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Project Mausam: India's Grand Maritime Strategy (Part I)

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This paper is the first of a two part essay on India's Project Mausam. Part I focuses on exploring the nature of Project Mausam while Part II will examine its impact on Malaysia and ASEAN and provide recommendations accordingly.

Onset of a 'maritime Asia'

Maritime travel, trade and even conquest have historically been part and parcel of the interaction among different communities, states and civilisations from South to East Asia. Control of key maritime routes by the ancient Asian kingdoms and subsequent European colonial powers meant control of trade and influence throughout the wider region. Hence, the announcement by several regional powers of new maritime centric initiatives to revitalise their 'maritime legacy' and that of the region have regional observers sitting up and taking notice.

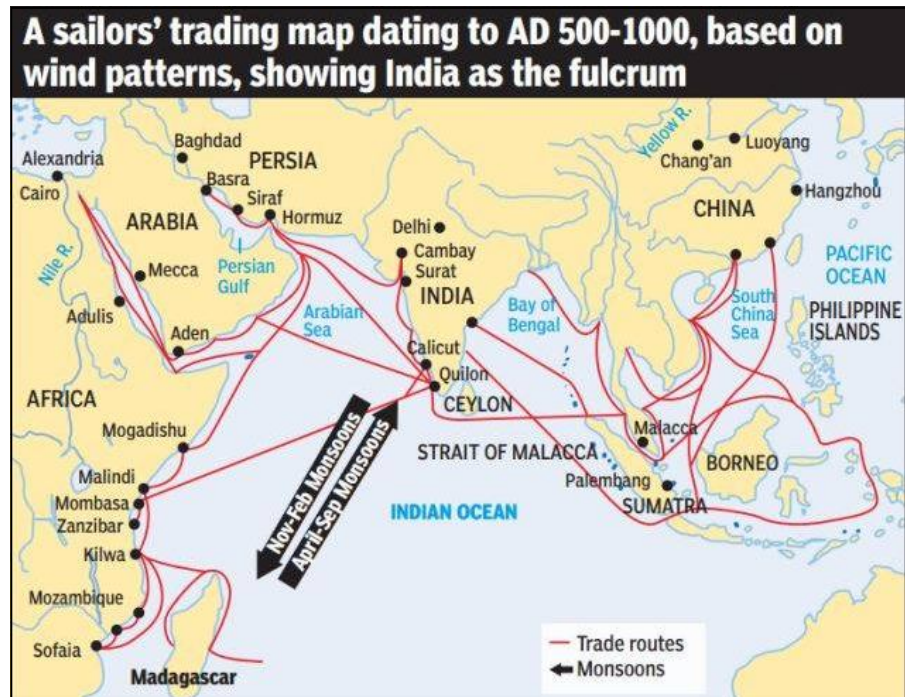
China got the ball rolling with its Maritime Silk Route (MSR), a strategic initiative to increase trade and foster collaboration across a range of fields leveraging on sea routes. This was announced in late 2013 during President Xi Jinping's visit to Indonesia and Malaysia. More recently, newly elected Indonesian President Joko Widodo also outlined his vision for Indonesia as a 'Global Maritime Axis', which aimed to capitalise on Indonesia's vast maritime geography. Not to be left behind, India looks set to unveil a maritime initiative of its own — Project Mausam. This essay aims to explore the nature of Project Mausam — its background, scope, aims and possible motivation behind its impending implementation.

India's Project Mausam

At its face value, Project Mausam can best be described as a foreign policy initiative that is being developed by the Modi administration. It aims to revive India's ancient

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Contents:	Project Mausam: India's Grand Maritime Strategy (Part I)	1
	The Seventh ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Dialogue	6



Source: *The Times of India*

maritime routes, cultural and trade linkages with a diverse group of states and regions that are connected to the Indian Ocean. The name 'Mausam' itself is derived from a myriad of regional dialects for the monsoon winds that were used by early maritime navigators to travel across the Indian Ocean — travel which ultimately shaped early interaction between communities and nations connected by the Indian Oceanⁱ.

The specifics of Project Mausam have yet to be officially released with only several general aims being cited by bureaucrats and analysts. Nonetheless, indications are that this is to be a major feature in India's engagement with the Indian Ocean region for the foreseeable future. It will likely complement contemporary initiatives like the 'Act East' policy — itself a proactive enhancement of India's nearly quarter century old Look East policy — which are geared specifically towards ASEAN and more generally towards East Asia. This action oriented approach aims to further forge economic, cultural, strategic and security cooperation with states in the region.

Ranging from East Africa via the Arabian Peninsula to Southeast Asia, Project Mausam is not just about examining historical ties of the past but more importantly, also seeks to enhance trade, diplomatic and security ties around the region with India as its central nexus. Project Mausam also involves a cultural aspect that aims to complement its trade and diplomatic emphasis. As it stands, India's Ministry of Culture has already started preliminary work on several initiatives aimed at fostering an enhanced understanding of values and concerns of natural and cultural heritage among Indian Ocean countriesⁱⁱ.

Project Mausam as a counterbalance to China?

Unlike Indonesia's Maritime Axis, which focuses as much attention on domestic concerns as it does on external policies, the general consensus among regional observers is that — diplomatic and cooperative platitudes aside — Project Mausam is in fact India's direct response, countering and confronting China's MSR.

Originally intended to boost cooperation and goodwill between China and ASEAN states, China's MSR has expanded significantly and now sets South Asia, East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and even Europe in its sights. Through maritime trade and infrastructure development, China proposes to strengthen trade and relations with all these regions. In fact, during his visit to New Delhi in September 2014, President Xi promoted the MSR to India, urging it to join the initiative while emphasising the benefits to all parties due to India's strategic and influential position in the Indian Oceanⁱⁱⁱ. Unlike its neighbours — who have welcomed the initiative and the prospects of a Chinese-driven development it entails primarily for what it might mean for the future of the Indian Ocean region — India was more circumspect about the extent of its participation in this latest Chinese initiative. India, like most of China's competitors, sees the MSR as a major plan to expand China's sphere of influence from its traditional hub of East Asia.

Not only has China grown its footprint in its 'traditional' East Asia, it is also making waves in South Asia and the Indian Ocean — India's front yard. Besides long-standing ally Pakistan, China has shown huge interest in Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bangladesh — investing heavily via economic aid and infrastructure development^{iv}. Most notable of these are the developments of Chinese funded and built deep-water ports in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and possibly the Maldives, which could, theoretically, be accessed by assets of the Chinese Navy. A similar project in Bangladesh was shelved in favour of one undertaken by a more multinational consortium after protests by India while reports of another Chinese driven port in East Africa — despite ultimately proven to be untrue — caused concern in New Delhi.

The Indian defence establishment also has growing reservations about the expansion of Chinese naval activities into the Indian Ocean^v. Visits by Chinese naval ships to neighbouring states are on the rise alongside Chinese naval traffic as it continues to participate in anti-piracy efforts off the Horn of Africa. However, multiple visits by Chinese submarines to Sri Lanka in late 2014 — berthed at ports developed by China — and reports that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and PLA Air Force (PLAAF) have been offered access to several military facilities in that country for joint training purposes have especially upset India and given ammunition to those who

Chinese Interests in the Indian Ocean



Source: Screen capture from CNN-IBN



President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Modi

advocate that China does indeed have growing ambitions for its presence in the Indian Ocean region. Interestingly, much of this concern and indeed the perceived growing Chinese presence and influence in the Indian Ocean reflects the ‘String of Pearls’ strategy that was bandied about during the previous decade — an approach that some then dismissed and criticised as too grandiose^{vi}.

India is playing a catch-up game in the wider region and it must move fast to set up the necessary bilateral and multilateral mechanisms to expedite further cooperation ...

The last few years have seen China make huge strides in strengthening its presence and influence in the Asia Pacific — a position that it is now apparently building in the Indian Ocean. A possible speed bump though could come in the form of the defeat of the Rajapaksa administration in Sri Lankan national elections held in early January 2015, which could see an adjustment of its pro-China policies. Newly elected President Sirisena has vowed to decrease the country’s dependence on Beijing though such changes — given the extent of Chinese driven development in Sri Lanka — is easier said than done^{vii}.

The challenge to regain influence

Naturally, India does have some cause for concern. The rhetoric about a rising India claiming its place alongside China as co-leader in a bipolar ‘Asian century’ has largely remained just that — rhetoric. While India has moved forward on many fronts, its attempts to successfully combine soft and hard power with a concentrated, sustained diplomatic strategy in order to cement its place in the new Asian order have fallen short.

Given the spike in high profile international engagements and his reputation as a ‘man of action’, Mr Modi will be expected to deliver on foreign policy as well. Obstacles, however, remain — especially internal challenges from competing domestic priorities and a foreign service that has been criticised as lacklustre and reactionary^{viii}.

Psychologically, this comes at an important time for India with analysts arguing that the current political leadership in New Delhi is not one that indulges in half-hearted initiatives. India is playing a catch-up game in the wider region and it must move fast to set up the necessary bilateral and multilateral mechanisms to expedite further cooperation that it aims to achieve. In this light, the development of Project Mausam is India’s attempt to address the imbalance and pre-emptively reassert its dominance over a region that it sees as its natural sphere of influence.

Notes:

ⁱPrashar, S. (2014), Narendra Modi's 'Mausam' manoeuvre to check China's maritime might, *Times of India* (Online), Available at: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Narendra-Modis-Mausam-manoevre-to-check-Chinas-maritime-might/articleshow/42562085.cms>

ⁱⁱParameswaran, P. (2014), Modi unveils India's 'Act East Policy' to ASEAN in Myanmar, *The Diplomat*, 17 November 2014 (Online), Available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/modi-unveils-indias-act-east-policy-to-asean-in-myanmar/>

ⁱⁱⁱPillalamarri, A. (2014), Project Mausam: India's answer to China's 'Maritime Silk Road', *The Diplomat*, 18 September 2014 (Online), Available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2014/09/project-mausam-indias-answer-to-chinas-maritime-silk-road/>

^{iv}Prashar, S. (2014), Narendra Modi's 'Mausam' manoeuvre to check China's maritime might, *Times of India* (Online), Available at: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Narendra-Modis-Mausam-manoevre-to-check-Chinas-maritime-might/articleshow/42562085.cms>

^vBrewster, D. (2014), The Bay of Bengal: The Maritime Silk Route and China's naval ambitions, *The Diplomat*, 14 December 2014 (Online), Available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2014/12/the-bay-of-bengal-the-maritime-silk-route-and-chinas-naval-ambitions/>

^{vi}Marantidou, V. (2014), Revisiting China's 'String of Pearls' strategy: Places with Chinese characteristics and their security implications, *Issues & Insights* Vol. 1, No. 7 (Online), Available at: <http://csis.org/publication/issues-insights-vol-14-no-7-revisiting-chinas-string-pearls-strategy>

^{vii}Tissainagaham, J.Y. (2015), Hold the champagne in Sri Lanka, *Foreign Policy*, 13 January 2015 (Online), Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/13/hold-the-champagne-in-sri-lanka-maithripala-sirisena/>

^{viii}Chellaney, B. (2014), Deconstructing the Modi foreign policy, *The Hindu*, 4 December 2014 (Online), Available at: <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/deconstructing-the-modi-foreign-policy/article6658904.ece>