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China and India: Maritime Maneuvers and Geopolitical Shifts in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

China and India are engaged in a tug-of-war over naval bases and forward presence in the Indo-Pacific. The crisis in the Maldives and wrangling over a naval base in the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean illustrate the rapidly shifting geopolitical dynamics. For small states, economic engagement with China has strategic consequences. Electoral politics provides Beijing with the opportunity to court and entice politicians of fragile democracies along the “One Belt One Road” (OBOR) to gain an advantageous position for itself over its competitors. In fact, China’s investments in littorals are less about development and more about Beijing’s desire to establish itself as a “resident power” in the Indian Ocean – much as the United States, Britain, and France have done. Ironically, China’s quest for resources, markets, and bases follows the direction taken by old imperial powers and attempts to establish an empire of “exclusive economic enclaves” run by Chinese conglomerates to usher in the age of Pax Sinica. This is now bringing former European imperial powers back to Asia in order to maintain a rules-based international order.

Keywords

China-India, Naval Rivalry, Geopolitics, Indian Ocean, Great Power Politics, World Order

Introduction

Asia’s old rivals, China and India—each a rising power in its own right with a distinct vision of regional order—are now competing furiously to establish bases for the forward deployment of their naval assets and to gain relative advantage and leverage over the other. Speaking at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on June 1, 2018, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi—in a veiled criticism of China – called for the Indo-Pacific region to embrace freedom of navigation and overflight, territorial integrity, and respect for all nations, regardless of their size: “We will promote a democratic and rules-based international order in which all nations, small and large, count as equal and sovereign. We

will work with others to keep our seas, space and airways free and open (Gallo 2018). For his part, U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, in far more pointed terms, called out China for its intimidation and coercion of smaller nations in the region. Both Modi and Mattis were expressing concern over China's military buildup on the artificial islands in the South China Sea and Beijing's 'debt-trap diplomacy' whereby China establishes naval presence through a string of bases along the Indian Ocean maritime chokepoints by bankrupting its trading partners (Malik 2018). However, from Beijing's perspective, China's military expansion is natural and commensurate with its status as the world's largest trading nation and supports its strategic imperative of protecting its vital sea-lanes and ever-growing economic assets, including large numbers of Chinese nationals across the region. Therefore, Beijing sees any criticism of its maritime expansion or adoption of countermeasures by India (and others) as containment.

To illustrate the ongoing shifts in geopolitical alignments, this article focuses on the growing Sino-Indian rivalry over two small island states in the Indian Ocean which bears remarkable resemblance to naval competition to acquire access to markets, resources and bases amongst rising industrializing powers of earlier eras in history. This analysis is grounded in Power Transitions theory which argues that shifts in the balance of economic and military power are often a sufficient trigger for a rivalry where previously none had existed (Lacey 2018). Rising powers compete for power and influence to impose their will on the global order. Due to an exponential growth in Chinese power over the last four decades, the Indo-Pacific today is home to both sub-regional and pan-regional rivalries, mostly involving China. Ganguly and Thompson (2011, pp. 8-9) and Goertz and Diehl, (1993) contend that many regional conflicts are prolonged by territorial disputes and complicated by interstate competition for predominance within their spheres of influence, for example, Sino-Japanese clashes in the East China Sea, Sino-Vietnamese confrontations in the South China Sea, and Sino-Indian frictions in the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean. Needless to say, Asian rivals do cooperate when their interests converge but compete when their interests and visions diverge. Actually, cooperation on economic, environmental and other transnational challenges helps moderate their geopolitical, nuclear and naval rivalries rooted in history, territorial disputes, contests for forward military presence and pre-eminence in their spheres of influence, regional and global institutions and so on.

Paradise Lost

Much like Sri Lanka, the Maldives archipelago in the central Indian Ocean, is strategically located along the vital sea lanes of communication. Although the Maldives has long been within India's orbit, concerns about growing Chinese influence came into sharp focus in early 2018 following a Beijing-backed 'self-coup' by President Yameen Abdulla Gayoom. In early February, the Maldives' President

Yameen declared a state of emergency in response to a Supreme Court order for the release of political opponents, including his rival and former president Mohamed Nasheed, sacked police chiefs, chief justices and prominent parliamentarians. Consequently, life in the archipelagic nation of 390,000 people has been thrown into turmoil. Since becoming president in 2013 after a controversial election, Yameen has systematically weakened democratic institutions, crushed all dissent, curbed civil liberties, and actively courted Beijing.

This ‘all-out assault on democracy’ by President Yameen drew widespread condemnation, including from the UN human rights chief. While India and the United States deplored the move and called for the restoration of the constitutional order and release of opponents, President Yameen dispatched envoys to ‘friendly nations’ China, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia to shore up support.

In response, former President Nasheed, who now lives in exile, appealed to rival India to send a military-backed envoy to resolve the crisis. He accused China of ‘buying up the Maldives,’ adding that this year’s presidential election could be ‘the last chance to extricate the Maldives from increasing Chinese influence’ (*Associated Press*, 8 February 2018). Beijing, of course, dismissed Nasheed’s accusations, claiming that ‘China has offered selfless assistance’ for social development.

Amidst reports of India putting its special forces on alert, Beijing voiced its opposition to external interference, saying that ‘China did not want Maldives to become another “flashpoint” in bilateral relations’ (*Times of India*, 9 February 2018). While the Foreign Ministry spokesperson invoked the ‘principles enshrined in UN Charter,’ the *Global Times* reported that China had threatened to ‘take action to stop’ an Indian intervention in the Maldives (Ai Jun 2018). China then indeed took action to match its words. To deter Indian intervention and to show solidarity with the beleaguered autocrat, a Chinese naval flotilla of eleven warships centered around a Type 071 amphibious assault ship entered the Andaman Sea through the Sunda Straits, emboldening Yameen to extend the state of emergency despite India’s strong opposition (*China Military Online*, 26 February 2018).

Thus, six months after the military standoff over Bhutan’s disputed Doklam territory in the Himalayas, China and India found themselves again watching each other warily, this time in the Indian Ocean. The growing political crisis in the Maldives is a direct consequence of the intensifying Sino-Indian geopolitical rivalry. As their need for resources, markets, and bases grows, Asia’s rising powers are increasingly running into each other in third countries. The hastily arranged informal Modi-Xi meeting in Wuhan in May 2018 was aimed at ensuring that ever-growing divide between China and India over a range of issues (e.g., the boundary dispute, the Belt and Road Initiative, the Nuclear Suppliers Group membership, and China’s growing naval presence in the Indian Ocean region)

does not lead to disputes and conflicts either in the Himalayas or in the Indian Ocean (Godbole 2018). However, China may slow down but will not stop its penetration of India's periphery.

For both China and India, 'forward presence' has acquired greater salience in their national security strategies to achieve 'situational awareness' in areas of strategic interest (Brewster 2018; Chandran 2018). For Beijing, this means having a presence in the Indian Ocean; for New Delhi, having a naval presence in the Pacific Ocean becomes critical for its strategic deterrence against Beijing. Having consolidated its hold over the South China Sea by militarizing artificial islands, China's navy has now set its sights on the Indian Ocean. Chinese strategists argue that it is a question of when, not if, a Chinese aircraft carrier battle group is deployed in the Indian Ocean to protect Chinese interests and assets there (Zhou 2018). Beijing's stance that the South China Sea is China's sea, but the Indian Ocean cannot be treated as India's ocean, draws New Delhi's ire and derision.

Historically, small states are the first to experience major geopolitical shifts. Usually 'the bit players' on the periphery of rising powers play a disproportionate role in triggering major crises, which prove to be turning points during power transitions. Tiny Bhutan, the Maldives and the Seychelles fit the bill. The changing geopolitical configurations in Asia—China's growing power and presence and India's response to it—have indeed put small states in a bind. And the vast Indo-Pacific region from East Africa to East Asia is fast emerging as a major arena of contestation amongst major powers.

Move Over, India – Here Comes China

Until the ouster of President Nasheed in 2012, the Maldives was tied closely to India economically and militarily under its 'India First policy.' In 1988, when a group of mercenaries tried to seize power, India intervened militarily in support of then President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who ruled for three decades, and later aided the Maldives' transition to democracy.

However, over the last five years, Beijing has made significant inroads into the Maldivian economy and politics. The shift began with the abrupt termination of a contract to an Indian company to develop the Malé international airport in 2012 and its subsequent award to a Chinese company. Following Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to the Maldives in 2014, the Yameen government amended the Constitution to allow foreign ownership of land, thereby paving the way for the island of Feydhoo Finolhu to be leased to China for 50 years. Since then, large Chinese investments in infrastructure, housing projects, and tourism have drawn the tourist paradise in the Indian Ocean into Beijing's tight embrace. Faced with the possibility of extinction due to rising sea levels, the Maldives also hopes to

leverage Chinese technical prowess in land reclamation and in creating artificial islands via dredging.

Meanwhile, ties with New Delhi plunged to an all-time low as the Yameen government adopted a ‘go-slow’ policy on India-backed economic and defense projects (Bagchi 2018). While India boycotted China’s Belt and Road Forum held in May 2017, the Maldives enthusiastically supported the One Belt One Road (OBOR, now renamed as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in English)¹, which envisages linking China with Africa, Asia, and Europe through a network of ports, railways, roads, and industrial parks. Then came Yameen’s decision to allow three Chinese ships to make ‘good will visits’ in August 2017, which raised hackles in New Delhi.

Media reports suggest a dual-use Chinese marine observatory is going to be constructed on one of the islets not far off from the Indian coast. Furthermore, days before President Yameen’s meeting with President Xi in Beijing in December 2017, a hurriedly convened parliamentary session rammed through a 1,000-page free trade agreement with China in less than an hour, leading to sharp criticism from the opposition. At Beijing’s behest, the Maldives neither participated in India’s premier multinational MILAN naval exercise nor did Male take part in the DefExpo2018, thereby signaling China’s growing heft in India’s front yard (Yin 2018b).

For small states, economic engagement with China has strategic consequences. Electoral politics provides Beijing with the opportunity to court and bribe politicians of fragile democracies along the BRI to gain an advantageous position for itself over its competitors. In actual fact, China’s investments in littorals are less about development and more about Beijing’s desire to establish itself as a ‘resident power’ in the Indian Ocean—much as the United States, Britain, and France have done. There is invariably a strategic element attached to enterprises that begin with commercial port construction or management and end with a naval presence and long-term ownership rights, as in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Myanmar.

The secrecy surrounding the financing terms of various development projects arouses suspicions about a hidden political agenda. An International Monetary Fund report projects the Maldives’ external debt will hit 51.2 percent of GDP in 2021, up from 34.7 percent in 2016. The Maldives also has a US\$286 million trade deficit with China (Lo 2018). Former President Nasheed claims that 80 percent of the Maldives’ foreign debt (approximately US\$1.5 to \$2 billion) is

¹ OBOR and BRI are used interchangeably in this paper because the Chinese-language phrase *yi dai yi lu* (一帶一路 literal translation: One Belt One Road) remains unchanged. Following criticism of the OBOR as too exclusive for others’ comfort, it was later renamed in English as the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) to placate non-Chinese audience.

owed to Beijing and that inability to repay the debt would 'force the Maldives to cede territory to China as early as 2019.' Alleging that 'China has already taken over 16 islands,' he claimed that '[w]ithout firing a single shot, China has grabbed more land than the East India Company at the height of the 19th century' (Kurunuma 2018).

Beijing denies any ulterior motives. True or not, the pouring in of Chinese money has the fledgling democracy in tatters and its future mortgaged to the Middle Kingdom. Though Nasheed promises to review deals signed with Beijing if he is returned to power, he may find his hands are tied in the same way as Sri Lanka's President Sirisena did over the Hambantota and Colombo port projects. At any rate, the next presidential elections scheduled for September 2018 are unlikely to be free and fair elections.

The Seychelles Saga

More often than not, small and weak states' attempts to extract benefits by playing one great power off against the other boomerang as they fall prey to intervention by external forces to influence and shape domestic political outcomes to advance their own vested interests. A case in point is the Seychelles' decision to defer its decision to award India the right to develop one of its islands, which is attributed to China's discomfiture. As part of India's riposte to China's expanding naval footprint in the Indian Ocean region, Indian Prime Minister Modi visited the Seychelles and Mauritius in 2015 and signed agreements for developing infrastructure on Seychelles' Assumption Island and Mauritius' Agalega Island. However, the Assumption project (i.e., the construction of an airstrip and a jetty for the Seychelles Coast Guard and Indian Navy) could not take off as the Seychelles government failed to get the opposition's support for the agreement. Then days before the Maldivian crisis erupted, India inked a revised version of the agreement on January 27, 2018 during Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar's visit to the Seychelles. The revised pact sought to allay domestic concerns about its impact on the environment and infringement of Seychellois sovereignty. The Indian government also committed in the new pact that no vessels or aircraft carrying nuclear weapons will be allowed to 'land, dock or use the facilities.' It further promised not to use the facilities 'in any way whatsoever for the purposes of war.' Still, those opposed to the pact continue to hold protests against the project, and on March 6, the bilateral agreement to build military facilities and station Indian naval personnel at Seychelles' Assumption Island was leaked online alleging that 'the Seychelles government had "sold off" the island to India to build a "military base"' (Mitra 2018). The online leakage of classified pact is said to be the handiwork of forces seeking to wean the Seychelles away from India's orbit.

Chinese Checkers

Distant countries and regions have now become part of China's critical interests as Beijing invests heavily in those countries. Beijing is indeed on a base-buying spree. Nearly two-thirds of the world's 50 major ports are either owned by China or have received some Chinese investment (Kynge et al. 2017). The People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy is militarizing the first island chain, which stretches from the Japanese archipelago to parts of the Philippines and Malaysia and encompasses the South China Sea. And Beijing is busy expanding into the second island chain further into the Pacific Ocean. Projections are that within a decade, China will have the largest naval and submarine fleets in the world. Despite China's propensity to conceal its naval ambitions, and despite the rhetoric of mutually beneficial 'win-win' relationships, the strategic approach dominates in the Indian Ocean. The incorporation of smaller states into a Sino-centric economic and trading hub-and-spokes system also lays the foundation for a China-led security system in the future. Beijing is increasingly dictating coercing small and weak countries to agree to its economic and foreign policy goals.

China's strategy of fusing its maritime expansion with regional economic development and multilateral integration is yielding rich dividends. Having acquired leasing rights to Pakistan's Gwadar port for 40 years, Greece's Piraeus port for 35 years, sections of Djibouti port for ten years, Sri Lanka's Hambantota port for 99 years, 20 percent of Cambodia's total coastline for 99 years, and the Maldivian island of Feydhoo Finolhu for 50 years, Beijing is now pressuring Myanmar to raise China's stake from 50 percent to 75 or 85 percent in the Kyaukpyu port on the Bay of Bengal, and to lease it for 99 years as well – at least if Myanmar does not want to pay a penalty for renegeing on the US\$3 billion Myitsone energy dam deal (interviews and conversations with senior officials and diplomats 2017-18). A Chinese base in Myanmar would further threaten India's naval dominance of the Bay of Bengal and heighten its sense of encirclement by the Chinese navy. In the western Indian Ocean, Beijing may also be eyeing Mombasa in Kenya, the gateway to East Africa, as 55% of Kenyan foreign debt is owned by China.

A military base in Djibouti, along with major port development projects in Kenya, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Malaysia, and Cambodia define the contours of China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) —an oceanic connectivity project that is part of the BRI centered on the Indian Ocean. The assumption underlying this strategy is that China's rivals, finding themselves encircled or obstructed by countries aligned with Beijing, will be sufficiently deterred from threatening China's economic and security interests.

Not surprisingly, India is increasingly uneasy with China's maritime forays. The internal power dynamics in many small states provide an opportunity for the Chi-

nese to entrench their naval presence among the islands strung along the south of India. As corrupt, weak regimes addicted to cheap Chinese loans keep falling into Beijing's strategic debt traps, New Delhi's traditional influence is now under serious challenge. China's economic weight has already replaced India as the most significant player in South Asia.

New Delhi Dilemmas

China's MSR has prompted the Indian navy to unveil a three-pronged strategy to ensure a stable balance of power in littoral Asia: fortify its defences in the Indian Ocean by acquiring privileged access to bases in Indonesia, Mauritius, the Seychelles, Madagascar, Oman, and Iran; conduct joint naval exercises in the East and South China Seas; sign logistics exchange agreements with the United States, Singapore, and France to gain access to naval bases in the Indo-Pacific, and launch an ambitious naval expansion program. Furthermore, India has stepped up aid to littorals and has offered an alternative vision to China's MSR with 'Project SAGAR' (Security and Growth for All in the Region)—a counter-move designed to revive India's ancient trade routes and cultural linkages around the Indian Ocean. Much to China's chagrin, Indonesia has granted India economic and military access to the strategic island of Sabang at the northern tip of Sumatra and close to the Malacca Strait, through which almost 40 percent of India's trade passes. India's attempts to place itself at the center of regional relationships with Japan, the United States, Vietnam, Australia, and Indonesia as part of a regional security architecture to balance China has drawn Beijing's fury. The state-owned *Global Times* warned in an editorial: 'If India really seeks military access to the strategic island of Sabang, it might wrongfully entrap itself into a strategic competition with China and eventually burn its own fingers' (Hu 2018).

The Maldives and the Seychelles are now caught in a tug-of-war between China and India. Both have strategic interests to protect. Both are jostling to gain the upper hand, but only one can emerge victorious. Seeing the Maldives as a critical component of its MSR, China has developed strong investments in the Indian Ocean microstate and wants the autocratic ruler of this state, President Yameen Abdulla Gayoom to stay in power. Likewise, Beijing is reportedly supporting forces opposed to the Indian project on the Seychelles' Assumption Island.

China's military and commercial links with Indian Ocean littoral states weave a coercive power web around India, making it politically costly for New Delhi to take action detrimental to Chinese interests in the Indian Ocean. However, India does not want its southern neighbor to turn into China's newest colony. New Delhi would welcome the return of former President Mohamed Nasheed to power to shift the balance of influence back in its favor. So, how will India respond to the ongoing crisis in the Maldives? What are India's options?

Given the Maldives's proximity and strong historic ties, doing nothing is not an option. But no option is cost-free. Military intervention might end either in a quagmire or become politically costly for India's long-term interests. Further, it would reinforce India's image as a big, bad bully. On the other hand, a lack of action would greatly undermine India's claim of being a 'net security provider' in the Indian Ocean region, emboldening adversaries and disappointing friends who look to India as a strategic counterweight to China.

The possibility of an Indian military intervention cannot be ruled out if New Delhi perceives its vital strategic interests as under threat. India has increased its naval presence in international waters about an hour from the Maldivian capital of Malé. But so too has China, with a bolstered naval presence that allows it to both intervene and evacuate. Chinese diplomats have made it known that Beijing stands ready to help Yameen if India tries to unseat him (Miglani 2018). However, given Beijing's current limited naval capability in the Indian Ocean, a military offensive in the Himalayas would be a more realistic option should China decide to 'teach India a lesson.'

Chinese strategic writings constantly remind India of China's overall technological, economic, and military superiority should a combination of disputes—related to Tibet, Pakistan, disputed Himalayan borders, India's energy exploration in the South China Sea, or the elbow-bashing in the Indian Ocean—snowball into an armed confrontation. If India backs off or otherwise acquiesces during any clash with Beijing, the small and weak states will quietly slide into China's orbit and a new Sino-centric order will then emerge in the Indo-Pacific.

A Clash of Values and Visions: BRI vs. FOIP

Beijing's nod to the military coup in Zimbabwe in 2017 and support for the Maldivian and Cambodian regimes' suppression of democracy reveal China's willingness to intervene in the domestic affairs of other states if it perceives vital Chinese interests are at stake and if the costs of intervention are relatively low. China sees itself as being engaged in a long, protracted competition with India, Japan, and the United States, and would want Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Pakistan to remain within its orbit. Beijing also wants to send a strong message that countries along the BRI—which envisages a network of ports, railways, roads, and industrial parks linking China with Africa, Asia, and Europe—can look to China for both economic growth and military security, and that challenges to its expanding sphere of influence will no longer be tolerated.

Despite a growing chorus in India's strategic circles for military intervention, the Modi government has thus far chosen a diplomatic pathway to pressure Yameen's government to uphold the Supreme Court's ruling and restore democracy. India

has also asked the United Nations to send a fact-finding mission to the Maldives. However, with China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia blocking attempts to have the Maldivian crisis tabled on the UN Security Council's agenda, the UN cannot be of much help.

India has, in turn, sought the support of the United States, Japan, and Australia to oust the pro-China Yameen from power through diplomatic, economic, and political means. The United States, with its own base south of the Maldives in Diego Garcia, shares India's concerns about an autocratic regime heavily indebted to Beijing being manipulated to provide access to Chinese naval vessels. Regional concerns about Chinese behavior regarding maritime disputes coupled with the PLA's acquisition of expeditionary capabilities worsen the security dilemma, and result in balancing behavior from China's neighbors. Indonesia, for example, has proposed a plan called the 'global maritime fulcrum' that is 'designed to balance the Belt and Road Initiative' (Chaudhuri 2018). As noted earlier, common concerns about Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean have led Indian and Indonesian governments to take up the Sabang port development project.

At the normative level, the Maldivian crisis challenges the resurrected Quad (comprising the United States, India, Japan, and Australia) and its quest for a rules-based 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP). The crisis highlights the need for a coordinated Quad response but to date the Quad meetings have been high on rhetoric and low on deliverables (Mullen 2018). Not surprisingly, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has dismissed the 'Indo-Pacific' concept and the Quad as a 'headline grabbing' idea which will 'dissipate like sea foam' (PTI 2018). The Maldives' fledgling democracy is, however, yet another casualty of President Xi's megaproject. High-interest Chinese loans worth hundreds of billions of dollars are saddling small littoral states with unsustainable debts and giving Chinese military access to strategic infrastructure such as ports and airstrips near international waterways. Evidence from Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Djibouti, and the Maldives suggests that BRI-related investments undermine democratic institutions, increase corruption, restrict civil liberties, and favor autocratic and military rulers. Let us call it the 'OBOR collateral' (Malik 2018). Wary of closer strategic alignment amongst democratic and maritime powers and sensing a once in a century opportunity, Beijing seems in a hurry to lock in its economic, geopolitical, and institutional gains vis-à-vis rival powers before forecasts of China's demographic and economic decline sets in (Yin 2018a).

Obviously, a broader contest of clashing values and visions between the FOIP and BRI is ongoing, which requires a multilateral response at different levels to prevent democracy from falling like dominoes under the march of authoritarianism. One country's response alone, whether that be from India or the United States,

cannot deal with the ideological and strategic challenge from China. Hyper-nationalism, a belief in Han exceptionalism, and certainty about the inevitability of a post-American Sino-centric world now shape Beijing's Asia policy. The Trump administration's transactional foreign policy and vacillating stance on U.S. commitment to its allies and friends have emboldened Xi's China to spread its wings diplomatically, economically and militarily (Townshend 2017).

Spellbound by the grandeur of sea power, Chinese strategic thinkers wax lyrical about resurrecting China's fifteenth century naval expeditions to the 'Western Ocean' (the old Chinese name for the Indian Ocean). China's cultivation of friendly, pliant regimes via economic inducements and strategic coercion all along the maritime choke points in the Indian Ocean sea lanes is similar to the Ming Court's past attempts to control the maritime lanes by changing political regimes in Malacca, Sumatra, and Sri Lanka so as to facilitate commercial and maritime dominance. Whereas the collapse of the Soviet empire led the West to declare victory and 'the end of history,' the East saw Beijing resurrecting China's imperial past.

The Geometry of Geopolitics

Ironically, China's quest for resources, markets, and bases following the direction taken by old imperial powers and attempts to establish an empire of 'exclusive economic enclaves' run by Chinese conglomerates to usher in the age of *Pax Sinica* has brought former European imperial powers back in Asia. French and British navies, backed by South and Southeast Asian countries, are now operating naval task forces in the Indo-Pacific to maintain a rules-based international order (Deng 2018; Pickrell 2018). In other words, China's attempts to establish a Sinocentric unipolar order via BRI are being frustrated by fluid, short-term, purpose-specific partnerships and alignments because the Indo-Pacific is inherently multipolar. Australia is seeking to build security ties with fellow democracies in the Indo-Pacific and to persuade European powers to re-engage with the Pacific to act as a bulwark against China's growing power (Smyth 2018). Since Beijing's economic expansion is strengthening authoritarianism and weakening democracies, the FOIP states may well be reinforced by a Concert of Democracies (COD) comprising Canada and the European Union at the global level to uphold a rules-based order. The infrastructure competition between Japanese and Chinese firms now extends throughout the Indo-Pacific. Tokyo is developing ports in three eastern Indian Ocean nations – Dawei in southeast Myanmar, Trincomalee in northern Sri Lanka and Matarbari in southeast Bangladesh – as part of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's FOIP strategy. And the U.S. Congress has passed the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act which reaffirms alliances with Australia, Japan and South Korea, while calling for deeper military and economic ties with India and Taiwan.

The next 15 to 20 years in the Indo-Pacific are fraught with risks – this is where some of the world’s most powerful states are forging new alliances, arms racing, pursuing mercantilist policies, extracting resources, and viewing competitors with growing distrust and engaging in containment of peer competitors. New strategic balances will emerge as partnerships and allegiances among states shift. Faced with an aggressive China, Asia’s major maritime powers—Japan, Australia and India—are working in a more synchronized manner in the quadrilateral FOIP grouping with the United States. They are largely backed by middle powers (e.g., Vietnam, Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia) which tend to cooperate with each other to defend a rules-based order that does not advantage big and powerful nations at the expense of small and weak states. A complex web of security relationships is thus beginning to emerge amongst ‘China-wary’ nations. The future of regional security cooperation is likely to be in the trilateral or triangular, quadrilateral and multilateral formats. As Prime Minister Modi told the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN): ‘We will work with them, individually or in formats of three or more, for a stable and peaceful region’ (Gopalakrishnan 2018). Flexible, issue-specific threesome, foursome balancing games are popular these days. Having multiple partners is in vogue. Over time, various trilateral (e.g. Japan-Vietnam-the Philippines, the U.S.-Japan-India, Australia-Indonesia-India, India-Japan-Vietnam, France-Australia-India) and informal multilateral efforts to constrain China could coalesce into a maritime coalition or the ‘Indo-Pacific Maritime Partnership’. Though one-on-one ‘Cold War-like’ bilateral alliances currently seem old-fashioned, the crystallization of fluid relationships into rigid alignments could occur in the event of a major rupture in the U.S.–Chinese or Indian–Chinese relations.

Whoever prevails in this geopolitical poker game will ultimately determine the future of the world order (Malik 2014). In the meantime, the risk of miscalculation lies with the Chinese military overestimating its strength, and the rest of the world underestimating Beijing’s ambitions, power, and purpose. Absent a rules-based order, Asian giants will continue to jostle over the territory, resources, and allegiance of small states from the Himalayas to the Indian and Pacific oceans, and the so-called Pacific Century may then turn out to be just another bloody century in Asia.

Bio

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