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Kshipra Vasudeo, University of Mumbai, Mumbai.

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From Malacca to Djibouti: China's Maritime Strategy and Security Dilemmas in the Indian Ocean Region

Kshipra Vasudeo*

Abstract

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) became a theatre of geopolitical competition when the Chinese coerced action in the near sea and shifted to "China's Two-Ocean Strategy". The far sea is the biggest concern for traditional power as well as the littoral and island countries that provide critical SLOCs and stations. At the same time, reducing the Malacca Dilemma by increasing its footprint in the IOR and protecting its SLOCs. Adherence to the "One China" principle, military modernisation, and mistrust of neighbouring countries undermine the international law of the sea, making security complex and reducing stability in the region.

Key words: China, Indian Ocean Region, Maritime, Security



1. Introduction

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has long served as a critical maritime corridor for global commerce and strategic interaction. Today, it remains central to international trade, with its sea lanes carrying more than one-third of global bulk cargo and nearly two-thirds of the oil shipments. Beyond

its commercial significance, the Indian Ocean provides access to critical energy resources, fisheries, rare-earth minerals, and other strategic commodities, making it indispensable to the global economy and international security.

The emerging discourse of the 21st century as the "Asian Century" along with the sustained economic and strategic resurgence of the

* Dr. Kshipra Vasudeo, University of Mumbai, Mumbai, India

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continent and an intensified geopolitical landscape has further elevated IOR's geopolitical importance. Its engagements with regional and extra-regional powers, linking Africa, West Asia, Eurasia, and the Indo-Pacific through expanding networks of trade, investment and security cooperation, have further enhanced its profile. Its significance is emphasised by Alfred Thayer Mahan's words, who said: "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia, the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters".¹

Stretching from the eastern coast of Africa to the western shores of Australia, the Indian Ocean connects thirty-three littoral states and nearly 2.9 billion people. Its strategic sea lanes and resource-rich maritime domain have made it a focal point of global strategic interest, drawing both regional and extra-regional powers engaged in either competition or cooperation. Despite this growing significance, the IOR has frequently been examined through separate regional lenses such as Africa, West Asia and South Asia, rather than as an integrated strategic space. Such compartmentalised perspectives overlook the interdependence of political, economic, and security dynamics that characterise the maritime domain.²

China's expanding presence has become a defining feature of this evolving strategic landscape. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), investments in overseas ports across Asia, Africa, and Europe, and the establishment of its logistics facility by the PLA Navy in Djibouti, Beijing has sought to secure maritime trade routes and safeguard its sea lines of communication while expanding its strategic reach.³ These developments have prompted greater strategic engagement by India, the United States, and other regional actors. Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) provides a useful framework for understanding how China's expanding maritime footprint has reshaped regional security interactions and encouraged closer strategic coordination among neighbouring states.⁴

The security dilemma further explains these dynamics. As Booth and Wheeler (2008) argue, one state's defensive steps may be interpreted by others as altering the regional balance, encouraging reciprocal military modernisation. When applied to IOR, it helps explain why China's expanding naval presence, overseas logistics and bases - even if presented as protecting trade and nationals look

threatening to neighbours and drive reciprocal buildups. From a realist perspective, such interactions foster chronic insecurity and a structural pull toward rivalry or conflict.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines China's expanding strategic presence and global power projection by analysing its military modernisation, overseas deployments, official policy statements, and broader security trends. It assesses how these developments are reshaping the regional strategic environment and influencing the evolving security architecture of the IOR.

1. China's Indian Ocean ambition

China's growing engagement in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) reflects its broader aspiration to secure its economic interests, protect critical maritime trade routes, and expand its strategic influence. As China's economy has become increasingly dependent on overseas trade and energy imports, the Indian Ocean has emerged as an indispensable strategic space. Consequently, Beijing has pursued a multidimensional approach that combines military modernisation, infrastructure development, diplomatic engagement, and maritime connectivity initiatives to strengthen its presence across the

region. China's strategic outlook is also shaped by its perception of an evolving regional security environment. As Singh (2023) highlights, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi criticised the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy during a press conference at the National People's Congress in September 2021, describing it as an expression of bloc politics. Referring collectively to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), the Five Eyes intelligence alliance, and AUKUS as a "5432" configuration, Wang called it a "sinister move" and argued that these arrangements encouraged geopolitical confrontation rather than regional cooperation.⁵ From Beijing's perspective, such initiatives represent attempts to contain China's rise and preserve American strategic primacy in the Indo-Pacific.

These concerns were reinforced during the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2022. The Congress emphasised the need for a proactive stance in response to perceived encirclement and suppression by the US-led Western countries. Beijing perceives coalitions like AUKUS and QUAD with suspicion, interpreting them as threats to its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and has responded with intensified diplomatic efforts with Global South

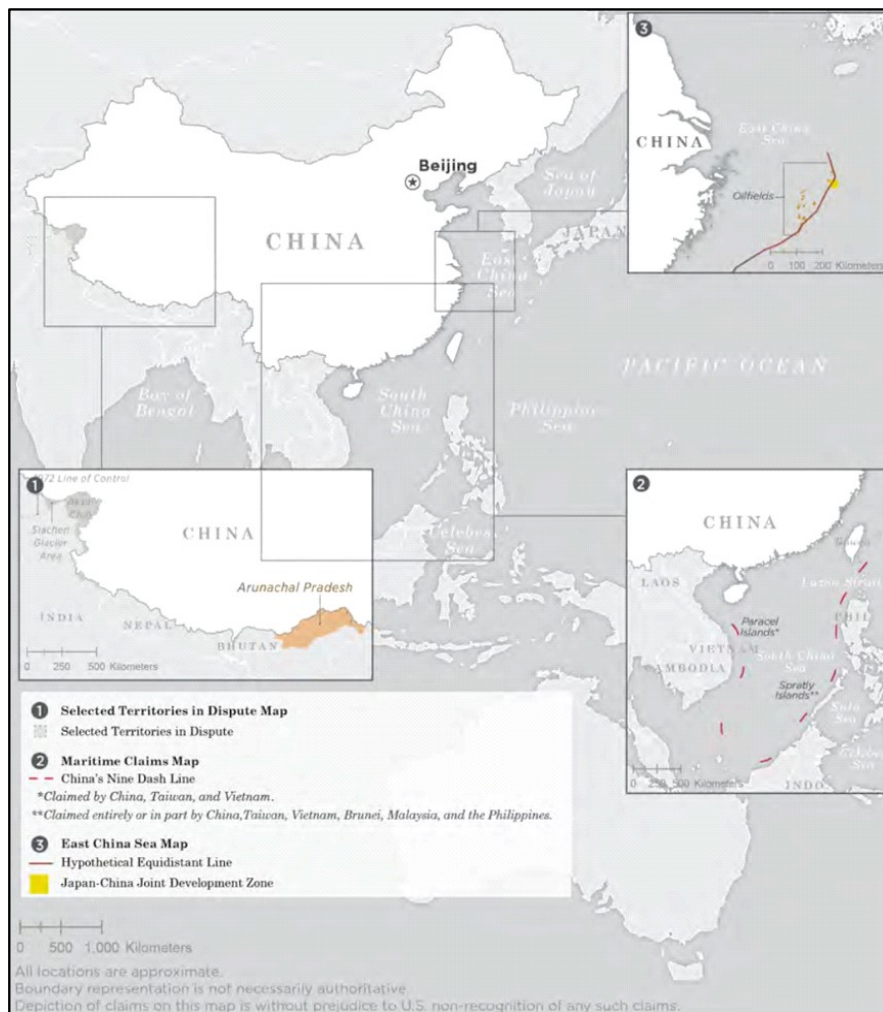
FROM MALACCA TO DJIBOUTI: CHINA'S MARITIME STRATEGY AND SECURITY DILEMMAS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

countries while promoting initiatives such as the Global Security Initiative (GSI) to advance an alternative vision of international security cooperation. China's diplomatic position during the Russia-Ukraine conflict similarly reflected its effort to balance its

strategic partnership with Russia while maintaining broader international engagement.⁶

China's evolving security outlook also reflects important conceptual changes in its understanding of

Figure 1: China's territorial claims



Source: Defence Intelligent Agency 2019⁸

national security. Yang (2010) notes that Chinese strategic thinking has expanded beyond traditional military defence to embrace the broader concept of “zonghe Anquan” or “comprehensive security”.⁷ This approach incorporates military preparedness alongside economic resilience, technological development, political stability, energy security, maritime access, and the protection of overseas interests. Such an expanded security framework provides the intellectual basis for China's growing engagement in the Indian Ocean.

China's territorial disputes continue to shape its broader strategic calculations. As depicted in Figure 1, China's approach to territorial disputes with India often leads to periodic standoffs including the 2017 Doklam standoff. At the same time, Beijing views the continued American military presence and security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific as influencing issues relating to Taiwan and the East and South China Seas. Since the 1990s, China has increasingly sought to complement the existing regional security architecture with institutions and partnerships that reflect its expanding geopolitical interests.⁹

These developments highlight the dynamics of the security dilemma, in which military modernisation undertaken by one state to strengthen

its security can prompt corresponding responses from others, creating an environment of sustained strategic competition. The pattern is demonstrated by the India-China relationship, where infrastructure development, force deployments, and maritime expansion are interpreted through the prism of mutual strategic uncertainty.

One of the principal drivers of China's Indian Ocean strategy is the so-called “Malacca dilemma”. Since a significant proportion of China's imported energy is shipped through the Strait of Malacca, this creates a significant vulnerability for Beijing should maritime access be disrupted during periods of crisis. To ensure energy security, as Li (2017: 481) argues, this concern has encouraged Beijing to pursue a long-term maritime strategy that includes naval expansion, overseas logistics facilities, and stronger partnerships across the Indian Ocean.¹⁰ Many observers similarly argue that India's geographical position provides it with considerable strategic leverage over this critical maritime corridor, thereby reinforcing China's efforts to diversify transport routes and strengthen its naval capabilities.¹¹

China's official strategic narrative nevertheless emphasises cooperation and collective security. During the 21st Shangri-La Dialogue in 2024, China's

Defence Minister Dong Jun emphasised Beijing's commitment to the Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilisation Initiative. He emphasised regional cooperation, shared development, and respect for legitimate security interests while reiterating Beijing's determination to safeguard national sovereignty, particularly regarding Taiwan.¹² These statements seek to present China's expanding regional role as compatible with regional stability and economic development.

China's maritime doctrine has correspondingly evolved from traditional "offshore waters defence" to one incorporating "open seas protection". This transformation reflects China's recognition that its national interests increasingly extend beyond its immediate maritime periphery.¹³ Its expanding military capabilities have become a defining feature of the evolving security landscape in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). In particular, over the past two decades, Beijing has combined sustained defence modernisation with growing diplomatic, economic, and military engagement to protect its expanding overseas interests. As China's dependence on maritime trade, energy imports, and overseas investments has increased, the

People's Liberation Army (PLA), particularly the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), has assumed a larger role in safeguarding sea lines of communication (SLOCs), supporting overseas operations, and reinforcing China's strategic influence across the Indo-Pacific and the western Indian Ocean. These initiatives have increased China's role across the Indian Ocean while encouraging greater strategic engagement among other regional stakeholders.

The Indian Ocean's strategic chokepoints, including the Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Malacca, Bab el-Mandeb, Lombok and Sunda Straits, the Mozambique Channel, and the Cape of Good Hope, are essential to global trade and energy security. Disruptions to these maritime corridors, particularly the Strait of Hormuz, through which around 13 million barrels of oil passed daily in 2025, as witnessed in the aftermath of the war between the US and Iran, significantly affect Asian economies. India and China remain especially vulnerable because of their dependence on imported energy. Prolonged disruptions would increase energy prices, raise shipping and insurance costs, strain supply chains, and intensify strategic competition over secure maritime routes across the Indian Ocean.

3. China's Military Expansion and Modernisation

China has emerged as one of the most influential external actors in the IOR. Economically, it is the largest import partner for twenty-four countries and the leading export destination for thirteen states across the region. Through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing has financed infrastructure projects across 39 African countries, 25 East Asian states, 17 North African countries, and 6 South Asian nations. Its partnerships with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, together with the extensive network of Chinese diplomatic missions, have strengthened Beijing's political influence alongside its economic presence.¹⁴

What distinguishes this expanding Chinese international profile is the slow but steady military dimension of this engagement. The country's overseas logistics base in Djibouti, commissioned in 2017, marked the PLA's first permanent overseas military facility. Located near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the base supports anti-piracy patrols, naval replenishment, humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping operations, and the protection of Chinese nationals abroad. The PLAN has also

increased its operational tempo through regular deployments in the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the western Indian Ocean. Joint naval exercises with Russia and South Africa, together with expanding defence cooperation across Africa and the Indian Ocean littoral, demonstrate Beijing's growing ability to sustain military operations far from its mainland. China has also become a major supplier of defence equipment to Pakistan and Egypt while expanding arms exports to Indonesia, Myanmar, Somalia, Tanzania, and Thailand, thereby reinforcing long-term security partnerships.¹⁵

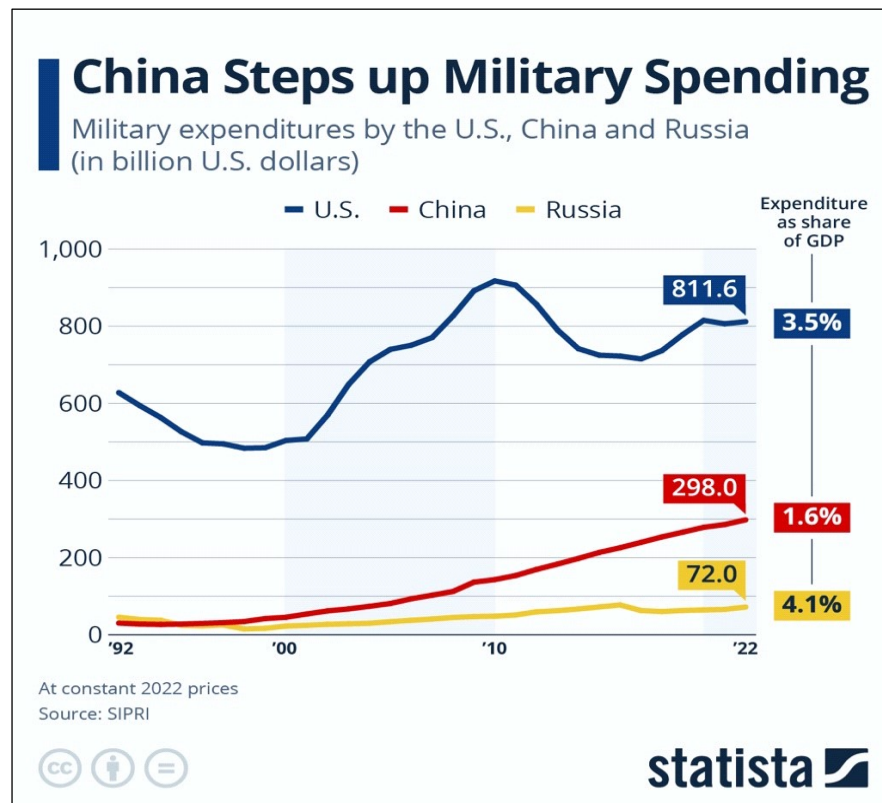
The expansion of China's military footprint has influenced regional security perceptions. As Chinese military infrastructure and naval deployments increase, neighbouring states and extra-regional powers have strengthened their own security cooperation and force modernisation programmes. This interaction reflects the dynamics of the security dilemma, in which efforts to improve national security alter other states' strategic calculations, encouraging reciprocal military adjustments.

China's defence expenditure shows the scale of its military transformation over the last few decades. As shown in Figure 2 above,

Beijing's military spending increased by almost 900 per cent between 1992 and 2022, reaching approximately US\$300 billion. This places China second only to the United States in global defence expenditure, while substantially exceeding Russia's defence budget. Notably, the omission of the term "peaceful reunification" regarding Taiwan from a key government report

presented to the Chinese National People's Congress, which approved a 7.2 per cent increase in defence spending for 2024, has sparked renewed scrutiny. According to a report by *South China Morning Post*, recent budget allocations prioritise advanced technologies, scientific research, logistics, precision strike systems, and force readiness, reflecting China's emphasis on

Figure 2: China's military expenditures



Source: Statista¹⁶

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SECURITY DILEMMAS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

Table 1: Numbers of Certain Types of Chinese Ships since 2005.
Figures for Chinese ships taken from the annual DOD report on
military and security development

Year of DOD Report	Submarines					Surface Combatants				Amphibious Ships				
	SSB	SSN	SS	CV	CG	DD	FF	FFL	PC	LHA	LST/LPD	LSM	China Battle Force	China Coast Guard
2005	1	6	51	0	0	21	43	0	51	0	20	23	216	N/A
2006	1	5	50	0	0	25	45	0	45	0	25	25	221	N/A
2007	1	5	53	0	0	25	47	0	41	0	25	25	222	N/A
2008	1	5	54	0	0	29	45	0	45	0	26	28	233	N/A
2009	2	6	54	0	0	27	48	0	70	0	27	28	262	N/A
2010	2	6	54	0	0	25	49	0	85	0	27	28	276	N/A
2011	2	5	49	0	0	26	53	0	86	0	27	28	276	N/A
2012	2	5	48	0	0	26	53	0	86	0	28	23	271	N/A
2013	3	5	49	1	0	23	52	0	85	0	29	26	273	N/A
2014	3	5	51	1	0	24	49	8	85	0	29	28	283	N/A
2015	4	5	53	1	0	21	52	15	86	0	29	28	294	N/A
2016	4	5	57	1	0	23	52	23	86	0	30	22	303	N/A
2017	4	5	54	1	0	21	56	23	88	0	34	21	307	185
2018	4	5	57	1	0	28	51	28	86	0	33	23	316	240
2019	4	6	50	1	0	33	54	42	86	0	37	22	335	248
2020	4	6	46	2	1	32	49	49	86	0	37	21	333	255
2021	6	9	56	2	1	32	48	51	86		57		348	223
2022	6	9	56	2	6	36	45	50	84		57		351	224
2023	6	6	47	2	8	42	47	50	60	3	57		328	142

Sources: Congressional Research Service¹⁹

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Key Abbreviation: N/A = Data Not available in annual DOD report, SSB = ballistic missile submarines, SSN = Nuclear-powered attack submarines, SS = diesel attack submarines, CV = aircraft carriers, CG = cruisers, DD = destroyers, FF = frigates, FFL = corvettes (i.e. light frigates), PC = missile-armed coastal patrol craft, LHA = amphibious tank landing ships, LPD = amphibious transport dock ships, LSM = amphibious medium landing ships.

developing integrated operational capabilities suitable for high-intensity conflict.¹⁷

Although China's defence spending has expanded considerably, its naval presence in the Indian Ocean remains more limited than that of the United States. But, as Becker (2020) argues, the PLAN has substantially improved its capacity to sustain deployments across the region during the past two decades.¹⁸ China's leadership increasingly recognises that protecting access to the Indian Ocean is essential for safeguarding energy imports, overseas investments, and maritime trade during periods of geopolitical tension.

This transformation is evident in the composition of the Chinese fleet. As shown in Table 1 above, there has been a sustained increase in the number of PLAN platforms between 2005 and 2023. Much of this expansion has occurred through the induction of Type-056 (Jingdao-class) corvettes, missile-armed coastal patrol craft, modern

destroyers, cruisers, and amphibious assault ships. More than half of the increase in fleet size (53 per cent) during this period resulted from the addition of corvettes and missile patrol vessels, reflecting China's emphasis on strengthening coastal defence while simultaneously expanding its capacity for regional operations. The steady growth in cruisers and destroyers (29) and amphibious ships (17) also indicates an increasing ability to conduct long-range deployments, expeditionary operations, and maritime security missions beyond China's immediate neighbourhood.

From Table 2, it can be observed that China's battle force fleet has grown from approximately 210 ships in 2000 to around 360 by 2020 with projections indicating roughly 400 ships by 2025 and more than 425 by 2030. This force includes aircraft carriers, nuclear and conventional submarines, destroyers, frigates, amphibious assault ships, replenishment vessels, and fleet auxiliaries. Aircraft carriers, destroyers, and large amphibious

Table 2:
Numbers of Chinese Navy Battle Force Ships, 2000 – 2030

Selected Ship Types	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2025	2030
Ballistic missile submarines	1	1	3	4	4	6	8
Nuclear-powered attack submarines	5	4	5	6	7	10	13
Diesel attack submarines	56	56	48	53	55	55	55
Aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers	19	25	25	26	43	55	65
Frigates, corvettes	38	43	50	74	102	120	135
Total number of China's navy battle force ships, including types not shown above	210	220	220	255	360	400	425

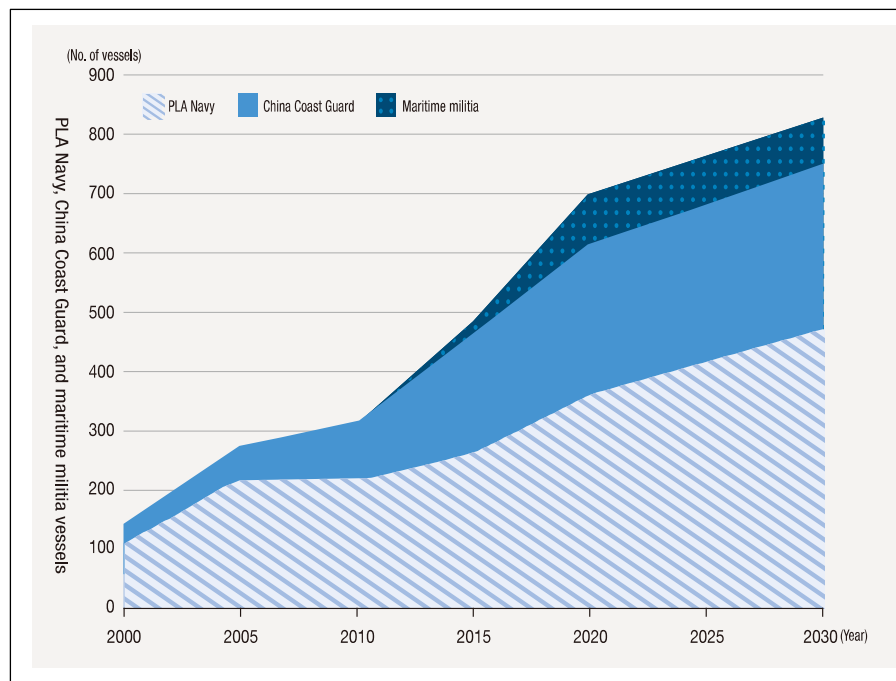
Sources: Congressional Research Service²⁰

platforms account for much of the projected expansion, reflecting Beijing's objective of sustaining continuous blue-water naval operations. These figures position the PLAN as the world's largest navy by number of battle force ships.

China's maritime capabilities are not limited to the PLAN and its coastguard (CCG). As shown in Figure 3, the country has seen parallel growth in the China Maritime Militia

(CMM), which plays a central role in advancing Beijing's maritime objectives, including reinforcing maritime claims, conducting surveillance, protecting fisheries, providing logistics, and conducting search-and-rescue operations. CMM engages in "Gray Zone" operations like standoffs and harassment such as near Iroquois Reef in the Spratly Islands (2021-2022), confrontation with Malaysia drill ship West Capella (2020), and the defence of China's

Figure 3: Number of PLA Navy, China Coast Guard, and Maritime Militia Vessels.



Note: Projected figures for 2020 and beyond.

Source: U.S. Marine Corps²¹

**Table 3: Conventional Missile Systems of the
People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF)**

Missile Category	Missile System	Primary Role/Capability	Estimated Range (km)
Short-Range Ballistic Missile (SRBM)	CSS-6 (DF-15)	Short-range ballistic missile	725–850
	CSS-7 (DF-11)	Short-range ballistic missile	600
	CSS-11 (DF-16)	Short-range ballistic missile	>700
Medium-Range Ballistic Missile (MRBM)	CSS-5 (DF-21)	Land-attack and anti-ship variants	1,500
	DF-17	Hypersonic Glide Vehicle (HGV)-capable	1,800–2,500
Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM)	DF-26	Multi-role (land-attack and anti-ship)	3,000–4,000
Ground-Launched Cruise Missile (GLCM)	CJ-10 (DH-10)	Ground-launched cruise missile	1,500
	CJ-100 (DF-100)	Ground-launched cruise missile	2,000
Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM)	CSS-4 (DF-5)	Intercontinental ballistic missile	~13,000
	CSS-10 (DF-31)	Intercontinental ballistic missile	~11,200
	CSS-20 (DF-41)	Intercontinental ballistic missile	~12,000
	CSS-10 Mod 2 (DF-31A)	Intercontinental ballistic missile	~11,000
	DF-27	Long-range ballistic missile	5,000–8,000
Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM)	JL-2	Sea-based nuclear deterrent	8,000
Anti-Ship Cruise Missile (ASCM)	YJ-12B	Anti-ship cruise missile	500
	YJ-18	Anti-ship cruise missile	540

Source: CSIS & Department of State, United States Government²⁴

HYSY-981 drill rig in disputed waters with Vietnam, supporting China's territorial claims while maintaining operations below the threshold of conventional military confrontation.²² The integration of civilian and military assets provides Beijing with additional operational flexibility in contested maritime spaces.

Likewise, the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) has witnessed significant modernisation under Chinese President Xi Jinping's directives, with three primary goals for the PLA's transformation, including "mechanization", "informationization", army building, and full "modernization" and "intelligentization" by 2035 (ibid).²³ The PLARF's conventional missile forces are shown in Table 3 below:

China's military capacity reflects its assertive actions in the South China Sea, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean Region, compelling other powers to bolster their weaponry.

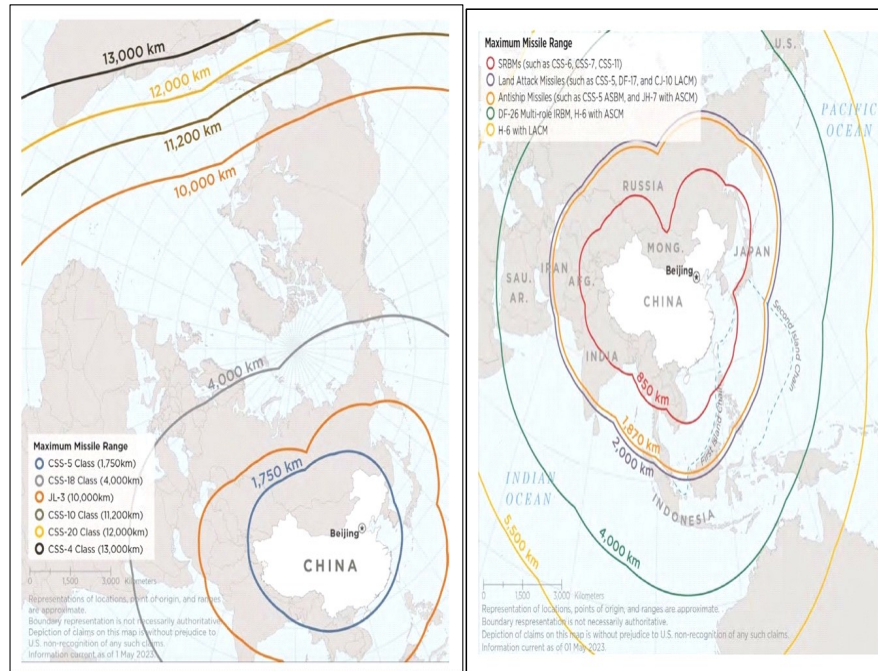
The PLARF, a central pillar of China's long-range precision strike capability, has in its arsenal key systems such as the conventionally armed DF-21D (CSS-5 Mod 5) anti-ship ballistic missile, designed to engage high-value naval assets, including aircraft carriers, at extended ranges from mainland China, including in the Western Pacific. Its DF-26 further broadens China's operational reach through its dual-capable design that allows it to rapidly switch between conventional and nuclear payloads while conducting precision land-attack and

Table 4: China Rocket Force till 2023

System	Launchers	Missiles	Estimated Range (km)
ICBM	500	350	>5,500
IRBM	250	500	3,000-5,500
MRBM	300	1000	1,000-3,000
SRBM	200	1000	300-1,000
GLCM	150	300	>1,600

Source: *Annual Report to Congress* ²⁵

**Figure 4 shows the maximum
Missile range from mainland China.**



Source: Annual Report to Congress²⁶

anti-ship missions across the Western Pacific, the South China Sea, and the Indian Ocean. Likewise, the DF-17, equipped with a hypersonic glide vehicle, enhances China's ability to strike military bases and deployed naval forces with greater speed and manoeuvrability. Complementing these systems, Beijing also possesses an estimated 350 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), deployed on fixed and mobile launchers and capable of delivering single or multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles.

China's broader military transformation seeks to develop a technologically advanced and integrated force. According to Nouwens (2022), the PLA prioritised mechanisation and information-isation by 2020, with subsequent reforms focusing on force professionalisation and joint operational capability by 2027, while aiming to complete comprehensive military modernisation by the middle of the century.²⁷ Overseas logistics infrastructure has become an important component of this strategy. It started with its first overseas

military support base in Djibouti in 2017, which strengthened the PLA's capacity to sustain naval operations, protect maritime trade routes, and support missions in the western Indian Ocean. There has been widespread speculation that Beijing was pursuing the establishment of a second naval base in Africa, possibly in Equatorial Guinea, Angola, or Namibia, despite the African Union's caution to its member states against allowing Africa to become a battleground for foreign militaries by offering military bases. Chinese investments in ports under the Belt and Road Initiative, along with regular PLAN port visits and joint exercises, have expanded defence cooperation across Africa. Countries such as Mozambique, Namibia, the Seychelles, and Tanzania source over 90 per cent of their military equipment from China, while Kenya and Ghana also maintain significant defence procurement relationships (over 50 per cent), thereby reflecting Beijing's growing security partnerships across the continent.

4. China's Expansion in IOR: Strategic Implications

China's strategic outlook towards the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has become more prominent in its recent geostrategic thinking. A comparison of China's 2025 National Security White Paper with its 2019 vision document reflects this shift, placing greater emphasis on geopolitical competition, maritime security, and

the protection of overseas interests. The White Paper presents the Indo-Pacific as an arena of intensifying strategic rivalry and attributes growing regional tensions to the expansion of United States-led security partnerships, including the Quad and AUKUS. Treating the seas with the same critical urgency as the preservation of the Communist political system itself,²⁸ it also places maritime governance, the protection of maritime rights and ocean security at the very core of China's national development strategy and links them to the country's long-term modernisation and national rejuvenation objectives.

This evolution in strategic thinking is reflected in China's conduct across the Indo-Pacific. Earlier "salami slicing" tactics, characterised by gradual, incremental advances, have increasingly been complemented by more visible militaristic approaches.²⁹ Recent incidents such as border confrontations with India, sustained military pressure around Taiwan, expanded naval operations near the Senkaku Islands, greater activity in the South China Sea and increased cyber capabilities highlight Beijing's willingness to employ a broader range of instruments to protect its interests. As Burges and Romaniak (2021) argue, these developments have reshaped regional security

calculations by increasing the frequency of military interactions and strengthening the role of deterrence in interstate relations.³⁰ For Beijing, the IOR occupies an important position within this broader strategic vision, consistent with Alfred Thayer Mahan's emphasis on maritime power as a foundation of national influence.

The Indian Ocean remains crucial to China's economic security, with over 80 per cent of its imported oil and a substantial share of its trade with Europe, West Asia, and Africa transiting through the region's sea lines of communication (SLOCs). Chinese strategic analysts, including Zeng Xinkai, have long recognised the vulnerability created by dependence on maritime routes that traverse waters where other major naval powers such as India and the extra-regional United States maintain a significant presence. These concerns have driven China's sustained diplomatic and naval engagement across the region, with Chinese naval port visits increasing from virtually none in 1999 to around twenty annually after 2010. Beijing has also established diplomatic missions in all six Indian Ocean island states which shows its efforts to deepen political engagement alongside its expanding maritime activities.³¹

Beijing's long-term strategic objective remains the achievement of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049. This vision includes economic development, technological advancement, military modernisation and enhanced international influence. Chinese leaders frequently describe international politics as an arena of strategic competition in which national power, governance models and technological capabilities shape global influence. The 2023 United States Department of Defence assessment notes that Beijing views American alliances and strategic partnerships as influencing China's external security environment. President Xi Jinping has similarly argued that external efforts to constrain China's development reinforce the need for stronger national resilience and comprehensive security capabilities.³²

China reinforces these external engagements through four complementary initiatives, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI). These combine infrastructure investment, economic connectivity, development assistance, diplomatic engagement and security cooperation to strengthen Beijing's international

profile. It is within this broader strategy that the Indian Ocean serves as the principal maritime corridor connecting China with Africa, West Asia, and Europe; hence, access to its sea lanes remains essential for Beijing to actualise its broader geopolitical and economic objectives.

Regional responses have evolved alongside China's growing presence. Security cooperation among Indo-Pacific partners has intensified through stronger diplomatic coordination, expanded defence dialogues and greater military interoperability. For instance, the Quad has broadened its agenda to include maritime domain awareness, critical technologies, and resilient supply chains; Japan has taken a firmer stance on Taiwan's security; the US has reinforced its ties with Taipei; and Australia has announced long-term military modernisation programmes. Likewise, the Philippines, a strong US ally, has expanded defence cooperation with Washington, Tokyo, and Canberra. As such, these developments reflect an increasingly interconnected regional security architecture shaped by evolving maritime dynamics.

Another important component of China's Indian Ocean strategy is its involvement in developing port infrastructure. Through the maritime

component of its BRI project, Beijing has invested in the construction, management or long-term operation of ports across the Indo-Pacific, Africa, Europe and West Asia. The geographical scope of these investments is highlighted by projects such as Hambantota in Sri Lanka (leased for 99 years), Piraeus in Greece (leased for 99 years), Haifa in Israel (leased for 25 years) and Durban in Australia (leased for 99 years), among others. Although these ports primarily serve commercial purposes, their strategic location has sparked extensive discussion about debt traps and potential security implications stemming from their contribution to China's long-term maritime access and logistical resilience.³³ Consequently, India, the US, Japan, Australia, and several European countries continue to monitor these investments as part of broader assessments of regional security.

Figures 5, 6, and 7 show that from 2007 through mid-2025, China steadily deepened its presence in the Indian Ocean. This integrated approach supports Beijing's objective of strengthening its presence across both the Pacific and Indian Oceans while protecting critical maritime trade routes. Chinese naval deployments, anti-piracy patrols, port visits, and joint exercises have

become regular features of the regional security environment. Between 2022 and 2025, China, Iran, and Russia conducted annual trilateral naval exercises, while PLAN vessels equipped with advanced anti-submarine warfare capabilities operated near several strategic maritime chokepoints. Moreover, China has emerged as an important supplier of defence equipment across the Indian Ocean region, with Pakistan, Myanmar,

Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates among its prominent partners. These have been accompanied by parallel efforts to secure seabed mineral exploration rights and to expand scientific research activities, further demonstrating China's growing interest in the maritime domain.

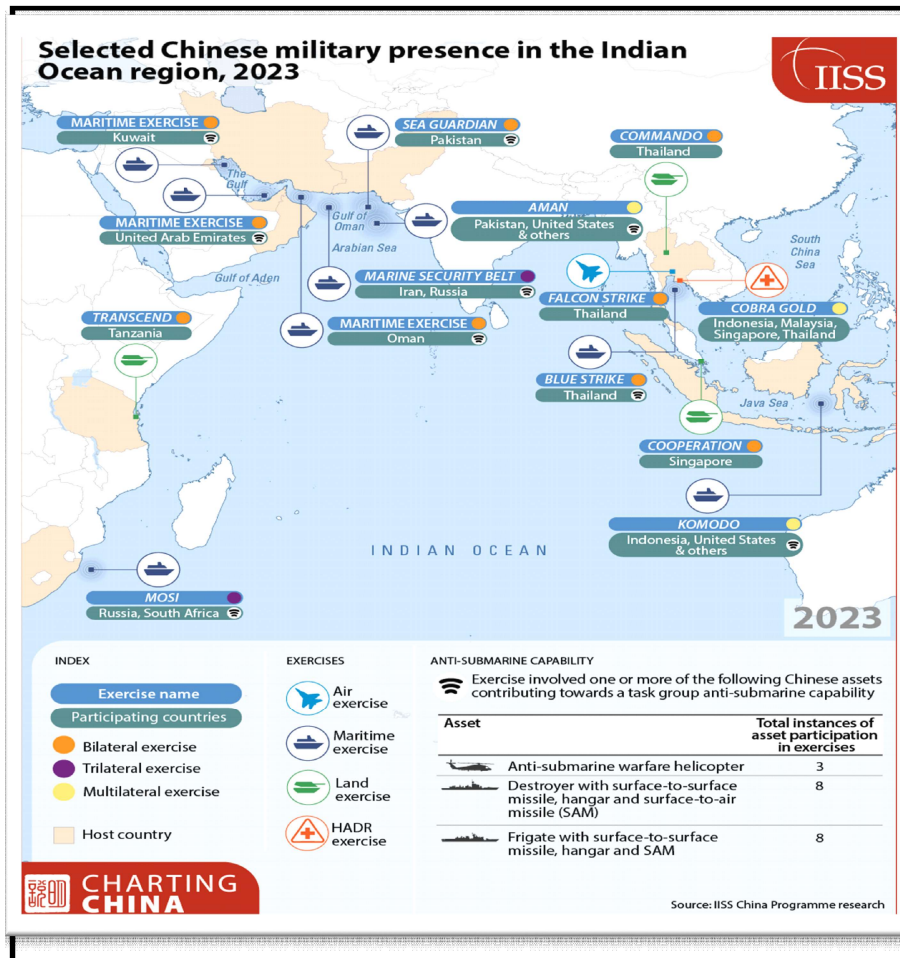
For India, these developments carry important strategic implications, as China's expanding

**Figure 5: China Contemplating hosting
Military Bases in various countries**



Source: *Geographica* ³⁴

Figure No. 6: Important Chinese Military Presence in the IOR, 2023

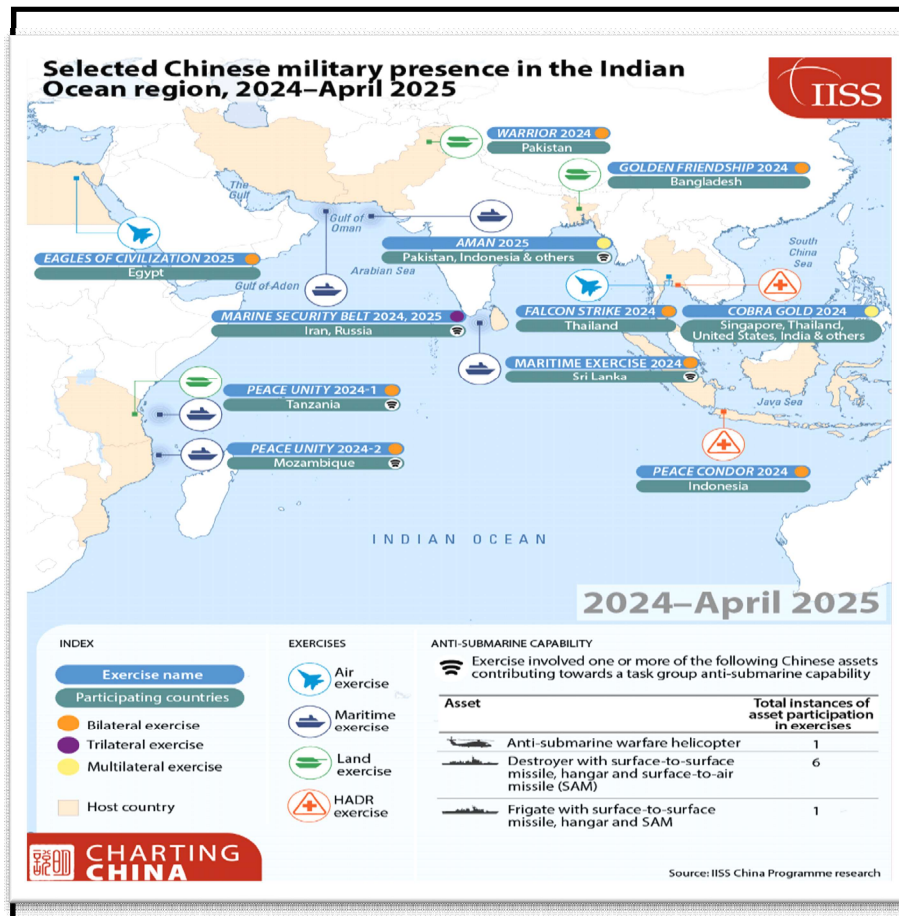


Source: Baruah, Schulenburg, Solanki, & Green (2025)³⁵

political, economic, and military engagements across South Asia and the western Indian Ocean have heightened the strategic importance of neighbouring states such as Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. As Beijing's presence continues to deepen across the Indian

Ocean, the region is likely to remain a central arena in the broader strategic competition among major powers, with maritime security, connectivity, and geopolitical influence forming the principal dimensions of this evolving landscape.

**Figure 7: Important Chinese Infrastructure
Projects and Sea Bed Exploration in the IOR.**



Source: Baruah, Schulenburg, Solanki, & Green (2025)³⁶

5. Security Dynamics in The Indian Ocean Region

IOR is emerging as one of the principal theatres of geopolitical competition, where maritime commerce, energy security, military power, and technological capabilities are increasingly intersecting.

China's expanding presence, alongside the sustained engagement of the United States, India, Japan, Australia, and other regional actors, has transformed the region into a complex strategic environment in which developments in one theatre increasingly influence security

calculations elsewhere. The IOR, therefore, represents more than a maritime trade corridor, as it has become an integral component of the wider Indo-Pacific security architecture.

China's maritime conduct in the South China Sea has shaped perceptions of its strategic behaviour across the Indo-Pacific, including the Indian Ocean. Its assertion of extensive maritime claims, expansion of military infrastructure on disputed features in the South China Sea, increased coast guard and naval deployments, and restrictions on navigation have generated concerns about the future of the rules-based maritime order. As Kuok (2019) argues, these developments have implications beyond the South China Sea by shaping the interpretation of international maritime law, freedom of navigation and the rights of coastal states under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).³⁸ Therefore, maritime security in the Indian Ocean cannot be examined in isolation from developments in the western Pacific, as both theatres increasingly constitute a connected strategic environment.

The operational evolution of the PLA Navy (PLAN) contributes to this changing environment. McDevitt

(2016: 12) observes that the PLAN's dual-command system, under which commanding officers and political commissars jointly exercise authority, reflects the Chinese Communist Party's emphasis on political control alongside operational effectiveness.³⁹ As China's naval capabilities continue to expand, uncertainty regarding the PLAN's future size, composition, and deployment patterns remains a key factor in shaping regional strategic planning.

India has responded to these developments by expanding defence cooperation with the US and other Indo-Pacific partners through agreements such as the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), and subsequent defence arrangements that enhance intelligence sharing, logistics support, interoperability, and joint military planning. These initiatives complement India's broader maritime strategy, which emphasises freedom of navigation, maritime domain awareness and the security of the Indian Ocean's critical sea lanes.

The gradual nuclearisation of the Indian Ocean has introduced an additional dimension to the regional security complex. While sea-based

nuclear deterrence enhances second-strike capability, it simultaneously increases the operational importance of maritime surveillance, anti-submarine warfare and secure communication networks. In the South Asian context as well, India, Pakistan, and China have each expanded their naval capabilities to support their strategic deterrence posture. This growing maritime dimension is highlighted by India's induction of its first ballistic missile submarine in 2009, followed by Pakistan's establishment of the Naval Strategic Force Command in 2012 with Chinese assistance.

Security challenges within the western Indian Ocean have also evolved from piracy to encompass illegal fishing, arms smuggling, human trafficking and spillover of conflicts from Yemen and Mozambique. Yet, alongside these transnational threats, increased naval deployments by extra-regional powers have introduced a more competitive strategic environment. Bueger and Stockbruegger (2022) argue that institutions such as the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) mechanism and the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) provide valuable foundations for cooperative maritime governance. Expanding these frameworks to include broader

security coordination, information sharing, and confidence-building measures could strengthen regional resilience while reducing the potential for strategic misunderstanding.

Figure 8 shows the geographical breadth of China's defence export network, which extends across Africa, Asia, West Asia, and parts of Latin America. It highlights that Chinese arms exports are no longer confined to longstanding strategic partners like Pakistan but now include a wide range of developing countries across Africa and Asia that are seeking affordable military equipment, flexible financing and fewer political conditions than those often attached to Western defence sales. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the global arms market remains concentrated among a handful of suppliers. Between 2021 and 2025, the US, France, Russia, Germany, and China together accounted for approximately 70 per cent of global major arms exports.⁴¹ This shift has created additional opportunities for Chinese defence manufacturers to expand their market presence across Asia, Africa, and West Asia. China's expanding defence exports reinforce its broader geopolitical objectives by creating long-term security relationships,

**Figure 8: China's Conventional Weapons and
Missile-Related Customers, 2002-2017**



Source: Defense Intelligence Agency⁴⁰

which increasingly complement Beijing's investments in ports, transport corridors, telecommunications and energy infrastructure. This allows China to integrate economic and military engagement across strategically important regions.

However, while China's expanding port infrastructure supports the PLAN's ability to maintain continuous deployments across the Indian Ocean, sustaining military operations during conflict presents considerable logistical challenges, as its military infrastructure remains geographically distant from its industrial base and principal naval facilities. Moreover, since most of China's imported energy and commercial shipping passes through the Indian Ocean before entering the Strait of Malacca, it presents what has been described as the "Malacca Dilemma", and has forced Chinese planners to diversify supply routes through overland pipelines, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and building larger strategic petroleum reserves. These measures improve resilience but do not replace the central role of maritime transportation.

China's maritime expansion has prompted broader strategic responses. India has strengthened maritime partnerships with the United States, Japan, Australia, and several Indian Ocean littoral states. Concerns regarding Chinese port investments and expanding naval access have encouraged greater cooperation in maritime domain awareness, defence capacity building, and infrastructure

development. Similar concerns have influenced debates surrounding the strategic implications of Chinese investments in ports with potential dual-use functions.

6. Conclusion

China's increasing power in the Indian Ocean Region signifies the convergence of trade and strategy. In times of peace, its investments in ports, corridors and maritime infrastructure serve economic objectives including safeguarding energy supply routes and enhancing commercial connectivity. However, during periods of heightened tension, these assets could acquire strategic significance by facilitating surveillance, logistics and forward access while simultaneously becoming vulnerable points within China's supply chain.

This interplay has made the IOR a more contested geopolitical arena. China's rise as a maritime power is occurring alongside a broader regional response from India, the United States, Japan, Australia, and other stakeholders, all of whom are expanding their diplomatic, naval and infrastructural engagement in the region. India's SAGAR vision, together with its maritime partnerships and security initiatives, indicates that regional states are not merely responding to China but are

also proactively seeking to establish a more balanced and secure regional order. At the same time, the region faces overlapping challenges, including instability in the Red Sea, piracy, extremism, trafficking, and climate-induced disruptions, all of which further enhance the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean sea lanes. In this context, China's involvement extends beyond economic expansion; it is also reshaping the evolving security dynamics of the Indian Ocean. The key takeaway is that the region's future will depend on the ability of regional and extra-regional powers to manage strategic competition while preserving maritime access, regional development, and collective security.

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