

# CSS | ISSUE BRIEF

## DIPLOMATIC CONTEST IN INDIAN OCEAN REGION

*Assessing the Sino- Indian relations and elements of contest in the Indian Ocean region and its strategic and economic implication in the region.*

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### ABSTRACT

China's actions in the South China Sea, on a international scale, are considered a major maritime and national security threat in the region and its neighboring states. Similar actions by the Chinese states have been seen and observed in the Indian Ocean Region. The difference that lies in the Indian Ocean Region is China progressively establishing economic and diplomatic relations with Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Diplomatic strength will allow China to gain a parallel hold in the maritime activities, which will include economic and strategic advantages in the region. This raises substantial concern for India, being the major actor in the Indian Ocean Region and maintaining peace and stability in the region. While China's actions and policies state a narrative of extending this idea of peace and stability, India's perspective on these actions constitute a major national security and territorial sovereignty threat to its maritime security. These actions put Indian Ocean Region's importance in question as well and whether the fact that this diplomatic standoff is worth some substantial economic or strategic advantage or whether it's a sovereign power play between two giants of Asia. This paper will precisely look upon China's historical and current actions in the Indian Ocean Region, evaluate it with India's outlook and foreign policy on the matter and a holistic analysis on the situation in IOR as a whole. Principal question of the paper will to address India's policy action on China's progression in the Indian Ocean Region and stakeholder analysis will entail understanding by looking at the diplomatic impact on neighboring states in IOR.

**Keywords-** Indian Ocean Region, Maritime Security, Diplomatic and Strategic Advantage

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## INTRODUCTION

*“Whoever controls the Indian Ocean controls Asia. The Ocean is the key to the seven seas.”- Admiral A T Mahan*

Maritime security and challenges are critical to the question of national security and sovereignty of any nation- state. India and China historically have been concerned about their maritime domain, the likes of which can be seen directly into the South China Sea Dispute and China’s aggressive actions in the region and India’s aggressive diplomatic stance against the Chinese delegation. The implication of the inter- state rivalry is clearly seen when India and China are involved in the Asian continent. Historically, diplomatic convergences between the two powers of the Asian continent continue to exist and are imperative in terms of the emerging relations.

Strings of Pearl strategy employed by the Republic of China has changed the course and dimension of Indo- Sino Maritime strategy (Chunhao, 2012). What is seen in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), a larger military and commercial attributions being taken by the Chinese delegation but these plans are a means of establishing China’s footprint in South Asia, which raises significant concern for India’s foothold in the region. China’s developments are not only a direct attack on the sovereign foothold of India in the region but it also concerns a major ideological shift which puts states like Maldives under the radar. This sort of narrative will also determine the strategic militarization of the zone and for India’s policy, it's imperative that the Chinese influence is successfully countered in the region and the principle of “strategic autonomy” is preserved in its entirety.

Status quo has seen how China has increased its hard military tactics, political patronage and widening list of economic dependents to establish a larger foothold in South Asia. This has led to India questioning its influence and strategic implications in the region and can create a major security threat for India. Even though the Indian Ocean Region stands as a major shipping lane for Chinese ships and its transportation, India’s economic and energy security needs should be guarded from the rising Chinese threat and the question of whether China is able to actualize its commercial support base in the Indian Ocean Region, is something that the whole South Asia is concerned about, especially because the dependence status of Bangladesh, Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan and Sri Lanka stands at the balance (Singh, 2015). The United States Defense Secretary has also observed the developments citing how China has managed to string together a patronage network of multiple South Asian coastal nations which was a consequence of major Chinese investment strategies and further seek the collaborative efforts of the aforementioned nation- states (White, 2020). China’s primary aim to secure the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOC) in the Indian Ocean Region is something that the Indian foreign policy is concerned about along its national security (Chunhao, 2012).

In order to discuss the Chinese progression in the Indian Ocean Region, there are certain questions which we need to address for the descriptive purpose of the paper. How is the Strings of Pearls being executed by China? What are the recent developments on part of the Chinese

republic? How is India directly affected by these developments and what is the consequent Indian response to the situation? What is the future of Indian Ocean Region along this diplomatic rivalry in the region?

## UNDERSTANDING THE CHINESE OPERATION

The roots of the Chinese operation in the IOR can be traced back to the mid- 1980s (Prakash, 2017). People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) focused on the coastal and near sea operations, as controlling the seas has strategic implications and affects the economic productivity of the trade routes. Indian Ocean accounts for almost half of the world's container traffic and one-third of world's maritime oil shipments. Economic implications of the region cannot be stated any clearly as the country which controls the seas has the advantage to span out its strategic and military influence over the region and neighboring countries including Australia, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Maldives. The 1980's initiative also focused on ports building, focusing Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and the earlier expansion arguments were put in the form of extending global peace in the IOR as per the Central Military Commission in 2004. Even though the narrative of sustaining and extending global peace, for countries like USA, France and especially India, this expansion was seen as opportunistic and a subtly aggressive move of expeditionary role in the IOR.

Since 2008, the port developments and navigational activities of the Chinese delegation have increased, marked by an active international observation on the Chinese activities in the IOR. These activities were initiated by an Anti- Piracy Operation in the Gulf of Aden and a strategic factor to become a global actor in the process. Up till 2017, China was able to develop its first overseas military base in Djibouti, an important staging ground for the Chinese military operations lookout over the whole region and a permanent presence of the Chinese warships in the IOR and Africa (Shukliya, 2018). Since 2017, Djibouti led escorts and subsequent developments has led China to conduct over 1,190 escort missions with one Fleet Support Ship and Frigates (Ghosh, 2020). With the developments and projects in place, there was also a simultaneous rise in the budget by the Central Committee, where the PLAN budgets from 2000 to 2016 saw an average increase of 10 percent, directing towards further exploration and overseas military setups in the Indian Ocean Region (Brewster, 2015). This budget also saw subsequent development of PLAN's infrastructure, technology and warships in the region, which also raised the question for maritime security for India.

In 2012, Ukraine was also seen endorsing the Chinese excursions by agreeing to a deal and contributing the Aircraft Carrier Liaoning- Kiev Class Aircraft- and in 2013 completed the building of its Aircraft Carrier- Shandong, which was de- commissioned in 2019 (White, 2020). Along with aircraft developments, surveillance developments and updated technology on that forefront has also been crucial for China. Satellite Surveillance technologies, satellite constellations such as BeiDou- 2&3 denote a substantial surveillance capabilities of the Chinese delegation in the IOR and precisely also revolves around their target of 'commanding the height of strategic competition in space' (Singh, 2015). Moreover, illegal research activities

in the region upon which China has been condemned under the United Nations Convention on Laws Of Seas (UNCLOS) stands ineffective. Research Vessel Shi Yan conducting illegal research near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and targeting the particular clause in UNCLOS which specifies asking permission from the sovereign state in order to explore under their Exclusive Economic Zone, in this particular instance India, stands as an active point of Chinese defiance of international norms and national interests (Brewster, 2015). Even though Shi Yan was duly asked to vacate the waters, Xiangyanghong 06, China's Specialist Survey Ships has also been condemned for conducting illegal research activities near the same area, which also deployed underwater drones to research the ocean floor (Prakash, 2017). And because of all of the surveys and warships, the high number of fishing vessels in the Indian Ocean is something that cannot be ignored on an international level. Fishing vessels are a direct threat for exhausting the existing fishing stocks in the ocean, which was also seen in regards to India- Sri Lanka seas dispute upon the exhaustion of fishing stocks by Sri Lankan fishing vessels.

India, France, Australia and Indonesia see this action as a part of China's similar aggressive stance in parallel to the policies taken in the South China Sea region. But the difference that sets out in terms of IOR as this project has been integrated with the idea of promoting economic growth and development of China's One Belt and Road Initiative. In Myanmar, Chinese investments have led them to establish a deep water port in Kyaukpyu and leasing of island Feydhoo Finolhu in Maldives (Sown, 2018). These ideas in the paradigm of investments are also signaled towards the formation of a debt trap regarding these developing economies and in case of Maldives, affected by economic crises, a state of vulnerable economies. Similar situation was seen in the case of Sri Lanka and the leasing of Hambantota Port which was a repayment to the Chinese debt by the Sri Lankan government (Sown, 2018). The debt trap diplomacy has been observed by India as mounting sophisticated military operations and capabilities that set beyond the western pacific itself and poses a direct competition with American strategists. Not only, this strategy implies a certain economic narrative for the Chinese operation in the IOR, implicitly China is able to establish its operation bases in order to gain strategic advantage in the region. To further the cause for securing its Sea Lines of Communication, Maritime Silk Road has always been a pretext for China's strategy (Sown, 2018). By establishing these intermediates in the form of debt traps, example of the Gwadar Port as a part of the China- Pakistan- Economic- Corridor(CPEC), will continue to allow China to have an upper hand over India's protection in the Indian Ocean Region. Along with these warships, illegal research activities and acquiring ports of different nation- states on the line of economic ventures, Beijing's vision to develop a new economic zone, north of Maldives, Ihavandhippolhu also known as iHaven Project, this contributes to a major military expansion to accurately monitor strategic corridor, especially targeting the India's Western and Eastern Coastlines (Sown, 2018).

## INDIA'S CONCERNS

How is India directly affected by these developments and what is the consequent Indian response to the situation? The rising number of naval assets and Chinese infrastructure poses a

twin- fold threat to India's sovereignty in the IOR. The strategic implication of the Indian Ocean allows it to be quite useful in terms of monitoring tactics and militarization developments for any of the nation (Chunhao, 2012). That includes not only a direct idea of the shipping lanes and interconnectivity between different states but moreover a strategic autonomy over trade control and economic surveillance upon neighboring countries.

Economies similar to Bangladesh or Maldives stand vulnerable to the actions of the state controlling the majority of the IOR. Commercial ambitions cannot be restricted to the dimension of economic interest as the strategic output will substantially assist in establishing maritime footholds in South Asia. Maldives, an archipelago lying at the edge of India's EEZ stands crucial for China. Political endorsement by the Chinese delegation in terms of the new regime and anti- Indian intervention narrative has allowed the iHaven project on a much faster pace, contributing a major security threat to India. The monitoring will also allow China to have access to the Eastern Pacific Outlook, proving a strategic barrier for any US action and will act as a parallel strategy similar to what China seems to be imposing in the South China Sea (Prakash, 2017).

Major concern also lies that along with Maldives, Chinese- Sri Lankan relations are on a rise on this narrative. When there will be stronger ties between the two nation- states, the Hambantota port will open to more strategic implication for China's military operations and specially in light of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and Chinese aid to the Sri Lankan government, these economic relations have the potential to become strong strategic ties as well, providing a substantial amount of advantage to China on this forefront. Xi Jinping endorses the victory of Rajapaksa with the clear indication, " Beijing looks forward to advancing its strategic cooperative partnership with Colombo" (Aassan, 2019). Further on this argument, it becomes imperative that Sri Lanka should maintain diplomatic and partnering distance from India and Japan (Aassan, 2019). Even if China is able to slow the relations by curbing the Japanese- funded light rail project and East Container Terminal project in Colombo, backing of Japan and India, China will be able to win this diplomatic contest to establish more peculiar relations with the Sri Lankan Government. Diplomatically, the concern becomes how is India able to deal with the rising relations with Maldives and Sri Lanka as the concern is not only reprimand of relations but sustaining them along strategic and sovereign concern.

India has decided to establish its relations with economic and infrastructure projects in the Maldives, its essential that India should be progressive with its economic policies in order to counter the Chinese influence. The Greater Male Connectivity Project, entering along a line of credit agreement of 400 million, stands as the largest infrastructure project undertaken by India in Maldives with the hope to resurrect the falling economic relations with the nation (White, 2020). Along with another 100 million, the objective stands to connect Villingili, Gulhifalhu and Thilafushi islands involving the construction of 6.7 km bridge to establish a network between Male and the 3 islands. India strives that this project surpasses the China- Maldives Friendship Bridge project which only focuses on the airport island of Hulhule and Male (Aassan, 2019). This also stands as a diplomatic maneuver in which India is trying to establish a more resilient and economically better narrative for Maldives and the current line of credit

comes after the previous 800 million line of credit invested towards Maldives and turns into the largest loan package in the IOR (Ghosh, 2020).

Along with this heavily invested project High Impact Community Development Projects Scheme stands for assisting in the construction of fish processing and water plants which is also expected to develop tourism zones and boost the economy post- COVID- 19 period as well (Ghosh, 2020). But the concern won't be removed on an immediate basis. Regardless of the fact how strong the newly formed economic relations tend to materialize, Chinese leased island of Feydhoo Finolhu has undergone a massive facelift which has created an ideological shift in the conflict for acquiring autonomy in the IOR (Prakash, 2017). The island is leased until 2066 and has an expected increase in its size from 38,000 sq. meters to 200,000 sq. meters (Prakash, 2017). The military base that China has been able to built in the region gives the geopolitical and geographical edge over India and even though India has surveillance systems or radar outpost in Seychelles, Madagascar and Mauritius, the tilt won't be balanced out until or unless India is able to develop a military overseas base in Maldives, in the status quo China has a hold of the region.

The concern also extends to the point as Hambantota port and Maldives has allowed China to regularly send research and survey ships and Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUV's) to map the water bodies with the prominent example of the presence of the 35th Fleet of the Chinese Navy (Singh, 2015). And as per the logic of the String of Pearls strategy, Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, China's military, commercial facilities are expected to extend upto the Middle East and even though Chinese diplomats have regularly denied this, the activities and developments hint otherwise and pose a major threat to India's Maritime Security and Development. The control over the Kyaukpyu port, a commercial maritime facility has the potential to be converted as a military facility and will pose a threat for any future conflict between China and India in the region and Chinese naval intelligence unit at a Coco islands, near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands will continue to keep India on the lookout for any Chinese hostility in the region. The cause for concern directly addresses India Maritime Security and Territorial Sovereignty in the Indian Ocean Region.

## **FUTURE OF IOR AND CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Despite the fact that India has undertaken a large scale repatriation mission in light of assisting Maldives, Madagascar, Comoros, Seychelles and Mauritius with medical aid, economic aid and professionals to tackle the crisis of COVID- 19 and to curb its economic impact. But the waters of the IOR have become a competitive stage for economic developments, disputes and conflicts and the influence of regional cooperation and this has aligned all the major powers such as the US, Australia, Japan, United Kingdom, India and China to have stakes in the security implication of the IOR (Brewster, 2015). Economic and strategic importance of IOR for controlling about 80 percent of the world's maritime oil trade and having a direct monitoring route to the Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Malacca, Bab- el Mandeb will keep the pressure on the Indian Ocean Region.



Security dynamics should not be underrated as the substantial control and navigational check over the maritime piracy and maritime disputes provides a key role for the nation- state which will try to establish its SLOC (Brewster, 2015). Acting as an intersection for the transport of oil from the Middle East, the vigor of external powers to gain foothold will enable them to alter the dynamics of peace and stability in the region. Beijing's actions depict a certain strategic element which has the full potential to gain strong footholds in the IOR, Africa and Island Nations. Meta- narrative involves the One Belt and Road Initiative to tie all the economic progress of different regions and Strings of Pearls to gain strategic consequences , depicts an aggressive diplomatic and ideological shift by the Chinese delegation, first of its kind in the 21st century. Geopolitical theory of Strings of Pearls would also provide China to further extend its infrastructure and commercial possibilities to the whole Horn of Africa, ASEAN nations and Pacific Island Nations (Chunhao, 2012). And not forgetting the fact that the ports that are leased to the Chinese government, will prove to be an active threat towards the influence of India in South Asia.

India's strategy to counter these Chinese influences rests on many factors. The principle of "strategic autonomy" that is being implied by New Delhi needs serious revamping and strategic revisions in order to curb the growing developments of China in the region. Given that India is part of several bilateral and multilateral military exercises in the Indian Ocean such as the MILAN Naval exercises hosted by the Indian Navy on November 8, 2019 and Malabar in order to involve Japan, United States of America and India and this is the beginning of India's new narrative in attaining strategic implication in IOR (Aassan, 2019). In light of the Sino- Indian clashes in Ladakh in 2020, Australia and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is the step forward to growing logistical advantage that China has been able to acquire in the region.

It is imperative for India as well that in the wake of the COVID- 19 crisis China increased its naval activities in the region, the geostrategic shift will only shift towards India's position when they resume with their naval activities in the region to counter China. In that light, the Strategic Plan involving the Western Pacific and the US's increased presence can assist India to have that substantial influence against China in the region. Moreover, to improve its strategic influence India should shift towards upgrading its facilities on the Agalega Islands in Mauritius, AFCON construction and RITES engineering consultancy have been given the 87 million project to construct the airport terminal in the region (Aassan, 2019). Despite the fact that the Agalega islands know that this is an act of displacement, Mauritian government look towards a substantial funding from New Delhi implying an economic revival of relations and with Seychelles, agreed on developing infrastructure on Assumption Island and assisted Victoria with ocean mapping to protect Seychelles and donation of aircraft and radar project (Shukliya, 2018).

All of these projects indicate the benefits of establishing relations with nonresidential maritime powers in Indian Ocean and economic and strategic isolation will stand against India's national and sovereign interest. Questions might be raised upon the fact that India's ongoing strategic ties might be a shift from its non- alignment policy of Cold War, which has been applied in the case of IOR as well. But it will allow India to curb China's attempt to maneuver the shipping

lanes in the region and further control the sea trade routes. Operationalization logistics along with France and the United States. This will allow India to gain access to Diego Garcia, Mayotte Island and La Reunion, which will help Indian military bases to be operationalized in these islands to successfully counter the logistical developments of China. With Australia, berthing rights can be given to Australia for Cocos Islands and cultivate naval cooperation along with all the states (White, 2020). Tactical naval alliances will allow India to upgrade its facilities in Seychelles and Mauritius and further ahead it can get the berthing access to Duqm Port in Oman and Maputo in Mozambique (White, 2020).

The region is on the brink of a Cold War. China and India have started to address certain aggressive actions across their respective regions. The situation in the IOR has now become a contesting platform for both the countries. The contest between the two states in the status quo is limited to diplomatic foothold and economic advantage upon each other. Situation in the IOR is far from what is being seen in the South China Sea but the Chinese advantages in the region can depict a similar picture in the future, if the conflict arises upto that point. India here is being tested on a maritime level. Even though a fierce contest is being given on the equation of; and and territory but the notion of maritime developments and foothold is something that will drastically change the ideological tangent of both the states.

The emerging Cold War in the region has now forced India to charter its own strategic and diplomatic maneuvers. The success of these moves will depend on how India's response will be received by the neighboring states in the Indian Ocean Region and whether the huge investment schemes undertaken by India will prove to be substantially advantageous and doesn't derogate India's current position in the Indian Ocean Region. The diplomatic tangent right now depends on how India and China are able to extend their influence upon the island nations. This is imperative and crucial as among the neighboring states, if any nation is not able to maintain that influence, the foothold in the IOR will shift towards the other. The region will await how both the nations will continue to charter their strategic policies and protect their sovereignty in terms of Maritime Security and Development in the IOR.

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