

# India's Island Bases Might be a Game-Changer in Its Regional Competition with China

By [Andrew Korybko](#)

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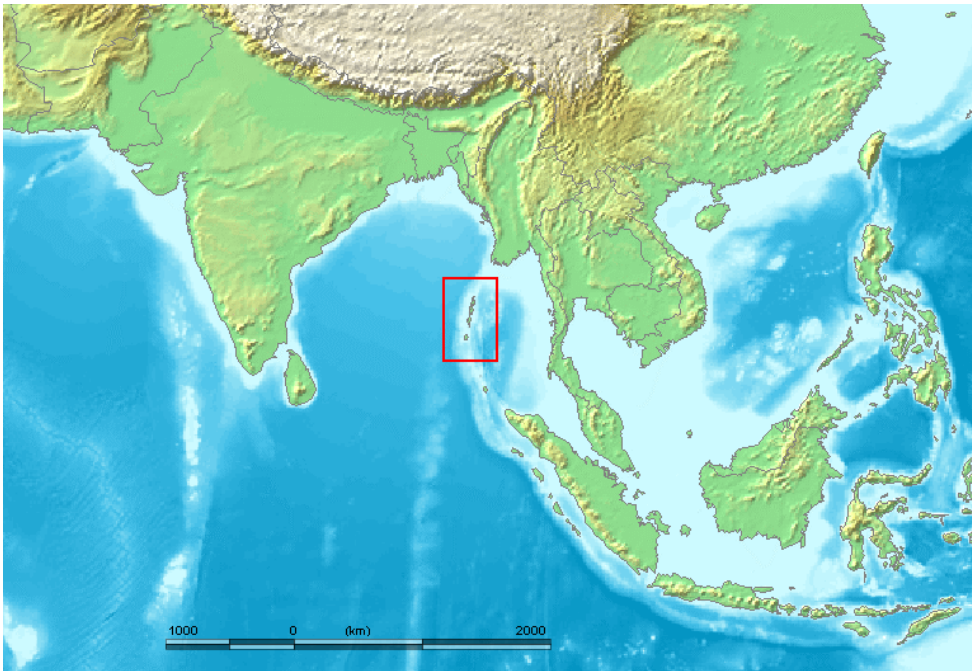
Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

*India's plans to construct full-fledged fighter bases in the union territories of the **Andaman & Nicobar Islands** (below) as well as **Lakshadweep** (2nd map below) might prove to be game-changers in its regional competition with China by enabling New Delhi to exert control over the waterways upon which the bulk of Beijing's international trade depends, especially in the event that the US exploits its "**Logistics Exchange Memorandum Of Agreement**" (**LEMOA**) with India in order to de-facto base its air and naval forces on those islands under the cover of them rotating in and out of there for "logistical" reasons.*

## **From Underdeveloped Island Peripheries To The Center Of Strategic Attention**

A lot of fair criticisms have been made about Indian grand strategy over the past decade, but it's important to give credit where it's due whenever it does something effective, which is the intent of the present article. [The Hindustan Times](#) cited Indian military sources to report that the rising Great Power plans to construct full-fledged fighter bases in the union territories of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands as well as Lakshadweep. For those readers who are unaware of where these territories are located, they're geostrategically positioned islands near the Strait of Malacca and the southeastern portion of the Arabian Sea, respectively. In the words of an unnamed tri-service commander quoted in the hyperlinked article, "The two Island territories will be like the new aircraft carriers for India, extending the navy's reach in the region far from the mainland. Both the Islands sit on the busiest sea lanes of the world with more than half the world trade going through this route." He's right, which means that this move might be a game-changer in India's regional competition with China.



### Will LEMOA Evolve Into SOFA?

The bulk of Beijing’s international trade depends upon transit through those two waterways, which will increasingly come under New Delhi’s control as it continues to beef up its military presence in those two geostrategic union territories. In an ironic twist, India might end up doing the exact same thing that China’s been accused of planning for years, which is to interfere with the free transit of trade through waterways in its proverbial “backyard”, albeit directed against Beijing’s vessels instead of non-Chinese ones like the Mainstream Media claims that the People’s Republic is plotting to impede. From a grand strategic standpoint, it makes sense why India aspires to obtain this leverage over China, but the problem is that its air and naval forces aren’t (yet) capable of exerting this level of total control, which is where the relevance of its 2016 “Logistics Exchange Memorandum Of Agreement” (2016) with

America comes in. That pact gave both countries the right to use the other's military facilities on a case-by-case "logistical" basis, but it might soon be exploited for other ends.

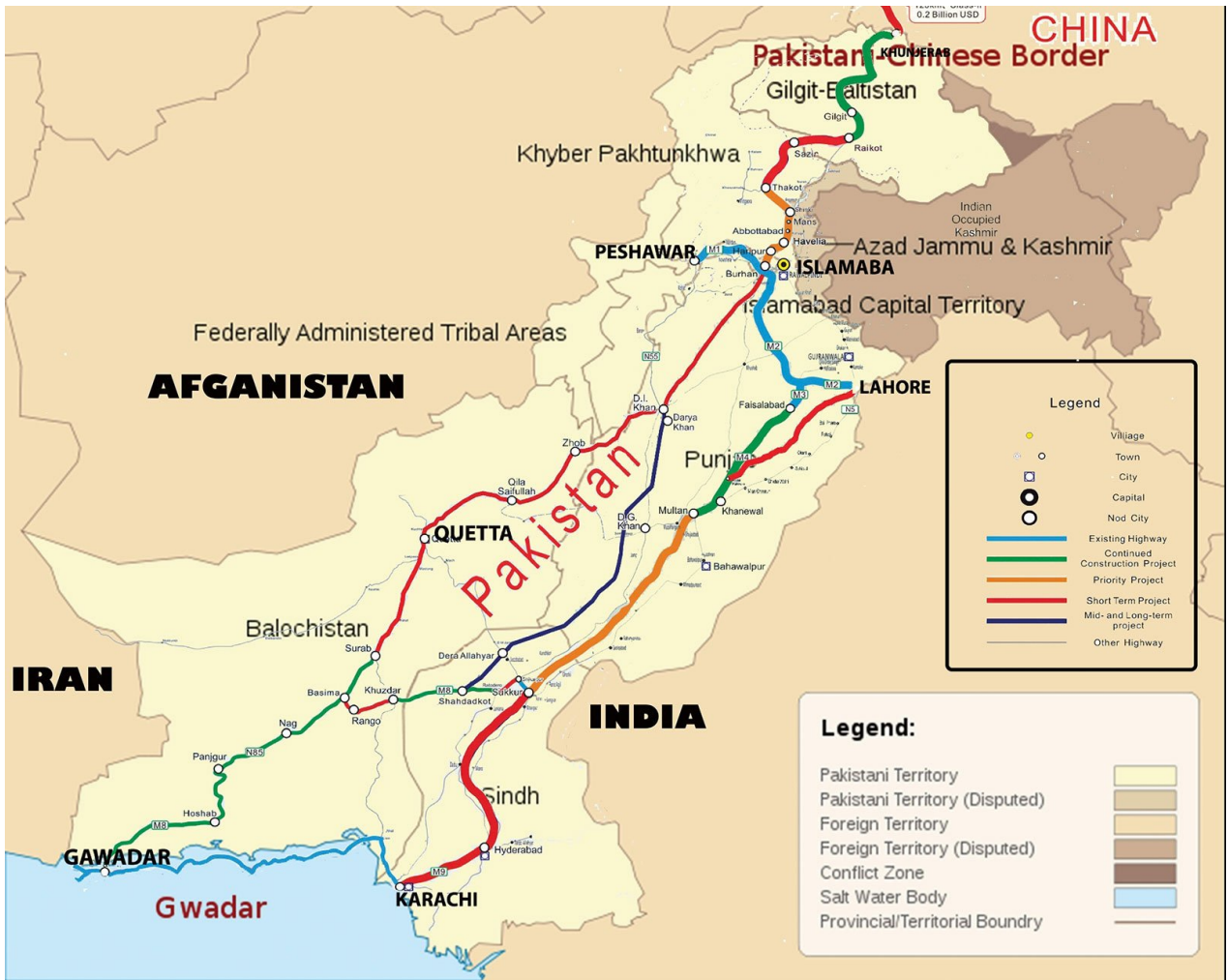
As the author [suspected](#) ever since news of the agreement's impending signing broke in mid-2016, LEMOA will likely be instrumentalized to enable the US to de-facto base its air and naval forces on Indian territory under the cover of rotating them in and out of there for "logistical" reasons. More specifically in the context of this analysis, they'll probably be based in those two union territories owing to the [overlap of grand strategic interests](#) between the US and India in regards to "containing" China in the Afro-Asian Ocean (the author's neologism for the "Indian" Ocean, which is much more civilizationally and geographically description accurate than its current name). In fact, LEMOA might eventually evolve into a full-fledged "Status Of Forces Agreement" (SOFA) with time considering the importance of basing US forces on those geostrategically positioned islands and the practical need to formalize their status after the "trial run" of de-facto stationing them there under the LEMOA pretext proves successful.

### **"Out Of Sight, Out Of Mind"**

It's important to note that the issue of hosting US forces is a very controversial one in Indian society, which is still largely under the influence of their leadership's so-called "multialignment" rhetoric which misleadingly claims that the country is practicing a 21st-century version of "neutrality" in the [New Cold War](#) between America and China. It's not, nor has it ever been since the South Asian state consistently moved closer to the US since the beginning of the current century. This is especially obvious in the aftermath of this summer's [Galwan Incident](#), which accelerated the "[decoupling](#)" between these two nominal BRICS and SCO "partners". Nevertheless, a large segment of Indian society is still uncomfortable with their country hosting foreign troops since it goes against decades of tradition, but they might be more accepting of this seemingly inevitable development if it occurs in the Indian island peripheries. As the saying goes, "out of sight, out of mind", and though they'll be potential military targets, they're in scarcely populated areas unlike the Indian mainland.

### **The S-CPEC+ & W-CPEC+ Workarounds**

Faced with this latent threat, China will naturally be inclined to double down on the Belt & Road Initiative's ([BRI](#)) flagship project of the **China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**, especially its branch corridors that the author groups together under the umbrella of [CPEC+](#). In particular, the western one ([W-CPEC+](#)) could see China pioneering overland trade with the EU via Iran and Turkey, while simply using CPEC as a shortcut to the Afro-Asian Ocean would immediately negate the challenge posed to Chinese maritime trade with the bloc by joint US-Indian control of the Strait of Malacca through their bases in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. Even though Lakshadweep sits in the extreme southeastern corner of the same Arabian Sea through which CPEC's trade with the EU traverses, it still isn't close enough to this maritime trade route to make much of a difference. In fact, India's existing facilities on the mainland are much closer to it than Lakshadweep is, though that union territory could still interfere with China's trade with Africa through [S-CPEC+](#), which might be its true strategic purpose.



In other words, China's response to this challenge is predicted to be its acceleration of work on implementing the W-CPEC+ vision for facilitating overland trade with Europe as well as

strengthening its Sea Lines Of Communication (SLOC) between CPEC's terminal port of Gwadar and "sister" sites in the Horn of Africa and East Africa. The massive series of deals that are [reportedly being negotiated](#) between China and Iran should help accomplish the first of these grand strategic objectives while the People's Liberation Army-Navy's (PLAN) rapid advances in the past decade mean that it's more than capable of protecting S-CPEC+'s SLOCs, at least for the time being, especially when one factors in the observation that Beijing chose geostrategically positioned Djibouti as the location of its first-ever overseas base. This facility shows the interest that China places in Africa, and it's likely that it'll seek to reach LEMOA-like agreements with the countries hosting its two main regional BRI port projects, Kenya and Tanzania. Taken together, this should be enough to defend against such latent threats.

## Concluding Thoughts

India is ambitiously trying to "contain" China in the Afro-Asian Ocean through the South Asian state's plans to establish full-fledged fighter bases in the geostrategically positioned union territories of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep, but it won't stand any credible chance of succeeding in this respect unless it allows the US to exploit LEMOA for the purpose of de-facto stationing its own air and naval forces on those islands. With time, LEMOA might eventually evolve into a full-fledged SOFA, but even so, that doesn't mean that China will be entirely "contained" in this important theater of the New Cold War. The People's Republic can rely upon its plans for W-CPEC+ and securing S-CPEC+'s SLOCs to defend itself from this latent threat, and all indications suggest that China is making important progress on both fronts. It'll still take time for the Indo-American and Chinese plans to materialize in full, but what's important is that their competitive dynamics have been identified and each side's strategies elaborated upon, which gives observers something solid to monitor.

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**Andrew Korybko** is an American Moscow-based political analyst specializing in the relationship between the US strategy in Afro-Eurasia, China's One Belt One Road global vision of New Silk Road connectivity, and Hybrid Warfare. He is a frequent contributor to *Global Research*.

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