

MARITIME PERSPECTIVES 2025

A SWEEP ACROSS THE INDO-PACIFIC

Edited by

Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan
Ms Anuttama Banerji



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Editors: Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan and Ms Anuttama Banerji

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Foreword

The tapestry of the Indo-Pacific is imbued with a diversity that might appear bewildering to the uninitiated, incorporating an intricacy of interrelated patterns, much as any oriental carpet might. The threads that represent the political, social, economic and military strains of the regional security loom, with its complex weave of wefts and warps, are varied and multi-coloured. We should not be intimidated by this diversity. Rather, we should luxuriate in the richness and strength inherent in its texture. The interplay of the concepts of ‘amity’ and ‘enmity’ have been seen right through history, but as our region matures, we would do well to promote ‘amity’, at the expense of ‘enmity’. ‘Amity’ is characterised by trust and cooperation amongst states and encompasses a wide range of security interactions, including expectations of capacity-building, capability-enhancement, information-exchanges, the development of interoperability in doctrinal as well as operational terms, and mutual protection or support. ‘Enmity’, on the other hand, connotes fear and rivalry generated by states and incorporates security relations founded upon mutual suspicion and competition. The very conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific is an emphatic rejection of security relations that are founded solely upon such negative values as mutual suspicion and military competition. This is not to marginalise the State at the altar of non-traditional security. The State remains an important player, if not the principal one, in both, domestic and international intercourse. It is the main referent of security, but the enlightened State recognises that security — whether maritime or land-based, encompasses not just military issues, but social, economic and ecological ones as well.

These ruminations form the *crux* of this volume of Maritime Perspectives. The Indo-Pacific has always had more than its fair share of naysayers. Today, with the current US administration having embarked upon a far more inwardly oriented set

of policies, there are those who feel that the term “Indo-Pacific” is losing some of its sheen. Such pronouncements are decidedly premature and very probably ill founded. The maritime perspectives contained in this volume illustrate the depth and significance that continue to drive the concept and serve to reinforce the relevance of the Indo-Pacific. In so doing, it prescriptively amalgamates the rigour of both theory and practice. Since sound theory must always precede sound practice, the opening section begins with key deliberations on theoretical underpinnings and concepts that govern the workings of the maritime domain. This focus on theory provides the conceptual clarity that is an essential prerequisite to comprehend the intricacies of the maritime domain.

In the first piece, a detailed assessment of *holistic* maritime security in the region, is made, such that the reader is able to familiarise himself/herself with the terms that facilitate the conduct of academic debates and discussions within the domain. It accordingly sets the tone for the discussions that subsequently address the several themes associated with the maritime domain that have relevance to the Indo-Pacific. The second chapter dwells upon the defence and security components that govern the region before examining the viability of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) within the Indo-Pacific regional construct.

The next section deliberates on the regional maritime security dynamics assessing the behaviour of individual States within the Indo-Pacific. For instance, an assessment of Chinese capabilities and capacities presents us with the nature, extent, and imminence of the China threat for India and other regional stakeholders. Similarly, a detailed reading of the ASEAN-led Code of Conduct (CoC) in a subsequent chapter ensures that readers are duly acquainted with the advantages and risks attached to the adoption of the CoC to potentially manage the China threat along the South China Sea, a key sub-region within the eastern flank of the Indo-Pacific.

Subsequent articles in the volume reflect upon nation-centric and region-centric approaches that could potentially enable the effective management of the Chinese threat across the different sub-regions within the Indo-Pacific. For instance, while the article focusing on the East African littorals, on the one hand, deliberates on the

capacity building and capability enhancement efforts/initiatives with great alacrity, the one on Indonesia draws our attention to the eastern segment of the Indo-Pacific while highlighting the strategic dilemmas faced by that archipelagic nation. A few European nations are beginning to establish themselves within the regional consciousness as serious maritime-security players. Consequently, Germany, which exemplifies this group of European States that are seeking to build a robust and enduring strategic partnership with India, also find detailed mention within the discourse.

The dynamism that defines the Indo-Pacific is examined through the lens of relatively recent partnerships and potential alliances, which are becoming endemic to the region. Türkiye is a significant new entrant into the Indo-Pacific and the maritime connotations of the nexus between Türkiye and Bangladesh are deliberated upon in some detail. Emphasising the contribution of apparent soft power to hardnosed maritime geopolitics, the final article in this section directs our attention to Chinese hospital ships and the purportedly ‘benign’ Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) missions being conducted by the PLA Navy.

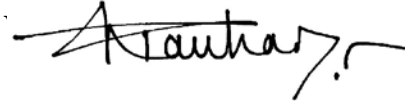
Moving ahead, the book reviews are important indicators of the reading that must accompany any serious attempts at research and analysis. The idea of maritime security and its enduring relevance is aptly assessed by a seasoned author who engages with premier scholarship on the subject. Similarly, leading publications on the Indian Ocean Region are reviewed and critiqued upon to inform readers about the existing limitations. Nuclear security and its abiding relevance to the maritime domain is also touched upon in a subsequent review.

À la fin, subjects such as the impact of culture and cultural tradition, which constitute the ‘alternative’ that more fully shapes geopolitics, are also incorporated within this volume. For instance, the metaphorical significance of the ‘chrysanthemum’ and the ‘sword’ within Japanese culture is reaffirmed to enhance our own comprehension of Japan’s strategic culture.

This volume is expected to situate itself upon the high table of prevalent maritime discourse and will guide policymakers, policy shapers, practitioners, researchers,

and students alike, in their common and constant endeavour to broaden and deepen their understanding-of and engagement-with the maritime domain.

Happy Reading! Sam no Varunah!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. S. Sathya', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Director General
National Maritime Foundation

Abbreviations

AIDA	Accelerated Industrial Development for Africa
AIMS 2050	Africa Integrated Maritime Strategy 2050
ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data
ADMM	ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting
AfCTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AKP	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi/Justice and Development Party (Türkiye)
AMD	African Maritime Domain
AMV	African Mining Vision
ANI	Andaman and Nicobar Islands
APSEZ	Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone
ASAT	Anti-Satellite Test
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
ASF	African Standby Force
ASW	Anti-Submarine Warfare
ASWJ	Ahlu Sunna Wa Jama'a
AU	African Union

BESIP	Blue Economy Strategy and Implementation Plan
BIAT	Boosting India Africa Trade
BIDA	Bangladesh Investment Development Authority
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRPL	Bharat Petro-Resources Limited
CAADP	Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme
CBM	Confidence Building Measure
CDRI	Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CGIMA	Contact Group on Illicit Maritime Activities
CIMSEC	Centre for International Maritime Security
CMF	Combined Maritime Forces
CMP	Combined Maritime Presences
COCOM	Combatant Command (United States of America)
CoC	Code of Conduct
COLREGS	Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea
COP	Common Operational Picture
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa

CRIMARIO	Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
CT	Computed Tomography
CUES	Code of Unplanned Encounters at Sea
DCoC/JA	Djibouti Code of Conduct/Jeddah Amendment
EAGL	East Africa Gateway Limited
EEAS	European External Action Service
EHTL	East Harbour Terminals Limited
ESIWA	Enhancing Security In and With Asia
EU	European Union
EUNAVFOR	European Union Naval Force
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
FON	Freedom of Navigation
FONOP	Freedom of Navigation Operation
FFG	Guided Missile Frigate
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
FY	Financial Year
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft Für Zusammenarbeit
GoA	Gulf of Aden
GMF	Global Maritime Fulcrum
HADR	Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief

HRD	Human Resource Development
IAFC	India Africa Forum Summit
IDRW	Indian Defence Review Wing
IFC	Information Fusion Centre
IFC-IOR	Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region
IORIS	Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IN	Indian Navy
INCSEA	Incidents at Sea Agreement
IDEAS	Indian Development and Economic Assistance Scheme
ILO	International Liaison Officer
IMO	International Maritime Organisation
IOFMC	Indian Ocean Forum on Maritime Crime
IOC	Indian Ocean Commission
IONS	Indian Ocean Naval Symposium
IOR	Indian Ocean Region
IORA	Indian Ocean Rim Association
IPOI	Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative
IPD	Indo-Pacific Deployment
ISL	International Shipping Lane

ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance
ITEC	Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation
IUUF	Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing
JNPA	Jawaharlal Nehru Port Authority
LSA	Logistics Support Agreement
MAHASAGAR	Mutual and Holistic Security and Growth Across Regions
MAI	Maritime Area of Interest
MAD	Mutually Assured Destruction
MARPOL	International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships
MBD	Mission Based Deployment
MDA	Maritime Domain Awareness
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China)
MM	Medical Mission
MOOTW	Military Operations Other Than War
MoPSW	Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways (India)
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MPA	Marine Protected Area
MPX	Maritime Partnership Exercise
MSA	Maritime Situational Awareness
MSC	Military Sealift Command (United States)

MSO	Maritime Security Operation
MTPA	Million Tonnes per Annum
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NCEO	Non-Combatant Evacuation Operation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NISHAR	Network for Information Sharing
NMF	National Maritime Foundation
NMSRR	National Maritime Security Risk Register
NSC	National Security Council
OIC	Organisation for Islamic Cooperation
OIL	Oil India Limited
OPNAV	Office of the Chief of Naval Operations
ONGC	Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
OVL	ONGC Videsh Limited
PCA	Permanent Court of Arbitration
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
PIDA	Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa
PIML	Public International Maritime Law
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy

PMO	Prime Minister's Office
POGDEP	Patrol of the Gulf of Aden Deployment
POLMAR	Policy and Strategy of the Sea
PPAC	Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell
P&O	Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company
QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
REC	Regional Economic Community
RMS	Royal Mail Ship (United Kingdom)
SADC	South African Development Community
SAGAR	Security and Growth for All in the Region
SAR	Search and Rescue
SCS	South China Sea
SDNT	Single Draft Negotiating Text
SHADE	Shared Awareness and Deconfliction
SMC	Standard Maritime Committee
SOLAS	International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea
SSP	Strategic Strong Point
START	Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty
STISA	Science and Technology Innovation Strategy for Africa
STCW	International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers

SUA	Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Maritime Navigation
SWADS	Special Warfare Diving and Salvage Unit (Bangladesh)
TCG	Turkish Naval Corvette
TERI	The Energy and Research Institute
TICTS	Tanzania International Container Terminal Services Limited
TIKA	Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı/Turkey Cooperation and Coordination Agency
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
UK	United Kingdom
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
UN IPCC	United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNTAD	United Nations Trade and Development
US	United States
USD	United States Dollar
VNSA	Violent Non-State Actor
WIOR	Western Indian Ocean Region
WSIE	White Shipping Information Exchange
WTO	World Trade Organisation

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*Conceptual Drivers Underpinning
Maritime Security*

Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific — A Contemporary Perspective

Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan, AVSM & Bar, VSM, Indian Navy (Retd)

In our contemporary times, two broad systems are currently engaged in global competition. The first is a state system that draws its legitimacy from a consensually derived rules-based order. The second is a state system that seeks to disrupt this consensually derived rules-based order and supplant it with an international order whose rules are generated in an exclusive State, namely the People’s Republic of China.

Thus, reflecting a desire to return to the “*Middle Kingdom*” period of Chinese hegemony, China is pushing for a global system of unipolarity that would be governed by rules formulated in Beijing — a system that would situate China as the keystone of all aspects of intra- and extra-regional affairs. In contrast, the USA has, thus far at least, advocated a system that sought to coordinate its own actions with those of major likeminded Indo-Pacific middle powers (e.g., Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, the UK, and Vietnam), contending that such a system was necessary to balance and counter China’s belligerent actions. This ongoing pull and push of these two systems is the fundamental cause of strategic uncertainty in the global maritime domain.

However, the current political dispensation in the US — what we often refer to as the second Trump administration — is injecting further uncertainty, by appearing to increasingly favour a world vision that is *not* one of *great-power competition* but of *great-power collusion*¹ — a system akin to the “Concert of Europe” of the 19th century.² Could Trump simply want a world managed by strongmen who work together — not always harmoniously but always purposefully — to impose a shared vision of

“order” on the rest of the world? In other words, the present Trump administration has questioned whether middle powers such as Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, the UK, and Vietnam have any actual agency at all!

Maritime Uncertainty at the Strategic Level

India’s situation is particularly interesting. Against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the widespread condemnation of Russia by Western powers — with many of whom India is developing strong ties across multiple policy fields — New Delhi believes that the geopolitical constriction imposed upon India by China will be even more severely felt than before and, as a consequence, as former Indian diplomat, JN Misra has put it, India only “*has bad and worse options to pick from*”.³ India, which shares an active border with China, must act to oppose any undue tightening of the Sino-Russian embrace, and is, therefore, reluctant to destroy its longstanding relationship with Russia. Arguably the most important feature of this relationship is India’s time-tested defence and diplomatic ties with Moscow, as Russia remains India’s largest arms supplier even though its share has dropped to 49% from 70% due to India’s robust efforts boost domestic defence manufacturing and to diversify its portfolio of defence imports.⁴ As a case in point, the S-400 missile system has long been believed by New Delhi to be crucial to India’s needs of air defence and, indeed, this faith was fully born out when the S-400 was used by the Indian defence forces to extremely telling effect in Op SINDOOR, India’s very recent four-day (07 to 10 May 2025) and very intense military clash with Pakistan.⁵

In Western minds at least, some degree of strategic uncertainty if not perplexity also exists when trying to rationalise India’s membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the BRICS construct against India’s obvious credentials as a vibrant democracy and an increasingly significant economy. This is largely an almost reflexive response to their mental positioning of Russia as a traditional adversary and a military threat, and of China as a more recently recognised one. It is this author’s view that such anxiety (and the strategic uncertainty that apparently arises in the wake of such anxiety) is wholly misplaced and stems from a cultural resistance to multipolarity in which Western powers are merely some poles amongst several others and not *primus inter pares*.

Arguably the worst strategic nightmare for Europe (and North America) is to have to deal with an axis or a compact comprising China, Russia, North Korea, and perhaps Iran or even Turkey. India is the only power that can prevent or at least delay the cementing of such an axis, given that Russia is not talking ‘to’ Europe nor is Europe talking ‘to’ Russia. Both are talking ‘at’ each other, mostly because they are not in the same room (i.e., in the same organisations) so-to-speak. The only major power talking ‘to’ Russia is India. And if Russia is to talk ‘to’ India, it will do so only if India is (and is perceived by Moscow to be) a *major* power with adequate and evident strength all across the diplomatic, informational, military and economic (DIME) paradigm.⁶ As this writer has often maintained, India must be strengthened and encouraged to engage with Russia in the SCO as well as in BRICS simply because India is the only “*adult in the room*”.⁷ India’s unique position should then be leveraged and such leveraging will actually serve to *reduce* strategic uncertainty.

A far more immediate and consequential cause of uncertainty is Türkiye. How should we think about Turkey/Türkiye under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan? Is Turkey/Türkiye the upholder of international law vis-à-vis the Montreux Convention⁸ in the Black Sea or is it a major source of strategic disruption, letting out *djinns* of religious fanaticism from bottles that ought never to be uncorked?

Nowhere can this picture of strategic uncertainty be seen in sharper relief than in the Indo-Pacific, which is a *predominantly* — although certainly not *exclusively* — maritime space, stretching from the eastern shores of the continent of Africa to the western coasts of the Americas, and from Eurasia’s southern edge to the northern coastline of Antarctica. This region is well recognised as having been restored to its historical position of being the centre of global socio-cultural and economic activity. Within its vastness, encompassing 64% of the world’s oceanic area, dwell half the world’s people in some 75 nation-states, accounting for nearly two-thirds of the world’s economy, and hosting seven of the world’s largest militaries. Along the many international shipping lanes (ISLs) that crisscross the Indo-Pacific, flows 50% of global container traffic and 80% of global maritime oil shipments, negotiating some 65% of the world’s strategic maritime chokepoints (Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, Mozambique Channel, Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, etc.).

Today, India's *'grand'* strategy, her *'military'* strategy, and her *'maritime'* strategy are all increasingly being contextualised to the Indo-Pacific. It is critical to recognise that for India — quite unlike for the USA — the Indo-Pacific is *not* in and of itself a *'strategy'*. It is, instead, a *'strategic geography'* within which New Delhi formulates and executes a number of strategies.

"Strategic Geography" is a term that might need some explanation in the manner in which it differs from *'real'* geography. If one were to take a chart or map that depicts *'real'* geography and then places upon it a set of coordinates defined by specific latitudes and longitudes, such that they enclose or bound a given area, and, within the area that has been so *'bounded'*, if one were to then give special focus — at the national-level — in terms of the planning and execution of one's geopolitical strategies, this enclosed or bounded area would define one's *'strategic geography'*.

Obviously, the strategic geography of one country can hardly be expected to be the same as that of another. Thus, the *'strategic'* geography of, say, Tonga, will not be the same as that of, say, India. Likewise, the *'strategic'* geography of, say, Sri Lanka, will not be the same as that of, say, South Korea, and that of Singapore will not be the same as that of Russia, and so on and so forth. Every country will have a strategic geography of its own and, since every State is sovereign, as it enjoys untrammelled freedom to name its strategic geography whatsoever it chooses.

In India's case, the name that New Delhi has given to its strategic geography is the "Indo-Pacific". The fact that its conceptualisation of the *'Indo-Pacific'* might not be identical in shape and form to another country's conceptualisation of its own strategic geography — which the latter might well have also named the *'Indo-Pacific'* is of no great consequence. For instance, nobody believes that that every *'John Smith'* must necessarily be defined by a physical shape and form that is identical to those of every other *'John Smith'* simply because both of them have been given the identical name of *'John Smith'*! And yet, far too many people waste precious time in arguing why one sovereign country's *'Indo-Pacific'* differs from that of another (equally sovereign) country's *'Indo-Pacific'*.

The *'Indo-Pacific'* constructs of Japan, ASEAN, the EU, Netherlands, France, and Germany, coincide with that of India in that they include the entire region

shaped by the Indian and the Pacific oceans, and, while those of Australia, Canada, and the USA do not presently go west of India and/or Pakistan, there is increasing evidence of *'strategic convergence'* in their constructs.

It must be noted that strategic convergence is not only about shared interests, which could, in their basest form, be simply transactional, but also shared values, ideas, and norms, across various policy-fields. New Delhi finds that strategic convergence with its partners is increasingly found in a variety of policy-fields. The sheer *'number'* of these policy fields and the *'depth'* of strategic convergence across them gives rise to a hierarchy of 'Strategic Partnerships', which was first articulated, albeit with fairly-limited numbers, by scholars from New Delhi's "Foundation for National Security Research", in November of 2011.⁹ The formulation has, over the past decade-and-a-half or thereabouts, been steadily gaining traction as an alternative to the US-led treaty alliances of the Cold War period (incorporating, within the Indo-Pacific, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand). The current hierarchy is depicted in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: India's Hierarchy of Strategic Partnerships

Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership	United States of America
Special, Strategic and Global Partnership	Japan
Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership	Russia
Special Strategic Partnership	South Korea
Green Strategic Partnership	Denmark
Strategic Partnership on water	Netherlands
Strategic Partnerships	Afghanistan, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, China, Egypt, EU, France, Germany, Iran, Italy, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nigeria, Oman, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan
Privileged Partnerships	Mexico

Source: Author

To reiterate, the Indo-Pacific is, for India, a *'strategic geography'* within which New Delhi seeks to formulate and execute a number of *'strategies'*. Obviously, each *'strategy'* reflects New Delhi's endeavour to attain one or another goal, be this a geoeconomic

goal or a non-geoeconomic one. Insofar as India is concerned, an illustrative listing (but certainly not an exhaustive one) of the geoeconomic goals, as also the non-geoeconomic ones, that its strategies, contextualised to its conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific, seek to attain, is indicated in **Figure 2**:

Figure 2: India's Geoeconomic and Non-geoeconomic Goals (Illustrative Listing)

<i>Illustrative examples of India's</i>	
GEOECONOMIC GOALS	NON-GEOECONOMIC GOALS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a high-quality digitalised economy • Move from a US\$ 3 tn economy (in nominal terms) to a US\$ 30 tn one by 2047 • Avoid the middle-income trap • Reduce national and regional wealth-inequality • Transition from a 'Brown' economy to a 'Blue' one • Become a major manufacturing hub in global supply- and value-chains • Become an advanced country (<i>Viksit Bharat</i>) by 2047 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustain territorial & cartographic Integrity • Build and enhance India's <i>Prestige</i> and reputation for wise and sagacious regional leadership across the Indo-Pacific (<i>Prestige</i> is a function of the <i>Perceptions</i> of other States with respect to India's capacities and New Delhi's ability and willingness to exercise its power) • Membership of the UNSC • Be the Preferred Security-Partner within the Indo-Pacific • Inspire the Global South

Source: Author

To attain the geoeconomic and non-geoeconomic goals depicted above, India formulates a series of geostrategies. Before going any further, it may be prudent to recall the difference between a 'strategy' and a 'plan': A 'plan' will always address questions such as "What is to be done?", "How is to be done", "Who is to do it?", "Where does it have to be done?", "When does it have to be done?", "For how long does it have to be done?", and so on.

A 'strategy', on the other hand, must not only provide answers to these very same questions, but in addition, must answer the critical question, "Why is it being done?". If a strategy does not answer the question 'Why', it could, indeed, be many wonderful things, but is *not* a 'strategy'. In addition, of course, a 'strategy' will often contain numerous subordinate 'plans' that are spread over space and time. It is also important to note that 'strategic' is an adjective and cannot exist without its noun, namely, 'strategy'.

To illustrate, India does not, in and of itself, have a *'strategic geography'*. It simply has a *'geography'*. Only if it has a *'strategy'* that seeks to leverage this geography will India have a strategic geography. The same is true for South Korea or, indeed, for any (and every) other country. Far too often, one encounters the bald statement that such-and-such country has a *'strategic' location* or a *'strategic' geography* without there being any evidence of that country having formulated a *'strategy'* to leverage its location or geography!

An illustrative sampling of the geostrategies that New Delhi is formulating for the attainment of the geoeconomic and non-geoeconomic goals that had been depicted in Figure 2, is depicted in

Figure 2: India's Geostrategies for the Attainment of its Geoeconomic- and Non-geoeconomic Goals (Illustrative Listing)

GEOSTRATEGIES FOR THE ATTAINMENT OF GEOECONOMIC GOALS	GEOSTRATEGIES FOR THE ATTAINMENT OF NON GEOECONOMIC GOALS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-engineer and reform government-processes • Prioritise global economic engagement • Lower Cost of Business through Deregulation • Strengthen domestic supply-chain capability and resilience • Promote port-led development • Develop Inland Waterways • Develop and regionally promote high-quality infrastructure that is resilient against adverse impacts of climate change • Extensive Skilling in AI-ML 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistent advocacy of UNSC structural change • Be (and be seen to be) the first-responder in HADR, as also in the countering of illicit maritime activities • Be proactive in cooperative regional <i>holistic</i> security and stability constructs • Give tangible manifestation to India's hierarchy of Strategic Partnerships • Develop initiatives for physical-, digital-, and people-to-people (cultural) connectivity

Source: Author

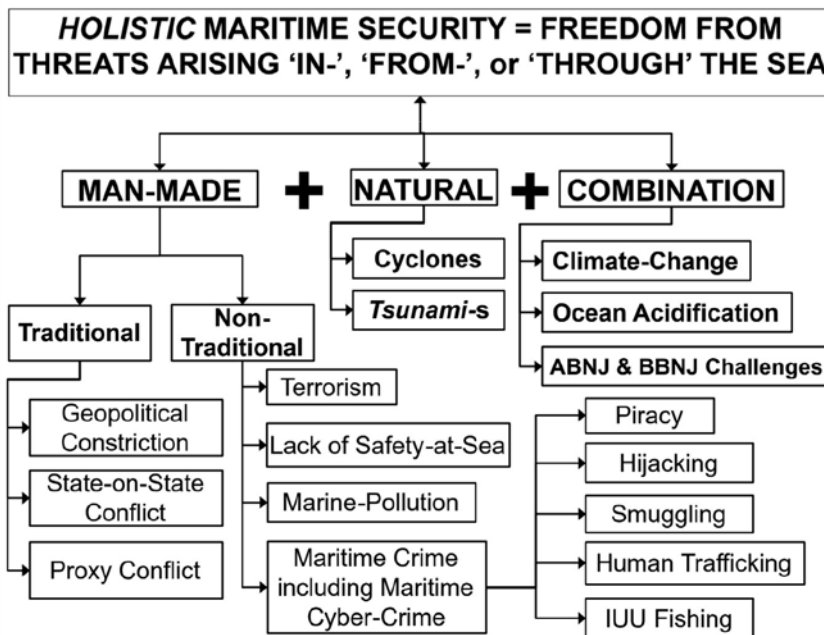
While executing these strategies, New Delhi remains acutely aware that India is *not* a post-modern State and that its geographical borders remain contested. The fundamental cartographic identity of the geopolitical entity called India, as also its territorial integrity, are, therefore, matters of very great sensitivity. New Delhi recognises that India's cartographic identity and its territorial integrity will always demand the acquisition and exercise of *'land'* and *'aerospace'* power (as so vividly

depicted in the recently conducted and hugely successful Op SINDOOR),¹⁰ and yet, India holds to the belief that the next two centuries will be centuries of the ‘*sea*’ and of ‘*space*’ and, therefore, over the course of these two centuries India will either be a ‘*maritime*’ power and a ‘*space*’ power, or she will not be any kind of power at all! Consequently, India’s strategic challenge will always be one of achieving the right balance between her ‘*maritime*’ and her ‘*land-based*’ geopolitical imperatives in this era of geopolitical uncertainty.

Within the vast maritime expanse of the Indo-Pacific, India’s principal ‘*maritime-security*’ interest has been articulated at the prime ministerial level and is the attainment of ‘*holistic*’ maritime security which has been defined as “freedom from threats arising ‘*in*’ the sea or ‘*through*’ the sea or ‘*from*’ the sea.”¹¹ Figure 4 depicts this typology schematically:

The adjective ‘*holistic*’ cannot be stressed strongly enough. It even finds prominent mention in India’s recently evolved and recalibrated maritime policy, which is

Figure 4: India’s Holistic Maritime Security Typology

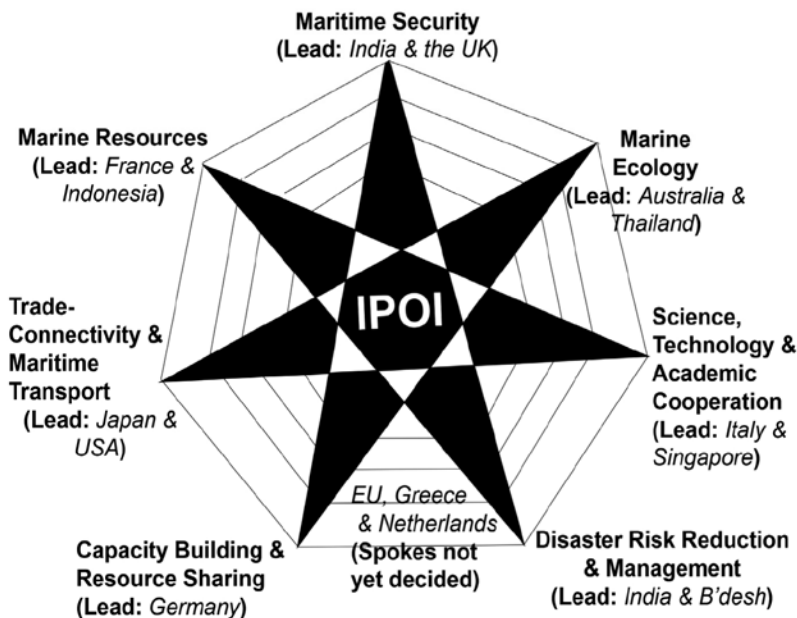


Source: Author

encapsulated in the acronym MAHASAGAR (*Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions*). While on an official visit to Mauritius in March of 2025, India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced this evolved *avatar* of India’s maritime policy, which has now replaced the earlier maritime policy-acronym SAGAR (*Security and Growth for All in the Region*).¹² MAHASAGAR retains the regional emphasis of SAGAR but extends its strategic focus to encompass not only subsume India’s expansive conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific but also the wider Global South, reinforcing India’s commitment to equitable maritime cooperation, inclusive growth, and capacity building across regions.

The Government of India has accordingly framed MAHASAGAR as a guiding policy doctrine¹³ for its maritime endeavours. Importantly, the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) — a non-treaty-based, voluntary initiative aimed at promoting cooperation for a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific region — continues to provide first-order specificity to this maritime policy/doctrine. The IPOI, as depicted in Figure 5, identifies seven major maritime lines-of-thrust. Although

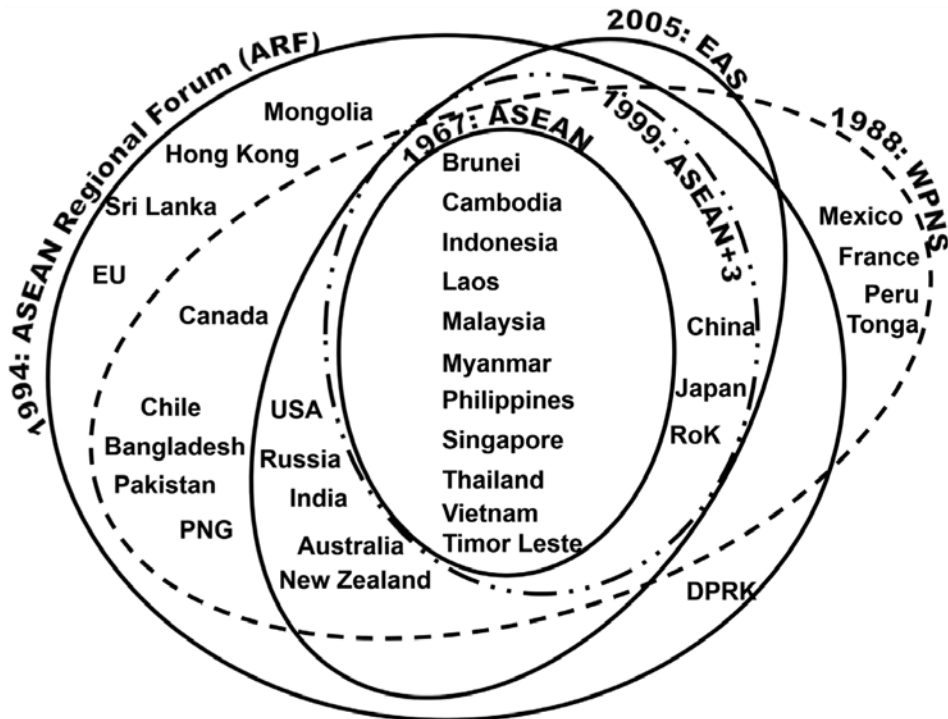
Figure 5: The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and lead-countries



Source: Author

In the eastern segment of the Indo-Pacific (the Pacific Ocean), too, India is included in all ASEAN-led constructs (other than the “ASEAN+3”) as **Figure 7** depicts:

Figure 7: Multilateral Constructs: Indo-Pacific Eastern Segment (Pacific Ocean)

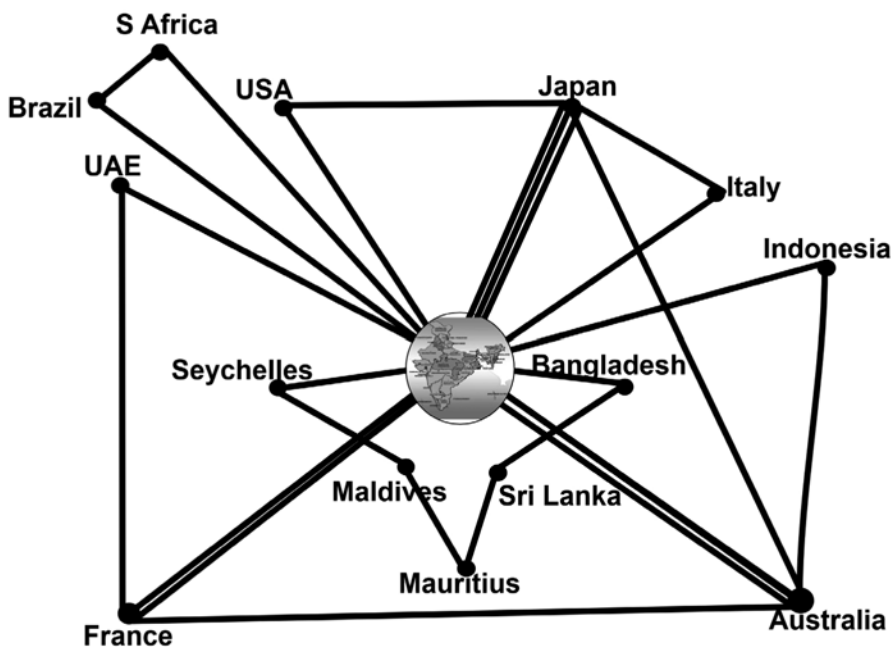


Source: Author

India’s second strategic approach is the “Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative” (IPOI), mentioned and schematically depicted in Figure 5. It is important to reiterate that the IPOI has been envisaged as an open, non-treaty-based global initiative aimed at cooperatively addressing maritime challenges that the international community faces in the Indo-Pacific. It is not some ‘grand plan’ of India’s that may be accepted or rejected or joined or left. It merely asks nations to cooperatively and collaboratively address the seven maritime lines of thrust that need to be addressed if mutual security, enduring stability, and inclusive, sustainable growth are to be achieved — all three of which are crucial prerequisites to lasting peace and prosperity.

India’s third approach is through ‘minilaterals’ such as the “Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation” (BIMSTEC); the “Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation” (FIPIC), which India established in 2014 and which includes 14 of the island countries – Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu;¹⁴ and the six members of the “Colombo Security Conclave” — India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles. Also embedded within this third approach are seven trilaterals as depicted in Figure 8:

Figure 8: India’s Seven Trilaterals and the Six-member Colombo Security Conclave



Source: Author

India’s fourth approach is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and its several capacity-building and capability-enhancement endeavours. India believes that perhaps the best way to sustain a stable, consensually derived rules-based order across the length and breadth of the Indo-Pacific is for the QUAD to weave the regional fabric through cooperative economic frameworks, quality infrastructure,

comprehensive maritime domain awareness, and collective Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Partnerships, health security, climate change and clean energy transition. The Quad is making progress and the sixth Quad Leaders' Summit held in Wilmington, Delaware, on 21 September 2024 was of particular significance, as summarised by Captain KS Vikramaditya, Senior Fellow at the National Maritime Foundation (NMF) when he wrote:

“The joint statement released at the end of the summit, now being referred to as the “Wilmington Declaration”,¹⁵ provides a roadmap for the Quad’s unified approach to maritime security, upholding international law, and addressing threats through joint initiatives. Emphasising the principles of peace, stability, and cooperation, the declaration highlights several areas that are critical for sustaining the Indo-Pacific’s security architecture, including support for the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), capacity-building for regional maritime partners, and technological investments in surveillance, and infrastructure resilience. Since the Indo-Pacific is primarily (although not exclusively) a maritime geography, it is only natural that the primary focus of the Quad’s varied endeavours remains maritime.”¹⁶

Within maritime security, the ongoing endeavours of the Quad are concentrating upon the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA). Although it is important for the Quad to address the twin issues of “maritime situational awareness” (MSA) and “maritime domain awareness” (MDA), this does *not* appear to be happening, and this lack of conceptual clarity could become significant in the future. This notwithstanding, since the programme’s inception, the IPMDA has expanded its network across various regional hubs, including the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (PIFFA) and the Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR). By providing its partner countries (not just its members) with real-time, integrated information, the Quad enhances their ability to enforce maritime laws within their waters. Prospective collaboration includes the sharing of satellite data, training in data analysis, and integration with local coast guard and naval operations.¹⁷ Further, over the coming year, Quad partners intend to layer modern technology and data into the IPMDA, thereby, continuing to deliver cutting-edge capability and information to the region.

The fifth and final approach being adopted by India in terms of constructive engagement is that of promoting connectivity in general and maritime connectivity in particular. It is very important that specificities be injected into deliberations

about maritime connectivity. At least six aspects require far greater granularity than is presently being afforded. These are: (1) the ports or nodes that are sought to be connected; (2) the medium upon which this connectivity is sought to be maintained; (3) the platforms that are intended to move between the identified ports and upon the identified medium; (4) the commodities (cargo, human beings, data-packets or data-streams) that would be carried by the identified platforms; (5) the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ infrastructure that needs to be established and sustained, and (6) the rules-based legal instruments, the security and safety norms, procedures, and processes, etc., which are necessary to support the envisaged maritime connectivity.

A few words about ‘hard’/ ‘military’ security may be in order at this juncture. Beyond the outer limit of India’s Legal Continental Shelf, the Indian Navy is the sole maritime manifestation of the sovereign power of the Republic of India. Given that the Indo-Pacific is a predominantly maritime space, the Indian Navy is India’s option of choice for the undertaking of stabilising and shaping operations, largely through naval diplomacy designed to signal national intent, as also to reassure, dissuade, and deter wherever appropriate and necessary. In many ways, “*Reassurance*” is the converse of “*Deterrence*” in that the former seeks to convince an ally or partner that it will, indeed, be supported in the face of coercion or aggression, but like deterrence, the success of reassurance is crucially dependent upon perceptions of capacity, capability, and resolve.

Where India and her navy is concerned, even amidst the rapidly changing dynamics of the Indo-Pacific, as described thus far, there are three great constants. The first is that India’s principal *national* interest remains the economic, material, and societal wellbeing of the people of India. The second is that as a maritime nation, India’s principal maritime interest remains freedom from threats arising in the sea or from the sea or through the sea as already depicted in Figure 4. The third is that India’s eight principal maritime objectives remain unchanged, namely: (1) protection from sea-based threats to India’s territorial integrity; (2) Stability (peace and prosperity) in India’s maritime neighbourhood; (3) the creation, development, and sustenance of a ‘Blue’ Economy that is resilient against adverse maritime effects of climate-change; (4) the preservation, promotion, pursuit and protection of offshore infrastructure and maritime resources within and beyond the Maritime Zones of

India (MZI); (5) the promotion, protection and safety of India's overseas and coastal seaborne trade including her Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), and, the ports that constitute the nodes of this trade; (6) support to marine scientific research, including that in Antarctica and the Arctic; (7) the provision of support, succour, and extrication-options to the Indian diaspora; and (8) obtaining and retaining a favourable geostrategic maritime-position.¹⁸

India's maritime-security strategies within the Indo-Pacific are informed by a continuous assessment of present and future *risk* in the region. Risk, of course, is a balance between probability of occurrence of an event *versus* the acceptability of resultant loss should the event occur. India identifies seven major maritime risks: (1) risks to territorial integrity, (2) geopolitical constriction, (3) risks concerning trade-dependence and disruptions, (4) risks arising from the security-impacts of climate change, (5) risks involving illicit maritime activities (including terrorism, piracy, and various forms of maritime crime), (6) risks of disruptions to maritime supply chains, especially those involving energy supplies, (7) risks of inter-State conflict.

Moving on from risk, India, like all other countries, also assesses maritime security '*threats*', where threat is the multiplication of military capacity-and-capability and aggressive intent.¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, only two countries emerge as serious military threats to India— China and Pakistan. Details of how India and its navy intend to deter — if deterrence proves unsuccessful — militarily deal with these threats should they manifest themselves as clear and present dangers, is outside the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that Naval Headquarters in New Delhi is fully in sync with other organs of the Indian defence forces and — since conflict is waged by States through actions by military forces amongst others — with the whole of the nation.

Before concluding, it is germane to state that as might be expected in a region that is pivotal to global industries including manufacturing, technology, finance, energy, agriculture, fishing, tourism, and shipping, security within the Indo-Pacific is a direct function of the acceptance, robustness, and durability of a rules-based maritime order. It is important to note that a consensually derived rules-based maritime order, as we know it, is the outcome of a complex web of public international maritime law (PIML) frameworks involving a whole slew of international conventions/treaties

which, when taken in aggregate, establish overarching principles and standards that govern the activities and behaviour of a large variety of maritime entities, whether these are operating upon the sea or are being controlled and managed from locations upon the land.

Unfortunately, far too many people believe that it is solely the 1982 “*United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*” (UNCLOS 1982) that is the determinant of this rules-based maritime order. However, it is critical to recognise that the *rules-based maritime order* is an amalgam of UNCLOS 1982 and a whole slew of extremely important international conventions, such as the “*Convention on the International Maritime Organisation*” (IMO Convention), the “*Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation*” (SUA Convention), the “*Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea, 1972*” (COLREGS), the “*International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea*” (SOLAS Convention), the “*International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships*” (MARPOL Convention), the “*International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers*” (STCW Convention), the “*Constitution and Convention of the International Telecommunication Union*” (ITU Convention), the FAO “*Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries*”, the “*Agreement on Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction*” (BBNJ Treaty), etc.

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12 June 2025

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Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) in the Indian Ocean

Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan, AVSM & Bar, VSM, IN (Retd)

*The Indian Ocean is a common heritage of the global community, and as in the past, its sea lanes will continue to provide accessibility to regional as well as extra-regional states.... What is needed therefore is an arrangement to maintain 'good order at sea'. Ensuring the ocean is 'open and free' for all, without exception, in keeping with the Convention on the Law of the Sea and finding ways and means of addressing any shortcomings in that Convention, through discussion and negotiation, and taking steps for domain awareness are among the solutions to the problem.*¹

This paper seeks to identify and analyse the necessity and relevance of maritime “Confidence Building Measures” (CBMs) that could lead to the desired end-result of predictable maritime behaviour founded upon a mutuality of trust, and the “good order” that arises therefrom, in the western segment of the Indo-Pacific, namely, the Indian Ocean. The initial section provides a broad overview of the types and forms of CBMs. Thereafter, the paper contextualises these to the maritime geography of the Indian Ocean, before focussing upon the question of whether fresh rules and norms governing the conduct of maritime entities — especially military maritime entities — are needed or whether the “*arrangement to maintain 'good order at sea'*” is already in place, requiring only adherence.

The United Nations defines “military” CBMs as “*planned procedures to prevent hostilities, to avert escalation, to reduce military tension, and to build mutual trust between countries*”.² However, even within the ambit of military measures alone, a more comprehensive definition is offered by the well-known former Director of the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Dr Johan Jørgen Holst, who describes

CBMs as “arrangements designed to enhance such assurance of mind and belief in the trustworthiness of States and the facts they create”.³ It should not, however, be concluded that merely because CBMs are preponderant within the military domain, they are confined solely to this domain. In the broader context of contemporary ‘holistic’ security, one increasingly encounters non-military CBMs as well.

Within this broader context, there is, indeed, much to be gained from the “OSCE Guide on Non-military Confidence-Building Measures” of 2012. It describes CBMs far more expansively, stating that “non-military confidence building measures are actions or processes undertaken in all phases of the conflict cycle and across the three dimensions of security in political, economic, environmental, social or cultural fields, with the aim of increasing transparency and the level of trust and confidence between two or more conflicting parties to prevent inter-State and/or intra-State conflicts from emerging, or (re-) escalating and to pave the way for lasting conflict settlement.”⁴

It goes on to dilate upon political CBMs, economic CBMs, environmental CBMs, societal CBMs, and cultural CBMs, averring, quite correctly in the opinion of this writer, that all of these are “...tools to lower tensions and make it less likely that a conflict might break out, escalate or re-emerge through a lack of information, misunderstanding, mistake or misreading of the actions of a potential adversary. They are also means to foster trust and bridge dividing lines between potential antagonists and an essential element of building sustainable peace. CBMs can help to repair the distorted communication between adversaries and to increase confidence among the parties that current and future commitments will be honoured. CBMs will, by themselves, not solve a conflict. But they can modify relations and behaviour and thereby the context in which the conflict resolution process takes place. Thus, they should be understood as an investment in the broader objective of peace rather than as objectives in themselves.”⁵

Political CBMs

Political CBMs are particularly important in addressing “trust-deficits”. So long as a trust-deficit is evident or is perceived to be evident by at least one State-party, the criticality of political CBMs remains unabated even in the absence of any overt inter-State armed conflict. The effectiveness of political CBMs, far more than other types

of non-military ones, is almost entirely dependent upon “*negotiated actions*”.⁶ Both words — “negotiated” and “actions” — are important.

While it is possible for confidence to be engendered solely through dialogue, the risks of misinterpretation and misunderstanding are ubiquitous ones, which are greatly exacerbated by apprehensions that one or both sides is/are using words (dialogue) to intentionally mislead the other. Of course, actions, too, like words, can indeed, be misconstrued or misinterpreted — particularly in an atmosphere that is already vitiated or one that is actively hostile. “*Yet because actions require greater effort than words, they are generally more credible and useful in helping conflict parties read each other’s intentions*”.⁷ In situations where conflict is absent, but a trust-deficit is deemed by one or another State-party to exist, political CBMs must be adopted as the leading approach. Other types of CBMs — economic, environmental, societal, cultural, and even military — can certainly supplement political CBMs but cannot supplant them.

Economic CBMs

Where economic CBMs are concerned, apparently ‘firm’ ground is much more likely to turn out to be quicksand. On the one hand, conventional wisdom holds that “*economic interdependencies foster close and fruitful relationships. States and intra-State actors/communities involved in such relationships seldom risk their economic wellbeing and survival by entering into confrontation*”.⁸ Regrettably, however, conventional wisdom, howsoever seductive, is seldom a reliable bellwether. There is already significant scholarship — not limited to dyadic (bilateral) inter-State relations alone — that fiercely challenges the notion that economic interdependence amongst nation-states generates peace. For example, Professor Katherine Barbieri, in common with many other influential scholars, offers a stern caveat to governments, strongly emphasising the dangers of any simplistic examination of empirical data in determining the linkages between economic interdependence and security.

From the mid-1990s onwards, a number of impressively researched and increasingly influential publications show that increased trade interdependence (even where dyadic trade is concerned) leads to an increase in the likelihood that a dyad

will fall into a ‘Militarised Interstate Dispute’ (MID), although this may not escalate into outright conflict. Using an extremely large data-set, with data between 1870-1938 and over 14,000 observations (dyadic years), Barbieri draws the very interesting conclusion that dyadic trade flows have a curvilinear effect on MIDs — more trade leads to more MIDs, and that higher economic interdependence, both symmetrical and asymmetrical, leads to more MIDs (even after allowing for contiguity, regime-type, relative-capabilities and alliance-commitments).⁹ At the very least, as Emiel Awad emphasises, what is beyond debate is the need for further and more rigorous research “*to get a fundamentally deeper understanding of how economic interdependence affects a state’s decision-making. Game Theory (but also other approaches) may be helpful to understand more clearly how economic interdependence affects the likelihood of war*”.¹⁰ However, even at the present stage of research amongst the intellectual elites of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and their institutions, it can hardly be contested that economic-ties between nations are deeply affected by the quality of their bilateral diplomatic relations and that economics and politics are inextricably intertwined.¹¹

Environmental CBMs

Environmental CBMs incorporate, *inter alia*, some combination of joint, cooperative, collaborative, or coordinated planning and training to deal effectively with regional or sub-regional natural disasters (and manmade ones as well) such as earthquakes, seaquakes, *tsunamis*, and floods, vulnerabilities to the adverse impacts of climate-change (port-fragility, for instance), oil-spills, etc. The great advantage of environmental CBMs is that they are perceived as shared solution-pathways to common threats. They are usually, (though not always) less impacted by political suspicion and sensitivities. While it is important to avoid the trap of defining CBMs too broadly — to the point where “*they can mean anything and nothing, thereby losing their conceptual clarity*”,¹² CBMs that address trans-national or pan-regional interdependencies and offer concrete incentives for cooperation and collaboration can be effective tools to knitting a neighbourhood, sub-region or a region together.

Societal CBMs

As one moves away from the confines of the Westphalian nation-state and examines the relevance and effectiveness of CBMs amongst collectives of human beings (as opposed to nationals or citizens — which are not interchangeable nouns) one encounters sharp increases in the need to retain conceptual coherence on the one hand, and an equally sharp increase in both, opportunities and challenges, on the other. Dialogues and exchanges between academics, educators (especially if these lead to the collaborative or joint production of textbooks), journalists, and policy-influencing institutions such as credible thinktanks, offer good examples of potential CBMs. The proactive creation and proliferation of advocacy platforms (conferences, symposia, workshops and seminars) as also joint-research projects can be effectively leveraged to engender and enhance confidence in past and present actions and future intentions of the States represented, thereby reducing such trust-deficits as might exist.

Cultural CBMs

Cultural CBMs are surprisingly effective but are seldom exploited with the same degree of vigour or persistence as are other types. The disappointingly lacklustre progress of the Government of India's *Mausam* initiative is an example of a very low realisation of very large potential.¹³

An important consideration is that while bilateral CBMs are the norm, this is not the sole format for their application. CBMs could also be unilateral, wherein a given State tries to assuage the insecurities of another (or others) and, by virtue of unilateral CBMs, encourages a diversion from a potentially conflictual trajectory to one marked by mutual comity thereby leading to non-confrontational negotiations. Indeed, it is not always appreciated that even in contemporary times, unilateral CBMs have an especially well-established lineage dating to the GRIT strategy (Graduated Reciprocated Initiatives for Tension-Reduction) of the mid-1960s, which had been developed for the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. This CBM is based on one of two potentially conflicting State-parties making one or more unilateral

gesture of goodwill and then waiting for the other to respond, without seeking direct reciprocity for each such goodwill gesture. As the process continues, both potentially conflicting and gridlocked parties could build trust and shore-up mutual confidence to a point where substantial negotiations can be resumed.

Quite apart from unilateral and bilateral CBMs and depending upon the context in which they are sought to be used, CBMs could even be devised and executed in a multilateral format, involving more than two parties. This is particularly relevant to five groupings that are operative within the Indian Ocean — (1) the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), (2) the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral, Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), (3) the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), (4) the Djibouti Code of Conduct - Jeddah Amendment (DCoC-JA), and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

Of course, transparency and predictability are crucial elements in all types of CBMs and the absence of either can prove severely detrimental to success. An example of lack of transparency is the explanation offered by the People's Republic of China (PRC) for the Indian Ocean deployment (specifically in the Arabian Sea) of its nuclear-powered submarines being an anti-piracy measure.¹⁴ This sort of lack of transparency tends to reduce confidence in the intentions of the State concerned and this lack of confidence breeds mistrust that then rapidly spreads to all Indian Ocean naval deployments (not limited to submarines alone) of the State in question.

Obviously, the utility and the format will depend upon the prevailing context and, hence, perception management will play a very substantive and substantial role. Within the maritime domain in general and the Indian Ocean in particular, perception management is a common feature of naval deployments and missions in support of a given navy's diplomatic role, especially in terms of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). The frequent HADR missions of India's Navy within its maritime neighbourhood — involving, *inter alia*, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Seychelles, Madagascar, Mauritius, Comoros, etc. — offer telling examples of unilateral CBMs.

In seeking the desired mutuality of trust, and the “good order” that arises therefrom, it is evident that the geographical spread across which this is to be

referenced will play a very significant role. The larger the geographical spread, and the greater the number of State actors (and non-State ones, too) contained within this geographical spread, the greater will be the complexities encountered.

Like any ocean, the Indian Ocean, too, includes its fringing seas. As such, its area of 73.6 million square kilometres¹⁵ may well be comparatively lesser than that of the Pacific and the Atlantic oceans, but it is, in absolute terms, quite formidable. It is separated from the Atlantic Ocean by the meridian of 20° East (south of Africa) and from the Pacific Ocean by the meridian of 147° East. The northernmost extent of the Indian Ocean is the Persian Gulf, at the approximate latitude of 30° North. Extending down to Antarctica at its southernmost reaches, it is practically walled off on three sides by land. The Arabian Peninsula and the east coast of Africa define its western wall. Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Timor-Leste, and, the north-west coast of Australia, define the eastern wall. The southern part of Asia forms a roof over its northern extent.¹⁶ The great peninsular landmass of India, jutting out for over a thousand miles, characterises the Indian Ocean, gives it its name, and distinguishes it from the Pacific and the Atlantic, which lie from the north to the south like great highways without any roof. The waters of the Indian Ocean lap the shores of as many as 38 nation-States (as shown in **Table 1**) with vastly varying territorial boundaries and limits:

Amongst the above-listed State-actors are some that have deep-seated and violent political conflictual histories that not only impact almost every sphere of their bilateral engagement, but also impact the sub-regional fabric of this major maritime sub-division of the Indo-Pacific, namely, the Indian Ocean. India and Pakistan are, perhaps, the principal exemplars of such hostility-driven States that *“have no confidence in each other [and] will often not even talk together, let alone enter serious negotiations or joint problem-solving”*¹⁷

However, a lack of confidence and inadequate trust could be evidenced in several other State-led engagement processes as well, even without the States concerned having experienced State-on-State geopolitical violence or conflict. In a few such cases, the normal course of diplomacy could be significantly hindered or may even be halted. In several such cases, *“Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) can be an*

Table 1: IOR Littoral States

West Asian Littoral		East African Littoral		South Asian Littoral		South-East Asian & Australian Littoral	
1	Bahrain	1	Comoros	1	Bangladesh	1	Australia
2	Iran	2	Djibouti	2	India	2	Indonesia
3	Iraq	3	Egypt	3	Maldives	3	Malaysia
4	Israel	4	Eritrea	4	Pakistan	4	Myanmar
5	Jordan	5	France	5	Seychelles	5	Singapore
6	Kuwait	6	Kenya	6	Sri Lanka	6	Thailand
7	Oman	7	Madagascar			7	Timor Leste
8	Qatar	8	Mauritius				
9	Saudi Arabia	9	Mozambique				
10	UAE	10	Somalia				
11	Yemen	11	South Africa				
		12	Sudan				
		13	Tanzania				
		14	UK				

Source: Author

*effective tool for preparing and deepening peace negotiations and mediation.*¹⁸ However, just as it is self-limiting to believe that CBMs are only relevant in the military domain, it is equally imprudent to consider them to be a panacea for all geopolitical ills or an alternative to the normal applications of diplomacy. Indeed, *“the usefulness of CBMs is often overestimated and this calls for a careful consideration of their limitations.”*¹⁹

Almost all contemporary discussions on means and methods of preventing dangerous (or unsafe) incidents at sea involving, either partially or wholly, naval vessels, are rooted in the “1972 Agreement for the Prevention of Incidents on and over the High Seas” (INCSEA).²⁰

The INCSEA Agreement was a response by the military leaderships of the USA and the erstwhile-USSR to a series of dangerous and potentially escalatory incidents that occurred in April of 1968, in the Sea of Japan. Both sides correctly assessed the extreme danger of having an essentially tactical show of naval brinkmanship escalate into a strategic (and possibly nuclear) armed conflict between the two superpowers

of that period. The apex levels of the respective military (naval) hierarchies involved themselves personally, lending requisite urgency to the process. The agreement was formally signed, in Moscow, on 25 May 1972, by the Secretary of the Navy (for the United States) and by Admiral Sergei Gorshkov, Commander in Chief of the Soviet Navy (for the USSR).²¹

Three aspects offer immediate and overarching lessons for our own contemporary considerations, although present-day analysts do not always give these the importance that they deserve:

- (1) The gravity of the situation was understood by the two powers, each of which was politically mature.
- (2) The danger of extremely rapid escalation from a tactical game of ‘Chicken’, played by carefully conditioned assertive and aggressive seagoing commanders, to a potential global nuclear conflict was correctly assessed to be very high.
- (3) This personal involvement of the highest naval leaders of the two countries signalled not only extreme gravity and extreme urgency, but also that civilian bureaucratic delays and obfuscation would not be brooked.

It is important to note that **none** of these impetuses are available in the Indian Ocean. It would also be worth recalling that the 1972 INCSEA Agreement was applicable only to vessels/platforms/units of the US Navy (wherein the prefix ‘USS’ — United States Ship — is used), as also to the US Marine Corps, the US Coast Guard, the US Air Force, the US Army, and government-owned ships of the US Military Sealift Command (MSC). A separate Protocol to the 1972 INCSEA Agreement had to be signed (in 1973) which basically stated that “*Ships and aircraft of the Parties shall not make simulated attacks by aiming guns, missile launchers, torpedo tubes and other weapons at non-military ships of the other Party, nor launch nor drop any objects near non-military ships of the other Party in such a manner as to be hazardous to these ships or to constitute a hazard to Navigation.*”²² This was necessary because the MSC has two distinct categories of vessels within it, either of which may be manned by a hybrid mix of uniformed and civilian personnel (the latter are known as ‘Civil Service Mariners’ [CIVMARs]) or an all-civilian crew.

The first category of ships of the MSC consists of US *government-owned* ships. These are US naval auxiliaries and are (quite confusingly for the lay person) given the prefix USNS, an acronym for ‘US Naval Ship’. The second category comprises vessels that are simply chartered from trade.²³ While USNS vessels have distinctive and unique blue-and-gold bands on their funnels, the chartered ones are indistinguishable from other merchant vessels.²⁴ All this is germane to the Indian Ocean because the US Navy — with its ships comprising a mix of warships (with the prefix “USS”) and naval auxiliaries (with the prefix “USNS”) — routinely operates in this ocean, as do British warships. The latter, too, are a mix of Royal Navy warships with the prefix “HMS” and Royal Fleet Auxiliaries (RFA). The crew of RFA ships are seagoing civilians who, although they have merchant marine insignia and ranks, are employed by the UK Ministry of Defence. Now, when such vessels operate in the EEZ of IOR States, there is some ambiguity as whether or not they ought to be considered warships in the classical sense and whether declarations that had been made by resident States while ratifying the 1982 UNCLOS (Bangladesh, France, India, and Pakistan, are examples of such States) include the activities of ships of the US MSC or British RFAs. This would be an apt case for the introduction of CBMs even though there are no conflictual confrontations between any of the resident IOR-States (other than, perhaps, Iran, Iraq, and Yemen) and the USA or the UK.

In the Indian Ocean, the India-Pakistan relationship might, at a superficial level, appear to mirror at least some elements of the US-Soviet one, giving rise to a feeling that the US-Soviet/Russia INCSEA Agreement can be extrapolated and some variant of the Agreement applied here, as advocated by Professor Monish Tourangbam (albeit in the Sino-Indian context rather than the India-Pakistan one).²⁵ Clearly, the seductiveness of replicating a perceived ‘successful’ model and applying it to a contemporary context is substantial. Indeed, this is the very sentiment that underpinned the conclusion of the India-Pakistan Confidence Building Measures between the navies of the two countries, as far back as 06 April 1991.²⁶

Although this seminal document is rarely studied or cited in India, its relevance can hardly be overstated, if for no other reason than that it failed. However, in

its failure lie important lessons on the limitations that must be placed on one's expectations in extrapolating the INCSEA Agreement as a maritime CBM. Quite apart from its major thrust on providing for advance notice of major exercises so as to preclude exercise-preparations from being mistaken for preparations for an actual armed conflict, this 1991 Agreement contained important preventive elements at a more tactical level involving the two navies, as witness the following extract:

“10. The Naval ships and submarines belonging to the other country are not to close less than three Nautical Miles (NMs) from each other so as to avoid any accident while operating in international waters.

11. Combat aircraft including fighter, bomber reconnaissance, jet military trainer and armed helicopter aircraft will not fly within ten kms of each other's airspace, including the Air Defence Identification Zones (ADIZ), except when such aircraft are operating from Jammu, Pathankot, Amritsar and Suratgarh air bases on the Indian side, as well as Pasrur, Lahore, Vehari and Rahimyar Khan air bases on the Pakistan side, in which case they will maintain a distance of five kms from each other's airspace. Unarmed transport and logistics aircraft including unarmed helicopters and Air Observation Post (AOP) aircraft will be permitted to operate up to 1000 meters from each other's airspace including the ADIZ.

12. Aircraft of either country will refrain from buzzing surface units and platforms of the other country in international waters.”

There were several eminently predictable reasons why this local variant of the 1972 INCSEA Agreement was never going to work. It is just that the seductiveness of replicating its perceived success was so great as to blind the concerned protagonists that this was not extrapolatable to the India-Pakistan framework. In 1991, neither country was a declared nuclear power (even though India had conducted a successful nuclear test in 1974), nor was, by any stretch of imagination, a superpower. The prevailing assessment was that a bilateral military would be unlikely to involve other countries of even the Indian Ocean alone, far less the world as a whole.

Finally, the CBM-document of 1991 was signed not by the two apex-level military leaders but, instead, by two very senior and experienced diplomats — the Foreign Secretary of each country. This might seem adequate in a normal case, but within a military as politically powerful as that of Pakistan, the sheer weight of a document signed by the senior-most military officer far exceeds that of a civilian bureaucrat, no matter how important sounding his title. Moreover, the agreement

was subject to ratification — a process that is convoluted enough in both countries and one that was almost impossible to attain in the supercharged atmosphere of the period in which Pakistani interference in the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir had reached a decadal peak. In any case, Pakistan’s Navy chose to ignore the provisions altogether and regular and dangerous ‘buzzing’ of Indian warships by Pakistani Air Force aircraft has continued apace. For example:

*“... in August 1995, Pakistan Navy (PN) Alouettes flew dangerously low over an Indian Navy (IN) ship participating in the International Fleet Review in the port of Tanjung Priok, Indonesia. In 1996, there was a near collision between a PN Alouette helicopter and an IN Sea King helicopter shadowing the PN’s annual SEA SPARK exercise in the Arabian Sea. The downing of the Pakistani Naval Atlantique by the Indian Air Force on August 12, 1999, is perhaps ... the most disastrous of these incidents...”*²⁷

There is little evidence even in more contemporary times, that the 1991 CBMs are even marginally effective beyond the mere provision-of-notice of major exercises. In July of 2011, for instance, there was a major incident involving an Indian and a Pakistani warship (the INS *Godavari* and the PNS *Babur*), both of which were engaged in what ought to have been a cooperative escort of a merchant vessel (the MV *Suez*) through a piracy-prone area, manoeuvring so aggressively as to end-up physically grazing and damaging each other.²⁸

All this notwithstanding, it is nevertheless important to note that outside of the significantly vitiated India-Pakistan relationship, the Indian Ocean region has been largely law-abiding, with warships or other maritime-security vessels adhering to established international conventions that govern unplanned or unexpected encounters at sea. Taken in aggregate, these conventions, rules, regulations, and traditional courtesies, cover the entire gamut of ship/vessel-based maritime intercourse, and constitute what is called a “rules-based order” at sea. While the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)²⁹ is, arguably, the best known of these conventions, and while an overwhelming number of IOR States have, indeed, signed and ratified this convention,³⁰ the 1982 UNCLOS is certainly not the sole determinant of predictable and lawful behaviour of seagoing entities. Another determinants of the consensually-derived rules-based maritime order is the 1988 SUA Convention (Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation)³¹ and its concomitant protocol also of 1988,

(Protocol for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Fixed Platforms Located on the Continental Shelf),³² both of which relate to maritime safety of ships and offshore platforms from hijacking, terrorism, etc., and address some gaps in the 1982 UNCLOS. Of even greater relevance are the determinants of ‘day-to-day’ predictability and lawful behaviour at sea. These are quite comprehensively covered by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). Not every enthusiastic proponent of CBMs in the maritime reaches of the Indian Ocean appears to appreciate that the IMO is not just a body of human representatives of nation-States and multinational entities. It is an international convention in precisely the same manner as the 1982 UNCLOS. This 1948 IMO Convention (which came into force in 1958) that was “*prepared and opened for signature and acceptance by the United Nations Maritime Conference convened by the Secretary-General of the United Nations pursuant to Economic and Social Council resolution 35 (IV)*”.³³ It has been signed and ratified by all coastal and island States of the IOR. Indeed, the IMO (as a body, with its council, secretariat, assembly, main committees, and subcommittees) draws its legal authority from the IMO Convention. The IMO has successfully sponsored a number of seminal conventions, rules and procedures, which put together, regulate the behaviour of all seagoing maritime entities.

The three major ones are the “Safety of Life at Sea” (SOLAS) Convention, 1974³⁴ (updated to 2020), the “International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships, 1973” (MARPOL),³⁵ and the “International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping for Seafarers” of 1978 (updated to 2023) [the STCW Convention], which specifies a uniform certification in respect of professional competence of seafarers. All three have been signed and ratified by all littoral States of the Indian Ocean. Another seminal piece of public international maritime law (PIML) that is a major determinant of the rules-based maritime order is the 1972 Convention (and its subsequent updates) on the “International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea” (COLREGS)³⁶, also known as the “Rules of the Road” (ROR).

The COLREGS Convention stipulates mandatory rules that govern patterns of movement, speed, and behaviour required for watercraft of all kinds so as to prevent close-quarter and other dangerous situations from arising. It includes the display of

shapes and lights and the generation of specific sound signals that signal the purpose and intentions of vessels in varying conditions of visibility (including vessels that are not in sight on one another). Likewise, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is the United Nations specialised agency for information and communication technologies (ICTs).³⁷ *“The legal framework of ITU comprises the basic instruments of the Union, which have treaty status and are binding on ITU Member States”*³⁸ The ITU’s Radio Regulations and their associated “Rules of Procedure”, *inter alia*, specify radio-frequencies that are to be used — including those for unplanned encounters of ships (including warships and naval auxiliaries). In the event that one or more vessels that are encountering one another are without radio communication, the communication-processes and procedures to be employed are mandated by the IMO’s “International Code of Signals”.³⁹ Linguistic incompatibility amongst vessels at sea is addressed by mandatory adherence to the IMO’s “Standard Communication Phrases (SCP)”.⁴⁰

It bears reiteration that each of these pieces of international legislation is a full-fledged convention, and each has been ratified by all littoral States of the Indian Ocean. Even where ‘hostile intent’ is concerned, the provisions of the “San Remo Handbook on Rules of Engagement” (Article 4.4 of Appendix 4 to Annex A) provide adequate guidelines in respect of seagoing vessels.⁴¹

Conclusion

What all this implies is that the pursuit of some fresh CUES-type of document (CUES is an acronym for “Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea”) is probably unnecessary for the maintenance of a rules-based maritime order that is predicated upon good order at sea.

Indian Ocean States ought not, perhaps, to expend undue energy in advocating a Code of Conduct that re-stipulates the existing conventions, treaties, rules and regulations, to which they are already publicly committed as ratifying parties. An undue insistence upon any additional ‘signed commitment’ or a pledge that promises predictable and lawful ‘good behaviour’ is unlikely to be more than chasing a chimaera and runs the very real risk of confusing ‘activity’ with ‘accomplishment’.

An international code of conduct already exists that transcends any given oceanic space. If a country is set on ignoring it, then concerted international pressure by way of deliberate and concerted social- (rather than economic-) ‘ostracization’, along with a ‘collective’ leveraging of extant legal arbitral mechanisms, are probably more likely to produce the desired behavioural change, if for no other reason than the fact that nations, like individuals, simply *want* to be liked by their peers.⁴²

In order to meaningfully contribute to regional policymaking by civilian and uniformed officials from across the Indian Ocean, the National Maritime Foundation (NMF) is working to prepare a properly cross-indexed “Maritime CBM Guide” that would act as a compendium or ready-reckoner, while also providing diplomats and officials with the requisite information with which to engage their counterparts from not just the Indian Ocean alone but those drawn from the wider Indo-Pacific.

The foregoing analysis must not, however, be considered as undervaluing in any way the enormous importance of non-military Confidence Building Measures in their several dimensions — political, economic, environmental, societal, and cultural. Indeed, in cases where a trust-deficit is felt to exist even in the absence of a state of confrontation, conflict, or actual hostilities, it is such CBMs, rather than ones aimed at seagoing entities that are likely to produce the most meaningful results.

09 December 2024

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*Regional Maritime Security
Dynamics*

Reviewing the “Code of Conduct” (CoC) in the South China Sea

Ms Sushmita Sihwag

At the 19th East Asia Summit (EAS) held in Vientiane, Laos, on 11 October 2024, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed support for the development of “*a robust and effective Code of Conduct*” (CoC) in the South China Sea (SCS).¹ This statement followed a series of public declarations by the top echelons of Indian leadership, all endorsing the finalisation of the CoC in the SCS “*in accordance with international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS*”.² On the face of it, these statements read as measured expressions of diplomatic tact, reflecting an attempt to balance India’s support for ASEAN-centrality and ASEAN-led processes with a commitment to the existing rules-based international order. However, a closer examination raises several pertinent questions about the rationale underpinning India’s balancing act.

This article examines the CoC from an Indian perspective and argues that its stated objectives are unlikely to be achieved realistically. It advocates for prioritising support for the strengthening of existing legally binding international conventions, rules, and regulations, which have already been ratified by the relevant parties. Finally, it considers the risks of prioritising an informal, potentially non-binding sub-regional mechanism over the multilateral, rules-based international order.

Insofar as India is concerned, a CoC for which India has not been consulted may well prove detrimental for the pursuit of its legitimate maritime interests in the SCS. Hence, it seeks to offer caution to India’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), the Ministry of Defence (MoD), and the Indian Navy (IN) that it might be premature to issue public statements supporting the CoC that potentially risks undermining the centrality and effectiveness of the existing

international legal frameworks. Instead, efforts need to be made through private bilateral negotiations with ASEAN and its member States to ensure that India's interests — and those of other seafaring nations, too, — are preserved.

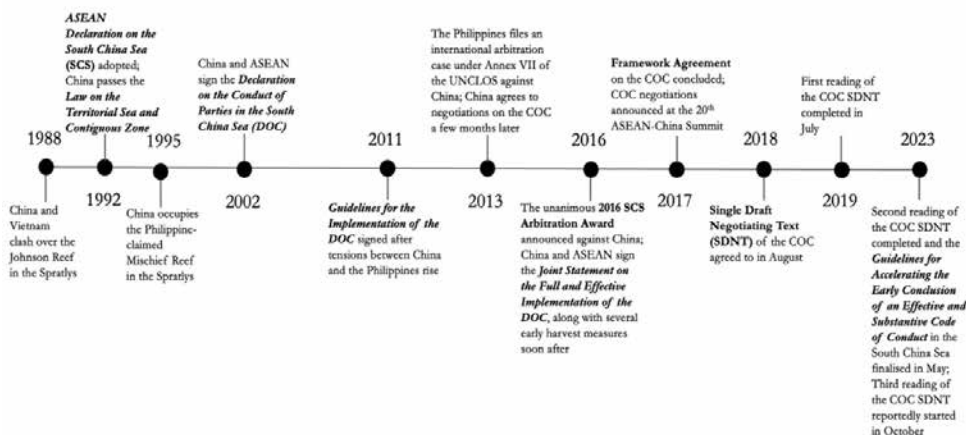
Analysis of the Objectives of the CoC

Before weighing in on India's support for the conclusion of the CoC in the SCS, it is important to consider whether the Code's stated objectives can be realistically achieved. In official statements, both ASEAN and China agree on the importance of fostering mutual trust, preventing and managing incidents, and creating a conducive environment for peaceful dispute resolution.³ However, in practical terms, the underlying aims and objectives of the two parties have diverged sharply. While ASEAN has viewed the negotiations on the CoC for de-escalating tensions and managing the conflict, China's increasingly aggressive manoeuvres have exposed its actual intent to utilise them as a delaying tactic to consolidate its claims in the SCS and alter the facts 'at sea'.⁴ For China, the negotiations serve to contain the issue at a sub-regional level and limit the involvement of external powers.⁵

Consequently, it has repeatedly agreed to ASEAN's calls for negotiations following tense episodes in the SCS, only to resume its island-building activities and harassment of the maritime enforcement agencies and fisherfolk from other littoral States soon thereafter. For instance, after it seized the Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines in 2012, causing the latter to file an international arbitration case under Annex VII of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) a year later,⁶ China adopted a more cooperative stance on CoC consultations with ASEAN.⁷ This notwithstanding, it pressed ahead with its island-building campaign on the seven reefs that it had occupied in the Spratly Islands, at an even more frenetic pace.⁸ Similarly, in 2016, after the Arbitral Tribunal ruled entirely in favour of the Philippines, China exhibited renewed enthusiasm for the CoC negotiations, while refusing to comply with the Award or giving up its strongarm tactics in the SCS (**Figure 1 refers**).⁹

The divergence in actual objectives possibly explains the failure of the negotiations and the preceding documents in effectively preventing or managing the disputes in

Figure 1. Timeline representing the Negotiation History of the Code of Conduct (COC)



Source: Compiled by the Author from Various Sources

the SCS thus far. The lack of mutual intention to implement the documents adopted is certainly a recipe for failure. Over the last two decades since its signing in 2002, the non-binding Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DoC)¹⁰ has arguably been reduced to little more than a political statement of noble intent. Its provisions on the freedom of navigation and overflight, refraining from undertaking activities on uninhabited islands, and humane treatment of persons in distress have been repeatedly disregarded, principally by China.¹¹

Since the CoC is not intended to be an instrument for the settlement of territorial disputes or the delimitation of maritime boundaries,¹² it does not address issues concerning sovereignty, which are, in fact, at the root of the conflict in the SCS. It is evident that the DOC and negotiations on the CoC have failed to create a “*favourable environment*”¹³ for the settlement of disputes.

Thus, even if the CoC were to be adopted, it is unrealistic to expect that it could aid in “*preventing*” or “*managing*”¹⁴ disputes while the underlying cause of the conflict continues to fester. It is important to bear in mind that when China employs aggressive manoeuvres against relatively weaker littoral States in the SCS, it acts on the narrative of asserting its sovereignty in the SCS, derived from its historic claims,¹⁵ represented initially by the ‘nine-dash line’, and later the “Four Shas” claim.¹⁶ At this

point in time, there is enough evidence to support the argument that its “grey zone” tactics are intentional acts of hostility, and not an outcome of misunderstandings or lack of communication which could be resolved by Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) or emergency hotlines.¹⁷

In addition, several key areas of disagreement have emerged during the course of negotiations on the Single Draft Negotiating Text (SDNT) of the CoC. These disagreements, pertaining to the defining of the geographic scope, the “*duty to cooperate*”, the role of third parties, and the legal status of the COC, have repeatedly delayed the finalisation of the Code.¹⁸ If ASEAN and China are unable to find consensus on these critical issues, the CoC risks becoming yet another political declaration like the DOC which ultimately lacks effective implementation. Reaching consensus on these contentious issues, however, is easier said than done as it may require the parties to compromise on their positions regarding sovereignty and foreign policy independence in the SCS.

Moreover, divisions amongst the claimant and non-claimant States within ASEAN have further weakened its collective negotiating position on the CoC *vis-à-vis* China.¹⁹ Thus, while the COC may achieve secondary diplomatic and strategic aims, such as fostering regional dialogue and lending a semblance of ‘ASEAN centrality’ to the negotiations, it is unlikely to fulfil its stated objectives of guiding the behaviour of the concerned parties at sea and promoting peace and stability in the South China Sea.

Existing International Legal Frameworks under the Consensually derived Rules-based International Order

Regardless of the progress, or lack thereof, on finalising the CoC, it is important to give due consideration to the existing legally binding conventions, rules, and regulations, which govern the behaviour of sea-going entities. The universally-recognised framework for maritime law, the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982) — often described as “*the Constitution for the Oceans*”²⁰ — establishes the rules for the delimitation of maritime boundaries and entitlements, innocent passage, management of resources, protection of marine resources, conduct

of marine scientific research, and lays down clear dispute settlement mechanisms.²¹ Importantly, it has been signed and ratified by all the parties involved in the CoC negotiations, *including China*.

Apart from the UNCLOS (1982), the International Maritime Organisation's (IMO) "Convention of the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea" (COLREGs), which was signed in 1972 and entered into force in 1977, outlines rules that govern the behaviour of "*all vessels upon the high seas and all waters connected to the high seas and navigable by seagoing vessels*"²² and provides unambiguous guidelines. By establishing responsibility for safe navigation and specifying measures pertaining to speed, ascertaining the risk of collision, the use of sound and light signals, and manoeuvring in any condition of visibility,²³ COLREGs already provides a strong foundation for ensuring safe and responsible navigation at sea, including in the SCS.

The COLREGs is supplemented by the "Radio Regulations" of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU),²⁴ along with several other consensually-established and internationally accepted rules and regulations, such as the IMO's Code of Signals²⁵ and the IMO's Standard Marine Communication Phrases,²⁶ which guide radio- and other forms of communication amongst vessels at sea.²⁷ The non-binding "Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea" (CUES),²⁸ signed in 2014, provides an additional set of guidelines for naval forces to follow in situations where they might encounter other military vessels or aircrafts in unplanned, non-combat situations, with the goal of avoiding misunderstandings and preventing clashes. These rules and regulations are particularly relevant for the SCS, where military vessels of multiple countries operate in close proximity, often in disputed waters.

In the specific context of Southeast Asia, the legally binding 1976 "ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in Southeast Asia" already provides a broad framework for the peaceful resolution of disputes through the provision for a "High Council".²⁹ If the failure of the parties to institute the High Council in all these years is any indicator of the likely outcome of the non-binding CoC, it would be more effective to operationalise and utilise the binding TAC mechanisms in earnest. Further, unlike the CoC which seeks to limit, if not exclude, the involvement of

external powers under China's influence, the TAC allows for accession by external States and regional organisations. Notably, India along with China, was the first non-ASEAN State, to sign the instrument of accession in 2003.³⁰

It has been well argued that these existing conventions, rules, and regulations already constitute an *"international code of conduct"*, and, if a country does not comply with them, then *"concerted social- (rather than economic-) 'ostracization', along with a 'collective' leveraging of extant legal arbitral mechanisms, are more likely to produce the desired behavioural change"* than are the signing of additional regional declarations and agreements intended to bring about *"good order at sea"*.³¹ This is exemplified by the international attention, and corresponding censure, that China's hostile actions in the SCS drew following the 2016 SCS Arbitration Award,³² which forced it to endorse a voluminous legal rebuttal³³ and come to the negotiating table, even if with an intention to bind ASEAN to talks and to deflect international attention from the issue.

The Award of the Arbitral Tribunal, constituted under Annex VII of the 1982 UNCLOS, was seminal because it was the first international legal ruling that afforded clarity on several contentious issues involved in the conflict unfolding in the SCS, and was salient for maritime disputes involving similar legal conundrums globally. It dismissed China's extensive historic claims in the SCS for being in contravention of the 1982 UNCLOS,³⁴ found that *"none of the high-tide features in the Spratly Islands is a fully entitled island for the purposes of Article 121 of the Convention"* and did not generate maritime entitlements beyond a 12-nautical mile (nm) Territorial Sea, and ruled that low-tide elevations such as the Mischief Reef and the Second Thomas Shoal could not be appropriated by China as they did not generate any entitlements and lay within the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of the Philippines.³⁵ By corollary, it found China's construction of installations and artificial islands at the Mischief Reef without the permission of the Philippines to be violative of Articles 60 and 80 of the 1982 UNCLOS.³⁶

Further, its finding that the actions of Chinese law enforcement vessels had infringed upon the traditional fishing rights of Filipino fisherfolk by hindering their activities at the Scarborough Shoal was notable for bringing some of China's *"grey zone"* tactics under the purview of international law. It found the actions of Chinese-

flagged vessels under consideration to be in violation of rules 2, 6, 7, 8, 15, and 16 of the COLREGs, and attributed these to China, which was, as a result, in breach of Article 94 [“Duties of the Flag State”] of 1982 UNCLOS”.³⁷ In addition, it held China liable for violating its obligations under Article 58(3) of 1982 UNCLOS due to Chinese maritime law enforcement vessels escorting and protecting Chinese fishing vessels illegally fishing in the EEZ of the Philippines.³⁸

China’s own policy of “*no acceptance, no participation, no recognition, and no implementation*”³⁹ notwithstanding, the binding Award provided international legal and diplomatic recognition of the legitimate claims and concerns of the other littoral States of the SCS. As a result, it aided them in moving the needle on the core issues of maritime delimitation, sovereignty, and jurisdiction.⁴⁰ Unsurprisingly then, the arbitration proceedings were characterised by Chinese analysts as “*a tool of political contests*”⁴¹ and an “*obstacle to the management of conflicts and resolution of disputes*”.⁴² Thus, it becomes crucial to frame the central issue in the SCS in terms of China’s coercive actions violating international law.

Insofar as India is concerned, it has called for adherence to the 2016 SCS Award more openly,⁴³ signalling a marked shift in its stance since 2023, one that is quite in contrast to its cautious response in 2016.⁴⁴ Arguably, making regular public declarations championing the binding Award would be more effective in bolstering the rules-based international order and putting pressure on a non-compliant State for violating international law, instead of statements supporting an informal, potentially non-binding, regional mechanism.

CoC and the Risks of the Decline in Multilateralism

In any case, the attempt to ‘regionalise’ the issue by shifting the focus to the COC negotiations, as opposed to its ‘internationalisation’, despite the Philippines filing, and eventually winning, the SCS arbitration case, has only served China’s interests and allowed it to continue its harassment of other littoral SCS countries. This shift towards regionalisation could be seen as a part of the larger trend of the decline in multilateralism and the growing preference for unilateral and regional maritime-security solutions.⁴⁵ Problematically, however, this leads to siloed regional approaches

to emerging global maritime-security challenges, while also making it difficult to hold States legally accountable.⁴⁶ For instance, it is increasingly becoming evident that “*grey zone*” tactics are not limited to China or the SCS.⁴⁷ Thus, the eminent maritime security expert, Dr Christian Bueger, recommends the need for a better balance between ‘formal’ global and ‘informal’ regional approaches to addressing maritime-security challenges, along with bolstering multilateral institutions and fora to develop global solutions.⁴⁸

However, while the Framework Agreement and the SDNT do mention commitment to the general principles of international law, the latter concerningly omits any reference to the binding dispute mechanism provided under Annex VII of 1982 UNCLOS or compliance with the 2016 Arbitration Award.⁴⁹ In a way, then, the CoC actually dilutes the dispute resolution provisions provided under international law by prioritising “*friendly negotiations*” and resolution at the cost of “*the consent of the concerned Parties*”.⁵⁰ This is in line with China’s rejection of any “*third party dispute settlement*” on matters pertaining to the SCS and its preference for dealing bilaterally with the States concerned “*on the basis of respecting historical facts*”.⁵¹ Regardless of the attempts by ASEAN member-States such as Vietnam to reconcile the CoC with existing international law through a “*global-regional nexus*”,⁵² it is difficult to imagine that such a balance could be achieved considering China’s vehement opposition to binding dispute-settlement mechanisms. Thus, an excessive focus on finalising the CoC risks undermining the centrality of the existing, consensually established international legal framework.

Conclusion

The foregoing arguments do not purport to recommend that India should eschew support for regional mechanisms. However, it is important to be clear-eyed about what they can or cannot realistically achieve. While ASEAN member States hope that the CoC will emerge as a critical framework for managing tensions in the SCS, its potential to clarify or dilute existing international legal norms — particularly 1982 UNCLOS — depends heavily upon the final text of the agreement. The secondary analysis of the SDNT, regrettably, does not hold much promise in this regard.

As an external but key stakeholder in the developments in the SCS, India has consistently supported the adoption of a CoC consistent with a rules-based order and existing international legal frameworks, such as the 1982 UNCLOS. While it is beneficial to support a CoC “in principle”, especially if the agreement emphasises freedom of navigation, peaceful dispute resolution, and regional cooperation, it is nevertheless critical to bear in mind that existing legal frameworks which form the foundation of a consensually established rules-based international order contain detailed provisions and guidelines which sufficiently address these issues. Thus, to strengthen the multilateral rules-based international order, it would be more effective to strongly demand adherence to the existing international legal framework and compliance with the 2016 Arbitration Award.

Policy Recommendations for India

1. **Tread with Caution.** India must continuously monitor the developments of the negotiations and be cautious about publicly supporting the COC without fully understanding the potential risks of legitimising China’s territorial claims in the SCS or undermining the binding dispute resolution mechanisms under international law.
2. **Ensure that the COC does not Undermine the Rules-based International Order and Legitimate Interests of non-COC negotiating Parties, including India.** India needs to prioritise safeguarding the integrity of the rules-based international order and the legitimate interests of non-COC negotiating parties, including India, within any regional cooperative framework.
3. **Prioritise Advocacy of Existing International Legal Mechanisms and Frameworks.** India should strongly endorse existing international legal mechanisms and frameworks, such as the 1982 UNCLOS, as well as the 2016 Arbitration Award, as the primary tools for managing disputes in the SCS, rather than focussing on a potentially non-binding agreement.

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Infusing Maritimity into India's Foreign Policy towards Eastern Africa – Policy Recommendations

Ms Anum Khan

India's maritime policy of SAGAR¹ was a comprehensive statement of India's policy-intent in progressing its maritime relations with the island- and coastal States of eastern Africa. Its subsequent amplification into 'MAHASAGAR', has extended India's maritime strategic outlook to the wider Indo-Pacific.² This policy extension underscores a more inclusive and cooperative approach, aimed at addressing a broader range of evolving threats across the maritime domain. That said, it is somewhat surprising to note that issues pertaining to maritime security and commerce tend to be unduly played-up by New Delhi, even while its endeavours in other facets of this policy, such as the building of capacity and enhancing of capability in the areas of human and societal development tend to be underplayed and understated.

This creates the impression — at least amongst the lay public — that India is principally interested in its own maritime security rather than in strengthening developmental activity that would prove to be beneficial to its African partners. It is not that India is not doing substantial work in maritime developmental activities along the eastern African littoral and in eastern Africa's Island States. It is more a matter of New Delhi balancing the form, content, and slant of its strategic messaging. After all, with the duality of 'security' and 'growth', the former is relevant principally in the manner in which — as also the degree to which — the former enables, shapes, and promotes the latter.

India's development partnership with Africa dates to the 1960s, when it began collaborating with developing countries based on the principles of partnership and cooperation for mutual benefit.³ However, despite the evolution of this partnership

to include an increasing variety of forms of engagement, the degree of centrality that ought to have been accorded to maritime development continues to be quite inadequate. Consequently, the feeling persists that in the practical execution of India's maritime policy towards Africa (an execution that ought to be guided by the seven lines-of-thrust encompassed within India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)⁴ that provides first-order-specificity to SAGAR, and now to MAHASAGAR), India's foreign policy vis-à-vis eastern Africa still lacks a holistic maritime development framework, maintaining only a skewed maritime focus.

In engaging Africa, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has adopted a triadic policy approach, progressing its engagement at bilateral, multilateral, and sub-regional diplomatic levels. Yet, despite this multi-layered engagement, a certain degree of maritime myopia remains evident in India's approach towards the continent. For example, there is a clear need to build policy bridges between India and the maritime-congruent structures of eastern African coastal and island States, which would allow these nations to replicate India's maritime development model. This article aims to highlight the range of maritime activities that India undertakes with these countries across a variety of domains; it analyses how these activities have influenced New Delhi's foreign policy, and simultaneously critiques the lack of a structured approach.

India's foreign policy compass has deflected in various directions over the years. Geography, being a significant factor, has influenced its progress. A major tactical shift arose when India chose to change its focus from 'continentality' to 'maritimity'. However, achieving a strong maritime orientation, or 'maritimity,' remains a key challenge. The concept of 'maritimity,' introduced by Saul B Cohen, reflects a nation's inherent inclination towards the maritime realm and its ability to harness the ocean's offerings.⁵ It represents a nation's penchant to continuously maintain maritime ties and manoeuvre its activities in all plausible maritime directions. The scope of this concept is broad enough to encompass economic interests, while still being specific enough to focus on fostering immigrant ties. This concept of maritimity, therefore, plays a crucial role in adopting this geographic role, given that India's maritime domain forms an elemental part of its foreign policy.

India is the 16th largest maritime State, with a recently estimated and promulgated coastline stretching to 11,098.81 km, and some 14,500 km of navigable inland waterways. India's maritime profile is quite elaborate and incorporates nine coastal states and as many as 1,382 islands. The maritime sector significantly boosts India's overall trade, with 95% of trade volume and 68% of trade value being conducted through maritime transport. Along its extensive coastline, India hosts 12 major ports and approximately 205 non-major ports, with a combined cargo handling capacity of 2627 Million Tonnes Per Annum MTPA (1617 MTPA from major ports and 1010 MTPA from non-major ports).⁶

Historically, India's maritime character has been shaped by the Indian Ocean, and today, its geoeconomic and geopolitical interests are converging in expanded strategic regions such as the Indo-Pacific. The nature of these diplomatic spaces is predominantly maritime, with eastern Africa acting as the western gateway to the Indo-Pacific. India views the Indo-Pacific as its strategic geography — a geography that stretches across from the shores of eastern Africa to those of the Americas.

The countries on the eastern African coast largely fall within India's western geostrategic gaze and form an indispensable part of its proximate maritime neighbourhood. Coastal eastern Africa, stretching from Somalia to segments of South Africa's coastline washed by the waves of the Indian Ocean, along with the Vanilla Islands,⁷ boast of an approximate coastline length of 16,147 km and borders three major waterways — the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden. The region also encompasses four significant maritime chokepoints, namely, the Suez Canal, the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, the Mozambique Channel, and the Cape of Good Hope. Beyond its geopolitical significance, the whole of Africa reflects a coherent biogeographic, climatic, and socio-political region, covering 30 million square kilometres, which is equivalent to 8.1% of the global ocean surface, with exclusive economic zones (EEZs) spanning over 6 million square kilometres. A geo-spatial assessment of the eastern African sub-region also reveals that it hosts critical coastal and marine resources as is evidenced by its establishment of more than 143 Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) or equivalent, covering a total area of 555,436.68 square kilometres.⁸

Bridging ‘Maritime’ and ‘Policy’

Eastern Africa provides India with fertile ground in which to grow its diplomacy. India’s maritime connection to the sub-region predates the establishment of formal diplomacy, but the post-colonial era brought a renewed focus on the region. At the critical juncture of newly independent India’s post-colonial foreign missions, Appa Saheb Pant, aboard the *SS Khandala* —the oldest vessel of the Peninsular & Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O) line — arrived in colonial East Africa, which then included Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, and Zanzibar, as the first Indian Commissioner in the newly established African diplomatic arena.⁹ Pant aptly observed, *“India and East Africa may seem to be distanced from each other by salt water. But they are, and always have been ‘next shore neighbours’, and surely their future lies in the direction of mutually profitable co-operation.”*

However, it was not until 2015 that the enduring maritime bonds between India and East Africa were truly galvanised with Prime Minister Modi’s ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy expanding its regional maritime focus and including eastern Africa within its ambit. During a visit to Mauritius in March 2015, Modi unveiled India’s inaugural maritime policy, SAGAR—an acronym for ‘Security and Growth for All in the Region’.¹⁰ In the same year, the Indian Navy unveiled its latest maritime-security strategy entitled, *“Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy,”* which outlined India’s intention to *“shape a favourable and positive environment by curbing security threats and challenges spread across its maritime neighbourhood and adjacent areas”*.¹¹ It is evident that India’s erstwhile maritime policy (SAGAR) aims to deepen India’s economic and security cooperation with its maritime neighbours, build their maritime security capacities, and imbue them with desired capabilities to safeguard their respective shores.¹²

Traditionally, India’s relations with the eastern African States have focused upon leveraging material resources to assert India’s geopolitical influence and gain competitive advantages. These efforts are often evaluated through metrics such as trade-volume, the establishment of diplomatic missions, defence agreements, and military exercises.¹³ In 2023, eastern Africa distinguished itself by having the highest number of countries with Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rates exceeding

5%, underscoring the subregion's robust performance and economic diversity.¹⁴ Notably, the island nations of Seychelles and Mauritius recorded impressive GDP per capita figures of USD 16,940 and USD 11,530 respectively, with their economies being primarily driven by tourism, fishing, and financial services.¹⁵

The 'Focus Africa Programme,' launched by India's Ministry of Commerce and Industry in 2002, set a benchmark in accelerating India's trade with Africa.¹⁶ In the first phase of the programme, seven countries were targeted, primarily in eastern Africa, including South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, and Mauritius. A glance at the value of Indian exports to East African States in Financial Year (FY) 2024 demonstrates that Indian exports to Tanzania had the highest value among the eastern African group amounting to 4.6 billion USD followed by Kenya with 3.1 billion USD.¹⁷

The eastern coast of African littoral comprises a diverse set of economies of both mainland-coastal States (Somalia, Kenya, Mozambique, and South Africa) and island ones (Madagascar, Seychelles, Comoros, Mauritius, and French-administered territories of Mayotte and La Réunion). India has maintained a broad and comprehensive outlook towards each of them. Many of these countries have elevated their bilateral relationships with India to "strategic partnerships," with South Africa leading the way in 1997. The Overseas Indian Community across these nations' numbers 30,83,851, contributing inward remittances to India of approximately 273.97 million USD.¹⁸ India's total trade with these countries amounts to around 630.61 billion USD, with South Africa and Kenya receiving the highest levels of Indian exports, and South Africa and Tanzania leading the import figures. Table 1 provides some details of India's bilateral economic engagements with each State in the region.

These sub-regional States also make up the membership of major African 'Regional Economic Communities' (RECs) such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), Eastern African Community (EAC), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA).²² These RECs are the prime facilitators of regional economic integration in the region. The 2019 Africa Regional Integration Index had ranked the EAC as the most integrated bloc in the region.²³ The mainland-coastal

Table 1: India's Bilateral Economic Engagement with Eastern Africa

	Country	GDP (2023) (Mn USD) ¹⁹	Total Bilateral Trade (2023) (Mn USD)	Population of Overseas Indians ²⁰	Remittances Received by Countries from India (2021) (Mn USD) ²¹
1.	Somalia	11,679.80	832.48	100	NA
2.	Kenya	107,440.58	3,291.51	80,000	37.21
3.	Tanzania	79,158.29	7,157.93	28262	26.67
4.	Mozambique	20,624.60	4,415.11	56,524	9.18
5.	South Africa	377,781.60	18,872.25	17,00,000	123.67
6.	Madagascar	16,031.70	361.4	10,500	6.55
7.	Seychelles	2,141.45	85.15	13,238	30.73
8.	Mauritius	14,397.13	869.53	894848	39.97
9.	Comoros	1352.38	44.06	220	NA
10.	Mayotte (France)				NA
11	Reunion Island (France)		74.19	300159	

Source: Collated and Tabulated by Author

and island States of eastern Africa are not concentrated within any of the specific RECs but rather, are dispersed across multiple RECs, with many having overlapping memberships.

These RECs are playing a transformational role as many of them have developed regional blue economy goals, while the maritime strategies envisaged by member States and have been contributing to the enhancement of maritime security as well. Of these, the SADC offers a prime example, with its pursuit of maritime security in the southern African maritime domain being notable. Its Standing Maritime committee (SMC) has been consistently convened as a forum that is dedicated to the goal of common maritime security.²⁴ Due to the presence of many mainland-coastal and island States within these RECs, economic communities within the region have developed distinct maritime political geographies with temporal and spatial characteristics.²⁵ Over the years, these blocs have established maritime

appropriate/inclusive structures, which have been involved in furthering the blue economy aspirations of the member States. Since the aspiration of becoming a ‘blue economy’ is a major economic derivative of any maritime space, this has pushed the African states to collectively realise the potential of the creation of an ‘African Maritime Domain’ whose ‘collective awareness’ could richly enhance the region’s oceanic potential.

However, geopolitics is unfolding at sea just as dynamically as it is on land, and in this ‘Asian Century’, it is Africa that is emerging as the brightest beacon of hope. ‘Maritime Africa’ is not defined merely by the expanse of its seas but by the maritime inclusivity of its pan-African and national developmental arrangements. Africa’s Integrated Maritime Strategy 2050 (AIMS 2050) has emerged as a foundational document wherein a multi-layered action plan has been incorporated by the African Union (AU).

Recognising the vast maritime potential within the African Maritime Domain (AMD), AIMS 2050 stands as a forward-looking blueprint with a strong emphasis on the blue economy. Its overarching goal is to “*foster increased wealth creation from Africa’s oceans and seas by developing a sustainable, thriving blue economy in a secure and environmentally sustainable manner.*”²⁶ The “African Charter on Maritime Security, Safety and Development in Africa” (known popularly as the “Lomé Charter”) has a soft (non-binding) legal approach and is the only existing document that uses “subsidiarity” as a principle that advocates freedom at the local level.²⁷

Each strategic initiative, whether continental or national in scope, is directed towards achieving unified African maritime growth by aligning the ‘blue economy’ with maritime security as complementary rather than isolated goals. Similarly, pan-African initiatives such as “Africa 2063” have acted as “*positive perception builders*”, positing Africa at the forefront of the foreign policies of partner nations. The “Agenda 2063” has developed two maritime-related goals, namely, Goal 6 and Goal 7. Goal 6 prioritises the blue economy for accelerated economic growth by focusing on marine resources and energy, ports operations, and marine transport. Goal 7 aims to foster environmentally sustainable and climate-resilient economies and communities. Table 2 below provides details of these two maritime-oriented goals:

Table 2

AGENDA 2063	
Goal 6	Blue Economy for accelerated economic growth
Priority Area – Marine Resources and Energy; Ports Operation and Marine Transport	
Goal 7	Environmentally sustainable and climate-resilient economies and communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable natural resource management and Biodiversity conservation • Sustainable consumption and production patterns • Water security • Climate resilience and natural disasters preparedness and prevention • Renewable energy 	

Source: Agenda 2063

Africa has emerged as a growing market for both investment and development. Its youthful population offers a favourable demographic dividend, while forward-looking policies for businesses and relaxed restrictions on resource sharing have renewed global interest in the continent. Africa's abundant natural resources and the recent discoveries of fossil fuels, including oil, gas, and coal, have led to a resurgence of investment in the continent.

On the maritime canvas, India's engagement with the littoral and island States of eastern Africa have progressed beyond merely addressing maritime insecurity. New Delhi's interests now transcend traditional trade, with a significant portion of India's diversified energy portfolio expected to come from this subregion. Offshore gas exploration in Mozambique is an excellent example. According to the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC), India's Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) imports grew by 17.5% year-on-year in FY24, reaching 23.5 million metric tonnes per annum (MMTPA).²⁸ India's involvement in Mozambique's Rovuma Offshore Area 1 project reflects its growing demand for clean energy, with a consortium of ONGC Videsh Ltd (OVL), Bharat Petro-Resources Ltd (BPRL), and Oil India Ltd (OIL) having diversified stakes.

India's commercial interests have intensified along maritime development corridors tied to mining. Vulcan, a subsidiary of the Jindal Group, acquired the Nacala Logistics Corridor and took over the Moatize coal mining asset, along with the 920-

km Nacala Logistical Corridor from Brazilian mining giant Vale in December 2021, with a cumulative investment of USD 270 million.²⁹ India's envisioned Critical Mineral Mission, as outlined in the Union Budget 2024-25, seeks to incentivise the acquisition of overseas assets. Given that Africa holds 30% of the world's critical minerals, India needs to strengthen its capacity-building efforts in African nations to accelerate mining exploration and extraction while minimising ecological impacts.

Additionally, India can offer technology for the beneficiation of mineral ores.³⁰ To achieve this, India must align its initiatives with the "Africa Mining Vision", which aims to integrate mining into local, national, and regional development policies. India can add value by transforming Africa's critical mineral landscape, building competitive infrastructure across the mining chain, and contributing to sustainable development in the sector. Due to the vast potential attached to this collaboration, the cumulative points of suggestions attached to it are enumerated in the 'way forward' section.

India has been building capacity in Africa through its Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme since 1964. The ITEC is India's most successful development partnership program and has maximum reach in Africa. However, it is not the only one. India's Africa policy was revitalised in 2001 with numerous capacity-building initiatives, such as the "Focus Africa Programme" in 2002, the "Indian Development and Economic Assistance Scheme" (IDEAS) initiative in 2004, and the "Team 9" initiative. Yet, these cross-sectoral, multi-nation targeting plans were largely *ad-hoc* in nature and did not seem to flow from a comprehensive strategy for Africa. In 2018, during PM Modi's visit to Uganda, ten guiding principles for India's engagement with Africa were enunciated, which for the first time articulated the fundamental bases of India's engagement with Africa.³¹ Three of these ten Principles carry predominant maritime connotations:

1. **Principle 5.** This principle is focused upon agriculture, within which a special segment on the 'blue economy' has been incorporated to augment cooperation in the sustainable development of marine resources. It seeks to place fisheries at the fulcrum of sustainable engagement and to focus on eradicating illegal fishing, managing marine resources, and exploring non-marine resources.

2. **Principle 6.** Principle 6 deals with climate change. Like India, Africa, too, has been bearing a disproportionate brunt of the adverse impacts of climate change, given that the continent contributes only 3.6 per cent to total global emissions.³² Africa and India both realise that addressing climate change requires a strong and focused engagement plan. The UNECA-TERI climate centre, established in Addis Ababa, was made possible through the efforts of The Energy and Resource Institute (TERI) which associated itself with the “New Partnership for African Development” (NEPAD) initiative, and was greatly facilitated by Indian embassies in Africa.³³ This association highlights the potential of domestic institutions to play key roles in building pan-continental architectures.
3. **Principle 8.** This principle focuses upon maritime security. Indeed, given the persistent instability in the waters surrounding Africa, maritime security forms the bedrock of India’s association with the continent. Since the inception of Somali piracy as a major global threat adding significantly to other non-traditional maritime risks and challenges, India’s evolving role as a preferred security-partner has become increasingly critical. This highlights the relevance and value of the Indian Navy, which has consistently responded to crises along the eastern African littoral, offering vital assistance whenever catastrophe has struck.

The engagement between India and Africa has been further invigorated through high-level political dialogue under the aegis of successive editions of the “India-Africa Forum Summit” (IAFS). The first two, IAFS I in 2008 and IAFS II in 2011, were conducted using the Banjul format of interaction by which the African Union (AU) would nominate a representative sample of only 15 countries (of the 54 comprising the AU) to engage with India at the summit level. These summits were complemented by meetings with Regional Economic Communities (RECs), the first of which took place in 2010. At the conclusion of the first summit, two key documents were adopted: the “*Delhi Declaration*” and the “*India-Africa Framework of Cooperation*”. The second summit produced the “Addis Ababa Declaration”. These documents addressed bilateral, regional, and international interests for both India and Africa. Both summits, through these declarations, focused on capacity-building

and capability-enhancement, with specific, albeit limited emphasis upon maritime training.

Initiatives under IAFS II included programmes such as human resource development (HRD) and scholarships and did impact the shipping and maritime sectors more significantly, covering areas such as nautical science, marine engineering, ocean engineering, and naval architecture. Additionally, specialised training courses in maritime sectors and climate change were envisioned. IAFS III, held in 2015 abandoned the Banjul formula and resulted in another “*Delhi Declaration*”, which recognised the ‘blue economy’ as an area of collaboration to “*promote cooperation in the Blue/Ocean economy, towards the sustainable development of marine resources; place special emphasis on closer collaboration in developing sustainable fisheries, combating illegal and unregulated fishing, managing the marine resources, exploring non-marine resources, conducting hydrography surveys, promoting eco-tourism, developing renewable energy, disaster risk reduction through modern early warning tools, pollution control and other coastal and ocean studies.*”³⁴

The IAFS process has thus far established new paradigms of cooperation, with capacity-building (which term incorporates capability-enhancement within it) as its core philosophy. However, India’s overall lack of a clear maritime vision has stunted such initiatives.

Revitalising Relations through a Renewed Maritime Approach

For India to pursue a more effective and distinctive partnership with Africa, it must revamp its policy approach. This requires reshaping its engagement strategies to align with the ambitions and developmental plans of African nations. Maritime collaboration needs to be a central component of India’s diversified action plan, especially if it aligns with the existing frameworks in eastern Africa. The mainland-coastal and island States of this sub-region need an India that can *build capacities* and *augment capabilities* within the eastern African maritime domain to meet their evolving needs. To transform their maritime boundaries into key geostrategic assets, these nations must fully harness their oceanic potential.

Accordingly, India should not only re-engineer its existing maritime initiatives for the region but also design new ones that would help these nations to embrace the

concept of *holistic* maritime security. Summarised below are some recommendations to help redefine this approach:

Threats across the African maritime domain have seen visible diversification, posing new challenges, particularly in the eastern African maritime subregion, where non-traditional security threats have made their presence felt. Somali piracy has remained a persistent issue, although, it has been partially mitigated over time but not fully eliminated. In addition to this enduring threat, various organised criminal activities are commonplace in these waters. The 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy (AIMS) identifies these risks, which include “*money laundering, illegal arms and drug trafficking, piracy and armed robbery at sea, illegal oil bunkering and crude oil theft along African coasts, maritime terrorism, human trafficking, human smuggling, and the movement of asylum seekers by sea*”.³⁵

Political instability on the land frequently spills over into the maritime domain, creating a pathway for transnational organised crime. *Al-Shabaab* in Somalia and *Ahlu Sunna Wa Jama'a* (ASWJ) in Mozambique are two active, Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs), who can and do carry out violence at sea, and have expanded the threat seascape of these littorals. Ensuring regional maritime stability is a critical security priority for India, as it is widely acknowledged that political instability in neighbouring countries can significantly and adversely affect national economies.³⁶ The eastern African coastal region includes two politically fragile states, namely, Somalia and Mozambique, which rank first and twenty-fifth, respectively, on the Fund for Peace's Fragile States Index 2024.³⁷ Additionally, the ACLED Conflict Index 2024 categorises Mozambique, South Africa, and Madagascar as turbulent countries, while Somalia and Kenya are classified as high-risk. This peculiar risk profile of the sub-region calls for enhanced security-measures.

India began anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden (GoA) in 2008, and by 2023, it had deployed nearly 107 ships for these missions. In 2017, the Indian Navy adopted a Mission-Based Deployment (MBD) strategy, and it currently mounts operations under the “Patrol off the Gulf of Aden Deployment” (POGDEP). The Indian Navy has also conducted Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NCEO),

such as Operation KAVERI, under which 278 Indians were evacuated by sea aboard INS *Sumedha* from conflict-ridden Sudan between 24 April and 05 May 2023. In addition to this, there are Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief operations, which are recognised as the most celebrated activities of the Indian Navy in the subregion.

As India's strength lies in capability enhancement, it is crucial to grasp the unique maritime security challenges emerging in the subregional African waters. None of the ten mainland-coastal and island States of eastern Africa thus far possess fully coherent national maritime security strategies that would enable them to independently manage their maritime zones. However, they are making arduous attempts to do so.

While Somalia and Tanzania have established maritime coordination committees, and Kenya, with the support of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), is developing a National Maritime Security Risk Register (NMSRR), Mozambique has implemented the Policy and Strategy of the Sea (POLMAR). South Africa, however, is still in the process of formulating its Maritime Security Strategy. India, as part of its capability-augmenting efforts, could and should assist these countries in developing a maritime security framework that aligns their national objectives with maritime security goals. Through the ITEC I, II, and III programs, India has been providing Navy-to-Navy training, offered either by invitation or upon request, which has previously included the development of staff college curricula for these countries. To enhance the resilience of these nations in securing their waters, India must take the following steps:

1. At the **institutional level**, New Delhi should propose organisational and functional support to the African Union's "Peace and Security Council". This should include assisting in the development of the naval component within the "African Standby Force" (ASF), a key pillar of the African Peace and Security Architecture. Given that the ASF comprises military, police, and civilian personnel, Indian cross-disciplinary support would enhance the former's capability to combat maritime crimes at multiple levels.
2. **Internationally**, maritime security frameworks in the sub-region are often format driven. An example is the Djibouti Code of Conduct-Jeddah

Amendment (DCoC-JA). The DCoC-JA is facilitated by the IMO, which convenes discussions among the ministries of transport from eastern and southern Africa and the Arab Peninsula on issues of maritime security and safety. Another example is the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC)-led and European Union funded, multilateral “Safe Seas Africa Programme” (a continuation of MaSé Programme), which promotes information-sharing and collaboration within the eastern African region. Likewise, the “Indian Ocean Forum on Maritime Crime” (IOFMC) fosters regional law enforcement cooperation. On the other hand, the “Contact Group on Illicit Maritime Activities” (CGIMA), despite an expanded mandate, has yet to play an active part and this provides an opportunity to New Delhi. As a member, India should propose CGIMA as a unified platform where all relevant frameworks could converge. Being an observer in DCoC, India has already proposed to invite the first multilateral DCoC liaison officer at IFC-IOR. Additionally, India could assist in building ‘maritime risk profiles’ for these nations, helping them to better understand their risk landscape and protect their interests more effectively. This would also be an excellent area of concentration for the proposed joint India-UK “Regional Maritime Security Centre of Excellence” (RMSCE) as well.

Maritime Situational/Domain Awareness (MSA/ MDA) and Information-Sharing

India has made significant progress in expanding its Maritime Situational/ Domain Awareness (MSA/MDA) capabilities. In 2014, it established the Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC), followed by the creation of the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in 2018. Located in Gurugram, the IFC-IOR hosts International Liaison Officers (ILOs) from a number of countries (14 as of May 2025) and is connected to 50 organisations across 25 nations. These centres play a crucial role in operational information sharing. A recent success involved coordinated efforts by Sri Lankan and Seychellois liaison officers, which led to the interception of the hijacked Sri Lankan fishing vessel *Lorenzo Putha 04*, located approximately 955 nautical miles east of Somalia.³⁸ To

enhance effectiveness, the centre should include ILOs from all eastern African littoral and Island States. Furthermore, since instability at sea often reflects instability on land, data analysis on maritime crimes should be diversified. The centre should use conflict indices such as the “ACLED Conflict Database” to study land-based conflicts, so as to generate a comprehensive threat picture.

Maritime Situational Awareness in the subregion is largely achieved by digital tools such as SeaVision—a web-based maritime situational awareness tool developed by the United States Department of Transportation, and the IORIS platform, which the EU insists is a neutral and secure information-exchange system. Currently, it is fully funded and supported by the “CRIMARIO II” programme for regional partners across the Indo-Pacific.³⁹ In a similar effort to enhance interoperability with friendly maritime neighbours, the Indian Navy has developed MITRA, a communication platform that utilises the NISHAR (Network for Information Sharing) tool. NISHAR provides a secure, encrypted web- and satellite-based tool that enables real-time communication and supports the creation of a ‘Common Operational Picture’ (COP), which is a key function of the IFC-IOR.⁴⁰

African Continental Free Trade Area: An Impetus to Maritime Trade

The “African Continental Free Trade Area” (AfCFTA) aims to create a single market of 1.3 billion people, making it one of the largest trade agreements since the WTO’s founding in 1995. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) estimates that a successfully implemented AfCFTA could boost intra-African trade by over 50% by reducing import tariffs by 90%. India-Africa trade, growing at an annual rate of 18% since 2003, reached \$103 billion in 2023, placing India as Africa’s third-largest trading partner after the EU and China. With around 90% of Africa’s trade conducted by sea, the continent’s vast coastlines emphasise its strategic importance. The “Maritime Transport Review” of 2021 — an annual publication by the UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD) — forecasts growth in African maritime trade, driven by AfCFTA, which will increase demand for transportation infrastructure. Ports in eastern African States such as Mauritius, Madagascar, Comoros, and Mozambique, are expected to experience heightened traffic. Kindled

by the launch of the AfCFTA, a major hope of India, is that Africa will become a more organised market and overcome the challenge of trade financing.

Mundra-Mombasa Shipping Route. The Mundra-Mombasa shipping route is a key link between India and eastern Africa, with Mombasa serving as a gateway for landlocked countries (these are better thought-of as “land-linked” countries) such as South Sudan, Uganda, and Rwanda. The recent surge of container traffic around the Cape of Good Hope due to the Red Sea Crisis has exposed capacity shortfalls in southern and eastern African ports. Ports in South Africa, Mauritius, and Madagascar had faced infrastructure challenges that militate against their competitiveness, despite volume growth.

Indian firms are expanding their investments in African port infrastructure. A new joint venture, the “East Africa Gateway Limited” (EAGL), has been formed with the Adani group being the primary shareholder, albeit in partnership with the AD Ports Group and the East Harbour Terminals Limited (EHTL), through which the Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone Ltd (APSEZ) has acquired a 95% stake in Tanzania’s TICTS for \$39.5 million.⁴¹ Projects like these could help close Africa’s infrastructure gap, aligning with the continent’s “Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa” (PIDA).

Way Forward

India’s enhanced maritime posture lends it a geostrategic salience that helps in realising the country’s geoeconomic goals, as also its ‘non-geoeconomic’ ones. Geoeconomic goals for India include *promoting maritime connectivity and port-led development, developing inland waterways, and building resilient high-quality infrastructure capable of withstanding adverse climate impacts*. Additionally, India aims to transition from a ‘brown’ model of economy to a ‘blue’ one that emphasises sustainability, while simultaneously aiming for enhanced ‘energy security’ and assured ‘security-of-energy’.

Similarly, India’s non-geoeconomic goals include maintaining *territorial and cartographic integrity, strengthening its maritime identity, and building a reputation for responsible leadership within the Indo-Pacific region*. Furthermore, India aspires

to be the first responder in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations and to counter illicit maritime activities. It also seeks to be proactive in regional cooperative security frameworks.

India's diverse initiatives, though not always tied to its mainstream foreign policy, have assisted in solidifying Indian maritime objectives. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), conceived by the Indian Navy in 2008, became the first major maritime security initiative of the 21st century. IONS provided a collaborative platform for Indian Ocean littoral navies to engage in *holistic* maritime security programmes and work toward collective maritime security. Currently, India's maritime diplomacy is evolving through inclusive frameworks such as the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the 14th East Asia Summit in Bangkok in November 2019.

The IPOI, an open and non-treaty-based initiative, aims to address maritime challenges in the Indo-Pacific through cooperative mechanisms. As mentioned earlier, the IPOI provides first-order-specificity to India's present maritime policy of 'MAHASAGAR' and marks an expansion of India's maritime approach beyond traditional naval operations. As India's maritime policy expands, it now involves more than the navy-coast guard amalgam, addressing a range of areas including *maritime security, marine ecology, technological and scientific cooperation, academic collaborations, disaster risk management, capacity building, resource sharing, trade connectivity, maritime transport, and the sustainable use of marine resources*. The seven pillars of the IPOI reflect this broader maritime diplomacy, underscoring India's intent to be an influential player in shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific region.

India's fundamental approach to maritime strategy within African littorals is one of 'constructive engagement.' Its efforts in the eastern African littorals are more deeply entrenched than what is often reflected in policy discourse. To provide a comprehensive maritime development framework for these countries, India needs to focus on pan-African frameworks and initiatives. Key programmes, such as the "Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme" (CAADP), the "Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa" (PIDA), the "African Mining Vision" (AMV), the "Science and Technology Innovation Strategy for Africa" (STISA),

“Boosting Intra-Africa Trade” (BIAT), and the “Accelerated Industrial Development for Africa” (AIDA), are all advancing country-specific agendas to achieve blue economy goals and address maritime infrastructure challenges. Additionally, eastern African Regional Economic Communities (RECs) have adopted maritime security and blue economy action plans to support the maritime needs of their member states. For instance, IGAD has developed a “Blue Economy Strategy and Implementation Plan” (BESIP),⁴² which its member countries can adapt and fit into their own national strategies.

India’s envisioned Critical Mineral Mission, as outlined in the Union Budget 2024-25, seeks to incentivise the acquisition of overseas assets. Given that Africa holds 30% of the world’s critical minerals, India needs to strengthen its capacity-building efforts in African nations to accelerate mining exploration and extraction while minimising ecological impacts. Additionally, India can offer technology for the beneficiation of mineral ores.⁴³ To achieve this, India must align its initiatives with the “Africa Mining Vision”, which aims to integrate mining into local, national, and regional development policies. India can add value by transforming Africa’s critical mineral landscape, building competitive infrastructure across the mining chain, and contributing to sustainable development in the sector

As India prepares for the “India-Africa Forum Summit IV” (IAFS IV), it needs to give special consideration to the maritime needs of Africa, with a particular focus on the eastern African mainland-coastal and island States. To deepen collaboration, India should organise a “Maritime Dialogue” with these countries and their respective RECs on the sidelines of the upcoming IAFS IV. India’s policy approach should embrace, internalise, and advocate a narrative of “*holistic* maritime security,” a concept originally articulated by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at the first Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). This concept advocates maritime security as comprising “*freedom from threats arising ‘in,’ ‘from,’ or ‘through’ the sea*” and incorporates both traditional/military and non-traditional/human security dimensions. This aligns closely with the 2050 AIMS, which underscores maritime security as fundamental to achieving blue economy objectives. Additionally, the Kampala Principles should be expanded to include all relevant maritime industries where India can partner with east African nations.

Climate Change is increasing the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. Countries located on and in the proximity of the Horn of Africa experienced prolonged droughts between 2020 to 2023. The challenges posed by climate change, as evidenced by the recent droughts and the devastation caused by Cyclone HIDAYA, highlight the urgency for resilient infrastructure in the region. India's international initiative "Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure" (CDRI) offers an ideal platform for collaboration in building sustainable port and coastal infrastructure. Expanding CDRI's membership to include additional eastern African countries will not only support local resilience but also strengthen India-Africa ties in the face of shared environmental threats. Together, these initiatives can build a more secure, prosperous, and resilient maritime future for both regions.

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Indonesia's Maritime Dilemma — Between Legal Consistency and Strategic Ambiguity

Mr Chemi Rigzin

Indonesia occupies a geostrategic position along some of the world's most vital international shipping lanes (ISLs), through which over 60% of global maritime trade flows annually.¹ Despite not being a formal party to the South China Sea disputes involving the Spratly or Paracel Islands, Indonesia remains deeply entangled in maritime tensions due to the overlap between its EEZ near the Natuna Islands and China's expansive "ten-dash line". Jakarta has long grounded its maritime policy in legal rigour. Its EEZ claims, based on straight archipelagic baselines from the outermost Natuna Islands, are fully consistent with the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Under this framework, Indonesia possesses sovereign rights over natural resource exploitation and the authority to regulate and prohibit foreign fishing in its EEZ. Accordingly, Jakarta's objections to illegal Chinese fishing activities and its enforcement actions, such as arresting foreign fishing vessels, are not only lawful but essential to preserving its maritime integrity.²

Yet, China remains Indonesia's largest trading partner and a critical investor in multiple sectors of the Indonesian economy, including strategic ones such as infrastructure, energy, and fisheries. These relationships are becoming increasingly important as Indonesia strives to achieve high-income status by 2045.³ The political calculus within Indonesia further complicates matters. President Prabowo's economic platform, anchored in an ambitious goal of 8% annual growth, hinges on foreign investments and industrial advancement, especially in emerging sectors like electric vehicles.⁴ Domestic pressures — such as a shrinking middle class, stagnant productivity, and economic inequality — have only intensified the appeal of Chinese

investment. China's strategic alignment with these goals has found a receptive audience in Jakarta.

In November 2024, during President Prabowo Subianto's visit to Beijing, a joint statement was made suggesting a "*common understanding on joint development*" in disputed waters.⁵ However, the ambiguity of this phrasing in the joint statement sparked domestic and regional concern. Although Jakarta later issued a unilateral clarification affirming that the agreement did *not* imply recognition of China's maritime claims, the damage to strategic credibility was already evident. Without a mutual correction of the narrative, Beijing retains room to interpret the agreement in its favour — an outcome that undercuts Indonesia's long-standing rejection of China's unlawful claims under UNCLOS. Nonetheless, the diplomatic space for such legal distinctions is narrowing, particularly when strategic language is left deliberately vague.

Indonesia's recent policy signals appear to blur this legal clarity with its participation implicitly acknowledging overlapping claims has prompted concern among regional observers and legal scholars. While Indonesian officials insist the agreement does not imply recognition of the infamous but misleading *ten-dash line*, critics argue that the optics undermine Indonesia's legal and diplomatic consistency. The move also weakens the credibility of Jakarta's firm rejections of Chinese incursions, such as those into the Tuna Block, a critical gas field where Chinese Coast Guard presence prompted sharp protests in 2021.⁶ Indonesia's relationship with China is marked by a strategic dualism — economic pragmatism on one hand, and geopolitical wariness on the other. This dual-track approach introduces inconsistencies, particularly evident in the contrast between Indonesia's joint statement with China and the subsequent unilateral clarification by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

As Southeast Asia's largest economy, Indonesia has deepened trade and investment ties with Beijing, welcoming billions in Chinese capital for flagship projects such as the Jakarta–Bandung high-speed rail and the Cirata floating solar power plant.⁷ However, these gains exist alongside mounting frictions in the maritime domain. During the first week of President Prabowo Subianto's administration in October 2024, Indonesian naval and coast guard forces confronted and expelled Chinese

coast guard ships from the Natuna EEZ on three separate occasions, underscoring the persistent tension between security imperatives and economic interests.⁸

Additionally, amid the intensifying US–China strategic rivalry and rising tensions in the South China Sea, Jakarta finds itself increasingly entangled in maritime friction with Beijing. Despite recent diplomatic overtures, such as the inaugural senior-level “2+2” dialogue between the respective defence and foreign affairs senior officials, Indonesia’s concerns over Chinese encroachment remain acute.⁹

The Perils of Proximity: Indonesia’s China Strategy Under Scrutiny

Chinese Coast Guard vessels continue to escort fishing fleets into Indonesian waters — actions that breach Indonesia’s sovereign rights under UNCLOS. While China retains the right to “*innocent passage*”, using State vessels to shield illegal fishing operations violates international maritime law and erodes Jakarta’s authority in its own EEZ. Indonesia’s willingness to engage in maritime economic cooperation with China — even in sensitive zones — raises alarms over the enforcement of maritime law, particularly concerning IUU fishing (IUUF). The presence of Chinese fishing fleets, often escorted by the China Coast Guard, has already led to confrontations in Indonesian waters. This, in turn, threatens local livelihoods and fisheries sustainability in an already contested maritime environment. These concerns are compounded by recent geopolitical signals.

The docking of China’s advanced Type 075 amphibious assault ship the *Hainan (31)*, with two other frontline PLAN guided-missile frigates — the *Liuzhou (FFG 537)* and the *PLAN Hengyang (FFG 568)* — at Indonesia’s Port of Tanjung Priok in late 2024, although couched in the language of a technical turn-around and a goodwill visit, highlights Beijing’s growing maritime reach.¹⁰ Meanwhile, China continues to oppose Indonesia’s lawful oil and gas exploration within its EEZ, further exposing the strategic incongruity of Jakarta’s willingness to cooperate in areas where Chinese objections persist.

Indonesia has responded by escalating patrols and enhancing military installations across its far-flung islands in the Natuna region. While Jakarta sees the maritime agreement as a potential incentive for finalising the long-stalled CoC (Code of

Conduct) between ASEAN and China, the reality is far more complex. The lack of cohesion within ASEAN, amplified by Indonesia's ambiguous stance, may weaken the bloc's negotiating leverage, making it more difficult to achieve a binding and enforceable CoC grounded in consensually-derived international law.

Between Opportunity and Risk: Indonesia's Strategic Outlook in a Shifting Indo-Pacific

Indonesia's consistent position since 2020, articulated in its official rejection of China's "*nine-dash line*" at the United Nations, underlines its commitment to UNCLOS and a rules-based maritime order. Unlike other ASEAN claimants, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, who have resisted joint development proposals out of concern for legitimising China's claims, Indonesia's openness to such initiatives requires careful recalibration. Indonesia's 2022 EEZ delimitation agreement with Vietnam, which took over a decade to conclude, could face political backlash or delay in ratification, as Ha Noi may question Jakarta's commitment to mutual legal consistency. While this may well be presented as economic pragmatism, it risks blurring legal boundaries and diminishing Jakarta's leadership role within ASEAN on maritime legal norms and the declaration of the Code of Conduct (CoC). Moreover, by leveraging the legal provisions of UNCLOS for an archipelagic State, Indonesia is provided with both, a moral and strategic imperative, to lead regional efforts in resisting Chinese maritime overreach. Softening this stance for short-term investment gains could cost Indonesia far more in long-term strategic influence and sovereignty protection.

Critics argue that by acknowledging overlapping claims in the Natuna waters, Indonesia has signalled a softening of its traditional stance. However, this should not be misinterpreted as a capitulation. Rather, it reflects a strategic shift to manage tensions while securing political and economic dividends. Still, ambiguity in rhetoric and policy leaves Indonesia vulnerable to divergent interpretations, especially by Beijing.

Indonesia's Security Equation with China in 2025

Indonesia's evolving security relationship with China reveals a complex balancing act. Key developments in early 2025 reflect both cooperation and latent friction:¹¹

1. **08 January 2025: Bakamla–China Coast Guard Talks:** Emphasis was laid on combating IUUF and ensuring freedom of navigation. Ironically, even while reaffirming mutual interests, these talks occurred against the backdrop of continued illegal fishing activities by Chinese vessels in Indonesia’s EEZ.
2. **09–10 January 2025: PLA Chief’s Visit to Jakarta:** The visit to Jakarta by General Liu Zhenli resulted in agreements to deepen military exercises and personnel exchanges. While cooperation is expanding, it remains unclear how Indonesia will reconcile this with its persistent maritime disputes.
3. **22 January 2025: Indonesian Defence Minister’s Visit to Beijing:** Defence Minister Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin’s trip reinforced earlier agreements and explored potential military technology transfers. However, Indonesia reiterated that such cooperation must not compromise its national interests or territorial integrity.

The most significant diplomatic engagement occurred during President Prabowo’s visit to Beijing in November 2024, which yielded over \$10 billion in investment agreements spanning infrastructure, trade, and maritime development.¹² Though marketed as economic cooperation devoid of sovereignty implications, such agreements risk legitimising China’s claims, particularly when other ASEAN claimant States, including Vietnam and the Philippines, have deliberately avoided such arrangements for fear of undermining their legal positions.

The ambiguity surrounding Indonesia’s policy is exacerbated by such a statement, framing cooperation on fisheries and resource-development in disputed waters as non-prejudicial to sovereignty, which offers Beijing a rhetorical advantage. Unless managed with extreme diplomatic precision, such language risks being interpreted by China through strategic messaging as implicit acquiescence to its “*ten-dash line*” claims, weakening Indonesia’s legal standing and credibility among regional and international partners, and the Chinese have done precisely that.

India–Indonesia Strategic Ties: Navigating Convergence in a Shifting Indo-Pacific

In this context, the bid to strengthen the maritime defence partnership between India and Indonesia reflects a shared strategic calculus as a counter to China’s

increasing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the South China Sea. India's commitment to a consensually derived rules-based regional order has aligned both nations in pursuit of mutual deterrence and defence modernisation. Crucially, this defence cooperation is underpinned by a shared commitment to international law. Both nations reaffirmed the principles of the 1982 UNCLOS and emphasised peaceful dispute resolution, freedom of navigation, and unimpeded maritime trade in their joint statement.¹³ These affirmations directly challenge China's efforts to unilaterally redefine maritime boundaries and signal the emergence of a more coordinated regional response.

While China has vocally criticised India's defence exports to ASEAN nations, arguing that they contribute to instability, such claims overlook the legitimate security concerns of Southeast Asian States. China's actions — supporting Pakistan's naval build-up, expanding military ties with Sri Lanka and Myanmar, and deploying vessels across contested waters — have prompted affected countries to diversify their respective defence partnerships.¹⁴ India's outreach is a natural response to these dynamics, rather than a provocation.

President Prabowo Subianto has reaffirmed Indonesia's intent to continue infrastructure collaboration in Sabang and the Andaman Islands, underscoring Jakarta's recognition of India as a key strategic partner.¹⁵ More recently, India and Indonesia have elevated their coordination mechanisms. In January of 2025, the two countries agreed to deploy an Indonesian International Liaison Officer at India's Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), signalling enhanced surveillance cooperation.¹⁶ This move reflects both nations' prioritisation of Maritime Situational Awareness (MSA) and Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), as critical in countering IUUF, drugs and arms trafficking, and incursions by third-party actors, particularly in the face of China's expanding naval footprint.

India's potential sale of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile to Indonesia — currently in its final stages — is a pivotal step in this evolving relationship. The deal, valued at \$450 million, follows a similar agreement that India had concluded with the Philippines and underscores India's growing role as a net provider of security.¹⁷ For Indonesia, the procurement is part of a broader effort to bolster maritime defence

capabilities in response to grey-zone coercion and assertive manoeuvres by Chinese maritime forces. The visits by Indonesian defence officials to Indian military-industrial facilities, and high-level diplomatic exchanges between President Prabowo Subianto and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, signify not only defence alignment but also a broader strategic convergence, which should be pursued continuously and vigorously.¹⁸

Moreover, the prospective White Shipping Information Exchange (WSIE) agreement and combined maritime patrols in the Eastern Indian Ocean could bolster refined and efficient interoperability. These initiatives are not just tactical, but part of a broader strategic convergence: India's maritime policy, which is encapsulated in the acronym MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Security and Growth Across Regions) aligns well with Indonesia's maritime policy of being the Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) in terms of promoting the freedom of navigation, rules-based maritime governance, and inclusive Indo-Pacific cooperation.

Nonetheless, significant challenges persist. The development of Sabang Port — a key maritime node envisioned to enhance Indo-Indonesian naval cooperation — has seen limited progress, and continues to be hampered by bureaucratic inertia and an absence of sustained strategic investment. Moreover, the lack of a trilateral or minilateral framework involving other Indo-Pacific partners such as Australia, Japan, or the United States restricts the potential for interoperability, coordinated MSA/MDA, and combined patrols in the eastern Indian Ocean.

India's potential sale of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile to regional actors such as Indonesia marks a bold strategic leap in defence diplomacy. However, this comes with escalating concerns about technology security. In an increasingly volatile geopolitical environment, the transfer of high-end, dual-use military technology — even to friendly nations — carries inherent risk. There is a growing possibility of these platforms being reverse engineered, diverted, or falling into the orbit of belligerent actors due to regime change, coercive diplomacy, or weak export controls. For India, the imperative must be twofold: to expand its strategic partnerships without compromising on its technological edge, and to ensure that defence exports are nested within a clear framework of end-use verification, security assurances, and long-term strategic alignment.

Navigating Troubled Waters: Indonesia's Potential Maritime Response to China's Encroachment

China cannot be contained through strategic ambiguity. In a region defined by maritime tension and legal complexity, clarity, consistency, and credibility is of paramount interest. Jakarta must reaffirm its leadership in upholding international maritime law, not merely in statements, but in action — before short-term diplomatic overtures risk long-term strategic compromise. To preserve its strategic autonomy and legal consistency, Indonesia must:

1. **Reject Joint Development in Disputed Waters:** Any cooperation with China must be confined to uncontested zones. Allowing economic engagement in disputed areas sets a dangerous precedent for the dilution of sovereignty.
2. **Enhance Deterrence:** Continued investment in maritime surveillance and the garrisoning of strategic islands, particularly in Natuna — will strengthen Jakarta's capacity to monitor and deter unlawful incursions.
3. **Clarify Policy Messaging:** A unified foreign policy apparatus is essential. Discrepancies between political statements and diplomatic clarifications could weaken Indonesia's credibility and strategic posture.

Indonesia's future in the Indo-Pacific will depend on its ability to assert its maritime rights without alienating vital economic partners. Striking this balance requires not strategic ambiguity, but principled engagement, rooted in law, regional solidarity, and long-term national interest.

Maritime cooperation must be confined strictly to undisputed waters — anything less risks being interpreted as tacit acceptance of contested claims, undermining Indonesia's legal and strategic standing. There is no room for complacency. Jakarta must take the lead in fast-tracking a binding, verifiable ASEAN–China Code of Conduct, firmly rooted in the principles of UNCLOS. Delay only serves those who seek to redraw maritime boundaries through coercion and *fait accompli* tactics. At the same time, Indonesia's growing defence ties with India, the United States, and Japan are at risk of dilution should Jakarta appear increasingly deferential to Beijing's maritime assertiveness.

Indonesia's *bebas dan aktif* (independent and active) doctrine must not be mistaken for passivity.¹⁹ In today's strategic environment, ambiguity breeds vulnerability. The window for preserving strategic autonomy is rapidly narrowing—and it cannot be done through hedging alone. It demands a recalibrated foreign policy that is visibly aligned with international law, bolstered by proactive regional coordination, and supported by like-minded maritime democracies. Failure to do so will not only cede initiative to more aggressive actors but will cast doubt on Indonesia's role as a regional anchor. The time for strategic equivocation is over. What is now needed is bold, lawful, and unambiguous maritime leadership—before the tide turns irrevocably.

Conclusion

India and Indonesia, as pivotal Indo-Pacific middle powers, must move beyond symbolic gestures and not allow themselves to remain stuck at merely institutionalising their maritime partnership, but move it ahead through structured mechanisms. This includes regular combined naval exercises, accelerated technology transfers, and integrated information-sharing systems for Maritime Situational Awareness (MSA) leading to MDA. Such efforts should be embedded within a formal strategic dialogue framework, ensuring consistency and long-term alignment. Financial cooperation, too, deserves prioritisation. The push towards using local currencies in bilateral trade should be seen not merely as economic pragmatism, but as a hedge against external geopolitical pressures and dollar-dominated vulnerabilities.

Critical infrastructure projects, such as the development of Sabang Port near the Strait of Malacca, must be expedited, and the white shipping agreements between the two countries should be the priority at this time. These initiatives are not just about connectivity — they are strategic counterweights to China's assertive maritime expansionism, particularly in the South China Sea, where Beijing continues to redraw boundaries through coercive means of strategic communications and to extend its influence into the Indian Ocean region.

The India–Indonesia partnership offers an alternative model, grounded in international law, mutual sovereignty, and collective regional stewardship. In an era of great power flux, the India-Indonesia partnership could be a role model that

illustrates middle powers as not merely spectators but active architects of maritime order. Their collaboration reflects a shift from reactive diplomacy to proactive, interest-driven engagement, where regional balance is sustained not by hegemonic dictates, but by the deliberate agency of committed stakeholders.

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From Hamburg to the Indian Ocean: Securing Maritime Horizons

Ms Saaz Lahiri

In making a set of policy-relevant recommendations to the Government of India that would be mutually beneficial to both India and Germany, this article outlines a few significant ongoing endeavours in the Indo-Pacific relevant to maritime security cooperation between India and Germany. In so doing, it examines regional security cooperation between the two nations, the existing cooperation on maritime safety and security, and ongoing bilateral cooperation in maritime technology.

India's centrality within the Indo-Pacific has been gaining significant traction in Germany, as witnessed by the latter's recently promulgated, India-centric policy entitled, *"Focus on India"*, which finds tangible manifestation in several facets of Germany's "Indo-Pacific Deployment 2024" (IPD-24). It must be conceded that Germany's increasing focus upon India is not a brand-new phenomenon but is rather, a trend that has been increasing and sharpening over the past few years — one that began to become evident in the year 2021 itself. In that year (2021), Germany introduced its "Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific"¹ which served as a roadmap for engaging with regional partners such as India, Australia, and the ASEAN member-States.

Key 'International Shipping Lanes' (ISLs) and chokepoints in the Indian Ocean are of critical importance to Germany as any disruption to the shipping flowing along these ISLs would adversely and significantly affect European supply chains, maritime transport, maintenance of military capabilities, and trade.² Further, these guidelines

underscored the importance of international maritime governance as outlined in the UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) in the context of several bilateral conflicts prevalent or threatening to rise in the IO.³

It is significant that Germany's approach emphasises establishing a maritime dialogue with the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC),⁴ in addition to recognising the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)⁵ centrality and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). The Guidelines also recommend the appointment of German liaison officers in the various Information Fusion Centres within the Indo-Pacific (including IFC Singapore) to maintain sustained presence in the region.⁶ Of similar significance is the fact that Germany's sustainable-development goals relevant to the maritime domain include enhancing climate resilience, combating cyber threats, and countering piracy and terrorism.⁷

Given that Europe's security and prosperity are closely intertwined with developments in the Indo-Pacific, this region clearly holds significant strategic importance for the EU and its member-states. To strengthen its security engagements in Asia, the EU has launched the ESIWA (Enhancing Security In and With Asia) project.⁸ The German Federal Foreign Office has notably joined this effort by co-financing the project. Germany's development agency, *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ),⁹ is actively involved in fostering practical cooperation between the EU and like-minded Asian partners. This collaboration includes security and defence policy dialogues, capacity-building (capability-enhancing) workshops, public diplomacy efforts, and peer-to-peer capacity-building and capability enhancement. Through the ESIWA project, cooperation has been enhanced between the EU and five 'pilot' countries — India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea and Viet Nam — in areas such as maritime security, counter-terrorism, cybersecurity and UN peacekeeping.¹⁰ GIZ manages two thematic areas within this initiative, namely, 'Counter-Terrorism/Prevention of Violent Extremism' and 'Crisis Management' (Common Security and Defence Programme and Peacekeeping). Interestingly, GIZ has yet to participate in the 'Maritime Security' thematic pillar that has been implemented by its French counterpart, 'Expertise France'.¹¹

Germany's Relevance to 'Maritime' India

Even a cursory examination would reveal the mutual benefits of Germany-India in collaboration in areas such as maritime trade and maritime security within the Indo-Pacific. However, to better understand Germany's strategic interests in the IOR, and Germany's consequent relevance to India, it is essential to explore Germany's "*Focus on India*" policy, Germany's role in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and non-CSDP initiatives, and Germany's bilateral maritime relations with China.

"Focus on India" Policy

On 16 October 2024, the German Government released its first strategic document dedicated exclusively to engagement with India. Although not officially designated as a strategy, the document's cabinet-level-involvement and explicit prioritisation of policy areas establishes "*Focus on India*"¹² as a detailed framework for Germany's intended approach towards India. Within this framework, Germany advocates strengthened relations between the EU and India, aligning with its commitments under the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).¹³ Key areas of cooperation include enhanced engagement through the "EU-India Trade and Technology Council for Trade and Security"; security and defence cooperation, particularly in implementing the EU's "*Strategic Compass*" vis-à-vis India; and contributing to maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, through initiatives such as the EU's "Coordinated Maritime Presences" (CMP) and the "Critical Maritime Routes in the Indo-Pacific" (CRIMARIO) projects, both of which Germany actively endorses.

EU's CSDP and non-CSDP Initiatives

Consequent upon the initial success of the CMP concept in the Gulf of Guinea 'Maritime Area of Interest' (MAI), the concept has been extended to encompass the Western Indian Ocean (WIO). Germany plays an active role in strengthening the EU's role in the region by volunteering national assets to support monitoring and response

activities in both MAIs, particularly within the Gulf of Aden and in the vicinity of the Horn of Africa.¹⁴ Germany's involvement in the CMP is complementary to its national objectives and broader EU initiatives such as the above-mentioned, CRIMARIO project. As part of its IPD-24, the EU's IORIS (Indian Ocean Regional Information Sharing) platform, a vital component of CRIMARIO II, was utilised during a recent exercise between the German Navy and the navy and coast guard of the Philippines, with the Philippine's 'National Maritime Fusion Centre' playing an important role. The objective of this combined exercise was to enhance coordination in developing maritime domain awareness (MDA) capabilities while intensifying defence cooperation between the two countries¹⁵ and by extension, with the EU as well.

The 'Focus on India' document advocates cooperation between the Indian Navy's Operation SANKALP¹⁶ and the EU's Operation ASPIDES¹⁷ to secure ISLs passing through the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea.¹⁸ Since 23 February 2024, the German federal armed forces (*Bundeswehr*) have been actively involved in the EUNAVFOR Operation ASPIDES, with one German multi-purpose frigate deployed alongside naval assets from four other EU member-states.¹⁹ Germany has also been actively involved in the countering of illicit maritime activities, under the EU-led EUNAVFOR (European Union Naval Force) Operation ATALANTA, which was initially established to safeguard international shipping around the Horn of Africa from the threat of piracy. This security operation, under the EU's CSDP, aims to deter, prevent, and repress illicit maritime activity off the coast of Somalia. In line with the EU's efforts, Germany has contributed to regional stability by deploying up to 400 soldiers²⁰ and has collaborated closely with countries such as South Korea, Japan, Indonesia and India.²¹ Participation in these efforts also fulfilled Germany's obligations under the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).²²

At a multilateral level, the German government collaborates with India in regional forums such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) as a dialogue partner, and more recently, the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) within the 'Capacity Building and Resource Sharing' spoke/pillar.²³

Germany's Strategy with respect to China

In common with the European Union, Germany, too, considered China to be simultaneously a 'partner, competitor and systemic rival'.²⁴ This perspective stemmed from China's defence expenditure in maritime technology, and military prowess in terms of their naval fleet. However, this perceptual-triad has come under considerable strain given Germany's recent focus on 'de-risking' its economic dependence on China. Germany, like many other countries, is attempting to diversify trade routes and suppliers while continuing to engage China economically. This approach reflects a balance between economic cooperation and cautious engagement in maritime security concerns in the Indo-Pacific.

Indeed, Germany's bilateral engagements with China complement and reinforce the delicately balanced relations of its EU partners vis-à-vis Beijing.²⁵ However, Germany remains acutely aware that it has significant strategic interest in maintaining freedom of navigation under the rubric of the internationally accepted and consensually derived rule based order, particularly in the Indo-Pacific — a space that has become increasingly contested due to China's expansionist tendencies.²⁶ The German Federal government aims to deepen exchange in the transport sector in order to ensure that air and maritime routes are open and equitable.²⁷ Arguably, this has motivated Germany to participate in the EU's, and/or multilateral and bilateral naval exercises to support an 'open' and 'rules-based' maritime order. Additionally, the German "Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific" also called for a legally binding Code of Conduct between the ASEAN member-states and the China regarding the South China Sea, with a focus on upholding international maritime law.²⁸

Cooperation on Maritime Safety and Security

India and Germany have cooperated on several initiatives to enhance maritime safety and security in common areas of interest, particularly on themes such as the countering of illicit maritime activities, and maritime search and rescue (SAR). Both nations have also conducted combined maritime exercises off the coasts of their respective countries.

India-Germany Combined Maritime Exercises

Germany is committed to expanding its presence in the Indo-Pacific as demonstrated through its Indo-Pacific Deployment 2024 (IPD-24). As a part of the IPD-24, Germany's frigate, the *Baden-Wuttermberg* (pennant number F-222) and the replenishment tanker, the *Frankfurt Am Main* (pennant number A-1412) effected a port call at Mormugao in the Indian state of Goa.²⁹ From 21 to 23 October of 2024, these two German warships exercised with the Indian Navy's guided-missile destroyer, INS *Delhi* in the Bay of Bengal. The exercise was designed to bolster maritime interoperability and incorporated cross-deck flying operations, underway replenishment, weapon firings, and tactical manoeuvres (see **Figure 1**).³⁰ The deployment, the port-call and the combined exercise were all intended to underscore Germany's commitment to cooperation with like-minded countries in the Asian region.³¹

On 05 August 2024, a frontline frigate of the Indian Navy, INS *Tabar*, engaged in another maritime partnership exercise (MPX) with the German Navy, this time off the Kiel Canal. Participating units in this exercise, which showcased India's expansive naval reach, included a German Naval "Sea Lynx" helicopter drawn from the 3rd Squadron Naval Air Wing (MFG5) and incorporated advanced maritime operations such as ship-controlled approaches, helicopter winching exercises, and vertical replenishment drills. In the run-up to this exercise, the *Tabar* had visited the Port of Hamburg (from 7 to 20 July 2024).

The German Frigate *Bayern* was deployed to the Indo-Pacific from August 2021 to February 2022 (**Figure 2 is relevant**). The primary purpose of this deployment was to enhance the visibility of the German flag in waters far from Germany's coast, underscoring the German Navy's reliability as a political asset capable of operating globally. On 26 August 2021, the INS *Trikand*, which was deployed in the Gulf of Aden to counter illicit maritime activities, participated in an MPX with the *Bayern*. During the course of this exercise, the two warships conducted cross-deck helicopter landings, heliborne boarding operations, and replenishment at sea evolutions.³²

IPD-24, encompassing a series of multinational naval exercises and international operations with a variety of partners, commenced in May of 2024 and concluded in

Figure 1: MPX between the Indian Navy and the German Navy



Figure 2: FGS Bayern's Deployment across the Indo-Pacific in 2021.



Source: Bundeswehr

December of that year. IPD-24 needs to be seen as a critical security deployment, especially given the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict in the western hemisphere, which has arguably compelled Berlin to reassess and re-prioritise its strategic approach.

China's support for Russia's war efforts has driven the EU and its member-states to deepen their engagements in the creation of a security architecture in the Indo-Pacific that would complement their well-established transatlantic security agreement.³³

Maritime Technology Collaboration

Germany and India have also collaborated in maritime technology, which includes shipbuilding — an hitherto neglected area but one upon which India is now focussing, and the collaborative construction of underwater systems and platforms (submarines). Included within this ambit are the submarines being inducted by the Indian Navy under “Project-75 India”, several shipbuilding contracts between Indian and German companies, and contracts for variable depth sonar systems.

Way-Ahead Recommendations

Although Germany released its “Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific” some four years ago (in 2021) actual progress in terms of both, bilateral and multilateral engagements, has been agonisingly slow. This is doubly problematic since considerable scope exists for Germany to serve as a ‘catalyst’ between the EU and India, particularly on issues such as public international maritime law (PIML), capacity building, capability enhancement and energy security. Towards these ends, the following recommendations merit consideration by the Government:

- (1) Given that the port of Hamburg and the Jawaharlal Nehru Port Authority (JNPA) are key ports for Germany and India respectively,³⁴ it is recommended that India's Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways (MoPSW) and Germany's Federal Ministry of Transport and Digital Infrastructure enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on maritime cooperation covering research and development in green shipping initiatives, shipbuilding, maintenance and recycling, ship repair facilities (commercial and defence ships), stimulation of cargo flows between the two nations, port planning and development, marine salvage and towing, maritime education and training and research.³⁵

- (2) In order to enable rapid and effective responses to maritime crises requiring humanitarian aid and disaster relief (HADR) operations, it is recommended that governments of India and Germany sign a Logistical Support Agreement (LSA). It would be noted that India already has LSAs with Australia, France, Singapore, South Korea and the United States of America.³⁶ Such an agreement with Germany would also enhance maritime situational awareness, thereby improving the degree of maritime domain awareness (MDA) attained, and this would, in turn, facilitate a greater number of combined maritime exercises/operations in the Indian Ocean.
- (3) Like Germany, India, too, is heavily energy-reliant on the production and supply of energy through offshore drilling rigs, processing and control platforms and pipelines, including crude-oil pipelines, natural gas pipelines, etc.³⁷ With the seabed hosting several hundred undersea pipelines and cables — and given that over 90% of internet data traverses through subsea cables, it is recommended that India and Germany establish a working group on the protection of undersea critical infrastructure under the ambit of the “Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative” (IPOI), concentrating upon the “Capacity Building and Resource Sharing” spoke of this deeply interconnected web of seven spokes. This group would focus on developing legal and physical protection measures to safeguard subsea infrastructure from both natural disruptions and those caused by malevolent human intervention.³⁸ While the Nord Stream Gas offshore natural gas pipelines, comprising Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2, which run through the Baltic Sea between Russia and Germany, were damaged by undersea explosions in September of 2022 (Figure 3 is illustrative in this context), this is not the only instance of undersea infrastructure being wilfully damaged.³⁹ For a more complete update, the reader is referred to a number of research-articles published by the NMF over the past four years.⁴⁰
- (4) “Track 1.5” and “Track 2” engagements are crucial to flesh-out the decisions of the working group mentioned in the foregoing recommendation. It is, therefore, strongly recommended that India and Germany jointly initiate a

series of “Track 1.5” and “Track 2” workshops on the protection of undersea critical infrastructure, focusing upon legal, industry and defence perspectives.

- (5) Maritime Situational Awareness (MSA), which is a *sine qua non* for MDA, is a common priority for both the EU and India. It is consequently recommended that Germany, much like France, appoint a German liaison officer to the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR). This would be a logical development of Germany’s intention to second a *Bundeswehr* liaison officer to the IFC, Singapore.

Conclusion

While the EU’s “Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific” relies heavily upon the contributions of France (a resident power) there is much that Germany, especially in partnership with India, can contribute to the EU’s strategic intent.

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Türkiye and Bangladesh: Strategic Embrace or Temporary Alignment?

Ms Aditi Thakur

This policy paper examines the Türkiye–Bangladesh relationship through the lenses of defence cooperation, ideological affinity, and geopolitical alignment. It explores whether this engagement marks a temporary convergence based on political convenience, or whether it has the potential to evolve into a lasting strategic partnership. If the latter, Bangladesh could become Türkiye’s second strong ally/partner in a region largely dominated by India, deepening Ankara’s South Asian presence and potentially reshaping regional dynamics.

The paper first traces the evolution of Türkiye–Bangladesh ties, then assesses the implications for India’s strategic and maritime interests in the Bay of Bengal and the wider Indian Ocean. It also considers whether a Türkiye–Pakistan–China–Bangladesh axis is emerging and what this might mean for India’s regional posture. Finally, it offers policy recommendations for India to manage this shifting landscape and prevent the consolidation of a potentially hostile bloc on its eastern flank.

Türkiye–Bangladesh Relations: From Historical Affinity to Strategic Engagement

Türkiye’s engagement with Bangladesh remains a relatively underexplored dimension of South Asian geopolitics, with limited academic or policy analyses in the public domain addressing the strategic implications of this growing relationship. The partnership gained wider attention when reports emerged that Bangladesh had released a controversial map of “*Greater Bangladesh*” that included Indian territory

— allegedly backed by a Turkish NGO involved in local political activities.¹ This incident raised concerns in New Delhi and triggered broader questions about whether Bangladesh’s increasing closeness with Türkiye reflects a strategic shift and whether this development should be viewed as a potential challenge to India’s interests in the region.

The context of this evolving relationship is particularly significant. India–Bangladesh ties are currently strained, while Türkiye–India relations have deteriorated in recent years, especially after Ankara’s vocal support for Pakistan during Op SINDOOR. Against this backdrop, the Mohammad Yunus-led government in Dhaka has been accused of enabling the reemergence of Islamist political forces and creating conditions conducive to stronger Bangladesh–Türkiye ties.² This raises important questions: is the Yunus government positioning Bangladesh as Türkiye’s next key partner in South Asia — similar to Pakistan — or is this simply a case of diplomatic opportunism?

Although both countries now refer to “shared historical and cultural ties”, the relationship has a complex past. Türkiye’s long-standing support for Pakistan not only led it to back Pakistan —both politically and materially — during the 1971 Liberation War, but also contributed to its hesitation in recognising Bangladesh as an independent State.³ It only recognised Bangladesh in 1974, during the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Summit held in Lahore.⁴ Following this, formal diplomatic relations were established, marked by the opening of the Turkish embassy in Dhaka in 1976 and the Bangladeshi embassy in Ankara in 1981.⁵ While the formative years of their bilateral relations were marked by cordiality and symbolic gestures, the depth and breadth of engagement remained limited, largely owing to Türkiye’s historically West-centric orientation of Ankara’s foreign policy. This gradually changed with the Justice and Development Party (AKP)’s rise to power in the early 2000s, and especially after the launch of the “*Asia Anew*” policy in 2019, which aimed to enhance Türkiye’s strategic visibility across the broader Asia-Pacific.

Despite their geographic distance, Türkiye and Bangladesh have long shared religious and cultural affinities, particularly those rooted in Islamic solidarity. These affinities were often reaffirmed through diplomatic support in international fora.

During the 1970s and 1980s, for instance, Bangladesh supported Türkiye's positions on contentious issues such as Cyprus, the delimitation of the continental shelf, and the Exclusive Economic Zone.⁶ Such gestures demonstrated Dhaka's willingness to endorse Türkiye's geopolitical concerns, even in arenas beyond its immediate regional focus. Türkiye, for its part, invoked historical Islamic bonds and civilisational unity as a means to reinforce bilateral goodwill. This cultural affinity found expression in symbolic exchanges, including the naming of roads and public spaces in Dhaka and Ankara after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Ziaur Rahman, and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, signifying mutual respect and recognition.⁷

Bilateral relations witnessed a notable acceleration from 2009 onwards.⁸ This turning point corresponded with Ankara's redefinition of its global diplomatic posture under the AKP's assertive foreign policy vision. President Abdullah Gül's visit to Bangladesh in 2010, and the subsequent visit by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in November the same year — the first by a Turkish premier in 21 years — signalled a renewed commitment to strengthening ties.⁹

During these visits, agreements were signed in a range of sectors including health, tourism, education, customs cooperation, and investment protection. The establishment of the Turkey–Bangladesh Business Council and growing activities by the Turkey–Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry (founded in 2007) became pivotal institutional mechanisms for promoting economic cooperation.¹⁰ These initiatives also coincided with a visible expansion of Turkish soft-power instruments, such as development assistance and civil society outreach, particularly through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), which began implementing projects in Bangladesh in health, education, agriculture, and infrastructure.¹¹

Defence and security cooperation between Türkiye and Bangladesh — discussed in detail in subsequent sections — also began to intensify during this period. Agreements on military training, equipment procurement, and technical exchange were signed, building upon an earlier 1981 defence cooperation agreement.¹² Defence ties further solidified after a 2008 protocol under which Türkiye committed to supply one military unit of Bangladesh annually with training and equipment

support.¹³ More recently, Bangladesh has emerged as a major importer of Turkish defence hardware, including drones, artillery systems, and possibly armoured vehicles and tanks.¹⁴

Yet, bilateral relations have not been without strain. The execution of top leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami party in Bangladesh between 2013 and 2016 — following their conviction for war crimes committed during the 1971 Liberation War — drew strong condemnation from Ankara.¹⁵ Erdoğan publicly expressed his disapproval, describing the judicial process as politically motivated and undemocratic. Türkiye even temporarily recalled its ambassador from Dhaka.¹⁶ The incident marked the lowest point in the bilateral relationship in the post-2000 era.

Nevertheless, this period of diplomatic chill was short lived. Following the attempted coup in Türkiye on 15 July 2016, Bangladesh was among the first countries to extend support to the Erdoğan government, with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina unequivocally condemning the coup and affirming her support for the democratically elected government.¹⁷ This gesture proved critical in resetting the tone of bilateral engagement. Türkiye, in turn, reciprocated with renewed diplomatic outreach, appointing a new ambassador and expressing its intent to rebuild and deepen relations.¹⁸

Türkiye–Bangladesh ties gained momentum through high-level visits and humanitarian cooperation during the Rohingya crisis, including aid pledges and hospital support by Turkish leaders.¹⁹ This goodwill was followed by structured political consultations, trade missions, and diplomatic engagements. In 2019 and 2020, foreign ministers from both sides met in Ankara and Dhaka, with President Erdoğan proposing a \$3 billion trade target and support for a friendship hospital.²⁰ During his visit to Dhaka in December 2020, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu described Bangladesh as “*the rising star of Asia*,” affirming Türkiye’s commitment to deepen engagement across multiple domains.²¹

As of 2025, Türkiye–Bangladesh relations appear to have reached a new zenith — propelled by the strategic coherence of Türkiye’s “*Asia Anew*” initiative and Bangladesh’s openness to diversifying its partnerships beyond traditional players.

Notably, the deepening of ties coincides with a fluid political environment in Dhaka, following the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government. While the political transition introduces a degree of uncertainty, it also presents opportunities for Türkiye to recalibrate its engagement with new stakeholders in Bangladesh's evolving political landscape.

However, these increasingly close ties have not gone unnoticed by regional stakeholders. The growing influence of Turkish-affiliated NGOs and civil society actors in Bangladesh, particularly in the context of rising political Islam, has drawn scrutiny from New Delhi. Indian authorities have flagged concerns over ideological narratives linked to Türkiye's outreach, including the activities of groups like "*Saltanat e Bangla*", which reportedly advocates a vision of a "*Greater Bangladesh*" encompassing parts of India's northeast and Myanmar.²² Although such views are not endorsed by either Ankara or Dhaka, they have added an element of ideological unease to an otherwise pragmatic bilateral engagement. Consequently, India has taken measures to limit the operational scope of Turkish entities in Bangladesh, particularly in sectors deemed sensitive to national security.

Türkiye–Bangladesh Defence Convergence: Strategic Evolution and Industrial Deepening

In recent years, Türkiye and Bangladesh have markedly intensified their defence and security cooperation, transitioning from a transactional arms trade relationship to a comprehensive and strategically significant partnership. Anchored in Bangladesh's broader *Forces Goal 2030* military modernisation agenda, this evolving alliance reflects Dhaka's ambition to reduce dependency on traditional suppliers and build indigenous defence-industrial capabilities.²³ For Ankara, the partnership aligns with its "*Asia Anew*" initiative, expanding its strategic footprint in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region.

At the centre of this defence convergence is Bangladesh's procurement of key Turkish platforms, notably *Bayraktar TB2* drones, *TRG-300* multiple rocket launchers, *MKE Boran* howitzers, and the expected acquisition of *Tulpar* light tanks.²⁴

These systems are bolstering Dhaka's tactical and operational capabilities while introducing NATO-standard interoperability into its armed forces. Operational deployment of Turkish-made drones along Bangladesh's borders — particularly areas adjacent to India — has been noted, although Dhaka maintains that these are routine surveillance operations.²⁵ These acquisitions are closely aligned with Bangladesh's pursuit of modernisation and technological sophistication under *Forces Goal 2030*.

This defence convergence, however, is not a recent development but builds upon decades of institutional cooperation. The genesis of formal military ties dates back to 1978, when Bangladesh President Ziaur Rahman visited Türkiye, setting in motion technical discussions that led to the 1981 Military Training Cooperation Agreement.²⁶ This agreement facilitated exchanges in military education and training, and Turkish naval special forces began training Bangladesh Navy's elite SWADS units in areas such as special warfare diving and salvage operations.²⁷ Over time, a number of Bangladesh Army officers also began receiving training at Türkiye's military academies, deepening personnel-level interoperability.

Türkiye's role in Bangladesh's defence transformation expanded notably after 2013, when the Bangladesh Army procured *Otokar Cobra* light armoured vehicles.²⁸ This was followed by a major Government-to-Government (G2G) contract in 2015 in which Türkiye offered guided missile frigates to Bangladesh.²⁹ In 2017, a US\$1 billion order for 680 light armoured vehicles was placed with Turkish firm Delta Defence.³⁰ A landmark agreement was signed in March 2019 between Bangladesh and ROKETSAN for multiple regiments of the *TRG-300 Kaplan* medium-range rocket system, further enhancing Bangladesh's artillery capabilities.³¹ This was followed in June 2021 by in-country training for 41 Bangladeshi military personnel on the system.³²

Beyond procurement, the bilateral relationship has expanded into joint production and industrial cooperation. A 2021 MoU facilitated the establishment of a production line for 105mm and 155mm artillery shells at the Bangladesh Ordnance Factories in collaboration with Turkish firm REPKON.³³ Further institutional cooperation is unfolding through efforts to establish defence-industrial zones in Chittagong and Narayanganj, guided by high-level engagements and site assessments.³⁴ Turkish

defence firms including MKE, ASFAT, and STM are involved in ongoing discussions, supported by the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA).³⁵ These efforts are being formalised through anticipated memoranda of understanding and the formation of a bilateral Defence Industrial Working Group.

Türkiye's support has also extended to repair and logistics support. Following the 2020 Beirut port explosion, Ankara assisted in repairing Bangladesh Navy ships damaged in the blast.³⁶ Additionally, Türkiye's naval design influence has been visible in Bangladesh's defence procurement — such as the 2021 order for three dive support boats from Khulna Shipyard based on Turkish blueprints.³⁷

Naval and aerospace collaboration has also seen significant progress. In May 2024, the Turkish naval corvette TCG *Kınalıada* (F 514) made a goodwill visit to Chattogram Port, marking 50 years of diplomatic relations and signalling greater maritime engagement.³⁸ In April 2025, Foreign Affairs Adviser Md Touhid Hossain met with *Turkish Aerospace* CEO, Mehmet Demiroğlu, at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum to explore cooperation in aviation investment, technology transfer, and human resource development.³⁹ A Turkish delegation is expected to visit Bangladesh to advance this dialogue, further diversifying the scope of bilateral defence cooperation.

Security collaboration, too, has advanced. A comprehensive Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed on 08 January 2022 institutionalised cooperation on counterterrorism, cybercrime, anti-narcotics operations, and intelligence sharing.⁴⁰ This includes capacity-building for Bangladesh's police, border guards, coast guard, and paramilitary forces. Türkiye has also extended humanitarian and technical support for Rohingya repatriation efforts, including the reopening of its field hospital at Bhasan Char.⁴¹

Taken together, these developments illustrate a deepening, multidimensional Türkiye–Bangladesh strategic partnership — one rooted in defence-industrial cooperation, capability enhancement, and institutional trust. As this trajectory continues, it signals a deliberate shift in Dhaka's strategic calculus towards greater diversification and autonomy in defence affairs, with Türkiye positioned not merely as a supplier, but as a long-term collaborator in Bangladesh's evolving security landscape.

The Türkiye–Pakistan–China Nexus and Bangladesh’s Tilt

Türkiye has rapidly emerged as a principal defence partner for Bangladesh, especially since 2021, as Dhaka recalibrates its foreign and security policy under the *Forces Goal 2030* framework.⁴² From advanced rocket launchers and howitzers to *Bayraktar* drones and potentially *Tulpar* light tanks, Bangladesh has inducted at least 15 categories of Turkish military equipment, positioning itself as the fourth-largest importer of Turkish defence products in early 2021.⁴³ In parallel, high-level defence visits between the two sides — including trips by all three Bangladeshi service chiefs to Türkiye and naval goodwill visits by Turkish vessels — have reinforced operational familiarity and institutional trust.⁴⁴ Turkish defence firms such as ROKETSAN, REPKON, ASFAT, and STM are now embedded in Bangladesh’s defence-industrial ecosystem through joint production, site development, and technology transfer.

Along with this Turkish footprint, Pakistan has re-entered the Bangladeshi defence landscape in a development that would have been considered politically untenable just a few years ago. In a landmark agreement signed in late 2024, the Pakistani Army was invited to train Bangladeshi military personnel, with the programme commencing in February 2025.⁴⁵ This is the first time since Bangladesh’s liberation war that Pakistani forces are officially present in any capacity on Bangladeshi soil. This arrangement is widely viewed as having been brokered in part by Ankara and represents a significant breach in the historical firewall that had existed between Dhaka and Islamabad. Pakistan’s return is not only symbolic of changing attitudes within Bangladesh’s military-political establishment but also indicative of the subtle trilateral alignment between Pakistan, Türkiye, and Bangladesh. Türkiye’s longstanding strategic embrace of Pakistan — reflected in defence collaboration and ideological commonalities — provides a diplomatic bridge that facilitates this rapprochement.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh’s economic realignment is also accelerating. Türkiye, already Bangladesh’s second-largest South Asian trading partner after India, is pushing to capitalise upon Dhaka’s shifting preferences.⁴⁶ Although a proposed Free Trade Agreement was stalled due to EU objections over Türkiye’s Customs Union, Ankara has publicly stated that it is prepared to “*replace India*” in Bangladesh’s import market

— especially in strategic sectors like aviation, defence, ordnance, and electronics.⁴⁷ This economic convergence comes against the backdrop of deteriorating India–Bangladesh trade relations. In May 2025, India imposed sweeping restrictions on Bangladeshi exports at 11 land ports, rerouting ready-made garments, processed foods, plastics, and other goods to seaports like Kolkata and Nhava Sheva.⁴⁸ A month later, similar restrictions were imposed on jute products.⁴⁹ While New Delhi framed these moves as reciprocal trade enforcement, many analysts see them as strategic countermeasures in response to Dhaka’s growing proximity to adversarial states.

The rupture extends into the political and security realms as well. Since Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s departure in August 2024, the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus has undertaken overt diplomatic realignment, with senior visits to Beijing and renewed security cooperation with Islamabad. Yunus’s reference to Bangladesh as the “*guardian of the ocean*” for India’s Northeast, especially in the context of the Siliguri Corridor, has provoked deep anxiety in Delhi.⁵⁰ India fears that access to and influence over the corridor — the so-called “chicken’s neck” connecting India’s northeastern states to the rest of India — could now be subjected to competing claims or leverage. Security challenges, too, are multiplying. Rising illegal migration, transborder extremist movement, and reports of ideological radicalisation linked to external actors, have heightened India’s perception of internal vulnerability.

The evolving geopolitical realignment in South Asia — marked by Bangladesh’s intensifying defence and economic engagement with Türkiye, its re-engagement with Pakistan, and expanding cooperation with China — has triggered mounting concerns in New Delhi. Once seen as India’s closest regional partner, Bangladesh is now becoming the focal point of a strategic axis that potentially excludes and challenges India’s traditional position in its eastern flank. This shift is not simply symbolic; it is structural, and it is unfolding across military, economic, and diplomatic domains.

While the formation of a formal Türkiye–Pakistan–China–Bangladesh quadrilateral alliance/partnership remains an unlikely near-term development, the growing convergence among these actors in defence, trade, and ideology points towards a latent strategic bloc that could marginalise India in its own neighbourhood. Ankara and Islamabad — both of which openly oppose India’s position on Kashmir and frequently invoke pan-Islamic solidarity — have found in Dhaka a willing

partner under its current leadership. China's parallel role as an economic investor and defence collaborator completes the circle. For India, this emerging alignment poses a multidimensional challenge: not only is its eastern flank increasingly slipping from its sphere of influence, but the presence of competing powers in close proximity — both physically and ideologically — threatens to complicate its strategic calculus in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region.

Way Forward: Recommendations for India

- (a) **Recalibrate Bilateral Engagement with Bangladesh.** India must initiate a calibrated political reset with Dhaka, avoiding overt pressure while discreetly re-engaging key stakeholders across the Bangladeshi political spectrum. While the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus may be ideologically distant, long-term stability in bilateral relations depends on depoliticising engagement and maintaining continuity beyond individual regimes. This includes reopening Track-II dialogues, backchannel diplomacy, and issue-specific working groups on trade, water-sharing, and counterterrorism.
- (b) **Expand and Modernise Defence Cooperation.** India must revitalise its defence cooperation with Bangladesh, perhaps through an offer of joint production, training exchanges, and high-end technology transfers, particularly in the naval and aerospace domains. Rather than viewing Türkiye's involvement as a zero-sum game, India must offer alternatives that are attractive on both economic and operational grounds — such as co-developing naval platforms or providing scholarships at Indian defence institutions. A revival of bilateral defence dialogues, last held in 2023, should be prioritised.⁵¹
- (c) **Strengthen Border Infrastructure and Surveillance Capabilities.** Given the potential for cross-border spillovers from Pakistani-trained elements or surveillance via Turkish drones, India should urgently enhance its security along its eastern frontier. This includes expanding UAV fleets, real-time satellite surveillance, integrated border management systems, and deepening intelligence cooperation with Bangladesh's security apparatus to prevent third-party manipulation or infiltration.

- (d) Revitalise Soft Power and Counter Ideological Narratives. India should boost its soft-power presence in Bangladesh through cultural outreach, academic exchanges, and civil society partnerships that highlight shared history and regional stability. At the same time, it must monitor Turkish-linked ideological networks, track their funding, and deploy counter-narratives via digital platforms and civil society, backed by stronger cyber surveillance and threat assessment.
- (e) Cultivate Countervailing Regional Partnerships. In response to the emerging Türkiye–Pakistan–China–Bangladesh axis, India should intensify cooperation with other Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal states such as Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Mauritius. Strengthening BIMSTEC and IORA frameworks — especially on maritime security and economic connectivity — would dilute the influence of any exclusive grouping emerging around Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Bangladesh's evolving defence and foreign policy trajectory — marked by deepening ties with Türkiye, renewed engagement with Pakistan, and a growing economic embrace of China — signals a significant realignment in South Asia's strategic landscape. Once a steadfast partner of New Delhi, Dhaka is increasingly asserting its strategic autonomy by diversifying partnerships and pursuing alternative security and economic arrangements.

For India, this reorientation presents a multi-layered strategic dilemma. Türkiye's rising presence in Bangladesh's defence-industrial sphere, its ideological inroads through NGOs, and its symbolic naval outreach in the Bay of Bengal challenge India's long-standing maritime and regional influence. The re-entry of Pakistan into Bangladesh's military domain — facilitated by Ankara — raises the prospect of revived hostilities and destabilisation along India's eastern borders. China's continued infrastructural and financial entrenchment in Bangladesh further intensifies the competitive environment, especially as India grapples with strategic encirclement on multiple fronts.

Yet even amid this shifting equation, it is imperative that Dhaka recognises the enduring realities of geography and interdependence. Surrounded by India on three sides and historically enmeshed in shared economic, cultural, and ecological systems, Bangladesh cannot afford to completely alienate or adopt an overtly adversarial posture towards India. Despite recent tensions, the two countries have been among each other's largest trading partners in key sectors, and continued diplomatic engagement remains essential to mutual stability and prosperity.

At the same time, India must avoid reactive or coercive approaches that could further alienate Dhaka. While India holds clear strategic and economic advantages, adopting a condescending or an overtly punitive posture would be counterproductive. The Muhammad Yunus-led government is an interim arrangement, and India must look beyond immediate provocations to invest in long-term strategic gains. Reinvigorating soft diplomacy, rebuilding trust, and addressing misperceptions — particularly among the Bangladeshi public — are vital steps towards reshaping the narrative and restoring influence.

Although the strategic embrace of Türkiye by Bangladesh may seem, *prima facie*, to be a temporary alignment driven by short-term political shifts, a deeper analysis suggests that it is part of Türkiye's broader *Asia Anew* initiative — an effort aimed at deepening influence across Muslim-majority states in Asia. The current political flux in Bangladesh has merely served as the icing on the cake, accelerating Ankara's outreach. However, unlike the entrenched Türkiye–Pakistan strategic axis, the Türkiye–Bangladesh partnership is not yet irreversible. With historical ties, geographic proximity, and strong economic interdependence, India retains significant leverage. If approached with patience, pragmatism, and careful diplomacy, New Delhi still has the opportunity to recalibrate this relationship and reassert its role as a stable and preferred partner in Dhaka's strategic calculus.

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Soft Power Diplomacy at Sea: The Case of the Chinese Hospital Ship *Peace Ark*'s 'Mission Harmony'

Mr Shrey Shaurya Singh Bisht

China's portrayal of itself as a "Peaceful Developing Power¹" is a calculated public relations strategy designed to conceal its more aggressive ambitions. To demonstrate its benign image and engagement with the world at large, President Xi Jinping has launched three initiatives, namely, the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilisation Initiative.² These initiatives are often employed to further China's strategic interests rather than to foster genuine collaboration. Behind the veneer of peaceful development lies an agenda focused on expanding China's global influence, securing economic leverage, and positioning itself as a dominant power in the international and regional arena.

While the world is apprehensive of the hard power efforts of China, it showcases consistent soft power diplomacy through 'Military Operations Other Than War' (MOOTW). These operations include counter-terrorism and stability maintenance, maritime rights and interests protection, counter-piracy and far-seas escort, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), non-combatant evacuation operations (NCEOs), international military exercises and military diplomacy³. These are frequently highlighted to demonstrate China's commitment to global peace and security.

However, these actions must be scrutinised within the broader context of China's strategic goals. For example, China has consistently deployed the hospital ship *Peace Ark*' on missions worldwide to project the strategic message of humanitarian

commitment and, apparently, to provide medical aid in regions lacking adequate resources. Its affiliation with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) raises significant concerns about its role and charter. Even while soft power is currently regarded as a vital tool for foreign policy, its effectiveness has hardly ever been examined empirically. Using data from Mission Harmony (2010-2024), this article seeks to analyse the degree to which the soft power engagement missions of the Chinese hospital ship, the *'Peace Ark'*, have advanced its geopolitical goals. Though China uses both the phrases, i.e., "Mission Harmony" and "Harmonious Mission," interchangeably, this article will consistently use "Mission Harmony" throughout.

The initial section provides a broad overview of the history of the PLAN's hospital ship, and its characteristics. Thereafter, it focuses upon the question of whether Beijing is using its naval diplomacy selectively—cooperating where it has no territorial ambitions while using more forceful or pressure-driven tactics in contested regions, particularly in the near seas. The latter section of the article further looks into whether the actions are *veiled* methods to further China's overseas presence and political leverage. The study relies on Chinese open-source materials, including military journals and news reports.

Chinese Hospital Ships: A Historical Perspective

China, in the aftermath of the 1974 naval skirmish with Vietnam over the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea, despite their apparent victory, suffered significant logistical challenges in providing medical care to wounded sailors. As a lesson, the PLAN recognised the indispensable role of hospital ships in far-sea operations. Accordingly, in 1976, taking the *Qiongscha* class of personnel transport ships as a base platform, the PLAN's South Sea Fleet and Medical Logistics Department formally proposed the construction of hospital ships -*Y832 Nan Kang* and *Y833 Bei Kang* equipped with medical facilities such as triage stations, operating rooms, and patient beds, while retaining defensive armaments like 14.5mm guns. However, their limited range, capacity, and lack of flexibility for broader logistical support highlighted gaps in the PLAN's maritime medical and operational capabilities. Hence, in 1996, inspired by the Royal Navy's civilian converted ships such as HMS *Uganda* and HMS *Argus* for naval use in the 1982 Falklands War, the PLAN introduced *Y82*

Shichang, a modular multipurpose ship aimed at increasing China’s capacity for both humanitarian and military operations.⁴ However, the PLAN’s focus soon shifted towards developing a dedicated hospital ship and it finally built a standard hospital ship *Y866 Daishan Dao* or the ‘*Peace Ark*’ in December 2008.⁵

To understand the role of the ‘*Peace Ark*’ hospital ship it is pivotal to comprehend its main characteristics. They are as follows:⁶

- Length: 178 m
- Beam: 24 m
- Height: 35.5 m
- Displacement: 14,000 tons
- Maximum speed: 20 knots
- Endurance: 30 days
- Helicopter: One Z-8 ambulance version

The ship has 300 beds, seven operational theatres, eight nursing stations, five auxiliary diagnostic units, and 17 clinical departments including a resuscitation room, X-ray imaging room, CT imaging room, inspection room, blood preparation room and others, and medical information centres with more than 100 medical personnel. This is the first domestically designed hospital ship to sail the ocean. It has visited 45 countries and provided medical services to over 290,000 people.⁷

List of Hospital Ships in China’s PLA Navy

In 2020, China commissioned two new *Anshen*-class hospital ships of about 4,000 tonnes, which provide medical treatment to personnel stationed in bases and missions in the South China Sea, which is placed in Table 1:⁸

Table 1: Hospital Ships in China’s PLA Navy

Class	Manufacturer	In service	Commissioned
<i>Anshen</i> (Type 919)	Huanghai Shipyard	2	2020
<i>Anwei</i> (Type 920) (<i>Peace Ark</i>)	Guangzhou Shipyard	1	2008
<i>Ankang</i>	n/k	5	n/k
<i>Qiongshe</i>	Guangzhou Shipyard	1	n/k

Source: Janes Fighting Ships (2023)

Chinese Soft Power Projection through Mission Harmony's Voyages

The humanitarian function of the *'Peace Ark'* has expanded significantly over the years as the number of treated patients and performed operations has progressively grown. This was a clear indication that the ship was gradually assuming a bigger role in medical missions in different areas, and health emergencies which have been at the core of Chinese diplomacy. The *'Peace Ark'* hospital ship is an active participant in multilateral HADR and MM exercises worldwide, including its involvement in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) HADR and MM Exercise in Brunei in 2013⁹. The ship has been carrying out its 'Mission Harmony' series of global voyages since 2010 to offer medical aid and preliminary treatment to the citizens in Asian, African and Latin American states.

With every succeeding mission, the *'Peace Ark'* enhances its medical and logistical device and equipment capacities. The on-board hospital has now grown to incorporate 14 clinical departments and sophisticated surgical wards. In addition, more recent missions have expanded to other realms, ranging from simple health care assistance to the organisation of health education, together with joint medical exercises, and academic exchange which has also fostered diplomatic relations and intellectual exchange. Table 2 outlines the details of Mission Harmony with ports and regions visited during such missions:

Key Highlights of Mission Harmony 2024

The year 2024 marks the 10th Mission Harmony¹⁰ of the Chinese Hospital Ship *'Peace Ark'*. It set sail on 16th June 2024 from Zhoushan Port in East China's Zhejiang Province and completed its sail on 16th January 2025. The *'Peace Ark'* visited 13 countries in Africa during the Mission, as per the details provided by Senior Colonel Zhang Xiaogang during a press briefing.¹¹

It also made port calls to France, Greece and Sri Lanka during the voyage. The entire voyage took more than seven months. The *'Peace Ark'* made a port call in each country for seven days on an average, providing medical assistance to the citizens, Chinese nationals living overseas and military personnel already deployed

Table 2: Mission Harmony Voyages – 2010-2024

Mission Harmony/Year	Ports and Countries Visited	Region
Mission Harmony - 2010	Djibouti: Djibouti, Mombasa: Kenya, Dar es Salaam: Tanzania, Victoria: Seychelles, Chittagong: Bangladesh	Africa and Asia
Mission Harmony -2011	Havana: Cuba, Kingston: Jamaica, Spain: Trinidad and Tobago, Puerto Limon: Costa Rica	Caribbean Islands
Mission Harmony -2013	Muara: Brunei, Male: Maldives, Karachi: Pakistan, Mumbai: India, Chittagong: Bangladesh, Yangon: Myanmar, Jakarta: Indonesia, Sihanoukville: Cambodia	South Asia and Southeast Asia
Mission Harmony -2014	Nuku'alofa: Tonga, Suva: Fiji, Vila: Vanuatu, Moresby: Papua New Guinea	South Pacific Region
Mission Harmony - 2015	Sydney: Australia, Bridgetown: Barbados, Papeete: French Polynesia, St. George's: Grenada, Acapulco: Mexico, Callao: Peru, Honolulu: United States	South Pacific, North and South America, Caribbeans
Mission Harmony - 2017	Djibouti: Djibouti, Freetown: Sierra Leone, Libreville: Gabon, Pointe-Noire: Republic of Congo, Luanda: Angola, Maputo: Mozambique, Dar es Salaam: Tanzania	Africa
Mission Harmony - 2018	Moresby: Papua New Guinea, Vila: Vanuatu, Suva: Fiji, Nuku'alofa: Tonga, Cartagena: Colombia, La Guaira: Venezuela, St. George's: Grenada, Roseau: Dominica, St. John's: Antigua and Barbuda, Guayaquil: Ecuador, Valparaiso: Chile	South Pacific, Latin America, Caribbean Islands
Mission Harmony - 2022	Jakarta: Indonesia	Southeast Asia
Mission Harmony - 2023	Tarawa: Kiribati, Nuku'alofa: Tonga, Vila: Vanuatu, Honiara: Solomon Islands, Dili: Timor-Leste	South Pacific
Mission Harmony -2024	Victoria: Seychelles, Dar es Salaam: Tanzania, Antsirana: Madagascar, Maputo: Mozambique, Cape Town: South Africa, Luand: Angola, Pointe-Noire: The Republic of Congo, Owendo: Gabon, Douala: Cameroon, Cotonou: Benin, Nouakchott: Mauritania, Djibouti: Djibouti, Colombo: Sri Lanka	Africa

Source: Collated by the author from various websites

there. These port calls were displayed as providing humanitarian medical assistance, raising awareness of international goodwill and reasserting Chinese dedication to the development of a maritime community with a common vision. The table below highlights the Mission Harmony voyages taken by ‘Peace Ark’ in 2024.

Table 3: Mission Harmony 2024 Voyages

Ser No.	Country/ Location	Date	Port Visited	Surgeries	Key Highlights
1	Seychelles	5–11 Jul 2024	Victoria	N/K	Cataract Surgery
2	Tanzania	16–23 Jul 2024	Dar es Salaam	80	60th anniversary -diplomatic ties
3	Madagascar	24 Jul –3 Aug 2024	Antsiranana	171	“Peace Unity 2024” joint exercise
4	Mozambique	9–16 Aug 2024	Maputo	74	First “peace baby” birth
5	South Africa	23–30 Aug 2024	Cape Town	N/K	Exchange of academics at the University of Western Cape.
6	Angola	5–11 Sep 2024	Luand	90	Paediatric and Gynaecological -specific surgeries
7	Republic of Congo	19–26 Sep 2024	Pointe-Noire	88	Cataract Surgery
8	Gabon	26 Sep– 3 Oct 2024	Owendo	N/K	Outreach programs in schools and communities.
9	Cameroon	8–15 Oct 2024	Douala	126	Health lectures in orphanages and schools
10	Benin	17–24 Oct 2024	Cotonou	28	First ship-borne robot-aided renal cyst surgery
11	Mauritania	1–7 Nov 2024	Nouakchott	117	Use of surgical laser positioning system
12	Djibouti	6–13 Dec 2024	Djibouti	48	Preventive care
13	Sri Lanka	21–28 Dec 2024	Colombo	N/K	N/K

Source: Compiled by the author from various websites

In addition, the ship had a five day technical halt at Algiers Port in Algeria from 21 to 25 November 2024¹², and in Singapore from 02 to 07 January 2025.¹³ Also, on December 15, 2024, it made a rendezvous with the 47th Chinese Naval Escort Taskforce in the Gulf of Aden and the ships sailed together for a day, as shown in Figure 1.¹⁴

Figure 1: ‘Peace Ark’ exercises with the PLAN supply ship Honghu in the Gulf of Aden



Source: Ministry of National Defence of the People’s Republic of China

Analysis of the objectives of different voyages of Mission Harmony: The Bigger Picture

The phrase ‘soft power,’ coined by Joseph Nye has been widely adopted by political leaders and practitioners of diplomacy. Several powers have commenced the adoption of strategies that emphasise cultural, political and economic engagement. In particular, China’s endeavours have been characterised by its clever manoeuvres that have both hard and soft power. One of the most visible and effective acts has been the deployment of the ‘*Peace Ark*’ hospital ship.

The world has become accustomed to countries showcasing soft power. This raises the question as to why these voyages require in-depth analysis. Analysing the mission would no doubt answer a several questions, but more pertinent is the need to assess the steps that could be taken to address the increase in Chinese overseas non-military activities that always have an ulterior motive.

Soft power is often less about getting others to do what one wants, than getting others to want what one does, by “transforming [their] interests and preferences to be in line with those of the leading state[s].” The highest form of strategic success is to win without confrontations, which can be achieved by exploiting an enemy’s weaknesses through psychological warfare, diplomacy, and subversion. Sun Tzu’s Art of War, therefore, suggests indirect tactics and the importance of being prepared, by repeatedly and regularly engaging in such pursuits.

Questions as to why Beijing would send the *Peace Ark* to a small Caribbean Island 16000 km away, (not just once but twice within five years) yet not send any ships to Japan which is only 1000 km away has led the analysts to observe that the answer to this dilemma cannot be justified on any account of practical or economic factors. Some argue that these missions were less about providing medical assistance, and more about gaining influence in the region. The Caribbean Island in question, which has close ties with Beijing, could have been targeted as part of China’s broader strategy to strengthen its geopolitical presence in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Chinese hospital ships have been selectively visiting nations in the southern Pacific Islands that have stopped supporting Taiwan. For instance, in 2019, when Kiribati and Solomon Islands both ended official diplomatic relations with Taiwan and conformed to the idea of ‘One China’, the *Peace Ark* visited the countries. After Grenada severed diplomatic ties with Taipei in 2005, the hospital ship sailed into the Caribbean Island twice.

Another way to look at the issue is to assess the impact of the Chinese soft power quotient by discerning the degree to which host countries and host regions (re) oriented their policies and preferences in ways favourable to Chinese interests after the hospital ship’s port calls. This would be somewhat evident if the visit marked a point of inflexion in trade with the host nation in which the trajectory of increase suddenly spiked or perhaps, reversed recent declines after the ship’s visit. Observers are just a few steps away from believing that in exchange for humanitarian and developmental assistance, China is doing a neo-colonial scramble for resources by investing in various forms of port infrastructure. Some of these includes the Piraeus Port in Greece, Gwadar Port in Pakistan, Doraleh Port in Djibouti, Dar es Salaam Port in Tanzania and many more.

The dual-use framework that China has proposed and adopted also raises concerns for the world as to what its actual goals are. Although Mission Harmony is ostensibly focused on diplomatic and humanitarian goals, its operations in strategically important regions like the South China Sea with a blend of humanitarian aid and naval deployments, hints a strategic agenda that extends beyond purely benevolent agenda. China always attempts to portray its innocuous image abroad through media overdrive. The missions do often coincide with China's Maritime Silk Road and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, suggesting that these initiatives may largely be used for enhancing political and economic ties, in addition to any claims of fostering peace and collaboration.

However, the influence that China seeks to garner through soft power diplomacy through Mission Harmony may not yield the desired results. Three aspects offer overarching reasons as to why China's HADR efforts face criticism:

1. **Strategic scepticism.** Deployment of the hospital ship and disaster teams in the South China Sea are seen as steps towards legitimising sovereignty. Critics suggest that they serve as tools for China to increase its influence in the region.
2. **Selective humanitarianism and credibility gap.** China dispatched the *'Peace Ark'* to the Philippines in 2013 only after being chastised for postponing aid because of disagreements with the Philippines over the South China Sea after Typhoon Haiyan struck the country. The construction of artificial islands (Fiery Cross Reef, Mischief Reef) and increasing naval patrols in contested waters of the South China Sea indicates that China does harbour ambiguous intent and interests, which it uses selectively – sometimes through cooperative measures and sometimes forceful, thereby, leading to a huge credibility gap.
3. **Unilateral approach.** There is a lack of collaboration with other nations and international bodies in contrast to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) which always adopts a multilateral disaster response approach.

Conclusion

The focus placed by Mission Harmony on symbolic actions, such as the well-known medical aid programmes and commemorations of Zheng He's seven voyages of exploration to the States around the Indian Ocean, may draw attention away from sincere attempts to address urgent world issues, turning the project into little more than a branding exercise. Almost every facet of naval diplomacy including the choice of which countries the ships visit, has a connected political objective. Thus, it remains uncertain whether China is genuinely attempting to project a benign image or whether there is a hidden strategy which does not readily meet the eye. The major concern which has intrigued everyone has been the dual nature of the 'Peace Ark' hospital ship, with a focus on symbolism over substantive action, blurring lines between humanitarian and military role¹⁵. There are discrepancies pointed out by the critics regarding data collection which cannot be ignored when intelligence gathering is done in the name of humanitarian operations.

Despite the umpteen apprehensions and concerns that bother maritime analysts across the globe about the deployment of the Chinese hospital ship, there remains no doubt that the ship has achieved much more international mileage for China as well as the PLA Navy through these series of voyages. This is something which umpteen number of rhetorical statements in white papers and other similar documents will never be able to create.¹⁶

India still does not have a hospital ship, neither in its naval inventory nor in the merchant marine. This critical void was realised during Op Shield in 1994 when the Indian navy fleet was dispatched to extract an embattled Indian Army battalion stranded in Kismayo in Somalia. The only alternative available to the Indian Navy was to designate INS *Godavari*, a guided missile frigate, as the makeshift hospital ship in addition to its combat tasking.¹⁷ China has developed advanced indigenous technology and equipment for hospital ships, making its designs mature and ready for export to other nations. In contrast, India continues to defer the decision to either acquire or indigenously build a design and equip hospital ship despite the very apparent benefits that may accrue to the country both, in peacetime and during combat conditions. Therefore, due to its role as a force-multiplier- during peace

time to project ‘soft power’ and as a critical troop-support platform during the war- it is strongly recommended that India must get a hospital ship post-haste.

15 February 2025

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Book Reviews

Book Review

Understanding Maritime Security

Author: Christian Bueger and Timothy Edmunds
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Ms Kripa Anand

The recently published book, “Understanding Maritime Security”, by Professors Christian Bueger and Timothy Edmunds, provides a detailed account of the threats and challenges that affect the global maritime order in contemporary times. The authors supplement their ideas by the use of rich examples from Europe, the Mediterranean, the Gulf of Guinea, the Western Indian Ocean, and Southeast Asia.

Comprising eight chapters, the book provides an excellent insight into the history of maritime security and provides important frameworks to understand the same. The authors suggest relevant tools to deal with the primary concerns of contemporary maritime security and provide an outlook for the future of the maritime security agenda. The book connects the dots between the various issues relevant to maritime security and provides the reader with an understanding that the maritime security agenda, is essentially, an interconnected web.

The authors begin by explaining what maritime security entails and puts forth the ‘three dimensions of challenge’ to maritime security. These emerge from three grand ocean visions: the idea of a closed sea, under the sovereign control of States, a free sea, and the sea as a global common, governed by international organisations.

These three dimensions comprise inter-State conflicts, maritime terrorism and extremist violence, and blue crime. The expression 'blue crime' includes crimes against maritime mobility, criminal flows, and crimes that cause substantial harm to the maritime environment. Bueger and Edmunds attempt to explain the existing threats and struggles that have shaped security at sea.

The idea of closed seas is an ancient one, but its more recent provenance lies in the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas, in which Spain and Portugal divided the global ocean between them as their sovereign territories. In our contemporary epoch, this same issue has evolved into a question regarding who has control over the ocean's resources and who should be responsible for environmental protection and marine safety. On the other hand, the idea of a free sea raises questions about the freedom to exploit ocean resources without any restrictions and the freedom of movement of ships for global trade. The debate around the third vision concerns how the wealth from ocean resource exploitation can be distributed equally.

The authors hold that the history of the maritime security agenda has been shaped by four waves of thinking. In the first wave, particularly evident after the terrorist attacks of September 2001 (9/11), the idea of security became a prime focus of concern, following which port and ship security were enhanced. A second wave followed in response to the rise of piracy off the coast of Somalia. The third wave of the maritime security agenda included crimes like smuggling and illicit fishing. The fourth wave has witnessed a broadening of the maritime security agenda through capacity building and an increase in the range of maritime security solutions. Moving forward, a fifth wave of maritime security, focused upon 'ecosystem thinking', which incorporates climate change, biodiversity-loss, marine protection, etc., as described by the authors and the need for collective action, is taking shape.

In Chapter 3, Edmunds and Bueger provide different frameworks to analyse maritime security. These frameworks are focused on law, State interest, institutions, meanings, practice, and causes. The framework on law, for instance, looks at ocean governance and the implication of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). State-centric frameworks, which also include institutions, underline that it is the responsibility of States to ensure the requisite degree of security. 'Practice'

connotes securitisation-analysis or a ‘security as practice’ approach. Frameworks focused on meaning and practice also look at the actions of maritime security actors and how these actions differ in their approach to the determination of solutions. Towards the end of this chapter, the authors introduce a framework of the root causes of maritime insecurity that could help in risk assessment.

The next part of the book focuses on inter-State conflicts, terrorism and grey zones. The authors find that most maritime disputes do not involve military force, unlike the case with conflicts upon the land. They furnish the example of “The Whisky War”, which was a dispute between Canada and Denmark over a small, uninhabited island called Hans. In 2022, the two States agreed to divide the island in half. This, according to the authors, demonstrates that maritime conflicts can be solved through peaceful negotiations. They also give the example of the islands of the Chagos Archipelago to show that international law does, indeed, provide the necessary instruments to peacefully resolve inter-State disputes. At the time the book was published, the UK had refused to return the islands to Mauritius. However, in October this year, after years of negotiations, the UK has agreed to hand over the Chagos Islands to Mauritius¹. The authors also give the example of the South China Sea to portray how complex inter-State conflicts can be. They explain that the line that segregates different types of conflict(s) is often blurred in practice. Grey Zone activities are a good example of this as they are characterised by ambiguity.

With the oceans covering more than seventy per cent of the earth’s surface, they are conducive to illegal maritime activities. Illicit flows are a big part of blue crime and smuggling is a major issue in the maritime security agenda. The authors give examples of the Western African Cocaine route that gained notoriety in the mid-2000s, the methamphetamine trade in Southeast Asia, and the European migration crisis of 2015.

The sixth chapter focuses upon the responsibilities of States in maritime security, which include protecting their own exclusive economic zones (EEZs), meeting obligations under the UNCLOS 1982 and other pieces of international law, holding combined security exercises, and so on. The authors delve into the role that international organisations play in conflict resolution and maritime security issues.

They also highlight the role of commercial actors in the maritime sector, arguing that their role in maritime security is based on self-interest, rather than tackling issues for the greater good. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), on the other hand, are underrated actors in the maritime security agenda. NGOs, they feel, play an important role in producing knowledge and maritime domain awareness and have also worked towards tackling the causes of blue crime. The key challenge is for all these organisations to come together for a coordinated response to mitigate maritime security issues.

The book then discusses possible solutions to address maritime threats. These include cooperation between naval forces, such as the US initiative of Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), which coordinates voluntary maritime security operations in the Western Indian Ocean. Another example is that of the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction meeting or SHADE, a platform that was set up in 2008 for informal discussions regarding counterpiracy operations off the Horn of Africa. Other types of cooperation include those between navies and industry, diplomatic fora, and interagency coordination.

Similarly, the authors discuss maritime security operations (MSOs) and show that the growth of the maritime security agenda has seen a rise in their number. Maritime security strategies, including action plans and information-sharing mechanisms also play a vital role to address maritime security, with improving technologies that provide better surveillance. Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) has also been a 'key enabling structure' for building trust between maritime security actors and improving the efficiency of maritime security operations.

In the last chapter, Bueger and Edmunds offer their views on where the maritime security agenda is headed. Threats, including cyber-crime, critical infrastructure protection, the protection of ports, underwater communication cables and maritime energy infrastructure, are highlighted. The authors underline that critical infrastructure such as offshore installations, data cables, and pipelines have, in aggregate, become a major factor in maritime security debates. Here, they give the example of the attack on the Nord Stream pipelines in the Baltic Sea in September 2022. Bueger and Edmunds also draw attention to human-induced climate change and its impact on the marine environment.

According to the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (UN IPCC), sea levels are likely to rise by up to 0.3 metres by 2050 and as much as 1.1 metres by the end of this century, which will result in vast areas of coastal zones and islands becoming uninhabitable. Warmer waters will have an impact on marine life, and in turn, on blue economies. Extreme weather events are also likely to exacerbate marine pollution. While the authors discuss how climate change will force us to take maritime security more seriously and mention the impact of rising sea levels on coastal communities, an issue they could have highlighted in this regard is that of climate change refugees. At a UNSC meeting in February 2023, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that the world will witness “*a mass exodus of entire populations on a biblical scale*”, as sea level rise will lead to a global security crisis.²

To conclude the book, the authors offer two clashing ‘master trends’, that is inclined towards the rise of ‘planetary thinking’, in which the focus is on environmental challenges the world is facing, and ocean governance. In similar vein, the other trend is towards growing geopolitical tensions between major States, making cooperation increasingly difficult, while also compounding the militarisation dilemma. The future of maritime security depends on how these two opposing trends take shape over time.

“Understanding Maritime Security” is an excellent reference point for the maritime security community. Overall, the aim of the book is to provide the maritime security analyst and professional, as well as the general reader, ‘what they need to know’ about maritime security, and the book does well to achieve this objective. Bueger and Edmunds succeed in piecing together different ideas, existing literature and theories of the maritime security agenda, providing a clear picture to the reader. Several ideas and theories of maritime security are made coherent with the assistance of tangible frameworks and examples from across the world. The substantial knowledge of the authors on the subject makes “Understanding Maritime Security” an essential read for anyone keen to learn more about this increasingly relevant subject.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Lammy David, “Foreign Secretary’s statement on the Chagos Islands”. 7, October 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-oral-statement-on-the-chagos-islands-7-october-2024>
- 2 United Nations, “Climate Change-induced Sea-Level Rise Direct Threat to Millions around World, Secretary-General Tells Security Council”, 14 February 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15199.doc.htm>

About the Reviewer

Ms Kripa Anand is a Research Associate at the National Maritime Foundation (NMF). Her research encompasses maritime security issues, with a special focus upon the manner in which India’s own maritime geostrategies are impacted by the maritime geostrategies of the island-States of Oceania in general and Australia in particular. She may be reached at ocn1.nmf@gmail.com.

Book Review

The Contest for the Indian Ocean: And the Making of a New World Order

Author: Darshana M Baruah
Yale University Press (New Haven), 2024, 206 Pages,
ISBN 978-0-300-27091-4

Ms Sushmita Sibwag

Darshana M Baruah's recent book, *"The Contest for the Indian Ocean: And the Making of A New World Order"*, which examines the evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Indian Ocean, begins with a bold assertion – "[T]his is the theatre where the competition between today's two great powers [the US and China] will be decisive." Emphasising the necessity of considering the Indian Ocean as a continuous theatre, the book puts a spotlight on the geostrategic relevance of this often-neglected western segment of the Indo-Pacific. In broad terms, the book explores three key themes pertaining to the Indian Ocean region (IOR): the strategic implications of geography in shaping competition; the influence of emerging actors such as Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, on regional dynamics; and the crucial role played by island nations in shaping great power politics.

The book opens with a comprehensive introduction, focussing on the geography and evolving geopolitics of the region. Notably, it argues for considering the Indian Ocean as a continuous geographical space. By drawing attention to the presence of "*sea lanes of communication*", the strategic importance of critical chokepoints, and the significant volume of energy trade transiting through the region, Baruah seeks to

underscore the centrality of the Indian Ocean to global trade connectivity. In this context, it is important to highlight the frequently misunderstood distinction — one that is also overlooked by the author — between International Shipping Lanes (ISLs) and Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), with the latter being relevant only to times of tension or conflict and generally involving the partial or complete re-routing of shipping traffic away from the ISLs. Baruah further asserts the necessity for dominant powers to secure access to these maritime routes to maintain their strategic advantage in the region. In addition, the book addresses several key issues, including the increasingly blurred lines between traditional and non-traditional security concerns in the resource-rich maritime region, the geopolitical significance of island nations when seen through a maritime rather than a sub-continental lens, and the absence of a cohesive Indian Ocean community or shared maritime identity among many of the littoral States of the Indian Ocean.

The second chapter examines the history behind the evolution of Diego Garcia as a US military base in the Indian Ocean, within the framework of the “*strategic island concept*” developed by the US Navy. By delving into the American strategic perspective at the height of the Cold War, Baruah offers the readers insights into how a dominant superpower approached strategic competition in the region. Analysing the “*National Security Study Memorandum 199: Indian Ocean Strategy*”, published by the US National Security Council (NSC) in 1974, Baruah examines how the US continued to view the region primarily through the lens of its competition with the USSR, alongside considerations of securing its energy supplies, access to ISLs, managing the volatile security situation in West Asia, and ensuring access to communications, intelligence, and future deployments. She further highlights the organisational challenges within the US military, particularly the division of responsibility for the IOR between three combatant commands (COCOMs), namely, the INDOPACOM, CENTCOM, and AFRICOM. Regardless of foreign policy priorities and considerations of resource availability, this division has contributed to a siloed approach, hindering the development of a cohesive strategy for the Indian Ocean.

Shifting the focus to “*Chokepoints and Naval Competition*”, the subsequent chapter underscores how this strategic neglect of the IOR as a unified theatre has resulted in the “*continentalisation*” of what is, in essence, a predominantly maritime region. It

highlights the centrality of key chokepoints, including the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, the Strait of Malacca, and the Mozambique Channel, in ensuring unhindered trade connectivity and the global energy supply. She highlights how this is crucial for China in addressing its “Malacca Dilemma” across the IOR, given that 80% of Beijing’s energy imports must necessarily traverse these chokepoints, as must its overall maritime trade. It is only through these chokepoints that China can expand its diplomatic footprint across South Asia, Africa, and West Asia, as also ensure maritime connectivity with Europe and its other global partners. With a military facility in Djibouti, Baruah anticipates that China’s “*second base*” will soon be established in the western Indian Ocean, likely between Djibouti and Mozambique. Here, the author demonstrates a lack of doctrinal precision by failing to distinguish between a “*military base*” and a “*place*” (also known as a “*Strategic Strong Point*” or SSP) — the former needing to be capable of viable defence in conflict and the latter providing advantages in terms of intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance (ISR) but only in times short of conflict.

Furthermore, considering the launch of the China-Indian Ocean Region Forum in 2022 and the opening of Chinese embassies in all six island nations of the Indian Ocean, the author feels that China has significantly consolidated its influence in the region. She adds that it is already the primary source of imports and a key trading partner for many littoral nations in the IOR. Thus, the author posits that the Indian Ocean serves both as a theatre of opportunities and vulnerabilities for China in its geostrategic competition with the United States, although a limited conflict is more likely to erupt in the Pacific. “*Connecting the Silos*” within the region is, therefore, in her opinion, a more effective approach to creating deterrence against China.

Baruah is on much firmer ground while focusing specifically on the role of island nations in shaping great power politics in the 21st century in her fourth chapter. Here, she explores how the strategic decisions of smaller players are increasingly influencing the actions of traditional powers, including India, France, and the US, in the region.

Baruah cautions against dismissing China’s investments in ports and maritime infrastructure in these island nations as “debt-trap diplomacy”, while overlooking

the agency of sovereign island nations themselves in inviting Beijing to invest in infrastructure projects. Drawing on first-hand interviews to capture the perspective of the island nations, she highlights how they view China as filling a void created by the “*strategic inertia*” of their traditional security partners. Consequently, Baruah argues that even recent initiatives by traditional powers to promote infrastructure development and connectivity in the region are often perceived not as genuine attempts to address the concerns of the island nations, but rather as geopolitical manoeuvres to counter China’s investments and strategic gains.

Further, the author underscores how the concept of maritime security of island nations differs from that of their traditional security providers, namely, France and India, in the western and eastern segments of the Indian Ocean, respectively. While the latter tend to focus primarily on geopolitical and military conflicts, the former are far more concerned with securing their extensive exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and addressing non-traditional security threats, such as illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, drug smuggling, human trafficking, marine pollution, and addressing the adverse maritime impacts of climate change, including sea-level rise. In fact, they view geopolitical competition as a significant barrier to being able to leverage their collective strengths in addressing these issues in collaboration with other regional stakeholders. Thus, Baruah recommends that traditional powers like India should adopt a “*two-pronged strategy*”, which recognises the agency of island nations in making their sovereign choices and supports them in addressing the aforementioned issues of concern, while turning the focus on leveraging the maritime geography of their island territories to advance military and strategic objectives in the region.

The next section argues that traditional powers should better utilise their island territories, including the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (India), Cocos Keeling Islands (Australia), La Réunion (France), and Diego Garcia (US/UK), to “*maintain and gain geostrategic advantages*” in the region, rather than becoming entangled in the internal politics of sovereign island nations. Focusing specifically on the history and evolution of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI) within India’s strategic calculus, the author advocates moving beyond the perception of the islands as merely a “*springboard to Southeast Asia*” and calls for reimagining their role in ensuring both

Indian and regional maritime security. This, she opines, can be achieved through leveraging the islands for enhanced maritime domain awareness (MDA), intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR), and anti-submarine warfare (ASW) operations. To address the environmental challenges that may arise from future infrastructure development on the islands, Baruah recommends collaborating with France to draw lessons from its experience in developing La Réunion.

The final chapter offers a futuristic outlook on the evolving geopolitical dynamics in the IOR and explores how the adversarial relationship between India and China will shape the region over the coming decades. It broadly addresses key issues, such as the weaponisation of fishing, particularly by China, as a means of conducting ISR and generating MDA in the region. The chapter also addresses the adverse impacts of climate change on the maritime domain and the pressing need to promote the blue economy model, especially from the perspective of small island nations. It highlights the use of the blue economy as a strategic tool and emphasises the importance of military, economic, and research capacity to sustain the blue economy while simultaneously achieving a country's developmental and broader economic goals. Mauritius is cited as a case study to demonstrate how island nations in the IOR are leveraging the abundant natural resources within their vast EEZs to gain access to emerging technologies from developed countries, such as Germany. Shifting focus to another critical area in the debates surrounding the future of energy and maritime security, the chapter discusses the opportunities and risks associated with the imminent commercialisation of the deep sea, stressing the need for the development of legal frameworks to close existing loopholes and mitigate potential risks.

Overall, despite the aforementioned instances of doctrinal fuzziness, the book provides a reasonable analysis of the recent developments in the IOR, positioning it as a critical theatre for great power competition in the 21st century. The author highlights the significance of the region, not only for traditional powers such as India, France, and the US, but also for increasingly influential players like China. By integrating historical, strategic, and geopolitical perspectives of traditional powers and small island nations, the book presents a balanced take on the evolving geopolitics in the region.

Importantly, by delving specifically into the maritime security perspectives of each of the island nations in the IOR, the book offers useful insights into the need for reconciling the differing priorities of these island nations and their traditional security partners. However, while the book attempts an analysis of the current geopolitical landscape in the IOR, it offers little by way of direct policy recommendations, particularly for India, on how to navigate the challenges that have been brought out. Her predominantly theoretical analysis could certainly have benefitted from detailed, practical solutions that could be implemented by India's ministries (especially those of Defence and of External Affairs) and its maritime agencies, which would have made it a useful scholarly resource for scholars and practitioners alike. Nevertheless, *"The Contest for the Indian Ocean"* does provide an analysis of the IOR's evolving dynamics and emphasises the need for India to pursue its various policies in the face of rising competition with China and emerging maritime security challenges in the region.

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About the Reviewer

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Book Review

The Free Sea: The American Fight for Freedom of Navigation

Author: James Kraska and Raul Pedrozo
Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018. 395 pages
ISBN 9781682471166, (Hardbound)

Ms Eram Mahtab

The concept of the free seas was first formulated by Hugo Grotius in his seminal work of 1609, *Mare Liberum (The Free Sea)*. James Kraska and Raul Pedrozo, in their book *The Free Sea* build on this legacy. To set the tone, the authors have dedicated this book to John Norton Moore who called freedom of navigation in the oceans the original “common heritage” of all mankind. Their book chronicles the historical events and accompanying legal developments that shaped the freedom of navigation at sea, which the US, till this day, deems critical to its maritime interests.

It covers more than two centuries of American naval history, starting from the Quasi-War with France in the late 18th century to the contemporary confrontations with Iran, Russia and more recently, China. While tracing these historical events, in some detail, the book highlights how freedom of the seas is “*a bedrock principle*” of international law and global order, and how the freedom of navigation is central to economic prosperity and strategic security of the US. The book manages to demonstrate how law, diplomacy, and defence forces, all have been leveraged to preserve this freedom on different occasions.

The book begins with the French conflict, when the US was still a nascent state. The conflict with the French (Chapter 1) and, later, the Barbary pirates (Chapter 2) brought to the fore the urgency and importance of having a navy. With the loss of previously available safeguards of the British Royal Navy, as a part of the empire, the Americans now had to embark upon a path of building their own naval assets in order to safeguard their trade interests. These events also mark one of the first occasions when the Americans insisted on the freedom of navigation of the neutral state. Robert Harper's famous statement 'Millions for defence- not a cent for tribute' became the rallying cry during this period. And while the naval prowess was beginning to be built, the legal doctrine of 'free ships make free goods' was relied upon to use law as a weapon in lieu of naval power. The law of prize and privateering were some of the major concepts delved upon in these chapters.

The third chapter of this book deals with freedom of navigation in the context of the 1812 War when the US still lacked both, a navy and a coherent naval policy to navigate the new seascape. The system of "*broken voyages*" and "*drawbacks*" came into play, in order to secure the interests of the Americans and their French allies. The British responded by expounding the doctrine of "*continuous voyage*", pointing out the distinction between "trading *with* the enemy" and "trading *for* the enemy." Although the doctrine of broken voyages was dismantled in the *Essex case*, by the end of the 1812 war, the US commitment to freedom of navigation was evident. Also, became deeply embedded in the American political psyche, the penchant for equal treatment. The gap between 1815 and 1915 did not see any major maritime conflicts but the technological advancements made in this period set the stage for the next century which witnesses the world wars and the cold war, as covered in chapters 4 to 9.

The world war started with the sinking of the RMS *Lusitania*, marking the beginning of thirty years of struggle with Germany, for the recognition of unfettered freedom of the seas. The idea of the *freedom of the seas* underwent a major shift from being a wartime right of neutral states to a peacetime right of all states. The Naval Appropriations Act 1916 was passed to address the inability of the navy to protect the nation's neutral rights. Woodrow Wilson famously remarked that the "*paths of the sea must be alike in law and in fact be free*".

The fourth chapter further highlights the second point of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points which emphasised the '*freedom of navigation upon the seas, alike in peace and in war, except as the seas may be closed in whole or in part by international action*'; Roosevelt's insistence on the freedom of the seas as the cornerstone of American strategy in peacetime and in war; and the Seventh Principle of the Atlantic Charter that says all nations enjoy the right to transverse the high seas and oceans without hindrance. The inherent aim here is to demonstrate the US commitment to freedom of the seas.

In the 'Blank Check', the book describes in detail, the Gulf of Tonkin Incident of 1964 which led to the increased involvement of the US in the Vietnam War. The episode ended in a Resolution that was later criticised for opening the door to a decade of the US combat operations in the Indochina. The incident also coloured the early American view of the conflict as largely a conventional assault by the armed forces of North Vietnam against the South, and the book illustrates how that incrementally affected the course of the conflict.

The authors dwell, in chapter 6, upon the USS *Pueblo* incident of 1968, in which the Banner class environmental research ship was attacked and captured by North Korean vessels. This incident was the consequence of a "*false sense of security*" based upon the incorrect belief that other nations of the international community would honour the customary legal norms. This was coupled with the past moderate responses of North Korea in the case of USS *Banner*. Diplomatic options were resorted to in resolution of this issue. However, the incident shattered the conventional American thinking on freedom of high seas and the inviolability of sovereign immune ships on high seas.

Then, in the *SS Mayaguez* incident in the Gulf of Thailand, where the Khmer Rouge forces hijacked the American ship, the authors emphasise on how the US responded by firmly '*drawing a line against illegal actions*', especially when important issues of principle were involved.

In chapter 8 *Crossing the "Line of Death"- Gulf of Sidra (1981-89)* the authors discuss how the American approach towards Libya's illegal claims of territorial sea

in the Gulf of Sidra became firmer as Ronald Reagan replaced Jimmy Carter as President of the United States. In this regard, the Reagan administration significantly increased the scope and frequency of the Freedom of Navigation (FON) operations as he believed that “*freedom of navigation is not an empty cliché*” within the realm of international law.

The issue of the attacks on neutral shipping was once again raised in the chapter on the Tanker Wars. The Tanker Wars were part of the broader Iran-Iraq War wherein a series of military attacks ensued on merchant vessels in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. Both the nations declared exclusion zones in the region. As a result, the US got involved in the war to ensure freedom of navigation in a region critical to energy supplies in various parts of the world, including Western Europe. *Op EARNEST WILL* followed. The war ended in 1988 with no significant gains to account for the great suffering it caused along with the loss of lives and battering of the economies. The authors, here, have illustrated how very little had changed in the US policy since the very first war the nation had fought as an independent country, in 1798-1800, as far as ensuring freedom of navigation is concerned.

In chapter 10, the *Black Sea bumping incident* exemplifies how the FON program has assisted in preserving navigational rights and freedoms for all seafaring nations. More than a decade after unsafe incidents initiated by the Soviet Union against the US ships and aircrafts, as the US conducted FON operations, finally led to a uniform interpretation of innocent passage in the light of UNCLOS provisions. Herein, the authors suggest that the bilateral Jackson Hole Agreement of 1989 can be used as a model in South China Sea and East China Sea. The Agreement asserted the unrestricted freedom of innocent passage for warships, encouraged compliance with the navigational regimes set forth in UNCLOS, and affirmed the value of negotiation to resolve maritime disputes. Overall, the INCSEA, and the Jackson Hole Agreement succeeded in reducing the naval incidents between the United States and the Soviet Union. In this regard, the role of diplomacy is highlighted by the authors.

The final chapter indulges in the analysis of ‘Freedom of Navigation with Chinese Characteristics’. It details the US response to Chinese claims in South China Sea, combined with the Chinese actions which threaten to “*undermine the legitimacy*

of UNCLOS as the constitution for the world's oceans". The FON operations in the initial phase were fraught with miscues and inconsistent messaging, during Obama's administration, but the authors believe that the new regime has done a better job. However, when compared to the earlier conflicts, the South China Sea issue has been considered different, by the authors, because there is no declaration of conflict here.

The authors conclude by emphasising the need for the US to join the UNCLOS. They also emphasise the fact that the costs of freedom of navigation should be borne by the international community, not just the US. Freedom of navigation is not a cost free public good. It is a global common that will require, for its preservation, unified action among the world's major democracies. US struggles to preserve freedom of navigation. The authors warn about the consequences of failure to ensure a free and open global maritime order.

Although the *prima facie* analysis in *The Free Seas* is about the freedom of navigation and its evolution during the course of history, the book does touch upon issues such as the technological evolution in naval warfare, especially in the American context. The book is a must read for practitioners of international maritime law and students of maritime history, alike. The case studies are quite comprehensive and go a long way in enriching a lay person's knowledge and comprehension of naval warfare and maritime history.

In an attempt to remain true to the theme, the authors have refrained from glorifying US efforts to secure freedom of navigation. They provide accounts of both the successes and failures of the United States, the struggles thereof, and the lessons learnt therefrom. The book references the various aspects of armed conflict at sea, without losing track of the focal point which is freedom of navigation. However, the attention to detail in the case studies can make it a cumbersome read for people who are unfamiliar with naval warfare and operations.

Kraska and Pedrozo have been able to bring in the practitioners' perspective in their writing. They have previously co-authored a volume on international maritime security law as well. Kraska himself has authored several volumes on international maritime law, law of naval warfare and piracy, to list a few. *The Free Seas* makes some reference to the impact of maritime boundary disputes on freedom of navigation,

particularly in the case of South China Sea. The theme of maritime boundaries has been dealt with in detail by Kraska in his later work on *Peaceful Management of Maritime Disputes*. As one dwells upon the freedom of the seas in the current volume, indulging in some of the previous works of the authors would be insightful, especially for a novice. While this book was written in the contemporary context of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, its broad coverage and attention to detail will ensure its significance in the times to come.

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About the Reviewer

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Book Review

The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture

Author: Ruth Benedict, Mariner Books
Reprinted edition 2005, 324 pages,
ISBN-10: 0-618-61959-3

Ms Aashima Kapoor

“They cultivate the pleasures of the flesh like fine arts, and then, when they are fully savoured, they sacrifice them to duty.”

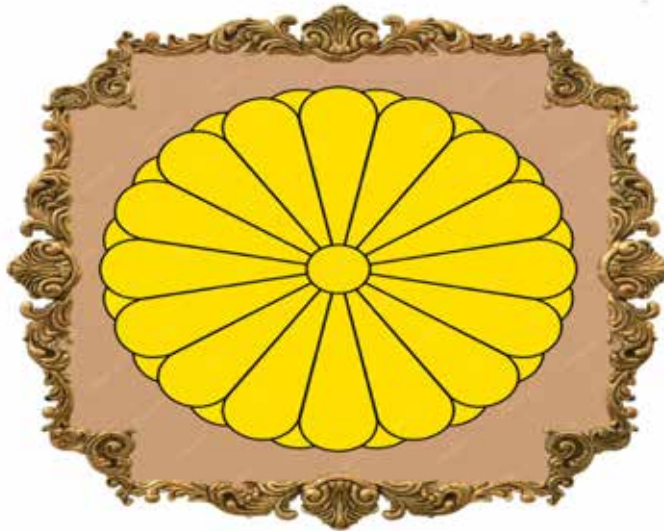
- Ruth Benedict

The very title of Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* is rich in symbolism, capturing in a single phrase the paradoxes and harmonies at the heart of Japanese culture. The chrysanthemum (or kiku (菊) in Japanese), is a flower that represents refinement, beauty, and resilience. It is no ordinary flower in Japanese culture. The 16-petaled chrysanthemum crest, known as the kiku mon (菊紋), has been associated with the emperor and the imperial family since the Kamakura period (1185–1333 AD), first adopted by Emperor Go-Toba. He was not only a ruler but also a poet, calligrapher, and swordsmith, who saw the chrysanthemum as a symbol of artistic refinement and imperial strength. In contrast, the 'sword' evokes the steel of samurai discipline, the code of loyalty, the martial virtues of obedience and the readiness to defend one's honour with violence if required.

Benedict's choice of title is masterful, for it fuses these opposing yet coexisting elements: aesthetic delicacy with uncompromising discipline. In many ways, this

duality still frames how observers perceive Japan — a society capable of extraordinary artistic sensitivity while maintaining a powerful social and military order tradition. Benedict uses this symbolism as the gateway into her anthropological study of Japan, attempting to explain its worldview to a wartime American audience.

The 16-petaled chrysanthemum crest of Emperor of Japan



Source: Freepik

Commissioned during World War II by the US Office of War Information, *the Chrysanthemum and the Sword* was intended to help American policymakers understand their then-enemy, “Imperial Japan.” Since travelling to Japan was impossible, Benedict relied on what was known as “*culture at a distance*,” gathering data through Japanese immigrants, prisoners of war, academic sources, newspapers, films, and other published works. Published in 1946, the book quickly became one of the most influential texts in the field of cultural anthropology and had a lasting impact on how the West perceived Japanese society. The book is remarkable for what it is ‘not’: it is not a study of Japanese religion in isolation, nor a monograph on Japanese political systems or its economic models.

Benedict herself clarifies on page 13 of the volume that it examines “*Japanese assumptions about the conduct of life.*” In other words, she tries to understand what

makes the Japanese behave as they do across multiple spheres of life — in war, family life, work, art, and moral conduct. Her central argument is that to understand a nation, one must understand its moral and emotional grammar, the deep cultural codes that shape day-to-day choices. Japan, to Benedict, is not just a collection of political institutions, but a civilisation with a powerful sense of order, shame, obligation, and beauty that frames everything from the tea ceremony to the ethos of the warrior.

The book delves deeply into the mortal substratum of Japanese society, offering enduring insights into the cultural forces that shape national behaviour. Among her more nuanced observations is the role of women - portrayed not merely as passive bearers of obedience, but as embodiments of quiet strength and resilience, particularly in times of national duress. This duality mirrors the broader Japanese ethic: outer deference, inner fortitude.

At the heart of Benedict's framework lie two critical constructs — *on* (恩) and *giri* (義理). *On*, signifies a lifelong social debt, a binding gratitude owed to parents, benefactors, and superiors. It is something that must be repaid with lifelong loyalty. *Giri*, is its moral counterpoint - it is the ethical imperative to act rightly and honourably in response to *on*. Together, they form a self-regulating ecosystem of duty and reciprocity. These concepts explain much about Japanese behaviour in personal and professional relationships, anchoring social cohesion in Japan.

While Benedict did not explicitly articulate the concept of *mentsu* (メンツ), or 'face,' it is an essential corollary to her analysis.¹ It is rooted in the samurai tradition of honour unto death (*Seppuku* or *Hara-Kiri*). *Mentsu* evolved from the warrior's 'big honour' to a more refined, civilian preoccupation with reputation and role-fulfilment. Unlike the relational emphasis in Chinese *mien-tzu*, the Japanese *mentsu* is structured around hierarchical obligation and shame-avoidance.

One's public persona is meticulously curated through the fulfilment of duties — the visible enactment of *on and giri* - and the avoidance of *haji* (恥), or disgrace. Shame is a powerful force in Japan. Unlike cultures where guilt — a violation of internalised conscience — is the primary moral regulator, Japan, Benedict argues, is a "shame culture," where social reputation and the avoidance of public disgrace are

the critical forces guiding behaviour. This explains many aspects of Japanese social cohesion: from the reluctance to challenge authority to the subtle etiquette of daily life, where harmonious interaction is prized above blunt honesty.

This layered conception of honour - where aesthetic restraint and moral discipline converge - continues to influence Japanese diplomacy, business etiquette, and military partnerships. For Indian interlocutors, especially in maritime and strategic domains, understanding this subtle grammar of dignity, obligation, and face is not merely cultural awareness, it is operational necessity. Missteps in this regard do not just offend; they erode trust.

Benedict also highlights the role of ritual, etiquette, and aesthetic disciplines — from *chanoyu* (茶の湯 - tea ceremony) to *ikebana* (生け花 - flower arrangement) and *haiku* (俳句 - Poetry) — in reproducing moral order. These are not mere artistic expressions, but structured practices reinforcing social hierarchy, emotional restraint, and moral continuity. Through such codes, Japan sustains not only beauty but cohesion.

Her work, while constrained by the limitations of wartime anthropology, remains a foundational attempt to “read” Japan on its own terms. Despite overgeneralisations and a tendency to contrast Japanese culture with an idealised American self-image, Benedict’s framework introduced a vital idea: that conduct in Japan is never solely individual or pragmatic — it is cultural, ethical, and performative. This has direct relevance for maritime analysts and policymakers. Japan’s merchant marine practice of *kaiso bunri* (階層分離) — separating ship ownership from operation — illustrates a culturally grounded ethic of trust and responsibility. The shipowner’s *on* to the crew, and the crew’s reciprocal *giri*, create a system where even commercial shipping is imbued with a near-military ethos of duty and honour.

Consequently, Japan’s maritime strategy is never devoid of cultural logic. Whether in coalition navies, MDA initiatives, or freedom-of-navigation operations, Japan brings with it not just tactical interest, but moral seamanship. For Indian maritime engagement, recognising this is essential. Japan’s approach is steeped in loyalty, precision, and mutual respect — all filtered through the cultural grammar

of *mentsu*, *on*, and *giri*. Strategic alignment, therefore, must be matched by cultural intelligence. Misreading the cultural cues — especially public embarrassment or perceived breaches of obligation — can cause disproportionate strain in bilateral relations. For Indian maritime strategists and diplomats, Benedict’s insights serve as both caution and compass: in Japan, strategy is not just calculated — it is cultivated.

For India, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* is more than a window into Japanese culture; it is a tool to better understand how to cooperate with one of Asia’s most influential powers. India and Japan share a growing strategic, economic, and technological partnership, from joint maritime security frameworks to critical mineral supply chains and digital innovation. However, policy alone cannot build trust. Deep, respectful cultural understanding is necessary to avoid misinterpretations that could otherwise arise in areas such as business negotiations, joint military exercises, or even tourism and people-to-people exchanges. For example, India’s approach to maritime security dialogues with Japan could benefit from appreciating the Japanese emphasis on hierarchy, collective duty, and harmonious decision-making — aspects rooted in *on* and *giri*.

These cultural logics influence how Japanese policymakers frame their responses to regional threats and alliances. Similarly, for Indian businesses, awareness of the subtleties of Japanese etiquette, aesthetics, and shame-based social regulation can prevent misunderstandings, encourage smoother transactions, and build the trust needed for durable commercial relationships. India’s policymakers and business leaders must recognise, as Benedict demonstrates, that in Japan’s worldview, social relationships are seldom transactional in a purely economic sense. They are moral frameworks built on a foundation of long-term obligation and honour. Understanding these frameworks will be invaluable as India looks to expand its maritime and commercial presence across the Indo-Pacific with Japanese support.

There is also a broader lesson here for India, which applies well beyond Japan. In a world where international partnerships increasingly hinge on cultural intelligence, reading works like *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* helps us appreciate that all nations carry deep-seated historical memories and moral assumptions that shape how they view security, prosperity, and social order. Just as the United States tried

to understand Japan through Benedict's work during World War II, India should constantly seek to read and interpret other societies with similar empathy and rigour. Whether in Southeast Asia, Africa, the Gulf, or Europe, India's rising role demands a nuanced comprehension of how partners think and act, going well beyond economic data and military capability.

History is not a static ledger of events; it is a living, breathing tapestry of ideas, symbols, and relationships. By studying how the chrysanthemum and the sword continue to define Japan, India can better appreciate the importance of cultural memory in shaping strategic policy. As we strengthen maritime partnerships, invest in transnational connectivity, and uphold rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, this kind of cultural literacy will be indispensable.

For India, maritime cooperation with Japan will continue to deepen — from shipbuilding to joint MDA to potential connectivity projects. Each of these domains involves not only technology but trust, loyalty, and reciprocal respect. Benedict's book, despite its age, warns us that failing to understand the moral codes of partners leads to misalignment and frustration. For instance, Japan's defence industry historically tends to favour long-term, stable relationships, with strict codes of conduct, rather than opportunistic quick deals.

When India pursues co-development of ship-based systems or advanced platforms, this pattern means that Japanese partners may expect consistent commitment and a culture of honour in negotiations, rather than shifting priorities and positions. Further, Japan's emphasis on shame avoidance means public diplomatic spats or sudden reversals could have outsized effects on bilateral confidence. Understanding how 'the sword' — the code of honour and discipline — still shapes modern maritime strategy in Japan will assist India safeguard trust in a complex and constantly evolving Indo-Pacific.

For Indian maritime strategists, Benedict's work offers a mirror to think about our own values, too. Are there equivalents of *on* and *giri* in Indian seafaring tradition, or in the Indian Navy's ethos of duty and respect? Can we map our own cultural codes more consciously as we design alliances? Reading this book is not simply about Japan. It is about the art of cultural literacy as a pillar of maritime strategy. Benedict

shows that no matter how modern a navy becomes, its spirit will still be shaped by symbols — the chrysanthemum’s grace and the sword’s discipline — which, in turn, shape how it fights, cooperates, and lives.

As India navigates the Indo-Pacific’s swirling currents, let us remember this: cultural understanding is as important as ships, satellites, and treaties. Benedict’s remarkable work still lights that path, reminding us that culture is the sea in which all strategies must sail.

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ENDNOTES

1. Kriti Ganesh, “Sino-Japanese Nuances of “FACE” and Lessons for India,” *National Maritime Foundation*, 09 March 2024. <https://maritimeindia.org/sino-japanese-nuances-of-face-and-lessons-for-india/>.

About the Reviewer

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Book Review

New Horizons of the Nuclear Age

Editor: Ichimasa Sukeyuki;
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Ms Aashima Kapoor

“The bomb’s only use is to keep others from using it.”

– *Robert S McNamara*¹

This quote from the former US Secretary of Defence encapsulates the essence of nuclear deterrence: a strategy where the mere existence of nuclear weapons is intended to prevent their use. *New Horizons of the Nuclear Age*, edited by Ichimasa Sukeyuki, probes into the evolving dynamics of this deterrence in a world that has become markedly more complex since the Cold War. This collection of essays emerges as a timely and essential resource for policymakers, military strategists, and scholars, addressing the realities of a multipolar nuclear landscape, the resurgence of great power competition, and the implications of rapid technological advancements.

The book offers a detailed exploration of what Sukeyuki and the authors term the “*second nuclear age*”—a period marked not only by the traditional US-Russia rivalry but by the emergence of new nuclear actors, such as China, North Korea, India, and Pakistan. The chapters collectively argue that the world is moving away from the relatively stable nuclear order of the Cold War into a fragmented environment where strategic stability is under unprecedented pressure. As international security frameworks face increasing stress from emerging technologies such as lethal

autonomous weapon systems, and AI, and as arms control agreements falter, this work asks the critical question: *What does nuclear deterrence mean in the 21st century?*

Strategic Stability in a Fragmented World

The book opens with Sukeyuki's introduction, setting the stage for a comprehensive discussion on the changing landscape of nuclear strategy. He provides a historical account, detailing the transition from the bipolar nuclear order of the Cold War to the current state of nuclear multipolarity. The narrative reflects how recent geopolitical developments — most notably Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's increasing nuclear modernisation — have revitalised discussions around nuclear weapons. The suggestion that by the 2030s we may see three nuclear superpowers (the United States, Russia, and China), marks a significant departure from previous strategic thinking, thus, requiring fresh approaches to arms control and strategic stability. In this context, Sukeyuki raises the alarm over (1) emerging technologies as a challenge to traditional deterrence frameworks, and (2) integration of these technologies into military arsenals. These technological advancements also pose increased risks to sea-based deterrence assets such as nuclear submarines equipped with ballistic missiles (NATO Classification: SSBN), which are crucial for maintaining second-strike capability.

However, enhanced precision-guidance and remote-sensing capabilities threaten the resilience of these assets, demanding measures to improve sea-based deterrence through strategic denial. The introduction thus provides an apt foundation for the book, though it could have benefited from a deeper discussion on the role of regional powers like India and Pakistan in shaping global nuclear stability. The impacts of regional conflicts on international deterrence should not be underestimated, as the book itself later acknowledges.

Revisiting the Stability-Instability Paradox

The opening chapter, by Kurita Masahiro, offers an in-depth examination of strategic stability, emphasising the stability-instability paradox. The paradox contends that

while nuclear stability — due to mutually assured destruction (MAD) — prevents large-scale nuclear wars, it may paradoxically encourage lower-level conventional conflicts. This chapter extends the discussion beyond the Cold War's US-Soviet dynamics to contemporary scenarios such as US-China tensions and the persistent volatility in South Asia. Kurita's analysis is particularly valuable in the way it relates this paradox to modern rivalries. The Kargil conflict between India and Pakistan is cited as a case where nuclear deterrence allowed conventional war to occur without escalation to nuclear use. The author effectively links theoretical frameworks to practical case studies, weighing how the perception of nuclear stability can embolden States to pursue aggressive policies, confident that full-scale war will be avoided. This insight resonates with current US-China dynamics in the South China Sea, where the risk of conventional skirmishes under the nuclear umbrella is ever-present. The chapter also addresses how advancements in technology, particularly missile-defence systems and cyber capabilities, disrupt the concept of strategic stability. The risk of undermining mutual vulnerability through missile interception or disabling nuclear command systems introduces new dimensions of unpredictability. The strategic landscape is, thus, not only shaped by the physical existence of weapons but also by the evolving means to detect, intercept, and manipulate their deployment.

Nuclear Compellence: A Risky Proposition

The second chapter, by Ohnishi Ken on nuclear compellence, digs into the challenges of using nuclear threats to coerce adversaries. The distinction between deterrence, i.e., preventive action, and compellence, i.e., forceful action, is crucial. The author also articulates the conditions required for successful compellence, such as the credibility of threats and the adversary's perception of the stakes involved. Historical examples, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, illustrate successful compellence through a credible demonstration of willingness to escalate. However, contemporary cases, such as US confrontations with North Korea, reveal the limitations of compellence, especially when the adversary's regime views nuclear capabilities as an existential threat to its survival. Ohnishi's argument is strengthened by a critique of how conventional military support and nuclear posturing must work in tandem to create a layered

coercive strategy. The use of brinkmanship is inherently dangerous, and the chapter acknowledges the ever-present risk of miscalculation, particularly as more actors with varying nuclear doctrines enter the strategic equation.

The Disruptive Potential of New Domains

The third chapter, by Arie Koichi, scrutinises the profound implications of space, cyberspace, and electromagnetic domains for nuclear deterrence and arms control. Koichi's discussion is timely, given the increasing reliance on space-based assets for early-warning systems, communication, and intelligence. The vulnerability of these systems to anti-satellite (ASAT) attacks poses a significant risk to the stability of nuclear deterrence. At the other end of the 'space' spectrum, in cyberspace, the potential for cyberattacks to disrupt nuclear command-and-control systems raises the risk of inadvertent escalation.

The author contends that while traditional arms control has focused upon reducing the number of warheads or delivery systems, there is a pressing need to regulate the new domains that affect strategic stability. He acknowledges, however, that recommendations for establishing international norms against targeting nuclear infrastructure in cyberspace or deploying offensive space weapons, though prudent, may be politically unfeasible due to the deep mistrust among the great powers. Koichi's analysis emphasises the unpredictability introduced by emerging technologies and the urgent need to adapt arms control frameworks accordingly. The difficulty lies in the covert nature of cyber operations and the blurred line between civilian and military space assets, which complicate efforts to establish universally accepted rules.

A Pragmatic Approach to Arms Control

The final chapter by Sukeyuki, addresses the future of arms control amidst great power competition. Traditional arms control frameworks, such as the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), have become increasingly strained as new actors and technologies reshape the nuclear landscape. The author advocates a "*reasonable approach*" to arms control that goes beyond simply limiting the number

of weapons and engages with emerging technologies. His call to include regional nuclear actors such as India and Pakistan in arms-control dialogues reflects an understanding that strategic stability cannot be secured solely through US-Russia agreements. Sukeyuki recommends confidence-building measures, such as improved communication channels, to prevent accidental nuclear war and suggests revising arms control agreements to include cyber and space-based threats. The chapter openly acknowledges the immense challenges that these proposals face, particularly given the erosion of trust between the US, Russia, and China. His suggestions, while pragmatic, require unprecedented levels of transparency and cooperation in an era characterised by strategic rivalry. Nevertheless, his vision for arms control as an evolving, flexible process remains a compelling pathway for mitigating nuclear risks.

Evaluation: A Timely and Comprehensive Analysis

New Horizons of the Nuclear Age provides a fairly thorough examination of the evolving nuclear landscape, with its greatest strength lying in its ability to bridge traditional deterrence theory with the emerging realities of multipolarity and technological change. Ichimasa Sukeyuki and the authors deliver a nuanced analysis that is grounded in both historical context and contemporary policy debates, making it highly relevant for today's security environment.

The book's innovative approach also includes distinct "*Column*" and "*Coffee Break*" sections, which add depth and versatility to the main chapters. These interludes offer supplementary insights and are designed to provide a pause from the dense theoretical discussions. The "*Column*" sections serve as concise explorations of specific topics, such as the competing schools of thought in nuclear strategy, enhancing the reader's understanding of complex themes. The "*Coffee Break*" sections, such as "*Nuclear Sharing*", focus on practical, real-world implications, offering discussions on topics such as NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements and their legal and strategic considerations. These features not only make the book more accessible but also contribute to a more engaging reading experience by providing a balance between scholarly analysis and digestible, thought-provoking content.

The book's pragmatic recommendations for risk mitigation, rather than idealistic disarmament goals, align with the current international atmosphere, where strategic

stability and arms control are under significant strain. While some proposals — such as multilateral arms control agreements — may appear optimistic, they nevertheless represent necessary aspirations in a world where the risks of nuclear miscalculation are ever-present.

However, the impact of the book could have been enhanced had it incorporated more detailed analyses of the political challenges involved in implementing these measures, especially in regions such as South Asia and West Asia, where nuclear dynamics are shaped by localised conflicts. Further, while the focus on new domains such as cyberspace and space is timely, a deeper exploration of real-world incidents (e.g., cyber intrusions targeting nuclear facilities) could have provided concrete evidence of the risks discussed.

As the world navigates an increasingly complex nuclear landscape, *New Horizons of the Nuclear Age* serves as a critical resource for policymakers and military strategists. It underlines the need for adaptive strategies that address the realities of multipolarity, technological disruption, and eroding arms control frameworks. Ichimasa Sukeyuki's work not only challenges conventional thinking on nuclear deterrence but also offers a roadmap for navigating the uncertainties of the second nuclear age. This book is not just a scholarly endeavour; it is a call to action for those tasked with ensuring that the ultimate use of nuclear weapons remains an unthinkable option.

12 November 2024

ENDNOTE

- 1 Robert S McNamara, “Blundering into Disaster: Surviving the First Century of the Nuclear Age”, 1986, *Pantheon Books*, <https://pure.iiasa.ac.at/id/eprint/14083/1/Blundering%20into%20disaster.pdf>.

Also see: The quote “The bomb’s only use is to keep others from using it,” is not a direct or widely recorded quotation attributed to Robert McNamara. However, it does summarise a key aspect of McNamara’s views on nuclear deterrence and Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), a policy he advocated during his tenure as US Secretary of Defence.

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