

# Are India and China on a Collision Course of Maritime Strategies?

Written by Andreas Fabian

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ANDREAS FABIAN, SEP 6 2015

### Are India and China on a Collision Course?

#### Discuss in Relation to the Maritime Strategies of Both Countries.

The last two decades have seen a growing trend towards describing India and China as rivals, potential adversaries and dangerous maritime powers playing a strategic and often hazardous game in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The words of Alfred Thayer Mahan – “whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia”[1] – and the words of another well-known strategist K.M. Panikkar who described the Indian Ocean (IO) as being “truly Indian”[2] seem to be still important and deep-rooted in nowadays Indian strategic thinking about the waters surrounding India and the littoral states of the IOR.[3] With a growing economic and political importance of China and its ever expanding sphere of influence, India has begun to feel threatened by cunning intentions of its long-term challenger in the IOR.[4] As Walgreen puts it, the IO “features a high level of strategic value in terms of location, resource potential, and political development,”[5] which could not have gone unnoticed by the Chinese, whose strategic involvement in the IOR has reached an unprecedented level. And it is not only China that is fast-growing and expanding its control and domination. India has also entered the stage of a competent great power which is predicted to affect the security apparatus of the international system.[6] Since India, as Holmes and Yoshihara argue, is not willing to “allow any outside power to police the region,”[7] and since “the Chinese aspire to expand its influence and to ultimately dominate the strategic environment of the IOR,”[8] the region is appearing to be a dangerous place on earth where competition is expected to further escalate in the years to come.

Before making future predictions about this tense situation, it is of a great significance to closely look and examine both countries’ intentions, strategic plans and tactics they use at sea that can give us a clue whether their strategies collide or not, and whether we can expect a clash in the form of contention or even conflict. The main aim of this paper is to investigate whether China and India are on a collision course by analysing their maritime strategies in the IOR. By examining the China’s ‘String of Pearls’ strategy and the India’s ambitions and its ‘Look East’ policy, the central argument of this essay has been developed – the Chinese and Indian maritime strategies and their aspirations have disposed two powers into a collision course in the IOR. First of all, the strategic significance of the IOR is highlighted, with an emphasis put on the importance for both China and India. In the subsequent section, two already mentioned strategies and countries’ ambitions are analysed. The next part looks deeper into the strategies and indicates a collision course. The last part of this essay concludes.

### The Strategic Importance of the Indian Ocean Region

In his article, Kaplan noted that geography dictates and determines the “critical trends in world politics.”[9] When we look at the map of the IO and if we keep today’s trends of consumer societies in mind, one quickly realizes the reason why the region has become increasingly salient within the scholarly and policy debates in the recent decade. When talking about the IO, first and foremost, scholars and strategic analysts point out the fact that the world’s most important water passages – Suez Canal, Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el Mandeb and Strait of Malacca – are all located within the IOR.[10] Moreover, the IO’s linkage with the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans through the maritime routes only

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adds to its geostrategic significance.[11] With the total of “90% of global commerce and about 65% of all oil that travel by sea, the IO accounts for fully half the world’s container traffic and 70% of the total traffic of petroleum products.”[12] As Cordero emphasizes, “more than half of world’s oil production is transported through the IO and more than 80% of this oil passes through the three IO straits: Hormuz, Malacca and Bab-el Mandeb.”[13] In addition, the majority of the commerce passing through the IO does not terminate within the region, but goes further to reach non-IOR states.[14] From the aforementioned statistics, it clearly appears that the IO bears not only economic but also political significance, and not only for the IOR littoral states, but also for outside powers. In order to ensure the smooth flow of goods necessary for world’s economic prosperity and to secure states’ national sensitive interests in the IOR, it is of utmost importance to inject enough power to fully safeguard the sea lines of communications (SLOCs) to avoid any unexpected and unwanted disturbance.[15] China and India have particularly been injecting the power into the IOR, which is for both countries essential for a number of reasons explored in the following part of this paper, which separately looks at the core motivation of these two rising powers.

## **The Importance of the IOR for China**

Over the past several years, the IOR has attracted a great level of attention of many Chinese scholars, strategic thinkers, and decision and policy makers. Even though the region is not on the top of the Chinese national security list, it still preoccupies China to a great extent due to its mounting dependence on it.[16] In his article, Scott shows that the Chinese motivation in the IOR is twofold: on the one hand, China has high economic stakes which are mostly related to its energy resources, and on the other hand, China aims to prevent India from dominating the entire region.[17] The past decade has seen the rapid development of China and the dramatic increase in country’s quest for energy imports that are vital for its economic expansion. [18] The United States Energy Information Administration (EIA) has ranked China on the first place in terms of consumption of energy, and on the second place in consumption and importation of oil.[19] As Khurana indicated, almost 80% of oil that China imports is “sourced from West Asia and Africa and these are transported through the Indian Ocean.”[20] The most critical water passage China is mostly concerned about is the Malacca Strait, through which more than three quarters of all oil has to transit from the IO to reach the Chinese territory.[21] The situation of such a huge amount of oil that needs to traverse the Malacca Strait has become to be known as ‘Malacca Dilemma’ and the term was coined when the Chinese President Hu Jintao expressed his concerns.[22] Since then, it has been widely used not only by scholars within academia, but also by the Chinese strategists and policy makers. Apparently, China is greatly dependent on the IO and in order to secure its interests, China keeps, as Holmes and Yoshihara emphasize, “anxious eyes on the sea lines of communication and the security of the waterways stretching from China’s coastlines to the IO has taken on special policy importance for Beijing.”[23] In addition, recent developments in India have even heightened the Chinese interests in the IOR. China is well aware of the fact that there is a high likelihood for India to become “the engine of economic integration in the IOR”[24] which might create a potential threat to Chinese interests, therefore, China has expressed even more eagerness for its expanded presence in the region. One of the conclusions that can be drawn from this observation is that the more China imports, the more it is dependent on the IO, therefore, the more power it needs to inject to secure its interests.

## **...and for India**

The importance of the IOR for India takes the character similar to that of China.[25] Besides being dependent on goods and energy resources originating from or passing through the IO, the additional meaning that has been attached to the Ocean by India, as highlighted in the introduction, seems to be of a great significance as well. India is one of the world’s top five fastest-growing economies and with almost three quarters of oil coming from abroad, the strategic nature of the IOR has become vital for India.[26] In terms of trade, India is almost fully dependent on sea transport and as indicated by Pant, “any disruption in the Indian Ocean can have a potentially catastrophic impact for Indian economy and societal stability.”[27] By saying disruption, the abovementioned water passages of the IOR are those that first come into the mind of Indian strategic thinkers. The one that is the most significant for India is the Strait of Hormuz, where approximately “US\$200 billion worth of oil transits annually.”[28] Similarly to China’s ‘Malacca Dilemma’, a large and growing body of literature has begun to make references to ‘Hormuz Dilemma’ that India has to face as a result of its dependence on this critical waterway and other crucial reasons that will be later revealed in this paper.[29] Although it is true that India features with geographic advantage by enjoying a closer

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proximity to critical water passages compared to China, this does not necessarily ensure that its shipping routes will be fully secured.[30] On what it mostly depends is the maritime strategy being deployed. In the following part, this essay looks at what strategies both China and India use to secure their own national interests, and investigates whether these strategies collide, or not.

## China towards the West, India towards the East: China's String of Pearls and India's Look East Policy

The primary goal of both countries is obviously to secure their national economic interests at sea. To do so, India and China have adopted provoking and often intrusive strategies that are unwelcome by each other. Recent evidence suggests that strategies China and India use go far beyond of having economic character only. Rather, their strategies of safeguarding trade and communication routes aggressively penetrate to each other's spheres of influence by making close contacts with each other's adversaries and by making their presence in sensitive places, which is consequently undermining their already tense relationship. As a result, their strategies have put them into a collision course which, unless properly managed, might pose a serious threat not only to regional, but also to international security.

In regards to the Chinese maritime strategy, there has been a new term created over the past decade – the 'String of Pearls' – used to describe the Chinese strategic posture towards the IOR.[31] In order to pursue its interests, Khurana explains that "Beijing's efforts have been directed at assisting some IOR littorals located strategically along arterial sea-lines to build ports and shipping infrastructure." [32] China is well aware that India perceives its presence in the IO undesirably, therefore, seeks to establish ties with surrounding countries whose relationships with India are not the best and which are likely to welcome Chinese presence in the region.[33] In addition to building ports and infrastructure, China also supplies countries with armaments – according to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), roughly 70% of arms are sold to three countries in the IOR – Myanmar, Pakistan and Bangladesh. [34] Basically, China is 'buying' sympathy of several IOR littorals. To date, the real intentions behind the String of Pearls strategy have been widely speculated. Whether it is merely the protection of critical sea routes or it is also aimed at pushing back India's expansionist approach, the one outcome that has become clear is that this strategy is strengthening China's strategic position in the IOR which is not gladly received by India.[35] Similarly, Khurana also emphasizes that it is still "unclear whether China's strengthening ties with regional littorals are merely politico-diplomatic and economic endeavours, or driven by military-strategic imperatives." [36] However, only the mere presence of China, whether it is diplomatic or military, is met with resistance by India, which has openly expressed its fear of being "strategically encircled" [37] by China. Therefore, the Chinese strategy is likely to get into collision with India.

At the beginning of the 1990s, India adopted the 'Look East' policy aimed at strengthening ties with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries in order to sustain economic prosperity.[38] Besides India's economic interest in Southeast Asia, the Chinese element also played a significant role while moving eastward, and with the continuing rise of China, the policy soon became "a demonstrable pillar of Indian foreign and defence policy." [39] The strategy India pursues is somehow similar to that of China's – penetrating to the Chinese sphere of influence by "stepping up military ties with countries traditionally wary of China's power." [40] The past couple of years have witnessed a growing interest of India in one of the most contested seas in Asia – the South China Sea (SCHS). The statistic Scott brings to his article indicates why. With more than half of its total commerce passing through the Strait of Malacca, and with the growing importance of China in the SCHS, India is cautious and keeps its eyes wide open on this gateway to the IO.[41] India is conscious of what consequences it would have if China would be one to rule the entire SCHS, therefore, seeks its enlarged presence in the region which is likely to encounter with opposition by China, which is very sensitive when it comes to issue of the SCHS.[42] As part of its strategy, India has gone even further and reinforced strategic relationships with South Korea and Japan what the Chinese find rather provocative.[43] Moreover, the Prime Minister Narendra Modi introduced at the ASEAN meeting last year a new name for the India's strategy – known as 'Act East' policy – demonstrating the growing interests India has in its eastern neighbourhood.[44] The present strategy of India clearly indicates that the more India penetrates to the east, the more likely it is to meet with the Chinese opposition.

It is evident that strategies India and China use take the similar character. While China infiltrates to the IOR by

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sponsoring IOR littorals, India penetrates to the east by making strategic connections with Southeast and East Asian countries. Apparently, both strategies enter each other's spheres of influence, which both countries are likely to find intrusive. Hence, these strategies are set in a way that puts countries into a collision course. To further justify this, the next part of this paper looks deeper into both strategies and investigates particular ties countries have recently made.

### **The Chinese 'Pearls'**

One of the most significant current discussions about the Chinese 'pearls' is primarily directed at China's relationship with Pakistan. In addition to the abovementioned arms sale to Pakistan, China is taking part in building of a strategically located port in Gwadar that provides China with enormous benefits, one of which is close proximity to critical water passages.[45] Consequently, by being present in this strategic place, Khurana argues that it will allow "monitoring of all shipping activity and military movements." [46] The Chinese presence in Gwadar has attracted much attention and has opened up the debate whether the port will serve a military function or it is being solely built for commercial purposes.[47] Regardless of whether there is a military presence of China or not, the Chinese growing ties with and its presence in Pakistan – India's long-term adversary – is all seen by India as an attempt to balance against its endeavour for maritime preponderance in the IOR.[48] This part of the Chinese strategy significantly adds to the 'Hormuz Dilemma' and because it is undesirably perceived by India, it clearly indicates a collision course.

In addition to Pakistan, China has engaged with at least three more 'pearls' to form the string. In recent years, China has linked with Myanmar, another 'troubled' state to which China has poured an enormous amount of money to build infrastructure, including several ports along the coast.[49] As with the previous case, the Chinese military activity in Myanmar has been much debated and despite the fact that no evidence has been found, Walgreen still thinks that "Chinese-financed port facilities are designed to accommodate vessels that Myanmar does not possess, but China does." [50] Any future possibility of a military presence by China in the IO would be hardly seen by India in a positive way. The same strategy has been used in Sri Lanka, where China is cooperating with Sri Lankan authorities to build a port in Hambantota that is believed to serve Chinese strategic interests due to its close proximity to critical sea routes.[51] Investments in Hambantota seem to bear little economic prospect for China, yet the only benefit China enjoys is its presence in the strategically significant IOR.[52] The last pearl presented in this essay is Bangladesh where the Chinese have expended money in building a port in Chittagong with the expectations of achieving a strategic presence, if not military.[53]

As it appears, it is very difficult to read and clearly understand Chinese intentions behind their strategy. The investments China has made could be understood in various ways and although it is difficult to prove the militarily-oriented thinking while building ports and financing infrastructure in various IOR littorals, what has become clear is that China has significantly expanded its presence in the region, the presence that the Indians are specifically worried about. India perceives this strategy as being created to "restrict India's freedom to manoeuvre in the region." [54] Thus, this situation is almost certain to cause a disagreement between the two rivals.

### **India's 'Eastern Friends'**

Recent developments in China and its growing presence in the IOR have obviously led to a renewed interest in India not to allow its counterpart to dominate the region and to control significant sea routes upon which both countries are dependent. To do so, India set up its Far Eastern Command in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in 2001 to make the entry to the IOR difficult in order to keep the level of the Chinese penetration to the region at minimum.[55] In 2012, India constructed a new military port called INS Baaz which is frequently used by India for purposes of policing the area.[56] Being militarily present in less than 100 miles from the Strait of Malacca, India is in a great position of maintaining surveillance over this significant water passage.[57] Even though China does not perceive India as an immense threat, India's exercise of power in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is a clear sign of the "potential challenge to China's maritime ambitions." [58]

Following the Look East policy, India has strategically linked with Vietnam. Both countries have found themselves sharing the same attitude towards China and their relationship has become to be seen as a reaction to Sino-Pakistani partnership.[59] As already mentioned above, it is crucial for India to prevent China from dominating the

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entire SCHS region and one way of doing so is to assist Vietnam with military modernization process, focusing particularly on Vietnamese maritime capacity and its air forces.[60] India's engagement with Vietnam has not yet reached the level that China would need to be worried about, however, China has already become interested in this strategic partnership because in the case of possible future confrontation in the SCHS, Vietnam would be able to find a strong support in India, the fact that might diminish China's success to win.[61] Besides Indo-Vietnamese partnership, India has gone further and reinforced its eastern ties in the form of "naval exercises with Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia." [62] Obviously, India is moving in a direction in which it is likely to gain a strategic leverage, thus likely to run into a collision with China.

## Conclusion

The world is changing, many new powers are emerging, population is rising and demands are increasing. Natural resources are becoming scarcer and rivalry is mounting. Many states have already been exposed to competition for the same objectives or for superiority in the same region, or for both. China and India represent the most profound example of such competition. Their growing dependence on the IOR and their national interests have been widely discussed, yet the future direction of their tense relationship remains uncertain and mostly dependent on their practices at sea. The main purpose of this study was to investigate whether China and India are on a collision course by looking at maritime strategies they follow. This essay has shown that stakes both China and India have in the strategically significant IOR are high and that strategies these countries have deployed collide. Through the String of Pearls strategy, China has entered the IO and has made strategic contacts with various IOR littorals, most importantly with Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, which collides with India's ambitions to achieve "pre-eminence in the region." [63] On the other hand, India has moved to the east and as far as to East Asia which is becoming a new element that is likely to foster the competition in the future.[64] As this essay has shown, India's military presence in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands might endanger China's national interests in the IOR, and the growing ties with Vietnam might jeopardize the Chinese maritime claims in the SCHS. Consequently, both countries' strategies are far from being harmonious and free from disagreement, rather, this essay argues that their actions clearly show signs of a collision course. To avoid conflict and real confrontation, the burden falls on the United States, the only power capable of keeping the situation under control.[65]

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[8] Pant, "India in the Indian Ocean," 288.

[9] Kaplan, "Center Stage," 16.

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- [14] Pant, "Sino-Indian Maritime Ambitions," 189.
- [15] Vasani, "India's Maritime Core Interests," 416.
- [16] Holslag, "The Reluctant Pretender," 42., and Pant, "Rising China," 5.
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- [40] Rehman, "Keeping the Dragon at Bay," 129.
- [41] Scott, "India's Role," 53-54.
- [42] Ibid.
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[64] Scott, "India's Role," 65.

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