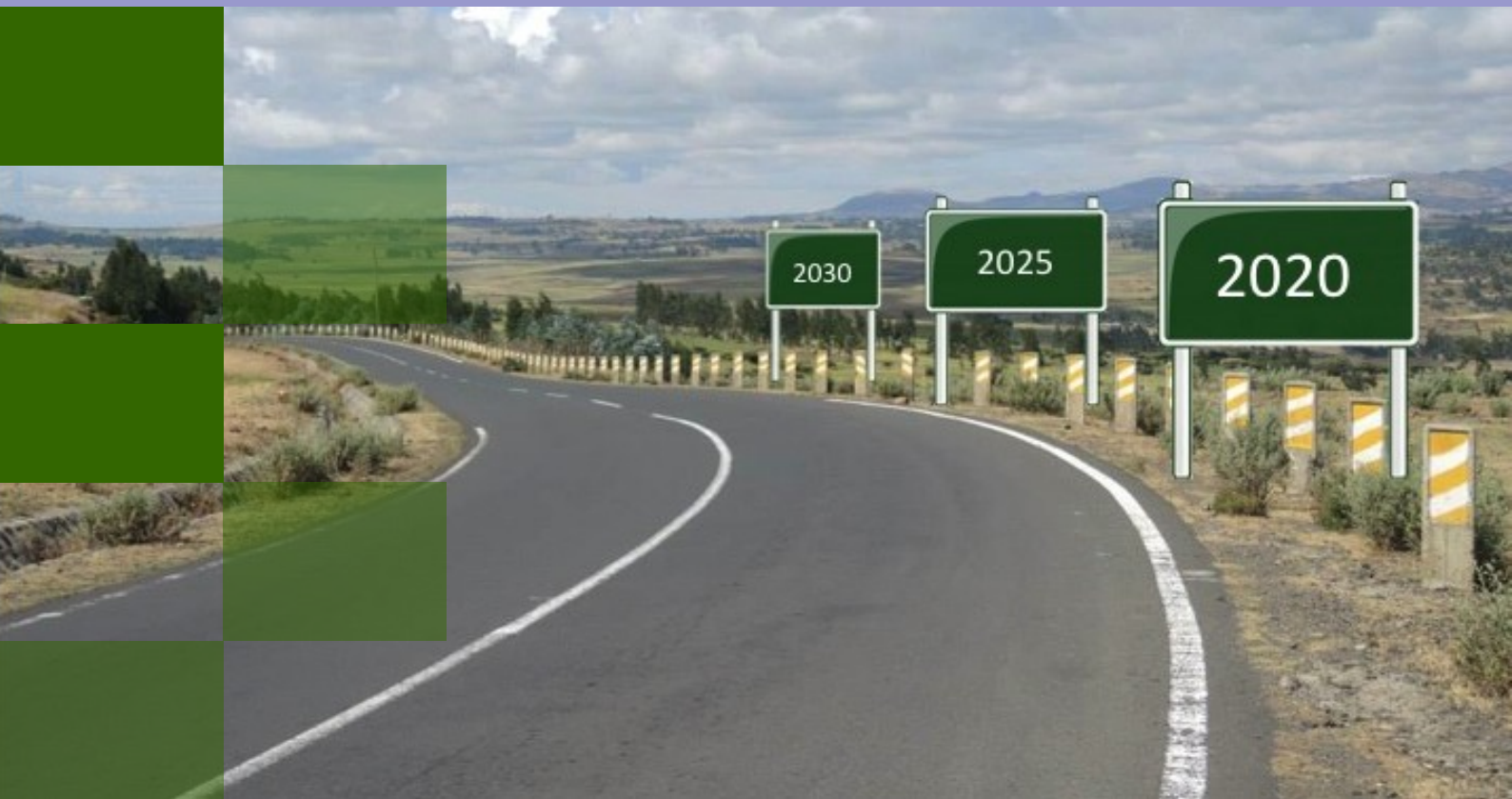


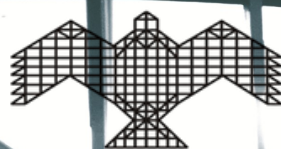
Trends. Threats. Road Ahead

Indian Ocean 2016 Major Trends

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In the Indian Ocean, the regional navies are in the vanguard to keep oceans and seas free from threats and challenges posed by violent non-state actors. Concurrently, they are training for war fighting, an important *raison d'être* of the force. Interesting, the regional and extra regional navies are cooperating to respond to asymmetric threats and challenges such as piracy and terrorism. Further, several Indian Ocean countries have given primacy to modernization of navies notwithstanding varying national economic conditions and priorities. The navies are also transforming their operational doctrines to meet the 21st century challenges and are building sufficient naval power to uphold national sovereignty through anti-access capabilities as also protect national maritime interests. Give the above milieu, four trends are discernible in the Indian Ocean.

Naval 'Order of Battle'

The naval modernization trends in the Indian Ocean region are quite visible and the 'order of battle' (ORBAT) of the navies of India, Pakistan, Iran, Indonesia, Singapore and Australia is significant. These have acquired strategic assets such as aircraft carrier, nuclear and conventional submarines, and expeditionary platforms which are forward deployed for a number of reasons that span the politico-economic-strategic continuum. This is not to undermine the relevance and importance of other platforms (destroyers, frigates, and patrol vessels) in the ORBAT, which serve a number of purposes such as power projection, coastal security and responding to low intensity maritime threats and challenges.

Among the Indian Ocean navies, the Indian Navy is the largest. It operates two carriers INS Viraat and Vikramaditya and the third carrier Vikrant is under construction. Apparently, the Indian Navy also has plans to build another aircraft carrier which may be nuclear propelled. It is hoped that by 2030, the Indian Navy would be a three carrier force. The Royal Thai Navy (RTN) operates the HTMS Chakri Naruebet an Offshore Patrol Helicopter Carrier (OPHC) and its motto is 'Occupy the Sky, Occupy the Sea'. However, the carrier has rarely been seen at sea due to high operating cost and lack of aircraft. Interestingly, Singapore has plans to acquire a Joint Multi-Mission Ship (JMMS) capable of hosting a number of helicopters and possibly short take-off aircraft.

Indian is the only country in the Indian Ocean which operates a nuclear submarine INS Chakra acquired on lease from Russia. The indigenous nuclear powered submarine Arihant is expected to join the Indian Navy in 2016 which would provide India the third leg of the nuclear triad. According to reports, the Indian Navy may acquire/ lease additional nuclear attack submarines. Besides India, at least four extra regional navies i.e. France, UK, China, and US have deployed their nuclear submarines in the Indian Ocean. As far as conventional submarines are concerned, these have emerged as 'the darling platforms'. Their popularity in the naval ORBAT of the Indian Ocean countries has improved significantly and even smaller countries have decided to acquire these. India, Pakistan, Iran, Singapore, Malaysia and Australia already operate submarines and Thailand, Bangladesh and Egypt have announced plans to develop a submarine arm.

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Naval Exercises

In the contemporary maritime security discourse, a frequently used word is 'cooperation'. Further, it is generally agreed that maritime security cannot be achieved by the efforts of only one country and it requires all users of the seas to work together and ensure safety and security of international

commerce. This involves a number of initiatives such as information exchange agreements, training and naval exercises. However, the exercises can be construed as targeted against a particular country either to contain or to shape regional naval balance of power. In the Indian Ocean, at least three such exercises merit attention.

First, the India-US Malabar series of exercises; the 2007 series of these exercises involving India, US, Japan, Australia and Singapore, were perceived as a naval 'concert of democracies' targeting China. This invited sharp reactions from Beijing and it sought an explanation from the participating countries on the 'purpose and the intent' of the exercises and urged them to be open and inclusive. Similar exercises have not been held since then; but in 2015, India, US and Japan decided to regroup and conduct naval exercises. The two other trilateral grouping i.e. India-Australia-Japan and US-Japan-Australia have also emerged and China appears to be worried about the intention of the partners. It is fair to argue that there is lot at stake for at least India and Australia and it remains to be seen how far they are ready to risk antagonizing China since it is their major trading partner.

Second, in the Persian Gulf, Iran had exhibited "aggressively hegemonic regional ambitions" and issued frequent threats to block the Strait of Hormuz. These threats have invited a variety of responses such as joint military and naval exercises including a scenario involving Israel, US and the EU conducting a combination of a preemptive strikes against Iran on account of its nuclear program or WMD proliferation. Third, though not specific to the Indian Ocean, the Russia-China naval exercises in the Mediterranean Sea provide an example of how states engage in signaling. In this case, Russia and China were apparently challenging the US and its European allies through an expression of strength of their partnership and suggesting that Russia was not deterred by the US led economic sanctions post-Ukraine crises. Similarly, China was indicating to the US that it was also not challenged by the US rebalance to the Asia Pacific.

Access and Basing

States and their navies are in constant quest to overcome the tyranny of geography at sea to enhance strategic reach and at times to shape the regional balance of naval power. In the Indian Ocean, the US and France have port access arrangements and have forward deployed forces through a number of bilateral and multilateral treaties, partnerships, alliance arrangements, and access and basing agreements.

During the last decade, China has been most aggressive in seeking access arrangements at Gwadar port in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Chittagong port in Bangladesh and few ports in Myanmar which came to be referred as the 'string of pearls'. China has now secured access at Djibouti and is also exploring access to Jask, a port in Iran which is located strategically in the Gulf of Oman astride the Strait of Hormuz. The long dormant Kra Isthmus project which envisions a 26-metre-deep and about 100 kilometers long artificial link through Thailand to connect the Bay of Bengal and the Gulf of Thailand also figures prominently in the Chinese thinking.

Likewise, the Indian Ocean figures prominently in the Japanese strategic thinking and security policy. Japan actively participated in counter piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and given the long distance from homeland, it enjoys an access arrangement with Djibouti where it has forward deployed Japanese Maritime Self Defence Force ships and aircraft. The Royal Navy has maintained a near continuous presence in the Persian Gulf region in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and war on terror in Afghanistan-Pakistan. Its contribution to the EU's counter piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden is also noteworthy. In 2014, UK was able to secure an access agreement for a permanent military base at Mina Salman in Bahrain for storing equipment and housing military personnel.

According to media reports, India may have secured access rights at one of the islands in Seychelles. However, this has been refuted by the Seychelles President who noted that the facility involves a "joint project between

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India and Seychelles involving our two Defence Forces in enhancing our mutual security along our western seaboard. Seychelles is absolutely committed to the project” which involves a fully operational coastal radar system (CRS) based in Seychelles which is expected to be ready by March 2016.

China in the IOR

Among the several Chinese initiatives in the Indian Ocean, the deployment of PLA Navy nuclear and conventional submarines and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative are noteworthy. In 2015, a Chinese Song-class conventional submarine along with a support vessel docked at the Colombo International Container Terminal in Sri Lanka. Earlier, a Chinese nuclear attack submarine was on deployment (December 2013 to February 2014) in the Indian Ocean. These reports caused alarm among a number of Indian Ocean countries particularly India.

At another level, China’s Maritime Silk Road initiative has attracted attention of a number of countries in the region. It is generally agreed that while the MSR is strongly embedded in economics (building infrastructure to support trade with the countries along the route), it also has a strong politico-diplomatic construct aimed at building robust relations with countries in Asia and beyond. However, the MSR in its strategic construct pivots on the notion of building outposts for the navy and facilitate operations in the Indian Ocean and beyond. Interestingly, the MSR also has a cultural context to help China promote its culture and enhance tourism. The MSR thus offers China a number of opportunities to develop a multipronged strategy to help reach out to the wider international community and to dispel the omnipresent ‘China threat’ among a number of countries.

Indian Ocean in 2016: Five Major Issues

The following five could be considered as major issues in the Indian Ocean in 2016. First, there are visible signs of naval modernization by the Indian Ocean countries who are engaged in developing strong naval power for a number of reasons enunciated above. Both big and small maritime states could acquire a variety of platforms and among these the ‘submarines’ are likely to find favour. However, the smaller countries and island states would be quite content to acquire systems and platforms for maritime domain awareness either individually or in close cooperation with bigger naval powers.

Second, the Chinese naval forays into the Indian Ocean would be more frequent. The choice of Chinese naval platforms (frigates, destroyers, conventional submarines) sent to the Indian Ocean in the past would qualitatively improve and nuclear submarines could become a common sight. This would encourage other nuclear submarine operating navies to deploy additional forces in the Indian Ocean resulting in an aggressive naval posturing in these waters.

Third, extra-regional powers would explore newer access and basing destinations in the Indian Ocean while reinforcing existing set-ups. They would surely offer different incentives such as economic and trade partnerships as also preferential arms sales or transfers.

Fourth, the frequency and sophistication of naval exercises in the Indian Ocean would improve qualitatively to support inter-operability with extra regional navies. The regional navies would certainly benefit from such initiatives which would result in exposure to advance concepts in warfare techniques and operational art.

Finally, the Chinese maritime diplomatic initiatives to support the MSR initiative will continue and a number of East African littorals can be expected to invite China to invest in their maritime infrastructure development projects. Related to that, China is expected to pursue an aggressive politico-diplomatic strategy to obtain access to newer destinations for access and basing in the Indian Ocean which would surely cause enormous discomfort in New Delhi.

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Views expressed are author’s own.

