



PLAN SUBMARINES: ENABLER OF A FUTURE PRC FLEET IN THE INDIAN OCEAN?

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Introduction

In 2019, Chinese Maritime strategist Hu Bo wrote that “in order to achieve an effective military presence in both oceans, PRC should consider deploying two oceangoing fleets, centred around aircraft carriers- the Pacific fleet and the Indian Ocean Fleet.”¹ Of late, many Chinese scholars have called for an Indian Ocean fleet that is consistent with the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) evolving naval strategy of ‘frontier defense’. Chinese security scholar You Ji defines this concept as the capacity to protect PRC’s newly-set frontiers and economic-security interests.² Expanding ties in the Indian Ocean have led many Chinese to justify the increasing security presence in the region. The proposed Indian Ocean fleet, accordingly, will be a key pillar of the People’s Liberation Army Navy’s (PLAN) ability to fight in the global commons.

From Beijing’s point of view, protection of its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) in the Indian Ocean becomes imperative from both imaginary and real threats in peacetime and in times of tension or war.

The Indian Ocean is of great importance to PRC’s energy security. In 2020, PRC imported 73.4 percent of its oil; this is expected to grow to 80 percent by 2035.³ 80 percent of this oil transits through the Indian Ocean. In addition, 95 percent of China’s trade with Europe, Africa, and the Middle East transits through the Indian Ocean.⁴ Simultaneously, Chinese exports pass through the Indian Ocean to Africa and Europe (20% of PRC’s GDP comes from exports). Therefore, from Beijing’s point of view, protection of its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) in the Indian Ocean becomes imperative from both imaginary and real threats in peacetime and in times of tension or war.

China’s threat perception in the Indian Ocean comes from India and the United States’

(US) dominance in the region. Beijing is concerned with the ability of the American navy to sever or severely disrupt PRC's Indian Ocean SLOCs in the event of a confrontation. Similarly, Chinese strategists point out that India's Andaman-Nicobar Command serves as an 'iron curtain' that can effectively block PRC's entry into the Indian Ocean.⁵ Hence, Chinese scholars' emphasis that an independent Indian Ocean fleet will be a strong statement of dissuasion and deterrence in the region.

What ails PRC's Indian Ocean fleet ambitions?

In a report titled, '*Securing PRC's Lifelines Across the Indian Ocean*', author Jeffrey Becker points out three, yet to be plugged, operational deficiencies in PRC's Indian Ocean ambitions.⁶ Firstly, PLAN has a numerically small presence in the Indian Ocean compared to India and the US. Secondly, PLAN suffers from limited air defense and anti-submarine warfare capacity in the region. Finally, PRC has limited logistics/sustainment infrastructure in the Indian Ocean to act as a support and supply point for the replenishment of its proposed fleet.

The report also mentions that PRC has shown great urgency to address these challenges by undertaking a slew of measures. Beijing has established an overseas military base in Djibouti, leveraged the nation's extensive commercial shipping fleet for logistical support, and increased the number of advanced PLAN assets deployed in the waters of the Indian Ocean.⁷ According to the former Indian Naval Chief, Admiral Sunil Lamba, there are between 6-8 PLAN warships in the northern Indian Ocean at any given time.⁸ Another study points out that the "PRC is already capable of maintaining about 18 ships on station full-time in the Indian Ocean, given the PLAN's current force posture".⁹

Beyond Djibouti, additional overseas military facilities could come up at Gwadar in Pakistan, Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, Seychelles, and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, as Chinese strategists are looking at these locations as future potential bases.¹⁰ These, as well as the recently signed agreement that gives the PLAN access to a Cambodian naval base in the Gulf of Thailand, would provide the necessary fulcrum for the proposed Indian Ocean fleet.¹¹

Another important feature of a PRC Indian Ocean fleet will be the role of PLAN submarines in the region. Submarines act as the eyes and ears of Navy aircraft carriers and expeditionary strike group operations. To support a future Indian Ocean fleet, it is imperative for PLAN submarines to master the operational environment of the Indian Ocean. With a clear goal to enable a future fleet to dominate the Indian Ocean's critical maritime SLOC, PLAN submarines have, in recent times, spent long periods exploring the Southern Asian littorals to "gain familiarity with the regional operating environment, fine-tuning standard operating procedures, and gathering vital hydrological and bathymetric data".¹²

As for the number of PLA Navy submarines that can be expected in the Indian

Ocean in the future, analysis by the US Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) says it expects PRC's submarine fleet to grow from around 66 boats today to 76 by 2030.¹³ Perhaps the most destabilising element in the Chinese naval build-up is the increased production of nuclear-powered submarines. Taking into consideration the recent estimates from a new production facility in Huludao, it has been found that PRC may be able to launch up to two SSNs and one SSBN annually.¹⁴ That puts the total strength of PLA nuclear submarines by 2030 at 24 SSNs and 14 SSBNs.¹⁵

Security Implications for India

PRC has so far refrained from engaging in any provocative behaviour in the Indian Ocean. But the possibility or, in the worst-case scenario, the actualization of a PRC fleet in the Indian Ocean will attempt to undercut the Indian Navy's preeminent regional status in maritime Southern Asia. Geopolitically, fear of strategic encirclement by PRC will grow in India as New Delhi could find itself restricted to the confines of South Asia.

So far, the deployment of Chinese submarines since 2013 has been the biggest disrupter in the Indian Ocean. From Beijing's perspective, submarines are integral to the protection of vital sea lanes that could become vulnerable in any hostile situation. With that in mind, PLAN has increased the visibility of its submarine operations by making port calls in Pakistan and Sri Lanka in recent years.¹⁶ It has begun to regularly send submarines to the Andaman Sea to gain knowledge of the waters surrounding the Malacca Strait. The strait is a natural chokepoint that has a total hold on the flow of goods, grains, and oil toward the whole of the western Pacific and PRC in particular. Whoever controls the Andaman Sea controls the Malacca Strait.¹⁷ If PLAN masters the water of the Andaman Sea, PRC can make good use of its submarine's sea-denial capabilities to "eliminate the possibility of India dominating these waters".¹⁸

This has prompted India to enhance its monitoring of the Andaman Sea. However, a recent Lowy Institute essay warns that much of the south-eastern Indian Ocean remains a "blind spot" for India.¹⁹ The absence of adequate surveillance capacity there opens up the possibility for Chinese submarines to slip through the Sunda Strait or Lombok Strait in wartime. Although these two chokeholds are much longer than the Malacca route, nonetheless, they are "viable lines of communication linking the Indian Ocean to Northeast Asia".²⁰ More importantly, they offer submarines a direct passage to the

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deep waters of the eastern Indian Ocean, from where they could take less obvious routes to their targets.²¹ Lombok Strait is also deep enough for PLAN's SSNs and SSBNs to dive through. Deterrence patrols by SSBNs on these routes, however, would mean that their patrols would be for a prolonged period, which would also test the at-sea endurance of its crews. PRC is addressing the problem by building the Type-096 Jin-class SSBN that will be larger and heavier than the current Type-094.²² Thus, the new generation of PLAN SSBNs will be able to accommodate larger crews and will be able to take longer deterrence patrols.

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The question that then emerges is whether the Indian Navy submarines have the ability to respond to external requests for support in the event of a fleet-to-fleet confrontation in the Indian Ocean? Currently, the Indian Navy is plagued with critical gaps in combat capability in the spheres of nuclear-powered submarines, conventional submarines, anti-submarine helicopters, and minesweepers, along with a shrinking budget that can blunt the Indian Navy's ability to push back the Chinese.²³ Even in peacetime, the Indian Navy's lack of ability to push back against the PLAN will only draw a stronger response from Beijing in India's near seas. Offensive realists claim that it makes "good strategic sense for states to gain as much power as possible to ensure one's own survival".²⁴ Critical gaps in the Indian Navy's combat capability will only energise PRC to up its operational ante in the Indian Ocean to incrementally take over India's strategic space. Since the Indian Ocean is an area of overlapping influence for both India and PRC, slow but steady encroachment of New Delhi's strategic space could run the risk of becoming a declining sign of Indian predominance in the region.

For now, greater Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean have influenced and swayed India's neighbours to strategically hedge between New Delhi and Beijing. If New Delhi continues to lose strategic space to Beijing in the Indian Ocean, the secondary states in the region will react according to the new balance of power and change their behaviour under duress, from hedging to possible bandwagoning. In such a changed security environment, it is only a matter of time before PRC manages to extract favourable concessions at strategic locations like Hambantota, Kyaukpyu port in Myanmar, and Feydhoo Finolhu Island in the Maldives, to act as support and supply points for its future Indian Ocean Fleet.

PLAN submarine, in a nutshell, can not only play the role of eyes and ears for a future PRC fleet in the Indian Ocean but can also play an enabling role for the fleet's very introduction in the region by exerting coercive influence.

Way Ahead

The key to a strong deterrence to a future PLAN Indian Ocean Fleet is to protect India's turf in areas of overlapping interests and influence with PRC in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Navy will have to continue growing its capabilities and modify its operating patterns to counter the challenges posed by PLAN.

The Indian Navy recently received a shot in its arm with the commissioning of its first indigenous aircraft carrier, Vikrant. The induction of Vikrant will allow the Indian Navy to put two carriers on its western and eastern seaboard. There is also evidence that the Indian Navy is testing its ability to forward deploy submarines to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in order to closely monitor PLAN's submarine activities in the Strait of Malacca.²⁵

At the same time, the Indian Navy's anti-submarine reach has expanded with the induction of US-supplied P-8I Neptune aircraft into the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea.²⁶ However, India still lags in credible combat capabilities to adequately monitor the south-eastern side of the Indian Ocean. India will need to increase its submarine strength from the current 16 to the desired 24 with 18 SSKs and 6 SSNs²⁷ to keep a close watch on the Sunda and Lombok Strait. There are palpable critical gaps in Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) capabilities that the Indian defence establishment must address by plugging the holes in enduring technological imbalances that could enable the Indian Navy to target PLAN's vulnerabilities.

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Notes:

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