

Book Review

China in the Indian Ocean

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The Costliest Pearl: China's Struggle for India's Ocean
by Bertil Lintner
Context, 2019.

China's growing regional ambitions have been the focus of many recent studies. With the strengthening of the Chinese economy and its financial clout, there has been an increase in Chinese influence globally. China is investing heavily in infrastructure and other projects across the world. With increasing investments extending beyond its boundaries, Beijing strongly feels the need to strengthen its military to defend its expanding external assets and interests. As a result, an all-round modernisation of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is underway. A rapid naval build up and acquisition of strategic ports and military bases along the principal sea routes—especially in the Indian Ocean-- is a particular goal of the PLA.

Chinese Aims

China traditionally has been a country with a security focus based on threats emerging from the land. However, over the last decade there has been a renewed focus on strengthening the naval power base. Such ambitions also emerge from Beijing's aspirations to counter the United States as well as find a solution to its Malacca Dilemma. Today, almost two-thirds of Chinese oil and resource imports pass through the Malacca Straits. China is aware that in case of a conflict, countries like the United States and India can blockade the flow of vital resources. Such fears have been gaining attention

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within the Chinese policy makers and think tanks. As a result, there has been a concerted effort to gain footholds across the Indian Ocean and to look for alternative transport routes. This strategy has been termed as the 'String of Pearls', where Beijing gains access to major ports in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal to be able to monitor and be in a position to counter the existing naval powers in the region -- India and the United States.

Given this backdrop, the book *The Costliest Pearl: China's Struggle for India's Ocean* by Bertil Lintner attempts to answer the question, "And what will happen when China's military presence in the Indian Ocean region reaches a point where traditional powers such as the United States and India really feel threatened?" (pp. 30). A similar sentiment is asserted when Lintner argues, "... regardless of the historical inaccuracies presented by Chinese leaders, China is determined to become the most powerful nation in the Indian Ocean" (pp. 168).

Coupled with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was announced by Xi Jinping in 2013 with a focus on a 'maritime silk route', China has intensified its attention towards sea routes. The author underscores the argument when he states: "The 'ancient maritime silk road' may be a myth, but it is clear that the strategic importance of Maldives for Xi's BRI is such that China will do anything to maintain its grip on the Maldives" (pp. 191). China has also been working towards assimilating the new infrastructure projects it is constructing in various countries, such as ports and maritime developments -- under the narrative of historical ties.

BRI Faces Hurdles

But all is not smooth for the BRI as it has already become embroiled in the negative aspects of debt trap, an outcome of ruinous clandestine conditionalities that inevitably lead to a debt-trap and non-repayment of Chinese loans. The Sri Lankan port of Hambantota is one of the most prominent examples of what Chinese loans and investments can entail for smaller countries with small economies. Lintner himself argues, "And there is the costly BRI. It is built on loans and credits offered to weaker nations, but if they cannot repay the money they borrowed, China may, at best, end up with more overseas real estate. That in itself would constitute an important strategic gain, though the money will have gone" (pp. 234).

The book 'Costliest Pearl' takes on from these points and argues that the Chinese new investments and interests in ports and countries in and around the Indian Ocean underscores that China wants to be a strong naval power. Lintner argues, "For the first time in history, China is emerging as an Indian Ocean power" (pp. 4). The book discusses the developments in the countries around the Indian Ocean region and tries to draw a narrative of increasing Chinese presence and the ongoing and strengthening tussle between Beijing and New Delhi for influence. India naturally regards the Indian Ocean region as its sphere of influence and is not comfortable with the Chinese inroads and efforts to undermine that position. The author argues, "The balance of power in the Indian Ocean is far more important, and one of India's most crucial lines of defence now goes through the former penal colony that has become the picturesque city of Port Blair. It is from here the Indians – and their allies – are hoping to counterbalance the increasingly important role China is playing in the countries in and around the Indian Ocean" (pp. 89-90).

Chinese Inroads and Counterbalance

The book covers the developments in various countries in the region -- Mauritius, Sri Lanka, Seychelles, the Maldives, Myanmar, etc. It draws on a narrative based on 'historical ties', current developments (both domestic and external), and the existing strategic prominence of these island nations and ports. The author builds the argument that as these countries are strategically placed on the sea routes, both India and China have been vying to increase their influence. In recent years China, which is not a coastal Indian Ocean state, has managed to achieve significant gains through its strong financial role, the BRI, and focussed military-diplomatic manoeuvrings. One of the questions raised by Lintner with respect to the Maldives is: "is the tiny island in the Indian Ocean big enough for both Asian giants?" (pp. 111). The Maldives is crucial for New Delhi and can be regarded as a "strategic red line that India does not want China to cross" (pp. 170). However, with respect to Myanmar the issue is more complicated. The success of India's Act East policy, he argues, "depends not only on denying Indian insurgents, sanctuary in Myanmar and improved infrastructure across its common border" (pp. 89).

To further underscore the current position of China, the author argues: "Today, China is a player not only on land but even more crucially on the high seas, and then primarily in the Indian Ocean" (pp. 237). He further highlights that New Delhi is getting

increasingly concerned by the closeness between China and island states such as Seychelles in the military and the economic spheres. Mauritius has also become a very important point in the BRI. In keeping with growing interest in these island states there has been an increase in the number of Chinese tourists visiting both Mauritius and Seychelles in recent years.

Much too Sanguine

However, one cannot shed the feeling that the conclusion is kind of obvious from the very beginning. Lintner argues, "...China's involvement in upgrading ports in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Pakistan has tilted the balance of power in the Indian Ocean region" (pp. 195). He concludes by saying, "For Xi, the Indian Ocean is the pearl he wishes to secure for his growing Chinese empire – irrespective of the cost" (pp. 238). This underscores the argument that Xi will do whatever it takes to increase the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean region.

But Lintner fails to highlight that the smaller nations who find the Chinese investment opportunities appealing will also be mindful of their own national interest. The issues of sovereignty and diplomatic independence will be, ultimately, important factors in the decision-making of these nations. In the last few years, there has been an increasing concern related to Chinese investments in countries like Malaysia, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Myanmar and Mauritius. The author raises the question, "... could China be overstretching itself with what it has said are projects amounting to several trillion dollars?" (pp. 219). So even if Xi is keen to own strategic leverage in the Indian Ocean region, it is not something that will be attained without clashing with the aspirations of the regional states and the existing powers like the United States and India.

The book is a good addition to the existing literature on the subject as it does provide extensive data on the developments in the region. The author has managed to write lucidly on a complicated and unfolding development. The juxtaposition of the current issues and the complicated, and fascinating history of the vast Indian Ocean region makes the book interesting to read and generates anxiety for the future.