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Issue Brief

Unpacking China's White Paper on Maritime Cooperation under BRI

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S*ummary*

The vision on maritime cooperation outlined by the White Paper (MSR Vision 2017) is largely a reiteration of the vision for the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road proclaimed in March 2015 (BRI Vision 2015). However, MSR 2017 also contains several new elements. This article unpacks the Chinese proposals for enhancing maritime cooperation along the MSR. The vision document considers maritime security cooperation as a lynchpin in the MSR and attempts to redesign the existing maritime security architecture in the oceanic arena of MSR. The proposed Asia Africa Growth Corridor, a joint initiative of India and Japan, needs to take into

The revival of the centuries-old 'Silk Road at Sea' into a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road is an integral part of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It has been flagged by China as a Chinese solution to global economic revival. The Silk Road Economic Belt on land connects China to Europe through Central Asia, while the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) at sea connects China to the European Market through the South China Sea, Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. In keeping with the proclaimed tenor of the BRI initiative, on 20 June 2017, China unveiled a white paper on "Vision towards enhancing maritime cooperation in building a peaceful and prosperous 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road". The vision document, prepared by China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and State Oceanic Administration (SOA), outlined that "China is willing to work closely with countries along the Road, engage in all-dimensional and broad-scoped maritime cooperation and build open and inclusive cooperation platforms, and establish a constructive and pragmatic Blue Partnership to forge a "blue engine" for sustainable development."¹ Notwithstanding constant reiteration from China about the centrality of the economic dimension in the Belt and Road initiative, there has been a constant focus by commentators about its sublime geostrategic design.²

The vision on maritime cooperation outlined by the White Paper (MSR Vision 2017) is largely a reiteration of the vision for the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road proclaimed in March 2015 (BRI Vision 2015).³ However, MSR 2017 also contains several new elements. This article unpacks the Chinese proposals for enhancing maritime cooperation along the MSR. "Blue Economy" and "Sustainable Development" are largely advertorial embellishments in the document. The vision document considers maritime security cooperation as a lynchpin in the MSR and attempts to redesign the existing maritime security architecture in the oceanic arena of MSR. The proposed Asia Africa Growth Corridor, a joint initiative of India and Japan, needs to take into account the extant Chinese vision on maritime cooperation in order to provide a viable alternative.

1 "Full Text of the Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative," June 20, 2017, http://english.gov.cn/archive/publications/2017/06/20/content_281475691873460.htm

2 Brahma Chellaney, "China's Imperial Overreach," Project Syndicate, May 24, 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/one-belt-one-road-china-imperialism-by-brahma-chellaney-2017-05>

3 National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of, and Commerce of the People's Republic of China, "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road," National Development and Reform Commission, March 28, 2017, http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html

Expanding Maritime Horizon of Belt and Road Initiatives

The original blueprint for the belt and road initiative had just one belt on land and one road at sea. The belt provided connectivity between China and Europe through Central Asia while the maritime road catered for oceanic connectivity of China, Africa and Europe through the South China Sea, Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. The white paper on Maritime Cooperation under BRI envisages three oceanic passages, which include: the originally envisaged China-Indian Ocean-Africa- Mediterranean Sea Blue Economic Passage; the blue economic passage of China-Oceania-South Pacific travelling southward from the South China Sea into the Pacific Ocean; and, a future blue economic passage to Europe via the Arctic Ocean.

In addition to these are the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC). both connected with China-Indian Ocean-Africa- Mediterranean Sea Blue Economic Passage. Thus, the 21st century Maritime Silk Road has a much larger oceanic canvas than originally envisaged. The linking of CPEC and BCIM within the wider framework of the Maritime Silk Road has been objected to by India,⁴ which had earlier boycotted the inaugural Belt and Road Forum due to sovereignty concerns given that CPEC transits Indian Territory in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir.⁵

Focus on Sustainable Blue Enterprise – Rhetoric or Reality

A focus on sustainable development and environmental protection in planning major industrial and infrastructure projects is mandatory due to concerns about climate change. The BRI Vision 2015 has also articulated similar phraseology of sustainable and environment-friendly approach for the projects envisaged under the initiative's auspices. The extant vision on maritime cooperation under BRI has been embellished with phrases such as 'blue economic passage', 'developing the blue economy', 'blue economy partnership', 'blue partnership', 'blue engine for sustainable growth', 'blue carbon ecosystem', 'blue carbon forum', and 'blue carbon report'. The word count of 'Blue' is the second highest at 30 in the document and the most repeated word is 'Economy' or its variations at 34 times. In essence, it indicates the Chinese commitment for the environment in the envisaged economic outreach in the maritime arena.

4 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Transcript of Media Briefing by Official Spokesperson (June 22 , 2017)," http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28553/Transcript_of_Media_Briefing_by_Official_Spokesperson_June_22__2017

5 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Official Spokesperson's Response to a Query on Participation of India in OBOR/BRI Forum," <http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28463/official+spokespersons+response+to+a+query+on+participation+of+india+in+oborbri+forum>

The environment commitment is further asserted through a focus on scientific research cooperation with littoral countries along the road as well as the setting up of regional institutions for marine environment protection and monitoring. Thus, the vision states that China has proposed “the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Blue Carbon Program to monitor coastal and ocean blue carbon ecosystems, develop technical standards and promote research on carbon sinks, launch the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Blue Carbon Report, and to establish an International Blue Carbon Forum and cooperation mechanism.”

This promise of environmental protection in the BRI is certainly in line with China's voluntary commitments undertaken as part of the Paris Climate Change agreement. However, Chinese practices in the recent past have indicated scant regard for environmental concerns in domestic developmental activities, reclamations in the South China Sea and overseas investment. The Hague Tribunal, in its ruling on the South China Sea, had castigated China for causing severe harm to the coral reef environment as well as for violating its obligation to preserve and protect fragile ecosystems and the habitat of depleted, threatened, or endangered species.⁶ China's island-building spree and its mobilisation of its ravenous fishing fleet have resulted in the deliberate destruction of the marine ecosystem and impaired the long-term sustainability of the marine environment around the South China Sea.⁷ China's domestic policies have prioritised development over environmental concerns with harrowing results.⁸

China's investments in Africa are concentrated in sectors which are environmentally sensitive (such as oil and gas exploration, mining, hydropower, and timber), and the resultant environmental damage has drawn sharp criticism.⁹ With the tightening of the domestic law on pollution, China may even incentivise the relocation of its most polluting industries to Africa where enforcement of environmental measures is weak.¹⁰ A Chinese scholar has justified such export of pollution and recommends that “Energy-hungry and polluting manufacturers may well be the first to move from China to Africa.”¹¹ Whether the environmental

6 Permanent Court of Arbitration, The Hague, “Press Release - The South China Sea Arbitration,” July 12, 2016, <https://pca-cpa.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/175/2016/07/PH-CN-20160712-Press-Release-No-11-English.pdf>

7 Jay Batongbacal, “Environmental Aggression in the South China Sea,” *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, May 7, 2015, <https://amti.csis.org/environmental-aggression-in-the-south-china-sea/>

8 Elizabeth C Economy, “The Great Leap Backward?,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/ October 2007, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2007-09-01/great-leap-backward>

9 David H. Shinn, “The Environmental Impact of China's Investment in Africa,” *Cornell International Law Journal*, 49 (2016), p. 25.

10 Peter Bosshard, “China's Environmental Footprint in Africa,” *China in Africa Policy Briefing*, 3 (2008), <http://198.61.250.55/sites/default/files/China's-Environmental-Footprint-in-Africa.pdf>

11 Tang Xiaoyang, *China-Africa economic diplomacy and its implications for the global value chain* (中非经济外交及其对全球产业链的启示) (Beijing: World Affairs, 2014). See also, a short review of the

friendly assurance of the vision in implementing envisaged maritime projects will become a reality can be assessed only when projects are implemented on the ground. However, there exist sufficient reasons for healthy scepticism in this regard at present.

Encouragement to Chinese Enterprises

The Silk Road Vision document aims to promote the participation of Chinese enterprises in maritime infrastructure projects, industrial parks and trade cooperation zones in the littoral countries along the maritime Silk Road. The Belt and Road Initiative has been proclaimed as a stimulus for global and regional economic growth. However, it has been argued that this initiative could be seen as an attempt to redirect surplus capital and industrial overcapacity in order to solve the prevalent structural problem of the Chinese economy.¹² Several studies have also questioned the economic viability and pointed to the associated political risks of the belt and road initiative.¹³ This apparent promotion of Chinese enterprises in the maritime cooperation vision document could be for two reasons. One, the productive use of surplus capital and industrial overcapacity. And two, it aims to address the growing risk aversion plaguing Chinese institutions in investing in far-flung projects with uncertain financial returns and political risks.¹⁴

Networks for Perception Management

Perception management for “garnering public support for intensifying ocean cooperation” seems to be an important area in the maritime cooperation vision. Key activities in this area include a network of Chinese and regional research institutions and think tanks, a “circle of friends” in media, Non-Governmental

book at China Dialogue website, Liu Qin, “Book: China’s Most Polluting Manufacturers Likely to Shift to Africa,” <https://www.chinadialogue.net/culture/7719--Book-China-s-most-polluting-manufacturers-likely-to-shift-to-Africa/en>

12 Brahma Chellaney, “China’s Debt-Trap Diplomacy,” *Project Syndicate*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-one-belt-one-road-loans-debt-by-brahma-chellaney-2017-01>

13 The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Prospects and Challenges on China’s ‘one Belt, One Road’: A Risk Assessment Report* (Economist, 2016), <http://pubs.sciepub.com/wjssh/2/1/2/>. See also Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “UN Warns about Financial Risks in China’s One Belt One Road Project,” *The Economic Times*, May 25, 2017, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/un-warns-about-financial-risks-in-chinas-one-belt-one-road-project/articleshow/58831087.cms>; Michael Meidan, *China’s New Global Investment Strategy: The Challenges Facing China’s Belt and Road Initiatives* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute of International Studies, February 2016), http://pure.diiis.dk/ws/files/409521/PB_Belt_and_Road_WEB.pdf

14 “Chinese Firms Wary of Political Risks on Xi’s Belt and Road,” *Bloomberg.com*, May 22, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-05-22/chinese-companies-wary-of-political-risks-on-xi-s-belt-and-road>

Organisations (NGO), and liaison networks for maritime law enforcement agencies. These networks would facilitate research cooperation, training and education, cultural exchanges, cross-border interviews through funding from China. The vision document elaborates detailed programmes for the development of these networks. A collaborative approach is aimed to lay a solid foundation of public support for the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. China aims to promote Matsuo Folk culture for the Maritime Silk Road's spirit of friendly cooperation including cooperation.

Maritime Security Assurance –The Lynchpin

The vision document identifies maritime security as a “key assurance for developing the blue economy” and aims to promote “the concept of common maritime security”. Four areas of maritime security cooperation in the vision document are:-

- Cooperation on Maritime navigation security to combat non-traditional security issues such as crime at sea.
- Cooperation with littoral countries in the application of the BeiDou Navigation Satellite System and remote sensing satellite system has also been proposed.
- Conducting joint maritime search and rescue missions to enhance capacities in dealing with emergencies at sea including major disasters and security threats to tourists.
- Cooperation on Marine disaster warning and mitigation through “setting up of marine disaster warning systems in the South China Sea, the Bengal Sea, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden” and development of “marine disaster warning products for *transportation, escort, disaster prevention and mitigation.*” (Emphasis added).

It has been argued that the Belt and Road initiative is primarily driven by broad geostrategic aims¹⁵ and China is using economic power in pursuit of geopolitical objectives in this initiatives.¹⁶ However, the broad contours of maritime security cooperation in the Silk Road vision clearly indicate China's willingness to use its maritime power for the protection of its expanding maritime interests and sea lanes, albeit in the extant case, under the guise of enhancing maritime cooperation on non-traditional issues.

15 Peter Cai, *Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative* (Sydney, Australia: Lowy Institute for International Policy, March 2017), <https://think-asia.org/handle/11540/6810>

16 Sanjaya Baru, “China's One-Belt-One-Road Initiative Is Not Just about Economics,” *The Economic Times*, April 25, 2017, <http://blogs.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/et-commentary/chinas-one-belt-one-road-initiative-is-not-just-about-economics/>

China's naval strategy has progressively evolved from a "near-coast defence" strategy prior to the mid-1980s to a "near-seas active defence" after the mid-1980s, and then to the advancement of a "far-seas operations" strategy by the mid-2000s.¹⁷ Hu Jintao provided the concept of 'New Historic Mission' which argued that the PLA must go beyond its previous mission of safeguarding national "survival interests" protecting national "development interests".¹⁸ China's Military Strategy 2015 provided greater emphasis on "open seas protection" and highlighted "long-standing task for China to safeguard its maritime rights and interests." The role of the PLA-Navy was augmented to include "participation in both regional and international security cooperation and effectively secure China's overseas interests".¹⁹ The contours of the burgeoning Chinese military presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has been evident through the near permanent presence of PLA Navy in the Gulf of Aden, deployment of submarines, the under construction naval base at Djibouti, and the planned deployment of Marines at Gwadar and Djibouti. The vision provides a broad design for the further expansion of China's maritime power in the IOR and beyond.

Contrasting Visions: Maritime Silk Road vs Asia Africa Growth Corridor

During the recently held annual general meeting of the African Development Bank (AfDB) at Gandhinagar on May 24, 2017, India and Japan unveiled the vision document for an "Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC)" which aims to enhance growth and connectivity between Asia and Africa with a focus on four areas: Development Cooperation Projects, Quality Infrastructure and Institutional Connectivity, Enhancing Skills, and People-to-People Partnership. Priority areas for development cooperation include health and pharmaceuticals, agriculture and agro-processing, disaster management and skill enhancement.²⁰ The AAGC seeks synergy between India's "Act East" Policy and Japan's "Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure" in order to improve growth and interconnectedness between and within Asia and Africa for realising a free and open Indo-Pacific region.²¹

17 Phillip C. Saunders et. al., *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles* (Government Printing Office, 2011), pp. 109-11.

18 James Mulvenon, "Chairman Hu and the PLA's 'New Historic Missions,'" *China Leadership Monitor*, 27 (2009), pp. 1-11.

19 "Full Text: China's Military Strategy - Xinhua | English.news.cn," http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-05/26/c_134271001.htm

20 Research and Information System for Development Studies, Economic Research Institute for Asean and East Asia, and Institute for developing Economies Japan External Trade Organisation, "ASIA AFRICA GROWTH CORRIDOR: Partnership for Sustainable and Innovative Development A Vision Document," May 24, 2017.

21 Ruchita Beri, "India's New Initiative in Africa: The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor," *IDS Comment*, June 13, 2017, http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/indias-new-initiative-in-africa-asia-africa-growth-corridor_rberi_130617#footnote8_d3wbpaj

Japan's contribution to the project will be its state-of-the-art technology and ability to build quality infrastructure, while India will bring in its expertise of working in Africa. The private sector of both countries is expected to play a big role by coming together to form joint ventures and consortiums and take up infrastructure, power or agribusiness projects in Africa.²² This Indo-Japan initiative is being seen as a counter to the Belt and Road initiative. AAGC is being presented as a "distinct initiative" borne out of a consultative process which would be profitable and bankable, unlike the "government-funded model" of Belt and Road initiatives.²³

The vision document of both initiatives explicitly covers the same ground, viz., economic connectivity through maritime infrastructure, pairing of ports for mercantile trade, environmental friendly approach, sustainable development goals, institutional connectivity, people to people contacts, etc. However, unlike the near global vision of the Maritime Silk Road, AAGC is limited in its geographical span. The AAGC espouses the Public Private Partnership (PPP) model in contrast to the government funded approach of the Maritime Silk Road. Unlike the encouragement to Chinese Enterprises in the Maritime Silk Road, the AAGC vision document does not mention any preferential treatment to Indian or Japanese enterprises. And, the Chinese vision document is more detailed in terms of specific activities and programmes envisaged in comparison to the AAGC vision document which has a rather broad brush approach.

One of the crucial missing links in the AAGC vision document is the aspect of maritime security cooperation even though the India-Japan Joint Statement of November 11, 2016, placed at the appendix of the document, acknowledges the imperatives of maritime security cooperation. It is apparent that the consultative approach of the AAGC vision has not included the views of experts from the maritime security domain. It is hoped that the Research Support Unit assigned for the preparation of the Asia Africa Growth Corridor Study between 2017-2018 would include aspects of enhancing maritime security cooperation within the ambit of AAGC along with a more detailed exploration of projects envisaged.

Conclusion

Beyond the semantic embroidery of collaborative development for a Blue Economy, China's vision document on maritime security cooperation under BRI contains an even more expanded 21st Century Maritime Silk Road which now expands beyond

22 Neha Sinha, "Asia- Africa Growth Corridor: Can It Be a Game Changer?," June 5, 2017, <http://www.vifindia.org/article/2017/june/05/asia-africa-growth-corridor-can-it-be-a-game-changer>

23 Avinash Nair, "To Counter OBOR, India and Japan Propose Asia-Africa Sea Corridor," *The Indian Express*, May 31, 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/explained/to-counter-obor-india-and-japan-propose-asia-africa-sea-corridor-4681749/>

the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea to include the Pacific and Arctic Oceans. However, at the core of the vision lies an elaborate framework of a cooperative maritime security architecture for protection of sea lanes of MSR. Through the assurance of maritime security under a cooperative framework as an 'international public good', China aims to solve its vexing strategic challenge of securing its expanded sea lanes. China's expanding maritime influence in the IOR certainly poses a challenge to prevailing regional maritime security mechanisms (viz., IORA, IONS, BIMSTEC etc.) in general and to India in particular. The extant vision envisages promotion of the Chinese Baideu navigation system. A network of ocean observation systems along with the creation of a liaison network for maritime security further accentuates this strategic concern. The Chinese vision document on maritime cooperation broadly confirms the assessment about the country's intention to further militarise economic policy in order to defend its ambitious global outreach, which is, as of now, being marketed as as a benign endeavour.²⁴

India has been proactively engaging with countries in its maritime neighbourhood at bilateral and multilateral levels. There is growing recognition of its role as a 'net security provider' in the IOR. India has clearly informed China about its sensitivities regarding CPEC and has objected to the linking of CPEC and BCIM corridor with the MSR. However, it must be noted that India's maritime outreach will progressively face even bigger competitive challenges from Chinese initiatives under MSR not only in the economic arena but also in maritime geopolitics. India certainly needs a whole of government approach and proactive engagement with like-minded countries to evolve a suitable strategy to ensure a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'.

²⁴ Harsh V. Pant, "How China Is Expanding Its Military Capabilities across the Globe," *Daily O*, June 25, 2016, <http://www.dailyo.in/politics/china-indian-ocean-military-india-china-ties-pakistan/story/1/17993.html>.

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