

Maritime Silk Road and the India-China Conundrum¹

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Are India–China maritime dynamics entering a new phase of power politics and balance of power? Both the South China Sea region and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) have received enormous policy attention from India and China in the recent past. Both neighbouring countries seem to be employing new methods, and upgrading their reach in these two strategically adjacent regions. What is more interesting to note, however, is how the two countries are engaged in cooperative yet competitive power balancing tactics vis-à-vis the two regions. The official policy parlance of both countries indicates that these two maritime zones are vital for their own energy security and economic sustainability. The strategic significance of these maritime zones for India and China is that they permit each other an absolute command of their neighbourhood politics and energy diplomacy in Asia as well as in the world.

This article looks at the emerging facets of India–China maritime complexity within competing and cooperative realms which have become far-reaching and multipolar in nature. It investigates the growing India–China intricacy both in the South China Sea region and in the IOR, and contextualises how the complexities in both these regions are interconnected with India–China relations. Some recent developments suggest that the two countries are entering a new level of maritime cooperative politics, which explains how politics in the maritime sector has become multipolar, diversified and constructive wherein the scope for cooperation and competition coexists. Recent media report suggests, for example, that China has invited India to join the newly propounded “Maritime Silk Road”.¹ The invitation was issued during the Special-Representative-level talks between the two sides in Beijing. China’s scheme of the Maritime Silk Road was originally mooted in the ASEAN context. The idea of extending it to South Asia, the IOR, the Gulf region and

¹*Though this contribution was received as a part of the preceding ‘debate’, it is being carried as a stand-alone article, as it addresses only one (but an important) aspect of the debate.*

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to the African coast will carry enormous implications for India and the other countries in the region. Why would Beijing like to connect with India, its regional rival, in this enterprise? The concept replicates Beijing's prodigious maritime strategy in which it has enunciated the concept of a "harmonious ocean" over the years². Further, what is interesting to note is that the concept of "harmonious ocean" is being pushed concurrently with China's new resolve to emphasize maritime security issues far more intensively. The new Chinese leadership under Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang is putting a lot of focus on maritime security policy. Amidst this, Asia's maritime politics have become more and more multipolar driven, prompting a new level of power politics among many powers in the region, especially between India and China.

Between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean

The dispute surrounding the boundary issue, historical hostility on the issue of Tibet, and the Tibetan discourse, and the newly emerging water conflict have dominated the competitive aspect of the relationship between India and China for some time. These competitive elements have extended steadily to different parts of Asia, also touching the maritime sector. In fact, their economic supremacy and authority in various sub-regions of Asia have created a multi-layered, multi-faceted and multi-structured power rivalry between the two. While their rise in global politics has propelled the thesis of multipolarism to the highest level, their influence and prominence in Asia has certainly confirmed the proposition that Asia is much more multipolar today than at any previous point in time. In fact, Asia's multipolarity is a topic of utmost importance because of the influence and prominence of China. The recent Chinese proposition of a Maritime Silk Road, continued China-ASEAN maritime dialogue proposal on the Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea which is pushing forward the gradual implementation of the Declaration of the Conduct of Parties (DOC), India's involvement and proposition of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and the newly formed India-Australia-Indonesia troika under the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) are some references which suggest how Asia's maritime politics have become more multilaterally driven and have created an ambience of multipolarism. In this context, not only is India's and China's maritime policy vital, but their maritime relationship, and mutual perceptions and misperceptions of each other are keys to Asia's maritime politics. This is important when both countries are today pursuing a stronger maritime policy. Both are giving enormous attention towards maritime security and energy sustainability.

As globalization has deepened, many countries are depending hugely on maritime resources to sustain their economies. As a result, sea transportation and securing maritime routes have become urgent. As emerging economies, the demand for energy among their domestic constituencies have compelled India and China not only to revitalise their energy policy and maritime strategy, but also to upgrade their status as key maritime powers in the South China Sea and in the IOR. India is considered as a local power in the IOR, and is geographically exposed to the sea from three sides. On the other hand, China is exposed to the sea from the East and the South, and is embroiled in two of the most prominent maritime disputes in Asia, namely the South China Sea dispute with some ASEAN members, and with Japan in the East China Sea region. Meanwhile, the growing power rivalry between India and China both in the South China Sea and in IOR has propelled new dimensions in India–China relations. For India, the South China Sea opens the door for a more vibrant Look East policy, while the South China Sea helps Beijing not only to consolidate its supremacy and position in East Asia and Southeast Asia but also provides a stable channel and gateway to the Indian Ocean. The South China Sea is also an important portion of the Pacific Ocean, encompassing waters from Singapore to the Taiwan Strait in the northeast. Consolidating its clout over the South China Sea enhances Beijing’s power, prestige and posture in the maritime sector in the region. The Chinese objection to India’s oil exploration drive with Vietnam a few years ago in the South China Sea demonstrated that Beijing is not only serious about territorial rights in the South China Sea but also about its own supremacy and autonomy in the region. Referring to India’s joint oil exploration with Vietnam as “illegal and invalid”, the Chinese authorities had stated strongly: “We hope that relevant foreign company will not take part in the oil and gas exploration so as to stay away from the South China Sea dispute”.³ Given current maritime politics and the emerging complexity in Asia, India will continue to face a stiff challenge from China over energy exploration in the South China Sea.

Meanwhile, Vietnam’s South China Sea spat with China has created a new level of opportunities for India. Some ASEAN members like Vietnam and the Philippines look to India as an alternative power in the region, while the broader ASEAN community views India as a power to reckon with. The broader ASEAN community has called upon India to be more forthcoming, promote intense institutional cooperation in trade, economy and maritime security, and take a more decisive stance towards the region—and this includes the South China Sea. For instance, both the Vietnamese President and Thailand’s Prime Minister have time and again urged India to take a proactive step in

regional affairs and enhance the India-ASEAN collaboration and connectivity. New Delhi's policy approach towards ASEAN suggests that India wants to reciprocate these sentiments. A strong reference to this was made in Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's statement at the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit on 20–21 December 2012: "As maritime nations, India and ASEAN nations should intensify their engagements for maritime security and safety, for freedom of navigation and for peaceful settlement of maritime disputes in accordance with international law."⁴ These perspectives are seriously noted in China. China's acuity over India's maritime perspective with regard to the South China Sea and its adjacent regions is constantly being upgraded. Moreover, Beijing is continuously monitoring India's activities not only in the maritime sectors but also in other regional spheres.

A number of issues and subject matters have dominated the India–China maritime political discourse regionally in the recent past. It comprises both cooperative and conflicting corollaries. Whether the conflicting courses override the cooperative drive or whether the cooperative drive will be able to manage and stabilise the relationship discourse is a matter for scrutiny. The United States' "pivot" to Asia, and intensifying conflict over the South China Sea and East China Sea in the recent past have impelled China to upgrade its maritime power building and posture in the region. On the other hand, though India has traditionally been vigilant about its position in the IOR, the Chinese objection to India's oil exploration with Vietnam in the South China Sea region and Beijing's recent proposal to India to join its Maritime Silk Road proposal has compelled New Delhi to review and reassess its maritime policy strategy in the region. China's maritime dispute with Japan over the Senkaku Island is not really a direct corollary of the maritime factor in China's relations with India; still, growing Chinese assertiveness in the East China Sea, South China Sea and in the IOR has direct implications for India, and has obvious connotations for India–China maritime relations. This is for two simple reasons: first, maritime politics are going to determine the course of power politics in Asia in the coming years; second, neither is the South China Sea aloof geographically from the IOR, nor are there any conformist traditionalist geographical barriers to differentiate between maritime politics in the two maritime regions. Politics in both regions are concurrent in some ways and involve both India and China massively, stimulating direct implications for their regional maritime relationship discourse. Besides, the recent Chinese proposal of implementing a new Maritime Silk Road at the regional level has brought the maritime regions onto a single platform. For China, India is a factor in this initiative. It explains a cooperative approach; yet underlying this proposal is the steady expansion of Chinese influence in maritime sectors

while tying up with regional countries no matter how adverse they are to Chinese strategic maritime interests. Beijing's invitation to India to join in the Maritime Silk Road is a case that explains the emerging balance-of-power politics in the India–China maritime complexity that extends between the South China Sea and the IOR.

Maritime Silk Road and Cross-Regional Multilateralism

In October 2013, while addressing the Indonesian Parliament, President Xi Jinping of China proposed the formation of a new Maritime Silk Road in the Southeast Asian region. Xi's thrust was on building a stronger China–ASEAN community, based on a strong political foundation and economic cooperation between the two sides. In making this proposal, Xi highlighted two aspects: *first*, the geographic proximity between China and ASEAN members, and how cooperation and development should bring them closer; and *second*, the economic potential of both China and ASEAN as emerging markets in Asia, which are important not only for their bilateral relations but also for regional economic growth and integration. The Silk Road concept has a hoary ancestry in Chinese foreign policy planning. Beijing has employed this concept traditionally to expand its overseas business, and commercial deals and linkages. But Beijing's orderly employment of this notion in the maritime sector reflects fresh thinking in China's foreign policy in terms of overseas commercial as well as maritime interests.

The Maritime Silk Road scheme is attached to China's ever-growing security awareness in the surrounding region, and also validates the Chinese postulation of "harmonious ocean". In recent years, the developments, disputes and growing tensions both in the South China Sea and in the East China Sea region have prompted Beijing to constantly search for new methods of policy planning in the maritime sector. The new leadership in China realizes that the way Beijing decides to handle maritime disputes and the security situation in the region will largely determine China's strategic posture in its neighbourhood and, more crucially, its global standing. History suggests that China is heavily focused on issues that are linked to its national security interests. Without compromising on national security, sovereignty and strategic interests that are keys to its national interests, Beijing always explores new modes and methods of regional engagement and partnership building in the spirit of coexistence.

The new leadership in China has discussed the idea of the Maritime Silk Road with Sri Lanka as well – during the recent visit of Sri Lanka's External

Affairs Minister to China. Recent reports also suggest that China has discussed this concept with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members. Similarly, China may raise the issue with African countries also. Thus, the proposed Maritime Silk Road extends to the IOR, covering the South Asian countries as well as countries or regions that are vital to China's maritime interests. All these have enormous implications for India and New Delhi's maritime politics in the region. Beijing's Maritime Silk Road may be an illustration of cooperative maritime politics; but this also creates conditions for China's rise as an economic maritime power, as also a challenge to India's authority in the IOR. India's authority and supremacy in IOR has been impressive so far. The Maritime Silk Road is an attempt to tie with India and other regional countries at the regional level, especially in Southeast Asia and IOR while steadily raising the Chinese economic and maritime posture.

Centrality of the ASEAN Maritime Zone

The dynamics of the Maritime Silk Road involve balance-of-power politics, encompassing both the maritime segment as well as strategic engagement with ASEAN that both India and China aim to pursue. At the moment, Beijing's Maritime Silk Road strategy is to take on board ASEAN countries and the region itself. Historically, China has preferred to promote the spirit of economic multilateralism with the ASEAN region. While promoting the Silk Road concept, Xi Jinping delved into the fifteenth-century bonding between China and ASEAN when the famous Chinese navigator Zheng made seven expeditions to the Western Seas. Xi also highlighted China's generous disaster relief assistance to the Indonesian people in the wake of the 2004 tsunami calamity, suggesting the common ethos and spirit both communities display in various fields.

Traditionally, ASEAN has been a key multilateral institution in the Chinese foreign policy outlook. Beijing's current approach to ASEAN is to consolidate its economic and political posture in the region. Despite tensions between the two sides over the South China Sea disputes, ASEAN-China trade is flourishing and has exceeded US\$ 400 billion. Beijing has also proposed to establish an Asian infrastructure investment bank, and to celebrate 2014 as the year of China-ASEAN cultural exchanges. In October 2013, Beijing floated the idea of a number of maritime cooperation projects with ASEAN, and allocated 3 billion Yuan (US\$ 484 million) to the China-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation Fund, whose primary objective is to promote marine research, rescue, navigation safety, etc. Surely, India's Look East policy, plus the USA's "pivot to Asia" policy as well as American backing to Vietnam and the Philippines in

the South China Sea dispute are some of the factors that have impelled Beijing to revitalize its approach, and reinvent its mode of engagement with ASEAN.

In his speech on 20 December 2012 at the Plenary Session of the India–ASEAN Commemorative Summit, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh expressed India’s interest as a maritime nation in Southeast Asia where there is scope for pushing forward and upgrading India–ASEAN relations. India’s current engagement with ASEAN is far behind that of China. Trade between India and ASEAN is also only around US\$ 80 billion. The real test for India from the Maritime Silk Road initiative will be over oil exploration with Vietnam and other countries in the South China Sea. Not long ago, China objected to India’s joint oil exploration initiative with Vietnam. Beijing may introduce new norms and conditions with ASEAN members when it implements the Maritime Silk Road. This will pose a challenge to India’s quest for energy exploration in the South China Sea region. After the Maritime Silk Road programme, China’s enhanced economic engagement with ASEAN will be another distinguishing feature of Beijing’s economic supremacy in the region. This will help China build new partnerships and economic alliances in its own favour, and attract the IOR or littoral countries to its maritime strategic fold.

Maritime Silk Road vs. “String of Pearls”

China has never accepted or validated the so-called “String of Pearls” theory projected by Western scholars. However, a view is emerging in China that the Maritime Silk Road policy could be a response to this postulation. The “String of Pearls” coinage has adduced the view that China aims to militarily encircle India through robust maritime contacts and cooperation with the other South Asian countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. The Maritime Silk Road policy enables Beijing not only to counter the String of Pearls theory but also to steadily and legitimately push forward its maritime presence in the ASEAN region and the IOR. In the IOR, China is anxious to explore economic opportunities, and forge better security understanding with the countries in the region in order to protect its sea lines of communication (SLoCs). It may be noted that Chinese experts and officials have floated the idea of “harmonious ocean” in the IOR, but, ominously, not for the South China Sea or the East China Sea region.

The posture of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in the context of the Maritime Silk Road in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island, South China Sea, and in the Indian Ocean are alarming facets that have implications for India–China maritime dynamics. The PLA’s announcement in November 2013 of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea zone

that overlapped the Japanese, South Korean and Taiwanese zones was a momentous development in this context. The PLA has also hardened its posture around the South China Sea in recent years. It is reported that, since 2013, China has commissioned seventeen new vessels in the South Sea Fleet to focus on the South China Sea region. PLAN has also commissioned a 051A multi-role warship, 056 light warships, 052C destroyer and a 903A supply ship in the region. Constant attempts are also being made to revitalize the South Sea fleets, whose area of operations is between north of the Taiwan Strait to the south – to the James Shoal. This area covers the Paracel and Spratly islands as well as Macclesfield Bank. Such assertive postures by the PLAN over the South China Sea have negatively affected China's discourse of a "peaceful rise", leading some Southeast Asian countries to view India as an alternative power in the region, and for the USA to revive its reach in Southeast Asia.

The Maritime Silk Road concept has permitted China to rejuvenate trust in its good intentions among ASEAN members. The dialogue of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) has also been emphasized on the side lines of this maritime strategy. With this strategy, Beijing is not only pushing its maritime interests but also showing minor restraint in its maritime posture on the South China Sea. It is a classic way of implementing the soft-power posture to hide a hard-power image. Concepts like "harmonious ocean" and "win-win situation" appear to be the core of this strategy that will cover both the softer and harder aspects of PLAN. PLAN is currently open to the idea of overseas maritime bases. China is engaged with ports, bases, and infrastructure construction with ASEAN, South Asian, littoral, IOR and African countries. This commercial drive has been supplemented by PLAN's constant drive and training exercises in the IOR. In January/February 2014, for example, the PLAN's South China Sea Fleet carried out combat readiness training in the South China Sea, the West Pacific, and the East Indian Ocean.

'Open Regionalism' vs. 'Maritime Silk Road'

India has been an ardent advocate of the "open regionalism" concept in the Indian Ocean.⁵ It has pursued this idea in IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association, previously known as IOR-ARC), the only comprehensive multilateral body in the Indian Ocean. In July 2013, India's Minister for Trade and Industry, Anand Sharma, advocated that trade barriers in the IOR must be relaxed, and trade practices in the region must follow international norms and practices. India has supported the outlook of other IORA members that there must be

greater cooperation in the field of the maritime security enforcement regime, and visa regimes must become liberal in order to boost trade and investment in the region. Under the theme of “Deepening Economic Linkages for Balanced Inclusive and Sustainable Growth”, India and Mauritius co-hosted the first economic and business conference among the IORA countries. Twenty IORA members currently subscribe to the “open regionalism” concept. China is a dialogue partner of IORA. Its idea of Maritime Silk Road is a comprehensive package that not only has economic nuances but political and security aspects as well. China’s employment of the concept in maritime Asia combines both soft- and hard-power elements; India’s “open regionalism” activism is limited to commercial multilateralism in the IOR.

China shares strong linkages with both ASEAN and IORA. Its total trade with the IORA is around US\$ 669 billion, compared with India’s trade of around US\$ 206 billion. The Maritime Silk Road initiative will further boost China’s commercial engagement with both ASEAN and IORA. This will have a huge impact in South Asia, where Beijing is emerging as a vital power. India’s standing in South Asia is being tested by China’s increasing influence in South Asia in recent years. Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh and Nepal have become China’s key partners in the South Asian region. Chinese port building initiatives in Gwadar, Hambantotta, and Chittagong reflect this fact. China is steadily upgrading its Maritime Silk Road concept with a variety of strategic proposals in the ASEAN region, in South Asia, as well as in IOR. This approach is linked with China’s “comprehensive national power” concept. Nation building, improving economic ties, and maximizing national security interests have moved simultaneously in China’s foreign policy strategies. The Third Plenum report of the Chinese Communist Party indicates how to push China ahead concurrently on the economic, political and security fronts. It suggests that Beijing must carry forward with defence reform, thrusting on quick decisions. The introduction of a National Security Committee reflects this thrust.

Conclusion

India–China maritime dynamics are witnessing new developments and balance of power politics. Beijing’s economic and maritime posture continues to emerge as a challenge for India. In fact, underlying China’s Maritime Silk Road strategy is an orderly diplomatic, economic, and maritime quest for power that India must take note of. A core aim behind this strategy is to re-brand China as an economic, political and maritime power in IOR as well as in the neighbouring region. In official parlance, this enterprise is intended to integrate Beijing’s

existing levels of cooperation in the region, and to look beyond. As Hua Chunying, spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, stated on 13 February 2014, “This is an initiative and idea of cooperation, which will help integrate all the on-going cooperation programmes, especially those in connectivity with the concept and spirit of the ancient Silk Road”⁶ India and other countries need to take note and respond to this discourse.

Notes

- ¹ “China Invites India to Join its Maritime Silk Road Initiative”, *The Economic Times*, 14 February 2014, at http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-02-14/news/47337341_1_msr-special-representative-yang-jiechi-border-talks; also see, “China Moots Maritime Silk Road with India”, *Business Standard*, 10 May 2014, at http://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/china-moots-maritime-silk-road-with-india-114021401367_1.html
- ² The concept of “harmonious ocean” has been smartly introduced in Chinese official idiom to promote China’s international maritime posture. Chinese leadership including PLA officials and maritime experts have floated the idea of “harmonious ocean” systematically since 2009, and today the term has gained some legitimacy in Chinese official parlance as well as in Beijing’s international advocacy on maritime issues. For few readings, see, Zhang Junshe, “Chinese navy, constructive force in building harmonious ocean”, *Chinese Military* (Online), 23 April 2014, at http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/pla-daily-commentary/2014-04/23/content_5878120.htm ; “Defender of a harmonious ocean”, *People’s Daily* (online), April 24, 2009, at <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90786/6644733.html>
- ³ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei’s Regular Press Conference on 22 September 2011”, *Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United Arab Emirates*, 23 September 2011, at <http://ae.china-embassy.org/eng/wjbfyrth/t861644.htm>
- ⁴ “PM’s Opening Statement at Plenary Session of India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit”, *Speeches*, New Delhi, 20 December 2012, at <http://pmindia.nic.in/speech-details.php?nodeid=1259> (
- ⁵ IOR-ARC Economic and Business Conference Press Communiqué, Department of Commerce: Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Government of India, 05 July 2013, at http://commerce.nic.in/PressRelease/pressrelease_detail.asp?id=3036
- ⁶ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on 13 February 2014”, *Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Iceland*, 13 February 2014, at is.china-embassy.org/eng/fyrth/t1128254.htm

