



STRING OF PEARLS OR MARITIME SILK ROAD – DIFFERENT NAMES FOR CHINESE MARITIME STRATEGY

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Chinese Submarine in Colombo

“Chinese nuclear submarine docks in Sri Lanka”....The media report in early November made headlines for obvious reasons. Chinese submarine presence in the Indian Ocean is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although it is not unusual for warships to enter friendly foreign ports for fuelling and turn around during overseas deployments, the same cannot be said for submarines...more so for nuclear submarines.

India expressed its concerns by saying that “Sri Lanka allowed the docking despite NSA Ajit Doval’s warning to Lankan Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa that any presence of a Chinese submarine in Sri Lanka would be unacceptable to India. The government is now left with no option but to look upon Lanka’s defiance as “inimical” to India’s interests.”ⁱ

In a newspaper interview on 05 Nov 14, Sri Lanka’s Navy Chief Jayantha Perera clarified that The Chinese submarine ‘Changchen 02’ accompanied by another vessel ‘Changxingdao’ were earlier docked in Colombo on 07 Sep 14. The vessels departed on 13 Sep 14. They were on their way to the Gulf of Aden and waters off Somalia. The same vessels were back at the Colombo port on 31 Oct 14 and left harbour on 05 Nov 14. The Navy Chief made it clear that it was not a nuclear submarine as reported by the media, but a ‘conventional’ one.ⁱⁱ Further, the Chinese news agency ‘Xinhua’ quoted a Chinese Defence Ministry official saying that the “Chinese submarine has docked

in Sri Lanka during its passage for escort missions in the Gulf of Aden and waters off Somalia for anti piracy patrols”.

India's Concerns

Although the justification given by the Sri Lankan and Chinese authorities appear quite logical the Indian government and the media were not convinced. It was probably based on the fact that the submarine's arrival, twice within a period of one month, was kept secret until the media raised questions.

India's concerns over China's increasing military presence in Indian Ocean were earlier expressed during visits of Sri Lanka's Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Navy Chief Vice Admiral Perera to Delhi just prior to this incident. Rajapaksa discussed the matter in general with the Indian Defence Minister Sh Arun Jaitley and NSA Ajit Doval. Sri Lanka's Navy chief was quoted in Indian media saying, "We will never compromise on (India's) national security. India's security is our security." However, the second docking of Chinese submarine 'Changchen 2' took place after these meetings, on its return journey from the Gulf of Aden.

India declared this act of Sri Lanka as a violation of the July 1987 agreement which says that "Trincomalee or any other ports in Sri Lanka will not be made available for military use by any country in a manner prejudicial to India's interests". The agreement also calls upon the two countries to not allow their respective territories to be used for "activities prejudicial to each other's unity, integrity and security".ⁱⁱⁱ

Sri Lanka's stand appears to be perfectly legal as foreign warships on anti-piracy mission, in peacetime, may not constitute an operational force, and hence not covered under this clause. For this very reason India has never objected to even Pakistani warships visiting Colombo.

However, it seems that India's security concerns are not limited to the Chinese submarine's visit to Colombo, but to the larger issue of Sri Lanka becoming a strategic partner in China's power projection in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as part of its (China's) new maritime strategy or what is generally known as "String of Pearls".

String of Pearls

The term 'String of Pearls' (SOP) refers to the Chinese intentions of establishing a network of commercial facilities along its sea lines of communication from the South China Sea through the Strait of Malacca, across the Indian Ocean, and on to the Arabian Gulf.^{iv} In a way, it is indicative of China's rising geopolitical influence by developing diplomatic relationships with countries of the region. This term was first used in 2005 in a United States Department of Defense report titled "Energy Futures in Asia". The term has never been used by official Chinese government sources, but is often used in the Indian media.^v

The Chinese SLOCs pass through many choke points such as Bab el Mandeb, the Malacca Strait, the Strait of Hormuz and the Lombok Strait. During this passage, these sea lines also run through sensitive strategic maritime areas of Somalia, the Maldives, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

To sustain its economic growth, China is dependent on external supply of energy, raw materials and food. More than 80% of China's trade goes through sea and it became the world's second largest importer of crude oil by 2004. It is estimated that, by 2020, an estimated 60% of China's oil has to be imported and about 65% of this oil will come from the Middle East and Africa.^{vi} This arrangement has left China extremely vulnerable to disruptions, which has led to China talking about its 'Malacca dilemma', whereby its oil must pass through the narrow waterway of the Strait of Malacca (just about 1.5Nm wide at its narrowest point).

Keeping in mind the importance of oil and trade, China wants to ensure complete protection of its SLOCs from Bab el Mandeb, Hormuz, to the Malacca Strait at any cost. Hence, in the near future, China may have to commit more resources towards maintaining security of the shipping lanes. In order to meet the operational logistic requirements of its maritime forces in the Indian Ocean it certainly requires logistic support stations. These stations are being termed as 'Pearls', and Sri Lanka is one such pearl in the long string.



The first pearl is located at the Hainan Island in South China Sea. The Yulin naval base has massive underground facility built under a mountain, which has been upgraded to accommodate up to 20 nuclear and conventional submarines, without any scope of detection by satellites. This base is aimed to accommodate Jin class SSBNs equipped with 8000 km range Julang-2 ICBMs^{vii}. The second pearl is the Woody Island, which is located east of Paracel archipelago. An airstrip has been made to support the naval operations.

Sittwe port in Myanmar is another pearl in this string where deep water berthing facilities are being constructed. In addition, the development of Kyaukpyu, as a deep sea port, is also being undertaken with Chinese help. On completion, it will have an oil and gas terminal which will be linked by pipelines to Yunnan, China. It is also understood that China has established a monitoring station in Great Coco Island, very close to Andaman Islands. Chittagong port in Bangladesh is also being developed as a pearl with a planned pipeline to supply energy over land to China.

From India's point of view, an important pearl in this string is port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka. Being located at the southern tip of the island, it is very close to the IOR SLOCs. Construction of this port started in Jan 2008 by China Harbour Engineering Company and Siohydro Corporation with a total cost of about US \$ 360 million, of which 85% is being

contributed by China. On completion, it will be the largest port in South Asia with a dockyard, a container terminal and all berthing facilities^{viii}. In addition, China is also investing heavily in developing the port of Colombo. A new container terminal called Colombo South Container Terminal (CSCT) is being built as a joint venture between China Merchants Holdings (85% holding) and Sri Lanka Ports Authority (15%).

Development of Gwadar port in Pakistan is another project which reinforces China's interest in IOR. It is a deep water port located close to the Gulf of Oman and is at the mouth of the Persian Gulf. Due to its strategic location it can become a regional hub for commercial traffic from/towards the Persian Gulf, Middle East, South East Asia, Central Asia and Xinjiang province of China. China's interest in this port is not only for provision of logistic support to its maritime forces but also the benefits which may accrue by finding an alternate access to the sea for its land locked western provinces. The construction work is being undertaken by the Chinese Harbour Engineering Company, with major share of cost borne by China. It has also invested heavily in building a coastal road between the Gwadar port and the commercial hub of Karachi.

Maritime Silk Road

"Access, rather than bases, is what the Chinese Navy is really interested in the Indian Ocean"^{ix}, was stated by Zhou Bo, an honorary fellow with China's Academy of Military Science, while referring to the establishment of bases in IOR. He goes on to say that China has only two purposes in IOR: economic gains and the security of SLOCs.

It appears that keeping in mind the economic gains, China has found another name for this move – the "Maritime Silk Road" (MSR). This term as a concept first emerged during Chinese President Xi Jinping's trip to Southeast Asia in Oct 13. The concept was aimed at increasing maritime cooperation between China and the Asian countries.^x The MSR concept is somewhat parallel to the land based Silk Road which runs between China and the Central Asian states. It is very interesting to note that whilst the concept of String of Pearls was never admitted by the Chinese, the MSR concept, on the other hand, clearly specifies their strategic goals in an official manner. While justifying its investment, China insists that its participation in the development of the regional maritime infrastructure is economically motivated and with obvious benefits for the host country.

Analysis

It is apparent that 'Maritime Silk Road' may just be a re-branding of the 'String of Pearls' concept. Based on the ongoing maritime scenario, the following is evident:

- ✓ The recent visit by Chinese submarine and warship must be treated as a routine naval call on Colombo port and need not be viewed with suspicion.
- ✓ The concepts of MSR or SOP seem to be exclusively aimed for economic security. It may have military implications, but only in the long run.
- ✓ Although the establishment of these bases (in Pakistan & Sri Lanka) to support Chinese naval operations in the IOR creates a security dilemma for India, but when seen on ground not much is visible as far as expansion of these bases in military terms is concerned.
- ✓ The strategy of developing military bases in other countries does not hold ground when seen with China's stated policy of non interference.
- ✓ It must be appreciated that China is a rising power, expected to surpass US, the world's largest economy by the year 2025. In this endeavor, it certainly requires partnerships and presence in countries far away from home. A similar strategy, of establishing colonies, was adopted by European powers in their days of supremacy.
- ✓ The security of its SLOCs is a cause of concern and China seems to be justified in creating infrastructure towards that requirement. In this endeavor, its maritime forces do require logistic support, for which certain arrangements or financial assistance for development of ports in friendly countries will help their cause.
- ✓ China is very much concerned and busy in resolving various territorial disputes in the South China Sea and may not be inclined to dedicate its maritime forces in IOR, in the near future.

Conclusion

It is evident that MSR and SOP are two different names for the same strategy of Chinese maritime cooperation, with diplomatic and economic components. China has officially raised the concept of MSR to re-brand the older concept of SOP which was viewed with military connotation. As of now, India should not be alarmed and should handle these developments appropriately on the diplomatic front. As far as, few odd Chinese submarine visits to Sri Lanka are concerned, there is no immediate cause for worry for India. In fact, such developments should reinforce our policies towards improving relations with the countries of IOR. Meanwhile, the Indian Navy must continue with ongoing maritime surveillance in these areas to observe any Chinese intentions of naval build up in future.

(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))

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ⁱ Lasanda Kurukulasuria, 'What's the subtext to the Chinese submarine's Colombo call? 09Nov 2014, <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/141109/columns/whats-the-subtext-to-the-chinese-submarines-colombo-call-126642.html>, accessed on 20 Nov 14.

ⁱⁱ ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Sachin Parashar, "Chinese submarine docking in Lanka 'inimical' to India's interests: Govt" , on 03 Nov 14, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Chinese-submarine-docking-in-Lanka-inimical-to-Indias-interests-Govt/articleshow/45025487.cms>, accessed on 21 Nov 14.

^{iv} Christopher J. Pehrson, "String of Pearls: Meeting the challenge of china's rising power across the Asian littoral" Jul 2006, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB721.pdf>, accessed on 21 Nov 14.

^v 'String of Pearls' [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/String_of_Pearls_\(Indian_Ocean\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/String_of_Pearls_(Indian_Ocean)), accessed on 20 Nov 14.

^{vi} Sam Chee Kong, "China's String of Pearls Strategy: Why is US Afraid" , in Malaysia Chronicle, 22 Dec 13, http://www.malaysia-chronicle.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=201131:chinese-string-of-pearls-strategy-complement-its-global-economic-domination, accessed on 19 Nov 14.

^{vii} Christian Bedford, "The View from the West: String of Pearls : China's Maritime Strategy in India's Backyard" Vol 4 Number 4 (winter 2009) Canadian Naval Review, <http://www.navalreview.ca/wp-content/uploads/public/vol4num4/vol4num4art9.pdf>, accessed on 19 Nov 14.

^{viii} Lt Gen Naresh Chand, "China's Maritime Strategy for South Asia", <http://www.spsnavalforces.com/story.asp?mid=38&id=1>, accessed on 19 Nov 14.

^{ix} Zhou Bo, "The String of Pearls and maritime Silk Road" 12 Feb 14, on www.china.org.cn/opinion/2014-02/12/content, accessed on 19 Nov 14.

^x Shannon Tiezzi, "The maritime Silk road vs The String of Pearls" 13 Feb 14, on www. <http://thediplomat.com/2014/02/the-maritime-silk-road-vs-the-string-of-pearls/>, accessed on 19 Nov 14.