Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean
A Changing Kaleidoscope

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The Indian Ocean Region (IOR), though considered an important maritime region, has not yet been accorded the due importance of a geo-strategic entity. One attributable reason is the 'sandwiching' of the IOR between two 'hotspots'—the South China sea and the Persian Gulf that divert the attention of nations from this area. While there are commonalities like 'Freedom of Navigation', the divergences—caused by varying strategic interests even while addressing common security issues such as piracy—have resulted in a sectoral view of the maritime security paradigm in the IOR. The security picture is thus affected by the waning interest and presence of nations historically linked with the region as well as the advent of China. This article examines how the strategic interest of nations is affecting the maritime security conundrum of the IOR.

Viewed rhetorically, maritime security consists of both convergences and divergences when seen through the prism of the laws of the seas and strategic interests. The convergences include laws which have been accepted as 'customary' and have also formed part of international conventions and agreements, be these bilateral or multilateral. Commonalities such as 'mare liberum' and 'freedom of navigation' are a few accepted connotations that form the framework through which nations view the maritime element. The divergences are brought about

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by individual national interests that affect maritime security and drive the actions of nations, thereby creating complex situations that question the very basic concept of freedom of navigation, especially in the global commons. Non-state actors, due to their non-recognition of the accepted laws, add to the growing complexities and undermine the efforts to create a secure maritime architecture.

The Indian Ocean is the world's link between the East and the West, encompassing vital sea lanes of communication that feed the world's economies. Around 80 per cent of the world's sea-borne oil trade passes through the choke points of this ocean. Despite its strategic location, the Indian Ocean has, for long, been overshadowed by the turbulence in its neighbouring areas—the Persian Gulf and the South China Sea, for example—and therefore, though it is a comparatively peaceful area, it has been much neglected. Of late, a greater interest is being evinced in the Indian Ocean,[1] an aspect covered by Admiral Arun Prakash in his introduction in the National Maritime Foundation publication, *Security Challenges along the Indian Ocean Littoral*: 'The surge of interest in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), of which India is a major geographical constituent, is a new phenomenon.'[2]

The combination of factors such as economic growth and slowdown, military expansion, increasing demand for natural resources, maritime capabilities vis-à-vis maritime jurisdictions (especially of the island nations in the IOR), geopolitical situation, increasing nuclear capabilities and variances in governance, is dictating a change in the manner in which nations view their maritime security, interests and rights at sea. The blurring of lines between traditional and non-traditional threats like piracy, terrorism and natural disasters is adding to the security jingoism. Therefore, the interest is apparently limited to the periphery of the IOR, and its main central expanse, which could see events unfolding in the future, remains neglected. This is, perhaps, due to the focus on national interest-related issues that are driven by strategic aspirations, which are, in turn, dictated by the ongoing events in the Persian Gulf (this is in reference to the ongoing imbroglio between the United States [US] and Iran) and South China Sea (this is in reference to the ongoing imbroglio over competing claims and the US involvement).

This article examines strategic interest-related issues that affect the maritime security conundrum in the Indian Ocean and the effect they would have in the region if due cognition of the changing dynamics is viewed holistically.

Strategic Interests and Piracy

Strategic Interests

The oceans reflect the classic model of a 'global commons', and the term is a useful metaphor for thinking about shared space.[3] The point that stands out is the aspect of shared space and in this context there are two main drivers that impinge on issues pertaining to interests and rights at sea—strategic interests and the maritime rights of nations which are enshrined in the 1982 United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). A conflict between interests and rights has risen (and will always arise) from time to time. Therefore, in order to avoid situations that require military and coercive solutions, a method of ocean governance could be evolved that would form a blueprint for other oceanic areas which would ensure peaceful and optimum utilization of this global commons. The declining presence of extra-regional powers and their governing interests could lead to a vacuum that would be filled by nations like China. The anti-piracy operations by the Chinese Navy off the Gulf of Aden, its growing maritime capabilities and engagement with IOR nations could be a pointer towards a growing presence of China in the IOR. Therefore, there exists the possibility of the ongoing conflict for maritime dominance in the South China Sea between China and the US spilling over into the IOR and affecting the relatively peaceful existing scenario. This, in turn, could lead to an imbalance of power with a possibility of conflict.

The importance of a region is governed by the strategic position it holds and the power plays that dominate it. The IOR, though of strategic value and concern, has been overshadowed by the ongoing and emerging issues both in the Persian Gulf and the South China Sea. The expansion of piracy and China's entry and growing influence in the region require this area to be seen more intrinsically, rather than just as an area that connects the two hotspots. Therefore, though strategically placed, the Indian Ocean has remained virtually an area of general interest rather than of vital interest. The main players that view this area have reduced and, presently, apart from the nations in the area, the major extra-regional presence here is limited to the US and China. Figure 1 indicates where the US, India and China have a presence or have built infrastructure.

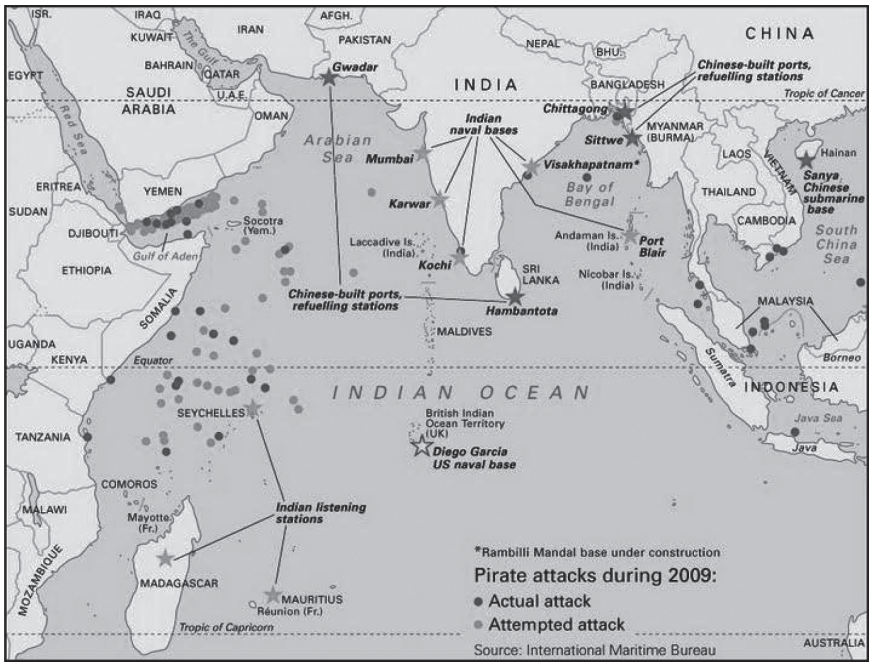

Figure 1 The American, Chinese and Indian Presence in the IOR

Piracy

Piracy, in a way, was an adhesive that forced nations to cooperate and brought a renewed focus on the IOR. Somali piracy has been acknowledged not only as a threat to maritime trade but also to maritime security. Somalia is near one of the major conduits traversed by maritime shipping—the Bab-el-Mandeb.

> [Thirty-five] per cent of all traded oil and gas passing through the Bab-el-Mandeb is destined for the European market, about 8 per cent of the world total. Approximately half of the world's container traffic also passes through the Bab-el-Mandeb, of which around 80 per cent is accounted for by Europe–Asia trade.[4]

The importance of this area has, in the recent past, been underlined by the activities of extra and intra-regional nations in the fight against terrorism and other aspects of national interest. Therefore, the emphasis on the fight against piracy at times does get diluted due to the imperatives guiding the interests of nations. This aspect is addressed later in the article.

Nations have, individually and collectively, deployed maritime assets to counter this threat in the maritime domain. However, this deployment could be considered as a part of the larger international power play. For some states (like European nations, the US, China and Russia), their involvement in counter-piracy was motivated as much by political signalling and wider security interests than by national and alliance commitments to solving the piracy problem. Despite the presence of modern maritime assets and establishment of mechanisms in the region, '[i]t is certainly peculiar that a few poorly armed pirates are enough to breach the system of global governance of commercial navigation.'[5] The main reasons attributable to this ineffectiveness could be divergent strategic outlooks, inadequate number of assets, expanding area of operations, number of operating groups with differing mandates, and lack of command unity. However, over a period of time, as the threat of piracy was recognized as an international malaise, nations worked together to combat this threat. Under the auspices of the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) initiative, nations cooperated, escorted ships and patrolled areas to optimize usage of assets. In sum, the collective efforts of nations brought about a drastic reduction in acts of piracy, and this could be seen as a model to be emulated to counter violent non-traditional threats. However, a look at how national strategic interests drove the intent of nations is essential as with piracy waning off Somalia, nations could revert to the existing status quo. I will now discus the varying interests of important nations like the European Union (EU), the US, China, Russia and India.

European Interests in the Indian Ocean

The EU deployed its naval force (EUNAVFOR) on 8 December 2008 as Operation Atalanta, six days after United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1846[6] was issued on 2 December 2008. The UNSCR 1846 extended the mandate of UNSCR 1816[7] issued on 2 June 2008, which authorized states acting in cooperation with the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia and with prior notification of the TFG to:

> Enter the territorial waters of Somalia for the purpose of repressing acts of piracy and armed robbery at sea, in a manner consistent with such action permitted on the high seas with respect to piracy under relevant international law; and Use, within the territorial waters of Somalia, in a manner consistent with action permitted on the

> high seas with respect to piracy under relevant international law, all necessary means to repress acts of piracy and armed robbery.[8]

France was the driving force behind this deployment, mainly due to the fact that it was keen to be seen as an important contributor for ensuring international security, especially as, at the time, it was emerging from its isolation from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) command structure.[9] The deployment of EUNAVFOR was under the then European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). This deployment could be seen as a factor evolving to highlight EU as a parallel civil and military institution to NATO, considering the apparent divide amongst NATO nations over its future role.

In addition, flagging economies and the resultant reduction in military assets have impaired the capabilities of European nations from operating in the Indian Ocean. These nations would, at best, deploy assets as and when required to operate with the US.

In December 2010, NATO released its new strategic concept renewing its commitment to 'Collective Security'. However, 'Due to lack of consensus among the member states provisions for potential future crises was not addressed adequately and the intervention in Libya demonstrated that NATO failed to find consensus over its future role despite the creation of a new strategic concept.'[10] The US concern was highlighted by the then US Defence Secretary, Robert Gates, in his farewell visit to NATO Headquarters in June 2011:

> The blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the U.S. Congress—and in the American body politic writ large—to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defence. Nations apparently willing and eager for American taxpayers to assume the growing security burden left by reductions in European defence budgets…What I've sketched out is the real possibility for a dim, if not dismal future for the transatlantic alliance. Such a future is possible, but not inevitable.[11]

Apart from anti-piracy operations, Operation Atlanta had two other objectives: first, to escort World Food Programme ships delivering food to Somalia; and second, to protect EU commercial shipping.[12] This illustrates the fact that the use of naval forces under the rubric of the ESDP is not restricted to peace operations, but may also encompass the protection of

EU maritime trade and possibly naval diplomacy.[13] Therefore, the varying objectives will impact on the overall anti-piracy operations, especially as the nations contributing to the operation—notably NATO members—would find themselves stretched to meet the obligations of national and NATO requirements.

US Interests in the Indian Ocean

Coalition Task Force (CTF) 151 was established as part of the US-led Combined Maritime Force (CMF) structure on 12 January 2009, to conduct counter-piracy operations throughout the CMF area of responsibility, to actively deter, disrupt and suppress piracy in order to protect global maritime security and secure freedom of navigation for the benefit of all nations.[14] NATO deployed its Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 to the region as part of its 2009 deployment to the Far East under Operation Pearl, before quickly establishing Operation Ocean Shield as a permanent counter-piracy task group.[15] In addition to these ongoing anti-piracy operations, nations have been requested to contribute to other operations and, therefore, find themselves stretched to meet conflicting obligations that would require them to either withdraw assets or place them in a position of not being able to deploy assets for anti-piracy operations. Hence, it is unlikely that European nations will have the capability of operating in the Indian Ocean, thereby reducing the number of players in the region. They would, however, at best, deploy assets as and when required to operate with US forces should any requirement arise. The division of the Indian Ocean under the US and Central, Pacific and Africa commands tends to dilute emphasis on the Indian Ocean, with these commands focusing more on Persian Gulf and South China Sea respectively. China's engagement of Seychelles (discussed later) and use of its port facilities places China closer to Diego Garcia. This requires closer scrutiny, especially as the issue of the pivot to Asia is being looked at as rebalancing.[16] Over the past few years, the Indian Ocean has emerged as a major area of geostrategic interest.

> The Pentagon's 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) set the tone by calling for a more 'integrated approach to the region across military and civilian organizations' and asking the rest of the US government for an assessment of 'US national interests, objectives and force posture implications', which the National Security Council is now undertaking in preparation for the next National Security Strategy report, expected in 2012.[17]

However, for the year 2012, no such report was made.[18] This aspect further brings out the how its attention to this region is waning.

Chinese Interests in the Indian Ocean

China's anti-piracy deployment and its increased participation in United Nations peace operations is indicative of a shift in Chinese policy towards an increased willingness to employ People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces in military operations other than war (MOOTW).[19] China's entry into the Indian Ocean by engaging Myanmar and Sri Lanka in the east and the south has now extended to the west and south-west, where it is engaging Maldives and Seychelles. Presently, the engagement is based mainly on infrastructure development and improvement of diplomatic ties, thereby availing of the facilities available for extending what could be called its 'Look West Policy'. In doing so, China is apparently gaining a foothold in the central expanse of the IOR.

A connected issue is that of bases. A base in pure military terms would mean building of infrastructure by the invited nation on land provided by the host nation to be used by the invited nation as it deems suitable. There would be the issue of jurisdiction of laws and other such associated aspects that would be covered in the understanding drawn up between the two nations. However, the establishment of military bases is far-fetched, and in today's scenario of extra- and intra-regional pressures and economic strangleholds, does not seem realistic. It would be more prudent to call them 'places' or 'facilities'. The establishment of Chinese military bases (or places) would imply a form of alliance that most nations, especially small island nations whose economies exist due to Western and regional influences, would like to avoid. The establishment of a Chinese military base in Myanmar was a remote possibility, which is now considered not possible post the recent US engagement of Myanmar with high-level visits by various officials. However, the implications of Chinese engagements in the IOR are tremendous and require to be viewed through multiple prisms ranging from the strategic to economic to military balancing.

In Myanmar, the Chinese have assisted in upgrading the radar facilities on the Cocos Islands[20] as well as the development of the Kyaukpyu deep-water port as part of an economic and technological zone,[21] and building/extending oil pipelines from there to China. The Cocos Islands lie north of the northern tip of the Andaman Island chain. The radar facility would definitely accord the Chinese surveillance inputs in monitoring activities

around the northern Andaman Islands. The port of Kyaukpyu in the north-east of the Bay of Bengal would give the Chinese greater leverage in the Bay, especially in the waters surrounding the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. In addition to this, it would place the Chinese in a position to influence events in the Malacca Straits, which is one of the major choke points of the IOR and a major anxiety with respect to protection of China's maritime trade, especially oil.

The port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka, developed with Chinese assistance, would be a major facility for refuelling and resupply for Chinese vessels, since it falls half-way along the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) en route from the Malacca Straits to the choke points in the north-west IOR, namely, the Gulf of Aden, Bab-el-Mandeb (and the Suez Canal further north) and the Straits of Hormuz. Hambantota would also grant the Chinese the ability to turn south and enter the southern Indian Ocean. The recent re-entry into Gwadar in Pakistan could strengthen the Chinese presence in the north-west Arabian Sea, and add weight to its ability to influence events in the region, especially given its relations with Pakistan and Iran.

The planned opening up of the Chinese Embassy in Maldives along with other plans of infrastructure development, including the possibility of a submarine base,[22] could permit, in future, an increase in China's presence in the Arabian Sea and its ability to monitor its trade transiting via the SLOCs from Sri Lanka to the north-western choke points in the IOR.

Although China's engagement with Seychelles is reportedly based on acquiring facilities for Chinese ships engaged in anti-piracy operations, there are a few other imperatives as well. In June 2011, China gifted two Y12 aircraft to Seychelles: of these, one would be used for anti-piracy and exclusive economic zone (EEZ) patrols and the other for inter-island connectivity.[23] Seychelles is situated north of the south-west Indian Ocean Ridge where China has been allotted an area of 10,000 square kilometres for prospecting and exploring polymetallic sulphides under a 15 year contract signed with the International Seabed Authority.[24] The usage of facilities at Seychelles for refuelling and resupply would ensure more effective exploitation and protection of Chinese assets and interests in the allotted seabed area.

China is looking at investing US$ 1 billion on a special economic zone (SEZ) in Mauritius. The figure appears too large for investment in a country that has no natural resources, a small labour force and an

insignificant domestic market.[25] Therefore, the only plausible rationale is that Mauritius provides a strategic advantage with respect to its geographical position in the IOR and proximity to the south-west Indian Ocean Ridge.

Even though China has stated that 'its activities in the region were restricted to seeking supplies or recuperating at appropriate harbours in the Seychelles or other countries as needed during escort missions',[26] these moves have strategic implications. These activities place China in a strategic position in the IOR with the capability of, first, increasing its footprint in the maritime domain, and second, bringing about a reorientation in the existing maritime military balance by enhancing its capability of power projection in the region. The next step would be reach out more west and extend the Chinese maritime footprint to beyond the Suez Canal.

Russia's Interests in the Indian Ocean

Russia's interest in the Indian Ocean could be viewed as a resurgence post the end of the Cold War. Having lost a vital foothold in the area, Russia faces a major challenge while seeking its re-entry. Russia's absence has resulted in the US becoming the predominant extra-regional power with maritime ties with most of the nations in the region. This aspect poses a major challenge for Russia as it starts seeking to renew its maritime contacts within the region. Although its relations with India have seen an upsurge in the past with the number of naval ships on order and delivered, Russia will have to 'woo' the majority of stakeholders in the region. A few steps have been taken in this regard. The Russian government intends to restore the military–technical support of their ships at the former military bases in Cam Ranh (Vietnam), Lourdes (Cuba) and the Seychelles. On 27 July 2012, the Russian Navy Commander, Vice Admiral Viktor Chirkov, announced that this move was not about plans for a military presence, but rather the restoration of the crew resources.[27]

The Russian presence in anti-piracy patrols could be considered as a counter to the US presence, viewed against the backdrop of the situation developing in Iran and Syria, and the stances adopted by Russia, China and the US. The recently concluded naval exercises with the PLA Navy in the Yellow Sea included several missions, such as the rescue of a hijacked ship, commercial vessel escort and defending a convoy from air and sea attacks.[28] This could be an indicator that the presence of Russia in the Indian Ocean, operating either individually or in concert with China, is only a matter of time.

The Russia–China Wild Card

The commonality of the stand on Syria and the view to counter the US predominance in areas of interest could be seen as the beginning of an alliance between Russia and China. The recently conducted naval exercises in the Sea of Japan in July 2013 could be the harbinger for a joint maritime counter to the US. Both Russia and China require a mix of capability, expertise and experience to be considered a force to be reckoned with in the Indian Ocean. This mix would require both to ride 'piggy back' on each other. Russia's past experience in the region and the capacity-building engagements by China in the region offer some advantages:

1. China could assist Russia in its re-entry into Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean.
2. China would benefit from Russia's experiences in the Indian Ocean.
3. In assisting Russia, China could in turn secure assistance in its entry into the Arctic.
4. As a result, China could, in time, extend its reach and enter the Mediterranean[29] and Atlantic, and complete the maritime circle to the Arctic via Europe.

Although futuristic and dependent on a number of variables, this wild card theory is a possibility. A major point to be considered in this aspect is that these nations would bring their understanding of international maritime law that could, in turn, complicate the existing comparative peaceful balance.

India's Interests in the Indian Ocean

A combination of the factors just listed impinge on India's interests and could dictate, to large extent, India's response to the challenges posed therein by both traditional and non-traditional threats, especially piracy.

India's participation in anti-piracy operations stems from the fact that piracy is affecting its maritime trade and the security environment in its immediate neighbourhood. As 'the Indian Navy has been mandated to be a net security provider to island nations in the Indian Ocean Region',[30] it is obliged to acquire and deploy assets so as to maintain a favourable military balance in the IOR (its main area of interest) as well as maintain its position of strength as a stable nation in the region. This could be seen as India's main interest in the Indian Ocean.

The presence of the US and China here, their strategies, and the implications of their presence and their strategies affect the issue as well. The US presence in the IOR and strategic use of the area could be viewed as mainly to support the ongoing war in Afghanistan and the imbroglio with Iran. Post its 2014 exit from Afghanistan, the US would in all probability shift some assets to the South China Sea, while maintaining a credible force in the Gulf to counter Iran. By concentrating and operating its assets mainly in the north-west of the IOR and east of the Malacca Straits, the US could be leaving gaps in the IOR that could be filled by India or China depending on the challenge and response posed by either nation. This is a growing challenge that the area is facing. Although '[t]he United States is responding to these challenges by strengthening traditional alliances, developing new partnerships, and updating its force posture in Asia to increase its access and presence in Australia, South East Asia and the Indian Ocean',[31] its priority is areas other than the IOR. The task of the US Navy will, therefore, be to quietly leverage the sea power of its closest allies—India in the Indian Ocean and Japan in the western Pacific—to set limits on China's expansion.[32]

At present, the entry of Chinese naval ships in the IOR is not considered a threat by India given the limited number of Chinese ships (and ship days at sea) operating at any given time in the area without adequate shore support, lack of ship- and especially land-based air support. These issues would also restrict China's ability to influence events on land. Although an aircraft carrier would add to the arsenal, India would always have the advantage of 'playing on home ground'. In the present state with China focusing on the South China and East China Seas and no credible air element, the sailing of Liaoning into the Indian Ocean would take some time to come by. The degree of threat would have to be reviewed once the Chinese are able to overcome this lacuna and are able to operate with a greater flexibility coupled with a strong force projection capability.

Therefore, India's response to these challenges would be to ensure a secure and stable region by engaging the IOR nations and ensuring security of its maritime trade routes. This aspect was covered by the Indian Naval Chief, Admiral D.K. Joshi, in a speech at IDSA on 5 March 2013, where he stated: 'India's geo-strategic location positions us right at the confluence of major arteries of world trade. The Indian Navy is therefore viewed by some of the littorals as a suitable agency to facilitate regional maritime security in the IOR as a net security provider.'[33]

The aspect of maritime routes is of the utmost importance as India is highly dependent on oil, being the world's fourth-largest consumer of energy. It imports around 65 per cent of its annual oil requirement, of which around 90 per cent comes from the Persian Gulf region. This factor would dictate India's stance on its maritime strategy as any change in military balance and shift in regional geopolitical stances would affect its trade, as its SLOCs originate and terminate in this region.

Conclusion

The oceans have been central to the security and commerce of all nations, even those that are landlocked. Over the centuries, ever since mankind first took to the seas, maritime security has seen paradigm shifts and has been viewed through differing prisms that have been dependent on and governed by the national interest of nations. The shrinking of the world into a global village and the growing interdependence of nations, especially in the maritime domain, has seen the emergence of a secure maritime architecture as a keel for the freedom of the seas.

Despite its unique geographical position, sandwiched between two hotspots, namely, the Persian Gulf and the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean has not received the due importance it should have received, except during the fight against piracy. It must be kept in mind, however, that despite the surrounding hotspots, the IOR is a relatively peaceful area. The presence of extra-regional nations and varying strategic interests could, in the long term, affect the strategic contours of the maritime domain. The ingress of China and the present disposition of the US in the region could result in a change in the existing maritime security conundrum. Any increase in the US presence and shift in policy to engage nations where there is both an existing Indian presence and growing Chinese interest could dilute the aspect of India being seen as a net provider of security. The myriad of issues could result in the Indian Ocean evolving from a comparatively 'peaceful' area into an area of severe competition and confrontation. If it is to be the centre stage of the twenty-first century, then developments owing to strategic interests and changes in military balance are being ignored to the detriment of the region's maritime security architecture.

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