

Major issues in the Indian Ocean. A glimpse from Moscow

G. Ivashentsov
Vice President, RIAC

The changes in the global political landscape require a new look at the role that the world oceans, especially the Indian Ocean, play in global politics and economy. The situation in the Indian Ocean region today is quite turbulent. Globalization is intertwined there with the struggle for spheres of influence, and financial tensions - with territorial disputes. The region accounts for half of global volume of container cargo delivered by the sea routes and about 70% of global sea transportation of hydrocarbons. Equally important is the military and political role of the Indian Ocean region. It is home of major armed conflict zones in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, as well as of Iran, which has been under attack by the West for more than three decades. The Indian Ocean also washes the shores of Africa, the struggle for the resources of which is a matter of the near future. Between the 1960s and 1990s, the United States clearly dominated the Indian Ocean militarily. However, today, with all its naval power, the United States can no longer count on the rights of a monopoly administrator in this region. New players are entering the "big game" there. These are primarily China and India, which have significantly increased their naval capabilities in the wake of the economic recovery, as well as Iran, which is now perhaps the only country in the Greater Middle East that is steadily increasing its economic, scientific, technical and military potential.

The processes developing in the Indian Ocean region have a significant common denominator – that is the US-China rivalry. Some people often draw a parallel between it and the Soviet-American confrontation during the Cold War missing a profound difference between the two. The Soviet-American confrontation involved not just two superpowers, but two ideologically opposed global systems, whose peaceful coexistence seemed to both Moscow and Washington just a short respite on the eve of the last and decisive battle.

China, unlike the former Soviet Union has risen in the existing system whose inherent globalization has been a major source of China's economic miracle. Accordingly, Beijing is interested not in breaking the current West-dominated global system but in carving in it an appropriate safe niche for itself. Hence there will be no global US-China bipolarity to divide the world.

As for China and India, the two powers presently play somewhat differing roles in international affairs. China is already showing its global ambitions. Its accumulated power allows it to project influence around the world: in Asia, Eurasia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. India has not yet put forward a global agenda. At the same time, New Delhi is undoubtedly thinking of extending its influence beyond the purely regional framework, which is confirmed inter alia by India's active interest in the concept of the "Indo-Pacific" in partnership with the United States, Japan and Australia. At the same time, if the United States, Japan and Australia expect to use the Indo-Pacific "Quad" primarily to create an arc of global containment of China, India seems to view that as a tool for increasing its own global weight. The age of Europe ended 100 years ago, the age of America is ending before our eyes. The twenty-first century will be the century of Asia, and India is determined to secure a leading position in it.

For both China and India, with their rapidly growing economies, it is crucial to protect their economic security, which in both cases depends heavily on energy imports. India meets more than 80% of its oil needs and more than 40% of its liquefied natural gas needs through imports by sea via the Indian Ocean routes. China receives up to 90% of its oil imports via the Indian Ocean. At the same time, China cannot do without sea communications in the Indian Ocean to deliver its goods to the European market. All this objectively determines in many ways the common interest of both China and India in the safety of transport routes passing through the Indian Ocean.

China's "One belt, one road" initiative plays a strategic role for Beijing. Its goal is to build an infrastructure axis between Asia and Europe as well as to give a powerful impetus to the development of China's South Western provinces. In this regard, Beijing is looking for additional access to the Indian Ocean, in particular by building an oil and gas pipelines from the Myanmar coast of the Bay of Bengal, to Yunnan province, and starting construction of a high - speed railway from China to Bangkok. The possibility of building the Panama type canal from the Bay of Bengal to the South China Sea through the narrow Isthmus of Kra in Thailand is also under consideration. They in Washington took notice of these efforts by Beijing, as well as of its attempts to gain access for its Navy ships to ports in a number of friendly countries in the Indian Ocean region, such as Myanmar, Bangladesh, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, etc. Experts of the American consulting firm "Booz Allen Hamilton" (in which, by the way, the well-known E. Snowden worked at one time) in a report prepared in January 2005 by the US Department of Defense order interpreted them as a Chinese strategy for military development of the Indian Ocean region. The Yankees gave this strategy the name of "the string of pearls", which was launched in the international media. The fact that neither Chinese officials nor Chinese journalists ever used the

term "the string of pearls" in public materials gave foreign commentators reason to talk about the extreme secrecy of this strategy.

Indians traditionally consider the Indian Ocean to be a determining factor in the country's politics and in the historical fate of India. Therefore, it is not surprising that China's concept of the "Maritime silk road" that runs through the Indian Ocean caused a mixed reaction in India. For New Delhi, the China-Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC), a part of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, is unacceptable as it passes through the disputed territory of Kashmir, which is under the control of the Pakistani military.

As for Russia, according to its Maritime doctrine, the Indian Ocean regional direction is one of its priorities. It is not just because that the sea route connecting the European Russia with the Russian Far East passes through the Indian Ocean. The situation in South and South-West Asia, located along the Northern contour of the Indian Ocean facing the Central Asian and Transcaucasian underbelly of Russia, directly affects its security.

This is why Moscow's desire to ensure its naval presence in the Indian Ocean is reasonable in view of the interest of global players and, above all, the United States. Moscow took into account the renaming in 2018 of the US Pacific Command to the Indo-Pacific Command, as well as the fact that the US concept of the strategy for the development of the Indo-Pacific region in 2019 described Russia as an "activated malign actor".

The US-promoted "Indo-Pacific Quad" project and the Chinese "One belt, one road" project bring new nuances and accents to the overall balance of power in the Indian Ocean region, to the bilateral regional confrontations between India and China, India and Pakistan, and to the conflict situation around Afghanistan and Iran.

In these circumstances, almost all interested parties have a kind of demand for political interaction with Russia. The United States and China, in the face of growing mutual contradictions, would like Moscow at least not to enter into an alliance with the opposing side. India, fearing the growing influence and military power of China, expects that Russia will not play along with Beijing in case of conflict situations. Pakistan, in turn, is interested in Russia not playing along with India in its confrontation with New Delhi. Without Russia, it is impossible to resolve the situation around Afghanistan, to settle the issue of Iran's nuclear dossier, and to counter international terrorism.

The Indian Ocean region, like the world as a whole, needs not a new leader, but a new non-bloc architecture of international cooperation that should ensure a balance between the various centers of political, economic, and military power. In these circumstances, it is in Russia's interests to follow a kind of non-aligned policy in relation to the region, without interfering in either the US-

China or inter-Asian proceedings. Perhaps it would be worth thinking about a kind of qualitatively new non-aligned movement, in which, along with Russia, India, the ASEAN states and other regional powers, such as Iran and Pakistan, could participate.

It is not about joining forces in opposing the American "unipolar world". The American "unipolar world" did not take place and will not take place. The United States will certainly never be displaced from either the global or the Indian Ocean scene. But neither the level of economic interdependence between the United States and the countries of the region, nor the large number and influence of Asian diasporas in America, nor the attractiveness of American technology and investment can force the Indian Ocean countries today to build their future according to the templates made in Washington. They intend to manage in their region themselves.

Reducing tensions between its two strategic partners in Asia, India and China, is of a paramount importance for Russia. In the West, especially in the United States, there is a popular thesis that India and China are strategic rivals, and a conflict between them, including an armed one, is inevitable. Russia, on its part, is of a different opinion. Neither China nor India is going to be content with the status of a regional power. Both of them see themselves among the world's leading states. Therefore, in fact, they are natural allies in fight for equality and fairness in global affairs. By building up bilateral partnership with both India and China, Moscow is simultaneously working to strengthen the structure of the RIC (Russia — India — China), to ensure coordination of foreign policy initiatives in the trilateral format. On many issues of the international and regional agenda, the positions of Russia, India and China coincide or are close; on others, there are fundamental differences, and in some cases the three countries compete with each other. However, in general, both the relations between China and India and the relations between all three members of the RIC correspond to the position of "different, but together".

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the world's largest non-Western international organization, could play a growing role in addressing the security problems of the Indian Ocean region, especially those related to Afghanistan and Iran. The expansion of the SCO at the expense of India and Pakistan, on the one hand, removed any suspicions about its possible transformation into a Russian-Chinese military-political alliance, and on the other — balanced the growth of China's power, placing it in a broad international framework. This is also beneficial to China itself, as it avoids rallying against it of the neighbors who are concerned about its power.

A significant contribution to trade and economic relations between Russia and the states of the Indian Ocean region could be the development of the "North-South" International transport corridor (ITC) from the Iranian port Bandar Abbas on the Indian Ocean through the territory of

Iran, Transcaucasia and Central Asia on both sides of the Caspian Sea with access to Russia. The inter-governmental agreement on the North – South ITC was signed in 2000 by Russia, Iran, and India. As of today, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Oman and Syria have joined the agreement.

COVID-19 has changed everyday life everywhere in the world. Challenged is the very global order as a whole. However, the word "crisis", written in Chinese, consists of two characters. One means "danger", the other — "opportunity". Like any global crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic not only creates additional risks and threats to any country's foreign policy, but also opens up new prospects for their interaction, including for security in the Indian Ocean region. The task is to identify and implement these opportunities.