

Chapter 8

The Military Drivers of the Belt-and-Road Endeavor: Expanding the Global Reach from Land Mass to the Maritime Domains

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The Belt-and-Road-initiative (BRI) literature in the West largely concentrates on its geostrategic implications, especially the BRI effect of reshaping the geo-political order in the Euro-Asian-African continents. So far few papers have been written from the angle of its military driver.¹ This article will explore the BRI's military connotation in the context of global geostrategic rivalry. In fact, the whole idea of westward expansion now underlining the BRI originated from the People's Liberation Army's wary about China's vulnerable geo-strategic environment along its eastern flank in the 1990s: another Korean war triggered by the nuclear crisis in the Peninsula or a Taiwan war due to declared independence would see the country's costal line completely concealed if the U.S. gets involved militarily. Search of an alternative strategic path in the west geographic direction became a hot topic of security debate among PLA generals, e.g., on how to cope with the two island chains in the West Pacific.² Their concern later deepened as they learned that America's AirSea Battle war planning specifically identified sea blockade as a cost-effective option in subduing China once a major Sino-U.S. armed conflict took place.³

¹ On the western BRI literature on its geostrategic aspects, see for instance, Nordin, Astrid, and Weissmann, Mikael, "Will Trump make China great again? The belt and road initiative and international order", *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 2 (2018). Serafettin Yilmaz & Liu Changming. "China's BRI Strategy in Eurasia and Euro-Atlanticism", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 70, No. 2 (2018). On military analysis of the BRI, see for instance, Lyle Goldstein, "China's 'One-Belt One Road' is a Big Deal. So What is the Role for Beijing's Military?", *National Interests*, February 2017; Andrew Scobell and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "The Flag Lags but Follows: the PLA and China's Great Leap Outward", in Phillip Saunders, et al, (eds.), *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing China's Military Reform*, National Defense University Press, 2019.

² Senor Colonel Li, Jie and Liu, Weixing, "The strategic status of the islands chains and their impact", *Journal of the PLA National Defence University*, no. 12 (2000).

³ Jeffery Kline, "Between Peace and the Air-Sea Battle: A War at Sea Strategy", *The Naval War College Review*, Vol. 65, No. 2, 2003, p. 36.

Conceptualizing the BRI's Geostrategic and Defense Context

The international debate about the nature of the BRI has created an interesting dichotomy in the BRI study: the Chinese scholars enshrine the economic benefits of the initiative while their counterparts outside China mostly talk about the BRI's revisionist implications. This paper sets its main thrust of argument along the lines of the BRI's military connotations, since security/defense dynamics are highly relevant to the BRI studies. The logic is simple: most large countries evaluate the BRI from the geo-strategic and security lenses (e.g., the political cost of participation) prior to their economic calculus.⁴ It is the geostrategic tug-of-war between the supportive and opposing camps that will determine the extent to which the BRI achieves its desired outcome. Presently the war of words concerning the BRI is thus more geo-political than economic.

The BRI's inherent military effects

Over time, the BRI's military dimension would gain greater currency in this geostrategic conundrum. The Sino-U.S. contention has moved into an upward spiral with Washington's strategic depiction of China as a peer rivalry. Their seesaw battle over the BRI will deepen with a military agenda, currently hidden.⁵ Therefore, the BRI's geostrategic/military impact on the major power relations will become increasingly heavier. For instance, its encounter with the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) may effectively alter the basic security structure in the Indo-Pacific, which would in turn galvanize natural backlash from great powers. Under pressure, Beijing cannot achieve its BRI objectives without a decent level of geo-political support from the stakeholder countries. In addition, China will formulate ways and means to offset the disruptive acts from the other camp, including employing the military power to protect its global economic reach. Then the PLA's BRI involvement becomes inevitable, either from the behind-the-scene BRI policy-making or in front in the BRI implementation.

Beijing's promotion of the BRI is replete with contradictory signals. It has officially depicted the BRI as an *initiative*, not a grand strategy, nor a state foreign economic policy. It is hopeful that a low-key depiction would help lessen international doubt about the

⁴ Speech by Dr. Giorgio Cuscito, Editorial board member of Italian Review of Geopolitics, to *The Italian Geopolitical Annual Conference*, Genova, 8-9 March 2019.

⁵ The U.S. strategic depiction of China as its peer and strategic adversary in its National Security Report and its National Defense Report in 2017 heralds such a tendency and the two reports proposed strong countermeasures against the BRI. *U.S. National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy*, Washington D.C., November 2017.

BRI intent. Yet Beijing has also taken a high profile in propagandizing the BRI. The two world BRI summits hosted by Xi personally in 2017 and 2019 have expressed Beijing's defiance against external oppositions led by Washington. This may have deepened the reservation towards the BRI by some countries, such as India.⁶ Domestically the way the government apparatus mobilized to carry out the initiative resembles the practice of pre-reform days when the top-down imposition of a leader's will was relentlessly inflicted upon the population. Xi may see vigorous BRI mobilization a necessity to tackle China's bureaucratic immobility but the outcome of mobilization may be problematic, indicated by the rising internal doubt about the BRI. Refraining from evaluating the elusive BRI intentions, this paper holds that it is plausible to assess the likely BRI effects with the instruments of international relations theories, such as geopolitics and geo-economics. For instance, the BRI's unfolding induces tangible changes in the balance of power in the Eurasian regions. This order-reshaping outcome exposes its divisive power, as seen, for instance, by the EU disunity over a consensual response. The international suspicion is natural for both the BRI adversaries and the recipients of BRI investments. The former concentrates on Beijing's strategic intention in promoting the BRI vis-a-vis the West's dominant positions in the world. The latter is wary about their interaction with China in asymmetry.

The geopolitical and military nexus

The BRI is rooted in geography of critical regions of many flashing points that are enmeshed with geostrategic rivalry of major powers. The military dynamics are thus genuine affecting BRI evolution. This has provided a good case for us to study the nexus of physical geography and military geography, which is essential to our understanding of state behavior, armed conflicts and militarization as both geographically constituted and geographically expressed.⁷ The BRI confronts the militarily-related matters one way or another in its entire course of development.

At the present, the BRI's military component may be more hypothetical than tangible, as it is not evident in Beijing's open statements, nor visibly shown by the on-going BRI projects. A few known cases, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

⁶ Amitendu Palit, "India's Economic and Strategic Perception of China's Maritime Silk Road", *Geopolitics*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2017), p. 292.

⁷ Matthew Rech, et al, "Geography, Military Geography, and Critical Military Studies", *Critical Military Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2015), p. 47.

and its Gwadar Port construction, have military implications. Yet it is dubious to define them as BRI endeavors. First, their launch was far predated the BRI. For instance, Li Keqiang officially announced the CPEC in May 2013 during his visit to Pakistan, five months earlier than that of the BRI, and no mention was made in connecting the CPEC and the BRI. The construction of the Gwadar Port started in 2002 and the Hambantota Port in 2007. The Chinese or non-Chinese interlocutors later put them into the BRI basket for different reasons. To the former it is a statement of political correctness. Yet the CPEC inclusion in the BRI has unnecessarily turned the controversies of the generic project affecting Sino-Indian relations to be BRI controversies that galvanize a military interpretation of the BRI, especially if the project acquires features of troop presence in the future.

Objectively the BRI's military relevance lies in the civil-military dual use in some BRI projects. For instance, China's railway project to link Kathmandu with its BRI rail networks in the Himalayas will greatly quicken the PLA's troop transportation to the zone of battles along the Sino-Indian borders. The same can be inferred to the upgrade of the Sino-Pakistan Karakoram Highway in the second stage of the CPEC construction, which will link the Gwadar Port to the Gwadar-Dalbandin railway, another BRI project.⁸ Once completed, it will also raise transport efficiency of both countries with a potent effect on Sino-Indian defense posture. Yet as of today, the BRI's military significance may have been over-stretched. Most of the dual use projects now under world scrutiny are still at an early stage of construction. It is therefore unclear whether they would indeed acquire military functions later and how they are used militarily. Sir Lanka openly denied that its ports under BRI construction would be put into military use in the future. At a geostrategic level, however, the BRI's relevance to military geography is inherent, as seen below.

The first is the precarious security environment in which the BRI is unfolding. In the post-Cold-War era, a deadly triangle has deepened along the route of today's BRI and poses grave risks to BRI undertakings.⁹ 1) Vigorous economic growth in Eurasia places increasingly greater stress on the supply of resources and safe transportation. 2) Various maritime territorial disputes threaten the sea-lanes of communications (SLOCs) throughout China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), a key part of the BRI.

⁸ Qian Feng, "India is the largest obstacle in the BRI's southward expansion", *Guogang Zhiku*, 26 March 2019.

⁹ Kent Calder, *Asia's Deadly Triangle-How Arms, Energy and Growth Threaten to Destabilise Asia Pacific*, London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 1996.

And 3) the combination of the first two has generated action/reaction dynamics of arms building-up in the Indo-Pacific. Military conflicts loom large if the territorial strife and SLOC disruption occur. In addition, other forms of non-traditional security challenges have become entrenched, such as piracy and maritime terrorism.

The second linkage is the PLA's responses to the allied intervention in Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Beijing has to factor in potential military challenges in planning the long-term BRI expansion. For instance, the BRI could be affected by Sino-U.S. militarized interaction over the freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea (SCS), one of the chocking-points for the MSR.¹⁰ Furthermore, the Indian Ocean has become the crux for the MSR's success in the context of India's negative attitudes towards the BRI.¹¹ China's SLOC safety is a key geostrategic determinant for the MSR and is of great geo-military significance in foreseen circumstances.

The BRI's Military Connotations

The above-mentioned military risks underscore the PLA's BRI commitment, although empirically hard evidence is scant to show it. The PLA has struck a meticulous balance between keeping a low key in BRI rhetoric to match Beijing's diplomatic depiction of the BRI as an economic pursuit and lauding a voice to back Xi's initiative and leadership. Overall, embedding BRI protection in the PLA's international agenda has been inseparable part of PLA contribution to the BRI.¹²

Conceptualizing the BRI's military relevance

Conceptually the PLA has emphasized the Clausewitz notion that "war is consisted of two distinctive forms of activities – preparation for war and conduct of war".¹³ This conceptually establishes the PLA's relevance in regard of the hostile scenarios along the BRI routes. Practically the PLA's BRI participation can be viewed to be two-layered, although for the time it is indirect or as part of a larger military modernization drive.

¹⁰ You Ji, "Sino-US "Cat-and-Mouse" Game Concerning Freedom of Navigation and Overflight", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 5-6, 2016.

¹¹ You Ji, "Indian Ocean: A Grand Sino-Indian Game of 'Go'", in David Brewster (ed.), *India and China at Sea: Competition for Naval Dominance in the Indian Ocean*, Oxford University Press (2018).

¹² Major General Pi Mingyong, "The Significance of the BRI entering Africa and China-Africa Security Cooperation", *China Military Science*, No. 4, 2018, pp. 84-88.

¹³ Michael Howard and Peter Paret (eds.), *On War*, Princeton University Press (1989), p. 179.

The first layer is reaction-oriented: to offset potential military disruption of China's global geo-economic reach-out in general and its BRI expansion in the troubled regions in particular. The PLA has engaged in low-intensity combat in these areas in terms of anti-terrorist operations and humanitarian relief, e.g., its naval operations in the Gulf of Aden. The second layer is the PLA's accelerated transformation to fight the future wars, which incorporates the generic strategy of long range power projection based on required capabilities. A global military would thus meet the demands of BRI safeguard. PLA participation in the top BRI decision-making process is seen as an essential guarantee for smooth BRI policy implementation.¹⁴

Related to this is the BRI's military relevance that can also be understood in two dimensions. The first is the PLA's expansion of its traditional and normal zones of combat activities in the context of BRI expansion. The second is about the PLA's scenario plans against possible scaled BRI disruptions, committed by state actors. These plans prescribe how combat engagement should be mounted against major powers' military hostility to the BRI. For instance, Pentagon has inclination of employing military superiority to subdue its opponents. Leveraging hard-power pressure is America's effective weapon of influence in world politics and an inherent part of the U.S. adversary strategy towards the BRI.¹⁵ Both, however, would affect the PLA's course of force transformation under a new set of geo-strategic-economic conditions.

The military precursor of the BRI

As mentioned earlier, the BRI's westward expansion underlines China's civil-military wary of SLOC vulnerability and reflects one of the original BRI ideas, more than 25 years ago. As true to any large trading nation, smooth seaborne transport is China's economic lifeline with tremendous national security consequences. Since 1949, the scenario of a Taiwan war has been on top of the PLA's list of its four future war scenarios.¹⁶ In this scenario, the U.S. blockade of China's east flank would cut off its waterways to the ocean

¹⁴ Senior Colonel Cao Yang and Lin Song, "Thought on the effective safeguard of the MSK", *Proceedings of the 6th Forum of South China Sea Studies*, Coordinated Centre for the South China Sea Research, Nanjing University, November 2018, p. 66.

¹⁵ American scholars concur such a viewpoint, see for instance, Robert Blackwill and Jennifer Harris, *War by Other means: Geo-economics and Statecraft*. The authors argue that since the military means is so effective, other means is often neglected.

¹⁶ The Strategic Research Department, *The Science of Military Strategy*, (战略学), Beijing: the PLA Academy of Military Science Press, 2013, p. 114

through which the bulk of Chinese overseas shipment sails. PLA generals have seriously contemplated alternative pathways in such a worst-case phenomenon, the pathway that is mainly set westward to circumvent the two island-chains in the Pacific.

Among various countermeasures envisaged is an early proposal by General Wang Zuxun whose insightful thesis *Strategic Pathway of Yunnan* for an advanced course in the PLA National Defense University in 1992 caught top leadership attention. He was then commander of the 14th Group Army deployed in Yuannan bordering Burma. Based on his knowledge of the India-Burma war theater of the World War II, he argued in his thesis that the alternative strategic routes from Yunnan through Burma's maritime access-points, e.g. Port of Yangon or Kyankpyu should be envisaged to circumvent America's sea blockade in East. From the Burmese ports the Chinese ships would get to the ports on the other side of the Indian Ocean, e.g., Singapore, even if this could only compensate for a percentage of the lost volume of sea borne trade. Jiang Zhemin and the top brass, i.e., Zhang Zhen praised General Wang for his strategic vision. The westward *strategic pathways to oceans* is ideationally the precursor of the MSR, which is still relevant to the original design of the BRI with a central theme to cope with a war in China's eastern flank.¹⁷

Matching military doctrine with the BRI expansion

The BRI has created new drivers for the PLA to transform. In doctrinal terms, China's revised national defense strategy put forward a concept of frontier defense. Frontier here is clearly a geostrategic concept embracing China's expanding economic and security interests beyond the national borders. Militarily it facilitates PLA transition from a traditionally defensive force for homeland defense to an offensive force capable of combat operations in other continents.

For instance, the notion of frontier means new strategic space along the BRI routes. Under such a guideline, the Navy has broadened its one-ocean strategy (the West Pacific) to a two-ocean strategy (plus the Northern Indian Ocean), the army raised an doctrine of "all-regions engagement" (全域作战) and the air force's aero-space strategy has added the

¹⁷ However, Major General Zhu Chenghu once said that the idea of the strategic pathway originated from the teaching team of the course General Wang attended. General Huang Yingxu of the PLA Academy of Military Science also expressed his contribution to the idea. It seems that senior PLA officers appreciated the westward reach-out much earlier than their civilian counterparts did and influenced top Party leaders.

scenarios of “beyond the border” combat.¹⁸ In addition, the concept of frontier defence obliges the PLA to build strategic buffer zones along the long BRI routes. Creation of a chain of overseas military presence has thus become a strategic necessity rather than a policy choice for Beijing, both for the BRI expansion and for BRI protection. In this context, the BRI sets China’s new and open-ended economic frontiers, which in turn dictates the PLA’s enlarged frontiers of national defense.¹⁹

Doctrinally, a civil-military relationship of demand and supply has emerged: the PLA’s overseas reach-out deepens with the enlarged BRI maps. For instance, the civilians’ new maritime frontier and the PLA’s new frontier of power projection converge in a reverse to the Mahanist sea power exercise. In Mahan’s times, gunboats paved the way for commercial ships to anchor in foreign ports. Now economics comes first, followed then by naval presence in or access to the regions of importance for the MSR.²⁰ At this stage of evolution, the PLA’s back up of the BRI appears more in the form of ensuring China’s economic security through safeguarding its overseas commercial interests rather than a vigorous global reach to rival its adversaries, due at least partially to its lack such resources. Chinese strategists argued that the PLAN’s activities in the Indian Ocean were meant to provide public goods for BRI participant countries and a response to Obama’s criticism of China’s free-ride on U.S. protection of global waterways.²¹ Now that the BRI strategy in full sway, the PLA is required to take SLOC protection by itself.²²

Constructing a “Go” posture

The BRI’s security demand compels the PLA to set a favourable “Go” posturing (围棋布势). In the PLA list of the overseas missions the escort of China’s freighters in times of crisis is high in priority but more strategic is its efforts to seek footholds in the BRI regions, which would serve first as the logistics supply points but, if necessary, may be turned into military bases in the future, following the model of Djibouti. The felt urgency

¹⁸ The Strategic Research Department, *The Science of Military Strategy*, (战略学), Beijing: the PLA Academy of Military Science Press.

¹⁹ Liu Huirong, “The new frontier in China’s maritime strategy and legal administration” *Asia-Pacific security and maritime affairs*, no. 4, 2018, p. 12.

²⁰ Senior Colonel Feng Liang (ret.), “Few strategic challenges in accelerating China’s oceanic development”, *Asia-Pacific security and maritime affairs*, no. 4, 2018, p. 20.

²¹ Ding Hao, *The Global Times*, 24 January 2019. “Obama’s ‘Free Rider’ comments draws Chinese criticism”, *New York Times*, 13 August 2014.

²² Lyle Goldstein, “China’s ‘One-Belt One Road’ is a Big Deal. So What is the Role for Beijing’s Military?”, *National Interests*, February 2017.

can be seen from Xi's quick endorsement of a National Defense University submission on the need of building a military base in Djibouti.²³ Although this base is still defined as a logistics node, given its high brigadier ranking and the large size of the base area, more combat functions can be added to the base with ease. Pakistan's acquisition of eight Chinese S-20 submarines and other types of warships has obliged the PLA to launch training centres in the country and help the boats' maintenance.²⁴

Today the PLA is no longer shy about constructing a "string of pearls" in the Indo-Pacific regions, as it is planning a chain of presence along the BRI routes.²⁵ Beijing's time-honoured policy of no-overseas bases has not been formally discarded but is not heard any more. The PLA is pro-active to justify why the overseas bases are essential for protecting China's vital national interests in the worsening international situation. Search of the likely sites is accelerated.²⁶ An Indian rear admiral composed a long list of the potential "pearls/nodes" that the PLA may acquire along the BRI routes: "Chittagong in Bangladesh, Myanmar's Kyakpyu port; Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Gwadar and Jiwani in Pakistan, Bagamoyo in Tanzania, Beira in Mozambique, Walvis Bay in Namibia, Kribi in Cameroon, the Doraleh Multipurpose Port, an atoll in Maldives, oil-infrastructure projects in Sudan and Angola, and others."²⁷ Clearly the majority of the mentioned would not be converted into military bases, although some dual use can be expected. A few of them will definitely be, such Gwadar, which is of practical military value with its 14-meter port to anchor aircraft carriers. A RAND report alleges that the Gwadar Port has already installed listening facilities to monitor U.S. naval activity in the Indian Ocean.²⁸ At the present 42 ports in 34 countries are either incorporated into the BRI plan or under negotiation for Chinese management.²⁹

²³ Jin Hao, "You do not know how urgent the PLA feels for obtaining overseas bases", *Phoenix Military Report*, 11 April 2016, news.ifeng.com/mil/, accessed 26 February 2017.

²⁴ *Experts' Analysis on Current Affairs*, The Macao-Asia TV, 8 April 2015.

²⁵ The term was coined by Lieut. Colonel Pehrson in 2006 to negatively connote PLA expansion. Christopher J. Pehrson, "String of Pearls: meeting the Challenge of China's Rising power across the Asian Littoral", Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2006. In the next decade, however, no clear evidence proved this was factual until the opening of the Djibouti base.

²⁶ Major General Jin Yanan, *Why do we seek overseas bases*, Mei Han Vision, <https://www.uoutude.com/watch?v=yOysX>, accessed 12 June 2019.

²⁷ National Maritime Foundation, *Indo-Pacific Report 2019*, New Delhi: NMF, 2019, p. 146.

²⁸ Andrew Scobell, Ely Ratner and Michael Beckley, *China's Strategy toward South and Central Asia: an Empty Fortress*, RAND Report, 2014, P. 77

²⁹ *News*, 12 November 2019.

Dealing with the SLOC vulnerability

In comparison with the continental Belt, the MSR faces tougher challenges, as China's sea power has been inferior in modern times. Under the prominence of the oceanic political culture, maritime domains to major western countries are of more geostrategic importance than land corridors. They have invested huge resources for the control of sea.³⁰ Against this backdrop China's weak naval power has been the short plate for China to handle the "barrier of the sea" both due to its dominant "yellow culture" and to its lack of industrial capabilities. Today the SLOC safety constitutes the soft-underbelly in China's overall BRI endeavor. For instance, the U.S. control of all the world's major waterways has rendered the long-term MSR expansion at mercy of the state of Sino-US relations. With hostility worsening between the two countries amid the on-going trade war it is not unimaginable that they may encounter a standoff in the high seas. For instance, the routinized U.S. entry of the 12 nautical miles of China's islet holdings in the SCS has turned the SCS dispute from territorial into geostrategic/military among the top powers. Logically it has met with the PLAN's vigorous shadowing. The close distance between warships heightens their physical contacts, even chances of a ship collision. Were there an incident with casualties, an armed standoff of some sort can be anticipated.³¹ Under the circumstances, the MSR will bear the first brunt in case of the U.S. mounting quarantine operations vis-a-vis Chinese freighters along the BRI routes, something similar to the forced on-board inspection on Ship *Yinhe* in 1992.³² Apparently such a prospect of SLOC disruption conveys a strong naval dimension of the BRI evolution.

China's huge sea-borne trade has progressively imposed heavier onus on the navy to protect its SLOCs. In a way, the SLOC safety determines the MSR's eventual fate in the context of China's uneasy relations with key naval powers along the BRI routes, typically the U.S. and India. Furthermore, the challenge for Chinese commercial shipments was

³⁰ Wang Gungwu's preface to the book by Yu, Hong, *Belt & Road Initiative: The Rise of China and International Cooperation: What Does It Mean to China and the Region?* Beijing: World Affairs Press, 2017, p. 3.

³¹ On 30 September 2018, after the PLAN destroyer 170 maneuvered within 40 metres of USS and forced her to make a sharp turn, the unleashed the electronic warfare measures against the Chinese warship and partially damaged 170's communication system. This was the first combat engagement between the two militaries since the Vietnam War. Were there a real collision, loss of lives was inevitable and the consequences were sinister.

³² The U.S. blockaded the Chinese freighter *Yinhe* in the international waters in late July 1993, alleging it to carry chemical stuff to Iran. After a standoff of 24 days the US Navy inspected the ship and found nothing illegal in the cargo ship. Washington refused apology and compensation. This was the first SLOC disruption case between the two countries since the end of their rapprochement in the mid-1970s.

traditionally perceived in the last section of its navigation around the Taiwan Strait. Now the risk mounts along the entire MSR routes where each choke point could be a fatal barrier.

Currently the bulk of the Navy's combat activities is designed within the range of its land-based PLA Air Force, whose efficiency of air cover diminishes as the PLAN moves further west along the MSR. Therefore, the first prerequisite for the PLAN to project combat reach along the MSR is acquisition of aircraft carriers that will provide air protection for the surface combatants to survive the adversaries' sustained air attacks. This tactical consideration is behind the PLA carrier project, which is a major capability booster for the navy's blue-water missions, as each carrier needs to have an escort fleet of a dozen major combatants. If the PLAN inducts three major aircraft carriers, they need more than 60 modern surface combatants as escorts, a considerable enhancement for the PLAN to sustain the BRI expansion.

Despite the visible navy-centered SLOC linkage to the BRI, this paper actually sees maritime challenges to Xi's MSR basically ones of politics, not military. Cooperation with the littoral states along the MSR routes is a better way to manage the potential state-imposed MSR disruption. For instance, maintaining a good relationship with Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia is a lot more cost-effective in overcoming the Malacca dilemma than deploying the carrier battle groups there. Cooperation with India is even more crucial in handling the choke points in the Indian Ocean. Therefore the PLAN preparation for an Indian Ocean operation is in the main a kind of hedging strategy implemented in a generally defensive manner, and from a position of weakness. China's vital maritime interests in the form of smooth MSR expansion are better served through cooperation rather than hard-power demonstration.

When the BRI Encounters the IPS

As mentioned earlier, the BRI's military dimension is currently in an intangible form, which interestingly, may become tangible in a mirror image reflecting America's rising military pressure concerning the BRI. Since 2016 many US security-related reports have singled out the BRI as an adversary object. Particularly the Indo-Pacific Strategy has a specific anti-BRI intent. The BRI and IPS are contested strategies interweaved together

by the structural conflicts of interests and mutual distrust.³³ Structural, as an American analyst commented on the *2019 IPS Report*, “the more closely countries integrate with the BRI, the less likely they are to go against their own national interests by burning bridges with China. This constitutes an uphill battle for the US to convince its regional partners in containing China”.³⁴ Geo-strategically, the IPS’ encounter with the BRI generates an action/reaction dynamics. Logically the stronger this U.S. pushback is, the heavier the BRI’s military dimension will be felt. This otherwise unlikely match seems to have taken roots with the passage of time. In January 2019 Sri Lanka government accorded transportation services to the U.S. military, providing faster and easier logistical support to its warships through the neighboring countries. A U.S.S. aircraft carrier John Stennis immediately used this service of precision supply.³⁵ Admiral Harris once named Sri Lanka as one of the eight key partner countries to assist the IPS. The enhanced bilateral defense cooperation serves as an offset against China’s potential military presence in the Indian Ocean.³⁶

The defense line vis-a-vis the BRI

Risking a level simplicity, there are two components in the IPS towards the BRI: general anti-BRI rhetoric, found frequently in various IP related reports; and the possible military response, hidden in IP related security agendas.³⁷ On the latter, although often not directly alluded to the BRI per se, the IPS is meant to reshape the regional defense landscape with a strengthened “Go” posturing against China’s economic and military reach-out. This should revise the existing ARF-based regional security architecture and the bilaterally-based alliance system that have become inadequate to cope with the adversaries’ assertiveness.³⁸ In a constructivist sense the new IP security order is envisaged to be based on a multilateral alliance network, probably in way of creating a mini-NATO

³³ Joel Wuthnow, “Contested Strategies: China, the U.S., and the Indo-Pacific Security Dilemma”, *China International Strategy Review*, Vol. 1, no. 1, 2019.

³⁴ Andrew Korybko, “The Pentagon’s Indo-Pacific Strategy Report is All about Containing China”, Centre for Research on Globalization, 3 June 2019. <https://www.globalresearch.ca/u-s-indo-pacific-strategy-report-all-about-containing-china/5679332>, accessed on 21 July 2019, pp1-12.

³⁵ Li Yibo, “America upgrades relations with Sri Lanka: causes and constraints”, *Research of International Affairs*, No. 3, 2019, pp. 56-58.

³⁶ Harris’ statement before the House Armed Services Committee, 27 April 2017.

³⁷ See for instance, the IPS Report.

³⁸ Stewart Patrick, “The New “New Multilateralism”: Minilateral Cooperation, but at What Cost?” *Global Summitry*, Volume 1, Issue 2, 2015.

in Asia.³⁹ The participants would join the “networked security architecture” less because they share a bright vision of a liberal order in the Indo-Pacific than a common perception of military threat.⁴⁰ China’s BRI endeavor may have sharpened this perception. In the dynamic BRI/IPS interaction, even if an institutionalized multinational relationship of military cooperation does not emerge any time soon, features of an informal defense bloc still stimulate coalescing through mechanisms such as the Quad, whose hidden (military) functions are more important than the loudly orchestrated values of the IPS. Under the US urge, the number of official or informal 3 plus 1, 2 plus 2, and N plus N defense arrangements has been increasingly initiated “with a purpose”, as stated in the Department of Defense’s *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report 2019*.

Like the BRI’s military origin mentioned earlier, the IP idea was similarly brewed with heavy military and geo-strategic calculus.⁴¹ It was about countering PLA activities in the “far seas” in general and the BRI westward movement in particular. Re-kindling the island chain strategy is a key component. In PLA maps the traditional first and second islands chains in the West Pacific have now been depicted as the Indo-Pacific islands chain. Centered in the Guam it extends southward and northward in a horizontal S-shape encirclement of China’s MSR, from Alaska in the east, to the outer edge of the West Pacific to join the first islands chain via the SCS before expanding to the Indian Ocean.⁴² US naval and marine redeployment, i.e., in Australia, can remarkably shorten the response time for US SCS operations.⁴³ The IPS integrates all Indo-Pacific geostrategic battle-fields covering the bulk of China’s MSR transit zones.

This new US posture vis-à-vis the PLAN is reflected in the strengthened of US force deployment along the BRI routes. In 2013 the US Pacific Command revealed a plan to enhance US forward presence in the IP region. It included reopening of the suspended military bases, such as Saipan; more regular troop visits to allies and partners to secure semi-permanent basing facilities; and quickened transfers of strategic and tactical

³⁹ General Brown, Chief of the Army, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command endorsed the use of the words Mini-NATO in his speech to the Australian Army Chief Symposium, Adelaide, 6 September 2018.

⁴⁰ Avinadan Choudhury Moorthy, “Strategic-Maritime Triangle in the Indian Ocean: An Emerging Indo-US Naval Entente”, *India Quarterly*, Vol. 74, No. 2 2018.

⁴¹ Gurpreet S. Khuran, *The Indo-Pacific Region: The Emerging Geopolitical and Security Environment*, Dictus Publishing, 2018; Rory Medcalf, *Pivoting the map: Australia’s Indo-Pacific System*, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 2012.

⁴² Senior Colonel Li Li’s comments to *New Defense Watch*, the CCTV Military Channel (7), 31 August 2013.

⁴³ Rear Admiral Ying Zhuo’s comments in CCTV Documentary *US Wielding Sword in the Asia/Pacific first islands chain*, Deep Analysis on International Affairs, CCTV-4, 26 November 2011.

capabilities to places close to Asian hot spots. In addition to US marine deployment in Darwin, the US Air Force will send jets to Changi air base in Singapore, Korat air base in Thailand, Trivandrum in India, and possibly bases at Kubi Point and Puerto Princesa in the Philippines and airfields in Indonesia and Malaysia.⁴⁴ PLA commanders see these efforts in light of America translating the geographically convenient islands-chains into a naval containment belt against China's SLOCs.⁴⁵ This sense was reciprocated by Carlisle's allusion that "Back in the late, great days of the Cold War, we had a thing called *Checkered Flag*. We rotated every Continental US unit to Europe, we're turning to that in the Pacific."⁴⁶ Once connected and militarized, the "strings" will constitute oceanic frontiers to put Chinese SLOC safety at risk and indirectly prohibit the BRI expansion.

Allied security connectivity vis-a-vis the BRI

The IPS' essence is reflected by the word connectivity that Trump and Abe alluded to. Interestingly it coincides the BRI's central theme of connectivity. However, the difference between the two is that the former orients towards security/defense and the latter geo-economy at the current stage. The IPS seeks to construct two kinds of connectivity: 1) the state connectivity of allies/partners to respond to a common challenge collectively; and 2) the geographic connectivity of the regional hot-spot conflicts against a targeted power. The linkage between the two is the allied efforts to structure the IP regions' separate sovereignty disputes into the geo-strategic contention of the major powers. For instance, the SCS dispute is no longer just disagreement on territorial demarcation among the claimants but is subordinated to Sino-U.S. rivalry over the shape of the world order, adding more uncertainties to an important section of the MSR.

In leveraging the regional flash points, the IPS has weaved Asian maritime territorial disputes together (Senkaku/Diaoyus, the Spratlys, and Taiwan) as the means of security connectivity.⁴⁷ If there is a showdown in one of these troubled zones, allied reactions in others will be anticipated to maximize pressure on China by dragging it into a multiple strife. Japan's legal and material support to Vietnam's SCS claims has a purpose to reduce

⁴⁴ John Reed, "U.S. deploying jets around Asia to keep China surrounded", *Foreign Policy Magazine*, 29 July 2013.

⁴⁵ Senior Colonel Li Li's comments to *New Defense Watch*, the CCTV Military Channel (7), 31 August 2013.

⁴⁶ John Reed, 29 July 2013.

⁴⁷ "Taiwan is part of Indo-Pacific strategy", *South China Morning Post*, 24 July 2018. The Indo-Pacific Strategy Report has particularly stressed Taiwan's strategic position in the IP.

China's pressure in the East China Sea. Here the geography of the disputes is critical to the BRI's wellbeing. For instance, the Malacca Strait is next to the SCS strife and India's Andaman-Nicobar naval bases. The Indian military has stepped up the strengthening of the base's combat facilities and the monitoring of Chinese ships through the Malacca Strait. It has added the third run-way for the purpose.⁴⁸ If the SCS becomes a major battle-field or Sino-Indian border friction worsen, these may become military choke-points for China's MSR activities.

In addition, this emerging security connectivity also has an oceanic/continental nexus. It is adventurous for India to link the Sino-Indian land border disputes to China's MSR dependence on the SLOCs in the Indian Ocean. Moreover, how China handles the SCS disputes with the Vietnam also affects the BRI's land route from Guangxi to Vietnamese ports on way further to Europe, as mentioned earlier.

This negative external environment to the BRI can be militarized because the territorial disputes occasionally trigger sparks of fire, as seen from the Sino-Vietnam confrontation over China's oil exploration in Paracels in 2014, and more recently, Sino-Indian armed faceoff in the Doklam in 2017.⁴⁹ Both have shown that each bilateral dispute is mingled with a set of other bilateral/multilateral challenges and thus becomes more difficult to be contained when the third-party powers intervened relentlessly.⁵⁰ This chain-reaction war scenario and planning underline the nexus of the land-sea conflicts in the Indo-Pacific regions, which has further highlighted China's geostrategic vulnerability.

More geo-strategically, the "minor land warfare" in the Sino-Indian Doklam faceoff created a pattern of resistance to China's approach to sovereignty issues elsewhere.⁵¹ As proof of the IPS' "security-connectivity", India's Doklam intrusion served as a test for how collective efforts against China could be mounted. During the standoff, the QUAD members enhanced support to India through tightening the behind-door defense planning vis-a-vis China, which, as seen by Beijing, lured New Delhi to initiate the

⁴⁸ *The Indian Time*, 24 January 2019.

⁴⁹ During the 981 confrontation the PLA Army was mobilized along the Sino-Vietnam land borders in case the ship-ramming escalated to a major naval warfare. A kind of armed retaliation on the ground was planned. Oral source from a senior PLA officer in the 2014 Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore.

⁵⁰ Prime Minister Modi visited Washington prior to the incident. Indian defense analysts told this author that New Delhi received clear support from the Quad members over the border crossing. Similarly the Vietnam leadership invited Russel, Assistant Secretary of the State to Hanoi for a closed-door consultation before deciding on a massive disruption of the Chinese oil exploration in May 2014.

⁵¹ Rory Medcalf, "Who Won?", *The Interpreter*, The Lowy Institute of International Affairs, 31 August 2017.

Doklam brinkmanship.⁵²

Conclusion

This paper postulates a number of arguing points. Primary among them is that the BRI's military-security ramifications will gradually become apparent over time, as it contributes to the restructuring of the existing geo-political and geo-economic order across the Eurasian continents. With asymmetric economic dependence between China and some BRI beneficiary countries deepening comes Beijing's call for their wider defense and security cooperation, which can also be asymmetric. *The Chinese Defense White Paper 2019* officially endorses the PLA to seek supporting points beyond the national borders. This has convincingly negated China's practice of "never stationing a single soldier overseas". This policy change has been driven partly by the rising needs to secure BRI projects in the geographic locations of turbulence. Even China's strategists no longer deny this intended or unintended geo-strategic and military effect of the BRI.

On the other hand, the geo-strategic effects are not fittingly equal to geo-strategic intention. While intention has to be proven with concrete evidence, effects are somewhat in a potent form, unless testified by an empirical case. This is particularly true to the measuring of the military dimensions of the BRI. Beijing does not talk about any military linkage in the BRI. Interestingly, *The Chinese Defense White Paper 2019* has not a single mention of the BRI. Apart from Beijing's concern about the world backlash against the BRI if it is seen linked to China's military ambition, one tactical reason is that the PLA's capability has been far lagged behind the BRI's expansion. A low key approach is thus the best in facing the purpose/capability gap. However, this does not change the Mahanist dynamics in the relations between the gunboat and geo-economic expansion, although in the BRI case the dynamic is projected in a reverse logic: the commercial ships run much faster.

A major security challenge to the BRI is the IPS' security connectivity that may point to a new pattern of coordinated military balancing against China in general and its BRI expansion in particular. In times of a major confrontation an IP advocate's maritime conflict with China in the East may be simultaneously matched by another in the West, e.g., in the Indian Ocean. Likewise a land border conflict with China in the subcontinent may trigger a chain of allied actions in the maritime domains. This

⁵² Interview with a Chinese security specialist in Beijing in July 2017.

evolution of collective moves to offset China's expanding power projection reveals how the territorial disputes can be utilized in IP geopolitics with a major impact on the BRI's well-being. The PLA will be logically tasked to protect the BRI through capability enhancement and overseas presence.