

## **India's Proposed Maritime Strategy**

**Author:** Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan

AVSM & Bar, VSM, IN (Retd)

**Date:** 14 February 2020

India's maritime strategy must necessarily be the aggregate of the individual strategies that the country formulates and executes for the preservation, pursuit, promotion, and protection of the six principal maritime interests of India, viz.,

- (1)** Protection from sea-based threats to India's territorial integrity;
- (2)** Ensuring Stability in India's maritime neighbourhood;
- (3)** Creation, development, and sustenance of a 'Blue' Economy, incorporating:
  - (a)** The preservation, promotion, pursuit and protection of offshore infrastructure and maritime resources within and beyond the Maritime Zones of India (MZI);
  - (b)** The promotion, protection and safety of India's overseas and coastal seaborne trade and her Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), and, the ports that constitute the nodes of this trade; and
  - (c)** Support to marine scientific research, including that in Antarctica and the Arctic;
- (4)** The provision of holistic maritime security — i.e., freedom from threats arising 'in' or 'from' the sea;

- (5) Provision of support succour and extrication-options to the Indian Diaspora; and
- (6) Obtaining and retaining a regionally favourable geostrategic maritime-position.

Each of the aforementioned maritime interests simultaneously flows-from and feeds-into India's core national interest. Emanating from the Constitution of India (Directive Principles of State Policy), **India's core national interest** is to assure the economic, material and societal wellbeing of the people of India. The phrase "the people of India" presupposes that there is some recognisable geopolitical entity called India, in which the people of India exist. Since every geopolitical entity is defined by borders, the territorial integrity of the geopolitical entity of India is tantamount to the inviolability of India's borders. Ensuring this inviolability is, therefore, the foremost interest of the country. The maritime border of India lies 12 nautical miles (nm), i.e., 22 kilometres, seaward of the country's promulgated baseline (or, where no baseline has been promulgated, 12 nm from the low-water line as depicted on a large-scale navigational chart. In contrast with the land, there are two additional boundaries that need to be factored at sea, namely, those of the country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and, the Continental Shelf.

India's overarching strategy is encompassed in its draft National Maritime Policy (NMP), which is, sadly, yet to be officially promulgated. The NMP rests upon two foundational pillars, viz., India's transition from a 'Brown Economy' to a 'Blue Economy', and, 'holistic maritime security'. These two pillars rest upon a legal framework wherein the country's domestic (municipal) laws are reconciled with international maritime law that India has signed and duly ratified. The broad contours of India's maritime security strategy, on the other hand, may be readily discerned from the October 2015 edition of the Indian Naval Strategic Publication (NSP) 1.2, titled, "*Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*".

There is much merit in India formulating and executing a maritime strategy that is focussed upon attaining the objectives arising from a detailed analysis of the country's principal maritime interests. This

‘interests-based approach’ is at the heart of India’s proposed maritime strategy, wherein India recognises — and leads regional recognition — that the geo-economic goals that the country seeks to achieve in this century are increasingly referenced to the maritime domain. This, in turn, will require India’s strategic thinkers, policy-shapers, and policy-makers to internalise the distinction between ‘capacity’ (implying material wherewithal such as ships, aircraft, submarines, etc.) — something that is likely to remain in relative short-supply — and ‘capability’ (implying the largely intangible multipliers of whatever capacity is available, incorporating, amongst others, organisation-skills; physical and mental (cognitive) training and skill-development, including operational research and gaming; administrative, managerial and leadership abilities; a very high level of materials-management, including maintenance and supply-chain management; legal acumen; and so on) — these are abilities that India possesses in abundance.

Countries that have excess ‘capacity’ will always tend to throw ‘capacity’ at a problem. By corollary, nations that have a surfeit in ‘capability’ must leverage this ability rather than solely hankering after ‘capacity’ and lamenting its relative lack.

Thus, in formulating and executing a maritime strategy geared towards India being a net provider of security in the region, India needs to play to her strengths (‘capability’) rather than to her relative weaknesses (‘capacity’). It is true that available literature on ‘capacity’ is far more abundant and is, consequently, far more seductive to naval officers who have largely been brought up on a West-inspired diet of hardware — and hardware-envy. Yet, a strategy that relies on weaknesses is unlikely to produce the desired results. This is not, of course, to say that India ought not to concentrate upon acquiring ‘capacity’, but only to assert that at the present juncture, our ‘capability’ is in greater abundance than our ‘capacity’ and we must leverage the former even while building up the latter.

If the proliferation of ‘capability’ is to be a strategy — and a successful one at that — the strategy needs to be fleshed-out so as to incorporate several interlocking plans. For such proliferation to be sustained in the recipient nations or navies of India’s maritime

neighbourhood, India will need to concurrently create a set of ‘virtuous cycles’ internal to India, involving ever sharper human skills. It must create and sustain these skills internally so as to be able to maintain a continuous flow of talent externally. In the external manifestations of such a strategy, India (and especially the Indian Navy and the Indian Coast Guard) needs to send the very-best talent that it has, to organise and train its maritime neighbours. This needs to be done without reservation and without seeking immediate returns on investment.

Internally, the development of genuine ‘intelligence-competence’ is a critical area upon which India needs to concentrate. Not all this needs to be cloak-and-dagger stuff. Much of it is merely good management. Take the fact that India already is a preferred destination for training of regional navies and coast guard organisations. Do we have a robust means of keeping track of whom we are training at an individual and country-specific level? In the future of which all individuals ought we to invest? How ought we to ensure that such investment is mutually beneficial and is perceived as being so? Which are the niche areas of competence that reside in our immediate-, proximate-, and extended maritime neighbourhood? For instance, the Sri Lanka Navy is the most experienced on the planet in fighting a maritime insurgency and also in innovatively maintaining high-speed Fast Attack Craft. Ought we not to have already formulated extremely detailed plans to take advantage of this expertise that lies right beneath our noses? Likewise, niche boat-building capabilities are to be found in the UAE. Could these skills be imaginatively ‘bartered’ by us? There are several spin-offs of a ‘capability-centric strategy’ that is strongly focussed upon information and its translation into intelligence. In times of peace, the multifarious challenges to coastal security — and hence to India’s maritime threats to India’s territorial integrity — posed by malevolent non-State actors and State-sponsored malevolent non-State actors predominate over all others. The need to maximise information of patterns of fishing and close-coast seaborne traffic, the development of internal ‘eyes-and-ears’ amongst the country’s coastal communities, the exchange of maritime intelligence with agencies external to the country and, often, external to government structures as well, can hardly be overemphasised.

The development of regional Maritime Domain Awareness is itself a significant facet of intelligence the execution of a capability-centric maritime strategy based upon information and its country-specific translation into intelligence. Optimal execution of this maritime strategy requires far greater awareness of the manner and extent to which other entities within the regional maritime domain (i.e., the Indo-Pacific) are developing similar or complementary capabilities, than is currently the case. Take CRIMARIO or the IORIS platform, for example. These EU-sponsored initiatives are transforming MDA around Africa. CRIMARIO 2.0 (whatever name is finally decided-upon) will be operative in South and Southeast Asia by the middle of the current year. What time-bound plans have we in place to leverage this? Is our maritime-security establishment demonstrating the imagination to take the EU seriously as a security-player within the Indo-Pacific maritime space, or are we still treating that organisation with barely disguised disdain? Does our maritime strategy cater to this? It certainly ought to.

Likewise, given the fact that although the contribution of maritime trade to India's GDP is growing rapidly (it already accounts for over one third of the GDP), do we have a human-development strategy in which our best naval/maritime minds are wrestling with the changed nature of the maritime transportation of merchandise goods — one where there is no longer any correlation between 'flag', 'owner', 'crew' and 'cargo'? The rationale for having a navy in the first place owes much to the centrality of maritime trade. India might well be able to protect its flag-shipping but, given that barely 7.5% of Indian exports and imports are carried on Indian bottoms, will that protect India's trade? What, then, ought to be India's maritime-trade strategy? Surely it cannot be the same one that prevailed when a nation's trade was almost exclusively transported aboard ships flying that nation's flag. The need for information is a pressing one.

The country's maritime strategy cannot afford to ignore the imperatives of climate change and the impact that this is already having. Whether climate change has predominantly anthropogenic causes or geophysical ones is not terribly germane. Whatever the cause, the impacts upon India's holistic maritime security (not limited to military security alone) are very significant and very adverse. Yet, there seems to be little more than lip service being paid at a national level. Clearly, an early

promulgation of the draft National Maritime Policy is a pressing need towards attaining coherence in the nation's maritime strategy. What are other countries doing? Focussed information across a number of impact-areas is desperately needed to drive a coherent future-ready maritime strategy.

A future-ready, capability-centric maritime strategy must be one where 'information' itself is based upon knowledge and scholarship. There is a great need to invest our abundant human capital in processes of technology-intensive research. Industry 4.0 will force the advent of 'Maritime 4.0'. As the new 'maritime India' struggles to get out from the shadow of the old one, there is a need for our strategy to accurately discern the shape and form of changes that lurk in the hazy yet near future.

Here, as an illustrative example, is a short list of what I believe to be the twenty most immediate challenges within the military-maritime domain, to which we will have to rise in the coming few decades:

1. The accelerated militarisation of space.
2. A sharply increased militarisation of the underwater domain.
3. A blurring of the distinction between the virtual world and the real one.
4. Miniaturisation — through the adoption of nanotechnology.
5. The rapid replacement of 'digitisation' by 'digitalisation'.
6. The maturing of robotics and additive-manufacturing driven by artificial intelligence.
7. A rapid spread of minimally-manned, unmanned-, semi-autonomous and fully-autonomous vessels operating upon-, under- and over the sea.
8. The replacement of explosive-ordnance by electromagnetically-driven kinetic ordnance (e.g., rail guns, extended-range

munitions, hypersonic missiles and hypersonic glide vehicles [HGV], etc.)

9. The continuing replacement of kinetic energy weapons by directed-energy ones.
10. A revival of lighter-than-air ships in large-load-long-endurance (L3E) configurations.
11. The gradual expansion of Mature Precision Strike Regimes at sea.
12. The widespread employment of lawfare to shape the operational environment, as also to shape operational-outcomes.
13. Tri-Service simultaneous-operations in own and enemy 'brown' (littoral) waters.
14. A sharply increased centrality of psy-ops and population-conditioning through the replacement of traditional vertically-structured communication by the horizontal proliferation of - social media.
15. An increasingly ubiquitous impact of climate-change.
16. An increase in tri-Service commonality of advanced weapon-sensor suites.
17. The steady replacement of crude-oil and its fractional-distillates by natural gas as a 'bridging-solution'.
18. A steady replacement of petroleum-driven propulsion for sea-going platforms by hybrid power.
19. A steady increase in the economic viability of deep-seabed mining.

20. A shift to the oceans as a source of fresh water, whether by way of reverse-osmosis desalination plants, or Low Temperature Thermal Desalination (LTTD) ones.

The pain and short-term turmoil of comprehensively preparing for these changes are undeniable disincentives for leaving one's comfort zone. Yet, this departure from our comfort zone is precisely what our maritime strategy must prepare and force us into, (often screaming and kicking) in terms of planning, execution and close monitoring.

\*\*\*\*\*

*\*The author, Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan (Retd), Indian Navy, is the Director General, National Maritime Foundation (NMF), New Delhi. He may be contacted at [directorgeneral.nmfindia@gmail.com](mailto:directorgeneral.nmfindia@gmail.com)*

*This article was published in the Navy Year Book Diary 2020. It was released at the Defence Expo 2020 in Lucknow in February 2020 and is reproduced with permission of the editor, Cmde(R) Ranjit B Rai MBIM (UK).*