

By Invitation

# 21st Century Maritime Silk Road

To succeed, it must be open and inclusive, and evolve from China's project to the region's.



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For *The Straits Times*

In October 2013, President Xi Jinping of China addressed the Indonesian Parliament. It was a historic occasion because relations between the two countries were restored only in 1990, following a long period of estrangement caused by the Indonesian allegation that the Chinese Communist Party had abetted the Indonesian Communist Party's attempt to seize power.

In his important address, President Xi proposed the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Earlier that year, during his visit to Kazakhstan, he had proposed reviving the overland Silk Road. The two proposals and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank are three of President Xi's flagship projects.

## ANCIENT ROUTE

Historical and archaeological records show that, for several thousand years, Arab, Persian, Indian, Ceylonese, Chinese and South-east Asian traders and seafarers had been traversing the East China Sea, South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. This vast expanse of oceans and seas can be called the Indo-Pacific. What were the traders buying and selling to one another?

South-east Asia exported its spices, scented woods, feathers of exotic birds, tortoise shell, ivory and rhino horns. China exported its three treasures of silk, porcelain and tea. The Indian exports included textiles, precious metals and jewellery. Arabia exported frankincense, glass and horses. The trade was, however, not just in goods but also of ideas, cultures and religions. An important characteristic of the ancient maritime trade was that it was conducted peacefully.

There are two lessons we should learn from the ancient maritime Silk Road. The first is the importance of the freedom of navigation. Without the freedom of navigation, shipping and maritime trade would not have prospered.

The second lesson is the importance of multiculturalism. The participants of the maritime trade were people from different countries. They belonged to

different races, religions, languages and cultures. They traded successfully because they treated one another with mutual respect. For example, Arab traders were allowed to build mosques to practise their faith in the Chinese port city of Quanzhou in the Fujian province. This is the spirit and ethos of the ancient maritime Silk Road which we should adopt.

## SINGAPORE AND THE MARITIME SILK ROAD

Singapore was a node in the ancient maritime Silk Road. Archaeological excavations at Fort Canning, along the banks of the Singapore River and the Kallang estuary have uncovered thousands of glass shards, beads, globules, ceramics and coins.

The ceramics found at Fort Canning are of Chinese origin and are datable to the 14th century. The Chinese ceramics found near the Singapore River are from the 14th to the 19th centuries. The Chinese coins were from the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127).

We have also found ceramics from Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar. This shows that ancient Singapore was already an entrepot port, trading with China, India, Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar and Vietnam.

The modern Singapore is a major shipping nation and port state. It is

only logical that Singapore should be an important hub in the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.

## NEW OPPORTUNITIES

I support President Xi's proposal for the following reasons: The proposal will boost trade, shipping, tourism and the development of maritime infrastructure, and enhance connectivity and promote better mutual understanding between and among people.

It will create many new economic opportunities and many new jobs. It will also complement and reinforce Asean connectivity. I also see positive synergy between President Xi's proposal and Indonesian President Joko Widodo's vision of developing Indonesia as a maritime axis.

Funding for infrastructure projects of merit should not be a problem with the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. There's also a role for the private sector's financial institutions in funding these projects.

## SOFT INFRASTRUCTURE

While the primary focus is on developing hard infrastructure, we should also pay attention to the soft infrastructure. We should cooperate in developing our human resources and in the sharing of skills and expertise. We should

encourage more people-to-people contacts and exchanges, especially among our young people.

We should develop a culture of respecting diversity and promoting better inter-faith and inter-cultural understanding. To succeed, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road must be based on the principle of mutual respect and mutual benefit.

When disputes arise, they should be settled peacefully, in accordance with international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. The rule of law must prevail over the rule that might is right.

## THREE SUGGESTIONS

I would like to make three suggestions for China's consideration. First, China should work harder to explain its proposal and to gain the understanding and trust of China's neighbours. At present, there is a deficit of trust between China, on the one hand, and Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines and India, on the other. Second, China should adopt an open and inclusive approach. All countries should be welcome to participate and no country should be excluded.

Third, China should listen to the region. It should sincerely solicit the views of the countries of the region and be prepared to take them into account in future

iterations of the proposal. The best outcome is for the proposal to evolve from being seen as a Chinese project to being the region's project. It is desirable for China to obtain the region's ownership of the proposal.

## OPEN AND INCLUSIVE

I support President Xi's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road because it will bring many benefits to the countries and peoples of the Indo-Pacific.

The new maritime silk road should reflect the spirit and ethos of the ancient maritime Silk Road.

The new road should be linked to the Asean Connectivity Masterplan.

To succeed, the new road should be open and inclusive, based upon the principles of mutual respect, mutual benefit and the rule of law. It should have the ownership of the region.

Singapore can play a useful role in narrowing the gap between China and the region. Singapore's private sector can also play a positive role in turning President Xi's vision into reality.

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