

## **(2) China's 'Maritime Silk Road' Initiative and its Implications for India and its Neighbourhood**

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### **Introduction**

An irony has emerged in the Indian Ocean during 2013-2015, cooperative schemes for the Indian Ocean that reveal inter-state competition between two states. The three schemes emerging for Indian Ocean cooperation are on the one side China's *Maritime Silk Road* and on the other side India's *Mausam* and *Spice Route* projects. Each of these projects evoke old economic and cultural links that flourished in historical times, but have now been rediscovered.<sup>1</sup> They have become official state-supported projects, designed to be implemented through policies and structures. International Relations (IR) theory in the shape of neo-liberalism would expect to see state cooperation in play with such proposed regional schemes; whereas neo-realism would indicate inter-state power rivalries manifesting itself in such proposed regional structures. The high politics involved in these three schemes shows a process of region formation in which Katzenstein's constructivist perspective would argue that regions are 'socially constructed and

politically contested and are thus open to change'.<sup>2</sup> The contestation is change through whose schemes?

This article has a two-fold structure. First, it draws out China's *Maritime Silk Road* proposal, with regard to its context, purposes and its enunciation in the Indian Ocean region around India. Secondly, it draws out India's response to it with regard to the ignorement, criticisms and counter-proposals (the *Mausam* and *Spice Route* proposals) by India. It then concludes with evaluating the likely outcome of such Chinese proposals and Indian counter-proposals. Both proposals involve strategic debates in both countries over the respective roles of China and India in the Indian Ocean, a debate which is followed in this article through extended deployment and close analysis of the positions taken in such strategic debates.

### **China's Proposal**

China's 'Maritime Silk Road' (*haishang sichou zhi lu*) concept has become a frequently mooted theme in foreign policy initiatives being pursued by the People's Republic of China (PRC), 'it is China's mission to understand the importance of building a Maritime Silk Road and take effective actions at present and for a certain period to come'.<sup>3</sup> Past historical links, and voyages by Zheng He through the South China Sea and across the Indian Ocean in the Ming period, formed a popular historical context for Chinese scholars.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, since autumn 2013, this historical framework has become a frequently repeated

mantra at the Foreign Ministry, at *Xinhua* the official state press agency, and among Chinese political analysts.

China's *Maritime Silk Road* concept was first unveiled by the Chinese leadership in the autumn of 2013. In September, the Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang mused that 'as early as over 2,000 years ago, China and Southeast Asia opened the maritime Silk Road. Today we are adding a new chapter to this historical splendour'.<sup>5</sup> The following month, in October 2013, the Chinese President Xi Jinping gave the highest seal of official approval to the concept in a widely profiled speech to the Indonesia Parliament where he stressed China's "effort to build the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century".<sup>6</sup> In turn, the following week Li Keqiang reiterated this current phase of Chinese diplomacy at the 16th ASEAN-China Summit held in Brunei, with his hope that ASEAN and China 'join hands building the 'Maritime Silk Road' in the 21st century, and to focus on implementing cooperation on maritime economy, maritime connectivity, environmental protection, scientific research, search and rescue as well as fishery'.<sup>7</sup> This was reiterated in March 2014 in Li Keqiang's official *Report on the Work of the Government* and his pledge there that 'we will intensify the planning and building of ... a 21st century maritime Silk Road'.<sup>8</sup> The Prime Minister repeated this pledge in his speech to the Boao Forum for Asia annual conference in April 2014, 'China will continue to promote the important projects of ... the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road this year'.<sup>9</sup> *Xinhua* followed Li's speech with headlines of 'China Accelerates Planning to Re-connect Maritime Silk

Road' detailed how this would be involving 'infrastructure construction of countries along the route, including ports of Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh', in which China would 'coordinate customs, quality supervision, e-commerce and other agencies to facilitate the scheme, which is also likely to contain attempts to build free trade zones'.<sup>10</sup> From a geographic, but also geopolitical, point of view these were countries surrounding India.

Although the *Maritime Silk Road* project was first floated with application to South China Sea and South-east China, it has been unrolled right across the Indian Ocean. With regard to audiences in the Eastern Indian Ocean, Xi Jinping's important presentation of it in Indonesia in October 2013 has already been mentioned, with Wang Yi arguing that 'we see Indonesia as a key partner in the construction of a 21st century Maritime Silk Road'.<sup>11</sup> The project went on during 2014 to receive positive responses from officials from Singapore,<sup>12</sup> Malaysia,<sup>13</sup> Thailand<sup>14</sup> , Myanmar<sup>15</sup>, and ASEAN.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere in the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh was similarly wooed in June 2014, 'Bangladesh is an important country along the Maritime Silk Road and China welcomes the participation of [the] Bangladeshi side in the construction of the cooperation initiatives of ... the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road'.<sup>17</sup>

The Western Indian Ocean was also brought into China's *Maritime Silk Road* project. Pakistan's support for the project was no surprise given its close strategic relationship with China, which included the building up of Gwadar as a deep water port.<sup>18</sup> Arab countries in the

Middle East were flattered by Xi Jinping's invocation of the Maritime Silk Route benefits at the sixth ministerial conference of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum in June 2014.<sup>19</sup> Oman, by the choke point of the Strait of Hormuz, was sought out by Chinese diplomats; as was Yemen, by the choke point of the Bab-el-Mandeb.<sup>20</sup> Egypt also gave its public support for the route coming up through the Red Sea and Suez.<sup>21</sup> By the middle of 2014, Kenya's port of Mombassa was included in maps of the envisaged maritime route, with China's project attracting positive Kenyan responses.<sup>22</sup>

Within the Indian Ocean, the *Maritime Silk Road* proposal was top of the agenda on President Xi's trip to the Maldives in September 2014. Before the President's visit, the Maldives had already been an envisaged partner for China in the implementation of project during the summer.<sup>23</sup> In his initial call at the Maldives, Xi Jinping took to the local press to extol the proposal:

China and Maldives should intensify practical cooperation. China calls for the creation of a 21st century maritime silk road. Strategically located in the Indian Ocean, Maldives was an important stop of the ancient maritime silk road. China welcomes Maldives to get actively involved in building the 21st century maritime silk road by leveraging its own strength. China looks forward to working with Maldives to speedily translate this cooperation initiative into reality.<sup>24</sup>

Maldivian support for the concept was indicated by the *Joint Statement* point 6 that 'the Maldives welcomes and supports the proposal put forward by China to build the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road' and 'is prepared to actively participate in relevant cooperation. The two sides agreed to enhance cooperation in other areas, such as marine, economy, and security'.<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, even as the Maldives government embraced China's proposal, Maldives' opposition leader denounced the government's identification with China's *Maritime Silk Road* proposal as being too pro-Chinese and being too anti-Indian a decision.<sup>26</sup> As a follow on, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the Maldives to officially join China's Maritime Silk Road policy was signed after the first ever Joint Committee on Trade and Economic Cooperation, held in Beijing in December 2014.<sup>27</sup>

China also actively pursued Sri Lanka as a *Maritime Silk Road* partner throughout 2014. When Gamini Lakshman, Sri Lanka's Minister of External Affairs, visited China in February 2014; according to China's Foreign Ministry, the leaders agreed to 'fully expand maritime cooperation and jointly build the maritime silk road of the 21st century'.<sup>28</sup> Later on, when Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapaksa visited China in May 2014 there was further positive references to the Maritime Silk Road initiative in their *Joint Communiqué*.<sup>29</sup>

This cooperative language reached a crescendo in September 2014, when President Xi arrived straight from extolling the *Maritime Silk Road*

concept two days earlier in the Maldives. In Sri Lanka, China's President again took to the local press to push the concept:

Sri Lanka has envisaged itself becoming a five-fold hub: maritime, aviation, commerce, energy and knowledge, which coincides with China's proposal to build the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road ... China and Sri Lanka need to turn our wishes into a driving force and enhance exchanges and cooperation between us in maritime, business, infrastructure, defense, tourism and other areas so as to accelerate the renewal of the Maritime Silk Road for the benefit of our two countries and two peoples ... I believe that the ship of China-Sri Lanka friendship and cooperation is bound to brave the wind and waves along the magnificent 21st Century Maritime Silk Road to pursue the dream of national development.<sup>30</sup>

China found a ready recipient in Sri Lanka. Consequently the joint *Plan of Action* clause 12, signed by China and Sri Lanka, recorded that 'Sri Lanka welcomes and supports the proposal put forward by China to build the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, and will actively participate and cooperate in this initiative'.<sup>31</sup> Practical details were fleshed out whereby 'the two sides agreed to further promote investment in the Magampura/ Hambantota Port Project. The two sides agreed to enhance maritime cooperation and proceed with the construction of the Colombo Port City Project'; and also announced 'the establishment of a Joint Committee on Coastal and Marine Cooperation to explore the feasibility

of areas for cooperation which would include ocean observation, ecosystem protection, marine and coastal zone management, search'.<sup>32</sup> This Action Plan went on in its following clause that 'the two sides agreed to strengthen defence cooperation'.<sup>33</sup> However, Rajapaksa's unexpected loss of power in the January 2015 Sri Lankan elections brought into question this marked pro-China tilt by Sri Lanka.

This *Maritime Silk Road* is envisaged as an East-West thoroughfare across the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, in which the concept 'represents the common concerns, interests and expectations of all countries' in the region.<sup>34</sup> One common interest stressed in the concept by China is cooperation to avert terrorist-piracy disruption to the choke points of the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Aden and Strait of Malacca.<sup>35</sup> Although the obvious purpose of China's concept is mutual trade flows and economic cooperation, it also draws China into a wider presence. In part, the concept operates along the ocean paths; 'sea lane safety is the key to sustaining the development of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road'.<sup>36</sup> In part, the concept also involves land infrastructure around the maritime rim: 'ports along the new Maritime Silk Road will act as "posts on sea" that handle cargo and resupply ships and people', and so 'China needs to work with countries along the road to build marine infrastructure ... China needs to support the construction of ports, wharves'.<sup>37</sup> Threats to the sea lanes like piracy and maritime terrorism imply potential security commitments, 'naturally,



fighting against non-traditional security challenges will become an important part of the Maritime Silk Road.<sup>38</sup>

China's *Maritime Silk Road* initiative reflects a wider dual Silk Roads diplomacy across land and sea routes, 'long term systemic engineering' as one Chinese scholar described them.<sup>39</sup> The Assistant Foreign Minister Liu Jianchao gave weighting to both elements at the *Asia Cooperation Dialogue Forum* on Silk Road Cooperation in May 2014 'two major initiatives of building an Economic Belt along the Silk Road and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road ('one Belt and one Road')'.<sup>40</sup> He stressed the positive intentions and reception behind these approaches 'to carry forward the spirit embodied by the ancient Silk Road' to achieve 'mutual benefit and win-win progress, further promote mutual understanding and trust between Asian countries, advance Asia's economic integration, and contribute to peace, stability and common development in Asia'.<sup>41</sup>

In part, the concept is couched as a positive alternative to the security-focussed partnerships embedded in Indian, Australian, Japanese and US adoption of 'Indo-Pacific' terminology. As such, it represents a 'charm offensive' by China.<sup>42</sup> In part, the concept is an attempt to counterbalance the negative imagery caused in Southeast Asia by assertive Chinese claims in the South China Sea. In part, the concept is an attempt to counterbalance the negative imagery caused by Indian perceptions of a ('string of pearls') encirclement policy from China towards India.<sup>43</sup> In part, the concept is an exercise in recovering the

history of the old maritime Silk Route of pre-colonial times. However, such a recovery of history has lessons for the present, with the concept operating as very much a political tool now for expanding China's soft power, and indeed also spreading China's maritime-naval power.<sup>44</sup> Hence the *Xinhua* report in August 2014 on how 'a dance drama dedicated to the glorious days of expanding Chinese influence titled "The Dream of the Silk Road on the Sea"' was staged at the National Center for the Performing Arts in Beijing.<sup>45</sup>

When initially broached it was unclear what the Maritime Silk Road actually would be in physical or economic terms; i.e. what infrastructure or economic activities would it involve and where and what would the economic justification for those activities? Would it be a series of unrelated infrastructure projects, between China and recipient countries; and if not, in what way would such bilateral projects would be related – in economic or other terms? Or would the project relate to a series of production zone? Thus 'while much of the public discussion to date has focused on ports and infrastructure, probably of greater significance is the development of new production and distribution chains across the region, with China at its centre'.<sup>46</sup> The comparisons drawn were 'akin to Japan's "flying geese" strategy of the 1970s when Japanese companies outsourced component production to successive tiers of lower-cost states in Southeast Asia', a process whereby 'if implemented, the initiative would bind countries in the Bay of Bengal and the northern Indian Ocean much closer to the Chinese economy'.<sup>47</sup>

By the end of 2014 there had been some clarification, and financial underpinning. In November 2014, China announced of a new US\$ 40 billion infrastructure-and-trade financing mechanism called the Silk Road Fund. The State Council would underpin about 65 percent through tapping foreign currency reserves, with 15 percent from the China Investment Corp, 15 percent from the Export-Import Bank of China and 5 percent from the China Development Bank Capital Co. Future injections may be ordered if investment demand warranted such injections.

### **India's Response**

With regards to India, Chinese rhetoric has sought to bring India into the scheme. The Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited India in June 2014, complete with assertions from the Foreign Ministry official spokespersons that 'the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road ... will enable China and India to link up their development strategies, complement and reinforce each other and achieve common development'.<sup>48</sup>

China reiterated this invitation for India to participate in the *Maritime Silk Road* initiative when President Xi visited India in September 2014, immediately following his trips to the Maldives and to Sri Lanka. Xi's message to his Indian audience was to push economic cooperation; 'we need to ... discuss the initiatives of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road'.<sup>49</sup> The Chinese media was clear on its potential, 'the Maritime Silk Road is another

important field of China-India cooperation' and 'can open an Indo-Asia-Pacific era'.<sup>50</sup>

However, simultaneously in an extended analysis by Zhao Minghao, there were more unsettled undertones. She admitted that although the Maritime Silk Road 'initiative is welcomed and supported by most countries, some are still suspicious of Beijing's long-term policy intentions'.<sup>51</sup> The word 'some' was pointed; 'some India strategists claim that the ports Beijing helps build in South Asia will become its overseas military bases and that China is engaged in assembling a 'string of pearls' to encircle India'.<sup>52</sup> However, her conclusion was not particularly reassuring for India. She recognised that 'as China is becoming a maritime power and conducting activities more frequently in the Indian Ocean, India inevitably feels worried'; yet still she welcomed how 'with the gradual implementation ... of a 21st century maritime Silk Road ... China will further expand its footprint in South Asia and the Indian Ocean'.<sup>53</sup>

Such an expanding Chinese footprint immediately arises Indian disquiet; hence Shashi Tharoor's sense that 'the Silk Road initiative has aroused significant geopolitical apprehension' in which "these fears have a strong historical basis".<sup>54</sup> Indian commentators lament how 'several countries are willing to accept these distorted historical narratives for economic reasons'.<sup>55</sup> Thus, on the one hand, Beijing invokes Zheng He's voyages across the Indian Ocean in the fifteenth century as an 'envoy of friendship and knowledge'.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, Tharoor interprets them

as missions 'to install friendly rulers and control strategic chokepoints in the Indian Ocean'.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, 'reminding them [Indian Ocean states] of this painful past may not be entirely in China's interest'.<sup>58</sup>

Indian responses to China's *Maritime Silk Road* proposal have been three-fold, ignoring it, criticising it, and counter-proposing with its own (*Mausam, Spice Route*) proposals.

With regard to ignoring China's *Maritime Silk Road* initiative, the Chinese Special Representative Yang Jiechi seemingly invited India to officially participate in the initiative during discussions with the then Indian National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon during the 17th round of border talks held in February 2014. However, no clear or public response ensued from the Indian side to the Chinese initiative. During the rest of the Singh administration's period in office, from November 2013 (when the initiative was launched by President Xi in his speech to the Indonesian Parliament) to losing office in May 2014 (when the Singh administration lost the Indian general election), India remained pretty silent on the Chinese initiative. Shivshankar Menon referred to China's push the following month, 'she [China] is also keen to involve us in connectivity projects, such as .... the New Economic Silk Road', but gave no comments on the merits or not of the project.<sup>59</sup> In part, this official Indian silence was because of the imminence of their general election, with neither the incumbent Congress administration of Manmohan Singh, correctly seen as facing imminent electoral defeat, nor the then

opposition BJP leadership under Narendra Modi, being in a position to commit India in any definite sense to new foreign policy initiatives.

The incoming Modi administration made little difference to this official Indian ignorement of China's *Maritime Silk Road* proposal. When India's Vice-President, Mohammad Ansari, visited China in June 2014, the Chinese government raised the issue of India's participation in (i.e. support for) China's *Maritime Silk Road* initiative. The Indian response was in effect no response, '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'.<sup>60</sup> In contrast to the joint statements drawn up in Xi's preceding visits to the Maldives and Sri Lanka, and despite Xi's own calls in the Indian media for similar China-India Maritime Silk Road cooperation, it was significant that in the *Joint Statement* drawn up between Modi and Xi there was general talk of economic cooperation, but no mention of the Maritime Silk Road, or indeed of the Indian Ocean.<sup>61</sup> In short, India remained studiously and deliberately 'silent' on this Chinese proposal under Modi as it had been under Singh.<sup>62</sup>

Chinese sources in effect admitted this Indian avoidance of giving a response. In an official Press Briefing on September 18th 2014, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei was asked 'do you think India will second and join China's proposal of building the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road', a question that he did not answer.<sup>63</sup> The following day, September 19th, it became clearer what India was ready to second

and join, and what it was not. On the one hand, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei stated how 'Xi proposed that the two countries speed up the building of the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, carry out cooperation under frameworks such as the [overland] Silk Road Economic Belt, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank'.<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, Hong followed this by giving the Indian response; which was that 'Modi stated that the Indian side will deliberate and join China's proposals considering the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank'.<sup>65</sup> In effect, two of the four proposals made there by Xi, namely the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, were welcomed by India as ones they wanted to participate in, whereas the overland and maritime Silk Road projects being mooted by Xi received no response.

A similar situation was witnessed when India's External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj visited China in February 2015. Her Chinese hosts explicitly advocated the merits of the Maritime Silk Road, but amid other points of economic cooperation the Indian minister refused to include the Maritime Silk Road in her points of economic cooperation for the future.<sup>66</sup>

An underlying reason for this relative silence during Indian administrations was because China's *Maritime Silk Road* proposal remained, and remains, an ambiguous 'chalice'.<sup>67</sup> Rajeev Chaturvedy's

analysis of the proposal in April 2014 illustrated the difficulties for India. The significance of the *Maritime Silk Road* (MSR) proposal was noted as 'the thrust on reviving the ancient maritime route is the first global strategy for enhancing trade and fostering peace, proposed by the new Chinese leaders'.<sup>68</sup> However, having noted its economic purpose, he went on that 'more importantly, it aspires to improve China's geo-strategic position ... The MSR places China in the "middle" of the "Middle Kingdom" and is an effort in initiating a "grand strategy"'.<sup>69</sup> He then went on to note that for China:

The MSR will also be helpful in promoting certain strategic objectives — for example, in supporting friends and clients, neutralising similar activities by other naval powers, or merely by showcasing one's maritime power. Indeed, naval power has certain advantages as an instrument of diplomacy. Naval forces are more resilient, and they have greater visibility.<sup>70</sup>

While he concluded that 'the hope is that the MSR, which 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', in many ways his preceding comments pointed the other way, heightened India-China naval rivalry in the Indian Ocean surrounding the *Maritime Silk Road* proposal from China.<sup>71</sup>



This is not to say that Indians have not used the *Maritime Silk Road* term themselves. Cooperative usage predates Xi's official usage by a decade. In 2004 Gurpreet Khurana was arguing that 'the sea-route extending from the North Arabian Sea to the Sea of Japan through the Indian Ocean is akin to the "New Silk Route" and its protection becomes a convergent strategic priority for many states'.<sup>72</sup> Two years later, his formulation was of a 'Maritime Silk Route' going across the Indian Ocean, in which there were India-China shared interests between India and China with regards to sea lane stability and economic trade to foster cooperation in the future.<sup>73</sup>

However, when faced with Chinese proposal in 2013 for shaping a *Maritime Silk Road*, neo-realism interpretations now make such a proposal problematic for many Indian analysts. Indian analysts openly questioned China's motives when the initiative was first announced in autumn 2013, arguing that 'maritime history illustrates that states have relied on maritime power for a full realisation of their power potential. Thus it is no surprise that China is pushing the MSR as a soft power projection in the region'.<sup>74</sup> The Chinese proposal was positively couched and stressed cooperation, so was difficult for India to openly reject. Indeed, the Chinese proposal was well within the orbit of general Indian government rhetoric on the desirability of closer economic cooperation with China. However, the 'dilemma' for India is that China's proposal explicitly envisages a greater Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean.<sup>75</sup> This remains something that India is uneasy about. India may not be

able to keep China out of the Indian Ocean, but that is different from actively welcoming it in. As Raja Mohan noted, an Indian government 'might have a hard time selling the idea to the Indian strategic establishment that has long been wary of Chinese navy's rising naval profile in the Indian Ocean', and which had already 'viewed with much suspicion Chinese construction of port infrastructure in Pakistan (Gwadar) and Sri Lanka (Hambantota)'.<sup>76</sup>

Consequently, both the Singh and Modi governments faced a quandary over the Chinese initiative throughout 2014. Without Indian participation, China's *Maritime Silk Road* initiative threatens to economically bypass India and reduce India's influence in the Indian Ocean. Indian participation offers the 'opportunity' and prospect of India helping to shape the initiative's operation in the Indian Ocean, yet such Indian participation will legitimise further and deeper Chinese involvement in Indian Ocean affairs.<sup>77</sup> China's initiative could also overshadow the Mekong-India Economic Corridor (MIEC) proposal being pushed by India, as part of a wider Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) framework which link Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam with India, and does not involve China. Chinese commentary on India's silence is pointed; 'instead of taking an explicit stance on Beijing's initiatives such as the "One Belt and One Road" [Silk Road] initiative', India in contrast 'welcomes Washington's Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor project in exchange of US and Japan's support for its Mekong-Ganga Cooperation project'.<sup>78</sup> The reason for the Chinese commentator was

simple and accurate; 'India's different attitudes toward China in strategy and economy show its mentality over the bilateral relations: It views China as its competitor in Indo-Pacific geopolitics'.<sup>79</sup>

The second Indian response was to criticise China's Maritime Silk Road proposal. As already noted, the Indian government remained silent over the Chinese proposal, which were difficult to officially criticise given their positive cooperative tenor. However, a battery of Indian commentators, unrestrained by not having to be diplomatic in their language, continued to show scepticism over the Chinese motives and purposes behind the proposal. In that vein, the former Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal noted, in an article reprinted on the Ministry of External Affairs website, that:

China's proposition of a maritime silk route connecting the Pacific and Indian oceans is part of its propaganda drive to convince the world about its peaceful rise. Its actions do not match its protestations ... The cynicism behind China's proposal is glaring ... India has been invited to join the Chinese proposal in what is clearly a bid to unsettle it diplomatically ... China's maritime silk route proposal is too self-serving to receive our support.<sup>80</sup>

At the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, Abhijit Singh voiced 'suspicions of geopolitical game play by China' in China's *Maritime Silk Road* concept.<sup>81</sup> Retired military figures were blunt. Arun Sahgal felt that

underpinning this concept 'the core of this thinking is based in the ruling Chinese elite's belief to dominate the peripheral and regional discourse through economic, cultural and political influence'.<sup>82</sup>

Chinese commentators may have explained the Chinese proposal as a non-threatening antidote to the *String of Pearls* encirclement theory, but some Indian commentators equated it as such. For example, Chand argued that 'the "Maritime Silk Road" will also be linked with the existing "String of Pearls", that 'both "String of Pearls" and "Maritime Silk Road" will provide China with naval bases in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean'; and so would thereby 'reinforce China's deepening economic presence in the Indian Ocean region and in India's neighbourhood'.<sup>83</sup> At the National Maritime Foundation, N. Manoharan warned about dependency on China arising from Sri Lanka (and others') embrace of the Chinese concept.<sup>84</sup>

The third Indian response to China's *Maritime Silk Road* project was to push cooperative initiatives for the Indian Ocean which did not involve China. Both IORA and the IONS remain Indian Ocean structures where India can continue to pursue economic cooperation and maritime cooperation with other Indian Ocean states without having China as a member. Even more directly, India's *Mausam* and *Spice Route* projects has been set up on Indian terms for explicit Indian Ocean application.

The *Mausam* ('Seasons') Project is set up to run from 2014 to 2019.<sup>85</sup> India's intention to carry out the *Mausam* project was

announced on June 20 2014 at the 38th session of the World Heritage Committee at Doha, Qatar.<sup>86</sup> Its title derives from the regular seasonal monsoon trade winds that knitted the Indian Ocean together in a regular pattern of trade throughout the year. Such a historical pattern of Indian Ocean cultural-economic linkages in which India played a pivotal role was profiled in Kirti Chaudhuri's magisterial 1985 survey *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*. If Western colonialism disrupted that Indo-centric Indian Ocean, a post-colonial rising India is now seeking to recover that setting of Indian Ocean pre-eminence. Its mission entwines the (culturally) past and (politically) present:

At the macro level it aims to re-connect and re-establish communications between countries of the Indian Ocean world ... Project 'Mausam' seeks to transcend present-day national and ethnic boundaries, documenting and celebrating the common cultural values and economic ties of the Indian Ocean 'world'. This will not only strengthen current ties between countries across the Ocean, but also set a precedent for new bridges of co-operation and continued relations and interactions ... Project 'Mausam' is an exciting, multi-disciplinary project that rekindles long-lost ties across nations of the Indian Ocean 'world' and forges new avenues of cooperation and exchange.<sup>87</sup>

Because it is being handled by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, at first sight the *Mausam* Project would seem to be just a non-governmental, educative project.

However, the *Mausam* Project defines itself in more official ways; 'the project, launched by India ... is a Ministry of Culture project' and that 'as an initial idea, the project was proposed by Mr. Ravindra Singh, Secretary, Ministry of Culture', with the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi as the nodal coordinating agency'.<sup>88</sup> The involvement of the Culture Secretary already gives this project some domestic political linkage, while its appearance on the Ministry of External Affairs website gives it further external political linkage. There, the *Mausam* Project was explained in July 2014 in mixed cultural and communication terms:

Project Mausam ... would reconnect and re-establish communications between countries of the Indian Ocean, leading to an enhanced understanding of cultural values and concerns ... Project Mausam would link cultural route and maritime landscape across the Indian Ocean ... It would thus contribute to the dissemination of culture and civilisation across the Indian Ocean.<sup>89</sup>

It was seen as very much India's initiative, 'Project Mausam is an exciting, multi disciplinary trans-national project' that looks backwards "to rekindle long lost ties across the Indian Ocean Littoral' and looks

forward to forge 'new avenues of cooperation and exchange between India and states of the Indian Ocean'.<sup>90</sup>

In effect, this cultural-historical project was re-announced in September 2014, when Foreign Secretary Sujatha Singh held a meeting with culture secretary Ravindra Singh 'to discuss how to give shape to the [Mausam] project'.<sup>91</sup> The fact that this politicisation of the *Mausam* Project was carried out during President's Xi's trip to India, when India was fending off Chinese attempts to have the Maritime Silk Road initiative welcomed by India, indicates its nature as something of a PR exercise. Such meetings have led commentators to see the *Mausam* project as 'garbed in India's cultural linkages but with a serious strategic dimension, in light of the Chinese emphasis on the maritime silk route'.<sup>92</sup> This is why Indian commentators have reckoned that the *Mausam* project 'is Narendra Modi Government's most significant foreign policy initiative to counter-balance the maritime silk route of China'.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, though re-presented by the India's Ministry of External Affairs during Xi's trip to India in September, at the start of 2015, this proposal has little serious further economic or political elaboration from India.

The *Spice Route Project* is a sub-national initiative from the Kerala state government launched in late 2013. It has trans-national aims for the Indian Ocean. On the Ministry of External Affairs website, it has official status as 'an important initiative of the State Government of Kerala, supported by the Government of India is the ongoing effort to

revive the two millennia Spice Route'.<sup>94</sup> It has a mixed socio-economic purpose in which 'besides re-establishing Kerala's maritime trade relations with 31 countries associated with the ancient spice route', the project 'seeks to rekindle interest among modern travellers to this ancient maritime route which was responsible for bringing travellers across the world in ancient times to India'.<sup>95</sup> Tourism has been the most obvious feature of it to date, as shown in the support of the United Nations World Tourism Organisation, with the *Spice Route's* evocation of cultural heritage gaining it support from UNESCO.<sup>96</sup> However, like the *Mausam* proposal, the *Spice Route* project has little practical economic or political underpinnings. Unlike China's *Maritime Silk Road* initiative, Kerala's *Spice Route* project has played no part in India's diplomatic relations with other Indian Ocean nations.

### **Conclusions**

Where does this leave these three cooperative schemes? In some ways, China's *Maritime Silk Road* initiative though packaged in 2013 as a new framework has already been operating for several years through infrastructure port projects around the Indian Ocean, at places like Sittwe, Chittagong, Hambantota, Gwadar and Mombassa. These infrastructure port projects were precisely what were already being dubbed a *string of pearls* encirclement by worried Indian analysts.<sup>97</sup> The difference this time is that such bilateral projects are now being knitted together by China into a wider regional narrative, as seen under the reassuring title of the *Maritime Silk Road for the 21st Century*. As India's



Minister for external Affairs Sushma Swaraj flew into Beijing in February 2015, China admitted after over a year canvassing the Maritime Silk Road that 'nevertheless there remains mistrust in China's strategic motivation behind the Silk Road proposals' on the part of some countries, most notably India.<sup>98</sup>

India's 'reticence' reflects ongoing hesitation and palpable unease over Chinese motives and consequences of the *Maritime Silk Road* proposal.<sup>99</sup> This explains Indian silence, criticisms and counter-proposals. However, it is unlikely that any of these responses will work as effective enough options for India. Remaining silent merely allows China to develop links with other Indian Ocean countries without India's countervailing presence. India's *Mausam* counter-proposal remains more of a theoretic academic-led exercise set up to run from 2014 to 2019, and which could languish in a rather vague abstract fashion. In contrast, China's *Maritime Silk Road* proposal has been running since 2013 and is already operating at the level of government to government interaction and action. The cultural historical study of the past which is prominent in the *Mausam* project, and the heritage-tourism emphasis of the *Spice Route* proposal perhaps give India less of a cutting edge with proposals when faced with the more overt official adoption, political pushing and economic rationale of the *Maritime Silk Road* initiative by the Chinese leadership.

Remaining critical may reflect accurate analysis by sceptical Indian commentators of Chinese motives, but such a response by the

government might nonetheless be irrelevant if other Indian Ocean states gravitate regardless of India towards China's proposed *Maritime Silk Road* route. As one Indian analyst admitted, 'placing these [Chinese] proposals in the ice pail is not good idea, however. India must realise that these [*Maritime Silk Road*] routes will come up irrespective of its participation'.<sup>100</sup> India's non-participation is not likely to stop other Indian Ocean actors from participating in it, 'countries across the region are drooling at the prospect of big infrastructure and cheap Chinese finance' exemplified in how 'Sri Lanka and the Maldives have lapped up Mr. Xi's plans for a "maritime silk road"'.<sup>101</sup> India may then have to join in China's proposal.

Despite questionable Chinese motives in proposing the *Maritime Silk Road* initiative, the initiative might anyhow contribute towards international socialization of China and weave in levels of economic interdependence that IR neo-liberalism and neo-functionalism would argue will soften antagonisms, and change Chinese normative values over the longer term. Indeed, Srinath Raghavan argued that despite Chinese motivations to increase its presence and soft power, 'India, too, could benefit much from joining these [*Maritime Silk Road*] ventures. For instance, the upgradation of our coastal infrastructure would considerably aid our emergence as a serious maritime — not just naval — power'.<sup>102</sup> Here, India's basic geopolitical advantages of location will surely continue to give her central place in the feasibility of any working cooperative scheme in the Indian Ocean, whether it is being initially pushed by China, India or indeed others? Furthermore, even as China

continues to push further west into India's backyard of the Indian Ocean, India can respond not by fruitlessly and unavailingly trying to block China's presence in the Indian Ocean, but by going further east back along the mooted *Maritime Silk Road* into China's backyard of the South China Sea. Such an ongoing strengthening by India of strategic partnerships along the maritime silk route with China-concerned actors like Australia, Vietnam, Japan and the US return us to a logic of classical geopolitics and IR realism.

### **2015 updates:**

February 1: During her trip to China, Sushma Swaraj says China's Maritime Silk Road initiative needs to be *synergy based* for India to consider getting involved.

March 4: Chinese ambassador Lu Yucheng claims that China's Maritime Silk Road initiative could be *linked* to India's Mausam and Spice Route projects as a "new starting point and a new bright spot" in China-India cooperation.

March 22-22: India's *Cotton Route* alternative highlighted at the "India and Indian Ocean" conference at Bhubaneswar.

March 26: The new President Maithripala Sirisena reaffirms Sri Lanka's participation in China's Maritime Silk Road initiative in his trip to China.

May: China pushes its Maritime Silk Road initiative for Modi trip to China.

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