

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

Ebrahim Aghamohammadi\*, Marziyeh Fattahi

Department of History, Faculty of Humanities, University of Arak, Arak, Iran.

Article Info	Abstract
<p>Original Article</p> <p>Main Object: International Relations                      Scope: China</p> <p>Received: 07 January 2025                      Revised: 14 February 2025                      Accepted: 22 February 2025                      Published online: 17 March 2025</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b>                      Admiral Zheng He,                      China,                      Indian Ocean,                      String of Pearls doctrine.</p>	<p>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.</p>

**Cite this article:** Aghamohammadi E, Fattahi M. (2025). "China's oceanic emergence: From Admiral Zheng He's strategy to the String of Pearls doctrine". *Countries Studies*. 3(3): 147-152. doi: <https://doi.org/10.22059/jcountst.2025.388350.1221>.



Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License

Website: <https://jcountst.ut.ac.ir/> | Email: [jcountst@ut.ac.ir](mailto:jcountst@ut.ac.ir) |

EISSN: 2980-9193

Publisher: University of Tehran

\* Corresponding author: ✉ [aghamohammadi@araku.ac.ir](mailto:aghamohammadi@araku.ac.ir),  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1144-5673>

## 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.

### References

- Abbaszadeh-Fathabadi M, Ramazani A. (2017). "China's policy in the South China Sea; Realistic approach". *World Politics*. 6(2): 59-84. <https://doi.org/10.22124/wp.2017.2485>. [in Persian]
- Anievas A, Nişancioğlu K. (2020). *How Did the West Come to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism*. Translated by Khazaei AR. Tehran: Charkh Publication. [in Persian]
- Armstrong B. (2007). "China... from the Sea: The Importance of Chinese Naval History". *Strategic Insights*. 6(6): 1-9.
- Asgari S, Ghaderi-Hojjat M. (2022). "Geopolitical position of the Strait of Hormoz in the Iranian Maritime Defense Strategy". *Quarterly of Fundamental and Applied*

- Studies of the World of Islam*. 3(7): 113-146. [in Persian]
- Ashraf J. (2017). "String of pearls and China's emerging strategic culture". *Strategic Studies*. 37(4): 166-181. <http://dx.doi.org/10.53532/ss.037.04.00204>.
- Barzegar K, Rezaei M. (2017). "Future of intervening strategic rivalry in the Indian Ocean". *Quarterly of Politics*. 47(1): 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.22059/jpq.2017.60771>. [in Persian]
- Becker, J. (2020). *China Maritime Report No. 11: Securing China's Lifelines across the Indian Ocean*. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/11>.
- Bhatti KA, Kharl SH, Butt KM. (2020). "String of pearls: Politics of ports in Indian Ocean". *South Asian Studies*. 35(01): 73-86.
- Bigdeli A. (2015). *Europe's History in Modern Centuries*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Tehran: Payam-e-Nour University. [in Persian]
- Butt KM, Siddiqui SJ. (2021). "Growing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean". *Strategic Studies*. 41(2): 64-81. <https://doi.org/10.53532/ss.041.02.0048>.
- Chegeni-Zadeh GA, Razavi H. (2023). "Position of the Indian Ocean in Sino-Indian strategic rivalry (2013-2022)". *Scientific Quarterly of Global Policy*. 12(1): 7-41. <https://doi.org/10.22124/wp.2023.23344.3109>. [in Persian]
- Christopher PJ. (2006). "String of Pearls: Meeting the challenge of China's rising power across the Asian littoral". *Strategic Studies Institute, Carlisle*. 3.
- Darmawan B, Erasiah E, Hakim L. (2024). "Malacca and ming dynasty in 15th-16th centuries: A diplomatic relations and regional stability". *JUSPI (Jurnal Sejarah Peradaban Islam)*. 8(1): 48-60. <https://dx.doi.org/10.30829/juspi.v8i1.18491>.
- Donya-e-eqtesad*. (2023). "Coming out of defense, China on the brink of conquering the seas". Paper No. 5791, News No. 3989694. Department of donya-e-eqtesad.com. [in Persian]
- Ebrahim-Khani H. (2019). *China's "String of Pearls" strategy: Fact or Fiction? Strategic Council of Foreign*. <https://www.scfr.ir/fa/>. [in Persian]
- Elahi H. (1999). *The Persian Gulf and Relevant Problems*. 5<sup>th</sup> Ed. Tehran: Ghoumes Publication. [in Persian]
- Falavarz S. (2004). *Age of Explorations*. Translated by Javaher-Kalam F. Tehran: Ghoghnoos. [in Persian]
- Fallahi E, Omidi A. (2018). "Comparative analysis of China's energy geopolitics in Central Asia and the Persian Gulf and Iran's position". *Quarterly of Energy Economy Studies*. 15(61): 29-66. [in Persian]
- Hadian-Jazi N, Bazvand M. (2021). "China's development and Indo-U.S. foreign policies against each other from 2001 to 2019". *Scientific Quarterly of International Relations Studies*. 14(2): 149-173. [in Persian]
- Hompot S. (2023). *Mainland China's Global Historiography in Search of Grand Narratives-A Discourse-Analytical Case Study of Recent Historiography on the Zheng He Maritime Missions (1405-1433 CE)*. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372156891\\_DISSERTATION\\_DOCT\\_ORAL\\_THESIS\\_Mainland\\_China's\\_Global\\_Historiography\\_in\\_Search\\_of\\_Grand\\_Narratives\\_A\\_Discourse-Analytical\\_Case\\_Study\\_of\\_Recent\\_Historiography\\_on\\_the\\_Zheng\\_He\\_Maritime\\_Missions\\_1405-1433](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372156891_DISSERTATION_DOCT_ORAL_THESIS_Mainland_China's_Global_Historiography_in_Search_of_Grand_Narratives_A_Discourse-Analytical_Case_Study_of_Recent_Historiography_on_the_Zheng_He_Maritime_Missions_1405-1433).
- Institute for East Strategic Studies. (2017). "Rivalry of two great Asian powers in the Indian Ocean, Delhi's confrontation with China's influence in the Indian Ocean". [www.iess.ir](http://www.iess.ir). [in Persian]
- Jafari A, Rasoulpour-Nalkia-Shari S. (2022). "Feasibility of power transition to the South China Sea: China's rise to confront the U.S. hegemony". *American Scientific Journal of Strategic Studies*. 2(7). <https://doi.org/10.27834743/ASS.2207.1108>. [in Persian]
- Khan L, Ali SE. (2024). "Balancing the seas: India's response to geopolitical shifts in the Indian Ocean region". *Pakistan Research Journal of Social Sciences*. 3(3).
- Lee CY, Chan YK. (2016). "China, imperial: 7. Ming dynasty period, 1368-1644". *The Encyclopedia of Empire*. 1-13.

- <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/9781118455074.wbeoe326>.
- Linklater A. (2016). *Sociology and International Relations*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Translated by Tayyeb A. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. [in Persian]
- Mazaheri MM. (2020). "Following the Economy: it's Now Time for Security: China's Rise to Become the world's Leading Maritime Power". *Iranian Diplomacy*. <http://irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/199542>. [in Persian]
- Mengal J, Mirza MN. (2022). "String of Pearls and Necklace of Diamonds: Sino-Indian geo-strategic competition in the Indian Ocean". *Asia-Pacific-Annual Research Journal of Far East & South East Asia*. 40: 21-41. <https://doi.org/10.47781/asia-pacific.vol40.Iss0.5862>.
- Mills JVG. (2014). *Ma Huan Travelogue: Wonders of the Silk Road from China to Iran*. From the Chun-Feng Cheng version. Translated by Karimpour S. Tehran: Ghoghnoos. [in Persian]
- Mon'em R, Ghorbani-Sheikhnesin A, Simber R. (2018). "Russia's influence and challenges from the West's hegemony in the Black Sea". *Quarterly of International Relations*. 11(4): 157-184. [in Persian]
- Nardou D. (2007). *Age of Colonialism*. Translated by Haghighat-Khah M. Tehran: Ghoghnoos. [in Persian]
- Pratisti SA, Sari DS, Hidayat T. (2020). "Zheng He's soft power discourse in Indonesia: Identity in power relation". *Economics, Politics and Regional Development*. 1(1): 64-71. <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eprd.v1n1p64>.
- Saad Arshad M, Shamsuddin S, Akbar N. (2023). "China's Role in the Indo-US Strategic Interest in the Indian Ocean Region". *GSSSR*. [http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2023\(VIII-III\).05](http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2023(VIII-III).05).
- Safdar A, Khan MA. (2021). "History of Indian Ocean-A South Asian perspective". *Journal of Indian Studies*. 7(1). 183-200.
- Sen T. (2019). "Zheng He's military interventions in South Asia, 1405-1433". *China and Asia*. 1(2): 158-191. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2589465X-00102003>.
- (2016). "The impact of Zheng He's expeditions on Indian Ocean interactions". *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*. 79(3): 609-636. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X16001038>.
- Shafiei N. (2022). "Chinese diplomacy: Trap of debts and a hegemonic position". *Iranian Research Journal of International Politics*. 11(1): 219-245. <https://doi.org/10.22067/irlip.2022.21450.0>. [in Persian]
- Shahbazi A. (1998). *Jewish and Persian Plutocrats: British Colonialism and Iran*. Tehran: Institute for Political Studies. [in Persian]
- Shamlou M. (1968). *The Persian Gulf*. Tehran: Sobhe-Emrouz Press. [in Persian]
- Singer A. (2023). "Middle kingdom maxims revisited: The long, winding, and bumpy road of Chinese history". *The Saber and Scroll Journal*. 11(3).
- Siu Y. (2022). Maritime exclusion policy in Ming China and Chosŏn Korea, 1368-1450: dynastic authority, national security, and trade. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Oxford.
- Soltani F, Mottaghi A, Mohammad-Jani M. (2020). "Investigating France's Political and Military strategy in the Indian Ocean". *Quarterly of International Studies*. 16(4): 87-110. <https://doi.org/10.22034/isi.2020.113655>. [in Persian]
- Strootman R, van den Eijnde F, van Wijk R. (2019). *Empires of the Sea: Maritime Power Networks in World History*. Brill.
- Taghizadeh-Ansari M. (2016). "China: from wealth to maritime expansionism". *Quarterly of International Relations Studies*. 1(22): 163-185. [in Persian]
- Touyserkani M, Asgar-Khani AM. (2019). "Relationship between introvert/extrovert foreign policy and the rise and fall of global hegemony". *Quarterly of International Relations Studies*. 12(46): 41-86. [in Persian]
- Vaezi M. (2010). "Role of great powers in the Persian Gulf and challenges arising from the U.S. hegemony". *International Quarterly of Foreign Affairs*. 2(6): 7-47. [in Persian]

- Varij-Kazemi M. (2021). "Developing the Chinese initiative of belt and roads via the maritime string of pearls". *Jaraian Think-Tank*. <https://jaraian.com>. [in Persian]
- Wade G. (2004). "The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment". Asia Research Institute (No. 31). Working Paper Series.
- Weisser P. (2018). The Admiral's Carrot and Stick: Zheng He and the Confucius Institute. <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd/625>.
- Yazdani E, Akbarian AR. (2012). "Energy and Chinese ties with the Persian Gulf". *Quarterly of Politics*. 42(2): 315-334. <https://doi.org/10.22059/jpq.2012.29982>. [in Persian]
- Yoon S. (2015). "Implications of Xi Jinping's 'True Maritime Power' its context, significance, and impact on the region". *Naval War College Review*. 68(3): 40-63.
- Zarandi S. (2023). "Review of comparative methodology: Theories, approaches, and horizons". *Quarterly of Comparative Public Administration*. 1(1): 4. <https://doi.org/10.22098/CPA.2024.14476.1029>. [in Persian]
- Zurndorfer H. (2023). "Human trafficking and piracy in early modern East Asia: Maritime challenges to the Ming dynasty economy, 1370". *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 65(4): 908-931. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417523000270>.