

Maritime Security Challenges in South Asia: India's Concern Against the String of Pearls Policy

Pankaj Kumar¹ & Dr. Amar Bahadur Shukla²

¹Research Scholar, University Department of Political Science, B. R. A. Bihar University, Muzaffarpur, Bihar

²Assistant Professor, University Department of Political Science, B. R. A. Bihar University, Muzaffarpur, Bihar

Abstract

Alfred Mahan once said "Whoever controls the oceans, runs the world." This assertion holds considerable importance in the context of 21st-century geopolitics in the Indian Ocean area, as dominance over this region is increasingly becoming a strategic battleground for global powers. India has always wanted the region to remain free from interference by outside powers. In recent years, with India's strong prominence on the global stage, tensions have arisen over India's role and the challenges posed by its own neighbouring nation China. Due to this, the region of South Asia has become a strategic battleground in the geopolitical sense, where two big players in the form of India and China try to encircle each other to establish their influence. In this perspective, the maritime domain of South Asia has emerged as a key arena for geopolitical competition, driven by growing trade volumes and strategic rivalry. In today's world of shifting geopolitical landscapes and heightened maritime activities, India is strategically focused on enhancing its maritime diplomacy, necessitating a thorough comprehension of the "String of Pearls." This article examines the evolving maritime security situation in South Asia, with particular attention to India's strategic concerns about China's "String of Pearls" strategy. It delves into the origins of the concept, its main elements, and the implications for India's naval strategy and regional collaboration. Additionally, the study investigates India's strategic responses and suggests measures to strengthen maritime governance and security in the Indian Ocean region.

Keyword: South Asia, Maritime Security, Geopolitical, String of Pearls, India, China, Strategic, Indian Ocean Region.

1. Introduction

The Indian Ocean is unique in being the sole ocean named after a nation. It is bordered by Asia, including India, to the north, Africa to the west, and Indonesia and Australia to the east. To the south, it merges with the Southern Ocean, also known as the Antarctic Ocean. The western boundary of the Indian Ocean can be seen from the Atlantic Ocean at two points: the Suez Canal and the meridian extending south from Cape Agulhas in South Africa. On its eastern side, the Indian Ocean meets the Pacific Ocean at the 147° east meridian, stretching from

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Tasmania's southeast cape down to 60° south latitude. In recent times, India has embraced a 'maritime mindset,' focusing on its maritime surroundings to safeguard national interests. This 'maritime identity' of India is highlighted in the bibliography of the Indian Navy's 2015 strategic document, "Ensuring Secure Seas: The Indian Maritime Security Strategy." At the core of India's evolving maritime foreign policy is its reliance on the Indian Ocean for trade, security, and foreign policy aspirations, especially in the context of the emerging Indo-Pacific region (Bose & Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2024). The Indian Ocean region is characterized by significant trade activities, energy exchanges, and a range of issues from political instability to threats like piracy, terrorism, and cross-border crime. Important chokepoints in this area include the Mozambique Channel, Bab El Mandeb, Strait of Hormuz, Malacca Straits, Sunda Strait, and Lombok Strait. Covering 20% of the Earth's surface, the Indian Ocean is the third-largest ocean globally. This region encompasses 38 coastal nations, 24 oceanic territories, and 17 landlocked countries. It hosts one-third of the global population, where the world's fastest-growing economies exist alongside some of the poorest nations. The region has become ripe for geostrategic competition (Singh, 2018).

The sea routes in the Indian Ocean are regarded as some of the most strategically vital globally. The significance of the Indian Ocean region is on the rise, with many experts viewing it as a focal point in global strategy. Maritime strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan famously stated, "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia, for the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters" (Parikh & Kureshi, 2024). This is especially relevant in the context of the ongoing struggle for maritime dominance in the region. India and China are strategically positioning themselves against each other in the Indian Ocean. Both nations are significant nuclear powers with maritime aspirations. Consequently, the Indian Ocean region is experiencing heightened strategic rivalry, particularly between China and India, and the geopolitical differences between these rising Asian powers are becoming more pronounced. Both India and China perceive themselves as being strategically encircled by the other. Therefore, both India and China aspire to establish their dominance over the region by expanding their security perimeter (Singh, 2018 and Parikh & Kureshi, 2024).

2. The String of Pearls Policy

The phrase "string of pearls" introduced in 2004 by the American political researcher Booz Allen Hamilton to describe China's emerging strategy of safeguarding its maritime trade routes. This approach involved establishing a chain of supportive ports and bases extending from China's coastline across the Indian Ocean toward the Middle East and Africa. These sea lines pass through several major maritime choke points such as the Mandeb Strait, the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz and the Lombok Strait, as well as other strategic maritime hubs in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Maldives and Somalia (Kumar, 2023). China has established a chain of naval bases and commercial hubs linking its mainland to Port Sudan, a strategic arrangement commonly referred to as the "String of Pearls" (Dutta & Dutta, 2024). This paradigm reflects Beijing's transformation from a land-based power to an emerging maritime force. As the analysis progressed, it became clear that China established military bases and intelligence facilities near the coastal areas through diplomatic relations, investment programs and port construction (Dutta & Dutta, 2024).

Figure 1: China's String of Pearls.

Source: (Ain & Bhat, 2020).

The “String of Pearls” strategy was designed to strengthen China’s economic, political, and diplomatic influence across the Indian Ocean. As part of this approach, China made substantial investments in port infrastructure in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. Every “pearl” in China’s “string of pearls” represents either a sphere of geopolitical influence or a strategic military installation in the region. Examples include the airstrip on Wood Island in Vietnam, the port of Chittagong in Bangladesh, and Myanmar’s deep-water port at Kyaukpyu. Most significant among these is the development of a naval base at Gwadar in Pakistan, regarded as the centrepiece of this network. These ‘pearls’ come from the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean region, the Arabian Sea and even the Persian Gulf (Parikh & Kureshi, 2024).

3. Challenges concerning Maritime Security in South Asia

There are several important marine security issues facing South Asia, including:

i. Geostrategic Chokepoints and Protection of SLOCs

Safeguarding the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) is vital to ensuring South Asia’s energy security and commercial exchange. Shipments of crude oil and liquefied natural gas move through key maritime chokepoints—including the Strait of Hormuz, Bab El-Mandeb, Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and the Mozambique Channel—before reaching markets in the Gulf and South Asia. Any disruption from piracy or state-level blockades could cripple economies; accordingly, extra-regional navies (United States, Japan, Russia, United Kingdom) maintain a presence to deter threats and reassure trading partners (Singh, 2018).

ii. Great-Power Competition

The interplay of China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” (The BRI is an infrastructure development program provided by the Chinese government for investment in more than 150 countries.), India’s SAGAR doctrine, and naval deployments of external powers (United States, Japan, Australia, UK) has intensified strategic competition for regional primacy and access. India as well as Russia are increasing their presence in the Indian Ocean region to increase their economic and military strength (Sigdel, 2020).

iii. Infrastructure Development and Investment in the Indian Ocean Region

Infrastructure expansion and financial investment in the Indian Ocean have intensified geopolitical competition, largely because many coastal states in the region face shortages of essential facilities and capital. President Xi Jinping leveraged this gap through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a mechanism to consolidate influence and expand connectivity, his flagship program. For instance, between 2006 and July 2019, China invested \$12.1 billion in Sri Lanka's infrastructure—an amount equal to 14 percent of the country's 2018 GDP. Likewise, by 2018 the Maldives had accumulated \$3 billion in debt to China, a striking figure compared to its annual economic output of \$4.9 billion. These investments are primarily focused on maritime infrastructure, including ports, naval bases and maritime surveillance systems (Narvenkar, 2024).

iv. Non-Traditional (Novel) Maritime Security Issues

South Asia faces a complex array of non-traditional maritime security issues. Climate change and increasing sea levels are already eroding coastlines and displacing fishing communities, while transnational crime—particularly piracy, drug and arms smuggling, and human trafficking—are exploiting weak maritime governance.

Maritime terrorism has demonstrated its lethal potential, most clearly exemplified by the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks, which exploited maritime infiltration. Terrorists such as Lashkar-e-Taiba continue to seek maritime routes to attack high-value coastal assets, including ports and nuclear installations. While, Greenberg et al. (2006) and Zelenkov et al. (2022) identified two primary targets for maritime terrorism: commercial vessels such as super tankers and container ships, and passenger ships. More recently, in January 2024, the Houthis launched a missile attack on a British tanker in the Gulf of Aden. The Indian Navy's INS Visakhapatnam extinguished the fire (Marathe, 2024). Strengthening coastal surveillance and ensuring the security of offshore installations are now key priorities for South Asian navies and coast guards.

Drug trafficking through the Indian Ocean further compounds these challenges. The Golden Crescent (Afghanistan-Pakistan) and the Golden Triangle (Myanmar-Thailand-Laos) remain major producers of heroin and opium, from where consignments are sent via sea routes to Europe and the Far East. India's northeastern states serve as overland routes, but the maritime portion of these routes allows large-scale, low-risk transport that fuels domestic drug addiction and finances insurgency. Three types of illicit narcotics dominate trafficking in the Indian Ocean; heroin, opiates, Ganja and cannabis (Singh, 2018).

Small and light weapons smuggling also find their way from excess stockpiles in Iran and South Asia to conflict zones across the Arabian Sea and beyond. These weapons fuel insurgent groups in both South Asia and Southeast Asia, and the lack of coordinated prevention efforts hinders effective regional arms control.

v. Regional Governance Gaps

India's membership in international maritime treaties and accords further strengthens India's commitment to international maritime governance and cooperation. India's active cooperation with other countries to enhance maritime awareness establishes it as a

responsible stakeholder in the surrounding seas, thereby promoting regional stability and security (Verma, 2024).

vi. Becoming a Nuclear Ocean

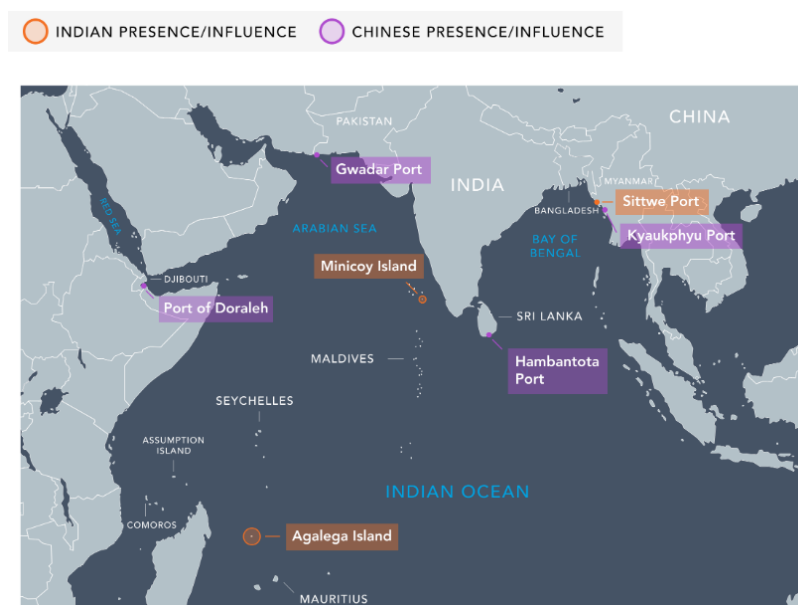
Ultimately, the waters of South Asia are becoming a “nuclear ocean” (Singh, 2018). The deployment of nuclear-armed and nuclear-powered submarines as well as surface combat ships increases the likelihood of any maritime crisis. Deterrence measures can prevent direct conflict, but the presence of these platforms requires strict protocols, transparency measures, and trust-building among regional navies to avoid miscalculations beneath the waves.

To mitigate these risks, India has begun strengthening its naval capabilities and developing ties with powers such as the United States and France, while also advocating for regional multilateralism and investment in infrastructure to maintain a secure presence in disputed waters.

4. India’s Security Concerns

The Indian Ocean is frequently described as the “lifeline of India” (Verma, 2024) since it facilitates nearly 80 percent of the nation’s petroleum imports along with a significant share of its trade, making it central to energy security and economic development. Therefore, it is essential to create a comprehensive security framework—one that addresses growing maritime threats such as piracy, terrorism, and conflicts between states, as well as new non-traditional challenges such as climate change, illegal fishing, and marine pollution. Monitoring maritime activities in India through a robust security framework helps authorities detect potential security risks and respond quickly to emerging crises (Verma, 2024).

Figure 2: Strategic Presence of India and China in the Indian Ocean Region.



Source: (Dutta & Dutta, 2024)

India’s maritime security is under mounting pressure from China’s “string of pearls” strategy, which seeks to develop a chain of naval and dual-use facilities across South Asian littoral states

including Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Maldives, and Pakistan. This strategic encirclement poses a direct challenge to India's long-standing predominance in the Indian Ocean, particularly by endangering its access to crucial maritime lanes and commercial routes that are vital for sustaining energy imports. India's worries about monitoring, possible blockades, and challenges to maritime sovereignty are further heightened by China's presence in key ports like Gwadar and the expanding military alliance between China and Pakistan. These developments pose a direct challenge to India's strategic autonomy, raising apprehensions that China could leverage its position to disrupt India's naval activities or economic lifelines in times of conflict (Kumari, 2025).

Due to its strategic importance, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) remains vulnerable to a range of security challenges, including piracy, terrorism, smuggling, and human trafficking. Incidents of piracy in the Gulf of Aden, the Horn of Africa and the Strait of Malacca are a serious concern in the Indian Ocean (Marathe, 2024).

5. Case Studies of Strategic Ports

Table 1: Case Studies of Strategic Port.

Port	Host Country	Chinese Involvement	India's Key Concerns
Hambantota	Sri Lanka	SEZ financed and Managed by China Merchants.	Debt-trap diplomacy, dual-use infrastructure fears.
Gwadar	Pakistani	Deep-water port under CPEC, operated by COSCO.	Potential naval logistics hub facilitating People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) access.
Chittagong	Bangladesh	Port and oil/gas pipeline linking to Yunnan.	Electronic intelligence to monitor India's activities.
Kyaukpyu	Myanmar	Port and oil/gas pipeline linking to Yunnan.	Strategic bypass of Malacca, PLA logistics corridor.
Djibouti	Djibouti	China's first overseas military base (2017).	Permanent PLA presence on vital Red Sea lifeline.

Source: Researcher's Derivation on the Basis of Study.

Initiated in 2017, the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka was acquired at an approximate cost of US\$360 million. Its establishment was driven by Sri Lanka's geostrategic position between the Strait of Malacca and the Suez Canal, serving as a crucial maritime link between Asia and Europe. However, financial incapacity to sustain the port's operations compelled Sri Lanka to

lease it to China for 99 years; an arrangement widely interpreted as an example of “Debt Trap Diplomacy” (Parikh & Kureshi, 2024). The port is located close to India's sea routes. Some analysts believe that Sri Lanka is included in the string of pearls for use by the PLAN (People's Liberation Army Navy). The Hambantota Port holds potential strategic value for China, particularly during periods of conflict. India is very near to Sri Lanka, so any large-scale infrastructure development by China in the region raises significant concerns for New Delhi. By establishing a major naval base at this location, China consolidates its maritime presence, which poses serious security implications for India. Such developments could provide Beijing with a decisive advantage over South Asian sea-routes, thereby challenging India's strategic interests and sovereignty in the Indian Ocean.

Gwadar Port, situated in Baluchistan, Pakistan, is regarded as one of the most strategically significant ports owing to its pivotal location within the Indian Ocean region. Despite its importance, mounting security challenges have led to delays in its effective utilization. Nevertheless, by providing direct access to the Arabian Sea, and thereby the wider Indian Ocean, the port plays a crucial role in stabilizing Pakistan's trade activities. Gwadar Port not only strengthens the security of China-Pakistan economic alliance and energy trade, but it is also an important place for monitoring US and Indian naval activities, which adds special strategic advantages to China (Parikh & Kureshi, 2024). The port is viewed as a pivotal nexus linking China's One Belt One Road initiative with the Maritime Silk Road. Situated approximately 120 kilometers southwest of Turbat and 170 kilometers east of Iran's Chabahar Port in Sistan, it lies in close proximity to Indian waters and the state of Gujarat. This strategic positioning makes it a critical site for monitoring India's maritime activities and regional movements.

Along the Bay of Bengal coast, China has made substantial investments in Bangladesh's Chittagong Port, a facility that provides Beijing with strategic connectivity to the southwestern provinces of Yunnan. This port handles nearly 92 percent of the country's maritime trade in exports and imports. The port will help China gain electronic intelligence to keep track of India's aggression in the Indian Ocean region (Parikh & Kureshi, 2024). As Bangladesh continues to transit between China and India, Chittagong will remain a key battleground in the broader competition for influence in South Asia.

The last pearl of the China's “string of pearls” strategy is Myanmar's Kyaukpyu Port, situated in the Bay of Bengal. In 2006, Beijing proposed the construction of a 1,200-kilometer oil pipeline extending from Sittwe to Kunming in Yunnan province. This will reduce the transport time of fuel crossing the Strait of Malacca by a week. Additionally, China expressed readiness to upgrade Myanmar's naval infrastructure in return for access to the strategically located Coco Islands. China began building a deep-sea port Kyaukpyu, a road from Kunming to Sittwe for which a feasibility study was carried out in 2005 and is also financing road construction from Rangoon to Akyab (Manhas, 2020). China is constantly assisting Myanmar in building naval facilities so that it can use them for its own purposes and gain an edge in the region. An example of this is the Coco Islands, where a naval jetty project was started in 2002. Its use is a point of conflict between China and India. China uses it to keep an eye on Indian missile testing, monitor commercial activity over the Strait of Malacca, and spy on India's military station at

Port Blair in the Andaman Islands. Further intensifying India's security concerns, China and Myanmar entered into a multi-billion-dollar agreement in 2018 to develop a deep-sea port on Myanmar's western coast. Under this arrangement, the Kyaukpyu Port is to be constructed by China's state-owned CITIC Group, representing a significant strategic challenge to India's maritime security. The project will be known as the Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ) deep sea port project (Manhas, 2020). Upon completion, the Kyaukpyu Port will extend China's presence into India's strategic sphere of influence in the Bay of Bengal. The facility is widely perceived as a component of Beijing's broader effort to encircle India through the establishment of military and naval assets across South and Southeast Asia.

6. The Strategic Responses of India;

6.1. The Necklace of Diamonds

India's diamond necklace strategy was designed as a direct response to China's string of pearls strategy, aimed at encircling the Indian Ocean with a network of friendly ports and logistics hubs. In early 2015, New Delhi secured naval access to Oman's Duqm port to supplement Pakistan's Gwadar, gained a foothold on Assumption Islands (Seychelles) on the edge of the Mozambique Channel, and replenishment rights at Singapore's Changi naval base. In 2018, India opened Sabang port in Indonesia at the western entrance to the Strait of Malacca, as well as invested \$500 million in Iran's Chabahar port to access Central Asia by bypassing Pakistan's land route. Simultaneously, Delhi struck deals on Sri Lanka's Trincomalee port and oil storage facilities to mitigate Hambantota's tilt toward China, supported Myanmar's Sittwe terminal (with an eye on Dawei), and ensured trade access to Bangladesh's Chittagong, creating a terrestrial "middle corridor" as an alternative to the choke point of Malacca (Parikh & Kureshi, 2024).

To string these disparate "diamonds" into a strategic necklace, India has put in place a number of policies and institutional frameworks. The International North-South Transport Corridor now connects Russia to Mumbai via Azerbaijan and Iran by rail and sea, reducing transit time and costs. Modi's 'Act East' and 'Neighbourhood First' policies have deepened ties with ASEAN and South Asian neighbours, while the 2020 India-Japan Acquisitions and Cross-Servicing Agreement and the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor have expanded Indian access to East Africa. Connecting all these ports will help explain how it is encircled like a necklace and strategically located to counter any Chinese military conflict. India maintains healthy relations with the encircled countries. Though the necklace is hampered by bureaucratic delays, sanctions regimes and partners reluctant to take on China's deep pockets, the diamond necklace reflects India's efforts to protect its sea routes of communication, secure energy imports and assert strategic autonomy against Beijing's maritime encirclement (Parikh & Kureshi, 2024).

6.2. Naval and Military Buildup

India has significantly upgraded its naval capabilities to safeguard vital sea lanes and choke-points in the Indian Ocean. It has pursued nuclear deterrence by being declared a nuclear-weapon state, thereby adding a strategic dimension to maritime defence. At the same time, it has signalled its presence through defence exercises and patrols in the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea and the Andaman Sea.

6.3. Strategic Partnerships and Alliances

A Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with the United States and a defence agreement with France have given India access and overflight rights to foreign bases. This has revived the Quad (with the US, Japan and Australia) not only as an anti-China bloc, but also as a platform for joint maritime domain awareness and coordinated patrolling of critical sea lanes. On September 9, 2020, India and Japan signed a similar agreement called the 'Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement' or ACSA, aimed at establishing a framework that will enable the expeditious provision of supplies and services between the armed forces of the two countries. In the same year, India and Australia also signed the Mutual Logistics Support Agreement or MLSA during a virtual summit between PM Modi and then Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, aimed at facilitating enhanced logistics cooperation, streamlining military engagement and enhancing joint readiness of forces to respond to regional humanitarian disasters. India has also signed similar agreements with other key partners, such as France, South Korea, Vietnam, and Singapore. These agreements are fundamental to New Delhi's operational reforms and improved communication in the waters (Satakul, 2025).

6.4. Act East Policy

India's Act East policy, which was launched as an effort to integrate the Indian economy with Southeast Asian countries, has been used to forge important military and strategic agreements with Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore, helping India counter to China (Kumar, 2023). By advancing this policy, India has given momentum to its Indo-Pacific vision while consolidating its strategic position in the region.

6.5. Diplomacy with South Asian Neighbours

- **Sri Lanka:** Prime Minister Modi's 2015 state visit was the first by an Indian leader in 25 years—India articulated its security concerns at the Hambantota port and received assurances of a balanced foreign partnership.
- **Bangladesh:** Resolved long-standing border disputes during Modi's visit and ensured access for merchant vessels to Chittagong port to enhance India's maritime presence in the Bay of Bengal. Continued to monitor China's deep-sea project at Sonadia and is in talks with Dhaka to protect shared SLOC interests.
- **Pakistan:** Countering the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) by highlighting its strategic vulnerabilities and advocating alternative routes such as Chabahar (in partnership with Iran) for regional stability.
- **Myanmar:** Under "Act East", high-level contacts were established with Myanmar, resulting in increased defence and economic ties to counter China's Kyaukpyu deep-sea port.
- **Maldives:** While China is setting up an ocean-observatory station, India is exploring possibilities of bilateral cooperation in maritime surveillance and coastal infrastructure under its 'neighbourhood first' policy.

India's Neighbourhood First policy reflects a proactive and future-oriented vision for

regional engagement. It emphasizes the strengthening of physical, digital, and cultural connectivity with neighbouring states, including Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. The framework is anchored in the principles of mutual respect, constructive dialogue, peace, and shared prosperity. India's support has ranged from high-level infrastructure to local development projects ("Bharat's Global Footprint," 2025).

6.6. Chabahar Port

India is working on the development of the Chabahar port in Iran, which will create a new land-sea corridor to Central Asian nations, avoiding Pakistan. The Chabahar port provides India a strategic position as it is located over the Gulf of Oman, which is an extremely strategic oil supply route (Kumar, 2023).

6.7. Strategic Pact with France and Other Countries

India and France have recently entered into a strategic agreement that enables mutual access for their warships to naval bases in the Indian Ocean. This agreement grants the Indian Navy access to crucial French ports, including Djibouti, where China's only overseas military base is located. India has also established a deal for a new base in the Seychelles and secured military access to naval facilities at ports and airfields in Oman. Additionally, in 2017, an agreement was made with Singapore to allow deployments to naval installations in both nations. With its expanded bases on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands at the end of the Strait of Malacca, India is strengthening its position in the battle over Southeast Asia's waters (Kumar, 2023). Collectively, these developments underscore India's pursuit of a robust maritime posture aimed at counterbalancing China's expanding footprint in the region.

6.8. Infrastructure and Coastal Security Enhancements

India is rapidly strengthening its maritime surveillance network in the Indian Ocean region through a series of bilateral initiatives: in Bangladesh, it has agreed to deploy 20 coastal surveillance radar systems along the coast to track Chinese warship movements in the Bay of Bengal; in the Maldives, Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) is installing ten radars – seven of which were completed by 2019 despite minor delays – to transmit live imagery, video feeds and ship location data; Sri Lanka already hosts six such radars and plans to add at least ten more under India-Sri Lanka cooperation; Mauritius has eight coastal surveillance radars operational; the Seychelles commissioned its first radar on Mahe in 2015 and, in India itself, BEL had installed 46 coastal radar stations and 16 command-and-control centres by 2015, with plans to add 38 more stations and five new control systems in the next phase (Kumar, 2023).

6.9. Capacity Building and Multilateral Frameworks

India frequently engages in joint naval drills such as SLINEX with Sri Lanka, SIMBEX with Singapore, Malabar with the United States and its partners, JIMEX with Japan, INDRA with Russia, VARUNA with France, KONKAN with the United Kingdom, MILAN with multiple international navies, and BONGO-SAGAR with Bangladesh. These exercises are designed to enhance operational interoperability and reinforce collective

strategies to counter threats like terrorism and piracy. India is deepening bilateral security partnerships with key island and coastal countries – Sri Lanka, Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius – by conducting regular joint naval exercises, sharing coastal radar data and providing capacity building support to coast guards and maritime police forces (Narvenkar, 2024).

Along with these exercises, India participates in the White Shipping Agreement to share unclassified commercial-vessel data in real time, has observer status under the Djibouti Code of Conduct to curb piracy in the Western Indian Ocean, and is a contracting party to ReCAAP for joint anti-piracy and armed robbery operations in Southeast Asian waters. As well as India is promoting regional integration and governance by proposing expanded mandates for the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and creating new sub-regional forums focused on information sharing, coordinated law enforcement at sea, and joint scientific research into oceanographic conditions – efforts that collectively limit the strategic scope for outside powers to dominate South Asian waters (Narvenkar, 2024).

6.10. Soft-Power Diplomacy

In addition to hard power, New Delhi leverages soft-power diplomacy – providing development assistance for port upgrades, humanitarian relief exercises, and blue economy partnerships – to demonstrate its role as a security provider rather than an adversary, thereby undermining narratives of containment associated with China's encirclement strategy. In September 2024, India launched 'Operation Sadbhav' (India launched this operation to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam, as these countries were affected by the severe floods caused by Typhoon Yagi.) to support Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar after Typhoon Yagi. In April 2025, it hosted the 'Africa India Key Maritime Engagement' (AIKEYME) exercise with ten African nations, strengthening maritime ties and shared responses to regional challenges ("Bharat's Global Footprint," 2025).

6.11. Surrounding China in North

India has invested heavily diplomatically in countries surrounding China such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Mongolia (Kumar, 2023). Narendra Modi was the first prime minister of India to visit Mongolia and even gave a one-billion-dollar credit to help develop an air corridor to boost bilateral relations between the two countries (Parikh & Kureshi, 2024).

6.12. SAGAR to MAHASAGAR Initiative

India has launched the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiative in 2015, under which India emphasizes trust, transparency, adherence to international maritime norms, sensitivity to each nation's interests and peaceful dispute resolution to promote collective surveillance and response capabilities. The new MAHASAGAR initiative is an extension of SAGAR with a shift of focus from just maritime security to economic and geopolitical concerns. One of the most important features of this initiative is the strategic containment of Chinese influence. MAHASAGAR reinforces India's partnerships with smaller island states like Mauritius so that they do not drift away from

Indian interests. As a result, MAHASAGAR strengthens India's regional security role and increases its presence in strategically important waters. Guided by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of MAHASAGAR, India promotes cooperation and stability across oceans. Over the past year, in response to piracy and rising threats in the Western Arabian Sea, the Navy deployed over 35 ships, conducted more than 1,000 boarding operations and responded to 30-plus incidents. These efforts saved over 520 lives and ensured safe passage for 312 merchant vessels carrying cargo worth more than 5.3 billion US dollars (Yadav, 2025 and "Bharat's Global Footprint," 2025).

In addition to all this, India is pursuing a multi-dimensional force integration strategy by improving tri-service coordination between its Navy, Air Force and Army linked to state administrations. This integrated command-and-control framework strengthens India's capacity to identify, monitor, and neutralize maritime threats before they penetrate its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

7. Way Forward

India's way forward hinges on weaving together strategic hard-power initiatives, nimble diplomacy, and robust governance reforms.

- First, New Delhi must strengthen the "Necklace of Diamonds" by deepening defence, infrastructure, and economic partnerships with Oman, Iran, Myanmar, Singapore, and Bangladesh, thereby counterbalancing China's foothold.
- At the same time, India should develop strategic ports—Chabahar, Duqm, Sabang, and Assumption Island—as dual-use hubs that secure forward logistics and strengthen regional connectivity.
- Multilateral engagement under the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and within the Indian Ocean Rim Association will cement strategic partnerships, while the Act East and Neighbourhood First policies reinforce ties with ASEAN and South Asian littoral countries. To link Asia and Europe, operationalizing the Middle Corridor and the Arab–Mediterranean route will diversify trade routes away from China's Belt and Road corridors.
- Domestically, India needs to upgrade its maritime domain awareness infrastructure to address threats — including expanding coastal radar networks, integrating real-time data into IMAC, and using AI-enabled satellite surveillance.
- Simultaneously, soft power and humanitarian diplomacy—through Quick Impact Projects, disaster-relief drills, and training of regional coast-guards—will build goodwill.
- Finally, comprehensive legal and institutional reforms, including passage of the Anti-Maritime Piracy Bill, harmonization of UNCLOS-based regulations, and strengthened interagency protocols, will ensure India's security architecture remains agile, legitimate, and ready to safeguard its maritime interests.

Conclusion

The Chinese leadership's "String of Pearls" strategy, designed to lessen reliance on the Strait of Malacca, has undeniably bolstered the PLA's influence in the Indo-Pacific area. This strategy

effectively embodies other Chinese foreign policy initiatives developed over time, such as the 'Belt and Road' and 'Debt-trap Diplomacy'. Chinese facilities at Sri Lanka's Hambantota port and various locations surrounding India pose a significant national security concern for New Delhi. China's expanding maritime collaboration with Pakistan and other regions has heightened India's suspicions. This is due to three main factors: China's backing of Pakistan, the Maritime Silk Road, and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, all of which carry military implications.

China's "String of Pearls" initiative aims to instil apprehension among Asian countries, thereby positioning China as a dominant force in both Asia and globally. However, this is just one aspect; India is also taking strategic steps by establishing naval bases in neighbouring nations to counter any potential Chinese threats. Additionally, India is strengthening its maritime capabilities by collaborating with countries such as the US, France, and Japan in the Pacific. It is important to recognize that these efforts will not yield immediate results and may take decades to fully materialize. Therefore, decisive leadership at the highest level, coupled with the timely execution of well-crafted initiatives, will be crucial in consolidating India's influence and ensuring a robust presence in the Indian Ocean.

India's maritime strategy is built on the pillars of vigilance, rapid response, and proactive regional involvement. Beyond its defence capabilities, India plays a crucial role as a reliable first responder for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in the Indian Ocean Region. This maritime strategy integrates a formidable naval force with inclusive diplomatic efforts, contributing to a secure and collaborative Indo-Pacific environment.

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