

Containing China's Increasing Footprint: India's Emerging Geo-Political Strategy with Special Reference to the Indian Ocean Region

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Abstract:

The Chinese strategy of strategic encirclement vis-à-vis the policy of “String of Pearls” poses a potential threat to regional peace and stability in the Indian Ocean Region and in the South Asian and South East Asian regions. The Chinese ambition of territorial expansionism is augmented by China’s strategy of “Debt-Trap Diplomacy” whereby China has sought to increase its footprint in many of the countries of the Indian Ocean Region and South Asia and South East Asia. Beijing has vigorously extended its commercial and naval access in littoral countries like Sri Lanka and is presently eyeing on Nepal, Bangladesh and littoral states of the Indian Ocean region including Mauritius, Seychelles, Maldives, etc. The control of strategic ports by China in the Indian Ocean Region poses a major security threat to India since these ports, which although are essentially commercial ports, could easily be converted into military bases in the event of hostilities with India. Against this background, India must explore geo-strategic options to contain China in the Indian-Ocean Region and more broadly in the South Asian and South East Asian regions, while increasing its own sphere of influence in terms of helping the countries in the region achieve their infrastructure and capacity building goals; In this context, India must vigorously pursue its Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) initiative, revitalizing the Indian Ocean Rim Association together with the Sagarmala initiative aimed at catering to the maritime security needs and economic development especially of Indian Ocean littoral countries. At the same time, joint military drills with the full participation of the militaries of all four QUAD countries must continue in the form of the Malabar Exercise. In response to the “String of Pearls” strategy, India must forge an alliance constituting of strategic partners from the Indian Ocean Region and South Asia and South East Asian regions forming a “Necklace of Diamonds”.

Keywords: Indian Ocean Region, “String of Pearls, Security” and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), Sagarmala, QUAD, Malabar Exercise, “Necklace of Diamonds”

The Chinese policy of strategic encirclement of the Indian Ocean Region coupled by China’s aggressive posturing in the South Asian and South East Asian regions in recent decades have emerged as major geo-political concerns which call for sustained and coordinated efforts at multiple levels to check Beijing’s unbridled and imperialistic quest for “resources, markets and bases”. As a matter of fact, Beijing’s expansionist agenda is clearly manifested in terms of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (formerly known as One Belt One Road or OBOR) which is aimed at creation of a network of overland routes for road and rail transportation (“Silk Road Economic Belt”) and maritime routes (“21st Century Maritime Silk Road”)

covering as many as 70 countries thereby connecting Asia, Africa, Europe, Middle East and the Americas. These Eurasian transport corridors, particularly in the Central Asian region, would be logistically vital for Beijing not only in fulfilling China's energy needs but also enabling it to "potentially use those routes to deploy its troops in the region in the event of a serious conflict that threatened Chinese security or strategic interests".ⁱ Through a policy of "debt-trap" diplomacy, Beijing has vigorously extended its commercial and naval access in littoral countries like Sri Lanka and is presently eyeing on Nepal, Bangladesh and littoral states of the Indian Ocean region including Mauritius, Seychelles, Maldives, etc. The Chinese littoral and maritime ambitions in the Indian Ocean region with a view to creating a niche for itself as a "resident power" dates back to early 2000s as evident from the 2005 report titled "Energy Futures in Asia," sponsored by the Director of Office of Net Assessment who headed the then US Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld's office on future oriented strategies. The report clearly stated that "China was building strategic relationships along the sea lanesin ways that suggest defensive and offensive positioning to protect China's energy interests, but also to serve broad security objectives". The report stated that China is adopting a "string of pearls" strategy of bases and diplomatic ties stretching from the Middle East that includes a new naval base under construction at the Pakistani port of Gwadar, monitoring ship traffic through the Strait of Hormuz and the Arabian Sea.ⁱⁱ Since the publication of the report, Beijing has significantly increased its military and commercial facilities along the major sea lanes of communication passing through the Indian Ocean region encompassing vital maritime choke points such as the Strait of Mandeb, the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Lombok Strait along with a mushroom growth of Chinese Ports in the Indian Ocean region including Hambantota (Sri Lanka) and Djibouti ports (the latter becoming the first ever naval base of the Chinese army abroad in 2016), while significant Chinese investments have been made in Bangladesh (especially in terms of development of Chittagong port), the Maldives and Somalia. The control of these strategic ports by China poses a major security threat to India since these ports, which although are essentially commercial ports, could easily be converted into military bases in the event of hostilities with India. For instance, China has already built a naval base in Gwadar, Pakistan as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project, the flagship of the Belt and Road Project. China arming Pakistan with J-17, S20 diesel-electric submarines based on the Yuan-class (Type 039A-series) design, and nuclear weapons demonstrates the utility of Pakistan as a pivot for Chinaⁱⁱⁱ. China is also deepening ties with Myanmar, as evident from the conclusion of the China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) which aims to have Kyaukpyu deep sea water port; China-Myanmar oil and gas pipeline; Mandalay Yida Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone; Tagaung Taung Nickel Industry Development Project; Letpadaung copper mine project; Kunming-Kyaukpyu railway line; Mandalay-Tigyaing-Muse expressway and Kyaukpyu-Nay Pyi Taw highway projects, etc.^{iv} At the same time, China is also trying to make inroads into Nepal by making considerable investments in infrastructure development in that country such as building airports and expanding rail connectivity upto Tibet. As per estimated figures for 2016-2017, China's investment in the region has been astronomical, amounting to \$13.87 billion to Bangladesh, \$3.11 billion to Sri Lanka, \$1.34 billion to Nepal, \$970 million to Maldives, and \$12.9 billion to Pakistan.^v India must now play a more proactive role in halting the buildup of China-led alliances, Chinese client states and countering the Chinese naval and military presence in the Indian Ocean region through strategic maneuvering.

Against this background, India must explore geo-strategic options to contain China in the Indian-Ocean Region and more broadly in the South Asian and South East Asian regions, while increasing its own sphere of influence in terms of helping the countries in the region achieve their infrastructure and capacity

building goals; reaching out to its own immediate and extended neighbourhood in more vigorous ways within the framework of the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) initiative, revitalizing the Indian Ocean Rim Association; and by way of increasing bilateral trade between India and neighbouring countries while making them aware of the ulterior designs of China. Ensuring the security of maritime territories holds significant importance in India's interactions with Indian Ocean littoral states or nations bordering the Indian Ocean. Operating through the Indian Ocean Rim Association, India should take the lead in orchestrating collaborative endeavours involving all concerned parties to ensure the safety of the Indian Ocean. The goal is to enhance maritime collaboration, fostering a region that is tranquil, steady, and prosperous.

It is pertinent to stress here that alongside this objective, India should also back and reinforce endeavours at a sub-regional level, aimed at cultivating a "Blue Economy." This strategy aims to stimulate smart, sustainable, enduring and comprehensive growth as well as employment opportunities within the maritime economic activities of the Indian Ocean region. This approach ensures the sustainable and judicious harnessing of oceanic resources. As a matter of fact, in March 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited three important Indian Ocean island states — Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka. During this tour, India's strategic vision for the Indian Ocean, namely, Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) was unveiled. It is a maritime initiative which gives priority to the Indian Ocean region for ensuring peace, stability and prosperity of India in Indian Ocean region based on a climate of mutual trust and partnership; respect for international maritime norms by all countries; peaceful resolution of maritime issues; and increase in maritime cooperation. SAGAR also aims at realizing a blue economy centering on livelihood generation, energy security, and strengthening ties with neighbours while also providing for maintenance of strategic partnerships by India with the littoral states of Indian Ocean Region in Asia and Africa.

The SAGAR initiative aims at investing and assisting in the development of maritime infrastructure in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), especially covering Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Oman and Iran. According to Vice Admiral Anil Chopra (former Commander-in-Chief of both the operational commands of the Indian Navy i.e. the Western Naval Command, and the Eastern Naval Command; as well as a former Director General of the Indian Coast Guard), some of the initiatives which could be undertaken by India as a part of the SAGAR initiative include the Bangladesh Pyara deepwater port project; the Kyaukpyu and Dawei ports in Myanmar which New Delhi can help develop solo or with allies like Japan; India Promoting the petrochemical complex at Trincomalee in Sri Lanka which is touted as one of the best natural harbours in the world; Rebuilding bilateral confidence with Maldives, so that India would regain the privilege of being consulted in all strategic and maritime matters; Chabahar port in Iran and its energy infrastructure .^{vi}

Furthermore, the Sagarmala initiative which was approved by the Union Cabinet on March 25, 2015, encompasses a National Perspective Plan (NPP) aimed at the holistic advancement of India's 7,500 km coastline, 14,500 km of potentially navigable waterways, and the maritime sector. This plan was unveiled by the Prime Minister on April 14, 2016, during the Maritime India Summit 2016.

The Sagarmala initiative essentially focusses on port development, port connectivity, port-led industrialisation, and coastal community development This programme involves several key components as discussed below: ^{vii}

Port Modernization & New Port Development: Upgrading existing ports, expanding their capacity, and establishing new environmentally sustainable ports.

Port Connectivity Enhancement: Improving port-to-hinterland connectivity by optimizing cargo movement costs and time through multimodal logistics solutions, including domestic waterways such as inland water transport and coastal shipping.

Port-linked Industrialization: Creating industrial clusters and Coastal Economic Zones near ports to reduce logistics expenses and time for both international and domestic cargo.

Coastal Community Development: Fostering sustainable growth in coastal communities through activities such as skill development, livelihood generation, fisheries improvement, and promoting coastal tourism.

Coastal Shipping & Inland Waterways Transport: Encouraging the use of eco-friendly coastal and inland waterways for cargo transportation to promote environmentally sustainable practices.

As a matter of fact, it has been suggested that “SAGAR, Sagarmala and seaports represent a maritime ‘Triple S’ growth triangle prospect for India” in the Indo-Pacific region. ^{viii}

Significantly, in consonance with the SAGAR initiative, in 2016 India-Afghanistan-Iran entered into a trilateral pact to jointly establish a trade route for land locked Afghanistan and Central Asian countries. Accordingly, in February 2019, the Afghanistan-Iran-India trade corridor through Chabahar Port was officially inaugurated. The Chabahar Port was built up with India’s support and it has recently witnessed cargo movement to South Asia and South East Asia. Maritime security must always remain a prominent feature of India’s relations with Indian Ocean littoral states. More recently, as part of the Sagarmala initiative, India and Japan are collaborating to develop the strategically important Matarbari Port in Bangladesh – the first deep-sea port of Bangladesh. This in itself is hailed as a major diplomatic victory for India vis-à-vis China. It is worth mentioning here that previously Bangladesh declined the Chinese offer to develop the Sonadia deep-sea port. In Nepal too, India has taken up infrastructural projects particularly with respect to hydro-power generation such as construction of the Sapta Kosi High Dam – a multi-purpose project. Further, with regard to the South East Asian countries, India has made significant investments in the natural energy sector in recent years while forging closer ties with Vietnam to which India has recently gifted the indigenously built in-service missile corvette INS Kirpan to Vietnam as a sign of India’s desire to deepen defence cooperation with Vietnam an important security partner of India in the Indian Ocean Region.

At the same time, India must continue coordinating with the navies of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean on the basis of shared principles and strategies including Coordinated Patrols (CORPAT) facilitating interoperability. India must try to involve more littoral countries in the Indian Navy’s Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) which is a coastal radar chain network to track and monitor shipping vessels in real time in the high seas.

A case in point is the Malabar (Naval) Exercise – a trilateral naval exercise involving the navies and air forces of US, Japan and India as permanent members. The naval exercise started as a bilateral exercise in 1992 between India and the USA and was subsequently expanded to include Japan in 2015. The exercise involves a diverse range of combat exercises carrier strike group operations, maritime patrol and

reconnaissance operations, anti-piracy operations, search and rescue operations, helicopter cross-deck landings, anti-submarine warfare exercises, etc. The last such tri-lateral maritime exercise was held in July, 2017 in the Bay of Bengal area signaling deeper military ties between the three nations (India, Japan and US). The aim is to maintain regional balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and Asia-pacific region in the face of the growing influence of China. Significantly, the Malabar Exercise held in 2020 also included Australia. It was held in two phases in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. The full participation of India, USA, Japan and Australia in the 2020 edition of the Malabar exercise signalled the potential long term strategic cooperation among the four countries raising hopes of the emergence of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue as a strong counterweight to China in the Indo-Pacific and the Asia-Pacific regions on multiple fronts and to recalibrate power equations for establishment of a “rules-based order” in the Indo-Pacific region aimed at ensuring maritime security and promoting freedom of navigation. The 2021 and 2022 editions of the Malabar exercise too witnessed the full participation of the militaries of all four QUAD countries with the 2021 edition being held off the coast of Guam and the 2022 edition being conducted off the coast of Japan. In a joint statement in March 2021, "The Spirit of the Quad," the Quad members spelt out “a shared vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” needed to counter Chinese maritime claims. The Quad pledged to respond to COVID-19,^[81] and held a first Quad Plus meeting that included representatives from New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam. The Indian Navy spokesperson remarked that the conduct of the naval exercise amid the COVID-19 pandemic is a “testimony of synergy” among the four Quad countries that will “provide an opportunity for common minded navies to enhance interoperability, gain from best practices and develop a common understanding of procedures for maritime security operations.”^{ix} It is worth mentioning that in April 2021, the Quad plus France engaged in the La Pérouse exercise in the Bay of Bengal indicating the willingness of other democratic countries to collaborate with the Quad members in the collective goal to ensure maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. This reflects how the Quad led military drills have grown in stature and significance in recent years. The 2023 edition of the Malabar exercise involving the militaries of all four Quad countries are being held in Australia comprising of two phases- the harbor phase and the sea phase.

It is to be hoped that QUAD members hold regular summits among themselves to coordinate their activities involving information exchanges and military drills while building closer economic ties among themselves with an eye to counter the threat of Chinese expansionism in a vigorous way. One of the key aims of QUAD is to develop strategies to keep important sea-routes in the Indo-Pacific region open for navigation and maritime trade. Having a permanent secretariat for QUAD is also required to lend continuity in its operational dynamics.

An especially reliable partner in QUAD for India has been Japan, both of whom have long coordinated their efforts in strategically countering China. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) agreement signed in 2017 aims for Indo-Japanese collaboration aimed at development projects in health and pharmaceuticals, agriculture and agro-processing, disaster management and skill enhancement. AAGC will essentially be a sea corridor linking Africa with India and other countries of South-East Asia and Oceania. It would revive ancient sea-routes and create new sea corridors linking ports in Jamnagar (Gujarat) with Djibouti in the Gulf of Eden and likewise the ports of Mombasa and Zanzibar will be connected to ports near Madurai; Kolkata will be linked to Sittwe port in Myanmar. As pointed out earlier, the development of the deep-sea port of Matarbari in Bangladesh is clearly reflective of the close ties and commonalities between India and Japan in geo-strategic terms.

It is heartening to note that in addition to the synergy achieved through QUAD, India has entered into Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (MLSA)s with the US, France, South Korea and Singapore and most recently with Australia. Talks are underway for MLSAs with Japan and Russia. The MLSAs serve to enhance the Indian Navy's capability in terms of facilitating reciprocal access to military logistics facilities, allowing more complex joint military exercise and improve interoperability between the security forces of the two nations. India should continue its joint exercises under such MLSAs. In March 2020 CORPAT drills were held between Indian and French navies in Reunion Island. More recently, in a strong strategic message to China, a US carrier strike group led by aircraft carrier USS Nimitz conducted a "cooperative" exercise with Indian warships in the Indian Ocean on Monday. Significantly, India has now deployed Jaguar maritime strike fighters in the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago that dominates China's critical sea trade routes passing through the Malacca Strait.

Thus, India must always prioritize the forging of reliable and stable partnerships to counter-balance Chinese maneuverers in the Indian Ocean Region. It is the larger interest of all stakeholders in the Indian Ocean region to coordinate their activities on multiple fronts to ensure navigational freedom in the Indian Ocean region while effectively curtailing Chinese expansionist territorial ambitions in terms of its "Debt Trap Diplomacy" and "String of Pearls Strategy". It is appreciable that India, in response to the Chinese strategy of "String of Pearls" has, in recent years, been working to develop the strategy of "Necklace of Diamonds" which is aimed at counter-encircling China vis-à-vis developing naval bases and forging closer ties with in littoral and other strategically placed countries, especially in the Indian Ocean Region to form a network of alliances to counter the Chinese strategy of "String of Pearls". The phrase "necklace of diamonds" was first coined by India's former Foreign Secretary Lalit Mansingh in August 2011 while delivering a lecture on 'India's Regional Strategic Priorities'. Under the strategy of "Necklace of Diamonds", the Indian Navy has been able to secure direct military access to certain naval bases and ports. Such naval bases and ports to which the India has been granted direct naval and military access include Changi Naval Base, Singapore, Sabang Port, Indonesia, Duqm Port, Oman, Assumption Island, Seychelles, Chabahar Port, Iran. At the same time, India must consistently pursue the SAGAR and Sagarmala initiatives to further consolidate her "Necklace of Diamonds" strategy.

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