



Research Article

China's Maritime Strategy in The Indo-Pacific: Implications for India's Security and Regional Stability

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21757797>

Abstract

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), unveiled in 2013, comprises two complementary pillars: the "Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB)" and the "Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI)". Together, these initiatives seek to reshape regional and global patterns of connectivity through the creation of extensive transport and supply chains, including ports, rail corridors, highways, and energy pipelines. Beyond physical infrastructure, the initiative also promotes institutional connectivity through trade facilitation, investment frameworks, and broader economic cooperation mechanisms. This article examines the geopolitical significance of the Maritime Silk Road by situating it within the broader evolution of China's external economic strategy. It argues that the MSRI extends beyond infrastructure development, functioning as an instrument of geoeconomic statecraft that integrates commercial interests with strategic objectives. The initiative encompasses multiple stakeholders—including national governments, Chinese state-owned enterprises, private corporations, and subnational authorities—whose interactions operate across local, regional, and global scales.

Manuscript Information

- **ISSN No:** 2583-7397
- **Received:** 13-06-2025
- **Accepted:** 25-06-2025
- **Published:** 30-06-2025
- **IJCRM:** 4(3); 2025: 688-693
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- **Plagiarism Checked:** Yes
- **Peer Review Process:** Yes

How to Cite this Article

R Prakash. China's Maritime Strategy in The Indo-Pacific: Implications for India's Security and Regional Stability. Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2025;4(3):688-693.

Access this Article Online



www.multiarticlesjournal.com

KEYWORDS: China's Maritime Strategy, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), Indo-Pacific Security, India–China Strategic Competition.

INTRODUCTION

Revisiting China's Naval Strategy

China's growing dependence on overseas resources, international trade networks, and maritime transportation routes has significantly transformed the strategic understanding of national security within Chinese policy discourse. The 2015 Defence "White Paper released by the Information Office of the State Council" represented an important shift by explicitly recognising the protection of overseas interests as an emerging security priority. The document argued that the expansion of China's national interests had simultaneously increased its exposure to external uncertainties, including regional instability, terrorism, piracy, natural disasters, and transnational health threats. In particular, the protection of overseas energy supplies, strategic sea lines of communication (SLOCs), foreign institutions, Chinese citizens, and economic assets abroad was identified as an increasingly urgent security concern. [1]

This articulation of overseas interests reflected a broader transformation in China's strategic outlook. As China evolved from a predominantly continental power into a globally integrated trading economy, maritime security became inseparable from economic security. The uninterrupted functioning of sea routes became imperative for sustaining China's crude oil imports, export-oriented economy, and participation in global supply chains. Consequently, maritime connectivity emerged not merely as a commercial requirement but as a strategic necessity linked to national development and geopolitical influence.

The turmoil in strategic space, the announcement of the "Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road (MSRI)" in 2013 marked a significant milestone in China's maritime ambitions. Interestingly, the major part of the "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)", the MSRI seeks to enhance maritime connectivity by building hard infrastructure in ports, shipping infrastructure, logistics links, and economic corridors linking China with "Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean region, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe". However, the strategic implications of these infrastructure projects have generated considerable debate among international observers. Analysts from the "United States, India, and Japan" have frequently interpreted China's overseas port investments through the concept of the "String of Pearls," arguing that commercially framed infrastructure projects could potentially facilitate the development of a network of strategic maritime access points supporting Beijing's maritime surge in the "Indo-Pacific Region" (IPR). [2]

The central question surrounding China's maritime trajectory is whether Beijing is pursuing a traditional blue-water navy strategy aimed at becoming a global maritime power comparable to the United States, Britain, France, or Russia. While China's official narrative emphasises economic cooperation, maritime trade, and connectivity, its naval modernisation and overseas infrastructure development suggest a broader ambition: securing maritime space, which is crucial for securing national goals

Deng Xiaoping and the Foundations of China's Maritime Transformation

The origins of China's contemporary oceanic strategy can be traced to the leadership of Deng Xiaoping and the broader process of economic reform initiated after 1978. Deng's rise to political prominence represented a turning point in the development of the "People's Liberation Army Navy" (PLAN). Having witnessed the limitations of China's naval capabilities during his tenure as Chief of the PLA General Staff, Deng recognised that China's existing coastal defence-oriented navy was insufficient for the security requirements of a rapidly modernising economy.

In 1979, Deng advocated the development of a more capable naval force equipped with modern combat capabilities. This transformation was closely connected with his broader economic reform agenda. The policy of "reform and opening up" (gaige kaifang) integrated China more deeply into global markets, increased dependence on maritime commerce, and encouraged export-led industrialisation. As China's economy became increasingly connected with international trade networks, maritime routes gained unprecedented strategic importance. [3]

The economic success of East Asian and Southeast Asian economies demonstrated to Chinese policymakers the importance of maritime commerce and export-oriented growth. China's coastal regions became the primary centres of economic modernisation, foreign investment, technological advancement, and industrial production. Therefore, ensuring secure access to international sea lanes became essential for maintaining economic growth. Maritime security was gradually redefined from a purely military concern into a fundamental component of national economic strategy.

A crucial figure in this maritime transformation was Admiral Liu Huaqing, who assumed command of the PLAN in 1982. Often described by scholars as "China's Mahan," Liu was strongly influenced by the strategic ideas of American naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan, particularly the argument that maritime power constitutes a foundation for national wealth and global influence. Mahan emphasised that oceans function as international highways facilitating commerce, communication, and strategic mobility. Consequently, states seeking economic prosperity and geopolitical influence must possess the capacity to protect maritime routes and maintain control over strategically significant waters. [4]

Liu adapted these principles to China's circumstances by advocating the modernisation of the PLAN and gradually shifting its strategic orientation from coastal defence toward regional maritime power projection. The security of "sea lines of communication" (SLOCs) became a central element of this strategy. In an increasingly globalised economy, disruptions to maritime routes caused by piracy, conflict, or geopolitical competition could generate significant economic consequences. [5] Thus, naval power became essential not only for military purposes but also for safeguarding trade flows, energy supplies, and national development.

Revival of the Maritime Silk Road

The revival of the ancient maritime trade networks under the framework of the “Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road” (MSR) represents one of the most significant components of China's broader “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI). Drawing historical legitimacy from the centuries-old maritime exchanges that connected China with “Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean region, Africa, and Europe”, the contemporary MSR has been presented by Beijing as an initiative aimed at enhancing global economic connectivity, infrastructure development, and shared prosperity. However, beyond its economic narrative, the initiative reflects China's evolving approach towards integrating economic diplomacy, maritime connectivity, and strategic influence.

The MSR constitutes the maritime dimension of the BRI, complementing the “Silk Road Economic Belt” (SREB), which concentrated on overland connectivity between China, Central Asia, and Europe. While the SREB seeks to establish transcontinental networks through railways, highways, pipelines, and industrial corridors, the MSR extends China's connectivity strategy through maritime routes linking Chinese ports with “Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, the Middle East, Africa”, and ultimately European markets through the Mediterranean Sea. Thus, together, these two components represent China's attempt to construct a multidimensional network of economic corridors connecting major centres of global production and trade. [6]

The 2017 Maritime Silk Road vision document largely reaffirmed the principles outlined in the earlier “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road” released in 2015. However, the later document introduced additional dimensions by placing greater emphasis on maritime governance, ocean cooperation, environmental sustainability, and maritime security collaboration. Among these themes, maritime security emerged as a particularly significant component, suggesting that the MSR is not merely concerned with economic connectivity but also with reshaping patterns of maritime cooperation and security governance.

The emphasis on concepts such as the “Blue Economy” and “sustainable development” serves an important diplomatic function by presenting the MSR as a cooperative and environmentally responsible initiative. These concepts align the project with broader international development discourses and help China portray its maritime expansion as compatible with global development objectives. [7] However, these narratives coexist with deeper strategic calculations related to resource security, protection of maritime trade routes, and the safeguarding of China's expanding overseas interests.

The Maritime Silk Road: Infrastructure Connectivity and Geoeconomic Integration

The contemporary “Maritime Silk Road Initiative” (MSRI) represents a comprehensive connectivity framework that extends beyond individual infrastructure projects to create an integrated network of transportation, economic, and

institutional linkages across Asia, Africa, and Europe. Unlike traditional maritime initiatives that primarily focus on shipping routes and port development, the MSRI seeks to construct a broader ecosystem of connectivity combining physical infrastructure, industrial cooperation, financial mechanisms, and regulatory integration. In this sense, the MSRI reflects China's transition from being merely a participant in global economic networks to becoming an active architect of transnational connectivity systems.

The geographical scope of the MSRI is closely interconnected with several existing and emerging economic corridors. These include the “China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)”, the China–Indochina Peninsula connectivity frameworks, the “Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor” (BCIM), the “Greater Mekong Subregion” (GMS) cooperation framework, and various railway and transportation networks linking China's southwestern provinces with Southeast Asia. However, these overlapping corridors, the MSRI connects China's inland regions with major maritime gateways, thereby integrating domestic development strategies with broader international economic networks. [8]

The evolving nature of the MSRI demonstrates that it is not a fixed blueprint but rather an adaptive and expanding geopolitical-economic project. The revised maps released by China in 2015 indicated an extension of maritime connectivity towards the South Pacific, suggesting that the initiative possesses considerable geographical flexibility. Rather than being confined to a single route, the MSRI functions as a network-based model of connectivity involving multiple nodes, corridors, and strategic locations. This flexible character allows China to adjust the initiative according to changing economic opportunities, regional partnerships, and strategic priorities.

A central component of the MSRI involves the development of extensive hard infrastructure, including ports, railways, highways, airports, energy pipelines, electricity networks, and digital communication systems. These physical infrastructures are designed not only to facilitate trade but also to restructure patterns of production, investment, and regional economic interaction. Maritime infrastructure, particularly port development, occupies a significant position within this strategy because ports serve as crucial nodes linking global supply chains, energy transportation routes, and international commerce. [9]

Beyond transportation infrastructure, the MSRI also promotes the creation of industrial parks, “special economic zones (SEZs)”, and manufacturing clusters along participating countries. These initiatives aim to relocate industries, create production networks, and encourage economic cooperation between China and partner states. By integrating infrastructure development with industrial investment, China seeks to establish regional value chains in which Chinese enterprises, technology, finance, and manufacturing capabilities become deeply embedded within host economies.

The economic sectors associated with the MSRI extend beyond traditional infrastructure construction. The initiative encompasses investment opportunities in shipping, energy,

logistics, tourism, information technology, biotechnology, renewable energy, and commercial services. [10] Through these multidimensional investments, the MSRI represents a broader strategy of economic internationalisation whereby Chinese companies gain access to new markets while simultaneously supporting the overseas expansion of Chinese industries.

Strategic Encirclement

The geopolitical interpretation of China's maritime expansion has generated considerable debate, particularly through the concept of the "String of Pearls" strategy. Initially developed by American, Japanese, and Indian strategic analysts in the mid-2000s, the concept suggests that China is attempting to establish a network of strategically located ports across the "Indian Ocean region" to maximise the naval force and potentially constrain India's maritime influence. According to this interpretation, Chinese investments in ports and maritime hard structures in nations such as "Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar" represent potential strategic footholds supporting future naval operations.

The "String of Pearls" argument is based largely on a Mahanian understanding of maritime power, which emphasises the quest of controlling "sea lines of communication (SLOCs)", securing commercial routes, and developing overseas access points to project naval influence. From this perspective, infrastructure projects at locations such as "Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Kyaukpyu in Myanmar" are deemed not merely as commercial investments but as possible parts of a broader maritime tactics designed to expansionist notions of China's control in the "Indian Ocean Region". [11]

Japanese and Indian strategic communities have been particularly attentive to these developments. Analysts have argued that China's growing maritime infrastructure network could eventually provide logistical support for Chinese naval deployments beyond its immediate coastal waters. Such concerns are reinforced by China's increasing emphasis on protecting overseas interests, securing energy routes, and developing a more capable blue-water navy.

However, Beijing has consistently rejected the "String of Pearls" interpretation, arguing that overseas port investments are primarily driven by economic interests rather than military objectives. Chinese thinktanks and academics have criticised the concept as a geopolitical narrative constructed by external observers to project China's peaceful development as a strategic conundrum. According to China's official position, port projects under the MSRI aim to improve trade connectivity, promote economic development, and provide public goods rather than establish foreign military bases. [12]

The Chinese argument is supported by the reality that most MSRI-related maritime projects involve commercial activities such as container transportation, logistics development, industrial investment, and energy cooperation. Many host countries also actively seek Chinese investment due to infrastructure financing requirements and the potential economic benefits associated with improved connectivity.

Nevertheless, the distinction between commercial and strategic objectives remains complex. Infrastructure assets frequently possess dual-use potential, where facilities developed for economic purposes may acquire strategic value during periods of crisis. Ports, in particular, represent spaces where commercial, political, and military interests can overlap. Therefore, the debate surrounding the MSRI is not simply whether Chinese infrastructure projects are commercial or strategic, but how economic networks can generate geopolitical advantages over time.

Some Chinese strategic thinkers have openly acknowledged the strategic importance of maritime infrastructure. Arguments have emerged within Chinese discussions that access to strategically located ports could enhance China's ability to protect overseas interests, secure maritime routes, and strengthen its position as an Indian Ocean actor. From this perspective, maritime infrastructure contributes to China's broader calculus of becoming a comprehensive sea power capable of protecting its expanding economic interests. [13]

The MSRI therefore occupies an ambiguous space between economic cooperation and strategic competition. It represents China's attempt to utilise infrastructure, investment, and connectivity as instruments of influence while avoiding the costs associated with traditional military expansion. In this sense, the initiative reflects the contemporary transformation of geopolitical power, where economic networks and strategic infrastructures increasingly function as mechanisms of statecraft.

India's Strategic Response to the Maritime Silk Road

The emergence of "China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative" (MSRI) has significantly influenced strategic calculations in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in India, whose geographical position places it at the centre of the region's maritime dynamics. Geographically its connected to the major sea lines of communication connecting "East Asia, the Middle East, and Africa". India occupies a strategically significant position within the Indian Ocean system. Consequently, China's expanding maritime presence through port investments, infrastructure partnerships, and connectivity initiatives has generated both strategic concerns and new opportunities for India to redefine its regional role. [14]

Indian strategic perceptions of the MSRI have been shaped largely by concerns regarding China's escalating maritime footprint in the Indian Ocean. Projects such as the development of "Gwadar port in Pakistan, Hambantota port in Sri Lanka", and maritime infrastructure initiatives in Myanmar have been interpreted by sections of the Indian strategic community as possible elements of a broader Chinese strategy to enhance its regional influence. These concerns are linked with the broader "encirclement" narrative, which argues that China's network of infrastructure partnerships could eventually provide Beijing with strategic access points surrounding India's maritime neighbourhood.

Furthermore, India's concerns extend beyond individual port projects to the wider transformation of sea power relations in

the Indo-Pacific. Beijing's increasing reliance on maritime trade routes, energy imports, and overseas economic interests has encouraged Beijing to expand its naval capacity and maritime control. From the Indian perspective, the possibility of China developing greater operational capacity in the Indian Ocean raises questions regarding the future security of "sea lines of communication" (SLCOS) and the power quest in the region. [15]

Nevertheless, India's counter to China's naval rise cannot be curtailed to strategic competition. Instead, New Delhi has attempted to construct an alternative vision of the Indo-Pacific on the premise of "openness", "inclusiveness", "freedom of navigation", and a "rules-based maritime order". The Indo-Pacific framework helps India to secure its strategic identity beyond its traditional regional role and participate more actively in shaping the emerging Asian security architecture.

India in Indo-Pacific

A major dimension of India's visionary "Indo-Pacific strategy" has been the deepening of defence cooperation with the United States. Since twenty years, India-US strategic relations have evolved considerably in maritime security, defence technology, intelligence sharing, and military interoperability. The signing of foundational defence agreements, including the "General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA)", "Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA)", "Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA)", and "Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA)", has strengthened institutional mechanisms for military cooperation. These agreements have enhanced information exchange, logistical coordination, and operational compatibility between the forces. [16]

The expansion of defence cooperation has contributed significantly to India's maritime capabilities. Access to advanced technologies, "intelligence-sharing mechanisms", and joint military exercises has improved India's ability to monitor maritime activities, protect its interests, and respond to emerging security challenges. Exercises such as "Malabar, involving India, the United States, Japan, and Australia", have become important platforms for maritime coordination and strategic signalling in the Indo-Pacific.

In particular, India's partnership with America reflects a complex balancing strategy rather than a traditional arrangement. While cooperation with Washington provides India with strategic advantages, New Delhi continues to emphasise autonomy in foreign policy decision-making. Thus, India's Indo-Pacific strategy represents an attempt to simultaneously engage major powers, preserve independence, and maintain regional influence. We must note that India's geostrategic position in the "Indo-Pacific" has also been reinforced through its growing relationship with Australia. The crux of bilateral relations to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2020" marked a significant expansion of cooperation in defence, maritime security, technology, and regional governance. [17]

The signing of agreements such as the "Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement and the Defence Science and Technology Implementing Arrangement" has created new opportunities for operational cooperation and defence collaboration. Both countries share concerns regarding maintaining a stable maritime order and ensuring freedom of navigation across critical sea routes. India-Australia cooperation is particularly significant because both countries possess extensive maritime interests and occupy strategically important positions within the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions. [18] Their partnership contributes to a broader network of cooperation aimed at strengthening regional resilience and promoting a balanced security environment.

India as a Provider of Regional Public Goods

Beyond strategic competition, India has increasingly attempted to project itself as a responsible regional power capable of providing public goods. The COVID-19 pandemic showed India's proactive response during regional crises. Through humanitarian assistance, medical supplies, vaccines, and emergency support, India strengthened diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries, including "Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and Seychelles". This humanitarian diplomacy contributed to India's broader narrative of being a reliable security and development partner in the "Indian Ocean region". Unlike China's infrastructure-centred approach under the BRI, India has emphasised "capacity building, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and development cooperation" as instruments of regional engagement. [19] Such initiatives form part of India's broader strategy to enhance influence without replicating China's infrastructure model. Instead, India seeks to build partnerships based on trust, transparency, and shared regional interests.

CONCLUSION

China's pursuit of maritime power represents a fundamental transformation in its strategic orientation from a predominantly continental power to an increasingly maritime-oriented global actor. The development of naval capabilities, aircraft carriers, overseas infrastructure partnerships, and maritime connectivity initiatives reflects Beijing's ambition to secure economic interests, secure sea lines of communication, and enhance its influence in the Indo-Pacific. The "Maritime Silk Road" (MSR) occupies a central position within this transformation. Notably, China presents the "MSRI" primarily as an economic connectivity, its infrastructure networks inevitably generate geopolitical consequences by reshaping patterns of trade, investment, and strategic access. The dual economic and strategic dimensions of the MSRI explain why it has become a major focus of international debate.

For India, the rise of China's maritime presence presents both challenges and opportunities. New Delhi's response has involved strengthening maritime capabilities, expanding partnerships with regional powers, promoting alternative connectivity initiatives, and advocating an open and inclusive Indo-Pacific order. Rather than seeking direct confrontation

with China, India's path involves explicit selective balancing, strategic partnerships, and regional engagement.

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