

## **New Delhi Response to Beijing ‘BRI’ Project: A Lucid connection with Chinese “String of Pearls”**

**Hafeez Ullah Khan and Dr. Ijaz Khalid**

### **Abstract**

Indian percepts of China are biased by dread of Chinese hegemony; at present, many individuals in Indian security establishment has positioned China a greater menace than ever before. This paper investigates Sino-India relationship and Indian responses to Chinese ‘OBOR’ (One Belt, One Road) project by examining the extent and nature of their relationship within the diplomatic, geopolitical, economic, and defense spheres. There is power struggle between China and India for the dominance on Indian Ocean. The Indians perceive Chinese Maritime Silk Road projects as Indian encirclement with the development of ports projects in Indian Ocean, which are part of Chinese “String of Pearls” strategy. Chinese military naval ships and submarine presence in the number of ports around the Indian Ocean has made India anxious, the Indian policy experts perceive it as a threat to their national security and interest. From the Chinese perspective, ‘String of Pearls’ is a doctrine to free China from its Malacca dilemma. In Foreign Policy, the beginning of wisdom is to understand what the other party conceives, and why. And this is just as important for our Chinese friends as for the Indians.

**Keywords:** New Delhi, Belt and Road Initiative, China, String of Pearls

### **Introduction**

“One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) obviously is slogan that Chinese government has been using since 2013, when President Xi Jinping aroused the plan of “Maritime Silk Road” when he visited Indonesia. Initially it was “Maritime silk Road” than during another visit to Central Asia (Kazakhstan) he presented China’s vision for “Silk Road Economic Belt”. China referred to both collectively as (Eee-ta-Eee-lo) “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR). In ancient times the businessmen from all over the world use to visit China and bought silk, textiles, art work, chinaware’s and sold grains, metal work, wood work, spices and other agriculture products (Integral Study of the Silk Roads). The nature of goods that were used to trade in ancient times has now clearly changed. Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) was the project of Beijing belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which was introduced by President Xi in Kazakhstan (2013), which aims to “forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation, and expand development in the Eurasian region” (“President Xi Jing Ping proposes to build “Silk Road Economic Belt”, 2013) There is a train service that runs from major Chinese commodity centers to Madrid, which carries the manufactured goods; washing machines, refrigerators, and other electronic equipment from China to Madrid (Europe), and it comes back

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almost empty. China export more goods but imports very little particular to some countries.

Maritime Silk Road (MTSR) is the second component of “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR), it was announced by President Xi Jinping in Indonesia (2013), which aims to “strengthen maritime cooperation with ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) countries and to make good use of the China-ASEAN maritime cooperation”, President Xi said that “China is ready to discuss with ASEAN countries the vision of concluding a treaty of good-neighborliness, friendship and cooperation in a joint effort to build good-neighborly relations” (JIAO, 2013). The Maritime Silk Road (MTSR) is started from China’s eastern sea-board the “Chongqing” (a small city of China famous for integration with Muslim world), throughout South Asia, South East Asia, particularly Sri Lanka, East Africa, Middle East, the Mediterranean and then to Europe.

Both Maritime Silk Road (MTSR) and Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) are not in a straight line but these are in brown shins. “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) is an enterprise to incorporate the Euro-Asian landmass politically and economically (Taneja, 2016). What exactly China hope to achieve? Different people have different perspectives on what China’s ambitions are and what China’s key objectives are? Officially according to Chinese government vision document, which was unveiled in early 2015, the OBOR (One Belt, One Road) have four key objectives.

- Raising territorial economic policy coordination,
- dispatching barriers to trade,
- mending territorial infrastructure, and
- Encouraging cultural ties to build support for the broader projects.

The OBOR (One Belt, One Road) project holds opportunities like systematic innovations, infrastructure development, adjustment in the flow and distribution of sources production, entails of production and mutual dealings of productions, enhanced business environment, enhanced the evolution of landlocked countries and distant areas, decreasing tolls of trade, investment barriers and vitality for amendments in national policies. The ‘Belt and Road’ enterprise is being framed as a series of transportation, energy, resources, roads, pipelines, river and maritime shipping and railway projects. “One Belt, One Road” initiative includes potentially sixty-five countries, 4.4 billion people and about forty percent of the global GDP (Hofman, 2015). However, projects will take 30 to 35 years to accomplish and may result in financial overstretch China aspires to attain an annual trade cost of 2.5 trillion US dollars with the nations which are sited on the ‘Belt and Road’ footpath within ten years.

The “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) initiative includes six economic corridors which are as follows;

- China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor.
- China-Pakistan Corridor.
- China-Russia-Mongolia Corridor.
- New Eurasian Land bridge.

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- Indo-china Peninsula Corridor.
- Bangladesh-India-China-Myanmar Corridor.

These corridors shows web of the six north-south or east-west trans-regional economic corridors, these corridors are differ largely in size and are at different phases of planning and exertion, with some relying on existing infrastructure or projects united into the OBOR (One Belt, One Road) initiative.

The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), China Development Bank (CDB) and China’s so called Policy Banks will be significant in tributes to OBOR projects. Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank has fifty-seven likely founding members which have signed the AIIB’s (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) articles of Affiliation. China holds a 30 percent stake in the AIIB, which translates in 26.06% of the bank’s voting rights. India is second largest investor with the share of 7.5%, Russia is third largest share investor (5.93%) and Germany is fourth largest share investor (4.15%) in AIIB. (Hofman, 2015). All of these banks are part of broader push by Beijing to enlarge the infrastructure necessary to tighten China with its trade dealing partners in the Middle East, Europe and Africa.

### **Indian Perceptions about OBOR**

The following are the views of Indian policy makers, experts, scholars, private sector think tanks and diplomats; about OBOR (One Belt, One Road) project which are as follows:

- One of the Indian experts view is that “OBOR (One Belt, One Road) project is part of Xi Jinping strategy to break over this East-Asian sea board, because China does not want to be only East-Asian power, China want to be a global power, so this initiative is a way for China to break over this East-Asian board”. Another China’s long term view is to limit US (United States) to North America and work with Asia and Europe to get dominance economically and politically.
- There are number of Indian Scholars who look at OBOR (One Belt, One Road) project as a “power maximization” project, they argues that through this project China will maximize its economic power as well as political power.
- China has tempted India to be part of “One Belt One Road” initiative. There is view by Senior Indian Diplomats: they say’s that its China’s national project what is it about to do with us, it’s there project, they are implementing it, we like them but it has nothing to do with us, as far as China’s invitation’s to be part of this project is concerned, India said we have no tangible ideas, its Chinese national initiative and there has been no consultation with us. Indian diplomats said about India’s membership in Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) that “India is a launching member of AIIB(Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) because China has invited India to be part of it, this organization has its own constitution, it has a legal status”, they further said that “we should not compare Asian infrastructure Investment Bank

(AIIB) with OBOR (One Belt, One Road) project, as both are Chinese initiatives but OBOR (One Belt, One Road) is different from AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Bank). OBOR is not an organization, it has no constitution and it is a very loose network of relationship of China with large number of countries.

- Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar (former Indian Ambassador to China) stated that “China violates Indian sovereignty because it runs through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) since they (China) are a country who has been very sensitive about its own sovereignty—China has taken step to launch the OBOR (One Belt One Road) initiative unilaterally, there has been no consultation with us and therefore it is unilateral decision of China”, he further said that “the network that China is going to build: will hardwire China’s interests, China’s ultimate goal is to isolate US (United States) and work with Asia and Europe”. He said “you cannot have a multi-polar world without a multi-polar Asia but China’s preference is that to have a unipolar Asia but a multi-polar world” (“India should be ‘flexible and pragmatic’ about PoK, says China in a pitch for CPEC”, 7th March 2017, 2017).

- There are also liberal views in India about Chinese initiative. One of the views of private sector think tank Sun eel Saurian (vice president of ORF, which was founded by India’s largest company Airline Industries) in his article he said that “Indian response to OBOR should be much more pragmatic, India should offer China an alternative, that in CPEC both governments, Pakistani and Chinese find difficulties to carry on. He said that what India should offer to China is construction of a joint large scale port project in Gandhi Nagar in Gujarat State (western India) and then India should fast act to development of BCIM (Bangladesh-China-Myanmar-India) Corridor which is not very much in progress because of Indian uncertainty about it, Sun eel Saurian said that India should accelerate progress on BCIM (Bangladesh-China-Myanmar-India) Corridor, which connect Kolkata (India) to Kunming (China), with good quality of highways and roads, if India work with China and build large scale port facilities in Gandhi Nagar (India) from west to east and then connect with BCIM corridor all the way to Kunming (China), then China wouldn’t need CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor)”, he further said that India should invite China to step-up a land connection corridor from Gandhi Nagar to Kolkata and invite Chinese companies to invest in industrial corridors because it is densely populated region and there is no shortage of labor. India should invite Chinese to build roads, railway lines, and allow their companies to invest in manufacturing along that corridor which will connect Kunming (China), then why would China want CPEC”.

- There is another opinion of Senior Retired Diplomats of India that “India should talk about OBOR (One Belt, one Road) project with China rather than saying that it has nil to do with us. He suggested that India should ask China that one of the first projects of OBOR with India should be a sea bridge connecting South India with Sri Lanka, which is only 30 kilometers at distance, as China has best engineers of sea bridges and one of world longest bridge is in China which is 39 kilometers in Shandong province. China has technology, China is investing in Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka is part of One Belt One Road project, China has already fabricated Hambantota

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Port in Southern Sri Lanka and they are now building Colombo port valuable projects, so India should ask China for building of a sea bridge between Sri Lanka and South India and Chinese government should provide financial assistance for this project but 'Chicken' (Chinese word means impossible) because China does not get anything from it, there is no 'win-win' to be came up. This bridge will significantly integrate Sri Lankan economy, but will China get any direct benefit from it? This project will test Chinese claims that 'this is about connectivity and this isn't about just China', this project will connect two South Asian economies and will elaborate economic activates".

### **Indian Objections**

#### **1. Indian objections on CPEC**

The 55 billion dollars project CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) will connect China's Xinjiang Province to Gawadar deep-sea port in Pakistan. The CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) mandates include the development of infrastructure, energy, railways and roads (Dawei, 2016). According to Vinay Kura (Indian expert) "the Chinese investment on Pakistan infrastructure projects for elaborating CPEC; can be seen as reward for Pakistan's efforts to tie up India in South Asia geo-political morass" (Kaura, 2017).

India have declared the current Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) route region "Gilgit-Baltistan" a disputed territory, they are claiming that this region is part of Kashmir and it was ruled by maharaja of Kashmir before 1947 (Bushan, 2016). India has not approved OBOR (One Belt, One Road) project not only because it is Beijing's endeavor to expand its influence in the region but also because it comprises CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor). Delhi has lodged regular protests against creating China-Pakistan Economic Corridor because it challenges sovereignty issue (Chaudhury, 2017).

The Gawadar Port of CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) is an important component in China's "String of Pearls". The Chinese military, naval ships, naval task force and submarines presence in Gwadar Port had made India anxious about CPEC and perceive it as an encirclement of India. According to Indian Security experts "the Chinese military presence in Gilgit-Baltistan will harden Pakistan occupation of that region and will imperil Indian national security".

#### **2. Indian Ocean Dominance**

According to International observers, in nineteenth century Atlantic Ocean had more significance, in 20th century Pacific Ocean had more significance, and in 21st century the Indian Ocean will have more significance. The Indian Ocean waters covers an approximated 73.5 million square kilometers, combining half the world's latitudes and

seven of its zones, along with 48 independent seashores and island countries including of 2.6 billion people which is world's 39 % of population more than 80% of the world's maritime trade oil passes through Indian Ocean Check Points, in which 40% oil passes through Strait of Hormuz, 35 percent passes through Strait of Malacca and 8 percent passes through the Babel-Man dab Strait. Indian Ocean sea lines are observed within the most strategically significant sea lines in the world.

The fuel dependency of the two swiftly growing economies (China and India) has been rising. The imported oil arrives to these two countries by oil tanker ships through Indian Ocean. China imports 80 percent of its oil and India imports 65 percent of its oil through Indian Ocean from Middle East and Africa (Das, 2014). Robert Kaplan (western observer) says that "there is power struggle between China and India for the dominance on Indian Ocean."

Though, the Indians perceive Chinese Maritime Silk Road projects as Indian encirclement with the development of ports projects in Indian Ocean. China is trying to pursue the dominance on Indian Ocean. According to former Foreign Secretary of India, Shayan Sharan "if China truly succeeded in the economic and geopolitical aims behind OBOR (One Belt, One Road), then India may get consigned to the edges of both land and maritime Asia(Dawei, 2016). One of the reasons of India's refusal to join OBOR project is that it will (H.C, Wang, & Steven, 2015)increase China's dominancy on Indian Ocean.

In response to Indian objections about China's dominancy of Indian Ocean, the Chinese General Chi Haotian said "the Indian Ocean is not India's Ocean". The Chinese increasing naval activities in Indian Ocean is for securing their trading ships from piracy, while Indian's perceive it as a threat.

In 2015, defense white paper China summed up that "China will safeguard its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vice admiral Su Zhiqian said in Sir Lanka that "safety and freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean is very important for the resurgence and growth of global economy; the Chinese navy will strongly maintain the peace and stability of the Indian Ocean"("Chinese Navy to Actively Maintain Peace and Stability of Indian Ocean", 2012).

The Indian security establishment argues that Chinese claims the PLAN (People's Liberation Army Navy) growing presence in the Indian Ocean for combating piracy; however the Chinese nuclear submarine patrolling in the Indian Ocean (in December 2013 for first time) is another story. The Indian security establishment knows that the nuclear submarines are not needed to tackle pirate boats (Puby, "Sighting of Chinese submarines become more frequent, navy step up guard in the Indian Ocean", 2015).

In 2015, Indian foreign secretary S.Jaishankar said that "those who are resident in this region have the primary responsibility for peace stability and prosperity in the Indian Ocean". The Chinese foreign ministry argued that "in the globalized era the security of the Indian Ocean is in the common interest of all countries"("China wants maritime cooperation with India in Indian Ocean", 2015). India alone cannot assure the security

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of the Indian Ocean, if China and US (United States) can accommodate in Pacific Ocean than why not India can accommodate with China in Indian Ocean.

### **3. Geo-strategic Implications**

The strategy required in dealing with geopolitical problems is called geo-strategy. India has longstanding border problems with Pakistan and China. However, China is major power in the Asia and has launched the initiative of OBOR (One Belt One Road). One of the reasons of India's refusal to joining this multilateral initiative is that OBOR will strengthen the Chinese influence on the Indian claimed regions. According to Indian policy experts the OBOR projects will have strategic implications on Delhi, during times of conflict ("heres why India skipped China's OBOR summit", 2015).

Ministry of State for home affairs in Arunachal Pradesh, Kiren Rijiju stated that "we (India) have lost Tibet but we have Dalai Lama, we (New Delhi) will not accept any kind of Chinese interference into our territory and we will not concede". In 2010, UPA (United Progressive Alliance) government has started policy, which refuses to recognize Beijing's "One China Policy". Modi government has further continued that policy of UPA government and they have clearly refused to recognize Beijing's "One China Policy" in joint statements. Sushma Swaraj, Indian External Affairs Minister in 2014 said that "Chinese counterpart India's support was conditional on China recognizing a "One India Policy", a reference to China's perspective on the quarreled region of Kashmir (Samanta, 2014).

In February 2014, Modi visited Arunachal Pradesh (Chinese claimed territory), he state dthat "no power on earth can seize Arunachal Pradesh away from us, the world has been changed, the world does not accept the mindset of expansionism, and China will have to alter their mentality of expansion(Gottipati, 2014,). In September 2014, at speech in Tokyo Modi stated "everywhere around us, we have 18th century expansionist mind-set encroaching on other country, interfering in others waters (Indian Ocean) intruding on other countries and capturing territory".

#### **Chinese String of Pearls**

The idea of "String of Pearls" was given by US (United States) analysts to China's doctrine for securing their Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC).This idea got famed at the start of the twenty-first century."String of Pearls" refers to series of ports and infrastructure projects covering China's Sea line of Communication. This strategy is retained by the use of political, diplomatic, economic and military means. At present it includes ports in Hanin (China), Gawadar (Pakistan), Male (Maldives), Colombo and Hambantota (Sirilanka), Sitt we or Kyaukphyu (Myanmar), Chittagong (Bangladesh). The question raises that Why China need 'String of Pearls'? String of Pearls is a doctrine to free China from its Malacca dilemma. Malacca Strait is in the Indian Ocean which connects Pacific Ocean with Indian Ocean, 1/4th of the world trade passes through this strait. This strait is heavily depended for the energy supplies to

countries like Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and China. This sea route is life-line to China's rapid economic growth and industrialization. China imports more than 4 trillion barrel of crude oil per day through this route and around 80 percent of overall China's oil imports passes through this strait(Marantidon, 2014).



Source:<https://www.MarineBuzz.com>

In picture above, pink line shows 'String of Pearls', and dark blue line shows the sea route through which China energy supplies passes. You can clearly see the bottleneck feature of 'Strait of Malacca', this route is lifeline to China's rapid economic growth, but China have negligible strategic control over this area.

India and US (United States) can easily block Chinese ships in an event of war. USA (United States of America) operates from Diego Garcia (a small island at the Central Indian Ocean). India had threatened China to block the Strait of Malacca in the past during 1971 Indo-Pakistan war, as China was pondering to assist Pakistan in the war. India can use its islands Andaman and Nicobar to block China's supplies at Strait of Malacca.

China is trying to diminish its dependency on the Strait of Malacca. Presently, ports at Myanmar will cut down China's distance by 3000 kilometers, China has built pipeline passing through Myanmar to China but due to volatile situation in the state (Myanmar) it is much periled. Myanmar government has closeness with western countries and especially due to Barak Obama's visit to Myanmar, it was very uneasy for China to make their roots in Myanmar. Another route for China to limit its dependency on Strait of Malacca is CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor), which will let China to export and imports its products through Gawadar Port (Pakistan) into Xinjiang (China). China has said about its naval bases and ports in Indian Ocean Region I-e Sri Lanka (Hambantota and Colombo), Pakistan (Gawadar), Bangladesh (Chittagong) and Myanmar (Sittwe or Kyaukphyu) that they will bring



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harmony in the region, they have no intentions to encircle India and denies its influence; China wants 'peaceful raise' and believes in 'peaceful co-existence'.

### **Indian Perspectives**

China is trying to accomplish maritime superiority and dominance in the Indian Ocean Region by the 'String of Pearls' strategy. In 'String of Pearls', every pearl act as a sphere of influence, these pearls make a chain of hubs that can serve military, intelligence and economic cores in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Indian defense experts claims that the 'String of Pearls' is a threat for India; it can cut off India's link from the rest of the world in case of war.

Gawadar Port which is a part of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is in control of China. Chinese military and naval ships presence in Gawadar port will make India susceptible in Arabian Sea and could pose problem if India tried to take any step against Pakistan. Myanmar's Kyaukpyu Port, will give China access to have a maritime commercial facility which can be used as a military facility at the time of conflict. It will also make it easy for China to reach Strait of Malacca; an airstrip in Myanmar could provide effective air cover for Chinese supplies and also in an event of blockade. Another main Chinese military base in Coco Islands, which are situated at south of Myanmar, close to vicinity of Indian shores, and at north of Coco Islands Indian Islands Nicobar and Andaman are present, which are strategically very significant in the event of war.

Hambantota Port, in the southern eastern side of Sri Lanka will provide handy in reconnaissance of Indian navy. China has provided assistance to Sri Lanka in major infrastructure projects including; Colombo-Katunayake Expressway (US 248.3 million dollars), Norochcholai Coal Power Plant Project (US 855 million dollars), and Rural Electrification Expansion and Development Project (US 45 million dollars) (Ranashinghe, 2011). Economic relation between China and India has been prospered from 1995-2005, resulting in an abundance of diplomatic initiatives and trade agreements (Ranashinghe, 2011, p. 58). Now China can emerge as Sri Lanka's major trading partner and has replaced Japan as the major aid donor (Pant, 2010).

China is biggest trading country of Bangladesh; China has developed the port of Chittagong (Bangladesh) which provides a station to Chinese to be used in heart of Bay of Bengal. Dacca has also provided container shipping facility to China (Choudhury, 2013). China is the major supplier of military hardware for Bangladesh's ground forces, air force and navy (Choudhury, 2013, p. 5). According to Indian observers, China is also pushing Bangladesh to allow China to elaborate a naval base with Chittagong (Dabas, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

Bilateral relations between India and China are continued to characterize by a major imbalance in threat perceptions. Chinese views towards India, meanwhile, are characterized by neutrality and despise. The Chinese nationalist have argued that India

is not a first-class major power; it is being misled by US and Japan to contain China. Due to blind arrogance of Indian elite's confidence in their democracy and inferiority of its ordinary people, very few Indians are able to treat Indo-Sino relations objectively, accurately, and rationally. There is a competition in between China and India where sphere of influence overlap (I-e Nepal and Myanmar). The Indian elites are influenced by American zero-sum strategic mentality which is restraining Indian decision makers from multilaterally beneficial win-win initiative of mega-projects. This zero-sum competition is likely to shape regional politics for the foreseeable future. Many countries are attracted by the prospects of billions of dollars of Chinese investments in infrastructure and energy projects, many countries have gladly accepted this initiative and accorded to participate in it. India has seized this economic opportunity of Belt and Road initiative. At present, the GDP (Gross Domestic Products) of India is roughly that of China in 2004, about thirteen years ago. India has limited resources, if India agreed to participate in One Belt One Road (OBOR) project; it will improve Indian connectivity to major markets and resources. India's participation in OBOR (One Belt, One Road) will give huge economic boost to Indian economy because it will connect India with world economies especially integration with Eurasian economy. India will also get oil and gas pipelines from Central Asian Republics which will fulfill energy requirements of India, I-e gas pipelines which are connecting Iran and Pakistan will also connect India, India will fulfill its infrastructure demands with OBOR (One Belt, One Road) initiative particularly in northeast regions of India; Indian participation in OBOR (One Belt, One Road) project will build up trust between China and India, it will help India to solve boarder issues with China on Ladakh and Arnuchal (Chinese referred to it as South Tibet)quarreled territories. This initiative will also provide a platform for peaceful solution of the problems.

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