

Maritime Power Play in the Indian Ocean and Challenges for Pakistan Navy

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ABSTRACT

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While broadly highlighting developing maritime power tussles underway due to cooperation and competition between and/or among regional and extra regional maritime stakeholders in western quadrant of the Indian Ocean the research explores multifaceted internal and external challenges that Pakistan Navy is likely to face. Mainly, challenges that have emerged with the navy's extended role and responsibilities in the aftermath of projects like Gwadar port development and maturing of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are of serious concern. For, successful completion and subsequent sustainability of these projects is highly dependent upon secured maritime zone. The internal challenges include sea blindness, budgeting constraints to infrastructural upgradation and expansion, infiltration issues that surfaced within navy and domestic security issues to the CPEC. Whereas likely external challenges are conventional threats due to technological gaps with the traditional rival i.e., Indian Navy, probability, and intensity of non-conventional hybrid maritime threats and above all growing nuclearization that could result in regional instability. To counter such a wide and diverse array of challenges frequent evaluation and assessment of war and peace time roles of Pakistan Navy is required by strategic policy makers.

Keywords

Maritime, Indian Ocean, Pakistan Navy, China Pakistan Economic Corridor, Gwadar Port, Naval Power

Introduction

Maritime power play in the era of globalization is creating greater opportunities and at the same time vulnerabilities emerging from different challenges for all the involved players. In the globalized world, strategic dynamics of the Indian Ocean have also changed considerably for concerned players. Apart from the growing strategic relevance of its critical maritime chokepoints, vital ports, and primary sea lines of communications (SLOCs) it is characterized by increasing trends of naval engagement between extra-regional sea powers and regional sea powers. These engagements are indirectly multiplying naval capabilities of the regional ones.

Persistent maritime developments by China and India to gain strategic influence in the

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Indian Ocean Region (IOR), mobilized by their increased maritime interests as well as perceived maritime threats prompted the US to redesign its security strategy. (Kapoor & Bajpai, 2014, p. 1) The underlying cause was to prolong the US' decades old regional maritime pre-eminence and maintenance of existent regional maritime order. Thus, defense cooperation with India was perceived inevitable among the US' policy circles. (National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2017, p. 46) As the two have expanded their naval collaborations, China has also extended its naval tentacles with likeminded players. Pakistan Navy (PN) thus has naturally joined hands with its Chinese counterpart.

The article shall focus that how this naval brinkmanship is likely to influence regional maritime domain particularly the western IOR and what lies ahead for PN. For, the latter cannot afford to remain insulated to a maritime scenario, that is going to shape with jostling of these maritime power brokers viz., the US, China, and India. Emerging scenario indicates that the western quadrant of the IOR will become increasingly important and complex maritime arena from a geostrategic standpoint. Therefore, while drawing a sketch of future regional maritime power play the article shall also illuminate certain internal and external challenges that can influence PN's regional position and maritime interests in both geopolitical and geostrategic scenarios.

The Evolving Maritime Power Play

Power tussles advanced in the Indian Ocean, by jostling of regional and extra-regional naval forces are in a state of flux. Augmenting sea power potential and its projection seems a dominant shade of stakeholder states' policies. Despite the fact that the US' net defense spending outweighs spending of next ten states ("U.S. Defense Spending Compared to Other Countries: The United States Spends More on Defense than the next 10 Countries Combined," 2020) combined, developing naval capabilities of China have somewhat checked the US' uncontested supremacy in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain. To avoid likely undesired repercussions linked with Beijing's rising maritime capabilities, the US Navy (USN) has consolidated its ties with the Indian Navy (IN) with expectations of a larger role for the latter beyond the IOR. Developments unleashed in aftermath of the Indo-US strategic partnership for instance, signing of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), White Shipping Agreement, Information Exchange Annex and sharing of cutting-edge technology are certain epic examples of collaboration between the two. This is mutually beneficial for USN-IN. Malabar and now QUAD exercises are manifestation. IN needs latest technology, platforms, and operational combat capability developments; USN desires to checkmate China and outsource its tasks to IN.

The IN has fully utilized its maritime alignment with the US and yet it continues to strive for its dream of uncontested dominance in the Indian Ocean. In spite of Washington's carte blanche and the New Delhi profound determination for such dominance; with gradually improving operational capacities, the IN is still long way from enjoying blue water status, let alone, to enjoy the complete dominance. Not at least, the way the navy dreams i.e., without foreign support or reliance upon overseas dependence for platforms equipment etc. Palpable difference between aspirations, quantitative indicators, operational capability, and readiness

suggests it will take more time to attain the said goal. (Singh, 2018)

Nonetheless, maritime experts believe that by 2025, the IN will be able to project substantial power and presence between the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca, if not beyond. In addition to the existent nuclear submarines and an operational carrier, another carrier and an SSBN are likely to be fielded. (Philip, 2020) Hence, the growing fleet capabilities will be helpful in honing sea control skills of the navy.

PN perceives that to ensure Pakistan's maritime interests, it will have to prove its capability to contend (the IN's) such designs of sea control in the western Indian Ocean, especially, in case of any contingency. With the given pace of development and likelihood of increasing collaboration with the PLA Navy, PN assumes that it will be able to limit the IN's ability to exercise sea control to the latter's territorial waters.

For, the expansion of Beijing's maritime footing in the western quadrant and engagement with PN, especially, in context of the Gwadar port and CPEC has become inevitable strand of the PLA Navy's Indian Ocean policy. Resultantly, PN is likely to avail the opportunity further not only to polish its combat power potential, but also to counterweigh the expected Indian designs. Thus, ensure stability in its area of responsibility (AoR). Though small, PN's credence has undergone an upward trend in terms of strategy, tactics and preparedness. (Shafei Moiz Hali, 2013) Thus, its presence as a formidable force will continue to be felt in large parts of the western Indian Ocean. (Muhammad Azam Khan & Aijaz, 2012, p. 50)

Against this backdrop, it would not be farfetched to expect an intense competitive scenario that shall further engage extra-regional and regional players. The CPEC apparently an economic project nonetheless has strategic undercurrents which seems a response to the expanding US Navy-IN alliance in the Indian Ocean. (M. A. Khan, 2017, p. 54) This power balancing has pushed the region into a complex security framework where interests of the states are intertwined. This expedited maritime power play is likely to generate following trends:

- i. The US's policies will continue to impact the strategic maritime trajectory of the region.
- ii. The IN is likely to demonstrate its dominance in the Indian Ocean, at least, between the Straits of Malacca and Hormuz. However, it shall need USN combat potential behind it even in this geographical area.
- iii. Chinese and Indian struggles to gain more political clout in the Indian Ocean and possible investments for future naval bases will further augment.
- iv. Spike in commercial and economic interests will force Beijing to expand its naval muscle in the IOR. Hence, its maritime capabilities and blue water potential are likely to strengthen further.
- v. PN is likely to further expand its networking with likeminded navies, mainly, China.

- vi. Sophisticated maritime weapons and technology sharing ventures are likely to expand further.
- vii. From time to time, non-traditional threats especially, natural disasters and non-state actors can surface that shall further destabilize the region.

In addition to that, ominous consequences of the US-Iran standoff that have persistently threatened the shipping plying in the region, current conflicts in Afghanistan, Yemen and Syria are also impinging upon security on the high seas. Any disruption in the maritime zone could trigger shock waves across the entire region.

Challenges for Pakistan Navy(PN)

It is against the aforementioned backdrop that PN must cater for Pakistan's maritime interests. Despite its honing sea power tendencies and increasing prospects of cooperation with the PLA Navy there remain several internal and external challenges in its way. These will be discussed in the ensuing paragraphs.

Internal Challenges

Sea/Maritime Blindness

The term refers to a policy/behavior in which large segment of governments and populace remain oblivion of maritime potential and subsequently lack any maritime vision for their state/region. The ignorance remains manifested in their inability to appreciate the central role the oceans and sea power can play in securing strategic security and economic prosperity objectives of the state. (Tempest, 2014) This inability ultimately, reflects in defense and economic policy choices of such states. Generally, all maritime states suffer the challenge, nevertheless, its impacts unfold in variant degrees in their economic and defense domain.

Sea blindness is one of the foremost challenges that PN faces internally. However, what remains unusual in Pakistan's case is the fact that relatively higher degree of perennial sea blindness dominated defense policies, longer than expected, owing much to its colonial legacy. In spite of the strategic blow of 1971, that immediately required revamping of the state's strategic policies and priorities in accordance with its maritime geography. However, this did not take place. Despite the fact that it became inevitable. For, findings of the Hamood-ur-Rahman Commission Report clearly highlighted a weak navy as one of the major contributory factor in the Fall of Dhaka and recommended measures for upgradation of naval armada. ("Hamoodur Rahman Comm. Rep.," 1974)

Subsequent decades however, continuously witnessed PN's struggle to 'create' its space in national power potential and vie for some organizational strength at par with its sister services. (Siddiqa-Agha, 2001, p. 159) Later, the IN's strategic intimidation at seas during the 1999 conflict was albeit checked, it confirmed the perils that lie ahead, had the sea blindness in strategic mindset continued further. Apart from that relatively poor strategic appreciation of maritime security environment by multiple military regimes, politico-bureaucratic class

remained a major contributor in maritime blindness.

Similarly, in socio-economic spheres of the country near absence of maritime awareness and maritime vision is still disappointing. Of late, the former Pakistani Naval Chief pointed out in an interview, that the current percentage of maritime potential of Pakistan is believed to be a “suboptimal realization” of actual maritime potential the country deserves. Subsequently, it hinders development of a “maritime culture” in the country. (Ansari, 2020)

The sea blindness has taken its toll on Pakistan’s economic development. The economic prosperity of the country could have been improved substantially, had the potential of marine economy or blue economy had been explored.

Likewise, intelligentsia and public policy makers also mired in continental thinking largely paid no heed to potential of maritime sector and blue economy. Either it remained neglected or altogether missing discourse in the mainstream academic, policy making and debating circles. It is relatively a recent development owing much to the CPEC, that the subject gathered some attention among academia, intelligentsia, media and political community. (S. Saghir, 2017a)

Considering its peace time maritime obligation, PN however, made constant efforts over the decades, to counter this land fixation and expand its public outreach to develop acquaintance of maritime awareness at grass root level. Certain consequential initiatives in this regard include moving of PN War College from Karachi to Lahore, holding increased interaction with academia, conducting seminars aimed at disseminating knowledge of oceanic affairs in collaboration with public sector universities are remarkable. Further, Maritime Security Workshops intended to engage policy makers, academicians, and senior civil bureaucrats about maritime sector its potential and challenging prospects were also designed to bolster the significance of national maritime sector. (S. Saghir, 2017b) This policy is also perceived as one of the stated objectives of launching the Maritime Doctrine of Pakistan (MDP).

Although gradual realization of this paucity in the strategic polices has been slightly acknowledged, and somewhat cured too, especially, in the aftermath of post-9/11 maritime security concerns. Moreover, the induction of sea-based leg of strategic deterrence has somewhat amended the perspective of PN merely being a junior partner among other wings of military force.

Realization of PN’s role, development and required modernization of its fleet, in the wake of CPEC and Gwadar was endorsed by national forum held to discuss revised national maritime policy. (“New Maritime Policy and Renewal of Navy Need of the Hour,” 2017) Another recent development that appeared in 2020, as silver lining was notification issued by the present government that declared the year “2020 as the year of blue economy” to focus more on developing the country’s marine economy. Although the step is appreciable, it will remain unable to produce desired level of outcome unless government authorities would get rid of the sea blindness in letter and spirit. The red-tapism and lacklustre approach evident from

the fact that revised national maritime policy was not finalized until 2018. Despite the fact that it was drafted by 2009 and blatant negligence of Maritime Zones Act after the 18th Amendment do not paint a very promising picture. (Alam, 2020)

Moreover, impacts of the pandemic i.e., COVID-19, have also slowed down the economy. Like other sectors of economy, it badly hit the maritime sector and shipping industry too, as well as, the supply chains that depend on it. However, at least, initially no productive policy framework for the maritime sector was tabled for emergency handling. (D. Saghir, 2020) The picture portrayed hints that lack of maritime culture and deep rooted sea blindness would not abate any time soon. To what extent PN can further counter this cognitive approach, by utilizing its evolving significance in the context of CPEC related changing maritime economic and security dynamics, appears as a real challenge in near future.

Budgetary Constraints

Another major internal challenge for PN would be to get budgetary share in accordance with its threat perceptions. This has markedly enhanced due to the current maritime power play, operationalization of Pakistan's significant geostrategic Gwadar port and the CPEC. Moreover, in 2015, after acceptance of Pakistan's claims at the UNCLOS, now, the state is entitled to have total 350 nautical miles' area as its EEZ. This has naturally increased PN's AoR up to 290,000 sq.km, in comparison to the previous 240,000 sq.km.(Humayun, 2014)

In that scenario, Admiral Muhamad Zakaullah-the then Naval Chief's demand made in 2016 to enhance PN's share, at least 15% in the defense budget seems reasonable.(Report of the Senate Standing Committee on Defense: Visit & Meetings of Senate Standing Committee on Defense at Pakistan Navy Installations Karachi, Ormara and Gwadar, 2016, p. 5) However, data gathered from various sources confirmed that in any case, present naval share in defense allocations can be estimated approximately between 10-12% of the total defense budget.

Moreover, the fact also remains intact that new naval technologies and equipment are always more cost intensive than other military ventures. As also pointed out in an interview by the former Naval Chief Admiral Zafar Mehmood Abbasi that with "limited budgets available, acquisition of contemporary technologies becomes a defining restraint" for PN modernization. Apparently, he was confident that such restraints would be tackled "in concert with national stakeholders and international partners" (Ansari, 2020). Probably, the latter is a clear reference to Chinese. Nonetheless, track record shows that budget constraints as major internal challenge would continue to haunt PN, in the following years.

Despite Pakistan's bleak economic situation and further financial setbacks due to the COVID-19, a colossal amount of 1,289bn/\$7.8bn was allocated to defense in the budget year 2020-21.(Anis, 2020) However, the clear hegemony that ground forces enjoy both, in form of their lion's share in budgetary allocations, and in form of political influence that they exercise upon Pakistan's fragile civil regimes/political setup endorse that there is a rare possibility that even in next few years, PN's share would be even closer to the percentage the former CNS demanded during 2016.

Infiltration Challenges

Another major internal front that PN must cater for is to assess and neutralize possibilities of infiltration threats from radical elements that allegedly expanded its tentacles within PN cadres in the past. Two such incidents discussed in the ensuing paragraphs are enough to identify gravity of the daunting challenge.

Back in 2011, naval intelligence traced presence of certain Al Qaeda affiliates operating covertly within the naval cadres. This led to massive internal crackdown and intelligence operations against the group that allegedly was planning to sabotage the military forces' War on Terror led coalition with the US. Reportedly, ten individuals were arrested in a series of operations by the naval intelligence for further interrogation. However, it led to burgeoning of a series of troubles, as the terrorist retaliated, probably, fearing that investigation would unmask more Al Qaeda loyalists in the naval cadres.

To avoid the possibility, the investigative authorities were threatened by the Al Qaeda that they must release the detainees or face dire consequences, such as, attacks on naval instalments. The tide of events allegedly led to opening of a 'dialogue' between the naval bigwigs and Al Qaeda. However, terms could not be settled between the two sides and as a warning sign the latter eventually expressed its wrath by attacking naval buses in April 2011. (Shahzad, 2011)

Subsequently, scale of the interrogation was further widened, eventually, leading to a major terrorist offensive launched at the PNS Mehran Naval Airbase that costed PN loss of at least two P-3C Orion aircrafts and various other sensitive depots.(F. Khan, 2011) Not only that circumstantial evidences hinted so but also security experts believed that the attack on naval base had overwhelming similitude with the GHQ attack (2009) that became possible only after the inside involvement. ("No Lessons Learnt after GHQ Attack," 2011) Initial findings of the inquiry board set to probe the incident also suspected that the inside job may not "necessarily just be on the navy's part, but also the air force" whose personnel visibly did not timely engage the attackers, thus substantiated the earlier claims.(Jawad, 2011)

Later, in September 2014, another such incident was reported when a group of rogue naval officers attempted to seize important locations of Karachi naval dockyard. Reportedly, the attackers had planned to hijack a warship, PNS-Zulfiqar that was scheduled to sail and join an international flotilla in the Indian Ocean. (Panda, 2014) Aimed to attack the US Navy's patrol vessels in the Indian Ocean, the attempt thus was planned to sabotage the US-Pakistan relations by blowing up Americans at sea. Whereas, the IN was also reported as a potential target. (Hassan & Houreld, 2014)

Although the attack was thwarted, at least, four naval officials were killed, in addition to mastermind Jakhani (former sub-lieutenant) and his Al Qaeda affiliated accomplices which also included at least, two serving sub-lieutenants. Khawaja Asif-the then Defense Minister told the Parliament those attackers could only have "breached security with inside help". Two days after the failed raids, three serving lieutenant commanders were also captured from

Quetta, allegedly, while they were trying to flee to Afghanistan. (Shah, 2019)

Subsequent inquiries led to crackdown against further suspected accomplices. Media reports surfaced in 2016, highlighted that the case led to at least five (all naval officers) suspects' death sentence ordered by PN inquiry tribunal. However, lawyer of the suspects' avowed to file an appeal against the decision. ("PNS Zulfiqar Case: Five Navy Officers Sentenced to Death," 2016)

These incidents appeared concerning for several reasons. First, they obviously questioned PN's professional credibility. For, the force was perceived incapable of looking after its own apparatus and appeared vulnerable to the threatening infiltration by the hardliner groups. Second, it created an uneasy rift if not complete trust deficit between PN and its foreign partners (then mainly the US). If the navy aspires to further escalate its ties with likeminded navies, mainly, the PLA Navy, the force will have to address this challenge on priority basis. And third, difficulties to maintain physical and procedural constraints and centralized command when nukes are deployed on submarines are high. Thus, prevention of invalid or unwanted use of nuclear weapons becomes more challenging.

Apparently, it seems that PN is somewhat cognizant of this critical responsibility, already. For, the MDP, clearly demonstrates that the service will ensure both, active and passive initiatives to achieve its objective of force protection. While the former shall focus upon all offensive measures to "prevent, deter, and respond to sub-conventional threats" through "pre-emptive, retaliatory and rescue operations, the latter will be entirely focused upon "anti-extremism and anti-terrorism" programs to "reverse negative ideological influences and reduce vulnerability to acts of terrorism". The defensive/passive measures will ensure the "basis for an effective fight against terrorism", it further maintains. The document proclaims that the policy is manifested in hiring of "religious and motivational officers".(Maritime Doctrine of Pakistan: Preserving Freedom of Seas, 2018, p. 154)

Albeit the policy is quite natural, for, military forces around the globe draw their moral motivation from religious/ideological sources, it is really like walking a thin line. After all, it was religious indoctrination instilled in the 80s, that later resulted in fomenting extremist tendencies in Pakistan. And its repercussions have been identified in the foregoing.

The forces previously inimical to PN's collaboration with the US, and effectively used religion card to sabotage their naval ties, can easily turn against its coalition with the PLA Navy (or any other navy), if they find it suitable to their vested interests. Especially, China's growing tensions with its Uighurs Muslim minority (Carrie Gracie, 2017) can provide such hardliners 'ample' reasons to act and put Pakistan in trouble. Therefore, constant evaluative measures to ensure that no hardliner tendency could gain room in future will be helpful to avoid any complexities.

The Gwadar Port and CPEC Security-the Internal Dimension

A wide range of militant religious outfits, both local and transnationals have remained

engaged in targeting natives, foreign engineering personnel working at the Gwadar port and CPEC project as well as in destruction of construction sites.(Javaid, 2016, p. 265) Creeping footprints of such militant outfits and growing resentment of nationalist groups have raised both states concerns, that resulted in formation of a Special Security Division.(Iqbal, 2017) Besides, possible range of threats to the Gwadar port and commercial activities in Gwadar's sea waters and coastal zone may include human, arms and drug trafficking in commercial containers, hijacking of ships, attacks on vessels carrying Petro-chemical commodities, oil/LNG, sabotage of onshore facilities of the port; example LNG terminal, miscreants taking control of land around the port, illegal fishing. (Iftikhar, 2016)

All these aspects demand an effective maritime security mechanism that could ensure capabilities essential for combating threats that are transnational in nature. Dismantling such challenges inevitably demand strengthening of maritime security, that is PN's ultimate liability. PN entrusted with the Gwadar port security in 2015, not only commissioned a Task Force-88 to effectively perform its calling but also established an exclusive Force Protection Battalion consisting of Pakistan Marines for the protection of Gwadar Port and the Chinese personnel. (Shaukat, 2016) As it was mandatory not only to secure Pakistan's economic interests but also deemed as a pre-requisite for consolidating Pakistan-China future ties.

For, Beijing is much considerate about "stable surroundings" essential to prevent the terrorist threat in its western border areas. Its strategy aims at deterring "three forces i.e., violent terrorist forces, ethnic separatist forces and religious extremist forces" from gaining momentum and penetrating China. Chinese officials also believe that the factors have become detrimental to construction of infrastructural projects, especially, the CPEC. Reportedly, China's augmenting concerns that all three of the said forces have joined hands and "concentrated in Pakistan along the continental channel from Kashi of Xinjiang to Gwadar Port of Pakistan" and related security challenges cannot be ignored. (Zhu, 2018, p. 117) Thus, it is very likely that enhanced efforts on part of PN in terms of CPEC related internal security issues will enhance further.

It is also worth mentioning that Chinese investments are largely unevenly distributed across Pakistan's class ridden society. Much of the benefits expected from development of the Gwadar and the CPEC project are likely to benefit the already well-established elite class. Thus, many among the historically, deprived and marginalized Baloch ethnic groups perceive the CPEC as another exploitative raw deal, unlikely to offer them any economic development or social welfare dividends that commensurate with its costs, which inter alia included population displacement and environmental degradation. Moreover, certain opaque terms and conditions of successive governments' deals with their Chinese counterparts has rendered critics to grumble about China as a new "East India Company," i.e. simply old wine of imperialism in new bottle.(Markey, 2020) Therefore, in addition to Baloch nationalists some mainstream political parties like Pakistan Tehreek Insaf (the ruling party opposed it before holding office) Awami National Party, and Jamiat Ulema Islam (F) expressed their resentments about the political baggage that comes with such infrastructural projects.(Abid & Ashfaq, 2015, pp. 151–152)

To mitigate long-standing political grievances that straddle among various factions of society, more than military approach is required. Hence, to counter these internal challenges effectively, PN with other stakeholders can play its part by engaging the locals and constructing an all-inclusive narrative. Otherwise, the already ripened socio-economic disparities will continue to slurp PN's efforts and resources.

External Challenges

Largely, source of all major external threats/challenges that PN is likely to face stem from India. Its various dimensions will be explored in the following section.

Technological/Hardware Challenges Against the IN's Fast Paced Naval Modernization

The IN's fast-paced naval modernization is heavily linked to its growing closeness with the US' naval forces. Apart from its drive to induct more nuclear submarines and nuclear tipped missiles, it is quest for other hypersonic weapons and platforms like P8I aircrafts, multirole helicopters, aircraft carriers and communication technologies that are likely to further increase conventional gap between the two forces. Launch of various mega-fleet development plans, reportedly, designed to match Chinese capabilities, for instance, the 30-year submarine building plan aimed to build 24 submarines, 18 conventional and 6 nuclear (Sandeep Unnithan, 2018) are an equal matter of concern for PN.

Available estimates indicate that the IN possessed a five to one quantitative advantage over its South Asian counterpart. Maritime analysts contend that PN's profound capabilities of sea denial and anti-access strategy have the potential to blunt the IN's capacity to project naval power in certain limited quadrants of the Arabian Sea. However, with increasing numerical gap between both, the former's ability is going to erode rapidly over time. Although Pakistan has tried to assuage the IN's conventional coercive edge with deliberate "strategic ambiguity" induced by commingling of its nuclear missiles with conventional platforms. (Rehman, 2018, p. 244) In a longer run, this is not going to serve Islamabad's stakes well. For, LEMOA (2016), Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (2020), Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (2018), naval base in Duqm Oman etc. all of these provide India/IN real time advantage in any war besides 24/7 monitoring of key SLOCs.

Subsequently, in spite of Pakistan's poor economic indicators, neglected maritime sector, and PN's smallest pie in the defence budget, the force will have to set some minimum threshold for its conventional purchases. Even, to retain its conventional gap with the adversary at minimum possible level would place it on a tightrope. Experts believe that implications of the growing Indo-US' maritime partnership (technological cooperation and modernization plans) will badly impact PN's stakes. Thus, challenges are going to rise for the latter.

The Gwadar Port and CPEC Security-the External Dimension

Initially, India was the only state that overtly opposed the CPEC, apparently, on grounds that its route also passes through the disputed territory. (Khurana, 2019, p. 29) Of late, however, the US also started backing the opposition, due to its apprehensions of China's

expanding foothold in the Indian Ocean.

More broadly, the deliberations behind the Indian opposition also stem from its leadership's own hegemonic aspirations in the Indian Ocean. For, New Delhi sees the project as China's encroachment in an area 'meant' to be India's traditional sphere of influence and seems weary that a China-backed Pakistan could be encouraged to pursue even more aggressive anti-Indian stance. Combine these threat perceptions with the Indian leadership's pugnacious approach towards Pakistan has resulted in heightened regional competition and a greater chance of violent conflict. (Markey, 2017) Another reason of India's opposition to the CPEC is the belief that China's intentions are driven more by geopolitical ambitions rather than geoeconomics. (Sharma, 2019, p. 146)

Indeed, the project has potential to pose formidable challenges to the India's competing maritime interests in the Central Asia. Moreover, it is reported that the development of Gwadar Port and subsequent PN - PLA Navy cooperation that it shall actuate, will enable both navies to track any movement on the mouth of Persian Gulf, even monitor the Indo-US maritime activities in the Indian Ocean. (Maqsood, 2017)

The threatening repercussions of external opposition to the CPEC are ultimately to shape regional maritime geopolitics. As the former Defense Minister Khawaja Asif stated while addressing a gathering at the Jinnah Naval Base, that success of the port and CPEC depends upon the IOR's "secure maritime environment" particularly, the Arabian Sea. (Panneerselvam, 2017, p. 41)

After all, it was no coincidence that after operationalization of the port, when first shipments from China started arriving in November 2016, it met with the IN's submarine sneaking close to Pakistani waters. Possibly, on reconnaissance and intelligence mission. (M. A. Khan, 2016) Against this backdrop, Pakistan's Secretary Defense assertion that the RAW Head Quarters has established a "special cell" to sabotage the CPEC project (Haider, 2016) have some reasonable weightage.

Of late, the CPEC project has entered in its second phase (Malik, 2019) which is likely to boost regional connectivity. The forces inimical to the regional integration would, however, endeavour to disrupt it further. Therefore, PN will have to maintain in fact increase its guarding efforts. Once the project would become fully operational, PN's responsibility as a security provider and torch bearer of Pakistan's maritime defense would augment further. As, it will further invoke the very traditional role between navies and maritime trade.

Rapid Nuclearization of the Indian Ocean Maritime Zone: Destabilizing Regional Stability and Security

The Indian Ocean's nuclearization by major powers to gain strategic superiority through nuclear submarines is relatively old. The USSR safeguarded unauthorized or accidental launch of its Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles by attaching "electromechanical locks to missiles", while the US preferred pre-delegation option. This means that

the latter provided de facto authority to submarine commanders to fire nuclear missiles. (Akhtar, 2019)

However, the recent wave of naval nuclearization manifests little clarity on how the regional players actively engaged in the nuclear race are going to deal with this issue. Subsequent scenario has rendered the regional maritime environment more precarious. Thus, disrupted regional stability and security. For, it is already a 'maritime battleground' for geopolitical contest through naval competition among littoral states. Independently developing nuclear security dilemma between China-India and India- Pakistan has intensified chances of the nuclear competition.

New Delhi's decision to develop and deploy sea-based nukes which arguably triggered this nuclear rivalry in the maritime domain is largely 'perceived' as a balancing act i.e., to ensure credible subsurface deterrence against China. However, this has gruesome repercussions for the stability of deterrence between Pakistan and India. While addressing a moot on this issue, Pakistan's former Minister for Economic Affairs-Hammad Azhar rightly pointed out that nuclearization of a common maritime heritage like, the Indian Ocean, is a "matter of concerns not only for the regional countries but also for the rest of the world." (Hussain, 2019)

Given the already flimsy nature of the two states' relations, the naval nuclearization is but aggravating the situation in the western Indian Ocean. The same concerns are expressed by other security experts, as a clear majority believes that this nuclearization drive is going to further undermine security at sea. Unlike land or air, the sea-based nukes demand devolution of authority to field commanders, which could create considerable risks due to increased chances of miscalculations and accidental use, especially, if submarine communications get choked. This has considerably lowered the nuclear threshold among the South Asian neighbors. (Brewster, 2015) Islamabad based nuclear security expert Dr. Zafar Jaspal remarked that with the nuclearization of the Indian Ocean, "both states have now crossed the threshold". ("Nuclearisation of Indian Ocean Pushing Pakistan , India Closer to War: Report," 2018) Likewise, another expert Dr. Maria Sultan-chairperson and DG South Asian Strategic Studies Institute, is of the view that New Delhi's approach of nuclearization in the Indian Ocean has placed South Asia's regional stability "under tremendous threat".(Hussain, 2019)

Some analysts still argue that sea-based nuclear weapons can contribute somewhat positively to maintain regional strategic stability. However, largely, many agree that in case of the Indian Ocean, it depends upon nature of maritime states' bilateral relations. Some likelihood of normalization/improvement of relationships over time is perceived as a hint to expect downward trend in nuclear rivalry. (Qadir & Rehman, 2017, p. 75) However, historical record of both states coupled with the incumbent Indian leadership's hawkish approach explains that in this case such hopes are extremely rare.

Due to both states' maritime geography and the IN's vivid aspirations to expand its reach to the Strait of Hormuz, likelihood of the IN and PN interactions with each other's platform have increased multifold. In fact, such incidents had already been reported when their

naval platforms came into close contact and brushed past each other. Such contact was recorded between PN's warship "PNS Babur" and India's "INS Godavari" in 2011. Such contacts if occur during a crisis or heightened tensions can lead to "inadvertent attacks" on each other's platform. For, chances of human error in assessment of intentions and capabilities of maritime aircraft or a ship operating at close range are fairly high. (Mian et al., 2019)

What further aggravate the situation is the fact that policy of commingling nuclear and conventional platforms on both sides is evidently being followed, that can also trigger Armageddon, even inadvertently. As portrayed in India's series of test firings of the Dhanush-class short-range ballistic missiles from offshore patrol vessels. So far, there seems a deliberate ambiguity. It is difficult to suggest whether the tests are intended to formally manifest the IN's ability and future intentions to station nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles on conventional platforms or whether the program is only temporary substitute, unless, the desired level of its SSBN fleet could be established. (Rehman, 2015, pp. 15 & 34) However, observation of the IN's nuclear track over the past decade endorses that chances of the latter possibility are fairly high. The project is likely to serve as a substitute until the SSBN fleet becomes operational.

Likewise, PN reportedly, has also reacted to India's posture by equipping the SLCM on its conventional Agosta-90B diesel electric submarines. Although this too seems a stopgap measure, it is very likely that adversary naval forces tailing a sub perceiving it conventional would end up chasing the one carrying strategic loads. This could eventually, risk the deterrence stability and trigger conflict. (Mishra, 2018)

The situation coupled with the fact that there is lack of communication between rival naval forces raises more concerns. A crisis situation leading to the IN's deployment of the nuclear submarine closer to Pakistan's coast could prove dangerously escalatory. As PN's anti-submarine warfare capabilities have improved with the induction of ATR-72 aircraft. This could place the IN's submarine force in a "use-it or lose-it dilemma", subsequently, increasing the latter's propensity to strike first. (Ullah, 2018)

It is worth mentioning that since 2016, when tensions between both states were spiked, at least twice, the IN's submarine presence closer to Pakistani waters was detected and warded off by PN. Moreover, such incidents also coincide with the haunting reality that as New Delhi's nuclear capabilities are increasing rapidly, so is its "No First Use" claim eroding. This has even raised questions regarding India's nuclear command and control structure too. (Lalwani & Haegeland, 2017)

Further, gaps pointed by the former Vice Admiral Vijay Shankar that IN lacks any mechanism that could ensure "reliable communication systems" hint that missing communication channel between the command centre and submarines operating at greater depths can be detrimental. As the enhanced degree of operational control over sea-based missiles would further lie with the staff on board. Thereby, making it too difficult rather impossible for central military authorities to ensure assertive command and control, especially during crises. (Ullah, 2018)

Moreover, second factor that renders sea based nuclear weapons further destabilizing in the South Asian context, is that peacetime berthing locations of submarines cannot remain secret for long, in the face of honing anti-sub and reconnaissance skills of both sides. The situation is further complex for PN because its submarine fleet is so small and only three out of eight are able to carry the SLCMs. Thus, it is not difficult for rival navy to assess locations of the three, especially, if they are not on patrol. Likewise, keen reconnaissance and advanced monitoring technologies can also enable the adversary to constantly monitor changes in submarine's readiness using satellite technology. Any crisis could likely force PN to "flush" all the three eligible submarines from port, to enhance ambiguity as well as secure the option of second strike. This could lure India to opt for counterforce venture by conventional or even nuclear means. (Clary & Panda, 2017, pp. 156–157)

Although this nuclearization is triggered by action and reaction and sea based second-strike capability became an inevitable choice for PN, the net effect on the regional stability portrays a gloomy picture. Albeit it has added to Pakistan's security, simultaneously, it has indeed, also added a new dimension to PN's challenges. For, availability of naval nuclear weapons has generated new sorts of dangers and threats, that seem somewhat higher than the land-based ones. Thus, demand an additional level of responsibility and professional expertise from the navy.

Sub-Conventional and Non-Traditional Challenges – Hybrid Approach

So far, non-traditional threats in Pakistan's coastal waters are of low intensity, that at least not undermine the state's sovereignty. Nevertheless, now, chances of emergence of intensive non-traditional threats like maritime terrorism are increasing rapidly, especially, in the wake of increasing CPEC-led maritime stakes. As recently, pointed out by Pakistan's former Chief of Naval Staff Admiral-Abbasi, that looming threats to Pakistan's maritime security range from "traditional to non-traditional, with an ominous mix of hybrid ones". Referring to the recent geopolitical shifts, the admiral maintained that "on our western flank, the US-Iran stand-off is manifesting into a precarious situation for shipping plying" the international waterways. Moreover, ongoing conflicts in Yemen and Syria are also very disturbing from Pakistan's maritime perspective. Especially, the warring groups' access to "shore-based missiles and remotely operated vehicles", poses serious challenges to SLOCs transiting the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.(Willett, 2020)

He further highlighted that the attacks on "motor vessels in the Gulf of Oman" clearly revealed the seriousness of the "prevailing threat" in maritime arena "closer to home for Pakistan". Numerous strategic challenges that are affecting the security balance means the idea of maritime security against non-traditional elements must not escape PN's focus. For the conflicts in close and extended maritime neighborhood have increased threats of maritime terrorism, piracy, narcotics, human and arms trafficking.(Willett, 2020)

Since, the modern warfare tactics are increasingly turning into amalgamation of conventional, sub-conventional, irregular and cyber means of warfare. This hybrid character implies that both conventional and non-traditional instruments of force and violence are suited

for bleeding the adversary in its maritime arena. For, maritime domain albeit bears vital economic interests of a state, a “predominant part of the oceans is not subject to national sovereignty, which makes it much easier for a hybrid threat to manifest”. (Khurana, 2017, p. 2)

Thus, added to Pakistan’s non-traditional maritime threats’ matrix is the traditional threat that stems from India. For, possibility that the latter can abet, aid or support non-traditional elements to destabilize Pakistan’s vital security interests is gaining momentum among the Indian policy circles. For instance, Ravi Joshi- a former official of India’s Cabinet Secretariat seems very supportive of the stance. Recently, he has even explicitly explored various means to target Pakistan with sub-conventional tactics. (Joshi, 2019)

Security analysts believe that such approach is more ‘suitable’ for the adversary in the context of solidifying Sino-Pakistan interests at Gwadar and Pakistan’s nascent achieved sea based second strike capability. As both provide a lucrative target. Thus, any restless attempt by the traditional adversary to sabotage or jeopardize Pakistan’s strategic interests through maritime military hybridization i.e., use of maritime domain for “conventional and unconventional means of combat” cannot be overlooked. (Azmi, 2017)

Conclusion

The IOR security architecture is likely to change in many ways. Omens of the change are already evident in the growing maritime power play. As rising sea powers are competing for influence whilst enlarging and wielding their naval might, the situation is likely to become further intense, especially, in wake of the US’ reducing naval power. Whereas, through political and economic clout, China is seeking to enhance its regional profile. In coming years, China will be able to further consolidate its position in the region in consonance with its great power ambitions. India’s counterbalancing approach in line with the US’ interest has unleashed the India-China rivalry more vividly in the naval domain.

Subsequently the region is swarming with multilateral challenges and competing maritime narratives. Gap in conventional and strategic deterrence is widening fast which has serious implications not only for regional maritime security and stability but also for Pakistan’s maritime interest.

Amidst those developments and evolving maritime order PN has a wide array of external and internal challenges to face. Torn between redressing an unprecedented naval build-up, as well as ensuring maritime security, the force needs to retain its strategic space in the face of growing nuclearization, increasing hybrid challenges and to prevail over national sea blindness and budgetary constraints. Such challenges necessitate adroit response during peace and war.

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