

Few reasons to fear China's 'pearls'

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Revelations that Pakistan has invited China to construct a naval base at the strategically located port of Gwadar have intensified anxieties about Beijing's Indian Ocean objectives.

For many observers, any militarisation of the Gwadar facility -- a predominantly Chinese-funded commercial port about 500km from the Strait of Hormuz -- would confirm deep-seated suspicions about Beijing's so-called "string of pearls" strategy.

According to proponents of this view, China is establishing ports throughout littoral South Asia as a smokescreen for intelligence gathering and as a precursor to more permanent basing arrangements. Many worry that ostensibly commercial ports in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Burma will eventually be transformed into fully-fledged naval facilities. Access to such bases would enable Beijing to project military power right across the Indian Ocean -- challenging US naval primacy, encircling India and threatening the sea lanes that transport about 25 per cent of the world's oil.

But there are many reasons to be sceptical about this hypothesis.

While Chinese state-owned corporations have bankrolled commercial "pearls" in South Asia, there's no evidence to suggest these have a military dimension. All are unfortified container ports designed to connect maritime supply chains to a growing network of continental roads, railways, pipelines and airfields. Most serve to link the land-locked provinces of southwestern China to the lucrative trade routes of the Indian Ocean.

Beijing's strategic interests to the west of Singapore appear more concerned with energy security than naval power. Since almost 80 per cent of its oil imports must traverse the Indian Ocean's vast and vulnerable waterways, China's main maritime objective is to secure its hydrocarbon lifeline. A string of South Asian shipping hubs shortens the voyage from the Persian Gulf to China and reduces Beijing's reliance on the Malacca Strait "chokepoint" -- dominated at both ends by US and Indian warships.

Of course, any deep-water port can also harbour warships. It is thus true that the maritime infrastructure under construction in South Asia will provide a series of useful footholds for naval vessels to rest, refuel and possibly refit.

Yet Beijing has no monopoly of access to these ports. Chinese warships on regional "friendship missions" or anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden will certainly make use of the Indian Ocean

pitstops; so, too, will the region's other maritime powers. What's more, the notion that these "pearls" could one day become robust naval bases seems farfetched.

Transforming "soft" commercial ports into "hard" naval bases is no simple task. To militarise the Indian Ocean facilities, Beijing would require local air defence capabilities, munitions storage units, mine-clearing assets and a permanent military footprint. These costly renovations would probably exceed the technical, logistical and expeditionary capabilities of the Chinese military for a decade or more.

Such bases would also be extremely vulnerable to attack. While the Indian Ocean is littered with US and Indian forces -- super-carrier strike groups, nuclear submarines, sophisticated warships and pre-positioned airpower -- China's strategic presence is relatively insignificant. Beijing has little experience projecting military power abroad.

Its blue-water fleet remains a work in progress. Its ability to sustain far-flung naval bases would be handicapped by distance and its military's cumbersome internal command structure. This means that Beijing would find it almost impossible to defend any future "string of pearls" in the (unlikely) event of a shooting war with the US or India. While bases would offer useful strategic reach in peacetime, their viability during a conflict would be far from assured.

What, then, would be the strategic logic behind building these bases in the first place? Many speculate that China's main objective is to offset the vulnerability of its energy supply-lines by acquiring the capacity to threaten the sea lanes of adversaries. However, while the Indian Ocean power balance remains tilted in favour of an Indo-US partnership, Beijing would be hard-pressed to sever trade routes on the high seas.

Indeed, Washington appears to hold the trump card as far as naval blockades are concerned. Situated at the heart of the Persian Gulf, the US Navy's Fifth Fleet is better placed than any other player to regulate the flow of Middle Eastern oil. As long as Chinese policymakers are unable to alter this reality, they're likely to think twice about militarising any "pearls".

None of this is to say that all is well in the Indian Ocean. As China and India continue to rise amid an overall climate of strategic mistrust, maintaining the security of international sea lanes will be an increasingly important diplomatic endeavour. This will require greater confidence and compromise on all sides. To allay suspicions and stop us jumping at shadows, Beijing will need to be more transparent on its Indian Ocean objectives.

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