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# Reconstructing maritime Silk Road & China's marine diplomacy with neighboring countries

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**Abstract:** Maritime Silk Road (MSR) is a good medium to channel China's growing maritime power. On APEC, 2014, China raise awareness for its "One Belt and One Road" program. The "One Belt and One Road" refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) of the 21st Century. MSR will strengthen regional connectivity, especially has tremendous potential for collaboration for China and the U.S., in terms of marine economic development, marine resource exploration, sea lane security, etc. Indeed, there are also difficulties that arise from the change in the Asia Pacific maritime order and the struggle between current and emerging maritime powers.

**Keywords:** Maritime Silk Road China Marine Strategy

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## 1. Introduction

Since October 2013, China has made efforts to improve relations with neighboring countries. The principles for China's foreign policy interactions with neighbors in the coming years are "friendship, sincerity, benefit, and tolerance;" and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) is set to become the diplomatic artery or bridge between China and its neighbors<sup>1</sup>.

In order to strengthen regional connectivity, On 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup>, November, 2014, on the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting, China raise awareness for its "One Belt and One Road" program. The "One Belt and One Road" refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) of the 21st Century, which is also called China's Marshall Plan<sup>2</sup>.

With China adopting parallel strategies in marine development and onshore development, implementing MSR has taken on new significance<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. MSR's New Significance

First, MSR is a road of peace connecting China and its neighbors that closes temporal and spatial gaps.

In the Han Dynasty, the first MSR was established with China's ancient capital city Chang'an as the starting point, then stretching through Asia, Africa and Europe. MSR connected land trading centers in ancient times, serving as an important "transportation corridor" from East to West. The high volume of marine trading intensified inter-country exchange and communication. Today, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century MSR has extended to not only reach the African continent but also other continents, delivering peace and prosperity afar. China's diplomatic policy plays a key role in forming a preferable regional environment and establishing maritime security. China always insists on peaceful foreign policy to address complicated geographic and political situations in its region, and to mitigate potential conflicts. These policies have helped China to win trust and support in this region.

Second, MSR can be a new channel to help China deliver marine culture to its neighbors, and to help China build soft power.

The UN Assembly has designated June 8 as "World Marine Day." The purpose of this special day is to promote marine awareness and marine culture, to enhance the general public's understanding of the ocean, to take care of the ocean, and to develop ocean resources in a harmonious way.

China in its history was a country with glorious marine culture. Zheng He led seven voyages to explore overseas

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<sup>1</sup> Xi in call for building of new 'maritime silk road', By WU JIAO in Jakarta and ZHANG YUNBI in Beijing, October 04,2013, China Daily

<sup>2</sup> The New Silk Road: China's Marshall Plan? By Shannon Tiezzi, November 06, 2014, the Diplomat.

<sup>3</sup> The New Silk Road: China Reclaims Its Crown, By Kerry Brown, November 18, 2014, the Diplomat.

territory, and the starting point of the historic MSR was China's capital city. MSR has been a vehicle of China's marine culture, demonstrating cultural understanding and mutual tolerance, promoting multilateral and bilateral dialogues, and establishing soft power-driven foreign relations. China's marine development relies on hard power like military and economic strength, but also on soft power like political, legal, technological and cultural power.

On one hand, China will defend its marine interests in accordance with international law and UNCLOS; on the other hand, China would like to strengthen mutual trust and mutual benefits with its neighbors. Today, the China-Russia partnership is increasingly strong; the China-Indonesia strategic partnership has been established; and China-Australia relations are expanding.

Third, MSR is the driver of marine economic development for China and its neighbors. During the period of China's 12<sup>th</sup> 5-year-plan, China's marine economy gross value has been growing at 8% per year; by 2015, the ratio of marine GDP to national GDP will reach 10%. At a time of downturn in the macro-economy, the marine economy will be a powerful driver of China's continued economic development.

Similar to other industrial economies, China's marine economy is driven by internal factors and external factors. International marine economic coordination is essential. Since the China-ASEAN FTA was established in 2010, China has become the number 1 trading partner of ASEAN countries, while ASEAN has replaced Japan as the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest trading partner of China. In addition, a China-Japan-Korea FTA is under negotiation. China is now the largest trading partner of Japan and Korea, while Korea and Japan are the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> largest trading partners of China, respectively. The significant interest in marine economic development provides the opportunity for China to improve and deepen its relations with East Asian countries. Marine cooperation can be industrial cooperation, marine resource development, marine ecology and environmental protection, marine technology cooperation, etc. For example, Japan and the US are very experienced in modern marine services; Singapore and Japan can be partners in port routing, information sharing, shipping and storage; etc. In terms of offshore drilling platforms and deep sea oil mining, Singapore and the US both own advanced technology, while China has a tremendous market. For marine technology partnerships, China can work with the US, UK, Russia, Japan and others on deep sea/submarine exploration; and for polar research, China can work with the US, Canada, Russia and others.

Fourth, MSR can be a buffer that enhances regional maritime security.

In recent years, Western Pacific countries have more or less adjusted their marine development strategies, triggering a lot of maritime disputes. Therefore, MSR, if built and operated in a positive way, can effectively mitigate the scale and intensity of maritime disputes.

China and its neighbors have many bilateral disputes which need to be resolved via friendly talks in order not to compromise overall China-ASEAN relations. Development of

marine resources in disputed areas can be achieved by introducing international cooperation, and inviting transnational companies to complete joint development projects to ensure shared interests in such projects. In terms of maritime security issues like piracy, drug trafficking, marine pollution, etc., an international mechanism involving countries in the South China Sea is needed to secure shipping routes. The Diaoyu Islands dispute, as a matter of fact, remains controllable and local—China always insists on resolution of disputes through dialogue.

China is seeking to build new bilateral relations with the US; however, the every-growing tension of maritime power struggles has brought profound impact to such bilateral relations, as well as to the worldwide landscape. Since 2010, due to aggravation of the Diaoyu Islands and South China Sea disputes, the power struggle in the region has been heightened, and so has the uncertainty of US-China relations. The US has been ambiguous on the Diaoyu Islands issue, claiming that it does not take sides; but also the US acknowledged Japan's "administrative jurisdiction" over the Diaoyu Islands and affirmed commitment to Japan's security.

The China-US maritime power struggle is based on three main points. The first is the US "Return to East Asia" strategy. Upon reelection, President Obama seeks a greater presence and further influence of the US in the Asia-Pacific region, and this has tipped the previous power balance in the Asia-Pacific. The second is China's strategy to become a marine power. From now on, China wants to expand its economic development strategy to cover marine development in addition to onshore development. This could intensify the existing maritime disputes. The third point is the East Asian countries' double dependency dilemma. East Asian countries rely on the US for security, and rely on China for economic growth. Now that China and the US have disagreements, East Asian countries don't know who to follow and this trend is certain to aggregate regional instability and insecurity. Due to the Diaoyu Islands dispute, bilateral relations between China and Japan have been the most unstable in the region. Now with the US "Return to East Asia" strategy, the US-Japan alliance will be strengthened while China-Japan relations will stall. Moreover, China is in dispute with the Philippines, another ally of the US. The active involvement of the US, Japan and even India can easily complicate and globalize the South China Sea issue.

### 3. Outlooks

From the above analysis, the MSR concept is a strategy for promoting trade and communications in the region. It has two functions, which helps to resolve China's domestic production overcapacity problems, meanwhile also promote Asia-Pacific regional development and connectivity. Besides, In addition to ensuring territorial sovereignty, China will rely on the MSR to buildup naval strength, promote marine culture, fully develop China's economy, explore marine resources, cooperate to ensure sea lane security, and work toward joint maritime governance. Based on shared interests, China will

continue to seek security dialogue with the US, Japan and ASEAN countries, to minimize tension and conflict, to foster collaborative win-win relations with the US, and to eventually ensure a peaceful and stable Asia Pacific maritime environment.

In the coming future, it's obviously to see the great opportunities of maritime cooperation between China and the U.S. During APEC, 2014, Xi and Obama underscored commitment to building a new type of major-country relations between the world's two largest economies. China upholds the principle of openness and inclusiveness in the proposals and initiatives it raised, such as the new security concept for Asia, China welcomes active participation from relative countries, including the United States, in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund. From now, China decides to contribute 40 billion U.S. dollars to set up a Silk Road Fund, which will be used to provide investment and financing support to carry out infrastructure, resources, industrial cooperation, financial cooperation and other projects related to connectivity for countries along the "Belt and Road".

On the other hand, there are following issues which China and the U.S should be cautiously to negotiate. For example, in terms of Asian security issue, in addition to the strengthening of its traditional dominance in the six-party talk mechanism to resolve nuclear crisis in North Korea, the US constantly intensifies its control over maritime affairs in East Asia. For instance, the US adopts a trilateral approach in dealing with China-Japan maritime territory disputes. In the Diaoyu Island issue, the US hopes the trilateral framework would help to solve the disputes between the two countries. As for the settlement of Diaoyu Island issue, China once adopted a principle of "putting aside disputes and seeking joint development", hoping to stabilize the current situation and maintain Sino-Japan relation. But Japan ignored the goodwill of China and made many petty moves in the Diaoyu Island issue. Japan has been constantly strengthening its control over Diaoyu Island, these unilateral hostile actions has made "putting aside disputes and seeking joint development" ineffective to stabilize the territorial waters around Diaoyu Island. It is obvious that the two countries have very different understanding on "putting aside disputes", and "putting aside disputes" became impossible to implement. Meanwhile, there are also problems in "seeking joint development".

It is not impossible to solve Sovereignty issue through negotiation. Looking back on history, China once advocated that the sovereignty issue was nonnegotiable; but that was under the particular historical background when the UK attempted to trade the sovereignty for longer administrative right. In practice, there had been compromises made over the border issue between China and Russia, especially the demarcation of Island Heixiazi, and the China-Burma and China-Mongolia border issues. Without out concession and compromises comes no breakthrough on border negotiation.

Under this background, diplomatic negotiation is obviously the most feasible way out. That is, China and Japan make joint efforts to create an atmosphere of reciprocity strategy

beneficial for both countries, solve the disputes over maritime rights on the basis of fairness doctrine and the spirit of "win-win and mutual benefits". In APEC 2014, China and Japan together reached the four consensus concerning major sensitive issues of Sino-Japan relation, such as historical issues and Diaoyu Island. That is, Adhering to principles and spirits of four political documents of Sino-Japan relation, both parties would continue to develop a strategic relation with mutual benefits. In particular, it's been acknowledged by both parties that different propositions exist in recent tensions of east-sea issues concerning Diaoyu Island and both parties agree to hold talks to improve the situation, and to establish a managing regime in case of emergency and unexpected events. Therefore, China-Japan relation is still fragile and there might be some disharmony and even tension. However, China and Japan has again established a dialogue mechanism, should establish maritime institutional mechanisms for crisis management, implement the development of ocean resources and establish different strategic countermeasures towards maritime territory disputes. Also, the cooperative mechanisms for inter-government textual negotiation, maritime liaison and maritime rescue issues need to be implemented to details.

All in all, to avoid conflict and to expand cooperation are the priorities to solve China-Japan maritime issues and the South China Sea issues. China should make the neighboring countries understand that, China's blueprint means opportunities, not threats for the next decade, it will create more opportunities than threats for the regional bloc despite their divisions on the East China Sea and the South China Sea issue.

China is yet to establish clear maritime strategies, including the MSR policy, but one thing is for sure, China is going to play a more and more important role in maritime affairs with its strong rise. Meanwhile, China will continue to address the US factor in maritime security. The US is not going to stop China from being a maritime power with no reasons. If China's navy deployment is beneficial for world stability just like what is happening in Aden Gulf in Somalia, the US will welcome it. However, if China's navy deployment is in the way of the US's interests, there could be worse conflicts between China and the US. In facing of US's uncompromising policy on maritime affairs in East Asia, cautions should be taken by China in dealing with it. If China poses as a military challenge, the neighboring countries might form alliance to restrain China's power and to reduce China's soft power and hard power.

The US has strong military edge and soft power while China is facing a geographical disadvantage in balancing the powers inside Asia. The most important thing is that both the US and China should try not to exaggerate the power from the other side, and not to overreact out of fear. The expectation of conflicts might in itself be the cause of conflicts. In fact, there are no deep rooted interest conflicts between the two countries, and both countries, together with other countries in the world, will benefit more from the cooperation of the two sides.

To conclude, MSR is a good medium to channel China's

growing maritime power and its neighboring policy. MSR is mainly a conduit for trade and cultural exchange between China's south-eastern coastal areas and foreign countries. There were two major routes: the East China Sea Silk Route and the South China Sea Silk Route. The US is a nation of maritime power which dominates the Asia-Pacific maritime order, and China is an emerging maritime power. China's strategy of onshore and marine development in parallel will not necessarily lead to maritime confrontation between China and the US. There is tremendous potential for collaboration for these two nations in terms of marine economic development, marine resource exploration, sea lane security, etc. Indeed, there are also difficulties that arise from the change in the Asia Pacific maritime order and the struggle between current and emerging maritime powers.

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