

## From South China Sea to Gwadar Port: Conflict Management in Asia and Broader Global Implications

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### Abstract

This article examines the potential challenges of China's expansionist projects in Asia to the U.S global governance model and ASEAN institutional model of governance based on non-interference. It analyzes the geopolitical challenges posed by China's expansionist initiatives, including the Gwadar Port, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and South China Sea projects, to the U.S. global governance model and ASEAN's regional non-interference approach. These developments signify a potential game-changer for Asia and global politics. The study evaluates ASEAN's effectiveness in addressing the growing economic and political rivalry between the U.S. and China. While ASEAN promotes a model of governance rooted in sovereignty and consensus, its limitations in resolving critical disputes highlight the escalating influence of China's unilateral strategies. The article also underscores the broader implications of China's initiatives, such as reshaping trade networks and challenging traditional power dynamics. By examining these trends, the study suggests that China's actions not only affect regional stability but also signal a pivotal shift in global governance frameworks and geopolitical alignments.

**Keywords:** China, U.S, Governance, ASEAN, non-interference, South China Sea, Gwadar, CPEC, conflict management.

### Introduction:

The end of the cold war and the rise of a unipolar state has brought with it a global governance system that was supposed to last unchallenged based on norms and principles that represented more than any other country those of the U.S. Theories such as liberalism and institutional order have held expectations that envisioned a future governed by American economic and institutional model for the world. The rise of free trade, globalization and a world dominating currency were expected to bring international relations into harmony under the lead of the U.S. Scholars such as Keohane and Nye have for long highlighted how a liberal regime would make countries interdependent through trade and nesting which is adopted by international institutions to make states bound to global governance norms by increasing the benefits of compliance decreasing transaction costs and more importantly making costs of deviating high by binding the state to each other in security, economics etc. (Keohane & Nye,

1996). This was expected to be brought about by a globalization trend that makes countries unable to have protectionist policies. Ikenberry in the book “After Victory” outlines how the U.S. has entrenched a global institutional order by building international institutions and binding states to it to ensure its long-lasting rule in the international arena. Once the institutions are established and operating, it would be difficult for states to get rid of them or change them into other institution that represented other norms. This international institutional order gives the U.S. a normative advantage and the privilege to constrain states by assuring them of mutual constraints through international organizations (Ikenberry, 2000).

### **Literature review**

Many scholars, however, have criticized such views on the prevalence of the U.S. and its system as the only players in the international scene. This is mainly highlighted as a counter-effect of the very same system established by the U.S. to maintain its dominating position. Globalization and free trade has according to many scholars allowed the rise of many countries that would not only challenge the U.S. economically but would also bring up institutional orders and norms that can conflict with those established by the U.S.

More importantly, challenges to U.S. model would rise through regional powers that would enhance regional integration and models that can challenge the western guided model of governance. This would not mean that it fully goes against its standards but that it challenges it in a way of creating a different model of governance to strengthen the region’s independence from the U.S.

Besides the example of the EU integration model which had posed a challenge to the U.S. by building an alternative market and a competing currency, more conflictual challenges are expected to rise from the South. Scholars such as Krasner have pointed out to how the inequalities fostered by the Northern model such as the IMF lending system etc. has given rise to calls for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) that represents the primary interests of the South such as an authoritative international model of governance rather than a market guided one. This is mainly because the market led governance created by the U.S. and the West puts Southern countries in the face of new non-traditional security threats while they are already weak states and divided by issues of state building, nationalism, poverty, political stability and ethnicity. Southern states mainly concerned about political stability and integration in their countries and regions would challenge the western international economic and institutional order (Krasner, 1996). The rise of South-South cooperation and organizations such as ASEAN and AU are examples of this. This is an example of what Walt has called leash slipping and soft balancing that is expected to rise in response to U.S. strength in international arena both institutionally and economically.

(Jervis, 2009); (Mastanduno, 2009) have pointed out to the ways in which the U.S. unipolarity carried the seeds of its own end or modification. The major reason for this is globalization which while at first gave room to the U.S. to manipulate other states has with time presented opportunity for other states to grow even faster than the U.S. and grow as challengers. Mastanduno in “System Maker, Privilege Taker” highlights how the system created to make the U.S. a privilege taker turned to be a challenge to U.S. unipolar ride in the system. Globalization and the spread of free trade has given rise to other markets in Asia and Europe. Japan and China’s economic rise leading to increasing demands on Asian market. The Chinese banks holding large amounts of U.S. dollar serves as a ‘nuclear weapon’ for china to constrain U.S. ability to stop China’s expansion in Asia and the world. This is mainly due to the extreme effects it would have on U.S. economy if China decides to sell off huge amounts of U.S. dollar held in its banks. China as Mastanduno calls it has adopted the status of the patient long term challenger of the U.S. This has been done by adopting the strategic plan of a “peaceful rise” which co-sounds Asian values of growing without threatening. This serves to calm down both regional and U.S. fears of China’s rise although a U.S. realist-theory led vision has instead emphasized on perceiving it as a threat rather than as peaceful rise. According to Mastanduno, China and Russia’s rise are clear signals that the U.S. would not prevail as the only player in the world economic and institutional order (Mastanduno, 2009). Wohlforth on his side, highlights on the U.S. social status management tools to keep its global rule by allowing and encouraging countries such as China and Russia as regional powers. This is done to ensure their stand at 2nd tier positions and not being able to come into direct competition with U.S. for 1st tier position. The U.S. would encourage China and Russia to have the lead in many regional spheres such as China leading the 6 talks on how to tackle North Korea and including Russia in G7 even when it didn’t have enough economic requirements for it. Wohlforth expects based on his social status management model that this would allow the U.S. to lead while keeping these growing countries limited to their regional spheres (Wohlforth, 2009).

Recent events in Asia, however, confirm the expectations of scholars about the increasing rise of Chinese challenge to the U.S. global and economic institutional order. China’s expansion in Asia and the nonconventional role played by ASEAN which does not cohort international norms and principles set a credible example for important changes in international relations that would challenge established views both in the practice and theory of IR based on U.S. unchallenged dominance economically, institutionally as well as militarily.

### **Research problem**

Considering the mentioned literature on global economic and institutional leadership and governance, this article explores in a general term the case of

China and ASEAN regional governance and its possible future implications on international politics. To do so, the article sheds the light on the case of the challenging Gwadar Port project and CPEC which is to be a game changer in the region and the world as an implication of the Asian regional governance model also known as the ASEAN Way in dealing with China's expansion in the region.

### **Sections outline**

The following sections are organized as follows; The first section explores the South China Sea conflict followed by a section on ASEAN and its conflict management way as well as its failed efforts to restrain China's aggressive expansion in the Southeast Asia. The third section explores China's unilateral and alternative action to fulfil its expansive plans other than the South China Sea through the Gwadar Port and CPEC with Pakistan. The Fourth section explores the geopolitical implications to follow from the success of this project and how it can be a game changer for Asia and the world.

### **I- South china sea conflict**

#### **Overview**

Home to more than 30,000 small islands and reefs across three archipelagos, South China Sea is one of the world's major shipping routes. It facilitates the movement of over half of the world's oil tankers traffic and over half of its merchant vessels by tonnage. The Malacca Strait between Singapore and Indonesia is a particularly vulnerable chokepoint for sea borne trade.

The South China Sea conflict involves both maritime and inland claims among the sovereign states in the region between china and the southeast Asian countries including Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Philippines and Vietnam. The parcel islands are subject to the disputed claims between china, Taiwan and Vietnam. Sparty Islands are disputed among China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam and Brunei. The Scarborough Shoal is claimed by Philippines, China and Taiwan. Maritime boundaries of Gulf of Tonkin are also disputed by China and Vietnam. In addition to these territorial claims access to fisheries, oil and gas resources is also at stake (Gregory, 2013).

#### **China's take on the sea**

Sharing almost 40 percent of the traded goods through the SEA, China has been involved in most of the direct clashes between rival claimants in the dispute. The dispute has been especially high between China and Vietnam. In front of the complicated claims around the sea and its possible implication on the China's power which would grow not only economically but also militarily and in terms of oil and other resources, the U.S. has tried to interfere in the conflict through global governance Sea laws principles (Lunn & Lang, 2016). The U.S. has urged claimants to pursue their territorial claims and accompanying rights to maritime space by applying the UN Convention on the

Law of the SEA. China has, however, showed full opposition to the U.S. involvement and preferred bilateral negotiations with rival Asian claimants. Rival countries such as Malaysia and Vietnam, however, have showed a preference for multilateral negotiations through Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The following map shows maritime border claimed by China versus those defined for china according to UNCLOS.



## II- ASEAN and its role

### Organization overview

Created in 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) emerged as an important regional organization that was looked forward to for bringing the divided and different countries of Southeast Asia, that have long been exhausted by international wars and foreign presence, under one institutional umbrella (ASEAN Secretariat, 2005). The organization was envisioned to be an institutional vehicle that would heal southeast Asia's past injuries through a peaceful way that is peculiar to southeast Asian values and history. Besides establishing a common southeast Asian identity, the institution was expected to facilitate an economically prosperous future for all its members and promote cooperation on issues that beset the region (Hideshi, 2013).

Given its particular history, cultural and ethnical as well as political identity, the association of Southeast Asian nations emphasized on adopting an institutional order that reflects Asian values and the needs of the region by protecting its unity and sacred principles such as sovereignty and nonintervention. ASEAN's main objectives were set as protecting sovereignty, security, promoting peace and prosperity as well as respect for one another's sovereignty based on the very sacred principle of non-interference. This was



done in direct opposition to the international norms of intervention, international justice and responsibility in cases that shock human conscience or are of interest to international community. The history of divide of American presence and of tearing regional wars in the region has made countries highly sensitive on any type of governance that can leave room for foreign powers intervention in internal affairs. this was done in line with Asian values of family and country first instead of individual rights first. Authoritarianism and other principles that went against American model of governing were to be highly respected and not interfered with as long as the state saw it beneficial for its peace maintenance and continuity. To bring the divided states together, ASEAN saw as compelling to adopt the principle of noninterference under the title of ASEAN Way to secure the fears of conflictual states such as Myanmar who has held a long record of human rights violation, junta rule and a harsh position against any type of interference or criticism in its internal affairs (Bensaoud, 2015).

As a result, ASEAN adopted its very own way that was in direct contrast to the western way of regional and international cooperation based on legalism, intervention, individual rights and confrontation. ASEAN made sure to put states' rights above the authority of the organization itself. This ASEAN Way, however, has come under heavy criticism in multiple instances as ASEAN adopted passive and quiet stances on the face of very serious human rights crises in Southeast Asia (Bellamy & Beeson, 2010). Cases such as East Timor and Rohingya made ASEAN be pointed out to by global community and accused of holding to non-interference (Guiyab, 2013) principle at the expense of human life which was against international law and norms of human rights and responsibility.

### **ASEAN south china sea conflict resolution and management**

ASEAN had attempted different ways and platforms for stopping China's move toward the sea, but which had in general been ineffective and not enough to stop China and its disputes with member states. This is mainly claimed to be the case because of ASEAN non-confrontational way which is dependent on the states will and consent to go ahead with an action or with accepting the agreement rather than being able to force a change in action on the state part through pressure. In 2002, China and ASEAN agreed on a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. According to the declaration, all countries agreed to seek peaceful solutions to disputes in the South China Sea. ASEAN member states used the UNLCOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) as a mean to pursue their own interests and oppose China's U-shaped line. The Philippines proposed a Zone of Peace, Freedom, Friendship and Cooperation (ZoPFFC) to resolve the conflict. China refused the proposal while Malaysia showed concern over it. Countries opposing China's interests such as Vietnam were instead in favor of it. Other countries, on the other hand, avoided opposing Chinese suggestions for a joint development of ocean

resources. As tensions escalated in 2010, Vietnam as the chair of ASEAN chose to internationalize the issue (Rustandi, 2016). This step was successful in leveraging the U.S. policy and succeeded to place the South China Sea issues on the priority agenda of ASEAN. While ASEAN made sure to undertake all negotiations by sticking to the regional code of conduct with Mainland China, it moved to adopting UNCLOS in all outcome documents of its negotiations.

In 2012, Cambodia serving as the Chair of ASEAN, however, failed to uphold ASEAN's unity in addressing the escalating tensions between ASEAN member claimants and mainland China. The held meeting ended without a joint statement, for the first time, which held a blow to ASEAN's long held desire and efforts to keep ASEAN's solidarity. During the 17th ASEAN Regional Forum Ministerial Meeting, the U.S. representative stressed that the U.S. had a national interest in the freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons and respect for international law in the South China Sea (Wang & Lee, 2014). The United States then moved for providing patrol boats to the Philippines and declared support for Manila making the conflict take an aggressive turn and almost impossible to solve under the auspices of non-confrontational umbrella of ASEAN. This divided ASEAN more on the issue and spared the organization's voice on the dispute as each state went for a different action against joint solutions. In response to the situation, China chose to respond also with military actions and diplomatic condemnation of ASEAN members. The problem on solving the dispute among Asian community composed of China and ASEAN 's members continued and became more of an issue between the U.S. and China than one among the direct claimants. The U.S. foreign intervention and support to some ASEAN members along with ASEAN institutional incapability to have a coherent stand on the issue due to its principle of state above the organization made all efforts go in vain regardless of its efforts as a mediator. The issue is to this day subject to dispute and is likely to continue given China's perseverant and patient efforts to grow as an economic and military power in the region by which to challenge the U.S. This added to the latter's fears from China's rise an aggressive one rather than a peaceful one as drawn by China has taken the dispute beyond what ASEAN can afford to solve as U.S. support behind member states brought back issues of trust and suspicion that are highly alerting to Asian countries especially when it comes to countries such as U.S. or Russia interfering in Asian affairs.

This shows that while ASEAN has enjoyed a long history of practicing its ASEAN Way which has failed in many instances and succeeded in few to promote regional peace and stability, ASEAN lacks the needed experience in conflict management and resolution when it comes to serious issues such as South China Sea. This is due to ASEAN values of non-confrontation and putting ahead states say against the organization one which make its power almost absent when states choose to for unilateral action and divide on issues like South

China Sea. ASEAN's way of trying to solve the dispute based on its classical approach of non-intervention has left room for China to seek a different solution that would satisfy its expansion in the region and the world through unilateral action and beyond South China Sea. China's Gwadar Port Project and CPEC with Pakistan has done a blow to U.S. ability to tie China down on South China Sea (Ramay, 2016). Taking its expansive and ambitious boats to an old friend shores, China's Gwadar port project if successful promises to be a game changer for China and Pakistan while changing the game rules in Asia and most probably largely in the world at least in economic terms. An expansion that would be beyond ASEAN or the U.S. to constrain and which is ironically built upon the very baby brain of the U.S. for global dominance which is free trade and more free trade, less distance, less time and more delivery efficiency by planning a geopolitical and strategic trade move. The following section overviews what the Gwadar and CPEC projects are as well as their possible implications.

### **III- Gwadar Port and CPEC: The Game Changers**

Located in the Gwadar city in the Baluchistan province of Pakistan, Gwadar port is the deepest Sea Port in the world in terms of its shore depth. Situated in the Arabian Sea near the mouth of the Persian Gulf right outside the Straits of Hormuz which is near the key shipping routes in and out of the Persian Gulf the port offers special opportunities both through its capacity and strategic location. It is estimated that following its completion, the port is supposed to have a shore depth of 17.1 to 18.2 meters which is the deepest in the world. It is expected to be able to allow 120 berths which is the highest capacity in the world along with the highest cargo handling capacity in the world of 400 Million Tons per year. This capacity gives the port the potential to become a regional hub for international businesses following its full operational capacity.

In 2015, the port was officially leased to China for 43 years until 2059. Accordingly, China is committed to develop the Gwadar port as a free trade zone like Singapore in Hong Kong Port.

### **CPEC-China Pakistan Economic Corridor**

Considering the complicated South China Sea dispute and the hazards of having to do trade through it along with the extra costs and distance of 11000 KM, China chose to invest in its long-trusted friendship with Pakistan and transfer shipments through Gwadar port by building rail-road projects under the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which is a project worth of \$62 Billion (Bhattacharjee, 2015).

The project is divided into four major areas which include the Gwadar port itself, energy, transportation infrastructure as well as other smaller projects such as building hospitals and schools throughout Pakistan. The projects are divided into early harvest ones expected to be completed by 2020 and long-term ones



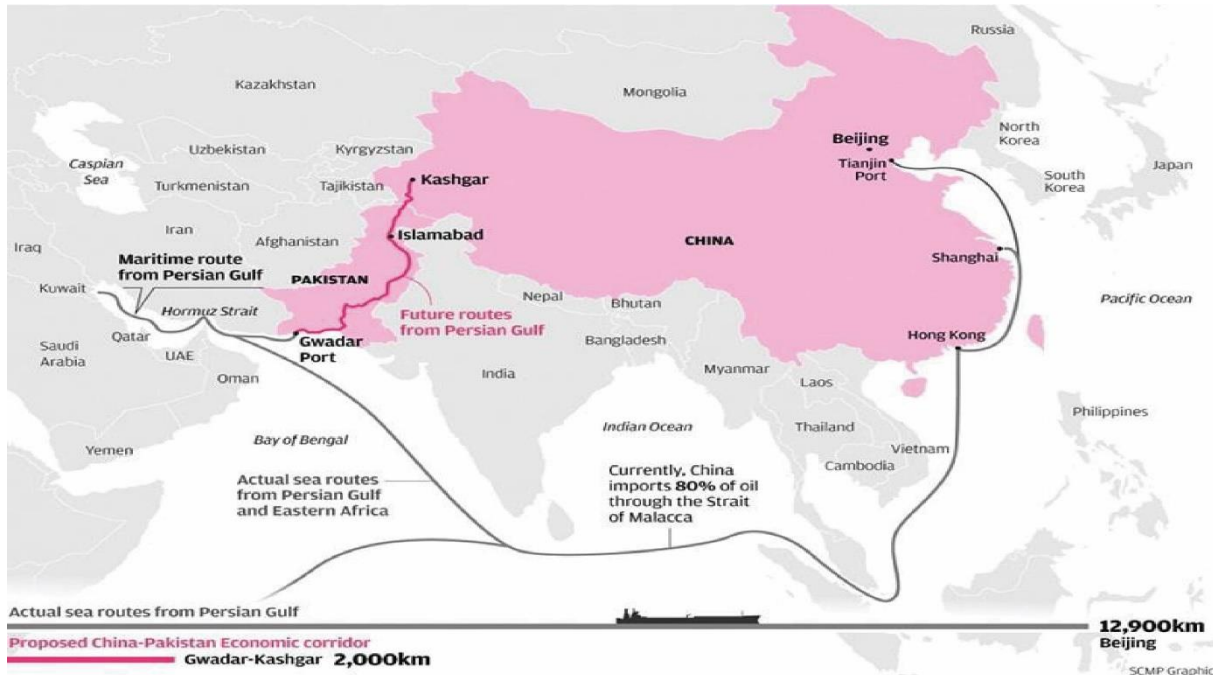
expected to need 15 more years of work (Pakistan, 2017).

Based on the 'one belt, one road' principle, the project is based on making Pakistan a bridge between the New Silk Road for Eurasian Connectivity and Maritime Silk Road between ASEAN countries. The project is not only expected to save huge shipping costs to China but also to be an incentive for developing Western China. This is mainly because the project position is linked to western China directly and trade would be entering and leaving china through its western part which would serve its objectives of balancing development in China and balancing the population distribution in the country. This is expected to directly benefit to the growth of both China, especially its western part, and Pakistan.

#### **IV- Geopolitical and Broader Implications: A Reflection**

Besides increasing China's chances of controlling the sea shores of South China Sea at its own terms as it gains dominance over trade activity in the region the project has high stakes for other nations such as Iran, UAE, India, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Oman. Iran's incentives for a similar project to lead trade in Asian region through a port which is not as deep and Gwadar and which cannot allow the same capacity. India's small port also is likely to be of less attraction in front of the impressive Gwadar. Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia would seize to be the hub of international trade which is the major source of their impressive growth in the recent decades. The very key strategic location of Gwadar with its unbeatable lodging capacity makes it an undefeatable potential financial hub for international trading that would put all the old trading order and powers into calculation. The port also serves Russia's interests for growth well as the port gives it better access to Pakistan's warm water which is more beneficial and efficient for Russian trade than normal one.

The following map show the port's strategic importance which reduces the distance for trading from 12,900 km from Beijing through actual sea routes from Persian Gulf to an impressive 2000 km through the proposed China-Pakistan Economic Corridor which is to be Asia' and world' new trading Hub (Wang, 2015).



Looking through the impressive potential and scope of the port to change the regional and international trade patterns through a faster road and an impressive capacity, it remains sensible to say that the project has high potential to be a geopolitical game changer that can change a lot in international relations. It is particularly beneficial for China to develop its western region which would give it better incentives to have an equal and better growth not only internally but also regionally and internationally. It also gives China dominance over trade in the region and most probably in the world through its efficient one belt one road which would change the trade calculations. State conducting trade through the port would spend less time and costs and gain more than those that might be tempted to stay out. Using the comparative advantage logic which also works to explain why states join international institutions that benefits some more than others, being out of the China established one belt one road and conducting trade through another route would put Chinese traded products to advantage than those traded otherwise. Following China's lead would then be the most sensible is being better in than worse out in front of an unbeatable successful project of china both in capacity, depth and strategic location. The dominance by which china is also to take out its major chunk of trade from South China Sea can give it better chances for controlling the SEA even more aggressively by controlling the other states through the major trade road through which they hold high benefits. The port potential to be an international trade hub puts at risk many countries and changes the geopolitical scenario in the Asian region with great implications for the world leading economies and powers. Needless to mention the fact that economic power is shifted to military and institutional ones to gain more influence and power in international relations by all states. Having the opportunity to lead such a record breaking port for world trade and a new geopolitical map for the region and beyond, it is not senseless to claim for an

impressive rise of China as a full challenger to U.S. dominance in international security, economy and institutional order. The power gained from such a project would give China more resources to invest in its military, ability to constrain other countries growth such as India and to gain more power as a rule maker and changer in international institutions. Using the same tools applied by the U.S. controlling world trade can make China invest more in international institutions while also expanding its challenging development strategy to EU and the west through aid without conditionality in Africa, Middle East and Asia. This Chinese version of soft power and of foreign aid has been well welcomed by countries of the South who have long been complaining about the trap-like lending system established by countries of the North which makes southern countries drawn more rather than grow more.

It would not, as a result, be far from realistic to witness a growing bloc of power with an institutional order with terms established under the lead of China and its counterparts such as Pakistan which may even conflict with international terms established under the lead of the U.S. Even if all these expectations do not come true, leading international trade by itself would put China to a very powerful position that would change many if not all aspects of international relations and politics.

## **Conclusion**

As a conclusion and in line with scholars' expectations such as (Jervis, 2009) Walt and (Mastanduno, 2009) Asia has been a challenging region for the U.S. to maintain an international order and governance that is in coherence and under its prevailing lead. The Association of Southeast Asian countries challenging way to the conventional western way based on cosmopolitan values has contributed to the inability to draw politics in the region according to western incentives. The association leaving room for a preference of states unilateral action through the principle of states before organization and the ASEAN way based on non-intervention in line with Asian values has shaped the road for the rise of even stronger China that can change the economic and political game in the region and beyond. The ASEAN Way failure to solve the South China Sea conflict which came to be subject to calculations beyond Southeast Asia and China toward the U.S. own fears from China's rise was a triggering factor for China's more intelligent and challenging move toward CPEC and Gwadar port. Considering the future potentials of the port as a geopolitical and economic game changer, it goes without question that in case the project is successful and operation the international relations and governance we are to see in couple of years are to be way different than what we have been seeing under a claimed undefeatable prevailing U.S. lead in governance, economics and military. This is especially considering the rising unhappiness with the west in Southern countries where a top down led globalization that is

seen as exploitative through western MNCs making benefits while ruining political stability is increasing.

This is in addition to the decreasing normative position of the U.S. since the Iraq war and western inconsistent attitude with its values in response to the question of refugees following Syrian crises and the political ruin of the Middle East following the U.S. led war on terror. Taking on the steps of initiated U.S. moves to expand free trade, China's Gwadar port is to break any country's current afforded beneficial road through an impressive capacity and road and time reduction. This is to unquestionably also reflect on the distribution of power internationally knowing very well as scholars such as Mark Brawley have pointed out that trade carry distributional effects that affect and shape the states' ability to lead and international hierarchy. This is mainly because trade advantages also reflect in military capacity and institutional power by giving the more powerful a more influential voice in shaping rule, principles and norms in international regimes and institutions. While it is not in the scope of this article to outline exactly how the project, when operational, is to change the whole international relations picture it remains within our current scope to drive rational expectations about the potential impressive power shifts based on current announced envisioned abilities of the project. The project is not only to change Pakistan and China in terms of development and economic well-being but will have regional and international effects at many levels. It remains, however, important to point to the challenges that would accompany the project from social, cultural and other points of views especially considering Pakistan. It would be a challenge for Pakistan to gather all the economic benefits and leadership from the trade project while also maintaining its somehow established social and cultural identity and system that is remarkably different from the Chinese model in terms of religion, society and culture.

This raises the point that has been raised by many scholars such as Acharya on the real diversity of Asia when it comes to identities and societies, but which is in general represented as a coherent unit through the political discourse of Asian values first initiated by Malaysian politicians to cover the ethnic divide between Malays and Chinese and Indians in power. The challenge to maintaining the success of the project and its heavy weight would be on the part of Pakistan to balance between the economic benefits while coherently bringing its society up without creating a large disturbance that can lead to identity or social status dissonance. Such social and identity dissonance has for long been a major reason behind terrorist motivations to counter the effects of globalization on local identities. Having a coherent social and cultural plan to balance out possible side effects of opening its port to be an international and regional hub for trade would prove essential for Pakistan to garner the great benefits of the projects without falling into the traps of globalization in security and social challenges. All in all, if well operated the project has great potential to change



the game of international relations and have important implications on its practice, geopolitics and theoretical perspectives.

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