

# Maritime Geopolitics in Indian Ocean: China's Bid for Regional Dominance

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**ABSTRACT:** In the contemporary world, China is one of the giants that intends to dominate the whole world. To achieve this enormous dream China took the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which will connect most of the world through land and maritime routes. BRI's geographical span is constantly expanding which comprises 3 continents, 68 countries covering 65% of the world's population which will involve infrastructural development like ports, roads, railways, and airports costing over US\$1 trillion in investments. The Indian Ocean has become a key strategic arena in maritime geopolitics due to its increasing importance in terms of global economic trade and security. This paper focuses on explaining the geopolitical dimension of BRI. Hambantota and Gwadar, two mammoth seaports, in the Indian Ocean play a crucial role in China's plan to increase its maritime footprint in littoral South Asia. This paper also attempts to find out China's emerging strategic security interests in this region by exercising soft power which is a key element in China's national security. The objective of the paper is to trace China's changing maritime stance towards the Indian Ocean, with the aim to improve regional dominance and integration by increasing trade and economic growth.

**KEYWORDS:** BRI, geopolitics, Indian Ocean, Gwadar, Hambantota

## Introduction

Since the beginning of Human civilization, water has been an essential element. Water covers two-thirds of our mother earth. Civilizations thrived near water bodies like the Nile River. Maritime routes have been proven to be the most trusted and ancient way of trading and till now modern trading depends on maritime networks. Over the decades, maritime geopolitics have evolved around the sea routes, chokepoints, and ports which shaped the strategies of economic development and military expansion. China's rapid economic growth and ambition to be a global power demand for greater influence and maximum utilization of maritime networks to safeguard spatially expanding geopolitical and strategic interests. The Indian Ocean has become a key strategic arena in contemporary geopolitics as it gives access to many maritime chokepoints and SLOCs which accommodates developing countries with dense population.

Around 30 percent of China's sea trade is worth more than US \$300 billion and 77 percent of oil import moves across the Indian Ocean (Khurana 2008, 1-2). Beijing has turned its attention to the Indian Ocean for ensuring safe and secure passage for its energy requirement and trading purposes and also to balance the Indian and US predominance in the region. As a part of the Belt and Road Initiative China has drawn the String of Pearls strategy which will connect the maritime silk route to the Indian Ocean. Gwadar and Hambantota port both play a vital role as they can be used to influence and control maritime geopolitics in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Chinese increasing interests and maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean are a growing concern for the dominant actors in the region. By using soft power China has created an image of an all-weather friend to the South Asian states by ensuring mutual benefits for all. China's long-term policy still remains like the Western Powers, which is becoming a global power, but the method is different.

## China's new stance in the global order

During the cold war, the world had two stories to offer one was Communism and the other one was Capitalism. With the fall of the Soviet Union, only one story came out victorious, Capitalism.

Capitalism established liberal world order which offered free trade, democratization and globalism. For long people were under oppressive regimes but the liberal world order, the doctrine of the West, gave people hope for freedom and liberation. Now this story is also facing an end. The 2008 global economic crisis, never-ending wars in the Middle East, Trump becoming the president of the USA, and Brexit events like these have put people's faith in the liberal order in decay. As people are losing their faith in the liberal world order but there is no new story to offer to the world. China is trying to build that new story in a unique manner. Within a few decades, China has transformed itself from an agrarian country into an industrialized country. The Chinese economy is booming in an ever-growing manner which has helped China to become a global trading power. To continue down this path China needs a safe and secure trading route and a huge amount of energy supply. To ensure this China has taken the Belt and Road initiative which will maximize trade through communication. China and the Western Powers hold the same long-term policy which is to be a global power but the strategy is different. In Asia, China is prying to be the regional hegemon and restore the Sino-centric order (Muzaffar et al. 2018, 101). BRI aims for economic integration where the center hub will be China.

China has its own way of becoming a global power which is pretty much different from the Western countries. Where the Western Powers has used the military means, meddled in the internal matters of countries, China has offered the world a new philosophy which is "Peaceful Rise". By using soft power, economic skills, creating a global market revolving around itself China has given the world a global sense of mutual benefits where everybody seems victorious. China has established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and Silk Road Fund to create an alternate global economic order. These will, in turn, undermine the still prevailing weak liberal economic order which was offered by Bretton Woods institutions.

### **What is BRI?**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a part of China's Peaceful Rise strategy which will connect Asia, Africa, Europe by Land and Maritime routes through Chinese investments in a multitude of infrastructural development projects like ports, roads, railways and energy pipelines. Chinese President Xi Jinping at the end of 2013 announced an initiative to make infrastructural developments to create a Silk Road Economic Belt and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road which together was referred to as One Belt One Road and later came to be known as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China aims to increase trade and economic growth across the globe through an enormous state-backed campaign for global dominance.

The Belt and Road Initiative consists of two parts. The first one is the Silk Road Economic Belt which will connect 65 countries and 4.4 billion people across Central Asia to Middle East, Russia, Europe, South Asia, and the second part is the Maritime Silk Road which will link the South China Sea to the Indian ocean, East Africa, the red sea and the Mediterranean (Du 2016, 31). The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) with US\$100bn and the Silk Road Fund (SRF) with US\$40bn is ready to provide financial support to BRI. China Development Bank, Exim Bank, Foreign Exchange reserve, and Sovereign Wealth Fund are ready to give additional support to this giant initiative. Indian Ocean Region (IOR) bears strategic significance in the layout of the Belt and Road Initiative. Hambantota and Gwadar seaports connect two important dots in the string of pearls strategy as a part of BRI, which will help China to counter the Indian predominance in the IOR. As China expands its presence in the Indian Ocean, backing up maritime geopolitics by embarking upon soft power diplomacy, China is imposing a threat to the regional big brother, India, who has a naval ambition of its own.

### **Geo-strategic implications of Gwadar port in Indian Ocean**

Pakistan has been blessed with about 960 km of sea frontage stretching to the west and south east axis. Gwadar, a mammoth deep Seaport, is situated on the juncture of South Asia, Central Asia and Middle East, just on the opposite of side of Gulf of Oman and Strait of Hormuz.

The port of Gwadar was not Pakistan's to begin with. It was under the occupation of Oman as it was located just right on the Gulf of Oman. During the partition of Indian Sub-continent Haji Baloch highlighted the importance of Gwadar port and insisted that Pakistan should take control of the port. In 1958 after four years of extensive negotiation Pakistan purchased Gwadar with the price \$3 million (Naseem 2014, 520). In 1964 Pakistan announced Gwadar to be a port but due to lack of initiatives and funding it remained a small fishing village for a very long time. But in 2001 situations changed when comprehensive steps were taken to build a fully working deep sea port and this is where China came in and took the opportunity. Vice Premier of China Wu Bangguo visited Pakistan in 2002 to officially start the construction of Gwadar deep sea port. However, the project didn't see any progress immediately. When George W. Bush announced the "War on Terror" Gwadar faced a major setback. When the US troops intervened in Afghanistan, there was a security concern that needed to be given priority and thus China backed out of Gwadar for a while. In 2015 Gwadar port was opened and became an important part of BRI. By 2018 the port as well as highways and railway networks connecting Pakistan and China became a huge economic factor contributing within the BRI.

Gwadar port is an important dot to connect the String of Pearls of the Belt and Road Initiative and China is giving utmost importance to this project. The first phase of this mega project is already completed by Chinese Harbor Engineering Company which cost around 248 million U.S. dollars, where China provided 198 million U.S. dollars and Pakistan provided 50 million U.S. dollars (Hassan 2005, 14). The second phase is yet to start and Pakistan is looking for funding.

Pakistan holds two established ports, Karachi Port and Port Qasim, which were not enough to fulfill the strategic interest of Pakistan. Karachi port has always been vulnerable for Pakistan due to its geographical proximity to India. During the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971, Pakistan's Karachi port faced naval blockade by the Indian Navy and the same scenario appeared again during the Kargil war in 1999 (Khondoker 2015). But the Gwadar port's distance from enemy line eliminates Pakistan's vulnerability which will give safe access to Indian Ocean and also will increase Pakistan's sea borne trade. This will also transform Pakistan's navy to stand strong with other navies in the Indian Ocean.

China is booming as an industrialized country and it needs safe and easy access to sea for transportation. But the main industrial region is very much far from the Shanghai port. It costs about 16,000 km of distance and 2-3 months of travelling (Naseem 2014, 522). Gwadar will help China to minimize this distance and cost. Gwadar port is only at a distance of 2500km proving to be beneficial for them as trade continues to take place throughout the year because of the hot waters (Naseem 2014, 522). It gives them a huge advantage in terms of saving time and money. Again, there is inequality between Eastern and Western parts of China in terms of development which China is trying to compensate by industrializing the Western parts. But from this region the Shanghai port is almost 3000km away whereas Gwadar port is only 1500km away. So, China's plan to develop western part will be easier through Gwadar.

Due to its location at the edge of Persian Gulf, Pakistan will work as a bridge for China to the oil producing countries in the Middle-East. Malacca Strait has always been a sensitive spot for China. Chinese dependence on the Indian Ocean and Malacca Strait for trading purposes have proven to be a strategic vulnerability, as USA has predominance over these waterbodies (Hussain 2017, 20). China's crude oil needs have doubled from 1995 to 2006 and is expected to double again in the next fifteen years (Gill 2019, 341). Gwadar will eliminate this vulnerability and secure its crucial SLOCs. It will enable Pakistan to have direct access to Energy brought from Persian Gulf through Pakistan with energy pipeline. The distance from Xinjiang province to Chinese industrial region is relatively far from Gwadar port. With the energy pipeline China can fulfill the energy needs of Xinjiang province with comparatively low cost. The distance between Gwadar port and Strait of Hormuz is only 400 km which will benefit China economically and strategically in transporting energy and oil requirements from West Asia shrinking its existing current maritime transportation distance from 13000 km to 3000 km (Muzaffar et al. 2018, 107). Moreover, the ports of UAE have been acting as nucleus for trading in this region. But due to Gwadar's strategic location it will create an alternative spot other than the UAE ports. Gwadar will be turned into a regional trade and commerce hub.

China can use the Gwadar port as a listening post to observe the naval activities of USA in the Persian Gulf (Malik 2012, 62). This way China will be able to keep an eye out for far more than an arm's length. And the port being far from Indian naval bases, it gives them advantage to keep tabs on Indian activities. The presence of Chinese vessels in the Gwadar Port will affect geopolitical dynamics in the Arabian Sea also (Fayyaz 2019, 16). This will result in a security dilemma for India and USA. They are the dominant actors in this area and now China is the one balancing the power by creating a counter force through the Gwadar port. Zhao Nanqi, the director of the General Staff Logistics Department of the Chinese Navy in a top-secret memorandum explained the PLA's strategic plans to enhance control over Pacific and the Indian Ocean where he stated that "We can no longer accept the Indian Ocean as only an ocean of the Indians" (Malik 2012, 62). So, it clearly indicates that China will try to balance the Indian dominance in the Indian Ocean. This port will also give China the strategic depth to project power in the western reaches of Indian Ocean and also to counter balance US and India's naval power. If China continues to develop naval capabilities in the Arabian Sea, then it could control the Strait of Hormuz from Gwadar port. If China have access to the Gwadar port to use it for military purposes then it will provide People's Liberation Army's Navy with a permanent base in the Indian Ocean (Gill 2019, 349). In this way India's regional hegemony and military capability will face serious challenges from China.

### **Geopolitics revolving around Hambantota Deep Seaport**

Hambantota port is located at the Hambantota district which is near the southern tip of the island. Sri Lanka has direct access to many key international shipping routes that linked Asia and Europe through trade and commerce. The strategic location of Sri Lanka has generated international trading opportunities through sea routes which are the prime source of the economy. Since the Colombo port deals with container handling, it is not efficient enough to support the port-related industries and provide other services. Thus, the proposal to build a port located in the southern province with access to the Indian Ocean carried paramount importance for Sri Lanka. The rapid economic growth in Asia has turned the Sri Lankan government's attention towards developing its port-related industry.

Ariya Wickramanayake founder and Chairman of Master Divers who did a study with his own funding to explore the port's potential and presented it to President Mahinda Rajapaksa, the then Minister (Sirimane 2010). In 2006, the construction of the Hambantota port was proposed with the aim to accelerate economic growth for Sri Lanka's in near future. When Sri Lanka put out an open request for funding, China stepped forward. China was the only country willing to throw its weight behind the development of Hambantota Port. The construction began in January 2008 with a US\$307 million loan from the Export-Import Bank of China (Exim Bank) which helped to build the first phase of the Hambantota Port project at 6.3% interest, a very high-interest rate by all standards (Carrai 2018, 1072). Within November 2012, phase 1 of HPDP was completed and the second phase of construction was in line.

Hambantota port was built with advanced technology and services that Colombo port did not offer, SLPA assumed that it will be able to alleviate pressure from the Colombo Port. Hambantota port will be able to cater ships that usually takes about a three-and-a-half-day tour from their shipping lanes for maintenance services (Dilka, Amaratunge, and Withanawasam 2015, 19-20). Hambantota port was built in order to attract heavy traffic along the key shipping routes like Strait of Malacca and Strait of Hormuz but it failed to do so. In 2010, after a year the port opened, a huge rock was blocking sea vessels to enter the port which hampered access to the port. Even though several attempts were taken to blast that huge rock at great cost the port managed to attract only 34 ships in 2012 (Wibisono 2019, 229). The heavy amount of losses led it to become another white elephant for Sri Lanka. When Sri Lanka could not repay the Chinese loans, it had no options left but to hand over the Hambantota port to China. On 29th July 2017, the agreement between the two states was formalized where Hambantota port was given to a Chinese-majority joint venture company for a 99-year lease and received around \$1 billion as a foreign direct investment (FDI) (Lim and Mukherjee 2017, 8). The 99-year lease is inconvenient for Sri Lanka and initiates concerns about whether Sri Lanka is falling

into a “debt trap” to China or not (Brautigam 2019, 4-5). The agreement between the govt. and CMP included setting up two separate joint-venture companies to supervise the port's commercial and security operations: the Hambantota International Port Group (HIPG) and Hambantota International Port Services Company (HIPS) (Carrai 2018, 1073). These are the main associations of CMPort, which retains an 85% share of HIPG with SLPA holding the remaining 15% (Carrai 2018, 1082). The advancement of Hambantota Port is one of the China-financed BRI ventures that has pulled in the most attention.

Hambantota port plays a strategic role in the Maritime Silk Road in the Indo-Pacific region. Sri Lanka is situated in the Indian Ocean on the world's busiest trading route and the world's second-busiest oil transit chokepoints (Julia and Popescu 2017, 95). China imports 75% of its oil through this passage, thus the development of the Hambantota port is very beneficial to China as it additionally depends on this port to send out its items to Europe and Africa (Lai 2007, 526). Over the decades, China's energy needs have doubled which poses a fear that any disturbance in the energy shipment will affect China's economic development (Holmes and Yoshihara 2008, 368). Around 77% of China's oil comes through the Indian Ocean from the Middle East and Africa, thus ensuring a safe and secure shipping flow is the prime concern of China. Any disruption in the flow to any of the oil and gas carrying transit ships can cause a huge impact. For China, Sri Lanka is a gateway to the Middle East and Asia, especially Iran who is one of the major oil exporters to China (Rajan 2015). Sri Lanka's direct link with the security of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) has incited China to ensure its presence in the island nation (Fernando 2010, 293). To ensure the security of many important maritime chokepoints is related to the protection of the SLOC.

China's speculation at Hambantota says something regarding its strategic motives. Since August 2017, when the arrangement was first marked, Colombo has transferred power over Hambantota International Port Services Ltd. (HIPS), the holding organization responsible for port security. CMPorts holds majority 58% of the stakes where Sri Lanka Port Authority holds 42% (Singh 2019, 202). China's activity in the Hambantota port has genuine ramifications for India's security. Chinese presence near India's southern coast involves grave concern as Sri Lanka can be used as a backyard to keep an eye on India. There's the possibility of China using the portside area to monitor and gather intelligence in the IOR. Delhi is worried about the People's Liberation Army-Navy's (PLAN) ships and submarines, which have a higher chance to dock at Hambantota port (Singh 2019, 200-202). To reassure India about Sri Lanka's stance, Sri Lankan security forces have been made liable for the Hambantota port's security and stated that it won't permit China to use the port's ground for its military purpose (Vasudeva 2018).

## Findings

Hambantota and Gwadar seaport are the most important hubs of China's String of Pearl Strategy to gain influence over the Indian Ocean. In the 21st century, maritime geopolitics and the significance of the seaports cannot be ignored; Ports play a crucial role in sustaining growth in one country's trade and commerce. China opted for Hambantota and Gwadar seaport to reify its presence in South Asia and to have a safe and secure shipping route through the Indian Ocean. Apart from that, the location of the ports being near maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca, Hormuz, and to the gulf has given strategic depth to China. The development of these ports is not only in the best interest of China but also in the best interest of the region's trade and development.

With advanced technologies like satellites, remotely controlled vehicles and cameras China can do surveillance in the IOR by sitting at home without any military base. So, China is trying to secure places rather than establishing military bases. Again, Chinese merchant vessels can make the shipment of spare parts and technical personnel of strategic naval missions in the region. China can keep India under check by offering Colombo to upgrade its naval commands' existing facilities in terms of intelligence, surveillance. Sooner or later, Sri Lanka might co-opt with China's proposal which is already a matter of concern for India.

The Gwadar port will provide China with trade advantages in terms of time and cost as it will create an alternative route by decreasing distance and money. The port's location is far from India, which gives both Pakistan and China safe and secure access to the Indian Ocean. It will work as a proxy to the ports in the Persian Gulf Region for trading and transporting energy. This port will also work as an observation post to monitor the Indian and USA's naval activities in the IOR. The long-established dominance of India in IOR will face challenges because of Chinese involvement in Gwadar port. On the other hand, Sri Lanka is directly linked to the security of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), which is a primary objective of China to establish its roots in the Indian Ocean. So that China can ensure its energy security through the access to Hambantota port. Vessels carrying oil and gas travel from the Persian Gulf gets transit via the Strait of Malacca around Sri Lanka, into the waters of the South China Sea.

## Conclusion

China has made significant progress in Indian Ocean littorals, particularly in Sri Lanka and Pakistan to guarantee smooth transportation of its vitality assets through the ocean. Beijing's effort to outflank the world order established by the western powers is meticulously reflected in the Belt and Road Initiative. It aims to integrate the developing economies of the world where South Asia is an important part to connect. Even though BRI primarily holds economic and energy security agenda, there is no guarantee that China will not use it as military means in the near future. Apparently, China's strategic ambitions for its naval presence in the Indian Ocean are shrouded under BRI. Hambantota and Gwadar seaports give strategic depth to China which in turn will provide trade and energy hubs in the IOR. Beijing's effort in securing the seaports along the string of pearls with soft power is more of a vigorous strategy to refrain the littoral South Asian states from demurring Chinese presence in their vicinity. The Chinese presence in the Hambantota and Gwadar seaports is representing a symbolic dagger pointed right at the elephant in the region, India. Gwadar could act as a strategic hedge to balance the dominance of India and the USA in the IOR. On the other hand, Hambantota can be used to secure the energy requirements of China as well as to monitor the commercial and military traffic of the key international shipping routes. Till date, Beijing's activities in Gwadar and Hambantota are going according to plan. At this pace, China will be able to fulfill its strategic interest regarding BRI but the future remains unpredictable like international politics, so no one cannot quite say what is bound to happen next. If everything goes according to plan, China with these seaports will be able to exercise the power of regional hegemon in the IOR

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