

The Growth of Indo-Pacific's Maritime Infrastructure: An Analysis of Foreseeable Intentions of China Transcending Territorial Boundary

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Abstract

The present paper aims to study the probable geo-strategic ambitions of China in the Indo-Pacific region transcending territorial boundary. The concept of Indo-Pacific has already been vastly analyzed and studied by different strategic experts and scholars because of its strategic and economic importance. The three major issues, security, insecurity and economy, directly and indirectly, are linked with maritime infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific which has been developed by China in the form of 'Artificial Islands', 'Ports' etc.. In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled his multi ambitious strategic project the 'Maritime Silk Road' to enhance infrastructure connectivity and also to justify its expansionist policy. Many countries in the Indo-Pacific region are facing shortage of investment for infrastructure development. The present paper will discuss how a sudden transformation in the behavior of these countries has taken place when China took over the Hambantota port. Many countries, who had already signed agreement with China, have now started reviewing the previously signed agreement with the fear of falling into the Chinese debt trap. Further the paper will discuss how some likeminded democracies including Australia, India, Japan, USA and European Union are trying to counter Chinese expansionist tendencies and the consequences that will be coming in the end because of growing maritime infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific region.

Keywords: *Infrastructure, Strategic, Augmentation, Expansionist, Maritime.*

Introduction

The present leadership of China is fairly optimistic about its policy of expansionism under the cloak of Maritime Silk Road. This hopefulness of Chinese government is supported by the need of developing countries to develop their infrastructure without any dependence on other international financial institutions. China has a grand strategy which has two hidden objectives. The first objective is to expand militarily and economically by connecting Beijing with the economic centers and ports of different countries.

This expansion cannot be possible without winning these countries and it is happening by developing infrastructure and major ports outside China that can be used as security if recipient countries default on their loans. The second objective is to provide security against several threats including sea piracy. China is also in a mood to end the US hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region and in response to this policy, many compatible democracies including India, Japan, Australia and the US pursuing the strategy of law and democratic based Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Both India and Japan are well cautious about the Chinese threat and ‘Strategic Vigilance’ with ideological tilt towards the USA.

Objectives Of Study

The study has following objectives

- To analyze the probable intention of China behind several maritime infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific region.
- To study the problem of Chinese debt trap.
- To study the response of several likeminded democracies to counter China’s expansionism.

Review Of Literature

Shino Watanabe, China’s Infrastructure Development in the Indo-Pacific Region: Challenges and Opportunities, 2019.

This research paper provides an analysis about China’s BRI strategic implications for the Indo-Pacific region in terms of both security and economy.

John Hemmings, Infrastructure, Ideas, and Strategy in the Indo-Pacific, 2019.

This report of Henry Jackson Society focuses on how the Indo-pacific has grown into a region where states across the area are modernizing their militaries, with an emphasis on naval power to ensure their national security. There is a lack of maritime infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific region which China has identified as a strategic opportunity.

Jagannath P. Panda and TitliBasu, *China-India-Japan in the Indo-Pacific: Ideas, Interests and Infrastructure: Pentagon Press, 2018*

This book contains a diverse set of arguments that are both conformist and non-conformist in nature. It focuses on a theme like infrastructure to bring a more pointed analysis in order to examine the national and international perspectives of China, India and Japan.

David Brewster, *India and China at Sea: Competition for naval dominance in the Indian Ocean: Oxford University Press, 2018*

China and India are emerging as major maritime powers as part of long-term shifts in the regional balance of power. The essays in this volume seek to understand the reason about why the two countries are increasingly bumping up against each other across the Indo-Pacific.

B. R. Deepak, *China's Global Rebalancing and the New Silk Road: Springer Publications, 2018.*

This joint volume discusses the One Belt One Road, or the New Silk Road, initiative of Chinese President Xi Jinping from the perspectives of the Belt and Road countries. This initiative has raised hopes as well as suspicions about China's goals and intentions in the Indo-Pacific region. In this volume, a number of strategic analysts and academics from India, China, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Germany and Southeast Asia have critically analysed every aspect of this mammoth project, including six major economic corridors identified by China for Infrastructure connectivity, trade.

Research Methodology

To understand the policies of China in the Indo-Pacific region and counter strategies of some likeminded democracies against China in the Indo-Pacific region, comparative method will be used. Since the topic is related to international politics, therefore documentary-analytical method will be used to conduct this study. Within it, the historical method will also be used to develop understanding about the background of the subject of research. This study will also include and analyse the views and opinions of several experts and think tanks involved in strategic analysis of the Indo-Pacific region.

Game Of Ports: An Instrument Of Expansion

Since 2002, China is investing in ports covering the area of eastern coast of Africa to the South China Sea. On the one hand China claims that these infrastructure investments are important to bring about economic development in the concerned nations and on the other hand many Indo-Pacific nations are suspicious about China's hidden intention of expansionism. China is investing in the port development with dual motives. China's ambition in the Indo-Pacific region is to change the status quo situation which was earlier in favor of the USA. Second possible purpose is

to challenge growing India's power in the region. In the following ways these ports can be used as an instrument of expansion:

- These ports can be used as a naval base at the time of war.
- Demographic change in the area can take place by shifting population to the concerned state like the case of Gwadar port in Pakistan where China is establishing modern city to house more than 5 lakh workers. It raises concern among other neighboring countries about whether this city is China's only colony in Pakistan.
- These ports can be used as a choke point by China to control the international trade via sea route.
- On June 1, the US department of defence has issued a report on Indo-Pacific strategy in which it was stated that India through its "Act East Policy" continues to make security, economic and development investments to protect the idea of Free and Open Indo-Pacific region. In the same report the region has been considered as the "single most consequential region for America's future". So far as China's increasing activities in the region is concerned, the report has said that China is hunting to reorder the region to its advantages by developing ports in the South China Sea and other parts of Indo-Pacific region. Both India and America have similar objectives so far as China's containment in the Indo-Pacific region is concerned and they even warned nations to not to join China's BRI projects as it lacks lucidity. Recently the state run newspaper of the Communist Party of China, Global Times warned that if the United States want from China to halt its activities, then a US-China war is inevitable in the South China Sea. Most of the time China dismissed international condemnation of China's policies in the South China Sea by giving the reason that it would be beneficial for the entire international society. Even some analysts went to the extent of saying that neither China nor US seems to be in a mood to back down.

Maritime Silk Route: A Road Towards Debt Trap Or Integration

Since the initiation of Maritime Silk Road Project, China claimed that it will connect Beijing with the trading hubs around the world. It is the maritime part of President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative. China maintains that MSR is expected to increase global integration but some strategic analysts are worried about China's motivations. It is appearing to some under-developed countries in the Indo-Pacific region not less than an opportunity but in reality it is Chinese debt trap of investment. In 2017, the Sri Lankan government formally hands over Hambantota Port to Chinese firms on 99-year lease in a bid to recover from the heavy burden of repaying a loan. The important littoral country in the Arabian Sea i.e. Maldives is also suffering from Chinese debt which India had warned her previously.

Artificial Islands: The Salami Slicing Tactics In South China Sea

China has adopted the ‘Salami Slicing’ tactics in the South China Sea. This policy is based on a long term strategy but with each move, only a small piece of territory is gained by China in such a manner that invokes the little reaction possible from other countries. Several islands have been constructed by China in the South China Sea including Fiery Cross Island having infrastructure like Air strip, Radar system, and Missile system. China is giving great importance to this area due to several reasons including security concerns, huge gas and oil resources and sea trade. According to U.S.

Energy information Administration, Oil and Gas Journal, the area is expected to have around 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas which China is not going to compromise. Most importantly around 30 percent of the global shipping trade flows through this area. Many countries in the South China Sea have boundary disputes with China and the situation is getting critical after China’s unwillingness to accept United Nations tribunal rule in favor of Philippines. On 12 July 2016, the tribunal ruled that China has no historical rights based on the nine-dash line map. It is also worth mentioning that China has been developing infrastructure on around seven spots in the South China Sea which become a matter of serious concern for strategic analysts and regional powers.

Foip: A Democratic And Law Based Response Against Undemocratic China

Free and Open Indo-Pacific is a rule based and democratic response against undemocratic China which is supported by some likeminded democracies in the region including Japan, India, America, and Australia. The term “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” was coined by Japan in 2017 after this it was accepted by these countries in order to confront China’s debt trap of infrastructure financing. The FOIP’s three pillars including freedom of navigation based on rule of law, the pursuit of economic prosperity by improving connectivity; and a commitment to peace and stability aims to democratize the Indo-Pacific region. The year 2016 witnessed China’s refusal to accept the findings of the South China Sea Arbitration Tribunal’s award on the legality of nine dash line. The Japanese government supported the award but the award which was in favor of Philippines, did not yield any fruitful results.

The four likeminded democracies having different security concerns, with diverse interests in the region, are confused even about their role for implementing Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy. America’s only interests in the region is to maintain its hegemony similarly India’s only interests is to broaden its sphere of influence by looking towards east and Japan’s prime concern is to meet its energy needs by protecting the Sea Lines of Communication. These divergent interests are can only be satisfied by proper implementation of FOIP.

Connect Asia Strategy: A Response To China’s Maritime Silk Road

There is a serious amount of concern among countries including India, America, Japan and Australia regarding Chinese Maritime Silk Road strategy for railway, road and ports construction based on debt trap. In order to counter this strategy of China, the European Union and Japan on Sept. 27, 2019 signed an infrastructure agreement to link Europe and Asia. The Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and European Union chief Jean-Claude Juncker inked the agreement to harmonize infrastructure, transport and digital projects.

There is a general consensus among most of the countries that development projects must be sustainable both financially and environmentally and these two objectives of development are absent in Chinese Maritime Silk Road project. Shinzo Abe in the same meeting claimed that China is trying to use this project particularly port construction in Asia, to dominate navigation routes. India has been critical of China's Maritime Silk Road and Belt and Road initiative because of its national interests and by joining hands with the European Union and Japan in this connect Asia strategy, India can put pressure on China.

Probable Consequences Of Growing Maritime Infrastructure In The Indo-Pacific Region: Positive And Negative

The positive aspects of growing maritime infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific region are given below:

- The connectivity between the economic centers of different countries is increased which is important for trade point of view.
- The instances of sea piracy are decreasing in the region with the growing militarization of Indo-Pacific region.
- In order to protect Indo-Pacific nations from being fallen into the Chinese debt trap, many infrastructure projects have been started by Japan in the region which acts as safe alternative than China's infrastructure financing.
- Some negative aspects of growing maritime infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific region are mentioned below:
 - The growing militarization of strategically important islands and ports in the Indo-Pacific region has created a cold war type of situation to counter China's expansionism.
 - Fear Psychosis among the ASEAN states regarding the end of ASEAN identity of the region.
 - Arms race among the nations of the Indo-Pacific region to counter China.
 - Formation of group like the "QUAD" in the Indo-Pacific region has also added fuel to the fire in the already tensed situation.
 - The construction of artificial ports and islands in the Indo-Pacific region in general and South China Sea in particular create disputes and conflicts among many countries including

Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia as the development of artificial islands lead to confusion in fixing maritime boundaries.

Conclusion

The present paper has discussed in detail that the growing maritime infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific region and the intention of China behind the infrastructural financing of these projects. China has a grand strategy with multiple instruments for its implementation in the Indo-Pacific region. The expansion of China in this region by way of developing modern ports and artificial islands is projected as undemocratic and unlawful not only by the external players of the region including European Union but also by many Southeast Asian states, India, the USA, Japan and Australia.

Almost every country in the region has boundary disputes with China and even their solution seems to be impossible as world has witnessed in the case of Philippines. China has expanding economy also which acts as significant instrument in propagating and implementing its grand strategy in the region. China is using its economy and debt diplomacy of financing infrastructure projects in the maritime area with multiple objectives including aspiration to become a global power, to change the status quo in the Indo-Pacific region, to end the US hegemony in the region. The United States of America don't want any change in its hegemonic position in the Indo-Pacific region which has now been challenged by China. The sudden outbreak of trade war between both the countries by imposing tariffs and counter tariffs further added fuel to the fire. The radical aspirations of China are countered by some democratic countries by forming some regional grouping like the "Quad", by providing financial assistance to the regional nations as an alternate of China's debt trap. These likeminded democracies are not in favor of China's growing power and adamant behavior in the South China Sea and as a response, the concept of Free and Open Indo-Pacific has been adopted by these democracies including Australia, India, Japan, and the US. The newly formed "Connect Asia" strategy of the European Union and Japan is an important step to stop China's evil intentions and if India and America join it in the coming future then this strategy will surely become a major instrument to stop China

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Our Heritage

ISSN: 0474-9030

Vol-68-Issue-1-January-2020

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