Ever since being elected as the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in November 2012 and subsequently the President of China in March 2013, Xi Jinping has put forth his grandiose ideas like the “Chinese Dream” and “One Belt and One Road” or the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI). The former aims to “realize great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” by realizing the two centenary goals, i.e. to double the 2010 GDP per capita income and build a moderately prosperous society by 2021 when the CPC marks its 100th anniversary, and the second is to turn China into “a great modern socialist country” by 2049 when the PRC marks its centenary. The latter refers to setting up of a Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) reviving China’s ancient connections with Europe by land and sea (Xi 2014, 315–20). These have raised hopes as well as suspicion as to what China is up to, and that even if silk routes existed in ancient times, but what is the relevance of such initiatives in modern times? And also, whether such initiatives are in sync with China’s foreign policy goals such as multi-polarity, common security, and not seeking hegemony, etc. or is the advocacy an antidote to the US foreign policy goals like Indo-Pacific Strategy and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue’ (QSD), etc., or, is China challenging the US hegemony and rewriting the rules of global engagement?

The concept was first proposed by Xi Jinping during a speech at Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan on 7 September 2013 when he said that “To forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation and expand development in the Euro-Asia region, we should take an innovative approach and jointly build an “economic belt” along the silk road. This will be a great undertaking benefitting the people of all countries along the route”. Xi (2014) proposed that traffic connectivity needs to be improved, so as to open the strategic regional thoroughfare from the Pacific Ocean to the Baltic Sea, and gradually move towards the set-up of a network of transportation that connects Eastern, Western and Southern Asia. Chinese President also urged the regional members to promote local-currency settlement so as to improve their immunity to financial risks and their global competitiveness”. Undoubtedly, the economic connectivity is the heart of the matter for which Chinese President also announced
the establishment of a Silk Road Fund with $40 billion to support infrastructure investments in countries involved; Xi Jinping pledged $14.49 billion more to the fund during the First Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in Beijing in 2017. Nevertheless, the notion is equally significant strategically, as it will imply common security or security dilemmas at regional and trans-regional levels.

The initiative of building MSR was proposed by Xi Jinping during his visit to Indonesia in October 2013 in order to deepen economic and maritime links. The MSR begins in Fuzhou in Southeast China’s Fujian province and heads south into the ASEAN nations, crosses Malacca Strait and turns west to countries along the Indian Ocean before meeting the land-based Silk Road in Venice via the Red Sea and Mediterranean. Under the ambit of MSR, China plans to build hard and soft infrastructure from Indo-Pacific to Africa, including transport, energy, water management, communication, earth monitoring, economic and social infrastructure. The “Digital” and “Health” silk roads are the new additions to the BRI.

1 Locating MSR in History

The “Belt and Road” concept is rooted in history as there existed an overland Silk Route and the MSR that connected China to countries across Asia, Africa and Europe. As far as India and China are concerned, both were connected by land and sea for over two millennia; the names of Bengal (that included Bangladesh), Calicut, Cochin, Quilon are frequently mentioned the Chinese historical records. The earliest records about the MSR could be attributed to Han Annals 《汉书》which informs us that there existed a maritime route from southern China to India over Malayan Peninsula during the second century BC. Ban Gu, the court historian of Han Dynasty, provides the first detailed account about the MSR in his Han Annals; however, this does not mean to say that the maritime trade route did not exist before the writing of the Han Annals.

Han Annals:Treatise on Geography, vol. II by Ban Gu (32-92) has the following account (Geng 1990, 6–7; ISAS 1994, 7–8; Ray 2004, 49–50):

From the Zhangsai in Rinan (日南 present day Vietnam) country passing through Xuwen, Hepu, (徐闻, 合浦 present day Xuwen and Hepu counties in Guangdong and Guangxi respectively) it takes five months to reach Duyuan country (都元国 present day Sumatra) by boat; sailing further by boat for four months is the Yilumo country (邑卢没国 in the vicinity of present day Bago region of Myanmar); a further twenty days or so sail will take you to Shenli country (,false parts of present day Irrawaddy coasts in Myanmar); from here ten days or so journey on foot is Fugan Dulu country (夫甘都卢国 Pyay region at the midstream of Irrawaddy in Myanmar). Then a sail of over two months will take you to Huangzhi (黄支国 Kanchipuram), where the customs of the people, are similar to those of Zhuya ( 珠崖 parts of present day Hainan). Huangzhi is big and population huge, and abounds in exotic products. The place has been paying tribute to Han since the time of Emperor Wu (140-87 B.C.). The interpreter, who is a royal official accompanied by other assignees went to the sea to buy pearls, beryl
Locating MSR in History

(vaduriya), precious stones and other exotic products and bartered it with gold and varieties of silks. In every country, they got good food and companionship; foreign merchant vassals took them to their further destinations. There were also people who hankered after profit, and there were cases of robbery and murder. Then there were hazards of sea storms and drowning, and those who survived returned many years later. The Larger pearls could reach two centimetres (cun) in diameter. During the Yuanshi Era of Emperor Ping when Wang Mang executed government affairs, as he wished to showoff the brilliance of his majestic virtue, sent rich gifts to the king of Huangzhi, in return Huanzhi sent an embassy along with the present of a live rhinoceros. About eight months sail from Huangzhi will take you to Pizong (皮宗 Pakehan River Bay of Isthmus Kra in Malay Peninsula); a further two months sail will take you to the border of Xianglin (象林 Duy Xuyen in Quang Nam province of Vietnam) in Rinan country. To the south of Huangzhi lies the country of Sichengbu (present day Sri Lanka), it is from here that Han interpreter returned.

As regards the location of Huangzhi, there have been varied opinions among the scholars; however, the one which have found currency is that it could be identified with present day Kanchipuram in South India. Chinese scholars such as Feng Chenjun and Han Chenhua support such claim. Sichengbu country that was located in the south of Huangzhi, has been reliably identified with Sinhala or present day Sri Lanka, therefore, Huangzhi may be identified with Kanchipuram. There may be differences among scholars about the exact location of these places, but one thing is certain that people in Southeast Asia and South Asia had established trade and other relations with China since time immemorial; the maritime was one of the main routes of communication between them.

As the route gained popularity, many new harbours sprang up along with the old Guangzhou. Ports such as Yangzhou and Quanzhou rose to prominence; it is mentioned in Old Tang Annals. Biography of Tian Shen-gong that when Tang general Tian Shen-gong entered Yangzhou that was controlled by a renegade Liu Zhan, Tian ransacked the city and slaughtered thousands of Persian and other foreign merchants (JTS; Ji 1991, 92). By this time, Quanzhou has also become one of the most important ports in China; here again, there were traders from India, other south Asian and Arab countries. There were Arabian, Indian streets or towns of foreign communities in Quanzhou on the lines of present day China Towns across the globe. Archaeologists have unearthed over two hundred cultural relics of Hindu sculpture in Quanzhou. In 1984, in an archaeological survey, a shivalinga was unearthed from the city wall of Tonghaiamenguan in Xiawei village of Quanzhou (Yang 1991, 100) Similarly, Chinese traders settled in Indian port cities. Wang Dayuan of Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368) and the author of Accounts Of Foreign Islands records that (Geng 1990, 286) while in Nagapattam in Southern India, he saw a Cinastupa (Chinese monastery). The Chinese characters carved on it read, “construction completed in the eighth month of third Xianxiang year during the Southern Song Dynasty in 1267”.

If the route originated in Han period, it increased in popularity during the Three Kingdoms Period (220–280) and Sui Dynasty (581–618), prospered during Tang (618–960) and Song (960–1297), and reached zenith during Yuan (1279–1368) and Ming (1368–1644) periods. The Naval Expedition in the Pacific and Indian Ocean
by Zheng He, at the imperial decree of Ming emperor Yong Le between 1405 and 1433 while demonstrating the great importance of the Silk Road, also establishes the Chinese supremacy in the high seas. The accounts of Wang Dayuan (1330–1350), Fei Xin (1409–1433), Ma Huan and Gong Zhen (1413–1433) who except Wang were part of Zheng He’s maritime exploration reveal that Calicut and Cochin in India rose to prominence as new ports. References of other sea ports such as Mahabalipuram, Goa, Nagapattam, Quilon, Nicobar, Bombay, Malabar, Calcutta and many more could be found in the records left by them.

1.1 Zheng He’s Maritime Explorations—Realpolitik and Problems

Zheng He’s explorations started off from Nanjing and some touched the east coast of Africa. The expedition sailed across Qui Nhon in Champa, Surabaya in Java, the bay of Palembang, then Ceylon and finally Calicut. Ships detached to the main fleet visited Bengal and many other places in the east coast of India, Arabia and Africa. The fleet consisted of several tens of thousands of soldiers and hundreds of vessels; the largest expedition comprised over 300 ships and 28,000 men (Ray 2003, 7). The following chart gives a brief account of his seven voyages and places visited:

| No. of voyages | Time                   | Places visited in South Asia                                      |
|----------------|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1              | Yongle 3rd–5th year (1405–1407) | Calicut 古里                                                    |
| 2              | Yongle 5th–7th year (1407–1409) | Cochin 柯枝, Coimbatore 甘巴里, Cail 加异勒, 阿拔把丹 Cannanore, Ceylon 锡兰山, Calicut 古里 |
| 3              | Yongle 7th–9th year (1409–1411) | Ceylon 锡兰山, Quilon 小葛兰, Cochin 柯枝, Calicut 古里              |
| 4              | Yongle 11th–13th year (1413–1415) | Ceylon 锡兰山, Cail 加异勒, Cochin 柯枝, Calicut 古里, Maldives 潞山 |
| 5              | Yongle 15th–17th year (1417–1419) | Calicut 古里, Cochin 柯枝, Ceylon 锡兰山, Maldives 潞山, Coimbatore 甘巴里, 沙里湾泥 sharwayn on the east cost of southernmost India |
| 6              | Yongle 19th–20th year (1421–1423) | Calicut 古里, Cochin 柯枝, Cail 加异勒, Chola 琐里, Ceylon 锡兰山, Coimbatore 甘巴里, 山溜 |
| 7              | Xuande 5th–8th year (1431–1433) | Calicut 古里, Ceylon 锡兰山, Maldives 潞山, Cochin 柯枝, Quilon 小葛兰, Cail 加异勒, Coimbatore 甘巴里, Bengal 榜葛剌 |

Source Compiled on the basis of information provided by Geng Yinzeng (1990)
According to Prof. Ray (2003, 7, 224; Sen 2014), these visits have given rise to various speculations. The sheer size of these explorations must have overawed many rulers to send tribute to China. The motive of these voyages could not have been entirely peaceful. The intention behind these visits contrary to the Chinese claim that they were peaceful and non-expansionist has to be studied carefully. While economic factor was one of the reasons, other factors such as quest for the missing emperor Huidi, at least during the first voyage, to showcase the Chinese cultural and military might, and also rewrite the geopolitical order in Pacific and Indian Ocean were some of the other factors. China’s regime change in Annam (Vietnam), extending Chinese tributary system to Siam (Thailand) and Java prior to Zheng He’s voyages, but the defeat of Palembang (a Srivijaya principality) ruler Chen Zuyi and his decapitation in Nanjing during the first voyage (Fei Hsin 1436, 53), as well as the dethroning of Alagagkonara (Fei Hsin 1436, 64–65), and taking him all the way to China in 1411 during the third voyage albeit he was released and sent back next year are some of the incidents revealing this aspect of Zheng He’s maritime explorations. Therefore, according to Sen (2014), “the portrayal of Zheng He as an agent of peace and friendship is problematic”; however, he agrees that “China’s Silk Road initiatives could boost economies of those in Asia or Europe willing to claim ancient links”.

In other words, Zheng He did demonstrate a sense of realpolitik in engaging China in Southeast and South Asia and acting as a countervailing power in all the episodes of regime change. However, we may also argue that Chinese presence in Indo-Pacific was not without the political development in the region. Secondly, and most importantly, even if China had storage facilities in the places such as Malacca and Sumatra, they did not seize territories in the littoral states in Indo-Pacific even though it was in a position to do so; neither did China alter the system of trade in the region. With the imperial ban on further voyages, Confucian bureaucracy’s dislike for trade and power of the eunuchs, and protracted wars with Annam abruptly withdrew the Chinese presence in Indo-Pacific; the Qing (1644–1911) initiated the policy of close doors and was awaken only by the gunboat diplomacy of the west.

### 2 China’s Perspective of the Twenty-First Century MSR

According to the Chinese perspective, ancient MSR must be separated from the Twenty-First Century MSR, as the old ceased to exist after 1840. The ancient MSR centred around the idea of “Sinosphere” the mainstay of which was the so-called tributary system and was clearly demonstrated during different phases of Chinese history, especially during Zheng He’s voyages. However, “the Twenty-First Century MSR is based on mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence, above all on equal footing” (Gong 2014, 5–7). Chinese President Xi Jinping (2014, 345-46 italics added) has also invoked the “Silk Road Spirit” saying that “for hundreds of years the spirit embodied by the Silk Road, namely peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning
and mutual benefits has passed down through the generations”. He further said that in order to promote the Silk Road spirit, “we need to respect each other’s choice of development path, need to focus on mutually beneficial cooperation, and advocate dialogue and peace”. Gong asserts that “the nature of political, diplomatic and trade exchanges, in the age of advanced technology has posed common financial and security risks”. It is obvious that as China’s economic footprints spreads across the continents, to secure the sea lines of communication (SLOC), boost GDP by developing maritime economy, expands maritime space by initiating various connectivity and capacity building projects in littoral states, and ultimately hedge the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the USA and other security constructs such as QSD are considered important for securing national interests. However, the same will also add to tensions in the Indo-Pacific and force countries in the region to make choices between the competing forces in the region.

The component of economic security remains pivotal to the MSR, for the security dividends would be built on the former. There are 32 littoral countries including China that touches the MSR. The combined population of these countries is around 4 billion people, and the GDP of around $30 trillion. The RCEP countries alone account for $26.2 trillion (ASEAN 2020). These are the countries with huge potentials and have achieved rapid economic growth recently; therefore, China sees a huge opportunity to reap these potentials. According to XinhuaNet (2017), in 2017, China’s maritime economy grew by 7.5% annually, generated $1.22 trillion, accounting for 10% of the entire GDP. The aim is to raise it to 15% by 2035. Marine economy is just one of the components of China’s strategy to transform China into a “strong maritime power”; others include making forays into marine science and technology and converting China into a strong naval power. It is in this context that China has undertaken port buildings in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Iran, Djibouti, etc. places.

Taking stock of the BRI in the last five years, Ning Jizhen, deputy director of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and director of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), revealed on 28 August 2018 that the total trade of China with the BRI countries as of June 2018 had reached $5 trillion. China invested $28.9 billion and created 240,000 jobs in these countries. Ning Jizhen revealed that as of now, 103 countries and international organizations have signed 118 cooperation agreements with China on the BRI; the implementation rate of these projects according to Ji has reached 95%. The focus has been on the “six economic corridors” of which China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the flagship, and the work is supposedly progressing smoothly. In order to push the projects signed by China under the CPEC, a CPEC Authority headed by an ex-army general has been created. The construction of China–Laos Railway, China–Thai Railway and Hungary–Serbia Railway has been progressing steadily; construction work on some sections of Jakarta–Bandung high-speed Railway has been initiated, and Gwadar Port could be operated to its full capacity. Other rail projects such as Djibouti–Addis Ababa and Mombasa–Nairobi have been completed (Deepak 2018b).

One thing which emerged clearly out of President Xi Jinping’s speech during the second BRI Forum on 26th April 2019 is that China is convinced that the projects signed with 125 countries and 29 international organizations during the first forum
in 2017 have “taken roots” along the “six economic corridors” in various countries (newly signed China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) maintaining the tally at 6 as the BCIM makes an exit), as China’s trade with the BRI countries exceeded $6 trillion, implying that 50% of China’s GDP originates from these countries. Not only China, but various countries along the BRI including the participants from new entrant Italy (the first in the G7) and Switzerland, etc., also echo President Xi Jinping’s words that the “BRI is a common road of opportunities, a road towards prosperity”. The China club, as many have referred to it, is undoubtedly becoming more and more attractive to the countries across the globe (Deepak 2019).

2.1 Responses

There are varied responses from various countries as regards China’s “Twenty-First Century MSR”. These responses vary from jumping the bandwagon by expressing their active participation and cooperation; observing neutrality, while some have proposed counter-initiatives. For example, most of the ASEAN countries have welcomed the idea as it sets to build a single market economic community. Having attended the second forum in Beijing in 2019, this author felt that there was almost an unanimity among the participants that prior to the Chinese initiative, the USA and its allies were the sole providers of the global goods; however, when China is willing to provide the same and wanting to make them inclusive by everyone’s participation, the question has been asked about the intention behind these. The thinking is rooted in China’s massive economic engagement with ASEAN as the block become second largest trading partner of China in 2019 with a trade volume of $644 billion. In the first quarter of 2020, ASEAN replaced both the EU and USA to become the largest trading partner of China. It is owing to such a relationship that most of the ASEAN countries have been “balancing economic development with sovereignty” assert Ghiasy et al. (2018) in a study conducted for SIPRI-FES with the signing of the RCEP, the economic partnership between China and ASEAN is bound to be deepened further.

Delegates from South Asia have seen the initiative as a massive opportunity for building capacities and eradicating poverty. China has invested billions of dollars in India’s immediate neighbourhood; in Bangladesh, infrastructure projects over $10 billion are being executed. Nepal is executing China–Nepal Transit and Transportation Agreement that will facilitate the building of a connectivity network in terms of roads, rails, air and optical fibre cables along Koshi, Kaligandaki, Karnali, etc., corridors. Interestingly, during this forum, of all the 13 bilateral and 16 multilateral agreements with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Pakistan, almost none was in the infrastructure sector. India’s official absence from the 2019 forum was conspicuous even though the flag flew high along the BRI countries flags at every venue of the forum. India has been critical of China’s insensitivities towards India’s core interest in the region, especially China’s investment in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. The “high quality development” perhaps is meant to blunt the Japanese pitch
of building “quality infrastructure” in the Asia–Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) and the Indo-Pacific region where India is a partner country. The presence of the all ten ASEAN countries and many African and Latin American nations at the forum show that the Japanese pitch was never a counter to the BRI. Furthermore, the presence of former Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatayama and many other delegates from Japan is confirmation of Japan warming up to the Chinese initiative and is even proposing joint investment in third countries, which China has welcomed for various reasons including financing of the projects (Deepak 2019).

Obviously, the Chinese initiative including others such as “Made in China 2025” has invited backlash from some countries, especially the USA. They have blamed China for initiating “neo-colonial” policies and establishing a “China centric” order. The issue of government debt in some countries has been hyped and Chinese loans to such countries are portrayed as debt traps. If one believes in the data provided by the Asian Development Bank, Asia will require an infrastructure investment of $1.7 trillion by the year 2030, which is roughly about $800 billion per annum. If the west remains non-committal towards investing in the region, people will certainly welcome the Chinese investment. For example, the US commitment of investing $113 million in the Indo-Pacific may be the case of too little too late. Nevertheless, some of the concerns are genuine. Some of the smaller participants of the BRI such as Mongolia, Pakistan, Laos, Sri Lanka, Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan are deep in debt. China committing $72 billions for the CPEC may be difficult for Pakistan to service; the example of Sri Lanka been forced to swap over $1 billion for Chinese equity is an example often cited to highlight the “ills” of the BRI. Though the Laos high-speed railway may connect China to Thailand, but the cost is too high and Laos may never be able to return the money. In 2018, citing “tough financing terms” Pakistan cancelled the $14 billion Diamer-Bhasha Dam project; Nepal and Myanmar followed the suit by scrapping a $2.5 billion and $3.6 billion hydroelectricity project, respectively. In the same vein, Malaysia too has cancelled the East Coast Rail Link and the Sabah natural gas pipeline projects in August once the new regime under Mahathir Mohamad formed the government. These may be few aberrations among the 21,284 projects the Chinese companies have contracted in more than 60 countries between 2015 and 2018 worth $410.78 billion. China perhaps has come a long way to understand the political, economic, cultural, environmental and legal risks of the BRI projects. Unlike the initial phase of the BRI, the projects are weighed for every risk and are subjected to asset-liability ratios and return on capital requirements. Moreover, some of the debt issues may have existed before the Chinese investment, therefore, not necessarily related to the BRI (Deepak 2018b). Even Europe sees opportunities in the MSR in China’s “Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the BRI”, a document issued by the State Oceanic Administration (SOA) and National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) in 2017. The document outlines marine ecological conservation, blue carbon, customs cooperation, and marine research infrastructure as key areas for international cooperation (XinhuaNet 2017). According to a study conducted by Duchâtel and Duplaix (2018) for European Council for Foreign Relations, “European public and private actors that can negotiate advantageous terms with Chinese counterparts may be able to benefit from
partnerships”. The scholars argue that even though China’s MSR affects Europe in five main areas—maritime trade, shipbuilding, emerging growth niches in the blue economy, the global presence of the Chinese navy, but it also creates space for cooperation. They also suggest that the EU “should emulate China’s blue economy as an engine of growth and wealth, and encourage innovation to respond to well-funded Chinese industrial and R&D policies”. As far as Indo-Pacific region is concerned, the scholars suggest that the EU must maintain strategic balance and uphold the vision of rule-based maritime order.

3 “Twenty-First Century MSR” and India

India which is considered as an important country by China along the “Belt and Road” perhaps went overboard to boycott the BRI forums. India’s dissatisfaction primarily originates from: (1) no policy consultations over the concept and more importantly on the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM) and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that runs through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), parts of which are under Chinese jurisdiction. India considers POK as an integral part of Kashmir, the sovereignty of which has been decided by the instrument of accession in 1947. India has conveyed to China that there would be no compromise on the core issue of sovereignty in the same way as China has never budged on its “one China” policy. (2) Since China-Pak relationship is primarily considered as an anti-India axis, India believes that both will further pin down India to the subcontinent. Thousands of Chinese soldiers operating in the POK territories go beyond the notion of connectivity and unimpeded trade. (3) Contrary to Xi Jinping’s overtures at the forums that there is no geopolitics in the project, India sees it as China’s ambition to realize its long-term vision for Asian regional and world order where given the nature of India-China asymmetrical relationship and Sino-Pak entente cordiale, India’s strategic space would further shrink. In South Asian context, “India centric” fragmented integration according to Chinese scholars has provided an opportunity to China to build the “community of shared future” with neighbouring countries proposed by Xi Jinping in 2014, which since then has been made integral to the construction of the “Belt and Road”. In fact, Xi Jinping’s reference to “build a big family with harmonious co-existence” just demonstrates that (Yang 2018, 43–50). (4) Another concern flagged out by Ghiasy et al. (2018) is India’s worries about the “dependency trap”. “India, alongside a number of stakeholders, believes that China is deliberately creating dependencies among the states along the MSR to make them strategic dependents and to create economic enclaves. China’s lease of ports such as Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Feydhoo Finolhu in the Maldives, Gwadar in Pakistan and Obock in Djibouti is a pointer in this direction.
3.1 Soaring Maritime Ambitions

Owing to the massive economic growth rates and burgeoning Gross Domestic Product in these countries along with the trends in maritime environment have forced both India and China to develop new capabilities and power projections. The fundamental factor in China’s military modernization is to increase its power projection capabilities beyond the Chinese borders. This includes the goal of transforming the PLA Navy (PLAN) into a blue water navy, acquiring aerial refuelling capability, creating a rapid reaction force, and bettering its nuclear arsenal. This is primarily because in the early 1990s, in the aftermath of the Gulf War, China realized that mechanized warfare of the industrial era would be gradually replaced by the information warfare. The focus of Chinese military modernization should turn to information and hi-tech war.

Factors such as forcible unification of Taiwan over the island’s declaration of independence; restoring the so-called sovereignty over disputed islands in the South China Sea; growing needs to protect China’s Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) in order to secure its overseas interests, especially the energy resources; and project its power globally so as to seek an increasingly dominant role in world affairs as it emerges to the status of a strong power from a big power, the modernization of the 225,000 strong PLAN, especially since the 1980s has been going on feverishly. The PLAN has been following a three-step strategy in its modernization process. In the first step, it aims to develop a relatively modernized naval force that can operate within the first island chain, a series of islands that stretch from Japan to the north, to Taiwan, and Philippines to the south. In the second step, the PLAN aims to develop a regional naval force that can operate beyond the first island chain to reach the second island chain, which includes Guam, Indonesia and Australia. In the third stage, the PLAN will develop a global naval force by the mid twenty-first century. In order to achieve this, China’s Central Military Commission under Jiang Zemin developed a three-step strategy. During the first phase, that is by 2010, China must lay a solid foundation for informatized development, and establish informatized systems of the army; during the second phase (from 2011 to 2020), achieve significant progress in information technology, and establish a more comprehensive information system for the armed forces; and during third phase (by 2050), basically achieve the goal of informatized army, and reach the average military level of the developed countries (Xu 2008, 72; Wang 2005, 47–8).

Han Junyan (2010), Professor at China’s National Defence University published an article in Huanqiu Shibao, entitled “China’s military must learn to fight the ‘global war’”. Han outlined four broad options for China in order to fight a “global war” on the lines of the US global war strategy. The options for China he said are: (1) China must look for military allies; (2) China must establish overseas military bases; (3) China must use military means to solve the “problem”; and (4) China must participate in international military efforts so as to enhance combat capability of the PLA. As far as setting up military bases is concerned, it has been reported by the Namibian Times that that China plans to set up 18 military bases across the Indian
Ocean including one in Walvis Bay in Namibia (David 2014; ET 2014; Hartman 2014). The others bases according to the paper include, Chongjin in North Korea, Moresby in Papua New Guinea, Sihanoukville in Cambodia, Koh Lanta in Thailand, Sittwe in Myanmar, Dhaka in Bangladesh, Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Djibouti in Djibouti, Lagos in Nigeria, Mombasa in Kenya, Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, Luanda in Angola, as well as in Maldives, and Seychelles, albeit the reports were immediately denied by the then Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman Geng Yansheng as “inaccurate”, “exaggerated” and therefore “groundless” which he said were based on an unofficial Chinese Internet report. However, if we go through the writings of Chinese strategic analysts like General Zhang (2009, 285) of the Institute of Military Science, it is obvious that China is contemplating to expand its sea power through acquiring military assets including aircraft careers and military bases. As far as the Indian Ocean is concerned, he says that the “possibility (of acquiring bases) cannot be ruled out”, for “if China could acquire naval and air force bases in Bangladesh and Myanmar in the Bay of Bengal, Pakistan, Iran and Oman, it would enable China to replenish and shield its military assets on the one hand and pin down India on the other. However, the possibility of acquiring bases in Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius is very remote,” maintains Zhang. Nonetheless, it appears that Chinese leased Maldivian island of Feydhoo Finolhu could be converted into a military base by China.

India on the other hand is also striving to enhance its capabilities by indigenization and overseas procurements. In October 2008, the then navy chief said that “By 2022, we plan to have 160-plus ship navy, including three aircraft carriers, 60 major combatants, including submarines and close to 400 aircraft of different types. This will be a formidable three-dimensional force with satellite surveillance and networking to provide force multiplication”. 1 It is quite unambiguous that after years of alienation and disenchantment, India has accorded high priority in engaging its immediate and extended neighbours. Inviting SAARC heads of the states to his swearing in ceremony; his first visit to Bhutan and then Nepal as Prime Minister; and a visit to three key Island nations in the Indian Ocean, Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka between 11 and 14 March 2015, Prime Minister Modi has initiated a highly assertive foreign policy. Perhaps taking cues from the Chinese diplomacy in the Indian Ocean region, India signed a series of agreements with the island nations ranging from developing blue economy, developmental strategies to maritime security. India secured infrastructure development rights for two islands in the region—Assumption from Seychelles and Agalega from Mauritius. Giving a fillip to strategic cooperation, Modi also launched a Coastal Surveillance Radar Project in Seychelles. Besides, India also signed an agreement for hydrographical survey for maritime cooperation with Seychelles. It is believed that Seychelles, which currently is an observer, will soon become a full partner in the maritime security cooperation between India, Maldives and Sri Lanka.

1Global Security.org “India-Naval Modernization” http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/india/in-navy-development.htm (accessed on 24 November 2014).
3.2 Overlapping Interests

If China’s increased presence in the Indian Ocean is becoming a major challenge to India’s maritime security, India’s Act East Policy and increasingly close economic and security ties with ASEAN has made China uneasy when Indian ships sail through the disputed waters of South China Sea. It is in recent years that China has started to define South China Sea as an area of core interest in addition to Taiwan and Tibet. India’s presence in the area has been challenged by China by resorting to various ways. For example, on 22 July 2011, one of India’s amphibious assault vessels, the INS Airavat on a friendly visit to Vietnam, was reportedly contacted by the Chinese navy and told that it was in Chinese waters. In June 2012 when four Indian naval ships left the Philippines for South Korea, they were greeted with “Welcome to the South China Sea, Foxtrot-47 [INS Shivalik]” by the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) frigates and later escorted for next 12 h. The message was clear that the Indian ships were entering the Chinese waters. In September 2011, when the ONGC Videsh extended the agreement with Petro Vietnam by three-year for block 128, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Jiang Yu, reiterated China’s “indisputable sovereignty” over the South China Sea and warned India without naming it that the “relevant countries respect China’s position and refrain from taking unilateral action to complicate and expand the issue”. The nationalistic *Global Times* was more aggressive in its editorial published on 14 October 2011 when it wrote:

Both countries clearly know what this means for China. China may consider taking actions to show its stance and prevent more reckless attempts in confronting China in the area. By inking pacts with Vietnam, India probably has deeper considerations in its regional strategy than simply getting barrels of oil and gas. India is willing to fish in the troubled waters of the South China Sea so as to accumulate bargaining chips on other issues with China. There is strong political motivation behind the exploration projects….. China’s vocal objections may not be heeded. China must take practical and firm actions to make these projects fall through. China should denounce this agreement as illegal. Once India and Vietnam initiate their exploration, China can send non-military forces to disturb their work, and cause dispute or friction to halt the two countries’ exploration. In other words, China should let them know that economic profits via such cooperation can hardly match the risk.

Another newspaper called *China Energy News* in a front-page commentary published on 16th October 2012 raised the pitch further by noting:

India is playing with fire by agreeing to explore for oil with Vietnam in the disputed South China Sea. India’s energy strategy is slipping into an extremely dangerous whirlpool. On the question of cooperation with Vietnam, the bottom line for Indian companies is that they must not enter into the disputed waters of South China Sea. Challenging the core interests of a large, rising country for unknown oil at the bottom of the sea will not only lead to a crushing defeat for the Indian oil company, but will most likely seriously harm India’s whole energy security and interrupt its economic development. Indian oil company policy makers should consider the interests of their own country, and turn around at the soonest opportunity and leave South China Sea.

Above all China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) called for bids from foreign companies offering exploration of oil in nine blocks in South China
Sea, including the Block 128. Foreign companies may not be interested in the bids in the disputed region, but the bidding itself is symbolic and assertion of China’s claim in the region.

It was perhaps under such a tremendous pressure from China that India communicated openly in 2012 that it also wanted to surrender Block 128 albeit for techno-economic reasons. India took a 180 degree turn on 15 July 2012 and agreed to stay on when Vietnam requested the ONGC to hold on in Block 128. It is obvious that India has a rather muddled and incoherent policy as regards its exploration in South China Sea. At the outset, when China reacted to India’s presence in South China Sea, India accepted de jure sovereignty of Vietnam in the contracted areas. According to the then spokesman of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “the Chinese had concerns but we are going by what the Vietnamese authorities have told us and have conveyed this to the Chinese”. A little later the then External Affair Minister S M Krishna said India is “purely there for commercial reasons” and for India’s energy security concerns. Of late, India has said that the disputes between different countries in South China Sea are a matter for them to settle; however, India will undertake commercial activities with governments who exercise actual control over disputed territories.

### 3.3 India’s Responses to China’s MSR

As far as “Belt and Road” Initiative of China is concerned, India has been part of the initiative with the signing of the BCIM economic corridor during Chinese Premier, Li keqiang’s India visit in May 2013. The BCIM was made into one of the six economic corridors of the BRI. However, India’s opposition to the BRI and boycott of the two BRI forums presided by Chinese President Xi, Jinping, the BCIM was taken out of the BRI economic corridors during the second BRI Forum in 2019. The BCIM remains an area where policy could be integrated, especially when we are thinking of developing landlocked and underdeveloped northeast region of India. We certainly need to take a leaf out of China’s experience as to how it has developed and connected its south-western and southern states to ASEAN. Is New Delhi ready to forgo its sensitivities in northeast in turn of economic development of the region? Can the trade between China–ASEAN and India–ASEAN percolate to the northeast India and northwest China? The answer to all these questions is yes provided we start looking at boundaries as gateways but not barriers.

However, India has been responding to the Twenty-First Century MSR by its own strategy. It has been expanding and strengthening its maritime partnerships with the USA, Japan, Vietnam, Australia, etc. countries on the one hand and engaging ASEAN in various domains on the other. While addressing the annual Delhi Dialogue on ASEAN–India partnership in Delhi on 11 March 2015, India’s the then External Affairs Minister Ms. Sushma Swaraj revealed that maritime cooperation with ASEAN was a priority of the government, and that by the end of this year, India will conclude a maritime pact with ASEAN. She said (MEA 2015):
Enhancing connectivity between India and ASEAN in all its aspects - physical, institutional and people-to-people, is a key strategic priority for us. Our North-Eastern region is our land-bridge to the ASEAN…ASEAN lies at the core of India’s Act East Policy and at the centre of our dream of an Asian century…We also have maritime boundaries with several ASEAN countries, and this is particularly important from a trade perspective. We have started negotiations on an ASEAN-India Maritime Transport Cooperation Agreement, and hope that it will be finalised by the end of the year.

Besides, there is new initiative such as “Project Mausam” initiated by the Ministry of Culture in tandem with Archaeological Society of India (ASI), New Delhi, as the nodal agency and Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi, as its Research Unit. The project was launched at the 38th World Heritage Session at Doha, Qatar, on 20th June, 2014. The endeavour of Project “Mausam”: Maritime Routes and Cultural Landscapes is to position itself at two levels: at the macrolevel, it aims to re-connect and re-establish communications between countries of the Indian Ocean world, which would lead to an enhanced understanding of cultural values and concerns; while at the microlevel, the focus is on understanding national cultures in their regional maritime milieu (MoC 2014).

Since area covered under the project extends from East Africa, Arabian Peninsula, Indian subcontinent and Sri Lanka to Southeast Asia, and has been termed as Indian Ocean “world” analysts and media has termed it India’s response to China’s MSR, and even Modi government’s most significant foreign policy initiative designed to counter China, as the project will expand its maritime presence, culturally, strategically and psychologically (Pillalamarri 2014). Pang Zhongying, an international relations professor at the Renmin University of China in Beijing, says that (WCT 2015) “Mausam is a ‘threatening and competing’ initiative that will pose a major challenge to China’s Belt and Road plans, the competing initiatives could turn into a major tussle between the world’s two biggest rising powers”. However, ambassador Le Yucheng holds that (DH 2015) “Belt and Road Initiatives can also be linked with India’s ‘Spice Route’ and ‘Mausam’ projects, thus forming a new starting point and a new bright spot in China-India cooperation”.

The idea may be grand but, India at present does not have the financial as well as technological muscle to implement the project, neither has government pushed it the way China has pushed its “Belt and Road” Initiative. If we go through the initiatives of the governments on this front, it does not go beyond a monthly lecture series at India International Centre (IIC), a few workshops and an international conference held in 2015. The kind of information available on IGNCA’s website does not term it beyond a cultural project. The MSR of China is wider in scope and deeper in content, and there are practical goals set by China in terms industrial capacity building, technological cooperation, environmental protection, cultural connections and legal sensitivities more prominently, thus enhancing the scope of the BRI from Eurasia to other continents. Therefore, “Mausam” is merely a cultural project devoid of any strategic intent.

Furthermore, India has also been pitching for an Indian Ocean Zone of Peace (IOZOP). It is understandable that increasing presence of the major maritime powers such as the USA, Japan, Russia, and especially China and its military ties with arch
rival Pakistan, has created uneasiness in India and the necessity to limit military maritime activity of these powers in the IOR. Strategic proximity to choke points such as the Malacca, Hormuz and Gulf of Aden puts India at a vantage point which was largely ignored until Panikkar (1945, 80) pointed to this in 1945. In his words, “While to other countries, the Indian Ocean is only one of the important oceanic areas, to India, it is the vital sea. Her lifelines are concentrated in that area, her freedom is dependent on the freedom of that water surface. No industrial development, no commercial growth, no stable political structure is possible for her unless her shores are protected”.

Subsequently during the Cold War, it became the arc of rivalry between major powers and was subjected to militarization. Alarmed by militarization of the IOR, India being the harbinger of non-aligned policy together with many IOR littoral states campaigned for declaring it a zone of peace during the conference of non-aligned states at Lusaka in 1970. In the following year, a Sri Lankan resolution declaring it a zone of peace was adopted which was unanimously adopted by the littoral states in 1979. In 1979, the UN constituted an ad hoc committee to convene a conference in 1981 on the matter in Colombo. T. P Srinivasan, who represented India in the ad hoc committee, recalls (2015) that:

The permanent members, except China, did not support the original resolution. France, the United States and the United Kingdom kept out of the committee as they felt that they had been directly targeted…. Till the end of the Cold War, India stuck to the purist interpretation of the zone as an area free of foreign military presence, particularly bases and other facilities, conceived in the context of great power rivalry. Implicitly, India did not object to the movement of warships, as long as they did not threaten the regional states.

The littoral states themselves now worked against it; Pakistan began to emphasize “denuclearization” of the Indian Ocean after the Indian tests of 1974; Sri Lanka was not sure if they wanted the USA out of region; China expressed solidarity for the littoral and hinterland states in seeking to eliminate foreign military presence. The end of the Cold War era saw the USA to establish naval superiority in the region. As ad hoc committee became defunct, India also changed its position. In the face of China’s rise and modernization of the PLA, India initiated its own security measures to strengthen its position in the IOR. It initiated naval exercises with multiple partners including the USA, thus legitimizing the presence of foreign players in the IOR. On 1 December 2014, India’s National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval while delivering the keynote address at the “Galle Dialogue”, held in Sri Lanka’s southern coastal town of Galle, evoked the 1971 resolution and said that “the Indian Ocean has to contribute to the prosperity of different nations, it is necessary that it remains a zone of peace”. Mr. Doval’s remarks were perhaps in response to China’s growing military presence in the island, especially the docking of Chinese nuclear submarine in Sri Lanka a few months earlier in that year. According to Srinivasan (2014):

…a new IOZOP will have even less chance of success than the old one. A strategy of enhancing cooperation between the littoral and hinterland states and external powers without the reference to the IOZOP may have a greater chance of success. India has special strengths in combating piracy, alleviating natural disasters and trafficking. The involvement of the U.S. in fighting terrorism may be of an advantage. China has already taken note of India’s
India may not have the capacities and capabilities to match the Chinese MSR; however, she has rolled out its own connectivity initiatives such as the “Act East” policy, “Look North” policy that envisages India’s economic integration with ASEAN and Central Asian Republics. Projects such as India–Myanmar Friendship Road link, which is part of the greater India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway; the Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project; the Mekong–India Corridor, which aims to connect India to Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam; development of Sittwe port in south-western part of Myanmar; master plan for integrating India’s northeast to the ASEAN; India’s gas and pipeline projects, Chabahar port development with Iran, and the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), etc. policy initiatives in the Indo-Pacific region.

4 The US Factor in Maritime Security

Many in China’s strategic circles believe that Western countries lead by the USA are suspicious of the rise of China, and the grandiose initiatives such as Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Silk Road Fund, MSR and most recent Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) has put China at the centre of global geopolitics and geo-economics. These initiative, while challenging the US hegemony in the region has also challenged the US notion of “pivot to Asia”, which is yet to take off but has been viewed by China a rider to the East Asia economic integration (Chen et al. 2014, 78). Not only this, the USA has also created fissures in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and obstructed expansion and cooperation between Asian and European economies by signing Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) agreement with the EU. The TTP and TTIP obstructs China establishing East Asia-Central Asia–West Asia economic and trade cooperation through “overland Silk Route: which in other words also restricts China from expanding its space in the seas (Chen et al. 2014, 78).

In the light of these, “Washington will be not as supportive of Beijing’s renewed drive as it was when China started its reform in the late 1970s given the fact that many American strategists now view China as the only potentially qualified rival” argues Zhao (2015), a Ph.D. candidate at Peking University. The growing anxiety has lead the USA to privately acknowledge sovereignty of Japan over Senkaku; this is precisely the reason why Japan has shown interest to develop the Islands, including the dispatch of US soldiers to the islands, albeit there are other issues such as oil and gas reserves in the islands. The US–China trade war and its Indo-Pacific Strategy should also be viewed in this context. In the aftermath of the Covid-19, the US–China relationship has touched a new low. If Pompeo’s speech made at the Nixon Library
on 23 July is any indication, the USA has identified the CPC as the enemy that must be defeated. In his speech, Pompeo said (2020):

…We imagined engagement with China would produce a future with bright promise of comity and cooperation. But today – today, we’re all still wearing masks and watching the pandemic’s body count rise because the CCP failed in its promises to the world. We’re reading every morning new headlines of repression in Hong Kong and in Xinjiang…We must admit a hard truth that should guide us in the years and decades to come, that if we want to have a free twenty-first century, and not the Chinese century of which Xi Jinping dreams, the old paradigm of blind engagement with China simply won’t get it done. We must not continue it and we must not return to it…Perhaps we were naive about China’s virulent strain of communism, or triumphalist after our victory in the Cold War, or cravenly capitalist, or hoodwinked by Beijing’s talk of a “peaceful rise.” …the only way to change communist China is to act not on the basis of what Chinese leaders say, but how they behave…President Reagan said that he dealt with the Soviet Union on the basis of “trust but verify.” …When it comes to the CCP, I say we must distrust and verify.

In Beijing’s view, the USA as an offshore power that has no stake in the South China Sea. China considers Japan as most reliable ally of the USA in the Pacific and India as a possible ally in the Indian Ocean. In June 2012, the then US defence secretary Leon Panetta had remarked that India would be “a linchpin” in America’s unfolding new defence strategy that revolves around “re-balancing” its forces towards Asia-Pacific (TOI 2012). The joint Malabar maritime exercises between the USA, India and Japan could be seen in this light. Ever since the normalization of defence ties and nuclear deal in 2005, India and the USA have conducted more than 50 joint military exercises. The Malabar exercises initiated in 1992 now include Japan, Australia and Singapore too. These include search and rescue exercises, helicopter cross-deck landings, underway replenishments, gunnery and anti-submarine warfare exercises, and are termed “complex, high-end operational exercise that has grown in scope and complexity over the years” by the Indian Navy website. The new India-US 2+2 dialogue held on 6 September 2018 officially replaced the earlier India-US Strategic and Commercial Dialogue established in 2010 and 2015, respectively.

Notwithstanding the India-China reset during the Wuhan Summit, India is moving closer to the USA as regards security cooperation. India has been granted the “major defence partner” status by the USA and India has been the signatory of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) a variant of the logistics support agreement (LSA) that the USA has with its NATO allies. The “partnership” has been further strengthened by signing the remaining foundational agreements, the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2018 and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Cooperation (BECA) in 2020. The agreements will enable India to operate on high-end secured communication equipment on platforms such as C-130 J, C-17, P-8I aircraft, and Apache and Chinook helicopters procured by India from the USA. Other deals in the pipeline are $1 billion purchase of 24-multi-role Sikorsky–Lockheed Martin helicopters for the Indian Navy, $1 billion National Advanced Surface to Air Missile System-II (NASAMS-II), and $2-3 billion unmanned Guardian drones. The tri-service military exercises and anti-terror exercises are also on anvil. Notwithstanding the above-mentioned facts, it will be a tardy and expansive excercise to transform the nerve
system of the existing platforms which are mostly of Russian origin. The Galwan incident of 15 June 2020 in the Western sector has certainly pushed India closer to the USA and we will witness further deepening of India-USA security and economic partnership even in the post Trump era.

5 Conclusion

It could be discerned that the Indo-Pacific maritime environment has undergone tremendous changes. The rising China has emerged as a new force in the Pacific with its new assets including the Liaoning aircraft carrier and has challenged the USA and Japanese dominance in the region, while its port infrastructural facilities in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan has threatened the traditional Indian dominance of the Indian Ocean. Indian Navy’s blue water ambitions are also visible from its increased footprints in the Pacific and the kind of maritime exercises it is engaged with the USA and other countries in the region. China seems to have ambitions to control the SLOCs in the Indo-Pacific maritime sphere and compete with the USA.

With the grandiose Twenty-First Century MSR, most of the ASEAN nations seem to have agreed to strengthen their maritime relations with China in the view of economic gains they tend to achieve. This is also deminstred by the signing of China driven RCEP in November 2020. Nevertheless, smaller countries in the Indo-Pacific maritime sphere appear to accommodate the well settled USA, dominant China and emerging India at the same time. As for India and China, both have adopted strategies and measure to hedge against each other. China has maintained that its MSR strategy is all about economic cooperation and win-win results, but India has been apprehensive that it may be a larger string of pearls of containment. It is obvious that if China’s increased footprints in the Indian Ocean have thrown new challenges to India’s maritime security, in the same vein, India’s “Act East Policy” under Modi, its increasingly intimate economic and security ties with ASEAN, and especially a “Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region” signed together with the USA, has made China apprehensive about India’s role in the Pacific.

China has shown interest in “Make in India” and “Mausam” initiatives of India, and sees some resonance with its MSR. Therefore, the hedging strategies of both India and China may pave way for cooperation rather than direct confrontation. In order to build trust, both need to be sensitive to each others’ sensitivities in the Indo-Pacific. In the view of this, it would be sensible for both to initiate a substantive maritime dialogue at an early date. In fact, China has been pushing the matter since 2012 when the then Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi proposed the dialogue with his Indian counterpart S. M. Krishna. In 2014, Yang Jiechi raised the issue again during his India visit, and finally, it was made part of the Joint Statement during Xi Jinping’s India visit in September 2014. According to the Statement (MEA 2014):
The two sides decided to hold the first round of maritime cooperation dialogue within this year to exchange views on maritime affairs and security, including anti-piracy, freedom of navigation and cooperation between maritime agencies of both countries. They also agreed to hold the consultations on disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control at an early date.

Notwithstanding the Joint Statement on maritime security, tensions along the land borders, overlapping interest in the Indo-Pacific, China’s port lease spree in the regions, and securitization of the same, will make it difficult for both to dock their development strategies least to talk about maritime strategies. On the contrary, China’s tough posturing along the border will push India to shed its ambivalences on the Quad, Indo-Pacific, its relationship with the USA and middle powers in the region.

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