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China's Geostrategic Interest in the Indian Ocean Region

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Abstract: *The goal of this research is to look at China's expanding geopolitical interests in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), as well as the strategic implications of its involvement. As it climbs to importance on the global scene, China has escalated its role in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) via economic investments, maritime infrastructure projects, and naval activities. The research explores China's interest in the IOR, diving into the country's economic imperatives, energy security concerns, and the geopolitical significance of securing maritime routes. The report also assesses the impact of China's actions on the dynamics of the surrounding region, focusing on China's relationships with neighboring states and key players in the IOR. By evaluating China's evolving tactics and the responses of regional parties, this research aims to provide insights into the wider geopolitical context and potential issues coming from China's increasing influence in the Indian Ocean. These insights will be gained by examining China's shifting tactics as well as the reactions of regional players.*

Key Words: Indian Ocean, China, US, Geo-Strategic, Interests, IOR, Regional Hegemony, Great Power Politics

Introduction

Chinese History in the Indian Ocean

Between the years 1407 and 1433, the Ming Dynasty's Admiral Zheng He oversaw a total of seven such missions. In the year 1424, a scholar and official by the name of Hsia Yuan-Chi made an appeal to Emperor Jen Tsung, pleading with him to suspend all outside voyages and shipbuilding. The advice was never put into action because Emperor Jen Tsung passed away before it could be put into action, and the succeeding emperor ordered Zheng He on yet another voyage. However, this emperor also went away shortly after, and the advice made by Hsia Yuan was accepted by his successors. Other scholars and officials in Zheng He's court burned the Chi reports that Zheng He had compiled after returning from his travels between the years 1465 and 1487 (Pearson, M. N., 2003).

Scholars of China's navy frequently make reference to two different 'island chains,' which is a strategic geopolitical concept that is also credited to Admiral Liu Huaqing. It is essential to be aware that the concept of "two island chains" has been interpreted in at least two distinct ways by various authors (Alpers, E. A., 2014).

The Region's history of China and the Indian Ocean

It is important to note that Kondapalli's citation of Downing places the Kuril Islands in the "second island chain," but Map 1.1 shows them in the perforated line that encompasses the "first island chain." Making this difference is crucial. Erickson and Goldstein's Map 1.2, which has a smaller cross-section but a greater scale, excludes the area north of Sakhalin and draws the 'first island chain' perforated line east of Sakhalin. These characteristics suggest Map 1.2 is inaccurate. Map 1.1 excludes the Kuril Islands from the "first island chain." Map 1.1 places the Aleutian Islands at the northernmost tip of the "second island chain." Its perforated line surrounds it east of Irian Jaya and Papua New Guinea, while its southernmost point is east

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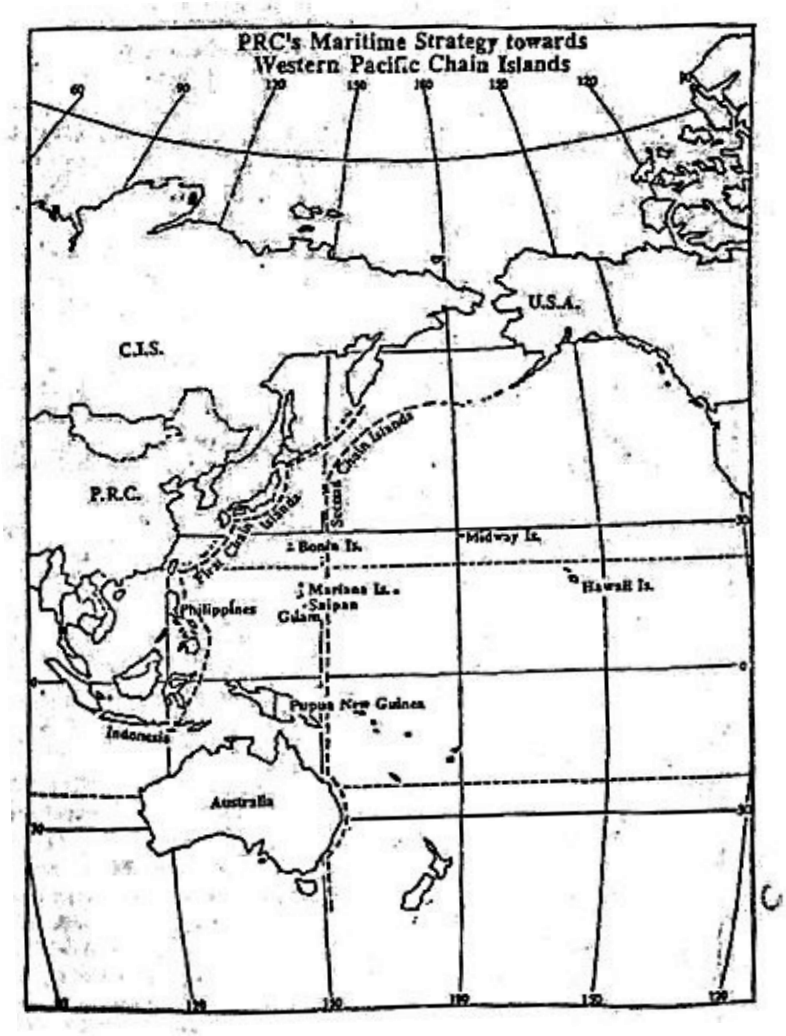
of Australia. In Map 1.1, the territory south of northern Australia is not shown, and the southern end of the ' second island chain' perforated line is west of Irian Jaya and Papua New Guinea. Both are Pacific Ocean locales. The two maps' main difference is that Map 1.1 positions the two 'island chains' further from China's shore. This is the main difference. In addition to the size discrepancy, Map 1.1 is based on a 1995 Taiwanese source, whereas Map 1.1 is based on a 1989 Chinese source. Both materials were published in their nations. Eastern China's coastline position may have contributed to its economic success after 1978. (Gupta, P., Hofmeyr, I., & Pearson, M. N., 2010).

Figure 1

China's Island Chains (Liao Wen-Chung, 1995)



It was reported that in 1993, international trade accounted for 33% of China's GDP, with seaborne commerce accounting for 85% of that total. As a result, the whole amount of China's overseas commerce rose by 22% between the years 2001 and 2002. In 1993, China started importing petroleum from other countries. Since that time, yearly growth rates in oil consumption have averaged 7.3%, while annual growth rates in domestic oil output have averaged 1.7%. Between the years 2001 and 2002, China increased the amount of oil that it imported by around 15%, going from importing over 60 million tonnes of oil in 2001 to over 7 million tonnes of oil in 2002. It was observed that in 2006, coal accounted for 70% of China's total energy needs, oil accounted for 25%, natural gas accounted for 3%, and other sources such as nuclear power, hydroelectric power, and other sources accounted for the remaining 2%. In Africa, Angola, Sudan, and Congo contributed 13.2%, 4.7%, and 3.9% of the same correspondingly to the total supply (see Table 1). Everything had to be carried by water, especially across the Straits of Malacca (Kearney, M., 2004).

Table 1

China's Crude Oil Imports from the Top Three Suppliers in the Middle East/West Asia and the Top Three Suppliers in Mrica during 2004 as a Percentage of China's Total Crude Oil Imports (Zweig and Bi Jianhai, 2004).

Country	Percentage of total Supply
Saudi Arabia	14%
Oman	13.3%
Iran	10.8%
Angola	13.2%
Sudan	4.7%
Congo	3.9%

He called this the "Malacca Channel problem," and he said Chinese President Hu Jintao had raised the issue at a December 2003 expansion of China's Central Military Commission. In 2006, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) organized an international energy security conference, and President Hu welcomed foreign delegations. This showed how seriously China views energy security. You, Ji, predicted that China's maritime policy would change due to the 'one lane' issue. One of the biggest concerns with higher-level maritime security cooperation, such as alliances and coalitions, is sending the incorrect message via exclusiveness. China worries about the US, Japan, and South Korea working together on security (Kemp, E. M., 1978).

Historians never paid much attention to IOR, but it has become a political battlefield. People and places are in convulsion due to the ocean's bizarre mix of inertia, somnolence, widespread stirrings, and frenetic activity. Undoubtedly, the whole area has garnered unprecedented interest, so much so that international politics sometimes start or pass through it. In reality, IOR events will eventually affect the planet, either directly or indirectly. IOR normally covers the whole area from Cape Agulhas at 20° east to the Antarctic Peninsula, eastward to Australia and Tasmania, and northward to the Asian shore. Some call the Antarctic and Arctic Seas oceans, although they're seas. This research exclusively considers self-governing, sovereign islands. We also consider the so-called Indian Ocean as a unique area that has been historically shaped ethnically, culturally, economically, and politically. Geographically, the marine expanse and its terrestrial frame form a unique area due to the Monsoon system of winds and oceanic currents. The IOR area's geographic compactness creates togetherness at three levels: ethnic or racial, cultural, and religious. It was a vibrant social and economic entity for centuries. The "route of the Austronesians, the Malay who settled in Madagascar, the Indo-Aryans and Dravidians who occupied Sri Lanka and Maldives, the aboriginals who occupied the Andamans, Nocobars and Australia; and later groups such as Arabs, Indians, Africans, and Europeans" (Lee, J. M., Boyle, E. A., & Suwargadi, B., 2014).

For centuries, much of the area has been Muslim and connected to Islamic thinking and culture and the major Arab capitals. The majority has not always been Muslim. South Indian culture, language, and literature dominated the area before Islam. Later, notably in the past two millennia, Malay-speaking people moved over IOR to Madagascar and eastern Africa. These migratory movements, coupled with those of Indians (the `shiraz'), greatly contributed to Indian Ocean unification. The region's prosperity fostered racial unity, cultural unity from the Indian Subcontinent, and religious unity from Islam, constantly refreshed and reinforced by wide-ranging intercourse between components(Vink, M. P., 2007).

Military Capability and Modernization

Military modernization is possible only if China has the economic will to sustain its economic objective of improving China's wealth. China's past economic policy seems to have shown the path to progress (Allison, Graham, 2017).

In April 2018, Xi said, "The task of building a powerful navy has never been as urgent as it is today." While upgrading and restructuring Command-and-Control systems, China built several warships, submarines, planes, missiles, and radar systems. To surpass the U.S., China must expand its military in air, ocean, and land. The third stage is completing the information station and modernizing national defense by 2050. (Rana D.S,, 2017).

The passage states, "National interests have expanded beyond territory, sea, and airspace to include the periphery, globe, seas, space, and electromagnetic space. The danger for large powers is rivalry to maximize national interests. In the future, this battle will concentrate on controlling global public places, including the ocean, polar, space, and cyberspace. Thus, the military has broadened its strategic outlook and offers significant strategic assistance over a larger area to protect national interests." (Science and Military Strategy, , 2013 Ed).

The Strategic Support Force (SSF) included naval soldiers, while the Air Force added air, internet, and cyber warfare. China created five theater commands to streamline its command organization. When military services collaborate to complete missions, Command-and-Control systems work well. Naval boats have been a successful policy adjustment in the previous two decades. China prioritized fast warship construction for long-distance deployment. China spent $126 billion on transit and storage without the boats, which piqued Indian Ocean countries' interest as China is a leader in port construction and operation. (Cestello, John , 2016).

PLAN inducted the first-generation aircraft carrier Shandong in April 2017 and commissioned it in December 2019, which has a displacement of up to 70,000 when full. It will be able to carry a few more than the Liaoning's 18-24 jets and 17 helicopters, compared with more than 50 jets plus helicopters for a U.S. Navy carrier.13 86 cruisers enable the firepower at sea, destroyers, and frigates combined, and five principal amphibious ships, making PLAN a formidable force at sea. Supporting the PLAN is the "People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF)" with 1932 tactical aircraft, 278 attack helicopters, 383 heavy to medium transport helicopters, 85 transport aircraft, and 18 multi-role tanker aircraft (Hossain, Khandakar Akhter , 2017)

The Maritime Policy of Beijing

Chinese naval progress resembles nationalism and social movement. The National War College's Bernard Cole stated that the US could easily seize Taiwan over a high sea wall (Acosta, Rene, 2019). Since the world wars, the US has maintained its credibility as a non-colonial power, and its presence in the Indo-Pacific would protect the seaside country and the SLOCs. Open-water freedom of navigation, consistent with UNCLOS, will promote democracy and openness. Gen. Goldfein, the U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff, stressed the need for unrestricted sea access: "FONOPS are conducted in the air and at sea. They collaborate to preserve access for everyone. Because commercial routes and unfettered navigation benefit everyone," A secondary power that leverages its local knowledge to its advantage might challenge U.S. supremacy, the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance claimed China would use asymmetric and area-denial methods to confront the U.S. (US Department of Defense , 2012).

According to the Mahanian paradigm, China must preserve its sea-based trade and energy-feeding sea routes to protect its expanding economic interests. Mahan was enthusiastic about the cycle of economic success, feeding the military and then preserving the economy, which China began to follow. Thus, China must build strong maritime war machines and supply them with refueling and docking facilities to acquire sea dominance. Chinese 2004 Security White Paper shows a "struggle for strategic points, strategic resources, and strategic dominance" (Green, M. J., & Shearer, A., 2012).

The Diplomatic Perspective of Beijing on IOR

China's trade depends on the clear passage for its goods transported across the world through oceanic superhighways. The oceanic highway is faced with compelling problems that include piracy, threats from non-state actors, human trafficking, narcotics, and smuggling, among others. These issues have a direct bearing on the economy if not restrained. Adding to the misery is the presence of maritime 'choke points' through which the trade flows (Singh, Ana,, 2019). Powerful states can block the Strait of Malacca during conflict and war with China. This situation referred to as the 'Malacca Dilemma,' could devastate China's economy and adversely affect its security. Any prolonged blockage of the Malacca Strait can bring China to the mercy of its adversary (Shaofeng, Chen , 2010) China seeks to protect these needs. China's establishment and strategic thinkers have explored its maritime strategy outside the South China Sea as its footprints in IOR have increased. Beijing's power elites' policy directives and comments contradict scholars' claims that it has no Indian Ocean strategy. Indian security concerns around Maritime Silk Road flag-bearing ships (Liang Fang, 2015).

Naturally, in 2014, the same year, China moored a warship and submarine in Sri Lanka. IOR allows the PLAN to test long-distance force insertion and Blue Sea Navy operating viability. China has stationed destroyers, frigates, and replenishment ships in the Persian Gulf for over 6–8 months after returning home. The PLAN claims to be safeguarding its maritime routes, but warships and submarines are involved, revealing its true purpose. PLAN despatched a navy vessel to map IOR near India's maritime boundaries. China stated this was a typical scientific experiment, but it seems it is mapping the ocean below to aid underwater navigation (Suri, Gopal,, 2017).

China's Far Ocean Strategy and Implications

The vast breadth of maritime cooperation and strategic rivalry with littoral states frames its development. China's two-ocean plan superseded its one-ocean framework for east-south near-sea scenarios. The present plan is PLAN extension into the far sea. Far sea means IOR and beyond. China wants blue water naval capacity to battle in the distant sea. A huge fleet of submarines, aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, and landing troops must be added to its maritime strategy. China's military plan shows its IOR penetration intentions. Xi Jinping's national defense policy in the marine language of global reach and deterrence reflects his desire for national rejuvenation. Global reach seems to encompass IOR. (Brewster, D., 2010).

Island Chain 1 China adopts Mao's 'active defense' 2015 National Defense Strategy recommended frontier defense. Chinese borders have SLOCs and IORs. This defense will be aggressive like its 'active defense.' China must include India and the U.S.'s IOR conflict in its border policy. BRI lets China exhibit its naval might. The U.S.-India conflict doesn't concern China. To counter IOR, China is building a blue sea navy. The PLAN is investigating IOR's oceanographic structure to enable China to create strategy and military equipment to exist in the huge Ocean away from its home ports. We must study marine policy-making to understand IOR's evolution. Poor coastline security harms China's geopolitics and security. China wants to control Taiwan and Shankaku while limiting US threats to the first and second small islands. The rapid PLAN deployment has chilled the IOR, and China lacks the military strength to conduct Blue Sea activities. China fears IOR resident powers despite practical obstacles (Anjelina Patrick, 2017).

Advances in doctrine have guided the PLAN's blue sea capabilities. The initial focus on the adjacent water was expanded beyond 10,000 nm to reach PLAN activity in early 2000. For reference, the Spratly is 1500 nm from China. Warfighting strategies should include the Indian and Pacific Oceans with the 10,000 PLAN operating capabilities. China plans to extend the IOR after seizing Scarborough Shoal in the Spratly in 2012 and hastily completing the islands' runway and PLAN ship docking facilities (Dutton, Peter, 2012).

China's Perception of India and its Strategy

China's military modernization has changed the IOR's military balance. Beijing's political and financial might has strained relations with India. China must consider India's response to any naval conflict in IOR, whether with India or the U.S. since India has permanent influence in the Indian Ocean. Plans may have many IOR docking possibilities. Only Djibouti in Africa is PLAN's main overseas hub (Dougherty, 2019).

India may be able to counter China's PLAN's naval advantage in IOR via domestic operations due to its location. India may worry about China's naval presence in IOR since it considers it its zone of influence. India is an average power to China, not a regional superpower. China expects its border dispute with India to affect maritime disputes. India fears China's dual road over and under it (Hornat, J., 2016).

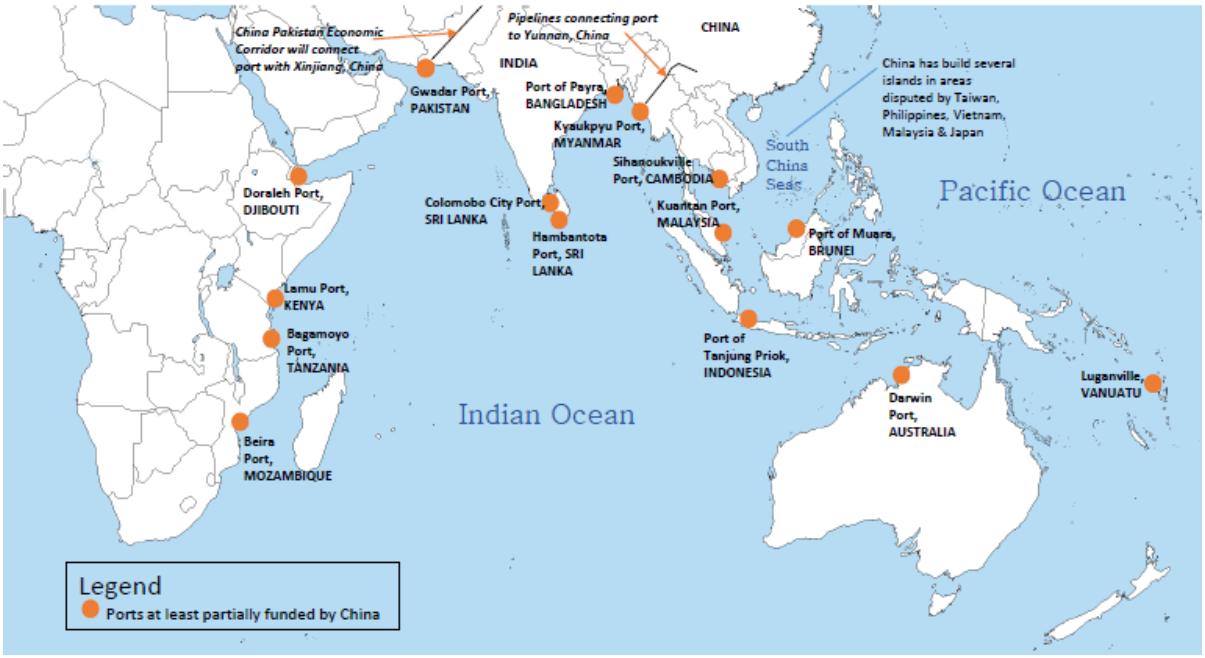
The Road links Karachi, Pakistan, with Xinxiang, China, over India's northern border. Karachi's CPEC route terminates 150 km from China-funded Gwadar port, which supports PLAN forces connecting mainland China via IOR and the Arabian Sea to Hambantota in Sri Lanka. Some call it the 'String of Pearls' strategy to limit India. The US and India worry about Chinese military expansion into the seas jeopardizing their maritime interests. Chinese global power objectives need global reach. Controlling IOR advances U.S. parity. China is searching littoral states in IOR and beyond for mooring facilities for future missions. China seeks to increase its IOR influence in India because of its strategic location. China must consider India's response as it grows in the Indian Ocean (Kim, Hankwon , 2013) Indian blue water capacity will rush to block the Strait of Malacca choke points, pushing China to negotiate. The 2017 India-China Doklam border conflict affects shipping. Signaling frightened New Delhi and responded to the India-U.S. Malabar exercise in IOR. India did not independently dispatch navy vessels to fight China in the maritime domain, demonstrating its willingness to IOR with partner nations (economictimes.indiatimes.com).

China's Relations with IOR States

China has overlooked India's IOR security concerns. China's actions suggest it doesn't care about India's maritime vulnerabilities. China seeks Indian Ocean littoral states to moor ships. India fears neighboring nations. India does not want its neighbors to be so dependent on external forces that its security is compromised. The border conflict and China's close collaboration with Pakistan on India's northeast and northwestern borders have strained ties with China. China said Shanghai, Tianjin, Xiamen, and Guangzhou Free Commerce Zones would connect with the MSR to boost investment and trade. A four-zone barrier will facilitate Chinese entry into IOR. Beijing-based AIIB, with 102 members and $14.27 billion in investments, finances worldwide operations. (Gippner, O. , 2016) China-funded MSR projects via the Silk Road Foundation and AIIB. The new strategic view for China's economic structure is to build contacts with important IOR partners to advance strategic goals. It goes beyond short-term efforts that fail. Medium to big economies may supply short-term funding to IOR nations. Chinese investors may launch a tiny test project and spend heavily on infrastructure if it succeeds. China wants to remain in the nation long-term; therefore, the MSR project prioritizes infrastructure development. China's MSR investments in port infrastructure are especially noteworthy (Lou, C. , 2012).

The MSR initiative does not have any precedent except for Zeng He's voyage in the 15th Century. The lack of historical clarity is compounded by Xi Jinping's narrative of linking China's past to legitimizing it is 21st-century maritime initiative. Though Zeng did not go beyond the East African coast, China now wants to connect the maritime and territorial routes to Europe. The land corridor will help it establish a connection with Central Asia, while the maritime route provides China with access to push beyond the Persian Gulf into the Fig: Chinese funded ports in the IOR (Rani D Mullen)

Figure 2



The grand design of clubbing sea and land routes to converge halfway across the globe will make China reach the top of the global power hierarchy. The port network's construction and building will take significant capital investment, managerial capability, and long duration. The BRI will attract over seventy countries and investment potential of up to USD 8 trillion. (Ghosh, P. , 2020).

India has closely monitored the flow of Chinese maritime power into IOR. China's growing maritime activity has made India install the Andaman and Nicobar Command, which serves all three defense services. Gwadar is a strategic place vital for China's network of port linking strategy that helps China's dominance in the region. The port can be accessed through a 3000 km land route from Kashgar in Xinjiang province in China. Though the road link is established between Pakistan and China, the topographic

difficulties make it difficult for Pakistan and China to indulge in the long land route for prosperous trade (India Today, June 3 2002).

China provided phase I financing in August 2001. China came back to Gwadar after India's May 1998 nuclear tests disrupted reconciliation. China agrees to deepen deep-sea ports from 14 to 19 meters. Docking larger yachts needs 11 meters. Chinese Navy's long-term Gwadar objectives are shown by port depth. Marine traffic signals outpost. China established a "strategic foothold" in the Arabian Sea with Gwadar. This affects India and the U.S., which relies on the Arabian/Persian Gulf. China may prioritize energy security above naval defense against giants like the US and India at Gwadar. Pipelines to China will reduce shipborne oil transit by 3,000 km. The PLA presence at Gwadar to monitor maritime traffic would assist in safeguarding sea passages, but it would not help the Indian or American navy fight big naval conflicts. (Zhou, Laura, April 17, 2017).

China's Maritime Domain Awareness and Naval Deployments in IOR

Recent years have seen secondary marine strategy replace continental strategy. China learned from its economic strategy that it required a proactive maritime policy to ensure most of its trade was marine to maintain the status quo and grow globally. This led China to examine IOR in the last decade. According to China's 2015 Military Strategy, "The traditional mentality that land outweighs the sea must be discarded, and great significance has to be assigned to managing the seas and oceans." China Military Policy (2015) urges "China to develop a modern military force" and get addicted to naval supremacy.

Table 1

Numbers of certain types of Chinese and U.S. ships Since 2005

Year of DOD report	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2020 change from 2005
Ballistics Missile Submarines	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	+3
Nuclear-power attack submarines	6	5	5	5	6	6	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	6	6	0
Diesel attack submarines	51	50	53	54	54	54	49	48	49	51	53	57	54	47	50	46	-5
Aircraft carriers	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	+2
Cruisers	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	+1
Destroyers	21	25	25	29	27	25	26	26	23	24	21	23	31	28	33	32	+11
Frigates	43	45	47	45	48	49	53	53	52	49	52	52	56	51	54	49	+6
Corvettes	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	15	23	23	28	42	49	+49
Missile-armed coastal patrol crafts	51	45	41	45	70	85	86	86	85	85	86	86	88	86	86	86	+35
Amphibious ships: LSTS and LPDs	20	25	25	26	27	27	27	28	29	29	29	30	34	33	37	37	+17
Amphibious Ships: LSMs	23	25	25	28	28	28	28	23	26	28	28	22	21	23	22	21	-2
The total of types above (does not include other types, such as auxiliary and support ships	216	221	222	233	262	276	276	271	273	283	294	303	317	306	325	333	+117
China coast guard ships	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	185	240	248	255	n/a

Total U.S. Navy battle force ships (which includes auxiliary and support Ships but excludes patrol craft)	291	282	281	279	282	285	288	284	287	285	289	271	275	279	286	296	+5
Total U.S. Navy battle force ships compared to the above total for certain Chinese ship types	+75	+61	+59	+46	+20	+9	+12	+13	+14	+2	-5	-32	-42	-27	-49	-37	+112

Note: (Figure for Chinese Ships taken from annual reports on military and Security developments involving China)
Source: U.S. Congressional Research Service 2021 (CSR Report RL33153 , 2021).

To command the seas, China requires tangible air protection for its aircraft carriers and cruisers. Wartime Chinese superiority in the Indian Ocean will increase without the December 2017-commissioned Type 002 aircraft carrier Shandong. Shandong possesses 44 J-15s. Ski jumps aboard the aircraft carrier prevent J-15 jets from deploying with their full payload. Just two Chinese aircraft carriers exist. Dual deployment to the Indian Ocean renders the Pacific Theater exposed to a coordinated U.S.-allied attack. China is developing additional submarines, destroyers, replenishment, and landing ships to lessen maritime hazards. As Chinese dockyards develop more aircraft carriers, IOR power may be predicted. China realized it required air help to deploy a Blue Sea aircraft carrier in 2006. The submarine building was an IOR border force priority. (Kristin Huang, December 26, 2019).

The PLAN Submarine Power operates a fleet of over 60 submarines, including nuclear power submarines and diesel-powered submarines. Though nuclear-powered submarines provide stealth capabilities by being less noisy underwater, it is expensive to build and operate. Therefore, the PLAN has in its procession conventionally powered diesel attack submarines. These include Type 039A and other submarines deployed in IOR and provide maximum thrust in the subsurface capability (Bei Dou, April 1, 2020).

Table 2

Numbers of battle force Ships, 2000-2030

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2025	2030
Ballistic Missile Submarines	1	1	3	4	4	6	8
Nuclear-powered attack Submarines	5	4	5	6	7	10	13
Diesel attack Submarines	56	56	48	53	55	55	55
Aircraft Carriers, Cruisers, Destroyers	19	25	25	26	43	55	65
Frigates	38	43	50	74	102	120	135
Total China Navy Battle force Ships, Including types not shown above	110	220	220	255	360	400	425
Total U.S Navy Battle Force Ships	318	282	288	271	297	n/a	n/a

The figure Includes both less-capable older units and more-capable newer units.

Source: U.S. Congressional Research Service 2021 (CSR Report RL33153 , 2021).

China uses the Submarine Force to dominate the sea. India and the U.S. will counter IOR submarine deployment by anti-submarine deployment. Submarines may be sent autonomously to complete tasks, but they must act stealthily to avoid resident powers. However, submarines' evasiveness and cost-effectiveness remain a frontier for China's Indian Ocean activity. Together with the aircraft carrier, destroyers, and other navy ships, submarines will boost China's maritime capabilities throughout the fight. However, access to distant oceans will provide PLAN underwater expertise to operate these advanced ships. China will use IOR as a forward base for large submarines. (U.S. Department of Defense, —, 2019).

China's Maritime Strategy

Deng Xiaoping wanted a strong fleet for late 1970s military-economic expansion. Deng underlined this in 1979 and 1985 addresses. China established its own naval forces to participate more in international affairs, use oceanic resources for expansion, defend its rights, and protect its maritime trade routes. China will

value SLOC more as its economy expands and it imports raw materials and energy (Khurana, G. S., 2016). The PLA-N will monitor economic zones, SLOC, and marine traffic as China's economy grows. The Chinese firm's control of the Panama Canal, the May 2000 pact with Egypt that allows China to utilize Port Said port infrastructure, and PLA-affiliated Chinese enterprises' substantial presence in Singapore demonstrate Chinese interest in crucial SLOC. Geostrategic components include fixed geography and variable geographic orientation. Geography influences orientation but does not determine it. National security and 'strategic depth' may be protected by buffer zones between potentially hostile states. Huge oceans can accomplish this. Since the early 19th century, economic and technological expansion has linked the world's waters, enabling global integration. A nation must emphasize maritime connectivity for prosperity and security. China has 9.6 million square kilometers (Erickson, 2007). Military technology like 'informationalization' may precisely target missiles from the sea beyond the first island chain to deep-inside political, economic, and military targets. Geographic orientation uses spaceflight technology to traverse the atmosphere into space. Satellite communication has made air and space vital to military operations and weapons. A magnificent concept may use even restricted maritime skills, they claim. Liu proposed a 'layered defense' by expanding the PLA-N's 'inshore' (jinari) to 'off-shore' (jinhai) defense. Breaking a Chinese 'maritime blockade' requires this defense. This layer would offer 'depth' for safeguarding vital economic centers along China's coast in a 'posture of defense' and allow China to blockade other nations in the region because international sea channels pass through it in a 'posture of offense.' (Yoshihara, T., & Holmes, J. R., 2018).

Furthermore, foreign procurement has not proven completely reliable in improving the PLA-N's overall capabilities. These technological developments will provide a solid foundation for naval development. Given its blue-water ambition, the PLA-N will seek to add an increasing number of large platforms to its fleet to give it a heavier force structure suitable for operating in the deep seas (Martinson, R. D. , 2016).

This reorganization has included removing several older and lighter ships, such as missile boats and frigates under 1900 tons, from service. Restructuring also sought to increase fleet quality. However, current combat needs have hindered the decommissioning of outmoded large fighters. According to the USN, 'fleet-in-being' might benefit the PLA-N. This would need multiple small, flexible units of specialist soldiers capable of tactical battles abroad. The 2010–2020 naval development cycle would need cruisers and aircraft carriers for increased oceangoing forces. All of this depends on how technical advancement is applied to PLA-N capabilities to stay up with the major naval nations. China has trialed most of its new PLA-N ship classes rather than mass-producing them. China remains far behind the West in technology despite its advances. The commercial growth of space, electronics, autos, and shipping since reforms and how the government has used this development to enhance China's military industry via the '16-character policy' Before embarking on such an attempt, China must ensure that it will not be obsoleted by big power naval improvements. After catching up with the main powers in 'mechanization' (engineering, manufacturing, etc.), China is now seeking to catch up in 'informatization' as well. Since the mid-1980s, China has tried to modernize its military industry so it can establish production lines that can generate high-tech equipment that can be marketed profitably to support its own growth. However, in April 1998, the government withdrew the procurement arm from COSTING, put it directly under the military, and called it the General Equipment Department to increase defense company competitiveness. Another goal has been to phase out outdated weapons while increasing the manufacturing of newer, more modern ones. (Lanteigne, M. , 2016).

A country's navy can be an important component of its overall diplomacy. The use of a fleet for combat, media projections of naval forces deployed in various regions, and the political tactics of port calls are aspects of the political resolve of the state. In 1993, Chen Mingshen, Deputy Commander of the PLA-N, noted that:

"As the navy plays a role in all historical periods, whether peace or war, it is also a means of pursuing national foreign policy. Navies possess many specific characteristics that differ from those of the armed forces. The navy has international capabilities of free navigation on the high seas, and in peacetime, it can cruise the world's seas, even conducting limited operations, outside the territorial waters of hostile countries".

According to researchers, developments in China's overall foreign relations appear to improve its position on the seas. He argues that by game ring support for principles and concepts such as

'multipolarity' and 'opposing hegemonies,' as well as through activities such as arms purchases, military cooperation, and port visits by warships, China may have laid the diplomatic foundations for the exercise of sea power (Xie, Z., 2014).

Its naval ties with Russia improved in the 1990s. After Chinese warships visited a Russian port in May 1994, Felix Gromov, the Russian fleet commander, visited various Chinese naval stations. After this visit, Gromov reported that China had accepted his offer to educate navy commanders in Russian schools. China and Russia launched naval exercises in 1999. Most of Russia's military shipments to China involve maritime issues. After meeting with Jiang Zemin in July 2000, Russian President Vladimir Putin committed to back China in combating "US hegemonism," blocking Taiwan's independence, and supporting multi-polarization. Prime Minister Rasizade supported 'multipolarity' while others sympathized with Armenian rebels in Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan and China have proposed a Caucasus-China 'new silk road' of trade and industry. Georgia also wants business relations with China. China may benefit economically from collaboration with these oil-rich nations. The '16-character policy' says economic cooperation and development would bolster the military. Vice-President Hu Jintao visited Belarus in July 2000. During his visit, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka reaffirmed support for China's Taiwan policy and cooperation in international issues. Optics, navigation, information systems, and field pipeline construction equipment are purchased. (Lei, D., 2008).

After the PNG government crushed an insurrection in 2000, China provided logistical assistance to the PNG Defense Forces. PLA General Wu Quanxu and PNG Defense Secretary Vari Fore pledged military cooperation, while PNG's Prime Minister supported China's Taiwan policy. Latin America would help China challenge the US Navy. China maintains electronic intelligence facilities in Jaruco, Cuba, and is helping Cuba enhance its satellite tracking and telecommunications networks. Hong Kong-based Hutchison Whampoa bought Panama Canal shipping port rights in 1997. The Rio Group—Colombia, Mexico, and Chile—supports 'multi-polarization' (Holmes, J. R., & Yoshihara, T. , 2005).

Emerging Balance of Power in the IOR and India's Maritime Security

In this setting, China's rise as a big power delayed India's desire for further foreign aggression and challenged the U.S. These developments justify the U.S.'s China containment effort with India. Unchecked China may damage India and the US. Not all analysts believe a stronger U.S.-India relationship is a containment strategy. Due to globalization and interdependence, it is unlikely to pursue a similar stance against China. According to Ashley Tellis, Beijing's containment might resemble Cold War architecture. To succeed, the U.S. must isolate and court all major economic powers from Beijing. (Mishra, V., 2017).

If such a policy indeed exists, it becomes prudent to analyze how India will figure in the U.S. calculation. India cannot be a satellite or subservient to the U.S. foreign policy objective. The Indian Ocean during the Cold War was an arena of superpower rivalry. India's confidence when John F Kennedy was inaugurated as the President of the U.S. soon faltered when China waged war with India in 1962. The U.S. extended support to the Pakistan-China axis to checkmate India. Henry Kissinger, National Security Advisor to President Nixon, was reported to have summoned the Indian Ambassador to Washington in July 1971 to tell him that India should not count on the U.S. anymore if China would intervene on behalf of Pakistan. The U.S. was ensnared to bring India to its feet by threatening to use nuclear weapons when it sent the USS Enterprise to the Bay of Bengal in support of Pakistan. If not for India's strategic partnership with the former Soviet Union, South Asia's political geography would have altered (Upadhyaya, S. , 2014).

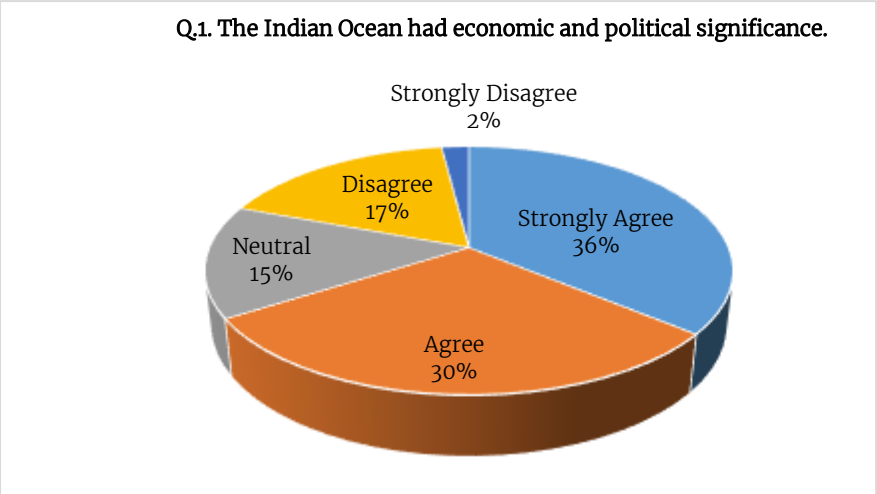
Cold War ties between India and the US deteriorated. The connection shifted shortly after the Cold War. Bitterness grew into collaboration. India exploited global commons for economic progress, but they safeguarded it. New Delhi depends increasingly on marine transportation for its USD 800 billion trade and economy. India depends on SLOCs for business. Hence, it emphasizes IOR sea-lane security. After opening up, India developed its economy via US liberalization, privatization, and globalization. U.S. markets expanded to India, encouraging growth. The US was warmed by India before the Soviet demise. (Bateman, S. , 2015)

Defense cooperation with the U.S. will also provide strategic leverage for India to build trust and confidence among nations' comity. The defense cooperation will also engage both countries in mutual trade, strategic cooperation, political influence, and technology transfer. New Delhi consistently looks at

its defense ties with Washington as giving the technology that it does not process and that other nations cannot provide (Panda, J., 2014).

Graph 1

Frequency Distribution of Q.1. The Indian Ocean had economic and political significance.



The following pie chart shows that the Indian Ocean had economic and political significance. Out of 150 respondents, 36% of participants strongly agreed, 30% agreed, 15% were neutral, 17% disagreed, and 2% strongly disagreed. Among these, the most frequently opt. Option was Strongly Agreed upon.

Table 3

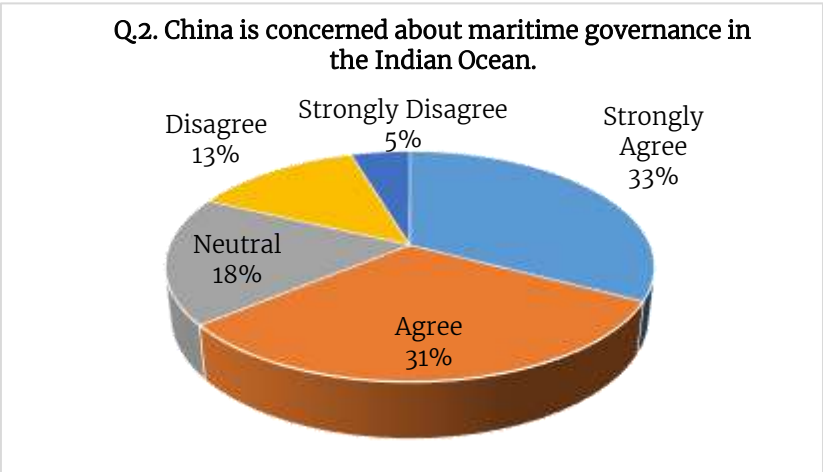
Q1

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	54	36.0	36.0	36.0
	Agree	45	30.0	30.0	66.0
	Neutral	22	14.7	14.7	80.7
	Disagree	26	17.3	17.3	98.0
	Strongly Disagree	3	2.0	2.0	100.0
	Total	150	100.0	100.0	

The following table illustrates the frequency distribution of the statement that the Indian Ocean had economic and political significance. Among the 150 participants, the strongly agreed was 54, agreed was 45, neutral was 22, disagree was 26, and strongly disagreed was 3.

Graph 2

Frequency Distribution of Q.2. China is concerned about maritime governance in the Indian Ocean



The following pie chart shows that China is concerned about maritime governance in the Indian Ocean. Out of 150 respondents, 33% of participants strongly agreed, 31% agreed, 18% were neutral, 13% disagreed, and 5% strongly disagreed. Among these, the most frequently opt. The option was strongly agreed upon.

Table 4

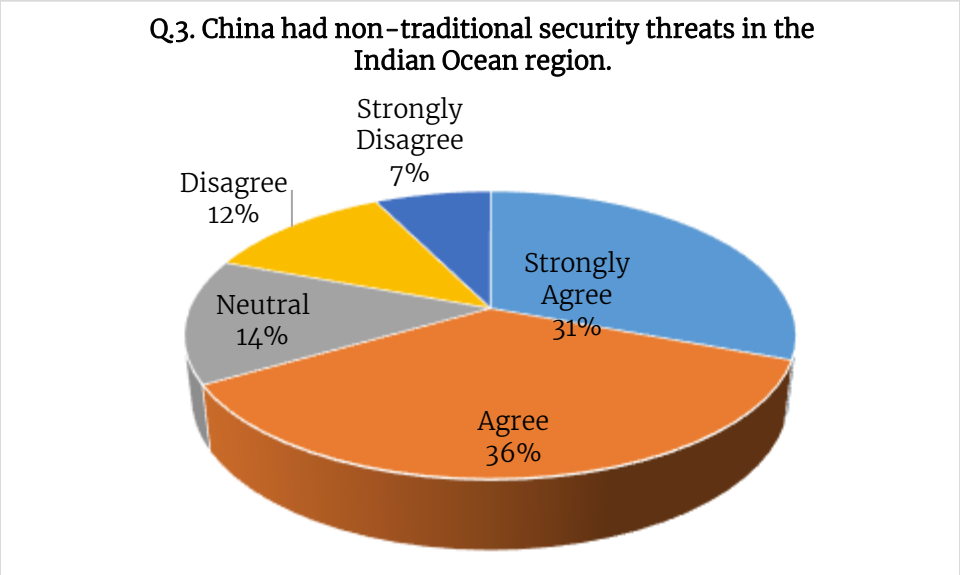
Q2

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	49	32.7	32.7	32.7
	Agree	47	31.3	31.3	64.0
	Neutral	27	18.0	18.0	82.0
	Disagree	20	13.3	13.3	95.3
	Strongly Disagree	7	4.7	4.7	100.0
	Total	150	100.0	100.0	

The following table illustrates the frequency distribution of the statement that China is concerned about maritime governance in the Indian Ocean. Among the 150 participants, the strongly agreed was 49, agreed was 47, neutral was 27, disagree was 20, and strongly disagreed was 7.

Graph 3

Frequency Distribution of Q.3. China had non-traditional security threats in the Indian Ocean region



The following pie chart shows that China had non-traditional security threats in the Indian Ocean region. Out of 150 respondents, 31% of participants strongly agreed, 36% agreed, 14% were neutral, 12% disagreed, and 7% strongly disagreed. Among these, the most frequently opt. The option was agreed upon.

Table 5

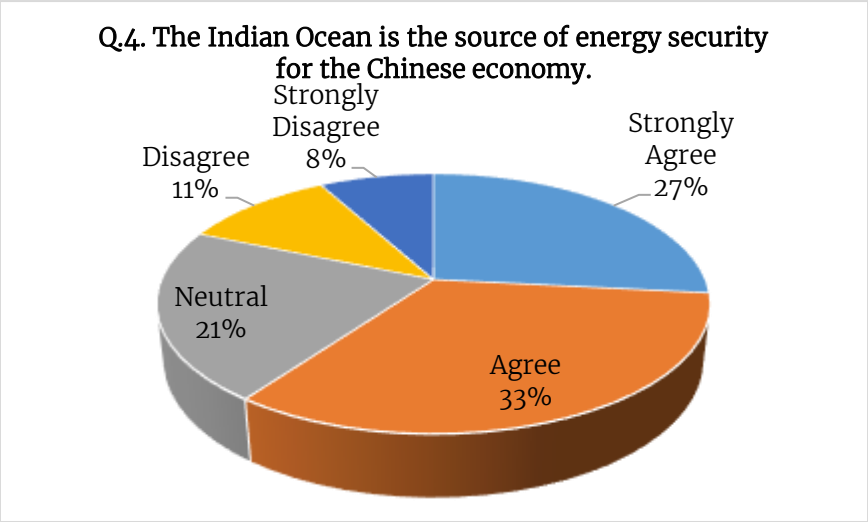
Q3

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	46	30.7	30.7	30.7
	Agree	54	36.0	36.0	66.7
	Neutral	21	14.0	14.0	80.7
	Disagree	18	12.0	12.0	92.7
	Strongly Disagree	11	7.3	7.3	100.0
	Total	150	100.0	100.0	

The following table illustrates the frequency distribution of the statement that China had non-traditional security threats in the Indian Ocean region. Among the 150 participants, the strongly agreed was 46, agreed was 54, neutral was 21, disagree was 18, and strongly disagreed was 11.

Graph 4

Frequency Distribution of Q.4. The Indian Ocean is the source of energy security for the Chinese economy.



The following pie chart shows that the Indian Ocean is the source of energy security for the Chinese economy. Out of 150 respondents, 27% of participants strongly agreed, 33% agreed, 21% were neutral, 11% disagreed, and 8% strongly disagreed. Among these, the most frequently opt. The option was agreed upon.

Table 6

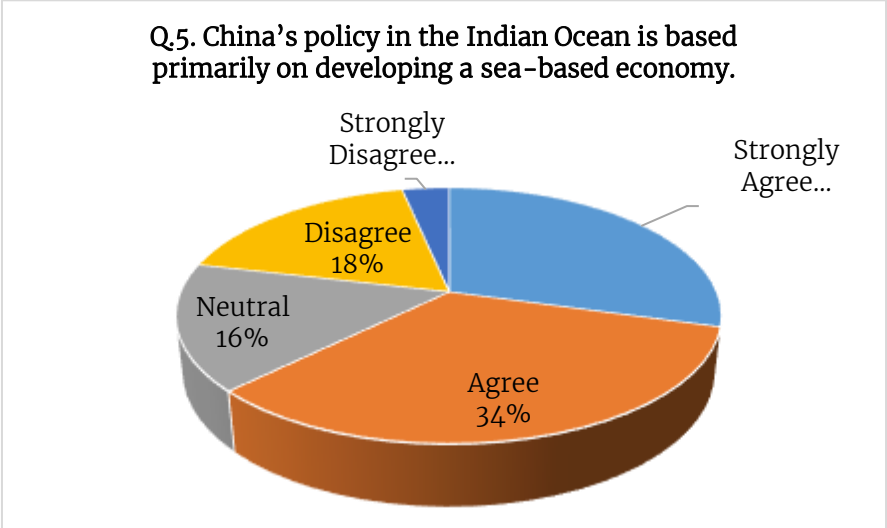
Q4

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	40	26.7	26.7	26.7
	Agree	50	33.3	33.3	60.0
	Neutral	32	21.3	21.3	81.3
	Disagree	16	10.7	10.7	92.0
	Strongly Disagree	12	8.0	8.0	100.0
	Total	150	100.0	100.0	

The following table illustrates the frequency distribution of the statement that the Indian Ocean is the source of energy security for the Chinese economy. Among the 150 participants, strongly agreed was 40, agreed was 50, neutral was 32, disagreed was 16, and strongly disagreed was 12.

Graph 5

Frequency Distribution of Q.5. China's policy in the Indian Ocean is based primarily on developing a sea-based economy.



The following pie chart shows that China's policy in the Indian Ocean is based primarily on developing a sea-based economy. Out of 150 respondents, 29% of participants strongly agreed, 34% agreed, 16% were neutral, 18% disagreed, and 3% strongly disagreed. Among these, the most frequently opt. The option was agreed upon.

Table 7

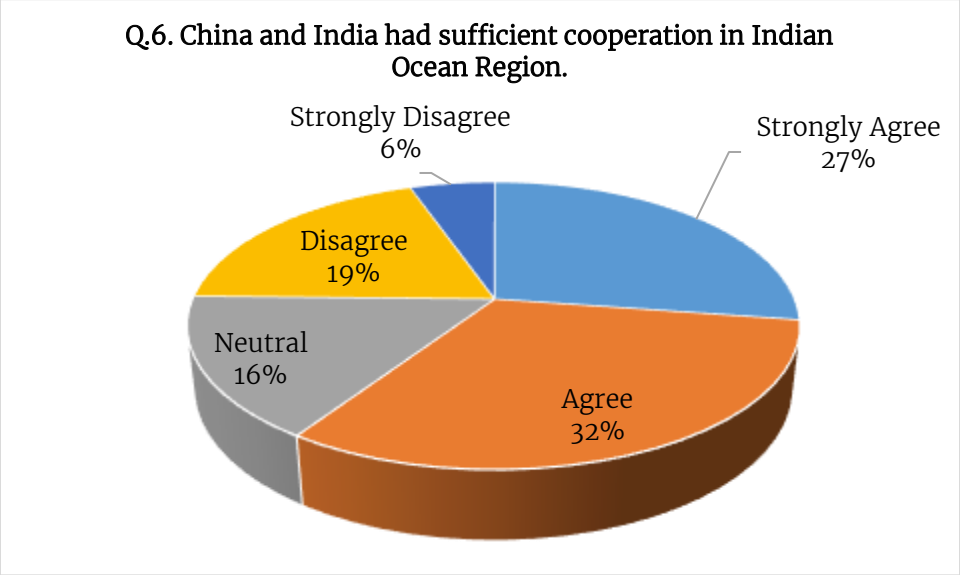
Q5

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	44	29.3	29.5	29.5
	Agree	50	33.3	33.6	63.1
	Neutral	24	16.0	16.1	79.2
	Disagree	27	18.0	18.1	97.3
	Strongly Disagree	5	2.7	2.7	100.0
	Total	150	100	100.0	

The following table illustrates the frequency distribution of the statement that China's policy in the Indian Ocean is based primarily on developing a sea-based economy. Among the 100 participants, strongly agreed was 44, agreed was 50, neutral was 24, disagreed was 27, and strongly disagreed was 5.

Graph 6

Frequency Distribution of Q.6. China and India had sufficient cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region.



The following pie chart shows that China and India had sufficient cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region. Out of 150 respondents, 27% of participants strongly agreed, 32% agreed, 16% were neutral, 19% disagreed, and 6% strongly disagreed. Among these, the most frequently opt. The option was agreed upon.

Table 8

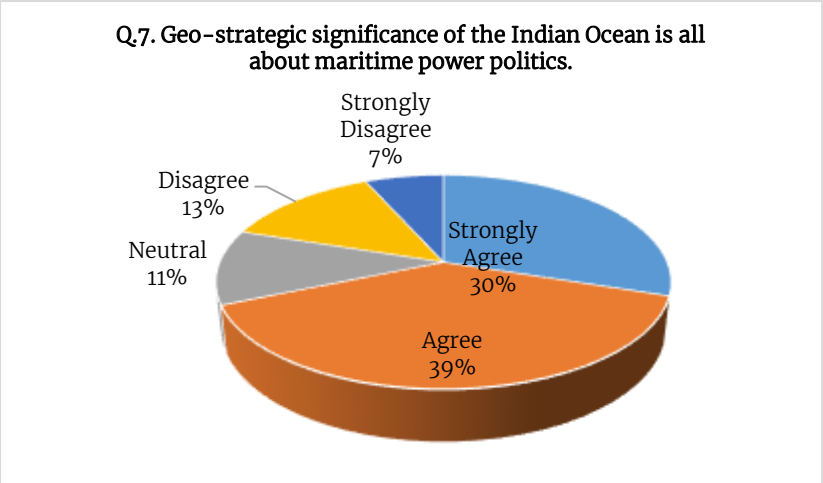
Q6

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	41	27.3	27.3	27.3
	Agree	48	32.0	32.0	59.3
	Neutral	24	16.0	16.0	75.3
	Disagree	29	19.3	19.3	94.7
	Strongly Disagree	8	5.3	5.3	100.0
	Total	150	100.0	100.0	

The following table illustrates the frequency distribution of the statement that China and India had sufficient cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region. Among the 150 participants, strongly agreed was 41, agreed was 48, neutral was 24, disagreed was 29, and strongly disagreed was 8.

Graph 7

Frequency Distribution of Q.7. Geo-strategic significance of the Indian Ocean is all about maritime power politics.



The following pie chart shows that the Geo-strategic significance of the Indian Ocean is all about maritime power politics. Out of 150 respondents, 30% of participants strongly agreed, 39% agreed, 11% were neutral, 13% disagreed, and 7% strongly disagreed. Among these, the most frequently opt. The option was agreed upon.

Table 9

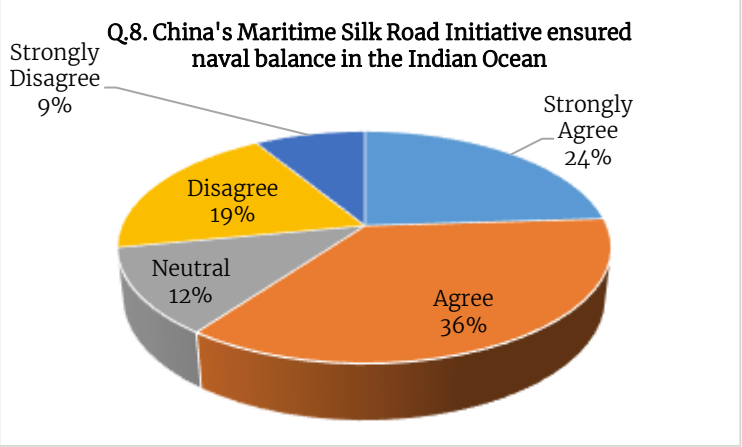
Q7

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	45	30.0	30.0	30.0
	Agree	58	38.7	38.7	68.7
	Neutral	17	11.3	11.3	80.0
	Disagree	20	13.3	13.3	93.3
	Strongly Disagree	10	6.7	6.7	100.0
	Total	150	100.0	100.0	

The following table illustrates the frequency distribution of the statement that the Geo-strategic significance of the Indian Ocean is all about maritime power politics. Among the 150 participants, the strongly agreed was 45, agreed was 58, neutral was 17, disagree was 20, and strongly disagreed was 10.

Graph 8

Frequency Distribution of Q.8. China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative ensured naval balance in the Indian Ocean



The pie chart (on previous Page) shows that China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative ensured naval balance in the Indian Ocean. Out of 150 respondents, 24% of participants strongly agreed, 36% agreed, 12% were neutral, 19% disagreed, and 9% strongly disagreed. Among these, the most frequently opt. The option was agreed upon.

Table 10

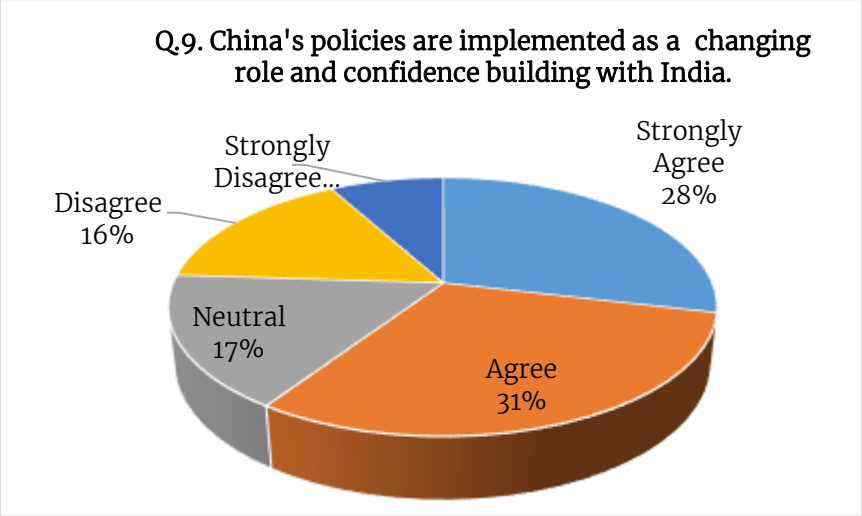
Q8

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	36	24.0	24.0	24.0
	Agree	54	36.0	36.0	60.0
	Neutral	18	12.0	12.0	72.0
	Disagree	29	19.3	19.3	91.3
	Strongly Disagree	13	8.7	8.7	100.0
	Total	150	100.0	100.0	

The following table illustrates the frequency distribution of the statement that China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative ensured naval balance in the Indian Ocean. Among the 150 participants, the strongly agreed was 36, agreed was 54, neutral was 18, disagree was 29, and strongly disagreed was 13.

Graph 9

Frequency Distribution of Q.9. China's policies are implemented as a changing role and confidence building with India



The following pie chart shows that China's policies are implemented as a changing role and confidence building with India. Out of 150 respondents, 28% of participants strongly agreed, 31% agreed, 17% were neutral, 16% disagreed, and 8% strongly disagreed. Among these, the most frequently opt. The option was agreed upon.

Table 11

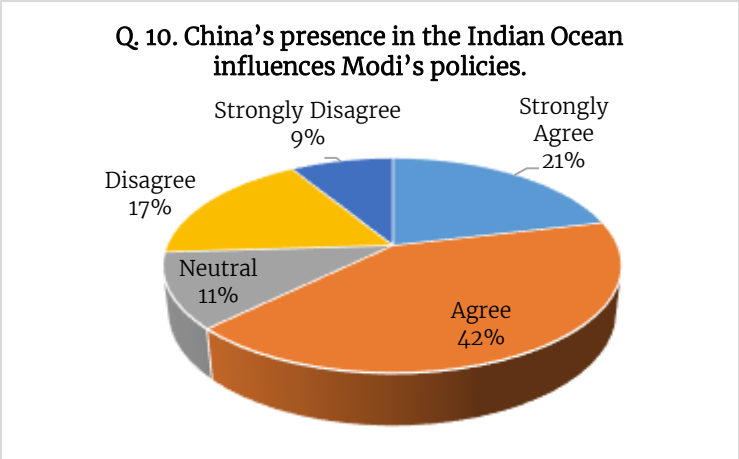
Q9

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	43	28.7	28.7	28.7
	Agree	46	30.7	30.7	59.3
	Neutral	25	16.7	16.7	76.0
	Disagree	24	16.0	16.0	92.0
	Strongly Disagree	12	8.0	8.0	100.0
	Total	150	100.0	100.0	

The following table illustrates the frequency distribution of the statement that China's policies are implemented as a changing role and confidence building with India. Among the 150 participants, the strongly agreed was 43, agreed was 46, neutral was 25, disagree was 24, and strongly disagreed was 12.

Graph 10

Frequency Distribution of Q. 10. China's presence in the Indian Ocean influences Modi's policies



The following pie chart shows that China's presence in the Indian Ocean influences Modi's policies. Out of 150 respondents, 21% of participants strongly agreed, 42% agreed, 11% were neutral, 17% disagreed, and 9% strongly disagreed. Among these, the most frequently opt. The option was agreed upon.

Table 12

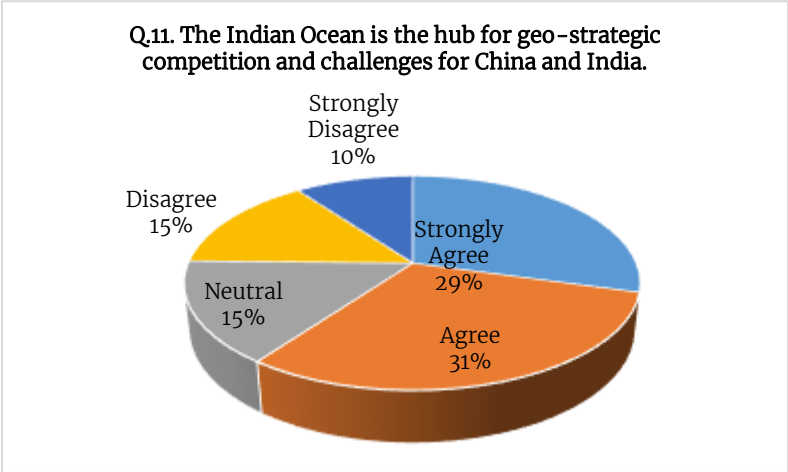
Q10

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	32	21.3	21.3	21.3
	Agree	62	41.3	41.3	62.7
	Neutral	17	11.3	11.3	74.0
	Disagree	26	17.3	17.3	91.3
	Strongly Disagree	13	8.7	8.7	100.0
	Total	150	100.0	100.0	

The following table illustrates the frequency distribution of the statement that China's presence in the Indian Ocean influences Modi's policies. Among the 150 participants, the strongly agreed was 32, agreed was 62, neutral was 17, disagree was 26, and strongly disagreed was 13.

Graph 11

Frequency Distribution of Q.11. The Indian Ocean is the hub for geo-strategic competition and challenges for China and India.



The following pie chart shows that the Indian Ocean is the hub for geo-strategic competition and challenges for China and India. Out of 150 respondents, 29% of participants strongly agreed, 31% agreed, 15% were neutral, 15% disagreed, and 10% strongly disagreed. Among these, the most frequently opt. The option was agreed upon.

Table 13

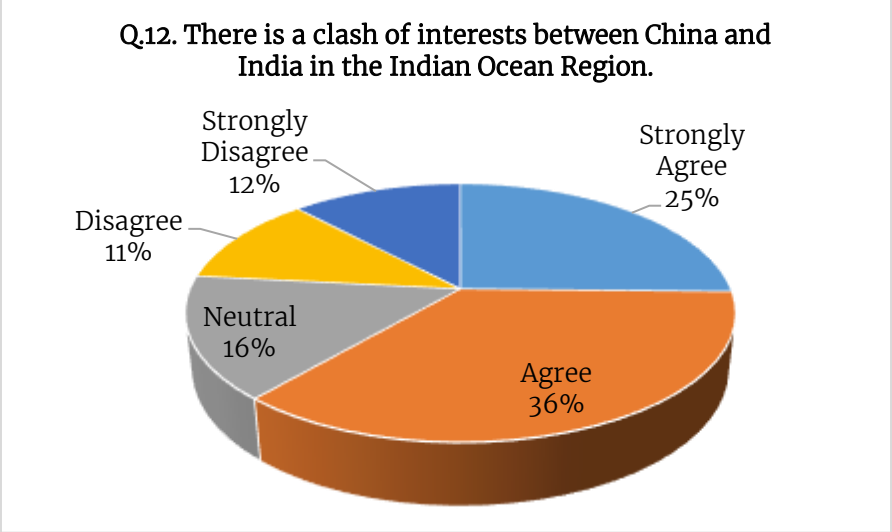
Q11

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	44	29.3	29.3	29.3
	Agree	46	30.7	30.7	60.0
	Neutral	23	15.3	15.3	75.3
	Disagree	22	14.7	14.7	90.0
	Strongly Disagree	15	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	150	100.0	100.0	

The following table illustrates the frequency distribution of the statement that the Indian Ocean is the hub for geo-strategic competition and challenges for China and India. Among the 150 participants, strongly agreed was 44, agreed was 46, neutral was 23, disagreed was 22, and strongly disagreed was 15.

Graph 12

Frequency Distribution of Q.12. There is a clash of interests between China and India in the Indian Ocean Region.



The following pie chart shows that there is a clash of interests between China and India in the Indian Ocean Region. Out of 150 respondents, 25% of participants strongly agreed, 36% agreed, 16% were neutral, 11% disagreed, and 12% strongly disagreed. Among these, the most frequently opt. The option was agreed upon.

Table 14

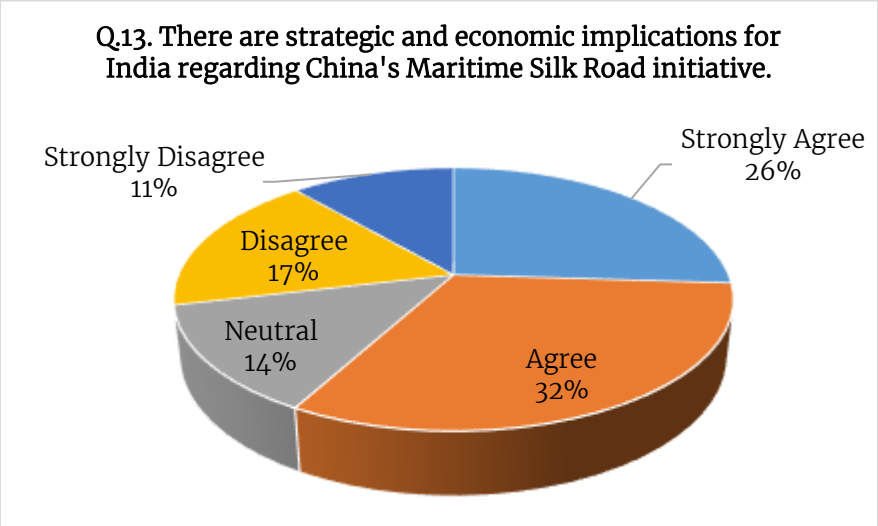
Q12

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	38	25.3	25.3	25.3
	Agree	54	36.0	36.0	61.3
	Neutral	23	15.3	15.3	76.7
	Disagree	17	11.3	11.3	88.0
	Strongly Disagree	18	12.0	12.0	100.0
	Total	150	100.0	100.0	

The following table illustrates the frequency distribution of the statement that there is a clash of interests between China and India in the Indian Ocean Region. Among the 150 participants, the strongly agreed was 38, agreed was 54, neutral was 23, disagree was 17, and strongly disagreed was 18.

Graph 13

Frequency Distribution of Q.13. There are strategic and economic implications for India regarding China's Maritime Silk Road initiative.



The following pie chart shows that there are strategic and economic implications for India regarding China's Maritime Silk Road initiative. Out of 150 respondents, 26% of participants strongly agreed, 32% agreed, 14% were neutral, 17% disagreed, and 11% strongly disagreed. Among these, the most frequently opt. The option was agreed upon.

Table 15

Q13

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	39	26.0	26.0	26.0
	Agree	48	32.0	32.0	58.0
	Neutral	20	13.3	13.3	71.3
	Disagree	26	17.3	17.3	88.7
	Strongly Disagree	17	11.3	11.3	100.0
	Total	150	100.0	100.0	

The following table illustrates the frequency distribution of the statement that There are strategic and economic implications for India regarding China's Maritime Silk Road initiative. Among the 150 participants, strongly agreed was 39, agreed was 48, neutral was 20, disagreed was 26, and strongly disagreed was 17.

Conclusion

The Indian Ocean is the busiest waterway in the world. The container traffic in the region has increased from 46 million TEU in 2000 to 146 million TEU in 1017. Littoral states in Asia, Australia, and Africa, along with non-regional maritime powers such as European countries and the U.S., play a predominant role in keeping the ocean safe for global commerce due to their technological superiority power projections to ward off threats emanating from state and non-state actors. Pooling resources help to tackle the major issues of piracy, human trafficking, humanitarian assistance, and disaster management by major countries whose interests depend on the secure global commons.

The reliance on sea trade has brought major powers together in cooperative and competitive arrangements. The major regional powers include India, China, Japan, and Australia, while the U.S. and Europe are major non-regional powers. However, IOR's emerging competitive nature is posing challenges and creating new equations between the countries to continue to secure the SLOCs and protect their maritime interests.

Unhindered and unchecked access to IOR for China could make the Indian Ocean a Chinese lake. The maritime Silk Road could turn out to be a pathway for PLAN‟s expansionism covering half of the globe. The only way to prevent China's aggressive behavior in IOR is to create a structural balance of affected and like-minded states that will work together to push back China and secure its maritime interests. The U.S., Australia, Japan, India, and states such as Vietnam and the Philippines are working to prevent China's aggression in IOR. The joint military exercises conducted periodically in IORs sharpen naval contact between friends and partners and showcase China's collective strength. The semi-formal organizations such as Quad, comprising of the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia, can turn into a major contact point to contain China.

As China continues to rise and increase its military might, Beijing will attempt to showcase its strength through expansionist behavior in the maritime domain. The cooperative arrangement and evolving mechanism between major players in the IOR is the way forward to secure global commons and maintain peace and tranquility in the region based on acceptable international norms. China is a continental power with a history of empires. During the Middle Ages, the legendary voyages by Zeng He from China to the coast of Africa were replete with examples of Chinese adventurism. Modern China emulates Zeng He's goodwill gesture through the Belt and Road initiative with maritime and land-based components. China's rise since the end of the Cold War is due to its integration with the world economy combined with cheap Labour and rapid industrialization. To sustain its economic growth, China needs an undisturbed supply of hydrocarbons from the Persian Gulf. To mitigate this problem, China devised a cooperative strategy where it identified friendly maritime states across the IOR that would welcome China's investment. Using economic leverage, China began constructing a network of port facilities or „String of Pearls‟ that could provide logistical support and act as a basing station for PLAN activities. These ports could help China respond to any threat that could disrupt the free flow of maritime traffic to and from the mainland.

China has legal holdings in the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, a strategic hotspot overlooking one of the world's busiest sea lanes. Chinese submarines and warships have docked at Sri Lankan ports. These networks of ports surrounding India appear to be aimed at threatening India. There is also fear that China would emulate the South China Sea model of militarizing the newly acquired ports and use them for a strategic purpose. These ports are among 35 other ports financed by China around the world.6 PLAN has acquired its first overseas military base overlooking the Horn of Africa at Djibouti. Apart from conducting the anti-piracy operation, the purpose of the base is to sharpen intelligence gathering and provide muscle to its blue water.

Therefore, it is pertinent to ask if these ports were acquired for military purposes and whether their sole purpose was to target and contain India. Though there have been hints of PLAN‟s engagements with ports in India's neighborhood, they serve a dual purpose of checkmating India's maritime advantages in the IOR, as well as China's commercial and strategic interests in the region and beyond. At present, this network of ports across the IOR is being utilized to enhance China's commercial activity and bolster trade relations with the host countries. China has demonstrated in Sri Lanka that its investment can create a debt trap for small countries that China can leverage prospectively for browbeating them into submission. Apart from the port, Sri Lanka has leased 15,000 acres of land to China for commercial purposes.

India's disputed border with China is vulnerable to Chinese intrusion, which could pose a challenge to India's security. China could ask Pakistan to open India's Western Front during the conflict, resulting in a two-front attack that could test India's response. India's naval modernization, which includes the induction of aircraft carriers, commissioning of nuclear-powered submarines, and acquisition of technologically superior P-8i Poseidon patrol aircraft, indicates India's aspiration of a blue-water navy. This could drastically minimize PLAN from undertaking missions against India and also provide the Indian Navy with enough muscle to go into the South China Sea. The asymmetrical power distribution between India and China calls for an external balancer to correct the imbalance posed by China's imposing military assets.

The U.S. contends that China poses a major military challenge to it in the next few decades. China's expansionist policy in the South China Sea, where Beijing has constructed an artificial island and militarized it, shows China's aggressiveness and goal maximization at all costs, even if it is at odds with

established international conventions and norms of behavior. The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command is in charge of monitoring Indo-Pacific security, which could potentially challenge the U.S. interests in the region. The U.S. is also focusing on creating a network of like-minded countries that have suffered or might suffer due to China's rise. Hence, even countries like India, Japan, Australia, Vietnam, and the Philippines are willing to keep China in check.

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