Crouching tiger, hidden dragon: The Indian Ocean and the maritime balance of power in historical perspective

Abstract
The Indian Ocean since ancient times was an important geo-strategic arena of inter-regional unities held together informally by trade winds and diplomatic relations. In the geographical and historical convergence of East and West, Asians, Africans and Europeans interacted with one another over a period of many centuries, participating in a sophisticated structure of commerce and politics underpinned by the system of monsoons. It was therefore only a matter of time before the 'balanced' geography of the Indian Ocean gave rise to balances of power. But when exactly, and how, did the geo-strategic, inter-regional character of the Indian Ocean translate into maritime balance-of-power considerations? This paper explores the historical roots and changing dynamics of that geopolitical equation. In so doing, it evaluates the evolving matrix of intra-regional and extra-regional players as well as the comparative importance of varieties of power in the Indian Ocean arena: 'hard' or 'soft', 'state' or 'non-state', 'land-based' or 'seaborne'. The paper then examines some of the long-term implications of these changing balances for the future of the region-especially in view of the present, concurrent rise of India and China.
For a maritime nation like India, its conception of maritime security of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and, specifically, its approach to maritime security has a long historical legacy. The modern Indian Navy has its origins in the colonial period. India's tryst with maritime security is often seen as being steeped in history. K.M. Panikkar writes: 'The importance of the sea came to be recognised by the Indian rulers only when it was too late.' Panikkar elucidates the conditions under which the Indian Navy had to develop: firstly, more symbolic as the Royal Indian Navy; secondly, as a force to take over the coastal duties; and thirdly, to create a naval tradition. Holmes Thus, the meaning of the film title Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon superficially stands for the powerful warriors and swordsmen in the film, but in fact appears to be the repressive emotion of each character, whose changes push the story forward. Whether I am right in making such multi-layered interpretation might be explained in Eco's model of the cultural encyclopedia: "the meaning of something is not a matter "correct" or "incorrect" interpretations, but rather an instance of an interpreter's competence in engaging the cultural encyclopedia, the whole repertoire of symbolic resources availa