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Maritime Imperatives of Indian Foreign Policy

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Admiral Arun Prakash, Chairman, National Maritime Foundation (NMF), Admiral Nirmal Verma, Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Sureesh Mehta, Admiral Tahiliani, Commodore Uday Bhaskar, Director, NMF, ladies, gentlemen and friends. Thank you for asking me to speak to you on the maritime imperatives of Indian foreign policy. Since its establishment, the Foundation has done remarkable work to raise awareness and promote a discussion of India's maritime destiny. This has not been easy in a country which has developed continental fixations, despite having maritime boundaries longer than it has on land. It is an honour and a privilege to speak to you on this subject.

I will not try to tell an audience of your eminence and knowledge what you know better than me, namely, how important the ocean is to India's future. Our maritime policies will be one of the major determinants of success or failure in our attempt to transform India into a modern, plural, open, advanced country that is both secure and prosperous. What I will like to do here is to dwell on what our maritime imperatives are and how they are reflected in our foreign policy. In the process, we might look at some relevant issues and developments, suggest elements for a suitable strategy and attempt a brief prognosis for the immediate future.

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*Speech by Mr. Shiv Shankar Menon, the former Foreign Secretary, Government of India at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi on September 11, 2009.

History

History shows that India was most prosperous and secure when she was most connected to the world, and that this connection was mainly by sea. It is well-known that we are an ancient sea-faring nation, as the 4,000-year-old port at Lothal and other Indus Valley finds show. What is less well documented or taught is the extent to which the sea was the major means of our links with the world to the West and the East. "Periplus of the Erythrean Sea" predicts the winds, currents and the monsoons for those sailing to the West well before the time of Christ. While Buddhism's spread overland in the second half of the first millennium is known, the earliest travel and trade with China was by the sea route, and this was how Buddhism first came to China and East Asia. Satavahana, Chola, Pallava, Chera and Pandyan prosperity and security were based on a maritime strategy that included Southeast Asia.

Jawaharlal Nehru's conclusion from our history was that:

> "*We cannot afford to be weak at sea. History has shown that whoever controls the Indian Ocean has, in the first instance, India's sea-borne trade at her mercy and, in the second, India's very independence itself.*"

Then why did we develop what can only be called a continental mindset in our grand strategy? One reason may have been the closing of the Indian mind after the 14th century, particularly in the Northern Gangetic plain. In the rest of India, the middle centuries of the last millennium saw considerable maritime activity. The construction of spectacular marine forts along both coasts in this period deserves much more study than they have received so far.

The continental mindset really set in later; during the centuries of colonial rule. Recognising the significance of the oceans to its control of India, the colonial rulers in London relinquished this area of strategic significance last even to the British government in India and then to Indians. Lord Curzon was the first (and possibly the last) Viceroy of India to write to London about the importance to India of control of key choke points from the Horn of Africa to the Cape of Good Hope to the Malacca Straits, and of the need to prevent an inimical power from making an entry into the Indian Ocean. He was promptly asked to mind his own business and to leave the Royal Navy and their affairs to the authorities in London.

As a result, the government of free India inherited a limited maritime vision, reinforced by severe resource constraints. There were significant objective capacity limitations in the decades just after independence. These included technology denial and lack of indigenous technological capacity, and United States' arms embargoes in 1965, 1974 and 1998. These constraints meant that even when Indian intent or thought was present, there was a strategy-policy mismatch. (The Army and Air Force generally received allocations twice the percentage allocated to the Indian Navy.)

The Imperatives

But whatever the mindset, the facts of India's geography and history are inescapable. What was true in history is equally or even more true today. In the midst of the third largest ocean in the world, India's location is in many ways her destiny. The seas, especially the Indian Ocean, are vital to India's interests. Transport by water remains the cheapest form available. Even when we speak of cyberspace, 95 per cent of internet traffic is at some stage carried under the sea by underwater cables. Maritime trade and energy supplies are critical to India's transformation.

Let us consider some statistics. Today, 90 per cent of global commerce and 65 per cent of all oil travels by sea. Of this, half the world's container traffic and 70 per cent of the total traffic of petroleum products is accounted for by the Indian Ocean.

Even in terms of energy, India depends on oil for over 33 per cent of her energy needs, and imports almost 70 per cent of that. We import coal from 10 countries (including Mozambique, South Africa, Indonesia and Australia), many of which are Indian Ocean littorals. This is also true of our liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports (from Qatar, Malaysia, Indonesia and South Africa). The International Energy Agency (IEA) estimates that global energy demand will grow by at least 45 per cent between 2006 and 2030, and that half that increase will come from India and China – two countries that are in an energy intensive phase of their development. Between 1990 and 2003, oil consumption in India and China grew by 7 per cent on an average, against 0.8 per cent growth in the rest of the world. By 2050, India may become the largest importer of oil in the world. Thus, both India and China face a "Hormuz dilemma". For China, this is compounded by a "Malacca dilemma" as well.

Given the need for energy security, it is therefore natural that Indian companies operate oil tank farms in Trincomalee and seek a role in oilfields from Sakhalin to Myanmar to Central Asia to Egypt, Sudan, Angola and elsewhere.

Add to this our other maritime interests – almost 5 million Indians work in the Gulf and West Asia, and the significance of the remittances they send home cannot be underestimated. Populations of Indian origin are scattered through the littoral states of the Indian Ocean. India also has a mineral-rich exclusive economic zone, which is well over 2 million sq. km in area.

And then there is security, even in the limited classical military sense of the word. As the events in Mumbai on November 26, 2008 showed, the same Indian Ocean that carries our energy and goods is also used by our enemies to attack us. The threats from terrorism, smuggling, piracy, transnational crimes, and proliferation that the Indian Navy's 2004 Maritime Doctrine warned about have all come true in the last few years. The geostrategic significance of the Indian Ocean is clear from the fact that about 60,000 ships transit through it each year.

Let us look a little more closely at the phenomenon of piracy off the Horn of Africa emanating from the Somali coast. Through *ad hoc* arrangements, the navies of several Indian Ocean countries, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), China and Japan are cooperating in fighting this menace. This experience shows what international cooperation can do to keep the sea lines open, but also suggests the limitations of military responses to such complex threat phenomena. About 20,000 ships transit through the affected area every year. As against this, so far this year, there have been about 135 pirate attacks from the Somali coast and 28 vessels have been successfully commandeered. My point is simple. One must re-examine the cost effectiveness of conventional military force in dealing with these new threats. This is no longer just a case of dealing with the pirates on the Spanish main or off the Barbary Coast. Given the stakes involved, and the nature of piracy today, a broader set of comprehensive measures, with much wider international participation, is essential to deal with this problem. I will return to this aspect later.

Foreign Policy

How do the three major imperatives of trade, energy and security (even in the limited traditional sense) impact on our foreign policy?

The Indian Ocean is already the centre-stage in international politics. When you think of issues that have concerned India in the recent past – the attacks on Mumbai, the end of Civil War in Sri Lanka, piracy off the Horn of Africa, the rise of China, energy security and trade, and instability in our periphery – each of them has involved

the Indian Ocean or its littoral countries in one way or the other. Clearly, India sits astride key and crucial sea lines of communication for energy security and trade critical for the world economy, and especially for China and Japan.

Over the last few years, we have worked with friendly foreign governments in the Asia-Pacific to enhance our naval cooperation, agreeing to operational turn around (OTRs), conducting joint naval exercises and working with others on issues of maritime security. We, along with other countries, are learning as we go. There is a natural tendency, at the initial stage of this effort, to confuse the formal declaratory parts of such activity (for instance, defence agreements, formal visits, talks and words of communiqués), with the actual substance of these relations. In terms of intensity and content, these exchanges in Asia are still far less than those in the Atlantic or Mediterranean. Because they occur in a rapidly changing regional and global context, and when the relative balance of power in the area is shifting and evolving, we need to be careful of the effect of these formal and informal demonstrations of intent on others.

The other aspect where we are learning as we go is our institutional capacity to make foreign policy and to integrate maritime considerations into foreign policy decision-making. That we have been able to do so in the last few years is due to the informal coordination and understanding that Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the Indian Navy were able to maintain. This needs to be institutionalised and developed to include the other parts of government, which also have a role in such policy formation. Taking personnel from the Indian Navy into the MEA is illustrative.

There is no question that there is a much clearer recognition within the Government of India of the importance of the maritime factor in our foreign policy choices. India's active quest for stronger ties with significant Indian Ocean littorals like Myanmar, Iran, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Oman and others is proof of this, as is the active 'naval diplomacy' that we have undertaken over the last few years. The Indian Navy's exemplary response to the 2004 *tsunami* and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) initiative are visible examples. These have been backed up by the issue of two maritime doctrine documents for public discussion.

India is now beginning to discuss and act on her responsibilities in the Indian Ocean, whether humanitarian or in terms of providing public goods, such as keeping the peace and freedom of navigation and trade. This is being done in a cooperative manner with other friendly navies and states. The exercises with friendly navies, our

discussions at various official and quasi or non-official forums, all reflect this new understanding. These must continue and be intensified.

This recognition is now also entering the realm of public debate in India, just as it is entering strategic discourse in the rest of the world. Unfortunately, however, much of the debate is framed solely in terms of India-China rivalry. This is especially true of strategists in India and China themselves, though not of their governments. The terms in which the argument is presented are limited and will be self-fulfilling predictions, were governments to act upon them. Nor are they based on an examination of objective interests of the states concerned.

Let us look at the facts. There are no Chinese bases in the Indian Ocean today despite talk of the 'string of pearls' (which, by the way, is a pretty ineffective murder weapon as any 'Clue' aficionado will tell you). There is, however, extensive Chinese port development activity in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, and active weapons supply programmes to these states. The question is whether and to what extent this improved access and infrastructure will translate into basing arrangements and political influence in future.

There are also Chinese interests involved. For China, as for India and Japan, her energy security is intimately linked to keeping the sea lines open in the Indian Ocean. The threats to energy flows in the Indian Ocean come not from the major powers, (such as India, the US, China or Japan), all of whom have a shared interest in keeping these sea lines working. The immediate threats come from local instability and problems in the choke points and certain littorals, particularly the Straits of Hormuz and the Horn of Africa. These will not be solved simply by an application of military force, just as piracy off the Horn of Africa cannot be. This is a test of wisdom and an aspect where China and other states can choose to be part of the solution rather than of the problem.

My question is, therefore: if energy and trade flows and security are the issues, why not begin discussing collective security arrangements among the major powers concerned? Is it not time that we began a discussion among concerned states of a maritime system, minimising the risks of inter-state conflict and neutralising threats from pirates, smugglers, terrorists, and proliferators? India's concerns in the Northwest Indian Ocean and China's vulnerabilities in the Northeast Indian Ocean cannot be solved by military means alone. The issue is not limited just to the Indian Ocean but indeed is one of security of these flows in areas and seas, which affect the choke points. These arrangements

should deal with transnational issues, such as piracy, crime and natural disasters. Now that Asian states and powers have evolved the capabilities and demonstrated the will to deal with these questions, it is time that a structured discussion among them and the major littorals takes place.

What is proposed here is different from what has been suggested elsewhere, for instance by Robert Kaplan in the March-April 2009 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, namely, that the US act as 'sea-based balancer' or 'honest broker' between India and China in the Indian Ocean. Which major power will not like to play the role of balancer, given the chance? It is cheaper and easier and leaves the real work to the powers being balanced. For a superpower that is refocusing on Asia, but finding the landscape considerably changed while she was preoccupied with Iraq and Afghanistan, this will naturally be an attractive option. But is it likely that two emerging states like India and China, with old traditions of state-craft, will allow themselves to remain the objects of someone else's policy, no matter how elegantly expressed? I think not.

Instead, what is suggested is a real concert of Asian powers, including the US, which has a major maritime presence and interests in Asia, to deal with issues of maritime security in all of Asia's oceans. As Asia becomes more integrated from the Suez Canal to the Pacific Ocean, none of Asia's seas or oceans can be considered in isolation. This will be a major cooperative endeavour and a test of Asian statesmanship.

It will be asked whether this quest is utopian, when the global and regional balance of power is shifting so rapidly, when there is a major build-up of naval strength taking place in Asia, and when each major Asian power is convinced that the future will be better for them, or at least that their relative position will improve rather than worsen in the years to come. It is precisely when uncertainty in the international system is higher than it has been for a long time, when the stakes are greatest, that the need for such an exercise is sharpest and it has the most chance of success. In any case, we will not know until we try discussing these ideas with others.

Thank you for your patient hearing. I will be most interested in your comments and views, and will be happy to answer any questions.