

Securing the Maritime Silk Road in South Asia and the Indian Ocean

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For roughly fifteen years, China's commercial and military activities in South Asia and the wider Indian Ocean have caused increasing concern about its intentions in the region. China specialists have examined the country's energy interests and naval planning along its sea lines of communication.¹ The proliferation of commercial infrastructure projects now branded under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has heightened these concerns about China's presence in the Indian Ocean region. Prominent infrastructure efforts include port development in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, while lower-profile efforts include tunnel and bridge construction in Bangladesh and Maldives.

These developments have raised questions about how China is attempting to secure the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR)—the waterway “road” component of BRI—in South Asia and across the Indian Ocean region more broadly. Because Pakistan will be examined by another essay in this roundtable and the China-Pakistan relationship is long-standing and predates BRI activities, this essay focuses on what China's activities look like elsewhere in maritime South Asia and out to critical Indian Ocean chokepoints.

Despite notable changes in the country's presence in the Indian Ocean over the last decade, to what extent is China securing its commercial interests using naval and maritime forces? If it indeed aims to do this in a comprehensive way, then the results are modest at present. The first section of this essay examines the evidence that China is working to secure its interests in the region. The next section describes challenges to China's efforts to do so and the galvanizing effects of its activities thus far. The essay will conclude by emphasizing the importance of monitoring potential indicators of a substantive shift in the Indian Ocean and South Asian order,

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NOTE ~ The views expressed are solely those of the author and not of any organization with which she is affiliated.

¹ See, for example, Bernard D. Cole, *China's Quest for Great Power: Ships, Oil, and Foreign Policy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2016), 148–49.

despite the limited scope of China's activities to secure the MSR to date, and by considering the implications for U.S. interests in the region.

Is China Securing the MSR?

The clearest examples of China acting to secure the MSR are the counterpiracy and noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs) conducted by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy and the establishment of a base in the far fringes of the Indian Ocean at the chokepoint in Djibouti.

Since 2008, Beijing has sent a PLA Navy task force to the Gulf of Aden. Originating out of UN resolutions to combat piracy,² China's military vessels have transited the Indian Ocean for the past decade, providing escort activity that aims to secure the safe passage of shipping, including for Chinese commercial vessels. China has used this mission to justify the deployment of submarines. These were clearly not in support of counterpiracy but instead appeared to be aimed at gaining operational experience far from home for this platform.³ As Admiral (ret.) Michael McDevitt observes, at any given time the PLA Navy has four to five surface ships and two support ships transiting the Indian Ocean, plus occasionally a submarine.⁴ India's chief of naval staff Admiral Sunil Lanba estimates a similar number (six to eight ships).⁵

Second, China conducted NEOs in response to domestic instability in Libya in 2011 and Yemen in 2015. In total, roughly 35,000 Chinese nationals were evacuated from Libya using Chinese civilian and military aircraft and ships,⁶ and nearly 1,000 Chinese and foreign nationals were evacuated from Yemen.⁷ Through such operations, China secured an important MSR asset—its citizens working in these countries.

² Alison A. Kaufman, "China's Participation in Anti-piracy Operations Off the Horn of Africa: Drivers and Implications," CNA, July 2009, 3, 6.

³ Andrew S. Erickson and Austin Strange, "China's Global Maritime Presence: Hard and Soft Dimensions of PLAN Antipiracy Operations," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, May 1, 2015.

⁴ Michael McDevitt, "Chinese Capabilities in the Indian Ocean: 'Seeing an Acorn, and Imagining an Oak Tree,'" in "Policy Recommendations by the Quadripartite Commission on the Indian Ocean Regional Security—Towards a More Stable Security Environment in the Indian Ocean Region: Appendix," Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 2017, 213.

⁵ Indrani Bagchi, "Chinese Subs in Djibouti to Fight 'Pirates' Worrying: Navy," *Times of India*, January 10, 2019.

⁶ Erica Downs, Jeffrey Becker, and Patrick deGateno, "China's Military Support Facility in Djibouti: The Economic and Security Dimensions of China's First Overseas Base," CNA, July 15, 2017, 22.

⁷ Kristen Gunness and Oriana Skylar Mastro, "A Global People's Liberation Army: Possibilities, Challenges, and Opportunities," *Asia Policy*, no. 22 (2016): 140.

Third, China established a military base in Djibouti in 2017. Although China had stated for decades that it had no intention of developing overseas bases, its counterpiracy operations as well as NEOs pointed to the potential benefits of having logistical support in place.⁸ The base leverages Djibouti's location at the Bab el-Mandeb Strait chokepoint, where the Red Sea meets the Gulf of Aden. China's presence at this far corner of the Indian Ocean shows the expanse of its operational reach across the region.

Challenges to China Securing the MSR

Through conducting counterpiracy operations and NEOs and establishing a base in Djibouti, China appears to be taking measures to protect its maritime interests in the Indian Ocean. Yet despite these activities, its current efforts to secure the MSR appear limited in scope, and challenges lie ahead for China to deepen its military presence in the region. As an extraregional power, it is at a disadvantage to resident powers such as India and even former colonial powers whose capitals are distant but that still have territories in the region (i.e., France and the United Kingdom). As mentioned above, China has only six to eight naval ships in the region at any given time, a number that is dwarfed by the number of Indian naval ships operating there. Another metric is port visits to Sri Lanka while transiting the Indian Ocean. Data from 2009 to 2017, for example, shows that China ranks only third in port visits (with 31), well behind India (82) and even Japan (67).⁹

More importantly, there are inherent limits to the expansion of China's military interests in South Asia. Consider military basing. It is notable that despite the emphasis of the dominant "string of pearls" narrative on this region since 2004, the first Chinese overseas base was not in South Asia but in Africa. Also worth noting is that China established this base after another Northeast Asian power—Japan—established its own base in Djibouti, where France and the United States also have long operated bases. Other countries have since pursued their own basing efforts in Djibouti. In 2011, before BRI was announced under the original name One Belt, One Road, officials from both Pakistan and Seychelles publicly offered basing to China, but Beijing did not pursue either opportunity. Meanwhile, leaders from the smaller South Asian countries actively reject the potential for China to establish

⁸ Downs, Becker, and deGategno, "China's Military Support Facility in Djibouti," 1, 22–23.

⁹ Jayanath Colombage, "Strategic Environments of South Asia/Indian Ocean Region: Sri Lanka Perspective," Center for Global and Strategic Studies, November 15, 2017, 7.

bases in their territory, given the negative repercussions from India. These countries have experienced India's economic, military, and intelligence reach—sometimes unwelcome—so this possibility is never far from their leaders' minds.

Next, Pakistan—whose close relationship with China endures—is the only country in South Asia that conducts regular bilateral naval exercises with China. The smaller South Asian countries certainly pursue military education and are eager to purchase platforms from China due to their affordability. But in terms of developing military ties along the MSR, China is not attaining the same operational-level interactions that India and even the United States obtain through their exercises with these countries.¹⁰ Instead, PLA Navy ships pay more limited goodwill visits to Indian Ocean countries, including as part of refueling stops. China's hospital ship *Peace Ark* also conducts humanitarian assistance missions to build goodwill among local countries, and Chinese ships already transiting the region have conducted disaster-relief operations—for example, during Maldives's water crisis in 2014 and the floods in Sri Lanka in 2017.

While China has not built bases in these countries, or even conducted regular exercises with their navies and coast guards, the reactions to the expansion of its commercial and military interests in the Indian Ocean region have been striking. China has (1) triggered India's pursuit of increased naval presence and capabilities, (2) heightened concern among the smaller states in the region about the effects of Chinese projects in their countries, and (3) focused unprecedented attention by major powers on their national interests in the Indian Ocean.

First, India is actively developing its naval capabilities and is even pursuing its first overseas basing effort—in Africa as well.¹¹ Following the Mumbai attacks in 2008, the Indian Navy was concerned about responding to threats of maritime terrorism and devoted considerable attention to improving its coastal security. By 2019, New Delhi had prioritized the development of more power-projection platforms (e.g., aircraft carriers) and antisubmarine warfare capabilities while considerably expanding its naval diplomacy to all corners of the Indian Ocean. These activities are driven by the long-term threat perceived from China.

¹⁰ For example, India conducts the SLINEX naval exercise with Sri Lanka and the Dosti coast guard exercise with Maldives and Sri Lanka, while the United States conducts the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asian countries.

¹¹ Nilanthy Samaranyake, "Asian Basing in Africa: India's Setback in Seychelles Could Be Worse," University of Pennsylvania, Center for the Advanced Study of India, September 18, 2018.

Second, concern has grown among the smaller countries in the region about the effects of Chinese projects.¹² For example, Bangladesh and Nepal have learned from the fallout over Sri Lanka's Hambantota 99-year port lease to China and are now seeking more favorable terms in their current project discussions with Beijing. Maldives's new president is trying to determine the precise amount of debt owed to China and to renegotiate the terms of payback. Moreover, public protests have taken place in Seychelles and Sri Lanka against Chinese projects, while Bangladesh blacklisted a Chinese company due to attempted bribery.

Third, other major powers are paying greater attention to the Indian Ocean with an eye to preventing the manifestation of tensions seen in the South and East China Seas. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (known as the Quad) has been resurrected from a decade ago, and officials from the United States, Japan, India, and Australia have held three meetings to discuss security and the "rules-based order" (albeit without mentioning China in statements). The negative discourse about China's lending terms and the potential for "Chinese debt traps" has driven India and Japan to join together to advance a transparent, sustainable alternative to BRI—the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). Finally, Washington has given unprecedented attention to the Indian Ocean region by prominently replacing the traditional "Asia-Pacific" focus with the new "Indo-Pacific" concept in the highest-level national strategy documents.¹³ This shift was evident in the renaming of U.S. Pacific Command as U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. Moreover, the United States is following India and Japan's lead with the AAGC by adopting a more competitive approach through the passage in 2018 of the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act, which aims to reform U.S. development finance tools and create the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation to support overseas projects.

Implications for U.S. Policy

To be clear, the future expansion of China's naval and maritime force presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean more broadly cannot be

¹² For further analysis of the smaller states of South Asia and their relations with China, see Nilanthi Samaranyake, "China's Engagement with Smaller South Asian Countries," U.S. Institute of Peace, Special Report, no. 446, April 2019.

¹³ White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C., December 2017); and U.S. Department of Defense, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge," January 2018.

ruled out. For example, at some point Beijing could increase the number of naval ships it deploys to the region by a significant factor. Another persistent concern is that China will convert one of its commercial port facilities in the region, such as in Colombo or Hambantota, for military use. This would, of course, require permission from the host country, as do port visits by PLA Navy ships at present. If China were to hold such discussions, conduct a regular bilateral naval exercise with a South Asian or other Indian Ocean country (not including Pakistan), or build a second overseas military base, then this would represent a fundamental shift from the status quo in the region.

U.S. policymakers should thus monitor the potential for China's aggressive behavior in East Asian waters to spread to South Asia and the wider Indian Ocean region. For example, in Djibouti, U.S. officials filed a diplomatic protest that China was responsible for directing lasers at U.S. Air Force aircraft, thereby threatening pilots. This kind of disruptive activity is exactly why the smaller South Asian and Indian Ocean countries are concerned about the potential for competition between major powers to destabilize their region.

Despite the limits of China's current presence and the challenges to its expansion, U.S. policymakers should not ignore the possibility that Chinese activities to secure the MSR could increase and destabilize the region. Instead, they should act to entrench U.S. interests in the Indian Ocean, such as by encouraging foreign direct investment by the private sector in maritime and road infrastructure. Such investment would be enthusiastically welcomed by the smaller regional countries seeking to diversify their sources of projects beyond China. ♦

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