



India's Emerging Concept of Regional Maritime Security

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ABSTRACT

There is a new conception of India's security taking shape in the Asian maritime domain. India's new evocation of security creates a seamless expanse of its interests from continental homeland transcending the coastal areas and extending to the maritime expanse of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This new approach of India seeks to secure its interests through an effective mix of soft and hard power built on a conception of security outreach that extends to the high seas. As the largest regional navy in South Asia with ever enlarging pan-Asian interests, India's attempt to find the right balance between adopting protective and assertive policies in the Asian maritime domain is gradually emerging as its fundamental strategic dilemma. India's approach to coastal security, territorial waters and even the exclusive economic zone signals a recalibration that repositions security, trade, connectivity and most of all counter-strategies to regain influence in the region.

Introduction

In the last decade, India's maximisation of interests in the maritime domain has broadened to include maritime economy, sea lines of communication, maritime investments made through various projects such as Security And Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), Project Mausam and Sagarmala project, developing historical and cultural links in the IOR and, above all, forms a renewed strategic outlook in the evolving maritime milieu of the IOR. Trade, security and connectivity have together come to form the fulcrum in India's emerging maritime security initiatives. Geographically, the expanse of India's core areas of interest in the Asian domain now covers most of Asia, extending from the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean, covering the expanse from the East African coast to the West coast of Australia. Importantly, this area includes all choke points of the IOR considered extremely strategic in an increasingly competitive regional maritime ambience. While India's primary interests still lie in its proximal waters, its secondary and tertiary interests can be described as those that venture out of its immediate coastal waters. India's attempt to build maritime bridges with East African countries and the Persian Gulf countries to its West, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries and Japan in the East and, more importantly, the US and Australia in the Indo-Asia-Pacific have outlined a gradual yet expansive encapsulation of its interests in Asian waters. Besides, India has also evinced

interests in the South China Sea and is involved in research activities in Antarctica in a gradational depiction of its extra-regional ambitions.

The Indian Navy released its latest maritime strategy, titled *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy* in October 2015. This edition is an updated version of the previous strategy document, *Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy*, which came out in 2007.¹ The new document anticipates a renewed assertion at both cognitive and pragmatic levels about India's evolving maritime security considerations within and outside the region. India's interests in the maritime domain have increasingly come to incorporate security risks in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) vis-à-vis the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and, more importantly, the choke points of the IOR. India also seeks to further strengthen its resolve regionally apropos pressing issues like maritime terrorism and piracy. On top of these concerns is perched India's coastal security, which could directly jeopardise India's homeland security, as was depicted in the 2008 Mumbai attacks. In the areas of security on the high seas and coastal security, India has been working hard but without much recognition and support from the international community. India still sits outside mega-maritime coalitions of the region such as the Combined Maritime Force (CMF) and its three ancillary forces targeting maritime terrorism, piracy and security in the IOR. India's naval reach in the northern Indian Ocean has also been limited despite its post-Cold War expansion of interests in the IOR. For instance, India has been rather purposefully kept out of the 37-nation naval series of exercises led by Pakistan, Aman. The latest version of these exercises depicted a nuanced attempt by Pakistan to upset the Indian Ocean balance of power against India through its involvement of the most important naval powers in this IOR naval show, except India.

Another major concern that has dominated the Indian maritime security paradigm is the strategic balance in the Indian Ocean. There are two dimensions to this. First is the exponentially growing nuclear arsenal of Pakistan that seeks to bring unsettling regional asymmetries in the IOR. Second is the rising power asymmetry in the IOR in relation to China. China's creeping advance in the Indian Ocean has been a pressing concern for India's security apparatus for the better part of a decade. While India has mounted a response to China's advance in the East, India's response on its western flank still requires consolidation and a more dynamic outreach to areas such as the Persian Gulf, the east African coast and the hitherto neglected southern Indian Ocean.

A holistic concept of maritime security also caters to what is referred to as the civil-maritime domain. For any country and particularly for India, the trade carried by sea and its related paraphernalia such as the merchant fleet, the shipbuilding industry and trained human resources are as important to security as any other component. For India, an import-dominant country wanting to move to being export oriented, maritime arteries, SLOCs and sea connectivity hold high significance. India's large-scale energy imports from West Asia catapult the need for safety of trade in the Indian Ocean to one of its utmost maritime priorities. India's ability and willingness to keep the IOR trade and passage safe should cater to a new and larger audience comprising its partner countries in the Asia-Pacific region that are also dependent on energy imports from the Gulf. For an able role in this regard, organisations such as the Ministry of Shipping and various port trusts should work in close coordination with the coast guard, the navy and the marine police.

As the volume of trade and ensuing security risks become more palpable in the Indian Ocean with each day, there is a parallel growth in the number of stakeholders in this region. Besides India which is a regional power, the US, Russia and now China have been integrally conceptualised as powers that wield immense influence in the IOR. India's growing relations with both Japan and the US have been assessed as the tip of the iceberg insofar as changes to Asian geopolitics are concerned. The greater the number of global players in the IOR, the greater will be India's need to churn out a sui generis security matrix in the region that would not only hold India in good stead but would also ensure its role as a champion of IOR security. The first step in achieving that would require a refurbished naval infrastructure together with unambiguous political will. In an era when trade and security go hand in hand, India's sea influence will depend on its naval strength and reach. In this regard, a stepping up of its naval capabilities in the recent past has been on the priority list for India. Even as conspicuous transformations are taking place in India's regional security infrastructure, a great deal remains to be done. Amidst these changes, it is not only important to assess how some of the initiatives taken up to bolster the regional security of India have fared but also to assess how future regional alignments will impinge on maritime security going forward. As such, it is important to assess the initiatives that have been taken vis-à-vis regional security in an effort to strengthen India's capabilities and perception at home, bolster defences through impenetrable coastal security and form a robust strategy in the region extending from its shorelines.

At Home: Counting Notable Strides

Much of the period that preceded 2008 depicted a weak state of the Indian Navy that suffered from delays, accidents, graft and poor management. Since then, the Indian Navy has placed special emphasis on its capacity building to transform itself at technological, numerical and strategic levels. In the next half-decade or so, the Navy is counting on seven stealth frigates, six diesel submarines and 30 other warships, besides more than 150 fighter jets, maritime-patrol aircraft and helicopters at an estimated cost of about US \$30 billion. Besides the numerical edge, the Navy intends to gain from the shifting balance of power in the IOR and the Indo-Pacific as a result of the expected regional realignments. From the period preceding 2008 until now, a lot has changed that accords completely new dimensions to India's conception of maritime security.

Although India's naval buildup, the most critical component of maritime security, is still a work in progress, it has made substantial strides in the past few years. The year 2013 witnessed the launch of India's first indigenous aircraft carrier, *INS Vikrant*, the keel for which was laid in 2009. *INS Vikrant*, which is scheduled to start operation sometime in 2020, is expected to be a potent force multiplier in the Indian Ocean for India. Although the growing number of nuclear and conventional submarines in the IOR and aircraft carriers' vulnerability to ballistic missiles seem to have somewhat theoretically undercut their relevance, aircraft carriers remain sui generis in their capability of power projection on high seas and strength extension through what is referred to as "distributed lethality"² – by strengthening individual components that form the carrier's overall strength. Insofar as India's aircraft carrier strength is considered, it currently has only one operational aircraft carrier, *INS Vikramaditya*, bought from Russia under a US

\$2.3-billion deal and inducted into service in November 2013. As India envisions a strengthened maritime future, it seeks to consolidate its maritime surface fleet through an effective carrier battle group (CBG) comprising at least three carriers, one each in either maritime flank of the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, while the third will serve as a contingency component with expected involvement in repairs, maintenance and monitoring.³

More recently, the Indian Navy has taken steps to fill the “critical hollowness”⁴ that India’s defense preparedness has been accused of. The navy has thwarted some of its criticism over perceived toothlessness by inducting newer technologies at a faster rate than before and avoiding the frequent accidents that dogged its recent past. Earlier this year, the only functional aircraft carrier, INS *Vikramaditya*, successfully carried out the maiden test of the newly installed Barak short-range surface-to-air missile. The Barak-8 system designed by Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO)–Israel Aerospace Industries has an interception range of more than 70 km. The delay in the development of the Barak missiles had led to the commissioning of INS *Vikramaditya* without its own defense systems.⁵

Besides the technological leap, the Navy’s need for a sound and effective infrastructure has drawn keen interest. Adm. Arun Prakash (Retd) has stated in this regard that for a powerful navy a sound industrial base is a prerequisite. A navy that is heavily reliant on imports and suffers from lack of industrial underpinnings impedes strength, regional heft and influence. Import dependence undercuts effectiveness and readiness as the navy has to wait for the foreign country/company to repair or retrofit the acquired equipment. Over-dependence on imports also undermines India’s strategic autonomy apropos decision-making while working with export countries.⁶ In the past few years, India has attempted to build its defence technology and industrial base (DTIB) through advanced production units, world class DRDO laboratories and especially through the entry of private players in the defense sector. In this regard, the Defense Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI) between India and the US has proven exemplary.

Concerns about ensuring effective maritime security remain on quite a few fronts. For much of 2016, India was without a functional aircraft carrier after INS *Vikramaditya* was held up due to maintenance and INS *Vikrant* not being expected before 2023, according to a Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India report.⁷ The CAG report criticised planning and execution in the construction of INS *Vikrant* and evinced scepticism that the navy would even be able to build a two-carrier force by 2023, let alone the planned three. These concerns have been compounded by shortage of steel and delays in other components such as diesel alternators and gearboxes, further delaying the launch of the ships. Above all, delay in commissioning of ships led to reduction in the deck-life of aircraft that are to be deployed on these ships. Furthermore, MiG29 K, the aircraft for the carrier, remains constrained by engine defects, hydraulic failures and even structural deficiencies. With INS *Vikrant* having the capacity to carry at least 12 MiG29Ks, the future looks anything but promising.

India’s subsurface maritime strength is also increasing, but at a slow rate. In 2012, the nuclear-powered attack submarine INS *Chakra* was formally inducted in the Indian Navy on a 10-year lease at the cost of US \$1 billion. INS *Chakra* has the ability to stay underwater for days at a time, and boasts a strong weapons delivery platform with its 300-km Klub-S land-attack cruise missiles and advanced torpedoes. Its ability to travel silently came

to light when it silently traversed the South China Sea on its way from Russia to be inducted in the Indian Navy.⁸ In August 2013, the nuclear reactor of India's first indigenously built nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN), *INS Arihant*, went critical, paving the way for its sea trials and eventually its commissioning. In August 2016, *INS Arihant* was commissioned into the Indian Navy and has been fully operational since then. It packs a great punch with its ability to carry at least 12 K-15 missiles with multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles, which could mean as many as 96 warheads.⁹ Importantly, the commissioning of India's first SSBN has elevated India's nuclear deterrence to a new high with India becoming only the sixth country to attain "nuclear triad", the ability to launch nuclear weapons from land, water and air. This achievement bids to change the strategic balance of the Indian Ocean.

Territorial Waters: Building Robust Defences

Coastal security has often been seen as the maritime gateway to homeland security. In the aftermath of the Mumbai terror attacks in 2008, in which terrorists sneaked through India's West coast, the coastal security of India has demanded recalibration. In 2009, India completely overhauled its coastal security network by placing the entire responsibility for coastal security with the Navy, primarily with the intension of thwarting any further attacks like the 2008 Mumbai attacks, and more importantly to put in place a network where coordination between multiple security agencies is a thing of the past. Furthermore, as a remedial measure, a new coastal command entrusted with coastal security and headed by the Coast Guard Chief was established.¹⁰ In the post-Mumbai terror attacks phase there has been much better coordination between the Indian Navy, Indian Coast Guard and Marine Police. Coastal surveillance has improved significantly through the installations of automatic identification system (AIS) receivers and radars along the coast. More importantly, maritime domain awareness has gained a new emphasis in India's security. The former Defence Minister inaugurated the National Command Control Communication and Intelligence Network (NC3I) in 2014.¹¹ Recently, the Union Home Ministry started the implementation of phase two of the comprehensive Coastal Security Scheme (CSS) to strengthen security infrastructure in coastal states. The scheme mandates operationalisation of 183 coastal police stations (CPSs) besides regular coastal security review and a significant increase in the number of vehicles and boats used in coastal surveillance.¹²

An important aspect of coastal security has to do with the maintenance and upkeep of ports and harbours, to keep them ready to meet any kind of challenge during operations, wartime or general functioning. India's 13 major and 176 minor ports do not portray an image of satisfaction apropos their upkeep and functioning. Efficient port management, expanding port capacity and prevention of external threats remain among the top priorities of the new maritime agenda of India. However, India's vast coastline, extending over 10 states and union territories and more than thousand islands, makes coastal security a challenging job. To meet this challenge, the present government is discussing a proposal to create a new force to guard maritime boundaries, the Coastal Border Police Force (CBPF). The CBPF is expected to assist the Indian Coast Guard with managing the littorals. However, its jurisdiction is estimated to extend beyond the territorial waters extending into the exclusive economic zone.¹³

Venturing out of the coastal zone territorial waters, the territorial waters pose another level of challenge to India's maritime security, where safety to trade has to be guaranteed

simultaneously with ensuring safe passage and cutting off any non-traditional threats such as piracy and maritime terrorism. Traditionally, India has failed to strike a balance between its eastward and westward approaches in the Indian Ocean on either side of its peninsula. In the recent past, however, India has involved itself in ensuring security on the high seas on either side. Its involvement in thwarting piracy bids near the Gulf of Aden and East African coast has attracted as much attention as its Passage Exercise (PASSEX) exercises to the east with countries like Indonesia. To some extent, this optimism has been corroborated by India's emerging symmetric focus between the India–Africa Summit and the India–Pacific Island Cooperation.

Amidst increasing dependence of global trade on maritime routes, the Asian maritime expanse has carved its own place. The period following 2014 has strategically coincided with an exponential rise in global merchandise trade being carried through the oceans of the world, to which the Indian Ocean is one of the largest contributors. The current Indian dispensation has emphasised the aspect of maritime security with particular interest in maritime security and seaborne piracy within the overarching framework of mutual respect and preservation of freedom of navigation. These concerns remain central to India's maritime security outlook.

Despite a drop in instances of piracy since 2008, when it had peaked, Somali pirates remain a persistent threat to the safety and security of vessels in the western Indian Ocean. India's gradual expansion of its security ambit has led to quite a few successful attempts at thwarting piracy bids in the recent past. India's deployment of naval ships in the piracy-infested Gulf of Aden has provided security to many countries that use its waterways for trade and energy shipments. Among many successful endeavours¹⁴ by the Indian Navy, some of the notable ones in recent history have been these: (1) India's naval warship *INS Sukanya* thwarted piracy attempts by Somali pirates in Gulf of Aden in 2011. This effort was conspicuous because the Indian Navy was successful in thwarting three piracy attempts in four consecutive days in the Gulf of Aden, in which eight armed Somali pirates were neutralised. (2) In May 2017, *INS Sharda* became the centre of discussion with an act of bravado. When it received a distress call from *MV Lord Mountbatten*, a Liberian carrier, which alerted them about an attempted attack by armed pirates off the Yemeni coast, *INS Sharada* successfully chased the suspects away and captured a huge cache of ammunitions. *INS Sharda* had been involved in conducting counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since April 6, 2017.¹⁵ And, finally, (3) in the most recent instance, the Indian Navy's *INS Trishul*, a stealth frigate, thwarted a piracy attempt on the Indian-flagged cargo ship *MV Jag Amar* in the Gulf of Aden in October 2017. In the successful operation, an AK-47 and one magazine with 27 rounds were recovered from the 12 suspected pirates, together with other equipment such as grapnel and ladders. These and many similar steps by the Indian Navy show that it is gradually emerging as a force that genuinely believes in maintaining peace and stability in the larger IOR and, unlike in the past, is ready to expand its ambit of responsibility in the region.

India's New Maritime World View: The Strategic Landscape

World views of nations hold undeniable significance when countries try to enhance their sea power. This was most notably depicted by the naval thinker Alfred Thayer Mahan, whose thoughts were critical in furthering American interests abroad. In the recent

past, India's maritime activities have been suggestive of an expanding regional strategic ambit. India's increasing activities to ensure safety of passage and trade near the Gulf of Aden, the East African coast and the Andaman Sea, along with its partnership with Japan and Australia in the east, are indicative of its attempt to balance power relations on either side of its peninsular jut into the Indian Ocean. India's revised maritime strategy brought out in 2015 incorporates the Red Sea, the Gulf of Oman and the Gulf of Aden along with their littoral regions; the Southwest Indian Ocean, including IOR island nations therein; and East Coast of Africa littoral regions as the areas of its "primary interest". Even its "secondary areas" have expanded to include the "Southeast Indian Ocean, including sea routes to the Pacific Ocean and littoral regions in the vicinity, the Mediterranean Sea, the West Coast of Africa, and their littoral regions".¹⁶

Furthermore, its emerging partnership with the United States in the IOR and the Indo-Pacific is reflective of India's desire to play a regional maritime role while still ensuring a maritime balance in the region. India's debunking of China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative through non-participation and a "sovereignty violation" objection has put its Asian maritime future at crossroads with that of China. India does not approve of either the OBOR's land component (Economic Silk Road Belt) or its maritime leg (Maritime Silk Road). Probably for the first time, India's maritime worldview is starkly in contrast with that of China. These emerging differences do not portend a bright future for Asian marine geopolitics, and put the waters now increasingly referred to as the Indo-Asia-Pacific¹⁷ right in the heart of potential conflict. However, in the process, these differences are churning up a new type of power relations in Asia which upend Cold War equations between nations. Many of the consequences of these new power alignments are expected to play out in the Asian waters, underscoring the domain's undiminishing significance in the foreseeable future for India.

As China persistently tries to venture westward into the waters of the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific, India seems to have developed a maritime world view that does not resist Chinese advances outright, but counters them through its own vision which relies on a coherent and expanding maritime strategy geared towards furthering its interests eastward. India's emerging interests in the South China Sea (SCS) were never clearer or louder. India's partnership with Vietnam, which started in October 2011, to expand and promote oil exploration in the SCS, and the consequent Chinese warnings were a prelude to the growing divergence between the two sides. Former Indian Navy Chief Admiral D.K. Joshi has stated¹⁸ in the past vis-a-vis the SCS that "we [the Indian Navy] will be required to be there and we are prepared for that". India's strengthening of its Tri-Services Andaman and Nicobar Command and enhanced focus in the Andaman Sea are being seen as its springboard to the SCS. Besides, the US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and the IOR, signed between India and the US in January 2015, officially voiced India's concerns regarding freedom of navigation in and overflight of the SCS. This was followed by Prime Minister Modi's veiled reference to the SCS dispute when he said countries must "respect and ensure freedom of navigation and cooperate not compete" while addressing the valedictory function of International Fleet Review.¹⁹ These, however, are not the only means India seems to have adopted in advancing its own maritime interests while resisting those of China. Two other examples of India's regional involvement that have been viewed through an anti-China prism are its involvement in the transregional, multimodal connectivity project International North South Transport

Corridor (INSTC) and the Indo–Japanese project Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). The INSTC seeks to connect Mumbai port in the south to Moscow in the north through a multimodal land–water connectivity corridor passing through the western Indian Ocean, Iran, Afghanistan, and parts of Central Asia on to Eurasia. Through INSTC, India intends to fill its traditional strategic vacuum in the northern Indian Ocean. The INSTC's proximity to the China–Pakistan-run-critical Gwadar port is being perceived as a dent in the regional free run that the two countries would have otherwise. On the other hand, the growing influence of China in the Indo-Pacific has been assessed as a direct reason for the birth of AAGC.²⁰

In a rare depiction of contrarian world views, both China and India have forged ahead with their own methods of advancing their national interests. As both the Asian giants are surrounded by a vast expanse of water, their maritime strategies remain central to advancing such interests.

India's partnership in the IOR and the Indo-Pacific with the US has portrayed maritime security in a new light, where coastal security, safety of cargo, prevention of non-conventional threats like piracy and maritime terrorism and, above all, balance of power are all tied in a seamless continuum. India and the US have committed to mutual sharing of data on terrorism, in turn strengthening homeland security in both countries. Effective homeland security for India forms an indispensable component of not just port and coastal security but of the relentless threat inbound from the seas, particularly in a country whose shorelines run well over 7500 km. In the phase that has followed the signing of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA),²¹ the mutuality in India–US cooperation in the areas of repair, refueling, personnel training and interaction are set to increase. LEMOA will facilitate frequent visit of US ships from the US Fifth and Seventh Fleets. Two other important agreements between India and the US which are in the pipeline, the Communication Interoperability and Security Memorandum Agreement (CISMOA) and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), promise to take stealth cooperation, war informatics and data sharing during peace and war times to a new level. Indian companies such as Reliance and Tata have been working in tandem with their US counterparts to further cooperate in ship building and repair and aircraft assemblage. These initiatives will not only boost India's power projection in the region and beyond but will also signal India's arrival on the international scene to take larger responsibilities in the region. Adm. Harry Harris, former chief of the Pacific Command, has stated²² that India and the US are sharing data regarding submarine presence and movement in the Indian Ocean. Although this confession pitted India–US cooperation in the IOR against Chinese interests, India has done well to steer clear of any anti-China imperatives in the region. However, India's strategic discomfort with China's creeping presence and continued dominance in the IOR cannot remain detached from its security concerns in the region. To that extent, analogies drawing on antagonism between India and China will be commonplace in the future and both countries should learn to deal with them maturely.

Besides a grand strategy that is being nurtured by India to ensure a safe maritime future, issues such as climate change, rising sea level, and the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (which address a host of issues ranging from marine pollution to protection of marine and coastal ecosystems, issues of ocean acidification, illegal and over fishing) have now become critical in India's maritime outlook. India under Prime Minister Modi has outlined its vision most succinctly through its SAGAR vision, which stands

for Security and Growth for All in the Region, both in essence and in practice. With its recent initiatives in the IOR, India seeks to build a security network with its peninsula as a fulcrum in the Indian Ocean and to form a web of connectivity that links its eastward outlook including most ASEAN countries, countries of the East Asia Summit and the Far East to that with countries in the Gulf and the East African coast. Significant progress in this balanced maritime regional outlook has been achieved through India's involvement in multilateral fora like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). However, much remains to be done in terms of consolidation of strength and integration of response to evolving challenges in the maritime domain for India.

Notes

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