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China–United States Rivalry and Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean, 2008–2026

Dr. Muhammad Naveed Ul Hasan Shah

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations,
University of Central Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

muhammad.naveed1@ucp.edu.pk

Muskan Zahra

BS International Relations, Department of Political Science and International Relations,
University of Central Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

muskanzahra0508@gmail.com

Fatima Soomro

BS International Relations, Department of Political Science and International Relations,
University of Central Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

fatimazahidsoomro@gmail.com

Abstract

The Indian Ocean has become a major competitive region in the strategic rivalry between China and the United States. Since December 2008, when the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) for the first time sent a significant force out of its area of operations, China has been battling against the US naval power in the Gulf of Aden. The paper examines the next 18 years of that rivalry, from China's anti-piracy escort missions to the building of its first overseas base in Djibouti, to the maritime dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative, and the so-called String of Pearls port network, to the United States' countervailing build-out of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, the AUKUS submarine partnership and a rejuvenated Indo-Pacific basing architecture. The rivalry is analysed under the classical sea power theory of Alfred Thayer Mahan, which emphasises the use of the battle fleet, a network of bases, coaling stations and protected commerce as the Mahanian instruments to dominate the Indian Ocean's critical chokepoints and sea lines of communication. The analysis positions India as a crucial third player whose SAGAR and MAHASAGAR policies of net security provision bring balance to the bipolar tussle between Beijing and Washington. The article finishes that the Indian Ocean competition is not always violent but follows the Mahanian logic of great powers competing on the sea, and suggests policy implications for regional and extra-regional powers up to 2026 and beyond.

Keywords: China-U.S. Rivalry, Maritime Security, Indian Ocean, Sea Power, Alfred Thayer Mahan, String of Pearls, Quad, AUKUS, Strategic Chokepoints

Introduction

Just a few narrow, easily blocked straits – the Strait of Hormuz in the northwest and the Strait of Malacca in the east – carry about two-fifths of the world's seaborne oil traffic and a similar volume of traffic for containers. For much of the post-1945 era, it was an American lake, patrolled by the Americans' Fifth and Seventh Fleets, anchored by the joint U.S.-U.K. base at Diego Garcia, and was not much challenged from outside. All that changed in December 2008, when the People's Liberation Army Navy sent its first modern-day out-of-area task force into the Gulf of Aden to take part in anti-piracy escort missions. Since then, they are continuing the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean region without interruption. This article starts by considering 2008 as the beginning of a new era in China-USA maritime competition in the Indian Ocean, one in which Beijing is

transitioning from occasional anti-piracy patrols to a permanent overseas military base in Djibouti and America is evolving from a belief that the Indian Ocean would remain largely free from Chinese naval competition to a more institutionalized “coalition approach” involving the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the AUKUS submarine pact.

It is a period of eighteen years which is analytically short enough to be treated closely in practice, and long enough to represent a legitimate turning point in Indian Ocean security affairs. It starts with an operation, the 2008 deployment to the Gulf of Aden, that Chinese naval planners then described as the moment the PLA Navy undertook its first sustained operational deployments beyond China's immediate periphery; and it ends with a full-fledged competition, characterized by rotating Chinese submarine deployments, an operational Chinese base at Djibouti, Belt and Road-linked port facilities around the ocean's rim from Gwadar to Hambantota and an American-led coalition architecture specifically designed to balance against such expansion. It also reflects the parallel emergence of India as a self-conscious net security provider, a discourse started by Indian officials in 2009, 2011, and later formalized in the 2015 doctrine of Security and Growth for All in the Region, and its replacement in 2025, the Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions doctrine.

The main thesis of the article is that this eighteen-year rivalry should not be read in the abstract context of a balance of power but in the more concrete and traditional framework of sea power as established by the late-nineteenth-century American naval strategist and historian Alfred Thayer Mahan. Mahan's description of the great powers fight for control of the sea by means of a fleet of able men and ships, a network of overseas bases, and the safeguarding of navigable trade, closely traces the actual history of the Chinese and American actions in the Indian Ocean since 2008. The rest of the article goes on like this. It first examines the literature that would be relevant to Sino-American and Sino-Indian maritime competition. It then expands the Mahanian theoretical framework and then uses it in succession in the context of China's strategy, America's strategy, and India's mediating role. The article ends with recommendations for policy measures in the context of regional stability during the rest of the decade.

Literature Review

A key theme of the scholarly literature on China's Indian Ocean strategy has been the so-called Malacca dilemma: a realization on the part of China's strategists that the overwhelming share of Chinese energy imports and export trade passes through a few small straits, any of which a hostile power might be able to block during a war. Marc Lanteigne's early and influential work on this theme suggested that the Chinese were increasingly interested in the Indian Ocean in the 2000s not because of any need for expansion, but due to their concern about sea lines of communication (SLOC) vulnerability (Lanteigne, 2008). This is a defensive reading that's been debated. Subsequent research by David Brewster directly addressed if the outcome of this competition would lead to a “security dilemma” between the two powers, finding that India's massive geographic and infrastructural advantages in the Indian Ocean would make it an asymmetric relationship instead of a “security dilemma” of mutual insecurity (Brewster, 2014). Mohit Choudhary (2020) described China's strategy as a calculated bluff, noting that Beijing has intentionally been ambiguous about its plans to engage in the Indian Ocean to ensure strategic flexibility and not to face India or the U.S. prematurely. There has been a parallel literature that has examined the so-called String of Pearls network of commercial port investments that China has made along the Indian Ocean rim, namely in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Cambodia. While years of

investment in infrastructure may have improved the situation, the Malacca dilemma, the underlying economic security vulnerability of China, remains largely unsolved. And the United States and its regional partners continue to have the practical means to limit China's sea lines of communication in a wartime scenario, the Georgetown Journal of International Affairs has argued (2023). This revelation is important not only because it shows that much of China's Indian Ocean activity since 2008 has been a continuing, unfinished quest for overcoming a structural weakness, but also because it suggests that such a development is far from complete.

On the American and allied side of the equation, Robert Kaplan's best-selling essay on the "Power Plays in the Indian Ocean :first Century-Center Stage for the Twenty" to strategic centrality, due to its location between the world's main energy and trade routes, and the fact that it is the intersection of Chinese, Indian, and American strategic interests, represented the broad American (and allied) view (Kaplan, 2010). Geoffrey Till's book on 'Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century' similarly has pinned down the focus of the post-Cold War era of great-power naval competition as being in exactly the kind of contested waters with chokepoints that typify the Indian Ocean region (Till, 2013). Most directly pertinent to the theoretical framework used in this article, the writings of the PLA Navy themselves unambiguously and repeatedly refer to Mahan, such that it is hard to imagine a more apt lens for viewing Chinese naval behavior today than that of the American naval theorist, a historical curiosity rather than one of the authors. (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2010) Lastly, a more systemic perspective on great power behavior in anarchy is provided by John Mearsheimer's work on rising powers and regional hegemony, which is readily apparent in the China-U.S.-India great powers triangle explored in this more maritime-oriented literature (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Theoretical Framework: Mahan's Sea Power Theory

The sea power theory put forward by the American naval officer and historian Alfred Thayer Mahan, which was first systematically used in his work on European and American naval history published in 1890, is used as the basic theory in this article. To Mahan, national greatness in modern times meant having control of the sea, which he defined as the power to use the ocean for commerce and defense and to prevent an enemy from doing so. As Mahan explained, the three elements of sea power were interlinked, production, the economic base producing goods to transport via sea; shipping, merchant and naval fleets carrying the trade and protecting it; colonies or overseas bases, coaling stations, ports and territories, where a navy could project and sustain power away from its home shores (Mahan, 2019). What mattered most was the patient work of keeping the sea lanes of communication and critical chokepoints in the Indian Ocean under control, Mahan explained, and he did so in a manner that eerily resembled the geography of the modern Indian Ocean, in which the key straits are located at Malacca, Bab-el-Mandeb, and Hormuz.

Indeed, as Holmes and Yoshihara have already shown, Chinese naval strategists have actively utilized and referenced Mahanian thinking in their own efforts to define China's PLA doctrine of far-seas protection, which includes the concept of acquiring overseas logistics bases and protecting sea lines of communication; seeing it as an integral part of the classical Mahanian playbook and not as something new. In the 19th century, Mahan described the need for 'coaling stations' as fundamental to the global reach of the steam navy; in the 2008–2026 period, the network of overseas logistics facilities and dual-use commercial ports that China has developed from Djibouti to Gwadar is the Indian Ocean equivalent. The functional alternative is how Beijing nowadays expresses its worry about

the Malacca dilemma and how Washington stresses freedom of navigation, while Mahan was stressing that protection of merchant shipping is a *sine qua non* to national prosperity. For Mahan, the control of the sea depended on the battle fleet itself; for the Chinese and Americans, it is the deployment of the battle fleet, increasingly with allies, in the contested waters of the Indian Ocean, in a rotational fashion, sustained to the point that control of the sea is guaranteed.

The absence of any central authority in the international system, which Kenneth Waltz (1979) called anarchy, forces states to resort to self-help and seek to counter the capability-building of other states by engaging in balancing behavior of their own. Structural realism is the reason to be suspicious that a Chinese challenge coming with sea power and American-led troops was likely, while Mahan's theory is the shape that the American, Indian, and allied responses and the Chinese challenge took.

China: How to get out of the Malacca Dilemma

However, China's enduring presence in the Indian Ocean started as an anti-piracy patrol rather than as a great power projection mission. After Somali pirates took to the high seas and attacked international shipping, the United Nations Security Council gave permission for the international navy to patrol the Gulf of Aden, and Beijing sent its first task force in December, 2008, what would be followed by continuous and uninterrupted rotations of PLA Navy task forces on the high seas for over ten years. Ever since, observers have pointed out that the mission, which was initially promoted only in the narrowest humanitarian and commercial terms, provided China's navy with its first extended time away from home waters into more expansive waters, a time the navy would draw upon as the Chinese navy expanded its reach to other regions of the wider ocean (Institut Montaigne, 2019).

The biggest structural adjustment to come from this is the establishment in 2017 of China's first foreign military base in Djibouti, at the mouth of the Red Sea in the Bab-el-Mandeb strait. The functions of the base were found during the time to be much more than they had been officially stated, rather being a base for rest and logistics support for the enlarged Chinese naval footprint in the wider Indian Ocean, and an area of training for exercises aimed at counterterrorism and non-combatant evacuation contingencies as well (Contemporary analysis, 2020). Congress has mandated the U. S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission to conduct an annual review of U.S.-China security and economic ties, and in its most recent annual report, it described Djibouti as the first of a strategic chain of overseas military bases that would decrease the resupply time for the PLA and further increase its operational radius beyond China's immediate surroundings (U. S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020).

China's strategy has been heavily dependent on a "String of Pearls" of commercial ports along the Indian Ocean rim, of which the military significance is still under debate. Gwadar (in Pakistan), Sittwe (Myanmar), Ream (Cambodia), and Duqm (Oman) have been identified as the facilities that are most likely to be developed to support high-end military logistics; while most of the network's ports are peacetime commercial and light logistical facilities only, and their wartime capabilities remain questionable (The Geopolitics, 2021). The still-limited size of China's basing presence has also been confirmed by analysis of Chinese naval operations, which has shown that China is deliberately trying to build up access and diplomatic ties with the Indian Ocean littoral states, rather than making a rush to establish bases in areas where it is likely to face early engagement with India or the United States (Jamestown Foundation, 2017). Other more recent estimates of Beijing's overseas basing intentions have indicated that China is

considering additional locations, even possibly beyond the Indian Ocean – into the Atlantic coast of Africa (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2026).

Gwadar port is located in the Balochistan province of Pakistan, not far from the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz and is a part of the sixty-two billion dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, making it a port of particular strategic significance among the other String of Pearls facilities. Studies of the maritime dimension of the corridor have also revealed that Gwadar is a potential solution for China to lessen its reliance on the Strait of Malacca to import energy from the Persian Gulf, and the Pakistan Navy has taken the security of the port under its direct control by establishing a special marine battalion (National Maritime Foundation, 2021). In more recent reporting, it has been observed that although Gwadar's development is of geopolitical importance, its operationalisation has been slower and more contentious than initially anticipated, due to local political discontent in Balochistan and periodic protest movements which have impacted the supply route from the port to its proposed overland corridors (Middle East Institute, 2025). However, Indian naval analysts remain focused on the threat that Gwadar poses India, and argue that the port's gradual development – among which continued transfer of Chinese naval equipment for Pakistan – is a long-term aim of Beijing and Islamabad as part of their strategy to tilt the underlying naval balance of power in the western Indian Ocean in their favour (National Maritime Foundation, 2026).

The American-Led Response: Coalition Architecture and Indo Pacific Command

Washington's reaction to the growing Chinese presence has been more in terms of building a more formal coalition structure than the unilateral American naval expansion, involving the United States, India, Japan, Australia and, in recent times, even the United Kingdom. Initiated by the U.S.-Japan-India-Australia as Quadrilateral Security Dialogue created after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami for humanitarian cooperation, the grouping has since been renewed and expanded into a regular leader-level strategic forum, but observation of their track record has revealed that it has consistently refrained from overt military cooperation that might offend Southeast Asian nations concerned by an escalation of U.S.-China security competition in their waters (Foreign Affairs, 2025).

The 2021 announcement of the AUKUS partnership between the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, focused on transferring nuclear-powered submarine technology to Canberra, represented a qualitatively different, and more explicitly military type of coalition making than the Quad had tried to do in the past. The agreement's dilemmas for India were analysed, revealing that AUKUS presented an underlying contradiction in the Indo-Pacific framework of coalition building: How much India was prepared to commit to making its own strategic reliance on Washington equal to Washington's? Or Was India prepared to go ahead with the strategy of strategic autonomy (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021)? Defense analysts based in Washington have suggested that the AUKUS submarine deal will have a significant impact on the military balance in the region: introducing a forward-based, long-endurance combat capability and fixing Australia and Britain closer to the U.S. war plans for a potential Indo-Pacific clash (PLuS Alliance Security & Defence, 2025).

Earlier evaluations of the overall coalition strategy have been mixed on effectiveness, up to the mid-2020s. While the Biden administration is credited with establishing the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, the comparatively more conservative approach to regional trade liberalization in comparison to Beijing's economic statecraft has left an important gap in Washington's competition with Beijing in the wider Indo-Pacific region (9DASHLINE, 2024). An assessment for the Belfer Center also warned that the Quad,

AUKUS, and the Partners in the Blue Pacific were components of a puzzle that is not yet fully understood, let alone integrated, that would need careful navigation from the United States if it was to form a lasting coalition, rather than falling into the trap of strategic overreach or misleading historical analogies to Cold War containment (Nye, 2023). There have also been more recent comments on the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy that have specifically pointed to its historical emphasis on the eastern Indian Ocean region, where the Chinese challenge has been more obvious, while leaving a comparatively less-developed strategic focus on the western Indian Ocean and East Africa region, where the Chinese challenge has been less visible, but arguably more significant (American Enterprise Institute, 2026).

India as the Pivotal Third Actor: SAGAR, MAHASAGAR and Net Security Provision

If one considers India as a passive player on which the Sino-American contest is played out, then no record of the rivalry between these two nations in the Indian Ocean is complete. The idea of India being the net security provider in the region was first articulated in the context of the role of security provider in 2009 and 2011 and subsequently formalised in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement in 2015 in Mauritius of the doctrine of Security and Growth for All in the Region, which is based on five pillars – security cooperation, economic integration, capacity building, sustainable development, and regional connectivity (Pacific Forum, 2025). In March 2025, a new and more ambitious successor plan was announced by Modi, the Maritime India Vision 2025, which was specifically made to push India's presence further into the western Indian Ocean and littoral Africa, where Chinese investments and influence have increased in recent years (Indo-Pacific Studies Center, 2025).

Increasingly, India's actual implementation of its role as a net-security provider has turned to maritime domain awareness infrastructure instead of kinetic action on the naval front. News of the Indian Ocean Region and related maritime partnerships for regional awareness has been analyzed by India's Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region, which enables New Delhi to network its surveillance with a broad band of the ocean, to sense and react to non-traditional security threats and to Chinese naval activities and, more importantly, to cultivate the kind of trust with smaller littoral states that Beijing's port-centric approach has sometimes failed to deliver (The Dialectics, 2025). This combination of hard security co-operation and soft security capacity-building assistance is suggestive of India's structurally middle ground role in the contest: geographically and historically preeminent in the Indian Ocean, a zone where India has no pretend claim to being the region's sole power, but materially and technologically reliant on American, Japanese, and Australian partnership to enjoy supremacy in the region, making any such claim impossible.

Synthesis: The Indian Ocean as a Mahanian Contest

The combination of the three preceding parts supports the main theoretical thesis of the article: since 2008, the China-US competition in the Indian Ocean has, in a uniquely clear way, demonstrated the maritime great power competition logic described by Alfred Thayer Mahan over a century ago. The Chinese quest for Djibouti as a logistics hub and the construction of dual-use commercial ports from Gwadar to Ream are concrete examples of Mahan's focus on colonies and coaling stations as essential elements of a nation's sustained naval operations. Furthermore, China's persistent fear of the Malacca dilemma being realized is a textbook paraphrase of Mahan's insistence that command of the sea is about more than naval glory; it is about keeping a nation's seaborne commerce safe. In a stirring mirror of those activities, the American response – the renaming of

Pacific Command to Indo-Pacific Command, the elevation of the Quad, and the establishment of AUKUS – is all about control of the sea through its very same mechanisms: a fleet of allies that is capable and increasingly interoperable, a network of bases from Diego Garcia onward, and the strong ability to defend or block a sea lane at any of its choke points.

The development of India's role as net security provider provides an interesting refinement of the purely Mahanian reading as the SAGAR and MAHASAGAR doctrines suggest that India's control of the sea in the twenty-first-century Indian Ocean is being achieved not only through the old (Mahan) method of a single great navy but through a multi-layered structure in which alliance relations, informal partnership relations and maritime domain awareness, sharing arrangements all are playing roles in functioning a multidimensional security net that is being assembled in the Indian Ocean. This refinement follows, rather than contradicts, the more general structural realist prediction that a military challenge by a rising power, such as the U.S. Navy's, would elicit balancing coalitions of threatened powers, as the overall structural realist framework outlined above suggests, but that balancing would still take the recognizably Mahanian form of bases, fleets, and chokepoint control. This rivalry has been almost entirely a nonviolent one, unlike the classic great-power naval races studied by Mahan, but in its basic form of competition for basing rights, chokepoint control and commerce protection would be familiar to the nineteenth-century naval theorist who inspired this analysis.

It is also a synthesis that would be difficult to explain simply in terms of structure or purely economics if direct armed clashes in the Indian Ocean between Chinese and American forces had not happened despite the steady accumulation of naval prowess by both sides over the last eighteen years, with periodic flare-ups over Taiwan, the South China Sea and more recently the Red Sea. One might imagine that this limitation is just a natural consequence of the nature of the contest each is engaged in: a Mahanian reading. Mahan's own historical examples centered on a time when command of the sea was often a matter of strict contestation, and was often decisive, fought out in fleet engagements, but Mahan drew attention to the cumulative, peacetime effort which was more important: bases, coaling stations, and commercial access. In this perspective, the lack of overt conflict in the Indian Ocean since 2008 is not a freak occurrence that needs to be explained separately, but the expected state of the rivalry between Beijing and Washington, which is primarily played in the same peacetime instruments Mahan described as the true foundation of sea power.

The Red Sea Shipping Crisis and its Indian Ocean Spillover

The Mahanian logic presented above can be most clearly demonstrated with the Red Sea Shipping crisis that commenced at the end of 2023 and extended on and on through the years of 2024, 2026 and beyond. In the wake of the Gaza war in October 2023, Yemen's Houthi group have started attacking civilian vessels passing through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, the choke point between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and then the wider Indian Ocean. The analysis of the crisis revealed that several months later, the average daily volume of transits in the strait had been reduced by over half, leading most major container shipping companies to reroute around the Cape of Good Hope at the cost of 10-14 extra days of shipping between Asia and Europe (Atlas Institute for International Affairs, 2025). Indeed, Bab-el-Mandeb is one of the same chokepoints central to both Chinese and American strategic thinking towards the Indian Ocean, and the crisis was an unplanned empirical test of the chokepoint-centered logic that is the article's subject for both powers.

The outcome of the great-power behavior was more or less what Mahan had envisioned. The United States organized and commanded a sea power coalition, dubbed Operation Prosperity Guardian, and then built on it with more combined task forces, explicitly aimed at the classic sea power goal of restoring freedom of navigation through a contested chokepoint. By contrast, despite having a Chinese base at Djibouti, close to the strait, China did not offer to deploy its own naval vessels for the multinational escort mission, but has instead made its own separate arrangements to exclude Chinese-flagged and Chinese-linked shipping from the Houthi target zone. This gap is itself instructive: it means that since 2008 Beijing has engaged in a strategy of Indian Ocean accumulation rather than in a strategy of sea policing, as China has not sought to take on the heavy, open-ended duty of policing sea lanes like the United States and its allies enjoyed and continued to carry out in 2026 through the continued strike campaigns against Houthis.

The crisis also further underscores the Indian Ocean's chokepoint geography in the competition discussed in this article. In mid-2026, renewed Houthi threats to blockade shipping to Saudi Arabia, plus separate concerns over the Strait of Hormuz, added up to the fact that the narrow straits of the ocean – Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, and Malacca – were the most vulnerable and most coveted prizes in the modern maritime order, as Mahan predicted in the nineteenth century. The incident served to strengthen a Chinese fear that had been encapsulated in the Malacca dilemma: Even a chokepoint so far removed from the Strait of Malacca itself was enough to wreak havoc on Chinese-connected shipping and thus reinforce Beijing's vulnerability on a systemic basis, rather than just in any given strait. The United States and its allies showed the ongoing readiness of the coalition to take the burden for protecting the sea lanes, and also the limits of that readiness, as the multinational naval reaction did not remove the threat to sea lanes, only made it less effective.

Policy Implications

The following are some policy implications of this Mahanian interpretation of the Indian Ocean rivalry of the 2008–2026 period. For one, the competition is not primarily centered on a single decisive battle, but around bases and chokepoints: crisis-management measures should target the risk of miscalculation around the narrow straits of the ocean, and at contested port facilities, where Chinese, American, Indian or allied naval forces are operating in close formation. Second, as much of Chinese Indian Ocean strategy is understood as one of running away from the Malacca dilemma rather than taking advantage of it, policies designed to put the Chinese at ease about the security of its legitimate SLOC at peace may diminish the need for further military-basing expansion while the United States and its allies persist in investing in the capacity to deny those same sea lines in a real crisis. Third, India is an intermediate country, and both Washington and Beijing want to avoid Iran-backed policies that would force New Delhi to make a clear-cut choice between full alignment with the American-led coalition and full accommodation of Chinese regional primacy, which will presumably remain a structural property of the conflict and remain a key determinant of India's strategy for the foreseeable future. Littoral and island nations along the Indian Ocean coast, from Sri Lanka to the Indian Ocean states of the Horn of Africa, will also continue to be under a great deal of pressure to make difficult choices between the economic advantages of Chinese port investment and the political and security stakes of acquiescing to China's *de facto* presence as a “neutral” great power in a potentially protracted and non-peaceful “great game” contest between the United States and China that appears far from resolution before the end of the decade.

Limitations and Future Directions for Research

There are a number of limitations to this analysis. Second, this study on great power competition was based on the Mahanian paradigm of 19th-century coal-powered, gun-fired, battleships, and that paradigm doesn't necessarily apply to a world that is defined by satellites, long-range precision strike, and undersea autonomous systems. Theoretical analysis of the technological character of naval power in the 21st century, as developed in more recent works, could be used in conjunction with the Mahanian categories in future studies. Third, this article has focused on the rivalry between China and the U.S. and India as a central, yet secondary, player; while this is the dominant dynamics of the past eight years, it may downplay the degree of independent agency of smaller littoral states, some of whom, such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives, have demonstrated the ability to side-step Beijing and Washington by playing them against each other. Fourth, the evidence used to evaluate the military, rather than commercial, potential of China's port network is largely inferential and disputed, therefore conclusions regarding the ultimate direction of the String of Pearls network should be viewed as provisional, and await further revelation or observable China military use of the ports in question. Lastly, the study of the rivalry explored here is a dynamic one, as demonstrated by the Red Sea crisis of 2025-2026 and the growing complexity of the AUKUS submarine programme, a study of which should be treated as a snapshot of a moving target, rather than as a snapshot of a settled balance.

Conclusion

The article has charted the development of the China-US competition in the Indian Ocean over the past 18 years, from the first deployment of anti-piracy vessels in the Gulf of Aden in December 2008, to the multi-actor Strategic Competition as seen by 2026. It has suggested that, while it developed to account for naval competition among great powers in the nineteenth century, it provides a remarkably accurate perspective on this modern competition, precisely because Chinese naval strategists have explicitly referenced Mahanian ideas in formulating their own doctrine of 'far-seas protection'. The Chinese quest for overseas bases and dual-use ports, its structural concerns about being chokepined and the U.S.-led coalition's equally parallel focus on bases, fleets and sea line protection all recreate, in a modern, to-date non-kinetic, version of the fundamental building blocks of the maritime competition that Mahan described. This bipolar scenario is complicated by India's own rise to be a self-aware net security provider, and its own security strategy is just as structured around a series of bases, fleets, and commerce protection as the broader conflict is.

It remains to be seen whether this rivalry will continue to be played out in the slow-moving, non-kinetic ways it has been since 2008 (bases, port access, coalition partnerships), or whether it will be played out in the direct ways the Mahanian law was intended to describe (e.g. bombs, missiles and other precision munitions). This analysis is clear: The Indian Ocean has firmly regained the strategic heart of the world that a previous generation of naval strategists once attributed to it, and that any satisfactory theory of the 21st century's great power competition must consider it one, not a marginal, theatre of international affairs.

The analysis has another implication for Pakistan and other regional countries in the region which are sitting on the crossroads of this rivalry. For states like Pakistan, whose Gwadar port lies at the physical heart of the String of Pearls network that this article examines, the position is structurally challenging: they need Chinese funding to develop the port, but they are at risk from being spied on by the competition to whom the port serves as a dual-use asset, irrespective of the host state's intentions. This exposure should

not be expected to wane over time, however, as the logic of the competition between two nations drives towards a further strengthening of those who can base ships elsewhere, host states will continue to be subject to foreign scrutiny of, and pressure on, their port and basing arrangements for as long as the competition between China and the United States in the Indian Ocean basin continues

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