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## The Chinese Challenge to India's Strategic Leverage in the Indian Ocean

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**W**ith the military modernisation and expansion programme, China's continental challenge to India at the Himalayan border has also been complemented by its maritime presence as a stakeholder in the Indian Ocean<sup>1</sup>. As the Galwan Valley clashes revealed last year, the frosty state of bilateral relations due to boundary disputes is likely to remain the case for coming years. To blunt the Chinese continental advantage, a section of opinion-makers has argued in favor of India deploying its leverage in the Indian Ocean targeting vital Chinese interests to deter its continental aggression<sup>2</sup>. However, this article argues that the Indian strategic leverage in the Indian Ocean region is dissipating faster, and it would not be as effective as envisaged by proponents of horizontal escalation.

### **Indian Ocean and the Sino-India Relation**

India and China both are ancient civilizations overly dependent on the sea route for trade since antiquity. The sea routes have become even more vital in the age of globalisation where the export orientation of both economies raises the strategic issue of sea control. Since access to the Sea Lines of Communications is seen as vital to economic interest, the incentive for sea control to meet strategic interests becomes apparent. In the case of the Indian Ocean as a vital geopolitical and geo-economic location, the Chinese vulnerability stems from the dependence on SLOCs to secure energy supplies. India's natural domination of the region adds to Chinese vulnerability in light of growing strategic animosity. Given the limited possibility of India prevailing in a border war along the Himalayas, its domination of the Indian Ocean Region where Chinese economic interest remains vulnerable provides a deterring leverage to India. India's continued domination of the region thus is vital to maintain some semblance of the balance of power between both nations.

### **Is India equipped for a maritime conflict with China?**

The possibility of a limited conflict with China as it seeks to pursue regional hegemony, nibbles on Indian territory in the Himalayas, and encroaches on the Indian sphere of influence in South Asia cannot be ruled out. India has also been wary of Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean in the form of anti-piracy missions, survey ships, or Chinese strategic assets like a submarine. Nevertheless, Indian observers still believe that India possesses the requisite force structure and critical assets and the Indian Navy is well prepared to take on China in the IOR<sup>3</sup>.

The argument goes that the geostrategic position of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands can be leveraged as an 'unsinkable aircraft carrier' performing as a force multiplier that could be considered as a forward outpost and a staging post for combat operations<sup>4</sup>. The archipelagoes overlook the 6 and 8<sup>0</sup> channel which are the major sea routes through which a substantial portion of world trade passes, including a lot of Chinese oil and other shipments. In addition, India has a long chain of Radio Stations

in Andaman as well as on the eastern coast and an Information Fusion Centre at Gurugram, allowing collection of information about the activities and Manoeuvring of the PLAN in the IOR. Despite the recent deepening of Chinese involvement in India's maritime neighborhood, India still maintains liaison with the Bay of Bengal littoral states which helps us to gather knowledge about the Chinese activities in these countries. All these advantages supposedly culminate in quintessential strategic leverage for India which encourages Indian security commentators and analysts to argue for the interdiction of Chinese shipping, deterring the Chinese deployments in the region, and exploitation of China's Malacca Dilemma.

### **The myth of the leverage**

But the scenario is not as simple as we consider it to be. The PLAN's military modernisation and strategic expansion in terms of far seas deployment would have adverse implications for Indian maritime calculations. Indian Navy documents appear to be ambiguous in stating their wartime strategy but the major strategies visible in these documents are; Far Sea Projection, SLOC interdiction, Sea Control, and Sea Denial<sup>5</sup>.

As far as we know, far sea projection is not an option for the Indian Navy, the strategy demands to deploy the Indian Navy ships and submarines in the far seas to demonstrate its strength to the adversary<sup>6</sup>, which could be perceived as thoroughly aggressive and unnecessary. In addition, Indian Naval capabilities might be inadequate for undertaking such operations given the budget allocation for the Navy. The other three options are interlinked. Sea control is a larger ambit under which sea denial and SLOC interdiction rest. Even though Sea control and Sea denial are entirely different strategies, Sea denial is seen as a sub-set of the Sea control strategy. Sea control, as defined by the Indian Navy, amounts to control of maritime estate for its use bound by space and time while also simultaneously denying access to the enemy. In recent years, there has been an acknowledgment of Sea denial strategies to be completely separate from Sea control operations<sup>7</sup>. The problem with the Sea Control strategy is that it might be perceived as aggressive by other players in the Indian Ocean littorals. The aggressive posture of the Indian Navy on the crucial sea lines of communication could irk the other beneficiary of the route which could limit the scope of Indian strategic leverage accrued by being a benevolent power. However, India enjoys unique leverage in the Indian Ocean it should not use its advantage to initiate any crisis which carry a risk of political and military backlash thus a denial strategy would be mindful of India's limitations. The strategies seek to reinforce the defensive bulwark of the Navy against the potential aggressor to deny them entry into the theatre<sup>8</sup>. The SLOC interdiction would involve denying Chinese ships access to the Indian Ocean as a crucial element of the Naval strategy.

The efficacy of these Naval strategies needs to be gauged because the PLAN possesses the world's largest Naval fleet with an exceptional modernisation programme.<sup>9</sup> The ballooning defence budget and increasing Naval artillery exhibits, including warships and information gathering ships in the IOR might be the current reality. But in the future, China might as well send more of these amphibious ships and nuclear submarines if they want to dominate the region. The Chinese long-term strategy appears to be to increase its presence in the IOR by fishing fleet or survey ships. The purpose likely is the gradual erosion of Indian influence rather than aggressive sea control in the Indian Ocean region and projection of PLAN as a stakeholder in the Indian Ocean by cooperating on developmental projects with Indian Ocean littorals.

Thus, the calls for taking the Himalayan confrontation into the high seas seem unrealistic<sup>10</sup>, especially when the strategies of Sea control and Sea Denial are designed to unravel explicitly against Chinese aggression in the Indian Ocean which will hurt the potential freedom of navigation of other countries. These doctrines are meant to be confrontational and might be counterproductive in dealing with the gradual Chinese encroachment in the IOR space. The SLOC interdiction strategy is also not without its difficulty. It would require differentiating between the neutrals and rival states' vessels. Importantly, the fundamental importance of Sea Lines of Communication in the Indian Ocean to global trade means the vital economic interest of other nations would also be impacted by SLOC interdiction. The strategy, thus, comes with its share of costs. Moreover, like sanctions, Naval blockades have also proven ineffective in imposing significant costs on strategic rivals given the workaround mechanisms often devised by interest groups that get affected.

In conclusion, the supposed leverage that India seems to have in the Indian Ocean does not seem so formidable and viable upon critical scrutiny. The range of plausible strategies that could be deployed to counter China in the IOR would come with their costs. Hence, in making decisions about inflicting costs on China in the maritime space, Policymakers need to work on the wider frame of strategies to counterbalance the detrimental effects that are likely to emerge in the aftermath of retaliatory measures, taken by the Indian Navy, against any Chinese offensive action in the Indian Ocean.

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<sup>1</sup> Sudarshan Shrikhande, "Harnessing Indian Sea Power Post-Galwan: Considerations of Time, Space and Force," ORF Issue Brief No. 379, July 2020, Observer Research Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> Arzan Tarapore (2020) "Building Strategic Leverage in the Indian Ocean Region", The Washington Quarterly, 43:4, 207-237, DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2020.1850833

<sup>3</sup> Abhijit Singh (2020) "THE CHINA-INDIA MARITIME BALANCE OF POWER", SEA CONTROL 201, Podcast hosted by By Jared Samuelson. <https://cimsec.org/sea-control-201-the-china-india-maritime-balance-of-power/>

<sup>4</sup> C. Raja Mohan and Anit Mukharjee ( January 18, 2016 ) “India’s Naval Strategy and Asian Security”, by Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> “Ensuring Secure Seas : Indian Maritime Security Strategy” – 2015, Indian Navy, government of India.

<sup>6</sup> Abhjit singh (2020), ‘India’s China Challenge- In the Indian Ocean and beyond’, Special Issue I, CSDRONline.  
[https://csdronline.org/upload/user/AbhijitSingh\\_Indias-China-Challenge\\_CSDR.pdf](https://csdronline.org/upload/user/AbhijitSingh_Indias-China-Challenge_CSDR.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Arzan Tarapore (9 Feb 2021), “India should prioritize a denial strategy in the Indian Ocean”, The Interpreter, Lowyinstitute. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/india-should-prioritise-denial-strategy-indian-ocean>

<sup>8</sup> Arzan Tarapore (9 Feb 2021), “India should prioritize a denial strategy in the Indian Ocean”, The Interpreter, Lowyinstitute. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/india-should-prioritise-denial-strategy-indian-ocean>

<sup>9</sup> Congressional Research Service, (August 24,2020) “China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities— Background and Issues for Congress”, CRSReports.congress.gov.  
<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33153/241>

<sup>10</sup> David Brewster (10 Jul 2020), “India-China conflict: A move from the Himalayas to the high seas?” The Interpreter, LOWYinstitute, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/india-china-conflict-move-himalayas-high-seas>

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