

CHINA'S NAVAL STRATEGY TOWARDS THE INDIAN OCEAN UNDER XI JINPING

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China is gradually emerging as a maritime great power' (MGP)¹ in the twenty-first century under President Xi Jinping. It is building a two-ocean navy—a Pacific Ocean fleet and an Indian Ocean fleet. Since China is an East Asian power and the proximate threat that China may face is in the East Asian theatre, the Pacific fleet acquires primary importance in China's naval strategy. Although the Indian Ocean is a secondary preference for China, the Ocean is becoming a linchpin for China's new global naval reach. China's 2015 Defence White paper declares "open seas protection" as a new naval strategy of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy/PLAN), which primarily deals with the Indian Ocean region (IOR). With massive investments under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) across the Indian Ocean region, China's Indian Ocean strategy can be seen as an effort to protect its economic interests, while also projecting its power across maritime Asia. China has recently been deploying submarines and platform ships through the Indian Ocean, however, the aircraft carrier is going to be the mainstay of China's Indian Ocean fleet. Indeed, without projecting Chinese naval power across the Indian Ocean, Xi Jinping's aim of becoming a 'maritime great power' will remain a dream only.

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1. In various Chinese documents, the term 'maritime great power' (MGP) and 'true maritime power' are interchangeably used but the meaning and context are the same.

Though China has tried to get overland connectivity to the Indian Ocean through Pakistan and Myanmar, this will not help it to overcome the vulnerabilities, such as the 'Malacca Dilemma'. As a result, getting access rights to ports in the littoral countries has been the only option for China.

China's Indian Ocean strategy is fundamentally different from its near-seas (East and South China Seas) strategy, because it doesn't face any direct threat from the Indian Ocean. The Southeast Asian archipelago divides the two oceans, the Pacific and the Indian, acting as both a protective barrier and a vulnerability for China. Unlike the near seas, the Indian Ocean belongs to the far seas area and the distance allows adequate time for China to prepare against a threat from the Indian Ocean. Its major concerns are as follows: first, the Southeast Asian archipelago restricts direct access to the Indian Ocean. Though China has tried to get overland connectivity to the Indian Ocean through Pakistan and Myanmar, this will not help it to overcome the vulnerabilities, such as the 'Malacca Dilemma'. As a result, getting access rights to ports in the littoral countries has been the only option for China, which it seeks to build through friendly relationships with them. Second, the rise of India as a predominant naval power in the IOR is considered as a major threat to Chinese interests in the IOR. As Mearsheimer argues, China, as a rising state to the great power status in East Asia will ensure that no state in Asia can threaten it,² and hence views India as a potential rival in its great power ambition. The threat is accentuated by India's advantages over China in a conflict over a land border dispute that India could extend the skirmishes into the Indian Ocean, where India has a geographic advantage over China, and has the potential to disrupt the Chinese SLOCS passing through the Indian Ocean. Third, the US Navy might take advantage of China's vulnerability in the Indian Ocean to exert leverage in conflicts within the Pacific. The US might act alone or in concert with India to disrupt China's dependence on the sea route for its economic survival. So, China's strategy towards the Indian

2. John J. Mearsheimer, "Better to be Godzilla than Bambi", *Foreign Policy*, no. 146, Jan.-Feb. 2005, pp. 47-48

Ocean is a combination of its threat perception and expansionism, i.e. developing strategies to overcome the threat by neutralising India's dominant position in the IOR and balancing the US' comparative advantage vis-à-vis China in the Indian Ocean, as well as expanding its power beyond the East Asian theatre.

Today the Indian Ocean has become a critical artery for China's energy lifelines, with more than 80 per cent of oil and gas passing through the Indian Ocean to China from the Middle East and Africa.

China is also dependent on the east-west trade route connecting the Pacific to the Atlantic through the Indian Ocean, one of the busiest trade routes in the world which carries Chinese industrial products to Europe. Any threat to this critical trade link, whether from the dominance of rival powers or from regional instability and lawlessness, would have a critical effect on the economic growth of China, impacting the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy to administer the state. To secure its energy and trade interests, China had earlier adopted a 'string of pearls' strategy, or some scholars referred to it as 'places not bases' strategy.³ This was done to reinforce Chinese presence into the region and to convey the message that China keeps an eye on the developments in the Indian Ocean. China's concern was that the US naval bases in the Indian Ocean and India's naval prowess might jeopardise its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. China's strategy has been to maintain the Indian Ocean region as free as possible, however, its major concern is an Indian dominance in association with a superpower of the Indian Ocean waters. Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, Beijing has been trying to expand its naval presence into the Indian Ocean in order to emerge as a formidable naval power in the region.

According to the US Congressional Research Service report of March 2021, the Chinese Navy has been transformed over the last 25 years into a much more modern and capable force, a formidable military force within China's near-seas region, and

China's strategy has been to maintain the Indian Ocean region as free as possible, however, its major concern is an Indian dominance in association with a superpower of the Indian Ocean waters.

3. Michael McDevitt, "Becoming a Great 'Maritime Power': A Chinese Dream", Centre for Naval Analysis, Virginia, June, 2016.

it is conducting a growing number of operations in more-distant waters, including the broader waters of the Western Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and waters around Europe.⁴ Moreover, China has become the largest Navy in the world in terms of battleships, with 360 by the end of 2020, compared to the US Navy's 297, and is projected to have 400 battleships by 2025, and 425 by 2030, while the US will still have less than 300 ships during this period.⁵ The US Department of Defense's 2020 annual report suggests that PLA's objective is to become a "world-class" military by 2049—a goal first announced by General Secretary Xi Jinping in 2017.⁶

XI JINPING AND CHINA'S NAVAL STRATEGY

Although the MGP is associated with the Xi administration, former Chinese leader Hu Jintao first enunciated it in his work report at the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in November 2012, when he stated China's ambition to become a "strong maritime power."⁷ It was, indeed, a response to the demand by many military leaders and strategic analysts for an active foreign policy commensurate with China's economic strength as well as improved military capability.⁸ This was heightened after 2008 when China successfully conducted Beijing Olympics, and also became the second largest economy in the world in 2010 in terms of GDP, surpassing Japan and behind only the US.⁹ However, Hu was reluctant to endorse such demands as he feared that it would have a destabilising impact on China's "peaceful development."¹⁰ Throughout the 2000s, PLA Navy had sought expanding

4. CongressionalResearchService, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress", March 9, 2021, at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33153.pdf>. Accessed on March 31, 2021.

5. Ibid.

6. Department of Defence, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020", Government of the United States of America, at <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>. Accessed on April 18, 2021.

7. "Full text of Hu Jintao's report at 18th Party Congress", November 27, 2012, at http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/18th_CPC_National_Congress_Eng/t992917.htm. Accessed on April 13, 2021.

8. Zhou Fangyin, "Between assertiveness and self-restraint: understanding China's South China Sea policy", *International Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 4, 2016, pp. 869-90.

9. Feng Zhang, "China's long march at sea: explaining Beijing's South China Sea strategy, 2009–2016", *The Pacific Review*, vol. 33, no. 5, 2019, pp. 757-87.

10. M. Taylor Fravel, "China's strategy in the South China sea." *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2011, pp. 292-319.

its wings far into the SCS and the Indian Ocean, including island-building proposals, but failed to get approval from the top on the grounds that the time was not yet right.¹¹ However, that moment came in 2013, when the PLA Navy, received approval from the new President Xi following a leadership transfer.¹² When Xi Jinping took power in 2013, he modified Deng Xiaoping's dictum of 'keeping low profile' foreign policy with the term 'striving for achievement' during the Central Conference on Periphery Diplomacy held in the same year.¹³ Further, he undertook reforms in the organisation of the PLA and urged it to "sharpen its combat readiness to fight and win the next war", with an emphasis on converting China into a maritime great power.¹⁴ The 2012 Chinese defense white paper had emphasised the importance of the maritime domain in Chinese strategic thinking and stated that the most likely scenario of conflict will occur at sea.¹⁵ As such, the maritime domain became the new strategic theatre, as Xi stated in his address to the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee's study session in July 2013, "We need to do more to take interest in the sea, understand the sea, and strategically manage the sea, and continually do more to promote China's efforts to become a maritime power."¹⁶

Xi's MGP strategy is more assertive and comprehensive with the goal of transforming China into an 'unparalleled' great power by 2050. For him, the true maritime power concept "is being used to embolden China's economic philosophy and, in conjunction with other national-security goals, to project a vision of future national greatness."¹⁷ During his speech to the 19th Party

11. Zhang, n. 9.

12. Jane Perlez, "The prospect of Philippine thaw slows China's plans in the South China Sea", *The New York Times*, September 24, 2016, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/25/world/asia/philippines-south-china-sea.html>. Accessed on April 12, 2021.

13. Ling Wei, "Striving for achievement in a new era: China debates its global role," *The Pacific Review*, vol. 33, no. 3-4, 2020, pp. 413-37.

14. You Ji, *China's Military Transformation* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015).

15. Ibid.

16. Ryan D. Martinson, "Jinglue Haiyang: The Naval Implications of Xi Jinping's New Strategic Concept", *China Brief*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2015, at <https://jamestown.org/program/jinglue-haiyang-the-naval-implications-of-xi-jinpings-new-strategic-concept/>. Accessed on April 16, 2021.

17. James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "China's Navy: A Turn to Corbett?", *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, December 2011, pp. 42-46, at <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2010/december/chinas-navy-turn-corbett>. Accessed on April 15, 2021.

Congress in October 2017, Xi outlined requirements for the PLA to become a mechanised force by 2020, a fully modernised force by 2035, and a “world-class” force by 2050.¹⁸ He pointed out that “building a maritime power was an integral part of China’s socialist undertaking because the importance of the sea had become more apparent with respect to developing the national economy, improving ecosystems, and competing for international politics.”¹⁹ In his “China Dream” of rejuvenating the Chinese Nation, Xi emphasised making China a “moderately prosperous nation” and a “true maritime power” with a strong navy by the time the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) celebrates its centennial in 2021, and a fully developed nation (unparalleled great power) by about 2050, around communist China’s 100th anniversary (2049).²⁰

There are both offensive and defensive aspects to China’s expansionist naval policy in the far seas. Its offensive nature has originally been explained in the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy*, which stated that future guidance to China’s navy will “elevate offense from the campaign and tactical levels to the strategic level.”²¹ It further says, China “cannot wait for the enemy to attack,” but rather should engage in “strategic attack activities.”²² Indeed, the “open seas protection” strategy is the last stage of PLAN’s gradual expansion from the coastal navy into a blue water navy capable of undertaking missions in faraway regions. Like many global maritime powers of the erstwhile period, China has modernised its naval force commensurate with its economic progress. The 2015 white paper underlines its commitment to “develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests,” and the PLAN has been tasked to

18. Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”, Speech Delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, China Daily Online, October 18, 2017, www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpconationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm. Accessed on April 15, 2021.

19. Kejin Zhao and Hao Zhang, “Projecting Political Power: China’s Changing Maritime Strategy”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2019, pp. 229-61.

20. “Structuring the Chinese Dream”, *China Daily*, January 25, 2014, at http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2014-01/25/content_17257856.htm Accessed on April 8, 2021.

21. Shou Xiaosong (ed.), *Science of Military Strategy*, (Beijing: Military Science, 2013), p. 107.

22. Ibid., p. 216.

“safeguard its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, protect the security of strategic SLOCs and overseas interests, and participate in international maritime cooperation, to provide strategic support for building itself into a maritime power.”²³

THE INDIAN OCEAN IN CHINA’S NAVAL STRATEGY

President Xi’s announcement of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in 2013 helped China in expanding its foothold into the maritime littorals of Asia and Europe by winning contracts and building infrastructures. This will ensure better strategic cooperation with the littoral countries, making China a legitimate stakeholder in the security affairs of the IOR. Undoubtedly, the more Chinese investments in the areas of maritime infrastructures such as ports, rail-road connectivity, and industrial parks along the littorals, the larger the Chinese naval presence that will be required to protect such assets. Hence, the need for a strong naval presence in the IOR. As a result, safeguarding the security of China’s overseas interests has become one of the major responsibilities of PLAN.²⁴ Though the objective of the new strategy is to protect China’s sea lines of communication (SLOC) and MSR investments associated with the Indian Ocean region, however, it will invariably project its power across the region.

With the “open seas protection” strategy, China has expanded its “strategic frontier” from near seas to the far seas, where China would be willing to commit military forces in pursuit of goals seen to be in the country’s national interests.²⁵ Since the area of operation of the “open seas protection” strategy is the Indian Ocean, Beijing would bring in more naval power into the region. This might conflict with India’s national security interests pertaining to the Indian Ocean which New Delhi considers its strategic backyard.

China’s Indian Ocean naval strategy is not only about protecting its MSR investments or securing its SLOCs but, more importantly, it is also about

23. *China’s Military Strategy 2015*, The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, Beijing, May 2015, at <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/index.htm>. Accessed on April 12, 2021.

24. Ibid.

25. David Shambaugh, “The insecurity of security: The PLA’s evolving doctrine and threat perceptions towards 2000”, *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, vol. 13, 1994, pp. 3-25.

While China's current capacities are insufficient for a full spectrum dominance of the Indian Ocean, but as and when the western Pacific becomes normal and a conflict-free zone, China will surely divert its resources towards Indian Ocean dominance.

projecting power across maritime Asia. Ever since it turned to the maritime domain as a result of dissipating threats from the former Soviet Union, it had set its eyes on the Indian Ocean as part of its expansionist propensity. China's first overseas naval expedition was to the Indian Ocean in November 1985, under the direction of the then PLAN commander Liu Huaqing and was backed by the political leadership.²⁶ Throughout its naval modernisation period, it considered the Indian Ocean water as a "buffer zone"—an area that should not be controlled by any other power until China becomes stronger to expand its influence.²⁷ China is now pursuing

the goal of filling the 'buffer zone' and seeks to establish its dominance, thereby diminishing Indian and the US power in the Indian Ocean region. While China's current capacities are insufficient for a full spectrum dominance of the Indian Ocean, but as and when the western Pacific becomes normal and a conflict-free zone, China will surely divert its resources towards Indian Ocean dominance.

With the mandate of overseas operations to protect Chinese interests, PLAN has increased its naval deployment in the far seas which include the northern Indian Ocean and the western Pacific Ocean, which some PLA sources refer to as the "two oceans region."²⁸ This is in line with the third stage of naval expansion of Liu Huaqing's time-honored island chain strategy, which emphasised that by 2020 China's naval capability should be mature enough to project its power between the

26. Christopher D. Yung, Ross Rustici, Isaac Kardon and Joshua Wiseman, "China's Out of Area Naval Operations: Case Studies, Trajectories, Obstacles, and Potential Solutions", *China Strategic Perspectives*, No. 3 (Washington, D.C.: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University Press, 2010).

27. Yves-Heng Lim "The Driving Forces behind China's Naval Modernization", *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2011, pp. 105-20.

28. Jennifer Rice and Erik Robb, "The Origins of 'Near Seas Defense and Far Seas Protection'", *CMSI China Maritime Reports*, February 13, 2021, at <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/13>. Accessed on September 15, 2021.

areas of second and third island chains.²⁹ To project its power across the maritime domain covering the deep western Pacific and the Indian Ocean, which also become part of the third island chain, China necessarily requires at least three aircraft carriers. China has planned to acquire a minimum of three aircraft carriers by 2025, so that it can deploy at least one, the first Liaoning carrier, into the Indian Ocean.³⁰ If it gets six carriers, as some reports suggest, then it may deploy two aircraft carriers in the Indian Ocean, making China a formidable military power in the region.³¹

PLAN must have the capability to conduct continuous far sea operations against other major sea powers at all levels of ships in order to project sustained power. The PLA Navy has had an unprecedented naval expansion since the 2000s.

NAVAL CAPABILITY

PLAN must have the capability to conduct continuous far sea operations against other major sea powers at all levels of ships in order to project sustained power. The PLA Navy has had an unprecedented naval expansion since the 2000s “that far exceeds the buildup in any other navy in the post-World War II era.”³² It had 216 ships in 2005 that increased to 333 in 2020, built 117 new ships in 15 years period (Figure 1). According to the US Office of the Naval Intelligence (ONI), China is on the cusp of marginalising the US’ predominant naval position in the Indo-Pacific region.³³ The ONI study shows that given the increasing PRC shipbuilding capacity and capabilities, it is likely that the PLAN surface force could approach 450 hulls and 99 total submarines by 2030.

29. Alexander Chieh-cheng Huang, “The Chinese Navy’s Offshore Active Defense Strategy”, *Naval War College Review*, vol. 47, no. 3, 1994.

30. *Global Times*, “China’s 3rd aircraft carrier expected to launch in 2021: Reports”, January 17, 2021, at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202101/1213074.shtml>. Accessed on May 31, 2021.

31. Christopher Colley, “A Future Chinese Indian Ocean Fleet?”, *War on the Rocks*, April 2, 2021, at <https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/a-future-chinese-indian-ocean-fleet/>. Accessed on July 31, 2021.

32. James E. Fanell And Scott Cheney-Peters, “Defending Against a Chinese Navy of 500 Ships”, *Wall Street Journal*, January 19, 2017, at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/defending-against-a-chinese-navy-of-500-ships-1484848417>. Accessed on July 31, 2021.

33. Office of Naval Intelligence (US), “The PLA Navy: New Capabilities and Missions for the 21st Century”, 2015, at <https://www.oni.navy.mil/News/China-Publication/>. Accessed on August 31, 2021.

Figure 1: Numbers of Certain Types of Chinese and US Ships since 2005

Year of DOD report	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2020 change from 2005
Ballistic missile submarines	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	+3
Nuclear-powered attack submarines	6	5	5	5	6	6	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	6	6	0
Diesel attack submarines	51	50	53	54	54	54	49	48	49	51	53	57	54	47	50	46	-5
Aircraft carriers	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	+2
Cruisers	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	+1
Destroyers	21	25	25	29	27	25	26	26	23	24	21	23	31	28	33	32	+11
Frigates	43	45	47	45	48	49	53	53	52	49	52	52	56	51	54	49	+6
Corvettes	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	15	23	23	28	42	49	+49
Missile-armed coastal patrol craft	51	45	41	45	70	85	86	86	85	85	86	86	88	86	86	86	+35
Amphibious ships: LSTs and LPDs	20	25	25	26	27	27	27	28	29	29	29	30	34	33	37	37	+17
Amphibious ships: LSMs	23	25	25	28	28	28	28	23	26	28	28	22	21	23	22	21	-2
Total of types above (does not include other types, such as auxiliary and support ships)	216	221	222	233	262	276	276	271	273	283	294	303	317	306	335	333	+117
China Coast Guard ships	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	185	240	248	255	n/a
Total U.S. Navy battle force ships (which includes auxiliary and support ships but excludes patrol craft)	291	282	281	279	282	285	288	284	287	285	289	271	275	279	286	296	+5
Total U.S. Navy battle force ships compared to above total for certain Chinese ship types	+75	+61	+59	+46	+20	+9	+12	+13	+14	+2	-5	-32	-42	-27	-49	-37	-112

Source: "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress", Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC, September 9, 2021, p. 8, at <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/RL33153.pdf>. Accessed on July 31, 2021.

The Chinese naval inventory includes advanced destroyers and attack submarines in large numbers, due to the PLAN's primary mission of 'active offshore defence' in the near seas. China's naval modernisation drive, which was launched in the late 1990s, has resulted in the replacement of older ships with new and technologically advanced larger ships, as well as the installation of modern weapon systems.³⁴ Destroyers are PLAN's frontline surface combatant strike groups, and China has commissioned six new classes of destroyers since the 2000s. Major inventory additions include Type 052D Luyang III-class guided-missile destroyers, the Type 054C Luyang II-class guided-missile destroyers, the Type 054A Jiangkai III-class guided-missile frigates, and the Soviet-built Sovremenny-class destroyers.³⁵ These vessels are equipped with the indigenous YJ-18 A or YJ-62 anti-ship cruise missile (ASCM) and the HN-2 land-attack cruise missile (a variant of the Russian Kh-55 missile). Type-052C also carries several Chinese built HHQ-9 surface-to-air missiles (SAM), housed in vertical launch systems (VLS).³⁶ In 2017, the Chinese Navy emerged as the world's largest navy, with more warships and submarines than the United States, however, the American fleet remains superior qualitatively, and it is spread much thinner.³⁷

With the incorporation of 'open seas protection' in China's naval strategy, the blue water naval capability has progressed exponentially. The new inventories were aimed at enhancing China's blue-water naval capabilities, and PLAN has now become a more blue-water force than it was before.³⁸ For instance, China commissioned or launched 44 surface ships throughout 2016–17, of which 26 are bluewater-capable.³⁹ Between 2014 and 2018, China launched more submarines, warships, amphibious vessels, and auxiliaries

34. Richard Bitzinger, "Modernising China's Military, 1997-2012", *China Perspective*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2011, pp. 7-15.

35. James E. Fanell, "Asia Rising: China's Global Naval Strategy and Expanding Force Structure," *Naval War College Review*: vol. 72, no. 1, 2019, pp. 11-45.

36. *Military Balance*, IISS, London, 2021, p. 252.

37. Steven Lee Myers, "With Ships and Missiles, China Is Ready to Challenge U.S. Navy in Pacific", *The New York Times*, August 29, 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/29/world/asia/china-navy-aircraft-carrier-pacific.html>. Accessed on July 31, 2021.

38. Koh Swee Lean Collin, "China-India Rivalry at Sea: Capability, trends and challenges", *Asian Security*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2019, pp. 5-24.

39. *Ibid.*

than the combined navies of Germany, India, Spain and the United Kingdom.⁴⁰ China commissioned 18 ships into its fleet in 2016 alone and another 14 were inducted in 2017 (Figure 2). On the other hand, US Navy had commissioned only 5 and 8 ships respectively during the same period. In 2018, China launched the world's largest destroyer, Type 055 class destroyer with a displacement capacity of over 11,000 tonnes, demonstrating its technical capability in building advanced systems and its blue-water naval capability.⁴¹ The Type 055 class destroyer is expected to perform major command and control functions in far seas operations and will likely serve as the primary escort of China's aircraft carrier strike groups in blue-water operations.⁴² China has launched five such destroyers which are under various stages of operational requirements.⁴³ China launched its second aircraft carrier, indigenously-built Type-001A Shandong, in April 2017, which underwent maiden sea trials the following June, and was commissioned in December 2019.⁴⁴ The *Shandong* can operate up to 36 Shenyang J-15 fighters, a Chinese copy of the Sukhoi Su-33, as well as several helicopters.⁴⁵ It uses a ski-ramp to launch aircraft, and participated in its first drill in the South China Sea in May 2021.⁴⁶ The first, *Lioning*, is originally a Soviet cruiser carrier, retrofitted by China and launched in 2012, with which PLAN has become a true two-

40. "How is China modernizing its navy?", *CSIS China Power*, at <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-naval-modernization/>. Accessed on August 31, 2021.

41. Rick Joe, "All You Need to Know About China's New Stealth Destroyer", *The Diplomat*, June 8, 2018, at <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/all-you-need-to-know-about-chinas-new-stealth-destroyer/>. Accessed on July 31, 2021.

42. "China set to showcase game-changing warship at navy parade", *The Week*, April 19, 2019, at <https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2019/04/19/china-set-showcase-game-changer-warship-at-navy-parade.html>. Accessed on July 31, 2021.

43. Franz-Stefan Gady, "China's Navy Commissions First-of-Class Type 055 Guided Missile Destroyer", *The Diplomat*, January 13, 2020, at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/chinas-navy-commissions-first-of-class-type-055-guided-missile-destroyer/>. Accessed on July 31, 2021.

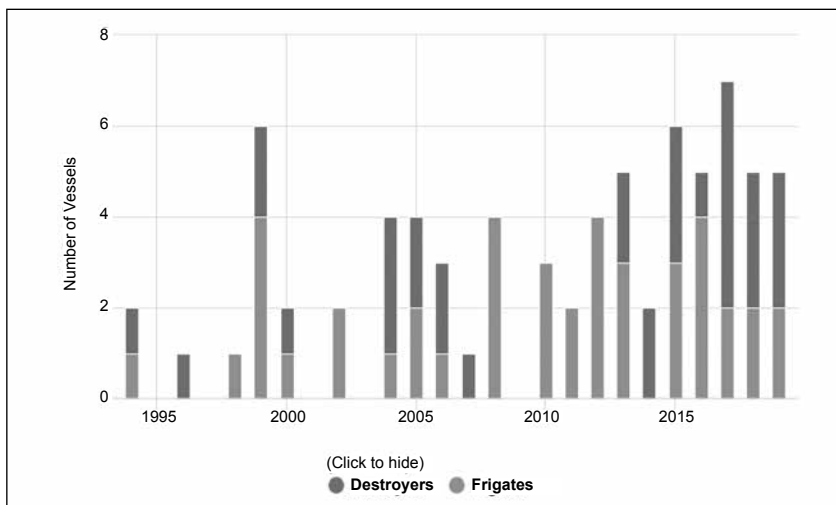
44. "China's 1st indigenous aircraft carrier to be combat-ready by 2020: Report", *Business Standard*, October 27, 2020, at https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/china-s-1st-indigenous-aircraft-carrier-to-be-combat-ready-by-2020-report-120102701577_1.html. Accessed on July 26, 2021.

45. Greg Waldron, "Beijing commissions its second aircraft carrier", *Flight Global*, December 18, 2019, at <https://www.flightglobal.com/defence/beijing-boosts-its-carrier-power-with-shandong-commissioning/135830.article>. Accessed on August 31, 2021.

46. "China's 2nd aircraft carrier group holds 1st drill in 2021 in S. China Sea, 'training for combat preparedness'", *Global Times*, May 2, 2021, at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202105/1222578.shtml>. Accessed on August 26, 2021.

carrier navy.⁴⁷ A third, larger vessel is also under construction, and Beijing's long-term carrier plan has generated considerable concern across the region. China had even mulled building a nuclear-powered carrier, but has put on hold the project, due to budgetary and technical constraints.⁴⁸ With this expected force level, it is believed that China would be able to project its power beyond the second island chain by 2030, and would satisfy the force required to meet Xi's goal of rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation by 2049.

Figure 2: Annual Number of Destroyers and Frigates Commissioned into the PLAN



Source: "How is China modernising its navy", *CSIS China Power*, September 1, 2021, at <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-naval-modernization/>

Warships play an important role in projecting one's power in distant locations simply "because they are there."⁴⁹ Ken Booth contends that "warships can have deleterious effects on foreign policies, they can shape or undermine

47. "Aircraft carrier Liaoning's latest voyage lays down foundation for enhanced night combat", *Global Times*, August 8, 2021, at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1230896.shtml>. Accessed on August 20, 2021.

48. Minnie Chan, "Chinese Navy Set to Build Fourth Aircraft Carrier, but Plans for a More Advanced Ship Are Put on Hold", *South China Morning Post*, November 28, 2019, at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3039653/chinese-navy-set-build-fourth-aircraft-carrier-plans-more>. Accessed on August 26, 2021.

49. Ken Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy* (London, UK: Croom Helm, 1977), p. 85.

China focuses on sustained naval operations in the Indian Ocean waters and has deployed destroyers, submarines, corvettes and may spare one aircraft carrier exclusively for the Indian Ocean operation.

a country's efforts in unpredictable and uncertain ways."⁵⁰ He adds, "To the extent that a government perceives itself to be vulnerable in the naval context, or identifies hostile naval intentions and capabilities on the part of the adversaries, so warships can be an important factor in defining the threat."⁵¹ Essentially a navy constitutes a fungible instrument of foreign policy, facilitating the pursuit of a country's national interests abroad. At the same time, "a key determinant of naval force projection is sustainability, which is related to the concept of geographical reach. It is the ability to maintain naval forces on station

under various operational circumstances, including in the presence of the enemy and under demanding operational environmental conditions."⁵² To achieve blue water status, navies must have sustained operation capabilities in terms of "sufficient size, seaworthiness, range, and endurance to operate at distances from their home base and in the specific operational environments that their missions require."⁵³ China focuses on sustained naval operations in the Indian Ocean waters and has deployed destroyers, submarines, corvettes and may spare one aircraft carrier exclusively for the Indian Ocean operation.

Launched with an anti-piracy objectives in the Indian Ocean region, China has continuously deployed its naval ships, platforms and submarines, since its first operation in 2008. Even though piracy and armed robbery have decreased as a result of sustained escort operations by various navies, China continues to make its naval presence throughout the year in the waterbody. The Task Force that China sends to the Indian Ocean for anti-piracy operations will have a minimum of three ships: a guided-missile destroyer, a missile frigate and a supply vessel, and spent 3-4 months for the escort operations in the

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

52. Collin, n. 38.

53. Ibid.

Indian Ocean.⁵⁴ Also, China sends a minimum of three task forces to the Indian Ocean region every year since 2009.⁵⁵ According to former Indian Navy Chief Admiral Sunil Lamba, “at any given time there are six to eight PLAN warships in the northern Indian Ocean”, which are “permanently present and they have three to four survey vessels or hydrographic vessels.”⁵⁶ In 2017, 14 ships were deployed for antipiracy operations in the Indian Ocean, and between 2015 and 2019, there were six submarines China deployed for the same purpose.⁵⁷ China has multiple objectives in its deployment of naval ships to the Indian Ocean: certain deployments are training exercises for the crew in the far seas area, others are for non-traditional security purposes, while some are to give political signals to its adversaries. For instance, it dispatched a fleet of two Type 052D destroyers, a 054A frigate, and a 071 dock landing ship to the Indian Ocean in February 2018 as part of the ‘Blue 2018 A’ exercise, which was held amid the political stalemate going on in the Maldives.⁵⁸ The contingent spent a week in the eastern Indian Ocean and was purportedly aimed at warning against a possible Indian military involvement in the political crisis in Male.

China established its first overseas naval base in Djibouti in 2017 to provide logistical support for PLAN deployed in the Indian Ocean region.⁵⁹ China claims that it has no plan to keep Djibouti base as a real military base as China is against

China has multiple objectives in its deployment of naval ships to the Indian Ocean: certain deployments are training exercises for the crew in the far seas area, others are for non-traditional security purposes, while some are to give political signals to its adversaries.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.

56. *Hindustan Times*, “‘Keeping a Close Eye on Chinese Presence in the Indian Ocean,’ says Admiral Lanba”, March 13, 2019.

57. Ibid.

58. “China Deploys Warships in Indian Ocean”, *The Hindu*, February 20, 2018, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/china-deploys-warships-in-indian-ocean/article22808463.ece>. Accessed on September 15, 2021.

59. Charlotte Gao, “China Officially Sets Up Its First Overseas Base in Djibouti”, *The Diplomat*, July 12, 2017, at <https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/china-officially-sets-up-its-first-overseas-base-in-djibouti/>. Accessed on March 31, 2021.

hegemonism and imperialism. However, the recently completed infrastructure modernisation at the Obock naval base suggests that it can be used for military purposes.⁶⁰ Currently, the base can accommodate an aircraft carrier, a minimum of four nuclear-powered attack submarines, and at least two large destroyers.⁶¹ In fact, since the 2000s, there has been a debate among Chinese strategists about the necessity to set up logistical supply bases far away from China for missions PLAN must conduct to protect SLOCs and also to support China's globalised economy.⁶² The need for building a naval base in the Indian Ocean was demonstrated in the writings of military scholars such as Col. Dai Xu who stated that China "needs to develop overseas bases as a logistical extension of the PLAN mission to the Gulf of Aden and as a necessity to safeguard [China's] commercial interests and world peace."⁶³ He further opined that those would, "not require the long-term stationing of large military equipment or large-scale military units...but they should be suitable for comprehensive replenishment."⁶⁴ China had looked upon various locations to set up its naval base in the IOR such as Port Salalah in Oman, Aden in Yemen, Karachi and Gwadar in Pakistan, Port Victoria in Seychelles, Colombo, Hambantota, and Trincomalee in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Chittagong in Bangladesh and Sittwe in Myanmar.⁶⁵ Djibouti was chosen for its strategic location; it hosts military bases of other countries, allowing China to negate the criticism of imperialism and hegemonism. Moreover, it is situated at the busiest trade route connecting the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea.⁶⁶

60. Sam LaGrone, "AFRICOM: Chinese Naval Base in Africa Set to Support Aircraft Carriers", USNI News, April 20, 2021, at <https://news.usni.org/2021/04/20/africom-chinese-naval-base-in-africa-set-to-support-aircraft-carriers>. Accessed on September 12, 2021.

61. H I Sutton, "Satellite Images Show That Chinese Navy Is Expanding Overseas Base", *Forbes*, May 10, 2020, at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hisutton/2020/05/10/satellite-images-show-chinese-navy-is-expanding-overseas-base/?sh=7a0118a68691>. Accessed on April 9, 2021.

62. Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "China's Military Base in Djibouti: A Microcosm of China's Growing Competition with the United States and New Bipolarity", *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 29, no. 125, 2020, pp. 731-47.

63. Daniel J. Kostecka, "Places and Bases: The Chinese Navy's Emerging Support Network in the Indian Ocean", *Naval War College Review*, vol. 64, no. 1, 2011, pp. 59-78.

64. Ibid.

65. Loro Horta, "China Turns to the Sea: Changes in the People's Liberation Army Navy Doctrine and Force Structure", *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 31, no. 5, 2012, pp. 393-402.

66. Richard Ghiasy, Fei Su and Lora Saalman, "The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Security implications and ways forward for the European Union", SIPRI, Solna, Sweden, p. 28, at <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/the-21st-century-maritime-silk-road.pdf>. Accessed on March 31, 2021.

CHALLENGES FOR CHINA'S NAVAL DOMINANCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

In terms of China's military dominance of the Indian Ocean, however, it faces structural problems. Firstly, geography plays a critical role in China's naval strategy and its ambition for dominance of the Indian Ocean. The Southeast Asian archipelago works as a barrier to the Chinese navy's access to the Indian Ocean waters; it has to cross any of the three narrow straits, the Malacca, the Sunda, and the Lombok, where it could be interdicted by rival navies.⁶⁷ This problem was amply explained by former Chinese President Hu Jintao in his 'Malacca dilemma' concept, as he declared that "certain major powers were bent on controlling the strait," and called for the adoption of new strategies to mitigate the perceived vulnerability.⁶⁸ However, so far its vulnerability has not been resolved, rather it has aggravated with more powers such as the United Kingdom, France, and Australia deploying their naval assets in the region. With the AUKUS pact signed between the US, Australia and the United Kingdom in September 2021, Australia is going to be a formidable challenger in the eastern Indian Ocean region with the would-be acquired nuclear-powered attack submarines.⁶⁹

Second, the Indian Ocean will always be a secondary preference in Chinese naval strategy; its primary preference has been the near seas covering the Bohai, the Yellow, East China and the South China Seas.⁷⁰ China's 2015 Defence White Paper stipulates that concerning the Indian Ocean the PLAN has majorly two objectives: to safeguard the security of China's overseas interests and to maintain strategic deterrence and counterattack.⁷¹ Before expanding its naval dominance into the Indian Ocean it has to establish first its control in the near seas by marginalising the US, which is highly unlikely

67. David Brewster, "The Changing Balance of Power in the Indian Ocean: Prospects for a Significant Chinese Naval Presence", in David Michel and Ricky Passarelli (eds.), *Sea Change: Evolving Maritime Geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific Region*, Stimson Centre, pp. 71-80, 2014.

68. Ian Storey, "China's 'Malacca Dilemma'", *China Brief*, vol. 6, no. 8, at <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-malacca-dilemma/>. Accessed on September 2, 2021.

69. Abhijit Singh, "India is not a bystander in the AUKUS Saga", *The Hindu*, September 25, 2021.

70. Zack Cooper and Allen Shearer, "Thinking clearly about China's layered Indo-Pacific strategy", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 73, no. 5, 2017, pp. 305-11.

71. *China's Military Strategy 2015*, n. 23.

in the near future. In this respect, China's strategy would be to ensure that no rival power dominates the Indian Ocean until China has full consolidation of the near seas, and it would do so by obtaining unfettered access across the Indian Ocean waters.

Third, even though the Chinese navy is the largest one in the world, its capability for a full spectrum military dominance of the Indian Ocean is doubtful, despite the fact that it is vying for six aircraft carriers by 2030.⁷² The requirement for a full-fledged two ocean-going fleets, into the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, centered around aircraft carrier, is unlikely to reach fruition any time soon.⁷³ Its strategic force lacks depth both in terms of quantity and quality to project power as a counterforce beyond the second island chain.⁷⁴ China operates a small number of nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) and nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs); most of China's submarines are non-nuclear-powered attack submarines.⁷⁵

Fourthly, since the Indian Ocean is far away from China, it necessarily requires military bases, alliances and partners. Even though China has set up its first overseas base in Djibouti, but it is not an actual military base rather a "logistical support facility" for the PLAN, "mainly used to provide rest and rehabilitation for the Chinese troops taking part in escort missions in the Gulf of Aden and waters off Somalia, UN peacekeeping and humanitarian rescue."⁷⁶ It has improved the facilities at the base, however, making it fully operational during a crisis is

72. Yves-Heng Lim, "China's rising naval ambitions in the Indian Ocean: Aligning ends, ways and means", *Asian Security*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2020, pp. 396-412; David Brewster, *India and China at Sea: Competition for Naval Dominance in the Indian Ocean* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018).

73. Hu Bo, *Chinese Maritime Power in the 21st Century: Strategic Planning, Policy and Predictions*, (London, Routledge, 2020); You Ji, "China's Emerging Indo-Pacific Naval Strategy".

74. Lim, "China's rising naval ambitions in the Indian Ocean, n. 72; Christopher D. Yung, Ross Rustici, and Scott Devary and Jenny Lin, "'Not an Idea We Have to Shun': Chinese Overseas Basing Requirements in the 21st Century", *China Strategic Perspectives*, No. 7, Institute for National Strategic Studies (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2014), at <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-7.pdf>. Accessed on August 31, 2021.

75. Congressional Research Service, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress", March 9, 2021, at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33153.pdf>. Accessed on March 31, 2021.

76. Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "China's Military Base in Djibouti: A Microcosm of China's Growing Competition with the United States and New Bipolarity", *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 29, no. 125, 2020, pp. 731-47.

doubtful due to the US naval presence in the region with two bases in the western Indian Ocean: the US' Fifth fleet at Manama and the base at Diego Garcia. Besides, except for Pakistan and Myanmar, no other countries are close partners of China, making it more difficult to use their resources against India or the US.

Finally, India's naval prowess is being considered as a major challenge for China to establish its military dominance in the Indian Ocean. As a resident naval power, India has a significant geographical advantage over China's 'distant power dilemma'.⁷⁷ Also, China sees progressing Indo-US strategic partnership as a major obstacle in its naval expansionism in the Indian Ocean region.⁷⁸ American scholar Ashley Tellis has succinctly put it that China's acquisitions of various air, naval and missile capabilities will allow it to project its power beyond the "second island chain" into the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea, but sees a major challenge in a strong Indo-US partnership in the Indian Ocean.⁷⁹

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

Despite such constraints on Chinese naval dominance in the Indian Ocean, its larger presence in the Indian Ocean is still a concern for New Delhi. India's concerns about China's forays into the Indian Ocean revolve around its expanding blue-water naval capabilities, especially submarines, and port access across the region. As navies carry foreign policy objectives while making friendly port calls when sailing in distant waters, deployment in the adjacent waters is being viewed as a threat for a hostile nation. The regular physical presence of rival navies, particularly

77. Distant power dilemma means that a distant superior power cannot be effective against a local power in a regional theatre. The US is facing the same problem against China in an East Asian theatre. Similarly, during the Falkland war Britain had the same problem in the initial period of the conflict, but Argentina was not at all a regional naval power so it was not able to sustain its local power advantage.

78. Joshy M. Paul. "US and India: Emerging Offshore Balancing in Asia", *India Review*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2019, pp. 221-42.

79. Ashley Tellis, "Protecting American Primacy in the Indo-Pacific", Testimony before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, April 25, 2017, at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/04/25/protecting-american-primacy-in-indo-pacific-pub-68754>. Accessed on March 31, 2021.

With sustained naval deployment in the water body and easy access at ports for naval ships along the littoral areas, the Chinese navy would effectively become a regional navy.

those with submarines in one's backyard, is indeed a challenge for the local power. In recent years, China has sailed its submarines through the Indian Ocean and paid port calls in Pakistan and Sri Lanka.⁸⁰ Deploying submarines in the Indian Ocean in the guise of anti-piracy operations is a concern for India because of its stealthy character. Importantly, the submarines can dock at China-owned ports in various locations across the Indian Ocean, as had been seen in a Song class submarine docked at the

Hambantota port of Sri Lanka in October 2014.⁸¹ Once inside the Indian Ocean, it doesn't need to return to China for refuelling and resupply, allowing for sustained PLAN deployment in the region. China's strategy is to negate India's geopolitical primacy and operational influence of the Indian Navy in the Indian Ocean, rendering India's 'net security status' redundant.

Besides, China's closer ties with the regional countries such as Pakistan, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka could hurt India's interest in the region. China is also planning to set up a major hub port in Tanzania that can also be used for military purposes. With sustained naval deployment in the water body and easy access at ports for naval ships along the littoral areas, the Chinese Navy would effectively become a regional navy. China might adopt the same 'harassment' tactics it employs in the South China Sea against India, which would lead to friction between naval ships of the two countries in the Indian Ocean.

80. H I Sutton "Chinese Navy Submarines Could Become A Reality In Indian Ocean", *Forbes*, January 26, 2020, at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hisutton/2020/06/26/chinese-navy-submarines-could-become-a-reality-in-indian-ocean/?sh=54c2d1b954a6>. Accessed on March 31, 2021.

81. Abhijit Singh, "Deciphering China's Submarine Deployments in the Indian Ocean Region", IDSA Commentary, July 8, 2015, at https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/DecipheringChinasSubmarineDeploymentsintheIndianOceanRegion_asingh_080715. Accessed on March 31, 2021.

CONCLUSION

As the 2015 defence white paper stipulates, PLAN's official policy towards the Indian Ocean is to safeguard the security of China's overseas interests; and to maintain strategic deterrence and counter attack.⁸² However, to protect the BRI investments in the Indian Ocean littoral states of around \$150 billion, the Chinese Navy will become a legitimate stakeholder in the security of the Indian Ocean region. With the BRI investments in ports and allied infrastructures in the littoral area spanning from Singapore to South Africa, and the many island states in the Indian Ocean, the Chinese navy will

get easy access to these ports during peace time, and some of them may be used for military purposes when China faces a crisis. China has strategically invested in countries who can be friendly to them while some are inimical to its rivals. For instance, Pakistan and Myanmar are expected to work as the best hedge against India, while Bandar Abbas in Iran and the port of Aden in Yemen could be used in the event of a US-China confrontation in the western Pacific. Similarly, as China continues its naval presence in the Indian Ocean throughout the year for the protection of MSR assets, PLAN ships could be called upon by the littoral countries when they face security challenges, especially for humanitarian assistance; generally, the Indian navy is being called upon for such assistance in the IOR. This shows that one of the major objectives of China's naval expansionism is to neutralise the Indian Navy's 'net security provider' position in the IOR.

PLA Navy will also work as a deterrent force in the Indian Ocean to prevent an adverse impact if a crisis broke out in the western Pacific. China's counter attack strategy in the western Pacific is to inflict unacceptable damage on the

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82. *China's Military Strategy 2015*, n. 23.

enemy forces who try to encroach on Chinese territorial waters or prevent Chinese ships in the Chinese 'controlled' waters—SCS and ECS. China may adopt the same strategy against other states if they disrupt Chinese SLOCs in the Indian Ocean or rivals getting assistance from the Indian Ocean littoral countries. It will be difficult for China to sustain a strategy of dominating the Indian Ocean but it will keep deploying nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers in the region for deterrence and counter attack purposes. Its current objective is that no rival power should dominate the Indian Ocean, while it enjoys unfettered access across the waterbody. However, once its East Asian problem is settled, it will definitely seek dominance of the Indian Ocean. India should prepare itself for such a future scenario.