

India's Strategic Environment – No more limited just to the Indian ocean. India & Russia to sign the Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Agreement (RELOS)

Vikram Suhag

PHD candidate, Russian presidential academy of National economy and public administration RANEPА, Moscow

India's new strategic environment is being shaped by a rising China, particularly in the Indian Ocean region and South Asia. Till now, India has managed to keep a check due to a strategic lever and containment philosophy based around the control of choke points on the Sea lanes of communications (SLOC's) in the Indian Ocean namely, The Malacca Strait. Any Chinese misadventure in the disputed himalayan region up north could be negotiated in the Indian Ocean, as most of China's energy security is ensured by the said route from the Gulf countries through the Malacca Strait into the South China sea. A growing Chinese economy, a huge gap both in numbers and capability of the Naval assets has started to surface between the two Asian giants. Although, India is still better placed in terms of capability and spread of the Naval bases in the Indian ocean, growing Chinese naval capability and

the exploration of alternate routes to bypass the Malacca route through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Northern Sea Route (NSR) have in the recent years policy makers in India slightly concerned. While priorities and capabilities remain different, Beijing's expanding presence across the Indo-Pacific presents a common strategic challenge for Canberra, New Delhi, Tokyo, and Washington, all of whom have adopted their own interpretation of the Indo-Pacific strategy to manage a rising China in the region. Containment of China in the Indian Ocean region is paramount for the Indian establishment.

The increasing Chinese presence in the region makes partnerships with other countries in the Indo-Pacific region a key aspect to close the capability gap for the Indian Naval establishment. With partnerships being the central pillar of New Delhi's strategy, Australia, France, Japan, and the



United States emerged as New Delhi's natural choice. But the crucial point to consider here is India's management of its relationships with Iran, Russia, and the United Arab Emirates. Russia and India both have a different perception of Indo-Pacific and Russia being a key partner for India's security needs views this concept from a neo realist point of view, a concept put forth by the United States to change the otherwise normal regional order targeted towards China, China being a key strategic partner to Russia. One of the areas of Naval cooperation is Marine Domain Awareness (MDA) for India launched Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC), managed by the Indian Navy and Coast Guard. India also launched the Information Fusion Center for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), which acts as a regional MDA hub for the Indian ocean region (IOR) in December 2018. But all these are just pieces of the larger MDA puzzle. The real time interaction between platforms of different naval assets of different partner countries is important for an optimum solution. That is where logistics agreements like the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA, 2016), the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA, 2018), and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Cooperation (BECA, 2020) with the United States. Several such agreements in the past, concluded with countries including France, Australia and Japan.

The initiative to check the growing Chinese activity in the IOR is based on the overlapping interest of the United States and other partners.

But, with the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and the growing closeness of Russia and China in the economic and security domain, the increasing militarization of the Arctic, the threat perception of the partners involved in the Indo-Pacific may move to a different plain in the Northern Atlantic and the Arctic. India is uncomfortable with the proliferation in the Arctic, which may lead to a lack of focus from the United States in the Indo-Pacific. This in India's view may lead to China growing in capabilities unchecked both in the Indo-Pacific and the Arctic region. Till now, Russia has been the gatekeeper to the Arctic in the military sense when it comes to China. But, that may very well change based on the emerging US-Russia and US-China security environment and threat perception. For India, it's not just the US-China relationship, but also the US-Russia, EU-Russia, US-EU and Russia-China equation which is worth analysing. It is for these reasons from a security perspective that we can see India making a push for the Arctic not only from a scientific or climate related agenda or to secure its share of natural resources through Bilateral arrangements with the Arctic Littoral states. But, from a national security perspective, mainly to be present in every theatre where China is gaining a foothold, even if it is as far away as the Arctic. One such example of which can enable India to maintain rotational Naval presence in the Arctic to acquire domain awareness of the Arctic can be the Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Agreement (RELOS), which will enable India to access Russian Naval facilities in the Arctic region and the Indian Naval ports could be accessed by the Russian Navy.