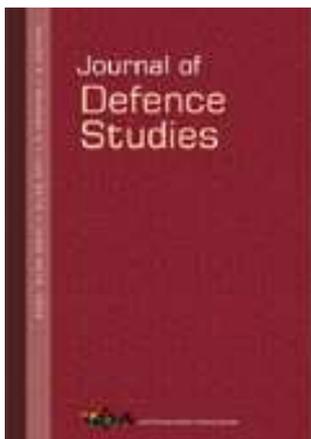


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Zorawar Daulet Singh

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Indian Perceptions of China's Maritime Silk Road Idea

*Zorawar Daulet Singh**

INTRODUCTION

According to a former Indian diplomat:

China has been seeking to consolidate her presence and ties to her South and West. They now extend beyond Southeast and South Asia and go across the Indian Ocean and Central Asia to the Mediterranean and Europe. A principal focus has been on establishing connectivity by every mode of transport.¹

The Maritime Silk Road (MSR) idea is part of this wider attempt by China to construct multiple lines of communication to its economic heartland in eastern China since the early 2000s. The underlying aim of such a geostrategy is to also develop inner Chinese provinces and shape China's regional periphery by exercising economic, political and cultural influence.²

In May 2014, *Xinhua* unveiled maps showing China's ambitious Land and Maritime Silk Roads.³ The MSR envisions an 'economic cooperation area' stretching from the Western Pacific to the Baltic Sea as a sort of maritime highway buttressed by Chinese-supported infrastructure and port facilities in states straddling maritime routes along which China's trade and natural resources flow.

According to the *Xinhua* map (see Figure 1), the MSR will begin in Quanzhou (Fujian province)⁴, and also touch Guangzhou (Guangdong

* The author is a foreign affairs analyst and a doctoral candidate at King's College London.





Figure 1 China: Proposed Land and Maritime Silk Roads

Source: <http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/newsilkway/index.htm>.

province), Beihai (Guangxi) and Haikou (Hainan) before heading south to the Malacca Strait. From Kuala Lumpur, the MSR heads to Kolkata, and then crosses the northern Indian Ocean to Nairobi, Kenya. From Nairobi, the MSR goes north around the Horn of Africa and moves through the Red Sea into the Mediterranean, with a stop in Athens before meeting the land-based Silk Road in Venice. According to China's official discourse, the MSR will bring 'new opportunities and a new future to China and every country along the road that is seeking to develop'.⁵

India was formally invited to join the MSR at the 17th round of Special Representatives (SRs) Talks in New Delhi in February 2014.⁶ The Indian response was lukewarm, and certainly not one of immediate

acceptance. But the Chinese SR deliberately communicated to the press as if India had accepted the invitation.⁷ The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson elaborated on the MSR:

This initiative is just an idea for cooperation. It is an open ended platform. The purpose is to integrate all kinds of ongoing cooperation especially cooperation on connectivity in the spirit of (ancient) silk road so that they can connect with each other and promote each other and accelerate regional countries' common development... China adopts an open attitude. We also hope to see good suggestions from other countries so as to substantiate this idea.⁸

So far, India has been reticent in its response primarily owing to a lack of clarity on the 'how' and 'what' of China's plans, and whether the MSR has a geoeconomic rationale or a more security-oriented approach. Chinese officials themselves have only offered general contours of the MSR, 'such as boosting regional maritime connectivity, and cooperation on disaster mitigation and fisheries development.'⁹ Conceptually, the upgradation of maritime connectivity between the Indo-Pacific and extending it further to East Africa and onto the Mediterranean is consistent with India's own broader maritime economic vision.¹⁰

The latest official response to the MSR was stated by India's Vice President, Hamid Ansari, in his recent China visit: 'In the discussions in the last two days the subject has been mentioned. We have asked for more details to be able to study the proposal in all its fullness.'¹¹

Can we anticipate India's policy responses? The resurgence of constructivist approaches to foreign policy analysis over the past two decades has enhanced the conceptual resonance of frameworks that focus on a state's ideational preferences.¹² In contrast to conventional structural theories such as neorealism, where a state's policy responses to systemic events is 'logically deduced' from a theoretically constructed system,¹³ constructivist research posits that it is through the perceptions of the policymaking elite that external trends are interpreted and interests defined.

China's MSR initiative is an excellent case to engage with this theme as Indian perceptions and interests are still evolving. While it is methodologically not feasible to directly study the policymaker's perceptions, a sample from the strategic community can be studied as a proxy for Indian thinking. This article attempts to study how the MSR is perceived from a variety of perspectives: former policymakers, diplomats,

strategic analysts, maritime and naval analysts and scholars. For analytical parsimony, this article has categorized these diverse Indian perceptions under four typologies.

ITS GEOPOLITICS, STUPID!

According to this view, MSR should be understood as part of a rising China's attempt to 'reorder Asia' and 'undermine American alliances' in the region. China is attempting to create trade and economic relationships with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries through trade, port and continental land bridges to countervail the United States (US) influence and to draw the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) littorals within its sphere of influence. Chinese proposals to develop Kunming Railway that will connect China–Singapore and other countries in Southeast Asia, as also the recently commissioned oil and gas pipelines and proposed railway line connecting the Rakhine coast of Myanmar with Kunming, underscore this thinking. The MSR proposal, thus, compliments such infrastructural initiatives and enables landlocked south-west China to access markets in Southeast Asia.

Some analysts also locate the MSR as part of a Chinese reassurance posture to 'diffuse the tension' on China's maritime periphery after a period of uncertainty over Chinese maritime behaviour. It is also viewed as a policy to complicate the US' rebalancing strategy by 'softening' ASEAN elites renewed interest in reaching out to the US, Japan and perhaps, even India. One former diplomat opines that 'an economics driven concept which would resonate well with' the IOR littorals 'would burnish the image of the peaceful rise of China...on the face of it this is a non-military and alternative paradigm to defense or power-oriented paradigms (and) in contrast to US and Japanese concepts.'¹⁴ China's official discourse projects such a view: 'a certain individual country (Japan) persistently promotes its own value and political systems and "zero-sum" mentality, complicating the regional situation. To be different, the Silk Road Spirit means peace and win-win cooperation.'¹⁵

The Indian dilemma is as follows. The fact that China is promoting two corridors (continental and MSR) as part of its evolving regional geostrategy and that 'India lies on both the Maritime Silk Route and the Southern Silk Route'¹⁶ poses opportunities and challenges for India in light of other potentially alternative economic options via strategic partnerships with Japan and the US. For example, a refusal by India and the MSR's acceptance by ASEAN and a majority of South Asian states

would leave India as an outlier and send a clear signal of India being on the wrong side of China.¹⁷ This is perhaps further complicated by India's own declared intent to attract massive Chinese investment capital in several industrial parks across the country.

Such contradictions imply that India would take a hard look at the evolution of the MSR proposal since it cannot afford to be excluded from the emergence of a new geoeconomic trend in Asia's political economy. Analysts argue that India can, simultaneously, conceptualize other strategic options with Japan and ASEAN to present alternative regional initiatives. Given the pace of China's MSR diplomacy, India must project its own ideas to influence the final contours of China's initiative. According to this view, Delhi should interpret all Chinese actions as a 'clinical assessment of Asia's rapidly evolving geopolitics and its consequences for Indian security....But Delhi appears a long way from developing an appropriate strategy.'¹⁸ Another scholar argues that if India 'could come up with a counter of our own which would naturally be less threatening but which would also allow us the excuse to expand our naval reach into these areas, then we would have used the Chinese opportunity.'¹⁹

FOREIGN POLICY TRADITIONALISTS OR NEOREALISTS

The entire proposal should be seen in the context of Indian national interests and implications for India's role in the IOR and South Asia. The unstated, underlying strategic objectives of MSR raise questions about Chinese intentions. China is attempting to expand its influence in the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea by building ports in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh, apart from other Indian Ocean littoral states, through a strategy generally referred to as 'String of Pearls'. Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have pledged support to Xi Jinping's MSR initiative.

If the MSR leads to important neighbours like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka drifting into the Chinese orbit, it would represent a serious setback to India's traditional conception of the subcontinent as a privileged sphere. Because nearly every Indian neighbour in the IOR littoral already has strong economic ties with mainland China, the perception is that these smaller states are finding it difficult to resist internalizing Chinese norms for Asian security. Since 2006, China–South Asia trade has increased by 280 per cent to US\$ 100 billion.²⁰

Another perception is that South Asian states have already discovered the option and ability to play the 'China card', that is, exploit Sino-Indian mistrust to advance their national and developmental objectives. For

India's neighbours, the MSR is perhaps another potential opportunity to play the 'China card' in their strategic bargaining with India. A former diplomat, however, argues:

[I]t would be premature to view the concept of MSR in purely strategic terms. The sovereign decisions of littoral states on scope and extent of Chinese investments should not be underestimated. No one would like to get sucked into military conflict or armed confrontations arising from port developments undertaken by the Chinese as part of the exercise.²¹

Nevertheless, one of the reasons for the regional outreach of the Modi government is to decelerate such a possibility by re-establishing Indian credibility with its neighbours.

Interestingly, while the *Xinhua* MSR map excludes Gwadar, Indian analysts offer competing interpretations. One view is that China is hedging against an unstable Gwadar corridor, which begins from Xinjiang and passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Given the potential for deeper instability in the AfPak region and Baluchistan province after the drawdown of Western forces, China is shifting its priority to other maritime routes in the IOR.

Another view is that China will pursue both *continental* and *maritime* lines of communication. If the MSR loses traction or is delayed, the land corridor to Gwadar can become an important commercial hub for both China and Pakistan. Gwadar's proximity to the Persian Gulf and its ability to support both naval and commercial activity in the Arabian Sea makes this Silk Road too attractive to be dismissed. Indeed, Sino-Pakistani diplomatic activity suggests the Kashgar–Gwadar corridor is still in play. After a recent visit to China, a Pakistani minister noted that 'Gwadar is the gateway to the economic corridor and it will be developed into a modern port city.'²²

Therefore, despite China's MSR map bypassing Pakistan, the planned Chinese investments in Pakistan are indicative of a sustained strategy. The omission in the map is probably deliberate to prevent adverse reactions from India's strategic community and make the MSR appear less contentious in Indian debates.

Since the MSR will probably be a long-drawn process, India will need to scale up its own investment in its immediate neighbourhood in precisely those capacities where China is investing (ports, logistics, shipbuilding) to dissuade India's neighbours such as Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka from becoming Chinese 'political outposts'.²³

MAHANIAN

Although the MSR is couched as an economic initiative, to the maritime analyst, it has deeper, particularly security, implications. What troubles Indian strategists is the fact that China's long-term ambition of establishing permanency of presence is being aided by the structure of 'outposts' from Myanmar to Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Pakistan, Sudan, Tanzania, Seychelles, Mozambique, and a couple of others in the pipeline. While these 'outposts' have been built in the guise of developmental assistance, the MSR is perceived as the final cog in the wheel that will make Chinese warships easily supportable in terms of logistics and operational turnaround, a prerequisite for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to forward deploy in IOR.²⁴

China has invested over US\$ 1 billion in Hambantota and Gwadar ports, and is also developing the Colombo South Port project. Such development in the 'String of Pearls' was intended as a return on upfront investments—places if not bases—for the PLAN and other Chinese vessels.²⁵ Another maritime analyst dismisses the 'String of Pearls' theory 'as purely speculative and over-hyped...China's port development activities' are to 'ensure that its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) were net-worked and constantly replenished.'²⁶

Another question posed is whether the MSR is part of China's attempt to neutralize its 'Malacca Dilemma'. In 2003, Hu Jintao had publicly expressed the 'Malacca Dilemma', which describes the vulnerable SLOCs crucial to China's trade and their potential to interdiction from another state.²⁷ China's long and vulnerable SLOCs extend from West Asia and East Africa to China's eastern seaboard. Eighty-five per cent of China's oil imports flows through the northern Indian Ocean in close proximity to Indian naval deployments. So far, the PLAN does not possess the quantitative strength or strategic basing rights to secure its IOR SLOCs.²⁸

There are two aspects to this. First, China's growing SLOCs can potentially convert the IOR into a contested space. Indian analysts take the official Chinese discourse seriously: that China's economic growth and high dependence on West Asian and African resources would translate into an expansion of Chinese naval power in the long term, requiring capabilities to accomplish missions in the IOR as well. For some, this is the logic that is driving PLAN to gradually extend its operational range from the first and the second island chains to 'far seas' that stretch from the east of the IOR to the east coast of Africa.²⁹ It is this broader impulse of projecting power up to and beyond 1,000 nautical miles from its

territorial waters that is driving China's maritime force development and possible deployment of nuclear attack submarines and carrier-based task forces in IOR by 2020.³⁰

Second, Indian strategists know that China is aware of the fact that the Indian Navy eyes Chinese SLOCs through the Malacca Strait as its 'Achilles' heel' and that a detour through the Sunda or Lombok Straits will not ensure complete security for China's strategic commodity trade because, ultimately, Chinese SLOCs traverse near the Indian peninsula.³¹ Another strategist argues, 'The Chinese weakness lies in the Indian Ocean...Today, they are merely SLOCs; tomorrow they will be the Chinese Jugular...a flotilla of (Indian) nuclear submarines and a three carrier air group in the Indian Ocean can economically cripple mainland China.'³² To be sure, this view is not uncontested, and the tactical and strategic efficacy of such a posture is easier said than done.³³

Nevertheless, if pushed to the wall or confronting coercion on the Himalayan frontiers, India can use an asymmetric maritime option by targeting China's vulnerability in the IOR.³⁴ This could be another reason for China to gradually transform the MSR into a collective security framework on its trade routes in order to produce some burden sharing by providing littorals with a 'common stake' in the security of Chinese SLOCs. According to one analyst, the MSR 'could well be a surrogate for a giant Chinese SLOC running all the way from the East African coast, to the Southern coast of China—created, maintained and controlled by Beijing.'³⁵

From India's maritime and naval perspective, should the MSR evolve in the framework just perceived, it would compel India to develop additional access points and facilities astride the proposed Chinese MSR. The Modi government's decision to expedite Indian involvement in the construction of Chabahar Port on Iran's Makran coast could also have been partially driven by this quest to seek high-quality transit points in the IOR. Another implication is that India will need to invest more on long-haul vessels to ensure greater endurance and sustainability for its own power projection and expeditionary roles.

Finally, there is an interesting contradiction in Indian perceptions of China's continental Silk Road and the MSR. In recent years, China has been pushing for a land corridor—termed as Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC).³⁶ The BCIM will connect India's North-East with China's Kunming province through road initially, and later, through rail connectivity. Initially, given India's

restive north-east and complex relations with Bangladesh and Myanmar, Delhi was lukewarm to the proposal despite an established track-2 BCIM dialogue. Delhi's 'reticence' was because of two factors: 'the fear of China's economic domination of our border regions' and 'India's nervousness about the physical security of its sensitive Northeast'.³⁷ But in the Indian Vice President's recent China visit, the BCIM was accepted as part of Delhi's enthusiasm towards improved economic connectivity and linkages with India's North-East and with South-East Asia. The Vice President noted, 'BCIM is a good and positive initiative we will be supportive of it'.³⁸

It can be argued, however, that if the BCIM corridor eventually fructifies, this would imply not only enhanced trade and connectivity but could also open the door for China to upgrade infrastructure in port facilities in Bangladesh and Myanmar, key hubs in a potential MSR. In other words, the BCIM would supplement the MSR enabling China an easier political opening in the Bay of Bengal. Nevertheless, Delhi's nuanced approach to China's various connectivity ideas does appear puzzling.

NEOLIBERAL INTERDEPENDENCE

China's discourse that accompanies the MSR ('new opportunities and a new future to China and every country along the road that is seeking to develop', 'economic cooperation area', 'common interests, fate, and responsibilities'³⁹) actually resembles India's own regional narrative since the mid-2000s where Delhi has also sought to diffuse similar norms towards South Asia.

From the neoliberal interdependence perspective, the MSR resonates as an inevitable trend of globalization and the rise of new economic centres of power in Asia. As one analyst notes, 'The (MSR's) underlying economic logic is based on the observation that no country in modern times has achieved sustained economic development without increasing its share in world trade and investment. And connectivity provides the channel to do so'.⁴⁰

This view holds that geoeconomics is what really matters and policymakers should not overlay security considerations in their assessment of the MSR. In the 'complex and interdependent nature of modern geo-economics and global business', the idea of zero-sum games is passé.⁴¹ Further, since India's own economic and physical connectivity with East Asia is dwarfed by intra-Pacific interdependence between

China and her neighbours, the MSR can be a stepping stone to a new Look East policy. It is, therefore, 'unrealistic for India to shy away from connectivity and openness to trade and business with our neighbours... it is important to connect further and deeper into the production and supply chains that stretch across ASEAN right upto China, Japan and Korea.'⁴²

A lawmaker of the BJP articulates a similar view: 'The NDA's China policy has always been one of trade outreach, tempered with caution... We will not be allies or "natural partners". But once we were the greatest of trading neighbours. Reviving that sentiment is eminently desirable... We can tie ourselves onto a new Silk Route.'⁴³ Another scholar offers a qualified endorsement: while there is 'no argument per se against the improvement of infrastructure', the first priority should be 'infrastructure within South Asia'. In other words, intra-South Asian 'linkages would have to be hooked with industrial hubs within' India. 'External development opportunity only works if we activate the internal development.'⁴⁴

Another qualified endorsement is that the MSR 'can be used to our benefit for greater bilateral and regional cooperation. But we also need to ensure that our presence is also made sufficiently effective along these routes so that we retain the ability to influence any major decisions.'⁴⁵ Ultimately, the neoliberal argument rests on 'The hope...that the MSR, which (traditionally) served more for trade and establishing friendly relations would continue to do so in the revived form, rather than create new naval rivalries or power displays.'⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

Nicholas Spykman once observed that 'Every Foreign Office, whatever may be the atlas it uses, operates mentally with a different map of the world.'⁴⁷ For the modern Indian state, it was recognized from the start that India was geopolitically located at the crossroads of several subregions. In Nehru's words:

India is situated geographically in such a way that we just cannot escape anything that happens in Western Asia, in Central Asia, in Eastern Asia or South-East Asia. Whether it is in terms of war or in terms of peace, we cannot escape it...we just cannot escape the burdens and responsibilities which that position brings to us.⁴⁸

A rejuvenated China has kick-started what will probably be a decades-long process of constructing new lines of communication to

these subregions of Eurasia. For China, it is incidental that India lies on the crossroads of Chinese Silk Routes. For India, however, this dynamic holds the potential to reshape its entire periphery and impact India's own role in Southern Asia.

To Indian analysts, the MSR initiative is part of China's attempt to break out of its maritime isolation, constrained by the US-led alliance's domination of the first and second island chains. To many, this is the backdrop to China's pitch for an MSR to ASEAN, and now to countries in South Asia. Further, by investing in states straddling routes along which China's west–east commodity trade flows, China aims to improve its resource security.⁴⁹

As one former policymaker opines, 'I do not see us, or the US, or others who share disquiet being able to stop the very strong Chinese impulse to use her excess industrial and other capacity to bind her periphery and now more distant regions to her economically and strategically.'⁵⁰ While Indian policy analysts are impressed by the financial (10 billion Yuan) and geographic scale of China's vision,⁵¹ many also view the MSR with a sense of unease. There is a sense of losing another important 'match' in the competition. For decades, India has felt that the Indian Ocean is 'our' domain, and has tirelessly endeavoured to keep extra-regional powers out of the region. The positive perceptions come from the neoliberal prism of interdependence that views the MSR as an opportunity. But even here there is a recognition that India's capacity constraints to even partially match Chinese investments along the MSR, especially in South Asia itself, could negate potential benefits.

Curiously, an important aspect that has been ignored by the strategic community is to analyse the strategic rationale of engaging China from India's neighbours' perspectives. As India has receded in its traditional role as a regional security provider, India's neighbours have found Beijing more useful as a counterweight and as a hedge against Western pressure and leverage being used against South Asian elites. Therefore, China's rising influence on India's periphery is also a consequence of India's own failure to craft an independent and robust regional role in Southern Asia.

For a policymaker, the MSR is a classic case of producing security and advancing national goals in a global political economy of interdependence. For the Modi government, the challenge is reconciling the diverse range of interests in the Indian state where development and security goals often produce competing images and policy choices (see Table 1 for the

diversity of Indian perceptions). Therefore, how the national interest is 'defined' is often the most crucial element of the policy–strategy equation.

A former policymaker sums up the Indian dilemma:

What I think is missing in the discussion...is a larger integrated view of how all these various Chinese proposals and actions for connectivity—BCIM, MSR, Land SR, Tibet railway to Nepal/ Yatung, Gwadar corridor, Dawei and other ports, Mekong development, etc.—can be used to serve India's interests...The issue therefore is how to turn these to our advantage, and a piecemeal approach and adhoc responses or delay is really not the answer.⁵²

Table I Indian Perceptions of MSR

<i>Typology within India's Strategic Community</i>	<i>Perception and Impact of MSR</i>	<i>Degree of Receptivity to MSR Idea</i>
Its geopolitics, stupid!	US–China great game and India should avoid getting lured into a single political–economic community.	Plug into MSR without closing options to the US-led network.
Foreign policy traditionalists/ neorealists	MSR will complicate India's regional role in South Asia and IOR with India's regional ambitions being crowded out by growing Chinese material capabilities and increased bargaining space for littoral states.	Strategic caution.
Mahanians	MSR offers India potential leverage over Chinese SLOCs that traverse close to Indian power projection capabilities. But if MSR is accompanied with China's blue-water forward deployments in IOR to militarily secure the MSR, it poses new strategic challenges for India.	Negative perception.
Neoliberal interdependence	An inevitable geoeconomic trend and India must not squander such an opportunity to plug into a dynamic economic space. But India's state capacity constraints pose the main obstacle in drawing potential benefits from the MSR.	High receptivity to MSR.

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