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China's moves in the Indian Ocean

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In News: According to the United States' "China's Military Power Report 2022," China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is "numerically" the largest navy in the world. The report also highlights that the PLA support base in Djibouti is going to play a crucial role in providing China the capacity to "project and sustain military power at a greater distance."

What is Indian Ocean Region (IOR)?

The only ocean of the world name after a Country is "Indian Ocean". The Indian Ocean basin is of particular importance for India, as the region's most populous country and geopolitical keystone. Although India has long been preoccupied by continental considerations, it has recently begun to re-evaluate its priorities.

Importance of Indian Ocean to World?

- 70 percent of world trade from West to East and East to West.
- Oil trade from Middle east to China, Japan, India, SE Asian countries
- Polly metallic nodules at Ocean floor provide vital metals extraction sources from ocean.
- Western powers involvement in security management against radical and fundamentalist Islamic groups in and around Iraq.
- All the sea lanes leading to the Indian Ocean, particularly the Suez Canal and the Straits of Malacca be kept open at all the times.

Importance of Indian Ocean to India?

- 7,500km coastline linking to Indian Ocean
- 80% of India's trade is through Sea route passes through Indian Ocean.
- 85% of oil and gas imported through Indian Ocean into the country.
- Fishing and tourism depends on it due to huge marine resources it spreads prosperity in coastal plains of India.
- Security of Country after 26/11 and recent 1st January 2015 (mid-sea blast of fishing boat incident). No industrial development, commercial growth, and stable political structure is possible unless our nation's shores are protected.
- Vital for managing better relation with neighbours like Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Sri-Lanka, Maldives, Seychelles, Mauritius, Iran, etc.

What China is doing in Indian Ocean Region?

The PLA has constructed a 300-meter-long berthing area, which is now ready to accommodate larger vessels like aircraft carriers, submarines, and amphibious vessels in the future. Experts also point out China may build additional facilities like drydock and repair facilities for both surface ships and submarines. Since it officially opened in 2017, the support base has been undergoing construction of new piers and is also suspected to have an underground electronic and cybersecurity facility. The support base is actively engaged in military exercises and outreach activities to demonstrate its presence in the region.

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Even though China presented the Djibouti base to the international community as a “logistic facility” or “support base,” the latest development activity shows it has truly become a complete naval base. As China seeks to expand its presence in the Indian Ocean region (IOR) through economic and commercial activity, the operation of new piers in Djibouti – and as a result, the increasing presence of Chinese submarines, survey and hydrographic ships close to Indian coasts – calls for greater security concern in India.

The PLAN presence in the Indian Ocean has been growing steadily since 2009. When piracy and hijacking ships for ransoms in the Gulf of Aden were disturbing global energy and trade routes, China joined the international effort to police the regional waters. Even today, a major justification for the PLAN presence is to ensure the security of their commercial engagements and maritime trade. Since 2013, Chinese submarines have been in the Indian Ocean, and they claim to be deployed for anti-piracy duties.

What are the threats for Indian?

China’s naval base in Djibouti and the growing presence of PLAN ships, submarines and research vessels in the Indian Ocean is a call for greater concern in New Delhi. It not only challenges India’s sphere of influence in the region but also raises the risk of security threats when Chinese vessels operate close to India’s Exclusive Economic Zone. In 2022, India had to postpone missile tests due to the presence of Chinese surveillance vessels Yuan Wang 6 and Yuan Wang 5 in the Indian Ocean. Moreover, India is also suspicious of Chinese deep-sea fishing vessels spying on Indian missile launch facilities, naval bases, and vessel movement in the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea.

What India has to do?

India needs to strengthen its underwater domain capability and requires a fresh rethink on the concept of undersea warfare to deal with the emerging underwater threat from China in the Indian Ocean.

India has a central role in the region and for regional actors. Thus, IOR countries should not ignore India’s strategic interests and concerns.

India’s importance in the region can not be marginalised as there is a growing trust deficit when it comes to China.