

BOOK REVIEW

India's ocean: The story of India's bid for regional leadership, David Brewster,
New York, Routledge, 2014, 224 pp., Rs. 8195, ISBN 978-0-415-52059-1

The Indian Ocean, as a geostrategic space where various aspects of international politics unfold, is gaining prominence in current strategic discourse. This is due to the increasing assertiveness of China which interplays with the growing aspirations of India under the overarching strategic presence of the United States. The title of the book is suggestive of India's potential and the opportunity to emerge as a dominant regional leader. Brewster examines whether India has the ideological and material resources to become a leading power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in the light of its strategic aspirations and security relationships with countries in the region. The narrative unfolds around several binaries of power and competition – regional versus global, inward versus outward focus, landward versus seaward orientation, material capabilities versus aspirations and leadership versus hegemony.

India is considered a “natural centre of gravity” (p. 2) in the IOR owing to its geostrategic location as a peninsula, facilitating its role as a responsible and legitimate stakeholder for maintaining balance and security. The narrative runs along how this geographical fact presents itself as one of the dominant reasons for India's bid for regional leadership. While it has been substantiated that control over the Indian Ocean is deemed essential to guard against the influence of hostile powers and acts as a building block for its aspirations to become a global power, it is necessary to test these claims in the background of larger politico-strategic goals of the country.

The focus of Brewster's enquiry is whether, with increasing military and economic capabilities, India would seek to create an extended sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean. The ambivalence expressed about the role of the US as a stabilising force and the evolving strategic attitude towards China proves that India is striving to achieve the status of a dominant regional power. Brewster concedes the generally accepted fact that India's aspirations to be a dominant power in the Indian Ocean may come to fruition in the coming decades, but this goal is mediated by several factors. The material capabilities and aspirations required for India's rise into a dominant regional force are analysed in the book along with examining the constraints in achieving the goal.

The author has thrown ample light onto the historic centrality of India in the IOR by recounting how India became the focal point from which much of Britain's Indian Ocean Empire was administered. Examined against the backdrop of this broad canvas, and given the geographical peculiarities, dominant power ambitions of India can play out well in the geographical expanse of the Indian Ocean. Notwithstanding the historic necessity, geostrategic pressures and political outlook of the Indian subcontinent to gravitate into the Indian Ocean, there are severe domestic constraints and external competitive dynamics that limit India's ambitions. According to the author, Indian strategic culture, driven by strong “morals”, “benign” status and “principled leadership”, makes India “status-inconsistent” (p. 203) which is a major impediment to its rise into a dominant power.

India's strategic tradition is founded on an interplay of factors that are derived out of an imperial past followed by the Nehruvian tradition of “strategic restraint”, the Indian Monroe Doctrine (Indira Doctrine), which considered India a guarantor of regional security, the Gujral doctrine which called for a shift from the “compellence strategy” of the Indira

Doctrine, emphasising India's role as a benign security provider, and gradually culminating in the existing idea of strategic autonomy. The Monroe doctrine, to the author, is assertive of Indian hegemonic intents and the Gujral Doctrine "signaled a move away from the 'hard' version of the Monroe Doctrine towards a greater emphasis on regional cooperation and respect for sovereignty" (p. 29).

The book is structured to render an account of India's engagement with countries in the IOR. India's strategic role in the subregions of the Indian Ocean and its security relationships are examined through various chapters. India exhibits its role as a "security manager" to provide stability to its smaller neighbours, which restrains them from forming security partnerships with competitive middle powers. The relationship with Sri Lanka and Maldives demonstrates how these small island states co-exist under the strategic influence of India, which is a predominant power in South Asia.

In the Southwest Indian Ocean, India exhibits the potential to play a leading role as a maritime security provider by combating piracy, providing patrols and training security forces, undertaking coastal surveillance, and having the capability for effective control of Mozambique Channel. India's role as a benign security guarantor to small island states such as Mauritius and Seychelles in the Southwest Indian Ocean is often mediated by France which leads to a "low-level competition" (p. 80) between the two states for strategic influence in the region. Cooperative engagement with France and considering it a key security partner in the region is, therefore, imperative to elicit a greater security role for India in the Mozambique Channel.

India's interest in East and Southern Africa is economic in nature. This region, though not primary in India's strategic calculus, is of growing concern owing to rising Chinese presence. Assuming the role of a maritime security provider in the region also enhances India's global status. Bound by a common history of colonialism, anti-colonial struggles, decolonisation and non-aligned movement, South Africa emerges as a potential regional competitor to India. However, the author explores the possibility of security cooperation with South Africa and its potential to emerge as a "key partner" (p. 85) for military cooperation with India in zones of competing influence.

In the Persian Gulf, India's strategic interests are driven by energy security. India's prospects to be a security provider and a hegemon in the region are restricted by Pakistan's strategic partnership with states in the Persian Gulf. Therefore, diluting Pakistan's influence constitutes one of the prime security agendas in the region, as a failure to do so may undermine India's efforts to be a regional leader in the Indian Ocean and may tilt the balance of power against India.

While the key to combating Pakistan's strategic influx into the Northwest Indian Ocean lies with controlling the Persian Gulf, control of the Northeast Indian Ocean is necessary to counter the strategic forays of China into the region. Several powers such as Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand may emerge as key partners for India in its intent to exert its influence in the region. This increasing strategic role of India undergoes a shift in the southern quadrant of the Indian Ocean where the possibility of a security relationship between India and Australia is constrained by diverging strategic concerns of the two states. India advocates "strategic autonomy", and Australia stands for strategic "collaboration" (p. 158).

The author points out that the relationships in the Indian Ocean are only a subset of broader strategic relationships, governed by a historical background and shaped constantly by current political happenings. Of the many ways that India can grow as a dominant power in the Indian Ocean, the book identifies the dual concepts of leadership and hegemony, through coercion and consensus with weaker states.

Ample references are made in the narrative to India's role as an essential strategic partner to the US in countering the growing influence of China. The Indo-US relations have ranged from

a “restrained rivalry” (p. 167) during the Cold War period to “strategic alignment” in the post-Cold War period. As India lacks superpower and hegemonic ambitions in the Indian Ocean, it allowed the US to provide maritime security in the region. This led to India’s emergence as a trustworthy ally and a capable military and economic partner of the US since the 1980s. However, the presence of the US as a stabilising power in the region is undergoing a gradual transformation and there are emerging claims of strategic autonomy posited against “pragmatic recognition” (p. 24) of the need to cooperate with the US in the Indian Ocean.

The “special role” and “special status” enjoyed by India in the IOR is not entirely imagined as its predominance enables it to “transcend South Asia and project power and influence into the Indian Ocean and beyond” (p. 44). However, a rise to regional leadership entirely rests on India’s capability to provide maritime security. India currently embarks on maintaining flexible bilateral relations, assuming different roles as it extends its sphere of influence. It plays the role of a hegemon to willing subordinates (in South Asia, the Southwest Indian Ocean and East Africa), explores its scope for cooperative security partnership with powerful nations (the US, China, France), and acts as a vague and benign guarantor of relations to middle powers in the Indian Ocean Region (South Africa, Indonesia, Australia).

As suggested in the title, the author examines India’s bid for regional leadership and concludes that while it may be possible for India to create a sphere of influence in small island states and South Asia, in other regions it may only assume a regional role to enhance its global status through security relationships. The rise to regional leadership, thus, rests on the capability to provide maritime security, but in the exhaustive account of relations that India maintains with the states around the IOR in the foreground, the changing role of India as a security provider, and its growing influence in the region, remains in the background of this book. Furthermore, given its aspirations and material capabilities, the indication that India is attempting regional dominance is inconsistent when examined against the background of India’s own strategic thinking. India has officially rejected territorial ambitions or any aspirations towards regional hegemony, and the claim that its efforts are channelled towards consolidating a dominant power status in the Indian Ocean, under such stark moral exceptionalism exhibited by India, is riddled with an inherent paradox.

India aims at a “cooperative, non-confrontational” (p. 37) expansion of its interests in the maritime realm. As the existing mechanism for ensuring security and good order at sea consists of a set of players and not one dominant power, the most viable option is to co-exist and provide security through building a network of capable partners. In an era where open security arrangements and multipolarity emerge as driving factors to achieving maritime security, the account of India’s bid for regional leadership emerges as a fact-finding endeavour to understand the plausible causes and effects of dominance over a vast, unbound oceanic space by one country.

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