



## CHINESE STRING OF PEARLS POLICY AND INDIA'S SECURITY IMPLICATIONS

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**ABSTRACT** String of Pearls refers to the Chinese intention to establish a network in India Ocean Region (IOR) surrounding India. Each Pearl represents some form of permanent Chinese military installation in a series of locations along a String. Recent development of ports around India, in Gwadar, Hambantota, Sittwe on the Bay of Bengal Coast in Myanmar etc. are seen as part of a string of pearls. Although these are commercial ports, the fear is that these could be easily converted to Naval facilities in case of a conflict in India.

**KEYWORDS** : String of Pearls, Network, India Ocean Region, Development, Commercial, Ports.

### INTRODUCTION

China and India are becoming major maritime powers, are actively developing port infrastructure in coastal states and, relying on foreign policy strategies, are making efforts to change the balance of power and consolidate their positions. The growing naval presence of China is affecting the strategic interests of India.

The String of Pearls is a geopolitical hypothesis proposed by United States political researchers in 2004. The term refers to the network of Chinese military and commercial facilities and relationships along its sea lines of communication, which extend from the Chinese mainland to Port Sudan in the Horn of Africa. The sea lines run through several major maritime choke points such as the Strait of Mandeb, the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Lombok Strait as well as other strategic maritime centers in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Somalia.

Strategic Thinkers in India believe this plan, together with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and other parts of China's Belt and Road Initiative under Chinese Communist Party general secretary Xi Jinping, is a threat to India's national security. Such a system would encircle India and threaten its power projection, trade, and potentially territorial integrity. Furthermore, China's support for India's traditional enemy of Pakistan and its Gwadar Port is viewed as a threat, compounded by fears that China may develop an overseas naval military base in Gwadar, which could allow China to conduct expeditionary warfare in the Indian Ocean Region. From the east, the deep-water port of Kyaukpkyu is also viewed with a similar concern. The first comprehensive academic analyses of Chinese plan and its security implications for New Delhi was undertaken in February 2008 by an active-duty Indian naval officer. Antedating China's anti-piracy naval deployment in the Indian Ocean beginning in December 2008, and the ensuing acquisition of its first overseas military base in Djibouti in August 2017, his analysis predicting China's "permanent military presence" in the Indian Ocean is viewed by Indian policymakers as prescient. Accordingly, India has since been making moves of various types to counter the perceived threat.

The term as a geopolitical concept was first used in an internal US Department of Defence report, "Energy Futures in Asia" in 2005. The term is also widely used in India's geopolitical and foreign policy narratives to highlight India's concerns over massive Chinese Belt and Road Initiative projects across southern Asia. According to the EUISS, the formation of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (consisting of United States, India, Australia and Japan) is a direct result of China's assertive foreign and security policy in the Indo-Pacific region.

The emergence of the String of Pearls is indicative of China's growing geopolitical influence through concerted efforts to increase access to ports and airfields, expand and modernise military forces, and foster stronger diplomatic relationships with trading partners. The Chinese government insists that China's burgeoning naval strategy is entirely peaceful and is only for the protection of regional trade interests. Chinese Communist Party general secretaries Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping have both asserted that China will never seek hegemony in foreign relations. It has been claimed that China's actions are creating a security dilemma between China and India in the Indian Ocean, that has been questioned by some analysts, who point to China's fundamental strategic vulnerabilities.

### Strategic Importance of the Indian Ocean

Indian Ocean countries have a long history of trade, culture and military interaction with the rest of the world. Today the Indian Ocean's traditional status as an international trade highway is more significant than ever before, while international military presence in the ocean is unprecedented. A major concern of India in the Indian Ocean is energy. India is almost 70 per cent dependent on oil imports, a major part of which comes from the gulf region. The sea lanes in the Indian Ocean are considered among the most strategically important in the world. More than 80 % of the world's seaborne trade in oil transits through the Indian Ocean choke points, with 40 % passing through the Strait of Hormuz, 35 % through the Strait of Malacca and 8 % through the Bab el Mandab Strait.

The Indian Ocean is an area of conflict. Some conflicts are internal and remain localised, but other local and regional conflicts are of global significance and are prone to foreign political and military interference. Some notable conflict areas are Israel and Palestine, Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. The region is home to continually evolving strategic developments including the competing rises of China and India, the potential nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan, the US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Islamist terrorism, and the growing incidence of piracy in and around the Horn of Africa, and management of diminishing fishery resources.

### Impact of China's String of Pearls on India

#### Strategic impact:

Strings of pearls will lead to China surrounding India. China, which doesn't have any openings in Indian Ocean, will be able to dominate it. Strategic clout of India which it enjoys today in Indian Ocean will be reduced. Countries which today consider India as a partner in response to China may end up in the lap of China.

#### Economic impact:

Indian resources will be diverted towards defence and security. Thus, the economy will not reach its potential hampering economic growth. This may further lead to instability in India and the whole east and south east region.

#### Maritime security:

China's presence will pose a threat to India's security through water. China is developing more firepower with more submarines, destroyers, vessels and ships. This endangers Indian maritime security.

### Steps taken by India to Counter String of Pearls

#### Act East Policy:

India's Act East Policy, which was launched as an effort to integrate India's economy with South East Asian nations. It has been used to make important military and strategic agreements with Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore helping India to counter China.

#### Military relationships:

India has developed strategic naval relationship with Myanmar to upgrade and train its navy which gives India an increased footprint in the area. India has also made strategic agreements for military cooperation in the region with Japan, Australia and the USA. The four countries carry out joint military exercises in the IOR region and are known as the 'Quad'.

**Chabahar port:**

India is developing Chabahar port in Iran, opening a new land sea route to Central Asian countries by-passing Pakistan. Chabahar gives India a strategic position since it overlooks the Gulf of Oman, a very strategic oil supply route.

**Strategic pact with France:**

India and France recently signed a strategic pact opening up their naval bases to each other's warships across the Indian Ocean. It grants the Indian navy access to strategically important French ports including one in Djibouti, home to China's single overseas military base.

**Surrounding China in the north:**

India has invested a lot diplomatically in countries like Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Mongolia, all surrounding China.

**Naval bases and airfields:**

India finalised an agreement for a new base in the Seychelles and negotiated military access to naval facilities at Oman's port and airfields. A pact allowing deployments from each other's naval facilities was signed with Singapore in 2017. With expanded bases on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands at the end of the Malacca Strait, India is raising the stakes in the fight over the waters of Southeast Asia.

**Growing Coastal Radar Networks**

- Bangladesh – India has recently signed an agreement with Bangladesh to install 20 Coastal Surveillance Radar Systems along the coastline of Bangladesh. This will help India to monitor Chinese Warships which have been frequently visiting the Bay of Bengal.
- Maldives – India will install 10 Coastal Radar Systems in the Maldives. These radars will relay live images, videos, location information of Ships moving in the Indian Ocean Region. The project is implemented by Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL). As of 2019, 7 are completed, there were small hiccups in the project due to the Government of Maldives.
- Sri Lanka – 6 Coastal Surveillance Radars (CSR) have been installed in Sri Lanka. As per some reports, India is planning to set up at least 10 more CSR in Sri Lanka. There are constant ongoing efforts by the Governments of India and Sri Lanka to solidify India- Sri Lanka ties.
- Mauritius – 8 Coastal Surveillance Radars have been installed in Mauritius.
- Seychelles – 01 Coastal Surveillance Radar (CSR) have been Installed in Seychelles. The 1st Coastal Surveillance Radar in Seychelles became operational in 2015. It was commissioned on the main island of Mahe. More Coastal Surveillance Radar will be installed in the small islands of Astove, Assumption and Farquhar. There are plans for 32 more Coastal Surveillance Radar Systems in Seychelles.
- India – BEL had set up 46 Coastal Radar stations and 16 command and control systems in 2015 in India. In the next phase, 38 more Coastal Radar stations and 5 command and control systems will be set up.

**CONCLUSION**

The String of Pearls strategy devised by China's leadership to reduce its reliance on the Malacca Strait has definitely strengthened the PLA's position in the Indo-Pacific Region. The String of Pearls perfectly ropes in all other foreign policy strategies devised by China over the years, like the BRI and Debt-trap Diplomacy. Chinese establishments in the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka and various other regions close to India are a serious national security threat to New Delhi. There has also been an increase in the frequency of PLA military vessels visiting the establishments that serve under the String of Pearls strategy.

With the help of "String of Pearls Project" China is trying to create a threat in the mind of the Asian countries so that it can emerge as the superpower in Asia and the whole world as well. But this is just one face of a coin; another face is that India is also setting a naval base in its surrounding countries so that any Chinese invasion can be tackled.

It should be noted that many of the solutions are not immediate in nature and may require at least 2-3 decades to fructify. What is needed is the strong decision-making ability at the highest levels to change the status quo. The timely execution of the planned strategic initiatives would play a key role in making India's presence in Indian Ocean a strong Leader.

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