



# **CHINA'S STRING OF PEARLS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN: STRATEGIC AND SECURITY IMPLICATIONS ON INDIA**

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## **Introduction**

India-China relations have a long and contentious history. Both states see themselves as heirs of continuous civilizations whose modern incarnations were founded in the 1940s—the Republic of India in 1947 and the People's Republic of China in 1949—after long periods of domination by Western countries (US Institute of Peace, 2020). Historically near neighbours, India and China had very little contact or understanding of each other. Two long but intermittent periods in early history may be considered as exceptions (Banerjee, 2010). Although the relationship has been friendly, there are border disputes and an economic competition between the two countries that have at times led to strained relations.

India's relation with China, since her independence have traversed many paths. Starting from very intense bonhomie manifested in 'Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai' slogan to bitter rivalry in the aftermath of 1962 war. Border dispute is the most dominating factor between two. It has been argued that since the inception of Indian foreign policy, there has been a lack of concrete and firm Indian policy Towards China. The momentum of visits continued as China and India moved ahead in different areas of bilateral Relations such as educational and cultural exchanges, science and technology co-operation, trade, Security dialogues etc.

The ongoing debate on India-China relation among the members of strategic and academic community has raised a number of issues including the future prospects and the major challenges confronting the bilateral relationships. The last six decades of India-China relationships have seen more of mutual mistrust and suspicion than friendliness and cordial atmosphere. Such mutual mistrust and suspicion grew over the years and have gone beyond proportions in the current context. The challenges have always been to bridge the differences of opinion from both sides and reach to a common understanding on a number of sensitive issues including Sino-Indian border issues. At the same time, one should not come to the conclusion that both India and China have always been at loggerheads.

China has also been following the tenets of the 'Monroe Doctrine'. The attempts have always been to deny access to other powers in the region that it perceives as exclusively within its sphere of influence. Chinese actions have been damaging the interests of other states especially to the countries in the East and South East Asia. Many of China's actions in this part of the world would require very careful analysis by India. It may be important for India in the current context to understand China's intentions and fundamental goals. India will always promote constructive engagement with China and avoid any direct confrontation. It would also be in China's interest if it forges greater and robust partnership with India in the twenty first century.

## The String of Pearls

In 2005, the term "String of Pearls" was coined by Booz Allen in his report called "Energy Futures in Asia". He predicted that China would attempt to expand its naval presence throughout the IOR by building infrastructures in friendly states in the region (Baker, 2015). Each pearl in the "String of Pearls" is a nexus of Chinese geopolitical influence or military presence (Pehrson, 2006). Hanan Island, with recently upgraded military facilities, is a "Pearl". An upgraded airstrip on Woody Island, located in the Paracel archipelago 300 nautical miles east of Vietnam, is a "Pearl". A container shipping facility in Chittagong, Bangladesh, is a "Pearl". Construction of deep-water port in Sittwe, Myanmar, is a "Pearl", as is the construction of a navy base in Gwadar, Pakistan (Al Jazeera, 2005). The port and airfield construction projects, diplomatic ties, and force modernization form the essence of China's "String of Pearls."

As a strategy, string of pearls is the concerted efforts of China to increase access to port and airfields, expand and modernize military forces and foster and stronger diplomatic relationship with trading partners. Chinese government insists that it is burgeoning naval strategy which is peaceful in nature and is only for the protection of regional trade interests. Some economists are of the opinion that Chinese moves are to be viewed commercial in nature but it had created a security dilemma between China and India in the Indian Ocean. China's development including expanding economy and increased global influence, its growing military might and demand for energy presents tremendous challenges to China's leaders as they manage the turmoil of massive structural, technological, and social changes. The governing elites of China have three

overarching concerns: regime survival, territorial integrity, and domestic stability (Pehrson, 2006). Regime survival is the foremost concern of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and party leadership is acutely aware that their success hinges upon the satisfaction of the Chinese people and the government's ability to protect Chinese national interests. Since the end of cold war, China has made progress with respect to territorial integrity. Although the unification of Taiwan persists as a contentious issue and territorial disputes remain, such as competing claim with Japan over sovereignty of the Diaoyutai (Senkaku) islands, China successfully has stabilized and demilitarized its land borders in North and central Asia (Pehrson, 2006). Successful economic development is perceived as key to China's third area of strategic concern and domestic stability. China's largest strategic concerns- regime survival, territorial integrity, and domestic stability- are inexorably linked to the economy. China's greatest strength and its greatest vulnerability is the economy, and therefore it is the centerpiece of Chinese policy and strategy. To sustain economic growth, China must rely increasingly upon external sources of energy and raw materials.

China is one of the largest oil consuming countries in the world. Securing trade route for this commodity has great significance for Chinese industrial Development. Oil can be transported only by ships. Passage for these tankers is one of the main Goals of string of pearls strategy. Actually, by securing string of pearls, China is forming a garrote Around India. India's ambition to gain access to these shipping routes as well as to some energy rich countries are being diminished by China in each passing year. They try to neutralize India as a competitor among the countries in string of pearls. The US shares a similar feeling as India towards Chinese expansion in the Indian Ocean.

The idea of string of pearls challenges the US naval presence in the region and also threaten US allies such as Philipppians, Japan and Australia. With this strategy China tries to Implement massive infrastructure projects in countries across the Indian Ocean region by using Chinese contractors. It can visible in Myanmar because the infrastructure projects have employed more than 40,000 Chinese workers. With the new strategy China also provides social development and military assistance to countries. Full controls of 'pearls' is especially important because the main suppliers of oil for Chinese industries are unstable countries. The social development projects are specially directed towards countries hosting the string of pearls. Rather it implies the development and stability of China. Spreading its influence especially in the economic sphere, China has secured a steady of growth of its Gross Domestic Products (GDP) and its Domestic industry. Even when investing in other countries, China is creating jobs for its nation. This job markets proves as important for the stability in the rural regions in China, which usually provides the majority of the work force.

### **Indian perceptions on "String of Pearls"**

The south China Sea is dubbed by China as the "Second Persian Sea" (Jawli, 2016). The location and energy reserves give the south China sea a critical geostrategic importance. China wants to control it as it imports most of its oil through this trade route. Doing so would enable China to establish hegemony in

East and South East Asia that no other country involved in the dispute is capable of. It has resulted in territorial disputes surrounding these more than two hundred small islands, but only about thirty-five of them are permanently above water (Jawli, 2016).

India considers itself as the leading Indian Ocean state and as destined to be the natural leader of the region. It thus takes somewhat proprietorial attitude towards the IOR and perceives the presence of extra regional naval powers, particularly China, as essentially illegitimate. India has long harbored ambitions to become the dominant power in the Indian Ocean (Brewster, 2016). India's views on the Indian Ocean are partly defensive: the country's colonial experience is used to justify the exclusion of extra regional powers from the Indian Ocean, an approach that is sometimes labelled as India's Monroe Doctrine (Brewster, 2014). But these aspirations for dominance in the Indian Ocean also reflect India's aspirations to be regarded as a major power. Some Indian strategists, including K. Subramanyam, have drawn a direct connection between India's maritime ambitions and its "Manifest destiny" to become a great power.

The US-India partnership is also emerging as an important component of India's strategy to balance China's power. India seeks US economic and technological assistance. For the time being, India's longtime security concerns- China and Pakistan- also now happen to be the United States long term and immediate strategic concern as well. Apparently at the same time, the United States does not want any single hegemonic power to dominate the region whether India or China or anyone else. India's economic rise is seen as serving Washington's long-term interests by ensuring that there will be countervailing powers in Asia- China, Japan, and India, with the United States continuing to act as an "engaged offshore power balancer" (Malik, 2012). India always aspires to become the responsible power in the Indian Ocean domain. Hence, in order to counter check the movements of China in the region, India has to balance the power imbalances by collaborating with other countries like Australia, Japan South Korea etc.

India has identified the challenge from China's string of pearls strategy. India has made serious attempts to smoothen and improve its relations with maritime neighbours. India, being the part of Quadrilateral Dialogue Initiative (QUAD), has stated its commitment to free and open Indo-Pacific region. Mutual cooperation among the countries in the region could stop any aggression in the region. The combination of QUAD countries could enable and enhance India to counter Chinese domination in the Indo-Pacific stretch (Express, 2022). India has invested a lot diplomatically and entered into multiple pacts with countries like Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Mongolia - all surrounding China. Besides, India has good old friends in Japan, South Korea and Russia. Many suggest that China is concerned with growing Indian influence on all sides of its boundaries as its attempt to build a realistic String of Pearls is being talked about and countered openly, New Delhi's outreach has gone largely unnoticed by the world watchers (Dutta, 2017).

## Strategic and Security implications for India

The Indian Ocean Region has emerged as a critical area for trade, commerce, and energy. The waters of the Indian Ocean region (IOR) have become a home for economic developments, disputes, conflicts and competition for regional influence by regional and extra regional powers. All major powers, such as the United States, Australia, Japan, United Kingdom, India and China have sought stakes in the security of the IOR. During the cold war, the Soviet Union wanted direct access to the IOR, now, China is looking for the same (Ghosh, 2022). The Indian Ocean, which lies at the crossroads of Africa, Asia, and Australia, houses a number of littorals that play critical roles in the region. The IOR is a vital sea lane with choke points such the Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Malacca, Bab-el Mandeb, and so forth. These choke points are of immense strategic importance, as huge volumes of trade pass through them. These choke points are exposed to piracy, international disputes, political dissents, and accidents. To ward off such threats and to gain/maintain a strong foothold in this resource rich region, regional and external powers flex their muscles (Ghosh, 2022).

Sardar K.M. Panikkar, the pioneer Indian geo-politician, argued more than 60 years ago that 'Since India's future was dependent on the Indian ocean, then the Indian Ocean must therefore remain truly Indian. The 16<sup>th</sup> century, Portuguese governor of Goa Alphonso Albuquerque was of the opinion that 'control of key choke points extending from the Horn of Africa to the cape of Good Hope and the Malacca strait was essential to prevent an inimical power from making an entry in the Indian ocean (Singh, 2016). India's national security must treat the maritime space as an important dimension of its rising power status and a key component of its economic growth and energy security, although the strategic concepts of its maritime role have yet to be fully developed. For India, achieving closer diplomatic and economic relations with the Indian Ocean littoral states and other major powers has assumed added importance because a number of security analysts have asserted that energy security needs to be India's primary strategic concern for the next 25 years, and that India must take urgent steps to address these needs in the Indian Ocean region (Singh, 2016).

Maritime strategy is playing an ever-greater role in Indian strategic thinking. As India reaches for great power status, it is increasingly turning to the Indian Ocean to expand its strategic space. As of 2005, China's presence in the littoral part of South Asia has become more and more evident with each passing year. Although this comes as no surprise since China's foreign policy is based on investment and economy in order to spread its influence, digging deeper, we can see that economic interests are only the first layer of the actual policy which Beijing is trying to implement in the IOR.

The idea of the "String of Pearls" strategy became popular at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The strategy includes and is maintained by the use of economic, diplomatic, political and military means. By following this strategy, the dragon is trying to achieve maritime dominance in the IOR. The string of Pearls will be especially important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Every "pearl" in this chain or string represents a sphere of influence which China is securing in harbours and in coastal towns along the shores of the Indian Ocean. The Main point of this policy is the strategic placement of these "pearls" with one another in order to make a chain

of hubs that can serve as both economic as well as military and Intelligence cores in the IOR. India and China are both dependent on Sea Lines of Communications through the Indian Ocean for secure energy routes and the free movement of trade to ensure their continued economic development. The potential geostrategic encirclement of India, through a combination of ports in the Indian Ocean ('String of Pearls') and China's de facto alliance with Pakistan, creates a security dilemma for India. To secure itself against this possibility, India must ensure that the choke points in the Indian Ocean region remain open and free, ensuring the conditions for its continued economic growth (Singh, 2016).

## Conclusion

The maritime security plays a vital role in the determination of global power status. The Indian Ocean region, and overall South Asian stretch, forms an important strategical ground for world politics. The emergence of aggressive China and role of USA has insisted India to rethink and reformulate its maritime policy in order to achieve and accomplish its national interests. China's "one belt one road initiative" and string of pearl theory possess a serious threat to India's security establishments.

Historically, India has regarded the Indian Ocean as an exclusive sphere of its influence. This Was similar to the Chinese view on the South China Sea and the American view on Latin America. When China started to move into the Indian "backyard" of foreign influence, it was deemed to be an aggressive act aiming at the encirclement and containment of India. Blocking off trade routes, Sea lanes and capturing harbors along the String of Pearls is something that India fears China Can accomplish. These fears are not unfounded. Pushing its strategy of securing energy Resources in the IOR and boosting its relations with Pakistan, China is effectively minimizing India's role as a regional power.

The "one Belt One Road" policy which China is implementing is a clear sign of Beijing's aspirations to be a superpower. The String of Pearls, which is a littoral route, will probably disrupt, challenge and upset more countries, especially the US, than the Silk Road policy, which is the land route for the "One Belt, One Road" strategy. Not only does the String of Pearls give China a safe energy, trade and shipping route, but it also allows China to station its security and intelligence forces throughout the IOR.

In this dynamic, India will look forward to building up the gambit with Indian Ocean littorals such as Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles to scrutinize the rise of China. India is also likely to develop a strategic plan with the United States, without overtly professing such measures as 'anti-Chinese moves. The security of India depends on the security of the Ocean and the countries that are littoral of it. India has to look to create strong relations with like-minded countries to serve India's own national interests.

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