

# India -China Naval War of 2019: Geopolitical Repercussions

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to conduct a study **Maritime** diplomacy is the key to **India's** more muscular **China** strategy to be tackled by the **Indian Navy in view of Naval War of 2019**. In recent years, the Indian Navy has sought to consolidate strength in India's near seas through its mission-based deployments. Since 2017, Indian warships have patrolled Indian Ocean sea lanes and choke points, including the approaches to the Malacca Strait. In its bid to keep track of Chinese submarines in the Eastern Indian Ocean, the Indian Navy has also been operating P-8I maritime patrol aircraft from the Andaman Islands. A chain of radar stations along the Indian coast has helped in providing better information about maritime movements, and a fusion centre in Gurgaon near New Delhi is helping manage tactical information in the near seas.

China, too, has been probing the subcontinental littorals. Since 2013, when it first sent a submarine to Sri Lanka, the People's Liberation Army Navy has significantly expanded its military and civilian expeditions in South Asia. In recent months, China has sent intelligence ships and survey and research vessels into the Andaman Sea, attempting to track Indian naval activity in the region. While it has so far desisted from challenging the Indian Navy, the PLAN's pattern of deployment suggests an aspiration for a sustained presence in areas of overlapping interest with India.

Three aspects about a possible India–China maritime conflict seem relevant. First, unlike with Pakistan, when the Indian Navy established a loose blockade in the northern Arabian Sea during Operation Talwar in 1999 and Operation Parakram in 2001, and again after the Balakot attack last year, an aggressive barricading approach in China's near seas would be unviable. India has virtually no presence east of Malacca, and unless it acts in concert with the US, Vietnam and Japan in the Pacific littorals, the Indian Navy cannot hope to take on the PLAN in its backyard. What seems more realistic is an interdiction strategy aimed at choking Chinese trade passing through the Indian Ocean sea lines of communication. A vast majority of China's oil shipments, container vessels and bulk cargo traffic approaches the Malacca Strait through the 10 degree channel between Andaman and Nicobar. Observers say the Indian Navy could stifle the flow of Chinese traffic, while aggressively patrolling the Indian Ocean chokepoints, keeping an eye on Chinese naval reinforcements.

*Key words: India, China, naval reinforcements, PLAN, maritime conflict, Indian Navy*

## Introduction

A Sino-Indian naval war seems improbable, for sure — but so do most wars, before they happen. It's certainly not unthinkable, and so it behooves Asia-watchers to lay out the odds now rather than be guilty of a failure of imagination should the worst transpire.

Right now China and India are glaring at each other across Doklam, the contested ground along the Sino-Indian frontier high in the Himalayas. It was the Himalayan border that prompted their last serious fight, when China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) dealt the Indians a short, sharp defeat in 1962. But any future war might not be fought on the high mountains, but the high seas.

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Bottom line: Don't be taken in by numbers indicating that China would steamroll India in a sea fight. Martial enterprises are seldom that neat.

China has settled its border disputes with most in the region — but it prefers to leave the contest with some of its neighbors simmering, especially India. A spokesman for China's defense ministry, Col. Wu Qian, warned Indians not to “push your luck” in the Doklam dispute. For good measure Wu added that the Indian Army would find it “easier to shake a mountain than to shake the PLA.” Beyond the present conflict, Chinese and Indian media have a long history of competing to see who can shout “By jingo!” in the other's direction the loudest.

History shows that rancor on land or in the air can easily sprawl out to sea. Or a saltwater conflict could ensue independently of events ashore. Both contestants take a proprietary view of waters off their coasts. China thinks about the South China Sea as a zone of “indisputable” or “irrefutable” sovereignty where Beijing ought to make the rules and others ought to obey. In a similar vein, India models its foreign policy and strategy in part on the Monroe Doctrine, and thus regards the Indian Ocean as an Indian preserve.

Such claims should have a familiar ring to Americans. During its own rise to regional and world power, the United States sought to exclude powerful outsiders from the Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico — its outlet to the Pacific Ocean. The Monroe Doctrine started off as a joint defense of the Americas against European imperial powers. It ended up with Washington proclaiming that its “fiat [was] law” throughout these waters, and that it could exercise an “international police power” there — meddling in fellow American states' affairs to preclude European seizures of territory in the Western Hemisphere.

The sense that nearby seas constitute a rightful *mare nostrum* — ancient Romans thought of the Mediterranean as “our sea” — means that Indians and Chinese are predisposed to resent, and oppose, apparent encroachment by outsiders in these seaways. Fishing disputes or undersea drilling take on particular resonance; natural resources concentrate minds in Asian capitals. Indians look askance at China’s “One Belt, One Road” initiative, which aims to build infrastructure and aid economic development along Eurasia’s historic silk roads, land and sea. Here too, however, there are likely to be complications. With a significant share of seaborne trade moving in Chinese-flagged vessels, an Indian interdiction strategy could result in regional blowback against New Delhi. Many Indo-Pacific states would view India’s disruption of regular shipping in an international sea lane as a hostile act that imposes unacceptable costs on neutrals. To avoid such a scenario, Indian warships will need to be careful in targeting Chinese-flagged vessels, and refrain from the unnecessary use of force.

Second, the Indian Navy will need to focus on denying the PLAN tactical space in India’s near littorals. Through the use of submarines and anti-submarine-warfare-capable air assets, India would seek to restrict China’s freedom of operation in the littorals. Part of the strategy would be to position Indian naval assets on the east coast and in the Andaman island bases to keep up a high tempo of operations in regional hotspots.

Denying China use of India’s near seas won’t be easy. With a vast fleet comprising nuclear attack submarines, guided missile warships, amphibious carriers and a host of other capable war-fighting platforms, the PLAN is the world’s second most powerful navy, and should not be underestimated. But it is constrained by the absence of operational logistics, ship-based air cover and land-based maritime reconnaissance capabilities in the Indian Ocean—gaps that the Indian Navy would hope to exploit.

Third, India should expect China to use its Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia to reduce its tactical deficit in the Indian Ocean. In Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Chittagong in Bangladesh and Sittwe in Myanmar, where China is building maritime infrastructure, the PLAN is likely to press for a greater presence to overcome logistical constraints in the Indian Ocean. Already China is constructing a naval base for Bangladesh in Cox’s Bazar that could be used to position naval ships and store military supplies.

### **Objective:**

This paper intends to explore Naval War of 2019 between China and India, as well as their geopolitical influence on India, who are commercial rivals at heart. Also intensity severe since People's Liberation Army **Navy** (PLAN) is now the largest **navy** in the world.

## India-China Naval strength

Chinese courtship of South Asian coastal states looks suspiciously like an effort to construct a “string of pearls,” or network of naval bases in the Indian navy’s traditional operating grounds. Most recently Beijing negotiated a 99-year lease of the Sri Lankan seaport of Hambantota, lodging itself firmly in the subcontinent’s environs, while Chinese engineers have fortified their naval station in Djibouti, in the extreme western reaches of the Indian Ocean.

In short, the kindling for marine conflict is increasingly in place while any number of quarrels between New Delhi and Beijing could strike the match. So, who would come out on top in an armed conflict? Well, the two navies are roughly comparable in aircraft-carrier aviation, operating one modest flattop apiece. That parity in numbers appears set to persist for some years, but carrier aircraft aren’t the whole of naval striking power.

On paper, the Indian Navy looks massively outgunned across the board. Consider: In 2019 the PLA navy will have 73 attack submarines, or “attack boats” in U.S. Navy slang, in its inventory. Attack boats are subs built to hunt other subs or pummel surface fleets from the depths. The Indian navy will operate 17 such craft in 2019. That looks like a 4:1 deficit for New Delhi.

China’s navy will also field an increasingly modern mix of 30 guided-missile destroyers (DDGs) by 2019. DDGs act as a carrier’s “shotgun,” using their missiles to fend off aerial, missile, or subsurface assault. They can also serve as capital ships in their own right, leading surface action groups against other fleets or shore targets. By comparison, the Indian navy will have a paltry eight DDGs. The PLA navy will have a mix of 92 frigates and corvettes, light combatants for duty in less menacing settings. The Indian navy will have 32 frigates and corvettes.

And so forth. These are overpowering numbers. They imply India will play Bambi to China’s Godzilla in any maritime conflagration – and we all know what happens when Bambi meets Godzilla. Even Adm. Horatio Lord Nelson, Great Britain’s virtuoso of sea battle in the age of sail, insisted that “only numbers can annihilate.”

**But numbers seldom if ever tell the whole story in marine combat.**

Consider several factors that will blunt what looks on paper like an insuperable edge. First, think about the human factor. A force inferior in numbers can outfight a larger antagonist through superior seamanship, tactical dexterity, and élan. It might escape annihilation. It might even defeat that antagonist's aims. The weak can win — and often have in the annals of warfare.

Do Indian mariners command a human advantage? Hard to say. There's little history by which to judge. Neither modern India nor modern China has fought a major naval engagement. In fact, the 21st century marks the first time in over half a millennium that the twin giants have both fielded formidable oceangoing fleets at the same time.

The historical databank is conspicuously bare as a result. Indian rulers proscribed sea voyages back in the 14th century, ostensibly to prevent scientists and mathematicians from decamping to Baghdad. China's Ming Dynasty broke up the world's largest and most technologically advanced navy, Adm. Zheng He's "treasure fleet," following a triumphal series of voyages to Southeast and South Asia — including full-on gunboat diplomacy in Sri Lanka centuries before the West learned the trick.

Asian powers thus evacuated the sea a historical eyeblink before Portuguese adventurer Vasco da Gama arrived on the subcontinent, ushering in an age of Western maritime dominance that is only now subsiding. Only in recent years, consequently, have Chinese and Indian fleets started jostling against each other, mainly in the Indian Ocean but on occasion in the South China Sea. Sino-Indian maritime competition is something novel, rendering it even tougher than usual to make predictions.

My own guesswork: Both navies would acquit themselves about equally well in action. They have gone out of their way to avoid common pitfalls, such as skimping on peacetime naval readiness for the sake of saving taxpayers' money. British Adm. Sir Herbert Richmond warned that denying ships regular upkeep and overhauls, keeping a fleet in port, and curtailing at-sea exercises depletes materiel while "rusting" officers' and sailors' proficiency at navigation, engineering, and weapons. After all, sailors only learn seamanship and tactics by going to sea early and often to practice.

To most appearances neither India's nor China's navy has let rust encrust ships or crews. The Indian navy has always maintained a regular presence in Indian Ocean waters. Until recent years the PLA navy tended to stay in port a lot, getting underway only intermittently. That is less and less true of late. China has kept a squadron on station in the Gulf of Aden for pushing a decade now. PLA navy vessels have turned up in expanses as remote as the Mediterranean Sea, Black Sea, and, most recently, the Baltic Sea. In so doing China has demonstrated its capacity to mount a naval presence in what Chinese strategists term the "far seas" beyond the China seas and Western Pacific.

What the PLA navy once lacked in training, it is striving to correct — reducing the chances of human or material corrosion. The deep military corruption that once led jingoistic Chinese Maj. Gen. Luo Yuan to make comparisons to the Beiyang Navy — the graft-ridden fleet that failed spectacularly against the Japanese in 1895 — appears to have been curtailed in the anti-corruption campaigns since 2012. The Chinese navy, like the Indian, seems ready to fight.

That's about as far as guesswork takes us. As strategist Edward Luttwak counsels, ships and planes are "black boxes" in peacetime. It's hard for outsiders to peek inside to see how smoothly their internal workings perform, either from an engineering or a human standpoint. Nor can peacetime maneuvers perfectly simulate the dangers, hardships, and sheer orneriness of war. A force that excels in canned exercises might be just that: a force that excels at exercises. Battle is the true arbiter of combat effectiveness and efficiency.

But if the human factor is a wash, geospatial strategy is definitely on India's side. It's doubtful in the extreme that any clash between Indian and Chinese forces would take place in the South China Sea or elsewhere in East Asia. The Indian Navy has plenty to do superintending events in the Indian Ocean and a bare minimum of assets to do it with. It has little to spare for extra-regional enterprises. Ergo, any probable naval war would unfold in India's home region, where the Indian military enjoys "interior lines" and Chinese expeditionary forces must contend with "exterior lines."

What that means in plain English is this: The Indian navy enjoys direct, relatively short routes to potential scenes of battle while the PLA navy must project forces across long, distended, potentially contested sea routes just to reach the fight. Distance favors the defender while debilitating its adversary.

Fighting across vast geographic distances imposes wear-and-tear on hardware while wearying crews. It imposes severe logistical burdens. After all, an expeditionary force must carry all the fuel, stores, and ammunition it needs to reach the scene of action and fight the battle. And fighting at a distance grants the antagonist opportunities to make mischief along the way.

The foe or its allies could harry the expeditionary force, taking up station at key geographic sites — the Strait of Malacca, anyone? — to snipe away. The PLA navy force could suffer losses. At a minimum, a forward defense would compel Chinese mariners to expend scarce resources defending themselves.

In short, powerful Indian forces reside near likely trouble spots, while China must operate along long, convoluted routes just to gain access to the region. It is no simple feat for a faraway great-power navy to overpower a rival naval power — even a weaker one — in that navy's home waters. Advantage: India.

### **Favorable nautical geography**

Which brings us to geography. India is blessed by favorable nautical geography. The subcontinent juts into the Indian Ocean, adjoining potential battlegrounds in the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea. Its geographical layout amplifies the advantages of the interior lines. Furthermore, New Delhi is sovereign over the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, an island chain athwart the western approaches to the Strait of Malacca. Suitably fortified with missiles, aircraft, and ships, the island chain would constitute a barrier to east-west Chinese maritime movement — enfeebling any force that ventures onto India's turf.

Chinese strategists are acutely conscious of the potential of island-chain warfare. It confronts them every day in East Asia, where U.S. allies occupy the “first island chain” paralleling China's coastline. Back in 1987, Adm. Liu Huaqing, the modern PLA navy's founding father, gave an address likening the first island chain to a “metal chain” barring China's access to the Western Pacific. Small wonder Chinese strategists have taken to describing the Andamans and the Nicobars as a metal chain inhibiting China's access to the Indian Ocean. The same logic holds.

Geography, then, could represent India's great equalizer against a more numerous Chinese navy. New Delhi can stage an anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategy of its own, harnessing geographic features for strategic gain.

Competing strategic imperatives will encumber PLA navy operations in the Indian Ocean. The overwhelming advantage on paper is misleading. The Indian navy will never feel the full weight of those numbers. PLA navy commanders cannot simply designate the entire battle fleet as an expeditionary force and send it sailing to the Indian Ocean to do battle. Doing so would expose the homeland to a formidable U.S.-Japanese fleet poised at China's door.

In short, like statesmen and commanders throughout history, China's leadership must juggle competing commitments — apportioning resources to keep the most important commitments while putting lesser commitments on hold or demoting them to secondary status. Martial sage Carl von Clausewitz sets the bar high for undertaking secondary theaters or campaigns: Such an endeavor must promise “exceptionally rewarding” gains, it must not risk too much in the primary theater or campaign, and therefore strategic leaders should forego it unless they boast “decisive superiority” of resources in the primary theater. Reward, risk, resources — call it Clausewitz's three Rs for setting and enforcing priorities.

In Clausewitzian parlance, the Indian Ocean constitutes an exceptionally rewarding theater for China. China is a net importer of energy supplies, much of which coming from the Persian Gulf. Beijing sees vital national interests at stake in the region – else it wouldn't bother with pricey ventures such as “One Belt, One Road.” The questions surround Clausewitz's second two Rs, risk and resources. Do China's armed forces really boast decisive superiority over the U.S. Navy and Japan Self-Defense Forces — which might make trouble in Northeast Asia while the PLA navy was away battling the Indian Navy?

## Conclusion

Who would prevail in the Sino-Indian naval war of 2019? It looks like a close-run thing. China has numbers on its side, but India's allies include geography, land-based sea power, and silent partners such as the United States and Japan. The leadership could allocate resources prudently while keeping risk to a minimum. That portion of the PLA navy — not the PLA navy as a whole — constitutes the standard of measurement for Indian naval adequacy. If the Indian navy can handle the fraction of China's navy likely to venture into South Asia, then it meets the standard. If not, rough waters await. The imperative for India is to track Chinese naval activity and warship movements along the Bay of Bengal rim. As it seeks to expand basing facilities for submarines and ASW aircraft in the Andaman Islands, the Indian Navy would look to position long-range surface-to-surface missiles on the island chain to more directly threaten Chinese naval deployments.

Needless to say, a naval conflict with China in the Indian Ocean would be an 'acid test' for India—one that would require considerable planning and effort to prevail over the adversary.

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