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Silk, Cotton and Cinnamon: Maritime Renaissance of the Indian Ocean

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Introduction

The Indian Ocean region covers an area of 73,556,000 square miles and links the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Being the third largest ocean in the world, it also encompasses many regional seas: the Arabian Sea, the Andaman Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Gulf of Mannar, the Gulf of Oman, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. In addition, it is connected to the Pacific Ocean through the South China Sea and the East China Sea.¹ Under such geographical context, it has been a hub of ancient civilizations, economic and cultural interactions.

With the rise of Asia in the global geopolitics, the region has re-emerged as a vital maritime arena owing to growing trade, interdependence and economic growth. Encompassing vital sea lanes of communication that feed the world's economies, the Indian Ocean is the world's link between the East and the West. Around 80 per cent of the world's sea-borne oil trade passes through the choke points of this ocean.² Given its geo-economic importance, the region has become the focus of the emerging world order.

The 'Indo-Pacific' has emerged as a critical strategic region, which has merged both the Indian and Pacific Ocean. This new geopolitical construct tends to integrate the two oceans seamlessly. The U.S. is rebalancing in the region by economic re-engagement and re-deployment of its naval and air forces. In order to secure their commercial interest in the global waterway countries like China, India and even Indonesia are using national approaches and policy initiatives to focus on revitalizing their maritime legacy. These emerging powers are using historical maritime engagements in the region as a mark of their symbolic presence and legacy over the oceanic exchange network. Despite being driven by economic interest, the approach of mutual cooperation and collaboration initiated by these countries provides a platform to various countries across the ocean to revive their 'forgotten and neglected' contribution in world history.

China and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR)

Chinese President Xi Jinping during his visit in Kazakhstan in September 2013 announced an initiative to revive the continental route called ‘Silk Road’. Almost a month later, while addressing the Indonesian parliament during 10th ASEAN-China summit he announced to revive the ancient ‘Maritime Silk Road’ to improve connectivity between China and Southeast Asian countries by building ‘the 21st century Maritime Silk Road’ (MSR).

The terminology ‘Silk Road’ has often been emphasized in Chinese strategy. The major impetus of recalling the past for Chinese is the Silk Road, as they view it as “the world’s oldest, and historically most important route”.³ The term Silk Road is collectively used to refer to the ancient trade network, which included both overseas as well as overland routes linking China to Central Asia.⁴ However, it is ironical that there is no mention of the term called ‘Silk Road’ in any of the ancient sources. In fact the term ‘Silk Road’ was a pre modern concept, coined by a German geologist Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877 to depict a route connecting China to Germany which, he called ‘The Silk Road’. The depiction was driven by his interest in the linkages between Han dynasty and Imperial Rome.⁵ Silk, was a textile produced in ancient China around 2,700 BC and was one of the commodities which was traded between the ancient Han dynasty and Imperial Rome. However, silk was not the only commodity that was traded, other commodities such as spices, jade, ivory, glass, silver and cotton were equally significant and often constituted a major share of the trade.

China unveiled details about its ‘Silk Road initiatives’ in a vision document that stated that it would stretch and connect the ancient Chinese port to Europe through South China Sea and Indian Ocean as well as to the South Pacific.⁶ More recently, Chinese ambassador Lu Fan in his visit to Spain emphasized that Spain was the western limit for the old Silk Road and one of the ‘creators of the Maritime Silk Road’.⁷

Despite gaining much attention across the globe for the geopolitical ambiguity of the initiative the question that is often asked with apprehension is why China taking the colossal task of reviving the ancient Silk Road? Chinese government officials have often stated that the initiative is of economic cooperation that aims to form a community of common interest, responsibility and destiny through infrastructural development, uninterrupted trade and people to people exchange. However, the ideological framework of adapting the ‘Silk Road’ is also symbolic and elucidates China’s historical monopoly over trade in the Indian Ocean exchange network in the past. A three day forum was recently organized in China by China National Silk Museum, where it showcased research findings on the reconstruction of

pattern looms from the Han Dynasty and discussed the importance of the silk in history of textile and technology.⁸ To encourage the vital importance of silk in the exchange network ‘International association for study of Silk Road’ was also initiated during the conference.⁹

The epistemological framework of using the Maritime Silk Route (MSR) to understand maritime past reinforces the connotation of European history, as it overlooks the role and importance of commodities other than silk. It can also be called ‘China’s Maritime Renaissance’ as the attributes and characteristics are indeed Chinese in nature. The way China is expanding its MSR using historical assertions substantiates its claims in the South China Sea and strengthens its economic interest in the region.

India: Project Mausam, Spice Route, and the Cotton Route

India under the new leadership has launched various initiatives to affirm its strategic position in the region. Often perceived as an initiative to counter MSR, India’s *Project Mausam* has received much limelight. It is an initiative by the Ministry of Culture to ‘reconnect and reestablish’ maritime routes, culture and trade linkages between various countries of the world.¹⁰ The word ‘*Mausam*’ was first used by an Arab traveler referring to Arabian Sea, which was later on developed and understood as regular wind system (Monsoon) that facilitated early maritime engagements.¹¹ Lately, taking advantage of monsoon winds, Indian naval ship, Tarangini was set to sail with Omani ship, Shabab Oman from Muscat to Kochi.¹² Celebrating diplomatic relations between India and Oman the “togetherness voyage” exemplified their symbolic presence in the overseas network. Furthermore, India has institutionalized naval exercises with Oman, “Sea Breeze” and “Naseem—Bahr” to get some winds back to its geopolitical sails by dovetailing it with Project Mausam.

Another example of India’s proactive involvement to strengthen ties using historical understanding in the oceanic exchange is the ‘Spice Route’. Taking a cue from China’s MSR, the Government of Kerala has signed a MoU with UNESCO to revive and promote two millennia Spice Route.¹³ The initiative aims to connect all 31 countries of Asia and exemplify the vital role played by Kerala in the historic overseas network.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s recent visits to Indian Ocean countries (Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles) have provided a new impetus to policy makers. A three day conference on India and Indian Ocean was organized in Bhubaneshwar in March 2015 with the aim to renew the maritime trade and civilizational linkages. The conference highlighted the use of multi-dimensional historical links to strengthen regional cooperation and integration. India’s ancient

‘Cotton Route’ was revived as a medium to rekindle linkages around the Indian Ocean Rim.¹⁴ In the pre-industrial phase Indian cotton was traded on both sides of the Indian Ocean and was used across social and economic hierarchies. As a mark of commemoration and symbolic presence of the 1000 year old cotton trade by the Chola dynasty, a stamp and coin were released in the conference.

At face value these initiatives can be best described as policy initiatives to revive ancient maritime linkages and exemplify India’s involvement. However, as it is unfolding they can also be seen as initiatives to compliment India’s strategic vision from ‘Look East’ to ‘Act East’. India under the new government has been actively pursuing its vision of ‘Act East’ and these initiatives have given robust thrust to its ambition. With the increasing power play and drifting focus to the east, it can be seen as India’s initiatives to strengthen its position by merging strategic, economic and cultural thought.

Indonesia and its Global Maritime Axis

Located strategically, at the geopolitical nexus of the Indian and Pacific Ocean, Indonesia is the world’s largest archipelagic country that shares maritime boundary with ten countries. After a period of relative neglect and internal security threats, Indonesia is now taking policy initiatives to emerge as a regional maritime power. During his inaugural speech as the President, Joko Widodo stressed on making Indonesia into a maritime power by rebuilding its maritime culture.¹⁵ Using the strategic platform of 9th East Asian Summit in Myanmar he outlined an ambitious vision of transforming Indonesia into a ‘Global Maritime Fulcrum’ (*Poros Maritim Dunia*). The initiative encompasses five key aspects: maritime culture; marine resources; connectivity; maritime diplomacy and naval development.¹⁶

In recent times with the emerging world order there is a shift in focus towards East and center of gravity is now drifting towards the Indian and Pacific Ocean. This new vista is witnessing active involvement not just from resident countries like China and India in the region but from extra regional powers like United States. Situated at the center of the major strategic transformation, Indonesia is taking advantage of changing dynamics and is establishing itself as an emerging power. In the vision statement of Global Maritime Fulcrum President Joko Widodo emphasized at portraying Indonesia as an ‘Indo-Pacific’ power.

Highlighting the first and the foremost pillar of the ‘Global Maritime Fulcrum’, the Indonesian government officials have often stressed on Indonesia’s ancient maritime culture and its legacy. Drawing genesis from the ancient cinnamon route that was established much before the silk route, Indonesian Ambassador Arif Havas Oegroseno recently spoke about the maritime engagements of Indonesia

during 5th century BC.¹⁷ The ancient maritime routes were used, particularly for transportation of spices, supplying markets across the world with cinnamon, pepper, ginger and cloves. Southeast Asia was regarded as '*Survarnabhumi*'¹⁸, meaning the 'real gold' or maybe it was used as a metaphor to equate the profit earned through the spice trade.

Indonesia was the hub of spices and was known as Spice Island (Malay) back then and the maritime route connecting east to the west was driven by the demands of spices.¹⁹ Spices such as cassia were traded as early as 2000BC, and were known for its medicinal and ritualistic purpose.²⁰ The earliest proof of spice trade comes from cloves found in Syria (1721 BC) which were grown in Maluka Islands in Eastern Indonesia.²¹ The traders followed the sea route from Indonesia to the island of Madagascar off East Africa.

With the vision of 'Global Maritime Fulcrum' Indonesia essentially aims to identify itself as an emerging power in maritime domain and revitalize its legacy. However, the term 'Cinnamon Route' is a modern terminology and has a misnomer as cinnamon was native to Sri Lanka. Despite the fact that South East Asia was called the hub of spices, cinnamons were central to Sri Lanka. Indonesia had its monopoly over cassia, which it traded as early as 2nd century BC.

Conclusion

Given the rise of Asia with its economic growth and strategic competition in the region, great powers are also initiating their pivot 'Towards East'.²² The US is rebalancing in the region by way of deployment of its naval and air forces and with economic re-engagement in the region. The resident countries on the other hand, are taking national and regional approaches to substantiate their geo-strategic and economic claims by acknowledging their presence in the overseas network. The initiative by China, India and Indonesia can be seen in similar light as three of them are engaging in policies to substantiate their historical presence across the maritime routes.

The mechanism of adopting ideological framework of silk, cotton and cinnamon is symbolic and represents a nationalistic identity. With the contemporary power play of geopolitics the contours of these concepts are still evolving. However, the emerging strategy of cooperation between the countries, not just for economic development but for knowledge sharing is relatively a new concept that acknowledges oceans as a shared space. Making a shift from previous attempt to explore world history these initiatives offer a holistic understanding of the past.

The approach of using cultural cooperation for tracing maritime linkages ensures partnering amongst various countries across the oceans, providing them a common platform to showcase a connected history. Acknowledging the maritime engagements as one of the earliest means of globalization, it recognizes the vastness and complexity of the oceans, connecting and separating nations and shaping their culture through the movement of goods, people, ideas and religions.

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