Russia in Indian Ocean littoral

What is the issue?

- Russia, long seen as marginal to the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean, is rejoining the major power scrum in the contested littoral.
- There are reasons why India should think of its consequences for its own regional strategy.

What are the events that highlight Russia's interest in the littoral?

- Three recent events highlight Russia's growing strategic interest in the Indian Ocean.
- **With Sri Lanka** - Perekop, a training vessel of the Russian Navy, arrived at the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka.
- **With South Africa** - Russian long-distance "Black Jack" nuclear bombers flew to South Africa.
- This is the first time these aircraft have been deployed to Africa.
- **Moris Exercise (Trilateral)** - Russia and China are conducting a naval exercise with South Africa in the waters off the Cape of Good Hope.
- This is the first time that the three countries are doing a joint exercise.
- Meanwhile, Iran plans to hold joint naval drills with Russia and China in the waters of the Persian Gulf.
- These events must compel India to think of its consequences for its own regional strategy.

Where is India's focus?

- Until now, India's discourse on the Indian Ocean has been focused on the growing competition with China.
- This has led to the rapid expansion of India's naval cooperation with the United States and Japan, as well as with its regional partners in the east, many nations in the Gulf and the east coast of Africa.
- India has also been developing a partnership with France, a resident power in the littoral.
- India would also want to develop similar intensive engagement with Britain and the European Union.

Why is there Russia's return to the Indian Ocean relatively recent?

- This must be seen as a part of its new strategic activism in the Middle East and Africa.
- Five decades ago, as a rising Soviet Russia sought to enter the Indian Ocean littoral, it set off concerns in the region about being sucked into the superpower rivalry.
- The region's calls for a zone of peace in the Indian Ocean went nowhere as the US replaced Britain as the main security provider in the littoral.
- The Soviet Union too expanded its strategic footprint the Indian Ocean during the 1970s and 1980s.
- But the collapse of the Soviet Union disrupted Moscow's Indian Ocean trajectory.

What are the constraints that remain on Russia's ambitions?

- Russia is a vast continental state and its limited access to the sea remains vulnerable to exploitation by its adversaries.
- The unfreezing Arctic will present new opportunities for Russia, but most of them are for the long-term.
- Russia is also constrained by its limited economic resources.
- China, Japan, Europe and the US bring far greater economic weight to bear upon the region.
- The Indian Ocean is certainly not at the top of Moscow's maritime priorities.
- Yet, Russian President has demonstrated the political will and strategic acumen to make the best of a weak hand.

How can Russia shape the strategic outcome of the region?

- While Russian might never dominate the Indian Ocean, it certainly has the capacity to shape the strategic outcomes in the region.
- Russia is **one of the world's major arms exporters** and has turned that into an effective leverage in the Indian Ocean region.
- The success of Russia's **military intervention** in Syria in saving the Bashar al Assad regime has got the attention of many countries in the littoral struggling to cope with civil wars.
- Russia is using its **new security role in the region** to gain privileged military access.
- Although it does not have a naval base in the Indian Ocean, acquiring one is probably a high priority.
- Meanwhile, Russia has stepped up its naval diplomacy in the region, making regular visits to ports in the region and deepening special relationships that it already has with countries like India.
- **As a permanent member in UNSC**, Russia offers diplomatic protection for

many regimes in the UNSC against Western pressures on such issues as human rights.

- Moscow's strong support to the **principle of non-intervention** in the internal affairs is of great value to many African nations.
- **Russian energy and mineral companies** do offer important options for resource development in many parts of the littoral.
- On the face of it, Russian activism in the Indian Ocean should be a welcome addition to the emerging multi-polarity in the region.

What are the challenges that need more debate in India?

- Moscow's deepening tensions with the West and growing strategic embrace of Beijing do pose problems for India's own strategy.
- But there is far less focus on the implications of the emerging Sino-Russian naval and maritime partnership.
- Over the last few years, China and Russia have conducted impressive naval manoeuvres in the Western Pacific, the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean.
- The joint exercise with South Africa recently brings the unfolding Sino-Russian naval partnership closer home to India.
- Delhi needs an early and intensive dialogue with Moscow on its Indian Ocean collaboration with China.

Source: The Indian Express

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