
Sino-Indian Security Dilemma in the Indian Ocean: Revisiting the String of Pearls Strategy

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Introduction

Supremacy over maritime Asia has become the primary bone of contention between China and India, particularly in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the South China Sea (SCS). Several analysts are of the opinion that the ongoing Sino-Indian competition presents a classic case of a security dilemma that could lead to rivalry and arms race in the region.

Security dilemma is the outcome of states' mutual suspicion of each other's intentions. China's increased focus on the IOR is rooted in the security of its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). The ongoing modernization of Chinese forces, greater power projection in the Indian Ocean, and economic and political linkages with the IOR states are perceived in the Indian security community as steps aimed at curbing India's dominance in the IOR. In line with this thinking, many in India are of the view that the String of Pearls is part of China's military strategy to choke India's political, commercial, and energy interests in the region. It refers to China's efforts to expand its naval presence throughout the IOR by investing in military and intelligence facilities in friendly states in the region.

Being a resident and dominant power, India has long perceived the Indian Ocean as 'India's Ocean'. China's growing influence in the IOR has now become a serious concern for New Delhi. During the last decade, India has sought to modernize and

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strengthen its defence forces, especially the navy, to project power and safeguard its strategic interests in and beyond the IOR.

This paper examines the Sino-Indian security dilemma in the Indian Ocean and revisits the String of Pearls debate. The first section discusses the theoretical concept of security dilemma. The second part explores the Indian and Chinese strategic positions and highlights their strengths and vulnerabilities in the IOR. The third covers the debate regarding the String of Pearls strategy and finds that China is not in a position to sustain a so-called policy of Indian 'encirclement' in the Indian Ocean because of its strategic, technical, and logistical shortcomings. The study concludes that Sino-Indian security dilemma does exist in the Indian Ocean but it can be reduced by minimizing provocation on either side.

Security dilemma: a theoretical interpretation

The classic definition of security dilemma was first given by German scholar John H. Herz in 1951.¹ Herz describes the security dilemma² as a structural notion in which "the self-help attempts of states to look after their security needs tend, regardless of intention, to lead to rising insecurity for others as each interprets its own measures as defensive and measures of others as potentially threatening."³ Major events like the First and the Second World Wars and the origins and the end of the Cold War have been seen through the lens of security dilemma. By deploying the same concept, policies are being prescribed for recent challenges of international politics like arms race management, planning lasting peace for ethnic and religious conflicts, and avoiding a likely clash between the existing and emerging world powers in their pursuit for dominance.⁴

Security dilemma is linked with other theories and doctrines of international security. There are differences among structural realists over the concept of security dilemma though. For defensive realists like Kenneth Waltz, the concept of security dilemma is the theoretical linchpin. Waltz argues that the anarchic nature of the state system is at the heart of security dilemma. In the absence of a 'common government', each state is in charge of its own security and survival. States are suspicious of other states' intentions and as a result always try to maximize their own security, which leads to security dilemma.⁵ Defensive realists

further argue that in the face of a common threat, security dilemma often paves the way for states to switch from brief alliances to genuine cooperation. On the other hand, offensive realists, such as John Mearsheimer argue that security dilemma makes war inevitable and rational.⁶

Constructivists assert that alleviating security dilemma is one of the channels through which reshaping identity can re-establish anarchy.⁷ Constructivists like Alexander Wendt focus on the subjective element, contending that security dilemmas occur due to “intersubjective understandings where states assume the worst about each other’s intentions.”⁸

As explained above, security dilemma occurs due to states’ mutual suspicion of each other. Robert Jervis identifies two key variables for analyzing the security dilemma: the offence-defence balance; and the knack to differentiate between offensive and defensive postures. Using these two variables, he creates the following four possible strategic conditions under which a security dilemma will arise in differing degrees:

“[F]irst, when offensive and defensive behaviour are not distinguishable but offence has a strategic advantage, then the environment is ‘doubly dangerous’ and the security dilemma is very intense. Status quo states will behave in an aggressive manner and the possibility of an arms race will arise; second, where offensive and defensive behaviour are not distinguishable but defence has a strategic advantage, then the security dilemma will be intense. In this situation, a state might be able to increase its security without being a threat to other states and without endangering the security of other states; third, where offensive and defensive behaviour are distinguishable but offence has a strategic advantage, then the security dilemma is not intense. Although the environment is relative safe, offensive behaviour has an advantage that might result in aggression at some future time; and fourth, where offensive and defensive behaviour are distinguishable and defence has a strategic advantage, the environment is ‘doubly safe’ and the security dilemma has little or no intensity.”⁹

In this context, security dilemma does exist between India and China, and a strategic rivalry between them is imminent. Their mutual suspicion is a product of historical experiences, unsettled border disputes, and China’s close ties with Pakistan. Hence both the countries are in the process of military build-up and power projection in the region.

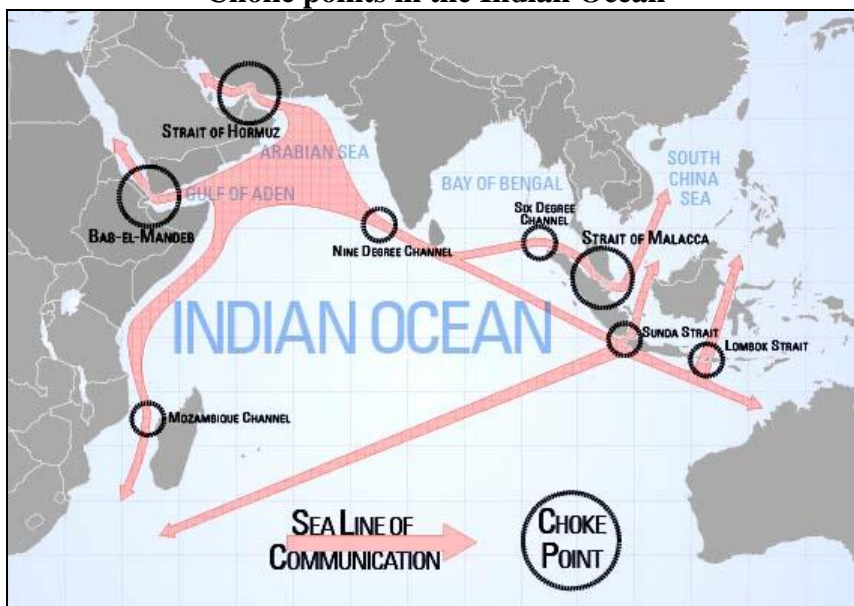
A number of authors have noted that tension between India and China presents a case of classic security dilemma.¹⁰ Competition in the IOR is just part of the whole picture. As C. Raja Mohan points out, the Sino-Indian rivalry has ‘spilled over’ into the maritime domain from being a traditionally continental competition.¹¹ The concept of security dilemma has gradually gained currency in political and academic debates. For instance, regarding maritime issues, Indian and Chinese political leaders talk of a Hormuz Dilemma or a Malacca Dilemma ‘to describe the vulnerability of their SLOCs across the Indian Ocean. The String of Pearls narrative also mirrors these perceptions.’¹²

The phrase is widely employed by its advocates to describe China’s mounting presence in the IOR, especially in the form of funding several ports on the coasts of Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. There is an apprehension among the Indian as well as some Western security circles regarding these ports, economic corridors, and railway links, and the geopolitical implications of China’s growing imprint in the region.

There has been much speculation and debate surrounding the legitimacy, extent, and potential intent behind the concept. However, as this paper will explain, the idea has been exaggerated.¹³ It is important to first take into account the Chinese and Indian strategic positions and their strengths and vulnerabilities in the Indian Ocean in light of the concept of security dilemma.

Understanding China’s security dilemma in the IOR

In recent years, China has initiated an active naval strategy geared towards trade, bases, ships, and advancement of naval capabilities. China’s rise in the IOR, and South and East China Seas has become a topical issue across the board. Energy security is the area of primary concern for China in the Indian Ocean. According to US Energy Information Administration (EIA), China became world’s largest net importer of petroleum and other liquids in 2013.¹⁴ Therefore, the security of the SLOCs stretching from China’s coastlines to the Indian Ocean holds exceptional strategic significance for Beijing (See Map 1).

Map 1**Choke points in the Indian Ocean**

Source: <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/mrdevlar/4922429758>>.

Around 42 per cent of China's oil imports pass through the Strait of Hormuz. The Strait of Malacca, the leading trade route between Indian and Pacific Oceans, serves like an energy life-line for China, through which 82 per cent of its oil imports are transited.¹⁵ It makes them vulnerable to interception by potentially adversarial countries, especially India—a purported Malacca Dilemma. New Delhi's hold over Andaman and Nicobar Islands gives it straight entry and potential choke point control of the northern approaches to the Malacca Strait. India's establishment of INS Baaz, a naval base in the southern part of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in 2012, is a case in point.¹⁶ Moreover, China's expanding trade and investment ventures in the IOR will result in higher strategic stakes in the region.¹⁷ Beijing's concerns are further aggravated considering India's enlarged focus on Indo-Pacific as enunciated in its latest maritime strategy and its growing presence in the SCS.

In order to address its Malacca Dilemma, China is trying to do the following:

- i. Diversify its energy transport routes through, for instance, Pakistan and Myanmar and building new oil and gas pipelines in Russia and Central Asia;¹⁸ and
- ii. Adopt a pragmatic expansion in the IOR.

China has been known for its 'soft diplomacy' in the IOR. However, owing to altering dynamics in the region, a new fillip is being witnessed in Beijing's maritime diplomacy, primarily with the regions bordering vital SLOCs. This is where the String of Pearls shibboleth comes in. Although China is modernizing its naval forces, its outreach in IOR remains limited.

Modernization of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)

A modernization process in the PLAN with a focus on transforming it into a 'blue water navy' began in the mid-1990s. However, significant pace in operationalizing as well as modernizing the PLAN during the last decade demonstrates China's altering maritime strategy with shifting economic and strategic realities in the region. China's first military strategy white paper of 2015 provides new guidelines for the PLAN:

"In line with the strategic requirement of offshore waters defense and open seas protection, the PLA Navy (PLAN) will gradually shift its focus from "offshore waters defense" to the combination of "offshore waters defense" with "open seas protection," and build a combined, multi-functional and efficient marine combat force structure. The PLAN will enhance its capabilities for strategic deterrence and counterattack, maritime maneuvers, joint operations at sea, comprehensive defense and comprehensive support... The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests."¹⁹

China has been integrating a variety of Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) systems and capabilities. These comprise not only weapons such as "anti-ship ballistic and cruise missiles (ASBMs), but also political warfare methods, including legal, public opinion, and psychological warfare techniques."²⁰

Under the process, the PLAN has endeavoured to improve both qualitatively and quantitatively. According to Pentagon's 2014 annual report to Congress about China's military and security developments, "China had 77 principal surface combatant ships,

more than 60 submarines, 55 large and medium amphibious ships, and about 85 missile-equipped small combatants.”²¹

China is expanding the geographic areas of operation for its submarines, and their length of deployment. It has also modified its manpower policies. The PLAN now holds exercises and deployments to enhance skills crucial for offshore defence. Such measures have amplified the PLAN's capacity to initiate anti-surface warfare (ASuW), naval air defence, and force projection missions. Nonetheless, the PLAN's Achilles' heel is its anti-submarine warfare capability. The PLAN seems to be aware of this failing and has increased the number of anti-submarine warfare (ASW) helicopters to dispel this paucity.²²

In its 2015 Annual Report to the US Congress, The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission observed: “Since it first sent a submarine to the Indian Ocean in late 2013, the PLA Navy has conducted at least three more Indian Ocean submarine patrols....The PLA Navy's increasing activities far from China's shores reflect China's growing capability and willingness to use its military to protect its overseas economic assets and expatriate population.”²³ India is particularly concerned over China's deployment of attack submarines in the Indian Ocean.²⁴

China has adopted an innovative and bold approach towards conducting operations against non-traditional security threats like piracy. On the one hand, it conducts multilateral operations in conjunction with the US and its NATO, EU, and coalition allies where it sits well with Chinese interests; on the other hand, it acts unilaterally, especially at its strategically vital choke points like the Horn of Africa.²⁵ Besides, the PLAN has maintained its anti-piracy presence in the Gulf of Aden since 2008.

Over the years, China has substantially minimized dependence of its armed forces on foreign countries. It has created a domestic defence industrial base by integrating Chinese arms manufacturers with civilian firms and establishing quality control. This is an area where India lags behind China. Today, China's naval potential substantially exceeds India's both in quantitative and qualitative terms.

While the PLAN's doctrine has clearly evolved, mounting apprehension in the Western and Indian security circles regarding its increased presence in the IOR is overstated for two reasons:

- i. As has been observed in a 2015 report by the US Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), for now and the years ahead, “Taiwan and the Near Seas (Yellow, East, and South China Seas) will remain the ‘primary focus’ of China.”²⁶ “The relatively-modest 13 per cent post-2009 growth in the number of submarines, major surface combatants, amphibious ships, and missile patrol crafts; as well as the nature of ships produced suggests continued Near Seas focus.”²⁷
- ii. China’s force projection capabilities are likely to remain limited in the IOR. Despite the PLAN’s modernization in recent years, it still lacks sophisticated technical, logistical, and strategic expertise to project power in the IOR. For instance, the PLAN’s sole aircraft carrier, *Liaoning* (commissioned in 2012), would become fully operational after a few years, and even then it would offer relatively limited combat capability.²⁸ Although the PLAN has recently started engaging in training and anti-piracy activities in distant seas, it largely lacks the experience in operating beyond coastal waters. China faces geographical constraints (long distances from Chinese ports and airbases) and lack of logistical backup and deployment facilities for the Chinese vessels through the Indian Ocean choke points.²⁹

China’s clout in the IOR

Despite its limitations, China has sought an active economic and diplomatic policy in the IOR. Apart from its longstanding ties with Pakistan, China’s history of involvement and influence in South Asia has remained confined in contrast to India. Over the past decade, however, China has instituted a significant economic presence throughout the region, fashioning strong ties with states like Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka through trade, diplomacy, aid, and investment.³⁰ Under the new ‘One Belt One Road’ vision, China has attempted to build alternative sea and land routes to increase its economic clout in

neighbouring countries. It is developing alternative overland energy transport networks from southern and western China to the Indian Ocean through Pakistan and Myanmar.³¹

China's most recent economic commitment to Pakistan is \$46 billion worth China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), with the port of Gwadar at its centre. The infrastructure development and assistance plan thus symbolizes an intensification of the long-lasting relationship. The China-Sri Lanka 'strategic cooperative partnership' in 2013 also demonstrated a new shift in the relationship. Since 2005, China's exports to Sri Lanka have "quadrupled to close to \$4 billion, coming closer to Indian levels."³² China has invested extensively in Sri Lanka's infrastructure development as well. Negotiations on a Free Trade Agreement are also on track between the two countries.³³ China has intensified economic ties with Maldives and Mauritius, both having long-standing links with India. China is now a leading investor in Mauritius.³⁴

Myanmar holds vital strategic value for China, potentially for keeping India off balance in the north-eastern part of the Indian Ocean. The existing Sino-Myanmar relationship is primarily economic; it certainly has a significant security component though. Under its 'national bridgehead strategy', China has made tangible progress in securing entry into the Indian Ocean through Myanmar. This approach focuses on promoting trade and transportation links between China and the Indian Ocean. The Yunnan-Yangon Irrawaddy road/rail/river corridor, and the recently completed oil and gas pipelines between the new port of Kyaukpyu (Myanmar) and Yunnan province in China are cases in point.³⁵

Kyaukpyu Port holds particular significance for China because the link can minimize dependence on the Strait of Malacca. Nevertheless, to some analysts, these alternative routes would become irrelevant if Chinese tankers are intercepted in the Strait of Hormuz, the Arabian Sea, or the Suez Canal. Besides, the proposed oil pipelines would also become vulnerable.³⁶

Southeast Asia exemplifies China's economic strength in the IOR. Beijing has adopted an intensive strategy of developing trade relations with member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). "A manufacturing hub and an important source of capital, China has the potential to buoy the

ASEAN economies.”³⁷ China’s increasing economic and diplomatic drive in the region is being closely observed by India.

India’s engagement with ASEAN has increased over the past two decades, chiefly under the ‘Look East Policy’. The Modi government renamed the policy ‘Act East’ to indicate an increased sense of commitment, connectivity, trade and infrastructure investment, and greater security cooperation with ASEAN.³⁸

Understanding India’s security dilemma in the IOR

By virtue of its size, geographic location, and economic and military potential, India is the predominant power in the IOR. India’s outlook of the IOR can be put as a sense of ‘crisis and destiny’. Regarding the sense of crisis, most Indian politicians and strategists believe that Indian Ocean and India’s national security are intertwined. As for destiny, India’s exclusive geographic setting has fomented India’s aspiration to look at and control the Ocean as India’s Ocean.³⁹ Although envisaged as a maritime power by its early leaders, India’s foreign policy and defence outlook remained land-centric for many years. This was primarily because throughout history, land-based threats dominated India’s major external security concerns. Nevertheless, during the last two decades, mounting reliance on foreign energy sources to stimulate its economic growth has impressed upon successive Indian governments to push for an enlarged focus on the Indian Ocean.⁴⁰

With its gradual ascension as a resident power, India has tried to legitimize its presence in the IOR. During the last decade, statements given by prominent Indian leaders on various occasions strongly emphasize India’s dominant role in the region. For instance, in 2009, former prime minister Dr. Manmohan Singh stressed, “there can thus be no doubt that the Indian Navy must be the most important maritime power in this region.”⁴¹ In 2010, former foreign secretary Nirupama Rao said, “India and the Indian Ocean are inseparable.”⁴² Ex-defence minister A.K. Antony stated on the occasion of the 2012 Naval Chiefs Conference, “India’s strategic location in the Indian Ocean and the professional capability of our Navy bestows upon us a natural ability to play a leading role in ensuring peace and stability in the Indian Ocean Region.”⁴³

Indian expectations are underscored by geopolitical considerations in which one persistent contextual feature in its maritime discourse is to accentuate the territorial benefits enjoyed by India in the IOR. These concerns and expectations were made public in a series of publications by the Indian Navy including Maritime Military Strategy for India 1989–2014 (1998), Indian Maritime Doctrine (2004), Navy's Maritime Capability Perspective Plan (2005), India's Maritime Military Strategy (2007),⁴⁴ and India's Maritime Doctrine (2009).⁴⁵

India's Maritime Military Strategy 2007 can be termed as the leading directive among the aforementioned documents as it provided "an insight and rationale for the resurgence of India's maritime military power."⁴⁶ It pivoted around the idea of 'power projection' as a feature of India's naval diplomacy. In a reference primarily to China, it called for a crucial need to wean the littoral states of its immediate neighbourhood away from the increasingly omnipresent influence of states hostile to Indian interests.⁴⁷ However, despite all its merits, the strategy lacked a concrete plan of action for achieving its goals in the competitive maritime sphere.⁴⁸

India's evolving maritime doctrine

With rapidly changing security dynamics in the IOR, India's maritime strategy has evolved over the years. Marking a decisive break from New Delhi's decades-old foreign policy, the current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has placed maritime issues on India's priority agenda. He has embarked upon an active maritime diplomacy by fostering stronger diplomatic, economic, and security links with the IOR littoral. These measures are aimed at strengthening the Indian economy, protecting India's exclusive economic zones (EEZs), instituting the country as a harbinger of regional growth, and ebbing China's growing appeal and expanding India's influence in the region simultaneously without relying exclusively on geographic advantage.

Indian Prime Minister's March 2015 visit to the Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka displayed an active foreign policy intent that the Indian Ocean littoral is at the "top of [New Delhi's] policy priorities."⁴⁹ During the visit, Prime Minister Modi laid out the

following five-fold framework for India's maritime engagement with the Indian Ocean littoral:⁵⁰

First, New Delhi will put greater emphasis on showing a resolve to do whatever may be necessary to secure India's mainland and island territories and defend its maritime interests.⁵¹

Second, India will continue to strengthen security cooperation with regional partners like Seychelles, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, and Maldives. Prime Minister Modi's recent offer to Seychelles and Mauritius of a broad range of military and civilian assistance suggests an increasing Indian footprint in the region. In Seychelles, Modi announced gifting another Dornier aircraft to the island nation. Four agreements were subsequently signed. These included "agreements on cooperation in hydrography, renewable energy, infrastructure development, and the sale of navigation and electronic navigational charts." The agreement to develop infrastructure on Assumption Island holds much significance as it provides an opportunity to New Delhi for positioning its strategic assets in the south-western Indian Ocean. Modi also launched a Coastal Surveillance Radar Project there.⁵² In Mauritius, Modi attended the commissioning of the Indian-made offshore patrol vessel Barracuda, illustrating his dedication to maritime capacity-building in small island republics. He also proposed assistance in developing the Agalega Islands to develop infrastructure for connectivity.⁵³ Modi's trip to Sri Lanka, the first in 28 years by an Indian PM, was seen by many as an attempt to offset Beijing's growing influence in Colombo. The two countries signed four bilateral agreements during the visit.⁵⁴

Third, Prime Minister Modi will strive to constitute multilateral cooperative maritime security in the Indian Ocean with India at the core. After Maldives and Sri Lanka, India plans to incorporate more strategically important littoral states to join its trilateral security initiative. According to C. Raja Mohan, India's access to strategic facilities in Seychelles and Mauritius marks a major departure from its traditional opposition to foreign military bases. They point towards the likelihood of an extended Indian strategic influence in the littoral.⁵⁵

Fourth, the Modi Government will work towards sustainable economic development in the IOR spearheaded by

India. Modi announced a joint working group to expand cooperation on the ‘blue economy’ wherein by understanding the ecology and resources, littoral states would be able to harness the ocean in a sustainable manner.⁵⁶

Fifth, Prime Minister Modi will carry out an Indian Ocean policy, which will include engaging with major powers in the IOR.⁵⁷ Its reflection was seen in January 2015 when India and the US announced renewal of their defence framework agreement and signed a broader framework for expanding cooperation in the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific.⁵⁸

Incorporating Modi’s framework into India’s maritime strategy of 2015

India released its latest maritime strategy in October 2015 titled *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*,⁵⁹ which is a revised and updated version of the 2007 maritime strategy. Modi’s five-fold framework and his increased focus on deepening relationships with ASEAN countries like Vietnam, Philippines, and Myanmar are in line with the current maritime strategy. The strategy reflects the key determinants of the altering security dynamics in the IOR and exhibits a fresh outlook on India’s maritime security requirements. It refers to “three salient maritime developments that have inspired the revision. The evolution of a new global construct of Indo-Pacific, Rise of non-traditional security threats in Indian Ocean region such as the 26/11 terror attack in Mumbai and India’s clearer recognition of maritime security, with increased engagement of the IOR littorals.”⁶⁰

Reviewing the change in India’s maritime strategy, Baruah writes:

“The fact that there has been a shift in India’s maritime strategy and policies was made clear through the navy’s engagement under the Modi government. There was, however, no document per se spelling out this shift. The 2015 maritime strategy not only formalizes the intent of the Indian navy, it also takes a bold tone in narrating the same... Be it through the Joint Strategic Vision with the United States, Japan’s inclusion into the MALABAR exercises, new bilateral exercises with Japan, Indonesia, and Australia, or re-engaging with the island nations of the IOR and South Pacific, there is a clear

message that India is willing to play a larger role in the unfolding security architecture in the region.”⁶¹

Modernization of Indian Navy

During the last few years, Indian Navy, the world’s fifth largest, has embarked upon a massive modernization programme, which seeks greater power projection in the IOR and SCS. Under the modernization process, the country’s naval force aims to turn itself into a blue water navy. India’s defence budgets from 2012 to 2016 provide a great deal of information about the modernization process in the Indian Navy and Air Force.⁶² The defence budget 2015-16 specifically demonstrates that the Modi government has endeavoured to kick-start the dilapidated domestic defence industry by raising the foreign investment limit to 49 per cent.⁶³

An article in *Foreign Policy* observed that India was planning to invest almost \$45 billion on 103 new warships, including destroyers and nuclear submarines over the next 20 years. In contrast, China’s outlay over the same period was expected to be around \$25 billion for 135 vessels.⁶⁴ Chietigj Bajpae, an expert on Indian military, notes that India has plans for the development of a 160-plus-ship navy, including three aircraft carrier battle groups by 2022. More than 40 warships and submarines are on order or under construction at the country’s three major shipyards. The Indian government’s approval of more than \$16 billion in February 2015 was a step in the same direction. The process includes new stealth destroyers, anti-submarine corvettes, and stealth frigates. These vessels will complement and in some cases replace the country’s ageing destroyers.⁶⁵

For upgrading its aircraft carriers, India procured the *INS Vikramaditya* from Russia in 2013 and formally inducted it in the navy in June 2014. India’s first home-made carrier the *INS Vikrant* is under construction and is expected to be inducted by 2018-19. “Plans for the development of the larger *INS Vishal* as part of the indigenous aircraft carrier-II (IAC-II) project” are underway.⁶⁶

India is boosting its expeditionary capabilities and security relationships throughout the IOR. Apart from the Indian Ocean island states, New Delhi has also invested in building relationships in and out of the Indian Ocean via its unilateral deployments

through cooperation with ‘choke point’ nations around the straits of Hormuz, Malacca, and Bab-el-Mandeb, as well as the Cape of Good Hope.⁶⁷

Around 63 per cent of India’s total oil imports pass through the Strait of Hormuz. It has been actively involved in unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral exercises with other states in the Indian Ocean.⁶⁸ For instance, in February 2016, India conducted the fourth India-Myanmar Coordinated Patrol naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal region.⁶⁹ In order to augment naval surveillance outreach and maritime domain awareness (MDA) throughout the IOR, Indian Navy is engaged in establishing “operational turnaround bases, forward-operating bases, and naval air enclaves” therein.⁷⁰ The US policy of ‘Pivot to Asia’, Indo-US strategic partnership, and regular joint naval exercises are also meant to contain China’s rise in the region.

To complement the growing fleet of vessels, the Indian Navy is also procuring MiG-29K multirole aircraft and *Kamov*-28 and 31 helicopters to deploy from its aircraft carriers. It has also built “nuclear-capable submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM), land-attack cruise missiles, and a submarine-launched supersonic missile that modifies its *BrahMos* cruise missile.”⁷¹ In March 2016, the Indian navy, for the first time, deployed one of its advanced maritime reconnaissance aircraft (Boeing P-8I) to Seychelles for surveillance of the island nation’s EEZs. This deployment reflected India’s profound maritime engagement in the IOR as well as a symbolic gesture of India being a credible security provider to the smaller states in the region.⁷²

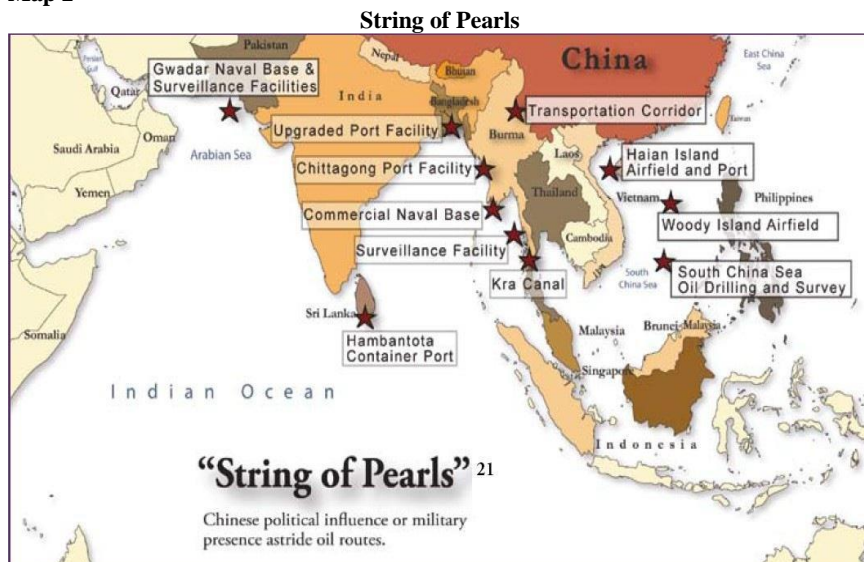
All these measures are meant to transform the Indian Navy into ‘a brand new multi-dimensional navy’ with ‘reach and sustainability’.⁷³ With India’s rise as a leading trade and resource-consuming power and China’s growing influence in the region, India stands resolute to guard its EEZs and expand its maritime influence beyond its littoral region.

The String of Pearls strategy

The term String of Pearls has been derived from Booz-Allen’s 2005 report titled ‘Energy Futures in Asia’, and is widely taken as an analytical trope by some analysts to describe China’s purported plan to institute military facilities and intelligence

stations all over littoral South Asia. Beijing has established closer diplomatic relations with many Indian Ocean nations during the last decade. Besides multi-million dollar aid, trade, and defence pacts in capitals across the region, China has financed commercial ports in Bangladesh (Chittagong), Myanmar (Sittwe and Kyaukpyu), Pakistan (Gwadar), and Sri Lanka (Hambantota and Colombo). Advocates of this narrative feel that owing to the PLAN's large-scale naval modernization programme, the apparently trade-oriented ports will one day be upgraded into permanent naval bases. It is believed that in case of a conflict, such 'encirclement' through bases might enable Beijing to threaten India's security, put global sea lanes at risk, and challenge US regional maritime superiority.⁷⁴

Map 2



Source: <<http://csis.org/publication/issues-insights-vol-14-no-7-revisiting-chinas-string-pearls-strategy>>.

Gwadar Port

The most talked about of the 'Pearls' is the warm water deep-sea port of Gwadar in Pakistan. The recently concluded CPEC project is a blend of roads, railway lines, and pipelines that will connect Beijing's concerned projects at Gwadar Port—600 km off the southern tip of the Strait of Hormuz—with Kashgar in

China's Xinjiang province. The project would establish an alternative energy supply route for China to reach the Middle East as well as Africa and Europe, thus minimizing Beijing's strategic reliance on the Strait of Malacca. China plans to transform Gwadar into a free-trade zone at the completion of CPEC.⁷⁵

To offset Chinese presence at Gwadar, India is investing in Chabahar Port in Iran, which is located about 72 km west of Gwadar Port. The port holds strategic significance for India as it provides it with a sea-land entry into Afghanistan and Central Asian countries, circumventing Pakistan. The recent lifting of sanctions on Iran will also change the regional dynamics. Investment in the port will yield immediate strategic gains for India. Apart from providing access to Iran's and Central Asia's oil and gas reserves, Chabahar Port will help India meet its maximum trade potential with Central Asian countries, where regional players like China and Russia have already established strong economic linkages.⁷⁶

In May 2015, New Delhi and Tehran signed a memorandum of understanding worth \$195 million to secure India's contribution in construction and development of the Chabahar Port. In February 2016, India approved a \$150 million project to develop the port.⁷⁷

The port project has its limitations though. Afghanistan lacks skilled labour and necessary infrastructure required for connectivity and exploitation of resources. Its strategic road corridors, including the Ring Road connecting Afghanistan with Chabahar and funded by India, have yet to be completed.⁷⁸ If these irritants are ironed out, the port could provide India an alternate trade route to the Persian Gulf, increasing China's strategic dilemma.

Kyaukpyu Port

China's investment in ports in Myanmar has garnered much speculation during the last few years. It has made huge investments in Kyaukpyu Port in Rakhine State on the Bay of Bengal, and is involved in joint oil and gas pipeline ventures with the Myanmar government. The first gas pipeline connects Kyaukpyu to Kunming (China) and was completed in 2013. China would bypass the Malacca Strait through the pipeline and tap directly into

Myanmar's offshore gas fields. The second project is an oil pipeline starting from Madaya Island in Kyaukpadaung and transiting to China's Kunming city in Yunnan province. This oil pipeline would serve as a conduit for Beijing's oil imports from West Asia and Africa.⁷⁹

China has remained one of the chief partners of Myanmar in the renovation and expansion of several ports on the Bay of Bengal. One of them is the Sittoung Seaport project, which India perceived as part of the 'Strings'.⁸⁰ In 2008, however, such claims were rendered groundless when India, under its 'Look East Policy' (now 'Act East' Policy), formalized a deal to use Sittoung Port (titled Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project) as a link to India's northeast. The plan is expected to improve India's economic linkages with Myanmar and the rest of Southeast Asia.⁸¹

Myanmar's Great Coco Island was also seen as China's primary signals intelligence facility meant to monitor India's naval base at Port Blair in the Andaman Islands and to keep tabs on commercial traffic through the Malacca Strait. In 2005, such claims were debunked when on-site inspections by the Indian Navy, on the invitation of the Myanmar government, proved that no Chinese facility or base on the islands or anywhere in Myanmar existed. The same holds good to-date.⁸²

During the last five years, investment climate in Myanmar soured for China when former president Thein Sein shifted his focus on Western and other Asian investments. India, under its 'Act East' policy, is all set to increase its outreach in Myanmar. The changed political structure in Myanmar, post-2015 election, would play a pivotal role in shaping the future trajectory of India-Myanmar and Sino-Myanmar relations.

Hambantota Port

China's increased focus on infrastructure and development projects in Sri Lanka such as Hambantota and Colombo ports, as well as regular docking of Beijing's submarines at Colombo Port for 're-fuelling and refreshment' are unnerving India.⁸³ Moreover, China is the only country to which Sri Lanka has granted the right to use its EEZ. The Hambantota Port project is funded by China since 2008 with the "aim to construct a harbor, two cargo

terminals, a repair yard, and an oil tank farm/bunkering system.”⁸⁴ Once completed, the port will be the largest in South Asia.

The proximity of the port to Indian sea lanes is perceived in New Delhi as a measure by China to ‘encircle’ India. The fact of the matter is that Sri Lanka had earlier offered the project to India. New Delhi declined Colombo’s offer as it was already developing trans-shipment trade ports at Vizhinjam, Cochin, and Tuticorin in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, which would have the capacity to compete with Sri Lankan ports.⁸⁵ India enjoys considerable economic and political clout in Sri Lanka which presumably will grow in the coming years.

Chittagong Port

In Bangladesh, China has invested in the modernization of the deep-sea port of Chittagong in the Bay of Bengal. Under the plan, the port will be connected with China’s south-western region of Yunnan through rail and road networks.⁸⁶

Beijing’s growing military and economic ties with Dhaka have ruffled India’s feathers. Indian trepidation regarding the Chittagong Port seems uncalled for though. During Prime Minister Modi’s visit to Bangladesh in June 2015, an agreement, inter alia, between the two countries was signed that granted Indian cargo vessels use of China-financed Chittagong and Mongla ports.⁸⁷ Sagar Island, near the India-Bangladesh border, is now India’s focus for a deep sea port, with an easy access to the Bay of Bengal. India is instituting ‘missile batteries and radar surveillance’ on the island.⁸⁸ It has expressed interest in developing Payra deep sea port, which is on the south-western corner of Bangladesh, close to Chittagong and much closer to the Indian coastline.⁸⁹

Analyzing the potential of the String of Pearls strategy

The exponents of the String of Pearls theory often refer to maritime strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan’s argument that China, after erecting a blue-water navy, will set up forward bases with strong geographical positions to project power and protect China’s economic and national interests.⁹⁰ The reality, nonetheless, is that Mahanian idea of naval bases has been misunderstood. Analysts are sceptical of the idea that China would seek naval bases in the IOR for the following reasons:

First, the positioning of purported ‘Pearls’ holds value as far as China’s energy and trade interests are concerned. However, they are unsuitable for use as naval bases primarily due to their proximity to India, which possesses a variety of aircraft like modern Su-30s and Mirage 2000s covering all of the String of Pearls sites.⁹¹ As Daniel Kostecka, a China analyst with the US Navy observes:

“Converting these facilities into naval bases would require billions of dollars’ worth of military equipment and infrastructure in order to ensure their viability in wartime. Even then, the exposed position of these facilities makes their wartime utility dubious against an enemy equipped with long-range precision strike capability.”⁹²

Second, a fortified naval presence through the deployment of forces and resources would be the basic prerequisite to transform the ‘Pearls’ into naval facilities. As has been discussed earlier, despite recent advancements, the PLAN is still deficient in sophisticated strategic, technical, and logistical expertise.⁹³ China’s naval force structure would have to be much more superior and larger than it is now to address the PLAN’s projected Indian Ocean drive.

Third, an idea of a purported Chinese String of Pearls cannot materialize instantly. These are long-term ventures, providing ample time to any adversary to prepare and respond.⁹⁴ A 2015 report titled *Not An Idea We Have to Shun: Chinese Overseas Basing Requirements for the Twenty First Century* by the US National Defence University viewed the so-called String of Pearls agenda of surreptitious access to Chinese-backed commercial ports as insufficient to support a forceful, “combat-oriented Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean.” The distances between China’s home ports and the PLAN ships stationed at the String of Pearls facilities would make it hard for China to defend its home waters and engage in major combat operations in the IOR simultaneously.⁹⁵

Fourth, almost all the ‘Pearls’ lack physical features necessary to utilize a facility for major combat operations. The authors of the 2015 NDU report examined the set of standards used by the US Department of Defence and Department of Transportation to distinguish military port facilities (see Table 1).⁹⁶

Table 1

DOD port requirements applied to the String of Pearls

Requirements	Gwadar		Hambantota		Chittagong		Coco Islands	
	2012	2035	2012	2035	2012	2035	2012	2035
Recommended infrastructure								
Three berthing spaces 1,000 linear feet each		X		X	X	X		
Minimum water depth of 35 feet	X	X	X	X				
30–45 acres of open storage	X	X		X	X	X		
Four rail offloading spurs of 1,000 feet of straight track each								
Four rail/truck end ramps					X	X		
Gatehouse/security	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Access to port-owned interchange yard to support switching two trains per day					X	X		
Suitable area to land/service helos (~5 acres)	X	X		X	X	X		
Two container handlers	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Adequate interior roadways to port facilities		X		X	X	X		
Office space with adequate utilities and communication service	X	X	X	X				
Processing area for 30 trucks		X			X	X		
Wash rack that meets USDA requirements								
<i>Terminal Access</i>								
Close proximity (<10 miles) to interstate highway system		X		X	X	X		
Access to at least one major commercial rail carrier		X		X	X	X		
Water channel access width of 500 feet and depth of 35 feet	X	X		X	X	X		
Access to commercial rail interchange yard (if port-owned facilities are inadequate)		X		X	X	X		

Source: <<http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-7.pdf>>.

The analysis suggests that barring the Chittagong Port in Bangladesh, all the ‘Pearls’ do not fulfil the minimal standards projected by DOD to support major combat operations. Even if Gwadar and Hambantota achieve the DOD criteria in future, their proximity to India would make them highly vulnerable.⁹⁷

Fifth, China has traditionally followed its approach of non-interference. Shunning this principle would tarnish China’s image of a power believing in ‘peaceful rise’. It would legitimize other countries’ interference in its internal affairs⁹⁸ and would threaten China’s global economic interests. Besides, in the presence of two

strategic powers, the US and India, it is unlikely that China would become a dominant military force in the region.

‘Places not bases’ for China

Several analysts⁹⁹ view a policy of ‘places not bases’ at friendly ports as a practical Chinese arrangement in the region. The ‘places’ would involve access to flexible logistics support arrangements (ports, airports, replenishment centres etc.) by one country to another on temporary basis. That would give the PLAN access to critical infrastructure in times of emergency. A non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO) during the Libyan crisis in 2011 exposed the logistical challenges faced by China during expeditionary activities. The ‘places’ would thus enable the PLAN to overcome the lack of overseas shore-based supply points that severely limits its capability to sustain forces far from its shores during NEOs or anti-piracy operations. Drawing on the US experience in Singapore and elsewhere, the PLAN has used the Port of Aden in Yemen, the Port of Salalah in Oman, the Port of Karachi in Pakistan, and the Port of Djibouti in Djibouti during its anti-piracy missions.¹⁰⁰ Recently, China and Djibouti have reached a consensus on building logistical facilities in the African state for Chinese military.¹⁰¹ Such efforts reveal a few things about how China plans to address the PLAN’s logistical challenges:

“A hybrid logistics support network or ‘Dual Use Logistics Facility Model’ that mixes commercial and military facilities is entirely workable for such missions. This basing model also emphasizes commercial contracts to support a Chinese military facility, cooperative development and use of a partner military’s logistics support capabilities, and continued positive economic and political engagement with the host nation.”¹⁰²

In short, there is little evidence to back the queer idea that China would pursue a String of Pearls strategy in the IOR. The narrative among the Indian and Western security circles reveals more about their insecurities than actual Chinese strategic intentions.

Conclusion

Amongst all maritime issues, the most infuriating one for India is China’s non-acceptance of Indian supremacy in the IOR

and its claim to great power status. Hence the relationship between them remains volatile, antagonistic, and tense. India's immediate objective in the Indian Ocean is to counter China's rise in the IOR, to secure and control India's EEZs, and to protect its strategic and commercial interests. Many in New Delhi believe that India and China would continue to compete and even clash in the Indo-Pacific strategic and maritime spheres.¹⁰³ The putative String of Pearls theory also reflects India's security dilemma vis-à-vis China.

Similarly, China's increased efforts to project power in the IOR and its strengthening relations with vital littoral states in the region represent China's security dilemma rooted in the desire to protect its SLOCs in the region.

Sino-Indian security dilemma has the potential to spread beyond the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. India has, therefore, started developing its capabilities at and around the choke points, aligning itself with the US, projecting its presence near the Strait of Malacca, and increasing involvement in the SCS. It has been very supportive of ASEAN countries having territorial disputes with China like Vietnam and Philippines. India intends to establish a naval base in Vietnam too.¹⁰⁴

Strategically, India has a natural advantage ('interior lines') in the Indian Ocean and China has corresponding disadvantage ('exterior lines').¹⁰⁵ Similarly, China can ill-afford to enforce easy blockade of the Strait of Hormuz because it will not be possible for it to get its oil sailed freely past India and through Malacca Strait. It would benefit China if it succeeds in minimizing provocation of India in the Indian Ocean and use its resources where it possesses strategic advantage. India, on the other hand, is beset with the challenge of how it will maintain its geographic advantage in the Indian Ocean without provoking China.¹⁰⁶

It can be concluded in light of the categorization used by Robert Jervis in understanding the security dilemma that the strategic environment in the Indian Ocean is 'doubly dangerous' and there is ample scope for an intense security dilemma between India and China. Since protection of trade and SLOCs are the key maritime security concerns in the Indian Ocean, discrimination between offensive and defensive build-ups by India and China would be difficult. As a matter of fact, the behaviour of India and

China depicts an intense security dilemma because each acts at the expense of the other.¹⁰⁷

Some scholars are of the firm view that the basic strategic choice India will face in the Indian Ocean is whether to limit Chinese maritime presence or facilitate its role as a stakeholder in the Indian Ocean. While some have suggested that a practicable way out could be that India, as a resident power in the Indian Ocean, works with China and the US to hammer out ways and means to accommodate the legitimate interests of all stakeholders. To them, this will help reduce the risks of strategic rivalry in the Indian Ocean. China is reported to have already signalled its openness to discussion about a cooperative mechanism on sea lanes in the Indian Ocean. The January 2012 agreement between China, India, and Japan for coordinating naval anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden is indicative of their willingness to encourage maritime security cooperation.¹⁰⁸ However, symbolic gestures like cooperation in anti-piracy activities cannot be taken as mainstay of overcoming the security dilemma arising out of traditional threats posed by the Sino-Indian strategic interests in the Indian Ocean.

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- ¹⁰⁸ Brewster, “India’s Ocean...,” *op.cit.*, p.195.