

China's Inroads into India's Neighbouring Island Nations: Initiatives and Implications

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China seems to have taken the famous naval adage to heart: “Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia. This ocean will be the key to the seven seas in the 21st Century. The destiny of the world will be decided on this water.”¹ But China’s forays into Indian Ocean remains an old story of the yore even though this has added to India’s anxieties regarding China’s expanding footprint and global ambitions.² Since early 1990s, China’s interest in Indian Ocean has resulted in its intensifying engagement with Indian Ocean littoral highlighted by its major investments in Hambantota, Gwadar, Kyaukphyu, Djibouti and so on. What is novel and freshly intriguing is how China has lately entrenched itself into the domestic politics of India’s immediate neighbours and created its local constituencies making local regimes equally, if not more, enthusiastic in cultivating China. What is especially disconcerting is how some of the leaders in these neighbouring nations of India have sought to present their friendship with China as their counterweight vis-a-vis India which needs to be examined to ensure appropriate course correction in India’s engagement with these nations.

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- 1 Sana Hashmi. (2024). “China’s growing influence in Indian Ocean is worrying: It harms the regionals stability”, *The Print*, 27 March, <https://theprint.in/opinion/eye-on-china/chinas-growing-influence-in-indian-ocean-is-worrying-it-harms-the-regions-stability/2017049/>
 - 2 Jonathan Holslag. (2015). “The reluctant pretender: China’s evolving presence in the Indian Ocean”, in Jivanta Schottli (ed.), *Power, Politics and Maritime Governance in the Indian Ocean*, New York: Routledge, p. 45.

This article, however, limits its scope to examining such trends only in India's immediate island nations amongst its maritime neighbours. This is where India's increasing maritime focus has begun to encounter such pro-China impulses amongst these nations' power elites and regimes holding India's engagement with the Indian Ocean littoral hostage to the complicated nature of India-China equations. Amongst these, apart from the much hyped case of Maldives, which earlier this year saw President Mohamed Muizzu coming to power on his 'India out' slogan and simultaneously cozying up to China with his maiden foreign visit to Beijing and signing of MoU, among others, on their defence, marine and maritime cooperation promising access to Chinese ships in its ports and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), Sri Lanka has come to be yet another case which is lately seen wavering on once again granting Chinese research vessels access to its EEZ and ports. China indeed has been warming up to all these six island nations — namely Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius,

Seychelles, Madagascar and Comoros—that comprise India's maritime periphery and today it is China, and not India or US, UK, France that alone has diplomatic missions in all these six island nations. To underline its advantage, China can also boast of not having any territorial disputes or imperial legacies with any of these nations and how its trade and investment have made China their most welcomed interlocutor.

What makes recent Maldives and Sri Lankan rethink instructive for a serious scrutiny of evolving larger regional trends is not just the fact that these two remain geographically closest to India as also most influential and most engaged by China among these six island nations. Equally important is to remember that Sri Lanka's ongoing one-year long "pause on foreign research vessels" access to its ports and EEZ, starting 1st January 2024, was triggered late last year by the visits of Chinese research vessels and by Colombo's recognition of openly expressed serious concerns of India and the United States.³ Maldives becomes especially instructive for these evolving

3 N. Sathya Moorthy. (2024). "Decoding Sri Lanka's moratorium on foreign research vessels", Observer Research Foundation (New Delhi), January 8, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/decoding-sri-lanka-s-moratorium-on-foreign-research-vessels>; PTI, "Sri Lanka says it will not ban any foreign research ships from its ports from next year", Money Control, July 7, 2024, <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/world/sri-lanka-says-it-will-not-ban-any-foreign-research-ships-from-its-ports-from-next-year-12763842.html>

India-China binaries germinating in the domestic politics of these maritime neighbours of India after all six have become partners and beneficiaries of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Social media spats earlier this year (2024), between Maldives and India had begun with the coming of President Mohamed Muizzu to power riding on his 'India out' slogan and then digging heels on evicting Indian military personnel. This cementing of India-China binary in his posturing became glaring with this coinciding his signing of January 2024 China-Maldives defence cooperation agreement.⁴ During candidate Muizzu's 'India out' campaign itself, in December 2023, China had delivered 8,200 deadweight tonnage multipurpose vessel to neighbouring Mauritius and the 45th naval task force of China—comprising of the destroyer Urumqi, the frigate Linyi and the comprehensive supply ship Dongpinghu—had paid a 5-day friendly visit to Seychelles.⁵ Put together, all of these allude to well-coordinated and deeper connotations of this surge in China's maritime footprint across the Indian Ocean region igniting speculations about Sri Lanka reversing its decision to allow Chinese ships into its EEZ and ports being just the symptom of some deeper quagmire of larger proportions.⁶

It is in this backdrop of China's growing entrenchment into the domestic politics of India's island nation neighbours—something that is increasingly reflected in some of their leaders' deeper cultivation of China and more so in their temptation to juxtapose this in terms of this enhancing their countervailing leverages vis-a-vis India—that this article seeks to examine the nature of Beijing's cultivation of India's immediate island nation neighbours and to reckon what it implies for New Delhi's policy options. In order to avoid exaggerations, it also makes an attempt to put China's engagement in perspective of its historical evolution and outlines how all this has been

4 Sudha Ramachandran. (2024). "India's Maritime Power Projection in the Southwest Indian Ocean Gets a Boost", *The Diplomat*, March 08, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/03/indias-maritime-power-projection-in-the-southwest-indian-ocean-gets-a-boost/>

5 Shen Shiwei. (2023). "China-built multi-purpose vessel facilitates Mauritius transportation", CGTN, 20 December, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-12-20/China-built-multi-purpose-vessel-facilitates-Mauritius-transportation-1pGgU5TkUNi/p.html>; Chen Xing and Zhou Jianlong, "45th Chinese naval escort task force arrives in Seychelles for friendly visit" China Military online, 22 April 2024, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/MOOTW/EscortMissions_209168/News_209169/16302753.html

6 Shishir Gupta. (2024). "Why are there three Chinese spy ships in the Indian Ocean Region", *Hindustan Times*, April 10, [accessed on 23 June 2024], <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/why-are-there-three-chinese-spy-ships-in-the-indian-ocean-region-101712717751038.html>

responded to by India and what could be its likely trajectories for the future. Finally, in examining this newfound enthusiasm amongst India's immediate island nation neighbours in engaging China, it also alludes to how this can further complicate extant border-tension driven contestations between India and China.

Genesis of 'Ban China' Narrative

The narrative about banning Chinese ships docking in India's maritime periphery go back to the increasing traffic that China's naval, commercial and research vessels have seen across Indian Ocean region from late 1990s.⁷ Their post-2008 surge is explained by Beijing in terms of its exponentially expanding foreign trade, its increasing engagement with ocean research and by overall increase in non-traditional security threats from sea-piracy and resultant multilateral anti-piracy networks with China being one of their partner nations.⁸ However, apart from increasing numbers of China's merchant shipping and its naval ships on patrolling duties there has been an upsurge in the presence of its so-called ocean research vessels that have become increasingly welcome amongst these smaller island nations while these remain suspect of spying or collecting ocean data that Beijing can potentially use in adversarial military terms. Such anxieties have been repeatedly publicly expressed by major Indian Ocean stakeholders like India and the United States.

To cite few specific examples, visits of ships like Yuan Wang 5 and Shi Yan 6, that had respectively docked on Sri Lankan ports during August 2022 and November 2023, had seen India and the United States strongly objecting to Colombo granting such access to what were suspected of being spy missions. Recognising concerns of India and the United States, Colombo had accordingly imposed a ban on all such foreign vessels leading it to deny access to the next Chinese ocean scientific research ship Xiang Yang Hong 3

7 Srikant Kondapalli. (2018). "China's Evolving Naval Presence in the Indian Ocean Region: An Indian Perspective", David Brewster (ed.), *India & China at Sea: Competition for Naval Domance in the Indian Ocean*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p.182.

8 Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange. (2015). *Six Years At Sea...And Counting: Gulf of Aden Anti-Piracy and China's Maritime Commons Presence*, Washington DC: The Jamestown Foundation, pp. 16-19.

that was scheduled to dock at its ports in January 2024.⁹ Incidentally, the same ship, Xiang Yang Hong 3, had been spotted earlier operating in the vicinity of India's Andaman & Nicobar's islands during November 2021. Before that in September of 2019, the Indian Navy had driven away another Chinese research vessel, the Shiyang 1, off the coast of Andaman and Nicobar Islands in India's EEZ.¹⁰ This action was taken by Indian Navy in line with Article 246 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea which prohibits conducting such maritime research in another country's EEZ without prior permission to do so. All such incidents have been viewed in India in light of China's grey zone operations in South China Sea which have since blurred the distinction between China's fishing, research and naval activities.¹¹

What made this more intriguing was the fact that the same ship, Xiang Yang Hong 3, had also earned notoriety of "going dark" by its crew turning off their automatic identification system transponders and, in that state, this ship was once intercepted by the Indonesia Navy in January 2021. A month later, the Indonesia Navy had found an Unmanned Underwater Vehicle resembling the Chinese Sea Wing (Haiyi) closer to their critical shipping choke points off the Sunda and Lombok Straits.¹² This comprehensive research vessel that still continues to operate in India's maritime periphery is an advanced 4,800-ton 99.6 meter long vessel that has capabilities to release similar long-endurance underwater gliders like the 'Sea Wing' or 'Haiyi' for research in a whole range of areas of microbial genetic resources, polymetallic nodules, ocean currents, tectonic plates, and this ship can rotate 360 degree at same station and also work as 'ice-breaker' given that it has all-electric 'azimuth' thrusters and bow thrusters.¹³

9 Vikrant Singh. (2023). "Sri Lanka's big blow to China Year-long moratorium on entry of 'spy ships'", WION, December 19, <https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/sri-lanka-big-blow-to-china-year-long-moratorium-on-entry-of-spy-ships-671275>

10 Anushka Saxena. (2024). "India Has Good Reason to be Concerned about China's Maritime Research Vessels", *The Diplomat*, February 02, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/india-has-good-reason-to-be-concerned-about-chinas-maritime-research-vessels/>

11 Eric Cooper. (2024). "Persistent Gray Zone Aggression in the South China Sea Calls for Increased Coordination in Rule of Law", RAND, April 16, [accessed on June 24], <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/04/persistent-gray-zone-aggression-in-the-south-china.html>

12 Ibid.

13 Zhang Chun. (2020). 'Nine extraordinary Chinese research vessels', *China Dialogue Ocean*, 2 October, <https://chinadialogueocean.net/en/climate/15239-nine-extraordinary-chinese-research-vessels/#:~:text=The%20Xiang%20Yang%20Hong%2003,360%20degrees%20on%20the%20spot.>

Xiang Yang Hong 3 Visiting Maldives

What made it alarming was that on January 22, 2024, the same Xiang Yang Hong 3 that had been disallowed docking in Sri Lanka in response to comments from India and the United States was welcomed at the Male port. The newly sworn-in pro-China President Mohamed Muizzu had provided this added leeway for Beijing to showcase its increasing acceptance amongst these island nations.¹⁴ It is instructive to see how all this unfolded: President Muizzu was on his maiden foreign visit to China during January 8-12, 2024 when Colombo announced its ban on visit of such foreign vessels. This visit, among others, witnessed China and Maldives sign separate MoUs on defence, maritime and marine cooperation where China was allowed access to Maldives' ports and EEZ with Beijing promising to help Maldives with data collection and protection of its fisheries stocks and other marine resources and environment.¹⁵ It was clarified later that such ships will not undertake any research when docked in Male yet, given China's track record, this remains subject to interpretations.

China, of course, continues to maintain that ships like Xiang Yang Hong 3 are part of its 'geophysical scientific research' and it expects Colombo to review its ban on Chinese research vessels. This is where vacillation of Sri Lanka's leaders in the middle of this year-long ban makes it open to speculation. Clearly, this could have been triggered by Sri Lanka's own domestic situation. Compared to the period of pandemic and follow-up during the last three years, Sri Lanka's economy and politics have stabilised, bringing greater self-confidence amongst its power elite and triggering such a rethink and return to equidistance from New Delhi and Beijing? Or has this rethink been engendered by piecemeal nudges from China? What does all this say about these island nations becoming vulnerable to China's larger game plan in the Indian Ocean region? How is India gearing up to address this tectonic shift where India's maritime neighbours may become more inclined to engage China than other way round, as it had been in the past?

14 Ajay Kumar Das. (2024). "Implications of Chinese research vessels Xiang Yang Hong 3 arrival in Maldives", United Services Institute, [accessed on 6 July] <https://www.usiofindia.org/strategic-perspective/Implications-of-Chinese-research-vessel-Xiang-Yang-Hong-3-arrival-in-Maldives.html>

15 Ibid.

This calls first to briefly decipher the nature and tenor of Sri Lanka's vacillation in this matter. To begin with, speculations on Colombo's rethink were ignited by Sri Lanka's foreign minister M. U. M. Ali Sabri's June 2024 visit to Japan. Foreign Minister Ali Sabri was quoted in local Japanese media saying that Sri Lanka will lift this ban on the visit of foreign research ships at its port from 2025.¹⁶ Not just that, Japan's *NHK World* reported him saying that Sri Lanka "can't have different rules for different countries and only block China" from accessing their EEZ and ports.¹⁷ However, on return home Ali Sabri denied these reports and said that he was misquoted. But at the same time, alluding to this rethink in an open-ended manner, he added that there was still time and that Sri Lanka "will assess the situation at the end of the year and then decide whether to continue the moratorium or lift it."¹⁸ This begs the question if each of these island nations are beginning to view their engagement with China from the prism of India-China, and even U.S.-China rivalries which could then define the next stage of China's engagement with these island nations and would call for different counter-strategies from India.

China's Indian Ocean Links

To first put China's engagement with these island nations in perspective, records of the presence of Chinese people in Indian Ocean rim go back to Admiral Zheng He's 15th century sojourns that made his fleet anchor at multiple ports and engage with multiple littoral societies of that time. His voyages still remain part of their respective folklore and anecdotal stories about his costly cargoes of porcelain, silk, lacquerware and other objects exchanged with local royalties and trading communities.¹⁹ More substantially, it was during the 19th and early 20th centuries that Chinese people arrived, and assimilated into several of IOR societies as European colonial masters brought them to some

16 Meera Srinivasan. (2024). "Sri Lanka to lift ban on foreign research vessels next year", *The Hindu*, July 06, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lanka-to-lift-ban-on-foreign-research-vessels-next-year/article68374732.ece>

17 Ibid.

18 Daily Excelsior. (2024). "No decision to end moratorium on foreign research vessels on Sri Lanka's EEZ: FM Sabry", *Daily Excelsior*, July 8, <https://www.dailyexcelsior.com/no-decision-to-end-moratorium-on-foreign-research-vessels-on-sri-lankas-eez-fm-sabry/>

19 Sanjeev Sanyal. (2020). *Incredible History of the Indian Ocean*, New Delhi: Penguin Random house, p.81.

of these countries as indentured labour for their plantations.²⁰ Many of these Chinese were to later emerge as traders and entrepreneurs. Also, most of these Chinese had over decades organically integrated themselves into their local societies and adopted to their culture, livelihoods and even politics. However, Chinese that are of concern to this article are those that have arrived across several nations of the Indian Ocean littoral as traders and investors from rising China of 1990s and especially under its Belt and Road Initiative of last ten years. This engagement of China remains purely a commercial and strategic opportunity to expand and reinforce its expanding footprint across the Indian Ocean region.²¹

To have a cursory look at this last decade itself, the year 2013 had seen China for the first time deploying Shang-class submarine as part of its Anti-Piracy Escort Force.²² Year 2014 had seen how China—a newcomer and an external player to the Indian Ocean—becoming the second nation after India to immediately respond to water crisis in Male. Responding to request, Beijing had immediately sent bottled water first by two civilian aircraft followed by their ocean rescue vessel carrying 960 tons of fresh water and with seawater desalinating facility onboard, arriving in Male.²³ The same year, Chinese had offered crew and four ships including two frigates assistance for multinational rescue operations around Andaman Sea for search of Malaysian Airline flight MH370 which had disappeared and had 150 Chinese onboard amongst its 239 passengers. This was, however, politely turned down by India which then deployed its latest maritime surveillance plane P8-I denying China “an opportunity to snoop around, which India would not like” as was mentioned by an unnamed Indian official.²⁴

20 Roukaya Kasenally. (2022). “China in Mauritius: The Telling of the Chinese Story”, *Asia Policy*, Vol. 17, No.3, July, p. 72.

21 Mathieu Pellerin. (2022). “The Recent Blossoming in Relations between China and Madagascar”, French Institute of International Relations, February [accessed on 12 July 2024], <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/noteafriquempellerinb.pdf>, p.10.

22 P.K. Ghosh. (2024). “Chinese Nuclear Subs in the Indian Ocean”, *The Diplomat*, 12 April 2015 [accessed on 8 July], <https://thediplomat.com/2015/04/chinese-nuclear-subs-in-the-indian-ocean/>

23 Xinhua. (2014). “China sends fresh water to Maldives”, *China Daily*, December 07, [accessed on July 2, 2024], https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014-12/07/content_19037526.htm

24 The Sunday Standard. (2014). “Indian Tiger Outsmarts Chinese Dragon Over Andaman Access”, *The New Indian Express*, 23 March [accessed on 5 July 2024], <https://www.newindianexpress.com/thesundaystandard/2014/Mar/23/indian-tiger-outsmarts-chinese-dragon-over-andaman-access-589707.html>

In 2015 again, China evacuated its citizens and foreign nationals from Yemen showcasing capabilities to respond to crises. This was followed by China opening its first foreign naval facility in Djibouti in August 2017 ostensibly to support its anti-piracy operations and for securing trade routes and this has since triggered speculations about China looking for more such naval facilities in the region.²⁵ Wang Yi, the Chinese foreign minister, visited Comoros in January 2021 followed by vice-chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, He Baoxiang, visiting Moroni as special envoy of President Xi Jinping on the presidential inauguration of President Azali Assoumani. This was China's way of underlining the critical location of Comoros for its international shipping as also the fact that Comoros held presidency of the African Union for 2023.²⁶ But most interesting was China's setting of its China-Indian Ocean Region Forum in November 2022 sans India! The logic behind why this Forum was attended by several Indian Ocean nations can be deciphered by examining how these six island nations have cultivated China and if they have done so at the cost of their partnerships with India.

China Cultivation by these Six Island Nations

Amongst these six island nations in India's maritime periphery, Sri Lanka remains the largest and most influential and here Ali Sabri's is not the only voice indicating a rethink on its China engagement. Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena was in Beijing this March 2024 and described China, its largest bilateral creditor, willing to "assist Sri Lanka's debt restructuring" which remains a key condition for its \$2.9 billion bailout from International Monetary Fund. Many of Sri Lanka's infrastructure projects, including Japanese funded expansion of Colombo Airport, that had come to halt in 2022 when Colombo ran out of foreign exchange to finance essential imports and declared a sovereign default on its \$46 billion foreign debt are to be now

25 Alex Vines et al., (2024). "Is China Eyeing a Second Military Base in Africa?", United States Institution of Peace, January 30, [accessed on July 9, 2024], <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/01/china-eyeing-second-military-base-africa>

26 Xinhua. (2024). "Special envoy of Chinese president attends Comoros presidential inauguration", *China Daily*, 27 May 2024, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202405/27/WS6653e17ea31082fc043c940d.html>; CGTN, "Wang Yi: China to import more high-quality products from Comoros", CGTN, 1st June, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2024-06-01/Wang-Yi-China-to-import-more-high-quality-products-from-Comoros-1u4xXNlgpzO/p.html>

revived with help from Beijing.²⁷ But, what makes this engagement support this article's contention about these island nations reinforcing binaries of India-China contestations, is when on 7th May 2024 Sri Lanka approved a 20-year power purchase agreement with India's Adani Group for \$442 million to develop wind power. Sri Lankan experts described it as an act of balancing between India and China.²⁸

Maldives has lately been in the news for President Muizzu cozying up to China which has already come to be their largest creditor accounting for 20% of their total public debt. Starting from 2014 when Maldives joined China's BRI, it has borrowed over \$1.4 billion from the Chinese mostly coming in turnkey projects like its \$200 million Friendship Bridge connecting islands of Hulhule and Hulhumale with capital Male.²⁹ In spite of India expressing concerns about President Muizzu's first defence agreement with China, he has signed two more defence pacts in March with China committing to providing military assistance in tandem, while India was exiting the scene.³⁰ This again reinforced the contention of this article of smaller neighbours of India further cementing binaries of India-China contestations. Indeed, China's assistance, most of it for free, seems aimed at enhancing President Muizzu's regime security and legitimacy.³¹ Not for nothing, at the time of writing, defying India's continued security concerns on its defence agreements and allowing

27 AFP. (2024). "China to develop strategic infrastructure: Sri Lanka PM", *The Hindu*, March 27, [accessed on 1st July 2024], <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/china-to-develop-strategic-infrastructure-sri-lanka-pm/article67998716.ece>

28 Munda Mushtaq. (2024). "Sri Lanka turns to India as counterbalance to Chinese presence", *Nikkei Asia*, May 9, <http://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Sri-Lanka-turns-to-India-as-counterbalance-to-Chinese-presence2>

29 Rhea Basarkar. (2024). "The Maldives is Moving Towards China: Here's What to Know", *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 2, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/maldives-moving-toward-china-heres-what-know>

30 Tran My Hai Loc. (2024). "China-Maldives defence ties threaten India's influence", *East Asia Forum*, 11 April, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/04/11/china-maldives-defence-ties-threaten-indias-influence/>

31 Akriti Anand. (2024). "How did China strengthen its bond with Maldives amid India exit? 10 key collaborations between Male, Beijing", *Live Mint*, 31 March, <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/maldives-shifts-towards-china-india-exits-10-key-collaborations-strengthen-male-beijing-ties-defence-water-health-food-11711817744976.html>

of Chinese ships, Male was scheduled to welcome the same Xiang Yang Hong 3 for the third time before end of July 2024.³²

Far away Comoros has over years replaced France with China as its major partner nation; granting her contracts for expansion of its Moheli and Moroni sea ports triggering serious concerns here and across the world.³³ Likewise Seychelles, where India's efforts since 2015 to build a joint military base on Assumption island has remained a case of "so near and yet so far", while China has deeply entrenched itself in various sectors.³⁴ In addition to Seychelles' National Assembly Building, Palace of Justice, national swimming pool, social housing and Standard Bureau Building, April 2024 saw China completing Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation facility fitted with Chinese radio and television technology.³⁵ Most recently, Seychelles hosted a second visit by Chinese naval hospital that was docked in Victoria during July 5-8, 2024. In Mauritius and Madagascar, Beijing has had the advantage of influential minorities of ethnic Chinese, often playing a leading role in different trades.³⁶ Of these, President Xi and his wife Peng Liyuan had visited Mauritius in July 2019 which can be seen as an inflection point tilting the balance from China soliciting friendship to China being welcomed as a partner country, especially by pro-China constituencies of these island nations.

32 Keshav Padmanabhan. (2024). "Chinese research vessel heading to Maldives again, 3rd port call likely in island country this year", *The Print*, 15 July, <https://theprint.in/defence/chinese-research-vessel-heading-to-maldives-again-for-rotation-of-personnel-and-replenishment/2175456/>

33 Team BharatShakti. (2022). "Will Comoros Be China's Next "Djibouti" in Indian Ocean Region", Bharat Shakti, June 04, [accessed on 3 July 2024], <https://bharatshakti.in/will-comoros-be-chinas-next-djibouti-in-indian-ocean-region/>

34 Ashok Mehta. (2023). "India's quest for Assumption Island: How New Delhi's military base aspirations in Seychelles are at a crossroads", *First Post*, December 10, [accessed on 1 July 2024], <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/indias-quest-for-assumption-island-how-new-delhis-military-base-aspirations-in-seychelles-are-at-a-crossroads-13485732.html>; China Military Online, "Chinese naval hospital ship Peace Ark visits Seychelles again after 14 years", People's Daily online, July 10, 2024, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2024/0710/c90000-20192056.html>

35 Sedrick Nicette. (2024). "China is working closely with Seychelles to enhance bilateral relations", Seychelles News Agency, May 22, <http://www.seychellesnewsagency.com/articles/20602/China+is+working+closely+with+Seychelles+to+enhance+bilateral+relations>

36 Federica Guccini and Mingyuan Zhang. (2021). "'Being Chinese' in Mauritius and Madagascar: Comparing Chinese Diaspora Communities in the Western Indian Ocean", *Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 112.

India's Response Rethink and Initiatives

Pertinent question here is whether India has taken note of this piecemeal yet tectonic shift where some leaders in India's smaller neighbours have developed deeper stakes in engaging China and what has India been doing in case of these island nations becoming more inclined to cultivating the Chinese, often, at India's cost? While the continuing border tensions have made most China watchers in India analyse all issues from that limited perspective, policy makers in New Delhi have shown signs of exploring other policy options in delinking this conundrum. Specifically, China's increasing inroads into these six island nations on India's immediate maritime periphery have perhaps engendered few tentative and even unconnected initiatives from India.

To begin from the most recent example, of the seven heads of state invited to Narendra Modi's third swearing-in ceremony as prime minister in June 2024, four were from these six Island states of the Indian Ocean, namely Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles. This alludes to India perhaps waking up to expanding its arch of maritime neighbourhood undergirded by India's consciousness about China's increasing diplomatic, institutional, economic, military and strategic presence in the region.³⁷ This rethink in India can be traced back to Prime Minister Modi prioritising maritime space and these islands, way back in March of 2015 when he had enunciated his vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) that was meant to enhance India's maritime capabilities and partnerships across the Indian Ocean littoral.³⁸ Indeed making a major policy shift over decades, India—that had once been the leading voice in declaring Indian Ocean as 'Zone of Peace' to keep American Navy at bay—has acquiesced to not only befriending the United States and holding Malabar naval exercises since 1992 but also including Japan from 2007 and now finally overcoming its resistance to include Australia into what has become Quadrilateral naval exercises to

37 Radhey Tammi. (2024). "Modi 3.0 and the Island States of the Indian Ocean", Forum for National Security Studies, Centre for Air Power Studies, July 5, <https://capsindia.org/modi-3-0-and-the-island-states-of-the-indian-ocean/>

38 Samir Bhattacharya. (2024). "India Is Embracing a 'Net Security Provider' Role in the Indian Ocean Region, *The Diplomat*, March 08, [accessed on 9 July 2024], <https://thediplomat.com/2024/03/india-is-embracing-a-net-security-provider-role-in-the-indian-ocean-region/>

address their shared concerns about expanding maritime footprint of China.³⁹ Chinese have already been concerned about Japan offering to assist India in the development of the Andaman and Nicobar islands as India prepares to open these islands to navies of US, Australia, France etc.⁴⁰ In this regard as well, India's logistical agreements with France and the United States clearly underline New Delhi's response to its evolving China challenges in these waters.⁴¹

Even amongst these six island nations, not all have drifted from India to China and all of them still continue to have enduring India-friendly constituencies that need to be engaged continuously using innovative strategies. With Mauritius, where people of Indian origin constitute 70 per cent of the population, India has had strong economic, political and military ties assisting Mauritius in its counter-piracy, counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics actions, combat human-trafficking, combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing etc."⁴² Earlier this year, Prime Minister Modi virtually inaugurated an Indian built airstrip in north Agalega islands, about 1,050 km north of Port Louis to provide maritime security to the island nation as also to protect its tourism and environment.⁴³ Prime Minister Pravin Jugnath had also been Prime Minister Modi's special invitee during the September 2023 New Delhi summit. Similar indulgences can be replicated in other island nations and their leaders as well.

39 Sumit Ganguly. (2018). "Malabar manoeuvres mark Modi's Indian Ocean Strategy", *East Asia Forum*, 10 July, [accessed on 24 June 2024], <https://eastasiaforum.org/2018/07/10/malabar-manoevres-mark-modis-indian-ocean-strategy/>

40 Sujan Chinoy. (2023). "Andaman & Nicobar enhanced India's role in Bay of Bengal: Open them up for US, Japan, France", *The Print*, 24 August, [accessed on 3 July 2024], <https://theprint.in/pageturner/excerpt/andaman-nicobar-enhanced-indias-role-in-bay-of-bengal-open-them-up-for-us-japan-france/1729295/>

41 Darshana Baruah. (2018). "Islands as Game Changers in the Indian Ocean", Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, April 20, [accessed on 5 July 2024], <https://amti.csis.org/islands-game-changers-indian-ocean/>

42 Sudha Ramachandran. (2024). "India's Maritime Power Projections in the Southwest Indian Ocean Gets a Boost", *The Diplomat*, March 08, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/03/indias-maritime-power-projection-in-the-southwest-indian-ocean-gets-a-boost/>

43 C. Krishnasai. (2023). "From Mauritius to Oman, India expands sphere of influence to counter China's presence in Indian Ocean Region", WION, September 22, <https://www.wionews.com/india-news/from-mauritius-to-oman-india-expands-sphere-of-influence-to-counter-chinas-presence-in-indian-ocean-region-638441>

Also, as the first batch of Indian military personnel left the Maldives on March 11, 2024 as part of a planned withdrawal, India's Minicoy in Lakshadweep has inaugurated Jatayu base demonstrating how India can develop its own capabilities on home ground to reduce its dependence on these small island nations where domestic politics could become pro-Beijing and pull India into added contestations with China.⁴⁴ But even when India has its own islands and time-tested nation outreach in Indian Ocean region as also military infrastructure in some of these island nations like Mauritius and Seychelles, India still needs to expand partnerships both—with these island nations as also with other major stakeholder powers. This is where apart from working with U.S., U.K., Japan, Australia, France etc, the Indian Navy maintains a support base in Duqm port of Oman that provides repair, overhaul, berthing, fuel and replenishment facilities for Indian ships transiting. Indeed, with India being engaged from Sabang to Changi, Agalega, Duqm, Chabahar etc., Chinese have been talking of India's necklace of diamonds surrounding China's outreach to the Indian Ocean.⁴⁵ But focus of India has to be not just competing with China but also cultivating constituencies and leaders in India's smaller neighbours some of whom have become vulnerable to China's luring deep-pockets driven engagement. Of course, India must also match with China's ocean research capabilities. For this, India will need to continuously work on domain awareness plus modernisation drives to improve logical and operational capabilities refurbishing forward bases, partnerships and innovation to strengthen its leverages against China's increasing acceptability and resultant maritime footprint amongst India's smaller neighbours.⁴⁶

Conclusion

China's inordinate economic rise and the lure of its deep pockets-driven BRI that has enhanced its acceptance levels across the Indian Ocean rim, has resulted in these island nations having developed strong domestic pro-

44 Smruti Pattanaik S Pattanaik. (2024). "China-India rivalry in the Indian Ocean", *The Kathmandu Post*, July 16, <https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2024/03/14/china-india-rivalry-in-the-indian-ocean>

45 Jahnzaib Mengal. (2022). "String of Pearls and Necklace of Diamonds: Sino-Indian Geo-Strategic Competition in the Indian Ocean", *Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 40, p. 32.

46 Abhay Kumar Singh. (2024). "China's Subsurface Presence in Indian Ocean and India's Options", IDSA Comments, July 11, <https://idsa.in/idsacomments/chinas-subsurface-presence-in-the-indian-ocean-aksingh-110724>

China constituencies resulting in pro-China regimes or vice versa. The enthusiasm of some of these leaders to cultivate China and to project that as their countervailing leverage vis-a-vis India, carries the potential to make them key players in determining India-China equations. To keep India's China policy out of this labyrinth of China's growing network of BRI partners like these island nations, calls for serious examination of some of these evolving trends as also a serious rethink for innovative strategies. Not just India, even the United States—that had become increasingly Eurocentric following the collapse of former Soviet Union and withdrawn from several island nations of the Indian Ocean region—was seen this year returning to open its embassies in Seychelles, Tonga, Solomon Islands and is scheduling to open its embassies in Maldives, Vanuatu and Kiribati next year.⁴⁷

India of course has added reasons to stay alert to China becoming more welcome amongst India's immediate neighbours. Given four years of India-China border tensions, such deepening entrenchment of China in India's periphery remains loaded with multifaceted tactical and strategic implications. While India has been far too focused on such trends in its continental smaller neighbours, New Delhi must also equally engage with its maritime neighbours especially smaller island nations. Ignoring such trends could make India exposed to exigencies that may not be triggered by India's actions. Of course, India has been working closely with other major powers that also see China as revisionist power, yet India cannot completely rely on their visions and actions; such convictions have been repeatedly articulated from India's highest level. No doubt the growing warmth of Indo-US partnership has witnessed increasing coordination in their multilateral exercises and endeavours that are aimed at addressing their shared China challenge yet each of them have their own unique equation with Beijing and India therefore must evolve its own niche responses even when working in tandem with others in addressing their shared strategic concerns.

47 Liz Sly. (2023). "In China's shadow, U.S. rushes back to neglected Indian Ocean island", *The Washington Post*, September 03, [accessed on 1st July 2024], <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/09/01/seychelles-china-us-diplomatic-relations/>