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China's Maritime Silk Road: The Politics of Routes

By Irene Chan

Synopsis

China has not effectively communicated its grand connectivity ideas to South and Southeast Asian countries. Beijing urgently needs to improve its communications with external parties and seek feedback so as to counter media speculations and to have a better understanding of regional needs.

Commentary

IN OCTOBER 2013, China's President Xi Jinping unveiled his concept of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) in a speech to Indonesia's parliament during an official visit. It attracted much attention in the region and further information from China was highly anticipated. However, for the months that followed, Chinese officials rehashed Xi's ideas on reviving ancient trade links and improving regional relations but provided little detail on the MSR.

At the 17th China-ASEAN Summit in November 2014, Chinese prime minister Li Keqiang put forward a "2+7 Cooperation Framework" for building a community of shared destiny, as an addition to the MSR. It comprises a two-point political consensus on building strategic trust, and promoting mutually beneficial economic development as well as seven priority areas for cooperation that include maritime cooperation, finance, security, environmental protection and people-to-people exchange. Today, regional countries remain unclear about China's grand connectivity project which seeks to expand port access to facilitate maritime trade across Southeast Asia, South Asia, the African coast and the Mediterranean.

Testing China's PR capabilities?

Judging from the policy debate in China, the MSR seems more like a work in progress than a worked-out master plan, with as many as 12 central government agencies involved ranging from the ministries of foreign affairs, commerce, transport and agriculture to the National Development and Reform Commission.

According to Chinese reports, 20 provinces have made suggestions and proposals for both the MSR and the related connectivity project overland, the Silk Road Economic Belt. The overwhelming domestic response and coordination difficulties between central and provincial governments resulted in China's inability to effectively communicate its ideas to external parties.

The resulting lack of clarity, unfortunately for China, has given rise to speculation and suspicion.

Although Beijing has yet to publish any official maps detailing the stops along the MSR, the state-owned Xinhua News Agency unveiled one in an ongoing series titled “New Silk Road, New Dreams” in May 2014. The news agency did not specify if the map was purely for illustrative purposes. Observers quickly concluded that China would bypass the Philippines as it was not featured as a stop on the map.

In November 2014, a Wall Street Journal report speculated that the Philippines would be excluded from the MSR because of its legal challenge to China’s South China Sea claims. It also quoted Philippine Foreign Undersecretary for Economic Relations, Ms Laura del Rosario, as saying that the Philippines felt left out of the plan.

China refuted the report and clarified that there were no official maps on the MSR. In view of this, China could have done a better job with a public relations campaign either through the mainstream media or through diplomatic channels with regional countries following Xi’s announcement in 2013.

ASEAN connectivity or concerns?

Fortunately for China, calls for boosting regional connectivity have been echoed for many years in Southeast Asia. The Master Plan for ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC), which was adopted in 2010, may be the ideal solution for China to clarify the MSR by linking it to ASEAN’s connectivity plan. The MPAC has identified 15 priority projects for physical, institutional and people-to-people connectivity. It also reviewed the achievements made and challenges encountered to build up the linkages in the region.

Given that China’s MSR is a large-scale project covering multiple regions, Chinese policy-makers may want to consider tapping onto the MPAC for the Southeast Asian region and rebranding projects which China takes on as a part of the MSR. It may help to save time in identifying priority projects while giving the regional countries some clarity on what to expect. By keeping ASEAN at the core, it may also help China dispel some fears of the creation of a China-centered regional community.

However, China should not be surprised to find that regional countries will have strategic concerns about the MSR, even though most have acknowledged the benefits of enhancing regional connectivity. In *Roads and Rivals: Politics of Access in the Borderlands of Asia*, Mahnaz Z. Ispahani notes how in decisions on foreign infrastructural aid, economic, political, strategic, and geographical concerns intersect. He adds: “The infrastructure of access is also dual-use: depending on its location and specifications, it can be an instrument of economic development or a tool of internal security or external defence.”

Railways, roads and ports have historical importance as integrative, political and strategic forces. It has been long argued that control of sea lines and strategic egress is increasingly pertinent to China’s strategic designs on Asia. Critics of China’s MSR have raised at least two key questions on regional security - what are China’s deeper motivations behind the initiative? What roles will the Chinese navy and maritime law enforcement agencies eventually play in the MSR?

The continued lack of communication on the MSR will raise doubts about China’s claim that it would separate a purely economic initiative from its political and security motivations. For instance, China’s MSR raised strategic concerns from India that Sri Lanka’s Chinese-funded container terminal could be used for military purposes after Chinese military submarines docked in Colombo. India also protested when plans were mooted for the building of a small Chinese aircraft repair base near the eastern port of Trincomalee.

What about the South China Sea disputes?

In Southeast Asia, there is skepticism about furthering economic interdependence without addressing the South China Sea disputes. In July 2014, reports emerged that the coastal cities of Guangzhou, Hainan, Zhanjiang, Beihai, Quanzhou, Zhangzhou, Ningbo, Penglai and Yangzhou made a joint proposal pushing for UNESCO World Heritage recognition of the ancient MSR.

Chinese reports also claim that the cultural heritage authorities have conducted frequent archeological surveys of the Paracel Islands and are expanding the surveys southwards to the Spratly

Islands. This raised concerns among claimant countries that China may use the MSR as a way to reinstate its historical presence in the region and legitimise its increased presence and fortify its claims in the South China Sea. While Chinese policy-makers rush to produce a blueprint for the MSR, it may serve them well to address regional strategic concerns rather than sweeping them under the carpet.

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