Issue Brief
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China's Gwadar Gamble: Reshaping Sea–Land Connectivity

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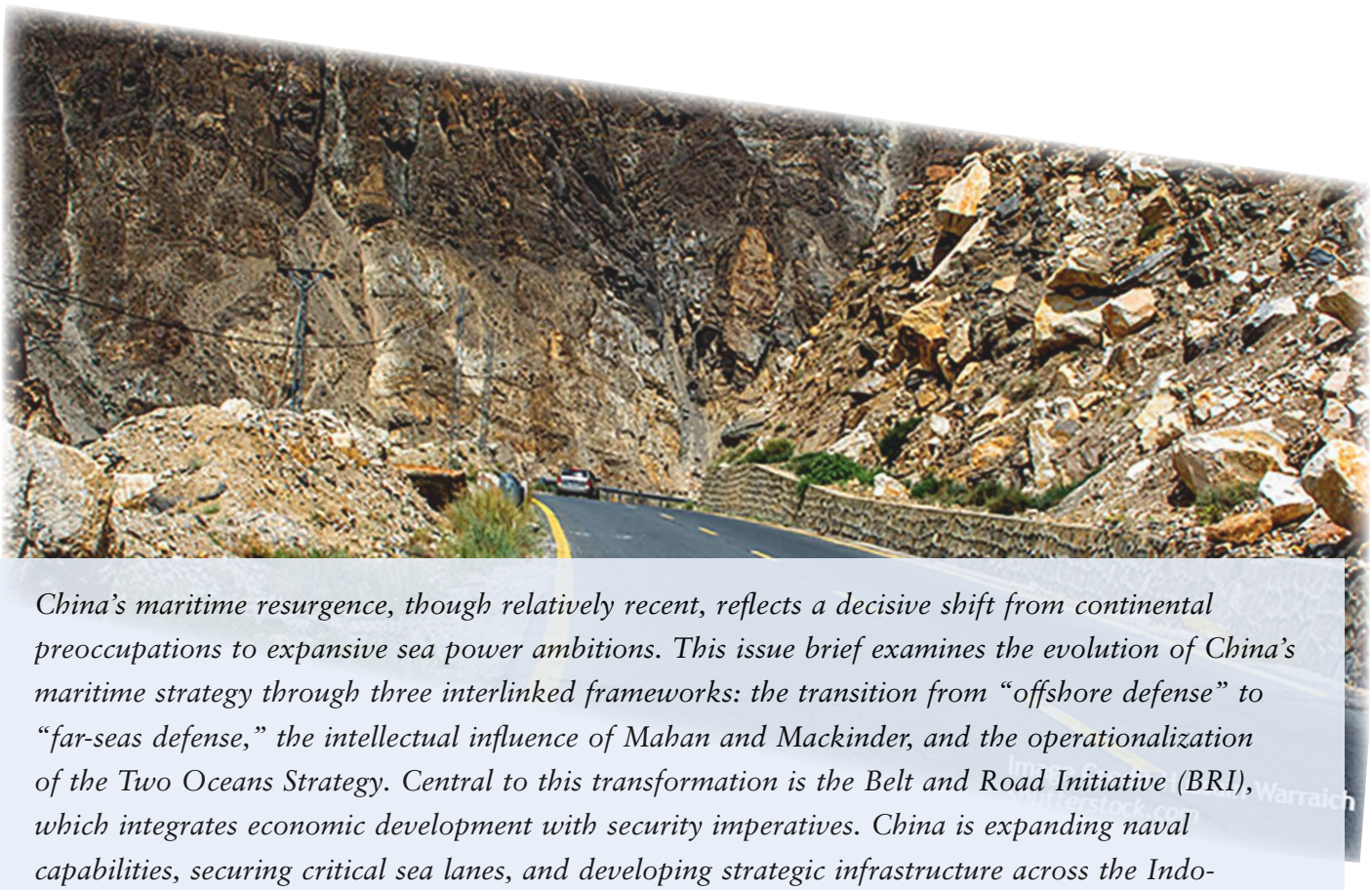

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China's maritime resurgence, though relatively recent, reflects a decisive shift from continental preoccupations to expansive sea power ambitions. This issue brief examines the evolution of China's maritime strategy through three interlinked frameworks: the transition from "offshore defense" to "far-seas defense," the intellectual influence of Mahan and Mackinder, and the operationalization of the Two Oceans Strategy. Central to this transformation is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which integrates economic development with security imperatives. China is expanding naval capabilities, securing critical sea lanes, and developing strategic infrastructure across the Indo-Pacific. Gwadar Port, a flagship component of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is analyzed as both an economic project and a potential strategic asset, despite its current operational and political challenges. This issue brief argues that China's sea-land strategy reflects a long-term vision of geopolitical influence, combining maritime power projection with continental connectivity to secure its global interests.

Introduction

China's maritime story is relatively new. The last time one hears of Chinese maritime history is in the 15th century, when the Ming Emperor Yongle sent his Muslim eunuch, Admiral Zheng He, on seven voyages (1405-1433) circumnavigating large parts of the known world while leading armadas of "treasure" ships that were ahead of their time in size, capacity, and capabilities.[1] Amazingly, soon after, successive Chinese dynasties began looking inwards and followed a policy of isolation until as recently as the late 20th century.

It was only after China unfurled its plans to modernize in the late 1980s that the Chinese military begin to feel the need for a navy. That process started with humble beginnings but picked up a rapid pace

as China's phenomenal rise necessitated a parallel expansion in the role, size, and responsibilities of the PLA Navy. Today, barely three decades later, the PLA Navy has the largest number of ships and is the second most powerful navy in the world.[2]

China truly emerged as a maritime power to reckon with after Xi Jinping announced his ambitious Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013.

China's sea-land strategy is driven by three main doctrinal principles: the expanding role of China's navy from 'offshore defense' to 'far-seas defense'; the influence of Mahan and Mackinder in establishing the BRI; and, China's Two Ocean Strategy. We shall investigate these three drivers.

From Offshore Defense to Far-Seas Defense

The development of Chinese maritime power has seen a major shift since the Chinese Communist Party under Mao Tse Tung took power in 1949. Mao did not encourage a blue-water fleet, believing it to be a tool of imperialism. China had a handful of coastal vessels and no navy worth mentioning, as the focus remained on resolving land borders with the 14 other states bordering China. Naval thinkers described this maritime strategy as "offshore defense," essentially concerned with immediate threats to its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The essence of this maritime strategy was to create a buffer between mainland China and the near seas—the South China Sea and the East China Sea—by employing an effective 'sea denial' strategy.

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The 2013 Defense White Paper had not yet factored in the BRI, as Xi Jinping announced this initiative only in September 2013. "The PLA Navy (PLAN) is China's mainstay for operations at sea, and is responsible for safeguarding its maritime security and maintaining its sovereignty over its territorial seas, along with its maritime rights and interests," it said.[3] It was only in the 2015 Defense White Paper that China first enunciated a shift from "offshore defense" to a combination of "offshore defense and open seas protection," and to ''build a combined, multi-functional, and efficient marine force structure".

Essentially, this envisioned an expanded role for the PLA Navy to protect the sea Lanes for trade and commerce after Xi Jinping had announced the ambitious BRI in 2013. "In response to the new requirement coming from the country's growing strategic interests, the armed forces will actively participate in both regional and international security cooperation and effectively secure China's overseas interests,"[4] a clear signal that the PLA viewed protecting China's ambitious BRI as a future challenge essential to safeguarding national interests.

In 2016-2017, Djibouti had emerged as a major naval base in North Africa, and Gwadar, a small port on Pakistan's Makran coast had been acquired in 2015 for a 43-year lease (2015-2058) as a part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).[5] In addition, a Chinese Naval Task Force, comprising three-four ships, ostensibly for combating piracy off the Gulf of Aden had become a fixture in the Indian Ocean Region.[6] Not surprisingly, the 2019

Defense White Paper clearly stated that, "One of the missions of China's armed forces is to effectively protect the security and legitimate rights and interests of overseas Chinese people, organizations and institutions."[7]

Influence of Mahan & Mackinder

Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, an American naval thinker, was a proponent of sea power and its influence on international relations. He made three important arguments: One, maritime commerce was essential to the economic prosperity of a great power. Two, maritime supremacy was the best form of protecting a nation's seaborne trade as well as hindering an adversary's trade. Three, a state with maritime superiority could defeat a militarily preeminent state.[8]

In sum, his thesis was ""Control of the sea by maritime commerce and naval supremacy means predominant influence in the world… because the sea is the world's great highway."[9]

Sir Halford Mackinder, a British parliamentarian, on the other hand, was a proponent of land power. His now famous 'Heartland Theory' was premised on the argument that a continental power could draw its power from the interiors, exploiting resources and forms of transport (rail, in those days) to expand and project power in all directions. Writing in The Geographical Journal in 1904, and later in a book entitled Democratic Ideals and Reality, Mackinder argued that the "world island" (modern day North Africa, Europe and Asia) "contained much greater human and natural resources than the rest of the planet's islands and continents combined." Within this world island, the 'Heartland'—essentially modern day Russia, Mongolia, Iran, Tibet, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe—had the great advantage of virtual inaccessibility to sea power.[10]

Mackinder argued that control of the Eurasian landmass—whether by Germany or Russia—generate such economic power that projecting it outward to sea would become relatively easy, enabling global dominance.[11] In fact, he warned that any nation that controlled the vast Eurasian landmass would dominate the world.

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The Chinese studied these two theories in detail. Admiral Liu Huaqing, the Commander of the PLA Navy in 1982, is often called China's Mahan, and his influence on Chinese maritime strategy—guiding it from a fledgling coastal navy into a challenger to U.S. naval power—has been profound. Liu was deeply influenced by Mahan and his seminal work, The Influence of Sea Power upon History: (1660-1783), and began to implement an early PLA Navy strategy rooted in three major tenets: first, control of the seas, especially the East China Sea and the South China sea; second, protection of Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) as China expanded its economic programs, including the BRI; and third, recognition of the expanding role of the Chinese Navy, especially after the brief skirmishes over the Paracel Islands with Vietnam (1978) and disputes over reefs across the South China Sea. He

expressed that the PLAN "is an organization to handle the issue of 'maritime rights' in struggles of manipulation, plunder and counter-plunder, which have always existed between maritime nations."[12]

Two Oceans Strategy

China's Two Oceans Strategy refers to its growing interests in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The Pacific is undoubtedly its priority, as the eastern seaboard of China is where most of the Chinese growth story emanates home to the bulk of its industrial capacity, military-industrial complex, communications, and transportation networks. The Indian Ocean, on the other hand, is the lifeline for China's energy supplies and its access to Asia, Africa and Europe via sea.

Therefore, any Chinese maritime strategy would hinge on achieving sea control in the near seas—namely, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the Sea of Japan, which are contiguous to its shores—and exercising sea denial in the far seas leading to critical chokepoints that could inhibit access to the eastern seaboard, namely, the Indonesian straits of Sunda, Lombok, Makassar, Ombai-wetar, and the Strait of Malacca.

> ***"The Two Oceans Strategy involves the projection of power beyond the Asian land mass through the development of a large navy capable of operating effectively in both oceans, and seeks to safeguard China's economic interests, especially its energy sea lanes and trade routes. Its manifestation can be seen in the development of two key platforms: aircraft carriers and nuclear-powered submarines***

The implications of the Two Oceans Strategy are twofold. First, it involves the projection of power beyond the Asian land mass through the development of a large navy capable of operating effectively in both oceans. This capability will naturally result in potential confrontation with other powerful navies that dominate these waters—the U.S. Navy, the Indonesian Navy, and smaller but capable navies such as those of Japan, the Philippines and Australia in the Pacific, and the Indian Navy in the Indian Ocean. Its manifestation can be seen in the development of two key platforms: aircraft carriers and nuclear-powered submarines.

Second, the strategy seeks to safeguard China's economic interests, especially its energy sea lanes and trade routes. China does this by using both hard and soft options: hard measures include building and acquiring ports—both commercial and military—and constructing infrastructure like roads, railways, airports, energy facilities and power plants. On the soft side, China uses diplomacy through multilateral mechanisms, financial leverage, coercion, lines of credit, and currency swaps to promote its economic interests along both land and maritime routes.[13]

In a vision document released in 2017, China explicitly articulated its thinking on maritime security. But the document is clear that all the benefits of maritime security will accrue only to those who participate in the BRI. Clearly, the strategy is directly linked to promoting economic interests.

"Strengthening cooperation in maritime law enforcement. Dialogue with countries along the Road will be intensified and differences managed. Maritime law enforcement will be boosted under

bilateral and multilateral frameworks. Cooperative mechanisms for joint maritime law enforcement, fishery law enforcement, and anti-terrorism and anti-violence at sea will be developed and improved. Liaison networks for maritime law enforcement will be established and emergency plans developed through collective efforts. Exchanges and cooperation among the maritime law enforcement agencies of countries along the Road will be promoted, and necessary assistance provided for training."[14]

The two main arteries of the BRI are the Maritime Silk Route (MSR) that follows the sea route from China to the Indian Ocean through the Strait of Malacca, touching Asian and African ports before reaching Europe, while the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), which passes through Western China, Russia and the Central Asian Republics into Eastern Europe, with offshoots like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), connecting to the Arabian Sea in the Indian Ocean Region.

Gazing into the Future – PLA's Sea-Land Strategy in 2030-35

An idea of China's future sea-land strategy can be gleaned from some of its official documents. On May 12, 2025, China released "China's National Security in the New Era", a white paper outlining Chinese thinking and concepts on security. This paper covers Xi Jinping's Global Security Initiative (GSI) in fair detail. The GSI is one of the three concepts driving Chinese thinking on the global stage, the other two being the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Civilizational Initiative (GCI). Broadly speaking, the GDI seeks to reframe the BRI as less aggressive, more benign, and more inclusive, while the GCI urges Western nations to respect the history, culture, and social traditions of older civilizations.

On security, however, the white paper is clear and explicit, establishing a close connection between development and security. China clearly identifies

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economic development, trade and commerce as inextricably intertwined with its security framework. The paper states:

"Entering the new era, China has explicitly established the coordination of development and security as one of the major principles of national governance. This principle has been integrated into the overall framework of economic and social development. China has consistently pursued high-quality development as its top priority while also managing national security as its paramount task. China has unified development and security by coordinating their planning, implementing them as a single strategy, and promoting mutual reinforcement between the two."[15]

Thus, China's sea-land strategy is premised on its ability to find global acceptance of Xi's concepts of the GDI and GSI.

Going forward, the Two Oceans strategy will necessitate a greater PLA Navy presence in the

Indian Ocean. Hambantota, the port that China has acquired on a 99-year lease from Sri Lanka, after Sri Lanka defaulted on payment of its debts to China, is another key location astride China's energy and trade routes. From a security construct, Hambantota port, along with the nearby Mattala airport—also built by China—has the potential to support the deployment of rapid-reaction forces in furtherance of Chinese interests in the Indian Ocean Region.

But, from a Mahanian–Mackinder construct, it is Gwadar that emerges as the focal point of this strategy. One must examine the capabilities being created as intent can always change with shifting geopolitical developments.

Why Gwadar?

Gwadar is situated at the confluence of three globally recognized and rapidly developing regions:

> ***Gwadar provides an alternative to reliance on oil and energy flows through key chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz and Strait of Malacca. By transporting oil through CPEC-linked pipelines, as well as road, rail and air options around Gwadar, China seeks to enhance the security of its energy supplies to mainland China in line with its Great Western Development strategy.***

the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia. Its strategic location makes it extremely important. The Persian Gulf lies to its west and the Gulf of Oman to its southwest. The region is bounded by Afghanistan to the northwest and Iran to the west. Its 600-km coastline includes natural harbors and strategic shorelines.

Gwadar is located 120 km west of the Iranian border, 460 km east of Karachi, and 400 km (624 nautical km east) from the Strait of Hormuz, a vital global energy supply route that transports 16–17 million barrels of crude oil annually.[16]

Aside from its geopolitical relevance, Gwadar has a complex and layered history. In 1778, the Khan of Kalat took control of Gwadar. Then, in 1783, an Omani prince named Sultan bin Ahmad arrived in Gwadar after a failed coup attempt in Muscat. The Khan of Kalat, Noori Naseer Khan, offered the prince refuge and allowed him to manage Gwadar. The prince was given half of the revenue from Gwadar as a maintenance allowance. In 1792, when the Omani prince Sultan bin Ahmad became Sultan of Oman, he did not return Gwadar to Kalat.

When Pakistan gained independence in 1947, Oman continued to administer Gwadar. But Pakistan soon began diplomatic efforts to bring the territory into its fold. The argument Pakistan presented during these negotiations was built around the historical connection between Gwadar and Kalat. Sultan Said bin Taimur of Oman eventually relented, with the British government acting as an intermediary. In 1958, Pakistan purchased Gwadar from Oman for three million pounds.

Surprisingly, it was not the Pakistanis who initially realized its significance; rather the Chinese offered to develop it into a deep-sea port. Much later, in 2001 Musharraf convinced Premier Zhu Rongji of China to assist in its construction in exchange for facilitating a Chinese coastal radar facility on the Makran coast. Construction finally started

in March 2001, lasting 72 months at a cost of $248 million. In 2007, Pakistan's government granted the management of the Port of Gwadar to the Port of Singapore Authority for 40 years, following U.S. concerns about growing Chinese influence.[17] However, after ensuing tensions between Washington and Islamabad in the following years, Pakistan began seeking more active commitment from Beijing. As a result, in 2013, the management of the Port of Gwadar was transferred to the China Overseas Ports Holding Company for a duration of 43 years. In 2015, the Port of Gwadar officially became part of the CPEC.

But is Gwadar all about commerce and enterprise?

The Gwadar Development Plan is very ambitious on paper. The port currently has three 200-meter multipurpose berths that can accommodate vessels with a deadweight tonnage of up to 20,000 DWT; additional berths and cargo tunnels are intended to raise that capacity to 70,000 DWT. In addition, a LNG terminal (capacity 500 million/cubic feet / day), a desalination plant, and a 2,292 -acre Special Economic Zone (SEZ) is planned. In addition, a $150 million International Port City project, covering 3.6 million square feet, offers a mixed-use, gated community in the heart of Gwadar to cater to locals, expatriates, and Chinese professionals expected to work there in the future. The website of the International Port City quotes the Chinese President as making Gwadar the "New Dubai".[18]

Behind this façade lie some stark realities.

The seaport and berths notwithstanding, trade through Gwadar has been abysmal. During the period 2015-2023, total exports through Gwadar was barely 0.843 million tons, i.e., less than even 1 billion tons over eight years.[19]

Gwadar has an airport, which by all accounts is the largest in Pakistan, covering an area of 4,300 hectares (almost 17 sq. km). Funded and built by China at a cost of $230 million, it was designed to handle 400,000 passengers a year.[20] The airport is part of the broader Gwadar Development Project aimed at facilitating trade through the CPEC and supporting the "New Dubai" vision. However, a review of flight operations suggests that barely two-three flights land in Gwadar daily. Work on the airport has been slow and plagued by delays due to security reasons.[21]

Internally, the project has been opposed by local Baloch people, who feel that the Pakistani government is not only exploiting the resources of Balochistan, but also unequally sharing revenues derived from oil and gas in the region. Balochistan trails far behind other provinces in key development indicators, with high poverty and unemployment rates, widespread illiteracy, and elevated child mortality.[22] Additionally, the Baloch fear that CPEC may result in demographic changes that could displace the local population, leading to protests. Since 2018, there have been regular attacks on Chinese engineers and CPEC assets resulting in heightened tension in the region.[23]

All this has frustrated Chinese stakeholders, who have showed concern at the pace of project development. One Chinese diplomat has been quoted as saying that "in China decisions are taken once and for all by the central government, while in Pakistan it is not the case. There are federal and provincial governments who develop differences over matters related to CPEC projects." The Chinese ambassador to Pakistan was more candid, stating that "China is there to help their brother country Pakistan in any way possible," but he also quoted Mao Zedong, saying: "Success requires you to stand on your own feet."[24]

Despite the problems plaguing the Gwadar project, China continues to support the CPEC. The reasons are entirely strategic. Gwadar is important to China because:

- Gwadar provides an alternative to reliance on oil and energy flows through key chokepoints

such as the Strait of Hormuz and Strait of Malacca. By transporting oil through CPEC-linked pipelines, as well as road, rail and air options around Gwadar, China seeks to enhance the security of its energy supplies to mainland China in line with its Great Western Development strategy.

- Gwadar offers the PLA Navy a possible base in the Indian Ocean, enabling it to protect China's economic interests and critical shipping lanes in the IOR. While there are no reports of a permanent PLA presence in the IOR beyond Djibouti, the infrastructure at Gwadar—including the seaport, airport and road-rail links—would easily facilitate the setting up of a permanent presence, should it be necessary.

- Gwadar enhances China's ability to support and protect its naval flotilla deployed in the Gulf of Aden for anti-piracy duties, safeguard BRI investments along the eastern coast of Africa, and provide assistance and aid to Chinese nationals and diaspora in the region.

Ultimately, Gwadar is the lynchpin in China's sea-land strategy in the Indian Ocean Region.

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