

China's "Blue Partnership" through the Maritime Silk Road

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Introduction

On 20 June 2017, China for the first time put forward a blueprint of its grand "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" (MSR) under the "*Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative*". The blueprint emphasised the establishment of a Blue Economy and sustainable development. China, through the MSR seeks to build a new form of maritime security regional cooperation. Here, the query lies in understanding China's 'blue partnership' under the MSR.

China's new Silk Road *via* the Waterway

In October 2013, during his visit to Indonesia, the Chinese President Xi Jinping put forward the proposal of the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" or "21 世纪海上丝绸之路". This maritime plan came as an adjunct to Xi's "Silk Road Economic Belt". Following up on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), on 28 March 2015, China's National Development and Reform Commission, in conjunction with China's Foreign Ministry and Commerce Ministry, issued an action plan for the BRI. The document titled "*Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road*", stated:

"The Belt and Road run through the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa, connecting the vibrant East Asia economic circle at one end and developed European economic circle at the other, and encompassing countries with huge potential for economic development. The Silk Road Economic Belt focuses on bringing together China, Central Asia, Russia and Europe (the Baltic); linking China with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central Asia and West Asia; and connecting China with Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean. The 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road is designed to go from China's coast to Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean in one route, and from China's coast through the South China Sea to the South Pacific in the other".¹

Given the above conception, from an International Relations framework, China's motivations behind OBOR can be broadly understood from two perspectives.² On the one hand, the realist perspective bases its evidence on China's national interest in securing natural resources, China's attempt to increase its military capabilities, and its desire to challenge the international order. On the other hand, the liberal perspective chooses as its evidence China's significant growth with its neighbouring countries, China's engagement in regional multilateral frameworks, and China's responsible commitment to the international community.³ With specific regard to the MSR, the "Vision" document notes:

"The Road is designed to go from China's coast to Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean in one route, and from China's coast through the South China Sea to the South Pacific in the other".⁴

That is, the "Road" is a maritime network of ports and other coastal infrastructure from South and Southeast Asia to East Africa and the northern Mediterranean Sea.



Figure 1: China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Source: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-04/14/content_20433306.htm

To break connectivity bottlenecks, China's geostrategic objective underpinning the Maritime Silk Road project is to guarantee Beijing's control over the most important sea trade routes and uninterrupted import of raw material. Here,

one of the key goals is to decrease China's dependence on the Malacca Strait, which carries almost 90 per cent of China's sea borne trade and energy supplies. Given this heavy dependence on one route, Beijing faces a "Malacca Dilemma".⁵ Therefore, to avert the risks inherent in this dilemma, Xi's MSR policy aims at building ports in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This is witnessed in China's port facilities in countries such as Myanmar (Sittwe), Pakistan (Gwadar), Sri Lanka (Hambantota) and Bangladesh (Chittagong).

China's Mapping of the MSR

On 20 June 2017, China's National Development and Reform Commission and the State Oceanic Administration released a document titled "*Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative.*"⁶ As stated in this document, China under its 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, aims at:

"synchronising development plans and promoting joint actions amongst countries along the Maritime Silk Road, setting up the all-dimensional, multi-tiered and broad-scoped Blue Partnership, jointly protecting and sustainably utilizing marine resources to achieve harmony between man and the ocean for common development and enhancement of maritime welfare."⁷

It is noteworthy that this is the first time that the Chinese government has released a plan of action on 'maritime cooperation' ever since the first flagging of the MSR project in 2013. In this context, Wang Hong, the head of the State Oceanic Administration (SOA), remarked that this is the first time that the Chinese government has systematically proposed a "blueprint" for advancing maritime cooperation among Belt and Road countries.⁸

The priorities of China's MSR "Vision" feature green development, ocean-based prosperity, maritime security, innovative growth, and collaborative governance. Most importantly, in forging closer ties, the "Vision" document puts forward the Chinese plan of building three ocean-based "Blue Economic Passages" along the Maritime Road that will connect Asia with Africa, Oceania, Europe and beyond. The three such passages are: the China-Indian Ocean-Africa-Mediterranean Sea Blue Economic Passage; the China-Oceania-South Pacific Blue Economic Passage; and one that will lead to Europe via the Arctic Ocean.

Given this proposed three-way network, the trajectory entails the following pathway: First, the China-Indian Ocean-Africa-Mediterranean Sea Blue Economic Passage- this will be based on coastal economic belts in China. It will link the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor and run westward from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean, connecting the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, according to the document. Second, the China-Oceania-South Pacific Blue Economic Passage- this is set to head south from the South China Sea into the Pacific Ocean. And the third is the passage to Europe – this will run through the Arctic Ocean. It can thus be stated that China's Maritime Silk Road is not a one way pass but a broad network of multiple passes.

In addition, the “Vision” document called on countries along the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road to focus on “sharing blue space and developing the blue economy,” which will target issues such as marine environment protection, marine interconnectivity, maritime security and common oceanic governance. Here, one of the key interests for China is to secure and strengthen its port facilities. In this regard, Zhuang Guotu argues that port logistics is an important aspect for deepening maritime cooperation between China and other countries along the MSR.⁹ He explains that:

“As exchanges and cooperation in trade, investment and tourism increase between China and other countries along the Road, it has been an irresistible trend to expand cooperation in port industry, ocean shipping, logistics, informatization, and human resources.”¹⁰

It may, therefore, be argued that the outlook towards building the Maritime Silk Road is strongly driven by China's quest for maritime supremacy and an aspiration for maritime expeditionary capabilities to operate in the deep waters of open oceans- a “Blue-Water Navy”. To explain, as China's comprehensive national power has significantly strengthened and its interests are geographically expanding , it becomes imperative for China to drive for a blue-water navy. This is well-noted in China's growing naval activities in the Indian Ocean, including the presence of its submarines, conduct of live fire drills, and the docking of Chinese warships in ports, such as in Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

China's Dream of *Haiyang Qiangguo*- A Strong Maritime Power

In advocating the efficacy of sea power, Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan famously stated: “Control of the sea by maritime commerce and naval supremacy means predominant influence in the world ... (and) is chief among the merely material elements in the power and prosperity of nations.”¹¹ This suggests that becoming a sea power is essential to a nation’s prosperity and if ignored can put a nation at risk. This perspective explains the motivation underpinning China’s maritime quest.

China’s ambition is to become a maritime power, possibly reflecting the shift from from being merely a continental power. This is well-noted in the 2015 Defence *White Paper* on “China’s Military Strategy” suggests:

*“The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests.”*¹²

These interests are driven by China’s economic rise, as also Beijing’s security interests concerning longstanding unresolved sovereignty issues, such as unification with Taiwan and gaining complete control of land features in the East and South China Seas held by other countries, all of which demands a focus on the maritime domain.

It needs to be noted that this Chinese maritime adventurism is an output of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CCP) in November 2012, wherein President Hu Jintao declared that China’s objective is to be a *Haiyang quango*—that is, a strong or great maritime power. This marked an important defining moment in China’s maritime strategy, as Hu posited:

*China should “enhance [the] capacity for exploiting marine resources, develop the marine economy, protect the marine ecological environment, resolutely safeguard China’s maritime rights and interests, and build China into a strong maritime power (emphasis added).”*¹³

This objective was reiterated in the 2012 defence White Paper on “The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces” that was released on April 16, 2013. The White Paper stated:

“China is a major maritime as well as land country. The seas and oceans provide immense space and abundant resources for China’s sustainable development, and thus are of vital importance to the people’s wellbeing and China’s future. It is an essential national development strategy to exploit, utilize and protect the seas and oceans, and build China into a maritime power.”¹⁴

Here, it is important to note that in the Chinese context, maritime power encompasses more than naval power but appreciates the importance of having a world-class navy.¹⁵ The maritime power equation includes a large and effective coast guard; a world-class merchant marine and fishing fleet; a globally recognized shipbuilding capacity; and an ability to harvest or extract economically important maritime resources, especially fish.¹⁶

The scope of China’s military strategy is also centered upon the maritime domain, that is to win “informationized local wars” by “maritime preparation for military struggle” – striving for achieving a ‘blue-water navy’.¹⁷ In view of this, the 2015 White Paper suggests a “long-standing task for China to safeguard its maritime rights and interests” and, the process to become a “strong maritime power”. The PLA Navy (PLAN) will play a greater role shifting its focus from “offshore water defense” to “open seas protection”- thus, making a shift from defence to offence.¹⁸

Conclusion

Given these objectives, China’s Dream of building a ‘blue partnership’ via the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ is a means to achieve its larger goal of securing China’s foothold in the maritime domain. In this light, the construction of ports and related facilities aim to extend China’s maritime reach across the Indian Ocean via the Suez Canal, into the Mediterranean basin. Here, the objective is to secure its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), which carry 90 per cent of China’s trade and energy supplies. More importantly, a secured maritime posture would also strengthen China’s naval military ambitions. In addition, attaining these goals will significantly result in a strong government, a prosperous economy, a harmonious society, and a strong military- the key elements needed in order to realise Xi Jinping’s Chinese Dream.

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