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India and the Changing Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean

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Introduction

Admiral Arun Prakash, thank you for giving me the privilege of speaking at the National Maritime Foundation. Admiral Nirmal Verma, Chief of Naval Staff, thank you very much for finding the time to be here this evening. I am grateful to Shri K. Subrahmanyam, who has been by mentor for so long, for joining us. For the last two years, I have had the opportunity of researching on a book about the maritime politics of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. I look forward to sharing some of my ideas with you this evening and benefiting from the insights and experience of this distinguished audience.

The Indian Ocean is back in fashion in the international geopolitical discourse. The current strategic excitement about the Indian Ocean is similar to the one more than four decades ago, when Great Britain announced the withdrawal of its forces from the East of the Suez. Then and now, the big question is about the meaning and consequences of a power transition in the Indian Ocean. In the late 1960s, there was

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no doubt about who might replace Great Britain as the dominant power in the Indian Ocean. The only issue then was how the United States would organise itself to manage the affairs of the Indian Ocean. Some of us in the newly independent nations of the littoral, quite innocent in those days, had rejected the very notion of a power vacuum. We had insisted that a collective security mechanism would be preferable to the replacement of one hegemonic power by another. In spite of our preferences, the baton passed from London to Washington. The change of guard four and a half decades ago was a relatively smooth one, for it shifted the burden of securing the Indian Ocean from one Anglo-Saxon power to another. It was also quite quick and put an end to the debate about the strategic future of the Indian Ocean. The current power transition could be longer and more destabilising.

Let me begin by saying what I will not do this evening – to belabour the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean. As a major source of raw materials, the home to some of the world's most volatile regions, the incubator of violent extremism, the main theatre for the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the location for a large number of failed and failing states, the littoral's importance for the global economy and great power relations has never been in doubt. What I would like to do is expand a bit on the unfolding geopolitical change in the Indian Ocean and dwell at some length on the challenges that it poses for India's foreign and security policies.

Geopolitical Change

Changes in the distribution of power, historians hold, are the main source of systemic conflict in world politics. The rise of new powers and the decline of the old sets up the context for destabilising struggles for rebalancing the world. Either preventing the power transition from one great power to another or facilitating it involves much bloodletting. One of the big debates in international politics today is whether we are on the cusp of a power transition in the Indian Ocean, the Asian Pacific, and the world at large. Some argue that the relative decline of the United States is inevitable and a reorganisation of the balance of power in the Indian and Pacific Oceans is necessary amidst the rise of China and the emergence of India. Others argue that structural change in the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean may be inevitable, but not imminent. They insist that the United States will remain the pre-eminent power in the world and in our own littoral.

Either way there is no denying the new imperatives for some structural adjustment in the region amidst the unfolding change in the regional and global distribution of power. For China is about to become the second largest economy in the world. India is inching its way to become the third largest in the next couple of decades if not earlier. The rapid accretion of economic power means Beijing and Delhi will be able to devote a part of it to acquiring a stronger military muscle. For a long time to come China and India will be countries with low per capita incomes. Yet given the large size of their population, Beijing and Delhi can become major military powers by spending a small portion of their GDP on defence in a sustained and purposeful manner. Put another way, China and India can become powerful without being rich in the traditional per capita sense. While all trend lines point to the inevitable emergence of China and India as great powers, nothing is assured in the life of nations. Recall the debate on the rising Japan a quarter century ago. Remember too the celebrated "declinist" literature on the United States at the end of 1980s. It was the Soviet Union that collapsed against all expectations and the United States bounced back. China and India have enormous internal problems and their leaderships could either stumble or over-reach – both of which could delay or destroy their much awaited moment in the sun. In any case, China and India will have to earn their greatness; I doubt it will be simply thrust upon them. Having entered those caveats let's turn to some of the important geopolitical consequences of China's rise and India's emergence, with a focus on the maritime context. Allow me take up five themes.

The first is the nature of the economic transformation in China and India that is fundamentally different from that of Soviet Russia – the previous challenger to Anglo-American primacy in the world. In the first half of the 20th century, Stalin extracted every possible ounce of human and material resource at home to make Russia a great military power. China and India, in contrast, are elevating their international standing through economic globalisation and regional integration. Soviet Russia disconnected itself from the world economy as it rose. China and India are deepening their ties to the world economy as they become major powers. Their extraordinary international exposure today is marked by the fact that trade forms nearly 70 per cent of China's GDP and closer to 35 per cent and rising in India. Unlike Russia, which tried to build an alternative economic model and limit its contacts with the world capitalist system, China and India are becoming privileged members of an economic order that they once denounced with some passion. That

they are members of the G-20 is less important than the possibility that China and India are emerging as important sources of the world economic growth and the drivers of regional integration in the Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

Second, the increase in the economic mass of China and India will intensify their gravitational pull and most certainly reconfigure the geopolitical space in the littoral of the Indian Ocean and the Asia Pacific. This would mean a restructuring of the relationships among major powers and regional actors. In my view the most important "strategic triangle" in our littoral and the maritime world will be that between the United States, China, and India. While other major powers like Russia, Japan, France and medium powers like Korea, Indonesia, Australia, and Iran to name a few will indeed have a bearing on the maritime structures of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, it is the triangular dynamic between Washington, Beijing, and Delhi that will be the most consequential.

There are many ways in which the triangular relationship could unfold. Some Americans see the importance of accommodating the rise of China through the construction of a condominium; some others see India as a natural balancer against China's rise. Yet other Americans argue that Washington must balance against both Beijing and Delhi. Some in Beijing worry that India's naval power, acting in collaboration with the United States and Japan, could hit at the vital maritime interests of China. There are others in Beijing who speculate that the rise of Indian naval power is a threat to the United States rather than to China. Delhi is itself quite coy about identifying the hierarchy of its threats. Standing with Chinese leaders we talk about the promotion of a multipolar world; shaking hands with the Americans we proclaim a natural alliance with the United States.

Third, the logic of globalisation and trade means China and India are today more reliant on the seas than ever before in their history. Nearly 90 per cent of world trade in commodities and goods continues to flow by the seas. China's per capita income today is around 4000 USD and India's a little over 1000. As their per capita incomes continue to grow rapidly, it is not difficult to see that the scale and scope of Chinese and Indian interaction with the rest of the world will be breathtaking. The more integrated China and India become with the world economy, greater are their stakes at sea. If oceans are the lifelines for the economic well-being of nearly two and a half billion people, Beijing and Delhi are bound to invest heavily – in diplomatic and military terms – in the management of the order in the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

Fourth, unlike in the past when China and India emphasised their autarky, their growing interdependence with the rest of the world now demands more supple and complex military strategies to realise their transformed national interests. As the most versatile of the military instruments, the navies will become increasingly weighty in the strategic calculus of China and India. Both Beijing and Delhi have begun to increase the share of resources devoted to their navies. This would mean a steady expansion of the size and quality of Chinese and Indian naval forces. It is also clear that both Beijing and Delhi will move towards building blue water navies. That Chinese and Indian security interests go beyond the local and regional is underlined by the fact that the economic prospects of their large populations are dependent on access to vital natural resources and markets in distant lands. Powerful blue water navies, then, become inevitable adjuncts to the globalising economies of China and India.

Fifth, this Chinese and Indian interest in acquiring maritime power marks a historic break from the strategic traditions. Naval nationalists in both China and India do speak of the ancient maritime traditions of their respective nations. China has made special effort to rediscover its naval heritage and elevate the maritime consciousness of its people. In India the belief in past greatness is equally intense, while the collective effort to express it is far less impressive. While China has Admiral Zheng He and India has Rajaraja Chola as maritime heroes, it would not be inaccurate to state that the naval orientation in China and India has at best been episodic. The principal security threats in both China and India were from their land frontiers, and interestingly from the same direction, the north-west. The Chinese preoccupation with barbarian invasions from the north-west saw the building of a great wall, and India had to devote most of its defence energies to the stabilisation of the region between the Indus and the Hindu Kush. That did not leave much time and space for the sustained development of naval capabilities, despite being blessed with long coastlines. As a new maritime imperative envelops Beijing and Delhi, the political elites in both capitals have had the challenge of reorientating their world view to an outward looking, globalising maritime strategy. It is no secret, however, that the Chinese mandarins have begun to respond faster and more purposefully than their Indian counterparts.

That brings me to the second part of my talk tonight. What are the specific new challenges that India faces as it becomes a major power with significant maritime interests and substantive naval capabilities? Let me focus on five broad issues. My emphasis will not be on the technical details of India's maritime strategy. Instead I will

focus on the difficult policy transitions that India has to complete. This involves the resolution of the tensions between the old principles that have been held dear by three generations of Indians and the new imperatives that confront Delhi's decision makers.

India's Unfinished Policy Transitions

From Autonomy to Responsibility

Most analysts of Indian foreign and security policy, whether at home or abroad, would tell you that the organising principle of India's international relations is the notion of ''strategic autonomy''. It is worth exploring when exactly this phrase started appearing in the articulation of Indian world view. Meanwhile, I am quite happy to go along with a recent description of the phrase by a French Scholar, Guillem Monsonis, as a ''realist mutation of the traditional non-aligned posture''. My guess is that as India moved from the expansive internationalist vision of Jawaharlal Nehru to the narrower world view of the Indira years, the pursuit of ''strategic autonomy'' became an important theme in the Indian foreign policy discourse. The Indira Gandhi years saw India steadily retreat from the global economy, become more distrustful of the West, and morph into an insular if not a xenophobic state. As the international system mounted pressures on India's strategic programmes, Delhi's emphasis was inevitably on protecting its much vaunted strategic autonomy.

But how credible is the notion of ''strategic autonomy'' at a time when the Indian economy is globalising and is becoming one of world's largest? Just as the mantra of ''self-reliance'' is no longer a hallowed concept in our economic strategy, ''autonomy'' can no longer be the organising principle of our foreign and security policy. Today India's economic growth and prosperity are tied very deeply to resources and markets outside its borders. As a result, India's own security perimeter has widened rapidly and its interests are more widely dispersed around the world. Autonomy is for weak powers which are trying to insulate themselves from the regimen defined for them by the great powers. For many decades, India has seen itself as a weak developing state that must protect its territory, interests, and freedom of choice from being trampled upon by the great powers. If India itself were to emerge as a great power, it is not impossible to see that Delhi's task will be to contribute to the management of the international order and not seeking autonomy from it. The mental leap from being a ''rule-taker'' to a ''rule-maker'' will not come easily to Delhi's decision-makers. But the international

pressure on India to take a larger role in the region and the world will be relentless. As in the case of China, so in the case of India, the compulsion will be to act as a ''stakeholder'' rather than a ''free rider''. This will be especially true of the maritime domain, where the weight of the growing naval power is now consequential for the ordering of the security complexes in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Towards Power Projection

The first is about the very conception of India's role in the Indian Ocean and the waters beyond. Since independence, India's traditional impulse was to protect its own territory and the waters around it. The Partition of the subcontinent and the creation of new borders made internal conflict in the Subcontinent a perennial one; the emergence of China as a new land neighbour after its control of Tibet added to India's security burdens. If India's land forces were weighed down by the defence of its borders, India's naval strategy too was guided by the imperative of protecting the territorial waters and its large exclusive economic zone. As the logic of economic globalisation unfolded over the last two decades, the Indian naval leadership began to invent a new maritime strategy that is in tune with its new circumstances.

Not surprisingly since the late 1990s, the two Prime Ministers we have had – Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh – repeatedly underlined the expanded geographic scope of India's maritime interests. The phrases from ''Aden to Malacca'' or ''the Suez to the South China Sea'' were re-injected into the national security discourse. That this is not empty talk is reflected in the operations of the Indian Navy that has frequently shown the Tricolour in waters as far apart as the North Atlantic and the South Pacific, and from the Mediterranean to the Sea of Japan. More importantly, anti-piracy activity in the Gulf of Aden (since 2008) and relief operations in the Mediterranean (2006) and the Indian Ocean (2004–05) have underlined the growing capacity of the Indian Navy and the new political will in Delhi to act far from its shores. Like India, China too is following the logic of what it calls ''far sea defence''. The difference, however, is in the level of political and policy commitment to the construction of a maritime grand strategy. In China, President Hu Jintao underscored the relationship between Beijing's expanding global interests and the ''historic missions'' of the PLA Navy amidst China's rise on the world stage.

What is missing in Delhi is that passion for maritime strategy among its political leadership and the business-as-usual approach by the bureaucratic leadership of the

government. For example, building a blue water navy needs a policy framework to expand capabilities for design, development, and production of naval equipment. Unlike China, which has dramatically expanded the indigenous naval production base, India is yet to promote a sustainable one. Successful power projection also depends on reorienting the armed forces to develop expeditionary capabilities. Despite two centuries of expeditionary operations under the Raj and half a century of international peacekeeping operations, the word ''expeditionary'' remains a taboo in Delhi's discourse. The notion of ''power projection'' continues to sit uneasily with our political classes who feel more comfortable with the old verities of third-worldism. Power projection also needs a more vigorous military diplomacy that can reinforce the Navy's capability to operate far from our shores. This would mean creation of arrangements for friendly ports and turn-around facilities in other nations that will increase the range, flexibility, and sustainability of Indian naval operations.

No great power has built a blue water navy capable of projecting force without physical access and political arrangements for ''forward presence''. Having long rejected ''foreign bases'' in the Indian Ocean, it is somewhat discomforting for our political and strategic communities to even contemplate the new imperatives. The proposition that China is building a ''string of pearls'' along vital sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean has had the merit of forcing open a whole new debate. Some analysts outside India are beginning to talk, somewhat prematurely, of a ''necklace of diamonds'' emerging in India's own plans for power projection. The idea of such a necklace is not new. Sardar K.M. Panikkar, who remains an inspiration for Indian naval thinking, emphasised the need for a ring of bases in the Indian Ocean to secure the nation. It is not clear if there is the political will and bureaucratic capacity in Delhi today to think clearly about the logic of power projection and the imperatives of forward presence.

Providing Security

The idea that India must look beyond its own security and provide it to others is beginning to reemerge in Delhi. From the late 18th century to the mid 20th, it was British power radiating, first out of Calcutta and then Delhi that kept peace in the Indian Ocean. It was commonplace then to call the Indian Ocean a British Lake. Although Britain was the sole super power then, it could not have exercised hegemony without the extraordinary resources of an undivided Subcontinent and

its geographical location at the heart of the Indian Ocean. In the decades after independence, India abandoned this tradition and adopted military isolationism as it turned inward economically and coped with the pressures for territorial defence. Despite the division of the Subcontinent, India did retain a measure of the past legacy in terms of its ability to contribute troops to international peacekeeping under the auspices of the United Nations. While India's territorial conflicts with its neighbours have not disappeared, the nuclearisation of the Subcontinent has muted them into very different tensions, especially at the sub-conventional level. As India's economic power and military prowess grow, it is but natural that other powers have begun to see Delhi as a ''net security provider in the Indian Ocean''.

But is the Indian political and bureaucratic leadership capable of internalising the notion of India becoming a security provider? The Indian Naval Headquarters has begun to emphasise the importance of assisting the weaker states of the Indian Ocean littoral in building their own capacities. As a result we have seen the Navy provide training, advisers, and equipment to some of the smaller countries in the Indian Ocean. Whether it was helping Mauritius operate a Coast Guard, strengthening Sri Lanka's ability to control its waters, or improving the ability of Mozambique, Madagascar and Maldives to monitor their maritime domain, India has taken a number of steps. This somewhat ad hoc policy has included the recent transfer of ships to Seychelles, Maldives and Mauritius. To realise its true potential as a security provider in the Indian Ocean, Delhi needs to develop a comprehensive programme for security assistance. This involves the development of a range of policy instruments including transfer of arms, financial resources and production capacities to match the growing demand for military cooperation with India, and devising frameworks for intelligence sharing, and stationing of Indian military personnel in significant numbers. This, in turn, calls for the national security apex to bring synergy and coordination to the activities of the Navy, the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office. Delhi's failure to respond to the demands for maritime cooperation will result in our neighbours and friends turning to someone else. We saw that happen in Sri Lanka. When Delhi slept over Colombo's invitation to build a new port at Hambantota, China stepped in. That brings us back to the notion of a ''power vacuum'' that we used to reject so vehemently. While we have begun to recognise its meaning now, Delhi is still some distance away from fully internalizing its implications for our national security.

Protecting the Commons

After it escorted the 1000th ship to safety from pirates in the Gulf of Aden last month, the Indian Navy reaffirmed its commitment to secure the maritime commons in the Indian Ocean in cooperation with other major naval powers. The ''global commons'' refers to various realms – like oceans, air, outer space and cyberspace – that are not under the control of any one state but are critical for the functioning of contemporary international life. The commons are a consequence of technological evolution and form the connective tissues of our globalised world. The dominant powers of each age had undertaken the responsibility to keep the maritime commons open for use by all and contribute to the maintenance of good order at sea. The new emphasis on the protection of the commons underlines two important evolutions in India's maritime thinking. One is that as a rising naval power, India is taking a much broader view of its responsibility than the mere pursuit of its narrowly defined national interests. Contributing to the public goods – such as keeping the sea lines of communication open – has become one of the stated objectives of the Indian Navy.

The other is the shift away from the territorial approach to the maritime commons that India had taken in the past. When the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea was being drafted in the 1970s, India sided with those seeking to extend the territorial jurisdiction of the coastal states. India, like many other developing states sought to restrict the rights of great powers to conduct naval operations near their waters. Today, as a maritime power in the making, India needs open seas rather than waters that are enclosed in the name of national sovereignty. Given the rapid expansion of our security perimeter and the need to protect our vital interests far from the national shores, we can ill afford constraints on the mobility of our naval forces in the maritime commons. No wonder the 2007 maritime military strategy of the Indian Navy is now titled ''Freedom to Use the Seas''. Spoken in the true tradition of maritime powers!

India's new non-territorial conception of the seas stands in contrast to the maritime philosophy of China. Beijing is not only asserting its expansive territorial claims in South China Sea but has declared that these waters which connect the Indian Ocean to the Pacific form a ''core national interest'' of China. The PLA Navy is also focused on developing anti-access and area-denial strategies that could constrain the operations of the United States and other maritime powers like India. One would presume at some point in the future, Chinese naval strategists would

come to appreciate, much like India, the importance of keeping the maritime commons open. For both China and India will need the freedom to use the seas to sustain their rapidly globalising economies.

Between the "Regional" and the "Extra-regional"

One enduring feature of Indian maritime thinking has been the opposition to the presence of extra-regional powers in the Indian Ocean. In the Indian debate that followed the announcement of the East of Suez policy by Great Britain in 1967, the Indian strategic community rallied around Sri Lanka's proposal for making the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace (IOZP). Arguing that the great power naval presence in the Indian Ocean will exacerbate regional insecurity, Delhi opposed the entry of the United States and Russia into the Indian Ocean after the British withdrawal. India's chattering classes believed in the moral superiority of their position in favour of a collective security mechanism in the Indian Ocean. Yet, India's campaign for an IOZP was seen by some as part of the Soviet propaganda against the West and an attempt to limit the naval options of the United States. Meanwhile within the littoral states, many of which were dependent on either the United States or the Soviet Union, had little commitment to the notion of collective security. India's own neighbours including Pakistan projected India's support to the IOZP and demand for the withdrawal of ''extra-regional navies'' as a thinly disguised plot to make the Indian Ocean ''India's Ocean''.

India's lack of realism was unsustainable after the end of the Cold War two decades ago. Along with its economic reforms, India began to engage all great powers, including the United States, which had a presence in the Indian Ocean. Yet when India took the initiative for convening the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium in 2008, it insisted that the membership must be limited to ''regional'' states of the littoral. India's support for the IOZP in the 1970s was probably rooted in the fear about the United States (recall 1971 and the *Enterprise* incident!) and opposition to Washington's alliances with China and Pakistan. India's rejection of ''extra-regional'' powers in the current phase appears to be a reflection of Delhi's concerns about the new Chinese profile in the Indian Ocean. As a rising maritime power, India must now begin to move away from the unproductive divide it has set up between the ''regional'' and the ''extra-regional''.

For one, India itself has often becomes a target of these artificial divisions. For example in the Malacca Straits, the theme of ''regional versus extra-regional'' is playing itself out often to the disadvantage to India. Nor would India want to be treated as an extra-regional power in the Western Pacific where it has significant interests. While the very definition of a region means drawing the line somewhere, it is reasonable to suggest that no regional mechanism will work if it is seen as keeping out an interested great power. From a practical perspective, then, India cannot either wish away the extra-regional presence of the United States or prevent the significant rise in Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean. Instead of proclaiming a Monroe Doctrine it can't enforce, India must find a way to deal with the reality of American and Chinese interests and presence in the Indian Ocean. This is not the moment to address the questions that follow from this proposition. Should India balance either the US or China, one or both of them? Can Delhi work with Washington and Beijing to create a great power concert for the Indian Ocean? Or is it possible to construct a collective security framework for the waters along the littorals of Asia, Africa and Oceania?

As I conclude with these questions up in the air, I would like to remind you of the ambitious naval vision for India articulated Sardar K.M. Panikkar more than six decades ago. In retrospect, that vision had little chance of being realised, given the post-partition challenges we have had to endure and the relative economic decline we suffered on the world stage. When we talked of self-reliance, rejected trade as a strategy, and disconnected ourselves from our neighbours in Asia and the Indian Ocean, there was little scope for a serious maritime strategy. All that has changed in the last two decades. As we become a trading nation – our international commerce will soon be close to half a trillion US dollars – the Indian and Pacific Oceans are beckoning us as never before. Emerging as a major power with widely dispersed interests, India needs a new maritime strategy and diplomacy that are at odds with many of its past normative and ideological preferences. Our objective circumstances allow us today to reclaim the boldness of Sardar Panikkar's maritime vision. The good news is that the Indian Navy, which was quick to grasp the military significance of India's economic globalisation, has begun to adapt. The challenge for the rest of us, within the government and beyond, is in generating the bureaucratic and institutional innovation so necessary for the realization of India's new maritime destiny.

Thank you for your attention.