

Connecting Chinese and Indian Initiatives in the Indian Ocean

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29 September 2015

China and India have launched a series of maritime cooperation initiatives such as the Chinese 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and the Indian Projects Spice Route, Mausam and Cotton Route. It is unfortunate that these initiatives are being interpreted by some as countermeasures against each other, which is producing an unfavorable atmosphere for China-India relations. The two sides may need to seek win-win cooperation and a sound development of Sino-Indian relations based on an objective and in-depth evaluation of these initiatives.

Project Mausam

Maritime Routes and Cultural Landscapes is a mega program launched by India's Secretary, Ministry of Culture at the World Heritage Committee conference held in Doha on 20 June 2014. Its main objectives are: a) transnational nomination of Maritime Cultural Routes; b) creation of a comprehensive database and UNESCO web platform on Maritime Cultural Landscapes and Routes; and, c) linking other UNESCO cultural conventions with the World Heritage convention through this theme. There are two major units for execution of the project; the first is a Project Research Unit, the second is a World Heritage Nomination Unit. The Archaeological Society of India (ASI) has been nominated as the nodal agency, while Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA) is the research unit entrusted with a five-year program (2014-2019). Under Project Mausam, a number of activities have been organised, comprising at least eight

(monthly) lectures, national and international conferences, publications, and online outreach. The project is aimed at transnational joint application of world heritage.

Project Spice Route

Launched on March, 2011, the Project is a development of Muziris Cultural Heritage Conservation Project. The project is regarded as a revival of the ancient spice route that connected 31 countries. The Project seeks to develop several historical areas of Kerala linked with the ancient spice route, including Wayanad, Valiyangadi, and Beypore. The Kerala Tourism Department has visited UNESCO and World Tourism Organization, leading to an agreement with UNESCO. The delegates of 31 countries along the spice route, including of China, Korea, Japan, Singapore, Aman, Brazil, Russia, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have also been engaged.

Cotton Route

The Project was introduced during a high-profile conference, ‘India and Indian Ocean: Renewing the Maritime Trade and Civilisational Linkages’, held in February 2015 at Bhubaneswar (in Indian province of Orissa). Besides the ministries of external affairs and defence, eight other Union government ministries were partners in the Conference. According to the Bhubaneswar Declaration issued after the Conference, India’s ancient Cotton Route needs due attention. It further states that in the pre-Industrial Revolution era, India clothed the world. ‘Cotton’ transcends social and economic hierarchies. The Cotton Route concept should be leveraged to rekindle the historical maritime trade linkages across the Indian Ocean Rim. The understanding and interpretation should be shared across the member states for possible consensus on a way forward.

Being a new concept, its details— including its execution and organization — are not yet clear, leading to a few groundless speculations. According to a Russian journalist, Cotton Route is likely to be an overarching concept covering all existing and potential Indian regional cooperation initiatives in Indian Ocean, with a focus on maritime cooperation with Iran and South Africa, the Indian Ocean islands (Mauritius and Seychelles, in particular) and Indonesia. It will be a ‘highway system’ involving

revival of cultural exchanges with countries from ASEAN to East Africa. Such interpretation — though interesting — seems to be more of a hyperbole and speculation.

21st Century Maritime Silk Road

The MSR is an initiative of cross-regional cooperation in its new pattern, which was made public in the Chinese President Xi Jinping's address to Indonesian Parliament. Details of this initiative is not available as yet since government agencies related (NDRC in particular) are still busy with setting a road map, while a lot of intensive research and survey work is still being done. According to tentative observations, the MSR would not be a regional cooperation organization in the form of ASEAN or SCO, but a network of cross-regional cooperation toward shared interests and shared destiny.

The initiative is characterised with inclusiveness and comprehensiveness. By this, it means that any confrontational or win-lose mindset must be rejected, as this is not going to work in the time of globalisation, regionalisation and involve shared interests. Any initiative conducive to peace and common development in the region would be welcome and might be interlinked with each other in order to construct of network of infrastructural connectivity, enhanced international trade, better policy coordination, and mutual understanding between peoples.

Strategic Implications?

Many are concerned about the so-called 'strategic implications' of such initiatives. The MSR has been interpreted by some as a Chinese foray into Indian Ocean with unfavorable implications for India. At the same time, the Indian proposals of Project Mausam, Spice Route and Cotton Route have been regarded as countermeasures against the MSR. Such observations, interestingly, is mostly from Indian media and analysts. For example, some reportage of the unveiling of Cotton Route link it to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent trips to Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka and the enhanced Chinese presence in Indian Ocean region. The logic behind such arguments seems to be: a) spice and cotton trade with the help of seasonal Mausam could be an effective counterweight to silk trade; b) Indian Ocean consciousness or identity nurtured by

Indian initiatives is not conducive to Chinese presence in Indian Ocean as China is not an Indian Ocean littoral; and c) Indian proposals of regional maritime cooperation could produce effective counterbalance to Chinese initiative of cooperation.

However, such interpretation might be a misreading of the motives of both China and India and mislead analysts. Project Mausam at its present stage seems to be more a project of cultural engagement with not too much strategic designs. Likewise, Project Spice route is basically a heritage reservation and tourism development program with some connotations to regional cooperation. Concrete evaluation of Cotton Route is presently difficult since not much details are available as yet. Nevertheless, at this stage, it cannot be interpreted as a grand strategic design to counter Chinese presence in Indian Ocean.

Interpreting the MSR as Chinese strategic design is also a far-fetched speculation. As a rising power (like India), China has interests worldwide, which makes comprehensive cooperation (with neighboring countries and regions) a necessity. The MSR as designed will increase Chinese investment to its partners, shift some of its world class manufacturing facility internationally, enhance regional connectivity (through railways, highways, harbors, airports, etc). This is beneficial for both China and its partners in terms of economic development and improvement of people's livelihood. More importantly, this much enhanced bond of shared interest will help the peace and development of the region. The region could therefore go a long way towards peace and prosperity. The inclusiveness of MSR makes it compatible to most if not all other regional cooperation initiatives, be it bilateral, multilateral, sub-regional, regional, or cross-regional.

Exploring Cooperation

As rising powers and major player in Indian Ocean Region, China and India need to find out meeting points of their regional cooperation initiatives and actively explore potentials of cooperation. The two countries need to make objective and fact-based evaluations of each other's initiatives and continue with meaningful policy dialogue to enhance mutual understanding and avoid mistrust. Both countries could learn from each other. For the Chinese, their Indian counterpart has offered excellent experiences

in keeping active communication with rest of the world through English with special attention to international audience, employing database and online platforms, interlinking academic and effective communication to general public, building government-international organization partnership, nurturing cross-national linkages, etc. More importantly, both countries need to actively take part in each other's initiatives with an open mind so as to cultivate shared interests and build a network of shared peace and prosperity for the benefit of their peoples.

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