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China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and Indian Anxiety: An analysis

Abdul Rab^{1*}, Amir Jan^{1*} & Niamatullah³

^{1,2,3} Faculty of Social Sciences and Management, Lasbela University of Agriculture, Water, and Marine Sciences, Balochistan, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: Niamatullah, E-mail: niamat.edu@luawms.edu.pk

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ABSTRACT

The present study analyzes Indian anxiety over Chinese mounting influence in the Indian Ocean Region particularly progressive activities of China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and Silk Road Economic Belt. The study deeply observes the reasons for Indian anxiety and misunderstanding on China's Belt and Road Initiative especially the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The study also argues that worldwide support exposed China's BRI importance in the regional socio-economic connectivity. However, India is the largest country in South Asia and has a strategic influence in the Indian Ocean. It plays an important role in other South Asian countries except for Pakistan in terms of economy, military and diplomacy. India's attitude is very crucial for China's BRI, especially the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, as being a most important neighbour of China regarding its economy and military magnitudes.

Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (hereafter BRI) is a grand initiative to resuscitate the ancient history of the Chinese silk trade route both sea and land. The BRI is considered Beijing's ambitious foreign policy and mega geo-economic plan in the history of China. The BRI covers three continents Asia, Africa and Europe which comprises nearly 70% of the world population and 40% of the world's GDP (Cai, 2018). During President Xi Jinping visits Kazakhstan and Indonesia in September and October 2013, he put forward the initial steps of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (hereafter 21st Century MSR) and Silk Road Economic Belt (hereafter SREB). Soon after the announcement of BRI, the Chinese ministries started their assignment under the leadership of Xi Jinping. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Ministry of Commerce and the National Development and Reform Commission jointly issued the vision and action on promoting the joint construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road on March 28, 2015 (Ghiasy & Zhou, 2017). These trillion-dollar program components such as the 21st Century MSR representing the 'Road' and Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) represents the 'Belt'. The 21st Century MSR is stretching from Chinese coastal ports (a length of 14000 km) across the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal to Southeast Asia and South Asia and Europe to Mediterranean Sea through the Suez Canal and the SREB connects China to Central Asia, Russia and Europe (Jean-Marc & Colin, 2017). Beijing's purpose of this initiative is to renew the ancient Silk Roads and modernize the 21st Century MSR infrastructure, to boost the regional economic connectivity and infrastructure development.

The 21st Century MSR has significant economic and strategic implications for all countries and regions it aims to traverse. The 21st Century MSR would be a key project in the emergence of a new form of political-economic development based on interconnectivity or flows rather than territorial control, a geopolitical imagination for a globalized world. The MSR geography has been a heavily active area as far as regional economic frameworks are concerned. Nevertheless, South Asia is a crucial region under China's BRI. Beijing has already made multilateral agreements worth of billion dollars in the South Asian region, including the \$62 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Khan, & Liu, 2019) and Bangladesh China India Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIMEC). Geographically, the Indian Ocean is a vital passageway for China (Brewster, 2018) to enhance its economic cooperation and close ties with South Asian countries. India the 6th largest economy

country in GDP and main competitor in the region is still unconvinced and even resistant to the BRI (Blah, 2018). The paper divided into three parts, in first part paper attempts to elucidate the Indian perception on China's 21st Century MSR; in the second part, the paper analyzes the importance of the China's 21st Century MSR for India in the Indian Ocean, the section disused India's counter policies against China's 21st Century MSR.

India's Perception of China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road

India is the only country in South Asia, with an influential role in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has a contrary understanding of BRI (Blah, 2018). China's proposed 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) is connecting the Pacific and the Indian Ocean to China's 14000 km costal line facilitating as a sea trade route. Indian Ocean is a crucial region as it is playing the essential role of the corridor connecting Europe, Africa and Middle East regions to China via the different junctions in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) (Medcalf, 2018). In all these routes China has serious security implications which compelled her to focus on the security perceptions (Cordner, 2018). On top of this, the Indian government realized that the Chinese efforts to regional economic connectivity to different region countries and especially with its neighbouring states on the Indian Ocean are a serious threat to its security and influence in the region. The 21st Century MSR is vastly dependent on trade routes that pass via the Indian Ocean which is a very important pathway for China mostly its energy imports (Michael, 2018). Thus, the Chinese government seek to protects its key routes in the Indian Ocean from counter-piracy particularly from the horn of Africa (Haiquan, 2017). India has shown its concerns from Beijing's regular naval activities and anti-piracy exercises in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) since 2008. China also deployed its submarines to the IOR in the last couple of years (Suri, 2016). More importantly, Beijing's military base in Djibouti facilitates as a fundamental power-projection base, which will strengthen its access to ports in India's close neighbours (Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) (Suri, 2016). China's mounting interests in the IOR is endangering India's national and security interests as well as reducing India's natural geographical advantages in the region.

On the other hand, for the sake of national security, India believes that the BRI will provide a reason for China to build military facilities in the Indian Ocean (Wu, 2020). Thus, this fear further examines that China's 21st Century MSR part of its maritime and naval strategy in the Indian Ocean to create a civilian port network that could be turned into a naval base during a war. Furthermore, Gwadar deep seaport in Pakistan and Hambantota port in Sri Lanka are important bases for China's 21st Century MSR in the Indian Ocean. Chinese investments and constructions of the ports in these countries bordering the Indian Ocean serve both commercial and naval activities in the IOR. In the interim, India believes that China wants to establish proper submarine deployment and replenishment bases in Sri Lankan Hambantota port and Gwadar deep seaport in Pakistan. Moreover, Chinese nuclear submarines have begun to appear in Sri Lankan and Pakistani waters, which China claims an effort to expand defence cooperation between the Indian Ocean bordering countries and seek support for his BRI. While New Delhi believes that China's 21st Century MSR will help to disguise China's military objectives in the Indian Ocean. In economic perception, India believes that Beijing's ambitious maritime economic corridors in the Indian Ocean would have disastrous consequences on its local industries and markets. Besides, New Delhi highlighted China's taking over the Hambantota port of Sri Lanka for 99 years lease as a "*Debt Trap Diplomacy*" (Umesh, 2019) and concerned over Chinese massive investments and economic grants in the shape of loans in the poor Indian Ocean neighbouring states.

The fundamental goal of Indian foreign policy has been the pursuit of great power in the region since her independence in 1947 (Horimoto, 2017). To achieve this goal, India adopted diplomatic policies to strengthen its foreign policy self-reliantly in the region. Now, India is in a good position to play the great power game in the Indo-Pacific region. Against this background, India geopolitically encircled by China's gulf facilities in Bangladesh, Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka via its 21st Century MSR and put New Delhi in an unprofitable and anxious position in the Indian Ocean (Malik, 2018). China is not a geographically part of the Indian Ocean region, but the 21st Century MSR is helping to carve out a niche for itself in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) (Wu, 2020). Through the 21st Century MSR, China may be challenging India on the existing balance of power architecture in the Indian Ocean region. India fears that its dominance in South Asia will be undermined with Chinese vigorous activities in the Indian Ocean (Li, 2016). Therefore, if India explicitly participat es in the 21st Century MSR, demonstrating China's presence in South Asia and Indian Ocean affairs, which is contrary to India's traditional diplomatic path of pursuing great power status in the region.

Apart from the above-mentioned concerns, New Delhi has shown its strong objection to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), with this reason India turned down China's invitation in the first-ever Belt and Road Initiative Summit in 2017 (Bansari, 2019). So far, CPEC is termed as a game-changer in the region, a lynchpin to China's BRI and symbol of Pak-

China relationship. The CPEC connects China to the Arabian Sea, a shortest route for Beijing to import oil and energy resources from the energy-rich Middle East and Gulf states (Garlick, 2018). Indian government declares CPEC, the violation of the International law and her sovereignty which is crossing through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir a disputed land. India sees this corridor as a Chinese conspiracy which may use it to control the Indian Ocean and encirclement of the New Delhi in the region (Deepak, 2018). However, China frequently reiterated that CPEC is not against any third party in the region which is only an economic activity to connect the region closer for prosperity.

Can India ignore China's 21st Century MSR?

China has always stated a positive attitude towards its BRI multilateral socio-economic cooperation among Indian Ocean Region (IOR) states. President Xi Jinping said in his speech during the three days' visit to India, "China and India have a combined population of more than 2.5 billion people. If China and India speak with one voice, the whole world will listen. If China and India work together, the whole world will pay attention. It is in the common interests of China and India to seek broad consensus and mutually beneficial cooperation". Narendra Modi Prime Minister of India likened China and India to "two bodies with one spirit" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014). India is an important participant in the BCIMEC (Karim & Islam, 2018) and an influential country in the Indian Ocean Region. Through the establishment of the corridor, India can get tangible benefits from it and further dispel India's doubts about China's BRI. 21st Century MSR could enhance India's trade with Southeast Asian states and shorten the route through the Malacca Strait as well as connect India via the future Asia Europe connectivity. This economic corridor will open immense opportunities in the socio-economic developments in India as more than 22% population of India is living under the poverty line (Samrat, 2019).

BCIMEC will also deepen India's ties with Myanmar and Southeast Asian countries. China's 21st Century MSR can moderate India's lack of maritime infrastructure (Palit, 2017). India can take advantage of constructions of Chinese seaports. Moreover, India is a huge market for investors where India could easily attract Chinese investors in many sectors. Additionally, China's 21st Century MSR is warmly winning the support from the IOR's countries, especially small island countries lacking expertise and funding in maritime infrastructure. India also desired to invest heavily in China, which would allow India to receive more investment from China. However, India cannot turn a complete blind eye to the BRI because, on one side, China is a vast market for India and on the second side, most of the South Asian states are part of BRI, which could isolate India if it ignores China's gigantic economic connectivity projects in the Indian Ocean Region. At the same time, the project will promote the development of India's Northeast region and further realize its "Eastward policy". For India, the 21st Century MSR provides a perfect platform to enhance its bilateral and regional cooperation with other countries. India can use China's economic power to accelerate its infrastructure development. India is not only a founding member of the AIIB but also the second-largest shareholder (China Daily, 2015). In recent years, leaders of China and India have exchanged visits and reached a series of cooperation agreements, injecting vitality into the BCIMEC. Although there are still some problems with the construction of the corridor, the potential for bilateral cooperation is huge and the attitude of India is gradually positive. In terms of policy implementation, India does not exclude China's BRI but selectively participates in cooperation. As more and more south Asian economies enter China's sphere of influence, India's "authority" in the south Asian region would be severely impacted time and again. If India does not participate, it may be isolated by south Asian countries. In this case, the best option for India is to accept China's invitation to actively participate in the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road project.

India's Counter Policies

Geo-economically Indian Ocean is playing the role of centre stage in the world due to its significant economic corridor and busiest route in the world, where two third of the world's oil cargos transported. Besides, through the Indian Ocean, Japan and China import their 90% and 84% oil respectively from the Middle East and Africa. In the IOR India with its huge energy and economic interests is undeniably the most vital regional actor. Furthermore, New Delhi desires to be a custodian of the Indian Ocean by enhancing bilateral and multilateral cooperation with other participated countries. Narendra Modi Government has an emphasis on proactive policies with durable attention to maritime concerns in the IOR with the response of China's BRI. Thus, New Delhi is altering its former policy "Look East" into "Act East" policy through paying more attention to the Bay of Bengal and responsive engagement with its neighbouring states (Anil, 2014). In addition to India's ambition to a leading role in the IOR, New Delhi looks to adopt the countermeasures against China's BRI and activities in the Indian Ocean by supporting the economic activities and development in the South China Sea. India is pursuing the cordial relation policies with South China Sea states to provoke China in the region. In this way, New Delhi is collaborating with Vietnamese firms in the sector of exploring oil and gas in the South China Sea. India is also following neighbourliness policies toward its close neighbours Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and the Maldives in the Indian

Ocean Region and jointly endeavouring on “blue economy” to strengthen the maritime development and improve the infrastructure capabilities.

On the other hand, India is investing billions of dollars in the Chabahar Port to develop a transport corridor to Afghanistan and Central Asian Countries bypassing Pakistan land route (Amirthan, 2017). The construction of the Chabahar port termed a competing port against the Gwadar deep seaport, which is a central part of the CPEC. The Chabahar port will facilitate New Delhi as a gateway connecting Afghanistan, Central Asian states and Europe via Indian Ocean and Iran as well as playing a vital role in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) (Conrad, 2017). Besides, India, Afghanistan and Iran signed a trilateral agreement on the development of international transport and economic corridor in May 2016. Also, Narendra Modi Government’s core policy is connecting India through its close Indian Ocean neighbouring countries and ambitious to make India as an international manufacturing centre. India has been interestingly investing billions of dollars in Ports construction of her Indian Ocean neighbouring countries since China’s BRI declaration. The huge investments consist of different mega projects including the upgrading ports, construction and renewal of railway lines and coastal shipping. India jointly venturing with Japanese and Sri Lankan companies in the construction of the Sir Lanka’s first LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas) terminal close to Colombo (The Hindu business line, 2017). Furthermore, India is engaging its economic activities with Southeast Asian countries, as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) emerged a very important region in the world trade.

Alternatively, New Delhi is tending toward Japan as a strategic partner to compete with China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Both India and Japan in a joint statement have announced the idea of an Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) and showing African continent their destination to promote and development industrial corridors as well as industrial networks in Asia and Africa (Bansari, 2019). AAGC is so far seeing as a retort to China’s mounting influence in Africa via BRI particularly coastal states in the IOR in Africa. Tokyo is financially supporting India’s northeast part to achieve the “Act East Policy”. The main purpose of this assistance is to the promotion of infrastructural development in northeastern Asia. More importantly, it will also facilitate the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway from India side (Mishra, 2018), which will connect India to the Southeast Asian region and accelerate economic connectivity in the IOR. New Delhi also in collaborating with Tokyo on several projects in the Bay of Bengal to develop infrastructure and connectivity aimed to counter China’s BRI in the IOR. India also taking a keen interest in the Quad 2.0 states (informer names of the participated states includes Australia, India, Japan and United States of America). The mentioned major democratic states met in the ASEAN summit in Manila on November 12, 2017, and discussed on the regional issues including the support of the “free and Open Indo-Pacific” idea (Patrick & Benjamin, 2020). The resume of the Quad 2.0 official meetings from Australia, India, Japan and United States of America participants on the response of the Chinese increasing economic and military influence in the Indo-Pacific regions (Le, 2019). However, Quad 2.0 points are not clear although, group persistently discussed the connectivity and maritime security issues in the Indo-Pacific region. Consequently, the influential competition between China and Quad 2.0 group in the region will raise the importance of India in the IOR.

Conclusion

China’s BRI components 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) seems an ample opportunity to strengthen infrastructure development, enhance trade cooperation, enlarge foreign investments and better economic connectivity in the regional level. The Indian perspectives regarding BRI recommends a conceivable challenge to New Delhi’s dominance in the Indian Ocean Region particularly South Asian neighbourhood. The contradicting discourses on BRI echo severe trust deficiency between New Delhi and Beijing. At last, China is fully confident of the universal viability of her progressive model leads by transferring its development model to countries along the BRI. Assumed India’s vast power gap with China and the potential security risks that allow China to expand in the Indian Ocean Region and its Indian Ocean neighbour states. Moreover, New Delhi is repetitively inclined to give the worst explanation for any cooperation agreement with China. To conclude, here need to strengthen the necessity for India and China to shift the focus from divergence to convergence of change in the two-sided attitudes, and the absolute importance of reassuring the unbiased perceptions of 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and other comparable development projects in the regions particularly in South Asia and Indian Ocean Region.

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