

**Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)**

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

62/17

CHINA'S VISION DOCUMENT FOR 'MARITIME COOPERATION UNDER THE BRI': WHAT IS IT?

Pooja Bhatt
Research Associate, CAPS

China has been investing a great deal of diplomatic capital in the One Belt One Road initiative in the recent past. Beijing organised the Belt and Road Initiative OBOR Forum on 14-15 May 2017 that saw an attendance of 29 Heads of State, 100 plus senior government officials, and more than 70 international organisations. To endorse joint actions and synchronised development plans with the 'States of the Maritime Silk Road', the two state agencies of People's Republic of China, namely National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and State Oceanic Administration (SOA) released the document on 20 June 2017. Titled as 'Vision for Maritime Cooperation under Belt and Road Initiative', the document envisions building a 'peaceful and prosperous 21st Maritime Silk Road'.

The vision document stated its objectives as developing a 'blue economy', promoting policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure and facilities, unimpeded trade, financial integration and fostering people to people bonds within various countries under this mega-project. Asserting that Oceans are valuable assets for human survival and common arena for sustainable development, it invokes Silk Road Spirit of 'peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit'. It also aligns itself to United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and forming a 'blue engine' of sustainable development.

The document speaks of 'shelving differences and building consensus' between China and the other Road States, apart from following the stated ambitious principles such as maintaining openness, cooperation, inclusive development, eliminating trade barriers, opening up of international markets and harmonious existence. For achieving ocean cooperation, it stressed upon market-based operation,

multi-stakeholder participation, promoting broad participation of governments, international organisations, and civil society in the industrial and commercial sectors.

A detailed reading of sections on framework and cooperation priorities respectively provides an insight into the extent of connectivity projects anticipated under the MSR. It provides minutiae on three 'Blue Economic Passages'. First, running westwards is China- Indian Ocean-Africa-Mediterranean Sea Blue Economic Passage that connects to China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor. Second Passage travels southwards from China connecting Oceania to South Pacific Ocean. It also envisages connecting China to Europe via the Arctic Ocean as under the third passage.

To develop the mutually beneficial blue partnerships, the documents provided an outline of four areas of cooperation under which the projects would be undertaken.

1. 'Green Development' of the maritime ecosystem and establishment of marine ecological conservation stations and cross-border ecological corridors. The document addressed climate change concerns by proposing low carbon development in marine sectors, developing new technological standards and to promote research on carbon sinks.
2. Ocean based prosperity' through sustainable utilization of marine resources; marine industrial cooperation in marine tourism routes, tourism information sharing; maritime connectivity through developing sister ports and forging port alliances.
3. 'Maritime Security' has been stressed by the establishment of navigational systems and remote sensing satellites, marine disaster warning systems that will assist in gathering and exchange of maritime related information (fisheries, anti-terrorism, anti-violence) with other countries. The areas covered under these systems spread from the South China Sea, to Bengal Sea, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. As Beijing's does not find allies in several of the countries in these maritime regions, such a proposition seems difficult to execute.
4. 'Innovative Growth' under the blue partnership that using existing regional structures such as APEC, ASEAN, PEMSEA and furthering China's bilateral engagements with Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Israel. The documents also detail on the development of joint marine research and cultural exchanges. To promote ocean-based culture, it mentions the development of media 'circle of friends'.
5. Lastly, the document foresees a high-level dialogue mechanism to promote 'Collaborative Governance'. This will involves connecting China with Small Island States, and also with

other South European countries- at two separate fronts. Promotion of 'cross-border marine spatial planning' for blue growth is also on the cards.

As far as 'Green Development of the marine ecosystem is concerned, China must lead by example. It is all very well to have such lofty ideas, but it should not be forgotten that China has paid scant attention to ecological conservation and has wilfully caused the destruction the marine ecosystem (something it now wants to champion) during its ongoing island reclamation in the South China Sea.

The document also remains silent on few contentious issues. One, delimitation of fishing zones that forms a bone of contention between China and its maritime neighbours. Second, the issue of maritime law enforcement is short on mentioning if it would follow existing international laws and regulations or develop any regional level maritime related mechanism in future. China's disregard for UNCLOS despite being the signatory is a case in point. Third, a problematic issue that document doesn't assuage is on 'Arctic Affairs'. China shares no border with the Arctic region. Nonetheless, Beijing has invested heavily on Arctic research and infrastructure development over the past few decades. On one hand, the document does mention about undertaking clean energy projects in cooperation with the Arctic countries , on the other hand, it also eyes on the exploration of Arctic resources in a 'sustainable manner'. Arctic is an environmentally fragile region and such explorations are deemed further unsafe for already melting glaciers and disappearing fauna and existing humanity living in difficult conditions within the region. 'Moreover, the Arctic region is a global common and any such activity planned by the Chinese should have universal acceptability and should be seen as beneficial to mankind'.

Even before the formal announcement of Belt Road Initiative Forum, China had been carrying out quite a number of infrastructure and connectivity projects both in Belt and Road sectors. The BRI has now included earlier projects apart from the proposed ones. This vision document demonstrates the scope and magnitude of Beijing's extent of planning. However, the document also raised certain questions that the leadership would need to answer on this expansive project.

(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])