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# INDIA'S DOUBLE FISH-HOOK STRATEGY

INCREASING DEFENCE ENGAGEMENT IN THE  
INDIAN OCEAN

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# The Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean has emanated as a paramount conduit for trade and energy. The significance of trade and the unmitigated opportunities of its sub-regions constitutes the Indian Ocean to be vital, owing to military and strategic associations. Although it is currently onerous for one country to dominate the entire Indian Ocean Region, its strategic importance and value remain consistent. Furthermore, the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as the modern geopolitical structure that encompasses the Indian and Pacific Oceans has impelled the Indian Ocean to be the focus of interest post the Cold war<sup>1</sup>. “Whoever controls the Indian Ocean, dominates Asia. This Ocean is the key to the seven seas. In the twenty-first century, the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters<sup>2</sup>”. This prescient articulation was made by Alfred Mahan, a notable maritime proponent.

Historically, the Indian Ocean Rim Association nations failed to benefit from the industrial revolution, owing to the decree of colonial leaders. Presently, the rising political and economic course has led to conflicts across the world. The strikingly large collapse of the Soviet Union was an unparalleled event of the late twentieth century. The profoundly discussed ideas of ‘mutually assured destruction’ and ‘zero-sum game equation’<sup>3</sup> were dissipated. The notion of a unipolar world, which was greatly noted for a certain period, was never determined. Following the progression of the strategic domain of ascendancy and the ideal change from land to ocean, India’s strategic order is gingerly redefining its prudent stance on the maritime domain. The ascendancy and dominance over the Indian Ocean may facilitate India to achieve a paramount influence eastward, and as a consequence, diversify its maritime impression in the Asia-Pacific region as a counterblow to China’s belligerent ‘*String of Pearls*’<sup>4</sup>. The idea of becoming a maritime power has not materialized due to a lack of resources to expand the navy. The army dominates the budget,

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<sup>1</sup> Baruah, Darshana. 2021. "What Is Happening in The Indian Ocean?". *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.

<sup>2</sup> Patnaik, Ajay. 2015. "Indian Ocean: The Key to India’s ‘Look East Policy’". *The Economic Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/et-commentary/indian-ocean-the-key-to-indias-look-east-policy/>.

<sup>3</sup> Patnaik, Ajay. 2015. "Indian Ocean: The Key to India’s ‘Look East Policy’". *The Economic Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/et-commentary/indian-ocean-the-key-to-indias-look-east-policy/>.

<sup>4</sup> "South Asia and The Indian Ocean Region: An Indian Perspective". 2020. *E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS*. <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/09/14/south-asia-and-the-indian-ocean-region-an-indian-perspective/>.

leading to deterrents in acquiring naval competence. Nevertheless, to subdue these institutional intricacies, the Indian Navy has been endeavouring to establish security relations with regional and extra-regional powers to enhance India's ability to manifest influence, while intercepting Chinese attempts of associating with key regional players.

## Chinese Strategic Interest in the Indian Ocean

One of the key objectives behind China's determination to dominate South Asia is its geographical location and interest in the region. Economically, South Asia is considered to be one of the most inadequately consolidated regions across the globe. The inter-regional trade has been subpar owing to high transportation costs, trade barriers, and political turmoil. As a consequence, Chinese imports have increased, allowing it to become South Asia's largest exporter and forcing its way into the regional markets with an unwavering expansion plan. China's most significant maritime apprehensions regarding South Asia are the trade transit points for western China, and the sea lines linking the Straits of Hormuz and the Straits of Malacca<sup>5</sup>.

The majority of the Chinese oil shipments pass via the Strait of Malacca, enabling the Indian Ocean to become a crucial crossroad for the country's energy supply. The propinquity between India and the Great Nicobar Island is a major source of apprehension for China. The Chinese government acknowledges the significance of dominating this passage and is wary of the fact that the country which has ascendancy over the Strait will restrict its supply stream. As a result, China is determined to place a greater emphasis on the Indian Ocean, while accelerating the amelioration of its navy capabilities. China has focused its endeavours in the Indian Ocean on the growth and burgeoning of port infrastructure, resources, military, and naval competence. China's neoteric emphasis on bolstering its marine strength stems from the notion that the country has adopted an ocean-centric approach. To accomplish this, China has been working towards evolving its strategic association with South Asian and East African nations. The 'Maritime Silk Route' and the 'Belt and Road

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<sup>5</sup> Fernando, Sithara. 2012. "China's Relations with The Indian Ocean Region: Combining Realist and Constructivist Perspectives". *Institute of Chinese Studies*. <https://www.icsin.org/publications/chinas-relations-with-the-indian-ocean-regioncombining-realist-and-constructivist-perspectives>.

Initiative' offer a perception of interconnection over the Indian Ocean <sup>6</sup>. To safeguard its national establishments and facilities, China has stationed greater naval power to secure its maritime interests. The Chinese nexus of maritime ventures and expansion of infrastructure in several nations have geopolitically encompassed India, driving towards the assertion of the '*String of Pearls*'.

China's '*String of Pearls*' strategy has fostered an idea that India has been encompassed by the nation's development ports created in collusion with the governments in neighbouring countries including Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh<sup>7</sup>. This strategy is aimed to apprehend India's ascendancy and restrict its maritime sway in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, as a means to counter terrorism, India strived to associate with its strategic allies like the United States, Australia, and France. Nevertheless, as one would expect China repudiates offensive strategies like the String of Pearls, although its measures and approaches are incongruous.

## India's Double Fish Hook Strategy

The Fish Hook strategy was hypothesised as the United States propelled approach accentuated by Liao Wen-Chung, a Taiwan military intelligence official. In the 1980s, it was feared that Russia would utilize the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as a platform for its aspirations in the Indian Ocean. This has led to apprehensions among nations like Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand, which were thought to be allies of the United States in Southeast Asia. The String of Pearls strategy has developed over time, with China working toward creating ports and similar substructures in nations like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. With that goal, India's first Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Bipin Rawat designated these islands as one of the theatre command centres.

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<sup>6</sup> "South Asia and The Indian Ocean Region: An Indian Perspective". 2020. *E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS*. <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/09/14/south-asia-and-the-indian-ocean-region-an-indian-perspective/>.

<sup>7</sup> Jha, Pankaj. 2020. "Countering Chinese String of Pearls, India's 'Double Fish Hook' Strategy". *Modern Diplomacy*. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/08/08/countering-chinese-string-of-pearls-indias-double-fish-hook-strategy/>.

There is an apparent escalation in India's engagement with its Eastern Indian Ocean neighbours Indonesia and Australia, and the island nations of Mauritius, Seychelles, and Madagascar. France expedited India's status in the Indian Ocean Commission as an observer. Furthermore, both countries have increased their engagement, expanding strategic and defence associations in the Indian Ocean Region. Moreover, this propounds that India has been deliberating on the double fish hook strategy. This strategy is envisaged to support the United States fish hook strategy in the Pacific Ocean. According to several media sources, China is assumed to have deployed many surveillance pods in the South China Sea to oversee the activities of the United States. The amelioration of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and \$6.67 million in funding manifests that India has a carefully planned strategy for these islands <sup>8</sup>.

China's String of Pearls strategy foresees India being encircled by Chinese-built ports in collusion with countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. In mid-2020, India signed the Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA), which offers to assist maritime reconnoitres carried out by the two nations employing their respective island resources. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Coco Islands of Australia have been enumerated for this logistical system. Australia has been working to improve its amenities in the Coco Islands and Darwin and Keynes. This logistical assistance arrangement would certainly assist the two nations in monitoring and reconnoitring. India and Indonesia have certified the idea to work on a port building project and the latter has concurred to assist in the growth of non-military and military establishments in the Sabang port. This is considered to be the first fish hook strategy, compassing the eastern Indian Ocean, Coco Islands, and Diego Garcia <sup>9</sup>. Likewise, the western fish hook strategy begins in Oman's Duqm port. India has also been striving to reach an arrangement with Djibouti to receive logistical assistance in the Horn of Africa. It has been observed that France is prioritizing the establishment of marine interconnection with India, along with conducting exercises with maritime surveillance aircraft like the P-8 I Poseidon. France has conceded that for safeguarding its territories in the

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<sup>8</sup> Jha, Pankaj. 2020. "Countering Chinese String of Pearls, India's 'Double Fish Hook' Strategy". *Modern Diplomacy*. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/08/08/countering-chinese-string-of-pearls-indias-double-fish-hook-strategy/>.

<sup>9</sup> Jha, Pankaj. 2020. "Countering Chinese String of Pearls, India's 'Double Fish Hook' Strategy". *Modern Diplomacy*. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/08/08/countering-chinese-string-of-pearls-indias-double-fish-hook-strategy/>.

Indian Ocean region, it has to increase coordination and interplay with the Indian navy. As a result, creating a line linking the ports will resemble a fish hook, eventually landing at Diego Garcia.

The exigency of developing this network has been acknowledged so that any Chinese venture near the Indian coast is encountered with interference and disruption of ships if emergency surfaces. This double hook strategy might succeed in conducting strategic activities between the Quad members, such as combating piracy or disaster mitigation operations. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Diego Garcia, and Djibouti base will be the three junctions of the double fish hook strategy<sup>10</sup>. In some ways, this would lead to the development of a potent triad for sea ascendancy. The double fish hook strategy will assist India in combating China's actions involving unmanned submersibles and submarines in the Indian Ocean region. Chinese deployment of troops has increased at the Djibouti base and is bolstering its influence in the Indian Ocean. The restoration of the Feydhoo Finolhu island demonstrates China's willingness to take chances to safeguard its energy supply lines and maritime trade. Furthermore, China's silk road policy would heavily rely on its military might as and supremacy over the Indian Ocean.

## Conclusion

It is conjectured that if the border dispute escalates to the brink of conflict, India recognizes the need of limiting China's marine traffic. The double fish hook strategy would heavily rely on the growth and expansion of facilities in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. India's revolution of the maritime realm has been challenging, with years of diplomatic and defence officials accentuating global concerns. The Indian Navy receives roughly 14 per cent of the defence budget speaks volumes about the precedence of the defence establishments. This is not to dismiss India's issues. As evidenced by contemporary concerns in Doklam and Ladakh, it is necessary to comprehend the significance of marine geography along with its relationship with India's strategic aims and burgeoning regional vying. The Navy's prioritizes the understanding of the maritime realm, which

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<sup>10</sup> Jha, Pankaj. 2020. "Has India Activated Its 'Double Fish Hook' Strategy in the Indian Ocean?". *Cescube.Com*. <http://www.cescube.com/vp-has-india-activated-its-double-fish-hook-strategy-in-the-indian-ocean>.

encompasses the acknowledgement of all movements on, below, and over the sea<sup>11</sup>. Being cognizant of the materializing menaces, it is vital to articulate and implement policies and strategies. If it is estimated that China is surfacing as a chief adversary in the Indian Ocean Region, India should redefine its perception of the Indian Ocean as an endless space and gain a better understanding of the region. The double fish hook strategy would subvert the Chinese String of Pearls and give India ascendancy over the contention between the two nations. This implies that China's incursions into the Indian Ocean will be discerned and challenged by India, with the assistance of Quad nations before the region's maritime order is reoriented.

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<sup>11</sup> Baruah, Darshana. 2021. "It Is Time to Reimagine the Indian Ocean". *Hindustan Times*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/it-is-time-to-reimagine-the-indian-ocean-101617111891839.html>.

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