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CHINA'S ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL PRESENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND SOUTH ASIA

Edited by
Mehran Haghirian and Luciano Zaccara



China's Economic and Political Presence in the Middle East and South Asia

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Implications for Indian Ocean Geopolitics

Noor Mohammad Sarker

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is, by far, the largest intercontinental mega project of the twenty-first century.¹ Given its historical and cultural aspects, both the overland and the maritime silk routes of BRI have underlying connections with South Asia. The active participation of Bangladesh and Pakistan in BRI from this region clasps a greater strategic importance for China. It has unlocked a new set of opportunities to strengthen China's long-standing bilateral security engagements with these two countries. China-Pakistan bilateral relationship has already been reached into the stage of "all-weather friendship," thanks to their sharing of land-boundary as well as to the contemporary settings of regional power politics in South Asia.² China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) falls under China's Silk Road initiative, whereas the Gwadar seaport of Pakistan is one of the checkpoints of China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR). China-Pakistan engagements under BRI have further strengthened their strategic partnership in the security arena.³ Correspondingly, Bangladesh and China have been going through deeper economic, security and cultural engagements since 1975, which have officially been termed as a "strategic partnership" in recent years by both countries.⁴ Though Bangladesh does not share a border with China, the former holds a key geographical position in both the land and the maritime routes of BRI. Bangladesh is one of the four members of BCIM-EC (Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar-Economic Corridor), which aims to revive the ancient Southern Silk Road under BRI, and its Chittagong seaport falls under the sea route of MSR.⁵

Considering these developments, the present study aims to analyze China's security cooperation with Bangladesh and Pakistan in the context of BRI and its implications to the individual interests and achievements of these three countries in the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. This chapter develops its arguments in several stages. It explores the geopolitical importance of the Indian Ocean and describes China's Belt and Road initiative. Then, the chapter delves into the geostrategic connotation of Bangladesh and Pakistan to BRI along with short depictions on their individual security cooperation with China. The study also briefly contextualizes the "India Factor" in this

regard. The subsequent section of this chapter describes some converging points of China–Bangladesh and China–Pakistan security cooperation in the context of regional power politics in the Indian Ocean. It also explains the rationale behind obtaining the different strategic approaches by Bangladesh and Pakistan in their individual security cooperation with China. Based on the analytical frameworks of structural realism in international relations and security strategies of the small states, proposed by Vaicekauskaitė,⁶ the study seeks to establish its hypothesis that, regardless of geographical differences, China–Bangladesh and China–Pakistan bilateral security collaborations are leading to a win-win situation for these three countries altogether in the given anarchic structure of the Indian Ocean geopolitics.

Geopolitical Importance of the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean is one of the most significant geopolitical hubs of the twenty-first century. It is the third largest ocean in the world with an area of about 73,556,000 square kilometers. The combined land and sea area of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) occupies 20.7 percent of the earth's surface.⁷ IOR is the home of approximately 39 percent of world's population, living in 51 of its littoral and surrounding countries.⁸ About two-third of world's crude oil, one-third of world's bulk cargo and half of the world's container traffic moves through this Ocean.⁹ These affirm the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean sea-lines of communication (SLOCs). Additionally, Bab-el-Mandeb and the Straits of Hormuz in the West, and Malacca, Sunda and Lombok Straits in the East serve as the major chokepoints of IOR. These SLOCs and chokepoints are critical for 80 percent seaborne trade of oil crossing through them.¹⁰ This geographical area is often considered as a cluster of sub-regions in the realm of world politics. These sub-regions are merely placed along the two bays of the Indian Ocean: the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal.¹¹

The Indian Ocean is a critical geographical area for some of the world's major economies. China, the world's second largest economy, for example, conducts around 90 percent of its foreign trade in goods through maritime transport, nearly 70 percent of which pass through the Indian Ocean. About two-thirds of China's domestic requirements of crude oil come through the SLOCs of the Indian Ocean.¹² Likewise, India relies on the Indian Ocean for about 80 percent of its import of crude oil, which accounts for nearly 3.28 million barrel per day.¹³ The country also imports 45 percent of its liquefied natural gas by sea.¹⁴ Above and beyond, the United States has been counting on the Indian Ocean SLOCs to meet its energy needs since the early twentieth century.¹⁵ These regional and extra-regional great powers are, therefore, keen to employ their maximum efforts to ensure an uninterrupted flow of trade and energy in IOR, which has already amplified a race on their individual naval power projection in the region, coupled with the increasing involvement of other powers in the grand-chase, like Australia, Japan, France and Russia.¹⁶

Hence, many analysts often acknowledge the importance of the region as a “center stage” of great power politics in this Asian Century.¹⁷

Besides countering each other’s strategic influence in IOR, this volume of naval deployments by the great powers is also aimed at responding to a number of non-traditional security threats, such as maritime piracy, arms smuggling, drug trafficking, human trafficking and natural disasters, which have become serious concerns to the uninterrupted flow of international trade and commerce through the Indian Ocean.¹⁸ For instance, in between 2007 to 2012, more than 150 ships, along with 3,000 crew members, were held hostage by the pirates in the Western part of the Indian Ocean.¹⁹ A series of sea-borne terrorist attacks in recent years, notably the attack on French oil tanker in October 2012 and attacks in Mumbai in November 2008, also indicate the security exposure of the IOR against terrorism.²⁰ Besides, the Ocean’s surface has suffered natural disasters derived from the adverse impacts of climate change, including storms, cyclones and sea-level rise at a regular basis.²¹ Considering the geopolitical importance of the Indian Ocean for global trade and energy flow, both regional and extra-regional powers are therefore focusing on deepening their political influence over IOR in order to respond to the existing traditional and non-traditional security threats in the region.

The Belt and Road Initiative: An Overview

China has put forward a fresh and inclusive version of globalization by pioneering the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the twenty-first century.²² The initiative was proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 under the broad heading of “The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road.”²³ BRI consists of two outward-facing models of connectivity, whereas the “Belt” refers to the overland connectivity and the “Road” indicates to the maritime connectivity. During his official visit to Astana, Kazakhstan, President Xi first talked about the prospect of the revival of the ancient trade routes, popularly known as the “Silk Route,” which once connected most of Asia to Europe and Africa.²⁴ Hence, the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) denotes the overland dimension of BRI, which will connect the Eurasian continent.²⁵ SREB is comprised of six exclusive economic corridors: New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor; the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor; China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor; China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor; China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar-Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC).²⁶ Besides, the maritime dimension of the initiative was also pointed out by President Xi during his state visit to Indonesia in October 2013.²⁷ The Maritime Silk Road is a complementary initiative to SREB that “begins in Fuzhou’s Quanzhou in southeast China’s Fujian province and extends south into the ASEAN nations, crosses the Malacca Strait, and turns west to countries along the Indian Ocean before meeting the land-based Silk Road in Venice via the Red Sea and Mediterranean.”²⁸ MSR is planned to revive the ancient maritime trade

route that once covered over 90 offshore countries of the different regions of the world with a total length of 14,000 kilometers.²⁹

This grand connectivity project encompasses more than 60 countries in 10 different geographical regions of the world, about 70 percent of world population, 29 percent of global GDP, 55 percent of world GNP, 75 percent of global energy reserves, and 40 percent of global trade.³⁰ In 2015, the Chinese government has set some major objectives of BRI, which include building a community of shared interests, destiny, and responsibility featuring mutual political trust, economic integration and cultural inclusiveness.³¹ As the pioneer of the project, China has taken the primary responsibility to fund BRI. The country has already established several financial institutions in this regard, such as the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (AIIB), the China's Silk Road infrastructure fund, and the New Development Bank of BRICS countries—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.³² Among these, AIIB is the largest, which, by 2020, consists of 103 member states, representing about 79 percent of global population and around 65 percent of global GDP.³³ As of September 2021, AIIB's registered capital is around US\$ 96,770.1 million, of which China alone has provided US\$ 29,780.4 million (more than 30 percent).³⁴

Geostrategic Importance of Bangladesh to BRI

Bangladesh, a littoral country of the Indian Ocean, is located in the north of the Bay of Bengal. The Bay covers the northeastern section of the Indian Ocean and serves as the midpoint of the Indo-Pacific region.³⁵ Bangladesh holds an outstanding geopolitical importance as a coastal country of the Bay with 710 kilometers-long coastline.³⁶ The country is the gateway between South and Southeast Asia, both in terms of land and maritime routes.³⁷ Bangladesh has been maintaining a growth rate of 7 percent in average for the last decade.³⁸ The maritime areas are the arteries of the Bangladeshi economy. The country's coastal zone is bestowed with living and non-living resources, including fishery, energy, minerals, and hydrocarbons.³⁹ In terms of fisheries, there are about 475 species of fish in the maritime domain of Bangladesh, which contributes about 2.73 percent of the country's total GDP, about 4.9 percent of its total export earning, and about 12 percent of its total employment.⁴⁰

The strategic importance of Bangladesh as an Indian Ocean littoral country was substantially increased with the demarcation of its maritime boundary with Myanmar in 2012 and with India in 2014.⁴¹ Bangladesh now enjoys its sovereignty over 166,000 square kilometers of sea area in the Bay of Bengal and a legitimate access to the Indian Ocean.⁴² This newly obtained maritime area has enabled Bangladesh to boost up its national development through effective utilization of blue economy and empowered to govern the adjacent sea routes of the Indian Ocean.⁴³ This has also provided Bangladesh with an opportunity to join China's BRI through the maritime dimension. Though these two countries do not share a physical border with each other, the extended maritime area of

Bangladesh has widened the scope of its bilateral cooperation with China to counter the emerging traditional and non-traditional security threats in the Bay of Bengal.⁴⁴

Geographically, Bangladesh is a part of both overland and maritime routes of BRI. It is one of the four members of BCIM-EC, which aims to physically connect southern China's Yunnan province with India's west Bengal via Myanmar and Bangladesh.⁴⁵ Under BRI scheme, China has been providing technical and financial assistance to Bangladesh in infrastructure developments that can be associated with BCIM. For example, two Chinese companies are working in the constructions of Padma Bridge over the *Padma* River and Multilane Road Tunnel under the *Karnaphuli* River in Bangladesh, both can be linked with the overland connectivity of BCIM.⁴⁶ Besides, Bangladesh's maritime trade routes in the Bay of Bengal and its seaports are integral parts of MSR. The Chittagong seaport of Bangladesh and its overland routes could provide important passage for China's landlocked southern provinces to get access to the Indian Ocean.⁴⁷ Therefore, in terms of geostrategic calculations, BRI remains crucial for Bangladesh to boost up its emerging role as a hub of regional connectivity in Asia.

China–Bangladesh Security Cooperation

Over the last two decades, China has emerged as a strategic security partner for Bangladesh.⁴⁸ The first notable milestone of their security cooperation was the bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement in 2002, which cleared the way for military-to-military cooperation between these countries in terms of training, maintenance, technical services, and relevant intelligence sharing.⁴⁹ Besides, most of the existing military equipment of Bangladesh's defense forces, especially army and navy, are made in China.⁵⁰ According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Bangladesh was the second largest destination of China's export of military equipment in 2018.⁵¹ In the aftermath of Bangladesh's maritime boundary demarcations with Myanmar and India, the country established a legal claim on a vast area in the Bay of Bengal and got rightful access to the Indian Ocean.⁵² These developments elevated the necessity of strengthening its navy and coast guard to protect the newly obtained maritime area from security threats.⁵³ While understanding the changing contexts, Bangladesh formulated a strategic initiative, first produced in 2009 and revised in 2017, to increase the efficiency and technological capability of its navy under its Forces Goal 2030.⁵⁴ According to the strategy, the Bangladeshi navy will undergo massive expansion and modernization. It will be equipped with modern ships and armaments, and its naval capabilities will be advanced from solely surface platforms into "three dimensions"—aviation, surface and submarines.⁵⁵

Based on the history of long-standing bilateral military cooperation, Bangladesh finds China as the most lucrative option to advance its naval strength. For the last few decades, China has been experiencing a rapid technological

development in constructing naval ships and armaments, which has already enabled the country to have world-class blue water navy.⁵⁶ In this regard, Bangladesh has grasped the opportunity of utilizing its existing strategic relations with China and thereby strengthening its naval power. The maritime route of BRI merges the strategic interests of both countries in the Indian Ocean. To guarantee an uninterrupted flow of maritime trade in the Indian Ocean by maintaining the naval balance among the regional and extra-regional powers and by countering piracy as well as maritime terrorism have been converging the aspirations of these two countries.

Under the framework of bilateral security cooperation, China has been providing technical expertise, building infrastructural capabilities, and selling modern naval equipment to Bangladesh.⁵⁷ In terms of technical support, China offered shipping designs and technologies to the shipyards of Bangladesh's navy in 2015–16.⁵⁸ Besides, China sold a large number of naval equipment to Bangladesh in the last few years. According to SIPRI, China supplied five maritime patrol vessels, two corvettes, and anti-ship missiles to Bangladesh since 2010.⁵⁹ Bangladesh purchased two *Durjoy-class* patrol boats from China in 2013. These patrol boats are equipped with lighter C-704 anti-ship missiles and are considered similar to the type 056 naval ships. In 2014, China delivered two ex-*Jianghu-III* frigates to Bangladesh.⁶⁰ In March 2015, Bangladesh procured two frigates, named *Abu Bakar* and *Ali Haider*, from China.⁶¹ Later, in early 2016, Bangladesh received two Type 056 corvettes from China, named BNS *Shadhinota* and BNS *Prottoy*, both were built by China Shipbuilding and Offshore International Company. These corvettes are equipped with C-802 anti-ship missiles, 76-millimeter and 30-millimeter naval guns, and FN-3000N surface-to-air missiles.⁶² As a part of its “three dimension” goal, Bangladesh purchased two refurbished submarines from China, named BNS *Nabajatra* and *Joyjatra*. These are Chinese Ming-class submarines with an overall length of 76 meters and maximum speed of 18 knots under sea, including the capability to launch Yu-3 and Yu-4 type heavyweight torpedoes.⁶³ China delivered these two diesel-electric submarines to the Bangladeshi navy in November 2016.⁶⁴

Geostrategic Importance of Pakistan to BRI

Located in the northwest of South Asia and northern side of the Arabian Sea, Pakistan's geographic position carries an enormous significance for the strategic calculation of great power politics in the Indian Ocean. Its 650-miles-long coastline in the Arabian Sea and its access to the Indian Ocean draw considerable attention from the regional and extra-regional powers spurring them to hold a strategic relationship with the country. Geographically, Pakistan's maritime area in the Arabian Sea is closer to the Persian Gulf. The Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf accounts for 35 percent of the world's total oil supply, most of which pass through Pakistan's maritime area.⁶⁵ In this milieu, BRI provides an immense opportunity for Pakistan to maximize its geostrategic advantages of being an Indian Ocean littoral country. BRI revives Pakistan's place at the center

of connectivity between Central Asia and the Indian Ocean region.⁶⁶ One of the six land corridors of BRI is exclusively focused on China–Pakistan multimodal connectivity, known as China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Through CPEC, Pakistan seems to provide a transit opportunity for China to connect the latter’s landlocked western provinces with the Indian Ocean. The corridor also facilitates gas and oil supplies from the Arabian Sea to the mainland China.⁶⁷ Hence, Pakistan’s coastline in the Arabian Sea is an integral part of the Maritime Silk Road, which “supplies a new channel for the Chinese enterprises to go global.”⁶⁸ CPEC is a meeting point between the land and maritime dimensions of BRI, and destined to promote both regional connectivity and economic development in the Asian continent.⁶⁹

Spanning an approximate length of 3,000 kilometers, the economic corridor connects Pakistan’s port city of Gwadar with China’s Kashgar, located in northwestern landlocked province of Xinjiang.⁷⁰ The CPEC project was launched during Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit to Pakistan in April 2015. During the visit, a total of 51 bilateral agreements were signed between these countries on infrastructure, energy, transportation and industrial cooperation, with a special focus on the implementation of the economic corridor.⁷¹ In order to utilize the maximum geopolitical and geo-economic opportunities of Pakistan in BRI, Xi announced for US\$ 46 billion of Chinese funding on a series of infrastructural projects along CPEC, including a seaport, an airport, gas pipeline and around 2,000 kilometers of railway.⁷² With all these, CPEC has turned into the flagship project of BRI.⁷³ The fund of the project was later increased up to US\$ 62 billion in 2017 with a roadmap of its completion in 2030.⁷⁴ The governments of China and Pakistan have come up with a consensual definition of CPEC in 2017, which asserts the key motives of the project as follows:

The CPEC is a growth axis and a development belt featuring complementary advantages, collaboration, mutual benefits, and common prosperity. With the comprehensive transportation corridor and industrial cooperation between China and Pakistan as the main axis, and with concrete economic and trade cooperation, and people-to-people exchanges and cultural communications as the engine, CPEC is based on major collaborative projects for infrastructure construction, industrial development and livelihood improvement, aimed at socio economic development, prosperity and security in regions along it.⁷⁵

The construction of a deep seaport in Pakistan’s Gwadar city, located in the southwestern province of Baluchistan, has been the cornerstone of CPEC. Gwadar seaport is designed to become the commercial hub for South and Central Asia.⁷⁶ Therefore, CPEC is often considered as a “Game-Changer” in South Asian geopolitics.⁷⁷ Gwadar port carries huge economic and strategic importance for China. It provides an alternative and convenient passage for China’s western provinces to the Arabian Sea. It enables China to bypass its long-distant trading routes through the Malacca Strait in the Indian Ocean

and reduces the distance from around 12,000 to around 3000 kilometers.⁷⁸ The construction of Gwadar port under CPEC provides a scope of economic prosperity and development for the western provinces of China. Through infrastructural developments and increasing financial activities, it is likely to create the employment opportunities for over two million people as well as to improve the socio-political condition of the Western provinces in Pakistan as well.⁷⁹

China–Pakistan Security Cooperation

Following their emergence as independent countries in the mid-twentieth century, both China and Pakistan soon recognized each other's geopolitical significance. Indo–Pakistan conflicts about Kashmir and the China–Indian Border War in 1962 have provided a scope for the long-standing China–Pakistan defense partnership against their common strategic adversary in the region—India.⁸⁰ Accordingly, they soon fortified their relationship by concluding a boundary agreement on March 2, 1963.⁸¹ Since then, on many occasions, China assisted Pakistan in many ways to improve the latter's national defense.⁸² For example, after the US sanctions in 1965, China emerged as the key alternative source of conventional weapons for Pakistan. During 1980, Pakistan's army was using about 75 percent of its tanks and the Pakistani air force was flying about 65 percent of its aircraft that were made in China.⁸³ Pakistan built its first defense industry with the help of China as well. It is generally believed that China's technological assistance to Pakistan's nuclear program enabled the latter to test its first nuclear bomb in 1998 and to develop its nuclear missile program.⁸⁴

Moreover, China has been playing a decisive role in the development of the Pakistani military by providing both arms and technical support.⁸⁵ Pakistan has been the largest importer of China's arms since 1991. In the period of 2014–8, for example, 37 percent of China's total arms exports was heading to Pakistan, which accounts for 70 percent of the total arms imported by Pakistan at the same time.⁸⁶ Moreover, in early 2018, China also announced the sale of sophisticated optical tracking systems to Pakistan, which are used for the nuclear missiles with multiple warheads.⁸⁷ Both countries have joint cooperation programs on developing modern tanks and producing JF-17 jet fighter planes.⁸⁸ In the initial years of their military cooperation, the main focus was on the development of the Pakistan army and air force. However, with the rising importance of the Indian Ocean in the regional as well as global power politics over the decades, in addition to the fact that China and Pakistan have converging geopolitical interests, their bilateral security cooperation has extended to the maritime dimension as well. Since 2003, for example, both countries have been undertaking regular naval exercises in the Arabian Sea.⁸⁹ Later, in 2007, Pakistan invited China to participate in a naval exercise, named *Aman*, which also continued in 2009, 2011, 2013, 2016 and 2017 as a multilateral naval exercise. For example, Russia and the US were among 37 countries that participated in the 2017 *Aman* naval exercise.⁹⁰

Given the rising traditional and non-traditional threats from the sea, both China and Pakistan are keen to ensure maximum security of their naval facilities and SLOCs in the Indian Ocean. Accordingly, in November 2016, Chinese and Pakistani navies conducted a joint naval exercise in the East China Sea off the coast of Shanghai. Among other segments, the exercise included anti-submarine warfare (ASW) techniques.⁹¹ Apart from training- and experience-sharing programs, China has been the major source of Pakistan's naval equipment. Back to 2005, for example, China sold four F-22p frigates and six Z-9c helicopters to Pakistan along with the transfer of technology. The deal was worth of US\$ 750 million and was regarded as the "milestone in the defense cooperation" between China and Pakistan. Three out of those four frigates were initially made in China and delivered to Pakistan by 2010, whereas the last one was built with the technical assistance from China at Karachi Shipyard and Engineering Works (KSEW), a state-owned shipyard of Pakistan.⁹² Pakistan signed another agreement with China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation in 2015, which included the purchase of six petrol boats along with the transfer of technology to the Pakistani navy. By 2016, Pakistan also ordered four fast attack missile boats equipped with C802/803 anti-ship missiles and four marine patrol vessels from China.⁹³

In order to further improve Pakistan's naval capacity and turn it into a strong blue water navy, Pakistan entered into a bilateral agreement with China in 2015 for purchasing eight Chinese type 039 and type 041 *Yuan-class* diesel-electric submarines along with the transfer of technology. The agreement was worth around US\$ 5 billion.⁹⁴ Besides, in reference to China State Shipbuilding Corporation (CSSC), *The Economic Times* reported in January 2019 that, in order to extend its cooperation with Pakistan as well as to ensure naval balance of power vis-à-vis India in the Indian Ocean, China has been constructing four naval warships to be delivered to Pakistan. The report also claimed that these warships will be equipped with the most advance features, including anti-ship, anti-submarine and air-defense capabilities.⁹⁵

The "India Factor" in China–Bangladesh and China–Pakistan Security Cooperation in the Indian Ocean

Given the geo-strategic and geopolitical realities in South Asia, any discussion about the security initiative in the Indian Ocean essentially includes India's role in it. Being an India-centered region, South Asian countries simply cannot ignore the "India factor" in their international relations. India regards itself as "net security provider"⁹⁶ in the region and considers the Indian Ocean as its exclusive backyard as well as the "interior line" of national defense.⁹⁷ However, the Chinese naval deployments in the Indian Ocean in the last few years and its rising operational capabilities have challenged India's monopoly in this area.⁹⁸ Increasing economic and security cooperation between China and a number of Indian Ocean littoral countries under the BRI project has also weakened India's long-standing strategic

supremacy over the region. Therefore, India observes BRI as a tool of China's forthcoming hegemony over South Asia, which contradicts with the India-led security architecture of the region.⁹⁹ Accordingly, China's increasing maritime security cooperation with Bangladesh and Pakistan under BRI has raised criticisms among Indian security experts and policymakers about the possible Chinese militarization of the Indian Ocean.¹⁰⁰

India perceives the Maritime Silk Road as a possible Chinese strategic encirclement of India and identifies it as a "String of Pearls" strategy¹⁰¹ in the Indian Ocean. China's assistance to the Indian Ocean littoral countries, such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, in terms of security assistance and modernization of civilian seaports has been conceived by India as the gradual development of possible Chinese military bases in this region in the near future. Therefore, India seems more suspicious about the strategic aspects of BRI, rather than considering its economic objectives.¹⁰² Consequently, the country has introduced its "Project Mausam" as a strategic response of BRI in the Indian Ocean. While a part of the Maritime Silk Road under BRI seeks to revive the ancient sea-based trade routes between China and South Asian littoral countries, the India-led Mausam project "aims to reestablish the cultural connectivity that monsoon winds and seafarers enabled across the Indian Ocean."¹⁰³

Besides, India has also strengthened its military build-up and naval deployment in critical chokepoints in the Indian Ocean. India's naval capability has been reinforced with the inclusion of nuclear submarines and aircraft carrier *INS Vikramaditya*, equipped with Mig-29 fighter planes and Kamov helicopters.¹⁰⁴ Indian Navy has deployed maritime patrol aircraft in its naval bases in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located at the western mouth of the Malacca Strait in order to monitor PLAN's movement.¹⁰⁵ The extra regional powers, such as the United States and Japan, also appear to be supportive of India's dominant role in this region. The regular trilateral *Malabar* naval exercises since 2015 among these countries, for instance, are frequently assumed to be aimed at countering China's assertiveness in the Indian Ocean.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)¹⁰⁷ among the US, Japan, Australia and India is also pointed out as a multilateral approach to contain China's growing naval strength in the Indo-Pacific arena. India's objective in Quad is to counter MSR by seeking extra-regional cooperation and, thereby, to strengthen its own geopolitical influence in the Indian Ocean.¹⁰⁸

China–Bangladesh and China–Pakistan Security Cooperation in the Indian Ocean: Converging Strategic Factors

Bangladesh and Pakistan are two Muslim-majority countries of South Asia, sharing a common colonial legacy and a closer sub-continental cultural heritage.¹⁰⁹ They were initially formed as a single nation-state in 1947 following the British partition of greater India into two parts, based on religion: Islam and Hinduism. From 1947 to 1971, the land of Bangladesh was identified as East Pakistan, while the current Pakistan was called West Pakistan. Largely,

due to their political and economic differences, East Pakistan declared the Liberation War on March 26, 1971 from the central authority of West Pakistan and, after a nine-month-long war, acquired independence on December 16.¹¹⁰ From that point forward, the political relationship between Bangladesh and Pakistan has been going through many ups and downs on account of different political regimes in these two countries.¹¹¹ However, Bangladesh and Pakistan are members of numerous international and regional platforms, including the United Nations (UN), The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Commonwealth, D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and so on.¹¹²

Notwithstanding, Bangladesh and Pakistan individually maintain warm relations with China in terms of political, economic, and security aspects. China and Pakistan are both nuclear powers and share a land-border with each other, whereas Bangladesh is neither a nuclear power nor shares any direct border with China. Yet, there are some overlapping strategic factors between Bangladesh and Pakistan, which have led to the development of their individual relationships with China. First, both Bangladesh and Pakistan have numerous issues of contention in their individual political relations with India in South Asia, though the nature of those issues varies between Indo-Bangladesh and Indo-Pakistan relations, directed by their different geographical and geopolitical settings. However, China has gradually come to the picture as a regional status-quo power for Bangladesh and Pakistan. Taken together, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and China share land borders with India, while Bangladesh and Pakistan share their maritime borders with India as well. India has been a common strategic competitor for China and Pakistan in the South Asian region. The “India factor,” therefore, serves as one of the key factors in bringing China and Pakistan closer to each other, especially in military and strategic aspects. On the other hand, though Bangladesh and India do not share any history of war against each other, the former, however, being a small state in the region, fears the hegemonic behavior of its neighbor.¹¹³ Unlike Pakistan, Bangladesh relies on India for the critical supply of some food items. Besides, India’s lopsided geographical, economic, and military establishments vis-à-vis Bangladesh and its regular interference in the internal affairs of the country have gradually fueled an anti-Indian sentiment in Bangladesh.¹¹⁴ In this regard, China has emerged as a strategic balancer for Bangladesh vis-à-vis India over the last few decades. As of 2021, China stands as the largest trading partner as well as the largest supplier of military weapons for Bangladesh.¹¹⁵

Furthermore, China has been a long-standing and reliable security partner for both Bangladesh and Pakistan. China is closely involved in the development and modernization of defense industries in these two countries. Moreover, given India’s rising naval strength in the Indian Ocean as well as its hegemonic posture in South Asia, both Bangladesh and Pakistan have realized the necessity to develop their individual navies and, thereby, to ensure strategic balance in IOR. These developments have gradually brought China in the equation. Rapid

technological advancements, constant introduction of modern equipment and increasing professional efficiency of PLAN have enabled China to emerge as a dominant blue water naval power in the Indo-Pacific. These factors have also motivated Bangladesh and Pakistan to seek naval cooperation with China and, thereby, to build up a three-dimensional blue water navy of their own, as mentioned above.

Analytical Framework: Structural Realism and the Security Strategies of Small Powers

The study proposes the structural realist school of international relations as a theoretical tool to explain the context of regional geopolitics in the Indian Ocean and the rationale behind the security strategies of Bangladesh and Pakistan within this given context. Structural realism, primarily advocated by Kenneth Waltz in his book *Theory of International Politics* (1979), assumes that international politics is an anarchic realm among the conflicting states, followed by the absence of any supranational authority above these states to control their behavior.¹¹⁶ To Waltz, “self-help” is the best way out for the survival of the states in this anarchic world order.¹¹⁷ The great powers in the international system enjoy relative autonomy to choose their individual survival strategies vis-à-vis small powers.¹¹⁸ In the Indian Ocean geopolitical structure, China and India are among the great powers and enjoy broader policy choices.¹¹⁹ On the other hand, Bangladesh and Pakistan have limited policy options due to their relative power gap vis-à-vis China and India. In order to survive in this anarchic regional order, small powers, like Bangladesh and Pakistan, need to adapt to particular security strategies.¹²⁰

In this regard, Vaicekauskaitė detailed four security strategies for small states in contemporary international politics, which they can follow in their individual relationships with great powers.¹²¹ First, small states can go for an “alliance” strategy with a stronger power or with the group of other small states nearby. Small states, in that case, may take the policy of bandwagoning or making alliances with the threatening power. They can also make an alliance with another strong power or a group of small states in order to balance against the threatening power, which is also known as balancing strategy.¹²² Second, “strategic hedging” refers to a context where small states maintain simultaneous ties with two competing great powers.¹²³ Evelyn Goh defined the concept “as a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality.”¹²⁴ Third, small states can also pursue “neutrality” in terms of their relationship with two or more great powers. Fourth, the “alliance shelter” strategy emerges in the context where small states seek to ally themselves with the strong power in order to reduce their social, economic, or political vulnerability.¹²⁵

Figure 10.1 shows that, given the anarchic structure of the Indian Ocean regional politics, the relative condition of Bangladesh and Pakistan directs the

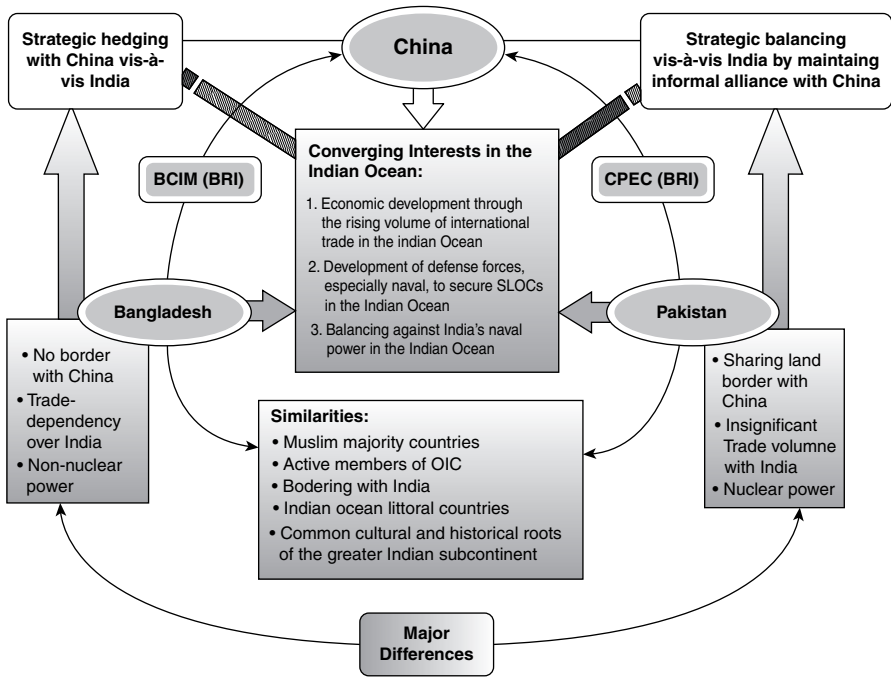


Figure 10.1 China–Bangladesh and China–Pakistan Win-Win Strategic Cooperation in the Indian Ocean, with a Focus on BRI
Source: Author.

nature of their individual strategic relationship with China. In this regard, the geographical factor stands as the key differential denominator between Bangladesh and Pakistan. Compared to Bangladesh, Pakistan enjoys a greater autonomy in terms of its geographical settings with India. Pakistan has a direct border with China in its northeastern part and an incessant access to the Indian Ocean through the Arabian Sea in the south. China–Pakistan land border provides a strong impetus for Pakistan to keep up a sound political, economic, and security relationship with China. Moreover, Pakistan shares a larger land border with Iran and Afghanistan in the west compared to its border with India in the east.¹²⁶ Regardless of their geographical proximity, Pakistan maintains an economic relationship with India that is inept to influence the bilateral foreign policy decisions from both sides. Hence, these developments have enabled Pakistan to maintain an all-round cooperative partnership with China in the twenty-first century for ensuring its strategic balancing vis-à-vis India.

On the other hand, Bangladesh is geographically surrounded by India from all sides, except a relatively smaller southeastern part bordering with Myanmar.¹²⁷ This geographical setting allows India to frequently interfere over the domestic political and economic affairs of Bangladesh. It also limits

Bangladesh's scope to enjoy a greater autonomy to shape its bilateral relationships with other states.¹²⁸ Therefore, Bangladesh's geographical proximity and interdependent political as well as economic relations with India limit its option to go for a strategic cooperation with China. As a result, Bangladesh seeks to balance in its relationship with India by pursuing strategic hedging with China vis-à-vis India.

Hence, Bangladesh and Pakistan pursue different strategies in their security partnership with China. However, in both cases, whether it is an informal alliance strategy by Pakistan or a strategic hedging by Bangladesh towards China, the key strategic objective of both countries remains the same—supporting China as a status quo power vis-à-vis India in the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. Given this issue of adapting different strategies, China–Bangladesh and China–Pakistan security cooperation, however, have brought win-win gains for Bangladesh, Pakistan, and China altogether by serving their individual security interests and providing them strong incentives with regard to their individual geopolitical positioning nearby the Indian Ocean Region.

From China's perspective, the bilateral security cooperation with Bangladesh and Pakistan provides security assurances for China's uninterrupted trade and energy supplies from and to Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, which is vital to keep up the speed of its national development. The country relies on the Indian Ocean SLOCs for 80 percent of its crude oil and 50 percent of its natural gas imports, which have, until now, passed through the Malacca Strait.¹²⁹ China faces grave security challenges following India's rising military build-up and naval deployments nearby these SLOCs. On the other hand, the United States has also sought to increase its naval presence in the Indian Ocean up to 60 percent under its "pivot to Asia" policy since 2011.¹³⁰ Hence, in the coming years, any naval blockade by India or the U.S. on the SLOCs through the Malacca Strait will severely harm the national economy of China. Coupled with these issues, the emerging non-traditional threats in the Indian Ocean, such as piracy and terrorism, have also become the foremost concerns as many Chinese trading ships and cargo vessels pass through this region. In order to mitigate these threats, China is not willing to rely on the naval supports of the US or India.¹³¹ Consequently, since the beginning of 2000s, China's maritime strategy has incorporated the idea of "far seas protection" which includes the construction of its independent blue water naval strength in the greater Indian Ocean.¹³² Accordingly, China looks at utilizing its security cooperation with Bangladesh and Pakistan to reinforce PLAN's strategic presence in the Indian Ocean, and thereby to ensure the safety of its trade and energy flows as well as its economic establishments in the region.

On the other hand, Bangladesh and Pakistan have also benefitted from their individual security cooperation with China. Given their geographical, demographical, and economic aspects, neither Bangladesh nor Pakistan alone can play the balancing role vis-à-vis India in South Asia. For both countries, China has gradually emerged as a power to balance against India. China's role in this regard can be explained in two ways: first, it plays the critical role

in the development of military strength of Bangladesh and Pakistan by providing them financial support, supplying them with modern weaponry, and training their soldiers; and second, through PLAN's presence in the Indian Ocean, China also undertakes joint naval programs with Bangladesh and Pakistan, which further strengthen their strategic cooperation. Therefore, even if they apply different strategies with regard to their security cooperation with China, both Bangladesh and Pakistan need China's cooperation and PLAN's strong naval presence in IOR.

Conclusion

The extraordinary pace of economic growth and the remarkable development of the military strength over the last few decades have enabled China to extend its influence in regional and international politics. Uninterrupted domestic energy supplies from the Middle East and securing international trade routes to maintain its own economic growth have been the two compelling factors that China seeks to guarantee by improving its bilateral political and security relationships with the countries along the Indian Ocean. Incidentally, BRI emerges as the latest manifestation of China's quest for boosting up its strategic relationship with the Indian Ocean littoral countries, like Bangladesh and Pakistan. Being an India-centric region, China–Bangladesh and China–Pakistan security cooperation carry a greater geopolitical implication for South Asia. BRI has brought a new dimension to these long-standing bilateral security partnerships by emphasizing the role of Bangladesh and Pakistan to secure their strategic maritime areas in the Indian Ocean. In this regard, this chapter has contributed to the existing literature by analyzing the linkages between China–Bangladesh and China–Pakistan security cooperation and how they function simultaneously to ensure a balance of power in the Indian Ocean geopolitics.

This chapter assessed the rationale behind the different strategic approaches taken by Bangladesh and Pakistan in their individual relationships with China. In this regard, their relative geographical proximity to China vis-à-vis India played the key role. Second, the chapter explained the decisive role of the “India Factor” in determining the nature of Indian Ocean geopolitics as well as the essence of any security engagements of IOR countries with other regional and extra-regional players. Additionally, by applying theoretical arguments of Waltz and Vaicenskaitė, this research identified two different strategies adopted by Bangladesh and Pakistan as small states in their individual security cooperation with China under the anarchic structure of Indian Ocean geopolitics. Finally, this chapter spelled out individual interests and achievements of China, Bangladesh and Pakistan out of these two sets of bilateral security engagements and explained how it brought about a win-win situation for all three states regardless of their diverse geographical positioning nearby the Indian Ocean Region.

Pakistan's geographical closeness with the energy-rich Middle Eastern countries and its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz provide some strong reasons

for China's greater interest on the development of China–Pakistan security cooperation. However, regardless of Bangladesh's lopsided geographical proximity with India and the absence of a land border with China, the China–Bangladesh security cooperation has been flourishing over the years in manifolds largely due to their complementary strategic interests, such as the development of regional connectivity in the Indian Ocean. Hence, these two sets of bilateral security engagements serve China's strategic interest in the Indian Ocean unevenly, but positively. Moreover, BRI's fresh approach to ascertain connectivity between China and the Indian Ocean, especially under MSR, has added further strategic value to these bilateral security engagements.

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