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INDIA-CHINA STRATEGIC COMPETITION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

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Abstract: *The XXI is considered by major countries in the Asia-Pacific region as 'the century of sea and ocean' and is accompanied by fierce competition among the nations to gain interest in the sea regions. On the basis that previously only considered the competition for military objectives, geostrategic bases and traffic channels through the straits, nowadays, countries worldwide have stepped up the competition for economic interests and marine resources. The development of military power and the competitive activities for resources at sea show clear the tendency to use the sea to contain the continent. In that context, the Indian Ocean, as the world's third largest ocean, has an important geographic location and rich and diverse natural resources; the arterial sea route is gradually becoming the center of new world geopolitics and an important area in the strategic competition between two 'Asian giants' - India and China. The competition between these countries in the Indian Ocean is growing and profoundly impacts the region's stability and security. This article focuses on the position and important role of the Indian Ocean in the policies of India and China, the fierce competition between the two countries in nearly two decades of the XXI century.*

Keywords: *Indian Ocean; India; China; Competition; Strategy*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the world and the region have witnessed the rise of both India and China. As neighboring countries that share a border of about 4,056 km and are the largest economies of the Indo-Pacific region, the fierce competition between these two powers will considerably impact the region's general situation. The recent rise of China has dramatically changed the regional and world power structure.

As the world prepares to enter the third decade of the XXI century, the strategic competition between China and India, the two great powers of Asia, is increasingly fierce. According to Dibyesh Anand: "An important factor in China's view is the idea of being the 'big man', the sole emerging power, while from the Indian side, it is an idea recognized by the international community and respected as China" (The Time of India 2020). In the current situation, China and India have established grand strategies at regional and global levels to

achieve overarching strategic interests. As for the Indian Ocean, which has an important strategic position, China and India have strengthened their close relationship, trying to find ways to connect this region in their calculations strongly. China and India today have territorial disputes, borders and global ambitions. Both are large markets and care deeply about safe and cheap trade routes and energy security.

At the same time, China and India have a long-standing traditional bilateral relationship, especially in trade and investment cooperation. However, protracted border conflicts, disputes, and economic and security concerns force these two neighbors to adopt a strategic approach to the competition rather than more cooperation. In terms of the nature of the relationship, India and China are opposed in terms of ideologies, are in conflict over strategic ambitions and goals, do not trust each other, but still have to cooperate to a certain extent, limited with each other, and head-to-head competition pervades the bilateral relationship.

In terms of the strategic interests of the two countries, China implements a competitive strategy to prevent a powerful India and tries all ways to restrain India's development, prevent the increase of cooperation between India and other countries in the region, especially the close economic, political, security and defense relations between the four countries, namely the US, Japan, India and Australia. Meanwhile, India identifies China as the main force that threatens India's security and development. Always in a weak position compared to China, India has never let down its guard against China, distrusted China, and passively dealt with China. The Indo-China relationship in the Indian Ocean is, to a certain extent, a 'mirror' reflecting the broader strategic relationship of these two countries, combining elements of cooperation, coexistence and competition.

INDIA-CHINA STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

The Indian Ocean's Geostrategic Position

The Indian Ocean, the world's third biggest ocean after the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, is between Asia, Oceania, Africa, and Antarctica and encompasses approximately 1/5 of the world's total ocean area (Varma 1967, 51). The Indian Ocean is a link between these four continents and a vital transportation corridor between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Historically, Western powers such as Portugal, the Netherlands, France, and the United Kingdom understood the Indian Ocean's strategic importance and battled for control of the ocean. The Portuguese built commercial posts in Goa and seized control of strategic sites in the Indian Ocean after discovering the Cape passage. They took control of the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf (in Socotra and Ormuz), and the Malacca Strait. The Portuguese monopoly on commerce in the Indian Ocean ended in 1641 when the Dutch took over Malacca. The British also achieved dominion over this ocean after decades of conflict between major nations. They drove the Portuguese out of Ormuz (1822), captured the Strait of Malacca (1759), defeated the Dutch at Trincomalee (1781), defeated the French at Mauritius (1810), captured Singapore (1819), and occupied strategic islands such as the Maldives, Seychelles, Chagos Islands, and finally Aden in 1839. The British acquired 'the most total dominion of all time' in the Indian Ocean with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 (Kaushik 1987, 14). At the start of the twenty-first century, the Indian Ocean

established itself as a significant maritime 'region' and a new political 'stage' for major nations, owing to its strategic security and economic significance.

Regarding strategy and security, the Indian Ocean has the highest concentration of waterways globally, with a strait serving as a vital transit conduit and a 'key' to global energy security. Additionally, the Indian Ocean is one of the busiest worldwide maritime commerce lanes, accounting for 1/4 of all global seaports and 1/5 of all cargo imported and exported (Zhu 2018, 4). Each year, over 100,000 boats sail through the Indian Ocean's waters (Singh 2016, 151), including 2/3 of all oil tankers, 1/3 of all big cargo ships, and half of all container ships in the globe. Each year, crude oil carried across the Indian Ocean amounts to 46.5% of all crude oil shipped by sea, while crude oil products account for 70% of global production. Annually, the value of two-way international trade over the Indian Ocean exceeds one trillion dollars (Vietnam News Agency 2013, 3).

The Indian Ocean is also home to some of the world's most vital sea lanes and strategic 'chokepoints'¹- the Suez Canal, Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz in the northwest, the Mozambique Channel in the southwest, the Malacca Strait, Sunda Strait, and Lombok Strait in the southeast, and the Cape of Good Hope in the southeast. Among the Indian Ocean's major maritime waterways, the Strait of Malacca and the Strait of Hormuz are of critical strategic importance. Each day, 32.2 million barrels of crude oil and gasoline are moved across these two straits, accounting for more than half of the world's marine oil traffic. The Indian Ocean accounts for over 40% of offshore oil production (Karim 2017, 57). This implies that gaining control of the Indian Ocean maximizes its abundant natural riches and allows for the containment of other countries in the area via shipping via the 'blood-vessel' maritime route.

Economically, the Indian Ocean is provided with abundant natural resources, tremendous marine economic potential, and significant riches in the form of oil, natural gas, minerals, and other resources. Mineral resources, primary oil and natural gas, are concentrated in the Persian Gulf. Oil reserves comprise 62% of global oil reserves, while natural gas reserves comprise 35% of global natural gas reserves. In terms of metals, the Indian Ocean is extremely rich, with 60% uranium, 40% gold, 80% diamond resources, and a variety of other minerals (Reddy 2016, 193). Additionally, numerous other mineral resources are available in coastal areas, including tin (56.6%), manganese (28.5%), nickel (25.2%), natural rubber (77.3%), iron, bauxite, titanium, lithium, cobalt, and chromium, all of which satisfy world powers 'cravings' for the Indian Ocean region (Dowdy 1983, 434). Additionally, new geological investigations indicate the presence of numerous oil and gas resources in Myanmar and Bangladesh, as well as off their shores (Muni 2005, 92).

Along with the transfer of the world's strategic, economic, and political center to the Asia-Pacific area, the focus of attention for major countries at sea has switched from the Atlantic-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific region in the XXI century. It is quickly becoming a crucial battleground in the conflict of great powers because of its geostrategic importance and priceless resources. Alfred Thayer Mahan, dubbed 'the founder of sea power theory' said, "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas. In the twenty-first century, the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters" (Scott 2006, 98).

¹ Referring to a geographical location above ground such as a valley or bridge or at sea such as a strait.

The Strategic Interests of India in the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean is the only ocean in the world named after a coastal country. Thus, while discussing the Indian Ocean's physical structure, it is hard to overlook India and its 'God-given' geographical advantage in the Indian Ocean region. India is to the east of the Indian Ocean, is a continental power, and holds a crucial location in the ocean's center. Simultaneously, the Indian Ocean plays a critical strategic role in India's security environment. According to K.M. Pannikar:

Although the Indian Ocean is a significant ocean for other countries, it is a sea of life and death for India. India's trade is centered on the Indian Ocean, and India's freedom is likewise contingent on the freedom of this ocean's surface. Without safeguarding India's coasts, no industrial development, commercial progress, and stable governmental framework would be conceivable (Sarath 2019).

For an extended period, India aspired to be the dominating force in the Indian Ocean. India has traditionally considered the Indian Ocean to be its 'backyard', and this is a natural state of affairs (Berlin 2006, 60). It wants to be the most powerful and influential country in the Indian Ocean area. Within the Indian Ocean, India, as a maritime power encompassing the majority of the South Asian subcontinent, has a 7,516.6-kilometer-long coastline (including 1,762 kilometers of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands coastline and 132 kilometers of the Lakshadweep Islands coastline) and a 2-million-square-kilometer exclusive economic zone (Chu and Bach 2015). As a result, India's marine security environment is exceptionally complicated compared to the comparatively confined continental area. This intricacy was emphasized by Kavalam Madhava Panikkar (1945), the father of Indian maritime theory:

The Indian Ocean is distinguished from the Pacific and Atlantic seas because its primary characteristic is in the interior rather than on the sides. This ocean is located beneath the Indian continent, and India spreads hundreds of kilometers into the ocean, all the way to Cape Comorin. India's geographical location has altered the nature of the Indian Ocean (p. 19).

The geographical environment has inextricably linked India to the Indian Ocean, laying the groundwork for India's traditional 'towards the sea' approach. As early as 1958, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru stated: "Whoever dominates the Indian Ocean would first result in the hegemony of others over India's maritime commerce, and then in India's independence" (Chu and Bach 2015). Thus, Indian maritime scholars assert that if the Indian Ocean region ceases to be a guaranteed sea of security, India's security and political position would be jeopardized by other countries, especially China.

The Strategic Interests of China in the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean is critical for China's marine commerce. China's critical energy imports from the Middle East must transit through the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea (Naidu 2015, 114). China's oil and gas imports come from the Middle East and Africa. In contrast, most

of its mineral imports come from West African nations, eastern South America, and Australia. The shipping route from the Arabian Peninsula to the western Pacific Ocean is regarded as the new maritime Silk Road. The Indian Ocean encompasses most of this maritime Silk Road, which serves as a vital sea route for China's critical resource imports and overseas commerce. By 2004, China had surpassed Japan as the most significant oil exporter in East Asia and had surpassed Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Iran as the world's second-largest oil importer, with approximately two-thirds coming from Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Iran (Klieman 2015, 211).

As a result, the Indian Ocean and the transfer of oil from Western Asia via the Strait of Malacca have grown in importance. Oil imported via the Strait of Malacca from the Persian Gulf to the northern Indian Ocean is estimated to account for 50% of China's total oil imports; oil imported via the Strait of Malacca from West Africa and Southeast Africa accounts for about 30% of China's total oil imports (Athwal 2007, 32). More than 80% of China's oil imports come via the Strait of Malacca. Additionally, this crucial waterway accounts for roughly 25% of China's exports to the Gulf and Europe (Mathur 2002, 554).

Furthermore, China's imports of other vital resources, such as iron ore, manganese ore, chromium, and non-ferrous metals, are mainly carried across the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean handles 40% of China's import and export commerce. As a result, China's security and the economy will likely suffer if the maritime route across the Indian Ocean is disrupted. India and China have strategic interests in the Indian Ocean and cannot afford to overlook this critical waterway. In the Indian Ocean area, competition between the two countries is unavoidable.

THE INDO-CHINA STRATEGIC COMPETITION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN DURING THE FIRST TWO DECADES OF THE XXI CENTURY

The Indo-China relationship in the Indian Ocean area is, in some ways, a 'mirror' of the two nations' more comprehensive strategic relationship, blending parts of collaboration and cohabitation with elements of conflict. While India regards itself as the dominant power in the Indian Ocean and regards leadership in the region as a part of India's 'manifest destiny' (Holmes 2009, 38), the presence of foreign naval powers in the region, particularly China, is essentially illegal; China refuses to recognize India's claims to great power status or perceived privileges in South Asia or elsewhere in the Indian Ocean region. The competition between India and China in the Indian Ocean has existed since the late twentieth century. It has grown increasingly severe in the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

China's emergence has significantly impacted global development since the Cold War, particularly in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, altering the worldwide distribution of power. According to Robert D. Kaplan, a United States Naval Academy professor, "China is actively reshaping the Eastern Hemisphere's power balance. Its influence stretches from Central Asia to the Russian Far East and from the South China Water to the Indian Ocean, both on land and sea" (Kaplan 2012, 200). China's 'ascendancy' has profoundly affected the area and neighboring nations such as India and the Indian Ocean region. Over the last two decades, Chinese security planners have developed an interest in the Indian Ocean. China also saw that India might "build a network of monitoring, balance, and expand its control over the whole Indian Ocean" (Li 2008, 233) because of its key position in the Indian Ocean (Li 2008, 233). As a

result, China constructed a military port on the Arabian coast of Gwadar around the turn of the XXI century (Pakistan). This not only converts Gwadar into a crude oil transit hub but also provides a pretext for the Chinese Navy's presence in the Indian Ocean, allowing it to "surveil naval activities. India's actions in the Arabian Sea and the prospects for US-Indian maritime collaboration in the Indian Ocean" (Hong 2008, 6).

Additionally, Bangladesh has granted the Chinese Navy the ability to use the port of Chittagong, which India has long coveted as a transit point for oil and natural gas transiting from Myanmar to India's northeast. China and Sri Lanka inked a master agreement in April 2005, allowing China the right to utilize Colombo's ports as a gateway to the Indian Ocean. As a result, New Delhi feels that "China's engagement in Myanmar encircles India on three sides and leaves India's zone of influence open in the absence of a buffer nation" (Hong 2008, 7). Indian defense authorities think that China's building of vital facilities in the Bay of Bengal will harm India's long-term security by allowing China to increase its influence. The influence of the Indian Ocean, which India has traditionally considered its 'strategic sea', is a maritime security concern in the two regional powers' strategic struggle (Selth 1996, 218).

China assumed a more aggressive involvement in the Indian Ocean region's affairs in the second decade of the twenty-first century. For the first time in 2013, China produced a policy document titled the 'Blue Book of the Indian Ocean' for the first time, emphasizing the Indian Ocean's strategic importance to China (Hilali 2015, 141). China is establishing critical points and areas throughout the Indian Ocean region's system of sea lanes, including the Bay of Bengal, the waters around Sri Lanka, and the Arabian Sea bordering Pakistan's border with Iran (Suryanarayana 2016, 4). The Bay of Bengal, particularly the Six Degrees Channel at the western entrance to the Strait of Malacca, is critical for China's bidirectional international trade and commerce. The Six India and Ten Indian Channels divide India's Nicobar Islands from the Andaman Islands to the north, strategically important commercially and militarily for both New Delhi and Beijing.

Currently, China's primary interest in the Indian Ocean is energy security. The Chinese government faces a 'dilemma' in Malacca due to its over-reliance on the strait and the influence of US efforts to control what is dubbed the 'most oil-global route'. Indeed, whoever controls the Strait of Malacca will also control China's oil shipping routes. As a result, the commerce and energy security issue has encouraged China to intensify its 'seaward' program, particularly with the Indian Ocean's coastline countries. China is fully aware of America's great power status and India's strategic advantage in the area and is using a coordinated approach to avoid any irritating interaction with both nations. This allows China to expand its strategic space through collaboration with Indian Ocean coastline states. China is also aware that India may use the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to blockade the western entry to the Malacca Strait, which China relies on (Kaplan 2009, 20).

China has proposed two remedies to its 'stuck' status in the Strait of Malacca: expanding its footprint in the Indian Ocean and creating trade routes and transcontinental energy lines. Through Central Asia, utilizing the 'String of Pearls' strategy (Nguyen and Nguyen 2017, 4). A 'String of Pearls' is a term used by American analysts to refer to China's maritime traffic routes connecting southern China to the Indian Ocean, passing through the Mandab Strait, the Malacca Strait, the Strait of Hormuz, and Lombok, as well as other strategic naval interests such as

Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Maldives, and Somalia. The military installation on Hainan Island, the container shipping facility in Chittagong (Bangladesh), the deep-water port in Sittwe, the Kyaukpyu port, the Yangon port (Myanmar), the navy station in Gwadar (Pakistan), and the Sri Lankan port of Hambantota are referred to as the 'pearls'. These 'pearls' range from mainland China's shore to the coastlines of the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf reefs (Pehrson 2006, 3). Each 'pearl' in the 'String of Pearls' symbolizes China's geopolitical clout or military presence in the Indian Ocean and other key seas. China intends to use this plan to extend its influence from Hainan in the East China Sea via the world's busiest sea routes to the Persian Gulf. The primary objectives are to restrict India, secure energy security, and maintain control over critical maritime lanes (Tran 2012, 77).

To carry out the 'String of Pearls' plan, China has developed relations with most of India's neighbors, including Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. In this sense, Myanmar is a potential springboard for China's ambitions to expand its sphere of influence into Southeast Asia and South Asia (Gupta 2013, 82). Myanmar occupies a critical geopolitical location, sandwiched between two major Asian powers, China and India. As a country on the Indian Ocean coastline, Myanmar is gaining strategic importance for Chinese authorities. Not only is Burma strategically vital to India, but it is also a critical component in China's plans to expand into the Indian Ocean. China's activities in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea (Myoe 2015, 26-27), the only neighboring countries that may provide China with access to the Indian Ocean from the east, are the first steps toward ensuring China's best interests in the Indian Ocean. China has also aided Myanmar in expanding naval bases at Sittwe, Hianggyi, Khaukphyu, Mergui, and Zadetkyi Kyun by constructing refueling facilities and radar stations for Chinese submarines operating in the Bay of Bengal (Singh 2007, 3). These installations are used to acquire intelligence on the actions of the Indian Navy and serve as advance bases for Chinese Navy operations in the Indian Ocean. With India's naval development ambitions stalled, the Chinese Navy's rising presence in the region has had far-reaching strategic ramifications for India. China's capacity to push deeper into Myanmar is eroding India's traditional geographical advantages. In response to China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean, India has organized a variety of maritime security agendas and launched several economic and security cooperation initiatives, collective action for peace and security, and improved regional cooperation, such as India's outreach initiative 'Security and Growth for All in Regions' (SAGAR).² The action is viewed as part of India's Indian Ocean strategy to assert its position in an increasingly competitive global environment and to fight China's expansionist plans in the Indian Ocean.

Additionally, India has boosted maritime cooperation with the US and Japan, heightening Beijing's concern. Beijing's authorities view it as an attempt to constrain China's maritime strategic growth in the Indian Ocean area, given that India lacks China's ability to act in the South China Sea. In 2007, the Malabar naval exercise between India and the US was expanded to a large-scale, multilateral exercise in the Bay of Bengal involving the US, India, Japan, Singapore, and Australia. China views this event as an attempt to halt the country's growth (Brewster 2010, 551). The 2014 India-US Joint Strategic Vision Statement also reaffirmed "the critical necessity of preserving maritime security and freedom of navigation and overflight throughout the region, particularly in the East Sea" (Das 2018, 161).

² In Hindi's language, the word 'sagar' means 'ocean'.

Along with the 'String of Pearls' strategy, China increases connections with regional countries through assistance, economic, and defense agreements, as well as by establishing new cooperative projects. China established the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' program in 2014 (a land-based belt connecting China to Central Asia, Russia, and Europe), as well as the 'Maritime Silk Road of the Twenty-First Century', which connects the Strait of Malacca to India, the Middle East, and East Africa (referred to as the 'Belt and Road Initiative'). This program intends to achieve strategic objectives in politics, security, economics, and territorial sovereignty while also establishing a new framework of game rules in the region and around the world in which China plays a leadership role (Tran 2017, 100). India has undertaken the Project of Maritime Routes and Natural Landscapes in the Indian Ocean in response to the Beijing government's 'Maritime Silk Road' effort with the Indian Ocean's coastline countries (Mausam). This multilateral project aims to reestablish India's old maritime channels and cultural ties with neighboring nations. The Mausam project's objective is to extend the connection from East Africa to the Arabian peninsula, the Indian mainland, Sri Lanka, and finally to Southeast Asia - all of which have an Indian cultural imprint and impact. The Mausam project is a significant strategic planning endeavor for India's standing in the region and the globe at large.

In short, India and China are quickly establishing themselves as major Indo-Pacific powers. This is also accompanied by China's growing influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, where New Delhi thinks Beijing is shaping the strategic environment and forming connections to rival India strategically. Hence, the India-China rivalry is one of the most significant strategic problems confronting the Indian Ocean area in the XXI century.

CONCLUSION

Since the Cold War's conclusion, the Indian Ocean has been a persistent struggle between several international powers. Due to the region's geopolitical, economic, and commercial significance has become a worldwide hotspot for competition and confrontation, altering the nature of international politics. The Indian Ocean became a 'pivot' of international conflicts and power dynamics in the twenty-first century. Combined with the Near East and Central Asia proximity, the Indian Ocean area generates a significant new geopolitical game (Kaplan 2010, 18).

As two 'rising' Asian powers, India and China compete for political positions, roles, influence, and strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. China is progressively demonstrating its interest in this ocean, which India views as a critical location. While the Indian Navy aspires to be a 'guarantor of security' in the Indian Ocean, China aspires to be a "guarantor of regional peace in pursuit of a greater geopolitical objective" (Nguyen & Nguyen 2017, 4). India and China's aspirations for world power status and a common interest in energy security have encouraged the two continental giants to shift their focus from land to water. Due to its critical geostrategic location, the Indian Ocean has become a focal point for India and China's seaward policy. One may argue that the Indian Ocean in the first two decades of the twenty-first century is where China's and India's interests and influences began to collide and interfere with one another. India, in other words, is China's most credible strategic adversary in this area (Holmes 2008, 53).

In brief, the Indian Ocean area, as a microcosm of the world, is increasingly becoming a focal point of major nations' foreign policies, particularly India and China. There is rivalry and collaboration in various vital domains, including the Indian Ocean (from politics, diplomacy, commerce, business, and so on) to military security and energy. The strategic struggle between these two Asian 'giants' is expected to intensify in the twenty-first century's following decade.

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