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China's BRI Conundrum: Rupturing Arteries (CPEC AND CMEC) and the Failing Grand Strategic Vision

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Abstract

This paper attempts to debunk China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), by arguing that two of its most important arteries namely the China- Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) – specifically oil pipeline projects - are destined to clog, if analysed from a geopolitical perspective, where geography hinders the economic feasibility of such projects. The literature is divided into four sections: *First* section introduces the resurrection of geopolitics in the international relations discourse, after it was discarded in post-World War II period. It also gives a descriptive analysis of what prominent geopolitical theorists thought and how their analysis

Key Points

- China's Belt and Road Initiative, though touted as the "project of the century", supposedly suffers with inherent risks and problems. Two essential components of BRI vis. the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, specifically the oil pipeline projects, are likely to be economically unsustainable in the future. Domestic protests, geographical hindrances and strategic ambiguity will make them unviable in future times.
- CPEC's oil pipeline artery, empirically, remains gripped with problems of geography, domestic predilections and Beijing's debt trap diplomacy, which worsens the future progress and casts doubt on the economic sustainability of the project. Likewise, the issue of CMEC remains astutely problematic, given the strong domestic hindrances. States, largely, are becoming aware about China's strategic interests which seek to dilute the recipient state's interest.
- Theoretically, China is engaging in different balancing mechanisms at different levels. Beijing is involved in "geopolitical presence" balancing and "order" balancing, with former efforts exacerbating China's problem, while the latter is coming to fruition, given Beijing's construing of an alternative international order aimed at superseding the US led liberal international order.

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applies to China's rising ambitions. *Second* section highlights the vision that guides BRI and its strategic intent. The *third* and *fourth* sections contain key technical and economic perspectives within a larger geopolitical framework to check if BRI's most ambitious projects will survive in the foreseeable future or not. The paper concludes by mentioning about a new type of balancing that is discernible in China's 'project of the century'.

Introduction

In the post-Cold War period, in a more economically liberalised world, geo-economics was suggested to be a way out for militarism and interventions, while geopolitics was deemed to be overshadowed by free trade, foreign direct investment and economic wellbeing that promised to deliver prosperity and peace to the world. However, in sharp contrast, as John Ikenberry puts it, geopolitics is just a norm as the liberal order is witnessing a prolonged demise with populist leaders gaining substantial popularity around the world.[1] This era has given way to geopolitics to re-emerge, given the involvement of states in geopolitical calculations to achieve crude returns based on territorial expansionism.[2] The recent Chinese aggression on Indian borders[3], military adventures in South China Sea (SCS)[4] and a more assertive posture in the East China Sea, is evidence of the fact that China is expanding its tentacles softly through economics, to pursue its strategic intent or to put it more bluntly, as John Mearsheimer labels "to become a hegemon".[5]

As China is growing and becoming more assertive, the context could not have been more apt to analyse what geopolitical theorists have written about great powers and their strategic preparations to become a superpower. Nicholas Spykman, in his series of articles titled "*Geography and foreign Policy*" asserted that geography "conditions" the foreign policy of a state, but it is not "deterministic".[6] He highlighted that the potential for a state to become a great power lies in its ability to traverse geographical obstructions and to create effective communication either through river or land between the centre and the periphery.[7] China's BRI initiative is labelled as "project of the century" due to its gigantic scope of connecting continents and creating economic corridors.[8] But in true strategic sense, this is only the Nation's first steps towards gaining a superpower status.

To respond as to why China's needs to expand, Robert Kaplan in an essay written for the Foreign Affairs argued that given the massive size and world's largest population, China will be forced to "cultivate" its need and "economic survival" will be the key driver for China's expansion.[9] These predictions, made decades ago, translated into reality with massive infrastructural developments that Beijing has undertaken to secure control over natural resources tapped in Africa and Central & South Asia. The obsession for securing supplies has forced China to lay claim on territories and zones in SCS and the Korean peninsula.[10] The SCS is estimated to hold enormous oil and gas reserves. The US Energy Informational Agency estimates that the SCS holds around 16-33 billion barrels of oil and around 14 trillion barrels of natural gas in “proved and probable reserves”.[11] In addition to this, China has been aggressively trying to maintain its monopoly over rare earth metals, including securing these minerals from countries like Congo. However, external sources are usually prone to disruptions.[12] This has pushed China to look for offshore solutions in the SCS. The seabed in SCS is rich in polymetallic nodules,[13] indispensable to the growing needs of a digital world driven by electronics. Claiming sovereignty over the SCS would ensure reliable supply of these rare earth minerals, allowing China to ensure cost-effective supply to its domestic industry and for exports dominance in the global market. Dominating the global supply chain of such minerals will result in great leverage for China.

China’s BRI and its Strategic Intent

China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a flagship initiative launched by President Xi Jinping and is characterised as the most ambitious infrastructure initiative which involves reviving the historical Silk Road connecting East Asia to Europe.[14] But this massive economic exercise is seen by many political analysts as a "trojan horse" for China's military and economic expansion and its ultimate aim of becoming a global hegemon.[15] China's Han dynasty laid the path for westward expansion by "forging" a trade network encompassing all Central Asian countries including Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in addition to India and Pakistan. Likewise, Xi aspires to emulate the same, but with more assertiveness. These trade routes are China’s important gateway to European countries.[16]

The plan includes two significant connections: the overland Silk Road and the Maritime Silk route.[17] The main motivation for initiating such projects lies in economics, but in the long term it will serve the growing interests of a rising power and its vision of the world. China's 'output focused' economic growth has resulted in vast amounts of unused resources, which must be parked elsewhere to earn substantive profits, given the supply has far outpaced the domestic demand.[18]

China's over-capacity and under-utilised resources coupled with huge capital surplus economy created a massive incentive for capital directed towards the underdeveloped and developing nations.[19] The need for capital in these countries for infrastructural development made China's involvement easy. It resulted in creating a vast network of railways, energy pipelines, highways which streamlined border crossing, both westwards and southward. Though economy might be the primary driver, the projects have vast potential for strategic consolidations. Furthermore, to ensure adequate energy supplies, China has built pipelines to safeguard its energy interests. However, protests have grown in numbers and severity as China's cheque book diplomacy has pushed these nations into a debt trap, and this 'debt trap mechanism' further enabled China to consolidate its position by gaining access to key infrastructures, which many believe can be used militarily in future conflicts.[20]

The strategic objective behind China's BRI strategy seems to be the creation of an alternative to the existing liberal world order.[21] Though, the strategy may not involve uprooting the much embedded liberal order, but aims engulf into it, and take advantage of possible loopholes to metamorphose a new order, which largely espouses authoritarian interests. The much-touted investment projects are financed by institutions created by China, which have seen massive worldwide participation like AIIB and others.[22] Since "system makers" cultivate such mechanisms to pursue their interest rather than others, this alternative construction is the path to dominate against the much constrained existing order.

China's maritime silk route is envisaged based on false historical narrative.[23] The maritime route complements the overland route connecting the Eurasian hinterland and therefore, plays an important role in furthering China's connectivity with the region, by avoiding the older ports and strategic chokepoints.[24] The road and maritime routes are strategic mechanisms to maintain China's presence around the world. Moreover, as David Brewster puts it, China's assertiveness implies "transforming" itself from a continental power to a "resident power in the Indian ocean region"(IOR).[25]

China has heavily invested in infrastructural developmental in the maritime domain, especially in ports that are under construction like the Hambantota Port in Colombo, Sri Lanka; Maday and Kyaukpyu Ports in Myanmar; Gwadar Port in Pakistan, and Ports in Djibouti and Tanzania.[26] Many defence analysts and realist thinkers observed that such developments may hamper India's interest in the region. But most importantly, the success of these overland and maritime routes are heavily dependent on the economic performance of two most critical routes— the so-called ‘arteries’ namely CPEC and CMEC. CPEC connects Pakistan's Gwadar Port with China's Xinjiang Province while Myanmar's Kyaukpyu Port connects China's Southern most Yunnan Province.

The paper attempts to analyse these two economic corridors carefully and particularly the oil pipeline projects and argue as to how these “arteries” are susceptible to clog in the future. This analysis will primarily focus on whether geography supports or opposes such initiatives. The analysis ends by arguing that as per physical and critical geographic explanations, these projects will largely be unsustainable in the forthcoming future , and probably disrupt the economic health of the states involved.

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Why CPEC's oil pipeline project is destined to ‘fail’?

The China- Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a flagship project initiated by President Xi Jinping, as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. Initially, the project attracted $46 billion in investment which was later increased to $62 billion by April 2017[27], to support large scale infrastructure construction and industrial development, with a comprehensive transportation corridor linking Pakistan to China.[28]

The proposed oil pipeline project is intended to avoid over-reliance on the Malacca Strait[29], usually referred to as the Malacca dilemma— a term coined by Chinese Premier Hu Jintao in 2003. China's fear is obvious as many policy analysts believes that the US can strategically use the Malacca Strait to check China's rise.[30]

The Gwadar port, will act as an “offloading space” for oil imports and its connection to Kashgar in China's Xinjiang province, through the oil pipeline must cross the challenging Himalayan region. The oil pipeline starting from the sea level must ascent the 15,400 ft Khunjerab pass to reach the Chinese mainland[31], necessitating heavy thrusting equipment to lift oil and significant power supply to keep the pipeline serviceable. Further, since the temperature could go down as low as -30 degree Celsius, the "pipeline needs extra heating as well as insulating material".[32]

Also, the fact that it took almost 14 days for the first shipment of goods to arrive at Gwadar from Xinjiang via Karakoram highway[33] shows the precarious nature of physical geography characterised by "overhanging valleys, glaciers, waterfalls", etc.[34] Since, the road and oil pipeline routes overlap, and since they fall in earthquake and landslide prone zone[35],therefore, this could damage the pipelines, making repairing and maintenance burdensome. In short, physical geography creates an obstacle to the reliable delivery of shipment whether it’s by road or through oil pipelines.

Another major issue, which warrants attention pertains to the technical details of the Gwadar port, having repercussions on technical feasibility of docking and stocking requirements. Naturally, the port has the capacity to manage about 50,000 DWT of cargo vessels, with draft up to 12.5 m deep[36], making it unrealistic to dock even mid-size oil tankers and cargo vessels. This allows only handy-sized carriers to ship[37], suggesting the limited commercial worth of the port. Though the authorities have successfully completed the dredging, which stands at 14.4 m depth as on January 2022, with the intent to dock larger ships having 70,000 DWT of capacity. However, even this deepening is insufficient to hold mid-size oil tankers, whose conventional capacity starts from 80,000 DWT and beyond.[38] Moreover, Gwadar has only three 200 m conventional berths and one general 100 m service berth; this limited capacity constraints the ability of port to unload major oil consignments, unless new berths are constructed.[39] This shows that the port has limited capacity. The lack of depth suggests that geography impedes the commercial viability of the port.

Moreover, a Shanghai-based shipping analyst Wu Minghua, noted in 2016 that the port has an estimated capacity to handle about 1 million tons of cargo.[40] Since, China's demand for oil is significantly more than what port could handle (335 times more), the absence of oil handling terminal[41], in the Gwadar port, further puts the practical intended significance of port in jeopardy, doubting the "cost-effectiveness of offloading and transporting oil supplies" through the route.[42]

Meanwhile, COVID-19 has brought major economies to a screeching halt, with the possibility of having a worst economic recession soon. The already burdened CPEC projects (oil-pipeline & Gwadar port), characterised by delays and low economic returns further worsens Pakistan's ability to clear its debts[43]. The suspicion that surrounds the plausible economic benefits of the project coupled with Pakistan's relatively grim economic recovery post-COVID 19[44] will inevitably prime the public sentiment against China leading to a heavy backlash against such projects. The consequences of such opposition might propel other states to follow suite, which will be a major setback for BRI, whose undermining could severely stall China's long-term goal of becoming a hegemon.[45]

To conclude, CPEC's oil pipeline project may remain an unreliable route for energy supplies. Geographical constraints, anti-CPEC protests in Pakistan and cost-benefit analysis limits the project’s further progress and casts doubt on its sustainability and scalability in the future. Though Pakistan benefits from CPEC in the short-term in terms of infrastructure development, CPEC will continue to worsen the country’s macro-economic stability as it struggles to service its foreign debt obligations.

China's "South Corridor" in Myanmar: Why the Prospects of Sustaining the Oil pipeline project is Bleak?

Similar to CPEC, China has been actively engaged in Myanmar for the past decade to secure its strategic interest by diversifying the risks posed to its traditional oil supply lines that involve a transit through the Malacca Strait. China’s actions are guided by the presence of the US Navy in the Indo-Pacific which it believes can interdict its trade, chiefly oil imports, through the Malacca Strait during any future US-China crisis.[46] To overcome this perceived threat, Chinese premier Hu Jintao coined the term "Malacca Dilemma".[47]Beijing approached its neighbour Myanmar, promising the latter high economic growth and employment, while systematically overcoming the possible ramification of future blockade by routing part of its oil supplies through Myanmar via an oil pipeline.

One such project is the construction of 771 km oil pipeline project. The initial idea of the pipeline was floated in 2004; the pipeline will connect the Maday (Made) Island in Bay of Bengal to Kunming city— capital of Yunnan province in South East China.[48] The aim of the pipeline is to reduce the risks that the oil supplies passing through the Malacca strait is exposed to, and offload some of the crude oil in Myanmar and transfer it through the pipeline connection to China[49], while cutting the time involved by about one- third. Though, the pipeline construction was completed back in 2015, the operations began after a two-year delay in April 2017. This highlights that the pipeline was afflicted with brief interludes, mainly related to the economic viability and disputes over terms and conditions. [50] In October 2016, the Myanmar Government imposed an extra five per cent tax on crude oil along with added transit fee and pipeline tariffs. [51] Such bureaucratic hurdles and policy instability, as commented on by PetroChina — which had built the pipeline —makes Chinese investments in Myanmar extremely risky. Moreover, in March 2017, as reported by *Reuters*, the first super tanker carrying oil from Azerbaijan failed to receive "approval" of Myanmar's Navy, given the cancellation of import license[52], thereby frustrating China.

The pipeline is supposed to deliver 22 million tons of crude oil per year[53], while China's total imports for the year 2019 stood at 506 million tons. However, the Kyaukpyu-Kunming oil pipeline supplied only 10.8m tons of oil in 2019,[54] accounting for a mere 2.13 per cent of China's total oil imports in 2019.This figure might have risen to a maximum 4.29 per cent if the entire pipeline capacity of 22 million tonnes/year was utilised amid a total crude oil import of 512.98 million tonnes in 2021.[55] Once China’s oil imports starts rising again, as the world economy recovers from the Covid Pandemic, the risk mitigation that this pipeline will offer to China is going to fall further in future.

The security of the pipelines is a major concern for all the stakeholders. The pipeline is more "vulnerable to sabotage and military interdiction than sea borne shipping", argues Erickson and Collin[56] especially from the non-state actors that is mainly ethnic groups managing semi-autonomous region in Myanmar.[57] The oil pipeline passes through Rakhine and Shan State[58], and periodically experiences violence, thereby making the region extremely risky for business operations and investment.

In early 2017, "ethnic cleansing" of the Rohingya Muslims by extremist Buddhists in Rakhine state, seriously disturbed the region[59], which included oil pipelines and Kyaukpyu port projects. Recently, violence again erupted in the region, this time between the Arakan Army— a Buddhist insurgent group demanding an independent Rakhine state and the state authorities.[60] Insurgent sympathisers and local communities, as observed by the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, are at significant risk due to the pipeline construction which results in land seizures and environmental degradation.[61] Similarly, locals voiced concerns over China's 85 per cent stake in the Kyaukpyu Port, which then left only 15 per cent of the port under the Myanmar authorities.[62] Though, the deal was revised amidst protests in October 2017, still China settled at 70per cent.[63] As reported by Chinese customs in 2019, around $2.5 billion of oil was transferred through this route in first six months[64], with central Myanmar Govt expected to receive roughly $13 million dollars yearly as taxes.[65] This is seen as an "extractive" enterprise catering to the needs of foreign state while benefiting the central govt[66], but largely ignoring the local population.

The oil pipeline passes through the Shan State before entering Kunming—the capital city of China's Yunnan province. Bordering Yunnan is a relatively large self-administered zone called Kokang region, managed by Myanmar's Central Govt, which until 2009 was under the administration of (Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army) MNDAA[67], a non-state armed rebel group. Twice in 2009 and 2015, MNDAA collided with Myanmar's military which resulted in thousands of native people seeking refuge in China's Yunnan province.[68] As observed, pipelines are more susceptible to disruption as compared to tankers and evidences from Colombia, Nigeria and Iraq suggests that non-state actors have often exploited pipeline infrastructure's vulnerabilities for achieving their political and military objectives.[69]

Myanmar is turning out to be no exception in this regard. Shortly following the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar, there was an attack on the oil pipeline station in the Singtaing Township.[70] Three security personnel were killed in the attack, raising alarm bells in Beijing. Interestingly, the attack took place three months after several anti-coup protestors took to social media where they threatened to blow up the controversial oil pipeline.[71] The anger and the anti-China sentiment among the locals in Myanmar, is due to China's continued support to the *junta*. The oil pipeline attack is not an exception. In March 2021, 32 Chinese backed factories in Yangon were destroyed by the protestors.[72]

China's concern for its oil and gas pipelines is expected to mount further. As the Myanmar military continues its crackdown on anti-coup protestors, curb freedom of expression and suppress democratic processes, the backlash against critical Chinese investments is expected to rise if it maintains its support for the *junta*. The evolving situation in Myanmar presents a fine case of "indigenous geopolitics" at work[73], where native populations struggle against powerful actors to pursue their interests and livelihood.

Conclusion

China's growing reach and its vision of altering the existing global order under the garb of economic development, is not without its challenges. Apart from other countries like India, US and Japan rallying to challenge China, the country also faces significant challenges from the domestic populations of the countries it's investing in. China's BRI initiative and its alternative vision for a liberal order, essentialises a new way of thinking about the balance of power politics. Irrespective of the traditional notions associated with balancing, China's approach can be distinguished into two parts— *first,* geopolitical "presence" balancing, where it tries to create spaces, whether physical or imaginary, to legitimise its control over them. Typically, such behaviour is seen as a counter against the US presence in most of the world. *Second*, is "order" balancing, as the US led liberal order is collapsing, given the backdrop of extreme populism in the world, China saw opportunity in such collapse to frame its alternative order.[74]

Here, China's strategy is twofold— *first,* to use its own version of liberalism to establish its own "neo-liberal" order, basically an adaptation learned from the weakening US led order. Such construction is usually forwarded as being more liberal, while typically undercovering some of the more illiberal tenets. *Second*, by creating a liberal Chinese order, China wants to fuel the growth of its geopolitical presence in every part of globe. Such balancing is possible by creating physical spaces around the world to counter the US presence.

As highlighted in this paper, China's geopolitical balancing is not as smooth as advocated by many scholars. By placing itself everywhere around the world, Beijing has created some strategic problems. *First*, the domestic dissent in many of the host countries against China's projects is increasing, perhaps to levels higher than Beijing initially estimated. Debt trap diplomacy is failing as many countries are becoming more wary of China's debt-ridden mechanisms to allure them. *Second*, the strategic vision surrounding the project ignores the economics involved to some extent, thus often making these projects economically unsustainable for host countries.

In conclusion, while China will continue to lend its support to these projects, the strategic cushion provided by these corridors is not enough and hence is unreliable. The two arteries, as examined technically in this paper, shows that China will inevitably have to focus more on securing energy supplies from the SCS and the Arctic[75] in order to find any sustainable and meaningful solutions to its Malacca dilemma.

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