



China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and Sino-Indian Maritime Cooperation

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Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the 21st century 'Maritime Silk Road' (MSR) during his visit to Indonesia in October 2013. MSR emphasizes on five types of connectivity: policy, trade, capital, infrastructure and people. In 2014, this idea began to take shape with focus on infrastructure and connectivity, gradually turning into concrete projects. MSR and Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) are now considered as two pillars of 'One Belt and One Road' (OBOR) project. Speaker argued that as India's posture in maritime policy is undergoing change, there is a possibility of emerging maritime hedging between the two countries and overlapping maritime 'security boundary' due to China's MSR and India's 'Act East' in the coming decades. Following this context, the speaker argued for the need for more maritime cooperation dialogues between China and India.

Ouyang Guoxing shed light on the implications of China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and try to assess the main strategic targets for China in MSR, the possible future of MSR, PLA-Navy's potential role in MSR, direction of India's policy on MSR post 2014 parliament elections in India and also Sino-Indian emerging maritime strategic hedging in Indo-Pacific region.

Speaker contextualises his presentation in the efforts led by Chinese government to put forward the idea of connectivity and growth through MSR but at the same time he is quite sceptical about India's activism in such a maritime project as India has been ambivalent about

participating in this project because of many apprehensions which Guoxing discussed in late part of his presentation.

Guoxing argued that MSR project was initiated towards the Southeast Asian countries as part of its maritime diplomacy and to find a stable backyard in the wake of US-Japan alliance. Through MSR, China intends to manifest its willingness to continue reforming and opening up, and also its commitment to the path of peaceful development. China presents MSR as a symbol of 'open and inclusive regional economic cooperation and cultural exchanges'. It has also been argued by many scholars and countries that China wishes to disseminate its voice to explain its rise and ideology through MSR as witnessed during National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference on 19th August. China's enthusiasm towards MSR has also been explained as a tool for economic diplomacy and strategy. It might contribute to solution of the issues such as domestic overcapacity i.e., steel, cement, electrolytic aluminium, glass, and also the goal of internationalisation of RMB. MSR will also have security implications for China in terms of expansion of security boundary. It aims to serve China's overseas interests and contribute to China maritime dream i.e., revival of golden age of ancient Silk Road.

Guoxing also highlighted various views and scepticisms regarding possible future of MSR. MSR project by China has been called by some as the Chinese version of Marshall Plan and also as the Chinese version of String of Pearls. Guoxing denies both the arguments as MSR deals with economic and trade connectivity and cooperation unlike Pearls of String and Marshall Plan which were essentially related to security and military field. He rejects any possibility of such a direction in China's position on MSR and believes it to be fruitful for China and India both as well as other countries involved in the region as China's top officials have confined this to economy and trade as put forward by Chinese officials in Central Leading Group on Financial and Economic Affairs on 4 November 2014. He cited China's official stand on this that is, 'No interference in the internal affairs of others, no seeking for spheres of influence and no striving for hegemony' in MSR. Besides this, China has also initiated the path of maritime Silk Road FTAs as the Politburo of the Communist Party of China Central Committee made 'FTA strategy' the theme of 19th collective leaning on 6th December.

Speaker also dealt with PLAN's possible role in the future of MSR. Chinese PLAN has kept silent on its role in this initiative until now. Yet, it should not be forgotten that famous ancient Silk Road was mainly developed by the Ming Dynasty navy only. At the same time,

PLAN has strong ambition to build blue-water navy. Also, naval officers are the regular guests in relevant academic meetings and actively advocate PLAN's proactive role in this route. This development indicates PLAN's active role in MSR in coming years. Maritime interests are likely to increase gradually with MSR. Due to these reasons, Guoxing calls PLAN's appearance in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) 'nothing unusual'. PLAN's desire to become blue water navy is also rooted in the context of surveillance and regular harassment by U.S. Navy and Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) and also the maritime power vacuum in IOR. PLAN can play a significant role in supporting China's Image projects, identifying the stable and friendly naval supply bases, and also ensuring mature military supply route.

Guoxing discussed India's maritime diplomacy as well to provide a better understanding for China-India collaboration in maritime diplomacy. Speaker calls maritime diplomacy as the highlight of India's Look East Policy (LEP) as a counterweight to China. But recently this has shifted to Indian PM Modi's 'Act East' i.e., American's Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor and Japan's Mekong-Ganga Cooperation initiative. Speaker calls Modi's maritime diplomacy as half swing policy as it is aimed at more aggressive maritime military cooperation though in past India didn't specifically mentioned the maritime disputes between China and other countries. For instance, during PM Modi's visit to Japan in 2014, both affirmed their shared commitment to maritime security and other issues related to maritime cooperation. Many such comments on maritime cooperation during this visit were regarded as India's official position and criticism toward China's announcement of East China Sea Air Defence Identification Zone. Similarly, during PM Modi's visit to US in September 2014, both the countries expressed concern about rising tensions over maritime territorial disputes. During Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's two-day visit to India, two countries signed the first significant military sales deal about selling new vessels to Vietnam, standing for the freedom of navigation in the air and waters of the South China Sea. These developments suggest India's recently evolved maritime policy which has grown more aggressive compared to past.

Moving to China-India cooperation on maritime dialogue, speaker argues that though both the countries have peaceful intentions towards MSR, economic cooperation prospects of this initiative are also becoming clear, but path of dialogue between China and India on maritime cooperation is quite unclear and uncertain. He is also bit sceptical of cooperation between Navies of both the countries in the background of geographical proximity, offensive power,

and aggressive intention. At the same time, he is very optimistic about cooperation between the two in maritime affairs due to following reasons:

- China and India have no maritime border disputes and maritime ‘boundary security’ is clearly divided.
- China and India never become a predominant threat to each other for a fairly long time.
- China’s core interests in western Pacific.
- Being US as the strongest military power in IOR and India as the strongest resident naval power in IOR, It’s unlikely for China to threaten India’s security on the sea.

Finally, Speaker recommends bilateral maritime dialogue between China and India beginning with non-sensitive areas to minimize divergences and maximize common interests as it will contribute to confidence building between the two. Maritime cooperation between the two will contribute to cooperation in maritime security, maritime economy and also to many other fields such as structural naval exercise between two navies, counter anti-piracy operations, etc. He commented that though both China and India after Chinese President Xi’s visit to India in September 2014 mentioned ‘decided to hold the first round of maritime cooperation dialogue within this year to exchange views on maritime affairs and security, including anti-piracy, freedom of navigation and cooperation between maritime agencies of both countries’, but maritime dialogue between the two countries remains a stillborn story.

Discussion

Some important questions were raised during discussion such as: what kind of structural exercises can be held between navies of China and India respectively?; as author claims that India and Indian navy has not been forthcoming in its attempts for maritime dialogue with China, so what are the areas where interests of China and PLAN would coincide positively with those of India and India Navy? And how does China consider illegitimate role for India and Indian navy in Indian Ocean region? In response to these questions, Guoxing commented that both navies can visit each other ports and get knowledge of information system so that it helps in better communication. Further he argued that China is more positive towards maritime dialogue compared to India as MSR was initiated by China itself. India, on the other

hand is quite sceptical about this initiative as Indian Ocean is a security concern for India and also because of other political issues and trust deficit towards China. Another question dealt with Chinese leadership's handling of PLAN's ambitions of trying to be actively involved in MSR as PLAN's involvement raises security concern for other member countries and also add an security dimension to MSR whereas China has insisted from time to time for MSR being an economic initiative. To this question, Guoxing responded that President Xi has confined this initiative to economy only but at the same time Indian Ocean region is also important strategically and so PLAN has a potential role to play in regional security.

About the Author

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