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DEBT, DEPENDENCY AND DUAL-USE INFRASTRUCTURE: REASSESSING CHINA'S "DEBT-TRAP DIPLOMACY" IN THE INDO-PACIFIC AND ITS STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

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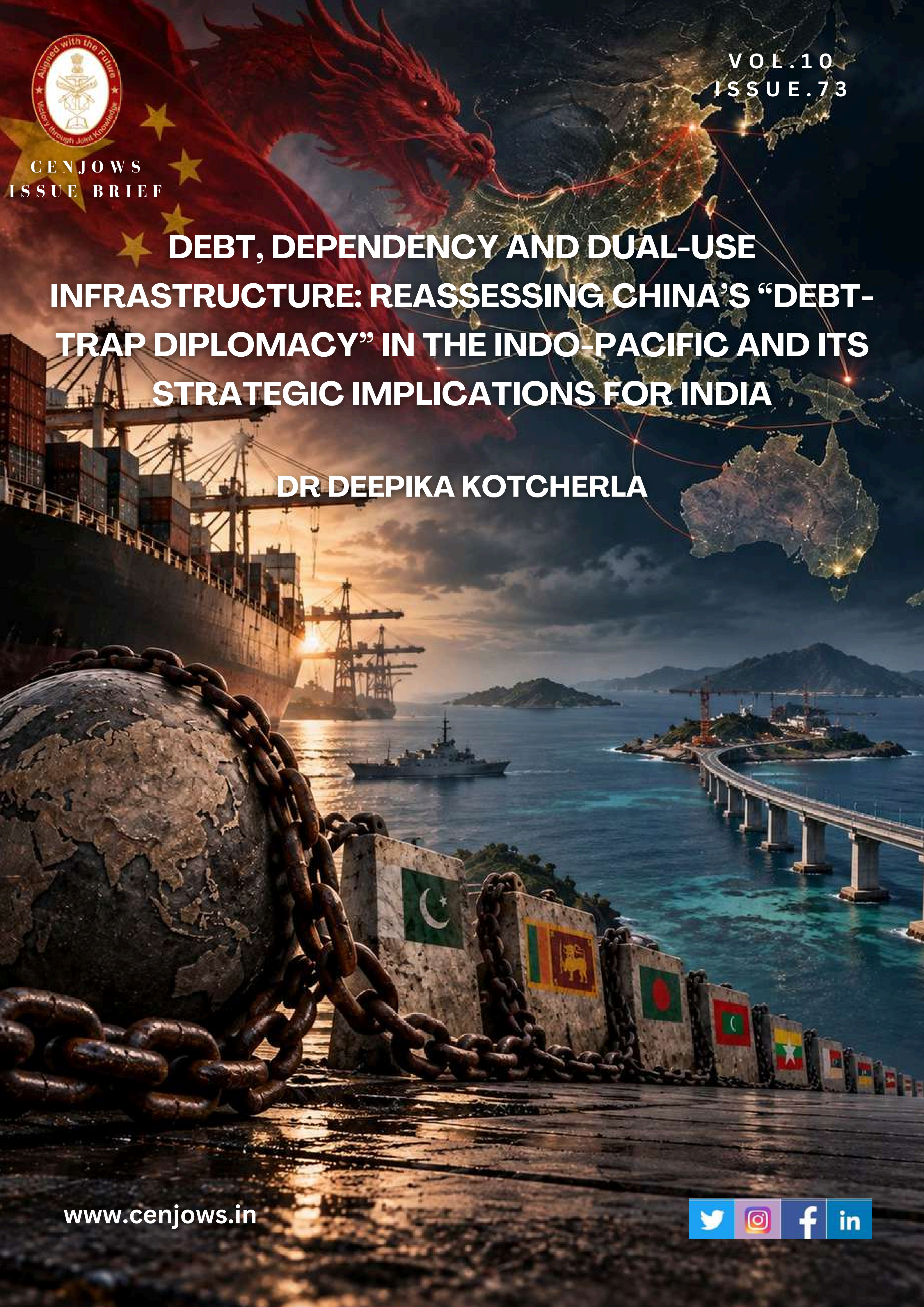

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Debt, Dependency and Dual-Use Infrastructure: Reassessing China's "Debt-Trap Diplomacy" in the Indo-Pacific and its Strategic Implications for India

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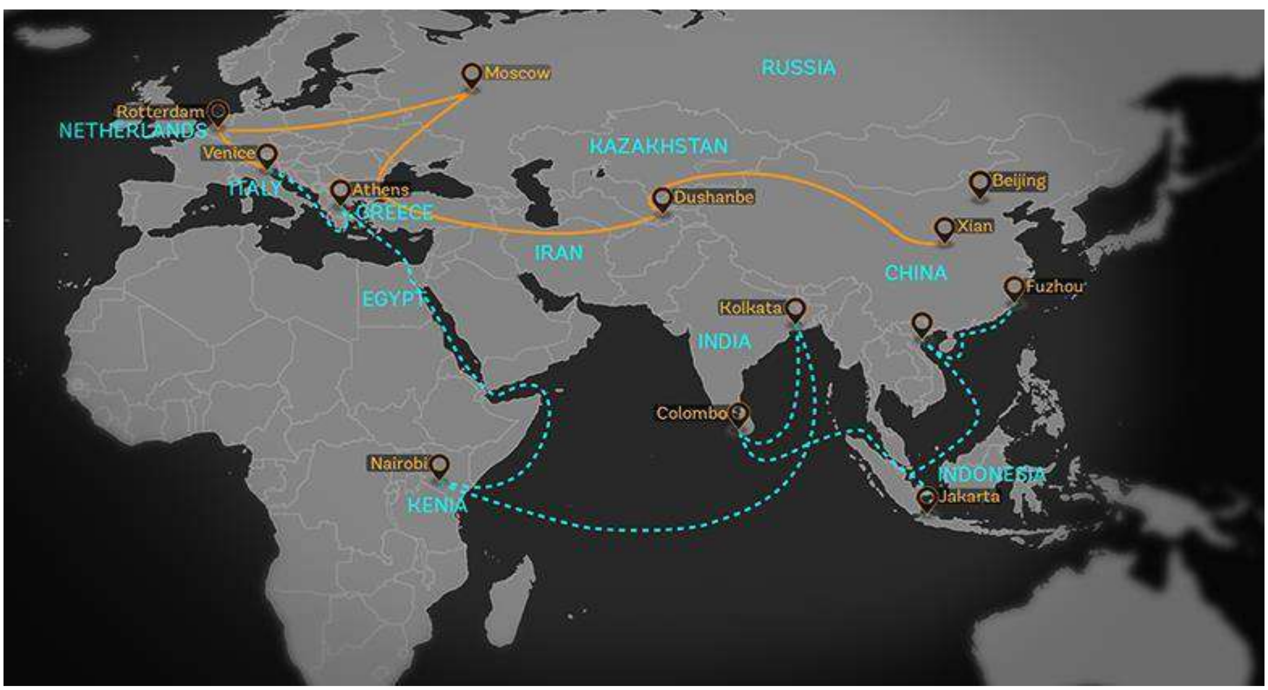
Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region is the global centre of gravity for geopolitical competition and strategic contention. The pursuit of strategic and diplomatic dominance by the US and China over this region, spanning from the East Coast of Africa to the West Coast of the Americas, has intensified the race for economic and strategic investments. China's Belt and Road Initiative is an example of the same. The BRI aims at developing shipping routes, ports, and trade centres across the Indo-Pacific.[1] "Debt-trap diplomacy" is a consequence of the same initiative by China, which is extending unsustainable loans to these nations at the expense of their sovereignty over infrastructural endeavours, thus leaving them in unrecoverable debt.[2] The magnitude of the consequent debt burden is striking. According to the latest study released by the Lowy Institute in May 2025, a record-high $22 billion is owed by the world's most vulnerable nations[3] to Beijing in annual debt service for that year. This represents a rise from less than 20% five years ago, when the amount owed to Beijing was only around $15 billion annually, to over 30% today, making up the lion's share of international bilateral debt service payments made by the developing countries.[4]

Currently there are over 150 countries under BRI projects.[5] The consequent strategic entrenchment of China around India's periphery as part of China's "String of Pearls" strategy causes encirclement of India and poses security challenges. This study aims to explore how China's "debt-trap diplomacy" affects India's strategic interests and India's response through Indo-Pacific engagement. This key maritime area holds major choke points like the Strait of Malacca, the South China Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb, making it the lifeline of strategic navigation and global trade. The region accounts for over 60% of global GDP and 50% of global trade and houses more than half the world's population.[6]



Map 1: Belt and Road Initiative **Source**: World Bank, "Belt and Road Initiative," March 29, 2018

The Belt and Road Initiative of China was first unveiled by the Chinese President Xi Jinping in Kazakhstan and Indonesia in September and October 2013. The BRI is an elaborate global venture which was launched in two parts: the Silk Road Economic Belt connecting China to Europe through Central Asia and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road connecting South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe through sea routes and ports.[7] It enables China to extend its power both strategically and economically by connecting it with other regions through infrastructure development, building highways, railways, sea routes and ports. China is at a major strategic disadvantage concerning the naval chokepoint, the Strait of Malacca, through which about 80 percent of China's oil imports pass through the Indian Ocean.[8]

Therefore, the "Malacca Dilemma" becomes one of the major factors behind the initiation of the BRI in search of alternative energy sources and land and sea transport routes.[9] Therefore, the initiative is useful in fulfilling such purposes by providing commuting routes from the Eurasian landmass to China for importing energy and building infrastructural corridors connecting China to the SLOCs and seaports located in the Indian Ocean region through China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), specifically through Gwadar. One more key advantage of the BRI is that it can provide access to natural resources, mining projects, oil & gas projects and agricultural lands abroad and thus contributes towards the development of the Chinese economy. The BRI focuses on financial integration, free flow of trade, infrastructure connectivity and socio-cultural exchange, and the Indo-Pacific region is considered as a crucial region for the success of the BRI.

In 2011, the US unveiled its "pivot" policy toward the Asia region as a security doctrine to balance and contain China. It also moved forward with its economic agenda in the Indo-Pacific region via the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), after which the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" concept was advocated. The BRI was therefore launched by China as a counterbalance to the same in 2013.[10] India refused to participate in the BRI, citing the $60 billion infrastructure corridor traversing the Indian part of Kashmir alongside other reservations[11] like its lack of inclusivity, inherent strategic interests behind economic investments, concerns over environmental and quality standards and the plausible geopolitical subservience after falling victim to a Chinese "debt trap".[12]

Mechanism of Debt-Trap Diplomacy

The term “debt-trap diplomacy” was coined by Brahma Challaney, who called out China’s BRI stating that “through its $1 trillion “One Belt, One Road” initiative, China is supporting infrastructure projects in strategically located developing countries, often by extending huge loans to their governments.[13] As a result, countries are becoming ensnared in a debt trap that leaves them vulnerable to China’s influence.”[14] The projects allow China access to natural resources or an open market for its exports. China sends its own manual labour, leaving very little scope for local job creation. As the debt increases, so does the burden on the smaller states, which ultimately enhances China's strategic leverage.

An example of this was when China used its influence to push Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand to obstruct a joint decision by ASEAN against China’s aggression and its territorial claims in the South China Sea.[15] Thus, when nations are unable to repay loans, China stands to secure long-term leases or strategic concessions, like in the case of Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port and Pakistan’s Gwadar Port. In fact, there has been an important change in the lending policy regarding the Belt and Road Initiative of China as of 2025. The fact is that Beijing switched to being a financial burden on the receiving countries since the debt repayments for the BRI loans provided in the 2010s exceeded further new lending. China keeps financing its strategically important partners, such as Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and mineral-exporting countries like Indonesia. However, the time when China was aggressively providing BRI loans has passed.

Case Studies

Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port is the most well-documented case of this phenomenon. It began with a loan of $1.3 billion with uncertain terms. As a result of default on loan obligations, the government of Sri Lanka had to sell a 70% share of the port and give it on a 99-year lease to China Merchants Port Holdings in 2017, therefore turning over the control of a strategically located port near the Indian Ocean’s busiest shipping routes to Beijing. This evokes apprehension regarding the regional security for India.

These ties evolve in 2025, when China and Sri Lanka signed debt-relief arrangements with flexible terms, vowing to "comprehensively expand bilateral ties", displaying how China is deepening political alignment with Colombo, leveraging economic concessions and directly impacting India's boundary.

The Gwadar port of Pakistan, a key component of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), has received investment worth more than $1.6 billion from China. The port, located at the entrance of the Strait of Hormuz, is vital to China's interest in accessing energy resources from the Middle East. It is run by the China Overseas Port Holding Company[16] on a 40-year lease without any noticeable economic benefits to the local community. The dual-use capability of the Gwadar port, used for commercial as well as military purposes, triggers India's strategic encirclement concerns and makes the region favourable for China.

Some other examples include Myanmar's Kyaukpyu port and special economic zone, which links the Indian Ocean directly to the Yunnan province of China, giving Beijing a direct energy corridor without going through the Strait of Malacca.[17] Such infrastructure provides China both an economic and a military and intelligence edge. The Maldives is yet another example that worries India because of its agreement for a debt relief deal with China and opening up yuan currency bank accounts to increase cooperation between China and India's immediate neighbourhood, which goes beyond port building.

Indonesia is another example of a Southeast Asian country under the Chinese debt trap, where the high-speed railway called "Whoosh" has been developed and funded by the China Development Bank. However, the cost has gone up from $5.6 billion to $7.4 billion, which has resulted in huge losses for the country, forcing it to negotiate debt restructuring with Beijing in 2025.[18] Another example can be seen in countries such as Malaysia and Thailand, where steps have been taken to reduce Chinese investments in their railways.

Strategic Implications for India

China's debt trap has created a network of ports, strategic footholds and economic dependencies complicating India's maritime space.[19] These ports and maritime bases stretching from Gwadar in Pakistan in South Asia to Djibouti in the eastern part of Africa have led to the strategic encirclement of India.[20] The Chinese control over Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, Kyaukphyu Port and infrastructural projects in Myanmar, the Maldives and Seychelles leads to the encirclement of India alongside creating operational impediments to India's defence and diplomatic influence in the region. China's increased naval presence in the IOR through submarine deployments, anti-piracy patrols and intelligence-gathering missions through access to data of these nations impacts India strategically. In addition to this, the existence of Chinese surveillance ships at the Maldives and the Andaman Sea also poses a challenge to India's influence and creates a security dilemma, thus requiring expansion of its limited maritime resources to ensure deterrence and constant monitoring.[21]

The military dimension of this containment was witnessed in the commissioning of China's Fujian (Type 003) aircraft carrier in November 2025, an 80,000-ton ship with a capacity of accommodating 50 to 60 aircraft.[22] Regional analysts agree this carrier can be viewed as a potential instrument of coercive signalling which can be deployed by China in the South China Sea and broader Indo-Pacific region with a flotilla of up to ten combat ships. This development demonstrates a qualitative shift in China's naval power projection capability and significantly increases the urgency of India's own naval modernisation agenda.

India's Strategic Response

India has reshaped its foreign policy and security strategy to counteract China's maritime entrenchment in the Indo-Pacific region. SAGAR - "The Security and Growth for all in the Region" was launched in 2015 during the visit of Prime Minister Modi to Mauritius, aimed at promoting collective security of the states in the region alongside trade connectivity and maritime cooperation. It has been expanded to MAHASAGAR, or Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions. Prime

Minister Modi launched this new strategy for the Global South from Mauritius in March 2025 when the country was celebrating its National Day. It is the strategic transition of India from a naval power in the region to an essential stakeholder across the Indo-Pacific.[23] The MAHASAGAR strategy also extends to trade-based development, economic cooperation, and technology exchange with the Global South, going beyond the Indian Ocean to the countries in Southeast Asia, West Pacific, the West Asia, and Eastern Africa.

In April 2025, India held the Africa-India Key Maritime Engagement (AIKEYME) in the Western Indian Ocean near the coast of Tanzania. This exercise involved the navies from ten African nations to increase their interoperability in the Western Indian Ocean. India also sent the Indian Ocean Ship (IOS) Sagar to nine countries in the Southwest Indian Ocean for a diplomatic mission and maritime domain awareness. These initiatives place India as an active security provider of the region.

India's naval military strategy is being developed in accordance with its doctrine to be a "net security provider" for the "Global South". Within such a line of naval modernisation, the Sagarmala project is envisaged to transform India into a global maritime centre through port industrialisation and logistical connectivity[24] with more than 500 proposed projects. It facilitates increased infrastructure facilities in ports and fosters coastal shipping and develops economic networks. The "Maritime Capabilities Perspective Plan" (MCPP) of the Indian Navy is set to create a fleet of 175 ships consisting of aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, and advanced stealth frigates by 2035[25] (Indian Navy, 2020). The indigenous aircraft carrier "INS Vikrant" of India that was commissioned in 2022 is an example of India's progress towards strategic autonomy. India is focusing on developing anti-submarine warfare capability and indigenous manufacturing through the "Atmanirbhar Bharat" initiatives. Alongside all of this, the navy is undertaking forward presence missions and arrangements in friendly countries, from brown-water navy to blue-water navy.[26]

India has also been instrumental in providing ports and infrastructure facilities abroad to gain strategic leverage against the Chinese encirclement strategy. The Chabahar port in Iran acts as a direct entry into Afghanistan and Central Asia, while the Sittwe port in Myanmar acts as an entry point for India's northeast via the Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport System. Meanwhile, the Duqm port in Oman provides the Indian Navy access to the western Indian Ocean Region[27] along with investment in the regional infrastructure through the "India-Japan Asia Africa Growth Corridor". Thus, India is pursuing constructive engagement in the Indo-Pacific region through multilateral as well as minilateral initiatives, both within the context of multilateral institutions such as the IPOI, or Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, a non-treaty-based institution[28] that has been voluntarily formed to pursue the aim of a "free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region", as mentioned by the Prime Minister in the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue. Prime Minister Modi also talked about pursuing a democratic and rules-based order[29] where all nations, regardless of size, would flourish equally. The IPOI focuses on capacity building and on ensuring maritime security, with an emphasis on marine ecology.

Complementing these overseas ports, India has also turned its native geography to its strategic advantage with the help of the "Great Nicobar Island Development Project" authorised by the National Green Tribunal. The project costing $9-$11 billion is constructing international container transshipment terminal, dual-purpose military and civil airport, electricity generation plants and a township at India's southernmost island near the western entrance of the Strait of Malacca, which an estimated 70% of China's oil imports pass through.[30] The construction of the infrastructure facilities will take place in phases, with operations beginning in 2028 and completion in 2047; upon completion, it is projected that it will provide India with constant surveillance capacity over the shipping routes adjacent to the strait and decrease India's own dependency on transshipment centres like Colombo and Singapore.[31] The number of projects through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor pursued by Beijing would increase with the Great Nicobar Project. The Chinese naval ships and surveillance activity would also increase in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea to monitor India's new vantage point.[32] Chinese commentators have already described the island as an emerging "economic and military outpost" threatening Beijing's "Malacca lifeline".[33]

India also has an active involvement in the South West Pacific Island Nations through disaster management initiatives, diplomacy and climate change in the Forum for India-Pacific Island Countries Cooperation (FIPIC).[34] These alliances have established India's image as a favourable democratic partner compared to expansionist China and its economic dependency policies. Since 2007, India has been part of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, a minilateral platform comprising the USA, Japan, and Australia as a counterbalancing strategy against revisionist China. The Quad alliance is gaining momentum through Malabar exercises, economic collaboration, maritime domain awareness and Human Assistance & Disaster Relief (HADR) partnerships.[35] India has been a part of all ASEAN-led groups (leaving aside the ASEAN +3), like the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum, engaging actively with the Southeast Asian states under the Act East Policy under economic and cultural cooperation.

The recent Foreign Ministers' Meeting held in Delhi on May 26, 2026, between the Foreign Ministers of the Quad countries symbolised the development in this direction. The ministers reiterated their commitment to defending the rule of law, territorial integrity and sovereignty and strongly reemphasised any destabilising or unilateral actions directed at changing the status quo by force or coercion. This can be understood in reference to China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific region. There were many concrete initiatives which were announced that advance India's strategic interests. The launch of the first-ever Indo-Pacific Maritime Surveillance (IPMSC) initiative to collaborate on maritime surveillance abilities beginning with the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), the Quad Critical Minerals Initiative Framework to improve the supply chains and investment of critical minerals and the Quad Initiative on Indo-Pacific Energy Security to develop regional energy reliance have notably paved the way for an ecosystem which could dilute the economic dependency that BRI creates on developing nations. On the digital front, the need to protect undersea cable networks from threats was emphasised. It was also confirmed that all Pacific Island Forum countries would be connected via Quad-supported undersea cables by 2026,[36] which can be understood as a countermeasure to the expanding Chinese influence in Pacific digital infrastructure. This symbolises a renewed diplomatic momentum in the Quad grouping and further highlights India's position as the Indo-Pacific's indispensable anchor as a stable democracy.

The recent visit of President Lam to India from May 5th to 7th saw India and Vietnam elevate their ties in the form of an enhanced comprehensive strategic partnership. PM Modi called Vietnam as "a key pillar of India's Act East Policy and Vision MAHASAGAR". Both India and Vietnam have agreed to establish a Strategic Diplomacy-Defence Dialogue (2+2 track dialogue) adding Vietnam to the select group of nations in a high-level security mechanism. Both the navies have conducted an inaugural joint hydrographic survey off the Vietnamese coast. Given Vietnam's strategic position in the South China Sea, this partnership carries direct strategic weight and displays India's attempt to build a network of like-minded maritime partners along China's southern flank[37] with institutional depth rather than confrontation.

Recommendations

The gap between what India possesses and its grand strategy may be an advantage for China. In order to overcome this problem, India should adopt a whole-of-government strategy in the Indo-Pacific region. The following recommendations can be considered towards that end.

- India should institutionalise MAHASAGAR through an institution-specific financial architecture where India could direct dedicated funds and finances for port infrastructure projects, maritime capacity-building and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) activities, along with offering scholarships to officers from partnering countries.

- India needs to build up realistic infrastructure options through proactive offers of real alternatives to countries that are part of BRI projects, with loans offered on clear, realistic terms, the creation of local jobs, and the transfer of technology without any strategic strings attached. By enhancing its financial cooperation under the G7 PGII and the India-Japan Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, India can significantly expand its influence, reducing the burden of single-handed spending.

- Improve maritime domain awareness and upgrade technologically. The Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) has partnered with 28 nations, which can be integrated with the Quad nations' "Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness" (IPMDA) initiative, enabling shared radar and satellite systems.[38] Enhanced collaboration and real-time awareness of maritime domain awareness are the most cost-effective force multipliers with respect to India, which will assist directly in countering China's edge in physical infrastructure building.

- To scale up Quad operationalisation beyond joint military exercises and rhetoric, establish burden-sharing institutions such as a prepositioned logistics system, joint patrols, and responses at strategic chokepoints like the Andaman Sea and the Strait of Malacca. The deployment of the PLAN Fujian carrier, officially commissioned in 2025, marks the first time China has a carrier equipped with an Electromagnetic Catapult Launch System (EMALS). By 2026, the carrier will achieve full combat capabilities through far-sea exercises. The Fujian carrier's deployment will mark a qualitative shift in threat calculations in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly at chokepoints (Strait of Malacca, Andaman Sea), thereby making Quad institutionalisation an immediate necessity.

- One of the most practical and important recommendations could be to take a proactive approach towards the neighbours in debt before the entrenchment becomes even more deeply rooted. Nations such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, the Maldives, and Myanmar are not beyond saving from the Chinese orbit. However, the fact of the matter is that these countries are experiencing tough financial situations that make the Chinese proposals look attractive. India can take the opportunity and offer debt relief and other competing alternatives to the BRI.

Conclusion

Debt trap diplomacy practised by China is changing the strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific region, creating a threat to the maritime sovereignty of India and its regional influence. This policy works in two ways at once: the economic way, whereby infrastructure development under the banner of BRI makes the borrowing nations economically dependent, hence forcing strategic concessions, and the military way, through which these strategically significant regions are exploited for surveillance purposes, naval access and political advantage. The ports of Gwadar to the West, Kyaukpyu to the East and the Maldives to the South are all part of the "String of Pearls" encirclement policy of China, which has come out of apprehensions and become a reality, made even stronger by the financial linkages of China with the Maldives. The changing nature of the relationship between China and Sri Lanka, from debt to politics, along with the launch of the Fujian carrier, changes the naval balance of the region altogether.

India's reaction to China's strategy has changed from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR as a reflection of India moving forward from a regional strategy to an attempt to shape the broader Indo-Pacific Order through a combination of democratic principles, transparent financing, and capacity building. Quad is an enhancement of security architecture, and IPOI is the practical approach to multilateralism. Port developments in Chabahar, Sittwe, and Duqm are the countering presence. The Africa-India Key Maritime Engagement (AIKEYME), the maritime drill between India and Tanzania to enhance maritime security cooperation and interoperability, and IOS (Indian Ocean Ship Sagar), an Indian Navy operational deployment programme that provides opportunities for sailors of friendly countries to train and execute operations together onboard Indian Naval Ships, indicate that MAHASAGAR is not only a policy but a working programme.

Thus, India will have to offer credible alternatives to the nation-states while at the same time managing the rise of China. Leveraging its normative soft power and strategic partnerships, India can become an ordering actor in the contentious Indo-Pacific region. The key difficulty here is the implementation. The transformation of China from a lender to a strategic investor changes the strategic footprint in India's neighbourhood and around the world. Hence, every delay in investments by India means the strengthening of China, and understanding this, India should match the risk that it is facing.

Declaration

I declare that this manuscript is being submitted exclusively to CENJOWS for publication consideration, is original, and has not been published or submitted elsewhere. I further certify that it contains no classified, restricted, or sensitive information and is based entirely on open-source material suitable for publication in the public domain.

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