

**Volume 2; Issue 1
January to March 2026**

E-ISSN: 3049-1134

International Journal of Political Studies

Peer Reviewed Indexed Refereed Journal

Quarterly International Research Journal



**‘Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)’ in the ‘Indian Ocean Region (IOR)’ and
Evolving India’s Diplomatic Initiatives**

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Abstract

The IOR has gained pre-eminent place within the ambit of India’s foreign policy because of the involved geo-strategic and geo-economic stakes therein. However, India has accelerated its diplomatic initiative with different countries in the region to exploit aligned interests. Simultaneously, India’s interests also came under pressure from expanding China’s global infrastructure architecture, the BRI. The objective of the research study is to examine the emerging nature of challenges to India’s strategic stakes in the IOR and the evolving pattern of India’s diplomatic responses, pursuing either a bilateral or multilateral strategy. China intends to dominate the region by controlling the major choke points and the strategic assets of the countries situated across the IOR. That has brought major strategic competition in the IOR between China and India on who will control more stakes. The analytical-descriptive research method has been applied to investigate the research objective. This study tries to fill the research gap with regard to evolving strategic competition between India and China in the IOR. It concluded that India has diplomatically engaged either multilaterally or bilaterally in the IOR to counter China. To accomplish the research study, primary and secondary literature have been utilised.

Keywords: *India, China, USA, West Asia, South Asia, BRI, DTP, IOR, etc.*

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INTRODUCTION

According to the IMF Report (2024), China (GDP USD 18,273 billion) has emerged as the second-largest economy, after the USA (GDP 29,167 billion). Phenomenally, the Economic Modernisation Program (1976) contributed to subsequent major economic transformation in China, which was achieved in the 1990s (Clover, 2017). Economic trajectory of China in the last four decades, undoubtedly, has helped to figure out its global vision for the new millennium. Evidently, in 2023, a document entitled '*A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions (2023)*'² envisioned China's global vision. However, certain policies have already been launched, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Global Development Index (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilizational Initiative (GCI), which share the philosophy of a shared future. Among all, the BRI has evolved as a flagship policy to carry forward the goal of shared humanity, which is geographically reached across the region. In comparison to all other regions, the BRI in the IOR, which covers the ASEAN, the SAARC, and GCC countries, where China has focused its attention and poured a significant proportion of monetary funds. The basic reason is that a strategic hold over the IOR would ensure the economic development of China through extensive trade and help to realise the goal of regional power. Therefore, the BRI's appendages, such as the Silk and Road

Initiative (SRI) and the Maritime Silk Road, are pertinently focusing on the building of a strong connectivity network across the countries in the IOR. Four out of six economic corridors of the SRI, such as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIMEC), the Indo-China Economic Corridor (ICEC), and the China–West Asia Economic Corridor (CWAE), focus on connecting China with the IOR. For this purpose, China has reframed its foreign policy priority in the IOR by promoting economic integration and subsidising political conflicts on maritime boundaries. The Indian policymakers have perceived the BRI in the IOR as an emerging threat to India's strategic interests there. Hence, a sort of *strategic discomfort* within India's foreign policy is apparent. Because India worries about shifting BoP in favour of China. In the post-LGP period, the IOR region, like China, is also a top priority for India, because of its economic potential. The development in the IOR has been considered as China's strategy to circumvent India's position within the policy-making circle. The reason for the shifting political equilibrium in IOR in favour of China is that India's opponent, Pakistan and other actors in the region are being intentionally used against India. Prof. Brahma Chellaney, in his article titled "China's Debt-Trap Diplomacy" and "China's Creditor Imperialism", showed how China is using its economic leverage by giving loans to peripheral countries in the region (Chellaney, 2017; Chellaney, a2017). Prof. Shrikant Kondapalli has also been critical of China's enhanced role in South Asia, which

² To read the full document: [Full Text: A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China](#)

has raised political frustration in India (Kondapalli, 2021). Mukesh Bharati also illustrated that the expansion of the BRI in IOR would create economic challenges to India (Bharati 2024, 21). Bhumika Chakama has also analysed India's position on BRI activities in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. She has taken the position that the Indian government has not appeared aggressive enough to counter BRI in the region (Chakama 2019, 184). Michal Himmer has led his investigation to determine whether DBT is a reality or a myth (Himmer, 2023). The available research does not adequately address the challenges that India faces in IOR because of the influence of the BRI from multiple actors. This research article has tried to examine the emerging strategic challenges in the IOR for India's interests and how PM Modi has been diplomatically proactive by building either multilateral or bilateral strategic fronts in response. This article is divided into four sections: First, it will explain the BRI and China's global vision; Second, the expansion of the BRI in the IOR; Third, what evolving concerns are in India's foreign policy regarding the IOR; Fourth, India's counter-diplomatic initiatives.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

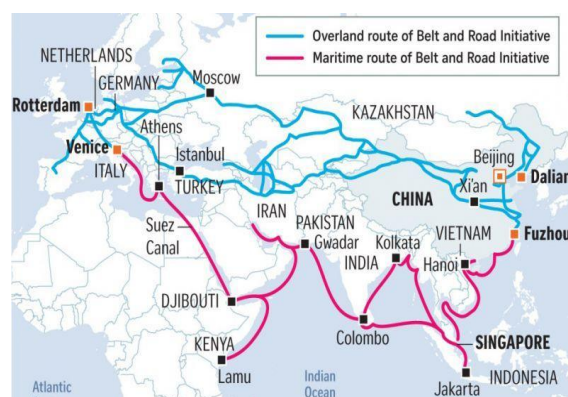
This research is based on an analytical-descriptive method to investigate the objective. The article has specifically focused on IOR because, since its launch, China has been extensively investing in the region because of political and economic importance compared to other regions, and due to its strategic location. The IOR is a vast ocean region that includes various

political geographies, such as ASEAN, SARRC, and the GCC. The research article has focused on the BRI development in all sub-regions of the IOR. However, in the context of India's diplomatic responses, the time period has been considered from 2014 to 2026. This study has relied on primary literature, such as government policy documents and reports, as well as secondary sources, including newspaper articles and journal articles, to achieve the intended objective.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

21ST CENTURY CHINA'S GLOBAL VISION: THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVES

Today, as a result of the Modernisation Economic Policy (1970s),³ China has emerged as one of the central pillars of the global economic order, alongside the USA and Europe. Zhu Min, a former deputy chief of the IMF, speculated that 'China is



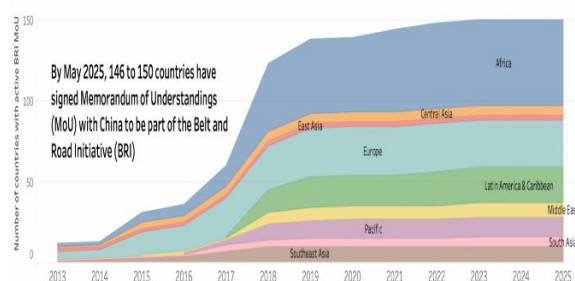
expected to surpass the US economy by 2035' (Xueying, 2024). Another opinion is that because of the current economic recession,⁴ China will have to wait until

³ To further on it see the link: [Chinese Modernization: A New Path for Global Development](#)

⁴ To get the details of China's economic trajectory, see the link: [GDP growth \(annual %\) - China | Data](#)

2060 to overtake the US (Sharma, 2022). This economic rise has helped China to define its global vision for humanity. In 2013, President Xi Jinping raised a serious question that *Where is humanity headed?* and stated, “*building a shared future is the guiding philosophy to lead global humanity towards achieving a common agenda*” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC, 2023). Thereafter, at the UNGA 70th Session (2015), he proposed five points, such as Equal Treatment; Common Security; Win-Win cooperation; Respect diversity; Green and Low-carbon development for the purpose of building consensus on an agenda of shared future (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC, 2015). Finally, in 2023, a white paper titled “A Global Community of Shared Future: China’s Proposals and Actions” was officially released to focus on the common aim of the Sustainable Development of Humanity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2023). Unwittingly, it has assigned China a role of a responsible actor in the global order along with the USA. The policies such as BRI/OBOR (2013), the Global Development Initiative (2021)⁵, the Global Security Initiatives (2021)⁶, and the Global Civilisation Initiative (2023),⁷ which reflect the aims and objectives of a dream of a shared future of humanity. Of which, the BRI has become so popular that it revived the century-old concept of ‘Silk Road’ (Bharti and Kumari 2024, 3-4). Details of it have been enshrined in the official document titled *The Belt and Road Initiatives:*

*Progress, Contributions and Prospects*⁸ and “*Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (2015)*”⁹, which identified five pillars such as expansion of trade routes, development of infrastructure, resource security, economic diplomacy, and people-to-people bonds (BRI Portal, n.d.; FDI China, 2025). However, because of the efforts of the ‘Joint Cooperation Framework (JCF)’ in policy branding and coordination, by 2025, around 146-150 countries connected with it, which are mostly from the global south, indeed have developmental priorities (GFDC, n.d.). With this global connectivity, it is expected that transport times will reduce by 12 per cent, trade will increase by 2.7 per cent to 9.7 per cent, income will increase by up to 3.4 per cent, and lift 7.6 million people out of extreme poverty (World Bank Group, 2018).



Map 2 Map of countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in May 2025 (Source: Nedopil 2025)

The BRI has evolved to encompass five primary functional areas: the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), the Digital Silk Road (DSR),

⁵ To read further: [P020240606193448267.pdf](https://www.mof.gov.cn/jwq/202406/06/20240606193448267.pdf)

⁶ To read further: [Global Security Initiative China's Diplomacy in the New Era](https://www.mof.gov.cn/jwq/202406/06/20240606193448267.pdf)

⁷ To read further: [Global Civilization Initiative China's Diplomacy in the New Era](https://www.mof.gov.cn/jwq/202406/06/20240606193448267.pdf)

⁸ To read the full document: [The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, Contributions and Prospects | english.scio.gov.cn](https://www.scio.gov.cn/english/scio.gov.cn)

⁹ To read further: [Full Text: Vision and actions on jointly building Belt and Road - Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation](https://www.scio.gov.cn/english/scio.gov.cn)

the Health Silk Road (HSR), and the Green Silk Road (GSR). First, the SREB is considered a “*Chinese Dream*” of development of building a strong network land infrastructure along defined six corridors: New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor (NELBEC); China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC); China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC); China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (CIPEC); The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BICMEC); The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Economy, 2018; OBORurope, n.d.). The SREB has revived the Cold War times ‘strategic corridor’ approach, which depicts aspects of the ‘politics of territory’ played by both superpowers to broaden their respective ideological blocs. Analogically, the BRI corridor approach constitutes three things: a) the territorialization and projection of state power; b) the spread of civilisation; c) the extension of the state's manufacturing production (Burna-Asefi, 2024).

Second, the MSR aims to promote approximately \$1.2 trillion ‘Blue Water Economy’, which would serve a range of interests, such as improving food and energy security, diversifying and securing sea lines of communication (SLOC), upholding territorial sovereignty, and shifting international discourse on major powers and dominance in Asia (Ghiassy n.d., 2). The ocean is operating more than 80 per cent of the volume of international trade commodities, and sustains the livelihoods of billions of people (United Nations, 2016). Map No. 1 provides details information about extension of MSR, which stretched

from China’s (Guangzhou¹⁰, Quanzhou, Ningbo, Nanjing, Fuzhou, Yangzhou, Penglai, and Liujia) to Southeast Asia (Port of Brunei and port of Singapore), South Asia (Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port, Pakistan’s Gwadar Port), Gulf and Africa (port of Djibouti, Yemen’s Port of Aden, Israel’s Port of Haifa, Egypt’s Port Sokhna), and Europe (Greece’s Piraeus Port). Nearly 50 ports where China has made heavy financial investments across the region have emerged as the world's largest seaport operators and constructors. Without doubt, China is trying to ensure its dominance over the IOR to have a trade monopoly (Mingxin and Liang 2024, 1). In 2017, ‘China’s Arctic Policy’¹¹ mentioned the ‘Polar Silk Road (PSR)’ also referred to as the Northern Sea Route (NSR), vowed to increase China's active participation in Arctic affairs in the near future (Xiao and Yifie, 2023). China has not taken any significant steps to implement the PSR in Russia amid the intensification of the Russia-Ukraine conflict (Erdem, 2023). On the contrary, China has not appeared more concerned about PSR but rather focuses on building strong port infrastructure in IOR, while Europe will be a lesser focused area because of interrelated factors of ‘distance’ and ‘developmental priorities’ (Mingxin and Liang 2024, 7).

Third, the DSR (or the Information Silk Road) was launched to promote innovation of Artificial Intelligence, which has pushed for building the digital architecture, which resulted in the Digital Silk Road or the Information Silk Road (2015). The DSR is

¹⁰ To know more about these port cities, see: [Maritime Silk Road Route, History, Map, Tour 2025](#)

¹¹ [China's Arctic Policy - BELT AND ROAD PORTAL](#)

an outcome of China's long-standing technological development process since 1949, which transformed the country from an innovation-driven economy to a global technological powerhouse. Currently, China accounts for almost 40 per cent of global e-transactions, with e-commerce standing at 15 per cent, 32% of global ICT goods exports and 6% of ICT services exports (Lele and Roy, 2019). Thus, China has transitioned from the '*world's traditional manufacturing workshop*' to '*highly professional economy*' (Burna-Asefi, 2024). However, the digital connectivity is a main component of China's foreign policy to spread its 'Soft Power' through promoting a 'China-centric digital connectivity network' (Adee, 2019). A debate is taking shape that China has heralded for shifting the centre of digital innovation from the West to the East. For example, recently, the debate on 'Deep Seek' technology is very relevant for the contextualization tech-race between the USA and China (Allen, 2025). Against DSR, the USA has spread a narrative that Chinese tech corporations are posing an unpredictable risk to national security through the mishandling of countries' intelligence data and promoting 'Chinese Authoritarianism', thus persuading allies to ban the entry of Chinese digital corporations. Despite such a narrative, the Global South is positive to welcome China's DSR because of the factor of necessity (Singer, 2019; Losavio, 2019).

Fourth, the HSR with the motto '*health for all humanity*', was launched to prevent infectious diseases through information sharing about modern and traditional medicine, which was also endorsed by the

World Health Organisation (WHO) (An, 2017). Its principal commitment is to strengthen international cooperation in health through 'sharing of epidemic information, the exchange of prevention and treatment technologies and the training of medical professionals [which will] improve capability to address public health emergencies jointly' (Rolland 2024, 23). During the COVID-19 pandemic, China offered great medical help to a large number of countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). Fifth, the Green Silk Road was launched to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by promoting renewable energy projects, environmental sustainability, and climate-friendly policies globally, while ensuring economic prosperity (BRI Forum, 2017). In 2023, the Green Silk Road Development Report was released, demonstrating China's successes in achieving its objectives (Yayan, 2024). However, the BRI International Green Development Coalition¹² of 2019 marked the first international climate-sustainability organisation to guide various projects internationally.

THE BRI IN THE IOR: EXPANSION OF CHINA'S STRATEGIC INFLUENCE

The IOR¹³ is a maritime boundary region that is at the crossroads of Australia, Asia and Africa. Moreover, the availability of several trade passes has enhanced its

¹² To know more about, see: [BRI International Green Development Coalition](#)

¹³ It encompasses nearly 20 per cent of the water area of Earth's surface. It includes regional seas, including the Andaman Sea, the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the Laccadive Sea. However, it also bounds the geographic regions, such as Asia, North Africa, Australia etc. See: [Indian Ocean Region - an overview | ScienceDirect Topics](#)

relevance in the global political-economic order for trading and strategic purposes. For example, the choke points of the Strait of Malacca and the Strait of Hormuz account for nearly 50 per cent of the world's oil shipments and other types of trade activities. Hence, the major economies, such as the U.S., China, India, Japan, and ASEAN countries, have involved their strategic stakes along the IOR (Radha, 2022). In this context, China's foreign policy has appeared significantly focused on deepening its strategic footprint in the IOR through the recent launch of the BRI. By ensuring a stronghold in the IOR, China intends to control the South China Sea, to monopolise the trade routes, and to challenge the U.S. and India's strategic stakes (Kannangara, 2018). Therefore, a large proportion of China's BRI investments has been diverted to the countries along the IOR. This section discusses the expansion of BRI in ASEAN, SAARC, and the Gulf countries, to check the increasing role of China in the IOR against India.

A) ASEAN Countries: A Strategic Focal Point for Investment

Within the BRI framework, China considers ASEAN as a strategic focal region for investment purposes and to push a certain foreign policy agenda in the region. Therefore, the MSR routes have overemphasized to have well connectivity of China with ASEAN countries. The China-Indochina Economic Corridor is specifically dedicated to enhancing land and sea connectivity with the ASEAN region. From the perspective of ASEAN and its member countries, the BRI is seen as a promising

opportunity to strengthen regional connectivity through infrastructure development that supports increased trade and investment. Therefore, they are willing to cooperate with China in developing various infrastructure projects collaboratively (Argaditya, 2025). However, China has also positioned itself as a friendly development partners for ASEAN by promoting the concept of “*common destiny*”. The Chinese government also emphasises the importance of building harmonious cooperation with the surrounding region. As part of this approach, both sides are pushing for alignment between the BRI and the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025. Collectively, ASEAN expects the BRI to play a complementary and supportive role to their multilateral and regional projects, particularly in enhancing connectivity and implementing the shared priorities outlined in MPAC 2025 and the BRI. The ASEAN Investment Report 2024¹⁴, which has shown a sharp rise in Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) into the region. Beyond, in totality, in 2024, trade between China and ASEAN reached approximately USD 800 billion, marking a 7.2 per cent increase year-on-year, that solidifying ASEAN's position as China's largest trading partner (CIIE, 2024). It has certainly reignited debate over the consequences of deeper engagement with Beijing's BRI. Against the backdrop of the U.S.-China strategic contest and ASEAN's own development ambitions, a pressing question arises: can ASEAN harness the BRI without compromising its

¹⁴ To see the full report, link: [ASEAN Investment Report 2024 - ASEAN Economic Community 2025 and Foreign Direct Investment](#)

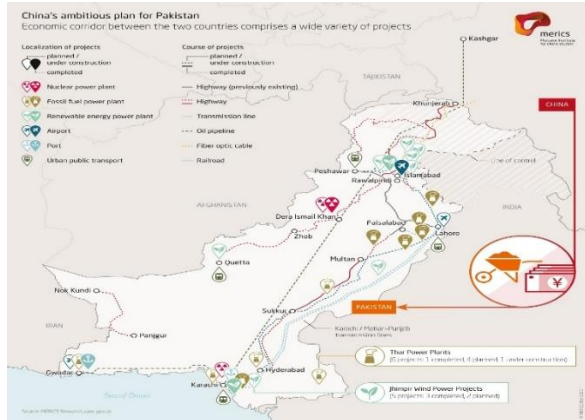
strategic autonomy? ASEAN's strategy amid the BRI and Indo-Pacific Strategy reflects its pursuit of strategic autonomy and regional stability. Caught in the vortex of global geo-politics, ASEAN finds itself navigating the intricate contours of BRI and the U.S.'s Indo-Pacific Strategy. To ensure regional stability and economic growth, the bloc has devised a carefully calibrated strategy to balance the competing interests of these two major powers. One key aspect of ASEAN's approach entails the pursuit of economic engagement with both China and the US (Scott, n.d.). One of ASEAN's main concerns is that China's frequent bilateral approach within the BRI could undermine ASEAN's centrality and unity. This approach is considered to be at risk of weakening the form of regionalism led by ASEAN and is feared to shift towards a China-centred regionalism model. In addition, the trade imbalance that increasingly favours China has also fuelled ASEAN's concerns about China's growing strategic influence.

B) SAARC Countries: A Way to Contain India

SAARC is another sub-region that has become very pivotal to China's foreign policy paradigm to make economic investment for seeking strategic objectives therein, such as shifting the balance of power against India and circumventing its strategic stakes. Hence, China is perfectly utilising the BRI for investing in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh and Pakistan, etc. Retrospectively, these countries are also interested in gaining economic help from China because of their need. Currently,

geopolitical development is reflecting that India's strategic stakes in IOR are directly influenced by the BRI. The CPEC (Map no. 3) and the CBIE are two corridors in the SAARC region specifically dedicated to this purpose. Alone, CPEC has an estimated cost of around USD 62 billion, which includes multi-faceted developmental projects and two ongoing projects, the Gwadar Port and the Karakoram Highway, which have become critical, on which India raised security objections. The major objection is on the Karakoram Highway, which traverses from the disputed PoK (Chaudhary, 2024; Tiwari, 2024). India has observed it as a direct threat to the country's sovereignty. 'Enemy's Enemy is Friend' is a simple principle behind China's enlarging engagement with Pakistan (Bhaumik, 2025).

Beyond, the location of the Gwadar Port is close to the Strait of Hormuz (the world's busiest oil transit point), so it would definitely help China in strengthening its regional footprint and establishing Pakistan's position as a key transit hub for global trade. It would enhance China's monopoly over the Arabian Sea via Pakistan and enhance China's energy security by ensuring uninterrupted supplies of oil and raw materials (Sun and Awale, 2025; Hashmi, 2025)



Map 3 China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Source: Council of Foreign Relations)

Factually, these two projects would help China to reduce dependence on traditional trade routes of the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait, for trading with Africa, West Asia, and Europe. This access would lead to not only bypassing potential maritime conflict with Western powers in the South China Sea for accessing the Arabian Sea, but also substantially reducing the cost and time of trading with these regions. However, the scope of CPEC transit through major cities of Pakistan, such as Kshagar, Khunjerab, Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Peshavar, Lahore, Multan, Sukkur, Quetta, Hyderabad, Karachi, and Gwadar (ABC News, 2025; ABC News, a2025).

Second, Sri Lanka has emerged as an important BRI partner of China in South Asia alongside Pakistan. China-Sri Lanka economic ties date back to the 1970s, and in the regime of President Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005-2015), the relationship was upgraded to a commercial model of interest-bearing loans for infrastructure development. As a result, several projects of transport, energy, and telecommunications with Chinese support were initiated, including the coal-fired Norocholai power station in 2006, the

Hambantota port in 2007, the Mattala International Airport in 2010, the Colombo International Container Terminal (CICT) at the Colombo port in 2011, and the Lotus Tower in 2012. Then, with the formal involvement of Sri Lanka in BRI, followed extensive economic investment of China in several road and expressway projects, water and sanitation projects (Wignaraja, 2020, 4). Table No. 1 shows trends of China's investment in Sri Lanka from 2006 to 2019. In 2006, investment was merely USD 455 million, and over the next six years it reached a level of more than USD 5000 million. Within five years since 2013, the investment flow was doubled. This upscaling trend of investment shows the rising importance of Sri Lanka for the expansion of BRI in IOR for certain geopolitical and geo-economic motives. However, a newly elected leftist President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's first visit to China has displayed Sri Lanka's tilt toward China compared to India. The visit resulted in the signing of several MoUs to facilitate BRI investment, and China offered investment of \$3.7 billion in building the refinery projects. Experts are worried about China's Debt-Trap Strategy for host countries, which would make it easy to force the country to give control over the strategic assets. Because Sri Lanka has already taken such experience concerning the Hambantota port (Economic Times, 2025). Debt to China is partly blamed for an unprecedented financial crisis in Sri Lanka, which is around USD 46 billion in 2023. In 2017, unable to repay a huge Chinese loan, Sri Lanka allowed China to take over the port at Hambantota. The deal, which gave the

Chinese company a 99-year lease, raised fears about Beijing’s use of ‘debt traps’ in exerting its influence abroad. Professor Mick Moore said Sri Lanka’s struggle with domestic economic problems is "This is the most man-made and voluntary in nature" (Hoskins, 2022). Early last year, Sri Lanka leased a white-elephant international airport built with Chinese loans to a joint venture between India’s Shaurya Aeronautics and Russia’s Airports of Regions Management Company, as the island nation’s bankrupt government sought to offload loss-making assets (Economic Times, 2025).

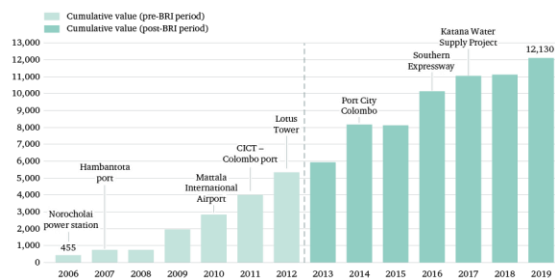


Table 1 China's investment in Sri Lanka (Source: Chathamhouse.org)

Third, the Maldives, an archipelago in the Indian Ocean, has become embroiled in the regional power rivalry between India and China. For both countries, the Maldives is a crucial location for security purposes and to maintain regional strongholds through controlling international sea lanes. Hence, India’s Neighbourhood First policy and MAHASAGAR policy have well understood the very strategic position of the Maldives. The newly elected President, Mohamed Muizzu, in January 2024, has preferred to distance the country from India and to be closer to China. Therefore, to strengthen bilateral ties, China was chosen as the first destination for an official visit before India (Regan, 2024). During the election

campaign, he garnered an agenda of “India Out” on the issues of treatment of minorities in India under the PM Modi regime (Jain, 2025). However, since the Maldives joined the BRI in 2014, the country has received around USD 1.4 billion from Chinese banks, which now makes up 20 per cent of its public debt (Woo and Cash, 2024). This percentage of external debt raised concerns about China’s DTD, but the Maldives ambassador Fazeel Najeeb, in an interview with Yeping Yin, said that “The idea of so-called debt-trap is misleading and does not accurately reflect the dynamics inherent in the Maldives-China partnership” (Yeping, 2025). The cost of the USD 200 million infrastructural projects is ongoing in the Maldives, such as the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, which connects the islands of Hulhule and Hulhumale with the capital, Male (Yeping, 2025). However, the strategic benefits to China is the Maldives sits along one of the busiest maritime trade passages in the Indian Ocean, through which nearly 80 per cent of Chinese oil imports could flow (Kaushik, 2024). All these economic engagements led to the upgradation of China's partnership with the Maldives to a Strategic level in 2024 (The President's Office, 2024; PRC China, 2025).

C) The Gulf Region

In its 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-2030), PRC China has given status to the Gulf countries as an ‘indispensable Partners’ because the region is vital for linking Global South and North through energy, innovation, and diplomacy. Today, China sees the GCC states not only as commercial trade partners for ensuring energy security but also as strategic partners to uphold the multipolar

world order (Zhang, 2026). Simultaneously, Gulf countries are also experiencing PRC China as an important player in Asia for economic, strategic, defence, and sci-tech purposes. Therefore, the report by Asia House in London mentioned that China has overtaken the West as the largest trading partner with countries in the Gulf region for the first time in 2024. It has been calculated that trade volume between China and the GCC countries rose 14.2 per cent to USD 257 billion in 2024. However, it is predicted that Gulf-China trade is expected to be worth USD 375 billion by 2028 (Yi, 2025). Despite the strategic relationship between China and the GCC, the latter was not originally part of the BRI map. Although the maritime route of the BRI passes through the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia, which sits astride the length of the sea, was not included in the initiative's plans and infrastructure. China began to update the BRI routes after its initial successes, integrating countries that were not included on its original maps. It began to link its emerging global network with the Gulf regional network in all six arenas of cooperation under the initiative, namely: hydrocarbon energy, infrastructure and transport, trade and investment, nuclear energy, satellites, and renewable energy. This integration was manifested in strategic partnership and comprehensive strategic partnership agreements with GCC states, the alignment between the initiative and the national development visions of these states, and Chinese investments in the region's ports and industrial cities. In fact, it seems that GCC states are now a crucial component of BRI. China's push to bring GCC states into the BRI came initially as

part of its efforts to expand the initiative to the broader Arab region. At the Sixth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on Sino-Arab Cooperation in June 2014, President Xi declared that the countries of the region are 'natural cooperation partners in building the BRI'. Then, in January 2016, China issued China's Arab Policy Paper¹⁵, in which it clarified its willingness to cooperate for the mutual benefit of both parties (Janardhan, 2017). In the same year, President Xi made two visits to Saudi Arabia and Egypt, focusing on the implementation of the BRI. He presented China's vision for security and stability as a 1+2+3 pattern of cooperation: that is, energy cooperation would form the top tier; infrastructure and the facilitation of trade and investment act as a second tier; and high-tech fields in nuclear power, space, satellites, and renewable energy come in as breakthroughs at the third level (Degang 2018, 80-82). As of 2019, China had signed BRI-related cooperation documents with seventeen Arab States and had established strategic partnerships and a comprehensive strategic partnership with twelve Arab states (Kaddorah, 2024).

The GCC states are not officially included on BRI maps or the proposed six corridors, and the Gulf region lies on the periphery of the maritime route through the Red Sea. Even so, these states are involved in all six areas of cooperation. A review of the strategic agreements with some GCC states shows how the landscape has gradually shifted in a way that suggests that these countries are now at the heart of the BRI.

¹⁵ [Full text of China's Arab Policy Paper - China.org.cn](https://www.china.org.cn/en/2016/01/20/content_401111.htm)

Various factors have influenced the shift in attention in both China and GCC states, from conventional bilateral relations towards a strategic partnership, in recognition of the importance of integration in the BRI.

Geographically, the Gulf region falls between the overland and maritime BRI routes and is adjacent to the Red Sea corridor leading to Europe. With the early successes of BRI projects, and as investments increased from an initial nominal value of some USD 1 trillion to USD 4 trillion, China has continuously updated BRI routes, integrating states that were not originally included on the map by creating a global integrated network based on regional sub-networks. If the global network is directly connected by the BRI maritime and overland routes, there must be a linkage between it and the subnetworks, which is where the six areas of cooperation come in. As a result of its economic rise, China has become the world's largest importer of oil and natural gas. While in the 1990s it consumed 2.3 million barrels of oil per day and 0.5 trillion cubic feet of gas, it is expected to consume some 16 million barrels of oil per day and 7 trillion cubic feet of gas by 2030 (Ghafouri 2009, 81-82). The country is thus now highly dependent on energy sources from the Gulf, importing 210 million tons of oil from GCC states in 2022, or about 41 per cent of its total oil imports (Webster and Pelayo, 2023).

China's interests in the region have also grown, as has the volume of trade. As of 2022, trade with all GCC states amounted to USD 304.7 billion, compared to just USD 1.3 billion in 1990 (Ghasseminejad, 2020). Chinese foreign direct investment in these

states in the period 2005-2021 amounted to about USD 107.22 billion. In line with the BRI, China has invested billions of dollars in several ports in the Gulf and the wider region, among them Khalifa and Fugairah in the UAE, Duqm in Oman, and Yanbu in Saudi Arabia (Baabood, 2023).

As China expands the BRI, it is keen to have these states' investments in BRI projects via the injection of funds into the AIIB, which is the main financing channel for the BRI. Two features of GCC states may thus explain their strategic importance and the drive to link them to the BRI: firstly, their massive energy exports to China and secondly, the geopolitical importance of the region. GCC states form the nexus, in terms of both geography and infrastructure, between Europe and many other regions, and they are of interest to competing powers (Fulton 2021, 1).

GCC states seek inclusion in the BRI because it is a promising global project. The types of projects covered by the six arenas of the initiative are extremely attractive because they combine the traditional economy with the new economy and high tech. In other words, the initiative could forge stronger links to new global economic networks and bring GCC states closer to their primary goal of diversifying their trading partners and economies. The national visions for development in each GCC country – Saudi Vision 2030, Qatar Vision 2030, We the UAE 2031, Kuwait Vision 2035, and Oman Vision 2040 -form the basis for their advancement. The goal of these visions is to develop all economic sectors and to carry out strategic development projects within a specific

timeframe. Linking these visions to BRI projects may therefore offer GCC states opportunities to develop relations with China and participate in its megaprojects and regional and global network, given China's rapid development in the past few decades.

THE BRI IN THE IOR: SECURITY CONCERNS IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

The BRI is addressing infrastructure development gaps in countries belonging to the Global South because the region is facing a paucity of development funds. In the IOR region, which comprises developing countries where the BRI has given special attention for developmental purposes. The IOR, where China has a significant interest are also involved. For example, the region of Asia requires around USD 22.6 trillion fund will be required by 2030, or USD 1.5 trillion per year, to tackle poverty and malnutrition, and other kinds of non-traditional security challenges (Agrawal and Bhardwaj, 2024; PPIAF, 2025). For Asia, the BRI has emerged as a beacon for bridging development gaps. However, China, through the BRI, is looking at IOR very positively to ensure a major investment in developmental activities and thereby ensure strategic goals. At the same time, another regional actor, i.e. India became more sensitive to safeguarding own regional interests against China's BRI involvement. In the IOR, it has been observed that geopolitics has taken a binary shape because of emerging contention between India and China over the agenda of *"who gets what"*. Because the foreign policy of the state is obsessed with national interests, and China's interest is to gain

major economic and political stakes in the region. At the same time, the foreign policy behaviour of China has created a security dilemma for India. Historically, these two actors have been constantly engaged in challenging each other's interests in the region. Thus, India has perceived the BRI in IOR would reshape the trade routes, transform investment flows, and alter security patterns, which in turn threaten to its interests. Out of six BRI corridors, four are specifically dedicated to ensuring investment in the IOR, such as CCWAEC (USD 150 billion), CIPEC (USD 200 billion), BICMEC (USD 11 billion in Bangladesh, USD 4 billion in Sri Lanka, USD 15 billion in Myanmar), and CPEC (USD 62 billion in Pakistan) (Belt and Road Initiative, n.d.). This huge inflow of economic investment in IOR would definitely transform the region's economic landscape more in favour of China, which would be responsible for compromising India's long-term strategic interests.

Moreover, Indian strategic experts have made critical remarks on the BRI that its objectives are not purely 'economic' but rather 'strategic', which are directed against India interests in the IOR. Brahma Chellaney, in a self-authored article titled "China's Creditor Imperialism", articulated that the Debt-Trap Diplomacy (DTD) is China's new foreign policy tool closely linked to the BRI, which is particularly committed against India by manipulating over partner countries' decision-making process (Chellaney, 2017). In 2025, Sri Lanka's total external debt is USD 57 billion, of which 20 per cent belongs to China (Trading Economics, 2025). And, in

2015, the debt was around USD 40 billion. At that time was unable to repay the debt amount, so China compelled Sri Lanka to lease the Hambantota port for 99 years in place of returning the debt amount. In July 2017, Sri Lanka signed a USD 1.1 billion deal to sell a 70% stake in the port to China (Sanyal, 2023). Kai Schultz described it as a deal that *'threatens the country's sovereignty'* (Schultz, 2017). Brahma Chellaney blatantly criticised the agreement and called it a *'closed strategic threat for India'* (Chellaney, 2017). It ensured China's monopoly over countries' high-value strategic assets, which could be exploited to contain India's stakes in the IOR. Unlike Sri Lanka, China's loans to Bangladesh and Nepal are not posing a risk factor for India (Sanyal, 2023). But China's engagement with Bangladesh aims to limit India's position in the Bay of Bengal. In May 2019, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo accused China of using DTD, as it involved corruption techniques and non-transparency, aiming to influence the given state's critical infrastructure to undermine its political functioning by creating enormous debt, and many depicted it "China's neo-colonialism in the twenty-first century" (Panda, 2019; Rana and Xiabai, 2020, 2).

Another major security issue that has been raised on the CPEC of which Karakoram (Himalayan) Highway, which passes through the disputed PoK region. To this, India has considered a direct intrusion into the sovereign territory by a third party, which is in contravention of international legal norms. Pakistan's Gwadar Port holds significant strategic and economic importance due to its location, situated on

the Arabian Sea and serving as a bridge connecting South Asia, West Asia, and Central Asia. It would heighten Pakistan's political standing in the regional politics against India. Furthermore, Gwadar's proximity to the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz allows Pakistan to effectively monitor vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs) (Payeng, 2024). Such investment has provided China a legitimate strategic ground to establish 'logistic bases' in the IOR region (Samuel 2018, 97), thereby shifting the security architecture of IOR in favour of China, which has created apprehension for Indian policymakers about compromising India's stake in the IOR (Faruque 2018, 4-5). Thus, CPEC is directly posing a strategic threat to India's geopolitical standing, making it tougher to pursue regional interests. Undoubtedly, the historical relationship of China and Pakistan with India has led them to target their common adversary in the Arabian Sea. There is doubt over economic gain for Pakistan from the CPEC because of emerging internal political disturbances, but China is truly exploiting Pakistan's location to target India indirectly. Therefore, CPEC has become responsible for degrading the relationship between India and Pakistan and intensifying strategic competition between India and China in the IOR (Samuel 2018, 97). Investment of China's major stakes in the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, and the Chittagong Port in Bangladesh have made it suitable for China to establish a direct trade relationship with the entire West Asia and North Africa region, which has sent a clear security signal to India. In the region's

politics, it has become apparent that China has successfully expanded its strategic footprint by aligning with countries through the BRI so as to become a dominant actor in the region (Bajpayee 2017, 117).

EVOLVING INDIA'S DIPLOMACY EFFORT IN IOR AND THE BRI

As the Indian economy has attained a worth of USD 5 trillion, this introduces a vast scope for diverse economic activities. It has attached recognition to India as one of the emerging major actors in the global system in the 21st century. In Asia, no doubt, India has a responsibility to play a vital role in securing its own geo-political and geo-economic stakes. India's foreign policy is looking positively towards the broader region of IOR, where it found a great scope for economic activities. The geopolitical scenario of the IOR is such that multiple actors are engaged for strategic purposes, which includes U.S., Japan, China and India. Among all these actors, India's main adversarial competitor is China. The history of the India-China bilateral relationship is proof of evidence for it. Hence, both India and China stood against each other in the IOR to secure major interests by hurting others. The major reason why these two countries are highly interested in the IOR is the availability of trade routes, which makes trade across the world easier. The launch of the BRI has been observed by India's policymakers as a threat to India's multifaceted interests in the IOR. Because China's strategy through various economic corridors and MSR is quite clear to take control over strategic assets of countries in the IOR, such as ports, straits, and choke points, then in turn place a challenge before

India. China's strategic incursion in the ASEAN, SAARC, and the Gulf of IOR region has been seriously taken into consideration by India; therefore, to put an alternative diplomatic strategy to counter emerging challenges.

India's Foreign Policy, especially under the PM Modi regime, has taken quite a 'realistic' approach to secure the country's strategic interests in the IOR region. PM Modi has focused to deepens strategic relationships with ASEAN, the Gulf and the South Asian countries under consideration of China's upcoming BRI. The Doklam controversy (2017) is substantial diplomatic evidence to get understanding of pragmatic-realistic foreign policy posture towards China. In this controversy, India never retreated from its political position despite tremendous political pressure from China. India's position concerning China in the region is simply based on the principle of "Pragmatic Multi-alignment" or "non-alignment 2.0", which is oriented to preserve regional stability by aligning with different actors according to strategic preference without compromising national interests (Mohammed, 2025). According to the principle of "Pragmatic Multi-alignment", India has entered into strategic partnerships with several stakeholders in the region, such as the US, ASEAN, and the Gulf countries, to safeguard its own interests. Several initiatives have become a part of India's counter-strategy against the BRI, which includes the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), the QUAD, India-ASEAN Strategic Partnership, BIMSTEC partnership, etc. These four

initiatives appear quite significant regarding India's counter-BRI strategy in the IOR.

A) INSTC

In early 2000, the International North-South Transport Corridor was signed amongst India, Iran, and Russia, and later on, several countries joined it. Now, INSTC has 13 countries, which aim to enhance trade and transport connectivity among the countries along the routes. However, it has the potential to enhance India's connectivity with the Central Asia and Eurasian region and vice versa, taking into account the geo-strategic importance of the involved countries (MEA, 2023). This multidimensional network project is ensuring connections of sea, rail, and road across the partners countries (Aliyev, 2024). The development of this connectivity project has been slow over time due to certain geopolitical issues. But, the project has once again in focus due to emerging geopolitical issues such as the Ukraine-Russia conflict and the US sanctions on Russia, the shipping attacks in the Red Sea, the ongoing Israel-Hamas Conflict, and China's reliance on Pakistan (Taneja 2024, 3). However, earlier in 2021, one of the largest container ships, the 'Ever Given', became lodged in the Suez Canal for six days, causing disruptions and heavy losses in maritime trade. The blockage left over 300 vessels waiting, resulting in huge transition costs for shipping companies. These incidents have created an urgency for looking at alternative routes. India, therefore, has renewed interest in the INSTC and sees two distinct advantages in operationalising this route: first, it offers an alternative to the Suez Canal route; and second, it provides India an

opportunity to exploit the untapped export potential that exists in the INSTC member countries, especially the Central Asian Countries (Taneja 2024, 3). One of the major projects along the INSTC is the Chabahar Port in Iran, which is very critical to counter the CPEC. However, Chabahar is a key node that connects all members of the INSTC and is perhaps more important than the Bandar Abbas Port (the original Iranian Port that was part of the INSTC), as it serves as a key access point to the eastern and western flanks of the corridor. Chabahar is also closer to India than Bandar Abbas port and can provide more direct and cost-effective access to Central Asian countries via Afghanistan. Although Afghanistan is not part of the INSTC, it has acceded to the TIR convention. In recent development, in May 2024, India and Iran signed a 10-year agreement for the management and development of the Chabahar Port in south-eastern Iran towards the advancement of the INSTC (Taneja 2024, 4). However, India's funded construction of the road network linking the Zaranj border crossing between Afghanistan and Iran aims to create a similar link between the Chabahar port and Central Asia (Lodhi & Bilal 2019, 233).

B) The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)

The QUAD (2017), composed of India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, has emerged as a key forum in the Indo-Pacific region, evolving strategic architecture. Initially a loose coalition responding to humanitarian crises, it has now transformed into a platform for regional resilience and cooperation. Two frameworks are often

invoked to interpret this transformation: Strategic balancing and containment. In the current century, India is one of the main epicentres in regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region; however, India's participation in it is to counter rising China's influence in the IOR. China's growing economic and military influence in the Indo-Pacific region has been a significant factor in shaping the aims and objectives of QUAD. Expansion of China's strategic footprint in the region by giving economic promises to partnering countries has created strategic concerns for the like-minded democratic countries in the region. Major concern is that small countries' sovereignty has been under threat because of economic dependencies, which is also called as DTD. That has directly impinged on its sovereignty and territorial integrity as it creates an imbalance in India's neighbourhood through the String of Pearls strategy (Trigunayat and Khemka, 2024). In the recent QUAD Foreign Ministers' Meeting (July 2025), they announced key initiatives to strengthen maritime and transnational security, economic prosperity and security, critical and emerging technology, and support humanitarian assistance and emergency response across the region. In the context of maritime security, the two most essential frameworks are the Indo-Pacific Partnerships for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) and the Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific (MAITRI), which aims to assess the capability gaps in the region and enhance the maritime capabilities in consultation with regional partners (MEA, 2025).

C) India-ASEAN Strategic Partnership

In 2012, India-ASEAN commemorated the 20th Anniversary of its Dialogue Relations, which was established in 1992, when both sides agreed to elevate their ties to the Strategic Partnership level. Again, another milestone was achieved in the partnership in 2022, which was the ASIAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership established to find common interests at the regional level. Since India became a Dialogue Partner of ASEAN, the collaboration has intensified to cover political and security dimensions. India participates in a series of consultative meetings with ASEAN under the ASEAN-India Dialogue Relations, which include Summit, ministerial and senior officials meetings, and meetings at experts level, as well as dialogue and cooperation framework initiated by ASEAN such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the Post-Ministerial Conference (PMC) 10+1, the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus as well as sub-regional cooperation framework, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation and Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which enhancing regional dialogue and accelerating regional integration (MEA, 2024).

In 2026, the relationship between India and ASEAN sits at the intersection of trade, security, and strategic balance. What began decades ago as economic outreach under the "Look East" Policy has evolved into a central pillar of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. ASEAN is not just a regional bloc for India. It is a strategic hinge between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific – and between

competing great power visions. India withdrew from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership in 2019, citing concerns over trade imbalances and domestic industry protection. Physical and digital connectivity are central to India's ASEAN engagement. Projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport are designed to link India's northeast with Southeast Asia. These corridors aim to integrate border regions into wider trade networks and reduce logistical isolation. Beyond roads and ports, digital infrastructure and fintech cooperation are emerging areas of partnership. As supply chains shift and digital economies expand, connectivity is no longer limited to highways. It includes a data logistics system and financial networks. ASEAN is one of India's largest trading partners, with bilateral trade crossing USD 110 billion in recent years. The India-ASEAN FTA, in force since 2000 for goods and later expanded to services and investment, laid the foundation for this growth (The Hind, 2026).

CONCLUSION

As the macroeconomic issues have surfaced, the pace of economic growth in China slowed down. As a result, the flow of investment across the region through the BRI was also affected. In response to macro-economic challenges, President Xi Jinping in 2021 unveiled an alternative small-scale version of the BRI that is the 'Small and Beautiful (S&B)' model, which prioritises investment in small- to medium-sized sustainable projects, thereby meeting the developmental objectives in partner nations

while also preserving Chinese influence therein (IFPP, 2025). Nevertheless, the BRI could successfully build the image of China globally as the emerging 'major actors' alongside the USA in the 21st century (Wang, 2025). It means the BRI have helped China to define its global vision by following the principle of 'Shared Future for the Human Community'. Similarly, the GDI (2021), the GSI (2021), and the CGI (2023) were also framed accordingly. This paper has illustrated the profile of BRI. Subscriptions from more than 150 countries to the BRI and a total estimated cost of USD 1.175 trillion show its success. Around it, the narrative has built that China wishes to displace the centre of economic activities from the Atlantic region to Asia. Because of the current slowdown may led wait China for the next few decades in fulfilling its wish. Anyway, China has placed strong economic competition for the USA at the global level and in Asia for India. Positively, developing countries in Asia and Africa have significantly benefited from the BRI activities. This article has analysed in depth about prominent challenges the BRI has posed for India in the IOR. India's major concerns over the BRI's outreach in IOR is the way of funding to countries, to which Indian expert called as DTD. Through which the borrowing countries compromised their decision-making autonomy in case of non-repayment of China's debt. Consequently, China takes control over the strategic assets of the host countries, such as port infrastructure, which are being used to target India's geopolitical and geo-economic stakes in the region. The DTD is witnessed in the case of Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and

Pakistan. However, China's BRI extension in ASEAN and the Gulf countries is also a worrisome case for India. China's ultimate ambition is to build a network in the IOR's sub-region so as to encircle India in the long term. India perceived that if China could forge a strong network along the IOR through control over ports and choke points, then definitely China's position would be unchallenged in the IOR. This China strategy is also known as 'String of Pearls'. So, India has taken effective counter-diplomatic steps to challenge China's intention in the IOR and safeguard its own stakes. Hence, the IOR has become a geopolitical 'hotspot' because of the emerging stiff strategic competition between India and China. India's stand includes collaboration with the USA in the Indo-Pacific region through QUAD, enhancing partnership with Iran on Chabahar Port through the promotion of INSTC, and increasing collaboration with the South Asian countries through BIMSTEC. This strategic engagement in the IOR is called as the 'Necklace of Diamonds', which includes building Changi Naval Base in Singapore, Chabar Port in Iran, the Assumption Islands in Seychelles, and Duqm Port in Oman. Indian position in the IOR was also strengthened by the USA's counter initiative in the Asia-Pacific Region, i.e. the "Asian Rebalance Strategy" (Rafi & Amna 2018,106).

Acknowledgement:

Thank you to the publisher for their support in the publication of this research article. I am grateful for the resources and platform provided by the publisher, which have enabled us to share our findings with a wider audience. We

appreciate the efforts of the editorial team in reviewing and editing my work, and I am thankful for the opportunity to contribute to the field of research through this publication.

"No AI software programme was used in the writing and preparation of this research article"

Author Contribution

The author is solely responsible for choosing the title of the article and collecting data sources.

Funding Information

This research received no external funding

Conflict of Interest

The author indicates that there is no conflict of interest involving any parties.

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