

CHINA'S MARITIME AND MILITARY STRATEGY IN THE BAY OF BENGAL AND THE INDIAN OCEAN

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China's strategy in the Bay of Bengal and the wider Indian Ocean is best understood as an integrated geostrategic, economic, and military project that combines port infrastructure, connectivity corridors, and incremental naval presence. While framed under the Maritime Silk Road, this approach steadily expands China's capacity to secure sea lanes, project power, and shape the regional order. The Bay of Bengal corridor—linking Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka—serves as a critical subsystem connecting the South China Sea to the Arabian Sea and beyond. China's Indian Ocean strategy has evolved from commercial access to sustaining an operational maritime presence, driven by three factors: (i) China's growing dependence on energy imports and trade; (ii) the PLA Navy's "far seas protection" doctrine, which emphasizes safeguarding overseas interests and maritime trade routes; and (iii) a layered engagement strategy that combines commercial infrastructure (ports and logistics), political agreements, and long-term leases for naval access with potential basing rights. This reflects a historical trajectory common to rising powers: commerce generates access, access requires logistics, and logistics ultimately requires military protection. The central argument is that China's approach is not simply about securing trade routes but about constructing an integrated maritime operating system in which infrastructure, commerce, and military access are mutually reinforcing.

The disruption of the Strait of Hormuz during the Iran war has cast a long shadow over another critical maritime chokepoint: the 900-km (550-mile)-long Strait of Malacca which provides the shortest sea route from East Asia to the Middle East and Europe. As the weaponization of strategic sea lanes becomes a feature of geopolitical competition, attention has shifted to the world's busiest waterway,

between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. At its narrowest point, Malacca is only 2.8 km (1.7 miles) wide, yet it carries nearly a quarter of global maritime trade, including roughly 16 million barrels of oil per day and over 90,000 vessels annually. The narrow and congested waterway has been strategically important to Beijing, with around 65 percent of China's seaborne crude oil and gas imports passing

through it from the Middle East and Africa, while Japan and South Korea depend on it for over 80 percent of their imports. Malacca is the world's largest "oil transit chokepoint" and the only one that the Strait of Hormuz. Any disruption—whether accidental, political, or deliberate—would reverberate across global energy markets and supply chains.

Furthermore, all shipping transiting the Strait of Malacca must pass through the Six Degree Channel, a vital sea lane located within India's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This gives India a commanding position over the western approaches to one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints. While Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia dominate the Strait's immediate littoral, India occupies the broader strategic high ground through the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, particularly Great Nicobar Island, situated barely 40 nautical miles from Malacca's entrance. New Delhi's ambitious Great Nicobar Project could significantly alter the strategic balance: plans include a major International Container Transshipment Terminal, a dual-use airport capable of supporting rapid naval and air force deployment, and the strengthening of the Andaman and Nicobar Command as a forward-operating hub. This is not just an infrastructure project but, once completed, will amount to the creation of an "unsinkable aircraft carrier," extending India's surveillance, logistics, sea denial, and power-projection capabilities astride China's critical energy and trade arteries.¹

In 2003, Chinese leader Hu Jintao coined the "Malacca Dilemma" to describe a harsh reality: China's economic rise depended on foreign oil passing through a narrow chokepoint that rivals could close in a crisis. For Beijing, this enduring vulnerability lies at the heart of the "Malacca Dilemma": there is no escape from the tyranny of geography. The alternatives—the Sunda and Lombok Straits—are shallow and hazardous for large tankers and increase transit time and costs.

Both routes also pass through Indonesian waters, creating operational and strategic constraints. Recent Indonesian musings about imposing transit tolls—quickly retracted, but nonetheless revealing—underscore a broader lesson drawn from the Strait of Hormuz: once one chokepoint is weaponized, others may not remain immune.² The Iran crisis has thus crystallized long-standing Chinese anxieties over maritime chokepoints and raised broader questions about how the Malacca Strait could be affected in the event of conflict in the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait.³

As a result, the eastern Indian Ocean is rapidly emerging as one of the world's most consequential geopolitical theaters, where disruption at one chokepoint can trigger cascading effects across others. The Bay of Bengal has emerged as a strategic hinge between continental and maritime Asia. For Beijing, it serves as both a gateway and a buffer—providing access to the Indian Ocean, linking South Asia to Southeast Asia, and connecting China's southwestern hinterland to key maritime routes, while enabling a forward presence along India's eastern flank. As competition over access, influence, and sea-lane security intensifies, the Bay is shifting from a peripheral waterway to a central arena of regional power politics. Geopolitically, the region remains volatile and unstable. Bangladesh is in political flux, while Myanmar remains mired in civil war. At the same time, major regional powers (China and India) and extra-regional actors (the United States, Pakistan, and Türkiye) are expanding their strategic footprints. The result is an increasingly crowded and competitive maritime domain marked by overlapping spheres of influence, mistrust, and rising geopolitical friction.

This Focus Asia examines China's expanding naval presence in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean and its implications for maritime competition and Indo-Pacific power dynamics. It analyzes China's use of infrastructure, connectivity

corridors, and naval modernization to expand its influence, and assesses the constraints and regional implications of this strategy.

China's National Interests and Strategic Objectives in the Eastern Indian Ocean

Contrary to conventional wisdom, China is among the most transparent major powers. Beijing consistently signals its intent through publicly articulated grand strategies, party leadership speeches, and policy documents—ranging from “Go Global,” the “two-ocean” strategy, “far-seas operations” and initiatives such as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) corridor (later absorbed into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including its Maritime Silk Road (MSR) component), to frameworks like Civil–Military Fusion, “Made-in-China 2025,” and the Global Security Initiative. Geopolitical thinkers Harold Mackinder and Alfred Thayer Mahan’s theories of land and sea power underpin China’s BRI, aimed at securing overseas markets, resources, and bases. As early as 1993, when China did not have much of a navy to speak of, PLA generals asserted that the Indian Ocean was not India’s ocean and that the South China Sea was China’s sea.⁴ Since then, Chinese policy has pursued this objective with sustained strategic consistency. Why? Because global supply chains are, in fact, maritime supply chains. Oceans and seabeds are the key arenas of strategic competition for critical minerals and rare earth resources.

Over the last two decades, Beijing has poured investment into ports in Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, while projecting an even stronger naval presence across the western Indian Ocean—from the Maldives and Pakistan to Djibouti and Africa’s east coast—positioning itself along critical maritime chokepoints. For Xi Jinping, sea power is central to restoring China’s “rightful place” in the world.

With over 370 warships and submarines, China now possesses the world’s largest navy, eroding U.S. predominance at sea.⁵ Having consolidated its hold over the South China Sea by militarizing artificial islands, China’s navy has now set its sights on the Indian Ocean.

As China’s economic stakes have expanded, so too has its naval footprint in the Indian Ocean. By securing port access, conducting anti-piracy patrols, and supplying military hardware to littoral states, China is entrenching itself as a “resident power” in the Indian Ocean.⁶

China’s activities across the Indian Ocean span military exercises, arms transfers, infrastructure development, maritime surveillance, and seabed mapping for both submarine operations and critical mineral exploration, strengthening its defense ties and regional footprint. It has also deployed anti-submarine warfare assets near key chokepoints, enhancing its ability to monitor and influence critical sea lines of communication. Principal recipients of Chinese weaponry include Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates. In parallel, Beijing has secured seabed exploration rights in the southwest Indian Ocean, reflecting the convergence of strategic and resource interests. The launch of the China–Indian Ocean Forum in 2022, which excludes India, further signals its intent to shape regional order without accommodating its principal rival.

The Bay of Bengal and the Strait of Malacca have become key theaters of maritime competition, with Chinese and Indian naval forces operating in increasingly close proximity and raising the risk of friction and miscalculation. Since 2015, China has maintained a near-continuous deployment of warships, submarines, and research vessels in the Indian Ocean, resulting in frequent encounters with Indian naval assets in and around the Bay of Bengal.⁷ In parallel, Chinese survey and fishing vessels continue to conduct extensive seabed map-

ping to support submarine operations, undersea warfare, and maritime domain awareness. For Beijing, this sustained presence serves not only commercial and energy-security interests but also broader objectives of influence and power projection across the Indo-Pacific.

China's objectives are to secure its trade and energy lifelines, expand geopolitical influence, sustain blue-water naval operations, and develop dual-use infrastructure under civil-military fusion. Since the early 2000s, it has pursued a multifaceted maritime strategy combining diplomacy, naval modernization, and economic statecraft—investing in ports, pipelines, rail corridors, and digital networks while building overseas access points and logistics support. Simultaneously, it has diversified energy sources, expanded strategic reserves, and reduced exposure to maritime chokepoints through overland and alternative supply routes. The cumulative effect is a layered strategy that transforms connectivity into influence, infrastructure into access, and economic presence into long-term strategic leverage. In regions marked by institutional fragility and infrastructure gaps, such as the Bay of Bengal, China is able to translate economic engagement into durable political influence and operational advantage.

Connectivity as Geostrategy: Dual-Use Infrastructure

Chinese industrial growth, manufacturing resilience, and energy security remain closely tied to uninterrupted access through Indian Ocean chokepoints. This dependence produces what Chinese strategists describe as a “vulnerability dilemma”: reliance on sea lanes that are heavily influenced by the United States, India, and allied naval powers. Beijing's response has been gradual strategic positioning rather than direct confrontation. Under the Maritime Silk Road, China has invested in ports, industrial zones, logistics hubs, telecommunications systems, and overland corridors stretching from the South

China Sea to the Arabian Sea. While commercially framed, these projects collectively expand access, presence, and strategic optionality along key maritime routes. Chinese state-owned enterprises further reinforce this ecosystem through their dominance in shipbuilding, port operations, insurance, and freight logistics, deepening China's embeddedness in global maritime trade.

More broadly, Beijing has pursued a layered strategy combining infrastructure finance, industrial engagement, energy cooperation, digital connectivity, and security partnerships to shape regional environments without formal alliances or overt coercion. This is reinforced by maritime capacity-building, arms transfers, bureaucratic ties, and port access arrangements that collectively allow China to influence local strategic choices while remaining below the threshold of direct military alignment.

It helps that Bay of Bengal states actively seek external investment to support development and economic diversification. And there is no shortage of distressed strategic assets in the IOR: financially stressed shipyards, ports, and logistics infrastructure that smaller states struggle to sustain independently. China invests where no one else would. For capital-constrained governments, Chinese financing is fast, large-scale, and relatively free of policy conditionality, creating both development opportunities and longer-term strategic dependence.

A defining feature of this “connectivity as security” strategy is the integration of continental and maritime geographies. China has linked Bay of Bengal ports to overland corridors such as the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM) and the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). Although BCIM has stalled due to Indian opposition, its underlying logic persists: connecting Yunnan to Myanmar and Bangladesh through highways, railways, pipelines, and industrial networks that feed into

maritime nodes. Kyaukpyu, already connected to landlocked Yunnan province via oil and gas pipelines, illustrates this land–sea interface. Collectively, this architecture reduces China's dependence on the Strait of Malacca while reorienting the Bay of Bengal as an extension of its southwestern hinterland.

At the core of this strategy is a network of strategically located ports and corridors—often referred to as a “String of Pearls”—extending from the Bay of Bengal to the Arabian Sea. Key nodes include Kyaukpyu, Chittagong, Hambantota, and Gwadar, the western anchor linking China to the Arabian Sea and the Gulf.⁸ These ports are located near major sea lanes and integrated with inland transport and digital infrastructure. Taken together, they function as dual-use assets that enhance commercial connectivity while enabling logistics support, maritime access, and potential military utility.

Cambodia: Official denials by Phnom Penh and Beijing notwithstanding, Cambodia's Ream Naval Base is being developed with substantial Chinese involvement. Located near the Gulf of Thailand, it offers strategic access to maritime routes connecting the South China Sea with the eastern Indian Ocean. Given Cambodia's deep dependence on Chinese political, military, and economic support, PLAN access to Ream would extend China's operational reach along the western approaches to the Strait of Malacca and other critical sea lanes.⁹ Its significance is further amplified by emerging overland connectivity linking Yunnan to mainland Southeast Asia through rail and transport corridors running through Laos and potentially onward to Cambodia.

Thailand: Bangkok's proposed Kra Land Bridge offers a practical alternative to the long-discussed Kra Canal, providing a multimodal corridor linking the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand that could bypass the congested Strait of Malacca and reduce transit times by several days. For

China, participation promises logistical resilience and potential integration with the China–Laos–Thailand rail network, strengthening overland–maritime connectivity. However, Thailand's hedging strategy—including its U.S. alliance and its insistence on a multi-investor, sovereignty-first model—means the project is unlikely to become a China-dominated strategic asset.

Myanmar: The Kyaukpyu deep-sea port and Special Economic Zone form a critical pillar of the CMEC, linking China's Yunnan directly to the Bay of Bengal through pipelines, planned railways, highways, and maritime infrastructure. Located in conflict-ridden Rakhine State, Kyaukpyu provides China with an alternative access route to the Indian Ocean, partially bypassing the vulnerable Strait of Malacca. Existing oil and gas pipelines from Kyaukpyu to Kunming already serve as an important energy corridor for Middle Eastern and African imports, while future transport links could further integrate southwestern China with Indian Ocean trade networks.

Beyond economics, Kyaukpyu carries major strategic implications. It complements China's wider network of Indian Ocean access points—from Gwadar to Hambantota and Djibouti—and reflects Beijing's long-term effort to expand its maritime reach into the Bay of Bengal. Myanmar's internal conflict and the weakness of central authority increase the permissiveness of the environment for Chinese intelligence collection and maritime surveillance activities. China's signals intelligence facility on Myanmar's Coco Islands lies just about 55 km north of India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands and includes an airstrip of roughly 7,500 feet. Although no Chinese base has been confirmed, periodic visits, infrastructure improvements, and Myanmar's instability have fueled concerns about incremental strategic entrenchment. Together, Kyaukpyu and the Coco Islands deepen China's strategic presence in the eastern Bay of Bengal, offsetting India's parallel initiatives in Sittwe and the Andaman–

Nicobar Islands. Furthermore, a significant share of China's rare earth supplies is mined in war-torn, and fragmented Myanmar, where Beijing's arms and influence have hindered the progress of Indian connectivity projects, including the Kaladan corridor and the India–Myanmar–Thailand highway.

Yet Kyaukpyu also illustrates the limits of China's infrastructure-led influence in unstable environments. Since the 2021 coup and the escalation of fighting in Rakhine State, the project has faced mounting security, political, and implementation challenges. While Beijing has sought to protect its investments through engagement with both the junta and ethnic armed groups, Myanmar's instability constrains the corridor's full commercial and strategic potential. Kyaukpyu therefore embodies both the promise and the vulnerability of China's Indian Ocean strategy: an attempt to secure long-term maritime access and strategic influence, constrained by local conflict, political instability, and intensifying regional competition.

Bangladesh: Chinese involvement in upgrading the ports of Payra, Chittagong, and Mongla, together with support for submarine-related infrastructure at BNS Sheikh Hasina, has expanded Beijing's strategic footprint in the Bay of Bengal. Although Dhaka maintains that these projects strengthen Bangladesh's own naval capabilities, enhanced facilities could also support Chinese submarines and surface combatants. While there is no evidence of a permanent Chinese military presence, the scale and specifications of the facilities have fueled Indian concerns that they could eventually provide Beijing with greater operational access and logistical flexibility in the Bay of Bengal, thereby complicating India's eastern maritime security environment.¹⁰

It is worth emphasizing that China's strategy is not port-centric but corridor-centric. Beijing seeks to integrate ports with railways, highways, pipelines, industrial zones, digital networks, and

energy infrastructure linking maritime nodes to China's interior. As noted earlier, the CMEC links Kyaukpyu to Yunnan, reducing dependence on the Strait of Malacca, while the CPEC connects Gwadar to western China through overland routes across Pakistan. Similar connectivity initiatives have linked Bangladesh and Myanmar more closely to southern China. The strategic logic is clear: ports without hinterland connectivity lack strategic depth.

Within this framework, ports such as Hambantota and Colombo in Sri Lanka, Gwadar in Pakistan, and emerging projects in the Maldives, Mauritius, and East Africa serve as critical nodes in a wider network. With the exception of China's military base in Djibouti, these facilities are officially commercial, but many possess clear dual-use potential that could support future PLA Navy operations. Port acquisitions through equity stakes, concessions, and long-term leases further embed Chinese influence within local economies and transport systems. Aligning with smaller states to counter big ones (*he xiao da gong*) is a strategy pursued by both China and the United States, to maintain a favorable balance of power that serves their interests.

By integrating maritime infrastructure into broader economic corridors, China diversifies supply routes, mitigates vulnerability to maritime choke-points—particularly the “Malacca Dilemma”—and deepens the dependence of partner states on Chinese capital, technology, and security cooperation. These projects exemplify Beijing's dual-use approach to connectivity: commercial infrastructure that simultaneously expands strategic access and political influence. Although some initiatives face delays stemming from political instability, debt concerns, local resistance, and growing geopolitical competition, they have nevertheless increased China's presence across the Indian Ocean and drawn many smaller littoral states more deeply into the strategic rivalry between China and India.

From Connectivity to Power Projection and “Far Seas Operations”

Since the early 2000s, and especially under Xi Jinping, China has transformed from a predominantly continental power into the world's leading maritime state.¹¹ It has pursued dominance across shipping, shipbuilding, logistics, and marine technologies to secure sea lanes, protect global supply chains, exploit ocean resources, and project power beyond its immediate periphery.¹² Beijing increasingly treats the maritime domain—alongside space and the polar regions—as “new strategic frontiers” central to twenty-first-century geopolitical competition.¹³ Reflecting this shift, China has become the world's largest naval and maritime power in aggregate terms, with the PLAN, Coast Guard, maritime militia, fishing fleet, and marine research vessels operating alongside extensive overseas port access and infrastructure networks. Between the PLAN and Chinese Coast Guard (CCG), China operates well over 1,000 surface vessels, with 558 in the PLAN and 546 in the CCG.¹⁴

China's military presence in the IOR has expanded steadily over the past two decades. Since 2008, the PLAN has maintained continuous deployments in the region, starting with anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden that evolved into a sustained operational presence of surface task groups, submarine patrols, and joint exercises. Commercial port access agreements and replenishment arrangements have progressively matured into overseas logistical support facilities, most notably China's military base in Djibouti. Ports such as Gwadar and Hambantota provide Beijing with latent basing capabilities, enabling access, resupply, and operational reach without the political costs of formal military alliances or permanent overseas bases.

China has also intensified maritime, air, and land exercises across the IOR. The deployment of anti-submarine warfare (ASW) assets near key chokepoints, alongside expanded intelligence,

surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) networks, reflects Beijing's growing emphasis on maritime domain awareness and sea-lane security.¹⁵ Regular PLA Navy deployments for refueling, hydrographic surveying, and surveillance have further deepened operational familiarity with the region while blurring civilian and military roles in ways consistent with broader gray-zone strategies.¹⁶

China's expanding defense partnerships with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia also reinforce its regional influence and deepen strategic dependencies. Since its first submarine deployment to the Indian Ocean in 2014, Beijing has steadily expanded its undersea presence, including the transfer of eight Yuan-class submarines to Pakistan, which will enhance Pakistan's regional naval capabilities.¹⁷ Looking ahead, China's growing ability to operate carrier strike groups in the IOR suggests that a permanent or semi-permanent Indian Ocean naval command—potentially supported by one to two carrier groups—is increasingly likely.

This expanding footprint reflects the development of a dual-capability force combining sea-control and sea-denial functions. China is building an expeditionary blue-water navy centered on carrier strike groups while simultaneously expanding submarine forces and anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) systems to constrain adversary operations in both near and far seas. Its submarine fleet has more than doubled over the past decade, underscoring the scale of this shift.¹⁸

Unlike most navies, which consist of “white hull” coast guard vessels and “grey hull” naval warships, China operates a distinctive four-tiered maritime force. In addition to the PLA Navy and the CCG, Beijing deploys a large maritime militia of blue ships and a lightly armed fishing fleet. Together, these forces intimidate neighbors, alter the territorial status quo, and conduct coercive gray-zone operations across the South China Sea.

People's War at Sea

A study in *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* argues that China may be adapting Mao Zedong's "People's War" doctrine to the maritime domain for far-seas conflict. A 2025 analysis by Chen Li and Li Yan in *Military Art* similarly proposes using asymmetric and hybrid tactics to offset U.S. naval superiority, including the exploitation of "civilian cover" by pre-positioning commercial, fishing, and research vessels in the western Pacific and Indian Ocean. This reflects an extension of "Unrestricted Warfare" logic, in which civilian maritime assets function as latent military reserves within a networked battlespace involving unmanned systems and "invisible hybrid warfare" (隐形混合战).¹⁹

In contested waters, sea denial shapes outcomes. Cheap asymmetric sea-denial capabilities can impose disproportionate effects on energy markets, insurance systems, and global shipping networks. One need not control the sea; one need only disrupt access and create uncertainty. The core vulnerability lies not in the open ocean, but in narrow chokepoints: Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, and Malacca, where limited missile and drone activity can trigger commercial "self-closure," surge insurance costs, and voluntary rerouting without the need for a formal blockade. Iran's "coercion without control" strategy shows how asymmetric "chokepoint warfare" with anti-access/area denial tools can impose major costs without defeating a powerful navy.²⁰ What Iran is doing in Hormuz is replicable elsewhere, for example, by China in the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea. We are drifting toward a fragmented, broken maritime order, where access becomes conditional because might is right.

China's expanding sea-denial capabilities—supported by militarized bases in the South China Sea, long-range missiles, unmanned systems, maritime militia, and surveillance networks—provide significant leverage to disrupt or constrain

maritime traffic across key East Asian sea lanes. While full blockade scenarios remain contingent and escalatory, even limited interdiction campaigns, as demonstrated by actors such as Iran and the Houthis, can generate disproportionate economic and strategic effects. China, however, possesses these capabilities on a far greater scale and with greater technological sophistication. Beijing has closely studied Iran's drone-enabled disruption of shipping in the Strait of Hormuz and is likely assessing how analogous asymmetric tools could be applied in the Taiwan Strait. In a "quarantine" scenario, sea-denial capabilities could probe and shape adversary responses while staying below the threshold of war. China's growing inventory of unmanned systems, mines, and anti-ship missiles makes such calibrated coercion increasingly feasible.²¹

In parallel, Chinese naval and research vessels are conducting sustained surveillance and ocean-mapping activities across the IOR. Under the Blue Ocean Information Network, research platforms are deploying seabed sensors linked to the Beidou satellite system, contributing to a wider undersea surveillance architecture. Chinese survey ships—including Yuan Wang 5, Shi Yan 6, and Lan Hai 101—have operated near the Chagos-Lakshadweep Ridge and the Investigator Ridge southeast of the Andamans, including along missile-test trajectories and key maritime chokepoints, often under the guise of scientific research. Reports also indicate broader efforts to map and instrument regions such as the Malacca Strait, Andaman Sea, and central Indian Ocean ridges, enhancing both submarine detection and undersea operational awareness.²² In March 2025, the research vessel *Dong Fang Hong 3* surveyed waters between Sri Lanka and Indonesia, collecting deep-sea data to improve submarine deployment and anti-submarine warfare capabilities. Together, these efforts provide China with increasingly sophisticated capabilities to detect rival submarines and operate its own in the Indian Ocean.²³

More broadly, these developments reflect China's evolution into a blue-water navy capable of both sea denial and sea control, securing its near seas while increasingly operating beyond the first island chain to protect expanding overseas interests. A key strategic objective is to prevent the emergence of regional peer competitors such as India and to consolidate China's status as a "resident Indian Ocean power" through a network of dual-use facilities and persistent naval presence. Consistent with its historic approach of advancing expansive maritime claims, China often raises questions about territories long regarded as settled. In 2016, a Chinese ambassador remarked that "someone in the future may dispute the ownership of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands."²⁴ Manufacturing disputes where none exist is a well-tested subduing tactic. The eastern Indian Ocean—particularly the waters around the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the western approaches to the Malacca Strait—remains the most likely theater of Sino-Indian naval confrontation, given its strategic geography and the relative advantages each side enjoys in adjacent maritime domains.

Challenges, Constraints, and Vulnerabilities

China's expanding footprint is reshaping the eastern Indian Ocean in three ways. First, it is transforming the region from an open maritime commons into a more contested space. Second, commercial investments are generating strategic leverage, as ports, logistics hubs, and connectivity corridors create political influence and potential military utility. Third, a **local or regionalized balance** is giving way to a broader multi-actor contest involving China, India, the United States, Japan, Australia, and other Indo-Pacific powers, particularly in the Bay of Bengal and eastern Indian Ocean.

Despite these gains, Beijing's strategy remains constrained by its enduring dependence on maritime trade. Approximately two-thirds of

China's oil imports continue to transit the Strait of Malacca, and alternative routes provide only partial diversification. The Myanmar corridor, Gwadar, and Central Asian links remain limited in scale and vulnerable to instability and geography, while Arctic routes are seasonal and commercially marginal.²⁵ The Myanmar pipelines bypass Malacca but handle only a fraction of China's import requirements (*Kyaukphe* is located in territory controlled by the separatist Arakan Army); Gwadar faces the security, infrastructure, and terrain challenges; Central Asian routes remain supplementary; and Arctic shipping is seasonal and marginal. Even proposed alternatives such as Thailand's Kra Land Bridge would diversify rather than eliminate vulnerability, effectively substituting one chokepoint for another.

China's overseas infrastructure network also remains dependent on host-country politics. Sovereignty concerns, domestic instability, insurgencies, and periodic renegotiation of Belt and Road projects continue to constrain implementation across South and Southeast Asia. Experiences in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Pakistan illustrate both the utility and fragility of Chinese influence, as many regional states simultaneously hedge by deepening ties with India, Japan, the United States, and other external partners.

Paradoxically, China's growing presence has intensified regional balancing. India views Chinese port projects in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan through the lens of strategic encirclement, prompting a sustained maritime response. India has unveiled plans to expand its naval fleet from 140 to over 200 by 2035—an ambitious buildup to secure its seas, including four nuclear submarines and three carrier battle groups—deployed in the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, and northern Indian Ocean.²⁶ New Delhi has expanded naval deployments, strengthened the Andaman and Nicobar Command, enhanced anti-submarine warfare capabilities, and deepened

cooperation with the Quad. The maritime domain surveillance initiative and stronger partnerships with the United States, Japan, Australia, and ASEAN states are steadily increasing the costs of Chinese power projection in the Indian Ocean. Together, these developments are increasing the operational costs and complexity of Chinese power projection in the region.

The wider Indo-Pacific is responding in similar fashion. The United States is strengthening defense ties with key littoral states, including Indonesia, while Japan and Australia are boosting cooperation with India and Southeast Asia through investments in maritime infrastructure, domain awareness, and surveillance networks stretching from the Andaman Sea to the western Pacific. There is some crystallization of rival blocs, with U.S. allies and partners, such as India, Indonesia, and Vietnam, on one side, and China's network of allies and partners, including North Korea, Cambodia, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Pakistan on the other. The result is a classic security dilemma: China's efforts to secure access and reduce vulnerability are driving counter-balancing coalitions that make its operating environment more contested.

Moreover, the Malacca Dilemma itself may be overstated. Unlike Japan, China is not an insular island state but a continental power with multiple overland connections. Any attempt to close the Strait would disrupt the energy supplies and trade flows of allies and adversaries alike, imposing severe costs on the global economy. For this reason, U.S. strategy has emphasized distant blockade options rather than physically sealing chokepoints used by partners such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and India.²⁷ India's own energy security depends on both Hormuz and Malacca, while 95 percent of its trade by volume moves by sea. For India, strategic competition with China begins not at Malacca but in the South China Sea. Beijing could also respond to any Indian role in disrupting Chinese shipping

by escalating pressure along the Himalayan frontier. Nevertheless, the vulnerability remains strategically significant because Chinese leaders fear that maritime pressure during a crisis could be combined with military and economic coercion across multiple domains.

In the long term, China's growing Indian Ocean presence is likely to generate vulnerabilities as well as opportunities. Its expanding network of ports, bases, and logistical facilities increases access and influence in peacetime, but also creates fixed assets that must be defended in wartime. Long supply lines, dependence on host-country stability, exposure to piracy, terrorism, and great-power competition, and the vulnerability of coastal infrastructure to conflict and climate change all complicate Beijing's ambitions. Even so, China's political, economic, and military influence across the Indian Ocean is likely to continue expanding, ensuring that the region remains a central arena of strategic competition for decades to come. Dual-use infrastructure generates more than logistical access—it creates dependencies and leverage. China's reported success in persuading Mauritius, Seychelles, and Madagascar to deny airspace access to Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te suggests that states benefiting from Chinese investment may be reluctant to oppose Beijing on issues that it regards as core national interests.

Conclusion

China's Maritime Silk Road stretches from the Chinese coast through the Indonesian straits and across the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean littorals. Within this vast arc, the Bay of Bengal has emerged as a critical hinge zone linking continental Asia to maritime Asia while providing access to strategically important littoral states such as Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. As a result, the Bay is no longer a peripheral space but a central contested theater in China's "two-ocean" strategy.

China is not simply building ports; it is constructing a maritime operating system across the Indian Ocean. Ports, pipelines, corridors, logistics hubs, digital infrastructure, and naval access arrangements are integrated into a broader strategy that fuses economic penetration with strategic positioning. The Bay of Bengal forms the critical middle layer of this system, linking continental China to global sea lanes while enabling the expansion of Chinese influence and operational reach. In this sense, connectivity has become strategy, infrastructure has become presence, and geography has become leverage.

A key analytical error is to separate Chinese projects into economic and military categories. In practice, commercial and strategic functions are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing. State-owned enterprises, dual-use infrastructure, maritime logistics networks, and continental corridors collectively advance Beijing's geopolitical objectives. Even economically unviable projects can have high strategic value when embedded within long-term geostrategy. The result is a two-vector strategy: inland penetration through continental connectivity and offshore positioning through maritime nodes.

This strategy reflects China's broader transformation from a continental power into a hybrid continental-maritime actor with global reach. Supported by a rapidly expanding blue-water navy, overseas logistical access, digital infrastructure, and growing influence over maritime connectivity networks, Beijing is steadily increasing its ability to shape the strategic environment across the Indian Ocean.

For India, this represents a long-term structural challenge requiring sustained naval modernization, stronger regional partnerships, and enhanced maritime surveillance across the eastern Indian Ocean. China's rise is reshaping the strategic geography of the Indo-Pacific. The Indian Ocean

is no longer a secondary theater but a principal arena of great-power competition. Just as the Western Pacific remains central to the U.S.–China balance, the Indian Ocean is emerging as the critical space where continental and maritime power intersect. Control over key nodes—particularly the Andaman Sea and approaches to Malacca—will shape the Indo-Pacific balance. Circumventing American and Indian defenses and penetrating the Andaman Sea are crucial to China's Indian Ocean goals. If the 20th century's geopolitical competition played out across the Atlantic and Pacific, the 21st century's geopolitical contestation is unfolding across an integrated Indo-Pacific maritime space in which the Indian Ocean is central, not peripheral.

This paper is a part of the ISDP SCSA-IPA research project, "The Silk Noose: China's Power Architecture in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region".

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Endnotes

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