

# CHINA'S PURSUIT OF FOOD AND ENERGY SECURITY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN: CONSEQUENCES FOR INDIA'S DEVELOPMENT

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*China and India are still predominantly rising powers. They are strongly inclined to achieve food and energy security, two priority areas for any nation with a vast population. The possibility of geopolitical flare-ups has been highlighted by China's ruthless pursuit of all kinds of resources. China's engagement in the Indian Ocean is not just to have a strong foothold in the region but also to fulfil its domestic demands for energy, food, raw materials, minerals, crude oil, and other essential commodities. This issue brief discusses whether a relentless pursuit of food and energy security in the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific regions by China will be a cause of concern for New Delhi and how it poses a strategic hindrance to the national and maritime security of India.*

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## Introduction

India and China are two of the world's fastest-growing economies and are considered rising powers in the global community. While they differ in many aspects, both countries share a common challenge of ensuring food security for their growing populations. India, with a population of over 1.4 billion,<sup>1</sup> is the world's most populous country followed by China. Despite being one of the world's largest agricultural producers, India faces challenges such as uneven distribution of food, insufficient infrastructure, and climate change impacts. China, on the other hand, with a population almost equivalent to India,<sup>2</sup> is undergoing rapid urbanization and industrialization,

leading to a decline in arable land and increasing food demand. China has implemented policies such as the Grain for the Green program and the Minimum Grain Purchase Price policy to ensure food security and stabilize grain prices.

Both India and China face the challenge of ensuring adequate food supply while maintaining sustainable agricultural practices. The issue of food security is especially critical given their large populations and the need to reduce poverty and hunger. As rising powers, India and China also have a crucial role to play in shaping global policies related to food security and sustainable agriculture. But this

pursuit of food and energy security has significant geopolitical implications for India and China.

As both countries seek to secure their food and energy supplies, they may compete for the same resources such as arable land, water, and fossil fuels. This could lead to tensions between the two countries, as well as with other countries that are major producers of these resources. The eager and active pursuit by China of food and energy security will also lead to a shift in global trade patterns. India and China are already major players in global trade, and their pursuit of food and energy security could lead to changes in global trade patterns. For example, both countries may increase their imports of food and energy, which could impact global prices and trade routes. Another factor that might play a significant role is the influence that these countries have on international organizations. India and China's growing influence in international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the United Nations (UN) could give them greater leverage in shaping global policies related to food and energy security.

This could impact the interests of other countries and lead to tensions between India and China and other nations. Pursuing food and energy security may also have domestic political implications for India and China. For example, policies to increase food production may involve subsidies for farmers, which could have an impact on domestic politics and social stability. Both India and China are large and rapidly growing economies that require vast amounts of resources to sustain their development. Pursuing food and energy security means competing for these resources, such as land, water, and energy, with other countries in the region and beyond. This competition can lead to geopolitical tensions and conflicts. India and China's pursuit of food and energy security may also have significant environmental implications. This could have long-term consequences for the health and well-being of their citizens, as well as for global efforts to address climate change.

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### **China's Forays in the Indian Ocean**

China's engagement in the Indian Ocean is not just to have a strong foothold in the region but also to fulfil its domestic demands for energy, food, raw materials, minerals, crude oil, and other essential commodities. Even though energy needs can be fulfilled through the Middle East region, China has always sought to diversify its resource portfolio, and that makes the Indian Ocean essential for its geopolitical interests.<sup>3</sup> The security of the sea lanes of communication in the western Indian Ocean region and its freedom from threats such as pirates and maritime criminals is pivotal to Chinese material interests.

In 2019, almost half of China's energy imports were sourced from the Middle East thus giving Beijing a reason to establish a base in the Indian Ocean in a relentless pursuit of its many material interests.<sup>4</sup> As much as 44 percent of its non-renewable energy, primarily petroleum, was imported from the Arabian Gulf region.<sup>5</sup> China, like India and Japan, is constrained in its petroleum, oil, and natural gas resources, and is known to import a vast majority of these resources from the western Indian Ocean region.<sup>6</sup> This triggers a rather unfavorable Malacca Dilemma for Beijing. In this dilemma, the criticality of the Straits of Malacca and the tiny chokepoints become ever so necessary for China to secure while

its merchant vessels traverse the area.

Unlike its energy imports, China's food imports are not entirely dependent on the IOR. China obtains a lot of its food from countries far away from its immediate periphery. China is also not an out-and-out food-insecure country like Japan. However, it faces severe food shortages and has a billion mouths to feed.<sup>7</sup> China incidentally is the largest importer of Indian rice for the years 2021-22. China accounted for 7.7 percent of all broken rice imports from India.<sup>8</sup> China suffers from a loss of fertile land due to rapid urbanization.<sup>9</sup> A critical percentage of its food is also wasted annually and its stored food reserves are subject to climate risks and natural disasters. In 2018, 16 to 17 million tons of Chinese food was wasted and this was inclusive of households.<sup>10</sup>

China's rapid urbanization and rising income levels have triggered an increase in food safety concerns, leading to a surge in agricultural imports over the last two decades, as per a USDA report.<sup>11</sup> The report highlights that the urbanization process has significantly elevated people's living standards and per capita income, thereby altering their dietary habits. People are consuming more meat, dairy, and processed foods while reducing their grain intake. In the last two decades, there has been a 32 percent surge in per capita consumption of poultry meat, a fourfold increase in soybean oil consumption, and a threefold increase in fluid milk intake.<sup>12</sup>

China relies extensively on merchandise trade with 90 percent of its trade being seaborne. China obtains a majority of both its food and energy imports via the critical SLOCs and the South China Sea—a hotspot for conflict between countries in the area.<sup>13</sup> In 2020, China's total merchandise trade was one-third of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Energy interests and imports of the same in large quantities is a key reason for China to be proactive in the IOR.<sup>14</sup>

India lies at the heart of the Indian Ocean's

geostrategic location. Peninsular India juts out into the central Indian Ocean, which is a key zone for preferably unimpeded trade and commerce. India maintains order in the Indian Ocean and its navy often engages to ensure sea lanes security. Both countries have been inclined to pursue important maritime objectives such as the health of the seabed, anti-piracy missions, and the ever-critical security of the SLOCs.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, India has glued itself to the South China Sea just as much as China has to the Indian Ocean. India finds itself involved in oil drilling in the South China Sea while it also conducts routine unilateral patrols and fosters strategic partnerships with its friends such as Vietnam and Indonesia.<sup>16</sup>

If viewed from an Indian point of view, China is trying to establish its presence in places which have been India's maritime and geopolitical interests. China has applied the String of Pearls strategy, which involves maintaining multipurpose island bases to keep a watch on the Indian Navy and Indian activities in the region such as deep-sea fishing, seabed mining, maritime-naval exercises, etc. India will not only have to be wary of such situations but will also have to be prepared should any eventuality unfold in its backyard.<sup>17</sup>

## Consequences for India's Development

China's food security has significant geopolitical security implications for India. This is because China is one of the world's largest importers of food and is heavily dependent on agricultural imports to feed its massive population. Any disruption in the supply chain of food to China could have severe consequences not only for the Chinese people but also for the global economy.

In recent years, China has been making strategic investments in food-producing regions around the world, including in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. These investments are aimed at ensuring a steady supply of food for the Chinese

population. However, this strategy has raised concerns in India, as some of these investments are in countries that have traditionally been part of India's sphere of influence.

Additionally, China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean region, where much of the world's food trade flows, is a cause for concern for India's national security. Furthermore, any disruption in the global food supply chain could lead to a rise in food prices, which could have severe consequences for countries like India, where a large portion of the population lives below the sustenance level. China has been actively seeking to secure its food supply by investing heavily in agriculture and food production both domestically and abroad. One of the ways it has done this is by investing in agricultural projects in countries like Pakistan and Myanmar, which are strategically located near the Indian Ocean region. This has raised concerns in India, which sees China's increasing presence in the region as a threat to its own security. India already has a long-standing territorial dispute with China and is wary of China's growing influence in its neighborhood.

### **Strategic Hindrance to Indian National and Maritime Security**

There are several areas where China's pursuit of food security can prove to be a disturbing element for India, overall as well as in the Indian Ocean region where India has significant presence. Both India and China are rapidly growing economies with increasing energy and food requirements. As a result, they may compete for resources such as oil, natural gas, and food commodities, which can lead to conflict over resources. China's dam-building activities on the Brahmaputra River, for instance, have caused concerns in India as they can impact the flow of water downstream. This can lead to water scarcity and affect India's agricultural productivity, which heavily relies on irrigation.

The South China Sea is a crucial shipping route

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for both China and India, and China's territorial claims in the region have caused tensions between the two countries. If China's territorial claims are not resolved, it can pose a threat to India's energy security as it can limit its access to oil and gas from the region. India is heavily dependent on imports of Chinese goods, including electronics, machinery, and pharmaceuticals. If China decides to impose trade restrictions or embargoes on India, it can impact India's economy and pose a threat to its energy and food security. China's control over Tibet can pose a security threat to India as it borders the region. India has accused China of building infrastructure along the border to enable Chinese troops to move closer to India's border.

China's activities in the Indian Ocean region, particularly its pursuit of food and energy security, have significant geopolitical implications for India. Some of the key impacts are:

1. Strategic encirclement: China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean region, including the development of ports and naval bases in countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, can potentially encircle India strategically. This could limit India's ability to project its influence in the region and protect its maritime interests.
2. Economic competition: China's investments in infrastructure and development projects in the region can potentially compete with India's economic interests. China's Belt and Road Initiative, which includes projects in the region, has been a point of contention between the two countries, with India concerned about the strategic implications of China's increasing economic influence in its neighborhood.
3. Maritime security: China's expansion of its naval capabilities in the region can pose a threat to

India's maritime security. China's growing naval presence in the Indian Ocean can potentially limit India's ability to secure its sea routes and protect its maritime interests.

4. Naval expansion: China's increasing naval presence in the Indian Ocean can potentially challenge India's traditional dominance in the region. This can increase the risk of maritime conflicts between the two countries and potentially undermine India's security interests.

### Way Out for India

China's food security is a long-term phenomenon and with its increasing population, its food imports are expected to only rise. India needs to have a solid, multipronged strategy in hand to deal with the above-discussed problems in the short as well as long term, to protect its interests and make its presence felt in the region.

India can modernize its naval capabilities to counter China's increasing naval presence in the region. This could involve developing new ships and submarines, enhancing its maritime surveillance capabilities, and improving its naval infrastructure. India can also seek to strengthen its alliances with other countries in the region, including the U.S., Japan, and Australia, to counter China's expanding influence. This could involve joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and economic cooperation to increase India's strategic leverage in the region. India can invest in the development of its own infrastructure in the region, including ports and naval bases, to counter China's String of Pearls strategy. This could involve partnering with other countries in the region to develop shared infrastructure and increase India's strategic reach. India can pursue economic cooperation with countries in the region to counter China's expanding economic influence. This could involve developing trade agreements, investing in regional infrastructure projects, and promoting economic development in countries that are vulnerable to China's economic pressure.

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India could pursue a more assertive foreign policy to protect its security interests in the region. This could involve taking a tougher stance against China's activities and challenging its influence in the region through economic, political, and military means.

Overall, India has several possible responses to China's activities in the Indian Ocean region. It is important for India to adopt a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to protect its security interests and promote stability in the region.

### Implications for the Indian Ocean Regional Setting

The introduction of BRI has contributed to the food security policy of China, leading to the emergence of the Food Silk Road.<sup>18</sup> The Food Silk Road aims to fulfil its long-term goal of food security and cooperation among BRI countries. China aims to expand its agricultural-based cooperation through investment, easing trade barriers, and technical assistance through suitable infrastructure and supply chain management. China's pursuit of promoting overall growth as the solution to global food security is reshaping how food is exported and imported using crucial chokepoints all around the world and also restructuring the global food supply chains.<sup>19</sup> The Strait of Malacca and the Panama Canal are the most crucial links for China to safeguard its food security. Any constraints/ delays or conflicts in the region may delay or adversely affect the food security of China.<sup>20</sup>

China has also focused on public diplomacy forums such as South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund to ensure cooperation in the agricultural field. Other public diplomatic forums like G20, SCO, and BRICS are also serving China's requirement to promote cooperation not just over food security but also energy security. Multilateral forums of the United Nations like WTO and the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) are some of the forums where China further promotes exchange and cooperation with the member-nations.<sup>21</sup>

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China has also agreed to be part of approximately 100 agro-based cooperation agreements with the countries associated with BRI. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the concern for food security has deepened in China, which has led it to transform and restructure food supply chains in the Indian Ocean region. The latest crunch in energy supply leading to delays in the manufacturing sector with several continued dark days in prominent cities has led China to rethink overseas FTAs and infrastructural investments, including farmland ownership in foreign countries like Egypt, Cambodia, and Pakistan. China's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean are not just related to creating a strategic foothold but also fulfilling its domestic demand. China appears keen to continue to seek alternative markets for food imports.<sup>22</sup>

The presence of such crucial resources in the region and the interest of regional powers has made the Indian Ocean a region of contestation. Both China and India are dependent on energy resources as well as food imports coming through this region. According to 2012 data, 84 percent of China's energy and food supplies come from the Indian Ocean region as reported by the U.S. Department of Defense.<sup>23</sup>

China-India border issues are also fuelling the race in the Indian Ocean. Continuous conflict along the border has provoked India to take pre-emptive steps to ensure the protection of its interests in energy, food, or border security. Continued development of port infrastructure through the Maritime Silk Road is China's strategy to completely overcome and bypass any regional conflict and ensure energy/food security. Be it Gwadar or Hambantota, these ports just ease the process of export and import in regions inaccessible to China. Another advantage that China avails through these Silk Road projects is countering the dominance of the U.S. in the maritime domain. There are also projects in the pipeline and once these projects are fully functional, neither India nor the U.S. will be able to object to or hinder China's quest for energy security.<sup>24</sup>

China's Malacca Dilemma has always haunted its growth. The Malacca Dilemma characterizes the probable factors that could encumber China's economic development by choking oil imports. If the Malacca Strait gets blocked—a possibility and fear in the mind of China—due to the continuous and frequent presence of the Indian Navy in the region via maritime exercises, drills, and humanitarian relief operations, it might dangerously impact China's development pace.

***China's increasing naval presence in the Indian Ocean can potentially challenge India's traditional dominance in the region. This can increase the risk of maritime conflicts between the two countries and potentially undermine India's security interests.***

In the last 10 years, India has also garnered the support of players who oppose China and its overarching territorial claims. The U.S., specifically, has supported the presence of India in the Indo-Pacific. China is quite bothered by the continuous presence and interference of the U.S. in its internal affairs or even foreign relations and this has, in a way, helped India secure its interests. China, while itself engaged in surveillance operations, opposes U.S. military surveillance operations in the South China Sea region.<sup>25</sup>

However, high dependence on an outside country to support India's presence in the South China Sea will have possible negative repercussions. India needs to learn from its previous mistakes before trusting a foreign country or an international organization blindly like it did with Kashmir initially. There are definite geopolitical benefits behind such high-level support, but India must rely on its own capabilities to counter the presence of China while securing its interests in the region.

## Conclusion

Countries in the region and specifically India need to work together to enhance regional cooperation, particularly in areas such as trade and infrastructure development. This would increase the collective bargaining power of the region and reduce its dependence on China. India can work with countries in the region to develop a joint security architecture to manage security risks in the region. This could involve enhancing maritime surveillance capabilities and developing joint response mechanisms to address security threats. India along with other countries should promote economic diversification, particularly in areas such as agriculture and renewable energy. This would reduce their dependence on China for food and energy resources. Alliance formation is also encouraged, regional as well as outside the region, to counterbalance China's growing partners and allies. Common grounds of interests can be exploited to form strategic alliances. Also, India can take various

steps to counter China's food and energy security endeavors in the Indian Ocean region geopolitically. One of the ways is to strengthen its own ties with other countries in the region such as Japan, Australia, and the United States, and increase cooperation on issues related to food and energy security. India can also invest in the development of its own ports and infrastructure, which can help to reduce its dependence on Chinese investments and strengthen its own position in the region. Additionally, India can work towards developing its own agricultural and energy sectors, which will help to reduce its reliance on imports and increase its self-sufficiency. Finally, India can engage in diplomatic efforts to counter China's influence in the region, including working to prevent the spread of Chinese influence through its Belt and Road Initiative.

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