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Rise of the East: The Maritime Dimension

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Celebrating the “rise of the East” after a 500-year interregnum, the author investigates the reasons why Europe surged forward through the Renaissance, followed by the industrial revolution, while this part of the world stood relatively still. Domination of the seas by European nations was, no doubt, a crucial factor that laid the foundations of their prosperity. A hoary maritime tradition and shipbuilding as well as seafaring skills notwithstanding, Asian nations failed to exploit the seas to their benefit for want of enterprise and ambition. The wheel having come full circle in the 21st century, the author sounds a note of caution as Asian nations, fortunes on the ascendant, stand on the threshold of a naval arms race. He counsels cooperation rather than conflict, and suggests that seas would have an important role to play in fostering peace and friendship.

Rise of the East

Not too long ago, one often heard the comment that while huge Asian countries remained mired in poverty, European nations with tiny populations were amongst the world's richest entities. These days, nothing is sweeter for Asian ears than to hear the phrase: “rise

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of the East". Europe's 500-year domination of Asia saw the wealth and resources of the East being carried away to fuel the growth and build the lasting prosperity of the Western world. The reverse process is now under way, on a much larger scale, and will lead to transfer of political power and intellectual influence away from the West. While we savour the flattering connotations of this phrase, we need to recognise some conundrums.

With attainment of nationhood by India, China, Indonesia and other Asian countries by the mid-20th century, signs of economic change were perceptible, but soon it became obvious that a key factor was going to be the political will to implement radical systemic reform. It happened in China in 1978 and in India and Indonesia in the early 1990s; and the rest is history. By 2015 Asia is predicted to account for 34% of global gross domestic product (GDP) and by 2050 its GDP will exceed the combined GDP of the United States and Europe.

A common refrain these days is that the current phenomenon is not just a shift in the balance of global economic power but a "restoration of the *status quo ante*". It is said that until the early 19th century, China and India accounted for 50% of global economic output, and after a two-century aberration, they are merely resuming the natural balance. While this statement may arouse chauvinistic pride, it does not present the full picture.

In the 15th century, China and India probably had about four times the population of Western Europe and their aggregate GDP must have been proportionately larger because its main source was agriculture. However, merely totalling up a country's GDP in the pre-industrial era did not convey a meaningful idea of a nation's prosperity. It is GDP per capita that determines the quality of life of a society as well as the economic status, technological prowess and a nation's standing in the world.

That is why today's indices are far more representative in terms of actual prosperity. But judging even by these criteria, it is clear that the pendulum of history, having completed a full cycle, is now surely swinging back our way. So much for economics; but let us now delve a little into history, to see how and why, for a period of 500 years, while the West surged forward, through the Renaissance followed by the industrial revolution, our part of the world stood relatively still.

Asia's Maritime Past

Asians have, generally speaking, been poor in recording their past, and most works on maritime history come from Western sources. They start with a description of the

seafaring tradition of the Mediterranean basin around 2500–2000 BCE, and dwell on the sea power of Crete, Phoenicia, Greece, Carthage and Rome. Nowhere will one find any reference to Arab, Indian, Chinese or Malay seafarers, or to an Eastern seafaring tradition.

It was the twentieth-century Indian scholar and diplomat, K.M. Panikkar, who asserted that European historians made a serious mistake when they assumed that the navigational tradition first emerged around the Mediterranean. According to him, for reasons such as predictable currents and steady monsoon winds, it was the Indian Ocean, and specifically the lands washed by the Arabian Sea, which saw the first oceanic sailing activity. Bolstering his claims with archaeological finds from remains of the Indus Valley civilisation, and references in ancient Indian literature, all of it going back to around 2500 BCE, he had this to say:

“Millenniums before Columbus sailed the Atlantic and Magellan crossed the Pacific, the Indian Ocean had become a thoroughfare of commercial and cultural traffic between the west coast of India and Babylon, as well as the Levant.”¹

Panikkar then went on to recount the continuum of strong cultural and religious bonds between India and Southeast Asia, created through intense maritime intercourse during the 1st and 2nd millennia CE. Starting with the great Indian Mauryan Emperors, he traces this connection through many dynasties of peninsular India like the Andhras, Chalukyas and Cholas which sustained intense maritime traffic.

There are two interesting points for us to note here.

In that era of rapacious conquests and religious zealotry, it is remarkable that the projection of Indian influence was entirely of the kind defined, by Joseph Nye, as “soft power”. Indians did not go forth with sword and fire; but used the instruments of culture, religion and trade to reach out as far as the Philippines and even Japan. The so-called “Hindu empires” such as the Majapahit and Mataram or the Srivijaya thalassocracy were created by indigenous Malay, Sumatran, Siamese or Khmer rulers who embraced Sanskrit titles, principles of *raja-dharma* and traditions from the Hindu epics: the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

The second important point illustrated by this multifaceted relationship between India and Southeast Asia refers to the development of shipbuilding and seafaring techniques. It is obvious that this intense maritime traffic and interaction, spread over

centuries, could not have been sustained without generations of hardy and intrepid sailors plying sturdy seagoing vessels. These voyages, across the stormy waters of the Bay of Bengal and South China Sea speak of the navigational skills and the shipbuilding expertise of our forebears; and establish, unquestionably, the existence of an ancient maritime tradition in Asia.

This is also an opportune juncture to recall the seafaring achievements of the famous Chinese Imperial palace eunuch and admiral, Zeng Ho. He is said to have sailed with his huge fleets of junks to many parts of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean as well as Africa and Arabia between 1405 and 1433 and established the seafaring skills of Chinese sailors. His expeditions came to an abrupt end when a change in Imperial policy in China suddenly imposed a ban on seagoing activity.

While this should eliminate any doubts about a long and hoary Eastern maritime tradition, it also reminds us that from this apogee, Asia's maritime prowess commenced a rapid decline in the 13th and 14th centuries for a number of reasons. Northern India fell to Central Asian invaders who had no concept of sea power. The South Indian Cholas Empire and the Sumatran Srivijayan Empire, having engaged in a 99-year-long maritime conflict went into steep decline. The Chinese had banned seagoing activity, and the Arab seafarers who succeeded to the supremacy of our seas, thereafter, were only commercial navigators, and not instruments of any national power.

The Advent of European Maritime Powers

At around the same time Europe was seeing advances in shipbuilding, navigational techniques and naval weaponry. These enabled mariners, especially from Portugal and Spain, to venture far from their homelands into uncharted seas and to return safely.

No foreign power had entered Indian waters until the arrival of the Portuguese adventurer Vasco da Gama in 1498. From that time onwards, the powers that dominated the oceans also dominated India. One hundred and sixty years later in 1757, the Indian province of Bengal fell to the East India Company, and this date is commonly accepted as the beginning of Britain's two-century rule of India. Commenting upon this historic event, Admiral Mahan remarks; "it may be said that the foundation thus laid could never have been built upon, had the English nation not controlled the sea".²

It is also interesting, to note that in the period just after the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815, Britannia is said to have “ruled the waves”. The industrial revolution had transformed Britain, known as a “nation of shopkeepers” into the “workshop of the world” and it suited British interests to propagate the concept of “free trade” whereby their goods could find markets worldwide under the watchful eye of the Royal Navy.

This required that strategic positions, which could command the sea lanes of the world, should be in British hands. Accordingly, Singapore, Ceylon, Mauritius, Seychelles, Aden, Falklands, Hong Kong, Cyprus and many other such bases were acquired. The powerful presence of the Royal Navy at key maritime locations strengthened Britain’s authority and ability to influence events in regions of interest, with natural economic spin-offs.

With the hindsight of centuries it appears obvious that domination of the seas is a *sine qua non* for a nation to attain economic prosperity and status of a great power. Nations which acquired a clear perception of sea power as a form of national strength nurtured large merchant fleets, created strong navies and acquired overseas bases. They were able to freely undertake trade and, when required, send armies across stretches of water, while preventing rivals from making use of the seas. According to Paul Kennedy: “western European princes and merchants had the will to expand, and they had developed superior means with which to crush any opposition . . . the motives for European expansion were . . . a mixture of politics, economics and religious fervour”.³

Asian princes and merchants, obviously, failed to grasp the significance of sea power; nor were they endowed with any desire to expand. As you would be aware, the theory of political realism postulates, amongst other things, that: states seek to amass resources in pursuit of national security; that the international community is essentially anarchic and self-seeking; and that morality and law are irrelevant beyond one’s national boundaries. The history of Asia bears testimony to this. It could be said that Asian nations were, perhaps, destined to remain subaltern powers and be economically exploited, because they were inexperienced in the conduct of international relations, and ignored the tenets of realism.

With that lengthy foray into the historical past, let me now “fast-forward” to the present.

The Current Asia-Pacific Scenario

I start by pointing out a geopolitical anomaly to you. Since Asia, technically, embraces a vast expanse stretching from Israel to the Russian Far East, the term Asia-Pacific was coined post-World War II to focus on the Western Pacific and to accommodate the United States as a regional power. The Asia-Pacific is further sub-divided into Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and Oceania. South Asia, which lies on the other side of the Malacca Strait, and includes India, is generally excluded from Asia-Pacific unless specifically mentioned.

I would suggest that it is time to coin a new term, the “Indo-Pacific”, which will encompass countries on the Pacific as well as Indian Ocean rims. The “Indo” here does not refer to India but to the Indian Ocean, whose intersection with the Pacific is being described as a “hub” of the 21st century world. While Indo-Pacific need not replace any other term, it would be a far more inclusive and appropriate phrase, especially when you are referring collectively to areas on either side of the Malacca Straits.

It is being pointed out that while Asia’s ascent may be the most visible, many countries in Africa and Latin America, too, have been showing unprecedented growth, and the economic phenomenon that we are witnessing could well be termed as “rise of the rest”. But the question is: will the “rise of the rest” be at America’s cost, squeezing its economic and geopolitical space, or will America have the flexibility to accommodate others alongside? Also worth pondering is whether the economic rise and decline of nations contains the seeds of a power struggle or conflict.

Any shifts in the existing balance of power in this region should be viewed with concern, because the ubiquitous US maritime presence has upheld a six-decade long *Pax Americana* to which the Asia-Pacific region owes its current prosperity. As far as the United States is concerned, we need to be realistic. Continuing economic adversity, two expensive wars, and a combination of skyrocketing hardware costs and declining defence expenditure, are certainly going to see US forces shrinking and commitments being cut back.

The rise of nations, apart from altering the distribution of power, has historically been accompanied by turmoil and instability. The Indo-Pacific is currently witnessing the rise of not one but two powers in close proximity: the People’s Republic of China and Democratic Republic of India.

Rising Powers in Asia

Let me then address the focus of curiosity for a lot of analysts in the West: why does a developing nation like India with enormous socio-economic problems have maritime ambitions which require a substantial navy?

While the Indian Navy had nurtured, since independence, a lofty vision of itself as a blue water force at some future point of time, this vision was shared neither by India's politicians nor the bureaucracy. We have just discussed the historical background to this malady of "sea-blindness". It is only during the last two decades that certain key factors have coalesced to drive a consensus that India did indeed need to focus on maritime security.

- The first of these is the powerful phenomenon of globalisation, which has done for India what Captain Mahan achieved for the United States by his persuasive writings. International trade, the *sine qua non* of globalisation, is carried overwhelmingly by sea, as is energy, the lifeblood of industry. Ensuring stability at sea, and the safety of shipping lanes in the face of multifarious threats, has assumed prime importance, and brought maritime forces into sharp focus.
- In 1993 explosives were landed on India's west coast, from a neighbouring country, by boat, and used to trigger serial blasts which created mayhem in Mumbai. Fifteen years later, in November 2008, terrorists landed by a fishing trawler in Mumbai to play havoc with the city once more. This has created a sense of intense vulnerability amongst the public about India's coastline, islands and territorial waters.
- Next is the recognition that China's economic and military rise, which underpins an increasingly assertive attitude, could lead to a confrontation. Once the gloves are off, the Sino-Indian military equation along the Himalayan borders is likely to be evenly matched, and if the Indian Ocean is going to become the decisive arena India wants to be ready to leverage its natural geographical advantage at sea.
- The fourth factor, more catalyst than driver, is the availability of funding. Steady GDP growth for the past decade is now generating sufficient resources for implementation of many of the navy's long-delayed plans.

The effectiveness of these drivers can be gauged from the commitments made by the Government of India to the navy's acquisition programmes. India has just launched its first nuclear-powered ballistic-missile carrying submarine (SSBN) as the lead boat in a building programme of at least three SSBNs. A Russian nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN) is due to be delivered, shortly, on a 10-year lease. India will be receiving, in 2013, a refurbished Russian aircraft carrier, while a second such ship, is being indigenously built in Cochin. About 30 other warships including stealth frigates, amphibious vessels and diesel submarines, as well as maritime patrol aircraft and carrier-borne fighters combine to represent a substantial financial outlay.

This may sound like a formidable force accretion, especially for a country with a huge population of poor people. No Indian can deny the fact that India's energies and resources must be fully devoted to the alleviation of the acute poverty that afflicts its masses and to developmental tasks. But India's experience has shown that these tasks can be properly addressed only if the nation is insulated against external intervention through adequate investment in national security. The point to note is that given the huge social, economic and developmental challenges facing it, India cannot be anything but a quintessential *status quo* power whose interests are best served by peace, tranquillity and stability in the region.

Now let me provide you with a brief perspective on China. When discussing China's growth, there is a tendency for us to be either nonchalant or hyperbolic. I will try and tread the thin line of objectivity.

Underpinned by massive foreign capital inflows, phenomenal productivity and a resolute but authoritarian regime, the Chinese economy has seen an unprecedented upsurge for the past three decades. China's economic boom has, no doubt, brought prosperity to millions of its impoverished citizens, and given hope to other developing nations. But it has also enabled a comprehensive modernisation and up-gradation of all components of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), including the 2nd Artillery Corps which holds the nuclear arsenal. One could say that this is nothing to get agitated about, because every nation has the right to decide its own security priorities.

And yet there are certain aspects of China's military expansion and modernisation that give cause for anxiety amongst its neighbours. With its land borders secure, and in a world of declining defence expenditures China's spending on its armed forces has

been seeing a sustained 15%–20% year on year increase over the past decade. China’s actions in acquiring significant offensive capabilities, including advanced resources for waging space and cyber warfare, seem to contradict its leadership’s proclamations of peaceful intent.

One could also say that China’s maritime ambitions are quite justified, up to a point. The burgeoning demand from its energy-hungry economy has led to increasing dependence on overseas resources. Since most of China’s energy imports as well as trade are now seaborne, it relies heavily on Indian Ocean and Pacific sea lanes. This is perceived, by China, as a strategic vulnerability. China also has anxieties about Taiwan, and about conflicting territorial claims in the South China Sea. It must be admitted that all this requires China to have a capable navy.

And yet none of these call for growing numbers of SSBNs, SSNs, stealth bombers, aircraft carriers or space warfare and anti-access capabilities.

It is the masking of its security policies, including the huge ongoing weapon acquisition programme, in total opacity, and the lack of sincere effort at rationalising its huge defence expenditure that worries neighbours. We note that PLA Navy task forces, on anti-piracy patrol off the Horn of Africa, have been sustaining themselves for extended durations with minimal shore support. And yet Chinese leaders still justify their quest for footholds in the Indian Ocean, to support naval forces.

Opinion in India about China’s long-term intentions remains polarised. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has frequently asserted that, “India and China are not in competition, and there is enough economic space for both”.⁴ But we also have many pessimists who predict that two powers cannot rise without a clash. The answer lies somewhere in-between.

The current Sino-Indian relationship is marked by an assortment of negatives and positives. Border and territorial disputes continue to linger and no resolution appears in sight. In a new development in September, India has found itself drawn into the South China Sea imbroglio. Its plans to commence joint offshore oil exploration with Vietnam have drawn fire from Beijing. This is another area where China’s sweeping claim to almost all of the South China Sea is causing anxiety. By the simple expedient of drawing a U-shaped line with nine dashes as the basis for “indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea”⁵ China could threaten stability in East and Southeast Asia.

Cooperation, not Conflict

Against the backdrop of this somewhat sombre scenario, one can clearly discern the nervous manoeuvring of countries in China's neighbourhood, trying to find a convergence of interests outside the South China Sea region so that they can strike partnerships, if not alliances for mutual support.

I do not think that it will be a good idea to think in terms of "containment of China" or of striking balance-of-power equations because that would be a sure way of raising regional tensions. On the other hand, we need to strive for a regional understanding on the lines of the 19th-century Concert of Europe formed by the great powers to keep peace in the post-Napoleonic era. With a little effort, we can identify and exploit many areas of common interests.

For example, China is today India's biggest trading partner, with bilateral trade of over 60 billion US dollars. It seeks a share of work in India's growing infrastructure and telecom sectors. The international arena has also provided opportunities for India and China to work together on issues such as the environment, climate change and food and energy security. The maritime arena abounds with many such low-hanging fruit, waiting to be plucked.

Another example is India's two decade old "look east" policy which has led to a set of close security linkages including membership of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit and now of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Defence Ministers Meeting, known as the ADMM plus. India has also launched initiatives such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) with the aim of enhancing maritime cooperation and common understanding among navies of littoral states.

In a gathering of Asia Pacific Chiefs of Defence at Hawaii in October 2011, the delegates present were unanimous in the view that Asian navies needed to make strenuous efforts to identify areas of mutual convergence in order to promote multilateral cooperation and ease tensions. It emerged that the maritime arena was perhaps the most fertile ground to seek such an objective. I will outline two salient challenges that we all face in this region, and see how we can use them as opportunities in this context.

Asian Arms Race

I begin by pointing out the reality of an unstated naval arms race right across the Indo-Pacific region. Uncertainties and tensions in East and Southeast Asia have

created an environment of general insecurity, leading to a steady rise in defence budgets and accretion of naval forces in the region. In addition, disputes in the South China Sea pose a security dilemma for many Southeast Asian countries. Overlaid on this is the possibility that the strategic rivalry between China and India may spill over into the maritime domain. This could be aggravated by an emerging overlap of interests; as China looks towards the Indian Ocean, India too finds interests in the South China Sea.

Consequently we are going to see many more surface combatants, aircraft carriers, submarines, both diesel and nuclear, as well as strike and maritime patrol aircraft operating in close proximity in Indo-Pacific waters. They will belong not just to China, India and Australia but also to Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines. Enhanced naval activity, especially in an area beset by unresolved maritime disputes, increases the chances of an incident between naval units. Risk management is a vital requirement.

Arms races are driven by perceptions of national interest and concerns about emerging capabilities in one's neighbourhood. Therefore, a broad-based dialogue on maritime security issues would serve to alleviate misgivings and mistrust. An idea for consideration is the constitution of an "Indo-Pacific Maritime Confidence Building Forum". Such a forum could address the underlying causes of insecurity, discuss measures to limit maritime capabilities, and prevent an unbridled naval arms race. Moreover, it could also facilitate the evolution of a multilateral "Incidents at Sea" or INCSEA agreement.

An Asian Maritime Partnership

The second area of common concern is the safety of international shipping in the Indian Ocean Region. Annually, over 100,000 merchantmen transit these waters, carrying cargo worth about a trillion dollars. All shipping traffic has to pass through a number of focal areas where it is vulnerable to interdiction or interference. While the threat from non-state actors like pirates has shown progressive decline in Southeast Asian waters, it has assumed serious proportions off the Horn of Africa. Somalia pirates are now hijacking ships close to India's west coast. Since Filipinos and Indians form a major proportion of seafarers, this is an area of serious public concern for both our nations.

The response to this menace, through deployment of individual warships and task-forces, has been ineffective because the resources committed are grossly inadequate for the vast ocean areas involved. Apart from the grave risk being posed to world shipping and commerce, there is need to consider the growing nexus between piracy and terrorism which could lead to far more serious geopolitical consequences.

It is time for a new and comprehensive regional maritime initiative which links up with land-based efforts to bring stability in the Somali homeland. Borrowing from an old US concept of a “1000 ship navy”, we need to consider the creation of an “Indo-Pacific Maritime Partnership”. Navies which have the capacity could contribute ships, aircraft or personnel. Such a multinational partnership would not only spread the burden of anti-piracy operations, but also make the protective umbrella for shipping more comprehensive. Since the scene of action is the Arabian Sea, India could provide support and coordination for this complex and protracted undertaking.

This maritime “force-in-being” could address multiple areas of mutual concern. The densely populated Indo-Pacific region is regularly struck by most of the planet’s natural disasters. Climate change too is now becoming manifest in many ways, and its impact on coastal areas and low-lying islands could cause immense human distress. Being local, such a maritime partnership could be mobilised at short notice to render humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in the vicinity.

Conclusion

For centuries the waters of the Indian and Pacific oceans have carried religions, cultures, languages, traditions, and indeed people, across thousands of nautical miles from one shore to another. No two individuals in this part of the world can meet and fail to strike a common chord in some manner or another. In this process of synthesis and cultural churning India has played a catalytic role, for no reason other than its central geographic location and the ancient seafaring tradition of its people.

Today, the states of the Indo-Pacific region, ranging in size from island nations to sub-continents and continents follow diverse methods of governance and often differ in their political beliefs. Notwithstanding this diversity, they are united by a great deal of history, geography and culture, as well as the oceans that wash their shores. Today,

as the force of economics lifts the region to higher levels of growth, we must remember that our security, prosperity and vital interests are inextricably linked to each other.

According to Robert Kaplan, Mahan's had, long ago, described the Indian and Pacific oceans as "hinges of geopolitical destiny", because they could enable a maritime nation to project power and wield far-reaching influence. Today, Kaplan predicts that the Indo-Pacific region, is where, "the rivalry between the US and China interlocks with the regional rivalry between China and India".

One can only hope that Kaplan is wrong in his prediction, but the fact remains that rivalries, unless carefully managed, can lead to conflict, which is something that this region needs to avoid; especially at a juncture when undivided attention is required for resolution of many economic problems, and developmental activities.

In order to reduce levels of tension and promote better understanding, nations of the Indo-Pacific must come together, to form multilateral institutions for cooperative security endeavours. While no one believes that Utopia is around the corner, cooperation is worth striving for, and the maritime domain is perhaps the easiest place to start since, as they say, *oceans make neighbours of people around the world*.

Notes

1. K.M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1945), p. 23.
2. Captain A.T. Mahan, *The Influence of Seapower Upon History 1660–1783* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1960), p. 271.
3. Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: The Ashfield Press, 1983), p. 15.
4. "India and China are not in Competition: Manmohan Singh." <http://www.vamban.com/news/india-and-china-are-not-in-competition-manmohan-singh/>, November 23, 2009 (accessed January 11, 2012).
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