

## China-India Competition in the Indian Ocean

By David Scott

China and India continue to circle each other across the Indian Ocean. On the one hand, their acute border confrontations along the Himalayas, most notably the 2020 Galwan clash, have receded in the wake of a limited disengagement agreement reached in late 2024. On the other hand, their ongoing maritime competition is left all the more noticeable in the Indian Ocean.

### Soft Power Initiatives

The China-Indian Ocean Regional Forum (CIORF) established by China in 2022, but crucially unattended by India, stands as a counterpoint to the Indian Ocean Conference (IOC) which India has led since 2016.

At the 3rd CIORF, held in December 2024, China announced the inauguration of a China-Indian Ocean Region Center for maritime cooperation and training. In his keynote speech, **Wang Yong** emphasised that “Yunnan is ready to play its role as a hub for win-win development between China and the Indian Ocean region, [promoting] better connectivity.” To India’s disquiet, this involves the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) and the current development of China’s Kyaukpyu port



project; which allows China to circumvent India’s grip on the Malacca Strait through Indian bases on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and to instead establish China’s presence on the Bay of Bengal coastline.

At the 8<sup>th</sup> Indian Ocean Conference, held in February 2025, India’s External Affairs Minister **Subrahmanyam Jaishankar** delivered a keynote address that, while avoiding any direct reference to China, made several pointed remarks concerning the Chinese. He highlighted India’s participation in the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMTT), and the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC)—all positioned as alternatives to China’s Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative, which India continues to boycott. Jaishankar stressed India’s growing role as a “First Responder” in the Indian Ocean region, an implicit critique of China’s presence and regional involvement.

He noted India's "robust" deployment of naval forces in the Northern Arabian Sea and Gulf of Aden against Houthi disruptions, whereas China had instead received exemption from Houthi shipping attacks.

Within the region, Jaishankar lauded India's expanding naval and coastguard partnerships, particularly with Mauritius. This relationship was further cemented by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's subsequent visit to Mauritius in March 2025, during which India's access to Alagea Island was reaffirmed. Modi was also awarded the **Grand Commander of the Order Of the Star and Key of the Indian Ocean (GCSK)**, Mauritius' highest honour.

On the institutional front, Jaishankar noted how "energetic" India was in regional institution-building. He specifically mentioned BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC), and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)—all venues where China has no membership or observer status. He also described the Quad (which brings together Australia, India, Japan, and the US) as the most "notable" example of India's plurilateral cooperation. The Quad's joint infrastructure initiatives and naval cooperation have been explicitly condemned by China. Furthermore, the April 2025 trilateral agreement between India, Sri Lanka, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to develop the Trincomalee's energy hub was presented as a **"strategic counterweight"** to China's Maritime Silk Road initiative.

At the BIMSTEC Summit in May 2025, a forum which neither included Pakistan nor China, **Modi** outlined a series of Indian-led regional initiatives, including the establishment of a Sustainable Maritime Transport Centre that would "enhance our cooperation in maritime security across the region."

### **Hard Power—Exercises and Deployment**

Hard power naval deployments and exercises remain fundamentally distinct for both countries. India's commitment to maritime security through multilateral exercises continues to expand through initiatives such as the Milan biennial exercise. The 11<sup>th</sup> edition, held in February 2024, now includes participation from 51 navies, including navies from the Indian Ocean littoral and islands nations, the Gulf, Southeast Asia (Vietnam) and East Asia (Japan, South Korea)—notably excluding China.

As part of a new wider Mahasagar strategic vision for the Indian Ocean, India announced two maiden exercise-deployments in April 2025. Analyst **Ashu Mann** characterised this strategic move as "motivated" by China considerations. The first initiative was the Africa-India Key Maritime Engagement (AIKEYME), a six-day biennial drill involving counterparts from Comoros, Djibouti, Eritrea, India, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, South Africa, and Tanzania. The *South China Morning Post* described AIKEYME as a direct **"counter"** to

China and its influence in the broader Indian Ocean region.

The second initiative featured the INS Sunayna, which was temporarily renamed as the Indian Ocean Ship (IOS) Sagar. The Indian crew was joined by counterparts from the Comoros, Kenya, Madagascar, the Maldives, Mauritius, Mozambique, the Seychelles, Sri Lanka, and Tanzania for a six-week tour. The tour included port calls at Dar-es-Salaam, Nacala, Port Louis, Port Victoria, and Male, as well as joint surveillance of the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of Tanzania, Mozambique, Mauritius, and Seychelles.

Conversely, China's naval exercise patterns in the Indian Ocean do not involve India. China regularly participates in bilateral naval exercise with Pakistan, whereas there have been no such bilateral naval exercises by China with India. China also participates in the Aman biennial exercises, hosted by Pakistan since 2007, which India does not attend. At the February 2025 edition of this exercise, the Chinese navy was thus able to operate alongside naval ships from around the Indian Ocean and littoral, reflecting the growing maritime collaboration between Pakistan and China. Analyst **Shivani Sharma** from *India Today* noted that this closer partnership and security cooperation is “posing challenges to India's maritime dominance.”

Meanwhile, India has also sought to broaden its strategic engagements with other external actors. The France-India-UAE cooperation initiative, running since 2022 at

the Ministerial level, gained momentum with the Desert Knight exercise held over the Arabian Sea in December 2024. In these same waters, China's trilateral exercise with Iran and Russia continued in March 2025 with the latest iteration of Maritime Security Belt. In contrast, while India continues to drill bilaterally with Iran (in October 2024) and Russia (Indra exercise, March to April 2025), it has avoided this particular trilateral format involving China.

## Conclusion

While some easing of land tensions is discernible, the ongoing military build-up along the Himalayas persist. No “charm diplomacy” encounters between Modi and Xi are scheduled for 2025. In contrast, Modi's visit to Washington in February marked a “**boost**” for further defence cooperation in the Indian Ocean, exemplified by the approximately \$131 million SeaVision Maritime Domain Awareness technology sale from the US to India.

As **Jaishankar** noted in February, “geo-politics is a reality;” a sentiment echoed in the strategic dynamics of the region: China's encirclement of India and the “Malacca dilemma,” whereby India holds a potential chokepoint over China's critical trade routes. Speaking at the end of May, India's Chief of Defence Staff General, **Anil Chauha**, pointed out the geopolitical and military implications:

“Shifting attention to the Indian Ocean Region, especially the northern Bay of Bengal, our geopolitical reality means we cannot move north due to tensions with China .... Therefore, the sea is our only viable pathway. That’s why the ocean is not just important, it’s our destiny.”

Yet, geopolitical reality is on display as China’s Two-Oceans doctrine, and perhaps its destiny, pulls it toward both the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

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