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IMPLICATIONS OF THE MARITIME SILK ROAD INITIATIVE ON THE MARITIME GLOBAL COMMONS

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JCSP 46

Service Paper

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

JCSP 46 – PCEMI 46
2019 – 2020

SERVICE PAPER - ÉTUDE MILITAIRE

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ON THE MARITIME GLOBAL COMMONS**

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Word Count: 2,221

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Nombre de mots : 2.221

IMPLICATIONS OF THE MARITIME SILK ROAD INITIATIVE ON THE MARITIME GLOBAL COMMONS

AIM

1. President Xi Jinping introduced the strategy of developing the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) in October 2013, one month after the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹ The People's Republic of China (PRC) has detailed lofty expectations of the project to include to “promote the economic prosperity of the countries along the Belt and Road and regional economic cooperation, strengthen exchanges and mutual learning between different civilizations, and promote world peace and development.”² However, Western nations have viewed the PRC's strategic intentions of the BRI and MSRI with considerable suspicion as a means to support the PRC's growing appetite to project power in the far abroad. The aim of this service paper is to examine the effects of China's MSRI on the global maritime commons.

INTRODUCTION

2. The stated aim of the MSRI is to “form an infrastructure network connecting all sub-regions in Asia, and between Asia, Europe and Africa...”³ This infrastructure network is an undertaking of incredible scale that will “involve the building of enormous amounts of hard infrastructure such as high-speed railways, highways and truck roads, air and sea ports, utility stations and power grids, oil and natural gas pipelines and

¹ The State Council The People's Republic of China, "Chronology of China's Belt and Road Initiative," last accessed 16 October 2019, http://english.www.gov.cn/news/top_news/2015/04/20/content_281475092566326.htm

² National Development and Reform Commission, “Visions and Action on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road,” last accessed 16 October 2019, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyw/qwfb/1084.htm>

³ *Ibid.*

telecommunication networks”⁴ In addition to hard infrastructure, the MSRI will look to build a series of trade agreements and special economic zones to support foreign investment along the MSRI route.⁵

3. The realization of the MSRI clearly indicates that the PRC sees its economic prosperity as being tied to maritime trade and is leveraging its considerable resources to further its regional goals with traditional and non-traditional trading partners. The implication of this is that the PRC will need to secure this maritime trade route to ensure the stability of its economy. The need to provide security for the MSRI has the potential to significantly impact access to the maritime global commons during periods of tension or war.

4. This paper will focus on the PRC's stated maritime focus of its national defence, the implications of its requirement to project power into the far abroad in support of its national strategic aims and the impacts of this on traditional power structures in the affected areas.

DISCUSSION

5. In 2015, China published its military strategy, in which, the PRC has made it abundantly clear the importance it is placing on one of four identified critical domains, the maritime environment.

The seas and oceans bear on the enduring peace, lasting stability and sustainable development of China. The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and

⁴ Jean-Marc F. Blanchard and Colin Flint, “The Geopolitics of China’s Maritime Silk Road Initiative,” *Geopolitics* 22, no.2 (2017): 227.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 227.

oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests. It is necessary for China to develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests, safeguard its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, protect the security of strategic [Sea Lanes of Communication] SLOCs and overseas interests, and participate in international maritime cooperation, so as to provide strategic support for building itself into a maritime power.⁶

This white paper demonstrates how the PRC sees its future economic and national security interests as being inextricably linked to the sea. This white paper tasks the Peoples Liberation Army (Navy) (PLA(N)) to “gradually shift its focus from “offshore waters defense” to the combination of “offshore waters defense” with “open seas protection...”⁷ It is the tasking of the PLA(N) to conduct open seas protection that is the most relevant to the MSRI as it is “linked with a blue water naval capability related to protecting the SLOCs in the Indian Ocean on which China depends for access to energy and other raw materials from the Middle East, Africa, and the European Market.”⁸

6. The PLA(N) has been executing this policy direction and has demonstrated its priority through its actions over the last decade. This period of time has seen the PLA(N) consistently forward deploy a naval task force to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean to escort commercial shipping. These deployments have also been used as a justification to forward deploy submarine assets in the area to gain the relevant operational experience of operating these assets far from national support structures. Additionally, the PRC has

⁶ The State Council The People’s Republic of China, “China’s Military Strategy,” last accessed 16 October 2019, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Guifang Xue, “The Potential Dual Use of Support Facilities in the Belt and Road Initiative” in *Securing The Belt and Road Initiative China’s Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads*, ed. Nadège Rolland (Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019), 53.

conducted non-combatant evacuation operations (NEOs) in both Libya and Yemen using joint forces.⁹

7. These actions by the PLA(N) demonstrate an appetite by the PRC to conduct expeditionary operations to secure their economic interests outside of their traditional operating areas. These deployments imply that the PLA(N) will need to increase infrastructure along the MSRI to support naval forces conducting open seas protection.¹⁰ The two are inextricably linked and Chinese academics have noted that “without support facilities and naval protection, no project can be implemented.”¹¹

8. Traditionally, Western forces have established military basing in forward locations to support the persistent operations of their forces. This approach is also being used by the PRC to some extent. In 2018, the PRC officially opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti and “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has made clear that similar facilities will be built when needed to protect China’s overseas interest.”¹² The PRC states that the Djibouti base will be used as a hub for peacekeeping operations, to provide logistical support for deployed naval task forces, and to support humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations. This, however, is contradicted by the installation’s size, the capabilities it possesses, and the forward deployment of marines.¹³ It is

⁹ Nilanthi Samaranayake, "Securing the Maritime Silk Road in South Asia and the Indian Ocean." *Asia Policy* 14, no. 2 (04, 2019): 22.

¹⁰ Rear Admiral Michael McDevitt ret'd, “Becoming a Great ‘Maritime Power’: A Chinese Dream” *CNA Analysis and Solutions* (June 2016): 51.

¹¹ Xue, “The Potential Dual Use of Support Facilities...”, 53.

¹² Matheiu Duchâtel, “Overseas Military Operations in Belt and Road Countries: The Normative Constraints and Legal Framework” in *Securing The Belt and Road Initiative China’s Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads*, ed. Nadège Rolland (Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019), 12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 12.

suggested that the base “represents a ‘breakthrough from the encirclement’ ...that China faces in the western Pacific.”¹⁴

9. In addition to the base in Djibouti, established port facilities that are predominantly owned and managed by Chinese state-owned corporations in Gwadar, Pakistan, Salalah, Oman, and the Seychelles have the potential to be used as permanent naval facilities.¹⁵ However, “there is as yet little firm evidence publicly available that Beijing intends to establish a ‘string’ of permanent naval bases across the northern Indian Ocean...”¹⁶

10. There are contradicting views if this represents a potential strategy of the PRC to establish a series of permanent naval bases along the MSRI, a theory referred to as the string of pearls. The greatest argument against this strategy is the arguably minimal military value of these installations during a period of conflict, specifically considering that “The cost of necessary investments and the exposed position of these ports may make their utility questionable against an enemy equipped with long-range precision strike capability.”¹⁷ This leads to the question of how else the PRC may meet its national objectives to secure its SLOCs.

11. The investments of the MSRI have resulted in commercial port infrastructure being developed along the route throughout the Indian Ocean and South Pacific, with many providing deep water access sufficient to host naval forces. In these facilities lies

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁵ Xue, “The Potential Dual Use of Support Facilities...”, 51.

¹⁶ David Brewster, “Silk Roads and Strings of Pearls: The Strategic Geography of China’s New Pathways in the Indian Ocean” *Geopolitics* 22, no. 2 (2017): 279.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 279.

the second option for the PRC to logistically support its forces conducting open seas protection. In this dual-use model, commercial port facilities can be developed with the option to use these facilities to support military operations. This could take the form of "standing agreements for PLAN vessels to use port facilities on a commercial basis, to the positioning of Chinese 'civilian' service providers, to the prepositioning of spares or munitions, or the use of facilities dedicated to the PLAN."¹⁸ This option is arguably more attractive to the PRC as it may help mitigate geopolitical concerns from competitors within the region.¹⁹ In this model, the PLA(N) can employ a similar sustainment model as the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) by utilizing the private sector. "Logistics companies can be reliable partners for the PLA Navy, and China has experimented with outsourcing logistics support to the private sector to increase the flexibility and sustainability of its maritime endeavours."²⁰ Having established the requirement of the PRC to conduct open seas protection in support of its SLOCs and two methods that the PRC may use to support its forward presence along the MSRI, this paper will now examine what the potential implications of this increased presence on the maritime commons.

12. One of the direct implications of the MSRI will be an increase in the militarization of the Indo-Pacific theatre of operations. This militarization takes several forms. Given the stated importance of the MSRI and its sister program, the BRI, to the long term economic stability of the PRC, there is undoubtedly a requirement by the PRC to secure this significant economic investment. Given the PLA(N)'s history of

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 279.

¹⁹ Xue, "The Potential Dual Use of Support Facilities...", 51.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

expeditionary operations with both its surface and subsurface fleets in the Indian Ocean, there is no reason to believe that this will not continue in the future as its economic links in the region are further developed. This is not necessarily a negative for Western navies conducting operations in the region. In fact, this greater opportunity for interaction at the tactical level may increase cooperation between Western navies and the PLA(N) “because they are far removed from Chinese home waters where sovereignty and maritime claim disputes create a different maritime ambiance.”²¹

13. The increased militarization of the Indian Ocean has also taken the form of other regional actors. The Indian Navy is placing a renewed priority on its naval capabilities in direct response to increased activity within the Indian Ocean by the PLA(N) and has “prioritized the development of more power-projection platforms...and anti submarine warfare capabilities while considerably expanding its naval diplomacy to all corners of the Indian Ocean.”²² There is a significant desire within India to assume the position as the primary naval power within the Indian Ocean to maintain the “Indian Ocean as a largely enclosed system involving keeping extra-regional powers out through control of maritime chokepoints and restricting access to necessary naval support facilities inside the Indian Ocean.”²³ While these goals may, in the end, prove to be overly ambitious, Western navies will certainly have to cooperate with a growing Indian naval power that is striving to assert more influence in the region. One can also expect that Pakistan will play an increased role in the power structure of the Indian Ocean as China develops its

²¹ McDevitt, “Becoming a Great ‘Maritime Power’...”, 132.

²² Samaranayake, “Securing the Maritime Silk Road...”, 24.

²³ David Brewster, “Silk Roads and Strings of Pearls...”, 287.

military linkages with the state. Currently, Pakistan “is the only country in South Asia that conducts regular bilateral naval exercises with China.”²⁴ This cooperation extends past joint exercises to several military programs, including cooperation to build a fifth-generation fighter aircraft. It is not inconceivable to expect this cooperation to extend to further domains in the future.²⁵

14. The greatest impact on Western navies of increased militarization along the MSRI route and the Indian Ocean, in particular, is the focus of the PLA(N) to conduct open seas protection in accordance with its 2015 White Paper. Western Navies “can no longer assume unencumbered freedom to posture...off Middle East and East African hotspots if Chinese interests are involved...”²⁶ This is not to say that if a military confrontation was to occur between Western and Chinese forces that Western navies would face the same difficulties in operations as they would face in the Asia-Pacific. At this time, the PRC is not able to project the same levels of Anti-Access/Area-Denial capabilities (A2/AD) outside of its home waters. Currently, it is not determined if the PRC wishes to pursue increased basing options throughout the Indo-Pacific. However, as discussed earlier, the particular vulnerability of these positions to Western precision strike capabilities makes their long term utility in a period of conflict questionable.

CONCLUSION

²⁴ Samaranayake, "Securing the Maritime Silk Road...", 24.

²⁵ The New York Times, “China’s ‘Belt and Road’ Plan in Pakistan Takes a Military Turn,” last accessed 25 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/world/asia/pakistan-china-belt-road-military.html>

²⁶ McDevitt, “Becoming a Great ‘Maritime Power’ ...”, 132.

15. As described in the PRC's 2015 and reemphasized in their 2019 white papers²⁷, the PRC sees their economic prosperity and implied national stability as being linked to the maritime domain. It can be implied that this is due particularly to the economic expansion and investment along the MSRI. The policy direction reflected in these White Papers has resulted in the PLA(N) refocusing its efforts from solely offshore waters defence to including ocean seas protection. The result of this policy shift has been a PLA(N) that is increasing its expeditionary experience with both its surface and subsurface fleets through continued deployments and operational experience throughout the Indo-Pacific to contribute to the securing of the MSRI. The requirement to support these deployments has led to permanent military basing being established in Djibouti and the possibility of expansion across established port infrastructure projects along the MSRI. The effect of these factors on the maritime global commons has been increased militarization throughout the Indo-Pacific by both regional and extra-regional actors. The impact of this on Western navies is that they can no longer rely on unencumbered freedom of action when responding to incidents throughout the Indian Ocean. This is true of crises that may implicate Chinese national interests or in response to a growing trend of increasing Indian assertiveness throughout the Indian Ocean region. As global tensions increase between Western nations and the PRC, the potential for misunderstanding of actions amongst naval forces is certainly to be a growing factor in the future. However, this also presents an opportunity to foster cooperation amongst Western and Chinese

²⁷ XinhuaNet "China's National Defense in the New Era," last accessed 25 Oct 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253389.htm

naval forces as both may potentially respond to political and humanitarian crises in the region in a combined manner.

RECOMMENDATION

16. After researching to support this service paper the following recommendations are to be considered for the CAF:

- a. As the probability of exposure to PLA forces throughout the Indo-Pacific is arguably greatest for the RCN than other services, it is recommended that the RCN seek out opportunities for interaction with PLA(N) forces during the conduct of its normal operations in the Indo-Pacific in order to facilitate understanding of normal procedures and operations in order to minimize the risks of misunderstandings between naval forces during periods of increased tensions.
- b. As the ability of the PRC to negatively affect access to the global maritime commons is largely tied to their ability to project power from either forward-deployed military basing or dual-use commercial infrastructure being developed along the MSRI, it is recommended that CFINTCOM, ADM(Pol) and SJS ensure that indications of further militarization of MSRI infrastructure are to be closely tracked and inform the operational threat assessment for the Indo-Pacific region when operating in periods of increased tension.

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