

**India and China at Sea: Competition for Naval
Dominance in the Indian Ocean**, edited by David Brewster,
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A multitude of reasons, like world geopolitics, rapid double-digit economic growth, military development, trade, presence in multinational organisations and global initiatives such as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Maritime Silk Route (MSR), keeps China at the forefront in global news. Any discussion of world order or superpowers is incomplete without the mention of China, and more so because of its contentious maritime issues. China's swift rise in the world order due to a strong economic surge and increasing military strength also predicates its aspiration to be a great power; and a great power status is ordained to a nation which is able to influence events, on land or sea, away from its homeland in support of the homeland. This is enunciated in the 2015 White Paper by China, where a marked shift from the erstwhile 'offshore defence' to a pronounced 'open ocean protection' in the maritime domain is interpreted as follows: having secured the defences in the South China Sea, it is time to protect Chinese interests to the West, namely, the Indian Ocean.

With the fervour and tempo of China's forays into the Indian Ocean at a feverish high, the volume edited by David Brewster, having an assemblage of well-researched articles, is a must read. Brewster is with the National Security College, Canberra, Australia, where he is a leading

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academic expert on Indian strategic affairs. The collection of essays presented in the book by known academics presents the broad spectrum of issues the two nations face in the Indian Ocean.

The volume argues, via the various contributions, the different facets of the growing geopolitical situation arising out of China's entry into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). China has justified its actions, beginning with its anti-piracy patrols since 2008, its growing investments in the region, the increasing number of Chinese nationals working here and thereby their interests and protection, to the trend of acquiring vantage ports and forward basing in the name of economic growth and protection of Chinese sea lines of communication (SLOCs), amongst other reasons.

On the other hand, India is a powerful and influential presence in the region and uses the maritime medium as one of the primary means of extending her relations and trade with the neighbourhood. Under the Modi government, as a result of the slow shift in the thought processes from a continental outlook to the maritime domain, the Indian Ocean rose to a level of priority in foreign policy arguably not seen since long, which is why the increased military presence and the 'encirclement' or the 'string of pearls' theory makes the Indian Ocean a jostling space between the two giant nations.

The volume mainly reconnoiters the Indo-China maritime security conundrums in broadly three sections. The first section delves into the perceptions of India and China about each other's legitimacy of the individual ambitions, and therefore the presence of their platforms in the Indian Ocean. The second section brings out the strategic connotations of the naval presence of either nations in the Indian Ocean with a comparison of force levels, capabilities, doctrinal thought processes and domain awareness, which is considered a critical capability for either nation. The third section is more concentrated on the economics of the MSR in the Indian Ocean and its relevance to the whole of Asia, while India remains apprehensive of the future outcomes of the initiative. The book is thus a well-packaged deal that takes the reader through the paces in a gradual complexity of escalation till it concludes with the last chapter talking about the best outcome coming out of dialogue and engagement.

In the first section, Brewster's introduction pertinently states that after having narrowed down the dynamics between the two nations to differing perspectives, maritime differences and national ideologies, the essence of the chapters looks more at 'managing' the space in the IOR, rather than definitive steps to resolve simmering issues. He also claims

that India has a proprietary view of the Indian Ocean, thus viewing the presence of other extra-regional powers as unnecessary, while Beijing refuses to acknowledge India's perceptions in the region. It is this dichotomy that leads to heightened threat perceptions at Delhi. China's thinking largely remains opaque, leading others to perceive notions that may or may not truly exist. John Garver (Chapter 4, 'Limitations on China's Ability to Understand Indian Apprehension about China's Rise as a Naval Power') calls this the 'autistic thinking' of China in not addressing the trepidations of its neighbours, especially India and Japan, of its rapid military growth and increasing global footprint. Jingdong Yuan (Chapter 2, 'Managing Maritime Competition between India and China') starts on a pragmatic view that China, while developing inroads into the Indian Ocean for economic interests and energy security, should include India in its plans to mitigate setting off alarms due to these initiatives. This lack of empathy by China has set off a train of influence and counter-influence activities in the region by both nations. India has gone on an overdrive in reaching out to the neighbours in the IOR (Sagar, Neighbours First policy, etc.) reasons Prमित Pal Chaudhuri in Chapter 3, 'The China Factor in Indian Ocean Policy of the Modi and Singh Governments'.

In the second section, Chinese scholar You Ji (Chapter 5, 'The Indian Ocean: A Grand Sino-Indian Game of "Go"') justifies that China is looking at 'far seas' expansion to protect her SLOCs and overseas interests in and around the IOR. This mandates a requirement of a blue-water capability of carriers and nuclear submarines. However, Abhijit Singh (Chapter 10, 'India's Naval Interests in the Pacific') argues against the thought of requiring carriers and nuclear submarines for protecting trade in the absence of any credible military threat in the SLOCs. As a result, it appears that China is looking at establishing strategic primacy in the IOR. This, then, brings out the comparison of force levels and capabilities of the navies of both the nations, where You Ji categorically claims that complete force projection in the IOR is still some time off due to capability deficits on the Chinese side and justifies the same saying building carriers is a wrong strategy for escorting merchant ships.

India enjoys a distinct advantage in terms of geography in the Indian Ocean, which allays the advantage that China may enjoy in terms of technology or naval platform numbers, as put forward by Raja Menon (Chapter 7, 'Scenarios for China's Naval Deployment in the Indian Ocean and India's Naval Response'). Further, Darshana Baruah, in

Chapter 9, 'India's Evolving Maritime Domain Awareness Strategy in the Indian Ocean', brings out that India's efforts in collaborating with other countries for enhancing the maritime domain awareness (MDA) in the IOR are in consonance with adapting to the changes in the maritime environment, rather than a direct reaction to Chinese activities. However, this is not viewed similarly by the Chinese, who have gotten into agreements for dual-use ports, logistical support bases, etc., thus giving credence to the 'string of pearls' theory. This segment covers a very broad gamut of comparing capacities and numerical capabilities of the dynamics involved in the friction in the Indian Ocean, with quite well-researched footnotes, thus providing the reader with adequate information.

The last section actually forms the crux of the perspective differences between the two Asian giants—economics. However, Chapter 11, 'The Maritime Silk Route and India: The Challenge of Overcoming Cognitive Divergence', by Zhu Li, seems very much toeing China's party line and soft peddling the whole idea of the MSR and BRI. Zhu says that the multibillion-dollar project is for the progress of the entire South Asian region, without any underlying motives, and that India's mistrust of the Chinese initiatives is undermining the projects. Though he claims that building port infrastructure may be advantageous to the host nation, he does not cover the consequences of being unable to repay the soft loans, as is the case in Hambantota Port, a scheme now being termed as a 'debt trap'. Jabin Jacob (Chapter 12, 'China's Evolving Strategy in the Indian Ocean Region: Risks in China's MSR Initiative') is more pragmatic in his approach and talks of political complications of the MSR–BRI-like influx of large numbers of Chinese workers into the host nation, routes passing through largely dangerous areas such as Pakistan and the repercussions of the current Chinese economy's slowdown. The concluding chapter by Rory Medcalf (Chapter 13, 'India and China: Terms of Engagement in the Western Indo-Pacific') says it all with this statement: 'the Himalayas are no longer a barrier to Chinese strategic ambition. China has crossed them—by sea.' China is here to stay in the Indian Ocean, but it would augur well for China to engage positively with India and other South Asian nations who have a larger say in the region rather than act unilaterally. India and China need to have a cooperative, constructive, comprehensive and competitive dialogue on the IOR.

The volume presents a balanced view with contributions, statements and citations from both sides of the Malacca. The sensitivities of both

China and India are put in focus, with the broad perspectives shown by various organisations and countries. *India & China at Sea: Competition for Naval Dominance in the Indian Ocean* segregates the underlying Indo-China ideation and perception issues in Chapters 1–4, with respect to individual strategic roles, security imperatives, etc., and Chapters 5–10 discuss the various strategies being employed that influence interactions in the maritime domain. Chapters 11 and 12 are articles on the growing presence of Chinese economy in the region and Chapter 13 gives a viewpoint on how India and other nations could engage with China constructively while it asserts itself in the world order.

Every chapter in the collection has takeaways for the reader over almost all the issues, ranging from the differences in perceptions and apprehensions to comparison of maritime capabilities, that are relevant in the Sino-Indian context. However, the trend of China offering loans to smaller beleaguered nations for developing huge infrastructural projects and later on changing the terms of agreement to suit its purposes when the repayment of the loan cannot be made could also have been covered, in depth, with respect to nations in the IOR. Finally, the anthology makes for very easy reading and the simple language with less jargon gives the reader a firm grasp on the subject. The volume is a must read for interested scholars, academics, practitioners, researchers, etc., in getting a handle on India and China's competition for naval dominance in the Indian Ocean, as the title says.

