

# Geopolitics of the Belt and Road Initiative: Maritime Imperatives for India

by Lalit Kapur

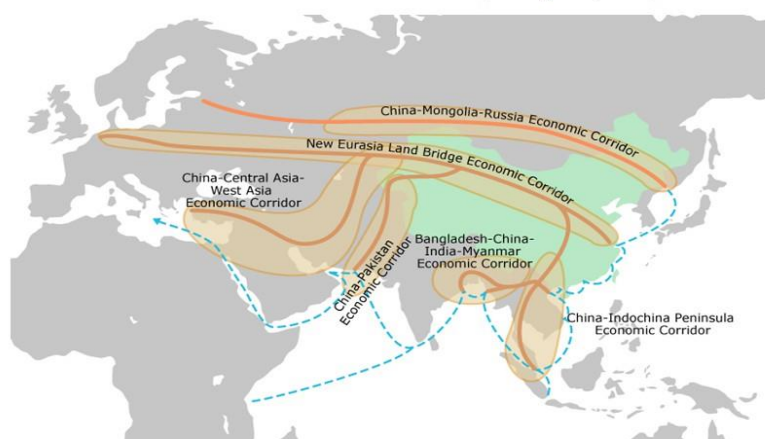
*Is the Belt and Road Initiative designed to promote economic rejuvenation or Chinese hegemony?*



During his keynote address at Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation on May 14, 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping painted a rosy picture of what he described as “the project of the century”<sup>1</sup>. The ancient silk routes, as per his

speech, had embodied “the spirit of peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit”<sup>2</sup>, becoming a great heritage of human civilisation. The pioneers who trod their paths, including Zhang Qian, Zu Huan, Marco Polo and Zheng He “won their place in history not as conquerors with warships, guns or swords”. Rather, they were “remembered as friendly emissaries leading camel caravans and sailing treasure-loaded ships”<sup>3</sup>. He went on to talk of the BRI vision aiming to create enhanced policy, infrastructure, trade, finance, and people-to-people connectivity; of building the Belt and Road into a road for peace, fostering the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security, with respect for the sovereignty, dignity and territorial integrity, development paths, social systems, core interests and major concerns of each nation involved<sup>4</sup>.

The Belt and Road Initiative: Six Economic Corridors Spanning Asia, Europe and Africa



Source: <http://china-trade-research.hktdc.com/business-news/article/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative/obor/en/1/1X000000/1X0A36B7.htm>

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- Commodore Lalit Kapur (Retd.), Senior Fellow, Delhi Policy Group

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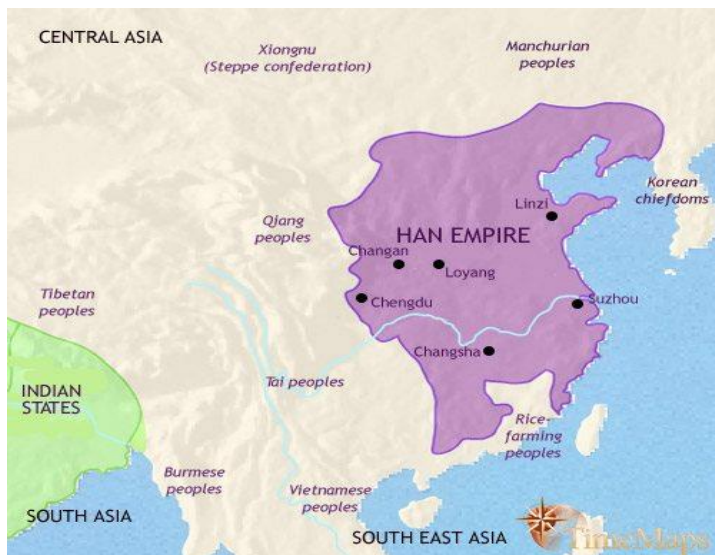
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**Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh**  
Director General

At first sight, the BRI vision certainly appears very attractive. The transcontinental part, the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB)<sup>5</sup>, comprises six rail road, air and/or pipeline corridors connecting all of Eurasia. Two East-West corridors have been projected: the China Mongolia Russia Economic Corridor; and the New Eurasian Land Bridge, going through Kazakhstan, Southern Russia, Belarus and Poland. Four ‘feeder’ corridors will link Asia to the New Eurasian Continental Bridge: the China Central Asia West Asia Economic Corridor, connecting Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran and Turkey; the China Pakistan Economic Corridor; the China Indo China Economic Corridor; and connected to it, the Bangladesh China India Myanmar Economic Corridor. The Maritime Silk Road (MSR) is the oceanic face of this gigantic project, envisaging a network of ports and associated coastal infrastructure emanating from China’s Pacific Coast and stretching through Indo-China and Malacca across South East Asia, the Southern Pacific, South Asia, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, East Africa and the Mediterranean before going on to Piraeus, Venice and Rotterdam. There can be little doubt that the connectivity to be created will increase trade, particularly China’s trade, with Europe, Asia and Africa, while also connecting Southern Pacific island nations through connectivity created and controlled by China.



China 200 BC, Pre Zhang Qian.

Source: <https://www.timemaps.com/history/china-200bc/>

But, as the history of Asia proves, control over such connectivity can have long lasting geopolitical and military consequences. The “friendly emissaries” named by Xi Jinping led to an expansion of the Chinese Empire, from its founding by the Xia Dynasty in a relatively small area of what now constitutes the Shando-Henan provinces of China, to its peak of over 13 million Km<sup>2</sup> under the Qing Dynasty. Zhang Qian was the first envoy from the second century BC Han court to what is now

Central Asia. His travels led to the Chinese colonisation and conquest of what is now known as Xinjiang, embodying neither peace nor cooperation, neither openness nor

inclusiveness. Zheng He was the eunuch Admiral from the court of the Ming Dynasty’s Yongle Emperor (who deposed his nephew to seize the throne). By some accounts, Zheng He’s voyages were primarily to search for the absconding nephew, making it the largest manhunt ever! The voyages were also intended to establish Chinese presence and impose imperial control over Indian Ocean trade while extracting tribute from kingdoms en route: Zheng He’s fleet during his first voyage, to Champa, Java, Malacca, Ceylon, Quilon and Calicut, carried more than 27,000 troops (no doubt for peaceful purposes) and reportedly brought envoys from Kingdoms en route, including the King of Quilon, to pay tribute to the Yongle Emperor. It preceded Vasco da Gama’s arrival in the Indian Ocean by over 90 years. But

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for subsequent Ming Emperors turning away from the sea to deal with a Mongol invasion (which would lead to fortification of the Great Wall) and the fourth and final Chinese occupation of Vietnam, the history of the Indian Ocean might have been one of Chinese colonisation, instead of European!



China 30 BC, post Zhang Qian.

Source: <https://www.timemaps.com/history/china-30bc/>

It is not just connectivity established by China that merits concern. As documented by macroeconomic historian Angus Maddison, India had the largest GDP in the world till around 1500 AD, with China being its closest competitor (the two countries between them accounted for more than 50% of world GDP till nearly 1700)<sup>7</sup>. During these times, Western Europe and the Middle East between them accounted for only about 20% of world GDP. Interaction and trade between India and Europe was known from the earliest days of history. Indian troops had fought under the Persian banner on Greek soil as far back as during the Battles of Thermopylae and Salamis, in 480 BC, as documented by historian, administrator and diplomat KM Panikkar<sup>8</sup>. A flourishing trade linked the Roman Empire of that time with India, “the land of desire”, using ships based in Egypt. From the time of Saladdin, however, Islam based first in Egypt and later in Constantinople not only became a barrier between Asia and Europe, but also spread eastward using established trade routes, through military conquest. More than two centuries of effort and numerous crusades were unable to penetrate this barrier. The only known route to obtain pepper, one of the biggest motivating factors of history, had to cross through Arab territory before it could reach markets in Europe. The silks and porcelain of China also lay across the Islamic barrier. Now merchants from Venice had established their influence in Cairo and were thus able to control this lucrative trade for the rest of Europe. This motivated their rivals in Genoa to find an alternate route to India and break the Venetian monopoly over trade with South and South East Asia. The Genoan merchants had strong influence in the courts of Spain and Portugal and were able to persuade these courts to sponsor a search for a route to the Indies, commencing in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It is their continued effort that was to culminate in Christopher Columbus going West and discovering the Americas in 1492 (he was actually aiming for Japan); while Vasco da Gama built on the effort of Bartholomew Diaz (who first rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1488) and discovered the sea route to India in 1498.

Economic factors may thus have spurred the European search for connectivity with India and the Indian Ocean littoral, but geopolitics took over almost immediately thereafter. One of its first expressions was the Papal Bull Inter Caetera, which granted all newly discovered lands west of the Azores to Spain and East of them to Portugal. This would result in the Treaty of Tordesillas.

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Other European powers, however, questioned the Pope’s authority to gift sovereignty over the vast lands discovered to Spain or Portugal. They would send out their own mariners and discover the same routes. Attempts to monopolise and control these routes and the trade they carried resulted in the Portuguese eventually being supplanted by the Dutch, then the French and the British. They would eventually result in the colonisation of almost all of Africa and Asia, a geopolitical outcome India’s continentally minded Mughal rulers of the time, who in any case did not understand the significance of the sea, could not envisage.

History thus teaches us that control of connectivity leads to colonisation. In so far as the BRI is concerned, Europe retains control over connectivity passing through its territory: after all, all the BRI does is link into existing infrastructure. It is the new infrastructure being created, the infrastructure being built with Chinese funds, over which opaque and perhaps extortionist financial and contractual terms enable China to retain complete control that is a concern. For the present, this includes CPEC and the MSR.

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It is not necessary that history is repeating itself. China’s current rulers may have entirely benevolent considerations, as claimed by Xi Jinping, including as recently as in China’s June 20, 2017 White Paper on the MSR. The paper talks of shelving differences and

building consensus and calls for efforts to uphold the existing international ocean order and respecting diversified concepts of ocean development in the countries along the MSR. In the section on Principles, it states, “Concerns of all parties involved will be accommodated, differences bridged, common ground sought and consensus achieved”. For the maritime domain, the White Paper states, “China will shoulder its due international obligations, participate in bilateral and multilateral maritime navigation security and crisis control mechanisms, and work with all parties to combat non-traditional security issues such as crimes on the sea”<sup>9</sup>. The words and language are beguilingly seductive, but the concern is about the sincerity underlying them, as also the risk of under-estimating or



ignoring the geopolitical potential that implementation of the BRI vision will provide China.

Let us now turn to this geopolitical potential. In 1890, Alfred Thayer Mahan published his “The Influence of Sea Power upon History: 1660-1783”, considered by many as the most influential book ever written on naval strategy. In an era when American industrial production and per capita income had exceeded that of all other nations and America was emerging as the world’s strongest economy, the book traced how Britain had become a global power through control of the seas. It turned the attentions of not just America, but also many other developed nations, to opportunities for global domination conferred by sea power. Mahan’s precepts have received widespread attention in the PLA Navy, including from Liu Huaqing, known as the Chinese Mahan and the Father of the Modern Chinese Navy. The unprecedented growth of the PLA Navy is visible for all to see, and while operational experience might be lacking, this can be acquired over time. This navy offers potential for control over Asia’s seas, particularly if it can drive out American power from the Western Hemisphere. China’s military strategy white paper of 2015 clearly identifies the maritime domain as a priority area<sup>10</sup> and tasks the PLA Navy to build up a blue water navy capable of blue water operations. The Chinese acquisition of aircraft carriers (Liaoning is operational, Shandong is being built and there is talk about more in the pipeline, including 110,000 ton nuclear powered super-carriers bigger than anything the United States has planned) has to be seen in this light. The stepping stones for China exercising control over the sea spaces of the Eastern Hemisphere are coming into view.

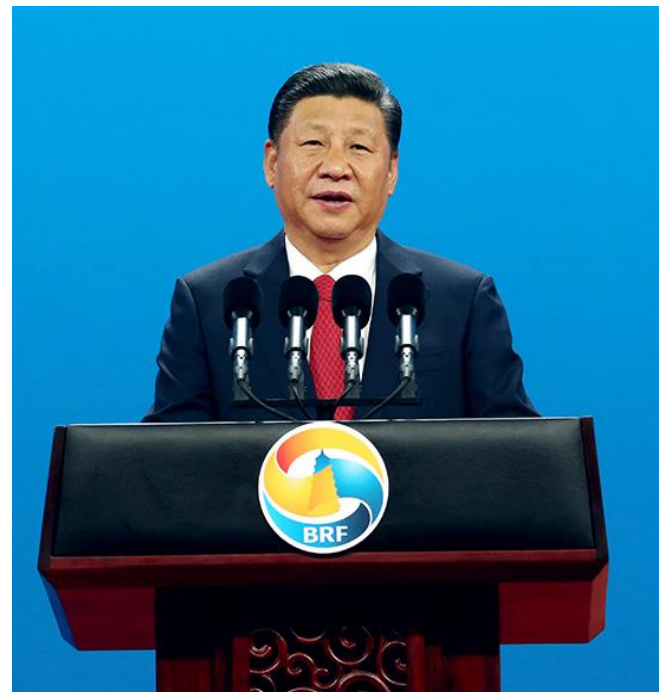
Fourteen years after Mahan’s seminal work appeared, Halford Mackinder published his globally acclaimed “The Geographical Pivot of History”. Mackinder postulated that control of the Eurasian heartland could not be achieved by sea power: it necessitated land power, with railroads giving the ability to move not just soldiers, but the immense logistical support they required for modern war. Control of this heartland and the immense resources it contained would, in his view, inevitably lead to control of the world island, comprising the linked continents of Europe, Asia and Africa. Control over the world island would in turn result in control of the world. The essay formed the basis of what has been described as American strategic policy since World War II: to prevent the domination of the ‘Eurasian heartland’ by a single power. The SREB, however, gives China de facto financial control over the heartland<sup>11</sup>.

In the 1940’s, Nicholas Spykman propounded his ‘Rimland Theory’, combining the visions of Mahan and Mackinder.

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Spykman postulated that it was the ‘Rimland’, i.e. the coastal belt around Eurasia that was the key to global control, because of its demographic weight, natural resources and industrial development. China has clearly imbibed the lessons of Mahan, Mackinder and Spykman, combining a bid for control of the heartland of Eurasia through control over connectivity, with

control over the sea spaces (again through controlling connectivity) and over the Rimland, starting with South East Asia and Pakistan, and gradually extending to cover the entire coastal belt of Eurasia and Africa. It will thus inevitably run up against the American strategy (not allowing Eurasia to be dominated by a single power), unless America chooses to retreat across the Pacific into the Western Hemisphere. India, Japan and South Korea are perhaps the only Rimland powers that stand in the way of China establishing a new tributary system, in which the World Island pays tribute to its Chinese overlords.



President Xi Jinping at the Belt and Road Forum.

Source:

[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/beltandroadinitiative/2017-05/14/content\\_29337969.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/beltandroadinitiative/2017-05/14/content_29337969.htm)

Xi Jinping's 'China Dream', of building a moderately prosperous society by 2021, and of transforming China into a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic and harmonious by 2049, is too well known to bear repetition. Historically, China has considered itself the 'Middle Kingdom', between heaven and earth, superior to all other inhabitants of the planet. Xi Jinping may paint a picture of a benevolent China, using only peaceful means to win the hearts and minds of people at home or abroad, the vision of *Tianxia*<sup>12</sup>, but history tells us that China has never been known for being uniquely benevolent. Warfare has, in fact, been a constant in China.

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Kublai Khan expanded his empire to encompass Central Asia, Burma and Vietnam through military force, while the recent Qing Dynasty more than doubled its land holdings from around 6.5 million Km<sup>2</sup> during the Ming Dynasty to over 13.1 million Km<sup>2</sup> under its rule, using military power. The current Communist rulers have used military force extensively, to swallow Xinjiang and Tibet, against India in 1962, against Vietnam in 1979, and to suppress internal dissidence in the Tiananmen protests of 1989. The CPEC, passing through what India claims as its territory in Gilgit-Baltistan, does not showcase concerns of all parties involved being accommodated, differences bridged or common ground sought. Rather, it speaks of China riding rough shod over concerns of those it views as weaker powers, of creating new facts on ground that will enable it to manufacture a different history. Emerging China may be projected by some as a responsible member of international society, but there is strong reason to believe that China does not accept the existing rules based structure of that society and seeks to change it to suit itself.

To bring about this change, China has a history of using sources of power at its command to coerce others to do its will, rather than relying on accommodation, respect for the dignity and territorial integrity of those opposing it, and international law. It has mastered the arts of media and legal warfare, of using instruments such as the maritime militia, its fishing fleet and Coast Guard, to achieve geopolitical objectives. The ongoing Doklam standoff is but one example of this coercion; others include the massive construction and militarisation of the South China Sea islands, China's open threats to the Philippines in their dispute over the Scarborough Shoal, or embargoing export of rare earths to Japan after the 2010 Senkaku incident, where the Chinese fishing trawler *Minjinyu 5179* was found fishing in Japanese waters and chose to ram the intercepting Japanese Coast Guard ships rather than be taken into custody. The

Chinese culture believes in and respects strength far more than it has regard for international law or treaties.

It would thus be myopic to ignore history and place faith in the words of China's current leaders, instead of the ample evidence provided by its recent and historic actions. The BRI vision undoubtedly has great potential, provided it is implemented in a transparent manner and takes into account the needs of mutual security. It is this need for transparency and mutual security related to Chinese infrastructure initiatives that India has been projecting, without achieving the requisite results. With its historical predilections, China does not even acknowledge the need to respond.

India, for all its continental fixations, can never be a continental power because of its geography. The Himalayas and the Hindukush form an imposing barrier, no longer impenetrable, but a serious obstacle to projection of military power across them. While China has no doubt built some technologically extraordinary infrastructure enabling movement of large quantities of men and material across the Tibetan plateau, the fact is that this infrastructure can easily be interdicted if push comes to shove – and cannot easily be repaired or rebuilt. For China to project military power across Tibet, or even through POK, would be difficult. For

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India to do the same would not only be out of character, it would also be impossible. Thus, it is sufficient for India to build up requisite defences in the Himalayas to ensure Chinese power does not overwhelm it; aspiring to anything more would be pointless.

This is not, however, true for the sea. Geography dictates that India be a sea power, central to the Indian Ocean. It is not due to chance that India built up enormous wealth in the middle ages: its rich lands gave it an agricultural surplus, which permitted the development of skilled artisans whose work, along with agricultural products, could be traded through the seas with other deficient areas, bringing wealth into the

country. The continental fixation of the originally Central Asian Moghul rulers led to India surrendering its maritime heritage. It is this maritime heritage India has to understand if it is to become a regional power once again. One of the key ingredients for India to attain great power status is building the requisite maritime infrastructure, including a Navy that can ensure that no other nation can operate in the Indian Ocean without India's acquiescence or to the detriment of its security and strategic interests.

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But navies, and indeed maritime power, are built by political leaders and decision makers in the government, not by the Navy. They require continued (and not occasional) commitment and investment. The Indian Navy can at best advise the government, competing with the other services for resources. India's ruling elites, however, traditionally have little

knowledge of or interest in sea power and have so far been known for a rather short term outlook. It is disconcerting to see the so-called literati and even strategists pointing to China's relative lack of experience with sea power and belittling the threat China's growing navy poses. They forget that gaining this experience takes lesser time than building a potent, blue water force – and it is in the building of this force where China is visibly far ahead of India. This author, at least, believes that the biggest challenge the Indian Navy currently faces is the risk of sea blindness of the Government of India, including its bureaucratic apparatus. The numerous gaps in Indian maritime capability, notably in submarines, helicopters, MCM capability, ISR and MDA capability, sonars and others, are indeed cause for serious concern.



Gwadar | source:

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/02/08/asia-pacific/pakistan-military-blankets-area-as-china-port-construction-underway/#.WXWp89OGNsM>



Djibouti | Source:

<https://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/2015/05/13/china-planning-navy-base-in-djibouti/>

China has already come into the Indian Ocean in a big way, with bases under construction in Djibouti and Gwadar and unknown plans for Feydhoo Finolhu Island in the Maldives, leased to a Chinese company for 50 years for just \$6 million last year. India should not take false comfort in the hope that China's BRI vision, including the MSR, will turn out to be purely economically focused, without an underlying intent of Chinese domination of the Indian Ocean littoral. Simply put, India cannot count on misplaced conjecture to protect the nation in years to come, when all the signs point to the fact that the BRI and the MSR are about much more than economic initiatives driven by Chinese altruism, and India needs to prepare accordingly. Failing to learn from history can cost India dear in the decades ahead and diminish its capacity to emerge as a leading Asian and global power. Hopefully, India's aspirational leadership will recognise the dangers of such complacency and rise to this challenge.

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**Endnotes:**

- <sup>1</sup> “Work Together to Build the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road”, Full Text of President Xi Jinping’s Keynote Speech , China Daily, May 14 2017
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid
- <sup>5</sup> Details of corridors sourced from “The Belt and Road Initiative”, HKTDC Research, <http://china-trade-research.hktdc.com/business-news/article/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative/obor/en/1/1X000000/1X0A36B7.htm>
- <sup>6</sup> “The Archeological Researches into Zheng He’s Treasure Ships”, R Adm Zheng Ming (Retd), sourced from <https://web.archive.org/web/20080827195453/http://www.travel-silkroad.com/english/marine/ZhengHe.htm>
- <sup>7</sup> “History of the Indian Economy”, sourced from <http://cgijeddah.mkcl.org/WebFiles/History-of-Indian-Economy.pdf> See also “India: How a Rich Nation Became Poor and Will be Rich Again”, Gurcharan Das, <https://gurcharandas.org/rich-nation-poor>
- <sup>8</sup> “Asia and Western Dominance”, KM Panikkar, Somaiya Publications Pvt Ltd, 1999,
- <sup>9</sup> “Full Text: Vision for Maritime Cooperation Under the Belt and Road Initiative”, June 20, 2017; sourced from [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/20/c\\_136380414.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/20/c_136380414.htm)
- <sup>10</sup> For an overview of the maritime aspects of this paper, see “Of Strategies and Stratagems”, Cmde Lalit Kapur, Force magazine, July 2015
- <sup>11</sup> For an overview of this strategy, see “The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives”, by Zbigniew Brzezinski. See also “Balancing Without Containment: An American Strategy for Managing China”, by Ashley Tellis.
- <sup>12</sup> “Rethinking Empire From a Chinese Concept ‘All Under Heaven’”, by T Zhao, published by Social Identities, Vol 12 No 1, January 2006, pp 29-41

**Delhi Policy Group**

Core 5A, First Floor, India Habitat Centre  
Lodhi Road, New Delhi 110003

Phone: +91 11 48202100

Website: [www.delhipolicygroup.org](http://www.delhipolicygroup.org)

Email: [dg@dpg.org.in](mailto:dg@dpg.org.in); [dgooffice@dpg.org.in](mailto:dgooffice@dpg.org.in)

**DPG POLICY NOTE**  
**Volume II, Issue 7**  
**July 2017**