



RESEARCH PAPER

Indo-US Strategic Cooperation: Emerging Regional Narrative and China's Response

¹Humera Hakro ²Ali Khan Ghumro* ³Jamshed Baloch

1. Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Sindh Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan
3. Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Sindh Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan

PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: February 28, 2022 Accepted: April 16, 2022 Online: April 20, 2022 Keywords: America, Geostrategic Relations, India and China *Corresponding Author ali.khan@usindh.edu.pk	The focus of this research is to analyze the relations among three major states America India and China. Increasing Indo-US relations have left spill over implications on China in geostrategic sphere. Since the end of cold war, the dramatic strategic change occurred in the trilateral relations among America India and China. During the cold war period Indian tilt was towards Soviet Union both the states remained strategic allies. The soviet defeat in Cold War created a strategic gap in American foreign policy to filling that strategic gap US deemed India as reliable partner and China as strategic competitor. For Countering China's economic, political and strategic influence America have established strategic relations with India. The dawn of 21 st century gave birth to shocking event of 9/11 that has changed the land scape of geo-political and geostrategic relations among the states; simultaneously Asian continent became singular focus of American policy makers for two reasons; one war on terror and other China's economic power. Analytical approach has been adopted and descriptive method is used in the research to achieve research objectives.

Introduction

Since ancient times, oceans have always remained crucial element for acquiring political power and been a great source of economic prosperity and enrichment for the nation state. In the current century geopolitical scenario which appears to show that these oceans pose threat to the global politics. Keeping in view the existing scenario of the Indian Ocean which is third largest in the world lying between the crucial geostrategic location of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal has now become more significant than the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and possesses great geo-strategic importance (Muzaffar, et. al. 2018)

It is the ocean that provides the great source of connectivity amongst Middle East, East Africa and East Asia including Europe and America. The geo-strategic importance that the ocean makes as linchpin for the maritime security, international trade and global security. It is the epicenter of the crucial sea lanes for the communication (SLOC) and important chock point. It connects the Bab el-Mandab, Lombok, Bali, Sundae and Makassar Straits, Singapore Strait, and Mozambique Channel. Almost 50 percent of world's traffic and above 80 percent of seaborne oil trade travels through Indian Ocean. Besides that Indian Ocean is source of 40 percent of offshore oil production (Kaplan, 2009).

During 1960s Britain was dominant power in Indian Ocean but after 1968 British forces withdrawal created a power vacuum which was filled by Soviets and by 1970s, almost 20 vessels along with several intelligence ships were deployed following the mutual defense treaty with India in 1971. Onwards USSR became the most powerful external power in the Indian Ocean. It became important to the Western world due to strategic, economic and political reasons. Crude oil, minerals, wealth and natural resources attracted the west to shift its policy towards this region. Indian Ocean got prominence in U.S policy due to number of issues such as: competing the rise of China, Terrorism, U.S intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, piracy and so on. Beside that Indian Ocean is vital for U.S because of its enduring reliance on oil imports from Middle East. Due to above reason U.S decided to re-orient its maritime strategy from the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans to the Indian Ocean (Muzaffar, et. al. 2019).

Historically, China has been a continental power, however it pursued maritime strategy since 2000s keeping in the view that the Indian Ocean is a source of economic growth, and determinant of the survival. China being a rising power shifted its maritime domain from Pacific to Indian Ocean due to its growing thirst for energy and other resources. Looking at the Mahanian way, China is in surge for the great power status fueled by booming economy. China imports around 70 percent of its energy supplies through shipping lanes of Indian Ocean region (IOR). It is imperative for China to defend itself through increasing military build up and naval power in the IOR owing to U.S-India alliance, that has potential to threaten the Chinese freedom of navigation (Brewster, 2014).

India is having dominant position in the Indian Ocean, by the virtue of its geographic location. India also has strong naval presence than does China. According to current reports, India is consolidating and modernizing its navy in the Indian Ocean and planning to develop its fleet through aircraft carriers that will watch IOR and proximity. India has augmented its naval power to the most important sea of lanes communication like the Suez Canal, the Strait of Malacca and the Persian Gulf. Because almost 95 percent of Indian trade run through this ocean and any barrier to sea Lane will have spill over implications on trade (Ranasinghe, 2011). According to Mukherjee (2018) New Delhi has ascendancy in IOR over Beijing's feeble position. However, it will be recklessness from the Indian side to ignore China's ambitions. China being a nautical player has the capacity to change the geometry of the region. It is a matter of fact that Chinese activities such as economic activities, political ascendancy and military modernization are considered as the matter of great concern for countries like India. The proactive stance of China in the Indian Ocean has given birth to Sino-India competition. The seismic maritime Shift of China from the Pacific to Indian Ocean is puts in a difficult situation to regional actors but challenges the interests of Great powers. The conflicting interests of three powers (i.e., USA, India, and China) can lead to conflict if the powers involved fail to adopt cooperative and positive approach towards each other. Hence the constructive approach is needed to avoid future competition or conflict (Albert, 2016 & Muzaffar, et. al. 2021)

Indo-US Strategic Cooperation in Indian Ocean

For all three major powers the region is very crucial because it is an essential for securing the national interests of India, America and China. United States established its base in Diego Garcia, because of its significance for U.S National security. For an ocean that does not directly touch U.S territory, it plays a significant role in current U.S policy. In direct action, it is a vital logistical route, supplying U.S. forces in the counterterrorism wars in the Middle East and South Asia. Additionally, the Indian Ocean is home to some of the key international economic supply routes (Suez Canal, Straits of Hormuz, Straits of Malacca), thus, having significant ramifications on U.S. policy. New Delhi is game changer in the IOR due to its long coastline, its economic growth and ascendancy in the regional states. India

enjoys vital geographical position as compared to other states to its proximity. because India is approximately 1000 miles in to IOR and has viable communication between the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, the Malacca and the Andman straits. There are very few states whose geographical location is as crucial as India in the IOR. For keeping the tight grip in the region, India has maintained its power capacity, strengthened deterrence and maintained its dominance over the maritime security in the region.

Keeping in view the mutual interests and security threats, India and U.S are holding promising maritime cooperation. Since the Indo-US interests are amalgamated in the region, both the states are collaborating to meet the emerging challenges in the region. The U.S government is supporting India with the sophisticated electromagnetic launching system for aircraft carrier especially the San Diego based General Atomics Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System. Beside that U.S is helping India to enhance its technological and planning capabilities in order to reduce the strain on U.S naval forces (Bender, 2015).

The joint naval exercises have been conducted by both the states for getting objectives against terrorism, piracy, and maritime security threats. In 2015 both the states decided to establish shared maritime security principles namely the joint strategic vision for Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean region.

According to Ashley J. Tellis, (2015) and Blackwill and Tellis, (2019), the major prospects of Chinese existence in the IOR is a real threat to the maritime security of India. For countering the Chinese existence and its aggressive attitude, New Delhi, and Washington should start joint venture to counter China through making next generation aircraft carrier which will enhance India's navel capacity. The most advantageous thing about the aircraft carrier is that it possesses marked superiority to the China's navel technology in the Indian Ocean Region. Furthermore in this direction U.S also offers sophisticated aviation structure like E-2C/D Hawkeye or airborne early warning and war controlling and the most advanced F-35C fighter jets for enhancing the ascendancy of Indian navy.

The strategists are of the view that owing to increasing growth in the Chinese economy and its increasing maritime power in the Indian Ocean is giving birth to great game in the (IOR) Indian Ocean region. China factor is becoming increasing element of cooperation between India and U.S in the Indian Ocean region. Both the states have serious concerns over increasing Chinese activities in the region either they are economic or strategic. However, some strategists are of the thought that the increasing interference of China into the Ocean is due to their extension of interests and influence. They are of the view that Chinese authorities have rejected the String of Pearls strategy and containment of India, the phrase itself is not obvious to define the Chinese influence in the region (Lou, 2012).

U.S is not likely to establish permanent military bases in Indian Ocean region, except for Diego Garcia, HMAS Stirling and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. However, U.S supports India to stabilize as watch dog and close ally for surveillance and balancing China in the region. Furthermore U.S is planning to make amicable relations with the states adjacent to the region like Japan, Australia, and India. U.S designed strategy is to deter China from getting ascendancy over New Delhi. If China is going to show assertive attitude, the regional states will be used as counter weight to it. U.S and will establish potential counter strategy that will discourage Chinese unilateralism in the region.

China's Strategic and Security Concern's in the Indian Ocean

Throughout the history, China's interests mainly served in the Pacific Ocean, however due to new dynamics of international relations China shifted its maritime strategy to Indian Ocean. China clearly mentioned in 2013 (white paper) that it is in overseas

interests of China to develop the navy and naval capabilities to secure the maritime rights in Indian Ocean. Keeping in view the global markets, global warming, energy security, nation building and mainly the India-U.S alliance, it was compulsion for China to shift its focus to Indian Ocean. It was confirmed by some authoritative scholars in the Chinese blue book of social sciences that China's dominant thinking on the Indian Ocean is majorly determined by the presence of two dominant powers, the U.S and India.

Due to its economic Rise, China is heavily dependent on sea routes to import energy and to have trade with other countries. So the primary concern of Beijing is to secure the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) that pass through the Indian Ocean and western Pacific, connecting the China's key oil stations and littoral refineries with Persian Gulf crude exporters. In order to have energy security, China has started far sea defense, which has augmented the distresses for U.S and India. As the demand of energy has increased more than double since 2011 China became the largest consumer of energy. In year 2000 China was dependent on 30% of oil import, where as in 2014 it increased to 57%. In 2017 China has surpassed U.S and became world top crude oil importer (Wuthnow, 2017). Chinese oil import exceeded to 77.7% in 2019 with cost of US\$238.7 billion. Increasing demand of energy has compelled China to put cogent eye on the supply lines in the Indian Ocean

Beside that China's strategists are anticipating Indian Ocean as a platform where U.S can contain Beijing's broader interests. U.S tilt towards India is the part of a strategy discussed by Alfred Mahan "whoever controls the Indian Ocean controls Asia". As Beijing's economic growth and military modernization has made it capable of challenging U.S hegemony as global leader. U.S has too adopted a competitive behavior towards China, such as challenges it in the East Asian region, controlling the important sea lanes and strategic maritime significant points like Strait of Malacca for checking the China's movement of goods. Chinese think tanks perceive the movement to cuddled and blocked Beijing's strategic space and encirclement of China by U.S and its allies through powerful naval force (Klare: 2008; Puravil, 2021; Chaudhry & Moorthy, 2018).

The unprecedented rise of China has created apprehensions in U.S because China is the only state threatening U.S commercial, strategic and economic interests in the Asia. In order to deal China, U.S has enhanced alliances broad based relations with emerging powers and redeploying more than 2500 marines towards Australia thus created grave concerns for China. Moreover China feels threatened by India because it possesses power and potential in the Indian Ocean region to become a competitor to China. Beijing analyzes that India's prerequisite of energy is another threat to its own energy procurement because India being a host state in the Indian Ocean could threaten Beijing's oil supply routes.

This concern has been mentioned by President Hu Jintao that:

"Malacca dilemma is the key to China's energy security and powers like India and U.S could establish their predominance on the Strait of Malacca through controlling navigation of the strait" (You Ji: 2007; Hakro, et. al, 2021).

China's Strategies to Counter-Weight India-US Alliance

China has adopted some strategies to counter-weight the Indo-U.S alliance. In order to secure Chinese interests in Indian Ocean, China has espoused the following strategic policies:

Firstly, Beijing is operating from Myanmar central point to get involvement in the IOR for supplies of oil and other commodities. From Yunnan to southwest through Myanmar to Indian Ocean, Beijing has made system of rail and air communication for the procurement

of trade and security competition that China wants to connect Myanmar by erecting the oil, gas and water pipelines. Recently a gas pipeline was established at seabed for gas field called show off to the Rakhine state, while a deep sea port has been constructed in Maday peninsula close to Kyaukpyu that is to supply crude oil from the Gulf States and Africa to Myanmar by a pipeline to China (Samir, 2017).

Secondly, China has started to establish the naval bases in Indian Ocean region to project China’s maritime power beyond the Middle East known as String of Pearls strategy. This strategy has been adopted by China due to the fears of an oil blockade by U.S and India from choke points in Indian Ocean such as the straits of Malacca, Hormuz, Luzon and Taiwan.



Figure 1. China’s String of Pearls Strategy
 Source: <https://www.globalvillagespace.com>

The Chinese policy can be described as Look West, aimed to encircle India. Chinese are determined to make bases for navy in the IOR to make its navy strong to achieve its strategic objectives. These Chinese ports are known as pearls such as; Gwadar (Pakistan), the Hambantota port (Sri Lanka), Chittagong (Bangladesh) and Sittwe and Coco Island (Myanmar).

Another way to deal with the Chinese fears, was Maritime Silk Road Plan, proposed by Xi Jinping in October 2013. 10 billion Yuan (\$1.6bn) was announced by China to build ports in order to have a maritime connectivity with Southeast Asian and Indian Ocean littoral countries. These all steps were taken to diminish the security and strategic concerns emerged as a result of Indo-U.S strategic cooperation and other disputes ranging from transcontinental threats such as piracy, armed robbery and terrorism.

China is extending hundreds of billions of dollars in loan in developing countries in order to have geopolitical gains from those countries. Along with that China is investing in ports and other development and construction activities as shown in (table: 12) throughout the littoral areas of Indian Ocean for achieving its strategic purpose.

Table 1
China’s Investment and Construction Activity

State	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Australia	\$10.99b	\$4.97b	\$10.28b	\$9.12b	\$8.87b	\$10.19b	\$11.43b	\$7.36b	\$9.25b

Bangladesh	\$170m	\$760m	\$790m	\$690m	\$1.06b	\$2.51b	\$4.31b	\$9.71b	\$4.16b
Burma	\$1.45b	\$1.58b	\$210m	0	\$300m	\$370m	0	\$2.52b	0
Djibouti	0	0	0	\$510m	\$190m	0	\$1.02b	0	0
Malaysia	0	\$2.16b	\$3.09b	\$3.56b	\$5.37b	\$3.45b	\$8.79b	\$9.9b	\$4.04b
Maldives	0	0	0	0	0	\$400m	\$330m	\$150m	\$820m
Pakistan	\$1.28b	\$3.52b	\$1.57b	\$1.2b	\$8.81b	\$5.4b	\$13.73b	\$7.91b	\$5.08b
Sri Lanka	\$1.1b	\$600m	\$1.41b	\$500m	\$2.46b	\$2.74b	\$1.55b	\$2.03b	\$1.08b

Source: The data is drawn from AEI, "China Global Investment Tracker," <http://www.aei.org>.

China-India Competition in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

World's third largest Ocean has now become breeding ground for competition between India and China. Both the states are trying to influence the smaller states through establishing deep water ports and military buildup. China intends to displace Indian influence in neighboring countries. Similarly growing Chinese heft in Indian front yard promoting a geopolitical rivalry in the Indian Ocean. South China Sea has been claimed as China's own Sea, whereas China entirely rejects any Impression that Indian Ocean should be considered as India's ocean. China perceived that India is having comprehensive cooperation with those countries who have strained relations with China such as Japan and U.S. On the other hand, India has long feared being encircled by China's 'string of pearls' network of installations in the Indian Ocean (Brewster, 2018).

Indian analysts Brahma Chellaney discourses the Indian government by quoting John Adams that there are two ways to conquer a country either through the sword or debt. And he said that China has chosen to influence the neighboring states of India through debt.

The major factors of competition between China and India are economic growth, increasing trade, and energy supply through Indian Ocean. The current focuses of both the states are on maritime and relations with smaller states which are close to sea lanes and have proximity with the Persian Gulf. The disturbance of the supply from the Indian Ocean is deleterious to the interest of China and other states as well.

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China's funded Hambantota port in Sri Lanka is security loss for India as both Sri Lanka and India have remained close allies historically. China's construction of deep water port Chittagong in Bangladesh is a major security loss for India. Moreover China has remained successful to have footprints in Burma (Myanmar) utilizing naval jetty at Sittwe as a launch point in the far eastern Indian Ocean. China isolated India in its immediate neighborhood, although India became successful to establish its influence in Marao. As shown in (Table-1)

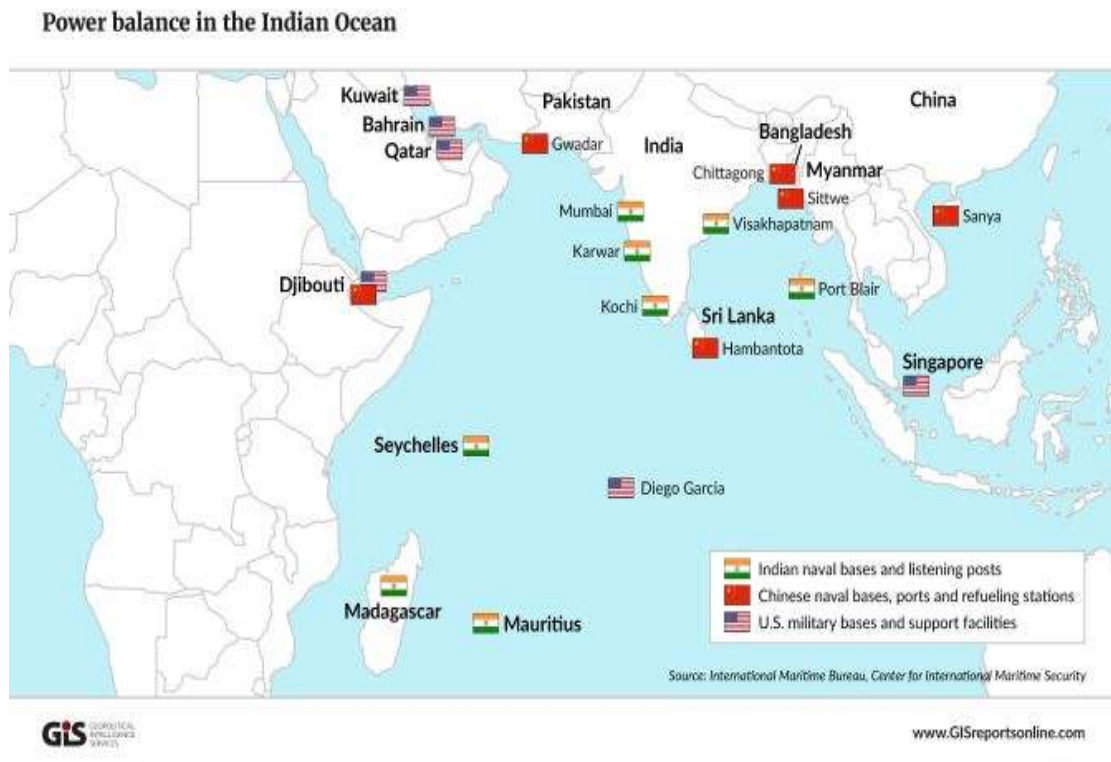
Looking at Chinese policy One Belt and Road steps BRI is source of communication to establish and unite the Pacific and IOR coastal areas. BRI has a potential to Impact India economically and geopolitically. The important strips are China- Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor, China CARS West Asian Economic corridor, Pak China economic corridor,

Bangladesh China-India Myanmar Economic corridor and China India Peninsula Economic Corridor.

Belt and Road initiatives are significant for the economic and strategic perspective and reduce the strategic fragility through expansion of trade and energy supply. In such a way, China will elevate its political influence by making trade relations and infrastructural development. Taking into account Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative in the South and Central Asian region and especially in Indian context it appears to have a growing rivalry between India and China. Some states in the Indian Ocean Region are fearful of China's rising power and that's why, are enhancing their military capacities and making alliances with the foreign powers for keeping balance in the region (Kwatra, 2018 & Muzaffar & Khan, 2021)

Military Expansion and Port Creation by India And China

Indian Ocean region (IOR) has become a focal point of geopolitical competition between China-India. Both states are revealing to advance their foothold in many states around the Indian Ocean. In order to have a better understanding of geopolitical dynamics of the two states, it is necessary to analyze the following section that how these states are unfolding their rivalry in littoral states around Indian Ocean.



Source: International Maritime Bureau, Center for international Maritime Security.

- Due to geopolitical and the strategic importance of Djibouti has significantly increased due to base operations of extra-regional powers. China's unequivocal military involvement in Djibouti has made it different from the rest of other countries across the IOR. The former French colony has geo strategically situated on the Bab-al-Mandab strait that sets apart the Red Sea from the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. All the powerful states like U.S, China, France and Japan have stationed their military facilities in the region. In August 2017 one of the first military base established by China in Djibouti.

However, Djibouti announced 10 years lease for the base to China in 2016. Under the agreement China was allowed to station it's up to 10,000 troops in Djibouti. In return, China is financing enormously in Djibouti. Although many spectators have grave concerns on the Djibouti's capability to pay off loans to Beijing worth of 60% of the states GDP (Jacob & Perlez, 2017).

- Pakistan's the deep sea port by China at Gwadar created grave concerns among the policy makers in India due to the two reasons. Firstly China's construction of pipeline from Pakistan to eastern China in order to have Chinese oil imports to avoid Malacca strait would diminish India's significance and ability to coerce China. Secondly through this port, China has got another naval entry into the Indian Ocean. India is having a fear that if a military conflict erupted between China and India, this port would be very suitable for Chinese. This development has created competitive relationship for India and China and has proved mutually beneficial for Pakistan and China (Khaliq, 2018).
- Sri Lanka is important for China, due to its strategic significance because it connects energy rich Persian Gulf with the other states of Asia. Keeping in view, Beijing is establishing strategic and economic ties with Colombo in order to serve its growing interests. China has augmented both economic and security assistance to Sri Lanka. The sum of investment in Sri Lanka from 2005 to 2017 by China is estimated of \$14.87 billion (Blinch, 2017). Sri Lanka attracted much interests as part of China's Belt and Road, trade and investment initiatives. It was totally economic considerations by the Rajapaksa's successor, President Maithripala Sirisena, to go forward With 99 years lease of Hambantota port for payments that will help Sri Lanka pay down some of its \$65 billion estimated debt to financiers. This was considered as security loss by Indian analysts as both Sri Lanka and India remained close allies and if the armed conflict ever breaks out the southern tip of the India near port would be strategically significant (Shephard, 2016).
- The location of Maldives is near sea lanes that transit the Indian Ocean. Keeping in view the strategic importance, during 2014 China's President Xi Jinping visited Maldives. In response during 2017, Abdullah the President of Maldives, visited China. They have signed agreement for enhancement of trade relations and MOU to bring Maldives into Maritime Silk Road. Beijing is investing in large projects of Maldives' development such as a bridge from Malé, the capital, to Hulhule Island. It is observed and feared that Maldives could fall into a Chinese debt trap due to major portion of the country's foreign debt worth 70% is payable to China (Chellaney, 2018). In 2015, the Chinese company acquired Feydhoo Finolhu Island on 50 years lease near Male. It was speculated that China is deploying naval task force to the India Ocean comprised of a Luyang III guided missile destroyer, a Jiangkai Frigate, and an amphibious transport dock ship. It is also observed that Chinese sheer presence of warships proved as deterrent to Indian interference. Moreover it is sign of China's fortitude to exercise its new-found influence worldwide (Seidel, 2018).
- Bangladesh is not only geopolitically crucial state for China in the South Asian region but also significant state for Asia as a whole. Bangladesh has close ties with China while having a positive relations with India, U.S and the West. Dhaka and Beijing applause the Belt and Road Initiative and signify the magnitude of the BCIM economic corridor. Beijing is establishing the Chittagong port and rail road communication system to connect Chittagong to Kunming. Beijing is upgrading the port to deal with the increasing volume of economic transit by 14% to 15% per annum. China is also establishing deep sea port of Sonadia of Bangladesh. This port is also decisive for BCIM economic corridor. India contemplates Gawader and Sonadia ports as Beijing's "String of Pearls" strategy.

In February 2016, Bangladesh under the pressure of Japan, America and India cancelled the project on account of Japan's initiative to establish new port worth of \$3.7 billion a new port at Matarbari (Ramachandran, 2016).

- Burma is considered one of the strategically important states for Beijing because it is a way to bypass the Strait of Malacca chokepoint. The facilities of the port and energy supply to South China would enable China to escape the "Malacca Dilemma". Both India and China have tough competition in Burma. However, China's soft power influence and its good relations with Burma's government overwhelmed India. Chinese started initiative of rail road to connect Kunming and Southeast Asia as part of One Belt One Road Initiative.

Beijing's CITIC group has given the contract to establish a deep sea port and crucial Economic Zone at kyukpyu. The expected cost of the port is approximately \$ 7.3 billion. On the other hand industrial park will also be established worth of \$ 3.2 billion. CITIC will have reserve rights for the operation of the port for fifty years including 25 years extension (Tiezzi. 2016). Myanmar is capable of serving the role as hub state for China in the South East Asia, playing the role of sub regional trade union with Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

- The other states of the South East Asia are also crucial for China's strategic, energy and economic interests. States like Thailand, and Singapore are center of financial mechanism. Beijing is well cognizant of the political and strategic realities of the region and the challenges to its energy supply from the Malacca chokepoint. In order to safeguard its energy interests, China intends to construct a canal across the Isthmus of Kra and into the Gulf of Thailand. Though the three states Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia are having economic significance for China. However, these states manipulate their dealing with America to counter China; like Malaysia adopted policy of nonaligned policy and stable trading environment with both states. U.S is being considered as indispensable security partner for Singapore. Whereas China overwhelms cultural and economic influence on Singapore. The activities on the upper reaches of the Mekong River by Chinese will probably be an irritant to China and Thailand relations and would reinforce support for the U.S as a hedge. Other than that the South China Sea dispute by China is the source of ongoing awkwardness among South-East Asian countries.

Conclusion

The cumulative results of this research suggests viable conclusion; the alliance between India and America can't leave much effects on geostrategic position of China. Because Beijing in the current geopolitical and strategic scenario is far beyond the counter strategy of both the state. First because China has adopted the policy of soft power counter strategy where its focus is on economic growth and increasing trade worldwide through one belt and road initiative and regional connectivity. Second China's policy of military modernization; through the policy Chinese military and strategic power can't be counter either by America or By India even the alliance of both the state cant affect China.

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