



Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

China, India and the Strategic Balance in the Indian Ocean: The Maritime Silk Road as a Double Edged Sword

China's ambitious drive to achieve 'global power' status pivots on the use of political and economic strengths for regional and trans-regional outreach. It has creatively used the maritime medium to promote its geopolitical, geo-economic and geostrategic interests through initiatives such as the 21st century Maritime Silk Road (MSR). The MSR passes through Southern Asia-Indian Ocean and China is using the associated maritime infrastructure as naval launch pads to disrupt the ability of potential hostile powers in the region to thwart its ambitions. It would appear that China believes that the MSR is a double-edged sword (economic-commercial-connectivity and strategic-military-naval) which not only helps expand trade networks in the region, but also secures the sea lanes and legitimizes its naval presence in the region. Further, this is in line with the Chinese Defence White Paper 2015 which notes that the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy) will progressively shift its focus and combine both 'offshore waters defense' with 'open seas protection' wherein its task forces are to be deployed in the Arabian Sea-Indian Ocean.

The MSR has found favor among most of the South Asian nations, barring India. New Delhi sees the MSR and other Chinese political, diplomatic, economic and strategic initiatives in Southern Asia - Persian Gulf - Indian Ocean as a containment strategy, aimed at ensuring that India remains embroiled in the sub-continent particularly against Pakistan, which serves as a 'brinkmanship actor' and is of immense strategic value for China.

India is now responding by invoking a number of creative rejoinders

including those which have so far remained diplomatic ‘taboos’ among the Indian foreign policy mandarins. These have peeved Beijing, which has advised caution to New Delhi as one of these involves its ‘core interest.’

Chinese naval activity in the Indian Ocean

Chinese naval posturing in the Indian Ocean clearly showcases a confident PLA Navy, ready to sail into distant waters and project naval power. Since 2013, there have been at least [six deployments](#) by Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean, and according to the Indian Navy chief his forces maintain “[maritime domain awareness of the deployment of PLA naval forces in the Indian Ocean region \(IOR\)](#)” and keep a close eye on these vessels. Chinese conventional and nuclear propelled submarines have been sighted in [Karachi](#) and [Gwadar](#) in Pakistan and [Colombo](#) in Sri Lanka. The Chinese have defended these deployments [stating](#) that their “submarine docks during its escort missions in the Gulf of Aden and waters off Somalia” where the PLA Navy is conducting anti-piracy operations.

India has expressed concerns over the presence of the PLA Navy in the Indian Ocean.

Interestingly, the Sri Lankan Navy chief too resonated with the Chinese argument. During his visit to India, he defended the port call to his country by the Chinese submarines stating that the visit was for ‘[economic](#)’ reasons; further, his country has “assured the Indian Government that nothing against India will happen in Sri Lanka land and waters around it.” These assurances notwithstanding, India has consistently expressed concerns over the presence of the PLA Navy in the Indian Ocean which is seen as a challenge to the Indian Navy’s sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean.

Indian concerns over Chinese naval presence were further aggravated after [media reports](#) announced China would increase the naval strength by 15 per cent from the current 235,000 personnel. The increase is specially targeted to augment the Marine Corps and recruit nearly 80,000 additional marines to “[protect the nation’s maritime lifelines and its growing interests overseas](#)”. This would bring the total marine force strength to 100,000 personnel, to be stationed at [Djibouti](#) in the Horn of Africa and Gwadar, Pakistan. In this context it is useful to recall that in 2015, ‘[Exercise-Silk Road 2015](#)’, apparently named after the MSR, was held between the Sri Lanka Army’s Commando Regiment and Special Forces and the People’s Armed Police of China.

Maritime Infrastructure: Gwadar, Duqm and Malacca Gateway

It is evident that Gwadar is the Chinese pivot in the Indian Ocean. It is also the seaward end of the 2442 kilometers long China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which is a part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The US\$ 46 billion CPEC is the largest ever foreign investment committed by China and is built around a number of projects involving rail and road networks from Kashgar in Xinjiang province of China to Gwadar in Balochistan. Besides, a number of power projects will be set up in Pakistan to tide over its energy shortages.

China and Pakistan are concerned about the security of the high value CPEC which prompted Pakistan to assemble 'Task Force-88' comprising of fast attack craft, unmanned aerial vehicles and surveillance platforms. These forces will be supplemented by marines onboard ships deployed off Gwadar for security operations as well as to ensure 'seaward security of Gwadar port and protection of associated sea lanes against both conventional and non-traditional threats'. In November 2016, the fourth Pakistan-China joint naval exercises were specifically **conceptualized** keeping in mind the maritime security threats and challenges to CPEC. The Pakistan Navy has also **set up** a Coastal Security and Harbour Defence Force for coastal security, and a Force Protection Battalion has been positioned at Gwadar for protection of Chinese workers.

Although Chinese investments in Hambantota and Colombo port projects in Sri Lanka and the Gwadar port in Pakistan are well known, China is now ready to finance and develop the Maleka Gateway in Malaysia and Duqm port in Oman. The former is located between the thriving maritime transshipment hubs of Port Kelang and Singapore but Malaysia has rejected the **non-competitiveness** of the port and offered it to China on a 99-year concession, along with a "freehold status." Melaka Gateway lies astride the international sea lane and overlooks the shipping entering or exiting the Straits of Malacca and is therefore strategically important for China which has interest in the safety and security of its ship borne trade and energy supplies and possible threat from the US Navy which is well entrenched in Singapore.

Likewise, Duqm in Oman overlooks the Arabian Sea and carries enormous strategic and **geopolitical importance**, "far removed from Strait of Hormuz and the Arabian Gulf," a fact acknowledged by the Government of the Sultanate of Oman. Unlike Gwadar, Duqm has attracted **Britain**, and the British Defence Minister Michael Fallon commented that the base will help establish "a permanent training hub" in **addition to a key military logistics center** that "will bring British engineering expertise to help develop Duqm as a strategic port for the Middle East on the Indian Ocean, benefiting the Royal Navy and others." These projects also have immense strategic value and can thus be seen as part of the Chinese attempts to build commercial infrastructure in friendly countries and put these to

military use.

Indian Politico-Diplomatic Riposte

The Indian riposte to China's containment strategy involves imaginative politico-diplomatic tools. Among these, the issue of sovereignty with regard to the CPEC and the Tibet-Dalai Lama card merit special attention.

As background, it is useful to mention briefly the partition of India in 1947. The partition involves a number of relevant issues: (1) disputed territory which India refers to as Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) and Pakistan refers to as Northern Territories, now called Gilgit and Baltistan; (2) territory which Pakistan calls Indian Occupied Kashmir; and (3), [United Nations Security Council Resolution 47](#) adopted on April 21, 1948. Under this resolution, both sides were to withdraw their militaries from Kashmir and thereafter India had to appoint a plebiscite administrator nominated by the United Nations who would conduct a free and impartial plebiscite. India and Pakistan had raised objections to the Resolution 47 which has not been executed to date. Both sides have vehemently contested their respective positions. Moreover, in the aftermath of the 1962 India-China war in the Himalayas, under a border agreement in 1963, Pakistan [illegally ceded](#) 5,180 square kilometers area in the Shaksgam Valley in POK to China.

Perhaps the Tibet-Dalai Lama issue is the most sensitive for the Chinese.

Over the years, India had played down but not ignored its claim over POK. India has now taken strong exception to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor the Indian Foreign Secretary observed that the project “[violates Indian sovereignty](#) because it runs through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (POK).” Further, CPEC will legitimize the presence of PLA in the POK that can potentially tilt the conventional military balance in favor of Pakistan.

Perhaps the Tibet-Dalai Lama issue is the most sensitive for the Chinese. Significantly, Tibet is part of the Chinese [core interests](#) including Taiwan and Xinjiang which have been the hotspots of domestic unrest in China. India was one of the first countries to recognize this political reality and has abided by the ‘[one China Policy](#),’ which had remained unaltered until recently. India has also been very conscious of Chinese sensitivities over the Dalai Lama, regarded by China as a political exile. New Delhi has prevailed upon the spiritual leader to refrain from any political activity

India has now attempted to put pressure on China by [allowing](#) Dalai Lama to visit Arunachal Pradesh leaving Beijing visibly [upset](#); the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson noted that “Border issues and Tibet-related issues concern China’s core interests. India failed to honor its commitments on Tibet-related issues and further stirred up border trouble by inviting and allowing the Dalai Lama to visit the disputed border region.” A Global Times [commentary](#) noted that India is using the ‘monk as a diplomatic tool to put pressure on China’ after Beijing did not support India’s membership bid to the Nuclear Suppliers Group and refused to blacklist Masood Azhar, head of a Pakistani militant group, in the UN Security Council resolution. The immediate fallout of this move in the maritime domain has been Chinese [refusal to acknowledge](#) the support provided by the Indian Navy to the PLA Navy in the Gulf of Aden while interdicting pirates attempting to hijack a merchant vessel.

Balance Sheet: Advantage Whom?

There are sharp political, diplomatic and strategic differences between China and India over a number of issues as enumerated above. Both sides are unwilling to reconcile and accede to each other’s expectations. What indeed merits attention is that the Asian powers are invoking new tools to pressurize each other. Clearly, the cordial note struck two years ago by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping appears to be wearing away and China and India are sending signals of an unfolding relationship which can potentially cause aggressive posturing both at sea in the Indian Ocean and on land across the Himalayas.

India has been rattled by the growing presence of Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean, and begun to feel the pressure of the ongoing naval developments at Gwadar and Djibouti ports. Perhaps the presence of Chinese naval marines at Gwadar port will impact on India’s Act East policy which has a strong maritime strategic content, forcing New Delhi to focus on the Arabian Sea than on South China Sea.

The Indian Navy’s warfighting capabilities are now being augmented and the focus is on antisubmarine warfare with new class of ships being acquired from foreign sources or being built at Indian shipyards. Similarly, China is investing in amphibious forces which enable maritime access for troops, hardware and supplies ashore in distant waters and fits well into the strategic dimensions of the MSR. It has announced plans to [build](#) new class of Type 075 amphibious vessels that are [comparable](#) to the US Navy Wasp-class and bigger than the Japanese Izumo and Kaga class. These vessels will support Chinese marines with regular presence in Gwadar, Djibouti, Colombo, Maleka Gateway, Duqm and across the Indian Ocean.

It is fair to argue that the current strategic-military balance in the Indian Ocean is in China’s favor and India would have to either reconcile to be a good large neighbor or build additional power potential, possibly in close partnership with the US, Australia and Japan.

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The views expressed are the author's own.

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