

A 'PLA-N' for Chinese maritime bases in the Indian Ocean by Abhijit Singh

Abhijit Singh (abhijit.singh27@gmail.com) is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) at New Delhi and specializes in maritime security affairs.

After a PLA-Navy submarine docked twice in Colombo, Sri Lanka last year, there is anxiety among Indian analysts of a renewed thrust by China for a permanent military presence in the Indian Ocean. New Delhi's policy and strategic circles are abuzz with rumours of a likely [Chinese naval base](#) in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Following [reports](#) of increased Chinese naval activity off India's Southern maritime frontiers, New Delhi has even revived the proposal for an [Indian Ocean Zone of Peace](#), in the hope that it would discourage Beijing from adopting a proactive maritime policy in the Indian Ocean.

Chinese maritime forays in the IOR aren't a new phenomenon. For some time Beijing has been trying to expand its strategic footprint in the Indian Ocean. The increasing frequency of Chinese anti-piracy deployments and naval exercises, as well as growing investments in maritime infrastructure projects have burnished China's image as a maritime player in the region. Yet, thus far, it seemed unlikely China had plans for establishing naval bases.

The recent spurt in Chinese naval exercises in the Indian Ocean, however, has led to whispers of a more pre-emptive PLA-N strategy. A string of naval deployments – [including one](#) with the 20,000-ton amphibious ship, the *Chengbaishan*, and another involving a [nuclear submarine](#) – has provided evidence that Beijing has its sights set on dominating the Indian Ocean. As a consequence, Chinese maritime basing in the Indian Ocean is no longer a strategic contingency to be taken lightly.

The first, in a set of revealing events, is the recent [docking](#) of a Chinese submarine at Colombo. While there was much discussion of the geopolitical implications of the visit, key operational [details](#) escaped critical analysis. It is noteworthy, for instance, that the Chinese submarine did not dock at the Sri Lanka Port Authority (SLPA) berths in Colombo – mandated to accommodate military vessels – but at the Colombo South Container Terminal (CSCT), a deep-water facility built, controlled and run by a Chinese company, the China Merchants Holdings (International). The CSCT may be well-suited for submarine dockings, but it is also a “Chinese enclave” within a Sri Lankan administered harbor. The presence of the Chinese submarine at the CSCT constituted a violation of protocol, but Sri Lankan authorities were reluctant to describe it as such. The SLPA chairman's explanation that the submarine needed the extra-depth at the CSCT seemed implausible, considering that the *Ming*-class diesel-electric's

limited draft rendered it apt for berthing at any of the available SLPA facilities. Moreover, as commentators [pointed out](#), the submarine visit was preceded by the docking of two other Chinese naval vessels at CSCT that Colombo tried hard to keep out of the media glare. This strengthens Indian suspicions that PLA-N assets are being allowed privileged access to Sri Lankan ports funded by Chinese investments.

Colombo is not the only Sri Lankan port with an exclusively Chinese facility. China also has a controlling stake at Hambantota port, where according to [media reports](#) Sri Lanka has agreed to grant Chinese state-owned companies operating rights to four berths in exchange for an easing of loan conditions. Apparently, Colombo handed over control of the port to China without issuing a commercial tender, a fact that took many in the shipping industry by surprise.

Similarly, in [Maldives](#), the Ihavandhippolhu Integrated Development Project, or iHavan, reportedly rides on huge concessional loans and aid financing from China. The loans, apparently, have been awarded at such a high rate of interest that Male is almost certain to default, unless it is offered some kind of unilateral waiver. Yet, it is exactly what Beijing is expected to do, as part of a now established formula of relaxing loan conditions in exchange for control over maritime projects it helps finance.

This raises troubling questions about the motive behind China's Maritime Silk Route, an umbrella term referring to maritime infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific region. Beijing, denies that the plan is a rebranding exercise for an existing “string of pearls” strategy aimed at encircling India. Still, with an impending [\\$40 billion dollar investment plan](#), it seems highly unlikely China would have assumed responsibility for the onerous projects without the promise of future strategic gains.

Beijing has been in fire-fighting mode ever since a [news report appeared in the Namibian](#) in November 2014 alleging the existence of Chinese plan for naval bases in the Indo-Pacific region and the west coast of Africa. A Chinese government spokesperson claimed the report borrowed liberally from a commentary in a Chinese state-controlled news portal in February 2013 that advised the PLAN to build overseas bases and protect its energy line in the Indian Ocean. There is some truth to this contention.

What is more pertinent, however, is that the original article not only outlined a blueprint for the establishment of 18 Chinese “Overseas Strategic Support Bases” in the IOR, but also recommended three specific categories of such facilities: fueling and material supply bases for peacetime use (Djibouti, Aden, and Salalah); relatively fixed supply bases for warship berthing, fixed-wing reconnaissance aircraft and the naval staff ashore rest (Seychelles); and fully functional centers for replenishment, rest and large warship weapons maintenance

(Gwadar in Pakistan). Describing the precise nature and functions of the future bases, the commentary suggested a methodology for acquiring the facilities. Access to fixed supply bases – as being planned in Seychelles – it said, could be gained by signing short-term or medium-term agreements, while the “fully functional centers” in Pakistan and other IOR states needed medium-and long-term MoUs.

It is the possibility of Chinese dual-use bases in the IOR that deserves the most attention. A commercial facility with low-level logistical support capability, a dual-use base is a risk-free way of establishing maritime presence in a region of interest. In 2013, Beijing is said to have [expressed an interest](#) in such a facility at Gwadar, thus validating claims that China may be looking for a low-level military presence in the IOR. Modern dual-use maritime facilities aren't completely benign assets. As a recent US National Defense University [report](#) pointed out, a powerful nation like China has the ability to upgrade a commercial port to support military operations in conflict scenarios, and even use it as a cover for construction of secret munitions stockpiles and other port infrastructure. It is possible, therefore, that Beijing might be contemplating agreements that offer it the right to properly militarize dual-use facilities in times of conflict.

A “dual-use” base is also what China appears to be pursuing in Seychelles. In 2011, it was widely reported that [Seychelles has offered China maritime basing](#) for its ships deployed to the Gulf of Aden and the West Indian Ocean to combat piracy. While Beijing was quick to deny the existence of such a plan, it did not exclude the possibility of an overseas supply point, fanning fears that it desired a more permanent military presence in the IOR.

China's pitch for benign security in the Indian Ocean appears to be an attempt to convince Indian Ocean states of the need for Chinese support and security arrangements. It is critical for the PLA-N to have a system of assured logistics, refueling, repair and replenish facilities in the Indian Ocean that would enable sustain operations over a prolonged period. A sustained “maritime presence” in the Indian Ocean Region, however, is all Beijing needs to strategically dominate the region. The ready availability of PLA-N assets for maritime security tasks has the potential to take the regional security initiative away from India. Not only would a Chinese naval presence in the IOR challenge the Indian Navy's primacy as a net-security provider, it would also erode India's strategic influence in the region.

A permanent PLA-N presence in the IOR without conventional “naval bases” could be a strategic master-stroke by Beijing, leaving New Delhi all at sea.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.