

## China's New "Pivots" in the Indian Ocean: Towards "String of Pearls" Strategy 2.0

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**Abstract :** China's port facility construction projects in the Indian Ocean (IO) region, Gwadar Port and Djibouti Port projects in particular, have led to a heated debate among both Chinese and Western strategists over whether the country has literally been carrying out its "string of pearls" strategy, an alleged Chinese plan to challenge America's military predominance in South Asia. Even though the Chinese government repeatedly denied the existence of such a strategy and highlighted the civilian/commercial nature of its port projects, it has significantly enhanced its strategic cooperation with littoral countries in the IO region since the "One Belt One Road" initiative was introduced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. Whether China does have a plan to expand its sphere of military influence westward concerns the balance of power in the IO region. If the answer is positive, the security environment there will be changed drastically. This paper argues that rather than simply copying the U.S. model of developing overseas military bases along the IO periphery, Beijing has been deliberating a more sophisticated plan for its physical presence there: creating a new set of "overseas strategic pivots." These "pivots," semi-military and semi-commercial in nature, are designed to help Beijing sustain its anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and serve as forward stations for the transportation of China's imported energy and merchandise. They can support the Chinese Navy's operations overseas but are not supposed to undertake face-to-face combat missions. This upgraded Chinese scheme can be identified as "string of pearls" strategy 2.0. Moreover, it is expected to help China deepen its roots in the IO region, implying that Beijing has to a large extent scratched its old diplomatic philosophy which highlighted the merits of non-interference and nonalignment. While a full-scale maritime confrontation between China and the U.S.-India security alliance is unlikely to be witnessed in the near future, an ambitious Chinese plan to step into the global maritime domain has been evidently shown.

**Keywords :** Chinese navy, Djibouti, Gwadar, Indian Ocean, string of pearls strategy

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