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**To cite this article:** Dhanwati Yadav (2019) Complexity to compatibility: Sino-Indian bilateralism concerning maritime security, *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India*, 15:2, 113-133, DOI: [10.1080/09733159.2020.1714265](https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2020.1714265)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2020.1714265>



Published online: 04 Feb 2020.



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## Complexity to compatibility: Sino-Indian bilateralism concerning maritime security

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### ABSTRACT

In global politics, the relations between India and China have long been branded by the countries' customary rivalry. Bitterness and resentment between the two came to the fore with the exile of Dalai Lama to India in 1959. Subsequent to this episode, the Sino-Indian war of 1962 further exacerbated their already strained ties. The continued border dispute, much importantly added fuel to fire. Altercations in their relations, thus are yet not extinguished. In the twenty-first century, when these Asian giants are putting forward their soft power together with military muscle through economic persuasion, the waters of the Indian Ocean are sponsoring economic and geo-strategic conflicts between the two. "India's participation in the new alliance formed in the maritime domain whereas could cause increasing insecurities to Beijing, Beijing's unregulated assertiveness through monetary aids along with modernized naval tactics is also viewed to have escalated India's security concerns". The global powers when examine such bilateral equation with probabilities of drawing complexities, cooperation between the two, in the form of an unprecedented "maritime dialogue", demonstrate their unabated commitment to ensure maritime security while pursuing their geo-strategic ambitions in the region. Developments of this kind can help promote regional peace as well.

### KEYWORDS

Economy; geo-strategy; India; China; Indian Ocean; maritime dialogue

The paper attempts to identify the potential scope and rationality of the "Sino-Indian Maritime Dialogue" as well as future prospects of maritime cooperation between the two countries, introducing various divergences and commonalities in their bilateral ties in the background.

### Historical background of India–China relations

The relations between India and China started on a promising note. Culturally, the influence of Buddhism was such that nearly all people of China had embraced this religion. Even Buddhist monks in India were migrating to China. The cultural affinity between the two countries does not stop there, and one can easily find mention of China in the Indian epic, *Mahabharata*. Commonalities expand here and we find India and China to be two of the oldest civilisations of the world.<sup>1</sup>

It was under the leadership of Nehru in 1950 when India envisioned China as the future third great power, and both countries founded their diplomatic relations. Despite a difference in their political ideologies, both countries developed a good level of understanding with the aim of deepening their bilateral engagements. India, notably, became the first non-communist country to set up its embassy in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and later emerged as first in terms of recognising Tibet as part of the PRC and supporting its "One China Policy".<sup>2</sup> However, tensions began to increase dramatically between them. What disturbed their ties was the departure of a sizeable number of Tibetans to India. When Tibet became subject to China, India opted to harbour the Dalai Lama and other Buddhist followers in Tibet. This sparked angst in China.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the breaching of terms by China, which were bilaterally set up under the Panchsheel Agreement, were seen by India as a setback. The occupation of Tibet by China converted the Himalayan region into a "zone of conflict".<sup>4</sup> Soon, the inaugural bilateral amity slipped into deep waters. Since then, their bilateral relations have been flipping between greetings and deadlocks. China expects unambiguous support from India to its "One China Policy", however, it rebuffs India's demand to recognise its "One India Policy".

### **Divergences in bilateral ties**

From the farthest north to the north-east extremity of India, China's activities in the region have always been viewed by India with scepticism. India has toiled hard in order to resolve the dispute with its immediate neighbour – Pakistan – over Kashmir, through bilateral talks, and it has never allowed any third party mediation in the matter.<sup>5</sup> China had been heard on multiple occasions saying that the "Kashmir issue should be resolved bilaterally by India and Pakistan." In contrast, however, it has also been heard calling Kashmir dispute an international issue. Pakistan, for decades now, has aspired to make the Kashmir dispute a multilateral issue; for India this would not work. China's supply of heavy weapons to Pakistan over decades, and its recent aid of \$6 billion to the country, launching the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) under the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative in 2015, all point to China's overt inclination for Pakistan. However, its stand on issues crucial to India – including the recently concluded Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), India's fight with Pakistan against terrorism and India's continued quest for a permanent seat in the UNSC<sup>6</sup> – is a clear projection of using a double-sided sword to win self-interest. History has witnessed how Pakistan ceded a huge portion of western Kashmir to China in 1963, which helped China enhance its strategic hold in the region, especially as it had already occupied the Aksai Chin part of the eastern Kashmir in the wake of the Sino-Indian war of 1962. China seeks to keep its authority alive in Aksai Chin as it considers this territory strategically highly valuable. India, on the other hand, regularly lays claims on these territories. It is objectionable to India that "around 20 percent of Kashmir is under de-facto control of China," especially given the fact that China's autonomous state of Xinjiang and Tibet are very much instrumental in stretching its influence in Central and South Asia.<sup>7</sup>

China has long been engaged in another contradictory territorial claim, over Arunachal Pradesh. It is critically observed that world maps, which are printed outside China, have

not displayed Arunachal Pradesh as its territory. It is so deplorable to China that it has so far destroyed 30,000 such maps.<sup>8</sup> India constantly views the presence of the Chinese military along its border as a potential threat to its country's peace and stability.

A reporter, Hu Weijia with the *Global Times*, writes, "Given the massive investment that China has made in countries along the OBOR, China now has a vested interest in helping resolve regional conflicts including the dispute over Kashmir between India and Pakistan." China has enormous commercial and strategic interest in Pakistan as well as geopolitical objectives in Kashmir.<sup>9</sup> The episode of Chinese mediation between Myanmar and Bangladesh over the Rohingya crisis also signals that it seeks to secure its overseas investment in Rakhine state (Kyaukpyu oil and gas pipeline to Kunming in China).<sup>10</sup> The Myanmar oil and gas pipeline is one of the major Chinese projects in Myanmar to meet China's energy needs. It cautiously wants to achieve a win-win outcome. In view of these economic compulsions, one might acknowledge China's intentions to play a constructive role in bringing stability to the region; however, to India these efforts are seemingly more destructive, as its interests are not aligned with China's developmental agenda.



Source: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/China-Myanmar-Economic-Corridors-2.png>, (accessed 25 November 2019).

Earlier, by establishing its presence in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Maldives under its deliberate strategy of "String of Pearls", China had aimed to encircle India and hijack its traditional clout in the region.<sup>11</sup> And, in recent times, the start of its CPEC project has become a bone of contention between both countries. China is continuously working in Pakistan on infrastructure projects. It is constructing a road to connect its Xinjiang province with Pakistan's Gwadar port.<sup>12</sup> Completion of this project would facilitate China importing oil from the Middle East to Gwadar port, avoiding around 15000 km of the long sea route, and from there the oil could be supplied to the mainland through roads and railroads that are currently under construction in Pakistan. Since the CPEC project runs through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), which includes the territory of Gilgit-Balitistan – usually considered by India as its territory – India believes the project significantly violates its sovereignty.<sup>13</sup> Currently, the Chinese presence

is calculated to be for commercial reasons, although it has been thought that China could construct a naval port there in the future to conduct naval patrolling in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).<sup>14</sup> It is strongly believed that, in the future, Chinese and Pakistani naval forces could come together to work in the region; this would certainly bring enormous challenges to India. The volley of criticisms constitutes the stand of India against the OBOR initiative amidst China's efforts to gain support from other developing countries.

Differences between the two countries are also marked in the maritime domain. While the application of economic diplomacy in view of its OBOR initiative has earned China a lot of influence in and around the Indian Ocean region, the critical role of the South China Sea (SCS) in further advancing that influence should not be negated.<sup>15</sup> China's increasing assertiveness in the SCS has prompted some victim countries of South East Asia, such as Vietnam, to call on India to install its naval presence in the SCS. Simultaneously, China strictly condemns any such presence and claim the waters of SCS through its nine dash line.<sup>16</sup> It is also found opposing India's oil and gas exploration activities undertaken by the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) in the area of SCS, claimed by Vietnam as its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).<sup>17</sup> China's position is often criticised by India and other big powers, referring to its tendency to violate the 1982 UNCLOS treaty that allows free navigation in the waters. In like manner, China's "passive aggressive steps" can also be seen in the Indian Ocean. Although China does acknowledge India's special role in stabilising the IOR, it categorically opposes the Indian Ocean as India's backyard. Brahma (2015) argues that China may use a new saying, "Your sea is our sea but my sea is my sea," contextualising the Indian Ocean to expand its maritime might.

The gradual stretching of power by China in the IOR via combining soft power diplomacy and strategy to boost defence cooperation with the littorals could affect India's conventional relations with them. Construction of overseas bases, deepening of economic and defence engagements with the island countries and maximisation of naval forays by China, are all posing important diverse threats to India in terms of its geo-strategic interests and security. China has already secured its first overseas military base in Djibouti, located in the eastern part of the African continent.<sup>18</sup> It is also importing goodwill from the Seychelles and other island nations through boosting its defence capabilities. In 2013, China was reported as pledging to reinforce its military ties with the Seychelles island. Senior officials of both China and the Seychelles had expressed interest in pushing forward their bilateral ties.<sup>19</sup> Discussion on how to enhance bilateral cooperation with the Seychelles in the field of defence was also pursued in 2016 when General Wang Guanzhong visited the island.<sup>20</sup> About 1969 km from the Seychelles, in Mauritius, China's increasing influence cannot be taken for granted. Mauritius has been an important bulwark in India's maritime strategy besides being the closest ally of India in the IOR. However, the evolving ties between China and Mauritius can supposedly give tough competition to India's advanced position. With Mauritius – "the key star in the Indian Ocean" – China's relation is not confined to the economic sphere and it has even offered small and heavy military weapons to Mauritius. Acceptance of such proposals by Mauritius would undoubtedly stir, if not completely derail, India's privileged position in the Indian Ocean. The Indian PM Narendra Modi's visit to three island nations, Sri-Lanka, Seychelles and Mauritius, in 2015 was also reportedly aimed to counter the growing influence of China among small island nations.<sup>21</sup>

Divergence between India and China can also be traced back to their colonial days. India and China have both been the victims of colonialism. While India highly condemns colonialism at regional as well as international levels, China apparently accommodates a colonial mindset while practising foreign relations. Questions are also being raised about whether China is the world's new colonial power.<sup>22</sup>

### **Congruencies in bilateral ties**

India and China are two powerful emerging countries. Although China is economically a giant, both wish to have their traces, imprints, and connections in as many countries as possible. Although at face value they seem diametrically opposite, both states' goal is to expand power and influence. Since both want to demonstrate their prowess and superiority or capability to developing and underdeveloped countries, they are bound to move diplomatically, strategically supposedly "hand in hand" for the outer world but with hidden agenda to show transparency both are contributing massively in the region.

However, both do not wish to take their differences to the point where ties freeze forever. Despite huge contradictions, the scope for cooperation between India and China cannot be sidelined. Bilateral economic cooperation, using trade as a potential tool over their economic competition, has set an example before the world. The enhancement of existing economic ties could also help China minimise its setback caused by trade war with the U.S. India and China enjoy a diversified engagement in the economic sphere and their economic ties have grown robustly over the decades. India is recorded as having experienced a trade deficit in its economic relationship with China but regular growth in their bilateral trade reveals their unabated interest in carrying forward their commercial ties. India's trade with China is reportedly "greater than that with Japan, the US and the entire world." Ninety-eight percent of Indian companies working in China have shown an interest in making investments there this year. According to a survey of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), bilateral economic ties between India and China will continue to grow.<sup>23</sup>

In the year 2000, bilateral trade was reported to be less than \$3 billion, which later grew to roughly \$66 billion in 2012 and further reached \$100 billion in 2015. In order to overcome the trade deficit, India is regularly putting pressure on China so as to enter into its IT and pharmaceutical industries. India and China both are member countries of the BRICS group of emerging economies. India was also one of the founding members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a multilateral development bank that was proposed by Xi Jinping in October 2013. Both sides are also providing cooperation under the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which is a multinational body to address political, economic and military affairs. China had welcomed India's inclusion in the group as a full member. Becoming a part of the SCO was expected to provide India with greater access to oil and gas exploration projects in Central Asia.<sup>24</sup> Both India and China advocate democratisation of international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, etc. Another area of cooperation was observed in the WTO. In 2015, during WTO talks, India and China, having joined hands, had vehemently demanded the developed countries led by the U.S. focus on the Doha development agenda (which was proposed to "respond to trade and development interests of developing

members and redress the imbalances codified in the rules resulting from the previous rounds of talks”) and not to distract the discussion by other issues.<sup>25</sup> China and India are both also members of the G-20 grouping. In addition, in the UN Summits on the environment, India and China have coordinated their strategies on the pretext of being targeted by the criticism of the U.S. and its allies.

As far as their bilateral cooperation in the context of the Indian Ocean is concerned, China has called on India for joint mining of the Indian Ocean. While activities related to mineral exploration in the Indian Ocean is at an all-time high, “China is eager to cooperate with India on deep seabed mining,” says the China Ocean Mineral Resource R&D Association, as quoted by the *China Daily*. The deputy director of the association, He Zongyu, calling India an ideal partner, stated that “China and India are both developing countries and contractors with the International Seabed Authority (ISA) so we have a lot in common and plenty of opportunities for further cooperation”.<sup>26</sup> The opening of the maritime dialogue between the two can be considered as a continual reflection of the same cooperation in the maritime domain.

### **Evolution of maritime cooperation in Sino-Indian bilateralism**

There is no doubt that Sino-Indian cooperation can potentially mitigate the rising challenges at sea, but what needs to be underlined is how long this cooperation will last and how effective it will be. The “Panchsheel” Agreement of 1954 between India and China, which entailed friendship and cooperation and other bilateral treaties to promote mutual security, peace and tranquillity, as in 1993 and 1996, could not draw much in terms of expanding mutualism and endearment between the two countries. Rather, China has evidenced a more coercive behaviour in its dealings with India by deploying military-engineering assets on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and furthering its engagement with Pakistan.<sup>27</sup>

China’s summons to India for cooperation has historically been rare and a part of its planned strategy, but their clubbing together in the maritime domain has attracted greater global attention as well as reflecting their common interests. It is belatedly a positive start in their engagements which might crucially help meet their respective national interests encompassing maritime objectives. The inaugural “Maritime Cooperation Dialogue” between India and China, which happened in 2016 to firmly address maritime security issues in the Indo-Pacific area has gained initial success, paving the way to the second such meeting of a uniform nature in 2018, in which broad discussions on maritime affairs such as the blue economy, maritime cooperation and further deepening of practical cooperation were made.<sup>28</sup>

This development is noted for the first time since Modi advocated India’s policy on the Indo-Pacific region amidst the steady ascendancy of China’s power projection and its influence in the South and East China Seas.<sup>29</sup> During the dialogue, the Indian side detailed India’s vision for the Indo-Pacific area as highlighted by the Prime Minister Modi at the Shangrila-La Dialogue in Singapore. Both sides equally emphasised the essence of this dialogue and considered it an important mechanism in their bilateral relations for consultations over maritime issues. They also agreed that maritime cooperation should be further strengthened, which in turn can possibly advance their mutual political and strategic trust. While concluding their talk, both India and China showed a keen interest in holding the

next round of the dialogue at some mutually decided time in India.<sup>30</sup> Somen Banerjee asserts that India and China being the emerging powers of the world, their cooperation can transform maritime governance to the extent of reinstating what has been lost and rejuvenating what is left.<sup>31</sup> But continuity in the dialogue is a must in order to attain the appointed goals.

### **Questioning the significance of “Sino-Indian maritime dialogue”**

Dialogues, meetings or forums hold certain purposes and play a critical part in resolving complexities and improving relations at bilateral or multilateral levels. Against this consideration, the “Maritime Dialogue” held between India and China is hypothesised to serve certain objectives. This unprecedented maritime dialogue can be said to be significant owing to three geo-strategic factors, identified as follows.

#### ***To protect multiple geostrategic interests in the IOR***

The phrase “better late than never” best suits the ongoing maritime rapprochement between India and China. This newly-manifested interface does not lead one to assume a competition-less alliance of India and China in the Indo-Pacific region, and, indeed, their cooperation is predicted to be running parallel to their existing race to overtake each other. Races and contests in the Indian Ocean have long not been an unusual matter, however equations comprising cooperation and coordination have remained a pivotal subject in global peace and security. When we discuss maritime perspectives concerning security content we find an enormity of parallelism between countries. The same can be applied to India and China with reference to the IOR where both possess, to a considerable extent, common interests and woes; the security of their energy needs, protection of the Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs) along the strategic choke points in the IOR, expansion of their individual spheres of influence and emergence as a dominant sea power.<sup>32</sup> In order to resultantly maximise their individual influence and power outreach beyond the Asian continent, policies are being redesigned by both, concentrating on how to enhance their energy, trade, human, military and territorial security. “Security” and “Power” are two faces of the same card and fall under the most prominent subjects in the global politics. The occurrence of “maritime dialogue” does not necessarily mean that the duo, India and China, have stopped circumscribing each other’s influence and forays in the IOR. However, their strategic convergence might give a push factor in achieving their desired economic ambitions by jointly safeguarding the SLOCs in the Indian Ocean. The SLOCs carry equal dependency for India and China since protected SLOCs can ensure sustainable energy supply and unrestricted flow of trade, resulting in economic prosperity of both countries.<sup>33</sup>

Sea has been the ultimate source for mollifying India’s and China’s hunger for oil. Much of China’s oil is brought through tankers from the Persian Gulf, crossing the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca. In order to guard the SLOCs and other geo-political ambitions, China has multiplied its endeavours by augmenting military activities and naval forays in the region. Putten et al. says

China has major interests in the region, in particular its access to raw materials in the Middle East and Africa, and to markets there and in Europe. Beijing may therefore, be expected to continue its present policy of building up strong diplomatic and economic influence throughout the Indian Ocean. It is also likely to happen that the Chinese military will continue to develop its regional presence against the backdrop of growing non-traditional security threats.<sup>34</sup>

The Indian Ocean carries immense potential for India as well for a variety of reasons. The issue of energy security in the IOR, similar to China, occupies a key place in India's Indian Ocean policy. India is heavily reliant upon energy imports. Of the total energy imports of India, approximately 80 percent navigates through the Indian Ocean using different channels.<sup>35</sup> In the post-Cold War era, India has enthusiastically endeavoured to integrate with the world through regional maritime cooperation. Regional trading blocs have thus acted favourably as stimulators to meet India's aspiration. In this context, the legacy interest of India in regional organisations such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is largely understood. Marking the increasing importance of the Indian Ocean for India, Prime Minister Modi says,

For us, it also serves as a strategic bridge with the nations in our immediate and extended maritime neighbourhood. In March last year in Mauritius, I had spelt out our vision for the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean Region is one of my foremost policy priorities. Our approach is evident in our vision of "Sagar", which means ocean and stands for Security and Growth for all in the region.<sup>36</sup>

As India claims the Indian Ocean as India's ocean, it assumes a responsive and legitimate role in maintaining security and peace in the region and its vicinity. India's notion of the Monroe Doctrine categorically discourages the ingress of illegitimate actors and their interference in the Indian Ocean.<sup>37</sup> Being a legitimate part of the Indian Ocean, India embraces responsibility to pacify conflicting situations arising in the region and is committed towards sustaining peace and stability (Table 1).

### ***Bilateral response better checks potential maritime threats***

Their multiple interests are well elaborated above, but in the wake of increasing maritime risks and insecurity it is doubtful those interests will be secured for long by both sides. The unprecedented dialogue was held after factoring in substantial maritime threats dwelling in the IOR and their lasting impacts on the ocean economy of both India and China as well as on their security structure in the region and its surrounding waters. As per the reports, in May 2011, an Indian warship undertaking an indigenous operation rescued a Chinese

**Table 1.** Classical Attempts by India to Establish Peace in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Peacemaker country	Country in crisis	Year of operation	Operations
India	Mauritius	1983	"Operation Lal Dora"
India	Seychelles	1986	"Operation Flowers are Blooming"
India	Sri Lanka	1987	"Operation Pawan"
India	Maldives	1988	"Operation Cactus"
India	Yemen	2015	"Operation Rahat"

Source: <https://usiofindia.org/publication/usi-journal/chinas-energy-diplomacy-and-changing-contours-of-security-structure-in-the-indian-ocean-new-scramble-for-sea-power/> (accessed 3 January 2020).

cargo ship from Somali pirates.<sup>38</sup> Piracy is a constant predicament that inflicts heavy economic and human costs. Maritime piracy and maritime terrorism have become potential challenges to global shipping. Apart from these problems at sea, weapons, drugs and human trafficking also have a maritime dimension.<sup>39</sup>

The number of incidents concerning maritime terrorism are reportedly fewer than land-based terrorist incidents but their far-reaching implications on international security and global economies are profound and inevitable. Terrorism has remained a critical subject in world history but it has engaged the global community post 9/11 in the U.S. and 26/11 in Mumbai in an unprecedented manner. The promotion of terrorist activities is a threat to human security, which can be felt in the maritime domain as well. Maritime terrorism is defined as launching violent attacks directed towards people, ships, vessels, ports, or other installations at sea to achieve certain political, religious and ideological ambitions. Earlier, while maritime terrorism followed a paradigm of hijacking and, importantly, hostage-taking for political ends, in the initial years of the twenty-first century it was dominated by suicide attacks on vessels. Out of 44 terrorists groups, ten have significant maritime capabilities as per U.S. Department of State's Country Reports on Terrorism 2009.<sup>40</sup> These groups are: al-Qaeda, Abu Nidal Organization, Abu Sayyaf Group, Basque Fatherland and Liberty, Hamas, Hizbollah, Jemaah Islamiya, Lashkar e-Tayyiba, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (currently defunct) and the Palestine Liberation Front – Abu Abbas Faction. Insecurity against maritime terrorism was particularly felt in January 2000 when the U.S. Navy discovered an al-Qaeda terrorist group in a shipping container. While the U.S. continues its search for outfits such as al-Qaeda who sponsor terror on land, the prospect of terrorising the shipping routes has ceaselessly threatened peace on the high seas. After the 26/11 terrorist attack, Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs) and territorial waters have become one of the focused areas of naval forces of many countries.

Asal Victor and Justin V. in their work – “Terror at Sea: Exploring Maritime Targeting by Terrorist Organizations” stress that a proliferation in maritime attacks might have a cascading effect on global maritime trade while disturbing global peace and security. Al-Qaeda exhibited its maritime terrorist capabilities in the year 2004 when it attacked a small boat launched from the USS *Firebolt* in the Persian Gulf. Such attacks, as a part of al-Qaeda's strategy, were planned to attack Western maritime targets, in particular those that had economic importance.<sup>41</sup> Terrorism and piracy have together made the IOR exceedingly insecure. The Indian Ocean is a centre of economic growth for global economies since it has some of the most important choke points of the world, including the Straits of Hormuz, Straits of Malacca, Lombok and the Sunda Straits. Article 101 of the 1982 United Nations Law of the Sea defines the term “piracy” as,

any illegal acts of violence or detention, or any act of depredation, committed for private ends by the crew or the passengers of a private ship or a private aircraft, and directed: (i) on the high seas, against another ship or aircraft, or against persons or property on board such ship or aircraft; (ii) against a ship, aircraft, persons or property in a place outside the jurisdiction of any State.

According to the report of International Chamber of Commerce's (ICC) International Maritime Bureau (IMB), a total number of 180 incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ships in the year 2017 have been reported.<sup>42</sup>

Some natural factors responsible for increased piracy threats in the contemporary times are: Seaborne commercial traffic, regional financial crisis, complexities attached to maritime surveillance. Many countries that are politically unstable have caused non-conventional security challenges such as maritime terrorism, drug trafficking as well as human trafficking. The security situation in this context is extremely precarious along the Horn of Africa. Hence, instability taking place in some of the littoral and hinterland states in the Indian Ocean and its vicinity is also counted as having contributed to the regional insecurity in the Indian Ocean.<sup>43</sup> The fragile polity resulting in instability and violence gradually constructs a fertile floor sprouting sea-based terrorist activities and maritime piracy.<sup>44</sup> Violent insurgency has threatened the political stability of the entire region that has eventually become a profound source of insecurity for ordinary people. As per the report of the World Food Programme (WFP), over 400,000 citizens were found internally displaced in Yemen's war-torn northern region alone.<sup>45</sup> As the insecurity increased, they left for adjacent high seas in order to gain illicit income by way of piracy.<sup>46</sup> All in all, similarities have been noticed between piracy and maritime terrorism, especially concerning the ways both are conducted. The important characteristic that marks a difference between maritime piracy and terrorism is the "goal". The pirates attack vessels and conduct this illegal activity to ask for ransom to help them to get rid of financial traumas, whereas terrorist groups attack in order to promote terror and fear. Both are conducted to achieve certain private ends.

Against the emergence of such a critical scenario, both India and China, being among the greatest civilisations of the world and emerging global powers, secure a special role to be played for ensuring maritime security. Their evolving cooperation will not merely be securing their blue economy plus additional strategic interests but also be providing a safety platform to global economies by checking increasing maritime threats in the region.

### ***Mitigation of regional tension and promotion of peace and stability***

Differences and associated skirmishes between countries, whether in the name of war of words or virtual military conflict, create socio-economic and political disorder jeopardising regional peace, and, if it continues for a reasonable period of time, it might affect global peace as well. The inevitable consequences of the Cold War between the then most powerful actors – the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. cannot be forgotten in this regard. The prolonged political and strategic warfare between the two for the sake of their respective interests triggered immense geopolitical tension and became the greatest threat to world peace, killing millions in Asia, Africa and Latin America.<sup>47</sup> Time cannot change history but it will be wise if the world averts such misfortune at the very beginning. It is no exaggeration to guess at a similar future conflict between India and China given their sharp rivalry. Further, it can be gauged from the fact that both Asian giants, like the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., seek to expand their clout, power and dominance on land and water across the world. The Indian Ocean, which had an extremely prominent role in the Cold War period, has already induced the "Neo-Cold War" in the twenty-first century between the U.S., India and China.<sup>48</sup> India and China are both obtaining unprecedented economic and military muscle and, combining these two matrixes, both are being eyed by the world as two emerging hegemonies of the twenty-first century.<sup>49</sup>

What differentiates them is their individual approach to attaining this strategic ambition. China, on various occasions is observed pursuing aggression, while India contrarily

imbibes an integrative and accommodative approach that subsequently has earned goodwill. Concerning the Indian Ocean, both are viewed as possessing a competitive outlook against each other in order to meet a series of national interests and to dissuade each other's progress and influence. Alfred Mahan, the father of US geo-strategy had once quoted "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean, dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas. In the Twenty-First century, the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters".<sup>50</sup> Against this consideration, far from the Himalayas, the Indian Ocean has emerged as a hot "zone of conflict" in the twenty-first century, between India and China, which has fuelled enormous tension in the region.

Subsequent to China's strategic encirclement of India via its "string of pearls" strategy, its increasing hegemony in the Indian Ocean and in the South China Sea, escalating economic and geopolitical association with the regional entities of the IOR and OBOR initiative, have all added to the worries of India. The OBOR strategy is seemingly a geopolitical stunt referring to the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and "twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road" in order to materialise China's potential intentions in the Indian Ocean. It's all about constructing roads, railways, bridges, ports, gas pipelines and power plants with an estimated infrastructure spending of \$5 trillion that will encompass more than 60 countries across Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa; this is what was proclaimed by Xi in 2013.<sup>51</sup> Along with this, the speedy naval forays of China in the Indian Ocean have prompted India to upgrade its maritime security assets in an unprecedented manner. Likewise India, China's concerns are also genuine. The former President George W. Bush, once referring to "the arc of Democracies", had hinted that China accommodates the fear of its encirclement. India's sea denial strategies could also significantly enhance its fear. In addition, the recent signing of the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement between India and United States paves the way for further interoperability between the armed forces of both countries. Also, the acquisition of advanced P-8 Poseidon Maritime Patrol Aircraft along with information sharing agreements between both countries will surely help India maintain de facto dominance on Sea Control and not just Sea Denial.

The journalist and author Bertil Lintner argues in his book *China's India War: Collision Course on the Roof* that any war between India and China is likely to be played out in the Indian Ocean. "China never had a navy. Apart from river patrol boats in the rivers to suppress banditry in their own country, now for the first time China is developing blue water navy," he adds.<sup>52</sup> A possible war between India and China will certainly not be limited to solely hurting the interests of these two countries, rather it will affect the interests and peace of the world, as well as getting big powers involved since this is the age of globalisation. Against such speculations, an initiative to hold maritime dialogues between these two powers has, on one hand, cultivated hopes of future warmth in their bilateral relations, and, on the other it's a probable indication of de-escalating tensions in the region to a certain degree that might have the potential to create peace.

As bilateral cooperation is expected in the Indian Ocean in order to fulfil their respective regional maritime ambitions, it can be exercised in the South China Sea as well. Seeing European interests and the steady dominance of China in the sea, the significance of the South China Sea cannot be overestimated. India and China are both important continental powers of Asia. Thus, it becomes the responsibility of both to

attend to issues concerning the Asian continent and its surrounding area. Both should work towards strengthening political and strategic mutual trust in the SCS using the mechanism of maritime cooperation. India is geographically located at the centre of the Indian Ocean and is a highly significant member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the only pan-Indian Ocean grouping. China must not overlook the critical role India can play to safeguard its maritime interests in times of crisis in the region, if cooperation continues. Understanding this fact, efforts to build an alliance with India in the SCS should be initiated urgently. This would not merely be beneficial for India in that it could explore markets in the native countries of the region, but in the meantime, it may be productive in keeping extra-regional forces at bay and promoting regional harmony and integration. The distance between the two Asian giants has so far offered a natural invitation to the U.S. to enter the region. Some lessons are ready for India as well. India, rather than levelling regular criticism at China's booming economic and infrastructural clout, should start working on new measures to increase its own area of influence after learning from China's strategic moves.

Finally, India's stand to build influence in China's backyard, particularly in the SCS under the "Act East Policy" of 2014 provides a whole new set of opportunities for India. These include providing considerable progress support to Taiwan along with the fostering of a long-term relationship with Vietnam for substantial military cooperation and bilateral trade developments with Cambodia. India is a net importer and needs to deepen its alliance, keeping specific strategic interests with countries such as Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines and so on (Table 2).

Little islands in the region are particularly important for various reasons. The keenness of the island nation, Taiwan, to engage with India is growing substantially. India has, over the years, also expressed its interest in expanding its socio-economic and cultural links with Taiwan. The Taiwan External Trade Development Council (TAITRA) had reportedly founded its four offices in India in 2018 in the metro cities Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai. Over 80 percent of the microchips India imports from Taiwan. India and China can both benefit by exchanging complementary advantages and driving a win-win collaboration. "India has a very good talent pool, technology and creativity which Taiwan lacks. Taiwan, on its part, has high tech competence which India demands," says Andrea T.J. Hsu, Deputy Director General, Hsinchu Science Park Bureau.<sup>53</sup> For India, improving trade ties in and around the SCS Region will strategically prove to be the most effective act to balance out the one-sided influence of China over the entire Indo Pacific Region.

**Table 2.** India–China comparative trade engagements with regional countries in 2018.

Countries	Chinese export (in %)	Chinese import (in %)	Indian export (in %)	Indian import (in %)
Malaysia	1.8	0.12	1.14	2.36
Singapore	2	1.8	3	1.91
Vietnam	3.2	2.72	2	0.15
Taiwan	2	8.41	0.1	0.2
Philippines	1.41	1	0.37	
South Korea	4.5	9.6	1.34	3.42
Hong Kong	12.3	3.96	5.3	5.5
Japan	6	9	1.77	2.58

Source: World's top exports.com (accessed 13 November 2019).

## Identifying future prospects of maritime cooperation between India and China

### *Intelligence sharing*

India has signed agreements on sharing intelligence with capable defence partners such as France, Australia, the U.S. and others. India and France signed a pact in July 2019 highlighting maritime intelligence sharing in the IOR. The agreement, which is called the White Shipping Agreement, enables both countries to share information on maritime traffic and maritime domain awareness in the IOR.<sup>54</sup> Uniform cooperation can be observed in the recently evolved security triangle of “the Paris–Delhi–Canberra axis” in the Indian Ocean that is dedicated towards sustaining stability and balance in the region. Under the recently held India’s 2 + 2 talk with the U.S. on 6 September 2019, India and the U.S. signed a historic agreement called the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), which will facilitate the sharing of military intelligence and provide Indian access to a host of U.S. military technologies such as advanced drones and communication platforms.<sup>55</sup> Engagements between India and China on similar lines could bring innovation in their bilateral relations while further strengthening their synergy to tackle maritime concerns.

### *Joint patrolling and surveillance exercises*

As far as joint patrolling and surveillance is concerned, it’s one of the most important mechanisms to help counter and check threats of a conventional and non-conventional nature. Against such a need, there is enough scope for cooperation between India and China. However, it is noted that India has hardly conducted joint patrols with countries across the world. In 2016, the then defence Minister, Manohar Parrikar, while ruling out any possibility to conduct joint patrols between India and the U.S. Navy, stated “as of now, India has never taken part in any joint patrol; we only do joint exercises. And the question of joint patrol does not arise”.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, the cases of joint patrols have been rare in Indian maritime history. Interestingly, the Indian and the Indonesian Navies have been carrying out Coordinated Patrols (CORPAT) twice a year since 2002 on respective sides of the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL), aiming to keep the vital SLOCs safe and secure as well as to overcome the challenges of maritime terrorism and piracy. The other such instance one can take of the naval forces of India and Bangladesh conducting joint patrols in the Bay of Bengal this year in June. Stretching for three days (27–29 June 2019) the joint patrol exercise, namely the Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT) was held with a common objective to ascertain the security of the maritime boundaries of the neighbouring countries.<sup>57</sup> It is recognised that joint patrol and surveillance mechanisms can stop maritime crimes such as terrorism, smuggling, piracy and militancy at sea to a great degree, and potentially foster net maritime security in the region. Notably, despite differences and huge competition seen between India and China, India has expressed her agreement about cooperating with China to address maritime concerns. On 16 April 2019, the Indian Navy extended cheers on Twitter while welcoming China’s PLA Navy in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Navy welcomed the 29th Anti-Piracy Escort Force (APEF) of PLA (N) in IOR.<sup>58</sup>

### ***Joint exercise and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)***

Joint military and naval exercises can be considered another preference of India and China in the name of cooperation. Notably, in November 2017 both countries took part in the Maiden International Maritime Search and Rescue Exercise (IMMSAREX) organised under the aegis of the IONS in the Bay of Bengal that was chaired by Bangladesh. Amid fierce tensions between India and China on the Doklam Plateau row, India did agree to join PLA Navy IMMSAREX.<sup>59</sup> The IONS is one of the most important regional forums concentrating on the Indian Ocean and involves, primarily, the littoral states. It was launched by India in February 2008 and since then has been represented by the Navy chiefs of the respective members and observers. It currently has 23 members including India, and nine observers including China.<sup>60</sup>

### ***Fishing to seabed mineral exploration***

Gurpreet Khurana explains that Chinese fishing nets in the southern part of India are apt reminders of the historic connections between India and China in this domain. The shore of Kochi in Kerala province, with as many as 20–30 nets employed in an extraordinary fishing method, has become a tourist destination. While it is doubtful whether the nets were carried by the Portuguese from Macau, or during the voyages by Admiral Zheng He's ships across the Indian Ocean, the indisputable part is the Chinese link, which may become a symbol of India–China cooperation in “ocean economy”. While fishing, sea trade and marine tourism can be considered scalable cooperation, seabed exploration and mining in the Indian Ocean might be the another facet of multiplying mutualism between India and China, counting their collective experiences and rights awarded by the ISA. In this area, the agencies concerned, belonging to the two countries, could undertake the joint development of seabed mineral exploration and extraction technologies.<sup>61</sup>

### ***Maritime Silk Road – a common platform for growth***

If China wants its economy to continue as an economic model, then sustainable economic progress is essential and the maritime economy is vital for this purpose. Given the increased dependency on ocean trade, China couldn't afford to detach the maritime factor from its OBOR initiative, that is the Maritime Silk Road (MSR). The global supply of its products and imports of raw materials is the lifeline of China's economy.<sup>62</sup> The Maritime Silk Road sub-initiative is meant to consolidate sea trade connectivity and holds great potential to award big economic dividends for China through building ports and other infrastructure in the Indian Ocean and its surrounding waters. Although India has shown its reluctance and dissent in joining this trade-oriented initiative of China, doubting its nature, an evolving proximity together with mutual trust might be expected if India becomes involved in it, and most likely China may “realise the full potential of the opportunity India offers”.<sup>63</sup> This is because this anticipated development may open new horizons of enhancing understanding and cooperation between the two countries in the field of maritime security. Moreover, to a certain extent, it can also lead to India's economic advancement on the contour of broadened connectivity in the said region.

### ***Proposed cooperative avenues in the Western Pacific region***

The idea of the “Indo-Pacific” was originally proposed back in 2006–2007, and has gained currency in recent times. The cartography of the larger Indo-Pacific region depicts the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean as a singular geopolitical regional construct. India’s Act East Policy is a crucial part of its “Indo-Pacific vision”. In the recently concluded India-ASEAN Summit, PM Modi outlined issues of national as well as regional importance, including growing Chinese assertiveness. Earlier, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang had revealed his readiness to cooperate with ASEAN countries to ascertain security and stability in the SCS. Stability in the SCS is highly critical to ensuring peace in the Indo-Pacific region. The ASEAN countries appreciated India’s rising role in the Indo-Pacific region, although Modi’s expression concerning China arguably displayed a considerable distance between the two in the region.<sup>64</sup> As far as the Western Pacific in particular, is concerned no real cooperation between the two has come up so far. The International Fleet Review initiated by India has apparently been a realistic move for partnering with the seafaring nations in order to achieve a secure maritime future.<sup>65</sup> Despite prevailing maritime frictions, China for the first time had confirmed its participation in the naval event held in Vishakhapatnam in 2016 and, later in 2018, also displayed its interest in participating in the review. India’s two battleships on the other hand, similarly took part in the Chinese grand Navy’s fleet review in April 2019.<sup>66</sup> The naval exchanges between India and China, which are of a very limited nature at present, could be increased in view of their mutual maritime interests in the region. Scope for new avenues of cooperation can definitely be explored as both possess the willingness and requisite infrastructure.

- Partnership in Shipbuilding

China and India are both powerful emerging economies of the world and hold substantive stakes in the maritime economy. Ships noticeably have played an indispensable role in the world economy. Apart from trade and commercial purposes, both have access to the Ocean for other reasons too. China’s shipbuilding industry is thriving in the wake of its growing maritime engagements. It was ranked first in the global shipbuilding industry in 2017.<sup>67</sup> Navy Chief Admiral Sunil Lanba had also highlighted China’s advancement in this field during his visit to Britain in March 2019 saying that no country has invested in shipbuilding as much as China.<sup>68</sup> China, a global leader in the field of shipbuilding can possibly share its specializations with India. Understanding the requirements of India, it can provide services related to designing, constructing and repairing ships meant for different objectives, such as container ships, cargo ships, tankers, fishing vessels, bulk carriers and other specialized vessels. India can further use them as per the necessity in the Western Pacific as well as in other maritime domains.

- Naval Maritime Training Programmes

The Indo-Pacific region secures a prominent place in India’s and China’s Ocean policy. Building a sound security architecture is the need of the hour to protect their diverse maritime interests and to boost regional stability and security. Attending the Indian-ASEAN summit, PM Modi had affirmed India’s priority to take unambiguous action against terrorism.<sup>69</sup> He said this while stressing strengthening India’s partnership on maritime security, human cooperation and the blue economy. Notably, both India and China have immense potential to build a coalition to address the challenges currently emerging in the region. Maritime risks, even of low intensity, could disturb the working climate of the region as well as impinge upon countries’ engagements. Bilateral training programmes can be undertaken in

the maritime domain as well to counter terrorism and growing radicalisation along with their joint military exercise to counter terrorism on land.<sup>70</sup>

- Cooperation in Marine Scientific Research

Another new avenue of cooperation for India and China in the Western Pacific region might be said to be in the field of marine science and oceanographic research. Both countries may form a combined expeditionary unit aimed at deepening their understanding of the ocean. Under the hydrographic surveys, oceanographic research vessels of both actors can carry out research to determine the physical, chemical and biological characteristics of oceanic water and oceanic atmosphere via collecting water samples. Both can also work to explore and exploit natural resources stored in the region. This all could be effectively processed through the initiatives of Ministries of Earth and Sciences (MoES) and National Institute of Oceanography (NIO) of respective countries. This initiative could become fruitful by harnessing a sustainable environment for marine living and non-living resources and also by protecting regional countries from seismological effects and natural disasters.

- The “Strait of Malacca” factor

The “Strait of Malacca”, which was named after the Malacca Sultanate is one of the most vital global shipping lanes. It is the chief shipping channel between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean,<sup>71</sup> and holds extreme importance for the Chinese economy. Rajaram Panda of IDSA believes that as global economic interdependence has increased leading up to an increase in mercantile traffic shipping from the Strait, it has further multiplied the criticality of the Malacca Strait.<sup>72</sup> Maritime risks in the name of maritime terrorism and piracy are also developing in the Malacca Strait region, which call for defensive measures to overcome these challenges. As per IMB’s Piracy Reporting Centre (PRC – 2018), in 2017 the Indo-Pacific region was exposed to the largest number of piracy cases.<sup>73</sup> Against these challenges, enhancing cooperation with India in the Indo-Pacific region at large could provide an edge to China in safeguarding its core energy route in a sustainable way.

## Concluding remarks

Change is the law of “Nature” and the change in India–China dealings is a need of the time and it may bring warmth in their existing relations, currently engulfed with conflicting storms. Increasing cooperation and coordination between India and China at bilateral, tri-lateral, quadrilateral or multilateral levels should further be evolved to escape the catastrophic phenomena in the Indo-Pacific region, which can potentially affect the economic, environmental and national security of multiple nations. Countries across the world are notably striving to secure their extensive economic interests, and putting the environment under stress. As far as the Indian Ocean is concerned, environmental crises such as illicit mining and fishing as well as over-exploitation of natural resources are apparent instances. This existing scenario needs to be reformed as nature is primary, and environment security must get equal importance as economic security and national security. In fact, an environment under stress won’t be able to sustain the economic interests of countries across the world.

The Indian Ocean holds a prominent stake for India and China in terms of their economic and geo-political interests. India is a member of the Indian Ocean Regional Association (IORA) whereas China is not a fully-fledged member but a dialogue partner in this regional body. In addition, both possess a substantive presence and influence in the region. Hence, both parties need to bear special responsibility in the matter of Ocean governance.

The progress in cooperation between India and China is being assessed positively by the strategic experts of both countries, underlining the efforts to free the region from existing and future maritime security threats. Any particular maritime security threat, such as maritime terrorism, piracy, goods and human trafficking or illegal fishing or mining, was not named by either side while conveying their respective notions. However, their collective aim behind this maritime dialogue was apparent in redressing maritime security in order to safeguard their multiple economic and geo-strategic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region.

Looking at potential security threats emanating in the Indian Ocean such as maritime terrorism, piracy and illicit trafficking of human and goods, both India and China might undertake joint military operations, patrolling and other important mechanisms, such as intelligence sharing, to gradually overcome these menaces. Other trilateral or multilateral engagements involving important regional players under the vanguards of India and China aimed at the similar objective of forming an inclusive Indo-Pacific can also achieve good results, enriching the political legitimacy of India and China in the region.

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