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Research Article

# Strategic Posturing of China in IOR: Implications for Regional Peace and Stability

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## Abstract

*China has been working on a modernization plan for its military. Particularly, the People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN) has been the focus of modernization due to China's seaward economic growth and development for protecting its maritime economic interests. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an example of strategic envisioning which has multiple facades besides dividends. Since China has a massive trade volume transiting Indian Ocean Region, PLAN has increased engagement in this region. Its modernization including its naval capabilities, surface and underwater vessels, unmanned maritime vehicles (UMVs), acoustic systems for information, and other technological advancements has made China's strategic posture in IOR dynamic and is threatening India's intrinsic naval supremacy in the region with certain implications over regional peace and stability. This is exploratory research conducted to determine the nature of naval competition and the resulting balance of power to identify implications for regional peace and stability.*

**Keywords:** Naval Modernization, UMVs, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUVs), Informatization, Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

## Introduction

The rise of China has emerged as one of the most remarkable phenomena of the Twenty-first Century with numerous prospects and implications for other actors. As part of this rise, China has an explicit desire to strengthen its

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People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) with the purpose to safeguard its economic interests in different oceanic spaces which is sometimes perceived to be a threat by some regional and extra-regional actors. China's BRI has particularly proved itself as a strategy that has the potential to bring massive changes in the international economic and political environment. The port development projects in different countries are specifically seen as dual-purpose investments of China to be used as naval bases as and if desired. Since BRI comprises two integral parts of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), it has extensive outreach toward other states of Africa and Eurasia by land and sea routes in which a larger part of maritime connectivity through the Indian Ocean (IO) is to be protected by PLAN. India perceives the growing role and involvement of China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as a major threat to its naval position in this region. Therefore, this paper argues that the asymmetrical naval power trajectories of China and India have increased competition within IOR causing mutual cynicism affecting regional peace and stability desired for ongoing socioeconomic and strategic activities in the region.

China and India are two important actors in the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, respectively. These two countries not only enjoy geographical proximity but have voluminous territory, sizeable economies, dense populations, industrial development, and technological advancement with strategic ambitions vis-à-vis their regional command and control. Both have a history of territorial disputes, conflicts, and border skirmishes, but without causing a major disruption to their mutual trade and commercial relations. Even during the military standoff in Eastern Ladakh, which started in May 2021, their bilateral trade touched the highest mark in 2021 with US$ 125 billion with an increase of 43.3 percent from the year 2020.[1] It gives China-India bilateral relations an outlook of complex interdependence.

Since the inception of BRI, China has emerged in the IO from the Pacific as a strong partner for the coastal countries of the IO which continues to haunt New Delhi. PLAN's modernization and outreach have certain implications for India's claims of naval supremacy and command of IOR. China's key aspiration is the uninterrupted foreign trade and energy security which has been acting as a driving force behind BRI. India and the US view BRI as a long-term security-oriented initiative and are building strategic pressure on China. They consider the ports developed by China in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar as an attempt to encircle India having the dual capability to be used as naval bases.[2] Abundant literature has been produced

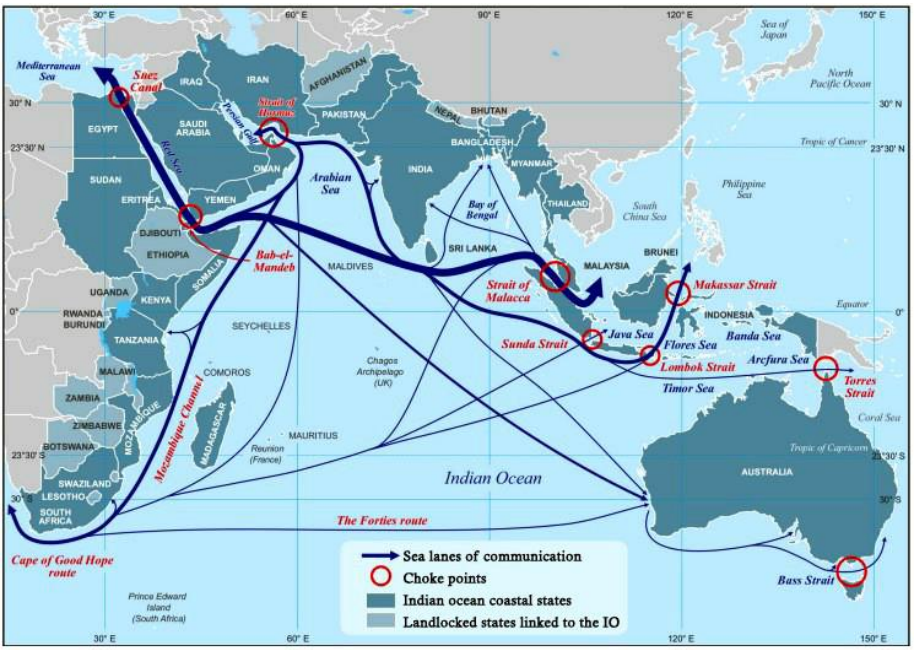
regarding China's two ocean strategy,[3] India's Indo-Pacific strategy,[4] geopolitical and geoeconomic dimensions of BRI,[5] and growing tensions and power competition between China and India.[6] In the same context, Joshua White has discussed China's strategic spending and its maritime strategy in consideration of its important objectives.[7] However, the academic discourse has not discussed the regional implications of the antagonistic strategic posturing of both countries. This paper aims at exploring how China's maritime strategic posturing in IOR as well as in the Pacific Ocean has threatened India's regional naval supremacy in the region; despite China's frequent reassurance of its strengthening naval capabilities as safeguarding strategies of its economic interests. This strategic competition in IOR has contributed to regional instability, further endangering peaceful navigation and maritime security. Being an exploratory study, this paper focuses on the comparative analysis based on secondary data to determine factors providing China with firm grounds for a strong foothold and making India feel threatened.

This research has been organized into the following sections: i. significance of the Indian Ocean Region, ii. India as an essential regional actor and naval power in IOR, iii. China as an extra-regional actor and challenger to the status quo, iv. naval power comparison between China and India: balance or imbalance, v. China-India strategic imbalance and implications for regional peace and stability, and vi. conclusion.

## Significance of IOR

The Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean. It is rimmed by India, Pakistan, and Iran in the north, Arab Peninsula and Africa in the west, Australia, Indonesia, and the Malay Peninsula in the east, and the Southern Ocean in the south. Its uniqueness and importance can be evaluated from its old historical linkages with the rest of the world as a trade route of goods, fineries, spices, as well as slaves. Another major attraction has been its favorable weather and wind system of monsoon which has been exclaimed as a 'life-affirming and beneficial climatic phenomenon' by Kaplan who considers IOR much beyond a 'stimulating geography'.[8] It has several straits and a strategic canal connecting different seas with other seas and oceans.[9] The Strait of Malacca (SoM), Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, Strait of Hormuz (SoH), Sunda Strait, and Lombok Strait are quite significant for trade and commercial activities in IOR. Therefore, IO has been described as the strategic crossroads of the Pacific Ocean, Atlantic Ocean, and the Mediterranean Sea.

**Figure 1:** West-East-West SLOCs Traversing the Indian Ocean




**Source:** Venter, "India and Africa: Maritime Security and India's Strategic Interests in the Western Indian Ocean."

This ocean's significance in the contemporary era has further increased as IOR carries 50 percent of the world's container ships. It contains one-third of the world's bulk cargo traffic and two-thirds of the world's oil shipment making it the most important sea route. Huge maritime activities take place in IOR through numerous sea lines of communication (SLOCs) acting as the main economic arteries for different oceanic regions. Those are important for social connectivity, commercial routes, and military movements. IOR hosts different navies from around the globe like the Chinese Navy, US Navy, Indian Navy, and the navies of the US allies including North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries. The foremost factors enhancing this presence and rationalizing mutual competition are geoeconomic activity and political influence in the region which have gradually diverted this competition more towards the struggle for command and control over activities in the IO through military posturing. Major regional competitors—China and India—and their activities make IOR a significant maritime arena. The most crucial part of this competition and even warfare is information, usually coming from intelligence based on which decision

making and strategy building are performed by states. This is one of the most important areas of naval modernization in which both countries are increasing their capabilities.

This intelligence-based information becomes more relevant in the maritime domain and comprises command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR), which define the command and control over seas and oceans. Traditionally, low flying surveillance aircrafts have been used in maritime zones, but the Twenty-first Century has brought forward naval technological advancements in the form of UAVs or drones,[10] and UMVs like UUVs,[11] and unmanned surface vessels (USVs), which use radio frequency for information gathering and transferring to relevant parties. The contemporary era is witnessing further advancement of maritime technology in the underwater acoustic system enabling state actors and in some conditions, non-state actors (NSAs) for wireless information transmissions with a variety of operations. This is a networked system of sensors, nodes, robots, modems, batteries, etc., deployed over the surface or submerged, transmitting collected information through wireless signaling.[12] Deploying an underwater network allows states to get real-time information through monitoring of different maritime zones, and makes remote configuration possible. It enables the connectivity of offshore deployed UMVs with onshore human operators. These advanced systems of information and intelligence collection and transmission are the most desired capabilities which act as a driving force behind the naval modernization of China and India in IOR as a prerequisite of the modern day competition.

## India as Regional Actor and Naval Power in IOR

Historically, India has kept certain impressions about oceans, particularly the IO as gods' business making it venerated domain.[13] India being the largest country in IOR, its intrinsic potential to dominate geographically is coupled with the desire to keep a firm hold over IOR politics. India's geographical positioning as a peninsula in IOR gives it a long coastline of 7500 km east and west of the IO with twelve major ports and two hundred small ports, reflecting the voluminous economic potential of India.[14] It was Jawaharlal Nehru's vision to transform IOR into a regional version of 'Monroe Doctrine', which required that the extra-regional actors be barred from entering or accessing IOR to prevent conflicts and challenges. The vision set by India's founding father underpins India's strategic thinking in IOR.

India has a dominant maritime modernization approach which reflects well in its maritime doctrines and strategies. India's maritime strategic thinking and doctrinal approach have evolved over time through every new document or revision. The first document 'Indian Maritime Doctrine' was prepared by the Indian Navy and published in 2004. The revised version of this document was published in 2009 and was modified once again in 2015. With a similar tone, maritime strategies launched for the first time as 'Freedom to Use the Seas' in 2007 and then as 'Ensuring Secure Seas' in 2015 were more auspicious. The content analysis conducted by Łukaszuk identifies changing disposition that reflected not only in the content but also in the titles. He saw 'the first one passive and the second one assertive and promising more openness and engagement in regional issues'[15] reflecting the shifting dynamics of IOR geopolitics and geostrategy.

India's '*Sagar Mala Project,*' initiated in 2015, is another example of the country's approach covering geoeconomic aspects of sustainable growth by augmenting its sea power through port-led development by modernizing ports' infrastructure for integrated transport system from coasts to hinterland. It includes the development of smart cities and townships, coastal economic zones (CEZs), special economic zones (SEZs), development of new and existing ports for better merchandized shipping and port handling.[16] This project is still incomplete but shows India's vision regarding its maritime agenda.

India has steadily increased its engagement within the region for two decades but it is still striving to achieve its aspirations for further expansion of political influence and control over the region. It remains cynical of China's growing maritime presence in the region. As China expanded its footprint in the IO through the development of maritime infrastructure in littoral states like Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and East Africa to acquire opportunities for robust diplomatic and trade relations with IOR countries, India and the US have considered it as their common enemy. China's steady maneuvering in all spatial realms has compelled other regional actors in IOR and the Pacific Ocean to think about countering China. The making of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) or Quad is believed to be catalyzed by China's policy and posturing in the Pacific Ocean region.[17] Although China was maintaining rather uneventful relations with regional neighbors including India, certain incidents raised alarm among the neighboring countries; and in order to respond to China, Quad 1.0 was created.[18]

Quad's second iteration or Quad 2.0 in 2017 after ten years of dormancy is another desperate effort by the four fundamental parties—the US, Australia, Japan, and India. Even during the dormant years of Quad, India, and Australia had been fostering strategic relations, e.g., the 2014-nuclear cooperation deal and the first joint naval exercise in September 2015;[19] but the revival of Quad in 2017 is an exasperated strategic move. Since then, regular meetings are being conducted at intervals, however, one significant event was the Raisina Dialogue held in January 2018 among the top brass of navies of the US, Australia, Japan, and India with an intent to signal China about their togetherness to counter Chinese maritime objectives.[20] In the wake of Covid-19, a video conference was held in March 2020, which apparently seemed to discuss ways to deal with the pandemic; it was attended by seven countries including New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam, and the Indian Media declared it a 'Quad Plus' event.[21] Therefore, the revival of Quad 2.0 with potential opening up for other states can become a precursor to shaping up of new alliance in the region with the common goal to counter China in IOR and Pacific.

The US and India have become comprehensive strategic partners in IOR and both are facilitating each other through several agreements and understandings such as Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA),[22] Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA),[23] and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement(BECA)[24] for geo-spatial cooperation. [25]

Another area of modernization is related to underwater warfare and anti-submarine warfare by using sonars to detect sound frequencies. The US started using the technology called 'Sound Surveillance System (SOSUS)' during the Cold War to stop Soviet submarines to enter or harm SLOCs in the North Atlantic. This system was restarted to be used in early 2005 to detect the movement of Chinese submarines in the SCS. Sooner it took the form of the 'Fish Hook Undersea Defense Line' extending till the Bay of Bengal giving an edge to India in locating Chinese submersibles.[26] The system uses active or passive acoustic sensors to detect modern day submarines which can stay underwater for a longer time.

The expansion of bilateral and multilateral naval cooperation is evident from KONKAN SHAKTI 2004, SLINEX 2005, AUSINDEX 2015, IN-BN CORPAT 2018, Bongosagar 2019, MALABAR, PASSEX 2020, MILAN, Sahyog-Kaijin, JIMEX, IMCOR 2013, ZAIR-al-BAHR 2019, planned and executed by India providing it with strong foothold through

cooperative security arrangements and exercises. Then tri-services exercises with wider impact like Tiger Triumph-2019 and INDRA also strengthened Indian strategic posturing and military cooperation in IOR.[27] The exercises with the involvement of the US and/or its NATO allies serve dual purposes of reinforcing the strategic partnership and containment of China's role and influence in IOR and broader Indo-Pacific.

Other regional arrangements like the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are also in place in which India enjoys dominance in important functions like decision making, which gives it a significant edge over other actors with stakes in IOR.

## China as a Counterweight in the IOR

China is an important player in IOR because of its economic supremacy in Asia besides its military capabilities. China has been increasing its presence in the region through several strategic acts, but the launch of the trillion-dollar BRI to connect its economy with the rest of the world is the most prominent. The Navy had been brought at first place in the hierarchy of forces in the early 1980s: PLAN developed anti-ship missiles, modern surface combatants, submarines, underwater acoustic deployments, and longer-range delivery systems as part of China's military modernization to augment China's naval prowess greatly. China's growing naval capabilities and involvement have significant implications for India. Both India and the US share a common interest i.e., to prevent China's role in oceanic regions, the US has sought to prop up India as a counterweight to China.

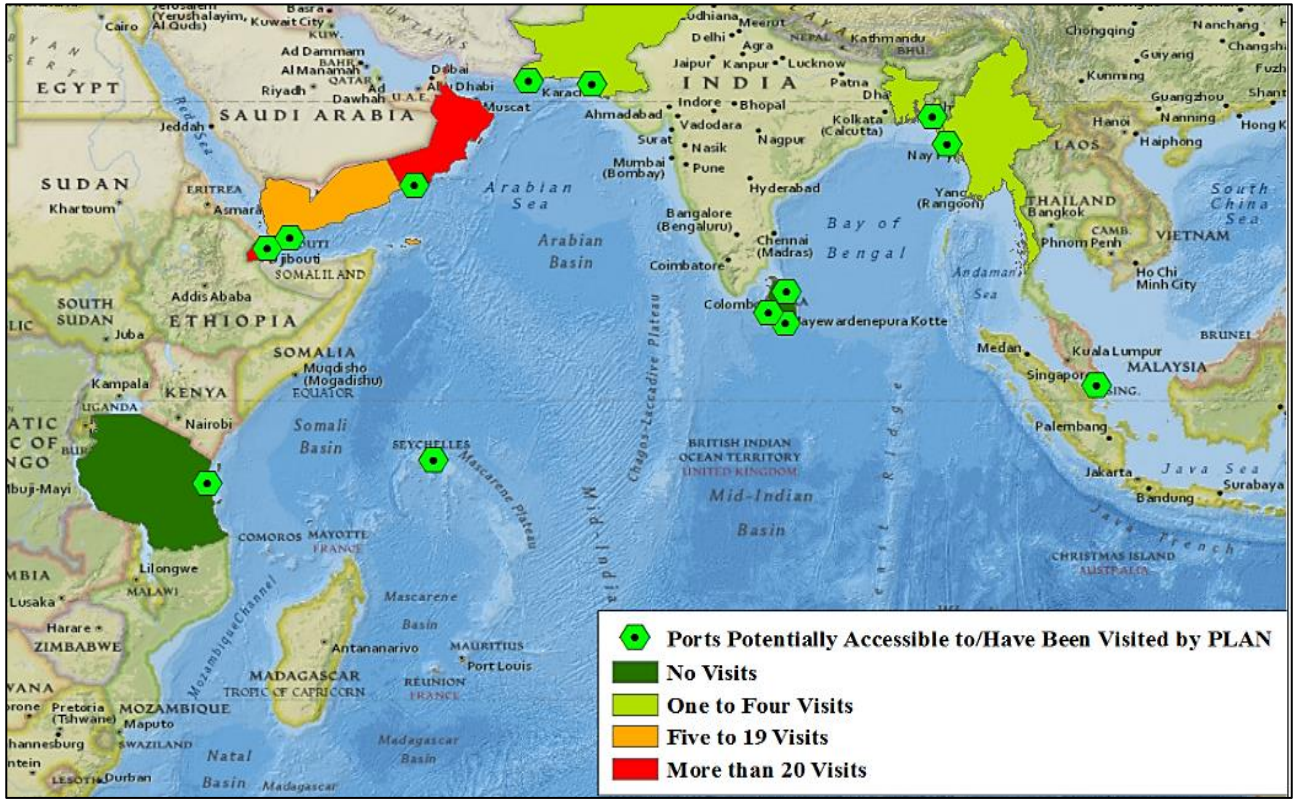
The rise of China across oceanic regions, while perceived as a threat, has prompted nations (including India) to reshape their maritime strategies. Though India was following the 'Look East' policy since 1991 as its foreign policy to build trade and commercial ties with emerging South East and East Asian economies, it started the second phase of this policy in 2003,[28] aiming at increasing Indian influence and role in the Asia Pacific region as a counterweight to China. India's Indo-Pacific approach too was an extension of its 'Look East' policy, naturally aligned with the US' Indo-Pacific strategy to contain China, proved a major modification of Indian strategic thinking about its role and maritime strategy in IOR which encouraged the process of modernization of Indian Navy. It further boosted Indian dominance in the region but China's BRI, particularly the Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk

Road (MSR) passing through the Pacific and IO and infrastructure and ports' development under that project, dampened and distressed Indian aspirations for dominance in IO. Indian and Western academics and media considered Chinese initiatives to constitute a policy to encircle India through a 'string of pearls.'[29] China never agreed with this interpretation, rather it offered India to become part of BRI too. However, neither India nor the US and its allies accept China's standpoint on BRI, and labeling its moves as a 'string of pearls' to encircle India, a countering approach of developing ports and bases has been initiated which is being denominated as a 'necklace of diamonds' in which diamonds are Changi (Singapore), Sabang (Indonesia), Chabahar (Iran), Duqm (Oman), and Assumption Islands (Seychelles) in oceanic space, and few more arrangements of strategic cooperation like bilateral air corridor between Mongolia and India which will use India's credit line, India and Japan's joint agreement over Asia-Africa Growth Corridor,[30] and understanding with Vietnam and Central Asian states over strategic issues reflecting India's intentions in the region.

If China's intentions in IOR are deciphered, a major share goes to providing socioeconomic security to its citizens, investments, industrial growth, agricultural sector, and other cultural and political engagements. As part of its foreign policy objectives to support BRI into other oceanic regions and protect its national interests, China's naval development and modernization, too, is part of its national security aimed at providing support and security to its maritime interests.[31] Since the launch of BRI, this process of modernization has geared up. China is keeping itself vigilant and prepared to protect its national interests across the world.

China's two-ocean strategy has long been under discussion. It is interpreted at two levels; at the regional level from being near seas to far seas defense capabilities. Far seas defense or offshore defense acts at the extra-regional level. PLAN prepares itself to provide offshore defense by practicing 'operations in distant waters, focusing first on cooperation missions.'[32] The same applies to the IO giving ground to China's PLAN for enhancing its capabilities of blue water navy. Kaplan sees China's two-ocean strategy as an expansion of its influence in the footsteps of the US and subsequent power after waning US supremacy worldwide.[33] According to Kaplan, China's plan to connect the Pacific and Indian Oceans through a strategic canal passing through Kra Isthmus in Thailand is attracting different actors to find opportunities for investment and infrastructural development in different sectors to benefit from this project too as 'for some time now, the strategic heart of the maritime world has not been the North Atlantic, but instead the Pacific and Greater Indian Ocean region.'[34]

**Figure 2:** Port Calls by PLAN in IOR




**Source:** Erickson and Collins, "Emerging Chinese Access Points in the Indian Ocean Region."

Modernization of the Chinese military is still following the vision of the former President Hu Jintao for naval advancements. In October 2007, he delivered a landmark speech at the occasion of Seventeenth Party Congress in which he stated that:[35]

> To attain the strategic objective of building computerized armed forces and winning IT-based warfare, we will accelerate composite development of mechanization and computerization, carry out military training under IT-based conditions, modernize every aspect of logistics, intensify our efforts to train a new type of high-caliber military personnel in large numbers and change the mode of generating combat capabilities.

Besides protecting its economic interests, another significant dimension of the strategic posturing of China in IOR is motivated by the desire for command and control of oceanic spaces. This is much like the US, which Kaplan sees as a consolidated capability of technological advancements and hardware progression with clear goals, consistency, and flow of information. China considers this flow of information a critical element of its modernization approach to compete with the world and calls it 'informatization'.[36] This concept stays at the core of PLAN modernization enabling China to utilize it in peace and war, on the surface of the sea or underwater.

Bommakanti quotes a definition of 'informatization' as 'gaining information superiority over the adversary in the maritime arena and in naval operations'[37] where the information spectrum is quite wide and intense due to China's hyperspectral imaging satellite which is very advanced with the capability to incorporate 'command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR)' which will have the capability to 'support ballistic, cruise missiles, and anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM) for precision-strike on moving targets (aircraft carriers and surface combatants) in the Indo-Pacific region.'[38]

To deal with SOSUS- Fish Hook technology used by the US in the Pacific and part of IO has compelled to extend its own 'Underwater Great Wall' project[39] as a means to underwater warfare which is getting aggressively advanced. China has started using indigenous capability in this regard and enabling itself in this domain too as the US, through a set of agreements and

understandings with India under its strategic partnership is providing C4ISR and anti-submarine warfare capabilities through the Fish Hook network.

China has already been working on its unmanned systems, particularly with the comprehensive capability of surveillance, strike and suppress the enemy. As a high priority part of its military modernization, China has employed at least 15 teams at major universities for research on UUVs and USVs supported by massive funding from China's government and PLA.[40] China's indigenously developed unmanned maritime surface vehicle is JARI-USV which is designed to perform multiple tasks. This vehicle is 'multi-domain/lethal autonomous swarming for China and attaches great importance to multi-purpose capabilities, adopts a modular design, can carry air defense, sea-facing, anti-submarine, and other mission loads, has flexible reorganization capabilities for combat missions, and can launch missiles and torpedoes. It can also perform all-around tasks such as anti-submarine operations, air-to-air operations, and sea-to-sea operations.'[41] These unmanned vehicles have emerged as a key component in unmanned warfare systems. There is a significant number of UAVs, tactical UAVs like ASN-209 tactical UAV system, and strategic UAVs like BZK-005 which have been deployed by PLAN.[42] Likewise, unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV) systems are being developed by China with the capability to carry weaponry. Besides military use, UMVs are used for peaceful purposes like 'oceanographic data collection, pollution monitoring, offshore exploration, disaster prevention, assisted navigation and tactical surveillance applications.'[43]

Since 2002, China's military has been engaging in bilateral and multilateral exercises not only to extend military diplomacy but also to learn new skills and ideas for the modernization process.[44] These exercises are impactful and enhance cooperative and collaborative security; China-Russia Joint Sea 2021, joint exercise with Pakistan-Peace 2021, China-Russia-South Africa Exercise MOSI, China-Thailand Blue Commando 2019, China-ASEAN Joint Maritime Drill-2019 are examples of PLAN exercises and drills which allow strengthening cordial and cooperative relations between states.[45]

Under BRI, China is developing ports and investing in infrastructure in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Maldives, Bangladesh, and East and North Arica. In Djibouti, China has established a logistics base. These developments are meant to secure maritime trade and commercial activity, protecting China's economic interests in IOR. In this context, China would be able to exert its influence in IOR by enhancing its naval presence and role in this region, disconcerting India and its designs.

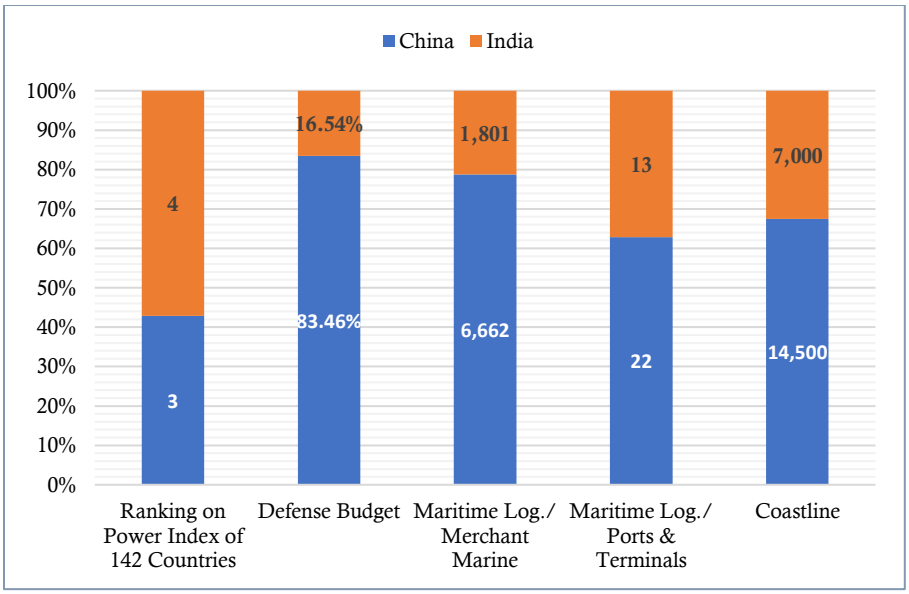
## Naval Power Comparison between China and India: Balance or Imbalance

Since IOR has emerged as an arena of strategic posturing, China and India have been flexing their naval muscle and maritime strategies to determine their areas of influence and extensive control over SLOCs and international shipping lines through increased containerized trade volumes. Providing security to enhanced economic activities in IOR is the purpose of all naval activities taking place in this region. Mahan considers maritime trade pertinent for any littoral state aiming at becoming a sea power besides its six elements and exclaims that augmented shipping volumes 'will reappear to compel the revival of the war fleet'[46] essentially to provide security from threats at sea like piracy, armed robberies, maritime terrorism, abductions, and many others. China and India too are working on their naval capabilities and modernization with identical approaches favoring geoeconomics within IOR. However, this desire to enhance maritime security seems more like a strategic race and naval competition.

When compared in terms of their naval strength, China and India have several components of both navies reflecting incongruence. As of June 2019, China's PLAN had around 235,000 personnel of which 20,000 are marines with their boisterous amphibian skills; whereas India had around 67,000 active navy personnel including 57,240 sailors. Likewise, China's naval fleet was bigger with a larger number of submarines that was 'more than 70 submarines, including seven nuclear ballistic missile submarines (SSBN), 12 nuclear attack submarines (SSN), and more than 50 diesel attack submarines' while India had less than 20 submarines in which only one was nuclear powered ballistic missiles submarine.[47]

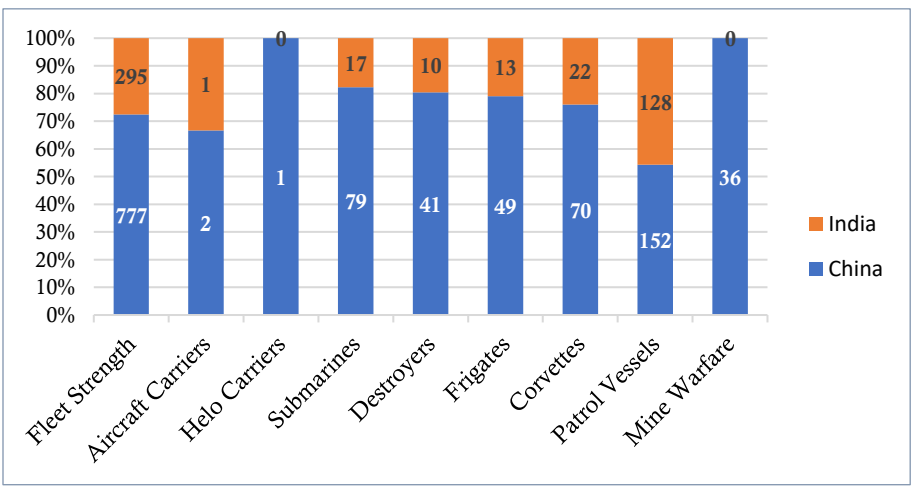
To analyze the strategic balance of both countries in terms of capabilities, ranking data has been compared for the year 2022,[48] however, available figures are meant for conventional warfare. This comparison is divided into two parts: the first one is the fundamental comparison and the second part is the naval power comparison. The basic indicators used for fundamental research are ranking on power index (among 142 countries), population, defense budget, maritime logistics, and coastlines.

**Figure 3:** Part I – Fundamental Comparison between China and India




**Source:** "Military Strength Comparison for 2022: Compare Nations," *GlobalFirePower.com.*

**Figure 4:** Part II – Naval Power Comparison 2022




**Source:** Ibid.

## China-India Strategic Imbalance and Implications for Regional Peace and Stability

There is a visible imbalance of naval capabilities favoring China over India. Similarly, strategic thinking and naval modernization are disproportionate palpably. India's maritime strategies and doctrines and strategic approaches launched within the past two decades have made difference at the regional level and are providing it an inadvertent opportunity in IOR. When China gained impetus in its economic outreach and strategic strengthening in the Twenty-first Century, India began to consider itself challenged due to the increased role and involvement of China in IOR. Such an unfavorable balance of power compels states to get into coalitions, partnerships, or alliances creating race-like competition making peace and stability compromised in any realm, be it land or sea. India, due to a stark imbalance of naval power finds its supremacy within IOR in murky waters.

On other hand, China enjoyed dominance in its own China Sea, with extensive territorial claims over the South China Sea despite the discomfort to the US and its NATO allies. As part of China's two-ocean strategy, the modernization of PLAN and its active defense policy besides the inception of BRI and resulting economic, cultural, and political ingress of China had posed a serious challenge to the status quo and supremacy of the US across the world in general and in IOR in particular. Instead of engaging directly with China and avoiding a situation that could convert into open conflict, the US put its weight behind India through robust engagement and comprehensive strategic partnership to balance the equation.

The first point to ponder is that China is engaging itself across the continents through BRI, and smaller economies and developing countries are finding economic refuge in this massive connectivity plan. Although this is not mere economic connectivity, it reflects Chinese soft power. Chinese culture and philosophy are emerging as prominent factors and connecting with global society by acquiring political dividends for China. However, China has not engaged itself with any overt military activity with countries getting connected under BRI. But the US and India see the convergence under BRI with suspicion. The port infrastructure development is viewed as an obvious threat that offers increased influence to China including the potential use of these ports as naval bases. Congruently, PLAN's engagement with different task forces or port of calls within IOR, and bilateral and multilateral naval exercises done with regional actors as part of cooperative or collaborative security arrangements are seen with dismay by both the US and India.

Secondly, the US-India strategic partnership is supporting India in unconventional ways like a civil nuclear deal against the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons regime's rules, values, and principles. Another significant aspect of this partnership is massive support to India regarding the Mutual Defense Agreement (MDA) and information flow which is the key element of modernization. India is now able to use real-time information about Chinese vessels and submarines through extensive acoustic sensor systems and hydrophone systems, using 'fish hook' technology and other submersible surveillance devices. The expanded spying network over China in oceanic regions of the SCS and IOR gives access to India to vital information through agreements and has the potential to change the strategic balance of power in favor of India and the US. These initiatives are causing distrust and further imbalances in the region. Such developments in the region potentially have been accentuating naval competition and arms race making peace and stability in IOR compromised by and large.

## Conclusion

The SLOCs passing through IOR carry tremendous volumes of trade and play a significant role in maintaining global flows. China's strategic posturing is increasingly being perceived as a threat to India's aspirations for gaining the status of a maritime power in the IO; however, China insists that its objectives are restricted to protecting its economic interests and commercial activities. On the other hand, the US too considers China as a challenger to its global supremacy which needs to be hampered. The US is acting as an enabler to India for the containment of China by enhancing India's naval competence and modernization process. However, this strategy has consequences for the whole region and is promoting a tendency to power competition.

Apart from the major contenders, other littoral states have to invest in naval developments, which makes the region more vulnerable and more militarized, and even nuclearized. The IOR already has regional nuclear powers like Pakistan, India, Israel, and the potential nuclear power – Iran. The inclusion of the US as a resident actor, France, and the United Kingdom (UK) as regional actors through their offshore island territories, and China and Russia with their interests in the region changes the geostrategic environment of IOR into a quagmire where states are struggling with their better survival and sustainability further endangering the region with the nuclearization of the ocean. The strategic imbalance between China and India and the environment of uncertainty in the IO have increased the environment of

distrust, and the insatiable lust for naval modernization has imperiled peace and stability in IOR.

The other noteworthy aspect of naval rivalry between China and India is that it has initiated another unstoppable race for UMVs and UAVs, acoustic systems, and advanced combat systems on the surface and underwater have created an intensely competitive environment that is compelling other regional states too to enter in that race. Although the oceans are a shared responsibility of the nations, the maritime realm has been marred with serious implications which have challenged peace and stability in IOR. Although China and India both express intentions to support safe navigation and provide security to global trade through IOR, their naval modernization and maritime strategic developments reflect their naval operational capabilities and nautical goals endangering IOR by and large by creating distrust and tough standards of naval balance in the region.

## Notes

[1] "India-China Trade Grows to Record USD 125 billion in 2021 Despite Tensions in Eastern Ladakh," *Financial Express*, January 14, 2022, https://www.financialexpress.com/economy/india-china-trade-grows-to-record-usd-125-billion-in-2021-despite-tensions-in-eastern-ladakh/2406853/?msclkid= ff6fd628b7d511ec866ba7518b7ae92e./.

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[8] Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (New York: Random House, 2010), Kindle Edition.

[9] Denis Venter, "India and Africa: Maritime Security and India's Strategic Interests in the Western Indian Ocean," in *Fluid Networks and Hegemonic Powers in the Western Indian Ocean,* Iain Walker, Manuel João Ramos, Preben Kaarsholm, eds. (Lisbon: Centro de Estudos Internacionais do Instituto Universitário de Lisboa [Center for International Studies - Lisbon University Institute], 2017), 131-167 (138), https://repositorio.iscte-iul.pt/bitstream/10071/13796/4/07Venter_FINAL12.07.17.pdf.

[10] For detail, see Haibin Duan, Xiaobin Xu, Yimin Deng and Zhigang Zeng, "Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Recognition of Maritime Small-Target Based on Biological Eagle-Eye Vision Adaptation Mechanism," *IEEE Transactions on Aerospace and Electronic Systems* 57, no. 5 (2021): 3368-3369, https://doi.org/10.1109/TAES.2021.3075524. UAVs are more effective in maritime surveillance due to small size, high speed, wider frame of vision, low operational requirements and better survivability in challenging environment.

[11] For details, see "Unmanned Underwater Vehicles: Defence and Technology Trends," *Naval Technology*, comment, September 9, 2021, https://www.naval-technology.com/comment/unmanned-underwater-vehicles-defence-and-technology-trends/?msclkid=393ea139bd5311ecb756657faae506b0 / Unmanned Underwater Vehicles: Defence and Technology Trends (naval-technology.com). UMVs are highly required to be included in naval fleets due to their extensive capabilities. 'Networked unmanned maritime assets are a key future tool for surveillance, data gathering, decoying, protecting high-value units and ports, minesweeping, detecting submarines and limiting capital ship exposure, as well as neutralizing or destroying enemy assets.'

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[15] Łukaszuk, "Indian and Australian Maritime Security Doctrines in the Indian Ocean Region in the 21st Century. Christian Bueger's Matrix of Maritime Security Approach," 113-114.

[16] Debu C., "Modi's Sagarmala Initiative for Development of Coastal and Port Cities," *MapsofIndia.com*, July 5, 2015, https://www.mapsofindia.com/my-india/government/modis-sagarmala-initiative-for-development-of-coastal-and-port-cities?msclkid=bebcda4ebcac11eca89ef378a398c1a4%20/%20%20Sagarmala%20Projec:%20Details,%20Benefits,%20Concept%20Implementation%20Plan%20-%20 Government%20(mapsofindia.com).

[17] The arrangement was first established as a response to 2004 Tsunami, which was then upgraded to a security dialogue due to common interests and convergence among the four countries—the US, Australia, Japan and India—in which lateral was entered into previously trilateral arrangement on the grounds of countering China. The first Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) was held on May 25, 2007 which gave birth to Quad. For detail, see Suhasini Haidar, "After the Tsunami: How the 'Quad' Was Born," *Hindu*, November 15, 2017, https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/after-the-tsunami/article20461149.ece.

[18] Jeff M. Smith, "The Quad 2.0: A Foundation for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (paper, The Heritage Foundation, Washington, DC, 2020), https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/BG3481.pdf.

[19] "India, Australia Bilateral Naval Exercise Next Month," *Economic Times*, May 9, 2017, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-australia-bilateral-naval-exercise-next-month/articleshow/58599682.cms.
[20] Rory Medcalf, "India Locks in the Quadrilateral Dialogue to Counter China," *Financial Review*, January 25, 2018, https://www.afr.com/opinion/india-locks-in-the-quadrilateral-dialogue-to-counter-china-20180124-h0ng2y.
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[22] LEMOA enables physical activities like replenishing and maintaining each other whenever desired by partners, enabling the US-led NATO forces and allies to remain strengthened against China in the Indo-Pacific, particularly the South China Sea (SCS).
[23] COMCASA deals with establishing data links, enabling the exchange of encrypted tactical information between war-fighting units of India and US/NATO forces. This inter-operable and inter-communicable protocol enables Indian data links to get connected with US data links.
[24] BECA deals with facilitating geospatial intelligence (GEOINT) data exchange as per the US standards which would replace India's faulty World Geodetic System 1984 (WGS84). This system is aimed at generating and exchanging information regarding the type, positioning, timing, and other details of vessels or aircrafts by using air traffic or satellite-based data or imagery. This information can be used for civilian and commercial purposes as well as defense and security through exchanging nautical information and charts starting from survey-based basic information to sophisticated naval grade information data. This agreement has immense potential to magnify India's space program and capabilities for espionage and surveillance through the satellite system. In this regard, the US-India Space Dialogue is working to enhance the potential of maritime security, safety, and defense capabilities, further enhancing India's primary interest in IOR for extending intelligence and checking systems not only on China's naval activities but other actors too.
[25] Milind Kulshreshtha, "Evolving Indo-US Naval Cooperation in Light of BECA, COMCASA and LEMOA Agreements," *Salute*, November 2, 2020, https://salute.co.in/evolving-indo-us-naval-cooperation-in-light-of-beca-comcasa-and-lemoa-agreements/?msclkid=c0a47d84bc1711ec80f8d9a530191a48 / EVOLVING INDO-US NAVAL COOPERATION IN LIGHT OF BECA, COMCASA AND LEMOA AGREEMENTS | Salute.
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