

Impact of BRI on Geostrategic Interests of India in The Indian Ocean Region

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Abstract

The recent developments in Afghanistan and China's overt inroads into Afghanistan needs to be viewed in the larger security paradigm of security scenario in South Asia & Indian Ocean Region. The current situation is also in line with China's Belts & Roads Initiative (BRI) with security implications in the Indo Pacific in general and India's strategic interests in the region in particular. BRI is a flagship initiative of President Xi Jinping and China is going to ensure that it remains at the Centre stage of its Geopolitics for the foreseeable future. It is as much a strategic compulsion as a geostrategic game changer for China. While China is using its Economic clout, Diplomatic might and security apparatus to assert its influence in the Indo- Pacific Region through BRI projects, Indian interests in IOR are likely to be adversely affected in the long run.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) ,Strategic Interests ,India's Security Interests in IOR , Geostrategic Importance of BRI for India & China , Impact of BRI on India's Security Interests in IOR Strategic Implications of BRI in IOR

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Introduction

On April 25-27, 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping convened the second summit of leaders and representatives from around the world to discuss his signature program, the Belt and Road Initiative. Xi's keynote address revealed his take on Beijing's trade struggle with the US as well as his approach to the concerns of poorer countries that lie along the initiative's route. The absence of leaders from India, South Korea, and Japan, all of which are geographically close to China, could imply indifference on their part toward the initiative, but could also indicate fear. India is apprehensive about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor that is being built into the initiative's framework. It has raised serious concerns about sovereignty issues and is being viewed as a serious stumbling block in India's participation in the project. However, as announced by the China National Development and Reforms Commission, the objectives of the initiative are firstly, Enhancing Policy *coordination* across the Asian continent; secondly, *Trade liberalization*, thirdly financial *integration*; and lastly *Connectivity* including people to people links.

Geoconomics & Geopolitics of BRI

It is becoming clear that China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) linking Asia and Africa with Europe through a network of various transportation corridors could fundamentally reshape the geoconomics and geopolitics of the whole Eurasian region and beyond. These developments have huge implications for India. Out of the proposed six international corridors (Hong Kong Trade Development Council [HKTDC], 2018; National Development Reform Commission [NDRC], 2015), four corridors, namely, the new Eurasia and Bridge, China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Cooperation (BCIM), directly affect India's economic and strategic linkages with these regions. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a Chinese initiative which has far-reaching ramifications (in terms of time) and global reach (in spatial terms). The BRI has been promoted as a project aimed at enhancing multi-modal regional and inter-regional connectivity to create 'corridors of economic prosperity in order to achieve greater economic integration between various participating nations.

The overtly stated motive of the project is promotion of trade and commerce resulting in ultimate spin-off in the form of economic development and prosperity. However as indicated by various analysts there is a possibility that China has an unstated geo-political motive behind the BRI to increase its political influence by employing geo-economic means aimed at furthering national interests. It may also entail increased military presence both on land and sea to exercise influence at geo-strategically vital points across the globe, initially with the purpose of protecting its geo-economic interests, but ultimately translating into a capability to not only dominate

and control existing as well as new land and sea based trade routes / Line of Communications but also assist in exercising political leverage and influence.

BRI Membership

The subject of India's membership of BRI and its impact needs to be viewed in light of the manner in which India is engaging China on the issue of BRI. Firstly, the issue of membership is a flawed proposition since BRI does not have a membership, the concerned Nations are only participants. Secondly, it would not be completely correct to say that India is not a participant in the affairs of BRI as India has never categorically denied or boycotted that. In fact India is one of the founding members of AIIB which is an important pillar of BRI financing. The Indian government's position on the OBOR project is more or less consistent since the initiative was first launched in 2013. The Indian government has neither fully rejected the initiative nor endorsed it in a clear manner. At the same time, the government has clearly opposed CPEC activities.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the study is to analyse the Impact of BRI on geostrategic interests of India in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). It includes the following:-

1. Geostrategic Importance of BRI for India & China.
2. Strategic Implications of BRI in IOR.
3. Impact of BRI on India's Security Interests in IOR.
4. India's Strategy- Challenges & Opportunities.
5. Recommendations.

Review of Literature

This is the review paper so various reviews have been discussed through out the paper.

**Geostrategic Imp Of
lor To India & China
Historical Perspective**

Ancient Silk Road. In the middle 19th century, the German geologist Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen named the trade and communication network or the Silk Road which referred to both land Silk Road and maritime Silk Road. The Silk Road was not a single road but a network of roads, tracks and trails which emerged gradually over centuries and got later connected to one another thread by thread. All the important civilizations grew in isolation separated by geographical features. The Romans who happened to be on the western terminus reqd huge quantities of incense for religious purpose thus expanded its trade to center Asia. The spices came from india and SE Asia by sea. When Alexander increased his reach through Persia towards India, the Greek, Egyptian, Persian and Indian civilizations met to become trading zones and thus laid the foundation for a bridge with China. The complete route was around 600 kilometers passing through treacherous mountainous terrain and deserts but hardly any Roman moved till China or Chinese came to Europe. Several important strategic cities came along these roads which flourished due to traveler's requirements of hotels, transit places, tax centers, temples, monasteries, brothels and other required amenities. The prosperity of Silk Road reached its heydays during the period of Tang dynasty (AD 618-907). During the Byzantine empire ASR sustained an international culture that strung together diverse civilizations across the geographical expanse, and reached its peak in the West. Trade between East and West also developed across the Indian Ocean between Alexandria in Egypt and Guangzhou in China besides areas of today's Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Mongolia.

**End of Ancient Silk
Road**

By the end of the 14th century, the fragmentation of the Mongols Empire loosened the political, cultural and economic unity of the Silk Road. After the fall of the Mongol Empire in 1404, the trade passed into hands of local traders. The Christians who had started taking over the territories in the eastern coast of the Mediterranean finally were defeated by the Ottoman Empire in 1453 and thereafter Europeans could not move freely towards the western part of the Silk Road. By this time, sea exploration and invention of compass made maritime route more relevant. Christopher Columbus, Vasco Da Gama, Ferdinand Magellan and others made the sea route more significant and thus the 1000 year old Silk Road came to an end.

Geostrategic Importance of IOR to India and China

China is the largest country in the Asia-Pacific region with two-third of the country's landmass landlocked and no direct access to the Indian Ocean. Almost the entire foreign trade of China is carried out from the sea ports located along the Eastern SeaBoard. Economic development is largely restricted to the Eastern provinces. Northern, Western, Southern as well as Central China has witnessed very limited economic development. The 'strategic vulnerability' of China may be understood by the fact that it has been termed by the Chinese strategic thinkers themselves as the 'Malacca Dilemma' or the 'Achilles Heel' of China. As per US Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 'In 2016, China imported oil to meet 64 percent of its need. Also, in 2016, approximately 80 percent of China's oil imports and 11 percent of natural gas imports transited the Strait of Malacca. In the words of Chinese strategists, "Reliance on Malacca Straits is a strategic weakness. Extrication from it is one of the foreign and defense policy goals of China".

Lack of Chinese Power Projection Capability in the IOR

As per Mahan a nation may possess great wealth on land but it must possess substantive sea power to facilitate trade which ultimately ensured a nation's overall security. This may become an impediment in the emergence of China as a great power. While almost the entire Chinese trade is sea-based, all sea transportation routes are controlled by the US and other European nations. China has no direct access to the Indian Ocean though its sea based trade relies heavily on SLOCs in the IOR. China has lacked credible naval power projection capability to protect its energy assets or to pose threat to other nations. A blockade of Strait of Hormuz or Strait of Malacca can effectively impose 'strategic energy and economic strangulation' on China. Overall China is undergoing a paradigm strategic transition from a hitherto fore 'continental orientation' into a more expansive and 'hegemonic continental-maritime orientation'.

Security Implications of BRI in IOR

The IOR, like the South China Sea (SCS), is pivotal to China's security interests as all its seaborne trade with Europe, the Middle East and Africa runs through it. The diversification and security of its sea lines of communication (SLOC) is in direct conflict with Indian interests in IOR and further increases the security complexity of the SCS, and even more so of the IOR. In the IOR, the BRI could alter the nature of the IOR into a more interconnected global commons, which would provide a host of new economic opportunities through, for example, the opening up of landlocked Central Asia. While this expansion of the IOR should be a positive trend, it would also precipitate greater rivalry between China and a gradually resurgent quadrilateral consisting of the USA, India, Japan and Australia (the 'Quad').

Geo-political Impact of Chinese Initiative on the IOR / India

CPEC is the flagship project of BRI which has the stated intent of improving connectivity between Western China and South Asia through Pakistan with the Indian Ocean with likely participation and economic benefits to other Central Asian nations and Persian Gulf Countries. In addition, BCIM-EC has been aimed at improving connectivity between South China with SE Asia and ultimately providing access to the Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean. These 'regional and inter-regional connectivity' projects in effect intend to 'irreversibly' change the effect of 'geographical barriers' which hitherto existed and governed the regional geo-political order in South / SE Asia and the IOR. China which earlier had no direct access to OR would get unrestricted access to the same on the East as well as West of Indian Subcontinent resulting in far-reaching geo-political consequences.

Geostrategic Impact

An increase in long-term Chinese economic interventions is likely to increase its capability to exercise political leverage on various littoral nations in the IOR (to include East Africa) ultimately resulting in providing China with a capability to project its military power. This is likely to *result in a change in the existing regional military 'balance of power'*. However any *unilateral change in the existing 'status quo' of 'balance of power' in the IOR is likely to have serious security implications for India*. The geo-economic implications of BRI have been discussed extensively by various analysts however greater attention is required to be accorded to the analysis of 'likely geo-political intent' behind the BRI and its implications on the existing security and stability situation especially in the IOR

India's Security Interests in IOR

India has major stakes in BRI in terms of its engagement with China on BRI, protecting its own geostrat and economic Interests and its relations/ engagements with other BRI participant States. IOR is likely to remain India's core strategic interest as is its Look East Policy in its relations with Asian neighbours. India cannot wish away the influence China is likely to bring upon IOR & its littoral states with BRI taking shape. At this stage it is not only important to understand the Impact of BRI on India, IOR & other member states but equally important for India to evolve its own counter strategies to secure its geostrategic national interests. This study could dispel the notion of India's isolation and bring out in real terms the manner of its engagement while protecting its own geostrategic interests with respect to China and other member states.

Strategic Implications of Bri

Imperatives for Military Power Projection by China in the IOR *Availability of permanent overseas bases is an important component of power projection providing the capability for pre-positioning, rapid deployment and sustainment of forces.* China has an *ambition to achieve 'global power status'* which in turn gives rise to a 'strategic necessity' to dominate the IOR. Presently, China has very *limited presence of forces in the IOR* in the form of anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden. However it has exhibited a *sustained effort* over the last decade or so *to substantially enhance its capability to deploy forces overseas.* The Chinese power projection capabilities have been increasing in terms of naval platforms as well as capability to put troops ashore by acquiring *expeditionary capabilities by expansion of the Marine component of its forces.* The *most important aspect of the capability to deploy forces rapidly in the IOR,* which is at a significant distance from the Chinese mainland, is *availability of overseas military bases in the region'.* China has established its first *overseas military base at Djibouti* which will permit pre-positioning of its naval assets very close to strategic SLOCs and is building capability to establish large sized floating bases which can be established on as required basis and anywhere to support its naval forces. The ability to sustain forces far away from the mainland is an important aspect of the overall capability of power projection. Presently *China has limited capability for logistics sustainment of large sized naval forces with a capability for credible power projection role.* However it is likely to enhance its logistics facilities in IOR littorals & West IOR soon.

Balance of Power in IOR**Cpec And Bcim-Ec And China's Necessity Of Overseas Military Bases In The Ior**

One of the key features of the CPEC and the BCIM-EC is the construction of commercial ports which provide direct access from the Chinese mainland to the IOR. The *characteristics* of these ports at Gwadar, Kyaukphyu and Hambantota are strategically located with adequate port infrastructure and good connectivity. If we analyze the characteristics of the *Gwadar and Kyaukphyu ports,* we can see that these *fit precisely into the Chinese geo-strategic plan of increasing its naval footprint in the IOR* for the purpose of power projection. An unrestricted control over these ports can result in their 'dual use', that is both for commercial as well as military purposes. A great degree of strategic convergence already exists between China and Pakistan. The most important aspect which contributes to China's power projection capability in the IOR is the fact that Gwadar and Kyaukphyu ports are *directly connected to the Chinese mainland through the two 'economic corridors'.* It provides China a *unique capability to endlessly sustain its forces* based on these ports from the Chinese mainland itself. In fact *no other 'external' player in the Indian Ocean has such a capability.*

Thus *CPEC and BCIM-EC provides China an opportunity* to convert these two ports for military purposes thus providing capability of *pre-positioning of forces* at multiple dispersed locations in the IOR, translating into *rapid deployment capability* beyond its own geographical borders as well as the ability to *sustain its forces* in IOR.

Importance of the IOR Littorals

There are 28 littoral nations in the IOR which comprise approximately 20 percent of the Earth's surface. The importance of Indian Ocean lies in the fact that major SLOCs traverses through it. In addition to the Indian Ocean littoral nations, 'the economies of East Asia, Europe and the Americas are also reliant on the India Ocean as it is a major global trade route...' (Philip Andrews-Speed, February, 2016). There are three major choke points which exist in the region namely, Bab el Mandeb, Strait of Hormuz and the Malacca Straits.

**Accretion in China's
Military Power
Projection Capability**

The earliest expression of Chinese intent of expanding their naval operations in the IOR was made by Vice Admiral SuZhiqian, Commander of the East China Sea Fleet of the Chinese Navy through a statement in Galle, Sri Lanka, 13 December 2012. It laid stress on the 'freedom and safety of the navigation in the Indian Ocean' acting as a crucial factor in global economy and declared that the Chinese navy will actively maintain the peace and stability of the Indian Ocean through carrying out 'maritime security cooperation' with the navies of various countries, especially seeking to establish a maritime security 'code of conduct' between them under the 'premise of respect for each country's sovereignty and maritime interests' ("Chinese Navy to Actively Maintain Peace and Stability of Indian Ocean", China Military Online, 15 December 2012). The Blue Book of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) released in June 2013 had chapters on India's "Look East Policy" and the "U.S.India Axis of Relation in Indian Ocean Region". As a document of an authoritative Chinese think tank, it appears as policy indicators. The intent to strengthen Chinese Armed Forces and their role in protecting 'overseas interests' has been articulated in the Defence White Papers of 2015 and 2019.

The US interests in the region however have been dynamic in nature. In recent years the US engagement in the region has been affected by a decrease in its dependence upon the Persian Gulf energy supplies. 'The Indian Ocean has not been a central part of naval strategy (of US) because US economic and strategic interests in the region have been modest, with the exception of the Middle East' (Ladwig, 2014). However safety of 'global commons' and prevention of conflicts to ensure that the international trade flows unimpeded has remained one of the US concerns. It needs to be seen as to how the US Indian Ocean strategy evolve in the light of "Pivot to Asia" announced in 2011 or whether it "re-balances" and focuses its attention only on the West Pacific region.

**Likely Future
Scenarios of Balance
of Power in the IOR****Scenario 1: Status
Quo.**

Such a scenario entails that the US continues to be the main security provider in the US with India maintaining its traditional role as hitherto fore. The most important precondition for such a scenario however is the acceptance by China of continuation of the existing set up. While 'status quo' is suited for the needs of the US, India as well as other littoral nations of the IOR however this scenario is unlikely keeping under consideration the Chinese intent of increasing its geo-political and geo-economic influence to meet its growing national aspirations of a 'global power status' and its emerging capabilities to translate such an ambition into reality.

**Scenario 2: US
Strategic Retreat and
Chinese Rise**

This scenario entails a 'US re-balancing' involving shifting of the strategic priorities wherein it increases focus on the West Pacific region with a commensurate decrease in presence in the IOR. This would result in creation of a 'power vacuum' in the region. Such a power vacuum would be an opportunity for China to rapidly increase its influence in the region. It may also involve the US seeking to establish a 'co-operative security architecture' for IOT with a greater role for other stakeholders. However this would result in marginalization of India and as such would be unacceptable to it. Also, it will result in a sense of insecurity among smaller littoral nations. Such a re-adjustment of 'Balance of Power' scenario may result in a high degree of instability in the region involving clash of interests of India and China.

**Scenario 3: US 'Pivot
to Asia' and
'Indo-Pacific Quad'
Concept Operationaliz
ed**

This scenario involves the US maintaining / enhancing its regional focus by creating a harmonious balance between the West Pacific Region and the IOR. In 2015, the US DoD announced 'The Asia Pacific Maritime Security Strategy'. With such a policy articulation, it has to a great extent refuted the territorial claims of China and has supported the stand of other nations who are party to the disputes in the South China Sea. It also envisages enhancing "forward presence" by improving the force posture. The underlying strategic reason for revival of 'Quad' dialogue stems from the common concern of the four nations arising out of China's over-assertive territorial hegemony in the South China Sea which challenges internationally accepted rule of laws as well as governance of 'global commons' threatening freedom of navigation through the South China Sea, one of the busiest sea lanes for trade.

It is unlikely that a 'status quo' of Balance of Power remains in the IOR primarily due to the unacceptability of the same to China. A change in the balance of power equation in the IOR is inevitable. Scenarios involving 'US Retreat and Chinese Rise' or 'Rise of Indo-Pacific Quad' seem to be the most plausible at this juncture. In both the scenarios one factor will be common. The common decisive factor in playing out

of either of these scenarios will be the 'power projection capability' of China in the IOR. It may be concluded that whichever scenario that plays out in the future, an increase in Chinese power projection capabilities will definitely influence the Balance of Power in the IOR.

Impact Of Bri On India's Security Interests In Ior

As far as India is concerned there has been a constancy of geo-strategic and geo-economic interests since its economy as well as security is inextricably dependent upon the Indian Ocean. There is no reiterating the fact that India's entire sea borne trade as well energy supplies depends upon the SLOCs in the Indian Ocean. One of the most relevant aspects is that presently, there is no formal 'security architecture' in the IOR. It thus implies that the existing Balance of Power in the IOR is highly fragile. The threat to the existing 'status quo' of 'power equilibrium' has been posed by China due to its intention of becoming a dominant player in the region.

Change in India's Maritime Security Threat Perception

An increase in Chinese geo-political influence in the IOR is against India's security interests. The growing Chinese power projection capabilities especially the Marine component would be in a position to pose a serious threat to Indian Island territories. This in fact results in a 'two-front Chinese threat'. As per an analysis, 'Possible impediments to India's ability to project power within the IOR include China's expanding footprint in the Indian Ocean, and growing Pakistani capabilities' (S Paul Kapoor, 23 February 2017).

In order to safeguard its vital security interests India is likely to contest Chinese inroads into the region. This would leave India with no choice but to increase its military capabilities in the region substantially. However such a scenario would result in high intensity competitive militarization of the region. 'China's ambition to control SLOCs in the Indian Ocean and its creation of a chain of friendly island countries only escalates the existing bilateral tensions between India and China'.

India considers the IOR as its vital strategic space and intends to maintain its geo-political influence in the region. This intent has been articulated at the highest political level. PM Modi has emphasized upon 'fostering stronger diplomatic, economic and security ties with the IOR maritime states as a means to strengthen India's economy, establish its role as a driver of regional growth and simultaneously diminish China's growing appeal' (Eleanor, 19 May 2016).. The 'Act East policy' is one such manifestation of India's regional strategic intent.

An increase in Chinese influence and consequent decrease in India's regional influence would result in India losing its relevance in the emerging geo-political alignment. In this regard, it has been analyzed that 'China's pitch for benign security in the Indian Ocean appears to be an attempt to convince Indian Ocean states of the need for Chinese support and security arrangements. A sustained "maritime presence" in the Indian Ocean region, however, is all Beijing needs to strategically dominate the region. The ready availability of PLAN assets for maritime security tasks has the potential to take the regional security initiative away from India. Not only would a Chinese naval presence in the IOR challenge the Indian Navy's primacy as a net security provider, it would also erode India's strategic influence in the region' (Singh, 27 January 2015).

Increase in Strategic Convergence Between China and Pakistan: Impact on India

An increase in Chinese influence in the IOR is linked to implementation of CPEC. As analyzed earlier, CPEC is emerging as an instrument of facilitating increase in Chinese power projection capabilities in the IOR. Also, CPEC is likely to result in total *economic and strategic dependence of Pakistan on China*. A change in the geo-political equation in the IOR in favor of China is likely to *further complicate the complex strategic equation between India and Pakistan*. The emerging China-Pakistan security relations would have adverse impact on India Pakistan strategic equation in the following ways:-

1. *Firstly, Pakistan is likely to emerge militarily stronger* especially in terms of naval capabilities as well as in terms of high end military technology due to generous help from China.
2. *Secondly, leveraging the dominant geo-political presence of its closest and "all weather" ally, Pakistan is likely to resort to greater belligerence and brinkmanship* towards India especially in terms of 'proxy war' in J&K.
3. *Thirdly, in case of a conflict situation with India in future, China would be in a better position to help Pakistan logistically due to CPEC thus increasing its war sustaining capability substantially.*

4. *Fourthly, in earlier conflicts between India and Pakistan, China has strictly avoided getting involved directly. Also, it has maintained a neutral stance on the issue of J&K. However due to increase in China's geo-strategic interest in Pakistan, the chances of China's direct intervention in the India-Pakistan dispute are likely to increase.*
5. *Fifthly, Pakistan will try to gain legitimacy of its claim over Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) due to the CPEC passing through. This will result in chances of resolution of long standing disputes between India and Pakistan reducing further.*
6. *Lastly, with Pakistani and Chinese navies operating in tandem in the Arabian Sea, the Indian option of imposing a strategic naval blockade of Pakistan is likely to be under question.*

Security of India's Trade and Energy

India's trade as well as energy security is largely dependent upon the SLOCs in the IOR. However the situation is likely to change with increased presence of the Chinese navy in the IOR. A permanent PLAN presence in the Indian Ocean with logistics and basing facilities at Djibouti, Gwadar, Kyaukphyu, Hambantota, which have spatial complementarity with each other, would provide capability to China to easily monitor and interdict strategic SLOCs on which India's trade and energy supplies depend.

India's Strategy: Challenges & Opportunities India's Options

Other Connectivity Projects The proposed Africa- Asia Growth Corridor (AAGC) seeks to encompass and integrate Africa, India and South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia and Oceania.' There is also a Russian International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) project, aimed at connecting Russia with the Arabian Sea, which India supports. It would cut Mumbai-St. Petersburg transport time from 40 to 20 days, also linking India with myriad Central Asian states. For India, it avoids any connection with China's BRI, though in practice both would use in part the same rail-links and other infrastructure, especially in Iran. There has been little action on the ground at Chabahar, India's only viable point of access. 'One would, however, have hoped that the strategically important Chabahar port project in Iran and the associated North-South corridor into Central Asia would have been pursued with the single mindedness they deserve. From an Indian perspective, Chabahar is simply an entry point to Central Asia. Transporting containers and commodities northward from that port has to involve first the Iranian rail and/or road network and then other rail and road links; some of these may be China-funded BRI projects.

An Asian Network

To the East of India, there are looming prospects of an Asian Highway, and eventually even an Asian Railway, but things at the Indian end have moved at a glacial pace. On the plus side there is, since 2011 a South Asian Sub-regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC), set up by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 2001, covers all SAARC countries except Pakistan and Afghanistan, and ADB acts as its secretariat (Asian Development Bank n.d.). This road project is part of an 'Asian highway' that is to link South Asia with SE Asia, and matching that, an Asian railway project is also under slow implementation. A different kind of connectivity initiative comes from Taiwan, which is embarked on its 'New Southbound Policy', indirectly to lessen dependence on trade with the PRC, which currently is around US\$100 billion, 20% of its total trade, and to diversify its economic connections (Glaser, Funaiolo and Jin 2017). Of course, Taiwan does not compare in its capabilities with the PRC or match it in its eco-political prowess, but it is interesting that India is one of the priority targets in this Taiwanese policy.

Mausam' and Indian Ocean Maritime Links

Mausam (the source word for 'monsoon'), a project to re-envision trans-Asian cultural and historical maritime links between India and the Indian Ocean region was put forward by the Indian Culture Ministry in 2013. Some initially saw it as an alternative to OBOR, but such assessments missed the point, which was to present historical facts, and reimagine past cultural and maritime links in ways that can serve contemporary requirements. Most of SE Asia, West Asia and the entire eastern seaboard of Africa are relevant to that project. *Mausam* is a modest project, aiming at intellectual exchanges and research via conferences and seminars; it is not remotely an investment in infrastructure building projects. Rather little about it has emerged in the media in recent times, but *Mausam* remains a relevant track for cooperation and exchanges among different countries, and for the reinforcement of memory and culture.

Sagarmala Project

Also relevant for India is its domestic Sagarmala project, which gained traction with the September 2016 incorporation of the 'Sagarmala Development Company', to better develop India's 7,500 km coastline and 14,500 km of potentially navigable waterways. Even while the country has invested in port development, via public funds and private investments, is it not painful to realize that not a single container major transshipment hub exists along that vast coastline; India relies on Colombo, Dubai, and Singapore for transshipment.

Challenges & Opportunities

Based on the foregoing analysis the following inferences can be drawn about the Geostrategic Importance of BRI in the IOR:-

1. BRI has an underlying geo-strategic dimension, hiding behind the veil of overtly stated aim of economic dimension.
2. China is likely to utilize infrastructure being built under BRI for military purposes when required in future.
3. China has made BRI a flagship initiative under President Xi Jinping and aims to leverage it to secure its Geo- Economic & Geo- Strategic Interests in IOR and to enhance its global footprint.
4. Indian strategic interests in the IOR are hugely impacted due to Chinese initiatives in the wake of BRI.
5. India does not have a stated/ clearly articulated strategy for dealing with BRI. India maintains that BRI is a Chinese initiative and India does not have to be a part of it or a signatory to it.
6. India has expressed its opposition to CPEC due to sovereignty issues and continues to maintain a hard stand on the issue.
7. India's membership of ADB and AIIB, both financial institutions under the umbrella of BRI, are an indicator of India's neutral stand on the overall BRI framework.
8. India is engaging constructively with China bilaterally on case to case basis to secure its interests getting adversely impacted due to BRI projects.
9. The Chinese designs are unmasked and this will hamper the implementation of yet to be constructed projects in South & SE Asian region. In all likelihood, the Chinese are going to review those projects which face resistance & are likely to carry out mid-course correction either by changing the scope of project or by reducing its magnitude.
10. In this regard the Wuhan Agreement between India and China is being seen as a major shift in the manner of engagement between two nations on BRI issues. India's engagement is likely to transform the manner of implementation of BRI projects in the aftermath of the negative publicity it has got for debt trap in smaller nations.
11. India is engaging with IOR littoral states in bilateral/ trilateral engagements to secure its strategic interests in IOR.
12. India's Act East Policy is an important cog in the strategic Wheel of Indian Strategy to deal with Chinese BRI initiatives in the region.
13. India's multilateral engagements and initiatives like QUAD, Asian Development Corridor, SAGAR and Chahabar Port are other initiatives which would help secure its geostrategic interests in IOR.
14. India has a clear and cogent strategy in place for dealing with BRI to secure its Geostrategic interests as is evident from multifarious initiatives/ engagements in the regional and global arena.

Recommendations For India

BRI is a flagship initiative of President Xi Jinping and China is going to ensure that it remains at the Centre stage of its Geopolitics for foreseeable future. It is as much a strategic compulsion as a geostrategic game changer for China. While China is using its Economic clout, Diplomatic might and security apparatus to assert its influence in the Indo- Pacific Region through BRI projects, Indian interests in IOR are likely to be compromised in the long run. Keeping this as backdrop, the following recommendations are made for India to secure its geostrategic interests in IOR:-

1. India should proactively follow up its Act East Policy to engage East Asian Neighbours and IOR littorals in bilateral engagements & treaties. It must fast track "Act East Policy" by carrying out infrastructure development in the NE region to smoothen connectivity with Myanmar, Thailand, Laos & Cambodia.

Remarking An Analisation

2. Enhance strength of diplomatic corps, increase staff at own missions & consulates in immediate neighborhood & SE Asian region including aspect of military diplomacy.
3. Cultivate politicians & political parties in neighboring countries sympathetic to Indian interests & assist them in gaining influential positions in their respective countries.
4. Proactively work with USA, Japan & Australia to highlight pitfalls of Chinese debt trap for smaller nation states & wean them away from Chinese influence through diplomatic efforts.
5. Provide them alternate investments through either by leveraging clout of Quad with existing world bodies such as IMF & World Bank or form a joint consortium to do the same.

Reinforce the spirit of Wuhan Agreement by showing overtures to BCIM and exploit Chinese vulnerability to build on AGC besides development of relations with CAR & East African Nations.

India should develop Chabahar Port in Iran on priority and develop connectivity with Afghanistan and other Central Asian Republics. This will provide a credible alternate trade route to countries in the region. Iran is a Shia majority nation and India should cooperate with it to oppose CPEC construction in Pakistan which is a Sunni majority nation, since this project is not in the national interest of both Iran and India. Even Russia which is showing interest in CPEC off late as per latest media reports should be influenced to join the Chabahar route and oppose CPEC.

Leverage soft power in the immediate neighbourhood to project India as a benign power respecting the principle of equality rather than as "big brother" which is presently the case.

Formulate plans for development of Andaman & Nicobar Islands as a trading hub straddling Malacca Straits on the lines of Singapore. Designate it as SEZ & provision for relaxation of Customs duty & taxation norms for the islands. As these islands have proximity to SE Asia, they can be effectively leveraged for implementation of "Act East Policy".

Develop a modern naval power with a third CBG in IOR to contain the change in Power projection capability and Change in balance of power equations in Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

India and China have a competitive yet cooperative relationship. India has not signed onto the Belt and Road Initiative as it has concerns over some aspects of it—especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Maritime Silk Road—and has proposed its own "Spice Route" or SAGAR project, with India at the centre of Indian Ocean relations. Nevertheless, India has joined the new financial institutions of the New Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (as its second largest shareholder after China) and most recently the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

India has a strategic interest in the IOR and it has been progressing in a sure footed way to contain Chinese footprints in the region albeit at a much slower pace. India needs to use its diplomatic, military, economic influence in the region to leverage BRI to its advantage. It needs to play a key role in the US Indo Pacific Strategy while continuing to have bilateral & trilateral agreements with other nations in the region including China in a constructive manner.

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