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Indian Ocean Region - China's Strategy and India's Response

What is the issue?

- China's engagement in the India Ocean Region poses new challenges for India.
- It is high time that India makes strategic partnerships, going beyond the current defensive mindset.

What are the recent exercises by India?

- A series of bilateral exercises with regional navies were conducted in the Indian Ocean.
- In April, 2019 in their biggest and most complex exercise, Indian and Australian warships held drills in the Bay of Bengal.
- This was followed by a much-publicised anti-submarine exercise with the U.S. Navy near Diego Garcia.
- Very recently, the Indian Navy held a joint exercise ‘Varuna’ with the French Navy off the coast of Goa and Karwar.
- Alongside, two Indian warships participated in a ‘group sail’ with warships from Japan, the Philippines and the U.S. on return from a fleet review in Qingdao, China.



What is the geo-political drive?

- **China** - The trigger for India's increased engagement at sea is the rapid expansion of China's naval footprint in the Indian Ocean.
- China has commercial investments in Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
- Beyond this, it has also established a military outpost in Djibouti, a key link in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).
- Reports also suggest that People's Liberation Army (PLA) was planning an expansion of its logistics base for non-peacekeeping missions.
- This raises the possibility of an operational overlap with the Indian Navy's areas of interest.
- It is anticipated that Djibouti could be a future where China would control key nodes covering important shipping lanes in Indian Ocean.
- This would in turn allow the PLA's Navy (PLAN) to dominate the security dynamic.
- **South Asia** - South Asian navies too have been making their presence felt in the seas of the Indian subcontinent.
- Sri Lanka has expanded engagement with Pacific powers which includes the Royal Australian Navy and the U.S. Navy.
- With China's assistance, Pakistan is becoming an increasingly potent actor in the northern Indian Ocean, a key region of Indian interest.

- Beijing has also been instrumental in strengthening the navies of Bangladesh and Myanmar.
- In these circumstances, India has had little option but to intensify its own naval engagements in South Asia.

What seems to be China's strategy?

- **Submarine** - China's expanding submarine engagements in Indian Ocean indicate its strategic ambitions in India's neighbourhood.
- Reportedly, PLAN has been studying the operating environment in the Indian Ocean.
- This comes in the context of a larger endeavour to develop capabilities for sustained operations in the Indian Ocean Region.
- As a result, the Indian Navy's recent bilateral exercises have focussed on under-sea surveillance and anti-submarine warfare.
- **Less sightings** - Despite the above developments, notably, Chinese submarine sightings are said to have decreased in recent times.
- With the Wuhan summit, it is believed that India and China are on a collaborative path.
- Also, India is silent on China's continuing aggression in the South China Sea.
- Indian warships were sent for the Chinese fleet review in Qingdao.
- All these largely suggest a conciliatory stance.
- **China's strategy** - Nevertheless, reduced visibility of Chinese submarines does not necessarily prove absence.
- Chinese submarines are quieter, craftier and stealthier than earlier.
- As suspected, PLAN could be on a quest to master undersea 'quieting' technologies.
- **South Asia focus** - China has been downplaying its strategic interests in South Asia.
- It is concerned that too much talk about its growing naval power could prove detrimental to the cause of promoting the BRI.
- The concerns raised at the recent BRI summit on Chinese 'debt traps' has led Beijing to revise some of its infrastructure projects.
- India's refusal to participate in the BRI may have also prompted China to rethink its economic and military strategies in Indian Ocean.

How is China's engagement in African region?

- China hasn't indicated any change of plan in West Asia and the east coast of Africa.
- Most of China's energy and resource shipments originate there.
- Chinese investments in port infrastructure in Kenya, Sudan, Tanzania and Mozambique have grown at a steady pace.

- In response, India has moved to deepen its own regional engagement, seeking naval logistical access to French bases in Reunion and Djibouti.

How significant are partnerships now?

- Despite the bilateral and trilateral naval engagements, India hasn't succeeded in leveraging partnerships for strategic gains.
- India's political leadership is reluctant to militarise the Quadrilateral grouping or to expand naval operations in the Western Pacific.
- Consequently, the power-equation with China remains skewed in favour of China.
- Indian Navy's regional strategy seems to be a mere 'risk management' tactic, with limited approach to shape events in littoral-Asia.
- For long, the Indian Navy has played a prominent role in the fight against non-traditional challenges in the Indian Ocean.
- These include Indian Navy's -
    i. contribution to the counter-piracy mission off the Somalia coast
    ii. humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (including in cyclone-hit Mozambique)
- However, a paucity of assets and capacity has forced the Navy to seek partners willing to invest resources in joint security endeavours.
- In all, partnerships are vital to the Indian Navy, especially in deterring Chinese undersea deployments in South Asia.

Source: The Hindu

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