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The book provides a narrative of the dramatic rise of China's presence on the Indian ocean and a parallel increase in China's naval assets

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Bertil Lintner has been a keen observer of the Southeast Asian political landscape for many years. His deep understanding of the complex relationships that animate the region's continuing transformation are evident in his books. He had explored the India-China relationship and the role of Tibet in his book *China's India War: Collision Course on the Roof of the World*. Lintner returns to this relationship in his latest offering, *The Costliest Pearl: China's Struggle for India's Ocean*. While the earlier volume focused on the land frontiers of the two countries, the current volume looks at their maritime contestation. The 'Costliest Pearl' in the title takes us back to the year 2005 when, for the first time in Washington, the concept of a 'String of Pearls' was coined to describe Chinese intent to establish an arc of maritime bases, or naval facilities, stretching from the South China Sea islands, covering Myanmar, Sri Lanka and the Maldives and then moving west to Pakistan, the Gulf and the east coast of Africa. India was not originally described as the target. The argument was used as a plea to maintain US naval presence in the ocean space to check Chinese ambitions. India is concerned because the 'string' also appears as a noose around the Indian peninsula. Lintner's use of the phrase 'India's Ocean' recognises the primary role of India in the maritime space around its peninsula. But a Chinese admiral not long ago asserted that the Indian Ocean is not India's ocean.

Lintner provides a fascinating narrative on China dramatically raising its presence on the Indian Ocean littoral and island territories. This is paralleled by a significant increase in China's naval assets, in particular its nuclear submarines. The first chapter, titled 'The New Casablanca', is about China's first acknowledged military base in Djibouti on the strategic Horn of Africa. Interestingly, the Chinese facility is cheek by jowl with an older American base and a later Japanese one, also that nation's first overseas military facility. Just as the old Casablanca, Djibouti has emerged as a latter-day nest of spies and cloak and dagger activities, but the common intent is to keep an eye on what each power is up to in the Indian Ocean.

The next chapter, on Myanmar, is probably the best in the book. It reflects the author's familiarity with the country. Myanmar has emerged as a most critical country for the realisation of China's long-term ambitions in the region and represents a case study of the multiple levers China uses to advance its influence. In the days of the Maoist revolution, the numerous ethnic groups along Myanmar's northern border with China were grouped together under the Chinese-sponsored Communist Party of Burma (CPB), which acted as a constant pressure point on the regime in Yangon. China itself disbanded the CPB in the 1990s and helped the military junta in Myanmar conclude ceasefire and arms for peace agreements with the various ethnic groups. However, China's links with these groups have remained strong, enabling it to ratchet up the pressure against Yangon whenever its interests are threatened. China took advantage of the relative

isolation of Myanmar after the military coup of 1990 to put in place trade and economic corridors across the country. The economic integration of Myanmar with southern China is now so dense that it will be difficult to wind down for any government in Yangon regardless of its political colour. The existing and planned road, railway and oil and gas pipelines that link the two countries together have made Myanmar one of the most important components of Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative. The latest Chinese project is to develop Myanmar's deep water port at Kyaukphyu on the Bay of Bengal coast facing the Indian eastern seaboard, which will not only give China a relatively short access to the Bay of Bengal, bypassing the Malacca Straits, but also serve as a potential naval facility threatening India. The Myanmar Corridor is more important than the China-Pakistan Economic corridor linking Kashgar in Xinjiang with Gwadar port on Pakistan's Baluch coast which has to traverse mountains and difficult terrain over which bulk transport is uneconomical.

The third chapter deals with India's response to China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean. Apart from expanding its own naval assets, India has focused on developing the Andaman and Nicobar islands as military facilities providing longer power projection and surveillance capabilities. Security arrangements with the US, Japan and Australia have been strengthened and there is a quiet but significant coordination with Indonesia, our maritime neighbour to the east. India is reportedly building a naval facility on the island of Sabang off the coast of Sumatra.

India's Indian Ocean Islands' strategy has focused on the islands of Sri Lanka and the Maldives off its southern coast and Mauritius and Seychelles in the western Indian Ocean. In his chapters on Mauritius, the Seychelles and the Maldives, Lintner provides a ringside account of the sharp contestation underway between India and China over these islands. China has an edge because of its deep pockets, but India has been successful in some of its countervailing moves. India alone cannot blunt the Chinese challenge. Lintner also writes about the significant role of France and Australia as key players and American allies in the vast ocean space. What is clear is China's abiding intent to emerge as the dominant military power in the Indian Ocean on its way to global pre-eminence. As Lintner observes in his final chapter, it is in the Indian Ocean 'where China's ambitions for regional supremacy are the strongest'. And 'For Xi, the Indian Ocean is the pearl he wishes to secure for his growing Chinese empire-irrespective of the cost.'

Lintner's book is a worthy read for anyone interested in the great game of the Indian Ocean.

Shyam Saran is a former foreign secretary and has served as India's envoy to Mauritius, Myanmar and Indonesia