

From 'String of Pearls' to 'Golden Necklace': The Impact of Chinese Strategy on India's Maritime Security

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ABSTRACT

The 21st century is often called the "Asian Century," as countries like China and India are reshaping the global distribution of power. In the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), China's increasing economic and military capabilities, especially its assertive maritime approach, have shifted the focus of international geopolitics. China's maritime strategy originally known as the "String of Pearls" and now evolving into the concept of the "Golden Necklace", has raised concerns regarding India's maritime security and strategic independence. This research aims to thoroughly examine this changing strategic environment, where the "String of Pearls" refers to China's geopolitical plan of building a network of ports, military bases, and economic projects across the Indian Ocean, forming a chain similar to pearls. Key examples include Pakistan's Gwadar port, Sri Lanka's Hambantota, Bangladesh's Chittagong, Myanmar's Kyaukpyu, and Djibouti's naval facilities. Recently, China has expanded this approach with the more sophisticated "Golden Necklace," which integrates economic investments, maritime diplomacy, digital infrastructure, and military presence to achieve broad maritime dominance. These strategies have directly and indirectly affected India's strategic planning, economic stability, and energy security. Central issues in this research include the challenges faced by the Indian Navy, the potential for strategic encirclement, the security of sea trade routes, and the influence on India's relations with neighboring nations. This study will explore the long-term effects of these strategies on India's maritime security and regional stability.

Keywords: *String of Pearls, Golden Necklace, Maritime Diplomacy, Maritime Security, India and China*

The 21st century being called the "Asian Century" is not merely a prediction, but is increasingly becoming a reality. This century is emerging as one in which Asia's two great powers, India and China, will play a crucial role in global politics, trade, and the security architecture. Alongside its economic progress in the domain of maritime power, China's military ambitions have also advanced at a rapid pace. It is evident that over the past two decades, China has shaped its foreign policy and geopolitical strategy through maritime expansionism, significantly impacting the strategic stability and balance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

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In this context, concepts such as the “String of Pearls” and the “Golden Necklace” are not merely strategic terms, but symbols of China’s maritime ambitions. Under the “String of Pearls” strategy, China has strengthened infrastructure and military presence in the Indian Ocean at locations such as Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Chattogram (Bangladesh), Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), and Djibouti (Africa). (Javaid, 2020) By linking these sites like “pearls,” China is moving toward establishing an alternative dominance in the Indian Ocean. In recent years, China has presented this strategy in a new form known as the “Golden Necklace.” This includes a blend of strategic investments, digital connectivity, debt-trap diplomacy, and naval presence. This new strategy appears to be far more refined, multi-dimensional, and driven by a long-term vision. In this sequence, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Maritime Silk Road projects are also included, which consolidate its influence through a maritime network. (Drun, 2017)

Research Objectives

- To provide a historical and conceptual explanation of the "String of Pearls" and "Golden Necklace" strategies.
- To analyze the maritime bases established by China in the Indian Ocean region and their strategic significance.
- To review India’s maritime security policy, naval power, and counter-strategies (such as Security and Growth for All in the Region SAGAR).
- To understand the role of cooperative security mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific region, such as QUAD and IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium).
- To suggest possible strategic options for India’s future maritime policy.

Studying China’s maritime strategy is essential not only from India’s strategic perspective but also for understanding the global balance of power and maritime laws. This research will be valuable for policymakers, security experts, and strategic analysts, enabling them to assess contemporary challenges and develop effective counter-policies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research will be based on qualitative and descriptive methods. Data Sources: Secondary sources such as government reports, Ministry of Defence documents, naval strategies, think tank reports (such as ORF, IDSA), Books and academic journals related to this areas. Data Analysis: Content analysis, geo-strategic mapping, and case study approach will be employed. Comparative Study: A comparative evaluation of China’s strategy versus India’s counter-policy will be conducted.

1. Historical and Conceptual Explanation of the “String of Pearls” and “Golden Necklace” Strategies

The “String of Pearls” and “Golden Necklace” are two key concepts of China’s maritime expansionist policies, aimed at strengthening its geopolitical strategy and foreign policy through maritime power. Understanding the historical background of these strategies is the key to grasping China’s long-term strategic thinking. (Bo, 2017)

The term “String of Pearls” was first used in 2005 by American defence analysts to describe China’s strategy of building a chain of maritime bases in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Under this strategy, China established strategic access in countries like Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh through economic investments and port construction. For example, Pakistan’s Gwadar Port, Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port, Bangladesh’s Chattogram Port, and

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Myanmar's Kyaukpyu Port serve as “pearls” that, when connected, form a maritime network. The aim of this strategy is not merely commercial access but also to establish future naval presence and security dominance. This approach is also considered a way for China to overcome its “Malacca Dilemma” its dependence on the Malacca Strait. (Kothwal & Singh, 2025)

The “Golden Necklace” is a refined version of the “String of Pearls,” encompassing not only geographical access but also economic, digital, and political spheres of influence. This concept is closely linked with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Maritime Silk Road projects. In the “Golden Necklace,” along with traditional naval bases, there is a broader plan to control targeted countries through 5G networks, port logistics, special economic zones, and debt-trap diplomacy.

Both strategies reflect China's thinking in terms of “soft power” and “hybrid warfare,” whereby it seeks strategic advantages without traditional warfare. (Drun, 2017) In the Indian context, these strategies raise concerns of maritime encirclement and pose a direct challenge to regional dominance. History shows that China's strategy is long-term, phased, and multidimensional, combining not just military means but also economic and political pressure. From the “String of Pearls” to the “Golden Necklace,” this journey is not just about ports but a global power-building project that has become a challenge to India's maritime security and strategic autonomy. (Manahas, 2020)

2. The Maritime Bases Established by China in the Indian Ocean Region and Their Strategic Significance

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is one of the most sensitive and strategic regions in the world from a geopolitical perspective. Nearly 80% of the world's seaborne oil trade and 60% of international commercial cargo passes through this region. In such a context, China's deepening involvement in the region is not merely commercial, but a clear strategy to expand its military and diplomatic influence. China has developed several strategic ports and naval facilities in the IOR, giving concrete shape to its “String of Pearls” strategy. (Pant & Halдар, 2025) The major ones are as follows:

1. **Gwadar Port (Pakistan):** A key component of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Gwadar Port provides China with direct access to the Arabian Sea. This port offers China an alternative route for energy supplies and strategic capability to exert pressure on India's western seaboard. In the future, it can also be used as a logistical base for the Chinese navy.
2. **Hambantota Port (Sri Lanka):** Developed by China through heavy loans, this port was leased to China for 99 years when Sri Lanka was unable to repay the debt. This is a prime example of “Debt Trap Diplomacy.” Although China is currently using it only for commercial purposes, its strategic location, very close to the southern part of India, has raised significant security concerns for India.
3. **Kyaukpyu Port (Myanmar):** This port strengthens China's presence in the Bay of Bengal and provides Yunnan Province with an alternative route for oil and gas supplies. This reduces China's dependence on the Malacca Strait and strengthens its grip near India's eastern coast.
4. **Chittagong Port (Bangladesh):** This port is one of the major sites that has received Chinese economic assistance. While Bangladesh does not currently grant China military access, the port's infrastructure could in the future serve as a logistics support hub for China.

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5. **Djibouti Naval Base (Africa):** Located near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the gateway to the Indian Ocean, this is China's first overseas military base. It clearly demonstrates China's strategic ambition to establish a significant military presence in the region, not just an economic one.

These bases demonstrate that China is not merely safeguarding its trade interests, but is actively working on a plan to strategically encircle India. The geographical locations of these sites provide China with a “positional advantage” in the IOR, potentially making it difficult for India to maintain its strategic autonomy. From these bases, China gains military logistics, surveillance, refuelling, and operational capabilities, which are steadily bringing its “blue-water navy” vision to reality. For India, this is a clear signal that it must prioritize not only the defence of its own maritime boundaries, but also maintaining the balance of power in the IOR through multilateral cooperation, technological advancement, and strong diplomacy. (Halдар & Gupta, 2025)

3. India's Maritime Security Policy, Naval Power, and Response Strategy

In the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), China's growing presence and strategies such as the “String of Pearls” have emerged as a direct challenge to India's maritime security. To counter this challenge, over the past two decades India has sought to strengthen its maritime security policy, naval capabilities, and diplomatic strategies.

1. **Development of India's Maritime Security Policy:** India's traditional strategic policy had been land-centric, but in the 21st century, recognizing the strategic importance of the seas, new policies were developed. In 2007, India published its first dedicated Indian Maritime Doctrine, which has since been periodically updated. In 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the policy of “SAGAR” (Security and Growth for All in the Region), which became the central pillar of India's maritime vision. Under the SAGAR policy, India has prioritized maritime security, disaster management, adherence to maritime laws, and regional cooperation. The main objective behind this policy is to establish India as a “Net Security Provider” in the IOR (Kunjumon, 2024)
2. **Strategic Strength of the Indian Navy:** The Indian Navy is among the most experienced navies in Asia. It operates three commands Eastern, Western, and the Andaman & Nicobar Command. The Navy possesses one aircraft carrier (INS Vikramaditya), and a second indigenous carrier (INS Vikrant) has recently entered operational service. The number of submarines, destroyers, and patrol vessels is steadily increasing. Maritime surveillance has been bolstered through long-range maritime patrol aircraft (P-8I). (Shiping, 2024) Under the Indian Navy's “Mission Based Deployments” policy, strategic chokepoints—such as the Malacca Strait, Strait of Hormuz, and Gulf of Aden are continuously monitored to keep track of the activities of powers like China.
3. **Response Strategies:** To counter China's strategic encirclement, India has adopted several multilateral and bilateral measures:
 - **QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue):** A grouping of India, the US, Japan, and Australia working to maintain strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific region.
 - **Andaman & Nicobar Command:** India's tri-service command of great strategic importance, capable of monitoring the Malacca Strait.

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- **Defence Cooperation:** India has signed agreements with Mauritius, Seychelles, Maldives, Sri Lanka, and other countries for naval training, infrastructure development, and port facilities.
- **Project Mausam and Blue Economy Initiatives:** These initiatives have integrated cultural and economic influence into India's maritime diplomacy.

India has clearly adopted a multi-layered and balanced approach in response to China's maritime strategy. The need of the hour is to ensure more effective implementation and coordination of these policies, while strengthening technological and industrial self-reliance (such as in defence manufacturing), so that India can maintain its strategic and diplomatic leadership in the IOR.

4. Role of Cooperative Security Mechanisms like QUAD, IONS in the Indo-Pacific Region

The vast expanse between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, now referred to as the Indo-Pacific has emerged as the strategic centre of the 21st century. In this region, China's growing maritime assertiveness, military expansion, and strategic dominance have prompted India and other democratic nations to establish cooperative security mechanisms. Among these, the roles of QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium), and other multilateral platforms have become extremely significant.

1. QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue)

QUAD is a strategic forum comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia. It began in 2007, but witnessed a revival particularly after 2017 due to China's aggressive policies and rising tensions in the South China Sea. Main objectives of QUAD:

- Ensuring a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.
- Cooperation in maritime security, counter-terrorism, cyber security, and disaster relief.
- A collective response to China's maritime encirclement and coercive tactics.

India's role: India views QUAD as a platform to establish a rules-based maritime order. India's geographical position in the Indian Ocean gives it a strategic advantage in the Indo-Pacific. Joint naval exercises under QUAD, such as the Malabar Exercise, send a clear message to China that regional democracies will unite to challenge its aggressive strategies.

2. IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium)

IONS was established in 2008 on India's initiative. Its aim is to encourage cooperation, coordination, and dialogue among the navies of the Indian Ocean region. Main objectives:

- Cooperation in tackling piracy, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief (HADR).
- Promotion of naval diplomacy.
- Discussions on regional security-related common interests.

IONS serves as a platform for strategic balance against China, as China is not granted membership. Through IONS, India has strengthened defence ties with small island nations such as Seychelles, Mauritius, and the Maldives. This cooperation aligns with India's SAGAR policy.

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3. Other Cooperative Initiatives:

- IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association): India is an active member, working to promote maritime trade, environmental protection, and security
- Maritime partnerships with BIMSTEC and ASEAN: Under the Act East Policy, India has deepened strategic partnerships with East Asian countries.
- Defence Corridors and Technical Cooperation: India has enhanced defence production and military technology collaboration with countries like Japan, Israel, and the United States.

Cooperative security mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific provide India with the strategic and diplomatic capability to counter China's encirclement. QUAD, IONS, and other multilateral platforms give India the opportunity to stand not alone, but alongside like-minded nations. India must continue to lead these platforms to ensure stability, freedom, and a balance of power in the region.

5. Evaluation of Potential Strategic Options for India's Future Maritime Strategy

In the 21st century, the global balance of power is rapidly shifting toward maritime geography. From China's "String of Pearls" to its "Golden Necklace" strategies, it is clear that maritime dominance will be at the centre of future geopolitics. In such a context, it becomes imperative for India to adopt a comprehensive and long-term approach to its maritime strategy, rather than limiting it solely to traditional security. Let us evaluate the potential strategic options available to India:

1. **Multi-Dimensional Naval Modernization:** India's navy must now take decisive steps to transform from a "Brown Water Navy" to a "Blue Water Navy. (Halдар & Gupta, 2025)" This requires focus on the following aspects:
 - Indigenous defence manufacturing (under Make in India & Atmanirbhar Bharat) for submarines, aircraft carriers, drones, and advanced warships.
 - Promotion of AI-based maritime surveillance systems, smart sensor networks, and satellite intelligence.
 - Overseas naval logistics bases: India should expand logistical facilities for refuelling and repair in friendly countries such as Oman, Mauritius, and Seychelles.
2. **Strategic Diplomacy and Multilateral Cooperation:** India must make regional and global cooperation the centre piece of its strategy:
 - Take a leadership role in forums like QUAD, ASEAN, IORA, BIMSTEC, and IONS to counterbalance China's influence.
 - Strategic investment and maritime cooperation with African coastal nations (such as Mozambique and Kenya) to maintain balance in the Western Indian Ocean.
 - Bilateral defence agreements with littoral states (coastal nations).
3. **Island Policy and Turning Andaman & Nicobar into Strategic Power:** The Andaman and Nicobar Islands lie near the Malacca Strait, a critical route for China's energy supplies. Strengthening military infrastructure in this region could provide India with significant geo-strategic leverage.
 - Establishment of naval bases, air force stations, and surveillance posts.
 - Empowering the Andaman & Nicobar Command as a fully integrated tri-service command.

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4. **“Blue Economy” and Protection of Maritime Resources:** India should integrate its maritime economy with its defence policy. This would not only protect resources but also increase the participation of coastal states.
 - Conservation of undersea minerals, energy, and fisheries resources.
 - Security of maritime transport and digitization of ports.
 - Considering maritime environmental protection as a strategic issue.
5. **Maritime Public Engagement and Regional Leadership:** India must develop new dimensions of maritime cooperation with its neighbouring countries to shield them from China’s debt-trap diplomacy.
 - Soft power diplomacy like humanitarian aid, training, and disaster management by the Indian Navy.
 - Economic and security cooperation under Project SAGAR.
 - Creation of Digital Maritime Corridors — integrating data, navigation, and smart port networking.

India’s maritime strategy must now shift from being defensive to being active, multilateral, and future-oriented. To play a leadership role in the Indian Ocean, India must base its strategy on the triangle of strategic courage, technological innovation, and diplomatic balance. Only then can it break China’s encirclement and secure regional dominance.

CONCLUSION

In the geopolitical landscape of the 21st century, the maritime domain has assumed a level of strategic significance unprecedented in history. What was once primarily a conduit for trade, cultural exchange, and passenger movement has evolved into a decisive arena for competition, cooperation, and conflict. The oceans are no longer passive highways of commerce; they are dynamic spaces where national interests converge and clash, and where the projection of power is as important as the movement of goods. Among all maritime regions, the Indian Ocean stands out as a critical theatre of global geopolitics linking the energy-rich Middle East with the manufacturing hubs of East Asia, and acting as a maritime crossroads for Europe, Africa, and Asia.

Within this evolving maritime reality, China’s ambitious initiatives such as the “*String of Pearls*” and the “*Golden Necklace*” encapsulate a calculated and long-term vision. These strategies are not isolated infrastructural projects but rather integrated components of Beijing’s comprehensive geopolitical plan. The “String of Pearls” refers to a network of Chinese-developed or financed ports, bases, and logistical hubs stretching from the South China Sea to the Arabian Sea and beyond, while the “Golden Necklace” can be seen as an upgraded and expanded version that incorporates broader economic and security dimensions. The underlying objective of both is clear to reduce India’s strategic space in its own maritime neighbourhood, ensure China’s sustained access to vital sea lanes, and cement its position as a preeminent maritime superpower. The material manifestations of these strategies are visible in the deep-water ports and naval facilities developed or controlled by China in Pakistan (Gwadar), Sri Lanka (Hambantota), Myanmar (Kyaukpyu), Bangladesh (Chittagong), and in several African nations along the eastern coast, particularly in Djibouti where China has established its first overseas military base. While officially described as economic development projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), these assets possess clear dual-use potential. They can support commercial shipping, but they can just as easily

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accommodate naval deployments, surveillance systems, and logistical operations effectively extending China's military reach deep into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

For India, these developments represent more than just commercial competition; they constitute a direct strategic challenge. India's maritime security calculus now must account for the possibility of Chinese naval presence in close proximity to its critical sea lanes, energy routes, and coastal installations. The Indian Ocean, once considered a relatively secure maritime space dominated by the Indian Navy, is increasingly becoming contested. This shifts India's security posture from a position of comfortable regional dominance to one that demands constant vigilance and strategic adaptation. India's response to these challenges has been multi-pronged, reflecting an understanding that maritime strategy in the 21st century requires a blend of hard power, soft power, and diplomatic engagement. (Das, 2025) At the policy level, the formulation of the *SAGAR* (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiative has provided a coherent framework for India's maritime engagement. *SAGAR* emphasizes cooperative security, sustainable development, and regional inclusivity, projecting India as a benevolent maritime partner rather than an aggressive hegemon.

Simultaneously, India has embarked on an ambitious program of naval modernization aimed at enhancing its blue-water capabilities. This includes the induction of aircraft carriers such as INS *Vikrant*, the expansion of the submarine fleet (including nuclear-powered variants), and the integration of advanced surveillance and missile systems. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located at the mouth of the Malacca Strait one of the world's most important maritime chokepoints have been significantly upgraded as a forward-operating base and a linchpin of India's maritime strategy. On the diplomatic front, India has deepened its participation in regional and extra-regional maritime cooperation forums. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), involving the United States, Japan, and Australia alongside India, has emerged as a critical platform for strategic coordination in the Indo-Pacific. Likewise, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) has provided India with a mechanism to engage with a wide range of littoral states on issues of maritime security, disaster response, and capacity building. These efforts collectively signal India's intent to counterbalance China's influence without overtly militarizing the region.

However, this study has also highlighted that India's maritime strategy cannot rely solely on defence preparedness. Future policy must integrate three mutually reinforcing pillars: defence, development, and diplomacy. Defence ensures that India retains the capability to safeguard its interests and deter potential threats. Development, through maritime infrastructure projects, port-led growth, and the blue economy, enhances India's attractiveness as a partner to regional states. Diplomacy ensures that India's maritime neighbours view it as a reliable and non-coercive partner, thereby resisting Chinese offers that come with strategic strings attached. In practical terms, this means India must continue to modernize its navy, making it not only more powerful but also more agile and self-reliant in terms of production, maintenance, and technology. Indigenous shipbuilding programs, enhanced research in maritime technology, and integration with private sector innovation will be critical. Simultaneously, New Delhi must offer viable alternatives to Chinese investment by supporting port development, maritime connectivity, and capacity building in neighbouring countries. Initiatives such as coastal radar networks, joint patrols, and training programs can serve both security and goodwill functions.

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Diplomatic engagement must be proactive, consistent, and sensitive to the needs of smaller states. India's ability to build transparent, mutually beneficial partnerships will be key in countering the narrative that China is the only source of large-scale maritime investment. By promoting multilateral cooperation, respecting sovereignty, and avoiding the debt-trap dynamics often associated with BRI projects, India can position itself as the preferred security and development partner in the IOR. Ultimately, the emerging maritime environment demands that India transcend a purely defensive approach. While safeguarding its coastline and exclusive economic zone remains essential, India's role must expand to that of a *proactive balancer*. This means actively shaping the security architecture of the Indian Ocean, ensuring that no single power can dominate its sea lanes or dictate its strategic future. It also entails contributing to the preservation of stability, freedom of navigation, and equitable access to maritime resources for all regional stakeholders.

In assuming this role, India will not only secure its own strategic interests but also enhance its standing on the world stage. A decisive, responsible, and outward-looking maritime policy will project India as a stabilizing force in an increasingly uncertain Indo-Pacific order. This will require sustained political will, resource allocation, and strategic foresight, but the dividends, in terms of security, influence, and international prestige, will be significant. The 21st century will be remembered as much for its maritime contests as for its technological revolutions or economic transformations. In this contest, the Indian Ocean will be a decisive arena, and India's performance within it will shape not only its own destiny but also the broader trajectory of regional and global stability. In rising to this challenge, India has the opportunity to define itself not merely as a participant in maritime geopolitics, but as one of its principal architects.

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Conflict of Interest

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