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Indian Navy's Moment of Reckoning: Intellectual Clarity Need of the Hour

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The emergence of the Indian Navy (IN) in recent years as an indispensable tool of Indian diplomacy, has made it imperative for Indian policy-makers and naval thinkers to think anew its role in Indian strategy. There is a long tradition in India of viewing the Indian Ocean as a national backyard and, therefore, advocating a greater role for Delhi in underwriting the security and stability of the Indian Ocean Region. India's economic rise should prompt Indian strategic thinkers to bring that focus back and make the IN integral to Indian grand strategy. While China remains a significant concern, the bigger problem remains one of introducing organisational changes and doctrinal evolution. The author has brought out how management of these issues will be significant not only for the IN's future but also for the rise of India as a credible global military power.

The Indian Navy is gradually emerging as an indispensable tool of Indian diplomacy, making it imperative for policy-makers and naval thinkers to think anew its role. There's a long tradition in India of viewing the maritime dimension of security as central to the nation's strategic priorities. With India's economic rise, the country should bring that focus back and make its Navy integral to a national grand strategy. While China remains a significant worry, the bigger problem remains one of introducing organisational changes and of doctrinal evolution. How India manages these issues will

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be significant not only for its Navy's future but also for the rise of the country as a credible global military power. The debate on Indian naval issues tends to revolve around three axes – the China problem, platform acquisitions, and organisational and doctrinal evolution. The more important debate on the trajectory that the Indian Navy should follow remains largely hidden from public purview.

Outgoing Chief of Naval Staff and Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, Admiral Sureesh Mehta drew a lot of criticism recently when he suggested that India neither had the 'capability nor the intention' to match China's military strength 'force for force'. But he was merely stating the obvious ground reality given that China's GDP is more than thrice that of India and India's annual defence expenditure is less than half of China's. Much of the criticism was unwarranted, as Admiral Mehta was probably trying to wake up the Indian political class by forcing it to think more clearly about the implications of China's rise. His was a warning about a China that is rapidly consolidating national power and if India does not move proactively, it will find it almost impossible to catch up with China. Towards this end, he suggested that India not only has to achieve higher rates of economic growth but it also needs to build ties with other major global powers and undertake significant reforms in the defence sector. These steps are necessary, as it is clear that if India has to protect its national interests, it will have to challenge China's growing might in its vicinity.

One should look at the euphoria in India surrounding the launch of *Arihant* in this context. While that euphoria is not entirely unwarranted – as after decades of investment, India finally has the ability to indigenously build and operate a nuclear-powered submarine, a feat accomplished by only five other countries – it should not blind the country to the fact that it has miles to go before it can catch up with China, which has made some significant advances in the waters surrounding India. Just a few months back, China's growing naval capability was on full display when it paraded its nuclear-powered submarines for the first time as part of the celebrations to mark the 60th anniversary of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). Gone is the reticence of yore, when China was not ready to even admit that it had such capabilities. Chinese commanders are now openly talking about the need for nuclear submarines to safeguard the nation's interests and the PLAN, once the weakest of the three services, is now the focus of attention of the country's military modernisation programme. In this context, the debate on China and its platforms is indeed an important one but organisational/doctrinal issues about the Indian Navy are more important as is the yet to evolve

debate on intellectual basis for the direction that the Indian Navy takes. This is something that India cannot afford to ignore any longer.

Mahan's Centrality in Indian Naval Thought

As India's global economic and political profile has risen in recent years, it has also, not surprisingly, tried to define its strategic interests in increasingly expansive terms. The traditional focus of Indian naval strategists has been the Indian Ocean region, which strategic thinkers have historically viewed as India's backyard and so have emphasised the need for India to play a greater role in underwriting its security and stability. Indian strategic elite has often drawn inspiration from a quote attributed to Alfred Mahan:

"Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. The ocean is the key to seven seas. In the 21st century, the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters."

Though apparently fictitious, it has highly influenced the way Indian naval thinkers look at the Indian Ocean for India's security.¹ Some Indian foreign policy-makers consider India the legatee of British rule for providing peace and stability in the Indian Ocean, while her neighbours remain concerned about India's 'hegemonistic' designs. As Britishers were leaving the subcontinent, its strategists, such as Olaf Caroe, envisioned a natural and inevitable continuing Indian pre-eminence in the region, as the "central constellation from which others in the Indian Ocean in the long-run are likely to radiate".² The Indian elite inherited the notions of maritime primacy and an expansive definition of a strategic frontier, stretching from Aden to Malacca from the British Raj.

Underlining the importance of the Indian Ocean, K.M. Pannikar, a diplomat-historian, called for the Ocean to remain 'truly Indian'. He argued that:

*"to other countries, the Indian Ocean could only be one of the important oceanic areas, but to India it is a vital sea because its lifelines are concentrated in that area, its freedom is dependent on the freedom of that coastal surface."*³

Pannikar strongly favoured Indian dominance of the Indian Ocean just as several British and Indian strategists viewed India's predominance of this Ocean as virtually inevitable. He was unequivocal that India's future would be decided on the sea and suggested that:

“a steel ring can be created around India... within the area so ringed, a navy can be created strong enough to defend its home-waters, then the waters vital to India's security and prosperity can be protected... with the islands of the Bay of Bengal with Singapore, Mauritius and Socotra, properly equipped and protected and with a navy based on Ceylon, security can return to that part of the Indian Ocean which is of supreme importance to India.”⁴

For Pannikar, it would be “the primary responsibility of the Indian Navy to guard the steel ring created by Singapore, Ceylon, Mauritius and Socotra”. He cautioned against the naval policy of a resurgent China.⁵

Another early Indian naval thinker, Keshav Vaidya suggested that India should try to be the undisputed power over the waters of the Indian Ocean and towards this end, the Indian Navy should become “an invincible navy (at least so far as the Indian Ocean is concerned)... to defend not only her coast but her distant oceanic frontiers with her own navy”.⁶ In demanding an increase in the range of Indian Navy, given that “the points which must be within India's control are not merely coastal, but oceanic... which are stretched far and wide in all direction”, Vaidya was foreshadowing the demand for a blue water long-range Navy.⁷ In tune with Pannikar, he also advocated an entire range of Indian naval bases all around the Indian Ocean rim and paid particular attention to China as a potential rival in the region. In the political realm, Sardar Vallabhai Patel had argued that:

“the geographical position and features of India make it inevitable for India to have... a strong Navy to guard its long coastline and to keep a constant vigil on the vast expanse of the sea that surrounds us.”⁸

In view of this intellectual consensus, it is surprising that India's civilian leadership was able to resist naval expansion in the early years after independence. India took its time after independence to accept her role as the pre-eminent maritime power in the Indian Ocean region and for long remained diffident about shouldering the responsibilities that come with such an acknowledgement. The focus remained on Pakistan and China, and the overarching continental mindset continued to dictate the defence priorities of the nation, with some complaining that the Indian Navy was being relegated to the background as the most neglected branch of the armed services.⁹

As the great powers got involved in the Indian Ocean during the Cold War years, India's ability to shape the developments in the region got further marginalised. India continued to lag behind in its ability to project power across the Indian Ocean through the early 1990s primarily due to resource constraints and a lack of a definable strategy. It was rightly observed that:

“if the Indian Navy seriously contemplates power projection missions in the Indian Ocean, [the then Indian naval fleet] is inadequate... it has neither the balance nor the required offensive punch to maintain zones of influence.”¹⁰

India, for its part, continued to demand, without much success, that ‘extra regional navies’ should withdraw from the Indian Ocean, a demand which met with hostility from the major powers and generated apprehensions in India's neighbourhood that India would like to dominate the strategic landscape of the Indian Ocean. India's larger non-aligned foreign policy posture also ensured that its maritime intentions remained shrouded in mystery for the rest of the world.

It was only since the late 1990s that India started to reassert itself in the Indian Ocean and beyond. This was the period when the Indian government asserted that:

“India has a vital stake in the security and stability of the littoral and island states of the Indian Ocean region. India's maritime security is dependent on its capability to effectively patrol, monitor and counter illegal activities in the region, be they attempted by national entities or by sub-national groups.”¹¹

But Indian naval capability had declined over the previous decade rendering such statements rather farcical. Indian naval commanders too acknowledged this vulnerability by underlining their concerns that naval power projection in the Mahanian mould “is not adequately understood by large sections of our countrymen”.¹² Looking at the Indian naval decay, Western observers argued that “it may not be feasible for developing states to sustain a Mahanist momentum”.¹³ While the threat from China had already started emerging, it was not clear if policy-makers were aware of the time and resource gap that had already started emerging between India and its nearest rival in the region. As George Tanham suggested:

“India can visualise a threat from the Chinese Navy, which has already ventured into the Indian Ocean, even as Indian naval planners are concerned that people do not appreciate how much time and effort [and finance?] is needed to develop the Navy they believe India will need in the 21st century.”¹⁴

When this realisation dawned, it was already too late in many ways. Nonetheless, an upward trajectory in naval expenditure had started emerging. This was largely driven by two factors – high rates of economic growth that India has enjoyed since early 1990s as a result of its economic reforms programme enabling it to invest greater resources on naval expansion and the growing realisation that China was rapidly expanding its influence in the Indian Ocean region; something that many in the Indian strategic community felt would be detrimental to Indian interests in the long-term. As the Indian foreign policy debate shifted towards greater strategic realism, the notion of an extended perimeter of national security involving the Indian Ocean littoral, the belief that India must undertake a more purposeful role in the region, and a willingness to devote large resources for such missions emerged as central to the new discourse.¹⁵

Meanwhile, non-traditional threats to global security had grown exponentially and maritime terrorism, gun-running, drug trafficking, and piracy emerged as major threats confronting India from its sea borders. Not surprisingly, India started making a concerted attempt to enhance its capabilities to back up its aspiration to play an enhanced naval role in the Indian Ocean. Jaswant Singh, as the then Foreign Minister, gave a rather expansive definition of Indian strategic interests when he suggested that:

“India’s parameters of security concerns clearly extend beyond confines of the convenient, albeit questionable geographical definition of South Asia... given her size, geographic allocation, trade links and the exclusive economic zone, India’s security environment and, therefore, potential concerns range from the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca in the West.”¹⁶

This understanding was behind the Atal Behari Vajpayee government’s 20-year programme to become a world power whose influence was felt across the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Gulf and all of Asia.¹⁷ India’s rapidly expanding geo-political as well as strategic interests were forcing India to maintain a sustained presence in various corners of the Indian Ocean. Because the Navy has proven itself adept at giving the

government sufficient leverage in operational situations in the Indian Ocean, its utility in projecting power and protecting its interests was only going to increase.

The *Indian Maritime Doctrine* of 2004 also exhibited Mahanian underpinnings by envisaging an assertive competitive strategy for the Indian Navy to dominate the Indian Ocean. By underlining the need for “an exposition of power projection beyond the Indian Ocean”, the doctrine aims to provide a naval vision for the nation that takes into account the entire arc from the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca.¹⁸ This was in tune with the evolving thinking in the political realm. Vajpayee, for example, had asserted that:

*“the strategic frontiers of today’s India, grown in international stature, have expanded well beyond the confines of South Asia... Our security environment ranges from the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca across the Indian Ocean... Our strategic thinking has also to extend those horizons.”*¹⁹

His successor, Manmohan Singh, is in agreement when he suggests that:

*“our strategic footprint covers the region bounded by the Horn of Africa, West Asia... Southeast Asia and beyond, to the far reaches of the Indian Ocean. Awareness of this reality should inform and animate our strategic thinking and defence planning.”*²⁰

Consequently, many in India are taking their inspiration from British India’s attempt to control the Indian Ocean and are re-emphasising India’s outward projection into the Indian Ocean. It has been rightly pointed out that a rising regional profile may eventually approximate to that of the British Raj – as an engine of economic growth, a major provider of security and an underwriter of collective goods.²¹

So, one finds a consistent theme in the Indian naval thinking that derives its inspiration from Mahan – the idea of projecting power and domination of the Indian Ocean for securing Indian strategic interests. Many of the issues that Indian naval planners are presently grappling with are part of this stream of thinking. This includes how to cope with Chinese power projection in the Indian Ocean, expanding Indian presence into the further reaches of the Indian Ocean, controlling sea routes and access

to bases in the region, and generating capability for sustained operations in and throughout the Indian Ocean.

Yet, this does not necessarily imply that India has been able to muster adequate resources and strategic vision to bring that role to fruition, especially as consensus has failed to emerge on defining India's global role within the nation's domestic polity. The most important challenge has emerged from China, which Indian planners have been pointing to over all these years. Yet, India finds itself unprepared to tackle this challenge.

Strategic Thought Confronts Reality: The China Challenge

China emerged as the biggest military spender in the Asia-Pacific in 2006, overtaking Japan, and now has the fourth largest defence expenditure in the world. The exact details about Chinese military expenditure remain contested, with estimates ranging from the official figure of US\$ 35 billion to the US Defence Intelligence Agency's estimate of US\$ 80 to 115 billion.²² But the rapidly rising trend in Chinese military expenditure is fairly evident, showing an increase of 195 per cent over the 1997-2006 period. The Chinese official budget for 2007 showed a significant increase of 25 per cent over the previous year though official figures are not reflective of the true level of resources devoted to defence by China.²³ The official figures do not include the cost of new weapon purchases and research or other big-ticket items for China's highly secretive military. From Washington to Tokyo, from Brussels to Canberra, calls are rising for China to be more open about its intentions behind this dramatic pace of spending increase and scope of its military capabilities. The Chinese Defence White Paper of 2006 makes it clear that major procurement programmes as well as the desire to pursue the Chinese version of 'revolution in military affairs' remain at the heart of this massive increase.²⁴ The PLAN, according to the White Paper, will be aiming at:

*"gradual extension of the strategic depth for offshore defensive operations and enhancing its capabilities in integrated maritime operations and nuclear counter-attacks."*²⁵

The PLAN is now considered the third-largest in the world, behind only the US' and Russia's, and superior to the Indian Navy in both qualitative and quantitative terms.²⁶ The PLAN has traditionally been a coastal force and China has had a continental outlook to security. But with a rise in its economic might since the 1980s, Chinese

interests have expanded and have acquired a maritime orientation, with the intent to project power into the Indian Ocean. China is investing far greater resources in the modernisation of its armed forces in general and its Navy in particular, than India seems either willing or capable at present. China's increasingly sophisticated submarine fleet can eventually be one of the world's largest and with a rapid accretion in its capabilities, including submarines, ballistic missiles and GPS-blocking technology, some are suggesting that China will increasingly have the capacity to challenge the US.²⁷ Senior Chinese officials have indicated that China will be ready to build an aircraft carrier by the end of the decade, as it is seen as indispensable to protecting Chinese interests.²⁸

With the rise in China's economic and political prowess, there has also been a commensurate growth in its profile in the Indian Ocean region. Chinese interests are expanding and it will like to see a stable Indian Ocean region, with its own presence more significant than before. This is resulting in a Sino-Indian competition for influence in Indian Ocean and beyond. Despite a significant improvement in Sino-Indian ties since the late 1990s, the relationship remains competitive in nature and, using its rising economic and military profile, China has been very successful in attracting Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and even Bhutan into its orbit, much to India's discomfiture. There is a growing perception in India that China has been very successful in containing India within the confines of South Asia by building close ties with India's key neighbours, in particular with Pakistan.

China is acquiring naval bases along crucial choke-points in the Indian Ocean not only to serve its economic interests but also to enhance its strategic presence. China realises that its maritime strength will give it the strategic leverage that it needs to emerge as the regional hegemon and a potential superpower, and there is enough evidence to suggest that it is comprehensively building up its maritime power in all dimensions.²⁹ It is China's growing dependence on maritime space and resources that is reflected in its aspiration to expand its influence and to ultimately dominate the strategic environment of the Indian Ocean region. China's growing reliance on bases across the region is a response to its perceived vulnerability, given the logistical constraints that it faces due to the distance of the Indian Ocean waters from its own area of operations. Yet, China is consolidating power over the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean with an eye on India, something that comes out clearly in a secret memorandum issued by the PLA's Director of General Logistic Department:

*"We can no longer accept the Indian Ocean as only an ocean of the Indians... We are taking armed conflicts in the region into account."*³⁰

China has deployed its *Jin* class submarines in a base near Sanya on the Southern tip of Hainan Island in South China Sea, raising alarm in India as the base is merely 1,200 nautical miles from the Malacca Straits and will be its closest access point to the Indian Ocean. The base also has an underground facility that can hide the movement of submarines.³¹ The concentration of strategic naval forces at Sanya will further propel China towards a consolidation of its control over the surrounding Indian Ocean region. The presence of access tunnels on the mouth of the deep water base is particularly troubling for India, as it will have strategic implications in the Indian Ocean region, allowing China to interdict shipping at three crucial chokepoints. As the ability of PLAN to project power in the Indian Ocean region grows, India is likely to feel even more vulnerable despite enjoying distinct geographical advantages. China's growing naval presence in and around the Indian Ocean region is troubling for India as it restricts its freedom to manoeuvre. Of particular note is what has been termed as China's 'string of pearls' strategy that has significantly expanded its strategic depth in India's backyard. China is building strategic relationships and setting up bases along the sea lanes from the Middle East to South China Sea not simply to protect China's growing energy interests but also to enhance its broader strategic objectives.³²

This 'string of pearls' strategy of bases and diplomatic ties include the Gwadar port in Pakistan, naval bases in Myanmar, electronic intelligence gathering facilities on islands in the Bay of Bengal, funding the construction of a canal across the Kra Isthmus in Thailand, a military agreement with Cambodia and building up of forces in the South China Sea.³³ Some of these claims are exaggerated, as has been the case with Chinese naval presence in Myanmar. The former Indian Defence Minister, George Fernandes, suggested that Myanmar had leased its Coco Islands to China in 1994 and China was planning to turn it into a naval base. However, in 2005, the Indian government had to concede that such reports were incorrect and that there were indeed no naval bases in Myanmar.³⁴ Yet, the Chinese thrust into the Indian Ocean is gradually becoming more pronounced than before. The Chinese may not have a naval base in Myanmar but they are involved in the upgradation of infrastructure in Coco Islands and may be providing some limited technical assistance to Myanmar. Given that

almost 80 per cent of China's oil passes through the Strait of Malacca, it is reluctant to rely on the US naval power for unhindered access to energy and so has decided to build up its naval power at chokepoints along the sea routes from the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea. China is also courting other states in South Asia by building container ports in Bangladesh at Chittagong and in Sri Lanka at Hambantota as well as helping to build a naval base at Marao in the Maldives. Consolidating its access to the Indian Ocean, China has signed an agreement with Sri Lanka to finance the development of the Hambantota Development Zone, which includes a container port, a bunker system, and an oil refinery. The submarine base that China has built at Marao Island in the Maldives has the potential to challenge the US Navy in Diego Garcia, the hub of US naval forces in the Indian Ocean. It is possible that the construction of these ports and facilities around India's periphery by China can be explained away on purely economic and commercial grounds, but for India this looks like a policy of containment by other means.

China's diplomatic and military efforts in the Indian Ocean seem to exhibit a desire to project power vis-à-vis competing powers in the region, such as the US and India. China's presence in the Bay of Bengal via roads and ports in Myanmar and in the Arabian Sea via the Chinese-built port of Gwadar in Pakistan has been a cause of concern for India. With access to crucial port facilities in Egypt, Iran, and Pakistan, China is well-poised to secure its interests. China's involvement in the construction of the Gwadar port has attracted a lot of attention due to its strategic location at about 70 km from the Iranian border and 400 km East of the Strait of Hormuz, a major oil supply route. It has been suggested that it will provide China with a 'listening post' from where it can "monitor US naval activity in the Persian Gulf, Indian activity in the Arabian Sea, and future US-Indian maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean".³⁵ Though Pakistan's naval capabilities do not, on their own, pose any challenge to India, the combinations of Chinese and Pakistani naval forces can indeed be formidable to counter.

It has been suggested that the Chinese government appears "to have a very clear vision of the future importance of the sea and a sense of the strategic leadership needed to develop maritime interest."³⁶ This is reflected in the attempts that China has made in recent years to build up all aspects of its maritime economy and to create one of the world's largest merchant fleets, with a port, transport, and ship-building infrastructure to match. In this respect, Indian Ocean has an important role to play in Chinese efforts

towards establishing its predominance as the main maritime power. All the steps that China is taking to protect and enhance its interests are generating apprehensions in Indian strategic circles about its real intentions, thereby engendering a classic security dilemma between the two Asian giants. It is fears and perceptions of the growing naval prowess of China in the Indian Ocean that is driving the Indian naval posture.

India's Multilateral Turn

Both China and India will most certainly like to acquire the potential to project power and operate interpedently far from their shores. Yet, it is China that as of now seems more willing to actually commit to the cost of building up its fleet, with a clear strategic agenda as to how it wants to utilise its naval assets. The ability of Indian policy-makers to think strategically on national security and defence issues has been questionable at best. Ad hoc decision-making has been the norm, leading to a situation where long-time observers argue that it is likely that "India will be among the medium powers... a country of great economic capabilities but limited cultural and military influence".³⁷ With policy-makers in the country far removed from the nation's sea frontiers, there is even less understanding of maritime issues. This political apathy has led to the three services operating in a strategic void.

Though Indian and Chinese navies are usually placed on par with each other as 'medium regional force projection navies' when attempts are made to classify world navies, the pace of their recent growth might soon call for a re-evaluation.³⁸ Indian naval strategists warn that despite all the talk of quality and capability-based platforms, the Indian Navy is actually shrinking in size and a 10-year strategic maritime gap has emerged between China and India, which will be difficult to close without radical actions to upgrade shipbuilding and port infrastructure.³⁹ Though Indian naval aspirations are growing, the emphasis placed upon sea power has not been commensurate with the nation's growing maritime commitments and the ever-more sophisticated threats emerging in the waters around it.

Moreover, despite the fact that some will like India to achieve preponderance in the Indian Ocean region, it remains an unrealistic aspiration, as other major powers have significant stakes and so will continue to operate and shape India's strategic environment. A rising India is beginning to discover that major global powers have stakes in far-flung corners and this realisation has allowed India to shun its fundamentally flawed argument about the need for 'extra-regional navies' to withdraw from the

Indian Ocean region. India's bilateral and multilateral naval exercises with major naval powers has helped in reducing misperceptions about India's maritime intentions and has brought Indian Navy's capacity to contribute to peace and stability in the Indian Ocean littoral to the forefront. India, therefore, will look towards cooperating with other major powers to secure common interests that include safeguarding the sea lanes of communication, energy security as well as countering extremist and terrorist groups.

India's hosting of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) since 2008 is, therefore, an attempt to take these ground realities into account and evolve an alternative approach toward maritime security. The IONS not only highlights the role of the Indian Navy as an important instrument of the nation's foreign and security policy but it is also an attempt by India to promote a multilateral approach in the management of the security of the Indian Ocean. India is signalling that as a rising power, it is willing to fulfil its maritime responsibilities but unlike in the past when India had been suspicious of what it saw as 'extra-regional navies' it is now ready to cooperate with other navies in and around the Indian Ocean. Whether India's leadership will be enough to promote genuine maritime multilateralism in the region, remains to be seen.

Despite the Mahanian underpinnings to Indian naval thought all these years, it is not clear if Vaidya's hopes in 1949 of India becoming a mighty sea-power by dominating the Indian Ocean "which she is destined by nature and which alone can ensure national greatness" are any closer to realisation than they were in 1949. For all the euphoria about Indian Navy's rise in recent years, the intellectual debate about its trajectory remains unresolved. It is the way it gets resolved that will shape India's rise. It is to this task that Indian naval thinkers should now return.

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