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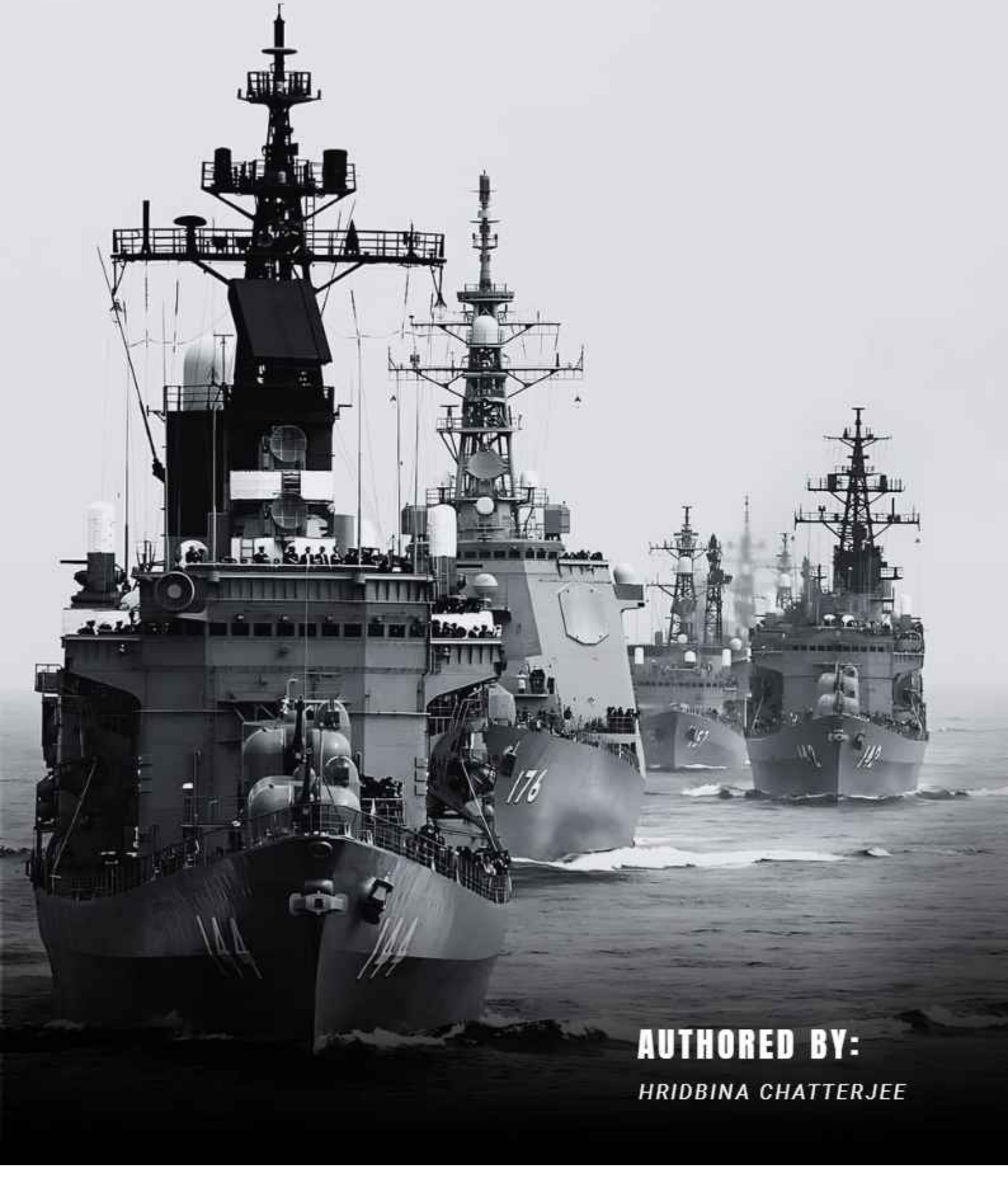
THE MARITIME CHOKEPOINT CALCULUS: NAVIGATING CHINA'S FOOTPRINT IN THE EASTERN INDIAN OCEAN



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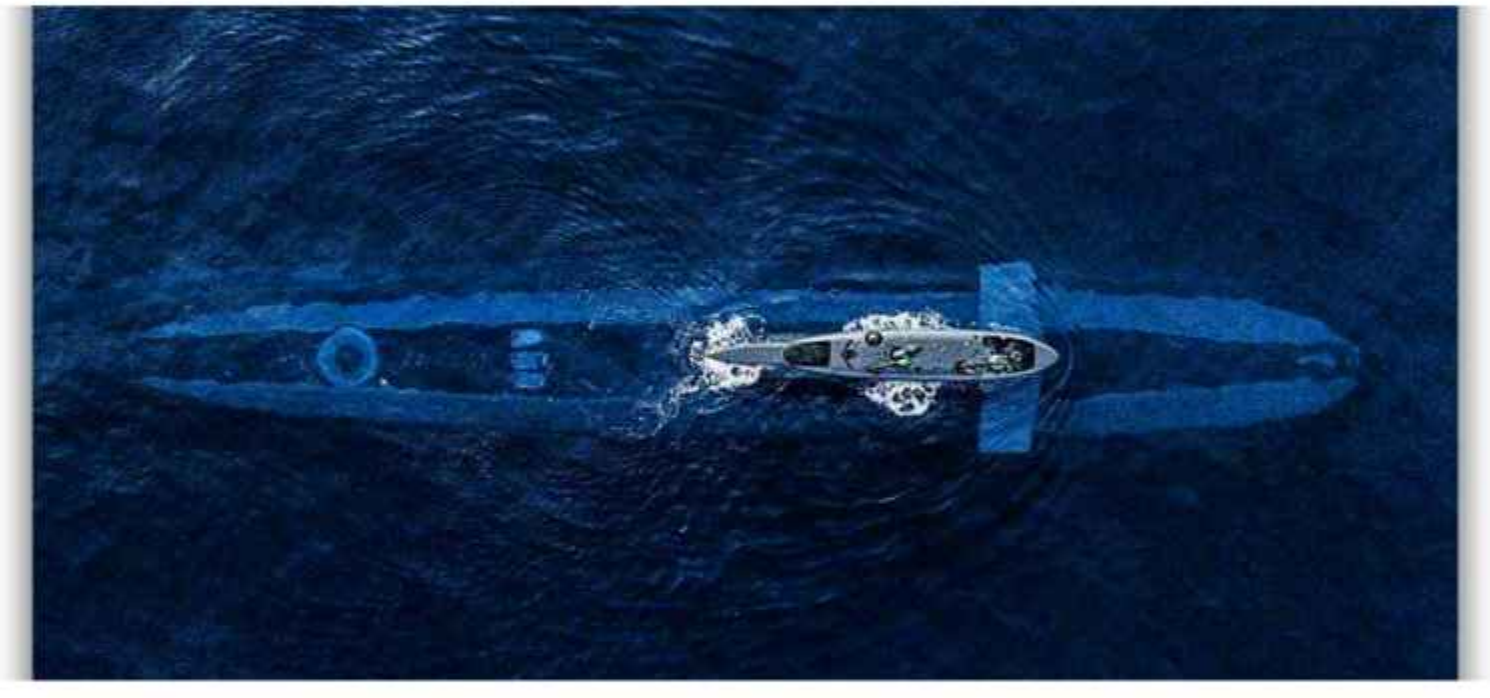
The Bay of Bengal and the wider eastern Indian Ocean have historically served as the geostrategic backyard of the Indian subcontinent, a maritime theater where New Delhi has comfortably exercised its influence as the undisputed net security provider. However, the contemporary maritime landscape is undergoing a profound structural transformation. The eastern Indian Ocean is no longer a tranquil maritime expanse; it has emerged as the primary locus of Sino-Indian geopolitical friction. Driven by the imperative to secure vital sea lines of communication and mitigate its longstanding "Malacca Dilemma," the People's Republic of China has systematically accelerated its operational footprint across this region. This strategic encroachment is not merely a projection of distant naval power but a calculated penetration into India's immediate neighborhood, fundamentally altering the maritime chokepoint calculus. The presence of the People's Liberation Army Navy and state-affiliated dual-use assets in the Bay of Bengal represents a sophisticated strategy of incremental expansion, designed to normalize Beijing's presence in waters that are critical to India's national security architecture and its broader Indo-Pacific aspirations.

For decades, the strategic consensus assumed that geographic distance and the inherent logistical hurdles of operating far from the Chinese mainland would naturally constrain naval ambitions in the Indian Ocean Region. This assumption has been systematically dismantled. Beijing has adopted a multi-domain approach that seamlessly blends economic statecraft, infrastructure development, and asymmetric naval operations to project power. By focusing intensely on the eastern Indian Ocean, China seeks to control the critical approaches to the Strait of Malacca, the Sunda Strait, and the Lombok Strait—the very arteries that sustain its energy imports and export-driven economy. Consequently, India finds its strategic autonomy challenged in its home waters, necessitating an urgent re-evaluation of its defensive maritime doctrines and regional diplomatic engagements.

CIVIL-MILITARY FUSION AND THE WEAPONIZATION OF OCEANOGRAPHY

China has placed significant reliance on the deployment of research and survey vessels that are used for seemingly civilian purposes, thus acting at the forefront of its maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean. Vessels assigned specific types have started appearing in the regions around the Indian peninsula. A number of Chinese research vessels in operation across the globe have shown traits that are suggestive of Beijing's military-civil fusion principle. These studies are a blatant example of dual-use since the vessels not only perform scientific research (such as marine mapping, exploration of energy resources, and studies on climate), but also are gathering hydrological, bathymetric, and acoustic data, which is otherwise quite important in the course of conducting modern submarine fighting.



The Bay of Bengal features a set of hydrological traits that are defined by temperature gradients, large changes in salinity due to influx of river waters, and complex bottom topographies. Thus, mapping these parameters becomes very important for achieving Underwater Domain Awareness. To operate without detection in these waters, submarine fleets must rely on accurate data about temperature layers, blind sonar spots, and sound propagation. The mapping of deep channels and recording of oceanic eddies allow these survey ships to make a valuable contribution towards the preparation for future battles. Continuous monitoring of these ships' deployments shows a pattern of using special vessels equipped with autonomous underwater gliders and sonar systems to conduct deep ocean surveys. This technique of gray-zone warfare allows China to gather valuable military information while remaining under the protective umbrella of international maritime regulations and make use of free access to waters of the Bay of Bengal while conducting reconnaissance of Indian Navy defenses.

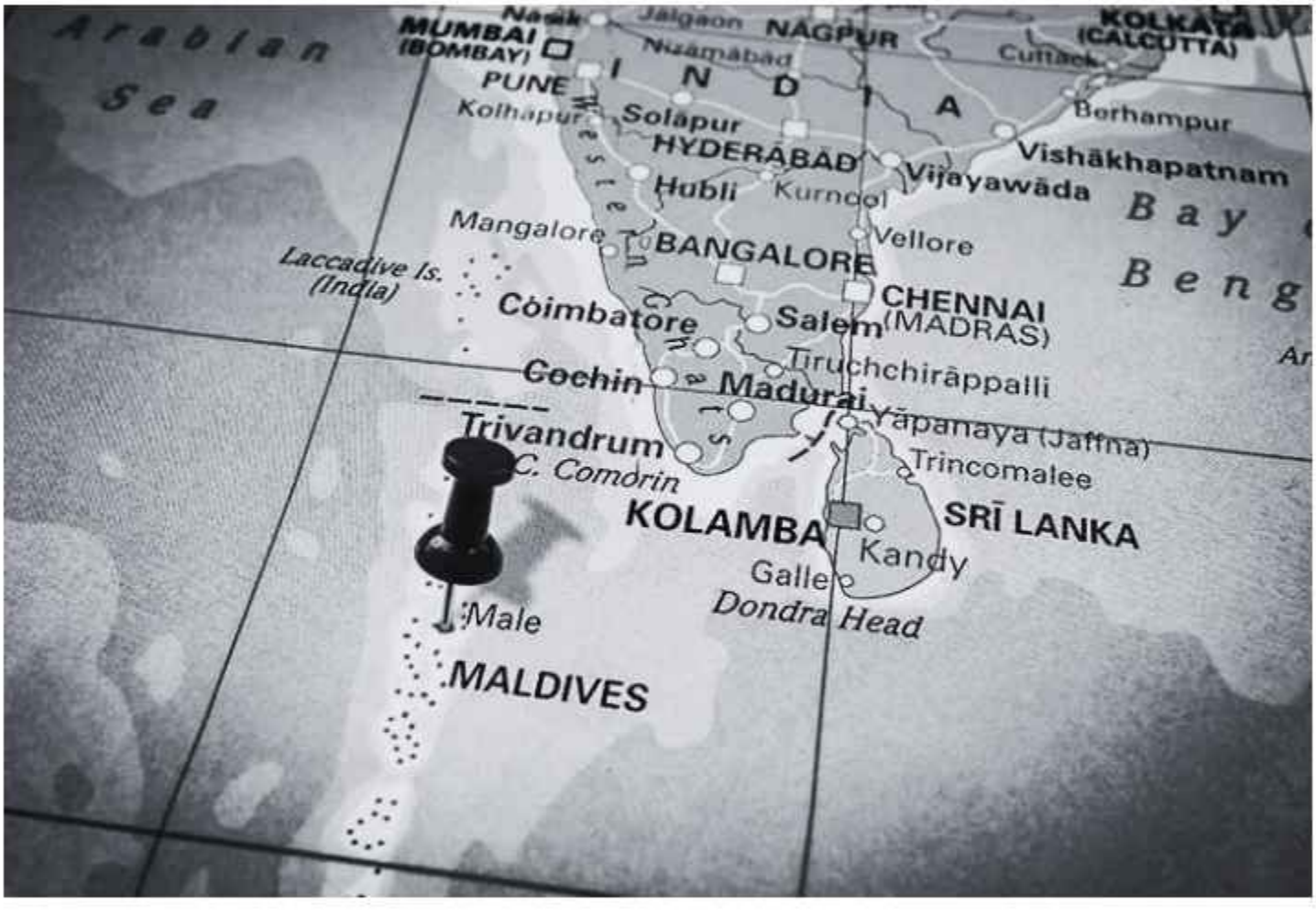
PORT INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE KYAUKPHYU STRATEGIC BYPASS

Supporting this offshore surveillance architecture is the continuing effort of China to create logistics centers on land at the periphery of the Bay of Bengal. The core of this land strategy is the Kyaukphyu Deep-Sea Port in Rakhine State, Myanmar, where it serves as a key part of the transcontinental economic corridor technology. Kyaukphyu provides China with an exceptional geographical opportunity—ground-based access to the Indian Ocean, which avoids the heavily loaded and highly threatened Strait of Malacca entirely. The scope of the port's advantages is greater than just shipping goods and mass delivery of oil for pipelines connecting to China. It enables the establishment of an enormous infrastructure necessary for keeping on the ocean in the vulnerable Indian region.

The development of deep-water berths at Kyaukphyu raises significant concerns regarding eventual dual-use militarization, a pattern observed in other international infrastructure projects. Should rotational access, replenishment rights, or technical support facilities be secured at this location, it would dramatically compress the response time available to the Indian Navy during a geopolitical crisis. The port's proximity to major naval commands and strategic missile testing ranges creates a permanent security vulnerability. Furthermore, continuous diplomatic and economic engagement ensures that the neighboring state remains tightly locked into external security orbits. This bilateral dynamic complicates broader regional policies and creates a formidable institutional barrier to seamless integration, physically anchoring foreign maritime influence in the heart of the eastern Indian Ocean.

THE ISLAND STATE PIVOT: SRI LANKA, THE MALDIVES, AND DIPLOMATIC HEDGING

The shifting security architecture of the region is perhaps best illustrated with the example of the island states that find themselves in a precarious position because of their location along the key maritime routes, thus serving as a backdrop for high-stakes geopolitical power struggles. Aware of the implications of the underwater mapping, India has been using its diplomatic and economic power to stop these operations. Such efforts have led to success when near neighbours—who are suffering from the economic crisis—declared a ban on foreign research vessels from coming into their EEZ, temporarily prohibiting exploration ships from patrolling the waters and proving that the countries still retain the ability to guard their geopolitical borders.



However, the limitations of diplomatic influence become apparent due to changing political developments. Sometimes, after changes in the domestic regime, island states have partnered with another nation, ignoring serious security predicaments, thereby allowing port visits for the rotation and replenishment of troops. This acceptance highlights a global and disturbing phenomenon for strategists as small coastal nations are becoming more inclined to use foreign nationals for the purpose of neutralizing established hegemony in the region. This tactic of diplomacy ensures that navies of opposing forces remain operational. As these island states oscillate between major powers, traditional concepts of exclusive spheres of influence are systemically dismantled, requiring a fundamental recalibration of regional foreign policies.

INDIA'S COUNTER-CALCULUS: THE ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR SENTINEL

The growing presence of India on the global stage has prompted the nation to shift its strategic perspective, with the Andaman and Nicobar Islands becoming the nation's most important defense line against maritime moves. Once seen only as distant and undeveloped locations, this archipelago is now being called a vital unsinkable aircraft carrier, guarding the western entry to important straits. The Regionally based tri-service theater command has recently been subject to major modernization efforts. The strategic, military, and infrastructural development of these islands is absolutely central to broader power projection capabilities across the Indo-Pacific.

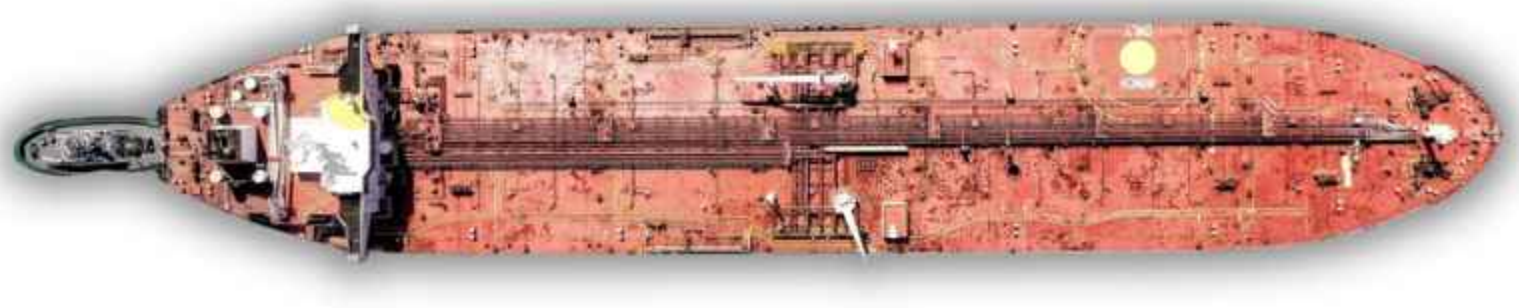
New Delhi is systematically expanding military infrastructure across the entire island chain, including extending runways to accommodate heavy maritime reconnaissance aircraft alongside advanced fighter squadrons. This infrastructure transformation enables the military to maintain persistent, long-range aerial surveillance over heavily trafficked maritime channels. By establishing a robust, interconnected web of coastal radar networks and forward-deploying anti-submarine warfare assets, planners are striving to deny uncontested access to regional waters. The overarching operational objective is to transition from a reactive strategy of mere sea denial to one of active, forward-leaning sea control, ensuring that any foreign naval or dual-use asset entering the eastern Indian Ocean is immediately tracked, continuously monitored, and strategically contained.

THE ROAD AHEAD: ADVANCING UNDERWATER DOMAIN AWARENESS AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Despite the recent, fast development of crucial island chains, counter maritime strategies must urgently tackle problems with underwater domain awareness, which still exist. While there has been great improvement in surface surveillance enabled by modern information fusion centers, it is still very complicated to trace silent submarines in deep water depending on the latest technology. In order to fulfill the task of a great intelligence gathering that foreign marine exploration vessels are currently conducting, regional navies must immediately purchase and implement new seabed acoustic sensor grids, drone underwater vehicles, and the latest towed-array sonars. The struggle for power in the eastern Indian Ocean is turning into a battle that is taking place under the water, which makes underwater detection crucial for naval supremacy.

Furthermore, the sheer scale and economic momentum of external maritime expansion necessitate that historical reluctance toward deep, formalized strategic alignments be abandoned. Securing the Bay of Bengal requires comprehensive intelligence sharing and tactical interoperability with like-minded maritime democracies. Multilateral security frameworks provide vital institutional mechanisms for pooling maritime domain awareness data and coordinating patrols. Collaborative initiatives act as essential force multipliers, offering unclassified satellite tracking of dark shipping and dual-use vessels that attempt to operate undetected.

By synchronizing regional efforts with the strategic presence of international partners—a layered, highly responsive multinational maritime defense architecture can be constructed. The maritime chokepoint calculus in the eastern Indian Ocean has irrevocably shifted. The seamless integration of civilian research with military intelligence gathering, coupled with the aggressive pursuit of regional port access, constitutes a direct, structural challenge to regional security stability. Navigating this complex, expanding footprint demands more than reactive diplomacy; it requires continuous naval modernization, the rapid acquisition of subsurface surveillance technologies, and the ruthless execution of an integrated maritime strategy.



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