

CHINA'S PRESENCE IN IOR – INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

NEWS: Parliament Committee Report has highlighted that **China's expanding strategic presence in the Indian Ocean Region** is a challenge for India.

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Debt-Trap Diplomacy in the IOR

- **Strategic Infrastructure Investments:** China's BRI involves massive investments in port, airport, and logistics infrastructure across the IOR under the guise of economic development, but with clear strategic and dual-use potential.
- **Dual-Use Infrastructure Concerns:** Many of these infrastructure assets—like Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Gwadar (Pakistan), and Kyaukphyu (Myanmar)—are built to serve both civilian and potential military purposes, enhancing Chinese strategic reach.
- **Debt-Trap Diplomacy Tactic:** These projects often burden host countries with unsustainable debt, leading to loss of sovereignty and greater strategic dependence on China. This is evident from Sri Lanka leasing Hambantota Port to China for 99 years.

Expansion of Chinese Naval Power in the IOR

- **Regular Naval Deployments:** China has increased the frequency and duration of People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) deployments in the Indian Ocean, ostensibly for anti-piracy or escort missions.
- **Establishment of Overseas Military Base:** China's military base in Djibouti, operational since 2017, serves as a logistics hub and signals a shift towards permanent naval presence in the region.
- **Support Infrastructure at Choke Points:** China is developing logistical and maintenance capabilities at key maritime choke points such as Bab el-Mandeb, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Malacca Strait, enhancing its power projection.

Use of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) for Surveillance

- **Survey and Research Vessels:** Chinese ships frequently conduct oceanographic surveys in the IOR, especially in India's neighbourhood (Sri Lanka, Maldives), under the pretext of scientific research.
- **Collection of Strategic Data:** These vessels gather sensitive data on seabed topography, ocean currents, and temperature profiles—crucial for submarine deployment and anti-submarine warfare.
- **Threat to India's Maritime Security:** Such activities raise concerns about intrusion into India's Underwater Domain Awareness (UDA) and possible mapping of Indian naval routes and vulnerabilities.

Strategic Port Development Close to India

- **Ports in India's Periphery:** China has invested in several key littoral states, developing or managing ports like Chittagong (Bangladesh), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Gwadar (Pakistan), which lie close to Indian maritime borders.
- **Encircling India Strategically:** These investments are perceived as part of a "String of Pearls" strategy to encircle India and limit its strategic autonomy in the IOR.
- **Long-term Maritime Power Projection:** China's aim is to build a comprehensive logistics and surveillance network to support long-distance naval operations.

India's Diplomatic Response and Bilateral Engagements

- **Raising Awareness Among Neighbours:** India has diplomatically cautioned IOR countries about the long-term strategic costs of accepting Chinese infrastructure funding without safeguards.
- **Emphasis on Regional Security:** India highlights the risk that Chinese-built infrastructure might be used for military purposes, undermining regional peace and stability.
- **Sri Lanka's Assurances to India (2024):** Sri Lanka's President reaffirmed that Sri Lankan territory would not be used in ways detrimental to Indian security, reflecting growing Indian diplomatic leverage.

India's Principled Opposition to BRI and CPEC

- **Opposition to BRI:** India is the only major regional country that has consistently opposed the BRI due to sovereignty concerns and strategic implications.
- **Core Concern – CPEC:** India's strongest objection lies in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, violating Indian sovereignty.
- **Repeated Diplomatic Protests:** India has consistently conveyed its objections to China and called for cessation of such activities, including through multilateral platforms.

India's View on Militarisation of the IOR

- **India's Anti-Militarisation Stand:** India has taken a clear stance that the militarisation of the IOR is undesirable and can destabilize regional security.
- **Broader Indo-Pacific Strategy:** India's position aligns with its Indo-Pacific vision that promotes a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based maritime order, free from unilateral aggression.

Significance and Revival of the Indian Ocean Region

- **Historic and Civilisational Linkages:** The IOR was a vibrant trade and cultural bridge historically, connecting South Asia, Africa, and Southeast Asia.
- **Neglect During Cold War:** The region remained geopolitically marginal during the Cold War due to the absence of great power rivalry.
- **21st Century Revival:** Economic rise of India and China, along with global trade shifts and Indo-Pacific strategic convergence, have revived global interest in the IOR.

Factors Contributing to IOR's Strategic Centrality

- **Emergence of Asian Economies:** China and India's growth has turned the IOR into a hub for global trade, investment, and infrastructure development.
- **Maritime Security Threats:** Piracy off Somalia, trafficking, and non-state actors have led to enhanced maritime policing and naval deployments by multiple countries.
- **Strategic Maritime Chokepoints:** Control over key chokepoints (Malacca, Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb) is critical for global energy flows and military access.
- **Indo-Pacific Concept:** The integration of the Indian and Pacific Oceans into a single strategic space under the "Indo-Pacific" construct highlights the IOR's importance in global geopolitics.

China's Strategy in the IOR – Subtle and Long-term

- **Non-Aggressive Approach:** Unlike its coercive behaviour in the South China Sea, China adopts a quiet, long-term strategy in the Indian Ocean to avoid triggering strong resistance.
- **Research and Surveillance Vessels:** These vessels support China's submarine mapping efforts and challenge India's maritime situational awareness.
- **Political and Economic Influence:** China uses trade, aid, and infrastructure to build enduring political alliances in South Asia and the IOR.

India's Strategic Response and Repositioning

- **Diplomatic Leadership:** India is emerging as the first responder during regional crises, enhancing goodwill and strategic trust among IOR countries.
- **Strategic Initiatives – MAHASAGAR:** India's new initiative "Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth for All in the Region" projects India's leadership role in IOR security and development.
- **Partnerships with Like-Minded Nations:** India is now open to collaborating with countries like the US, Japan, Australia, and France to counterbalance Chinese influence in the IOR.

Naval Modernisation and Capability Building

- **Indigenous Defence Production:** India is focusing on building its own maritime hardware, including aircraft carriers (INS Vikrant) and destroyers (INS Visakhapatnam), to strengthen naval deterrence.
- **Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA):** India is expanding its real-time tracking and surveillance capabilities through coastal radars, satellite systems, and joint patrols with partners.
- **Regional Outreach:** Through forums like IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium) and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), India is reinforcing its leadership role.

Conclusion: Contest for Primacy in the IOR

- **High-Stakes Strategic Competition:** The IOR is becoming the principal arena of India-China rivalry, with China pursuing quiet expansion and India asserting regional leadership.

- **India's Strategic Doctrine:** India's evolving maritime doctrine emphasizes defending its core interests, building partnerships, modernizing naval forces, and resisting encroachments by extra-regional powers.
- **Balancing China's Influence:** Through a blend of diplomacy, security cooperation, and indigenous capability building, India seeks to maintain a free, secure, and multipolar maritime order in the Indian Ocean.

Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/chinas-expanding-strategic-presence-in-indian-ocean-region-is-a-challenge-for-india-parliament-committee-report/article69748570.ece>