

Indo-China Competing Maritime Interests, Measures and Countermeasures in the Indian Ocean Region

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Introduction

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR), one of the most significant and geo-strategically important maritime regions in the world, lies at the heart of both India and China's political and strategic ambitions. The reason for this can be attributed to several factors. First of all, its central location as a key maritime trade route that also houses three of the seven critical chokepoints heightens its importance.¹ Secondly, it is one of the most resource-rich areas with 16.5 per cent of the oil reserves, 25.5 per cent of the natural gas reserves and around 29 per cent of the coal reserves of the world originate from the Indian Ocean.² Due to its immediate proximity to the Indian Ocean, India also sees this region as its natural domain and thus seeks to project power while safeguarding its national and economic interests. From China's point of view, the increasing Indian presence in the Indian Ocean can bolster its influence while simultaneously undermining China's interests. Hence, China seeks to counterbalance the hegemonic designs of India through various economic and security measures. This study aims to assess how India is trying to fortify its position in the IOR and the means that China is employing to address the evolving dynamics.

India's Maritime Aspirations

For India, the Indian Ocean serves as a critical conduit for trade and other maritime ambitions. There are numerous drivers of India's strategic interests in the IOR, on both

economic and political levels. The Indian Maritime Doctrine (2004) clarified India's need to protect the maritime trade routes lying in the Indian Ocean to safeguard its economic activities. During the Commander's Combined Conference, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh emphasised that the Indian Navy must improve its capabilities to protect the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) to their east and west. Thus, recent years have witnessed a significant increase in India's naval footprint across the Indian Ocean and its induction as a blue water navy. Indian warships have been deployed at seaports in different countries such as Hawaii, Seychelles, Bangladesh, Egypt etc. India's power projection in the Indian Ocean is omnidirectional, with its establishment of naval bases and ports in the pursuit of the "Necklace of Diamonds" strategy that is meant to counter China's presence in the region. These bases are strategically positioned in a way that collectively, they encircle China by forming a ring, or a "necklace" around it. The development and functioning of Changi Naval Base in Singapore, Chabahar Port in Iran, Sabang Port in Indonesia, Duqm Port in Oman, and a potential base on Assumption Island in Seychelles is at the cornerstone of this strategy.

Simultaneously, it is also working on enhanced regional cooperation and diplomatic engagements with countries such as Mongolia, Vietnam, and Central Asia and has also signed a joint agreement with Japan for developing the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). India is also engaging in joint naval training programmes

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and Coordinated Patrols (CORPATs).³ Additionally, India joined hands with major players such as the United States, Japan and Australia to form a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). It is a strategic alliance that is seen as yet another tool that will act as a counterweight against China's influence in the IOR, which seems to be gaining momentum at an exponential pace. The parties to QUAD mutually conducted joint military exercises and put on an elaborate display of their naval capabilities and power, for instance, the Malabar Exercise. India's security interests stem not only from geopolitical rivalry but also because it is prone to a number of non-traditional security threats especially in the Bay of Bengal. These include the movement of illegal and undocumented migrants, human trafficking, drug trafficking, potential maritime terrorism, illegal fishing, coastal armed robberies, etc., across these waters.⁴ In addition to these activities, India has also launched a joint venture regarding Coastal Surveillance Radar Systems that would be installed in Bangladesh, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius and Seychelles. They primarily serve the purpose of keeping a watch over the Chinese activities and vessels that frequently navigate across the Indian Ocean but it is not confined to just monitoring Chinese movement. With the exacerbation of piracy threats in the IOR, improved intelligence will help in neutralising and mitigating those threats.⁵

China's Naval Counter Play

The undertakings of India in the Indian Ocean have exposed China to a "security dilemma" where it sees its influence threatened in the region. Hence, China has adopted a multi-dimensional approach to counterpoise the Indian presence. The Chinese efforts throughout the IOR are characterised by a commitment to regional stability, strategic and

diplomatic engagement with regional partners, as well as shared benefits. First and foremost, China has responded to Indian activities by adopting the "String of Pearls" strategy. This term, coined by Booz Allen Hamilton in 2005, referred to China's plans to possibly encircle India by establishing a "string" of bases and ports in various countries in the IOR from the Chinese Mainland to the Middle East and Africa. China is seeking active maximisation of its maritime presence in the Indian Ocean through the acquisition of naval vessels and the establishment of bases and ports. The enormous economic scale and geographical footprint of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a testament to China's commitment to strategically gaining a stronghold in this region. In 2013, the maritime counterpart to the Silk Road was announced, namely the Maritime Silk Road (MSR). Under this project, China has invested billions in setting up facilities in other locations such as Hambantota, Sri Lanka; Gwadar, Pakistan; Chittagong, Bangladesh; and Sittwe and Kyaukphyu in Myanmar.⁶ Another venture that China undertook was the neutralisation of the growing Indian influence in the Chabahar Port. India invested around \$500 million in Chabahar, which was countered by Xi Jinping's BRI in Eurasia. China signed a 25-year strategic partnership agreement with Iran on investing \$400 billion in the economy of Iran. In exchange, Iran was to cater to China's energy needs at discounted prices and cooperate in various BRI projects. This is a certain way to exert its influence in another port in the region, thus counterbalancing India's presence.⁷

The most recent link in this chain can be dated back to 2017 when China established its first overseas naval base in Djibouti.⁸ According to China, these bases are meant only for logistical support purposes, e.g. refuelling, replenishment and resting of naval crew, as well as for anti-piracy and humanitarian assistance

missions.⁹ Even though these bases are, indeed, positioned very strategically in a way that they can challenge India's interests; they are far more significant in terms of the benefits they garner for the states on the receiving end of these investments. The majority of the host countries are the ones that have been subjected to economic instability for a long time, and joint ventures with China can significantly boost their economies. In the case of China, this is infinitely beneficial as well since it can position itself at the economic crossroads and secure the SLOCs and, thus, its economic interests. This symbiotic relationship poses a win-win for all parties involved not merely because of the economic and geopolitical benefits but also due to the enhancement of diplomatic ties and cooperative bonds between these countries.

Apart from naval establishments in the IOR, a notable increase can be seen in the numbers and deployment of People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). As of 2024, the Chinese Navy is the largest in the world, with 370 submarines and ships, as reported by the US Department of Defence.¹⁰ Chinese Navy has deployed new submarines, survey and hydrographic vessels in the Indian Ocean with some of them operating quite close to Indian Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). In recent years, China has gained attention for manoeuvring its elite vessels, e.g. the Haiyang class 22, Xiang Yang Hong 03 and 10, which have surveyed different regions, such as the Bay of Bengal and the Southwest Indian Ocean.¹¹ This increased naval presence and surveillance is important for China to maintain since the safety of its economic and security concerns depends upon these two things. Around 80 per cent of China's oil trade passes through the Indian Ocean¹² and growing Indian influence in the region has made China wary about its safety. The presence of alliances such as QUAD and I2U2 operating throughout the Indo-Pacific

region reeks of a ganging up against China by the parties involved. Hence, China is keeping its economic and security interests first and leaving no stone unturned in their pursuit.

Theoretical Analysis

The evidence clearly suggests that India and China are strikingly similar in both their aspirations and approaches regarding their maritime interests. These countries follow a Neo-Realist model where they are inclined to maximise both power and security. Their struggle to achieve these objectives has sparked a 'security dilemma' amongst these countries, which states that the security of one state spells out insecurity for another rival state. The suspicions of the two countries towards each other, and their strategic actions will keep on exacerbating their mutual tensions, rendering the IOR a geopolitically volatile region. Both countries are adopting strategies that are not overtly offensive but can definitely be seen that way. Hence, the cycle of action and reaction will be perpetuated unless the two countries come together and find common grounds for cooperation and peaceful coexistence in the maritime region of IOR. Until then, the region will remain vulnerable to instability, marked by a climate of mistrust and escalation of an "arms race". Not only this, but the smaller states are bound to get caught in the crossfire of this great power game between the two potential hegemonies. This will cause further polarisation and bloc formation within the IOR.

Conclusion

India and China have been at odds with one another for a long time, due to their comparable means and ends. Each player wishes to develop its hegemony over the Indian Ocean Region for the fulfilment of their economic, strategic and political objectives.

India's increasing influence in the IOR can pose threats to Chinese interests, hence the latter seeks to balance the situation out and vice versa. This struggle to gain advantage over each other can have serious implications, not just for the countries themselves but for other players involved as well. India has always exhibited a pattern of putting its own interests first, despite the external pressures and thus, will continue to do so. A full-scale conflict or a confrontation does not serve either state, but the tensions are bound to persist if a better solution is not sought. Hence, to prevent further complication of dynamics in the region, China

and India must join hands together. They should pursue the means to exist harmoniously together through joint ventures, mutual exchanges and enhanced bilateral cooperation. Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) can play a huge role in de-escalating their tensions and developing trust between India and China through open communication and regular dialogues. Another effective solution is the establishment of hotlines between the authorities so that the other one can be informed of any situation that might lead to rupture, or to clarify any misunderstandings to minimize any possibility of further tensions.

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