Developing China's Indian Ocean Strategy

Rationale and Prospects

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Abstract: From the strategic perspective, the Indian Ocean has been increasingly important to China's foreign trade and energy security. China has been faced with a deepening dilemma in the Malacca Strait for years, in large part due to the strategic pressure from the United States and India. Under its new initiative to construct the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road," China needs to develop a long-term, security-oriented Indian Ocean strategy based on a comprehensive analysis of all the favorable and adverse conditions. Its strategic goals should include building an Indian Ocean fleet, expanding its base networks, and sharing power peacefully with the United States and India, so as to safeguard its legitimate rights and interests in the region.

Keywords: Indian Ocean; security strategy; Malacca Dilemma; "21st Century Maritime Silk Road."

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States enjoyed decades of hegemonic glory. However, in recent years, its power has been

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undermined in large part by its frequent use of military forces in the Middle East and other parts of the world. Meanwhile, China has emerged as the world's second largest economy, with continual expansion of overseas interests and steady growth in naval power. The rise of China and relative decline of U.S. influence is poised to change the long-existing power structure in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. In this context, China needs to seize every opportunity to develop a long-term Indian Ocean strategy and get prepared for closer security engagement in the region, in order to safeguard regional peace and security as well as the openness of maritime routes.

Deepening Malacca Dilemma for China

The Indian Ocean, the third largest ocean in the world, separating Asia, Oceania, Antarctica and Africa, covers a total area of 73.44 million square kilometers, and accounts for about 20 percent of the total ocean area in the world. To the north of the Indian Ocean is India, Pakistan and Iran; to the west is the Arabian Peninsula and Africa, and to the east is Australia, Indonesia and the Malay Peninsula. The Indian Ocean is the strategic crossroads of the Pacific Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. It has increasingly become the main route of communication between Europe, Asia, Africa and Oceania.¹ The coastal ports of the Indian Ocean are in operation all year round, and the waters are deep and wide, navigable in four seasons, making it one of the most developed and busiest waterways. The northern edge of the Indian Ocean, an arc from the Red Sea to the Strait of Malacca, constitutes the "soft underbelly" of Eurasia that covers many conflict zones, and is also known as an "arc of Islam." In history, any power that controlled the edge of the Eurasian continent along the northern part of the Indian Ocean could control the entire Indian Ocean, and penetrate the "heartland" of Eurasia.² Therefore, the Indian Ocean has

¹Robert D. Kaplan, "Center Stage for the Twenty-first Century: Power Plays in the Indian Ocean," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 2 (March /April 2009), pp. 16–32.

²Song Dexing and Bai Jun, "21shiji zhi yang: diyuanzhanlue shijiaoxia de yinduyang [Ocean of the Twenty-first Century: The Indian Ocean from a Geostrategic Perspective]," *South Asia Research*, No. 3 (2009), p. 35.

long been a key area of strategic competition for the world's major powers. At present, no single power plays a dominant role in this region.

Connecting the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, the 1,080-kilometer-long, 25 to 115-meter-deep Malacca Strait has been under joint governance by Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia since the end of World War II.³ It is the world's longest and one of the busiest international waterways, known as "the Gibraltar of the east," supporting about a quarter of the world's maritime trade. At present, over 50,000 ships pass through the Strait each year, of which nearly 60 percent are Chinese vessels.⁴

China's energy imports rely heavily on the Strait of Malacca; as such, any blockage in the Strait would be a serious threat to China's energy security. This is the source of the "Malacca Dilemma" for China over the past decades. Since China became a net oil importer in 1993, China's oil imports and consumption have been rising steadily. In 2009, China became the world's third largest oil importer, accounting for 7.5 percent of global oil trade. In the same year, China became the world's largest oil consumer, accounting for 9.3 percent of global demand.⁵ Although China's energy demand growth has been slowing down in recent years, China remains the world's largest energy consumer, constituting nearly a quarter of global consumption and over half of global net growth.

At present, more than half of China's domestic oil imports come from the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia, and about four-fifths of the imported crude oil is transported through the Malacca Strait. China's three largest oil exporters are Angola, Iran, and Saudi Arabia (crude oil imports from them account for nearly half of China's total oil imports), and oil tankers from all of them have to go through the Malacca Strait. Such heavy reliance on the waterway poses a major potential threat to China's energy security, which is subject to the changing dynamics of strategic competition among major powers over control of the Malacca Strait. In November 2003,

³Singapore is important but small, and the majority of the Strait of Malacca is owned by Malaysia and Indonesia.

⁴Wu Qi-min, "Qingting lishide sushuo — hujintaozhuxi fangwen maliujiahaixia ceji [Listening to History — President Hu Jintao's visit to the Straits of Malacca]," *People's Daily*, November 12, 2009, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64093/64094/10362009.html>.

⁵BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2015, <http://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/pdf/Energy-economics/statistical-review-2015/bp-statistical-review-of-world-energy-2015-full-report.pdf>.

then Chinese President Hu Jintao concluded at the Conference on Economic Work of the Communist Party of China (CPC) that the Achilles Heel of the Chinese economy and energy security lies in the Malacca Strait, expressing grave concerns over the "Malacca Dilemma"⁶ faced by China.

Moreover, China's "Malacca Dilemma" has been exacerbated by the Strait's geographic conditions,⁷ piracy activities, India's strengthening of naval power and its "Look East" policy, as well as the lasting presence of American military forces.⁸ As an American researcher at the National Defense University suggested, if China is engaged with the United States in a military confrontation, the latter could implement "sea control," blockade the Strait of Malacca, intercept all the activities in and out of these waters and force China to back down. According to him, the United States could send 13 to 15 marine corps units to intercept about 800 ships carrying or exporting goods to China's main ports.⁹ The Chinese government is clearly aware of this potential scenario, and thus has begun to minimize its vulnerability by building transport networks on land through Pakistan and Myanmar. But due to political and technical reasons, trade routes and energy supplies in the Indian Ocean, in particular through the Malacca Strait, remain crucial to China.

Since the Indian Ocean route is the most important of China's four major shipping routes (the other three lead to the east Pacific, the Arctic and the Atlantic, respectively), accounting for 40 percent of China's overseas trade and 80 percent of its total imports, it is natural for the Chinese

China's trade routes and energy transport in the Indian Ocean face serious potential threat.

⁶Marc Lanteigne, "China's Maritime Security and the 'Malacca Dilemma,'" *Asian Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2008), p. 144. There are some disputes whether Hu used this term, but it has certainly acquired a prominence due to its purported use by him.

⁷The Strait of Malacca is quite narrow, with 37 shallow spots less than 23 meters in depth and growing sedimentation. Sunken ships in the past also hinder the passage of supertankers beyond 200,000 tons.

⁸In June 2012, the United States and Singapore agreed on the U.S. deployment of littoral combat ships in Singapore and deployment began in April.

⁹"Meizhuanjia zhizhao zhongmeichongtu kefengsuo maliujia rangzhongguoditou [U.S. Experts Suggest Blockade of the Malacca in Time of Conflict with China]," *Global Times*, September 30, 2014, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2014-09/30/c-127053436.htm>.

government to regard the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Strait as a key section of the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road," an initiative proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. To make sure the Maritime Silk Road is safe and clear, China needs to increase its presence in the Indian Ocean, guarantee the interconnectivity between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific while overcoming the "Malacca Dilemma," in order to promote safe and free passage in the Indian Ocean.

Strategic Advantages of the United States and India

Indeed, with the Maritime Silk Road receiving increasing support from Indian Ocean nations,¹⁰ China is enhancing its political and military presence in the region; this has triggered concerns from the United States and India. Up till now, India has remained silent on China's invitation to participate in the Maritime Silk Road.

Since the end of World War II, the United States has been a global maritime hegemon with its powerful navy. The largest U.S. military stronghold in the Indian Ocean is the island of Diego Garcia. In 1966, the United States secured a 50-year lease of the island by selling "North Star" nuclear missiles and their launch system to Britain. Located 2,000 kilometers west of the Strait of Malacca, the 27.2 square kilometer-large island is truly an "unsinkable carrier on the Indian Ocean."¹¹ It is not only a comprehensive military base with complete facilities, ready for forward operation, supportive supply and strategic projection, but also the only overseas military base that can serve the U.S. combat missions to both the east and the west, and meet the operational needs of U.S. carrier battle groups, nuclear submarine forces, amphibious fleets, strategic bombers and large transport aircrafts. It has demonstrated its irreplaceable role in the Gulf War, Afghanistan War, and Iraq War. At present, the base is deployed with a long-range bomber unit and a P-3C patrol unit that can detect and attack enemy submarines.

¹⁰Many countries bordering India, including Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Pakistan, have signed up to join in the initiative. Pakistan has received \$46 billion in pledged investment from China, the largest single overseas investment by China.

¹¹Yu Dianxiang, "Digejiayi: yinduyang shang 'buchenhangmu' [Diego Garcia: an 'unsinkable aircraft carrier' in the Indian Ocean]," *PLA Daily*, June 13, 2014.

In 1986, the United States announced a plan to control 16 key shipping lanes around the world, including six in the Indian Ocean: the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, the Strait of Malacca, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, the Persian Gulf, and the sea-lane south of Africa. Controlling these strategic passages into and out of the Indian Ocean has given the United States an absolute advantage in the Indian Ocean. Currently, the west Indian Ocean including the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea and the vast waters to the east of Africa is the operational zone of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, while the remaining area is that of the U.S. Seventh Fleet.

Central among the continents surrounding the Indian Ocean, and with a coastline stretching over 6,000 kilometers, India is a “superpower” among South Asian countries and a natural contender for strategic leadership in the Indian Ocean. Over the past decades, India has many a time reiterated its “special interests” in the Indian Ocean, and its naval strategy has evolved from “coastal defense” to “zone control,” and to “distant ocean offensive.” To strive for maximum control of the Ocean, India has been strengthening its military forces, in particular a blue-water navy; it has also established such security mechanisms as the “Indian Ocean Naval Symposium,” of which China became an observer in 2014 after six years of endeavoring to participate in the regional mechanism.

In 2001, India set up the East Naval Command in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, 1,000 kilometers away from its mainland, to exert stronger control over the area to the west of the Malacca Strait. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are made up of 244 islands, ranging more than 1,000 kilometers from north to south. Overlooking the Ten Degree Channel, the Preparis Channel, and the Strait of Malacca, the islands can serve as a strong bulwark and supply base in times of conflict, which further aggravates China’s “Malacca Dilemma.”¹² According to *Jane’s Fighting Ships 2014–2015*, the Indian navy boasts 116 major warships, including a nuclear-powered attack submarine, 13 conventional submarines, 2 aircraft carriers, 47 destroyers and frigates, as well

The U.S. and India enjoy great strategic advantages over China in the Indian Ocean.

¹²Walter C. Ladwig III, “Delhi’s Pacific Ambition: Naval Power, ‘Look East’, and India’s Emerging Influence in the Asia-Pacific,” *Asian Security*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2009), p. 91.

as a total of 202 aircrafts; its combat zone can extend 1,000 kilometers from land bases.¹³ That means India's naval power can cover the entire region ranging from the Strait of Malacca and the Bay of Bengal to most of the Arabian Sea and the Strait of Hormuz.

Since the end of the Cold War, India has also made great efforts to develop relations with Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan and other Asia-Pacific countries, especially with the launch of the "Look East" policy; it has also been trying to enhance its engagement in security issues in the South China Sea, in large part to counterbalance China's growing influence and inhibit China's naval entry into the Indian Ocean. Ironically, while India claims that engagement in the South China Sea issues is its "legitimate interest," it often criticizes China for cooperating with Indian Ocean countries in infrastructure-building and other economic affairs. Such debate is bound to continue as both China and India are highly sensitive to each other's strategic moves into their traditional "doorsteps."

At the same time, both the United States and India enjoy comparative strategic advantages over China in the Indian Ocean: compared with the United States, China is a weaker power; compared with India, China has a geographical disadvantage. U.S.-India relations began to warm up during the G.W. Bush era. Since then, the United States has regarded India not only as a partner in counter-terrorism, but also as a defender of the maritime transport line and an ideal partner to constrain China's growing influence. Thus, both countries have taken measures to intensify military cooperation by holding joint military exercises, signing agreements on arms sales, and sharing security information.¹⁴ Now that both countries share the strategic goal of balancing against China's rise, as evidenced in the emerging security arrangement among the United States, Japan, Australia and India (the "Quad" as it is called), as well as the latest U.S. National Security Strategy Report,¹⁵ China's maritime lifeline in the Indian Ocean is faced with greater challenges.

¹³He Ping, "Yinduhaijun yuanhaizuo zhannengli fazhan fenxi [An Analysis of the Development of India's Naval Combat Capabilities]," *Modern Military*, No. 2 (2015), p. 95.

¹⁴Iskander Rehman, "Keeping the Dragon at Bay: India's Counter-Containment of China in Asia," *Asian Security*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2009), p. 126.

¹⁵The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf>.

China’s Naval Build-up in the Indian Ocean: Past and Present

Both India and the United States acknowledge that they cannot match the pace of China’s increasing strategic influence in the Indian Ocean region given its expanding financial power at a time when all regional countries are in urgent need of funds and technologies for faster development.¹⁶ With the extension of the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road,” China is indeed bringing about fundamental changes to the past regional order; the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) also provides a more viable platform for financing infrastructure construction in Indian Ocean countries.

So far, China has developed robust trade relations with major Indian Ocean countries, though the total trade volume with some of these countries seem to have experienced a downturn in recent years due to the global economic slowdown (see Table 1).

In addition, China has forged a number of partnerships with regional countries, such as the “all-weather strategic partnership” with Pakistan, “comprehensive strategic partnerships” with Thailand, Myanmar,

Table 1. China’s Trade with Major Indian Ocean Countries (2013–2016) (in \$100 Million).

Country/Year	2016	2015	2014	2013
India	696.2 (↓1.7%)	708.3 (↓1.1%)	716.0 (↑8.6%)	659.5 (↓4.1%)
Sri Lanka	297.0 (↑1.6%)	292.2 (↓3.6%)	303.3 (↑11.9%)	270.9 (↓0.3%)
Indonesia	475.9 (↑7.0 %)	444.6 (↓7.1%)	482.3 (↓8.7%)	524.5 (↑2.7%)
Malaysia	581.1 (↓1.8%)	591.5 (↓6.9%)	635.3 (↓1.4%)	644.5 (↑10.1%)
Singapore	832.3 (↓7.3%)	898.2 (↓6.3%)	958.5 (↑4.1%)	920.6 (↑10.7%)
Thailand	658.4 (↑2.5%)	642.2 (↑1.4%)	633.6 (↓1.7%)	644.4 (↑0.5%)
Australia	1040.7 (↓2.8%)	1072.1 (↓15.9%)	1281.7 (↓5.9%)	1364.4 (↑12.3%)
Turkey	277.6 (↑1.9%)	272.4 (↓1.8%)	277.4 (↓2.1%)	283.2 (↑17.4%)
Egypt	88.6 (↓6.9%)	N/A	N/A	N/A
South Africa	204 (↓11.8%)	231.1 (↓4%)	240.8 (↓11.9%)	273 (↑10.4%)

Note: Here, Indian Ocean countries include such Pacific countries as Indonesia, Malaysia and Australia, as they all border the Indian Ocean.

Source: Country Trade Report, Ministry of Commerce of China.
<https://countryreport.mofcom.gov.cn/default.asp>.

¹⁶“Meiyin zai yinduyang shang tiaotange yinmei: yanjing dingzhezongguo [Tango of the U.S. and India on the Indian Ocean — Indian Media: Eyes on China],” *The Reference Network*, July 7, 2015, <http://www.cankaoxiaoxi.com/mil/20150707/841752.shtml>.

Table 2. China's Naval Vessel Deployment in the Indian Ocean, 2013–2017.

Time	Major Vessels Deployed
July 2017	Newest-type 052D destroyer, "Yuan" class conventional diesel-electric submarines, submarine support ship "Chongming Island," and ocean surveillance ship "Neptune"
2016	"Han" class nuclear submarine and a conventional submarine
July 2014	China's largest amphibious landing ship "Changbai Mountain," and two destroyers "Wuhan" and "Haikou"
December 2013–February 2014	"Shang" class nuclear-powered attack submarine and a "Song" class diesel-electric submarine

Source: Compiled by author.

Mozambique, and South Africa, as well as "strategic partnerships" with Sudan and Sri Lanka. In the meantime, China has begun to deploy naval vessels in the Indian Ocean region to secure its trade routes and for other non-military missions (see Table 2).

As its primary interest in the Indian Ocean is to ensure free and safe trade routes, including the crucial energy transport routes, China has no other choice but to build a blue-water navy that can support its expanding role in the region (specifically anti-piracy missions) and make sure that its trade routes, in particular the safe and free passage through the Strait of Malacca, are not subject to the caprice of any dominant power. In doing so, the Chinese government needs to continually increase its naval budget, enhance security engagement in the region, and strengthen political and economic ties with regional countries.

China is building a blue-water navy mainly to protect its sea routes for energy and trade.

Under the military concept of "building a blue-water navy," China has been readjusting and optimizing its military structure that used to prioritize the army. On September 3, 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced that China would cut 300,000 personnel from the troops. The disarmament mostly targeted the army, while the navy, air force, and the strategic missile

force would be further strengthened, marking one of the biggest military modernization steps of China since the end of the Cold War. Today, with

more high-tech vessels and weaponry in service, as well as a more efficient and comprehensive command system, the Chinese navy is playing an increasingly important part in safeguarding China's regional and global interests and facilitating the construction of the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road."

In fact, since the beginning of the 21st century, China's naval strength has been growing at a much faster pace than before, and its navy has begun to patrol in the Gulf of Aden, west of the Strait of Malacca, and other areas key to its trade route security, despite the fact that its logistic network in the Indian Ocean remains weak and fragile. The Chinese navy has conducted regular anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean since the later part of 2008, during which more than 10,000 naval troops are estimated to have been trained under the complicated far-sea circumstances.

On December 21–23, 2009, the first Chinese naval escort fleet called on the port of Aden in Yemen for supply of fuel, fresh water and food. Due to its strategic location, the port of Aden is an ideal staging area for the Chinese navy on its missions to the Gulf of Aden and the western Indian Ocean. From June 21 to July 1, 2009, another Chinese naval escort fleet called on the port of Salalah in Oman for supply. Since then, Chinese escort fleets have been calling on East African and Middle Eastern seaports regularly, providing more escort services for Chinese and international commercial vessels and humanitarian relief when necessary. The Chinese navy also often calls on Pakistan's Karachi Port, which is equipped with complete ship-building and repair facilities, especially when the navy conducts friendly visits to nearby countries or participates in regional naval exercises.

Again, it is worth noting that while steadily increasing its naval strength and presence in the Indian Ocean, China places great emphasis on promoting political and trade relations with regional countries. For example, China has been Oman's largest oil importer, importing more than 90 percent of Oman's oil; China and other Arab countries also enjoy closer relationships with ever more mutual trust. This is helpful for both sides to reach new agreements on China's naval port call and use of local ports for peaceful naval missions.

China's endeavor to expand its overseas naval bases has received much international attention in recent years. Indeed, China has begun such

efforts by enhancing commercial relations with countries along the Indian Ocean shipping lanes, such as Pakistan and Cambodia, usually through building new commercial ports or renovating existing ports. These ports are developed as commercial investment projects and operated by Chinese enterprises. Reaping economic benefits, the host countries would allow Chinese naval vessels to use those ports for supply and other naval operations.

At present, China has developed a series of “pearls” — ports along the Indian Ocean trade routes — that include the Chittagong Port of Bangladesh, the Sittwe Port and Coco Islands of Myanmar, the Hambantota Port of Sri Lanka, the Pakistani Port of Gwadar, and Tanzania's Bagamoyo Port. These moves have increasingly upset India, which is keeping a close eye on China's stronger political, economic and naval presence in its neighborhood. More importantly, because those ports are not official naval bases, India and other countries can hardly find a legitimate cause to protest.¹⁷

Admittedly, a country's naval strength should extend to where its commercial interests are. Given its increasing political, economic and strategic interests in the Indian Ocean, China needs to increase its security presence in the region to safeguard its legitimate rights and interests and, in particular, to be able to neutralize hostile situations at critical times. The reality, however, is that China's naval power has long been lagging behind its strategic needs.

China's naval presence can barely meet its growing interest in the Indian Ocean.

According to a report by the U.S. Defense Department, the Chinese navy had developed the capacity to deploy 10 battle-ships, one attack submarine and one supply ship in the Indian Ocean by 2014. In that year, China also deployed a Han-class attack submarine and a Song-class diesel-electric submarine in the region, all of which aimed to protect China's sea lanes and enhance

¹⁷“Zhongguo dazao lanshuihaijun: liyong yinduyangshanggang xingjian bujijian [China Building Blue Water Navy: Using the Indian Ocean Commercial Ports to Build a Supply Ship],” *The Reference Network*, November 5, 2014, <http://mil.cankaoxiaoxi.com/2014/1105/554097.shtml>.

China's security presence in the Indian Ocean.¹⁸ Yet, as this is China's only fleet in the region, the Chinese navy finds it very difficult to fulfill comprehensive goals other than the missions of escorting the convoy and evacuation of overseas Chinese in special circumstances. Despite the fact that China has placed much closer heed to security threats on the western Pacific, the most challenging being potential military conflicts across the Taiwan Strait as well as in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, it is time for the Chinese navy to move westward to the Indian Ocean with bigger steps.

Indeed, by 2008, China had expanded the South China Sea Fleet by deploying the latest battleships and transferring nuclear submarines from the North Sea Fleet, whose defense zone covers the Bohai Sea and the Yellow Sea to the northeast and mid-China. Strengthening the South China Sea Fleet would give China better options in the event of potential blockade from hostile navies in time of military confrontation; it would also enable China to implement economic blockade on target territories if necessary — especially when the South China Sea Fleet is joined by the East China Sea Fleet, whose defense zone covers the East Sea as well as parts of the Yellow Sea and the South China Sea. As disputes over South China Sea islands are quieting down, the South China Sea Fleet would be able to deploy more ships to the Indian Ocean for various missions.

It is no secret that China is building battleships over 7,000 tons at an unprecedented rate. Between 2010 and 2015, a total of 12 Type 052D destroyers were in service or under construction, with a total tonnage of 84,000, most of which were deployed to the South China Sea Fleet. Since 2003, 6 Type 052C destroyers with a total of 38,400 tons have been deployed. In addition, the Chinese navy boasts 18 "Aegis"-class missile destroyers today. Apart from the 70,000-ton "Liaoning" aircraft carrier, China is building its first carrier in Dalian as well. It is commonly estimated that the next one to two decades will witness an even more ambitious ship-building plan by the Chinese navy, which would allow it to surpass Britain, France, Japan, and Russia in total tonnage, ranking only after the United

¹⁸Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2015* (Washington, D. C.: U.S. Department of Defense, September 2015, p. 27, http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2015_China_Military_Power_Report.pdf.

States. By the general standard of an aircraft carrier fleet (one carrier escorted by 4 "Aegis"-class missile destroyers as well as 4 to 6 Type 054A/B missile frigates), China is on its way to building four or five carrier fleets by 2035.¹⁹

China aims to build four to five carrier fleets in the next two decades.

China's massive ship-building plan indicates that the Chinese navy has a greater ambition than to fulfill escort tasks in the so-called first and second "island chains"; it may create China's fourth fleet aimed at missions on the Indian Ocean — the Indian

Ocean Fleet or the Open Seas Fleet. According to a researcher with the Global Security Team at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) in Switzerland, the new fleet may eventually consist of two aircraft carrier battle groups, the home port of which will be located in Hainan Island. The fleet could be under the direct leadership of the Central Military Commission (CMC), China's top military decision-making body. Aircraft carriers will form the core of the fleet, as they have a smaller role in the western Pacific due to their vulnerabilities to potential threats from the overwhelming naval power of the United States and its allies.²⁰ As the main value of aircraft carriers lies in their psychological impact rather than military functions, the Indian Ocean should be an ideal place to deploy those carriers to demonstrate China's strong stand in safeguarding its national interest and providing international security public goods.

Forging a Naval Base Network in the Indian Ocean

The Chinese navy used Sri Lanka's Colombo Port, a key supply point in the middle of the Indian Ocean, for the first time in 1985. Afterwards, China helped Sri Lanka to build the Hambantota Port and provided military aid for combating the anti-government Tamil Tigers. However, China has had

¹⁹"Hanhe: zhongguohaijun zaojianqianlijingren huoyuanyuanshuaikai yingfari [Kanwa: China's Naval Vessel-Building Capacity Is Amazing and May Far Outpace Britain, France and Japan]," *The Reference Network*, July 31, 2015, <http://www.cankaoxiaoxi.com/mil/20150731/872764.shtml>.

²⁰Prem Mahadevan, "China in the Indian Ocean: Part of a Larger PLAN," *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, No. 156, June 2014.

no formal naval base in the Indian Ocean, which greatly limits the role of the Chinese navy. If a foreign port is closed for political or other reasons, the Chinese navy will not be able to sustain large numbers of battleships far from home.

One way to overcome this weakness is by building more supply ships. The search for the missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 in early 2014 is a case in point. During the early days of the search mission, China sent 24 naval vessels and support ships to the southern Indian Ocean, but due to the shortage of support ships and because it could not secure access to nearby Australian ports, those vessels could only stay in the search area for a limited period of time.²¹ Since then, China has begun to build more Type 903 supply ships to provide longer hours of support for its fleet.²² However, supply ship building can only serve as an expediency because it is both time-consuming and expensive, and there are many limitations to supply ships as well.

As China strengthens contact with littoral countries along the "Maritime Silk Road," it is tapping into its growing economic appeal and maritime power to foster a naval base network in the Indian Ocean. In recent years, China has invested tremendously in building port facilities in such countries as Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, and has increased various maritime links with the Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius.

In April 2017, China was granted permission of 40 years' operation in Gwadar Port in southwestern Pakistan, which has long been regarded by some Western observers as a "Chinese version of Gibraltar."²³ The port is close to the Strait of Hormuz that witnesses a third of the world's crude oil supply passage each year. The Pakistani government has expressed its hope to make Gwadar the western end of an economic corridor and an energy pipeline stretching into China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, which would enable China's oil imports from the Middle East and Africa to bypass

²¹"Meimeicheng MH370 baolu zhongguohaijun yanzhongbuzu mianlinyanzhongweixie [U.S. Media Say MH370 Indicates Fatal Weaknesses of the Chinese Navy under Serious Threats]," *Huanqiu*, May 1, 2014, <http://mil.huanqiu.com/observation/2014-05/4985127.html>.

²²"Zhongguo dazao lanshuihaijun: liyong yinduyangshanggang xingjian bujijian."

²³Daniel Kostecka, "The Chinese Navy's Emerging Support System," Jamestown China Brief, July 23, 2010, http://www.ocnus.net/artman2/publish/Defence_Arms.13/The-Chinese-Navy-s-Emerging-Support-Network_printer.shtml.

the Malacca Strait. Nonetheless, even if China manages to secure the right to use Gwadar as a naval base so as to enhance its strategic reach, the Chinese navy will still face the challenge of the overwhelming naval power of the United States for lack of land-based defense support. Besides, it cannot help reduce China's vulnerability to an energy embargo imposed through the Strait of Hormuz in time of military confrontation.

Djibouti Port on the east coast of Africa can serve as an important base for the Chinese navy on its escort missions in the Gulf of Aden. Though China and the Djibouti government are negotiating the possibility for China to use the port as a naval base, the Chinese navy will have to cope with other naval powers in the region, in particular the United States and France. Japan also signed an agreement with Djibouti in April 2009, by which Japanese naval vessels and aircrafts patrolling at the Gulf of Aden can dock at Djibouti Port.

China should seek to develop some of the existing logistic sites into naval bases in the Indian Ocean.

At present, most of the Indian Ocean ports open to the Chinese navy provide supplies and other services on a purely business model. Thus China needs to make more effort to negotiate with related countries on using their ports as reliable supply bases, in order to secure necessary supply locations in the Indian Ocean.²⁴ As predicted by the U.S. Defense Department, to expand

its power and logistics networks in the Indian Ocean region, China may establish access points or supply bases in the region in the following decade, possibly by signing agreements with related countries on providing the Chinese navy with fuel, supply, personnel services and low-level maintenance.²⁵

Based on the concept of "geostrategic parity," China believes that it has equal rights with the United States to develop overseas military bases, given that the United States keeps hundreds of them around the world. Certainly, China has already built a network of quasi-bases along the

²⁴"Zhongguohaijun yinduyanghouqinbujizwangluo chuxianchuxing [The Chinese Navy's Indian Ocean Logistics Network Begins to Emerge]," *Global Military*, No. 8 (2010), pp. 28–29.

²⁵Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2015*.

northern edge of the Indian Ocean to protect its commercial sea-lanes. However, this is interpreted by some observers as China's strategy to dominate the region by grasping the "String of Pearls," a term used by American consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton in 2005 to suggest that China would keep on expanding its strategic footprints in the Indian Ocean under the guise of infrastructure building along the ocean edges — China may seek to reach tacit agreement with the ruling elites of local governments out of pragmatism rather than principle, to build port facilities for dual uses and gradually develop the ports into its naval bases.²⁶ To address the concerns of existing naval powers and regional countries, China has proposed the initiative to build the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road," which is aimed to strengthen the interconnectivity between the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean for common economic and social benefits of the whole region. However, with increasing overseas interests to protect, China has been determined to enhance its naval strength and implement a blue-ocean strategy to expand its naval presence in the Indian Ocean; fostering a naval base network in the region would prove completely necessary to meet that goal.

Conclusion

To sum up, China's large-scale involvement in the Indian Ocean will quietly reconstruct the power relationship of the region. With the new initiative of the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road," China is seeking more security presence in the region with growing political, economic and military influence, in order to safeguard its legitimate rights and interests, as well as to provide more security public goods for regional countries.

With the expanding interests of emerging powers and the potential withdrawal of U.S. commitment to regional security under President Trump's "America First" doctrine, freedom of navigation in the vast expanse of waters of the Indian Ocean should not and cannot be under the exclusive protection of the United States. Neither should the Indian Ocean be regarded as India's "sphere of influence," although India's special concern and interests should by all means be respected. In fact, China, the

²⁶Benjamin David Baker, "Where is the 'String of Pearls' in 2015?," *The Diplomat*, October 5, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/10/where-is-the-string-of-pearls-in-2015/>.

United States, India and other naval powers should try to reach an agreement similar to the *Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits* in 1936, which allows each party to protect the legitimate rights and interests of their own without harming those of other parties, so as to achieve peace and neutralization of all open seas in the Indian Ocean.