

China's Maritime Expansion in IOR

Mustansar Hussain Tasir¹

<p>Article History:</p> <p>Received: 01 Nov, 2021</p> <p>Accepted: 24 Dec, 2021</p>	<p>ABSTRACT</p> <p>China has recently made maritime as its national priority in the wake of its rapidly expanding geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economic interests and imperatives. A huge transformation has been witnessed in Chinese naval capabilities build-up, its strategic outlook towards maritime affairs, its over-dependence on maritime trade and its overall focus on leading the country towards next level of sea power as preached by Mahan. Despite the fact that the region is not Chinese direct or natural area of influence, the long list of maritime projects China is pursuing in Indian Ocean Region attest the claims that China is aspiring to dominate this third largest body of water for a secure and interrupted flow of its national trade. Keeping in view its current imperatives, China has successfully shifted its identity from a continental power towards a great maritime power inevitable for an aspiring superpower. China has stretched itself from its early "off-shores waters defense" to "open seas protection." Offensive Realism prevails and China has been transforming its strategy and modernizing its naval muscle to meet all the challenges of a 21st century's sea power. China is also increasing and consolidating its military presence in the Indian Ocean which has alerted the regional stakeholders, especially India. Despite China and India have many areas of divergence but China doesn't see India as its real competitor in the Ocean. China's Anti-Access and Anti-Denial (A2/AD) or the 'counter intervention' strategy is primarily against the US. Chinese ingress in the Indian Ocean has potential to change the security structure of the region. China asserts that it has neither military nor hegemonic designs but the western world led by the US doesn't stop seeing all these Chinese advances at seas as a threat to their world order and international security.</p> <p>Key Words: National Priority, China, International Security, threat</p>
--	---

Introduction

Indian Ocean has gained centrality for China as recently China left behind the US and has become the largest crude oil importer of which around 90 percent of its oil containers are being transported by China via Strait of Malacca and then through the South China Sea (Strait of Malacca Key Chokepoint for Oil Trade, 2018). Keeping in view its anticipated over-dependence on the Strait of Malacca route and the risks attached to it due to many geographical and security reasons, China's leader Hu Jintao as early as in 2003 came up with this notion of "Malacca dilemma" the realization of which the country is now left with no option but to modernize its maritime forces and to go for alternative routes, (such as from Pakistan, Myanmar etc.), directly from Indian Ocean while minimizing its

1. Independent Geopolitical & Research Analyst - Pakistan Email: mustansar.tasir@gmail.com

dependence on the strait and also possibly to bypass the Pacific Ocean and the disputed South China Sea routes(Lanteigne, 2008)

For Chinese maritime power besides developing and maintaining a world class navy, “includes a large and effective coast guard; a world-class merchant marine and fishing fleet; a globally recognized shipbuilding capacity; and an ability to harvest or extract economically important maritime resources, especially fish.” (McDevitt, 2016). In military strategy presented in its 2014 White Paper, Chinese strategists reiterated their vision of a strong military muscle for making their country stronger and envisaged that “the PLAN will enhance its capabilities for strategic deterrence and counterattack, maritime maneuvers, joint operations at sea, comprehensive defense and comprehensive support.”

The naval modernization is part of announced Chinese policy and this is where Chinese Monroe Doctrine seems to be at work. Similarly, Chinese current maritime expansion in Indian Ocean, its naval force multiplication as well as its expanding geopolitical objectives, can also be correctly understood through the Offensive Realist lens. The theory proposes that in the anarchical international system with security and survival as the states’ first priority and also where intentions of any nation cannot be predicted precisely, the offensive postures especially of the contending nations and their endless power competition seems obvious. The questions addressed in this paper are:

- a. What could be the strategic objectives China aspires to achieve particularly in the IOR?
- b. What are the main contours of Chinese maritime strategy to achieve those objectives?
- c. Do Chinese have placed naval power among its top national priorities so to efficiently execute those strategies including MSR and String of Pearls?
- d. Has China achieved or closer to achieve Blue Water Navy status or does China has capacity to do that?

China’s Interests, Imperatives in IOR

The Indian Ocean and its routes’ unrivalled significance for economic activities, trade and commerce cannot be overestimated and the rising China’s stakes and interests in the region have become unprecedentedly substantive and supreme. There is no point of disagreement that the fulfillment of China’s rapidly multiplying energy needs, as well as the sustainability of its current pace of economic growth safety and security of the Indian Ocean’s Sea Lines of Communication across Indian Ocean, is primary. This is one of the main reasons that China is shifting its identity towards a maritime power and also rapidly consolidating and expanding its presence in Indian Ocean making footholds through various means to secure and find alternative routes it uses for its trade and transportation.

According to western narratives, the China's increasing presence and expansion in the Indian Ocean, is more than just economic objectives (Blanchard & Flint, 2017).

Its aspirations are, according to this version, to boost its Comprehensive National Power to achieve its hegemony and dominance for which it is altering geography, upgrading its military power into a Blue Water Navy and is also strengthening its overall role and position in the IORs for establishing and maintaining its long-term economic, security and political stakes in the region at the cost of others; primarily India (Khurana, 2016, pp. 13–24).

China's military power build-up, especially recent in naval domain, is not something strange rather it seems very much in congruence with the country's economic, diplomatic and political growth. In the anarchic world system, as realism explains, that the great powers, especially if they are emerging from a lower level and challenging the existing status quo (balance of power), always secure their key national interests through military muscle build up.

China's Expansion in IOR

Keeping in view the geopolitical, geo-economic and geostrategic significance of Indian Ocean Region for the world in general and for China in particular, China in recent years has made significant inroads in the region such as the 21 Century Maritime Silk Road and the so-called String of Pearls. A point noteworthy here is that so far there is no announced Chinese policy or strategy for Indian Ocean.

Maritime Silk Road and String of Pearls

In 2013, the Chinese President Xi Jinping revealed the country's plans to work for the development of a web of connectivity and economic activity both land and sea based called the New Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) in his two separate speeches in Kazakhstan and Indonesia respectively. MSR and SREB were collectively named as One-Belt, One-Road (OBOR) which was later in 2017 renamed as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Inside China's Plan to Create a Modern Silk Road, n.d.).

The significance of MSR could be discerned through the fact that it was incorporated into the Chinese ruling Communist Party's constitution. MSR is planned to be a grand route passing through the strategic chokepoints of both Pacific and the Indian Oceans and will serve as an intra and inter-regional and continental links as it "starts from the coastal ports of Southeast China, goes southwestward through South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca, Lombok, and Sunda Strait, and reaches the waters of Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden through the north of Indian Ocean (Wang & Zhu, 2016).

The Chinese did not use term ‘String of Pearls.’ This term was originated in a report titled; “Energy Futures in Asia” published in 2005 by Booz Allen Hamilton. Unlike MSR, String of Pearls is considered a pure military strategy designed to provide Chinese Navy with a chain of ports and bases in Indian Ocean and beyond. According to the Chinese, MSR is “integrating all the existing cooperation, especially that in the field of connectivity with neighboring and regional countries and enabling everyone to share development opportunities. (Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on February 12, 2014, 2014). It is aimed “to promote the implementation of the Initiative, instill vigor and vitality into the ancient Silk Road, connect Asian, European and African countries more closely and promote mutually beneficial cooperation to a new high and in new forms” (Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, 2015). China has strongly denied any intention to build a series of military bases and posit that China just want access. Beijing has stated “China has only two purposes in the Indian Ocean: economic gains and the security of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) ... from Babel-Mandeb, Hormuz, to the Malacca Strait, is thus vitally important for China.” (Bo, 2014).

Here is presented some detailed contours of the Chinese Maritime Silk Road initiative and String of Pearls, as majority of the strategists and analysts bracket both. Here is a point to be clarified that as per focus of this study, the scope of discussion on MSR or String of Pearls will remain confined mainly to the Indian Ocean Region, primarily South Asia. What is this multi-dimensional mega project all about? It is mainly about the ports and military bases for which China is engaging the smaller regional nations diplomatically and commercially. Some of the main ports China has achieve access to or is negotiating for in the Indian Ocean Region are:

Gwadar

Pakistan and China are jointly working on China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) around \$62 billion mega project of which development of the state-of-the-art Gwadar port, a gateway to the CPEC, is a flagship project. Situated closer to the Strait of Hurmuz, Gwadar is a deep-sea port located in Pakistan’s Baluchistan province, with tremendous tonnage capacity and immense geo-strategic and geo-economic potency. It will make China’s access to energy rich Middle East easier and secure. The port and CPEC route will not only shorten the distance connecting Indian Ocean with Chinese Kashgar in Xinjiang province (Arranz, n.d.) for China’s goods trade and transportation but also offer immeasurable macro and micro economic dividends for the region and beyond, through connectivity, investments, free zones, and by inclusion of many Central, South Asian and other nations (“IPRI,” 2016) It has further strengthened Sino-Pak time tested and all-weather partnership while China finances and assists in “turning Pakistan port into regional giant.”(Gul, 2017).

However, the Indian and Western analysts tend to see Gwadar more as spot of China's station in the Indian Ocean dubbing it "a new naval base in China's String of Pearls in the Indo-Pacific" (Kamwal, 2018). Michael Krepon anticipates that Gwadar will eventually prove its worth to China as a naval base (M. Krepon, personal communication, January 2019). According to the American media, Chinese presence and massive investment in Gwadar will boost the local economy but as the BRI has also taken a military dimension, it "gives Beijing a strategic card to play against India and the United States if tensions worsen to the point of naval blockades..."(Abi-Habib, 2018) this group argues that China and Pakistan are currently working on a joint naval and air facility for Chinese military in Pakistan's Jiwani Port.(Bill, 2018) Varsity of this claim is yet to be confirmed.

Hambantota, Sri Lanka

China took charge of Sri Lanka's southern, strategically crucial Hambantota port in December 2017 on 99-year operating lease (Singh, 2019) New Delhi views this China's move having an obvious "strategic dimension" and setting aside Sri Lanka's assurances, predict "insertion of PLAN training and support teams" as well as "positioning of greater Chinese naval assets, declaring the port, "a crown jewel in China's "string of pearls" strategy" (Singh, 2019).

Chinese control of the ports in Indian Ocean such as Hambantota have been clamored largely as evidence of BRI as an expansionist Chinese "grand strategy" and a challenge to India's regional maritime leverage having potential to "alter world trade routes" as the Hambantota will optimally contribute to mitigate the China's geographical and maritime vulnerability in Indian Ocean for being located at the main sea lane only over 10 nautical miles away from the Malacca Straits (Fuhrman, 2017).

Kyaukpyu, COCO Islands, Myanmar

China and Myanmar have reached agreements on development of Kyaukpyu deep water port in the Indian Ocean worth multibillion on the coast of strategically crucial Bay of Bengal in the country's Rakhine State. China has committed around 70 per cent of the total cost funds for the Kyaukpyu port while the rest will be contributed by Myanmar itself (China, Myanmar Sign Port Deal after Years of Negotiations - Global Times, 2018). "The signing of the framework agreement marks a significant step for the port project, which has been stalled since 2015, and for the continued implementation of the China-proposed Belt and Road initiative (BRI)." (China, Myanmar Sign Port Deal after Years of Negotiations - Global Times, 2018).

The cooperation will further strengthen ties between the two countries and will build trust to move on with the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) of which the port will be a part (Williams, 2019). China's continuous insistence for the port make sense due to its undeniable economic and strategic significance because "shipping goods from Europe,

the Middle East, Africa, and India to Kyaukpyu and then overland to Yunnan could save thousands of miles (Poling, 2018). The Kyaukpyu port will help China to address to a greater extent its "Malacca Dilemma (Poling, 2018). China is negotiating the lease of Myanmar's Great and Little Coco Islands that are in close proximity with India's Andaman group of islands.

Chittagong and Payra Ports, Bangladesh

Bangladesh's Chittagong port is another project China has negotiated and agreed to develop under MSR for shared objectives of mutual economic development and "a win-win choice for both countries out rightly denying any military objective in sight. However, the international media views it as a part of string of pearls (He et al., 2018). The port will give a rapid boost to Bangladesh's economy through efficient and smooth transportation of ships and its vital role in raising trade and commercial activities in and across the Indian Ocean cannot be denied. Other than Chittagong port, the two countries are part of Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor and serious negotiations and consultations under way to develop the Payra Port which is the country's "largest deep-water port" with the estimated total cost of around \$15 billion (Consultation Now Under Way to Develop Plans for Largest Deep-Water Port in Bangladesh - 2019)

Bagamoyo, Tanzania

China's Merchants Holdings company, in financial collaboration with Oman, is near to start work on the Tanzanian port Bagamoyo. The port has so far been confined to a small fishing port despite tremendous prospects of becoming the continent's largest and busiest one within few years. Once completed, it is anticipated to be "the most significant construction project in the last four decades of Chinese-Tanzanian relations (Servant, 2019).

Foothold in Maldives

Maldives, a country of 12,00 islands, situated in very significant geostrategic location, has entered into Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China and also signed an MoU to become a part of China's Maritime Silk Road initiative.

China funding very important Friendship Bridge that will connect Hulhule Island with its international airport and capital Male (Ramachandran, 2018). China has also expressed its interest in building a Laamu a toll port in the archipelago (Maldives Admits China Interest in Building Port, 2019) and there are also reports, which China denies, that China entered into some secret agreement with Maldives' former president Abdulla Yameen to build a military base or what Prime Minister Modi called "Chinese Pearl" in Maldives for a "countervailing Chinese naval presence" very close to India's Lakshadweep Islands

(Shukla, 2018). However, after the 2018 change in the country's government as a result of defeat to president Abdulla Yameen (Afeef, n.d.) the outlook of the new government towards China's debt policy seems to have changed and the country now giving clear indications of renegotiation of the terms or unwind some of the projects similar to Malaysian leader Mahathir Mohamad who uniquely sees BRI and the Chinese debt policy as "a new version of colonialism" (Mundy & Hille, 2019).

There are many more Chinese initiatives under the MSR. According to various reports and assessments China has "plans to build 18 "naval bases" in the IOR in Hambantota (Sri Lanka), in Pakistan and Myanmar, Walvis Bay (Namibia), in Djibouti, Yemen, Oman, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Seychelles, Madagascar and other parts of Indian Ocean (Katoch, 2018).

Such grand strategic maneuvers are clear indications of China's offensive and expansionist strategy for IOR in congruence with Offensive Realist's and Monroe Doctrine's explanations of geopolitical wrangling, power accumulation, spheres' expansion, and power projection. Even if for the time being China denies any geopolitical or strategic interests, the opponents intend to see all these developments through String of Pearls lens. In this world of anarchic nature, no state trusts the opponent's intentions on the basis of its declared policy. Intentions could relatively be best assessed through the adversary's military buildup and strategic maneuvers.

In the next section, China's naval presence in the IOR and its upgradation and modernization will be discussed.

PLA Navy in the IOR

China's realization that no nation may achieve the status of a superpower without a competitive and sizeable sea power, has led the country into development and upgradation of its naval muscle rapidly. With its maritime ambitions expanding speedily particularly in the Indian Ocean, as detailed above, China's increasing presence in Indian Ocean and its massive naval modernization is natural. Otherwise, it might not be possible for China to meet its set strategic goals of MSR or the so-called String of Pearls.

China's Maritime Objectives

China is putting its extraordinary effort to cash-in all the maritime advantages and also expanding and strengthening influence in the region to achieve its national objectives. According to an analysis by Vice Admiral Yoji Koda an expert from the Center of the New American Security some of the Chinese objectives could be:

- a. To safeguard China's sovereignty and territorial integrity
- b. To protect and boost people welfare and their living standards;
- c. To compete with the US militarily and strategically;

- d. To challenge or break America's monopoly over "global expeditionary capabilities." (Koda, 2017)

They are not all but possibly some of these goals Chinese might want to accomplish as their national objectives or interests. However, some other objectives are presented below:

- a. To challenge so-called Indian traditionally monopolized sphere of influence in South Asia and other Indian Ocean Regions;
- b. To establish that Indian Ocean can in no way be considered as India's Ocean or an Indian Lake;
- c. To achieve and consolidate regional dominance in Indian Ocean Regions
- d. To mitigate its geographical vulnerability through military might particularly its Malacca Dilemma.
- e. To build an unchallengeable military power to keep intact its national growth trajectory;
- f. To ensure that its interests and objectives are not jeopardized in the face of the challenges posed by US-led Quad's China containment strategies.

China's Strategy in IOR

Unlike India, there is no formal, focused or official document produced by Chinese strategic community with the name of its maritime strategy. The observers have to perform arduous task of collecting bits and pieces from various official, semi-official and on-ground developments to analyze Chinese maritime strategy.

China has transformed its PLAN into a world-class force that will be ensuring the nation's security and dominance in Pacific as well as in the Indian Ocean Region and is supposed to be the guarantor of achieving China's aspiration of a future superpower. In 2015 White Paper of Chinese Military Strategy, it was revealed that the country was officially shifting its military strategic posture stating, "the PLA Navy (PLAN) will gradually shift its focus from "offshore waters defense" to the combination of "offshore waters defense" with "open seas protection," and build a combined, multi-functional and efficient marine combat force structure." And also, that "the PLAN will enhance its capabilities for strategic deterrence and counterattack, maritime maneuvers, joint operations at sea, comprehensive defense and comprehensive support (China's Military Strategy, 2015).

It is necessary for China to develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests, safeguard its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, protect the security of strategic SLOCs and overseas interests, and participate in international maritime cooperation, so as to provide

strategic support for building itself into a maritime power (China's Military Strategy, 2015)

In this regard, establishment of military base in Djibouti at very significant Horn of Africa, a strategic junction covering and overlooking world's main waterways of trade and shipping such as Red Sea and the Suez Canal, China has real meant for not only India but also for the international and regional players. The establishment of the bases has created serious apprehensions among skeptics who believe that due to the Djibouti base, "strategic ripples are gathering (Phadnis, 2017) A sense of insecurity and a security dilemma is natural outcome particularly for India.

In its 13th Five Years Plan (2016-2020) (The 13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China | Green Growth Knowledge Platform, 2016) along with economic and social sector development schemes, China also outlined the nature of its maritime strategic goals for the next five years which many observers consider China's maritime strategy. Among other objectives and goals for the country, Chinese policy makers committed in the plan to elevate the country into "strong maritime country" in the wake of its expanding maritime "rights and interests." And pledged China's "active part in the establishment and protection of the international and regional maritime order." (The 13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China | Green Growth Knowledge Platform, 2016)

The aforementioned feature of Chinese maritime strategy is the notion of China challenging the established maritime order is being further strengthened due to China's "counter intervention" or what strategists call Anti-Access and Anti-Denial (A2/AD) military strategy which are actually the China's emerging military capabilities to counter or prevent the US or any other adversary's military (both air and naval) access or to cripple the enemy's free movement or maneuverability within that particular area which China sees as its specified zone of influence. This maritime strategy is said to be a credible military capability to restrain the adversary from intervening in the China's zone, area or the space of exclusivity (Davis, 2017)

Pushed by its strategic objectives, China's White Papers and A2/AD strategies seems a pragmatic combination to meet those objectives for which considerable military modernization steps sound logical for achievement and protection of China's wider national interests. But the question here arises as listed above, do Chinese have placed naval power among its top national priorities so to efficiently execute that strategy including MSR and String of Pearls? And has China achieved or closer to achieve Blue Water Navy status and does China even has capacity to do that?

To have reasonable understanding of the China's naval power prioritization, the study moves forward to the next point.

Maritime: A National Priority

China has shifted itself from its identity of a continental power towards a sea power. China's current Communist Party government has practically made maritime power as its national priority. President Xi Jinping, in April 2018, during inspection of China's largest naval exercises at Hainan Island, stated "the task of building a strong Navy has never been as urgent as it is today and called for more efforts to build the PLA Navy into a world-class force (President Xi Calls for Establishment of World-Class Naval Force, 2018).

Many world observers witnessing China's expanding global maritime vision declared as "offshore waters defense," its loosely defined maritime rights and interests, then strengthening of the PLA Navy (PLAN) in all aspects, upgrading the naval inventory both qualitatively and quantitatively, declare that the country is visualizing to become a maritime superpower (McDevitt, 2016).

PLAN: A Blue Water Navy?

Alfred Thayer Mahan posited that only great and visionary leadership will be able to explore greater "strategic opportunities on high seas... (Kane, 2002) which will perhaps define the nation's strategic role in the maritime domain. Today, China's sizeable presence in Indo-Pacific itself explain China's strategic vision and affirms that the country has achieved the status of Blue Water Navy (Ji, 2016).

Its MSR or String of Pearls can never be imagined a success without developing a powerful naval or maritime force. For all such endeavors, far beyond its coastal regions, in the international commons of Indian Ocean as well as Western Pacific, China has been expeditiously and single-mindedly working for "producing frigates, destroyers, submarines, both conventional and nuclear powered, at an unprecedented rate" to develop a "blue-water navy (Anfilofyeva, 2013). Again, when one studies the China's White Paper Strategy in which the country aims to move beyond its off-shore coastal security interests and other extra regional aspirations were clear indications of it developing "a globe spanning blue water navy (Raina, 2015).

"In just over two decades, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the Chinese military, has mustered one of the mightiest navies in the world. This increased Chinese firepower at sea - complemented by a missile force that in some areas now outclasses America's - has changed the game in the Pacific. The expanding naval force is central to President Xi Jinping's bold bid to make China the preeminent military power in the region. In raw

numbers, the PLA Navy now has the world's biggest fleet. It is also growing faster than any other major navy" (Lague, n.d.)

Hence, there seems no denying fact that China has achieved the level of its PLAN that it has created serious challenges for regional balance. It is not necessary that China would really have intention to disrupt the existing order but as in international relations, intentions are generally gauged through a nation's actions on ground and its power accumulation. So, the emergence of apprehensions among various stakeholders, especially the weaker contender India, does not sound irrational.

Thus, to fulfill the plans such as BRI, MSR or String of Pearls and China's strategic vision for the region, there are two supportive and implying factors that are contributing to this security dilemma in the IOR. First, China's fast Naval buildup and the other is PLAN's rapidly increasing presence in the IOR.

PLA Naval Modernization

In Chinese military strategy, it has placed special focus on Preparation for Military Struggle (PMS) to development and modernize all organs of its military power which is needed for the modern age of informationization. Chinese military will have to meet all the technical as well as professional requirements of the PMS so to "maintain vigilant and efficient combat readiness." (China's Military Strategy 2015, 2015). Walter Ladwig says China's rapid naval modernization is certainly a concern, particularly given the fact that it cannot be justified as a defensive measure.

There has been no sharp, adverse development in China's security situation that suddenly necessitates a major expansion of the PLAN— which has never been a significant naval force from a historical perspective. The likelihood that the Chinese navy will have a negative impact on the Indian Ocean Region depends in large part upon events in east Asia. Taiwan and maritime disputes with Japan and Southeast Asia states are still more important to China than the Indian Ocean Region and only when these are resolved will the IOR become a more important focus for Chinese naval presence (L. Walter, personal communication, 2019).

China through its ingress in the Indian Ocean Region and its aspirations for Blue Water Navy has attested to a greater extent that it has an Offensive Realist outlook and majority of its maritime expansionist moves are cause of serious concerns for India and the US.

These developments are also to attest the PLA Navy's capacity to execute its White Papers as well as A2/AD strategies. The study has less to do with the US Navy but the level of PLAN's developments is so high that it seems mismatched to compare them with India. India's inability "to keep China out of its backyard" (Nahar, 2018) is evident from

a comparison of the current Indian and Chinese naval capabilities, China has more than three times India's total number of principal surface combatants (cruisers, destroyers and frigates), as well as nearly four times the number of attack/guided-missile submarines." (Nouwens, 2018).

For example, to match its offensive strategic posture such as A2/AD, China has developed the "carrier killers," namely DF-21D and its next version the DF-26, which are unprecedentedly high-speed ballistic missiles that possess the capability to hit the moving warships. With the range of around 1,800 to 2,500 miles, DF-26 is capable of launching strikes both with conventional and nuclear warheads with acute precision and accuracy.

Similarly, for another instance, submarines are primary to naval strength of any military force. Overall, China is "currently operates 4 nuclear powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBN), 5 nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN), and 47 diesel-powered attack submarines" and as per estimates the number of China's submarines will rise from 69 to 78 by the year 2020. (Annual Report to Congress, 2018).

China has made a mark by producing "diesel-electric submarines with Air Independent Propulsion (AIP) technology" which according to some analysts' understandings is breaking all earlier records (Majumdar, 2018).

China is actively working on type-003 Aircraft Carriers (Xuanzun, 2018) type 055 Destroyer, type 054B Frigates, KJ-600 Fixed-wing Airborne Early Warning and Control Aircraft, type 075 Landing Helicopter Dock and the fifth Generation Fighter Jets.

PLAN's increasing footprints in IOR

It was 2014 when a PLAN's Type093 Shang-class nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarine was detected in Indian Ocean which caused serious worries among the Indian Navy as India equates it to be of crossing of redline by Chinese. India takes Indian Ocean as its own property and any such intrusion is seen "doubly objectionable when it looks permanent (Holmes, 2014).

In August 2018, Indian Navy claimed to have spotted 14 Chinese vessels in the Indian Ocean Region from Gulf of Aden to the Strait of Malacca supposedly on anti-piracy mission (Gurung, 2018).

In December 2018, China dispatched its submarines to Indian Ocean which raised alarms however Chinese Ministry of Defense spokesperson Senior Colonel Ren Guoqiang committed that "in the future, the Chinese military will continue to send ships to conduct escort missions in international waters on a regular basis, giving full play to the role of the PLA logistics support base in Djibouti, (Panda, 2018).

The preceding discussion reveals that China aspires to maintain its dominance overall in the greater Indo-Pacific Region, its naval buildup and increased presence in Indian Ocean Region, the strategic backyard of India, creates worries and irritation for the latter. Maritime experts and strategic thinkers view these current developments as transgression of its sphere of influence and China's scheme to encircle India which the latter must strive to counter (Brewster, 2010). Undoubtedly, India's concerns of China's expansion and holding spaces in Indian Ocean Region does not sound starkly misplaced however Chinese deny the encirclement concerns of India and assert that its role in the IOR neither a zero-sum game nor aimed at damaging India's interests and imperatives in the region (XIAOPING, 2018)

Conclusion

China is transforming its identity from primarily a continental power to a maritime power. It is understandable because no state could ever achieve the status of a superpower, as Mahan posits, without becoming a powerful and a dominant sea power. For China, it is more relevant because of its less promising geographical location, its energy hunger, relative vulnerability of its routes of transportation and the Sea Lines of Communications, and also the regional opposition it faces. China has been investing massively for also its long-terms plans such as BRI and MSR mainly to meet all the challenges, to create more geo-economic, geopolitical and geostrategic spaces and influence, and for overall regional connectivity and economic prosperity.

However, every country is not bound or even supposed to see the developments with Chinese lens particularly India owing to their divergent world view, variant strategic culture, and persistence of many areas of serious differences which have caused an unbridling gulf of trust between the two nations.

What sort of response China's action will generate is still to be studied but fact of the matter is that these Chinese strategic moves cannot go unchecked in the longer run. Security dilemma ensues arms race and an endless power competition that can definitely mar the regional peace and security. When three active regional stakeholders and the extra-regional players possess strategic weapons of mass destruction, and any military confrontation result in some untoward, unaffordable adventurism, the nations are realistically left with no option but to mitigate the issues of divergence and to fill the existing trust gaps. They must engage with the opponent through peaceful means. China might not have any belligerent intents in pursuing all its maritime plans, but in global politics, a state's visible strategic, political and diplomatic maneuvers are considered as the true depiction of its intentions.

References

- China Military Power Report (p. 145). (2018). [Congressional Report]. <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Aug/16/2001955282/-1/-1/2018-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT.PDF>
- Abi-Habib, M. (2018). China's 'Belt and Road' Plan in Pakistan Takes a Military Turn. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/world/asia/pakistan-china-belt-road-military.html>
- Afeef, Z. R., Isha. (n.d.). Abdulla Yameen concedes defeat in Maldives election. Retrieved November 18, 2021, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/9/24/abdulla-yameen-concedes-defeat-in-maldives-presidential-election>
- Anfilofyeva, N. (2013). China's Naval Aspirations: A 'Blue-Water' Force. CSBA. <https://csbaonline.org/about/news/chinas-naval-aspirations-a-blue-water-force>
- Arranz, M. H., Marcelo Duhalde, Adolfo. (n.d.). Belt and Road Initiative. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved November 18, 2021, from <http://multimedia.scmp.com/news/china/article/One-Belt-One-Road/pakistan.html>
- "Belt and Road" incorporated into CPC Constitution-Belt and Road Portal. (n.d.).
- Bill, G. (2018). Inside the Ring: China plans Pakistan military base at Jiwani [News]. *The Washington Times*. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/jan/3/china-plans-pakistan-military-base-at-jiwani/>
- Blanchard, J.-M. F., & Flint, C. (2017). The Geopolitics of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative. *Geopolitics*, 22(2), 223–245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1291503>
- Bo, Z. (2014). The String of Pearls and the Maritime Silk Road. *China-US Focus*. <https://www.chinausfocus.com/videos/>
- Brewster, D. (2010). An Indian sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean. Undefined. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/An-Indian-sphere-of-influence-in-the-Indian-Ocean-Brewster/aef1f7fdce41ec2b65cd18eb19a25b4499ca81e7>
- China, Myanmar sign port deal after years of negotiations—*Global Times*. (2018). [News Paper]. *Global Times*. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1126664.shtml>
- China's Military Strategy 2015. (2015). [Official]. Gov. On the State Council the People's Republic of China.

http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm

Consultation Now Under Way to Develop Plans for Largest Deep-Water Port in Bangladesh. (2019). [Unofficial]. Handy Shipping Guide. https://www.handyshippingguide.com/shipping-news/consultation-now-under-way-to-develop-plans-for-largest-deep-water-port-in-bangladesh_10743

CPEC: Macro and Micro Economic Dividends for Pakistan and the Region. (2016, October 15). IPRI - Islamabad Policy Research Institute. <https://ipripak.org/cpec-macro-and-micro-economic-dividends-for-pakistan-and-the-region/>

Davis, M. (2017). Towards China's A2AD 2.0. The Strategist. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/towards-chinas-a2ad-2-0/>

Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on February 12, 2014. (2014). [Chinese government website]. Chinese Foreign Ministry. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1127856.shtml

Fuhrman, P. (2017). China-owned port in Sri Lanka could alter trade routes. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/f0d88070-9f99-11e7-9a86-4d5a475ba4c5>

Gul, A. (2017). China Turning Pakistan Port into Regional Giant. VOA. <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-china-gwadar-port/4084175.html>

Gurung, S. K. (2018). 14 Chinese navy ships spotted in Indian Ocean, Indian Navy monitoring locations. The Economic Times. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/14-chinese-navy-ships-spotted-in-indian-ocean-indian-navy-monitoring-locations/articleshow/61882634.cms>

He, H., Nie, J., & Wang, Y. (2018). China's assistance for Chittagong port development, not a military conspiracy. The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/perspective/chinas-assistance-chittagong-port-development-not-military-conspiracy-1595092>

Holmes, J. (2014). Coming to the Indian Ocean, the Chinese Navy: How Should India Respond? [Text]. The National Interest; The Center for the National Interest. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/coming-the-indian-ocean-the-chinese-navy-how-should-india-11415>

Inside China's Plan to Create a Modern Silk Road. (n.d.). Morgan Stanley. Retrieved November 18, 2021, from <https://www.morganstanley.com/ideas/china-belt-and-road>

- Ji, Y. (2016). China's Emerging Indo-Pacific Naval Strategy. *Asia Policy*, 22, 11–19.
- Jianing, Y. (2016). White paper 2014—China Military [News]. China Military. http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2016-07/13/content_7153396.htm
- Kamwal, G. (2018). Pakistan's Gwadar Port: A New Naval Base in China's String of Pearls in the Indo-Pacific. *CSIS*, 1, 5.
- Kane, T. M. (2002). *Chinese Grand Strategy and Maritime Power*. Psychology Press.
- Katoch, P. C. (2018). China's military base in Maldives. *SPS Naval Forces*. <https://spsnavalforces.com/experts-speak/?id=214&h=China-s-military-base-in-Maldives>
- Khurana, G. S. (2016). China as an Indian Ocean power: Trends and implications. *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India*, 12(1), 13–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2016.1175127>
- Koda, Y. (2017). China's Blue Water Navy Strategy and its Implications. Center for New American Security. <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/chinas-blue-water-navy-strategy-and-its-implications>
- Krepon, M. (2019). Chinese Strategic Interests in IOR [Email].
- Lague, D. (n.d.). China's vast fleet is tipping the balance against U.S. in the Pacific. Reuters.
- Lanteigne, M. (2008). China's Maritime Security and the "Malacca Dilemma." *Asian Security*, 4, 143–161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799850802006555>
- Majumdar, D. (2018). China's Advanced Submarines Are "Breaking Records" [Text]. *The National Interest*; The Center for the National Interest. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/chinas-advanced-submarines-are-breaking-records-26811>
- Maldives admits China interest in building port. (2019). *Maldives Times*. <https://avas.mv/en/46702>
- McDevitt, M. (2016). Becoming a Great Maritime Power: A Chinese Dream | CNA (p. 160). CNA. <https://www.cna.org/news/events/china-and-maritime-power>
- Mundy, S., & Hille, K. (2019). The Maldives counts the cost of its debts to China. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/c8da1c8a-2a19-11e9-88a4-c32129756dd8>

- Nahar, P. (2018). It will now be very difficult for India to keep China out of its backyard. Here's why. The Economic Times. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/view-why-chinas-latest-aircraft-carrier-should-worry-india/articleshow/58353694.cms>
- Nouwen, M. (2018). China and India: Competition for Indian Ocean dominance? IISS. <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2018/04/china-india-competition>
- Panda, A. (2018). China Dispatches New Naval Fleet for Gulf of Aden Escort Mission [News]. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/china-dispatches-new-naval-fleet-for-gulf-of-aden-escort-mission/>
- Phadnis, A. (2017). A new Cold War in the Indian Ocean. Business Standard India. https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/a-new-cold-war-in-the-indian-ocean-117121600831_1.html
- Poling, G. B. (2018). Connecting China to the Indian Ocean. CSIS, 3.
- President Xi calls for establishment of world-class naval force. (2018). [News]. CGTN. https://news.cgtn.com/news/7845444d346b7a6333566d54/share_p.html
- Raina, H. (2015). China's Military Strategy White Paper 2015: Far Seas Operations and the Indian Ocean Region. Center for International Maritime Security. <https://cimsec.org/chinas-military-strategy-white-paper-2015-far-seas-operations-indian-ocean-region/>
- Ramachandran, S. (2018). The China-Maldives Connection – The Diplomat. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/the-china-maldives-connection/>
- Servant, J.-C. (2019). La Tanzanie mise sur la Chine. Le Monde Diplomatique. <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2019/02/SERVANT/59566>
- Shukla, A. (2018). In Maldives, India's Modi sees the glint of a Chinese pearl | South China Morning Post. South China Morning Post. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2174776/maldives-indias-modi-sees-glint-chinese-pearl>
- Singh, A. (2019). All out at sea: On India's engagements in the Indian Ocean [Think Tank]. ORF. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/all-out-at-sea-on-indias-engagements-in-the-indian-ocean-50901/>
- Strait of Malacca Key Chokepoint for Oil Trade. (2018). The Maritime Executive. <https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/strait-of-malacca-key-chokepoint-for-oil-trade>

The 13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China | Green Growth Knowledge Platform. (2016). Green Policy Platform. <https://www.greengrowthknowledge.org/national-documents/13th-five-year-plan-economic-and-social-development-peoples-republic-china>

Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road. (2015). [Chinese government website]. Chinese Foreign Ministry. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1249618.shtml

Walter, L. (2019). Chinese Naval Expansion [Email].

Wang, R., & Zhu, C. (2016). 21st century maritime silk road (1st ed.). Singapore Social Science Academic Press Singapore Springer Science + Business Media Singapore Social Science Academic Press.

Williams, C. (2019). Myanmar is set to embrace Xi's Belt and Road Initiative | GRI [Think Tank]. Global Risk Insights. <https://globalriskinsights.com/2019/01/myanmar-set-embrace-xis-belt-road-initiative/>

XIAOPING. (2018). When India's Strategic Backyard Meets China's Strategic Periphery: The View from Beijing. War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/when-indias-strategic-backyard-meets-chinas-strategic-periphery-the-view-from-beijing/>

Xuanzun, L. (2018). PLA Navy to have at least 5 carriers: Experts—Global Times [News Paper]. The Global Times. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1130535.shtml>