Indian Navy's Maritime Security Strategy:
An Assessment

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In February 2016, India's Eastern Naval Command hosted the International Fleet Review (IFR), underlining Indian Navy's growing prowess and ambitions. Though it was largely a ceremonial inspection of naval warships by the Indian president, it provided an opportunity to the Indian Navy to showcase its might and rapidly expanding capabilities. It was in 2001 that an event of such a scale was last held in India and since then the Indian Navy's participating contingent has only grown bigger, with 75 frontline ships and submarines in attendance, in addition to 24 ships and delegations from over 50 nations including Australia, Bangladesh, Brazil, China, France, Indonesia, Iran, Maldives, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Flagging the threat of sea-borne terror and piracy as two key challenges to maritime security and underlining the need to respect freedom of navigation against the backdrop of South China Sea dispute, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared during the IFR that the Indian Ocean region remains his government's priority given India's 1,200 island territories, and its huge exclusive economic zone of 2.4 million sq km. He further underlined the Indian Ocean region's role "as a strategic bridge with the nations in our immediate and extended maritime neighbourhood."[i] Underlining the need for a "modern and multi-dimensional Navy," Prime Minister Modi stressed that India would continue to actively pursue and promote its geopolitical, strategic, and economic interests on the seas, in particular the Indian Ocean.[ii]

The Indian Navy has emerged as an indispensable tool of Indian diplomacy in recent years, making it imperative for Indian policy-makers and naval thinkers to think anew about the role of the nation's naval forces in Indian strategy.[iii] Despite a general understanding among Indian political elites that it was the littoral dominance by the European powers that led to their colonial ascendancy in the Indian heartland, the focus on land frontiers led to the dominance of the Indian Army in the national security discourse.

Until the end of the Cold War, the maritime dimension of India's security did not figure adequately in the national consciousness. Indian policy-makers did not perceive the advantage of building up the nation's maritime sinews as the country remained concerned with the north and north-western frontiers after partition rather than with her sea frontiers. Yet despite the Indian Navy's marginalization and the preoccupation of policymakers with safeguarding the integrity of nation's land frontiers, the Indian Navy was largely successful in maintaining a credible naval force in the region.

Today, the Indian Navy's original local sea control and shore defence orientation, which largely focused on preserving the integrity of Indian coastal waters from regional threats, has given way to a more ambitious naval posture.[iv] India's naval policy is geared toward ensuring the freedom of navigation for shipping and safety of sea lines of communication as well as to safeguard its interests in contiguous waters, exclusive economic zone, and island territories. The Indian Navy would eventually like to emerge as a world-class blue-water force, equipped to meet regional challenges, and threats and to safeguard India's maritime interests. India needs a blue water navy not only to meet naval threats from China and Pakistan, but also to exploit its strategic location at the centre of the Indian Ocean as well as to protect its extensive exclusive economic zone.

At the heart of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), with control over vast areas of sea, India is in a pivotalposition to provide security over its sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), resources and territories. This presents the Indian Navy with significant challenges. The security of the IOR and its SLOCs has a regional and worldfocus; moreover, the diverse number of states with interests in, or moving across, the IORalso

provide India with a complex security dilemma. In a wider context, the Indian Navy must protectthe nearly 100 ships that pass through its maritime area of interest daily.The SLOCsentering and exiting the IOR pass through several narrow passages including the Straits ofHormuz, the Gulf of Aden, the Suez Canal and the Straits of Malacca, creating 'chokepoints'.These present opportunities for rogue-states and non-state actors, who do not possessa maritime capability, to interdict or disrupt shipping across important east-west trade routes.The resultant disruption or dislocation in the trade chain would have very seriousimplications for the economic growth of most major economies. As land-based naturalresources in the region and around the world are depleted, the exploitation of marineresources, such as seabed minerals, oil and other hydrocarbons, will have added significanceand raise the potential for future conflict.Consequently, to protect its own national interestsas well as those of global trade, India must structure the Indian Navy to meet those challenges.

It is in the broader context, the Maritime Security Strategy document of the Indian Navy released in October 2015 presents interesting insights into the future trajectory of the Indian Navy as well the challenges it is likely to face in the near future.[v]

The Strategy Document

All maritime security policies or statements have an element of political intent in them. It is the nature of the relationship between the use of the sea, sovereignty, international interactions at sea, and domestic politics and security that form the basis of such statements. Therefore, given the combination of these elements within the 2015 Indian Maritime Security Statement document, it is a useful window through which one can analyse Indian maritime strategic intention as well.

The first issue of interest from the statement is just where it is that India thinks it has maritime interests. Obviously coastal waters as designated by international law are the logical starting point for such thinking. Sovereignty issues and the protection of Indian national security, as well as prevention of criminal activity such as fishing

violations, drug and people smuggling, and other illegal activities are common themes that all nations with coast-lines have to contend with. The influence of the ever-changing nature of the use of the Indian Oceans and the surrounding seas is, therefore, a main feature of the analysis provided by the statement. More importantly than these low-level or domestic maritime issues, however, are the statements regarding the condition, intention and operation of the Indian Navy in larger maritime activities. The statement clearly intends that the Indian Navy become a larger part of the overall Indian national security agenda in that the protection of India's maritime interests must be recognized as having a greater importance than ever before. The changing character and nature of the threats to India's ability to safely and fully utilize the maritime domain are seen as being essential to India's overall national security. A persuasive and comprehensive argument for the connectivity of India to the rest of the world, and thus the economic and social stability connected to that globalized system, are all depended on India's ability to have a greater role in influencing the regional maritime domain. In short, the statement is a declaration of the Indian Navy's intent to increase its overall domestic and international importance as a tool of security, deterrence, coercion, alliance formulation and stabilization and be recognized as a key source of national power.

As far as the condition of the Indian Navy is concerned, it is clear that there is a desire on the part of the Indian Navy to modernize and increase its warfighting capabilities across all aspects of naval capability. Naval aviation, on shore and at sea, subsurface units, surface units, modern computer systems for both weapon systems and communications, joint capabilities, amphibious operations and a mix of low-intensity and high-intensity combat systems are all seen as being necessary for providing the required naval forces able to deter and compel various actors, as well as give a credible warfighting posture. Power projection is a key theme for the acquisition of many of these new or improved systems. The statement outlines an ambitious plan for increased naval capabilities across the entire maritime domain spectrum, especially in the area of increased Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). Such desires will, however, of course rely on the willingness of the Indian Government to provide the necessary funding for such a vision. The statement is a very good primer for such Government officials that

require the linkages between India's national security and a greater role and reliance on its maritime forces to be illustrated to them. As such, it is one of the better documents of its type to make a powerful and thoughtful case for why India must pay greater attention to the modernization and expansion of its naval forces and their ability to meet a wide range of threats. A large part of this maritime modernization policy has another domestic political aspect to it: the concept of the 'Indianization of the Navy'.

The theme of Indianization runs throughout the statement. This idea envisions a greater domestic ability to create the required technical and industrial expertise to allow India to be more independent in its naval systems acquisition planning. Instead of the traditional methodology of acquiring technical expertise, either through the purchase of hulls and systems from other sources such as Russia, or, the licensing for manufacture of systems from other providers, Indianization asks for India itself to undertake a greater focus on investing in shipbuilding, weapon system design, and computer networking capabilities.[vi] Through such investment, a greater sense of autonomy and freedom of action, as well as reliability and availability of necessary technical expertise and capacity will be achieved. This greater maritime independence in the procurement and development areas marks a change in the nature of India as a maritime power. However, the idea of Indianization is somewhat at odds with another theme that runs throughout the statement: greater interaction and attachment to other maritime nations to create a greater maritime collective security system.

The United States figures in those engagement statements. A greater number of exercises and strategic discussions are seen as being the basis for creating an enhanced maritime relationship with America. Again, such open statements regarding India's future workings with the United States in such a way, aimed at the containment and deterrence of Chinese naval expansion in the seas neighbouring and influencing the Indian Ocean and the vital trade that flows through them all, is a change away from the traditional 'non-alignment' posture taken by India.[vii] There is little doubt when reading the statement that the Indian Navy sees itself as a close and useful partner of the United States Navy (USN) in its quest to be able to meet the challenges being created by the rise of Chinese maritime forces. That political condition may have an impact on the Indian

Navy's Indianization policy that has not been considered in detail. Certainly it does not appear to have been in the statement.Working with the most sophisticated and technological advanced navy in the world comes with advantages and disadvantages. If there is a desire to use home-grown naval technology, and at the same time, have a higher degree of ability to work usefully with the USN, a tension could occur. Navies that are able to work in such a fashion with the USN have been able to do so through the commonalities produced through membership of NATO. Still, the American Pacific Fleet is not really able to communicate or coordinate with the European USN forces due to different technologies, differences which are being increased further by the American 'Re-Balance' Strategy towards the Pacific and 'Air-Sea Battle' Concept and 'Third Off-set' Strategy requirements. As the USN increasingly modernises and changes its technological profile for its Pacific Fleet, can India keep in step and provide a useful naval partnership with Indianized technology? This is not a question for the Indian Navy alone. It is one that many navies allied or closely linked to working with the USN are having to ask themselves today: can we afford to keep pace with USN technological development and contribute to the Air-Sea Battle/Third Off-set Strategy vision?[viii] The 2015 Maritime Security Statement's strategic and operational desired end-state of such bilateral cooperation must bear in mind these technical and industrial realities if domestic buy-in to an increased role for the Indian Navy is to be won through greater investment in indigenous Indian maritime technical and industrial acumen.

Overall the document is a powerful statement about India's need, and possible ability, to become an important part of the global maritime power community. Given the centrality of her maritime areas of interest in the overall globalization system, being a regionally powerful maritime actor makes India an important global maritime actor. This is a point not lost on the document's authors. The proof will be in the spending. If a long-term governmental commitment to the expansion and sustainment of such a large and powerful modern naval force becomes a reality, then many of the strategic aspirations outlined in the statement will come to fruition. At the very least, the fact that the Indian Navy is willing to openly say many of the things it does in this document shows that there is a sea-change underway in India's thinking about its relationship with the sea. Only time will tell if that change is more than thinking.

Conclusion

There's a long tradition in India of viewing the maritime dimension of security as central to nation's strategic priorities. With a coastline of 7516 kilometres and over 1200 island territories from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal, India is the only country in the world that has maritime boundaries with as many as seven other countries. With India's economic rise, New Delhi is trying to bring back that maritime focus into its strategic worldview, making its navy integral to national grand strategy.

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared at the Maritime India Summit in April 2016 that "India has had a glorious maritime future," and is "on the path of shaping an even better maritime future," he was underscoring New Delhi's political resolve to restore India's position of eminence in the global maritime sector.[ix] Indian Navy will be playing a crucial role in that endeavour and its strategic vision is in sync with the government's priorities. While changes in the regional and global balance of power remain a significant worry, the bigger problem remains one of introducing organizational changes and doctrinal evolution. How India manages these issues will be significant not only for the Indian Navy's future but also for the rise of India as a credible global military power.

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Notes and References

[i] Prime Minister's address at International Fleet Review 2016 is available at
http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/26333/Prime+Ministers+address+at+International+Fleet+Review+2016

[ii] -Ibid-

[iii] For an overview of contemporary trends in Indian Navy, see Harsh V. Pant (ed) *The Rise of Indian Navy: International Vulnerabilities, External Challenges* (London: Routledge, 2012)

[iv] On this evolution in Indian Navy's ideational focus, see Arun Prakash, "Evolution of the Indian Navy: Towards a Maritime Awakening?" in Harsh V. Pant, *Handbook of Indian Defence Policy: Themes, Structures and Doctrine* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 145-160.

[v] Indian Navy's Maritime Security Strategy Document is available at
http://indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian-Maritime-Doctrine-2009-Updated-12Feb16.pdf

[vi] An overview of the challenges facing defence procurement in India, see Amit Cowshish, "Defence Procurement in India: Challenges Abound," in Pant, *Handbook of Indian Defence Policy*, pp. 252-267.

[vii] On changing Indian approach towards 'non-alignment,' see Harsh V. Pant and Julie M Super, "India's non-alignment conundrum: a twentieth-century policy in a changing world," *International Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (July 2015), pp. 747-764.

[viii] For a detailed discussion of these issues in the context of the larger Asia-Pacific, see Greg Kennedy and Harsh V. Pant, *Assessing Maritime Balance in the Asia-Pacific: The Impact of American Strategic Re-Balance* (London: Routledge, 2015).

[ix] Lalatendu Mishra, "India's coastline can become engine of growth: PM Modi at Maritime Summit," *The Hindu*, April 14, 2016.