

# Scenarios for China's Future Strategic Presence in the Indian Ocean region

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This paper will discuss the size and nature of China's future military presence in the Indian Ocean region (IOR). It will focus on China's strategic imperatives in the region and what that means for strategic presence.<sup>1</sup>

Key conclusions include:

- China's presence in the IOR is likely to grow significantly in coming years, principally driven by the country's expanding economic interests.
- While China's military presence will grow, its missions will likely remain limited for some years to come.
- Achieving military predominance in the IOR, including control of the Indian Ocean, would be a major undertaking for China requiring decades of sustained expansion of military capabilities and local security partnerships.
- Instead, in the short to medium term, China's military capabilities will principally reflect imperatives involving the protection of Chinese nationals and assets.
- These capabilities will likely evolve over time to provide options in respect a wider range of contingencies.

## China's Imperatives in the Indian Ocean

A starting point in understanding China's future regional presence is to understand China's strategic imperatives in the Indian Ocean.

As most of us know, China has strong strategic interests in the protection of its sea lines of communication across the Indian Ocean. A very high proportion of China's oil imports come across the Indian Ocean from the Persian Gulf, East Africa, West Africa. China also heavily depends on the Indian Ocean for the transport of exports. Beijing is keenly aware that its sea lines of communication (SLOCs) are highly vulnerable to threats from state and nonstate actors. Chinese strategists are concerned that an adversary may use these vulnerabilities as a bargaining chip in a wider dispute.

But China also has other important interests in the region, associated with a growing population of Chinese nationals and big investments. These are likely to become increasingly important in Beijing's strategic thinking about the region and create a long list of strategic imperatives, including:

- **non-combatant evacuation operations (NEOs):** In 2011, the Chinese navy and air force evacuated some 35,000 Chinese nationals from Libya, staging through the IOR. There are many other examples of smaller NEOs across the Indo Pacific in recent years. There are an estimated 2 million Chinese nationals in Africa and many hundreds of thousands in Pakistan. These numbers are due to grow significantly in coming years and will become an important factor in cases of civil conflicts or disturbance.
- **provision of on-ground security for Chinese nationals and property:** Many Chinese investments are being made in highly insecure regions, putting Chinese nationals and assets on the front-lines of several active insurgencies. There have, for example, been several attacks by Baluchi insurgents against Chinese workers in Pakistan, and it is highly likely that more attacks will occur.
- **support for China's fishing fleet:** We are currently seeing a major expansion of Chinese fishing fleet into the Indian Ocean as fishing grounds close to China are being exhausted. This currently

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws from an extended discussion in David Brewster, "The Red Flag Follows Trade: China's Future as an Indian Ocean Power" in *Strategic Asia 2018–19: Mapping China's Expanding Strategic Ambitions* (Washington DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019), pp.175-210.

involves large fleets near Somalia and Madagascar with more fishing likely to occur in the eastern Indian Ocean. There is a significant risk of disputes and even conflict involving Chinese and local fishers and local enforcement authorities. In areas such as the South China Sea, Chinese maritime agencies have become involved to support Chinese fishers against local authorities, and it is possible that this may also occur in the Indian Ocean.<sup>2</sup>

- **Humanitarian and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations:** China is only beginning to understand the important soft power benefits of providing HADR to neighbouring states. This would be expected to play an ever more important role in China's presence in the region.
- **anti-terrorism operations:** This could involve the protection of Chinese nationals (e.g. hostage rescues) or the pursuit of broader political objectives against extremist groups that are perceived as a threat to Chinese national interests.
- **support for political objectives:** As China becomes more closely involved in the IOR, including developing important political and security partnerships, then there will be a greater likelihood of the deployment of Chinese security forces to support local governments or groups in support of China's interests. Recent examples of jostling for influence between China and others in countries such as Sri Lanka and Maldives presage what will likely be a deeper involvement in local regimes in coming years.<sup>3</sup>

### China's Navy in the Indian Ocean

China's naval expansion program will enhance its ability to project power into the Indian Ocean in the long term. China's naval presence has grown in connection with antipiracy deployments in the western Indian Ocean. The PLA Navy (PLAN) now has an average of 4-5 ships deployed in Indian Ocean at any given time, generally in two task groups (one of which is deployed on anti-piracy duties in the western Indian Ocean while the other is in transit or on goodwill visits). The PLAN aspires to be a two-ocean navy, permanently deployed in both the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Some publicly available projections are that PLAN strength in the Indian Ocean will reach around 20+ vessels within 5-10 years.

Among the most important geostrategic facts about Indian Ocean is that it is very large and that it is virtually enclosed on three sides with only narrow points of entry/exit to the Pacific Ocean and Mediterranean Sea. This means that naval ships from extra-regional powers such as China need to travel a long way to get there via narrow chokepoints. In order to sustain any substantial and geographically dispersed naval presence there, the PLAN would need to have access to port infrastructure in several different parts of the IOR.

This is why China has developed permanent logistical support facilities in Djibouti. But it will also require support facilities elsewhere in the Indian Ocean. Pakistan seems one likely host. Although many analysts assume that a Chinese naval facility in Pakistan will likely be located at Gwadar, this may not necessarily be the case.

China is also looking at other support facilities elsewhere in East Africa, where it has potential partners among several states. Any ocean-wide naval presence would also likely require support facilities in the eastern Indian Ocean. In recent times, we've seen Chinese engagement with several eastern Indian Ocean countries such as Sri Lanka, Maldives, Myanmar in connection with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Many BRI projects involve the development of a swathe of maritime infrastructure across the Indian Ocean – which could potentially be used for military as well as commercial purposes.

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<sup>2</sup> David Brewster, "Chinese fishing fleet a security issue for Australia," Lowy Interpreter, 17 November 2018. <http://lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/chinese-fishing-fleet-security-issue-australia>

<sup>3</sup> See generally, David Brewster, *Between Giants: the Sino-Indian Cold War in the Indian Ocean*, Institut Français des Relations Internationales, 2018.

[https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/brewster\\_sino\\_indian\\_cold\\_war\\_2018.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/brewster_sino_indian_cold_war_2018.pdf)

Importantly, in understanding the trajectory of China's influence across the Indian Ocean, we should not see China as some sort of unstoppable juggernaut. In many instances it has been one step forward and two steps back for China. The Maldives, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Malaysia have all seen political backlashes against perceptions of corruption relating to Chinese BRI projects, which have contributed to changes in government or political leaders. China will likely act opportunistically across the region – if it suffers setbacks in one country, it will just focus on another.

### ***Nature of China's future naval presence***

China's strategic imperatives in the region provide some important clues about its future military presence.

As a starting point, the strategic importance of China's SLOCs across the Indian Ocean suggest a focus on their protection. But protecting the sea lanes used by Chinese vessels, stretching from Persian Gulf around India and across the Indian Ocean (or from West Africa across the central the Indian Ocean) and then through the Indonesian archipelago, would be an extraordinary undertaking in practice. The distances are vast and major adversaries (such as India) would have many opportunities for interdiction. Indeed, it is doubtful that even the United States could protect the entirety of its Indian Ocean SLOCs it against a major competitor. China is many decades away from achieving such as goal even if it sought to. Among other things, it would require huge naval build up and multiple local allies in the Indian Ocean. Realistically this would be beyond China's reach for the foreseeable future.

So what imperatives are likely to drive China's presence in the IOR? Key imperatives are likely to include the protection of Chinese nationals and economic assets. China will want to develop options to respond to a range of contingencies on land and at sea. This may, for example, require the deployment to the Indian Ocean of naval assets such as helicopter carriers which can be used for non-combatant evacuation operations, anti-terrorist operations and humanitarian and disaster relief.

The size and composition of Soviet naval forces in the Indian Ocean during the 1980s may also provide some clues about a future Chinese presence. These were structured to be used for a range of missions to protect Soviet interests in the region.

### ***China's future non-naval military presence***

The PLAN is likely to have a leading regional role among China's armed services, but other services and security agencies will also likely play important roles.

The protection of Chinese citizens and assets on land requires some different considerations than the maritime realm. China's preferences in this respect will likely be:

- Reliance as much as possible on local forces (perhaps with Chinese advisors, where required). The creation by Pakistan of a 15,000 strong security force specifically to protect the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is an example of this.
- Reliance on Private Security Contractors (PSCs) to supplement local security forces. There will be a strong preference for Chinese PSC companies with responsibility for internal security in Chinese operated compounds, working with local PSCs outside the compounds. However, Chinese PSCs might also take more active roles, such as occurred in Sudan when Chinese PSCs worked with Sudanese military to rescue Chinese nationals who were being held hostage.
- Use of Chinese ready reaction forces where necessary. Given the role of the PLAN in the region this may involve the use of Chinese marines. In recent times there has been a significant expansion of the Chinese Marine Corps from 20,000 to 100,000 personnel together with organic aviation. A company of Chinese Marines has also been based in Djibouti as fast response force for Africa and Middle East.

### ***Air Force/Navy Air Force presence***

A significant military presence will also require significantly expanded presence of the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) and/or PLA Navy Air Force (PLAN-AF). The vast distances across the Indian Ocean means that a significant air presence would be required for mobility, logistics and maritime surveillance functions.

The PLAAF and PLAN-AF currently have poor capabilities for long distance and expeditionary operations (including refueling and transport and long-distance maritime air surveillance). These are being developed but will take many years before these capabilities are mature.

The geography of the Indian Ocean, in which Chinese territory is not contiguous with the ocean, is also not in China's favour, making it difficult to undertake many functions operating from Chinese territory. Among other things, China would require overflight permissions from Indian Ocean states. Countries such as Pakistan might be expected to provide such permissions but others are unlikely to.

China will therefore likely need to establish an air force presence at several locations around the IOR or at least enter into arrangements under which it has guaranteed access. This imperative will likely drive increasing competition for control of airports among Indian Ocean states such as Maldives, Sri Lanka or in East Africa.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, competition for access to maritime ports which has been seen in recent times will likely extend to competition for control of airports.

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<sup>4</sup> David Brewster, "Why India is buying the world's emptiest airport" *Lowy Interpreter*, 4 December 2017. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/why-india-buying-world-s-emptiest-airport>