



# CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

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## Strengthening 24x7 Vigil in the Indian Ocean Region

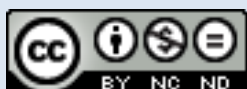
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In May and June 2023, the Indian Air Force (IAF) conducted two important long-range missions in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). In the first mission, four Rafale jets were flown over the region for six hours.<sup>1</sup> Later in June, a fleet of Su-30 MKI jets carried out a strategic mission over the IOR for eight hours.<sup>2</sup> Conducting regular long-range missions by the IAF has come at a time when the threat of various traditional and non-traditional challenges in the IOR is looming large, thus necessitating an effective reconnaissance over the region. This is in addition to the most recent development of acquiring 31 MQ-9B predator drones from the United States, which will aid in potent surveillance. With India being a pivotal player, constant surveillance and reconnaissance will remain central to stepping up its game in the Indian Ocean.

### **Web of Threats in the Indian Ocean Region**

The Indian Ocean, from the east coast of Africa to the western shores of Australia, is considered the primary area of responsibility for New Delhi. Apart from security challenges erupting from piracy, robbery, illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, drugs, human smuggling, and sea-based terrorism. Increasing forays by so-called Chinese 'research vessels,' fishing fleets, and commercial vessels under different flags of convenience have generated considerable anxiety about their strategic intentions. Apart from collecting information about resources, the research vessels also collect data related to salinity, depth, turbidity, oxygen, and chlorophyll levels. The use of this information is not restricted to civilian use but can also be used for military purposes.<sup>3</sup> It can be used to track their own submarines and others.

This is in addition to the regular visits by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Naval ships in several countries of the IOR, which are also India's neighbours like Pakistan and Sri Lanka.<sup>4</sup> Thus, bringing Beijing closer to Indian borders. To this end, China's role in increasing the maritime capabilities of Pakistan cannot be sidelined. The sales of submarines, frigates, and anti-ship missiles to its all-weather friend have the potential to increase Islamabad's strategic depth against India in case of any adverse action across its western frontiers. According to the reports, China may be looking at setting up a military base in Pakistan's Gwadar.<sup>5</sup> To this end, there have also been reports that China is building a listening post on the Cocos Island of Myanmar in the Bay of Bengal region.<sup>6</sup> Such activities can be dealt with through precise and vigilant 24x7x365 surveillance of the IOR to make sure that the region remains free of any inimical and untoward activities.

### **Importance of Long-Endurance Mission**

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A long-endurance mission, demonstrating the ability of an aircraft, manned or unmanned, to cruise for the maximum length of time, has become vital for the protection of Indian interests in the IOR. Such maritime operations involve aerial refuelling and long-range standoff weapons, which increase the reach of land-based airpower and make it effective for the conduct of maritime air operations.<sup>7</sup> Such missions not only display the capability of India's air power but also assist in precision strike capability, coordination, and reconnaissance. Carrying out long endurance with Rafale fighters, the most advanced fighter jet in India's kitty, mirrors its power projection capability as it is mounted with Israeli helmet-mounted displays, radar warning receivers, low band jammers, infra-red search, and a tracking system.<sup>8</sup> All of this helps with -in-depth strikes, anti-ship strikes, and nuclear deterrence missions.<sup>9</sup>

In the two missions conducted, India displayed its ability to cover both the eastern and western seaboard. The Sukhoi-30 MKI flew over the southwestern Indian Ocean while the Rafale covered the eastern Indian Ocean, thereby demonstrating operational prowess in the complete IOR. They are also capable of carrying weapons, which helps in force posturing.

### **Enhancing Surveillance Capability**

The purchase of MQ-9B drones from the US will not only strengthen defence cooperation with Washington but will also further enhance India's surveillance capability by ensuring its endurance and assurance as a net security provider in the region. This drone can stay in the air for nearly 30 hours continuously at a height of approximately 50,000 ft., making it a high-altitude, long-endurance aircraft, in addition to having the capacity to carry various armaments. It is also equipped with two important sensors, like the AN/DAS-1 Multi-Spectral Targeting System (MTS-B), which will help in identifying the target precisely, and the AN/APY-8 Lynx II, which will help in persistent surveillance.<sup>10</sup> The command and control centres on both land and sea collect relevant data through the drone's intelligence-gathering capability and help in taking necessary action. Due to their ability to skim both over the surface and below the water, acquiring such unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) is the need of the hour.

According to the 2022 Doctrine of the IAF, the region from West Asia to Southeast Asia remains central to India's political, economic, and security interests.<sup>11</sup> Any misadventure by an adversary will be against India's national interest. Hence, introducing such drones and demonstrating the IAF's capability to cover such a wide region definitely conveys a message of caution to the neighbouring nations at large.

## What can India do further?

As the Indian Ocean is too large to be covered by a single country at one time, being a residential power, India can play a central role by partnering with friendly nations like France and Australia. Such collaborations will act as a force multiplier for scanning the whole region and dealing with threats effectively. The island nations of French Reunion Islands in the west IOR and Australia's Cocos Keeling Islands in the east IOR, in addition to India's Lakshadweep and Andaman and Nicobar Islands on its western and eastern seabords respectively, can add great value to the surveillance capability of New Delhi. Island territories can act as stepping stones to opportunities in this direction. For instance, India regularly deploys its surveillance aircraft P-8I on La Reunion islands for joint patrolling of the western IOR.<sup>12</sup> The joint operation allows for better coordination of regional and international waters. In this context, talks are underway between India and Australia for strategically using the Cocos Keeling and Andaman and Nicobar Islands.<sup>13</sup>

The evolving dynamics of the Indian Ocean require strict vigilance and surveillance of the area. In this context, the role of long-endurance missions and coordinated surveillance is central and critical to dealing with threats coherently and comprehensively. Hence, New Delhi's collaboration with like-minded partners like France and Australia in the IOR is imperative to enhance its capability further.

## NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> "Rafale Jets Carry Out Long-Range Mission in Indian Ocean Region", *The Hindu*, May 31, 2023. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/rafale-jets-carry-out-long-range-mission-in-indian-ocean-region/article66915082.ece>, accessed on June 11, 2023

<sup>2</sup> "SU-30 MKI Jets of IAF Carry Out Long-Range Mission in the Indian Ocean Region", *The Economic Times*, June 09, 2023. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/su-30mki-jets-of-iaf-carry-out-long-range-mission-in-indian-ocean-region/articleshow/100881659.cms?from=mdr>, accessed on June 11, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Radhey Tambi, "Islands of Opportunity: Australia and India's Chance to Collaborate", *The Interpreter*, December 05, 2022. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/islands-opportunity-australia-india-s-chance-collaborate>, accessed on June 11, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> "India Keeping Eye on 'Large Presence' of Chinese Vessels in Indian Ocean Region: Navy Chief", *India Today*, April 29, 2023. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-keeping-eye-large-presence-chinese-vessels-indian-ocean-region-navy-chief-2366368-2023-04-29>, accessed on June 12, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> "China May be Looking at Setting Up a Military Base in Pakistan's Gwadar", *The Times of India*, May 12, 2023. <https://m.timesofindia.com/world/pakistan/china-may-be-looking-at-setting-up-a-military-base-in-pakistans-gwadar/articleshow/100096885.cms>, accessed on July 24, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Saurabh Sharma, "India Confronted Myanmar About Chinese Spy Post on Island in Bay of Bengal: Report", *Business Today*, April 09, 2023. <https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/world/story/india-confronted-myanmar-about-chinese-spy-post-on-island-in-bay-of-bengal-report-376634-2023-04-09>, accessed on June 20, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> "Doctrine of the Indian Air Force", 2022. <https://indianairforce.nic.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2MB.pdf>, accessed on June 12, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Snehesh Alex Philip, "All About Rafale Fighters, the Game- Changing Dream Machines IAF Will Get Tomorrow", *The Print*, October 07, 2019. <https://theprint.in/defence/rafale-fighters-game-changing-dream-machines-iaf/302255/>, accessed on July 17, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Vedant Saigal, "India's Prolonged Wait for MQ-9B Drones Ends", *South Asian Voices*, July 06, 2023. <https://southasianvoices.org/indias-prolonged-wait-for-mq-9b-drones-ends/>, accessed on July 17, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> "India Deploys P-81 Aircraft at France's Reunion Island for Third Time in Three Years As China Increases Presence in Western Indian Ocean", *Swarajya*, November 09, 2022. <https://swarajyamag.com/defence/india-deploys-p-8i-aircraft-at-frances-reunion-island-for-third-time-in-three-years-as-china-increases-presence-in-western-indian-ocean>, accessed on June 26, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> "India, Australia Could Sign Pact for A Military Base in Andaman's and Cocos Islands- Experts", *Eurasian Times*, May 23, 2020. <https://eurasianimes.com/india-australia-could-sign-pact-for-a-military-base-in-andamans-and-cocos-islands-experts/>, accessed on June 26, 2023.