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CHINESE GEOPOLITICAL INFLUENCE IN INDIA'S MARITIME NEIGHBOURHOOD: NATIONAL SECURITY CONCERN BY CAPT(IN) KAMLESH AGNIHOTRI (RETD)

ORGANISED BY CENJOWS
29 MAY 2025

CHINESE GEOPOLITICAL INFLUENCE IN INDIA'S MARITIME NEIGHBOURHOOD:

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The lecture delivered by Captain (IN) Agnihotri focused on the strategic challenges emerging from China's growing naval presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), and the implications this holds for India's maritime security and regional influence. Emphasizing the critical importance of maritime power in the current geopolitical landscape, the lecture analyzed as to how China's naval expansion is reshaping the strategic environment and pressing India to recalibrate its approach to regional security.

Captain (IN) Agnihotri provided detailed insights into Chinese naval activity, including frequent and sustained deployments of People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) warships and submarines in the IOR. These operations reflect China's intent to establish a permanent presence in the region. Beyond military deployments, China is leveraging its economic tools—such as the Belt and Road Initiative, to build maritime infrastructure and gain strategic footholds in key regional countries, including Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. These nations, increasingly dependent on Chinese investments and military equipment, are becoming nodes of Chinese influence, thereby complicating India's strategic and security calculus.

The lecture also addressed the close defense cooperation between China and Pakistan, which includes large-scale arms sales, joint naval exercises, and technology transfers. This partnership enhances Pakistan's military capabilities and presents a dual-front maritime security concern for India in the Arabian Sea and in the Western Indian Ocean.

A significant portion of the lecture was dedicated to analyzing the operational implications of China's presence for the Indian Navy. The regular patrols and intelligence-gathering missions conducted by Chinese vessels in the IOR create persistent surveillance and deterrence challenges. Captain (IN) Agnihotri emphasized the need for India to adapt its naval posture and operational planning to account for the new reality of near-constant Chinese activity in its maritime backyard.

To respond effectively, India must enhance its maritime security architecture through a combination of naval modernization, intelligence sharing, and strategic partnerships. Captain (IN) Agnihotri highlighted the importance of working more closely with regional partners to establish cooperative frameworks that ensure freedom of navigation, maritime domain awareness, and a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

The lecture concluded with a reflection on India's evolving maritime identity. Increasingly seen as a de facto island nation due to its extensive coastline and maritime interests, India must place greater emphasis on naval power and ocean governance. A forward-looking maritime strategy, supported by diplomatic engagement and robust infrastructure, is essential to safeguard national interests and maintain stability in the Indian Ocean Region.