



## China and the Ports of the Indian Ocean

Richard T. Griffiths (ed.)

2022. International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS)

358 páginas

ISBN: 9789083305516



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The Book *China and the Ports of the Indian Ocean* was edited by Richard T. Griffiths, research fellow and programme coordinator at the International Institute for Asian Studies (Leiden). The chapters of this volume had different authorship or co-authorship, which included Griffiths himself, M. Ziauddin Alamagir, E. Freymann, M. van der Heijden, M. Islam, E. Ventura Jariod, R. Mitra, B. Marabini San Martín, and G. Shahzad-van der Zwan.

Blossomed through the adversities of COVID, *China and the Ports of the Indian Ocean* tells the story of China's involvement in the Indian Ocean through the different ports that populate the region. China participates in the development of the ports as a borrower and contractor for projects, to eventually contribute to the enhancement of port efficiency. The importance of the proper management of ports derives from their status as gates for international trade for the countries touched by the Indian Ocean. This book highlights the extent to which technical aspects are linked to the development of the port, and that of the region as a result. The role of China as a lender is only apparently insignificant, as it has important hidden geopolitical and economic implications.

Considering that the development of the economic and strategic areas interlinks in the case of the ports, states who accept Chinese investments might see their ports turned into military strongholds. This aspect surely raises important points that geopolitical or purely economic

studies do not necessarily touch. The book presents the Chinese presence in the ports, discussing the development of these structures and the involvement of different entities and states. In the sense of development, the book is also transparent in showing how Chinese participation is rather opaque and to what extent the shadow of the Communist Party still lurks in these projects, not merely directly, but also through State-Owned Enterprises.

The book takes the reader on a journey through Iran, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, to conclude with the Malacca Strait and its eponymous dilemma. While the book mentions both China's allies, e.g., Pakistan, and opponents, e.g., India, the cases of non-traditionally allied countries shine in their uniqueness, like the cases of Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

The journey starts with Chabhar, which is a “gateway beyond trade matters” (Mitra, 2022, p. 53), triangulated among Afghani, Indian, and Chinese relations, to then follow with its Pakistani counterpart, Gwadar. Defined as the “crown jewel” of the China-Pakistan corridor, this port is a reference point for its access to gas and minerals from Balochistan and it is linked to Xinjiang through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Still, it is incomparable to Karachi and Qasim, which handle about 90% of Pakistani international trade. The journey leads to Nhava Sheva and Mundra which show the isolationist and politicised approaches to ports espoused by the Indian governments, to then move on to the enthralling cases

of Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. The port of Hambantota shows how China saw Sri Lanka's "fiercely resistant to external interference" (Freymann, 2022, p. 148) strategic culture as added value for the area. After a mention of the ports of Madras and Chennai, to present the not-so-efficient Japan – India Strategic and Global Partnership, and Calcutta/Kolkata, to present the potentialities of human mitigation against an unfavourable location, the narration comes to the case of Bangladesh. A major interlink with China happens through the Maritime Silk Road through the ports of Chattogram, Mongla, and Thilawa, which have paved the way for several projects all over the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor. The journey reaches its end with the ports of Myanmar and closes with the importance of the Maritime Silk Road and the Polar Silk Road in the Strait of Malacca.

In many different aspects, this book offers out-of-the-ordinary perspectives, with the intersection of technical and geopolitical aspects striking for its peculiarity. While the more technical jargon may raise some eyebrows among the more general international relation readers who might not be familiar with hearing about berths and turnaround time, the flow of the book eases even the least accustomed reader into acquiring such knowledge and applying

it to the study of the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. Technical aspects deepen the knowledge about the Indian Ocean region, and their use can become an acquired taste for many Political Science or International Relations scholars. The book is a rather intriguing addition to the existing literature on the Indian Ocean, which often discusses Chinese influence in the pearl necklace of ports that constellate the whole region but works primarily on abstract theoretical premises. It gives the important insight that China is more than a fierce dragon preying on the Indian Ocean by providing a clearer understanding of how the country operates very concretely as a supporter, who might or might not have ulterior motives.

### Bibliography

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