

The India-China Conundrum: The Maritime Dimension

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Crystal-gazing in international relations is a hazardous occupation, and history is replete with instances where statesmen have blundered in statecraft, leading their countries to grief. In September 1938, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain loftily predicted, on return from Munich after his talks with Hitler; “I believe it is peace for our time.” Less than a year later, he was proved, not only a false-prophet, but utterly naïve, when Hitler remarked at the outbreak of war: “Our enemies are little worms. I saw them at Munich.”¹

Closer home, India’s post-independence leaders, nowhere as well-versed as Chamberlain in international relations, certainly misread the intentions of China’s Communist regime in 1949. Prime Minister Nehru also compounded his error of judgement by ignoring the few pragmatic voices that tried to raise an alarm. Home Minister Sardar Patel had written to Nehru, in November 1950, warning him that notwithstanding Indian Ambassador Panikkar’s “false sense of confidence”,

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1 “Conquest at Munich”, *The History Place*, 2001, <https://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/triumph/tr-munich.htm>.

China was indulging in duplicitous conduct vis-à-vis Tibet.² But Nehru chose to ignore this warning.

Those of us who grew up in the 1950s would recall frequent references to *Panchsheel* and the non-aligned movement which regularly peppered headlines and radio news. We often saw photographs of smiling Premiers Jawaharlal Nehru and Chou En Lai in newsreels and papers; and the famous slogan: “*Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai*” was enthusiastically adopted by the Indian public in good faith. In 1950 China invaded the independent state of Tibet and incorporated it as an autonomous republic. When India tamely accepted Chinese suzerainty over Tibet in 1951, few realized the implications of the elimination of a huge buffer state, bringing China right to our northern doorstep.

India’s humiliating military defeat at China’s hands in 1962, proved a historical watershed in many ways. For one, it shook the political leadership out of its complacent thought-process, which had assumed that the profession of non-violence and adoption of *Panchsheel* would render us immune to aggression. Responding to former President Radhakrishnan’s admonition about his “credulity” and “negligence”, vis-à-vis China, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had, ruefully, acknowledged, “We were getting out of touch with reality in the modern world and living in an artificial atmosphere of our own making.”³

This essay attempts to examine the rationale and motivation behind China’s long-term strategic objectives, with a focus on its grandiose maritime ambitions, and the threat they pose, in the hope that it will cast some light on the way ahead, for India to deal with this conundrum.

2 “Sardar Patel’s Letter to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru”, *Friends of Tibet*, November 7, 1950, <https://www.friendsoftibet.org/sardarpatel.html>.

3 G Parthasarathy, “Lessons from the 1962 debacle”, *The Hindu Businessline*, October 24, 2012, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/columns/g-parthasarathy/lessons-from-the-1962-debacle/article64598653.ece>.

THE INDIA-CHINA RELATIONSHIP

India's Ambivalence

As news of the clash that took place on the Aksai Chin plateau in the night of June 15, 2020, between Chinese and Indian troops, reached a dismayed Indian public, many wondered whether history was repeating itself. Whether or not, one accepts the value of history as an aid to prediction, it is undeniable that even after being embroiled in a territorial dispute with China for 70 years, there is little clarity in New Delhi about the long-term strategic aims and objectives underpinning China's belligerence.

One can only conclude that the roots of our diffidence towards China, lie in our profound ignorance about this huge neighbour. Till a decade ago, we had neither created a substantive pool of Mandarin speakers, nor fostered many institutions dedicated to researching China's history, culture, economy, industry, and strategic thought. In the absence of a national security strategy or a Parliamentary 'white paper' on Sino-Indian relations, it is not surprising that our response to recent Chinese actions has been lacking, both in clarity and resolve.

It would seem that, from Jawaharlal Nehru's naïve hopes, encapsulated in the *Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai* mantra, to Prime Minister Modi's prolonged courtship of Xi Jinping, India has been groping in the dark, while misreading China's real intent. As we watch Beijing's sinister border strategy unfold, the absence of a matching counter on India's part becomes painfully obvious.

Other concerned nations have not been remiss on this account. The US Congress, for example, has mandated not only the Department of Defence to render an annual report on China, but also tasks its own Congressional Research Service

(CRS) to provide regular inputs on China's economic and military developments. A November 2022 CRS report, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy*, opens with the statement:

China's military modernization... is the top focus of U.S. defense planning and budgeting... China's naval modernization has been underway for more than 25 years, since the early to mid-1990s, and has transformed China's navy into a much more modern and capable force.

On current trends, China's rapidly growing economy promises to endow it with all the attributes of a great power by (or before) 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic. This is the date by which President Xi Jinping has declared China's intent to become a "fully developed nation" and thus to attain strategic equivalence with the US.⁴ It has become increasingly obvious, from Beijing's utterances and actions, that domination of its neighbourhood is seen by China as a prerequisite for the attainment of this state of eminence.

No meaningful study of the rationale and the motivations underpinning China's actions is possible, nor should policy formulation be attempted, without a glimpse into its historical past.

CHINA'S PAST

When viewed against the backdrop of China's actions as well as oft-heard utterances of its leaders, three predominant influencing factors can be discerned in its past. First, China has an imperial tradition going back many centuries, in which

4 Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*, Henry Holt & Co., Kindle edition, 2015, pp. 335-390.

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a well-defined heartland, overwhelmingly populated by ethnic Hans, exercised military dominance over the surrounding peripheral states. Thus, China has historically had a ‘great-power’ self-image, underpinned by the abundance of resources, economic self-sufficiency and vastness of the imperial state and its population.

Second, in tandem with the cultivation of a ‘great power’ persona, the Chinese people have also nurtured a deep seated ‘victim mentality’, as a result of China’s defeat, subjugation, and humiliation by foreign powers.⁵ During the 19th century, China’s inability to resist Western military pressures led to the Opium Wars and signing of what they called the ‘Unequal Treaties’ with USA, Russia, UK, and other European powers. These treaties violated China’s sovereignty by granting trading, judicial and other extra-territorial rights on Chinese soil to foreigners.

In 1900 China suffered the humiliation of an invasion by a coalition of Western powers to put down the ‘Boxer Rebellion’. In 1937 Japan invaded China, and in the intense eight-year conflict that followed, China suffered at least 20 million casualties and many atrocities at the hands of the ruthless Imperial Japanese troops.⁶

Third, this ‘victim syndrome’ has served to intensify a strong urge to emphasize foreign threats and justify the creation of a powerful Chinese nation which not only commands international deference, but can also redress perceived past wrongs.

Maintenance of internal order and domestic well-being is considered the foundation of China’s national security.

5 Michael D. Swaine and Ashley Tellis, “China’s Grand Strategy. Past Present and Future”, RAND Corporation, 2000, https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1121.html.

6 Henry Kissinger, *On China*, Penguin Books, London, 2012, p. 109.

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The current Communist system, still repressive and corrupt, exists alongside a market economy; and the Chinese people often question the compatibility of the two. There is enormous pressure on the present regime to sustain high levels of economic growth in order to cope with a rising population, and sharp emerging economic disparities between the industrialized coastal provinces and the agrarian hinterland.⁷

Ethnic tensions simmer just below the surface in non-Han majority areas like Tibet, Sinkiang, Mongolia, and Manchuria, incorporated into China in the last century. The brutal suppression and arbitrary detention of the Uyghurs in internment camps, has led to outbreaks of ethnic violence, which represent an additional source of insecurity for the state.

Against this backdrop, the parallel evolution of China and India as 20th century nation states is significant.

A PARALLEL EVOLUTION

The first half of the twentieth century saw both China and India undergo immense change, accompanied by prolonged turbulence, while proceeding on the path to nationhood. In 1947 India emerged from two centuries of British rule using Mahatma Gandhi's unique philosophy of non-violence as a tool. Independence, accompanied by partition of the sub-continent into India and Pakistan, however, witnessed widespread violence.

Having overthrown imperial Manchu rule in 1911, China saw a prolonged internecine conflict between the Communists and the Nationalists (known as Kuomintang or KMT) from 1927 to 1949. This was overlaid by a Japanese invasion and brutal occupation from 1931 to 1937, followed by WW II in

7 Rollie Lal, *Understanding China and India: Security Implications for the United States and the World*, Praeger Security International, Westport, Connecticut, 2006, pp 14-25.

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1941. The Communists, having emerged victorious from the civil war, established the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, while the KMT retreated from mainland China to set up the Republic of China on Taiwan island.

While the early policies of both the PRC and the Republic of India were shaped by strong leaders like Mao and Nehru, whose stature gave them much authority, the security perceptions of each of these countries were influenced by its unique historical experience. In China, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), having participated in the civil war and nation-building endeavours, remained closely identified with the ideology of the Communist Party and the decision-making processes of the state. In India's case, the strategy of non-violence, adopted during the freedom struggle, as well as the nature of its parliamentary democracy, tended to marginalize the role of the Indian armed forces. India's military has traditionally remained aloof from politics and accepted subordination to the elected political authority.

The Western powers having refused to recognize the Communist regime, KMT-ruled Taiwan was given a seat in the UN as well as in the Security Council. At this juncture, Prime Minister Nehru actively espoused the cause of the PRC in the hope that the two nations could form an Asian grand-alliance to fight colonialism. India was, thus, one of the few nations which advocated China's admission into the UN and UN Security Council, which eventually happened in 1971.

In the years following civil war/independence, both China and India suffered from widespread poverty, as well as threats to territorial integrity. While leaders of both countries focused on economic growth and used force to quell insurgencies and separatism, the ideologies they adopted were different. China, under Chairman Mao Ze Dong, relied heavily on revolution and

economic policies dictated by Communist dogma. India, under Nehru, remained ideologically ‘non-aligned’ and adopted a ‘Socialistic pattern of society’ for economic development. The 1990s saw both countries undergo ideological shifts in their policies, veering away from Communism in China’s case and from Socialism in India’s, to embrace economic liberalization.

According to American analyst, Michael Pillsbury, a few years after the end of the Civil War, the Chinese leadership under Mao had decided that a long-term aim for the country would be to surpass the Soviet Union and, following its own playbook, to eventually overtake America and become the dominant actor on the world stage.⁸ Along the way, China would acquire nuclear weapons and eliminate potential rivals, starting with its Asian neighbourhood. As far as India was concerned, attainment of the latter aim manifested in two ways.

Firstly, the Chinese attack of October 1962 dealt, not just a physical blow to India’s security, but also to its national psyche, by the humiliation of a military defeat: exactly the result desired by China. Secondly, by making an ally of Pakistan, China created a South Asian proxy to checkmate and neutralize India. The unprecedented manner in which China has indulged in proliferation – nuclear as well as conventional – to arm Pakistan, has enhanced Pakistani belligerence. The China-Pak axis has kept India off-balance, sustaining the ever-present threat of cross-border terrorism and a potential ‘second front’.

Against this historical backdrop, it is useful to examine the geo-political rationale that has, possibly, underpinned Beijing’s conception of a grand strategy, which seeks an expanded economic, political, and military presence spanning the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. The ‘Chinese characteristics’ of

8 Michael Pillsbury, *op. cit.*

this strategy are symbolized by Xi Jinping's prized Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in which the 'Belt' refers to Chinese ambitions on land and the 'Road', to its seaward component, the 'Maritime Silk Road'.

Geo-political Underpinning of China's Maritime Growth

In 1904, English geographer Halford Mackinder had put forth a proposition that the 400-year era of sea power, was over, and the future of global power lay, not in Mahanian grand-fleets dominating the global sea lanes, but in control of the vast land mass of Eurasia, which he called the 'World Island'. Mackinder, known as, the father of geopolitics, had pronounced, "he who rules the World-Island commands the world."⁹

In Mackinder's day, Eurasia was dominated by Imperial Russia, which was succeeded by the Soviet Union. But today, it is China, which is integrating Asia with Europe, through its internal network of high-speed railways, energy pipelines and fibre-optic cables. Having followed Mackinder's prescription on land, China has also learnt from Admiral Mahan's wisdom. Its leadership has acknowledged the role of maritime power, not only, as a shield against foreign hegemony, but also as a potent instrument for attainment of political goals. Safeguarding of the BRI has been designated a strategic objective, and one of the missions of China's armed forces is to "effectively protect the security and interests of overseas Chinese people, organizations and institutions."¹⁰

In the maritime context, apart from the contentious disputes thrown up by China's arbitrary and irridentist

9 Halford J Mackinder, "The Geographic Pivot of History", *The Geographical Journal*, Volume 23, Number 4, April 1904, pp 421-437.

10 "China's Defense White Papers- 1995-2019", July 23, 2019, <https://www.andrewerickson.com/2019/07/china-defense-white-papers-1995-2019-download-complete-set-read-highlights-here/>.

claims based on the ‘9-dash line’, the most serious issue with security implications is the ‘reunification’ of the Republic of China (ROC) or Taiwan, with mainland China. Chauvinistic considerations, apart, Taiwan’s importance for Beijing lies in its location, which dominates China’s eastern littoral, its seaborne trade and, hence, its economic development.

CHINA’S MARITIME LEGACY & DOCTRINAL OUTLOOK

The Chinese stake claim to an ancient maritime tradition, going back to the first millennium BCE, which gave rise to important navigational and shipbuilding innovations, and saw the opening of many trading routes to Asia and Africa. Early 15th century narratives, of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) describe Admiral Cheng Ho’s remarkable fleet of huge junks, carrying troops, treasure, merchandise, and victuals, which made seven epic voyages to India, the Middle East and Africa. This era of impressive Chinese naval power lasted a mere 30 years, as a combination of fiscal and political compulsions led the Ming Emperor to impose a ban on further voyages, and order destruction of Cheng’s ‘treasure fleet’. Over the next few centuries, protracted threats from the north and west, ensured that China’s naval power remained at low ebb and, therefore, incapable of repelling European imperialists who came by sea in the 18th and 19th centuries. China’s inability to resist Western commercial and military pressures led to the Opium Wars and signing of the ‘Unequal Treaties’ with USA, Russia, UK, and other European powers.

The PLA Navy (PLAN), on its official founding in May 1950, was equipped with warships and submarines supplied by the Soviets, who also helped establish training and maintenance infrastructure. China’s early maritime outlook was shaped by the naval advisers positioned by USSR at staff, command, and unit levels to disseminate Communist dogma along with Soviet

naval doctrine. This doctrine emphasized coastal defence against amphibious assault by capitalist navies, using small craft and submarines to wage ‘guerrilla war’ at sea. Even as the Soviet Navy underwent a dramatic change after the 1961 Cuban missile crisis, the PLAN clung to its coastal defence and peoples’ war doctrines through the Cultural Revolution.

The Sino-Soviet split of 1960, followed by the decade long Cultural Revolution were both major setbacks for the PLAN, and hindered its technological development. It is noteworthy that, well before the Sino-Soviet doctrinal falling-out, the Chinese leadership had ordered the systematic purloining of Soviet weapons technology on a massive scale. Once the break occurred, in mid-1960, the Chinese leadership proclaimed the general policy of self-reliance based on reproducing the Soviet technology. This was to be a reverse engineering project, termed *Guochanhua* in Mandarin, mounted at the national level.¹¹ Within two decades of the Sino-Soviet split in 1960, China had accomplished the reverse engineering and serial production of major weapons and heavy machinery required by its armed forces. It was a combination of Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms and the appointment of General Liu Huaqing as PLA Navy commander, in 1982, that triggered the process of its transformation from a relatively inconsequential coastal force, to a substantive blue-water navy. Liu, a graduate of the Soviet Voroshilov Naval Academy, outlined a strategy for the PLAN which would give it all-round combat capabilities, by mid-21st century. As an influential member of the Central Military Commission, Liu had the influence to push through his vision in which the PLAN moved away from the “coastal defence” paradigm to “offshore defence” and then split the

11 Arun Prakash, “Not made in India”, *The Indian Express*, 31 January, 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/not-made-in-india-fdi-in-defence-foreign-investment-military-budget-5045360/>.

term “offshore” into different maritime zones to be brought under China’s influence in phases.

In the first phase, the PLAN was to establish itself in the area delineated by the ‘first island chain’, which is defined by a line running through the Kurile Islands, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Borneo and the northern tip of Indonesia. In the next phase, Liu’s strategy envisaged control of the ‘second island chain’, marked by a line running through Japan, 2000 miles south to the Mariannas and Carolines islands in the Central Pacific. The third and final phase envisaged the PLAN becoming a global force by 2050.

PLA NAVY’S RISE TO EMINENCE

Political backing for Liu Huaqing’s vision followed in 2003, when Chinese Premier Hu Jintao sounded a warning about the ‘Malacca Dilemma’ that China could face. This reference to the vulnerability of Chinese shipping, during its long passage across the Indian Ocean via the Malacca Strait into the Pacific, led the PLAN to seek enhanced reach and endurance. Early signs of China’s ‘maritime awakening’ started emerging when its 2004 Defence White Paper spelt out the PLA Navy’s responsibilities as “safeguarding China’s maritime security and maintaining the sovereignty of its seas, along with maritime rights and interests”, but observers remained sceptical about such lofty ambitions. A decade later, scepticism started giving way to apprehension, as it became clear that the white paper’s intent was being translated into reality.

At a 2013 Politburo meeting, Xi Jinping had pointed out that China’s broad maritime interests were dictated by four strategic objectives: (a) defending China against a seaward attack by the US; (b) ensuring security of China’s seaborne trade; (c) safeguarding China’s global economic interests; and (d) recovering sovereignty over claimed maritime territory

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– especially Taiwan.¹² China’s leadership has been shrewd enough to realize that becoming a ‘maritime power’ requires the acquisition of a full range of capabilities, and China’s economic boom has enabled it to do so.

Less than a decade later, it became clear that Hu’s announcement had been based on a well-considered, long-term strategy. The September 2020 edition of the US Department of Defence report on China declared that the PLAN had become the “largest navy in the world”, with an overall battle-force of approximately 350 ships and submarines, including over 130 major surface combatants, relegating the US Navy (USN), numerically, to second place.¹³ The report also pointed out that China was the world’s top ship-producing nation. Chinese-flagged merchant ships outnumber all others on the high seas and China boasts of the largest Coast Guard as well as fishing fleet in the world.

The PLAN’s rise to eminence has been clearly propelled by considerations related to the four strategic objectives outlined by the Politburo in 2013. In order to deter the US Navy from mounting offensive operations from the western Pacific Ocean, China has developed what is dubbed by western analysts as the “anti-access, area-denial” or A2AD capability. It aims to pose a layered threat to approaching forces which may come in support of Taiwan or threaten the mainland; the prime targets of A2AD being US aircraft-carriers.¹⁴

12 Michael A McDevitt, *China as a Twenty First Century Naval Power*. Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 2020, pp. 43-45.

13 “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020”, US Department of Defence, Report to US Congress, pp. 44-46, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

14 Arun Prakash, “India’s Maritime Air Power - Outlook for the 21st Century”, *Naval War College Journal*, Volume 32.

China's 2019 Defence White Paper (DWP) described how, "the PLAN is speeding up the transition of its tasks from defence of the near seas to protection missions on the far seas..."¹⁵ Apart from its BRI commitments, China, in its quest for securing strategic resources, has cast its net world-wide; from Australia to the Russian Far East and from West Africa to the heart of South America. These far-flung economic interests make China dependent on extended sea lines of communication (SLOC) which criss-cross the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and expose China's "Achilles heel." It is to protect this significant vulnerability that China seeks to stage a revival of the Imperial 'great game' in the Indian Ocean.

At USD 225 billion, China's 2023 defence budget was nearly four times that of India's (USD 72 billion) and next only to that of the US.¹⁶ China possibly spends an equal amount, secretly, on strategic forces and special projects. China's military expansion and modernization has been marked by total opacity of purpose, and it has never attempted to rationalize this expenditure, or to reassure its neighbours. India must, therefore, assume the worst and expect hegemonic dominance.

China's leadership has, astutely, grasped the reality that maritime power is much more than just a 'fighting-navy'. The results are truly striking; China is, today, the world leader in ship-building and its 5000-ship strong merchant marine ranks No.1 in the world. It also owns the largest number of coast guard vessels that protect the world's biggest fishing fleet. (It is noteworthy that China's sea-going fishing fleet is viewed

15 "China's National Defense in the New Era", Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, July 24, 2019, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/4846443.html.

16 Liu Xuanzun, "China's 2023 defense budget to rise by 7.2%, a 'reasonable, restrained' increase amid global security tensions", *Global Times*, March 5, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202303/1286643.shtml>.

in strategic terms as a guarantor of national food-security and marine economy). Chinese shipyards are rapidly adding to its fleet of modern warships as well as merchantmen. Its force of homebuilt nuclear submarines is operationally deployed and its first two aircraft-carriers are at sea, with more to follow.

INDIA'S MARITIME AWAKENING

Overcoming Sea-Blindness

Had New Delhi paid adequate attention to India's 'oracle of maritime wisdom', Sardar K.M. Panikkar, it may have brought earlier focus on the maritime domain, and been better prepared for coming events. As far back as 1945, Panikkar, speaking of India's dependence on the Indian Ocean, had written: "Her national interests have been mainly on the Indian Ocean, over which her vast trade has found its way to the marts of the world, throughout history." Panikkar had also forewarned: "That China intends to embark on a policy of large-scale naval expansion is clear enough... with her bases extending as far south as Hainan, China will be in an advantageous position..."¹⁷ Panikkar's prophesy came true, half a century later, in 2000, when China started construction of its southern-most naval base at Yulin, on Hainan Island.

India's ancient seafaring skills and maritime tradition had remained dormant for almost a thousand years, till they were revived by a visionary post-independence naval leadership, which laid the foundations of a navy and triggered India's maritime revival. Our political and bureaucratic decision-makers, however, continued to suffer from a continental mindset and the malady termed (by sailors) as 'sea-blindness'.

17 K.M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1945, p. 82 and 85.

Their ‘maritime-awakening’ was triggered, not by a sudden epiphany, but a series of disruptive developments, which included the globalization of India’s economy in the 1990s, the drama of rampant piracy, the trauma of a sea-borne terror strike on Mumbai, and the spectre of a fast-growing and belligerent PLA Navy.

One of the most significant decisions taken by the Navy’s leadership as far back as in 1960, was to initiate indigenous warship design and construction. Today, the Navy’s stature as well as operational capability owe much to the fact that its ships are largely designed and built at home. Six state-owned shipyards have, over the past five decades, built over 100 modern warships, ranging from patrol boats and diesel submarines to aircraft carriers, and from tankers to nuclear submarines.

However, it must be noted that, unlike China, India has failed to take a holistic view, and while focusing on the navy, it has neglected many other components of maritime power, such as ports, shipbuilding, shipping, fisheries, and seabed exploration.¹⁸ Moreover, despite advances in nuclear and space technologies, India has been a laggard, as far as military technology is concerned, and remains amongst the world’s leading importers of arms, with a significant proportion coming from Russia and other states of the former USSR. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, has already imposed delays on the delivery of systems and spares for the Indian Navy, and will certainly have an adverse, long-term impact on India’s military preparedness.

18 Prakash, Arun, “India’s Neglected Maritime Domain; a Missed Opportunity”, in Manoj Joshi et. al. (ed), *In Hard Times*, Bloomsbury, New Delhi, 2022.

INDIA'S MARITIME STAKES

India's central position in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), astride major shipping lanes, accords it both advantages and responsibilities. Jutting a thousand kilometres into the ocean named after it, the Indian peninsula has a 7,500-kilometre-long coastline, containing 200 major and minor ports, with an exclusive economic zone of over two million square kilometres, rich in food and mineral resources. India has 1,200 islands along both seaboard, which are located astride vital shipping lanes that run from the Persian Gulf to the Malacca Strait. With the Laccadive group lying across the Arabian Sea shipping lanes, and the Andaman and the Nicobar group guarding the mouth of the Malacca Straits, they constitute strategic maritime outposts.¹⁹

The waters of the Indian Ocean see over 120,000 merchantmen in transit annually, carrying cargo worth a trillion dollars. Amongst these are ships that carry 95 per cent of India's foreign trade. In 2022, India's merchandise trade stood at close to USD 90 billion,²⁰ with the "trade to GDP ratio" having risen from 10 per cent in 1960 to 45 per cent in 2021.²¹ This intense international exposure of the Indian economy is changing the nature of India's national interests. India's investments, energy partnerships and economic interests are dispersed all across the globe today, and the maritime domain has acquired an unprecedented importance for India. In addition, there are

19 "Ensuring Secure Seas, Indian Maritime Security Strategy", Indian Navy, Integrated HQ, Ministry of Defence, 2015, https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf.

20 "India's Foreign Trade: November 2022", Ministry of Commerce & Industry: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1883953>.

21 "Trade (% of GDP) – India", The World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NE.TRD.GNFS.ZS?end=2021&locations=IN&start=1960>.

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1,400 vessels of about 20 million tons that fly the Indian flag and almost two hundred-thousand Indian sailors serving on board foreign ships that are also plying these waters.

A defining moment, which not only established India's credentials as a regional power, but also demonstrated its maritime prowess, was the December 2004 Great Asian Tsunami. Within hours of the calamity, Indian Navy ships and aircraft had reached out, with alacrity, not just to India's own stricken citizens but also to its Sri Lankan, Maldivian and Indonesian neighbours in dire need. This humanitarian undertaking left a deep impression on international observers, and India's image has been steadily reinforced by subsequent operations by the Indian Navy, to evacuate South Asian refugees from conflict or disaster-stricken zones in the middle-east and Africa.

THE INDO-PACIFIC SCENARIO

The 2015 Indian Maritime Security Strategy identifies India's "primary areas of maritime interest" as, essentially, the North and South-west Indian Ocean and all its entry, exit and choke-points. It then defines the "secondary areas of maritime interest" that encompass the South East Indian Ocean, Western Pacific Ocean, South and East China Seas, the Red Sea, the west coast of Africa and other areas based on Indian Diaspora, overseas investment, or other interests. What this means is that India's vital maritime interests go well beyond the Indian Ocean and are, in fact, better defined by the more inclusive notion of an 'Indo-Pacific' geo-strategic vision.

The roots of the Indo-Pacific concept, which replaced the post-WW II 'Asia-Pacific' construct, lay in the need felt by the US, for creating a new and more inclusive paradigm to embrace

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a broader geographic scope.²² Amongst the factors that, possibly, influenced its evolution was the near simultaneous rise of China and India, on either side of the Malacca Strait, and the interests of US allies like Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan and Australia, who are dependent on trade and energy sea-lanes, running across the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and who are vulnerable to a hegemonic China.

Today, the US unhesitatingly acknowledges that the Indo-Pacific is the “single most consequential region for its future,” and its maritime strategy is marked by a commitment, in partnership with other nations, to contain China’s rise as a regional hegemon. The military underpinning of this commitment was conveyed by renaming of the US Pacific Command as the ‘Indo-Pacific Command’ in 2018. India, apprehensive about the adverse reaction that recognition might evoke from China and Russia, remained ambivalent about the Indo-Pacific concept, for a few years. Eventually, the reality of Chinese pressure on India’s northern borders, and the imperatives of ensuring maritime security across the vast region convinced the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) of the Indo-Pacific logic. In 2019, separate divisions for the Indo-Pacific as well as Oceania regions were created in the MEA, which formally defined the Indo-Pacific as the “maritime space stretching from the western coast of North America to the eastern shores of Africa.”²³

India’s main source of concern is the increasing presence of the PLA Navy in its primary area of interest. Starting, in 2008,

22 ‘Asia-Pacific’ is associated with the part of Asia that lies in the Pacific Ocean, while ‘Indo-Pacific’ is the integrated region that combines the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Ocean, and the landmasses that surround them.

23 “PM Modi’s Keynote address at Shangri-la Dialogue”, June 1, 2018, https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pms-keynote-address-at-shangri-la-dialogue/.

with anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden, the PLA Navy has steadily gained experience and confidence, and deploys for extended periods in waters distant from home. 2014 saw the first PLAN submarine dock in a Sri Lankan port, to be followed by the visit of a nuclear attack submarine (SSN). Since then, there have been frequent reports of Chinese warships, as well as intelligence gathering ships (designated 'research vessels'), visiting and transiting through Indian Ocean waters.

Apart from its permanent military facility in Djibouti and the upcoming naval-base in Gwadar, China has created a series of ports in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) littoral states, including Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, which could offer logistic support to its forward deployed forces. Thus, as the PLAN's fleet strength grows, it would seek to create a permanent forward presence west of the Malacca Strait, and once it can spare an aircraft carrier task force, we may well see a Chinese naval squadron in these waters, as a hedge against any attempt to interfere with its maritime interests.

While, the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean is self-evident, less well-known are India's rapidly growing interests in the Pacific. Almost, 55 per cent of India's trade with the greater Asia Pacific area transits through the South China Sea. ONGC Videsh Ltd (OVL) ships crude oil extracted from its the Russian Far East concessions, to the refineries back home. OVL had also been awarded offshore drilling rights in Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea, but work was suspended due to a maritime dispute with China. Any attempts to dominate waters of the Indian or Pacific Oceans would, thus, represent a grave threat to India's vital interests. In this scenario, what options does the maritime domain have to offer?

INDIA'S MARITIME OPTIONS

Power Balancing via Naval Diplomacy

Statesmanship and diplomacy having failed to persuade the Chinese to resume *status quo ante* on India's northern land boundary, New Delhi, seems to be looking for options, other than 'boots on the ground', which could bolster India's negotiating position. Given the difficult situation facing them, it is logical for India's decision-makers to explore possibilities in the maritime domain.

In this context, it is necessary to acknowledge two facts at the outset. Firstly that, given China's dramatic progress in the economic, technological, and military domains, India can no longer count itself in the 'same league'. Secondly, that given China's powerful industrial base and the PLA Navy's growing strength, the Indian Navy cannot contemplate matching it 'force-on-force'. However, options do exist, both for power-balancing, via naval diplomacy and partnerships, as well as for direct action via naval deployments.

That navies, unlike armies and air forces, have many roles to play, even in peacetime. was driven home by Soviet Admiral Sergei Gorshkov, when he observed, in 1979: "Demonstrative actions by the fleet, in many cases, have made it possible to achieve political ends without resorting to armed action, by merely putting on pressure... Thus, the navy has always been an instrument of policy and an important aid to diplomacy in peacetime."²⁴ This unique attribute of navies enables their use in support of foreign policy objectives, to deliver messages of reassurance to friends and of deterrence or coercion to adversaries. In this context, two inter-related maritime

24 Admiral Sergei Gorshkov, *The Sea Power of the State*, Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1979, p. 247.

concepts. ‘Exercise Malabar’ and the Quadrilateral Dialogue or Quad have come into the limelight, and bear discussion.

Malabar is the name of a bilateral naval exercise, which dates back to 1992. It originally involved just the Indian and US navies, but was later expanded to embrace Japan, and has now become a four-cornered naval drill that also includes, Australia. Serving to enhance interoperability and cooperation between the participants, Exercise Malabar has provided a professionally beneficial meeting ground for the four navies. The Quad, on the other hand, was originally formed for coordination of relief efforts, between the US, Australia, Japan, and India, during the 2004 Tsunami, and lapsed into inactivity, thereafter. It was revived in 2007 as a four-cornered security dialogue, which has become linked to Exercise Malabar, since the two now have a common membership.

Although, Exercise Malabar and the Quad remain, currently, in the domain of military-diplomacy, both have the potential to project themselves as security partnerships, for conveying messages of reassurance to members, and deterrence to adversaries. China, on its part, has made no secret of its neurosis about the Quad grouping, as well as Exercise Malabar. Beijing’s displeasure arises from the suspicion that these combinations are aimed at the ‘containment’ of China. While heaping scorn on their attempts at synergy and coordination, China loses no opportunity to send threatening messages to Quad nations.

Regrettably, the Quad members have shown palpable trepidation *vis-à-vis* China, and have gone to great lengths to emphasise that the grouping has no security implications and is not an ‘Asian NATO’. The February 2022 Quad Ministers’ Joint Statement, for example, spoke only of issues like COVID

vaccine, disaster relief, terrorism, cyber-security, the Myanmar crisis, and North Korea's missile tests. The word 'China' did not find a single mention in the statement. Fearful of China, the Quad members have neither created a charter for the group, nor invested it with any substance. No wonder, China, dismisses it as a "headline grabbing idea which will dissipate like sea-foam."²⁵

There is, however, an internal contradiction within Quad. While Japan, India, and Australia display great wariness in their pronouncements, Washington does not miss any opportunity to display bellicosity *vis-à-vis* China. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy of February 2022 pulls no punches, as it bluntly declares: "From the economic coercion of Australia to the conflict along the LAC (Line of Actual Control) with India to the growing pressure on Taiwan and bullying in the East and South China Seas, our allies and partners bear much of the cost of China's harmful behaviour."²⁶ Two recent US initiatives, in this context, deserve brief mention, because of their implications for Indo-Pacific security.

AUKUS and iCET

In a surprise statement, in September 2021, the heads of government of Australia, the UK and USA, announced the formation of a trilateral security pact, to be known by the acronym, AUKUS. Without naming China, US President Biden announced, that "in order to deal with rapidly evolving threats," the US and Britain would share, with Australia, intelligence and advanced technologies in areas like artificial

25 "Quad Move Will Dissipate Like Sea Foam: Wang Yi", *Press Trust of India*, March 8, 2018.

26 "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States", The White House, February, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

intelligence, cyber-warfare, quantum-computing and nuclear submarine construction.²⁷

Given the circumstances, it is obvious that creation of the AUKUS is an attempt to send a stronger message to China, than that conveyed by the Malabar Exercise/Quad. However, Beijing's description of this alliance as an 'exclusionary bloc', should be food for thought for two members of these forums – India and Japan – who have been excluded from the new grouping. It remains an open question whether AUKUS will overshadow the Quad and diminish its importance, or the two will reinforce each other.

An issue that should give cause for reflection in New Delhi, arises from Biden's promise to transfer advanced technology, including, submarine nuclear-propulsion to Australia, under the AUKUS. It brings into stark relief, India's failure to acquire any significant high technology from the US, despite bilateral ties that have grown in warmth and closeness over the past decade and a half.²⁸

Perhaps it was to address this state of stasis in Indo-US relations that, in May 2022, a communique after the Biden-Modi meeting in Tokyo announced the launch of a US-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) spearheaded by the National Security Councils of the two countries. Pitched at such a high level, the iCET could become a 'game-changer' in catalysing Indo-US technology cooperation, persuading the US to lift existing export control restrictions, and encouraging

27 "The aftermath of the AUKUS deal at the Shangri-la dialogue," *Hindustan Times*, July 4, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/ht-insight/inter-national-affairs/the-aftermath-of-the-aucus-deal-at-the-shangri-la-dialogue-101656939934489.html>.

28 Arun Prakash, "The new AUKUS alliance holds some lessons for India", *The Indian Express*, September 21, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/aucus-alliance-new-partnerships-realpolitik-7523384/>.

the private sector of both countries to cooperate in sensitive sectors.²⁹

Apart from these various multi-lateral endeavours, India has, for many decades, been reaching out to its Indian Ocean neighbourhood to engage its maritime neighbours, and create a favourable environment through naval diplomacy.

INDIA'S MARITIME OUTREACH

A decade ago, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had declared that India was well positioned to play the role of “a net provider of security in our immediate region and beyond.”³⁰ Even as the Indian Navy was trying to shoulder this onerous role, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had, in 2015, coined the slogan, “SAGAR”, the acronym for “Security and growth for all” in the Indian Ocean. Although there is no document outlining the SAGAR vision or doctrine, it has become a foreign policy catchphrase, representing a broad concept of maritime cooperation to which many naval diplomacy initiatives are credited.

An important component of India's evolving naval diplomacy has been the creation of a strong maritime domain awareness (MDA) capability. MDA encompasses sensors, located along the coast, at sea and in the air/space, which continuously monitor shipping and compile a realtime maritime traffic picture, via a network. This picture, which India shares with neighbouring Seychelles, Mauritius, Maldives, and Sri

29 Arun Prakash, “The fine print in the Indo-US pact, iCET”, *The Indian Express*, February 9, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-fine-print-in-the-indo-us-pact-icet-8432798/>.

30 Vinay Kumar, “India well positioned to become a net provider of security: Manmohan Singh”, *The Hindu*, May 23, 2013, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-well-positioned-to-become-a-net-provider-of-security-manmohan-singh/article4742337.ece>.

Lanka, enables the early detection of seaborne threats and illegal or unauthorised activity at sea. Another significant development has been the setting up, in 2018, of the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), in Gurugram. Intended to extend the scope of maritime collaboration, the IFC-IOR regularly exchanges MDA and other information with similar centres in France, Singapore, and Malaysia.

Having discussed the role that maritime-diplomacy or soft-power can play in power-balancing, a final look at the role of hard-power in the India-China context is also necessary.

Naval Deterrence

The fact that it has taken a border confrontation in the Himalayas to bring focus on India's maritime domain clearly indicates that the salience of maritime power is not yet fully understood by our decision-makers. Nor have the two major advantages bestowed on India by its fortuitous geographic location been fully appreciated in New Delhi: firstly, that the Indian Navy has the ability to exercise maritime dominance over Indian Ocean SLOCs; and secondly, that in any conflict situation, India's maritime forces will be operating on short 'interior lines' of communication, whereas the navies of all Pacific powers will be operating on 'exterior lines' stretching 10,000 to 15,000 kilometres from home.

The overwhelming dependence of China's economy and industry on uninterrupted passage of seaborne trade and energy, renders its Indian Ocean sea-lanes akin to an 'Achilles heel' or 'jugular vein', which India could threaten via trade-warfare. To illustrate this vulnerability, it may be noted that, as the world's top consumer of crude oil in 2022, China imported 11 million barrels per day (BPD),³¹ over half of which came

31 Chen Aizu, "China 2022 crude oil imports fall for second year despite Q4 pickup", *Reuters*, January 9, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/>

from the Persian Gulf. This is the equivalent of 5-6 tankers of the VLCC (very large crude carriers) class unloading oil in Chinese ports every single day. This means that, on any given day, apart from hundreds of cargo ships, there are 70-80 VLCCs bound for China on the high seas. Although China is known to maintain a significant buffer stock of crude oil, any disruption or delay of tanker traffic could upset China's economy, with consequent effects on industry and population.

Trade warfare is a feasible strategy during wartime, and once hostilities commence, belligerents may declare a 'naval blockade', against the enemy; denying entry and exit to all merchant shipping from the latter's ports and even sinking enemy merchant ships at sea. Laws of naval warfare also allow both belligerents to 'visit and search' an enemy or neutral vessel to determine the character of the ship or its cargo, and to intern it if necessary. In peacetime, however, a different set of rules apply, and legally speaking, navies cannot interfere with international shipping on the high seas.³²

'Naval compellence operations', according to British naval historian Geoffrey Till, are intended to force an adversary to do something he does not want to do, or to stop him from doing something that he intends to do, by use of coercive sea-based forces, which may or may not involve actual violence.

'Maritime interception operations' (MIOPS) which involve the stopping, boarding, searching, and diverting a foreign-flagged merchant ship on the high-seas, constitute a non-lethal form of compellence which can help persuade a state to change its policy, by posing a threat to its economy. While stopping

commodities/china-dec-crude-oil-imports-3rd-highest-yr-2022-imports-down-09-2023-01-13/.

32 Arun Prakash, "The India-China Confrontation: A View from Seawards", *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, Volume 8, Issue 1, 2021, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/2347797021992528>.

and boarding requires permission of the flag-state or ship's Master, a 'non-compliant' boarding is feasible, and if all else fails, the 'doctrine of necessity' can be invoked by a warship (or submarine) to board, search, divert or capture a merchant ship.³³

The success of these actions depends, to a great extent, on political will, and chances of success increase if there is international collaboration. Whether 'trade warfare' or MIOPS are ever employed or not, they constitute a potent 'threat in being' that must be used like a Damocles sword, to hang over a trade and energy dependent China.

Breaking old shibboleths

The Sino-Indian military equation along the Himalayan borders is heavily tilted in China's favour. Moreover, in case of a Sino-Indian conflict, Pakistan is likely to render support by opening a second front. Under these circumstances, the best that India's ground forces and air power can hope to achieve is a precarious stalemate. It is against this background that we need to look seawards and examine what the maritime domain has to offer.

The Indian Navy, despite fiscal constraints, has emerged as a compact but professional and competent force, and India's fortuitous maritime geography will enable it to dominate both the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. We must, however, bear in mind that the PLA Navy is underpinned by China's powerful economy and supported by a vast and efficient shipbuilding industry, both of which the Indian Navy lacks.

Notwithstanding its handicaps, India, as a democracy, a nuclear weapon state and a significant economic and military power, must stand firm, as a bulwark against regional

33 Geoffrey Till, *Seapower*, Routledge, Oxon, 2013, pp. 236-37.

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hegemony. History shows that neither appeasement, nor empty bluster works with hegemonic powers. If India is not to cede ground to China, physically or diplomatically, it must marshal all elements of its 'comprehensive national power' focusing especially on the maritime dimension.

The existential dilemma posed by an increasingly powerful and hegemonic China can only be countered by a stronger India. As a nation, we need to accelerate economic growth, enhance technological and industrial capability, and boost military muscle to stand up on our own. To attain its full potential, India will need a breathing spell, and insurance against hegemony. Consequently, while preparing to fight its own battles, India will need to seek external-balancing. If *realpolitik* so demands, it must break old shibboleths and strike new partnerships, or even alliances, wherever there is a convergence of interests.

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