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India's strategic vision: Imprints of K.M. Panikkar's arc

Gitanjali Sinha Roy

East Asian Studies Department, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

K.M. Panikkar's understanding of India's strategic vision for the Indian Ocean highlighted the strategic dots of Socotra and Indonesia, which were a part of a larger game plan of a "strategic arc". His idea of Socotra and Indonesia was based on the linkage between the two strategic sea lanes of communication. In the present context, Panikkar's strategic arc has been readopted in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's new vision, which aims to pave the way for India to engage in friendly ports so as to create a network of strategic ports for defence and civilian purposes. This article endeavours to understand Panikkar's "strategic arc", traced from the east coast of Africa to the island of Sumatra. Further, it analyses how Panikkar's strategic arc has been realigned and reinvigorated in the present scenario from Oman to the islands of Indonesia, which helps in furthering India's economic interests as well as protect its strategic well-being. The article concludes by offering a set of policy recommendations based on Panikkar's strategic arc and how these could be inculcated within the larger framework on India's security and maritime policy.

K.M. Panikkar's strategic arc

In his book *India and the Indian Ocean*, K.M. Panikkar (popularly known as Sardar Panikkar) opined that the "Indian Ocean washes the entire Africa east coast up to Somaliland, the South coast of Arabic, the Southern shores of Iran and Baluchistan, the peninsula of India, the western shores of Burma, the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra." He also stated that "the eastern and western entrances are guarded by two arrows straits, the Bab el Mandeb and the Straits of Malacca both of which can be easily controlled".[1] In this concept, from the vantage point of India and standing at Ujjain which was earlier the Asian meridian, one can observe an arc-like formation from the east coast of Africa to the island of Sumatra. It is this strategic arc which Sardar Panikkar had proposed through the two strategic dots of Socotra (Yemen) and Indonesia. In the present context, the strategic arc proposed by him should be realigned – starting from Oman (replacing Socotra) to the islands of Indonesia. Furthermore, this strategic arc must be revived in order to increase navigational communication and exchange.

Panikkar pointed out that the route from Bab-el-Mandeb is the way forward towards the Red Sea, which becomes an inland sea controlled by land on both sides. In the context

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CONTACT Gitanjali Sinha Roy ✉ gitanjaliclaws@gmail.com 📧 East Asian Studies Department, University of Delhi, Delhi 110007, India

of the Strait of Malacca, he stated that it opens up into the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean and the lands on either side become narrow, making it rather easy to control egress and ingress. Also, the control of key islands along sea routes has been a quintessential aspect of strategy of sea powers. The history of naval warfare is replete with instances of contestation over key island features. For instance, Britain and France had fought a rather prolonged naval battle for control of islands in the Indian Ocean in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the strategic relevance of islands was further accentuated during the Second World War. In the present context too, these islands have the same strategic and economic value, and their being a part of the strategic arc would only be possible with numerous strategic ports in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Sardar Panikkar was the first person in India to have emphasised on the strategic significance of the islands in the Indian Ocean. The submarine ridges end up forming a large number of islands in the ocean, leading to the formation of three main chains of islands along the longitudinal side of direction, that is, North to South, which can be divided into the western, central and eastern groups of islands. The north-western group of islands are Masirah, Socrata and Kuria-Muria. The central-western group of islands, forming a rough circle, includes Madagascar, Diego-Suarez, Comoros, Zanzibar, Amirante, Seychelles, Agalega, St. Brandou group, Mauritius and Sri Lanka. The eastern group of islands, of convex shape, consists of Myanmar, Sumatra, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the Indonesian islands.[2]

Panikkar opined:

> While to other countries, the Indian Ocean is only one of the important oceanic areas, to India it is a vital sea. Her lifelines are concentrated in that area, her freedom is dependent on the freedom of that water surface. No industrial development, no commercial growth, no stable political structure is possible for her unless her shores are protected … .[3]

He wished to create a "steel ring" in the Indian Ocean with situatable "air and naval bases in Singapore, Mauritius, Yemen (Socotra) and Sri Lanka".[4] Currently, India has also been engaging in the same through collaborating and cooperating engagements, such as the "Act East Policy to Act Indo-Pacific"[5] and "Neighbourhood First Policy", that cover a multiple number of neighbouring countries. This is expected to help transform India's engagements into stronger relations, emphasising on economic and security cooperation.[6]

Panikkar further observed that merchant marines were essential in naval power as both their skills and the vessels could be used in war time. He wanted independent India to develop as a naval power:

> India's security lies on the Indian Ocean: that without a well-considered and effective Naval policy, India's position in the world will be weak, dependent on others and her freedom at the mercy of any country capable of controlling the Indian Ocean. India's future therefore is closely bound with the strength she is able to develop gradually as a Naval power.[7]

This is apt in the present context too as the Indian Ocean is facing the heat of Chinese aggressiveness, and, in order to ensure a "free and open Indo-Pacific", India could well be a leader in helping other countries build themselves as strong naval powers.[8]

Panikkar discovered that large Hindu kingdoms and empires had flourished in Champa (Siam), Cambodia, Java, Sumatra and the other areas of Indonesia. He

wanted to revitalise these paths of islands as they were important for his maritime chain of islands and argued:

> … the book, *India and the Indian Ocean* … was meant to document our naval tradition reaching back to Vedic times. Western historians used to tell us that naval power originated in the West and we never had any prowess at sea. We came to accept this story. I had no difficulty in showing that this was incorrect and that unless there had been a strong seafaring tradition in India, Hindu culture could not have reached places as distant as the Indonesian archipelago.[9]

The reason Panikkar drew out references from India's historical past was to showcase India's strong trade and maritime relations with neighbouring countries through the Bay of Bengal, which had emerged as the centre of great maritime activity and hub of trade and shipping. Though the historical awareness about India's cultural and economic linkages with Southeast Asia through maritime routes predates *India and Indian Ocean*, Panikkar essentially fashioned a grand narrative of India's maritime history to redirect the continental gaze of India's strategic elites towards the Indian Ocean. He also indicated that the Andhra dynasty could have colonised Java, Sumatra and the other islands of the Pacific as several images and coins have been found.

In the present context, Panikkar's thought process can be seen in "Project Mausam", which was launched by India in 2014 to examine the processes and phenomena linking the Indian Ocean littoral and the coastal centres to their hinterlands. One of the aims of the project was to share the knowledge and manipulation of monsoon winds across the Indian Ocean, which would further help in the sharing of knowledge systems, traditions, technologies and ideas along the various maritime routes. It was anticipated that it would also help countries of the Indian Ocean to reconnect and re-establish communication, thereby enhancing the understanding of not just cultural values but also national cultures in their respective regional maritime milieus.[10]

According to Panikkar, there was regular maritime traffic by the peninsular Hindu kingdoms in the South China Sea. He also spoke about the Mauryan Empire (fourth century BCE) and highlighted the commercial colonisation and cultural and religious exchanges between India's east coast and Southeast Asia. Panikkar opined that the ancient Hindu kingdom, "Suvarnabhumi" (Land of Gold), was known for its architecture, religion and culture. The Hindu kingdoms had the skill to construct sturdy ocean-going ships and used the magnetic compass (*matsya yantra*) for navigation.[11] Between the fifth and tenth centuries AD, kingdoms of Vijayanagaram and Kalinga had established rule in Malaya, Sumatra and West Java. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands served as the central point of trade between these kingdoms and the Indian Peninsula, and, at times, China was also a part of this trade network.[12] Panikkar certainly re-emphasised Mahanian logic about the strategic relevance of sea power for protection of trade, though he did not focus adequately on maritime commerce development.

While Panikkar highlighted the three maritime chains of islands – and through these chains, he sowed the seeds for India's maritime strategy – he also spoke of how the Indian Ocean was the hub of all colonial powers, like the British, the Dutch,[13] the Portuguese and the French. He stressed that India, under British rule, was rather late in understanding and grasping its maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean. He felt that the establishment of the Royal Indian Navy (RIN) during the inter-war period was largely symbolic since

there was no challenge to British naval superiority in the Indian Ocean. The RIN was not a fighting force but merely a coastal defence force. In fact, he has quoted at length Admiral Fitzherbert, KCIE, CB, CMG of RIN, regarding challenges faced by the fledgling naval force and its glorious accomplishments.

Panikkar's aim was to trace the influence of the Indian Ocean on the shaping of Indian history and to discuss the vital importance of oceanic control to the future of India. He was essentially challenging conventional wisdom about India's strategic vulnerability through land frontiers. He argued that India had never lost her independence till she lost the command of the sea in the first decade of the sixteenth century. In his view, India's destiny has been determined not on the land frontiers, but on the oceanic expanse. In the present context too, one can see how India is working on building its maritime security and strategy. The Indian Navy's publication, *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, states that maritime security is a vital part of national and international engagement; and, in particular, it emphasises the importance of the IOR for India.[14]

Panikkar's approach towards control in the Indian Ocean by creating a steel ring certainly has strategic relevance even today. However, considering this approach as a cornerstone of India's maritime cooperation poses some doctrinal difficulty. India's contemporary strategic approach considers the ocean space as "free and open" and naval power as a tool for building bridges, as evident in the 2016 International Fleet Review (IFR) theme, "United through Oceans", and in humanitarian task during COVID time, "Samudra Setu". Panikkar has also conveyed that if India wants to expand as a maritime power, it must analyse various types of seamless and holistic approaches towards maritime security, keeping in mind both the freedom to use the seas and India's national interests. Thus, for India, not only is the Indian Ocean vital, its security is equally essential.

India's national interests are dependent on the IOR, mainly in terms of safety and security of seaborne trade and energy routes, along with maintaining national, regional and international economic interests. Therefore, there is a need for cooperation and coordination between the navies of different countries, including enhanced training and hydrographic cooperation with friendly maritime forces, so as to counter the multiple threats at sea. India's maritime security and strategy also work in the domain of regional cooperative approaches. It aims at enhancing the maritime security of IOR, along with creating a net security realm which would also work on operational interactions, such as Milan and Malabar.[15] Thus, there needs to be a greater emphasis on the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and also on the Indian Ocean Regional Association.

In the present context, the need for a maritime chain of islands is indeed essential. Panikkar rightly stated:

> The elimination of Japan from the ranks of naval powers will in no way solve the problem, for there is every reason to think that a victorious China will embark on a naval career. With her bases extending as far south as Hainan, China is placed in even a more advantageous position than Japan.[16]

Today, China has become a belligerent and aggressive maritime power. The way China has woven its "string of pearls theory" around the subcontinent is a wake-up call for

India. Similarly, China has been expanding its "Belt and Road Initiative", along with investing extensively in ports and other infrastructural facilities around the world so as to become a superior naval power. Panikkar's book highlighted the Chinese intention of embarking on building a large-scale navy. Currently, this is evident as the Chinese naval expansion is at an all-time high, posing a security threat to India and other countries.

In 2015, Admiral Sureesh Mehta, then Chief of the Naval Staff (CNS), opined that the first decade of the twenty-first century had seen considerable turbulence and sweeping changes in the IOR.[17] Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean started with their investment in the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, where they set up a port close to the East–West shipping route and aimed at building naval as well as airspace stations.[18] Several submarines and underwater surveillance were detected in the Colombo Port.[19] After this, China carried out a series of projects involving the development of ports and facilities in India's neighbouring countries, like Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar,[20] and also worked on strengthening relations with Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles. Also, China recently deployed its fleet of underwater drones, the *Sea Wing* (Haiyi) glider, in the Indian Ocean, mainly for naval intelligence purposes.[21] In an email interview to *HuffPost*, Admiral Arun Prakash (Retd), former CNS, opined: "China's actions in the South China Sea are also a cause of concern for India because a substantial proportion of its seaborne trade and energy traffic transits through these waters."[22]

Panikkar also mentioned in his book that "major European powers had acquired interests in the Indian Ocean area as countries like France, Germany and Italy had territories on the African coast and strategic power hubs like Diego Suarez, Djibouti, Massawa, and Mogadaccio had gained prominence".[23] Today, China, France, the United States (US) and Japan have bases in Djibouti, and this strategic point could well be a major point of conflict in the near future. Further, Sardar Panikkar had stated that "there will be the growth of two powerful naval powers in the Pacific which would revolutionarise the Indian Ocean in the context of naval supremacy".[24] This aspect is also visible in the current scenario as the US is already a strong naval power in the Pacific while China has emerged as one of the strongest naval powers in East Asia in the recent times, with capacity to project power into the Pacific.

Japan too could be termed a revivalist naval power as it is striving to become a full-fledged maritime power. Here, it is important to remember that Panikkar had stated that "Japan would again become a considerable naval power within a reasonable time"[25] – a fact reflected in Japan's pioneering of the strategy of "free and open Indo-Pacific". In addition, Panikkar had said that "Japan would like to acquire bases at Malacca and Andaman".[26] In the present context, Japan has been involved in the development of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands where India and Japan have agreed to develop smart islands and also agreed on several infrastructural projects along with installing sound surveillance sensor/system (SOSUS) to improve underwater domain awareness.[27] These efforts have been made to keep a close eye on Chinese aggressiveness in the IOR. Japan has also strengthened its relations with Indonesia and Vietnam, which could pave the way for trilateral cooperation between Japan, Vietnam and Indonesia.

Panikkar suggested that American naval strategists fully realised the importance of the islands in Southeast Asia and if the US acquired a base – say, in Papua – her entry into the Indian Ocean would be free and unmolested. He was reflecting on the possibility of

ingress of the US in the Indian Ocean, which could take place through the Malacca Strait or the Lombok Strait. In his view, through control over the Philippines, the US could dominate Malacca, and a base in Papua would permit transit through Lombok. He did not imply that the US would keep the Indian Ocean free and unmolested. On the contrary, Panikkar was concerned with the US design to dominate the Indian Ocean.[28] It needs to be understood that Panikkar said this in order to maintain India's security and superiority in the Indian Ocean. Correspondingly, he felt that through naval and air operations, American dominance must be maintained in these small island nations so as to protect them from China. He also suggested that the strategic importance of the South China Sea would grow.

Sardar Panikkar was a true maritime visionary as he not only outlined India's maritime history and its fault lines but also gave solutions as to how India must work to protect the Indian Ocean by aiming for a maritime chain of islands which would interlink the network of ports in these places. It is important to understand that Panikkar's conception of the strategic arc was situated in a particular geopolitical context of the time; in the present scenario, this arc needs to be seen from Djibouti to Papua. This would cover the overall domain of the Indo-Pacific and would be useful in tackling Chinese maritime aggression as well as work towards safeguarding the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea. It is also important to understand that all the countries who have aligned with the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy are not a part of the Quad – comprising four exclusive powers, namely, the US, India, Australia and Japan – and so, there is a need to expand the group in order to strengthen the strategic arc suggested by Panikkar.

Reinvigorating Panikkar's arc to maritime chain: Policy recommendations

In terms of the strategic arc, there is a need to look at the ways in which Panikkar's ideas can be inculcated within the larger framework on India's security and maritime policy.

Panikkar suggested that there was a need to form strategic islands in the Indian Ocean. This can only be achieved if a maritime chain of islands is created. India can take the initiative of working with other foreign powers, such as the US, Japan, France, Indonesia and Vietnam. Therefore, Washington, Paris and Tokyo could work together in Djibouti, which is home to their bases, and extend their way to the western coast of India, where Kochi could be developed as an international port, along with logistical support, and connect it to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which could be further extended to Sabang in Indonesia and finally, connected to Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay. It is important to understand that except for Kochi and Sabang, most of the ports have been developed as bases either due to historical reasons or to the present situation, and this can be a major game changer in the IOR. India has already facilitated the Sagarmala port development project, which would help address the infrastructural and operational challenges, along with connectivity issues. Once all these ports are developed, it would help India not only nationally but also regionally and globally.

With regard to the Arabian Sea, India needs to work upon building its western coastline to counter both Pakistan and China's increased activities in this region, especially through the Chabahar and Gwadar Ports. Also, recently, Pakistan is believed to have handed over two islands of Sindh to China, enhancing the possibility of the formation of a second string of pearls strategy by China. Thus, China could be building a maritime

chain from Gwadar Port to Bundal and Buddo islands (Pakistan) to Maldives and Djibouti. In order to tackle this, India would need to build itself a Red Dot Network. The Red Dot Network would include a line of ports on the western coastline of India, and involve reviving and interconnecting the old ports, from Kandla–Okha–Mumbai–Nhava Sheva–Mormugao–New Mangalore–Vizhinjam–Kochi to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.[29] By doing this, the traditional routes can be revived and put to use for trade and commerce, along with building up a strong western coastline. They can also have defence attachments in order to take care of any unforeseen situation.

In recent times, the Government of India has taken several steps to improve the ports, including modernisation of existing ports and setting up of new ports, so as to reduce bottlenecks, increase the capacity of existing ports, and build new greenfield ports. Creating domestic interconnectivity of ports would help in mobilising multi-modal logistics solutions, like domestic waterways which have both coastal shipping and inland water transport, and that would be both time saving and cost-effective. Port-based industrial clusters and coastal economic zones would not only reduce logistical costs but also work on coastal community development through sustainable development. They would also provide skill development and livelihood opportunities, and help in the development of fisheries and tourism.

There could be the possibility of other maritime chains of islands and this would be completely in sync with Panikkar's thought process. A maritime chain hub is possible between Guam, Okinawa (Japan), Cam Ranh Bay and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands[30] – which will be a maritime chain hub with an American presence. It would also protect the Strait of Malacca and parts of the South China Sea. Japan too could take the initiative to create a maritime chain of islands from Okinawa to Cam Ranh Bay to Sabang in the South China Sea region. In this, Japan must assist Vietnam and Indonesia; and eventually, India can be brought in as a part of this maritime chain of islands. Further, there could be a formation of a South China Sea maritime chain of islands, which would take place between Japan, Vietnam, the US, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia and Australia. This would be exclusively for the South China Sea nations who would be the primary powers, and other powers like India could be invited as observer members.

As most of the countries have signed the logistics agreement, the Quad nations should set a maritime logistics chain of islands soon, consisting of Okinawa, Guam, Darwin and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which can serve as logistics bases; and they can have joint exercises, like Malabar exercises. Apart from this, Quad needs to be expanded as many important regional partners have been left out, like South Korea, Vietnam and New Zealand. If these members are brought in, they would help out in the Indo-Pacific domain. There is a need to develop a joint Indo-Pacific maritime strike squad, composed of the navies of the four Quad nations, which would be stationed in one of the host nation's bases, on a rotational basis, and work on joint exercises and operations. The Quad nations can also work on building a joint oceanic strategy and policy that will cater to their different problems and also work on joint maritime issues. This oceanic policy is essential as it would further formalise the Quad as a maritime grouping, and could also make it into a security grouping dealing with defence issues in the future. In addition to dedicated information sharing, there is a need to study and analyse Chinese maritime strategies so as to create counter-strike methods. Further, military encryption methods need to be devised in order to tackle Chinese maritime aggression.

Conclusion

Panikkar's vision related to the Indian strategic outlook in the colonial era was not just premised on two strategic dots, Socotra and Indonesia, but proposed a larger strategic arc. In this context, the two maritime strategy documents of India talk about security and defence from the structural point of view. Panikkar's vision of Socotra and Indonesia was based on the two strategic sea lanes of communication,[31] which has been repeatedly reflected in naval strategy documents and has also resonated in the higher commanders' meetings. Indeed, India's far eastern command, the Andaman and Nicobar Command, and the Western Naval Command were primarily meant to address these two vantage nodes. The new vision which has been proposed by Prime Minister Modi looks into the larger defence and civilian infrastructure from the "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR) point of view, knowing very well that engaging friendly ports and countries in a network of civilian and defence ports will be of immense strategic benefit.[32]

Panikkar's strategic arc acts as the first line of security. However, it also aligns with Indian aims at new investment and engagement in Eastern Africa and maritime Southeast Asia, where it paves the way for furthering economic interests while protecting India's strategic space. Panikkar's strategic arc has been instrumental in the development of an Indian maritime consciousness in the present scenario, which is inevitably a result of a fuller consciousness of its oceanic heritage.[33]

In his book, *India and the Indian Ocean*, Panikkar spoke about the strategic importance and geographical vastness of the Indian Ocean. It is the only ocean in the world to be known after the name of one of the littoral countries and so, Panikkar justifiably calls the Indian Ocean as "India's Ocean". Further, being a maritime strategist, he argued that the Indian Ocean is a vital sea and is "truly Indian". One can also say that Panikkar's thought of the Indian Ocean as truly Indian must be seen through two strands of thought: one, geographically; and second, strategically.

Therefore, Panikkar's book was prescient in that present-day India must maintain its maritime relations with countries with which it had trade relations in the ancient times. The relations cultivated in the ancient times would help to engage and maintain future strategic relations with these countries, which would be vital for India's maritime strategy. The comprehensiveness of his ideas is a clear eye-opener as to what India must do in order to protect the Indian Ocean. In addition, he not only discussed and pre-empted the issues that India would face but also gave valid solutions. His emphasis on the need to work on defence, especially underwater defence methods and tactics, is something that India still needs to improve upon. India also needs to collaborate with other powers to establish a scheme or strategy of oceanic defence to counter Chinese aggressiveness in international waters. Therefore, K.M. Panikkar can be called the father of Indian maritime strategies for his far-reaching maritime vision.

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Notes on contributor

Gitanjali Sinha Roy is a research associate at the Centre for Security and Strategy Studies (CesCube) and is also a PhD scholar at the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Delhi.