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UNDERSTANDING CHINA'S WEI QI MOVES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

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Since China became a net importer of oil in 1993, strategic importance of the Indian Ocean for China has increased manifold. In this regard, China's dependence on the Strait of Malacca—which is popularly known as China's "Malacca Dilemma"—has been articulated by the former Chinese President Hu Jintao. In order to deal with the situation China is playing the board game of 'Wei Qi'¹ in the Indian Ocean. In fact, China's economic development is dependent on uninterrupted supply of energy. The same is true for many other countries in the region. Though China is working on stockpiling a large amount of oil as commercial reserve and Strategic Petroleum Reserve, military preparedness and acquiring power projection capabilities to face challenges in the Indian Ocean have been in the priority list of the Chinese government. It is, therefore, imperative to understand China's strategic moves in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

China's moves are calculated to strengthen its position through construction of ports and establishment of "protected clusters".² In the process, Beijing has built the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, Hambantota port in Sri Lanka and Kyaukpyu oil terminal port in Myanmar. In addition, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and China-Myanmar Economic Corridor are at different stages of construction and negotiation. The "geographic advantages" of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and Yunnan Province are cited in China's 'One Belt, One Road' Initiative blueprint.³ Thus, energy security policy and connectivity strategy will strengthen China's maritime posture in the Indian Ocean.

First, China's participation in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden has provided Beijing a foothold in the Indian Ocean.⁴ Though the operations are conducted as part of an international coalition against piracy, the experiences will put China in a better position to prepare for its blue-water naval operations.



Secondly, development of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and construction of Gwadar Port in Pakistan have strategic implications in South Asia. Most importantly, the energy pipeline component of the whole project will allow China to get shorter access to the energy rich Persian Gulf countries. Thirdly, China has built a crude oil pipeline through Myanmar to lessen dependence on the Strait of Malacca. The pipeline is part of China's strategy to diversify energy import routes.⁵ However, China's Malacca Dilemma will continue to be a concern due to increasing oil consumption in China.⁶ Nevertheless, the oil and natural gas pipelines and the Kyaukpyu terminal oil port will legitimise China's naval presence to secure its maritime interests and ensure energy security along the sea lines of communication (SLOCs).

Regarding the changing security landscape, the white paper on China's military strategy states that China's national security is "vulnerable to international and regional turmoil, terrorism, piracy".⁷ Moreover, Beijing is increasingly concerned about energy security, security of the SLOCs, personnel and assets abroad.⁸ In order to achieve the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation, a militarily strong China has been projected as the means. Moreover, Beijing has put forward the strategic requirement of "employment of military forces and means" to ensure its "peaceful development".⁹

Interestingly, the policy of peaceful development is "a strategic choice made by China to realize modernization, make itself strong and prosperous, and make more contribution to the progress of human civilization".¹⁰ This policy relies on both the domestic market and foreign markets and uses both domestic and foreign resources.¹¹ Under the new situation, some of the strategic tasks for China's armed forces include safeguarding China's overseas interests and support for national economic and social development.¹² The emphasis on force development in critical security domain—which includes "managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests"—underscores the fact that China is building itself into a maritime power.¹³ In fact, Beijing has articulated the need for a combination of "offshore waters defense" with "open seas protection".¹⁴

Meanwhile, India's vision in the Indian Ocean region is informed by China's rapid military modernisation, its increasing naval presence in the Indian Ocean, Chinese submarine visits to its neighbouring countries, and development of networks of sea ports in the littoral states. Despite its unilateral actions to enhance strategic influence in South Asia, China cannot overlook India's strategic dominance in the Indian Ocean and New Delhi's potential to play a greater role in the maritime security domain. For example, the 'Malabar Exercise' has become a key framework in the maritime

security domain in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁵ Moreover, India is also engaged in an informal strategic dialogue with the US, Japan and Australia since 2007. In reality, India enjoys “a geographic advantage” while China faces the “tyranny of distance” in the Indian Ocean.¹⁶ To put it in a nutshell, strategic balance of power in the Indian Ocean is in favour of India.

Nevertheless, China has been actively participating in the anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and Somali waters since December 2008. Undoubtedly, it is the manifestation of China’s naval modernisation.¹⁷ Such operations will contribute to China’s power projection and blue water capabilities. Another key factor is China’s efforts to develop technology for manned deep-sea submersible vessels.¹⁸ Through the development of such technologies China is engaged in exploring the polymetallic ore deposits in the Indian Ocean.¹⁹ Also, under the ‘One Belt, One Road’ connectivity strategy, China has expressed interests in “the building and operation of major ports” and “joint development of industrial clusters around these ports” along the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.²⁰

After commissioning China’s first aircraft carrier Liaoning (Type 001) in September 2012, Beijing is planning to put into service its first indigenously developed Type 001A aircraft carrier (which is under construction in Dalian) by 2020.²¹ In addition, China is constructing its third aircraft carrier (Type 002) in Shanghai.

Deployment of a Chinese aircraft carrier group in the Indian Ocean is likely to happen after 2020 if the maritime security situation deteriorates for China.²² However, taking into account India’s security and strategic concerns, Beijing would be cautious about such a move.

Despite having such concerns, China is determined to acquire the power projection capabilities. Also, Beijing is building more replenishment ships for supporting operations in the distant seas. In addition to access facilities in Seychelles and Djibouti, China is making efforts to enhance its “sea-based logistics capability” through employment of commercial vessels for military missions.²³ Thus, building of replenishment ships, employment of commercial vessels and land-based logistics facilities in some of the Indian Ocean littoral states are viable options for China to deal with the tyranny of distance.

China has articulated the importance of security cooperation to ensure energy security and safeguard its maritime interests and overseas assets. To face the challenges posed by both traditional and non-traditional security threats, Beijing is committed to enhance security in the IOR through procurement and development of power projection capabilities, maritime cooperation with the littoral states, participation in anti-piracy operations and construction and operation of ports. Against the backdrop of such developments, India and Japan

have expressed the need for enhancing cooperation and partnership with other countries which share common interests and values to maintain security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. It underscores the inseparability of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. To realise a free and open Indo-Pacific region, New Delhi enjoys India's geographic advantage and the strategic opportunity provided by partnerships with the US, Australia and Japan. Nevertheless, the actions and initiatives for safety and security in the Indian Ocean point in the direction of an evolving security dilemma.

(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 It is a board game in which a player works towards encirclement of the rival with calculating moves through long-term planning rather than quick tactical advantage.

² Keith Johnson, What kind of game is China playing? *The Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304259304576374013537436924>, accessed on February 27, 2017.

³ Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, March 28, 2015, http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html, accessed on February 9, 2017.

⁴ Keith Johnson, What kind of game is China playing? *The Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304259304576374013537436924>, accessed on February 27, 2017.

⁵ Michael Richardson, "China betting on overland energy-supply lines," *The Japan Times*, July 27, 2013, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2013/07/27/commentary/world-commentary/china-betting-on-overland-energy-supply-lines/#.WLP7kNR97Gg>, accessed on February 27, 2017.

⁶ Daniel Brutlag, China's Reliance on Shipping Crude Oil Through the Straits of Malacca, https://sites.tufts.edu/gis/files/2013/02/Brutlag_Daniel.pdf, accessed on February 27, 2017.

⁷ China's Military Strategy, May 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/26/content_20820628.htm, accessed on February 27, 2017.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ China's Peaceful Development, September 6, 2011, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-09/06/c_1311102329_2.htm, accessed on February 27, 2017.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² China's Military Strategy, May 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/26/content_20820628.htm, accessed on February 27, 2017.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Prashanth Parameswaran, The Malabar Exercise: An Emerging Platform for Indo-Pacific Cooperation? *The Diplomat*, June 12, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/06/the-malabar-exercise-an-emerging-platform-for-indo-pacific-cooperation/>, accessed on February 27, 2017.

¹⁶ 2016 Annual Report to Congress on U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Annual_Report/Chapters/Chapter%203%2C%20Section%201%20-%20China%20and%20South%20Asia.pdf, accessed on February 28, 2017.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Chinese Deep-sea Explorer Ship Completes Maiden Voyage, September 26, 2016, http://english.cas.cn/newsroom/china_research/201609/t20160926_168111.shtml, accessed on March 1, 2017.

¹⁹ "China's Deep Sea Submersible 'Jiaolong' Begins Exploration of Indian Ocean," *NDTV News*, January 3, 2015, <http://www.ndtv.com/world-news/chinas-deep-sea-submersible-jiaolong-begins-exploration-of-indian-ocean-721823>, accessed on March 1, 2017.

²⁰ The 13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China, <http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201612/P020161207645765233498.pdf>, accessed on February 28, 2017.

²¹ "2nd carrier almost complete," *People's Daily*, February 21, 2017, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0221/c90000-9180578.html>, accessed on February 22, 2017.

²² Vishnu Som, "Chinese Aircraft Carrier Can Sail Into Indian Ocean At Will, Says Top US Commander," *NDTV News*, January 19, 2017, <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/chinese-aircraft-carrier-can-sail-into-indian-ocean-at-will-says-top-us-commander-1650420>, accessed on March 1, 2017.

²³ Gurpreet S Khurana, Why China may not need a 'String of Pearls' in the Indian Ocean, *The Wire*, July 8, 2015, <https://thewire.in/7977/why-china-may-not-need-a-string-of-pearls-in-the-indian-ocean/>, accessed on March 1, 2017.

