



China's Maritime Interest and the Great Game at Seas

Peu Ghosh*

Department of Political Science, Lady Brabourne College, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Received: 22 Dec 2017 ; Accepted: 20 May 2018

Abstract:

Linking China's interest in the maritime waters arises from the geo-strategic importance of Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) vital to the oil supply of the country. China is building strategic relationships and developing a naval capability to establish a forward presence along the SLOCs that connect China to the Middle East and to Africa. The entire stretch includes South China Sea, Indian Ocean region and stretches as far as the Persian Gulf on the one hand and Port of Sudan on the other. The net result is a geographical distribution of bases like the Chinese 'pearls', USA 'diamonds' and Indian 'nuggets', principally reflecting concerns over energy security and secure access to SLOCs by each of the players. This paper would highlight the great game along the maritime domain of China while highlighting the clash of interests with major players in this area as well as Chinese engagements with multitude of players to counter the challenges arising from competitors. How energy requirement and quest for market imbibe China to design maritime strategies will be an important focus of this paper. It is also necessary to make an in-depth study of Chinese maritime strategy as it is going to have a grave impact on world politics. The paper will try to make future projections of the 'Great Game' in the maritime stretch of importance to China.

Keywords: Sea Lines of Communications, Maritime strategy, Great Game, Strategic relationship, 'Pearls', 'Diamonds', 'Nuggets'.

Introduction

The twentieth century witnessed a wave of globalization, spread of capitalist free-market economy and a total change in the international economic scenario. The political scenario also experienced dramatic transformations. From a bipolar world, it moved to a unipolar world. The reason is obviously the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the

world heading towards the existence of a sole hegemon, the United States of America (USA/US). The US became the strongest power both in economic terms and military dominance in the Post-Cold War era. However, the 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror did not reinforce American hegemony and the economic meltdown of 2008 further accelerated what academicians have started

*Corresponding Author's Email: peupolsc@gmail.com

to ascribe it as an end of the American Century. Against this backdrop, the rise of a multipolar world with countries like China and India has to be followed closely. In the context of this article, China's gradual rise is to be examined as it tries to consolidate its vital interests through OBOR initiative and 'Maritime Silk Road'.

This article is an attempt to study the perspective that is thought to be behind the 'maritime silk road' as well as changes in China's naval strategy in the recent times to show its naval prowess in the maritime stretch along the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) which are transit for energy and goods supply. Oil politics or to put it another way, the disruption of choke points along the SLOCs have been dealt with this article to show the future flash points of rivalry in the high seas. The catch point of this article is that it tries to make future predictions of trends of maritime world politics along the maritime zone of interest of China.

A Prelude to China's Maritime Interest and Strategy

A name to reckon with any kind of discussion of maritime strategy or maritime policy connected with a country's maritime interest is that of Alfred Thayer Mahan. The works of this American naval strategist has relevance till today and will continue to be so. Mahan was a legendary geo-political strategic thinker who can be ascribed as a naval visionary. His understanding of the real politics in international relations and the importance of geography in the strategic thinking of a country has to be recognized with respect. His understanding of the role of sea power in national security as well as in the international

arena undoubtedly has an influence on contemporary World Politics even in the Twenty-First Century, too. The most revered work of Mahan which is being referred to in this article is his book – *The Influence of Sea Power upon History: 1660-1783*, (1890).

The strategic concepts which he discussed in this book can no way be undermined. He talked about the sea as a 'great highway' and 'wide common' with 'well-worn trade routes' over which men pass in all directions. He also identified several narrow passages of strategic 'choke points' and the control over them are what give a decisive power to a country. He had largely talked about the evolution of Britain into a World Empire. Mahan in his several writings like the one in the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled 'The United States Looking Outward' (1890) hinged upon the point that U.S. security and interests were affected by the balance of power in Europe and Asia. He understood that an Anglo-American sea-power was key to ensuring geo-political pluralism in Eurasia. In his later writings, Mahan reviewed the successive moves towards the European continental hegemony by Spanish and Austrian Hapsburgs, Louis XIV's France as well as Napoleonic France where the great conditions supported by sea-power thwarted the would-be hegemons. In his other work *The Problems of Asia and Its Effect Upon International Policies*, (1900) he showed how an expansionist Russia should be contained by an alliance of the US, Great Britain, France, Germany, and Japan. The Cold War period witnessed such containment policies as projected by Mahan.

In this work, Mahan also identified China with 'immense latent force' and a potential geopolitical rival of USA. Chinese military thinkers might feel inspired by the dictums of

Mahan and might be embracing the strategic thinking of Mahan in the twenty-first Century. The book written by James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara entitled *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: the Turn to Mahan* (2007) is a pointer in this direction.

Undoubtedly economic motivation is the primary driver force in China's orientation towards its claimed maritime domain. China therefore, is interested in securing sea lanes that are vital to China's energy supplies and other important economic activities. For this, China is bent on thwarting the regional rising hegemony and international global players and trying to increase its influence in the sea. This can be related to China's 'rise' and its ambition to become a global player in international relations, too. This leads to many probabilities of interaction between USA and China, China and India, China and South-east Asian Countries and China and Japan and how they manage their international/bilateral/multilateral relations pertaining to high seas.

Identifying China's Maritime Interest and Choke Point Politics

At the outset, the maritime stretch of China needs to be identified. From a Chinese point of view, its maritime stretch includes the South China Sea, and even East China Sea, Indian Ocean region, and stretches as far as the Persian Gulf on the one hand and Port of Sudan on the other. China seeks to ensure that there is unimpeded access to markets, energy supplies, raw materials and technology and secured maritime and land transport corridors as a part of its national interest along this entire stretch of water.

The presence of choke points is vital to the security of the SLOCs along this maritime stretch. The politics of choke points is vital in the interplay of international politics.

The US Energy Information Administration (EIA) acknowledges the importance of eight vital choke points in the world which are crucial to oil supply. They are the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, the Cape of Good Hope, and the Bab-el Mandab, the Danish Straits, the Suez Canal, the Bosphorus and Panama Canal. Out of these eight, China has concerns over those choke points present in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean stretching as far as the Persian Gulf and route to Europe. These routes are of China's concern because these are strategic trade routes and oil supply lines for China. A blockade of such choke points would hit hard the Chinese economy. Therefore, to secure such vital choke points establishing 'island outposts' therefore, becomes a priority for China with which it has been working and staking claims of several islands in this maritime stretch. The Chinese claims of the islands of Paracel and Spratly are pointers in this direction. Chinese military buildup in these islands is noteworthy. The aim obviously is to create military bases as well as naval bases in order to secure not only the oil routes but also southern approach to the country.

The eight vital choke points in this Indian Ocean region are the Strait of Hormuz, the Mozambique Channel, the Six Degree Channel, the Sunda Strait, the Bab-el Mandeb, the Nine Degree Channel, the Strait of Malacca and the Lombok Strait. Chinese security stretch extends from the Strait of Malacca to the Strait of Hormuz and extends as far as to the coast of Africa. For instance, China is cautious about its **Malacca dilemma**- a choke point blockade threat. Therefore, Chinese involvement in port and pipeline developments in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Burma are aimed at enhancing energy security and reducing China's dependence on the Malacca Strait chokepoint to counter In-

dia's strategies of blocking the choke points. There is also another urge for China to worry about in the Indian Ocean Regional that is exploration and exploitation of sea-bed resources. China Ocean Mineral Resources Research and Development Association (COMRA), the nodal agency for seabed exploration and exploitation of resources was established. In 2001, China obtained mining rights for poly-metallic nodule and in 2002, poly-metallic sulfide deposits in the Southwestern Indian Ocean. In 2011, COMRA signed a 15-year exploration contract with the International Seabed Authority (ISA) that entrusted it with rights to develop ore deposit in future. China plans to deploy the manned deep-sea submersible Jiaolong in the Indian Ocean. Jiaolong can potentially monitor submarine cables which carry nearly 99 percent of digital data and crisscross the Indian Ocean. China has therefore, broad plans for garnering its position and prowess in the Indian Ocean. (Sakuja, 2014) China's Hormuz dilemma is discussed later in this article in the context of CPEC and OBOR initiative.

China's current claims on its ocean frontier comprise three main elements like claim to territorial sovereignty over Taiwan, claim to territorial sovereignty over a large number of other small islands in the South China Sea (Paracel and Spratly islands) or the East China Sea (Senkaku Islands), and claim to maritime resource jurisdictions that might pass on to China if its claims to the land territories were recognized by adjacent states.

Given a complicated regional picture, China is expected to continue to invest heavily on the navy and inspired by a vision almost similar to Mahan, where in the future it can ultimately seek maritime domination it will embark upon an aggressive policy. If the

projection is that 'whoever controls the oil can also control the lifeblood of other countries' economic development' (Erickson and Goldstein, 2009) then China has a vision similar to this in the South China Sea as well as along its entire maritime stretch.

Chinese Maritime Strategy: Developing the Maritime Silk Road (MSR)

Chinese maritime strategy has been using the economic power as well as the military power to secure its maritime stretch. China targeted the countries all along the SLOCs and has tried to penetrate economically. With government encouragement, Chinese businessmen invested heavily in Southeast Asia, Latin America, Central Asia, and Africa, winning access to massive agricultural, timber, food, and mineral resources around the world. China is now the biggest trade partner of many Asian countries. These include the ASEAN countries and also South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan among others. (Roberts, 2011: 10-12)

Chinese economic investments in Asia and Africa have come to attract international attention. It is observed that behind strategic planning, there are heavy economic investments which are new tools of entrapping countries facing low economic growth. A debt trap creates a dependency syndrome which can be utilized by China for fulfilling its strategic purpose as OBOR/BRI, Maritime Silk Road or its 'string of pearls' strategy. If we follow World Systems Theory or the Dependency Theory, satellites or neo-colonies are created this way in contemporary international relations to the benefit of neo-colonialists. A few examples will make things clear.

Sri Lanka is one such case. The Hambantota Port (part of the 'string of pearls' strategy), was built by the Chinese. The Mattala International Airport and other infrastructural facilities have seen Chinese investments. It is this economic penetration which has entangled Sri Lanka in a debt trap. To come out of this debt trap, Sri Lanka, in 2017 had been thinking of handing over the Mattala International Airport to India. This might help Sri Lanka to repay the dues to China's Exim Bank. Though through this initiative, India, can balance the Chinese influence in her neighborhood, but China has succeeded in getting 99 years lease of Hambantota Port (short of using it for defense purpose). (Krishnan, 2017:36)

Now turning to the African continent blessed with huge resources and a lucrative destination for extra-regional players, China here too invests to materialize its maritime vital interests. Along with the US, Russia, Turkey, Brazil, and India, China has become a topmost investor and trading partner in Africa. Among many other African countries, Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia, Morocco, Kenya, Egypt are some of the attractive destinations for Chinese investments. The Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway is being funded by the Chinese. The same is being constructed by China Road and Bridge Construction (CRBC). Development of Port Lamu in the east coast of Africa is also within the Chinese strategic design. Port Sudan has been incorporated into the 'string of pearls' strategy by the Chinese for its geo-strategic location. So it is also being developed by the Chinese.

Other investments in Africa that can be cited are like Husab in Nigeria which has one of the world's biggest uranium deposits and this has been acquired by China. In Angola, the Chinese has built roads and railways in

exchange for oil. In Democratic Republic of Congo, the biggest high grade copper deposit in Kamoa is being developed by China. These though look economic investments but are actually strategic investments to protect the Chinese vital interests in the far seas. (Krishnan, 2017:34)

China has extended its maritime stretch as far as the Horn of Africa. It is investing heavily in constructing a new military base in Obok in Djibouti. Djibouti is located at the southern entrance to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. More precisely, it is located between Somalia, Eritrea, and Yemen. It occupies a strategic location adjacent to the Bab el Mandab Strait, which is a critical corridor for international shipping. Crude oil imports and natural gas imports transit make this junction a sensitive area. Therefore, the security dilemma involving the choke points in this region has been the part of compulsions of Chinese maritime designs in the Indian Ocean Region. The presence of other powers like the US, France, and Japan with the sole foreign military base in Djibouti, matters will become complicated in the future undoubtedly with the growing Chinese presence.

As scholars of International Relations, we can find an echo of dependency theory in international relations in Djibouti and other countries of Africa too. Poor economic health creates grounds for neo-colonial powers to exploit and extend their influences in these neo-colonies like Djibouti. This will result in a scramble for control of neo-colonies in the future in the African continent by foreign powers working towards achievement of their strategic and economic interests.

Therefore, what is clear from the above discussion is that China has used its economic prowess to boost its strategic designs to manage its maritime stretch as well as economic belt initiatives. Here, it will be impor-

tant to remember that the current policy of the Chinese government is to develop the 'Maritime Silk Route'. The design of the route and the urge to create the route are important points of discussion in current international relations.

The 'maritime silk road' initially targeted to China's neighbors in the South China Sea, especially the ASEAN countries. It was proposed as an attempt to enhance connectivity and cultural links in China's backyard in the South China Sea. Later it was expanded to include the littoral states of Indian Ocean and extended as far as Africa. It is clearly discernible that China has a vision of constructing ports, logistical stations, storage facilities, and free-trade zones in the South China Sea extending till the Indian Ocean.

A question which can be raised is that whether the 'maritime silk road' is a larger version of the 'string of pearls'? This though never has been officially announced by China, never-the-less has been doing rounds in the academic circle as well as the military strategic thinking of the concerned countries. The referral region in this context is the Indian Ocean Region, and the country specifically targeted is India, as well as the US. (Krishnan, 2017:35)

The 'string of pearls' concept is often viewed as a military initiative and is viewed as a Chinese strategy of giving Chinese navy accesses to a series of ports stretching from the South China Sea to the Arabian Sea extending to the Persian Gulf on one hand and the Gulf of Aden moving towards Europe on the other. This has caused some worry particularly in India, which feels that it is being encircled as pointed out in the above discussion by the Chinese 'string of pearls'. Therefore, a new terminology of 'maritime silk

road' is a more non-military approach which will involve its strategy of investing in maritime infrastructure in ASEAN and further west and not to leave out Africa.

The Indian Ocean Region is gradually becoming an 'arena of competing for influence', more so with the significant presence of the United States and India. The net result is a geographical distribution of bases like the Chinese 'pearls', USA 'diamonds' and Indian 'nuggets', principally reflecting concerns over energy security and secure access to SLOCs. The Chinese 'pearls' comprise Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The US 'diamonds' consists of Australia, Bahrain, Diego Garcia, Djibouti, Egypt, Indonesia, Kenya, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Singapore, and UAE. The Indian 'nuggets' though lesser in number, yet are important footholds for India. They include Andaman Islands, Mauritius, and Maldives.

India is the rising hegemon in the Indian Ocean Region. Therefore, containing India is a prime motivating factor behind the adoption of the 'string of pearls' strategy by China. This involves massive Chinese investments in developing or managing strategic stations and ports all along the Indian Ocean Region to counter India and compete with the US. In Sri Lanka China has built the port of Hambantota. Another container port is underway in Chittagong, Bangladesh. In 2014 China floated the idea of developing Ihavandhippolhu in Maldives as Maldives has been identified as a 'pearl' too by President Xi Jinping. Other activities include involvement in Myanmar's offshore islands, including St. Matthews, near the mouth of the Malacca Strait, and the Coco Islands (Indian until their transfer to Burma in the 1950s), in the Bay of Bengal. There are reports of the

presence of Chinese communications monitoring facility for collecting information about Indian naval operations and missile testing. The most important of all is the Gwadar port in Pakistan which is very close to the Strait of Hormuz. China has constructed the Gwadar Port to create a huge naval base here. (Haider, 2005) China suffers from the **Hormuz dilemma** too which is almost identical with its Malacca dilemma. The choke points closure or disruption will hit the Chinese energy supply hard. The potential threat of course is from India and her cooperation with the Iranian government to develop the port of Chabahar. Also, India is being a part of the project of construction of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) which will join Mumbai port and Bandar Abbas (on the narrow Strait of Hormuz).

China, sensing its Hormuz dilemma therefore, alongside the development of the port of Gwadar, has embarked on ambitious plans with Pakistan like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as well as the 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) trade initiative. These preparations are all geared up to protect China's vital interest in the Strait of Hormuz extending as far as to Central Asia. The naval preparedness close to the Strait of Hormuz, a geographic choke point, as well as sending feelers to the Iranian government for joint naval exercise show full proof plans to secure its maritime interests and maritime strategies in this region.

China's 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) initiative now known as 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), is designed to use Chinese 'soft power' strategies to win over countries along this belt. This includes giving soft loans to the participating countries to help them build infrastructure for the BRI. The whole strategy is quite a design of what can be dubbed as a

neo-imperialist strategy as discussed in the previous section. The object is to get these countries entangled in a debt-trap so that their dependency on China would turn them into neo-colonies of China. China will strategically be able to maintain military presence in these countries and station PLA along the periphery of BRI. OBOR or BRI is an ambitious project of linking mainland China with Central Asia and Europe. Central Asia and the Caspian Sea region are blessed with rich energy resources which can be reached through the economic belt much easily and at a low cost. (Kanwal, 2017) The 'maritime silk road' must be seen as a counter part of the OBOR, one stretching over the maritime interest areas of China and the other on the land.

Here, one point must be highlighted and that is the change in the strategic planning of the Chinese military establishments. There was a decision from the top leadership in around 2013 that the size of the PLA would be reduced. The White Paper released in 2013 declared Chinese naval forces would enhance comprehensive offshore operations. Followed by this would be developing task force formation in the blue water. This meant gearing up overseas operational capabilities. (Kondapalli, 2018: 114)

The new alignment of the maritime strategy was announced in 2013 by President Xi Jinping. There was also the announcement of centralization of the bureaucratic control over the maritime law enforcement agencies and assimilation of the previously separate maritime law enforcement bodies into the one integrated structure under the State Oceanic Administration (SOA) which is a part of the Ministry of Land and Natural Resources. Another highlight of this new policy has been an increasing importance of the China Coast Guard. This is not a part of the Navy but this

agency play an important role in the maritime waters like in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. It would be pertinent now to draw attention to the Scarborough Shoals incident with Philippines in 2012 when a Philippine Navy surveillance plane intercepted several Chinese fishing vessels in a lagoon at Scarborough. The news prompted the Philippines to deploy its largest warship, the BRP, *Gregorio Del Pilar*. Two Chinese maritime surveillance ships later reportedly positioned themselves between the *Gregorio Del Pilar* and the Chinese fishing vessels, preventing the arrests of the fishermen. Therefore, behind civilian vessels, or Chinese Coast Guards, there is a huge naval presence lurking in the rear and waiting for signal to act.

The 2015 White Paper mentions the military preparedness to effectively secure China's overseas interests. It calls for a combination of strategies of offshore water defense to open seas protection.

Thus, China's Blue Water Navy with powerful amphibious warfare and aircraft carrier components are 'rocking the boat' in the IOR and the South China Sea. This might help China to secure its ever lengthening maritime stretch of communications along the SLOCs or its implementation of the Maritime Silk Road of the Twenty-First Century. However, China's neighbors are suspicious about its intentions and China's naval power projections. A feeling of 'threat' among the neighbors may be behind China's attempt to dilute military strategy by a non-military concept of Maritime Silk Road Initiative.

Future Projections: A Competition for Global and Regional Leadership

What can be the consequences of such expeditious policy of China has to be pondered

upon with a serious note. Whether it is the Pacific or the Indian Ocean, there is an observable presence of the US Navy and existence of the US naval bases. The US, in its bid to maintain its position as a hegemonic maritime power dominance not only in the Atlantic or the Pacific, but also in the Indian Ocean has taken many measures to achieve this goal, including strengthening its presences in Diego Garcia and Bahrain, updating its military cooperation with established allies, and setting up forward military networks to control key choke points. As we have mentioned in the previous section the America maintains the 'diamonds' or bases in the entire maritime stretch that coincides with China.

The US has propped many allies in the ASEAN countries and also roped in India. In September and October 2005, for instance, the US and India conducted their first naval maneuvers—MALABAR 05—employing U.S. and Indian aircraft carriers, and this occurred in the Arabian Sea. Recent naval exercises, the nineteenth edition of MALABAR (2015), a joint naval exercise of the US and India in the Bay of Bengal saw innovation as there was the presence of Japanese Navy which took part in the iteration of MALABAR for the first time. Hence, there has been a transition from a bilateral engagement to a trilateral one (INDIA, USA and JAPAN). Another development has been the Indian Navy's engagement with the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) in 2015. Therefore, China has to face competition from the US, Japan, and India. If it follows Mahan, then to control the sea it has to remove its opponents. The rising regional hegemon, India has to be encircled and contained within the limits of the South Asia.

Several repercussions can follow from this. A series of future predictions can be summarized as given below:

- 1) There can be clashes and competitions between the Chinese Navy and the US Naval Forces in the Pacific as well as in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Latest in July 2017, the US Navy destroyer USS Statham sailed 12 nautical miles (22km) of the small Triton Island in the South China Sea which is claimed by China, Taiwan and Vietnam. China quickly readied its naval ships and military jets to ‘warn off’ the destroyer. China denounced the US move as a ‘serious political and military provocation’. In June 2017, China launched its biggest new generation domestically-built destroyer. It is equipped with air defense, anti-missile, anti-ship and anti-submarine weapons. This is a 10,000-tonne warship and its inauguration can be seen as a part of China’s plan of becoming a naval power.
- 2) Rife over Taiwan will continue and on economic and political front there can be ups and downs in the Sino-US relations. President Xi Jinping, in the background of the US warship moving into China’s alleged territorial waters, said that the US should manage its relations on the basis of ‘one-China’ policy.
- 3) There can be another twist to the Sino-US relations. The US in order to reduce its trade deficit can continue to pressurize China to revalue their currency. China can pressurize the US over Taiwan. Both can come to an understanding and balance off each other in the maritime domain too. As President Xi Jinping made it clear that certain ‘negative factors’ are hurting China-US relations. The 2018 tariff war is a test of nerves between the US and China.
- 4) Strong US presence in the Pacific, South China Sea and the Indian Ocean can be a factor in China-North Korea relations. Amid the Singapore Summit between Kim and Trump in 2018, China and North Korea, both are guarding their relations cautiously. For China, North Korea can be an important card as it faces a potential trade war with the US in 2018.
- 5) ‘Containment policy’ of China towards India may continue as India stretches her ties to the South-East Asia through her Act East Policy. Containing a competing regional hegemon is a necessity for China to get rid of its ‘choke point’ dilemma along the SLOCs.
- 6) Border tensions between two big neighbors, India and China as witnessed during the 2017 at Doklam, can be on the rise. Side by side there can be competitions at High Seas also. Following the Doklam standoff there was a surprising presence of the Chinese warships (almost 13) in the Indian Ocean Region. There can be such shadow boxing between India and China in the high seas whenever there is a crisis on the land front. As China tries to secure its mainland, there can be clashes be-

- tween India and China more often along the border.
- 7) More tensions are in the offing regarding the implementation of mega connectivity projects like the BRI or even the Maritime Silk Road. As of June 2018, even in the 18th SCO summit though there was agreement on other SCO initiatives but India expressed her dissent over BRI. So matters may brew up in the future.
 - 8) How well can India play the Japan Card is also an important leverage that India can think about. This came out to be true when Japan gave its support to India on the Doklam stand-off between China and India. Japan had pinned on thwarting the expansion of China in the East China Sea. Therefore, similarity of Chinese expansionist policy prompted Japan to enter the scene. The disputed island of Senkaku in the East China Sea, already has witnessed quite a military preparedness on both sides. If China is successful in Doklam, it might try out Senkaku unilaterally. Japanese trade which passes through the Strait of Malacca might be subjected to China's maneuvering. If India continues to be the dominant naval power in the region, Japan will be assured of its energy and trade roads. Therefore, Japan-India strategic partnership can see an upsurge in the future. In the June 2018, India-Japan Vice-Ministerial 2+2 dialogue in New Delhi, both India and Japan proposed to synergies their 'Act East Policy' and 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy'. This can be seen as an act of balancing off China at open seas of interests of all three countries.
 - 9) ASEAN neighbors of China have to witness clashes along the maritime stretch and confront Chinese Coast Guards and Naval Ships as maritime disputes continue.
 - 10) Russia is another big question. How Russia will maneuvered and handle such changing scenario has to be watched closely. In the wildest of the imagination can there be a China-Russia strategic partnership with Pakistan as an ally? If this ever happens, the regional as well as global politics will see a dramatic change in the power equations.
 - 11) China has started to take an active interest Afghanistan and is trying to broker peace between Pakistan and Afghanistan. A trilateral, China—Afghanistan—Pakistan has been formed which is a foreign minister level dialogue forum. This will act to enhance the peace process in Afghanistan. Definitely, this has a long-range object in the Chinese thinking. Not only achieving regional stability and adopting a posture of arbiter of regional and international disputes but also ensuring the CPEC and routes to Central Asia as well as the security of the 'maritime silk road' cannot be de-

nied. This will have an impact on regional politics too when has seen in the context of India.

- 12) Another point that should not be forgotten is that the African continent would face more competition, more dependency, and there will be a scramble for neo-colonies among existing powers and aspiring powers like China as has been shown in the above discussion.

The expansionist strategies and military designs backed by economic policies point out that China are planning to assume global leadership. It seems that China will first secure its mainland and then it will secure its maritime domain. The latter will bring instability and clash into the high seas. The 2020 has to be watched carefully whether major players like the US and India balance of, or clash with China at the seas.

Conclusion

One thing comes out to be clear is that China has restructured its maritime strategy. The focus is more on naval forces rather than land forces. Again, when it comes to using its naval forces, it does not mean the navy only. China is revamping its Coast Guard Units and as pointed out above, China has deployed the world's largest Coast Guard Vessel in the South China Sea. Is this ringing an alarm bell for its neighbor? This is a valuable question. It has disputes with almost all neighbors- India, Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia to mention a few. Therefore, to tackle the maritime disputes, conflicts in the high seas, or patrolling in the contested waters or the development of strategic bases in the disputed islands, China has devised this strategy of deploying paramilitary or civilian vessels to stake its claim in the disputed

maritime regions instead of a full-fledged navy. Simultaneously, ambitious plans like OBOR or BRI and 'maritime silk road' initiatives are creating waves in the strategic thinking of China's neighbors.

Therefore, the maritime stretch of China is most likely to witness a 'Great Game' among regional and extra-regional players. Clashes in the seas will be more frequent as the Chinese vessels patrol the disputed maritime waters. The East China Sea, the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean will be witness to the clash of vital interest, if not, choke point disruptions.

The silence in this maritime stretch after the game-changing verdict of the international arbitral tribunal in The Hague on the Philippines' South China Sea case against China in 2016 is illusory. The Tribunal found that China had violated the Philippines' sovereign rights in those waters by interfering with its fishing and petroleum exploration and by constructing artificial islands. However, Beijing refused to accept the ruling. There is no doubt this region is going to witness many a nerve-racking politics among regional and extra-regional powers in the not so distant future.

References

- Anandabazar, Patrika*, (Bengali Newspaper, daily), (2017), 'Djiboutite Ghati, Noushakti Barate Nazar Beijing r', Kolkata, July
- Economic Times*, (2017), 'China commissions biggest new generation destroyer ship for its navy', 28 June, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/china-navy-launches-latest-generation-destroyer/articleshow/59351769.cms> (accessed on 21 August, 2017), June
- EIA (2013), 'The South China Sea is an important world energy trade route',

- <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=10671> (accessed on 20 August 2017).
- Erickson, Andrew and Goldstein, Lyle, (2009), 'Gunboats for Beijing's New Grand Canals? Probing the Intersection of Beijing's Naval and Oil Security Policies', *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 62, No. 2, Spring, p. 50.
- Haider, Ziad, (2005), 'Baluchis, Beijing, and Pakistan's Gwadar Port,' *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 6, no. 1, Winter/Spring, pp. 95–103
- Human Rights Watch*, (1998), 'Sudan: Global Trade, Local Impact, Arms Transfers to all Sides in the Civil War in Sudan', Vol. 10, No. 4 (a), New York, pp. 28-29. August 1998
- India Today*, (2017), 'Why Japan lent support to India against China over Doklam standoff', <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/japan-india-china-doklam-standoff/1/1028783.html>, (accessed on 22 August, 2017)
- Kanwal, Gurmeet, (2017), 'Belt & Road Initiative', *the Statesman*, Kolkata, May 2017
- Kondapalli, Srikanth, (2018). "China's Evolving Naval Presence in the Indian Ocean Region", in Brewster, David (ed.) (2018) *India & China at Sea: Competition for Naval Dominance in the Indian Ocean*" New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Krishnan, Ananth, (2017), 'The Chinese are coming', *India Today*, New Delhi. 30-38, June 2017
- Mahan, Alfred Thayer, (1900), *The Problem of Asia: Its effect on International Policies*, Boston: Little, Brown & Co.
- Mahan, Alfred Thayer, (1898), *the Problem of Asia and its Effect upon International Politics*, Boston: Little, Brown & Co
- Postcard, news* (2017), 'Sri Lanka, the First Asian Country to Become the Victim of China's Debt Trap', <http://postcard.news/sri-lanka-first-asian-country-become-victim-chinas-debt-trap/> (accessed on 20 August), July 2017
- Quartz Africa, (2017), 'Scramble for Djibouti: How a tiny African country became the world's key military base', <https://qz.com/1056257/how-a-tiny-african-country-became-the-worlds-key-military-base/> (accessed on 22 August, 2017)
- Rana, Muhammad Amir, (2017), 'China in the Afghan Theatre, *the Statesman*, Kolkata, July 2017
- Roberts, Priscilla, (2011), *China Views Nine-Eleven: Essays in Transnational American Studies* in Roberts, Priscilla, Renyi, Mei, Xunhua, Yan Xunhua (Eds). 2011. *China Views Nine-Eleven: Essays in Transnational American Studies*. UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing
- Sakhuja, Vijay, (2016), 'China in the Indian Ocean: Deep Sea Forays', Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, <http://www.ipcs.org/article/china/china-in-the-indian-ocean-deep-sea-forays-4286.html>, (accessed on 25 February, 2016)
- The Times of India*, (2017), 'Amid Border Stand-Off, Chinese Ships on Prowl in Indian Ocean', Kolkata, July 2017

The Times of India, (2017), 'Negative Factors Hurting China-US Ties: Xi to Trump', Kolkata, July, 2017

Vasudeva, P.K. (2018), "Dissent over Belt & Road", the Statesman, Kolkata, 22 June 2018