

Indian Ocean island sustainable development in the context of the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road

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Abstract: Island countries and territories are often subjected to standardized development strategies, which overlook the distinct needs of different island societies. Indian Ocean island countries and territories face certain shared sustainability challenges but also have their own diverse needs when it comes to sustainable development. This paper undertakes a qualitative analysis of 1) the overarching philosophies of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) projects and 2) the specific Indian Ocean island-focused initiatives that have formed part of the MSR. The aim is to ascertain the manner in which island sustainability is conceived by and pursued within the MSR framework. The article finds that the Chinese government envisions the MSR as a path toward transnational mutual benefit and pursuit of shared interests, with economic and environmental sustainability being mutually contingent and reinforcing. Focus is placed on bilateral and multilateral partnerships that advance sustainable development across the region and on Indian Ocean islands in particular. Although there is at present a lack of effective assessment of sustainability achievements within the MSR, this policy framework offers an opportunity for working toward sustainable development in a manner that suits diverse island needs.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); China; Indian Ocean; islands; sustainable development; 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR)

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Introduction

This paper considers the manner in which the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), which is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), conceptualizes and constructs sustainable development in Indian Ocean island states and territories. It does so through

discussions of the role of sustainability within relevant policy documents and of how this initiative has been applied in the Indian Ocean region. We argue that although this vision of sustainable development in some senses runs counter to traditional ideals of island sustainability, it may better reflect types of development that are relevant to the particular islanders in question. We also, however, suggest that attention needs to be placed on ensuring that the MSR's vision of sustainable development is actually put into practice, to prevent it from serving as a greenwash for unsustainable behavior.

Islands and sustainability

Island states and territories face distinct challenges when it comes to sustainable development. Some of these challenges arise directly out of characteristics of island geography, while others can be seen as psychological responses to ideas concerning islandness.

Over the past decades, researchers have gained greater understanding of the ways in which island states and territories may be affected by their island geography. As Baker (1992, pp. 6–7) recognizes, the relationships between smallness, islandness, and poor economic and administrative performance are frequently asserted but often misleading: for although the empirical evidence suggests that some small islands are more successful while others are less successful, “a litany of perceived scale-related economic disadvantages [head] almost every paper about small states [...]. These problems customarily include absence of scale economies, vulnerability to fluctuations in the world market due to their ‘openness’; frequent remoteness; limited domestic resource base and market; and high levels of emigration.” In the intervening years, it has become increasingly clear that these disadvantages are real but also that they are only part of the story.

Connell (2018), writing in the context of island sustainability initiatives, finds that ‘sustainable development’ “is a much overworked phrase, used in a wide variety of contexts as a means of legitimizing a plan or practice and an ideology, rather than as a strategic, analytical or explanatory device.” When discussing how islands can develop sustainably, it is necessary to question not just what ‘sustainability’ means but also whether and why ‘sustainability’ should mean anything different for island places than it does for non-island places. As Kelman (2019) notes, “Islands have long been subjected to promoting what islanders and non-islanders think an island should be and how islanders should act regarding sustainability.” That is, certain approaches to coping with environmental, economic, political, and social challenges on islands are themselves tinged by a homogenizing tendency, where certain sorts of actions are deemed as appropriate for islands in a general sense, despite the vast diversity of island environments and societies around the world.

Thus, researchers find that standardized narratives and strategies are applied for islander adaptation to climate change even though such narratives and strategies might not fit anyone's experiences and desires (Robinson, 2020; Baldacchino, 2018; Beyerl, Mieg, & Weber, 2018; Perumal, 2018). Similarly, researchers find island governments being advised to pursue standardized or oversimplified economic development policies that build upon island stereotypes rather than island realities and/or that have not been adapted to local circumstances and scales (Pugh, 2017; Grydehøj, 2018; Thomas, Moore, & Edwards, 2018). Conceptions of island vulnerabilities can be illusory or deceptive (Kelman, 2020), but so too can island advantages, with the apparent benefits of using islands as testbeds for or exemplars

of sustainability and sustainable development solutions proving problematic upon close inspection (Grydehøj & Kelman, 2017; Chandler & Pugh, 2020). In the words of Hong (2020, p. 51), “Mainland society’s enclaving tendencies with regard to islands betray a desire to escape its own reality by constructing a utopia that is both away and accessible.” The ideal of the pure, pristine island paradise is in fact unachievable (Krieg, 2018), and pursuit of this ideal does not necessarily do islanders any favors. When ideas regarding environmental sustainability are conceptualized externally and then imposed on island communities, without taking account of existing power structures and sociotechnical systems, the results are often disappointing for everyone (Grydehøj & Nurdin, 2016).

As a result, it is important that those developing policies to promote the sustainable development of island states and territories both attend to the genuine potentials and constraints associated with island geography and ensure that they are addressing locally felt needs in locally appropriate ways.

Materials and methods

This paper undertakes a qualitative analysis of the overarching philosophies of China’s BRI and MSR projects as well as the specific Indian Ocean island-focused initiatives that have formed part of the MSR. The aim is to ascertain the manner in which island sustainability is conceived by and pursued within the MSR framework.

The authors undertook an unsystematic review of key Chinese government policy documents as well as reports, newspaper articles, and online sources regarding transnational collaborations involving sustainability and Indian Ocean island countries and territories within the MSR. We then analyzed these materials in light of the existing research literature on island development and the MSR. We use two brief case studies—Seychelles (an Indian Ocean island country) and Guangdong (a Chinese province)—in order to better understand how the MSR vision of sustainable development may play out in practice.

Philosophy behind the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road

The 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and the Silk Road Economic Belt combine to form the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was announced by China’s President Xi Jinping in 2013. From 2017, talk also began regarding an Ice Silk Road or Polar Silk Road, running through the Arctic. Although the BRI has come to encompass states and territories—including island states and territories—around the world, the Indian Ocean region is of particular relevance to our study, both because of its key role in the original formulation of the MSR and because of the prominence of island states and territories within it (including the island states of Comoros, Madagascar, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka as well as numerous subnational island jurisdictions, such as France’s Mayotte and La Réunion; India’s Andaman and Nicobar Islands; Tanzania’s Zanzibar; and Yemen’s Socotra).

China’s National Development and Reform Commission’s (NDRC, 2015) *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road* document sets forth a framework for the BRI as a whole, presenting it as “a systematic” project to “promote the connectivity of Asian, European and African continents and their adjacent seas, establish and strengthen partnerships among the countries along the Belt and

Road, set up all-dimensional, multi-tiered and composite connectivity networks, and realize diversified, independent, balanced and sustainable development in these countries.” The Chinese National Development and Reform Commission and the State Oceanic Administration (NDRC & SOA, 2017) subsequently issued a *Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative* document, which specifies that “China advocates the Silk Road Spirit—‘peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit’, and exerts efforts to implement the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the field of coasts and oceans. China is willing to work closely with countries along the Road, engage in all-dimensional and broad-scoped maritime cooperation and build open and inclusive cooperation platforms, and establish a constructive and pragmatic Blue Partnership to forge a ‘blue engine’ for sustainable development.”

The Chinese government thus regards sustainability as a prerequisite for activities occurring within the MSR, seeking to “promote ecological progress in conducting investment and trade, increase cooperation in conserving eco-environment, protecting biodiversity, and tackling climate change, and join hands to make the Silk Road an environment-friendly one” (NDRC & SOA, 2017). Emphasis is placed on ‘green development’:

Ensuring the health of the ocean contributes to improving human well-being for present and future generations. China proposes that countries along the Road jointly undertake marine ecological conservation and provide high quality marine ecological services, thus safeguarding global marine ecological security. Safeguarding marine ecosystem health and biodiversity. Pragmatic cooperation will be strengthened to protect and restore the marine ecosystems and to conserve rare and endangered species. Mechanisms for long-term cooperation will be promoted and cross-border marine ecological corridors built. Efforts will be undertaken to jointly monitor, evaluate, preserve and restore the health of mangroves, sea-grass beds, coral reefs, island ecosystems and coastal wetlands. (NDRC & SOA, 2017).

These plans are complemented by efforts to strengthen:

cooperation in addressing climate change. Demonstration projects for recycling and low carbon development in maritime sectors will be encouraged. China is willing to support small island states in adapting to climate change, and to provide technical assistance in response to marine disasters, sea level rise, coastal erosion and marine ecosystem deterioration. Support will also be provided to the countries along the Road in conducting island and coastal surveys and assessments (NDRC & SOA, 2017).

It is significant that environmental actions within the MSR are presented as pathways to economic growth and ‘ocean-based prosperity’:

Promoting development and eradicating poverty are the common aspirations of the people along the Road. Countries along the Road are encouraged to give full play to their comparative advantages in sustainably utilizing marine resources, enhancing interconnectivity and promoting the blue economy for a shared future” (NDRC & SOA, 2017).

Such an approach is important, not because all environmental values must be conceptualized as ‘ecosystem services’ (Wu et al, 2020; Zhang & Xiao, 2020) but because efforts at specifically *islanded* environmental protection frequently prioritize what Grydehøj and Kelman (2017) refer to as ‘conspicuous sustainability’, focusing on delivering particularly visible or communicable sustainability results. Besides placing island states and territories at risk of falling into an ‘eco-island trap’ (Grydehøj & Kelman, 2017), these processes have the potential of devaluing less showy but perhaps more sustainable initiatives that can contribute to long-term environmental protection and economic growth (Grydehøj & Kelman, 2016).

The Chinese government’s vision of sustainable development within the MSR is, in contrast, a specifically human-centered vision of shared interests. The wider BRI’s conceptualization of “a community of common destiny” (Zeng, 2016) is furthermore a vision that transcends national borders (thereby avoiding the pitfalls of eco-island exemplarism) without losing sight of the actual islanders whose lives and livelihoods are at stake. This is neither about casting islanders as doomed victims of modernity (Farbotko, 2010; Chandler & Pugh, 2020) nor about empowering islanders to compete against one another.

The MSR’s vision of mutually beneficial sustainable development, with a special emphasis on Indian Ocean islands, is thus quite radical. How though has this movement toward sustainable development worked in practice?

Actions toward Indian Ocean island sustainable development within the MSR

Recognizing both that countries within the MSR have shared interests and that island states and territories possess special needs, the Chinese government has engaged in a large number of activities targeting development in Indian Ocean island states and territories. Activities aimed at economic development have included Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) regarding BRI or MSR participation with Madagascar (2017), the Maldives (2017), and Comoros (2019) as well as free trade agreements with the Maldives (2017) and Mauritius (2019). In 2017, the government of China entered into an investment promotion framework agreement with Sri Lanka, followed by more specific joint development and investment plans, and the China Development Bank signed financing cooperation agreements on infrastructure projects. In the same year, China entered into bilateral cooperation agreements with Madagascar concerning infrastructure and the economy as well as with the Maldives concerning such areas as the economy, technology, human resources development, oceans, environment, healthcare, and finance. In 2018, the governments of China and Comoros signed a Concessional Loan Framework agreement, aimed primarily at modernizing Comoros’ fixed and mobile network coverage.

The Chinese government has also promoted environmental sustainability. Efforts in this direction have included a 2014 Memorandum of Understanding on Complimentary Supplies for Addressing Climate Change, signed alongside China, Benin, Burundi, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Grenada, Madagascar, Maldives, Nigeria, and Samoa. This served as a framework for Chinese donations of energy-efficient technologies. China has in addition hosted nine sessions of ministerial workshops on development of marine management, marine technologies, and the Blue Economy among MSR countries. In 2019, China, Sri Lanka, and Ethiopia began engaging in “a trilateral South-South cooperation” focused on “enhancing access to renewable energy technologies within the global commitment to achieve the

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [and promoting] sustainable energy solutions by focusing on demonstrating the applicability of biogas and solar photovoltaic technologies for communities in Ethiopia and Sri Lanka” (United Nations Development Program, 2019). In recent years, China and Sri Lanka have likewise entered into collaborative endeavors to understand, prevent, and adapt to coastal erosion. This is within the wider context of the China–Sri Lanka Joint Commission on Ocean Cooperation, which first convened in Beijing in 2013 and has discussed the creation of marine research institutions, a long-term marine management and cooperation program, funding for Sri Lankan researchers to study in China as part of the Ocean Scholarship Program, and many other issues.

China’s environmental cooperation with the Maldives has included work on enhancing seawater desalinization capabilities and research into coastal environmental and ecological processes. Significantly, Chinese businesses and the Asian Development Bank have been contributing to renewable energy hybrid power plants in various atolls in the Maldives, helping to address the archipelago’s energy insecurity.

Case study: Seychelles

In order to gain a better understanding of how China’s vision for the MSR plays out in practice, we will briefly discuss activities occurring within this framework involving Seychelles, a small island state that has in recent years deepened its engagement with China. Seychelles is the smallest Indian Ocean island country by both land area (459 km²) and population (around 97,000). Like many small island territories, Seychelles’ economy is highly dependent on both tourism (Giampiccoli, Mtapuri, & Nauright, 2020) and fishing (Robinson, 2019), two industries that are sensitive to environmental degradation. Seychelles is furthermore affected by many of the capacity-related issues and the economic openness commonly associated with small population and small economic size (Thompson, Wissink, & Siwisa, 2019; Podhorodecka, 2018). In the words of Eriksen (2020, p. 14), “There is considerable awareness of the vulnerability entailed by dependence on continuous interaction with the outside world.”

The Seychelles government has viewed the Blue Economy and marine protection as key policy priorities, yet local stakeholders have struggled to see value in environmental conservation, wishing to see it more clearly linked up with sustainable development in practice (Schutter & Hicks, 2019). It is in this context that China’s MSR philosophy has had the potential to not just bolster Seychelles’ capacities within the Blue Economy but also to highlight the economic value of engaging with this kind of sustainable development vision.

In 2018, China’s Ministry of Natural Resources and Seychelles’ Ministry of Environment, Energy and Climate Change signed a Memorandum of Understanding to construct platforms for marine cooperation, research, and Blue Economy development, with a shared understanding of the need for marine ecological protection. Multiple bilateral trade agreements between the two countries were signed in 2019 (Laurence, 2019; Karapetyan, 2019, December 19). China and Seychelles have, moreover, engaged in specific collaborative projects. In December 2019, it was announced that the Chinese government had donated US\$200,000 to the Seychelles government for purchasing, redeveloping, expanding, and greening the site of the Bazar Labrin market (Karapetyan, 2020, February 5), a marketplace that is both culturally significant and provides employment and opportunities for sale of local products. China is furthermore providing US\$21.4 million in funding for educational projects, including the construction of a new technical and vocational school (Karapetyan, 2019, December 19).

Perhaps the most prominent field of activity related to sustainable development along the MSR is Chinese and Seychellois scientific collaboration. The establishment of a Chinese-funded international science center in Seychelles has been proposed (Karapetyan, 2019, December 19). This idea is in line with the gradual ramping up of marine science research visits and exchanges that have linked oceanographic institutions in China and Seychelles. China's State Oceanic Administration has likewise supported individuals from Seychelles studying marine science in China (Seychelles Nation, 2017).

Case study: Guangdong Province

While many cities and provinces in China have engaged with the BRI policy framework, it is the southern province of Guangdong that has played the most crucial role in the MSR, a role that is in some senses a continuation of Guangdong's longstanding importance for Chinese trade and economic reform. Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong, was for many centuries the largest port in China, and the ancient sea route connecting Guangzhou and the Persian Gulf via the South China Sea and Indian Ocean was until the period of European expansion in the 1400s the longest and most productive maritime trade route in the world (Xie, Zhu, & Grydehøj, 2020).

Although it is easy to conceptualize the MSR as a system established by China's national government and extended out toward other states and territories, it is important to recognize that MSR-related activities in China are inevitably carried out by locally rooted networks and institutions. There are many reasons for subnational governments to seek to engage in the MSR (Yoshikawa, 2016). Guangdong Province provides vital human and organizational links with Indian Ocean island countries, grounded in Guangdong's long history of engagement with the Indian Ocean region. It is indicative of such links that, in 2012, Sri Lanka established a consulate general in Guangzhou. Similarly, China's status as the largest trading partner of Mauritius is undergirded by this island state's sizable 'overseas Chinese' community, which was established predominantly by immigrants from the Guangdong town of Meizhou. Meizhou and Foshan in Guangdong continue to maintain close links with communities in Mauritius and have since entered into sister city partnerships with towns in Mauritius. The same is true for the Seychelles and La Réunion (a French department), which both have prominent Chinese communities with origins in Meizhou, Foshan, and Guangdong more generally, who have played important roles in the local economies and in creating economic and cultural links between Guangdong and Indian Ocean islands.

If the MSR is to contribute to sustainable development, it cannot simply focus on environmental protection or human wellbeing in the overseas states and territories with which China is engaging. The conceptualization of shared interests in sustainable development implies that China must develop in a sustainable manner as well. Guangdong's strongly peninsular, insular, and riverine geography have over recent decades encouraged the province's further development as a leader in industrial production, knowledge industries, and port services, reflecting efforts to shift away from highly polluting industries that impact local, national, regional, and global environmental and public health. The province now hosts various pilot free trade zones (Nansha in Guangzhou Qianhai, Shekou in Shenzhen, and Hengqin in Zhuhai) and is increasingly linking up with China's two special administrative regions, Hong Kong and Macao. The formalization of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area as a unit of governance is itself part of the effort to strengthen the region's

role in the MSR, and the annual Guangdong 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road International Expo, which has run since 2014, has become an important international platform for promoting cooperation between Guangdong and MSR countries. MSR-facilitated connections between China and Indian Ocean island countries thus frequently run through or are developed with actors in Guangdong.

With the MSR, Guangdong has the opportunity to place environmental protection initiatives within a recognized policy framework and to position itself as a leader in collaborative sustainable development grounded in shared interests (Zhang & Bai, 2018). Foreign trade, especially in low value-added products, is strongly associated with pollution, but the existence of cross-border or overseas environmental regulations could prevent an environmental race to the bottom (Mao & He, 2018).

Discussion

Both the MSR's overarching objectives and the specific ways in which the MSR has been deployed in connection with Indian Ocean island countries and territories are indicative of the complexities involved in coordinating sustainable development across countries and regions.

The MSR is a policy umbrella under which different parties can place a variety of economic initiatives. As a result, the bilateral and multilateral agreements made between states and territories and explicitly linked to the MSR represent just a small part of the MSR's real and potential impact. For example, useful though Seychelles may find Chinese economic support and bilateral trade agreements, such government-to-government collaboration ultimately serves to lay the groundwork for further, high-impact activities. Chinese support for marine science research in Seychelles is less significant than what ends up being done by the marine scientists and with the research that they produce, and fair trade between Seychelles and China is less significant than the manner in which the traded products are produced and in which the costs and benefits of this trade are distributed within the Seychellois and Chinese societies.

Multinational business actors, which are at the core of the BRI, may not be inclined to fundamentally shift to more sustainable practices just because they find themselves operating within an MSR framework (Solmecke, 2016). Indeed, multinational business actors may not be particularly inclined to even work toward shared national interests. It remains unclear to what extent the Chinese government can enforce sustainability and environmental cooperation from above (Dong et al, 2015) when dealing with "transborder infrastructure development projects" in countries that feel the need to prioritize immediate social and economic development over longer-term environmental goods (Tracy et al, 2017). It is thus that some researchers have called for formalized assessments of the MSR's sustainability, for instance as Strategic Environmental and Social Assessments (Ascensão et al, 2018). This requires a means of determining which activities undertaken in MSR states and territories are actually attributable to the MSR *per se*, a difficult task given that interactions between the various island communities in the MSR were interacting with one another island prior to the conceptualization of the BRI and MSR.

Sustainable development along the MSR will no doubt prove challenging. Lofty ideals count for little if they do not bear results and may actually be damaging if they are used to greenwash or provide cover for harmful activities. What the MSR offers is a policy framework

for prioritizing a holistic vision of sustainability, taking into account shared needs and interests. Part of what has made the BRI in general attractive to island states and territories is precisely that it has offered a vision of development that is not premised upon island societies making sacrifices or undertaking economic reforms determined by great powers and that it does not require island societies to commit to being part of someone else's sphere of influence (Davis, Munger, & Legacy, 2020). The fact that the Indian Ocean region is already a site of intense transnational exchange—of products, of labor, of capital, of tourism, of animal life, of pollution—but that such exchange is not always managed in a joined up manner (Krieg, 2020; Thompson, Wissink, & Siwisa, 2019; Dunlop, Dunlop, & Brown, 2020) heightens the desirability of explicitly transnational planning processes. The MSR offers the possibility for different island countries and territories to give voice to their distinctive needs, avoiding the kinds of standardized, one-size-fits all approaches that have all too often been applied to island contexts.

The current economic paradigm fosters inequality across nations and leads to an environmental race to the bottom. The MSR's discourse of shared interests and shared stakes is not guaranteed to alter this, but it does at least hold out the possibility of changing mindsets and priorities regarding what must be sacrificed in the name of economic development as well as changing opportunities for island countries and territories that seek sustainable development on terms that are appropriate to their needs.

This means that the MSR framework needs to be undergirded by evaluative processes to ensure that the project is indeed achieving its economic, environmental, and social sustainability goals. These goals may be long-term: immediate victories in highly visible or 'conspicuous' sustainability (Grydehøj & Kelman, 2017) may be illusory, may be unsustainable, and may come at the cost of the actual island societies who need to live with the consequences. The long-term and widely scoped nature of the MSR project complicates assessment and evaluation but does not make it impossible. Future research is needed to develop means of determining and reinforcing successes in the MSR's movement toward a form of sustainability that benefits all peoples along this maritime passage.

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