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# CPEC's Success Hinges on Pakistan's Maritime Strategic Depth in East Africa

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## Key Points:

- The success of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is predicated on Pakistan's territorial security, and the strategic waterways linking the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea.
- Geostrategic success of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is directly proportional to the geo-economic success of CPEC.
- Pakistan's primary area of maritime interest, however, is limited within the North Arabian Sea. In the context of BRI, this myopia can be termed as "geostrategic timidity", while with reference to India, it is a "strategic faux pas".

Extra-regional actors are increasing assertiveness in Indian Ocean policymaking, facilitated by a revisionist India that aspires for regional dominance. The traditional policy of non-alignment has been replaced with "strategic autonomy", a misnomer referring to India's network of strategic and economic alliances aimed at curtailing the perceived Chinese "String of Pearls" strategy. This agenda resonates with certain like-minded Western countries that fear the Euro-Atlantic world order being absorbed into a China-led "Asian Century".

The bedrock of China's influence lays in the completion of the China-Indian Ocean-Africa-Mediterranean Sea Blue Economic Passage since oceans form the basis for enhancing common welfare. This mammoth passage can be realised through links between Western Pacific and Indian Ocean down south (China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor) and, separately, inter-connectivity

between Western and Eastern Indian Oceans through CPEC and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC).<sup>1</sup>

Growing India-United States (Indo-US) strategic bonhomie appears to have prompted a rethink in Beijing<sup>2</sup>, which could help explain why BCIM-EC was conspicuously absent from South Asian connectivity maps issued during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Belt and Road Forum in 2019.<sup>3</sup>

Pakistan has consistently asserted that CPEC will help achieve a "well connected, integrated region of shared destiny, harmony and development".<sup>4</sup> In lieu of the

"Full Text: Vision of Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative", *Xinhua*, last modified June 20, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/20/c\\_136380414.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/20/c_136380414.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Md. Safiqul Islam, Huang Ailian and Zhang Jie, "Major Challenges and Remedies in Building the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor", *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, accessed October 23, 2020, <https://www.worldscientific.com>.

<sup>3</sup> K. J. M. Varma, "Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar-Economic corridor project not abandoned, says China", *The Print*, last modified June 10, 2019, <https://theprint.in/world/bangladesh-china-india-myanmar-economic-corridor-project-not-abandoned-says-china/>

<sup>4</sup>"Introduction", *CPEC M/o Planning Development & Special Ini-*

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preceding context, it is evident that CPEC's success is predicated not just on Pakistan's territorial security but also the strategic waterways linking the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. To summarise, the geostrategic success of BRI is directly proportional to the geo-economic success of CPEC. Ironically, Pakistan's primary area of maritime interest is limited within the North Arabian Sea.<sup>5</sup> With reference to BRI, this myopia can be termed as "geostrategic timidity" but when viewed with reference to India, it transforms into a "strategic faux pas".

## India's Maritime Outlook

The Indian Maritime Doctrines (2004 and 2009) envisaged northern Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as the country's "primary area" of maritime interest. While the Indian Maritime Military Strategy (2007) had a passive-defence posture focused primarily on freedom of navigation, the Indian Maritime Doctrine (2009) elucidated in detail the navy's desire to attain "greater prestige" on account of India's geographic position and utility of the seas for national economic development.<sup>6</sup>

The Integrated Defence Staff's Joint Doctrine for Air-Land Operations (2010) discusses the conduct of Littoral Operations through "Maritime Manoeuvre from the Sea", which the author of this paper refers to as the maritime equivalent of India's infamous Proactive Operations or "Cold Start" doctrine.<sup>7</sup> Validation of this concept has mostly been carried out through the tri-service Theatre Ready Operational Exercise (TROPEX) since 2007 which includes elements of the Indian Coast Guard.<sup>8</sup>

With the passage of Indian Maritime Military Strategy (2015), the Indian Navy's 'primary areas' of interest were significantly expanded to include the Red Sea, East African littoral countries and Cape of Good Hope (Western Indian Ocean) and also chokepoints at the Strait of Malacca and Singapore (Eastern Indian Ocean/Western Pacific).<sup>9</sup> According to a senior retired Indian Navy official, IMSS-2015 highlighted albeit implicitly the

*tatives*, accessed October 23, 2020, <http://cpec.gov.pk/introduction/1>.

<sup>5</sup>As gleaned from the Maritime Doctrine of Pakistan (2018).

<sup>6</sup> Iskander Rehman, "India's Aspirational Naval Doctrine", *The Rise of the Indian Navy*, accessed October 23, 2020, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Indias\\_Aspirational\\_Naval\\_Doctrine.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Indias_Aspirational_Naval_Doctrine.pdf).

<sup>7</sup>"Joint Doctrine for Air-Land Operations", *Integrated Defence Staff*, last modified March 25, 2010, [https://ids.nic.in/IDSAdmin/upload\\_images/doctrine/Jt%20Doc%20Air%20Land%20Operations-Mar%202010.pdf](https://ids.nic.in/IDSAdmin/upload_images/doctrine/Jt%20Doc%20Air%20Land%20Operations-Mar%202010.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Rajat Pandit, "Navy to conduct massive wargames", *Times of India*, last modified February 2, 2007, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Navy-to-conduct-massive-wargames/article-show/1552917.cms>.

<sup>9</sup> "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian MARITIME Security Strategy", *Indian Navy*, last modified October 10, 2015, [https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian\\_Maritime\\_Security\\_Strategy\\_Document\\_25Jan16.pdf](https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf).

(Indian) Ocean's geo-strategic "exclusivity" for India.<sup>10</sup>

## Pakistan's Maritime Outlook

During the 15 years of Indian Navy's doctrinal evolution, Pakistan's military forces were engaged in nationwide counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations vis-à-vis the conflict in neighbouring Afghanistan. Back then, a young Pakistan Navy officer (now a Rear Admiral) said that the "continental mind-set" of national policymakers had "affected the development of the Pakistan Navy as an effective element of the military strategy".<sup>11</sup>



Figure 1 – Power Balance in the Indian Ocean

Pakistan's first maritime doctrine emerged at the end of 2018, more than 14 years after India's first publication. Its restricted "vision" is a reflection of the status quo in the high-level policy planning. Unlike India which places equal emphasis on power projection alongside territorial defence, the Maritime Doctrine of Pakistan broadly highlights concepts and terminologies, coastal defence and the vitality of the blue economy.

## Void in the CPEC-BRI Maritime Security Chain

Analysts have variously described Gwadar port as the crown-jewel of CPEC which would concurrently serve as a "beachhead" for China in the IOR.<sup>12</sup> Pakistan has taken significant initiatives to raise domestic security forces exclusively for the project, such as the Pakistan Army's Special Security Division (SSD) and Pakistan Navy's Task Force-88 (TF-88). However, both the SSD and TF-88 were raised for mainland and coastal

<sup>10</sup> Gurpreet S Khurana, "'Net Security Provider' Defined: An Analysis of India's New Maritime Strategy-2015", last modified November 23, 2015, <https://www.maritimeindia.org/View%20Profile/635838396645834619.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Raja Rab Nawaz, "Maritime Security in Pakistan", *Naval Postgraduate School, California*, accessed October 25, 2020, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a429850.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Claude Rakisits, "A path to the sea: China's Pakistan plan." *World Affairs*, accessed October 25, 2020, <https://go.gale.com/ps/anonymous?id=GALE%7CA441490900&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=00438200&p=AONE&sw=w>.

defence, respectively, without any mandate for Out-of-Area Contingency Operations (OOAC). Historically, apart from peacekeeping deployments under the United Nations (UN) flag, contingents from Pakistan Armed Forces were stationed in a few Arab Gulf countries, mostly for assistance in border security, imparting training, crisis response and internal security assistance.<sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup> Islamabad has never adopted an inside-out approach to establish its foothold in any regional country and create a “beachhead”, per se.

In the event of a major conflict or war with India, Pakistan will be unable to compete with the geostrategic semi-encirclement of the waters around North Arabian Sea. The Indian Navy has a conventional edge on account of its forward operating posts in the Lakshadweep and Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) arrangements with island countries to the south. The signing of Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) between the US and India will enable Indian Navy forces to refuel and take-off/land from US bases in three theatres, namely Central Command (USCENTCOM), Africa Command (USAFRICOM) and Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM).

India’s access to USCENTCOM facilities directly impacts Pakistan Navy’s primary area of maritime interest i.e. the North Arabian Sea. Traditionally, the Indian Navy’s coordination with US Navy had been restricted to the USINDOPACOM theatre. In September 2019, India availed its first refuelling by the US Navy Ship (USNS) Yukon, in North Arabian Sea (USCENTCOM theatre).<sup>15</sup>

The only relief Pakistan could get in such a scenario could come from the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) base in Djibouti. Pragmatically, it would be unreasonable for Beijing to escalate the conflict dynamics in this precarious environment, since support vessels coming from the PLA Southern Theatre Command would be easily intercepted and offset by USINDOPACOM assets. The US Naval Support Facility Diego Garcia could serve as a pivot for coordinated Indo-US maritime interdiction operations along the southern Indian Ocean. In early 2019, Indian and US naval forces already tested coordinated “submarine-hunting” drills near the waters of Diego Garcia.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup>“Evacuation of Eleven Pakistanis from Yemen”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, last modified April 14, 2015, <http://mofa.gov.pk/evacuation-of-eleven-pakistanis-from-yemen/>.

<sup>14</sup>“Pakistani troops in Saudi providing ‘internal security’, Khawaja Asif tells NA”, *DAWN*, last modified March 9, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1394177>.

<sup>15</sup>“Indian warship INS Talwar undertakes refuelling with US Navy tanker in Arabian Sea”, *Zee News*, last modified September 24, 2020, <https://zeenews.india.com/india/indian-warship-ins-talwar-undertakes-refuelling-with-us-navy-tanker-in-arabian-sea-2309693.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Christian Lopez, “US, Indian navies practice hunting submarines together in Indian Ocean”, *Stripes and Stars*, last

Essentially, even if Pak-India conflict is removed from the equation, any aggressive posturing against Chinese interests in the Western Indian Ocean could jeopardise the BRI’s core Maritime Silk Route (MSR) which lies well beyond Pakistan’s maritime frontiers. The CPEC will still be impacted adversely.

As one scholar framed it, a comprehensive regional strategy for US forces in the Indian Ocean “would encourage more rapid and extensive infrastructure development in concert with partners in the region”.<sup>17</sup> No other country except India offers that level of strategic and political assurance.

## The East African Frontier

While New Delhi’s policy of “Look East” matured to “Act East” in a bid to counter perceived Chinese assertiveness on its eastern flank, it has also remained mindful of the imminent great-power competition in Africa.<sup>18</sup> This convergence of interests led to the creation of Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) by the governments of India and Japan in 2017 which entails counterbalancing the perceived Chinese expansion via BRI through the development of new sea corridors linking East African ports with India (South Asia) and Sittwe in Myanmar (Southeast Asia).<sup>19</sup> However, the project appears to have stalled since 2018<sup>20</sup>, removing chance of a geo-economic alliance in the Western Indian Ocean.

This predicament would make it all the more imperative for India to make up for the lack of economic influence through sea-based power projection. Commenting on East Africa, Indian Navy Commodore Srikant B. Kesnur, Director of Maritime Warfare Centre in Mumbai, proffers the following:

“...this particular geographical area needs to have a greater profile and recognition in our national and strategic discourse. While defence diplomacy can be applied to all nations and regions, geography, common

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modified April 18, 2019, <https://www.stripes.com/news/pacific/us-indian-navies-practice-hunting-submarines-together-in-indian-ocean-1.577532>.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew S. Erickson, Walter Ladwig and Justin D. Mikolay, “Diego Garcia and the United States’ Emerging Indian Ocean Strategy”, *Asian Security*, last modified 30 September, 2010, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254224904\\_Diego\\_Garcia\\_and\\_the\\_United\\_States'\\_Emerging\\_Indian\\_Ocean\\_Strategy](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254224904_Diego_Garcia_and_the_United_States'_Emerging_Indian_Ocean_Strategy).

<sup>18</sup> Eric Olander, “Reflections on the Coming Era of Great Power Competition in Africa”, *The China Africa Project*, last modified July 13, 2020, <https://chinaafricaproject.com/2020/07/13/reflections-on-the-coming-era-of-great-power-competition-in-africa/>.

<sup>19</sup> Avinash Nair, “To counter OBOR, India and Japan propose Asia-Africa sea corridor”, *Indian Express*, last modified May 31, 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/explained/to-counter-obor-india-and-japan-propose-asia-africa-sea-corridor-4681749/>.

<sup>20</sup> “What happened to the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor?” *Young Australians in International Affairs*, last modified July 24, 2019, <https://www.youngausint.org.au/post/2019/07/24/what-happened-to-the-asia-africa-growth-corridor>.



partners. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), brainchild of the Indian Navy, includes Pakistan among its member states. Over the passage of time, its objective of promoting “maritime multilateralism” appears to have nosedived since the rejuvenation of the “Indo Pacific” concept.<sup>28</sup>

Seven East African nations are part of IORA while five are members of IONS. The common East African members include littoral states of Kenya and Tanzania and island countries, Mauritius, Seychelles and Madagascar.

To be noted that IORA, which serves as an acknowledged forum of the “Free and Open Indo Pacific” (FOIP) concept, has allowed American patronage of Indian defence diplomacy targeted against larger Chinese interests in the Western Indian Ocean.<sup>29</sup> It was against this backdrop that former Indian Chief of Army Staff (incumbent Chief of Defence Staff) General Bipin Rawat visited Kenya and Tanzania in 2018 to lay the bedrock for India-African military exercises.<sup>30</sup>

## Pakistan’s “Look Africa” Policy

India has a sizable diplomatic presence in the African continent, with 47 missions including 12 honorary consuls, and fifteen in the east.<sup>31</sup> Compared to China which has 50 missions, India’s footprint can be considered impressive.<sup>32</sup> Pakistan, meanwhile, maintains official diplomatic presence in a total of 15 African countries only, from which only six are situated in East Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Mauritius, Sudan, Tanzania and Zimbabwe).

Pakistan’s Ministry of Commerce has ventured into Africa using trade and commerce as the guiding mediums. The “Look Africa” policy approved in August 2017 prioritises trade with 10 out of 54 African countries, four of which are in East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, Sudan and Ethiopia).<sup>33</sup> The Ministry of Commerce’s efforts appear to have fostered mentionable change in trading patterns. Pakistani exports to East Africa (Malawi, Zimbabwe and Djibouti only) increased by \$2.4 million

<sup>28</sup> Harsh V. Pant, “India in the Indian Ocean: Growing Mismatch between Ambitions and Capabilities”, *Pacific Affairs*, accessed October 23, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25608866?seq=1>.

<sup>29</sup> “Advancing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific Region”, *US Department of State*, last modified November 18, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/advancing-a-free-and-open-indo-pacific-region/>.

<sup>30</sup> IANS, “Army Chief General Bipin Rawat to Visit Tanzania, Kenya From December 17”, *India*, last modified December 16, 2018, <https://www.india.com/news/india/army-chief-general-bipin-rawat-to-visit-tanzania-kenya-from-december-17-3482333/>.

<sup>31</sup> “Indian Missions Abroad”, *Ministry of External Affairs*, accessed October 23, 2020, <https://www.mea.gov.in/indian-missions-abroad-new.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> “Chinese Diplomatic Missions Abroad”, *FMPRC*, accessed October 25, 2020, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zft/eng/xglj/zfsg/>.

<sup>33</sup> Mubarak Zeb Khan, “Pakistan’s ‘Look Africa Plan’ envisions greater bilateral trade”, *DAWN*, last modified September 23, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1359489>.

to \$6.9 million in July 2020, when compared to July 2019.<sup>34</sup> The Employers’ Federation of Pakistan (EFP) has already held negotiations with the ministry to kick-start phase 2 of the Look Africa policy.<sup>35</sup>

Dr Moeed Yusuf, Special Assistant to Pakistan’s Prime Minister on National Security Division and Strategic Policy Planning, reportedly briefed the Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi on a comprehensive economic diplomacy programme.<sup>36</sup> A high-ranking official familiar with the roadmap said it covers the “entire world”.<sup>37</sup> It remains to be seen, at least publicly, how the policy orients itself in regional and sub-regional groupings.

## Conclusion

Pakistan’s economic foray into Africa is a commendable step in the right direction. However, to subtract broader geostrategic threats from this approach will prove futile. To ensure that Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) connecting CPEC with BRI/MSR remain intact in case of conflict, Islamabad needs to develop a proactive maritime-centric OOAC strategy in partnership with friendly East African countries.

For instance, the East African nations of Djibouti and Somalia, home to Chinese and Turkish military bases, respectively, do not have formal diplomatic relations with Pakistan. Ironically, India can avail of the US base in Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti courtesy of LEMOA.

Pakistan can begin by increasing its missions in East African countries. The economic outreach through Look Africa should be complemented through increased Pakistan Navy port calls in countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, Somalia, Djibouti and Mauritius. The logical course of action to follow through would be the conduct of bilateral exercises.

Secondly, Pakistan must push for early membership of IORA as a geostrategic priority. India’s efforts to veto its entry need to be desisted through back-channel dialogue facilitated by the US.

Logistics exchange agreements should be considered keeping in view supreme, long-term national geo-economic and geostrategic interests instead of “concerns” by Arab Gulf states. A strategic chain linking Gwadar

<sup>34</sup> “Pakistan’s ‘Look Africa Policy’ shows reasonable export growth”, *Mettis Global*, last modified August 11, 2020, <https://mettis-global.news/pakistans-look-africa-policy-shows-reasonable-export-growth>.

<sup>35</sup> M. Khan, “EFP kick-starts Look Africa Phase-2 with Ministry of Commerce”, *Jasarat*, last modified October 13, 2020, <https://www.jasarat.com/en/2020/10/13/efp-kick-starts-look-africa-phase-2-with-ministry-of-commerce/>

<sup>36</sup> IANP, “SAPM Moeed Yusuf chairs first meeting of ‘Economic Diplomacy’ outreach program”, *The Nation*, last modified October 3, 2020, <https://nation.com.pk/03-Oct-2020/sapm-moeed-yusuf-chairs-first-meeting-of-economic-diplomacy-outreach-program>

<sup>37</sup> Communicated to the author on the condition of anonymity

(Pakistan) with Turkish bases in Qatar and Somalia alongside PLAN base in Djibouti needs to be activated. This would prove economically viable for a resource-hungry and finance-deficit Islamabad. Pakistan Navy as an experienced IOR security actor can provide valuable training to Turkish and Chinese counterparts.

Lastly, yet most importantly, the Government of Pakistan will need to reconsider its stated approach of de-hyphenating geo-economics from geo-strategy. In Pakistan's case, these are intertwined phenomena that cannot be pursued in isolation. The country's long-term economic prosperity hinges as much on stability in the Western Indian Ocean as it does on table-top discussions within closed doors.

Foregoing in view, it is evident that Pakistan's maritime strategic depth, guarantor of CPEC's success, lies along the shores of East Africa.