



New and emerging concerns in Indian Ocean neighbourhood

(This editorial is based on the article [‘New and emerging concerns in Indian Ocean neighbourhood’](#) which was published in ‘Raisina Debates in ORF’ on 25th March, 2019. The article talks about growing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean Region and challenge it poses for India’s maritime security.)

In an ‘advisory opinion’ as different from a verdict, The Hague-based International Court of Justice (ICJ) has recently said that Chagos Islands in the Indian Ocean belonged to Mauritius, and not to the UK.

The order may have implications for the prevailing ‘rules-based’ system prevalent in the Indian Ocean neighbourhood, where nations like Sri Lanka, Maldives and India are the other shared stake-holders.

Long ago, India backed Mauritius on the issue. In the current context, the Indian need may be even more, what with ‘China in the Indian Ocean Region’ and the ‘String of Pearls’ becoming New Delhi’s strategic pre-occupation.

The Issue

Britain detached the Chagos Islands from Mauritius in 1965 three years before Mauritian independence, calling it British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). BIOT was endowed with a sole purpose: to serve the defence and security needs of the UK and its ally-US.

Due to this, the indigenous inhabitants of BIOT were deemed unnecessary by both London and Washington. In a shameful episode, officials knowingly misrepresented the Chagossians as migrant workers and forcefully deported them. Ever since, the Chagossians have campaigned for a restoration of their right to return.

The UK government has always opposed the Chagossians’ claims, chiefly at the behest of US military planners who prize the seclusion that Diego Garcia provides.

Indian Ocean Region: New Economic Arteries

The oceans, as global highways of connectivity, have been the principal means for propagation of political, social, cultural, economic and military influence beyond continental masses since recorded history.

Much like the Pacific Rim which shaped the global economic trajectory for the two decades, the Indian Ocean has the potential to become the most important resource of new global growth over the next 20 years.

With the Indian Ocean channels carrying two-thirds of the world’s oil shipments, a third of the bulk cargo and half of all container traffic, the region’s strategic significance remains well established.

China’s rise has added another dimension where traditional power equations are now in flux. For India,

which sits astride the Indian Ocean as its pre-eminent power, this is clearly an important phase in the evolution of its thinking on the region.

Challenges

The recent ICJ advisory opinion that Chagos Islands in the Indian Ocean belongs to Mauritius and not to the UK change the geopolitical tilt in the region from favouring US to a more tentative position.

Despite Mauritius' declaring that it would allow US to continue using American military base in Diego Garcia, there is still ambiguity as to how the Mauritius will react in the decades to come. A lot depends on the relative political and economic power of the US, China and India, at any given point, in the medium to long term.

The aspirations of the Chinese Navy to register its presence in the region, and then follow it up by projecting power as part of its 'Far Seas' operating philosophy can be seen in Hambantota, where China is in possession of Sri Lankan real estate, for developing a port and Special Economic Zone.

Maldives, another island is caught somewhere in between, which has shared a strenuous relation with India in the recent past and has received generous aids from China, a feature of the so called 'debt trap' policy. Since the Maldives represents a buffer zone surrounding India's maritime strategic space, China's steady encroachment there is a serious cause for concern.

Even in the South China Sea issue, when the world, especially the US and to a lesser extent, India and Japan, were upset and anguished, but the so-called affected nations in South-East Asia seem to have re-adjusted themselves to a 'new normal'.

With bigger Chinese purse and its habit to increasingly question the established global order and India's problem in establishing maritime/naval presence in Island nations where the Governments keep changing their positions and commitments, can cause a paradigm-shift in global understanding and acceptance of emerging heat -- not warmth -- in the Indian Ocean waters, not far away from the Indian shores.

Steps suggested

The concept of strategic buffer zones in the naval domain is enshrined in great power politics and any nation getting a head start in it can safely avoid anti-access and area denial tactics from their adversaries. India therefore should develop a similar outlook to guard against Chinese encirclement of its strategic space.

New Delhi should look to operationalise logistical agreements with France and the United States, in order to upgrade naval relations and allow its own bases to be used for logistical support by the French and American navies.

These logistical bases can enhance India's capability to establish sea-denial in the Indian Ocean, demonstrating the breadth of Indian naval power. These moves should be accompanied with counter-theatre presence in the Western Pacific, and diplomatic outreach to South Asian nations that are being courted by China.

India should look to develop interdependencies with neighbouring countries, both economically and strategically, which until now it has failed to realise. The void left by India has been dutifully fulfilled by China.

Way forward

With global negotiations still on an expanded EEZ for individual sea-bordering nations, India has settled future disputes only with one neighbour, namely, Bangladesh.

With China already on the Indian Ocean's mouth at Hambantota, and Diego Garcia's distant future possibly becoming tentative, there may be more on India's hands in the future on the water-front than on

the land-front just now.

New Delhi should take a faster and closer look at impending issues, to be able to arrive at an earlier solution before it becomes a political talking-point.

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