

**India's Unofficial Deterrence Towards the Hegemonic Vision
by China in Indian Ocean Region**

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Introduction

The Indian Ocean is a wide region that stretches from the Malacca Strait and Australia's western coast in the east to the Mozambique Channel in the west. It stretches from the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea in the north to the Indian Ocean in the south. 71% of the surface of the Earth and 97% of the water on Earth are contained in the Indian Ocean. The ocean is the third largest water body in the world. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is bounded by 38 countries, in terms of demography, it has over 2.5 billion population which is one-third of the population in the world. The region is on the verge of becoming the world's most critical ocean in the coming century, and this fact is especially apparent in the superpower priority being paid to this ocean, for example, the U.S. government released a document titled the "Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Sea Power" designed to advance the security of the ocean. Deep-water port development in littoral states and military patrols are two areas of influence which two regional powers - India and China has put efforts to extend their presence and authority in the ocean. Even though India is geographically close to the Indian Ocean, it has bolstered its naval power projection capabilities in the region by strengthening its capabilities.

The Indian Ocean is a warm-water ocean with two established monsoons. The warm water provides a diverse assortment of fish, as well as year-round use and monsoons bring in the moisture, resulting in a cooling temperature. 'Blue Economy', in the region is beginning to play an increasingly important role as it is mostly dependent on coastal and marine ecology and resources. The centrality of India in the Indian Ocean is enhanced by the positions of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula to its west and southwest, and southeast Asia to its east.

In the Indian Ocean, the main states which influence the region are United States, China, Japan, Australia, and India. China, which is steadily becoming a global economic powerhouse, has made it obvious that it intends to use the Indian Ocean from the perspective of its great BRI project and to build a maritime silk road for its national interest. This power struggle has resulted in a "maritime cold war," which has been increasingly militarized and hence has taken on significant importance in world politics in the twenty-first century.

Alfred Thayer Mahan, an American maritime strategist in 19th century illustrated that, “Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas in the 21st century, the destiny of the world will be decided in these waters”. Which brings us to take consideration that the world economy has shifted from the west to the east, and now the Indian Ocean has increased in prominence since it is the sole viable link between the two regions.

The Sino-India relations has always been complex, filled with tensions and cooperation. The rise of both the countries in today’s period has led to a strategic development in the international affairs; it is considered to be as the new world from political, social, economic and security purposes. Chinese vision of world dominance and its geopolitical initiative has become a ground of contention for many countries. Belt and Road Initiative and Maritime Silk Road which is led by China for easy access and control over the vast region of Asia, Indian Ocean and Europe has become a matter of concern for many of the countries like the United States, Japan, India and Australia which thus has given these countries to counter China’s rise with their quadrilateral relation known as “QUAD/QUAD PLUS”. In conclusion the article argues about the developmental strategies initiated by China and how India has laid down its naval and development strategy to counter China in the Indian Ocean Region.

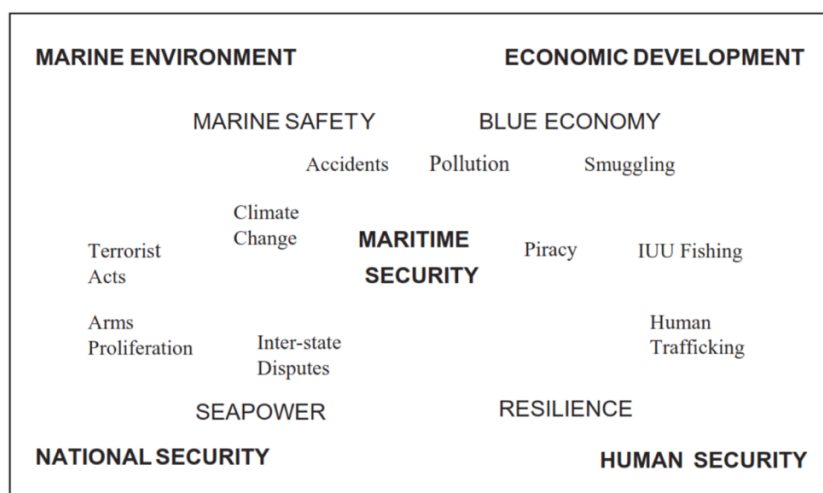
Maritime Security in Indian Ocean

Maritime Security holds both challenges and opportunities, which propagates into both bright and dark sides in terms of transport, energy, digital connections and human-dimension networks. The 2005 National Strategy for Maritime Security by the United States considered maritime security from the perspective of a list of threats, including nation-state threats, terrorist threats, transnational crimes, piracy, environmental destruction and illegal seaborne immigration.¹ As per Indian Maritime Security views, it visions for “the freedom to use the seas for the pursuit of maritime activities, in support of national development and prosperity, and to promote legitimate use of the maritime global commons.”² The Indian Ocean which is the 3rd largest ocean in the world; which covers 20% earth water surface; holds a population of 2.6 billion has great many threats towards maritime security, including territorial and maritime disputes, piracy, illegal-unreported-unregulated (IUU) fishing and pollution of marine environment.

Security at sea is not simply threats to maritime ports or infrastructures, they now encompass challenges to the livelihoods of coastal populations as well as initiatives to promote economic and social development and sustainable use of seas and oceans. To make the ocean more secure, the countries need to abide by the international law of 1982 which is United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), also referred to as the “constitution of the oceans.” Maintaining peace and stability through the amalgamation of “maritime security matrix” which includes national security, marine environment, economic development and human security should be promoted by the nations.

¹¹ The White House, “The National Strategy for Maritime Security,” 2005.

² Ministry of Defense of India, “Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy,” 2015, 166.



Maritime Security Matrix (Bueger 2015: 161)

A major theatre of strategic competition is taking place in the Indian Ocean region. As part of the Belt and Road Initiative, China is the significant stakeholder, and has spent hundreds of billions of dollars on infrastructure projects in the region (BRI). In recent years, China has become increasingly reliant on the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca for its energy supply, and as a result, it has become more active in the area economically. In order to balance China, many major players have stepped in, such as Australia, India, the US, and Japan, who have invested, understood, and have been carrying out infrastructure projects. There is a great suspicion amongst Chinese government with regards to India’s inclination and close bilateral relations with United States, it has also gone vary with the recent development of 2017 and the re-establishment of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD).

String of Pearls Doctrine led by China

The String of Pearls Doctrine was never initiated by China, rather the term was coined by the United States in 2004 by consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton. The ‘String of Pearls Project’ is a geographical theory concerning China's goals in terms of military, commercial, maritime communication, and diplomatic in the Indian Ocean. It is China's strategy to surround India by retaining and growing its strategic outposts in nations around India, including Pakistan, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar. This motive of China is to confine India to its own territory and limit the country's influence on neighbouring countries. The String of Pearls approach is close radius with South China Sea which gives China backing towards its operations at sea. The expansion of China’s investment begins from Hainan Island in the South China Sea, through the littorals of the Straits of Malacca, port developments in Chittagong in Bangladesh; Sittwe, Coco, Hianggyi, Khaukphyu, Mergui and Zadetkyi Kyun in Myanmar; Laem Chabang in Thailand; and Sihanoukville in Cambodia, it then extends across the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Pakistan’s Gwadar Port, and in islands within the Arabian Sea and into the Persian Gulf. China's increased regional power dominance began in earnest

³ Christian Bueger, “What is maritime security?” *Marine Policy*, 53 (3/2015): 159-164

following the country's attempts to boost trade access through ports, develop its military, and strengthen bilateral relations with trading partners.

Due to China's policy of debt trap, the small nations of the Indian Ocean Region have been financially subjugated. The disturbing thing is that a significant portion of the world's worst debt trap victims reside close to India or in airspace.

Threat to India's Security and Its Response: India's Necklace of Diamonds

For India, the Indian Ocean is seen as the country's own backyard, and for decades, it has been a net security provider in the area. Lakshadweep, Diu, and Dadar Nagar Haveli are situated on the western and eastern coasts of India, they all rely on the long-term peace and stability in the IOR. In terms of their power to exert influence over the sea lanes of communication, the Andaman Nicobar Islands offer complementary roles to peninsular India.

India will need to implement certain policy measures in order to take on a prominent role in the Indian Ocean Region and keep its geopolitical and geo-economic interests. SLOCs' security is essential for India's economic and national stability. Since the rise of the Indian economy, India has developed ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other Western countries including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iran, and Israel. Geographically, India is positioned to control as the largest nation in the region, as well as control over the waterways and airways.

For India BRI and Maritime Silk Road has been portrayed as geoeconomics and military expansion by China, which has become a threat to India's national security as the activity by China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has increased. Clashes between major powers are likely to ensnare in the regional countries, particularly small and medium-sized ones in the Indian Ocean Region.

The 'Necklace of Diamonds' initiated by India as a strategy is a response to China's String of Pearls. It is part of a large strategy to oppose China's ambitions in the Indian Ocean region and the Indo-Pacific region. The 'Necklace of diamonds' is a strategic and economic endeavour to offset the 'string of pearls' strategy of surrounding India with hotspots of its influence. In order to counter China's rise, India has been attempting to enhance relations with China's immediate neighbours, including Taiwan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Japan, since the early 1990s. On the other hand, to offset China's Gwadar initiative, India has reached an agreement with Iran, and the two countries are currently working together to develop Chabahar Port, which is even more important than Gwadar because it is positioned at the mouth of the Hormuz strait. India has also made significant diplomatic investments in nations such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia, which are all neighbours to China.

Four fifths of the container traffic between Asia and the rest of the world, and three fifths of the world's oil supplies, pass through the Indian Ocean. To challenge Beijing, India is working on 'MAUSAM – Maritime Routes and Cultural Landscapes Across the Indian Ocean,' which was launched at the 38th World Heritage Session in Doha in June 2014, and has been the old

spice route initiative with the region's governments. To offset China's convergence, India needs to invest more in infrastructure projects in these Indian Ocean littoral countries. India should consider converting the islands whose development rights they have obtained from Seychelles and Mauritius into military outposts. In the current situation, India must abandon its objection to establish military outposts abroad.

“It is clearly emerging that China’s policy is a kind of method by which they not only promote economic interests, but they are also trying to keep India boxed in within the South Asia context. And this is where we have to respond to their so-called string of pearls”

- Lalit Mansingh – former Ambassador to the United States⁴

As of 2008, and continuing until 2018, the Indian armed forces began constructing strategic outposts in Singapore, Oman, Indonesia, Seychelles, and Iran. One of the major, and most well-known, counters to China's 'String of Pearls' strategy is Sabang, located at the entrance to the Malacca Strait.

1. Changi Naval Base, Singapore (2018)

In 2018, Prime Minister Modi signed the India-Singapore Bilateral Agreement for Navy Cooperation, which permits Indian Navy ships to get logistical support, including refuelling, at Singapore's Changi naval station. Access to Singapore Changi Naval Base near the South China Sea is key pivot for India in southeast Asian seas.

2. Sabang Port, Indonesia (2018)

India gained access to the military port of Sabang in Malacca Strait, near the Nicobar Islands in 2018. A big portion of trade and crude oil travels via this region, and a considerable amount natural gasses pass through for China.

3. Al Duqm Port, Oman (2018)

As a matter of geo-strategic positioning, Duqm is situated not far from the Indian Ocean ports of Djibouti in the Horn of Africa and Gwadar in Pakistan. The little Persian Gulf country of Oman is India's oldest defence ally in West Asia, and it is a great benefit to our efforts to gain influence in Africa. In 2018, India was granted access to the Duqm Port for military purposes as well. Oil from the Persian Gulf is delivered to India through this port. Because of India's access to this port, interception of activity in the Strait of Hormuz has also become more straightforward and easier for India.

4. Assumption Island, Seychelles (2015)

It was one of China's desires to sway domestic political opposition to an agreement between India and the Seychelles. India hence started it bilateral relations by constructing a naval station on Assumption Islands in 2015. Seychelles also received \$100 million in line of credit for defence procurement and as a result, President Danny Faure's first state visited to India. It is expected that India is investing \$550 million to expand and develop this port. This base is

⁴ <https://idsa.in/askanexpert/why-has-india-necklace-diamonds-strategy-indian-ocean-region>

strategically important to India since China aims to strengthen its footprint in Africa via the maritime route, and Assumption Island is located on the major interface. It is possible for India to monitor Chinese actions at the Marao atoll thanks to access to Assumption Island. The island's close proximity to the Mozambique Channel would provide an additional advantage for Indian intelligence operations in the region.

5. Chabahar Port, Iran (2016)

Cordial relations between India and Iran have strong implications for the IOR because Iran is a prominent country in the IOR and a significant actor in global and regional affairs. The Iranian Chabahar port serves as a gateway to Afghanistan and a vital commerce route to Central Asia which lies in the Sistan and Baluchistan province of Iran, not far from Gwadar. India aspires to compete with China, which will be built and operate adjacent to Gwadar Port in Pakistan, giving India an upper hand in terms of maritime security. With the development of India-Iran relations U.S has managed to uplift the sanctions which were levied upon Iran earlier.

Conclusion

The changes taking place in the Indian Ocean Region are contributing to the emergence of a world that is less Western-centric and more multi-polar in nature. Both India and China have identified the Indian Ocean as a critical location for achieving strategic goals. As China extends its flaps in the Indian Ocean, India's maritime diplomacy must be more robust and productive. To protect its fundamental national security interests, New Delhi should participate actively in the Indian Ocean region. Naval air bases at Goa and Arkonnam, as well as other air bases, have been built in Visakhapatnam by India. It has also built air bases in Port Blair and in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, where it also protects its commercial and jurisdictional interests in the deep south of the ocean. The focus of India's approach to China's strategies in the IOR is to strengthen the country's navy and to provide naval cooperation with nations in the region.

China and India as well as other regional players may find new security partnerships in the varied non-traditional security issues like Natural disasters or Piracy found in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Regional organisations such as BIMTEC and IORA have arisen which are interested in advancing sustainable economic growth, trade liberalisation, and security.

The notion that India has chosen non-alignment in its foreign policy because of its unique geographical location in the IOR has been corroborated by researchers. Additionally, India has affirmed its desire to see IOR designated as a 'zone of peace'. This has benefited India's reputation across the globe, particularly among developing countries.

The COVID pandemic continues to rage, and the Indian government has sent lots of vaccine to many nations within the IOR, including Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Singapore. According to unconfirmed sources, India's strategy of gifting COVID vaccine was in part intended to build its Maitri (vaccine friendship).

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