

Growing Chinese Presence in the Indian Ocean: Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract

The ‘String of Pearls’ strategy attributed to China for growing its relations with the states situated around the Indian Ocean (IO) in order to neutralise Indian influence. Furthermore, protecting economic and strategic interests are also the key factors that China is maintaining its presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). After the completion of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), it is predicted that Gwadar Port will be the most precious pearl of the string. With the increased Chinese influence, the United States (US) will not fall behind and will have to revise strategy to maintain its supremacy in the IO and keep Chinese influence under check. However, Chinese presence will enhance economic prospects in the IO but may also pose some challenges for regional peace and security. In this paper, an analytical study would be undertaken on such questions.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, Sino-US Relations, China, US, PLA Navy, String of Pearls.

Introduction

The Indian Ocean Region IOR has turned into a strategic hotspot since 2010. Ever a great oceanic expanse of geo-strategic significance due to its centrality in continental trade and a conduit of energy supply to the Asiatic powers, this region has found added salience as a medium to the fulfillment of the ‘Chinese Dream’ as transmitted by the PRC (People’s Republic of China).¹ China has launched a massive programme to enhance its presence

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¹ Saji Abraham, *China’s Role in the Indian Ocean: Its Implications on India’s National Security*, (Vij Books India 2015).

and position in this region. In the normal course of nation-building effort, the PRC's venture into this economic theatre is quite understandable. The concern, however, that caused India to be worried about China's Indian Ocean aims is about the means and methods that China has adopted in materialising its 'presence' in the expanse of Asiatic lifeline. China sees the IOR as its domain of strategic importance in which her economic relationships, based on military and economic power projection. Accordingly, the Indian Ocean (IO) is a top priority in China's political and economic road map towards its achievement as a global power status. In this process, a competition with other stakeholders of the IO like; the US, Britain, India, Australia, France and Japan has started.² Of course, these powers will not like to give a free hand to China to flex its muscles and such confrontation would not be conducive for regional peace, coherence and for maintaining the balance of power. India's geographical position in the IOR is an obstacle for the strategic objectives of China. Meanwhile, China has featured the IO as it is strategically 'beat' which combined with its planned military bases around the Indian peninsula and would disturb traditional neighborhoods of India. This paper is a description of the PRC's conceived and adopted strategies to materialise her renewed 'position' in the IO.

It is a descriptive research based on analytical approach. The data collection for the research is based on secondary resources. Various books, articles and websites were consulted to gather relevant information. Views and statements given by the social scientists and leaders in this region are included to critically analyse the situation.

Mackinder's Heartland Theory and the Indian Ocean Region

The 'Heartland' theory put forward by Halford Mackinder and he put emphasis on the 'pivot area.' He described, the increased attention was put through the concept of geopolitics. In addition, Mackinder's concepts revolving around geopolitics and sea power (significance of navy) are opposite the idea put forward by Alfred Thayer Mahan. Mackinder's theory assumed the incorporation of a huge empire into existence at the Heartland. This Heartland would be independent of the coastal areas and intercontinental transportation and will not need to use the seas for keeping

² Suhasini Haidar, "*Quad-The Confluence of Four Powers and Two Seas*," *Hindu*, July 25, 2020.

herself intact. Mackinder considered the geography of Earth divided into the core (world island consisting of Eurasia and Africa) and border (America, British Isles, and Oceania). The border or periphery was much smaller than the core and would rely mostly on sea transport to cope with the technological level of the core. The core would be in control of sufficient natural resources in contrast to the periphery which would have a broadly divided industrial base. The Heartland could use its navy to destroy each of them in turn and establish its own industries further than the reach of the periphery thus gave it the much-needed strategic advantage. The Core addressed by Mackinder as the Heartland because it was at the center of the world. Moreover, he also gave credit to the tactical advantage provided by the coastal areas and oceanic regions.³

The IO geopolitics holds great significance among China, the US, and India in the 21st century. This significance is attributed because the rim-land as described by Mackinder consists of states sharing shore by the sea (also described as Upland or Tributary region). India and South Africa began an Indian Ocean rim initiative which was later on joined by Australia and Mauritius. Subsequently, it lured other littoral states and the initiative was joined by Malaysia, Tanzania, Mozambique, Sri Lanka, Yemen and Indonesia. Keeping the rim-land initiative in mind, one can say that Nicholas John Spykman's assumption becomes quite relevant to the contemporary world, as whoever controls the Indian Ocean subsequently controls the world. The 'geographic' world refers the land, sea, air, space and most possibly cyberspace and it cannot be avoided. Today's strategic significance of the IO is the same as four decades back in history. When Great Britain withdrew its forces from the Suez Canal, the biggest concern was the power-vacuum and who would fill it. This fact draws the IO back into the spotlight as the impact of geopolitical scenario is observed on both intentional behaviours and military co-operations among different states. "When the transition of power occurred from the Great Britain in the late 60s, no one was in doubt of who will be filling the gap, the only question then was how the United States (US) was planning to organise and control the Indian Ocean."⁴ It was a quick and smooth change of guard at the IO between the two Anglo-Saxon powers. This swift shift of burden also put a

³ Mackinder, H. J. "The Geographical Pivot of History." *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 23, no. 4 (1904):421-37, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1775498>

⁴ Thomas J. McCormick, *America's Half-Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War and After, Second Edition*, (JHU press, 1995).

quick end to the debate about the Indian Ocean and its strategic future. Furthermore, “The geopolitical arena will be reconfigured as China and India move towards intensifying their economic growth thus producing a gravitational pull that will transform the shape of Asia Pacific, Indian Ocean and the littoral. The result would be a reformed state of relations between both major world powers and their regional allies. This shift will transform into a ‘strategic triangle’ both in the Maritimes and littoral world between India, China, and the US.”⁵

Growing Presence of China in Indian Ocean

India has stakes and been exerting its influence among the island states in the IO as a big economy and military power in the region. Therefore, India always looks upon the IO as its domain of influence.⁶ This is the reason that soon after taking office, the then newly elected Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi in May 2014 announced that his first and foremost task would be to extend and enhance its bilateral trade relations with the neighbouring states of India. This was a time when China, too, was gradually overshadowing India in the region, by extending its own economic growth, and Modi was well aware of the danger India would face as a consequence of being overshadowed by its immediate regional economic rival.⁷ What worried Modi was that China’s One Belt One Road (OBOR) project through which China was extending its influence by building in-roads into South Asia? These in-roads shifted the inclination in relationships of its neighbour states from India to China and deepened her relations with the states that were already on friendly terms and ultimately this is not only putting India at risk of lagging behind China but also would make it relatively less important in South Asia.

To add to it, China also has an established military base in Djibouti and is in talks with Myanmar for managing the Kyaukphyu port. Moreover,

⁵ Dilip Das, “Regionalism In A Globalising World: An Asia-Pacific Perspective,” *CSGR Working Paper No. 80/01*, 2001, Centre for the Study of Globalisation and Regionalisation (CSGR), University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom, <http://www.csgr.org>

⁶ Priyanjoli Ghosh, “India’s Indian Ocean Region Strategy,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Air University Press, August 31, 2020.

⁷ Sreeram Chaulia, *Modi Doctrine: The Foreign Policy of India’s Prime Minister*, (Bloomsbury Publishing : September 14, 2016, 1st Edition) ,

“China has persuaded the Thai authorities to re-consider the idea of building a canal at the Kra-Isthmus which would put the significance of Strait of Malacca at risk by allowing ships to pass from the Bay of Bengal to the South China Sea without having to pass through the Malacca.”⁸

For much of its history, China’s focus was on South East Asia but since 2014, a steady shift has been observed in her policy towards the South Asian region. South Asia — home to one fourth of the global population and the world’s third largest economic region in terms of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP).⁹ This all combined produces a lucrative and more profitable market with a diverse base for Chinese products. Due to political conditions and infrastructural challenges, accessing the Indian markets directly through Arunachal Pradesh, Afghanistan or Pakistan — the only way left for China to access the Indian markets is via Bangladesh due to the friendly relations these two states maintain. The Chinese plan in Bangladesh through its check book diplomacy¹⁰ initiating massive infrastructural development projects. Given the central location of Bangladesh in the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) which holds a strategically important Chittagong port along with the contemporary Maritime Silk Road is a very important factor in the realisation of both economic and maritime Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI). If the Chinese succeed in passing their naval ships through the Bay of Bengal, India could find itself struggling on three fronts at the same time against Chinese forces. This would include the Arunachal Pradesh, India’s Northeast, the Bay of Bengal at its east and Pakistan at its west which are both China’s ally at the same time. The Chinese government is using political and military tactics combined with expanding economic assistance to the countries in South Asian region for having strong footholds. China undertaking all these steps in the region, meanwhile India is unable to match her naval, strategic or economic power to China. Table no. 1 shows the procurement of Chinese vessels by the South Asian naval powers in extraordinary numbers, most of the time, a result of joint Research and Development for developing new combat vessels and submarines. In

⁸ A. Morsy, “The Impact of “The Belt Road Initiative,” *Egypt Economy and Foreign Policy*, 2019

⁹ Lee Jong-Wha, “Is the Asian Century Really Here?” *Project Syndicate*, April 01, 2021. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/asian-century-requires-unified-regional-leadership-by-lee-jong-wha-2021-04>

¹⁰ Check book diplomacy is used to describe a foreign policy which openly uses economic aid and investment between countries to carry diplomatic favor.

addition, these countries are heavily relying on China in terms of Maritimes commercial operations due to her heavy investments in deep seaports and other related infrastructural projects.

Table No. 1
Economic and Strategic Relationships
of Selected South Asian Countries with China

Country	Active Naval Vessels of China	Ports Infrastructure and developed by China	Chinese Investments 2005-2017 (US\$ billion)	Status of Free Trade Agreement with China
Bangladesh	46	Chittagong port	24.1	Biggest trading partner (2016)
Maldives	0	iHavan project	NA	Signed 2017
Myanmar	17	Kyaukpyu port	7.4	ASEAN-China 2010
Pakistan	15	Gwadar port	50.6	Signed 2007
Sri Lanka	17	Hambantota port	14.7	Signed 2014

Source: Belt and Road Portal: <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/>

India has somehow succeeded in attaining its strategic alliance with Maldives, though it is a tiny state, yet it will give India a little edge over China as China's most energy imports travel from the Middle East and Africa and pass by near Maldives. In case of any conflict between the two countries, China would be disadvantaged from this point as India's base at the Andaman Islands could interrupt the transportation of Chinese ships via Strait of Malacca along with to disrupt Pakistani maritime activities at the same time in the Arabian Sea by using its naval power. It is understood that such developments have made the IO strategically more important regionally as well as globally. With the passage of time, as the size of economies of the South Asian countries and China further grow, the IO will have more vitality.

China's Power Projection in Indian Ocean

The massive volume of trade has compelled China to secure strategic position in the IO for protection of her interests. China's growing economic stature at global level necessitates its power projection in IO. Chinese maritime aims also call for a worldwide 'PLAN.' "The father of the contemporary Chinese navy, Liu Huaqing, projected People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy) to become a global force by 2050."¹¹ China's aspirations of becoming a maritime power as stated in its White Paper of 2013 is in line with this thought process. Chinese analysts also feel necessity of using the PLA Navy for the protection of China's international ambitions and interests. Rear Admiral Y. Zhou, a nationalist political adviser stated, "The paramount importance is safeguarding Chinese nationals abroad by taking care of their political, economic and occupational safety. He notes that safeguarding them would ensure steady development on the domestic level. Thus, to do this, China needs naval power and advanced technological infrastructures like aircraft carriers."¹²

China gained support from certain states of the IOR, particularly in East Africa; and its financial investments grew there, as some of them were politically unstable and had difficulties for the foreign business as well. According to Director of the College of African Studies at Zhejiang Traditional University, Liu Hongwu, "The key aspects in the future development of cooperation between the African Union and Chinese government are security and co-operation. Now, for the last few years, many African states are asking the Chinese government to develop and update their security protocols."¹³

China has also entered into strategic partnerships with a number of countries like South Africa, Egypt, Pakistan and the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) which intended for shaping an

¹¹ Andrew Scobell, Michael McMahon and Cortez A. Cooper, "China's Aircraft Carrier Program: Drivers, Developments, Implications," *Naval War College Review*, vol. 68, no. 4 (2015): 64-79, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26397884>.

¹² William A. Callahan and EBSCO host, *China Dreams: 20 Visions of The Future*(Oxford University Press Oxford 2013).

¹³ Chris Alden, "China's and Africa's Natural Resources: The Challenges and Implications for Development and Governance," Africa Portal, 2009, <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/china-and-africas-natural-resources-the-challenges-and-implications-for-development-and-governance/>

international order competitive with its long-term interests. The ongoing modernisation of the Chinese armed forces is also aimed at emerging a limited power projection competence to “develop strategic data based on a favourable and emphasised employment of the military forces.”¹⁴ Furthermore, it can be noted that Chinese power projection in the region through diplomatic and military initiatives coupled with an outreach to various countries, amidst ever-increasing economic engagement will remain a basis of its foreign policy as China graduates to big power status.¹⁵

Implications of Chinese Presence in the Indian Ocean

One should not forget that ever since the Cold War, the US had supremacy over the Indian Ocean and was playing a monitoring role to oversee the trade routes. It seems obvious that the US would not compromise the role and position that could be challenged by the growing Chinese influence. The significance of the IO will draw special attention from the US strategists because of its pivotal location and being a trade hub of global trade and energy supplies.

Due to the importance of the IO, certain world powers also have their naval presence in the IOR. Such can be seen in the case of the US where in addition to its forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, “it’s 5th Fleet is in Bahrain and regularly using the Diego Garcia Island as its naval and air-based operations in addition to providing logistical support to its operations in the IOR. The US Task Force 152 is also having a significant presence in the area tasked for ensuring the safe and secure flow of energy resources through the Persian Gulf. In addition, Task Force 150 is assigned for combating piracy throughout the Gulf of Oman and Kenya. The US also maintains a significant presence throughout the Indian Ocean and has an established military base in Djibouti which is the largest base of such significance on

¹⁴ Stephen Hoadley and Jian Yang, “China’s Cross-Regional FTA Initiatives: Towards Comprehensive National Power,” *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 80, no.2 (2007): 327-348.

¹⁵ Joshua Eisenman, Eric Heginbotham, “Building a More “Democratic” and “Multipolar” World: China’s Strategic Engagement with Developing Countries,” *The China Review*, vol. 19, no. 4 (November 2019): 55-84.

the whole of the African Continent.”¹⁶ The purpose of the Djibouti base is to ensure safe passages through Bab-el-Mandeb and Suez Canal which is known as the world’s busiest shipping routes. “A major function of this base is to counter the Somali piracy which is attracted to the region due to the frequency of passing ships and size of cargo passing through. In recent years, given its significant location due to Somalia in South and Yemen lying approximately 30 km from the strait, China has also started establishing a base in the region.”¹⁷

In the case of Europe, however, France is the only country that has a considerable presence in the IOR quadrants facing the south west and north, maintaining bases in Abu Dhabi and Djibouti. Recently, the US has declared an infrastructural development fund of 113 million dollars for development in digital economies, energy, and infrastructural projects to counter the increased Chinese presence in the region as the Chinese are rapidly investing in Sri Lanka, Bangladeshi and Pakistan ports and African developmental projects.

The IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) which aims to develop considerable economic growth, security and liberal trade practices have 21 border member states along with Australia. “The white paper, published in the 2017 edition of Australian Foreign Policy, registers its maritime aims as such, to support and assist the IORA in pertaining to International law and maritime trade and security.”¹⁸ The security of maritime trade routes holds vital importance to Australia’s economic wellbeing and energy supplies to the region. Of more importance to Australia in the South East Asian strategic depth for her security that is provided by the FPDA (Five Power Defense Agreement). Initially, this alliance was formed by Singapore, Malaysia, the United Kingdom (UK), New Zealand and Australia which provided security assurance to the Australia’s proneness to extremist attacks carried out in the aspect of its western perspective propagated globally. Due to the FPDA, any attack on any of the five states would obligate other states

¹⁶ Lord Jopling, “*Maritime Security: Nato and EU Roles and Co-ordination*,” NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2010.

¹⁷ Theo Notteboom, “Towards a New Intermediate Hub Region in Container Shipping? Relay and Interlining Via Cape Route vs The Suez Route,” *The Journal of Transport Geography* (2012): 164-178.

¹⁸ Gurpreet S. Khurana, “China’s Maritime-Strategic Presence in IOR: Geopolitical, Geo economic and Security Import,” *Maritime Affairs: The Journal of The National Maritimes Foundation of India*, 1-15, 2014.

to consult and carry out a single or distributed response towards tackling the immediate threat. Because of Australia's western character, "it is susceptible to attacks and maritime security both on naval and trade grounds hold pivotal significance for combating non-state sea bound threats in the IOR and Southeast Asia."¹⁹

Notwithstanding "After the Chinese government established a naval base in Sanya at the Southern edge of Hainan, it deployed its Jin submarines in the Indian Ocean in 2008. This base is just 1200 nautical miles from the Malacca Strait and holds the closest accessibility route to the Indian Ocean. This move raised eyebrows of Indian leaders, as it is the closest access route for India towards the Indian Ocean. The Sanya base holds an underground facility that serves the function of hiding the movement of the Jins and makes it difficult to be detected."²⁰ These tunnels and underground facilities at the tip of deep-water worry India as this facility can have strategic implications for her in the IOR. "This facility serves as a chokepoint for the Bab-el-Mandeb, Hormuz and Malacca straits and facilitates the 'String of Pearls' strategy that China is gradually adapting to increase its strategic impact on the region and also is a strategic threat to India."²¹

String of Pearls Strategy

This term was used by the American and Indian defense and strategic analysts to refer to the major plan of China to surround India by establishing seaports and airports in countries situated around India. The term 'String of Pearls' was first used in 2005, "in a report entitled 'Energy Futures in Asia' provided to the US Defence Secretary Donald H Rumsfeld by defence contractor Booz Allen Hamilton."²² It alleged that China was following the strategy of 'string of pearls' making bases from the Middle East to the Southern China. These 'pearls' were naval bases or electronic spying posts

¹⁹ Chris Rahman, "*The Rise Of China As A Regional Maritime Power: Strategic Implications For A New Century*," University Of Wollongong Thesis Collection 1954-2016, 2003.

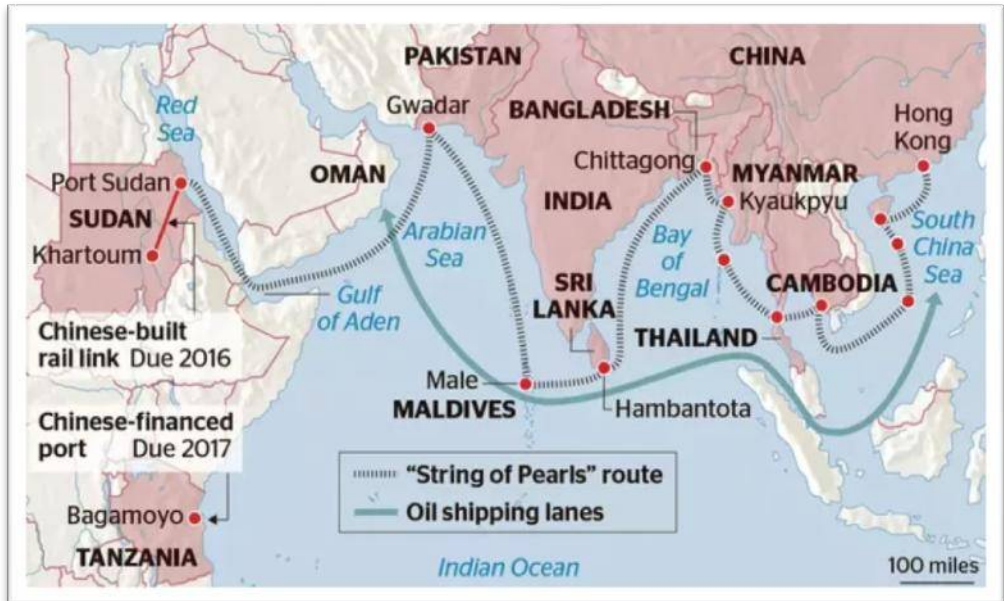
²⁰ Harsh V Pant, "Rising China In India's Vicinity: A Rivalry Takes Shape In Asia," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (2016): 364-381.

²¹ Mari Izuyama, Masahiro Kurita, "*Security in the Indian Ocean Region: Regional Responses to China's Growing Influence*," Chapter 2, East Asian Strategic Review 2017, The National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan.

²² Zhou Bo, "*The String of Pearls and the Maritime Silk Road*," *China Daily*, February 12, 2014.

built by the Chinese in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The basic purpose was to protect its overseas power and protect its trade shipments.”²³

Figure No.1
String of Pearls Routes



Source: <https://www.quora.com/Why-is-String-of-Pearls-strategy-of-China-a-threat-to-Indias-economy-and-security>

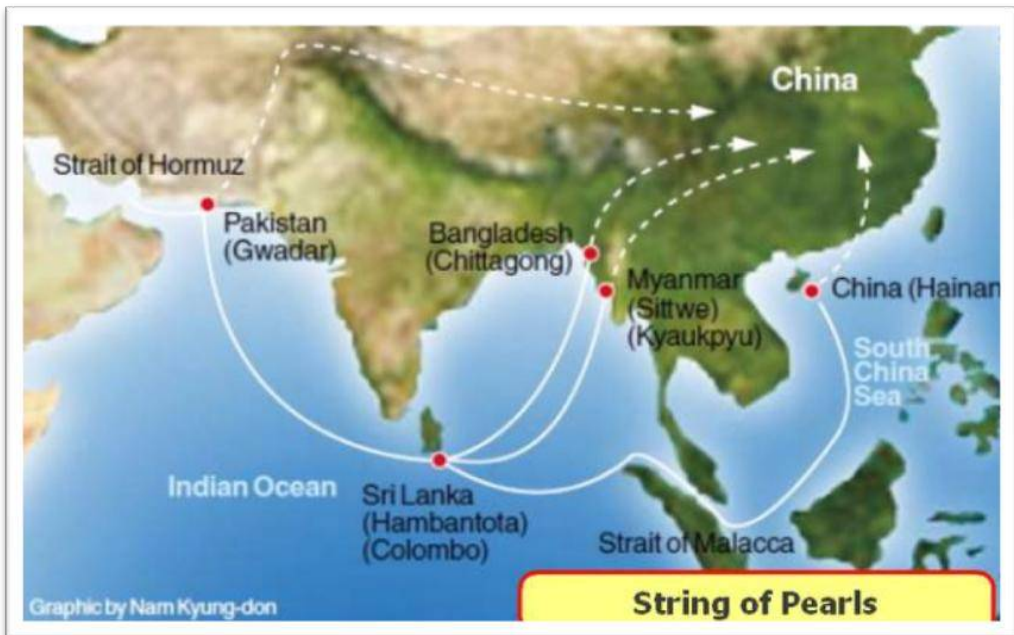
The Gwadar deep seaport in Balochistan (Pakistan) also serves as an important component of the Chinese ‘String of Pearls’ strategy. Apart from this, “the Chinese base in Burma and Chinese intelligence activities and established facilities at the Bay of Bengal, the Kra Isthmus proposal towards the Thai authorities and military pacts with the Cambodian authorities have helped China to build substantial presence throughout the South China sea and IOR.”²⁴ China’s 80 per cent of fuel passes through the Malacca Strait

²³ D. G., Dwivedi, “Indian Ocean Region (IOR) : India as a Net Security Provider- The Way Ahead, <https://usiofindia.org/publication/usi-journal/indian-ocean-region-india-as-a-net-security-provider-the-way-ahead/>

²⁴ Chandana Priyantha Arangalla, “*Nonalignment To Balance China’s Influence On Sri Lanka: Negotiating Chinas String Of Pearl Strategy For The Pearl Of The Indian Ocean*,” Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, California, 2017.

and she is not likely to rely on the US naval power for its security because of strained relations between the two. China, therefore, is establishing its own naval bases at eastern choke points along the South China Sea and Persian Gulf region for self-reliance. Apart from the naval bases, China is also establishing container ports at Hambantota (Sri Lanka) and Chittagong (Bangladesh) to consolidate its position at the IOR. China has already agreed with the Sri Lankan government to establish and finance the Hambantota Development Zone and build a bunker system, oil refinery and container ports.

Figure No.2
String of Pearls: Sea Routes in the Indian Ocean



Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/97816112@N02/14090911884>

“The Gwadar Port at the Southwest of Pakistan has generated lots of curiosity due to its strategic location lying around 70 km from Iran and 400 kilometers east to the Hormuz which is a vital energy resource supply route to the world. The Gwadar deep seaport will provide the Chinese with a ‘attending post’ which can use to keep an eye on the American and Indian

activities at the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea.”²⁵ Although the potential of Pakistani naval forces doesn't have a serious threat for India yet, a combination of Chinese and Pakistan naval forces at Gawadar can be a problem for India and it will be hard to counter the joint Sino-Pak forces.

It cannot be ruled out that China has followed a policy of neutrality for economic gains throughout the world without involving in alliance or military coalitions. According to Chinese government statements, “The strategy of ‘mutually beneficial cooperation and common prosperity’ is a centerpiece of Chinese strategy, as stated in numerous PRC White Papers on National Defense.”²⁶ It is debatable whether China is pursuing hegemonic interests through ‘String of Pearls’ strategy, or simply following the policy for economic growth and peacefully rising to the global stage as a major actor. Whatsoever is the reason, Hence India perceives that China is encircling her for strategic advantages.

Interests of Other Stakeholders in Indian Ocean

The IOR has huge economic and strategic value even to the European states despite the distance. Most of the European trade routes from Asia pass through IOR. “The IOR also provides the only gateway to Europe towards Southeast Asian and Asia-Pacific markets. Europe maintains almost 35 per cent of its exports to Asia and has 4 out of its 10 major trade partners in the IOR.”²⁷ It goes without saying that “The IOR’s chokepoints at the Strait of Hormuz and Malacca have most of Europe’s energy supply passing through it on a daily basis. An almost 34m barrel of oil is carried through these chokepoints every day.”²⁸ Therefore, it is heavily dependent on smooth SLOC (Sea Lines of Communication) and swift passage throughout their trade routes.

²⁵ Sajid Shahzad, “Maritime Affairs in Pakistan’s Exclusive Economic Zone in Indian Ocean,” University Of Punjab, Lahore, 2017, <http://173.208.131.244:9060/xmlui/handle/123456789/6041>

²⁶ Anthony Cordesman, Steve Colley and Micheal Wang, “*Chinese Strategy And Military Modernization In 2015: A Comparative Analysis*,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, Rowman & Little Field, 2016.

²⁷ Thomas Christensen, “*Fostering Stability or Creating A Monster? The Rise Of China And US Policy Toward East Asia*,” *International Security*, 31(1), 81-126, 2006.

²⁸ Geoffrey Till, *Sea Power: A Guide For The 21st Century*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2013).

Similarly, for the United Kingdom (UK) importance of stability in IOR as its maritime interests align with the smooth transportation of its cargo from South Asia, the Middle East, China and Africa. After the Brexit, it is a fact that “UK adopted austerity measures among its public departments, its presence on diplomatic fronts have decreased globally. There is a smooth reorientation towards streamlining its economic interests to become an economic powerhouse in the EU.”²⁹ These policies are directed towards many IOR economies including Malaysia, Singapore, India, and Indonesia. These markets are targeted, as high growth rate environments for Britain’s products. Even after, it is no longer an Empire; the UK still has stakes in the IOR.

Japan, Australia and other stakeholders are also perturbed about the Chinese rising investments in the region. These economies have proposed to establish a global order based on a set of pre-defined rules in the Indo-Pacific regions to counter the growing Chinese presence particularly at important strategic chokepoints. Most IOR countries have their own navies in the Indian Ocean which are now coupled with naval alliances with China, the US and the European States. Similarly, Japan, the US and Australia see Beijing’s acquisition of lands along the shores of IOR as a threat to their interests and are worried that with the passage of time, China will adopt a relatively stronger approach towards the IOR by undercutting the collaborative practices and norms established in the Indo-Pacific water.

The US defence department has strategic interest in safeguarding and streamlining the SLOCs for their energy imports and protecting trade routes from any adventure or interference by maintaining a strong naval presence in the Indian Ocean. Since the Cold War, the US has established this order in the IOR and is still doing so by having established military bases in Diego Garcia and the Persian Gulf. At the same time, Japan holds its own economic interests in the Southeast Asian region, serves as a lifeline for her energy supplies. Despite having naval forces, Japan is unable to secure the naval routes due to the limits imposed by its own constitution. Therefore, it seems obvious that, Japan would re-visit her security options in order to protect its strategic and economic interests in the South China Sea and the IOR.

²⁹ Richard Pomfret, “Regionalism In East Asia: Why Has It Flourish Since 2000 And How Far It Will Go?,” *Asia Pacific Economic Literature*, vol. 25, issue no.2 (2011).

For the time being, European states have been observing the rapid developments in the IOR from the sidelines. However, in case of security threat or instability in the region, Europe's trade and energy supplies would be at risk. Any instability in the region will have far-reaching implications on Europe's economic and strategic security. The EU member states have been discussing a single principle-based order in the IOR to protect their interests in the Indian Ocean. The EU can achieve these goals by engaging with the IOR countries on diplomatic channels and draw a mechanism by using presence of French naval fleets in the region.

Russia as part of its 'Pivot to the East' strategy, she is developing stronger diversified ties with regional players in the IOR. "The Russian MoD on October 16, 2018 announced Friendship 2018 which were joint military exercises carried out in the Northern region of Pakistan involving more than 200 troops from both countries signifying towards a new step towards bilateral relations between the two countries."³⁰ They are now exacerbated by the emergence of new means of communication and/or attacks linked to the technological revolution, for example, artificial intelligence and robotics technologies. Ensuring digital security in the IO is no less important now, with regional states increasingly susceptible to cyber-attacks. In this context, the need for security and safety of deep-water cables are also worth mentioning.³¹

Cooperation or Confrontation in the IOR

China's BRI has attracted great media attention and generated heated discussions globally since it announced. It is a combination of huge infrastructural development projects and steps towards the reduction of non-tariff barriers establishment of trade connections in Asian, African and Eurasian regions. These projects will increase connectivity and commerce activity by establishing new land and sea lines, connecting China with other regions of the world. The BRI is split into 2 parts: the revival of the historic Silk route on land and the revitalisation of the Maritime Silk route to cover around 60 countries that are currently

³⁰Chuanlu Feng, "An Analysis On The Geopolitical Pattern And Regional Situation In South Asia," Springer, Singapore, 2018.

³¹ Miles Brundage et al., *The Malicious Use of Artificial Intelligence: Forecasting, Prevention, and Mitigation* (Oxford University Press, February, 2018).

generating a total of 55 per cent of the world's Gross National Product. The BRI will encompass around 70 per cent of the world population and will provide a transport route for more than 75 per cent of the discovered natural energy reserves.

The seaborne BRI focuses on developing relatively short and smooth routes by constructing a chain of deep seaports and controlling vital chokepoints along the Maritime route to the economic and manufacturing hubs in China. It includes not only port projects, but also cross-land connections such as railway and pipeline constructions. As enormous as the projects in BRI are, the obstacles, costs, potential energy and rewards are all huge. Therefore, the plan of BRI will bring great opportunity for international trading companies and logistics service providers to expand their business and for the countries involved, to develop their economies.³² To achieve these goals, it is important to first understand the current trading situation and transportation network and foresee the changes that the projects will bring.

As an emerging power, China needs oil and for that matter, she has to import it from energy rich IOR and Caspian Region. "China has not been involved in an offensive strike for the last two centuries. Although China has influence over a vital economic and military route, the Wakhan Corridor, it has not yet been used or provided for the deployment of the western forces for combat in Afghanistan. The Wakhan Corridor serves as a trade route between the Indian Ocean Region and the Caspian Sea. China wants to secure its economic routes passing through Afghanistan and even Pakistan leading to much wanted Gwadar Port at the choke point energy-rich Hurmoz in IOR."³³ The presence of the US in Afghanistan is making China compromised; however, analysts and economists are of the view that "China is an emerging economic power and can wait for the right moment. Each actor in international arena acts to its own interests an every regional and global power knows that peace in Afghanistan is vital for stability in region. As per China, the point of concern is not only the US but also the

³² Andrew Chatzky and James McBride, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative" Council on Foreign Relations, Updated, January 28, 2020.

³³ Hasan Yaser Malik, "The Emerging Strategic Rivalries In Indian Ocean Region: An Analysis Of Indo- American Ambitions And Implications For China," *Journal of Contemporary Studies*, vol. III, no.2 (Winter 2014).

aspirant India that is eager to occupy the gap in power vacuum at the IOR created by ouster of the US forces.”³⁴

Conclusion

This paper mainly focuses on the analysis and the implications of regional and extra-regional powers in the Indian Ocean. The IOR's strategic location and importance compel every stakeholder to secure maximum advantages for its national economic and strategic interests. The US along with other countries aspires to utilise the SLOCs for smoother trade conduction. Therefore, India and the US also hold reservations over the growing presence and influence of China in the IOR. India seems that in future, perhaps compromise on sharing its power and writ on the IOR with China for its own economic interests. Pakistan, shares border with some of the key regional players in the IOR but have little implications when it comes to the IOR. For China, peace and stability would be the first priority in the IOR for ensuring smooth, swift and safe trade and the US would play its part in promoting regional peace and stability instead of pursuing domination in the IOR for its own gains which can undermine international trade and stability.

The US wishes to keep its 'traditional role' for its supremacy and to monitor the Indian Ocean for the protection of its political interest which is already under threat in the Asian countries like Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. Therefore, to deal with such challenges, the US needs to keep its supremacy and grip in the Indian Ocean.

China traditionally is known, as a non-expansionist state does not seem to have political supremacy in the IO thus will avoid involving herself in international conflicts. However, she will prefer smooth trade and growing economy instead of involving herself in conflict with the US and other Western powers because that may undermine its BRI plan. It is likely that China would find a peaceful and moderate way and will create a win-win situation for major stakeholders with her soft diplomacy. It is presumed that China would manage to keep major stakeholders quiet and use the String of Pearls strategy to secure the economic benefits of the region rather would go

³⁴ S.K. Chakrabarty, *Aspects of Modern International Relation*,” Mittal Publications, 1995.

for any naval supremacy and hegemony in the Indian Ocean. In case, China is unable to manage this then its BRI multibillion-dollar plan for economic gains will be compromised.