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MOHAMMAD SAMIR HUSSAIN

## INDIA-CHINA STRATEGIC RIVALRY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

*The present paper examines the key strategic issues faced by India in the Indian Ocean in the light of growing Sino-Indian rivalry. The ongoing rivalry between India and China is no longer confined to only land borders, but, rather, it has extended to maritime areas of interest to both. Both sides as expected are competing in many areas, including the maritime dominance in the Indian Ocean. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century has witnessed a deep and wide strategic rivalry between India and China over the control of the strategically located Indian Ocean. The paper argues that the contest for regional influence in the Indian Ocean has resulted in a strategic competition between them that makes the Indian Ocean a contested space. The paper further argues that India, by virtue of its geo-strategic location, enjoys considerable strategic disadvantages in the Indian Ocean compared with China.*

### ***Introduction***

The twenty-first Century has been referred to as the Asian Century because of the dominant role India and China are expected to play, given the fact that both countries represent the two largest economies and the most populous countries in the world. India and China attach tremendous significance to the

Indian Ocean for a variety of reasons. Both countries to meet their increasing energy requirements and further development of their economy, will continue to rely on foreign sources of energy, which is imported mostly from the Persian Gulf and East Africa, via the Indian Ocean. Besides, a significant proportion of their external trade is transacted through the Indian Ocean.<sup>1</sup>

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) endowed with rich energy resources and intense trade volume is very much significant for Asia's two rising powers, China and India, which are increasingly reliant on oil transiting the region. India and China continue to rely heavily on the Indian Ocean to meet its increasing requirements. Over 80% of China's imported oil and natural gas is carried through the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, nearly 80% of Indian crude oil requirement is imported by sea, using the international shipping lanes across the Indian Ocean.<sup>2</sup>

India-China rivalry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is no longer confined to only land borders; rather, it has extended to maritime areas of interest to both. Both sides, as expected, are competing in many areas including the maritime dominance in the Indian Ocean. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century has witnessed a deep and wide strategic rivalry between India and China over the control of the strategically located Indian Ocean. Against the rising Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean region, India remains committed to protecting its extended geopolitical interests in the Indian Ocean.<sup>3</sup>

The strategic rivalry between the two Asian giants – India and China over the Indian Ocean is based on the latter effort to gain access, including the use of ports and the securing of bases. China in particular, sought to secure energy resources and reduce its reliance on the Strait of Malacca, and has laid forth its "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative.<sup>4</sup> The Indian Ocean has of late emerged

1 Raj Mittal, "Sino-Indian Relations in the Indian Ocean: Conflict or Convergence?", *Associate Paper*, Future Directions International, November 26, 2019, available at <<https://www.futuredirections.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Sino-Indian-Relations-in-the-Indian-Ocean-Conflict-or-Convergence.pdf>>.

2 Taylan Ozgur Kaya and Fatih Kilic, "Sino-Indian Strategic Rivalry in the Indian Ocean Region", *The Journal of Humanity and Social Sciences*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2017, p. 156.

3 Francine R. Frankel, "The Breakout of China-India Strategic Rivalry in Asia and the Indian Ocean", *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 2, Spring-Summer 2011, p. 5.

4 Mari Izuyama and Masahiro Kurita, "Security in the Indian Ocean Region: Regional Responses to China's Growing Influence", available at <[http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/east-asian/pdf/2017/east-asian\\_e2017\\_02.pdf](http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/east-asian/pdf/2017/east-asian_e2017_02.pdf)>.

as one of the strategic priorities of China. The maritime interests of Beijing overlap with those of India's interests. They witnessed a sharp competition in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Beijing has expanded its naval activities into the Indian Ocean, policymakers in New Delhi have expressed serious concerns over the growing Beijing's power projection in the region.<sup>5</sup>

China has of late increased its naval presence in the Indian Ocean by way of establishing strong economic and military ties with India's neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan through the building and upgrading of port facilities, rail links, pipelines, etc. The move is actually aimed at boosting its regional influence in the Indian Ocean. In response, India, taking advantage of its position, remains committed to prevent China from challenging its predominant status in the region. India has every reason to be cautious about the Chinese strategic dispersion into the Indian Ocean littorals and its naval activities in the region as it posed a profound strategic challenge to the former's its vital strategic interests and pull down its pre dominant position in the region.<sup>6</sup>

One of the key arguments for this paper is that the contest for regional influence in the Indian Ocean has resulted in a strategic competition between them that makes the Indian Ocean a contested space. The present paper sought to examine the key strategic issues faced by India in the Indian Ocean in the light of growing Sino-Indian rivalry. The paper further argues that India by virtue of its geo-strategic location, enjoys considerable strategic disadvantages in the Indian Ocean as compared with China.

### ***Understanding Factors Guiding Geo-Strategic India-China Rivalry in the Indian Ocean***

Several factors have shaped the ongoing strategic rivalry between India and China in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. These include -

- a. India-China power asymmetry and the growing Chinese profile in the world order;
- b. China-Pakistan ever-expanding strategic engagement via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a key project in China's Belt

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5 Tüneer Mukherjee, "Sino-Indian Maritime Competition: Shadow Fighting in the Indian Ocean", South Asian Voices, June 7, 2020, available at <<https://southasianvoices.org/sino-indian-maritime-competition-shadow-fighting-in-the-indian-ocean/>>

6 Taylan Ozgur Kaya and Fatih Kilic, n. 2, pp. 157-58.

- Road Initiative (BRI);
- c. China's growing dominance by way of its multi-dimensional engagement with countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Myanmar, etc;
  - d. China's intensifying maritime presence in the IOR, including the new military base at Djibouti as well as an increased naval presence in the Indian Ocean;
  - e. India's decision not to join China's BRI over sovereignty concerns related to CPEC projects in Kashmir;
  - f. Prolonged border disputes between India and China and the recent border standoff at Galwan Valley in Ladakh in 2020;
  - g. China's opposition to India joining the Nuclear Suppliers Group and to it becoming a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council;
  - h. India's hosting the Dalai Lama and nearly 100,000 exiled Tibetans;
  - i. India's growing profile in South East Asia and the recent transition from Look East Policy to Act East Policy and its expanding economic and defence cooperation with South East Asian countries.<sup>7</sup>

### ***China's Long-Term Strategic Objectives in the Indian Ocean***

The long-term strategic objectives of China in the Indian Ocean region have to be seen in the light of its broader foreign policy objectives. Such objectives are largely influenced by its threat perception and its desire to remove or reduce sea-borne threats. Beijing in particular, is concerned about the growing understanding between India and the United States in the region. China's core interests in the Indian Ocean are as given below:

- a. Thwart the development of rebel groups in neighbouring Indian Ocean littoral states that could pose a security challenge to China's maritime interests in the Indian Ocean region;
- b. Promote China's global image by expanding engagements with countries located in the Indian Ocean region in the field of trade, investment and

<sup>7</sup> See, "China-India Great Power Competition in the Indian Ocean Region: Issues for Congress", *Congressional Research Service* # R45194, 20 April 2018, p. 10.

- security;
- c. Ensuring that China's maritime objectives are not jeopardised by any countries, including India, the United States;
  - d. Ensuring uninterrupted access to markets, energy supplies, raw materials and technology;
  - e. Ensure full protection of maritime and land transport corridors.<sup>8</sup>
  - f. Secure protection of sea lines of communication (SLOC).

To serve its long-standing maritime interests and generate maritime connectivity, China has over the last decade, developed 14 ports at different locations throughout the Indian Ocean region. Since, over 85 percent of China's oil import is transported across the Indian Navy-guarded Indian Ocean and passes through the Straits of Malacca. China needs to protect its SLOCs across these regions.<sup>9</sup>

### ***China's Expanding Military Influence in Indian Ocean Region***

China's growing military presence in the Indian Ocean region in the recent past has come in sharp conflict to India's ambitions to become a leading power in the Indian Ocean region.<sup>10</sup> From a futuristic perspective, India's aspirations in the Indian Ocean have been that New Delhi be acknowledged as a major power in the region.<sup>11</sup> China's emergence as a major power in the Indian Ocean has something to do with its rising profile in the global scenario. This has added a new maritime dimension to India's threat perceptions of China. China is seeking to establish effective control over the Indian Ocean through its projection of naval power. This was very-well predicted many decades ago by our renowned geographers, K. M. Panikkar, when he underscored that,

'It was only the existence of the naval power of the SriVijayas that prevented the Chinese from establishing their authority in the Indonesian

8 See, 'China's Strategic Objectives in the Indian Ocean Region', Workshop Report of *Future Directions International- Independent Strategic Analysis of Australia's Global Interests*. May 23, 2011.

9 Thangavel K. Balasubramaniam and Ashok Kumar Murugesan, "China's Rising Missile and Naval Capabilities in the Indo-Pacific Region", *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Summer 2020, p. 98.

10 David Brewster, "India and China at Sea: Competition for Naval Dominance in the Indian Ocean", *South Asia Democratic Forum*, No. 116, February 13, 2018, p. 1.

11 Thangavel K. Balasubramaniam and Ashok Kumar Murugesan, n. 9, pp. 98-99.

Archipelago and as the Portuguese appear soon after the breakdown of Sri Vijaya, the southward expansion of China over oceanic space was shut out. The movement towards the south which is indicated by the significant demography of the area, may, and in all probability will, be reflected in the naval policy of resurgent China.<sup>12</sup>

To ensure secure and uninterrupted protection of seaborne transportation, strategic Passageway for energy import and exploitation of resources in international waters, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has undergone rigorous military modernisation. It has also established a military base in Djibouti and developed a port in Hambantota, Sri Lanka. China also developed the port of Kuantan port on the east coast of Malaysia, which connects the SCS and the Indian Ocean. These ports and overseas military bases are strategically located on the sea lane of the MSR, encroaching upon India's maritime domain. This causes greater strategic deterrence for India's maritime security in the Indian Ocean.<sup>13</sup>

Prior to 2008, Chinese PLAN ships had rarely made its presence into the IOR, as their maritime oriented operations were largely limited to the coastal waters of China and the Western Pacific. However, post-2008, PLAN personnel were found to be visible in countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, Iran and a number of African countries, where they are involved in training, providing support in the operation of newly acquired platforms and the like. China has also grown to be the third largest arms supplier in the world, which has led to a number of buyers in the IOR and a consequential Chinese presence.<sup>14</sup>

Over the past few decades particularly since the turn of 21<sup>st</sup> Century, China has made significantly strides in its engagements in the Indian Ocean region, raising significant fears among American and Indian strategists to take effective responses. The Chinese PLAN forces sought to create a strategic space

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12 K. M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: an Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1945), pp. 85-6.

13 See, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress", Congressional Research Service, RL33153, May 21, 2018, available at <[https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20180521\\_RL33153\\_e35f60e52cf5ea7a1d4140a0860971a2b4d7cb40.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20180521_RL33153_e35f60e52cf5ea7a1d4140a0860971a2b4d7cb40.pdf)>.

14 Gopal Suri, *China's Expanding Military Maritime Footprints in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR): India's Response* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press in association with Vivekananda International Foundation, 2017), p. 87.

for it to undertake a range of military missions in the region. Ever since PLAN began its initial deployments in 2008, there witnessed regular deployments till the present day involving a regular rotation of surface vessels and occasionally conventional and nuclear attack submarines as well.<sup>15</sup>

Over the years, the naval strength of Beijing has improved significantly, both quantitatively and qualitatively.<sup>16</sup> China is keeping an eagle eye on any developments in the Indian Ocean region for fuelling the fast-growing economy and energy needs of the country by way of introducing naval modernisation programmes. China's ability to project genuine naval power in the Indian Ocean and for the next decades or so should not be miscalculated.<sup>17</sup> As Robert Kaplan has argued in this regard that, 'China's naval leaders are displaying the aggressive philosophy of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century and want sea powers for influence and for the decisive battle. So, they have a formidable offensive force.'<sup>18</sup>

**Table 1**  
**China's Naval Vessel Deployment in the Indian Ocean, 2013–2017**

Sl. No.	Year	Major Vessels Deployed
1	July 2017	Newest-type 052D destroyer, "Yuan" class conventional diesel-electric submarines, submarine support ship "Chongming Island," and ocean surveillance ship "Neptune"
2	2016	"Han" class nuclear submarine and a conventional submarine
3	July 2014	China's largest amphibious landing ship "Changbai Mountain," and two destroyers "Wuhan" and "Haikou"
4	December 2013-February 2014	"Shang" class nuclear-powered attack submarine and a "Song" class diesel-electric submarine

**Source:** Li Jiacheng, "Developing China's Indian Ocean Strategy", *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 2017, p. 489.

15 Joshua T. White, "China's Indian Ocean Ambitions: Investment, Influence and Military Advantage", pp. 1-3, available at < [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FP\\_20200615\\_chinas\\_indian\\_ocean\\_ambitions\\_white-1.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FP_20200615_chinas_indian_ocean_ambitions_white-1.pdf)>.

16 Mari Izuyama and Masahiro Kurita, n. 4, available at <[http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/east-asian/pdf/2017/east-asian\\_e2017\\_02.pdf](http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/east-asian/pdf/2017/east-asian_e2017_02.pdf)>.

17 International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Strategic Survey 2011: The Annual Review of World Affairs* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2011), p. 339

18 Robert D. Kaplan, "Center Stage for the 21st Century: Power Plays in the Indian Ocean", p. 22.

China is meticulously taking up stringent measures to strengthen its naval presence in Indian Ocean, which is being viewed as emerging threat for the interests of India and US as well. The strengthening of China's maritime power under the so-called "Far Sea Defense" is tasked to achieve two main objectives. Firstly, to conserve China's maritime security (including its territorial seas and EEZ); Secondly, to enhance and secure its maritime economic interests, specifically in the IOR and West Africa. The Rear-Admiral Zhang Huachen, the deputy commander of the East Sea Fleet, further reiterated that 'with the expansion of the country's economic interests, the navy wants to protect the country's transportation routes and the safety of our major sea lanes.'<sup>19</sup>

To display its strategic interests and influence in the IOR, Chinese Navy were dispatched as part of an anti-piracy escort mission to the Gulf of Aden in 2008. This move is also aimed at combating Somalia-based piracy and its threat to security in the region. With this, PLAN navy has significantly increased its presence in the IOR.<sup>20</sup>

India's expanding maritime influence in the IOR is in response to the naval superiority it enjoys in the entire region. The net naval capabilities of India and China in 2010 and 2020 can be seen from Table 2 and Table 3. India's naval capabilities is lacking quite behind as compared to China at the present scenario. China's naval superiority is a key factor in influencing Beijing to play a role in the region which has without any doubt attracted the attention of India's policymakers and defence analysts.

**Table 2**  
**India and China's Net Naval Capabilities in 2010**

Sl. No.	Items	India	China
1	Sub-Surface Combatants	16	65
2	Principal Surface Combatants	45	80
3	Patrol and Coastal Combatants	28	253

**Source:** Tuneer Mukherjee, "Sino-Indian Maritime Competition: Shadow Fighting in the Indian Ocean", South Asian Voices, June 7, 2020, available at <<https://southasianvoices.org/sino-indian-maritime-competition-shadow-fighting-in-the-indian-ocean/>>

19 Joseph Lin, "China Focuses on Far Sea Defence", *Asia Times Online*, July 9, 2010 and Edward Wong, "Chinese Military Seeks to Extend its Naval Power," in *New York Times*, April 23, 2010.

20 Gopal Suri, n. 14, p. 88.

**Table 3**  
**India and China's Net Naval Capabilities in 2020**

Sl. No.	Items	India	China
1	Sub-Surface Combatants	17	59
2	Principal Surface Combatants	27	82
3	Patrol and Coastal Combatants	170	209

**Source:** Tuneer Mukherjee, "Sino-Indian Maritime Competition: Shadow Fighting in the Indian Ocean", South Asian Voices, June 7, 2020, available at <<https://southasianvoices.org/sino-indian-maritime-competition-shadow-fighting-in-the-indian-ocean/>>

India is deeply concerned about the PLAN's deployment in the Indian Ocean in the name of counter-piracy operation, which the former believe it could possibly be used to gain a strategic foothold in the region. The recent activities by Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean have attracted the attention of the Indian Navy demanding stringent actions to tackle it. It came as a surprise to India when PLAN conventional submarines made calls to Sri Lanka twice, once each in September and November 2014. Since then, PLAN has been regularly dispatching nuclear submarines for counter-piracy operations, and there is a growing concern in India that such deployments will help China acquire the capability to conduct littoral warfare.<sup>21</sup> As against the expanding military influence of China, India's response has been that of the use of the Indian Navy's "diplomatic role," and neither operational guidelines nor defence procurement plan directly reflects them.<sup>22</sup>

In the coming years or so, China is most likely to increase the strengths of nuclear-powered submarines, ballistic missile launch submarines, aircraft carriers, surface combat ships, intercontinental ballistic missiles, medium-range ballistic missiles, and combat aircraft to intensify its position in the Indian Ocean region.<sup>23</sup>

21 Mari Izuyama and Masahiro Kurita, "Security in the Indian Ocean Region: Regional Responses to China's Growing Influence", available at <[http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/east-asian/pdf/2017/east-asian\\_e2017\\_02.pdf](http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/east-asian/pdf/2017/east-asian_e2017_02.pdf)>.

22 Ibid.

23 Thangavel K. Balasubramaniam and Ashok Kumar Murugesan, *op cit.*, p. 99.

## *China's String of Pearls Strategy and its Strategic Implications to India*

Chinese presence could be felt both economically and militarily in the Indian Ocean region. China has in recent years developed a strategy that is actually aimed at easing the way for long-term strategic relationships with a number of island and littoral states in the Indian Ocean region. Economically, for the sake of resource exploitation and to reduce its dependence on the Strait of Malacca, China had in 2004 begun negotiations with Myanmar on the construction of oil and natural gas pipeline to import crude oil from the Middle East and Africa via Myanmar. To further strengthen its position in the region, China had developed Gwadar Port in Pakistan, which started operation around 2004, to serve as an oil and transportation route to China's Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region. Besides, China had also developed Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Chittagong Port in Bangladesh, under the so-called "String of Pearls" strategy.<sup>24</sup> China's ambitions have been to develop bases from where it can project power and further expand its influence in the region. The concept as such was first advanced to the US Department of Defence by consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton in a classified report in 2005. According to the report, 'China is building strategic relationships along the sea lanes from the Middle East to the Nan Hai (South China Sea) in a way that suggests defensive and offensive positioning to protect China's energy interests.' China is also developing deep-water ports throughout the Indian Ocean to support its projected blue-water naval capacity. In the SOP concept, a "pearl" entails infrastructure such as the construction of new ports, airports, logistical facilities, and improvement of those that might already exist. These developments are to serve dual trade and military interests, including supply, refuelling and electronic listening stations. As port facilities are attained, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) could press its maritime presence forward from the Nan Hai and Strait of Malacca to Africa and the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>25</sup>

24 Mari Izuyama and Masahiro Kurita, *op cit.*, available at <[http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/east-asian/pdf/2017/east-asian\\_e2017\\_02.pdf](http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/east-asian/pdf/2017/east-asian_e2017_02.pdf)>.

25 David L. O. Hayward, "China in the Indian Ocean: A Case of Uncharted Waters", in Hayward, "China in the Indian Ocean: A Case of Uncharted Waters", in Leighton G. Luke and Tas Luttrell (eds.), *Indian Ocean: A Sea of Uncertainty* (West Perth, WA: Future Directions International, 2012), p. 101.

In pursuance to its national maritime interests, China has in recent years made a significant investment in port facilities in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Burma. At the same time, it has also increased its maritime ties with the Maldives, the Seychelles, and Mauritius. Taken by themselves, these initiatives might be ascribed solely to China's growing economic profile. However, the nature of Chinese investment in Pakistan, and specifically in the port of Gwadar, has aroused concern in the West. Gwadar lies close to the Straits of Hormuz, through which one-third of the world's oil supply transits. Pakistan has expressed hopes that it can form one end of an energy corridor that would extend into China's Xinjiang province. Beijing remains officially ambivalent about such a prospect, which would enhance its strategic reach considerably (particularly if Gwadar later became a PLAN base) but would also bring Chinese ships within striking distance of the US Navy in waters far from land-based airpower and missile cover. Chinese Navy's close interaction with Indian Ocean states such as Myanmar and Bangladesh, development of facilities in the Andaman Sea, particularly installation of radar facilities at Cocoa Islands, and providing assistance to Pakistan for developing Gwadar and Kasni port at Makran coast are posing a threat to India's security in the Indian Ocean. These activities are compelling India to adopt a new approach in the Indian Ocean to secure her strategic and economic interests.<sup>26</sup>

### ***India-China Rivalry in the Indian Ocean: Pakistan as a Factor***

Pakistan has been and continues to remain a key factor in the ongoing strategic rivalry between India and China in the Indian Ocean. Pakistan occupies a crucial position in China's strategic calculations in Indian Ocean, not only in counterbalancing India, but also advancing its maritime interests.<sup>27</sup> It is always in the interests of Pakistan that China's maintains a strong naval presence in the Indian Ocean. Given its close understanding and engagement with Pakistan, that occupies a crucial position in the Indian Ocean, China wants to make capitalise

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26 Prem Mahadevan, "China in the Indian Ocean: Part of a Larger PLAN", *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, No. 156, June 2014.

27 See, 'China's Strategic Objectives in the Indian Ocean Region', Workshop Report of *Future Directions International*- Independent Strategic Analysis of Australia's Global Interests. May 23, 2011.

on it to strengthening its position in the Indian Ocean. China-Pakistan relations have been described as an all-weather and time-tested strategic partnership. Their joint interest of containing India from becoming a regional power in South Asia and gaining increasing weight on the international stage has contributed to strengthening the China-Pakistan strategic partnership, based on the premise that the enemy of one's enemy is one's friend.<sup>28</sup>

Former Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf during his visit to China in November 2003 said that the China- Pakistan strategic partnership was "deeper than the oceans, higher than the mountains."<sup>29</sup> While the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Shaukat Aziz has underscored that, 'Pakistan and China enjoy all-weather friendship based on complete trust and confidence. Our friendship is rooted in the psyche and ethos of our people. From Khunjab to Gwadar, the symbols of Pakistan-China friendship dot the landscape. The mega projects that we have undertaken with China's help are like anchors that hold the two countries together in trusted friendship.'<sup>30</sup>

Due to the fact that the coastal areas of mainland China don't enjoy any connectivity with the Indian Ocean, it is quite imperative for the PLAN to establish bases in littoral countries like Pakistan. The support of Islamabad is crucial for Beijing to expand its naval presence and influence in the Indian Ocean.<sup>31</sup>

In support of China's maritime interests in Indian Ocean, Pakistan has offered the much-needed PLAN ship repair services in Karachi, and the naval vessels and submarines of the Navy dispatched to the Gulf of Aden. PLAN would deploy ships in coordination with the Pakistani Navy, with the aim of protecting Gwadar and trade under China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. It is also being said that there is a plan to start construction of a large-scale shipyard in Gwadar that will be responsible for the design and development of equipment for the Pakistani Navy. To further strengthen their deep understanding, joint

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28 Mohammad Samir Hussain, "China-Pakistan Strategic Partnership: An Indian Perspective", *Suraksha Chintan*, Vol. 7, No. 7, July 2013.

29 Robert G. Wirsing, "The Enemy of my Enemy: Pakistan's China Debate", Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies Special Assessment, December 2003, p. 4.

30 Swaran Singh, "Introduction", in Swaran Singh (ed.), *China-Pakistan Strategic Cooperation: Indian Perspectives* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 2007), p. 22.

31 Michael Beckley, "China and Pakistan: Fair-Weather Friends," *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 7, No. 1, March 2012, p. 9.

naval exercise between the two countries was conducted in the northern Arabian Sea.<sup>32</sup>

The emerging maritime cooperation between China and Pakistan in the western Indian Ocean is a challenge for India. The possibility of Chinese warships being everlastingly positioned at the Karachi or Gwadar port cannot be ruled out. In response, Chinese has committed to provide every necessary assistance to Pakistan's naval modernisation programme such as up gradation of four F-22P frigates, supply of Yuan-class submarines and high-end weapons and sensors.<sup>33</sup>

### ***China's Strategic Influence in Indian Ocean and India's Response***

China's factor looms large in India's strategic calculus in Indian Ocean region. Under the so-called string of pearls strategy, China's has made significant inroads in the Indian Ocean demanding urgent action from the Indian side. The expanding PLAN influence in the region is never in the interests of India. The economic and strategic rationales have brought China in to Indian Ocean. In response to growing strategic collaboration with the South Asian countries in the Indian Ocean, former Chief of Indian Naval Staff, Admiral Verma made a sound argument that, 'It is important to realise that if one nation does not meet a need, there will always be another ready to fill the vacuum. Such cooperation drives the strategic balance between friendly and other influences in the region.'<sup>34</sup>

China's rising maritime profile in the Indian Ocean is a key factor driving India to strengthen its maritime activities in the Indian Ocean. Deeply concerned about China's naval build-ups and the potential of maritime conflicts in the Indian Ocean, India will need to strengthen their naval capabilities plus

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32 Mari Izuyama and Masahiro Kurita, "Security in the Indian Ocean Region: Regional Responses to China's Growing Influence", available at <[http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/east-asian/pdf/2017/east-asian\\_e2017\\_02.pdf](http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/east-asian/pdf/2017/east-asian_e2017_02.pdf)>.

33 Abhijit Singh, "China's military base in Djibouti strategic implications for India", Observer Research Foundation, August 22, 2017, available at <<https://www.orfonline.org/research/military-base-china-djibouti-strategic-implications-india/>>.

34 Shreya Upadhyay, "The Indo-Pacific and the Indo-US Relations: Geopolitics of Cooperation", *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, Issue Brief # 256, November 2014, p. 5.

cooperate with like-minded countries such as the US, Japan, and other Southeast Asian countries in the region.<sup>35</sup>

The growing profile of China and its naval activities in the Indian Ocean posed serious challenges to India's predominant position and its ambitions of expanding influence across the entire Indian Ocean Region via trade, investment, and entering into strategic partnerships with the countries in the region. From the Indian perspective, broadening engagements with Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia holds immense significance as they are rich in mineral deposits and energy reserves critical to India's economic development and great power aspirations. Seemingly, this would hold the key to ensuring that China does not gain a significant strategic foothold in the region. Further, New Delhi will need to strengthen influence and control over the Indian Ocean choke points through security relationships with key littoral states such as Singapore, Mauritius and Oman.<sup>36</sup>

The role of naval diplomacy will be crucial in India's Indian Ocean strategy and in expanding naval cooperation with the Indian Ocean littoral states. India has in recent past shown stringent commitment in modernising and expanding its Navy, in tune with its strategic objective to become a major security provider in the Indian Ocean. The naval modernisation programme undertaken so far includes upgrading facilities along the naval base and its listening stations, acquisition of a nuclear-powered submarine capability and aircraft carriers.<sup>37</sup>

India will need to keep a constant watch on every aspect of Chinese naval build up, its communication and port access and presence in the Indian Ocean. India has every reason to be seriously concerned about the development in the Indian Ocean, owing to its strategic importance. 'Each pearl in the string is a link in a chain of the Chinese maritime presence', Former Chief of Indian Naval Staff, Admiral Sureesh Mehta had in a speech given on January 2010 had expressed concern that naval forces operating out of ports established by the Chinese could 'take control over the world energy jugular.'

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35 Zhihai Xie, "China's Rising Maritime Strategy: Implications for its Territorial Disputes", *The Journal of Contemporary China Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 121.

36 Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe, "India's Strategic Objectives in the Indian Ocean Region", Workshop Report of *Future Directions International*- Independent Strategic Analysis of Australia's Global Interests. October 20, 2011, p. 2.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

To protect its maritime interests in the IOR, India has significantly strengthened its maritime capacity and is closely associating with the navies of friendly powers in securing sea lanes of communication (SLOCS) for uninterrupted trade and energy flows, effectively combating sea piracy, and providing humanitarian relief when natural disasters occur. Indian Navy in particular is one of the largest navies operating in the region that is well-equipped with one aircraft carrier, one amphibious transport dock, eight landing ship tanks, eleven destroyers, fourteen frigates, one nuclear-powered attack submarine, one ballistic missile submarine, thirteen conventionally powered attack submarines, twenty-three corvettes, six mine countermeasure vessels, ten large offshore patrol vessels, four fleet tankers, and various auxiliary vessels and small patrol boats. The Indian Navy is well supported by the Indian Coast Guard in tackling with sea borne threats.<sup>38</sup>

In response to increasing Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy interest and activities in the Indian Ocean Region, Indian Navy has in recent years started to invest more in anti-submarine ships, such as the Kamorta-class corvette, long-range maritime reconnaissance aircraft, and in procuring ships such as the Saryu-class patrol vessel and unmanned aerial vehicles such as the IAI Heron-1.<sup>39</sup>

India's eastern part in particular, is highly prone owing to its proximity to China's strategic launch missile capabilities that is capable of hitting vital Indian naval assets in Visakhapatnam and air force assets in Hyderabad. The DF-26 can reach any portion of India's eastern coast. The growing maritime activities of PLAN in the Indian Ocean endanger southeastern India. In view of increasing vulnerabilities along eastern coast, defence and security expert have call upon the imperative need to strengthen its hold along the eastern and southeastern of India to deter the Chinese maritime threat. The move will ensure the maritime security of the Bay of Bengal region. The Eastern Naval Command at Visakhapatnam is ill-equipped lacking better maritime facility and infrastructure to protect the entire eastern coast of India. It is therefore suggested to establish an additional naval command at Chennai and two new naval-air bases in that eastern naval command to confront Chinese threats directed from various ports located in

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38 Kanwal Sibal, "Indian Ocean Strategy and Vulnerabilities", in Satish Kumar (ed.), *India's National Security: Annual Review 2016-17* (London: New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 268.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 277.

close proximity to New Delhi. Further, it is suggested that the exiting Indian Air Force training base at Kodiyakarai be upgraded to a Naval Air Base, given its geo-strategic location in close proximity to Sri Lanka's Palaly Military Base, which was recently converted to a Sri Lankan Air Force base. The naval-air bases located between Thoothukudi and Kanyakumari in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu may be designed to confront tactical multidirectional attacks and undermine the first-strike capability of China.<sup>40</sup>

### Conclusion

The ongoing struggle between India and China in the Indian Ocean has the potential to profoundly affect the peace, security and stability of the region. Given the level of mistrust and distrust that exists between the two Asian giants, the contest between the two resembles the competition between US and Soviet Union during the Cold War. The situation may pressurise the other Indian Ocean states to align themselves with either of the two sides resulting in an increasingly unstable and complex security environment in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.<sup>41</sup>

India will continue to enjoy an advantage over China in the Indian Ocean region. Prof. Harsh V. Pant has underscored that, 'given the immense geographical advantages that Indian enjoys in the Indian Ocean, China will have great difficulty in rivaling India in the Indian Ocean.'<sup>42</sup> Despite China's larger naval spending and naval forces, India can concentrate its forces in the Indian Ocean far more than China can, giving India likely continuing regional superiority there over China. China's emerging so-called 'string of pearls' presence in the Indian Ocean potentially encircles India; yet India in turn lies across such extended lines, and is able to cut them fairly easily, given what Iskander Rehman considered as 'India's enduring tactical advantage.'<sup>43</sup>

With a view to encircle India and its maritime ambitions, China has over the last few decades sort out maritime understanding with the Indian

40 Thangavel K. Balasubramaniam and Ashok Kumar Murugesan, *op cit.*, pp. 107-08.

41 David Brewster, "Between Giants: The Sino-Indian Cold War in the Indian Ocean", IFRI Center for Asian Studies, No. 103, December 2018, p. 3.

42 Harsh V. Pant, "China's Naval Expansion in the Indian Ocean and India-China Rivalry", *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2010.

43 Iskander Rehman, "China's String of Pearls and India's Enduring Tactical Advantage", IDSA Comment, June 8, 2010.

Ocean littorals comprising of Gwadar in Pakistan; Hambantota in Sri Lanka; Chittagong in Bangladesh; Sittwe, Coco Islands, Hianggyi, Kyaukpyu, Mergui and Zadetkyi Kyun in Myanmar.<sup>44</sup> It is clearly mentioned in China's National Defense White Paper of 2010 that, 'the PLAN enhances the construction of composite support bases so as to build a shore-based support system, which matches the deployment of forces'. It is pertinent that China would exploit the potential of these prospective naval bases in the Indian Ocean.<sup>45</sup>

Given the strategic vulnerability it faced in the Indian Ocean, China's ability to strengthen its maritime power projection in the Indian Ocean is still very limited. Even the development of several Pearls close to India would do little favour to mitigate these vulnerabilities. On the contrary, India, given its geo-strategic location and its military capabilities are well poised to overcome the challenges of Beijing expanding influence and further promote its maritime interests in the Indian Ocean.<sup>46</sup>

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Dr. Mohammad Samir Hussain is presently working as Guest Faculty in the Department of National Security Studies, Manipur University, Manipur. He is the author of three books and has edited many books. Besides, he has contributed chapters in many edited books and seminar proceedings. Moreover, he has published research papers in numerous reputed national and international journals.

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44 Pushpita Das, "Securing the Andaman and Nicobar Islands", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 35, No. 3, May 2011, p. 467.

45 Jaimie Hatcher, "China's Growing Indian Ocean Maritime Interests: Sowing the Seed of Conflict?", *Soundings*, No. 2, Sea Power Centre – Australia, October 2013, available at <[https://navyvic.net/news/documents/Soundings\\_2.pdf](https://navyvic.net/news/documents/Soundings_2.pdf)>.

46 David Brewster, *op cit.*.