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Issue Brief

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Long-term Chinese Vision for Maritime Cooperation

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Recently, Chinese government released a white paper laying out long-term plans for its 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, a component of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It calls for establishing ocean-based ‘blue economic passages’ connecting Asia with Africa, Oceania and Europe. Document titled, ‘Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative’ has been jointly released by National Development and Reform Commission and the State Oceanic Administration of China.¹ It lays out a vision for development, prosperity, security and building of a new regional order.

China calls for ‘synchronising development plans,’ while engaging in ‘all-dimensional multitiered and broad-scoped’ maritime cooperation to build open and transparent partnership platforms with countries along the Maritime Silk Road. Such cooperation, as per document, will promote mutually beneficial ‘blue partnerships,’ and forge a ‘blue engine’ for sustainable development. Maritime cooperation will also enable nations to address challenges and crises, thus, promoting ‘regional peace and stability’.

In an effort to reach out to diverse nations along the Maritime Silk Road, document assures that ‘concerns’ of other involved nations will be “accommodated, differences bridged, common ground sought and consensus achieved.” China also underscores the need to build ‘mutual political trust’ to enhance cooperation under the BRI. By acknowledging concerns of other nations, and seeking common ground, Beijing is indicating preference for dialogue for resolving differences and pursuing peaceful development.

Aside from route, documents stresses that the principle of cooperation would be ‘market-based operation.’ Beijing acknowledges the ‘interests of all parties’ and it provide opportunity to comparative strengthen of each nation, however, primary driver of the cooperation will be enterprises abiding by ‘market rules and international norms.’ This principle, if implemented in letter and spirit, would address concerns of many nations along the maritime route, as it would provide level playing field to private sector in other nations to compete with the Chinese enterprises.

The most crucial part of the document is the route for establishing China-Indian Ocean-Africa-

¹ “Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative”, *Xinhua*, June 20, 2017, accessed July 6, 2017, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/20/c_136380414.htm

Mediterranean Sea Blue economic passage. After public release of the document media outlets in India reported that China has called for joining China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC).² A closer reading of the text, however, highlights that Beijing envisions first linking China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, westward from South China Sea to Indian Ocean, and onwards to Africa and Mediterranean Sea, and on route BCIM-EC and CPEC would be two nodes. Document notes that,

“Ocean cooperation will focus on building the China-Indian Ocean-Africa- Mediterranean Sea Blue Economic Passage, by linking the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, running westward from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean, and connecting the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC).”

The envisioned Blue Economic Passage would be routed from China to Africa and Mediterranean Sea via Indian Ocean. It is in the Indian Ocean that BCIM-EC and CPEC will be connected to the Blue Economic Passage. Chittagong and Kolkata ports are part of BCIM-EC,³ while Gwadar port lies on the end-point of CPEC, and these ports would become nodes on the blue economic passage linking Indian Ocean to Africa and later to Mediterranean Sea after crossing Red Sea.

In essence, the long-term plan and the vision of maritime cooperation is already under implementation. In recent years, China has entered into cooperation agreements with nations in South East Asia, South Asia, Middle East and Africa under the Belt and Road Initiative. These include construction of new ports, modernisation of infrastructure and provision of financial resources to Chinese and foreign enterprises for undertaking joint projects.

² Sutirtho Patranobis, “China says it will link Pakistan corridor with project involving India,” *Hindustan Times*, June 20, 2017, accessed July 6, 2017, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/china-says-it-will-link-pakistan-corridor-with-project-involving-india/story-9q3gDO1pZ2v7dr7GSddWIK.html>

³ Atul Aneja, “Dialogue on stalled BCIM corridor set to resume in Kolkata,” *The Hindu*, April 19, 2017, accessed July 7, 2017, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/dialogue-on-stalled-bcim-corridor-set-to-resume-in-kolkata/article18131888.ece>