

Maritime Power Race: India and China in the Indian Ocean

M Lipika and Sadhana Pandey

Department of Political Science

Institute for Excellence in Higher Education, Bhopal - 462016 India

Abstract

India and China are the great powers of Asia in the 21st century. Their large population and young individuals having a majority of the total population have generated opportunities for economic development. India- China relations are complex. In 1962, the war between the two became a major constraint in their bilateral relations. At present, the Indian Ocean region constitutes a large part of trade routes and choke points. China and India aim to harness the Indian Ocean region for regional and global interests. China, through its String of Pearls strategy, has increased its naval presence in the arena and India has responded through a counter-encirclement strategy as Necklace of Diamonds. To counter Chinese Dominance, India has conducted maritime diplomacy at three levels, such as high-level Bilateral visits, project Mausam, and regional cooperation.

Keywords - *China, India, Indian Ocean, Maritime System, Necklace of Diamonds and String of Pearls.*

Introduction

Alfred Mahan (Historian and naval officer) said “Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas”. Geographically, the Indian Ocean constitutes 20% ocean which spans three continents and twenty-eight countries as a major international trade route. In recent years this region has gained prominence for India and China to control trade routes, create dominance, and militarization.

85% of China’s energy requirement passes through the Indian Ocean which concerns PRC of piracy, blockade, or any type of disruption that could harm its economic and energy security interests. China’s competitive assertiveness can be interpreted through its naval presence in the region and the development of strategic and military ties with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and African nations. Recently India has been enlarging its regional cooperation, energy security, and economic interests in the region. India similarly responded by strengthening naval ties with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Iran, and Myanmar.

China’s String of Pearls

China aspires to become a superpower which is why the country needs to expand its market, business, trade, and other facilities in different countries. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is concerned with economic ties, trade expansion, market access, infrastructural development, and new establishments. The String of Pearls is a geopolitical strategy to build commercial facilities, make smooth and safe passage for maritime business, and establish military networks and bases for protecting trade interests around Indian neighbours in the region.

China aims to limit India's influence in the Indian Ocean by establishing a network of strategically placed allies. String of Pearls focuses on establishing maritime bases in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Maldives, Pakistan, Oman, Mauritius, and Djibouti to enhance trade interests and security concerns. China, in recent years, has heavily invested in the viable ports of Bangladesh (Chittagong), Myanmar (Sittwe and Kyaukpya), Pakistan (Gwadar) and Sri Lanka (Hambantota and Colombo)

Moreover, China holds an opinion that, with such purported 'encirclement' with bases, China might be in a future conflict threatening Indian interests, putting the International Sea of Line of Communications (ISLS) at risk and endangering the U.S. oceanic superiority.

India and the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is considered as India's backyard and its natural sphere of influence by some Indian scholars. In recent years, the focus of maritime thinking has shifted towards a greater emphasis on maritime supremacy—with principal concern on Indian oceanic trade, protection of Economic Exclusive Zones [EEZ], and expansion of Indian strategic depth in the ocean.

Apart from its geo-strategic importance, the Indian Ocean is significant to India for energy security, and oil demand has increased in the country, along with its growing economy and population. India's oil import is 80% [for crude oil] and 45% for natural gas [LNG]. India is greatly dependent on the marine trade that passes from the international shipping lanes across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Most of the energy required [80% of crude oil] is imported through the Indian Ocean Region—which makes it a vital region for India to monitor and dominate.

Indian maritime strategists have stated that the Chinese oceanic 'encirclement' of India or to keep India strategically lopsided and isolated in its sphere of influence, India has formulated a counterbalance strategy to deepen and broaden its cooperation with countries like the USA, Iran, Myanmar, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

Necklace of Diamonds

India has started working on the 'Necklace of Diamonds' strategy which aims at garlanding, the counter encirclement. India is expanding its naval bases and is improving relations with strategically placed countries by building ports, extensive Coastal Surveillance Radar (CSR) systems, importing state-of-the-art surveillance planes, deepening defence ties, expanding bilateral relations with South Asian countries, Island nations in the Indian Ocean region, Southeast Asian Nations and carrying out regular military exercises with navies of USA, Japan, Australia.

India is developing Chabahar port in Iran, located close to the Gwadar Port in Pakistan and it is close to the Strait of Hormuz. The Iranian Port is also accessing Afghanistan and can do business with Central Asia by using this port.

India is building a deep-sea Port at Sabang (Indonesia) located right at the entrance of the Strait of Malacca (a choke point for China) and India's Andaman & Nicobar Islands.

India got military access to Sabang Port providing a support base for India against any security threat in the Indian Ocean Region and South East Asia Region. Sittwe Port is a deep-water port constructed by India in 2016 at Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine (Myanmar) , on the Bay of Bengal. The port is being financed by India as a part of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project aimed at developing transport infrastructure in south-western Myanmar and north-eastern India to provide alternative connectivity to Kolkata.

India got military access to the Duqm Port (Oman) in 2018 located close to the Strait of Hormuz, also more than 30% of oil exports pass through this channel. It facilitates India's crude oil imports from the Persian Gulf. Besides this port is situated between two Chinese bases-Djibuti and Gwadar.

India has signed an agreement for access to Changi (Naval Base), Singapore, which is located close to the Strait of Malacca.

In 2015 India and Seychelles jointly agreed to develop naval bases in Assumption Island as it is of strategic importance to India and China desperately wants to increase its presence in the African continent by the Maritime Silk Route (MSK).

India and France recently agreed to a strategic agreement that allows both countries' warships to access each other's naval bases throughout the Indian Ocean. The Indian navy has access to crucial French ports, including Djibouti.

India's Act East Policy is closely connected with its long-term vision of developing its North-Eastern Region (NER). It has been used to make important military and strategic agreements with Vietnam, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Indonesia, among others.

It can be analysed that India has maintained cordial relations with nations in China's periphery. This will give strategic access to India and the pattern can be seen as a 'necklace of diamonds' garlanding China in a counter encirclement.

Challenges ahead

China's investments in the string of pearls strategy exceed the investment made by India for its Necklace of Diamonds. Almost all nations(in the region) have economies dependent on China and no country wants to get into a cold war with China. India's "Necklace of Diamonds" involves several countries with differing interests, and it can be difficult to find common ground and ensure the smooth implementation of the strategy.

Conclusion

India and China share a double-edged sword history since their independence which affects security dilemmas and the global maritime system. In recent years, border skirmishes have sharpened India's security concerns and have resulted in regional competition in the Indian Ocean. The geopolitical environment will unfold in ambiguous ways shortly.

Some scholars also hold the view that it is too early to analyse the effectiveness of any one strategy implemented by the two countries in this competitive dynamics. It is also important to note that both countries have certain common nations for executing developmental projects that would create uncertainty to escalate tensions. Also, the encirclement strategy is not an

official strategy but an interpretation of the activities of both India and China in the region by various academicians.

References

1. Bhattacharya Sumanta, Ray Jayant, Sinha Shakti, and Sachdev Bhavneet. "Can India's Necklace of Diamonds Strategy Defeat the China's String of Pearls." *International Journal of Recent Advances in Multidisciplinary Topics* , Volume 2, Issue 11, November 2021.
2. Mengal Jahanzaib and Mirza Nadeem Muhammad. "String of Pearls and Necklace of Diamonds: Sino-Indian Geo-Strategic Competition in the Indian Ocean." *Asia Pacific*, Vol.40,pp21-41, 2022.
3. Rishti Tasnim Naoshin "Necklace of Diamond: The Indian Strategy to Counter China." *Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS)* July 2024.
4. Scott David "India's China Challenge: Foreign Policy Dilemmas Post-Galwan and Post – Covid." *The Journal of Indian and Asian Studies* , Vol 2 , No.2 (July 2021).