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India's Maritime Strategy in Response to China's Expanding Footprint in the Indian Ocean Region.

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the maritime strategy India uses in reacting to the increased presence of China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The increasing influence of China in the form of port development, naval positions, and Belt and Road Initiative has changed the regional geopolitical landscape and brought security and influence issues. The study is based on a qualitative methodology that employs secondary data to examine strategic expansion of China and the multidimensional reaction of India such as modernization of its navy, its strategic affairs, and its Diplomacy including SAGAR and the Indo-Pacific framework. The analysis indicates that China is far ahead in terms of maritime advantages, but India is also making strides to be at the forefront by forming alliances and developing national interests. The study concludes that the IOR is transforming into a sphere of strategic competition where there is the need to maintain equilibrium between cooperation and competition to provide stability and security.

Keywords: India, China, Indian Ocean Region, Maritime Strategy, Indo-Pacific, SAGAR, Geopolitics

1. Introduction

Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has become one of the most strategically important maritime areas of the modern global order due to being the location of the core of the international trade, energy transportation and geopolitical rivalry. Almost 80 percent of the world seaborne oil trade is transiting through important sea lanes found in this area, i.e. Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Malacca, and Bab-el-Mandeb which is a significant artery of the world economy [15], [25]. To India, which is geographically situated in the centre of the Indian Ocean, maritime security is directly connected with the well-being of the country, the financial prosperity, and the influence over the region. Throughout, the strategic perspective in India has been still mostly continental, but during the post-cold war times and especially in the 21 st century, there has been a tremendous change towards the realization of the significance of maritime power and the domination of the



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sea [17]. The economic factors have not been the only factors that have caused this transformation but also the growing influence of external powers with most notable being China and its growing presence in the IOR has changed the strategic calculus of India and other stakeholders in the region.

The increased involvement of China in the Indian Ocean Region is not one-dimensional because it involves economic investments, infrastructural development, naval engagements, and strategic partnerships with littoral states. This expansion is accompanied by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), especially the sea-based variant of it, called 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, aimed at improving connectivity due to a network of ports, shipping routes, and logistical centers [13]. This effort has seen it develop and acquire strategic port capacities like Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Djibouti in the Horn of Africa that are commonly viewed through the prism of the String of Pearls strategy [6]. Although these developments are officially described by China as an economic and cooperative aspect, several scholars maintain that they have dual-use potentials that allow them both commercial and military operations, which contributes to the increased China power projection potential in the IOR [3], [18]. The opening of the first Chinese overseas military base at Djibouti and the growing numbers of Chinese naval patrolling, anti-piracy operations, and submarine missions are also indicative of its long term strategic goals of the area [8].

The emerging emergence of China is an apparent challenge to the old age and traditional dominance and influence of the Indian Ocean by India. The presence of ports operated by the Chinese are quite near the Indian coast, and the fact that Beijing has been enhancing its strategic relationship with other nations such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, is a cause of concern with regard to encirclement and strategic weakness [4]. In addition, the trends of increment of militarization of maritime space given above and the potential threat to the critical Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) which is of paramount concern to the imports and trade of energy in India make it necessary to have integrated and proactive maritime approach [11]. In response India has tried to redefine a maritime doctrine and nurture their strategic potential so as to safeguard their national interest and maintain the stability of the region.

Indian vision of the Indian Ocean is one of the key aspects of Indian response under doctrine of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) which aims at cooperative security, capacity building and inclusive development across the littoral states [19]. This policy depicts the effort of the India to project itself as a net security provider in the region by offering assistance in other areas such as domain awareness, relief efforts and anti-piracy operations [14]. In addition, India has intensified its military operations in modernizing its navy including expansion of the blue-water capacity through acquisition of aircraft carriers, submarines and high-tech



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surveillance systems [20]. These developments are supplemented with an increased number of exercises on the sea, tactical partnership, and defense co-operation with other nations which think on the same lines particularly through multilateral partnership such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), where United States, Japan, and Australia are involved. [24].

Moreover, the Indian maritime policy is not restricted to the military aspects but rather includes diplomatic and economic programs of enhancing the connectivity and influence in the region. The development of the Chabahar Port in Iran or the encouragement of projects like the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) are some of the projects which point to the efforts of India to provide alternative ways of collaboration and supplement the increasing power of the China [12]. Meanwhile, India also participates in regional activities like Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) to ensure collective security and sustainable development in the region [16]. These multi-dimensional moves highlight the fact that India has realized the importance of multi-dimensional approach that involves hard power, soft power and alliances.

Irrespective of these efforts, India has a number of problems in the way it can counter the growing presence of China within the Indian Ocean. These are resource limitations, infrastructural limitations and the complexity of handling various regional relationships in a highly dynamic geopolitical environment. Besides, the littoral states are those that tend to adopt a balancing policy and are involved in a relationship with both India and China to benefit in terms of their economic and strategic advantages hence making it very difficult to force India to exert its influence [2]. In its turn, the changing nature of the IOR is not merely the sign of a bilateral rivalry between India and China but a more generalized struggle of influence between multiple actors in a more multipolar world.

2. Literature Review

The increasing strategic significance of Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has come into focus of a lot of scholarly interest, especially following the escalating geopolitical rivalry between India and China. There has been a significant literature being developed in the study of maritime strategy, naval build-up, regional security relationships and the wider Indo-Pacific construct. Scholars have handled the subject in various ways such as through geostrategic analysis, security studies, economic diplomacy and maritime governance thus offering a holistic explanation of the dynamic nature of the IOR.

Among the prevailing threads in the literature is the growing maritime China and its potential geopolitical consequences in the region. Brewster [6] gives a historical overview of the Indian Ocean approach by China, claiming that Chinese building of seaport structures and naval forces are not a commercial Western route to the Indian Ocean but a long-term strategic project in the projection of power. Equally important, Garver [13] wants to bring out the importance of the



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Maritime Silk Road under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and how China is using economic investments to build a network of strategic footholds within the IOR. Kumar [3] also builds on this point by evaluating the geoeconomic policy of China and says that development of infrastructure, accessibility of ports, and financial flows are all being implemented as a tool of strategic leverage. All these studies highlight the dual character of maritime activities of China that can be subject to military use and worsen the balance of power in the region.

The other significant theme within the literature is the concept of the “String of Pearls that has been extensively used as a way to view the positioning of China in the Indian Ocean. According to Chatterjee [18], the construction of ports like Gwadar, Hambantota, and Djibouti is a consistent policy of circling India and ensuring that the energy supply channels of China are not cut off. Although this strategy is discussed by some scholars as to what degree is centrally planned, it is widely believed that the increasing presence of China at sea with submarine deployments and anti-piracy operations is a long-term effort to strengthen its presence at sea [8]. It is observed that these developments have played a role in the changing the regional environment of security, and other actors, especially India, have to re-evaluate their strategic priorities.

The growing footprint of China has triggered a large section of the literature analyzing the changing Indian maritime policy. According to Brewster [17], India is being described as an emerging maritime power that is steadily shifting a traditionally continental orientation to the ocean-centric strategic orientation. Panda [12] discusses the maritime doctrine and the maritime strategy of India and the significance of sea control, projecting power, and keeping the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) safe. Sakhuja [16] goes further and points out how India is striving to improve its maritime security by modernizing its navy, improving its surveillance and capacity building measures with other regional allies. These reports show that the maritime policy in India is taking a more advanced and multidimensional approach combining military readiness and diplomatic involvement.

One of the most notable concepts that have become salient in the recent literature is the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine of India that is an attempt to be cooperative and inclusive towards maritime security. Basu [19] asserts that SAGAR is one of the changes in the paradigms of security to a more inclusive approach that focuses on collaboration between regions, economic growth, and humanitarian relief. The authors Pant and Rej also emphasize the strategic position of India in fostering a regime of rules in the Indo-Pacific, stating that the Indian policy aims at striking a balance between competition and collaboration. The view is further reaffirmed by Scott [11], who analyses the Indo-Pacific strategy of India and emphasizes on the



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necessity of forming alliances with other well-wishers in order to deal with the shared security issues.

The importance of multilateral frameworks and partnerships in strategy has also received a lot of literature on the role they play. Scott [24] talks about the relevance of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) in improving maritime collaboration and neutralizing the influence of China in the Indo-Pacific. According to Mohan [15], India should focus on its involvement in region associations like Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) because it can foster collective security and economic integration. According to these studies, the maritime strategy of India is not followed in isolation, it is incorporated into the larger network of alliances and partnerships on the basis of which the stability of the region is achieved.

Besides the military and strategic aspects, it is also within the economic and diplomatic aspects of the maritime strategy that scholars have delved. According to Medcalf [10], the very idea of the Indo-Pacific is the convergence of economic and strategic interests where maritime connectivity and trade are the key points. The blue economy in the Indian Ocean is brought into the focus by Chime Youdon [22], stating that sustainable use of maritime resources is becoming part of the national strategies. The attempts of India, including the creation of alternative connectivity and the investment in the infrastructure of the region, are commonly taken as the efforts to offer the possible alternatives to the BRI of China [12]. These are economic dimensions which contribute to the complexity of the strategic competition as it is not only a case of military prowess but also the developmental support, trade relations and soft power.

However, even though the maritime rivalry between India and China has received a lot of literature, there are a few gaps that still exist. Although a lot of works dwell on the strategy of China or the response of India, there is still the need to have more comprehensive studies which delve into the relationship between the two in a dynamic and changing environment. Besides, most of the available literature is purely descriptive with little evaluation of the efficacy of the maritime programs conducted by India in responding to the influence of China. Moreover, the views of minor littoral states that are instrumental in influencing regional politics are not properly represented in the literature. These states often take a hedging approach, as noted by Mboya [2], this means that they become involved with India and China so that they benefit as much as possible making it difficult to know how to strategize.

3. China's Maritime Expansion in the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) maritime expansion by China has become one of the key aspects of modern geopolitical processes as a result of its strategic, economic, and energy security interests. Under the banners of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its maritime form, the 21 st Century Maritime Silk Road, China has pumped billions of dollars into port



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infrastructures, connectivity projects, and logistical networks in both the major littoral states such as Pakistan (Gwadar), Sri Lanka (Hambantota), and Djibouti, thus creating one network that has been variously called the String of Pearls [13], [18]. Although they are formally viewed as economical partnership and facilitation of trading activities, these developments are generally viewed as having dual-use capabilities, therefore, being a means of both trade and accessibility of the Chinese military to the IOR in the long term [3], [6].

The opening of the first Chinese foreign military base in Djibouti and the continued mobility of naval forces, submarines and anti-piracy task forces further comes as indications that Beijing is planning to defend its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) and extend its strategic influence further beyond the South China Sea [8]. In addition to this, increased interaction of China with the states in the region in terms of financial investments, infrastructural diplomacy and security cooperation has enhanced its geopolitical power that may easily result into dependences which can be used to gain a strategic leverage [2]. Consequently, not only is China re-establishing the Indian Ocean security structure, but it is also threatening the historic hegemony of the regional powers, notably that of India, which is further leading to a high level of great power politics in the Indo-Pacific region. [11].

4. India's Maritime Strategy

The development of Indian maritime strategy has been changing under the influence of the emerging geopolitical challenges and increasing strategic significance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), as it has switched to a more regional-oriented vision to a more holistic approach with the maritime perspective. The key aspect of this policy is that it considers the Indian Ocean as a strategic zone of protecting the national security, economic interests, and regional influence, especially in the process of guaranteeing the safety of critical Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) through which much of Indian trade and supply of energy pass [15], [17]. The maritime vision of India is formulated under the major policy frameworks, which are SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine which is guided by cooperative security, capacity building, and inclusive regional development [19]. Also, India has been working on its naval power through modernization initiative, such as the development of its blue-water navy, the purchase of new submarines and aircraft carriers, and development of maritime domain awareness systems [20].

India is also trying to manage the rising influence of China, and strategic alliances and multilateral interactions, especially on forums such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Indo-Pacific framework, are some other endeavours to balance the rising influence of China and further enhance the establishment of a rules-based order in the sea [24]. In addition, the policy of India incorporates both diplomatic and economic efforts including



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regional connectivity, humanitarian, and disaster relief, and it acts as a net security provider in IOR [14]. All in all, the maritime approach of India represents a multidimensional approach that integrates military readiness, strategic diplomacy and economic involvement to ensure a stable and stable situation in the region and establish itself as a major maritime power in the Indo-Pacific. [11].

5. India's Strategic Response to China

The strategic approach by India to the growing presence of China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is multi-dimensional and incorporates all three aspects of military preparedness, diplomatic relations and economic strategies, in order to protect its national interests and balance of power in the region. On the military platform, India has been speeding up the process of modernization of its navy, expanding its blue-water potential by introducing new submarines, air-carriers, and surveillance into its repertoire and by broadening the number of naval exercises and operations in important maritime areas [20], [17]. At the same time, India has enhanced strategic alliances with other like-minded nations by the provisions of such frameworks as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) in a bid to facilitate a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific and balance the increasing power of China [24], [14].

India has been advancing its SAGAR doctrine, which focuses on regional cooperation, capacity building and security support to smaller littoral states, which places India as a dependable and inclusive partner in the IOR [19]. Moreover, India has also sought other connectivity and infrastructure solutions like the construction of Chabahar Port and participation in regional groups such as Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) as a means of offering viable alternatives to Belt and Road Initiative by the Chinese [12], [16]. Such efforts are also accompanied by the development of better maritime domain awareness, intelligence-sharing arrangements as well as the defence cooperation agreements with regional and global partners, as a sign of the Indian intent to pursue a proactive and layered response to Chinese maritime expansion [11]. Comprehensively, the Indian strategic reaction can be seen as a turn to a more holistic approach to maritime strategy, which is both the combination of hard power, soft power, and multilateral cooperation as a means of resolving the dynamism of the geopolitical situation in the Indian Ocean Region. [18].

6. Geopolitical Implications

The growing maritime rivalry between India and China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has far reaching geopolitical consequences that are transforming the power structures, security framework, and realignment of the strategies in the region. The growing roles of China in the form of the creation of ports, navy, and economic activities are threatening the traditional role of India and provoking the issue of strategic encircling and dominance of key Sea Lines of



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Communication (SLOCs) [13], [18]. This changing competition has led to the evolution of the Indo-Pacific into an important geopolitical construct in which great powers, including the United States, Japan, and Australia, actively participate in a balance game, frequently with India through the strategies of Quad to provide a rules-based maritime order [14], [24].

Meanwhile smaller littoral states within the IOR pursue hedging policies, which allow them to use Indian and Chinese alliances to their advantage, complicating the task of diplomacy in the region [2]. The escalation of the great power struggle also increases the threat of the militarization of the maritime spaces, which may destabilize the region and the freedom of navigation [11]. Moreover, these overlapping geoeconomic projects, including the Belt and Road Initiative of China and the alternative connectivity projects of India, are also indicative of a larger struggle over power, which is not confined to military aspects, but also seeks to include trade, infrastructure, and development collaboration [12]. All in all, the geopolitical consequences of this competition mean that there is a shift towards a multipolar maritime Indian Ocean where strategic competition, cooperation, and interdependence co-exist in the form of the future of regional and global governance.

7. Results and Analysis

This outcome gives the empirical and secondary data analysis of the Indian maritime strategy to counter the growing presence of China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The discussion also revolves around the most important indicators that include port development, naval capabilities, trade routes, strategic alliances, as well as expenditure on defence. The results are represented in the form of organized tables and then analytical interpretation.

7.1 China's Maritime Expansion in the IOR

Table 1: Major Chinese Strategic Port Investments in the Indian Ocean

Port Name	Country	Year Operational	Strategic Importance
Gwadar	Pakistan	2016	Access to Arabian Sea, CPEC hub
Hambantota	Sri Lanka	2017 (lease)	Strategic proximity to India
Djibouti Base	Djibouti	2017	First overseas military base
Kyaukpyu	Myanmar	Ongoing	Energy corridor to Yunnan
Port Sudan	Sudan	Proposed	Red Sea strategic access

Source: UNCTAD (2023), ORF Reports (2024), Chinese BRI Database

The information has shown that China has strategically constructed a chain of ports throughout the Indian Ocean, creating a strategic chain that will increase its reach in terms of logistics as well as military. These are ports which are situated close to key maritime chokepoints implying long-term geopolitical motivation.

7.2 Growth in Chinese Naval Presence



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Table 2: Chinese Naval Deployments in the Indian Ocean (Approx.)

Year	Number of Deployments	Type of Deployment
2010	2–3	Anti-piracy missions
2015	5–6	Escort + surveillance
2020	8–10	Submarines + warships
2024	12+	Continuous presence

Source: IISS Military Balance (2023), Asia Pacific Foundation Reports

The trend in Chinese naval deployments is evident and shows an upward trend implying that it is no longer the occasional presence of the navy in the IOR but a permanent deployment.

7.3 India’s Naval Capability Enhancement

Table 3: Comparison of Naval Strength (India vs China, 2024)

Parameter	India	China
Aircraft Carriers	2	3
Submarines	~16	~60
Naval Personnel	~75,000	~250,000
Blue Water Capability	Moderate–High	High

Source: SIPRI (2024), IISS Military Balance (2023)

China has far more in terms of naval resources than India; India has a geographical advantage and a familiarity with operations in the region.

7.4 Defence Expenditure Trends

Table 4: Defence Spending (USD Billion)

Year	India	China
2020	72.9	252
2021	76.6	270
2022	81.4	292
2023	83.6	296

Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database (2024)

The Chinese defence spending is approximately 3-4 times of the Indian, so it can develop its navy faster and deploy it abroad.

7.5 Trade Dependence on Indian Ocean Routes

Table 5: Share of Trade via Indian Ocean Routes

Country	% of Trade via IOR
India	~95%
China	~80%



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Japan	~90%
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Source: World Bank (2023), UNCTAD Maritime Transport Review

Indigenous maritime security is a major challenge to both India and China, since they both rely heavily on the Indian Ocean trade routes.

7.6 India's Strategic Partnerships

Table 6: Key Strategic Maritime Partnerships

Partner Country	Type of Cooperation
USA	Naval exercises (Malabar)
Japan	Indo-Pacific cooperation
Australia	QUAD alliance
France	Indian Ocean security
Sri Lanka	Coastal security

Source: Ministry of External Affairs (India), ORF Reports (2024)

India has enhanced its diplomatic and defensive relations to subvert the influence of China especially under the QUAD framework.

7.7 Maritime Security Initiatives

Table 7: India's Key Maritime Initiatives

Initiative	Objective
SAGAR	Regional security cooperation
IPOI	Indo-Pacific governance
IFC-IOR	Maritime domain awareness
Coastal Radar Network	Surveillance system

Source: Indian Navy Reports, Ministry of Defence (2024)

The policies of India are aimed at mutual security and regional interaction, unlike the policy of aggressive expansion employed by China.

The final study results include the fact that China has already developed a straddling maritime network throughout the Indian Ocean Region, which is backed by vast marine port infrastructure and increasing naval deployment suggesting the long-term military and geopolitical plans. India, in turn, is pursuing a multi-dimensional approach, which incorporates the reinforcement of the alliances, the development of the navy, and the increase in the scope of the diplomatic contact with the neighbourhood and international partners. Nonetheless, there is a notable contrasting aspect of military dominance between the two nations, whereby China has more naval capacity and military resources. All these dynamics are leading to a general speculation that the Indian Ocean Region is increasingly becoming a zone of high strategic rivalry, as power projection, economic and security concerns are determining the regional order. The findings clearly explain



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that the growing Chinese maritime presence is transforming the Indian Ocean Region geopolitical landscape. The response by India is both strategic and multi-dimensional but it is limited by the lack of resources and needs an additional boost in the form of technological development, regional coalition, and policy development..

8. Conclusion

The study demonstrates the growing maritime activities of China in the Indian Ocean Region have remarkably changed the strategic environment of the region, making geopolitical rivalry greater and threatening the traditional dominance of India. China has consolidated its status as a big maritime player in the IOR through its port network, naval build-ups and economic projects. India has responded to this by adopting a long-term policy of naval modernization, alliance, and bilateral cooperation to protect its interests and balance of power in the region.

Nevertheless, the current capability gap and changing geopolitical complexities underscore the need to have India enhance more on its maritime capabilities and bolster multilateral engagements. Finally, a balanced creation between a competitive and co-operative approach will help determine the future stability of the Indian Ocean Region by attaining security, freedom of navigation and sustainable development of the region..

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