



Russia's Maritime Strategies in the Indian Ocean

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Intense global pressure on Russia has led the country to be more assertive at the global stage. The sanction regime, which was imposed in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis, decelerated its economy and brought hardships to the Russian people. The fall in oil prices on which Russia depends heavily and ban on state-of-the-art Western technology, ranging from the extraction of hydrocarbons to civil aircraft production, have led to some silent questioning of Putin's leadership in the domestic quarters. These cumulative pressures forced Russia to take more firm stance on global issues. Even though there was resistance to Putin's attending the G-20 summit, the Russian President chose to attend it. On the sidelines of the summit, a fleet of Russian warships was deployed in the Coral Sea of Australia. This was seen as an intimidating action by Russia. Analysts from all quarters have started speculating whether it is a renewal of the Cold War. A resurgent Russia and the resistive West were the major points of discussion. Former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev also alluded in one of the speeches regarding this return of the Cold War.

The Ukrainian crisis, NATO's active engagements, economic sanctions and hitting the lowest in its relationship with the US – all these factors have compelled Russia to take active part in the Asian region, so that its economy can be rejuvenated. Although Russia, with the US initiative, had agreed upon a 'reset' policy in 2008 for a healthy and positive relationship, but the

undercurrent of competition cannot be ignored. An accumulation of all the above factors has led Russia to quicken its pace in shifting its focus from the West to East.

In the last six months, the activities of the Russian navy, such as the maritime exercise called 'Komodo 2014', held from March 28 to April 3, 2014 that focused on simulated disaster-relief manoeuvres; the Russian Naval Ship 'Moskva's' arrival at the Colombo Port on a replenishment and goodwill visit; navies of Pakistan and Russia conducting a joint naval counter-narcotics exercise in the Arabian Sea in October 2014; and Russia's offer of various forms of modern technology to support Indonesia's maritime sector, are some of the examples that mark a crucial evolving Russian footprint in the region.

Since 2000, under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, Russia had already outlined its trajectory of expanding its reach to every sphere of the world, militarily and economically. In the document 'Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2020' published in 2001, Russia demarcated Atlantic, Arctic, Pacific, Caspian and the Indian Oceans as the major regional areas of the National Maritime policy. This policy is built on the basis of their specific characteristics. With regard to the Indian Ocean, apart from Russia's economic interests, it has made clear its ambition to preserve and consolidate its position in this region. It aspires to transform the Indian Ocean into a zone of peace, stability and good neighbourly relations, on a periodic basis to ensure its naval presence in the Indian Ocean. By 2013, as mentioned in its foreign policy document, Russia foresaw the shift of global power and developmental potential to the East, primarily to the Asia-Pacific region (APR), the Indian Ocean region, and the Arctic region.

Russia already had strong bilateral ties with Asian countries since the erstwhile Soviet Union's time through its arms export deals with countries such as India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Vietnam. However, with respect to its long term objective, as laid down in its foreign policy document, President Putin borrowed the term 'pivot to Asia' in June 2013 to reiterate Russia's interest in this region. Consequently, since the last few years, Russia is actively propagating its ambition and increasing its activities, including maritime pursuits in this region.

In this context, the strengthening of Russia's bilateral relations with the Asian countries can be viewed as an initiative to make its geopolitical space in this zone. For example, Russia regards Vietnam as the key pivot point of Southeast Asia, as it occupies key shorelines connecting the Strait of Malacca with North East Asia. The country is accessible by sea to Russia's Far East ports. Moscow also understands the significance of rejuvenating its old ties with India and establishing new relationships with countries, like Pakistan.

India's geostrategic position in the region is the gateway for Russia to establish economic and maritime power. Russian activities in the Indian Ocean have been exemplified by its participation in five joint exercises with India since 2003, known as the *INDRA* Project. Meanwhile, with Pakistan, the goal behind initiating the relationship is the Karachi Port. The availability of the docks in the port for the Russian navy to make port call during any mission in the Indian Ocean and, in future, to link its energy pipelines through Gwadar Port of Pakistan to the rest of the regions (East and West) are its basic objectives for engaging Pakistan.

The Indian Ocean region is witnessing a burgeoning of regional militarisation, which gives Russia a good opportunity to capitalise on its niche naval and aerospace technology, which might help in boosting its economic and military power. It is showing keen interest in the security dynamics of the Indian Ocean and the presence of the Russian navy in the region reflects its ambition to engage in distant water operations and also in accomplishing its objectives mentioned in the Maritime Document of 2020.

The increasing activities of economic cooperation through energy and arms exports and military engagements through naval exercises, etc. with these countries will provide port accessibility, in return, for the Russian Navy. The rationale behind the activities is also to balance other powers, whose ambition might hamper Moscow's aspirations, such as the US.

Therefore, Moscow would not like to leave any opportunity to balance the US, and Asia might become the next battle field, along with the Arctic region, to outplay each other. Russia will strengthen its partnership with its existing allies and establish new ones with others. It will try to follow the objective of mutual cooperation with the Asian countries, but if its ambitions are

limited by the US strategies (with these countries) of containing Russia, then the Indian Ocean region might see active militarization as witnessed in the Arctic Ocean. Hence, the Asian countries, especially India, need to balance both the powers with adroitness in order to avoid instability in the Indian Ocean region.

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