

# India's Counter Strategic Response to China's 'String of Pearls' in the Indian Ocean: An Analysis from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Perspectives

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><i>Article history:</i> <i>Date of Submission:</i>04-03-2025 <i>Date of Acceptance:</i>24-04-2025 <i>Date of Publication:</i> 24-03-2026</p>	<p><i>This paper examines China's 'String of Pearls' strategy – a phrase that was first coined by Booz Allen Hamilton in 2005 – in the Indian Ocean with a focus on India's security concerns and its counter-strategic response, contextualized within the framework of China's BRI. BRI, unveiled in 2013, actually represents China's desire to improve regional connectivity and establish its dominance through infrastructure projects, particularly in the maritime and continental domains. The 'String of Pearls' strategy refers to China's attempt to build a network of ports and bases along the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) – a maritime component of BRI – in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), vis-a-vis military presence, which raises a serious security concern for India. China's strategic investments to encircle India through this strategy are best illustrated by key locations such as Gwadar in Pakistan, Kyaukphyu in Myanmar, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Chittagong in Bangladesh. In response, India has taken some diverse measures to counterbalance China's growing influence, including the 'Neighborhood First' policy, 'Act East' policy, 'Necklace of Diamonds' strategy, and participation in the QUAD, etc. Apart from this, India is also pursuing initiatives like Project Mausam, SAGAR, and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) to enhance its maritime security and economic ties. This study concludes by contending that, even though India has every reason to be concerned about China's BRI-related 'String of Pearls', the country must actively participate in the project to avoid the 'Thucydides Trap', and foster regional stability, while also considering closer strategic alignment with like-minded anti-China nations (i.e., Australia, the US and Japan).</i></p>
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## Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), erstwhile referred to as the ‘One Belt, One Road’ (OBOR) and occasionally also referred to as the New Silk Road, was launched by the Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 as a global strategy for infrastructure investment and regional integration, has generally two key components: continental and maritime. The continental dimension includes the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), whereas the maritime domain involves the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (henceforth, MSR). Whether SREB is land based connecting China to Europe through Central Asia by six major economic corridors; MSR, as a maritime complement of SREB, is basically sea based, aims to boost infrastructure connectivity throughout the Southeast Asia, Oceania and the Indian Ocean (henceforth IO) and East Africa by linking China’s southern coast to Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe via sea routes (Green, 2018). According to Chinese sources, BRI aims to ‘enhance regional connectivity and embrace a brighter future together’. Further, it aims to promote ‘connectedness of infrastructure and build a community of common interests’ (The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2015). But, in actuality, the BRI is more than just a regional infrastructure project, but a global strategy through which China aims to establish itself as the world’s dominant economic and hegemonic power (Brînză, 2018). So, there are distinct geo-economic, geo-strategic and cultural facets to BRI. However, as the central pathways for MSR, the IO is hugely important to China. This is because MSR directly traverses the IO from the northernmost tip of Sumatra, reaching Sri Lanka, southern India, Bangladesh, and the Maldives. Resultantly, the IO is currently developing into a strategically important space that is a more complicated, congested, and disputed strategic area. There is no denying the fact that, at present, the most significant major-power relationship in Asia is that between China and India, which is also the most subtle and complex (Li, Z. 2016). And, BRI has downgraded the already negative India-China dynamics. Since BRI includes a corridor connecting China to the IO and has raised concern in India and other nations, China’s incursion into the Indian Ocean Region (henceforth IOR) along the MSR is significantly altering regional power dynamics. Against this backdrop, this article investigates China’s ‘String of Pearls’ in the IO and evaluates the strategic measures India is undertaking to safeguard its interests amid evolving geopolitical dynamics in the IO and in response to China’s regional incursion. To this end, the paper asks the following questions: How is India’s security threatened by China’s ‘String of Pearls’ along the MSR in the IO? How is India responding strategically to this regional encirclement strategy? To answer these questions, this research employs a qualitative method, drawing primarily on secondary sources, including academic literature (books and scholarly journal articles from JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar), policy documents, reports, news articles, and credible media analyses. This paper is mainly divided into five sections, including an introduction and concluding remarks. While the second section addresses conceptual issues, the third and fourth sections analyze China’s ‘String of Pearls’ strategy in the IOR and

India's counter-strategic response, respectively.

### **Conceptual Understanding**

Being a relatively new subject, Geopolitics is constantly evolving to reflect shifting global events. The late 19th and early 20th centuries are considered the era of classical geopolitics, whose leading scholar was British geopolitician Halford John Mackinder. His 'Heartland Theory' that he discussed in his paper *The Geographical Pivot of History* (1904) put forward the idea of the 'pivot area'. According to Mackinder's Heartland Theory, the key fulcrum to achieving global domination was to control the 'pivot area' or the Eurasian interior. He summarized his geopolitical theory in three sentences: "Whoever controlled Eastern Europe would control the heartland; whoever controlled the heartland would control the World Island; whoever controlled the World Island would control the world" (Mackinder, 1919, p.194). Conversely, Alfred Thayer Mahan, a US naval officer and one of the most influential strategists, shifted the focus to the oceans, claiming that naval dominance was the cornerstone of global influence. As Mahan argues in his seminal work *Influence of the Sea Power on History* (1890): "Command of the sea is not naval. It is one of national policy, national security, and national obligation..." (Mahan, 1911, p.512). In Mahan's opinion, gaining sea power is the key to national strength for any littoral state since a state with reasonable control over the seas will dominate the trade and consequently govern the world. Mahan's theory remains relevant today and for years to come. Because, following Mahan's idea of sea power, the US and China are developing their naval capabilities to gain a competitive advantage in the IOR. Despite Mackinder's influence on generations of strategic studies worldwide, he has been criticized for ignoring 'sea power' and paying little attention to Mahan's Sea Power concept. Echoing Mahan's theory, American strategic thinker Nicholas Spykman, one of the most frequently cited authors of classical geopolitics, developed the 'Rimland Theory', combining geopolitics with realist notions (Patnaik, 2016). While Mackinder places greater emphasis on the Heartland, Spykman gives the Rimland greater prominence while remaining mindful of Mackinder (Hussain, 2024). Rimland is basically the littoral or coastal perimeter surrounding Eurasia, where land power meets sea power. In the context of 21st-century geopolitics, the Rimland emerges as the decisive arena where the future of global power will be contested. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) underscore the Rimland's strategic importance. What is more, in global politics, China is currently applying both Mahan's theory of sea power and Spykman's Rimland theory through MSR, on the one hand, and Mackinder's Heartland Theory through the SREB, on the other. In the contemporary world, China, as an international actor, is working to take over the heartland and rimland of the world, beginning with IOR and South Asia (Sahar, 2020).

**Figure 1: Heartland and Rimland**

Source: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09592318.2024.2331986>

### ***Situating IO in the Rimland Theory***

Since the Rimland consists of IO littoral states, understanding the IO is crucial. Geographically speaking, IO generally stretches from the Strait of Malacca in the east to the Mozambique Channel to the west, and includes the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Eden, the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, and the Bay of Bengal. With an area of around 70 million sq km, the IO is the third biggest body of water on Earth. This is also the oldest maritime route, which dates back 5,000 years. As it extends from East Africa to the Indian subcontinent and Australia, it is bordered by four continents and is a closed ocean, unlike the Pacific and Atlantic, rendering its access very limited (European Foundation for South Asian Studies, 2019).

However, IOR contains 36 littoral states, 14 adjacent hinterland states and four vitally significant choke points or access waterways, namely: Strait of Malacca, Strait of Hormuz, Suez Canal and Bab el Mandeb (Djibouti-Yemen) (Pakanati, 2019). Being a home to about 40% of the world's population, over 80% of seaborne trade in crude oil passes through the IO choke points, with 40% transported through the Strait of Hormuz, 35% through the Strait of Malacca and 8% through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (Butt and Siddiqui, 2021). India is the residential naval power in the IO. With over 7,500 km of coastline, 14,700 km of navigable waterways and 212 active ports, India is highly reliant on the IO for commercial and noncommercial shipping (Du, 2016).

American author Robert D. Kaplan, in his book *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* predicts that the New Great Game will be played

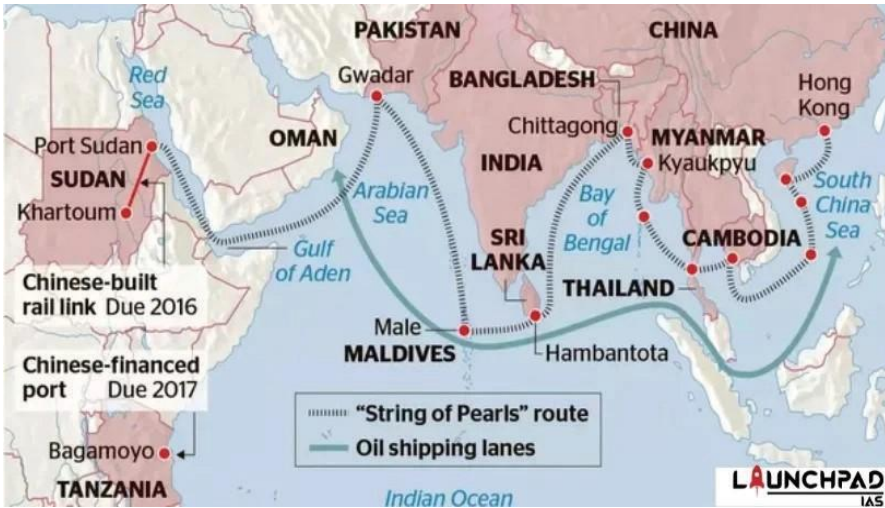
on the IOR by drawing attention to the US, China and India to scramble for new colonies in the form of influence and control over waterways (Kaplan, 2011). Even K.M. Panikkar, often regarded as the father of Indian naval strategy, in his seminal work, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* argues the importance of IO to India by stating that IO must 'remain truly Indian' and India should create a 'steel ring' through controlling the farthest reaches of the IO. He also advocated the establishment of a network of forward bases at or near the IO choke points, including Singapore, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and Socotra (near Aden) (Brewster, 2016). So, keeping Spykman's assumption in mind, it can be said that whoever controls the IO subsequently controls the world (Butt and Siddiqui, 2021). Therefore, in terms of 21st-century geopolitics, IO has become a hotspot among China, India and the US to establish their own sphere of influence. China's regional encirclement ('String of Pearls' strategy) and India's countermeasures could both be apprehended in this conceptual framework.

### **China's Regional Encirclement ('String of Pearls')**

India's apprehensions about encirclement by China, dubbed as 'String of Pearls' theory, are reportedly intended to diminish Indian influence in IOR and South Asia. China's String of Pearls strategy is part and parcel of the BRI-related policy. The string of Pearls theory was first coined by the US consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton in 2005 to refer to China's continuous effort to develop a series of bases across the IO littoral states (Khan et al., eds. 2016). From a strategic standpoint, some analysts argue that China is trying to establish a 'String of Pearls' with ports along the MSR that might potentially be exploited for military purposes (Du, 2016). India suspects that MSR is an economic version of China's 'String of Pearls' scheme.

Although India views IOR as its sphere of influence and wants to play a dominant role here but Beijing denies it by saying that 'the Indian Ocean is not India's Ocean' (Colley, 2024). China is investing heavily in harbors and installations around the Indian subcontinent, including Gwadar in Pakistan, Kyaukphyu in Myanmar, Chittagong in Bangladesh, and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, which is now fully operated by the Chinese administration. China's so-called 'pearls' in the IO include infrastructure projects in the Maldives, KyaukPhyu Port in Myanmar, Gwadar Port in Pakistan, Chittagong Port in Bangladesh, and Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka (European Foundation for South Asian Studies, 2019).

Figure 2: China's 'String of Pearls' Strategy



Source: <https://launchpadeducation.in/string-of-pearls-strategy/>

China's maritime policy resembles A.T. Mahan's Sea Power hypothesis: "whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate the whole of Asia" (in Kanwal, 2018). From a military standpoint, many experts believe that China's significant investments in the construction of 40 sea ports across 34 nations would ultimately result in its dominance over those ports due to China's rising financial reliance on its host nations, helping to achieve its 'String of Pearls' strategy for the Indo-Pacific (Zhang, 2018). But China has continued to argue that, since this region accounts for over 70% of its oil imports, its objectives are not to challenge India but rather to refuel for commercial purposes and to secure its sea lanes (Kumar, 2019). China's 'String of Pearls' in the IOR strongpoints include:

**Gwadar:** Gwadar, as the gateway to China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and China's first strategic foothold in the Arabian Sea, is the shiniest pearl within the String of Pearls. Prior to its recent development as Pakistan's massive deep-sea port, which is sponsored by China, Gwadar was a backward cluster of fishing villages on the Makran coast of Pakistan. However, it is interesting to note that, at the time of Pakistan's establishment in 1947, Gwadar had been a principality under the possession of the Sultan of Oman for almost 200 years. Oman sold Gwadar to Pakistan in 1958 for \$3 million, and since then, it has been an integral part of Pakistan's Balochistan province (Hillman, 2018). Gwadar is only 172 km from the Iranian Chabahar and 400 km east of the Strait of Hormuz – a major chokepoint for global oil supplies. Pakistan identified it as a potential port site in 1964. It was in 1993 that the Pakistan Government foresaw the idea of building Gwadar as a deep-sea commercial port. However, the Gwadar port dream truly started in 2013 when a China-owned company (China Overseas Port Holding Company: COPHC) acquired the

right to port operation. COPHC has been building this port's infrastructure since 2013, and Pakistan leased this port to COPHC in late 2015 for a 40-year contract that would expire in 2059. A 90% of the port's revenue is contracted to go to the Chinese company (Dialogue Earth, 2021). The port was officially inaugurated on 13 November 2016, as part of the larger CPEC.

However, Gwadar is a kind of win-win opportunity for both China and Pakistan. China has promised a total investment of \$1.6 billion for port expansion (The Times of India, 2024, May 14). Gwadar is now regarded by the Pakistani authorities as the 'crown jewel' of the CPEC, whereas Chinese officials have compared Gwadar to the erstwhile fishing village in Southern China, calling it the 'second Shenzhen' (Calabrese, 2024). Gwadar has also been referred to as 'Chinese Gibraltar' by Washington (Azhar, 2015). Through Gwadar, China will be able to reach West Asia in 3-4 days instead of the current 2 weeks, and the sea distance will be reduced from 9,500 miles to 2,500 miles (Dinesh, 2021). The Indian activities in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Aden have always been an eyesore for the Chinese. Gwadar is not only China's forward operating base and naval port, but it also has a listening post, a military garrison, a major refinery/petroleum storage facility constructed by China, and a modern air defense unit. Gwadar's facilities can accommodate the largest vessels of the PLA Navy, including the Type 071 Landing Platform Dock, the Type 075 amphibious assault ship, and even large aircraft carriers. Thus, it demonstrates that China is constructing Gwadar with the potential military use of this port in mind (Vázquez, 2023). Gwadar would be capable of providing a strategic listening outpost to China in IOR for monitoring Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) emanating from the region of 'Persian Gulf' and the bottleneck at Strait of Hormuz, and thus observing US naval activities in the Persian Gulf and Indian activities in the Arabian Sea. India heavily relies on the Strait of Hormuz, the world's most important oil transit choke point, which lies between Iran and Oman. More than 85% of India's energy passes through this strait, including two-thirds of its oil and half of its LNG imports (The Economic Times, 2024).

So, Chinese influence in Gwadar will enhance the security dilemma for both India and the US. India's Naval Chief, Admiral (retd.) Sureesh Mehta has voiced his worries by stating that "It has a serious strategic implication for India, being only 180Nm from the exits of Strait of Hormuz, would enable Pakistan to take control over the world energy jugular and intersection of Indian tankers" (The Economic Times, 2008). Furthermore, by providing an alternative to Karachi Port, which now handles 60% of Pakistan's seaborne trade, followed by Port Qasim, which now accounts for 35% of seaborne trade (Hellenic Shipping News, 2019) and is vulnerable to security threats due to its close proximity to India, Gwadar will provide India's arch-enemy, Pakistan, even greater strategic depth.

***Kyaukphyu:*** As part of China's continuous effort to encircle India, China has accelerated the development of the deep-water Kyaukphyu port on the western coast

of Myanmar. The Kyaukphyu's work was started in 2010, and this one is located in Myanmar's unstable Rakhine state, where the Tatmadaw is battling the Arakan Army. This port will allow China to overcome its Malacca Dilemmas<sup>2</sup>, as well as reduce the time and cost of transportation of energy and other goods supply to southwestern China. This maritime center could probably be used for military purposes when required. Given this port's strategic location, India is very concerned. Because it is being built in close vicinity to India's naval base, INS Varsha, which is now under construction and located on the eastern coast of India. When the USD 7.3 billion Kyaukphyu port is completed, it will connect the seaport to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, by a rail and road connection, providing access to IO (Firstpost, 2024). In addition, the close proximity of Kyaukphyu to India's northeastern states may increase the scope for China to support insurgent activities there.

**Hambantota:** Sri Lanka – an island state – is India's immediate neighbor, just 30 nautical miles away from its southern coastline. It is also important to China because China is transporting about 80% of its energy and other goods through SLOCs near the coastline of Sri Lanka (Islam, 2019). The case of the Hambantota deep-sea port in Sri Lanka is the first indication that the 'String of Pearls' strategy is coming into play. Chinese state-owned firm (China Merchant Group) completed the construction of Hambantota port in 2010, where China invested a total of USD 1.5 billion in the entire project. But ever since, the government of Sri Lanka has been so deeply indebted to China that in 2017, China was granted a 70% share in addition to a 99-year lease over this port (Murphy, 2023). This port is strategically so valuable due to its location at the southern tip of Sri Lanka, approximately 600 nautical miles north of the international SLOCs in the IO. Additionally, it is about 1,300 km east of the two strategically key Indian naval installations at Visakhapatnam and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal. Therefore, from India's perspective, China's participation in the deep-seaport project in Hambantota poses a potential threat, potentially reducing India's dominance in the Bay of Bengal (Islam, 2019).

**Chittagong:** The Bay of Bengal is a critical area for India's defense interests, and China has sought to bolster its presence in the Bay of Bengal. As a part of China's MSR, China has contributed to the construction and operation of several ports, including Chittagong Port. China Harbour Engineering Company has started constructing a 750-acre industrial park in Chittagong Port city, and in return for

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<sup>2</sup> Strait of Malacca, which might act as a possible bottleneck for China, is strategically important. It is an 800 km funnel-shaped water body, a natural maritime chokepoint that connects the South China Sea with the Indian Ocean. China is truly reliant on this strait for its daily transportation of 4 million barrels of crude oil, which is considered its economic lifeline. China fears that the US and its allies may shut the Strait of Malacca, a situation referred to as the Chinese 'Malacca Dilemma' (or 'Seaborne Trade and Energy Dependency'), which may stifle its domestic diplomacy that depends on oil imports and make its economy inoperable (See Shah, et al., 2022).

investing about USD 10 billion, China would own 70% of this industrial park (Colley, 2024; Chow and Silva, 2024). Many international media, for instance, according to an article published by BBC, China's large investments in Chittagong port represent Beijing's attempt to realize some special purposes, and this port could be an important link of China's 'String of Pearls' in the IOR (Daily Star, 2018). Chittagong Port may play a larger role, serving as a crucial link for South Asia to reach Southeast Asia, East Asia, and beyond. In addition, China had been lobbying Bangladesh for decades to construct a port in Sonadia and a proposed port deal in Sonadia was cancelled in 2016 due to pressure from India, Japan and the USA, manifesting a great power game. More recently, Beijing and New Delhi have both been contributing to the construction of Bangladesh's second-largest port, Mongla (Daily Star, 2018). Bangladesh formally joined BRI in 2016. Following Pakistan, Bangladesh is the second-largest receiver of Chinese financing under the BRI in South Asia. Furthermore, China is Bangladesh's largest trading partner and also its largest supplier of arms (Colley, 2024). So, it is difficult for Dhaka to avoid Beijing as its development partner; therefore, Dhaka is now trying to maintain a careful balance between Beijing and New Delhi to uphold its strategic autonomy.

**Maldives:** The Maldives is viewed as a 'natural node' to China for its MSR. The Maldives is located 1,200 km away from the Indian mainland and only 700 km away from India's strategic Lakshadweep archipelago (Bose, 2020). Following Mohamed Muizzu's victory in the presidential election of the Maldives held in November 2023, there has been a downturn in the relationship between Male and New Delhi. Muizzu is known as an anti-Indian and pro-China president who has promoted the 'India Out' policy by demanding a complete withdrawal of the 89 Indian troops stationed in the Maldives (Dutta and Choudhury, 2024). Upon the arrival of Muizzu as President, China and the Maldives entered into two defense agreements in March 2024, with China committing to offer military assistance (Loc, 2024). Prior to that, in February 2024, Muizzu allowed a Chinese military research vessel to make a port call, which the Indian media referred to as a 'spy ship'. China's 'String of Pearls' grand strategy heavily relies on the Maldives (The Diplomat, 2024)

Although the Maldives has historically been under India's sphere of influence, the Maldives might strengthen China's maritime presence and capabilities in the IOR. The Chinese navy is now the world's largest, with 370 ships and submarines, and this number is projected to grow to 435 by 2030, while India's maritime fleet is less spectacular, with 132 warships. So, India is no match for Chinese naval power or for resisting Chinese naval aggression in the IOR (Dutta and Choudhury, 2024).

### **India's Strategic Response to China's 'String of Pearls'**

Over the years, India's land border conflicts with China and Pakistan have created a sort of 'continental obsession' that has strengthened the nation's air force and military while largely neglecting its naval capabilities (Dutta and Choudhury, 2024). But India's security challenge from China has both continental

and oceanic dimension. Whether the continental dimension is mainly CPEC related, the maritime component in this case refers to the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), where China is actively pursuing the regional encirclement strategy- ‘String of Pearls’. Upon considering this, India has recently taken some measures to counterbalance the Chinese security threat. New Delhi is well aware of the reality that no single power, not even the US, can counterbalance China’s power and influence on its own. Hence, a strong push towards strengthening her ties with ASEAN and QUAD is considered vital for India (The Times of India, 2023, July 31). India is essentially attempting to counter China’s BRI or MSR through diplomatic, military and economic means. India is responding to China’s ‘String of Pearls’ in three ways: by pursuing a neighborhood first policy, mostly in South Asia, keeping close ties with ASEAN countries and fostering good relations with the anti-China power block through QUAD-like groupings.

Given the MSR security concerns, India has devised its own projects. India wants to reaffirm its role as the net security provider in the IOR because its central location in the IO provides it an uninterrupted access to the 40 rim nations in the IOR (The Diplomat, 2024). In 2015, India’s maritime approach to IOR has significantly evolved from sea control to sea denial – a tactic to negate an adversary’s war-waging capabilities by stopping them from accessing crucial areas and, if necessary, inflicting harm or attacking the adversary. The 2015 maritime doctrine also emphasized its role as a net security provider and first responder, offering security not only for its own but also for the other regional stakeholders (THE GEOSTRATA, 2024). However, India has taken the following strategic moves to offset the threat posed by BRI-related ‘String of Pearls’:

#### ***a. Neighborhood First policy***

To respond to the growing influence of BRI and to further its strategic aspirations through strengthening its political and economic cooperation with South Asian neighbors, India has launched the ‘Neighborhood First’ policy. This policy is also closely associated with its ‘Act East’ and ‘Look West’ policy. However, upon being elected as the Prime Minister in 2014, Modi implemented the ‘Neighborhood First’ policy by inviting the heads of the South Asian nations to his swearing-in ceremony. The primary justification is that India can only successfully influence the world scene when it can maintain cordial relationships with its neighbors, mainly when there is notable power disparity between India and other smaller South Asian nations. Due to the asymmetric power relationship between India and its neighbors, South Asian nations have started to play the ‘China Card’ through active engagement with China. Therefore, in response to the growing presence of China in South Asia and the IO, India has strategically reoriented its neighborhood policy to give its neighbors a preferential treatment and enhance its reputation as a benevolent hegemon. Moreover, in order to increase its sphere of influence, India also plans to apply the ‘Neighborhood First’ policy to countries in Southeast Asia and West Asia (Jain and Gill, 2024).

### ***b. 'Act East' policy***

'Act East' policy is the core of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. With the goal of deepening economic and cultural engagement with Southeast Asia or ASEAN countries, late Indian Prime Minister Narshima Rao enunciated the 'Look East' policy in 1992, which was changed to the 'Act East' Policy by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, incorporating a maritime security component and extending its reach to encompass East Asia (Ladwig, 2024). Steps in this direction include strengthening BIMSTEC, pursuing the projected Mekong-Ganga Economic Corridor, maintaining strong ties with Vietnam and fostering marine relations with Singapore and Indonesia (Sugreev, 2018). In 2020, Modi radically modified the 'Act East' policy, focusing more on strategic concerns, to enhance India's stance in the Indo-Pacific while containing China even more than before (Radjaradjane, 2022).

### ***c. Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)***

India's Indo-Pacific strategy evolved out of the earlier 'Look East' and 'Act East' policies, but it is much more focused on strategic considerations rather than trade and connectivity (The Times of India, 2023, August 14). BRI is heavily influencing India's military postures and doctrines. India is geographically wedged between two powerful neighbors – China and Pakistan. Of late, there has been a significant reorientation of India's foreign policy due to violent clashes at the India-China disputed border in 2015 and 2018 (Pant, 2022). In the early stage, India was hesitant to adopt Indo-Pacific discourse due to the perception that it was a strategy to counter China. India, in the mid-2010s, sought to maintain its strategic autonomy and balance its strategic relationships with China and major democratic states in Asia (Shekhar and Bansal, 2024). India also initially struggles to define and lay out the concept within its political framework. But given the geopolitical circumstances, India has finally embraced its own vision and framework of Indo-Pacific strategy through Modi's speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018 (Baruah, 2020; Ladwig, 2024). India's Modi's speech was later addressed by launching IPOI in 2019. (Vashisht, 2023). India's Indo-Pacific vision supports an open, free, peaceful and navigable region.

India's role in the Indo-Pacific is considered crucial by Australia, Japan and the US. Therefore, the US, Japan, and Australia have emerged as key pillars of India's free and open Indo-Pacific strategic partnership (Baruah, 2020). India's Indo-Pacific strategy is reflected by its naval expansion, considering the IOR its primary sphere of influence (Sana and Akhtar, 2020). The US has also aligned its Indo-Pacific strategy with India, as the US Indo-Pacific Report (2019) proclaims that, "the United States and India share a common outlook on the Indo-Pacific". (Sana and Akhtar, 2020)

### ***d. Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)***

The QUAD was formed in 2007 and revived after a decade-long hiatus in 2017 against the backdrop of China's assertiveness in the IO and the South China Sea.

This is an informal strategic grouping of four democracies—India, Australia, the US and Japan—who support the common interest of unhindered maritime trade and security in the Indo-Pacific region. China sees QUAD as a mechanism to contain its global rise (Crisis Group Asia Report, 2023). India's joining in these initiatives seeks to contain Chinese bellicosity in the Oceans. India introduced the SAGAR concept and IPOI for maritime security, where India also tried to align the objectives of the QUAD with SAGAR and IPOI in 2018 (Pant, 2022).

#### ***f. Project Mausam***

Project Mausam should be viewed in conjunction with India's other policies impacting the maritime domain, like SAGAR. To counter Chinese MSR, India is using its history, culture and geography. Project Mausam stands out as India's exclusive cultural policy for the maritime space of the Bay of Bengal and the IO. The Indian Government launched this initiative in 2014 at the World Heritage Committee meeting held in Doha to explore historical and cultural linkages in the IOR. The Modi government created this project as a counterweight to BRI (Wagner and Tripathi, 2018). There are similarities between India's Project Mausam and China's MSR because both allude to a specific idea of civilizational exceptionalism and linear historical continuity (Das, 2024). The Indian government has identified 39 countries with whom it seeks to develop a broader understanding based on a common heritage and multiple identities (Padmaia, 2018).

#### ***g. 'Security and Growth for All in the Region' (SAGAR)***

SAGAR doctrine has a close connection to India's emergent Indo-Pacific geostrategic concept. Due to the fact that SAGAR operates through regional organizations such as ASEAN, IORA, and BIMSTEC, the Indian government accepted the policy in 2015 in an effort to further consolidate its 'Neighborhood First' policy. According to this doctrine, India would do everything needed to secure its mainland and islands and safeguard its interests (Pagmaja, 2018). Moreover, it will also work to ensure a safe, secure and stable IOR, which aligns with the US-advocated 'free, open, inclusive, peaceful, and prosperous' Indo-Pacific strategy. SAGAR is also a countermove to MSR, aimed at reviving ancient Indian trade routes and cultural linkages around the IO. SAGAR is a strategic move of India to enhance its bilateral relations with IOR littoral neighbors (The Diplomatist, 2020).

#### ***h. Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)***

IORA has an important role to play in India's SAGAR vision. IORA, previously known as the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), established in 1997 as an interregional cooperation to promote economic cooperation and regional integration among countries bordering the IO, holds great importance to India to tackle its arch-foe China in the IOR. India has attempted to revive IORA as a part of its regional leadership strategy. This platform is also perceived as a maneuver of India to contain China's influence, as neither China nor Pakistan is a full member of IORA but only a dialogue partners.



**Figure 3: India's Strategic Response in the IOR**

Source: <https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/balancing-tides-indias-competition-china-dominance-indian>

***i. International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)***

Additionally, India is trying to align the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) with its 'Go West' strategy, which will ultimately provide access to Central Asian countries. An agreement between India, Iran and Russia established the trilateral INTC, a vast 7,200 km multimodal transportation network that links the Caspian Sea, Persian Gulf and the IO. As an alternative to CPEC's Gwadar port, INTC offers Iran's Chabahar Port as a strategic key node for monitoring Chinese action in the Arabian Sea and the Strait of Hormuz. In response to Gwadar, India is genuinely keen to develop the strategic Chabahar port in Iran (Maj Gen Shankarnarayanan, 2024). In May 2016, the Indian government allocated \$500 million to develop Chabhar, which is only 70 km from Gwadar (Wagner and Tripathi, 2018).

***j. Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC)***

AAGC, a brainchild of India and Japan, was conceptualized under the rubric of the contemporary Indo-Pacific concept (Khurana, 2019). Established in 2017, India and Japan are collaborating on the AAGC to develop a countermodel to BRI (Sugreev, 2018). The IO and its coastline states are the main targets of AAGC (Wagner and Tripathi, 2018). As a member of AAGC, India has established a close economic and political cooperation with Japan, which gives India a new tool for pursuing its goals in IO (Wagner and Tripathi, 2018). Both India and Japan are

apprehensive of China's growing foothold in Africa (like the Chinese naval base of Djibouti in the IO), which encouraged them to form the idea of AAGC (Taniguchi, 2020). This Indian-Japanese collaborative vision aims to boost connectivity through high-quality infrastructure in Africa and to foster cooperation between Asia and Africa, while nurturing the interests of India and Japan.

***k. 'Necklace of Diamonds' strategy***

'Necklace of Diamonds' strategy is a phrase that was first used by Indian former Foreign Secretary Lalit Mansingh in 2011 to refer to India's efforts to safeguard its interests in response to China's 'String of Pearls' strategy. Unlike the 'Act East' policy or SAGAR, the Necklace of Diamonds is not an officially promulgated strategy or has not yet been mentioned in any official discourse, but is a phrase used by commentators to interpret certain government policies.

This strategy entails gaining access to naval bases in strategically located states and developing ties with other countries in the Indo-Pacific and IOR. Under this strategy, India gained access to several strategically located ports, including Changi Naval Base in Singapore, Sabang Port in Indonesia, Chabahar Port in Iran, and Duqm Port in Oman. In the Seychelles, it intends to get safe military access to Assumption Island. To counter China's grip on the chokepoint of the Mozambique Channel, India signed an agreement with Seychelles in 2015 that allows India to use Assumption Island for military purposes (Jochheim and Lobo, 2023). India is collaborating, as part of this strategy, with strategically positioned countries such as Indonesia, Japan, Mongolia, Oman, Seychelles, Singapore, Vietnam, and the Central Asian Republics to 'garland' China. India is also converting the strategically significant Agalega Island, which it leased from Mauritius in 2015, into a military base by completing six infrastructure projects, including a dock and an airstrip, that would serve as an intelligence outpost for New Delhi (Dutta and Choudhury, 2024).

In 2019, the Indian Navy took a massive military infrastructure development plan worth 56.5 INR in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, a vital point near the Malacca Strait, presenting India with a strategic advantage against China in the IOR (Ghosh, 2020).



**Image 4:** Necklace of Diamond Strategy

Source: <https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/necklace-of-diamond-strategy-1592404137-1>

### **Avoiding Thucydides Trap<sup>3</sup>: A Way Forward**

As examined above, India has truly some legitimate concerns in the IO relating to China's 'String of Pearls' along the MSR. China's BRI has recently brought up a new economic and security dynamic in the IO. In addition to security concerns, India has consistently argued that BRI lacks transparency, a multilateral and consultative approach, and is not grounded in the principles of good governance and the rule of law. The lack of clarity from the Chinese side on the details of specific BRI and MSR projects has garnered concern for Indian analysts. But if China and India continue to pursue hegemonic behavior in the IO and South Asia, it will accelerate the conflict that might trigger the Thucydides Trap. In order to dispel suspicion, China should provide more explicit details of specific projects in the BRI, going beyond diplomatic rhetoric, which will allow Indian strategists to assess potential opportunities and risks objectively (Sugreev, 2018). Even though BRI has been introduced unilaterally but it will be pursued bilaterally and multilaterally. And any project spanning more than 65 countries depends on both legal considerations and legitimacy issues. In that case, the legitimacy issue of BRI can be greatly enhanced by including India in discussions, at least when it comes to the routes that do or could potentially impact India (Khurana, 2019). Incorporating India into the BRI will improve the project's viability by reducing mistrust between the two nations, giving China access to India's thriving market, and strengthening collaboration in other areas of global significance (Khurana, 2019). China is fully

<sup>3</sup> According to the Greek historian Thucydides, confrontation between an established power and a rising power is inevitable. Today, China, an established power and India, a rising power, are currently on their way to fall into their own Thucydides Trap – a term popularized by Professor Graham T. Allison. China perceives India as an opponent and vice versa.

aware that India is the only nation in this region that can legitimately compete with China both from a military and an economic standpoint, not only now but also in future. New Delhi would never fully invest in the US, as it did not fully invest in the former Soviet regime, if China maintains a good relationship with India. Additionally, by doing this, the security on China's western frontiers, both on land and at sea, would significantly improve. But if China pushes India toward the US, maintaining hostility and aggressiveness, India, alone or in association with other anti-China blocs, could cause endless trouble for China in the future (Colley, 2024). If China continues to pursue hegemonic behavior in the IO, it will accelerate a conflict that could trigger the Thucydides Trap.

In other ways, India's participation in the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank), and BRICS has little or no impact on New Delhi's perception of BRI. But India's reluctance to participate in the BRI more meaningfully and constructively would be a wasted opportunity. India, for its greater interests, should act constructively, avoiding unnecessary suspicion. At present, there remains a huge asymmetry between the two economies. Resultantly, 'the Chinese are relaxed about the rise of India, but the Indians are much more nervous about the rise of China' (Grant, 2010). This is an indisputable fact that China has an economic and technological upper hand, which India severely handicapped. In economic terms, being the largest trading partner of China, India's trade deficit with China reached a historically high level of US\$85 billion in 2023-24 (Maj Gen Shankarnarayanan, 2024). So, India does not have much of an economic upper hand to counter China. BRI already has contracts worth over \$1 trillion and is expanding its area of collaboration, but even if India aims to become a \$10 trillion economy by 2032 (The Economic Times, 2024), it will be difficult to achieve this without joining the expanding Asian market and its supply, production, and market chains. India should cautiously balance between the long-term economic facilities that come with BRI and the potential security threat in the IOR.

India needs to understand that the BRI will proceed with or without Delhi's presence. It would therefore be wise for India to use the BRI opportunity meaningfully and constructively, responding appropriately to geopolitics without compromising national security. A SWOT analysis performed by Ravi Bhoothalingam rightly argues that,

India should join OBOR and use its strengths and resources to co-create the OBOR architecture from within for what works best for the country. India needs a good 30 years of high-speed growth, and it is difficult to visualize that we can get it if we remain on the sidelines of what looks like the route to a burst of growth and innovation in Asia. (in Sharma, 2019)

Given Asia's current balance of power, India should also consider close alignment with like-minded nations (i.e., Australia, the US, and Japan) to collectively address China's growing influence. India has far fewer military, political, and economic

resources available to it than China to carry out its foreign policy objectives. Since India does not have a technological and economic upper hand to offer an alternative to BRI, therefore, collaboration with other countries is also a means of countering 'String of Pearls'. To counter China in the IO, India is viewed as a linchpin to the US. Because both the US and India are aware that 'no single power— not even the U.S.— can offset China's power and influence on its own' (Chellaney, 2016). But India should not in any way compromise its strategic autonomy<sup>4</sup>, while aligning with a like-minded anti-China bloc. If truth be told, both China and India bear a responsibility to carefully manage their rivalry in order to avoid conflict and pursue opportunities for growth together. There still exists a lot of distrust and skepticism between the two Asian giants, but projects like BRI can also help earn significant economic and geopolitical dividends that will ensure sanity and growth in the IOR.

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<sup>4</sup> Strategic autonomy, as used in diplomatic term, the concept of a state to make decisions of its own, particularly in international affairs, and adopt preferred options without being influenced by others (Maj. Gen Shankarnarayanan, 2024).

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