

Power play in Indian Ocean and what it means for Asean

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While competing claims in the South China Sea grab the headlines, the strategic framework being laid out around the Indian Ocean by India and China is going unnoticed.

Jostling in the Indian Ocean is more about how China and India place themselves at a strategically advantageous position in the region. China's phenomenal economic miracle necessarily extends its footprint into the Indian Ocean, to protect its sea lanes for energy supplies and trade.

In pursuit of its strategic interests, China finds a ready partner in Pakistan. Their relations, known for their endurance, are expanding in scope. Common adversaries, mutual interests and prudence have cast their relationship into an "iron friendship".

The military component of this relationship has also come to assume a vital strategic dimension. China now provides half of Pakistan's military hardware and has demonstrated a willingness to transfer technology to Pakistan.

China sees growing cosiness between India, the United States and Japan threatening its sea lanes, especially the energy choke points at the Hormuz and Malacca straits, in the Indian Ocean as well as in the South and East China seas. China watches India's military overtures to Mauritius and Seychelles with concern. Recent reversals in Chinese influence in Myanmar and Sri Lanka have been to India's advantage.

Of particular anxiety to China is India's potential military build-up in the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago just north-west of the Strait of Malacca, from where India can project its power into the strait and beyond.

India's maritime doctrine reflects the thinking of Indian historian and diplomat K. M. Panikkar that the Indian Ocean is Indian.

In a 1945 essay, he recognised Vietnam's importance in controlling China's entry into the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. This forethought

underlines modern-day Indian attempts to develop security relations with Vietnam. India's building of a satellite station in Vietnam to eavesdrop on China is no comfort to the Chinese.

In 1973, former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee stated that "India's security environment ranged from the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca across the Indian Ocean... and South-east Asia". His successor, Dr Manmohan Singh, reaffirmed it in no uncertain terms. Such declarations worry China.

Pakistan, fearful of India's overwhelming presence in the Indian Ocean region, is naturally drawn closer to China. With both confronting the same adversary, there could be no better geostrategic partners. China's naval relationship with Pakistan is, therefore, the most developed for any country. Its first naval exercise was with Pakistan in 2003 and in 2007 China participated in a multilateral naval exercise for the first time, hosted by the Pakistan Navy (PN).

China, which had built Gwadar Port, was displeased when, to manage the port, Pakistan picked Singapore's PSA in 2007 in competition with the Chinese and Dubai bids.

Since Pakistan's own defence is closely tied to Chinese interests, Defence Minister Ahmed Mukhtar went public in a Financial Times report in May 2011, disclosing that "we have asked our Chinese brothers to please build a naval base at Gwadar".

Transferred to China Overseas Port Holdings Company in February 2013, the port remains civilian in nature, for now. But regular visits by Chinese vessels to Karachi and Gwadar allow the People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLA-N) to get acquainted with the local operating environment, in partnership with the PN. This interoperability and technological synchronisation will be an equaliser for China in a tussle to control the region.

In this Indian Ocean chessboard, if China obtains naval facilities at Gwadar, China in one stroke positions itself to defend its own energy supplies passing through the Indian Ocean choke points, especially Hormuz. A bridgehead at



Indian Navy warships during a media event off the coast of Mumbai in December. Pakistan, despite modernisation of its navy, will find it difficult to tackle India's formidable naval arsenal alone. Hence its dependence on China. PHOTO: REUTERS

Gwadar eases China's "Malacca Dilemma" through the projected overland supply lines to western China. The recent news of China setting up a naval base in Djibouti, on the African side of the Indian Ocean, is a pointer to China's future strategy.

Pakistan's enfeebled economy, internal discord and growing isolation make it increasingly dependent on China. Pakistan, therefore, considers a strengthening of China's position its own. It is most likely that Pakistan, seeking that elusive sense of equality with India, would facilitate China's presence in the region.

The two navies are strengthening relations due to the changing international environment. China is helping Pakistan modernise and enhance its naval capacity. But despite all this modernisation, Pakistan alone will find it difficult to tackle India's formidable naval arsenal that is to include aircraft carriers and nuclear-powered submarines. Hence China.

As geopolitical alignments are changing, strategic interests are drawing China into the Indian Ocean and India into the South China Sea.

This tug of war between the two biggest countries, projected to be the two leading economies of the

world by mid-century, could potentially be damaging for Asean interests. Placed in the middle of the two, Asean has the historic opportunity to be the moderator and to promote the peaceful rise of China and India for the larger good of the region and beyond.

This is a challenge, which Asean leadership must embrace.

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