

**RESEARCH PAPER**

The Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean: China-India Strategic Competition

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine China and India due to China's growing maritime footprint through ventures as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and the development of port infrastructure in the Indian Ocean (IO) littorals, which India considers as its 'backyard' and deems China's activities as its 'encirclement'. This study explores the interplay of economic, strategic and security factors that shape the naval postures and regional engagements. The IO has emerged as a strategic arena for maritime contestation as the US and India maintain a robust presence to contain China's expanding influence. Methodologically, this research employs a qualitative approach utilizing content analysis of existing literature, including official policy documents such as China's Defense White Paper, India's Maritime Security Strategy, and academic literature. In conclusion, to offset China's assertive activities, India has enhanced its naval expansion and forged alliances such as the Quad (the US, Australia and Japan), evolved the US-India partnership and initiated the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). This enduring strategic competition will continue to define the architecture of the IO. To recommend, it is suggested that to prevent escalation during naval encounters, stable communication channels should be developed between China and India. Both states need to strengthen joint maritime domain awareness (MDA) by expanding information-sharing networks and coordinated surveillance mechanisms.

Keywords: China, India, Indian Ocean, BRI, Blue-Water Navy

Introduction

The IO has emerged as a theatre of competition between China and India. In 1890, the seminal work, 'The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660-1783' by Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, the US naval strategist enunciated the geopolitical significance of the IO, "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas. In the 21st century, the destiny of the world will be decided in its waters." (Mahan, 2011) India's Maritime Security Strategy seeks to maintain its powerful naval presence in the IOR and prevent other regional powers from gaining ground in this strategic maritime region. Mohan Malik notes that for Delhi, securing a naval presence in the Pacific Ocean becomes important for its strategic deterrence against China. Having consolidated its control over the SCS and militarized the artificial islands, China's navy has now set its sights on the IO. China deems the SCS as 'China's Sea', but the Indian Ocean is not treated as India's Ocean, which invited India's ire (Malik, 2018, March 15). China and India's inland competition has already led to military engagements, if on a limited scale, most recently over disputed borders, and there are signs of maritime tensions in the strategic IO. As both countries are enlarging their naval military capabilities, the possibility of conflict grows, as their competition is increasingly characterized by hostility.

IO is the third largest and warmest ocean on earth, occupying an area roughly equal to Asia and Africa combined (Mboya & Arun, 2025). It is bounded by the continents of Asia, Africa, Australia, and the Southern Ocean (Ocean Geography, n.d). The IOR encompasses the IO and land territory stretching from the Mozambique Channel in the west, to the Strait of Malacca in the east and incorporates the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Bay of Bengal, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Oman. Moreover, the 33 IO littoral states with a total population of approximately 2.9 billion form the economic and strategic heart of the Indian Ocean Rim (Mboya & Arun, 2025; Baruah, Labh & Greely, 2023 June 15). The IOR is critical for the world's trade; nearly 90,000 ships pass through the region's waters yearly, accounting for \$7 trillion in total trade in 2022 (Mboya & Arun, 2025).

The area within the continental shorelines is also rich in natural resources, including hydrocarbons, minerals containing cobalt, zinc, gold, copper, nickel, and rare earth minerals and living resources such as fisheries stock. The ocean floor contains rocks and biological materials. Within the region are several crucial choke points through which goods, naval movements, commercial shipping, oil and energy traverse. These include the Six, the Eight/Nine-degree Channels, the Straits of Malacca, Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, the Singapore, the Sunda and Lombok, the Cape of Good Hope and the Mozambique Channel. Securing these channels and the trade going through them, along with security and stability, is critical (Mboya & Arun, 2025).



Figure 1: Significant Chokepoints in IO Source: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/06/mapping-the-indian-ocean-region?lang=en>

The IO holds enormous strategic, political and economic significance, serving as a maritime conduit for global trade and energy. Over 80 percent of global sea-borne oil trade and a total 40 percent of world trade pass through the Straits of Hormuz, Oman, and the Malacca (Lee & Horner, 2014 Jan 11). This ocean connects the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. China and India's pursuit to access critical chokepoints and expand their zone of influence in the IOR aims to dominate the IOR.

For China, IO is the lifeline to secure supplies of energy/oil, with nearly 80 per cent of its oil imports passing through the Strait of Malacca, a significant chokepoint often termed as 'Malacca Dilemma'. China has sustained investment outlays and engagements with the region (Dosson, 2025 July 8). Moreover, China remains a top importer for 24 states and a top exporter for 13 states in the IO. China's investment and development ventures have furthered its cooperation and diplomatic, economic and military ties with the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh (Butt & Siddiqui, 2021). China's naval expansion through foreign naval bases and installations underscores its strategic ambitions to safeguard maritime interests and trade routes, project force, expand its blue water naval capabilities and to shelter economic pursuits. China's building of ports in the IO littorals such as Gwadar, Hambantota and Djibouti, underpinned by its national interests and energy security pursuits and extending outreach in the IO.

The US encourages its allies to share the responsibilities and play a proactive security role to counter China's expanding presence, infrastructural ventures and naval arms buildup in the Indian Ocean. The US forges Quad, intelligence-sharing accords and joint drills (such as Malabar) with like-minded navies. The US maintains a robust naval presence in the IO through naval facilities such as Diego Garcia, Fifth Fleet presence and operations and anti-piracy and counter-terrorism missions to secure vital sea routes and chokepoints. The US, along with its allies, regularly conducts naval drills and surveillance operations to ensure open SLOCs and prevent any single power, especially China from dominating the region.

India, as a resident maritime power, considers the IO as its natural sphere of influence. Its 7500 km coastline, along with 14,500 navigable waterways, comprises 212 active ports, including 200 minor ports. India maintains one of the largest navies in the region and several surface vessels, aircraft carriers, and submarines (Baruah, Labh & Greely, 2023). The defense expenditure of India is mounting with an emphasis on aggregating its maritime capabilities and counterbalancing the security perils in the region. India's maritime security approach is reinforced by Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), the development of a port network (Andaman and Nicobar Islands), and participation in multilateral naval drills such as Malabar.

Literature Review

For long, the IO has emerged as a core of great power rivalry due to varied powers vying for domination, which has been a recurring feature of global politics. The IO is home to four key chokepoints, the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca, the Suez Canal and Bab-el Mandeb. The IO connects East Asia, Africa, the Middle East with the Americas and Europe. In the past, major powers had competed with each other such as in the 19th century, Great Britain controlled and dominated the region till its relative decline and the emergence of two superpowers, the US and USSR, during the Cold War. The US and USSR vied to extend their influence and power. However, for long, the US remained the key player in the region. Currently, India attempts to establish its predominance, but its limited material capabilities have constrained India from fully responding to China's ascending capabilities in the IO (Yaseen, et al., 2016; Pant, 2009).

China's paramount concern in the IO is the access of uninterrupted energy supplies, which has more than doubled in the last two decades, exacerbating its reliance on oil and gas imports from the Persian Gulf and the Horn of Africa. With this objective, China operates soft-power diplomacy to secure bases and ports in IO bases linking the Middle East and China, augmented by diplomatic ties. China has cultivated close ties with the IO littorals to counterweight the US and monitor India's rise and has earned a 'String of Pearls' in the US. China expands its maritime pursuits and material power; it encounters another emerging power, India that is a dominant power in the IO (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008).

India, due to its geographical proximity, deems itself a natural leader and perceives the presence of extra-regional naval powers, particularly China, as illegitimate and enjoys exclusive rights in the IO. India has covertly harbored ambitions to emerge as a dominant power in IO and perceives it as “India’s ocean” and its backyard. It is exclusively a region and ocean named after a single state. India’s approach in the IO is defensive due to the state’s colonial experience to justify the elimination of extra-regional from the IO, labeled as “India’s Monroe Doctrine”. On the Other hand, China is making huge investments with the objective of sheltering the sea routes and chokepoints across the IO to fulfill its interests for its growing population (Brewster, 2016).

Material and Methods

This research employs the Qualitative Content analysis technique to unearth the evolving maritime security, economic and strategic dynamics of China-India strategic competition in the IO. The content analysis of existing literature, including official policy documents, think-tanks reports, peer-reviewed scholarly articles, reputable international newspapers’ articles and China’s Defense White Paper, India’s Maritime Security Strategy, and academic literature. This approach allows interpretation and contextualization of the complex and multi-dimensional nature of data to identify themes, patterns and underlying meaning.

Results and Discussion

China’s Maritime Strategy: Its Strategic Motivations in the Indian Ocean

China’s Defense White Paper indicates the doctrinal shift from ‘near-seas defense’ to ‘far-seas protection’ to sustain operations and project powers in distant maritime regions, not limited to immediate perimeters or littoral waters and support its overseas interests (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2019, July 24).

China’s maritime strategy in the IO is comprised of four key chunks. First, naval force deployments to secure maritime trade and economic pursuits in the IO; it reinforces the MSR initiative; second, to obtain logistical and operational capabilities for sustained far-seas presence; third, to disrupt India’s geostrategic zone of influence as the two are strategically entrenched in zero-sum game in maritime competition and, fourth, to overpower the hazard of US naval domination and deter its coercive maneuvers by increasing the cost of conflict (Krupakar, 2017). Beijing aspires to emerge as a ‘global maritime power’ (haiyang qiangguo) able to command the far seas and oceans (Monika & Khan 2023). Cognizant of India’s strategic advantage in the IOR, China’s rhetoric is to pursue a ‘harmonious sea’ strategy, advancing maritime cooperation with IO littorals while projecting power to significant sea routes and secure economic pursuits (Mboya & Arun, 2025).

Beijing’s economic statecraft, including BRI, has emboldened its ties with IO littorals through infrastructural ventures and economic investments (Ain, et al., 2024; Rolland, 2017). PLAN has expanded its zone of influence into the IO critical for trade, connectivity and energy security. Doraleh Multipurpose Port (DMP) in Djibouti is China’s first overseas naval base in the IO, providing Beijing with logistic facilities and replenishment capabilities for far-flung missions. Port visits, joint drills and anti-piracy missions along the Gulf of Aden and Arabian Sea provide China with operational capabilities and augment its maritime diplomacy. The development of port infrastructure under BRI, such as Hambantota, Sri Lanka; Gwadar, Pakistan; and Kyaukpyu, Myanmar, increases China’s capability to project influence in eastern IO. China’s direct outlet into the IO is through the China-built Kyaukpyu, along the coast of the Bay of Bengal. But China has built other facilities in the region, including the Gwadar and Kyaukpyu deep-water ports and is increasing its presence in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. These advances have bolstered India’s concern about China’s ‘String of Pearls’ strategy (a term adopted by the US-based consulting firm), aiming to

encircle India and secure China's supremacy over significant chokepoints like the Straits of Malacca and Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb (Wang, 2018, April 13; Butt & Siddiqui, 2021). Djibouti's naval base and frequent docking at Gwadar, Pakistan, enable China's extended deployments and logistical support far from its mainland. China-Pakistan naval cooperation has intensified due to the partnership under CPEC.

Distant geographies and regions have emerged as a part of Beijing's critical infrastructure. Beijing's heavy investments in other states and base-acquisition spree are manifested as approximately two-thirds of the 50 major ports in the world are either in China's hold or have received some Chinese investments. The SCS stretches from Japan's archipelago to parts of Malaysia and the Philippines. Also, Beijing's expansion into the Second Island Chain reinforces China's presence further into the Pacific Ocean. Also, China is projected to operate the world's largest naval and submarine fleets. In spite of China's covert naval aspirations and narrative of a shared benefit relationship, the strategic approach dominates the IO (Malik, 2020, March 23). Beijing has combined the naval expansion strategy with economic development and multilateral integration in the region. Beijing has acquired Hambantota Port for 99 years, Gwadar Port in Pakistan for 40 years, Djibouti Port for 10 years, 20 per cent of Cambodia's coastline for 99 years, Piraeus Port, Greece, for 35 years, and the Maldivian island of Feydhoo Finolhu for 50 years on lease (Malik, 2018).

Beijing's development of Kyaukpyu Port in Myanmar on the Bay of Bengal under the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) is a bilateral venture under BRI. China's military base in Djibouti, along with development of major ports initiatives in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Malaysia, and Cambodia, are developed under MSR- an oceanic leg of BRI positioned at IO.

Chinese activities have impelled the Indian Navy to unearth a three-pronged strategy; 1. To strengthen its control in IO through forward bases in Seychelles, Mauritius, Maldives, Iran, Madagascar and Oman, 2. Conduct joint naval drills in the South and East China Seas, agreed on logistics exchange agreement with the US, France and Singapore which reflects its naval expansion ambitions, 3. Propose aid to littorals and "Project SAGAR", an alternate vision to China's MSR, aimed at reviving India's ancient trade channels and cultural bonds with the IO littorals (Malik, 2018).

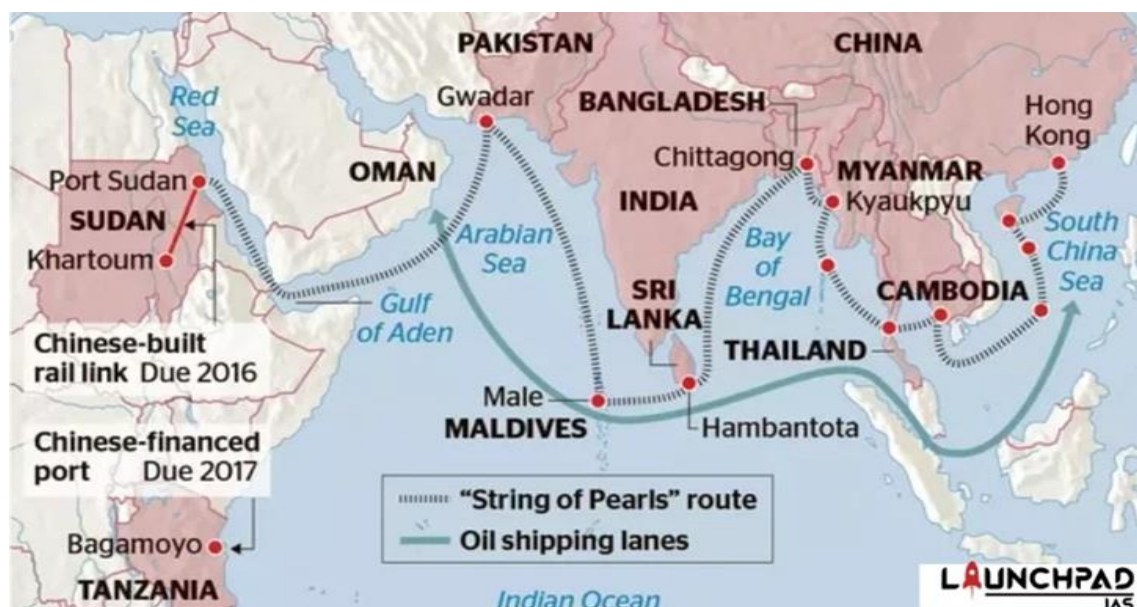


Figure 2: China's 'String of Pearls' StrategySource: <https://launchpadeducation.in/string-of-pearls-strategy/>

The BRI, launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, is a grand strategy aiming to enhance connectivity, trade, and geopolitical influence across Asia, Europe, Africa, and beyond. Its two components, the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), overland corridors to connect China with Europe and Central Asia and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), a sea-based linking China's ports to Southeast Asia, the IO, Africa and the Mediterranean, strategically serve multiple purposes, including economic, geopolitical and maritime. BRI has facilitated China's construction, expansion and operation of several ports, including the Lamu Port, Kenya, among others and related infrastructure across the IOR. Nearly 147 states, accounting for two-thirds of the world population and 40 per cent of GDP, have agreed or shown interest in being a part of BRI (McBride, Berman & Chatzky, 2023, Feb. 2).

The implementation of the BRI in collaboration with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) will not only reduce travel times but will also directly connect China to ports in the IOR as well as to other strategic locations. Gwadar Port, the main project under CPEC, is in proximity to Chabahar Port in Iran and the ports of the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

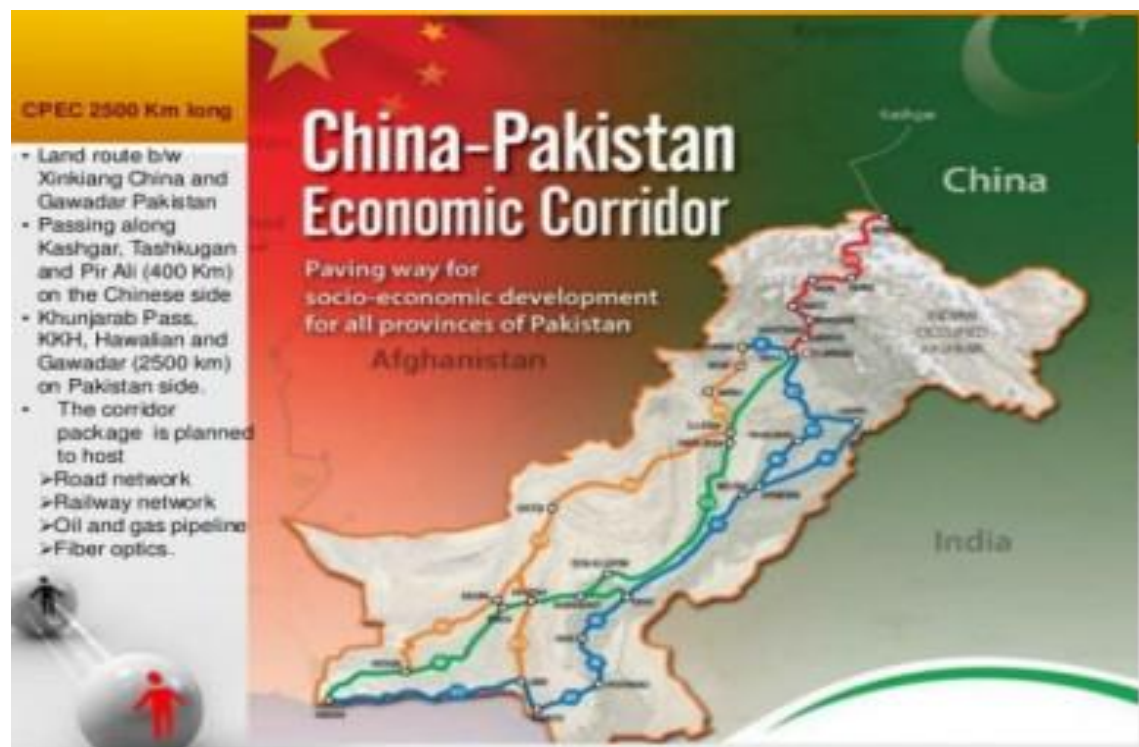


Figure 3: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Route Source: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1491843/trumps-new-afghan-strategy-actually-ploy-cpec-claims-russian-journalist>

China's investment provides China with the potential dual-use facilities that can serve both economic and strategic purposes (Krupakar, 2017). China's naval expansion through far-off naval bases and installations underscores its strategic ambitions to shelter maritime interests, connectivity routes and economic pursuits, project force and enhance its blue-water naval capabilities. The growing militarization of key sea routes, coupled with China's assertive actions, has the potential for strategic contest with competing powers. China expands its presence in the IOR through BRI and associated maritime infrastructure.

Moreover, the regional rival, India and a global power, the US, have sparked concerns against BRI due to its debt trap of partnering states, erosion of sovereignty of host states and strategic encirclement of India. They observe it as a tool of geo-economic expansion from a continental power to a maritime and ultimately a global power. India has

opposed CPEC passing through Gilgit Baltistan, part of Pakistani-administered Kashmir that boosts the China-Pakistan strategic nexus.

However, China avers that the BRI is a development venture having purely economic and not strategic intentions and rejects the idea of encircling India, emphasizing its collaboration is open, inclusive and non-targeted to third parties and it does not alter the status of the disputed territory of Kashmir to be resolved peacefully. Furthermore, China argues that its rise is based on peaceful coexistence steered by the 'community of shared future of mankind', which is a global development rather than an international system. Responding to 'debt dependency', China asserts that win-win cooperation and debt distress in some states are owing to structural challenges of host states. China has undertaken debt restructuring and engaged in consultations with partnering states to address debt sustainability issues.

India's Maritime Security Strategy and Response

India enjoys traditional dominance in the IO and plays a key role between the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. India's territorial waters include 193,834 sq. km. Also, it enjoys an extensive Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) spanning over 2.02 million sq. km. The IO plays a vital role in trade, securing sea and port routes in and beyond the region. Also, India relies significantly on the IO for trade, energy supplies, tourism and livelihood (Schottli, 2022).

As mentioned in Indian Maritime Security Strategy, India's primary areas of maritime interest include not just littoral waters (immediate seas) but farther IO regions that are significant for India's trade, energy and strategic SLOCs such as "the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, Andaman Sea, and their littoral regions; the Persian Gulf and its littoral...the Gulf of Oman and Aden, Red Sea; South-West Indian Ocean, including IOR island states therein and East Coast of Africa littoral regions..." The secondary areas of interest incorporate India's strategic maritime strategy which stretches beyond the IO to incorporate parts of the South-East Indian Ocean (towards the Pacific), the South and East China Seas, the Western Pacific, and even the Southern Indian Ocean down to Antarctica (Indian Navy, 2015, p. 32).

India is establishing naval alliances and engagements with like-minded states in the Indo-Pacific, such as the Quad to counterweight China to achieve energy, economic and national security. India attempts to secure its maritime pursuits, subvert the challenges, shelter its coastline, maintain a sturdy naval presence in the IO and project power beyond its immediate seas. The contemporary IOR is embodied with vying maritime strategies and multilateral alliances.

Indian Premier Modi in 2015 articulated the Project SAGAR, complementing India's Maritime Security Strategy. SAGAR denotes a comprehensive strategy to enhance maritime security and capacity-building, achieve economic cooperation and maintain regional connectivity. Furthermore, India projects itself as a 'net security provider' capable of maintaining security, counter the threats and deter external intervention (Embassy of India, Belgrade, 2025 Aug 18). India's institutionalization of multilateral frameworks such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) aimed at maintaining maritime order and countering the emerging naval threats.

The bilateral security agreements reinforce the US-India strategic partnership in the IO. Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with the US enables logistical support, reciprocal access to bases, extending India's operational reach (Muneer, 2016). Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreements (BECA) offers India access to the US satellite, geospatial and mapping data, increasing surveillance, navigation and targeting capabilities. Mutual Security and Resilience Agreement (MSRA) reinforces bilateral security frameworks

and resilience measures, enabling cooperation in managing maritime threats and regional contingencies. Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) permits the sharing of encrypted communications and real-time tactical data, enhancing interoperability. These frameworks deepen US-India defense ties and enable a cooperative approach to shelter free navigation and stability in the IO (Banerji, 2024).

Also, India's 'Act East Policy' supplements its maritime vision and mounts its outreach to the Western Pacific by aligning with maritime security frameworks such as the Quad. This multi-vector approach aims to counterweight China's growing assertive actions and secure India's strategic maritime presence across significant maritime chokepoints; Straits of Malacca to Mozambique Channel (Singh, Singh & Singh, 2024). Launched in 2019 by Premier Modi, India's IPOI framework supports a safe, stable and secure maritime order in the Indo-Pacific, achieved through cooperation in which India is positioned as a leading maritime power.

India's participation in the Malabar drill highlights its alignment with like-minded democracies, enhancing interoperability. India's Project Mausam is a soft-power initiative by revitalizing ancient maritime sea lanes and civilizational connections across the IO. By underscoring historical and cultural links, India seeks to influence through democracy, common identity, and historical collaboration (Pandey & Mahapatra, 2024).

China conducts bilateral and multilateral drills particularly with Russia, Pakistan and Iran in the Arabian Sea, indicating increased naval collaboration and shared interest in balancing the US alignments. In IO, China's naval exercises aim to safeguard vital SLOCs and shelter strategic interests such as BRI. PLAN's operations include anti-piracy missions, naval presence and port calls to project force across the IO western rim. Joint naval exercises such as the "Sea Guardians" series reflect China's support for naval security in the Arabian Sea and the IO. The joint maneuvers close to Gwadar Port include anti-terrorism and naval security exercises. A multilateral naval exercise, Mosi, involving China, Russia, and South Africa and the Marine Security Belt (with China, Russia and Iran), represents a convergence of emerging counter-coalitions to US and India-led security arrangements and "deepen exchange and cooperation" between participating navies, exhibiting resilience and the ability to collaborate to maintain maritime security and peace. Whilst apparently, these drills focus on anti-piracy and security collaboration, showing the formulation of alternative security frameworks (Dezheng, Ke, & Ningchuan, 2024, March 14).

India maintains IO as a strategic zone of influence that is driven by China's naval reach in the IO. Moreover, Beijing is apprehensive about India's ability to monitor and its potential capability to restrict Chinese energy and trade flows accessing through this route. India views IO as its strategic backyard and ensures blue-water naval capabilities. India views China's naval movements in the IO, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, including China's 'String of Pearls' strategy.

To counter BRI, India has engaged in infrastructure cooperation, such as Chabahar Port, Iran, strategically sited close to Gwadar Port, providing India an alternative to Gwadar to connect India to Central Asia. Moreover, India endorses the idea of Blue Economy through fisheries and other ocean resource management and maritime capacity enhancement to immediate island countries such as Mauritius, Maldives and Seychelles, where China has made inroads through BRI.

India's balancing strategy involves a mix of strategic denial and engagement. India augments surveillance and security collaboration with littorals to check PLAN's expansion. India's strategic alliances allow its access to facilities in Vietnam and Oman. India is proactively engaged in developing ports and facilities with partnering states such as Assumption Island (Seychelles), Duqm (Oman), Lakshadweep and Sabang (Indonesia), to create a network of alliances rather than bases, which enhances surveillance, force

projection and sea routes security. On the western flank, the Lakshadweep Islands offer India strategic depth in the Arabian Sea, facilitating it to shelter SLOCs connecting the Persian Gulf with the Indian coast. Extending beyond its territorial waters, India's access to Duqm Port, located near the Strait of Hormuz, in 2018 defense cooperation agreement offers a key logistical hub to replenish and refuel India's naval vessels operating in the western IO (Sharma & Bhatt, 2019).

Through the "Necklace of Diamonds" strategy, India aspires to balance China's infrastructure benefit by strengthening ties with like-minded states and mobilizing across ocean space. As a result, India is increasing its naval bases and managing its ties with Chabahar Port, Iran, Mongla Port, Bangladesh, Sittwe Port, Myanmar, Changi Naval Base, Singapore and Sabang Port, Indonesia. The enhancement of naval facilities at INS Dweep prakshak (Kavaratti) increases India's logistical and operational preparedness, serving as a readiness to offset China's increasing influence (Das, 2025).

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India's only tri-service command, are sited proximate to the Strait of Malacca and constitute India's eastern outpost, serving as a hub of the most critical chokepoints of the world through which China's major energy imports transit. India integrated collaborative operations and reinforced maritime domain awareness to coordinate with allies such as the US, Japan and Australia, under the Quad framework (Muraliprasath, 2021).

Together, these bases offer India's "Act East-Look West" maritime vision and functionalization of the SAGAR doctrine by enabling India to act as a 'net security provider', counterweight to China's maritime assertive strategies, and ensure the security of the ocean's sea lanes.

China's naval force projection in the IO manifests a clear objective to secure access to energy resources, deter adversaries, shelter key maritime routes and chokepoints and reshape the regional maritime security order. PLAN is the largest navy in the world. Due to PLAN's blue-water naval capabilities, operational expertise, expanding naval infrastructure and naval arms buildup, it can influence occurrences in the IO and it is arduous for the adversaries to offset without a sustained and coordinated response. Moreover, in 2014, PLAN sent a nuclear-powered submarine into the IO, overtly to undertake anti-piracy missions.

India maintains credible force projection and presence in the IOR but confronts a qualitative and quantitative gap, keeping in view China's blue-water naval capabilities. India augments multi-domain maritime assets and increases alliance cooperation in the region. India responded by increasing naval drills, modernization and expansion of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, deeper collaboration with the US, Australia, and Japan and emerging as a dominant actor or 'net security provider' to offset the perceived China threat.

India's Navy, though significant, remains outpaced by China's rising zone of influence in both naval assets and fleet tonnage. The Indian Navy operates 150 vessels, 18 submarines and 2 aircraft carriers (INS Vikramaditya), with the commissioning of INS Vikrant in 2022 reflecting a growing blue-water naval capability. In contrast, the PLAN operates more than 370 vessels, approximately 73 submarines and 3 aircraft carriers (Global Military, 2025; The Economic Times, 2025). More precisely, China's under-water force comprises 6 SSBNs, 6 SSNs, and some 48 diesel-electric boats, whilst India reportedly has about 3 SSBNs and 16 diesel-electric units as of recent exports (The Economic Times, 2025). Moreover, India's active naval force is around 67,000, while China's naval force extends beyond 235,000, including marines (Indian Defence News, 2020 September 10). However, China's destroyers and frigate fleet are larger and more advanced. China has fielded numerous Type 055 destroyers with significant vertical-launch missile capacity, outpacing India's fewer and older surface combatants (ajaishukla.com).

China's economic diplomacy with IO littorals such as BRI, port infrastructure building and loans and India's SAGAR strategy, naval drills with Quad participants and surveillance mechanism reflect that they both are competing for maritime influence. Both states deem the IO as vital. China perceives it necessary for energy security and trade flow, while India perceives it integral to national security due to geographic centrality.

China-India naval competition in the IO is framed by structural factors such as asymmetrical powers, geography and security dilemmas rather than political dimension. Both states seek strategic depth, influence and security, making the IO a crucial theatre of the 21st century geopolitics. Persistent competition, balancing foreign policies of middle powers and ascending naval modernization define the future trajectory of the region.

Conclusion

The China-India naval competition in the IO embodies a broader strategic competition for access to critical SLOCs and to expand their zone of influence in the IO. India is a resident power in the IO. India expanded its naval infrastructure to sustain its traditional supremacy and ensure freedom of navigation through ventures such as SAGAR and IONS, and forging the alliances such as the Quad. On the other hand, China's mounting naval deployments, its expansive naval ventures such as BRI and the construction of ports' infrastructure along the IO littoral states signify its pursuit to access energy and trade supplies and global maritime outreach. India's maritime gain lies in contiguity and operational proficiency. PLAN's power rests on its blue-water naval capabilities and greater industrial capacity. The lack of mutual trust and a communication mechanism amplifies the hazard of miscalculation, particularly between security postures and strategic competition for littorals influence. Thus, the growing maritime competition highlights not merely a transformation in power dynamics but also a pressing need for collaborative frameworks, CBMs, to avoid IO from emerging into a theatre for competition rather than conflict.

Policy Recommendations

To maintain peace and security in the IO, the regional forums such as IORA (China holds the status of Dialogue Partner) and IONS (China participates as an occasional observer) offer mutual dialogue and training, cooperative maritime security initiatives, but these remain underutilized or not effectively employed to address security and strategic challenges. Fortifying these frameworks could increase confidence-building measures (CBMs) such as regular naval exchange of information and collective search and rescue operations to avoid confrontation between major consequential navies in the IO. China and India need to proactively engage through collaborative ventures such as the seaborne economy, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) and protection of the maritime environment. The smaller IO littorals need balanced ties with China and India and exploit economic advantages such as infrastructure development, port investment and maritime connectivity.

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