

China's String of Pearls: Notes for UPSC

International Relations

The String of Pearls is a geopolitical theory on potential Chinese intentions in the Indian Ocean. It refers to the network of Chinese military and commercial facilities and relationships along its sea lines of communication, which extend from the Chinese mainland to Port Sudan in the Horn of Africa.

Theories like the String of Pearls affect the relation between China and India in such a way that its implications are a must-know for all candidates who are currently attempting the IAS Exam this year.

What are the implications of the String of Pearls doctrine?

Defence analysts believe that this doctrine along with initiatives like the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor and other parts of China's One Belt and One Road Initiative, is a threat to India's national security. This as such a system would encircle India and threaten its power projection, trade, and potentially territorial integrity. Furthermore, China's support for India's traditional enemy of Pakistan and the construction of its Gwadar Port is viewed as a threat, compounded by fears that China may develop an overseas naval military base in Gwadar, which could allow China to conduct expeditionary warfare in the Indian Ocean region.

From the east, the deep-water port of Kyaukpyu is also viewed with similar concern. The first comprehensive academic analyses of Chinese plan and its security implications for New Delhi is known to be undertaken in February 2008 by an active-duty Indian naval officer.

Antedating China's anti-piracy naval deployment in the Indian Ocean beginning in December 2008, and the ensuing acquisition of its first overseas military in Djibouti in August 2017, his analysis predicting China's "permanent military presence" in Indian Ocean is viewed by Indian policymakers as prescient. Accordingly, India has since been making moves of various types to counter the perceived threat.

How has India responded to the String of Pearls doctrine so far?

In 2007, India opened its second overseas military listening post in northern Madagascar, with the aim of better overseeing shipping movements through the Mozambique Channel. The Indian government has, with the same intentions, hosted negotiations with Mauritania regarding the construction of an airstrip for Indian surveillance aircraft, as well as organised the construction

of radar stations in the Maldives. Other measures include buying airports and other infrastructure in strategic locations around Sri Lanka. Although the full implications of these actions are yet to be seen in the India- Sri Lanka relations, it is widely seen as a counter move to all of China's overtures in the island country.

Like China, India is heavily dependent on foreign oil producers for its energy needs. About 89% of India's oil arrives by ship, and the burning of oil provides for approximately 33% of India's energy needs. The protection of the major sea lines of communication is therefore recognised as an economic imperative. In this regard, India has historically focused heavily on anti-piracy and counter-terrorism efforts across the Indian Ocean. Most notable among these is Operation Island Watch, the 2010 effort to patrol India's western seaboard against Somali pirates.

A number of these counter-terrorism and anti-piracy efforts have been conducted in co-ordination with American forces, though Indian officials have traditionally restricted joint military exercises to common interest initiatives, often those under United Nations sanctions.