

Unraveling China's "String of Pearls"

Ashley S. Townshend

Published on *YaleGlobal Online Magazine* (<http://yaleglobal.yale.edu>)

16 September 2011

With the US and the western world mired in debt crisis, the rise of China's military appears more threatening than ever. The recent launch of China's first aircraft carrier will only add to regional anxieties over the military challenge emanating from Asia's fastest rising giant. But a closer examination shows that at least one aspect of China's supposed military prowess – its alleged creation of far-ranging naval facilities, the so-called "string of pearls" strategy – can be discounted as more fevered imagination than actual military threat.

Coined in a classified 2005 Booz-Allen report, the shibboleth is widely used to describe China's purported plan to establish naval bases and intelligence stations throughout littoral South Asia. Adherents to this perspective argue that Beijing has spent the past decade trying to forge closer diplomatic relations with many Indian Ocean nations. China has signed multimillion dollar aid, trade and defense deals in capitals across the region, while Chinese state-owned corporations have financed commercial ports in Pakistan (Gwadar), Sri Lanka (Hambantota and Colombo), Bangladesh (Chittagong) and Burma (Sittwe and Kyaukpyu). Viewed alongside the large-scale naval modernization program being undertaken by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) many worry that these ostensibly trade-oriented ports will one day be upgraded into permanent naval bases. In a worst-case scenario, it's feared such bases might enable Beijing to threaten India's security, menace global sea lanes and challenge the United States for regional naval primacy.

This assessment is greatly exaggerated, and there are many reasons to be skeptical about a Chinese "string of pearls."

Crucially, there's no evidence to suggest the PLAN is involved with these ports. Nor is there any proof to support claims that "listening posts" and "monitoring stations" have been hidden amidst the cranes. On the contrary, China's "pearls" appear to be what Beijing says they are: conventional shipping facilities designed to connect China's landlocked western provinces to maritime trade routes in the Indian Ocean.

This doesn't mean they lack strategic value. The South Asian harbors and their overland conduits to China will permit some Chinese-bound tankers to offload Persian Gulf oil without having to sail all the way to East Asian waters. Such arrangements will reduce China's dependence on precarious shipping routes through the Malacca Strait "chokepoint," where Beijing fears that its tankers could be blockaded by US warships already deployed to the region. In the name of energy security, such facilities offer a degree of flexibility for China's otherwise vulnerable Indian Ocean supply-lines – across which roughly 80 percent of Beijing's imported crude must travel each year en route to the mainland.

Even if China's leaders were contemplating militarizing these "pearls," there are serious doubts about the feasibility of such a scheme.

Diplomatically, Beijing would find it difficult to convince its South Asian counterparts that hosting PLAN bases is in their best interests. As "swing players" in an emerging Indo-Pacific "great game," the littoral states of the Indian Ocean stand to gain more by oscillating between Beijing, New Delhi and Washington than by aligning with any one of the three. Indeed, Colombo, Dhaka, Islamabad and Rangoon already enjoy lucrative economic and military relations with two or more of Asia's competing great powers – often leveraging their financiers' strategic anxieties to advance their own national objectives. Whatever sweeteners China might offer, it's hard to imagine that any South Asian regime would jeopardize this geopolitical flexibility for a PLAN pied-à-terre and political blessing from Beijing. While some, notably Pakistan, may be tempted to provide berthing rights to PLAN warships, such moves would fall short of granting China sovereign bases abroad.

Establishing a "string of pearls" would face serious practical obstacles. Transforming commercial ports into defensible forward bases requires high levels of technical, logistical and strategic expertise. Despite the PLAN's growing proficiency, the demands of this Mahanian task would probably exceed China's capabilities for at least another decade. The PLAN has little experience in force projection, joint operations or sophisticated intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. It would be hard pressed to fortify distant bases with local air defenses, mine-clearing assets or munitions storage facilities, and is likely to be handicapped by its inflexible command structure. As such, the PLAN would find it almost impossible to defend isolated naval bases from cruise-missile strikes or airborne attacks by potential US or Indian adversaries. While such kinetic scenarios seem highly unlikely, they still beg the question: Why would China invest billions in South Asian bases that would be impotent during wartime?

The answer, many argue, is that Beijing's base-building ambitions are largely defensive in nature – designed to offset China's sea-lane vulnerabilities by deploying PLAN assets to challenge rivals' sea lanes. Acutely aware of the strangulation threat Indian and US forces pose to Beijing's Indo-Pacific energy supply lines, some Chinese strategists have advocated offshore naval bases as a means of protecting China's economic interests overseas. As forward bases would permit Chinese warships to wield some "tit-for-tat" coercive power over Indian and American vessels, Beijing's modest objective would be to project limited sea power for deterrence – not to position the PLAN for great power confrontations.

Yet China is unlikely to achieve even this limited goal. As the prevailing Indian Ocean power balance is tilted in favor of Washington and New Delhi, Beijing's capacity to influence international sea lanes remains grossly inferior. While India and the US boast multiple carrier strike-groups, nuclear submarines and experienced blue-water fleets – supported by US bases in Bahrain and Diego Garcia – China's nascent navy is only beginning to project power abroad. Even if PLAN warships were one

day able to contest Indian Ocean sea lanes, the US Fifth Fleet would still hold a geopolitical advantage – exercising, as it does, near-total control over access to the Persian Gulf source of China’s hydrocarbon lifeline.

But what about three decades from now? Might a militarized “string of pearls” form part of a longer-term strategy to project Chinese strategic weight west of Malacca?

While current geopolitical and military obstacles appear unlikely to be overcome any time soon, it’s true that Beijing’s Indian Ocean objectives are not purely commercial. Chinese leaders are reticent to continue outsourcing their nation’s sea-lane security to US and Indian flotillas. As concerns about energy security intensify, Beijing will almost certainly seek a more permanent naval presence in the Indian Ocean. At a minimum, this will require access to deep-water ports for PLAN vessels to rest, refuel and possibly refit. This could, of course, be achieved by negotiating long-term berthing arrangements at various South Asian ports. Yet it would be foolish to ignore the strategic advantages of full-fledged naval bases. In the future, a stronger China may well make this calculation – motivated perhaps by growing strategic anxieties or a bellicose turn in its foreign policy. While Beijing’s proclivity for financing commercial ports does not necessarily portend this worrisome future, China’s stake in well-situated South Asian harbors offers a number of ship-ready options for eventual expansion.

Whatever naval facilities are developed over time, it’s difficult to envisage a scenario in which Beijing would be willing to undermine maritime security in the Indian Ocean. China is destined to face mounting energy demands, compelling it to acquire new resources, trade routes and the means to defend both. Dependence on seaborne energy supplies is likely to instill in Beijing – like the US, India and other maritime powers – a powerful incentive for stability at sea. While the myth of a Chinese “string of pearls” will continue to trouble US and Indian analysts, it’s important to recall that all Indo-Pacific states depend on unfettered Indian Ocean trade. Asia’s greatest challenge is not to position naval forces in preparation for conflict, but to defuse maritime tensions for the sake of regional order.

Rights: Copyright © 2011 Yale Center for the Study of Globalization

Ashley S. Townshend is a research associate at the Lowy Institute for International Policy, Sydney, and a former visiting fellow at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University.