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Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Thu, 09/06/2018 - 13:12

Paper No. 6422 Dated 6-Sept-2018

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China's Maritime Silk Road projects underway in the last two years emerges as a direct strategic and military challenge to the Indo Pacific Security Template adopted by the United States, India and Japan as it aims to establish a China-dominated maritime grid spanning the maritime global commons of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean region.

Security and stability in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean Region are essential imperatives for the overall security and stability of the vast Indo Pacific Region spanning the Western Pacific and encompassing the Western Indian Ocean. China has already been successful in converting the South China Sea into a regional and global flashpoint and now by its attempts for an intrusive presence in the Indian Ocean is likely to generate similar 'flashpoint contours'.

The United States and India along with Japan and Australia have legitimate security stakes in ensuring the freedom of navigation and unimpeded access in the global commons that constitute the vast maritime expanses of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Strategic convergences which flow from this strategic convergence should bind the United States, India, Japan and Australia to band together and ensure that the 'freedom of the high seas' is ensured.

China's Maritime Silk Road enterprise is not an economic response but a strategic and military response to the United States 'Strategic Pivot to Asia Pacific' and India's 'Look East Policy' assuming more proactive contours as 'Act East Policy' incorporating Indian Navy presence in the South China Sea and Western Pacific. China if it was a responsible member of group of Major Global Powers should have collaborated with them in maintaining security and stability in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Regrettably, its demonstrated track record was the opposite and hence invited countermeasures.

China forgets that the above-mentioned strategic responses by the United States and India and which find equal resonance with Japan and Australia were the logical responses to China's not so benign military rise and China's aims to evict the United States from the Western Pacific and a double encirclement of India both in the Himalayan Borders in the North and open a new maritime flank in the South in the Indian Ocean.

In an overall calibrated maritime strategy China commenced its opening moves in the South China Sea in the closing years of the last decade and is now assiduously engaged in challenging the status quo in the Indian Ocean Region. China's track record in illegal military occupation of the South China Sea by aggressive military brinkmanship and over-militarisation there has put the Major Global Powers on notice in terms of China's real strategic intentions.

China's 'Full Spectrum Dominance' of the South China Sea not only endangers the survival of US Allies in the region like Japan and South Korea but also of Vietnam and the Philippines which have suffered unprovoked Chinese aggression in the form of their island territories being forcibly occupied and transformed into fortified Chinese military bases.

China's intrusive naval presence in the Indian Ocean commenced with its participation in international naval patrols in the Gulf of Aden to prevent Somali piracy. Soon under cover of these naval patrols China added prowling of the Indian Ocean in the Arabian Sea segment of Chinese nuclear submarines. Surely, Chinese nuclear submarines were not required to fight Somali pirates.

China also displays double standards in terms of designation of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. China scoffs at any attempts to rename the South China Sea as it denotes China's sovereignty over this international waterway but has no qualms in making demands that the Indian Ocean be renamed as presumably there is no 'Chinese Ocean'.

With Chinese naval ambitions clear in terms of its strategy to dominate the Indian Ocean in much the same way as it has perpetrated in the South China Sea alarm bells should be ringing primarily in Washington and in New Delhi, besides Western Europe and Asian capitals.

China's Maritime Silk Road blueprint poses a bigger strategic challenge to Indo Pacific Security when to its maritime grid are added the North-South Belt & Road strategic feeders like the China Pakistan Economic Corridor and China's push for a parallel Corridor emanating

from Yunnan and traversing the length of Myanmar. These corridors are duplicitously termed as Economic Corridors aimed at economic development of the host countries but in actual effect they are Strategic Highways giving China access to the Indian Ocean through the North Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal.

China's Maritime Silk Road project is intended to add flesh and substance to China's global maritime ambitions as enshrined in China's Maritime Strategy Doctrine unveiled in 2015. China realised that China devoid of China's naval presence in 'Distant Seas' can never aspire to demand the recognition and respect of being a Global Power.

China's burning ambition to emerge as a Global Power and seek 'Strategic Equivalence' with the United States stand discussed in Chapters 12 to 14 of my Book: 'China-India Military Confrontation: 21st Century Perspectives (2016)

China adopting the old colonial British practise of global naval presence via the establishment of logistics refuelling stations at strategic naval locations and control of strategic choke points initially put into place its naval strategy of 'String of Pearls' which the Indian strategic community viewed it as the encirclement of India. Strategic encirclement of India it was but China had a larger strategic design in the initial stages itself.

China's long term strategic thinking surpasses those of United States and India and this can be gleaned from a documented fact that China soon after 1949 initiated preparatory moves for China acquiring nuclear submarines despite the fact that at that stage China had not even mastered the intricacies of producing a nuclear bomb. It is with such a background that the United States, India, Japan and West European countries should at this stage be wide awake to the long-term Chinese strategic naval ambitions.

Emphasis is not required to highlight how critical it is that the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean which will see the main traverse of China's Maritime Silk Road remain as free global commons permitting free flow of maritime trade and traffic unimpeded by controls sought to be established like China has attempted to impose in the South China Sea. How the major powers like the United States, India and Japan should proceed ahead in this direction will be discussed later on in this Paper. But first, a few notable observations need to be made.

China's Maritime Silk Road has not drawn any notable support from any advanced major Powers whose trade and commerce use the sea-lanes that pass through these maritime expanses. India stands out so far as the notable abstention in lending its support to the China Maritime Silk Road and also the China Pakistan Economic Corridor. Indian PM Modi even at international meets in China has refused to budge from India's refusal as this has severe strategic implications for India,

India should never lend its support to China's such encircling projects despite any political overtures from China.

The second notable point is that economically viable and strong Asian nations along the maritime and land routes of China's so-called

economic development routes have joined China's One Belt One Road projects. Asian nations like Pakistan, Myanmar, Maldives and Sri Lanka have been exploited by China with massive investments for associated infrastructure but at exorbitant interest rates pulling these countries into severe 'Debt Traps' converting these countries into Chinese colonial entities like Pakistan.

China's establishment of a naval base at Djibouti is a case in point as to the evolving and expanding blueprint of Chinese Maritime Strategy.

China's access and investments in these ports like Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka and in Maldives facilitate use of such ports as logistics support staging points for the Chinese Navy to expand its naval sway over these maritime expanses. With passage of time and these host nations drowning further into the Chinese 'Debt Trap' Chinese demands for berthing of Chinese Navy ships and nuclear submarines would be an expected demand.

Another point of note in relation to the Chinese Maritime Silk Road geographical configuration has been enlarging by the day with China enticing more and more economically weak nations into its fold.

Moving to the strategic implications of China's Maritime Silk Road on the security and stability of the Indo Pacific let us first begin briefly with the impact on the United States which is not only even now as the sole Superpower straddling the globe but also has vital geopolitical and geostrategic stakes in the Western Pacific more pointedly.

China's associated moves in the Western Pacific impacting the United States stand analysed in a number of my SAAG Papers in the past. Suffice it to state that China has tried to achieve multiple strategic objectives by illegal military occupation of the South China Sea and ensuring 'Full Spectrum Dominance' militarily. China has managed to limit US Air-Sea Doctrine of close-in military interventions against China. China has achieved the military capability for initial impeding of US Navy transference of its Fleets from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean and vice versa. China is in a position to strangle Japanese and South Korean economies. Lastly, this puts in place an overall cumulative Chinese strategy of prompting the United States to make a military exit from the Western Pacific.

The impact on India of this Chinese strategy encompasses a much wider strategic field because China is in direct military confrontation with India along India's Northern Borders with China Occupied Tibet. With India no military pushover for China there is a need for China to open another front against India on its Southern Flank, namely the Indian Ocean. China's intrusive and expanding naval presence in the Indian Ocean facilitated by Pakistan's complicity and reinforced by China's CPEC project is in effect turning the Western Flanks of India's security.

China is more strategically concerned that the Indian Ocean unlike India's Himalayan Frontiers is one area where India finds strong support from the United States, Japan, and Australia and West European countries in terms of strategic convergences. All these countries support India's efforts to ensure that the Indian Ocean does not get transformed into a maritime expanse where China succeeds in establishing naval dominance. This strategic convergence that India enjoys of Global Major Powers is extremely galling for China. Chapter 7 of my Book

referred above examines this aspect in detail.

This enrages China even more when it is considered that China has not been able to muster support from any leading Major Powers around the globe. Obviously, these Powers are fully aware that China's stated motives for the Maritime Silk Road do not match China's underlying strategic intentions as borne out by China's demonstrated record in the South China Sea.

The crucial question that next arises is if Indo Pacific Security is in danger of being adversely impacted by China's grandiose designs of spreading its tentacles both on the High Seas and on the Central Asian landmass, then what logical steps can the United States, India and Japan and Australia can undertake to checkmate China?

With Russia acquiescing with China's military adventurism camouflaged in economic terms simply because it pits China against the United States---a 'No Cost Low Risk' option for Russia, no assistance can be expected from Russia even when China is muscling into Russian turf in the Central Asian Republics.

Strong imperatives therefore exist for the United States, India, Japan and Australia besides other Asian nations on China's peripheries to cooperate intensely to ensure that both the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean are kept free from any sort of Chinese-generated turbulence or disruptive activities. It also implies that China's propensity to exploit the economic weaknesses of smaller nations in the region is not allowed to fructify. Capacity-building of such nations both in the economic spheres and the military realm would be a priority.

The China Threat to peace and stability in the Indo Pacific Region manifesting itself in China's aggressive moves in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean requires a strong combination of geopolitical, military and economic responses by the United States, India, Japan and Australia as the relatively more powerful nations. These responses need to be coordinated and integrated for a powerful cumulative deterrence.

The Quadrilateral Initiative amongst these four countries is one excellent move which combines the geopolitical, military and economic strengths of the United States, India, Japan and Australia. In this grouping India has been diffident weighed down by Indian policy establishment's deference to China's sensitivities. This should be immediately dispensed with as correspondingly China has never respected India's strategic sensitivities.

The United States and Japan are engaged in FONOPS Naval patrols in the South China Sea and West European countries and Australia are soon to join in. India does maintain a rotational naval presence in these waters but it is held back from joining in Joint Naval Patrolling. Perhaps here too India's diffidence because of the Chinese Factor overhang, India could join in if the United Nations takes a lead in organising international patrolling of the South China Sea.

Repeated many times in my past writings is the simple fact that India cannot maintain the Indian Ocean as “Indian” within its own naval capabilities. India needs the United States, Japan and Australian Navies besides those of France and UK to ensure that the Indian Ocean is kept free of China’s domination strategies.

While the United States has put into operation geopolitical and military moves to cater for the emerging China Threat in international maritime expanses of the Indo Pacific, India is yet to be fully seized with proactively responding to the Chinese naval threat on its Southern Flank. India leads long lead times to build up her military strengths dissipated by India’s neglect of the nation’s ‘War Preparedness’ by the previous ruling dispensation. India also stands mistakenly deceived by China’s spasmodic political reachout to India confusing India’s responses.

In Conclusion, I would like to emphasise that India as the pivot in the Indo Pacific Security Template led by the United States needs to be alive to playing its pivotal role to the hilt. Playing a pivotal role expected from her by the United States and India’s other Asian strategic partners involve a necessary dispensing of India’s strategic diffidence in coming to grips squarely with threats to Indo Pacific Security. Needless to state, that India is more affected by emerging threats. And, the last point in conclusion is that India does not lose her ‘strategic autonomy’ by strategic partnering against emerging threats.

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