



Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet
Admiral Scott H. Swift
U.S. Naval War College
China Maritime Studies Institute
Workshop on China's Silk Road Institute
November 3, 2016
As prepared for delivery

I'd like to thank Peter Dutton, Ambassador Cloud, the Naval War College and China Maritime Studies Institute for hosting this workshop and for offering me an opportunity to participate in what I am sure will be a lively, candid and productive dialogue. While I wish I could stay for the panels today and tomorrow, I'm heading to the mainland immediately after our Q&A. Regretfully this means our time will be less than I would want so I'll keep my remarks brief, then look forward to your questions and comments.

I don't want to get too far ahead of the panels, but as I approach One Belt, One Road from a naval perspective, I have many of the same basic questions already on the workshop's agenda. What is this initiative and who is it for? What does it mean for China, regional countries including the United States - and I would add - the naval forces under their command? What resources are needed to make it happen and what are the intended and unintended consequences for the actors involved? Why is it relevant now? I am pleased that key members of my staff will be on hand to participate as this workshop explores those questions. I'll look forward to hearing their thoughts when I return.

Looking back over the past 70 years, I share a widely-held view that the Indo-Asia-Pacific region achieved its unprecedented levels of prosperity in large part by upholding the international rules-based system and principled security network that supports it. On one hand, inclusive, multilateral initiatives that promote cooperation, develop public goods and guarantee free and open access have already enriched many regional countries – including the United States and China I should add – and there is always room for more growth. This is especially true in Central Asia, which is among the world's least-developed, least-connected regions in terms of infrastructure, trade and investment. According to the Asian Development Bank, there is an 800 billion dollar gap between supply and demand for infrastructure alone. On the other hand, exclusive, self-serving initiatives that coerce allegiance, nationalize public goods and control access have also existed, but with the opposite effect.

Certainly official Chinese rhetoric about One Belt, One Road matches the former approach. Regardless of the motivation, the stated intent to help develop and connect more regional countries is laudable; particularly given the region's unfunded infrastructure gap. Many observers have noted that the "Belt" could help reroute China's over-capacity abroad, open investment for state-owned enterprises burdened by non-performing loans, and develop China's western provinces. Others have linked Chinese investment in Indian Ocean ports like Djibouti, Colombo, Chittagong and Malacca as nascent examples of the Maritime Silk Road.

But there aren't many tangible signs of One Belt, One Road yet on land, or at sea for that matter. Like the early stages of economic reform and opening that helped China gain access to the many benefits of the international system in the 1980s, there seems to be an element of Deng Xiaoping's "crossing the river by feeling the stones" here as well. The key difference with another famous statement from Deng Xiaoping, "to keep a low profile abroad," is that One Belt, One Road may reflect a more activist Chinese foreign policy, which has obvious relevance for the broader Indo-Asia-Pacific region both on land and at sea.

I say obvious because it's my view that many of the maritime challenges nations and their naval forces face today – which I view broadly as a rising arc of regional angst and diminished transparency – have land-based origins that manifest as frictions at sea. These frictions may be political or economic initially, but when they reach major shipping ports and international sea lines of communication, the strategic and security implications become undeniable.

Unfortunately, once at sea, these land based frictions are often forgotten, and when manifest at sea, suffer from the same sea blindness that obscures the threat of a gathering storm at sea from those ashore who often are most at risk from its effects. That is why from a naval perspective, our most pressing maritime security challenge today is to prevent those land-based frictions from flashing seaward, and in turn, to prevent the resultant triggered sea-based frictions from spiraling landward.

Now, I do not mean to suggest that we should view One Belt, One Road or any regional initiative in zero sum terms. There is a lot of "back to the future" talk lately about the resurgence of great power rivalries, but there is no need for one nation's Malacca Dilemma to become another's Thucydides Trap. Maritime economies are also increasingly intertwined globally, especially in the Indo-Asia-Pacific, and Cold War economic bifurcation is much more difficult to imagine today.

Provided host nations also reap the potential benefits, One Belt, One Road could complement other multilateral initiatives like the U.S.-led New Silk Road and the Central Asia-South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project. Though the regional angst I mentioned before is real, invocations of inevitable, tragic conflict ignore political responsibilities as well as the obligation of naval forces to manage frictions at sea even when the sources of those frictions come from irresolution of disputes on land.

As my State Department colleague Danny Russel has said in the context of other regional issues, this is about more than concrete and steel on land or ports and hulls on the water, it's about the people and the rules we want to govern our shared neighborhood in the Indo-Asia-Pacific. I think we already have an excellent rule-set that has proven itself for the past 70 years. It has built in mechanisms to adapt to the changing international environment and there is always room for more multilateral initiatives that benefit counties and peoples who have yet to reap the benefits of globalization and technology.

With that, I look forward to your questions and comments.