Research
The “String of Pearls” in South Asia: Why there will always be a “Checkmate”

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Abstract: The accusation that China is encircling India in the Indian Ocean through the “Spring of Pearls” became popular within the academic and media streams since 2004. With China financing the construction of ports along the coasts of friendly states in the South Asian region, the criticisms became harsher as opponents feared the “activation” of the so-called pearl strings. After almost two decades since the use of the phrase, there has not been any militarization (activation) of Chinese-sponsored ports. This paper seeks to explain why the “string of pearls” has not been “activated” to this day. It argues that the supposed “string of pearls” faces critical challenges in South Asia. Multi-party democracy (in other words the domestic politics) together with the interests of the U.S and her allies, counter-responses from India, and self-imposed principles on the part of the Chinese government, will encumber any probable activation of the “pearl strings” into naval or military bases in South Asia.

Keywords: Spring of Pearls, South Asia, Multi-party Democracy, Militarization, Indian Ocean

Introduction
A rising China, a great power, and a potential superpower depend heavily on the Indian Ocean for her energy needs and sustained economic growth. An open, secure, and controlled route is then necessary to connect this part of the ocean through the Malacca Straits into the Pacific and finally to the coasts of China. Achieving open and ‘controlled’ maritime sea routes in this part of the ocean will not come without a challenge from regional and international critics. In a 2004 report by the Virginian Technology consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton, the company claimed to have unveiled a grand strategy by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to build
naval bases in the Indian Ocean in what was referred to as ‘string of pearls.’ It was at this point that the ‘spring of pearls’ phraseology began to gain traction within academia and policy circles. The phrase was most emphasized within Indian and Western political and military-strategic parlances; as they continued to caution against the encircling of India by China through the construction of military bases along the coastlines of friendly states in the Indian Ocean.

As Brewster observed, some of the challenges to the Chinese dominance of the Indian Ocean is the proximity of ports to her coasts and the lack of logistical support. In recent times, however, the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) appears to have addressed the problem through the construction of ports. While the debate and discussions on the ‘string of pearls’ continued without any substantive confirmation, the launch of the (MSR) as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by the Chinese government in 2013 gave credence to China’s critics.

In the South Asian region, Sri Lanka’s Hambantota, Bangladesh’s Chittagong, and Pakistan’s Gwadar ports have all been identified and ports constructed as part of China’s MSR that has the potential of forming strong alliances and increasing Beijing’s footprints. By all assessments, the MSR in South Asia reinforces the importance of the Indian Ocean to China and the need to play a dominant role over—either for commercial or military purposes.

Beijing, like in all projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), trumpets them as having the ability to boost the economy of the beneficiary nations and herself, calling it a ‘win, win’ for all parties involved. The international community (most concerns raised by India) have equally registered their apprehensions and criticized harshly on several circumstances. New Delhi concomitantly associates her dominance of East Asia to her control of maritime affairs. With China getting deeply involved in the Indian Ocean, India feels her security and sovereignty could be compromised in South Asia, and eventually relegates her as the traditional “owner.” About the “string of pearls,” the more China ‘encircles’ India by financing the construction of ports in friendly states, the less secure India feels.

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4 Ibid., 2.
In assessing India’s capability to dominate the Indian Ocean, Pant (2009) argues that India lacks the material capacity. This revelation suggests that India will require more than just material resources in order to successfully counter China’s engagement with friendly littoral in South Asia. Until this is done, the “string of pearls” will likely continue to bother Indian elites.

However, more than a decade has passed since the phrase was first used, yet militarization of the so-called ‘string of pearls’ by China is far from happening. If the string of pearls is that feasible, what then has prevented China from militarizing the financed ports of Gwadar, Hambantota, and Chittagong all this period? Marantidou argues that China’s non-interference principles will always dissuade her from pursuing any military base goals at the ports in question. This is only one reason, and cannot suffice to tell the whole story of why there have been no military bases to date. David Brewster, in his argument, provided a more extensive explanation. He opines that the fact that China’s grip of influence in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, for example, continue to wane explains why the string of pearls (if it exists) cannot be successful in any event. What the author failed to do is to explain what accounts for the wane in China’s influence in those countries. Such an explanation is what this paper seeks to do using narratives from the political terrains of the three South Asian states, viz. Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. The paper then combines the political environment argument with the other possible reasons from the existing literature.

The politics of South Asia is a complicated one that has often been influenced by religion, tensions, and sometimes violence. While these features are generally associated with internal politics of individual nations (except with some interstate skirmishes between India and Pakistan and also Afghanistan and Pakistan), the marine world is yet to play any critical role in domestic politics; perhaps except for the massive demonstrations in Sri Lanka against the 99 years leasing of the Hambantota port to China. In the event of these challenges comes multi-party democracy. With the region hosting the largest democratic country in the world, it appears that all the neighboring countries practice some form of democracy. This allows for power alternation between political parties, causing domestic and foreign policies of governments to

change at any given time when whirled by the wheels of periodic elections. Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan’s political terrains are fashioned along with similar characteristics.

This is the real challenge to the ‘string of pearls.’ Together with the interest of the US and her allies, a counter-attack by India, and self-imposed principles on the part of the Chinese government, the paper argues, explains why the so-called ‘spring of pearls’ have failed to be activated.

It is important to note, however, that this paper does not take into account the whole of the Indo-Pacific or the Indian Ocean; it focuses only on the South Asian States that are in the littoral zone and have seen ports financed by Beijing. That is Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. All other Chinese ports within the Indo-Pacific fall outside the purview of this paper. However, the conclusions could still apply to some of those countries and their Chinese sponsored seaports.

**Economic or Military Strategy?**

The debate surrounding China’s BRI is enormous and has spanned throughout the program’s implementation since 2013. The Maritime Silk Road Initiative, for example, is purely defined under the ambit of economic cooperation and mutual benefit along the continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe; it nowhere mentions military or prestigious inclinations. It is difficult to estimate how much investment has been made in the overall BRI so far, let alone the MSR in South Asia specifically. Notwithstanding, it is undeniable that billions of dollars have been pumped into various projects in South Asia (with Pakistan being a mega receiver of around $60 billion under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), including but not limited to Sea Ports along with the nations mentioned above.

Some international bodies like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have raised concerns about the possibility of nations falling into a severe debt crisis where strategic projects could be handed over in the event of the default payment and the possibility of military establishments. China has, however, refuted all the allegations.

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With the MSR directly aimed at becoming an infrastructural conduit between Southeast Asia, Oceania, the Indian Ocean, and East Africa through the Suez Canal into Europe, the economic purpose is thereby defended. Chinese cargo ships need ports to dock, refuel for the adequate transportation of goods and services to and from China to the rest of the world. With the Indian Ocean serving as an essential sea route, it is crucial to have ports that could serve the purpose. Since South Asian countries like Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh are not in an economic position to finance the port construction themselves, China needs to be commended for providing the funds for a free and open Indo-Pacific and helping to boost trade in the least integrated region in the world. In 2017, for example, it was estimated that the Gwadar Port would handle around 400 million tons of cargo a year when completed, a figure that is four times the initial capacity of the port.\textsuperscript{10} The Port of Chittagong in Bangladesh will also have a more viable and feasible capacity when completed, confirming that the projects indeed can boost economic growth in those countries.

The possibility of converting the ports into Chinese Naval Bases like in Djibouti has also been made famous among observers and analysts alike. The Gwadar Port, for example, has been pointed out, notably by Indian and US scholars and diplomats, for the possibility that it could host a Chinese military base near traditional rival India. Newspaper articles in 2018 stated that moves are underway to establish a military base near the port fully: citing a Beijing security analyst.\textsuperscript{11} Also, US Vice President Mike Pence, in his October speech at the Hudson Institute, accused Beijing of planning to establish a military base in Hambantota, Sri Lanka.\textsuperscript{12} The Chittagong Port has also caused similar fears and concerns from China’s critics.

The accusations have been denied by the Chinese officials and host leaders of nations where the ports are constructed. Pakistan’s Navy secretary, Rear Admiral Javaid Iqbal, said at a forum in Singapore that the Gwadar Port was solely for economic purposes, and without military overtures. \textit{‘Let me emphasize that the Gwadar port is purely a commercial venture and has no...}

military overtones," he stated. Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe also denied reports that Hambantota could be used as a military base by Beijing in the coming years.14

The swing of accusations and counter-accusations of the ‘military base’ argument reinforces the ambiguity of the situation. That is further accentuated by the fact that project documents are not made public; they are confidential documents that remain in the bosoms of Beijing and her recipient partners. The content of projects, as has been established, is not even accessible among nations along the Maritime Silk Road. Under such circumstances, one could sense misgivings on both sides, making it very difficult to pinpoint whether or not there is a hidden agenda. Nevertheless, when dealing with national issues of such magnitudes that could dent reputations of governments, it is not conclusive to rely solely on governments’ officials’ interviews and pronouncements for conclusions; an independent context and content analysis is still required to arrive at the root of the matter.

Such was the path taken by the Washington based think tank: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). They conducted case studies of four Chinese and Indian sponsored Ports in the Indian Ocean, three of which fall within the horizon of this paper—Gwadar, Hambantota, and Chabahar. Using three variables, they argued that all the ports are close to shipping lanes and so have the likelihood of attracting some cargo to its shores. However, the fact that they are all situated close to already existing and well-functioning ports does not make them productive enough. The Hambantota Port, for example, is counterproductive due to its proximity to the Colombo Port. The same could be said of the Indian-Iranian Port in Chabahar close to Gwadar. Again, the fact that these Ports are not well connected to the mainland also downplays their economic viabilities to an extent.

In the end, the report concluded that the ports have less economic viabilities but could be used by China to strengthen her foothold in the Indian Ocean and broaden her regional influence during peacetimes. In wartimes, they will be challenging to control.15

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14 Ibid.
“Activating the Pearls” Verses the Realities

The ‘string of pearls,’ no matter how obvious and threatening they might seem to India and the international community, will not be useful in the face of the realities in South Asia’s internal and external politics. The uncertain domestic politics of Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, forged with the breath of multi-party democracy, will serve as a check on any form of the militarization of the so-called “pearls” that could arise in the near and far future. More so, the concern and interest of other foreign powers like the US and her allies will have the same damaging effect on the ‘pearls.’ These two factors, combined with self-imposed Chinese foreign policy principles and other countermeasures adopted by India, will intercept any attempt of militarization by Beijing. They are elaborated below:

a. Domestic Politics

Internal politics within the South Asian region is diverse and unpredictable, a feature that presents both opportunities and threats. Hosting the largest democracy in the world, all countries except war-torn Afghanistan is either full-fledged democracies or pseudo democracies. By this, democracy is not limited to the holding of periodic general elections; but by extension, multi-party system, the respect for constitutional rule, free press, and active civil society groups. All the above features could not be said to be one hundred percent operational in South Asian states. However, the mere fact that there is a strong perception of their existence, and constant reference to being to it by the rulers and the ruled alike, is enough to prevent obnoxious government policies from successful implementation. Multi-party democracy or its equivalence, therefore, means diversified opinions and more room for protests and dissents against unpopular local and foreign policies of the government.

In Sri Lanka, this was the problem when the government decided to lease the Hambantota port to Beijing. Hundreds of people made their voices heard by protesting against the government for commodifying the territorial sovereignty of the state. Despite the government’s decision not being reversed, it confirms that the leaders will always have politically active people to answer on any decision taken. The responses from government officials concerning the issue further underscore their understanding of how democracy works. Prime Minister Wickremesinghe stated in plain language President Sirisena’s stance on the issue. Let me refer to Sri Lanka’s decision to develop its major seaports, especially the Hambantota port which some claim to be a military base. I state clearly that Sri Lanka headed by President Maithripala
Sirisena does not enter into military alliances with any country or make our bases available to foreign countries,\textsuperscript{16} he said. Rear Admiral Dharmendra Wettewa, a naval officer and a top government official also reiterated that they would not sanction the port to be used as a military base. He even went ahead to emphasize the need for the government to ensure transparency in the deal with the Chinese.\textsuperscript{17} These gestures, if for nothing at all, allay fears of any ominous militarization move in the future. It illustrates that the political landscape (how decisions are made) of the state of Sri Lanka has inbuilt mechanisms to check for government excesses.

It is also worth mentioning that of all the unsolicited Chinese-Funded projects in Sri Lanka, the Hambantota Port is not one of them: it had been part of the government’s official plan since 2002.\textsuperscript{18} This revelation strengthens the fact that the Rajapaksa’s government was only eager to see significant development in his hometown, something that his ‘people’ could remember him for. All the narratives only show how political ambitions were miscalculated and misunderstood in the face of Chinese “generosity.” It is indicative the Sri Lankan government has learned a good deal from their mistake, and although the content of the future use of the port is still not known, the “worst-case scenario” of a military base has a lower probability.

In Bangladesh, the same features of a nascent but vibrant multi-party democracy could be touted. The nation is well noted for her high-level role of women in politics and how two women have, in turn, ascended to the position of prime ministers since 1990. The incumbent Sheikh Although Hasina’s government has been labeled within sections of the media as cracking down on dissenting views and rigging elections to her favor, and such charges have always been blown out of proportion by oppositions in democracies who want to be seen as the alternative government. This is however not to say the charges are entirely fabrications. Over here, there is no real protest to the Chinese funded Chittagong Port expansion project other than concerns raised by India and her allies. The Indian concerns were heeded to, and the Sonadia port project was canceled, while other concessions were made to India. All this was made possible as a result of the current friendly relationship between Hasina’s Awami League and India. This is also to


suggest that we could perhaps be telling a different story were the Chinese-favored Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to be in power. Such scenarios make political decisions in the country unpredictable and, likewise, the relationship between Bangladesh and her “big brothers,” that is, India and China. Going into the future, an electoral victory for the BNP will mean a somewhat strained relationship with India and a very cordial one with China and Pakistan. Even that, a robust opposition party and the fear of losing elections will be a significant reason to avoid controversial policies, especially one that could lead to the establishment of a Chinese naval base anywhere within the Bay of Bengal.

With the signing of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) agreement in 2015, the Gwadar deep-sea port has become a major focal point in South Asia-China relations. The case of this port is a bit unique and might seem like an outlier at first sight, but not entirely so. With Pakistan nicknamed China’s “all-weather” friend in Asia, it might not be convincing enough, at least for the time being, to say the internal democratic dispensation could drag and check any excesses. Although the government has vehemently denied any move to site the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) naval base in Gwadar, the country comfortably being the highest beneficiary of the BRI still presents more questions than answers. However, there is a substantial twist to this narrative. The newly-elected Imran Khan government has further proved how multi-party democracy could cause upset between allies, even stronger ones like China. Due to the concerns from some locals, international observers, and warnings from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) about the debt crisis, the Prime Minister set up a nine-member committee to review the CPEC and recommend ways to make it more beneficial to Islamabad.19 Later last year too, a trade and investment adviser to the Prime Minister, Abdul Razak Dawood, criticized the former Pakistan Muslim League’s administration of “not doing their homework correctly” in negotiations with Beijing.20

These actions and statements clearly show that the new centrist government is not pleased with at least certain aspects of the deal. The government has, however, been slow in walking the talk. A noteworthy signal was however sent early this year when the Tehreek-e-Insaf government decided to suspend a major 1,320 MW power plant project that was initially

planned under the CPEC earlier this year. The government also promised to suspend several other projects in the months ahead—further confirming that the CPEC could be altered by Pakistan’s local government whenever the need arises. It is essential to mention that the original CPEC is yet to be reformed even after the government’s indication. Either way, what is perhaps evident is that the Gwadar could not quickly become a Chinese naval port without a contest from multi-party democratic politics.

b. American Concerns and Interests

The issue of foreign military assistance and other forms of interventions and interference from the US and her allies is not a new phenomenon to South Asian states. Washington has, for the past 19 years, engaged in Afghanistan with the Taliban government under her “war on terror” foreign policy. The United States Indo Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), the largest foreign military command with the largest Area of Responsibility (AOR), is operational right within the ocean where the ports in question are located. Acknowledging huge population, home of the largest democracy, driver of world economy, busiest sea lanes, largest seaports, massive militarization, among others, the USINDOPACOM is well designed by the Department of Defense to among other things, protect the Washington’s interests, collaborate with her allies to enhance a stable Indo-Pacific, respond to contingencies and deter aggression.22

The US unfettered commitment to this part of the ocean is understood by the strong words used above. Interestingly, the USINDOPACOM, until early last year was known as US Pacific Command (USPACOM), the name was changed to include the Indian Ocean as a result of the connection between the two oceans and also, as some commentators allege, to underscore the role of New Delhi in achieving Washington’s foreign policy objectives in this part of the sea.23 If China is increasing her presence in the Indian Ocean and out of nowhere the US renames her largest foreign military fleet to recognize India, (who sees China’s presence as a threat to her national security), then it does not require the stretch of the slightest of imaginations to identify the target like no other than China.

In September last year, the US committed to a $39 million grant to Colombo’s military to boost maritime security in the island nation.\textsuperscript{24} This is only part of a broader military strategy up to $300 million that seeks to support national militaries in South and Southeast Asian nations. Sri Lanka and Bangladesh (Bay of Bengal) were explicitly mentioned in the fact sheet as part of the broad strategy.\textsuperscript{25} Similarly, around the same time last year, the USINDOPACOM participated in a four-week joint military exercise with the Sri Lanka navy to further strengthen the relationship between the two states.\textsuperscript{26} All these gestures are out of nothing but a direct response to China’s acquisition of Hambantota and to diffuse any future militarization purposes.

The Gwadar port, however, seems a bit out of the equation. With US-India relations improving by the day, US-Pakistan friendship continues to sag. As experience has taught them, Pakistan perceives Washington as a non-reliable ally who rates their interests higher than that of their friends.\textsuperscript{27} With China coming into the picture, it seems American influence on Pakistan could do little to dissuade any move by Beijing to militarize Gwadar. However, as the Rand report further suggested, their relations could improve as a result of any slight turn of events in the future. Such a scenario will not be suitable for China and Gwadar.

Yet another hurdle is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, also known as Quad between U.S, Japan, Australia, and India, formed in 2007 to ensure a ‘free Indo-Pacific’ region. As has been suggested, this was in direct response to Beijing’s supposedly assertive gestures in the South China Seas and beyond. Although the dialogue has not been fruitful as a result of uncertain stances of India and Australia, current security dilemmas posed by China in the Indo-Pacific are compelling them to achieve a compromise—it was manifested in the 2017 ASEAN Summit in Manila. As the 22\textsuperscript{nd} edition of the Malabar Military Drill occurred in the Indo-Pacific last June,\textsuperscript{28} the commitment of these states towards their interest in the Ocean was reinforced once again. As China’s MSR enters a new phase, this alliance could serve as a significant

setback. China is economically stable and militarily powerful, but her naval arsenals and capabilities cannot outsmart that of a joint military force: militarizing any port in the Indian Ocean is reduced to an image.

c. India’s Counter Response

India has always regarded the Indian Ocean as ‘India’s Ocean.’\(^{29}\) As a result, they have responded to the assumed Chinese threat by ‘unstringing’ the *pearls* through financing specific port projects of her own in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).\(^{30}\) The country collaborated with the Iranian government to co-finance the Chabahar Port just about 90 kilometers away from the Chinese controlled Gwadar Port. The Modi government also succeeded in getting Bangladesh to cancel the Sonadia Port project that the Chinese had offered to construct and went ahead to secure a contract to build the Payra seaport close to Chittagong. As the evidence suggests, it will be inadequate to submit that the Chinese ports are for economic purposes only; the fact that their economic importance is slightly misplaced gives some credence to the military strategy argument. From a New Delhi perspective, the military strategy of the *pearl strings* is more important to China than the economic gains. This could be supported by her lessons learned from Beijing’s ‘creep and acquire’ strategy used to reclaim lands and militarize the Spratly in the South China seas (SCS) back in 2016. At the initial stages, Beijing denied reports of land reclamation, only to later admit to it and promised not to militarize it. However, the reality in the SCS now presents a complicated situation.

In the case of such actualities, New Delhi could be justified to use all her diplomatic and strategic prowess to “contain” the *pearls* and prevent a strong foothold of her rivals at her backdoor. By opting to invest in the redevelopment of the Colombo Port, they could diffuse the Chinese footprints in Hambantota. The economic strength between the two countries is asymmetrical, and thus, New Delhi cannot sustain her port financing to the extent Beijing could go in the long term. Beijing’s diplomatic abilities are also not at par with that of India; they do not seem to have an excellent international image like their rivals. In the future, India could rely on its comparative advantage to keep the Indo-China power pendulum swinging.


d. Self-imposed Principles

Just like India, the Chinese believe strongly in the ‘Panchsheel Principles,’ an old philosophical Buddhist doctrine of Peaceful Co-existence well recognized by the UN Charter. The principle encapsulates, among other things: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual nonaggression, mutual noninterference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.\(^3\) As the action plan of the BRI is born out of these very principles, they are like a ‘Janus-faced god’ that has, on the one hand, paved the way for China’s program to be received in good fate. Yet, on the other hand, they will handicap Beijing from any form of “territorial trespassing” that is not supported by the beneficiary country.

The U.S, in the past, invaded nations unilaterally to enforce her interests because their foreign policy principles nowhere succumb to these doctrines. Military intervention was always an option whenever their national interest conflicts with that of adversary states. China with an already vilified international image, will hardly worsen it by attempting militarization of those ports against the desires and aspirations of the South Asian states. This is not to say China has always been at peace with her South Asian neighbors; it is to say border conflicts necessitated those instances of confrontations. With Beijing not having any border conflict with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, or Pakistan, there will be no *casus belli* to intervene and hence to defeat the whole idea of imposition.

Conclusions

China’s MSR has come to stay, and no matter the challenges, it is still filling infrastructural gabs in South Asia and beyond. The ports financed in South Asia are for both economic and military purposes. The *string of pearls* is a reality that might pose security challenges to India, especially in war times when they are deployed using expeditionary warfare. India has responded to the threat by ‘unstringing’ the *pearls* through financing port projects strategically located around that of Beijing. The *pearl strings* without military equipment and installations are like a guitar without chords; they cannot make any sound. Such is the situation that the so-called *pearl strings* find themselves in South Asia. They cannot be militarized

because of multi-party democracy, the U.S, and China’s self-imposed doctrines. Like a player’s King in a chess game, it appears China is in a ‘checkmate’ now and will require a pragmatic retooling of her policies to get out of the situation.

In the Spratly in the South China Seas (SCS), militarization was partly successful because there were no human inhabitants, let alone multi-party democracy, or a strict application of the Pancheel doctrine as Beijing lays territorial claims. India’s navy was also absent, and there was no real threat apart from ones presented by weaker military states like the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei. The other ‘preventing’ factor here was the USINDOPACOM, which even though it could not prevent militarization; yet succeeded in repudiating the claim of territorial sovereignty. The narrative will be entirely different in South Asia as these factors will serve as checkmate. The region’s Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) are therefore guaranteed to be open and at least without China’s militarization for the foreseeable future. The pearl strings notion will only exist in the imaginations of its advocates and may never be a reality.

References


**Dedication**
Not mentioned.

**Conflicts of Interest**
There are no conflicts to declare.

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