



RESEARCH PAPER

Strategic Prospects of the Maritime Silk Route (MSR) with respect to Energy Security and Military Purposes

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ABSTRACT

The 21st-century Maritime Silk Route refers to a broader geographical region stretching from South China, South Asia, Southeast Asia, South West Asia, Europe, and Africa. This qualitative study aims to explore the strategic prospects of the Maritime Silk Route concerning energy security and military drives. Since most of China's imports of energy supplies transit through the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, Beijing is interested to ensure unobstructed access in these regions. China is establishing a network of permanent naval bases from the Middle East to China. The MSR has emerged as cornerstone of China's foreign policy to capitalize the opportunity of Africa, Europe and Asia's transformation to create strategic space for China. It is effective in pursuing specific goals with respect to security of energy and China's maritime superiority. Furthermore, it concludes that MSR is a win-win as it concentrates primarily on long-term benefits to all participating countries.

Keywords: Silk Road, South China Sea, Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs), Energy Supplies, Grand Strategy, People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)

Introduction

The air, sea, and land routes define the spatial extent and geographical capabilities indispensable for enhancing a state's economic, military, and political potential (Chaturvedy, 2014). Sea routes were employed centuries ago. From national conflict to trade, the seas are the most effective medium for war and peacetime activities. China has an extensive and prosperous legacy as a sea power (Xinru & Lynda Norene, 2007; Ghani, Ahmed & Muzaffar, 2017). It has remained a global leader in navigation and shipbuilding in the past. China has almost a coastline of 18,000 km and many ports functional around the year. The ancient Maritime Silk Road (MSR) enabled peaceful communication among various civilizations and cultures, fostering the growth of long-distance trading activities for centuries and ensuring the development of an entirely novel global political and economic system, with China playing a leading role. The historical sources reveal that delegates from South and Southeast Asian nations, along with Rome, were the first to arrive in China by the sea in the quest for establishing diplomatic ties (Chaturvedy, 2014). During the Han dynasty's era (209 BC to 8 AD), marine trade was given greater importance in China. Since the seventh century, sea routes have been preferred for military and commercial purposes, with the role of Arabs becoming more prominent. The voyages made by Admiral Zheng symbolized China as a great sea power during the fifteenth century (Iftikhar & Faizullah, 2016).

The contemporary MSR endeavor is not a novel concept of China, yet it was already witnessed as an effective maritime strategy in the 15th century during the Middle Kingdom. South Chinese people have been using small boats to maneuver rivers and coastline waters and rivers since ancient times (Baoxia, Xianlong, & Adam, 2020). The earliest silk routes originated from the complex interactions between nomadic communities from the Eurasian steppe and urban-agricultural China. Initially, Beijing considered the participation of only those countries located along the maritime trade routes connecting Europe and China (Putri, 2017). As per records of the Book of Han, Emperor Wu deployed a fleet that traveled into

the South China Sea through Southeast Asia and across the Indian Ocean while finally arriving in Sri Lanka. Maritime routes were established earlier in the Western parts of the Zhou Dynasty from east to Japan and south to Vietnam. Since the era of the Tang Dynasty, the MSR has been a primary communication channel through which ancient China made contact with the outside world. China pledged itself to modernize and expand transportation networks along the historic trading routes, once connecting Asia and Europe, to enhance the economies of the concerned areas (Péter, 2018).

The term "Silk Road" and its derivative "Maritime Silk Road" are Western ideas (Baoxia, Xianlong, & Adam, 2020). The 21st-century MSR refers to a broader geographical region stretching from China and South China, South Asia, Southeast Asia, South West Asia, Europe, and Africa. The modern MSR is, in fact, the 'Renaissance' in the 21st century. The new-fangled MSR and the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure projects are regarded as remarkable and unmatched in history. The attachment of China to the history and recall of ancient times resonates with the OBOR plan. The 21st-century MSR is one of the two most ambitious and significant projects announced by Xi Jinping in 2013 under the current name, BRI (Ewa & Joanna, 2019). Li Keqiang proposed the concept of 21st-century MSR during his address in Brunei to the 16th session of the ASEAN-China summit and during the address of Xi Jinping in October 2013 to the Indonesian Parliament (Wu, 2013). The MSR is also a key component of China's BRI unveiled in 2013. In October 2013, Xi Jinping put forward the concept of MSR while addressing the Parliament of Indonesia as part of his participation in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum (Zhu & Cheng, 2013). China's BRI initiative consists of two major components: the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), unveiled independently in 2013 (Jean-Marc F. & Colin, 2017).



Figure 1. Twenty First Century Maritime Silk Route (Calabrese, 2020).

Literature Review

China suggested the creation of the 21st-century MSR to accomplish joint development, peaceful coexistence and mutual benefits through practical collaboration in multiple areas such as maritime economy, oceanic connectivity, disaster prevention, environmental protection, as well as cultural and social interactions in the true essence of friendship, peace, development and cooperation. Currently, China is reshaping maritime history, which by some historians is referred to as the maritime renaissance of Beijing. The expansion of China's reach in creating and running off-shore ports and port facilities and efforts to create a modern blue-water navy is seen as a tremendous leap forward (Howard J, 2012). The present-day leadership of China seem enthusiastic in their attempts to redefine China's global position boldly and innovatively. The MSR endeavor aims to create a global environment conducive to China's ongoing development as a crucial aspect of the Chinese grand strategy, which will strengthen cooperation and propel marine relations to new

heights. It will have a far-reaching impact on regional stability and world peace. According to Hua Chunying, a spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China proposed MSR to explore ideas and the unique values of the centuries-old Silk Road, namely mutual learning from one another, and to add new content to the current era, thereby achieving common development and prosperity of all nations in the region. The leadership of China wish to reaffirm the world of their commitment to peaceful growth, underlining that a stronger China will contribute to global peace and utilize the positive energy for friendship to provide development opportunities to the world, particularly Asia, rather than posturing as a threat (Chaturvedy, 2014). From a diplomatic perspective, the MSR has emerged as the cornerstone of China's foreign policy, which seeks to capitalize on the opportunity of Africa, Europe and Asia's transformation for China to create strategic space. Although it is a novel concept with the potential to advance social progress and bring about lasting peace and stability; nevertheless, it is still in its formative stages (Calabrese, 2020). The MSR has taken on tremendous geopolitical relevance, particularly for Southeast Asia since it is a major component of diplomacy and geo-strategy and has become the deciding factor in China's foreign policy. As an attempt to launch a 'grand strategy' with global ramifications, MSR places China in the heart of the "Middle Kingdom". It will expose the ambitions of Beijing from the perspective of China's expanding naval prowess. It will also be effective in pursuing specific strategic goals, such as minimizing comparable efforts by hostile forces, or asserting one's maritime superiority (Christopher, 2015).

Material and Methods

The descriptive qualitative technique is used in this research, which focuses on describing the social processes involved with the development of the MSR. It gives an interpretation and study of the facts in the field to uncover the context of time and place connected to the concept of MSR established by China as part of BRI. This study further investigates and clarifies the understanding of the social realities of the MSR by looking at several variables and evaluating the relationships between them. The variables of this research are the development of infrastructure like ports, sea routes, islands, naval facilities, financial institutions, blue economy, construction, shipping, tourism, commerce, energy, and connectivity channels through the MSR under the framework of the BRI. The data was obtained through a comprehensive review of relevant literature from dissertations, theses, news articles, research papers, scientific journals, and other pertinent scientific publications on the research topic.

Results and Discussion

The twenty-first century has ushered in novel facets of global politics under the auspices of a liberalist framework, wherein geo-economics obtains power over other aspects, notably in geopolitics. The MSR draws upon and incorporates the longstanding allegory of amicable philosophy to construct a novel framework for contemporary times, which prioritizes the enhancement of connectivity, with a significant focus on bolstering China's geostrategic standing on the global stage. This initiative has the potential to not only enhance China's energy security but it will also promote communication and integration in the region (Saif, Ihsan, & Shafiq, 2019). It is a global geopolitical endeavor encompassing multiple stakeholders, including governmental bodies, private enterprises, and state-owned Chinese organizations, operating across various geographic levels ranging from local municipalities to entire continents (Jean-Marc F. & Colin , 2017). The MSR is set to commence from Fujian and traverse through Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan provinces, ultimately proceeding towards the southern direction leading to the Strait of Malacca. It transits the Indian Ocean to Nairobi from Kuala Lumpur through Kolkata. After leaving Nairobi, it travels north across the Horn of Africa, through the Red Sea, and enters the Mediterranean. On its way to Venice, it stops in Athens, where it meets the land-based Silk Road (Chaturvedy, 2014).

Prospects with respect to Energy Security Purposes

Security of energy is one of the critical aspects of MSR. China needs not only access to a wide variety of energy sources, but it must also secure cost-effective, uninterrupted energy supplies across the country. The primary concern of China is the steady transit of oil supplies since its industry relies on oil. As a result, the MSR cannot be assessed until smooth energy supplies from the major oil-producing nations extending from Africa to the Middle East are addressed (Christopher, 2015). China's viewpoint of energy security, emphasizing the diversification of energy based on a combination of conventional and renewable sources, is equally significant in the context of MSR. Before reaching China, eighty per cent of the imported crude oil must transit through SLOCs. It is widely believed that SLOCs play a substantial role in the transportation of energy supplies (Saif, Ihsan, & Shafiq, 2019), based on which the safety of SLOCs matters a lot for MSR and China. Since most of China's trade and oil supplies are seaborne, which transit through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, Beijing keenly understands the strategic importance of SLOCs. China invests heavily in infrastructure development, enabling marine networks in the Indian and West Pacific Oceans to increase its long-term outreach to the SLOCs. The specific waterways and seaports have significant geostrategic worth (Morgan, 2015).

Southeast Asia is the second most important region along the MSR. Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Maldives are critical South Asian partners (Moramudali, 2017). In addition to the Gwadar port project in Pakistan, China is also working on both Hambantota and Colombo ports in Sri Lanka (Dr. Peter, 2016). Chinese investment worth \$1.7 billion aims to develop an export processing zone and the international airport at the Sri Lankan port of Hambantota. Two years ago, Sri Lanka approved the USD 1.4 billion "Colombo Port City" project, which would have required a \$20 billion investment from the Chinese government owing to the port in Hambantota and the new city that was going to be constructed around it (Moramudali, 2017). China, notably after 2013, has surpassed India as the top investor in Sri Lanka. The fact that China is spending \$1.3 billion to construct an artificial island off the coast of Colombo is quite significant. Using this investment, China has assured the presence of a critical stop along her maritime route (Saif, Ihsan, & Shafiq, 2019).

To make the New MSR project a reality, China has planned its execution while concentrating on ten of the most prominent global destinations worldwide, beginning with Gwadar. (Pakistan) (Merlinlinehan, 2016). The primary reason for Pakistan and China's geopolitical partnership is Pakistan's exceptional geographical and strategic position. Both Karachi and Gwadar, two of Pakistan's ports, are located on highly busiest SLOCs. Therefore, Pakistan is the most significant player in China's execution of its "string of pearls" strategy, which aims to connect the South Pacific Ocean, the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean (Dilip, 2015). Linking Western China to the Middle East and Europe is a strategic priority for Beijing. Pakistan is a gateway to China, as its Gwadar port is only 386 kilometers from the Strait of Hormuz. In Djibouti, Beijing intends to establish its first military base outside China (Dr. Peter, 2016). China's leasing of a naval facility in Djibouti for \$100 million per year serves economic and military purposes, but its primary objective is to ensure the security of MSR. The establishment of China's first-ever overseas naval base in Djibouti in November 2015 greatly assists anti-piracy military operations off the East African coast (Zhou, 2014). As a result of this development, China will have the chance to expand its strategic overtures by extending its military outreach by protecting global business interests. Beijing is interested in collaborating with Myanmar to reduce its reliance on the Malacca Strait. Myanmar and China have agreed to construct an industrial park and a deep-sea port in the Kyaukphyu region (Merlinlinehan, 2016).

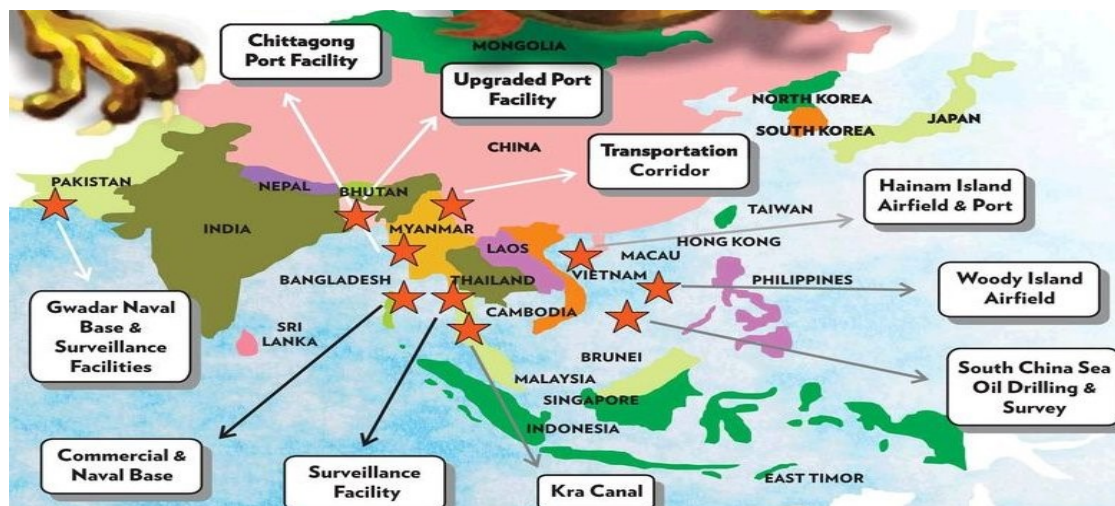


Figure 2. Chinese military presence astride oil routes (Roy, 2008).

Indonesia is the largest economy in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and is projected to become the seventh-largest globally by 2030. China's ambitions are entirely modified to accommodate Indonesia's goal of becoming a "coastal axis" between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. From a geo-economics and geopolitical perspective, Indonesia has become the most important Southeast Asian nation for China. In addition to the Strait of Malacca, the Sunda and Lombok Straits are vital sea lanes that enable the biggest country in the area to exercise control over strategically significant maritime trade channels along which most of China's import-export traffic transit through. As a result, the New MSR will be doomed to failure in the absence of Indonesia's participation (Putri, 2017). The ports constructed along major maritime routes between 2015 and 2019 were estimated to cost USD 57 billion to boost trade prospects, connectivity and foreign investment in Indonesia. The new MSR strategy of China focuses primarily on Indonesian ports since Jakarta is looking for alternative possibilities, mainly for Japan, to build port facilities on several islands, which poses a significant challenge to China in terms of formulating a viable strategy in this regard (Merlinlinehan, 2016). In November 2014, President Jokowi made public his aspirations to transform his homeland into a "global maritime fulcrum" and made a personal commitment to develop Indonesia as a trade nation by building and upgrading the infrastructure of its five deep-sea ports and 24 strategic ports (Duquennoy & Robert, 2015).

Thailand's Golden Water Ways project proposed building a 30 km long canal through the Isthmus of Kra to cut the narrowest part of Thailand and allow ships to bypass Malacca Strait on their way from China to Europe, which has been met with criticism both locally and internationally (Merlinlinehan, 2016). As part of the OBOR initiative, Thailand plans to build the Eastern Economic Corridor to connect China and Southeast Asia. The initiative has the potential to transform Thailand into a new hub for Far Eastern trade which is of significant importance to both the Thai and Chinese governments. In the late 20th century, constructing a canal intersecting the Kra Isthmus was proposed but never materialized due to political and economic constraints. By providing an alternate route for energy imports to China, a project identical to the Panama Canal will reduce the security threats of navigation through the Strait of Malacca (Ewa & Joanna, 2019).

Prospects with respect to Military Purposes

Maritime access plays a significant role in forming strategic alliances and security ties. Marine power has significant benefits as a diplomatic tool, which initially seems more resilient and visible. Naval troops at foreign seaports and on the high seas will be employed for prestige and deterrence. Access to the sea makes a nation more powerful and a neighbor to all other countries that can be reached by ship (Hedley, 2008). Some analysts see the ancient MSR as China's attempt to assert its influence beyond borders (Baoxia, Xianlong, &

Adam, 2020). Reviving the MSR demonstrates China's unique approach and grand strategy with worldwide implications. It has a defined strategic objective and is a conduit for China's grand strategy. By reinstating the MSR, Chinese policymakers aim to give new life to China's periphery strategy and reduce tensions with its neighbors. Beijing has shifted its foreign policy emphasis in the 21st century from land to ocean-oriented diplomacy to foster marine connections with its neighboring states. Xi Jinping advocates for the combined development of an economic belt along with the Silk Road and a Maritime Silk Road in the 21st century, therefore updating the spirit of the ancient Silk Route, certainly reflecting China's grand strategy. The fundamental goal of MSR as an OBOR initiative is consistent with the strategic views espoused by Chinese President Xi Jinping since 2013. It aims to fulfil the Chinese Dream of attaining great rejuvenation (Kuhn, 2013).

Some experts believe that MSR is primarily motivated by military ambitions, best summed up by China's "string of pearls" strategy. Due to maritime conflicts, China has "acrimonious" ties with certain Southeast Asian states, making it more difficult for China to improve its relations with the countries located in its immediate vicinity. The South China Sea is crucial to China's political, economic, and strategic interests. Maintaining dominance in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea is critical for China (Zhou, 2014). In addition, 60% of oil imports from China arrive through the route of the South China Sea, while products worth an average of over USD 5.3 trillion are transported annually across the South China Sea, accounting for 30% of the global trade. Concerns that China will use its financial investments as political leverage in discussions to restore its position as a naval power have been fueled by the uncertain situation in the South China Sea and tensions among certain ASEAN member states (Saif, Ihsan, & Shafiq, 2019). China has maintained its aggressive stance toward expanding its position in the South China Sea by converting reefs and other undersea maritime features into fully functional islands equipped with 3000 m runways, air defense stations, and traffic control towers (William, 2015). Beijing is trying to protect China's energy supply routes in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Since most of China's imports of energy supplies transit through these regions, Beijing places increased emphasis on the safety of the SLOCs and has expanding strategic interests in assuring unobstructed access in these regions (Christopher, 2015).

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) seeks dependable logistical networks throughout Southeast and South Asia along SLOCs (William, 2015). Through the string of pearls strategy, Beijing is interested in establishing a network of permanent naval bases from the Middle East to China (Van der, Frans, & Minke, 2015). The most critical condition that must be met before PLAN can make its operational commitment is establishing a dependable and efficient logistics chain. The primary objective of MSR, from a geostrategic point of view, is to ensure Beijing's dominance over the most important marine trade routes and to ensure the continuous supply of raw materials. PLAN's deployments in the Indian Ocean and beyond will also be facilitated by MSR. China desires to deploy PLAN for operations in maritime security, including vassal protection, the strategic bottleneck at SLOCs and global energy resources (Zhou, 2014).

MSR's theoretical basis looks quite enticing since its goals vary from those of unbalancing the international order through imperialist moves disguised as unipolarity (Saif, Ihsan, & Shafiq, 2019). As a result of the shift in the global balance of power, the nations of Southeast Asia will attempt to take advantage of the situation by forming the most beneficial alliances possible with the competing Great Powers. China will have an edge due to MSR in the competition between the world's two major powers. The rise of China and the decline of the US both imply imperative geopolitical repercussions for the nations of Southeast Asia. As a result, it is anticipated that the US will have less influence, and the area will be compelled to adhere to the Chinese strategy to a greater extent than in the past (Péter, 2018). Developing a 21st-century MSR depends on cooperation between China and the nations along the route. MSR, China's most ambitious plan, is a win-win since it

concentrates primarily on the interests of the world's most populous nation and guarantees long-term benefits to all participating countries (Ewa & Joanna, 2019).

Conclusion

It is imperative to conclude that China's introduction of the OBOR project in the fall of 2013 is evidence of its growing global influence. Its ambitious goal was to revive the centuries-old traditions of the ancient Silk Road. The initiative known as the 21st-Century MSR is a significant shift in China's foreign policy in recent times. It seeks to promote port interconnectivity, trade exchanges, as well as economic and cultural cooperation between China and the countries alongside the MSR. In this manner, a win-win political and economic growth pattern based on mutual reliance and mutual benefit can be established, and a better geo-economic and geopolitical environment may be produced for China's peaceful development. It is widely believed that MSR under the framework of BRI is an effort to establish a global order that is either bipolar with China and the US as the dominating actors or multipolar with other significant powers like the EU, India and Japan and that it will undoubtedly give China more leverage and influence over its neighbors. Apprehensions about a potentially disastrous hegemonic conflict between China and the US have been exacerbated by China's more assertive foreign policy, especially in the West. Beijing has expressed concerns about the US pivot to the region of Asia-Pacific as part of the "irresistible move" from the West to the East. Washington sees China as a massive threat to its hegemony in East Asia, for which it has developed a multifaceted strategy to hedge, rebalance, and restrict the expanding influence of China by using economic, military, diplomatic and cultural measures to preserve control in the area. Crossing the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) connecting South and Southeast Asia becomes much more difficult. However, the US Navy and allied troops will continue to hold a superior position in the area for the foreseeable future. In response to the US rebalancing strategy in Asia, China launched the MSR as a regionally integrated investment-driven plan. China sees the US military presence in East Asia as a significant threat to its vital interests and national security since Washington has adopted a hostile containment policy in response to China's rise.

Recommendations

In the future, Beijing may consider exploiting Japan's energy insecurity by directing a more significant share of energy supplies through the Gwadar Port, which would be subsequently stored or sold by China, thereby restricting the energy volume traversing the Strait of Malacca. Primarily Japan is apprehensive of the MSR that could be used to limit or obstruct energy supplies to East Asia. Japan relies on 90% of its foreign energy imports, making the country very susceptible to disruptions in the energy supply. It also plays a significant role in Japanese efforts to diversify and maintain its access to resources and facilities, such as its collaboration with India to establish the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, whose stated goal is to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific by promoting development and connectivity between Africa and Asia. South Asian countries are facing significant apprehensions that could potentially lead to heightened mistrust and prevent the development of MSR.

The MSR has to deal with the geopolitical battle between India and China while simultaneously addressing the varying interests of the South Asian nations, namely India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives. Its expansion in the area is unlikely to be smooth. Some scholars have proposed that to mitigate security concerns and enhance confidence, China should provide concrete evidence to support its stance on the nine-dash line and provide its plan for settling territorial disputes. China may concentrate more on providing military and security aid to nations in South Asia rather than prioritizing the costly and inefficient construction of large-scale islands. India perceives MSR as a significant risk to its regional safety and strategic objectives.

From a soft power perspective, New Delhi is concerned that the strategic decisions that regional nations have made concerning the MSR will result in these countries being firmly aligned with Beijing's interests due to the debt burdens they incurred. From a hard-power perspective, New Delhi is concerned that China intends to utilize Gwadar as a dual-purpose port in the foreseeable future, which would provide strategic entry into the Indian Ocean for the Chinese PLAN. In addition, Gwadar will also strengthen the capacity of Pakistan to prevent any potential naval superiority of India. India will maintain reservations that MSR is a geopolitical strategy designed to advance the security objectives of China. These concerns could lead to prompt counter-strategic measures like Indian "Project Mausam," which aims to reestablish historic cultural linkages and sea routes in the area to compete with the MSR. New Delhi is wary that China may take control of significant infrastructural assets in its peripheral waters, which could be utilized for strategic and military objectives.

The MSR is a tool for expanding Beijing's strategic influence far into India's strategic interest zone. Both the sea and overland channels of the Silk Road Initiative are seen as strategic moves to "encircle" India by China. Due to its potential influence on the economic framework in the regional domains, India is also wary of the MSR. The growth of Chinese trade and investment is deemed to be in every nation's best interest. However, if consensus cannot be reached and mistrust persists, the endeavor risks being seen as a geopolitical conspiracy. Therefore, China needs to develop strategic and political partnerships with the nations of South Asia.

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