

CHAPTER REVIEW

“INDIA’S MARITIME DIPLOMACY, 2004–14”

by Rahul Roy-Chaudhury in *Forging New Partnerships, Breaching New Frontiers: India’s Diplomacy during the UPA Rule 2004–14*, ed Rejaul Karim Laskar, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022)

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In the 21st century, India has emerged as one of the important geopolitical anchors of the Indo-Pacific. A key instrument of India’s outreach in the maritime expanse of the Indo-Pacific has been its maritime diplomacy. The UPA (United Progressive Alliance) government, in many respects, played a formative role in moulding India’s maritime profile against the backdrop of evolving geopolitics of Asia. Roy-Chaudhury’s chapter titled “India’s Maritime Diplomacy, 2004-2014” touches upon this very topic and traces the broad contours of India’s maritime diplomacy during the UPA years.¹

The author begins by stating the “*inherent difficulties*” in highlighting maritime issues in India due to the “*abysmal neglect of maritime affairs by successive governments*” as well as the “*strong bureaucratic turf battles*”; and against this context, he presents the progresses made during the UPA era where various steps were taken to safeguard India’s maritime interests.²

Roy-Chaudhury proffers three reasons for the proactive stance of the UPA government in focusing on maritime issues. The first was the realisation that India’s energy imports depend on the safety of international shipping lanes, which made the UPA government aware-of and sensitive-to maritime security risks and challenges. The second was the aggressive stance of China along the Himalayan frontier and the growing Chinese geopolitical presence in the Indian Ocean, which, in aggregate, made New Delhi serious about securing its own maritime space. The third was the shock and surprise of the terrorist attacks of November 2008 in Mumbai, which lay bare the gaps in India’s coastal security and prompted the UPA government to bolster India overall maritime security.

¹ Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, “India’s Maritime Diplomacy, 2004– 14” in *Forging New Partnerships, Breaching New Frontiers: India’s Diplomacy during the UPA Rule 2004– 14*, ed Rejaul Karim Laskar, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

² Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, “India’s Maritime Diplomacy, 2004– 14”, 327

The chapter posits that India's assertions of being a "*Net Security Provider*" in the Indian Ocean is emblematic of India's rising aspirations of securing regional maritime space, of which the maritime diplomacy is a key instrument.³ Roy-Chaudhury cites India's anti-piracy patrols off the coast of Somalia, its increasing naval exercises with friendly navies, the issuance of the Indian Navy's official maritime doctrine and strategy, and the deepening security ties with the US and Japan, as amongst the major indicators of India's growing maritime outreach in the Indian ocean and beyond. He argues that the rising Chinese inroads into the Indian Ocean have prodded India to increase its own naval interactions with the navies of the US, Japan, and Australia. The strategic convergence amongst these like-minded democracies began to become evident during the UPA years. Moreover, the author presents the deepening India-Japan maritime and strategic cooperation at multiple levels of governance as one of the key highlights of the UPA government's foreign policy. However, the chapter also observes the reluctance on the part of the UPA regime which, despite being engaged in defence cooperation and naval engagements with the United States, was disinclined to enter into any formal defence or logistic agreements due to its concern of further jeopardizing its tenuous relationship with China.

Roy-Chaudhury asserts that it was the realisation that India's economic and energy interests have far expanded beyond the confines of South Asia that also propelled New Delhi to expand its diplomatic engagement with the littoral countries of the Indian Ocean. The term "*net security provider*" became a part of India's maritime security lexicon and was used to signal India's will to be a "*potent and stabilizing force*" in the Indian Ocean.⁴ The Indian Navy's updated maritime doctrine of 2009 categorically placed the South China Sea and friendly littoral countries of the Western Pacific in its secondary area of maritime interests and linked "*overseas investments*" and the presence of Indian diaspora amongst India's strategic interests.⁵

The author cites India's deepening ties in maritime security with the countries of West Asia, such as Oman and Qatar, and Indian Ocean Island States such as the Seychelles and Mauritius, to highlight the widening arc of India's maritime interests. Closer home, the chapter cites the trilateral maritime security cooperation agreement between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives, signed in 2013, as a coordination mechanism for thwarting terrorism and piracy, as also to build better maritime domain awareness.

Amongst the more serious conceptual flaws in Roy-Chaudhury's chapter, is his usage of the expression "*net security provider*", which betrays a disturbing lack of scholarship, given that it is largely a creation of Western media, dutifully lapped-up by the Indian media and, considerably more surprisingly, incorporated into the lexicon of India's own Ministry of External Affairs. The correct expression has consistently been that India is well positioned to be a "*Net Provider of Security....*". This is the precise phraseology that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh used in his speech on 23 May

³ Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, "India's Maritime Diplomacy, 2004– 14", 328

⁴ Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, "India's Maritime Diplomacy, 2004– 14", 331

⁵ Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, "India's Maritime Diplomacy, 2004– 14", 329

2013,⁶ and is also exactly what Robert Gates, the Secretary of Defence of the USA between 2006 and 2011, had used in his address in the Shangri-la Dialogue in 2009, which is, once again, exactly the phraseology that appeared in the US “*Quadrennial Defense Review Report*” of February 2010.⁷ The word ‘net’ always implies some ‘gross’ value from which something has been subtracted. When one says that India is well positioned to be a “*net provider of security....*”, what is being said is that there are several ‘providers’ of net security and that India is amongst them. In other words, it is the ‘providers’ that are the focus of the phrase. To illustrate the dangers of using noun-adjective-strings, so beloved of the American media (and, by extension, the Indian media as well) one only has to write the words “*Net Security Provider*” twice, hyphenating the words differently in each instance. Thus: (1) Net-Security Provider, and (2) Net Security-Provider. It would be immediately apparent that these two cases imply entirely different things! Since much of the edifice of Roy-Chaudhary’s argument is dependent upon this media-concocted phrase, his lack of accuracy weakens what is an otherwise succinct analysis of the data he has collated for the period 2004 to 2014.

Whereas the chapter, given its scope, focuses solely on the UPA regime; a brief description of India’s evolving vision of its “*extended neighbourhood*”, which became a keyword in India’s foreign policy parlance during the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) rule (1998-2004) and certainly had a maritime dimension to it, could have added a layer of strategic continuum to the analysis.⁸ Moreover, had the analysis looked at the ‘UPA-1’ and the ‘UPA-2’ years separately, the author could have presented a more nuanced understanding of the impetus accorded to maritime security and diplomacy by the successive UPA governments.

In overall terms, and barring the significant conceptual error arising from the usage of the phrase “net security provider”, the chapter is a well-researched contribution on a very relevant topic. As such, it makes an important contribution towards the understanding of India’s maritime diplomacy, and will go a long way in enriching the existing scholarship on India’s maritime geostrategy and outreach in the Indo-Pacific.

⁶ Government of India, Prime Minister’s Office, Press Information Bureau, Release ID :96146, <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/erecontent.aspx?relid=96146>

⁷ Government of the USA, Department of Defense, “Quadrennial Defense Review Report”, 01 February 2010, 60. https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/QDR/QDR_as_of_29JAN10_1600.pdf

⁸ Scott, David. 2009. "India's “Extended Neighborhood” Concept: Power Projection for A Rising Power". *India Review* 8 (2): 107-143.