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String of Pearls: Politics of Ports in Indian Ocean

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ABSTRACT

Regional security order which is a complex combination of actors and factors is no longer associated exclusively with political and military might. Asia has experienced significant changes in its regional preponderance like economic interdependence and interconnectedness. The phenomenal economic growth of some countries is attributed to its ascendance. The Asian region has become a cauldron of global economic and geopolitical transformation. In this regard, the specter of Maritime Silk Road China with regards to Pakistan Economic Corridor and China Myanmar Economic Corridor are glaring examples enclusively in this region. They have heralded metamorphosis in the pearls of the string by providing an alternate route making Indian Ocean a hub for trans-regional connectivity through multifold alternative routes. History is witnessed for the benefits of certain alteration in the routes such the Panama Canal and Suez Canal. To find such alternation of routes in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has caused a competition between China and India which can have multiple effects.

Key Words: Regional Connectivity, Gwadar, Kyaupkyu, Indian Ocean, Silk road, BRI, MSRI, CPEC, LAPSET, CMEC

Introduction

‘Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. The ocean is a key to the seven seas in the 21st century, the destiny of the world will be decided in these waters’ (Khan, 2011).

As various historians and strategic thinkers portray the geopolitical, commercial, military and maritime trade preponderance of Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in the world that provides navigational feasibility about 70 percent of the total maritime transportation from East to West and from North to South. The Indian Ocean can be considered the hub of international trade from the ancient to recent times. Four important chokepoints out of six in the world are in the Indian Ocean: Strait of Malacca, Straits of Hormuz, Strait of Mandeb and Mozambique Channel (Energy Information Administration, 2007). The hegemonic powers had been trying to dominate the region with different strategies and whether it was France, Prussia or United Kingdom in Medieval ages, USA and USSR in Cold

War era or US, India and China in the post-cold war era. The Indian Ocean is a geostrategic pivot for China's economic and political rise. China imports about 80 percent of oil and gas and exports finished goods through the Indian Ocean to the Persian Gulf, Africa, and Europe. The incessant and peaceful shipment is the first and foremost priority of China to become an economic superpower.

Analyzing the current situation of the Indian Ocean, one can state that the USA has been enjoying dominant position in IOR. The renewed Indian role is to counter China with the support of the USA and maintains its preeminent status quo of a major power in the region. The situation seems to be changed in subsequent years because of changing role of regional actors like Pakistan and Myanmar are looking East instead of West. Similarly addition of Bangladesh and Srilanka for seeking more economic benefits has enhanced the strategic strength of China. This can pose a challenge to the status quo in Indian Ocean. The construction of Gwadar port adjacent to Persian Gulf and operationalization of Kyaukya port of Myanmar in the Bay of Bengal will provide a better position to China. This new developments have already envisaged metamorphosis in the Chokepoints of String of Pearls and sea lines of communications in the Indian Ocean because of rejuvenation of Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI).

China's grand initiative in shape of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) renders an opportunity to Gwadar to become another 'Dubai in Arabian Sea. Gwadar port would be a central point to control, monitor and manage most of Sino's maritime shipping, imports, exports and particularly transportation of energy needs from the Middle East and South West Asia. China's focus on Gwadar, Kyaukya is a modification of String of Pearls that ultimately would disturb US-India Pacific strategy. This research briefly answered the following questions: How Gwadar is an alternative the maritime route in the Indian Ocean? How modification of a String of Pearls provides the upper hand to China against India? This paper also highlights India's counter strategy for Chinese 'String of Pearls' or 'Look East Policy' due to the recent developments in the region.

Hypothesis

The construction of Gwadar, Kyaukya and Pyara ports under Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has heralded an alteration in the String of Pearls and Sea Lines of Communication in Indian Ocean Region.

Literature review

Although plenty of researches being undertaken on the theory of String of Pearls and its importance for China and implications on the region. This paper is an attempt to touch the new facet especially after China's investment in Gwadar port on the mouth of Strait of Hormuz and Kyuapkyu port in the Bay of Bengal. Many scholars have discussed the String of Pearls strategy and security or insecurity challenges for US hegemony and India's concerns over encircling her. Cory

String of Pearls: Politics of Ports in Indian Ocean

Gassaway states that the rise of China and its investments across the sea lines is meant to encircle India under the camouflage of a String of Pearls strategy. He apprehends that China's expansion will lead to the instability and fragility in the region. So, the USA should use Sri Lankan card to counter China in the Indian Ocean and prevent the encircling of India (Gassaway, 2011). Further, this debate concludes that China's de facto alliance with Pakistan and her strategy of a String of Pearls is creating a security dilemma and this intends to surround India (Sanive Sokinda, 2015). In another study, it is argued that Chinese String of Pearls is ostensible postulation of her military and strategic intentions in the region and Maritime Silk Route Initiative is nothing but old wine in the new bottle to surround India (Suri, 2016). In other studies, C.J. Pehrson (2006) and Virginia Marantidou (2014) have somehow expressed similarly that rise of China and its maritime development is to counter American dominance through economic investment and infrastructural projects across the Sea Lines of Communication. They are of the view that the rise of China is in the fever of USA because both countries could have win-win share and reap fruits through the cooperation and minimize the perils of geopolitics in Asia Pacific Region.

Martin Conrad (2012) has touched very interesting gamut of China's grand strategy of a String of Pearls by neglecting the threats perceived by many stakeholders and diplomats in USA and India that China's intentions are to build naval bases and military expansion outside the mainland as many countries in the world. He has uttered that sophistication in technology and warfare has enabled China (C4ISR, ICBM, and Cyberspace) to hit any target in the world. Now, there is no need to build naval cantonments extraterritorially. Khurpreet Khurana (2008) has also endorsed the argument of Conrad that China's investment and developmental initiatives across the sea lines have no military intentions. He has further analyzed the evidence and recent developments and declared the speculations by counter powers (India and USA) tagging China's role for military preponderance.

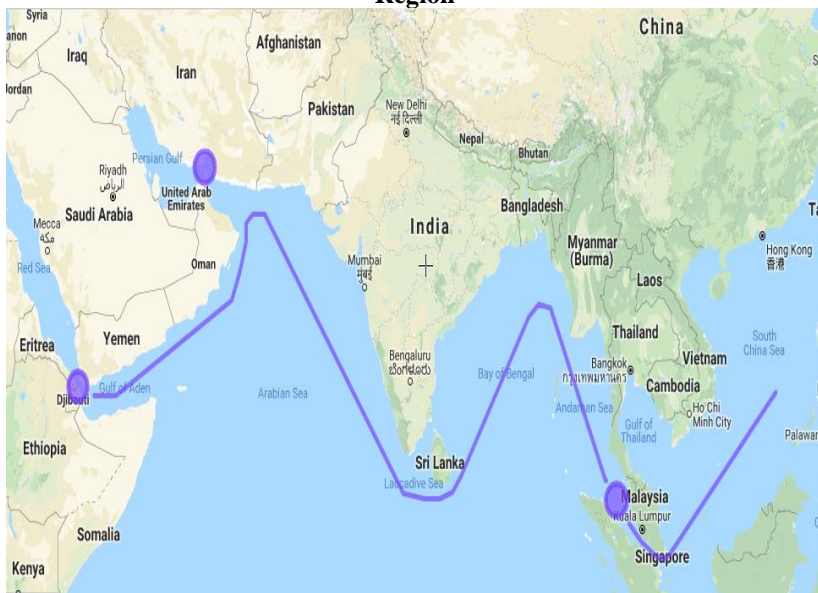
Holmes and Yoshihara (2008) come up with an idea that China will not take any risk confronting America directly rather Beijing's all attempts are aimed to secure her energy transportation smoothly and peacefully with the exertion of 'soft power'. David Brewster (2017) discusses a new dimension that China's Maritime Silk Road and String of Pearls is a grand strategy to connect landlocked Eurasian region by terminating geographical hazards through the establishment of new pathways and corridors whereas Palit (2017) emphasizes that China's construction of economic corridors are aimed to diversify the economic interests and India should become the part of it to get its share in investment despite maligning these unprecedented and ambitious initiatives those are beneficial for more than 60 states. Shee Poon Kim (2011) agrees with the opinion that China's investment and infrastructural development in coastal areas are to secure energy routes, easy approach to the new markets and social and economic prosperity through building win-win opportunity for all. The profound analysts discuss military and geopolitical prevalence of String of Pearls in respective ways. Whereas the paper

is aimed to investigate how does establishment of Gwadar port bring vicissitudes in regional connectivity and effect present eminent chokepoints in the Indian Ocean? This paper focuses on commercial and geographical eminence rather military or geopolitical.

String of pearls

String of Pearls theory refers to a maritime trade route for China that originates from the East China Sea, enters the Indian Ocean Region and provides further navigational trade feasibility to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. This maritime trade route engrosses strategically prevalent ports and chokepoints that are often called Sea Lines of Communication. Although, this notion was fabricated by Western scholars but never refuted by the Chinese Government. The term was firstly used in ‘Energy Futures in Asia’ by US consultancy consortium entitled Booz Allen Hamilton in 2004 (MacDonald, 2004:3). The pearls are basically the strategic points, straits or ports that hold the tremendous geostrategic location in the Indian Ocean. It is a fact that Strait of Malacca links the South China Sea to the Bay of Bengal, Strait of Hormuz connects the Arabian Sea to Persian Gulf and Strait of Mandeb provides a pathway to the Red Sea and further Suez Canal to the Mediterranean Sea (Figure.1)

Figure 1: Sea Line of Communications and Straits in the Indian Ocean Region



Source: Designed by authors

The above figure demonstrates that there are three pivotal chokepoints in the Indian Ocean; Malacca, Hormuz and Mandeb Straits. Every freighter that travels from Europe to East Asia and South East Asia has to pass through these littorals.

String of Pearls: Politics of Ports in Indian Ocean

The three passages have enormous commercial prevalence, especially for China to funnel her finished goods to the Middle East, Africa, West Asia and Europe, the main consumer markets and in return, to quench her industrial thirst China needs to import gas and oil from the Middle East. Chinese freighters have to cross the straits in both cases of imports and exports. Taking commercial benefits for China, geo-strategists called sea line of communications, ‘String of Pearls’ and China never disapproved it. The existed String of Pearls (Figure.2) has crucial ports to control the trade navigation, establishes hegemony in the region and maintains monopolization over Sea Lines of Communications; Singapore strait/port, Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the ports of Sri Lanka and Maldives, Indian Ports like *Khaptanan*, Chennai, Kochi, Goa and Mumbai, and Pakistani ports such as Karachi and Gwadar (see Figure.2).

Figure 2: String of Pearls and Important Chokepoints



Source: Designed by authors

So, an incessant and secure commercial activities, shipment and trade navigation is indispensable for China’s rise through connecting feasibility from the South China Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. But, two historical events in the last century created a sense of insecurity among Chinese strategists and urged them to find out an interminable alternative route that could have smoothly transportation of their goods. The blocking of commercial activities by India in 1971 (Indo-Pak War) and 1999 (*Kargil War*) (Ramachandran, 2009) urged Sino policymakers to learn lesson and counter the proximity of India in the region that envisaged vicissitudes in the the whole panorama. Their pursuit resulted in two developments; first, it led to renewed String of Pearls and second to find a short and safe passage to supply commercial goods in the international market and import energy resources. Additionally, constant US-India military exercises exacerbated the situation. The trap of Indian naval bases and bilateral cantonments across the Sea Lines of Communications in Andaman and Nicobar Islands at the

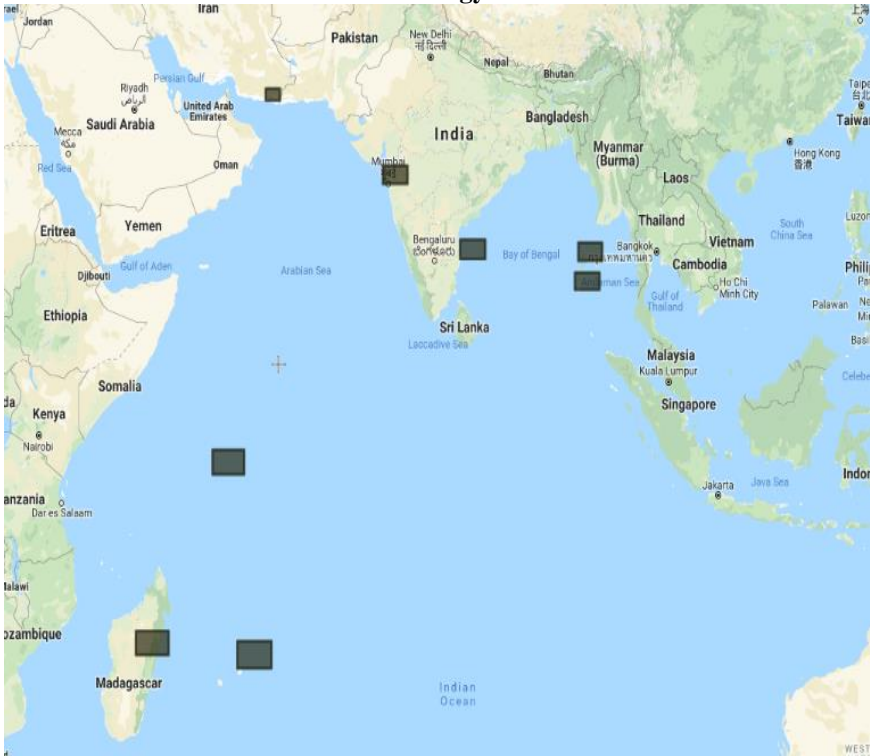
neck of Malacca Strait accelerated the process by inculcating Sino strategists to become an economic superpower and for that matter China needed to discover alternative routes that indirectly incepted 'modification' when China started establishing Gwadar port and Kyaupkyu port to bypass Malacca.

Countering string of pearls

Malacca Strait funnels almost 80 percent of China's energy needs and 60 percent of the world trade quantum. However, US-India naval bases in the Andaman Sea are intended to maintain supremacy of US and monitoring the IOR and simultaneously presents Indo-US moves to control IOR itself. To minimize and counter China's role, the Indians intended to have their own String of Pearls for unstringing the String of Pearls. According to the Indian intelligentsia, Chinese String of Pearls is supposed to encircle India strategically. Their apprehension is crystal in these words, 'Beijing has been reaching out to India's neighbors on the premise of development and trade, allegedly recreating the Silk Route. From Nepal in the Southeast to Myanmar, Bangladesh to Sri Lanka in the South and Pakistan in the West, China plans to choke India' (Abbhi, 2015). Diplomatically, China is surrounding India through the initiation of mega infrastructural development, energy projects, financial grants and construction of corridors in South Asia, establishing ports across the sea lines of communications in its neighboring countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Maldives, and especially in Pakistan. 'Reverse String of Pearls' (Abbhi, 2015) or 'Look East Policy' (Shrivastava, 2013) is therefore, initiated by India to maintain her position in the IOR.

To materIALIZED the dream of unstringing the String of Pearls of China, India has started building extraterritorial military bases in IOR and financed to establish the ports to counter the Dragon. Accordingly, *Chahbahar* Port of Iran was financed by India to counter Gwadar Port of Pakistan and establishment of Jaffna port in North of Sri Lanka against *Hambantota* which is under control of China. Additionally, a dispersed network of naval bases in IOR while making agreements and succeeded to establish naval bases in Mozambique, Mauritius, and Madagascar. Nevertheless India has already old naval bases, Andaman Island, and the Nicobar Islands. Sometimes, India has also signed an agreement with the Maldives and built a radar system for surveillance and monitoring (Shrivastava, 2013). India also proposed some infrastructural and energy projects to enhance ties with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Vietnam (Figure.3) (Abbhi, 2015). It cannot be ruled out that such strategic initiative of India are to counter Chinese String of Pearls.

Figure 3: External Indian Naval Bases in IOR and Reverse String of Pearls Strategy



Source: Designed and drawn by authors

Indeed, India has been making efforts to neutralize China's proactive role in IOR. The Indo-US alliance is not supposed to neglect their traditional position and military presence around the Malacca Strait. India wants to keep the Indian Ocean a truly Indian (Rumley, Doyle and Chaturvedi, 2012:11) whereas the US wishes to maintain her position in South Asia. One target is set for both powers to collaborate and strengthen military and geostrategic partnership. After 9/11 under Bush Administration aimed to assist India to become a major power in Asia to counter China (Department of State, 2005). Similarly, the US' Indo-Pacific strategy has similar objectives and India can be the best strategic partner to materialise it. Recent agreements and top officials visits between the both countries are aimed to strengthen it. The maritime military strategy of India asserted in 2004 to control the choke points and used it as a bargaining chip in international power politics; expansion of Indian military and naval cantonments are carrying this stark reality (Ministry of Defense, 2004:64). India's 'Reverse string of pearls' strategy or 'Look East policy' is carrying military dissuasion and diplomatic measures to unstring the pearl by controlling choke points, counter China and keep the Indian Ocean truly Indian. This Indian strategy has triggered a new String of Pearls.

Renewed string of pearls: new maritime silk road

German Philosopher Friedrich Hegel's 'Dialect Method' seems applicable in also modern times. Although it was not used by Hegel, his predecessor Johann Fichte originated it. However it can be recapitulated as '(a) a beginning proposition called a Thesis, (b) a negation of that thesis called an Antithesis, and (c) a Synthesis whereby the two conflicting ideas are reconciled to form a new proposition' (Schnitker and Emmons, 2013) and process continues like a recycle process because a Synthesis becomes a Thesis when it confronts with an Antithesis. As a Thesis has Antithesis, an Antithesis triggers Synthesis, similarly 'String of Pearls' and its counter led by Indo-US alliance through policy of 'Countering String of Pearls' gave birth to a new and modified String of Pearls. However, what is the route of this renewed String of Pearls? How is it more comprehensive and secure for China? How is it different from an existing string of pearls? And what are the main littorals of the new String of Pearls? Discussion below is supposed to answer these questions.

Basically, the reinvigoration of Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) has revised the route of a present String of Pearls and drawn a new route with modification bringing some vicissitudes in IOR. The construction of two new ports under MSRI, Gwadar and Kyaupkyu has changed the course especially Kyaupkyu which is going to bypass Strait of Malacca, the critical point between India and China. As aforementioned, India has naval bases in Andaman and Nicobar Islands adjacent to Strait of Malacca that can create a challenging situation for China. With the operationalization of renewed route, China will be able to overcome the precariousness of trade navigation. In the renewed Chinese String of Pearls, Kyaupkyu and Gwadar are the most strategically located pearls. It has both head and tail in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea and connected to China through land corridors. Gwadar is connected to *Kashgar* (Xingjian province) through CPEC whereas Kyaupkyu is also linked through a road around 2400 km to Kunming (Yunan province of China) passing through Mandalay called China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). Additionally, road connectivity is almost accomplished, and 2400 km of gas and oil pipeline is being built from Kunming to Mandalay and further connects with Kyaupkyu to funnel gas and oil to Kunming and then other parts of China (Abbhi, 2015).

Figure 4: Connectivity through CPEC (Gwadar) and CMEC (Kyaupkyu)+

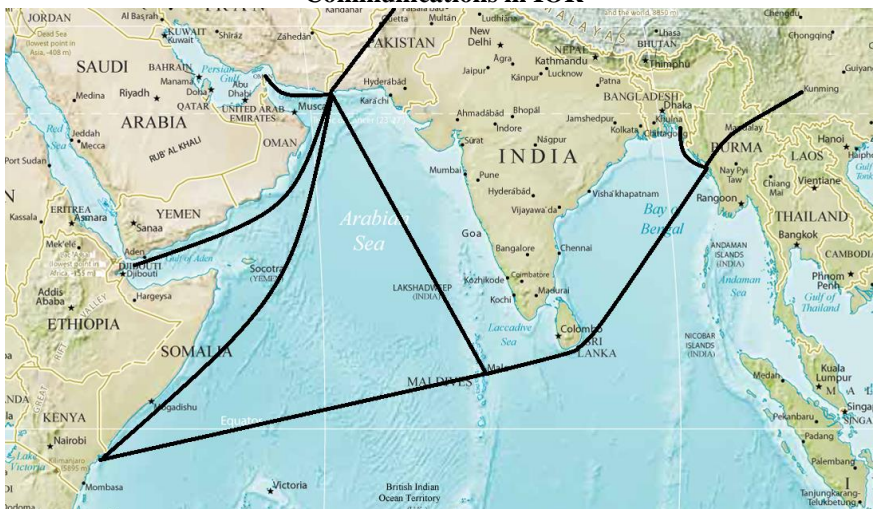


Source: Drawn by authors

China is also purchasing approximately 11.76 billion cubic feet gas annually from Myanmar that is passed through Thailand and then supplied to other party of China for the smooth supply of gas. Sometimes, China invested more than \$7.2 billion to build Kyaupkyu Port and has 70-85% of the port's stakes (Yimou, 2017). China invested \$2.7 billion to construct an industrial zone in Kyaupkyu and \$1.5 billion to lay down oil pipeline from Kyaupkyu to Kunming (Poling, 2018). China's strategic interest in Kyaupkyu and the construction of oil and gas pipeline is evident that she intends to bypass Malacca and reduce not only to dependency on it but also avoid adversaries like India and USA. Kyaupkyu is an important geostrategic pearl of 'Renewed String of Pearl'.

Another pivotal littoral of 'Renewed String of Pearls' is Gwadar port in Pakistan. China is investing approximately \$62 billion under the umbrella of CPEC to construct Gwadar deep sea port to get access in the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. Several proposed mega projects are under construction in Gwadar such as Special Economic Zones, international airport, housing societies, energy projects, and carriage terminals. Gwadar is connected to *Kashi* (West China) via western Route of CPEC (Government of Pakistan, 2017). China has then approached Strait of Hormuz through Gwadar directly. Gwadar would be a hub of economic activities and would help to monitor and control shipments. The port has been given to China for 40 years initially. It can also serve as a naval base for China because Pakistan and India are strategic rivals, so Pakistan can serve China's interests to counter India in the Arabian Sea. Other littorals of 'Renewed String of Pearls' are Chittagong (Bangladesh), *Hambantota* (Sri Lanka), *Marao* (Maldives) and *Lamu* (Kenya) ports respectively.

Figure 5: Renewed String of Pearls: Littorals, Route and New Sea Lines of Communications in IOR



Source: Designed and drawn by authors

Sri Lankan government officially handed over *Hambantota* port to China for 99 years in 2017 after ratifying a bilateral lease agreement. China's Merchants Port Holding Company with the collaboration of Sri Lankan Port Authority owns the port. Company paid \$1.2 billion for 99 years lease (Panda, 2017). Initially, China paid \$300 million as down payment (Times of India, 2017). *Hambantota* port is a significant Southern port of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean. Similarly, China is also investing in infrastructure and energy sector in the Maldives. It goes without saying that Maldives' insolvency of 70 percent of debts made more and more dependent on China. Infact China is more interested to build *Mario* port and link it with Male (Times of India, 2016). In the Bay of Bengal, acquisition of Chittagong and especially *Sonadia* is another strategic achievement for China. Similarly, China is intended to expand the China-Myanmar Corridor (CMC) to Bangladesh and Bangladesh predisposed positive gesture for investment in infrastructure and deep-sea port projects of \$9 billion (Reuter, 2010). Moreover, China has proposed other infrastructural energy projects to persuade Bangladesh by her side.

The last string of pearl is *Lamu* port of Kenya. Again, Dragon has stretched upto Africa to finance and build port alongwith initiation of huge projects. The establishment of this port is the crust of Lamu Port South Sudan Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) which is being commissioned by China Communication Construction Company. Initially, work was started in 2016 and 20 percent is completed recently and is expected to accomplish in 2020. Port will have 32 total berths while the first berth is completed in 2018 (Xinua, 2017). China consumed \$480 million to construct the *Lamu* Port which can be another Gwadar for her in Africa. As Gwadar has geostrategic prevalence in the Arabian Sea and destiny of

CPEC, *Lamu* is a geo-strategically significant and an ultimate of LAPSSSET Corridor that has a worth of more than \$24 billion (Mwangi, 2014).

Materializing the renewed string of pearls

The materializing of this 'Renewed String of Pearls' is actually the result of the revitalization of Maritime Silk Road Institution (MSRI) by China. She has been investing billions of dollars under this flagship project which will connect Asia with Africa, Europe, and within Asia Middle East, West Asia, Central Asia, and South Asia. As matter of fact, Asian ascendance in the 21st century can truly be cashed by China through the initiation of mega projects and exertion of soft power across the continents. The establishment of Gwadar, Kyaupkyu and *Lamu* through CPEC, CMC, and LAPSSSET has paved the way for new navigational route in the Indian Ocean for China. Renewed Chinese String of Pearls is more useful, comprehensive and secure as compared to Allen's perceived String of Pearls because every pearl of this renewed string is more precious politically, economically and strategically in Indian Ocean for China.

China has picked the pearls and sewed it into 'Renewed String of Pearls' to bypass Malacca, baffle Indo-US military presence in Andaman and Nicobar Islands and guarded maritime route for navigation of goods across the mainland. Gwadar port is the most precious pearl of this new string because of two reasons: first, it will enable China to counter India and give her an upper hand which previously India had and second, it will become a hub of trans-regional connectivity. The presence of Sino-Pak Navy in the Arabian will create balance of power in the Indian Ocean and counter Indian aggressive moves as historically were undertaken by India when she threatened to block China's trade navigation during war in 1971 and 1999. In new situation, if India threatens China to impose blockade in the Indian Ocean, she can tackle India in the Arabian Sea and Strait of Hormuz because Chinese naval presence at Gwadar port. So, power equilibrium can be achieved in Indian Ocean due to the establishment of Gwadar port. Third, Gwadar can be considered a monitoring or controlling point because of its strategic location. It will not only help China to import energy paraphernalia from Middle East and further supply it to its main land but also keep her presence at geostrategic region close to Strait of Hormuz, the Persian Gulf, and the Arabian Sea. Similarly, China can export its finished goods through Gwadar to the Middle East, Europe, Africa and West Asia bypassing Strait of Malacca. Renewed String of Pearl provides routes that bypass Malacca and Singapore Strait. Now it is hard to calculate the velocity of commercial navigational impacts because ports are not fully operationalized yet, it can easily be quantified while statistical data are available, but it is clear that the new pearls have given China short and safer routes, different studies say that Gwadar has more potential than Dubai as it is calmer, deeper and larger than Dubai port and much close to Strait of Hormuz. China's recent developments in this region and building of ports are not only

aimed to counter Indo-US nexus to strengthen its position in the Indian Ocean but also to have secure routes for shipment of commercial goods.

Figure 6: Renewed String of Pearls and its Impacts on Regional Connectivity



Source: Edited and drawn by authors

Finally, old string of pearls is no longer applicable to China's geostrategic preponderance for her ascendance. However renewed String of Pearls will reduce dependence and vulnerability as far as China is concerned.

Conclusion

China has become an economic giant through peaceful means and never indulged directly in international political conflicts. Nevertheless, With alternative routes and renewed String of Pearls, China will become a stakeholder of Indian Ocean which will be a great political advantage for her yet it is likely that she will not challenge American supremacy in the region and provide a win win situation for all stakeholders. Indeed, renewed 'String of Pearls' has economic benefits for China and other associated countries but at same time it would also place China political and strategic advantageous position in IOR. So in the few years time IOR would experience a new balance of powers.

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String of Pearls: Politics of Ports in Indian Ocean

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Khalid Manzoor Butt, Sanwal Hussain Kharl & Khizar Abbas Bhatti

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