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## Building Strategic Leverage in the Indian Ocean Region

Over the past decade, China has established a permanent and escalating military presence in the Indian Ocean region. The littoral states, islands, and waters of the Indian Ocean—defined here by the choke points of the Cape of Good Hope, Bab el-Mandeb, the Strait of Hormuz, the Malacca Strait, and the Torres Strait—are part of the wider Indo-Pacific region, but they constitute a distinct strategic landscape. The United States' strategic competition with China does extend to the Indian Ocean region, but it does not take the same form as the heavily militarized territorial disputes of the western rim of the Pacific Ocean or the South China Sea, which attract the lion's share of attention from US policymakers and military planners. The Indian Ocean faces a particular set of strategic risks and a particular constellation of likeminded partners—an effective strategy must account for those particularities.

Since 2009, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has maintained an ongoing naval task group in the Gulf of Aden, ostensibly to conduct counter-piracy operations. This task group, along with frequent oceanographic survey and submarine deployments, means the PLAN maintains a constant presence of seven or eight navy ships in the Indian Ocean at any time, with occasional surges.<sup>1</sup> In 2017, China established its first-ever overseas military base on the western edge of the ocean, in Djibouti. Under the banner of the Belt and Road

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Initiative (BRI), it is building or developing several other ports from Tanzania to Indonesia that could have dual civilian and military uses.<sup>2</sup> And alongside its rapidly growing commercial influence, it has expanded security cooperation with regional states. It already has a comprehensive security partnership with Pakistan and is a major source of regional arms transfers, especially to Bangladesh and Myanmar.<sup>3</sup> Over the past decade, China has sharply accelerated its rate of military exercises with regional states.<sup>4</sup>

This military expansion poses strategic risks for the United States and its allies and partners. It gives China rapidly increasing capacity to use military coercion in the Indian Ocean region, both directly, through military intervention, and indirectly, by compelling changes in regional states' security policies. It also gives China advantages in case of a potential war in the region, with access arrangements and operational experience to project force across the Indian Ocean. China's growing capacity does not mean it will inevitably coerce and win wars in the Indian Ocean, but it does heighten the risk that China poses to US and partner interests. If these risks are left unchecked, the United States and its partners face an increasingly uncertain Indian Ocean region, where their freedom of action is curtailed and direct threats can materialize without warning.

In response, the United States and some of its likeminded partners have proclaimed their devotion to an idealized version of the regional status quo under the rubric of an ill-defined "free and open Indo-Pacific." The four powers with the greatest interest and capacity to push back on China's inroads—the United States, India, Japan, and Australia—have banded together as the "Quad," to consult and eventually coordinate policies. Washington and its partners have raised the tempo of ministerial-level consultations, combined military exercises, and military-to-military cooperation on, for example, maritime domain awareness.<sup>5</sup>

But whether acting independently or in some combination, the Quad's response has been haphazard, limited to repeating the "free and open" mantra as their goal and scrambling to marshal national resources for sustained competition. Ramping up their collective military activities is an encouraging sign, but unfocused declarations of shared values or cooperation for the sake of cooperation does little to curtail China's capacity to coerce small states or posture for war. The most pressing risks are not being mitigated, largely because the United States and its partners have failed to articulate a causal "theory of success" that would explain how their increased efforts would achieve their desired end-state.<sup>6</sup> Worse, this feverish effort without a compelling

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strategic theory incurs opportunity costs, taking resources and policymaker attention away from more productive courses of action.

To address that gap, this paper offers a strategic assessment and a conceptual framework by which the United States and its likeminded partners—especially but not exclusively the Quad—can more effectively mitigate the risks of Chinese military expansion. I argue that their most urgent task is to build “strategic leverage”—developing their political relationships and military capabilities in specific ways that consolidate their existing advantages and impede China’s capacity to coerce regional states or posture for wartime advantage. Increasing US and likeminded powers’ strategic leverage would ideally convince Beijing that coercive policies are unworkable or prohibitively costly. Among the United States’ likeminded partners, India would have the greatest scope to act in the Indian Ocean region, given its relative advantages. A coherent strategy would be most effective if it exploits India’s unique advantages, but it should also account for India’s particular resource and policy constraints and be tailored accordingly; massive arms acquisitions programs are not the answer.

In the remainder of this paper, I first elaborate on the strategic risks posed by China’s military expansion in the Indian Ocean region. Second, I show that the strategic responses that the United States and its partners have mounted thus far are unrealistic or illogical. Third, I highlight India’s position as a central actor in the Indian Ocean, with key strategic advantages but also, in a fourth section, constraints. Fifth and finally, I posit a conceptual framework for building strategic leverage to mitigate risk and operationalizing it along four lines of effort.

### **China’s Military Expansion Generates Strategic Risks**

China’s military power is expanding rapidly, and it is expanding in the direction of the Indian Ocean. It has already established a formidable array of networked, long-range precision weapons in its near seas in East Asia. The PLAN launched more new shipping tonnage from 2014 to 2018 than the entire Indian Navy.<sup>7</sup> Its fleet is increasingly designed for oceanic deployments beyond China’s near seas (for example with longer-range air defenses and aircraft carriers to project force ashore), features larger ships that allow greater endurance away from home ports, and is rapidly expanding its amphibious capability, with a planned five-fold increase in its marine infantry and development of ocean-going landing helicopter docks. The PLAN’s high tempo of survey and research vessel deployments in the Indian Ocean suggests a long-term interest in undersea operations there.<sup>8</sup>

None of this should come as a surprise to students of geopolitics—as a great power with an enormous population and industrial capacity, unhindered by continental rivals and determined to secure its growing maritime interests, China is

bound to expand its naval power.<sup>9</sup> Beyond its near seas, the Indian Ocean has become the primary target of China's military expansion in order to secure not only BRI projects, but also the energy supplies and trade routes that are the lifeblood of the Chinese economy.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, China's authoritative military doctrinal text, *The Science of Military Strategy*, attributes particular strategic importance to a unified "two oceans region," encompassing the western Pacific and northern Indian Oceans. It calls for China to establish a presence in those oceans,

**China may be nearing the high-water mark of its relative power in the region**

extract their resources, influence countries on their littorals, and develop its military capabilities for those purposes.<sup>11</sup> And Beijing may feel some urgency to establish a long-term military presence. Given the rising power of multiple middle powers and its own impending domestic economic slow-down, China may be nearing the high-water mark of its relative power in the region and may be keen to lock in its influence.<sup>12</sup>

As China stretches its military power into the Indian Ocean region, it poses risks for the United States and its likeminded partners. It does not pose a clear and constant military threat as it does in East Asia—for example, against Taiwan and to a lesser degree against rival claimants in its various territorial disputes, from Japan to several Southeast Asian states. Instead, in the Indian Ocean, where China is not engaged in territorial disputes, its posture and behavior may pose more amorphous dangers, emerging and receding aperiodically with varying severity.

There are no clear and constant targets of Chinese aggression nor a sustained Chinese campaign against a designated adversary, but mainstream consensus holds that it does pose a strategic risk to regional states.<sup>13</sup> Much of China's most high-profile activities associated with the BRI involve economic and political risks that lie outside the scope of this paper, and it has a vision of a China-centric regional political order that clashes directly with the "free and open Indo-Pacific" envisioned in Washington and allied capitals.<sup>14</sup> But its military expansion poses at least three particular strategic risks to the United States and its partners: direct coercion, indirect coercion, and wartime advantages.

### **Direct Coercion**

First, more Chinese military power in the Indian Ocean raises the risk of direct coercion. Over the past decade, China has established a clear pattern of military coercion and provocation. This pattern is especially apparent in its territorial disputes in the South China Sea, but there are compelling reasons to interpret it as a more general shift in China's approach to statecraft.<sup>15</sup> Even against countries

with which China has no territorial disputes, Chinese naval or, more often, militia ships have often used aggressive tactics, such as blinding laser attacks.<sup>16</sup> And China already uses non-military vessels in the Indian Ocean region to compromise regional states' sovereignty while staying below the threshold of military force—often for intelligence collection or hydrographic research to enable future naval operations.<sup>17</sup> Faced with such “gray zone” tactics, the other state must decide whether to escalate with military force, and often it backs down—in effect, coerced to accept a status quo of Chinese presence.

Alternatively, China can use military shows of force, for example, to support resource extraction. PLA Navy vessels have been used to escort Chinese illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing activities in distant seas, which may operate in or transit the Indian Ocean.<sup>18</sup> During a 2018 political crisis in the Maldives, a PLAN surface action group entered the Indian Ocean for the first time in four years. This move was seen by some Indian analysts as an effort to deter an Indian military intervention in the Maldives.<sup>19</sup> Deterring military action by the United States or its partners would directly impede their efforts to defend their interests. Over time, as China's force-projection capabilities improve, this risk could even extend to China's own military interventions in semi-permissive or contested environments, for example on behalf of Chinese citizens or interests abroad.<sup>20</sup>

### **Indirect Coercion**

Second, China's political and military influence raises the risk that it could indirectly coerce the United States or its partners, either by building the capacity of China's dependable partners or by offering other states inducements to change their security policies in ways inimical to the United States and its partners. The clearest example of this is in Pakistan, where China supplies military equipment, economic investment, and diplomatic cover. In return, Pakistan remains a potent military threat splitting India's attention as well as resources and offers to China the promise of new transport and energy links to the western Indian Ocean.

China has also used a mix of economic inducements and corruption to convince leaders of smaller states, including Sri Lanka and the Maldives, to alter their security policies. For example, the aforementioned 2018 Maldives crisis was triggered when then-President Abdulla Yameen, enticed by the lure of extravagant BRI projects, moved to quash his political opposition. In the process, he also sought to end a long-standing Indian military presence in the Maldives—in effect reorienting the Maldives' security policy toward security cooperation with China—until he was subsequently voted out of office.<sup>21</sup> Over time, this indirect coercion may spawn multiple spoiler states in the region—from the Seychelles to

Bangladesh<sup>22</sup>—limiting the United States’ and its partners’ ability to generate collective policy action or manage other security threats.

### Wartime Advantage

Third, China’s expanding military presence, with more bases and deployed forces, raises the risk of wartime advantage, which China could use, for example, in a local conflict in the Indian Ocean or as an option to escalate or widen a war in the western Pacific. The PLAN’s new access and presence in the Indian Ocean gives it new positional advantages on the far side of the second island chain and the Malacca Strait—geographic barriers that otherwise could, if adequately fortified, hem in China’s navy—and astride globally significant sea lines of communication (SLOCs). Operating military bases or dual-use ports gives China a certain guarantee of access, extending its military reach, much as colonial ports did for old European empires.<sup>23</sup> The military base in Djibouti, for example, provides not only logistical support for Navy ships, but also a mechanized infantry contingent and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which could be used to project power in the region.<sup>24</sup> Other dual-use ports, such as Gwadar, could be used for logistics support to extend the operating range or endurance of Chinese naval forces.

The PLA recognizes the need to expand its global logistics footprint with more bases and perhaps prepositioned equipment and would be prepared to use civilian ports and shipping to that end.<sup>25</sup> In wartime, it could use its expanded forces to attack certain high-value enemy targets ashore, bottle up enemy naval forces in port, or hold at risk or interdict enemy SLOCs. China’s persistent naval presence,

enabled by regional base or port access, provides Beijing with enough sea denial capability to disrupt and raise the costs of adversary’s commercial shipping.<sup>26</sup>

These three risks engage US and partner national security interests across the Indo-Pacific, even if China is not directly targeting those states. Washington’s partners rely on freedom of navigation in the global commons not only for the free flow of vital energy and commerce, but also because US alliance guar-

antees depend on access to forward areas via oceanic SLOCs.<sup>27</sup> The very real possibility that China could effectively jeopardize the United States’ global access would suffuse their policy deliberations with uncertainty and caution. A stronger China that generates such a risk would thereby curtail US and like-minded states’ freedom of action, reduce their warning time for emerging threats, and raise the specter of higher costs or defeat in wartime.

**Three risks face US and partner national security interests across the Indo-Pacific**

## Current Responses to China Are Illogical or Unrealistic

Despite the dangers, the United States and its likeminded partners have not arrested this increase in China's regional military power. Their response to date has been based, in some cases, on flawed strategic logic and, in other cases, on unrealistic assumptions. The flawed logic is a feature of strategic concepts ill-suited to the Indian Ocean region. Indeed, some arguments omit an explicit strategic logic altogether—calls for building regional partners' capacity rely on vague notions of counter-balancing and often do not address how stronger partners would mitigate the specific security risks of Chinese coercion or wartime advantage.<sup>28</sup>

Some analysts have offered strategic concepts that center on a long-term “competitive strategy” approach to reshape Chinese defense priorities.<sup>29</sup> For example, one idea suggests that stronger Indian ground forces may compel China to divert some resources away from its US-facing naval expansion and toward the Himalayan border.<sup>30</sup> But China's prioritization of its near waters is based on the extremely high political value it places on its sovereign claims and countering a US intervention; given its preference ordering and its strategic depth in the west, any marginal resources it devotes to its western land borders would not come at the expense of the US-China military balance in its near seas.

Another flawed idea uses the logic of deterrence by punishment. This logic suggests that a revisionist actor like China may be dissuaded from aggression, for example in the western Pacific, if the United States and its partners threaten to retaliate in other areas where China is relatively weaker, such as the Indian Ocean. Aware that the Chinese economy relies on energy flows and trade that traverse the Indian Ocean, this idea suggests that maritime powers like the United States, perhaps with Indian support, could effectively threaten or impose a blockade on China.<sup>31</sup> Even in the event that deterrence fails, advocates of a blockade suggest it could effectively compel China to concede elsewhere. Indian analysts, for example, have suggested that in the midst of the ongoing military crisis on the India-China land border, India should consider more aggressive naval maneuvers in the Indian Ocean, or even the South China Sea, to coerce China into backing down in the Himalayas.<sup>32</sup>

But this logic of punishment in the Indian Ocean is flawed and therefore lacks credibility. A distant blockade would not only be exceedingly difficult to sustain tactically and politically, it would also be so escalatory as to guarantee a general war. Economic strangulation of China would be catastrophic for the global economy and would

**The logic of punishment in the Indian Ocean is flawed and lacks credibility**

require significant time to work; if it succeeded to the point of threatening the Chinese regime's survival, it would risk further escalation.<sup>33</sup> Such options for cost-imposition against China are unworkable—in any feasible limited war scenario, China's authoritarian leaders will have the resources and resolve to weather punitive costs. Thus, concepts based on punishment may be a speciously attractive option because they offer the United States and its partners a way to impose costs on China, but they still lack a theory of success for deterring or compelling Chinese behavior.

In other cases, US and partner policies have been undermined by unrealistic assumptions. Most prominently, Washington quickly and correctly identified India's potential as a counter-balance to China, and in the past two decades has come to rely on a policy of "strategic altruism"—supporting India's rising power with the expectation that it would naturally serve as a vital bulwark against a Chinese bid for hegemony.<sup>34</sup> While this policy is conceptually appealing, it rests on two assumptions that are increasingly empirically dubious: that India's economic and military power will quickly grow and close the gap with China's power, and that the United States and India will consistently see eye-to-eye on key regional issues and especially on policy toward China.<sup>35</sup> In fact, because India's economic growth is slowing in the absence of structural reforms and its military modernization is starved of critical resources—the gap with China is growing, not shrinking.<sup>36</sup> This problem is not confined to India: a detailed research report recently concluded that the US military is an "atrophying force" with a dwindling capacity to uphold a favorable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>37</sup> And while the United States and India may both see China as their primary long-term rival, they often assign different priorities and tools to various dimensions of the challenge, and they each remain easily distracted by more politically salient security threats, especially in the Middle East and Pakistan, respectively.<sup>38</sup>

While Washington should be prepared to re-examine its assumptions about Indian growth and policy preferences, any strategy for the Indian Ocean region must place India at its center. The issue for US policymakers is *how*—not *whether*—India can play a role in regional security, given its particular advantages and constraints.

## **India's Critical Relative Advantages**

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Of the United States' likeminded partners, India has the greatest scope to shape outcomes in the Indian Ocean region. It will be central to any efforts to mitigate regional risks, and it is by far the largest resident littoral state—its population of 1.3 billion people dwarfs the next largest state (Indonesia, with 267 million); its

US\$2.6 trillion economy, measured by GDP, is already almost twice as large as the next largest regional economy (Australia's US\$1.4 trillion economy); and its military of 1.45 million active duty personnel, with another 1.6 million paramilitaries for internal security, is more than twice the size of the next largest (Pakistan's 650,000 active duty personnel and 280,000 paramilitaries).<sup>39</sup> These raw inputs of power should be the basis of India's long-term accrual of material power. But as I noted above, a strategy that relies only on symmetrical material competition with China, given India's uncertain mobilization of that power, risks policy failure.

The United States and its partners are more likely to manage risk if they instead craft a strategy that exploits their relative advantages over China—and among Quad partners, India has the greatest structural advantages in the Indian Ocean region. These advantages are based on geography and historically long-standing informal and formal relationships, so they are resilient to rapid shifts in material power or policy changes.

**India has the greatest structural advantages in the Indian Ocean region**

### Geography

First and foremost, India has a central geographic position. Its long subcontinental coastline lies in close and unimpeded proximity to the heavily trafficked SLOCs that are the jugular of global commerce and energy flows, connecting Europe and the Middle East to East Asia. This access is one of the necessary elements of maritime power as explained by strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan's canonical theory—an element that some past would-be maritime powers such as Germany have lacked.<sup>40</sup> The pre-independence Indian naval theorist K.M. Panikkar noted that the Indian Ocean approximated a land-locked sea. As long as colonial powers controlled the ocean's gateways—the straits at Bab al Mandab and Malacca—they could dominate the Indian Ocean and thereby dictate terms across its whole littoral.<sup>41</sup> India also possesses outlying islands—the Andaman and Nicobars and, to a lesser degree, the Lakshadweeps—that offer bases from which India could project power considerably farther than its mainland ports would allow.<sup>42</sup> In Mahanian terms, the Andaman and Nicobar islands boast impressive *situation*, or geographic position, but they lack *strength* or *resources*—that is, strong defenses or material self-sufficiency.<sup>43</sup>

Other major status quo states in the Indian Ocean may either be resident on the periphery—such as Australia, which still sees greater interests engaged on its other, Pacific coast<sup>44</sup>—or they may operate distant bases in the Ocean, such as France with its base at Reunion or the United States with Diego Garcia.<sup>45</sup>

China, similarly, even with its base in Djibouti, must operate in the Indian Ocean at long distances and through predictable chokepoints, which reduces its forces' available firepower and endurance and increases their vulnerability.<sup>46</sup> In comparison, India's central geographic position, closer to the Ocean's key SLOCs and chokepoints, lends it a relative advantage for projecting naval force across the region.

### **Informal Networks**

India's second key relative advantage is its extensive informal economic links and social networks across the Indian Ocean region. In large part, these links are a legacy of India's centuries of colonial subjugation, which brought together not only South Asia, but also large portions of the Indian Ocean littoral, under an interconnected economic and social system. Under British colonial control, some 30 million Indian merchants, bureaucrats, laborers, and soldiers flowed to the region's extremities—from Natal and East Africa to the Persian Gulf, to Burma and Malaya—and beyond, throughout Britain's global empire.<sup>47</sup> The circular flows of capital, people, and ideas lost momentum after the 20th century's world wars and decolonization, but the Indian diaspora, with its linguistic, cultural, and familial connections, remained scattered abroad.

These informal economic and social ties provide India an ongoing connection to the elites and social networks from Africa to Southeast Asia. This gives India a broad and resilient base of political influence in small states such as Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Myanmar—despite the dearth of formal institutions and infrastructure—that cannot be replicated by China's economic largesse or corruption. India also finds political utility in stressing its ethnic, religious, or linguistic connections to Indian Ocean states as the roots of its soft power—and instruments for political influence—in the region. In Myanmar, for example, Indian intelligence has maintained clandestine connections with various rebel groups and has courted the ruling junta with appeals to shared culture—even the Indian grassroots Hindu-nationalist group, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, maintains a branch in Yangon for cultural-political programming.<sup>48</sup>

China, in contrast, lacks similarly broad-based connections with regional elites. When it secures access and investment agreements as part of BRI, it generally exploits the authoritarian or self-enrichment impulses of local leaders, such as Abdulla Yameen in the Maldives or Mahinda Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka.<sup>49</sup> Its influence is accordingly narrower and more brittle. In contrast, India's broader influence among local elites better positions it to collect human intelligence and gain political influence. It is probably not a coincidence that Yameen and Rajapaksa were both summarily defeated in elections by leaders who, upon gaining power, made immediate and fulsome overtures to India.

### Diplomatic Agility

Third, India holds the relative advantage of productive relationships with most states of the region. It has rapidly improved policy and operational cooperation with the most capable status quo powers of the region—the United States, Japan, Australia, and France. These burgeoning relationships are critical for Indian power: arms transfers, military exercises, and intelligence- and logistics-sharing agreements with these states have been the primary sources of India’s military capability improvements in the past two decades.

However, consonant with its tradition of “strategic autonomy,” India has also retained good working relations with other regional states shunned by the United States and its allies. The most important of these are Iran and Myanmar, which flank India on its adjacent seas. If China could secure and control movement corridors through these states, it could connect its continental interior to the Indian Ocean, unifying its (continental) belt and (maritime) road, somewhat easing its dependence on Southeast Asian chokepoints.<sup>50</sup> For this reason, China’s burgeoning investment in Iran—especially in critical infrastructure and military cooperation—carries significant geopolitical implications.<sup>51</sup> Chinese ports in these states, such as Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, would also provide the PLA with additional bases for projecting power into the Indian Ocean. The United States and its allies keep themselves at arms’ length from both these states, denying themselves any prospect of political influence. In contrast, India’s diplomatic and economic relations with both provides a much-needed political tether that prevents them—especially Myanmar—from drifting into China’s orbit.

### India’s Critical Constraints

While India enjoys these relative advantages over other status quo powers as well as China, it is also encumbered by its own characteristic constraints. The same factors of geography and path-dependent history add limits to New Delhi’s actions, and likeminded states’ strategic approach to the region must account for these limits on Indian capacity. Four such constraints are most important.

**India is also encumbered by four characteristic constraints**

#### Shortage of Resources

First, India’s material power is severely curtailed by a shortage of resources. Its mediocre economic performance, dysfunctional procurement processes, and lack of strategic planning have critically limited its military modernization.<sup>52</sup> With shrinking budget allocations and burgeoning personnel costs, the Indian military cannot

sufficiently invest in capital acquisitions necessary for replacing outdated legacy platforms, let alone for new power projection capabilities.<sup>53</sup> It has, for example, cut back on its planned acquisitions of P-8I maritime patrol aircraft and Sea Guardian armed drones.<sup>54</sup> Its earlier plans for a 200-ship Navy have now been scaled back to 175 ships.<sup>55</sup> Major acquisitions programs, either from domestic production or foreign sales—such as the *Tejas* light aircraft or the yet-undecided medium multi-role aircraft—routinely suffer years-long delays. With these resource constraints, Indian policy cannot buy its way to success. A strategy that hinges on, say, operating Indian aircraft carriers or submarines will not come to fruition for decades at best; more likely, relying on India's uncertain acquisition of future capabilities risks policy failure.

### **Continental Threat Perceptions**

Second, India's military remains heavily dominated by threat perceptions and actions on its northern continental periphery, at the expense of the Indian Ocean region.<sup>56</sup> Most of India's warfighting experiences have reinforced this strategic-cultural bias; even in recent years, its most acute militarized crises have been on its land borders, both against China (at Doklam in 2017 and in Ladakh in 2020) and Pakistan (in Kashmir in 2019). The Army accounts for 57 percent of the Defence budget and 85 percent of military personnel.<sup>57</sup> The Indian Navy has led an increasing tempo of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) missions across the region in recent years. But the Indian strategic community remains gun-shy about interventions in non-permissive environments after the disastrous 1987–90 intervention in Sri Lanka, a bruising counter-insurgency campaign that quickly came to be known as “India's Vietnam.” India has certainly expanded its military presence and capabilities for the Indian Ocean region, but that expansion will continue to be of secondary importance for New Delhi compared to continental threats to its territory.

### **Reluctance to Dominate**

Third, India remains sensitive not to appear domineering over the region's small states—albeit often with mixed effect. As the erstwhile champion of post-colonial states and the global South, India has traditionally framed itself as a collaborative partner, respectful of others' sovereignty and preferences, rather than an agenda-setting hegemon. This framing often produces policy positions that may conflict with those of its likeminded status quo partners. It has rarely lent its support to US military interventions, for example. It even supported a 2019 UN resolution to evict British administration from Diego Garcia, which hosts a critical US military base.<sup>58</sup> And as noted above, it resiled from military intervention in the Maldives crisis of 2018. Given the choice, India is more likely

to choose low-profile or deniable policy tools rather than trumpeting highly visible military interventions.

### **Suspicion of Formal Alliances**

Fourth, India remains reluctant to ally itself openly and formally with any other major power. It has deepened its strategic relationship with the United States, informal groupings such as the Quad, and other likeminded partners such as France. Through such activities and joint statements, the direction of its political outlook in favor of the status quo and in opposition to Chinese revisionism is clear. This alignment with the United States will probably accelerate following the still-unresolved 2020 border crisis, which has galvanized Indian domestic opinion against China.<sup>59</sup> Even in this environment, with fatal skirmishes on the Chinese border and US security cooperation at unprecedented levels, India's External Affairs Minister Jaishankar insisted that India "will never be" part of an alliance.<sup>60</sup>

In part, this reluctance to join a formal alliance is probably a function of bureaucratic processes that retard diplomatic engagement and residual reflexive anti-Americanism in some quarters of the Indian state. But in part, it also reflects a deliberate policy choice to calibrate its engagement, especially with the United States—India sees the threat of closer alignment with the United States as a source of leverage against China, and declaring a close alliance would expend that leverage.<sup>61</sup> Indian officials may also believe that reassuring China of India's independence from the United States will mollify Beijing, which could yet flex its muscles more than it has.<sup>62</sup> As the materially weaker power, New Delhi is perfectly rational in seeking to avoid a costlier and riskier security dilemma with China. Whatever the reasons, India's partners should recognize that it prizes this utility of "strategic autonomy," will continue to calibrate its confrontation against China, and will withhold a more formal or complete alignment with the United States or other powers.

### **Building and Operationalizing Strategic Leverage**

As the preceding strategic assessment shows, India will play a central role in the Indian Ocean region—but it does not offer salvation. Its geography allows it relatively easy reach to key SLOCs and chokepoints, but, given resource shortfalls and continental priorities, its navy will struggle to control them; it boasts significant political access and influence across the region, but it would prefer not to be seen as a unilateral power or to needlessly provoke China; it has deepened partnerships with likeminded status quo powers such as the United States and the Quad, but it will assiduously maintain policy independence from them. Given

these advantages and constraints, a strategy that continues to seek to match China symmetrically by building material power or threatening to impose prohibitive costs is likely to fail.

**A more viable option is to build their collective strategic leverage in the Indian Ocean region**

A more viable and effective option is for the United States, other Quad members, and other likeminded partners to work with India to build their collective *strategic leverage* in the Indian Ocean region. As I showed in the preceding sections, India already has considerable leverage to influence regional politics and security. A fruitful strategy would consolidate those advantages and operationalize them in ways that thwart potential Chinese coercion or positional advantage in wartime while being mindful of India's constraints.

Building strategic leverage is a concept that focuses on consolidating political and military capabilities while deliberately eschewing signals of adversarial intent that may intensify the security dilemma against a better-resourced and resolved China. Strategic leverage has both political and military dimensions: the political dimension would seek to protect smaller states from potential Chinese coercion by binding them more closely to India and its partners; the military element would seek to develop Indian and partner capabilities to deter aggression and generate military options to counter Chinese force projection. Building strategic leverage is an approach that is particularly well-suited to India and its Quad as well as other partners that seek to mitigate strategic risk—it would not require a significant growth in Indian material power or consistently uniform policy approaches among supporting partner states.

Strategic leverage would mitigate risk by using the logic of *deterrence by denial*. As I noted above, current policy responses are either bereft of a clear theory of success or rely on unworkable logics of punishment. In contrast, deterrence by denial seeks to reinforce defensive bulwarks to convince a potential adversary that aggression would either fail outright or be prohibitively costly. Ideally, the adversary is dissuaded from aggression; but even if the adversary is undeterred, denial would seek to physically or politically impede the aggressor from achieving its goals.<sup>63</sup> Some analysts have already made compelling arguments for the United States to pursue a denial strategy in its priority theater in the western Pacific.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, the United States, India, and their partners could mitigate the risks of Chinese military expansion in the Indian Ocean region if they convince Beijing that coercion would either fail or incur too high a material or political cost and that it could not triumph in a limited war. Even if Beijing is

undeterred from acting in a particular case, a failed or unexpectedly costly episode may give it pause in subsequent cases.

To reinforce this deterrence by denial, India and other likeminded partners would need to thicken political relationships with the institutions of regional states and develop military capabilities that counter China's force projection capacity. Such a campaign to build strategic leverage would purposefully mitigate the risks of Chinese military expansion and shape the region by erecting strong new defensive bulwarks in peacetime, rather than reacting to spot-fires initiated at times and places of Beijing's choosing. These actions would allow the Quad, for example, to consciously prioritize—through a deliberate planning process—the states, sub-regions, or issues where they would prefer to concentrate their risk-mitigation resources and attention.

There is no single way to operationalize a campaign of building strategic leverage. While strategic leverage can and should be a comprehensive approach that builds an array of political connections and military capabilities, this paper offers an indicative foray emphasizing some elements of defense policy. In the remainder of this section, I present four nominal lines of effort to illustrate how that may be implemented. For each line of effort, I explain the strategic logic of how an action would mitigate the risks of Chinese coercion and/or wartime advantage while offering purely illustrative examples of such actions. Some of the illustrative policy options are deliberately designed as aspirational “stretch goals,” which current governments may consider implausible. These options may, however, become politically feasible if there is an escalation in Chinese provocations, or after an exogenous shock—in the same way that the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami catalyzed rapid joint action by the United States, India, Australia, and Japan, which then evolved into the first iteration of the Quad.<sup>65</sup> Today's likeminded partners, accordingly, should be prepared to act with alacrity in the event of a crisis or shock.

### **Institutional Binding**

The first line of effort would seek to ensure that the government machinery of smaller regional states is institutionally bound more closely to India or other likeminded powers. This step would seek to ensure that small states' governments have a broad bureaucratic or military base of support for a continued security partnership with India. It would help to generate internal support for policy continuity and resistance to sudden shifts in the small states' security orientation. Thus, even if China seeks to curry favor with a state's particular leadership, the state's bureaucracy and military would be bound by both formal mechanisms, such as treaties or memorandums of understanding, and informal resistance among officials, both of which would make rapid security policy shifts more difficult.

None of this provides a guarantee of impeding Chinese coercion, but it creates obstacles and resistance to it.

India has already embarked on several regional binding initiatives. One recent example is the South Asia Satellite (designated as GSAT-9), launched by the Indian Space Research Organisation in 2017. The satellite provides communications and meteorological information to several South Asian states as a “gift” from India.<sup>66</sup> Another example is the Information Fusion Centre—Indian

**Institutional binding may be most promising at the military-to-military level**

Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in Gurgaon, inaugurated in 2018. The IFC-IOR is operated by the Indian Navy but shares maritime domain awareness information with a range of regional countries.<sup>67</sup> Such initiatives not only offer a high-profile largesse and critical services to regional states, but they also habituate those states’ technical and military establishments to routine interaction and interdependence with India. In several regional states, such as

Indonesia, the military will be the most organizationally stable and politically influential institution; thus, institution-binding may be most promising at the military-to-military level. Such institutional links are the stuff of broad and enduring alignments that would complicate any third party’s plans to coerce policy changes.

An aspirational example of institutional binding would be a multinational military headquarters—perhaps the “Indian Ocean Task Force” (IOTF)—that would be based in India but include military officers from several regional states integrated in key staff positions. It may even include representatives from other likeminded powers that have extensive experience in multinational operations, such as the United States and Australia.<sup>68</sup> The IOTF would be a standing institution that could develop contingency plans, test those plans in command-post exercises, and organize field training exercises. Once running at full operating capability, it would represent a “turn-key” operation that could be easily expanded during a contingency and could command Indian-led multinational HADR operations. For regional states, officer rotations at IOTF would provide a sought-after training opportunity and valuable transparency of India’s military organization and processes. Such an operation would of course require both India and its regional partners to display a significant degree of trust—integrating principal staff officers is usually practiced only among the most mature partnerships<sup>69</sup>—but it would also be an invaluable mechanism for building trust and strategic interdependence. As IOTF demonstrates its utility, both for peacetime interdependence and in contingency operations, it would emerge as a key pillar of security cooperation between India and regional states.

Of course, such an initiative would be extremely ambitious and is unlikely absent a significant catalyst to bring the regional states together. In the meantime, an intermediate option, in which India hosts a disaster-relief coordination center,<sup>70</sup> rather than a standing headquarters with command arrangements, would still modestly advance the purpose of institutional binding.

### **Forward Presence as a Tripwire**

The second line of effort in building strategic leverage would involve the forward deployment of Indian or other partner personnel or materiel across the region. This forward presence could be in the form of military units or other government agencies. Borrowing a principle from the theory of extended deterrence, the aim would be to establish an Indian “tripwire” across the region, which would implicate Indian or other partner interests should the host nation fall victim to coercion or attack.<sup>71</sup>

This line of effort guards against a threat of a Chinese military intervention designed to coerce a smaller regional state, even if it has an ostensibly benign purpose such as protection of Chinese citizens or assets. The tripwire need not comprise a major military unit and need not offer any materially meaningful defensive power—its purpose would largely be political and symbolic, so even a small detachment of military personnel, government officials, or valuable equipment may suffice. Its ultimate purpose is to ensure that the potential Chinese military intervention also engages the interests of the tripwire provider, presenting a visible obligation for the tripwire provider to claim an ongoing stake to be involved in the contingency.

India may be best placed, among Quad members, to deploy a tripwire across much of the region, given its long-standing and broad political relations. But even a non-combat Indian military presence may not be welcome in some states—in which case a tripwire from any of the Quad members would be effective. An Indian tripwire would stand as a material commitment to the security of the host nation without the need to enter into a formal alliance, which would otherwise irk New Delhi. A forward presence in a smaller regional state would, in effect, serve to internationalize a dyadic dispute between China and the less-powerful regional state, increasing the risk that India or another Quad member would become involved and thereby raising the costs to China of coercion against small states.

Ideally, a tripwire would deter Chinese aggression. China often uses extreme power asymmetries to its advantage by using gray zone tactics against a single, less powerful adversary to quickly achieve its goal, as it has done repeatedly in asserting its territorial claims in the South China Sea. But by the same token, Beijing has backed down from coercive threats when multiple states, especially

**Ideally, a tripwire  
would deter  
Chinese aggression**

major powers, are involved in a dispute. For example, in 2019, China was unsuccessful in coercing Vietnam to halt the *Hakuryu-5* rig's offshore drilling at Vanguard Bank. Vietnam used an array of naval and diplomatic tactics in the months-long stand-off, internationalizing the dispute through *demarches* and public diplomacy—though China was probably also dissuaded from escalating because *Hakuryu-5* was not only a Vietnamese asset but also a Japanese rig being operated by Russia's national oil company.<sup>72</sup> Other rival claimants have begun to recognize this dynamic: Indonesia, for example, is seeking foreign investment in the Natuna Islands from Japan and Australia, not only to develop them economically but also to deter future Chinese coercion in their disputed waters.<sup>73</sup>

India already maintains small military detachments in other countries. Most notably, it supplies experienced military officers to command key elements of Mauritius' security forces, including its only helicopters and offshore patrol vessel, and provides the Mauritians with specialized training, mentorship, and niche capabilities.<sup>74</sup> India has shown a willingness to send forces abroad on rotational deployments—for example, it deployed an Indian P-8I maritime patrol aircraft to the French-administered island of La Reunion in 2020 for joint patrols with French forces.<sup>75</sup> These Indian deployments, which are not necessarily a combat force and may not be large or permanent, nevertheless demonstrate the type of forward presence that both India and various host nations across the region could comfortably accommodate.

The concept of rotational deployments could also be part of more aspirational goals involving the Quad. For example, Australia plans to upgrade its runway on Cocos Island to accommodate its P-8A maritime patrol aircraft and could then also host Indian P-8Is.<sup>76</sup> More broadly, trilateral cooperation between India, Australia, and Indonesia could pool scarce naval surveillance capabilities in the key maritime area around the Lombok and Sunda straits—which, along with the Malacca Strait, are the choke-points between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea—and help to create a more complete maritime domain awareness picture that the parties could share and use collaboratively.<sup>77</sup>

In such cases, an Indian forward presence would carry significant military utility—but quite apart from the operational benefits, an Indian tripwire in the region represents a significant signal of New Delhi's political commitment to defending its partners from coercion. Such a tripwire would not be automatic: it would still require a political decision by New Delhi to act if its tripwire is engaged. To the extent that a tripwire would have a deterrent effect, it would be precisely because it generates its own risk to China, India, and the state

where the tripwire is laid.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, smaller regional states retain their agency—some may be more inclined to hedge between India and China rather than accept an Indian tripwire deployment. Nevertheless, to the extent that India establishes tripwires, they would create a public commitment and a greater incentive for India to mitigate the risk of Chinese aggression across the region.

### **Interoperability with Capable Partners**

The third line of effort would seek to build interoperability among capable status quo partners—especially between India and partners such as the United States, Japan, Australia, and France. The aim would be to build the military effectiveness of not only India, but other likeminded powers that may seek to operate in the Indian Ocean in concert with India. If these powers' militaries can communicate, resupply, and conduct combat operations seamlessly together, they will multiply the force available to deter coercion or conflict; in the worst case, they will multiply the force available in wartime.

Interoperability, then, is the key to offsetting the resource constraints that afflict all Quad members and the problems inherent in coalition operations. With interoperability, the region will not have to depend on India's uncertain military expansion. Interoperability would benefit from likeminded militaries operating the same equipment, but that is neither necessary nor sufficient—interoperability also benefits from common or mutually intelligible processes and approaches to planning and command.<sup>79</sup> Critically, by focusing on the tactical level, this effort would focus squarely on military capabilities rather than intent—it would increase strategic leverage regardless of fluctuations in national policy, and it certainly does not require the politically infeasible step of India formalizing a military alliance with the United States.

**Interoperability is the key to offsetting the resource constraints for all Quad members**

India has taken significant steps to build interoperability with its status quo partners. Its growing arms acquisitions from the United States means it operates an increasing amount of common equipment. For example, its P-8I aircraft are a variant of the P-8As operated by the United States and Australia, and it plans to acquire the same MH-60R helicopters that the United States and Australia operate. These common platforms among the three navies should facilitate combined anti-submarine warfare operations. India has also signed formal “foundational” agreements to enable the sharing of logistics support, secure communications, and geospatial data with the United States; it has signed, or plans to sign, similar logistics pacts with others including France, Singapore,

Russia, South Korea, and Australia.<sup>80</sup> Finally, the Indian military has vigorously expanded its roster of joint military exercises, granting greater mutual transparency with partner militaries and building habits of cooperation.

The next steps in interoperability are incremental—expanding the types of weapons systems and mission sets where India’s military can operate effectively with partners. Primarily, this would require partner interoperability to be a major consideration—alongside battlefield performance, cost, and industrial offsets—for Indian procurement activity. An aspirational goal would see this interoperability extend beyond field operations and into the spheres of intelligence and planning. This extension may include interoperable information systems for the timely sharing of more-sensitive intelligence and ultimately mutually visible or even combined contingency planning. More interoperable intelligence and planning would allow India and its partners to respond with speed and mutual trust in regional contingencies. This improved response would be valuable for any military operation, but it would be especially important in cases of Chinese coercion that use gray zone tactics, which can most effectively be countered with speed of action and multilateral coordination.<sup>81</sup>

### **Military Capabilities for Sea Denial**

The final line of effort to build strategic leverage is to develop military capabilities for *sea denial*. In a naval strategy of sea denial, India and its likeminded partners would disrupt and raise the costs of China’s offensive naval operations, thereby deterring or preventing China from projecting force and, if necessary, threatening to interrupt its use of SLOCs for military or paramilitary purposes. A strategy of sea control—the lodestar of Mahanian sea power—seeks the ability to use the seas unmolested, but generally requires a much higher threshold of naval power, and the ability to find and decisively defeat the enemy fleet. In contrast, sea denial would require India and its likeminded partners to have somewhat more modest capabilities—to hold PLA forces at risk or to destroy them, if necessary, in a limited conflict. Sea denial comes in multiple forms—my use of the term aligns more closely with the concept of “guerrilla warfare at sea,” rather than the more ambitious concept of erecting an impermeable barrier at sea.<sup>82</sup>

In this framework, sea denial would be intended to counter China’s force projection capabilities, especially its undersea, aircraft-carrier, and amphibious capabilities. These offensive capabilities, which already exist but are rapidly growing in numbers, would greatly expand China’s ability—and, therefore, the strategic risk—to use direct military coercion. They, along with China’s expanding base access arrangements, would also enable the PLA to range significant force across the entire Indian Ocean region, giving it positional advantages in

wartime. India and its likeminded partners could most effectively mitigate this risk by concentrating military capabilities for sea denial near the PLA's bases, SLOCs, and primary operating areas—that is, across the northern Indian Ocean, and especially in the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the Andaman Sea.

India's geographic centrality once again underscores its importance as the lead likeminded partner in implementing a sea denial strategy. India's partners, especially the United States and Australia, would play a key role. They have already published strategic or doctrinal documents outlining their plans to develop long-range sea denial capabilities: the US Marine Corps' "expeditionary advanced base operations" concept and Australia's 2020 *Defence Strategic Update* both call for a long-term force structure built around long-range missiles.<sup>83</sup> India and its supporting partners could share tactical expertise, refine skills with combined and increasingly complex multinational training exercises, provide mutual logistics supply, and ultimately share intelligence and plans.

The Indian Navy, however, is best positioned to monitor and deploy across the whole Indian Ocean littoral and is accordingly best placed to orchestrate a sea denial strategy. At the same time, given New Delhi's resource limitations and its strategic preferences to avoid intensifying security competition with China, it need not base its modernization plans on acquiring destabilizing or unrealistic new capabilities. To effectively execute a denial strategy, India could prioritize capabilities that can track and prosecute enemy surface and undersea targets, rather than the prestige platforms such as aircraft carriers that a more traditional Mahanian strategy of sea control would require.

In practice, sea denial in the Indian Ocean amounts to an immediate priority on anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and mobile precision fires, such as cruise missiles mounted either on aircraft or mobile launchers. Such capabilities are far less costly and far quicker to build and field than the enormous undertaking that an aircraft carrier and its associated air wing and escorts would represent. They offer a more survivable capability—the multiplicity of aircraft and bases creates redundancy, whereas a single or small number of capital ships are much more vulnerable to attrition. The mobility of launch platforms—especially aircraft—is important because it would lend India the operational flexibility to concentrate its forces if necessary or “swing” them quickly from, say, the Bay of Bengal to the Arabian Sea or vice versa.

Moreover, aircraft and mobile missile launchers would add to crisis stability. When surface combatants are deployed even in routine peacetime “presence”

**T**he Indian Navy is best placed to orchestrate a sea denial strategy

operations, they convey with them “latent suasion” because they represent a very visible and persistent package of combat-ready military power in the area of deployment.<sup>84</sup> In crisis, such a deployment to a chokepoint or contested area would be an escalatory act of coercion. In contrast, aircraft and missiles remain over the horizon in the rear—they need not establish a visible presence, let alone a persistent presence, in the area of the potential target. Elevating their readiness levels in a crisis would not be as visible and threatening as a surface ship deployment. For this reason, force dispositions are also an important consideration: routinely deploying aircraft to offshore bases in peacetime—be they the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Reunion, or even eventually Cocos Island—would create a normalcy pattern, whereas doing so only in wartime would send an escalatory signal. The Indian military already operates these qualitative capabilities, although it would benefit from a quantitative improvement, with a larger number of launch platforms and larger missile magazines, to give it operational flexibility and sufficient stocks in case of wartime usage.

The critical enabler for this denial complex is a robust intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and command and control (C2) network. Finding the enemy in a large ocean has always been a central challenge of naval strategy, and long-range precision weapons only exacerbate this problem because using them effectively requires search for and tracking of the enemy in an exponentially larger area. In this age of long-range precision fires, naval combat is often reduced to a “hider-finder” contest, where finding the enemy first confers a significant tactical advantage.<sup>85</sup> Operational awareness is not only a matter of warfighting; in peacetime, China has gotten away with much of its threatening activity simply because its assets can remain undetected for some time—as in the case of the Chinese survey vessel recently discovered intruding in India’s Andaman Sea EEZ.<sup>86</sup> Thus, simply having a proven capability to find and track Chinese vessels would have a considerable deterrent effect against coercion.

India can use a combination of space-based surveillance, coastal radars, and surface ships for maritime domain awareness and to cue its attacking forces.<sup>87</sup> But an effective military deterrent would require high-fidelity ISR for targeting, as well as reliable sensor-shooter networks that can overcome the Indian military’s inter-service organizational seams and be resilient to the enemy’s offensive cyber disruption. If this is not sufficiently aspirational, an even more ambitious goal would be to spread that sensor-shooter network over a multinational coalition, where Indian forces can be cued by likeminded partners’ interoperable ISR sensors or vice versa.

Sea denial, however, may not be one-sided. If India can deny Chinese forces the ability to operate freely in part of the Indian Ocean, China may be able to similarly restrict Indian and partner forces in the same area. This “mutual sea

denial” would render an area unsafe for either side’s large naval formations, deterring both sides from major offensive actions.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, based on current trends, this is the likeliest outcome in the Bay of Bengal.<sup>89</sup> If China’s existing development projects in Myanmar deliver it basing access, it could project persistent surface and sub-surface force into the Bay of Bengal. This presence would challenge the notion of an Indian naval and nuclear bastion in the Bay of Bengal and endanger critical resupply lines for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. While India may chafe at an inability to control its adjacent waters, mutual sea denial would at least preserve a status quo where China is unable to achieve dominance. As long as India, supported by its likeminded partners, can keep pace with ASW capabilities, precision strike, and accompanying ISR enablers, it should retain the ability to defend the local status quo and thwart any aggressive Chinese military expansionist impulses.

### **A More Realistic and Effective Strategy**

A campaign of building strategic leverage is designed to mitigate the risks of Chinese military expansion in the Indian Ocean region. It would recognize that, among the United States and its likeminded partners, India is the most consequential power in the region. But rather than expecting India to replicate American strengths or mirror China’s expansion, strategic leverage is a framework that follows directly from the strategic assessment of India’s unique geographic and political advantages. Its “theory of success” rests on a layered defense of political relationships (through institutional binding and forward presence) and military capabilities (through interoperability and sea denial capabilities). Together, they would impede or raise the costs of Chinese coercion and counter its force projection capabilities, ideally deterring it from any aggression in the Indian Ocean. At the same time, strategic leverage offers policy subtlety that is mindful of India’s material and political constraints. Rather than advocating a full-frontal strategic competition with China, which may be counterproductive for a modestly growing India, it demands realistic increases in capability and eschews bold declarations of confrontation.

Strategic leverage offers a framework for recommended action—an underlying logic with illustrative lines of effort—rather than specific prescriptions. It therefore accommodates a scalable range of specific policy options, depending on the material resources available, the political appetite for action, and the specific sub-region or issue in question. The region may not be ready for an Indian Ocean Task Force for years yet, but Indian policymakers and military planners can still appreciate the imperative of institutional binding and execute other, more modest proposals in that vein.

Similarly, strategic leverage offers an organizing principle for strategic relations between the United States, India, and their other partners. The members of the Quad all share a commitment to a “free and open Indo-Pacific,” but that formulation of an end-state provides no self-evident program of works for the Quad members to pursue. The four lines of effort in this paper clearly address the risks of Chinese coercion as well as wartime advantage and can accordingly structure the coordinated or joint work of likeminded partners. As the United States and Australia, for example, each seek a deeper security relationship with India, building strategic leverage provides a framework for planning and prioritizing their defense partnerships. This framework could give cues on structuring their policy discussions, arms transfers, and even joint military exercises.

This article is not designed as the final word on strategic competition with China. Ongoing efforts to compete with China’s economic influence—for example, by investing in regional infrastructure—are necessary to demonstrate there is an alternative to Chinese largesse across the whole Indo-Pacific. As the coronavirus pandemic shows, ongoing efforts to counter China’s self-serving narratives and international institutional influence are also necessary to shape the global order. In the longer-term global competition, the Quad members and other likeminded partners will need to mobilize whatever other relative advantages are salient, perhaps ranging from demographics to technological innovation. But mitigating the strategic risks of coercion and wartime advantage require their own focused and realistic solutions. The United States and its partners need not be constantly reacting to security crises or policy initiatives concocted in Beijing. Over time, by building strategic leverage, they would also be able to purposefully shape the Indian Ocean region, taking realistic and effective steps to realize their vision of a “free and open Indo-Pacific.”

## Notes

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