

Maritime Politics in South Asia and Naval Compulsions of CPEC for Pakistan

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Abstract

[The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), highlighted both by Chinese and Pakistani leadership as the flagship project of Beijing's 'Belt and Road (BRI) Initiative,' is essentially a long-term plan for closer economic partnership. It promises immense benefits not only for the two nations directly involved but for the entire region, especially in terms of trade, transit and transportation. But at the same time, the development of sea-ports as part of BRI in general and Gwadar as part of CPEC in particular has provided a context to India to magnify its 'concerns' and aim for a renewed naval build-up. Chinese larger strategy is also seen by experts in the region and beyond as starting a new maritime contest in the so-called Indian Ocean. In this background, it seems that CPEC would lead toward increased maritime politics and contestations not only between Pakistan and India but would also involve China and US. Islamabad needs to carefully evaluate its options and develop its strategic response accordingly, involving but not limited to continuous development of its naval capability and an even closer maritime cooperation with China. – *Editors.*]

Introduction

The epitome of sea power cannot be studied exclusively from the significance of land and aerial powers. The three domains of forces have always considered to be an essential feature for protecting the sovereign values of states. The defence of sea-lanes and protection of oceanic borders cannot be achieved without the existence of a strong naval force. The maritime security and politics of ocean highlighted by Alfred Mahan and Julian Corbett have always remained an integral part of maritime strategic thought and politics. The geopolitical intellect of both these scholars always remained an important feature of the discourse on world politics.

China's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) and fast paced pushes under BRI for building stronger economic partnerships with countries such as Pakistan have ignited a new debate on strategic and security dimensions

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of these partnerships, including the linkages with maritime security. BRI is a mega set of China's long-term plans of building land-based trade routes and economic corridors accompanied as well by maritime connections, including but not limited to development of ports in and with the partner countries. In this respect, Beijing has introduced various economic projects and Beijing-sponsored trade agreements for different regions, including South Asia.

The signing of an economic corridor agreement with Islamabad, i.e., China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), in 2013, while essentially an initiative for a robust economic partnership, has also been seen in the light of Beijing's perceived geostrategic ambitions to influence South Asia, by some regional and extra-regional countries. Both the states have already initiated the development of Gwadar Port as a modern harbour along with several other economic initiatives. The development of this warm-water port in Arabian Sea has larger implications being an essential feature of Beijing's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road – the 'Road' part of BRI.

No doubt, the Chinese-sponsored mega plan for regional connectivity will explore countless economic avenues for states from diverse regions. But at the same time strategic implications arising out of fears of regional and extra regional players, notwithstanding the genuineness or otherwise of such concerns, demand serious attention in Pakistan. The uncalculated risks, unmeasured threats, and unassessed consequences need a thoughtful survey of economic development under regional connectivity envisaged in CPEC.

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Some observers are of the view that the primary purpose of CPEC under BRI is to seek and maintain enhanced Chinese geopolitical influence in South Asia. The Beijing-Islamabad economic cooperation will create new avenues while exploring diverse economic opportunities, but it will also ignite maritime politics in the region. While Pakistan's oceanic security coupled with maritime border has already been jeopardized by Indian rapid naval development and consistent marine infringements, the Indo-US strategic nexus will further exacerbate the maritime competition in South Asia.¹

¹ Ajay Patnaik, *Central Asia: Geopolitics, Security and Stability* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 146.

Therefore, central theme of the paper revolves around the maritime security challenges that may result from BRI / CPEC and their implications for Pakistan. Furthermore, a comprehensively critical evaluation of ongoing bilateral Sino-Pak cooperative patterns will be discussed which is an area missing the due scholarly attention. In short, the fundamental objective of the paper is to provide critical appreciation of security challenges that may result out of fears of neighbouring states from CPEC in particular and Chinese Maritime Silk Road in general.

Strategic Significance of Sea Power

The history of naval warfare or conflict over sea-lanes is rooted in ancient times when the rivers, canals and seas were considered the viable option for travel, trade, and transportation. The main navigational points of the world, gradually, attracted the powerful nations to use their sea vessels for maximizing the economic gains. The scientific inventions developed transportation and an improved system of water navigation resulted in the Industrial Revolution. The construction of bridges, canals and creation of steam engines, further squeezed the world. Moreover, growth of waterways resulted in commercial rivalries or the conflicting claims over strategic chokepoints. The projection of armies parallel to trading goods, through river ways resulted in a worldwide strategic culture of empire building.

The utilization of seas for commerce in lieu of projecting seashore power has always remained an indisputable imperative of state's sovereign values. The coastal areas (less than 80km from the sea) contain two third of global population.² The sea trade generated strategic clashes throughout history because 90% of the trade between states passes through intercontinental oceanic links. A network of 4000 major ports along with some ninety thousand commercial ships are involved in sea-based trade around the world.³ An effective control of oceanic strategic locations includes the control of canals, straits and chokepoints, strengthening state power as a consequence. Thus, sea power cannot be separated from land and aerial domains of power.

In this overall context, the significance of maritime politics and its close linkages with world politics is an undeniable reality of international system. The expanding strategic competition between great powers unambiguously use the sea-lanes to capture victorious points of

² Kaleem Shaukat, "Role of Pakistan Navy and Seaward Defence," *Hilal*, Vol, 53, (July 2006), <http://hilal.gov.pk/index.php/layouts/item/2176-role-of-pakistan-navy-and-seaward-defence>

³ Ibid.

oceans. The leading architectures of national security strategies always prefer to correspondingly signify the maritime security cemented in sea power in their strategic priorities.

Theoretical Dimension of Maritime Security

The Greco-Persian wars between Greek city states and Persian Empire pointedly considered to be the first large scale naval conflict in the world. The ancient Greek literature of Homer, exclusively the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, discusses the role of sea power while describing the conflict (or Trojan War) between Athens and Spartans. Another Greek historian and father of political realism, Thucydides, focuses the significance of sea power while explaining the nature of Athens-Sparta's war under *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. The maritime conflict between the Greek city states was originally started from Delian League which was founded in 477 BC. The members of the league had spread across the Aegean Sea which initiated the Peloponnesian War. In short, the classical Greek literature emphasized the significance of naval powers and its inseparable connection with the sovereign states.

The philosophical basis of maritime security in world politics and its essence in the life of a state is highlighted further by an American admiral, Alfred Thayer Mahan, in *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History (1660-1783)*. In 1890, Mahan's work strengthened the American positions in the Caribbean and the Pacific Ocean. Another geostrategic of maritime school of thought, Julian Stafford Corbett, supported the Mahan's ideas while expressing his scholarly view on naval power in *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy (1919)*. Corbett's empowered the strategic position of Royal Navy in the oceans. Both scholars of naval warfare emphasized the command of seas or the navigational water-paths. Several other naval strategists reinforced the ideas of Mahan and Corbett parallel to their own strategic intellects.

The imperial ambitions of great powers further enhanced and empowered the development of strong navies. The naval strategists granted the states strong navies which can certainly navigate in seas while subduing the rival navies. The naval conflicts of Haitian, Roman, Persian, Ottoman, Russian or British empires mainly occurred in sea-lanes. The command of sea or control of principle navigational waterways were the central point of disagreement in strategic thinking of empires which initiated naval clashes in the international system. The contesting models of empires for expanding and maintaining their sphere of influences caused countless oceanic battles.

The Han Dynasty of China (207 BC–220 AD) introduced and promoted the notion of Silk Route which spread across Asia. The Chinese access from Southeast Asia to Horn of Africa including Persia and Arabia, Central and South Asia, Europe and Africa, maintained economic, cultural and political links between different civilizations. The fall of Mongol Empire fractured the trading contacts under Silk Route between states of different regions. The emergence of Byzantine and Ottoman Empires further deteriorated the Silk Route. The European mercantilism and Ottoman response separated the European continent from Silk Route. As a result, the Ming Dynasty preferred to adopt the economic isolationism, which led to weakening the notion of ancient Silk Route.

China's Maritime Silk Road

Chinese initiatives of recent years such as Trans–Siberian Railway (between Europe and Asia), Trans–Mongolian Railway (from China to Russia), and Eurasian Land Bridge reflect the revival of traditional Chinese notion of Silk Route. The Chinese government intends to expand the Silk Route project beyond neighbouring Eurasian states. The “Silk Road Economic Belt”, mentioned first by Xi Jinping during a visit to Astana in 2013 and now the ‘Belt’ part of BRI, will enable Beijing to recover the lost routes of ancient Silk Route.⁴

It all is not restricted to the development of continental infrastructure, but also emphasizes the advancement of coastal areas under the 2st Century Maritime Silk Road. A network of ports “across South East Asia, South Asia, the Gulf, East Africa and the Mediterranean, forming a loop terminating at Piraeus (Greece), Venice (Italy) and Rotterdam (Netherlands) in Europe and Mombasa (Kenya) in Africa”⁵ will be a major part of this Maritime Silk Road. In South Asia, a substantial network of ports with several States (Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar) is part of it.⁶ Therefore, a combination of continental and maritime links under BRI creates closer connectivity of China with different regions. The regional connectivity through economic collaboration is an attempt to recall the values of durable peace, sustainable development, and long-term cooperation for mutual benefits attached to ancient Silk Route project, according to Chinese

⁴ Alexander Cooley, “New Silk Route or Classical Development Cul-de-Sac? The Prospects and Challenges of China’s OBOR Initiative,” *PONARS Eurasia*, Policy Memo. 372, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/new-silk-route-or-classic-developmental-cul-de-sac>

⁵ Shyam Saran. “Road Strategy Means for India, Asia and the World,” *The Wire*, September 10, 2015, <http://thewire.in/12532/what-chinas-one-belt-and-one-road-strategy-means-for-india-asia-and-the-world/>

⁶ R. Sidda Goud et al., *Sino – Indian Relations: Contemporary Perspective* (New Delhi: Allied Publishing, 2016), 136.

government.⁷ The states located along the Belt and Road will be able to improve their infrastructure. Moreover, the economic connections will also create social links among different states.

The Politics of CPEC

BRI, ostensibly a project of mutual economic development, is now increasingly seen as an irrefutable part of international geopolitical competition between major powers. An amalgamation of economic and strategic objectives attached to it are viewed as altering the strategic scenery of international system. BRI of China and American-pushed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) can be regarded as two initiatives attempting to counter each other. Another US-designed and -backed economic initiative with European States under Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) is also in the process. The move for closer US–EU economic relations were initiated by President Obama in the State of the Union Address of 2013.⁸

Beijing, on its part, is consistently engaged in designing several projects to secure greater share in international market, countering the rival moves. The Eurasian based economic integration under Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and its expected expansion to South Asia in addition to Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) are the considerable multilateral frameworks promoted by China to prestigiously capture a vital position in world politics while securing its economic and strategic interests. Made in China 2025 is one of the principle projects of China which is primarily developed to meet new demands of emerging markets across the globe.⁹ In short, a widespread application of Chinese economic strategy is diminishing the space of its opponents across the globe.

The expansion of Chinese trading and commercial proposals through inter- and intra-regional connectivity under BRI involving Asia, Africa and Europe is a considerable effort to confront American influence. In South Asian perspective, the successful moving ahead of CPEC, including the positing of Gwadar port as a regional hub, becomes a focus of BRI.

⁷ "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road," Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China with State Council Authorization, March 2015, http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html

⁸ Kyriakos N. Demetrious et al., *The European Union in Crisis: Explorations in Representation and Democratic Legitimacy* (New York: Springer, 2015), 245.

⁹ Scott Kennedy, "Made in China 2025," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, June 01, 2015, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/made-china-2025>

Besides its economic strength, the strategic implications for regional security environment should also be studied independently in this overall context. Considering that CPEC has given India a new pretext to highlight the perceived increased Chinese strategic influence in this part of the world, it becomes important to analyse from a Pakistani view that what strategic challenges the coming Indian postures may pose to Pakistan's overall security milieu. It is important to mention here that New Delhi has already achieved its nuclear triad capability by successfully launching nuclear capable submarine to threaten the regional counterbalancing state – Pakistan. Thus, CPEC particularly the development of Gwadar port has the potential to transform the South Asian strategic culture from a largely continental to a significantly oceanic one.

Naval Developments

New Delhi's scuttle response toward Gwadar and increasing Chinese role in Indian Ocean has resulted in massive Indian naval development. The launching of a nuclear laced submarine (Arihant Class) empowered New Delhi's offensive role in Indian Ocean. The acquisition of triad nuclear structure helped India to maintain its oceanic deterrence. Further improvements on another nuclear capable submarine are in process.¹⁰ The New Delhi's offensive ambitions to deter its neighbours in the Sea has jeopardized the security of Islamabad's maritime borders.

Apart from Pakistan, the swiftly stretching Indian naval muscles are designed to counter People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLA-N, the Chinese Navy) in Indian Ocean. The probability of conflict between New Delhi and Beijing in Indian Ocean is regarded as high in future. China's signing of various economic deals along with several construction projects, including the developments of ports with Islamabad, Dhaka, Colombo and Naypyidaw have largely been seen in India as carrying expansionist ambitions. The emergence of such seaborne contest over South Asian waters has resulted in Indian and Chinese naval

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¹⁰ Gurmeet Kanwal, "India's Nuclear Force Structure 2025," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 30, 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/30/india-s-nuclear-force-structure-2025-pub-63988>

developments.¹¹ In spite of Pak-China bilateral naval collaboration, that has been enhanced significantly in recent years particularly after the advent of BRI, the Pak-India naval asymmetry is an undeniable reality and a strategic concern for many in Islamabad.

The Pak-India blame game has reached to its zenith with exchange of the statements accusing each other of maritime terrorism. While the Indian authorities claimed to have communicated what they saw as the security challenges to Chinese interests arising out of possible terrorism in Arabian Sea,¹² China has appeared convinced to actively work with Pakistan in counterterror activities. Beijing does realize that terror remains as a major challenge to Gwadar and the economic corridor as well and the adversaries of the two countries may exploit the situation.¹³ The Chinese officials have also announced additional financial assistance for counterterrorism campaign in Pakistan while keeping in view the potential challenges to the security situation of Xinjiang.¹⁴

As mentioned above, the maritime security challenges in South Asia have launched a new era of massive naval developments in the region. It seems that a naval race between India and Pakistan is going to be an incontestable feature of South Asian strategic culture in years ahead. The emerging competition between both regional powers, China and India, will be architecting the future of maritime politics in South Asia. The contesting naval attributes of New Delhi and Beijing are now transforming their contest from South China Sea to Arabian Sea, and it will also push Pakistan to match its naval capabilities to arch rival India. Beijing has agreed to help Pakistan for the strengthening of its maritime security. In this way, the robust security mechanism of Pakistan's oceanic boundaries will ultimately secure Pak-China economic cooperation under CPEC.

South Asian Future

The multidimensional diplomatic connections between Beijing and Islamabad have resulted in increased trade and commercial ties while facilitating the construction of Gwadar port which will be an economic

¹¹ Eleanor Albert, "Competition in the Indian Ocean," Council on Foreign Relations, May 19, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/regional-security/competition-indian-ocean/p37201>

¹² Aman M. Hingorani, *Unravelling the Kashmir Knot* (New Delhi: SAGE, 2016), 267.

¹³ Atul Aneja, "Xi Comes Calling to Pakistan, Bearing Gifts Worth \$45 Billion," *The Hindu*, April 18, 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/xi-jinping-visit-to-pakistan-previous/article7114980.ece>

¹⁴ Andrew Stevens, "Pakistan Lands \$46 Billion Investment from China," *CNN*, April 20, 2015, <http://money.cnn.com/2015/04/20/news/economy/pakistan-china-aid-infrastructure/>

trade route for China. The construction of Gwadar port will connect China to the rest of the world by becoming a window of opportunities for Central Asian states as well. The Beijing's support for Gwadar port will enhance the economic potential of Pakistan and China, along with integrating the economies of Asian region.

The critical behaviour of India covered in offensive reaction to CPEC is highly troublesome point for the corridor projects. Indian proposal of India-China-Silk Route Corridor (ICSRC) based on Ladakh–Xinjiang connection is an indication of how India might attempt to woo China with an alternate of CPEC to China.¹⁵ The proposal was aimed at exploiting Pakistan's internal security situation by proclaiming Pakistan as an inappropriate state for the economic corridor project. The attempt to negatively portray Pakistan globally is to broadly degrade Pakistan's role in the regional politics of South Asia particularly, and Indian Ocean generally. Moreover, the Indo–Iran collaboration on Chabahar port project reflects New Delhi's larger geo–strategic response to Pak-China partnership specially Gwadar port. In order to gain Central Asian and Middle Eastern access and in an attempt to undermine Pakistan economic ambitions, India has included Afghanistan in its Chabahar project.¹⁶

The Chinese Blue Ocean Strategy revolves around the creation of Maritime Silk Road. China's rapidly growing interest in Arabian Sea through Gwadar is also seen in India as an attempt to counter Indian expanding influence from South to Southeast Asian seas. The Indian centric claims over Indian Ocean is going to a sea – based competition between India and China. The outbreak of an oceanic clash between New Delhi and Beijing is portraying a troublesome future of South Asia for Islamabad. The consequence of such maritime politics exploited by Indian naval adventurism will increase the maritime insecurities in the region. The

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¹⁵ P. Stobdan, "The Need for Haste on Pakistan – occupied Kashmir: China Pakistan Economic Corridor Needs a Counter Strategy," *Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis*, October 07, 2015. http://www.idsa.in/system/files/policybrief/PB_PStobdan071015.pdf

¹⁶ "India's Chabahar Port Plan is to Counter Our Gwadar Port Plan: Chinese Media," *The Hindu*, June 07, 2016, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/indias-chabahar-port-plan-is-to-counter-our-gwadar-port-plan-china-media/article8700691.ece>

protection of China's maritime interests has forced Beijing to sign additional agreements for substantial ports' developments with other South Asian states.¹⁷ Therefore, Pakistan unwillingly is accepting the emerging oceanic political models of South Asia where Indian marine infringements along with its seaborne deterring capabilities are great concerns for Pakistan. The Arabian Sea, as an integral part of Indo-Pacific Ocean would not be spared from Sino-Indian competition in which Pakistan's strategic location will be based on Islamabad's well equipped naval capabilities.

Options for Pakistan

The state authorities in Islamabad need to keep in view the fact that CPEC which is essentially an economic plan, may have some strategic implications, mainly in response. The emergence of Beijing's Continental Maritime regime globally will have strong impacts on its neighbouring states and adjoined regions. In response to swiftly changing strategic game in the region, a persistent trend in naval development is a viable option for Pakistan. A technologically advanced and highly equipped naval force has become a dire need of Islamabad. The naval advancement will correctly secure Pakistan's position in the age of an active maritime South Asia.

Moreover, in response to Chinese concern over the militancy in Xinjiang, Islamabad has announced a plan for effective promotion of cooperation in areas across Pak-China border. While exploring maximum opportunities from CPEC, Islamabad has established a vision of economically developed Pakistan by 2025.¹⁸ The security forces are aiming to neutralize the potential challenges to the CPEC. A force of well equipped 8,000 guards has been deployed for the security of 8,112 Chinese citizens working for 210 initial projects. A second batch of 12,000 soldiers will be added further to enhance existing security mechanism.¹⁹ The security of Chinese engineers working in Pakistan is presently serving Islamabad's objectives. The actual challenge for Islamabad is the maritime security along with Pakistan's interests in Arabian Sea.

¹⁷ Christophe Jaffrelot, "A Tale of Two Ports," *Yale Global Online*, January 07, 2011, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/tale-two-ports>

¹⁸ "Pakistan Needs a Long March for Economic Revival: Ahsan Iqbal," Ministry of Planning, Development & Reforms, <http://www.pc.gov.pk/?cat=12&paged=1>

¹⁹ Zahid Gishkori, "Economic Corridor: 12,000 - Strong Force to Guard Chinese Workers," *The Express Tribune*, March 30, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/861078/economic-corridor-12000-strong-force-to-guard-chinese-workers/>

A comprehensive analysis of Chinese strategic interest in Indian Ocean will help Pakistan to conceptualize the future politics of South Asia. Beijing's ambitions to influence Indian Ocean will help China to secure its future in South China Sea. A persistently growing naval collaboration among India, US, and Japan is a further point of concern not only for Pakistan, but China as well. Therefore, policymakers from Islamabad needs to pay attention on geostrategic interests of competing states changing strategic landscape of the broader region.

An exclusive analysis indicates that smart diplomacy of friendly-rival model of Sino-India relations in the presence of Indo-US close alliance should be seen as an option for Pakistan before accommodating any change in the region.²⁰ A broader analysis of changing strategic culture of South Asia cannot be completed without calculating the counter-offensive reaction of India on the CPEC.

The Indian blame calling Pakistan as a state sponsoring terrorism should be responded to, resoundingly. In this way, a set of adequate measures to enhance the security of Pakistan's maritime borders is among the important needs of time. Enhancing Pak-China naval cooperation and making it responsive to emerging alignments in the region specially Indo-US strategic alliance is imperative. Delhi's monitoring of Pakistan's economic developments in bilateral relations with China along with its close ties with Washington is serious challenge for Pakistan. Overall, Pakistan needs to prefer a pragmatic approach over its optimistic vision of economic development under CPEC. The maintenance of strong navy will be an unquestionable component of Islamabad's national security strategy in future. An application of realist-driven ideas on new economic engagements for Pakistan would be useful, otherwise the sceptical strategic assessments about Maritime South Asia could be troublesome for Islamabad in future.

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Conclusion

The Chinese notion of Maritime Silk Road is turning South Asian geopolitics into maritime politics in which the states with strong naval capabilities will be able to ensure their maritime survival. China's

²⁰ P S Suryanarayana, *Smart Diplomacy: Exploring China – India Synergy* (New Jersey: World Century Publishing, 2016) 56.

strategic outreach is going to augment an unending strategic competition between major powers in South Asia. The combination of continental and maritime economic plans is Beijing's geostrategic pronouncement which is going to launch a new age of economic competition along with strategic struggle. The CPEC as an integral part of BRI in this overall context should not entirely be regarded as an economic opportunity. It is more a pragmatic approach to influence the international political landscape by creating Beijing's dependants across the globe. The economic allies of China located in different regions as partners in BRI under a mutually dependent scenario would also be serving Beijing's strategic interests effectively.

The construction of a Chinese-influenced port in Arabian Sea is going to provide a context to New Delhi for further aggressive naval developments that would consistently undermine the security of Pakistan's maritime borders. The main security architects from Islamabad need to accurately calculate its security challenges from neighbouring states while accepting any change in regional landscape of South Asia. In order to overcome the awful maritime situation, Islamabad needs to focus the naval advancement.

Rapidly growing Indian naval capabilities under conventional and nuclear arms are dragging Pakistan towards oceanic competition. The swelling nature of Indian naval force is pushing Pakistan toward seaborne domain of South Asian politics while inviting China to counterbalance India. Moreover, the Chinese Maritime developments are not purely confined to economic developments. In short, the active involvement of extra-regional power will intensify the existing conflict oriented landscape

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of South Asia. The never-ending multipronged and dogmatically protracted clash between New Delhi and Islamabad will never leave the inescapable contesting connections between Washington and Beijing. The fight for global leadership and political dominance once again is going to ruin strategic fate of South Asia where the intense involvement of extra-regional powers always tries

to redefine the regional political patterns. A robust naval force under highly developed navigational infrastructure can ensure the success of CPEC. The establishment of a strong naval force can also secure Pakistan's maritime borders while neutralizing the offensive maritime developments of India.

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