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Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal: A Strategic Factor in China-South Asia Relations¹

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Chinese President Xi Jinping's go-global strategy towards Maritime South Asia will be fashioned by the interests and concerns of China, but may well be buffeted by those of India. The centrepiece of this study is a bird's-eye view of the emerging interplay of such potential Sino-Indian power projections.

Geopolitics or even geo-economics is a *function* not only of geography but also power – a *function* as in the idiom of mathematics. A geographically well-placed state can be a geopolitical or geo-economic player or both, only if it commands on its own, or with the help of other countries, the three drivers of power for peace, economic good, and war. These three drivers of power can be collectivised as mind-money-and-military power. It can be argued that China and India are, by far, in the first category of geopolitical and geo-economic players in

¹ This Conference Paper formed the basis of a presentation by Mr P S Suryanarayana at the workshop on 'China and South Asia', organised by the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and the Colombo-based Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS), in Colombo on 5 and 6 December 2016.

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their own right. Pakistan by and large, and Sri Lanka as well as Bangladesh to a lesser extent, are in the second category of being enabled by China for geopolitical and geo-economic roles. Pakistan has been buttressed by the United States, too, at various times in this regard.

In essence, the emerging dynamics of China as a strategic factor in the geopolitics and geo-economics of South Asia flow from Beijing's command over the three drivers of power for peace, economic good, and war. Such a view is conventional wisdom in the study of contemporary South Asia in this second decade of the 21st century. But if you tilt the prism of perception slightly, the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal can themselves be seen as a strategic factor in China's relations with the South Asian countries.

Obviously, the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal are not states *per se*. But their location, south of China in a somewhat linear view, is directly relevant to Beijing as it projects its mind-money-and-military power towards Maritime South Asia. Chinese President Xi Jinping's 'Belt and Road Initiative', in particular his '21st century Maritime Silk Road', is emblematic of his country's geopolitical and geo-economic power projection towards and beyond South Asia. There is really nothing amiss about China's doing-so, because power projection is intrinsic to human as well as state behaviour. Innate human and state behaviour is intrinsic to geopolitics just as the properties of matter are the foundational basis of physical or more-precise sciences.

For the purpose of my research in this realm, the Bay of Bengal, which is seen in some scholarly circles as a part of the Eastern Indian Ocean, is treated as a distinctive sub-theatre. The reason is pretty clear: the waters of this Bay wash the long shoreline of Eastern India. So, India tends to be *possessive* about this maritime sub-theatre, somewhat like China is *possessive* about South China Sea and East China Sea. These three maritime sectors are of considerable importance to international trade and commerce. To this extent, China's power projection towards South Asia through segments of the Bay of Bengal becomes a matter of interest and concern to India. Delhi, therefore, has a strategic compulsion to try and keep Beijing at bay (pun intended) in this sub-theatre. This is not a counter-intuitive factor in this Bay sub-theatre (and indeed in the other sub-theatres of Sri Lanka's Indian Ocean environs, as well as the Arabian Sea along the India-Pakistan-Iran coastline). Although India does not match China's huge macro-economic strengths and military expenditures, Delhi has strengths and ambitions that matter to the sub-theatres in focus here. Above all, China and India have had a deeply chequered relationship since the mid-20th century.

Surely, South Asia's Bangladesh, besides a few Southeast Asian countries, are littoral-states along the Bay of Bengal. Inevitably, the interests and concerns of these states will in some ways impinge on the China-India paradigm of power projections in this sub-theatre.

In addition, the China-South Asia maritime relations will, by and large, be determined by Beijing's power projection in, as well as near, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Relevant to this context are: (a) the Indian Ocean itself that encircles Sri Lanka in a standard cartographic depiction, and (b) the Arabian Sea, a sub-theatre, which some scholars portray as a part of the Western Indian Ocean.

As for Rising India's natural instinct of competing with the Ascendant China in the entire spectrum of the Indian Ocean, relevant, too, are some parts of Maritime Southeast Asia and Australia in the East, besides parts of East Africa as well as Mauritius and Seychelles in the West. In this limited study, we keep *these* sub-theatres out of the visibility range of our lens, mainly because our primary focus is on China and South Asia.

Specifically for this study, the geographical contours have now been traced for China's geopolitical interactions with South Asia in the maritime domain. Within this framework, I shall focus on three sub-theatres: the Bay of Bengal itself; as an extension, Sri Lanka's sphere of *interest* in the Indian Ocean as such; and Pakistan's territorial waters in the Arabian Sea. The geopolitical dynamics of Xi Jinping's go-global strategy towards Maritime South Asia will be fashioned by the interests and concerns of China, but may well be buffeted by those of India. The centrepiece of this study is a bird's-eye view of the emerging interplay of such *potential* Sino-Indian power projections.

Six-and-Ten-Degree Channels

As calm and stable as possible is the current state of the *potential* China-India competition in the Bay of Bengal sub-theatre. In this overall ambience, Beijing does seek to project economic and strategic power towards South Asia through this maritime sector. However, China needs to navigate with political care and strategic craft. India holds a *potentially* commanding advantage. There are three nodal points of *potential* China-India tussle – one nodal point in the southern Bay of Bengal, and two points in the central portion of this sub-theatre. A careful look at an authentic or accurate map will suffice to recognise these current realities.

The nodal point in southern Bay of Bengal is the 200-km-wide Six-Degree Channel near the western entry-exit gateway of the Malacca Strait. Delhi has a legitimate military presence here, more precisely at the nearby Nicobar Island that belongs to India. The Six-Degree Channel is indeed the passageway for much of China's two-way commercial traffic in this sub-theatre. Beijing's military traffic, if any at both the surface-level and the sub-surface level, passes through this pathway to and from South Asia (Sri Lanka and Pakistan in particular). For China, this pathway is clearly the shortest sea-route to and from South Asia. In such a calculus of distance, the Sunda and the Lombok Straits, both farther to the east, suffer in comparison with the Malacca Strait and the Six-Degree Channel.³ Given this geographical reality, Delhi's Tri-Services Command at the Indian outpost of Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANIs) in the Bay of Bengal is a geopolitical factor that China is aware of. These islands, widely recognised as India's latent strategic asset, are vulnerable to natural disasters. But the Indians have demonstrated resilience after the 2004 Tsunami, which hit Nicobar in particular. India has sustained its military presence at the ANIs after that Tsunami.

There have been occasional reports that China had stealthily navigated its submarines to test India's military capabilities in the vicinity of the Six-Degree Channel and the ANIs. However, neither China nor India has publicly acknowledged any nasty surface-level or sub-surface stand-off between their respective Navies around the Six-Degree Channel and the ANIs. Indeed, naval experts say that the depths of Malacca Strait are not ideally suited for navigating submarines for military purposes.

There is ample scope, though, for a stand-off as China seeks to rise to its full potential as a global player in international trade as well as military matters. For now, the geopolitics of international commerce, including China's, does not impinge on India's own vital economic and security interests in the vicinity of the Six-Degree Channel.

Also in the southern Bay of Bengal, India can hope to gain greater strategic presence off the Trincomalee port along Sri Lanka's eastern seaboard. During India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Sri Lanka in March 2015, Delhi scaled up its activities at the Trincomalee Oil Tank Farm. Even without India's enhanced access to this Oil Tank Farm, it is easy to foresee that the modernising Indian Navy can make its strategic presence felt off Trincomalee. The

³ For more about the naval salience and challenges for India – in relation to the Six-Degree Channel as well as the Ten-Degree Channel (mentioned later in this paper) – read, among others, Jeff M. Smith, *Cold Peace: China-India Rivalry in the Twenty-First Century*, Lexington Books, Lanham, Maryland (USA) and Plymouth (UK), 2014, pp. 164-174

Indian Navy is engaged in a quest for full-spectrum capabilities. This might be an added factor for China to consider, as it expands its power projections towards South Asia.

However, the international commercial traffic as well as military traffic (if any), including China's in particular, generally passes at quite some distance away from Trincomalee, except for such traffic (if any) bound for this port itself. Viewed in this perspective, the Indian Navy's *potentially* potent strategic presence off Trincomalee will not necessarily give Delhi any 'anti-access, area-denial' capabilities in this segment, with reference to China, especially during peacetime. The phrase 'anti-access, area-denial' has come into vogue to denote a state's dominance in a maritime sector, to the detriment of other states, during peacetime.

Moving away from southern Bay of Bengal as a sub-theatre, and as mentioned earlier, we should take note of two more nodal points for *potential* China-India tussle. These two points lie in the central portion of the Bay of Bengal.

One of these two, namely the 150-km-wide Ten-Degree Channel, is relevant to a scenario of suspected Chinese 'plan' to create an artificial alternative to the Malacca Strait. Thailand's Isthmus of Kra is the *potential* site for this artificial waterway, which might be modelled on the Panama Canal and/or the Suez Canal. Relevant to this context is the location of the Ten-Degree Channel quite close to the Isthmus of Kra, which also lies in or near the same Ten-Degree Latitude. The Ten-Degree Channel, which segregates the Andaman Island from the southern Nicobar Island, is a passageway of commercial and strategic importance.

The Lure of Kra

At this writing, China has *not* officially confirmed that it is poised to launch work on carving out an artificial alternative to the Malacca Strait. The farthest that China has gone so far is to simply distance itself from the news reports, in mid-May 2015, that Sino-Thai corporate memorandum of cooperation was indeed signed for carving out a Kra Canal. Beijing did not, however, contradict those reports.⁴

Moreover, it stands to reason that China has *not* taken off the table the challenging but tempting option of carving out the Kra Canal as an artificial alternative to the Malacca Strait. A reason

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei's Regular Press Conference on May 19, 2015, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn> (English site)

for this is not far to seek. Beijing is concerned about a scenario of the US being able to impose some form of blockade at or near the Malacca Strait to China's detriment in a hyper crisis like war. Obviously the US is still a powerful force in the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific domains. It is of course anybody's guess whether the US would remain hyperactive after the presumably-isolationist Donald Trump assumes American presidency in January 2017. Moreover, naval experts say that blockading an international waterway like the Malacca Strait, as different from port(s) in suitable location(s), is a huge diplomatic-and-military challenge. However, Beijing, as a rising global power, does not ignore even a minimal chance of the Malacca Strait becoming inaccessible to China in a hyper-crisis. Beijing's best bet, therefore, will be an artificial alternative to the Malacca Strait, as conceived and likely carved out by China itself. Indeed, significant Chinese statements reinforce the validity of the existing signs that Beijing is conceptualising the Kra Canal.

Amplifying China's initiative of '21st Century Maritime Silk Road', Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi had said in December 2014 as follows: "As time goes by, the great significance and far-reaching impact of the initiative will become more keenly felt".⁵ This phraseology, indicative of epochal proportions over time, does point to China's 'plan' of carving out the Kra Canal in the future. Reinforcing my inference on these lines is a tell-tale comment carried by the state-run *China Daily* in August 2015: ". . . In the context of rapidly growing economic exchanges between Asia, western Eurasia and Africa, the [proposed] Kra Canal would not be a substitute for the Strait of Malacca but a necessary complement. . . . *The 21st century Chinese return to centrality, accompanied by the great leap outward of global China, provides the means and the need to realize the Kra dream now. . . . [New] initiatives that do not come from the West are not necessarily anti-Western; they are simply the mark of a multipolar world*"⁶ (emphasis added). This comment in a state-run publication, as well as Wang Yi's promise about the "great" future "significance" of the '21st century Maritime Silk Road', reveals China's thinking. Therefore, it stands to reason that, as time goes by, China is likely to *explore* the 'plan' for an artificial alternative to the Malacca Strait. After all, it will be imprudent of China to imagine any kind of an isolationist-America for all time to come, although Trump's prospective US presidency has given rise to an image of an inward-looking superpower-in-decline.

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, *2014 in Review: A Successful Year for China's Diplomacy*, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn> (English site)

⁶ *China Daily: Asia Weekly* (Print edition in English), China Comment by David Gosset, August 21-27, 2015

However, China has not so far publicly announced and launched work on carving out the Kra Canal, because there are quite a few factors that need to be sorted out first. Foremost is the issue of China being sure about the likely long-term attitudes of several stakeholders: (1) Thailand, which is still grappling with a number of political and constitutional challenges at home; (2) the other littoral states along the Malacca Strait, especially Singapore; (3) the US which, as the lingering superpower in the overlapping Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific maritime domains, has the *means* to play counter-games even during, or perhaps after, the Trump presidency; and (4) India which has begun to make its presence felt in the Bay of Bengal.

Of prime relevance to our discussion here is the India factor. In conventional political terms, India surely is not a littoral state along the Malacca Strait. It can, therefore, be argued that the Chinese need not necessarily factor-in Delhi's likely attitude *before* finalising their Kra Canal 'plan'. However, China is expected to be cognisant of Delhi's growing military presence in the vicinity of the Isthmus of Kra, which lies to the east of India's indigenous military base at the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. For China, India's military presence of this magnitude will be a major factor to reckon with – especially in the event of a security-crisis *after* the Kra Canal has been carved out. On balance, China cannot ignore India as a military power in the Bay of Bengal, now and into the future,⁷ regardless of whether Delhi can enter into a more-robust strategic partnership with the US even under the Trump presidency.

No Visible Sino-Indian Storm, for Now

We have so far discussed the Ten-Degree Channel as one of the two nodal points for *potential* China-India tussle in the central portion of the Bay of Bengal. The other nodal point in this sector is not really a precise point but rather the growing capabilities that radiate from India's Eastern Naval Command (ENC) at Visakhapatnam in India's sub-national State of Andhra Pradesh. International observers take note of the reports, too, about the preparations by India for protecting its nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed submarines at an upcoming stealth facility not far from the ENC.⁸ India's military-power projection of this magnitude in the Bay

⁷ For a strategic perspective on China's Kra-Canal 'plan', read P S Suryanarayana, *Smart Diplomacy: Exploring China-India Synergy*, World Century Publishing Corporation, Hackensack, New Jersey, USA, 2016, pp. 47-56

⁸ While details about India's nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed submarines are not easily available as open-source data, read, among others, *Military Balance 2016*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, and *Cold Peace: China-India Rivalry in the Twenty-First Century* by Jeff M. Smith, Lexington Books, Lanham, Maryland, USA, and Plymouth, UK, 2014, p. 163

of Bengal sub-theatre will be of interest to China because of three reasons. One of these three reasons is that the Chinese commercial traffic (and perhaps also military traffic) continues to pass through or in the vicinity of Malacca Strait. The other two reasons in this sub-context are Beijing's interest (therefore, Delhi's as well) in the Kra Canal 'plan', besides China's *potential* (if not current) naval access to Bangladesh as well as Southeast Asian littoral states along this Bay.

As for China's non-ceremonial naval access to the South Asian littoral states along this Bay, Bangladesh stands alone. Dhaka's current procurement of Chinese conventional submarines is a normal state-to-state transaction, given also Bangladesh's legitimate sense of national sovereignty. However, the future course of the Sino-Indian strategic equation in the Bay of Bengal sub-theatre will depend, in part, on the level of Dhaka's *operational partnership* with the Chinese Navy as time goes by.

As for another relevant dynamic, there is no hard evidence of the US being prepared to deploy its state-of-the-art naval assets, alongside India's, in the Bay of Bengal. Surely US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter did pay a high-profile visit to India's ENC at Visakhapatnam in 2015. However, the US has so far called upon India to emerge in its own right as a 'net security provider' in the Indian Ocean region (including the Bay of Bengal). Moreover, the disposition of the imminent Trump presidency towards matters such as these is still *terra incognita*. On balance, therefore, there is, for the moment, *no* surface-level Sino-Indian storm in the Bay of Bengal sub-theatre of the Indian Ocean region.

A 'Dazzling Pearl'

Sri Lanka has been identified by China as a "dazzling pearl" along the route-map for President Xi Jinping's '21st century Maritime Silk Road'⁹ initiative. Given the general belief that Beijing chooses its words carefully for both praise and polemics, this statement places Sri Lanka almost on an equal footing with Pakistan, China's "all-weather strategic partner" as anointed by Xi Jinping in April 2015.

⁹ Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's conversation with his Sri Lankan counterpart Mangala Samaraweera in Beijing in early-2015, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn> (English site)

As is well-known, the ‘21st Century Maritime Silk Road’ (increasingly abbreviated as just the Road) is emblematic of Ascendant China’s go-global grand strategy. It consists of plans to create a web of economic and strategic connectivity between China (on one side) and much of Asia as well as Europe and Africa (on the other side). Maritime Asia, including coastal South Asia, has been conceived of as the arterial route for China’s seaside-connectivity to the outside world. For now, China has identified Sri Lanka and Pakistan as the South Asian king-pins along this route.

Beijing has pledged its economic resources towards a network of energy-and-port projects in countries that are willing to participate, as China’s partners, in carving out this maritime route. China’s economic resources for these purposes include its contributions to its own Silk Road Fund and to a multilateral institution, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) – both being new entities. In seeking to co-opt partners for the ‘21st century Maritime Silk Road’, China has so far not had India on-board (on the deck, as it were). The Indian authorities have said that China did not consult them while conceptualising and launching this ‘Maritime Road’ and the related ‘Economic Belt’ initiative.¹⁰ In contrast to this “unilateral” Chinese move, the AIIB has been conceptualised and launched as a multilateral initiative. As a result, India says, it has actively associated itself with the founding and operationalization of the AIIB. India ranks next to China among the principal stakeholders in the AIIB’s equity portfolio.

As noted earlier, India has chosen to stay outside the purview of China’s “unilateral” ‘Maritime Silk Road’. As a result, Sri Lanka has emerged as China’s key South Asian partner in the coastal water-space of the Indian Ocean (as distinct from the associated Bay of Bengal or Arabian Sea).

Ample indeed are the *conceptual images* of the Chinese-built Hambantota port in southern Sri Lanka as Xi Jinping’s strategic staging post and India-monitoring station. In contrast, widespread are the *practical stories* of utter non-utilisation of the port, airport, and other infrastructure facilities that have come up at Hambantota in recent years thanks to China’s ‘prized’ or rather ‘priced’ help.¹¹ In the same vein, narratives abound, too, about the craftiness of Sri Lanka’s previous executive President Mahinda Rajapaksa. He is suspected to have

¹⁰ Delhi’s studied attitude towards China’s ‘Belt and Road’ initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor was spelt out by India’s Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar at the IISS Fullerton Lecture, under the auspices of the Asia office of the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, in Singapore in 2015.

¹¹ The lacklustre story of the China-aided Hambantota infrastructure facilities in southern Sri Lanka is widely available in media reports and other open-source domains.

merely wanted to do his political bailiff a huge favour by inviting the Chinese to place Hambantota on the global map of geopolitics and geo-economics. So, the failure of this project to take off on the apparently-intended geo-economic trajectory must be blamed on the lack of economic vibrancy in the Hambantota region, it has been argued.¹²

There is a colourful geopolitical counter-narrative in this sub-context. It is said that the Indians, Sri Lanka's closest geo-cultural neighbours, evinced no interest in developing the Hambantota port, when they were offered this project before the Chinese moved in. Non-Indian observers often portray such a supposed lack of enthusiasm as a sure sign of India's strategic immaturity. However, Delhi's failure to seize this 'Hambantota opportunity' can be traced to the uncooperative 'federalism' in a country of mind-boggling diversity like India. Unified national purpose has rarely been easy to generate in fashioning and executing India's foreign and strategic policies.¹³

By and large, these varied reasons and narratives do explain why Hambantota has not emerged as Xi Jinping's first success story in his nearly-worldwide 'Belt and Road' initiative. His first success story may well be the Gwadar port in Pakistan, other things being equal. We will come to that later in this paper.

For now, despite Delhi's supposed strategic myopia towards Sri Lanka in this Xi-Jinping-era in global affairs, the reported 'sightings' of Chinese submarine activities at the Hambantota port have served as a wake-up call for India. In this context, some observers argue that Sri Lanka will be well-advised to focus on a massive development of the Colombo port and the 'Colombo-port-city' with China's proffered help. They would like Sri Lanka to turn these projects into economic game-changers for this island-republic. They would also prefer that Sri Lanka abandon or soft-pedal its hospitality towards China in providing it with strategic space at the 'unproductive' Hambantota port and related facilities.¹⁴

Indeed, the present Sri Lankan administration, headed by President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, is by and large accommodative of China's geo-economic and geopolitical interests in the Colombo port and the 'Colombo-port-city' projects. With China likely to gain such unchallenged strategic access to Sri Lanka, what indeed are

¹² Ibid

¹³ The largely-impressionistic account of India's failure to seize the 'Hambantota opportunity' is not considerably off the mark, considering the way the story is still unfolding.

¹⁴ These informal ideas and propositions came into focus at a panel discussion under an ISAS-organised workshop on "Maritime Governance in South Asia", held in Singapore on 29 November 2016.

India's options? In my view, Delhi may have to explore the possibilities of enhancing its current geo-economic access to the Trincomalee port on Sri Lanka's eastern seaboard – this in the manner of gaining geostrategic access as well. Another option for Delhi is to try and enhance its current acceptability ratio in Sri Lanka's Northern Province. These propositions are *not* aimed at seeking the conversion of Sri Lanka into a strategic playground, if not also a battleground, for Sino-Indian power projections. Colombo's own sense of strategic autonomy will be a key factor in imagining and configuring China's and India's stakes in Sri Lanka, going forward. However, China and India, too, should recognise that the red-line for their respective self-interest in Sri Lanka will be the latter's own sense of strategic autonomy.

Another Indian Ocean state of importance to Xi Jinping's '21st Century Maritime Silk Road' initiative is the Maldives. This country does fall within India's and China's respective *sphere of interest*. But I would suggest that Delhi let its current 'strategic partner', the US, take the lead in trying to moderate China's influence in the Maldives. After all, the US does have a huge strategic presence at Diego Garcia, not far from the southernmost island of the Maldives. Much will of course depend on the prospective Trump presidency's priorities, if at all, in the wider Indian Ocean region. Regardless of this aspect, India may be better-able to protect its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean region by focusing attention on Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Iran, the larger Gulf, besides Mauritius and Seychelles. This does not, however, mean that India should back-track on its current maritime-security cooperation with Sri Lanka and Maldives – a network that is being extended to include Mauritius and Seychelles.

Quest for a Jewel in China's Crown

Time was when the now-defunct British Empire had elevated its colonial possession of Undivided India to the status of a jewel in the British Crown. Now, surely, it is nobody's case that Pakistan, Beijing's "all-weather strategic partner" since 2015,¹⁵ is China's colony. However, the manner in which Xi Jinping is going about in carving out the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) does indicate that he is looking upon Pakistan as a potential jewel in China's Crown. He has completely ignored Delhi's objections to the passage of the mapped-

¹⁵ It was on 20 April 2015 that Chinese President Xi Jinping elevated Pakistan's status from an "all-weather strategic friend" to the more-important height of "all-weather strategic partner". Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?prID=2733> (The relevant file details have been cited as they existed at the time of access)

route of the CPEC through a stretch of Pakistan-controlled territory that India regards as its own. Xi is doing so despite Beijing's own stand, a few years ago, that the Asian Development Bank should not finance India's economic projects in an area that China regarded (and does continue to claim to this day) as its own. Relevant to the brief discussion, which flows from here, is the well-known skewed Indo-Pakistan equation.

Equally relevant to our current discussion here – China's strategic outreach towards South Asia – is Pakistan's Gwadar port at the tail-end of the CPEC, not the disputed territory at the point where the Corridor enters Pakistan. It is to China's credit that the viability of the Chinese-built Gwadar port as a CPEC exit-point has been successfully demonstrated very recently. There are many arguments, even controversies, within Pakistan about the mapped-routes of the CPEC and about the inter-provincial 'gains' and 'losses' that might accrue from this corridor. These aspects fall outside the scope of this paper. Despite these controversies and despite Beijing's frequently-aired concerns about the safety of Chinese personnel and installations inside Pakistan,¹⁶ the first consignment of Chinese cargo has now been transported along a CPEC route and outward through Gwadar.

A cursory glance at an accurate map will reveal the strategic importance of the Gwadar port for not only the CPEC but also for China's maritime outreach towards South Asia. In this context, and coinciding with the 'operationalization' of the Gwadar port for CPEC-purposes, the Chinese and Pakistani Navies exercised off Gwadar in November 2016. Both sides emphasised that such exercises were designed to promote the viability of the CPEC project. Indeed, Senior Captain Chi Qingtao, Flotilla Commander of the Chinese Navy, was quoted as saying that "these bilateral exercises will further refine operational capabilities of both the navies". As the commander who led the Chinese side for this particular exercise, he was further quoted as observing that "these exercises are also significant in the backdrop of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)".¹⁷ Xi Jinping himself has often expressed his commitment to helping Pakistan fight terrorism and ensure the security of the CPEC-personnel and CPEC-installations in tune with the "national conditions" of Pakistan itself.¹⁸ So, the comments from the Chinese Navy personnel, such as those quoted here, sound credible.

¹⁶ Chinese President Xi Jinping himself has officially asked Pakistan's top political and military leaders to take steps to protect Chinese personnel and installations in Pakistan. Details can be had from the English website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn> (English site)

¹⁷ Details of the latest Sino-Pakistani naval exercise near Gwadar port are available at <http://www.ispr.gov.pk>.

¹⁸ Xi Jinping's commitment to help Pakistan protect itself and the CPEC-personnel and installations has been disseminated by the PRC's Foreign Ministry. <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn> (English site)

It is in these newly-emerged Sino-Pakistani strategic environs off Gwadar port that India's recent outreach towards Iran, Pakistan's neighbour and "Islamic brother", acquires unexplored importance. When India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently visited Tehran, both sides weighed the possibilities of Indo-Afghan connectivity through Iran's Chabahar port, which will be developed by India.¹⁹ At this writing, however, there is no precise indication of an Indo-Afghan Economic Corridor being conceptualised through Iran from its Chabahar port. In any case, Indo-Iranian relations have not yet matured to such a stage. So, India cannot easily seek to match China's strategic and economic presence at Gwadar through India's potential geo-economic access to Chabahar in Gwadar's vicinity. Iran's relations with the prospective Trump presidency in the US will also impinge on Indo-Iranian geo-economic cooperation. On balance, Beijing's outreach towards the entire Maritime South Asia will be shaped by the India-US-China equation, too, under Trump, for a start from now. And, if Russia were to gain strategic or geo-economic access to Gwadar port in Pakistan (something that Islamabad is interested in), this aspect will add an altogether new dynamic to China's strategic outreach towards the entire Maritime South Asia.

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¹⁹ Details of Modi's outreach to Iran can be had from India's External Affairs Ministry, <http://www.mea.gov.in>. Former Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati had also highlighted Indo-Iranian cooperation at Chabahar, while speaking at a panel discussion during the ISAS-organised South Asian Diaspora Convention held in Singapore in July 2016.