

# Chinese Naval policy in the Indian Ocean Region: Building “string of pearls” around India

Dr. Aruni Sharma

Associate Prof., Department of Political Science, Shri Jai Narayan PG College, Lucknow

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## ABSTRACT

There is little doubt about the Chinese intentions vis-à-vis India. By virtue of its economic power and military might, it has been able to play a dominant role in the Indian Ocean region. China has embarked upon the policy of building a string of pearls around India by providing economic and military aid to the countries of the region especially those in close proximity to the Indian shores.

Because of the uneasy past and the territorial disputes between India and China, the Chinese actions in the Indian Ocean region have been viewed with growing suspicion by India.

It is obvious that the 21st century would be characterised by ever-rising competition for natural resources and world influence between the ‘Asian Elephant’ and the ‘Asian Dragon’. Although India and China do not share a maritime boundary, the recent Chinese aggressive postures in the South China Sea coupled with its foray into the Indian Ocean region by developing port facilities in the Indian Ocean region countries have seriously raised Indian concerns and security stakes in the area. The Chinese submarines have been visiting the ports of India’s neighbouring countries with increasing frequency giving jitters to the Indian strategic establishments. There is little doubt that one of the most characteristic features of international relations in the Indian Ocean region in the 21st century would be the competing claims for dominance between the India and China.

This paper would take a look at the Chinese naval policy in the Indian Ocean region and how it has an impact on Indian Maritime concerns. It would also discuss how India can successfully challenge the Chinese hegemonic designs in the region.

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## Introduction

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Although India and China do not share maritime boundary, the recent Chinese aggressive postures in the South China Sea coupled with its foray into the Indian Ocean region by developing port facilities in the Indian Ocean region countries have seriously raised Indian concerns and security stakes in the area. The Chinese submarines have been visiting the ports of India’s neighbouring countries with increasing frequency giving jitters to the Indian strategic establishments. There is little doubt that one of the most characteristic feature of international relations in the Indian Ocean region in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be the competing claims for dominance between the Asian Elephant and the Asian dragon.

India was one of the first countries to lend support to Chinese struggle. She was also one of the first countries to recognise the communist mainland China as an independent country. India’s first Prime Minister J.L. Nehru was very enthusiastic about the mutual cooperation between the two countries which had suffered at the hands of the colonial powers and thus enjoyed a common past. However, China paid only lip service to the slogan of “Hindi Cheeni Bhai Bhai” and first annexed Tibet thereby destroying the centuries old “Buffer” between the two great countries. India also suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Chinese Army in the Ladakh Sector in the 1962 war. The relations between the two Asian giants have had an uneasy ride since.

## Chinese naval policy In the Indian Ocean Region

In the early years of the People’s Republic of China, China’s goals in the Indian Ocean area were quite unclear. China’s national defence policy is essentially land-based, and the country’s strategic goals in this regard are murky at best. Around the same time that Britain announced in 1968 that she would withdraw her soldiers from the east of the Suez Canal, the Chinese undertook a complete shift in her strategic doctrine. The Soviet Union and the United States prepared to fill the void in regional dominance, sparking an arms race and expanding their conflict into the Indian Ocean. The Chinese adopted a more ideological, politico-strategic viewpoint on the Indian Ocean after observing the stances of the United States and the Soviet Union. The Chinese government has been

critical of Russian and American dominance in the region. The Chinese government considered Russian efforts to gain naval superiority in the Indian Ocean as part of a larger Soviet goal to surround China in the maritime sphere.<sup>1</sup>

The authorities of China believed that the United States was the only country capable of providing a balance to the Soviet Union. Later, beginning in 1977, relations between the United States and China improved, and there were rumours of a tacit agreement between the two nations to counteract any Soviet efforts to acquire strategic footing in the Indian Ocean. Having the Indian Ocean demilitarised has long been a goal of China's foreign policy, as it would pave the way for Beijing to increase its sway over the region's littoral and hinterland governments and secure strategic foothold there via military outposts.<sup>2</sup>

In 1969, China officially acknowledged Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda's independence. China provided substantial economic and military help to countries like Zambia, Mozambique, South Africa, and Rhodesia, which were inspired by Chinese philosophy. China has been quite involved in West Asia, namely in the cause of the Palestinians. The United States and the Soviet Union were very worried about the rise of China in the Gulf, especially in nations like Oman and Yemen. A number of island nations, most notably Zanzibar "Chinese Cuba", were impacted by the Chinese.

China has provided significant financial, military, and technological assistance to countries including Sri Lanka, Mauritius, the Seychelles, and Madagascar.<sup>3</sup>

Soviet naval expansion in the Indian Ocean in the late 1970s, at which time the Soviet Union wanted a maritime passage from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific and Sea of Japan, was viewed as "encirclement" by the Chinese.<sup>4</sup> Thus, China redoubled its efforts in the Indian Ocean littoral states in the early 1970s, and then turned its focus to the Soviet Union while treating the United States with kid gloves. Slowly but surely, China began to gain a decisive advantage over the Soviet Union in key areas.

The Chinese navy established a facility in Myanmar (Burma) on the island of Hangyi in the late 1980s. Hangyi is about 100 miles from Andaman & Nicobar Island and is close to the maritime boundary with India. The sale of Chinese weapons to Myanmar, including jet fighters, tanks, rockets, and coastal ships, has alarmed the region's other governments. The Chinese have become a dominant power in the South China Sea since the end of the Cold War in August 1991. Putting down four structures on Mischief Reef, she asserted Chinese sovereignty over the Spratly Islands. There are other

nations with claims to these islands besides China, including Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Brunei, but they are unwilling to use force to challenge China's claim. China sees the ocean as a place of essential national interest, and its long history in the area motivates it to play a significant role there. East Africa, Burma, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and the South China Sea have all been major focal points in China's aspirations to expand its sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean.

Currently the People's Liberation Army Navy PLA-N with 255000 officers and ratings is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest navy in the world after the US. But according to a US Congress report Chinese navy is likely to overtake US Navy in the Asia-Pacific region by 2020. China's exact expenditure on its navy, though hard to be known, is estimated to be around \$131 billion in 2014, more than 12% higher than the previous year.<sup>5</sup>

### Chinese' string of pearls around India in the Indian Ocean region

As a rising economic super power, China is fast expanding its area of influence both in strategic and economic terms. It has embarked upon a mission to enhance its influence in the entire Indian Ocean Region IOR, starting from Southeast Asia right up to Africa on one hand and Australia on the other. Part of China's plan to build various lines of connection to its economic core in Eastern China is the so-called Maritime Silk Road (MSR). Since the turn of the millennium, such a policy has sought to develop China's interior provinces while simultaneously shaping the country's regional perimeter through the application of economic, political, and cultural muscle. China's dominance in South Asian trade lanes would be bolstered by the MSR, making it a crucial strategic initiative.

China's grandiose Land and Maritime Silk Roads were first revealed on maps by Xinhua in May 2014. China plans to bolster infrastructure and port facilities in governments spanning maritime channels through which China's trade and natural resources flow to create an 'economic cooperation region' that stretches from the Western Pacific to the Baltic Sea.<sup>6</sup>

China is constantly embarking on a plan to expand its presence in the Indian Ocean region by offering to develop port facilities in various countries including some in India's immediate vicinity. Chinese media have reported that 18 different naval bases will be established around the world. These include locations in the northern Indian Ocean (Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar), the western Indian Ocean (Djibouti, Yemen, Oman, Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique), and the central South Indian Ocean (Seychelles and Madagascar). According to media sources, China's efficacy in

<sup>1</sup> 'Peking Review, 27 June 1969, p.J7'.

<sup>2</sup> 'Bhasin V.K., Super Power Rivalry in the Indian Ocean, New Delhi, S. Chand & Co., 1981, p.91'.

<sup>3</sup> "New Review on South Asia Indian Ocean", Strategic Analysis, IDSA (New Delhi), vol.24, no.9, September 1992, p.675".

<sup>4</sup> "Peking Review, n.60, p.17".

<sup>5</sup> 'The Chinese Navy Will Be Bigger Than America's by 2020', Business Insider, December 14, 2014, <https://www.businessinsider.com/the-chinese-navy-will-be-bigger-than-americas-by-2020-2014-12?IR=T>

<sup>6</sup> Zorawar Daulet Singh, 'Indian Perceptions of China's Maritime Silk Road Idea', JOURNAL OF DEFENCE STUDIES Volume: 8 Issue: 4, October 2014.

fulfilling its responsibilities to ensure the security of international marine channels thanks to the construction of these three critical lines would help to preserve peace in the area and the globe as a whole.

Other naval bases are: North Korea's Chongjin Port, Papua New Guinea's Moresby Port, Cambodia's Sihanoukville Port, Thailand's Koh Lanta Port, Myanmar's Sittwe Port, Bangladesh's Dhaka Port, Pakistan's Gwadar Port, Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port, Maldives' and Seychelles' ports, Djibouti's port, Nigeria's Lagos Port, Kenya's Mombasa (Angola).<sup>7</sup>

According to a Reuter's report dated July 2, 2018, Sri Lanka shifted its naval base to the Port of Hambantota, controlled by the Chinese. Sri Lanka in a way, had to surrender the port to the Chinese by leasing it for 99 years.<sup>8</sup> This action of Sri Lanka, despite repeatedly denying that Hambantota Port would not be used for military purposes, raises serious doubt about Sri Lankan intentions vis-à-vis India, its immediate neighbour. China could easily use Hambantota port for military purposes, such as for reconnaissance and spying, as it has almost exclusive control over the port since it has the legal right by virtue of the lease.

Two months apart in 2014, Chinese navy submarines docked at Colombo Port without any warning. The first time was in September 2014, coinciding with a trip to Vietnam by Indian President Shri Pranab Mukherjee. According to a report in the Times of India on November 3, 2014, the Chinese nuclear-powered submarine Changzheng 2 and the warship Chang Xing Dao returned to the Colombo Port despite India's earlier warning to Sri Lanka that the presence of Chinese submarines in Sri Lanka would be unacceptable to India.<sup>9</sup>

When one of China's diesel- and nuclear-powered submarines (of which three can launch ballistic missiles) crossed into the Persian Gulf from the Indian Ocean for the first time in early 2014, it captivated the attention of the world's media.

The Wall Street Journal recently published an article claiming that China's submarine fleet is the country's greatest military threat in the area. The fact that they have begun to appear at Sri Lankan ports gives credence to some of New Delhi's darkest suspicions about China's growing footprint in India's neighbourhood.<sup>10</sup>

The Sino-Pak axis is having been a source of constant worry for the India establishment. China developed a close partnership with Islamabad starting with early 1960's and continued to provide military hardware and technology to the latter. The Chinese hand is also strongly suspected in Pakistan acquiring nuclear weapon and missile technologies. China is also the largest arms supplier to Pakistan. China has also helped in the development of the naval base at the deep sea port of Gwadar situated in the Balochistan province of Pakistan.

Due to close Sino-Pak military partnership, Indian defence experts fear the interference by the Chinese forces in the event of a military confrontation between India and Pakistan. The Chinese attempts at developing port and naval facilities in the Island nations of the Indian Ocean region including some in the immediate vicinity of India is seen as a part of the strategic containment policy against India and as Chinese denial of dominant regional power status in the Indian Ocean region to India.

The Chinese leadership has made it a point to assuage Pakistani concerns whenever there is any thaw in the Indo-Chinese relationship. The strategic advantages China enjoys from its partnership with Pakistan and with other Islamic countries through Pakistan easily outweigh the advantages it receives from its improved relationship with India. Pakistan is also the only country which stands up to India, thus fulfilling a key objective of China's south Asia policy of preventing India's hegemony over the region.<sup>11</sup>

### **Need to confront China in the Indian Ocean Sea lines of communication SLOCs**

Some Indian defence analysts have also argued in favour of increased naval capabilities by India in the Indian Ocean region in order to counter the security and strategic threat from China. According to an article in "the Hindu" dated July 19 2013, Rear Admiral RETD. Raja Menon has argued that in the event of hostilities India should aim at blockading Chinese shipping in the Indian Ocean which has become increasingly important for China in view of the resource dependence on African countries. Much of the trade obviously passes through the sea lines of communications in the Indian Ocean. According to him by creating a "mountain strike core" India is only playing to the strategic advantage of China which has built a huge logistical network in Tibet. "A geographically limited one axis offensive will not destabilise the PLA, but a flotilla of nuclear submarines and a three carrier air group in the Indian Ocean can economically cripple mainland China."<sup>12</sup> But in another article in the same newspaper, Zorawar Daulet Singh has argued that due to the fact of reduced dependence of China for at least some strategic resources like Oil and Gas

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> 'Sri Lanka to shift naval base to China-controlled port city', Reuters, July 2, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-china-port-idUSKBN1JS22H>

<sup>9</sup> 'Chinese submarine docking in Sri Lanka inimical to India's interests: Govt', The Times of India, Nov 4, 2014. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Chinese-submarine-docking-in-Lanka-inimical-to-Indias-interests-Govt/articleshow/45025487.cms>

<sup>10</sup> 'Sri Lanka snubs India, opens port to Chinese submarine again', the Times of India, Nov 2, 2014. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Sri-Lanka-snubs-India-opens-port-to-Chinese-submarine-again/articleshow/45008757.cms>

<sup>11</sup> J. Mohan Malik, 'China-India Relations in the Post-Soviet Era: The Continuing Rivalry', The China Quarterly, no. 142, June, 1995, P.335.

<sup>12</sup> 'A mountain strike corps is not the only option', The Hindu, July 29, 2013. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/a-mountain-strike-corps-is-not-the-only-option/article4963979.ece>

on Indian Ocean SLOCs and the increased Chinese access to Central Asia and Russia through the land route, India must rely on strong built-up of its army on land. . Thus, strong army build up is necessary to counter the continental China.<sup>13</sup> But Raja Menon believes that the debate will eventually be “overtaken by China’s hurtling pace of growth, that will force Beijing to rely almost exclusively on its SLOCs to support the garnering of resources from Africa and South America. “So Mahan will eventually prevail — not his theory of the big battle; but that of protecting extended lines of commerce by an active maritime policy.”

## Conclusion

With the possible economic down-turn, China may be forced to rely upon an aggressive foreign policy both in order to quell internal dissention as well as to garner more economic resources for itself from the Indian Ocean Region. Chinese aggressive postures in the South and East China sea, as well as its increasing tendency to start a confrontation with India on land, at the same time conniving with Pakistan, is a clear indication of things to come.

China, in its latest policy document on defence, has also vowed to increase its "open seas protection" in tune with its expanding long-range deployments of nuclear submarines, destroyers and frigates far away from its shores.

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13 'China deterrence cannot come from Navy', The Hindu, August 07, 2013. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/china-deterrence-cannot-come-from-navy/article4996362.ece>