



Centre for Air Power Studies

PROJECT MAUSAM: NOT A COUNTER TO CHINA'S MARITIME SILK ROUTE

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Introduction

India's Ministry of Culture initiative, Project 'Mausam,' seems to have aroused much curiosity in the Indian media and strategic circle. While some reports term this initiative as a measure to check China's maritime might¹, some are calling it a reply to China's much touted Maritime Silk Route (MSR)² initiative. These, by and large, appear to be untrue and unsubstantiated assumptions where an Indian initiative at improving understanding between India and its ancient trade partners, is being presented as a strategic manoeuvre to counter China. In the heat of the competition that now exists in Asia-Pacific, anything and everything would be viewed as a strategy by one power to balance the other. However, there is a need to first understand the idea behind this initiative and then judge whether it is in fact a strategic move to counter China's maritime might or not. This paper is an attempt at analysing the yet-to-be implemented Project Mausam and to explain its intrinsic objectives.

What is Project Mausam

Project Mausam: Maritime Routes and Cultural Landscapes Across the Indian Ocean, is a Ministry of Culture project in association with Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) which would act as the nodal coordinating agency. The idea for the project was proposed by the Cultural Secretary on 20th June 2014 at the 38th session of World Heritage Committee at Doha. Along with the Director General of UNESCO, several ambassadors

expressed their interest in the project. The central themes that hold Project 'Mausam' together are those of cultural routes and maritime landscapes that not only linked different parts of the Indian Ocean littoral, but also connected the coastal centres to their hinterlands³.

The project focuses on three key objectives⁴:

- At the macro level, it aims to re-connect and re-establish communications between countries of the Indian Ocean Region, which would lead to an enhanced understanding of cultural values and concerns.
- At the micro level, the focus is on understanding national cultures in their regional maritime milieu.
- The project would seek the nomination of maritime cultural landscapes across the Indian Ocean as a trans-national property on the World Heritage List of UNESCO.

The area that would be covered under the project extends from East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Indian subcontinent and Sri Lanka to the Southeast Asian archipelago, which has been termed as Indian Ocean "world". The project is basically an attempt at reviving the ancient maritime routes which were used by traders and travellers to visit different parts of Indian Ocean littorals and which led to the exchange of cultural practices and sharing of ideas, values and religious practices⁵. Traces of Indian cultural and religious practices could still be found in almost all of Southeast Asian and East Asian nations.

Is it a counter to China's MSR?

Project Mausam is purely a cultural initiative. It would be wrong to assume that it is a strategic manoeuvre to check and counter China's initiative of establishing Maritime Silk Route. The only possible political objective behind this project could be to boost India's soft power and enhance understanding among the countries with which India shared a cultural linkage historically. These cultural linkages allowed Indian religions such as Hinduism and subsequently Buddhism to spread to Southeast Asia, China, Korea and as far as to Japan.

Some of the linkages still continue to exist. Importantly, the project would highlight the cultural exchanges and linkages that existed between India and China. Not many are aware of the number of temples that are in China which were built by the visiting India traders, especially from Southern India.

Apart from the above mentioned facts, it would be wrong to compare these two initiatives where one is a response to the other. There are several fundamental differences between the two and both have completely different objectives. For example, China's MSR seeks to strengthen trade ties with South and West Asia by developing the region and ports which would be used by China for trade purposes, whereas Project Mausam seeks to re-connect and re-establish India's communication with its old friends, which would lead to enhanced understanding of cultural values and concerns between them. Unlike China, India is not aiming at developing mutually supportive infrastructures with the members but only endeavours to rekindle the long-lost cultural exchange.

Conclusion

Calling an initiative, which is purely aimed at promoting cultural exchanges and enhance interactions, a strategic manoeuvre to counter China, will not only undermine the sincere efforts of the government of India to improve relations between India and China but would also present India as a rival to China. China already perceives India with apprehensions and unfounded assumptions by Indian as well as Chinese media would not bode well for the relationship. It additionally creates the risk of jeopardising the real intent

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of the initiative by making other countries suspicious of India's intention. China, among other countries has welcomed India's Project Mausam initiative and India too has expressed its interest in joining China's MSR. These steps might lead to dissimilating the huge distrust that pervades between the two countries.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

End Notes

¹ Sachin Parashar, "Narendra Modi's 'Mausam' manoeuvre to check China's maritime might", *The Times of India*, September 16, 2014, at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Narendra-Modis-Mausam-manoevre-to-check-Chinas-maritime-might/articleshow/42562085.cms>, accessed on September 17, 2014.

² "India to launch Project Mausam to counter China Silk Road", at <http://www.economylead.com/featured-news/india-launch-project-mausam-counter-china-silk-road-38264>, accessed on September 17, 2014.

³ "Project 'Mausam' Launched by Secretary, Ministry of Culture", Ministry of Culture, June 21, 2014, at <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=105777>, accessed on September 17, 2014.

⁴ Ibid.,

⁵ Ambassador Bhaswati Mukherjee, "International recognition of India's world heritage - New, exciting projects on anvil" Ministry of External Affairs, GOvt. of India, at <http://www.mea.gov.in/in-focus-article.htm?23601/International+recognition+of+Indias+world+heritage++New+exciting+projects+on+anvil>, accessed on September 17, 2014.