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ANALYSIS

GEOPOLITICS OF INDIAN OCEAN: PAKISTAN AS A MARITIME SECURITY ACTOR

The Indian Ocean, having vital sea-lanes of communication and energy chokepoints has gained currency in terms of geostrategic and geoeconomic realms in recent decades. Thereby changing security constellation generating across the region dropped the hitherto backseat role of the Indian Ocean while bringing it at the center of strategic dialogues. As being energy heartland and the commercial hub connecting East and West markets, the security threats ranging from traditional to non-traditional ones such as piracy, terrorism, smuggling, environmental degradation, are comprehended as having repercussions transcended beyond the region. Therefore, counted them as international maritime security challenges highlight the importance of cooperation.

Meanwhile, coupled with shifted global power-center from the West to the East with the economic rise of Asia, herewith arising geopolitical trends have found their logical end by the incorporation of the Indian Ocean into strategic concepts. However, the so-called Indo-Pacific construct embracing a motto of Free and Open Indo-Pacific, the extended version of Asia-Pacific by featuring the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Ocean theatres, remains contested. Touted as an alternative to potential Sino-centric order, although not having widespread reach, may put the region at the mercy of a zero-sum game.

The absence of accepted regional leadership with due capacity or any equivalent of an intergovernmental organization in the Indian Ocean region set a bleak security environment in which states may bear [some security risks rather than exert resources](#) to deal with them. Given geopolitical fragility across the region, perhaps this further hinders coordinated regional state response. Instead, amidst rising navalism, extra-regional powers in the pursuit of preserving strategic interest with favorable [maritime posture](#) tend to rely on key coastal states. However, it is arguable to what extent such flavor of regionalism makes its way to attract them in the face of heightened militarization underlined by polarization through power competition. Indeed, some observers point out the tendency towards the balance of power in a sense of [middle powers' coalition](#) and issue-specific groupings in the view of great power rivalry.

That being said, promoting a collaborative environment for the sake of common maritime interests, thus, lies much on the littoral states' part. In a similar vein, Pakistan has dedicated itself to that end with a signature initiative of the AMAN military exercise under the slogan of 'Together for Peace' since 2007. Holding every two years, this year from February 11-16, the seventh edition of the multinational maritime exercise [AMAN-2021](#) off the coast of Pakistan's southern port city of Karachi in the Arabian Sea has brought together the naval forces of 45 states Exceptionally, it marked the first time after Bold

Monarch 2011, [Russia's Navy](#) operated side-by-side with NATO members this time took place in Pakistani waters. That also indicates the benefits of such a cooperative platform, exceeding the regional to extra-regional countries, which can be considered the well-crafted policy prescription in terms of maritime diplomacy.

Moreover, alongside enabling a valuable mechanism for enhancing interoperability and mutual understanding, the exercise is a demonstration of Pakistan as a security facilitator in the region who can act in the name of peaceful coexistence vis-à-vis spoilers in that regard. Not surprisingly, in his address at the Ninth International Maritime Conference, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi [touched upon](#) Pakistan's concerns about the hegemonic maritime design imposed by India's bellicose practices. In assessing the situation which depicted India being isolated against the backdrop of AMAN-21, the common perspective among commentators and analysts is a need to revision its foreign policy, notwithstanding, the question of how, may differ.

In that respect, growing US-India security cooperation, even in a form of quasi alliances regarding the recent revival of QUAD may provide valuable insights into ongoing political configurations and their sources of consideration. Seemingly, for India's part, within the newly arisen security atmosphere, in particular following the Galwan valley clash between the Chinese and Indian armies, may also having two-front war challenge in mind, reconsideration of foreign policy orientation came to surface, despite being the reluctant member of QUAD, as otherwise being faithful to non-alignment principles. Nevertheless, the US, poised itself for convergence of common security ground to solidify Indo-Pacific Alignment, is more vocally projecting QUAD as an anti-China front, even in a sense 'Asian-NATO'. Furthermore, [the meeting](#) of officials from QUAD member countries held on 6th October last year, symbolically marked the reemergence of QUAD with a pledge to regularize such meetings, by which in continuation [3rd ministerial meeting](#) to be held on 18th February this year. Having said that, QUAD has upgraded itself to some extent in terms of interoperability, that backed by [logistic support agreements](#) concluded among all rest member states one after the other following the China-India tensions. This reflects the maritime-oriented strategic partnership as the mentioned agreements enabling participants' access to strategic ports respectively. Equally important, the alleviant that QUAD being far from taking institutional shape to some degree get balanced in the wake of Australia joining, the first time since 2007, [Malabar](#) trilateral naval exercises comprising India, Japan, and the United States, by signifying the military potential of grouping.

Notably, the [competing port strategies](#) pose a factor in the security picture as well, given their role in connectivity projects in quest of geoeconomic interests. Indeed Sino-Pakistan maritime cooperation was added further layer with the announcement of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which is a benchmark project of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. Since then, China placed much hope in Pakistan's stability, as affirmative to its regional calculations. That can help to explain Beijing's full commitment to the project against any sort of security risks, exemplified in the signing of the new deals in the framework of CPEC last year amidst rising separatist backlash in the region. Though, such a disposition may automatically draw Pakistan in an axis with China vis-à-vis growing New Delhi-Washington strategic ties, whereas especially considering the so-called 'String of Pearls' narrative about Chinese intentions to build naval bases.

Gwadar Port, located at a crucial geostrategic point near the Strait of Hormuz, is the last destination of CPEC by connecting China's western provinces with the region. In so doing, it offers the opportunity to relieve strategic vulnerability as called the Malacca Dilemma to indicate a high concentration of China's trade and energy routes flowed there in the IOR.

On the other hand, located at a distance of 70 km from Gwadar Port, [Chabahar](#) as being the only ocean port of Iran is expected to cut the timespan of India's north trade route via the Suez Canal, by more than double. Beyond this, for India, the genuine importance of the project lies in its offering an alternative route to Afghanistan and Central Asia by bypassing Pakistan, thus countering CPEC. Conversely, Iran avoids portraying the project as an alternative to CPEC, rather advocating they are complementary to each other. In line with Iran's Look East diplomacy aiming to counterbalance the West, it is pursuing to [maintain good relations](#) with both India and China.

In conclusion, acknowledging middle powers' role in balancing in the view of great power rivalry, as well as lack of leadership, similarly, posit global maritime security remains at the hands of littoral states. Despite the given volatile geopolitical context, Pakistan is showing its devotion to the established rhetoric to foster global cooperation in an address to maritime-security challenges.

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