

CHINA'S INDIAN OCEAN AMBITIONS: INVESTMENT, INFLUENCE, AND MILITARY ADVANTAGE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

China has significantly expanded its engagements in the Indian Ocean region over the past three decades, raising fears among American and Indian strategists that its growing naval presence, together with its use of so-called “debt-trap diplomacy,” might provide it with meaningful military advantages far from its shores.

Although China's ultimate aims in the Indian Ocean remain somewhat ambiguous, it is clear that the Chinese leadership is actively pursuing capabilities that would allow it to undertake a range of military missions in the region. This paper explores five such mission objectives — ranging from relatively “benign” activities to those that would be more alarming to U.S. and Indian policy planners — and describes the kinds of defense and economic investments that China would require to carry them out. These objectives are: 1) conduct non-combat activities focused on protecting Chinese citizens and investments, and bolstering China's soft power influence; 2) undertake counterterrorism activities, unilaterally or with partners, against organizations that threaten China; 3) collect intelligence in support of operational requirements, and against key adversaries; 4) support efforts aimed at coercive diplomacy toward small countries in the region; and 5) enable effective operations in a conflict environment, namely the ability to deter, mitigate, or terminate a state-sponsored interdiction of trade bound for China, and to meaningfully hold at risk U.S. or Indian assets in the event of a wider conflict.

This paper argues, first, that while the United States, India, and their partners are right to be concerned that

China is developing a range of dual-use capabilities that could prove valuable for higher-end missions in a conflict environment, policymakers should take care not to assume that, in the Indian Ocean context, China can easily leverage “debt-trap diplomacy” investments in ports and other infrastructure for meaningful *military* advantage. The kinds of capabilities that the Chinese military would want to leverage in a conflict would go beyond what might be available from a commercial venture or intermittent ship visits. Indeed, access arrangements that are grounded in economic coercion are unlikely to be politically stable or strategically reliable.

Second, this paper argues that notwithstanding some skepticism about the military utility of China's commercial activities in the region to date, there *are* indeed investments that could foreshadow China's intention and capability to be able to operate high-end military missions of the kind that would be perceived as threatening to U.S. and Indian interests. Policymakers should watch carefully for leading indicators that could presage Chinese efforts to undertake such missions. These include certain kinds of naval deployments that clearly overmatch the requirements of counterpiracy or humanitarian activities; new platforms for maritime-based intelligence collection against state adversaries; and efforts to bolster the resilience of logistics networks that would be critical to sustaining operations in a conflict environment.

INTRODUCTION

China's growing economic and military reach into the Indian Ocean has precipitated considerable anxiety, both in the region and globally. This anxiety takes

several forms. Indian observers have nervously eyed China's increasingly sophisticated military capabilities and noted its gradually expanding mission sets that extend beyond the waters of the western Pacific.¹ American strategists, increasingly focused on a multi-front competition with a rising China, have taken to warning the world about China's so-called "debt-trap diplomacy," for which South Asian cases such as Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port are presented as troubling exemplars. And small countries within the region, while seeking to leverage Sino-Indian competition to their advantage, have quietly expressed concerns about whether they can navigate China's political influence while retaining their freedom of maneuver. The degradation of the U.S.-China relationship under U.S. President Donald Trump has only further fueled concern that the Indian Ocean will emerge as a theater for destabilizing proxy competition between Washington and Beijing.

These concerns are entirely reasonable. And yet most are derived not from present-day assessments of China's influence, access, or capabilities in the region — all of which remain modest — but from future projections of its role in the wider Indian Ocean region (IOR).² Forecasting the trajectory of China's influence in the IOR is no easy task, now made all the more complicated by the as-yet-unknown implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for geopolitical competition in general, and China's global investment strategy in particular. Any forecast of the future environment in the IOR quickly prompts a set of exceedingly complex questions about Chinese intent, unity of effort, and causality: What precisely is China seeking to achieve in the region? Does it have a coherent, bureaucratically synchronized, all-encompassing strategy to secure military and strategic advantages across Asia, or are its military efforts incremental responses to new exigencies, such as noncombatant evacuation, which arise from China's economic expansion? Are China's economic activities the vanguard of its military ambitions, or vice-versa? Or both?

This paper does not pretend to divine China's grand strategic ambitions in the IOR — a task which would presumably involve deciphering opaque Chinese strategy documents and extrapolating from China's fragmentary engagements in the region. Instead, it will consider practically and prospectively how China

might be able to convert its broad range of regional activities into meaningful military advantages.

The core question is this: What economic or defense investments in the IOR might China be able to leverage to take on more sophisticated military missions in the region, particularly ones that the United States and its partners might perceive as threatening? In other words, what kinds of Chinese activity in the Indian Ocean might reasonably prefigure an evolution from relatively "benign" military missions to those that are more advanced and possibly more alarming to U.S. policy planners?

The paper begins with a review of the ways in which the Chinese government has justified and carried out its activities in the IOR, with a particular focus on military engagements and capabilities, as well as economic investments which may be dual-use or provide strategic advantages. The heart of the paper then briefly considers five "meta-mission objectives" that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) might in principle pursue, and to varying degrees is already pursuing, roughly ordered from those that are the most notionally non-threatening to those that are the most ambitious and potentially troubling to the United States, and to its close partners in the region such as India.³

These five meta-mission objectives, described in greater detail below, are: 1) conduct non-combat activities focused on protecting Chinese citizens and investments, and bolstering China's soft power influence; 2) undertake counterterrorism activities, unilaterally or with partners, against organizations that threaten China; 3) collect intelligence in support of operational requirements, and against key adversaries; 4) support efforts aimed at coercive diplomacy toward small countries in the region; and 5) enable effective operations in a conflict environment, namely the ability to deter, mitigate, or terminate a state-sponsored interdiction of trade bound for China, and to meaningfully hold at risk U.S. or Indian assets in the event of a wider conflict.

These mission sets would not necessarily be pursued sequentially; and certain skills, capabilities, and platforms that the PLA might establish in the IOR would naturally be transferable between and among missions.⁴

For each of these five meta-mission objectives, this paper will consider two questions: i) what capabilities and resources would China require to carry out this set of objectives? and ii) to what extent do Chinese defense and economic investments in the IOR to date suggest that China is pursuing these objectives, and what would it look like if they did?

The paper will conclude with a wider look at how China might realistically convert its investment, influence, and presence into military capabilities that could threaten U.S. security interests directly, or could do so indirectly by degrading India's relative advantages in the region. It argues, first, that policymakers should take care to avoid facile assumptions that China can, particularly in the Indian Ocean context, easily leverage its so-called "debt-trap diplomacy" investments in ports and other infrastructure for *military* advantage. And, second, that policymakers should watch carefully for leading indicators that could presage PLA efforts to undertake higher-order missions in the region. These include certain kinds of naval deployments that clearly overmatch the requirements of counterpiracy or humanitarian activities; new platforms for maritime-based intelligence collection against state adversaries; and efforts to bolster the resilience of logistics networks that would be critical to sustaining operations in a conflict environment.⁵

CHINA'S REACH INTO THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

A doctrine of far seas defense

The Indian Ocean has long been, at best, a secondary theater for Chinese strategists. They accorded India itself some degree of strategic importance, given the longstanding bilateral border dispute that boiled over into a major war in 1962, India's investment in long-range missiles, and its eventual emergence as a nuclear power. But China's ability to project power into the IOR required an expeditionary naval capability that, until recently, was neither well conceptualized in its public strategic documents, nor available in the form of actual military assets.

Scholars trace the roots of China's out of area operations in the IOR to the mid-1980s, when the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), which had

until that time naturally focused on coastal and near sea operations, was directed to undertake a series of port calls on Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.⁶ It became apparent shortly thereafter during the 1991 crisis in Somalia that the PLAN was ill-equipped to carry out even non-combat operations far from its shores; the Chinese government had to arrange for a state-owned commercial vessel to evacuate Chinese citizens.⁷ Notwithstanding this limitation, China's first defense white paper, released in 1998, reflected limited naval ambitions and took pains to note that China "does not station any troops or set up any military bases in any foreign country."⁸ President Hu Jintao upended and enlarged the scope of the navy's ambitions in a speech to the Central Military Commission in 2004, in which he charged the PLA with defending China's expanding national interests and "safeguarding world peace."⁹ While the PLAN continued to prioritize near seas defense, these new publicly articulated missions foreshadowed a more ambitious and active expeditionary role for the navy. The 2006 defense white paper noted the rise of security-related issues pertaining to energy and international shipping routes, and the 2008 paper sharpened China's public focus on a rising global competition for resources and expressed the need for the PLAN to have the capabilities to conduct "cooperation in distant waters."¹⁰



The PLAN has used more than a decade of [counterpiracy] deployments, undertaken as a unilateral effort rather than in conjunction with multinational task forces, to develop its blue-water logistics capabilities and justify its military presence far from Chinese shores.

Beginning in late 2008 the PLAN began a series of counterpiracy deployments in the Gulf of Aden, which it has continued almost without interruption to the present day. These deployments have involved a regular rotation of surface vessels, and occasionally conventional and nuclear attack submarines as well.¹¹

The PLAN has used more than a decade of such deployments, undertaken as a unilateral effort rather than in conjunction with multinational task forces, to develop its blue-water logistics capabilities and justify its military presence far from Chinese shores.

Subsequent Chinese defense white papers continued to gradually expand the public ambit and specificity of the PLAN's ambitions. The 2010 paper highlighted the importance of logistics support for out of area activities, and the 2013 paper noted explicitly the development of blue-water capabilities and listed specific missions such as protecting merchant vessels, evacuating Chinese citizens abroad, and providing "reliable security support for Chinese interests overseas."¹²

If there was any remaining doubt about the scope of China's blue-water ambitions they were laid to rest with the 2015 defense white paper, which delineated eight "strategic tasks" for the PLA:

"...effectively safeguard the sovereignty and security of China's territorial land, air and sea; resolutely defend the unification of the motherland; safeguard China's security and interests in new domains; safeguard the security of China's overseas interests; maintain strategic deterrence and carry out nuclear counterattack; participate in regional and international security cooperation and maintain regional and world peace; strengthen efforts in operations against infiltration, separatism and terrorism....; and perform such tasks as emergency rescue and disaster relief, rights and interests protection, guard duties, and support for national economic and social development."¹³

Subsequent defense documents, released in 2017 and 2019, expounded on these themes, and did so in a way that seemed designed to support the narrative vision of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), giving particular emphasis to the PLA's role in protecting Chinese interests and citizens overseas.¹⁴

It should be evident even from this cursory history that China has, over the last three decades, articulated an increasingly expansive public vision for its military activities in the IOR. From China's defense strategy documents, as well as the broader literature, it is possible to discern several broad objectives that drive

Chinese military presence in the region: securing key sources of energy, protecting overseas investments and citizens, bolstering China's reputation and political influence, and maintaining strategic deterrence.¹⁵

Key Chinese defense capabilities for the Indian Ocean region

Although the PLA's real capabilities in the IOR continue to lag, at times dramatically, the broad set of strategic tasks it has been asked to pursue, it has in recent years made notable strides in building its expeditionary capabilities and enablers.¹⁶ Most visible, and perhaps surprising, have been the sustained counterpiracy deployments in the Gulf of Aden, and the establishment in 2017 of a naval logistics facility in Djibouti that will enable the PLAN to more effectively undertake activities, and project power, in the IOR.¹⁷ After years of asserting that it sought no overseas bases, the Chinese government has justified the base at Djibouti on various grounds, claiming that it will support peacekeeping operations, the protection of overseas citizens, anti-piracy operations, and protection of regional BRI-related investments.¹⁸

As part of its broader efforts at modernization, the PLA is developing an array of military platforms that, due to their endurance and defensive capabilities, are likely to be utilized in the IOR. While much attention has been paid to the PLAN's commissioning of its first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, in 2012 and its ongoing indigenous carrier program, perhaps the most significant contribution to the PLAN's out of area capabilities has come from its rapid development of other major surface combatants, many of which have already been deployed in the IOR.¹⁹ These include guided-missile cruisers (Type 055), destroyers (Type 052C/D), and frigates (Type 054A).²⁰ The PLAN has also built six large amphibious transport docks (Type 071) that can house four air-cushioned landing craft and four helicopters, and is building a fleet of even larger amphibious assault ships (Type 075) that can likely carry over two dozen helicopters. So as to enable these combatants to undertake sustained missions in the IOR, the PLAN has sought in recent years to expand its nascent fleet of replenishment and auxiliary vessels, including oilers, salvage and rescue ships, hospital ships, and transport vessels.²¹ For its part, the PLAN's submarine fleet, which is "heavily geared towards anti-surface and land-attack missions,"

is also slated to grow.²² Both conventional and nuclear-powered submarines have undertaken patrols in the Indian Ocean and made port calls at friendly countries.²³

At the same time, the PLA is investing in other enablers that could be used to support specific overseas missions in the IOR. The People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) presently has limited expeditionary capabilities, but is expanding its long-range airlift fleet that has used episodically for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations, noncombatant evacuation (e.g., from Libya in 2011), and exercise engagements with foreign militaries.²⁴ Chinese forces operating in the IOR are presumed to be largely reliant on host-nation infrastructure and commercial satellites for communication and situational awareness, though China is believed to be investing in longer-range military communication infrastructures.²⁵

Security cooperation and strategic investments

As its ambitions and capabilities have grown, China has naturally increased its military-related engagements with countries in the IOR. Overall PLA military engagements have risen significantly over the last decade. Data show that the PLA's engagements in Asia began a steep annual rise in 2012; its aggregate number of outbound naval port calls (apart from those related to the counterpiracy task force) began rising dramatically in 2013; and international military exercises began a similar trend in 2014.²⁶ The data suggest that these trendlines similarly apply to the PLA's engagements specifically in the IOR.

At times the PLA's rising visibility in the region has caused a stir, notably the pair of submarine visits to Colombo in 2014; the first visit to the region by a Chinese nuclear-powered submarine, which made a port call to Karachi in 2016; and the presence of a sizable PLAN surface and submarine presence operating in the Indian Ocean as the Sino-Indian Doklam crisis unfolded in the summer of 2017.²⁷ On the whole, however, the PLA is starting from a relatively low base as it engages countries in the region, and the frequency and sophistication of its military exercises and bilateral engagements pale in comparison to those conducted by India and the United States.²⁸

China's most robust military relationship in the IOR is with Pakistan, with whom it has decades-long defense and security ties that span a range of sensitive issues, including nuclear technology, satellites, intelligence sharing, and co-development of fighter aircraft. The majority of the PLAN's port visits in the IOR in recent years have been to Pakistan, and Chinese naval vessels are presumed to enjoy fulsome access to supply and repair facilities at the Karachi shipyards. Pakistan represented over 40% of China's total arms sales between 2000 and 2014, and these sales — some of which may have been made on concessional terms — have included submarines, frigates, and other major equipment.²⁹ As part of its multi-billion dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Beijing has helped to build out Pakistan's fiber optic infrastructure, and has provided grants and loans to develop the remote deep-water port at Gwadar.³⁰ Although Gwadar has to date processed negligible commercial traffic, and the most ambitious plans for expanding the complex have not yet materialized, the port has been used by Pakistan Navy vessels, and international observers have speculated that it could someday be developed into a full-fledged PLAN military outpost.³¹ While military and political elites in Pakistan have been broadly supportive of CPEC, there has been growing public criticism in recent years regarding the risks of Chinese debt, and the provincial and ethnic inequities that might arise from its investments.



Despite the relatively attractive cost of its military equipment, China has not yet made the concessionary sale of arms a major aspect of its defense diplomacy, and many countries in the region have been wary of upsetting India by purchasing major Chinese arms or engaging in regular defense exercises.

Bangladesh is the second-most significant recipient of Chinese military equipment and engagement. The country counts China as its only formal defense

partner, and its leading defense supplier.³² It has purchased submarines, jet trainers, and other major equipment, as well as small arms.³³ Not surprisingly, bilateral defense ties between the two countries are strong; their military personnel train and exercise together, and the Bangladesh military has deepened ties with the PLA even as it has sought to assuage its neighbor India that China will not be given a strategic foothold in the Bay of Bengal.³⁴ While Bangladesh has accepted Chinese financing for roads, industrial parks, and an inland port project at Payra, it has reportedly declined several Chinese offers to develop ports with more strategic potential, likely out of concern that it would antagonize India.³⁵

China's defense engagements with countries in South Asia apart from Pakistan and Bangladesh remain limited. Despite the relatively attractive cost of its military equipment, China has not yet made the concessionary sale of arms a major aspect of its defense diplomacy, and many countries in the region have been wary of upsetting India by purchasing major Chinese arms or engaging in regular defense exercises.³⁶

Nepal undertook its first military exercise with China only in early 2017, a small event notionally focused on counterterrorism operations.³⁷ Nepal retains deep security ties with India, with whom it has a longstanding but politically fraught relationship.

China's security relationship with Sri Lanka is more robust, and benefits from the legacy of Beijing's military support to Colombo in the latter stages of Sri Lanka's long civil war.³⁸ More recently, the PLAN has used Colombo as an occasional port of call; the two militaries have engaged in joint exercises; and the PLA has donated a frigate to the Sri Lankan navy and is constructing facilities at the Sri Lankan military academy.³⁹ Sri Lanka is a site of significant Chinese investment, including commercial development of the Colombo port, and a controversial 99-year lease of Hambantota Port to a Chinese state-owned enterprise. The Chinese government has insisted that Hambantota is an exclusively commercial venture, though critics both inside and outside of Sri Lanka have raised questions about the structure of the deal and the prospect that Beijing could use its financial leverage with Colombo to extract concessions related to military presence or access to the port.⁴⁰ While continuing to

look to China for targeted investment, tourism, and political support, Sri Lankan elites have been notably more wary in recent years of the reputational costs of taking on Chinese debt.

Myanmar has also been a major focus of China's BRI efforts. As part of the so-called China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), China has proposed significant investments in oil and gas pipelines that would link its Yunnan province with the Bay of Bengal, terminating at a new deep-water port at Kyaukpyu in Myanmar's Rakhine state. The Kyaukpyu project has been plagued by delays and local protests, and has been scaled down from its original ambitions to contain costs.⁴¹ Although some domestic and international analysts have raised fears that the port could someday be used as a base or access point by the PLA, Myanmar's leaders have been careful to preserve their sovereignty, and can point to the constitutional prohibition on the deployment of foreign military forces within its territory.⁴²

China has economic ties to other Indian Ocean states, such as the Maldives, where it has financed a major bridge and other investments, and Seychelles and Mauritius, which have received attention from senior Chinese political leaders and hosted PLAN vessels for port visits. In large part due to India's dominant influence in the region, China's defense engagements with these small island countries have thus far been very limited, and speculation regarding Chinese ambitions to establish other sites for naval access in the IOR has been at the very least premature.⁴³

PLA MISSION SETS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

Non-combat operations

China has made significant strides in building capabilities to carry out non-combat operations in the IOR. Missions such as counterpiracy and humanitarian assistance, which are oriented around the provision of public goods, have formed the backbone of Beijing's public justification for an expanded presence in the region. Many of the PLA's major investments in capabilities and platforms plainly support these mission objectives.

The PLAN's capabilities and tempo of operational deployments arguably already overmatch the actual threats posed to China by piracy in the Gulf of Aden. (Nuclear powered submarines are, for example, not a particularly specialized or effective counterpiracy platform.) The nearly continual deployments in that theater since 2008 have allowed the PLA to build a small but highly trained force capable of tracking and interdicting hijackers and carrying out basic escort duties for commercial transport vessels.⁴⁴ Although it is unlikely to serve as a model for other bases due to its unique politics, the facility at Djibouti allows the PLA to more easily sustain these deployments by providing basic resupply, replenishment, and other logistic support.⁴⁵ In practice, this should allow PLAN vessels to sustain greater operational time in theater, and reduce reliance on friendly port calls for resupply. The counterpiracy deployments also suggest, according to one close observer, that "PLAN ships are very reliable during peacetime operations" and that the navy has cultivated a growing cadre of officers who have experience deploying far from China's shores.⁴⁶

Many of the same far seas sustainment capabilities that the PLAN has cultivated in its counter-piracy missions have value for humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HA/DR) activities as well. China has utilized its Peace Ark hospital ship for goodwill missions in the IOR and the PLA has been able to undertake basic search-and-rescue and limited humanitarian airlift missions in response to disasters.⁴⁷

The PLA has also built limited capabilities for noncombatant evacuation operations (NEO), which it would presumably use in support of Chinese citizens who are living abroad or supporting BRI investment projects in the region. These capabilities were put to the test in 2011 with a large-scale evacuation of Chinese nationals from Libya, and again in 2015 with an evacuation from Yemen to Djibouti.⁴⁸ Unlike its earlier experience in Somalia in the early 1990s, the PLA did not in these more recent NEO activities have to rely on merchant vessels for transport of noncombatants.

What would it look like were China to expand its ability to undertake these kinds of non-combat missions? Some of its investments would be specifically applicable to these mission sets, such as growing the

number and availability of hospital ships; using its base at Djibouti to stockpile humanitarian supplies; or conducting more complex amphibious exercises focused on force protection efforts against non-state actors, which would be particularly relevant for counterpiracy missions and NEO efforts conducted in non-permissive or politically unstable environments in the Middle East or Africa.⁴⁹

Other capabilities and skillsets that China might reasonably bring to bear in non-combat missions in the IOR, however, are ineluctably dual-use and could be leveraged for other more sensitive missions or even combat activities. These include general sustainment capabilities such as fleet supply and long-range communications, as well as more specific capabilities such as expansion of long-range airlift assets; use of amphibious ships and ship-to-shore operations involving rotary lift assets; military engineering activities, including rapid runway repair; and intermediate medical or mortuary facilities at Djibouti.⁵⁰ Although China already has access to the Port of Karachi, it could negotiate additional access at Gwadar to support its counterpiracy efforts or potentially stockpile supplies for humanitarian emergencies. Such access would of course provide the PLA with advantages in pursuing higher-order missions as well.

Would China's non-combat operations in the region benefit appreciably if Chinese companies were to establish more commercial footholds at ports in the IOR? Possibly, but only on the margin. Long-term lease agreements of the kind that state-owned China Merchant Port Holdings secured at Hambantota in Sri Lanka may prove useful in providing contingent access to the PLAN during a humanitarian emergency or a NEO, but in such cases countries in the region would in any case be naturally inclined to provide temporary access to support goodwill operations. The Chinese government could in theory request that it be allowed to preposition humanitarian supplies at Chinese-managed commercial ports, but even such requests could be politically fraught and seen as a means by which the PLAN was seeking to securitize Chinese commercial activities in the region.

Counterterrorism operations

The second set of far seas missions that the PLA may be expected to conduct in the IOR involve counterterrorism (CT) activities, undertaken unilaterally or with partners, against organizations that threaten China. A 2015 law provides a broad legal architecture for the PLA to deploy overseas on CT missions.⁵¹ At present, however, China's ability to conduct such operations in the region is limited on account of the PLA's modest assets in theater. Any efforts to undertake CT operations on foreign soil could also invite political complications for China, given its longstanding but increasingly dubious insistence that it does not interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries.⁵²

To date, Chinese CT activities have operated primarily in two domains. The first is in cooperative CT exercises and activities with allies and partners, principally with Pakistan and, multilaterally, under the aegis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).⁵³ The nature and scope of China's CT-related activities remain opaque, though much of it is probably limited to bilateral and multilateral intelligence exchange, and, reportedly, joint operations against Uighur separatist groups along the mountainous China–Pakistan border.⁵⁴ (Reports about Chinese soldiers conducting joint CT activities with the Afghan security forces in the remote Wakhan Corridor have not been confirmed.⁵⁵) China has been a leader in standing up the SCO's CT exercises and cooperative mechanisms, which include a joint CT center in Tashkent.⁵⁶



The Chinese government may well be especially wary of conducting even partnered CT operations in a country in which a Chinese company has large-scale investments, as it would introduce unique risks of retaliation.

The other potential domain for China's CT efforts in the IOR is in the maritime environment. Chinese special operations forces have occasionally been deployed overseas in conjunction with counterpiracy missions.

According to some reports, the PLA is “developing its special operations capabilities to build a more flexible and deployable force that can support missions abroad.”⁵⁷ This might, for example, involve hostage rescue efforts deployed from PLAN platforms, or partnered operations against terrorist groups which target BRI infrastructure projects.

Narrowly focused special operations activities of this kind would not necessarily require extensive military infrastructure or sophisticated platforms. Neither would they necessarily benefit from the presence of Chinese companies or infrastructure in the target countries. Indeed, the Chinese government may well be especially wary of conducting even partnered CT operations in a country in which a Chinese company has large-scale investments, as it would introduce unique risks of retaliation. The limiting factors for Chinese CT operations in the region would therefore largely relate to questions of high politics, and secondarily to the tactical effectiveness of PLA special operations forces.

Higher along the conflict spectrum, one could imagine the PLA someday undertaking more dramatic unilateral CT activities from its offshore naval platforms in the Indian Ocean. Some of the PLAN's major surface combatants, which as noted above are expanding in number and sophistication, are equipped with long-range land-attack cruise missiles and the service has “invested heavily in a range of sensors and datalinks to enable over-the-horizon targeting” that could, in theory, be used against on-shore CT targets.⁵⁸ Needless to say, any action by China — even in the context of a partnered operation — to undertake ship-to-surface strikes against CT targets would be predicated on a dramatic change in China's political calculation and risk acceptance.

Intelligence collection

The third broad mission objective that we might expect the PLA to pursue in the IOR involves collecting intelligence in support of operational requirements, and against key adversaries. Intelligence-related activities are by their very nature opaque, but we can presume that they take several forms.

The most significant and sustained type of collection would likely be of tactical and operational maritime domain intelligence that could directly support

non-combat as well as more advanced PLAN operations in theater. Already the PLAN is presumed to have used its submarine deployments in the Indian Ocean to map key underwater topographic features and possibly assess the vulnerability of undersea cables.⁵⁹ China can also leverage civilian vessels, including fishing boats for this sort of collection.⁶⁰ In 2019 the Indian Navy expelled a Chinese civilian research vessel from India's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the waters around the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, an important maritime choke point. Its research activities likely produced oceanographic information of value to both civilian researchers and military planners.⁶¹ The submarine deployments, along with more recent use of unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs), stand to provide the PLAN not only with more detailed information of the physical operating environment, but intelligence as to the patterns of operation and tactical behaviors of the U.S. and Indian navies and other navies operating in the IOR.⁶² This information is presumed to be buttressed by other PLA collection activities focused on the region, such as the occasional deployment into the Indian Ocean of electronic surveillance ships (such as Type 815 vessels) equipped to map the electronic signatures of vessels and aircraft.

China's defense cooperation engagements, as noted above, provide opportunities for collection on the capabilities and intentions of countries in the region. Cooperative HA/DR and counterpiracy exercises, defense exchanges, and weapons sales all provide entree for passive collection.⁶³ China has intelligence-sharing agreements with several countries in the region, including reportedly Bangladesh (2018), and presumably Pakistan, though it is not clear whether these are limited to CT threats or include maritime domain information sharing.⁶⁴

In less visible ways, China is presumed to be laying the groundwork for leveraging its commercial infrastructure in the region for intelligence collection. The management of ports by Chinese state-owned enterprises is one potential inroad.⁶⁵ As one close observer has rightly noted, "the information about flows of goods and personnel through ports has clear military intelligence value" that the PLA would be eager to exploit, particularly during times of heightened Sino-Indian or Sino-American tension.⁶⁶ U.S. Navy officials have even noted in public fora that the presence of

Chinese information technology and communication infrastructure at its commercially managed ports could compromise or interfere with the military systems of U.S. Navy vessels, and might deter regular U.S. port calls.⁶⁷ These risks can likely be managed, and would probably not meaningfully impinge on U.S., Indian, or partner navy operations in the region, but could complicate port calls and security cooperation efforts.

More broadly, many American observers fear that China may seek to exploit commercial information technology infrastructure, such as Huawei 5G wireless networks, that are sold and installed in countries in the IOR. Just as Chinese shipping and port entities have a mandate for supporting Chinese national defense objectives when called upon to do so, it is presumed that Huawei also must provide sensitive network information to the PLA upon request.⁶⁸

Perhaps the most consequential intelligence collection advances that the Chinese military could make in the IOR would involve addressing its vulnerabilities in maritime domain awareness (MDA) along critical sea lines of communication (SLOCs), including near the choke point of the Strait of Malacca, and along routes leading to alternate choke points such as the Sunda or Lombok straits. Doing so would likely require forging robust maritime surveillance information-sharing agreements with countries such as Myanmar, Bangladesh, Thailand, or Sri Lanka; establishing signals intelligence collection sites (such as one that has been rumored but not confirmed at the Great Coco Island); and establishing realistic platforms and concepts of operation for the use of maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) near these SLOCs.⁶⁹ MPA sorties could be facilitated by some sort of rotational access agreement from a friendly country in the Bay of Bengal or the Gulf of Thailand, though such an agreement could no doubt invite severe Indian recriminations on the host country. Or they could be generated on a periodic basis from a large amphibious PLAN vessel or aircraft carrier. Such operations could prove useful but would be limited by the type and number of fixed-wing ship-based MPA platforms available, and would hardly overcome India's inherent advantages from its joint facilities on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which host sophisticated long-range P8-I maritime surveillance aircraft, and from India's leadership role in hosting an MDA fusion center for members of the Indian Ocean Rim Association.⁷⁰

These more complex MDA collection efforts would certainly be useful for facilitating the PLA's non-combat operations in the region, but more importantly, would also prove valuable for higher-order missions designed to thwart sea denial efforts or hold adversaries' assets at risk during a serious crisis.

Support to coercive diplomacy

The fourth potential mission objective that the PLA may be called on to pursue in the IOR would involve supporting Chinese efforts aimed at coercive diplomacy toward small countries in the region. Needless to say, this is not a mission objective previewed in the public doctrinal literature. Nor is it one that is likely to feature prominently, at least in the near term, in the PLA's planning or development of capabilities in the IOR.

The United States and India, however, have good reason to be concerned in general terms about Chinese efforts at coercing smaller states. In East and Southeast Asia, for example, China has used its economic leverage to pressure countries to oppose recognition of Taiwan; has used boycotts and restrictions on Chinese tourism flows to coerce or punish countries with whom it has political disputes; and has used fishing fleets and maritime militias to harass and coerce countries with whom it has contested maritime claims.⁷¹

How might China use the PLA in support of coercive diplomacy in the Indian Ocean? In the western Pacific, Chinese leaders have used the PLAN and PLAAF for maritime coercion and so-called "grey zone" tactics.⁷² While in theory they could do the same in the Indian Ocean, they are less likely to do so for the simple reason that, apart from the longstanding Sino-Indian boundary dispute, China does not have contested borders or maritime claims in the region.⁷³

This is not to suggest that the PLA could not be used in the Indian Ocean in support of coercive diplomatic efforts by Beijing. PLAN vessels could be used to harass or intimidate small countries, or conduct show of force activities during a political crisis.⁷⁴ Merely anchoring a PLAN surface combatant just beyond the territorial waters of a small island country, such as the Maldives, would send a powerful message — not only to Maldivian leaders, but to India, which sees itself as the Indian Ocean's natural hegemon.

Using the PLA for this kind of signaling in locales so far from China's near seas would most likely prove politically counterproductive over the long term, but doing so would not require any specialized military capabilities beyond what China already has in the region. Were the PLA to build an even more persistent, robust, and resilient presence in the Indian Ocean, it would merely generate more flexibility for China to use the PLA for such coercive missions.

Operations in a conflict environment

At the high end of the operational spectrum, China would likely want to be able to undertake effective operations in a conflict environment against state adversaries. This could take many forms, but would presumably involve two principal and at times related missions: the ability to deter, mitigate, or terminate a state-sponsored interdiction of trade bound for China; and to meaningfully hold at risk U.S. or Indian assets in the event of a wider conflict.⁷⁵

China already has established some limited ability to deter a blockade or other interdiction of trade by a state adversary. It could, first, use PLAN assets in theater to escort commercial vessels. The PLAN has gained some experience doing this in conjunction with its counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, but in a scenario in which the purpose was deterring state-sponsored interdiction, Chinese military escorts would be forced to operate in a more expansive geographic domain (i.e., in both the eastern and western areas of the Indian Ocean) and with significantly heightened risk to the fleet and to wider military escalation. Second, China could seek to deter trade interdiction with show of force missions, hoping that a sizable and timely deployment of major surface combatants and submarines in the Indian Ocean would prompt India or the United States to reconsider plans to disrupt Chinese commercial traffic. As PLAN deployments in the Indian Ocean grow, China will likely be able to generate more constructive ambiguity about its presence, activities, and retaliatory options — all of which might, at the margins, dissuade attempts at commercial interdiction.

China can take some comfort from the substantial literature that suggests that effectively prosecuting a naval blockade, or even a sustained and economically

meaningful campaign of harassment against China-bound commercial vessels, would be a formidable task for India.⁷⁶ Accounting even for the deference, or active support, of the United States and Australia, sustaining a blockade would be fraught, inviting difficult questions about how and where to confront PLAN escort vessels, how to ensure that oil is not sold to China once it passes through the eastern Indian Ocean choke points, how to protect against Chinese submarines, and, most vexingly, how to preempt the flow of PLAN reinforcements into the Indian Ocean theater.



The geography of the Indian Ocean and its choke points are such that the PLA would have long and fragile supply lines, subject to disruption by Indian, U.S., or other partner forces.

Notwithstanding how unlikely this scenario may be, it remains the case that mitigating or terminating a serious blockade or other state-sponsored interdiction of trade bound for China would prove exceptionally difficult. There are several reasons why, and taken together they get to the heart of China's challenges in conducting high-end missions in its far seas.

Put simply, Chinese forces in the IOR would face significant vulnerabilities in any serious conflict.⁷⁷ The geography of the Indian Ocean and its choke points are such that the PLA would have long and fragile supply lines, subject to disruption by Indian, U.S., or other partner forces.⁷⁸ Lacking wide-area air defense and sophisticated antisubmarine warfare capabilities, Chinese naval vessels in theater would be vulnerable to shore-based aircraft, and would be at a notable information disadvantage, particularly near crucial maritime choke points.⁷⁹ Absent robust, politically sustainable, and operationally resilient basing arrangements in the region, Chinese forces would struggle to resupply fuel and other vital materials, undertake more than perfunctory refit and repair, or manage casualties.⁸⁰ China's logistics facility at Djibouti and its presumed access to naval facilities at Karachi would, of course, be helpful.⁸¹ If the PLA

ever established a full-fledged naval base at Gwadar with layered defenses, that would be more helpful still, particularly in mitigating threats to Chinese vessels transiting the Gulf of Oman. But even with these facilities the PLA would struggle to manage resupply and repair activities in a contested environment, especially in the eastern Indian Ocean where the threat to Chinese-bound maritime traffic might prove most acute.⁸²

Along its land border with India, China has established a force posture and set of capabilities designed to hold at risk Indian assets and deter Indian attempts to revise the status quo.⁸³ In the maritime domain, China can in principle hold at risk Indian or U.S. assets, but at present has only modest credibility in doing so. In theory, PLAN vessels could use ship-to-surface or ship-to-ship cruise missiles, or submarine anti-ship capabilities to target an adversary's installations or vessels. The credibility of this deterrent will likely become more robust in the coming years as the sophistication of Chinese naval forces and their operational time in theater increases. Even so, Chinese vessels in the IOR will continue to face significant disadvantages in domain awareness, targeting, and logistics. And in any wider military conflict they would be ripe targets for Indian and U.S. retaliation.

The broader point here is not that India and the United States together have an insurmountable advantage in all respects in the IOR, or that the Chinese military has no hope of operating in the region in a crisis. Rather, it is to recognize that in a major conflict, commercial investments, personnel, and even naval vessels may prove to be a net *liability* rather than a net asset for China. Ports or special economic zones managed by Chinese companies, or other facilities that provide limited and contingent access that might be modestly useful to PLA forces in non-combat environments and for non-combat missions, would likely be of limited utility in a serious conflict. High-end operations require sophisticated infrastructure and logistics of a kind that simply cannot be borrowed *in extremis* from commercial ventures.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Although China's emerging capabilities in the Indian Ocean region have been greeted with suspicion, many

of them are explicable given China's understandable interests in protecting the increasing number of Chinese nationals far from its shores; supporting the growth and security of large-scale Belt and Road investment projects; and mitigating the inherent fragility of China's energy supply lines. Indeed, some of China's most visible capabilities in the IOR — including regular naval deployments, the base at Djibouti, and military exercises — can justifiably support a wide range of non-combat operations and humanitarian contingency plans.

At the same time, some of these very same capabilities that are valuable for lower-end, non-combat missions could plainly prove valuable for higher-end missions including counterterrorism operations, more robust intelligence collection activities, political coercion, and certain operations in a conflict environment.⁸⁴ China's efforts, for example, to bolster its capabilities in strategic airlift, secure communications, at-sea resupply, and rotary wing naval aviation could prove useful across a wide range of missions. Given the way in which China has developed and justified its expeditionary capabilities over the last decade, there is very little it could do that might reassure the United States and countries in the region that its far seas ambitions, and the associated PLA mission sets, are not likely to broaden even further.



Access arrangements that are grounded in economic coercion are unlikely to be politically stable or strategically reliable.

In this sense, China can reasonably assert that much of its military presence and investments thus far in the IOR can be explained with reference to benign missions and even the provision of public goods, even as the United States, India and their partners are right to be concerned that China has adopted an expansive set of pretexts whereby it can develop dual-use capabilities that may one day be valuable for higher-end missions in a conflict environment.

For the United States and its partners, the challenge is arguably less in reconciling these views, or in seeking

to divine future PLA doctrinal shifts, than in trying to distinguish in practical terms which kinds of Chinese investments in the region could meaningfully be leveraged for higher-end military missions. Here we can draw two broad observations from this paper's review of Chinese capabilities and potential mission sets.

The first is that while there are ample reasons to be concerned about the prospect of China exerting coercive economic and political influence over small states in the IOR, many of its high profile investments and activities, such as those at port facilities, are not by themselves easily convertible into meaningful military advantages. U.S. government officials and independent analysts have made much of China's supposed "debt-trap diplomacy" in countries such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Some of this discourse seems to have been designed to prompt countries in the region to more carefully consider the potentially pernicious long-term economic, political, environmental, and social implications of accepting Chinese investment. But there has also been a more expansive rendering of the "debt-trap" argument, predicated on the idea that China's state-owned enterprises may lure countries into unsustainable debt loads, may then offer to exchange that debt for equity, and may then leverage that equity for access arrangements that provide a strategic benefit to the Chinese military.⁸⁵

In the abstract, the logic of debt-for-equity-for-access is compelling. In practice, though, there are reasons to be skeptical of its utility as a strategy to advantage the Chinese military in the IOR. Access arrangements that are grounded in economic coercion are unlikely to be politically stable or strategically reliable. In some countries, such as Sri Lanka, even commercial investments by Chinese state-owned enterprises and occasional ship visits by PLAN vessels have already proven to be politically fraught.

There is ample evidence to suggest that China leverages its investments, enterprises and shipping companies to supplement PLAN logistics in non-conflict environments.⁸⁶ And it is plausible that China could take advantage of coercive economic leverage over countries in the IOR to establish access arrangements, or at the very least to complicate U.S. or Indian security relationships with countries in the region.⁸⁷

But what the PLA would likely want in order to enable higher-end missions — e.g., a resilient, hardened logistics hub with prepositioned military supplies — would go far beyond a commercial venture or intermittent naval access, and would incur for China the kinds of reputational risks that come with effectively abjuring its longstanding discourse of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states.⁸⁸



The more [Gwadar] appeared to be a standalone Chinese military base on Pakistani soil, the more such an arrangement would present political risks in the form of projecting Pakistan as a Chinese client state.

China might choose to accept such risks in the IOR, even for modest returns, and indeed there may be contexts in which China pursues some variation of a debt-for-equity-for-access strategy. There have been reports in recent years of suspicious Chinese investments and construction projects in places such as Cambodia and the Solomon Islands.⁸⁹ That notwithstanding, both India's proximity and preponderant political influence in the Indian Ocean theater would likely make any Chinese coercive access arrangements there both more risky and less valuable than in the western Pacific.

A softer version of the debt-for-equity-for-access argument posits that China might leverage its economic investments in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to pave the way for military access arrangements at new locations such as the strategically located Gwadar port. This is plausible, though in practice the PLA already has deep and mutually-beneficial military ties with Pakistan which presumably include fulsome access to the naval shipyards in Karachi.⁹⁰ It is unclear whether overt military access to dedicated facilities at Gwadar would appreciably improve the PLA's resilience during a conflict, unless a PLA base there was built out with layered defense capabilities. The more it appeared to be a standalone Chinese military base on Pakistani soil, the more such an arrangement would present political risks in the form of projecting Pakistan as a Chinese client state.

The second observation is that, notwithstanding some skepticism about the military utility of China's commercial activities in the region, there *are* indeed investments that could foreshadow China's intention and capability to be able to operate high-end military missions of the kind that would be perceived as threatening to U.S. and Indian interests.

Most experts consider it inevitable that the PLAN will continue to increase its deployments to the IOR as its surface and subsurface fleets assigned to its Southern Theater Command grow in size and sophistication. Such deployments will likely continue to be publicly justified on the basis of non-combat activities, even as they provide capabilities that, at times, vastly overmatch the mission requirements for counterpiracy, noncombatant evacuation, and humanitarian assistance activities. This is true for most present-day deployments of the submarine fleet to the IOR; and the capability overmatch would be even more pronounced if, as analysts anticipate, the PLAN someday deploys at regular intervals a carrier strike group with a substantial air wing and wide-area tactical air control. Such deployments only make sense as efforts to build "soft power" influence in the region; establish platforms for more routine intelligence collection against state adversaries; exercise operational capabilities that would be valuable in higher-end missions; and position assets in the region that can be used for political signaling and coercive show of force operations as needed.⁹¹

Operating in a conflict environment in the IOR would also require the PLA to obtain more robust platforms for intelligence collection. This effort is presumably already underway in the form of efforts to map undersea features, but the Chinese military will face persistent disadvantages in maritime domain awareness against potential state adversaries, particularly around key choke points. Mitigating these disadvantages would likely require the regular, even if not persistent, use of long-range manned or unmanned maritime patrol aircraft. In the absence of permanent bases outside Djibouti, such aircraft could be operated occasionally from PLAN flattops in theater or from rotational access agreements that Beijing might strike with friendly countries, possibly in conjunction with MDA information-exchange arrangements.⁹² Such arrangements would be, from the vantage point of the PLAN, imperfect, intermittent, politically contingent,

and likely easily targeted from the Indian mainland, but would nonetheless signal a serious effort to build collection capabilities for higher-order missions.

More notable still as a signal of PLA intentions would be efforts to bolster resilience in the IOR. As noted above, Chinese personnel, equipment, and investment projects would at present be highly vulnerable to disruption in the event of a serious conflict.⁹³ The surest sign that the PLA is building capabilities for higher-end missions focused on potential state adversaries would be efforts to invest in specialized warehouses for prepositioning military equipment and ordnance, or construction and deployment of multiple afloat prepositioning vessels in theater; building or securing access to robust repair, resupply, and refueling facilities, including ones tailored for submarines; hardening existing facilities at Djibouti; establishing robust medical and mortuary services; deploying secure and redundant area-wide communications and command-and-control systems, perhaps with dedicated satellites; and investing in other capabilities that are primarily oriented toward force protection against state adversaries.⁹⁴ Most, if not all, of these kinds of investments would be visible, and difficult to establish under purely commercial cover. Some of these capabilities could be secured with some discretion at shared or dedicated facilities at Karachi or eventually Gwadar, but China would find it challenging to hide for long a military-grade logistics hub on foreign soil.⁹⁵

The broad conclusion of this paper is that there are ample reasons for the United States and India to be concerned about the growing Chinese presence in the IOR. Chinese investments are providing Beijing with new and sometimes troubling forms of economic and political leverage; China's political and military leadership have publicized formal requirements for the PLA to protect China's overseas interests; the military has stepped up its deployments in the region and will likely take advantage of some of its most advanced naval technologies for

far seas missions; and the PLA has gained a foothold at Djibouti that, even if it is not a template for future bases, signals an interest in investing in military logistics capabilities. As China pays more attention to the IOR and deploys more forces to the region, the likelihood of misperceptions is bound to increase, including the prospect that Chinese actions designed to defend narrow interests in its far seas are read as efforts to hold at risk American or Indian assets.⁹⁶

For that reason and others, this paper highlights the value of seeking to discern which kinds of Chinese investments are likely to be meaningful in enabling higher-order missions. Many of the investments that have spurred the most public hand-wringing, such as Chinese ownership or management of commercial ports, are politically troubling but are not easily convertible in the IOR into meaningful military advantages. Other Chinese capabilities and activities are inherently dual-use, and can be rationalized — if not fully justified — on the basis of non-combat missions.

The United States and its partners would, then, do well to focus their attention on the development of specific Chinese capabilities in the region that plainly overmatch the requirements of humanitarian and counterpiracy missions; on efforts to establish more persistent intelligence collection against state adversaries, particularly in the maritime domain; and on efforts to improve the resilience of China's fragile supply lines and logistics networks far from its home waters.

China may be many years away from having the ability to operate effectively against state adversaries in a conflict environment in the IOR. But its efforts to gradually build operational capabilities for higher-order missions are at least as important to the future stability of the region as its often haphazard portfolio of infrastructure investments, many of which are bound to generate questionable economic as well as strategic returns.

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