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THE GEOECONOMIC CHOKEPOINT: WEAPONIZED INTERDEPENDENCE, PORT INFRASTRUCTURE, AND INDIA'S ASYMMETRIC MARITIME RESPONSE (2020-2026)

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Abstract

Through the lenses of the maritime-infrastructure nexus and geoeconomic competition in the Indo-Pacific from 2020 to 2026, this article conducts a qualitative case study and policy analysis to examine the development of the geopolitical rivalry between China and India. The study uses the theoretical lens of "weaponized interdependence" to examine how commercial maritime infrastructure, supply chain corridors, and logistics tracking software have evolved into tools of state coercion and strategic leverage, going beyond conventional naval power comparisons. It analyzes India's asymmetric counter-strategy and breaks down China's "Strategic Strongpoints" throughout the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

According to the study, New Delhi uses macro-diplomatic frameworks such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) in conjunction with state-backed private capital accumulation to create rival port hubs. The Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) is given particular attention, demonstrating how open-source intelligence (OSINT), AI-driven satellite monitoring, and data-sharing networks are essential defenses against maritime asymmetry. The study concludes by bridging these tangible realities with the politics of perception by examining how maritime maneuvers and satellite tracking data contribute to hostile domestic information ecosystems and "visual warfare." The study comes to the conclusion that the maritime-economic sector has emerged as the defining boundary of the Asian "Cold Peace," where the balance of power is determined by control over international trade and information flows.

Keywords: Weaponized Interdependence, Geoeconomic Competition, India-China Rivalry, Strategic Strongpoints, Asymmetric Counter-Strategy, Maritime Domain Awareness, and Visual Warfare.

I.Introduction & Theoretical Grounding

A.The Maritime-Economic Nexus

One of the most strategically significant geopolitical arenas of the twenty-first century is the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The IOR, which stretches from the eastern coast of Africa to the western Pacific, serves as both the global economy's circulatory system and a marine area. The Straits of Malacca, Lombok, Sunda, Hormuz, and Bab-el-Mandeb are some of the most important Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) in the world. These SLOCs facilitate the unprecedented flow of energy supplies, containerized trade, digital communication cables, and strategic commodities. It is impossible to comprehend current geopolitical rivalry in Asia without acknowledging the importance of these maritime routes to national security, global capitalism, and the projection of state power.The Indian Ocean is essential to both developed industrial economies and rising nations, as over one-third of the world's maritime trade and around two-thirds of its oil exports pass across it annually,following the post-Cold War acceleration of globalization and the incorporation of Asian manufacturing hubs into global supply chains, the strategic significance of these routes has grown dramatically. In this regard, marine infrastructure has developed into a crucial tool of geopolitical leverage, including ports, logistical terminals, underwater fiber-optic cables, naval bases, and industrial corridors. Increasingly, control over marine connectivity translates into power over digital surveillance, energy security, trade governance, and geopolitical coercion.

The IOR is both a critical structural vulnerability and a strategic requirement for the People's Republic of China (PRC). Nearly 80% of China's imported oil has historically passed via the Strait of Malacca, which is crucial to the country's export-driven economic model. Hu Jintao, the former president of China, memorably described this reliance as the "Malacca Dilemma," alluding to the concern that adversarial nations, especially the US or its regional allies, would obstruct or interfere with Chinese trade during times of geopolitical unrest. Therefore, the need to guarantee overseas logistical access, diversify trade channels, and lessen vulnerability to external interdiction has been the driving force behind China's maritime strategy since the early 2000s.China's extensive maritime outreach under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly its Maritime Silk Road component, was made possible by this strategic worry. China has attempted to create an integrated network of dual-use logistical facilities by making significant investments in commercial port infrastructure around the IOR, including Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, and Port Sudan. These ports, which are officially presented as commercial development initiatives meant to improve connectivity and regional prosperity, also give Beijing strategic footholds that can assist long-term power projection, information collection, and navy resupply. Combining commercial and strategic goals is part of a larger Chinese strategy where security policy and economic statecraft work together rather than independently.

However, India views the Indian Ocean as its natural domain of geopolitical influence rather than a far-off commercial frontier. Due to its peninsular location, India has a dominating center position in the IOR and can see important shipping lanes that stretch from the Persian Gulf to Southeast Asia. The Indian Ocean has long been seen by Indian strategists as crucial to economic survival, regional stability, and national security. Maritime transportation accounts for over 80% of India's energy imports and 90% of its trade by volume. As a result, New Delhi views any attempt by an outside force to militarize or control the IOR as a direct challenge to India's regional dominance and strategic autonomy.The old naval rivalry gave way to a multifaceted struggle for infrastructure, connection, and systemic influence between 2020 and 2026 in the maritime-economic nexus. An important turning point in bilateral relations was the brutal conflict between Chinese and Indian soldiers in the Galwan Valley in June 2020, which accelerated strategic mistrust in all

areas. As China increased its commercial and naval presence in the Indian Ocean and India strengthened security ties with similar-minded nations including the United States, Japan, Australia, and France, maritime competition grew more intense. Ports, supply chains, digital infrastructure, and logistics networks all saw a rise in securitization during this time. Commercial infrastructure was no longer seen as politically neutral; instead, it was integrated into larger frameworks of coercive statecraft and geopolitical rivalry.

India had serious fears about encirclement and strategic penetration as a result of China's acquisition of strategically placed port infrastructure, which is frequently explained by the "String of Pearls" thesis. Chinese-controlled or Chinese-financed ports are increasingly seen by Indian authorities as possible military entry points that may limit India's operational flexibility in the Indian Ocean, despite Beijing's rejection of such interpretations. Through programs like SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, and increased participation within the Quad framework, India simultaneously attempted to offset Chinese influence. These programs demonstrated India's attempt to create a different regional order built on strategic alliances, robust supply networks, and cooperative security.The changing competition also brought attention to how economic interdependence is changing. Traditional liberal theories traditionally believed that by fostering mutual dependency, trade and connection would lessen the probability of conflict. Interdependence, however, can also be a source of coercive leverage, as modern geopolitical realities show. Strong states looking to gain a geopolitical edge might use control of infrastructure, reliance on technology, financial debt, and logistical centrality as weapons. This shift calls for a more complex theoretical framework that can explain the simultaneous coexistence of globalization and strategic competition.

B. Theoretical Framework: Weaponized Interdependence and Neoclassical Realism

This study integrates Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman's idea of Weaponized Interdependence with the framework of Neoclassical Realism to understand these developments. By focusing on how states react to changes in relative power within the international system, neoclassical realism offers a structural explanation for state behavior. Neoclassical realism acknowledges that systemic influences are filtered by domestic political institutions, elite perceptions, strategic culture, and state capability, in contrast to classical structural realism. Therefore, decision-makers' perceptions of possibilities and challenges in the global environment influence a state's foreign policy in addition to material might.Neoclassical realism provides an explanation for why both China and India view the Indian Ocean as a crucial area of strategic rivalry. India's sense of encirclement motivates balancing conduct through military modernization and strategic alliances, while China's expanding economic and military might encourages outward maritime development. Each state's operationalization of its marine policy is further influenced by nationalism, domestic political narratives, bureaucratic interests, and economic concerns.

However, the modern importance of international logistical networks and commercial infrastructure cannot be adequately explained by realism alone. The geopolitical ramifications of globalization and network centrality are frequently overlooked by traditional realist paradigms, which place a higher priority on military prowess and territory control. This analytical restriction is addressed by the notion of Weaponized Interdependence, which contends that global networks financial, digital, logistical, or infrastructural—are not distributed equally. Rather, they typically grow around extremely centralized centers under the leadership of strong businesses or states.Dominant states gain structural advantages that can be used as tools of coercion. The Panopticon Effect and the Choke Point Effect are the two main ways that such power functions, according to Farrell and Newman. The ability of central hub governments to track and map network traffic is known as the "Panopticon Effect." This could involve following cargo movements,

gathering logistical intelligence, keeping an eye on shipping patterns, or surveilling underwater communication equipment in the maritime sector. China has more insight into regional commercial flows and strategic action throughout the IOR thanks to its growing control over port facilities and digital marine systems.

In contrast, the ability of a hub state to limit or cut off access to crucial nodes within the network is known as the "Choke Point Effect." By interfering with trade routes, preventing logistical access, or regulating supply chains, states in charge of vital infrastructure can impose significant operational and financial costs on adversaries during times of crisis. In addition to their commercial value, ports like Gwadar, Hambantota, and Djibouti are strategically significant because of their capacity to act as geopolitical leverage points in the larger framework of global connectedness.

This paper illustrates how China has turned commercial connectedness into a type of structural state power by incorporating weaponized interdependence into a neoclassical realist framework. It also outlines India's changing counter-strategy, which incorporates digital counter-intelligence tools, domestic infrastructure development, mini-lateral alliances, and naval modernization. The outcome is a fundamental struggle over the future architecture of Asian connectivity, regional order, and global marine governance rather than just a naval rivalry.

II. The Architecture of Chinese Maritime Leverage

A. The Geoeconomics of Commercial Port Acquisition

Geoeconomics the application of economic tools to accomplish long-term strategic and geopolitical goals is at the core of the People's Republic of China's current maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). China's strategy functions through commercial penetration, infrastructure funding, logistical integration, and technology dependency, in contrast to conventional imperial naval expansion, which mostly depended on overt military conquest and official colonial territories. The creation of what Chinese strategists frequently refer to as "Strategic Strongpoints," a network of commercially linked marine nodes across the Indo-Pacific and the western Indian Ocean, is the most obvious example of this approach.

These advantages are not haphazard business endeavors motivated only by market reasoning. Instead, they are a part of the Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) carefully built strategic architecture, especially its Maritime Silk Road component. The ports serve as latent military support facilities, commercial entry points, logistical hubs, and locations for gathering intelligence. Their strategic importance stems not just from the money they make from shipping, but also from their location close to important chokepoints that control the flow of energy and international trade.A wider shift in global power politics is reflected in the reasoning behind China's port acquisition. Infrastructure is becoming a source of geopolitical power in a time of hyper-globalization. These days, ports, railroads, fiber-optic cables, industrial parks, and logistical corridors serve more than just economic purposes; they also determine whether states have the ability to influence supply chains, shape trade patterns, and project power beyond their borders. Therefore, China's port diplomacy is an effort to both lessen its strategic vulnerabilities and institutionalize long-term structural influence throughout the IOR..

The port of Gwadar in Pakistan is the most notable example of this design. Gwadar is one of the world's most strategically significant places, adjacent to the Strait of Hormuz and the mouth of the Persian Gulf. It is the marine end of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a major BRI project that uses pipelines, railroads, roadways, and industrial infrastructure to link western China with the Arabian Sea. Due to

minimal local industrial activity, security concerns in Balochistan, and insufficient regional integration, Gwadar has had difficulty generating significant economic returns. But its strategic significance goes beyond short-term financial gain Gwadar provides Beijing with a viable alternate energy corridor that avoids the Strait of Malacca, so mitigating the "Malacca Dilemma" to some extent. Additionally, it increases Beijing's ability to keep an eye on marine activity in the Arabian Sea and gives China access to the Gulf's energy-producing regions. However, Gwadar represents the combination of Sino-Pakistani strategic cooperation aimed at undermining Indian interests. Concerns about military encirclement and the long-term militarization of Pakistan's coastline are raised by the presence of Chinese personnel, surveillance infrastructure, and possible PLAN access.

In a similar vein, another important hub in China's marine network is the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka. Hambantota holds a very favorable position in the Indian Ocean commercial system, being only a few nautical miles from the major East-West shipping lanes that connect Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. The port was eventually leased to China Merchants Port Holdings for ninety-nine years due to Sri Lanka's incapacity to repay large-scale Chinese debts; this conclusion is commonly seen as an example of debt-leverage diplomacy. The Hambantota case shows how financial dependence can lead to long-term strategic concessions, even while China opposes the "debt-trap diplomacy" narrative. At first, there was little commercial traffic at the port, which raised concerns about the investment's economic justification. However, from a geopolitical standpoint, Hambantota gives Beijing a long-term logistics base near the southern coast of India. Because it showed how commercial funding may result in long-term strategic access within India's immediate vicinity, the arrangement's symbolic importance greatly frightened Indian leaders.

China's military logistics center in Djibouti, located further west, serves as an example of how China's overseas presence has changed over time, moving from mainly commercial infrastructure to explicit military support capabilities. The Djibouti facility is located in a crucial area that connects the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the Suez Canal, close to the Doraleh Multipurpose Port and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. For trade between Asia and Europe, this chokepoint is essential. Despite being officially designated as a support facility for peacekeeping and anti-piracy activities, the camp is China's first permanent military installation abroad.Djibouti has enormous strategic value. It makes it possible for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to support evacuation missions during regional emergencies, carry out replenishment operations, maintain long-term deployments distant from Chinese ports, and safeguard Chinese commercial interests in Africa and the Middle East. More significantly, it illustrates Beijing's shift from a maritime-limited continental power to a blue-water naval force that can exert influence throughout the Indian Ocean and beyond from the western Pacific to East Africa, Gwadar, Hambantota, Djibouti, Kyaukpyu, and other Chinese-affiliated naval facilities come together to form an interconnected matrix of influence. China's capacity to monitor maritime activity, secure trade routes, and possibly limit hostile naval activities is all improved by this network. The overall impact on India is comparable to a slow, planned encirclement of the country. As a result, infrastructure control is becoming more important in the IOR's maritime competitiveness than just naval fleet numbers.

B. The Dual-Use Pipeline

China's Strategic Strongpoints are distinguished by their inbuilt "dual-use" functionality, which allows for the quick adaptation of allegedly civilian infrastructure for military use. This tactic is part of the larger Military-Civil Fusion (军民融合) philosophy, which is a state-directed policy that aims to do away with the divide between military operational requirements and civilian commercial capabilities. This paradigm

integrates China's national security apparatus with commercial firms, infrastructure projects, technical platforms, and logistical systems.

Military-Civil Fusion is important because it gives China strategic flexibility without the political fallout that comes with overt militarization. China builds economic infrastructure that can covertly support military operations during emergencies rather than building massive overseas military outposts like those of the United States. Beijing is able to preserve plausible deniability about its long-term strategic aims because of this strategy, which also lessens host-state worries and diplomatic resistance;evidence of this dual-use pipeline became more apparent between 2020 and 2026. Ports run by Chinese state-affiliated companies, such as COSCO Shipping and China Merchants Port Holdings, were always built with standards that went above and beyond standard business needs. Planning that went beyond the requirements of civilian trade was suggested by deep-draft docks that could hold big destroyers and aircraft carriers, enormous fuel storage facilities, reinforced docking platforms, heavy-load cranes, and advanced communications systems because current naval operations mainly rely on overseas logistical support, these infrastructure aspects are very important. Refueling, maintenance, replenishment, crew rotation, and intelligence coordination are all necessary for long-term maritime operations. Without openly announcing military outposts, China successfully establishes a distributed support ecosystem for the PLAN by integrating these capabilities into commercial ports. In order to gradually normalize a continuous Chinese maritime presence throughout the IOR, this model permits Chinese naval boats to access commercial infrastructure during port visits, anti-piracy operations, humanitarian missions, or cooperative exercises.

The dual-use pipeline improves China's capacity to acquire intelligence. Sensitive data on shipping manifests, cargo movements, vessel timetables, customs records, and maritime traffic trends is accessible to commercial port operators. Because it makes it possible to trace trade interdependence, naval logistics, and supply chain vulnerabilities, such data has enormous military utility from a strategic standpoint. As a result, it becomes harder to distinguish between strategic monitoring and commercial management. Furthermore, competitor governments' strategic actions are made more difficult by the operational ambiguity that dual-use infrastructure creates. Direct opposition has the risk of coming out as diplomatically aggressive or economically antagonistic because the facilities are nominally civilian in nature. As a result, India must respond to China's geopolitical growth without upsetting its neighbors who profit economically from Chinese investment. Because of this asymmetry, Beijing can gradually increase its power without incurring the expenses that come with military imperialism.

C. Data Asymmetry and the Digital Belt and Road

China's maritime might extends beyond its physical facilities. The development of the Digital Belt and Road (DBR), which aims to give Beijing control over the technology and informational networks that support international trade, is equally significant. The creation of Logink, China's National Public Information Platform for Transportation and Logistics, is an example of this approach in the maritime domain; one effective method of digital infrastructure governance is Logink. It combines information from shipping firms, port management systems, customs registries, satellite tracking systems, and cargo databases to provide an integrated logistics information platform. Many ports and logistics companies throughout the IOR have embraced or integrated Logink-linked systems since the platform is provided as an effective and affordable technological solution for developing economies.

This network has significant geopolitical ramifications. China has previously unheard-of visibility over international marine trade flows thanks to Logink. Beijing may be able to watch military-related logistics

moved through commercial networks, monitor shipping routes, determine the contents of cargo, examine supply chain connections, and see economic vulnerabilities in real time. According to the theory of weaponized interdependence, this is a classic example of the Panopticon Effect.

China simultaneously limits access to its own domestic maritime data through tough cybersecurity and national security rules, which creates an asymmetry. Therefore, while Chinese authorities may have a great deal of information into international commercial activity, foreign actors have minimal visibility into Chinese logistics activities, navy deployments, or strategic shipping patterns. During global crises, this imbalance can be used to gain a structural intelligence advantage,additionally, artificial intelligence, predictive analytics, satellite surveillance, and automated logistics management are becoming more and more integrated with digital maritime platforms. Influence and observation are made possible by control over such systems. States that control digital logistics systems have the power to influence shipping priorities, interfere with supply chains, control trade flows, or restrict access during times of crisis. As a result, data itself becomes a strategic asset on par with territory, oil, or military equipment.

India's national security is being threatened by this growing digital divide. Indian commercial shipping, energy imports, navy logistics, and trade dependencies may be more susceptible to foreign spying due to Chinese-controlled digital infrastructure. Because of this, the maritime rivalry between China and India includes not only naval deployments but also the invisible fields of information architecture, algorithmic governance, and network monitoring.China's maritime policy is essentially systemic rather than just naval, as evidenced by the convergence of physical infrastructure, military-civil fusion, and digital logistics systems. Beijing is building an integrated infrastructure of influence that can influence trade, obtain intelligence, project power, and take advantage of economic dependence throughout the Indian Ocean region.

III. The Bridge to Information and Visual Warfare

A. Satellite Sovereignty and Open-Source Clashes

Naval fleets, economic ports, and maritime chokepoints are no longer the only aspects of the geopolitical struggle taking place throughout the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The ownership, dissemination, interpretation, and weaponization of visual information all have an equal impact on maritime competition in the modern information era. Artificial intelligence-assisted geospatial analytics, real-time digital media ecosystems, high-resolution commercial satellite imagery, and open-source intelligence (OSINT) communities have all significantly changed how strategic competition is viewed and challenged. In addition to being used physically, maritime power is now created visually through stories, images, and digitally enhanced perceptions.

As a result of this change, a strategic environment known as "Visual Warfare" has emerged, where governments vie to influence public perception, diplomatic credibility, and geopolitical narratives by manipulating and disseminating visual intelligence. In contrast to the Cold War era, when state intelligence organizations controlled satellite reconnaissance, modern surveillance capabilities are now somewhat democratized. Near real-time imagery is now available to governments as well as journalists, researchers, think tanks, civil society organizations, and online intelligence communities thanks to commercial companies like Maxar Technologies, Planet Labs, BlackSky, and Sentinel satellite networks,because of this, strategic advances that were previously concealed behind classified military evaluations are now reviewed

by the public in a matter of hours. Satellite images of Chinese dredging works, port facility expansion, submarine docking infrastructure, radar installations, or logistical depots can spread quickly on international digital platforms. Because infrastructure projects are now the focus of public discussion, media sensationalism, and nationalist mobilization rather than just official diplomatic channels, this has significantly changed the politics of maritime rivalry.

After the 2020 Galwan Valley skirmishes, India-China ties deteriorated, making this issue especially important in the Indian context. Indian television discussions, newspaper coverage, and digital comments ecosystems regularly feature satellite imagery showing Chinese infrastructure expansion in Gwadar, Hambantota, Djibouti, and other critical places. Pictures of purported PLAN-compatible berths, tracking towers, fuel stores, or naval-access facilities are frequently presented as proof of a developing Chinese encirclement campaign. As a result, visual data serves as a tool for political mobilization in addition to intelligence.What can be called "Newsroom Nationalism" emerges as a result of this dynamic. Satellite imagery is rapidly being used by Indian television networks, digital news portals, YouTube defense analysts, and strategic commentators to create emotionally charged stories about dangers to national security. Newsroom nationalism is decentralized, driven by audience engagement and commercial incentives, in contrast to traditional state-controlled strategic communication. Public concerns over China's maritime presence in the Indian Ocean are heightened by sensationalized headlines, gory images, and militarized rhetoric.

This occurrence has important strategic ramifications. First, it shortens the period between the gathering of intelligence and the political response of the general public. Because satellite revelations prompt public scrutiny and demands for a rapid official response, policymakers are no longer able to covertly influence geopolitical developments through slow-moving diplomatic channels. Second, it limits Indian decision-makers' diplomatic options. Indian political elites are under domestic pressure to take publicly strong stances rather than practical or accommodative ones once visual narratives of "Chinese encirclement" take center stage in public discourse. Thus, rather than being solely determined by military calculations, strategic rivalry is increasingly influenced by public opinion and media cycles, additionally, the securitization of infrastructure itself is facilitated by visual warfare. When dual-use features are revealed by satellite photography, commercial ports that could otherwise be seen as economic development initiatives become symbols of strategic penetration. A communications tower turns into a "surveillance hub," and a logistics terminal into a "future naval base." The power of the picture is found in its political interpretation and narrative framing in addition to what it actually shows, conventional state-held informational monopolies are weakened by the democratization of monitoring. Before official government pronouncements are released, independent OSINT analysts often spot military movements, shipping patterns, and infrastructure modifications on sites like X (previously Twitter), Reddit, Telegram, and specialized defense forums. Due to the decentralization of strategic observation, maritime rivalry takes place under continuous digital surveillance in an extremely transparent setting by strengthening control over domestic geospatial data and limiting access to critical marine information through national security laws and cybersecurity rules, China has simultaneously attempted to combat this informational weakness. Due to this imbalance, there is a paradoxical information order: China has limited reciprocal visibility into its own strategic operations while being able to view significant segments of the global marine system through commercial and digital infrastructure networks. Visual warfare is therefore intricately linked to the more general dynamics of information asymmetry and weaponized interdependence.

B. Tracking the Spy Ships

The ongoing disputes involving Chinese monitoring and telemetry vessels operating in the Indian Ocean region highlight the convergence of digital transparency, maritime surveillance, and geopolitical fear. The Yuan Wang-class ships are particularly important from a strategic standpoint. These ships, which are officially classified as scientific research and space-support vessels, are a part of China's advanced maritime tracking network that facilitates deep-space operations, missile testing, and satellite launches. Their sophisticated abilities, however, go well beyond civilian scientific endeavors. Yuan Wang vessels have significant military utility since they are outfitted with phased-array radars, electronic intelligence (ELINT) equipment, sonar arrays, telemetry receivers, and signals interception technology. They can map underwater topography, intercept area communications transmissions, track ballistic missile trajectories, monitor naval drills, and gather electronic signatures. From a strategic perspective, these vessels serve as mobile intelligence assets that can improve China's situational awareness throughout the Indo-Pacific. Every time a Yuan Wang ship approaches ports in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, or the Bay of Bengal, or enters the Indian Ocean through the Strait of Malacca, a series of computerized reactions are set off. Satellite images, maritime tracking websites, OSINT communities, and Automated Identification System (AIS) data start tracking the vessel's path in real time. These moves are quickly interpreted by Indian defense pundits, strategic experts, retired military personnel, and social media users as signs of Chinese intelligence operations against Indian military stations and missile testing facilities.

This phenomenon illustrates how geopolitical conflicts can be exacerbated by digital transparency. AIS systems were initially created for marine coordination and navigational safety. However, these platforms also function as publicly available surveillance tools in the modern information ecology. Anybody with internet access can track the movements of Chinese research ships, making ordinary naval deployments more political. For example, the landing of a Yuan Wang ship close to Sri Lanka often provokes heated discussion on India's national security vulnerabilities. When such warships are thought to be keeping an eye on Indian missile testing, submarine movements, or naval drills taking place in the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal, worries grow. These ships are frequently referred to as "spy ships" in Indian media, which highlights their capacity for gathering intelligence rather than their formally stated scientific purposes.The ensuing political pressure at home puts India's neighbors in challenging diplomatic situations. Nations like Sri Lanka and the Maldives make an effort to strike a compromise between their economic links to China and their concerns about India's security. New Delhi often perceives Colombo's decision to allow a Chinese monitoring vessel to dock at Hambantota as proof of growing Chinese strategic power. Indian diplomatic channels then put pressure on regional nations to restrict the operational activities of such warships or deny them access to ports.

This dynamic demonstrates how the political sovereignty of smaller South Asian republics is increasingly being impacted by maritime rivalry. Regional governments are forced to negotiate conflicting demands from Beijing and New Delhi in ports. Therefore, the dispute over Chinese tracking ships is a reflection of larger conflicts within the Indian Ocean order over strategic autonomy, alignment, and influence.Additionally, what could be called "algorithmic securitization" is facilitated by the digital amplification of these instances. Emotionally charged and conflict-focused content is given priority by social media algorithms, which amplifies nationalist narratives about Chinese naval action. Public impressions of an increasing maritime threat environment are reinforced by the widespread circulation of images of tracking ships, dynamic radar visualizations, and speculative military analysis on internet platforms.This procedure establishes feedback loops between state behavior and digital discourse. Online-generated public anxiety determines media coverage, which in turn forms political pressure, which in turn influences military and diplomatic decision-

making. As a result, rather than being passive observers, information ecosystems themselves start to actively participate in geopolitical competition.

C. Geoeconomic Deterrence via Narrative Power

Infrastructure competition is waged through narrative domination in addition to physical building and military positioning amid the growing "Cold Peace" that characterizes Asian geopolitics. The capacity to influence how infrastructure projects are viewed globally is becoming more and more important for strategic success. Legitimacy, trust, political acceptance, and regional alignment are all determined by narratives. In this regard, there is an ongoing conflict between China and India on the definition and interpretation of maritime connectivity.

China presents the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a cooperative development initiative that aims to improve trade integration, infrastructure upgrading, regional prosperity, and poverty alleviation. Ideas like "win-win cooperation," "shared development," and "community of common destiny" are emphasized in Chinese official discourse. Beijing portrays itself in this story as a helpful development partner that helps the Global South with its infrastructural deficiencies. Instead of being tools of geopolitical expansion, ports, railroads, highways, and industrial corridors are depicted as engines of economic prosperity.

In many developing nations where infrastructure funding from Western organizations has historically been inadequate or hampered by strict political requirements, this developmental framework is especially effective. Beijing is a desirable partner for governments looking for noticeable economic reform since Chinese state-owned firms provide large-scale funding, quick project implementation, and relatively flexible financing arrangements.

However, this narrative is contested by India and its Western allies, who depict Chinese infrastructure projects as tools of coerced reliance. A key component of this counter-narrative is the idea of "debt-trap diplomacy." This viewpoint holds that China purposefully gives vulnerable states unsustainable loans in order to obtain long-term strategic concessions when repayment issues arise. A common example of this occurrence is Hambantota ,for India, this narrative battle serves crucial strategic purposes. India tries to undermine the political legitimacy of Beijing's maritime expansion by portraying Chinese ports as possible military outposts or Trojan horses for strategic dominance. Public mistrust of Chinese intentions can lead to more political opposition in host nations, make project approvals more difficult, cause delays in regulations, and enhance scrutiny of Chinese investments. Thus, narrative-based deterrence functions as an inexpensive but very powerful geopolitical tool

Additionally, normative posture is a key component of India's strategy. India often prioritizes openness, sovereignty, democratic accountability, and rules-based regional cooperation, in contrast to China's infrastructure-centric strategy. India aims to project itself as a responsible regional power dedicated to protecting the autonomy of smaller Indian Ocean governments through programs like SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region).

In the end, the struggle for narratives is a struggle for regional order. While India tries to maintain a regional balance that prevents overwhelming Chinese dominance, China wants to normalize its position as an essential economic player in the Indian Ocean. Perceptions become strategically significant in this setting. Infrastructure projects are successful not only when they are constructed but also when they are recognized as beneficial and lawful by the political community.

This completes the link between information warfare and maritime geoeconomics. Narratives created by ports influence public opinion, which in turn influences diplomacy, which in turn shapes the Indian Ocean Region's strategic architecture. As a result, India and China's current maritime rivalry is more than just a conflict over land or trade routes; rather, it is a full-fledged war for visibility, legitimacy, control over information, and narrative dominance in the changing Indo-Pacific order.

IV. India's Asymmetric Multi-Alignment and Quad Integration

A. Networked Strategic Autonomy

India has not relied solely on direct military balance to counter China's growing maritime and geoeconomic influence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Instead, New Delhi progressively created a more complex and flexible structure between 2020 and 2026, which is best described as "Networked Strategic Autonomy." This approach is a significant development in India's foreign policy heritage. It breaks from the strict neutrality of the Cold War era by adopting flexible, issue-based partnerships intended to enhance India's strategic power without compromising sovereign decision-making authority, even though it is built on the historical ideals of non-alignment and strategic independence.

The evolving geopolitical landscape in Asia influenced the development of this paradigm. Following the Galwan Valley battles, China's hostile border stance, growing naval capabilities, rapid economic growth, and technical penetration persuaded Indian leaders that alone balancing would be insufficient. India lacks the financial resources to match China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) dollar for dollar, especially when it comes to financing international infrastructure and developing maritime logistics. As a result, New Delhi implemented an asymmetric approach that prioritized technology integration, coalition building, and selective strategic alignment. India's strategy eschews legally enforceable treaty duties and automatic collective defense commitments, in contrast to conventional military alliances like NATO. Rather, India participates in overlapping mini-lateral agreements with nations that have similar concerns about regional stability, supply chain resilience, freedom of navigation, and maritime security. This helps New Delhi to maintain flexibility in areas where interests diverge while working closely with big countries like the United States, Japan, Australia, and France,because it illustrates how India pursues security through interconnected strategic connections rather than traditional alliance dependence; the idea of "networked" sovereignty is crucial. India wants to integrate itself into larger regional security systems while maintaining its position as the primary decision-maker in its own strategic calculations. New Delhi can leverage Western technical resources, intelligence-sharing frameworks, maritime surveillance capabilities, and defense relationships without coming out as subservient to any external group thanks to this balanced stance.Escalation management is one of this strategy's main benefits,Because such agreements could exacerbate security issues and limit diplomatic flexibility, Indian authorities are still wary of joining a strict anti-China containment alliance. Formal alliances are politically controversial at home since India's strategic culture has traditionally placed a strong emphasis on independence and resistance to outside dominance. Therefore, networked strategic autonomy enables India to maintain its ability to diplomatically engage Beijing on trade, border control, climate problems, and multilateral organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS while simultaneously strengthening deterrence against China.

India's growing defense and maritime cooperation accords demonstrate this strategy's practical application. Through agreements like LEMOA (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement), COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement), and BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation

Agreement), India and the US have strengthened their logistical cooperation. While avoiding a formal alliance structure, these agreements greatly increased India's access to encrypted communications, logistical support, and geospatial intelligence.Under the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), India increased naval cooperation with Australia and Japan at the same time. Coordinated fleet maneuvers, advanced naval aviation operations, anti-submarine warfare, and maritime surveillance were all part of the more complex interoperability displays that resulted from joint naval exercises like Malabar. Due to its vast Indian Ocean territory and naval presence in the western IOR, France also became an important maritime partner

Crucially, India's strategic alliances expand beyond military cooperation to include programs for resilient connectivity, digital infrastructure governance, semiconductor cooperation, supply chain security, cybersecurity, and key mineral access. This reflects the wider realization that modern geopolitical conflict is multifaceted, involving not only conventional military might but also technology ecosystems, economic networks, and information architectures; as a result, India's networked strategic autonomy offers a particularly flexible middle-power balancing strategy. It is neither completely in line with the system of Western alliances nor does it continue to be disconnected from new Indo-Pacific security frameworks. Rather, it establishes an adaptable strategic network intended to limit Chinese hegemony while upholding India's independent agency in a more divisive global system.

B. Operationalizing the Quad: The IPMDA

In order to reestablish information transparency and marine situational awareness for Indo-Pacific governments, the IPMDA was created as a counter-network. In order to create a nearly real-time operational picture of the Indo-Pacific maritime environment, the initiative creatively integrates commercial satellite imagery, radio frequency (RF) detection systems, artificial intelligence-assisted analytics, and unclassified maritime tracking data, as opposed to solely depending on classified military intelligence systems,with the Information Fusion Center – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in Gurugram, India is a key player in this system. The IFC-IOR was created as a center for regional coordination and the exchange of maritime information. It combines data from commercial satellites, partner navies, coastal surveillance networks, and marine tracking devices. The center facilitates cooperation between regional and extra-regional marine entities by serving as both a diplomatic platform and a technical hub. Tracking "dark vessels" ships that purposefully turn off their Automatic Identification System (AIS) transponders to avoid surveillance is one of the IPMDA's most crucial functions. These ships are often linked to illegal activities such as smuggling, illegal fishing, sanctions evasion, clandestine marine operations, and covert military logistics. Even when conventional tracking systems are turned off, the IPMDA may detect suspicious vessel movements by using satellite-based radio frequency collecting and AI-driven anomaly detection.

The strategic balance in the Indian Ocean is drastically changed by this capacity. China's integrated maritime data ecosystem and digital logistics infrastructure contributed to its informational advantage. By democratizing marine awareness across regional states, the IPMDA combats this. By gaining access to common maritime data, smaller Indo-Pacific nations that previously lacked advanced surveillance capabilities can lessen their reliance on digital infrastructure supplied by China. The program is part of a larger shift in security governance. Military resources including navy patrol planes, reconnaissance ships, and classified satellite systems were crucial to traditional maritime monitoring. In contrast, the IPMDA uses both civilian and commercial technologies in ways that make it difficult to distinguish between the military and civilian spheres. This is similar to the more general dynamics of militarized dependency, where commercial infrastructures take on strategic significance.

The IPMDA strengthens India's diplomatic clout in the region. India enhances its reputation as a "net security provider" in the Indian Ocean by presenting itself as a supplier of marine security and information transparency. More and more regional states see New Delhi as a partner capable of supporting maritime governance, disaster relief, anti-piracy operations, and regional stability, rather than just as a counterbalance to China.The marine ambitions of the Quad are also symbolically significant. They show that preserving an open, transparent, and rules-based marine commons is just as important to Indo-Pacific cooperation as military containment. Instead of being outwardly aggressive, India and its allies may portray their actions as protective and stabilizing thanks to this normative framing

Strategically speaking, China's Panopticon advantage is successfully undermined by the IPMDA. India and the Quad lessen Beijing's power to control maritime visibility in the Indo-Pacific by developing an alternative informational infrastructure based on networked data integration and shared surveillance capabilities. Because transparency limits clandestine maneuvering and lowers ambiguity about maritime activity, information itself becomes a kind of deterrence

C. Private Capital as Economic Statecraft

The growing incorporation of private capital into national strategic goals has been a defining characteristic of India's geoeconomic transformation between 2020 and 2026. In the past, ineffective bureaucracy, a lack of state funding, and sluggish implementation procedures have hindered India's involvement in international infrastructure projects. On the other hand, under the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese state-owned businesses functioned with significant financial support, centralized coordination, and quick execution skills.

New Delhi progressively embraced a hybrid paradigm in which strategically aligned private corporations served as tools of larger national economic statecraft after realizing this disparity. India's strategy for maritime rivalry underwent a dramatic change as a result. India used commercially flexible indigenous companies that could quickly acquire, operate, and grow vital marine infrastructure overseas rather than depending solely on state-led initiatives.The Adani Group stood out among these players as being especially important to India's maritime strategy. By making significant investments in ports, logistics, energy, and shipping infrastructure, the group emerged as a crucial instrument for India's international business growth. Despite being officially private, these companies are progressively operating under more expansive strategic frameworks that are in line with Indian geopolitical goals.

This strategy is aptly demonstrated by the Colombo West Container Terminal project in Sri Lanka. The Indian-backed facility has both economic and strategic uses, and it is situated next to the Chinese-run Colombo International Container Terminal. From an economic standpoint, it improves India's logistical access to one of South Asia's busiest transshipment centers. From a strategic standpoint, it keeps Chinese companies from fully controlling Colombo's port infrastructure and strengthens India's position in Sri Lanka's maritime sector.

In a similar vein, India's participation in Israel's Port of Haifa shows how its marine policy is expanding geographically. Haifa gives India important access to westward connection pathways because it is situated at the Mediterranean end of new intercontinental commerce lanes that connect Europe, the Middle East and Asia. The purchase represents India's aspiration to penetrate wider Eurasian and Mediterranean logistics networks in addition to the Indian Ocean,supporting India's aspirations for connectivity, maritime balancing, and regional influence. This is part of a broader global trend wherein states employ investment networks, enterprises, and financial institutions as tools of geopolitical rivalry.Another pillar of India's geoeconomic

strategy is the Chabahar Port project in Iran. Through the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), Chabahar enables India to avoid Pakistan and gain direct access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Chabahar serves as an Indian counter-corridor with the goal of maintaining strategic access to Eurasian markets and regional connectivity, in contrast to Gwadar, which is intricately linked to China-Pakistan strategic cooperation.

This change has wider implications since it combines geopolitical goals with business reasoning. Indian private companies are now more than just profit-driven businesses that operate apart from the interests of the government. Rather, they are becoming more and more strategic actors.Furthermore, in contrast to China's state-centric Belt and Road Initiative, India's utilization of private investments gives regional states an alternate growth model. Indian projects are frequently presented as being more open, economically viable, and considerate of the sovereignty of the host state. It's arguable whether this view accurately captures reality, but the story itself strengthens India's diplomatic standing.

In the end, India's asymmetric maritime reaction shows that symmetrical replication of Beijing's strategies is not necessary to balance China. India has developed a multifaceted strategy that combines mini-lateral diplomacy, digital maritime surveillance, technology cooperation, private capital mobilization, and narrative legitimacy rather than competing only through state spending or military development. By using this flexible framework, New Delhi aims to prevent any one power—especially China—from gaining unchallenged structural control over the strategic and economic architecture of the Indian Ocean rather than to completely dominate the region.

V. Conclusion & Synoptic Integration

A. Synthesizing the Matrix

From 2020 to 2026, India and China will engage in a marine geoeconomic rivalry that goes much beyond a traditional struggle for territorial dominance or naval superiority. Commercial infrastructure, digital surveillance systems, private finance networks, media narratives, satellite intelligence, and marine security architectures are all intricately linked in this radically new strategic environment. Once thought of as a region for trade and naval maneuvering, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is now the main location where geoeconomics, information warfare, strategic technology, and diplomatic rivalry all coexist.

The understanding that military assets like aircraft carriers, submarines, and naval tonnage are no longer the only factors determining maritime power in the twenty-first century is at the heart of this shift. Rather, the ability to mold and manage the infrastructures that facilitate trade, data, logistics, and information flow is becoming the source of maritime influence. The strategic importance of ports, digital logistics systems, satellite networks, underwater communication cables, shipping databases, and maritime tracking infrastructures is now on par with that of conventional military facilities. As a result, the struggle between China and India in the IOR shows how profoundly securitized globalization has become.

The methodical development of structural maritime leverage was a defining feature of China's strategy at this time. Beijing aimed to establish an integrated network that could safeguard Chinese trade flows, lessen susceptibility to maritime interdiction, and facilitate long-range naval operations through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the expansion of strategically placed "Strongpoints" like Gwadar, Hambantota, Djibouti, and Kyaukpyu. However, the importance of these initiatives went beyond economics. China successfully converted commercial connectivity into a geopolitical tool that could produce informational

visibility, logistical impact, and coercive leverage when combined with military-civil fusion programs and digital platforms like Logink.

China gained a significant structural advantage through the integration of digital and physical infrastructure. Chinese-affiliated maritime systems may be able to gather logistical intelligence, track shipping trends, and increase strategic visibility across vital sea corridors that run from the Red Sea to the South China Sea. As a result, what Farrell and Newman refer to as "weaponized interdependence"—a situation where control over centralized global networks turns into a source of strategic power—was given a marine embodiment. China showed how economic integration might be converted into geopolitical leverage without direct military conflict by combining infrastructure financing, digital logistics governance, and access to foreign ports,but between 2020 and 2026, India's answer demonstrated the development of a novel and extremely flexible type of asymmetric balancing. Instead of trying to replicate China's strategy in a symmetrical manner, New Delhi developed a multi-layered strategic matrix that included private capital mobilization, technology integration, diplomatic networking, and narrative deterrence. This answer demonstrates a crucial shift in India's strategic thinking: the understanding that networked resilience, as opposed to isolated military building, is necessary for power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific.

In this sense, India's adoption of "Networked Strategic Autonomy" was very noteworthy. India adopted flexible issue-based relationships while maintaining sovereign strategic decision-making, in contrast to traditional alliance arrangements that require strict military commitments. Without giving up its long-standing desire for strategic independence, India integrated itself into overlapping maritime security frameworks through deeper collaboration with the US, Japan, Australia, France, and regional Indo-Pacific governments. By avoiding the escalating hazards associated with formal military blocs, this paradigm enabled India to optimize access to defense interoperability, maritime technology, intelligence sharing, and logistical cooperation,Information itself has evolved into a key strategic resource, as seen by the Quad's operationalization and the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA). India and its Quad partners developed a counter-network that can lessen China's informational gap by combining satellite imaging, AI-driven analytics, radio-frequency tracking equipment, and open-source maritime data. Beijing's attempt to control regional maritime visibility through platforms like Logink was directly challenged by the IPMDA, which did more than just enhance maritime surveillance.

This change emphasizes the need for data transparency and informational clarity, which is a defining feature of modern strategic competition. Physical force projection was the main metric used to assess military might in earlier times. However, the ability to monitor, analyze, and forecast activities across maritime networks has become as crucial in the current geopolitical situation. Because it limits clandestine maneuvering, reveals strategic intentions, and lowers uncertainty, situational awareness itself serves as a deterrent. Therefore, India's investment in digital maritime surveillance and information fusion is a crucial response to the realities of network-centric geopolitics.

India's increasing use of private capital as a tool of statecraft was equally significant. New Delhi overcame the constraints of sluggish state-led infrastructure development by collaborating with homegrown businesses like the Adani Group. Projects supported by India in Colombo, Haifa, and Chabahar demonstrated a hybrid paradigm where national strategic interests and commercial agility become more entwined. This change allowed India to improve its own marine positioning while offering regional states alternatives to Chinese development financing.

This shift is significant not only in terms of economic rivalry but also in terms of how the state-private enterprise relationship has changed. Corporations are no longer only market players functioning

independently of national strategy in the current geopolitical environment. Rather, they increasingly serve as tools for supply chain security, geoeconomic influence, and strategic connection. India's adoption of this paradigm shows how contemporary nations are adjusting to a world in which geopolitical rivalry and commercial networks are intertwined.

The increasing importance of information warfare and narrative competition was another crucial aspect of this struggle. The political climate around maritime infrastructure projects was drastically changed by the democratization of satellite imagery and open-source information. Chinese ports and transportation infrastructure came under continual media attention, digital inspection, and nationalist interpretation. "Newsroom Nationalism" in India reduced diplomatic ambiguity and increased public security concerns by turning commercial facilities into obvious symbols of strategic encirclement.In order to undermine the legitimacy of Chinese investments, India and its allies simultaneously implemented narrative-based deterrent tactics. New Delhi raised the internal political costs for smaller South Asian nations interacting closely with Beijing by portraying BRI initiatives as examples of "debt-trap diplomacy" or latent military expansionism. This narrative fight shows that, rather than relying just on material capabilities, geopolitical struggle is increasingly contested through legitimacy construction and perception manipulation.

A new strategic order characterized by ongoing rivalry below the threshold of open war has emerged in the Indo-Pacific as a result of these developments taken together. The India-China rivalry is distinguished by economic interdependence, overlapping institutional participation, and simultaneous collaboration and competition, in contrast to the bipolar Cold War conflict between the US and the USSR. The simplest way to characterize this situation is as a "Cold Peace," which is a geopolitical setting characterized by ongoing strategic rivalry without a complete military breakup.

B.The New Statecraft

In the end, the development of the maritime rivalry between China and India shows that statecraft in the twenty-first century has become essentially multifaceted. The conventional division between information management, economic policy, technology governance, and military security has essentially disintegrated. Ports, supply chains, digital platforms, satellite networks, logistical data, private companies, and media ecosystems are all strategic tools used in the exercise of modern power. Commercial infrastructure cannot be seen as politically neutral in this new geopolitical landscape. Ports are much more than just places to facilitate trade; they are nodes of geopolitical influence that can assist economic coercion, naval operations, and information gathering. In the same vein, digital logistics systems are now methods of surveillance, informational management, and strategic visibility rather than merely efficiency tools. The Indian Ocean competition serves as an example of how globalization has produced infrastructures that allow for both coercion and collaboration.

The theory of international relations and strategic practice are significantly impacted by this change. The main factors that determine power, according to classical realism, are military prowess and geographical control. These elements are still significant, but they are now intricately woven into larger network systems. Because they can affect the trade, energy, information, and financial flows that other states rely on, states that are able to dominate crucial nodes within global systems gain disproportionate power,Therefore, rather than relying solely on raw material strength, power in the twenty-first century increasingly comes from structural positioning inside networks. Even in the absence of direct military conflict, the state that controls robust logistical routes, upholds informational clarity, protects digital ecosystems, and defines strategic narratives obtains long-term geopolitical leverage. India's reaction shows the potential of asymmetric,

network-based balancing mechanisms, while China's ascent illustrates the efficacy of infrastructure-centered geoeconomic strategy.

As a result, the Indian Ocean region becomes more than just a maritime theater—it becomes a proving ground for the future of international statecraft. The conflict taking place across its waters is a reflection of more general changes in international politics, including the securitization of globalization, the combination of military and economic might, the emergence of data-centric security architectures, and the increasing significance of perception management in geopolitical rivalry between 2020 and 2026, China and India fought over the architecture of connectivity itself rather than just ports or sea lanes. Determining the norms, networks, narratives, and infrastructures that the Indo-Pacific order would use in the ensuing decades is at risk. As a result, the strategic lessons learned from this competition have worldwide implications. They show that in the new era of hybrid geopolitics, those that can integrate infrastructure, information, technology, and diplomacy into cohesive systems of resilient power projection will be more important than those with the biggest economies or militaries.

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