

CHINA'S INDIAN OCEAN STRATEGY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA'S MARITIME SECURITY

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Abstract:

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has become a principal arena of strategic competition in the 21st century, shaped by China's expanding geopolitical reach and India's security priorities as a resident maritime power. China's Indian Ocean strategy characterized by port infrastructure development, enhanced naval presence, and graded strategic partnerships aims to protect Beijing's sea trade routes and extend influence. This study critically examines the strategic objectives of China's Indian Ocean policy, including the so-called String of Pearls and Maritime Silk Road initiatives, and evaluates their implications for India's maritime security. It highlights the challenge to India's freedom of maneuver, potential threats to its sea lines of communication (SLOCs), and the emerging security dilemma between the two powers. The article also assesses India's strategic responses, including naval modernization, maritime domain awareness enhancements, and regional security cooperation. Through this analytical framework, it argues that India must synergize power projection, multilateral engagement, and defense diplomacy to uphold stability in the Indian Ocean.

Keywords: China's Indian Ocean Strategy; Maritime Security; India–China Strategic Competition; Indian Ocean Region (IOR); Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs); String of Pearls; Naval Modernization; Regional Security Cooperation; Power Projection; Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA).

1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian Ocean connects critical maritime routes that serve as the backbone of global trade and energy flows. It is estimated that nearly 80 percent of India's crude oil imports and a significant portion of its trade traverse this expanse, making maritime security vital to India's economic and strategic stability (Nasir & Munir, 2022). For centuries, India has regarded the Indian Ocean as its strategic domain, maintaining naval superiority and influencing regional security architectures.

However, since the early 2000s, China's presence in the Indian Ocean has expanded significantly. Through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing has invested in port infrastructure across South Asia, East Africa, and the Middle East. While these initiatives are presented as economic arrangements, they possess strategic implications that extend beyond commerce and into security and influence projection (Badawi, 2025). China's naval deployments, infrastructure agreements, and defense cooperation with littoral states challenge India's traditional maritime predominance and prompt New Delhi to recalibrate its security strategies.

This article examines China's Indian Ocean strategy within the context of its broader maritime ambitions, explores the security implications for India, and assesses the evolving strategic responses by New Delhi. By examining scholarly sources and regional security analyses, the paper situates the Sino-Indian maritime dynamic within a competitive and multipolar regional order.

2. CHINA'S STRATEGY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

2.1 Infrastructure Expansion and Strategic Port Engagements

China's maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean involves cultivating strategic access through port infrastructure and logistics hubs. While officially framed as commercial investments under the BRI framework, many of these port projects have dual-use potential meaning they can support both civilian traffic and military logistics. This infrastructure engagement is seen by many analysts as part of a broader strategic plan to secure sea lanes critical to Chinese trade and energy imports (Badawi, 2025).

Strategic port investments extend across the IOR, including in nations such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and East Africa. Through these arrangements, China enhances its influence while potentially securing docking and logistics support for its naval vessels. These initiatives also often come with long-term leases and operational agreements that bind host countries economically and politically to Beijing's strategic outlook.

2.2 String of Pearls and Maritime Silk Road

Scholars widely refer to the network of Chinese port engagements in the Indian Ocean as the *String of Pearls* strategy, a concept that describes Beijing's attempt to establish a series of strategic nodes along key sea lanes (Badawi, 2025). While originally highlighted in Western strategic literature, the term has gained traction as a framework to understand China's incremental approach to maritime influence.

Badawi (2025) explains that China's establishment of facilities near strategic chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca reflects more than commercial interests it is part of a concerted effort to secure maritime trade routes vital to Chinese energy and commerce flows. This network enhances China's logistical support for seaborne trade but also carries implications for regional naval competition.

In this context, scholars emphasize the dual nature of these installations, which while primarily commercial provide potential strategic leverage in times of tension. Nasir and Munir (2022) further argue that control over or influence in these strategically placed ports can facilitate sustained naval operations far from China's immediate shorelines, complicating India's traditional role as a dominant maritime power in the region.

2.3 Naval Presence and Power Projection

In addition to infrastructure, China has steadily increased the frequency and scope of its naval presence in the Indian Ocean. PLAN warships regularly transit the region, participate in anti-piracy patrols, and make port calls in friendly states. These deployments provide Beijing with operational experience and visibility outside its immediate sphere of influence. While the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) maintains that these operations are routine and defensive, the projection of naval presence in distant waters signals a broader strategic intent (Badawi, 2025).

The establishment of China's overseas military logistics facility in Djibouti in 2017 marked a significant milestone in its ability to sustain naval operations far from the mainland. Though Beijing positions this as an anti-piracy and peacekeeping support structure, its location near major maritime corridors indicates broader strategic utility.

Analysts also note that China's naval modernization, including surface combatants, submarines, and auxiliary vessels, enhances its ability to support long-distance deployments, offering expansion beyond traditional coastal defense roles. Such increased naval capacity has implications for regional power balances, especially where it intersects with India's own security imperatives.

2.4 Diplomatic and Economic Outreach

China's Indian Ocean strategy extends beyond infrastructure to include economic and diplomatic influence. Beijing's involvement in infrastructure development, resource exploitation, and socioeconomic investments fosters political leverage with Indian Ocean littoral states. This influence is particularly visible

in countries seeking economic assistance or market access, where China's financial resources provide attractive incentives.

By strengthening bilateral economic ties and offering credits, loans, and development projects, China cultivates relationships that can yield strategic support on international platforms. This economic engagement often complements Chinese defense cooperation, reinforcing its presence and influence within the region's security matrix.

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA'S MARITIME SECURITY

3.1 Strategic Encirclement and Freedom of Maneuver

India perceives China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean as a strategic challenge that could constrain its freedom of maneuver and undermine its traditional role as a resident maritime power. The geographic positioning of Chinese facilities and access agreements, particularly near strategic chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca and Arabian Sea, raises concerns about potential encirclement or influence over critical sea lanes (Badawi, 2025).

Nasir and Munir (2022) argue that this encirclement perception, whether overtly stated by Beijing or not, influences India's defense planning and naval strategy. These concerns shape India's efforts to enhance surveillance, improve operational readiness, and pursue partnerships that can balance China's expanding reach.

3.2 Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) and Energy Route Security

India's economic stability relies heavily on uninterrupted maritime trade and energy supplies that flow through the Indian Ocean. Any disruption to these sea lines of communication would have profound economic and security implications. China's strategic footprint in the region including potential influence over key maritime infrastructure could, in crisis scenarios, affect the security of these routes.

China's maritime strategy is often linked to securing its own energy trade, but because many of these routes are shared with India, New Delhi is attentive to how enhanced Chinese naval presence could alter regional dynamics in ways that jeopardize maritime security. Nasir and Munir (2022) emphasize that both Indian and Chinese commerce heavily rely on these waterways, making competitive access and control a significant competitive concern.

3.3 Maritime Security Dilemma: Competition and Rivalry

The intersection of Indian and Chinese strategic interests in the IOR has produced a classic security dilemma, where each state's efforts to enhance its own security through naval build-up, alliances, or infrastructure influence is perceived as a threat by the other. Such dynamics can intensify competition and limit cooperation.

Scholars like those in *India–China Maritime Competition: The Security Dilemma at Sea* (Basrur et al., 2019) argue that India's naval expansion in response to China's presence influences how each side interprets the other's strategic intentions, complicating opportunities for mutual de-escalation or confidence-building.

This maritime security dilemma is compounded by broader geopolitical factors, including China's efforts to cultivate ties with Indian Ocean littorals and India's own efforts to lead regional security collaborations. It underscores that power projection in the Indian Ocean is not just about material capabilities but also about perceptions and strategic signaling.

4. INDIA'S STRATEGIC RESPONSES

4.1 Naval Modernization and Force Projection

India has actively pursued naval modernization to maintain credible maritime deterrence and protect its national interests. India's naval investments include expanding its fleet of surface combatants, submarines,

and maritime patrol aircraft. These efforts enhance operational capabilities across the Indian Ocean and provide India with greater reach to monitor and counter strategic challenges (Badawi, 2025).

India's strategic location including institutions like the Andaman and Nicobar Command supports power projection near critical maritime junctions such as the Malacca Strait. Enhanced naval infrastructure and logistics strengthen operational readiness and response capability.

4.2 Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)

Improving maritime domain awareness is a key pillar of India's strategic response. Maritime domain awareness involves collecting, processing, and sharing information on maritime traffic, naval movements, and potential threats. Enhanced MDA enables India to monitor naval activities, including Chinese deployments, more effectively.

Darshana Baruah (in *India and China at Sea*) argues that India's traditional maritime awareness frameworks require bolstering to track surface and subsurface activities across a vast maritime expanse (Baruah, 2018). Increased cooperation with friendly states and improved satellite-based monitoring enhances India's surveillance reach, addressing gaps in its maritime vigilance.

4.3 Regional Partnerships and Multilateral Cooperation

To counterbalance China's presence, India has strengthened strategic partnerships with regional states and like-minded powers. Joint naval exercises, defense collaboration, and maritime security dialogues contribute to regional stability and collective security.

India's engagement in naval exercises with African and Indian Ocean states reflects its efforts to enhance interoperability and signify its commitment to secure regional waters. For example, India's largest-ever joint naval exercise with African nations underscores its intention to deepen maritime cooperation and assert regional presence amidst growing competition (Financial Times, 2025).

Multilateral cooperation, including dialogues with ASEAN and Quad partner countries, further enhances India's strategic options and contributes to a networked approach to maritime security.

4.4 Diplomacy and Aid Initiatives

India's maritime strategy also involves developmental aid and economic support to neighboring Indian Ocean states, reinforcing diplomatic ties and strategic influence. For instance, recent economic assistance to Mauritius for port redevelopment and maritime security projects reflects India's commitment to support littoral states and maintain a strategic foothold (Reuters, 2025).

These initiatives complement India's defense and diplomacy toolbox and help foster goodwill and alignment among Indian Ocean countries.

5. CONCLUSION

China's Indian Ocean strategy reflects a multidimensional approach combining infrastructure investment, naval deployments, and economic diplomacy aimed at securing maritime interests and extending geopolitical influence. This expansion poses significant challenges to India's maritime security, particularly in terms of freedom of maneuver, SLOC security, and strategic competition.

India's response has been comprehensive, encompassing naval modernization, enhanced domain awareness, regional partnerships, and diplomatic engagement. While competition in the Indian Ocean is likely to persist, India's strategic emphasis on collaborative security architectures and power projection aims to preserve stability and safeguard national interests.

Future dynamics in the Indian Ocean will depend on how effectively India and its partners adapt to evolving maritime challenges while engaging China through a balance of deterrence and cooperation.

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