

## **Tiger and the Dragon: India and China's Maritime Competition in the Indian Ocean Region**

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### **Abstract**

*The Indian Ocean holds immense strategic importance for China and India. The Indo-Pacific region has become an intense maritime battleground for regional and external powers, especially the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The IOR is a vital strategic and economic arena for military, diplomatic and regional involvement of India and China. By using qualitative research methods, this article explores the significance of 'maritime communication.' How does China's "String of Pearls" approach aim to secure its maritime and geopolitical position in the IOR? and in response, how is India's "Necklace of Diamonds" strategy designed to counter-balance and mitigate Chinese influence in the region? Building on the assumptions of Raoul Castex, a French naval admiral; this article employs explanatory research that provides insights into China and India's maritime interests in IOR through the 'string of pearls' and 'Necklace of diamonds' approach. The research examines that India and China are adopting a highly defensive posture in controlling maritime international connections and ensuring the economic as well as national security of their respective countries as mentioned in the writings of Raoul Castex.*

**Keywords:** Belt and Road Initiative, Indian Ocean, Indian Navy, Maritime Communication, String of Pearls, Necklace of Diamond.

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## **Introduction**

The ongoing competition in the Indo-Pacific region between China and India has become a deliberate oceanic battlespace for both countries in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Both countries are exploring alternative approaches for restoring strategic balance in the respective region and trying to compel each other by reaching out to countries and even island nations of the IOR. The Indian Ocean is the 3<sup>rd</sup> most crucial ocean in the world (The World Factbook, n.d.). India's energy resources come through sea lanes of communication, and 95 percent of its trade depends on them (Venkatshamy, 2015). According to Donald Berlin, India perceives the Indian Ocean (IO) as its abutment. To enhance its proficiency in the IO, India needs to dominate this region. India desires to be a Net security provider and aspires to gain significant power in the IOR.

In addition, on November 19, 2010, Nirupama Rao, former Foreign Secretary of India, declared that India and the IO are intertwined (Begum, 2022). Moreover, China has been increasing its presence in the IO by deploying warships through People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). China has developed its naval strategies, which include command of the sea and securitisation of sea lanes of communication. Within China's maritime policy, they increase naval modernisation, frequent naval exercises in the ocean, exploration rights of the high seas, building naval facilities, investment in deep seaports, and upgrading partners' navies (Rather, 2020).

Raoul Castex was a French army officer's son. He established the Institute of Higher Studies of National Defence in 1936 (Shurkin, 2024). Castex took inspiration from Mahan's historical approach regarding the importance of sea power and the battleship's dominance of fleets. However, unlike Mahan, Castex's research was concerned with strategy in general rather than just naval strategy. His exceptional work, published in academia with available records, was "Theories Strategiques" (Strategic Theories) and comprised of five volumes between 1927 and 1935. Like Mahan and Corbett, Castex also believes that gaining or denying the mastery of the sea is control over vital surface communications, which is the primary objective of maritime operations. He also believes that there are two ways to control maritime

communications, i.e., offensive and defensive. He also states that whoever controls maritime communications will maintain international connections.

The control of maritime communication also protects one's coast from potential enemy attacks. He strongly supports how crucial it is economically to control maritime communication, and this communication control is significant for maintaining the country's industrial and commercial activity. He argued that attacking and defending communications is closely tied to the battle for maritime dominance. According to Castex, attack on and defence against marine communications are inextricably linked and have an ongoing impact on one another (V ego, 2009).

### **Maritime contest Between India and China in the Indian Ocean**

According to Castex, maritime communication is essential to national and economic security and guarantees international connections through vast waterways. As per literature, India and China are playing their role through a string of pearls and a necklace of diamonds approaches in Indian ocean. China's approach is based on "The String of Pearls" which establishes a network of ports and economic and military facilities across numerous nations. This concept was first proposed by the American consultant Booz Allen Hamilton and gained popularity after being published in Energy Futures. Through this approach, China is establishing a network of military and commercial installations, relationships, and sea lanes of communications from mainland China to the African region (Shurabhi Ghosh, 2020).

As Western media named this approach, the practical manifestation of this claim came in 2013, when Xi Jinping in October 2013 declared the establishment of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" in Kazakhstan and Indonesia. He also called for the creation of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road and the Belt and Road Initiative. The Maritime Silk Road strategy focuses on infrastructure and economic development across Southeast Asia, Oceania, the Indian Ocean, and East Africa to enhance China's influence (Green, 2018). Through this, China dominates the maritime communication channels in the Indian Ocean Region (Drun, 2017).

India's former foreign secretary, Lalit Mansingh, first mentioned the necklace of diamonds in a think tank discussion. He described China's String of Pearls and India's Necklace of Diamonds approaches. This approach secures Indian interests in Indian Ocean naval cooperation. However, this term was not officially mentioned in Indian official discourse (Mengal, 2022). The necklace of diamonds encompasses strengthening India's naval might, growing its military installations, and fortifying its ties with neighbouring countries; 'it seeks to encircle China.' The plan calls for building connections with other countries in the area and gaining access to naval bases in strategically positioned countries (Group Discussion Ideas, n.d.). Furthermore, the Indian navy also prioritises building ports and advanced coastal surveillance radar systems to detect enemies, as well as Chinese submarines and other weapons in the ocean. India is also working on fortifying defence ties and enhancing bilateral relations with South Asian Nations, the island nation of the Indian Ocean, and Southeast nations (Biswas, 2022).

### **China's Rising Presence in Indian Ocean States and Islands**

#### **➤ Djibouti**

Djibouti is home to several overseas naval bases, including those of the US and China (BTI Transformation Index, 2024). China also maintained relations with Djibouti by investing in its infrastructure, which includes port developments, railways, and roads. Huawei Marine also introduced the underwater fibre optic cable, which links the country with other republics and increases technological advancements. China invested in the Islands of Djibouti through the One Belt and One Road initiative. China invested 350 million dollars in the port of Djibouti through the Chinese Merchant Group company to enhance the port facilities and make the port a trade hub. This also led to the 2035 vision of Djibouti, which intended to make Djibouti a global trade Hub (Dr. Indu Saxena, 2021). In addition, China's first foreign military base was completed in 2017 in Djibouti near the Red Sea. According to the satellite images, the Chinese naval warship, Yuzhao-class landing Ship 071, docked there. This large warship hosts 800 soldiers, an air-cushioned landing craft, and a helicopter (Woody, 2022).

➤ **Myanmar**

China's key strategic goals in Myanmar stem from the country's ability to project power into the Indian Ocean basin and streamline trade and energy flows as part of its Belt and Road Initiative. Myanmar is situated between China's landlocked southwest and the Bay of Bengal. It mapped out large-scale infrastructure projects as part of the Economic Corridor between China and Myanmar (International Crisis group, 2024). China is in charge of maintaining security of the 2,000 km shared border between the two nations. China's primary goal in Myanmar is to take control of Kyauk Phyu, a dual-use deep-sea port on the country's west coast, and open up access to the Indian Ocean through Myanmar (Nielsen, 2022).

Originally a part of the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCMIEC), the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) was originally proposed as a stand-alone economic corridor in 2014. The critical infrastructure investments, roads, trains, and ports are situated along the 1,700-kilometer inverted Y-shaped corridor that connects China's Yunnan province with Myanmar's important commercial hubs. In 2017, India declined to participate in the BCMIEC under CMEC due to the growing tensions between China and India. The project encompasses both hard and soft connections, including those made through joint research, human resource development, and interpersonal and physical linkage through industry, transportation, infrastructure, agriculture, and other technology.

The goal of CMEC is to give Myanmar reliable supply chains for necessities including food, fertilizer, and steady energy. China is Myanmar's biggest commercial partner between April 2022 and January 2023, bilateral trade was valued at over \$2.16 billion. Chinese enterprises are establishing power projects, particularly hydropower plants in the area, as part of resource-sharing agreements. The Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone opened a \$180 million, 135 MW power facility in October 2022. Notably, since February 2023, China has been using a 770-kilometer oil pipeline that connects Yunnan province in China to Rakhine province in Myanmar (Ahmed 2023).

➤ **Madagascar**

Madagascar and China signed agreements to enhance their trade and economic relations. Almost 30 Chinese companies work in Madagascar in agriculture, telecommunication, medical, and infrastructure developments. The RN5A project in Madagascar, funded by the Chinese enterprise, was completed in 2022 (Xin, 2023). China plans to develop a military base near the Mozambique Channel in Madagascar. It also reduces China's dependence on the Malacca Strait. China provides military training and assistance to Madagascar (Chaudhury, 2022).

➤ **Seychelles**

China invested in Seychelles in the domain of the navy and in developing infrastructure, agriculture, and health. In 2007, the Seychelles and the Chinese signed an MOU for military collaboration. This Chinese vessel was allowed to dock on the Mahe Islands. In 2012, China increased its naval engagement with the Seychelles. China gave two Y-12 aircraft to Seychelles for surveillance. China also delivered Etoile, a Shanghai II patrol ship type 062C, in 2014. China is expanding its footprint in Seychelles to build a military base there (Cabestan, 2021).

➤ **Coco Islands (Myanmar)**

Coco Islands is on Myanmar's north-eastern side of the Bay of Bengal. It is near the Strait of Malacca, Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It is 11 km long, and it is suspected that it hosts China's naval outpost, close to the vital sea line of communication. Firstly, it was a 1300 metre runway in Coco Islands, but now it has been upgraded to 2300 metres. A radar system, two new aircraft carrier hangers, chamber blocks, and a crossway between the Great Coco Island and smaller islands are constructed (Selth, 2023).

➤ **Bangladesh**

Bangladesh imports two-thirds of its arms supplies from China. In 2016, Bangladesh received a Type 035G diesel-electric submarine, part of the Ming-class

submarines that Bangladesh ordered from China. China Poly Technologies agreed with Bangladesh to develop a submarine support facility on Sheikh Hasina's naval base. The base can dock six submarines and eight warships (Matthew P. Funairole, 2023).

➤ **Maldives**

The Maldives is an Island territory. It is strategically important as it is near the eight-degree channel through which the world's oil shipments pass. In 2011, China opened its embassy in the Maldives capital, Male. China signed an MOU with Male under the BRI. China and the Maldives also signed a Free trade agreement to enhance bilateral relations. Before that, Maldives was unimportant to China (Ramachandran, 2018). After taking office, the newly elected President of the Maldives, Muhammad Muizzu, visited China and increased bilateral relations between both states. The Maldives also signed an agreement with a Chinese firm to upgrade the facilities of Ibrahim Nasir International Airport. Both countries signed agreements in green technology, blue economy, and infrastructure (Yeping, 2024). They also signed a deal on military assistance, which shows President Muizzu's first policy for China. China invested approximately 200 million dollars in the Maldives in different development projects (Regan, 2024).

➤ **Pakistan (Gwadar)**

In Pakistan, Gwadar is a natural deep seaport approximately 240 miles away from the Strait of Hormuz. Gwadar gives direct access to China in the Arabian Sea. Pakistan and China signed many bilateral agreements. In 2015, Pakistan signed an agreement with China to give eight Yuan class diesel submarines Type 039/041, which Pakistan will get in 2028. Pakistan will also get a second Hangor class submarine from China. The Babur III missile was suspected of fitting in the submarine (Tiwari, 2024). China invested in the New Gwadar International Airport, which has facilities to accommodate larger aircraft. At about 3.78 km, it is the most significant runway in South Asia. China's investment in other infrastructure development in Gwadar will upgrade the city and make it a trade hub for the world due to its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz (China

Embassy 2022). The new phase of Gwadar started in Pakistan, which included the development of Gwadar International Airport, a hospital, port infrastructure development, more facilities for Gwadar fish harvesters, which makes Gwadar a trade hub, and also the development of an electricity plant in Gwadar. Due to these developments, Gwadar's standards will ameliorate (Express Tribune 2024).

### ➤ **Sri Lanka**

Sri Lanka is an Island state in India's backyard. China gifted Sri Lanka the P625 frigate warship and trained the Sri Lanka Navy officers in Shanghai. Hambantota port, Sri Lanka's second-largest port, was given on lease to a Chinese company. China plans to develop a military base in Hambantota port. The port is vital for China because world oil passes through it and it is also important for China's exports to Europe and Africa (Singh S. , 2020). China installed a radar facility in Sri Lanka at Matara, which is 500 km away from the Hambantota port. Yang Wang 5 research vessel was docked in Sri Lanka in 2022 (Kuruwita, 2023). China proposed a plan to develop a radar surveillance system in the Dondra port of Sri Lanka. This gave China an edge in the Indian Ocean region because, through this radar surveillance system, China not only monitored the Indian navy activity but also checked Indian naval installations at Andaman and Nicobar Island (Sharma, 2023).

## **Indian expansion in the Indian Ocean**

### ➤ **Mauritius**

Mauritius is an Island territory in Southern Africa. Its important islands include Agalega, Cargados Carajos, and Rodrigues (Geography of Mauritius, n.d.). India invested in different fields in Mauritius. India was the first country to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic and give vaccines to the Mauritius government. Both countries are the most significant trading partners (Nwankwo, 1982). India has been building a military naval base in the Agalega Islands of Mauritius to maintain strategic superiority in the Indian Ocean. An MOU was signed between India and Port Louis for earth observation satellites and technological advancements. For training and surveillance of

EEZs, INS Sharda, an Indian naval warship, was docked at Port Loius and it participated in naval joint exercises. India plans to deploy its Boeing Poseidon 8I maritime patrol and survey aircraft in the recently built facility (Bhaumik 2023). India also installed Coastal Surveillance radar in Mauritius (Panda 2015). India signed an agreement with Mauritius to extend the airfield and install communication and intelligence facilities. India plans to install a transponder system in Mauritius to identify ships in the Indian Ocean (Bhattacharya, 2024).

#### ➤ **Maldives and Lakshadweep**

Since 2009, both countries have engaged in joint military exercises in the name of Ekuverin to combat terrorism. Relations deteriorated when President Yameen told India to take back two of its helicopters that India gave them for surveillance and signed bilateral deals with China. When Muhammad Solih emerged, both countries increased their partnership in economics, defence, and healthcare facilities (Samim Aktar, 2022). In 2019, India installed a Coastal surveillance radar system in the Maldives. India and the Maldives also signed the white shipping agreement to exchange information between navies and coast guards (Bhaumik, 2019). In 2021, India and Maldives engaged in an agreement on Uthuru Thila Falhu, Maldives Island naval base, to develop and maintain the base.

The island base was maintained along with the new harbour, which served to monitor the Maldives EEZ, and the National Defence Force Coast Guard was able to maintain security checks on its country's waters (Bhaumik, 2021). Due to the Lakshadweep controversy, relations between the two countries were constrained; questions arose in the Maldives as the Indians replaced the Maldives with the Lakshadweep. The newly elected Maldives President asked the Indian troops to leave the Indian territory. The Muizuu government is pro-Chinese, and during the election campaigns in the Maldives, Muizuu called for an India Out policy. Muizuu also refused to revive the security agreement with India (Samaranayake, 2024).

The Maldivian government asked the Indian troops residing in the Maldives for marine surveillance to leave the country by March 15. The Maldives returned the gifted

helicopter and Dornier aircraft to India (Regan, 2024). The Maldives is at a strategic point in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, so China reached out to the Maldives. The Minicoy Island of the Indian Lakshadweep archipelago is just a hundred Kilometres away from the Maldives' northern water tip. It is 380 km from Kavaratti and 425 km from the coast of Thiruvananthapuram (the closest to India) (Kannan, 2020). In 2024, the President of the Maldives visited China. During Muizzu's visit, twenty agreements were signed between the two nations regarding economic and infrastructure development, trade, green development, the development of Male roads, and 30,000 social housing units (Regan, 2024).

Maldives is the top priority of India and China due to its location in the Indian Ocean. India did not want to lose its neighbours to the Chinese bloc. For the movement of its energy necessities from the Middle East, China wanted to secure its military presence in the Arabian Sea (Mohamed, 2024). To counter Chinese presence, India used its Lakshadweep territory as a countermeasure. India opened the INS Jatayu base on the Minicoy Islands in the Lakshadweep archipelago, 125 kilometres from the Maldives (Kaushik, 2024). Lakshadweep is the Union territory of India. Nine-degree channels separate the mainland Lakshadweep from the Minicoy Island, and eight degrees separate the Minicoy from the Maldives (Geography of Lakshadweep, n.d.).

India has stepped up attempts to enhance aerial communication between Lakshadweep and mainland India, as well as other regions of the world, considering the growing trend of the Maldives Boycott. The projected Minicoy dual-use base is anticipated to handle fighter jets and Airbus A320/737-sized aircraft. Furthermore, after twenty years, efforts to expand Agatti's current airfield are beginning to gain momentum. With the extension, smaller turboprop aircraft currently in service will be replaced by larger aircraft like A320 (Royal Aeronautical Society, 2019).

#### ➤ **Andaman and Nicobar Islands**

Andaman and Nicobar Islands are India's Union territory. They increase India's significance in the Bay of Bengal (Kaul, 2015). Port Blair is the only base station of Andaman and Nicobar Island from where all three Indian forces operated. INAS 318

and INAS 321 are stationed at the INS Utkrosh near the INS Jarawa naval base. Dornier228 and C 130J stationed at INS Baaz. InS Kohassa accommodates helicopters and Dornier (Lintner, 2019). Seven air and navy bases are operational in Nicobar and the Andaman Islands. India invested to extend the airfields of INS Kohassa and INS Baaz in Shibpur and Campbell Bay. India plans to build the Great Nicobar Islands, south of these Islands, which include an international airport, 450 MV gas and power plant, and an international container transshipment terminal (Singh A. , 2023).

#### ➤ **Bangladesh**

India is Bangladesh's 2<sup>nd</sup> largest trading partner. In 2022, they signed a comprehensive economic partnership agreement. India established EEZ at Bangladesh's Mirsarai and Mongla ports. Bongo Sagor is a naval military exercise between the two countries. CORPAT is a bilateral patrolling exercise between India and Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal (Deb, 2022). For the first time in 2021, an Indian navy ship visited Mongla port on the eve of the Bangladesh independence celebration (Report, 2021). Both countries signed six agreements to enhance maritime security. In 2015, India and Bangladesh signed a Coast Guard agreement. Indian Coast Guard ships Shaurya and Rajveer were deployed in Chittagong for six days to enhance maritime security. India and Bangladesh signed an agreement under which India used the Chittagong Port and Mongla Port to transfer goods. Both countries also signed an agreement for the installation of the surveillance radar system (India News Network, 2023).

#### ➤ **Singapore**

The Navy of India and Singapore Navy held the Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX) in 2021. In 2022, the Singapore Navy also participated in the 11<sup>th</sup> MILAN multinational naval exercises (Ministry of External Affairs 2022). Furthermore, in 2018, both countries signed the “India-Singapore Mutual Agreement for Navy Cooperation, Logistical Sustenance, and Refuelling Capacity” at Singapore’s Changi Naval base (Desk, 2020). The Singapore Navy operates the Changi base on the

country's eastern side. The base hosted the ASEAN Regional Forum maritime security shore exercise in 2007. Many countries' fleets visited the base, including India, the USA, Malaysia, Japan, China, New Zealand, and Australia (Arunasalam, 2016).

### ➤ **Oman**

Oman borders the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman. To the north, on the Musandam Peninsula, it borders the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. To create a naval presence in Oman, India reached out to Oman at Port Duqm. Port of Duqm lies at the centre of the Indian Ocean, serving eastern and western corridors by connecting the Strait of Hormuz to the Asian and European worlds. In 2018, Prime Minister Modi visited Oman, India, and was granted access to the port of Duqm. In 2017, an Indian attack submarine visited the port. INS Mumbai, Shishumar -class submarine, and Two P-81 long-range maritime Patrol aircraft also visited. Under the “India-Omani Joint venture”, the port of Duqm Special Economic Zone, the Sebacic acid facility also increases its economic significance. In 2019, the Maritime agreement was also inked between both countries (Maritime Gateway 2022).

### ➤ **Iran**

India and Iran are developing their ports through mutual collaboration with other countries. Chabahar port is directly connected to the Indian Ocean near Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India and acts as a bridge for the North-South Corridor. Additionally, Chabahar is one of the few locations in Iran free from US sanctions, which significantly eases trade processes with other nations (Ekstrom, 2021). Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced in 2016 that India will invest \$500 million in the development of Chabahar Port. India and Iran will finalise the Agreement to Develop Chabahar Port in 2024. To increase collaboration and transit capacity between the two nations, both proposed the creation of a joint transportation commission (Reuters, 2024).

➤ **Indonesia**

In 2018, Prime Minister Modi visited Indonesia to increase its naval presence in Southeast Asia and promote “The Act East Policy” An Indian naval vessel docked at the port of Sabang. In The same week, INS Sumitra visited the port. Moreover, President Jokowi and Prime Minister Modi decided to develop Port Sabang's infrastructure. This port is strategically crucial for India as it is 90 nautical miles away from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Panda, 2018). In 2023, reports surfaced that India and Indonesia had finished their joint study on the viability of the Sabang port and those higher authorities were reviewing the results before proceeding (Mattoo, 2023).

**Analysis**

Unrestricted sea lanes of communications are significant for the states. They underpin global enlargement and engagement. These sea lanes of communication have faced a broad range of disruption scenarios, including blocked, piracy, political and economic embargos, terrorism, and naval standoffs between enemy navies. These vulnerabilities lead to maritime power projection through naval exercises, port building, or surveillance systems installations at critical locations. Presently, in the Israel-Gaza war, Iran-backed Houthis attacked commercial shipping in the Red Sea around the Bab al-Mandab and attacked the US and UK ships.

The Indians and other countries, along with task forces, are trying to secure the free passage of ships in the Indian Ocean. Along with these strategic choke points islands play a crucial role in war as well as in peace times. In Russia Russia-Ukrainian war, Snake Island proved that these small dots are crucial for international connection and communication, for national, and economic security. Snake Island is less than a 1 km island and is 45km away from Romania's coast and near the southwestern coast of Ukraine. The island is strategically important in the Black Sea because Russia is trying to install its defence system and if they were able to control it till now, they would be able to control the northwest part of the Black Sea. After a series of attacks Ukrainian forces were able to get control of this island from Russian forces. Similarly, China's

ambitions in the Indian Ocean have been destabilising India's position. China is constantly developing ports and bases within the Indian Ocean littoral states such as Seychelles, Madagascar, Coco Islands, and Gwadar to keep an eye on India and other regional states. Indian Ocean is India's background, which holds immense significance for India. India is constantly threatened by Chinese presence which sparks speculation and a definite threat to Indian security. To diffuse the Chinese threats in the future India is also developing bases and coastal radar systems on key strategic islands such as Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Indonesia Sabang port, Oman Duqm port, Lakshadweep Islands, etc. The ongoing maritime competition between them is constantly changing and shaping. Both powers are trying to secure the maritime communication channels at their finest.

## **Conclusion**

The strategic hold of India and China in the islands discussed above provides a practical manifestation of the String of Pearls and Necklace of Diamonds approach. Both countries are developing a strong foothold to ensure their presence in the Indian Ocean. Although the String of Pearls is a term coined by the Western media, the actual practical manifestation can be seen from China's policies in the form of their international engagements with Djibouti, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, etc. However, according to Castex, there are two ways to control maritime communication; offensive and defensive. In this case, India and China both are highly defensive as per his idea. Through both approaches India and China are protecting their coast from potential attacks. They also maintain maritime international connections which eventually stabilize their national and economic security in the Indian ocean.

## **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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