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Not Another US-China Trade War: EU-China Economic Tensions

The emerging EU-China economic

Context

Europe's economic quarrel with China is a problem in which Europe is trying to hold on to room for manoeuvre between Washington and Beijing while depending on both.

Facts

■ **EU goods deficit with China : €359.9 billion in 2025.**

■ **2019 EU-China Strategic Outlook : the document that first called China a systemic rival.**

■ **"De-risking" became central EU policy by 2023 : reducing dependence in critical minerals, semiconductors, telecommunications and artificial intelligence, not ending economic relations.**

Analytical Crux

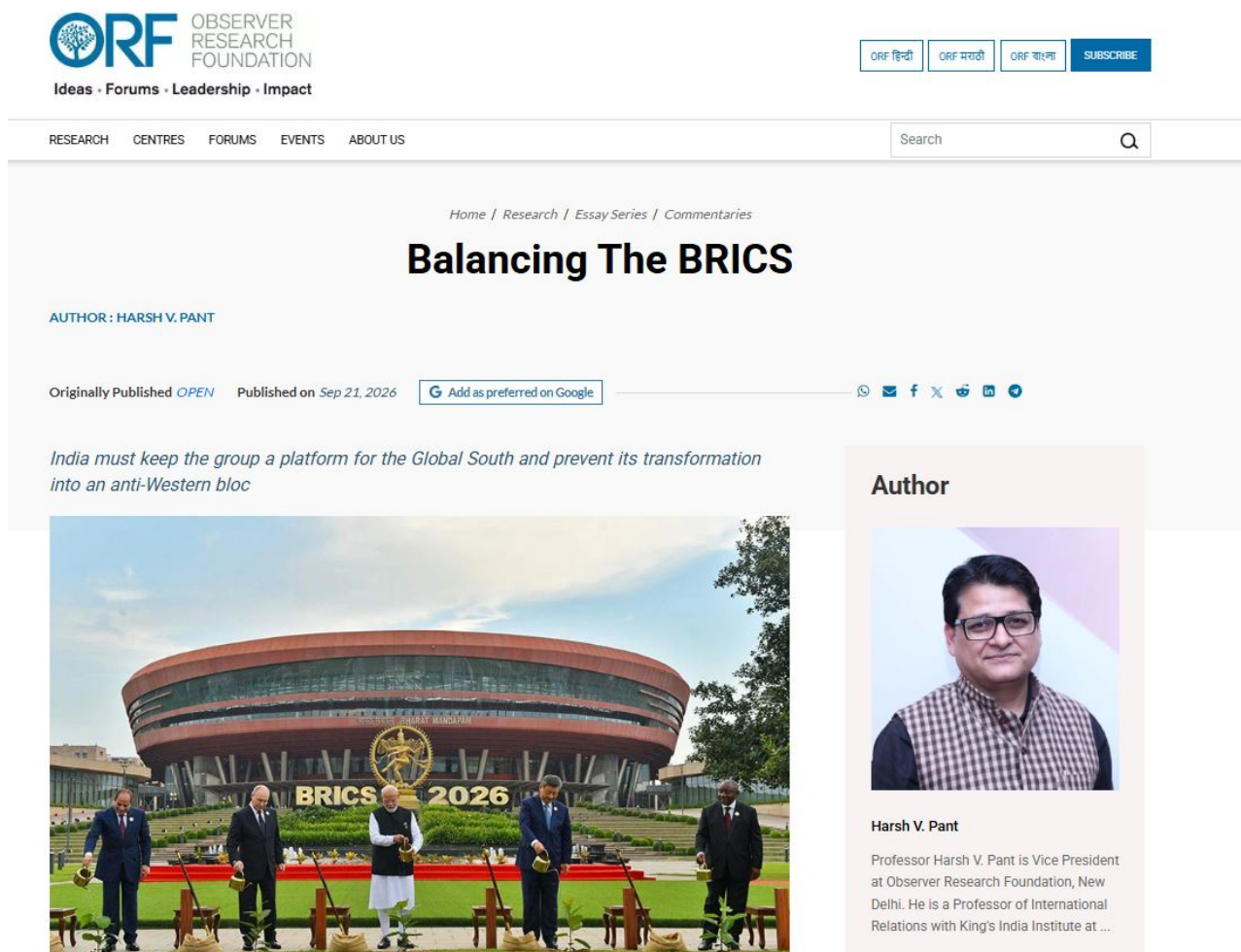
Europe's China problem is not a trade deficit. Chinese competition exposes European weaknesses, but does not create all of them. It is the 2021 sanctions quarrel, COVID and the war in Ukraine which took the EU from a reciprocity agenda to a security agenda. It has moved from market access to de-risking to economic security. The trap is that Europe's two dependencies pull in opposite directions i.e. it needs cheap Chinese green technology to decarbonise and cheap Chinese inputs to manufacture, while needing American security and American technology to stay safe. The problem is no longer cheap Chinese manufacturing but Chinese competition at the top of the value chain and Europe's difficulty is less what China does than its own failure to turn scientific and industrial strength into scale.

Verbatim Quotes

"Europe risks becoming a major market and industrial base without controlling enough of the technologies, capital and supply chains that will determine future competitiveness."

– Prerna Gandhi

Balancing The BRICS



Context

BRICS has grown large enough to matter and diverse enough to stall. India's job is to keep it a Global South platform rather than let it turn into an anti-Western bloc.

Facts

■ **BRICS covers** : *half the world's population and two-fifths of global GDP in PPP terms.*

■ **Institutions** : *New Development Bank and Contingent Reserve Arrangement gave the early agenda institutional form.*

■ **Limits of BRICS** : *economic models vary, some are deeply integrated into Western financial systems while advocating local currencies.*

Analytical Crux

BRICS has bought scale at the price of coherence. Every new member adds weight and also a fresh veto point. It criticised the Western-led order without declaring itself against the West, and it is refused by India because a bloc defined against Washington would be a bloc led by Beijing. India's structural problem inside BRICS is not the West at all but China's economic predominance. New Delhi's response has been neither confrontation nor accommodation but insistence on consensus, development and strategic autonomy. That is why India pushes payments, digital public infrastructure and local-currency finance rather than declarations. BRICS is therefore an instrument for diversifying power and not an architecture that replaces anything.

Verbatim Quotes

"India does not need BRICS to become an alternative to the West. It needs BRICS to become more useful to the countries that have historically had limited influence over the rules of global governance."

— Harsh V. Pant

A Malacca-Singapore model for resolving Hormuz

A Malacca-Singapore model for resolving Hormuz

As the siege warfare continues in the Strait of Hormuz and the world suffers, it may be instructive to revisit the Straits of Malacca and Singapore.

The Strait of Malacca runs for some 800 kilometres between the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian island of Sumatra, connecting the Andaman Sea to the Strait of Singapore, while the Strait of Singapore, some 105 km long, forms its eastern continuation and connects the Malacca Strait to the South China Sea.

A territorial turning point

The Straits were once considered “international” in the sense that they were like the high seas, over which no country had any claim. In 1971, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore jointly challenged this notion.

Indonesia, a newly decolonised nation, feared for the security of its individual islands if the waters between them were not considered its territory, and in 1957 declared that all waters “surrounding, between and connecting the islands” were Indonesian waters. Then Indonesian President Sukarno had an adversarial relationship with the colonial powers, and the nation was wary of big-power interference.

As the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) was being formulated, Indonesia insisted that its territorial waters should extend 12 nautical miles from the outermost islands. Malaysia, despite its 1963 armed conflict with Indonesia over Borneo, revised the stance it had taken at the 1958 UNCLOS conference and also announced a 12-nautical-mile territorial sea, choosing to work with Jakarta on the Straits through bilateral treaties and joint naval patrols. The two nations continue to cooperate actively to this day.

At their narrowest points, the Straits are well under 24 nautical miles wide. Once both states claimed 12-nautical-mile territorial seas, the zones met in the middle, leaving no strip of high seas or exclusive economic zone (EEZ) between them. Under the customary law of the time, this meant that the Straits were simply territorial seas, where foreign vessels enjoyed only the right of “innocent passage” – a right that Indonesia or Malaysia could suspend for security reasons and



M. Kalyanaraman

The Malacca-Singapore experience has lessons for navigating the Hormuz impasse

that excluded submerged submarines.

The three nations issued a joint statement in 1971 proposing a coordinating body comprising representatives of the three states to administer the Straits. Singapore, an island nation dependent on trade and shipping, did not quite agree to declaring the Straits “not international”, but did make common cause with Malaysia over the safety of navigation.

The Straits and the great powers

Japan, a major player through the Japan-funded Malacca Strait Council, offered cooperation with the three states rather than seeking an internationalised regime. The United States and the Soviet Union, otherwise rivals, were allies on this one issue – keeping the Straits under territorial waters “international” so that ships retained the right of “continued, politically uncluttered transit”.

As UNCLOS entered its final phase of formulation in the 1970s, the United Kingdom introduced the concept of “transit passage” for straits connecting the high seas or EEZs – a right of transit only in a “continuous and expeditious” manner, with no stopping or loitering, but one that applied to warships as well, going beyond mere innocent passage. Indonesia agreed to this formulation with reservations, trading its acceptance for greater security for its archipelago, which UNCLOS eventually addressed separately. Malaysia’s concerns centred on environmental safety, insurance requirements and permissible vessel draught.

In 2007, the three states working with the international community arrived at a Cooperative Mechanism building on a traffic separation scheme similar to what Iran and Oman had agreed for the Strait of Hormuz in the 1960s. A core aspect of the 2007 mechanism was for user states and industry to contribute to a fund for aids to navigation, hydrographic surveys and safety projects, administered jointly with the littoral states.

The Aids to Navigation Fund is supported through voluntary financial contributions from non-profit organisations such as The Nippon Foundation and the International Foundation for Aids to Navigation, as well as industry

stakeholders and states with an interest in the safe and efficient use of the Straits. These contributions do not amount to tolls. The fund is administered on a rotation basis by a committee comprising representatives of the three littoral States and the contributors. The three littoral States – Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore – do not impose fees, tolls or any other form of payment on ships exercising their right of transit passage.

The geographic parallel

The Strait of Hormuz is similar to the Malacca-Singapore Straits, in that the territorial waters of Iran and Oman intersect, making sections of the Strait part of their territorial waters.

In 1993, Iran, which has not ratified UNCLOS, passed a law requiring foreign warships to seek its authorisation to pass through the Strait. This continues to be a sore point today.

Persian Gulf nations have a history of both conflict and cooperation. The United Arab Emirates, for instance, was among Iran’s leading trading partners. Qatar is among the Persian Gulf nations that have supported the Iran-Oman talks. It had also mooted the Malacca-Singapore straits as a model.

Yet, even if the Gulf nations arrive at a framework they all agree on, the U.S. has shown that it may not accept it. The Malacca-Singapore issue was resolved as UNCLOS itself was being put into effect, when trade-offs were part of negotiating a convention intended to govern the world’s oceans.

A key concern in the Malacca-Singapore Straits was the safety of navigation and the environment, whereas in the Strait of Hormuz, the key issue is Iran’s security.

Iran is demanding that all nations revisit the Strait of Hormuz, and some are willing to do so. Though Iran and Oman have apparently agreed on a framework for reopening the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait has not been reopened, and the U.S. has not accepted the arrangement. The context has changed, even though there are clear parallels in the technical details.

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Context

How Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore turned the Straits of Malacca and Singapore from contested water into a working and jointly managed regime, and how that experience can be transferred to Hormuz.

Facts

■ **Strait of Malacca :** runs about 800 km between the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra, and the Strait of Singapore, about 105 km, carries on to the South China Sea.

■ **2007 Cooperative Mechanism :** built on a traffic separation scheme, with a fund for aids to navigation, hydrographic surveys and safety projects administered jointly with the littoral states.

■ **The difference :** in Malacca-Singapore the concern was safety of navigation and the environment; in Hormuz the issue is Iran's security.

Analytical Crux

The lesson of Malacca is that a chokepoint is never settled by declaring it international but it is settled by giving the coastal states enough security and money that they choose to keep it open. Indonesia and Malaysia won the legal argument i.e. 12-nm claims closed the high-seas corridor and made the Straits territorial sea. The maritime powers have a right of continuous and expeditious passage for warships, by conceding transit passage in the UNCLOS bargain. *Malacca's problem was safety and the environment but Hormuz's problem is Iran's security. Malacca was solved while UNCLOS was still being written, so side-payments were available. Iran never ratified UNCLOS and the transit-passage regime is not a settled entitlement between these parties but the very thing in dispute.*

Verbatim Quotes

"The Straits were once considered 'international' in the sense that they were like the high seas, over which no country had any claim."

– M. Kalyanaraman

- PSIR Paper II, 2026: What is UNCLOS? Explain its salient features.
- GS Paper II, 2026: “BRICS acts as a powerful counterweight in global governance, actively amplifying the voice and influence of the Global South.” Explain the role of BRICS in projecting itself as an alternative to other groupings.
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