

# SINO-INDIAN MARITIME COMPETITION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION: SECURITY CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIC RESPONSES

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the evolving dynamics of Sino-Indian maritime competition in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and its implications for regional security and strategic stability. As China expands its naval presence and economic footprint through initiatives such as port development, sea lane protection, and defence partnerships, India perceives growing challenges to its traditional influence and security interests in the region. The paper analyses the drivers of maritime competition, including geopolitical rivalry, asymmetries in defence capabilities, economic interdependence, and differing strategic cultures. It also evaluates the role of non-traditional security threats, institutional mechanisms, and multilateral engagement in shaping both competition and cooperation. By assessing India's strategic responses—ranging from naval modernization and regional partnerships to diplomatic engagement and confidence-building measures—the paper argues that while Sino-Indian rivalry in the IOR is likely to persist, avenues for managed competition and limited cooperation remain essential for maintaining regional stability and safeguarding the Indian Ocean as a global maritime commons.

**Keywords :** Indian Ocean Region (IOR); India–China Relations; Maritime Security; Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); Indo-Pacific Strategy; Strategic Competition; Port Diplomacy

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## 1.0 Introduction

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has increasingly emerged as a pivotal arena in the contemporary political, economic, and security dynamics of the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions. As a vital maritime corridor facilitating global trade, energy flows, and maritime connectivity, the IOR has attracted sustained attention from major powers such as the United States, Japan, and Australia, alongside regional actors.<sup>i</sup> Within this evolving geopolitical environment, India and China stand out as the two most consequential Asian powers whose expanding maritime interests have the potential to shape the future stability of the region. Their growing presence in the Indian Ocean is not merely a reflection of economic globalization, but also an outcome of strategic recalibration in response to shifting global power balances.<sup>ii</sup>

## 1.1 Divergent Strategic Perceptions And Emerging Rivalry

Despite expanding economic ties, India and China continue to hold fundamentally divergent perceptions regarding their international status and the legitimacy of their strategic ambitions in the Indian Ocean. These differences have created significant strategic “blind spots” between the two countries,<sup>iii</sup> particularly in the maritime domain. Rooted in contrasting threat perceptions, strategic cultures, and geopolitical outlooks, these divergences heighten the risk of adverse strategic interactions. As a result, the prospects for sustained strategic competition in the IOR remain strong, while the likelihood of meaningful accommodation between India and China in the near or medium term appears limited. Indeed, as China's activities and presence in the Indian Ocean continue to expand, the risk of intensified rivalry is likely to grow.<sup>iv</sup>

## 1.2 Historical Sensitivities And India's Security Concerns

India is among the states most directly affected by China's growing footprint in the Indian Ocean. The expansion of any external power in the IOR inevitably carries significant implications for India's security and strategic interests. Historical experience has left a deep imprint on India's strategic consciousness, as centuries of colonial domination were facilitated largely through maritime control of the Indian Ocean. This historical legacy contributes to India's heightened sensitivity toward the presence of foreign powers in its surrounding maritime space.<sup>v</sup>

China's rise as a maritime power further complicates this strategic environment. India and China share a history of armed conflict and continue to face unresolved border disputes, factors that have prevented the development of sustained mutual trust. Although bilateral economic engagement has expanded considerably over recent decades, it has not mitigated underlying strategic suspicions. Recurrent border tensions and political disagreements ensure that bilateral relations fluctuate between periods of strain and heightened confrontation.<sup>vi</sup> This persistent atmosphere of distrust forms the lens through which both states interpret each other's actions in the Indian Ocean.

### **1.3 China–Pakistan Relations And Strategic Encirclement**

China's close and enduring relationship with India's neighbours—most notably Pakistan—has emerged as a major source of concern for New Delhi. Beijing's expanding strategic, economic, and military engagement with Islamabad, combined with its growing influence across South Asia and the IOR, is widely perceived in India as part of a broader strategy of encirclement.<sup>vii</sup> Consequently, analysing India's apprehensions regarding China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean is essential for understanding India's security calculations and its evolving strategic responses.

### **1.4 India's Opposition To The Belt And Road Initiative (Bri)**

India's consistent refusal to participate in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a key dimension of this strategic divergence. India's primary objection is rooted in concerns over sovereignty and territorial integrity, particularly in relation to the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which traverses Pakistan-occupied Kashmir—a territory claimed by India.<sup>viii</sup> In contrast, several of India's neighbouring countries, including Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, and Pakistan, have adopted a more receptive stance toward the BRI and have entered into various cooperation agreements under the initiative.<sup>ix</sup>

At the official level, India has articulated its opposition in unequivocal terms. The Indian government has stated that no country can accept a connectivity project that disregards its core concerns regarding sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>x</sup> Prime Minister Narendra Modi has similarly emphasized that infrastructure connectivity cannot come at the cost of undermining national sovereignty.<sup>xi</sup> Reinforcing this position, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar observed at the Raisina Dialogue in 2017 that while China is highly sensitive about its own sovereignty, the economic corridor passes through what India considers illegal territory. He underscored that India's objections are therefore both reasonable and inevitable, given that the project was initiated without consultation and in disregard of India's territorial claims.<sup>xii</sup>

### **1.5 CPEC, BRI, And Strategic Implications for India**

China and Pakistan have developed close strategic coordination through major connectivity initiatives such as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). A principal reason for India's refusal to join the BRI lies in the alignment of CPEC through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), territory claimed by India. From New Delhi's perspective, participation in such a project would amount to legitimising violations of its sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>xiii</sup> This territorial dimension has transformed CPEC into a deeply politicised and security-sensitive issue within the broader context of Sino-Indian rivalry in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

### **1.6 Militarisation of Cpec And Gwadar Port**

Beyond territorial disputes, the increasing militarisation of CPEC infrastructure represents India's most immediate strategic concern. Pakistan has reportedly deployed nearly 15,000 troops to secure CPEC installations from potential threats, while naval assets have been tasked with protecting Gwadar Port.<sup>xiv</sup> Simultaneously, China has expanded its naval activities at Gwadar, reinforcing Indian apprehensions that the corridor may evolve into a strategic military stronghold capable of threatening Indian maritime trade routes. These concerns are further intensified by instability in Pakistan's Balochistan province, which borders India and carries long-standing geopolitical and security implications for the region.<sup>xv</sup>

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has increasingly emerged as a pivotal arena in the contemporary political, economic, and security dynamics of the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions. As a vital maritime corridor facilitating global trade, energy flows, and maritime connectivity, the IOR has attracted sustained attention from major powers such as the United States, Japan, and Australia, alongside regional actors.<sup>xvi</sup> Within this evolving geopolitical environment, India and China stand out as the two most consequential Asian powers whose expanding maritime interests have the potential to shape the future stability of the region. Their growing

presence in the Indian Ocean is not merely a reflection of economic globalization, but also an outcome of strategic recalibration in response to shifting global power balances.<sup>xvii</sup>

From a long-term strategic perspective, India anticipates that sustained cooperation between China and Pakistan under the BRI framework will enable Beijing to project power more deeply into the Indian Ocean. Gwadar Port, situated near the strategically vital Strait of Hormuz, provides China with potential access to one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints. Chinese naval deployments, including warships and submarines, have already been observed in the western Indian Ocean.<sup>xviii</sup> Indian strategic analysts argue that if China consolidates maritime control in this area, it could exert influence over nearly 60 percent of crude oil supplies originating from the Middle East. This represents a significant vulnerability for India, particularly given the relative lack of strategic depth and defensive infrastructure along its western maritime approaches. Consequently, CPEC has emerged as a trigger point for Chinese expansion and a highly sensitive national security issue for India.<sup>xix</sup>

### **1.8 Regional Connectivity, Chabahar, And Strategic Setbacks**

India's security concerns are further compounded by shifting regional dynamics. India's withdrawal from the Chabahar railway project, combined with China's expanding engagement in regional port infrastructure and its deepening role in CPEC, is perceived as diminishing India's strategic leverage in South Asia. Indian policymakers argue that CPEC will allow China to import oil and gas from Iran and other Middle Eastern states while simultaneously embedding economic zones, highways, and railways in PoK, thereby reinforcing contested territorial claims.<sup>xx</sup>

### **1.9 India's Alternative Connectivity Vision And Strategic Countermeasures**

At the same time, India has displayed selective openness toward alternative connectivity frameworks such as the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor, which focuses on integration with Southeast Asia. However, this engagement is tempered by India's broader concerns regarding China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean and the perceived emergence of the "String of Pearls" strategy—an alleged network of Chinese-supported ports encircling India.<sup>xxi</sup> In response, India has advanced its own initiatives, including Project Mausam, the Cotton Route, the Spice Route, the Blue Revolution, and the doctrine of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). These initiatives seek to position India as the civilizational and strategic epicentre of the "Indian Ocean World," extending influence from East Africa to Southeast Asia.<sup>xxii</sup>

### **1.10 Competing Maritime Visions: Project Mausam Versus The Maritime Silk Road**

While Project Mausam emphasizes cultural heritage and historical maritime linkages, China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) prioritizes infrastructure development, with routes converging toward China. Though both initiatives promote regional integration in trade and commerce, they represent competing strategic visions aimed at expanding influence—economically, politically, and militarily. India's initiatives were, in part, shaped by concerns that China might emerge as the dominant power in the Indian Ocean, a region that carries nearly three-quarters of global bulk cargo and oil shipments.<sup>xxiii</sup>

### **1.11 Expanding Chinese Maritime Footprint And Indian Apprehensions**

China has invested heavily in port development across the IOR, including Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Chittagong (Bangladesh), and Sittwe (Myanmar). These investments, along with substantial funding in the Maldives, Mauritius, Sudan's Red Sea coast, and Tanzania's Bagamoyo port, underscore China's ambition to establish itself as a major maritime power.<sup>xxiv</sup> Although these projects have contributed to infrastructure development in host countries, they have generated persistent unease in India, particularly due to China's unwavering strategic support for Pakistan.

### **1.12 Military Signalling And Chinese Naval Presence In The IOR**

India's apprehensions are reinforced by overt military developments. In September 2014, a People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) submarine docked at a Sri Lankan port, marking a symbolic assertion of Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean.<sup>xxv</sup> Since then, Chinese naval and research vessels have operated with increasing frequency in the region. The arrival of the Chinese research vessel *Yuan Wang 5* at Hambantota port in August 2022 heightened regional concerns, as such vessels are widely regarded as dual-use platforms capable of collecting strategic oceanographic and military data.<sup>xxvi</sup> These activities enhance the PLAN's submarine and surveillance capabilities in the IOR, reinforcing India's perception that China's maritime initiatives under the MSR are closely intertwined with long-term military objectives.

### **1.13 India's Counter-Initiatives In The Indo-Pacific And East Asia**

In response, India has undertaken several initiatives in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea regions in coordination with neighbouring and like-minded countries to counterbalance China's expanding influence.<sup>xxvii</sup> In the coastal areas of Vietnam, India's presence is strongly felt due to several Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and agreements signed in 1992, 2006, and 2014 to increase visibility along the Vietnamese coast.<sup>xxviii</sup> India's increased involvement in East Asia has been enabled through the adoption of the East Asia (Act East) Policy.<sup>3</sup> Mongolia has acknowledged India as its "Third Neighbour" alongside its two powerful geographical neighbours, China and Russia.<sup>xxix</sup>

### **1.14 Strategic Rationale Behind China's "String of Pearls"**

From another perspective, China's "String of Pearls" strategy is not solely focused on India but is also aimed at reducing China's vulnerability regarding fossil fuel imports and commercial transactions through the Strait of Malacca.<sup>xxx</sup> The Indian Ocean and Gulf routes are essential to China should the Malacca Strait become a non-viable transport route. For India, extending connectivity for foreign trade would similarly promote national economic growth and address structural economic constraints.<sup>xxxi</sup>

### **1.15 Connectivity Corridors And Competing Economic Visions**

The land-based BCI and Maritime Silk Road (MSR) can function as effective maritime supplements. The India-supported BCIM scheme proposes the development of multiple connectivity corridors and ports along the Indian coastline to enhance maritime trade linkages.<sup>xxxii</sup> Such initiatives would stimulate economic development in coastal regions and associated socio-economic zones. The Nathu La Pass, reopened by India and China in 2006, forms part of the ancient Silk Road and connects Sikkim with Tibet. Additionally, the Stilwell Road has the potential to restore connectivity between India, Myanmar, and China, enhancing trade and regional cooperation among emerging Asian powers.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

### **1.16 Debates Within India On The Belt And Road Initiative**

There is considerable debate in India regarding China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly on whether it constitutes a strategic threat or an economic opportunity. While some Indian scholars argue that the BRI is designed to strategically encircle India, others suggest that it could offer infrastructure financing opportunities and support India's development and employment objectives.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The South China Sea, Indian Ocean, and East Asia remain vital commercial zones for both China and India. If the two countries aspire to realize an "Asian Century," they must balance competition with cooperation.

### **1.17 Economic Interdependence And Competitive Cooperation**

Historically, India and China together accounted for nearly 50 percent of the global economy two centuries ago. China's rapid economic growth after 1978 was driven by economic reforms, while India's growth accelerated following liberalization reforms initiated in 1991. Despite progress, both countries face domestic challenges—China with rising debt and export dependence, and India with infrastructure deficits and labour market constraints.<sup>xxxv</sup> If sustained growth continues, both could again represent a substantial share of the global economy. Hence, a strategy of "competitive cooperation" remains essential.

### **1.18 Trade, Alternative Connectivity Initiatives, And Strategic Partnerships**

India and China are among the world's major trading partners, with bilateral trade reaching approximately USD 95.7 billion in 2018. In comparison, China-Pakistan trade stood at about USD 15.6 billion in 2019. India has also pursued alternative connectivity initiatives such as the Kaladan Multimodal Project, Chabahar Port, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) in partnership with Japan.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Both India and Japan have refrained from joining the BRI and instead promoted quality infrastructure initiatives across the Indo-Pacific.

### **1.19 Expanding Geopolitical Implications Of CPEC And The BRI**

Saudi Arabia's interest in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) aligns with its Vision 2030 goals of economic diversification and reduced oil dependency. Strengthening Saudi-China ties supports China's energy security while offering Pakistan enhanced trade opportunities. This development has geopolitical implications given Saudi Arabia's traditionally close relationship with the United States.<sup>xxxvii</sup> The BRI is expected to strengthen China's supply chains through land and maritime routes. Despite economic headwinds arising from

trade tensions and regional disputes since 2018, the BRI remains central to China's growth strategy. China's expanding presence in the Indian Ocean has significant implications for both littoral and extra-regional powers and may lead to new geostrategic alignments.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

## 2.0 Strategic Imperatives For India

To respond effectively, India must strengthen internal infrastructure and pursue the following measures:

- i. Modernize transport and maritime connectivity;
- ii. Enhance domestic integration similar to China's "Go West" strategy; and
- iii. Deepen diplomatic and economic engagement with advanced economies such as Japan to attract investment and technological collaboration.<sup>xxxix</sup>

## 3.0 Future Trajectory Of Sino-Indian Competition In The Indian Ocean Region

- i. **Persistence of Strategic Competition:** Given the current trajectory of Sino-Indian relations, strategic competition in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is likely to persist over the long term. Both states are expected to continue balancing each other across multiple domains in the region. While China enjoys a substantial economic and technological advantage, India derives strategic leverage from its geographical location and historical presence in the IOR. As both seek greater influence, occasional strategic frictions and minor standoffs are likely. However, due to factors such as economic interdependence, nuclear deterrence, and the growing role of multilateral institutions, these rivalries are unlikely to escalate into large-scale conventional conflict.<sup>xl</sup>
- ii. **Rhetorical Restraint and Diplomatic Signalling:** China has consistently emphasized narratives of "win-win cooperation," a "shared future for mankind," and peaceful coexistence in its official discourse, reiterating that it does not seek hegemony or follow the path of earlier great powers. Similarly, India has consciously avoided overtly anti-China rhetoric in its diplomatic engagements. Instead, New Delhi often employs neutral language and highlights historical and civilizational linkages in its outreach to East and Southeast Asian states. This rhetorical restraint reflects a mutual recognition that overt confrontation would be counterproductive, distinguishing Sino-Indian competition from the more explicit adversarial posture adopted by the United States toward China.<sup>xli</sup>
- iii. **Hedging Behaviour of Littoral States:** Although, competition between India and China is evident across the littoral states of the IOR, most regional actors, apart from a few exceptions such as Pakistan, seek to avoid full alignment with either power. Smaller states increasingly adopt hedging strategies designed to maximize economic and strategic benefits while preserving autonomy. Over-dependence on any single major power is widely perceived as a strategic vulnerability. Maintaining balanced relations with both India and China allows these states to safeguard sovereignty and expand their diplomatic manoeuvrability.<sup>xlii</sup>
- iv. **Military Posture and Strategic Access:** Speculation regarding potential military build-ups by India and China in the IOR has intensified in recent years. However, both states appear more inclined to pursue access to logistical facilities, port infrastructure, and strategic footholds rather than establish overt military bases. Within China, debates on protecting overseas interests and citizens have gained prominence, yet official narratives continue to frame overseas facilities as "support" or "logistical" installations rather than permanent military bases. This approach reflects an effort to expand strategic reach without provoking overt regional backlash.<sup>xliii</sup>
- v. **Power Asymmetry and Strategic Alignments:** China is likely to remain the dominant power in the IOR due to its superior economic capacity and extensive investments across littoral states. Although India ranks among the world's largest economies, the relative gap with China persists. Consequently, India is expected to further strengthen partnerships with like-minded powers and regional groupings to collectively counterbalance China's influence. Naval cooperation, joint military exercises, and capacity-building initiatives with third parties are likely to intensify, reinforcing deterrence while avoiding direct confrontation.<sup>xliv</sup>

## 4.0 Possibilities Of Cooperation In The Indian Ocean Region

Despite persistent strategic rivalry, India's and China's interests in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) do not exist in a purely zero-sum framework. While both states seek to expand their strategic influence, competition does not necessarily preclude cooperation. There remain several issue areas where interests converge, offering scope for pragmatic engagement. Given their expanding naval capabilities, growing economic stakes, and dependence on maritime trade, both India and China possess the potential to contribute constructively to regional stability if

cooperative mechanisms can be institutionalized and sustained.

- i. **Cooperation on Non-Traditional Security Threats:** One of the most promising areas for cooperation lies in addressing non-traditional security threats. Both India and China share concerns regarding the security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs), piracy, maritime terrorism, extremism, and the maintenance of freedom of navigation. The Indian Ocean's importance as a resource-rich region and a critical conduit for global maritime trade underscores the necessity of collective approaches to maritime security.<sup>xlv</sup>

In the contemporary era, threats to SLOCs arise less from direct inter-state conflict and more from non-state actors engaged in piracy, terrorism, and organized crime. These challenges impose significant economic costs on global trade, shipping operations, and maritime insurance. Addressing such threats presents opportunities not only for Sino-Indian cooperation but also for coordinated engagement with extra-regional powers such as Japan and the United States, reinforcing the provision of maritime security as an international public good.<sup>xlvi</sup>

- ii. **Institutional Platforms and Confidence-Building Mechanisms:** Institutionalized dialogue mechanisms play a crucial role in mitigating mistrust and managing competition between major powers. India and China are members of several regional and international institutions, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), BRICS, ASEAN-led forums, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the G-20. These platforms facilitate confidence-building, policy coordination, and norm-setting while reducing the risks of misperception and unintended escalation.<sup>xlvii</sup>

Both countries have also participated in bilateral and multilateral military exercises, particularly under the SCO framework. Although limited in scope, such engagements reflect a degree of pragmatic cooperation despite enduring strategic suspicion. This distinguishes Sino-Indian relations from those of outright adversaries and suggests that functional channels for engagement remain open even amid rivalry.<sup>xlviii</sup>

- iii. **Regional Stability and Conflict Management:** Another potential area of cooperation lies in managing instability across the wider IOR, a region marked by fragile states, internal conflicts, insurgencies, and governance deficits. Given their growing diplomatic reach and economic presence, India and China could play constructive roles in facilitating dialogue, supporting peace initiatives, and promoting capacity-building among littoral states.<sup>xlix</sup>

Joint or parallel efforts to combat piracy and maritime terrorism could contribute to the establishment of a "safety platform" for global commerce by reducing maritime risks. Recent initiatives involving India, China, and the United States in addressing non-traditional security threats indicate an emerging recognition of shared responsibilities in maintaining regional and global stability.<sup>1</sup>

- iv. **Economic Interdependence as a Stabilizing Factor:** Economic interdependence further enhances the prospects for cooperation. Bilateral trade between India and China, approaching USD 100 billion annually, acts as a stabilizing factor by increasing the economic costs of overt confrontation. While unchecked competition may result in strategic overreach and resource depletion, cooperation offers the possibility of shared economic gains and regional prosperity.<sup>li</sup>

This logic was articulated by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his 2015 address at Tsinghua University, where he emphasized the importance of strategic communication, sensitivity toward third-party relationships, and recognition of mutual interdependence over alliance-based rivalry. Such statements underscore the normative foundations for managing competition through dialogue rather than confrontation.<sup>lii</sup>

## 5.0 Problems And Challenges In Sino-Indian Strategic Competition

- i. **Asymmetry in Defence Capabilities and Industrial Capacity:** Geopolitics continues to exert a decisive influence on the international system, particularly with the growing strategic significance of Asia and the Indian Ocean. China's rapid rise has intensified great-power realignment, most visibly reflected in the evolving strategic competition between India and China.<sup>liii</sup>

India's defence budget of ₹301,866 crore (approximately USD 42.7 billion) includes ₹19,021 crore allocated to the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO). In contrast, China's officially declared defence expenditure of USD 177.61 billion in 2019 excludes substantial spending on research and development, paramilitary forces, nuclear modernization, space capabilities, and cyber warfare. Estimates by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) place China's actual defence expenditure closer to USD 278 billion, highlighting a significant asymmetry.<sup>liiv</sup>

China's expanding domestic defence industrial base increasingly supports its military modernization in both scale and technological sophistication. By contrast, India's indigenous defence production remains constrained, limiting its capacity for sustained modernization and export competitiveness. This disparity is reflected in the divergent import–export profiles of the two defence sectors.<sup>lv</sup>

- ii. **China's Defence Industrial Strategy and Export Orientation:** China has pursued a deliberate defence industrial strategy emphasizing civil–military fusion and technological self-reliance. Significant investments have been made in aviation, naval platforms, missile systems, and unmanned technologies. Unlike earlier periods when exports were confined largely to small arms, China now exports advanced aircraft, naval vessels, missile systems, and UAVs to multiple regions.<sup>lvi</sup> Virtually every major defence import undertaken by China has contributed to indigenous capability development. The Sukhoi Su-27 program illustrates this trajectory: while both India and China acquired similar platforms, China rapidly transitioned to indigenous production of the J-11 series, whereas India's licensed production of the Su-30MKI concluded only around 2020. Export orientation and industrial learning have thus been central to China's defence modernization outcomes.<sup>lvii</sup>
- iii. **Strategic Disputes and Military Posturing:** Although the Wuhan Summit generated momentum for dialogue, it did not produce substantive concessions from Beijing. China's territorial claims over Arunachal Pradesh, its occupation of Aksai Chin, and infrastructure developments in areas such as Doklam remain unchanged. Following theatre command restructuring, China has deployed advanced air and missile assets in Tibet, reflecting the accelerating pace of its military modernization. Additionally, the continuation of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) despite India's objections has further strained bilateral relations.<sup>lviii</sup>
- iv. **Economic Realities and Structural Constraints:** A 2017 analysis titled *India Is Not the Next China* cautioned against overstating India's economic convergence with China. According to IMF data, China's GDP in 2016 stood at USD 11.4 trillion, compared to India's USD 2.25 trillion, making China's economy more than five times larger. Despite comparable population sizes, China's per capita GDP remains significantly higher, underscoring structural differences in development trajectories.<sup>lix</sup> This distinction between growth rates and absolute economic expansion highlights a critical structural constraint. Consequently, India must diversify its economic engagement beyond its immediate neighbourhood to accelerate development and employment generation. While China's expanding presence in the IOR raises legitimate concerns, it must be assessed alongside India's role as a stabilizing regional actor. India's central challenge lies in safeguarding its diplomatic influence, defence partnerships, and economic interests without triggering unnecessary escalation.<sup>lx</sup>

## 6.0 Recommendations For Strengthening India's Maritime Security And Strategic Posture In The IOR

- i. **Engage Littoral Nations Constructively:** Indian diplomacy should continue to engage proactively with littoral states in the Western Indian Ocean, leveraging historical ties and past investments in capacity-building, infrastructure development, and military training. This approach will help India maintain influence and strengthen regional stability.
- ii. **Promote Multilateral Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific:** India should work closely with major Indo-Pacific powers such as Australia, Japan, and the United States, fostering a cooperative framework for security, economic, and maritime governance initiatives.
- iii. **Joint Military Exercises as Strategic Signaling:** The extended Malabar naval exercises provide a platform for India, the U.S., Japan, and Australia to demonstrate shared strategic goals, including addressing security challenges posed by China in the Indo-Pacific. Such drills help develop coordinated responses to regional contingencies.
- iv. **Expand Anti-Piracy and Maritime Security Collaborations:** India has a history of collaborating with regional partners on anti-piracy operations, occasionally including China. Strengthening multilateral maritime security mechanisms can preempt threats while establishing India as a responsible regional security provider.
- v. **Divide Monitoring and Operational Responsibilities:** To adequately monitor Chinese naval activity across the Western Indian Ocean and the broader Indo-Pacific, India should develop a division of labor with partner nations. India may take the lead in the Indian Ocean while others focus on Eastern waters, ensuring burden-sharing without compromising strategic coverage.
- vi. **Address Rising Chinese Naval Capabilities:** Recognizing China's growing maritime power, India should continue to cooperate with regional maritime states to maintain security in the Indian Ocean.

Enhanced coordination and joint planning can help India counterbalance Chinese influence while safeguarding regional stability.

- vii. **Strengthen Ties with Smaller Regional States:** Chinese interference in the domestic affairs of smaller states like Myanmar and the Maldives is a growing concern. India can strengthen strategic interdependence by sharing maritime domain awareness and space-based surveillance data, reinforcing trust, and encouraging continued cooperation with these nations.
- viii. **Balance Cooperation and Deterrence:** While China, the United States, and Pakistan pose potential maritime challenges, India's maritime strategy—such as the *Ensuring Secure Seas* initiative—should prioritize cooperation over unilateral deterrence, building partnerships rather than relying solely on confrontation.
- ix. **Promote Maritime Stability and Secure Trade Routes:** Sustained maritime cooperation in the IOR is essential to secure critical sea lanes of communication (SLOCs). Protecting these trade routes will ensure economic prosperity for India and other nations with vested commercial interests in the region.
- x. **Integrate Maritime Power into Broader Economic Planning:** Sea power extends beyond naval strength, encompassing merchant shipping, marine infrastructure, and maritime diplomacy. India should integrate its “Blue Economy” into national development plans, including port upgrades and inland connectivity under the Sagarmala project.
- xi. **Institutionalize the Blue Economy Concept:** The Indian government has formalized its maritime policy through SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), emphasizing sustainable economic use of the Indian Ocean while securing India's strategic interests.
- xii. **Prepare for a New Maritime Front:** Traditionally, India has focused on land-based threats from China, investing heavily in ground forces. Rising maritime challenges require a complementary focus on naval and maritime capabilities to address this evolving front effectively.

## 7.0 Conclusion

The Indian Ocean Region has emerged as a central arena for Sino-Indian strategic competition, driven by both countries' quest for economic growth, maritime influence, and regional security dominance. China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), has heightened India's strategic anxieties, especially given the alignment of infrastructure projects through disputed territories and key maritime chokepoints such as Gwadar Port and the Strait of Hormuz. India's refusal to participate in BRI, coupled with its own initiatives like Project Mausam, SAGAR, and the BCIM corridor, reflects its efforts to assert sovereignty, protect trade routes, and counterbalance Chinese influence.

The competition is multifaceted, encompassing economic engagement, infrastructure development, naval modernization, and strategic partnerships with littoral and extra-regional powers. While China holds advantages in economic clout and maritime investments, India leverages its geographic position, historical ties, and partnerships with other Indo-Pacific nations to maintain a credible presence in the IOR. Both nations also share potential areas for cooperation, particularly in addressing non-traditional security threats such as piracy, maritime terrorism, and freedom of navigation, highlighting the importance of dialogue and multilateral engagement.

Despite inherent challenges, including asymmetric military capabilities, infrastructural gaps, and evolving geopolitical alignments, India has proactively developed a range of strategic, economic, and diplomatic tools to safeguard its interests. Recommendations such as expanding maritime cooperation with littoral states, strengthening connectivity, leveraging regional alliances, and integrating the Blue Economy into national planning provide a roadmap for India to navigate the complex security landscape of the IOR.

In essence, the Sino-Indian competition in the Indian Ocean is unlikely to diminish in the near future. Rather, it will persist as a strategic balancing act, where both nations seek to assert influence while managing risks associated with confrontation. India's continued engagement, enhanced maritime capabilities, and strategic partnerships will be crucial in ensuring that the Indian Ocean remains a zone of stability, economic prosperity, and regional security, balancing competition with selective cooperation to protect national and regional interests.

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