

# **Maritime Silk Road and the Geopolitics of the Indian ocean**

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## **Maritime Silk Road**

AS we know, more than two thousand years ago the people of Eurasia explored routes of trade exchanges that connected the major civilizations of Asia, Africa, Europe. The land route and sea route were called the Silk Road. In recent years, the Chinese government got inspiration from the ancient Silk Road, and proposed Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road ( BRI ), which have attracted close attentions from the world.

In October 2013, during the state visit to Indonesia, Chinese President Xi Jinping put forward the initiative of building the“Maritime Silk Road”(MSR). He said that China is willing to strengthen maritime cooperation with ASEAN countries, and hopes jointly build the MSR. In the speech, President Xi expressed his willingness to build a closer China-ASEAN community of shared future.<sup>1</sup> The MSR is closely related to "Silk Road Economic Belt", which was firstly proposed by President Xi in Kazakhstan in September 2013. BRI aims to form a new pattern of all-round opening to the outside along with China Eastern part city and western part city. And China hopes to jointly create community of shared interests, community of destiny and community of the responsibility for political mutual trust, economic integration and cultural inclusiveness with relevant countries.

As an important part of the Belt and Road Initiative, MSR is the public goods China offers to the world and major platform for international development cooperation. China wants to join hands with the relevant countries to promote the policy, infrastructure, trade, financial and people to people connectivity<sup>2</sup>, especially with the sea power. Since China consider the ocean as a bond that connects the countries along the MSR together, the countries adhering to the principle of

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<sup>1</sup> 《习近平谈治国理政》(第 1 卷), 外文出版社 2018 年版, 第 292-295 页。

<sup>2</sup> Issued by the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, with State Council authorization, “Vision and actions on jointly building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Maritime Silk Road”, March 2015.

"co-consultation, co-construction and co-sharing", are participating in the wave of cooperation. Therefore, we could chase these blue opportunities.

In recent years, maritime connectivity has become more convenient, and maritime cooperation in multiple fields has achieved more remarkable success. The MSR is a platform for national development and regional cooperation. In terms of geographical scope, the key direction of MSR is from China East coastal ports through the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean, extending to Europe. Although the MSR has similarities with the ancient MSR in terms of geographical scope, they are completely different in strategic connotations and construction contents.<sup>3</sup> MSR is promoted by diversified cooperation mechanisms. It focuses on the five key points, which are policy communication, facility connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bond.<sup>4</sup> Through cooperation, MSR aims to establish a global economic and trade cooperation network that could benefit ports, cities and countries.

In fact, countries along the MSR have different conditions, different development strategies. Many people think these differences as challenges to coordination and cooperation. On the contrary, China sees a great potential and space for cooperation. In the circumstances, it is very important to strengthen policy communication. Only by coordinating policies firstly, could countries work out plans for regional cooperation and solve related issues, then they could eliminate barriers and achieve mutual interests.

Infrastructure connectivity is the basis of development for the countries along the route. Backward infrastructure construction is always a critical weakness that slows down the pace of economic recovery. Therefore, facility connectivity should be a priority for MSR. In detail, countries should push port infrastructure construction, build transportation channels, increase sea routes, and enhance information technology cooperation on maritime issue. When carrying out the projects, we should

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<sup>3</sup> 贾益民、许培源：《21世纪海上丝绸之路研究报告》（2017），社科文献出版社2017年版，第2页。

<sup>4</sup> Issued by the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, with State Council authorization, "Vision and actions on jointly building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Maritime Silk Road", March 2015.

take into account the impact of climate change, thus promote green infrastructure construction.

Optimizing the trade and investment environment and eliminating trade barriers. Countries along the MSR have large population, strong demand, and huge market. It is the common desire of all countries to enhance trade, by which they could sell more goods, import advanced equipment and enrich their people. After the MSR carrying out, China strives to improve trade facilitation and remove trade barriers to build a more attractive commercial environment within the region. China hopes to expand mutual investment areas, promote cooperation in marine-product farming, ocean engineering technology, environmental protection industries, marine tourism and other fields.<sup>5</sup> Chinese government welcomes companies from the world to invest in China, and encourage Chinese company to participate in infrastructure construction in other countries, some of which have built industrial parks there. Chinese officials support Chinese companies' localization, which could boost the local economy, thus benefit both sides.

Finance is the blood of the economy, and financial integration is an important measure to promote the MSR connection. Financial integration could not only support the construction of the real economy, but also promote multilateral cooperation. China hopes to deepen financial cooperation, and manages to build a stable currency, investment and financial system. China makes efforts to reach financial regulation cooperation, encourages the signing of Mous in bilateral financial regulation.

Amity between people holds the key to sound relations between states, and the people-to-people relation promote mutual understanding. The MSR is not only the interconnection of infrastructure, rules and regulations, but also personnel exchanges. The essence of the connectivity is the closeness of people. Therefore, China always support sport exchanges, and encourages states along the MSR to bid to host international events. Since the MSR proposed, China and the states along the route have paid more attention to cultural exchanges. The increasing cultural exchanges

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<sup>5</sup> Issued by the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, with State Council authorization, "Vision and actions on jointly building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Maritime Silk Road", March 2015.

witness closer relationship among states and lay a solid foundation for the development of MSR.

### **The Geopolitics of the Indian ocean**

The Indian Ocean is the most important link among Asia, Africa, Australia, and Europe. It is also played as a shipping trade route across the ocean from the East Coast of Africa and the Arab world to Southeast Asia. The sailors master the monsoon, which could help the ships transit significant distance. Sea route is more important than land route, because they carry more goods and more economic. When the world came into the globalization era, the sea route is still important. Unlike the Atlantic Ocean and Pacific Ocean, The Indian Ocean is an economic zone. Most of the goods rely on container transportation, and the Indian Ocean is the most important sea route for the world's container traffic.<sup>6</sup> The economy of Asia Pacific countries is booming, the middle class is growing, and they need all kinds of goods. Therefore, the sea route of Indian Ocean will be more important in future.

Energy politics plays an important role in international arena, especially oil resources are more and more crucial. Since the 1960s, the energy structure of European and American countries has undergone great changes, oil replaced coal as the main energy. Although countries have strengthened their investment in the field of new energy in recent years, oil and natural gas will still play an important role in energy market for a long time. The Indian Ocean region has enormous resources, especially oil and nature gas, It contains two thirds of world proven oil, and one third of the world's natural gas.<sup>7</sup>

The sea route and the energy resources are the two key factors promote the position of Indian Ocean in Cold War. In the 21st century, Indian Ocean have attracted more and more attention from major countries. Especially with the advancement of globalization, countries cannot ignore the economic value and strategic significance of the Indian Ocean. The emerging economic growth of South East Asia countries, the

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<sup>6</sup> Robert D.Kaplan, *Monsoon: the Indian Ocean and the future of American Power*, Random House, 2011, p.7.

<sup>7</sup> Manoj Gupta, *Indian Ocean Region: Maritime Regimes for Regional Cooperation*, Springer, 2010,p.3.

steady rise of India, and increasing exports of raw materials from developing countries, has recalibrated the Indian Ocean strategic importance in world politics. When we consider the economic issue and trade route within the context of serious security problem in Indian Ocean, it is no doubt that major naval power and regional power has put Indian Ocean into a priority place, and some maritime power has already strategic planning.

With shift of the international strategic environment, the focus of major powers is shifting from the "Atlantic-Pacific" to the "Indo-Pacific". From a geopolitical perspective, the Indian Ocean plays an important role in China's foreign strategy. The rise of China and India in the Indo-Pacific push the Indian ocean more important. And U.S. has strengthened strategic presence in the Indian Ocean region.

### **1. Great power competition has intensified.**

In recent years, the U.S., India, E.U. have increased their strategic investment in the Indian Ocean, trying to shape a regional order of the Indian Ocean that is conducive to their own interest.

In new era, the U.S. Indian Ocean strategy is obviously subordinate to their global strategy. U.S. strategic goal is to maintain hegemony in the world, and prevent regional powers threaten its hegemony. The U.S. has two main strategic goals in the Indian Ocean, one is to ensure the security of energy shipping channel, and the other is control strategic island or military base around the Indian Ocean.<sup>8</sup> U.S. strategic interests in Indian Ocean are maintain dominant position, protect shipping lines, and control choke points.<sup>9</sup> When Obama Administration pivoted to Asia, U.S. has given more attention to East Asia, and wanted to continue to upgrade its relation with India. U.S. hold that China's rising influence in the Indian Ocean may change the strategic structure of Indian Ocean, thus U.S. should take measures to prevent China's expansion.

After Trump took office, the U.S paid more attention to Indian Ocean. In 2017,

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew S. Erickson, Ladwig C. Walter III b & Justin D. Mikolay, "Diego Garcia and the United States' Emerging Indian Ocean Strategy," *Asian Security*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2010

<sup>9</sup> Michael J. Green and Andrew Shearer, "Defining U.S. Indian Ocean Strategy", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol.35, No.2, 2012.

the Trump administration released "National Security Strategy", pointing out that the "Indo-Pacific" is a priority of U.S. foreign policy. And U.S. see the Indo-Pacific as most populous and economically dynamic part of the world. U.S. hope India to be a defense partner, and also seek to increase cooperation with Japan and Australia.<sup>10</sup> In 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense released the "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report". In this report, U.S emphasizing the importance of Its allies and partner countries in the implementation of "Indo-Pacific" strategy. U.S also actively develops relations with countries on the northern coast of the Indian Ocean, for example U.S. try to improve relation with Southeast Countries like Indonesia. Indonesia is the largest country in Southeast Asia and a member of the G20, and Indonesia plays an important role in countering terrorism and piracy in the Indian Ocean region.

**India.** In the imperial era, European maritime power controlled Indian Ocean, and the British was a leading power. Indian Ocean became a sort of British lake, British not only had the impact on sea and Island, it also controlled the coastline area. After British retreated from Indian continent, India government hoped to get the position like British In Indian Ocean. Some of the Indian strategic analysis like Panikkar, consider that India should put more budget on coastline security, and India should play a important role in Indian Ocean.<sup>11</sup> In cold war era, India hoped to build up blue water navy, but actually India put more effort on land border. Indian navy focused on the secondary work, provided support to land force.

After Cold war, Indian government started the economy reform, and India reconsidered the Indian ocean. In 21st century, Indian politicians and strategists have launched maritime strategy based on the national foundation and development direction. Indian official issued report, Indian Maritime Doctrine (2004), The Indian Navy`s Vision document (2006), Freedom to Use the Seas: India`s Maritime Military Strategy(2007). These reports outlined India`s "maritime strategic vision", as India hoped to extend its scope.<sup>12</sup> India is extending its activities to the South China Sea

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<sup>10</sup> The White House, Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "Strongman, Constable, or Free-Rider? India's "Monroe Doctrine" and Indian Naval Strategy", *Comparative Strategy*, Vol.28, No.4,2008,pp.332-335.

<sup>12</sup> The Indian government issued the maritime outlook(SAGAR, Security and Growth for All in the Region) in

and the edge of the Pacific Ocean to the east, crossing the Suez Canal to the west and bordering the Mediterranean Sea..

Under the guidance of the maritime strategy, India has actively strengthened military cooperation with neighboring countries and joint maritime exercises to enhance its influence on maritime issues. Firstly, India improves maritime security cooperation with the U.S. In cold war time, Indians was conscious that U.S Navy rule the wave in Indian Ocean, and India could not forget U.S. Fleet deployment to the Bay of Bengal in 1971. But In 21<sup>st</sup> century, India has changed attitude toward U.S., India thought U.S is not a threat , and U.S. could play a positive role in Indian Ocean security Issues.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, Indian has changed its attitude toward intervening Indian Ocean issue, and emphasized "active" role for regional security. Thirdly, India accelerates naval modernization.<sup>14</sup> After India economy open up in 1990s, India has got a steady growth. India has more budget to allocate to navy. Indian Navy has purchased new weapons from U.S., Russia, France and Israel., India hopes to be a strong power in Indian Ocean Region.

**EU.** EU's perception of the Indo-Pacific has gone through the process of "Indo-Pacific" replacing "Asia-Pacific", and participatory is the label of the EU Indo-Pacific strategy .The increasingly important strategic position of the Indian Ocean, the role of a third-party force outside China and the United States competition, the maintenance of strategic choke points security, and the response to Non-Traditional Security have driven for EU Indo-Pacific policy. EU's interest in Indian Ocean are expanding economic interest and ensuring shipping line security. EU wants more strategic autonomy in Indian ocean affairs, but EU do not seek hegemony in Indian Ocean. In recent years, EU has upgrade the relations with Indian ocean maritime power, India, Australia,etc.<sup>15</sup> And EU dispatches the fleet to Indian Ocean, takes part in escort operation.

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2015. S. Jaishankar, *The India Way*, Happer Collins Publishers, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Prakash Gopal, "Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific: The Role of the US and its Allies", *Maritime Affairs*,, 2017, Vol. 13, No. 1.

<sup>14</sup> C.Raja.Mohan, *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific*, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp.57-68.

<sup>15</sup> Garima Mohan, "A European Strategy for the Indo-Pacific," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol.43, No.4, 2020; European Commision, "The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," 16, Sep, 2021.

## **2. Non-Traditional Security issues are still prominent.**

In current security situation, Non-Traditional Security issues seriously threaten the international stability. Indian Ocean is world most important oil reserve region and shipping trade route, it is vulnerability due to various Non-Traditional Security issues. The Non-Traditional Security factors in the Indian Ocean include piracy, terrorism, drugs, climate change, and natural disasters etc. In Indian Ocean, most of the Non-Traditional Security challenge are transnational, thus it needs more countries to cooperate.

Indian Ocean is a traditional trade route for local people. Piracy emerged since the trade route existed. The areas where piracy problems occur in the Indian Ocean are mainly the Gulf of Aden and Malacca strait.<sup>16</sup> In general, poverty is seen as principal reason for the person to piracy. If the poverty coupled with the serious unemployment, more and more people would go risk. In Somalia, the long period of internal conflict had made the economic situation worse. The situation caused the young people unemployed, and they came together to rob the commerce ship. In recent years, more and more commerce ships pass through choke points such as the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz etc. Pirate gangs launched multiple hijackings around 2010 in Somalia Coast, they earned ransom by capturing commerce ship. However, after the international community's active anti-piracy operation, Somalia coast has witnessed dramatic drop of the pirate criminal. And the situation also better in strait of Malacca, because the Southeast countries come together patrolling the sea line.

The Indian Ocean is the important sea route for drug smuggling. In recent years, some Indian ocean countries has been ranked as the top of the world largest drug supplier. Some drugs via sea route go to Europe. We need to notice two points: First, sea shipping route via the Indian Ocean is safer than land for drug transportation; second, Asian and African countries are important drug markets in recent years, and they can be reached by sea transportation via India Ocean.

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<sup>16</sup> Aditi Chatterjee, Non-traditional Maritime Security Threats in the Indian Ocean Region, *Maritime Affairs*, 2014, Vol.10, No.2,2014,pp.79-81.



In the past decade, we can see some terrorist launch the attack at sea. On the one hand, the terrorist attack the military target, notably is U.S warship Cole attacked in Aden in 2000. on the other hand, terrorist attack the civilian person from the sea. At the same time, some countries along Indian Ocean are unstable, their government could not control the situation, and this provide the terrorist space to hide and act. In the Arabian Sea, we have witness numerous maritime terrorist attack. The most powerful terrorist association are al-Qaeda, "Islamic State". Especially, after gaining a foothold in Middle East, the "Islamic State" try to infiltrate the South Asia and Southeast Asia.

The Indian Ocean disasters are mainly divided to natural disaster and man-made disaster. Natural disaster include earthquake, tsunamis, hurricane, climate change, etc. In 2004, the strong earthquake happened at the intersection of the Indian Ocean plate and the Eurasian plate triggered by a large-scale tsunami, affecting many parts of the Indian Ocean. It caused huge human casualties and massive property damage. In recent years, the sea level rise due to the climate change, and the Indian Ocean island countries face serious problems. If tsunamis and hurricanes are unavoidable disaster, man-made disaster such as oil spills pose equally threats to the Indian Ocean. Indian Ocean is the busiest oil shipping route, it has thousands of supertankers via Indian Ocean to East Asia or Europe. And with the improvement of shipping technology, the supertanker could carry more and more oil. But the Indian Ocean is unsafe. When the pirate gangs attack the supertanker, it could make the huge crude oil spills. And if the supertanker sinks, the Indian Ocean will be polluted. We should point out that if the supertanker clashed in the choke points like the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca, the situation could be worse, narrow channel of the strait may be blocked. It is directly interrupting the transportation of cargo.

**3. social environment of some countries in the Indian Ocean still unstable , and the countries hope to improve the economy. The Indian Ocean Region countries hope life better and better.**

The Indian Ocean region is one of the insecure region. The countries in this region have great differences in politics, economy, culture, etc. Many countries have

complex domestic problems, such as political conflict, separatism, extremism, etc. In particular, the political turmoil and internal conflicts have not only lagged their own development, but also affected outside confidence in investment, and hindered stability. The military intervention and arms assistance of major powers outside the region made regional security more complex. If we do less efforts, the instability in Horn of Africa, West Asia, may spread to other parts of Indian Ocean. Competition among the internal power make the development more difficult. For example, Iran and Saudi Arabia, India and Pakistan all want to be at the high table in Indian Ocean region arena.

At the same time, most of the countries in Indian Ocean Region are developing countries, the potential is huge. They are imperative to achieve economic development, hope to meet the living needs for its people. Especially, the countries face more challenge after pandemic, they hope to improve economy, their people want to have better life. Therefore ,they want to upgrade economic cooperation with the Indian Ocean countries and outside countries.

Among the countries in Indian Ocean region, Australian economy level is relatively high, but its economic scale is not big. Australia located on the edge of Indian Ocean, which cannot drive the development of the Indian Ocean region. U.S. is the most powerful country in the world, and has the most powerful military in Indian Ocean. After the pandemic, U.S. takes more attention on domestic issue, and does not have enough determination to cooperate with the Indian Ocean countries. Even on vaccine aid, U.S. failed to supply public goods in Indian Ocean.

China is the largest developing country in the world, which hopes to join hands with the Indian Ocean countries and boost the post-pandemic recovery. The MSR pursues the mutual development, and mutual benefits, and hopes to take advantage of development experience to share with Indian Ocean.