

STRATEGIC CHESSBOARD: EXAMINING THE INTERPLAY OF SAUDI ARABIA, IRAN, INDIA, AND PAKISTAN AMIDST GLOBAL POWER SHIFTS

Mubashar Hassan Shahid*

Abstract

The rise of China has seemingly brought it on a collision course with the preeminent power, The United States of America. This has convinced various states most notably India, Pakistan, Iran, and the Gulf countries to re-orient their foreign policies. China's investments through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), QUAD's resurgence, Israel's foray into the Arab countries, and persistent American support to enhance India's stature at par with China, have pushed the Indian Ocean Region to be at the epicenter of all global rivalries. The presence of extra regional forces in Western Indian Ocean Region has ensured some semblance of stability in the region but it is the complex, interdependent relationship between strategically co-located states of Saudi Arabia, Iran, India, and Pakistan under the shadow of China-USA competition that is the objective of this study.

Keywords: *Western Indian Ocean Region, Abraham Accords, QUAD, Belt and Road Initiative*

"If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner."

Nelson Mandela

Introduction

The fall of Soviet Union was not triggered by a military failure but rather an economic failure where the Soviet economy could not grow enough to support the military expenditure required to balance American military prowess. It was also the success of the Americans in making successful alliances such as NATO and cultivation of other third world friends and allies in the form of Pakistan, Indonesia and Egypt. These are one of the few reasons listed by Kishore Mahbubani in

* DS(Navy) at PAF Air War College Institute, Karachi and a PhD scholar in International Relations, University of Karachi. Email: mushi437@gmail.com

how the USA defeated Soviet Union.¹ China on the other hand has learnt these lessons and has applied them astutely while it prepares for global influence. China's economic rise has been unprecedented but it still lags behind the immense American industrial and military might.² Doubts have been raised on whether the figures quoted for Chinese defense budget are accurate but there is no doubt that Chinese progress has alarmed the Americans.³

Table 1: China – USA Comparison

Parameters	China	USA
GDP per capita (thousands of \$)	89.5 (1960) 12720.2 (2022)	23888.6 (1960) 76398.6 (2022)
GDP per capita -Purchasing Power Parity (current int \$)	981.4 (1990) 21475.6 (2022)	23888.6 (1990) 76398 (2022)
GDP % of global economy	18.6 % (ranks 1 st)	13.6% (ranks 3 rd)
Defense Spending	242 billion \$ (2022)	767 billion (2022)
Payments from Intellectual property rights	12 billion \$ (2021)	125 billion \$ (2021)

Source: Author's compilation.

China may lag behind in certain numbers but its rise has been nothing less than extraordinary. To pull around 700 million people out of poverty over four decades is undoubtedly a great feat.⁴ Nevertheless, China with its first overseas base in Djibouti coupled with economic ties led by infrastructure projects in key states as far as Kenya, Tanzania, and Madagascar has slowly done away with Deng Xiaoping's adage of "keeping a low profile and biding one's time."⁵ All of this has not gone unnoticed.

This American fear of a global competitor in the shape of China has been evident since 2000 when Condoleezza Rice, then a foreign policy advisor to the Republican presidential election campaign's candidate George W. Bush Jr. She had identified China as a "strategic competitor" that "would like to alter Asia's balance of power in its favor" while proposing that the United States "should never be afraid to confront

¹ Kishore Mahbubani, *Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2022).

² Wohlforth Brooks, Stephen G. William C., "The Myth of Multipolarity, *Foreign Affairs*," June 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/china>.

³ Beaver Robertson, Peter Wilson, "China's Defense Budget Is Much Bigger Than It Looks," *Foreign Policy*, September 19, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/19/>

⁴ World Bank, *Four Decades of Poverty Reduction in China: Drivers, Insights for the World, and the Way Ahead* (The World Bank, 2022)

⁵ Yan Xuetong, "From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, April 22, 2014.

Beijing when their interests collide."⁶ The USA sees China as the only state with both the capacity and intent to reshape the international order to achieve greater political influence in the region.⁷ NATO also perceives China's ambitions and coercive policies such as its hybrid and cyber operations and its confrontational rhetoric and disinformation campaigns as a challenge to its interests, security, and values.⁸ However, the continued success of the Chinese in finding new partners and the residual effects of the Trump Presidency's America First policy has driven the Americans to aggressively engage with India and to prop it up against China. Similarly, Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific,"⁹ India's "Act East Policy," South Korea's "New Southern Policy"¹⁰ and Australia's "Pacific Step-up"¹¹ have been developed to encourage deeper and dedicated bilateral coordination and cooperation amongst the Indo-Pacific countries primarily to ensure their interests against China's problematic behaviour.^{12 13 14}

⁶ Condoleezza Rice, "Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 1 (2000): 45.

⁷ "National Security Strategy," *White House* (Washington, 12 October 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/>

⁸ "NATO Strategic Concept 2022," June 29, 2022, www.nato.int/strategic-concept/

⁹ Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific is primarily based on maintaining a rules-based order, freedom of navigation and deepening defence and technological cooperation with states having common interests in Indo-Pacific Region.

¹⁰ The New Southern Policy (NSP) is founded on the principles of People, Peace, and Prosperity. 'People' aims to make safer, better lives with greater interaction between South Korea, ASEAN member states, and India. 'Peace' seeks a community where all are free from fear or threat while 'Prosperity' aims to create mutually beneficial and future-oriented economic cooperation.

¹¹ Pacific Step Up aims to make friends and influence the people of the Pacific region. It is an engagement-type strategy that primarily aims to ensure that China's ingress into Pacific islands is curtailed to ensure the preservation of Australian interests. Australia's Defence White Paper 2016 and Foreign Policy White Paper 2017 also call for thriving, successful and a safe Indo-Pacific region.

¹² Jagannath P. Panda and Ernest Gunasekara-Rockwell, *Quad Plus and Indo-Pacific: The Changing Profile of International Relations*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2021)

¹³ 'Indo-Pacific' is defined as a region ranging from ranging from the eastern shores of Africa including Arabian Sea till the western coast of the United States.

This paper intends to study the relationship between four states i.e. India, Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia in the backdrop of the challenges being faced in the Arabian Sea/ Western Indian Ocean region. It is important to analyze how important one state is to the other and how a relationship between two states is impacted by remaining two states with Sino-American rivalry in the background.

China and BRI

China's Belt and Road Initiative, initially coined by Chinese Premier Xi Jinping is a grand plan to ensure increased domestic productivity, improved industrial standards, while enhancing regional and international connectivity. China geographically has coastal regions on the east with all its Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) moving through Malacca Strait. This is a major dependency for which China requires adequate alternative options to overcome the oft-titled 'Malacca Dilemma.'¹⁵ It would offer development opportunities to eastern and central regions of China at par with the coastal China. It would allow for the opening of new markets and thus resolve issues of excess industrial production.¹⁶ However, not everyone views BRI simply from the lens of development. Many states view it as a Chinese effort to propagate its economic and political influence while describing it as a 'debt trap'. This 'unsustainable debt' as it is oft-titled can be gauged from the fact that China's high-speed rail project in Laos will cost almost half of the Laos's GDP.¹⁷ Four projects i.e. Gwadar Port in Pakistan, Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, Koh Kong Port in Cambodia and Kyaukphyu Port in Myanmar in the Belt and Road Initiative are the cornerstones of China's increased political influence and economic connectivity.¹⁸ Out of these four ports, Gwadar and Hambantota stand out due to their geo-strategic location.

¹⁴ "Antony Blinken Calls China's Behaviour in the Pacific 'Problematic' on Visit to Tonga," *The Guardian*, July 26, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/>

¹⁵ Marc Lanteigne, "China's Maritime Security and the "Malacca Dilemma," *Asian Security*, (2008) 4(2), 143-161.

¹⁶ Daniel Lindley, "Assessing China's Motives: How the Belt and Road Initiative Threatens US Interests," *Journal of Indo Pacific Affairs*, no. July August 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Jul/31>.

¹⁷ Dylan Gerstel, "It's a (Debt) Trap! Managing China-IMF Cooperation Across the Belt and Road," *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, October 17, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/>.

¹⁸ Daniel R Russel and Blake H Berger, "Weaponizing the Belt and Road Initiative," *Asia Society Policy Institute*, September 2020, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/>

Hambantota Port

The origins of Chinese investment in Hambantota Port are surprisingly found in the American lease of Diego Garcia from the United Kingdom in 1966 located in the Chagos Archipelago in the Indian Ocean.¹⁹ During the Sino-Indian War of 1962, the Americans felt it necessary to have a base in the Indian Ocean especially when they felt the absence of permanent American air power presence in the region.²⁰ However, despite Western concerns, the Chinese have shown no inclination to use of Hambantota Port for military purposes. The Sri Lankan Port Authority created two subsidiaries i.e. The Hambantota International Port Group (HIPG) and Hambantota International Port Services (HIPS). HIPG was tasked to operate and develop the Port on a 99 year lease which subsequently sold its 85 per cent shares to China Merchant Port (short titled CMPort).²¹ The signing of a terminal Service Agreement with a Japanese firm NYK for a Roll-on Roll-off facility has further lifted the fog over the Port's future.²²

Gwadar Port

Gwadar on the other hand offers the same Geo Strategic location not just to Pakistan but to all countries having their political, economic and security interests in the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea. With the economic interdependence of various countries dependent on oil flowing safely out of the Persian Gulf, almost every country is interested in the safety and security of shipping lanes. Gwadar not only offers an alternate port to Pakistan away from the pre-dominant Indian threat but also offers connectivity to Western/ South Western Pakistan i.e. Balouchistan, one of the most backward regions of Pakistan. It also has the potential to offer connectivity to landlocked countries like Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics (CARs). But as with Hambantota Port, Gwadar Port's performance has yet to ruffle any feathers. As Hambantota Port, the Chinese have not shown any interest in operating military assets out of Gwadar Port.

¹⁹ "Exchange of Notes Constituting an Agreement Concerning the Availability for Defense Purposes of the British Indian Ocean Territory," December 30, 1966, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication>.

²⁰ Micheal McDevit, "Diego Garcia: An American Perspective," *The Interpreter*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>

²¹ Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, "Debunking the Myth of 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy': How Recipient Countries Shape China's Belt and Road Initiative," Asia-Pacific Programme, Chatham House, August 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites>.

²² Umesh Moramudali, "The Hambantota Port Deal: Myths and Realities," *The Diplomat*, January 1, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/>.

Suspicious over BRI

Suspicious over BRI have always existed. Former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson emphasized that Chinese opaque contracts, predatory loan practices, and corrupt deals are tools to advance its strategic interests in the region.²³ Ex-Secretary Defense of the USA, Mark T. Esper remarked during the Munich Security Conference in 2020 that China's overseas investments are forcing other nations into "*sub-optimal security decisions*," while in the same breath, he speaks of not seeking a conflict with China.²⁴ This all leads to fears that at some point in time, China would transform all these investments into Military bases and multiply its economic and political influence. But China's only acknowledged overseas military base is a PLA Djibouti Logistic Support Facility.²⁵ Djibouti is also home to Japanese, French and American bases primarily due to its location abreast Bab al-Mandeb strait. For China, importance of Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandeb is only second to the South China Sea and Malacca Straits primarily due to its economic concerns.²⁶

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) was originally formed as a loose organization between four states i.e. USA, Japan, Australia, and India as a coordination forum to respond to the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami and conduct Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations effectively. The late Japanese PM Shinzo Abe is considered the 'brainchild' behind the formation of QUAD and he stressed an open and transparent network amongst India, Japan, the USA, and Australia to allow for the free flow of people, goods, capital, and knowledge in his speech to the Indian

²³ Aman Thakker, "A Rising India in the Indian Ocean Needs a Strong Navy," *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, October 17, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/rising-india>.

²⁴ Mark T Esper, "As Prepared Remarks by Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper at the Munich Security Conference," U.S Department of Defense, Munich, February 15, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/>

²⁵ Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "China's Military Base in Djibouti: A Microcosm of China's Growing Competition with the United States and New Bipolarity," *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 125 (2 September 2020): 731-47.

²⁶ Bo Hu, Zhang Yanpei, and Geoffrey Till, *Chinese Maritime Power in the 21st Century: Strategic Planning, Policy and Predictions*, Cass Series : Naval Policy and History 64 (London ; New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2020)

Parliament in 2007.²⁷

Despite becoming dormant after the initial fanfare in 2007, Shinzo Abe after coming to power in 2012 re-emphasized the role of QUAD while expressing his concerns over China's intent and activities especially in South China Sea.²⁸ The 'America First Policy' propagated by ex-President Donald Trump created further misgivings in the US-China relationship. This mis trust has only grown during President Joe Biden's tenure. Biden's proposition to add 5G technology, Cyber security, Artificial Intelligence, Space technology, and most importantly adherence to a maritime rules-based order in South China and East China seas has furthered the objectives set forth for QUAD.²⁹

The competition between China and USA, world's 2nd and 3rd most populous states is taking place in Western Indian Ocean Region (WIOR) where China is trying to increase its sway through its flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India and Pakistan, world's top and 5th most populous states respectively are also co-located in the same region. The conversion of this American-Sino competition into confrontation may have unfavorable effects not just for Pakistan and India but also for Saudi Arabia and Iran, where both states are vying for regional influence. A stable relationship between these four states i.e. India, Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia has the potential to instill confidence in the region and bring development to an expanse where India lies 107th and Pakistan on 99th on 2022 Global Hunger Index ratings.³⁰

Graham Allison's magnum opus 'Destined for War' may have predicted a US-China conflict but where this conflict may manifest is yet to be determined.³¹ The geo-political dynamics of WIOR especially after the departure of American forces from Afghanistan, signing of Abraham Accords and Russo-Ukraine conflict has pushed the USA and China to increase their influence to protect their vital interests while expanding their political, economic and military horizons. For the Americans however, India, an original member of the QUAD, holds great importance.

²⁷ Shinzo Abe, "Confluence of the Two Seas' Parliament of the Republic of India," August 22, 2007, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>.

²⁸ Shinzo Abe, "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond," *Project Syndicate*, December 27, 2012, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/magazine/>

²⁹ "Joint Statement from Quad Leaders," *White House*, Washington, September 24, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/>

³⁰ Aakash Hasan, "India Gets Mixed Marks on Poverty, with Hunger Rank behind Pakistan," *Nikkei Asia*, October 30, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/>

³¹ Graham T. Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017)

India – Friend to Many

India is central to peace and harmony in the Western Indian Ocean Region (WIOR). It's not just because of its geographical location, size or population or its growing economic prowess, but simply because of the importance that is being accorded to it by the major powers in the form of export exemptions of Nuclear Supplier Group, arming it with the most potent military platforms or signing of strategic agreements in the form of COMCASA³², LEMOA³³, and BECA.³⁴ This is all to ensure that a strong India, with suitable political, economic and military support from like-minded countries would act as a counterbalance to China.³⁵

India, has dealt its cards very cleverly in light of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It has abstained from various UN resolutions on the Russo-Ukraine conflict and although it supported an inquiry into to Bucha Massacre, it did not mention Russia in its statement.³⁶ It continues to buy Russian oil and thus help finance the Russian 'Special Military Operation' in Ukraine but has not been sanctioned by the Americans or the West. It even escaped American sanctions for purchasing the Russian S-400 Air Defence System. To date, even the members of QUAD have accepted the Indian stance on Russia.³⁷ But there are doubts on how this will eventually play out as the USA describes it as the '*long game*.'³⁸ The recent humiliation of the Indian Billionaire owned Adani Group in which almost 135 billion US \$ were wiped off their value after the publishing of a damning report by Hindenburg Research on 24 January 2023 has been

³² COMCASA – Communications, Compatibility, and Security agreement allows India to purchase American secure communications and data equipment while being offered real-time data sharing over secure networks.

³³ LEMOA – Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement is a functional agreement that allows for the provision of essential supplies and services that one country would provide to another.

³⁴ BECA – Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement gives India access to American geo-spatial intelligence which improves the accuracy of its automated systems and other weapons.

³⁵ "US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific," National Archives, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/>

³⁶ "Ukraine: India Strongly Condemns Bucha Civilian Killings," *BBC News*, April 6, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/>

³⁷ Kallol Bhattacharjee, "Quad Has Accepted Indian Stand on Ukraine, Says Australian Envoy," *The Hindu*, March 20, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/>

³⁸ K. Alan Kronstadt, "India-Russia Relations and Implications for U.S. Interests," Congressional Research Service (Washington, August 24, 2022), <https://sgp.fas.org/>.

labeled as an 'Attack on India.'³⁹ India's national security thinkers are still not as confident as they are in comparison to Russia especially when it comes down to Strategic cooperation.⁴⁰

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan helped make new friends and created mistrust in old ones. Iran refused to join directly the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia-USA support of Mujahideen against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. India had supported the Soviet entry into Afghanistan which was at the request of the then-Afghan government.⁴¹ Although the Mujahideen funded by the Americans and Saudis successfully drove the Soviets out, the civil war that ensued divided opinion within the region. Pakistan continued its support of the Mujahideen (later Taliban) while Iran supported the Northern Alliance. This was the first time, the interests of Iran and India aligned and since then there has been no turning back.⁴² The relations between the two countries have only improved and despite American sanctions undermining Indian investments, there is an understanding on the Iranian end of the Indian limitations. India has in the past made a string of investments in Iran based on its strategic interests. Before the imposition of sanctions, the India-Iran trade amounted to 17 billion US \$ which plummeted to less than 2 billion US \$ from April 2021 - January 2022. India was banking on two major investments in Iran i.e. Gas discovery in Farzad-B Gas Field and the rail link between Zahedan and Chahbahar, but were later taken over completely by Iran due to Indian fear of American sanctions.⁴³ The fact that around 85% of Indian crude oil imports pass the Strait of Hormuz till Russia-Ukraine conflict broke out, having good relations with Iran was in India's interests. These interests have only digressed into Gulf of Aden with increased Russian imports through Suez Canal.⁴⁴

³⁹ Annabelle Liang, "Adani Group: Embattled Indian Giant Strikes \$1.87bn US Deal," *BBC News*, March 3, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business->

⁴⁰ Ashley J. Tellis, "Completing the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Agreement: Fulfilling the Promises of a Summer Long Past, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace," <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/11/27/>

⁴¹ "India Supports Soviets' Afghan Position in U.N. Debate," *The Washington Post*, January 12, 1980, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/01/12/>

⁴² Kadira Pethiyagoda, "India's Pursuit of Strategic and Economic Interests in Iran," *Brookings Doha Centre*, September 2008, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/>

⁴³ "Iran Drops India from Key Chabahar Project," *Dawn*, 15 July 2020.

⁴⁴ Saurav Anand, "From Middle East to Moscow: India's Evolving Oil Routes Paint a New Energy Map, ET EnergyWorld," *Energyworld*, 21 September 2023, <https://energy.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/news/oil-and-gas/from->

Indian- Gulf Connection

India's influence in the Gulf region has steadily grown with the growth of its economy. GCC was India's largest trading partner bloc in FY 2021-22 with trade of over 154 billion US \$ which includes Indian exports of around 44 billion US \$ and imports of around 110 billion US \$.⁴⁵ Saudi exports alone to India have increased over an average rate of 10 per cent from 1995 (1.31 billion US \$) to 16.8 billion US \$ in 2020. Indian Maritime Strategy highlights the importance it attaches to the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, and Gulf of Aden in addition to the Malacca Straits and the Eastern coast of Africa.⁴⁶ It's also indicative of the importance India attaches to the countries of this region and more importantly, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar. Nonetheless, the projection of Indian Hindutva ideology across the Arabian Sea in to the Gulf states is viewed with great suspicion by the Arabs and their leadership.⁴⁷

Table 2: India & the Gulf Countries – Important Markers

	Bilateral trade (US\$)	Remarks
India – KSA	\$ 34.29 billion (2021) \$ 52.75 billion (2023)	Indian imports crude oil worth \$15.8 billion (2021)
India – UAE *	\$ 73 billion (2021)	3.5 million NRIs living in UAE
India – Qatar †	\$ 15 billion (2022)	50 per cent of Indian LNG imports come from Qatar
Total Remittances from NRIs +	\$ 100 billion from all over the world 68 per cent of NRIs live in Gulf Countries	

Sources: Author's compilation

Questions for India

"The RSS will either destroy India or India will destroy them."

middle-east-to-moscow-indias-evolving-oil-routes-paint-a-new-energy-map/103841163.

⁴⁵ "India-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Decide to Pursue Resumption of Free Trade Agreement (FTA) Negotiations ,"Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Govt of India, 25 November 2022, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage>.

⁴⁶ *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy* (New Delhi: Indian Navy, 2015).

⁴⁷ Kamran Yousaf, "India's Bonhomie with Gulf on Edge amid Muslim Prejudice," *Express Tribune*, April 21, 2020.

Arundhati Roy⁴⁸

The alignment of interests of the Americans and the West with India especially about India has indirectly pushed India into a downward spiral. Starting domestically, India's push towards Hindutva has marginalized all segments of society less the hardline Hindus. The desecration of Mosques, the public lynching of Muslims by Hindutva-driven fanatics, and the demolition of Muslim homes as corporal punishment have divided the once 'Secular India'.⁴⁹ The Legislative action against Muslims in the form of "anti-conversion" laws, which advocate against the perceived notion that Muslim men marry Hindu women so that the women can be converted to Islam has raised concerns for genocide in the making.⁵⁰ The Hijab controversy in the Southern province of Karnataka has brought out the evil from the bud. The judiciary is also being regulated in a fashion to ensure BJP's political objectives as a party are fulfilled.⁵¹

India currently lies at 161st position down from 140 in 2013 and 150 in 2022 in World Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Sans Frontiers.⁵² The treatment of international media in particular e.g. BBC in India with its offices being raided shows the other side of 'Shining India'. The silence from the Western leadership is astounding barring a few docile statements from the foreign office spokespersons. No notable opposition has come from any Western nation against Modi's suppression of minorities, media, the incidents at Manipur, and more importantly occupied Kashmir. The only opposition to Indian behaviour has come when Sikh leadership was targeted by Indian intelligence agents in Canada and USA.⁵³

Illegally Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) & India's Hybrid War against Pakistan

Its people are being suffocated. Ground down into some kind of powder. But still, they rise. The Kashmiri press has been garrotted. The Indian media just

⁴⁸ "Arundhati Roy interview with TRT World," TRT World, Last modified March 9, 2022, <https://www.trtworld.com/asia/rss->.

⁴⁹ Lindsey Maizland, "India's Muslims: An Increasingly Marginalized Population | Council on Foreign Relations," 14 July 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/>.

⁵⁰ "Genocide Watch - India Country Report 2023," (Genocide Watch, April 2023), https://www.genocidewatch.com/_files/ugd.

⁵¹ "Arundhati Roy interview with TRT World."

⁵² Reporters Sans Frontiers, Accessed September 15, 2023, <https://rsf.org/en/index>.

⁵³ "This Is What Canada Has Been Talking about, Says Trudeau after U.S. Charges Indian for Plotting Sikh Separatist's Murder," *The Hindu*, November 30, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/>

lies. The gates have been opened for Indians to flood in and overwhelm Kashmir by just their sheer numbers.

Arundhati Roy⁵⁴

Kashmir by far is the core unresolved conflict between two nuclear-powered neighbouring states, India and Pakistan. All past efforts to keep Kashmir on the back burner have fizzled out. Three wars, the first two over Kashmir and the third one which resulted in the birth of Bangladesh and numerous other confrontations and interferences have created the perfect environment of distrust, suspicion, and misgivings. There are more than 700,000 Indian troops deployed in IIOJK, the highest density of military personnel in the world with cases of extra-judicial torture and rape a routine activity.⁵⁵ With the abrogation of Art 370 and 35A in August 2019 and Indian Supreme Court offering a respite to the Modi government in its recent judgement⁵⁶, the Kashmir issue continues to be a bone of contention between the two neighbouring states.

India's hybrid warfare campaign against Pakistan is also well documented and can be tracked down to the Agartala conspiracy (before the 1971 separation of East Pakistan) to the support of Baluch Liberation Army terrorists and its leadership not just in Pakistan but abroad. This includes lobbying to keep Pakistan on the grey list in FATF, targeting Pakistan's purchase of weapons from Western countries, information warfare against Pakistan highlighted by the EU Disinfo lab (Indian Chronicles), and allegedly various cyber-attacks affecting critical banking and revenue sectors of Pakistan.⁵⁷ Ajit Duval, the Indian NSA has expressed India's desire to sponsor terrorist activities within Pakistan, especially in Balouchistan as part of Indian Policy.⁵⁸ The case of Commander Kalbushan Jhadav, a serving Indian Navy officer apprehended by Pakistani Intelligence Agencies in Balouchistan on charges of espionage and sabotage and later sentenced to death is a case in point.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Suvojit Bagchi, "RSS will either Destroy India or India will Destroy them: Arundhati Roy," 2021, <https://www.trtworld.com/asia/rss->

⁵⁵ Raksha Kumar, "For Kashmiris, Resolution to Decades of Conflict Remains a Distant Dream," *NPR*, August 21, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/>

⁵⁶ Hrishikesh Sebastian, Meryl Shranaya, "Article 370: India Supreme Court Upholds Repeal of Kashmir's Special Status," *BBC News*, December 11, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/>

⁵⁷ M Ashfaque Arain, *India's Hybrid Warfare against Pakistan: Challenges and Response Options* (Islamabad: Centre for Aerospace and Strategic Studies, 2021).

⁵⁸ A.G Noorani, "A Hawkish Doctrine," *Dawn*, January 24, 2018.

⁵⁹ "Jadhav Case (India v. Pakistan)" (International Court of Justice, July 17, 2019), <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/>

Pakistan – Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Pakistan, a country of 220 million people with a Muslim majority, is not just geographically located on the Eurasian supercontinent but is also titled the 'Zipper state' of Pan-Eurasian integration.⁶⁰ With CPEC being touted as the pivot of BRI, and Gwadar being the pivot of CPEC, Pakistan is in the midst of the great power rivalry taking place in the Indian Ocean Region. The American withdrawal from Afghanistan has created more hiccups and worries for Pakistan as it was 'Pakistan' again that was left alone to sort out the problems on its western border. This transactional relationship since the very beginning has not transformed into any meaningful relationship between Pakistan and the USA. The US labeling of India as a 'Net Security Provider' in the region has created more doubts in this floundering relationship.⁶¹

Pakistan's desire to have an all-weather strategic partner was quickly filled by China. China, in return, gained a reliable partner in Pakistan which can be seen from its support and commitment extended in the case of Taiwan, the South China Sea, Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang province. The commonality of interests, abstinence of Western countries and the USA in particular from creating a meaningful long term relationship with Pakistan coupled with the Malacca Dilemma presented China an opportunity to offer a deal in the form of China Pakistan economic Corridor (CPEC) to Pakistan, an offer Pakistan couldn't refuse. It also offered China an opportunity to further its influence in the region. China's unequivocal support on Kashmir issue at all diplomatic levels and has helped Pakistan in beefing up its conventional deterrence by providing hi-tech military equipment to replace the ageing western military hardware. Economically, the development of Coal-fired Power Plants, Wind Energy Projects, the construction of Gwadar Port, various infrastructure projects in the transport sector, and the construction of Special Economic Zones have helped Pakistan to move forward despite the immeasurable economic and human losses in the two decades post 9/11⁶². In essence, Pakistan's political, security and economic interests are firmly rooted with China for the foreseeable future.

China's 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' with Pakistan's western neighbor Iran in 2016 which sought expansion of ties not just in the political domain but also to promote tangible cooperation in various facets of economy and social development is viewed with renewed

⁶⁰ Irfan Takalvi, "Fulcrum of Eurasia: Why Pakistan Needs a Policy Road Map for Eurasian Super-Continent," *Daily Pakistan*, July 27, 2019.

⁶¹ *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington DC, February 2010)<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/QDR/>

⁶² "CPEC Projects Progress Update," Ministry of Planning, Development, & Special Initiatives, <https://cpec.gov.pk/progress-update>.

optimism in Pakistan⁶³. This development although still in its planning stage holds great promise for future expansion of China's BRI. Its connectivity with CPEC will also ensure alternate routes for Chinese exports and imports while affording interconnectivity between the three neighboring countries.

Iran – A Case of Infinite Complexity

Iran borders Pakistan in its East, and there exists a historical and cultural connection between the two nations. The Iranian province of 'Sistan va Baluchestan' borders the Pakistani province of 'Balouchistan'. The lack of road connectivity within Balouchistan and with major cities, vast spans, and minimum population density in Pakistan is a major impediment to its development. This also means the old routes connecting Iran to Pakistan are frequently used to bring foodstuff and other necessities from Iran. These routes are also used by smugglers and terrorists to carry out attacks on both sides of the border.⁶⁴ These smugglers and terrorists sometimes become a bone of contention between the two states as seen from the unprecedented Iranian aerial attack on 16 January, 2024 with Pakistan's forceful retaliation within 48 hrs forcing countries like Turkiye and China to intervene and calm down the tempers across the border.⁶⁵

⁶³ "Full Text of Joint Statement on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between I.R. Iran, P.R. China," President of Iran, Tehran, January 23, 2016, <https://www.president.ir/en/91435>.

⁶⁴ "Pakistan Army Says 4 Soldiers Killed in Attack near Iran Border," *Al Jazeera News*, April 1, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/>

⁶⁵ Simon Speakman Cordall, "Credibility at Stake: Why Did Iran Strike inside Pakistan amid Gaza War?" *Al Jazeera News*, January 19, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/19>.

Table 3: Strait of Hormuz Important Data (21 million barrels per day)

USA	10 per cent of American imports pass through SoH monthly
Saudi Arabia	The majority of oil exports pass through SoH
China	3.5 million bpd (38 per cent daily import)

Source: Author's compilation, data from Dryad Global

Iran is central to the safe passage of shipping in the critical Strait of Hormuz (SoH) connecting the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman. Iran's geographic location and contestation with the USA have brought maritime security into the limelight. To ensure the security and safety of merchant vessels, all major countries have placed their naval assets in some form to deter any activity that would adversely affect maritime security and primarily their national interests. This can be gauged by the presence of the US 5th Fleet stationed at Bahrain operating under US Central Command despite American withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan. The International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) was formed in July 2019 to ensure the safe and secure transit of cargo in the Arabian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Southern Red Sea.⁶⁶ Its operational arm is CTF SENTINEL which is supported by the ten member nations of the IMSC.⁶⁷

The Europeans also launched an initiative around the Strait of Hormuz in January 2020 led by the French with its headquarters in Abu Dhabi. European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH) surveillance mission was supported by Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal in addition to Norway. EMASOH's military component, Operation AGÉNOR justifies the EU designation of this area as a 'Maritime Area of Interest' as one of 'strategic interest' to the EU.⁶⁸

In all these initiatives, the coastal states are directly or indirectly involved. The only missing state is Iran. The level of distrust between the Western nations led by the USA and Iran has only widened since the American withdrawal from JCPOA. With no end in sight to the nuclear negotiations and crippling American sanctions, Iran believes that freedom of navigation in the critical SoH should not be taken for granted if its

⁶⁶ "International Maritime Security Construct," last accessed 11 March, 2023, <https://www.imscsentinel.com>

⁶⁷ IMSC includes Albania, Bahrain, Estonia, Lithuania, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Seychelles, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and the United States.

⁶⁸ Moretti Bianco, Cinzia Matteo, "Europe's Role in Gulf Maritime Security," *Middle East Institute*, May 9, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/europes-role-gulf-maritime-security>.

strategic interests are threatened. A string of attacks on merchant ships connected with Israeli commercial enterprises were allegedly linked to Iran and reprisals allegedly from Israel against Iranian-flagged/ owned merchant vessels.⁶⁹ The targeting of a Liberian-flagged Merchant ship CSAV TYNDALL by a surface-to-surface missile in July 2021 was not the only incident where merchant ships have been targeted to settle political differences.⁷⁰ The recent targeting of ships having any linkage with Israel by the Houthis from Yemen in response to the atrocities by Israel against population of Gaza has further complicated the maritime environment.⁷¹

Even before the Gaza Crises, this confrontational environment had brought the whole region to a knife's edge. The signing of the Abraham Accords and the opening up of major Gulf countries like UAE and Bahrain to Israel was only going to become a reason for increased hybrid threats against Iran and by Iran. Territorial disputes between Iran and UAE may come to the fore which have remained dormant for many years. Similarly, Iranian aspirations of using Nuclear energy for civilian purposes are seen by many in the West and in the Gulf with great suspicion. Most of all Saudi Arabia remains skeptical of the Iranian's desire to utilize Nuclear energy for peaceful purposes 'only'. Nevertheless, the Saudi's desire to go nuclear if Iran tests a nuclear device is hardly hidden from anyone.⁷²

Saudi-Iran relations since the 1979 revolution have remained tenuous at best. But there have been times when the ice was broken and a thaw in relations was observed. This was due to both nations opening up and this détente was most notably seen during the time of Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and President Khatami. President Rafsanjani was the one who sowed the seeds of dialogue and opened the doors of reconciliation. President Khatami elected to the Presidency after President Rafsanjani's two tenures at the helm of the Iranian leadership, continued with the reconciliation effort. The Saudis led by King Fahad and Crown Prince Abdullah also followed up with the reconciliation effort with Crown Prince Abdullah attending the OIC summit in Tehran which was

⁶⁹ "Iranian Vessel Saviz Targeted by Limpet Mines in Red Sea - Tasnim News," *Reuters*, April 7, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/>.

⁷⁰ "Israel Probes Possible Missile Attack on Cargo Ship: Reports," *Al Jazeera News*, July 4, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/4>.

⁷¹ Ruxandra Lordache, "Yemen's Houthi Attacks Norwegian Tanker after Threat to Target Any Israel-Bound Ships," December 12, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/12>.

⁷² Simon Henderson, "Money for Missiles? Reassessing the Saudi Visit to Pakistan," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 29, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/>.

followed by a ten-day visit by President Khatami and his entourage.⁷³ All of this has not happened without any incidents. The Al Khobar bombing in June 1996 in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia cast a major doubt on the future of Saudi-Iranian relations.

The Saudi-Iran relationship touched a historic low with the judicial execution of Saudi Shiite cleric Nimr-al Nimr by Saudi authorities which was amongst other reactions followed by a mob attack on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran. The cleric had been charged by the Saudis with *disloyalty to the ruling family, using violence and seeking foreign meddling*.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the recent thaw in diplomatic relations under China's auspices between the two regional rivals has been seen with great enthusiasm by the regional countries. The talk of a Chinese-led or sponsored/ supported Maritime Task Force involving both Saudi Arabia and Iran in coordination with other regional countries will surely ruffle a few feathers.⁷⁵

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)

Saudi Arabia is the world's second-largest oil producer and biggest petroleum exporter of the world with 17 per cent of the total proven oil reserves of the world. Petroleum products alone account for about 85 per cent of Saudi export income making the economy heavily dependent on oil exports through Bab al-Mandeb and Strait of Hormuz. Any disruption in the maritime domain has a direct impact on the Kingdom's earnings.

The Saudi-Iran rivalry has played heavily on the regional security dynamics and has impacted Pakistan as well. A gas-starved Pakistan, despite being an immediate neighbor to Iran has not been able to import Iranian gas not just because of American sanctions but also Saudi anger. Saudi Arabia on the other hand, continues to be one of the biggest contributors to the Pakistani economy and has supported Pakistan through thick and thin. Every natural disaster that has struck Pakistan, Saudi Arabia has remained a steadfast brotherly nation. Around 3 million Pakistanis live and work in Saudi Arabia and with the presence of the two Holy Mosques, a religious connection binds the two nations firmly.

However, the conflict in Yemen was a unpleasant time for Saudi Arabia-Pakistan relations. The Saudis expected full support but that request was not acceded to by the Pakistani Parliament on account of

⁷³ Dilip Hiro, *Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Struggle for Supremacy* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018)

⁷⁴ "Saudi Arabia Executes 47 on Terrorism Charges," Al Jazeera News, January 3 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/1/3>.

⁷⁵ "Iran Claims To Be Forming Regional Naval Coalition," *Iran International*, March 6, 2023, <https://www.iranintl.com/en>.

regional and internal security concerns. Pakistan decided to remain non-aligned in the conflict and declared to ensure and defend the territorial sovereignty of Saudi Arabia.⁷⁶ Pakistan's fear of a proxy war in Yemen between Iran and Saudi Arabia spreading to its territory and transforming into a Sunni-Shia conflict was well-founded. Nevertheless, astute diplomacy and strong communication links ensured Saudi Arabia-Pakistan relations remained in safe waters.

The Saudi-Indian relations have expanded exponentially in recent times. Around 3 million Indians are working in Saudi Arabia sending home remittances of around 10 billion US \$. In 2016, PM Modi, oft titled 'Butcher of Gujrat' and denied visas by the USA/ EU because of the massacre in Gujrat in 2001 was awarded 'King Abdul Aziz Sash' the highest civilian award in Saudi Arabia during his first official visit to Saudi Arabia.⁷⁷ The return trip by Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman in 2019 also opened up various opportunities for Saudi Investment in India.

Israel and its continued diplomatic success in the form of the Abraham Accords within the greater MENA region is a major concern for Iran and Pakistan. The alleged meeting between Israeli PM Netanyahu and Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman reported by Western media and public confirmation by Yoav Galant has led to credibility to the reports.^{78 79} The presence of an Israeli delegation in Saudi Arabia for the UNESCO meeting in September 2023 was also a first of its kind and is seen as a major step.⁸⁰ But the Hamas response on 7th October, 2023 to years of Israeli blockade against Gaza and Israel's genocidal acts in reprisal against the people of Gaza has brought the Israel-Palestine conflict back to the forefront and stopped any further Israeli recognition by Muslim states in its tracks.

Analysis

China-USA competition may be going strong but there is an underlying understanding that things need to improve between the two states. The fact that both states have a bilateral trade of around 760 billion

⁷⁶ "The National Assembly of Pakistan Gazette," National Assembly of Pakistan, May 2015, https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1431958789_151.pdf.

⁷⁷ "India-Saudi Relations," Ministry of External Affairs, Republic of India, n.d., https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Saudi_July_2016.pdf.

⁷⁸ Yoav Galant – Retired Israeli Defence Forces General and current Israeli Defence Minister since 2022 - Member of the ruling Likud Party.

⁷⁹ Oliver Holmes, "Netanyahu Holds Secret Meeting with Saudi Crown Prince," *The Guardian*, November 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov>.

⁸⁰ "Israeli Delegation Attends UNESCO Gathering in Saudi Arabia," *Reuters*, September 11, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/>.

US\$ underscores the importance both have for each other. The re-commencement of military communications in addition to various other cooperation arrangements despite various critical disagreements post Biden-Xi summit in November 2023 speaks of their common interest to avoid any confrontation based on faulty or scanty information and progressing ahead where common ground exists. There is a lesson in all of this especially for the two pairs of states i.e. India/ Pakistan and Iran/ Saudi Arabia.

India and Pakistan with huge population centers have the most to lose in case of regional instability in WIOR. With around 3 million Indians and 4 million Pakistanis working and living in Saudi Arabia alone, any deterioration of ties with Saudi Arabia would mean a threat to this workforce⁸¹. All in all, it is also extremely important for Modi led India to be aware of the religious sensitivities of the GCC states and to not antagonize them by exporting Hindutva ideology across the Arabian Sea.

In the past two and a half decades only, both India and Pakistan have grossly mis-calculated each other's intentions, more recently observed during the Pulwama/ Balakot incident of 2019. Add to this the domestic environment in India and Pakistan and more importantly, India. The spread of Hindutva ideology, curbs on free media, marginalization of minorities especially Muslims and Christians, the atrocities on Kashmiris in IIOJK and more so the hatred towards Sikhs spreading into other countries is unbecoming of the world's largest democracy.

Pakistan and Iran will continue to figure prominently whenever there is talk of Saudi Arabia and India. For the Saudis, it is the Indian moral, economic, and political support to Iran and for the Indians, it is the Saudi's unflinching support to Pakistan from a national level and the forum of OIC and United Nations especially on the Kashmir issue. But this unconditional support of the Saudis to Pakistan has limited its options with Iran in light of Saudi suspicions over Iran's regional influence, its nuclear program and the threat of American sanctions. This can all change with an improvement in Saudi-Iran relationship.

China's involvement in the Iran-Saudi rapprochement is a welcome sign for the region, especially Pakistan. "It secures Iranian support against elements operating against Chinese interests in Baluchistan province. Moreover, the proposed formation of a Maritime Task force led by the Chinese with the inclusion of Iran, Saudi Arabia, India, and Pakistan would surely increase Maritime Security in the region and thus become a catalyst for stability. China, as compared to USA has very little maritime presence

⁸¹ "Saudis Pressure Forced Pakistan to Skip KL Summit: Erdogan," *Express Tribune*, December 20, 2019.

in WIOR and is considered to be 'military featherweight' in the region.⁸² Maritime Security of the global commons is essential and can only be achieved with the participation of all regional coastal states in cooperation with extra regional forces.

The destiny of these four nations i.e. India, Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia is intertwined. No matter how much trust or distrust might exist, regional stability in particular and global stability, in general, cannot be sustained without cooperation and engagement amongst these four nations especially in light of the Global Power competition brewing between China and the USA. State sponsored proxies, Private Military Contractors, and Non-state Actors all have the potential to provide enough catalyst to an environment that is ripe with suspicion and mistrust.

The freedom accorded to India by major powers to prop it up against China as a regional power house on the lines of Japan and Australia is bound to create unwanted and undesired effects for the region and especially for Pakistan. With rising cross-border terrorist activities from the west and a weakening economy, it is imperative for Pakistan to hedge its bets on developing a Pakistan-centric, broad based relationship with USA while cementing its current bond with China. This also entails cultivating regional relationships especially with Iran and Saudi Arabia while decoupling it with India's relevance to these states.

It is without an iota of doubt that Israel's increased presence in the region is a matter of great concern for Pakistan and Iran. Israel has great capacity, interest, and political backing to hurt Iranian interests. This proxy war between Iran and Israel, and the Houthis campaign to harm Israeli interests in Red Sea/Gulf of Aden are a bad omen for all regional countries including India. This also implies that there is no room for any slip up between Iran and Pakistan. Issues at hand must be resolved through diplomatic means without further complicating the regional environment. India, on the other hand must use its influence within Iran and Israel to ensure that WIOR remains ""peaceful while keeping its hands off Iran-Pakistan divergences.

Conclusion

"Our object should be peace within, and peace without. We want to live peacefully and maintain cordial friendly relations with our immediate neighbours and with the world at large."

Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah

The US-China competition is not one that would simmer down any time soon. American interest in creating a power centre in the form of

⁸² Ruike Xu and Degang Sun, "Sino-American Relations in the Middle East: Towards A Complementary Partnership?" *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 13, no. 2 (3 April 2019): 143-61.

India against China is bound to have a detrimental effect on the regional peace and security especially in WIOR. It is immensely important for Pakistan, India, Iran and Saudi Arabia to keep regional peace and security on top of their priority list while embracing their national security objectives. Chinese growing influence in the WIOR cannot be ignored but every effort should be to ensure a peaceful co-existence despite the political differences and at the same time drawing away from any harmful after-effects of global power competition. More importantly, all four states must appreciate that their rational behaviour in such obfuscated times is critical for regional peace and stability. And as Albert Camus puts it, *'Peace is the only battle worth waging.'*

