



CHINA'S GEO-STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR AMERICA

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Abstract

The rising economic power of China has steered it to develop its geopolitical power beyond Asia into the Indian Ocean region. The Indian Ocean is a significant Water channel for international trade, with about 40% of the world's vessels passing through it. China's growing economic and strategic interests in the region have elevated apprehensions in America and other Western Countries. The implications of China's rising existence in the Indian Ocean region for America have Economic, Strategic, and geopolitical scopes. The current study aims to find out the Geo-Strategic Interest of China in the Indian Ocean and discover its implications for America. The nature of research is Qualitative so a qualitative research design is applied to this research. For data analysis analytical approach was used. On the basis of analysis, this research shows that China's mounting military and economic existence in the region poses a strategic challenge to America's traditional supremacy in the region and China's rising soft power in the region, mainly through the Belt and Road Initiative, creates a challenge to the American traditional geopolitical power in the region.

Key words: *Geo-Strategic Interest, Indian Ocean, implications for America, geopolitical influence*

Introduction

The Indian Ocean (IO) has received significant political and maritime security importance because of its increasing geostrategic scope. The area, which is home to over 51 states, has become a central point of struggle for power among major powers (Kaplan, 2009) such as India, China, and the America. The Indian Ocean (IO) is a critical maritime route for worldwide trade, with about 60% of world's oil and 50% of its vessel traffic passing through it. The region is also rich in natural resources, comprising rare metals, fish stocks, and mineral deposits, making it strategically significant (Fatima & Jamshed, 2020). The growing race for influence in the region has led to a number of progresses. For example there has been a notable increase in armed activity in the area. China has been growing its naval competences, with its army PLAN (China's People's Liberation Army Navy) creating an enduring existence in the area. The America, too, has been growing its martial existence, with the positioning of aircraft carriers and other naval assets.

Significance

Geo- strategic interests of China in the Indian Ocean are driven by its desire for economic development, energy security, trade military presence, countering US influence, and regional cooperation. These interests have significant implications for America, as they challenge its military dominance, economic influence, and strategic partnerships in the region. As a result, America will need to adapt its strategy to counter mounting existence in the Indian Ocean and maintain its own interests in the region.



Aims of the Study

- I. To explore the geo- strategic interests of China in Indian Ocean region.
- II. To analyze the implications of strategies of China in Indian Ocean for America

Research Questions

- I. What are the geo- strategic goals of China in the Indian Ocean?
- II. How do China's strategies in Indian Ocean pose implications for America?

Research Methodology

The present research is qualitative in nature and employs a descriptive, explorative and analytical approach to explore the subject matter. It primarily involves explaining and critically analyzing existing information and facts. The data utilized in this study is primarily derived from secondary sources such as research articles, books, newspapers and official reports. This research purposes to give an inclusive understanding of China's geostrategic interests and how they pose challenges for America, based on the available data.

Literature review

The study (Ahamed&Rahman 2020) highlights China's efforts to connect its southwestern region to the Bay of Bengal as part of its Western Development Strategy. This move aims to open up the area economically and strategically. Both China and India are striving to enhance their financial and strategic interests in the region. To achieve this, both countries are building economic, defense, and strategic partnerships with Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. China is also developing land routes, rail lines, gas pipelines, seaports, and landing strips in Myanmar to strengthen its ties with the Bay. Additionally, China has established strategic, economic, and defense relationships with Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, and is constructing highways, bridges, railways, and Special Economic Zones, providing military hardware, and building seaports in Bangladesh and Hambantota. While China is still viewed more skeptically than the other way around, it is also evident that Chinese perspectives are becoming increasingly pessimistic as well.

Ahmad, Asmi, Ali, Rehman, & Abbas (2017) conducted a study on China's investment in Southeast Asian countries and analyzed the concept of the "String of Pearls," a geopolitical theory coined by Booz Allen Hamilton, a Western scholar and defense analyst in 2004. The objective of this policy is to secure China's sea traffic lane in the Indian Ocean by building relationships with Southeast Asian countries and developing deep sea ports with modern infrastructure. The ports included in this strategy are Chittagong port in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka's Hambantota port, Myanmar's Sittwe port, and Gwader port in Pakistan.

According to the research of Khalid (2013) the region of Indian Ocean is significant due to its abundance of resources and crucial role in global trade, with 51 coastal states contributing to growing economic dominance. India aims to enhance its global standing through nuclear deterrence and naval collaborations with other countries, but China's expanding influence through the Maritime Silk Road project poses a threat to India's strategic position. Reliance of China on the Indian Ocean for 80% of its crude oil, gas, and finished goods trade has led to strengthened relationships with neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan and the Gwadar port. Pakistan must weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the Gwadar Port and Chinese contributions to its development. The region of Indian Ocean is contested due to conflicts between littoral nations, which threaten stability and security. Delhi 's struggle to counter



Beijing's power and influence in the Indian Ocean through nuclear deterrence and naval exercises are ongoing. Ultimately, the region's prosperity rests on addressing the region's disputes to ensure peaceful development.

Study of Syed & Walsh (2012) highlights the geo-strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region, encompassing the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, due to the high volume of international business and energy shipping that goes through its watercourses. The China, United States and India are all heavily invested in this area, making it a crucial focal point for their geopolitical interests.

China's assertive rights and actions in the region of South China Sea, which are supported by military buildup and infrastructure development, pose a significant challenge to regional norms and power dynamics (Karim, 2017). The America cannot answer to this danger alone, and its traditional partners in the region, for example South Korea and Japan are seen as unreliable. India, (Brewster, 2014) on the other hand, presents a natural counterbalance to China due to its economic growth, low debt levels, and strategic location in the middle of BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) of China. geopolitical influence of India in the region, particularly in the Indian Ocean, is also significant for the United States (Sharma, 2019). Therefore, India is a striking and cost-effective ally of the United States to contain the growing power of China in the region of Indo-Pacific.

Indian Ocean's Geo-Strategic importance

Throughout history, the oceans have served as crucial pathways for the transportation of goods worldwide (Zhu, 2018). For centuries in connecting the different parts of the world the Indian Ocean has remained an important water route (Bouchard, & Crumplin, 2010). The increasing reliance of nations on global trade strategically is further elevating

Importance of the Indian Ocean.

The presence of crucial Marine Route of Communication in the Indian Ocean further highlights its importance, as these routes facilitate the flow of goods and resources between nations. Moreover, this area is home to the oil-rich Middle East, turning it into a strategic hub for energy resources (Akber, 2015). This factor enhances the ocean's significance as a major economic and geopolitical focal point. From a geographical standpoint, the Indian Ocean's strategic value is underscored by its location at the crossroads of major international shipping routes. Key international shipping routes and choke points of Indian ocean are as follows:

- I. The Bab-el-Mandeb
- II. The Strait of Hormuz
- III. Cape of good hope
- IV. The Lombok straits
- V. The Strait of Malacca
- VI. The Sunda
- VII. Mozambique Channel
- VIII. Six Degree Channels
- IX. Ten Degree and

Overall, the Indian Ocean's geostrategic significance rests in its significance as a main maritime passage for global trade, energy resources, and geopolitical benefits, constructing it a central point for local and world powers alike (Khan, Ahemmed, & Ahamed, 2019).

Policy of China for the Indian Ocean

Policy of China for the Indian Ocean is defined by three main aspects:

- (1) Progressing its BRI(Belt and Road Initiative)through infrastructure projects and guaranteeing free and unobstructed entrée to Indian Ocean ports.
- (2) Addressing the Malacca Dilemma by safeguarding its energy resources and trade transportation through the region without interfering from competing nations, and (3) defensive strategic undersea communication lines as a national security priority.

China's policy towards the Indian Ocean also includes soft power effect, counter-terrorism activities, and the placement of both economic and security-oriented policies. Though, the struggle for superior status in the region from the America and India's worry of China's presence create challenges for Beijing to defend its activities in the area (Dixon, 2014). The possibility for conflict between a growing power and a ruling one, as postulated by political scientist Graham Allison, enhances to the complication of policy of China in the Indian Ocean.

Maritime strategy of China

Since the mid-2000s, China has been asserting its influence in both the Indo-Pacific and South China Sea region through its policy of "two ocean" This strategy involves two key components: the first is to building of the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century and second is the planning of far-sea actions.

Operations of Far Sea

The concept of "Far Sea Operations" is being realized through the increasing presence of the Navy of China in the region of Indo-Pacific. This shift towards an ocean-centric strategy is aimed at securing China's energy needs and ensuring its continued existence in this vast expanse of water.Haikou the missile destroyer of the Chinese Navy is currently engaged in anti-piracy operations in the eastern part of the ocean. Additionally, in July 2017 in the Bay of Bengal surveillance vessels of China were dispatched to observe the joint exercises between India, Japan and the United States.

In the Indian Ocean the rising presence of navy of China is viewed as a maritime encirclement aimed at countering India's land encirclement. In August 2017,in the ocean' western part a live-fire drill was conducted by China involving the guided missile frigate Jingzhou, destroyer Changchun and the supply vessel Chaohu. Although the target of the drill was not explicitly stated, it was widely believed to be aimed at India's naval forces.

Project of Maritime Silk Road

The project of Maritime Silk Road that china started in 2013, carries two major parts .The first component aims to revival of olden Silk Road, while the second element focuses on the development of maritime ports. This initiative , also recognized as "One Belt One Road," encompasses geo-economic, marine and geopolitical benefits for China(Blah, 2018). It involves over 70 countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe, connecting China to these nations via roads, railways, and shipping ways. The program aims to interconnect harbors and nodes along the route of ocean. This will increase China's involvement in global trade actions and the amount of Chinese trade ships. It will also increase naval presence of China. This idea is also an image of "String of Pearls" strategy of China.

China's Geo-Strategic Interests in the Indian Ocean

China, often recognized to as an "Asian tiger" in the region, may not be a coastal country of the Indian Ocean, but its growing economy and increasing energy needs have forced it to pay special attention to this body of water(Khurana, 2008). The Indian Ocean is important among the world's five main oceans, as it is linked to 51 countries and have natural resources like, gold, uranium, nickel and tin. Almost 30% of international trade is conducted through the Indian Ocean, with significant waterways for example Malacca Strait ,the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el Mandeb are playing vital roles in this trade. As China imports a substantial share of its oil and gas through the Indian Ocean, it has become progressively significant for China's economic progress and development.

In addition to its dependence on foreign energy sources, Strategic interest of China also stems from its rising economic power in the region(Agnihotri, 2011). The BRI, which contains the "Maritime Silk Road," and the objectives to encourage trade and investment between Asia, Europe, and Africa through infrastructure growth and connectivity plans. This step will not only support economic development of China but also augment its soft power and geopolitical influence in the region. Furthermore, growing engagement of China in regional security and diplomacy is another reason driving its interest strategically in the Indian Ocean.

Counter Policies of China in the Indian Ocean

String of Pearls

The strategy of "String of Pearls" is an idea that emphasizes on China's Sea ways of Communication in the Indian Ocean. It contains a sequences of important ports, passages, and strategic positions that are likened to pearls on a string, representing vigorous geostrategic existence of China in the region (Aoyama, 2016). This idea describes the significant sea ways that link the Bay of Bengal to the South China Sea, containing the Malacca Strait, the strait of Hormuz connecting the Arabian Sea to the Mandeb Strait and Persian Gulf giving entree for China to the Suez Canal and Red Sea (Brewster, 2017).

Renew String of Pearls

By developing these ports, China can ensure a safe and short trading route for its finished goods as well as importation of energy resources. Though, as China requirements of energy upsurge, it started dependency on Malacca Strait for its imports from the Middle East and Africa. This reliance created threats of potential blockades by other states, which forced leadership of China to launch a substitute strategy (Jiacheng, 2017). The strategy of 'String of Pearls' contains construction of ports along border of Chiana, permitting it to sidestep the Strait of Malacca. Gwader in Pakistan and Kyaupkyu in Myanmar are main ports according to this strategy.

The 'Renew String of Pearls' strategy is element of 'Maritime Silk Road Initiative' greater project of China which aims to connect different regions like Asia with Europe, Africa, West Asia, Central Asia, Middle East, and South Asia through innovative navigational routes in the Indian Ocean. This project involves financing billions of dollars and will allow China to enjoy new navigational routes in the Indian Ocean through the expansion of Gwader port, Lamu, and Kyaupkyu through 'CMC ' (China-Myanmar Economic Corridor), CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor), and 'Lamu Port South Sudan Ethiopia Transport' (LAPSSET). This strategy

will not only provide China with alternative trading routes but also strengthen its strategic and economic existence in the region.

China's Strategic Pearls in the Indian Ocean

Gwader Port

In 2002, a joint agreement was signed for the construction of the Gwader Port, which is a significant project for the entire region, particularly for China due to its strategic location on the Arabian Sea. The port is located 400 km farther away from Strait of Hormuz and 720 km farther away from the Iran, making it the most crucial pearl in the 'String of Pearls theory of China' (Hamzah & Maini, 2016). This route being shorter and secure decreases the dependence of China on the Strait of Malacca which has been a main apprehension for the state because its vulnerability to possible obstruction (Shahnawaz, 2011). The building of this port is an important progress for the region as it improves connectedness, eases trade, and encourages economic progress.

Port of kyaukpyu

Economic relations of China with Myanmar are important, but strategically, Myanmar embraces more significance for China (Fan, 2011). Because of sharing of its border with the Kunming city of China. This step will also permit China to lessen its dependence on India for transportation and additionally reinforce its economic relations with Myanmar (Mannan, 2020).

Hambantota Port

The partnership between Sri Lanka and China regarding the Hambantota port has evolved and developed significantly. China has provided substantial financial assistance to Sri Lanka for major projects of infrastructure for example Rural Electrification Expansion, the Norochcholai Coal Power Plant, Colombo-Katunayake Expressway and Development Project (Desilva, 2011). This financial support has helped Sri Lanka to advance its infrastructure and development.

The China-Sri Lanka economic relations have flourished due to trade agreements and political initiatives. China is now Sri Lanka's primary trading partner. In 2017 Sri Lanka after endorsement a bilateral lease agreement gave the port of Hambantota to China for 99 years on lease (Baruah & Joshi, 2021). Merchants Port Holding Chinese Company in collaboration with the Sri Lankan Port Authority now keeps the port, having paid \$1200 million for the lease (Naomi, Zaidi, & Saud, 2021). Primarily, China paid \$0.3 billion for the port. Port of Hambantota is an important Sri Lankan southern port in the ocean, and China has also constructed the Hambantota and Colombo ports in Sri Lanka in recent years (Berlin 2006).

Sri Lanka has increasingly favored China and has become a major part of the "Maritime Silk Road initiative as well as part of BRI which goals to encourage economic development and connectedness between Europe, Asia, and Africa through infrastructure development and investment. Sri Lanka's partnership with China in the Hambantota port is a significant part of this initiative, as it will facilitate trade and commerce between China and other nations in the region.

Djibouti Port:

In the present day, Djibouti is a key player in hosting both established and emerging global powers, creating a delicate yet manageable situation. Strategic position and deep-water port Djibouti have made Djibouti significant for world power. Both China and US have made armed bases in the country, with China violation its traditional strategy of not posting troops overseas to do so (Kostecka, 2011). Economic investments of China in the region,



enhanced the strategic importance of Red Sea region. Expansion of China in Africa is also seen as a way to facilitate the completion of the BRI mega projects and gain access to the Suez Canal.

China's engagement in Kenya:

The MSR (Maritime Silk Road), a key part of China's BRI, is set to intensify Chinese investment in Africa, particularly in infrastructure projects. According to a report by Risberg (2019), China's investment in Africa surpassed \$240 billion by 2014, and this figure is expected to increase by an average of 16% annually (Ahamed 2019). The MSR will connect Europe, Africa, and Asia through the sea, with Kenya's ports of Lamu and Mombasa serving as crucial connections to enhance trade and connectedness with the continent.

The African segment of the Maritime Silk Road will cover three states, Djibouti, Egypt and Kenya with a focus on building large-scale infrastructure schemes, comprising high-speed railways, air and sea ports, highways, utility stations, oil and natural gas pipelines, power grids and telecommunication networks. These investments and schemes not only contribute to the BRI but also aid in the renewal and progress of Africa.

Morao Port:

China is currently investing funds into infrastructure and the energy sector in the Maldives, leading to a significant increase in the country's debt reliance on China. One of China's major projects is the construction of a port in Mario and its connection to the capital, Male (Bo, & Till, 2019). The Maldives Government has granted a Chinese company a 40-year lease on an island near Male for \$4 million, potentially resulting in adverse strategic implications for India as China strengthens its presence in the region.

American interest in Indian Ocean

Washington recognizes the strategic importance of both Eurasia and the IOR in pursuing its preferences while stopping any country or coalition from threatening or acquiring a hegemon status over its interests (Baum, 2001). The growth of trade and economic activities in the Indian Ocean region has amplified strategic repercussions as the geo-economic trend in Asia is noticeable internationally. Though, the increasing economic and armed abilities of China are producing antagonism and clash in the region.

To stop the hegemony of any other country, the America has developed numerous strategies (Chan, 2013). These contain having better diplomatic and defence dealings with alliance members, reassuring a command and control-based culture for local defence, functioning towards the security of its power resources, supporting diplomatic chokepoints and autonomy of steering in the Indo-Pacific region, conducting anti-terrorist operations in the region, depressing the spread of arms of mass destruction and anti-state actors in the region and not helping escalation between India and Pakistan for turbulences in sovereignty and trade (Pant, 2010). The America also cooperates with countries that share mutual interests for example common values, legal provisions, political and religious freedoms and democracy.

The America has also taken several important actions for example AUKUS defense pact among Australia, United Kingdom and the US and QUAD agreement among India, Australia, the US and Japan that are supposed against active participation of china in the region (Deb & Wilson 2021). These actions shows that the Washington goals to protect the region from any possible hegemon that can create a danger to its security. President Trump announced

National Security Strategy of 2017 declared that "big power race has resumed," with special mention to Indo-Pacific region regarding China.

The American Strategy for the Indian Ocean

The American Strategy for the Indian Ocean is multifaceted and driven by several factors. The main focus is on protecting strategic chokepoints, ensuring energy and communication safety, preventing terrorism and WMD proliferation, promoting a rule-based order, and supporting open societies and shared values. The US is also responding to the rising power of India and China in the region and aims to prevent any hegemonic domination by these powers. The US will work with all countries in the region, regardless of size, to achieve these goals and maintain its national security interests region of Indian Ocean. Additionally, the US will pursue to play a leading role in non-traditional security activities in the region.

America unveiled different policies to counter and restrict the influence of China in the Indian Ocean. In 2011 launched the 'Pivot to Asia' to contain geo-military and economic rise of China in the Asia Pacific region (Tahir & Ejaz, 2020). In 2017 'National Security Strategy' and in 2018, the 'National Defense Strategy,' marking China as a revisionist power' and a challenge to the 'unipolar moment' led by America. The America accused China of engaging in 'debt-trap diplomacy,' offering large amounts of debt to developing countries with flexible conditions. This argument gained credibility when the Malaysian Prime Minister at that time, Mahathir Mohamed, canceled \$23 billion worth of BRI projects and warned China against a new form of imperialism. Washington declared debt-trap diplomacy of China is a tactic to establish hegemony in the region. America set up a '\$0.3 billion security assistance' fund with the Overseas Private Investment Corporation investing \$3900million within the Indo-Pacific region. America also declared plans to collaborate with Australia and Japan to give substitutes to Chinese investment.

Implications for America

Influence of China in the region of Indian Ocean poses a significant threat to the US-India partnership's vision for dominance in the area. Given China's reliance on trade for global economic and political control, the Indian Ocean region holds strategic importance as all of China's trade routes pass through it. The BRI, has given China in 2017 the opportunity to progress of the Gwadar deep seaport.. This development will lessen China's dependence on the Strait of Malacca, which has long been crucial for its trade with Middle East and Europe (Li, 2009). However, there are suspicions that China may also build a marine base in Gwadar, which would provide intelligence capabilities to China in the waters of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) adjacent to the Strait of Hormuz, posing threats to America and India.

Developing naval links of China with Maldives, Myanmar and Bangladesh indicate its leaning for supremacy over the IOR through strategic partnerships with other states, as these coastal countries are of great significance due to their geostrategic locations in the region's politics (Hilton, 2013). China's construction of deep-sea ports and Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Myanmar and its recent military support for Maldives in times of crisis further strengthens these ties, while its military relations with Bangladesh have become increasingly concerning for India due to its proximity to India's borders.

Opening of China's first military base in the region of Djibouti located in East Africa is also considered to be a game-changer for China, as it provides China with access to the strategic

route connecting Asia to Europe (Blanchard, 2017; Wang, 2018; Ahmad et al., 2019). This theory of the "String of Pearls" suggests that China's networks, investments, and partnerships in states surrounding the Indian Ocean, between the Chinese mainland and Port Sudan, are part of China's strategy to converge military and commercial facilities in these locations, encircling India from strategic geopolitical positions (Ahmad et al., 2019). The BRI, which goals to assimilate the IOR with Middle East, Africa, Europe, and, is the of China aspiring project to establish dominance over the IOR (Ahmad et al., 2019). The rise of China as a main power in the region Indo-Pacific is supposed as an important threat to the hegemonic position of the India and US because of its BRI, CPEC and the progress of the Gwadar Port. Expansion of China, coupled with rise of Pakistan has developed a main apprehension for both the India and US.

The BRI policy, which connects states through economic strategies, diplomacy, military, and other means, is a significant factor in rising influence of China the region. This policy not only links countries but also gives the shortest land and sea routes to landlocked and coastal countries. Economic expansion of China is not limited to economic growth but also extends to military and naval bases. The US and India are responding to actions of China in the region by conducting large-scale military exercises to monitor China's activities in the ocean. The Malacca Strait, a strategic narrow corridor for China and other local countries for oil and energy transportation, is a major concern for both the US and India.

Here are some of the important implications of growing existence of China in the Indian Ocean:

Strategic Maritime Presence

As China endures to reinforce its naval competences, it has extended its strategic influence by forming its first foreign military base in Djibouti. This development has elevated apprehensions among local and global powers equally, as it indicates determination of China to encounter the prevailing naval order. America, which has for a long period enjoyed a status of unchallenged supremacy in the Indian Ocean, is now fronting amplified rivalry from China in this strategically significant region (Shah, 2023). This progress describes the rising geopolitical strains between the two powers and emphasizes the necessity for a more complex approach to handling the emerging security paradigms in the Indian Ocean.

Economic Interests

The goal of Belt and Road project of China to unite eastern coastline of China to Europe, the Middle East, Africa through a connection of harbors, railways and roads. The Indian Ocean is a precarious element of this plan, as it gives entrée to oil and gas resources of Middle East. America has showed apprehensions about the BRI, as it sees it as a debt trick for developing nations and a source to Enhance strategic influence of China. For instance, Sri Lanka Port Hambantota because of non payment of China's loan that was provided for the establishment of this port forced Sri Lanka to give this port on lease for the period of ninety nine years. This has generated fears about strategic objectives of China in the region and the probability of debt-trap diplomacy.

Conclusion

China's Geo-strategic interests in the Indian Ocean which base on economic, security and energy concerns carries substantial consequences and implications for the US, as it threaten and challenges the prevalent marine order and expands China's strategic influence of China. Ultimately, the America must sensibly direct the difficulties of the geo-strategic tussle

with China in the Indian Ocean because to safeguard its own benefits and reservation of stability in the region. By using a blend of political, economic, and defense instrument, America can capably reply to growing presence of China in the Indian Ocean region and protect its strategic interests.

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