



China's growing Military-Civilian Synergy in the Indian Ocean Region

Rohan Khattar Singh
Research Associate, CAPS

Keywords: China, Indian Ocean, SAGAR, IFC-IOR, Maritime Security

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted a massive troop build-up in the Ladakh region during the first and second quarters of 2020, heightening tensions with India towards its Northern region. As the standoff to the North continues, China has increased its activity in the Southern region too, with its maritime activity in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) increasing steadily. Chinese research, merchant and fishing vessels have increased from 300 to almost 450 this year¹. These vessels operate in designated zones around the Strait of Malacca, the Southern Indian Ocean, and the Western Indian Ocean region. Chinese fishing trawlers have increased their activities off the coast of Somalia and Oman supported by the People Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) deployment in Djibouti, in the horn of Africa². China's maritime movement in the IOR has been on the rise as a part of its Maritime Silk Road (MSR) ambition, a maritime off-shoot of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Under the MSR, China intends on investing economically in the IOR littorals while building infrastructure

projects like ports, shipyards, and docks, which would allow its vessels multiple docking points throughout the IOR. Often coined as the 'String of Pearls', China's growing presence has raised alarm bells in the strategic corridors of New Delhi.

In January 2020, Indian Naval Chief, Admiral Karambir Singh asserted that China's BRI was being used to "impinge on India's maritime sovereignty and poses a national security threat"³. The Indian Navy has been constantly tracking PLAN movements in the IOR and has driven away PLAN ships from India's Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) several times. As India's military manoeuvres have countered PLAN movements effectively, China has begun utilizing its merchant and fishing ships for its strategic objectives. The rising military-civilian synergy has allowed Chinese civil vessels to dock at various MSR docks and ports while undertaking economic activities of fishing and transportation of resources. Furthermore, these

ships have been accused of monitoring and tracking military movements of other navies in the blue waters of IOR. In the South China Sea, Chinese fishing trawlers have rammed and sunk Vietnamese, Philippine, Indonesian and Japanese ships⁴, creating serious concern for the IOR littorals with small or non-existent navies. In addition to aggressive and violent manoeuvres, these trawlers have constantly deployed illegal methods of maritime fishing. According to the spokesperson of the Indian Navy, “Chinese trawlers have been conducting illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing in the waters of IOR with their transponders turned off, in order to avoid detection”⁵. Beijing’s super-trawlers are a part of its 200,000 strong merchant fleet, which have been subsidized by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and rarely adhere to the rules of maritime fishing in deep waters. Chinese trawlers have been repeatedly accused of damaging the marine ecosystem due to their methods of bottom trawling⁶. An example of this is the official complaint lodged by Ecuador against China when China sent a 260-vessel strong fleet to the Galapagos to conduct IUU in August 2020⁷. Ecuador scrambled to garner support to drive the Chinese away from its EEZ, which prompted America to come to Ecuador’s aide. In 2019, China was ranked as the country most likely to undertake IUU, compared to 152 other countries⁸. Actions of Chinese civilian vessels are causing diplomatic flashpoints, and the growing Chinese civil fleets in the IOR are a cause for worry for India, along

with other IOR littorals, particularly smaller states with miniscule navies.

India’s Role in Maintaining Stability

The IOR has many developing littorals with populations residing and surviving on a shared coastal dependence. China’s use of civilian vessels to impinge on fishing sovereignty will lead to a shortage in maritime capture in the region, resulting in a direct impact on health, nutrition, and livelihoods of coastal dependent populations. To track Chinese civil and military ships, India has constantly deployed its ships and reconnaissance aircraft in the IOR to drive the Chinese out of its EEZs⁹. The Indian Navy has also established an Information Fusion Centre- Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in partnership with 35 other IOR littorals to track all the shipping vessels operating in the IOR¹⁰. This allows increased operability and trust building among the large and small littorals of IOR. The IFC-IOR was established in 2019, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s initiative towards providing an organized and formal security blanket to the IOR. Termed as Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), this maritime doctrine was first launched in 2015 and is focused on the surveillance of EEZs, search and rescue and anti-piracy in the IOR. As part of the IFC-IOR, India, along with other participating states have agreed to segregate the shipping lanes between merchant and fishing fleets. This allows for easier navigation, monitoring, tracking, and

information sharing of vessels operating in the IOR. In addition to providing maritime surveillance and security, India's IFC-IOR initiative also includes capacity building, which is largely included as part of SAGAR. Therefore, India must continue to lead a multilateral framework for inclusive security to prevent any predatory activity from occurring in the IOR, especially from China. This would provide security to the sovereignty of smaller littorals and allow India to supplement its dominating influence in the region.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Team, WION Web. "Growing Presence of Chinese Research and Fishing Vessels in Indian Ocean Raises Security Concerns." WION. November 30, 2020. <http://wionews.com/india-news/growing-presence-of-chinese-research-and-fishing-vessels-in-indian-ocean-raises-security-concerns-346489>.

² "China Trawlers Ravaging the Indian Ocean Region! Indian Navy Keeps a Tab on Its Growing presence." The Financial Express. December 11, 2020. <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/china-trawlers-ravaging-the-indian-ocean-region-indian-navy-keeps-a-tab-on-its-growing-presence/2148161/#:~:text=The number of Chinese fishing,China,Hong Kong and Taiwan.>

³ Pti. "Chinese Navy in Indian Ocean: There Have Been Instances When We Had to Tell Them to Go Back, Says Indian Navy Chief." The Economic Times. January 17, 2020. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/chinese-navy-in-indian-ocean-there-have-been-instances-when-we-had-to-tell-them-to-go-back-says-indian-navy-chief/articleshow/73277857.cms?from=mdr>.

⁴ Thayer, Carlyle A. "The United States and Chinese Assertiveness in the South China Sea." *Security Challenges* 6, no. 2 (2010): 69-84. Accessed December 16, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26459938>.

⁵ "China Trawlers Ravaging the Indian Ocean Region! Indian Navy Keeps a Tab on Its Growing presence." The Financial Express. December 11, 2020. <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/china-trawlers-ravaging-the-indian-ocean-region-indian-navy-keeps-a-tab-on-its-growing-presence/2148161/#:~:text=The number of Chinese fishing,China,Hong Kong and Taiwan.>

⁶ Bottom Trawling is a fishing technique that requires dragging large and heavy nets attached with metal plates across the ocean floor. This uproots and impacts corals, sponges, and fish, and creates a disbalance in the marine seabed ecosystem. To read more on bottom trawling, refer to.. USGS, USGS. "What a Drag: The Global Impact of Bottom Trawling," 2016. <https://www.usgs.gov/news/what-drag-global-impact-bottom-trawling>.

⁷ Ruwet, Mélodie. "Chinese Trawlers in the Galapagos: The Protection Challenge." The Interpreter. August 10, 2020. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/chinese-trawlers-galapagos-protection-challenge>.

⁸ "China." IUU Fishing Index. <http://www.iuufishingindex.net/profile>

⁹ "China Trawlers Ravaging the Indian Ocean Region! Indian Navy Keeps a Tab on Its Growing presence." The Financial Express. December 11, 2020. <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/china-trawlers-ravaging-the-indian-ocean-region-indian-navy-keeps-a-tab-on-its-growing-presence/2148161/#:~:text=The number of Chinese fishing,China,Hong Kong and Taiwan.>

¹⁰ IFC-IOR. <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/ifc-ior/about-us.html>.