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CHINESE BLUFF IN MALACCA

The Future Security Architecture of the Region and China's Indian Ocean Strategy

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ABSTRACT

The rise of China has been the subject of in-depth research in international politics. Beijing's rapid rise appears to be mostly driven by trade-driven economics. China made an equal contribution to the expansion of world commerce from 2007 to 2017 as did all other nations. China's trading route, the Indian Ocean, thus, became into Beijing's key lifeline. In fact, China has talked publicly about its maritime vulnerabilities, with the so-called Malacca problem generating the most discussion. Contrary to Beijing's portrayal of the Malacca problem, China seems to be playing on its fragility in order to assert its control over these straits. China plans to accomplish this in order to exert dominance across a larger portion of the Indian Ocean (IOR), which it has begun to view as its proper sphere of influence. China's strategy towards the IOR is long-term and might have a destabilising effect, necessitating a cooperative security architecture in the area. This article begins by examining the Malacca conundrum from a Chinese perspective, as well as China's solutions to the conundrum. The Malacca bluff, the underlying Chinese IOR plan, and its effects are then examined. Finally, the article suggests that the area implement a multilayered security system.

KEY WORDS: ***IOR, SLOC, IORA, Strait of Malacca***

China's energy needs increased significantly as it became the global hub for industry. At the start of the twenty-first century, China's domestic oil consumption grew by 30% annually.[3] Chinese domestic oil production, however, was falling behind. Compared to 2003, China's oil imports increased by 40% to 120 million tonnes, while local oil production increased by only 2%.[4] The usage of natural gas increased in lockstep with this. Between 1993 and 2007, China's natural gas consumption increased by 3.4 times, from 13.7 million tonnes to 60.6 million tonnes.[5] Despite being able to fulfil demand, domestic gas production, according to the International Energy Agency, may soon be unable to keep up with rising domestic consumption.[6] The writing was very obvious on the wall. If China wanted to maintain its economic expansion, it would have to rely more and more on importing fossil fuels from the Middle East and Africa via ships. The legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) swiftly grew entwined with the ability to satisfy the nation's expanding energy needs in order to maintain economic growth. The CCP's fundamental requirement in a nation with a history of exploding regimes is to have a grasp over the enormous populace. The CCP's propaganda of being the only force behind the "century of humiliation"-era Chinese state's renewal is essential to establishing this need. The CCP had to take all necessary measures to protect its marine lines of communication due to China's increasing dependence on oil imports, which were essential for domestic stability and economic progress. (SLOC).[7] The stability of domestic affairs and the CCP's tight control over its population were directly impacted by any vulnerability in oil transit. In this way, the CCP's survival in a fast growing economy and, thus, a national or regime security imperative, became inexorably related to energy security. The Malacca Dilemma was coined as a result of the need to secure the maritime trade routes that required passage through the Malacca Strait in order to ensure energy security.

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[3] You Ji, "Dealing with the Malacca Dilemma: China's Effort to Protect Its Energy Supply," Strategic Analysis 31, no. 3 (18 September 2007), 469.
[4] You, "Dealing with the Malacca Dilemma," 469.
[5] Chen Shaofeng, "China's Self-Extrication from the 'Malacca Dilemma' and Implications," International Journal of China Studies 1, no. 1 (January 2010), 5.
[6] Chen, "China's Self-Extrication from the 'Malacca Dilemma'," 5.
[7] You, "Dealing with the Malacca Dilemma," 470.

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Understanding the topography of the strait and its surroundings is crucial to comprehending China's alleged predicament. The phrase "Malacca dilemma" was coined by President Hu Jintao in 2003 during a CCP economic work meeting.[8] According to Hu, geography plays a major role in the straits' vulnerability. There are few entry or exit points and significant distances between them on the East-West trade routes between China and the oil-producing nations.[9] The Malacca Strait, which has a length of 1,100 km and a width of 2.8 km at the Phillips Channel, is a crucial point of entry and exit. Hu stated unequivocally that this geography provides a possible chokepoint that is crucial to the Chinese economy and, consequently, its security.[10] He added, "Certain powers have all along encroached on and tried to control navigation through the strait."[11] This was not a fresh development; it was a covert attack against the US presence in the neighbourhood. Experts who believed this story went on to explain that the strait was vulnerable to accidents, piracy, and terrorist strikes, particularly after 9/11.[12] Chen Shaofeng asserts that as a result, the Malacca Strait turned into a weakness for China that might be used by rivals and non-state players in order to hold Beijing hostage to their demands.[13] By viewing the issue via a Chinese lens, one can better comprehend how Beijing wants the international community to perceive China's responses.

Concerning this article, Beijing's responses to the Malacca conundrum are mostly divided into two categories. The military plan is the first step in ensuring safe passage for Chinese ships travelling through the Malacca Strait. According to the CCP, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) must play a bigger part in ensuring that commerce vessels may transit through the straits safely. This is required as a strictly defensive measure. Beijing believes that by promoting free and open seas and enhancing overall regional security, this will lessen China's vulnerability. Second, China has to discover alternate routes that avoid the Malacca Strait. These initiatives include the Kur Strait in Thailand, the Myanmar Oil Pipeline to Kunming, China, and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which connects the Gwadar Port in Pakistan with the Xinjiang Province in China.[14] In a nutshell, the ideas appear simple and appropriate for any state seeking wealth and security. The Chinese solutions, however, have significant regional implications and necessitate a microscopic examination of this purported conundrum to comprehend Beijing's genuine objectives.

MALACCA BLUFF: LOOKING BEYOND THE CHINESE VERSION OF THE MALACCA DILEMMA

Numerous ambiguities external to the Malacca Strait are revealed by a thorough analysis of China's Malacca conundrum. Geographical, security, and behavioural ambiguity are the main three. When looking at the geographical ambiguity, one must first zoom out from the Malacca Strait and avoid viewing it in isolation, as Beijing would have the rest of the world do. The Malacca Strait is not the sole exit from the IOR, according to a macro-analysis of the area. The Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar are three more nearby straits, and taking this diversion is not as expensive economically as the CCP story suggests. The Strait of Hormuz would serve as a chokepoint if one were necessary.[15]Hu contends that China is thus faced with a Malacca issue, but if so, why not a Hormuz dilemma, or even a Sunda, Lombok, or Makassar dilemma?[16] Geographically, the Hormuz and the entire IOR are significantly more vulnerable because that area is not the PLAN's typical bastion but rather one where the United States and India have a distinct advantage.

For three reasons, Beijing exaggerates China's security worries in the Malacca Strait. First, the Malacca Straits are surrounded by three neutral nations: Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. These nations oppose any international administration of the straits, including US plans, because of worry that it would undermine their regional cooperation efforts.[17] Second, there is conflict on the local level on the main danger to the straits. One the one hand, the waterways' susceptibility to terrorism and piracy is highlighted by the United States and Singapore. Malaysia and Indonesia, on the other hand, think that certain nations are using the threat of terrorism and piracy as justification for establishing a strategic dominance over the region.[18] These opposing arguments rule out the targeted blockade of the strait by a single player. In addition, Beijing is equally concerned about terrorism and piracy, which are global problems that affect both China and the West.[19] The three neighbouring nations' coordinated maritime patrol efforts successfully decreased piracy assaults from 38 in 2004 to just four incidents in 2008.[20] Third, as previously mentioned, given that the US Navy has

[8] Marc Lanteigne, "China's Maritime Security and the 'Malacca Dilemma," Asian Security 4, no. 2 (2008), 143, https://doi.org/.
[9] David Brewster, "An Indian Ocean Dilemma: Sino-Indian Rivalry and China's Strategic Vulnerability in the Indian Ocean," Journal of the Indian Ocean Region 11, no. 1 (2015): 48–59, https://doi.org/.
[10] Lanteigne, "China's Maritime Security and the 'Malacca Dilemma,'," 144.
[11] Lanteigne, "China's Maritime Security and the 'Malacca Dilemma,'," 145.
[12] Lanteigne, "China's Maritime Security and the 'Malacca Dilemma,'," 146.
[13] Chen, "China's Self-Extrication from the 'Malacca Dilemma'," 2.
[14] Chen, "China's Self-Extrication from the 'Malacca Dilemma'," 10
[15] You, "Dealing with the Malacca Dilemma," 472.
[16] Brewster, "An Indian Ocean Dilemma," 49.
[17] Lanteigne, "China's Maritime Security and the 'Malacca Dilemma,'," 146.
[18] Chen, "China's Self-Extrication from the 'Malacca Dilemma'," 8-9.
[19] You, "Dealing with the Malacca Dilemma," 472.
[20] Chen, "China's Self-Extrication from the 'Malacca Dilemma'," 8.

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undisputed superiority in the former, the US is more likely to favour Hormuz than Malacca when seeking to enforce a blockade against the Chinese. Even in an unlikely scenario where the US imposes a costly blockade on Malacca and all the nearby straits, China may respond by imposing a similar blockade on US allies like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan via the East and South China Seas. Discussing Malacca Straits, You Ji, a professor at the University of Macau, argued, "SLOC risks are often overstated, by seeking to portray SLOC insecurity as a matter of life and death for nations, in view of its adverse impact on economy."[21]
It looks unusually Inconsistent for a Chinese president to have highlighted the Malacca Strait as China's Achilles' heel on the party conference stage in 2003. Historically, the propaganda around the party's crucial role in the advancement of the Chinese country and future action plans has taken centre stage at party conferences. This highlighting of a behavioural contradiction and a strategic weakness may be a cunning strategy to justify China's pivot to the IOR and signal to the rest of the world that China's ambitions are growing. Or, to put it another way, China wants to control the straits and use them as a base for its naval presence in the IOR. Overall, the three variables expose China's Malacca bluff and explain the underpinnings of its approach to the IOR.

INDIAN OCEAN STRATEGY OF CHINA

In relation to the importance of the IOR for Beijing, China made the Malacca bluff. China consequently adopted a "Two Oceans" strategy to assert control over the Indian and Pacific Oceans. For China to continue to prosper, both oceans are essential. For China's demands in energy and raw minerals, the Indian Ocean serves as a maritime thoroughfare. The Pacific Ocean serves as the country's economic highway. Despite the fact that the United States and its allies pose a strong threat to China in the Pacific, the IOR's power vacuum and its fragmented security system provide a fantastic opportunity for Chinese growth. The new Chinese approach in the IOR is not impromptu. Instead, it's a carefully thought-out and formalised attempt at doctrine. This shift in emphasis from "China does not station troops or set up military bases in a foreign country" to "distant force projection" can be seen in China's defence white papers from 1998 to 2008.[22] Chinese ideas about the West's collapse and how China may lead the world to economic rebirth were strengthened by the global financial crisis of 2008. China looks to be pursuing this goal in the IOR with a three-pronged strategy that may be broken down into diplomatic, military, and economic lanes.

First of all, China is aware of the power of money in a region with weak nation-states. The IOR states, which include Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Myanmar, have historically been vulnerable to outside influences and struggle with a combination of military coups, shaky economies, and poor democratic institutions. Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which President Xi Jinping has referred to as a "win-win" endeavour for all parties, Beijing has partnered with these countries on massive infrastructure projects. Each of these IOR states is a participant in the project, which involves Chinese businesses building port infrastructure and adopting unfeasible debt management practises.[23] The Seychelles, Maldives, and Madagascar have also received lucrative infrastructure assistance from China.[24] By offering alternate transportation routes, normalising Chinese presence in the IOR, and enabling greater oversight of maritime routes, the infrastructure allays China's SLOC worries. However, the initiatives have not yet shown to be economically successful, let alone contributing to the progress of the host nations. However, the initiatives offer a great chance to include China and give Beijing a more powerful voice in the IOR. Additionally, these debt traps strengthen China's control over internal politics and policymaking in these states and give it the opportunity to influence the IOR narrative.

Second, while geoeconomics influence Chinese policy, the Chinese strategy of regional hegemony depends on a strong military presence in the IOR. As a result, the PLAN became the primary consideration in upcoming military strategy. China's 2008 White Paper highlights the urgent need to build capabilities for remote water, arguing that "Struggles for Strategic Resources, Strategic Locations, and Strategic Domination have Intensified."[25] The 2015 white paper unambiguously stated, "China will work to seize the strategic initiative in military competition."[26] China's military presence in the IOR therefore dramatically grew. China's military IOR presence has grown significantly, from the first deployment of a nuclear submarine in the IOR in 2013 to a satellite-tracking ship making a port call in Hambantota in 2022.[27] China has made its long-term goals in the IOR known with evacuation operations in

[21] You, "Dealing with the Malacca Dilemma," 472.
[22] David Brewster, ed., India and China at Sea: Competition for Naval Dominance in the Indian Ocean, 1st edition (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 113-15.
[23] Frédéric Grare and Jean-Loup Samaan, The Indian Ocean as a New Political and Security Region (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 23.
[24] Brewster, India and China at Sea, 118.
[25] Brewster, India and China at Sea, 114.
[26] Brewster, India and China at Sea, 114.
[27] Grare and Samaan, The Indian Ocean as a New Political and Security Region, 26; and Yvette Tan, "Chinese 'spy Ship' Yuan Wang 5 Docks in Sri Lanka despite Indian Concern," BBC News, 16 August 2022, sec. Asia, https://www.bbc.com/.

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Yemen, the establishment of a naval facility in Djibouti in 2017, and agreements for military access to ports in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, along with joint military drills with the host countries.[28] Beijing furthered its position in the IOR by denying any competing claims made by a regional player by asserting that the Indian Ocean does not belong to India.[29] Beijing appears to be planning to create offensive and counteroffensive capabilities in case of a larger crisis and avoid any sea-based blockage of its commercial routes, according to China's undersea intelligence-gathering and mapping operations. In other words, for China to secure trade and project economic strength in the IOR and its environs, a significant naval presence is essential.

Third, Beijing has used diplomatic pressure to firmly establish China's position in the international forums of the IOR. China actively responded to the expanding economic and security requirements of the island nations and secondary powers in the IOR. Due to their shared animosity with India, Beijing has long had a "all-weather friendship" with Pakistan, but it also became Bangladesh's largest partner for the import of textiles and military hardware.[30] In a similar vein, China has established relations with four IOR island nations—Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles—that are strategically located near its maritime trade routes. China is Sri Lanka's top export market and has been a significant supplier of military equipment to Colombo. The importance that these "new natural partners" hold for China is demonstrated by the more than 50 high-level visits that have taken place between China and these nations, as well as post-BRI announcements. The support of these secondary powers and island nations ultimately paved the way for increased Chinese influence in regional organizations such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Commission (COI).[31] To put it simply, Beijing is using a combination of hard- and soft-power strategies to gain access to the IOR. China has room to manoeuvre on the diplomatic and military fronts thanks to financial levers. Beijing has been actively advancing its three-pronged plan to assert its dominance as a regional hegemon and fill the power vacuum that has developed in the IOR as a result of a perceived lack of Indian response and a relative US decline.

The future trajectory of the IOR appears unstable, notwithstanding Beijing's claims that the greater Chinese presence in the IOR is for the improvement of collective security. Two causes can be identified for this instability. First, the extraordinary Chinese presence heightens the security conundrum between India and the US. In the past, India has viewed the IOR as its sphere of influence and has rejected outside involvement. The situation exacerbates New Delhi's sense of insecurity and subsequent responses as China rejects any such Indian claims and builds potential dual-use infrastructure all around the Indian peninsula, referred to as the "string of pearls."[32] Similar to this, China's naval manoeuvres in the area with Iran and Russia pose a threat to US dominance.[33]

Chinese infrastructure projects and investments typically have a destabilising effect. Due to the hesitation of international institutions to provide help of this magnitude, Chinese economic aid proved profitable to host nations[34]. It therefore came as no surprise that countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and others failed to make loan payments to China. Additionally, the growing number of Chinese citizens and private security companies in these nations is perceived as a type of neocolonialism, complete with all the injustices of that age.[35] Baloch opposition to the Gwadar project and growing domestic opposition to the Colombo Port project both serve as examples of how these countries' populations feel about Chinese influence. The future of the IOR doesn't seem particularly secure with Sri Lanka declaring bankruptcy, a nuclear-armed Pakistan facing financial difficulties, and worries that Bangladesh and Myanmar are retreating from democracy. In order to address security concerns in the area, there is an urgent need for action due to the instability.

[28] Grare and Samaan, The Indian Ocean as a New Political and Security Region, 26.
[29] Brewster, India and China at Sea, 114.
[30] Anu Anwar, "China-Bangladesh Relations: A Three Way Balance between China, India and the US," Merics, 18 August 2022, https://merics.org/.
[31] Grare and Samaan, The Indian Ocean as a New Political and Security Region, 30-32.
[32] Virginia Marantidou, "Revisiting China's 'String of Pearls' Strategy: Places 'with Chinese Characteristics' and Their Security Implications," Issues & Insights 14, no. 7 (June 2014), 28, https://www.files.ethz.ch/.
[33] "Iran, Russia, China Hold Joint Naval Drill Amid Growing Ties," Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, 21 January 2022, https://www.rferl.org/.
[34] "China Hesitates on Bailing Out Sri Lanka, Pakistan as Debt Soars," Bloomberg, 13 April 2022, https://www.bloomberg.com/; and ANI, "Pakistan Following Sri Lanka's Path to Land in Chinese Debt Trap," WION, 18 June 2022, https://www.wionews.com/.
[35] Behram Baloch, "Gwadar Protesters Threaten to Block CPEC Projects," Dawn, 14 November 2022, https://www.dawn.com/; and Bharatha Mallawarachi, "Sri Lankan Protest Chinese Funded Port City Project," Seattle Times, 4 April 2016, https://www.seattletimes.com/.

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A MULTILAYERED SECURITY ARCHITECTURE: RECOMMENDATIONS

China's investments and growing influence in the IOR destabilise the area's economy and security. Despite this, the region's increased security conundrum cannot be resolved by a formalised security architecture. There are frequent requests to formalise Indo-Pacific forums like Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) into an Asian NATO without considering the region's history of such organisations' failure. Within 25 years of their founding, the post-World War II treaty organisations for Southeast Asia (SEATO) and the Central Pacific (CENTO) both failed.[36] Due to existing physical, political, economic, cultural, and historical diversity, the region is mostly inappropriate for this type of construction. Furthermore, a group like this that doesn't include China will simply exacerbate Beijing's security issue and further destabilise a volatile region. Additionally, removing small but important nations close to these dangerous chokepoints from a security architecture causes unrest and is perceived as extra-regional intrusion.

A multilayered and inclusive security framework that includes both major powers and regional players is required due to the complexity and divergent opinions in the IOR. There are three different ways to express this arrangement. Such a plan should first address the worries of neighbouring states about regional problems like piracy and terrorism. For instance, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore should be in charge of maintaining security in the Malacca Straits. Powerful governments' contributions will be confined to developing capability and exchanging maritime domain awareness. This will not only allay the worries of smaller governments but also shift the crucial ownership to more pertinent parties, maybe resolving the shared security conundrum of the region's large powers. Second, the major nations must carefully consider how they act in forums like the Quad and the United States-Australia-United Kingdom (AUKUS) trilateral. Cooperative international forums have the potential to either exacerbate or, by strategic signals, alleviate an adversary's security challenge. The AUKUS and Quad's naval exercises must be carried out in a way that sends a balanced message rather than merely being power plays that invite an equal response from the opposition. In addition, Quad and AUKUS should include systems that allow additional states to watch and take part in joint activities.

Third, there has to be more coordination and communication between regional groups like the IORA and COI, as well as maritime security-focused groups like the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and the Malacca Strait Patrols. (MSP).[37] In a region that is in chaos, formalised political and military interaction will help to create a shared understanding of maritime issues and may even help to resolve sources of contention. In other words, copying NATO is not the answer to the IOR's instability, and China cannot remain isolated either. India and the US need to accept that there will always be Chinese influence in the IOR. Beijing must also understand that, while developing naval capabilities, its security concerns in the IOR are overblown and that China cannot rule the region.

CONCLUSION

It is paradoxical that an apparently anti-imperialist China is displaying the features it claims to detest—basically participating in a sort of neocolonialism—in its ambition for resource hoarding and military dominance in the IOR. The IOR goal of China is straightforward: to gain political clout, it must make vulnerable nations economically dependent. Beijing seeks to legitimise its dominance and utilise the Malacca Straits as a gateway to control the strategically significant Indian Ocean by portraying the straits as a weakness. A comprehensive and all-encompassing security architecture is required because of the rising militarization of the area and the divergent perspectives of the IOR governments. Local concerns of neighbouring governments should be addressed, and strategic communication concerning issues and disputes between big countries should be improved. On the other hand, sticking to a traditionalist security approach will only make large players' security issues worse and increase the likelihood that they will start fighting among themselves. The key is to normalise Chinese activity in the IOR without jeopardising stability or compromising the legitimate domains of influence of major players.

[36] Jagannath Panda, "The Elusive Quest for an 'Asian NATO," Strategic Analysis 45, no. 1 (2021): 58, https://doi.org/; and Ani Prakash, "Communist Containment in the Middle East: Emergence of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO)," Association for Diplomatic Studies & Training, 27 June 2022, https://adst.org/.

[37] Grare and Samaan, The Indian Ocean as a New Political and Security Region, 205-14; and Collin Koh Swee Lean, "CO16091 | The Malacca Strait Patrols: Finding Common Ground," RSIS Commentary, 20 April 2016, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/.