

# **China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean and India's Concerns**

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## **Abstract**

The Indian Ocean has turned out as the significant arena between India and China. The two regional powers have made many advances in the region to assert influence in the ocean, including deep-water port construction in littoral states and military patrols. At the same time, the presence of several non-traditional security issues in the IOR presents considerable opportunities for India and China to collaborate. However, China's efforts to expand its commercial maritime footprint, cultivate deeper relationships, and offset pressures produced by natural choke spots in the IOR create tensions between the littorals of the IOR, particularly India. In this backdrop, the paper attempts to examine China's enhanced presence in the Indian Ocean, along with addressing India's concerns.

## **Introduction**

In contemporary times, the Indian Ocean is gaining geopolitical importance due to its vast marine basin for maritime trade, energy supply and maritime security, along with other traditional and non-traditional concerns. In terms of economics, security and strategic relevance, it has developed as a vital maritime space in the region of Indo-Pacific. The Indian Ocean's geopolitical importance in the current century is based on the trade and transportation of energy resources. It has played a prominent role both at the political and economic levels as a strategic link between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, and is broadly referred to as the 'world's energy super highway'. It transports the most tonnage of commodities, with more than 3/4 of the cargo coming from outside the region. With such a huge transport system in place, energy resources are the major strategic resources that power globalisation and economic progress in the Indo-Pacific littorals. As a result, as economic interdependence and global distribution have interwoven supply chains and markets, safeguarding supply chains and energy supplies is critical.

In general, the significance of the oceans has further increased in order to supplement depleting natural resources. Maritime security in the Indian Ocean was largely built on the Mahanian Paradigm's emphasis on Sea Denial methods/ Sea Control. The challenge at hand was how to project power from the land to the sea. However, the post-Cold War era has seen a reversal of the naval approach to the littoral, as it moves from the sea to the land (Neetika 2018). Besides, Professor Geoffrey Till proposes four fundamental and interconnected characteristics of sea power, including sea as a channel for trade, the sea as a resource in terms of what exists within as well as beneath its waters, the sea as a medium for cultural and informational interchange and lastly, but perhaps most crucially, the sea as a medium for dominance (Till 2018). The Indian Ocean possesses all of these characteristics, which has resulted in its growing geopolitical importance in world affairs.

The Indian Ocean has an important geostrategic feature since it serves as a communication hub not just for the countries that border it, but also for the other countries in the world. It also holds huge energy reserves and supports the transportation of this maritime trade and energy. It transports half of the world's container ships, a third of bulk cargo traffic, and two-thirds of global oil exports. It connects trade routes and controls important sea lanes, serving as a lifeline for the global trade and economy (Rooyen 2011). It also features a huge number of world maritime choke points, which means that sea transport and/or aviation routes that are vital to the welfare of a particular state or set of states are at risk of being closed, or at the very least restricted, at these places. The Straits of Malacca, the Cape Sea Route, the Straits of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandab in the Gulf of Aden, the Sunda Straits and the Mozambique Channel are among them. In addition, through other key IOR chokepoints, especially the Straits of Malacca and Hormuz, approximately 32.2 million barrels of petrol and crude oil are transported per day i.e., more than 50 percent of the world's maritime oil trade. Moreover, nearly 40 percent of the global offshore petroleum is produced in IOR (Karim 2017).

## **Significance of Indian Ocean for India and China**

The Indian Ocean has occupied a significant strategic importance for both India and China. Both the countries are dependent on sea lines of communication (SLOC) through the Indian Ocean for free movement of trade and secure energy routes in order to ensure their continued economic growth. For China, the region is significant due to its economic stakes and energy security interests as 82 per cent of its energy requirements i.e., oil and gas pass through it. Besides, 33 per cent of China's trade, worth nearly \$300 billion is shipped through the Indian Ocean annually. For India, 77 per cent of its trade transits through the Indian Ocean (Sokinda 2015). Moreover, as the largest South

Asian country and the leading regional military power, India has natural desire to project its power as well as maintain dominance in the Indian Ocean Region in order to uphold its global status and maintain economic and military security. On the other hand, China has gradually enhanced its presence in the IOR in order to counter potential threats of supply disruptions and potential distortions (Weimar 2013).

India enjoys a unique geographical location in the IOR than any other country and intends to seek little dominance if not absolute in the region (Lou 2012). Besides, it perceives the presence of any extra-regional naval powers as essentially illegitimate particularly China. As Donald Berlin (2006) points out that “India considers the Indian Ocean as its backyard and deems it both natural and desirable that India function as, eventually, the leader and the predominant influence in this region-the world’s only region and ocean named after a single state”. Also, dominating the IOR reflects India’s desire to be treated as a major power. This is reflecting in New Delhi’s claims of been seen as a ‘net security provider’ to its region. As India’s former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2009 said that India has “sought to assume our responsibility for stability in the Indian Ocean Region. We are well positioned, therefore, to become a net provider of security in our immediate region and beyond” (Mukherjee 2014).

On the other hand, China is highly concerned about the protection of its SLOC across the Indian Ocean as these are highly vulnerable to threats from both state and non-state actors. The policy makers in China believe that these vulnerabilities can be used by an adversary as a bargaining chip in the context of a wider dispute (Brewster 2016). As a consequence, China expanded its naval presence in the IOR as well as started developmental activities in IOR littoral sates including ports, pipelines, highways and airports (Panda 2014). Such developments in the recent past indicates China’s quest for creating a permanent maritime-strategic presence in the IOR (Khurana 2014). As against this, the growing presence of China in the IOR is seen as a potential matter of concern for New Delhi as Indian Ocean attributes a special importance for India’s national security. In this context, India’s former Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao on 19 November, 2010 stated that “India and the Indian Ocean are inseparable. In the midst of the third largest ocean in the world, India’s location is in many ways her destiny. That is not just a statement regarding a fact of geography but of deeper civilizational, historical, cultural, economic, and political linkages that have been forged between India and the Ocean that bears its name” (Government of India 2010).

#### **China’s enhancing presence in the Indian Ocean and India’s Concerns**

The Indian Ocean Region has become a significant maritime arena for China as energy resources from this region have fuelled China’s economic expansion, and will continue to be a vital source for the foreseeable future. The unrestricted flow of seaborne traffic, much of which passes through the Indian Ocean shipping lanes, is thus critical to China’s rise as a trading power. As a result, China has recently emphasised the importance of the Indian Ocean in numerous fora. China has increased its economic and military influence in the Indian Ocean as well as enhanced its overseas aid since the late 1990s in order to secure energy supplies.

Since 2008, the PLAN’s deployment in the IOR has been aimed toward obtaining its capability, with anti-piracy missions-involving the escort of merchant vessels, providing sufficient chance for its ships and crews to polish the crucial skill of convoy protection. So far, the PLAN has deployed approximately 60 warships and replenishment ships for anti-piracy escort missions, accounting for nearly half of the PLAN’s combat power. These regular deployments have also provided the PLAN with first-hand knowledge of the IOR’s operating environment, which will be critical in any confrontation. It has also aided the PLAN’s development of the ability to effectively support long-term operations (Suri 2017).

In addition to resource exploitation, China has continued to work in the IOR to lessen its reliance on the Malacca Strait. For instance, China in 2004 initiated talks with Myanmar about building a natural gas pipeline and also constructing an oil pipeline to import crude oil from the Middle East and Africa through Myanmar. Nevertheless, the gas pipeline became operational in 2013 and the oil pipeline in 2015 (Dawei and Kensuke 2015). Besides, China developed Gwadar Port in Pakistan, which started operation in 2004. The Gwadar port is strategically significant to China since it allows China to avoid the Malacca sea lanes, enhance access to Central Asia and Europe and avoid the US encirclement (Gulrez 2015). Furthermore, the Gwadar port provides an alternate path for moving resources and energy imports to China while avoiding the influence of the United States and India in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean (Kabiraji 2012). Moreover, it is the quickest route for China’s energy imports from the Middle East (the Malacca Strait takes 45 days, whereas the Gwadar port takes only 10 days), and thereby reducing transit time and cost (Hussain and Hussain 2017). Besides, it allows China to better its comparatively backward Western provinces through increased commerce and development activity. China sees its Western provinces closeness to Gwadar as a benefit in transforming its backward regions into more developed places (Yang and Siddiqi 2011).

In relation with Sri Lanka, the primary goal of China’s policy is to protect its interests in the Indian Ocean while also maintaining a naval presence in these areas to influence India’s and other major powers security calculi (Khurana 2008). China built a port in Hambantota, Sri Lanka, with 85 percent finance from China’s Export-Import Bank to achieve these goals (Bhatia 2016). The port would allow China’s rapidly expanding navy to conduct routine

operations in the Indian Ocean from “safe bases” in the region (Richardson 2010). It would also provide refining facilities for oil shipments from the Middle East and Africa (Indraguptha 2011). In addition to the port, Beijing has selected Sri Lanka as a crucial stop on the Maritime Silk Road, which runs from China to Africa, as part of its aspirations to expand infrastructure along this ancient trading route (Bhatia 2016). Furthermore, China has provided Sri Lanka with development support for a number of critical infrastructure projects in exchange for the allocation of an exploration block in the Mannar basin to Beijing for oil exploration (Sahoo 2013). In April 2016, China updated its flagship project of \$1.4 billion for the building of Colombo Port City and the resumption of key infrastructure projects that Beijing had started previously (Sunday Times 2016).

Likewise, Beijing made significant investments in Bangladesh’s infrastructure and gained access to Chittagong’s port (Destradi 2011). In 2014, both governments have expressed interest in reinstating a direct road link between Beijing’s Kunming and Kathmandu’s port city of Chittagong along the ancient Southern Silk Route (Sarker 2014). Recently, a railway connection connecting the key Red Sea port of Djibouti and Addis Ababa, the capital of landlocked Ethiopia was launched by the China. According to Agence France-Presse, China is also sponsoring the majority of Djibouti’s fourteen key infrastructure projects, which are worth a total of US\$ 14.4 billion. In recent years, Chinese investment in Indonesia has increased dramatically, with Chinese firms investing in mineral smelters such as nickel and bauxite, cement, as well as the automobile and steel industries. China is currently bolstering its economic ties with Myanmar by investing US\$ 280 million in the construction of a deep-water port at Kyaukphyu in Myanmar’s problematic southeastern Rakhine Province (Suri 2017).

China, which has grown increasingly confidence in its infrastructure investment results, offered the “Maritime Silk Road” concept in Indonesia, where the 2013 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit was held. Following that, it held the Dialogue on Strengthening Connectivity Partnership in November 2014, coinciding with the APEC Beijing Summit, garnering support for its One Belt One Road initiative, which includes the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”, from seven non-APEC member countries, including Myanmar and Bangladesh (Xing 2018).

Although OBOR has some positive characteristics, such as strengthening land and marine infrastructure and offering international public goods, it also permits China to strategically use that infrastructure network while excluding other countries, as Yoshinobu Yamamoto has pointed out (Yoshinobu 2015). It is necessary to investigate whether the idea of improving the IOR’s “connectivity” is compatible with the national interests of China in terms of resolving the Malacca Dilemma, securing energy and securing destinations for its investment capital as well as to determine whether the establishment of a regional order to Beijing would impact the current order.

In 2009, PLAN began to strengthen its influence in the region by taking part in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. In 2010, China dispatched a hospital ship to the Middle East, starting in Djibouti and concluding in Chittagong, Bangladesh, to provide medical assistance to the countries in the region. These efforts may not constitute a direct military danger, but they have increased China’s visibility as a global contributor. Beijing has also benefited from an increasing number of opportunities to work with other country’s navies like three combined anti-piracy drills with the US Navy in the Gulf of Aden. China’s participation in anti-piracy operations, on the other hand, clearly demonstrates a shift toward open-seas defence (The Japan Times 2010). Ongoing participation in anti-piracy operations may contribute to the long-term improvement of China’s open-seas deployment capabilities. In 2014, China and Djibouti signed a strategic partnership agreement in 2014, but in 2015, it was revealed publically that Chinese logistic facility in Djibouti aims to support the PLAN’s operations. In July 2017, China sent military troops to Djibouti to help establish its newly constructed naval base in the African nation (Pant and Haider 2017).

On the other hand, India has multiple concerns about China in the Indian Ocean. In 1993, the Director of the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences, General Zhao Nanqi stated that “China would step in to prevent what they saw as an attempt by India to dominate the Indian Ocean. We are not prepared to let the Indian Ocean become India’s Ocean” (Roy 1998). From this, it becomes clear that the China’s policy towards Indian Ocean has been predominantly conditioned by its imperatives to contain India in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) (Prabhakar 2007). Besides, India’s former naval chief Suresh Mehta claimed that, “China is reshaping the region’s maritime battleground. It is making friends in the right places. If you don’t have the capability to operate in these waters for an extended period of time, you will need allies who will back you up when the time comes, which China is doing, as are Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and the countries south of Africa” (NDTV 2007).

China has expanded its economic influence in South Asia’s smaller countries in order to counterbalance India’s imperial objectives (Bukhari and Bakht 2013). It also became a more appealing trade and investment partner for South Asian countries (Fingar 2016). China is attempting to establish significant inroads into the South Asian region by investing in infrastructure in ports in Pakistan (Gwadar), Bangladesh (Chittagong), Sri Lanka (Hambantota) as well as a railway route in Nepal (Lhasa to Kathmandu) (Lele 2008). Furthermore, in the realm of security, China has

emerged as a key player in the procurement of military gear, such as the sale of military hardware to Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, as well as its missile and nuclear ties with Pakistan (Kanwal 2012). As a result, China is bringing the smaller South Asian countries closer under its control while also preventing them from associating with India.

Besides, the proximity of the Gwadar port to the Persian Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz provides China with a strategic footing in the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea, as well as the ability to exert significant regional influence. It would also give a forward platform for monitoring Indian operations in the Arabian Sea, US Navy activity in the Persian Gulf, and future US-India maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean, in addition to allowing Beijing to monitor its energy supplies from the Persian Gulf (Chaziza 2016). In terms of the CPEC, it will run through the PoK, meaning that China has conferred de facto acceptance of Pakistan's claim to the disputed region. In addition, the proposed corridor has wider strategic consequences for India because it will limit India's ability to take military action against Islamabad's cross-border terrorism. If Chinese citizens are assaulted in the PoK region during a renewed battle between India and Pakistan, it will result in a crisis between India and China (Wagner 2016). Furthermore, in order to secure the CPEC, Beijing can send troops in Pakistani territory not far from the Indian border on a permanent basis (Chopra 2016). As the CPEC runs through disputed region between Pakistan and India, India has expressed reservations about it. As India's former Foreign Secretary, Sujatha Singh while speaking to reporters during the sixth round of Sino-India strategic dialogue on 14 April 2014 said that "We have raised this issue and raised our concerns not (only) this time, we have made them known earlier. They have noted our concerns" (Ranjan 2015).

India is concerned about the PLAN's deployment in the Indian Ocean, expressing concern about China's counter-piracy operation, which could be a pretext for gaining a strategic "toe-hold". Since 2013, the Indian Navy has been raising concerns about increased Chinese submarine activity in the Indian Ocean, and it came as a huge surprise to India when PLAN conventional submarines visited Sri Lanka twice, first in September and then in November 2014. From then, China has dispatched nuclear submarines for anti-piracy operations on a regular basis, raising concerns in India that such deployments will aid China's acquisition of the capability to conduct littoral warfare, not just in terms of information gathering but also in terms of operational capability. The actions of Chinese submarines, combined with the asymmetry in submarine capacity between China and India, may be factors in the IOR's instability (Izuyama and Kurita 2017).

### **Conclusion**

Since the establishment of diplomatic ties for more than six decades, the relations India and China has been largely driven by territorial disputes, diplomatic friction and more recently the growing competition and distrust in the Indian Ocean. Besides, the growing needs of India and China for energy resources and their dynamic security interests have shifting their focus of attention from the borders and peripheries to increasingly overlap in IOR. Although, the two countries on several times affirmed that they would coordinate their domestic needs as well as cooperate in the energy sector, but these affirmations have not yet materialize anything substantial rather than the mere issuing of MoUs.

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