



GEOPOLITICS OF MARITIME SILK ROAD POWER SHIFT OR COMPETITIVE COEXISTENCE

Seminar Report

This report is based on the seminar titled ‘Geopolitics of Maritime Silk Road: Power Shift or Competitive Coexistence’, which was co-organized by Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Islamabad and Maritime Study Forum (MSF) on March 3, 2022, with a view to analyze developing trends in global maritime domain.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), formerly known as One Belt One Road (OBOR), was promulgated by the Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. This project had two dynamics: The land-based Silk Road Economic Belt, and the ocean-based 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The Maritime Silk Road (MSR) consists of numerous projects across the Indian, Pacific, Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Arctic Ocean.

Although China claims that it is purely an economic initiative and has no strategic aims, this plan boosts China’s interdependence with the countries that are a part of this scheme. And as China gets economically more vigorous, then through the weaponization of mutual dependence it can significantly influence the policies of these countries by exploiting vulnerabilities of interdependence. This can have geopolitical and geo-economic advantages that will help China in strengthening elements of power, reshaping the structure of world order as well as transmuting the subsisting status quo. Consequently, this dynamic of China’s initiative is engendering geopolitical tensions and contravene initiatives are emerging.

To contravene China’s strategic aims and objectives, firstly, the US transmuted the Asia-Pacific policy to the Indo-Pacific policy in order to highlight security linkages and the single threat of strategic space. Furthermore, it gave currency to regional security debate and re-organized Quad. Secondly, the US aims to contain China through a normative coalition and also providing alternative economic projects such as

Build Back Better World (B3W) and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, which will not include China. Lastly, it is also bolstering the bulwark and strategic faculties of regional countries to engender a balance of power to maintain its status quo as well as pursuing policies to counter China’s influence in other oceans.

The seminar attempted to interpret how the geopolitics of MSR are playing out across the oceans, explored the nature of this competition, whether this rivalry will remain zero-sum or non-zero-sum, and especially aimed to understand whether this competition is going to bring a power shift or competitive coexistence is going to dominate. The participants also tried to understand the impact of competing imaginaries on geopolitics, the geopolitics of energy, regional security, economic dynamics, and balance of power in a world that has broad, deep-rooted economic interdependence, power diffusion, and hyper-connectivity. Besides, the discussion explored ways for countries of the Indo-Pacific region so that they can develop connectivity and resilience and make policies without culling sides in a zero-sum competition and subscribing to competing imaginaries.

Another important aspect of the seminar was to understand the geopolitical competition in the Arctic in the context of climate change and dynamics of energy flows. During the seminar, experts shared their valuable insight to develop an understanding about the nature of above mentioned challenges in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Dr. Maliha Zeba, assistant professor of international relations at the National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, in her keynote speech, said that the concept of connectivity is emerging across the globe, as the world is getting linked through different roads and corridors. Connectivity through the sea is also at the center of this developing phenomenon, and since China launched the BRI, this trend has started garnering even more attention. Through MSR, China is pursuing realistic objectives and engendering multiple channels of connectivity. Due to MSR, China is emerging as a positive revisionist actor in the maritime domain and shaking the status quo of the 'blue order' established by the US. Speaking about the military domain, she said traditional and non-traditional threats are present. She added that on the economic side, we require inclusive growth fixating on human security and human development. Furthermore, Dr. Maliha highlighted that MSR is facing threats such as populism, hybrid warfare, and grievances of local populations. She observed that MSR is challenging the status quo by creating complex interdependence; however, non-traditional security challenges subsist and their magnitude can exacerbate due to geopolitical competition. Competitive coexistence is going to remain the major feature of MSR, she concluded.

Commenting on Dr. Maliha's speech, Vice Admiral Iftikhar Ahmed Rao (retd), chair of the session, agreed with the notion of competitive coexistence, indicating that as an outcome of Chinese investments in different economic projects and initiatives in various countries, the West is being forced to establish alternate means for economic and constructive development. He pointed out how the Indian perceptions of no foreign interference in the Indian Ocean during the Cold War changed to allowing foreign presence only for a positive cause. This shift happened after the Cold War and the rise of India. It is in the interest of the US to keep India as the net security provider in the region, and India also has hegemonic designs. He further stressed that, for these reasons, Pakistan must keep a careful eye on the developments in the Indian Ocean.

Lokman Karadag, Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Political Science at International Islamic University, Malaysia, gave his perspective of the

Pacific Ocean. He pointed out how the naval activities of China in the western Pacific are creating security issues and geopolitical implications. According to the speaker, the MSR initiative cannot survive unless the security issues, including regional disputes in the East and the South China Sea, are sorted out. While presenting his views on the future of MSR through the lens of regional power politics and international efforts to contain China, he also discussed how the structural changes are taking place due to the power transition.

Attal Khan, visiting lecturer at a university in Islamabad, presented his views on matters of the Arctic Ocean. He also shared his findings on the transformation of the Arctic Ocean and Polar Trade Route. He pointed out that the Northern Sea Route has the potential to become an alternative to Suez Canal, cutting the trade distance between the Pacific Ocean and Europe by 9,700 km. Based on this, he explored the geo-economics of the Arctic, Arctic shipping routes, international implications, and limitations to achieving the maximum benefit of the Polar Silk Road.

Later the session was opened for comments.

Cdre Baber Bilal, presenting his views on the topic, said that the Chinese are setting up their stations in all the oceans. He further commented on how China has exploited all the key sea routes for their trade and economic incentives, and it is also investing in all the countries having significant ports, including Myanmar, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Oman, and Djibouti. He maintained that the eastern ports of China would continue to use the routes through Malacca Strait, and the western region of China is going to use the land route towards the ports. Furthermore, China cannot divert all maritime trade from the latest trade network. In addition, he highlighted the importance of hard power to protect the maritime trade.

In conclusion, the speakers agreed that there is a need to keep an eye on the recent trends. They were of the view that competition among states cannot turn into full-blown war due to their interests being aligned with the sea lines of communications. However, competitive coexistence will remain a significant feature of the conflict in the Indian Ocean Region.

Profiles of the Speakers

Vice Admiral Iftikhar Ahmed Rao (retd) has more than 40 years of maritime experience. He has served on-board and commanded ships and is also a naval aviator, giving him vast experience of the coast. He raised PNS *Makran* at Pasni as its first commanding officer and then raised Pakistan Navy's coastal command as a flag officer and diligently worked for development of Pakistan's coastal regions. He has been deputy chief of naval staff (operations) and was a member of Gwadar Port Implementation Committee at the start of the port project and actively contributed to its development. As managing director of Karachi Shipyard and Engineering Works, he is credited with its turnaround. He remained an advisor to the government of Pakistan for the development of shipbuilding industry and is considered the brains behind the conception of this industry's development, its vision and plan for Pakistan, which has been approved by the prime minister. He has been an advisor to the Royal Saudi Naval Forces, too. He has written several books including *Elements of Blue Economy*, considered widely in Pakistan's maritime circles and academia as a pioneering work in this domain, and *Gwatar Bay to Sir Creek*. He is a regular speaker at National Defence University, Staff Colleges, National School of Public Policy, and seminars on maritime affairs.

Maliha Zeba Khan is an assistant professor of international relations at the National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad. She has been teaching a course related to maritime affairs for several years. She is the pioneer of a course on politics of the sea. Furthermore, she has an extensive role in creating awareness of maritime affairs in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in Pakistan, where people are not aware of the matters related to the oceans and 'sea blindness' is common even among policymakers. In addition, she has supervised the thesis of many students focusing on the different aspects of the politics of the sea. During her supervision, she has covered topics ranging from non-traditional security threats to geopolitical competition.

Lokman Karadag is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science at International Islamic University Malaysia. He has been working in the field of international relations since 2014. His academic fields of study are Belt and Road Initiative, Maritime Silk Road, geopolitics of Indo-Pacific and Asia-Pacific, and US-China competition.

Attal Khan is a visiting lecturer at a university in Islamabad. He has been working on the concept of Maritime Polar Silk Road for many years, and is one of the leading experts on energy flows in the Arctic Ocean.

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