



INDIA'S
'CHINA-CHALLENGE'
IN THE INDIAN OCEAN AND
BEYOND

POLICY PAPER II

SPECIAL ISSUE I
"EVASION TO ACCEPTANCE: INDIA'S
APPROACH TO CHINA 2020-2030"

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Summary

- China's growing footprint in the IOR is causing disquiet in India's security establishment. This expansion suggests Beijing's Indian Ocean strategy is intended at more than just the protection of Chinese economic interests.
- Beijing's 'debt-trap' diplomacy and BRI projects in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Iran, Bangladesh and Myanmar have sparked apprehension in New Delhi of an 'encirclement strategy'. There are indications that Beijing is attempting to leverage its BRI projects to establish a wider footprint in littoral-South Asia.
- Following the June 2020 clash in Eastern Ladakh, New Delhi has expedited plans to fortify the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to counter China in the Indian Ocean. An interdiction strategy, however, could be complicated, not least on account of the possibility that it might militarize the littoral, adversely affecting the interests of South and South Asian states.
- At a time when New Delhi is negotiating a truce with Beijing in the Himalayas, India's decision to invite Australia for the 2020 Malabar exercises, viewed in conjunction with the Indian Navy's efforts to dominate the Eastern Indian Ocean, could trigger a strong reaction from China.
- New Delhi has two options to constrain the PLAN in the Indian Ocean: combine with friendly powers to deny the Chinese navy operational space in the Eastern Indian Ocean, or carry out joint operations with partner states in the Western Pacific. In the near-term, a sea-denial strategy appears suitable as it could capitalize on the PLAN's Indian Ocean vulnerabilities.
- In the long run, a counter-projection strategy is likely to be more effective in the Western Pacific. China's core interests lie in the South China Sea, where the PLAN is facing pushback from the US and its allies. A subtle, yet persistent Indian naval presence in the region could be useful in conveying India's resolve to Beijing.
- China's assertive maneuvering on regional stability, and its exacerbation of existing power asymmetries requires a nuanced and dynamic response from New Delhi. Increasing the frequency of bilateral and trilateral naval exercises, and broadening its engagement with key Indian Ocean states could limit China's strategic options in the littorals. The IN must also seek to leverage its Pacific operations for geopolitical effect.

About the author



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About this Special Issue

Recent events have brought home the realisation that China's rise is bound to have serious implications for India and other smaller states in the region. It is now clear that India-China relations may be at an inflection point. An increasingly aggressive China is pushing at its peripheries to announce its arrival at the global stage. While this has been happening for quite some time in the South China Sea, India is its most recent victim in South Asia. It is therefore necessary that India recognises this geopolitical reality and puts together a coherent strategy to balance China. To this end, this special issue consists of articles that make policy prescriptions for India for the next decade.

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Introduction

China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean is causing disquiet in India's security establishment, where policy planners and maritime observers believe Chinese maritime activities are diminishing India's strategic leverage in the littorals. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is expanding engagement with regional navies and that has served to heighten Indian anxiety, with growing worries that China might be attempting to position itself as a stakeholder and security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

At the January 2020 Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi, the Indian naval chief, Admiral Karambir Singh, expressed **India's reservations** over China's burgeoning presence in the Indian Ocean. India's political and military leadership, he noted, were concerned about the tenor of Chinese maritime engagement in South Asia. The Indian navy has been observing Chinese movements, and had begun 'Mission Based Deployments' at sensitive spots in the IOR to ensure Indian interests are not adversely impacted.

The navy chief's remarks were prescient. Since June, when a border clash between the Indian Army and the Peoples Liberation Army in Eastern Ladakh killed 20 Indian soldiers, a vast majority of the Indian navy's frontline warships and submarines have been deployed in the Indian Ocean Region. Their mission was to apply **strategic maritime pressure** on China around the Malacca Strait, critical for supply chains through sea routes. Additionally, the navy conducted exercises in the Andamans (including one with a US carrier battle group), and even deployed **MiG-29K fighters** on the islands.

The developments come at a time when there has been a **notable uptick** in China's non-military maritime activity in the Indian Ocean, focused seemingly on bolstering Chinese economic investments and soft power influence in the littorals. From the appearance of Chinese research and survey vessels in the waters off the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, deep-sea mining ships in the Southern Indian Ocean, and coast guard escorted Chinese fishing fleets in East African littorals, **China's non-naval presence** in the Indian Ocean has been steadily expanding.

Many in New Delhi are viewing PLAN's Indian Ocean operations in conjunction with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). President Xi Jinping's flagship program has made significant inroads in South Asia, with new projects to construct highways, railroads, pipelines, ports and other critical connectivity infrastructure. However, skeptical Indian analysts insist the initiative is a **veiled display** of economic power meant to boost Beijing's geopolitical profile in Asia and

Europe. Far from a model of ‘win-win’ development, China’s investments under the BRI are aimed at expanding its sphere of influence in the wider Eurasian space.

To some Indian watchers, China’s Indian Ocean play appears **suspiciously anti-India**. The steady infusion of PLAN blue-water assets, and increasing “out-of-area” presence in the IOR, seems intended at dominating India’s neighborhood. While desisting from deploying warships in Bay of Bengal, China’s security outreach to Bay states – in particular Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar – suggests Beijing is keen to establish a larger strategic presence in South Asia. Indian analysts reckon New Delhi will find its regional interests more directly challenged if the PLAN expands its military footprint in the **Bay of Bengal region**.

This essay evaluates the Sino-Indian maritime dynamic in South Asia. It focuses on New Delhi’s security dilemma in the littorals, stemming from China’s surreptitious attempts to expand its military and non-military presence in the Eastern Indian Ocean. The essential argument is that notwithstanding structural constraints imposed by the lack of logistics in the Indian Ocean, the PLAN could leverage Belt and Road infrastructure projects to establish a wider Chinese footprint in littoral-South Asia. While it may not dominate the Eastern Indian Ocean any time soon, China’s growing maritime presence in India’s near-seas could undermine New Delhi’s regional strategic leverage.

The paper makes two sets of recommendations. First, India must continue to strengthen its sea denial capabilities in the Eastern Indian Ocean where the Indian navy enjoys a considerable advantage over the PLAN. Second, the Indian navy must consider frequent deployments in the Western Pacific and the South China Sea – a theatre of core Chinese interests – as a means of signaling strategic intent to Beijing.

China’s Naval Deployments in the IOR

The central question for Indian analysts evaluating the Sino-Indian balance of power is this: could China’s growing naval presence result in an accidental skirmish between the Indian and Chinese navies? A corollary to that question is whether a naval face-off - inadvertent or otherwise - could result in a wider conflict that draws in other regional and global powers. Lastly, how must India protect its maritime equities without having to fight China in a naval war?

To answer these questions, it may be useful to dwell on the essential nature of China's maritime deployments in the Indian Ocean. China first began sending warships for anti-piracy duties in December 2008, at a time when there was a genuine demand for constabulary presence off the coast of Somalia and the Horn of Africa.ⁱⁱ Comprising guided missile destroyers/frigates and a supply ship, the taskforces were meant to escort merchant shipping through pirate-infested waters. Over time, the PLAN leadership began sending **sophisticated warships** (the Type 52 C destroyers, Type 54A frigates, and Type 71 amphibious carriers), even as piracy levels off the coast of Somalia dipped.

In recent years, PLAN deployments in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) have averaged seven to eight warships every year. Twice a year, a submarine accompanied by an escort ship and some research and hydrographic vessels **visits** the IOR. Yet, China anti-piracy missions have acquired a distinct strategic lilt, with increasing PLAN warship visits to East African and small island states, and growing bilateral naval exercises with regional maritime forces. This had contributed to a growing sense in New Delhi that China's anti-piracy contingents are being used to mark strategic presence in the South Asian littoral.

While always wary of Chinese naval presence in its neighborhood, India's maritime observers did not view China's anti-piracy deployments as a threat, until November 2014 when a PLAN submarine docked in Colombo. Indian policymakers and analysts considered this a violation of the 1987 agreement which stipulates that "Sri Lankan ports will not be made available for military use by any country in a manner **prejudicial to India's interests**". Since then, there have been at least eight submarine missions in the Indian Ocean Region, including some that are said to have closed in on Indian waters.ⁱⁱⁱ Each PLAN submarine foray has contributed to a growing sense of insecurity in New Delhi.

China's undersea forays in the IOR have both tactical and strategic significance. Unlike surface and air assets that have a visible presence, submarines stay undetected for long periods, providing a tactical advantage to a dominant power in a contested littoral. Consequently, an adversary's inability to track a submarine in its near-seas is seen as a tactical setback. This perhaps explains why it has been hard for the Indian navy to track Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean. Indian analysts **suspect** Chinese submarine crews have been studying the ocean environment, collecting hydrological information and bathymetric data, fine-tuning standard operating procedures, developing their expertise for protracted missions in the Indian. Far from performing an anti-piracy function, PLAN submarines seem to mark far-seas presence, projecting strategic influence in South Asia.

A Chinese Military Base at Djibouti

The establishment of China's first overseas military base in Djibouti further heightens Indian concerns. The facility is officially termed a logistics support base and justified as supporting China's commitments to international anti-piracy and peacekeeping, as well as to protect overseas assets and evacuate Chinese citizens in crisis situations. But Chinese policymakers and experts have also called it 'a strategic strong point', denoting a forward presence designed to support the ability of the Chinese military for long-range force projection, including as part of a network of such strategic points.

With an estimated area of nearly 250,000 square feet and a large underground complex capable of hosting an estimated 10,000 troops, the base is clearly more than just a logistics facility. Recent reports suggest it is being modernized into a full-fledged military facility with a 1,120-foot pier that can berth Chinese warships, including the Liaoning aircraft carrier. Notably, Beijing's moves in Djibouti seem to depart from China's traditional role as a resource extractor with primarily commercial interests in continental Africa. While China's security interests in East Africa are significant, the acquisition of a military base expands China's military footprint, embedding the PLAN into the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. For many Indian watchers, this suggests a significant shift in China maritime strategy that has hitherto been about safeguarding economic investments.

China's 'Debt' Diplomacy

A key feature of China's Indian Ocean strategy is its 'debt-trap' diplomacy, demonstrably at work in Pakistan, where Beijing has leveraged its Belt and Road projects for strategic gains. In December 2018, Pakistani and Chinese officials are said to have put the final touches on a secret proposal to expand Pakistan's building of Chinese military jets, weaponry and other hardware.^{iv} Commentators had noted that the military projects were designated as part of the BRI to draw strategic concessions from Pakistan. Recent satellite imagery seems to validate such claims, with clear evidence of the installation of anti-vehicle berms, security fences, sentry posts and elevated guard towers – all pointing to the construction of a possible submarine docking base. Unsurprisingly, Beijing is the chief patron of the Pakistan navy, underwriting the latter's modernization program, including the construction of Type 054A Jiangkai II-class frigates and a project for eight Yuan class submarines.^v The PLAN is even said to be considering deploying Chinese naval ships and marines for the defense of Pakistan's maritime infrastructure at Gwadar as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.^{vi}

Sri Lanka is another illustration of China's attempts at economically softening South Asia. At Hambantota port, the China Merchant Ports Holdings Ltd. (CMPorts) has taken over 70 percent assets on lease for a period of ninety-nine years. The deal stemmed from Sri Lanka's inability to service loans from China's EXIM Bank that initially funded the construction of the port. Indian observers say China's purpose for acquiring the port is **strategic**, rather than commercial. With CMPorts holding majority stakes in the project, they surmise the facility will eventually be utilized as a logistical outpost for future PLAN deployments. The **gifting** of a Chinese warship (a Type-53 frigate) in June 2019 to Sri Lanka did seem intended to establish Chinese naval presence in the island state. The end-purpose, Indian experts aver, could well be a dual use **commercial/military** facility to forward position, restock and refuel Chinese naval ships and submarines.

In Maldives, President Ibrahim Solih's efforts to undo the concessions made to China by the Yameen government have not succeeded in stemming the tide of Chinese expansionism. Not only do Chinese companies continue to remain involved in high-profile projects in the island nation, Male has done little to reduce its indebtedness to China, including the huge public debt generated by the recently inaugurated **'friendship' bridge**. In fact, China's presence in Maldives has grown further, with recent **satellite pictures** showing large scale construction activity at Feydhoo Finolhu, a small island leased out to a Chinese firm, not far from the capital city. China's Exim Bank, meanwhile, has **demande**d that the Maldivian government clear \$10 million of an unpaid installment from the total \$127 million loan to a former Yameen ally – a clear demonstration of harassment of a government deemed unfriendly to China.

In a related development, China has made a commitment to build key sectors of Iran's economy. According to a leaked 18-page draft of a comprehensive bilateral agreement - parts of which were published by the *New York Times* in July 2020 - China will invest \$400 billion in Iran's oil and gas and infrastructure sector in return for an assured supply of Iranian fuel for the next 25 years. Chinese construction companies are set to initiate multiple infrastructure projects along Iran's Gulf coastline, including free-trade zones in Abadan, a city on the eastern bank of the Shaṭṭ Al-ʿArab River, and on the island of Qeshm, where Tehran is planning a major hub for oil production and storage. A Chinese company has developed and is operating a port at Jask, a port city just outside of the Strait of Hormuz, only 150 miles away from Gwadar. A rudimentary Chinese naval presence at **Jask** could lead to greater joint military training and exercises between Iran, China and Pakistan, enhancing China's regional security profile. Maritime infrastructure on the Iran-Pakistan coast also suggests a plan to dominate the sea-lanes in the Northern Indian Ocean.

Meanwhile, China is developing Payra in Bangladesh and Kyaukpyu in Myanmar as deep-sea ports, sparking apprehension in New Delhi of a Chinese ‘encirclement strategy’. Chinese analysts claim that their country intends merely to secure trade and reduce the vulnerability of SLOCs in the Indian Ocean. However, Indian observers remain convinced that the ultimate purpose of China’s BRI projects is to monitor the movement of Indian ships and submarines, and to facilitate access for Chinese war ships and submarines in the IOR.

Indian Assertion in the Eastern Indian Ocean

In the aftermath of the India-China clash in Eastern Ladakh, New Delhi has focused squarely on the Eastern Indian Ocean, with many Indian analysts advocating an **aggressive strategy** aimed at interdicting Chinese trade. A vast majority of China’s oil shipments, container vessels and bulk cargo traffic, approaches the Malacca Strait through the Ten Degree Channel between Andaman and Nicobar. India’s naval planners surmise the Indian Navy could stifle the flow of Chinese traffic, while aggressively patrolling the Indian Ocean chokepoints, keeping an eye on Chinese naval reinforcements.

New Delhi has expedited plans for basing **additional military forces** on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI), including a proposal to construct facilities for more warships, aircraft, missile batteries and infantry soldiers on the strategically-located islands. Runways at naval air stations, INS Kohassa in Shibpur and INS Baaz in Campbell Bay, are being extended to support operations by large aircraft, even as a 10-year infrastructure development “roll-on” plan, pegged at Rs 5000 crores, is fast-tracked. Indian strategic commentators are even urging New Delhi to permit friendly foreign navies access to the ANI’s military bases.

India’s **strengthening** of the ANI gives credence to the view that India is moving to counter China in the Indian Ocean. The new infrastructure will allow for a more expansive deployment of the P-8I surveillance aircraft that will boost Indian efforts to track Chinese submarines in the near-seas. Plans are also in place to construct three forward operating bases (FOBs) on the islands — at Diglipur, Kamorta and at Campbell Bay — to allow its Khukri-class corvettes to be **distributed** across various locations in the archipelago. The Indian navy has prepared a Maritime Infrastructure Perspective Plan to transform smaller naval detachments in India’s island territories into larger maritime hubs.

However, an aggressive Indian strategy in Andaman Seas is likely to be complicated. Aside from the fact that ‘trade warfare’ isn’t known to be effective in peace-time, an Indian interdiction

strategy could trigger regional blowback against New Delhi. ASEAN and Bay states are bound to view the disruption of regular shipping in the high seas as a hostile act that imposes unacceptable costs on neutrals. Interdiction of Chinese sea lines of communication anywhere could expose the **vulnerabilities** of Indian shipping in many reaches of the Indo-Pacific, including in the Western Pacific. Indian warships must then focus on denying the PLAN tactical space in India’s near littorals, without deploying hard coercive means. In particular, the Indian navy will need to be careful not to target Chinese merchantmen in the international shipping lanes passing through the Andaman Seas, even as Indian submarines and ASW-capable air assets attempt to restrict China’s freedom of operation in the littoral.

More vital is the need to track Chinese naval activity and warship movements in the Bay of Bengal. Indian planners are aware that Beijing is looking to use its Belt and Road projects in the Bay region to reduce its tactical deficit vis-à-vis the Indian navy. In Hambantota, Cox Bazaar and Kyuakpyu, where China is building maritime infrastructure, the PLAN is likely to press for a greater presence to overcome logistical constraints in the Indian Ocean. Eventually, these facilities could be used to position naval ships and store military supplies.

A Wider Conflict in the Littoral

A broader question for Indian analysts to consider is whether an India-China skirmish could result in a wider conflict between the two countries? The possibility cannot be denied. As the second most powerful navy in the Indo-Pacific region, the PLAN would not consider backing down in the face of Indian assertiveness. As Table 1 shows, the maritime balance of power between the PLAN and IN is vastly in the former’s favor. Yet, Indian planners reckon the PLAN is not operationally ready for a fight in the Indian Ocean; not just on account of its long logistical lines, but also the lack of tactical air cover and maritime reconnaissance capability.

Type of Warship/ Submarines	China	India
Ballistic Missile Nuclear Submarines (SSBNs)	04	01
Nuclear Attack Submarines (SSNs)	06	01
Diesel Electric Submarines (SSKs)	50	13
Aircraft carriers	02	01
Destroyers	33	10
Frigates	54	12
Corvettes	42	23
Amphibious Carriers (LSTs/LPDs)	37	04

Table 1: China and India (Comparative Naval Strength) *Source: IISS Military Balance 2019*

In response to the stand-off in Eastern Ladakh, India has, in recent weeks, drawn closer to Quad partners- Japan, Australia and the United States. On October 19, the Indian government **announced** its decision to invite Australia for the 2020 edition of the Malabar exercises. The move is in line with what India's leading maritime thinkers have long advocated. In July this year, Admiral Arun Prakash, former Chief of Naval Staff had publicly called on Indian policymakers to shed their inhibition in expanding the Malabar exercises. **"The time for ambivalence is over"**, he noted in an op-ed in the *Indian Express*, "the moment to seek external balancing is upon New Delhi. It must seek an enlargement of the Quad – into a partnership of the likeminded."

A 'Quadrilateral' Malabar provides a fillip to naval efforts to impede Chinese movements in the IOR. Chinese analysts and communist party mandarins are sure to take note of the recently concluded four-nation exercises, held in two phases in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. Yet, Delhi will be wary of a strong Chinese reaction. Beijing is reflexively allergic to the idea of a military quadrilateral of democratic powers. In 2007, China formally protested a similar initiative that saw the coming together of Japan, India Australia, and the United States. Earlier this year, *The Global Times*, the Chinese communist party's mouthpiece, noted that India's intention to involve Australia in the Malabar drill, at a time of strained bilateral ties with China, could only be construed as a move directed at forming an anti-China alliance. By "putting more pressure on China" and moving to expand its "sphere of influence into the entire Indian Ocean and the South Pacific", India, the newspaper suggested, was risking harsh consequences.

Admittedly, at a time when India and China are negotiating a truce on the border in Eastern Ladakh, New Delhi's invitation to Australia to participate in the Malabar exercise does send contrary signals to Beijing. Indian decision makers had so far been careful to strike a balance in India's relationships with China and New Delhi's Quad partners. Even as Indian naval ships and aircraft patrolled the Andaman Sea, New Delhi desisted from aggravating moves that could complicate efforts to ensure a peaceful land border with China. The decision to invite Australia for the Malabar exercise could potentially move the needle away from reconciliation with Beijing. No matter how Indian officials frame it, Chinese watchers will construe India's Malabar decision as a provocation; the CCP leadership is bound to interpret the military-Quad as messaging that India will counter Chinese naval presence in the Bay of Bengal to secure a favorable outcome on the India-China border.

Act 'East' to Protect 'West'

If the tactical imperative for the Indian navy is to dominate the Eastern Indian Ocean, the strategic necessity is to keep China off-balance in the Western Pacific. Indian analysts argue that India cannot deter Chinese expansionism in Ladakh unless it shows credible capacity to challenge China's interests in regions where it is vulnerable.^{vii} Only when New Delhi is willing to project power east in the South China Sea – a region that lies at the core of China's national interests– will Beijing be more amenable to negotiations in other contested spaces.

As such, the IN has been expanding its Pacific operations under the 'Act East' outreach, aimed at establishing deeper political, economic, and institutional linkages with Southeast Asia. Through regular ship visits, naval exercises, and maritime capacity building programs, the Indian Navy has sought to **underscore** Indian economic and security stakes in the regional seas. Lately, New Delhi has also been vocal about its stand on the South China Sea disputes. Indian experts acknowledge the detrimental impact of China's assertive maneuvering on regional stability, and its exacerbation of existing power asymmetries. But Indian decision-makers also recognize that Beijing's tightening grip over the Spratly islands provides the PLAN with a platform to project naval power in India's neighborhood.^{viii} Pacific outreach is thus deemed necessary to restore strategic balance with China.^{ix}

Not surprisingly, Indian leaders constantly stress ASEAN centrality in New Delhi's Indo-Pacific strategy, investing diplomatic capital in the strengthening of ties with Southeast Asian countries. Given Southeast Asia's penchant for cooperation in areas of non-traditional security, the IN has sought to **collaborate** on counter terrorism, HADR, trafficking, transnational crime and marine conservation. The Indian navy also regularly conducts coordinated patrols with all the key ASEAN states including Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand.

The IN's challenge is to take its naval diplomacy with Southeast Asia to the next level by actively collaborating in maritime security initiatives in the South China Sea – for instance, partnering with Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore in the Malacca Strait Patrols.^x To oppose China's expansionist moves, the Indian navy must subtly, yet persistently, challenge Chinese dominance in the Western Pacific. A more proactive 'Act-East' could deter China in the Indian Ocean, without provoking a conflict in the regional littorals.

Recommendations

To conclude, New Delhi's options to constrain the PLAN in the Indian Ocean are essentially two-fold: either combine with friendly powers to deny the Chinese navy operational space in the Eastern Indian Ocean, or carry out joint operations with partner states in the Western Pacific. A sea-denial strategy seems more appropriate in the near-term, not least since it capitalizes on the PLAN's Indian Ocean vulnerabilities – the absence of operational logistics, ship-based air cover, and land-based maritime reconnaissance capabilities. The Indian Navy must exploit these gaps to reduce China's operational maneuverability in the Eastern Indian Ocean.

The navy, however, must leverage its strengths without appearing to be hostile, as overt aggression in the Indian Ocean will prompt China to respond with greater strength. Beyond enhancing its presence in the Andaman Sea and regional chokepoints, the IN must keep a watchful eye on the Bay of Bengal rim where there is likely to be a higher degree of Chinese naval presence. Basing facilities on India's eastern seaboard and the Andaman Islands must be expanded, and high-end combat assets and long-range surface-to-surface missiles deployed on the ANI. Even so, the IN must be careful not to challenge Chinese naval and commercial shipping in the high-seas; passive aggression, and not overt provocation, is likely to deliver results.

To maintain a high tempo of operations in the Eastern Indian Ocean, the Indian navy will need to increase the frequency of bilateral and trilateral operational exercises with Quad partners and regional maritime forces. Indian decision makers must weigh the pros and cons of inviting Australia for the Malabar exercises, with the full awareness that an overly aggressive approach could cause an escalation in tensions with China.

Maritime engagement with littoral neighbors must be enhanced in keeping with **Prime Minister's SAGAR doctrine**, and the IN must also broaden its engagement with key Indian Ocean ASEAN states like Thailand and Indonesia. While focusing on the Eastern littorals, India's naval leadership should not neglect the challenge posed by the Pakistan-China maritime nexus in the Western Indian Ocean. Unlike Bay of Bengal countries that strive to maintain equidistance between India and China, Pakistan is more likely to be used as a Chinese surrogate in a conflict with India.

In the long run, a counter-projection strategy in the Western Pacific is likely to be more effective. China's core interests lie in the South China Sea, where the PLAN is facing pushback from the US and its allies. It is also a space where Beijing is **acutely sensitive** to real and

perceived infringements of sovereignty. India must deny China space in East Asia by **marking its presence** in the South China Sea, China's strategic backyard. By expanding the scope of its naval deployments in the Western Pacific, India could deter China without causing conflict in the littorals.

There should be no doubt that in the long run, the most **viable approach** for India is to emulate Beijing's playbook and leverage naval operations in the distant seas for geopolitical effect. A nuanced high-seas presence in China's near-littorals – the South China Sea and the Western Pacific at large – is likely to be most effective in preserving a favorable balance of power in the Indian Ocean.

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