

China's oceanic emergence: From Admiral Zheng He's strategy to the String of Pearls doctrine

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Article Info	Abstract
Original Article	The Indian Ocean represents a region that China, during the fifteenth century of its medieval history, brought under its hegemony through Admiral Zheng He's fleet, which placed the region's political, economic, and military relations under Chinese authority. This research examines the primary question of China's motivations for turning toward the Indian Ocean in medieval times under Admiral Zheng He and in contemporary history through the String of Pearls doctrine. Using a comparative approach to sources, this study argues that the Indian Ocean, as a crucial political and commercial region, possesses the potential to enable China's dominance over the global economy. This economic dominance in medieval Chinese history centered around spices and control of strategic straits for goods transit, reinforced and protected by military presence to command global political relations. In the String of Pearls doctrine, oil resources replace spices, and again, through power projection in strategic straits via military presence in the Indian Ocean, China not only secures these resources for its growing needs but also shapes contemporary global political and economic transformations to favor its hegemony.
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Extended Abstract**Background**

Before European colonial nations diverted attention to the Indian Ocean, this ocean had been the site for China's massive fleet under Admiral Zheng He. Nevertheless, with China pulling back its fleet from the Indian Ocean in a turning inward policy, it did not care much for the maritime sphere until 1979, when it resumed its expansionist maritime strategy with its "near seas defense" doctrine. China's actions created the perception that this strategy was being used as a practice to become a naval superpower and disrupt the world order. Then in 2004, with a "new historical mission strategy", China actively began conducting military exercises in offshore waters. In 2005, with the String of Pearls doctrine, which relies on connecting strategic regions and ports, China pursued expanding its influence in the Indian Ocean region. Alternatively, given its economic development, China views the mastery of the Indian Ocean oil transit routes as a means to satisfy its growing demands. Yet, if one looks into medieval Chinese history and Admiral Zheng He's hegemony. He, too, envisioned the hegemony of the Indian Ocean as being crucial to realizing his dream of Chinese hegemony in all the seas. Hence, the String of Pearls doctrine and objectives can be found in the historical past of China and Admiral Zheng He's hegemony.

Aims

The main objective of this paper is to compare Admiral Zheng He's hegemony and the String of Pearls doctrine. The current research aims to explore the capabilities China has discovered in the Indian Ocean during two eras of oceanic hegemony, i.e., during the medieval era under Admiral Zheng He and the modern era through the String of Pearls strategy. Through a description of its action in the Indian Ocean, the research aims to account for how China conceived control over this oceanic space to ensure its naval superiority.

Methods

This study employs a comparative method. First, materials about Admiral Zheng He's hegemony and the String of Pearls doctrine were collected and classified before comparative analysis.

Results

The findings of this study are that the String of Pearls doctrine is not an entirely new concept but a reinterpretation of Admiral Zheng He's hegemony. Admiral Zheng He embarked on political, economic, and military goals by his Indian Ocean supremacy. The documentation of the paper is such that the String of Pearls doctrine also attempts to achieve objectives similar to those in the context of the Indian Ocean. Beyond perhaps placing India in a challenging situation, given its status as the principal adversary of the Indian Ocean, the doctrine also has the

potential to challenge the United States as the world's greatest power by dominating that maritime regions.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis data of the paper attests to the same goals of Admiral Zheng He's hegemony and the String of Pearls doctrine. The central objective in both instances—mastering the Indian Ocean and becoming a naval superpower—is mastering strategic ports. In taking these ports under its economic and political influence, China, in effect, positions itself to exert a dominant influence on global economic gain movement according to its own interests. During Admiral Zheng He's period, this economic current, identifiable in the form of spice trade transit and tribute levies from subjugated regions, gives way to oil deposits and lending with exorbitant interest rates in the String of Pearls policy. From another vantage point, while Admiral Zheng He employed his military assets in the open to declare China's hegemony over the Indian Ocean, the String of Pearls policy can transform each pearl into a strategic point for defending its hegemony in this maritime zone.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to the original idea, study design.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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