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Study  
11.11.2019

# Projecting Power Westwards

China's Maritime Strategy  
in the Arabian Sea and its  
Potential Ramifications  
for the Region

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## Acronyms

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CASCF	China-Arab States Cooperation Forum
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CIIS	China Institute of International Studies
EIA	Energy Information Administration
EU	European Union
FOIP	'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'
IOR	Indian Ocean Region
MSR	Maritime Silk Road
OBOR	One Belt, One Road
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
SCZone	Suez Canal Economic Zone
SLOC	Sea Line of Communication
SOA	State Oceanic Administration
US	United States
VLCC	Very large crude carriers

# 1 Introduction

Few sea lines of communication (SLOC) are under such scrutiny as those that cross the Arabian Sea. This body of water, located in the northern region of the Indian Ocean, is not only a strategic focal point for the surrounding countries, but is also important for transregional actors and thus heavily disputed by the US, India and China. In the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), described as "an expression of a grand strategy" (Chung 2017), Beijing has been investing both economically and militarily in the Indian Ocean, particularly in the Arabian Sea. Extending its realm of maritime influence from its own Southern Sea out to the Horn of Africa, China is claiming deep sea territories, and thus empowering itself as an emerging sea power. This paper argues that Chinese military strategy can no longer be explained only through the analytical lens of challenging the US fleet in the region; rather, China is expanding its maritime profile to fulfil resource demands required for its strategy of global power projection. Although a plethora of scholars have already assessed the BRI (Ghiasy & Zhou 2017; Dave & Kobayashi 2018), to date most debates have circled around the land routes, the so-called 'Belt' (Kennedy and Parker 2015; Ferdinand 2016; Aoyama 2016); the response of the targeted countries (Chen 2016; Dave & Kobayashi 2018); or its challenges and risks (Ghiasy & Zhou 2017a). In contrast, the maritime dimension of the BRI has received less scholarly attention (Duchâtel & Duplaix 2018; Funaiole & Hillman 2018; McDevitt 2016). Thus, the geopolitical implications of the Maritime Silk Road, its contribution to competitive connectivity in the Indian Ocean region (IOR), and possible implications for the Middle East deserve a closer look.

Against this backdrop, this Study introduces China's maritime strategy in deep seas and its main strategic considerations in the context of the Maritime Silk Road (MSR). The paper focuses explicitly on the Arabian Sea, as a strategic hub within China's maritime strategy. The authors trace China's strategic expansion from an internally directed maritime power towards maritime power projection, via a regional focus on the Arabian Sea. The Study shows that this expansion has significant ramifications for China itself, as its maritime investments in the region increase the need for regional security provision, both on the seas and within the countries along the shore.

This Study has four main sections: The first chapter sketches the key characteristics of China's MSR and the so-called "String of Pearls", followed by an outline of the main objectives of China's maritime strategy. The third chapter dives into China's strategic interests and activities in the Arabian Sea as an area of geostrategic importance and assesses the Chinese approach towards key chokepoints. The Study concludes with a discussion of potential ramifications of China's new maritime strategy, both for China itself and for the region, and suggests incentives for further research.

## 2 China's Maritime Silk Road and the 'String of Pearls'

The following section sketches the key characteristics of China's maritime profile and explores the development of China's maritime strategy and influence in the context of the BRI.

Introduced in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative is China's long-term vision that aims to improve global connectivity in mainly economic, but also political and cultural terms; expand production and trade chains; and improve cooperation between the countries along the Road. The BRI mainly focuses on Eurasia and Africa, while its maritime component intends to create a network of ports and to develop portside industrial parks and special economic zones (Ghiasy et al. 2018). The MSR stretches from southern Chinese ports to Piraeus in Greece and includes several sensitive sea routes, such as the Malacca Strait, the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Aden (Ploberger 2017). In this context, China has started to construct ports in the Arabian Sea, such as Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, Gwadar Port in Pakistan, or Doraleh Port in Djibouti, as well as on the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. (Aoyama 2016).

Currently, the Maritime Silk Road consists of three major sea lines of communication: The first route stretches from the southern Chinese coast to Europe, passing the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea until the Atlantic Ocean. The second route reaches from China to the South Pacific until Australia, and the third route extends through the Arctic Ocean via Russia, passing Europe and towards Canada. This route was added in June 2017, and is also referred to as the 'Polar Silk Road' (冰上丝绸之路 – *bīng shàng sī chóu zhī lù*) (Ghiasy et al. 2018: 2). In the context of this maritime expansion, China has defined several strategic hubs,<sup>1</sup> each of which represents a valuable 'pearl' within the Indian Ocean. 'String of pearls', a geopolitical concept, was first referred to in an internal report by the US Department of Defense, *Energy Futures in Asia*, in 2005. The term relates to potential Chinese intentions, in the Indian Ocean region, to counter its competitor India by encircling it at sea, and stretches from Chinese mainland to the Sudan Port, along China's sea lines of communication. The term 'string of pearls' is not used in official Chinese rhetoric: In official statements, they vehemently deny the existence of such a strategy. For Beijing's rivals, however, the term encompasses the Chinese strategy in the Indian Ocean Rim and beyond, and describes the

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<sup>1</sup> These include, for instance, the Bab al-Mandab Strait, the Strait of Malacca and the Strait of Hormuz.

importance of the IOR for China's overall naval strategy along the Maritime Silk Road (Khurana 2008). As perceived by the US Department of Defense, the string of pearls strategy represents a long-term, geo-strategic approach by China to expand its naval influence over crucial sea lines of communication and choke points in the IOR, by constructing military bases, ports and other facilities in the targeted areas to achieve strategic purposes (Athwal 2009). Each 'pearl' refers to a strategic hub of Chinese geopolitical influence, military presence or port with substantial Chinese investment (Marantidou 2014). China's purported string of pearls strategy has been tied to its development of ports in Pakistan's Gwadar, Sri Lanka's Hambantota, Bangladesh's Chittagong and Myanmar's Kyaukpyu, to name some examples, which are viewed as military stepping-stones to counter India's dominance in the Indian Ocean region (Lu 2016; Flint & Zhu 2019).

## 2.1 Strategic Shifts in China's Maritime Strategy

Until 2015, China focused on running its 'brown water navy', a riverine force capable of patrolling and defending navigable inland waters and estuaries. A brown water navy does not project power into the deep seas nor towards securing national interests beyond the national coastlines, but rather focuses on coastal waters, harbors and ports. But when China increased its global power projection in the context of the MSR, it started to develop a 'blue water navy', which means a military force that can operate on the open seas on a sustained basis and has the logistic capability to conduct replenishment operations at sea. In 2015, a white paper of defense, entitled *China's Military Strategy*, outlined the strategy of 'active defense' and promoted far-seas operations. Ever since, China has continuously developed its capability to project power onto land and sea and to conduct surface, air and subsurface operations around the world (Erickson 2016).

This shift from a brown water to a blue water navy reflects China's shift from an internally directed maritime force towards increased power projection into the deep seas. Beijing's increasing oil imports from the Middle East, combined with China's need to develop offshore oil deposits in the East and South China Seas, may indicate the motivation of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to develop a force-projection capability extending beyond Chinese coasts into blue waters. In the context of the MSR, this consideration is part of a two-layered strategy, developed under Chinese President Xi Jinping, which encompasses "near seas defense, far seas protection", a term used frequently in China's 2015 white paper on defense (Erickson 2016). Shortly following, in

2016, the State Oceanic Administration (SOA), which has the lead in developing policies on the blue economy (蓝色经济 – *lán sè jīngjì*),<sup>2</sup> stated: “The status of oceans in national development dominates more than in any other period of human history” (State Oceanic Administration 2016). Likewise, the Chinese president indicated at the 18th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012 that China should be both a land-based power and a major ocean force with extensive marine strategic interests. Thereby, President Xi Jinping elevated the “construction of a strong maritime country” (海洋强国 – *hǎiyáng qiángguó*) to the level of a national goal for the first time in China’s history. This strategic reorientation became even clearer during the following Congress in 2017, where Xi Jinping pointed out that maritime policies form part of China’s global leadership ambitions: Maritime power is now one of China’s top priorities concerning non-traditional security.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of the Arabian Sea and its surrounding watergates contributed to this strategic shift. An uninterrupted flow of oil and natural gas through the Arabian Sea occupies a prominent place in China’s foreign policy (Salman & Geeraerts 2015); a concern also of crucial importance for other regional players, like the US. Sea lines of communication that pass through the Arabian Sea have also become increasingly important for China’s economy and national security. These major shipping routes are crucial for protecting access to imported natural resources, as well as to project power around China’s periphery (Ibid.; Lei 2008). As articulated by President Xi during the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, the Arabian Sea SLOCs form part of the country’s “far seas” strategy, and foster Sino-Arab ties with emphasis on the region’s geo-economics (Gresh 2017: 38). While China has not yet achieved global sea power status, it has moved from mere coastal defense to extending its naval reach into disputed territories overseas. In this context, the Chinese military is also using information technology to improve and extend its potential to target surface ships, especially U.S. aircraft carriers, via missiles, submarines, and cyber weapons (Gompert 2013).

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**2** Blue economy refers to a marine based economy, which combines high productivity with conserving the ocean’s health.

**3** This paper understands non-traditional security issues as all those that are “transnational in scope (neither totally domestic, nor purely interstate) ... and are transmitted rapidly due to globalization and communication revolution” (Caballero-Anthony 2010: p. 312). Traditional security issues, in contrast, are vital to state survival and directly affront the safety or territorial integrity of states in their relations with other states.

## 2.2 Main Objectives of China's Maritime Approach

In general, there are three different strategic objectives as regards China's maritime approach.



*Figure 1: Strategic considerations behind China's maritime strategy. Authors' own depiction*

### **Resource Demands**

Economic considerations play a key role in China's maritime approach. In order to secure a continuous supply of economic, energy and military goods from the Middle East and Central Asia, China needs to secure the main sea lines of communication. As China grows increasingly dependent on maritime trade, its capabilities to project sea power become ever more important. In order to safeguard China's maritime sea lines and overseas areas of economic interests, China has shifted the focus of its naval strategy to far-seas defense (Duchâtel et al. 2014: 15). Its rapid modernization of the past decade has also resulted in a steady reliance on maritime trade to foster development and investment in new industries. As the Chinese economy becomes increasingly dependent on overseas markets and energy supplies to sustain its economic growth, this in turn affects the overall Chinese maritime orientation and military doctrine (Lei 2008). China primarily seeks to secure access to the Persian Gulf region and the Red Sea to facilitate its trade routes to Africa and the Middle East (Henderson 2018). The GDP of this strategic region, which includes Afghanistan and Pakistan, is 3.1 trillion USD (in 2016). Although relatively minor compared with China's GDP of 11.4 trillion USD, it surpasses that of India (2.3 trillion USD) and Russia's (1.1 trillion USD), and highlights the substantial economic opportunities for China contained in the MENA region (Ehteshami 2018: 390). The region is also of major strategic importance as regards China's continuous search for stable sources of energy to power its ballooning economy.

### ***Regional Hegemony***

China intends to break free from what it considers a strategic encirclement by US alliances in the overall Indo-Pacific region. Following US President Trump's expanded articulation of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) region, defining India and Japan as fundamental players and adding Australia to the regional security complex within the overall US Indo-Pacific strategy (Nye 2017), Chinese regional hegemony became ever more important. The objective of regional hegemony relates to the Chinese intention to contain India's sphere of influence within the Arabian Sea and to challenge competitor aspiration for regional leadership (Brewster 2018; Thakker 2018; Rüländ & Michael 2019). This strategy also drives the Chinese development of additional 'pearls' in the Indian Ocean region. Chinese intentions to contain India's naval influence in the IOR have led to increasing preoccupation among critics in New Delhi that Beijing may try to make national interest claims in India's maritime sphere of influence, especially if China gains a foothold in the Arabian Sea through the Pakistani Gwadar Port (Ghiasi & Zhou 2017: 33).

### ***Naval Power Projection***

China aims to counter the weight of regional and international military bases in the Arabian Sea by applying a form of "debt trap diplomacy"<sup>4</sup> (Green 2019), in order to force regional countries to limit US military access to regional strategic bases. China has been increasing the presence of its navy and deploying equipment, including submarines, surface combatants, and anti-ship ballistic missiles, alongside aircraft carriers, as for example at the Horn of Africa (Melvin 2019: 3). Via its new maritime strategy, China has decided to take security concerns in the IOR into its own hands, instead of relying on the USA and its allies, who have long served as the main security providers in this maritime region (Scott 2018; Art 2010). This shift adds to the rising competition in the region between China, the US and India. In response to Beijing's 2017 *Vision for Maritime Cooperation Under the OBOR*, the United States introduced its Indo-Pacific strategy in November 2017. The US strategy is more or less directed against China's increasing influence in the Indian Ocean and is intended to guarantee US interests by defending the Pacific and Indian Oceans against China's sea power (Nye 2017).

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<sup>4</sup> The term „debt-trap diplomacy“ describes the Chinese approach to trap developing countries, mainly along the BRI, to borrow money from the Chinese state in order to invest in infrastructure projects.

### 3 China's Strategic Interests and Activities in the Arabian Sea

China does not appear to have one comprehensive maritime strategy for the Arabian Sea as a whole. Rather, it is developing distinct strategies for the different sub-seas, following what the former leader of the PRC, Deng Xiaoping, coined as a “crossing the river by feeling the stones” strategy. This section outlines the importance of the Arabian Sea within China's maritime strategy, introduces the various watergates within the Arabian Sea, and highlights the strategic interests that China pursues in the area.



Figure 2: Major SLOCs of China in the Arabian Sea. Authors' own depiction

The Arabian Sea is a crucial offshoot water body of the Indian Ocean region and a major focus within China's maritime strategy (Jiadong 2016: 25). The importance of the IOR derives from both its size and location. It covers almost one-fifth of the total ocean area of the world and includes many sub-seas, such as the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Gulf of Oman, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the Strait of Malacca (Qamar & Jamshed 2015). The western Indian Ocean borders Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, while the central Indian Ocean stretches around India's coastal waters and the eastern Indian Ocean meets with the Bay of Bengal. Geopolitically and strategically, due to its role in

connecting the Middle East, Africa, South Asia and Europe, the Indian Ocean is a crucial, and thus highly disputed, ocean region for the US, India and China (Albert 2016). The IOR is accessed and controlled through five main points, with two being located in the Middle East: the Persian Gulf / Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Aden (Karim 2017). In China's maritime strategy, these two Middle Eastern chokepoints are of special importance. They guard the flow of oil from the Gulf States, the Arabian Peninsula and Iran; and they overlook the traffic of trade from the Western Pacific into the Indian Ocean (Karim 2017).

China's main interests in the IOR are of a geopolitical, economic and security-related nature (Mohan 2017). A key motivation for Beijing is to safeguard its sea lines of communication, which flow to and from Europe, East and North Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and the western sphere of Southeast Asia. As previously mentioned, assuring an uninterrupted flow of oil and natural gas through these SLOCs is prominent in China's foreign policy (Salman & Geeraerts 2015). With China's increasing investments overseas in the context of the BRI, as well as its growing hunger for oil and other energy supplies, the IOR provides important maritime-terrestrial supply chains. Secure access to oil is one of the most important public goods, while the price of oil significantly affects the economic growth of China (Du et al. 2010: 4142). Around 82 percent of China's overall oil imports transit the IOR; and an increasing number of BRI pathways and assets are being created on land and sea to contribute to China's energy and food security (Ghiasy et al. 2018). Thus, China's maritime strategy intends to create an integrated system to transport energy between Asia and the Middle East (Salman & Geeraerts 2015). The Indian Ocean connects the eight busiest ports with the main EU ports in and around the Atlantic, and therefore hosts the world's main trade and shipping routes. It even has one of the ten most important container ports worldwide, located in Jebel Ali, Dubai (Ghiasy et al. 2018). For these reasons, the IOR is a highly disputed territory and playground for great power rivalries. Parallel to China's efforts, India, the US, Japan, Australia and the EU are also increasing their naval presence and military capabilities and are investing in various strategic assets in the Indian Ocean region. Smaller naval powers, such as Pakistan, Malaysia, Singapore and South Korea, have also recently started to expand their activities in the region (Putten et al. 2014).

China's maritime strategy in the Arabian Sea focuses on three main areas: the Gulf of Aden and Bab al-Mandab Strait; the Suez Canal; and the Persian Gulf with the Strait of Hormuz.

### 3.1 The Gulf of Aden and Bab al-Mandab Strait

The ***Bab al-Mandab Strait*** is located at the most southwestern point of the Arabian Peninsula, and is bordered by four countries: Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula, and Djibouti, Ethiopia and Somalia on the African side. For China, the strategic importance of Bab al-Mandab derives from its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz, which provides a vital link to the trade route between the Mediterranean and Asia. Most vessels carrying goods between Europe and Asia, as well as oil from the Middle East to China, pass through the Strait before navigating Egypt's Suez Canal. The US Energy Information Administration (EIA) estimates that 4.8 million barrels per day of crude and petroleum products flowed through the Strait in 2016, with about 2.8 million barrels going north toward Europe, and another 2 million moving towards Asia (Lee 2018; Cordesman 2015). In the context of China's growing energy needs and the Middle East as a market to satisfy these needs (Gurol 2018), securing the Strait is important for China.

The ***Gulf of Aden***, between the coasts of Yemen and Somalia, connects to the Red Sea through the Bab al-Mandab Strait, and is an important waterway for shipping oil from the Persian Gulf to Europe and North America. About 20,000 ships, from more than 100 countries and regions, pass through the Gulf of Aden every year, with a freight volume that accounts for about one-fifth of the world's total sea cargo (EIA 2017). All exports from the Gulf States and Asia to the West must pass through the Gulf of Aden before entering the Suez Canal, with more than 1,000 merchant ships traveling from China to Europe every year via this route.

Besides, or perhaps because of, its strategic location and importance for global trade and shipping, the Gulf of Aden was the world's most frequented area for pirates to attack merchant ships in the last decade. According to Chinese sources, 20 percent of Chinese ships sailing through the Gulf of Aden since 2008 faced pirate attacks of some kind (Dossi 2015). In order to secure its merchant and fishing ships, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has been conducting anti-piracy missions in the Arabian Sea since December 2008. These missions highlight two main developments: 1) China's growing role in countering piracy as evidence of its navy's growing expeditionary role; and 2) the PLAN's transition from its historic role as a coastal defense navy to a global blue water navy (Panda 2018). By joining the missions of the European Operation Atalanta and its force – officially named EU Naval Force (EU NAVFOR) –, China has also shown willingness to cooperate internationally in order to obtain higher benefits. While its initial maritime cooperation, in 2008, was mainly due to the necessity of the poorly-equipped Chinese navy accessing European

technologies and capabilities, China is now modernizing its maritime equipment from internal sources, according to a leading academic on China's foreign and security policy (interview, 04.03.2019, Fudan University, Shanghai). Keeping pace with technological innovations, the Chinese naval escort task force has become the vanguard to protect China's interests overseas. In the past few years, the Chinese navy has held bilateral joint maritime training exercises in the Gulf of Aden with the navies of 14 countries, including Russia, the United Kingdom, France, the United States, Pakistan, India and South Africa. Additionally, China has conducted various forms of multilateral maritime training exercises with relevant countries (The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2010). PLAN's ongoing presence, alongside its assistance to countries in the region, not only promotes friendly regional relations, but also demonstrates China's strength and its capacity to safeguard national interests. Similar reasons have led to the establishment of China's first overseas military facility in Djibouti, taking advantage of the country's strategic location astride the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Additional overseas naval bases are about to follow; for instance, in Tanzania, where China has already taken control of the new port of Bagamayo (Zheng 2019).

Over the past 10 years, the Chinese naval far-seas security model has achieved a qualitative leap in the Gulf of Aden. On July 2017, the Chinese established a support station in Djibouti, mainly for the replenishment of the Chinese military in its escort, peacemaking and humanitarian relief efforts in the Gulf of Aden and Somali waters. All ships traversing the major chokepoint of the Gulf of Aden are vulnerable to either piracy off the Horn of Africa or potential violence spilling over from Yemen (Gresh 2017: 43). Even minor incidents along the Yemeni coast carry the risk of damage to China's shipping in the straits and possible disruption to its strategic oil cargo routes. Consequently, expanded Chinese engagement in the Gulf of Aden, in order to secure passage of Chinese ships, also entails responsibility for overall regional security. Thus, Beijing has provided new weapons and equipment, developed by China, to be used in conjunction with other naval forces in the Gulf, including destroyers, frigates, dock landing ships, and integrated supply ships.

### 3.2 The Suez Canal

Twelve percent of total world trade passes through the Suez Canal every year: This makes the canal "potentially exposed to significant trade disruptions, and could be the victims of pirate-induced price distortions in their traded goods, with consequent welfare implications" (Burlando et al. 2015: 525). Two drivers characterize Chinese strategic interests in the Suez Canal: to secure energy

supplies and to secure the trade route for Chinese ships. The strategic importance of the Suez Canal for Chinese economic interests is reflected in the multiple Chinese infrastructure projects in the region surrounding the canal. One example is the construction of a new terminal basin in Sokhna Port, south of the Suez Canal, in the northeast of Egypt. The port, a project associated with the BRI, is located within the Suez Canal Economic Zone (SCZone) and is one of Egypt's main infrastructure projects. The initiation of the Sokhna project makes China the largest investor in the development of Egypt's Suez Canal Corridor (Fouly 2017).

Any form of hostile presence in the region, be it via air or sea, can threaten the entire traffic of trade through the Suez Canal. Even a temporary disturbance could cause significant increases in energy costs for China. A disruption or blockade by non-state armed groups from Yemen or Somalia, for example, would harm Chinese trade in the region and reverberate across China's economy (Gresh 2017: 39).

### 3.3 The Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz

The third Chinese strategic focus in the Arabian Sea is the Persian Gulf, situated between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the Strait of Hormuz, which is located between Iran and Oman. The Strait of Hormuz forms the entrance to the Persian Gulf from the Gulf of Oman and, further afield, the Arabian Sea.

The **Strait of Hormuz** is about 104 miles in length, but narrows to only 20 nautical miles at its northeastern end, between Larak Island on the Iranian side, and the Quioins on the Omani side. It carries around one-third of the world's seaborne oil and is considered by many as the "world's most important oil chokepoint" (Cordesman 2015). The strait links Middle East crude producers to key markets in Asia Pacific, Europe, North America and beyond. For China, the Strait of Hormuz is the main route through which Persian Gulf exporters (Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) ship their oil. China's concerns regarding the Strait of Hormuz can be summarized under two main points: First, its physical features make the Strait of Hormuz a strategic concern for China, as well as for the US. It is a hub for China-US competition, as the majority of trade from the Gulf to both countries passes through the strait. Furthermore, there are only a few functioning pipelines that could provide alternative export routes (Cordesman 2015). However, these pipelines are in the hands of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and are not accessible to China nor the US. A previous long-term, strategic weakness of China, due to their lack of capacity and equipment, was its dependence on the US navy to protect Chinese oil tankers in the Strait

of Hormuz, according to an expert on Chinese foreign and security policy (interview, 04.03.2019, Fudan University, Shanghai). This dependency on the US navy, which risked Chinese access to oil if US-China relations turned sour, was a crucial factor in the strategic blue water navy shift in Chinese maritime policies, from 'free-riding' and dependence towards a more proactive and independent stance. China's second major concern is that this strategic hub, the Strait of Hormuz, has repeatedly been subject to geopolitical conflicts; for example, Iran's Revolutionary Guards threatened to shut down the Strait in response to US sanctions in July 2018. This Iranian threat was criticized by China (Pakistan Defence 2019), as the implications of such a disruption of oil trade would have devastating consequences on the global energy market. In the context of recent tensions in the region, mainly channeled through rising US-Iran ill will, the Strait of Hormuz has become a geopolitical theatre. The costs of chartering very large crude carriers (VLCC) through the Persian Gulf to China have risen – and may continue to rise by as much as a third – as ship owners and charterers pass on rising insurance and fuel costs (Swift 2019). China has reacted to the current tensions by stating that, should the military situation in the region deteriorate further, it might employ its own ships to protect Chinese VLCCs sailing through the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf (Eyal 2019).

The **Persian Gulf** is located between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula. In the east, it is connected to the Gulf of Oman by the Strait of Hormuz; its western end is marked by the delta of the Shatt al-Arab river. The Persian Gulf is bordered on the north, northeast, and east by Iran; on the southeast and south by parts of Oman and the United Arab Emirates; on the southwest and west by Qatar, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia; and on the northwest by Kuwait and Iraq. The Gulf is 865 km in length, 56 km (Strait of Hormuz) to 370 km in breadth, has a surface area of 251,000 km<sup>2</sup>, and a maximum depth of 92 meters. Geopolitically, it serves as a bridge between Africa, Europe and Asia, a vital cross point in the global maritime system.

The Persian Gulf is a linch pin for the BRI, due to its rich oil and natural gas resources, which are of essence for China's growing economy (Qian 2016: 33). China's Persian Gulf policies are determined by a combination of China's overall foreign strategy, its core national interests in the Persian Gulf, and the Persian Gulf region's strategic structure are all (Bingbing et al. 2011). 'The (Persian) Gulf Pearl Chain', which references investments in the Gulf countries as well as Iraq and Iran, is considered as a major breakthrough to reduce China's dependence on SLOCs as well as increase economic and regional integration (Lokhande 2017).

## 4 Ramifications of China's Maritime Strategy

### 4.1 Ramifications for China: The Need to Provide Regional Security

Ever since Beijing began implementing the BRI in 2013, and their resultant increased activities across the Middle East and Africa on both land and sea, China's security interests have continued to keep pace with its geo-economic interests and investments. This holds true for the BRI land projects as well as the increased Chinese trade in the Indian Ocean region, and the Arabian Sea in particular. China's new maritime strategy, which substantially augments its attendance to strategic chokepoints in the IOR and overall naval presence in the region, may add to China's emergence as an important regional maritime actor, and change its overall role in the region. As China increases its presence in places such as Djibouti, the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Aden, it also touches upon regional security issues. This involvement augments the challenges to protect Chinese investments overseas, but also raises the potential of the PRC to assist with regional security and stability. Although its MSR is still in its infancy, China's rising military presence overseas renders it a transformative influence across the broader Middle East, including the Gulf region and Arabian Peninsula (Gresh 2017: 44–45), and thereby becomes part of the future equation as regards the security needs of its trading partners. If tensions continue to escalate in the Persian Gulf, Beijing may find it has no other choice but to provide a security presence in the Middle East. In a recent statement, the Chinese Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates Ni Jian indicated that China considers guarding its own oil, and even voiced interest in participating in the proposed US naval security plan for the Persian Gulf, despite the ongoing trade war (Stratfor 2019). This new US-backed maritime security framework, dubbed Operation Sentinel, aims to increase the overall situational awareness in the region, and would focus on intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, as well as improved information sharing. If China does decide to join, this would mark a significant increase of China's military and naval presence in the region.

### 4.2 Ramifications for Coastal Countries of the Arabian Sea

Given the lack of information on the Chinese maritime approach in the region, it is very difficult, not to say speculative, to talk about concrete ramifications for the countries along the Arabian Sea.

China's frequent incursions into the Arabian Sea could be seen as a power projection of Beijing's growing naval fleet (Hornat 2016). At this stage, however, with China's new maritime strategy still unfinished and the main details of implementation undetermined, the concrete implications for governments and militaries in the Middle East remain unknown. As a researcher from the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) stressed, the concrete arrangements of China's maritime strategy are still not very clear. Compared with China's BRI land route, there remains less clarity on the specifics of the maritime route (interview, 07.03.2019, China Institute of International Studies, Beijing). Further and in-depth research would be needed to assess the concrete implications of increased Chinese power projection, via a country-to-country approach. While such an analysis goes beyond the scope and aim of this Study, it is possible to project some general potential ramifications for the region. There is little doubt that future Chinese maritime capabilities will reflect not only the country's growing technology and economic capacities, but also its vulnerability to trade disruption and its dependence on oil imports from the Middle East (Lei 2008). Despite aggressively pursuing supply diversity, as much as 70 to 80 percent of China's future oil imports could come from the Middle East and North Africa (Gresh 2017: 40). Increasing Chinese presence in the Arabian Sea and the wider Indian Ocean region reflects its energy import needs from the Middle East. For instance, the Strait of Malacca, a key passage in the Indo-Pacific region, is an important waterway for oil tankers from the Middle East. It is expected that the continued rollout of the BRI and the MSR will lead to a further boost of China's economic ties to the coastal countries of the IOR. However, any increasing economic interests and ties for Beijing will be accompanied by political and security interests.

#### **4.2.1 Regional Economic Ramifications**

Concerning economic consequences, the increased Chinese presence is directed towards securing China's main energy supply routes. From the Chinese perspective, the Middle East's natural chokepoints in the Straits of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab, the Gulf of Aden and the Suez Canal, are subject to a high level of geopolitical uncertainty, as China is unable to secure them on its own (Kuo 2018). The new Chinese maritime strategy, and its stronger navy presence, could act to stabilize trade and export opportunities for many Middle Eastern countries – not least for Iran – and facilitate shipping of goods via sea routes to China. During an Iran-China joint military exercise in 2017, it became obvious that China's increasing maritime presence could lead to closer collaboration and interaction between the two navies. The strategic focus of such joint missions is the Strait of Hormuz, which is also the recent setting for the

Tehran and Washington face-off. The strait is of crucial importance to China, as around 30 percent of global oil exports and over 80 percent of China's oil imports from the region pass through the strategic waterway annually.

The countries along the Persian Gulf also depend heavily on revenues from their exports that pass through the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf. Thus, the passage through the Strait of Hormuz is both an economic and a security issue. Any disruption of trade due to Chinese-US rivalries would signify great losses for exporters; and importers would face supply shortages and higher shipping costs. Countries along the Persian Gulf are seeking to reduce their dependence on the United States and therefore are building cooperative relations with China. For instance, according to Chinese customs data and EIA estimates, Saudi Arabia is currently reshuffling the priority destinations of its crude oil exports and boosting sales with China (Paraskova 2019). Due to its increasing oil imports, China is becoming a valuable partner for many countries in the region. Yet, it is highly unlikely that any country will sacrifice its relations with the US in favor of China.

#### **4.2.2 Security Ramifications**

Concerning the security dimension, the implications of China's push into the IOR are a mixed bag. In times of peace and stability, China will most likely use the new IOR maritime infrastructure and port facilities to refuel and resupply its naval vessels. There clearly is a correlation between China's naval power expansion and the rise in its oil import dependency, as China uses its resource needs as a pretext to improve its naval capabilities (Erickson and Collins 2007: 665). However, there is no concrete security link between China and the countries that are the recipients of Chinese investments. Beijing has been, and remains, very hesitant to establish a sizeable military presence in the region, and thus become an arbitrator in regional disputes; such as between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Iran and the US, the Yemeni conflict or maritime insecurities around the Horn of Africa (Oosterveld 2017). This reluctance to intervene was also noted during the past China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), an annual gathering that outlines China's Middle Eastern policies (Fulton 2018). Recently, however, China undertook naval exercises with Iran and a counter-terrorism exercise with Saudi Arabia, actions which can be interpreted as an effort to maintain a balance of power in the region (Oosterveld 2017) and to seek the role of a mediator.

Critics argue that China could use ports associated with the Maritime Silk Road to service military assets, for instance through the Gwadar port in Pakistan, the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka and the Kyaukpyu port in Malaysia (Funaiole and Hillman 2018). Its military overseas base in Djibouti, initially

flagged as purely logistical to support the PLAN's anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden, has developed into a full-fledged base that represents Chinese military strength. The MSR does not merely provide much needed access to markets, trade opportunities and investment and development. Even though the Chinese presence does not directly affect the Middle Eastern or African states surrounding the Djibouti base, it can be interpreted as a challenge to the, formerly unquestioned, US military dominance in the region. For this reason, the emerging Chinese maritime presence in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz is being closely observed by countries in the region, each on the lookout for potential repercussions for their specific national interests, secondary to increased US-China naval rivalries.

From either vantage point, it becomes clear that China, via its new maritime strategy, intends to strengthen control over regional maritime law enforcement and expand its military command to overseas.

## 5 Conclusion and Outlook

The Study has shown that China's new maritime strategy overseas and the implementation of the Maritime Silk Road have already had, and will continue to have, ramifications regarding China's role in the Arabian Sea. The authors have argued that the maritime component of the Belt and Road Initiative not only affects the oceans of the region, but also impacts the coastal countries inland, as China leaves increasing footprints throughout the Middle East. China's maritime strategy seems to pursue a low profile approach even as it steps up its military naval strength. The Study has laid out that China's current sea power, and its maritime strategy in the Arabian Sea, are affected by three different factors: naval power projection; resource demands; and regional hegemony. It was also highlighted that China does not appear to have one comprehensive maritime strategy for the Arabian Sea; rather, it is developing distinct strategies for the different sub-seas. Future research should therefore be directed towards investigating the specific ramifications of China's new maritime strategy for the individual countries in the Middle East and in North and West Africa, concerning economy, security and geopolitical connectivity. Additional research efforts should also explore concrete policy reactions of the specific countries to China's new maritime strategy, as well as their perceptions of China's maritime presence along their coasts.

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ISSN 2367-4539

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