Sea lines under strain

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*Action expresses priorities*

(Gandhi)

Choc a bloc in the SLOCs

Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) are key maritime passageways that facilitate heavy shipping traffic volumes and hosting the transportation of key maritime trades such as crude oil. They feature narrow passages or ‘chokepoints’ that require ship captains to exercise extra caution when passing through, for fear of causing accidents that may spill the cargos carried by their ships and disrupt the flow of shipping traffic through those passages. Any incident in these chokepoints can result in disruption to shipping traffic that can have adverse repercussions on the economic interests of the littoral states and on international trade.

By virtue of this definition, SLOCs hold tremendous strategic importance and geopolitical value to their users. In times of conflicts, it is not unusual to find SLOCs being blocked by naval powers seeking to deny their enemies of critical seaborne supplies to cripple the latter. When the great American maritime historian and scholar Alfred Thayer Mahan said “whomsoever controls the sea, controls the land”, he well might have had SLOCs in mind.

As world trade rises in volumes, shipping traffic is also expected to grow in correspondence. Ships enable the transportation of nearly 90% of the world’s trade by volume and facilitate a host of other activities such as offshore oil and gas exploration and production, fishery and cruise tourism.

With this, the world’s SLOCs such as Straits of Malacca (the world’s busiest shipping lane), Strait of Hormuz (the most strategic passage for seaborne global crude oil transportation) and the South China Sea (a maritime area subject to claims, counterclaims and disputes and strategic power play among naval powers) are expected to host a growing number of ships in the foreseeable future. International spotlight will train brightly on the safety of navigation, security and environmental state of these passageways as shipping traffic along them intensifies.

In addition to growing use by merchant vessels, SLOCs are expected to host more naval vessels in the foreseeable future. As nations exert their claims and propagate their

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strategic interests in key maritime areas, the role of navies as an instrument of power to protect these claims and interests will become more pronounced in SLOCs.

Crouching threats, hidden dangers

More than ever, the world’s SLOCs face a growing number and variety of threats – natural and man-made – arising from the intense use and from causes than can be traced on land. If not addressed, these threats can impede safe passage for ships, cause adverse effects to the fragile marine environment and the population residing along the SLOCs, and compromise the strategic interests of its users. Not to mention causing instability to a world already reeling from all kinds of economic, security and environmental issues, problems and challenges.

Nowhere is the demonstration of naval powers to flex their muscles and safeguard national interests more notable than in and along SLOCs. In the Strait of Hormuz, the threat by Iran to close the crucial energy passageway, amid rising tension over Teheran’s nuclear programme, underscores the vulnerability of SLOCs. This threat, although appearing to be more bluster than serious, cannot be taken lightly and is enough to send jitters across then oil and financial markets. The closure of such a key sealane that facilitates much of the world’s oil trade under such circumstances could upset the strategic balance in the Strait and elsewhere, and could well trigger naval conflicts. One would recall the frequent attacks on oil tankers passing through the Strait of Hormuz during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and also the Gulf War in 1990s.

Other SLOCs and adjacent waters have also been subject to tension that could pose a threat to shipping traffic and compromise the strategic interests of their littoral states. In the Gulf of Aden, which is adjacent to the Strait of Hormuz, the navies from various countries have been patrolling the pirate-infested area to protect merchant vessels. Despite their presence, the number of attacks in the key passageway has not showing signs of subsiding. The Straits of Malacca also saw a worryingly high number of pirate attacks around 2006-2007 that resulted in this narrow and busy sealane being designated as a ‘war risk zone’ by London-based marine underwriters’ grouping Lloyds Market Association. Arising from that, a naval power even suggested to send its vessels to patrol the Strait should the piracy attacks continued. It wasn’t until the number of piracy attacks in the Straits declined sharply – thanks to the increased patrols and surveillance by the maritime security and enforcement agencies of the littoral states – that the naval power backed down from its ‘threat’ to patrol the Straits.

The international spotlight is shining brightly on South China Sea, a SLOC of immense strategic importance. China, a growing global power, has not been discreet in stating what it describes as its “undisputable sovereign rights” in the sea which it also calls a “core interest”, while the United States has declared the sea as an area of “national interest” and parts thereof as a “pivot”. Such strong language suggests that the two naval powers would not hesitate to use naval force to safeguard their interests in the South China Sea and exert their supremacy in this sealane of tremendous strategic importance.
SLOCs in the Asia Pacific: Lifeline for commerce

In recent times, the growing non-conventional threats posed by non-states actors such as pirates and terrorists have inflicted enormous cost to shipping in terms of the loss of lives and assets, the ransom that has to be paid to release kidnapped crew and stolen ships and cargos, and the disruption to the maritime trade supply chains. They have also exerted enormous pressure on the part of the ‘SLOC stakeholders’ to mitigate and counter these threats.

This is especially so for SLOCs in the Asia Pacific region, one of the world’s most populous, economically vibrant and strategically important region. Given their location along some of the world’s busiest shipping routes, it should not come as a surprise that SLOCs in the region are increasingly reeling under heavy use and facing a plethora of issues and challenges. SLOCs such as the Straits of Malacca and South China Sea are passageways of enormous importance to the littoral states and the international community owing to their role in facilitating much of global seaborne commerce and their strategic value to naval powers.

Given the asymmetrical nature of some of these threats, they can only most effectively be neutralized and addressed through multilateral efforts. Protecting and safeguarding Asia Pacific SLOCs calls for cooperation among their stakeholders – which include Governments, naval forces, shipping industry and coastal communities, among others - to close ranks and work towards managing, and protecting key maritime arteries. Although the task of maintaining security in SLOCs falls upon maritime agencies of respective coastal states, addressing threats such as pollution, natural disasters, piracy, smuggling and illegal, unregulated fishing call upon nations bordering SLOCs and other stakeholders to pit resources, capacity, capability and information to neutralize the threats and manage the SLOCs to ensure they are open and safe at all times.

It is important to stress that in protecting SLOCs from threats, nations must adhere to international principles and laws, most notably the United Nations Conference on the Laws of the Seas (UNCLOS), and not let narrow interests get the better of common ones.

The growing importance of SLOCs in the Asia Pacific in facilitating trade, economic activities and strategic interests of littoral states and naval powers cannot be overemphasized. The free movement of ships and seaborne trade along SLOCs in the region is a pivotal issue that affects most regional countries and the international community. The persistent piracy attacks on merchant vessels in the Gulf of Aden, growing concern over navigation safety, the ever-present threat of terrorism on maritime interests and maritime disputes that could undermine regional stability demand keen attention by the SLOC stakeholders to ensure that the regional sealanes are safe and secure.
With the economies and trade in the vast Asia Pacific region set to become more integrated in the years ahead, the focus will grow on SLOCs in the region to facilitate this. As the regional economies and trade become more integrated, thanks to the efforts of groupings like Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), there will be a corresponding increase in shipping traffic in the region’s waterways.

The increase shipping traffic poses threat to navigation safety that can impede seaborne commerce. Collision and grounding of ships in SLOCs, especially at their chokepoints, can result in shipping traffic along the passageway being disrupted. The process of removing collided ships and their cargos or cleaning up of spilled cargos, especially toxic ones like crude oil, may necessitate in temporary closure of SLOCs to shipping traffic. This can cause inconvenience to shipowners and shippers as shipping schedules are disrupted and goods and materials fail to reach their destinations on time. In a world so dependent on cross-border trade and just in time production schedule, and in which speed and efficiency are of the essence in facilitating trade, any impediments to seaborne transport may cause severe repercussion to the global economy.

Managing SLOCs: The way forward

As SLOCs face a multitude of issues and challenges, decisive measures are needed to ensure they are well managed, safe, secure, clean and kept open for the benefit of their many users and stakeholders. These issues cover areas such as legal, economics, trade, environmental protection, navigation safety and security.

With regard to trade and merchant shipping patterns, it would be helpful for policymakers and stakeholders of SLOCs to understand the trends in seaborne trade and shipping from the North Asian, Indian Ocean, South East Asian and international perspectives. The construct of such an understanding may help to put into context the enormous importance of SLOCs to global trade, much of which is carried by merchant vessels, and the challenges faced by the sealanes in accommodating growing shipping traffic and growing size of vessels.

SLOCs watchers will be following the developments in South China Sea with keen interest. The sea, which hosts multiple claims and counterclaims and multiple strategic interests of the littoral states and naval powers, has in recent years seen a number of worrying incidents among the protagonists. The situation gives rise to tension in the sea that has prompted analysts to predict that the South China Sea could be a potential flashpoint between naval powers. Should naval conflicts occur in the sea, the freedom of voyage of shipping traffic would be curtailed and the economic and strategic interests of the coastal states and international community would come under grave threat.

Such a state should be avoided at all cost. Littoral states of SLOCs and the international community must work together to maintain peace, security, safety and open passage in...
SLOCs. The world in which there is high economic inter-dependency among nations simply cannot afford full-scale conflicts in SLOCs, what more amid the global economic downturn during which the main priority is to stave off the impacts of recession and financial crisis and to create economic growth.

The time has come for stakeholders of SLOCs, especially in contested waters such as the South China Sea, to step up engagements in meaningful, sustained multilateral initiatives in order to build confidence among them. Such initiatives may include enhancing naval cooperation, sharing information, promoting and jointly engaging in economic activities, combating transnational crime, protecting the environment, and engaging in search and rescue efforts and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief initiatives, among many others. These will lead to confidence building and understanding that can avert confrontation among nations with conflicting interests in SLOCs. The construct of cooperative councils in SLOCs would help bring user nations together and foster engagement among them in areas of common interest and mutual benefit in the sea. Nations with conflicting claims in SLOCs can even pursue joint development of marine resources in disputed areas. In addition, activities can also be undertaken at the track two level among research institutes and think tanks to promote dialogues and research on SLOCs as a means to find viable options to manage them efficiently and address the threats they face. Such initiatives promote understanding and goodwill among the littoral states and users of SLOCs which can act as a bulwark that prevents conflict between them.

Detailed deliberations need to be triggered to yield practical ideas to enhance the safety, security and environmental integrity of the world’s SLOCs without compromising on the need to keep them open, safe and secure for all users. This takes some urgency amid worrying developments in SLOCs such as the relentless piracy attacks in the Gulf of Aden, potential closure of Strait of Hormuz, increasingly assertive posturing by naval powers in South China Sea, actions by claimant states and external powers in South China Sea that may shake regional peace and the potentially and growing shipping traffic in the Straits of Malacca.

Serious questions need to be asked whether the responses to these developments are effective and even warranted to begin with, for example the ‘send in the cavalry’ response to piracy attacks in the Gulf of Aden and the ‘winner takes all’ approach by a certain power in exeriting its claims in the South China Sea. Any actions taken – either unilaterally or jointly by two or more nations – should not lead to shipping in SLOCs being interrupted and the safety and security of the sealanes being threatened.

Lessons must be drawn from these responses which can provide valuable leads to chart the course for the management of SLOCs. In light of recent geo-political developments that may threaten navigation safety and security of SLOCs – for example the possibility of regime change in Egypt post-Mubarak that could result in the disruption of traffic in the Suez Canal and the threat by Iran to block the Straits of Hormuz – investing in pre-emptive options to counter such threats may be helpful. Given the importance of the SLOCs in facilitating shipping and trade, the stakeholders of SLOCs simply cannot
afford to wait and be reactive by hastily coming up with a set of responses only when SLOCs come under threat.

**Challenging course ahead**

The world is rapidly changing and developments in many areas – social, political, legal, economics, security and international relations, among others – will exert enormous impacts on the world’s SLOCs and they way they are used. The nature of the seas is such that they host multifaceted interests of multiple nations, hence require a nuanced approach to manage.

There is a need to have a fresh and inclusive look at issues related to SLOCs. As more users ply through the vital sealanes offered by the SLOCs, including naval powers that may potentially act in a belligerent fashion in safeguarding their interests, the SLOCs are increasingly coming under tremendous pressure to continue playing their roles of providing unhindered passage to its users.

Given that huge global interest are trained on SLOCs as facilitators of trade and a potential lightning rod for conflict, socio-economic and geo-political developments in the years ahead will be crucial in determining the dynamics in these sealanes. Questions will be asked whether existing international laws, modalities, security architecture and management approach of SLOCs and their respective regions will be able to adequately accommodate traditional concepts like the freedom of the seas and cope with the growing use of SLOCs. Amid growing concerns over disputes and aggressive naval posturing in regional SLOCs that may lead to clashes that can impede the smooth flow of shipping, the way SLOCs are managed will be subject to stringent assessment and stern examination.

No doubt the ‘political temperature’ in SLOCs is rising due to conflicting use and interests and a host of threats facing the sealanes. However, there is much to be optimistic about the prospect of cooperation. We can indeed take comfort in the success stories in the management of several key SLOCs, for example in the manner international navies, backed by a UN resolution, are working hand in hand to combat the scourge of piracy in the Gulf of Aden. Also, the joint efforts by security enforcement agencies of the littoral states of the Straits of Malacca that have dramatically reduced the number of piracy attacks, and their efforts to establish a Cooperative Mechanism in the Straits are stellar examples of how SLOCs can be effectively managed on a multilateral platform. Cooperative. However, much more initiatives need to be promoted to build confidence and enhance cooperation among SLOC stakeholders before the sealanes can be guaranteed to be always open, secure and safe for those who depend on them.

While regional and global cooperation to counter menaces such as piracy are already in place, there are still plenty of challenges ahead to be overcome to safeguard the regional SLOCs. Collective and cooperative security mechanisms would likely emerge as the norm rather than exception in protecting the sealanes and to ensure they are open for all.
No nation can go it alone in fighting trans-boundary and asymmetrical threats such as piracy, smuggling, trafficking, marine pollution and natural disasters, hence they ought to engage in cooperative efforts to face, address and neutralize these threats.

It is hoped that the success stories of managing SLOCs such as the effective anti-piracy measures and the Cooperative Mechanism in the Straits of Malacca will set the template for good management of other SLOCs. Long may such cooperative efforts continue among the stakeholders of the regional SLOCs to work together to safeguard the crucial maritime passageways.

The users of SLOCs are morally responsible to contribute to the upkeep of these sealanes and use them in a sustainable and responsible manner. They must shed the free rider mentality and drop their sense of entitlement in their use of SLOCs. To paraphrase a famous quote by a famous statesman, the stakeholders must ask what they can do for the SLOCs, not what the SLOCs can do for them

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