

# CHINA'S MARITIME SILK ROAD AND INDIAN DILEMMA

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*"Nations have no eternal allies and no perpetual enemies, only interests that are perpetual and eternal and those interests it is our duty to follow."*

*Lord Palmerston<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction**

PM Narendra Modi echoed the view of many Strategic thinkers when he said prior to his May 15 visit to China that, ".....the 21<sup>st</sup> century belongs to Asia".<sup>2</sup>

As the world grapples with economic problems, there is a clear shift of growth from North to South. This economic shift is being followed by the fight for Strategic space with Pivot of geopolitical clout moving from West to East. With China emerging as the biggest challenge to the sole super power of the world, the next round of Strategic block formation based on realpolitik is on the horizon.

India, due to its strategic location, economic power, nuclear advantage and demographic value holds an important place in this struggle for strategic superiority. While both the

groups are trying their best to sway India in their favour, India's foreign policy still remains in the realm of being 'Non-Committal'. While India's interests in World trade agencies are more aligned to China, it achieves a strategic advantage being with US and as recent trends show, it is positively engaging with both the groups. However the real question in front of Indian policy makers today is whether to maintain its existing neutral policy or shift towards a specific camp in changing contours of Global matrix.

While it is easy to converge economically, it is difficult to align strategically. Hence both the powers are presenting proposals which are actually ambiguous. One such dilemma currently facing India is Chinese 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR). It is one of the most ambitious as well as most vaguely

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<sup>1</sup>"Morality: Does national interest always come first in Foreign Affairs?" BBC News, Open Politics, available at URL: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/in\\_depth/uk\\_politics/2001/open\\_politics/foreign\\_policy/morality.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/in_depth/uk_politics/2001/open_politics/foreign_policy/morality.stm), (accessed on 19 Jun 15)

<sup>2</sup>Amit Roy, "PM Modi says 21st belongs to Asia", (Asian Age, 23 Apr 15), available at URL: <http://www.asianage.com/india/ahead-trip-china-narendra-modi-says-21st-century-belongs-asia-742> (accessed on 19 Jun 15)

defined International Maritime Economic and Infrastructural Project proposed by China. According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying, "The reason why China proposed the building of the Maritime Silk Route is to explore the unique values and ideas of the ancient Silk Route... and achieve common development and common prosperity of all countries in the region." However for some, it's another name for "China's 'String of Pearls' project — designed to make China the hub of a new order in Asia and the Indian Ocean region."<sup>3</sup>

India was formally invited to join the MSR at the 17<sup>th</sup> round of Special Representatives Talks in New Delhi in February 2014.<sup>4</sup> India's lukewarm response shows its apprehensions with the project. However with Chinese economic juggernaut rolling and India's appetite for large foreign investment, it cannot simply ignore this proposal and miss the large benefits it promises. At the same time its blind acceptance runs the risk of Strategic

alignment with Beijing or worse becoming its junior partner. The MSR proposal needs to be holistically explored as ignorance is no more a bliss in today's fast changing globalized world.

### **China's Economic Shift**

China has complex governance with a Single party Communist system running a State controlled Capitalistic economy. This provides it with dual advantage of reaping economic benefits of the globalised world while insulating it from its disadvantages. Deng Xiaoping's adaptation to 'Socialism with a new face', clinically and gradually coupled China with the World Economy resulting in three decades of high growth, making it the 'world's factory'.

China's economic growth has been in gradual steps with large domestic investment in 1980s followed by huge export led growth since the 1990s. However its leadership, taking a cue from Japan, was well aware of the dangers of economic stagnation. Hence

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<sup>3</sup>Brahma Chellaney, "China reinvents 'string of pearls' as Maritime Silk Road", (*Nikkie Asian Review*, 01 May 15) available at URL: <http://chellaney.net/2015/05/01/china-reinvents-string-of-pearls-as-maritime-silk-road/> (accessed on 20 Jun 15)

<sup>4</sup>"China willing to strengthen communication with India over 'Belt and Road' initiatives: envoy", (*Xinhua*, 01 Apr 15) available at URL: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-04/01/c\\_134116871.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-04/01/c_134116871.htm) (accessed on 20 Jun 15)

it utilised its large foreign reserve in aggressive foreign investment and lending from 2000 onwards, with special focus on Africa. This policy shift coupled with surge in domestic investment helped China face the Tsunami of Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2009. With the developed West stagnating, China shifted its focus towards South-South trade in what Vice-President Li Yuanchao emphasised ‘a profound adjustment’ in international trade landscape.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years continuing global slump is seriously affecting the way world trades. With US government bond returns dwindling and China’s own domestic infrastructure growth stagnating, Beijing is currently facing double whammy of huge foreign exchange reserves and overcapacity in construction materials. In order to resolve both issues simultaneously, it has started aggressive investment in emerging economies. As it emerges as the new ‘mega-trader’ of the world,

more than half of China’s burgeoning trade is with Asia, accounting for 52% of China’s exports and 56% of its imports. In addition, China is also already the biggest trade partner for almost all Asian countries.<sup>6</sup>

China is now moving to the second stage of experiencing a “Deng Xiaoping Moment 2.0.” As it finds itself on a strong economic platform, Chinese leadership is making bold and confident moves to shift its Global standing to the next level, which it historically held. Its policy makers are taking cues from the past to build new bridges of economic and strategic cooperation and the proposal of reviving the MSR demonstrates this innovative approach.<sup>7</sup>

Chinese leaders have repeatedly described the MSR as a project of economic cooperation for maritime trade. In official parlance, it is creation of infrastructure and facilities, supported by Chinese state agencies,

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<sup>5</sup> Lyu Chang/Li Yingqing, “China, S. Asian ties ‘never more important’ as global trade patterns change”, (*China Daily Europe*, 13 Jun 15), available at URL: [http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2015-06/13/content\\_20992758.htm](http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2015-06/13/content_20992758.htm) (accessed on 20 Jun 15)

<sup>6</sup> “Global trade unbundled”, *Special Report by Standard Chartered*, available at URL: [https://research.standardchartered.com/configuration/ROW%20Documents/Global\\_trade\\_unbundled\\_09\\_04\\_14\\_23\\_33.pdf](https://research.standardchartered.com/configuration/ROW%20Documents/Global_trade_unbundled_09_04_14_23_33.pdf) (accessed on 20 Jun 15)

<sup>7</sup> Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy, “Reviving the Maritime Silk Route”, (*The Hindu*, 11 Apr 14), available at URL: <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/reviving-the-maritime-silk-route/article5896989.ece> (accessed on 19 Jun 15)

which can be commonly shared by friendly countries to boost economic trade. In the words of Premier Li Keqiang, "We stand ready to work with other countries to boost economic growth, deepen international cooperation and promote world peace through developing the ocean, and we strive to build a peaceful, cooperative and harmonious ocean".<sup>8</sup>

### **China's Strategic Defence**

As China expands its economic reach to far flung areas through maritime trade it is imperative that People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) changes its course from being 'Brown Water' to 'Blue Water' Navy to protect these economic interests. China is heavily dependent on its oil imports which pass through the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) making it a key area of interest for Chinese strategists. With some 85% of its international trade moving by sea lanes,<sup>9</sup> securing its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) is no more desirable but an essential task for the PLAN.

This fundamental shift in the PLAN Strategy is reflected in 2010 white paper which transforms its tasks from just 'Sea denial' in its "first island chain" to conducting operations in distant waters (yuanhai) and countering non-traditional security threats.<sup>10</sup> This necessitates rapid expansion of the PLAN as well as growth of supporting infrastructure at vital points across its maritime trade lines. The MSR aims to develop strategic ports at such points specifically in countries of ASEAN and the IOR, which though commercial can be equally used for the PLAN support. This will assist in achieving three objectives of securing its SLOC, better maritime trade cooperation with developing countries in its neighbourhood and providing an alternative to choke points such as Strait of Malacca.

However with historical British and US economic expansion as background, it is obvious that this mercantile protection may gradually

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<sup>8</sup>Liu Cigui, "Reflections on Maritime Partnership: Building the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road", (Publication by China Institute of International Studies, 15 Sep 14), available at URL: [http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/2014-09/15/content\\_7231376.htm](http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/2014-09/15/content_7231376.htm) (accessed on 19 Jun 15)

<sup>9</sup>Dean Cheng, "Sea Power and the Chinese State: China's Maritime Ambitions", (Publication by The Heritage Foundation, 11 Jul 11), available at URL: <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/07/sea-power-and-the-chinese-state-chinas-maritime-ambitions> (accessed on 19 Jun 15)

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

transform itself into a hegemonic force, especially in absence of any strong adversary. While there is no doubt that the MSR has got a significant economic purpose, it cannot be denied that a strategic purpose rides on it. Unlike a pure economic or cultural association, it involves more 'physical' association between member countries. This will lead to Chinese penetration into junior partner's economic and physical space which may later be followed by strategic space.

The MSR also holds an important strategic perception value. With an offensive western media, any bold move by China is immediately picked up as a threat value to neighbouring countries. The majority of South East Asian and IOR countries view this widening Chinese influence with an inherent risk. China is now countering this perception with its own diplomacy blitzkrieg which appears to have a conscious strategic direction. The MSR has been presented as counter description to the 'String of Pearls'

argument and a tool to diffuse tensions due to maritime disputes with its neighbours.

Chinese leaders assert that "a stronger China will add to the force for world peace and positive energy for friendship, and will present development opportunities to Asia and the world, rather than posing a threat."<sup>11</sup> The language and economics of the MSR holds a stark similarity to the US Marshall Plan of 1948, "An act to promote world peace and the general welfare...."<sup>12</sup> It seems Chinese policy makers have picked up a leaf from their western counterparts in Wilsonian rhetoric of world peace as Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi dismissed comparisons of the initiative to the U.S. sponsored Marshall Plan stating it is "the product of inclusive cooperation, not a tool of geopolitics, and must not be viewed with an outdated Cold War mentality".<sup>13</sup> However the lesson from history is that the Marshall Plan was immediately followed by formation of a military alliance - NATO to counter Soviet influence.

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<sup>11</sup>Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy, Note 7

<sup>12</sup>"Marshall Plan, 1948", ('Our Documents' at US government website), available at URL: <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=82> (accessed on 25 Jun 15)

<sup>13</sup>Tian Shaohui, "Chronology of China's Belt and Road Initiative", (Xinhua, 28 Mar 15), available at URL: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-03/28/c\\_134105435.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-03/28/c_134105435.htm) (accessed on 19 Jun 15)

### China's Strategic Offensive

The present Chinese assertiveness in maritime disputes in East and South China Sea presents a remarkable shift from Deng Xiaoping's 24-character strategy that enjoined it to "...hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership."<sup>14</sup> This challenge to status quo of American influence in Indo-Pacific may be attributed to Mao's advocacy of 'Active Defence', which means "defence for the purpose of counter attacking and taking the offensive".<sup>15</sup> China has openly amalgamated 'Active Defence' in its recently released New Defence Strategy which sets out a goal of moving from "offshore waters defence" to "offshore waters defence and open seas protection".<sup>16</sup> This swing is reflective of Chinese confidence in their economic and military capacity to challenge the sole world superpower and become a global player in maritime affairs.

The present focus of Chinese leadership is the expansion of the PLAN both technologically and numerically. The spurt in development of guided missile destroyers, five new classes of modern conventional and nuclear submarines and steps towards aircraft-carrier operations are the fulfilment of earlier Chinese president Hu Jintao's dream of 2006 that "we should endeavour to build a powerful people's navy that can adapt to its historical mission during a new century and a new period."<sup>17</sup>

However this 'historical mission' is being countered by the 'US Pivot to Asia.' As US and China are economically coupled together in a complex mesh, the direct confrontation between the two is remote. Hence, the US is trying to rebalance its strategy by containing China economically through trade blocks like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and geopolitically through its regional alliances with Japan and wooing other

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<sup>14</sup>Jabin T Jacob, "China's 'Moral Code'," (*The Hindu- World View*, 01 Jul 15)

<sup>15</sup>Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific- Chinese Rise and Challenge to US Maritime Strategy*, (Naval Institute Press Annapolis, Maryland, 2013), pp 84-85

<sup>16</sup>Premvir Das, "Navy to Navy", (*Business Standard*, 15 Jun 15), available at URL: [http://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/premvir-das-navy-to-navy-115061501172\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/premvir-das-navy-to-navy-115061501172_1.html) (accessed on 25 Jun 15)

<sup>17</sup>Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, *Note 15*, pp 1-2

sceptical Chinese neighbours like India.<sup>18</sup> The MSR appears to be Chinese counter to this US Grand Strategy cloaked with rhetoric of peace and common development.

While Chinese investment appears to pacify its disturbed neighbours, its term and conditions are set to make them dependent in the long term. The recent revelation of disadvantaged loan terms and conditions, corruption and absence of relevant approvals in Colombo Port City project being built by China Communication Construction Company are a case in point.<sup>19</sup> China has also been criticised for supporting despotic powers in Africa in exchange of continuous support for unfair trade practices. Unlike the World Bank and ADB, Chinese led recently constituted AIIB promises investment without any political considerations. These policies bear a resemblance to Imperialist England and depict Chinese quest for not only economical but even strategic supremacy.

### **India's Economic Dilemma**

As the World economy continues to be in doldrums, the present Indian Government has to look hard for sources of investment to keep its promises of growth and poverty alleviation. Beijing with its big pockets and expertise in infrastructural projects appears as the destined solution provider. While China has emerged as India's biggest trading partner, the huge trade deficit has distorted the economic balance.<sup>20</sup> The top leadership, with 'Summit Diplomacy' and more, is trying its best to overcome the historical baggage and define new partnership. The MSR with promises of direct infrastructure investment appears to be a step in the right economic direction.

India has displayed eagerness for active economic engagement with China. It has become a founding member of Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and BRICS bank and a key player in joint

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<sup>18</sup>Gurpreet S Khurana, "China's 'Maritime Silk Road': beyond Economics", (Publication of National Maritime Foundation, 16 Apr 15), available at URL:

<http://www.maritimeindia.org/CommentaryView.aspx?NMFCID=8495> (accessed on 20 Jun 15)

<sup>19</sup>Peter Martin, "How to heat up lukewarm India-China relations", (East Asia Forum, 14 May 15), available at URL: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/05/14/how-to-heat-up-lukewarm-india-china-relations/> (accessed on 20 Jun 15)

<sup>20</sup>Special Report by Standard Chartered, Note 6

development of Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor from Kunming to Kolkata. Further, with half of its overseas trade moving through the South China Sea and large investments planned in Oil exploration and other maritime projects with Vietnam,<sup>21</sup> China needs to be engaged positively. A complete rejection of the MSR may jeopardise India's economic interests, especially if majority of South Asian and ASEAN countries become an integral part of it.

However Chinese economic penetration in South Asia comes at the cost of decreasing Indian influence. It is not only Beijing's huge investment in PoK, but its key economic support to Sri Lanka under erstwhile Mahinda Rajapaksa government that sent alarm bells ringing in India. China not only emerged as Sri Lanka's largest donor, it also started utilising Sri Lankan facilities for the PLAN logistics support.<sup>22</sup> As China woos Nepal and Burma with huge investment plans and surpasses India as a major financier of projects in most small South Asian countries, Indian influence in its

immediate neighbourhood is in danger.<sup>23</sup> The MSR may speed up the process unless India takes its own corrective steps.

### **India's Strategic Dilemma**

While the economic goals of the proposal are obvious, it is the issue of Strategic goals which has kept partner countries, especially India, guessing about its real intentions. The biggest concern about the MSR is the secrecy shrouding the proposal and no clear cut policy on its implementation. With China as the harbinger, the opacity seems to be intentional.

India is the only country with which China has still not resolved its boundary dispute, leading to frequent tensions between the two Armies. At present due to the PLA strength, Chinese infrastructure at Sino-India border and geographical limitations, China holds an upper hand in the land engagement. However in scenario of any large scale conflict, India has an option to throttle Chinese maritime trade through the IOR and cripple its

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<sup>21</sup>Premvir Das, Note 16

<sup>22</sup>Samam Kelegama, "China's growing reach in South Asia", (*East Asia Forum*, 25 Jun 14), available at URL: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/06/25/chinas-growing-reach-in-south-asia/> (accessed on 19 Jun 15)

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*



supply of fuel and other important resources. The MSR may reverse this by boosting PLAN strength and creating its own ‘outposts’ in the IOR. This will be a significant blow to India’s strategic strength against China.

On the other hand, China’s ‘all weather’ friendship with Pakistan by supporting it militarily, economically

and diplomatically displays its strategic intent against India. The handover of Gwadar, the deep-water port at the edge of Straits of Hormuz, to China Overseas Port Holdings for a 40-year operations agreement<sup>24</sup> asserts the idea that the MSR may be simply a euphemism for “String of Pearls”. A glance at its proposed route (refer Figure below)<sup>25</sup> around the Indian coast creates the fear of Indian encirclement.

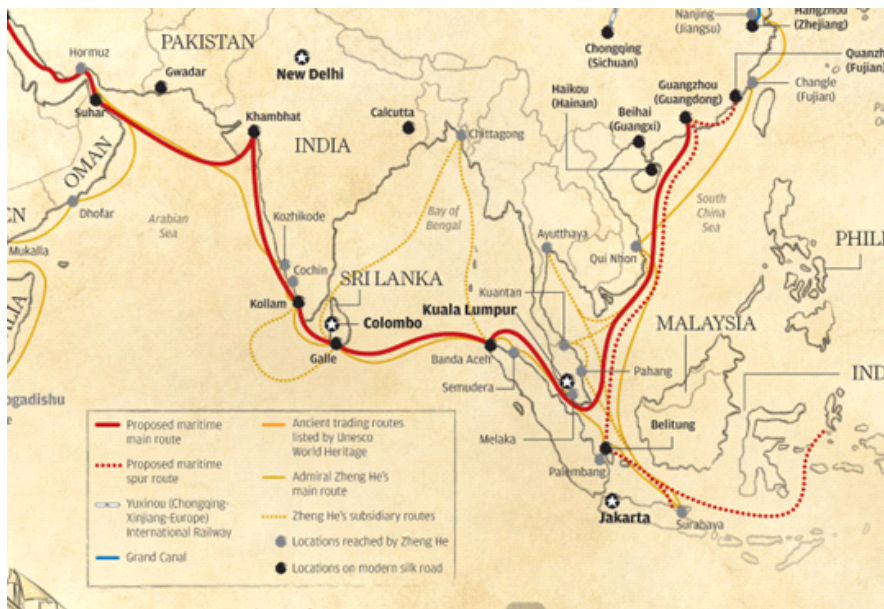


Fig. The Maritime Silk Road – Proposed Route.

<sup>24</sup>Sajjad Ashraf, “China link up an opportunity and a challenge for Pakistan”, (*East Asia Forum*, 02 Jun 15), available at URL: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/06/02/china-link-up-an-opportunity-and-a-challenge-for-pakistan/> (accessed on 19 Jun 15)

<sup>25</sup>“International Seminar on the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative”, (*China.org.cn*, 30 Jan 15) available at URL: <http://images.china.cn/attachement/jpg/site1007/20150130/001ec949c22b163589ea1e.jpg> (accessed on 19 Jun 15)

Naval power has been historically capitalised as diplomatic tool. China may use the MSR to strengthen its relations with partner countries and gradually bring them in its orbit of influence. The proposal may slowly be graduated to a collective security framework with China providing partner countries a 'common stake' in the security of its SLOCs.<sup>26</sup> India as a smaller player in such a pattern may become Beijing's junior geopolitical partner in the IOR.

### India's Options

As India weighs its options, China is already making huge strides in the correct economic and strategic direction. India cannot extract the economic advantages of the MSR without being affected by its strategic disadvantages. It has an option to give up its 'splendid isolation' and embrace one of the two power groups. The shift towards the US may provide the strategic umbrella to counter China as well as receive more advanced military support. However this opportunity may be exploited by the US to use New

Delhi as a direct tool for Chinese containment, bringing India into open conflict with Beijing. This will adversely affect Indian interests in present economic and geopolitical scenario. The Chinese focus is primarily on US as Zhu Feng, a leading Chinese commentator and professor at Nanjing University, puts it, "we don't consider India a very successful contender ...."<sup>27</sup> Further with conflicting economic interests, evident in patent issues and WTO summits, India cannot completely rely on the US for all its future requirements.

At the same time, India cannot quietly watch Chinese juggernaut rolling in its own backyard. As western economies roll back their global influence post GFC, India can face China only through self-reliance. New Delhi's impromptu response in the past to Beijing's clinical move in the IOR had definitely given advantage to China. However, China is perceived as a hegemonic power and India is always looked up to as a supportive nation. While China is using its economic leverage to make inroads, India can

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<sup>26</sup>Zorawar Daulet Singh, "Indian Perceptions of China's Maritime Silk Road Idea", (*Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 4 October-December 2014, pp. 133-148), available at URL:

[http://idsa.in/jds/8\\_4\\_2014\\_IndianPerceptionsofChinasMaritimeSilkRoad.html](http://idsa.in/jds/8_4_2014_IndianPerceptionsofChinasMaritimeSilkRoad.html) (accessed on 20 Jun 15)

<sup>27</sup>Peter Martin, Note 19

utilise its historical soft power with a mix of economic-strategic collaboration to maintain an upper hand.

The first and foremost requirement is to make a clear strategic plan which should actively propagate Indian interests instead of making passive response to Chinese moves. This needs a strong political will which is a possibility under the present leadership. New Delhi has recently made the right diplomatic moves in its immediate neighbourhood. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka reflects New Delhi's prominence to the IOR. President Maithripala Sirisena choosing India as his first foreign destination post swift political transition in Sri Lanka and signing of important economic and strategic agreements is indicative of changing environment.<sup>28</sup> India's overwhelming support to Nepal under 'Operation Maitri' and signing of the land-swap agreement with Bangladesh represents a resurgence in India's diplomacy.

## Conclusion

As alienation is no more an option in today's globalised world, the most effective tool to counter a resurgent China is to positively engage it. In the new government's quest of 'Make in India', the MSR can act as a breakthrough. It could effectively supplement navigation and transportation by linking it with projects such as BCIM economic corridor and India's own 'Sagarmala' project'.<sup>29</sup> India needs to amend the project as per its requirements and aim to use it as a platform for its progress.

It needs to simultaneously balance Beijing's increasing clout in the IOR by reasserting its credibility in the neighbourhood. A dynamic diplomacy and positive economic cooperation may be utilised as India shifts its policy to 'Act East' from 'Look East'. An active alliance with Japan, Australia and South Korea will further provide the required strategic boost to counter an aggressive China. In this environment, the Indian Navy will be looked upon to provide leadership role

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<sup>28</sup>Rupakjyoti Borah, "India's renewed push into the Indian Ocean", (*East Asia Forum*, 28 Apr 15), available at URL: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/04/28/indias-renewed-push-into-the-indian-ocean/> (accessed on 19 Jun 15)

<sup>29</sup>Gurpreet S. Khurana, "Why is India So Coy About China's Maritime Silk Road?", (*The Wire*, 09 Jun 15), available at URL: <http://thewire.in/2015/06/09/why-is-india-so-coy-about-chinas-maritime-silk-road/> ((accessed on 19 Jun 15)

in ensuring safe seas in the IOR. Its continuous expansion and engagement with friendly navies will provide the strategic depth to out-manoeuvre Beijing and blunt its assertiveness.

As China and the US compete, India can advance its national goals by

partially aligning as well as maintaining equidistance from both the powers. India needs to develop itself by all available means to meet global challenges, even if it involves taking a lesson from Deng Xiaoping that, "It doesn't matter whether a cat is white or black, so long as it catches mice."<sup>30</sup>



### ***About the Author***

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<sup>30</sup>John Ross, "Deng Xiaoping - the world's greatest economist", (China.org.cn, 22 Aug 14), available at URL : [http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2014-08/22/content\\_33303318.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2014-08/22/content_33303318.htm) (accessed on 20 Jun 15)