

China's Strategic Maneuver in South Asia: Analyzing the String of Pearls and Its Consequences for India

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Abstract- *This study scrutinizes the strategic expansion of China within South Asia through the analytical prism of the 'String of Pearls' theory. It posits that China is systematically establishing a series of maritime assets that could potentially serve dual commercial and military purposes, encircling India and influencing the regional security architecture. The paper dissects China's strategic motivations, the deployment of its methods, and the resultant ramifications on the South Asian nations, with a particular focus on India. It provides a nuanced understanding of the geopolitical shifts engendered by China's ascendancy, offering strategic insights for policymakers to craft informed responses. The research underscores the imperative of comprehending China's burgeoning clout to safeguard regional equilibrium and foster constructive engagement amongst South Asian states.*

Purpose and Significance of the Research: The purpose of this research is to analyze the strategic implications of China's policies in South Asia, with a focus on the String of Pearls theory and its impact on India. The significance lies in understanding how China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean Region could alter the strategic balance and affect India's security and economic interests. It also aims to provide insights into the potential geopolitical shifts in South Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region, offering policymakers a comprehensive analysis to inform future strategies.

This research is particularly important for scholars, strategists, and policymakers who are interested in the dynamics of regional power politics, the challenges of maintaining regional stability, and the prospects for cooperation and competition in South Asia.

I. INTRODUCTION

Overview of China's Rising Influence in South Asia: China's influence in South Asia has been growing steadily over the past few decades. This is evident through its increased economic investments, diplomatic engagements, and strategic partnerships within the region. China has become a major trading partner for many South Asian countries and has invested heavily in infrastructure projects across the region, including ports, highways, and energy plants. These initiatives are often seen as part of China's broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to enhance regional connectivity and economic development.

Definition of the String of Pearls Theory: The "String of Pearls" theory refers to the network of Chinese military and commercial facilities and relationships along its sea lines of communication, which extend from the Chinese mainland to Port Sudan in the Horn of Africa. The sea lines run through several major maritime choke points such as the Strait of Mandeb, Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Malacca, and the Lombok Strait as well as other strategic maritime centers in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Somalia. The theory suggests that China could potentially use these "pearls" to project power, secure energy supply routes, and potentially contain India's rise.

Section 1: Historical Context and Evolution of China's South Asia Policy:

Early Relations Between China and South Asian Countries Post-1949: After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China's relations with South Asian countries were characterized by a passive response to international affairs. During this period, China was largely preoccupied with its own internal challenges and revolutionary changes. However, the concept of "Zhoubian," or neighborhood diplomacy, began to take shape, emphasizing the importance of peaceful coexistence with neighboring countries. China's approach to its South Asian neighbors during this time was influenced by the broader geopolitical context of the Cold War and the need to secure its borders and regional interests.

Shifts in Policy During the Cold War and Post-Cold War Era: China's foreign policy during the Cold War went through several distinctive stages, starting with the "Lean to One Side" policy, which saw China aligning closely with the Soviet Union. The Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance in 1950 marked a significant alliance against perceived threats from the United States and its allies. However, the relationship between China and the Soviet Union eventually deteriorated, leading to a realignment of China's foreign policy. In the post-Cold War era, China adopted a more balanced approach, reducing support for

revolutionary movements abroad and focusing on economic development and regional stability.

Current Trends Under Xi Jinping’s Leadership: Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China has pursued a more assertive foreign policy, seeking to expand its influence and promote the vision of a “community of common destiny.” Xi’s leadership has been marked by a focus on consolidating power within the Chinese Communist Party, modernizing the military, and pursuing ambitious economic initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative. This has led to increased engagement with South Asian countries, both economically and strategically. Xi’s approach reflects a confidence in China’s rising status and a belief in the potential for a rejuvenated Chinese nation to play a leading role on the global stage.

These trends highlight the evolution of China’s foreign policy from a reactive stance in the early years of the PRC to a proactive and strategic engagement with South Asia under Xi Jinping’s leadership.

Section 2: The String of Pearls Theory:

Origins and Development of the String of Pearls Theory: The “String of Pearls” theory originated from a report by the U.S. consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton in 2004. It posited that China would try to expand its naval presence by building civilian maritime infrastructure along the Indian Ocean periphery. The theory has since evolved to describe China’s strategic initiative to create a network of commercial and military bases in countries along the Indian Ocean, which are seen as a means to protect its trade interests and secure energy supply routes.

Key Components of the Strategy: Commercial and Military Bases: The strategy involves China developing a network of ports and bases across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). These include ports like Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Kyaukpyu in Myanmar. While these facilities primarily serve commercial purposes, they also have the potential to be used for military objectives, such as resupplying naval ships and submarines, which could enable China to project power across the region.

Geopolitical Implications for the Indian Ocean Region: The String of Pearls strategy has significant geopolitical implications for the IOR. It challenges the traditional dominance of regional powers like India and the United States. The development of Chinese bases around the Indian Ocean is perceived as a strategic encirclement of India, potentially threatening its security and influence in the region.

Moreover, it could lead to a shift in the balance of power, with China gaining the ability to control vital maritime trade routes and exert influence over the politics and economies of IOR countries². This has prompted countries like India to strengthen their naval capabilities and seek closer security ties with other regional players to counterbalance China’s growing presence.

Section 3: China’s Strategic Interests in South Asia:

Economic Opportunities and Trade Routes: South Asia’s economic landscape is shaped by its strategic geographic position, which offers significant opportunities for trade and commerce. The region serves as a crucial link between the East and the West, with vital sea lanes and trade routes passing through it. Initiatives like the World Bank’s Accelerating Transport and Trade Connectivity in Eastern South Asia (ACCESS) Program aim to boost regional trade by reducing trade and transport costs and transit time along key corridors. Moreover, the region’s economic potential is further highlighted by the World Bank’s report on expanding opportunities toward inclusive growth, emphasizing the need for broad reform programs to put South Asia on a more robust and inclusive growth path.

Territorial Disputes and Security Challenges: Territorial disputes in South Asia are a significant source of tension and conflict, often stemming from colonial legacies and competing national interests. The South China Sea, for example, is a hotspot for territorial claims by multiple countries, including China, which has led to increased militarization and diplomatic confrontations³. These disputes pose a threat to regional peace and security and have implications for international maritime law and freedom of navigation. Additionally, traditional security narratives in South Asia revolve around inter-state conflicts, border disputes, and the threat of war, further complicating the security landscape.

Containing Indian Power and Resisting American Influence: China’s strategy in South Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region includes efforts to contain Indian power and resist American influence. This involves using economic, political, and military means to establish a dominant position in the region. For instance, China’s investment in ports and infrastructure projects like the Belt and Road Initiative is seen to increase its leverage over regional countries and counterbalance India’s and America’s presence. Furthermore, China’s military activities and territorial claims, such as those in the South China Sea, are viewed as part of a broader strategy to challenge the existing regional order and assert its own vision for the future.

Section 4: Implications for India:

Threats to India's Maritime Security and Economic Interests: India's maritime security is crucial due to its extensive coastline and dependence on sea routes for trade. The primary threats to India's maritime security and economic interests include piracy, terrorism, smuggling, illegal fishing, and environmental degradation. These threats can disrupt India's trade routes and affect its economy, which relies heavily on maritime transport for international trade. Additionally, the security of India's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and its energy imports, which are predominantly transported by sea, are of significant concern.

Potential Encirclement and Impact on India's Regional Clout: The potential encirclement refers to the strategic positioning of Chinese infrastructure and influence around India's periphery, which could limit India's strategic options and regional influence. This includes China's development of ports and facilities in countries around the Indian Ocean, which are part of the String of Pearls strategy. Such encirclement could impact India's regional clout by challenging its role as the predominant power in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region.

India's Counterstrategies and Regional Partnerships: In response to these challenges, India has developed counterstrategies and regional partnerships to bolster its security and influence. These include strengthening its naval capabilities, enhancing maritime domain awareness, and engaging in regional cooperation initiatives. India's strategic partnerships with major powers and participation in regional organizations like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) are part of its broader foreign policy to balance global alliances and address regional challenges. India's Act East Policy and Neighborhood First Policy are examples of initiatives aimed at strengthening ties with neighboring countries and enhancing regional cooperation.

Section 5: Case Studies:

Case Studies: Strategic Developments and Responses in the Indo-Pacific

Gwadar Port, Pakistan Gwadar Port is a deep-sea port situated on the Arabian Sea at Gwadar in Balochistan, Pakistan. It is a key part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and is considered a link between the Belt and Road Initiative and the Maritime Silk Road projects. The port's strategic location, not far from the Strait of Hormuz, gives it potential to serve as a major trade hub. However, its development has raised concerns about China's growing

influence in the region and the possibility of the port being used for military purposes.

Hambantota Port, Sri Lanka the Hambantota International Port in Sri Lanka is another significant "pearl" in China's strategic layout. Notable for its 99-year lease to China Merchant Ports, it was opened in 2010 and is Sri Lanka's second-largest port. The port has been a subject of controversy due to concerns over Sri Lanka's sovereignty and the debt trap associated with Chinese investments. There are also apprehensions about the port's potential military use by China, which could alter the strategic balance in the Indian Ocean.

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) CPEC is a 3,000 km Chinese infrastructure network project in Pakistan, aimed at securing and reducing the passage for China's energy imports from the Middle East. It includes roadway and railway projects, energy sector developments, and other cooperative initiatives. CPEC is expected to create jobs and boost economic growth in Pakistan, but it also presents geopolitical challenges, particularly for India, due to the corridor's proximity to the disputed region of Kashmir.

India's Response: Act East Policy and Indo-Pacific Strategies India's Act East Policy focuses on enhancing connectivity and economic integration with Southeast Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific region⁶. It has evolved from an economic initiative to include strategic and cultural dimensions, with an emphasis on infrastructure development, trade, and people-to-people contacts.

In terms of Indo-Pacific strategies, India promotes a vision of a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based order in the region. India's approach includes strengthening partnerships with countries like the US, Japan, and Australia, and participating in regional forums such as the ASEAN, Quad, RIC, SCO, and BRICS. The strategy is seen as a way to counterbalance China's influence and ensure regional stability.

These case studies illustrate the complex interplay of economic opportunities, strategic interests, and geopolitical challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. They highlight the need for careful diplomacy and strategic foresight in navigating the evolving landscape.

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