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Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Western Indian Ocean

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Introduction

The Chinese President Hu Jintao's brief stopover in Mauritius in February 2009, as part of his four-nation African tour, does not fit in with the widespread perceptions of Beijing's resource diplomacy. On the eve of President Hu's second African tour in barely two years, which included Mali, Senegal, Tanzania and Mauritius, Chinese officials were eager to counter the notion that China's African diplomacy was all about resources. Pointing out that the four African states on Hu's itinerary were not known for mineral wealth, Chinese officials insisted that Beijing's interest in Africa "isn't confined to energy and resources".² New Delhi, it appears, has every reason to take Beijing at its word, and focus on the very different strategic dynamic that appears to be shaping Beijing's interest in the Western Indian Ocean and its island states like Mauritius.

To be sure, India is concerned about the scale and depth of China's resource diplomacy in Africa. It is no secret that India has been chasing China's tail in its quest for equity oil and acquisition of mineral resources all around the world, including Africa. New Delhi has also followed Beijing in giving a greater coherence to its diplomatic efforts in Africa. Following the first China-Africa summit in Beijing at the end of 2006, India organised a smaller version of its own Africa summit in mid-2008. None of this competitive dynamic, however, captures the incipient Sino-Indian rivalry in the Western Indian Ocean. While China's attempts to build maritime infrastructure in Gwadar in Pakistan and other South Asian ports has received widespread attention in India and beyond, their competition for strategic influence in the important islands states of the Indian Ocean has not been adequately analysed. That the two recent trips of President Hu to Africa in February 2007 and February 2009 ended in the Western Indian Ocean islands has not gone unnoticed in New Delhi. If the former trip concluded in Seychelles, the latter terminated in Mauritius. That these two island nations have had strong political and security ties to India has made the Chinese forays all the more interesting for those interested in the shadow boxing between Asia's rising powers.

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² The statement on the eve of the visit by Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Zhai Zun in Beijing, 6 February 2009; see, Xinhua, "FM: energy coop only part of Sino-Africa coop", 6 February 2009, available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-02/06/content_10775342.htm accessed on 18 February 2009.

China's Outreach

The fact that the President of the world's largest nation chose to show up, in quick succession, in two of the world's smallest countries – Seychelles (population: 85,000) and Mauritius (1.25 million) – speaks of the strategic significance of the two island nations. For centuries, these and other islands such as Madagascar, Comoros, Reunion, Djibouti, and Socotra have been critical links in the flow of goods and people across the Indian Ocean, from east and west and north and south. In the colonial era, they acquired a military significance amidst the efforts of European powers to control the sea-lanes of the Indian Ocean. During the Cold War, the island territories of Western Indian Ocean were at the very heart of American power projection into the region. Before it freed Mauritius in 1968 and began to withdraw from the East of Suez, Great Britain separated the island of Diego Garcia and handed it over to the United States. After the Cold War, Diego Garcia has been the pivot of United States naval operations in the Indian Ocean and the many wars it has fought in the Persian Gulf. The French granted independence to the Comoros but retained control over Reunion; they also maintained the second largest naval presence in the Indian Ocean after the United States. Through the Cold War, the Soviet Union continually jockeyed for influence with occasional successes as in Seychelles. Many of these island states were fragile and were easy targets for not just great power intervention but also threatened by attacks by small mercenary groups. If there was a relative decline in the military significance of the western Indian Ocean territories since the end of the Cold War, the rise of China has once again put them back on the global geopolitical map.

Beijing's growing strategic interest in the Western Indian Ocean is firmly rooted in the dramatic expansion of the Chinese economy over the last three decades. Most of China's exports to Europe, South Asia, Middle East and Africa as well as China's growing imports of energy from the Gulf and mineral resources from Africa are transported through the sea-lanes of the Indian Ocean. The faster the economic growth in China, the greater is its dependence on imported natural resources. It was inevitable then that energy and resource security considerations would increasingly compel China to pay attention to the protection of its seaborne trade in the Indian Ocean. This in turn became an important justification for a more modern and powerful navy that would look beyond the traditional security concerns vis-à-vis Taiwan.³

These concerns were further accentuated by the fact that the energy and resource supplies from the Gulf and Africa have to transit through the narrow choke points in the eastern Indian Ocean. That resource supplies to China could be squeezed by powerful potential adversaries such as the United States has come to be defined in the celebrated phrase, Beijing's "Malacca Dilemma". Ever since the Chinese political leadership reportedly referred to the problem in 2004, there has been considerable outpouring of internal and external discourse on this theme.⁴ China's perceived vulnerability in the Malacca Straits has been useful in explaining Beijing's efforts to develop alternatives such as building a canal across the Kra Isthmus in

³ "As China Grows, so does its Long Neglected Navy", *Wall Street Journal* (New York), 16 July 2007, p. A1; Zha Daojiong, "China's Energy Security: Domestic and International Issues", *Survival*, Vol. 48, No. 1, Spring 2006.; see also Lee Jae-Hyung, "China's Expanding Maritime Ambitions in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 24, No. 3., December 2002.

⁴ See for example, Ian Storey, "China's 'Malacca Dilemma'", *China Brief*, Vol. 6., No. 8, 12 April 2006; You Ji, "Dealing with the Malacca Dilemma: China's Effort to Protect its Energy Supply", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 31, No. 3, May 2007, pp. 467-89; and Marc Lanteigne, "China's Maritime Security and the 'Malacca Dilemma'", *Asian Security*, Vol. 4, No. 2. 2008, pp. 143-61.

Thailand, developing the Irrawaddy corridor in Myanmar that is linked to the Yunnan province, and building the Gwadar port in Pakistan and connecting it to Xinjiang in Western China through the Karakoram highway. Impressive as these efforts have been, they have been widely seen as inadequate in addressing China's maritime vulnerabilities.

As it became clear that China must find a way to operate in the Indian Ocean by securing access to bases and facilities in the littoral, Beijing's new focus on island territories had begun to draw widespread attention. In what came to be described as the 'string of pearls' strategy, China appeared to devote special attention to developing access arrangements to ports along the sea lanes linking the energy sources in the Persian Gulf with the consumption centres in coastal China.⁵ Many analysts, including some in the United States, question the alarmist nature of the initial assessments on China's island strategy in the Indian Ocean. Some in China, on the other hand, appear to have dismissed the 'string of pearls' strategy as unsustainable without a significant blue-water navy that is free to operate in the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, for many in India, China's new activism in the Indian Ocean and in the immediate vicinity of South Asia has renewed the old perceptions on "Chinese encirclement" of India, this time from the seas.⁶ As India geared up to limit the Chinese search for access in and around the South Asian waters, it was surprised to find Beijing's unexpected new thrust in the Western Indian Ocean, especially towards Seychelles and Mauritius.⁷ Although China's initiatives towards both these island territories were framed within Beijing's Africa policy, there was no mistaking the centrality of maritime considerations from the perspective in New Delhi.

Breaching India's Sphere of Influence

Unlike in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Pakistan, there has been no public evidence of China seeking military access arrangements or new port contracts in Seychelles or Mauritius. India, nevertheless, is anxious about the scale and intensity of the diplomatic and political energies that Beijing seems to be devoting to the two island nations. India's concerns are not about a major immediate move by China in the two island states but about Beijing's strategic intentions underlying its high profile outreach to Seychelles and Mauritius. For now, India enjoys rather strong political and security ties to the two island nations. The big question for New Delhi is whether China is laying the foundation for wresting these two small states out of what has been widely perceived as India's sphere of influence in the Western Indian Ocean.

While it cannot prevent an intensification of economic cooperation and political cooperation between China and the Western Indian Ocean island territories, New Delhi is aware that Beijing, by its own declaration, is keen to promote bilateral military and security cooperation

⁵ Christopher J Pehrson, *String of Pearls: Meeting the Challenge of Rising Power Across the Asian Littoral* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College, July 2006).

⁶ Gurpreet S. Khurana, "China's 'String of Pearls' in the Indian Ocean and its Security Implications", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 32, No. 1, January 2008, pp. 1-39; see also, Amit Kumar, "A New Balance of Power Game in the Indian Ocean: India Gears up to Tackle Chinese Influence in Maldives and Sri Lanka", *IDSIA Strategic Comments*, 24 November 2006, available at <<http://www.idsa.in/publications/stratcomments/AmitKumar241106.htm>> accessed on 19 February 2009.

⁷ C. Raja Mohan, "Beijing is Testing Strategic Waters in India's Backyard", *The Indian Express* (New Delhi), 30 January 2007, p. 1; and C. Raja Mohan, "Circling Mauritius", *The Indian Express* (New Delhi), 11 February 2009, p. 13.

with all the African states.⁸ After years of avoiding them, China is now stepping up its contribution to international peacekeeping operations around the world, including Africa. There have been reports about China's growing arms transfers to the African states.⁹ India, which already has close military and security ties with these island nations, would not want to be outflanked by Beijing.¹⁰ There have been indications that concerns about Beijing stepping in to supply arms to Seychelles compelled New Delhi to embark on a pre-emptive move in early 2005 when the Indian Naval Chief, Admiral Arun Prakash, gifted the "INS Tarmugli", a fast attack craft, to the Seychelles Coast Guard. The Indian Naval Headquarters considered the request from Seychelles so urgent that it decided to pull the ship out of its own fleet barely three years after commissioning.¹¹

For the moment though India's economic and security cooperation with Seychelles is robust. India has trained large numbers of police and military men from Seychelles. A memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation was signed when then Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat visited Seychelles in 2003. India has also gifted a few helicopters to Seychelles over the years. Indian naval ships routinely visit Seychelles. High-level visits between India and Seychelles have been frequent, and have included a visit by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi way back in 1981. However, China now is all set to compete with its intense high-level political attention. Seychelles President James Michel was in Beijing in November 2006 to participate in the first China-Africa Summit. Barely three months later, President Hu went on a return visit to Seychelles.

Given the small size of Seychelles' economy and the limited nature of its requirements, China has few difficulties in rapidly expanding its influence in the island state. New Delhi will closely monitor any attempt by Beijing to explore Seychelles' expansive waters for oil and natural gas. Although the land area of Seychelles is only 435 square kilometres, it has an Exclusive Economic Zone of nearly 1.3 million square kilometres. A few international oil companies are beginning to test the waters for hydrocarbons. Even more important from New Delhi's perspective is to prevent a major move by Beijing to sell arms or establish listening posts and monitoring stations on the island. There has been some speculation in Seychelles political class that Beijing might be looking for precisely such arrangements in the island.¹²

India's links with Mauritius are in fact deeper and more enduring. Few other countries in the world are as intimately linked to India as Mauritius. Nearly 68 percent of its population is of Indian origin and deeply values the relationship with the mother country. India's profile in every aspect of the life of Mauritius remains significant and high.¹³ China, too, has its historical links with Mauritius and there are nearly 30,000 Mauritians of Chinese descent.

⁸ See, *China's African Policy*, January 2006, available at <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200601/12/print20060112_234894.html> accessed on 19 February 2009.

⁹ Ian Taylor, "Arms Sales to Africa: Beijing's Reputation at Risk", *China Brief*, Vol. 7, No. 7, 18 May 2007; see also Andrei Chang, "China Expanding African Arms Sales", UPI Asia, 26 January 2009, available at <http://www.upiasia.com/Security/2009/01/26/china_expanding_african_arms_sales/1148/> accessed on 19 February 2009.

¹⁰ Alex Vines and Bereni Oruitemeka, "India's Engagement with the African Indian Ocean Rim States", *Africa Programme Paper No.1/08* (London: Chatham House, 2008).

¹¹ Author's conversations with senior naval officials in New Delhi, March 2005.

¹² See for example, the speech by the founding president of Seychelles, James R. Mancham, at the Westminster College, Salt Lake City, Utah United States, 25 September 2007; available at <<http://www.seychellesreview.com/node/120/print>> accessed on 19 February 2009.

¹³ For an official review see, "India-Mauritius Bilateral Relations", available at <<http://www.mea.gov.in/foreignrelation/Mauritius.pdf>> accessed on 19 February 2009.

Beijing now appears determined to step up its relations with Port Louis and President Hu's visit in February 2009 was an expression of that political will. In the first-ever visit to Mauritius by a Chinese Head of State, President Hu announced a US\$260 million loan for the modernisation and expansion of the airport in Port Louis and the speeding up of the completion of the US\$730 million dollar special economic zone.¹⁴ If the former represented Beijing's interest in picking up a stake in the infrastructure of the island nation, the latter is about taking full advantage of Mauritius as the gateway to Africa. The massive special economic zone project is expected to become a hub for Chinese commercial activity in Africa.¹⁵ It is also the largest single injection of foreign capital into the island and is expected to generate up to 40,000 jobs and generate exports of up to US\$200 million annually. While India's bilateral trade and economic engagement with Mauritius is deeper and larger than that with China, President Hu's visit signaled that this might not remain uncontested.

As India assesses China's rapidly rising profile in Mauritius, New Delhi would have every incentive to consolidate, expand and protect its role as the principal security and military partner of Port Louis. Within years of its independence, Mauritius turned to New Delhi to secure its vast maritime estate. The Mauritius coast guard was established through Indian assistance, and India has regularly provided ships and helicopters to equip the force and officers to man it. Indian naval ships conduct hydrographic surveys for Mauritius. Recent reports suggest that Mauritius has offered India a project to lease and develop tourist infrastructure on two of its islands called Agalega. Speculation abounds that this project would allow the Indian Navy to develop an important facility in a critical location in the Indian Ocean.¹⁶ India's growing security profile in the Western Indian Ocean includes the construction of a monitoring station in northern Madagascar and its growing naval cooperation with Mozambique that includes coastal surveillance, and supply of equipment and training of personnel.¹⁷ It is quite clear that Beijing too would like to emulate the Indian Navy's wide-ranging activism in the Western Indian Ocean littoral. India would, however, be extremely reluctant to see an expanded role for the Chinese Navy in the Indian Ocean.

Mitigating the Security Dilemma

That there is a security dilemma – the pursuit of legitimate interests by one party is seen as threatening the legitimate interests of the other – between India and China in the Indian Ocean has already been argued quite succinctly.¹⁸ As China seeks to overcome its geographic weakness in the Indian Ocean, it runs headlong into India which is determined to keep out extra-regional powers that it deems hostile. This fundamental tension between the maritime strategies of the two nations has become acute, as both China and India rise, and seek strong and powerful navies as necessary instruments in the protection of their growing interests far from their shores. President Hu had insisted at the end of 2006 that China must 'build a powerful people's navy that can adapt to its historical mission during a new century and a

¹⁴ Richard Lough, "China signs \$260 mln airport deal with Mauritius", Reuters India, 17 February 2009, available at <<http://in.reuters.com/article/asiaCompanyAndMarkets/idINLH32372920090217?sp=true>> accessed on 19 February 2009.

¹⁵ "Mauritius-China: 'Gateway to Africa' Aim", *Africa Research Bulletin*, 16 February – 15 March 2008, p. 17733.

¹⁶ Sidhartha, "India eyes an island in the Sun", *Times of India* (New Delhi), 26 November 2006, p. 1.

¹⁷ Sudha Ramachandran, "India's Quiet Sea Power", Asia Times Online, 2 August 2007, available at <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/IH02Df01.html> accessed on 19 February 2009.

¹⁸ See John Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), esp Ch 10, pp. 275-312.

new period”.¹⁹ India’s Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Sureesh Mehta has argued that India must pursue its ‘manifest destiny’ by becoming a strong maritime power.²⁰

Conclusion

The fact that China and India attach lofty goals – ‘historic mission’ and ‘manifest destiny’ – to their maritime objectives would not necessarily lead to confrontation. However, the footprints of these two rising powers do overlap in the Indian Ocean. If the initial consequences of this were seen in the Eastern Indian Ocean, we now are seeing the first signs of a potential conflict in the Western Indian Ocean. There is no question that their search for political influence and maritime access is bound to increase the tensions between the two Asian giants. Before this competition becomes antagonistic, China and India must find ways to understand each other’s interests and concerns and embark on maritime confidence-building measures.

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¹⁹ David Lague, “China airs ambitions to beef up naval power”, *International Herald Tribune* (Singapore), 28 December 2006, p. 1.

²⁰ Sureesh Mehta, “Foreword”, in *Freedom to Use the Seas: India’s Maritime Military Strategy* (New Delhi: Ministry of Defence, 2007), p. iii.