

India's Maritime Partnerships and China's Naval Expansion: Competing Visions for the Indian Ocean

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Abstract

This paper examines the strategic maritime competition between India and China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). As China extends its naval presence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and String of Pearls strategy, India has responded by strengthening maritime partnerships with the United States, Japan, Australia, and regional littoral states. The research analyzes how these competing approaches reflect broader geopolitical visions for the region's future security architecture. Through examination of naval modernization efforts, port development strategies, and multilateral security arrangements, this paper argues that the Indian Ocean has become a critical theater for great power competition, with significant implications for regional stability and the international order.

Keywords

Indian Ocean, maritime security, India-China relations, naval strategy, Belt and Road Initiative, Indo-Pacific, Quad

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1. Introduction

The Indian Ocean, historically considered India's "backyard," has emerged as a focal point of strategic competition between rising powers in the Indo-Pacific. As the world's third-largest ocean, it serves as a critical maritime highway connecting Europe, Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and the Asia-Pacific, with approximately 80% of global seaborne oil trade traversing its waters (Kaplan, 2011). The strategic significance of the Indian Ocean has intensified in recent decades with China's economic rise and subsequent naval expansion beyond its traditional sphere of influence in the South China Sea. India, as the region's traditional maritime power, has viewed China's growing presence with alarm. While China frames its activities in the region as purely economic and focused on securing vital sea lanes for energy imports, India perceives these developments as part of a systematic strategic encirclement that threatens its security interests and regional influence (Brewster, 2018). This has prompted India to accelerate its own naval modernization program while simultaneously cultivating strategic partnerships with like-minded maritime powers including the United States, Japan, and Australia.

This paper seeks to analyze the evolving maritime competition between India and China in the Indian Ocean Region through an examination of their contrasting approaches to naval expansion, port development, and alliance building. It further evaluates how these competing strategies reflect fundamentally different visions for the region's security architecture and what implications this holds for regional stability and the broader international order.

The central research questions addressed are:

1. How have India and China's maritime strategies in the IOR evolved over the past decade?
2. What role do strategic partnerships play in India's approach to counterbalancing China's maritime expansion?
3. What are the implications of this maritime competition for regional security architecture and the future of the Indo-Pacific order?

2. Historical Context and Strategic Imperatives

2.1 India's Traditional Maritime Outlook

India's geographical positioning at the center of the Indian Ocean has shaped its strategic outlook since independence. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, recognized the importance of maritime power, stating that "to be secure on land, we must be supreme at sea" (Nehru, 1946). Despite this early recognition, India's maritime strategy remained underdeveloped during the Cold War period as continental threats from Pakistan and China dominated security planning (Pant, 2016).

However, following economic liberalization in the 1990s, India began to recognize the critical importance of maritime security for its economic development and regional influence. The 2004 Indian Maritime Doctrine formally articulated India's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean, defining a sphere of influence extending from the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca (Indian Navy, 2004). This was further expanded in the 2015 maritime security strategy, which emphasized India's role as a "net security provider" in the region (Indian Navy, 2015).

2.2 China's Maritime Transformation

China's naval strategy has undergone a dramatic transformation since the early 2000s. Historically a continental power, China's economic rise and growing dependence on maritime trade routes has driven a fundamental shift in strategic thinking. Admiral Liu Huaqing, often referred to as China's "Mahan," articulated a vision for transforming the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) from a coastal defense force into a blue-water navy capable of protecting China's expanding global interests (Cole, 2010).

The concept of "far seas protection" emerged in Chinese naval doctrine in the 2015 defense white paper, signaling China's ambition to operate beyond its immediate periphery (Ministry of National Defense, PRC, 2015). This doctrinal shift has been accompanied by rapid naval modernization, with China commissioning new destroyers, aircraft carriers, and submarines at an unprecedented rate (IISS, 2023).

China's strategic interest in the Indian Ocean is primarily driven by its energy security concerns. With approximately 80% of its oil imports transiting through the Strait of Malacca, China faces what President Hu Jintao termed the "Malacca Dilemma" – a strategic vulnerability that could be exploited by adversaries during a conflict (Storey, 2006). This vulnerability has been a key driver behind China's efforts to establish alternative maritime and overland energy routes through the Belt and Road Initiative.

3. China's Maritime Strategy in the Indian Ocean

3.1 The Belt and Road Initiative and Maritime Silk Road

Announced in 2013, China's Belt and Road Initiative represents the most ambitious infrastructure development program in modern history, spanning over 140 countries with investments exceeding \$1 trillion (World Bank, 2023). The maritime component, known as the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, encompasses a network of ports, logistics hubs, and maritime corridors connecting China to Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.

In the Indian Ocean context, key BRI projects include the development of deep-water ports in Pakistan (Gwadar), Sri Lanka (Hambantota), Myanmar (Kyaukphyu), and Kenya (Lamu), as well as industrial zones and transportation

corridors linking these ports to mainland China (Hillman, 2020). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship BRI project with investments exceeding \$62 billion, aims to connect Xinjiang province to the Arabian Sea via the Gwadar port, potentially allowing China to bypass the Malacca Strait for a portion of its energy imports (CPEC Authority, 2022).

Critics argue that these investments constitute a “debt trap diplomacy” strategy designed to gain strategic leverage over economically vulnerable states. The case of Sri Lanka’s Hambantota port, which was leased to China for 99 years after Sri Lanka struggled to service Chinese loans, is frequently cited as evidence of this approach (Chellaney, 2017). However, more nuanced analyses suggest that host country agencies and complex domestic political factors also play important roles in these arrangements (Jones & Hameiri, 2020).

3.2 The “String of Pearls” Theory

The “String of Pearls” theory, first articulated in a 2004 report by defense contractor Booz Allen Hamilton, posits that China is systematically establishing a series of naval facilities across the Indian Ocean to support long-range power projection capabilities (Khurana, 2008). According to this theory, Chinese port investments in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Djibouti form a strategic necklace of bases that could eventually support military operations throughout the region.

China has consistently denied military motivations behind its port development projects, emphasizing their commercial nature. However, the 2017 establishment of China’s first overseas military base in Djibouti, strategically located at the entrance to the Red Sea, and reports of exclusionary zones for Chinese naval vessels at commercial ports like Gwadar have heightened concerns about the dual-use potential of these facilities (Pant & Joshi, 2019).

Recent analysis by the U.S. Department of Defense suggests China is actively seeking to establish additional overseas military bases, with Cambodia, Tanzania, the United Arab Emirates, and Pakistan identified as potential locations (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). If realized, such a network would substantially enhance China’s ability to sustain naval operations throughout the Indian Ocean.

3.3 Naval Modernization and Deployment Patterns

China’s naval modernization program has produced remarkable results over the past decade. The PLAN now possesses the world’s largest navy by number of vessels, including three aircraft carriers, approximately 50 destroyers, and 70 submarines (IISS, 2023). While quantitative growth is impressive, qualitative improvements are equally significant, with new vessel classes like the Type 055

destroyer featuring advanced air defense, anti-submarine warfare, and long-range strike capabilities comparable to those of established naval powers.

The PLAN's presence in the Indian Ocean has grown steadily since 2008, when China began deploying naval task forces to the Gulf of Aden for counter-piracy operations. These deployments have provided valuable operational experience in distant waters while establishing a legitimate rationale for regular Chinese naval presence in the region. By 2023, China had conducted over 40 naval escort missions in the Indian Ocean, demonstrating sustained operational capabilities far from home waters (Xinhua, 2023).

Chinese submarine deployments to the Indian Ocean, which began in 2013, have been particularly concerning to Indian security planners. Between 2013 and 2022, Chinese submarines conducted regular patrols in the Indian Ocean, with port calls in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Malaysia (Gurung, 2022). These operations suggest an emerging undersea competition that could complicate India's traditional advantage in regional anti-submarine warfare.

4. India's Maritime Response

4.1 Naval Modernization and Force Projection

India has responded to China's naval expansion with an ambitious modernization program of its own. The Indian Navy's 2015 Maritime Security Strategy outlines plans for a 200-ship fleet, including three aircraft carrier battle groups, to ensure dominance throughout the Indian Ocean Region (Indian Navy, 2015). However, budgetary constraints have slowed implementation, with naval allocations frequently falling short of requirements (Pant & Joshi, 2020).

Despite fiscal challenges, India has made significant progress in enhancing maritime domain awareness and force projection capabilities. The commissioning of INS Vikrant, India's first indigenously built aircraft carrier, in 2022 marked a major milestone in naval development (Ministry of Defence, 2022). Meanwhile, the leasing of two Predator drones from the United States has enhanced surveillance capabilities in the northern Indian Ocean, with plans to acquire 30 more such platforms in the coming years (Raghuvanshi, 2022).

India has also prioritized the development of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as a strategic outpost controlling access to the Malacca Strait. Infrastructure improvements, including expanded runways capable of supporting long-range maritime patrol aircraft and fighter jets, have strengthened India's ability to monitor Chinese naval movements from these islands (Peri, 2021).

4.2 Maritime Partnerships and the "Quad"

Recognizing the limitations of unilateral approaches, India has pursued a strategy of cultivating strategic partnerships with like-minded maritime powers.

The most prominent manifestation of this approach is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) involving India, the United States, Japan, and Australia. Initially established in 2007 and revived in 2017, the Quad represents an effort to promote a “free and open Indo-Pacific” based on shared democratic values and respect for international law (White House, 2021).

While the Quad is not a formal military alliance, it has steadily enhanced maritime security cooperation through exercises like Malabar, which have grown increasingly sophisticated and now regularly feature carrier operations, anti-submarine warfare, and integrated air defense components (Singh, 2022). The March 2021 virtual Quad Leaders’ Summit elevated the grouping to the leader level and expanded its agenda to include critical technologies, climate change, and vaccine diplomacy, while reaffirming maritime security as a core focus (Quad Leaders, 2021).

Beyond the Quad, India has strengthened bilateral maritime partnerships through logistics exchange agreements with the United States (LEMOA), France, Australia, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea (Ministry of Defence, 2023). These agreements enhance operational reach by facilitating access to partner facilities for fuel, supplies, and maintenance.

4.3 Indian Ocean Region Outreach

India has simultaneously sought to reinforce its position as the preeminent security partner for smaller Indian Ocean states. The 2015 “SAGAR” (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine articulates a vision of inclusive regional development with India as a “preferred security partner” for island nations and littoral states (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015).

Concrete manifestations of this approach include:

1. The Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) was established in 2018, which shares maritime domain awareness data with regional partners and now hosts liaison officers from 12 countries (Indian Navy, 2022).
2. Provision of maritime security assistance to Mauritius, Seychelles, Maldives, and Sri Lanka, including gifted patrol vessels, surveillance equipment, and training support (Pant & Mehta, 2023).
3. Development of port infrastructure in Iran (Chabahar), Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Vietnam as a counterweight to China’s port investments (Jha, 2021).
4. Regular naval deployments throughout the region, with Indian warships conducting port calls and joint exercises with nearly every littoral state in the IOR (Indian Navy, 2023).

This multifaceted approach aims to preserve India's historical influence while preventing smaller regional states from becoming exclusively dependent on Chinese investment and security cooperation.

5. Comparative Analysis and Strategic Implications

5.1 Contrasting Approaches to Regional Order

India and China's competing maritime strategies reflect fundamentally different visions for the regional order. China's approach emphasizes infrastructure development and economic integration as pathways to regional influence, while leveraging growing naval capabilities to protect expanding interests. This model offers partner nations economic benefits through infrastructure development but may create dependencies that limit strategic autonomy (Ghosh, 2022).

India, in contrast, has promoted a vision based on respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and adherence to international law, particularly UNCLOS. India's approach emphasizes capacity building rather than creating dependencies, encouraging regional states to develop their own maritime security capabilities with Indian assistance (Pandit, 2022). However, India's limited economic resources relative to China constrain its ability to match Chinese infrastructure investments. These competing approaches have created a complex strategic environment where smaller regional states increasingly practice "strategic hedging" – maintaining positive relations with both powers while avoiding exclusive alignment with either (Rajagopalan, 2020).

5.2 The Intensifying Maritime Security Dilemma

The simultaneous naval buildup by both powers has created a classic security dilemma in the Indian Ocean. Actions intended as defensive by one side are frequently perceived as threatening by the other, triggering counterresponses that escalate tensions (Pant & Joshi, 2019). This dynamic is exemplified by China's establishment of a naval base in Djibouti, which was justified as supporting anti-piracy operations but prompted India to secure access agreements with France and the United States for regional facilities.

The risk of miscalculation is heightened by limited crisis communication mechanisms between the two navies. Unlike the established protocols that govern U.S.-China naval encounters, India and China lack robust mechanisms for preventing and managing incidents at sea (Rehman, 2022). This deficiency, combined with broader bilateral tensions following the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, creates the potential for rapid escalation from even minor naval incidents.

5.3 Implications for Regional Stability and International Order

The maritime competition between India and China has significant implications for regional stability and the broader international order. Three potential scenarios emerge:

First, continued competition could lead to a bifurcated regional order with countries forced to choose between Chinese or Indian/Western security frameworks. This outcome would increase regional tensions and potentially undermine economic integration (Mohan, 2023).

Second, pragmatic accommodation could emerge through tacit recognition of respective spheres of influence, with China focusing on the western Indian Ocean and India maintaining primacy in the eastern Indian Ocean. While reducing tension, this scenario might compromise principles of openness and freedom of navigation (Pant & Mehta, 2023).

Third, multilateral frameworks could evolve to manage competition through confidence-building measures, incident prevention mechanisms, and collaborative approaches to common maritime challenges like piracy and climate change. This scenario, while challenging to achieve, offers the best prospects for regional stability (Khurana, 2023).

The outcome will depend significantly on how each power balances assertiveness and restraint in pursuing its maritime objectives, as well as the ability of regional institutions to manage great power competition.

6. Conclusion

The maritime competition between India and China in the Indian Ocean represents a critical dimension of evolving Indo-Pacific geopolitics. As China expands westward from its traditional Pacific sphere of influence and India seeks to maintain its historical predominance in the Indian Ocean, their interactions will significantly shape regional security architecture and the broader international order. India's response to China's maritime expansion has been multifaceted, combining naval modernization with strategic partnerships and regional outreach. This approach has yielded notable successes, including the revitalization of the Quad and strengthened bilateral maritime partnerships with key global powers. However, persistent gaps between strategic ambition and financial resources constrain India's ability to fully counterbalance China's influence. China's Belt and Road Initiative and naval modernization have fundamentally altered the strategic landscape of the Indian Ocean. While primarily driven by legitimate economic and energy security concerns, China's growing military presence raises questions about long-term intentions. The dual-use potential of Chinese-developed ports across the region creates strategic ambiguity that fuels regional anxiety.

Looking ahead, managing this maritime competition will require creative diplomacy and confidence-building measures. Both powers have a shared interest in maintaining maritime security and freedom of navigation in vital sea lanes. These common interests could potentially form the basis for limited cooperation, even

amidst broader strategic competition. For smaller regional states, the challenge will be maintaining strategic autonomy while benefiting from engagement with both powers. Most have adopted pragmatic hedging strategies that avoid exclusive alignment, but sustained pressure from intensifying great power competition could eventually force difficult choices.

Ultimately, the trajectory of India-China maritime competition will significantly influence whether the Indo-Pacific evolves toward increasing confrontation or a stable, rules-based order accommodating the legitimate interests of all regional powers. The outcome remains uncertain, but its implications for global security and prosperity in the 21st century are undeniable.

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