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A road India must travel

Strengthening security ties with the West will give India the confidence to participate in China's one-belt and one-road plan, writes SHYAM SARAN

At the recently concluded session of China's National People's Congress, Chinese leaders declared that the focus of China's diplomacy during 2015 will be on its One Belt and One Road Initiative (BRI). The initiative refers to the proposal made by Chinese President Xi Jinping in September 2013 for the revival of the ancient land and sea routes linking China with Europe on which silk, tea and other products were traded. The land route traversed a number of countries in Central Asia, West Asia and the Gulf. The sea route linked China's eastern coast with ports on the rim of the South China Sea, the Malacca Straits, the Indian Ocean and then on to the Mediterranean.



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The plan for revival involves the establishment of transportation, energy and communication networks along with associated trade facilitation, currency exchange and financial infrastructure. It would also promote cultural and people-to-people exchanges. Thus the BRI is comprehensive and multi-faceted and seeks to establish China not only as an Asia-Pacific power but as a truly global power. Its public diplomacy emphasises the mutual economic and commercial benefits that BRI would generate for all participating countries and underplays the strategic gains that would flow to China. Partners will be attracted by the considerable investment China promises. A Silk Road Fund of \$40 billion has been announced and the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB), of which India, too, is a founding member, is expected to support BRI projects. For example, China is committed to financing the Colombo Port expansion project with a credit of \$1.4 billion.

China claims that the BRI is not a Chinese 'solo' project but will rather be a symphony that will emerge through consultation and coordination with partner countries. Nevertheless it is clear that the symphony will be orchestrated by a Chinese conductor.

In a recent survey of Chinese literature on the subject there were some writings which were candid about the strategic intent of the BRI. The key objectives mentioned are: First, 'Countering the containment

policies of certain Western countries, ensuring safe navigation, improving relations with relevant countries and maintaining security'; second, 'A strategic move towards gradual assertion of Chinese presence in the Asia-Pacific region.... and build China's image as a rising nation that is ready to undertake more international responsibilities and protect its territorial integrity; and, third, the Belt would open up China's western and inland provinces which are comparatively underdeveloped. There is a reference to \$16.3 billion having been approved for infrastructure development in the so-called Belt provinces, including Xinjiang. The coastal province would benefit from export opportunities made available in an expanded market.

In one commentary, India is described as a key country for the success of the Maritime Silk Road: 'Considering India's enormous development demands and its huge market, it (China) should use the huge potential for bilateral (maritime) cooperation to improve ties with the South Asian country.'

Chinese analysts are aware that the BRI has so far not generated the positive response that had been expected and that there are suspicions about China's motivations. While forswearing such intentions there are also strong assertions that China will defend what it rightfully considers its own territory.

The BRI makes it clear that China considers the Indian Ocean as a vital space for its expanding economic and security interests. Indian and Chinese interests are bound to intersect in the coming years and we will have to find ways to manage an increasingly competitive environment. In a recent article in a Chinese navy journal, a 16-character strategy for the Indian Ocean has been spelt out: 'Select locations meticulously, make deployments discreetly, give priority to cooperative activities and penetrate gradually.'

This is in fact that the strategy which underlies the BRI and describes the manner in which it will be rolled out.

Just as India decided, on balance, to join the AIIB, it should come on board the BRI as well. The Chinese appear to recognise that India will play a key role in the success of the project and that should give it leverage to shape it in a manner conducive to our interests. We do need massive infrastructure investment and currently China has both surplus capital as well as excess capacity in its infrastructure industry such as steel, machinery and power. At a time when India is threatened with marginalisation in the global economy by the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership in the Asia-Pacific and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, joining together North American and European economies, the BRI may be a useful alternative to explore.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi appears to have conveyed his willingness to expand economic and commercial ties with China even while taking a more firm position on the security front. Perhaps there may be a trade-off here which India could explore. At the same time there should be every effort made to retain the current but diminishing edge that India possesses in naval power in the Indian Ocean. The recent visit of Modi to three Indian Ocean countries was long overdue and this re-engagement must be built upon. We should also make speedier progress on the Chahbahar port on the Iranian coast, which will give us access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. This would enable India to be a major player in the overland Silk Route as well.

China sees the BRI as a response to what it considers is a containment strategy pursued by the US. India does not need to sign on to a containment strategy but the strengthening of its security links with the US, Japan, Asean and Australia would give it more room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis China and greater confidence to participate in the BRI. Shyam Saran, a former foreign secretary, is chairman, RIS, and senior fellow, CPR The views expressed by the author are personal

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