Second Wind for China's String of Pearls Strategy. Part 1

The naval maneuvers conducted from January 29 to February 14, 2014 by a small squadron of the PCR's navy in the Eastern part of the Indian Ocean literally blew up the media and served as a rude "awakening", in the words of "Australian" newspaper, to politicians and security experts in the USA, Australia, India, and other countries, who are all still skeptical of Beijing's long term intentions to establish a navy capable of projecting power within and beyond this zone.

These were the first exercises conducted by the Chinese navy in the waters between Australia and the Java Island in the Indonesian Archipelago, and also the first time it used the Straits of Sunda and Lombok to enter and exit from the Indian Ocean. These straits, as well as the Strait of Malacca, were recognized by the USA long ago as critical "choke points" that would be strategically important for establishing an economic blockade of the Middle Kingdom should there arise a minor or major Sino-American conflict.

There was essentially nothing illegal about the maneuvers, as they were held in international waters. Nevertheless, Australia's air force dispatched a P-3 Orion aircraft to conduct surveillance and reconnaissance of the exercises.

For China, this was a thematic, important step in the implementation of its "string of pearls" strategy, aimed at protecting its oil flows, affirming the country as a global naval power with diverse interests throughout the world, and overcoming attempts by the USA to cut off access to or from China via the world's oceans. Furthermore, an important task lay in minimizing potential threats in the most complex and vulnerable choke point at the junction of two oceans, named the "Malacca Dilemma" by Hu Jintao in 2003.

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Remember that the "string of pearls" concept was put forward by Christopher Pehrson, a lieutenant colonel in the US Air Force, and subsequent analyst at the Pentagon. The phrase was first used in January 2005, in a report to US military officials prepared by the Booz-Allen Hamilton consulting company. It explicitly showed the world the growing influence of China in Southeast and East Asia and the Indian Ocean due to the appearance on maps of such strategic points as Hainan Island, the Woody Islands close to Vietnam, Chittagong (Bangladesh), Sittue and the Coco Islands (Myanmar), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Gwadar (Pakistan), the Seychelles Archipelago, etc.

Initially, Chinese politicians and pundits reacted to the elegantly named concept with skepticism, apparently because it originated in Washington. However, the global academic community successfully introduced it into the lexicon, and it began to appear on the pages of magazines, newspapers, and studies.

The Chinese gradually implemented the multipurpose strategy according to the developed plans A, B and C. The essence of plan A lay in the utilization (in addition to Malacca) of the remote straits of Sunda and Lombok, in the laying of an oil pipeline with a length of 2380 km starting in 2010 for a total price of 2.5 billion USD from ports in the Bay of Bengal in Myanmar to Kunming, the capital of the Yunnan Province, and in the participation in the possible construction of an oil pipeline in northern Malaysia or a canal across the Kra Isthmus. Plan B envisaged a material presence in the Indian Ocean by creating a network of bases, ports, large storage facilities, and other facilities in the group of friendly countries listed above, and in a decade or two, by placing a naval contingent in the Indian Ocean.
According to plan C, China formed a plan to construct “land bridges”, access roads, aqueducts, and viaducts to strengthen relations of its landlocked southern provinces with neighboring ASEAN countries, and to provide them with access to the Indian Ocean. To this end, railroads and highways were constructed from Kunming and Nanning to Hanoi along the Irrawaddy River, etc. In Central Asia, branches of a Karakoram Highway stretching 750 km are being constructed, and pipelines to the port of Gwadar are being laid.

However, according to the estimates of both the Chinese themselves and their foreign colleagues, such grandiose plans, including the solution of the critical “Malacca Dilemma”, obviously cannot be implemented in a short period of time. They required substantial capital investment, adherence to established goals, and most importantly - overcoming the instability and "tyranny of distance" of the regions where the majority of the planned projects are located, the well known politico-economic pragmatism and efforts to minimize potentials risks of the Chinese notwithstanding.

A decade has passed since. The world has changed. The situation in the Indian Ocean has changed. The Indian Ocean is now a global energy highway and major choke point! The economies of the Asian giants, China and India, as well as Japan and South Korea, and to a lesser extent Europe and the USA, depend to a significant degree on the complicated and risk-laden energy flows along routes running East and West in the Indian Ocean.

This naturally raises the question: in what areas did Beijing succeed and fail last time, and how should it improve? The capabilities of Beijing in the region have been overestimated by Indians, who are not eager to see Beijing grow too powerful right under their nose, but have been underestimated by Americans. For example, analyst E.Erickson considers China to possess only modest capabilities. According to his observations, one or two Chinese ships appear in the naval theater only when necessary, for example, to evacuate Chinese citizens from Libya when it was engulfed in crisis in February 2011, a major floating hospital to examine and treat the population in the area of the Indian Ocean in 2010 and 2013, and finally, a squadron of ships to participate in anti-piracy campaigns since 2008.

Numerous Russian experts agree with E. Erickson, and consider the infrastructure potential established by the Chinese in this area to be insufficient to oppose the USA and its allies.

Meanwhile, it is impossible to ignore the fact that China has been steadily increasing its presence in the region in different ways. For example, Chinese navy ships are using ocean communications increasingly often. There are numerous examples. At the end of July 2012, a Chinese destroyer with two escort ships went through the Indian Ocean and the Suez Canal to participate in maneuvers off the coast of Syria. In September 2013, a Chinese amphibious assault ship was also spotted there. In October 2013, Beijing first mentioned that Chinese nuclear submarines had begun to patrol the Indian Ocean on a rotating basis. In January 2014, the Chinese patrol ship "Yancheng" navigated the Suez Canal to reach the Mediterranean Sea and participate in the transportation and disposal of chemical weapons from Syria. According to expert estimates, by 2015 China will possess a fleet of submarines twice as large as the USA’s.

China's unprecedented decision to send a squadron of ships to the Horn of Africa in 2008 has been regarded with great curiosity by politicians, military analysts, and the media throughout the world. They have all wondered whether such an act can be explained solely by China's desire to protect its economic and trade interests? Is this step an attempt to exploit the opportunity to train navy ships a substantial distance from the shores of the Middle Kingdom? Or is Beijing trying to show off its growing role as a powerful and responsible global player in the world and its oceans?

Responding to these questions, many political scientists have come to the conclusion that the participation of Chinese ships in international anti-piracy campaigns in the Gulf of Aden is a test of the strength and capabilities of the Chinese Navy, its newest equipment and logistics, and the skill of its teams for future operations in the Indian Ocean and the "blue waters" of the world's oceans. This experience will surely benefit Beijing in conflict situations over, say, Taiwan in the South China Sea, for protects sea lines of communication (SLOCs), etc.

All this was conjectured by one of the "fathers" of Beijing's naval doctrine, declared at the turn of the century - Shi Yong-Sheng, an admiral and former head of the Navy, who considered it necessary to establish a twenty-first century navy, capable of reliably protecting China's coastal zone, utilizing advanced and high-tech equipment as well as adequate systems of the most modern weaponry, and composed of well-trained personnel, in order to achieve the accession of Taiwan, to establish control of the South China Sea, and to expand China's influence in the western area of the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

(To be continued)
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