

## **The Costliest Pearl: China's Struggle for India's Ocean**

by Bertil Lintner, Chennai: Westland Publications Pvt. Ltd, 2019,  
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The 'string of pearls' is a western narrative about China's economic and/or military engagements with countries in the Indian Ocean littorals with a strategic outlook of encircling the Indian peninsula. Most of these engagements are established in locations overlooking the important trade Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The 'string of pearls' theory, enunciating an expansionist view of China in the Indian Ocean, is what makes Bertil Lintner's book a knowledgeable read for Indo-Pacific watchers. Lintner, a Swedish journalist, is one of the leading experts on South Asian geopolitics with a special interest in Southeast Asia. This book speaks of the various strategic dalliances that China has engaged with IOR countries surrounding the Indian peninsula, and more importantly the smaller island nations, and what could be presumed as its intentions for doing so.

*The Costliest Pearl* is not the usual run-of-the-mill story of China and the 'debt trap' theory. It is a thoroughly researched history of the native actors in the IOR, namely, Myanmar, Djibouti, Mauritius, the French island territories, Seychelles, Maldives, the outlying islands of Australia and the Indian island groups. The story stitched together by Lintner is thus about the countries of the East (Bay of Bengal) and deep South

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Indian Ocean and their strategic importance in giving China maritime space in the region. The author has delved deep into the modern histories of these small but vital nations and the intense political competition that swings the balance of these nations towards China or others, including India, from time to time. The book is a trove of information on the ways of these 'pearls' in the Indian Ocean and where they stand as on today.

Lintner weaves small strands of facts and stories into an intricate web of the politics in the region. He begins by narrating the importance of a road between Jiegao in China—a once nondescript tiny trading outpost that is now a bustling business centre—and Muse in Myanmar through which trade flows to places as far as north-eastern Indian towns, flooding them with Chinese products. The crux of the matter is how an Indo-Myanmar initiative for trade actually benefits China's landlocked south-western provinces in pushing through their wares. Not far from this road is the Kyaukpyu Port from where oil and gas lines have been laid to Yunnan to circumvent the Malacca choke point. This 'Myanmar Corridor' is a key enterprise of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The importance of the Indian Ocean is reiterated by the fact that four-fifths of container traffic between Asia and the world and three-fifths of world oil supplies pass through the region and China becomes a dominant player if the BRI is successfully implemented.

Djibouti's strategic location at the mouth of Red Sea and Suez Canal has catapulted this tiny nation into a global centre for military outposts. It earns valuable currency by hosting foreign military bases of France, the United States (US), China and Japan. Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) too are contemplating opening military bases in Djibouti. Historically, Djibouti was a trading post owing to its access to the seas and, even today, 70 per cent of its economy is dependent on transshipment of goods to landlocked Ethiopia. China appears to have taken advantage of these factors in establishing its presence in this region. Also, taken together with the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, there is a growing doubt whether China's presence in the region is for securing its energy resources and protecting trade lines, as claimed, or for a larger stake in the region.

Myanmar's internal politics has led it to tilt favourably towards China; and it was in turn viewed by China as a springboard to spread Maoist Communism to South and Southeast Asia. Through the 1970s and the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping supported the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), which, in turn, supported and trained rebel movements

in Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and even India. At a later stage when the CPB was put down, China was quick to economically aid the new military junta regime. However, the military elite were well aware of their fight with the CPB cadre, heavily armed by the Chinese, and this led to a see-saw in relations depending on who held the reins of power in Myanmar. The author states that Western sanctions and attitude towards Myanmar also contributed in pushing Myanmar towards China. On the whole, Myanmar has remained a close ally of China.

His next focus is Mauritius whose ethnicity poses a problem for China but not the preponderant dependence on Chinese money. The author looks back to the fifteenth century to chalk out the colonial history of Mauritius featuring the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, and the British. The Chinese began immigrating to Mauritius from the mid-nineteenth century and were an established community in the 1950s. Lintner also talks of the dubious ownership of the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT)—mainly the island of Diego Garcia—which is a mainstay for the US forces in the region.

Seychelles is also seeing China, India and other regional powers locked in an intense competition to gain influence. The islands sit in an important geographic confluence of the BIOT, Indian subcontinent and Africa. Coups, counter-coups, mercenaries, meticulously related by the author, all dot the history of this idyllic island group. Lintner mentions the 1986 coup attempt by Ogilvy Berlouis, the then Minister of Defence, which was thwarted by the deployment of Indian Navy's *INS Vindhyagiri* to Port Victoria. China has also been able to inveigle naval facilities for PLA Navy ships at Seychelles in the garb of supply and support to ships fighting piracy off the Horn of Africa. China's overtures towards Seychelles are being monitored by India and countered with offers of infrastructural projects, military training assistance, and maritime engagements.

An interesting aspect of the book is the light it sheds on the French presence in the Indian Ocean. The island of Reunion is not just French, it is France, the author says. The French connection of the islands in the Indian Ocean started in 1642, till the process began in the 1940s to turn them into overseas department of France. In this period, the islands saw military, political and nuclear intrigue. Between Reunion, Kerguelen and other islands, France commands 2.5 million sq km of exclusive economic zone in the IOR, bigger than that of India's. The Chinese counterbalanced the French presence in the region with their

own investment in Comoros. Comoros and France share a strained relation due to the French ownership of Mayotte Island, which China has manipulated to its advantage. China has financed stadiums, schools, airports, power plant, clinics, mosques, trained Comoran soldiers and finally, got Comoros to cooperate in the BRI. Another erstwhile French territory in the region, Madagascar, was similarly lost to the Chinese with their overwhelming economic investments.

Closer to India, the islands of Maldives straddle a crucial and strategic position in the Indian Ocean. The political set-up of these islands has been beset with ideological differences swinging between India and China depending on who was running the country. Recently, during the presidencies of Presidents Yameen and Nasheed, Maldives has been anti-India, or pro-China, with some occasions being diplomatically edgy. The author states that it is rumoured that in the late 1990s, a secret defence agreement was signed between China and Maldives regarding the lease of an island for use as a Chinese submarine base (p. 117). President Xi too has claimed that Maldives was an important port of call in the ancient Maritime Silk Road (a concept claimed to be fictitious by the author), it would be revived in the twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road initiative. In 2014, Maldives signed in support of the BRI, one of the first countries to do so. The Maldives is more important strategically than Mauritius or Seychelles and it is unlikely that the Chinese would let go of the archipelago easily.

The Cocos (Keeling) and Christmas islands provide Australia an extended reach for surveillance, air defence, maritime and ground strike operations and could, in effect, serve as 'unsinkable aircraft carriers'. These islands were fought over by the British, Germans and the Japanese in both World Wars. An interesting interlude in the strategic significance of the Cocos Islands is the ownership of these islands by the Clunies-Ross family from the 1820s till they were purchased from the family in 1978 by the Australian government. The author discusses the dilemma faced by Australia with defence alliances with the US since World War II, while also, in the more recent times, having China as its largest trading partner. A counterbalance to China's increasing influence in the Indian Ocean is Australia's Indian Ocean islands, which can be utilized by agencies allied to Australia. Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper talks about improving the facilities on the islands to cater for maritime surveillance aircraft.

Lintner's book delves into the histories of the 'pearls' of the Indian Ocean to show why they are what they are. It should not be misconstrued as a China-heavy tome on what the Chinese are doing to influence the countries in the IOR, though it does mention Chinese influence or power play to gain the cooperation of these countries. The book is a factual recount of history with no rhetoric or bias towards anyone in the region, and therefore offers the reader a clear view of the situation as it is. The chapters in the book are segregated by country, with a little overview on surrounding nations too and China's influence on them. This makes for easy reading with neither military nor economic jargon to obscure the reader's thought. This book is indeed a good read for Indo-Pacific watchers to understand the nuances of the nations discussed and their worldview.

