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CHINA-INDIA COUNTERBALANCING MEASURES THROUGH INTERNATIONAL CORRIDORS AND PORTS: THE FOCUS ON CHABAHAR AND GWADAR PORTS

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Abstract: *Beijing and New Delhi, as new world emerging powers, despite border skirmishes, have not considered themselves arch-rivals. Still, the necessities of real politics have forced India to take counter-measures towards China's grand connectivity strategy in the framework of BRI and the Maritime Silk Road. This article assumes that China's grand connectivity strategy has not targeted India in particular, but unavoidably it has affected India's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean and Eurasia. In a qualitative and case study methodology, this research explains China's grand connectivity strategy and how it affects Indian strategic interests. It also elaborates on India's counter-measures vis-à-vis China policy. It concluded that the Chinese connectivity strategy has affected Indian strategic interests in the Indian Ocean and Eurasia. Therefore, Chabahar, Gwadar ports, and Malacca Strait are centers of gravity in these great connectivity rivalries.*

Keywords: *China-India; BRI; Silk Road; Chabahar Port; Gwadar Port; Strings of Pearls; Necklace of Diamond*

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, access to reliable and sustainable energy sources and connection to the large market of the Eurasian geography has been the central issue in the foreign policy of two emerging powers, i.e., China and India. In this period, China and India had the highest economic growth among the world's countries. These countries have experienced significant economic growth despite the global economic recession. China's annual economic growth averaged 10.5% between 2001 and 2010 (International Monetary Fund 2019, 160) and 9.7% from 2010-2017 (United Nations 2019, 182). After the United States, this country has the largest economy in the world, with more than 17.73 trillion US dollars in GDP in nominal value in 2021 (World Bank 2021).

Meanwhile, India has gotten more than 2.7 trillion dollars in GDP in little value and is ranked as the fifth largest economy in the world after Germany (World Bank 2019). In 2017-2010, this country experienced annual economic growth of 7.3%, and in 2018, it was 7.4% (United Nations 2019, 183). It is predicted that by 2050, China and India will rank as the first and second world's largest economies (PWC 2023).

These two major Asian emerging economies have focused on international corridors to expand the sphere of influence, exporting surplus products, accessing large consumer markets, providing reliable and stable energy, and pursuing and securing national security in great

Eurasia. However, they do not openly confirm the strategic competition between them. In this regard, Chinese President Xi Jinping, on his official visit to India, called this country Beijing's strategic partner and opined: "We plan to partner with each other to take our strategic and cooperative partnership of peace and prosperity to a higher plane" (The Times of India 2014). Narendra Modi, Indian Prime Minister, highlighted the significance of a good relationship between two of Asia's major economies: "Harmonious partnership between India and China is essential for economic development and political stability of the continent" (The Economic Times 2015). However, Beijing has initiated the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project centered on Gwadar Port in Pakistan, an essential branch of the New Silk Road Project dubbed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

On the contrary, the Indians have initiated the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) centered on Chabahar Port. China's investment in Gwadar Port and India's initiative in Chabahar Port can be analyzed in the context of geopolitical competition between China and India in South Asia and access to Eurasia. However, the tip of the Chinese arrow is its competition against the US rather than India. However, China considers New Delhi one of Washington's allies in its global competition with the US. Hence, Beijing simultaneously intends to contain India in the geostrategic sphere of the Indian Ocean. Therefore, this research seeks to explain the geopolitical competition between China and India in connectivity initiatives such as the "Necklace of Diamonds" and "String of Pearls" in line with their international corridors initiatives emphasizing the role of Gwadar and Chabahar Ports in this geopolitical rivalry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In reviewing the research background on the issue, there are considerable outputs, some of which were cited in this article. Panda (2023) argues that India should take the initiatives to have bargain chips *vis-à-vis* BRI. So the INSTC will serve as a counter-incentive to BRI and check Chinese power in Central Asia, West Asia, and Eurasia. Omid and Noolkar-Oak (2022) elaborated on the importance of the Chabahar Port in India's access to Central Asia and Afghanistan. This research just addressed Iran-India relations, not the China variable. Aswani et al. (2021) recommend that India-Vietnam bilateral relations can counterbalance the Chinese BRI strategy, especially in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). They consider one of China's BRI targets to contain India, so they view Vietnam as a counterbalance piece to India.

Sharma (2019) argues that India has taken a selective approach to the various components of the BRI. India just publicly opposes the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and no other relevant projects, so BRI, in a broad sense, is also beneficial to India. In this context, Singh (2019) believes that this project will be a potential threat and competitive structure in the region for India. Beeson (2018) states that the BRI is an excellent strategy game that forced India's counter-strategy. Indian researcher Sachdeva (2018) concluded that BRI-CEPT conflicts with India's geopolitical interests. Halder (2018) believes that India has designed its counter model to reach a kind of parity in connectivity issues to China's BRI. New Delhi's strategy encompasses Central, South East, and Africa. He believes India has not been passive but has taken a proactive foreign policy. Hu (2017) has studied China's BRI strategy and its opportunities and challenges for India. He believes this strategy will cause more Chinese influence in the

Indian Ocean and jeopardize India's interests. Das (2017) thinks the Chinese BRI strategy will provide multiple opportunities for Beijing in South Asia and create challenges for India. However, most of the above research elaborates on the Chinese and Indian counter strategies in connectivity issues. They should have addressed the Chabahar and Gwadar ports as determining points in the two great powers' connectivity rivalry. Furthermore, this paper argues that INSTC plays a principal role in India's grand strategy to balance *vis-à-vis* China BRI. Therefore, in India, more investment in Chabahar is a must.

CHINESE CONNECTIVITY INITIATIVES WHICH AFFECT INDIAN INTERESTS

China's strategy to maintain its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean, which affects India's strategic interests, has appeared in two ways. One is the expansion of the Maritime Silk Road with considerable investments in the critical ports of the beneficiary countries, as well as the hypothesis of establishing the Thai Canal and a direct connection between the China Sea and the Indian Ocean for encircling Malacca Strait. The second is the solid economic interdependence between China's economy and the countries of ASEAN and South Asia.

The Strait of Malacca, with 65,000 square kilometers, is a waterway connecting the Andaman Sea (Indian Ocean) and the South China Sea (Pacific Ocean), which is located like a river between the Indonesian island of Sumatra in the West and the Malaysia peninsula in the West and southern Thailand in the East. This funnel-shaped strait is 800 kilometers long and comes from the commercial Port of Malacca, which was very important in the 16th and 17th centuries. Approximately 60% of the world's maritime transport, more than 150 ships a day, most of which are colossal oil tankers from the People's Republic of China and Japan, pass through this strait; thus, about 25% of the oil transported between the Middle East and Asia passes through this strait; a figure that has steadily increased with the growth of the population and wealth of China and other regional powers (Seyedi 2022). The Strait of Malacca is playing geographically a vital role for the entire Indo-Pacific region, which is why many countries in the area, including China and even the United States, are eager to protect this passage. The fact is that there is a big potential competition between two Asian powers, namely China and India, in the Strait of Malacca region, which has become known as the "Malacca Dilemma". Due to the increasing presence and influence of China in the Indian Ocean, India, in response, has taken precautionary measures and has expanded its presence from its eastern coast to the strait in order to maintain balance. India is advancing its positions towards the western mouth of the strait to watch China's maritime strategy, which focuses more on Malacca. India's location at the mouth of the Straits of Malacca has created panic among Chinese officials, so they are trying to find an alternative route.

It should be noticed that most of China's oil imports from the Persian Gulf, Venezuela, and Angola and raw materials from Africa, where China has invested billions of dollars in mining projects and infrastructure, are carried out through the strategic Strait of Malacca. In the case of tension between Beijing and New Delhi, the Strait of Malacca will be easily impacted by India; because of India's natural position in the Indian Ocean, with logistical capabilities in the Indian Andaman and Nicobar Islands at the mouth of the strait, allows the country's navy to have a comparative military advantage.

The fact that both the US and India enjoy a strategic advantage over China in the Strait of Malacca has persuaded Beijing to explore other options for an alternative. China has taken several initiatives to ensure its maritime security. One proposal has been the creation of the Thai channel. This hypothetical canal is along China's most ambitious infrastructure and a regional project dubbed the Maritime Silk Road. This controversial canal will be built south of Thailand's Kra Isthmus - the narrowest point of the Malay Peninsula - which could become China's second gateway to the Indian Ocean. As Figure 1 shows, the canal will enable China's navy to move its ships between its newly established base in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean without traveling the 700-mile route south to bypass Malaysia (Foreign Policy 2020). The Thai government has yet to conclude China's construction of this canal. In February 2018, Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha declared that the canal was not a government priority (Strait Times 2018). However, on 16 January 2020, the Thai House of Representatives agreed to set up a committee to study the Thai Canal project (Bangkok Post 2020). Nevertheless, if it is built, China's geopolitical privileges in the Indian Ocean will increase in disadvantage of India.



Figure 1: The Hypothetical Thai Canal (Source: Bangkok Post 2020)

Another project of the Chinese Maritime Silk Road is a massive investment in the construction and long-term lease of ports in the coastal countries of South Asia, such as Chittagong Port in Bangladesh (about 24.1 billion), Myanmar's Kyakpyo Deep Water Dam (about 7.4 billion), deep water Port of Gwadar, Pakistan (about 50.6 billion), Hambantota Port of Sri Lanka (about 14.7 billion), Havana mega project of Maldives, a \$10 billion Port in Bagamoyo of Tanzania, etc. which these ports play the role of connecting bridges link China to the Indian Ocean (Mukherjee 2018). In this regard, China's 10-year contract with the Djibouti government (extendable for another ten years) in January 2016 to establish a support facility for the Chinese Navy at Bab al-Mandab is another example of an ambitious Maritime Silk Road in the Indian Ocean. Beijing also poured a \$350 million investment in the Port of Djibouti (Manson 2016).

China also owns over 100 ports in approximately 63 countries. Over 80 percent of China's overseas port terminals are owned by the "big three" terminal operators: China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO), China Merchants Group (CMG), and CK Hutchison Holdings (Rochat 2021).

Economically, China's growing presence in the Asian market is worrying India. In the field of investment, according to the estimate of India's Gatehouse Institute, in the last decade, China spent more than 150 billion dollars in various sectors of South Asian economies, including ports, airports, transportation, energy, leasing, industrial and economic urban infrastructures, research and development, space, mines, and agriculture which, among other things, covers 60 projects in Pakistan, 33 projects in Myanmar, 50 projects in Bangladesh, 38 projects in Sri Lanka, 37 projects in Nepal and 20 projects in Maldives (Bhandari and Mindal 2018). Based on the data analysis of 261 Chinese projects in Central Asia by January 2019, China, along its the Belt and Road Initiative, has invested 136 billion dollars in projects in the fields of minerals and oil, industry, nutrition and agriculture, finance and IT, road and rail connections, energy connections and non-governmental projects in Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan 102 projects, Kyrgyzstan 47 projects, Tajikistan 44 projects, Uzbekistan 43 projects and Turkmenistan 26 projects) (Vakulchuk et al. 2019). Meanwhile, based on the IMF statistics, India's total turnover with Central Asia has increased from \$108 million in 2000 to \$1.5 billion in 2017 (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2019). According to the statistics of the "Indian Mission to ASEAN", between 2000 and 2019, foreign direct investment from ASEAN to India was 90.802 billion dollars. India's total investment in ASEAN by 2020 was about 2 billion dollars (Indian Mission to ASEAN 2022).

Meanwhile, China-ASEAN bilateral trade even bucked the negative trend caused by the pandemic, jumping from US\$641.5 billion in 2019 to US\$975.3 billion in 2022 (Mission of China in ASEAN 2023). Meanwhile, the total trade between India and ASEAN in 2021 did not exceed 78.90 billion, and India, with imports (47.42 billion) more than exports (31.48 billion), has a negative trade balance of -15.93 (Indian Mission to ASEAN 2022). Similarly, from 2015 to 2019, export goods from China to the countries of Central Asia, it has increased from 17.563 billion to 26.207 billion dollars (China Briefing 2021). However, India's trade with the countries of this region has been at most two billion dollars by 2019 (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2019). Given the above figures, China seeks to maintain and promote ASEAN's asymmetric interdependence on its advantage through the promotion of economic cooperation, thereby preventing economic cooperation, thereby preventing regional and international competitors from gaining strength in this region (Chegnizadeh and Razavi 2022, 1-32).

China can access India's borders by land through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and China-Myanmar economic projects and gain a strategic advantage in a war with India. Also, some Indian and Western analysts believe that China, through enormous investments in the construction of ports in coastal and island countries of the Indian Ocean, follows a long-term maritime strategy called "Strings of Pearls" (Figure 2). According to this plan, the military bases that China is building will expand from Myanmar in Southeast Asia to Sri Lanka, Maldives, Pakistan in South Asia, and Djibouti in Bab al-Mandeb. Joint military maneuvers with Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and others in the Indian Ocean are evaluated in this regard. However, the Chinese never motioned that the target of their actions was against any county, including India. However, one primary potential purpose of Chines grand maritime strategy is India (Chegnizadeh and Razavi 2022, 1-32).



Figure 2: China's String of Pearls Strategy (Source: Rettig and Hayut-Man 2017)

INDIAN INITIATIVES TO COUNTERBALANCE CHINA

Subrahmanyam Jaishankar (2022), Minister of External Affairs of India, in his recently launched book "The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World", writes that "this is a time for us to engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia, bring Japan into play, draw neighbors in, extend the neighborhood and expand traditional constituencies of support" (p. 18). The whole paragraph can be clubbed into a current foreign policy of India. Using the word "manage" for China is - seems to be in the sense of competition or rivalry, and responsive, without delays. Extending neighborhood refers to engaging with new emerging countries, including South Caucasus and Central Asia, which have not been given much attention in previous administrations. India believes that despite China's official narrative, BRI is not just an economic development project, nor is it value-free. Its ultimate purpose is to build a Sino-centric Eurasian order in which Beijing's influence and power have significantly expanded. Through the expansion of financing of international trade and financial assistance in terms of reasonable interest, china is believed to create new spheres of influence which put countries in jeopardized situations. The recent examples are infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Djibouti. Region-wise, all these four countries are incredibly significant for China as they fall in the trade route of its oil imports and their exports to Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. According to the report published in print, for example:

The World Bank stated that Djibouti's debt servicing costs tripled to USD 184 million from USD 54 million in 2021. A further increase to USD 266 million has been predicted for 2023. According to Boston University's Global Development Policy Centre data, Djibouti took USD 1.5 billion from Chinese lenders between 2000 and 2020. This is a huge amount, given the limited avenues of revenue in Djibouti to repay the loans (The Print 2022).

An actual quote from historian Alfred Mahan is his doctrine of maritime hegemony, stating that "Whoever conquers the Indian Ocean will rule all of Asia" (Ghosh 2011). With 28 nations scattered across three continents, the Indian Ocean region takes up 17.5% of the

planet's land area. Over 2.6 billion people, or more than 35% of the world's population, reside in this area. Some of the world's nations with the fastest growth rates are in the Indian Ocean region (Davis and Jonathan 2022). Apart from maritime trade routes, the Indian Ocean contains some of the most precious resources in the world. A large portion of the resources of the Indian Ocean is yet to be explored, and it is said that 16.8 percent of the entire world's reserves and 27.9 percent of natural gas reserves are in the Indian Ocean itself. It is one of the most strategic regions in the world, located at the crossroads of world trade itself, the Indian Ocean connects the international economies of the North Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific region, and it connects the central region's Main sea lane. What is impressive about the Indian Ocean is that 80% of the world's seaborne oil trade flows through just three narrow passages of the Indian Ocean in the Straits - the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, and the Strait of Bab-El-Mandeb. These points are called choke points. Because when these points are choked, most of the world trade halts. China is the world's largest manufacturing economy, an exporter of goods heavily dependent on trade, and a considerable chunk of trade happens via the Indian Oceanic. Noticeably, China has strategically emerged as one of the most important trading partners of the Indian Ocean region, accounting for 16.1 percent of its total good state as of 2017 (MERICS 2019).

India considers that the rising Chinese power has posed a threat to Indian interests, which includes "International Rule-Based Order" and "Free and Open Indo-Pacific". India also considers the Chinese "String of Pearls" a strategic move. As a result, in order to counterbalance China, India has been steadily operating in a stealth mode with something called the "Necklace of Diamond Strategy" (Figure 3) and through the alliance with the QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), which is meant to develop a mechanism for cooperation among members in strategic intelligence and military exercises. It is, indeed, primarily envisaged to balance increasing Chinese hegemony. However, India's QUAD engagement may harm India's good relations with Russia as Russia's relationship with the USA has consistently deteriorated since the Crimea annexation in 2014, almost forcing Russia to cultivate good relations with China. Russia has always patronized Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral formation, eventually giving birth to organizations such as BRICS and SCO. The QUAD is said to be against the RIC spirit. Therefore, India adopts a balanced approach between QUAD and SCO, BRICS. Particularly after the Russia-Ukraine war (2022), India began buying oil from Russia, which brought much condemnation from the West and perhaps weakened the QUAD.

Through the "Necklace of Diamond" strategy, India is attempting to increase naval cooperation, engagements, development aid, and Investments with the Indian Ocean countries. This strategy is not a part of any official Indian document, so one cannot claim which investment is under the strategy. However, it is an obvious indication from the various trade agreements that India has signed and set up strategic bases. Experts claim that the action is related to worries over China's expanding maritime influence in the area and is a part of Modi's "Act East" strategy to forge closer connections with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Reuters 2018). The strategy was first discussed in 2011 by Lalit Mansingh, the foreign secretary. In reaction to China's "String of Pearls Strategy", as elaborated earlier, he used the phrase to describe India's actions to safeguard its interest (IAS Express 2022).

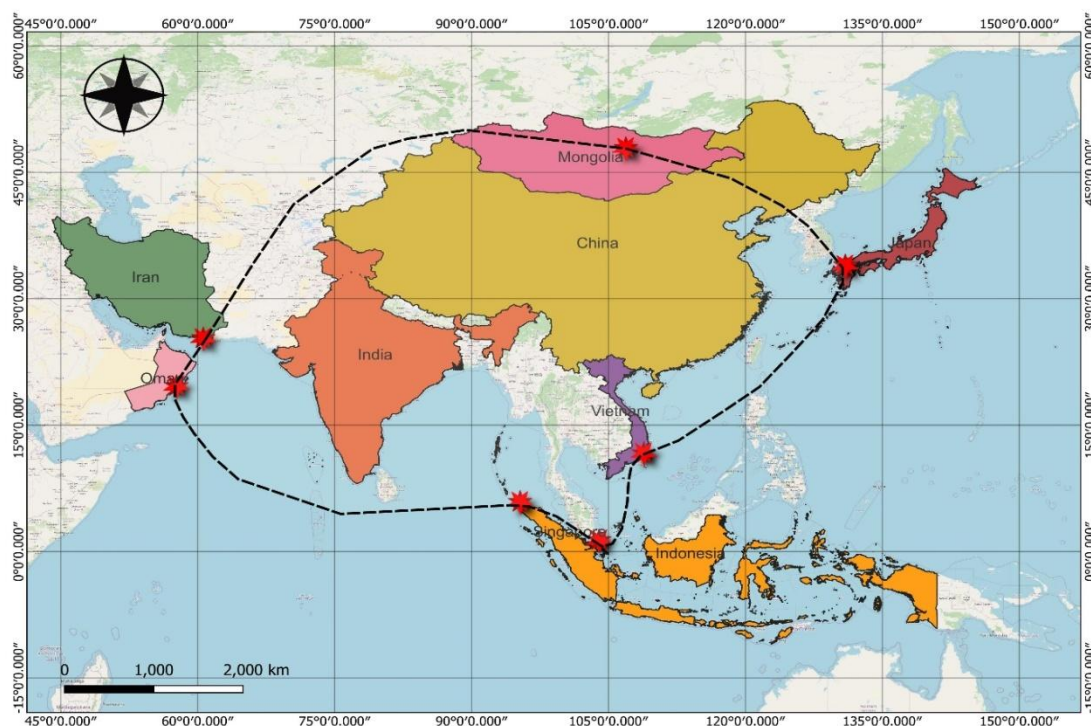


Figure 3: Necklace of Diamond Strategy (Source: Authors' depiction)

India first placed its base in Oman, where Duqm Port lies, to counter China's strategic placement at Gwadar and Djibouti. India's critical crude imports flow from the Persian Gulf through this port. This place is strategically located on the southeastern seaboard of Oman and overlooks the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. It is also straddled by the critical sea lanes in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Eden. Oman is at the entrance to the Strait of Hormuz, through which one-fifth of India's oil imports pass. India has gained military access to this port due to its close ties to Oman. In 2019, India was the third-largest market for non-oil exports and the third-largest source of imports (after the United Arab Emirates and China).

The second choke point was the Mozambique channel in 2015. Prime Minister Modi signed an agreement with the Seychelles president to develop Assumption Island for military use. However, unfortunately, after this deal was done and because of protests organized by locals, the government changed this. As of now, this is in a shaky situation.

Third, the essential choke point is the Strait of Malacca, and the other two are beside Sunda Strait and Lombok Strait, the Changi naval base in Singapore. In 2018, Prime Minister Modi signed an agreement with the government of Singapore. This agreement has provided direct access to the Indian Navy, so while sailing through the South China Sea, the Indian Navy can refuel and rearm its ship through this space. In 2018, India got military access to Sabang Port in Indonesia. Sabang is less than 500 km from the mouth of the Malacca Channel, through which more than 40% of India's trade goes, and 710 miles southeast of the Andaman Islands (The Economic Times 2022).

Next is the strategy in Vietnam. India historically had a great relationship with Vietnam. From a meager US\$ 200 million in 2000, bilateral trade between India and Vietnam has steadily

grown. Statistics show that bilateral trade between India and Vietnam increased by 27%, reaching US\$ 14.14 billion in the financial year (FY) 2021–22. India's exports to Vietnam increased by 34% to US\$ 6.70 billion, while its imports from Vietnam increased by 21% to US\$ 7.44 billion. In FY 2021–2022, Vietnam was India's 23rd-largest trading partner internationally and its fourth-largest ASEAN trading partner, after Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia (Embassy of India in Hanoi Webpage). Vietnam and India have solid navy-to-navy cooperation, and India is one of the few nations with which Vietnam holds naval drills. In addition to Halong Bay, Hanoi permits the Indian Navy to dock in Cam Ranh Bay and Nha Trang, both of which it has asked India to develop (ORF 2022).

Among the last connecting points of the strategy is Japan. On 9 September 2020, India and Japan signed the Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement that would allow the militaries of both these countries to exchange supplies and services on a reciprocal basis, so again, Japan and India can use each other's support as per their strategic agreement. It gives a very close placement to the mainland of China. Rajesh Rajagopalan argues that India's strategy in the Indo-Pacific has become a "subset" of its policy towards China though there is no official recognition of the same. India's partnership policies towards the United States and Japan, particularly concerning the Indo-Pacific, reflect this stance.

On the other hand, certain aspects of collaboration are also evident with China, further complicating the mix of policies (Rajagopalan 2020). Following Japan, Modi became the first Indian prime minister to visit Mongolia. More importantly, India has established a robust relationship with Mongolia by giving out a US\$ 1 billion credit to develop an air corridor for Mongolia (The Economic Times 2015). Lastly, the Chabahar Port in Iran is also a part of the Chinese BRI initiative wherein China intends to have a railway line from China to Iran passing through Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, ending at Tehran in Iran. India agreed to build a deep-water port in Chabahar on the Gulf of Oman in 2015 when Iran was subject to crippling economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation. As part of this deal, Modi visited Iran and inked the agreement to build this port and accompanying infrastructure (Omidi and Noolkar 2022).

Once all these points are connected on the world map, one can notice its necklace around China. More importantly, they are strategically located points that can be used to counter the Chinese in case of any military conflict.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHABAHAR AND GWADAR IN THE INDIA-CHINA CORRIDOR RIVALRY

While corridors are generally demarcated in linear terms as defined by dominant modes of transportation, they also tend to deepen economic activity and create logistic hubs. This growing engagement will manifest in the proliferation of special economic zones, industrial parks, transport hubs, and other dedicated spaces, creating a new geography for organizing production, attracting investments, and regulating the labor supply. As a result of more excellent connectivity between these nodes and the mainland, the frontier would increasingly be transformed into a corridor, which turns into a more excellent means of geoeconomics activities. However, geopolitical tensions between countries tend to rule the geoeconomics and trouble

over political gains. There are today several connectivity projects that reflect this geopolitical thinking. Gwadar-Chabahar ports nexus is one of them. Both ports emerged out of the need for logistic hubs and geopolitical competition. Both are critical geopolitical points for the two emerging powers, India and China. These ports are located in Balochistan, a region that lost its independence in the 19th century during the “Great Game”. Now, the ports of Chabahar and Gwadar are re-entering a New Great Game era, with the potential for far-reaching repercussions and consequences (Hosseinbor 2016; Singh and Singh 2019, 177). Gwadar is Pakistan’s third most important deep sea port after Karachi and Qasim ports. For China, Kazakhstan is a gateway to Europe, and Pakistan is a gateway to the Indian Ocean. It is at the cross-junction of Pakistan’s international sea shipping and oil trade routes. It can act as an international trade hub for Pakistan. However, a very relevant question needs to be raised here: Pakistan is fearless of having a Chinese presence in its territory, which may lead to a complicated relationship with the West.

China secures energy supply and strategic CPEC-BRI dominance westwards, funding Pakistan’s infrastructure and improving technology, market, and people’s livelihood. Nevertheless, Gwadar is operational, but the transport infrastructure linking it to the rest of the country is still lacking. Once it is connected to the rest of the country and region, it will raise the poor inhabitants’ living standards. Nevertheless, Baluch leaders have argued that the CPEC is perceived as exploitative, just like the railway lines, bridges, telegraph lines, and strategic garrisons that had been built by the British to maximize exploitation and counter the Russian movement towards the warm water ports and that had been made without the participatory process of the local population. Although Pakistan has committed to increasing security for the CPEC’s employees and facilities, this may be ineffective and invite further sub-nationalist responses (Sengupta 2019). The CPEC project claims to draw a sizable number of laborers from outside Baluchistan, in addition to Chinese people. Baluchistan’s ethnic demographics, which are already a source of contention for nationalists, are expected to change. From the beginning, India was interested in Gwadar Port and blamed Pakistan for illegally ceding it to China. India has expressed its displeasure several times, claiming that building infrastructure in conflict areas violates international law. It challenges China’s neutrality on Kashmir issues (a long-standing dispute between India and Pakistan).

The CPEC provides an alternative north-south connection to the International North-South Transport Corridor that India supports. The Russians had recently shown some interest, particularly after its total war with Ukraine when India began buying oil from Russia, and trade figures between Russia and India skyrocketed. Given the emerging rules and regulations that would govern global trade and the global reality of a China-centered trade network overlapping with a Russian-directed economic community engulfing both Asian overland and maritime routes, either developing a logistical alternative or connecting with the existing frameworks would be essential for India’s agenda of economic development and urbanization (Sengupta 2019). Gwadar is exceptionally significant for China as most oil imports come from the Middle East through the Indian Ocean (the Strait of Malacca). According to a Warsaw Institute report, more than 70 of China’s petroleum and LNG exports are shipped through this strait of Malacca; on top of that, 60 percent of China’s trade flows are moved through this trade passage and the South China Sea (Paszak 2021). If China does something like Russia, which an invasion of Taiwan

or any other nation, the USA and India can use an alliance with Singapore to choke this point and when done so, immediately seventy percent of China's oil supply, as well as 60% of their trade, will be blocked or slowed down. If done so, these ships will have no other option but to take a very long route that is said to cost them 200 billion dollars a year, and even in those routes, there are USA allies who can make it very difficult for Chinese trade to happen.

Similarly, China has many vulnerabilities in its trade route, making it difficult to command a superpower. China intends to build an alternate trade route. So, to overcome the marine limitations, China is hugely possessive about Gwadar Port, and it has provided billions of dollars in loans to Pakistan under the guise of aid and has indirectly begun owning CPEC. The port has been leased for 40 years. China recently won a contract from the Pakistani government to build a 3,021-kilometer strategic crude oil pipeline from Gwadar Port in Pakistan to Xinjiang in China. Pakistan has also agreed to grant tax exemptions for 20 years on profits of Chinese companies and revenues from oil pipelines. Then a highway will link Pakistan and China from Gwadar to Kashgar (ANI 2023).

Moreover, with Pakistan giving China a 40-year lease on Gwadar Port, India fears this will give China a foothold in the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean and challenge Indian naval dominance. It manifests China's desire to exert naval power in the Pacific and the Indian Ocean (Purushothaman and Unnikrishnan 2019, 76). As India anticipates, Gwadar Port may serve as a base for Chinese ships and submarines, posing a direct threat to India (Hafeez 2019, 23).

As mentioned above, through the Chabahar Port, India hopes to counter Pakistan's Gwadar Port. It was decided that Indian investments in the Chabahar Port would follow the build-operate-transfer (BOT) paradigm, whereby India would be given the right to manage the port for at least 40 years. In a broader context, Chabahar and the INSTC seem to be India's answer to China's much-promoted BRI initiative of global connectivity, as Chabahar is just 80 km from China's Gwadar Port in Pakistan, and it has the potential to be a competing exercise. (Kukreja 2020, 19; Khan 2020). The port's deep draft of 16 m is suitable for handling large shipment vessels and large ships (over 100 thousand tons) (Rashid 2022). The current capacity of Chabahar Port is 2.5 million tons per annum, increasing to 12.5 million tons per annum (ANI 2022). Modi intends to use Chabahar Port to ally with Iran and Afghanistan, counter Chinese dominance, bypass Pakistan, and enable land exchange between India and Afghanistan. In that sense, Chabahar can weaken Pakistan's decades-long rule over Afghanistan (Kukreja 2020, 19).

Once fully operational, it is not now because of reluctance shown by Indian developers due to the fear of secondary sanctions imposed by the US on businesses engaging with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. This is because the Guards are connected to the great majority of Iranian businesses involved in the Chabahar Port project will be an essential turning point for India in realizing its goals in Central Asia. Therefore India continues to view the Chabahar Port as a "Gateway" to Central Asia. India has invested in Iran's Chabahar Port under a trilateral agreement that includes Afghanistan to develop that port and connect it to Afghanistan's Garland highway via Zaranj and Deralam (Khan and Koch 2021). From there, it could move further north, reaching republics in Central Asia and even Russia. The strategic importance of Chabahar to India as it serves as a gateway for Indian operations in Afghanistan and Eurasia. Chabahar is the shortest sea route for landlocked countries in Central Asia, and other alternatives are via Bandar Abbas ports in Russia, Turkey, or Iran (Raghavan 2022).

The recent blockage of the Suez Canal, which cost the world's economy a whopping US\$9 billion, has increased awareness of the Chabahar Port as a more expedient and affordable multi-modal transit corridor linked with INSTC (Cyril and Kotova 2021). The INSTC envisions the transportation of goods by sea from Mumbai, India, to Shahid Beheshti Port in Chabahar, Iran; by land from Chabahar to Bandar-e-Anzali, an Iranian port on the Caspian Sea; and by ship from Bandar-e-Anzali to Astrakhan, a Caspian Port in the Russian Federation; and finally, by Russian railways from Astrakhan to other parts of the Russian Federation and further into Europe (ANI 2023). Recently, INSTC has come into more limelight due to the Russia-Ukraine war and Iran (due to sanctions from the USA, both went off SWIFT and are under pressure to find new ways for their economies to run smoothly). Since INSTC is a cheaper and faster route than the conventional Suez Canal (Figure 4), it is argued that the former has the potential to be an alternative to the latter. Directions through Armenia and Georgia are also of interest to India. However, whether the latter direction is attractive for the delivery of goods to Russia and Europe or whether it is only intended to connect the countries with the trade markets of the Asia-Pacific region, this Indian position has not yet been clarified. Chabahar has been exempted from sanctions by the USA. However, the railway connection between Chabahar and Zahedan is still lost. In early 2021, on the Indian initiative, a working group of India, Afghanistan, Iran, and Uzbekistan was created to use this transport hub jointly, and after the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Tajikistan, confirmed Indian interest in the further development of this port together with the Central Asian countries. He said that: "the countries of Central Asia, together with India, will be able to unlock the possibilities of Chabahar" (Business Standard 2022). The Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar highlighted the region's fundamental principles of transport corridor cooperation. He underlined that connectivity efforts must be consultative, transparent, and promote economic activity instead of creating debt burdens, an indirect reference to concerns about China's Belt and Road Initiative (Hindustan Times 2021).

Therefore, the development of Chabahar Port is very important for India in its connectivity strategy. This port will allow India to bypass Pakistan and establish trade relations with Afghanistan directly and thereby containing Pakistan's influence in this country in the post-Taliban era. This port will also help India to increase its exports to the destination countries and reduce the cost of transporting its export goods through the INSTC by 30%. At the same time, realizing the Chabahar development plan will allow India to counterbalance China's presence in the Oman Sea and Pakistan's Gwadar Port. This last reason explains why the US recently exempted Chabahar Port from its terrible sanction regime against Iran.

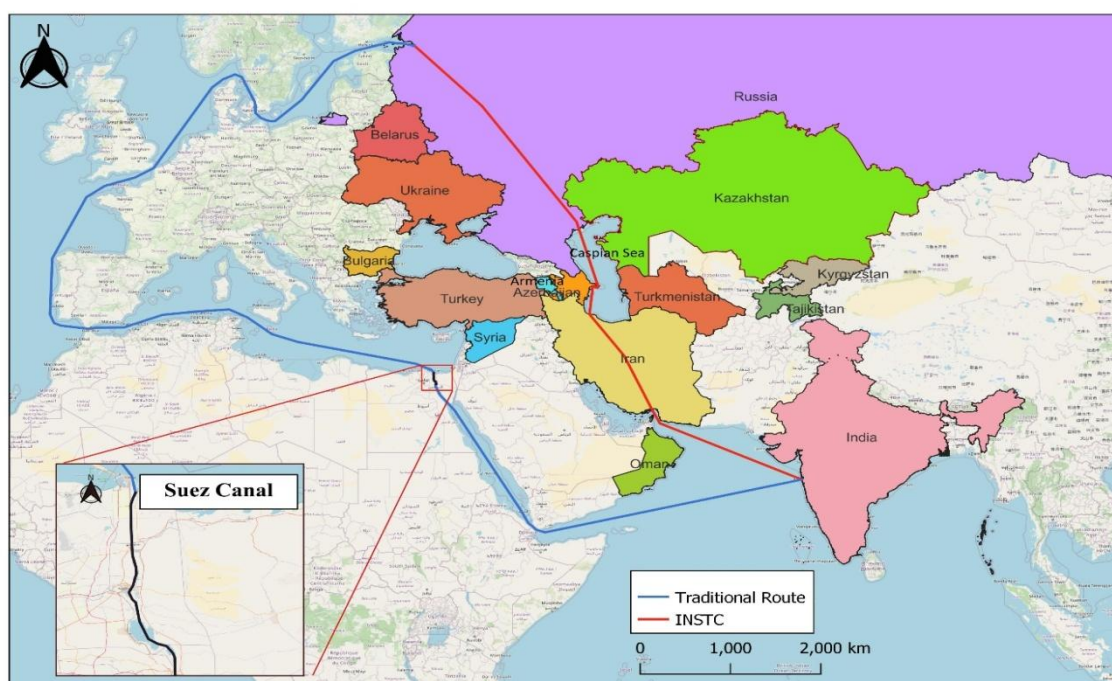


Figure 4: Traditional Route (Via Suez Canal) vs. INSTC Route (Via Chabahar Port in Iran)
(Source: Authors' depiction)

CONCLUSION

By global standards, China is now considered a *de facto* world power, and India is recognized as a rising power. In 2023, China and India currently rank second and fourth in the world regarding military spending, respectively. They have made significant progress by possessing nuclear weapons and achieving high economic growth rates. The relations between Beijing and New Delhi can be defined in the framework of “cooperation and competition” in which the competition characteristic is highlighted. With the increase in Chinese investments inside India, the latter has become China’s most important trading partner. In addition, the presence of the two countries in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS has brought them closer to each other. However, Chinese President Xi Jinping’s bold geopolitical policies in India’s geopolitical sphere, especially in the Indian Ocean, and territorial disputes have brought about India’s concerns. China has tried to create geopolitical privileges in the Indian Ocean by investing heavily in long-term lease agreements along the Maritime Silk Road in the ports of Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Pakistan, Djibouti, Tanzania, etc. China’s presence in the Indian Ocean and establishing a military base in Djibouti was Beijing’s first tangible presence outside its territory, which India considers a potential challenge. At the same time, China, by creating a complex economic interdependence with the South Asian and ASEAN countries, has been directing the political and economic relations of the region to its advantage. In any case, India wants to increase trade with China, making New Delhi more dependent on Beijing. This happens while India knows China’s increasing political and economic influence in the region.

While India has yet to join China's New Silk Road Initiative, New Delhi did not oppose it either. However, it is simultaneously trying to balance with Beijing through geopolitical balancing strategies such as the "Necklace of Diamond", participation in the North-South Corridor, the formation of the QUAD, and so on, so these measures to create a network of partners for itself in Asia-Pacific region.

In the meantime, by adopting a connectivity strategy, India and China have been seeking secure and easy access to the resources and markets of Eurasia and the Indian Ocean region. In this strategy, the land of Pakistan and Iran are recognized by China and India as a suitable balancing place for establishing trans-Asia communication corridors. The two ports of Gwadar and Chabahar have appeared as focal points in the communication corridors as rivals in the geopolitical competition between China and India. By Gwadar Port, China has created a new geopolitical privilege *vis-à-vis* India. On the other hand, India is trying to deal with the geopolitical challenges of China and Pakistan by participating and investing in the INSTC with a particular focus on the Chabahar Port. In this framework, Chabahar Port is more than a commercial port in India's foreign policy. In other words, India is trying to improve its geopolitical and geoeconomic weight against China through the Chabahar Port and Iranian territory. According to the Indian government, Iran's land and Chabahar Port not only connect India to Central Asia but can also play an essential role in balancing India against China's grand connectivity strategy. Therefore, it is not without reason that India named 31 July Chabahar Day.

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