



The Indian Ocean Conundrum: A Theatre of Sino-Indian Maritime Competition

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Abstract

The Sino-Indian competition is not a recent development when it comes to global and regional affairs. In recent years, the crisis between China and India has manifested serious geostrategic risks to the stability and safety of the South Asian region and maritime domain. This paper precisely analyses the Sino Indian maritime competition in the Indian Ocean where both the Asian powers are regarded as one of the most significant naval capabilities for their geostrategic vision. An overview of China's and India's strategic objectives in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is what this study aims to convey in the first section. The section analyzes the geo political and geo-economic importance of Indian Ocean for both China and India. The latter section sheds light on China's growing concern for the IOR stemmed from its Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) security and explains the expanding activities of China in the region. The Indian security community views China's continued modernization of its military, increased power projection in the Indian Ocean, and political and economic ties with the IOR states as measures to counterbalance India's dominance in the region. The next section outlines how China's increasing sway in the IOR is becoming a major worry for New Delhi. In an effort to project power and protect its strategic interests both inside and outside the IOR, India has worked to modernize and bolster its armed forces over the past ten years, particularly the navy. India is currently envisioning a more grandiose and newer role for itself in the IOR by procuring infrastructure in a number of IOR countries. India has been trying to thwart China's attempts to establish IOR dominance. This, combined with India's essential naval build-up and overwhelming spatial advantage, would significantly challenge China's goal of enhancing its leverage in the IOR through its "String of Pearls." Thus, all these counter activities of the two Asian powers against each other have gradually been fueling the maritime competition in the IOR a more intense one.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, Maritime Domain, Strategic Importance, Rivalry, China, India

Introduction

In today's world politics, maritime security has emerged as a crucial concern. Both national, human, regional and international security dimensions are continuously being affected by it. The geographical reality of the twenty-first century acknowledges that, in the age of globalization, Asia's competing maritime geographic, geostrategic and geoeconomic linkages are trending towards an area that has been fought over by many important players of the region. Precedence over maritime Asia has emerged as China and India's main point of dispute, especially in the IOR continuous. A security issue arises when states have mistrust for one another's motivations. According to a number of observers, the current Sino-Indian competition is a prime example of a security conundrum that may spark regional hostility and an arms race. The two most populous countries in the world, China and India, look to be growing more rivals. In recent years, the contested boundary between the two countries and other diplomatic issues has garnered prominence; nevertheless, the competition between China and India is also spreading into the Indian Ocean. In order to maintain control in the ocean, the two regional powers have made several advancements in the Indian Ocean maritime domain, such as military inspections and the building of deepwater ports in Indian Ocean's littoral states. However, there are also a lot of unconventional security concerns in the IOR, which offers China and India a lot of opportunity to work together. Tensions exist within India and her neighboring littoral states, as a result of China's attempts to increase its economic maritime footprint, forge closer ties, and counteract pressure from the region's natural choke points. Therefore, China's increasing pressure in the Indian Ocean and India's worries have gradually influenced the regional, geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics for the last couple of decades. China has significant security interests in the Indian Ocean, which is currently driving the country's military presence in the area to unprecedented levels. China's main concern in the Indian Ocean is the security of its maritime trading routes, particularly those that transport the gas and oil that are vital to the country's economy. Beijing is aware that these trading routes are defenseless against enemy threats, especially given the few "chokepoints" in the Indian Ocean that must be crossed for marine trade. On the other hand, India's ambition to be the most dominant actor in the Indian Ocean has been continuously present. Many Indian policy makers and security specialists saw it as the long-term archetype for the region. India has occasionally also entered a proprietorial contest for Naval Domination in the Indian Ocean. Views on the attraction of keeping other troops out of the Indian Ocean are, in part, a defensive reaction to India's frontier experience. This confirms the opinion of many Indian investigators that the

presence of foreign forces in India's neighborhood is essentially misguided and that the country's neighbors, especially those in South Asia, should rely on it as the dominant regional leader and security provider. The situation in the area has become more complex and unpredictable due to the engagement and interests of the two states, India and China. China wants to dominate the military and economy in order to become a big power, while India has made it clear that it wants to be the dominant force in the area. China and India are both in control of crucial assets located across the ocean, and they intend to leverage them to control future actions.

Methodology

A systematic and scientific process for gathering, evaluating, and interpreting quantitative or qualitative data in order to address research questions or test hypotheses is known as research methodology. Quantitative researchers use measurement, experimental, and statistical analysis to resolve their research questions, while qualitative researchers use observation, interview and content analysis. Mixed-method research as a common ground combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches. This research focuses on the geopolitical competition between two Asian giants, China and India, over the sphere of maritime influence notably concerning the Indian Ocean. As the concerned study mostly encompasses narrative facts, there is very little scope to define the whole aspect in quantitative form. On the other hand, qualitative research is what can bring justice to the study at its best as it focuses on the descriptive nature of any research work. This study completed through qualitative approach due to its data availability from various narrative sources such as- book chapters, journal articles, websites etc.

Theoretical Framework

International relations theories come in a variety of forms and can be categorized in various ways. They are frequently categorized into three main groups: constructivism, liberalism, and realism. One of the most powerful and ancient ideas of international relations is realism. It is predicated on the idea that there is no centralized body or authority that has the power to impose laws or regulations, hence making the global order chaotic. States are the primary actors in this situation, and their goals—particularly to ensure their safety and survival—are what motivate them. Thomas Hobbes envisioned politics in a pre-social condition of nature in his 1651 novel *Leviathan*. The outcome is a very transparent classical realism theory that is generally acknowledged to provide significant insights into some enduring issues of international relations and assigns about equal emphasis

to human behavior and international chaos. Egoism and anarchy are given about equal weight in Hobbes' classical realism. Most realist writing after the 1970s has remained somewhat rigidly fundamental, primarily due to Kenneth Waltz's influence, even though "neo-classical" realism has recently made a slight resurgence. Neo-realism explains the global environment by emphasizing competitiveness, survival, and power balance (Svensson, 2012). As the founder of neo-realism, Kenneth Waltz contends that all states priorities survival and that looking just at survival motivations may explain state behavior. Waltz maintains that all states are security maximisers rather than power maximisers, which sets him apart from other well-known neo-realists like Mearsheimer, who promotes power maximization in his theory of "offensive realism," which differs from Waltz's theory of "defensive realism" in that it takes a different stance on the amount of power a state desire (Svensson, 2012).

The Sino-Indian competition in the IO vividly sets out the insights of neo-realism. Both the states are giving leaving no stone unturned not only to establish the hegemonic image in the region but also to safeguard its interests. One of China's main motivations for developing a "blue water" navy with more power projection capacities is to ensure the safety of its Sea Lines of Communications in the IO. Worries have been raised by China's growing political and economic ties with India's neighbors, including a "string of pearls" of possible bases in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. China's activities in the IO seem to have perceived as threat by India against its economic, geopolitical and geostrategic interest. This runs against to India's goal of becoming the IO's regional premier. India has also been seen to have counter responded against China with utmost enthusiasm. They are showing antagonism with a view to safeguarding their respective interests accompanied by an urge to sprout as most influential actor in the IO. Moreover, due to lack of any central authority to neutralize the chaos there, the whole scenario is getting utterly anarchic.

Importance of Indian Ocean for China and India

The Indian Ocean is a crucial geopolitical theatre where a network of coastal regions plays crucial roles in the security and strategic dynamics of the area. Being geographically close to some of the most important Sea Lines of Communications has made the Indian Ocean, the third biggest body of water on Earth, more strategically significant in recent history. It possesses 27.9% of the world's proven natural gas reserves and 16.8% of the proven oil reserves. Furthermore, 17.8% of the world's gold and about 35.5% of the world's iron are produced in Indian Ocean economy (Nasir, 2021). A major maritime corridor, the

Indian Ocean is home to important choke points, including the Straits of Hormuz, Malacca, and Bab-el Mandeb, through which significant traffic passes. It is located between Africa, Antarctica, Asia, and Oceania. These four continents are connected by the Indian Ocean- an essential route for transportation connecting the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. In the past, European nations like Portugal, the Netherlands, France, and the UK fought for supremacy over the Indian Ocean due to their awareness of its strategic significance. “Whoever controls the Indian Ocean can rule Asia,” as strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan famously stated (Long et al., 2023). This has validated the Indian Ocean’s crucial geopolitical significance. With 62% of the world’s oil deposits, 35% natural gas, 40% gold, 60% uranium, and 80% diamonds, the region is incredibly resource rich (Long et al., 2023). Additionally, it serves as a vital oil conduit connecting Europe and Asia with the Persian Gulf. In terms of strategy and security, the Indian Ocean boasts the greatest number of waterways in the world, and a strait act as a crucial transit route and a key to the security of the world’s energy supply. Furthermore, the Indian Ocean is one of the busiest water channels for maritime trade worldwide, hosting one-fifth of all seaports worldwide and all imported and exported goods. Over 100,000 vessels navigate the waters of the Indian Ocean annually; among them are two thirds of all oil tankers, one third of all large cargo ships, and half of all container ships worldwide. 70% of the world’s production is made up of crude oil products, of which 46.5% are delivered by sea each year and are carried across the Indian Ocean (Chuong et al., 2022). Over one trillion dollars are exchanged annually between countries across the Indian Ocean in two directions (Chuong et al., 2022). For China and India, the Indian Ocean has long held great geopolitical significance. To maintain their ongoing economic progress, both nations rely on Sea Lines of Communications across the Indian Ocean to provide for unrestricted trade and safe energy supplies.

China

The Indian Ocean region is a very useful avenue for China to secure its supply of energy in terms of economic security. China’s economy has experienced significant growth after undergoing reform and opening up. This presents a need for China’s economy to grow or for a steady supply of energy. According to reports, 33% of China’s GDP came from overseas trade in 1993, with seaborne commerce making up 85% of that total and consequently, from 2001 and 2002, China’s total volume of exports increased by 22% (Khan et al., 2023). Since 1993 when China began importing petroleum, the average annual increase rate of domestic oil output has been 1.7%, whereas the average annual growth rate of oil

consumption has been 7.3% (Khan et al., 2023). China purchased more oil between 2001 and 2002, increasing its imports by around 15% between 2001 and 2002, from over 60 million tons in 2001 to over 7 million tons in 2002. According to observations, in 2006, coal supplied 70% of China's energy demands, while oil provided 25%, natural gas provided 3%, and the remaining 2% came from sources like nuclear and hydroelectric power (Khan et al., 2023). Everything had to be carried by water, especially across the Straits of Malacca that increased the geostrategic importance of Indian Ocean to China. Since the region supplies 82% of China's energy needs, namely gas and oil, it is important to the country both economically and in terms of energy security. Furthermore, the Indian Ocean ships approximately \$300 billion worth of China's annual trade (Rather, 2020). China, having the second greatest economy in the world, is heavily dependent on other economies for commerce, particularly through the Indian Ocean. China's energy security greatly depends on the seamless operation of maritime lanes linking it with the Middle East and Africa. China primarily wants to ensure that marine traffic may continue unhindered from the Strait of Hormuz to the Persian Gulf, the Bay of Bengal, and Malacca. This is why it is interested in the Indian Ocean. China is therefore forced to look for measures to protect the Indian Ocean trade route. One tactic is to build and maintain a strong naval presence in the area, which not only protects Middle Eastern energy supplies but also strengthens ties with the coastline nations of the Indian IOR. Under the "Two Oceans" doctrine, China has been extending its reach from the South China Sea to the Indian Pacific region since the beginning of the century. The primary goals of this policy are to protect strategic interests by ensuring the presence of far-off waters and, in the current millennium, to guarantee the seamless operation of commercial activities by establishing the Maritime Silk Road (Kalim et al., 2023). China is the world's greatest energy consumer, thus ensuring a steady flow of electricity to its expanding industries is a top priority and essential to the country's economic expansion. China is taking major steps to prevent future confrontation in order to minimize any disasters in the Sea Lines of Communications in the Indian Ocean. China's measures to defend itself against possible threats from other nations are highlighted in the Blue Book. Beijing views these obligations as a serious danger to its Indian Ocean interests. China is strengthening its naval, especially at points of contention in the Indian Ocean, to improve trade with Africa and the Middle East. Furthermore, a lot of attention has been paid to reducing the project's flaws since China unveiled its grandiose "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)" plan. China has been aggressively expanding its energy and trade networks in an effort to gain more political clout through trade and investing in infrastructure. China has funded

and built industrial port infrastructure in several South Asian nations as part of its strategic plan. These are Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, and Chittagong in Bangladesh. China has put its daring “String of Pearls” plan into action in order to create a military link between the Indian and South China Seas. China’s goal aims to expand its influence from Hainan Island to the Persian Gulf by using the busiest water routes in the world. This policy aims to secure oversight of important shipping lanes, assure energy security, and counter India’s position in the region. Through the execution of the “String of Pearls” policy, China hopes to improve its military, economic, and energy capacities. As a result, the Indian Ocean plays a crucial role in developing this plan since it aims to control the sea and restrict India’s strategic reach.

India

The only ocean in the world bearing the name of a coastline nation is the Indian Ocean. As a result, it is difficult to explain the physical makeup of the Indian Ocean without mentioning India and its “God-given” geographical advantage. East of the Indian Ocean, India is a continental power that occupies a key position in the center of the ocean. Concurrently, the Indian Ocean holds significant strategic importance in the security landscape of India. K.M. Pannikar states that while the Indian Ocean is an important body of water for other nations, it is a sea that separates India and death. The Indian Ocean is the hub of India’s trade, and the freedom of this ocean’s surface is very essential to India. India would not be able to achieve growth in industry, economic prosperity, or a stable political system without protecting its coasts (Chuong et al., 2022). India places a great deal of attention on the Indian Ocean. India aims to pursue minimal, if not total, domination in the IOR due to its advantageous geographic location, which sets it apart from all other nations. Furthermore, it regards the existence of any naval powers outside of the region, especially China, as fundamentally illegitimate. According to Donald Berlin (2006), India views the Indian Ocean as its backyard and believes it is both natural and desirable for it to eventually dominate and be the dominating force in this region—the only area and ocean in the world named after a single state (Rather, 2020). India’s ambition to be regarded as a big power is also reflected in its dominance in the IOR. New Delhi’s assertion that it is regarded as a “net security provider” in the area reflects this. According to Manmohan Singh, the previous prime minister of India, the country (India) has sought to assume its responsibility for stability in the IOR. As a result, we are in a good position to start offering security services both locally and globally (Rather, 2020). Geographically speaking, India has more than 7,500 km of coastline and is situated in the middle

of the ocean (Long et al., 2023). Presently, the Indian Ocean is required to transit through 95% of India's exports by volume and 68% of trade in value (Long et al., 2023). Additionally, the Indian Ocean is used to importing about 80% of India's crude oil demands. The Indian Navy estimates that, when its offshore oil production and exports are taken into account, the country's maritime reliance on oil will be approximately 93% (Indian Navy 2016, 25). Furthermore, India depends a great deal on the fish and mineral resources found in the Indian Ocean. It is evident from this that commerce and resources found in the Indian Ocean are essential to the Indian economy. By 2025, the Indian Ocean economy is predicted by the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute to account for 20% of global GDP, nearly tripling GDP per capita (Ali, 2024). India is aware of the blue economic system's enormous potential, which includes aquaculture, tourism, fisheries, and marine biotechnology. Investments in maritime infrastructure are necessary for these industries to grow sustainably, which depends on a secure maritime environment. Prime Minister Modi's maritime policy in India places a strong emphasis on using marine and coastal resources to further economic growth. A key component of Modi's Indian Ocean strategy is viable economic development, which entails advancing the blue economy to harness ocean resources for regional economic expansion, employment creation, and environmental sustainability. Modi formed a collaborative working group to improve collaboration in the blue economy, promoting ethical and ecologically friendly economic development, while on a visit to the Seychelles. A key component of India's larger plan is sustainable economic development, which ensures the appropriate and sustainable exploitation of the region's natural resources while enhancing the welfare of the littoral states around the Indian Ocean (Ali, 2024).

Indian Ocean islands have great power and support the IOR's security architecture by providing naval troops with access to the Sea Lines of Communications for ongoing presence and security upkeep, particularly in times of peace and conflict. Being the hub for the transportation of Middle Eastern oil, the Indian Ocean draws outside nations looking to bolster their influence and show off their strength. The Persian Gulf, located in the northern Indian Ocean, is a key component of India's security strategy, which is centered on safeguarding small- and medium-sized islands in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea from piracy threats. This highlights the area of security dynamics in the Indian Ocean Region. India's commitment to maritime security is demonstrated by its naval presence in the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman and by the creation of the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR). Given the region's enormous oil deposits in the Middle East, the Indian Ocean's historical significance as a major

trading route linking East and West emphasizes its importance as an international commercial highway. The Indian Ocean, especially its smaller seas like the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea, which are essential to shipping and trade and link to the larger Indian Ocean and its important maritime trade routes, is coming under more and more international scrutiny as India and China's influence increases.

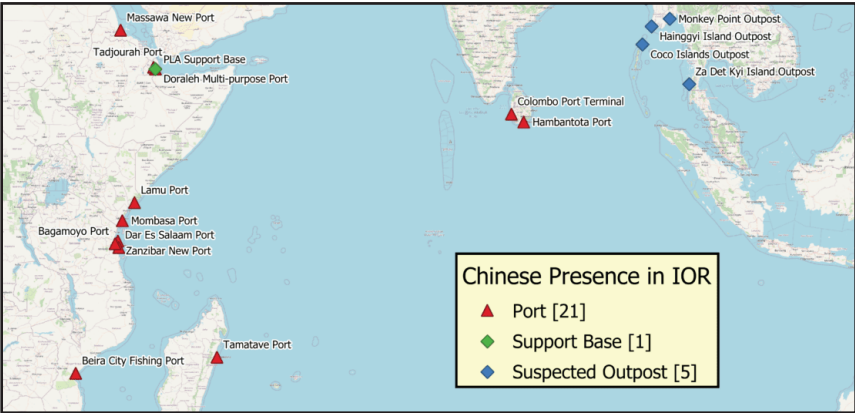
China's Expanding Presence in the IOR

China is becoming a more significant political and economic force in the Indian Ocean Region, especially with the Belt and Road Initiative. China is essentially reshaping the world with the Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to connect and build other vital infrastructure throughout Eurasia, the Indian Ocean region, Africa, and the South Pacific. Its influence might be greater in the IOR, where it might radically alter the strategic dynamics of the area. China has increased both its military and economic clout in the Indian Ocean. China has increased its overseas aid since the late 1990s in an effort to acquire energy supplies. Apart from resource extraction, China has persistently endeavored to decrease its reliance on the Strait of Malacca in the Indian Ocean region. For instance, it started talks with Myanmar in 2004 to build a natural gas pipeline and also built an oil pipeline to import crude oil through Myanmar from the Middle East and Africa; the former started operations in 2013 and the latter in 2015 (Izuyama & Kurita, 2017). The opening of Djibouti's "Logistic Facility" expanded China's opportunities to showcase maritime exercises (Kalim et al., 2023). China has greatly increased its influence in the Indian Ocean region throughout the last 20 years. It opened a military installation abroad in Djibouti in 2017. Furthermore, China is building commercial ports in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar that may one day be used for military purposes (Rather, 2020). China is the only major state holding diplomatic missions in each of the six Indian Ocean Island nations (Jain, 2022). China's ultimate objectives in the Indian Ocean are still somewhat unclear, but it is obvious that the country's leadership is aggressively seeking the means to acquire the capabilities necessary to carry out a variety of military operations there. As China's footprint in IO has grown, its establishment and strategic analysts have investigated its maritime policy beyond the South China Sea. The policy instructions and remarks of Beijing's power elites refute academics' assertions that the country lacks an Indian Ocean strategy.

Building of Chains of Ports and Maritime Facilities

The development of the “Maritime Silk Road” can be advanced by ports, which are also an essential starting point for preserving and growing interests. In 2013, China proposed the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road which envisions to establish maritime access to important ports in the areas along with routes. China has developed a sophisticated model in recent years, in addition to building coastal ports for maritime activity in the Indian Ocean. The Western Indian Ocean region links the Indian Ocean with the Gulf and the Red Sea in addition to connecting Asia and Africa through significant maritime routes like the Straits of Hormuz and Bab el Mandeb. It is a crucial area in the center of the “Maritime Silk Road,” where things are quite complex and China’s foreign policy is rather precarious. China has been actively involved in developing and constructing of ports in the majority of nations in this region over the past decade (Zou, 2021). It has concentrated on port building to encourage economic collaboration and growth in the neighboring regions and to fulfil the goal of allowing one case to guide an entire region.

Chinese researcher Sun Hai Yong claims that China’s port developments around the Indian Ocean are a thorough test of the country’s ability to create diplomatic goals, hedge risks, and maintain economic viability (Long et al., 2023). He underlines that Chinese businesses are able to construct ports and gain a significant presence in the Indian Ocean port system. Colombo and Djibouti are two prime instances of China’s plan to establish a port city in the Indian Ocean region.



Source: Reddy (2022)

Figure 01: China’s Port in Indian Ocean Region

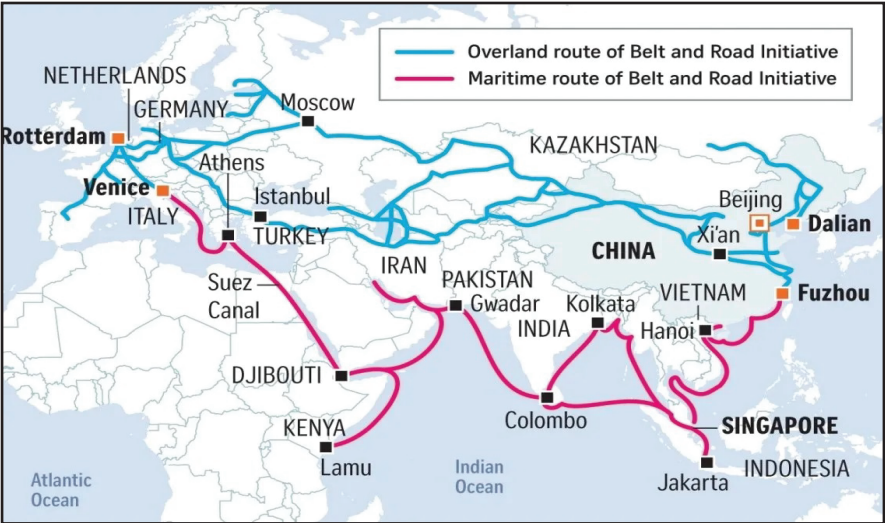
String of Pearls and Malacca Dilemma

China's main concern in the Indian Ocean right now is energy security. Because of its excessive reliance on the strait of Malacca and the US government's attempts to regulate what is known as the "most oil-global route," the Chinese government is faced with a dilemma in Malacca. In fact, the person in charge of the Strait of Malacca will also have authority over China's oil transportation routes. China has therefore been urged to step up its seaward program, especially with the countries that border the Indian Ocean, as a result of the commerce and energy security issues. China is employing a concerted strategy to prevent any tense interactions with both countries since it is fully aware of America's status as a great power and India's strategic advantage in the region. China can now work with states that border the Indian Ocean to increase the size of its strategic area. China is also concerned that India might blockade China's access to the Malacca Strait from the west by using the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. China has suggested two solutions to its "blocked" situation in the Strait of Malacca: increasing its presence in the Indian Ocean and establishing intercontinental energy and trade links by way of Central Asia, employing the "String of Pearls" approach. American experts describe China's shipping pathways, which pass through the Mandab, Malacca, and Strait of Hormuz and connect southern China to the Indian Ocean, as a "String of Pearls." Other tactical maritime goals that the country has are in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Somalia, and the Maldives (Chuong et al., 2022). The phrases "Pearls" indicate a number of locations, including the naval base in Gwadar, Pakistan; the military complex on Hainan Island; the container shipping facility in Chittagong, Bangladesh; the deep-water port in Sittwe; the Kyaukpyu port; the Yangon port (Myanmar); and the port of Hambantota, Sri Lanka. The shores of mainland China, the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, and the Persian Gulf reefs are all home to these "Pearls" (Chuong et al., 2022). Every "Pearl" in the "String of Pearls" represents China's military supremacy or geopolitical influence throughout the Indian Ocean and other major waterways. With this plan, China hopes to expand its influence from Hainan in the East China water to the Persian Gulf via the busiest water routes in the world. Restricting India, ensuring energy security, and keeping control of vital marine channels are the main goals.

Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI)

One of the two main routes of China is Belt and Road Initiative. The coastlines around the Indian Ocean, which include Australia, South East Asia, India, the Middle East, East Africa, and Southern Africa, have had a notable

increase in economic development during the last thirty years. Intraregional trade activity has increased significantly as a result of this phenomena, routinely outpacing trends in the global economy. The Indian Ocean region had a remarkable yearly trade volume growth rate of 9.4% between 2000 and the global financial crisis of 2009; however, this pace decreased to 4.8% between 2011 and 2017 (Ali, 2024). The Indian Ocean region’s economy is going through a significant shift at the beginning of the twenty-first century, which can be linked to current geoeconomic dynamics. The principal goal of China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative is to reshape the Indian Ocean region’s economic geography through major capital investments. China’s main objectives in the Indian Ocean are energy security and maritime safety. But it’s also aiming for wider spheres of influence. Through its BRI, China is specifically looking to establish new economic routes. In order to achieve its goals, China requires the logistical help of local states, which it now obtains from Pakistan, Oman and Seychelles. As a result, it has established its first-ever foreign military facility in Djibouti and strengthened its ties with nations like the Maldives and Sri Lanka. China’s anti-piracy efforts in the Arabian Sea will be aided by this base. The Chinese navy regularly travels to Karachi in order to obtain supplies and upkeep. Chinese shipping interests in the Strait of Hormuz are near to the Chinese-built port at Gwadar, Pakistan. Additionally, it will serve as the hub for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which would link Pakistan and Western China. In Gwadar, housing for 500,000 Chinese laborers is planned (Davis et al., 2020). Indian concerns over Chinese



Source: Bharti (2024)

Figure 02: Belt and Road Initiative of China

influence in Sri Lanka prompted them to purchase the mostly deserted Hambantota airport. Kenya has received a 3.2-billion-dollar loan from China to build a 470 km railway that will connect Mombasa, a port city, with Nairobi, the country's capital (Davis et al., 2020). China has tight links with Tanzania in Eastern Africa, where it is forging military connections. It also enjoys close ties with Madagascar and Mozambique. China has also attempted to establish stronger ties with the Maldives, where a recent internal political conflict is perceived from Chinese and Indian influence. China is also looking for port access in the Persian Gulf and the Eastern Indian Ocean.

The BRI is regarded as a key component of President Xi Jinping's foreign policy and is the largest transcontinental infrastructure project in decades of economic growth. Along with the Made in China 2025 economic development vision, experts view the BRI as one of the key pillars of a more audacious Chinese statecraft under Xi. It should be mentioned that the majority of BRI-related funding and building contracts were drawn to Asia between 2013 and 2018 (Abeyasinghe & Wijesinghe, 2021). Regarding the Indian Ocean Region, the bulk of IOR nations are included in the BRI. China has made major investments in these nations over the years, and it continues to be the largest or second-largest trading partner of almost all BRI nations in the Indo-Pacific. The expansion of port facilities has been a key component of the BRI. In order to maintain open and unobstructed shipping routes, the Chinese government has stated in its 13th Five Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China (2016–2020) that it will build advantageous oceanic hubs along the Maritime Silk Road of the twenty-first century, assist in the construction and management of major ports along the route, and encourage the collaborative growth of industrial clusters surrounding these ports.

Indian Concerns on China's Presence in the Indian Ocean

China and India are becoming more at odds as a result of China's expanding military pressure in the IOR. India has always aspired to be the dominant force in the Indian Ocean. Many in New Delhi have long considered the Indian Ocean to be "India's Ocean," at least in the long run, despite the fact that few Indian authorities may be willing to acknowledge this in public (Brewster, 2018). Ten years ago, an American analyst made the following observation: "New Delhi views the Indian Ocean as its backyard and believes it is both natural and desirable that India function as, eventually, the leader and the predominate influence in this region—the only region and ocean in the world named after a single state" (Brewster, 2018). India's goals in the Indian Ocean are a reflection of

multiple schools of strategic thought. It is somewhat related to India's desire to be seen as a big power. However, India primarily uses reflexive reasoning. Due to its colonial past, it developed the belief that extra regional powers should be kept out of the Indian Ocean's forward defense perimeter in order to prevent involvement within the territory of the subcontinent. China's growing activity in the Indian Ocean, where Chinese fishing ships and research vehicles are frequently spotted, including in Indian EEZ, has India extremely concerned. These research ships are employed to investigate different oceanic factors, which could help the Philippine Navy conduct submarine operations in the future. China may not be directly targeting India with its expanding footprints throughout the Indian Ocean, but they do indicate a sneaky long-term plan for Chinese naval dominance around the world. India's worries about maritime security are exacerbated by the fact that it sees Gwadar Port in particular as a component of China's growing naval projection into the Indian Ocean. Even while Gwadar is still a civilian facility, China may eventually use it as a navy station, changing the balance of power in the area (Jain, 2022). India's "Monroe Doctrine" refers to the concept of an exclusive sphere of influence within and surrounding the Indian subcontinent. It borrows concepts from the British Raj and is reminiscent of the US Monroe Doctrine, which the US put forth in the 1800s to deny the existence of "outside" powers in the Americas (Brewster, 2018). Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru cited the Monroe Doctrine to demonstrate the newly independent India's resolve to purge the subcontinent of all remaining colonial influence and to bar foreign powers from entering the whole South Asian region. Although India's Monroe Doctrine has taken many forms, it essentially states that its neighbors must rely on India as a regional manager and security provider and that the military presence of outside nations in their area is illegal (Brewster, 2018). Though it focused mostly on India's place in South Asia, it also had an impact on Indian strategic thinking about the Indian Ocean region as a whole. According to Suresh Mehta, the former head of India's navy, "China is reshaping the region's maritime battlefield" (Rather, 2020). It involves finding the proper people to be friends with. You will require neighbors who will support you whenever the moment arrives if you lack the capacity to function in these waterways for a longer amount of time. China is doing this, as are Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and the nations in Southern Africa (Rather, 2020).

The development of substantial military and civilian facilities by both countries has heightened Sino-Indian competitiveness in the Indian Ocean Region in recent times. This strategic rivalry has been sparked by New Delhi's long-standing concerns about Beijing's growing influence in the IOR. This necessitates a thorough examination of the root reasons and actual expression of

this competition. In order to offset the perceived danger posed by China, India has recently aligned its strategy with the US, going against its historical neutral posture in international affairs. Beijing and New Delhi now have a complex relationship that involves both competition and collaboration. This is because of India's emerging strategic alliance with the United States. Despite the fact that trade between these two nations has increased dramatically in recent years, New Delhi views China's strengthening ties with the surrounding nations with deep suspicion as being geared against the country itself. India's further concern involves the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, which would provide China unprecedented access to the region via the Arabian Sea. It has compelled India to establish closer ties with the US, Japan, and Australia. Beijing's perceived threat to New Delhi's power in the Indian Ocean is the driving force behind Sino-Indian rivalry. In the framework of the BRI, China is solidifying its engagement in the area in order to expedite a number of economic initiatives. Sino-Indian rivalry is intensifying in South Asia and the India Ocean regional geopolitics. The rivalry between China and India is highlighted by the BRI framework and its initiatives in the South Asian region. However, as a result of BRI initiatives in its near neighbors, India is forging closer ties with Iran and building the Chahbahar port to counter China's influence at Pakistan's Gwadar port (Bharti, 2024).

Microscopically examining the capacities of the two nations leads one to the conclusion that China has numerous advantages over India. India's location in the Indian Ocean is its lone advantage. India wants to keep and profit from its advantage in the global political landscape; thus, it is very concerned about any challenges in this area. However, this strategic advantage in the Indian Ocean is being threatened by China. The Chinese analysts have developed a policy to counter this threat as a result of this prospect (Nasir, 2021).

John H. Gill has made an effort to clarify India's approach to strategic thinking. According to his argument, since independence India's security approach has been regional in nature, concentrating on domestic instabilities and external dangers across disputed land borders with China and Pakistan. This approach has been seen harmful for maritime issues and expeditionary possibilities. However, the geopolitical landscape is changing due to Chinese military expanding, Sino-Pakistani collaboration, changing regional nuclear dynamics, and other considerations. According to him, the Indian strategic view has always been dominated by three traditions: "Fatalism, Activism, and Moralism" (Nasir, 2021). It is sufficient to analyze New Delhi's concerns about China's ascent and the strategic culture that the current administration is pursuing to comprehend the

reasons for India's hostility towards China. China appears to be reacting only to India's assertive measures in the Indian Ocean. Ensuring the security of its fossil fuel supplies and SLOCs travelling across the Indian Ocean is one of China's top priorities.

Beijing, meanwhile, is being forced by New Delhi's more assertive stance to improve its naval might, increase its presence in the IOR, and build up its ever-expanding maritime infrastructure. Now, China is working on the well-known Belt and Road Initiative, under which it plans to build physical infrastructure that will allow its ships and containers carrying valuable raw commodities to dock. China has signed agreements with a number of countries to bring this about. The Sino-Indian rivalry is being transformed into a competition because India views this initiative as its encirclement.

India's Maritime Strategy: A Steppingstone for the Sino-Indian Competition in the IOR

India's present maritime policy has been molded by its strategic culture and ongoing competition with China in the Indian Ocean Rim. It has placed a high priority on important locations including the Gulf of Aden, Persian Gulf, and Straits of Malacca. India's "Sapphires Strategy" is centered on the islands of Mauritius, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Seychelles, which are important regions. It may be argued that New Delhi wants the world to view it as a nation that has significantly benefited from strategic wins in the Indian Ocean and is able to counterbalance China both locally and globally. The Cape of Good Hope has always been a vital marine passage. As time has gone on, its significance has only increased. Furthermore, a key component influencing India's naval strategy is its reliance on the Gulf States for imports of fossil fuels. In addition to maintaining friendly ties with Iran, it is actively working to construct the port of Chabahar in order to secure a position at the Persian Gulf's mouth and guarantee a steady supply of fuel. The United States and India have similar interests when it comes to the Gulf region. In a same vein, India has continued to have diplomatic ties with the Maldives, an island nation central to both the SLOCs and the IOR. India has further planned for its expansive marine policy. It features unique designs to allow it to be seen across the Malacca Strait and into the South China Sea. Nonetheless, New Delhi's aspirations have put it at odds with other regional powers like Malaysia, which is against cooperative security patrols with India. In an attempt to align its interests with South East Asian nations that are at odds with China in the South China Sea, New Delhi has intensified its diplomatic efforts. Despite making

several high-level trips to these nations, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has not been able to win them over them (Nasir, 2021). That hasn't stopped India from conducting aggressive naval patrols along the Straits of Malacca, though.

The gist of the Indian marine policy is as follows (Nasir, 2021):

- A stronger focus on demonstrating commitment to protecting island and mainland areas in order to protect marine interests.
- Maintaining security cooperation, particularly with island states, with neighboring neighbors.
- With India at its center, work towards establishing multilateral cooperative maritime security in the Indian Ocean.
- IOR-wide efforts to promote equitable economic growth are led by India.
- Execution of the collaboration strategy with major powers in the Indian Ocean region. This demonstrates India's commitment to becoming a major power.

India's maritime strategy continues to prioritize the safety and security of seaborne trade and energy routes in the Indian Ocean Region. India's marine security aims to achieve these principal goals (Nasir, 2021):

- To prevent strife and pressure directed towards India
- To carry out naval operations in a way that permits an early and amicable settlement of the conflict that benefits India.
- To create a suitable and encouraging maritime atmosphere in India's maritimately significant locations in order to improve net security.
- To defend Indian offshore and coastline assets against dangers and attacks that come from the sea.
- To create the necessary numbers of marine troops and keep up the ability to satisfy India's needs in terms of maritime security.

Additionally, India is stepping up its military presence in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It is evident from India's strategy in the Indian Ocean that multilateralism has received more weight. This runs antithetical to Beijing's policy of bilateralism. One excellent illustration of this is the Quad, an unofficial alliance consisting of the United States, India, Japan, and Australia.

Apart from augmenting its armed forces in the area, India is also engaged in the Sagarmala port development initiative. The Ministry of Shipping's flagship Sagarmala program aims to leverage India's 7,500 km of coastline, 14,500 km of

potentially navigable waterways, and its advantageous location on important international maritime trade routes to foster port-led development throughout the nation (Ministry of Shipping-Government of India, 2020). The program's goal is to shorten the time and cost of logistics for moving domestic and international freight while also developing port-proximate future industrial facilities close to the shore (*ibid*). There are now 200 minor ports and 12 major ports in India (Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defense-Navy, 2015). India has been more concerned about port infrastructure development and port quality than China has been. China does significantly better than India in terms of port quality and efficiency. The center of international marine trade continues to be ports. Therefore, India faces an intimidating task in developing infrastructure related to increasing the quality of their ports. However, the maritime rivalry between India and China in the Indian Ocean may generate a considerable number of impingements in the region including sea-based anarchy, competition over sea minerals possession, deep sea activities, different nontraditional threats, and there is a higher probability of turning this maritime politics into global politics.

The Indian Ocean and China's Strategy

In the Indian Ocean region, China's presence and impact are growing. This presence now includes a military component in addition to trade and business. Although it's unknown how quickly and to what degree China intends to advance its strategic stance in the area, some regional experts claim-China's influence is growing more quickly than observers had predicted (Vaughn, 2018). It is true that a nation's naval prowess ought to match its economic interests. China must strengthen its security presence within the Indian Ocean to protect its lawful rights and interests, including the ability to neutralize adverse situations at crucial moments, given its growing political, economic, and strategic interests in the region. China's new IOR policy is not *ad hoc*. Rather, it is a well-thought-out and codified theological endeavor. This transformation may be seen in China's defense white papers from 1998 to 2008 (Leader Mohit Choudhary & Air Force, 2007). Chinese perceptions of the West's fall and China's ability to guide the world towards economic restoration were reinforced by the worldwide financial meltdown of 2008. In the IOR, China seems to be pursuing a three-pronged approach that may be split down into political, military, and economic avenues in order to accomplish this. But in actuality, China's naval capacities has long lagged behind its strategic requirements. The U.S. Defense Department reported that by 2014, the Chinese navy had mastered the ability to put up ten battleships, one attack submarine, and one supply ship in the Indian Ocean (Jiacheng, 2017).

China is using its increasing economic attractiveness and maritime might to support a network of naval bases in the Indian Ocean as it expands its relations with littoral nations along the “Maritime Silk Road (MSR).” China has made significant investments in the construction of port infrastructure in nations including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan in recent years. It has also expanded its maritime connections with the Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius (Jiacheng, 2017).

Although geoeconomic factors influence Chinese policy, a strong military presence in the IOR is essential to China’s regional hegemony plan. As a result, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) became the primary focus of military planning going forward. “China intends to grab the strategic lead in military concurrence,” the 2015 white paper stated unequivocally (Leader Mohit Choudhary & Air Force, 2007). China’s military presence in the IOR grew dramatically as a result. From the initial deployment of a nuclear submarine in the IOR in 2013 to the 2022 port visit of a satellite-tracking ship at Hambantota, China’s military involvement in the IOR has grown significantly (Leader Mohit Choudhary & Air Force, 2007).

Theoretically, the People’s Liberation Army Navy’s maritime approach emphasizes blue water, but in practice, it is mostly influenced by the green water security doctrine, which is founded on a light military structure. The absence of radar facilities in the Indian Ocean further restricts China’s aviation force (Tambi Radhey, 2023). According to a Chinese analyst with the US Navy, transforming ports like Hambantota or Gwadar into military installations would necessitate billions of dollars in construction expenditure and the ability to launch long-range preciseness strikes in order to make them feasible for any hostile actions by China in the area (Tambi Radhey, 2023). Thus, rather of looking for bases, the new Chinese strategy aims to find sustainable locations to uphold and guarantee its presence in the Indian Ocean. During evacuating or anti-piracy activities, these locations might be practical for logistical support, but not in a crisis.

Conclusion

With Asia emerging as a global powerhouse in the twenty-first century, the Indian Ocean has already established itself as the primary backdrop for the grand struggle for world dominance.

Maintaining peace and stability in the ocean becomes increasingly important as the Sino-Indian rivalry in the Indian Ocean intensifies. China’s

foreign policy has changed significantly over the past few decades, as evidenced by the way it is now demonstrating aspire to be a significant player in global politics. These days, China, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative, has the ability to significantly influence global affairs.

Unsecured Indian Ocean, in India's view, equates to an unsecure India. For India to secure its own security, the region's peace and stability must continue to exist. China's Belt and Road Initiative would be significantly impacted by the unstable Indian Ocean region. As previously mentioned, China has already made significant investments in the area and is interested in seeing the projects through to completion. At present, an apparent security quandary exists in the Indian Ocean region between China and India. There is fierce competition between the two nations to maintain their dominant positions in the area. There's a good probability that this competition will turn into a fight. Mearsheimer (2006) pointed out that China's ascent is not peaceful and that it will probably take over Asia. He states that China will aim to ensure its dominance is so great that no state in Asia can possibly threaten it (Abeyasinghe & Wijesinghe, 2021). But judging by India's actions in the Indian Ocean, it appears that the country is ill-prepared to deal with the increasing power of China there. Therefore, every nation on the planet would undoubtedly suffer grave consequences from an escalation of the fight of this maritime competition. A military confrontation would jeopardize the national security of the nations in the area. This would split the area in half, form two camps, and—most importantly—certainly impede Asia's development. A multi-layered, inclusive security architecture is required because of the region's growing militarization and the IOR nations' divergent perspectives. It should concentrate on resolving local issues in adjacent states and improving strategic communication regarding issues and disputes between India and China. However, adopting a conservative security approach will only make the two state's security problems worse and possibly lead to them starting self-defeating disputes. Normalizing China's position in the IOR without upsetting stability or jeopardizing the legitimate domains of influence of India is ultimately the answer.

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