

China's 'String of Pearls' in the Indian Ocean: A Challenge For India

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Abstract

The Asian region has become the epicenter of global economic and geopolitical change. In this regard, the Pakistan Economic Corridor, 'String of Pearls' and the Maritime Silk Road in relation to the China Myanmar Economic Corridor are inclusive examples in this region. China has been trying to surround India in the Indian Ocean for a long time. In recent years, Chinese efforts have seen considerable upsurge. For this, it is working on a scheme called 'String of Pearls'. To make the Indian Ocean a hub of trans-regional connectivity through several alternative routes. Despite China's effectual interests in the Indian Ocean, its naval presence will particularly have a significant impact on the security of India and other major powers. However, as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Beijing's strategic culture is more focused on self defense. Because the purpose of the 'String of Pearls' is to establish a Silk Road near the Indian Ocean region. There has been competition between India and China to find other such routes in the Indian Ocean region that could have a significant impact. The purpose of this article is to discuss China's objectives, its approach to the Indian Ocean and its impact on India's security measures to prevent it.

Keywords: String of Pearls, Indian Ocean Region, India, China, Chinese.

Introduction

China's presence in the Indian Ocean region can be traced back to the early 1960's. When it began to actively express its cohesion with some Afro-Asian states with financial aid and military supplies¹. After this, in 2004, the discussion about China's 'String of Pearls' policy started very fast. Through which China is establishing Chinese military networks and commercial facilities in the Indian Ocean. And is also improving its relations with many countries so as to use them against India. Many analysts believe that the Chinese String of Pearls complements the strategy of encircling China by combining the Belt and Road initiative and debt trap diplomacy. The Indian Ocean is of utmost importance at the international level. The Indian Ocean is important to both India and China. China's strategic rivalry with India's maritime dimension has been exacerbated by reliance on resources and increased maritime trade. China's penetration in the Indian Ocean is increasing. China and India are following in the footsteps of other countries of the world. Who have established their bases abroad². In recent years, China has mainly increased its activities in the region. China has deployed this strategy to protect its business interests. Because much of its trade extends across the Indian Ocean and to various congested areas such as the strait of Hormuz, the strait of Malacca and the strait of Lombok. China is expanding its sphere of influence. But India has always had a pacifist and non-confrontational approach. Which would surround India and threaten its potential for speculation, trade and potential local integrity. This dilemma can lead to rivalry in the region and an arms race that results from a mutual suspicion between the two countries. India-China security dilemma exists in the Indian Ocean but

it can be controlled by reducing the abetment from both the sides. We will know how China is trying to challenge India by using which strategic positions in the Indian Ocean region and South Asia? And what is India trying to stop it.

The 'String of Pearls' Strategy

The term 'String of Pearls' is taken as an analytical trap by the title of a 2005 report by Booz Allen. Which describes the Chinese plan to establish military bases and intelligence centers throughout South Asia³. String of Pearls is a strategy used by China to build a network of trade and military bases and ports in several countries. It refers to China's relations along the sea lines. China aim to gradually upgrade these trade-oriented ports into permanent naval bases, which it is also doing. However, China maintains that this transport infrastructure is only for commercial use. China has tried to establish its influence in the IOR through its assertive diplomacy⁴. Whereas the truth behind this is something else which is in front of India. China's plan is very dangerous, it wants to maintain its sole dominance in Asia. That is why it is trying to surround India by putting navy all around. From above, China has surrounded India through CPEC. Whereas from below, it is engaged in encircling it through its navy through Cambodia, Thailand Burma, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. This policy will affected the maritime security of India. Apart from this, it will also affect us economically, due to which India needs to allocate more resources for the development of the defense sector. Through this map, we will know which countries are playing the main role in the Chinese strategy?

And it will also see what important strategic investments China has made so far, how is it engaged in expanding its relations? Lastly, we will also talk about countering this siege by India.

Figure 1 China's String of Pearls



I Source : indiatimes.com

The String of Pearls project is an unofficial project and has not been announced officially. Now we will talk about how China is trying to surround India by making its base through String of Pearls.

Gwadar Port (Pakistan):-

Gwadar is a port of Pakistan located in the Arabian Sea. China's relations with Pakistan have transformed very rapidly in the last few years. One reason for this is also Pakistan's traditional allies USA getting away from it. Gwadar port is therefore also important⁵. Because it is seen as an important link between China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative(BRI) and the maritime Silk road. Under the BRI, CPEC(China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) will give China direct access to the Gwadar port. CPEC is a costly project, that ruined Pakistan's GDP. And China also wanted that if Pakistan becomes poor then we will treat it like slaves forever. Taking advantage of this, China has taken the construction rights of Gwadar port on lease for 40 years. China has set up container facilities at both Karachi and Gwadar ports. Once the China strengthens here, it could exert its influence over each and every oil container originating from the Middle East region. Oil of Middle Eastern countries passes through this base. Appropriate facilities are being provided to them for the use of Chinese naval base so that Sino-Pakistan relations can be strengthened in the coming years⁶. Pakistan's improving relations with China and increasing military aid are of great concern to India. It is considered to be the biggest threat for India.

Marao Island (Maldives):-

It is a small island in India located in the Indian Ocean. But it is very important from a strategic point of view. China has been active in the Maldives for many years. The two countries had signed a military agreement in the year 2012⁷. China is strengthening its hold in the Maldives through global trade and its infrastructure plan. China wants to build its naval base in the Maldives using debt trap diplomacy. From here China can keep a close watch on India. China has invested billions of dollars in Maldives, which was done during the previous government. Maldives became a cause of concern for India when the political crisis started in 2018 under Abdul Yameen's government. But due to the coming to power of Ibrahim Mohammad Solih in 2019, India is currently feeling a lot of relief. China had demanded a port for its navy in the Maldives. But Maldives refused this. Whereas China has got permission to trade here. The problem is only with the surveillance radar navy. India has helped a lot in Maldives at the time of Corona. Here China's string of Pearls strategy has not been successful yet.

Hambantota Port (Sri Lanka):-

China plans to capture the Hambantota port of Sri Lanka its naval military operations in the Indian Ocean. China is also providing financial and technical assistance to this country to allow it to use its territory against India in times of need⁸. Where China's debt trap diplomacy has been seen most prominently. It was unable to repay the loan taken by Sri Lanka, due to which the Chinese company took Hambantota port on lease for 99 years. In which China's share is 80% and Sri Lanka's 20%. This port is close to Asian, European, international shipping routes and the strait of Malacca. The real intension of China's claim in Hambantota is to be geopolitical and to encircle India, which will affect India's political and security interests. Today the economy of Sri

Lanka is very weak. This is the reason why the Chinese investment in this is huge so that it can use this area against India in times of need. China has set up container facilities in both Colombo and Hambantota islands. China wants to use the islands of Sri Lanka against India as part of its strategy which is part of its String of Pearls.

Chittagong Port (Bangladesh):-

China has also established its presence in this country by establishing its naval base at Chittagong port. Chittagong is the largest and most important port in Bangladesh. It is also known as Chattogram Port. The movement of Chinese war ships continues through this port. The development of this port project has also promoted bilateral relations between China and Bangladesh in other areas. This port is very important commercially, which China wants to take advantage of. Apart from this, it is trying to surround India by strengthening its hold. Chittagong port has been ranked as the 58th busiest container port in the world in the year 2019. This port is also used by India and Nepal. In the year 2019, Bangladesh has reached China to its two important major port areas, Chittagong and Mongla. China has also signed an agreement with Bangladesh to develop Mongla port. China is following the strategy of turning South Asian nations on its side. The pearl on this chain or String symbolizes a place of power, which China trying to protect it near IOR⁹. China also intended to build new ports in Chittagong and Sonadia but these projects have not started due to concerns from India and others.

KyauKpyu Port (Myanmar):-

China has increased its military and economic ties in Myanmar. So that it can increase his influence here. The Kyaukpyu port is vital in advancing Beijing's interests in the wider region. The port is China's terminal, a massive natural pipeline built to bypass Malacca and ensure energy supplies. By which this Malacca can avoid the dilemma. Indian naval officers are very worried about this. To increase its influence in the Indian Ocean, China has made Myanmar a friend by helping in the nuclear and missile sector. China has increased its activities on many islands of Myanmar. Myanmar's Coco island is the main installation for Chinese electronic intelligence. Coco island is located at a distance of about 50KM from Andaman and Nicobar island. From here China can easily monitor the activities of India. China's veto in UNSC (United nation security council) after the recent military coup in Myanmar also shows that China is looking at his relations with Myanmar from a strategic angle. The construction of China Myanmar Economic Corridor with increasing investment by China is a development that India needs to watch carefully. The challenge for India seems to be increasing¹⁰.

Other Naval Bases and Ports in IOR by China :-

The Indian ocean region is very important for China and the world because of its strategic importance in trade prospects. China established its first naval base in 2017 in Djibouti, an African country¹¹. Djibouti strategic location is one of the most important assets to Chinese economic interests, located at the crossroads of one of the world's busiest shipping lane. It controls access to both the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. It is estimated that China's presence in Djibouti can be challenging for India as well as other countries. China's military base in this sea can pose a threat to India. A railway link is also being built by the Chinese state-owned enterprise

between Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, and the port of Sudan. The Male's city of Feydhoo, Finolhu and the inhabited island closest to the international airport were leased to a Chinese corporation for 50 years at a cost of approximately \$4 million. Oman is a valuable strategic partner for China in the development and execution of the MSRI (Maritime Silk Road Initiative). Many African countries show interest in China's BRI like Kenya, Tanzania and Seychelles. In the Seychelles also, plans are underway on 16 of China's major government financials. For a long time, it has been working on making its naval base from China in the name of supplying oil to its Seychelles in the sea. China's political ties with the Seychelles date back to 1976¹². The Chinese base in Seychelles is not just for supplying Chinese naval ships. Rather, it is China's trick to encircle India from a strategic point of view. These are all India's security concerns because of China's strategic interest.

'String of Pearls' Impact on India

Due to the increasing influence of String of Pearls in the Indian Ocean, it points to the increasing influence of China in India's neighbors and South Asian region. This strategy will have its impact on India as well as other countries. Some of its effects on India are as follows:

- This strategy of China will affect India strategically. The strategic clout that India has today will be reduced. And it will take China around India. Countries can go to China's lap that considers India as a partner in China's response.
- The growing supremacy of China in the Indian Ocean will have a negative impact on the defense and security of Indian resources. This may cause instability in India and region of the entire East and South East areas. Its economic impact on India will be seen in this way.
- China's presence would jeopardize water security of India. China is evolving more firefighters with more submarines, ships and destroyers. This will help in posing a threat to security of India through water.
- China is setting up a foreign naval base in Gwadar that would allow China to organize a campaign war in the Indian Ocean.

India's reply to String of Pearls:-

India is using a multi-sided strategy to fight the Chinese String of Pearls strategy. This approach includes extensive coastal surveillance radar systems and building ports to trace Chinese submarines and warships, importing state-of-the-art surveillance aircraft that Chinese submarines. Airports are being operated in the neighboring country to check the port. Following are the some steps taken by India to combat the Chinese Navy and their effects in the Indian Ocean region in South Asia:

(1) The policy of India's Act East: - An attempt has been Initiated in an effort to integrate the Indian and Southeast Asian economies. The Act East Policy has been used to formulate significant military and strategic agreements with Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia, South Korea, Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand. So that India can be helped in countering China. Security is an important aspect of India's Act East Policy. Regarding the growing assertive

behavior of China in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, Key to the Act East Policy is the freedom of navigation and the role of India in the Indian Ocean¹³.

(2) Building and Accessing Ports:-

- **Bangladesh:** India will help in modernization of the sea port at Mongla (Bangladesh) and can also use Chittagong port to connect West Bengal to Northeast India.
- **Myanmar:** A deep water port in the Sittwe was constructed by India in 2016.
- **Singapore:** An agreement has signed by India to access Singapore's Changi naval base that is located near the straits of Malacca.
- **Oman:** India has signed agreements to provide access to Oman's properly designated naval facilities. The center is located near the Strait of Hormuz. More than 30% of the oil exports passes through the Hormuz Strait.
- **Indonesia:** India builds a deep Indonesian ports called Sabang. It has of strategic significance because of its closeness to the Strait of Malacca and the Andaman and Nicobar islands of India.

(3) Coastal radar networks:-

- **Maldives:** India to set up ten coastal radar systems in Maldives. These radar systems will transmit live images, videos and information about live location of ships operating in the Indian Ocean. The proposal is being executed by 'Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL)'. The project is progressing at full speed as soon as India's friendly government comes to power¹⁴.
- **Bangladesh:** Recently, an agreement has signed between India and Bangladesh for setting up Coastal surveillance radar system along Bangladesh coastal areas. It will help in monitoring of Chinese warships which often visit the Bay of Bengal.
- **Seychelles:** A 'Coastal Surveillance Radar (CSR)' has been established in Seychelles. In 2015, first coastal surveillance radar became operational in Seychelles that was authorized on Mahe's main land. 32 more CSR Systems are further planned to install in Seychelles.
- **Sri Lanka:** Six CSR have been installed in Sri Lanka. According to a report, India is planning to install 10 CSR in Sri Lanka. Efforts are being made by the governments of both the countries to strengthen India-Sri Lanka relations.
- **Mauritius:** 8 CSR have been established in Mauritius.

Apart from this, India has done investments a lot diplomatically in several countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Mongolia and Uzbekistan. These countries encompasses China from the north direction.

(4) Signing pact with France: India and France have signed a strategic agreement to open their naval bases for each other's warships in the Indian Ocean. This will make India's access to French ports much easier.

(5) Quad Group: America, Japan, India and Australia, these four countries conduct joint military exercises in the Indian Ocean region, known as Quad. China considers it Asian NATO and is quite unhappy with it. India is taking interest in the Quad as well as making it stronger. Quad diplomacy has grown over the years. Recently the leaders of these countries have got more oriented in their shared concerns about the increasingly emphatic behavior of China¹⁵.

(6) Necklace of Diamond: The necklace of diamond is India's answer to the String of pearls of China. It is part of a multi-pronged strategy to counter China in the Indian Ocean region and the Indo-Pacific¹⁴. There have been many deceptions in India and have tried a lot to make China a brother, but China is not ready for this.

String of pearls vs. Necklace of diamonds:-

To stop China's "String of Pearls", India has started manufacturing "Necklace of Diamond". China is building its sea bases which include Sri Lanka, Maldives, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Djibouti etc as a "String of Pearls".

Changi Naval facility in Singapore, Duqm port in Oman, Chabahar port in Iran, Assumption Island in Seychelles, Sittwe port in Myanmar, deep sea port in Indonesia, WCT (West Container Terminal) of Sri Lanka, and a military base on Mauritius, Agalega Island are among the "Necklace of Diamond". India is forgoing strong ties with Vietnam and Mongolia to offset China's "String of Pearls". Apart from this, India is building secured naval relations with Australia, Japan, United States and France as well¹⁶. However, there is a significant difference between a "Necklace of Diamond" from India and a "String of Pearls" from China. The BRI has spent \$60 billion in Africa. In which a "Necklace of Diamond" worth \$8 billion has been invested at Chabahar port in India. India's only worthwhile investment is in Sabang, which is near the Straits of Malacca. This is indeed a matter of concern for China. India's "Necklace of Diamond" are less effective than China's "String of Pearls" due to China's massive investment in other countries.

String of Pearls vs. Necklace of Diamonds:-



- India should support the suffering countries.
- India should actively participate in the Quad group.

- According to UNCLOS, India should pressure China to respect the freedom of movement in the South China Sea.

Conclusion:-

The ports financed in South Asia are for both economic and military purposes. China's non-acceptance in the Indian ocean region and its claim to superpower status are both the issues that anger India the most. Therefore their relationship remains uncertain, rancorous and tense. The immediate objective of India in the Indian Ocean is to combat the China's rise in the IOR by securing and controlling India's EEZ's and its military and mercantile interests. India should focus on foreign investment in various sectors including defense and aerospace sector. India should become the export hub of the world. India should invite companies for Make in India, Make for India and Make for the world. India should make its foreign policy flexible but effective. The 21st century is an Asian century and the Indo-China duet play a big role in this regard. India has the ability to lead the world as it did in the past without the dominance of arms and forces amongst philosophy trade and various other things. In fact, India and China's behavior reflects a deep protection abeyance as each acts at the expense of the other. In the present scenario, India should respond to China in a Chinese tone and abandon its appeasement policy. Because this Narendra Modi ji has also said that "Mind is never a problem, Mindset is".

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