

PAKISTAN'S NAVAL DIPLOMACY INITIATIVES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION (IOR)

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The Indian Ocean (IO) is the third-largest ocean in the world, covering around 20% of the Earth's water surface and is home to 2.7 billion people (1/3 of the total global population). It has 51 coastal and landlocked states including 26 Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) states, 5 Red Sea states, 4 Persian Gulf states, Saudi Arabia, France, Britain and 13 landlocked states. The Arabian Peninsula, bordering the Indian Ocean on the west, is the major source of global energy needs. Around 55% of the oil and 40% of the gas global reserves are in this region. The Indian Ocean also contain precious minerals and abundant food resources for future generations.

Pakistan also has legitimate maritime interests in the IOR as it is heavily dependent on maritime trade (91% of total imports and exports). Its area of interest is, although, beyond the IOR, but at the same time, it needs to exercise positive influence in the parts of the Indian Ocean to protect its vital maritime interests. At present, Pakistan, an energy-starved country, is heavily dependent on imported coal (from the Far East and South Africa) and oil and LNG (from the Middle East). Similarly, Pakistan also imports edible oil from the Far East. Pakistan's major trading partners are China, Japan, the EU and the Americas. With the development of Gwadar Port under CPEC and the China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Pakistani ports will be linked to the African Continent and the Arabian Peninsula through maritime bridges. These strategic developments need secure seas for commercial activity, for which the Pakistan Navy and Pakistan Maritime Security Agency have a role to play. This also entails that developmental plan for these two strategic assets of the Pakistan Armed Forces should be prepared well while keeping the challenges of modern times in mind.

Pakistan has always been at the forefront of global efforts to maintain peace and security at sea. Pakistan's contribution to maintaining peace in the North Arabian Sea, ensuring the free flow of Middle Eastern oil, is second to none. The Pakistan Navy has been a global partner in regional and extra-regional efforts since 2005 under US CTF arrangements. Pakistan has also been holding multi-national naval exercises "AMAN" since 2007 on a regular bi-annual basis. In addition, the Pakistan Navy (PN) has contributed significantly through "Naval Diplomacy" to strengthen its relations with other navies in the region and beyond. PN has also been instrumental in the development and training of most of the regional navies, especially those of the Middle East and Africa.

The IO is a center of geostrategic importance for global powers as well. IO will continue to seek global attention because of rising Chinese power potential, Indian global aspirations, and the US global strategic agenda. We also know that no single state can manage global affairs in the 21st century the way the British, French, or Portuguese empires did during the colonial period in IOR. This situation was well understood by Admiral Mahan of the USN when he said that "***Whoever controls the IO will dominate Asia; the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters***".

According to the Realist theorists, geopolitical realities are never static; thus, the balance of power keeps shifting and adjusting according to new developments. This reality has forced states to align with global peace initiatives where possible. IO has also seen the growth of different groups associated with the management of peace and development of IOR over the years. At present, 12 different organizations support these peace and development initiatives in the IOR. In addition, new developments like "QUAD" (the US, Australia, India &

Japan), "AUKUS", a new defense cooperation agreement between the USA, UK and Australia, US Indo-Pacific Policy and Indian global power ambitions are creating new challenges for peaceful communities of IOR.

On the other hand, Israel, a formidable Mediterranean maritime power, has also shown interest in the IO. Israel is cooperating with India, the USA, and some of the Muslim countries of the Middle East to gain a major role and foothold in the IO. Last year, India, Israel, the US and the UAE held a ministerial-level meeting and formed a joint working group to look after maritime security in the Indian Ocean in addition to many other issues. This new development, being dubbed as "New QUAD" is a serious development as it will have long term consequences for Pakistan's maritime interests, particularly in the North Arabian Sea.

US Navy (USN) has also been at the forefront in Naval Diplomacy to further their global interests. USN has been conducting bilateral/ trilateral naval exercises with regional countries on regular basis in the past. Now, US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) has launched a major multinational maritime exercise code-named "International Maritime Exercise 22 (IMX-22)", in which more than 60 states or organizations with 50 vessels and more than 9,000 personnel will participate. The main feature of this exercise is the inclusion of over 80 drones to focus on the use of new technology in naval warfare. This will arguably be the biggest assembly of naval platforms ever held at the global level. The exercise will be for 18 days and scheduled in the North Arabian Sea. All major regional / extra-regional naval powers, aligned with the US will participate including India and Israel.

Pakistan is also participating in the wargames as Deputy Commander of the whole activity – an honour indeed and acknowledgement of Pakistan Navy's professionalism and contribution to world peace. Such events provide opportunities and experiences; to sharpen naval warfare skills, understanding of modern trends and know-how about standards of other navies. Moreover, it is also extremely important for Pakistan to continue working with major global powers like USA, UK, and France for maintaining peace in the North Arabian Sea and beyond.

Unfortunately, some pseudo-intellectuals are creating a fuss about it as if Pakistan is directly engaging Israel, which is incorrect. First, Israel will participate in different theatres and Pakistan will be in other. Moreover, one cannot control the invitation list of main hosts. Thirdly, although Pakistan has not recognized Israel and is not likely to do in near future and thus, bi-lateral engagement is out of the question. In addition, Pakistan has been playing against Israel in the Olympics and other world events as well as participating in different world forums like the UN etc. on equal footing. Finally, opting out of such activity will certainly provide the enemy to fill in the vacuum created by us. It is, therefore, necessary to understand that noise over such petty issues without looking into the bigger picture is not in Pakistan's interests.

Participation of the PN in a multi-national global event is the need of the hour. Moreover, its participation will not be part of any US-China conspiracy activity nor any regional or religious agenda. Participation of PN is a simple Naval Diplomacy initiative to safeguard and promote Pakistan's Maritime Interests. PN participation as Deputy Commander is an honour, testimony of its excellence in the naval field and acknowledgement of its historical role as a provider of maritime security in the region, for which we should all be proud.

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