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GREAT POWERS MARITIME INVOLVEMENT IN THE INDIAN OCEAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN'S SECURITY

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*If the world were an egg, Hormuz would be its yolk; Whoever is
lord of Malacca has his hand on the throat of Venice*

— **Felipe Fernandez-Armesto**

Introduction

This paper reviews Sino-US offshore balancing of maritime interests as an instance of great power politics in the Indo-Pacific region.¹ It relies on the realist perspective to argue that clash or overlap of Sino-US maritime interests carries an immense impact on Pakistan's security interests. The argument is based on historical analogy holding that great powers' involvement has been an experience of expediency, opportunism and short-term gain in South Asia which the strong have imposed on the weak. This paper is divided in three sections: 1) Sino-US maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean; 2) Sino-US convergence and divergence of interests and; 3) Implications for Pakistan's maritime security.

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Sino-US maritime strategy in the Indian ocean

This section discusses Sino-US and the US' maritime interests and strategy in the Indian Ocean region. First used by Karl Haushofer as *Indopazifischen Raum* in the 1920s, the term Indo-Pacific refers to the Indian Ocean, Western Pacific region, and South China Sea as a single strategic concept.² According to Ashley Tellis, both politics and economics join to make a fantastical integration of these two ocean spaces possible.³ The region, in conceptual and dialectical frameworks, constitutes the fulcrum of a global geopolitics — an area of global re-balancing of strategic interests.⁴ According to Robert Kaplan, the greatest drama of the 21st century is that the US — as hegemon of the western hemisphere — would prevent the rise of rival hegemon in the eastern hemisphere.⁵ He also asserts that the fight for democracy, energy independence and religious freedom would either be lost or won in the Indian Ocean.⁶ Similarly, John Mearsheimer regards China's peaceful rise thesis to be based on incorrect historical analogy. According to him, despite high claims, states are always doubtful about one another's intentions — whether they are revisionist or status quo powers. Moreover, it is equally difficult to distinguish between a state's offensive and defensive military capabilities. Mearsheimer further maintains that China would considerably increase its offensive military power by 2030. Consequently, according to him, as the Sino-US power asymmetry shrinks, the US strategic primacy in the Asia-Pacific region — maintained since 1945 would diminish.⁷ Interestingly, the present Indian Ocean's security architecture is marked with partnership alliances.⁸ If history remains a guide for the future, important lessons could be drawn from China's naval expansion in the Indo-Pacific region.

China's naval projection, at the heyday of Qing dynasty (1644–1912), stretched not far beyond the 'Cape of Good Hope'. Contradicting imperial naval legacy, China's naval growth has drawn attention to Beijing's maritime strategy.⁹

As far as the Indian Ocean is concerned, China has already acquired off the shore operational capability. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) extends its reach as far as the Gulf of Aden and the shores of Libya with Chinese warships making routine port calls in the Middle East. China aspires to build blue water navy which is supported through its operational long-term presence in the Indian Ocean. Simultaneously, China has also increased its participation in multilateral institutions.¹⁰ Its participation in the UN peacekeeping, international disaster relief, counter-terrorism and counter-piracy missions grant a soft image to Beijing's international policy stance, winning China diplomatic favours from several African and Asian states.¹¹

However, as China's GDP (\$18.96 trillion) has surpassed that of the US (\$18.12 trillion) in 2014, a gap which is likely to increase to 25.3 per cent by 2020.¹² China's neighbours increasingly view Beijing's naval projection as a formidable offensive force. Equally interesting to study is the Sino-US competing maritime dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. Washington has considered Beijing's naval modernization as a potential threat to stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Chinese scholars, however, defend Chinese strategy of naval expansion, 'as deriving out of China's trade interests requiring maintenance of blue water navy in the High Seas and not due to any mala-fide intentions of rivalry with the US.'¹³ As China builds a dominant naval position, its ambitions increasingly clash with those of the US.¹⁴ PLAN's modernization allows Beijing enough military means to lay claim on the Yellow Sea, East China and South China Sea, which China's verbal rhetoric supports.

The US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, was the first US official to warn of China as a potential source of instability in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁵ In March 2010, Chinese officials warned the US not to interfere in the South China Sea, imposing a no-fly zone in 2013. On 8 April 2014, Chuck Hagel, the US former Defence Secretary, while addressing a press conference on US-China's

defence summit, dismissed Beijing's unilateral establishment of a no-fly zone over the disputed islands in South China Sea.¹⁶ Hagel invoked the US defence treaty obligations to defend allies locked in disputes with Beijing. Asserting Beijing's exclusive sovereignty, Chang Wanquan, the Chinese defence minister, warned the US not to support Tokyo and the Philippines.¹⁷ The Chinese minister expressed Beijing's resolve to use force, if needed, with the incredible will of its military to assemble as soon as summoned, fight any battle and win.¹⁸ In a press conference with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on 24 April 2014, the US President Barack Obama reiterated American commitment to Japan's security as absolute. The US president declared that Article V of US-Japan's defence treaty committed the US to defend all territories under Tokyo's administration, including the Senkaku islands, dismissing unilateral change.¹⁹ Reiterating Beijing's 'indisputable sovereignty' over the islands, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman, Qin Gang, warned that the US-Japan alliance should be careful not to impinge on China's territorial rights.²⁰ The statement advised the US 'to respect facts, speak and act cautiously, without taking sides on territory and sovereignty issues and play a constructive role in regional peace and stability'.²¹

China's latest move of land reclamation in May 2015 has provoked a tough US response. The new US Defence Secretary, Ashton Carter, speaking at Honolulu, Hawaii, demanded China's 'immediate and lasting halt to land reclamation'.²² He declared that the US intended to remain 'the principal security power in the Asia-Pacific for decades to come'.²³ Carter threatened to deploy the US warships and surveillance aircraft within 12 nautical miles of Chinese maritime claim asserting the US will 'to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows'.²⁴ Further, he held that the US intended to remain, the 'principal security power in the Asia-Pacific for decades to come'.²⁵ On 3 June 2015 Carter took a ten-day tour to partner nations to affirm the US commitment to Asia-Pacific region.

Chinese leaders have defended the Chinese naval expansion as being defensively oriented, terming it 'Far Sea Defence,' holding that the Korean peninsula, Japan, Taiwan, Philippines and Vietnam are China's 'First Island Chain of Defence' in the Western Pacific. Beijing's 'Second Island Chain of Defence' comprises archipelago extension of Guam and Northern Mariana Islands.²⁶ Various issues surfaced from 2009 to 2014 illuminating the Sino-US maritime power asymmetry.²⁷ Restricted currently to coastal periphery, China has built offshore oceanic capability with blue water navy being beyond its territorial periphery.²⁸

China has sought naval expansion in two key directions. First, beyond the 'First Island Chain' referred to as Washington's 'Forward Defence Perimeter', generally referred to as the 'US great wall in reverse'. Coined by Dean Acheson and Douglas MacArthur in the 1950s, the term implies Japan, Taiwan, Philippines and the islands in between. The US forward defence deployment along the peripheral region has provided for preservation of maritime hegemony in the Asia-Pacific. In 2010, Beijing deployed North and East Sea Fleets through and beyond the 'First Island Chain', and further between the Japanese islands of Okinawa and Miyako in June 2011. China's naval expansion has sought a breakthrough into the US protective shield in order to alter the balance of power which would make the US position unsustainable in the long run.²⁹ Naval deployment by China led to the United States Pacific Command (USPACOM) officials complain about Beijing's restriction of international, in particular, the US maritime and air activities in the near seas. As evidence for the unfolding maritime rivalry, Chinese ships, operating in international waters, 75 miles south of China's new Yalong Bay submarine base on Hainan islands, surrounded the 'USS Impeccable' on 8 March 2009.³⁰ China's current policy aims at holding down strategic costs for itself while increasing it for rivals in the region.

The ‘Second Island Chain’ comprises another geopolitical zone of Sino-US competition in the Western Pacific.³¹ China plans to stretch its naval influence beyond the Second Island Chain — the Japanese-held Bonin Islands, the US-held Northern Marianas, Guam, Palau and the Carolinas. Its naval submarines creep as far as the waters off Guam — the bastion of the US naval power in Asia-Pacific — making it wary of Beijing’s growing naval capabilities and hegemonic ambitions while creating a long-term strategic challenge for the US.³² China may block access to Korea, Japan and the Philippines, incapacitating the US to intervene in the South China Sea.³³

China’s projection of power as far as Guam has been a repulsive realist drive to defend its own backyard. Interestingly, Henry Kissinger has remarked on the Chinese offensive oriental strategy called *wei qei*, which originates from the Chinese Confucius ideology.³⁴ Guiding policy choices since imperial dynasties, the strategy calls for prevention of China’s strategic encirclement. Chinese maritime strategy portrays Mearshiemer’s offensive positionalist strategy i.e. minimizing gaps in favour of one’s own, while increasing gaps with respect to the adversary. China’s maritime strategy can be viewed from neo-structural realism that can be interpreted as a mark of offensive positionalism. China’s indigenous compulsion of gaining energy security and exogenous compulsion of acquiring security underlie the Chinese drive for naval modernization.

Nuclear-powered submarines

China’s naval modernization aims to achieve superiority in maritime strategic nuclear forces. The shift in the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific occurs on account of China’s key naval developments: nuclear-powered submarine, missile warships and Supersonic Maritime Strike Aircrafts. China’s ‘Defence White Paper’ has stated that PLAN navy enhances its nuclear counterattack capability by the introduction of *DF-31* and *DF-31A* road mobile

Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) and the *JL-2 Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs)* missiles, launched from nuclear-powered submarine — *SSBNs*.³⁵ China has built *SSBNs*, *Type 094*, or *Jin* class with improved missile launch, 7,200 miles target capability.³⁶ Although scholars invoke prestige and inter-service politics as motivational factors for submarine development, yet *Jin* class-submarines have enhanced China's capacity to deter third party intervention in a regional conflict — something the US Office of Naval Intelligence has referred to as China's development of Anti Access/Area Denial or A2/AD capability.³⁷ Improved submarine force would allow China to expand patrol capability in the Western Pacific. China's first-generation *Type 092 Xia SSBN* is equipped with short-range 1,770 miles *JL-1 SLBMs*, incapable of conducting an extended patrol.³⁸

The development of the credible second strike nuclear capability depends on reducing the probability of detection, enhanced naval sea training and nuclear command and control. *Jin* class *JL-2* submarines can evade the US missile defence interception, if launched from certain patrol areas of operation. Ambiguity persists regarding the number of *SSBNs* China plans to build, their bastions for deployment, command and control in case of crisis and instability.³⁹ However, the US Office of Naval Intelligence and Quadrennial Defence Review state that China plans to build a fleet of five *Jin* class *SSBNs* to provide for a near continuous presence at sea, preventing surveillance of area of operations through deployment at Xiaopingdao, Huludao and Yalong Bay.⁴⁰

Supersonic Missile Aircrafts and ASBMs

The US forward defence strategy over the past years rested successfully on three carrier task forces positioned in the Western Pacific.⁴¹ China's Naval modernization strains the US to maintain 11 to 12 large-deck nuclear-powered carriers for maritime stability. China's development of long range supersonic

maritime attack aircraft supported by nuclear-powered submarines neutralizes much of the US Fleet carriers and expeditionary strike groups' naval capability. Moreover, China's development of the *Anti-Ship Ballistic Missiles* (ASBMs) — termed the 'US Fleet carriers' killer would be the ultimate naval weaponry which would potentially change the strategic equation.⁴²

So far, China has relied on Land-Based Strategic Missiles and *SLBMs* for nuclear deterrence. However, the US intelligence sources state that Beijing possesses 1500 km plus range DF-21/CSS-5 solid propellant Medium Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBM).⁴³ China plans to develop *ASBMs*, making it a high priority for its military 'Research and Development programme'.⁴⁴ *ASBMs* could hold the US carrier strike groups at risk in the Western Pacific. It seeks to achieve the kill chain of detection, tracking, and guidance including pinpoint accuracy necessary to hit a fast moving target. This requires a prescribed angle of impact to break in a carrier's protective covering or armour.⁴⁵ An ASBM with a nuclear warhead solves the accuracy problem. The US Navy implements a strategy of Air and Sea Battle concept to create deterrence. The US aircraft carrier striking forces are ever ready to respond to Chinese aggressive actions against allies in the region.⁴⁶

Pivot Asia entails the US naval reinforcement to defend allies by encircling China along the eastern and southern flanks of the 'First Island Chain' periphery. Moving in Central Command (CENTCOM) from Iraq and Afghanistan in addition to the PACOM,⁴⁷ the US has positioned combat ships at Singapore, the Bay of Bengal in eastern Indian Ocean, and northeast into the South China Sea. It patrols Seventh Fleet to show resilience to China in its support of allies in the region.⁴⁸

In order to contain China, the US has tried to build a strategic ring to encircle China. The US did this through the expansion of its defence treaties. The US moves have been a part of the Indo-Pacific war plan to contain China.

Western scholars have cited historical evidence to guard allies against Beijing's coercive tactics.⁴⁹ The US renews defence treaties with allies for land operations in the region, which Beijing has interpreted as strategic ring of encirclement.⁵⁰ Based at Hawaii, the US Pacific Command monitors the Indo-Pacific.⁵¹ The US plans to shift 60 additional naval fleets and six more aircraft carriers to the region.⁵² For example, at the strategic juncture of the Indo-Pacific nexus — the South China Sea, Strait of Malacca, and the Bay of Bengal, the US projects power at Australia's north-western coast. It strengthens the US marine presence at Darwin, Australia, sending 2,500 additional troops in 2011. It bases *US P-8* surveillance planes and drones at Australia's Coco islands.⁵³ The US has expanded its joint naval exercises with Japan and the Vietnamese navy, the Obama administration has sold arms to the Philippines and built defence ties with India, Singapore, Indonesia and New Zealand.⁵⁴

Sino-US convergence and divergence of interests

This section discusses the convergence and divergence of Sino-US maritime interests in the Indian Ocean. The contours of Sino-US power competition in the Indo-Pacific relate to the South China Sea territorial disputes and the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs). Extending in between the Strait of Malacca in the Southwest to the Strait of Taiwan in the Northeast, the South China Sea comprises 250 small islands spreading over an area of two square miles, which are part of either the Paracel or Spratly Islands.⁵⁵ The contested region includes:

- East China Sea archipelago atolls/extensions between China and Japan on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Japan refers to these islands as Senkaku and China as Diaoyu.⁵⁶
- South China Sea claims on the Spratly Islands between China and the Archipelago states of Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia.

The South China Sea has become a bone of contention between the littoral states, China and the US.⁵⁷ In a bid to prevent China's expansion of influence, the US global defence strategy seeks to control the resources of the South and East China Seas. The quest for energy security underlies competing claims on hydrocarbon and mineral reserves of the disputed islands' continental shelves.⁵⁸ Economic interests lead to the construction of infrastructure facilities increasing regional anxieties.⁵⁹ China's claim extends to Senkaku and Ryukyu, located towards its eastern Seaboard on the way to the wider Pacific Ocean in close proximity to Taiwan, based on maps as early as 1914.⁶⁰ Administered by Japan, Chinese naval and commercial vessels navigate the islands as an outlet to the sea.⁶¹ Defining the islands as an 'arc of freedom and prosperity',⁶² Japan's revised 'National Defence Programme Guidelines' announced enhanced surveillance and reconnaissance operations with additional support for submarine activities.⁶³ China, Japan and South Korea heavily depend on the South China Sea for communication and trade with \$5.3 trillion of world trade passing through the South China Sea.⁶⁴ The US trade accounts for \$1.2 trillion of this total.⁶⁵

American scholars interpret Chinese regional claims as 'broad and sometimes without total merit.'⁶⁶ The United Nations Convention on Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) enjoins upon states to surrender historical claims in favour of the 1982-UNCLOS. The US and China interpret the clause differently. Article 58 of UNCLOS provides freedom of navigation and over-flight within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), while it stresses states to respect the rights of the coastal state, its laws and regulations while availing 'transit passage.'⁶⁷ Article 38, paragraph 2 of the UNCLOS defines transit passage as freedom of navigation and over flight 'for continuous and expeditious transit'. This implies that vessels and ships of other states may use the EEZ of a coastal state for transit, but not without consent of the coastal state. China terms surveillance and the US intelligence gathering objectionable and unacceptable as per UNCLOS provisions in Articles

38, 39 and 40. Beijing asserts that foreign warships obtain advance approval before entering the EEZ.⁶⁸ Series of incidents strain Sino-US relations over the South China Sea.⁶⁹ China resents the US involvement, preferring a bilateral approach for settlement.⁷⁰

Chinese armed force strategy maintains coordinated plans to promote military preparedness alarming, in turn, the US policymakers to believe that Beijing aims to disrupt the US military balance which is structured on maintenance of the status quo.⁷¹ The US strategy can be interpreted as one of the defensive positionalist signifying the expansion of expanding gap in the US favour while prevention of it with respect to China. Pivot Asia appears to be counter-effective.⁷² President Obama has maintained a clear support for the littoral states favouring Japan against China, while renouncing the earlier neutral approach of previous US administrations. South East Asian states' joint defence collaboration with the US can be interpreted as the US alliances against China.⁷³

International Sea Lanes of Communication

SLOCs in the Indo-Pacific region from east to west comprise the South China Sea, the Bay of Bengal extending to the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf as a major transportation route between Far Asia and Europe. Energy procurement along with security of the main supply routes determines the contours of next global power hegemony.⁷⁴ The sustenance and growth of Chinese economy invariably depends on free and secure navigation passage for import of energy, raw materials and foreign trade along the SLOCs.⁷⁵ Beijing accounts for 20 per cent of global energy consumption, investing \$44 billion in African oil production networks, ranking as the world's second-largest oil consumer surpassing the United States in 2010.⁷⁶ Its oil imports from Middle East and Central Asia would exceed to 7.3 million barrels per day.⁷⁷ Sino-US maritime collaboration displays in the provision of sea-lane security, counter terrorism,

non-proliferation and disaster relief operations.⁷⁸ However, China needs to counter check revisionist ambitions on its economic growth by ensuring safe passage along three water passages connecting South China Sea with the Indian Ocean along the littorals.

- First is the narrow, five hundred mile long, less than two miles wide passage between Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula known as the Straits of Malacca surrounded by Singapore;
- Second is the Lombok Strait farther towards the south in the Indian Ocean;
- Third is the Sunda Strait cutting along with Lombok through Indonesia towards the south, located in the open waters of the Indian Ocean just to the north-west of Australia.

The US security architecture builds on nuclear deterrence, defence alliances with the littorals and forward-deployment of military forces in the Indian Ocean region.⁷⁹ Singapore sits astride the Malacca Strait allied to the US in a defence treaty, building recently a deep-water pier at Changi (an area at the eastern end of Singapore) for the US aircraft carrier operations. The world's most heavily-travelled maritime chokepoint, comprising the eastern doorway of SLOCs.⁸⁰ *Malacca Dilemma* refers to 85 per cent of China's oil shipment from the Middle East vulnerable to the US encroachment in case of any war.⁸¹ Clear advantage rests with the US superior sea power in the region as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and now India patrol the SLOC along with the US. Realism tends to dictate the US horizontal escalation strategy of building joint naval defence with India, Singapore, Vietnam, Philippines, and Australia. Moreover, multilateral institutions provide a shared ground for the US cooperation with Australia and India in Asian maritime security.⁸² Trilateral cooperation entails joint Indo-US-Australia naval strategic collaboration in naval activities.⁸³ Employing Mearshiemer's analysis, one could discern the US working on the

defensive strategy of 'gap maximizer'. The Pivot Asia's strategy is a manifestation of the US additional naval deployment in the region.

The Lombok and Sunda Straits offer an alternate naval passage to China. However, the US defence strategic encirclement makes Australia and Japan sit tight in the region. Beijing must maintain military presence in the waters off the northern coast of Australia and Indonesia to ensure safety of passage.⁸⁴ Divided into three fleets, North Sea fleet of the Chinese Navy is stationed in the Yellow Sea; East Sea Fleet in the East China Sea; and South Sea Fleet in the South China Sea. Although, Beijing's development of ASBM Dong Feng 21D having 1,100 nautical miles range can take a large sized US aircraft carrier in one blow, China's naval capability, however, remains inferior to that of the US. The US bases in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Diego Garcia have provided logistical support to the US nuclear sub-marines, blue-water fleets and multiple carrier strike groups. Employing offensive realism, China has acted as a 'gap minimizer viz-a-viz the US, seeking to minimize power asymmetry while maximizing it with respect to Southeast Asian littorals.'⁸⁵

Indo-US Maritime Connection: The China Factor

A combination of traditional and non-traditional threats have converted the Indian Ocean into a zone of international maritime intervention.⁸⁶ The 'US Strategic Guidance 2014' has linked economy and security to developments in the Indo-Pacific, elevating Indian role to a net security provider in the region.⁸⁷ President Obama declared US-India relationship as 'defining partnerships in the 21st century.'⁸⁸ Within this context, the US Senate Armed Services Committee declared Indo-US joint naval exercises as a 'vital pillar of stability in the Indo-Pacific region.'⁸⁹ Indo-US 'Maritime Security Framework Agreement 2006' provides for the US naval technology transfers and co-production of weapons to India.⁹⁰ Co-chaired by US-India Military Cooperation Group and India's

Integrated Defence Staff, the US Pacific Command supported marine collaboration with India on two prime features: one, Indian naval dominance and military capability, and two, Indo-US common perspective on regional stability through conducting joint maritime exercises.⁹¹

In the Indian Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India's Far Eastern Naval Command (FENC) overlooks the Indo-Pacific regional security architecture through construction of a new Indian Naval Base *Baaz* at Port Blair. Overlooking the six degree channel, Baaz symbolizes a brilliant strategic location — a bottleneck from where 50,000 merchant ships and 40 per cent of the international seaborne navigation would pass.⁹² To supplement Indian naval stretch of influence, the US has delivered India *INS Jalashwa* and *P-8I* Multi-mission Maritime Aircraft (MMA) with maritime reconnaissance and ASW capabilities. Indo-US maritime interoperability provides long-range surveillance, air interdiction, including airlift and patrolling capability, offering expanded leverage of power and influence to India in the Indo-Pacific. The US strategy works on neo-structural realist balancing against China, while the Indian rationale has sought an informal strategic alliance with the US to contain China. Malabar naval exercises provide for shared sea drills, aircraft-carrier operations and joint amphibious exercises to establish procedural and technological compatibility.⁹³ While the Indian navy capitalizes on the US nuclear submarine, the US navy has learnt operational capability from Indian diesel-fuelled electric submarines.

Based on rival claims of great power hegemonic ambitions and offshore balancing, Indo-US maritime nexus builds on the history of Sino-Indian contentious relationship history⁹⁴ and energy competition in the Middle East, Central and Southwest Asia.⁹⁵ The Indian navy extends its influence as far as Oceania and the South Pacific Rim threatening China. Stephen Walt's realism explains Indo-US softer balancing called hedging, which entails features of internal and external balancing.⁹⁶ Both resort to internal balancing to maintain

independence in foreign policy, while balancing externally against China. The Indo-US overlapping maritime security interests signify a tough security competition which could have dire implications for South Asian regional stability. Power squabble would change the geostrategic landscape of South Asia. China's traditional counter-balancing and preventive strategy — *wei qei* manifests in string of pearls strategy in the Strait of Hormuz. Acting as China's node of influence, the string of pearls allows China the diverse acquisition of energy resources. Xi Jinping's *Maritime Corridor Belt Strategy* bypasses the SLOC via ports constructed along the rim of the Indian Ocean, linked directly through roads to China's mainland. The policy has manifested itself in China's development of commercial maritime bases in the Indian Ocean in Pakistan (Gwadar, Pasni), Sri Lanka (Hambantota), Myanmar (Sittwe and Kyaukpyu) and Bangladesh (Chittagong). The Chinese official position defends the ports as commercial in nature serving as trade storage facilities. The US-Indian coalition terms Chinese ports reconnaissance and surveillance facilities along the Indian Ocean Rim. Scholars do not rule out China's naval espionage via the alleged SIGINT facilities in Coco Islands or via discreet hydrographic research.⁹⁷

The core of China's string of pearls strategy has demonstrated China's strong desire to reduce vulnerability to its key energy imports, protect massive investments, reinforce deterrence and enhance geo-strategic leverage.⁹⁸ Chinese navy, however, has not engaged in activities of an overtly military nature on its maritime bases. However, Mearshiemer's logic applies — states, intentions remain intangible whether offensive or defensive in nature. The Chinese ports may serve China as refuelling and logistical cushion for naval deployments in the Indian Ocean. Interestingly, the International Law, while prohibiting from using states neutral ports as bases for naval operations, does not oblige the host states to close bases either. Hence, China's modernization of its naval forces, access to ports and airfields testifies to offensive realism — reducing the gap in favour of

one's own while increasing it with respect to the adversary. The US multiple corporate interests include capital investments in the Persian Gulf oil production, conventional arms sales and the protection of oil interests of allies in the Western Pacific and Far East region.

As China's influence expands, the US strategy builds on Stephen Walt's 'balancing against threat logic', working to support a rival hegemon in the region. India and China would counterbalance to prevent domination of one against the other. Indian maritime exercises with the US allies create a reverse string — a necklace of diamonds in the Indo-Pacific.⁹⁹ Interesting features of maritime competition can be observed as India excludes China in the Milan exercises involving 15 participants.¹⁰⁰ Indian navy systematically stretches its naval access to Mauritius — 1,200 miles southwest of Addu Atoll in the Maldives, 960 miles off Diego Garcia.¹⁰¹ To Pakistan's alarm, India can use the atolls as combat base for logistics and reconnaissance using maritime patrol aircraft and Unmanned Air Vehicles (UAVs).¹⁰² Deployment of combat aircrafts in the southwest expands Indian stretch of naval influence as far as Africa and Alaska.¹⁰³ India has held a key position in the US Pacific Strategic Command (PACOM) enjoying access to a vast expanse of the Indian Ocean.¹⁰⁴ Indian naval deployment demonstrates appreciation for all key entry and exit points in the Indian Ocean — the Cape of Good Horn in the southwest, the Red Sea to the west, Straits of Malacca, Lombok and Sunda in the east, and the waters around Australia. Indian Far Eastern Naval Command in Andaman and Nicobar allows for India's naval eastward expansion, extending from the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca.¹⁰⁵

Sino-Indian navies show maritime strategic competition expanding from Sri Lanka to Mauritania along the southern stretch of the Arabian Sea. India has developed aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines and stealth frigates, sent military satellites to space and established naval bases at Chabahar, Mauritius, Mauritania, Vietnam and Oman.¹⁰⁶ The Chinese counter manoeuvres including joint naval

exercises with Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia, defence cooperation with Bangladesh and Maldives, construction of a naval base at Marao Atolls, a secret treaty with Seychelles — allocating \$6.4m for a joint secret project¹⁰⁷ and reinvigoration of ties with the African states. Defence agreement with Bangladesh allows China's navy access to a refuelling station for aircrafts in Chittagong, exposing India to be kept under pressure. The Middle Eastern oil accounts for about 67 per cent of India's oil imports, 90 per cent of trade and 75 per cent of oil transportation by the sea. In the event of a conflict, if India tries to choke Malacca strait in the Indo-Pacific, China would be poised to equalize it by increasing its strategic presence adjacent to the Persian Gulf at Gwadar. All these developments would have dire implications for Pakistan's maritime interests and security.

Implications for Pakistan's maritime security

This section discusses the implications of Sino-US competition in the Indian Ocean for Pakistan's maritime security. China's development of blue water navy, sea mines and long range missile capability are indicative of China's grand strategy of offensive orientation. Pakistan's geo-strategic position in close vicinity to the global oil life line makes it a part of the great power impending rivalry. Sino-US competition, cooperation and rivalry hold strong repercussions for Pakistan's maritime security interests in the region. The collusion of Indo-US maritime interests make China and Pakistan wary of their semi-hostile overtures, compelling Pakistan and China to resort to counter-balancing strategies.¹⁰⁸ Power balancing based on Stephen Walt's logic of 'balancing against threat' defines the context of Sino-US involvement in South Asia. There have been three significant developments on the global landscape. one, the inescapable US threat perception of China's rise; two, the US fears of international terrorism emanating from Central Asia and Southwest Asia, and three, the US economic and corporate interests push for the strong US involvement in South Asia. The US desires to

contain China in the Southwest and the Central Asian region has generated fissures in Pakistan's territorial integrity and its inter-state relations within the region. Sea borne trade has instilled a compelling need for Pakistan to achieve stability at sea.

At the global level, Sino-US strategic competition and rivalry for maritime dominance has unveiled itself in China's construction of the Gwadar Port. Constructed on the basis of reciprocity of interests, the port would position Pakistan in the rival camp. The US had once expressed its concerns to Pervez Musharraf on the port's construction as changing the maritime balance. Robert D. Kaplan remarked that the development of Gwadar, as a key strategic port, would either unlock the riches of Central Asia or plunge Pakistan into a dangerous civil war.¹⁰⁹ The project unduly has drawn Pakistan into great power's maritime rivalry, linking it to the 'new great game' fought on the strategic chessboard in close proximity to Central Asia and Afghanistan. According to Selig S. Harrison:

Pakistan has granted China a base at Gwadar, in the heart of Baluch territory. So, an independent Baluchistan serves the US strategic interests. Without Gwadar, it would be difficult to imagine anyone fighting over this unwelcoming deserted and hostile land.¹¹⁰

Simultaneously, Gwadar port's inland route raises genuine concerns and it would become a tug of war among Pakistan's politicians. Security challenges would further delay if not dampens Gwadar's future prospects. The port's construction, its transfer from the US dominated Singapore company to Chinese Harbour Engineering Port would dangerously jeopardize Pakistan's geo-strategic stability. The US grand design aims to neutralize China's geostrategic and economic advantage in Pakistan.¹¹¹

Caught between the devil and the blue sea, the interplay of Sino-US maritime power politics in the Indian Ocean allows for great powers' involvement in the region. Chinese manoeuvres to prevent strategic encirclement or *wei qei*

leads to Indian response of maritime expansion in the Arabian Sea, creating a security impediment for Pakistan. The development of Gwadar catches Pakistan in an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation with its arch-rival India, eventually throwing Islamabad into the strategic basket of China. The Indo-US maritime collaboration forces Pakistan to counteract by developing a Pakistan-China Maritime nexus as a strategic necessity. Strategically, Gwadar would serve as the farthest seaport from Indian naval bases and airfields. As an additional port further west from Karachi, Pasni and Ormara, Gwadar would provide a strategic edge against Indian maritime dominance. The strategic bottleneck of Gwadar would evade the possibility of Indian imposition of a naval blockade, as was the case in the 1971 war. In September 2014, a flotilla of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy ships made a friendly visit to Karachi, although Pakistan has not allowed for PLAN bases at Gwadar.¹¹² These were followed by several other visits of Chinese naval warships.¹¹³ However, Pakistan faces a volatile security threat along its southern borders, catching it in a spiral of suspicion and hostility with its regional neighbours Iran and India. Great powers' regional involvement in the Indian Ocean, on the roller-coaster ride of their proxy collaborators, leads to the inherent prisoner's dilemma of overt maritime balancing for regional rivals India and Pakistan.

In the emerging Indo-Pacific great game, Pakistan would stand to gain more through oscillation between Beijing and Washington. The port offers financial opportunities as well as strategic challenges for Pakistan. An integral southern tier of China's Silk Route Economic Belt Strategy and a vital lifeline of the proposed \$45 billion Pakistan-China Economic Corridor, construction of the port holds a huge potential to transform Pakistan's economic landscape by linking South, Central and Western Asian regions.¹¹⁴ The development of the economic corridor and the port are mutually beneficial projects, providing Pakistan with a substantial revenue generation resource as a transshipment port

for natural resources from land-locked states in Central Asia.¹¹⁵ Pakistan could generate around US\$60 billion a year in transit fees in the next 20 years from the project. Moreover, the port entails the prospects of generating economic activity in Pakistan's under developed hinterland.

Global economy requires the vast oil and gas reserves of Russia, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf. Over the years, Western Asia has emerged as the energy hub for the rapidly growing economies in Asia-Pacific and South Asia. South Asia's security climate is riddled with undesirable complexities due to external factors.¹¹⁶ With Pakistan's prime location offshore on the Indian Ocean, China has contemplated numerous energy delivery options, including pipelines and rail/road network connections. With China doubling the present figures of oil consumption by 2025 pooled from the Middle East, Gwadar offers the closest access.¹¹⁷ Pakistan is crucial to China's bid for energy access, its global and regional influence. Gwadar reinvents Pakistan's role as the most significant player on the global arena. Pakistan's strategic location as a gateway to the West and Central Asia is vital to secure energy routes amid China's growing economic needs.

Gwadar allows a strategic edge to China in the interplay of great powers' quest for energy. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), would serve as the oil and gas outlet for energy reserves of the Middle East. Leased for a period of 40 years and operated by China's Port Holding, China Merchant and Cosco Shipping, ideally, Gwadar would be integrated into China's vision of grand strategy. The port would allow China to emerge as the only great power with access to two seas — Arabian Sea and Western Pacific. Located 72 nautical miles from the Strait of Hormuz, the port would curtail China's nautical miles sea transportation from 24 days. Linked to China's western regions, the proposed corridor from Pakistan would reduce China's oil shipment by more than 4,000 nautical miles, allowing overland oil transportation to China. Gwadar would be a

feasible strategic solution to China's *Malacca Dilemma*, overcoming the energy vulnerability amidst Indian Ocean's growing militarization. The upstream land based energy transport route would secure China from external disruptive influences. Gwadar offers the shortest possible distance from Central Asian energy reserves to the sea outlet in the Arabian Sea. It materializes China's plans to pipe down petrochemicals from Central Asia (Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) and minerals from Afghanistan for land transportation upstream from Gwadar to Western China.

Simultaneously, Indo-US support to the construction of Chabahar, would strain Pakistan's relations with India and Iran.¹¹⁸ Gwadar would affect the Indo-US strangulation threat. The US fifth fleet exercises a total geo-political control over China's hydrocarbon lifeline in the Persian Gulf. Hence, Beijing's rationale for naval presence in the Arabian Sea is to secure energy investments in Africa and the Middle East. Pakistan may be tempted to provide berthing rights to PLAN warships. Hosting PLAN bases would be in Islamabad's national interest. However, transformation of commercial ports into defendable forward naval bases would require high levels of technical, logistic and strategic expertise for Beijing — a task well beyond Chinese capability for at least another decade for the time being. Gwadar has in store a number of ship ready options for China's eventual naval expansion. Conversely, force projection, joint operations and surveillance appear to be a hard pressed task for China just as air defence fortification, mine clearing assets or munitions storage facilities etc. The port would allow China a strategic foothold through the provision of logistics, supplies and repairing facilities to sustain long time maritime operations on the sea. However, China may find it difficult to defend isolated naval bases from the US or Indian cruise missile strikes or airborne attacks during wartime.

Interestingly, the Gwadar project faces security impediments for Chinese workers and engineers in the attempt to foil prospects of the energy corridor.¹¹⁹ In

2004, a car bomb killed three Chinese engineers, two Chinese engineers were kidnapped at the Gomal Zam Dam in South Waziristan, Gwadar airport too came under rocket attack, three Chinese working at the Gwadar seaport were gunned down by unknown attackers at Hub in 2006¹²⁰ and three Chinese mechanics were killed in an attack in Peshawar on 8 July 2007. Pakistan has substantial evidence of Indian RAW agents' involvement in the attacks on Chinese workers.¹²¹ Evidently, the Chinese deaths have discouraged private enterprise resulting in a general reluctance to invest in projects in Pakistan.¹²² To prevent derailment of Pakistan's economic growth and strategic partnership with China,¹²³ a joint task force to ensure foolproof security for Chinese nationals has been formed.¹²⁴

Pakistan has 990 kilo metre long coastline west to east, and it's EEZ that covers 240,000 square kilometre coastal line. Conditional to settlement of the maritime boundary with India, almost 50,000 square kilometre of continental shelf will be added to Pakistan's territory. Islamabad became an active member of US-led multinational Combined Task Force, CTF 150 covering an area of responsibility from Gulf of Aden to the gulf of Oman, the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea as part of international maritime collaboration.¹²⁵ In January 2009, the Combined Maritime Task Forces headquarters in Bahrain formed CTF 151, comprising ships and aircrafts from 20 countries.¹²⁶ To reinforce regional maritime security, Pakistan's navy has also instituted multinational exercises called AMAN since 2007.¹²⁷ Pakistan Maritime Doctrine entitled 'Preserving Freedom of the Seas' provides for national perspective on maritime security. The vision of Pakistan Navy embodies the concept of 'a modern potent navy manned by motivated professionals that contributes effectively to deterrence and national security across the full conflict spectrum and capable of radiating influence region-wide with a global outlook.'¹²⁸ Regional and extra-regional dimension invite contending powers to establish a foothold in the coastal belt of Makran,

fuelling the conflict in Baluchistan.¹²⁹ Independent Baluchistan establishes a strong US foothold along the southern borders of Iran while checkmating China's access to the Arabian Sea.

Pak-China strategic convergence of interests envisions energy corridor from Central Asia and the Persian Gulf while investing in mega projects in Pakistan. For Islamabad, this is an opportunity to promote trade and expand economy.¹³⁰ Apparently, the realist model frames Indo-US desire to prevent prospects for China's transit route to Central Asia by obstructing developmental projects in and along the CPEC and Gwadar.

Realist balancing frames Indo-US policy designs in Gwadar and Baluchistan. Indian advantageous position in geography and maritime capability allows the US to build political, strategic and economic ties with India, while it maintains fluctuating, trans-lucid and fluid security relations with Pakistan. If Gwadar develops, Indian financial stakes in the Gulf centres would be dimmed. For the US, a Chinese strategic port uncomfortably close to the US forward deployment base in the Gulf becomes unacceptable.¹³¹ Moreover, a full scale operational Gwadar would allow China a speedy access to energy reserves in Africa and the Middle East. Conversely, instability retards implementation of Pak-China Economic Corridor in the southern belt, which would retard or delay China's economic development and growth. The success of CPEC would make the region a strong foothold for China. The larger global design to engender regional instability would restrict Pakistan's prospects to benefit from the region's wealth. Insecurity in Baluchistan would increase the prospects for Chabahar, forcing China to divert investments from Pakistan. India funds a 200 kilometres long road to link Chabahar to Zaranj and then Herat in Afghanistan bypassing the transit to Central Asia available through Pakistan.¹³² Chabhar's development at a fast pace, its well-connected rail/road infrastructure would make the port a better strategic option in the prevalent strategic environment. Iran, India and

Afghanistan accord on Chabahar constitute a strategic threat for Pakistan in the post 2014 geo-strategic environment.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the clash in Sino-US maritime interests in the Indian Ocean region. Analysing the patterns of great powers involvement in the region, it has argued that Sino-US off-shore balancing of their maritime interests carries immense security implications for maritime regional stability along the South Asian coastal periphery. The Indo-US collusion of maritime security interests has inflated the role of Indian navy in the Indian Ocean region. The move compels Pakistan's counter balancing response to neutralize Indian preponderance along its coastal belt. It has allowed Pakistan to increase its maritime collaboration with China as a strategic necessity. The Indo-US maritime and strategic collaboration increases the propensity for armed polarization along the long stretch of Indo-Pak coastal periphery.

Pakistan has advocated sovereign equality, non-interference, territorial integrity and mutual coexistence. Its leadership is poised to resist hegemonic and dictatorial ambitions of regional dominance from any single state in Southwest and Central Asia. In a recent development, Pakistan's Army Chief Gen. Raheel Sharif highlighted Pakistan's firm commitment to provide for speedy operationalization of Gwadar and the CPEC. Civil-military amicable relations in Pakistan provide for swift implementation of the projects. Pakistan has been committed to implement the grand agenda of China-Pak national rejuvenation, stability and growth. Pakistan's establishment has held that peace and stability cannot be confined to territorial boundaries. It needs to be shared across borders in today's world of trans-border interconnectivity and regional integration.

Embarking on an open door policy of regional cooperation, Pakistan wants friendly relations with all its neighbours including India. With unflinching faith in

joint stakes of mutual development, China-Pak strategic partnership offers collective prospects for countering formidable challenges of regional dominance, hegemony and cross-border terrorism in the region. Pakistan-China Economic Corridor will prove to be a game-changer, which would empower the three billion people in the wider hinterland of Southwest and Central Asian region. China-Pak strategic partnership offers the prospects for mutual development and growth, dwelling on win-win strategy of good neighbourly relations.

Notes and References

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- 127 The concept entails information sharing, identifying areas of common interest for participating navies and a shared understanding on maritime security operations, counter terrorism operations and operations related to humanitarian assistance. Pakistan has formed a joint Maritime Information and Coordination Centre JMICC for sharing information to the threat of piracy.
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