



# ICS - KAS Conversation



## PLA Navy's Expansion in the Indian Ocean Region: Challenges and Opportunities for India

### Key Takeaways

Webinar organised by

**Institute of Chinese Studies  
&  
Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung**

Media Partner



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# Background

The People's Republic of China aspires to build a "modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious" by 2049. Widely considered as a euphemism for a "Global Power", the Chinese Dream (中国梦) envisages China claiming its rightful role in the global stage after more than a 'Century of Humiliation'. Commensurate with the national goal, the People's Liberation Army aspires to be a 'world class 'military by 2049. Of particular importance is the PLA Navy (PLAN) which has grown from a 'brown water 'Navy to the "largest Navy in the world" in just three decades, defying conventional modelling and predictions. The growth of the PLAN is prominent in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), where it has a near-permanent presence with a logistic base at Djibouti, counter-piracy patrols, and a growing footprint that necessitates critical examination. This webinar proposed to delve into current and future developments in the PLAN that are of concern to India.

The Webinar was covered the following parts: -

- i. PLAN's expansion in the IOR till date.
- ii. PLA's likely force projection capabilities till 2035.
- iii. Perspective Planning for India as a Net Security Provider in the IOR.

# Programme Overview

To explore the presence of People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy in the Indian Ocean and the resultant challenges and opportunities which arise for India, the Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS) in partnership with the India Office of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) organized the ICS-KAS Conversation on '*PLA Navy's Expansion in the Indian Ocean: Challenges and Opportunities for India*' on Wednesday, 28 October 2020 at 3:00 P.M IST on Zoom along with ICS media partner, ThePrint.

The Conversation witnessed the presence of distinguished panelists from National Maritime Foundation, Centre for Contemporary China Studies, who provided valuable insights on the PLA Navy's expansion in the Indian Ocean Region and the Challenges and Opportunities for India.

The panel comprised of the following Panelists:

- **Admiral Sunil Lanba, PVSM, AVSM (Retired)**, Chairman, National Maritime Foundation and former Chief of Naval Staff, Indian Navy.
- **Lieutenant General SL Narasimhan (Retired)**, Director General, Centre for Contemporary China Studies and Member, National Security Advisory Board, India.
- **Darshana Baruah**, Visiting Fellow, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Tokyo, and Non-Resident Scholar, South Asia Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The Conversation was moderated by **Amb. Ashok Kantha**, Director, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

# Glimpses

A presentation slide titled "PLA Navy's Expansion in the Indian Ocean Region: Challenges and Opportunities for India". The title is in blue at the top. Below it is a section titled "MARITIME STRATEGY" in yellow. The strategy points listed are: Active Defence, Two Oceans Strategy, Off shore waters defence to Open Seas Protection, Active part in the establishment & protection of international & regional maritime order, Construction of strategic maritime hubs along the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road, and Control of Oceans – Sir Julian Corbett (Andrew Latham, 24 Aug 20, The Diplomat). A small video window in the top right shows a man speaking. The bottom right corner has a "zoom" watermark. The bottom left corner shows a video player with a play button, a timestamp of 34:00 / 1:32:10, and a scroll for details button. The bottom center has a "zoom" watermark.

A map titled "FIRST &amp; SECOND ISLAND CHAINS" in yellow at the top. The map shows the Pacific Ocean and parts of Asia and Oceania. It highlights the "First Island Chain" (the island arcs of Japan, the Ryukyu Islands, the Bonin Islands, the Paracel Islands, the Spratly Islands, and the Scarborough Shoal) and the "Second Island Chain" (the island arcs of the Kuril Islands, the Amakiriwa Islands, the Ryukyu Islands, the Bonin Islands, the Paracel Islands, the Spratly Islands, and the Scarborough Shoal). A small video window in the top right shows a man speaking. The bottom right corner has a "zoom" watermark. The bottom center has a "zoom" watermark.

A presentation slide titled "CHINA'S PORT ACQNS" in yellow at the top. It features a world map showing China's global port investments, with red dots indicating ports in various countries. A legend at the bottom left defines port status: In use (red dot), Signed/under construction (yellow dot), and Planned (blue dot). Text at the bottom left reads "Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit, China Merchants CO- 29 Ports in 15 Countries &amp; COSCO 47 Terminals in 13 Countries". A small video window in the top right shows a man speaking. The bottom right corner has a "zoom" watermark.



# Key Takeaways

- PLA Navy's (PLAN) has witnessed an unprecedented expansion from a 'modest sized, coastal, brown water navy' to the 'largest Navy in the world' and its evolving focus from 'offshore waters defence' to a combination of "offshore waters defence" with "open seas protection". The political and strategic underpinnings of this expansion were articulated by President Xi Jinping in his 2017 statement that China's defence modernisation would be complete by 2035 and that its armed forces would transform into world-class forces by mid-21st century.
- The doctrinal shift along with other factors such as the Maritime Silk Road, near continuous naval presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), its first overseas facility at Djibouti and anti-piracy patrols have progressively enlarged the footprint of PLAN and are in consonance with China's stated policy of becoming a great maritime power. China's naval strategists have underscored the imperative of adopting a 'Two Oceans Strategy' i.e. the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific as theatres for operations for PLAN.
- China's actions in the past two years have resulted in apprehension amongst European nations and USA and its internal and external actions have created unease. China's global aspirations are also being spelt out clearly, which reflects a confident China under a strong leadership.
- As a consequence, other nations are realigning their foreign policies. India has not acceded to China on the Galwan Valley incident but is negotiating to resolve the issue. Germany has revised its 'Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific Region' and is looking for partners in the IOR to uphold multi-lateral world order and free trade, for which India is a natural. Reiterated was the need to understand underlying Chinese thought-process and rebuild credible alternatives in Indo-Pacific based on free world values.
- There was little concern about China's presence in the Indian Ocean earlier as China could not sustain its presence. Since 2008, China has maintained a continuous presence in the IOR by deployment of counter-piracy task forces and has progressively evolved its naval doctrine from 'requirement of logistic support for 'Out of Area' contingencies' in 2010 to 'open seas protection' in 2015, strengthening the argument that China needs to be capable of protecting its interests, business and citizens overseas, like other navies. The 2014 docking of a Chinese submarine at Colombo port and the 2016 Maldives' water crisis showcased China's capabilities, interests and political commitment in establishing itself in IOR.
- Historically, China has utilised commercial activities to secure its maritime interests which include the Belt and Road Initiative and protecting its sea lines of communication

including its energy supplies. With considerable investments, citizens and commerce in the region, it has justification to strengthen its foothold in the region.

- It has expanded its engagement across the IOR and stepped up diplomatic, political and strategic collaboration with littoral islands including training of personnel, strengthened Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), acquisition of ports and increased surveillance and mapping exercises by various means to acquire oceanographic data, critical for naval deployments. China's ability to acquire dual-use ports and increase its Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) will determine its future role in IOR.
- IOR nations have sought alternative security partners to avoid dependency on a single country. Concerned with sovereignty and cross-rivalry between major nations, these nations have engaged with other countries including China to address their concerns such as illegal fishing, natural disasters, trafficking and climate change.
- India's greatest strengths are its geography as witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic, understanding requirements of IOR community and Maritime Domain Awareness. However, India would need a combination of traditional and non-traditional approaches to security to deal with China's expansion in IOR.
- By 2035, PLAN's assessed force levels would include four to five aircraft carriers, 110 destroyers and frigates and 20 replenishment ships. The increase in number of replenishment ships will enhance its long-range deployment capabilities.
- In recent years, Chinese naval strategists have been increasingly influenced by Sir Julian Corbett's 'Control of Seas'. Focus areas for PLAN are likely to be South China Sea, Western Pacific and Indian Ocean in decreasing order of priority. By 2035, China is likely to mark the beginnings of becoming a global maritime power and is likely to progressively expand to, what Prof. Andrew Latham terms as, the third, fourth and fifth island chains, by 2050.
- China is concerned about its strategic vulnerabilities in the IOR and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) and the proposed Kra Canal are intended at reducing its 'Malacca Straits Dilemma'. It has employed various means such as Oceanographic research vessels, deep sea fishing, setting up and expansion of Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance facilities providing naval platforms to Pakistan and conducting exercises with Iran, Pakistan and Russia to increase its influence in the region.
- It is also in the process of creating strategic maritime hubs. China's port acquisitions are focussed on Mediterranean, Western Europe, Panama and Nicaragua canals. While these acquisitions are purely commercial and do not have facilities required to support naval operations, China can upgrade them as logistic support or naval bases in future.

- While the PLAN was created in 1949, it was only in 1984 that two PLAN ships left their coastal waters and visited Karachi. Since 2008, PLAN has a permanent deployment in IOR. Assessment of annual patterns indicates permanent presence of six to eight ships in the IOR in the form of Anti-Piracy Escort Forces and intelligence/ hydrographic survey ships and an annual deployment of two submarines for a period of three months from 2013 to 2018.
- Since 2007, Indian Navy has permanently deployed ships along routes of ingress and egress in the IOR such as Malacca Straits, Gulf of Aden and Southern Indian Ocean to provide MDA along with Long Range Maritime Patrol Aircraft. PLAN ships are continuously monitored during their presence in IOR and hydrographic and surveillance ships are escorted out of India's Exclusive Economic Zone. While commercial ports permit 'operational turn around', additional facilities are required to support naval operations which is currently available only at Djibouti.
- As Net Security Provider, India has a comprehensive engagement policy in the region. This includes training of 1000 naval personnel from 30 countries at any given time, building capacity and capability of maritime forces in the form of ships and improving their capability to operate them. Coastal radar networks have been established in Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles and talks are on with other countries to establish coastal radar networks to create comprehensive MDA. It shares data with IOR countries through its International Fusion Centre and International Multi-Agency Centre. Indian Navy also conducts coordinated patrols with other navies such as Bangladesh, Thailand, Mauritius and Seychelles.
- Based on PLAN's assessed force building and commitments, a maximum of 20 ships in the Indian Ocean along with logistic ships may be deployed in the IOR. Its carrier battle groups are likely to take decades to operationalise and deploy. Its 100,000-strong PLAN Marine Corps is evolving to project power, support China's global presence and secondary roles along China's borders.
- Cooperation with other countries in the form of communications compatibility and security agreement (COMCASA), Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and the proposed Maritime Information Sharing Technical Arrangement (MISTA) will improve Indian Navy's capabilities in terms of MDA logistic sustenance.
- India's Defence reforms are not theatre, country or threat-specific but synergise and integrate capabilities to support envisaged role of India in the global comity of nations.

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# Chair



**Ambassador Ashok Kantha** extended a warm welcome to everyone and introduced the distinguished panelists: Admiral Sunil Lanba (Retired), Lieutenant General SL Narasimhan (Retired) and Ms Darshana Baruah.

At the outset, Amb. Kantha noted the unprecedented peace time PLA Navy's (PLAN) expansion from a modest sized coastal 'brown water' navy to the largest Navy in the world with deployments well beyond China's proximate waters and its rapidly expanding footprint in the IOR. He highlighted the political and strategic underpinnings of this expansion as stated by President Xi Jinping during the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, 'We will make it our mission to see that by 2035, the modernization of our national defense and our forces is basically completed; and that by the mid-21st century our people's armed forces have been fully transformed into world-class forces.'

Regarding the Navy's role as part of this world-class force, he brought out Xi's reiterations of building a world-class Navy, China's strategic priorities of becoming a maritime power and protecting overseas interests and the change in focus of the PLAN from 'Off-shore water Defence' to 'Open Seas Protection' as enunciated in the 2015 China's White Paper on Military Strategy. He highlighted the numerous changes which have occurred – the doctrinal shift, rolling out of Maritime Silk Road Initiative, unprecedented and speedy build-up of PLAN and its assets, major reforms in modernisation, ongoing militarisation of augmented features in South China Sea, near continuous naval presence and regular submarine deployments in the Indian Ocean,

development of its first overseas facility and deployment of the PLAN Marines at Djibouti, anti-piracy patrols and other actions taken by China, which have progressively resulted in a much larger footprint of the PLAN and are in consonance with China's stated policy of becoming a great maritime power. China's naval strategists are currently discussing about the imperative of moving from 'One Ocean Strategy' to 'Two Oceans Strategy' which incorporates Indian Ocean as a normal theatre for operations and combat reach of the PLA Navy in the future, apart from the Western Pacific.

Raising pertinent questions on the issue, Amb. Kantha commenced the panel discussion by highlighting the various facets of the discussion: a) Chinese Navy's rapidly expanding presence and its current capabilities in the IOR, b) likely PLA Navy force projection capabilities, postures and doctrines by 2035 and c) challenges and opportunities for India in response thereto.

# Opening Remarks



**Mr. Peter Rimmel** welcomed the distinguished guests and participants and remarked that debating China, its rise and its growing international ambitions is a herculean task and of growing importance. He also highlighted the series of webinars which were organized by ICS and KAS in the recent past and looked forward to more such events in the future.

The rise of China and its actions over the past two years has finally drawn the attention, it deserves in Europe and America. Just as People's Republic of China's actions in the domestic arena and along with its periphery have drawn world attention in the recent past, it is likely that its growing footprint in the Indian Ocean and the broader Indo-Pacific will draw attention in the future. Hence, it is necessary to assess China's Great Power ambitions and its naval build up.

China has emerged from the shadows of Deng Xiaoping's strategy of 'hiding our capacities and biding our time'. Under Xi Jinping, China's global aspirations have been spelt out more clearly. This can be seen as a sign of a confident China under a strong leader but could also be a symptom of systemic internal policy failure.

China's partners are improving their understanding of China and are no longer willing to blindly acquiesce. For instance, India has not accepted the border incidents but has ensured that China returns to the negotiating table. In the maritime domain, China has secured commercial and military access as part of the Maritime Silk Road and is likely to inhibit India's access to seas.

Here too, China has overplayed its hand, encouraging resistance and forcing it into a more aggressive stance, resulting in, if not an outright defeat, then at least a policy failure.

Past experience has made it clear that German Foreign Policy of rapprochement has not worked. China has used trade to access German technology either willingly or through coercion and has utilised economic leverage to take advantage. Germany has redrafted its China Policy and its outlook on the Indo-Pacific. The ‘Policy on the Indo-Pacific’ issued recently, seeks to ensure that the seas remain free and that every country has a chance at peace and prosperity. Germany is looking for partners to uphold a multilateral world order rather than picking sides and India fits in naturally.

To conclude, even highly efficient top-down organization can suffer from lapses of judgment. While authoritarian regimes prefer to keep their decision-making process in the dark and project an image of a strong and all-knowing leadership, strength of democracies lies in their ability to make mistakes and debate them publicly. We need to understand the underlying Chinese motivation for its behaviour and achieve greater compatibility between the changing World Order and China in the long run.

As the revised German Policy on the Indo-Pacific shows that both nations can adapt to new situations. The current circumstances show that regional powers are committed to a multilateral world order and free trade with the ‘Quad’ and the ‘Two plus Two’ talks. It is time to rebuild a credible alternative to China’s influence in the Indo-Pacific and we need to actively influence the shaping of a new rules-based World Order based on the values we all believe in.

# Panelist



**Ms. Darshana Baruah** covered China's expansion in the IOR with a focus on developments concerning India.

She stated that earlier, India was not concerned about Chinese activities in IOR as it was assumed that China was far off and incapable of sustaining its presence in the IOR. China's narrative has changed significantly in recent years and the effects of India's border disputes are expanding to the maritime domain, with PLAN maintaining a continuous presence in the IOR since 2008.

China's Naval Doctrine has evolved from need for logistic support for 'Out of Area' activities i.e. beyond the Western Pacific, in 2010, to outlining the 'need for a blue water navy' in 2013 to 'Open Seas protection' in 2015. It has consistently focused on China's ability to protect its interests, business and citizens overseas, similar to other navies around the world.

In terms of concerns, 2014 docking of PLAN submarine at Colombo Port was the first 'red herring', but was unfortunately, viewed from the point of Sri Lanka's right to do so rather than as assisting China's Indian Ocean interests. During the 2016 Maldives' water crisis, China was a quick second after India, despite having to cover significantly more distance, reflecting Beijing's interest and political commitment in establishing itself in the IOR.

With global ambitions and its Belt and Road Initiative, China needs to sustain its presence in the IOR and protect its sea lines of communications, its energy links with the Middle-East and its trade in the IOR. Historically, China has utilized commercial activities to secure its maritime interests through trade but now has sufficient reasons to strengthen its foothold with considerable investments, citizens and commerce in the region. It established its logistic military facility in Djibouti in 2017, despite a policy of having no overseas bases or military facilities in the IOR. While China's strongest partners are Pakistan and Bangladesh, followed by Sri Lanka and Myanmar, its commercial and political engagement spans across the IOR.

In terms of traditional security, China's military presence has been fairly limited. Its biggest challenge has been geography, which is India's strength. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, China could not reach its partners in the IOR as quickly as India. And while China evacuated its citizens, it did not offer to use the same aircraft to assist Maldivian citizens stranded in Wuhan, China. India undertook the evacuation of students from Bangladesh and other countries, which reflects its ties with the region. Similarly, India undertook a massive mission to deliver essential food and medical supplies and provide medical training across the Indian Ocean. Thus, Geography will play a crucial role in deciding China's strengths in the IOR.

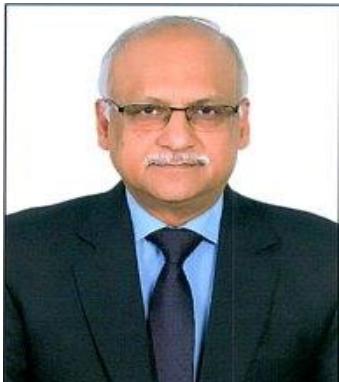
However, China's approach is not purely military and India's approach too would have to be a combination of non-traditional security issues and traditional security issues. For instance, China has managed to deepen its relationship with sub- regions of the IOR simultaneously, while most countries including India, have visualised the IOR in silos. The Ministry of External Affairs' IOR Division, established in 2016, included Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles but excluded Madagascar and Comoros. These two countries were finally included in 2019, thus providing a 'whole of region' approach to the IOR. Meanwhile, China has consistently reached out to African islands and Western Indian Ocean littorals, where India has not been strong in terms of training assistance and political visits. Most of these countries now send their personnel for training to China, which are reflected in their interpretations on UN Convention on Law of Sea (UNCLOS).

It is also essential to understand why nations across IOR are welcoming China as an alternative security partner in the IOR. These nations want to widen their ties with security partners and avoid rivalry between major nations. China is likely to continue to offer assistance, enhance its relationship and play a significant role in the IOR. However, its operational experience in the IOR is limited and it needs to gain operational strength through exercises and port calls to establish a substantial presence in the region.

One of China's major challenges in the Indian Ocean is Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), which China is addressing through non-military means as well. It has increased its surveillance and mapping exercises in the region in the form of scientific and fishing vessels as well as hydrographic missions. It is safe to assume that China is building on its underwater data and Oceanographic mapping of IOR, critical for its submarine deployments along with other missions.

Dual-purpose ports, which form a part of the Belt and Road Initiative, are a point of concern. While it is difficult for China to convert commercial ports into military bases, it can utilise these ports for non-traditional security issues such as Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief and scientific surveys, which have strategic and military implications. Even fishing rights, something that China acquires widely in the IOR, especially in South West Indian Ocean, carry more implications than a road or a bridge in one of the islands or littorals in the IOR. In the immediate future, China's ability to gather information and improve its MDA will decide, what role it plays in the region and which ports can sustain such measures. MDA will be critical with China's Indian Ocean ambitions and it is essential to understand that creating MDA, gathering information, does not necessarily have to be through direct military means.

# Panelist



**Lieutenant General SL Narasimhan** in his opening remarks covered the Force projection capabilities, postures and doctrine of PLAN by 2035.

Stressing that numbers are only one factor of any kind of combat power, he highlighted the current and assessed force levels of PLAN by 2035. From two aircraft carriers, 33 destroyers & 49 frigates at present, it is estimated that by 2035, PLAN will have four or five aircraft carriers, 55 destroyers and 60 frigates. In addition, it has 80 Type 22 Houbei class missile boats and Type 56 Jiangdao class corvettes for territorial defence. The number of Jiangdao class corvettes is likely to increase to between 55 to 70 by 2035. Replenishment ships which improve long-range force projection capability, have increased from five a decade ago, to 15 at present and is likely to increase further to 20.

As regards strategy, the principle of Active Defence has been adopted since Mao Zedong era. Active Defence is not limited to land-oriented strategy, but is applicable to the maritime domain as well. Simply put, one does not wait for his opponent to launch the offensive or take the initiative. One grabs the initiative, if one can and launches the first strike.

China's 'Two Oceans Strategy' involves the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean with the inter se priorities being, South China Sea, Western Pacific and lastly the Indian Ocean. The 2015

China's White Paper on Military Strategy indicated a gradual change from offshore waters defence to open seas protection, which indicated that PLAN would move out of its territorial waters and seek a global role slowly and steadily. China has also started taking an active part in the establishment and protection of international and regional maritime order. For instance, China adheres to UNCLOS selectively, especially in areas where procedures and rules are yet to be established. This will have a significant impact by 2035.

China is gradually adopting Sir Julian Corbett's writings on 'Control of the Oceans' as against the Mahanian theory of 'Command of the Seas' and is trying to cover the entry and exit points of the oceans. By 2035, it is assessed that China would mark the beginnings of becoming a global maritime power. While the first and second island chains are well known, Professor Andrew Latham, talks about the Third, Fourth and Fifth Island chains, with the Third Island Chain encompassing Alaska, Hawaii and New Zealand, the Fourth Island Chain linking Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Diego Garcia and the Fifth Chain extending from Djibouti, Madagascar and South Africa and encompasses the Persian Gulf Region. As China's Comprehensive National Power and PLAN's capabilities increase, it is expected to progressively extend its influence from first to fifth island chains. The same may not be feasible by 2035 but possible by 2050 and beyond.

IOR has remained a strategic vulnerability for the PLA and is one of the reasons for China pursuing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) and the Kra Canal. CPEC and CMEC, which are in progress, provide two corridors on either side of India into the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. In addition, if, Kra Canal comes up, China may overcome the 'Malacca Straits Dilemma', spoken by Hu Jintao in 2004.

While the priority for operations of PLA Navy until about 2035 is debatable, the increase in the PLA Navy activities in IOR will be clearly visible. The Anti-Piracy Task Force provided an opportunity to reach the IOR nearly seven years ahead of schedule i.e. 2015, to enter the IOR. China has carried out exercises with Russia and Iran and is progressively likely to reach out to other countries. Research vessels, deep-sea fishing, anti-piracy, HADR and maritime infrastructure are other areas where PLAN activities are likely to increase.

Strategic maritime hubs along the 21st century Maritime Silk Road will provide access arrangements, shore-bases, maritime-reconnaissance, naval exercises and sale of naval platforms, thus creating a dependency and will assist in expansion of ISR facilities to support PLAN operations. As far as port acquisitions are concerned, focus areas are the Mediterranean and Western Europe, covering the entry and exit points of Mediterranean. On the other side of the Atlantic, the Panama Canal is owned by Hong Kong-based Li Ka-shing, and the Nicaragua Canal is being constructed by Chinese companies. Thus, Chinese influence has increased. So far, Djibouti is the only place which is a logistics base for the Navy. There are many other port acquisitions taking place, which are commercial and give preference to Chinese trade. However, these could be converted into bases to support naval operations in the future.

# Panelist



**Admiral Sunil Lanba, PVSM, AVSM (Retired)** covered the Challenges and Opportunities for India due to the PLAN's growing presence in the IOR.

Admiral Lanba brought out that while PLAN was created in 1949, its first overseas visit took place in 1986 when two ships visited Karachi port. PLAN has a near permanent deployment since December 2008 in the form of Anti-Piracy Escort Force and at present, the 35th Anti-Piracy Escort Forces is operating in the Gulf of Aden.

Past trends indicate that PLAN has six to eight navy ships in the IOR at any given time, including three as part of the Anti-Piracy Escort Force and the remainder, three to four Intelligence-hydrographic survey ships, generally deployed in Southern Indian Ocean and sometimes in international waters of the Andaman Sea, carrying out survey, bottom-mapping, and obtaining hydrographic data. The exception was in July-August 2017, when there were 14 to 16 ships for about 40 days, which is likely to be a coincidence. From 2013 to 2018, two PLAN submarines were deployed every year, for a duration of three months. Post-2018, there has been no known deployment of PLAN submarines. Between 2015 and 2017, Anti-Piracy Escort Force generally visited Europe and United States after finishing its tenure, but post-2017, the escort forces have returned home directly. PLAN's global deployment has come down since 2017.

Since 2007, the Indian Navy has been mission deployed with ships permanently deployed at the mouth of Malacca Straits, the Gulf of Aden, the Andaman Sea, and periodically deployed in the Northern Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf, Bay of Bengal and Southern Indian Oceans. This has, ensured a near permanent presence along the two main ingress and egress routes of the Indian Ocean, which along with daily patrolling by Long-Range Maritime Patrol Aircraft generates MDA. Intelligence or hydrographic ships entering India's Exclusive Economic Zone are escorted out of India's waters as has happened on two occasions in the past few years. Similarly, PLAN submarines have been detected and tracked by both aircraft and ships. Thus, regular inputs are available about deployment of PLAN ships in the IOR and they are monitored for their location and activities, at least once in 24 to 48 hours.

While China has acquired commercial ports in the IOR, these cannot be utilised as bases. While these ports can assist in operational turnaround, they do not have facilities to support naval ships. PLAN's sole overseas facility at Djibouti has a 335-metre jetty, which can accommodate their future aircraft carrier.

As Net Security Provider, India provides security in the form of training, building capacity and capability, sharing MDA, conducting multi-lateral exercise and coordinated patrols. India conducts training for nearly thousand personnel, from over 30 odd countries at any given time, with the largest numbers from Sri Lanka, Kenya, Tanzania. There are capacity constraints in terms of physical infrastructure and support under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme. By providing ships to Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Sri Lanka and opening Lines of Credits to various countries such as Vietnam and building Fast Patrol Crafts and leasing a submarine to Myanmar, India has not only built capacity but also capability to operate these platforms. India has also provided Maritime Patrol Aircrafts with a permanent deployment of Dornier aircraft with crew in Seychelles.

The Indian Navy is increasing its sustenance capability by signing of Logistic Support Agreements with a number of countries, including the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with USA, ongoing project in Mauritius, and talks with Seychelles and Oman.

To improve Maritime Domain Awareness, India has set up International Fusion Center for the IOR at Gurugram in December 2018 to exchange white shipping data with over 20 countries and a classified version is provided to various agencies. Coastal radar chains have been established in a number of island nations such as Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles along with dialogue with other nations to set up coastal radar chains, to generate comprehensive MDA

Exercises with other maritime forces is an important form of engagement, with the most important being MILAN. This multi-lateral exercise has grown from initial six nations in 1996 to a planned 42 nation exercise in 2020, which unfortunately had to be cancelled due to COVID and is now being planned in 2022. Apart from exercises, Indian Navy conducts coordinated patrols with a number of countries such as Bangladesh, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar, Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius. Thus, India has a comprehensive engagement policy in the IOR and in 2015, the Indian Navy came out with a defence diplomacy document and identified priority areas for engagement in the IOR.

# Interventions

**Q.How do you read China's motivations when it is expanding its presence in the IOR and what is India's assessment in this regard?**

**A.** Throughout history, no country has become a ‘Great Power’ without being a maritime power, be it Portugal, Spain, France, Britain and United States. As China has decided that it is going to be a global power, it has to build its maritime power. One of the main motivators for China to develop their Navy is to be a Global Power with the help of maritime power.

The other motivator is China’s vulnerability in IOR, which will not reduce with China-Pakistan and China-Myanmar Economic Corridors. Almost 65-70 percent of China’s energy imports go through the IOR and the oil pipeline from say, Myanmar to Kunming has a capacity of some 300 million barrels which would replace 24 to 30 tankers. The rest has to go through the Malacca Straits. Hence, China will be vulnerable in the IOR.

China’s aspirations to be global power are based on development of maritime power which can be seen from the investments made in PLAN. No other navy has grown at this pace since the Second World War. They are commissioning between 12 to 18 ships in a year and out of that, there are four or five frigates and destroyers being commissioned every single year which is unmatched in the world. The number of ships commissioned in the past seven to eight years is more than the combined strength of the Indian, French, Spanish and German navies put together.

While the naval build-up up to 2035 has been covered, the moot point is how many assets can be deployed in the Indian Ocean. An analysis carried out a few years ago brought out that with 70 per cent availability and the rest undergoing refit, PLAN would not be able to deploy more than 20 destroyers / frigates in the Indian Ocean along with logistic support at the end of a very long logistic chain. The Indian Navy would be more than capable of handling PLAN, if the need arises.

**Q. As the PLAN expands its presence in the IOR, what are the potential areas of conflict between PLAN and Indian Navy? Are standoff situations between the two navies anticipated in the IOR?**

Standoffs occur generally along the land borders but rarely occur between two navies at sea. Based on developments along the land border, the Government of India may expand the theatre of operations into the maritime situation. It is to India's advantage to expand the theatre of operations into the maritime domain and it will pay dividends by applying additional pressure on China.

**Q. As the difference between the relative strengths of PLAN and the Indian Navy widens towards 2035, there will be capability gap vis-à-vis the PLAN. What kind of role will India's partnership with other like-minded countries play in dealing with India's concerns?**

**A.** Cooperation with other like-minded countries is likely to be more in terms of support systems such as Maritime Domain Awareness and sharing of intelligence. It is unlikely that all four countries (India, USA, Japan and Australia) will join together to form an alliance against China.

**Q. China's force projection capabilities are being developed in the IOR with the PLAN Marine Corps being deployed in Djibouti. How do you visualise the PLAN Marine Corps developing in the future as one moves towards 2035?**

**A.** There are three aspects to it – First is the expansion of the Marine Corps from two brigades in 2016 when the reforms commenced to six or seven fully formed marine brigades. While 300,000 troops were reduced from the PLA, there was an increase in Marine Corps to about 100,000 troops, which will improve their power projection capabilities. The second aspect is that PLAN Marines are training in Xinjiang and other areas along the border. It is likely to be another role for the Marine Corps and possibly, the role of the Marines is still evolving. The third aspect is the requirement of bases for any kind of power projection. While commercial

ports cannot be used as bases to support naval operations, China's phased conversion of Djibouti into a base indicates that China may develop bases over a period of time. While it may not happen by 2035, India needs to be prepared to see PLAN operating in many parts of the world by 2050.

**Q. Which are the countries in the IOR that are likely to cooperate with China and its expansion in the IOR? At what level and to what extent are these countries likely to become arenas for India-China rivalry?**

**A.** There are a number of aspects to it. One, island nations are not looking to offer a particular base to the Chinese. They are very concerned about their sovereignty and want to make sure that they do not become a battleground for India and China or even US and China. At the same time, it provides them an opportunity to address their own security concerns. There has been a change in the manner, Indian Ocean islands identify themselves over the past decade from being a South Asian or an African nation to an Indian Ocean nation as a number of countries are looking forward to coordinate or cooperate with them. While Sri Lanka and Maldives are a main concern due to their proximity with India and have seen some politically difficult times, Madagascar and Comoros have a large number of collaborations and they have significant diplomatic presence.

Two, these nations have a lot of historical baggage. Countries in the Western Indian Ocean where France is the primary security partner, there is a bit of historical baggage and they acknowledge that they cannot work without France just as Sri Lanka and Maldives acknowledge that they cannot work without India. However, these countries are making sure that they are not completely dependent on India and are cooperating on security with other nations which does not necessarily mean China, the issue is which countries are available. They are keen to engage with Japan Australia and EU.

Three, their security concerns are different and the way they define their security challenges is very different than the way India defines its own security challenges. Their security challenges are illegal fishing, disaster management, trafficking, climate change and they are working with World Bank, Norway and other Scandinavian countries. Hence, India's approach to the IOR

also has to be a balance between non-traditional and traditional security issues because, these islands which played a significant role in World War II, are for the first time, sovereign nations with foreign policy choices and strategic interests and their foreign policy choices will have an impact on how India is seen in the IOR.

## Speaker Profiles



**Admiral Sunil Lanba (Retd)** PVSM, AVSM is the Chairman of the National Maritime Foundation, and alumnus of the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, the College of Defence Management, Secunderabad, and the Royal College of Defence Studies, London. In an illustrious naval career spanning four decades, the Admiral specialised in Navigation and Aircraft Direction and served as the Navigation, Direction and Operations Officer aboard several ships in the Eastern and Western Fleets of the Indian Navy. Alongside several sea command tenures, Admiral Lanba served ashore as Chief of Staff of the Eastern Naval Command, Commandant of the National Defence College, and Vice-Chief of Naval Staff. He assumed command of the Indian Navy as the 23rd Chief of Naval Staff on 31st May 2016, and demitted office on the 31st May 2019. He was also Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, and has served as Chairman of NMF since June 2019.



**Lt Gen. SL Narasimhan (Retd)** PVSM, AVSM\*, VSM is a Maths graduate, has a Master's Degree in Defence Studies and a doctorate in India-China relations. Narasimhan is an infantry officer from Madras Regiment. He is fluent in Chinese and has served a tenure as Defence Attaché in Beijing. He has been an avid China watcher for 20 years. He is presently Member of the National Security Advisory Board, India and Director General, Centre for Contemporary China Studies. He is also a Distinguished Fellow with the Centre for Air Power Studies, India.

## Speaker Profiles



**Darshana Baruah** is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Tokyo, where she is working on a book about the significance of strategic islands in the Indian Ocean Region. She is also a Nonresident Scholar with the South Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Her primary research focuses on maritime security in Asia and the role of the Indian Navy in a new security architecture. Her work also examines the strategic implications of China's infrastructure and connectivity projects as well as trilateral partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. Previously, Baruah was the Associate Director and a Senior Research Analyst at Carnegie India where she led the center's initiative on maritime security. Her research projects there included work on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as well as trilateral partnerships and strategic connectivity projects in the Indo-Pacific.



**Ashok K. Kantha** was Ambassador of India to China until January 2016. Prior to this, he was Secretary (East) at Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi with responsibility for about 65 countries in India's extended neighborhood. His previous assignments include High Commissioner of India to Sri Lanka and Malaysia, Consul General in Hong Kong, Deputy Chief of Mission in Kathmandu (Nepal), and Joint Secretary (East Asia) in Ministry of External Affairs. Earlier, Kantha served in different capacities at Indian Missions in Singapore, China and the USA, and at headquarters in New Delhi.

## Speaker Profiles



**Peter Rimmel** is currently the Resident Representative of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Office, India. He has a First Law Degree from Freiburg University, as well as a Second Law Degree from the Ministry of Justice Baden-Württemberg, Germany and a M.A. in Geography. After working as, a jurist, judge and lecturer, he took public office as Ministerialrat, Head of Division at the State Ministry of the Interior in Saxony, Germany, from November 1991 on until 2000. There he first served in the Police and Security and later in the Local Government Department. On behalf of the German Foreign Ministry he served in East Timor as Registrar General, Head of Civil Registry and Notary Services (UNTAET), and became later the principal Advisor for Governance Reform for GIZ (German International Cooperation) to the Ministry of Administrative Reform and the Anti-Corruption-Commission of the Republic of Indonesia, where he served for 7 years. He then moved to Rwanda, also as Principal Advisor Good Governance/Justice Program. Earlier he was Resident Representative Lebanon, Director of Rule of Law Program Middle East North Africa, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

## Institution Profiles



**The Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi** (ICS) is one of the oldest research institutions on China and East Asia in India. With support from the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, it is the mandate of the ICS to develop a strategic vision for India's dealings with China and to help adapt India's priorities quickly and appropriately to address the research and educational demands arising from China's emergence. The ICS seeks to promote interdisciplinary study and research on China and the rest of the South -East Asia with a focus on expertise in China's domestic politics, international relations, economy, history, health, education, border studies, language and culture, and on India-China comparative studies. It also looks to foster active links with business, media, government and non-governmental organizations in India through applied research, executive training programmes, and seminars and conferences, and to serve as a repository of knowledge and data grounded in first-hand research on Chinese politics, economy, international relations, society and culture.

Its supporters include Tata Trusts, Indian Council of Social Science Research Gargi Vidya Prakash Dutt Memorial, Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation and Pirojshaty Godrej Foundation. It also boasts of various universities worldwide as academic partners. The mandate of the ICS is to develop a strategic vision for India's dealings with China and to help adapt India's priorities quickly and appropriately to address the research and educational demands arising from China's emergence. The Institute has played a notable role in shaping the public opinion on China through a variety of outlets such as its regular publications like China Report, ICS Analysis, ICS Occasional Papers and Working Papers, which marks its activity on the academic forefront. It also has a robust social media presence as it is very active on Twitter and Instagram, uploads regularly on Soundcloud, videos on YouTube and publishes regular blog pieces on its website.

## Institution Profiles



Freedom, justice and solidarity are the basic principles underlying the work of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS). The KAS is a political foundation, with a strong presence throughout Germany and all over the world. We cooperate with governmental institutions, political parties and civil society organisations building strong partnerships along the way. In particular, we seek to intensify political cooperation at the national and international levels on the foundations of our objectives and values. Together with our partners, we contribute to the creation of an international order that enables every country to develop in freedom and under its own responsibility. The Konrad- Adenauer-Stiftung has organized its program priorities in India into five working areas:

- Political Dialogue and cooperation
- Foreign and Security Policy including Energy Policy
- Economic policy and management
- Rule of Law
- Media and training programmes for students of journalism

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's India office takes great pride in its cooperation with Indian partner organisations who implement jointly curated projects and programmes.