

String of Pearls and China's Emerging Strategic Culture

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on the strategic culture of China in the 21st century and establishes a link with the Chinese 'String of Pearls' strategy. The article explores the relevant literature and develops an empirical premise that China's contemporary strategic culture is still defensive, in line with its past practices. However, after the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing's strategic culture is more focused on its defence preparedness as 'String of Pearls' is aimed at establishing the maritime Silk Road along the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The paper also briefly discusses China's importance on developing partnerships and economic relations with different regions like Asia, the Middle East, Europe and America to show its peaceful rise and defensive strategic culture.

Keywords: China, Strategic Culture, 21st Century, Indian Ocean, String of Pearls, Maritime Security, Belt and Road Initiative.

Introduction

The concept of strategic culture has become increasingly important in the 21st century. The term 'strategic culture' was coined by Jack Snyder while analysing the nuclear warfare of the former Soviet Union. Strategic culture, according to Snyder, can be explained as "the sum of ideas, conditioned emotional responses and patterns of habitual behaviour that members of a national strategic community share with regard to nuclear strategy."¹ Snyder's inception of strategic culture led to considerable progress in this field, which stimulated evolution of the strategic culture. In the late 1990s Alastair Iain Johnston defined the term with a different perspective as "strategic culture is an integrated system (argumentation, structures, languages, analogies and metaphors) which acts to establish all-

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¹ Lawrence Sondhaus, *Strategic Culture and Ways of War* (Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006).

encompassing and long lasting strategic preferences by developing notions of the role and usefulness of military force in interstate political affairs and by clothing these origins with such an atmosphere of factuality that the strategic preferences seem uniquely realistic, effective and efficient.”²

Strategic culture in the 21st century has shifted from its traditional stance of the 20th century to more focus on other aspects of security that include economics, ecology, environment, energy, population and the rights of the unborn.³ China focuses greatly on these aspects, which has been further amplified by the maritime security policy, BRI, previously known as One Belt One Road (OBOR). The BRI was announced by the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, during his visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013.⁴ It is expected that the BRI will build a chain of seaports linking China with South Asia, South East Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe. It will also set up direct road and rail corridors between Europe and East Asia.⁵ It also aligns with China’s String of Pearls strategy. To understand strategic culture of China, it is important that historic perspective should also be taken into consideration.

The term strategic culture was first used in China’s polices in 1988. Many historians have emphasised that the Chinese strategic culture has taken more influence from the Confucius school of thought which focuses on peace and defence.⁶ Furthermore, the contemporary Chinese strategists have also asserted that the country’s strategic culture has always emphasised the defensive military stance, therefore, it stands in

² Alastair Iain Johnston, “Thinking about Strategic Culture,” *International Security*, (Spring 1995): 32-64, <http://www.fb03.uni-frankfurt.de/45431264/Johnston-1995-Thinking-about-Strategic-Culture.pdf>

³ Gautam Sen, “Developing Strategic Culture Role of Institutes of Higher Education and Think Tanks,” *Manek Shaw Papers*, (2014). [http://www.claws.in/images/publication_pdf/1491191531_MP53PrintversionGautamSen\(1\).pdf](http://www.claws.in/images/publication_pdf/1491191531_MP53PrintversionGautamSen(1).pdf)

⁴ Tian Shaohui, “Chronology of China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” *Xinhuanet*, March 03, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-03/28/c_134105435.htm

⁵ Benjamin Robbins, “One Belt, One Road and the History of the Maritime Silk Road,” E-International Relations Students, March 26, 2017, <http://www.e-ir.info/2017/03/26/one-belt-one-road-and-the-history-of-the-maritime-silk-route/>

⁶ Frank A Kierman and John King Fairbank, *Chinese Ways in Warfare* (Harvard University Press, 1974).

contrast with the aggressive strategic cultures of many other countries.⁷ Other analysts also point to Sun Tzu's *Art of War* which stresses on the Chinese tendency to adopt stratagem (trick/ploy) over combat and psychological and symbolic warfare over head-to-head combat on the battlefield.⁸

One school of thought argues that China has a *parabellum*/ real politick strategy and Confucian-Mencian, which was presented by Johnston, while another says that China follows Confucius doctrine of peace and harmony.⁹ The cult of defence, the teachings of Confucius and Sun Tzu, and the uncompromised goal of national unification are the hallmark of the Chinese security doctrines. Under the influence of the cult of defence, the Chinese civilian and military leaders identify their use of military force as extremely limited.

The community of defence studies identifies six principles that influence the decision-making of Chinese elites namely; the importance of national unification; intensified threat perceptions; the concept of active defence; the Chinese just-war theory; domestic chaos; fear and stress on the welfare of the community over that of the individual. The common upshot of these beliefs manifests in a tendency to engage in coercive behaviour in a crisis with a simultaneous propensity towards risk-taking all the while providing ample evidence and justifications of the use of force citing a bigger picture.¹⁰

Furthermore, it is important to note that, since 1940, China considers every military venture as a self-defence measure, including the Korean War (1950–1953), the Sino-Indian war (1962), the clashes with the Soviet Union (1969) and the land attack against Vietnam (1979). So,

⁷ Andrew Scobell, "China's Real Strategic Culture: A Great Wall of the Imagination," *Contemporary Security Policy* 35, no. 2 (2014): 211-226, DOI: 10.1080/13523260.2014.927677

⁸ Jonathan R Adelman and Chih-yu Shih, *Symbolic War: The Chinese Use of Force, 1840-1980* (Institute of International Relations: National Chengchi University, 1993).

⁹ Shivnarayan Rajpurohit, "China's Strategic Culture: Today, Tomorrow and Yesterday," *Counter Currents*, October 12, 2013, <http://www.countercurrents.org/rajpurohit121013.htm>

¹⁰ Scobell, "China's Real Strategic Culture."

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historically, China has affirmed that their strategic culture revolves around defence and protecting its borders.¹¹

The objective of the paper is to explore the link between String of Pearls and the BRI. The paper also examines China's focus on culture of partnerships and developing strong economic relations with other states. The research in this paper is formed on the study of literature from different books, journals, reports and newspapers. Furthermore, international relations theories like realist school of thought and idealist school of thought were also investigated to go into the depth of this study. The research is purely descriptive in nature and is based on the analysis and evidence available.

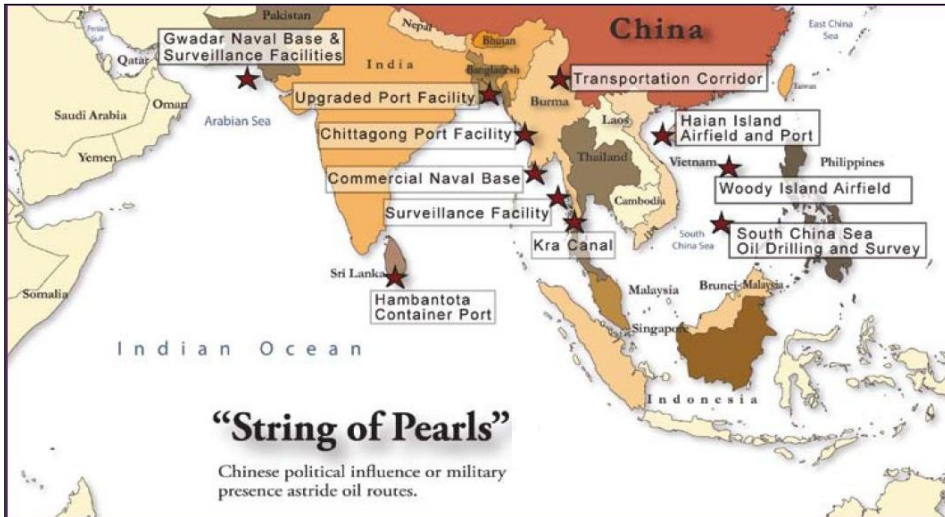
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In 2005, the term “String of Pearls” was coined by Booz Allen in his report called “Energy Futures in Asia.” He predicted that China would attempt to expand its naval presence throughout the IOR by building infrastructures in friendly states in the region.¹² The String of Pearls strategy is focused on increasing China's economic, military, diplomatic and political clout in the IOR. Every pearl in this chain or string symbolises a sphere of power, which China is trying to secure along the IOR.

¹¹Ibid.

¹² Benjamin David Baker, “Where is the ‘String of Pearls’ in 2015?,” *Diplomat*, October 05, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/where-is-the-string-of-pearls-in-2015/>

Map No. 1 String of Pearls



Source: <https://southfront.org/chinas-string-of-pearls-project/>

The pearls are a metaphor for the Chinese seaports in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Maldives. In Pakistan, China is building infrastructure at the Gwadar port, which is strategically located only 240 miles from the Straits of Hormuz. In Sri Lanka, the Hambantota port is of great significance as it is approximately 6 nautical miles away from the major Indian Ocean's east-west shipping route.¹³ China is also interested in upgrading the Chittagong port facility and to establish its link to Yunan province in China via Myanmar. Myanmar has great strategic location as an ocean outlet, which would facilitate the flow of resources (oil in particular) to China, without passing through the vulnerable waters of the Malacca Strait.¹⁴ Furthermore, the Maldives is an island nation that is roughly around 1,190 coral islands, grouped in double chain of 26 atolls oriented north-south off India's Lakshadweep islands, between Minicoy island and Chagos Archipelago, where the American base of Diego Garcia, is located, making it strategically an

¹³ Marshal Jr., "The String of Pearls: Chinese Maritime Presence in the Indian Ocean and its effect on Indian Naval Doctrine," *Calhoun* (2012), http://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/27865/12Dec_Marshall_Richard.pdf?sequence=1

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

important country.¹⁵ China wants to achieve maritime superiority thus trying to challenge the US and its position as a global superpower. The main objective of this strategy is the strategic placement of these pearls with one another in order to make a chain of hubs that can serve as both economic as well as military and intelligence cores in the IOR.¹⁶

The 20th century naval flag officer, strategist and historian, Alfred Thayer Mahan, had predicted that the future of the 21st century would be determined on the waters of the Indian Ocean in these words “whoever controls the Indian Ocean, dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas in the 21st century, the destiny of the world will be decided in these waters.”¹⁷ The Indian Ocean covers at least one-fifth of the world’s total ocean area and is linked with Africa and the Arabian Peninsula (known as the western Indian Ocean), India’s coastal waters (the central Indian Ocean), and the Bay of Bengal, near Myanmar and Indonesia (the eastern Indian Ocean). The most important trade routes of the world pass through this region. These routes link the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia with the broader Asian continent to the east and Europe to the west. More than 50 per cent of the world’s maritime oil trade is carried out in the IOR, which itself is believed to be rich with energy reserves.¹⁸ The IOR is the hub of most important strategic chokepoints in the global maritime trade, making maritime security and access to water vital to a state’s power and progress. The Straits of Hormuz and Malacca are also among such chokepoints through which 32.2 millions of barrels of crude oil and petroleum are transported every day.

¹⁵ Vineeta Bhatt, “India and China in the Maldives: Recent Developments and Emerging Trends,” *Global Journal for Research and Analysis* (2016), https://www.worldwidejournals.com/global-journal-for-research-analysis-GJRA/file.php?val=May_2016_1464948601__35.pdf

¹⁶ Igor Pejic, “China’s String of Pearls Project,” *South Front*, October 05, 2016, <https://southfront.org/chinas-string-of-pearls-project/>

¹⁷ Sufyan A Khan, “Greater Indian Ocean: A Peaceful Geo-political Pivot or a Contentious Source Of Hedging,” *Eurasia Review*, June 23, 2011, *Eurasia Review*, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/23062011-greater-indian-ocean-a-peaceful-geopolitical-pivot-or-a-contentious-source-of-hedging>

¹⁸ Eleanor Albert, “Competition in the Indian Ocean,” Council on Foreign Relations, May 19, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/regional-security/competition-indian-ocean/p37201>

In the 21st century a race has been started for economic competition and dominance over the trade routes, especially with respect to maritime security in the IOR, as it is strategically very important and currently dominated by the US and its allies. China, on the other hand, has been seeking to improve its position in the IOR by implementing String of Pearls under the BRI. The strategic culture of China in the 21st century is influenced by economic growth, trade and maritime security, which would help China to counter the US influence in the Pacific Ocean.

Recently, the most important concept in China's strategic culture is the doctrine of 'active defence.' This concept is described as balance between defence and offence, there is flexibility in active defence, highlighted by Iain Johnston and according to the Chinese strategists this doctrine in many ways summarises the old-styled Chinese stance for only fighting in self-defence.¹⁹ The status of China as the only potential challenger to the US global superiority is now, by and large, clear and unchallenged and it is looking to disconcert the global position of America's supremacy.²⁰

The study of China's String of Pearls is significant for policy implications and regional development in Asia as it is likely that China will become a great sea power in the 21st century, defying the predominance of the US in the Indian Ocean, and trespassing on the backyard of India in the Bay of Bengal. These pearls are intertwined and locked into a strong chain or 'string' because of their strategic standing and arrangement to each other.²¹

China's foreign policy has become more proactive and globally driven and the BRI forms a cornerstone. It stretches across 60 countries along envisioned routes extending through Asia, the Middle East, Europe and even Africa, and could potentially generate an even greater international impact. The alteration of China's foreign policy began late in the period of the former President Hu Jintao. As its economic and financial power significantly enhanced, China began to involve in multilateral regional

¹⁹ Scobell, "China's Real Strategic Culture."

²⁰ Peter Hays Gries, "China's Rise: A Review Essay," *Asian Security* 4, no. 1 (2008): 101-105, DOI: 10.1080/14799850701783528, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14799850701783528>

²¹ Shee Poon Kim, "An Anatomy of China's 'String of Pearls' Strategy," *Hikone Ronso* (2011), <http://www.biwako.shiga-u.ac.jp/eml/Ronso/387/Kim.pdf>

collaborations. Hence, China's current proactive foreign policy under President Xi Jinping, is a reflection of stability and a permanent evolution rather than of revolutionist change. China has now turned a new page in its foreign policy decision-making and is firm in its stance to redesign the world order rather than be moulded by the changing world. Compared with his predecessors, President Xi has discarded China's long-held policy of keeping a low profile in international arena. China's foreign policy is now more centralised, proactive and even more aggressive.²²

Factors Influencing China's Strategic Culture

China's economy is mostly dependent on international maritime trade and seaborne energy imports, like oil, accounts for almost 70 per cent of its total energy supplies.²³ Furthermore, China also exceeded the US as the largest oil importer in September 2013, thus, increasing China's dependence on the Strait of Malacca, which approximately caters for 80 per cent of the Chinese imports.²⁴ Traditional and non-traditional security threats to China's supply lines in the IOR are a matter of grave concern for Beijing. Approximately 80 per cent of China's oil imports (EIA 2016) pass through the Strait of Malacca, a rather vulnerable chokepoint, signifies China's Malacca dilemma, which was initially highlighted by President Hu Jintao in 2003. On this, one newspaper even gone far as to declare "that whoever controls the Strait of Malacca will also have a stranglehold on the energy route of China."²⁵ China obtains half of its oil from Africa and the other half from the Middle East, passing through the Strait of Hormuz, another chokepoint

²² Hong Yu, "Motivation behind China's 'One Belt, One Road' Initiatives and Establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank," *Journal of Contemporary China*, (2016): DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2016.1245894
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2016.1245894>

²³ Andrew Erickson and Goldstein Lyle, "Gunboats for China's New 'Grand Canals' Probing the Intersection of Beijing's Naval and Oil Security Policies," *Naval War College Review* 62, no. 2 (2009): 45,
<https://www.usnwc.edu/getattachment/f655705e-0ef3-4a21-af5a-93df77e527fa/Gunboats-for-China-s-New--Grand-Canals---Probing-t.aspx>

²⁴ Virginia Marantidou, "Revisiting China's 'String of Pearls' Strategy: Places 'with Chinese Characteristics' and their Security Implications," *Issues & Insights* 14, no. 7 (June 2014),
https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/182061/140624_issuesinsights_vol14no7.pdf

²⁵ Shi Hongbo, "China's Malacca Dilemma," *China Youth Daily*, June 15, 2011,
http://zqb.cyol.com/content/2004-06/15/content_888233.htm

in the IOR.²⁶ Apart from the US control over the Indian Ocean, there are other factors which influence China's strategic culture. The issue of South China Sea also has resulted in China's increased interest towards developing String of Pearls and enhancing maritime security. China's claims of sovereignty over the South China Sea and its 11 billion barrels of untapped oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves have provoked competing claimants among Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan the Philippines and Vietnam.²⁷ Furthermore, the issue of the East China Sea with Japan over Senkaku/Diaoyu²⁸ islands also encourages China to develop its naval force across the Indian Ocean. In addition, China also sees India as a threat to its maritime security, so it has extended close relations with the respective littoral countries in the IOR, which may be linked to China's military strategic calculus.²⁹

China's Policies

In the early 1990s China initially started to focus on partnerships and Comprehensive National Power (CNP), defined as the sum total of the powers or strengths of a country in economy, military affairs, science and technology, education and resources and its influence.³⁰ This can be seen as China's platform leading towards more proactive policies in the 21st century. The deals that can be considered important with respect to strategic culture in the 21st century are summarised in the following table:

²⁶ Euan Graham, "Maritime Security and Threats to Energy Transportation in Southeast Asia," *RUSI Journal*, 160 (2) (2015):43-45.

<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/maritime-security-and-threats-energy-transportation-southeast-asia>

²⁷ Elizabeth C Economy, "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea," Council on Foreign Affairs, <http://www.cfr.org/global/global-conflict-tracker/p32137#!/conflict/territorial-disputes-in-the-south-china-sea>

²⁸ Sheila A Smith, "Tension in the East China Sea," Council on Foreign Affairs, <https://www.cfr.org/global/global-conflict-tracker/p32137#!/conflict/tensions-in-the-east-china-sea>

²⁹ Gurpreet S Khurana, "China's 'String of Pearls' in the Indian Ocean and its Security Implications," *Strategic Analysis* 32, no. 1 (2008): 1-39, DOI: 10.1080/09700160801886314, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09700160801886314>

³⁰ J S Bajwa, "Defining Elements of Comprehensive National Power," *CLAWS Journal* (2008), http://www.claws.in/images/journals_doc/1302263399_JSBJBajwa.pdf

Table No.1
Strategic Cooperation Agreements between China and other Countries

April	1996	China and Russia established a strategic, co-operative partnership of equality and mutual trust facing the twenty-first century
May	1997	China and France established a comprehensive partnership
October	1997	China and the United States declared they would build toward a constructive strategic partnership in the twenty-first century
November	1997	China and Canada agreed on a comprehensive partnership straddling over the present and the next centuries
December	1997	China and Mexico agreed on a comprehensive partnership straddling over the present and the next centuries
December	1997	Chinese and ASEAN leaders agreed to establish a partnership facing the twenty-first century based on good-neighbourliness and mutual trust
December	1997	Chinese and Indian leaders reached a consensus on the establishment of a partnership of constructive co-operation facing the twenty-first century
February	1998	China and Pakistan decided to establish a partnership of comprehensive co-operation facing the twenty-first century
April	1998	Chinese and EU leaders agreed to establish a constructive partnership of long-term stability facing the twenty-first century between China and the EU
October	1998	China and the United Kingdom decided to establish a comprehensive partnership
November	1998	China and Japan declared they would establish a partnership of friendship and co-operation facing the twenty-first century working for peace and development
February	1999	China and South Africa decided to establish a constructive partnership facing the twenty-first century
April	1999	China and Egypt confirmed they would establish a relationship of strategic co-operation facing the twenty-first century
October	1999	China and Saudi Arabia confirmed they would establish a relationship of strategic co-operation facing the twenty-first century

Source: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10670560220129612?needAccess=true>

Entering the 21st century, economic globalisation has not only accelerated the process of the integration of the world economy but also increased competition among countries, especially among big powers. The motivation for China's strategic culture in the 21st century in consideration to its naval existence in the IOR may be inferred as follows:

- i. To deter a state from interdicting its shipping/strategic imports.
- ii. To guard energy investments, mainly against non-state actors.
- iii. To shift influence of major economic competitors in the IOR.
- iv. To realise geo-strategic 'leverage' against the adversaries.
- v. To achieve military objectives in face of any probable crisis with its adversaries.
- vi. To bolster nuclear deterrence capability against India.

With regards to resolving China's Malacca dilemma, China's naval presence in the IOR can be seen as a crucial element in advancing its interests. Once sufficient deployable submarines are available, the only

requirement will be the means to preserve these. China is likely to implement its plans through its String of Pearls policy.³¹

It has been indicated in reports from 1990s that China has shown a great interest towards the Indian Ocean. For instance, in a report from July 1992, China's General Logistics Department (GLD) called for stepped-up naval visits to the Indian Ocean. In another memorandum issued, in early 1993, by Zhao Nanqi, GLD Director of People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy, gave a detailed strategic plans to consolidate control over the Indian Ocean (and the South China Sea) under a new PLA doctrine of 'high-sea defence.'³² China moved further towards its maritime-oriented strategic culture when, in November 2003, China and Pakistan engaged in a joint naval exercise off Shanghai. It was China's first ever joint exercise with any country.

China has invested in increasing its national merchant shipping fleet to carry its own cargo.³³ The Ninth Chinese White Paper was the first one to deal with China's military strategy. This white paper emphasised China's maritime realm and termed it a critical security domain. The white paper also advocated expansion of the modern maritime military force structure and providing strategic support for building itself into a maritime power. Furthermore, the paper called for a greater PLA Navy presence in the oceanic spaces of the Indian Ocean. Moreover, it also highlighted the importance of developing naval-related systems. The purpose of all these developments was to strengthen the defence of China on the offshore waters.

China has made rapid progress in phasing out older and obsolete platforms and replacing them with modern and more effective ones. It is evident from the fact that over 50 ships were laid down, launched or commissioned in 2013 and 2014, only. China launched more naval ships than any other country. According to the US Congressional Report, the salient PLA Navy modernisation programmes include anti-ship ballistic

³¹ Khurana, "China's 'String of Pearls' in the Indian Ocean."

³² Yossef Bodansky, "The PRC Surge for the Strait of Malacca and Spratly Confronts India and the US," *Defence & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy* (1995): 6.

³³ Holmes James R and Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan* (London: Routledge, 2008).

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missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, submarines, air craft carriers, surface combatants, UAVs and state-of-the-art C4ISR systems.³⁴

The most noteworthy operation of the PLA Navy in recent times was the visit of a Song-class conventional submarine along with a submarine support ship Chang Xing Dao, which stopped at the Chinese-run Colombo International Container Terminal (CICT) in Sri Lanka, in 2014, near the Gulf of Aden for anti-piracy activities. There is now evidence that the PLA Navy had also dispensed a nuclear submarine in the Indian Ocean on anti-piracy patrols, taking cautionary measures by informing all the relevant countries including India and the US well in advance.³⁵

China participated in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden in 2008, for the first time in modern history.³⁶ China has also deployed ships in the Indian Ocean, markedly during the evacuation of the Chinese citizens from Libya in 2011, and from Yemen in 2015.³⁷ It is evident that China's strategic culture of 21st century revolves around the String of Pearls and is actively pursuing to enhance and legitimise its maritime security in the Pacific Ocean. The evaluation of China's maritime activities delineates that China can hold permanent position in the IOR with one or more carrier based groups deployed in the region.

The Chinese strategic culture of the 21st century is based on rapid economic development and partnerships; it is also focused on maritime security which revolves around the Indian Ocean. Deng laid foundation for economic development. In 2003, China began to use the term peaceful rise, presented by Zheng Bijian in November 2003. In 2004, the Chinese government used the term peaceful development instead of the peaceful rise. The term "harmonious world" has been used since 2005.

³⁴ Ronald O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernisation: Implications for US Navy Capabilities — Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service Report, 2015, https://news.usni.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/RL33153_6.pdf

³⁵ Vijay Sakhuja, "The Expanding Maritime Geography of the Chinese Navy," *NMF Commentary*, May 08, 2015, <http://www.maritimeindia.org/CommentryView.aspx?NMFCID=8501>

³⁶ Marantidou, "Revisiting China's 'String of Pearls' Strategy."

³⁷ Shishir Upadhyaya, "Expansion of Chinese Maritime Power in the Indian Ocean: Implications for India," *Defence Studies* 17, no. 1 (2017) : 63-83, DOI: 10.1080/14702436.2016.1271720

The growth in China's naval operational coverage to the Indian Ocean through dispatches of naval warships to Somalia in 2008, and the development of naval-base ports and naval-base-use-related ports in Gwadar (Pakistan), Chittagong (Bangladesh), Kyaukphyu (Myanmar), along with the 'String of Pearls,' has been the focus of China in this decade.³⁸

On March 28, 2015, China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), Ministry of Commerce and Ministry of Foreign Affairs mutually released the "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road,"³⁹ (the Blueprint) delineating pertinent agenda and action plans under the BRI. This blueprint provides the clearest overall picture yet of the Silk Road strategy and reveals China's effort to materialise its grand vision. The BRI represents President Xi's ambitious foreign policies, demonstrating a new policy direction for China and its ambitions for global superiority.⁴⁰ The BRI is a reflection of China's strategic culture of the 21st century that promotes China's growing power in the global arena. After Donald Trump's ascendance to presidency of the US, having an anti-globalisation stance, it is highly expected that China will take a driving seat in the global political dynamics.

With the announcement of the BRI, China shifted its strategic culture, which is although still defensive but is more inclined towards pursuing active defensive strategic culture. Given the anti-globalisation and national-populist agenda of Trump administration, China's focus on smooth implementation of the BRI might lead to China's greater role in global affairs. The BRI emphasises on linking China to Europe through Central Asia and Russia, the Persian Gulf through Central Asia and South East Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean. The Maritime Silk Road will pair the BRI, concentrating on using sea routes and the

³⁸ Hankwon Kim, "The Implications of the Chinese 'String of Pearls' for the US Return to Asia Policy: the US, China and India in the Indian Ocean," *J Glob Policy Gov*, no. 2 (2013):193–204, DOI 10.1007/s40320-013-0032-5

³⁹ "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 28, 2015, https://reconasia-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media/filer_public/e0/22/e0228017-7463-46fc-9094-0465a6f1ca23/vision_and_actions_on_jointly_building_silk_road_economic_belt_and_21st-century_maritime_silk_road.pdf

⁴⁰ Yu, "Motivation behind China's 'One Belt, One Road' Initiatives."

Chinese coastal ports to link China with Europe via the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, and the South Pacific Ocean through the South China Sea. These projects are as an effort to augment trade and political relations amongst China, Europe and Asia.⁴¹

It is expected that the BRI will cover a population of 4.4 billion people with a GDP of US\$21 trillion (one-third of the global wealth) and connect all participating countries to three continents.⁴² China undoubtedly has noteworthy strategic imperatives in the Pacific Ocean that give it aims to magnify its naval presence in coming years and this will surely require greater access to ports. The Maritime Silk Road has the potential of creating China a resident power in the Indian Ocean, not just an extra-regional power.⁴³ China has further amplified its String of Pearls agenda by holding its first ever joint military exercises with Nepal in April 2017, causing shocks to India as well.⁴⁴

Criticism on China's Strategy

India and America have been suspicious of China's grand plan and economic advances, especially India as they see China as a threat to them. India has criticised the flag ship project of BRI, China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as they opine that it passes through the disputed territory of Kashmir. However, it is noticeable that the BRI will seriously obstruct India's efforts in increasing its share in global trade, if India chooses to stay out of the BRI.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the US views China as a main challenger to

⁴¹ One Belt One Road, *Singapore Audit Tax Advisory*, November 2015,

<https://www.bdo.com.sg/en-gb/insights/advisory/one-belt-one-road-report-2015>

⁴² Nadege Rolland, "China's New Silk Road," The National Bureau of Asian Research, February 12, 2015, <http://www.nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=531>

⁴³ David Brewster, "Silk Roads and Strings of Pearls: The Strategic Geography of China's New Pathways in the Indian Ocean," *Geopolitics*, (2016), DOI:

10.1080/14650045.2016.1223631

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2016.1223631>

⁴⁴ "Nepal, China begin first-ever Joint Military Exercise," *Express Tribune*, April 16, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1385226/nepal-china-begin-first-ever-joint-military-exercises/>

⁴⁵ Geethanjali Nataraj and Richa Sekhani, "China's One Belt One Road Initiative: Analysis from an Indian Perspective," *HKTDC Research*, March 17, 2016, <http://china-trade-research.hktdc.com/business-news/article/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative/China-s-One-Belt-One-Road-Initiative-Analysis-from-an-Indian-Perspective/obor/en/1/1X000000/1X0A5J3C.htm>

its interests in East Asia, and has adopted a mixed strategy of containing China's growing influence to maintain its strategic positions in the region. On the other hand, Beijing considers that Washington is pursuing a "contain China" strategy. Therefore, the US military poses a considerable menace to China's national security and its core interests. America has a selective response to the BRI as some US officials have praised the significance of the BRI, while some have warranted caution.⁴⁶

China's is concerned to protect its sea lines of communications and there is still not much could be said that China looks towards a strategy of achieving naval predominance.⁴⁷ It can be seen that even the US and India have not been able to point China's grand strategy as offensive as some experts even have shown that there is a sentiment that both the countries should join China.

Conclusion

The Chinese strategy of the 21st century is clearly defensive, mainly based on the String of Pearls with the announcement of the BRI and developing strong economic relations with the littoral countries of the Indian Ocean that could possibly provide political influence in the future. It is clear that a Chinese naval base or logistics facility in the Indian Ocean could facilitate a larger role for China in the region and it could challenge the presence of the US in the region.

Following the World War II, the US emerged as the leader of the capitalist world. Instead of assuming explicit hegemonic role, the US championed capitalism by creating the Bretton Woods institutions that other countries of the developed world followed. Deng Xiaoping departed from the course of his predecessors and led China to the capitalist camp with the aim of development through adherence to the economic order set by the US and its allies.

While China, now a rapidly growing economy, and ranking economically behind only the US in absolute terms, has pursued a defensive doctrine. The realist policy orientations of the US and other developed and

⁴⁶ Patrick Hebrard, "Challenges to Freedom of the Seas and Maritime Rivalry in Asia," *Wise Pens*, March 23, 2017, <http://www.wisepens.com/2017/03/>

⁴⁷ Brewster, "Silk Roads and Strings of Pearls."

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developing countries reflect their inclination to the Offensive Realist doctrine which dictates that power politics at the international level is one of a zero-sum nature, and thus a rise in the national power of one is perceived as a loss of it for the other.

Consequently, regardless of China's defensive orientation, the nature of the global politics leaves others suspicious of a rising China. With the US presidency taking a rather inward-looking stance, China has left no opportunity to show that it is very much a part of the global economic order and would actively participate in it. Nevertheless, China has also displayed a revisionist stance by setting competing economic institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), whose founding members also include the UK.

As represented by China's strategic culture, it has to ensure the well-being of its public and would manoeuvre through economic orders in such ways that fulfil its objectives. The String of Pearls and more broadly now the BRI are intended to achieve China's strategic objectives, but do so at the cost of a security dilemma for others especially the US and its Asian allies such as India, Japan and those surrounding the South China Sea with competing claims with China on the islands whose maritime ranges cover areas rich in energy resource. In the contemporary global arena, the BRI has taken a special significance. As nationalist waves grow across the globe and anti-globalisation attitudes, protectionist agenda and building of walls to limit the movement of goods and people and also stalling the progression of global economic integration are compelling a certain reversal of roles.

The Indian Ocean and String of Pearls holds huge significance for China's strategic objectives. It is only a matter of time before the divergent interactions between China and the US and its allies in this region become more pronounced, with the security dilemma potentially spiralling into an atmosphere of heightened tension.