online*, 7 April, 2006, available at http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/HD07Df01.html.

² Praveen Swami, "Nine Maldives Jihadists Held in Pakistan," *The Hindu*, 4 April, 2009.

with this strategically located island republic. Sri Lanka's recent war against Tamil Tigers provided an opportunity for China to emerge as a reliable friend of Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse recently expressed his appreciation to the Chinese also for their assistance in the economic and social development spheres. China's support in terms of arms sale, economic assistance and diplomatic manoeuvring played a key role in Sri Lanka's ability to score a military victory over the Tamil Tigers, especially after many western countries stopped selling weapons to Colombo due to human rights concerns. In recent years, China has emerged as the biggest donor to Sri Lanka. Chinese assistance to Colombo has grown fivefold in the last year to nearly \$1 billion, thus overtaking Sri Lanka's long-time and hitherto largest donor, Japan. China provided \$ 1 billion assistance last year as compared to \$ 7.4 million and 1.25 million pounds by the two other major donors US and UK respectively.³

China's recent entry into oil exploration in Sri Lanka, participation in development of port and bunker facilities at Hambantota, assistance in infrastructure development, strengthened military cooperation and augmented bilateral trade, should all be cause of concern for New Delhi.⁴ About six nautical miles north from one of the world's busiest shipping routes, construction work on a new deep water port at Hambantota worth \$1 billion has already begun with Chinese assistance. China's eagerness to participate in the Hambantota project is not just about economy but also linked to Sri Lanka's strategic location near strategic sea lines of communication. Many believe it is also about China's eagerness to undertake a strategic presence close to Indian shores. After Gwadar, Chittagong and Sittwe, Beijing is seeking to further consolidate its presence in Indian Ocean through Hambantota.

Chinese plans for Sri Lanka should thus be treated as part of its larger strategy of building an encircled network of road-and-port connections in India's neighbourhood, with an eye of strategic dominance over the IOR. It was also reported that contracts for Hambantota port were first offered to India by the Sri Lankan government but was then given to Chinese companies after India rejected. Thereby, India's loss has turned out to be China's gain, much to the chagrin of Indian security planners.

Hu's Islands

China also looks resolute to bring Mauritius and Seychelles into its sphere of influence. The Chinese President Hu Jintao's recent visits to the two smallest nations of the world was a step in that direction. China's billion dollar assistance to Mauritius, a nation of only 1.3 billion inhabitants, might have had something to do with power thrust in Indian Ocean. As C. Raja Mohan pointed out in a recent

³ Hannah Gardner, "China's Aid Revealed in Sri Lanka's Victory Parade," *The Nation*, September 11, 2009.

⁴ Amit Kumar, "Sri Lankan Lions in Dragon's Arms," *South Asia Monitor*, March 2008, available at <http://www.southasiamonitor.org/2008/Mar/news/17wsa3.shtml>

analysis, "If China's quest for access in the eastern Indian Ocean has been focussed on Myanmar, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, in the western part of the littoral, Seychelles and Mauritius are of natural interest to Beijing."⁵

Two years ago, President Hu Jintao visited Seychelles as part of his visit to eight African countries. Hu was the first Chinese head of state to visit the Seychelles since the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations in 1976. During the visit, both countries signed 5 bilateral cooperation agreements related to economic and technological cooperation, investment promotion and education. Although this small island nation may not have many natural resources to offer, its strategic location in Indian Ocean may be a significant attraction for Beijing.

India, which has had close defence security ties with Seychelles, would not want to be marginalized by Beijing's diplomatic moves. In February 2005, anticipating the Chinese Navy's intentions to sell arms to Seychelles, New Delhi gifted the "INS Tarmugli", a fast attack craft, to the Seychelles Coast Guard. Earlier, a Memorandum of Understanding on defence cooperation was signed during Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat's visit to Seychelles in 2003. India also gifted two Chetak helicopters in 1981. Indian naval ships have been making regular goodwill visits to Seychelles capital Victoria over the past several years. Three Joint military exercises between Indian Army and the Seychelles Peoples' Defence Forces (SPDF) have already taken place in Seychelles.

Similarly, Hu made a visit to another geo-strategically located Indian Ocean island state – Mauritius in February 2009. As Raja Mohan exclaims, "It might not be accidental that Hu's two trips to Africa are ending in Indian Ocean island states that are rather close to India."⁶

Mauritius's geographical proximity to Diego-Garcia is another major reason for augmented Chinese interest. Diego-Garcia, 17 square mile atoll of coral and sand, has been a US naval base since 1970. Diego-Garcia, discovered by Portuguese explorers in the early 16th century, was a territory of Mauritius between 1814 and 1965. Diego Garcia came under the administrative control of the British government in 1965 with the formation of the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). In 1970, Britain leased the island to the United States, and created a US-UK air and refuelling and support station. Diego Garcia proved to be very significant as a refuelling base during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, and during Operation Desert Fox. The United States used Diego Garcia when it launched B-2 and B-52 bombers attacks against Afghanistan in 2001.⁷ During the Cold War, besides the United States, Russia and France also tried to gain some control in this part of western Indian Ocean but failed

⁵ C Raja Mohan, Circling Mauritius, *Indian Express*, 11 February, 2009. See also, C. Raja Mohan, Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Western Indian Ocean, ISAS Insight, available at <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?ots591=0C54E3B3-1E9C-BE1E-2C24-A6A8C7060233&lng=en&id=97204>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

to attain much success. In the post Cold War geo-political scenario, China has been making incisive moves to build a strong foot hold in this region.

China is making all effort to strengthen its partnership with Mauritius. During the visit in February 2009, Chinese president Hu Jintao granted Mauritius \$260 million to expand the island nation's airport. In addition, he signed deals paving way for an interest-free loan of \$5.9 million. Despite the economic downturn, China-Mauritius economic and trade relations have consolidated in recent years. Over the last five years, trade between Mauritius and China has almost trebled. Imports from China have also trebled in the past five years, now accounting for 11.4 percent of imports. While China- Mauritius economic and trade relations have got boosted in recent years, the pace of India–Mauritius cooperation has comparatively slowed down.

Strengthening China- Mauritius ties is therefore a major challenge for India. New Delhi, a most favoured partner of Mauritius, needs to develop its own strategic plan to limit Chinese influence in this region. Ensuring the security and sovereignty of the Mauritian territory has always been India's utmost priority. Surveillance and monitoring of the vast Exclusive Economic Zone of Mauritius is a vital component of India-Mauritius security cooperation. In 1974, the foundation the Mauritian marine security capability was laid with the gifting of Indian Naval Ship 'Amar' that was later inducted as the first unit of the Mauritian Navy and transferred later to the National Coast Guard.

In the subsequent years, New Delhi emerged as principal security provider and military partner of Port Louis. In early December 2006, one of the leading Indian news papers carried a series of reports that Mauritius had suggested transferring the two of its islands ' North and South Agalega' to India on a long lease in order to develop tourist infrastructure. But many speculate that this project would allow Indian Navy to develop monitoring station or any other facility.

India's listening post at Madagascar: trying to parry China's moves

Unlike the Seychelles and Mauritius, China has not got much success so far to enhance its influence in Madagascar. India has already activated a monitoring station in Madagascar. The high tech monitoring station in northern Madagascar is India's first listening post in the western Indian Ocean. The station is gaining importance because of five reasons: first, growing incidents of piracy in this region; second, its proximity to Pakistan's Gwadar port; third, growing Chinese involvement in western Indian Ocean; fourth, increasing oil traffic across the Cape of Good Hope and the Mozambique Channel route; and fifth, India's political, economic and military interests in Africa.

Options for India

Considering Chinese ambitions, India has to make a sagacious move to regain or retain the traditional influence in Indian Ocean island states. The foremost task for Indian policy makers is to augment the economic and trade cooperation with these

island countries. China's trade with most of these nations has been increased manifold in recent years while India is showing modest escalation in comparison to China.

The IOR needs an active regional forum to enhance economic and defence cooperation among member states. To further enhance the cooperation with small Indian Ocean littorals, New Delhi should make serious attempt to form some sub regional groupings or rejuvenate the inactive Indian Ocean Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC). Such moves can also possibly discourage the involvement of external forces.

China's strengthening relationship with these island states is a replica of its Africa policy. To enhance influence in the western Indian Ocean, New Delhi must realise the importance of strong bonding with neglected east African countries. It is also imperative for India to develop an 'East Africa policy' if it has to have an enduring presence in island states of the western Indian Ocean.

New Delhi also needs to further strengthen Indo-US maritime cooperation in western Indian Ocean. US and India, two key players of the Indian Ocean, can work together to combat piracy and terrorism in this region, as well as potentially squeeze Chinese aspirations.

Additionally, search for reliable maritime access in the Indian Ocean requires India to have a true blue water navy. Without that access, the navy's reach will be limited to its own coastal waters. The more 'global' the economy becomes, the stronger the imperative for a blue water navy that is plugged firmly into the security politics of the Indian Ocean.⁸ Creating a framework of enduring maritime cooperation with key island states and generating reach and flexibility for naval operations through reliable access arrangements must now be high priorities for the Foreign Office.⁹

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⁸ Amit Kumar, "From Brown Water to Blue," *Indian Express*, 5 December, 2006.

⁹ Ibid