

India-China Rivalry in the Indian Ocean: Strategic, Economic, and Maritime Dimensions

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Abstract-

India and China rivalry is not new to this world sometimes by claiming the northern and eastern land of India's territory and nowadays in the perspective of Indian ocean. Indian ocean plays an important role in international region, especially for countries in that region as srilanka is the heart of Indian ocean and it can be more beneficial for China to keep it on their side, China always tries to lure srilanka on the name of heavy debt and development which was even being reported in the New York times as debt- trap diplomacy. The underlying causes of both nations' aspirational goals in the Indian Ocean, which resulted in the competition of the Sino-Indian War, are thus examined in this essay. According to this study's realism viewpoint, both nations behave in their own best interests while attempting to preserve or grow their influence within the global system. In this study, the researcher used a qualitative approach with descriptive analysis. The method of gathering data makes use of library research from a variety of journals, articles, news stories. Both nations were determined to be economically dependent on the Indian Ocean. This leads to rivalry between the two, which will undoubtedly affect neighbouring nations, especially those that collaborate with China or India.

Keywords- rivalry, diplomacy, territory, national interest

1. Introduction-

Rivalry between China and India, the world's two most populous nations, seems to be on the rise. Although tensions over the two nations' disputed border and other diplomatic frictions have taken centre stage in recent months. The strategic rivalry between the two leading Asian nations is growing more intense as we approach the third decade of the twenty-first century. A 4,056-kilometer boundary separates the largest economies of the indo-pacific region. Dibyesh Anand states: "The idea of becoming the "big man," the only developing power, is a significant factor in China's outlook, while from the Indian side, it is an idea recognised by the international community and respected as China" (The Time of India 2020)." In order to accomplish broad strategic interests, China and India have developed ambitious regional and global plans. Regarding the Indian Ocean, which has a crucial strategic position, China and India have deepened their ties and are looking for ways to incorporate this area into their calculations. Today, China and India have international aspirations, borders, and territorial disputes. Both markets are sizable and have strong concerns about energy security and safe, affordable trade routes. The recent rise of China has profoundly

altered the balance of power in the region and the world. As they work to align the area with their own interests, China and India have strengthened their tight ties. China and India are now involved in territorial disputes, border disputes, and international ambitions. Both are large markets with significant worries about energy security and safe, reasonably priced trade routes.

The competition between China and India in the Indian Ocean is influenced by historical, strategic, and economic concerns. However, there is a long history of bilateral interactions between China and India, especially in the fields of commerce and investment cooperation. However, because of the long-running border conflict, tensions, and economic and security challenges, the two neighbouring countries have been forced to adopt a strategic approach to competition rather than collaboration. Regarding the nature of their relationship, China and India are limited to each other, have conflicting strategic goals and objectives, are ideologically at odds, lack mutual trust, and are always in competition.

India claims that China poses the primary danger to its security and growth. Also Although India has consistently held a weaker position compared to China, it has never lowered its vigilance regarding China, remains skeptical of China, and has been quietly opposing China. In certain respects, the connection between China and India in the Indian Ocean acts as a "reflection" of their broader strategic alliance, which incorporate elements of competition, cooperation, and coexistence. For India, the Indian Ocean is essential for its security and prosperity. A significant amount of India's energy needs are via the Indian Ocean, and thus China's growing influence in the region is a strategic threat to India. India suspects that China's infrastructure investments in India's neighbours in the Indian Ocean region could transform into military installations and upset the regional balance of power. In reaction to China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean, India has been constructing alliances for maritime security with other Quad nations like the US, Japan, and Australia.

Evolution of India–China Rivalry in the Indian Ocean

Ancient time-

Throughout antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the present, India-China ties have changed. Scholars and pilgrims like Faxian and Xuanzang travelled between the two civilisations in the past, when ties were mainly peaceful and focused on trade, Buddhism, and cultural exchanges. Although there was little direct political involvement during the Middle Ages, contacts persisted mostly through trade, Buddhism, and diplomatic encounters. The Indian Ocean region (IOR) was a hotspot for strategic competition among European colonial powers such as the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British. The British East Company's presence in the subcontinent is an example of such competition. Nevertheless, China and various other Asian nations have also held important roles in the IOR. Zheng He's expeditions (1405-1433) serve as an instance of China's short venture into the Indian Ocean.

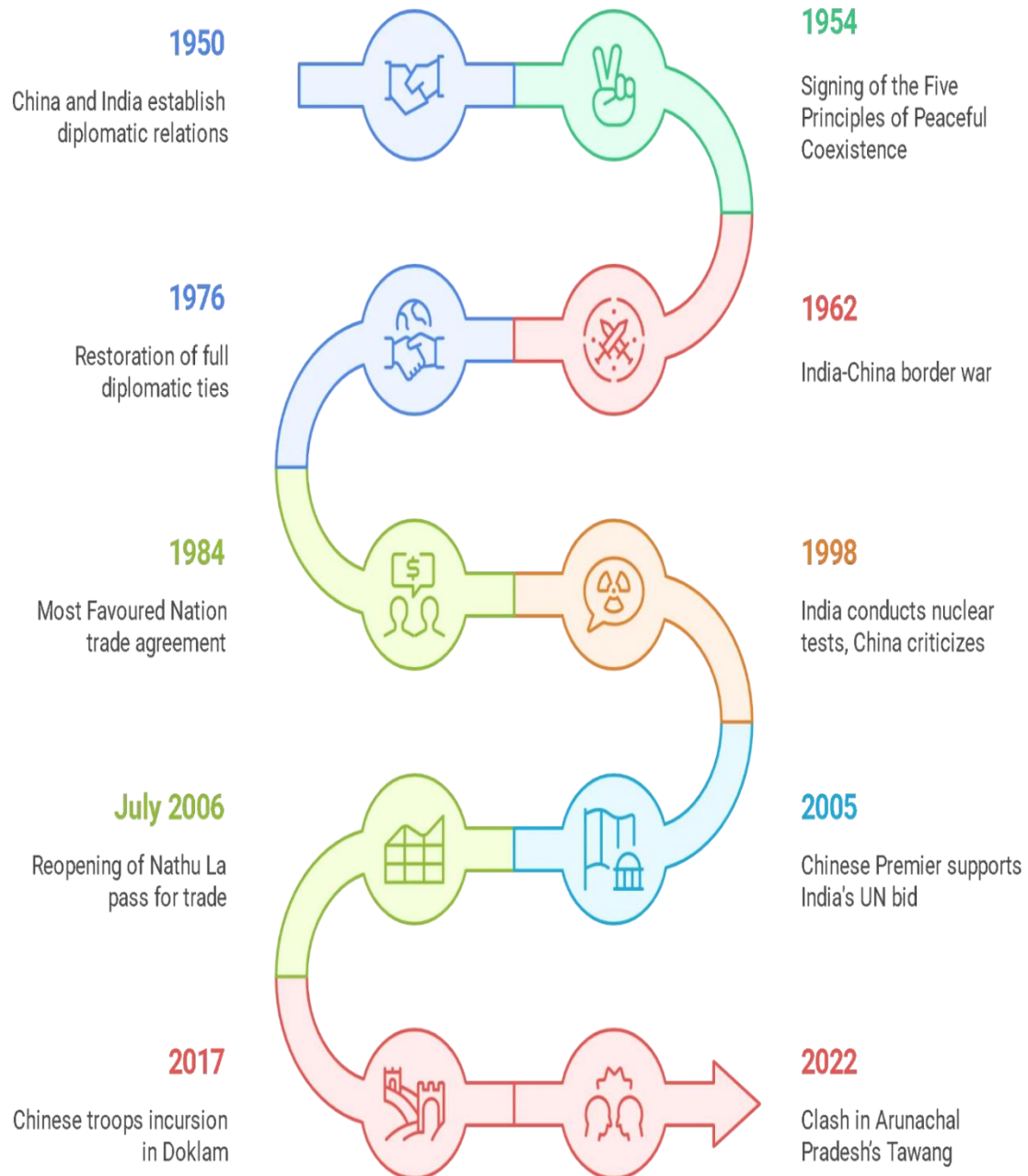
Modern time

In the contemporary era, relationships experienced a significant change. The "Panchsheel" mentality and "Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai" characterized the early phases of diplomatic relations between China and India after they were established in 1950, but border concerns finally led to the 1962 conflict. Beginning in the late 1980s, relations gradually improved through diplomatic engagement and agreements meant to build confidence, and commercial and economic ties expanded. In the twenty-first century, cooperation has

continued in areas like international forums and trade, but border conflicts, geopolitical competition, and incidents like the Ladakh crisis in 2020 have complicated the relationship.

India China relation timeline-

Key Events in India-China Relations: A Historical Timeline



Significance and major strategic location in Indian ocean region (IOR)

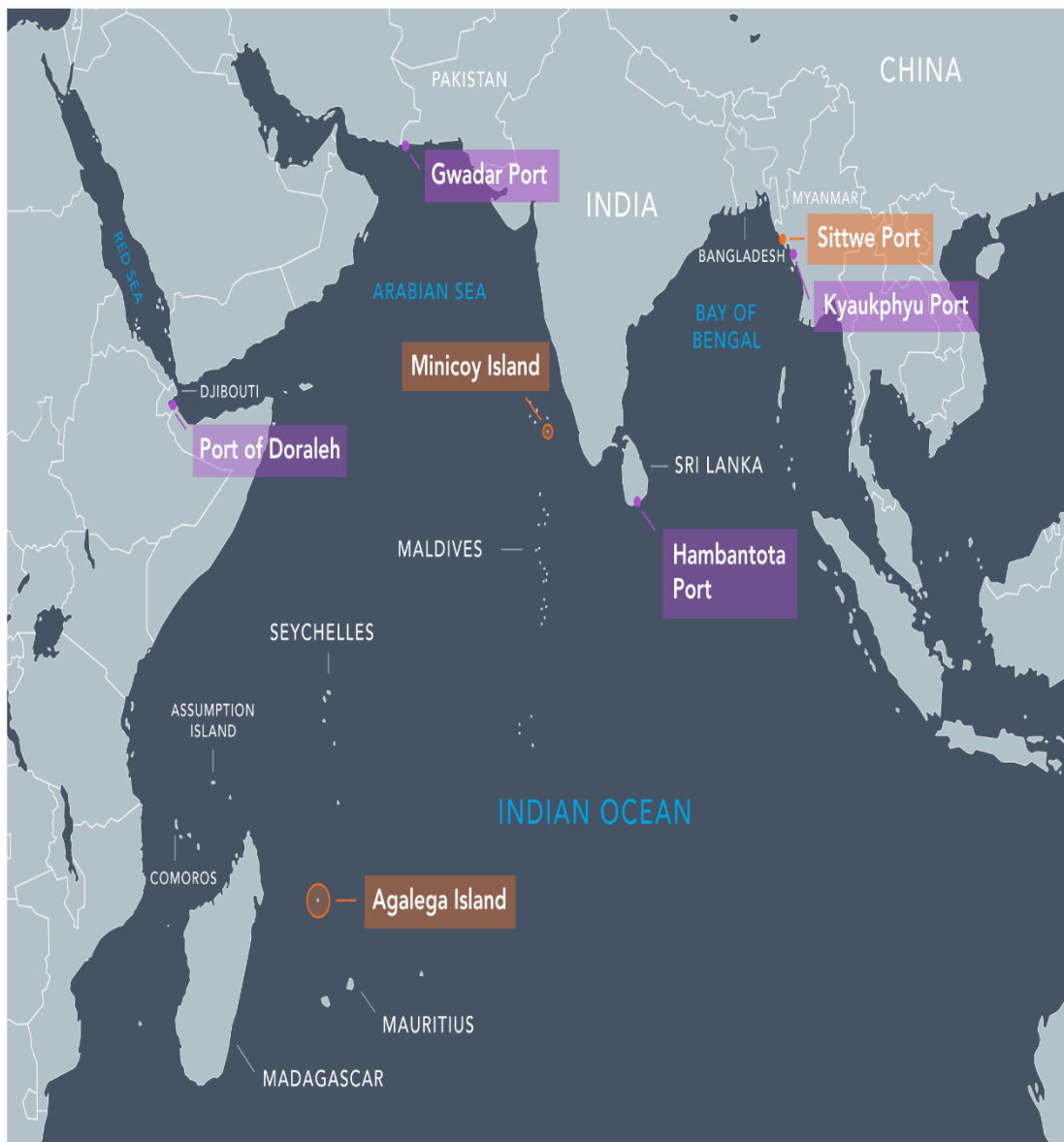
The Indian Ocean Region is generally taken to include the territory and the waters extending from the Straits of Malacca in the east to the Mozambique Channel in the west and comprising the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, the Gulf of Aden, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and 33 littoral countries with a combined population of approximately 2.9 billion. The importance of this region lies in its strategic maritime trade routes that enable international commerce through oceans and are referred to as 'strategic highways'. These sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) connect the Middle East, Southeast Asia, East Asia, Europe, and the Americas and play a key role in international economic security. Strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region takes place around the desire to retain or gain military and strategic advantage near key chokepoints on SLOCs, where states vie for dominance to secure their interests or prevent others from doing so. The Indian Ocean region's centrality to India makes it inherently important as nearly 80 per cent of its crude oil and 95 per cent of its trade (by volume) are carried through maritime corridors. The growing presence and investments by China in the region through enhanced infrastructure, ports, and military facilities have raised concern in New Delhi in relation to strategic and security purposes.

Coercive involvement with its neighbours in the South China Sea is just one aspect of China's effort to increase its influence in the region. Interestingly, though, China has taken a measured and nuanced approach to the Indian Ocean. China has not increased its naval presence in the Indian Ocean, in contrast to the South China Sea. Instead, China's strategy for the region has been based on three main strategies: increasing its political influence by strengthening its economic and political ties with the littoral states of the Indian Ocean; promoting regional cooperation by establishing a different regional institutional framework; and gradually increasing its maritime presence by deploying research vessels in the area.



Strategic competition in the Indian Ocean Region

 INDIAN PRESENCE/INFLUENCE
  CHINESE PRESENCE/INFLUENCE



India-China strategic partnership

Economic Dimensions

Over the last ten years, bilateral commerce between China and India has increased fourfold. For the fourth year in a row, India-China trade exceeded \$100 billion, reaching US\$127.71 billion in FY25. China was the 22nd largest foreign investor in India as of September 2024, having invested a total of US\$2.50 billion since April 2000. Approximately 0.35 percent of all foreign direct investment (FDI) coming into India comes from China.

Due to the rising bilateral trade in recent years, numerous Indian firms have begun establishing operations in China to cater to their Indian and multinational corporation clients there. In addition to this, over 100 Chinese firms have set up offices/operations in India. Numerous major Chinese companies in the machinery and infrastructure construction sector have secured projects in India and established project offices in the country.

Multilateral co-operation: BRICS, SCO and global governance

The two countries actively participate in multilateral platforms such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and are finding common ground. Such a platform allows both countries to demonstrate responsible leadership on global issues ranging from climate change to economic stability. Cooperation between the two countries in multilateral frameworks often transcends bilateral tensions and reflects common interests in reforming international institutions and promoting developing country perspectives in global governance.

China's strategy in the Indian ocean region (IOR) –

Infrastructure Development & Maritime Partnerships-

China's maritime policy in the Indian Ocean includes developing strategic access through port infrastructure and logistics centres. Despite being legally portrayed as commercial expenditures within the BRI framework, several of these port projects have dual-use potential, meaning they may handle both civilian traffic and military supplies. This infrastructure participation is seen by many observers as part of a broader strategic effort to protect marine lanes that are essential to Chinese trade and energy imports. The IOR hosts important port investments in nations such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and East Africa. Through these agreements, China could gain docking and logistical support for its naval vessels, which would also enhance China's influence. Extended leases and operational contracts that connect Nations that align politically and economically with Beijing's strategic perspective are often involved in these initiatives.

String of pearls strategy-

China's greater maritime aspirations and its quest for more powerful force projection capabilities depend on this strategy. The string of pearls initiative primarily seeks to enhance China's strategic foothold and impact across the IOR by establishing a series of "pearls," which symbolize the interconnected network of ports, naval facilities, and logistical centres. These pearls have several uses, such as protecting crucial sea lines of communication (SLOCs), enabling naval operations, and supplying China's expanding maritime troops with logistical assistance. Furthermore, the string of pearls plan is intended to lessen

China's dependence on possible chokepoints, such the Strait of Malacca, which is still influenced by the United States and its allies. China intends to reduce its vulnerability and guaranty the unhindered movement of its maritime trade and navy assets by constructing alternate marine access routes and logistical support facilities. The strategy asserts China's position as a significant maritime power on the international scene while also having a long-term impact to fight perceived containment measures by the United States and its allies.

Naval deployment and power projection-

China has progressively expanded the frequency and extent of its naval presence in the Indian Ocean in addition to infrastructure. PLAN warships conduct port calls in friendly states, travel the area often, and take part in anti-piracy missions. Beijing gains visibility and operational experience outside of its local sphere of influence through these deployments. The projection of naval presence in far-off waters indicates a larger strategic objective, despite the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) insistence that these actions are normal and defensive. Additionally, analysts point out that China's navy modernization which includes surface combatants, submarines, and auxiliary vessels improves its capacity to support long-distance deployments, providing extension beyond conventional coastal defence missions.

India's strategic responses –

India has responded to China's maritime expansion with an integrated strategy that includes international involvement, strategic alliances, and military development. In order to improve naval situational awareness and operational readiness, the Indian Navy has experienced major upgrades, including the introduction of cutting-edge battleships, submarines, and surveillance equipment. This enhancement project aligns with India's objective of safeguarding its marine interests, particularly along the vital sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) that are vital to its trade and energy supplies. India has improved its two-party and multilateral relations with key partners through initiatives like the Quadrilateral Security Dialog (Quad), which includes the US, Japan, and Australia. These partnerships show our mutual dedication to an open, free, and cooperative Indo-Pacific. India has also actively participated in maritime drills like Malabar to enhance operational coordination and show a common military posture against unilateral maritime activities. Additionally, India's Act East Policy and programs like SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) show the country's commitment to global connectivity, security, and cooperative development. Through capability building initiatives and marine cooperation with coastal nations in Southeast Asia, the Pacific, and Africa, India aims to strengthen regional resilience against aggressive sea tactics.

Maritime surveillance and intelligence –

Increasing awareness of the marine environment is one of the core principles of India's strategic response. Maritime domain awareness includes collecting, evaluating, and sharing information about marine traffic, naval operations, and potential threats. Enhanced MDA makes it easier for India to monitor naval activities, especially Chinese deployments. In order to monitor surface and subsurface operations over a wide maritime area, India's traditional maritime awareness frameworks must be improved, according to Darshana Baruah (in India and China at Sea) (Baruah, 2018). Through improved satellite-based

monitoring and increased collaboration with friendly states, India's surveillance reach is extended and gaps in its maritime vigilance are filled.

2. Conclusion-

China's Indian Ocean strategy is a multifaceted approach that combines economic diplomacy, naval deployments, and infrastructure investment with the goal of growing geopolitical influence and safeguarding maritime interests. India's response has been all-encompassing, including diplomatic engagement, improved domain understanding, navy modernization, and regional cooperation. This paper investigates the geopolitical imperatives underpinning India's strategic posture and analyzes how its responses to China's maritime development are impacting regional dynamics. It also explores the viability and efficacy of India's Indo-Pacific strategy in the face of evolving non-traditional security risks, shifting alliances, and economic interdependencies. How well India and its allies respond to changing maritime issues while interacting with China through a mix of collaboration and deterrence will determine future dynamics in the Indian Ocean

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