



# CHINA'S DISPERSED PEARLS: HOW THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE IS RECLAIMING THE "STRING OF PEARLS"

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The phrase "String of Pearls" was first used in a 2004 report by the US consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton titled "Energy Futures in Asia."<sup>1</sup> It was said that the region's friendly nations should build infrastructure to enable an unimpeded flow of energy through the Indian Ocean. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was introduced by the Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2013, effectively reclaimed the Western narrative of a strategic string of pearls and therefore legitimised China's century-old global connectivity scheme. From the contentious Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka to China's naval station in Djibouti, Beijing has since grabbed headlines with its large investments in maritime infrastructure.

In its drive for supremacy in the Indian Ocean region, China has not stopped at funding the Maritime Silk Route projects, according to a closer examination of the country's growing connections with island and littoral states in the area. Instead, Beijing has taken things a step further by using Chinese state-owned firms and other Chinese organisations to construct and fund more important infrastructure in the area. Periodic high-level visits, gatherings, and trade deals have helped China strengthen its political and economic connections. Beijing has embraced a soft-power strategy that includes generous development assistance, interpersonal and cultural links, and most recently, vaccine diplomacy in the strategically important region. China sent medical teams to Madagascar, sent an experimental medication to eradicate malaria in the Comoros, and held joint naval exercises with Pakistan in the Arabian Sea while the rest of the world was debating China's debt-trap diplomacy. Beijing is gaining governments' support and persuading people to extend China's influence in the Indian Ocean region much further than what was originally planned as the String of Pearls.

The unfavourable conceptions of Chinese expansionism in the Indo-Pacific have received a lot of attention in Western media, which has also referred to Chinese investments in the Global South as "debt traps." As a result, Western governments and media frequently ignore the complexity that certain Chinese involvements in the Global South have really contributed positively to numerous Indian Ocean nations. Despite the fact that these narratives affect how the developing world views China, the nations of the Global South have continued to forge closer connections with that country. The West won't be ready

to confront China's rapidly expanding footprint in the Indian Ocean region unless China's nonregional rivals look beyond their own narrative of a China that is practising "chequebook diplomacy."

With their strategically located naval bases, the nations that were once seen to be a part of the String of Pearls easily fit into the BRI. When one closely examines Chinese activity in the Indian Ocean, it becomes clear that China's interest in the region extends beyond obtaining high-risk investments or key locations, but also includes establishing long-term strategic ties with the governments and people of these countries. One might contend that Beijing has expanded beyond what was initially thought of as a few strategic outposts in the Indian Ocean to secure China's trade and energy supply routes to a grander vision of being a global power that can project power in nations on the other side of the globe, particularly under the BRI. So, it could be argued that China's interest in the Indo-Pacific extends beyond just protecting trade routes or even just ensuring a strategic presence. The developing countries of the Global South will find China to be "an all-weather friend" and "a preferred development partner" if the West persists with the narrative of a debt trap and fails to take the growing expansionism in China seriously. Strategic outposts, expanding markets, and stronger people-to-people ties are just a few of the benefits China would receive in return, all of which would be threats to the current global order that the West and its allies are trying to preserve. The case studies that follow, which range from Djibouti in East Africa to Myanmar in Southeast Asia, only scratch the surface of China's expanding regional influence. They serve to highlight China's growing Indo-Pacific engagement.

## CAMBODIA

A secret pact between China and Cambodia that grants China access to the strategically positioned Ream Naval Base in the Gulf of Thailand for 30 years with annual automatic renewals prompted worries in 2019 according to a Wall Street Journal story. The Cambodian government has strenuously refuted allegations of a covert agreement with China, but it has destroyed portions of the naval base that were originally constructed with American assistance in the name of expanding the base. Ream Naval Base improvements and expansion are supposedly supported by China. According to the Prime



Minister of Cambodia, China would not have exclusive access to the Ream Naval Base and the Cambodian Constitution prohibits the establishment of foreign military bases there. Regional powers worry that Ream could end up being utilised by China as a dual-use facility, or a port that serves both military and civilian needs, given China's role in developing the military base.

## MYANMAR

While China's engagement in Myanmar has increased dramatically over the past ten years, under the recently deposed State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, bilateral connections have accelerated, despite certain difficulties. President Xi visited Myanmar in January 2020 to commemorate 70 years of diplomatic ties between the two nations. The two sides signed a record 33 memoranda of understanding (MOU) and agreements during the first visit by a Chinese president to the southern neighbour in nearly 20 years. These agreements covered a variety of topics, including infrastructure development, industrial and power projects, railways, trade, investment, and human resources.

China had invested \$21 billion in Myanmar through foreign direct investments (FDI) as of March 2020. Myanmar also joined the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a free trade agreement (FTA) among 15 countries in the Indo-Pacific, in November 2020. Beijing has achieved a significant geopolitical win since the RCEP will enable China to profit from increased regional economic integration.

The deal for the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone and Deep Seaport Project, which is intended to give China a backdoor to the Indian Ocean, was one of the most important accords reached between the two nations during President Xi's visit last year. Through Kyaukphyu deep seaport, the BRI's China-Myanmar Economic Corridor will link China's Yunnan Province to the Indian Ocean. The Kyaukphyu deepwater port project will be carried out by a Chinese joint venture business with approval from the Myanmar government in August 2020. Concerns have been raised about Kyaukphyu becoming a Chinese facility in the Bay of Bengal given that China's CITIC Myanmar Port Investment Limited owns a 70% part in the joint venture.

## BANGLADESH

In 1975, Bangladesh and China established diplomatic ties. Although China initially refused to recognise Bangladesh as an independent state, bilateral ties have since improved, and according to Bangladeshi academic Prof. Imtiaz Ahmed, "now, there are practically any anti-Chinese in Bangladesh, which is a great improvement."

Bangladesh's military employs Chinese fighter jets, Chinese tanks, and Chinese frigates, similar to the services of many other nations in the area. Bangladesh received two submarines from China in 2016. China is currently assisting Bangladesh in building its first submarine station in Cox's Bazar and training Bangladeshi personnel to staff the site and operate the submarines. It's interesting to note that according to

Bangladeshi officials, China has no plans to use the base. In addition to expanding its naval infrastructure, China provided loans totaling \$1.7 billion in 2019 to Bangladesh for the country's sole electricity sector. With an estimated \$12 billion in yearly bilateral trade, China is one of Bangladesh's main commercial partners.

Bangladesh signed numerous BRI agreements in December 2016. The Payra Port's extension and development, which cost \$600 million, was one of these important projects. China State Shipbuilding Corporation was awarded a \$120 million project in 2020 to transform the Payra Port into a significant deep seaport. Sheikh Hasina, the prime minister of Bangladesh, also said in 2019 that the two biggest ports in the nation, Chittagong and Mongla, will be open to use by the southwestern provinces of China in addition to India. As a result, Bangladesh has virtually allowed China access to all of its important ports.

## SRI LANKA

Perhaps no other nation has faced the level of international backlash that Sri Lanka has because to its thinning connections with China. Relations between China and Sri Lanka now have existed for more than 50 years. In 1950, Sri Lanka was one of the first nations to acknowledge the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as the nation in power, and the two nations went on to sign the illustrious Rubber-Rice Pact two years later. The ban and embargo that Western countries had placed on China were lifted in part thanks to this accord. For more over 60 years, Colombo and Beijing have enjoyed close cultural, economic, military, and technical relations. By providing the Sri Lankan government with aircraft, ships, weapons, ammunition, and rockets in exchange for cash or for lenient loans during the war, when many nations had put sanctions on providing military assistance to Sri Lanka, China played a crucial role in helping to put an end to the civil war there in 2009.

Up to 20 bilateral agreements were signed between China and Sri Lanka during President Xi's visit to the island nation in 2014. These agreements covered a variety of topics, including power, industry, sea reclamation, and water supply. China has been Sri Lanka's greatest development partner, working on projects for its transportation infrastructure, including its ports, airports, and roadways. Chinese FDI in Sri Lanka had topped \$7.3 billion by the end of 2018. China remains one of Colombo's major trading partners, with annual trade between the two countries totaling around \$4 billion. In 2019, China accounted for the majority of Sri Lanka's imports. Yang Jiechi, a CCP politburo member and former foreign minister, visited Sri Lanka in October 2020, marking what was thought to be the first overseas trip by a senior Chinese official to South Asia following COVID-19. He did so to express China's importance for Sri Lanka and to announce a \$90 million grant for healthcare, education, and water supplies in the nation's rural areas.



In the maritime sector, China Harbor Engineering Company, which has ties to the Chinese government, is constructing a \$1.4 billion Port City on 269 hectares of reclaimed land next to the Colombo Port, which is thought to be one of South Asia's best connected ports in exchange for the right to share some of the land. It will enlarge Colombo, Sri Lanka's commercial hub, and be governed by a different set of laws, including alluring tax breaks that are allegedly beneficial to investments and business operations. Furthermore, China Merchants Port Holdings Company, which owns an 85% share in the Colombo International Container Terminal (CICT), one of the port's busiest terminals, is under its control. It is the only deepwater terminal in South Asia with a draught of 18 metres that can accommodate the largest ships in the world. Up to 40% of the Colombo Port's total volume was handled by CICT in 2019.

The Hambantota Port In Sri Lanka was eventually constructed with Chinese funding after being initially turned down by both India and the United States. It received harsh criticism both domestically and abroad for being a former president Mahinda Rajapaksa's "white elephant" project and the embodiment of China's debt-trap diplomacy. Huge Chinese loans were used to construct the port. The first phase of the project was financed by a \$306 million commercial loan with a 15-year term and a 6.3 percent interest rate, while the second phase was funded by a \$600 million loan from the Exim Bank of China and a Renminbi Yuan 1 billion concessional loan from the Chinese government. In 2017, the port was leased to China Merchants Port Holdings Company for \$1.1 billion with a 70% ownership for 99 years because it failed to provide the promised return on investments and Sri Lanka could no longer pay the loan.

Hambantota is of strategic importance to China. Indonesia and the eastern coast of Africa are both equally distant from Sri Lanka. One of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, where 275 ships pass daily, is less than 20 nautical miles from Hambantota Port. Hambantota is a key component in the equation because China also imports large quantities of bulk energy and other supplies from Africa. As a result, it is crucial to secure China's sea lanes of communication (SLOC).

## MALDIVES

President Xi became the first Chinese head of state to visit the Maldives in 2014, shortly after announcing the BRI a year earlier. The archipelago of islands was once more well-known as a honeymoon destination than a strategic location. Since then, China's involvement in the Maldives has rapidly increased, leading to significant Chinese infrastructure investments like the \$200 million construction of the famous China Maldives Friendship Bridge, also known as the Sinamale Bridge, and the expansion of the Velana International Airport. The bridge, which connects the islands of Hulhulé and Hulhumalé to the nation's capital city of Malé, was the nation's first over-the-water structure.

There are rumours that the people who lived on the Gaadhoo island in the southern Laamu atoll of the Maldives were relocated to the nearby Fonadhoo island so that China could build the Gaadhoo Port nearby the "One and Half Degree Channel," which divides the northern and central atolls of the Maldives from the southern atolls and is situated close to the SLOCs between Africa and Asia. The PLAN cruiser Chang Xing Dao visited the port of Malé in 2014 to deliver fresh water amid a plant failure, and three Chinese warships paid the Maldives a five-day goodwill visit in 2017.

China completed a social housing construction project in the Maldives in 2020 that included 16 residential structures with as many as 7,000 apartment units, housing almost 30,000 of the 540,000 inhabitants. Additionally, China decided to forgive \$25 million of the \$100 million official debt that the Maldives had to pay to China last year. Additionally, given that China sends some 300,000 tourists to the Maldives each year, a number of Chinese businesses have leased islands there to develop resorts.

## PAKISTAN

Since 1951, when Pakistan recognised the PRC, the two nations have maintained a close bond they refer to as a "iron brotherhood." China has given Pakistan significant economic, military, and technical support, leading to the development of a strategic alliance between the two nations.

A nine-day combined naval exercise between the fleets of Pakistan and China was finished in the Arabian Sea in January 2020. This particular joint exercise was the sixth. General Wei Fenghe, China's military minister, visited Pakistan in December 2020, and the two nations inked an MOU to expand their relations. China has been Pakistan's top defence supplier for the previous ten years.

Pakistan is geographically significant because it connects western Chinese regions through Xinjiang to the oil-rich Middle East through Gwadar Port, which can reduce transportation costs and distance for shipping goods overland through Pakistan. This is similar to Myanmar, which connects southern China to the Indian Ocean. Additionally, there are long-term ambitions to link Gwadar Port to the Central Asian nations, which have abundant gas and energy resources.

Another strategic gem for China is the isolated Balochistan region of Pakistan's Gwadar Port, which is close to the Strait of Hormuz. Chinese Overseas Port Holdings Limited runs the port, which is controlled by the Gwadar Port Authority, a government-owned entity in Pakistan. The Gwadar Port, which is a crucial component of the \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which connects Pakistan to Xinjiang, received more than 80% of its \$248 million development cost from China. In order to increase connectivity between China and the Middle East, the CPEC also entails plans to build oil pipelines, rail, and road links.

China's expanding relations with Southeast and South Asian nations like Cambodia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives are frequently highlighted in the media, particularly in the West, but little attention is given to



China's expanding influence in the island nations of the Indian Ocean off the coast of East Africa. Despite China's presence in Djibouti, these islands are strategically significant for China to protect the SLOCs in the congested Hormuz Strait and Bab-el-Mandeb Strait as well as between Africa and Asia. China has aggressively increased its ties with these Indian Ocean islands, especially over the last ten years.

## SEYCHELLES

China and the Seychelles have had diplomatic links for 45 years, and there has been a development in their mutual understanding on economic, trade, educational, and cultural matters. Numerous infrastructure projects in the nation, including the National Swimming Pool, the National Assembly Building, the Palais de Justice, the Anse Royale Hospital, and the Glacis Primary School and Crèche, have received funding and grants from China.

The La Gogue Dam Project, built by Sinohydro Group Limited and intended to increase water security in the nation, and the Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation facility, which is funded by a grant from the Chinese government, are two of China's major projects in the nation. He emphasised China's commitment to work with Seychelles to boost the development of BRI projects in January during the visit of the Chinese state councillor and foreign minister Wang Yi. The Chinese foreign minister announced gifts totaling \$11 million during the visit, including \$4.6 million for a project promoting green energy. China also gave Seychelles multiple batches of anti-epidemic supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was crucial in Seychelles' fight against the disease.

Soldiers from the People's Defense Forces of the Seychelles have received training from China, and Chinese naval warships have frequently called on Victoria Port in the Seychelles. Additionally, PLAN personnel took part in Seychelles' national parade for the first time in 2013 at that time. Jean-Paul Adam, who was the foreign minister at the time, said that his nation had urged China to establish a military facility in Mahé to combat piracy as long back as 2011. The Chinese Ministry of Defense has chosen to seek supply facilities at suitable harbours in the Seychelles in accordance with escort needs and the needs of other long-range missions, despite the fact that China declined the offer. For China to benefit from dual use of Seychelles ports, they do not necessarily need to be Chinese military bases.

## MAURITIUS

Since 1972, China has significantly increased its investments in Mauritius, primarily for the construction of infrastructure. Former Chinese president Hu Jintao proposed the modernization of Port Louis airport and the establishment of a special economic zone as early as 2009, during his historic first official visit to Mauritius. As a result, the Jin Fei Smart City project and special economic zone were created. At a cost of \$188 million, China also constructed the Bagatelle Dam, which is south of Port Louis and is projected to help the city and its

environs satisfy their long-term water needs. In preparation for the Indian Ocean Islands Games in 2019, China assisted the Mauritian government at constructing a multisport facility in St. Pierre.

The FTA between China and Mauritius entered into force on January 1, 2021, making it the first FTA between China and an African nation. By signing up to this FTA, Mauritius hopes to act as a liaison between China and continental Africa. Mauritius may serve as China's strategic gateway to the enormous continent of Africa. With 16.7% of all imports into Mauritius in 2019, China is also the country's top importer. While the trade balance is in China's advantage, what is even more significant for Beijing is the strategic position it gets by forging stronger economic connections with the island nation of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean.

## COMOROS

In contrast to other Indian Ocean nations, China's participation in Comoros is somewhat different. Malaria is the leading cause of death for all demographics in this island nation. China started implementing the first stage of the Fast Elimination of Malaria by Source Eradication (FEMSE) initiative in 2007, giving the entire nation an experimental anti-malarial medicine. The initiative is now regarded as China's most effective health endeavour in Africa.

Additionally, China is involved in the construction of hospitals and a proposed airport and has, among other things, offered Comoros-made goods a duty-free market of 1.4 billion people. Most recently, in January 2021, China deployed 48 physicians, virologists, and specialists from Guangxi medical services to Comoros and Niger for an 18-month term to address the escalating COVID-19 issue.

China was the first nation to recognise the Comoros' independence and to open diplomatic ties with them in 1975. Since then, China's investments in Comoros have had a huge impact on the people of the island nation, from mosques, schools, and hospitals to major infrastructure projects like airports. Comoros is essentially a strategic gem for China, with a people who are so appreciative of what China has given them.

## MADAGASCAR

China and Madagascar have long-standing cultural relations that go back to the middle of the nineteenth century, when Chinese immigrants began arriving in Madagascar to work on French colonial projects. As a result, there have been many intermarriages, and the country has a sizable community of Sino-Malagasy people.

Since the beginning of diplomatic relations between China and Madagascar in 1972, China has dispatched numerous medical missions to that country. China, however, increased its participation in the largest island off the coast of Africa by investing in infrastructure during the 1980s and 1990s.

Several agreements were signed between the two nations in 2017 during the state visit of the former president of Madagascar, Hery Rajaonarimampianina, to Beijing. These



agreements aim to speed up Chinese investment in the construction of ports, airports, and energy and aviation infrastructure. Madagascar was one of the first African nations to sign an MOU on the BRI, and the two nations forged a close alliance. For many years, China has been Madagascar's top importer, largest commercial partner, and fourth-largest export market.

The building of a 240-kilometer motorway connecting Antananarivo with the port city of Toamasina (Tamatave), which serves as the nation's entryway to the Indian Ocean, is being funded by China. The development of the Narinda Bay deepwater port on Madagascar's eastern coast has also been announced by China. Several Ambodifototra Port redevelopment projects also involve China.

## DJIBOUTI

China established its first overseas military post in Djibouti in 2017, claiming it is there to offer "logistical support" for local counterpiracy and escorting operations. Although several other nations, including the United States and France, also have military presence in the Horn of Africa, China believes that having a naval presence in the area is crucial for a number of reasons, including China's growing trade, investment, and aid in Africa, the crucial trade and energy supply routes connecting Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, which pass through the congested Bab-el-Mandeb strait, and the maritime and security challenges in the area, such as piracy off the coast of Somalia.

China has made significant strategic investments in Djibouti, just as it has in other important places in the Indian Ocean. It has provided funding for the Dolareh Port, an addition to the Port of Djibouti that is situated where international trade lanes linking Asia, Africa, and Europe converge. This multipurpose port is situated in a sparsely populated, less commercially active, but strategically significant region with potential, similar to China's substantial investments in ports elsewhere. Another significant Chinese investment in Djibouti is the modernization of the 756-kilometer-long Ethiopia-Djibouti Railway, which was built by China Railway Group and China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation and received up to 70% of its funding from China for the railway's construction in landlocked Ethiopia.

Since the beginning of the millennium, China and Djibouti have developed a strategic cooperation, and in addition to sharing ports, railways, and free trade zones, the two nations also have strong economic and political links. Ismail Omar Guelleh, the president of Djibouti, has made three trips to China in the past three years, with Wang Yi, the foreign minister of China, making his most recent trip in 2020.

China has easy access to the Red Sea, the Suez Canal, the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, and the farthest corner of the Indian Ocean thanks to a sizable naval facility in Djibouti that would have the capacity to house huge warships and China's new aircraft carriers.

## CONCLUSION

China has established a pro-active foreign policy and regularly interacts with all of these Indian Ocean governments through high-profile political visits and diplomatic engagements, as well as through large subsidies and donations, which include COVID-19 medical help and vaccinations. China has established Confucius Institutes or classrooms in each of these nations to help overcome the cultural and linguistic divide. While Confucius Institutes are a contentious topic in the West, they offer Mandarin and martial arts instruction in several African nations, much like the American Centers, British Councils, or Alliance Française do with English, French, and other components of Western culture. Some countries, like the Comoros, also offer courses in engineering and information technology for talent development. As a result of the scholarships given to thousands of students from these nations to attend prestigious Chinese colleges, China has gained popularity and a new generation of Sinophiles.

Building ports, roads, airports, and other facilities is only one aspect of infrastructure projects; others involve connecting people, enhancing their quality of life, and facilitating their means of subsistence. There are numerous successful Chinese investments throughout the Indian Ocean region, including the Sinamale Bridge in the Maldives, the Colombo International Container Terminal, and the Southern Expressway that connects Colombo to southern Sri Lanka, and millions of people are appreciative. Their governments and leaders view China as an all-weather friend.

The debate above is not meant to downplay the serious concerns that exist about China's expanding political, economic, and culturally ties in these nations, from Cambodia to Madagascar. It is also not a thorough analysis of China's bilateral relations with any of these nations. Furthermore, none of these nations have tolerated Chinese presence without opposition or criticism. There are accusations that China has violated labour and human rights, over-extracted natural resources, degraded the environment, supported dishonest authorities, influenced local politics in foreign nations, and paid kickbacks to politicians. There have been violent protests in Madagascar against various Chinese ventures, including a gold mining operation in Soamahamanina and a sugar facility in Morondava, despite the fact that China is the nation's main trading partner. In Pakistan, the provincial administration of Balochistan began fencing off 24 square kilometres of the city, which is at the centre of the CPEC project, as recently as December 2020 because Baloch separatist organisations oppose China's presence there."

Despite these accusations, China is seen as a trustworthy friend and a development partner by many Indian Ocean states for a number of reasons. Beijing's loans-with-no-strings-attached strategy does not demand democratisation, reforms to governance systems, or other international best practises, which are frequently prerequisites for traditional donors." As a result, South Asian and African nations now favour China as a partner. These nations look to Chinese funding primarily to advance



regional power balancing and local development objectives. China is a favoured partner for many of these nations because to years of solid relations based on friendship and equality and China's trademark policy of non-interference, which is more or less the norm though there have been exceptions. China is constantly willing to offer assistance in a variety of ways, from grants and loans to joint ventures, to friendly nations in geopolitically significant locations. China is flush with cash and ravenous for strategic assets.

While its adversaries were condemning China for its unconventional diplomacy, China has gone above and beyond what the Booz Allen Hamilton report's authors suggested with its BRI and many other projects outside the BRI. China is currently developing maritime facilities in Ream in Cambodia, Kyaukphyu in Myanmar, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Gwadar in Pakistan, all of which have the potential to become dual-use facilities in the future. China has not stopped at the construction of a naval base in Djibouti. Chinese influence has also grown significantly in a number of strategically important island states in the Indian Ocean, including Comoros, Madagascar, the Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles.

A covert arrangement to grant PLAN access to these sites during a crisis may result from the close diplomatic and business relations with the host nations. To effectively manage the Indo-Pacific, the United States and its allies must prioritise its contacts with the minor but strategically crucial Indian Ocean states rather than continually harping on about China's "debt-trap diplomacy." While only Djibouti has actually turned into a Chinese military post thus far, it is anyone's guess whether any of these other naval installations will eventually turn into a Chinese military base or a dual-use facility as connections and relations between the two countries grow. They were meticulously picked over many years; they are China's dispersed pearls in the Indian Ocean. The West and its allies' actions—or lack thereof—will determine whether China's stray pearls eventually form China's String of Pearls.

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