

Strategic Realignment at Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean: Recalibrating Sea Lines of Communications (SLOC) in Restructuring Maritime Cooperation

Mian Johar Imam

Student of Law, University Law College, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

Muhammad Sharreh Qazi

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

Iram Khalid

Chairperson, Department of Political Science, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

Email: chairperson.polsc@pu.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

With geostrategic canvas around Strait of Hormuz receiving significant strategic realignments and the Middle East revisiting its approach towards prospective confrontations, Pakistan would be mandated to utilize its maritime expertise for avoiding polarization. Gwadar is the hallmark of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and has received substantive challenges in operating as a spearhead of future maritime posturing in Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. China and Pakistan have significantly shared their vision for Gwadar and Iran is also expecting similar offers to its Chabahar port. Attention is slim, if not non-existent, in this larger canvas for smaller ports of Pakistan that may have significant geo-strategic value in prospective future for naval securitization of entire region. Pakistan can utilize its maritime vantage points not only as a junction for maritime strategies but also as an intersection for international collaboration. The spillover of this realignment on the India Ocean has also converged interests between India, America and the Middle East which is a new realignment in itself. This paper will explore possibilities of strategic realignments in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean after CPEC, America's new containment strategy post-Abraham Accords as a new link to its strategic alignment with India. This paper will also explain Iran's probable posture within prospective strategic realignment at the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and the Gulf. It will also explore possibilities of connecting international strategic interests in the Hormuz region between principal investors and contending stakeholders. The paper will utilize existing strategies for geo-economic operationalization of maritime junctions and how they interplay in contemporary geo-strategic shifts in power politics.

Key Words: Containment Strategy, Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), Strait of Hormuz, Strategic Realignment, Indian Ocean

Introduction

Linking Persian Gulf with Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea, Strait of Hormuz has achieved a paramount status in contemporary geo-politics due to its geo-strategic value in the region. It also incorporates the fact that it serves as vital maritime route through which a significant portion of global oil trade is carried

out. Informally termed as the world's most important oil transit choke point, nearly 1/5th of global oil trade is carried out through Hormuz, which imputes it with a significant geo-political value easily eclipsing that of the Danish Straits, the Bab el-Mandeb and the Suez Canal combined (Tensions rise in the world's most strategic oil choke point, 2019). Serving as maritime route through which nearly 20 % of global energy trade is carried out, Strait of Hormuz has been the pivot of numerous political disputes regarding oil trade; a state of affairs exacerbated by Iran's political posture regarding relations with USA and Saudi Arabia. Conditions in the region have remained tense as Iran asserts territorial proximity over Hormuz while the USA maintains a dominant military foothold through the Fifth fleet. In order to securitize their respective interests both sides refrain from a policy of open confrontation to maintain the ongoing economic trade. India, with the Introduction of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) understands how Hormuz would magnify its impact on the Indo-Pacific canvas. For India, having to enhance its posture would be to combine its maritime ambitions in the Indian Ocean to the larger canvas of American naval interests in and beyond the same.

This subtle balance of powers is being increasingly disturbed as new stakeholders seek to adjust within the established yet fragile status quo as result of the Belt and Road Initiative undertaken by China. The development of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is a major part of Chinese quest for economic emancipation and entails subsequent rapid development and operationalization of Gwadar port. The project has been initiated by China in a bid to bypass its Malacca dilemma, as identified by the Chinese premier in 2003 as it stands to endanger nearly 80 % of Chinese trade (Mudurini, 2020). The BRI is designed to expand the economic outreach of China over the globe thereby expanding its size whilst simultaneously providing a viable alternative to Strait of Malacca surrounded by the US and its allies. Wary of this geo-strategic maritime detour and aware of the consequences that follow, US has redirected its attention to the Indo-Pacific region in a bid for Chinese containment. This re-posturing is evident from initiatives such as the Abraham Accords, Indo-US alliance in the Indian Ocean and joint maritime protectionism through Australia-United Kingdom-America 'AUKUS' in the Indo-Pacific. Meanwhile, initiation of BRI has also accelerated Indo-Iranian collaboration regarding the development of Chabahar Port in Iran that would allow India to access Central and Western Asia bypassing Pakistan and balance out the Pakistan-China alliance meanwhile providing Iran with much needed foreign capital (Aliasgary and Ekstrom, 2021). Even when Iran moves between Indian investments and Chinese projects, it tends to be wary of how maritime restructuring in the region would create a unique architecture where Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) would have to be redrawn.

Needless to say, US and China are not the only major contenders in Indo-Pacific region when it comes to determining or redetermining SLOCs. Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean via CPEC has been construed by numerous Indian think tanks as an assault on Indian sovereignty due to the fact that a part of

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projected CPEC initiatives pass through the disputed Kashmir region (Mudurini, 2020). Though it does not topple any maritime interests that New Delhi maintains, it does connect land and sea operability that extensively infringes any maritime strategic maneuvering. The chokepoints created on land effectively neutralize India's capacity to retaliate on maritime projects without significant assistance. The Chinese move has also been interpreted as a major hurdle that would effectively deter regional dominance of India in the Indian region as China seeks to develop and establish a formidable naval presence in the area (Singh, 2018). The future strategic alignment of India in this region while balancing its economic interests with its territorial relevance would be a deciding factor in the future of this region. All these recent developments would also restructure conventional circumstances in the Strait of Hormuz as a major flashpoint for all stakeholders in the region ranging from Iran-Saudi Arabia to America-China and Pakistan-India. Traditional rivals would have to reorient their approach towards this region in order to secure a promising future within the prospective economic dynamics of the region.

Prior to CPEC, Strait of Hormuz exhibited a more or less politically bipolar alignment that is now undergoing a rapid transformation as a result of BRI. Inclusion of new stakeholders within the region as a result of such recent developments is an inevitable consequence that naturally calls for a strategic realignment within the Arabian Sea among major contenders for restructuring maritime cooperation. Failure to do so would not only jeopardize global trade network and compromise structural integrity of BRI leading to catastrophic economic consequences, but considering the nature of stakeholders involved as well as their bilateral relations, could lead to an open confrontation among all adversaries. Such eventuality is an extrapolation complicated by extensive nuclearization of the region as at least four of the involved parties are nuclear weapons states. Such a tumultuous state of affairs is neither desirable nor feasible and therefore calls for a dynamic re-calibration of current maritime status quo in Arabian Sea; a goal that can only be accomplished by developing a holistic understanding of interests of all parties involved and suggesting various realignments in order to adjust those interests. The ensuing political alignment within such a highly nuclearized and concentrated region would undoubtedly have a global impact due to an inevitable trickle-down effect within global politics (Schöttli, 2013).

The impression that Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean will have to be seen as a single maritime entity, divorced of their fragmented existence is where all stakeholders have found consonance in their objectives. The ability to dominate this large maritime section thereby gaining control over all crucial naval strategies is a dream long held by proponents of Mahan. For America and China, this stands to signal one of the most significant displays of superpower influence while for India and Pakistan, it stands to establish either state as a declared

regional hegemon. To the Middle East and the Gulf, this can either be the start of a series of compulsive confrontations or a renewed opportunity to retake global economic activity. Either way, each stakeholder stands to benefit from this convergence of maritime SLOCs and this amalgamation of economic, political, geostrategic and military interests. This also naturally would realign and restructure conventional alliances and partnerships to form new initiatives and impact how each stakeholder or alliance operates with the other.

Establishing New SLOCs: Understanding Strategic Imperative beyond the Arabian Sea

Rapid economic progress in recent decades has increasingly put China at odds with the US that views the former's increasing economic growth and the ensuing political clout in global politics with distrust and apprehension. This paradigm shift in global economics towards Asia indicates a fiscal danger with political consequences for the Atlantic powers thus generating concern in the West. Furthermore, globalization has led to a subtle diffusion of economic and military power with the result that the latter cannot be evaluated by disregarding the former. This principle dictates military enhancement is ultimately dependent on economic progress and the vice versa (Lake, 2014). Therefore, a desire for economic expansion would always be accompanied by military augmentation. China's progress when viewed by the West in light of this political conjecture leads it to believe that such a situation would destabilize the global political order and therefore necessitates a check and balance system on Chinese economic emancipation.

Apprehensibility of how China is seen as an antagonist in Strait of Hormuz is a widely held belief augmented by how American maritime interests have been able to converge themselves with that of the region's stakeholders. CPEC and BRI have been presented as inherently detrimental to economic survival of Middle Eastern states sharing Strait of Hormuz. For India and its role in America's containment policy, it is a strategic choice which allows them to integrate with America and exploit its maritime prowess for peripheral gains. This, in consonance with America's quadrilateral agreements and Abraham Accords, upsets the delicate balance of maritime precaution by introducing amalgamated interests and converged security objectives in a more broad-spectrum economic necessity. Origins of the rivalry date back to the Cold War with the US displaying an apprehensive approach in dealing with China due to its communist ideology and undertook certain measures in the Korean War as well as the Vietnam War in order to maintain an eye on China. Taking advantage of the limited maritime access of China, the US quickly formed alliances with nations in the Far East such as Japan, Taiwan and Singapore in order to ensure an active surveillance mechanism in one of the most accessible maritime junctions for Chinese trade. Backed by the European block and emerging as the sole victor at the end of the Cold War it seemed that the US had successfully managed to ensure its dominance

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in the global order by pre-emptively dealing with its prospective rival. Conscious of its restrictive maritime access in the vulnerable South China Sea, China announced its new global economic expansion policy at the turn of the century known as the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road Development Strategy or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for short. Investing heavily in strategic locations across the globe China aims to economically reorient the entire maritime connectivity of the globe with itself at the centre. Such an initiative allows China to expand while bypassing the South China Sea and harvest economical as well as political relations with states around the globe that would welcome Chinese capital.

It is interesting to note that China has displayed a preference to invest in developing states especially in Africa and Asia that are not an active part of the US block. Termed as the 21st century Silk Route the Chinese project is presented as a global economic integration plan while the US and its allies dub the plan as a Chinese Trojan horse that would allow China to extend its political dominance beyond its regional dimensions through schemes of debt trapping and fiscal manipulation as projected by states that subscribe to the American lens of maritime economic future. Despite such apprehensions and contentions, the plan has managed to obtain endorsement from nearly 130 states as developing states welcome foreign capital (Nedopil, 2022) regardless of the strings usually attached to them. China's legally valid 99-year lease of the Hambantota Port has been alleged by many to be a vivid example of how China may utilize its economic project for realization of political goals. The move sparked a global backlash against China and was denounced as a strategic threat in India's backyard. The move is also being portrayed as a part of China's "String of Pearls Policy", a maritime manoeuvre by which China is securing new SLOCs and ensuring maritime dominance by developing strategic ports including Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Chittagong in Bangladesh and Kyaukpyu port in Myanmar.

However, evidence suggests that Gwadar is the cornerstone of this initiative due to two reasons; Firstly, it provides an alternate route of access to the dreaded Straits of Malacca for Chinese trade while simultaneously cutting transport costs. Secondly, it provides China with direct access to the Arabian Sea and the Straits of Hormuz thereby upsetting the long held naval hegemony held by the US within the Indo-Pacific region.

Indian Maritime Interests amid Iran-China-America Competitiveness for Maritime Synchronization

The Chinese influence can also be construed to thwart goals of zonal supremacy by regional powers such as India and Iran. It is noteworthy that the string of pearls strategy entails a natural maritime encirclement of India that stretches from the

Straits of Hormuz to the Bay of Bengal thereby providing India with an existential impetus to undertake necessary actions. Maintaining maritime dominance in the Indian Ocean is essential for national sustainability of India as well as for its prospective goals of regional hegemony. Undoubtedly it is also cognizant of its economic, political and structural deficiencies that prevent it from directly confronting a superpower such as China in the conventional sense. Naturally this means that Chinese ambitions in the Arabian Sea are a source of danger as well as an opportunity for India, as the former lacks a solidified established presence in the region. This provides India with a rare chance to offset Chinese ambitions in the Arabian sea by taking advantage of China's temporary imbalance provided India takes the initiative. Currently India seems to be taking this chance by becoming an active part of the Chinese containment regime led by the US which allows it to proactively counter probable Chinese naval dominance from under the US naval umbrella. Additionally, India seeks to balance out Chinese economic presence in the area by heavily investing in Chabahar port of Iran with no definitive success; a project that is also aimed at bypassing Pakistan as a transit state between Afghanistan and India (Kumar S, 2021). However, till date the project has faced considerable hurdles due to the incessant rivalry between the United States (US) and Iran leading the former to impose economic sanctions on the latter thus crippling its economic capacity (Ansar, 2018), a situation worsened by the US withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal. However, in December 2019, India gained some concessions from the US under the Iran Freedom and Counter-Proliferation Act of 2012 for developing the Chabahar Port and to construct a railway link between the port and the Afghan border which also could not see fruition and saw China as a dominant contender and an overwhelming investor (Kumar, 2021).

In hopes of preserving the current global order the US has led the West in pursuance of several global initiatives designed to restrain the Chinese giant, a few of which include the Indo-Pacific Alliance in the Arabian Sea, the US led alliance in the Far East resulting in the Malacca dilemma, the Abraham Accords in the Middle East and most recently initiated trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS) in the Indo-Pacific region. Ardent political support of Taiwan is also considered to be a part of this global crusade. The Abraham Accords of 2020 brokered by the US and aimed at normalizing relations between Israel, UAE and Bahrain are assessed to be closely tied to the commencement of CPEC not only due to regional proximity but also because they are being interpreted as an aggressive re-assertment of American hegemony in the region (Wagner 2020). However, it is too soon to correctly ascertain the full impact of the Accords for the future of the Straits of Hormuz, especially when analysed in light of CPEC induced realignment. On one hand the Accords seems to be a testament of US dominance in the region as it signifies the alliance of two of the most trusted allies of the US in the region. There is no doubt that the maritime as well as geo-strategic rivalry of Gwadar and Dubai played a dominant part in the decision taken by the UAE (Al-Shammari, 2017). Depending

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upon the accuracy of this assessment, the Accords are just one instance of how CPEC may induce unexpected strategic realignments with global overtones.

However, it would be impractical to determine that the Accords are entirely detrimental for Chinese goals of economic augmentation. Undoubtedly in its essence the BRI project is an economic enterprise that would stand to gain immensely if the Accords result in reducing conflict within the region. While it is true that the Accords may be construed as a catalyst for geostrategic polarization the true implications of the Accords will ultimately depend upon how China decides to posture itself when it finally enters the Arabian Sea. A cautious evaluation would suggest that the Accords would stimulate economic competition if the Chinese movement is kept wholly commercial as envisioned originally in CPEC, however the inverse might be true if the Chinese decide to pursue aggressive militarization in the region prompting a reciprocated response from the allies. Sino-Israel collaboration regarding the administration of Haifa Port (“China’s investment in Israel”, 2021) and Sino-UAE cybersecurity cooperation (Kaskanis, 2021) would suggest that the alignment formed under the guise of the Accords would be reactive rather than proactive so that present economic ties with China are maintained. However, the role played by the Accords in determining the future of realignment in the Arabian Sea is not limited to its direct participants, rather it will have political overturns in determining the strategic alignment of other principal stakeholders in the region including Iran.

Probable Future Realignments and Restructuring of Geostrategic Alignments

Iran has often found itself at odds within its geography not only due to a sectarian rift but its ideological differences regarding political structure of its rivals. However, the tense albeit static situation in the Straits of Hormuz stands to undergo rapid strategic terraforming as China enters the region with an emancipated maritime economic interest. This decision by China has already initiated a cascade of global realignments as explained above and now calls on Iran to reassess its relative posture in the region not only strategically but also economically. Iran has reacted temporarily by initiating an economic partnership with India over the operationalization of Chabahar port despite the fact that the project faces multiple challenges and weaknesses. These challenges demonstrate that although such peripheral projects may be cause of concern for certain stakeholders, the true potential of such projects can never be examined if Iran fails to decisively determine its position in the region and its subsequent realignment. Considering the involvement of multiple nuclear states within the Arabian sea following the inception of CPEC, maritime cooperation within the region becomes an imperative necessity for preserving trade connectivity as well as global security. Iranian nuclear aspirations have prompted the US to retain an interest in the region as it seek to dissuade further nuclearization in the region. CPEC has not only

resulted in introducing China within the Arabian Sea but has also exacerbated Indian attention in the region as it eyes the Chinese incursion as a probable strategic threat leading it to form a naval partnership with the US. Recent events such as the proclamation of Abraham Accords indicate a future Israeli involvement thereby suggesting that prospects of maritime structuring are by no means exhaustive. Alongside the development of this “nuclear conjunction” within the Arabian Sea, Pakistan seeks to maintain the operational integrity of the project by re-evaluating its naval strength as well as posture.

Considering the nuclear nature of stakeholders involved, a reference to doctrine of MAD (mutually assured destruction) would be deemed relevant in order to evaluate probable alignments within Arabian Sea. The hostile environment in which CPEC aims to operate would suggest that a framework of maritime cooperation would have to be made a considerable of general understanding of strategic restraint so as to avoid inadvertent escalation caused by such convergence of interests. Establishing new SLOCs or realigning regional interests in the maritime domain imply that all stakeholders possessing strategic deterrents be mindful of outcomes of their actions. In this aspect, reduction in hostility through carefully converged interests, calibrated responses to maritime adventurism and a holistic, apprehension-free take of maritime restructuring be understood. Addressing strategic compression caused by actions of one or more parties is where these new SLOCs would play a crucial role. Distinguishing between kinetic and non-kinetic deployments and observing the differences between defensive and offensive strategies would be crucial in outlining consequences of each decision. MAD would also play a vital role in disciplining any adventurism and may even incentivize stakeholders to enter into pacification of disputes as a byproduct for strategic stability. The broad spectrum impact of connecting Arabian Sea and its maritime contents with that of Indian and Pacific Ocean channels how global maritime maneuvering would be impacted if one actor opts for adventurism as a means to achieve superiority. This rearrangement of SLOCs within and beyond the Strait of Hormuz would serve as an added restraint mechanism in favor of nuclear deterrence among contending parties.

A candid analysis would reveal that in the current scenario Iran might opt for possible political manoeuvres in order to re-calibrate its maritime posture within the arising situation. Provided Iran decides to engage in bloc politics it might adopt a declared reconciliatory approach by announcing a recommitment to limitations set by the The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) it set aside via an announcement in 2020 (Davenport, 2022). Although this move would re-open Iran’s nuclear regime to scrutinization by IAEA thus leading to chances of economic penalties, the move would undoubtedly end its political isolation and provide it with much needed international support. The fact that the US would not be able to exercise effective political control in this scenario due to its abandonment of JCPOA is another consideration that might encourage Iran to adopt this course even after America does rejoin, its position post-abandonment would be politically precarious to say the least. A refusal to accommodate within

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the JCPOA regime might bolster Iran's nuclear programme but would ultimately lead to strict economic sanctions and political isolation in a region full of powerful stakeholders. Economic regression in such an economically charged environment might also offset any advantage that Iran might gain from nuclearization.

Given its geo-political predicament Iran may pursue any of the above stated manoeuvres whilst harvesting an independent inclusion within the BRI project as recent Iran-China agreements would indicate (Reuters 2021). Such a non-polar adjustment would certainly help Iran to avoid any direct or indirect strategic interaction with the allies of US notably Saudi Arabia and Israel who have remained skeptical with the status of JCPOA as a deterrent in preventing from nuclearizing.

Geo-Economic Operationalization of Strategic Maritime Junctions; Securitizing new SLOC's

With Hormuz hosting major strategic realignments, it is imperative for Pakistan to utilize all of its maritime assets in order to effectively secure the new SLOC created by CPEC. The exponential economic as well as political value of the project of the enterprise necessitates drastic policy consideration for the Pakistan. The project not only promises economic growth and investment for a country with a struggling economic system but also promises to deliver political dividends to a country facing an "image problem" in the contemporary international community by placing it within the center of the CPEC induced recalibrated realignment (Iqbal, 2017). Such circumstances provide a rare opportunity to Pakistan of playing a constructive role within the region and establishing a strategic significance within the changing political canvas of Arabian Sea, a prospect that presupposes the securitization of new SLOC's. This policy necessitates the development of strategic yet unexplored maritime junctions that augment in creation of vantage points in the SLOC that exists in and around Hormuz. Doing so would also allow Pakistan to avoid a polarized posture in prospective future arrangement of the Arabian Sea and the Indo-Pacific Ocean. Adopting such a policy of subtle naval non-alignment would allow greater political maneuverability for Pakistan whilst strengthening its maritime posture within the region by increasing its naval outreach.

Conclusion

The new sea lines of communication that are currently being developed by the BRI and especially CPEC are at the center of the world's attention as the consequential realignment initiated by the project has drawn in major stakeholders, almost all of which possess nuclear capabilities or operate from under nuclear umbrellas. The project reserves significant fiscal prospects for Pakistan's economic structure while holding immense geo-political as well as economic relevance for China's

future as it embarks upon economic expansionism in the 21st century (Afzal & Naseem, 2018). Naturally this places the project on the priority list of the two partners not only from an economic vantage point but also from a security perspective. Unsurprisingly, the project conduces political developments in the region that are proportionate to its economic impact. A realistic analysis of the strategic paradigm shift within the regions reveals the presence of major stakeholders for whom, the project holds immense geo-political implications. This reality indicates that the nuclear conjunction formed as a result of this project has essentially elevated CPEC from being an economic partnership to a supra-economic enterprise that encompasses major social, political, geostrategic and economic implications for the stakeholders involved. While the US and its allies within the Middle East may hold major reservation regarding Chinese expansionism leading them to adopt linear policies, India seems cautious about its prospective policies regarding the structural realignment going on in its backyard.

With India hosting a major rivalry with its western neighbor and adopting a multifarious approach in its relationship with China, India is refrained from utilizing the linear strategy that is being deployed by the West. On one hand India continues to engage in a multi-billion dollar trade with China while on the other it seeks to balance Chinese influence in the Arabian Sea by focusing on its naval cooperation with the US. While it is true that India seeks to preserve and cultivate economic ties with China, the geo-strategic and ultimately political implications of CPEC cannot be ignored. The BRI project not only encapsulates a maritime encirclement of India thus reducing India's prospects for regional supremacy but also envisions Gwadar Port as a manifestation of China's strategic depth within the Arabian Sea. Furthermore the strategic location Gwadar grants China and Pakistan major naval leverage over the SLOC's operating within the Strait of Hormuz that currently handle a major portion of the global energy trade (Rahman, Khan, Lifang, & Hussain 2021). This convergence of interests naturally stimulates India to reorient its strategic posture within the region. This endeavor while relying majorly on traditional hard power expressions cannot be determinedly so. Although political initiatives such as India's participation in QUAD, Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) 2020, Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) 2016, Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) 2018, indicate an increasing Indian tilt towards the US naval bloc in the Arabian Sea, it does not mean that India would not opt for a soft power arrangement within the Arabian Sea. The density of bilateral trade between China and India could serve as a major impetus for maritime cooperation between the two states with current anti-piracy cooperation acting as prospective models. In such an arrangement India's increasing maritime activity could be categorized less as a deterrent against Chinese expansionism and more as a realization of Mahan's doctrine which attributes Asian dominance to hegemony over the Indian Ocean (Hudaya, Anggara, Putra, & Andarini).

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