

REVIEW ESSAY

Annual Reports on the Development of International Relations in the Indian Ocean Region (2014-2018), Edited by Rong Wang and Zhu Cuiping.

-Pooja V

The review essay is based on the *Annual Reports on the Development of International Relations in the Indian Ocean* published from 2015 to 2019. The reports are a compilation of the research conducted by Chinese scholars on the evolving geo-economic, geo-political, and geo-strategic significance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)- substantiated with empirical data to analyse China's growing interests in the extended neighbourhood.¹

The strategic importance of the IOR in China's ambitions and international policies has been established with its rising economic and military power. As states compete to secure energy and resources, an examination of Chinese activities in the region forms the crux of literature in these annual reports. India's influence in South Asia and palpable presence in key maritime zones of the Eastern Indian Ocean is noted by the authors. The Chinese worldview permeates the analysis of the regional power structure.

In examining the evolution of Chinese approaches towards IOR conveyed in the annual reports, the authors begin by reflecting on China's attempts in establishing greater communication and cooperation with smaller South Asian nations of Myanmar and Pakistan. The

scholars remarked at the significance of Bay of Bengal as a vital point for competition and cooperation among great powers and the penetration of extra-regional influence in the traditional power structure of the region. The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) was then highlighted in the annual reports as a primary strategy to leverage the comparative advantages of China. The successive reports have pointed out the assertive and proactive behaviour of the Indian Government and its implications for China-India relations and the future of the ties. Challenges posed by change in India's leadership (under Prime Minister Narendra Modi) led to introspection by the authors of China's cooperative measures with India's neighbourhood countries in South Asia like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. The final volume of the annual reports has captured the emerging debates of the new geographical construct of Indo-Pacific, perspectives of US, India, and Australia on Indo-Pacific, and addressing China's dilemma and countermeasures.

China's contemporary strategic view of the sea often draws reference from naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan's 'Sea Power theory', which addresses the importance of sea in ensuring peace, waging war, and achieving national prosperity.² China's military strategy under President Xi Jinping has turned expansionary and assertive- taking a departure from Deng Xiaoping's dictum of "keeping a low profile". The 1998 defence white paper of China³ focused on resisting any setting up or

stationing troops in the foreign nation. In contrary, the white paper of 2015 focuses on the combination of “offshore water defense” with “open sea protection”.⁴

China’s growing geostrategy in South Asia is identified as ‘breakthrough by two wing and lever the middle’ plan enabling it to encircle India. The economic development of Pakistan⁵ and Myanmar has strategic benefits to China as they are identified as the two gateways for the entry into the Indian Ocean. Pakistan provides direct access to Strait of Hormuz, whereas the location of Indo-China Peninsula or western Southeast Asia provides a strategy of ‘direct’ southward penetration into the Bay of Bengal. The advancement of such a plan is witnessed in Chinese involvement in creating the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and setting up of Mekong Sub-regional economic cooperation as projects of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)- forming a circuit route in integrating the regional countries with China. In addition, the construction of BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar) corridor will facilitate economic advancement in the eastern part of the IOR, which is vital to project China’s influence in the region.

China attributes India’s endowing geographic position, natural resources and its influence over the trade security across Indian Ocean as highly significant and yearns for Indian participation in the BRI project. Chinese scholars view that MSR is beneficial to

India’s influence and would strengthen its position in IOR. Moreover, a successful MSR through India’s participation will ensure security of China’s maritime trade and overcome its Malacca Dilemma. Chinese interests are also driven by long-term benefits, for instance, involvement of Chinese-owned enterprises to mine undersea minerals in the Indian Ocean. The authors have keenly observed India’s ambitions and maritime engagements in IOR. The Chinese scholars practice the concept of ‘circle’ or ‘concentric circles’ to study India’s geostrategy. In addition, Chinese scholars have expressed that India’s reluctance in participating in BRI or MSR is a long-term tactic in limiting China’s growing influence in terms of investments and developing relations in the IOR. They also exclaim that the illustration of China’s presence in IOR as a ‘string of pearls’ strategy by India is a misinterpretation of Chinese intentions.

In Chinese view, the Indian government is wary of the BRI despite as Beijing’s ‘win-win’ rational which strives for economic development of all countries concerned- based on accusations of debt-trap, issues of transparency and lack of technological transfers.⁶ The Chinese naval base in Djibouti is viewed by international scholars from the lens of increasing Chinese political and strategic foray in the IOR⁷. As argued by Indian scholars, expanding Chinese military facilities in the Horn of African nations and port visits by Chinese submarines in Sri Lanka and Pakistan are seen as China’s attempt to establish its geopolitical influence over littoral

states.⁸ The Indian strategic community believe that the influence of China near its seas as a threat to India and has formulated the concept of 'China Threat Theory'. The shift in China's inward looking strategy is attributed to the rise in its influence across the Indian Ocean littorals. Thereby, the future access of Chinese navy from the Western Pacific into the Indian Ocean increases India's perils as traditionally the region is considered to be its sphere of influence.

It is also noteworthy that the Chinese footprints into the Indian Ocean has provided significant traction to the concept of 'Indo-Pacific'- a way to counter China's geopolitical ambitions and to connect geo-economics and security dimensions between Indian Ocean and Western Pacific Ocean. The concept has been widely accepted by India, US, Japan, Australia and ASEAN nations to establish free and open seas for maritime trade. However, China believes that the emphasis over the Indo-Pacific concept has the objective of constraining China's rise in the Asia-Pacific region. To which, the attempt by Western nations in fortifying the worldview of China as a threat to Indian Ocean peace and order has led to an increase in China's relations and promotion of soft power with smaller IOR countries as a means to strengthen its presence in the region. As argued by Rory Medcalf, China's rejection of Indo-Pacific term is ironic as it is a part of the region.⁹ He emphasises on the importance of quadrilateral informal strategic dialogue between the United States, India, Australia and Japan, to balance China's expansion in the region.

To conclude, China considers itself as a stakeholder in the Indian Ocean and is seeking to become the dominant power in the IOR. Chinese writings indicate mutual benefits and harmonious inclusivity through greater cooperation with littoral nations. However, increasing military activities in the Indian Ocean signify China's strategic interests and great power ambitions. China's expanding engagements in IOR is a threat to India's influence and aspirations. India's differences with China over disputed boundary, arms and technology transfers to Pakistan, and support to insurgent agencies through Myanmar raises the spectre of a highly competitive maritime environment as China attempts to secure its place in the Indian Ocean. India's concerns over Chinese rhetoric on joint development have surfaced as smaller countries in the region are entrapped in debt. China's foray into the Indian Ocean has upset the power status quo in the region and carries implications for regional stability. As the way forward, India must attempt to enhance its partnerships with extra-regional powers as a leverage to counter balance China's ambitions in the Indian Ocean Region.

End Notes

¹ Rong Wang and Zhu Cuiping (eds.) (2015), *Annual Report on the Development of International Relations in the Indian Ocean Region (2014)*, Berlin: Springer-Verlag Publishing House, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-45940-9>, accessed on 27 June 2020.

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² Gary Roughead (2014), "Defining Maritime Asia", *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiatives*, <https://amti.csis.org/defining-maritime-asia/#:~:text=Most%20think%20of%20maritime%20Asia,rise%20of%20the%20Chinese%20Navy.>, accessed online 22 July 2020.

³ Information Office of the State Council Of the People's Republic of China (1998), "China's National Defense", <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/5/index.htm>, accessed online 24 July 2020.

⁴ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (2014), "China's Military Strategy", http://www.china.org.cn/china/2015-05/26/content_35661433.htm, accessed online 24 July 2020.

⁵ China considers Pakistan as a 'Primacy cooperation partner' in South Asia and continues strengthening efforts to Pakistan.

⁶ See, Ministry of External Affairs (2017), "Statement of Ministry of External Affairs of India on Participation of India in OBOR/BRI Forum, 17 May 2017, <https://mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28463/Official+Spokesperson+s+response+to+a+query+on+participation+of+India+in+OBORBRI+Forum>, accessed online 22 July 2020.

⁷ Max Bearak (2019), "In strategic Djibouti, a microcosm of China's growing foothold in Africa", *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/in-strategic-djibouti-a-microcosm-of-chinas-growing-foothold-in-africa/2019/12/29/a6e664ea-beab-11e9-a8b0-7ed8a0d5dc5d_story.html, accessed online 26 July 2020.

⁸ Cited in Singh Abhijit (2018), "China's Military base in Djibouti: Strategic implication for India, *War on the Rocks*, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/chinas-military-base-in-djibouti-strategic-implications-for-india/>, accessed online 23 July 2020.

⁹ Rory Medcalf (2015), "Reimagining Asia: From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific", *The ASAN Forum*, <http://www.theasanforum.org/reimagining-asia-from-asia-pacific-to-indo-pacific/>, accessed online 25 July 2020.

Pooja V. is a Research Intern at the Centre for Land and Warfare Studies. She is pursuing Post-Graduate degree in Geopolitics and International Relations at Manipal Academy of Higher Education [MAHE].