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BOOK REVIEW

**China's Air Power And Maritime Strategies Towards the
Indian Ocean Region**

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CHINA'S AIR POWER AND MARITIME STRATEGIES TOWARDS THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

Joshy M. Paul



In an era dominated by states competing for dominance in the maritime domain, China's Air Power and Maritime Strategies Towards the Indian Ocean Region by Joshy M. Paul arrives as both a timely and necessary contribution to Indo-Pacific studies. Published by Routledge in association with the Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS), the book offers an in-depth examination of how China is projecting military power into what has long been considered India's oceanic domain. Paul brings eighteen years of research experience across East Asian affairs, air power, and maritime dynamics.

The book is structured across nine chapters that move logically from theoretical discussions on policy and grand strategy to operational capability and to geopolitical consequences for the region. The opening chapters focus on China's military planning strategy and modernisation programme, establishing the ideological foundation upon which the rest of the analysis rests. Paul traces the evolution of China's strategic thinking from Mao's continental preoccupations with regional defence to Xi Jinping's ambitions and vision of China as a major power. He situates China's naval and air expansion not as opportunistic adventurism, but as a deliberate expression of a coherent grand strategy designed over decades to secure the BRI and guarantee uninterrupted access to energy flows, of which roughly 80% of China's energy imports pass through the IOR.

The chapter on China's air-enabled capabilities is among the book's most technical and detailed. Chapter 4 catalogues the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) inventories with precision. Paul highlights the growing fleet of submarines, including Jin-class SSBNs armed with JL-2 SLBMs capable of striking targets from Guam to Alaska. He also discusses the three aircraft carriers already in service or fitting out, alongside the proliferation of fourth-generation fighters and the H-20 bomber. The breadth of hardware examined is impressive, and the author is careful not to let the book become merely encyclopaedic. He consistently returns to the strategic implications of each platform. The discussion of China's maritime nuclear programme, for example, traces Mao's determination to build a nuclear submarine "even if it takes 10,000 years" to the Type 094A Jin-class boats of today and is particularly well examined.

Chapters 4–7 constitute the book's analytical core, examining China's expanding maritime and air footprint in the IOR through port investments, the Maritime Silk Road, the "String of Pearls", and PLAN operations under Xi Jinping. The author uses detailed tables on China's BRI investments in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and East Africa to examine how economic instruments function as the leading edge of strategic penetration into the region. He analyses cases of dual-use infrastructure, China's first overseas military base, and the involvement of more than seventeen different IOR ports, collectively painting a picture of patient and systematic positioning. Importantly, Paul avoids overstating his claims. He acknowledges that the debt-trap narrative has been contested and carefully distinguishes between commercial presence, dual-use infrastructure, and outright military basing. This analytical restraint strengthens his credibility.

The most original contribution of the book is arguably Chapter 8, which offers a comparative assessment of PLAAF expeditionary capabilities against the Indian Air Force (IAF)'s deterrence posture. Through a series of instructive maps and combat-radius analyses examining the reach of China's J-16 fighters from Mischief Reef and the coverage of Su-30MKI aircraft from Thanjavur and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands command bases, Paul argues that geography remains India's greatest strategic advantage in the IOR. He contends that this provides India with a natural A2/AD capability between the Strait of Malacca in the east and the Strait of Hormuz in the west, provided that the IAF invests in the assets and access arrangements required to exploit this advantage.

Nonetheless, the book could have engaged more extensively with Chinese-language primary sources and internal deliberations within the People's Liberation Army. The author heavily relies on English-language analyses, translated materials, Pentagon reports and IISS data. While these are legitimate and carefully cited, a closer reading of the PLAN and PLAAF doctrinal documents would have improved the treatment of intent and capability. The recommendations for India's strategic response, developing A2/AD capabilities, leveraging access arrangements with democratic partners and strengthening the Andaman and Nicobar Command, are sensible but would benefit from further elaboration.

These criticisms are modest in the context of what is otherwise a well-organised and authoritative study. Paul's prose is accessible without being simplistic, and his command of both the technical and geopolitical dimensions of the subject is evident throughout. In my opinion, China's Air Power and Maritime Strategies Towards the Indian Ocean Region is essential reading for anyone working in Indo-Pacific security studies, as well as for defence analysts and policymakers grappling with the consequences of China's naval rise. It maps with rigour and clarity how this strategic shift is being engineered across the IOR and is likely to stand as one of the seminal texts on the subject in recent years.

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