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COMPETITION OF STRATEGY BETWEEN CHINA AND INDIA IN THE INDIAN OCEAN NOWADAYS

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Abstract: *In recent years, the Indian Ocean Region has become central to the strategies of major global powers due to a series of geoeconomic and geopolitical factors. While China increased its influence in this region by opening up connections within the framework of the BRI, offering loans, and constructing infrastructures, India, with its "neighborhood first" policy, also preserved its traditional sphere of influence. Due to the rising strategic competition by powers, Indian Ocean Region was at the crossroads of great power competition, especially the strategic competition between China and India. The article was based on a comparative approach and simultaneously compared India and China's influence in each field in the Indian Ocean region. The analysis showed that competition between China and India in the context of the two countries still has many tensions, leading to each country's efforts to strengthen military control over the Indian Ocean region. However, this competition tends to serve as a balance between the two countries, motivating them to develop regional power rather than allowing a single dominant state to become a hegemon.*

Keywords: *Competition; Strategy; China; India; Indian Ocean*

INTRODUCTION

The definition of "competition" in political science can be understood as "dispute", referring to "a battle or a flight of those having the opposition between demands, idealism, believes, values or targets (Pia and Diez 2007, 2). In the definition, "competition" always implies some level and intensity of antagonism, each side strives to increase its power and influence, in order to achieve objectives that are directly related to the other competitors. "Strategy" is derived from the ancient Greek word "*strategos*" (στρατηγός), which mainly uses in the military field, emphasizing the role of the general in the army. During the era of Alexander the Great, the term "strategy" was employed to describe the skills and abilities of leaders in their quest to overcome adversaries and establish systems of dominance over competing forces. However, as the 19th century drew to a close in Europe, the concept of "strategy" underwent a significant transformation, shifting its focus from the military domain to business and commerce. As the 20th century progressed, the concept of strategy expanded into the realm of state management. Edward Mead Earle (1943), in his influential book "Makers of Modern Strategy" presented a comprehensive definition of strategy: "Strategy is the art of controlling and using the resources of a nation - or a coalition of nations - including its armed forces, for the purpose of achieving

its vital interests effectively, guaranteed to succeed against the enemy in the actual world, potentially or just hypothetical" (p. viii). Strategy is also considered as "a set of methods and plans to determine goals, arrange or gather forces and solutions to achieve its goals by the most beneficial way, create a new state of development of a field, the society or the whole world in a certain period" (Institute of Police Science and Strategy 2005, 211).

Thus, "strategy competition" in International relations is the race and "combat" of a nation or an alliance of nations with its rival throughout its mottos, strategies, and policies, which are planned for a certain time, aiming to achieve the goals of its the national interests set out to create superiority over the opponent or the dominance related to the position, power, influence or interest in "competition" aspect. This competition arises when actors in international relations share common goals related to power, influence, interests, and more. In contemporary international relations, strategy competition is dynamic in which actors vie for influence, primarily through non-armed conflict means. By employing a theoretical analysis of strategy competition, this article primarily utilizes the framework of realism to examine the phenomenon. This theory stresses that "the international environment is anarchic, so countries must compete with each other to protect their sovereignty and interests; all countries are pursuing power in the international arena, emphasizing competition in the international system in which states are racing in pursuit of goals such as international power and status" (Hoang 2017, 47).

The relationship between India and China is marked by ongoing competition across various domains as both countries strive to assert their influence and demonstrate their respective superior power. One key battleground of this rivalry is the Indian Ocean, which has traditionally been considered India's sphere of influence but has recently faced encroachment from China, intensifying the rivalry between the two nations. China employs an "economic force" approach in its engagement with the Indian Ocean, bolstering ties with countries like Pakistan. At the same time, India, under Prime Minister Modi's leadership, is pursuing a "Neighborhood First" policy to regain its influence. The country that manages to establish dominance in this region will hold the key to extending its reach beyond Asia, serving as a pivotal point in the process.

THE VALUE OF THE INDIAN OCEAN TO CHINA AND INDIA

The Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean in the world, with important trade routes, including straits such as Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, and Malacca. Strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan once said: "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean can rule Asia" (Mahan 1987, 138). This has confirmed the strategic position of the Indian Ocean. The region possesses extremely rich natural resources, with 62% of the world's oil reserves, 35% natural gas, 40% gold, 60% uranium, and 80% diamonds (Erickson, Walter, and Mikolay 2010, 216). It is also an essential oil route from the Persian Gulf to Europe and Asia. The most prominent are China and India, trying to show more and more of their role in this region. The reason is that both countries have closer interests in this key geostrategic region.

For China, in terms of economic security, the Indian Ocean region is an extremely valuable route to ensure its energy security. China's economy has undergone the process of reform, opening up, and has risen strongly. This poses a requirement for a stable energy supply

for the development of the Chinese economy. In the realm of energy, China heavily relies on the Middle East and Central Asia reserves to fulfill 60% of its oil and natural gas requirements. However, transporting more than 80% of China's oil and gas imports involves lengthy sea routes, often resulting in extended transit times. These imports traverse the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea (Weimar 2013, 9). With the world's second-largest economy closely connected with outside economies, China's prosperity is tied to its trade routes, including the Indian Ocean. The smooth operation of sea lanes connecting China with the Middle East and Africa holds immense significance for China's energy security. Specifically, China's primary interest in the Indian Ocean is ensuring the unobstructed maritime trade flow from the Strait of Hormuz to the Persian Gulf, the Bay of Bengal, and Malacca. Consequently, China is compelled to seek ways to safeguard the trade route of the Indian Ocean. One approach involves establishing and sustaining a robust naval presence in the region, which not only safeguards access to energy resources in the Middle East but also fosters strong relationships with the coastal states of the Indian Ocean region.

Furthermore, following the announcement of China's ambitious "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) strategy, a significant focus has been placed on minimizing vulnerabilities associated with the initiative. China has been actively diversifying its trade and energy routes while seeking to expand its political influence through increased trade and infrastructure investments. As part of this strategic approach, China has financed and constructed commercial port facilities in various South Asian countries. These include Chittagong in Bangladesh, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, and Gwadar in Pakistan.

Regarding military security, China has implemented its ambitious "String of Pearls" strategy to establish a connection between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Under this strategy, China seeks to extend its influence from Hainan Island through the world's busiest sea lanes, ultimately reaching the Persian Gulf. The main objective of this strategy is to challenge India's influence in the region, ensure energy security, and gain control over crucial shipping routes. By implementing the "String of Pearls" strategy, China aims to enhance its energy, economic, and military capabilities. Therefore, the Indian Ocean is pivotal in formulating this strategy as it seeks to control the sea and limit India's strategic reach.

Moreover, the region is home to nuclear weapons states such as Pakistan, China, and India, as well as hosting the US naval base at Diego Garcia. Given the US's strategy to safeguard its interests in Asia, the Indian Ocean holds great importance for the US to consolidate its influence. This further intensifies the competition between China and the US as they strive to expand their respective influences in this crucial region.

For India the Indian Ocean is of particular importance to this country. Geographically, India is located in the center of the ocean and has more than 7,500 km of coastline. Currently, 95% of India's trade by volume and 68% of trade by value must pass through the Indian Ocean (Ministry of Shipping 2016, 4), and almost 80% of India's crude oil needs - imported by sea through the Indian Ocean. According to the Indian Navy, if India's offshore oil production and exports are considered, India's maritime dependence on oil will be around 93% (Indian Navy 2016, 25). Moreover, India is heavily dependent on the resources of the Indian Ocean, such as mineral and fish resources. Thus, it can be seen that the Indian economy is reliant on trade and resources in the Indian Ocean. Strategically, the Indian Ocean region can be considered India's

"security valve". India's main objective in the region is to protect the sea lines of communication, which have many non-traditional security threats. India has established Information Fusion Center-the Indian Ocean Regional (IFC-IOR) to monitor ships' movements in the region closely. Predominance and control over the Indian Ocean would allow India to exert significant influence eastward. The country can expand its maritime reach into the Asia-Pacific region from there. This has important implications for India's development strategy - this will allow India to reduce the influence of China's "String of Pearls". Nowadays, the rise of China creates obstacles for India's development. As a result, India needs to increase its naval power first and foremost in the Indian Ocean region.

With strategic interests related to national prosperity, China and India are trying to preserve and increase their influence and control in the Indian Ocean region. This creates fierce competition between these two countries in this region to protect the strategic interests of each.

THE CURRENT SITUATION OF CHINA-INDIA COMPETITION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

Many analysts argue that the rise of a China-centric "Asian system" does not benefit India significantly, especially considering India's aspirations to become a leading power in Asia. The Indian Ocean region, in particular, holds direct and profound implications for India's economic and security interests. Therefore, India's efforts to enhance its influence in the Indian Ocean are entirely comprehensible. On the other hand, for China, as it strives to establish itself as a global power, expanding its presence in various regions is imperative, and the Indian Ocean, with its crucial strategic position, cannot be overlooked. Thus, China cannot afford to neglect this area in its strategy to extend its influence. The ongoing competition between China and India in the Indian Ocean region can be analyzed based on the policies and strategies pursued by each country, as described in the following text.

China

For China, the Indian Ocean and South Asia have become crucial junctions in its energy supply routes. Not only that, China's 21st-century "Maritime Silk Road" embodies a vision of interconnected ports and nodes across the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, China is undertaking "attacks" on the marginal states of the Indian peninsula in order to secure its foothold in the Indian Ocean.

Firstly, China quickly established and developed a complex infrastructure network at important seaport points in the Indian Ocean region. Over the past decade, Beijing has directed its efforts towards building a chain of ports and maritime facilities in the Indian Ocean, extending from Kenya to Malaysia. Beijing has signed agreements to develop maritime facilities in various countries, including Kenya, Sudan, Pakistan, Maldives, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Malaysia. In the past few years, China has not only built Indian Ocean coastal ports for maritime activities but also expanded into a complex model. China has taken the Shekou model as a template for the development of several strategic Port zones in the Indian Ocean region in order to take advantage of China's influences to transform

the port's functions. This model is named after and inspired by Shekou - a small fishing village in China's Guangdong province. China Merchants Group (CMG) developed a seaport and export processing zone in the early 1980s, turning the village into a world-class commercial, financial, and industrial hub (Deng 2017). This transformation requires the construction of transport infrastructure, industrial parks, free trade zones, export processing zones, development of commercial services and residential areas adjacent to the port. Shekou model, in which the beginning is the construction of the port, which develops into the industrial park, and the last is the city model (Port-Park-City model) (Lin and Zao 2019, 26). This signature approach is designed to facilitate the movement of goods and foster a larger business system. According to Sun Hai Yong, a Chinese scholar, China's port projects along the Indian Ocean are a comprehensive test of China's economic viability, hedging the risks and ability to set international agendas (Sun 2017, 54). He emphasizes that Chinese enterprises have enough capacity to build ports and establish a strong foothold in the port system in the Indian Ocean. Two typical examples of China's strategy of building a port city in the Indian Ocean region are Djibouti and Colombo. For Djibouti city, by assembling industrial, logistics, and business services facilities near the Djibouti Port, Chinese companies hope to replicate Shenzhen's city model successfully. Chinese companies see Djibouti as a major transit hub and "key" to opening up the economies of the Horn of Africa and connecting Asia-Europe (Wagner and Caslin 2019). With support from industrial and banking groups such as CM Port, and China Exim Bank, CMG has established a financial, infrastructure, and commercial platform that allows many Chinese companies to do business in an unattractive economic environment (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China 2018). With a substantial investment of approximately $15 billion in port and inland development, China has emerged as the leading external trade participant in the Djibouti Port City project (Port de Djibouti 2015). Through the construction of rail, pipeline, and road infrastructure, Djibouti city is poised to become the Shekou of East Africa, serving as a vital hub for transportation, logistics, and trade in the region (Deng 2017).

The City of Port Colombo (CPC) in Sri Lanka is planned on land reclaimed in the Indian Ocean region, with an area of about 269 hectares, to form the country's first special economic zone for service-oriented industries. The city is scheduled for completion in 2041. It is divided into five distinct areas: the financial area, the marina area, the central residential area, the island residential area, and the international island area. The CPC is Sri Lanka's largest foreign direct investment project, worth around $1.4 billion, and will spur an additional $13 billion in secondary investment (The Times of India 2021). CPC is fully funded by China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) and is a key project within China's BRI framework. The project's vision is to transform CPC into a world-class city for South Asia and the most dynamic economic hub in the region. CPC is expected to become a regional business center and a city with high-quality public space and infrastructure, attracting domestic and foreign investors. International investment is estimated to bring in $15 billion and create 83,000 local jobs (Gupta 2021). Being included in the construction plan since 2011, after many pauses due to many economic and political factors, in May 2021, the CPC project was officially approved by the National Assembly of Sri Lanka with some amendments to the constitution of this country.

Secondly, China tries to control the Indian Ocean by increasing its military presence there. In the 1990s, the Chinese Navy (People's Liberation Army Navy - PLAN) did not visit ports

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in the Indian Ocean region. Since 2010, PLAN has had an average of nearly 20 port visits per year in this region. In China's view, the Indian Ocean is controlled by China's rivals, including the US and India. Therefore, China has tried to increase its military presence in this region in recent years. The concept of China's "String of Pearls" strategy has shown the country's ambition to build strategic port points in the Indian Ocean to contain India. Increasing its military presence in the Indian Ocean is one of the most effective ways for China to expand its maritime power. To achieve its goal, China needs to develop strategic fulcrums in the Indian Ocean that can resupply and support the strategic role of China's maritime power.

One of China's successes in controlling the Indian Ocean was constructing its military base in Djibouti in August 2017. This development in Djibouti City is a key component of Beijing's dual strategy, encompassing the "String of Pearls" and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), central to China's objectives in the Indian Ocean. Djibouti City is the initial testing ground for establishing regional shipping routes and developing seaports, laying the groundwork for future military presence. China has expanded the wharf at this military base, providing sufficient capacity to accommodate a fleet of at least four ships, including the large Type 901 support ship. The PLAN has officially used one of the six berths at Djibouti's Doraleh multipurpose commercial port (The Economic Times 2020).

Another notable example is Gwadar, a strategically located deep-sea port in Pakistan, which has been invested in and leased by China until 2059. Gwadar holds significant importance as it is a crucial element of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), with a substantial investment of approximately $54 billion to establish transport infrastructure and foster industrial development within Pakistan. China has commercial and political interests in advancing the Gwadar Port in Pakistan. The port could provide Beijing with a connection by road and rail through the Strait of Malacca. Chinese goods could also take a shortcut through Pakistan instead of going around South Asia. Gwadar is considered a future overseas base for the Chinese Navy, complementing the existing base at Djibouti City in the Horn of Africa. The first report of China's plans to build a naval base at Gwadar emerged in January 2018. In June 2020, it appeared on satellite images of construction sites, including the protected complex (Sutton 2020). There are rumors that China deployed its marines there in March 2017 (Maritime Executive 2017). The process of China's naval base presence in Gwadar remains to be followed up. However, if this presence becomes a reality, PLAN can strengthen its capabilities in the Indian Ocean, along with warships or submarines, which could change the naval balance in the region.

China has successfully used "financial diplomacy" in the Indian Ocean region to build influence. Its economic strength has allowed China to compete and gain an edge in the race with other great powers, including India. China's growing presence and influence in the Indian Ocean today is undeniable.

India

In the preceding era, the prevailing power asymmetry and persistent bilateral conflicts among the Member States of SAARC have hindered India's ability to establish robust bilateral partnerships. Furthermore, these circumstances have influenced the political dynamics and

foreign policy decisions of India's smaller neighbors, with attempts to exert hard power through military intervention and economic blockades yielding ineffective outcomes. This situation has even led to a growing inclination among these neighboring countries to distance themselves from India, thereby providing an opportunity for increased Chinese influence in the region. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, New Delhi has adopted a fresh approach to foster better engagement with countries in the region.

In the political-diplomatic field, the Indian Ocean and neighboring regions of India have become a priority in India's foreign policy. Prime Minister Modi's vision for the Indian Ocean is the "Sagar" doctrine. Sagar means Ocean in Hindi and stands for "Security and Growth for All in the Region". According to this doctrine, India seeks an "atmosphere" of trust and transparency, peaceful settlement, and enhanced maritime cooperation. As soon as becoming Prime Minister of India, Modi invited the leaders of SAARC countries to attend the swearing-in ceremony. This first move is important to neighboring countries in India's foreign policy. Besides, India's leaders continuously visit most of the neighboring countries. Not only stopping at visits, but India also actively demonstrates its responsibility and influence in the region. India and Bangladesh have strengthened their ties through various initiatives, including the Land Boundary Agreement and energy, connectivity, and counter-terrorism proposals. These measures have fostered closer cooperation between the two nations (Communist Party of Vietnam Newspaper Online 2015). In addition, the termination of the Sonadia project with China, a deep-sea port southwest of Bangladesh (Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury 2020), is a clear sign that India-Bangladesh relations are growing and developing well. Relations with Sri Lanka have also been actively improved by India. The country has signed an agreement with Sri Lanka to provide a currency exchange service worth $400 million to help Sri Lanka deal with the economic hardship caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the agreement has officially been in operation since February 2021 (Srinivasan 2021).

In particular, India is also trying to increase its presence in strategically located seaports. The country is developing the Iranian Port of Chabahar. This is Iran's only deep-sea port with direct access to the Ocean. India has approved an initial investment of $85.21 million to develop the port. In December 2018, India took over Shahid Behesti Port operations in Chabahar, the first time India took control of a port on a foreign coast. The Port of Chabahar is strategically important due to its location in the Gulf of Oman and at the entrance of the Strait of Hormuz, allowing Iran to have direct access to the Indian Ocean. The Chabahar Port is also quite close to the Gwadar Port of Pakistan, which China is developing. The Port of Chabahar is also quite close to the Pakistani Port of Gwadar, which China is developing. Thus, by participating in the development of Chabahar Port, India will have a presence in a strategically important area of the world while also helping it to keep a close eye on China's developments in Gwadar Port. India commenced operations at Chabahar Port in May 2021 (Kumar and Verma 2021).

In the economic field, with concerns about Chinese investment in important ports such as Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Gwadar in Pakistan, India is investing in developing commercial ports and airports in the region. India can access ports such as Djibouti, the Reunion Islands near Madagascar, Diego Garcia in the southern Indian Ocean, and the Duqm Port of Oman. The Indian Navy also actively kicked off the Indo-Pacific Business Summit in 2018 to recognize the importance of the Indo-Pacific region (Verma 2020). In investment, India has shown flexibility

when cooperating with Japan to develop the "free corridor" plan by implementing infrastructure projects across Africa, Iran, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia. This is seen as a strategy to confront China's unilateral infrastructure strategy BRI connecting Europe and Africa. In Eastern Sri Lanka, Japan and India are expected to participate in expanding the Trincomalee Port.

Moreover, the two countries will also cooperate in developing Dawei Port along the Thailand-Myanmar border. The "Asia-Africa Growth Corridor" plan will also focus specifically on Africa, especially East Africa, to unlock the region's true economic potential. India and Japan will focus on exploiting the connection between the Mekong-India Economic Corridor (MIEC) with the Kenya-Tanzania-Mozambique Special Economic Zone (KTM) through Jawaharlal Nehru and Kochi Ports (Singh 2019). This Asia-Africa connection promises to bring many economic and strategic values.

It must be recognized that this cooperation aims to bring stability to the region in the context of China's implementation of the BRI strategy, causing many countries to have doubts. In order to create an advantage over China's BRI, India and Japan focus on improving the quality of infrastructure projects. On the other hand, BRI is creating worries for participating governments to join the project because of the quality of infrastructure. The quality of infrastructure will be one of the better attractions of cooperation of local governments preferring India and Japan. BRI strategy becomes a concern for India because of concerns related to national security. This led the government of India to expand cooperation with Japan as a response to China's "expansion" moves. Strengthening relations and tightening cooperation between India and Japan will boost the Japanese economy and India's development strategy to expand to the Indo-Pacific region.

In the security and military field, not only increasing and improving relations with neighboring countries in the region, but India is also trying to increase its military strength, especially its maritime power, to have better control over the Indian Ocean region. The "Make in India" initiative is one of the government's approaches to the Navy's modernization goals. Under this initiative, several major maritime projects have been carried out. They are estimated to be completed within 5 to 10 years, turning India into a country with a strong Navy by 2030. The Indian government is taking a multi-pronged approach to developing and achieving national capabilities while improving the infrastructure, supporting a holistic approach towards maritime modernization goals. Estimates are given that by 2030 if all the plans are carried out on time as planned, the Indian Navy will grow to deter any form of maritime threats in the Indian Ocean region.

India also sees Maritime diplomacy as a vital step in shaping its role in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Navy has conducted Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) patrols with Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius to provide a comprehensive live feed of ship activities in the Indian Ocean region, ensuring safety issues and non-traditional security at sea (Peri 2020). New Delhi also expands military ties with other major powers in the Indo-Pacific. This effort includes the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement signed with the US in August 2016. The agreement gives the two sides access each other's military facilities for replenishment and refueling (The Hindu 2016). In 2018, New Delhi signed similar agreements to expand access to French facilities, particularly the Naval Base at Réunion and Singapore's Changi Naval Base. India also signed a

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fourth logistics agreement with South Korea in September 2019 and, on the other hand, finalized similar arrangements with Australia, Japan, and Russia.

India also actively participates in many bilateral and multilateral military exercises in the Indian Ocean. The MILAN exercise (MILAN is a biennial multilateral naval exercise incepted by the Indian Navy in 1995 at Andaman and Nicobar Command), organized by the Indian Navy most recently on 8 November 2019, with the participation of the navies of 17 other countries. This exercise for 2020, although not yet held due to the impact of Covid-19, also marks the expected participation of the navies of 30 countries. It has proved India's position and prestige in expanding its military connectivity and influence in the Indian Ocean region. Another maritime event named Malabar between India, Japan, and the US aims to enhance cooperation and military skills among the participants. In the context of the Indo-Pacific strategy becoming increasingly clear and realistic, in 2020, India invited Australia to participate.

After the border clash with China in June 2020, India seems more determined to engage closely with the members of the Quad to counter China's assertiveness, enhancing New Delhi's position towards Beijing. Since June 2020, the Indian Navy has also increased surveillance and operational deployment in the Indian Ocean during the Galwan clash. India's military exercises and increased presence in the Indian Ocean region are important in counterbalancing China's power.

CONCLUSION

The India-China competition is no longer limited to economic or military strength but has become a combination of many factors and spreads across many fields and locations. However, economics and security are the two most prominent areas. This competition can be seen through the following characteristics:

First, China has advantages in the Indian Ocean region, although China's presence raises many doubts about political and military purposes. China's approach to each country in the Indian Ocean region is considered quite flexible. China seems to have quite quickly and closely approached the countries in the Indian Ocean region through its economic strength. Using the Maldives as a prime example, the close ties between the Maldivian president and Beijing have resulted in a surge of infrastructure development projects within the country. China has completed the airport project in the Maldives following the cancellation of a $511 million infrastructure deal with India by President Yameen's government. Official reports indicate that the Maldives has allocated several islands for China's development initiatives.

Furthermore, President Xi Jinping's visit to Myanmar in January 2020 marked the revival of the Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone, which includes the controversial plan to construct the Kyaukpyu deep-water port. This project, financed by China with a significant aid package worth $1.3 billion, holds strategic importance as it would enable Beijing to directly access oil supplies from the Middle East, bypassing the Strait of Malacca. This development becomes even more significant considering the ongoing maritime competition between India and China in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.

China has strategically partnered with several coastal states in the Indian Ocean, employing a defensive tactic to encircle India with a series of naval bases in preparation for

possible direct conflict. One notable example is Pakistan's Port of Gwadar, which serves as a means for China to enhance its energy security and establish connections between its western regions and the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, China's involvement in maritime and infrastructure projects in countries like Somalia, Kenya, Seychelles, and Mauritius positions China as a significant and long-lasting benefactor, providing these nations with economic benefits, technical assistance, and military support (Marantidou 2014, 7). It is crucial to acknowledge that the expenses associated with China's extensive megaprojects in the Indian Ocean region far surpass the costs and benefits of maritime shipping. Consequently, China's activities in the region primarily aim to assert its military presence, affirm its dominance, and advance its strategic ambitions in the Indian Ocean.

Second, in the face of competition with China, India has become more flexible and responsive in its policies towards Indian Ocean Region. Maldives is a prime example. India has been quite flexible regarding China's growing presence in Sri Lanka. It has taken advantage of closer ties with the Maldives. In October 2020, EXIM Bank of India signed a credit agreement for $400 million for the Greater Male Connectivity Project (The Indian Express 2020). It is believed that this project would be the second most important connectivity project in the Maldives, after the project of China-Maldives Friendship Bridge which connects the Hulhule Airport with the capital's island. The current aid package complements the previous $800 million credit, one of the largest loan packages India has made available to any country in the vicinity (The Economic Times 2020). India has also given Maldives $1.4 billion in aid to overcome the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic (Livemint 2020). The developments in relations with the Maldives have even led some Indian politicians to view it as a model for developing relations with its neighbors as part of the "Neighborhood First" policy. Furthermore, the growing competition with China may provide additional impetus for India to develop further its relationship with the US and other regional partners in the Indo-Pacific, such as Australia or Japan.

The competition between India and China in the Indian Ocean region presents opportunities and challenges for the coastal states. On the one hand, the interests of these two powers can create new prospects for the development of these states, offering investment projects that have the potential to transform their underdeveloped economies. However, this also exposes them to risks such as debt traps, political dependence, or becoming pawns in the power struggle between the two nations. Some countries in the region are hedging against China's growing influence by bolstering their defense capabilities and forming partnerships with other states. Conversely, some countries adopt strategies that align more closely with China or adopt a combination of approaches. Additionally, some countries view this competition as an opportunity to balance India's regional influence.

Fourth, China-India competition must be viewed more broadly in the Asia-Pacific region, focusing on the East Sea. India's strategy in the Indian Ocean can be considered defensive realism - as a response to the threat of Chinese influence. Particularly, India is securing its economy and energy dependence, confirming its visible presence in the South China Sea.

The Act East Policy has helped India increase cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. Moreover, New Delhi has developed "one of the largest and most powerful navies in the world" (Katyal 2014), not only to gain dominance in the Indian Ocean but also to expand its reach beyond its water borders. India is trying to have a stronger presence east of the South China

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Sea. India's role in the disputed territories in the South China Sea is being consolidated. China's Defense White Paper asserts that new threats have emerged from hegemony, power politics, and neo-interventionism, as well as intensifying competition to redistribute power, rights, and interests: "On issues related to China's territorial sovereignty as well as maritime rights and interests, some of its distant neighbors have taken provocations Chinese military by reinforced their military presence on China's reefs and islands that they are illegally occupied" (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2015). Nowadays, the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea are becoming more interconnected because the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea play more important roles in India and China's economy, energy, and national security.

For the Indian Ocean region in particular, India-China competition focusing more on maritime is gradually taking shape. It could create a military power race here. Therefore, the region will also face various challenges as there is an increase in military intervention. Competition between China and India in the context of the two countries still has many tensions, leading to each country's efforts to strengthen military control over the Indian Ocean region. However, this competition tends to serve as a balance between the two countries, motivating them to develop regional power rather than allowing a single dominant state to become a hegemon. For India, it is crucial to cooperate with Japan to preserve and strengthen its influence, which serves as a wise choice in countering the strategies of its neighboring giant, China. Simultaneously, India strives to position itself as a mediator between China and the United States, aiming to maximize its advantage in the Indian Ocean region. This strategic approach allows India to navigate the complex dynamics between the two global powers and leverage its position effectively.

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