



CHINA, INDIAN OCEAN & THE NUCLEAR DETERRENCE **THE DESTABILIZING EFFECT**

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The Indian Ocean traditionally refers to the water body that covers the expansive area from the eastern coast of the African continent to the western coast of Australia. The IOR includes all the countries that have a coast on the Indian Ocean. This paper focuses on the northern boundaries of the IOR, from the Iranian coastline to the Myanmar coast.

As China continues to grow steadily, it needs energy resources to meet the increasing needs of its rising population. A majority of the oil imported by China passes through the Indian Ocean, especially through the Strait of Malacca. Given its geographical proximity and historical

linkages, India, the other rising Asian power, has traditionally had an influence over the Region. Hence, China, unsurprisingly, believes increasing its own presence in the region as an imperative to preserve its national interests.

The situation becomes further grim when one realises that all the major countries in the region are nuclear-equipped. Apart from India, China, and Pakistan actively indulging in nuclear testing, the US too has a naval presence in the Region.

What are the implications of Chinese interests in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) vis-a-vis the concerns of India, Pakistan, and the United States (US)?

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Views expressed are author's.

The prevailing nuclear environment is far from stable, with four nuclear states that have strategic interests in the region. While Pakistan is building its nuclear stockpile (allegedly with China's help) to deter India, India is wary of the threat from China. The successful India-US nuclear deal has raised the possibility of an India-US alliance to counter a China-Pakistan alliance in the event of a conflict that could involve

Nuclear Security Programme (NSP)



nuclear weapons. India is well within range of China's land-based nuclear-capable ballistic missiles, and is worried about China's establishment of a 'string of pearls' – by constructing ports – in its neighbouring countries in an effort to militarise, and possibly nuclearise the region.

China claims that this strategy is only to provide it with alternative sea lanes and trade routes to decrease its reliance on the Strait of Malacca, a chokepoint; India doubts it. New Delhi's launch of the Arihant-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) in 2009 indicates its desire to nuclearise its navy. India is not as well equipped as China, and Beijing doesn't view New Delhi as a serious threat. However, the presence of Chinese naval nuclear power has created an uneasy atmosphere in the Indian Ocean Region.

This essay argues that the advancement of efforts to realise Chinese interests has the potential to destabilise the region, and that both India and China need to take significant measures to maintain the current deterrence.

I THE SOUTH ASIAN NUCLEAR DYNAMIC

The South Asian nuclear dynamic is complex, and one that is presently facing a diplomatic impasse, with no direct talks or negotiations on nuclear policy. India cites the threat from China, and not Pakistan, as the primary reason for the development of its own nuclear programme. George Fernandes, former Defence Minister, Government of India, made it explicit in a statement he made following the 1998 Pokhran

tests. India held the fear that all of its major cities were within range of Chinese nuclear missiles, and considered this a legitimate justification for its nuclear initiatives. India enthusiastically went ahead with nuclear weapons testing, arguing that the provision, that only the P5 nations could hold nuclear arsenal, was unfair (Burns, 1998). Naturally, this allegation did not go well with Beijing, that in turn criticised India for making baseless allegations and accused India's rationale as being 'totally unreasonable'.

To this day, China refuses to engage in nuclear talks with India as it stands by the UN Security Council Resolution 1172, which calls on India to stop all further nuclear testing, as well as because India is not a signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) (Pant, 2010). As a consequence, China does not apply the concept of 'No-First-Use' (NFU) – which is otherwise an essential component of Chinese nuclear doctrine – to India (Cunningham & Medcalf, 2011). Resultantly, India has concerns while dealing with China.

In the midst of this tussle, Islamabad believed (justifiably so) that India's nuclear weapons programme was aimed at Pakistan (Rehman, 2012), not China; which it probably was. Given the historical conflict between the two states, and the vulnerability of the major Pakistani power centres owing to geographical proximity to the Indian border, it is not surprising that the Pakistanis came to such a conclusion. The situation becomes particularly precarious when it comes to the India-Pakistan nuclear dynamic. Although India espouses an NFU policy, Pakistan does not. Instead, Pakistan's India-centric nuclear doctrine has a set of four conditions on the basis of which it would proceed with a nuclear attack on its eastern neighbour. These conditions are: large-scale penetration by the Indian Armed Forces into Pakistani territory; large-scale destruction of the Pakistan Armed Forces; economic strangulation of Pakistan; and the political destabilisation by India (Kumar, 2004).

Hypothetically, India may be faced with a situation where a non-nuclear war could escalate into a nuclear war, in which case India would have to concentrate on its second strike

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capability. This is probably the reason why India has an assertive nuclear doctrine, assuring second strike wherever there is capability (Cunningham & Medcalf, 2011).

The Sino-Pakistan nuclear relationship has introduced an interesting twist to the aforementioned nuclear dynamic. Historically, China has supported Pakistan's nuclear programme; Beijing has even provided Islamabad with essential material for developing nuclear programme. Although China officially claims that its nuclear cooperation with Pakistan falls within International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA) norms, reports from the US intelligence as well as the surfacing of the A. Q. Khan network have indubitably proved that China has had a major hand in equipping Pakistan with nuclear weapons (China's nuclear exports and assistance to Pakistan, 1999).

Gurmeet Kanwal (2000) even takes the extreme position of stating that it is China that is intimidating India using Pakistan as the means. While this is unlikely to be the sole reason for Pakistan's aggressive policy, one cannot let facts go unnoticed. China's collaboration with Pakistan also highlights its double standards when it comes to its stance on adherence to the NPT and UNSC Resolution 1172. Though the resolution was directed at both India and Pakistan, China was hesitant to condemn Pakistan, yet eager to condemn India for its nuclear tests in 1998 (China and the nuclear tests in South Asia, 1999).

Arguments have been made, especially after the success of the India-US nuclear deal, that the Sino-Pakistan relationship could be countered by a possible India-US alliance. In fact, the US desires such an alliance in order to contain the rise of China as a regional hegemon (Brewster, 2009). However, this balance of (nuclear) power in South Asia is not that easy to achieve. While the Sino-Pakistan relationship has been called an 'all-weather friendship' (Cunningham, 2011; China-Pakistan all-weather friendship scales new heights, 2012), the India-US relationship is only a 'fair-weather friendship' (Brewster, 2009). This is because the US realises that it cannot always oppose China, given the larger role Beijing plays in the international system.

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A reassessment of the US strategy in the Indian Ocean Region by Geraghty (2012) recommends that Washington abandon New Delhi as a security partner in the region given India's extreme strategic independence. In other words, the US cannot rely on India to pursue activities that are in Washington's national interests.

All these factors contribute to the existing mistrust between the powers of South Asia. As much as there is an obvious reluctance to initiate a nuclear war, there is also reluctance on the part of all the powers to initiate nuclear dialogue with the aim of stability. The reasons for this vary from bilateral disputes such as the India-China border dispute to disproportionate nuclear capabilities, to non-adherence to international nuclear protocol. Lora Saalman (2012) argues that while the land-based nuclear warheads serve as deterrence, the sea becomes the arena for showcasing development in nuclear and missile technology in the case of India and China. Keeping this in mind, the next part of the paper discusses the maritime nuclear situation in the Indian Ocean.

II

A STRING OF PEARLS?

The term was first used by a 2004 Booz-Allen report in trying to describe the elaborate system of ports developed by China in the IOR – from Sittwe in Myanmar, to Gwadar in Pakistan, with ports in Chittagong, Bangladesh, and Hambantota, Sri Lanka – with the alleged aim of a strategic encirclement of the whole of India. The map in Figure 1 helps in visually imagining a

'string of pearls' hugging the Asian coastline that places China in a very advantageous strategic position. Colonel Gurmeet Kanwal (2000) put forth the idea even before the term came into existence. He argues that China is aiming to contain the rise of India in the Indian Ocean by forming friendly relationships with all of its maritime neighbours, thereby creating a legible threat from sea.

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has made strides in its naval nuclear capabilities, deploying three Jin-class (Type 094) nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) in active service as of 2007 (Kristensen, 2007). This has made the Chinese nuclear presence in the Indian Ocean an immediate possibility. This has resulted in New Delhi hot on Beijing's heels, by undertaking sustained efforts to develop the Indian Navy. While India's INS Chakra, a nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN) leased from Russia is in active service, the Arihant-class SSBN, launched in 2009, is currently undergoing sea trials (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2013). Despite Rehman (2012) and Saalman (2012) arguing that the recent Indian forays into naval nuclear capability are merely demonstrations of technology, it is hard to downplay the importance of these developments.

These pursuits toe the lines of the China's nuclear doctrine of limited deterrence (Medeiros, 2008) and India's doctrine of credible minimum deterrence (Kumar, 2004). In the absence of any maritime protocol agreement between the two countries, the pessimistic scenario could readily turn into an arms race and a security dilemma in the Indian Ocean (Rehman, 2012). The Pakistan Navy would also be dragged into the picture. The naval nuclear capabilities of the countries, originally built with the intention of increasing national security, would have the exact opposite effect as a nuclear-charged IOR would result in increased insecurity.

So grave is the concern on the Indian side, that the Indian Navy has embarked on a plan to build its own string of pearls in the Indian Ocean, argues Brewster (2009). The setting up of a strategic naval base in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in 2001 (Geraghty, 2012) was also done keeping the Chinese threat in mind.

However, a majority of experts argue that the 'string of pearls' theory is a highly exaggerated version of events. The military threat posed by China in the IOR is considerably lower than the Indian government touts it to be. R. Bhanu Krishna Kiran (2013) even believes that India has an edge over China when it comes to naval power. The fact remains that China set the ports up only for commercial purposes. With the exception of Gwadar in Pakistan, there is hardly any scope for Chinese military activity in these ports, as India's neighbours would not want to anger India by blatantly housing Chinese naval vessels.

Bangladesh even ensured a ban on Chinese military vessels in Chittagong while entering the contract (Rehman, 2012). Above all this, China's primary motivation to set these ports up is to make alternate transport routes for its oil imports. This is being done to reduce the dependence on the Strait of Malacca, a major chokepoint, and provide China with resource security and relative relief. The Chinese Minister of National Defense, Liang Guanglie, prior to his visit to India in September 2012, asserted that the PLAN had no intentions of deploying military ships and/or setting up military bases in the Indian Ocean ('China has no plan for Indian

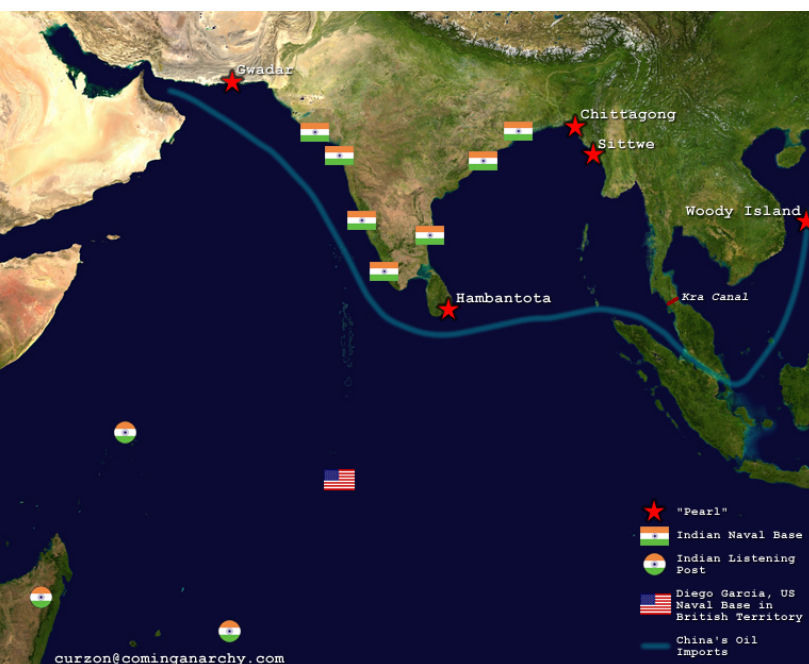


Figure 1: China's String of Pearls.

Source: <http://cominganarchy.com/2010/10/22/string-of-pearls/>

Ocean military bases', 2012). Rehman (2010) goes to the extent of arguing that the alternate oil routes via Pakistan and Myanmar are in India's strategic interests as it would have the power to strangle oil supply in the event of a war. Further, India is geostrategically well-positioned to counter any Chinese threat in the region, which would have to operate from bases dispersed all over the region.

Given its long history of strategic partnership with Pakistan, the only port that could serve as a Chinese military base is Gwadar. Even here, experts argue that it is a strategically vulnerable position, and far from being ideal for setting up a naval base. Even so, India showed interest in the Iranian port of Chabahar, only 72 kilometres west of Gwadar (see Figure 2), in order to counter the perceived Chinese threat. India has stated that Chabahar will serve as a link to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The prevailing political situation in Afghanistan is nowhere near stable (Jaffrelot, 2011). India's real motives for involving itself in Chabahar escape no one's eyes. Such an immense escalation of conflict is hypothesised primarily due to the lack of trust between India and China. Kaplan (2010) sees a conciliatory role for the US Navy, where its aim would be to keep the rise of these highly nationalistic states in check.

Pakistan's role in the naval dynamics of the IOR is minimal for a variety of reasons. One would think that Pakistan should play a greater role given that 95% of its trade and 100% of its oil comes via the Indian Ocean. Also, the entire length of its coastline is on the Indian Ocean. It is, therefore, in Pakistan's interests to counter Indian dominance over the region (Rafi Sheikh, 2013). Commander Muhammad Azam Khan (2010) goes to the extent of terming India's naval nuclear doctrine as 'India's Monroe Doctrine', highlighting India's ambition and zeal for dominance in the region.

Pakistan's minimum role is a result of two factors. First, Pakistan relies on China to champion its interests in the Indian Ocean. Given that the navy is the weakest among Pakistan's three military arms, collaboration with its trusted partner China fills a large gap (Rafi Sheikh, 2013). Though Pakistan is pursuing the development of naval nuclear capability, which, according to Rehman (2012), is enabled

Map of Gwadar, Chabahar and Karwar

Source: <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/tale-two-ports>



by China, it does not have any nuclear-powered submarines yet. Secondly, most of Pakistan's defence spending goes to protecting its land border with India, which it views as a greater threat (Schaffer, 2011). Perhaps Pakistan does not spend as much on its navy due to its fruitful relationship with, and the security assurance from, China.

III THE FUTURE

Admiral Arun Prakash, Chief of Army Staff (Retd.), India, argues in his book, 'Maritime Military Strategy,' that a clash between India and China is inevitable. The geographic proximity of the two nations, coupled with the strategic importance of the region, results in an obvious clash of interests (Holmes, Winner, & Yoshihara, 2009) – which inevitably leads to a situation of conflict, insecurity and instability. Moreover, the relatively nascent (in relation to the US and Russia) nature of both the countries' naval nuclear capabilities necessitates distrust. Ironically, this distrust is harboured alongside healthy economic and trade relations between the two.

A further tinge of irony is acquired when one notices that the security of trade routes is one

of the main (though not the only) driving forces behind the continuing conflict. While it is clear that China's military strength exceeds that of India, no straitjacket conclusion can be made that China would definitely prevail in the event of a military conflict. What China needs to assess before pushing its interests further is the combination of the (unpredictable) role of the US, the geographic distance of the Indian Ocean from the Chinese coast, and the missile capability of the PLAN, besides weighing the implications on other maritime conflicts that China is involved in – such as the South China Sea and the East China Sea conflicts. An aggressive stance in one conflict may cause fear in the belligerents involved in the other conflicts.

Neither India, nor China, and nor the US, seem to want to maintain the status quo in the Indian Ocean, i.e. nuclear deterrence. Yet, doing exactly this would be beneficial to all the parties. The current status quo includes a healthy trade. In this light, a bilateral dialogue between India and China on the issue of the 'string of pearls' would do much to soothe both sides and reassure them of the real purpose of alternative oil and trade routes. Dialogue on the issue of nuclear weapons may be of help on some issues. This would serve as an important starting point to initiate cooperation and reduce existing tensions; but given the current Chinese viewpoint, any dialogue seems unlikely.

Both India and China are rising powers in global politics and will have significant roles to play in the international infrastructure in the years to come.

A direct confrontation between two of the world's major powers won't be in anybody's interest, and will result in negative ramifications all over the world. The decision to cooperate on matters of national importance has to come from within the countries themselves. The US cannot be trusted to maintain a neutral stance if entrusted with a conciliatory role. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that both the countries realise the need for convergence and try to sort out their differences in the IOR at a bilateral level. Fruitful relations between these two regional powers could further lead to overall regional stability, and reduce the threat of war.

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