

China's Anti-Piracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden and Beyond: Implications for India

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Abstract

Since 2008, China has been conducting anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden marking an inflection point in its increasing maritime interest and footprint in the Indian Ocean rim. This also marks a significant shift in its naval strategy: from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean and from limited coastal-defence focus to holistic maritime governance partnerships. While Chinese naval missions may have contributed to regional maritime security, they have also raised critical concerns amongst major stakeholders in the peace and security of the Indian Ocean region. This is especially true of India that has become increasingly conscious of the disruptive nature of China's expanding naval footprint in its immediate maritime periphery. In this fast-changing strategic landscape, this article explores into the magnitude and motivations of China's deployment of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) starting from 2008 in the Gulf of Aden and then expanding its maritime engagements way beyond this limited region and limited issue of piracy. It elucidates various operational aspects of China's missions and broader geopolitical implications of China's infrastructure building. From there, it extracts likely potential challenges that this entails for India's maritime interests as also what has been India's response in ensuring its regional maritime stability and security.

Introduction

On 15 January 2025, the Chinese embassy in Mogadishu announced the release of China's fishing trawler and its 18 crew members that were hijacked off the coast of Somalia and kept in Somalia's northeast Xaafuum district for

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over ten weeks. Though it made no mention of ransom, earlier reports had indicated to pirates rejecting their offer of \$1 million and demanded \$10 million. In 2021 as well, the Nigerian military had brokered release of another Chinese vessel and its crew for \$300,000.¹ Though, for over a decade, all incidents of hijacking in Gulf of Aden are contained to mostly single digit per annum and have remained very low compared to their peak of 212 incidents recorded for 2011, yet, experts believe Chinese nationals and ships are becoming increasingly “prime targets of such crimes because they are now associated with wealth and financial assets.”² Equally important is the fact that as the world’s largest trading and shipbuilding nation, with world’s largest distant water fishing fleet (estimated at a whopping 17,000 vessels), China’s exponentially growing presence in the Indian Ocean have “blurred the lines between economic enterprise and state ambitions” resulting in “increasing the number of bases it maintains across the region in Cambodia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates, and elsewhere” which also makes its vessels not just lucrative but likely target for pirates.³

The problem of piracy in the Gulf of Aden — located between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa that serves as a critical maritime corridor linking the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal — had peaked between 2005 and 2012 disrupting global shipping and prompting the United Nations to authorise international naval interventions. Among the nations responding to the crisis, China’s deployment of the PLAN since December 2008 marked a pivotal moment for the Indian Ocean as also for China’s naval strategy, reflecting a new chapter in Beijing’s global maritime governance ambitions. This has seen China directly or indirectly involved in 17 ports in the Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) with 13 of these, from Gwadar in Pakistan to

1 Nyabiage, Jevans. (2025). Chinese fishing crew safe after hijack but is piracy returning to Gulf of Aden?, *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3294808/chinese-fishing-crew-safe-after-hijack-piracy-returning-gulf-aden>

2 Ibid.; Bentham, Jonathan and Louis Bearn. (2025). “China’s outsized advantage in its critical maritime infrastructure protection”, *Charting China*, London: International Institute of Strategic Studies (accessed on 21 March 2025), <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/charting-china/2025/03/chinas-outsized-advantage-in-its-critical-maritime-infrastructure-protection/>

3 Dutton, Peter Alan. (2023). “Law, Order, and Maritime (In)Stability”, in Catherine L. Grant et al., *The New Age of Naval Power in the Indo-Pacific: Strategy, Order, and Regional Security*, Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, p. 61; Odakkal, Comde Johnson. (2025). “Silent Invasion: China’s fishing fleet is militarising the Indian Ocean”, *The Sunday Guardian* (New Delhi) (accessed on 21 March 2025), <https://sundayguardianlive.com/top-five/silent-invasion-chinas-fishing-fleet-is-militarising-the-indian-ocean>

Lamu in Kenya, built by Chinese companies.⁴ This makes China the most influential new player in the IOR. And, given India's complex equations with Beijing, this new era of China's Indian Ocean presence, sustained through its expanding naval presence, has triggered serious strategic concerns in New Delhi.⁵ Having earlier witnessed Soviet-American naval contestations in this region, India views expansion of Chinese naval operations in this region, including the establishment of a military base in Djibouti and lease of other port facilities, as disrupting the regional maritime strategic balance that negatively impacts India's maritime security.

It is in this fast-changing landscape of China's Gulf of Aden deployment, leading to its ever increasing presence in the Indian Ocean, that this paper examines the genesis of and motivations behind China's anti-piracy operations triggering an ever expanding naval presence by building partnerships across this water body. This is done from perspective of explicating its implications for India's maritime interests and thereby elucidating India's strategic choices and regional initiatives.

Piracy, Response and China's Motivations

This story unfolds from the collapse of the Somali government in 1991, making Somali piracy in the Gulf of Aden a major security threat to sea-faring nations in this region, especially so from the early 2000s.⁶ What had defied the known conventional anti-piracy strategies of major naval powers was the fact that, for the first time, it had presented an unique genre of land-based piracy (with onshore support systems) giving pirates far greater leverage in holding their hostages and bargaining hard with their countries and companies.⁷ These heavily armed pirate groups were targeting merchant vessels and demanding millions of dollars in ransom. This new breed of pirates which now included foot soldiers, seamen, financiers, negotiators and other suppliers with crime

4 Paul, Joshy M. (2025). *China's Air Power and Maritime Strategies towards the Indian Ocean Region*, New York: Routledge, p.2.

5 Goud, R. Sidda. (2024). *China in the Indian Ocean Region: India's Security Challenges*. (Noida, UP: Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd., p.6.

6 Acharya, Avidit, Robin Harding and J. Andrew Harris. (2020). "Security in the absence of a state: Traditional authority, livestock trading, and maritime piracy in northern Somalia," *Theoretical Politics*, Vol.32(4), p.503.

7 Percy, Sarah and Anja Shorland. (2011). "The Business of Piracy in Somalia", *DIW Berlin Discussion Papers No. 1033*, Berlin: German Institute for Economic Research, p.28.

syndicates buying investor shares of \$50,000 or more, expecting 20-fold returns in ransom against hostages.⁸ In 2008, the hijacking of a Saudi oil tanker, the MV Sirius Star, carrying crude worth over \$100 million had made global headlines attracting worldwide attention to the magnitude and severity of this crisis, leading to the UN Security Council adopting “a series of resolutions to construct the legal edifice for the twenty-first century’s global war on piracy.”⁹

Given the dysfunctional state of Somalia during 2005-2012 and explosive rise in piracy in the Gulf of Aden, the UN Security Council had begun action with Resolution 1816 of 2008 extending article 101 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to “encompass territorial waters of Somalia” thereby creating novel cooperative maritime governance norms that was to make “traditional adversaries” (major trading nations) come together in creating “multinational expeditionary counter-piracy operations” for the western Indian Ocean.¹⁰ The follow-up UNSC Resolution 1851 (of 2008) further expanded such international naval operations to include action on Somali land as well. This mandate by the UNSC was utilised in launching naval coalitions such as the U.S.-led Combined Task Force 151 (CTF-151), the European Union Naval Force’s Operation Atalanta, and NATO’s Operation Ocean Shield.¹¹ Several countries including China, Japan, India, and Russia, also dispatched warships to protect their ships traversing these routes.

As regards rising China’s motivations to deploy the PLAN in the Gulf of Aden, this had presented itself as an unexpected opportunity for its long-standing ambitions. These had been publicly articulated since mid-1980s starting with China’s former Vice Minister for Communications, Pan Qi, publishing an article in the *Beijing Review* magazine.¹² As evidenced by

8 Roth, Michel P. (2017). *Global Organized Crime: A 21st Century Approach*, New York: Taylor & Francis, p.428.

9 Dua, Jatin. (2019). *Captured at Sea: Piracy and Protection in the Indian Ocean*. Oakland, Cal: University of California Press, p.98.

10 McCabe, Robert C. (2018). *Modern Maritime Piracy: Genesis, Evolution and Responses*. New York: Routledge, p. 26.

11 Singh, Swaran. (2021). “India’s Approach to Security Challenges in the Indian Ocean Region”, in Cuiping Zhu, *Annual report on the Development of the Indian Ocean Region* (2019), Yunnan (China): Research Institute for Indian Ocean Economies, p.93.

12 Lintner, Bertie. (2019). *The Costliest Pearl: China’s Struggle for India’s Ocean*. London: C. Hurst & Co (Publishers) Ltd., p.3.

China's naval operations in the Western Indian Ocean since 2008 and its engagement with various littoral nations, it was reflective of this deeper strategic thinking. Accordingly, China's PLAN deployments since 2008 were not limited to seeking redressal from this piracy problem alone. This is showcased by China's build-up of various strategic assets and partnerships across this rim which have collectively outclassed the old 'String of Pearls' theory by Booz Allen Hamilton, or the 'Malacca dilemma' thesis of President Hu Jintao.¹³ Even President Xi Jinping's Maritime Silk Road vision only partly covers all of PLAN's multifaceted maritime initiatives, making China an emerging maritime power to reckon with. In short, the triggers or motivations for China's expanding maritime engagements from the Gulf of Aden to the larger Indian Ocean Region include the following:

- (i) *Economic Interests*: First and foremost, China's \$20 trillion economy remains undergirded by it emerging as the world's largest trading nation underpinning its stakes in the safe and free access to sea lanes as also its 'security dilemma' vis-a-vis the United States.¹⁴ For the Indian Ocean Region especially, the engine of China's growth story — over 80% of its crude oil imports transit through the Indian Ocean — makes piracy in the Gulf of Aden a critical impediment for sustaining its energy security.¹⁵ China's expanding economic engagement therefore remain both the cause as also the consequence of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with its Maritime Silk Road impelling its ever greater maritime footprint.
- (ii) *Military Modernisation*: China's economic rise has both necessitated as also enabled and encouraged PLAN's modernisation thus expanding sea-faring missions into the Indian Ocean Region. These have since provided the Chinese Navy with valuable operational experience and hydrographic data, facilitating its transformation into

13 Suri, Gopal. (2016). *China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road: Old String with New Pearls?*, Vivekananda International Foundation Occasional Paper, New Delhi, pp.2-3.

14 Jash, Amrita. (2020). "The Rising Tide of China in the Indian Ocean Region and India: Strategic Interests and Security Concerns", in R. Sidda Goud and Manisha Mookerjee (eds.), *China in Indian Ocean Region*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers Pvt.Ltd., p. 259.

15 Tirziu, Aleksandar Gadzala. (2024), "China's strategic evolution in the Middle East: From oil to security". 4 July (accessed on 10 March 2025), <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/china-middle-east-security/>

a blue-water navy.¹⁶ For several decades China's Navy had remained a dignified coast guard and then focused largely on the Pacific Ocean only. However, starting from the early 1990s, it has revealed its blue water ambitions.¹⁷ But, till the Gulf of Aden provided it convincing pretext, China's operational outreach had remained largely eastwards into the Pacific Ocean with its operations and initiatives in the Indian Ocean being of more recent origin.¹⁸

(iii) *Diplomatic Significance*: With much of the Western world projecting rising China as a systemic challenge, successive US Presidents since President Obama's 'pivot' to Asia, have seen China trying to contest its recent 'wolf-warrior' diplomacy image with its peace-maker narrative and diplomatic initiatives.¹⁹ This is where participating in international anti-piracy networks were seen in Beijing as an opportunity to project itself as a responsible global conflict mediator.²⁰ This also coincided with China's growing interest in UN Peacekeeping operations followed by China lately brokering peace first between Saudi Arabia and Iran and then between Saudi Arabia and Israel.²¹

(iv) *Geopolitical Expansion*: By February 2025, China's 47th Naval Escort Task Force mission in the Gulf of Aden, that took over from its

16 McDevitt, Rear Admiral Michael A. (2020), "China's Navy Will Be the World's Largest Navy 2035", *Proceedings*, Vol. 146, U.S. Naval Institute (accessed on 18 March 2025), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2020/february/chinas-navy-will-be-worlds-largest-2035>

17 Su, Yu-ping. (2025). *China Maritime Force-Navy, Coast Guard, MSA and Maritime Militia*, https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/China_Maritime_Force_Navy_Coast_Guard_MS/Jk3yEAAAQ-BAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=Chinese+navy+a+dignified+coast+guard&pg=PA97&printsec=front-cover, p.97.

18 Press Trust of India. (2024). "Indian Ocean poised to see 'disruptive' changes: Jaishankar", *The Indian Express*, 3 August, (New Delhi), (accessed on 12 March 2025), <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/indian-ocean-poised-to-see-disruptive-changes-jaishankar-9491913/>

19 Jost, Tyler. (2024). "Have China's Wolf Warriors Gone Extinct?", *Foreign Affairs* (New York), 27 June, (accessed on 15 March 2025), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/have-chinas-wolf-warriors-gone-extinct>

20 Legarda, Helena. (2018). "China as a conflict mediator", Mercator Institute for China Studies, 22 Aug (accessed on 12 March 2025), <https://merics.org/en/comment/china-conflict-mediator>

21 Mishra, Anant and Christian Kaunert, "In the Middle East, China presents itself as a constructive actor", *The Strategist* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Initiative), 17 June (accessed on 15 March 2025), <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/in-the-middle-east-china-presents-itself-as-a-constructive-actor/>

46th Task Force in December, had already completed 1,658 escorts.²² For China, these Gulf of Aden missions have set a historic precedent for its future overseas military engagements, culminating with China establishing its first, not the last, overseas naval base in Djibouti since August 2017.²³ This base is now home to its forces including marine and special forces and it is equipped with a heliport which can be used for drones as well, plus a 660 meter-long pier and an underground facility for cyber and electronic warfare that represent the new genre of China's geopolitical footprint in the Indian Ocean region.²⁴

China's Operations and Infrastructure

Entering as a legitimate player in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden from 2008, in 2017, China's Djibouti naval base has come to be the new epicentre for staging its naval operations across eastern Africa, the Middle East and the Arabian and Red Sea maritime theatres. These naval operations and training drills typically consist of: (a) guided-missile destroyer (Type 052C/D), (b) guided-missile frigate (Type 054A Jiangkai II), and (c) replenishment ships for its extended operations into the larger Indian Ocean. China's warships are often equipped with helicopters, special forces teams, and other advanced surveillance systems. China's rules of engagement in these operations emphasise on deterrence, with forces mostly conducting convoy escorts, intelligence gathering, and rescue missions. But equally interesting are the regular visits of its research vessels and underwater unmanned vehicles (UUVs) that remain busy familiarising with the sea-bed topography and terrain while collecting hydrographic data for use in its potential naval operations. All this demonstrates how China's setting of its naval infrastructure at Djibouti has been part of its larger ambition for sustained long-term deployments, accompanied by refuelling and resupply operations that promise to expand its geopolitical influence in the Indian Ocean region.

22 Gao, Dezheng and Ren Ke. (2025). "47th Chinese naval escort task force completes multiple escort tasks". Ministry of National Defence (People's Republic of China), 6 February (accessed on 9 March 2025), http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16368022.html

23 Cabestan, Jean-Pierre. (2020). "China's Djibouti naval base increasing its power", *East Asia Forum*, 16 May (accessed on 18 March 2025), <https://eastasiaforum.org/2020/05/16/chinas-djibouti-naval-base-increasing-its-power/>

24 Ibid.

Second, the Djibouti naval base also represents a shift in its long-standing policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations.²⁵ To begin with, soon after China set up its naval base, Djibouti unilaterally terminated DP World's 25-year concession of 2004 for its Doraleh Container Terminal and nationalised it, in spite of this managing company holding a 33 per cent stake in that terminal. This was not all. Soon, this Terminal was handed over to China Merchants Port Holdings which had held some unspecified minority stake in that Terminal.²⁶ Among others, China's increasing scale of investments under BRI have seen it influencing domestic dynamics of recipient nations across the region. Africa, which accounts for maximum number of coups since the 1950s i.e. 106 of the 214 globally, remains especially vulnerable. So much so that the final declaration of the 2024 China-Africa Cooperation summit had to formally record that China will not interfere in African states' internal affairs or impose any political conditions on its assistance.²⁷ Nevertheless, at the same summit China also pledged to invite 7,500 young African military personnel plus 1,000 political party leaders for training in China in the next three years.²⁸ In 2022, the Nyerere Leadership School in Tanzania was the first such school in Africa that was set up, supported and modelled after the Chinese Communist Party's Central Party School in Beijing.

Examples of other similar interference in other smaller island states of the Indian Ocean remain equally interesting and instructive.²⁹ This is part of China's larger global vision where it today operates or has ownership of 91 active port projects across the globe "where military use is a possibility, providing it foothold on every continent except Antarctica."³⁰ In this region immediate to the Gulf of Aden, i.e. from East Africa to South Asia, China

25 Chaziza, Mordechai. (2018). *China's Military Base in Djibouti*, Ramat Gan, Israel: The Begin Sadat Centre for Strategic Studies, p.11.

26 Kuo, Mercy A. (2019). "China in Djibouti: The Power of Ports", *The Diplomat*, 25 March (accessed on 20 March 2025), <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/china-in-djibouti-the-power-of-ports/>

27 Ping, Jonathan and Joel Odota. (2004). "Will China Intervene Directly to Protect its Investments in Africa?", *War on Rocks*, 25 October (accessed on 12 March 2025), <https://warontherocks.com/2024/10/will-china-intervene-directly-to-protect-its-investments-in-africa/>

28 Ibid.

29 for details see Singh, Swaran. (2024). "China's inroads into India's Neighbouring Island Nations: Initiatives and Implications", *Journal of Indian Ocean Studies*, Vol.32, No. 2 (May-August), pp.?-.

30 Ronde, Daniel F. And Austin Hardman and Clara Benin. (2024). "Responding to China's Growing Influence in Ports of the Global South", Washington DC: Centre for Security and International Studies, 30 October (accessed on 15 March 2025), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/responding-chinas-growing-influence-ports-global-south>

has built from the scratch new port terminals at 21 ports making it the prima dona of regional maritime engagements.³¹ This has ensured China's sustained naval operations in the Indian Ocean waters and has seen it regularly deploy its destroyers, submarines, corvettes. Potentially, China could even spare one aircraft carrier task force for its Indian Ocean operations not just for training its navy—for non-traditional exigencies—but also to send political signals to its imagined adversaries like the United States or India.³²

Security Implications for India

Given the nature of India-China relations, PLAN's growing naval capabilities in the Indian Ocean are bound to be viewed as a matter of concern for India. China's Djibouti naval base, that presents China's permanent foothold near India's western maritime approaches, is not the only Chinese asset that concerns India. This, of course, has majorly reinforced the ongoing debates about China going way beyond its conventional 'String of Pearls' strategy, where it now has access to several strategic ports across the Indian Ocean rim. Seen in terms of China's encirclement of India, this surely presents a serious challenge for India's maritime manoeuvrability and even credibility amongst its immediate neighbours.³³ The most important among these ports that have made India's Indian Ocean engagements increasingly China-centric include the following:

- *Gwadar Port* (Pakistan) – As part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor — that China celebrates as the flagship project of its BRI with its most trusted ally — Gwadar port is the “most prized port” expected “to open up an energy corridor from Central Asia and the Gulf across Pakistan to Western China” resolving China's ‘Malacca dilemma’ by providing an alternative access route to the Gulf oil.³⁴

31 For details on these 21 ports see Reddy, Rahul Karan. (2022). *China in the Indian Ocean: Ports and Bases*, New Delhi: Organization for Research on China and Asia, 6 July (accessed on 15 March 2025), <https://orcasia.org/article/296/china-in-the-indian-ocean-region>

32 Paul, Joshy M. (2021). “China's Naval Strategy towards the Indian Ocean under Xi Jinping”, *Air Power Journal*, Vol. 16, No.4 (Winter: October-December), p.112.

33 Karim, Mohamad Aminul. (2021). *Is China Encircling India?* Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, p.32.

34 Fazl-e-Haider, Syed. (2023). Will Pakistan's Gwadar port resolve china's Malacca dilemma?, ThinkChina, 30 November (accessed on 15 March 2025), <https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/will-pakistans-gwadar-port-resolve-chinas-malacca-dilemma>

India's massive investments in Iran's Chabahar port were once "seen as a counter to China's String of Pearls" and so especially to China's Gwadar port, but no more.³⁵ Not only China's investments in Chabahar threaten to replace India but President Trump's recent executive orders on Chabahar have further "reset the region's balance of power to India's detriment and in China's favour."³⁶

- *Hambantota Port* (Sri Lanka) – Leased in 2017 to China for 99 years, it stands in the mid-point of world's busiest sea lanes linking energy rich West Asia to tiger economies of East Asia. Given visits of Chinese submarines and other ships this has also raised the spectre about its potential military use by PLAN. Sri Lanka's near-collapse during 2022 had seen India funnel \$4 billion of assistance to tip the balance but the coming of Marxist-leaning President Anura Kumara Disسانayake have reversed the tables with him agreeing to China now setting up \$3.7 billion oil refinery in addition to its \$4.5 billion already invested in Hambantota region's infrastructure.³⁷
- *Kyaukpyu Port* (Myanmar) – Having failed to obtain Sonadia Port from Bangladesh that China had sought since 2006³⁸, China, in 2018, proposed a \$10 billion investment for Myanmar's Kyaukpyu port and its adjacent SEZ which is the strategic terminus for its \$1.5 billion oil pipeline from Kunming in Yunnan.³⁹ This not only allows China an eye on India's East coast but is especially close to India's under-construction naval base, INS *Versha*, intended to host India's nuclear

35 Seli, Yesli. (2024). "Why India's takeover of Chabahar port is a big deal", *The New Indian Express* (Hyderabad), 19 May (accessed on 23 March 2025), <https://www.newindianexpress.com/explainers/2024/May/19/why-indias-takeover-of-chabahar-port-is-a-big-deal>

36 Gul, Haris. (2025). "Chabahar: Where Trump is hurting India and helping China", *Asia Times* (Hong Kong), 22 February (accessed on 18 March 2025), <https://asiatimes.com/2025/02/chabahar-where-trump-is-hurting-india-and-helping-china/>

37 ET Online. (2025), "China's new deal with Sri Lanka: Should it worry India?", *The Economic Times*, 17 January (accessed on 15 March 2025), <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/chinas-new-deal-with-sri-lanka-should-it-worry-india/articleshow/117336416.cms?from=mdr>

38 Ramachandran, Sudha. (2020). "Bangladesh Buries the Sonadia Deep-Sea Port Project", *The Diplomat*, 12 October (accessed on 15 March 2025), <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/bangladesh-buries-the-sonadia-deep-sea-port-project/>

39 Poling, Gregory B. (2018). "Kyaukpyu: Connecting China to the Indian Ocean", CSIS Briefs, Washington DC, March (accessed on 18 March 2025), https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180717_Poling_Kyaukpyu.pdf

attack and ballistic missile submarines.⁴⁰ In view of internal instability however — with Myanmar's largest insurgent group, the Arakan Army, capturing 14 of 17 towns of Rakhine State including the *junta*'s Western Command headquarters and seizing most of Chinese projects — the progress here now stands in suspended animation.⁴¹

- *Intelligence & Surveillance*: China has used this expanding access to regional port facilities for enhancing its ability to conduct intelligence gathering and data collection. PLAN warships and submarines transiting the region also collect information on Indian naval movements and missile tests thereby raising concerns about espionage. For instance, three Chinese vessels, Xiang Wang 03, Zhong Shan Da Xue, and Yang Wang 7, were last year seen regularly sailing near areas where India was to carry out some underwater drills.⁴² This when Sri Lanka has, on request from India and the United States, banned China's research vessels from anchoring in its ports.⁴³

India Blending Competition and Cooperation

India's naval doctrine of 2004, updated in 2015, highlights the concept of India being the 'net security provider' thereby proposing a pro-active approach for "enhancing net security in India's areas of maritime interest" with naval strategy evolving from 'sea denial' to 'sea control', that pre-supposed blending competition and cooperation.⁴⁴ More specifically, India has

40 Shrotryia, Ujjwal. (2024). "China's New Port In Myanmar Is Uncomfortably Close To India's Future Nuclear Submarine Base", *Swarajya*, 05 January (accessed on 19 March 2025), <https://swarajyamag.com/world/chinas-new-port-in-myanmar-is-uncomfortably-close-to-indias-future-nuclear-submarine-base>

41 Kavi, Maung. (2025). "Myanmar Junta Pushes Key Chinese Projects in Rakhine Despite Looming AA Threat", *The Irrawaddy* (Yangon), 16 January (accessed on 15 March, 2025), <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/myanmar-china-watch/myanmar-junta-pushes-key-chinese-projects-in-rakhine-despite-looming-aa-threat.html>

42 Saha, Bidisha. (2024). "Explained: Why Chinese ships loitering in Indian Ocean region", *India Today* (New Delhi), 21 August (accessed on 09 March 2025), <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/chinese-ships-in-india-ocean-region-ladakh-standoff-india-china-relations-2585927-2024-08-21>

43 Behera, Ajay Darshan. (2025). "Sri Lanka's Dilemmas Over Chinese 'Research' Vessels", *The Diplomat*, 08 January (accessed on 09 March 2025), <https://thediplomat.com/2025/01/sri-lankas-dilemmas-over-chinese-research-vessels/>

44 Dutta, Sayesha, and Suvolaxmi Dutta Choudhury. (2024). "Balancing Tides: India's Competition with China for Dominance of the Indian Ocean", Vancouver: Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 24 April (accessed on 24 March 2025), <https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/balancing-tides-indias-competition-china-dominance-indian>

responded to China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean with increased naval deployments plus by recasting of its regional maritime partnerships with its immediate Indian Ocean neighbours as well as major powers. Amongst others, India's recent initiatives to address this emerging China challenge in the Indian Ocean include the following:

- *Mission SAGAR* (Security and Growth for All in the Region): This vision was outlined in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's March 2015 visit to Mauritius, and during his second visit to Mauritius during March 2025 saw him expand this vision to MAHASAGAR initiative by locating India's maritime engagement with immediate island nations in the larger frame of the Global South.⁴⁵ The new acronym is called Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions (MAHASAGAR).
- *Naval Modernisation* – India is also expanding its blue-water capabilities that have seen the commissioning of aircraft carriers like INS Vikrant and nuclear submarines INS *Arihant* and INS *Arighaat* and increasing submarine patrols. The 33 new ships and seven new submarines, that is a total of 40 launched in the last decade, 39 of these having been built in India. On 15 January 2025, the Prime Minister commissioned three frontline naval combatants — INS *Surat*, INS *Nilgiri*, and INS *Vaghsheer* — showcasing India “becoming one of the leaders in defence manufacturing and maritime security.”⁴⁶
- *Quad and Indo-Pacific Strategy* – The return of President Donald Trump to White House in January 2025 saw focus returning to China and the Indo-Pacific region. The first multilateral meeting of Secretary of State Marco Rubio was his hosting of the Quad Foreign Ministers meeting that took place within hours of the inauguration. Indeed, the Philippines has already invited India to join ‘Squad’ i.e. another spinoff group for military cooperation, intel-sharing and joint exercises in the

45 Bhaumik, Anirban. (2025). “India upgrades SAGAR doctrine to MAHASAGAR, steps up maritime security ties with Mauritius to counter China's Indian Ocean forays”, *Deccan Herald* (Hyderabad), 12 March (accessed on 21 March 2025), <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/india-upgrades-sagar-doctrine-to-mahasagar-steps-up-maritime-security-ties-with-mauritius-to-counter-chinas-indian-ocean-forays-3443307>

46 Sagar, Pradip R. (2025). “How India just took three big leaps towards global maritime dominance”, *India Today* (New Delhi), 16 January (accessed on 21 March 2025), <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/how-india-just-took-three-big-leaps-towards-global-maritime-dominance-2665726-2025-01-16>

South China Sea comprising of the Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and United States.⁴⁷ India, on 19 March 2025, hosted a meeting of top defence officials of Quad which met on 19 March 2025 in New Delhi and reiterated their concerns about “China’s assertive behaviour.”⁴⁸ India will be hosting the Quad summit later this year keeping the focus on India’s maritime concerns.

Without doubt, India’s participation in Quadrilateral Security Framework has catapulted India’s leverage in addressing their shared China challenge. This trend of India further strengthening cooperation with the U.S., Japan, Australia and other friendly European nations to counterbalance China’s influence in the Indian Ocean is likely to gather momentum in the coming times that are expected to witness the return of US-China brinkmanship. While India remains wary of China’s maritime expansion in its immediate Indian Ocean periphery, it also remains open to engaging China in a pragmatic naval cooperation in addressing the piracy problem. Indian and Chinese warships have participated in multilateral anti-piracy coordination, and both nations also remain engaged in BRICS and SCO military exercises and security dialogues. However, their strategic mistrust persists and has indeed enhanced following their June 2020 tensions along the Line of Actual Control though relations have experienced a thaw and normalcy has since been revived with both sides bracing to deal with President Trump’s tariff blitzkrieg. This is already seeing New Delhi “relaxing Chinese FDI” terms for a start.⁴⁹

The Way Forward

President Donald Trump’s tectonic policy shifts in disengaging with several multilateral arrangements and norms that have undergirded United States

47 Maitem, Jeoffrey. (2025). “Philippines aims to expand ‘Squad’ grouping by adding India, South Korea to counter China”, *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), 21 March (accessed on 23 March 2025). <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3303324/philippines-aims-expand-squad-grouping-adding-india-south-korea-counter-china>

48 Divya A. (2025). “China presence in Indo-Pacific region is concerning, say Quad defence officers”, *The Indian Express* (New Delhi), 20 March (accessed on 23 March 2025), <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/china-presence-in-indo-pacific-region-is-concerning-say-quad-defence-officers-9895557/>

49 Singh, Sandeep, and Anil Sasi. (2025). “US tariffs looming, India looks at easing non-trade barriers, relaxing Chinese FDI”, *The Indian Express* (New Delh), p.1. <https://indianexpress.com/article/business/economy/us-tariffs-looming-india-looks-at-easing-non-trade-barriers-relaxing-chinese-fdi-9902293/>

global leadership for over a century and his preoccupation with raising tariffs and deporting illegal immigrants has created new grounds for New Delhi and Beijing to explore alternative choices for their relationship. But their mistrust is too deep-rooted and continues to persist. So even if both sides may indicate a new start towards exploring partnerships both believe in keeping the powder dry. India remains committed to protecting its critical maritime interest which demand effectively counterbalancing China's growing naval presence in India's periphery which now extends to much larger maritime geographies of the Indian Ocean Region. So even the best scenario of their working together will assume both sides negotiating from position of strength which calls for multi-pronged strategy that must include:

1. *Strengthening Naval Capabilities* – Continuously investing in aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, and unmanned surveillance systems to maintain regional superiority.
2. *Enhancing Regional Partnerships*—Continuously deepening of maritime partnerships with Indian Ocean states, particularly immediate neighbours like Sri Lanka, Seychelles, Mauritius, and the Maldives.
3. *Increasing Maritime Domain Awareness* – Rising India needs to expand its maritime consciousness as well as capabilities enabled by prompt policy making and building real-time surveillance capabilities through satellite networks and partnerships.
4. *Leveraging Strategic Alliances* – Today, no nation can harness its opportunity or redress its challenges without building partnerships. Here, India has to fine tune its participation in relevant forums engaging all sides including the Chinese.
5. *Engaging China Diplomatically* – While maintaining deterrence, India must continuously stay engaged with Beijing in starting a new chapter in their confidence-building measures to prevent confrontations including in the Indian Ocean rim.

Indeed, distant Indian Ocean theatres can be useful testing grounds of their working together in building mutual trust. In this, China's anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden have since 2008 heralded a new chapter in India-China cooperation and contestation that has significantly altered the strategic maritime landscape for New Delhi. In April 2017, for example, Indian and Chinese navies had, in a joint operation in the Gulf of Aden,

rescued a merchant vessel OS 35 along with its 19 Filipino crew members.⁵⁰ But only four months later, China was to inaugurate its Djibouti naval base that symbolised China's growing maritime footprint and further reinforcing the 'String of Pearls' prognosis, posing long-term challenges to several stakeholders in the Indian Ocean and being seen as against India's maritime interests. Emerging India today must respond by exploring partnerships with all, while recasting its maritime vision, strengthening its naval capabilities, enhancing its regional partnerships, while leveraging its strategic alliances to counterbalance China's ever-expanding footprint in the Indian Ocean region. While cooperation in multilateral forums remains important, India must remain vigilant to safeguard its maritime security at its core.

50 Press Trust of India. (2017). "Indian, Chinese navies rescue merchant ship in Gulf of Aden", *The Indian Express* (New Delhi), 09 April (accessed on 24 March 2025), <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/indian-chinese-navies-rescue-merchant-ship-in-gulf-of-aden-4606616/>