“One Belt One Road”: China at the Centre of the Global Geopolitics and Geo-economics?

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Guest Column by B R Deepak

Ever since being elected as the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in November 2012 and subsequently the President of China in March 2013, Xi Jinping has put forth grandiose ideas like ‘Chinese Dream’ and ‘One Belt and One Road’.

The former aims to ‘realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’, by realising the two centenary goals, i.e. to double the 2010 GDP per capita income and build a moderately prosperous society by 2021 when the Communist Party of China marks its 100th anniversary; and second goal is to turn China into an all-around modern and socially advanced country by 2049 when the People’s Republic marks its centenary. The later refers to setting up of a geopolitical and geo-economic Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) connecting China to Europe by land and sea.

These grandiose initiatives have been scantily reported and least debated in India and may be the world at large. Nevertheless, have raised hopes as well as suspicion as to what China is up to. And that even if silk routes existed in ancient times, but what is the relevance of such initiatives in modern times? And also whether such initiatives are in sync with China’s foreign policy goals such as multi polarity, no hegemony, common security etc. or an antidote to the US foreign policy goals like ‘pivot to Asia’ or ‘Trans Pacific Partnership’ (TPP)? Or, is China challenging the US hegemony and rewriting the rules of geopolitical and economic architecture?

The ‘One Belt one Road’ concept is rooted in history as there existed an overland Silk Route and a MSR that connected China to countries across Asia, Africa and Europe. In the last three decades of reforms, China has built a network of highways and railroads from north to south.
and from east to less developed western and south western regions. Having achieved that, China sees an opportunity to link the hinterland with south Asia, Europe, Africa and even the Americas.

The concept was first proposed by Xi Jinping during a speech at Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan on 7 September 2013 when he said that ‘To forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation and expand development in the Euro-Asia region, we should take an innovative approach and jointly build an ‘economic belt’ along the silk road. This will be a great undertaking benefitting the people of all countries along the route.’ Xi proposed that traffic connectivity need to be improved so as to open the strategic regional thoroughfare from the Pacific Ocean to the Baltic Sea, and gradually move toward the set-up of a network of transportation that connects Eastern, Western and Southern Asia. Chinese President also urged the regional members to promote local-currency settlement so as to improve their immunity to financial risks and their global competitiveness (XHN 2013).’ Undoubtedly, the economic connectivity is the heart of the matter for which Chinese President Xi Jinping also announced the establishment of a Silk Road Fund with 40 billion US dollars to support infrastructure investments in countries involved; however, the notion is equally significant strategically as it will imply common security or security dilemmas at regional and trans-regional levels.

The initiative of building MSR was proposed by Xi Jinping during his visit to Indonesia in October 2013 in order to deepen economic and maritime links. The MSR begins in Fuzhou in Southeast China’s Fuzhou province and heads south into the ASEAN nations, crosses Malacca Strait and turns west to countries along the Indian Ocean before meeting the land based Silk Road in Venice via the Red Sea and Mediterranean. Under the ambit of MSR, China plans to build hard and soft infrastructure from Indo-Pacific to Africa, including transport, energy, water management, communication, earth monitoring, economic and social infrastructure.

China has sought the participation of countries and regions touching the ‘One Belt and One Road ‘zone. For example most of the ASEAN countries with whom China has a trade volume of 400 billion dollars has welcomed the idea as it sets to build a single market economic community by 2015. As far as South Asia is concerned except India most of the smaller nations have also welcomed the idea as they perceive the initiative as a great opportunity to comprehensively deepen economic and people to people relations.

Why has India remained silent to China’s invitation even if the former has underscored the importance of India as far as the initiative is concerned? Should security analysts and sceptics see these initiatives as part of ‘strategic encirclement’ of India policy, and club it with China’s similar but smaller initiatives such as China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the prospective Trans-Himalayan Economic Zone of Cooperation with Nepal and Bhutan, and the BCIM Economic Corridor that connects India’s northeast to China’s southwest, Bangladesh and Myanmar? Is it because of this ‘strategic encirclement’ of India that India is going slow on the BCIM-Economic Corridor even if it was officially signed during Premier Li Keqiang’s India visit in 2013 and falls in the ambit of ‘one belt’ initiative? The security establishment and strategic community have always maintained that India cannot give China access to its sensitive areas. But, can the new government in office think differently on the issue?
Shennon Tiezzi (2014) associate editor of the *Diplomat* and Chen Dingding (2014) has drawn parallels between ‘One Belt one Road’ to the ‘Marshal Plan’ that established the US as a ‘bona fide super power’. The Chinese scholars including Prof. Shi Ze (2014) of the *China Institute of International Studies*, however, have denounced the western criticism of the initiative and have maintained that the policy of ‘Three Nos” that is non interference in the internal affairs of other nations; not to seek the so called ‘sphere of influence’; and not to strive for hegemony or dominance equally applies to the “One Belt One Road” policy (Shi Zi 2014). The initiative indeed is larger than the Marshal plan as it attempts to encompass the entire world, the economic value of which could reach whopping 21 trillion US dollars (Shennon Tiezzi 2014). Will this grandiose concept succeed and realise not only the Chinese dream but the dreams of various countries and people around the world? Or will it give rise to geostrategic rivalries around the world and cold or hot war with the sole and declining superpower of the world?

It appears that if grandiose initiatives such as Asia Infrastructural Development Bank (AIDB), Silk Road Fund, MSR and most recent *Free Trade Area* of the Asia Pacific (FTAAP) has put China at the centre of the global geopolitics and geo-economics, and has forced the US to scramble for a leadership role at least in the region if not globe; the same has challenged the US hegemony in the region including the US notions of ‘pivot to Asia’ and Trans Pacific Partnership which is yet to take off. It remains to be seen, how India approaches both the camps as for now it is out of the ambit of US as well as Chinese initiatives. The Chinese have realised that the US would not be supportive of Beijing's renewed drive as it was during the formative years of reforms and open door policy in the late 1970s. The US sees China as the only potentially qualified rival to the US hegemony. China also believes that if there are countries that restrict China’s maritime ambitions these are the US, Japan and India (Zhang 2009). Under such circumstance, will India maintain its strategic autonomy or lean to one side, the choice would be difficult to make.

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References:


