

Navigating the Blue Diplomacy: Indo-Pacific Oceans and the Geopolitical Chessboard of India and China

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Abstract:

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a focal point of global geopolitical dynamics, with the Indian and Pacific Oceans serving as strategic arenas for major powers to assert influence and secure their national interests. This research paper explores the evolving maritime strategies of India and China, two prominent players in the Indo-Pacific, and analyzes the geopolitical chessboard that unfolds as they navigate the complex waters of the region. The study delves into the concept of "Blue Diplomacy" as a framework for understanding and interpreting maritime policies, economic interests, and geopolitical aspirations in the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Blue Diplomacy, Maritime Strategy, Geopolitics, India, China, South China Sea, Indian Ocean, String of Pearls, Belt and Road Initiative, SAGAR

1. Introduction:

The Indo-Pacific region has witnessed a shift in geopolitical dynamics, with maritime considerations playing a crucial role in shaping the strategic interests of nations. India and China, as two major actors in this evolving geopolitical landscape, are employing Blue Diplomacy to safeguard their interests and assert influence. Blue Diplomacy refers to the strategic use of maritime capabilities, policies, and economic initiatives to achieve national objectives and maintain influence in the maritime domain. This section will provide a comprehensive definition of Blue Diplomacy and its significance in the context of Indo-Pacific geopolitics. India's effort to promote Blue Economy, which can be called blue diplomacy, has mostly been carried out in multilateral forums. IORA tops the list due to India's important and strategic location in the Indian Ocean region. The IORA programs have been actively supported and modified by government, researchers and corporate management. IORA demonstrated its commitment to the Blue Economy agenda through three Ministerial Conferences and the Jakarta Summit, as well as several initiatives from 2014 to 2020. Three are particularly noteworthy: i) the Working Group on Blue Economy (WGBE) developed a work plan that includes a list of specific projects in each of the six priority areas; (ii) the fisheries management core group provides a coordinated mechanism. involvement of relevant stakeholders in fisheries management in Member States; iii) The Blue Carbon Hub aims to build knowledge and capacity to protect and restore blue carbon ecosystems in the IOR. France and Germany cooperated with member states, including India. France, now a member, provided technical and financial assistance related to fisheries and aquaculture, and observer Germany contributed to initiatives related to climate change,

sustainable shipping, and marine pollution. India organized four workshops with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to develop policy alignment and joint Blue Economy projects. They were held in Vietnam (2017), New Delhi (2018 and 2019) and Jakarta (2021). They helped strengthen the ASEAN-India partnership. "The goal is to promote smart, sustainable and inclusive economic growth," wrote Manoj Kumar Bharti, India's ambassador to Indonesia, "which maximizes job opportunities in the ASEAN-India region, with a special focus on maritime activities." The Indo-Pacific Initiative (IPOI), which Prime Minister Modi launched at the East Asia Summit in November 2019, various aspects of Blue Economy are discussed, although the government does not mention it by name. All its seven pillars are anchored in the maritime space. India has actively sought partners to act as a "leader" in certain sectors. The pillars identified so far and their guidelines are: i) Maritime Safety (India), ii) Marine Ecology (Australia), iii) Marine Resources (France and Indonesia), iv) Capacity Building and Resource Sharing (Expected Lead), v) disaster risk reduction and management (India), vi) science, technology and academic cooperation (introduction pending) and vii) trade, connectivity and maritime transport (Japan). At a recent national IPOI conference, a senior official called on specialized institutions to "do academic research, generate ideas and develop academic links with similar institutes in the region." In other forums - including the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), BRICS (a group of emerging economies consisting of Brazil, Russia, China, India and South Africa) and the India-Africa Forum Summit - India and other parties discussed the need to continue the Blue Economy agenda, but their efforts have not yet progressed beyond pious declarations. Blue Economy is also involved in bilateral discussions between India and some countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives. However, progress has been uneven as the main focus has been on maritime security. One exception is: the Indo-Norwegian dialogue has led to significant progress in the construction of zero-emission autonomous ferries and the sustainable recycling of ships. The representatives of India and Norway emphasized the growing importance of bilateral Blue Economy cooperation, especially in light of the restrictions resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Maritime Strategies of India:

As India's economic and military power rises, there has been greater attention to what India seeks to do in the maritime realm. India straddles a vital apiece of maritime real estate, on top of major Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) that connect not only markets to the world's factory in China but also the source of energy in the Middle East and the major consumers of energy in East Asia. This brings into focus India's potential role in a securing these SLOCs among other roles. The Indian Navy is the fifth largest in the world and the most powerful in the region, but it faces major problems in maintaining an adequate fleet because of problems of procurement, especially considering that India is still dependent on imports. On the broader maritime front, the inadequate size of its shipbuilding industry, port handling facilities and a connectivity as well as the size of its merchant fleet all reveal the shortcomings in India's maritime strategy. India's port capacity has suffered until now given the multiple authorities between the central and state governments. The infusion of private sector on a BOT (Build, Operate and Transfer) principle is likely to yield better results in strengthening India's maritime capabilities. Along with the capacity building, the Indian political leadership has to also spell out its maritime strategy in clearer terms. In order to enhance its global reach for trade and energy, protection of the sea routes is an important task, and India has a powerful navy with two aircraft carriers. India's geographical location additionally gives it the unique advantage of being able to dominate the maritime traffic connecting the Indian Ocean, the South China

Sea and the Western Pacific. With increasing Chinese foray into the Indian Ocean, the potential for conflict is real. While traditionally India has had an advantage in the Indian Ocean in relation to China, this might no longer hold true as China's, naval capacity increases. While India's maritime ambitions have grown, there are questions about whether these ambitions match its capabilities.

2.1 Evolution of India's maritime strategy:

India was a maritime power until the arrival of the Europeans in the middle of the last millennium. But with the advent of Central Asian invasions after the thirteenth century, India began to have a more 'continental outlook' and accordingly its naval power began to decline, which was also reflected in the dwindling Indian share in global trade. As Panikkar points out, the 'unfortunate tendency to overlook the sea' and assuming that 'the security of India is a matter exclusively of the North-West Frontier and of a strong enough army to resist any aggression across the 'Hindukush' has been a serious issue." Indian naval strategists continue to argue that 'It was our inability to contest the European control of the Indian Ocean in the 18th century that led to nearly two centuries of foreign domination. Neither the British rulers nor the newly independent Indian political leadership paid much attention to this domain, which was reflected in the financial allocations, procurement of technology and capabilities, and the lack of operational readiness of the Indian Navy. David Scott points out a however that there were Indian strategists like K.M. Panikkar and Keshava Vaidya as well as Sardar Patel, India's Deputy Prime Minister, who gave great importance to naval power even though this will not ultimately be translated into a strong navy in the Nehru period. Daniel Spence suggests racial reasons for British advisers discouraging India from developing a more effective navy in the 1950s. Also, the considerable demobilization after the Second World War left only a small number of ships and trained personnel in the Royal Indian Navy. This force was further sized to two-thirds after the India-Pakistan partition. Furthermore, the huge shortage of funds in the early years after India's independence for naval modernization was a big factor in limiting India's choices.!! For the first decade after independence, India's primary strategic focus was towards the north-east and the north-west. For different reasons, the threat from both Pakistan and China was primarily a land and air threat, rather than a naval one. Pakistan had a relatively meagre naval capability but not an inconsequential land and air capability. China on the other hand had no naval capability that could reach into the Indian Ocean or the Bay of Bengal. Ashley Tellis has argued that the new Indian leadership's approach was that of a 'Fortress Indica' to insulate itself from any' external interference'. Thus, given the lack of significant naval security threats, India's naval strategy was determined more by budgetary and bureaucratic considerations than security ones. Nevertheless, the Indian Navy's share of the defense budget did go up from 4 per cent in 1950-1951 to 12 per cent in 1959-1960, allowing it to build up a 'modest force'. In the aftermath of the 1962 war, a comprehensive government review of defense requirements ascertained that China was the 'primary threat'. Accordingly, the government decided to increase the strength of the army and the air force. Given that India was already resource-stretched, the new decision meant that the Indian Navy's proposal for a force level of 130 ships did not receive much support and a phased plan was adopted to replace the ageing ships. In the absence of a justifiable naval threat from China and Pakistan, it was difficult to make an effective naval demand for further acquisitions. As Admiral Hiranandani notes, there was consensus among all the international interlocutors (United States, United Kingdom and the USSR) that India did not face any significant naval threats. But this neglect meant that the navy was unprepared for the 1965 India-Pakistan War in which it therefore played a very minimal role. Subsequent to the war, responding to the navy's unhappiness, the government did approve new acquisitions, which

also led the navy to turn towards the Soviet Union because the United States and the United Kingdom were unwilling to meet these needs. This led to some new acquisitions, mainly missile boats and India's first submarines. During this period, India also began to develop a domestic warship building capability with British assistance, leading to the Nigiri class frigates. All these led to a more capable Indian Navy playing an active and offensive role in the 1971 India Pakistan War. This also clearly established that India was 'the clear maritime power among the South Asian countries'.

India's naval orientation began to undergo a change in the 1970s within expanding oil requirements as well as the oil shock of 1973. Nevertheless, the Navy continued to receive the smallest share of the defense lie. Despite long coastlines that needed to be protected and the growing Indian interests in sea-borne trade not least India's dependence on imported oil - the political leadership could not be impressed upon to give the Navy a bigger share of attention and resources. The absence of determined seaward threats to Indian independence' as also 'the early expectation that the British and the Americans would continue to protect the Indian Ocean' made it difficult to convince the civilian leadership of the urgent need for major naval modernization. Thus, naval modernization continued to be left at the mercy of financial availability, and the Indian Navy continued being the most neglected of the three services in India. Additionally, as Tellis argues, 'the British legacy allowed both the Indian and Pakistani establishments intimacy with land warfare to the detriment of naval operations', thus contributing to the neglect of the -navy as India debated defense of the country.

The Quad concept was born out of an operational partnership when the United States, Australia, India and Japan formed the Tsunami Task Force to respond to the deadly 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. The success of diplomatic coordination raised hopes for a possible grouping of the four democracies to solve regional problems. The Quartet, erroneously referred to in popular culture as the "Quaternary Security Dialogue" (a term absent from official documents or narratives, especially since the rise of the Quartet in 2017), is not a security or military group. It can best be described as an advisory group that seeks to shape the Indo-Pacific region in ways favorable to its members at a time when China is seeking regional dominance. Since the establishment of the Quad in 2007 and its revival in 2017, there has been an ongoing debate about India's role in the Quad. This is natural as India is the only country in the group that is not formally affiliated with other members. The deterioration of India's relations with China after the Doklam standoff (2017) and the border skirmishes in 2020 strengthened India's willingness to embrace the Quad. In 2017, Quad members therefore met at vice-chancellor level; After Doklam, they also met at the ministerial level in 2019. The India-China confrontation in 2020 further deepened New Delhi's bilateral and mini-relations with the Quad members. That same year, India accepted Australia's request to join Exercise Malabar, making it a de facto meeting of the Quads. In 2021, the Quartet became a top-level grouping, up from the assistant secretary level at their first meeting since 2007. Despite closer cooperation with the Quad, India remains a modest player in the traditional security world. While China's growing footprint in the Indo-Pacific region poses a direct challenge to all members of the Quartet, India has been uncomfortable framing the Quartet as an anti-China grouping. Instead, India continues to insist that the group is not "resisting anything or anyone" but "standing for something". In contrast to a strong military alliance, India - and the Quad by extension - prioritizes non-traditional security issues: including maritime awareness, humanitarian and disaster relief, vaccine diplomacy and cooperation on innovative technologies. This allows India to shape the region while maintaining decisive autonomy and avoiding securitization and diversifying relationships through multiple partnerships.

3. Maritime Strategies of China

3.1 The Belt and Road Initiative:

In October 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled his new global development strategy called "The Belt and Road Initiative" (The 21st century Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road). This was undoubtedly the official launch of the largest and most ambitious economic initiative in world history. It is building a sustainable link between China and Afro-Eurasia through various infrastructure projects in 60 countries, where almost 60 percent of the world's population lives and with a GDP of 21 trillion USD. The strategy was developed in two main directions - on land and at sea. Six economic corridors connecting China with Europe, Russia, the Middle East and South Asia are planned to be built on the land route. According to the Chinese government, in the four years 2013-2017, 50 state-owned enterprises invested in almost 1,700 different infrastructure projects. The Maritime Silk Road, on the other hand, aims to promote cooperation by investing in maritime routes from Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean to the Horn of Africa, the Middle East and the Mediterranean. The ultimate long-term goal of this grand initiative would be to make Beijing the dominant power in Eurasia, allowing China to surpass the European Union and the United States as leading economic and global powers.

3.2 The "String of Pearls" theory:

The "String of Pearls" theory has evolved over the last two decades and is linked to Beijing's massive economic and commercial growth and the resulting need for geostrategic security of sea lanes and "choke points". Each "pearl" represents a specific port project on the Indian Ocean coast. Connecting these ports would create a central chain that would serve as economic hubs or military and surveillance points for the Chinese military. According to Beijing, there is currently no such strategy officially, and all their activities are guided by completely peaceful intentions to protect their commercial interests and develop the regional economy. The latter would help strengthen China's regional soft power. However, it is impossible for observers not to notice a systematic and deliberate set that goes far beyond such modest intentions. According to the classic geopolitical theories of Nicholas Spykman and Alfred Mahon, China is apparently trying to exploit the periphery (edge), passing through the coasts of Asia and Africa, to gain a dominant foothold in Afro-Eurasia and from there to the rest of the world. From its closest ally North Korea to Cambodia, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Pakistan and 11 other African countries where China has seaports, Beijing is investing huge resources in its efforts to project power. This is done through investment or direct control of important ports, airports or other infrastructure and by strengthening political and diplomatic relations. When all this is added to the extensive expansion and modernization of the Navy, a complex and multi-layered strategy for maritime supremacy can be assembled.

3.3 China in South China Sea: Controlling the South China Sea is one of the milestones of China's dominance. The sea itself is one of the busiest trade routes and the shortest possible route connecting the Western Pacific/East Asia with the Indian Ocean, Africa and Europe. It also offers direct access to nine of the world's ten largest commercial ports. The annual trade flow through the South China Sea is estimated at 5 trillion USD, which is more than half of the world's total trade and 1/3 of the world's maritime traffic. The amount of oil transported through the Malacca Strait to East Asia is three times that of the Suez Canal and 15 times that of the Panama Canal. About 90% of China's oil imports in 2016 came via this route from Africa and the Middle East. And in this context, China has been aggressively trying to assert its disproportionately large and internationally unrecognized claims covering more than 90 percent of the

South China Sea over the past 10 years. Expansion involves building entire islands, building airports and military bases, and exerting economic and political pressure. Ultimately, all these efforts put China in direct conflict with other regional powers and express Beijing's will and ambitions for global leadership. Until now, China's territorial claims have been most obviously expressed in the occupation of the Paracel Islands (including Taiwan and Vietnam) and part of the Spratly archipelago (including Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines). Woody Island is the main island of the Paracels and China has built there a fishing village, several small ports and a small airport capable of supporting fighter jets. The Spratly archipelago, on the other hand, is even more important because of its strategic location on the main sea lanes of the South China Sea and its potential for the development of oil and gas fields. Over the past three decades, the Chinese military has built and occupied at least seven artificial islands and islets, three of which have airports and various military facilities.

3.4 Military Buildup: The massive expansion and modernization of the Chinese navy over the past decade has gone hand in hand with the "Belt and Road" initiative and a strategy to consolidate maritime supremacy. Naval ships have traditionally always been the physical embodiment of a certain maritime strategy through which a certain country pursues its interests. And this is clearly the case for China. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, China currently has the second largest navy (by total number of ships) in the world, and has been steadily increasing since 2015. In the past five years alone, China's military has fielded ships with a combined tonnage greater than the entire Indian Navy. The aircraft carrier program deserves special attention, and Beijing will likely rely on it to implement its strategy. Aircraft carriers greatly increase a fleet's capability and capacity to project power. Currently, the only aircraft in use is the 65,000 tons. "Lioning", "Admiral Kuznetsov" class. Expected to be officially launched before the end of 2019, the Type 002 is a significantly improved version of the "Liaoning" with a catapult launch system and increased power. The Type 003 is also under construction, and here is still no reliable information on its size or whether it will be nuclear or conventionally powered. In any case, China's naval expansion is more than impressive, far exceeding the capabilities of most conventional navies. However, an increase in size does not always mean an increase in quality. Especially when it comes to high-tech modern warships. The operational capability of the Chinese Navy is highly questionable and there are serious doubts, especially regarding crew and command experience. At present, it is difficult to speculate whether the Dalian Naval Academy has the potential to produce a sufficiently well-educated and trained crew at the rate at which Chinese industry is producing ships. In addition, the Chinese navy has almost no experience in combat missions, except for a few anti-piracy missions in Somalia. However, this trend is unlikely to continue and the potential remains huge. Massive naval expansion will not only allow China to move regionally, but will most likely allow Beijing to reach far beyond its traditional sphere. Mainly because of its strategic control of key points along the "String of Pearls" line and the new possibilities for deployment of combat forces that this line opens up.

4. Conclusion:

In conclusion, navigating the Blue Diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific requires a delicate balancing act for India and China. While competition is inevitable, constructive engagement and diplomatic solutions are essential to ensure stability and prosperity in the region. The geopolitical chessboard is dynamic, and the choices made by these nations will shape the future landscape of the Indo-Pacific. The evolving strategic scenario in the Indo-Pacific appears to be complex and multi-layered. The normative framework emerging

from the strategic and economic initiatives of major states and regional organizations is idealistically driven by the desire for an Indo-Pacific region that is open, rule-based, inclusive, "free from all means of coercion", etc. Democratic values and norms are well reflected in the definition of an Indo-Pacific political space that can facilitate free trade and respect for international law and national sovereignty. Concerns about self-reliance and challenging the rules-based order have contributed to the emergence of various initiatives to promote bilateral, regional and global cooperation in many different forms and in many ways. US initiatives such as the Blue Dot Network and B3W and Japan's Quality Infrastructure Initiative will be launched to promote value- and standards-based cooperation to provide an alternative to China's BRI. In addition, Japan and Australia have promoted initiatives such as RCEP and CPTPP, and SCRI together with India generally emphasizes the "China Plus One" strategy to achieve economic balance in the Indo-Pacific region. The United States, Japan, EU, ASEAN and India share a common vision of the Indo-Pacific region that emphasizes the importance of freedom of navigation and compliance with international law. All these countries called for a peaceful settlement of the maritime dispute in accordance with international law, especially UNCLOS. In addition, all participating countries, except ASEAN, also support the strengthening of maritime and military cooperation with like-minded countries to ensure maritime security and freedom of navigation. This maritime security consensus paved the way for India to increase maritime and military cooperation with like-minded countries to secure its waters and SLOCs. In addition to maritime security, maritime cooperation to ensure the sustainable use of marine natural resources (especially to fight illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing), the promotion of the blue economy and the mitigation of marine pollution and climate-induced sea level rise are top priorities in the Indo-Pacific region. visions of these countries. As India also faces these challenges, the harmonization of the Indo-Pacific by various interested countries offers New Delhi an opportunity to improve economic and technological cooperation with developed countries to jointly mitigate climate change and other maritime challenges.

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