



BETWEEN SOFT POWER AND SEA POWER: CHINA'S NAVAL DIPLOMACY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

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Abstract

The increasing naval strength of China operating in the Indian Ocean is defining the new geopolitics of the maritime world and provoking a discussion over whether to focus on friendly diplomacy or strategic projection of power. This paper analyses the role of China, by integrating soft power with sea power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) through the use of naval diplomacy and how this is viewed by the regional states. The primary objective of this study is to examine the Chinese naval diplomacy tools like, port visits, joint exercises, humanitarian operations, anti-piracy operations, and their drivers and consequences in the wider maritime approach. This study is significant as it contributes to understand China behavior towards new maritime culture beyond hard power, particularly in a region that is crucial in global trade and security. This research based on Qualitative design relying on document analysis such as policy papers, official statements, deployments of the navy, and scholarly literature, followed by the use of a theoretical framework, integrating the soft power and the sea power perspectives. The findings of this study indicate that the purpose of Chinese naval diplomacy is twofold: to present itself as a responsible security actor and pursue long-term strategic and geopolitical interests in the Indian Ocean.

Keywords: Indian ocean, Naval Diplomacy, Soft power, Sea power, Geopolitics, China maritime culture

Introduction

The Indian Ocean has turned out to be one of the strategic regions in the contemporary world. It encompasses an area of approximately 73 million square kilometers connecting East Africa, South Asia, southeast Asia, and Middle East. The sea serves as an important transport route to conduct international trade, energy vessels, and maritime security (Cannon, 2024). According to global shipment statistics, over 80 percent of the global seaborne oil trade passes through the Indian Ocean, which is a lifeline to the energy-intensive nations like China, India, Japan and South Korea (Desilva- Ranasinghe, 2011). In addition to economic significance, the ocean bears enormous geopolitical burdens. It is the geographical proximity of its neighbors to major powers of the region and the rapidly developing economies and is a place of great-power politics and regional security concerns, which intersects. Strategic landscape in recent years has been transformed by the incursion of extra-regional powers, particularly China, who have been establishing navy strength, providing ports and naval diplomacy as a complete blueprint on how to expand their economic and security presence in the area.

The development of a blue-water navy has become the hallmark of Chinese foreign and security policy in the past two decades. China used to be a predominantly continental power with meager presence in the sea but currently constructs a fleet that could go long distances beyond its coast. This expansion is associated with its String of Pearls strategy. The term refers to the network of ports, trading stations, and commercial areas along the coast of the Indian



Ocean. The core objective is to defend the Chinese sea lines of communications (SLOCs), particularly those routes linking the Middle East and Africa to East Asia that are crucial both in imports of energy and trade. Naval diplomacy is the core of the Indian Ocean policy of China. It takes advantage of seafarers and travels to achieve strategic, economic, and political objectives without reliance on overt warfare. Naval diplomacy consists of both hard and soft power: sea power projection, port access, exercises, and humanitarian missions, training, and cooperation. The rationale behind the String of Pearls is two-fold: it allows China to ensure its trade and energy interests and gradually expanding its influence without facing regional or global forces directly. Incorporating naval presence in non-military and non-defense initiatives, China makes its expansion seem a non-violent form of development, which focuses more on collaboration and mutual advancement, particularly noting that it is not about competition.

To classical theory of sea power and Mahanian thought, these acts were interpreted as the domination of major seaway routes, as demonstrating the naval power and manipulating the regional equilibrium (Mahan, 1987). The growing fleet of destroyers, frigates, and amphibious vessels qualifies China to act anywhere within the Indian Ocean and remain in position to handle strategic and economic objectives. Simultaneously China employs soft power by positioning its actions as collaborative, humanitarian, and development-oriented. Joint exercises, capacity building and port agreements portray a responsible appearance as they strengthen bilateral relations. This combination of sea power and soft power allows China to adopt an aggressive, but digestible policy, which reduces the risk of stiff resistance.

The increasing role of China in the Indian Ocean is receiving mixed response among coastal states. Smaller nations like Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bangladesh have a tendency to support Chinese investment and naval relations. Their infrastructure works, aid and security assistance allow them to develop, enhance maritime security and minimize reliance on Western powers. The ports and Chinese-financed facilities enhance their economies and regional connectivity promoting an acceptance of Chinese interests by governments. By contrast, major powers such as India are suspicious of the presence of China. India perceives the String of Pearls and the Chinese deployments to be a weapon of strategic encirclements aiming at restricting the influence of Indians and jeopardizing its maritime leadership. To counter the influence of China, this has prompted India to modernize its own navy, enhance its allies, and participation in multilateral security fora like the Quad (India, USA, Japan, Australia) to help mitigate the exercise of power by China.

The study illuminates the manner in which an emerging power employs maritime strategy, naval diplomacy, and soft power to meet its objectives without resorting to open conflict. It also provides an understanding of the tricky combination of local perceptions, insecurities, and geopolitics struggles, revealing challenges and possibilities of the expanding presence of China in the Indian Ocean.

Research Questions

1. What are the key instruments of China's Naval diplomacy in the Indian Ocean?
2. How do Indian Ocean Littoral states perceive and respond to China's Naval diplomacy?
3. How does China integrate Sea Power and Soft Power through Naval diplomacy in Indian Ocean to achieve its strategic objectives?

Research Objectives

The main objectives of this study are

- To identify the key instruments of China's naval diplomacy in the Indian Ocean Region.
- To examine the perceptions and responses of Indian Ocean Littoral states towards China's naval diplomacy.



- To analyze the integration of sea power and soft power in china's naval diplomacy in the Indian ocean Region.
- To assess the strategic implications of china's naval diplomacy for regional maritime security in Indian Ocean.

Research Methodology

In this research, the qualitative research approach is chosen because it emphasizes the explanation of social phenomena in terms of meanings, interpretations, narratives, and contextual analysis instead of their measurement in numbers. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited to investigate any complex political and strategic processes in which perceptions, intentions, and discourses are of primary importance (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative methods have become common in international relations and the study of security to examine behavior of states, narratives of strategies, and even diplomacies (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). This methodology is well suited to the present study as the Chinese naval diplomacy in the Indian Ocean is non-material in nature; it touches upon legitimacy, perception, cooperation, and soft power which cannot be summarized using quantitative measures only.

The research utilizes explanatory and analytical research designs. Explanatory research aims to establish causal correlations and answer questions such as why and how certain phenomena take place (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019). It goes further and explains why things happen in a given pattern. Analytical is a systematic study involving analysis and interpretation of available information, documents and theories with the aim of testing relationships and obtaining conclusions (Kothari, 2004). It evaluates the existing sources critically rather than developing new primary data. The main data collection strategy is data triangulation. Triangulation involves utilizing more than one data source, approach, or view point to improve the validity and reliability of qualitative results (Patton, 1999). Reliance on one source may give way to bias or incompleteness in the field of security and strategic studies. Triangulation is important when the subject relates to controversial accounts and heightened maneuvers, as in the case of the China naval diplomacy. To analyze data, the study employs discourse analysis, a qualitative approach that looks at the way language creates meanings, power relations, and political reality (Fairclough, 1995). Discourse analysis is particularly useful within the field of international relations since the behavior of a state is frequently conformed and explained in the use of strategic narratives, official rhetoric, and policy language. It is usually used in foreign policy speeches, defense documents, and diplomatic communication (Milliken, 1999).

Significance

The study is theoretically, empirically, regionally, and academically important. It explores a crucial aspect of modern maritime politics that is gaining growing importance China naval diplomacy in the Indian Ocean. In theoretical terms, it adds to the body of literature regarding international relations and maritime security because it sees naval diplomacy as a combination of sea power and soft power. Current literature is inclined to study the maritime ascendancy of China primarily in a realist perspective, considering the role of hard power, naval capabilities, and politics of balance of power. Empirically, the study provides a detailed study on the Chinese naval operations, port interactions and diplomacy within the Indian Ocean region.

The systematic identification of the main tools of Chinese naval diplomacy and the study of its reaction to the development of the region will help to close a gap in the knowledge base that tends to interpret the development of ports in China, ship operations in its waters and humanitarian activities as phenomena. It describes the perception and reaction of Indian Ocean littoral states to the expanding naval presence of China, and emphasizes the variation in



accommodation, cooperation and strategic concern. In the case of South Asia and the wider Indian Ocean, the research enhances the comprehension of the impacts of Chinese naval diplomacy in shaping regional power politics and the relationship of the moves in the context of India and smaller coastal states.

China's Naval Diplomacy

Naval diplomacy is the art of using the naval power in peacetime in order to achieve foreign policy goals by signaling, engagement, reassurance and limited coercion but avoid armed conflict. Contrary to the classical naval war technology, it is not employed to cause kinetic harm, but to influence the political views of regions, form an alliance, and find a strategic entry point. In modern maritime politics, naval diplomacy serves as a regular duty and presence mission, port visit, joint operations, emergency relief operations and humanitarian aid (HADR), evacuation operations and participation in multilateral security structures. These operations enable states to exercise ability and dedication without compromising deniability and flexibility. Owing to the fact that maritime spaces now take a central role in global trade and energy flows, the notion of maritime diplomacy is emerging as a major force that can be employed in influencing the strategic environment, especially where formal alliances are weak or disputed (Till, 2018).

In the case of China, naval diplomacy has been developed to accompany its general maritime development and increasing reliance on sea lines of communication. The People Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) no longer remains a coast-protecting unit; it has evolved into a blue-water navy fleet, with the benefit of Beijing having the capacity to demonstrate naval diplomacy on a long-term basis, particularly within the Indian Ocean (Erickson and Goldstein, 2015). The strategy of China incorporates the naval involvement into a broader political-economic context, equating security cooperation with infrastructure development, trade, and development aid. Therefore, naval diplomacy is not an autonomous context but it can be viewed as a supplement to the overall foreign policy of China because it enables building stronger resilience in political relations and supports long-term access without compromising operational projection of military forces.

The most noticeable tool of Chinese naval diplomacy has been its sustained involvement in the anti-piracy efforts at the Gulf of Aden since 2008. Such operations provide Beijing with a legal and commonly agreed context to sustain a fixed naval presence well beyond its shores by interacting on a frequent basis with regional actors as well as extra-regional fleets. With escort operations, combined patrols, and coordination, China is able to present itself as a provider of maritime security and world-wide common goods. Simultaneously, the operations provide the PLAN with operational experience and familiarize it with its presence in the Indian Ocean, making it less politically sensitive to Chinese warships in the area.

One of the essential parts of the strategy of China is port visits and naval exchanges. Chinese naval vessels stop frequently at the South Asian, Middle East and East African ports. Such visits are usually accompanied by training, cultural activities and top-level diplomatic discussions. They also have both symbolic and functional purposes: they have to mark the intentions of goodwill and partnership and have to make host states familiar with the Chinese naval forces and processes. Through these interactions, formal defense-cooperation agreements have been established on logistics, replenishment and training over time. The presence of a long-term support structure in Djibouti is an example of the process of institutionalization of sustained naval diplomacy. On record being a logistics center focused on peace-keeping, anti-piracy and humanitarian support, the facility nonetheless gives China a more operational range

and capabilities in the western Indian Ocean. Another area of China based naval diplomacy is based on close relationships with major regional partners.

Maritime cooperation between Pakistan and China has become more established in joint exercises, submarine and surface-fleet engagement, training programs and port development in the context of auxiliary economic initiatives. A series of PLAN visits to Pakistani ports and combined exercises reflect an increasingly clear strategic convergence and ensure Chinese access in the key sea paths. The experience of port infrastructural participation in Sri Lanka by Chinese authorities, involvement in naval interactions as well as goodwill visits demonstrates how port naval participation can be integrated into brief relationships between diplomats. Even though these ports are officially commercial, periodic Chinese naval transit demonstrates dual-use possibilities that worry certain actors in the region. Analytically, Chinese naval diplomacy represents an intentional combination of soft power and material capability (Brewster, 2014).

Table:1 China Naval Diplomacy Projects in the Indian Ocean

Strategic Objective	Naval Diplomacy Instrument	Case Example (Indian Ocean)
Ensuring maritime security	Anti-piracy deployments	PLAN task forces in the Gulf of Aden (since 2008)
Signaling presence & deterrence	Submarine and surface ship port calls	PLAN submarine visit to Colombo (2014)
Strengthening partnerships	Joint naval exercises	China–Pakistan <i>Sea Guardians</i> exercises
Sustaining operational reach	Overseas naval support facility	Djibouti support base (2017)
Securing strategic access	Dual-use port engagement	Hambantota Port, Sri Lanka
Projecting soft power	Hospital ship diplomacy	<i>Peace Ark</i> visits to Indian Ocean states
Legitimizing forward presence	Non-combatant evacuation operations	Yemen evacuation (2015)

Note: The table summarizes China’s naval diplomacy in the Indian Ocean, highlighting the primary instruments and associated case examples aligned with strategic objectives.

Integration of Sea Power and Soft Power in China’s Naval Diplomacy

The Indian Ocean plays a pivotal role in the maritime strategy of China due to the fact that it supports the economic lifelines and the energy security of the nation. Over 80 percent of Chinese oil imports pass through the Strait of Malacca, a very small chokepoint that is susceptible. Meanwhile, militarization and tensions in the South China Sea have restricted the possibility of China to find trade routes along its shores, compelling it to find other ways of passing through the Indian Ocean. By spreading power throughout this area, China will be able to diversify their energy and trade avenues, reduce transit times and components of its business lifelines shall not be able to be destroyed by elements which is the way strategic necessity spurs it to be there (Kaplan, 2009; Brewster, 2017). Successful projection at the maritime level demands functional competence as well as normative influence. Sea power in the sense of the term used by Mahan denotes dominance over strategic waterways with their ability to use force when necessary and their ability to keep operating (Mahan, 1890). Soft power according to Nye allows a state to influence perceptions, create legitimacy and encourage cooperation without coercion (Nye, 2004). The Indian Ocean approach by China is a combination of these instruments: soft power justifies the presence whereas sea power gives it credibility and



sustainability. This assimilation enables China to project power beyond leveling an outright confrontation with dominant countries like India, the United States or Australia in the region. Soft power includes humanitarian interventions, technical assistance, training of officers and visit of ports. The hospital ship *Peace Ark* has conducted medical tours in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and the Maldives and Myanmar providing lifesaving healthcare services and demonstrating PLAN professionalism. Visits to Chittagong, Mongla, Colombo, Hambantota, male and Gwadar focus on disaster-response exercises and exchange of officers (Zhao, 2017). These operations establish confidence and make the Chinese presence normal and indicate to the littoral states that the PLAN is not an abusive force but a constructive ally. In smaller nations, like Mauritius and Seychelles, soft-power action has played a critical role in establishing China as a maritime-capacity-building companion, which authorizes access to ports and a sense of operational familiarity. Sea power complements such engagements through expansion in operational coverage and strategic flexibility. The PLAN anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden which have been going on since 2008 demonstrated sustained deployment capability, extensive range logistics and interaction with the international navies-imparting an image of credibility and intent to co-operate (Zhang, 2019). The Djibouti Logistics support facility further strengthens Chinese presence in direction and positioning their role in humanitarian and anti-piracy missions (Heginbotham et al., 2015). The Gwadar, Hambantota and Colombo ports are multifunctional; operationally geographically extending the scope of PLAN and increasing maritime familiarity, politically operating globally and regionally with their mutually beneficial and mutually advantageous framework which guarantees that hosts states and regional players comprehend the strategic value.

The analysis of littoral states reveals the functioning of this hybrid approach. Plan visits and training PLAN in Bangladesh are conducted alongside Indian and U.S. naval activities. Chinese crews cooperate and maintain discipline, which minimizes perceived threat and enables Bangladesh to perceive PLAN interaction as complementary and not confrontational (Brewster, 2017). In Sri Lanka, port visits to Colombo and Hambantota have created familiarity and trust through the repeated pattern, whereas there is latent operational capability through the introduction of dual-use infrastructure. Pakistan proves the strategic importance of integration: Gwadar port provides an access to operations, as well as commercial legitimacy, supported by the soft-power strategies, including exercises and the exchange of officers. Likewise, the Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles humanitarian operations are perceived to extend the influence of the Chinese through central Indian Ocean nodes, and reinforce the image of China as a responsible maritime partner. These cases demonstrate that the influence of China is not coercive, it is not symbolic, but rather calculated and balanced, that is, the management of perceptions and plausible working capacity. This strategy is reinforced by the cultural and operational standards of the PLAN. Fanatical precision combined with military drills, rigidity, and compliance with international standards make Chinese naval operations stand in contrast to less convincing regional powers. This professionalism reflects a sense of restraint and reliability in the midst of anti-piracy operations and joint exercises, which also enhances the performance of soft-power efforts. Combining competence and legitimacy helps China to make sure that humanitarian efforts, training activities, and port diplomacy are perceived as collaborative interaction in place of slim coercion (Roy, 2015).

Indian Ocean States Perception of and Response to Chinese Naval Diplomacy

The growing Chinese naval operations in the Indian Ocean have been met with mixed reactions by the other regional powers, based on their individual strategic interests, internal politics and alliance to other countries like India, the United States, and multilateral blocs like the Quad.

Some states stand more or less in relation to the initiatives of Beijing, others take a cautious or balancing stance, indicating concern about asymmetries in power and the sense of Chinese influence.

1. Pakistan

Pakistan reacts to Chinese naval diplomacy with tactical conformity and productive collaboration. Islamabad considers China as an economic collaborator and one of the main security players, establishing a dynamic that goes beyond defense relations to the sea. The foundation of this collaboration is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Gwadar Port is not only commercially and logistically useful but also gives latent naval support. Islamabad positions Chinese naval activity in the area as mutual assistance and common security, which fits its strategic calculus to the presence of China. This cooperation is reinforced by joint naval exercises, such as the series of Sea Guardians exercises; such exercises include coordinated operations, training interoperability and protracted sea operations, which reflect the confidence in the presence of PLAN in strategic waters (Orcasia, 2025).

The official foreign-policy rhetoric of Pakistan has glorified the role played by China in the Indian Ocean as stabilizing and favorable towards the development of the region. The Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office release statements that mention a full-fledged strategic partnership and the fact that China has been supporting defense modernization, maritime training and infrastructure development. This perspective places the idea on naval diplomacy of China as a valid counter to regional underlying power that India had, underpinning the long held view by Islamabad of India as a hostile regional power. Instead of hedging, Pakistan accepts Chinese naval operations, port calls, exercises, and capacity-building programs as win-win instead of win-lose. This is a great contrast to the risk apexes reactions of the other littoral states, highlighting the immensely strategic consistency between Islamabad and Beijing towards the Indian Ocean.

2. India

The response India is giving to the Chinese naval diplomacy is influenced by the perception that Indian ocean is its major strategic space- a zone where India has long held the desire to exercise and uphold security. The growing naval presence in Beijing, the warming of ports, and structural interconnections are viewed in New Delhi as a threat to the Indian regional dominance and strategic independence. Therefore, India integrates capacity building, strategic signaling, normative framing, and international collaboration in response. Official statements of the Indian government and its strategic evaluation repeatedly signal that there is a need to achieve maritime interests and avoid the dominance of the external powers in the Indian Ocean. The unofficial communications also emphasize that India wants to see a free, open and inclusive maritime order, which respects sovereignty and international law, and implicitly challenges the notion of unilateral influence. An example is the Ministry of External Affairs, which has shown interest in promoting maritime freedoms and dispute settlement in the South China Sea and which promotes broader fears and concerns over the aggressive actions of Chinese naval powers even into the Indian Ocean (Ujala, 2025).

The increasing presence and influence of China in the Indian Ocean has publicly been a matter of critical concern by parliamentary oversight and strategy reviews in India. In a report by a 2025 parliamentary committee, it was stated that the rising influence of China, particularly through naval support to Pakistan and dual-use infrastructure, is proving to be a significant challenge to Indian strategic interests and advised an increasingly assertive and versatile maritime stance (ABP Live, 2025). Through such official expression, the Chinese naval diplomacy is not portrayed as benign but a geostrategic challenge that needs proactive policy

solutions. India has increased its blue-water capabilities and has moved toward modernization in the navy. The Indian Navy has undergone modernization by investing in aircraft carrier, submarines, state of the art surveillance, and interoperable fleet capabilities that will help in the security of the key sea lines of communications that are considered to be necessary in the Indian trade and also energy imported (Bajpae & Jie, 2025). Defence Minister India has consistently affirmed that the great-power rivalry in the Indian Ocean is requiring greater intensity and needs the provision of robust naval presence, which can be used to deter the adversary as well as responding to the crisis (Reuters, 2025).

The Indian naval diplomacy relies on multilateral interaction with the aim of reinforcing supportive maritime security conventions. Current efforts like MALABAR exercises with the United States, Japan and Australia and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) which India has chaired enhance interoperability, institutionalizes maritime norms, and even provides alternative security frameworks. Major events such as the International Fleet Review, which attracts dozens of warships of the international fleet to the ports of China, can be viewed as a symbolic and functional response to the rising presence of China. Such moves show that India is willing to establish a maritime order of cooperation instead of the unilateral influence (Times of India, 2026).

India is also a promoter of security and development projects. India demonstrates its readiness to collaborate with neighbors on the issues of both maritime security and sustainable development and climate resilience, demonstrated by the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) framework and the Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions (MAHASAGAR) initiative. Although such efforts are neither directly directed to confront China, they offer a discourse of alliance that emphasizes participation rather than strategic rivalry. The perspective of India towards the Chinese naval diplomacy comprises of the deterrence, building partnership, normative leadership, and capability improvement. New Delhi has not engaged in binding military coalitions that might impinge on its strategic independence although it has enhanced collaboration with other countries, particularly under the Quad. India pursues its own interests by boosting its Indo-Pacific connections and increasing its naval presence in the region to ensure that no other force dominates the Indian Ocean and as a result endangers its own strategic interests.

3. Bangladesh

Bangladesh has been pragmatic in dealing with the naval diplomacy of China, focusing on engagement with maintaining strategic autonomy. Dhaka opens its doors to Chinese naval port visits and training packages, detailing visits to Chittagong and Mongla as capacity-building activities and not targeting a local force (Masud and Rahman, 2020). These activations provide familiarity in operational practice in PLAN to Bangladesh that is both made of logistics and anti-piracy practices and expands its naval capacity without overt strategic commitment. Diversified partnerships that help decrease reliance on one ally and enhance deterrence are indicated in the negotiation of defense procurements, such as Chinese fighter aircrafts and radars (Khan, 2015). China is described as a strategic partner by senior officials, and it is openly stated that the two countries must maintain a balanced relationship, which is dual-track diplomacy to maximize economic and defense advantages without sacrificing sovereignty.

4. Sri Lanka

The reaction in Sri Lanka has been more involved with tactical experience. The massive Chinese investment in infrastructure (mostly the Hambantota port lease) and the visits of the PLAN to ports and joint exercises indicate that China is immensely present in the region (Babar, 2023). These activities by Colombo are introduced in the media as goodwill missions

that foster cooperation and mutual benefit (The Citizen, 2025). Simultaneously, the Sri Lankan policymakers are focusing on procedural protection of the foreign naval access, such as the routine operating procedures when visiting a research vessel, to guard sovereignty and alleviate the view of militarization. Such a strategy will enable Sri Lanka to enjoy Chinese maritime and economic capital without losing diplomatic and strategic flexibility with India and other regional players (Abeyasinghe et al., 2024). Institutional control ascertains that decisions regarding the presence of foreign navies are within the confines of domestic authorities.

5. Maldives

The policy signals to China in the Maldives have been unstable with domestic political dynamics; a factor that underscores the susceptibility and positioning of the country in core sea lanes. Rhetoric under President Mohamed Muizzu became more accommodative to China, particularly in the areas of infrastructure development, maritime connectivity and security cooperation. The rationale behind this transition was less about ideological compatibility, than external financing and strategic leverage. Meanwhile, Maldivian leadership has always placed a lot of emphasis on close relations with India as India is viewed as the main responder among the Maldives, in the security, disaster relief and economic stabilization. Public utterances of such non-alignment and rejection of great-power rivalry are a hedged strategy: China is anti-allied to diversify external relationships and increase bargaining power, and reassurance to India contains necessary security and economic aid. This two-sided messaging indicates that Chinese naval diplomacy is tolerated insofar as it does not conflict with Maldivian autonomy and evokes Indian retaliation, emphasizing the Maldives attempts to stay out of the rivalry between regional powers (AP News, 2024).

6. Mauritius

Mauritius pursues a more institutionally based pattern of strategic diversification. Port Louis, being a small island state that has limited military but considerable economic interests, is open to Chinese economic participation and soft-power actions that will speed up the development and improve connectivity. Chinese maritime diplomacy, such as visiting ports, and maritime collaboration are perceived in this development story instead of framing them as a security alignment. Parallel to this, Mauritius considers strategic collaboration with India particularly in the area of maritime domain knowledge, coastal security, and local security management. The justification behind this posture is the historical relations, the relationships of the diaspora and the role of India as a security guarantor within the south-western Indian ocean. Official foreign-policy discourse persistently emphasizes the concepts of diversification and sovereignty, which indicates that Mauritius plans to derive economies and diplomatic advantages out of China without being overly reliant, as doing so would limit policy-making freedom and disrupt regional security balances. The Mauritian reaction is consequently the logical response to structural asymmetry: ties to China are functional and constrained, and are put in place to augment, rather than strain long-standing strategic ties (Reuters, 2025).

Conclusion

China's Naval Diplomacy in the Indian ocean demonstrates a carefully calibrated combination of operational sea power and normative soft power, allowing Beijing to project influence while framing its presence as cooperative and mutually beneficial. The importance of the Indian ocean also becomes clearer when viewed alongside tensions in the South China sea, where territorial disputes and increasing naval presence by the United States Navy and regional actors create uncertainty about the security of China's near sea trade routes. The responses of littoral states reveal both pragmatism and agency. Across the region, states demonstrate a nuanced understanding of opportunity and risk, accepting Chinese presence when it aligns with National



interests and autonomy. This interplay underscores how regional actors actively negotiate influence, shaping a complex landscape where power projection, diplomacy, and local agency coexist.

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