

KM Panikkar and India's Maritime Future

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Indian historian and diplomat KM Panikkar is one of India's most famous and important maritime theorists.¹ His work, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History*, is often referenced in analyses of maritime issues in the Indo-Pacific.² In 2023, the Indian Navy introduced a new essay writing competition named in Panikkar's honor, titled, "The Navy Intellectual Beacon."³

Yet many of his works are generally overlooked today. This omission is unfortunate because many of his ideas remain relevant as India navigates the 21st century strategic environment. Moreover, Panikkar's ideas are interlocking, that is, the arguments and assumptions that are mentioned in *India and the Indian Ocean* are further elaborated in his other works. In the mid-1940s, through a series of articles and presentations, he laid out a vision of a maritime-focused India which would create a new organisation of Asian states in a common defensive defence community. These other works are critical to truly understanding his complex and at times paradoxical ideas. We would be missing a full and nuanced understanding of Panikkar's work by reading only Panikkar's *India and the Indian Ocean*.

To put Panikkar's work in context, the mid-1940s were a period of rapid change. When he started writing these works, India was still part of the British Empire, it was engaged in fighting the Second World War.⁴ At the same time, India was rapidly moved towards independence in 1946-47. The future was unclear of what India's role would be in the region, in Asia, and the new Commonwealth. Lastly, while British power in Asia was diminished during the war, Britain made a concerted effort to re-establish its presence by the war's final years, sending the large British Pacific Fleet to the region in 1945.⁵ The British retreat from the "East of Suez" was still years away.⁶ Panikkar entered the fray to shape the political discourse.

Panikkar was well positioned to influence the debate. He had spent the previous two decades as an official in the Chamber of Princes (the representative body for the Indian Princely States), and proved himself an effective entrepreneur, producing innovative ideas that British and Indian elites valued.⁷ Starting with the 1942 Pacific Relations Conference, Panikkar emerged as a leading Indian voice in discussions about post-war Asia and the future of Imperial defense.⁸ The Institute for Pacific Relations (IPR), which had organized the conference, requested that he turn his remarks into a book, which was subsequently published in 1943, as *The Future of Southeast Asia*. This book in many ways was a prequel to his *India and the Indian Ocean* book. Following the conference, Panikkar gave presentations to the Royal Institute International Affairs and the British General Headquarters India (the high command of the British military in India).⁹ He also

published in major international journals like *Foreign Affairs* and *International Affairs* and in the leading Indian think tanks of the era (the Indian Institute for International Affairs, and the Indian Council for World Affairs).¹⁰

Panikkar became involved with Sir Olaf Caroe and the Viceroy's Study Group during the war. This group was exploring what the future of British Indian defence would look like post-war. The group was favourable to Panikkar's efforts because it wanted to cultivate a new strategic elite in India, and to have Indians writing on these topics. To Panikkar's benefit, the group facilitated dissemination of his work, most notably getting *India and the Indian Ocean* published during the restrictive years of war-time censors.¹¹ As Caroe put it, "[Many of the group's ideas] are percolating through various channels, e.g. Panikkar's books."¹²

His articles from the mid-1940s (many of which are detailed in his article) were presented at international conferences and in the burgeoning Indian think tank community, and were suggested as vital readings to high-level British officials like Lord Mountbatten.¹³ In the August of 1945, he reached out to Lionel Curtis of the Round Table Movement proposing an Indo-British defence relationship to the incoming Labour Government, including sending a draft of what would become his article "The Defence of India and Indo-British Obligations," in *International Affairs*.¹⁴ In March 1947, G.E.G. Catlin – a British political scientist and proponent of Anglo-American relations – wrote to Mountbatten, "Sardar Panikkar's pamphlet *THE BASIS OF AN INDO-BRITISH TREATY [sic]* should be regarded as urgent reading."¹⁵ Testimony such as this underscores that Panikkar sought to influence the actual political debate, to shape history, and to offer solutions to contemporary problems.¹⁶

This is not to say that Panikkar was always accurate in his predictions: his visions of an Indo-British partnership did not come to pass, and Nehru's India focused on non-alignment, not building a regional organisation. However, the strategic context of today's India is in many ways similar to India in the mid-1940s, and to aspects of Panikkar's vision. Panikkar doubtless would approve of today's India, which is more and more focused on sea power and maritime security. Today we see an India that is building a strategic partnership with great powers like the United States, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("QUAD"), and also engaging with and building new organisations. The 2015 Indian Maritime Strategy, *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, bears a distinctly Panikkarian stamp to its framing and analysis. Lastly, India's concerns over China's growing presence in the India Ocean also would have been very familiar to Panikkar's writing.

So today as India charts a new maritime future, Panikkar's ideas on sea power and national security fall under several important categories: Sea Power and Sovereignty; the Strategic Geography of the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia; Raising Maritime Awareness in India; a Maritime Strategy for India, Technological Change and Indian Naval Strategy; Great Power Competition in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia; and Strategic Partnerships for India.

This essay examines each category, to include their relevance to 21st century Indian maritime security.

Sea Power and Sovereignty

Panikkar's greatest historical insight was that sea power was vital to maintaining or losing sovereignty in Asia.¹⁷ In his study of history, he concluded that once India had lost control of the seas, a succession of European powers expanded their control, deeper and deeper into the Indian mainland. By controlling and exploiting the sea, European states then dominated most of the rest of Asia. For India – and by extension the rest of Asia – to maintain its independence, India needed to be able to control its territorial waters.

Panikkar observed that over the centuries, India's sovereignty has been tied to naval power. In his early histories, *Malabar and the Portuguese* (1929) and *Malabar and the Dutch* (1934), Panikkar traced Western Imperialism in Asia to the Portuguese conquests in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, rather than in the Battle of Plassey (1757) and the granting of the Diwani in 1765 to the East India Company, which were commonly referenced during his time.¹⁸

Panikkar's insights were not merely historiographical in nature. He saw the past as relevant for a newly independent India. For India, to maintain its sovereignty in the long term, it would have to control the maritime approaches to India. Imperial Japan drove this point home during the Second World War when it conducted a raid into the Indian Ocean attacking naval bases and ships around British Ceylon.¹⁹ Due to the losses to the British Far East fleet, it had to retreat toward East Africa, and the British lost control of the Indian Ocean for the first time since the 1780s.²⁰

The Strategic Geography of the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia

Flowing from his work on imperialism and sea power, Panikkar examined how the physical geography of the Indian Ocean shaped history.²¹ Panikkar saw an Indian Ocean world like the inter-connected Mediterranean world that the French historian Fernand Braudel articulated.²² Following on the Mediterranean analogy, Panikkar also saw the Indian Ocean as a closed sea, different from the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans.²³ It was bounded by Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.²⁴ These geographical realities had to be considered when fashioning a maritime strategy for India.

Echoing Alfred Thayer Mahan, Panikkar looked at the geographic position India had, dominating the central Indian Ocean.²⁵ Rather than seeing India as a sub-continent isolated from the rest of Asia, he saw India as centrally located in a dense arc of trade between West Asia and East Africa, and Southeast Asia.²⁶ India provided the linchpin or base for Portuguese and British control of the IOR. If India fashioned an appropriate maritime strategy, it could both secure its sovereignty, and play a leading role in the region.

Panikkar saw that the geography of the IOR consisted of strategic choke points. If one power controlled those points and maintained a central base on the subcontinent – as the Portuguese Viceroy Alfonso Albuquerque did – they could dominate the IOR. As Panikkar observed,

*His strategy was simple enough. Recognizing that the two gateways to the Indian Ocean were the Straits of Babel man deb and of Malacca, he postulated that if these two could be effectively held, then the Indian Ocean could be controlled from a naval base in India, so long as uninterrupted communication was maintained with the Atlantic. Socotra and Malacca gave him control of the two doors.*²⁷

This strategy ensured that the IOR was effectively under Portuguese control in the 16th century. This same strategy was then used by the British when they established their Indian Empire.

In the 1940s, Panikkar worried that the demise of the British Empire in Asia would create a security vacuum. An independent India would not automatically be part of a post-war Imperial/Commonwealth defense system. Panikkar believed that “*control of the Indian Ocean is a matter of life and death for [India]. This is especially so, as the vital points that control the Ocean lie far away from her.*”²⁸ Moreover, just as India would be independent, it was likely that the colonial outposts that made up those access points like Aden and Malacca would also become independent.

For Panikkar, because of its geography, only an independent India could play a leading role for Southeast Asia after the Second World War.²⁹ In contrast, extra-regional powers like Japan or the United States could only reach the region after establishing lines of communication through island chains, which were vulnerable.³⁰ However, he was concerned that the combination of new weapons technology and the impending dissolution of the British Empire would bring new challenges for India and the rest of Asia.

Panikkar believed that the newly independent states that would include the Straits of Malacca or Aden would be economically and militarily weak, and thus in danger of falling under the control of external powers. His proposed solution was for India to have a maritime focus and work with Britain to forge a new security architecture in the IOR and Southeast Asia. Then, Indian naval and air forces would be positioned to better defend India. Such a step required the development and implementation of a maritime strategy for independent India.

Raising Maritime Awareness in India

Ironically, Panikkar believed that the critical role of sea power was forgotten in British India because sea control was taken for granted. Unlike the role of the British Indian Army and colonial administration in policing India’s land frontiers, sea control was outsourced to the Royal Navy. British Indian officials were focused on the land, and dealing with the internal threat of nationalist uprising and external threats on the Northwest Frontier. Their preoccupation with the “Great Game” with Russian in Central Asia and continuous skirmishing with forces along the Khyber Pass left a strong mental impression in Delhi. Largely out of sight, sea power was also out of mind. As Panikkar observed, “*the sea might of Britain was supreme, and practically speaking the problems of defence did not arise.*”³¹

Much like Mahan, Panikkar saw the “maritime blindness” of political leaders as one of the major obstacles to establishing a maritime strategy.³² Panikkar worried that this maritime blindness of British India would be carried forward to perspectives in independent India. Given that the new leaders of independent India were trained in the British colonial system, and many went through higher education in Britain, Panikkar believed they would inherit the same maritime blindness.³³ Panikkar was fighting against generations of political and military leaders in Delhi who looked west and northward towards the frontier, rather than South and to the sea.

Being from modern day Kerala, Panikkar was aware of the sea and its impact on Indian history, unlike most of the rest of the Congress Party. Consequently, much of Panikkar’s work from 1944 to 1946 concentrated on raising maritime awareness for Indian elites, through works like *India and the Indian Ocean*, but also his well-timed *History of India* that was published as India became independent. In contrast to the standard historical narratives that focused on movements of people into the sub-continent from West and Central Asia, Panikkar highlighted the place of South India and its links with trade and exchange in the Indian Ocean region. For Panikkar, only if Indian leaders internalised the importance of the sea could India both be secure and a major power in the region.³⁴

A Maritime Strategy for India

Panikkar’s examination of Indian history and geography led him to make recommendations for an Indian maritime strategy. India was surrounded on three sides by the Indian Ocean, and the Himalayas cut India off from the rest of Asia. British India was highly dependent on trade, Panikkar estimating that 90% of the trade (mostly trade with Britain and the Empire, rather than external trade per se) came by sea.³⁵ An independent India would be no different and therefore, it needed a new maritime strategy based on policy analysis.³⁶

Panikkar called for both a short-term and a long-term naval policy for India. In the short term, India needed to develop a small, but balanced navy capable of defending the key maritime approaches to India: The Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. Panikkar broadly laid out the requirement for a fleet in both areas, a pattern that independent India would implement. Panikkar envisioned a small navy that would work with both a larger naval power and smaller regional powers in key locations like the Malacca Straits. As Panikkar envisioned it, Britain would need to keep the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) open in the Indian Ocean to maintain its presence in the rest of Asia. This would be a major impetus for building a strategic partnership for Indian and British navies to work together.³⁷

In the long term, India would need to build up its industrial capabilities for maritime construction and supply while raising awareness of the importance of sea power to Indian foreign policy elites and the public. Panikkar estimated this would take at least 25 years.³⁸ The issue of maritime blindness has already been covered, but Panikkar also stressed the importance of the industrial and economic basis of maritime power. In several of his works, Panikkar decried the sad state of India’s shipbuilding industry and lack of a merchant marine.³⁹

Technological Change and Indian Naval Strategy

Panikkar was fascinated by technological changes and their effects on warfare. He felt that the development of long-range air power and submarines had fundamentally changed warfare, with considerable implications for India's security.⁴⁰ India was impacted in the following ways: (1) air power diminished the value of land buffer states; (2) aviation and submarine technology made it easier to control key choke points; and (3) aircraft carriers and naval air power were necessary for India's security.⁴¹

Panikkar felt that air power was changing strategic geography.⁴² He believed that long-range air power severely degraded the benefit of difficult terrain like deserts and mountain ranges as a defensive perimeter. Simply put, small buffer states would no longer be useful if bombers could simply fly over them. For example, the size of a country gave it advantages – larger nations had what he termed “space power” over small ones and this would allow these countries to better absorb a sustained strategic bombing campaign.⁴³ For Panikkar, the sheer depth of the Tibetan Plateau helped shield India on the landward side, given the range limitations of bombers of the time.⁴⁴ Conversely, the range of air power as delivered from the sea would provide both a challenge and an opportunity for India.⁴⁵

It was a challenge because while the Himalayan Plateau gave India “space power” to shield it from most land-based aviation, India was vulnerable to attack from the sea. Panikkar argued, “*India is open to large scale air bombardment, but not from the side of its land frontier. If control of the sea is lost, not only could she be blockaded and her economic life subjected to slow strangulation, but the center of her industry pounded out of existence by carrier-borne aircraft.*”⁴⁶

It was also an opportunity, because he felt that the development of both submarines and carrier-based naval aviation could ultimately benefit India, if India invested in the appropriate capabilities and secured access points of the IOR. Panikkar thought that these technologies gave smaller navies – provided that they had favorable geography – an advantage over larger navies far from home. He saw the vulnerability of surface vessels during the Second World War, in particular the Japanese sinking of HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse* in 1941.⁴⁷

India's central position in the Indian Ocean also meant that its naval aviation – whether based on the land or on carriers – would dominate the air above the seas around it. If India lacked its own aviation capabilities, it was vulnerable to attack, as the British were in 1942. However, if India developed its capabilities, developed its own island bases, and secured access to key choke points like Aden and Malacca, India could not only defend itself but also deny adversaries access to waters close enough to India to mount their attacks. Panikkar believed that an effective naval air force, combined with the island bases like the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, made India a massive unsinkable aircraft carrier, or inaccessible “air island.”⁴⁸ Moreover, Panikkar thought the combination of naval aviation and submarines would give India the capacity to defend islands and narrow seas against external power projection.⁴⁹

He believed that the Mahanian notion of a single decisive battle to control the seas was obsolete thinking.⁵⁰ “The problem of the mastery of the sea has been complicated by

the growth of air power.”⁵¹ Navies would be more heavily involved in protecting lines of communication and convoys, and naval operations would be more cumulative and continuous in nature.⁵² Thus, the combination of technology and geography would be doubly beneficial for India.

Foreshadowing much of the anti-access strategies of the early 21st century, Panikkar saw the value in a relatively small navy with appropriate bases and capabilities to prevent an adversary from gaining access into the narrow seas. Anti-access strategies focused on using long-range weapons to prevent navies from being able to enter narrow seas. In short, navies would not be able to get close enough to influence events on land, severely limiting their utility in conflict. Panikkar saw the two major maritime approaches to India, the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian sea, as narrow seas. He saw the opportunity for India to control the seas around her and close them off from larger naval powers.

Panikkar was a proponent of the independent India having a larger naval force that included aircraft carriers. However, one must note Panikkar was a historian and political advisor, not a naval officer or a civilian professional working in the Admiralty. As a result, his views concerning the specifics of force structure remained at the conceptual level. Nonetheless, he had several recommendations for India. He wanted the development of an independent naval air arm (as part of the Navy but separate from the Air Force), which he believed was vital for modern warfare. Its missions would include “*patrolling the coasts, by keeping the sea clear and affording air cover to the navy.*”⁵³

Though it is beyond the scope of this study, it is worth looking at Panikkar’s later thinking about aircraft carriers. In the mid-1950s, Defence Secretary MK Vellodi sought out Panikkar’s views as India’s only known naval theorist. In a letter to Vellodi, Panikkar argued that in the contemporary era, India needed an adequate naval air arm, and that the best way to use this force was through aircraft carriers. Panikkar proposed that carriers would be useful in two contingencies: (1) protecting SLOCs during a global war not involving India, and in local/regional wars where India was directly involved; and (2) in a limited local war involving India. Even if India remained neutral in a global war, given the disruptions of the war, other states would probably have an increased demand for Indian goods and production. As Panikkar put forward,

the duty of keeping the area clear for our [emphasis in the original] commercial navigation will fall on us. Nor should we forget that in another few years we shall have a considerable mercantile marine whose protection in high seas will be a primary duty. The defence of our territorial sovereignty (territorial waters, etc.) would also require an effective task force.

In the case of a limited war, where India was a direct combatant, aircraft carriers would: (1) protect the Indian coast from raids; (2) prevent communications between West and East Pakistan and intercept maritime forces between the two; (3) protect Indian coastal and other shipping; and (4) destroy enemy naval forces either at sea or in bases.⁵⁴

Panikkar, perhaps knowing the budgetary limits of India in the 1950s, proposed a single carrier.⁵⁵ Panikkar was then out of step from the Indian Navy’s plan for two carriers.⁵⁶ His rationale for only one carrier was based on the idea that strategic geography would fill in for numerous carriers. He offered as an example that the Andaman Islands were an

“unsinkable” aircraft carrier in the Bay of Bengal, covering India’s Eastern seas. So, India would only need a carrier for the west in the Arabian Sea to protect the SLOC. Moreover, similar to views in his earlier writing, he assumed that in either contingency Britain and the Royal Navy would be assisting India in some capacity, again making a single carrier viable.⁵⁷ In other words, India’s security rested to some degree on the relationship with a major power.

Great Power Competition in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia

Panikkar’s applied geopolitical lens gave him a long-term perspective on contemporary events. Panikkar was concerned that in the future, a nation would gain control over key access points to the Indian Ocean Region in order to project power into the region.⁵⁸ When most observers at the end of the Second World War saw a defeated Japan, a chronically weak China, and only focused on the rise of the Soviet Union and the United States, Panikkar felt contemporary issues had to be contextualized into a longer geopolitical narrative.

Panikkar believed that the geographic position of a country shaped its foreign policy, more than a particular ideology. “*The policy of a State or a country is determined by its geographic position... It follows that the form of Government in a State has but little to do with its external policy, at least in a long-term sense.*”⁵⁹ Just as Revolutionary France sought to dominate Europe, as King Louis XIV had done previously, so too would Japan and China once again seek to expand their influence into Southeast Asia.⁶⁰ In Panikkar’s words, “*Japan will again become a considerable naval power within a reasonable time.*”⁶¹ Further, while the imperial powers had pushed China out of its traditional areas of influence, Panikkar was certain this was only a temporary state of affairs:

*it is hardly to be imagined that China will in the future neglect her naval interests. With her bases extending as far south as Hainan, she is placed in even a more advantageous position than Japan. Further, the entire southern region has large and powerful Chinese settlements and a southward expansion by land cannot be ruled out once China settled down to reorganize herself.*⁶²

China would once again expand its influence, and India had to take that step into account post-independence.⁶³ He also felt that ultimately the Soviet Union would push into the IOR region.⁶⁴ His observations were likely influenced by fellow geopolitical thinker, NJ Spykman, and his observations on Russia’s quest for access to warm water ports to escape her geographical challenges.⁶⁵

Strategic Partnerships for India

This history of extra-regional powers entering to the Indian Ocean, and controlling key access points, meant that India must not only build up its military capabilities, but also

seek strategic partnerships. This included both working with a major power, like Great Britain, which in the event of a major war would help ensure that the Indian sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) remained open and secure. Partners would also help India develop its economy, infrastructure, and defense industrial base. Lastly, Indian leadership of regional organisations would help stabilise newly independent countries that guarded access points to the Indian Ocean, perhaps allowing India to retain bases or use of these points in times of need.

While Panikkar wanted independence for India, he also saw a critical role for a reformed Imperial system – the Commonwealth – with a British-Indian strategic partnership at the centre of it.⁶⁶ He elaborated this idea most eloquently in his essay *The Basis for an Indo-British Treaty*, published by the Indian Council on World Affairs. The leading British strategist of the age, Sir B.H. Liddell Hart wrote to Panikkar, calling the work a “masterly exposition on the subject.”⁶⁷

However, Panikkar’s interest in a strategic partnership went beyond Anglophile sensibilities, as he saw several imperatives for cooperation with the United Kingdom. At that time, India occupied a key strategic position in the Indian Ocean between Britain’s West and East Asian colonies. Britain also needed to cooperate with India to maintain lines of communication with its East Asian Empire and the dominions of Australia and New Zealand.⁶⁸ India in turn required help to maintain its maritime position in the Indian Ocean, in particular in case of a major war involving great powers. An independent India would have modest naval capabilities, which would ideally be adequate for a smaller regional war, but it would be challenged by a major sustained war.

Perhaps the most important and overlooked aspect of this partnership was the economic and technical assistance to build a modern India with the development of a modern industrial base.⁶⁹ Panikkar had a long interest in the problems of colonial economies, particularly how imperialism interfered with economic processes and thereby delayed modernisation and industrialisation. Panikkar strongly believed that in order to be successful in modern warfare, states needed an advanced industrial base and an educated population.⁷⁰

Further, Panikkar was particularly impressed by the speed of modern warfare and the impact of air power. The speed with which Japan conquered European colonies in Southeast Asia convinced him that warfare had changed the balance of power in Asia. Previously, the British drew upon the reserves of manpower that their colonies provided, including India. However, he felt that large non-mechanised armies were no match against the smaller, but more technologically advanced forces with air power (including naval aviation). As Panikkar wrote during the Second World War, “*fundamentally it is the economy of colonial development that rendered effective defence on modern lines impossible.*”⁷¹

Panikkar sought British support to build a modern aeronautical industry in India.⁷² He called for Britain and India to work together to develop India’s capabilities, arguing that India as a more robust naval and maritime power would be a better geo-strategic partner with Britain. For Panikkar, India needed the capability to build its own platforms, and to train and educate its military and civilian personnel. In short, India needed to not only develop a modern industrial system that could endure wartime losses in a protracted war

like the Second World War, but also experiment and develop new technology.⁷³ In some sense, Panikkar's emphasis on the importance of a robust aeronautical industry calls to mind the importance Mahan put on the merchant marine and shipbuilding industry as key elements of sea power. A modern state needed that defense industrial base to conduct research, improve capabilities, build capacity to overcome equipment losses in war, and develop future pilots, designers, engineers, and skilled workers for success in modern aerial warfare. Panikkar put the same emphasis on building up an Indian merchant marine and shipbuilding program.⁷⁴

Beyond Britain, Panikkar felt that with the impending dissolution of the colonial system in Asia, India needed to work with smaller states to construct a set of regional organisations. Panikkar called for an institutional response to this challenge. Following the 1942 Pacific Relations conference, Panikkar wrote his first major works on contemporary security in Asia: *The Future of Southeast Asia* and "Regional Organization in the Indian Ocean Region."

Panikkar believed that the newly independent states of Southeast Asia would not be able to stand up to threats from larger powers. He saw a primary role for India, ideally working with Britain, in organising regional security institutions for the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia. Panikkar fit this new body within this existing framework of a new Commonwealth arrangement where Britain, its former colonies, and the Dominions would have a new organisational relationship as independent states that would also be a regional security organisation:

*The defence of the Indian seas must... be a joint concern of India, Great Britain and the other units of the Commonwealth bordering on the Ocean. A Council of the Indian Ocean as an organisation of regional defence is the solution of this problem.*⁷⁵

A regional organisation would give India access to the key choke points of the Indian Ocean and allow India to mount an effective defence of the subcontinent from these points, rather than enduring attacks on the Indian homeland, and on Indian shipping in its own waters. In short, an effective regional security organisation would solve the strategic problem introduced by the end of the British Imperial system.

Panikkar's Ideas and India in the 21st Century

While Panikkar's arguments about the importance of sea power and the loss of sovereignty were well received in India and internationally, his ideas were overtaken by events with the independence of India and the start of the Cold War. Nehru's India emerged as a leader of Pan-Asianism and non-alignment with the two superpowers. While open to being a member of institutions like the United Nations and the Commonwealth, it had no interest in either joining a formal military alliance or establishing a security bloc with other Asian States.⁷⁶ Moreover, the independence of India removed one of the major pillars of the British Empire in Asia. Panikkar had overestimated the willingness of Britain to continue as an Asian power in the long term. Britain and India's strategic interests drifted apart post independence. Lastly, in many ways, the maritime blindness that Panikkar feared asserted itself strongly for several decades.

Conclusion

Many of Panikkar's ideas remain relevant in examining India's contemporary strategic position. As mentioned above, Panikkar's keen observations about the geography of the Indian Ocean and its implications for India remain true today. As Panikkar warned, "*whoever controls the Indian Ocean has India at his mercy.*"⁷⁷ In the 2015 Indian Maritime Strategy, the second chapter on "Maritime Security Imperatives and Influences" quotes Panikkar:

*The vital feature which differentiates the Indian Ocean from the Atlantic or the Pacific is the sub-continent of India, which juts out far into the sea for a thousand miles. It is the geographical position of India that changes the character of the Indian Ocean....*⁷⁸

Reflecting Panikkar's belief in the link between sovereignty and naval power, many states in the Indo-Pacific have invested heavily in naval capabilities in the past three decades.⁷⁹ Moreover, Panikkar's thinking about smaller navies using geography and technology to resist power projection foreshadowed some aspects of the contemporary anti-access/area denial debate. India has shifted its focus toward more investment in naval capabilities and made the crucial investment decision not only to buy and operate carriers, but also to build them. This is consistent with Panikkar's contention that "*a country which has to buy all her vessels outside cannot be a naval power.*"⁸⁰

India's Comprehensive Global Strategic partnership with the United States seem to echo many of the benefits Panikkar wrote about partnership with Britain, especially the increased focus on the technology sharing.⁸¹ Additionally, India has been deepening many of its other relationships with Japan, Australia, France, and other countries. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the QUAD) has emerged as one of the principal diplomatic and military arrangements in the region. In that respect, India has made common cause with the United States, Japan, and Australia to support a free and open Pacific. India has also played an active role in engagement with regional bodies such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its biannual Milan exercises.

Panikkar's ideas remain prescient in many respects about the strategic environment in an era of great power competition. Moreover, his conceptual competency makes him a valuable source for prompting new ideas and new thinking. The Indian Navy established the KM Panikkar Navy Intellectual Beacon (NIB) to stimulate "systematic analysis within [the Indian naval] community." It was named in his memory because Panikkar had been a "*maritime strategic thinker who advocated maritime awakening in India, wrote strongly in favour of enhancing maritime consciousness in the nation, and relentlessly highlighted the significance of maritime power and naval policy to India's growth and prosperity.*" A more accurate summary of Panikkar's legacy cannot be offered.

Notes

- 1 For example see James Holmes, Andrew Winner, and Toshi Yoshihara, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-first Century* (Routledge, London: 2010); Harsh Pant, "Introduction," *The Rise of the Indian Navy: Internal Vulnerability, External Challenges*, ed.
See Also: Harsh Pant (Ashgate, London: 2012); J. Raja Mohan, *Samudra Mathan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific* (Carnegie, Washington: 2012);
See Also: David Brewster, *India's Ocean: The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership* (Routledge, London: 2014);
See Also: Geoffrey Till, *How to Grow a Navy: The Development of Maritime Power* (Routledge, London: 2023).
- 2 For a recent view see in previous issues of this journal, Gitanjali Sinha Roy, "India's Strategic Vision: Imprints of K.M. Panikkar's Arc," *Maritime Affairs*, 17, no. 2 (2021): 1-10; and C. Raja Mohan, "India and the Changing Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean," *Maritime Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2010): 1-12; Using Panikkar's insights is by no means new in Indian analysis of the Indian Ocean, see Chandra Kumar, "The Indian Ocean: Arc of Crisis of Zone of Peace?" *International Affairs*, 60, no. 2 (1984): 233-346.
- 3 <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/sardar-km-panikkar-%E2%80%98nib%E2%80%99-essay-competition>
- 4 India's position was unusual because at the same time as its massive mobilization in the war, most of the nationalist leaders objected to India's involvement in the war and spent much of the war in prison, and there was also a large Indian National Army fighting with the Japanese. See, Raghavan, *India's War*.
- 5 Robb-Webb, "The British Pacific Fleet and the Decline of Empire? Adaptations to Change."
- 6 Kennedy, Greg, "British Sea Power and Imperial Defense in the Far East: Sharing the Seas with American," 208–9.
- 7 For an excellent background on Panikkar's early life and career in the Chamber, see Elli and Paolini, *Indian National Identity and Foreign Policy*, in particular chapters 1 and 2.
- 8 Fortuitously for Panikkar though he was an Indian nationalist, his work for the Chamber of Princes (generally seen as pro-British) made him a figure who could appeal to a variety of audiences. See Michael Anderson, *Pacific Dreams: The Institute of Pacific Relations and the Struggle for the Mind of Asia*, (Ph.D diss. University of Texas, 2009), 75-77. For more on British discussions on the need to have Indian representation that supported British rule in India at these conferences, see RIIA, "Minutes of the Meeting of the I.P.R. Committee," 11 May 1942, (RIIA Archives Chatham House, London.).
- 9 "India's Policy Towards States of the Indian Ocean," on 27 October 1945, this was later reprinted as an appendix along with the article, "The Basis for an Anglo-British Treaty," published by the Indian Council on World Affairs in 1946. Letter Panikkar to Liddell Hart to 20 January 1946, (Kings College Archives, file 565). The IWCA publication also includes "Defense and National Efficiency," "India Policy Towards the States of the Indian Ocean Area," and "The Organization of Indo-British Relationship." During the 1940s, he continued to participate in major international conferences like the 1945 Commonwealth Conference and the 1947 Asian Relations conference. In addition to others and used these as platforms to convey his ideas in both presentations and written documents.
- 10 "Lecture Tours in the United States and Canada by Indian Delegates to the I.P.R. Conference, "Institute of Pacific Relations: Representation of India at Forthcoming Conference," IOR,

- L/I/1090, p. 6. Similarly, he wrote a short pamphlet *Indian States* for the series Oxford Pamphlets on Indian Affairs. (K.M. Panikkar, *Indian States*, Indian States', by K.M. Panikkar, Oxford Pamphlets on Indian Affairs No 4., (Mysore, 1942), IOR Mss, Eur F144/33: 1942). These articles included, "The Himalayas and India Defence," *India Quarterly* (April-June 1947), and the *Journal of the Indian Institute of International Affairs*, and "The Princes and India's Future," *Foreign Affairs*, (April 1943); and "The Defence of India and Indo-British Obligations," *International Affairs*, (Jan. 1946).
- 11 Panikkar network and ideas were shaped by his interactions with Wint, Toker and others in the Viceroy's Study Group lead by Sir Olaf Core, see Peter Brobst, *The Future of the Great Game: Sir Olaf Caroe, India's Independence, and the New Defense of Asia* (University of Akron Press, Akron, 2005). For Panikkar's conversations with Guy Wint, see Panikkar's *Autobiography*, 184; for Toker, see Toker's review of Panikkar's *India and the Indian Ocean book*, republished in, BJ Chacko (ed.) *Sardar K.M. Panikkar: Shastyabdapoorthy Souvenir* (Pathrubhumi Press, Koshikdoe: 1954): 177-81; For Liddell Hart, Letter: Panikkar to Liddell Hart to 20 January 1946, (Liddell Hart Papers, Kings College Archives, file 565).
 - 12 As quoted in Brobst, *The Future of the Great Game*, 30.
See Also, Ext 3343/42(6) Viceroy's Study Group: "Modern China's Asiatic Empire", etc; winding up of group. IOR/L/PS12/729: 5 Jul 1945-4 Jan 1946.
 - 13 The Secretary of State for India, Leo Amery, wrote to Viceroy Wavell in early 1945 praising Panikkar and his work on imperial organization (Letter from Amery to Wavell. IOR/L/PO/10/22, 10-15 : 4 Jan 1945); in 1945, the Maharaja of Bikaner sent a copy of Panikkar's Indian Ocean book to Mountbatten (Letter from the Maharaja of Bikaner to [Lord Louis Mountbatten], 22 July 1945. Broadlands archives. MS62/MB/1/C/35/54, University of Southampton Special Collections. (<https://archives.soton.ac.uk/records/MS62/MB/1/C/35/54>). Panikkar attended several conferences, such as the Pacific Relations Conference of 1942, the Commonwealth Conference of 1945, and the Asian Relations Conference in 1947, in addition to others, and he used these as platforms to convey his ideas in both presentations and written documents.
 - 14 Memorandum from the Dewan of Bikaner [Panikkar] Regarding the Organization of Indo-British Relationship," (IOR/L/PJ/7/7260: Aug 1945).
 - 15 Copy of a letter from the Viceroy of India to G.E.G. Catlin, concerning the future title of India; the Indian National Army, Mrs. S. Naidu; dealings with M.K. Gandhi and Jai Prakash Narain; a pamphlet by K.M. Panikkar' and M.A. Jinnah, 15 April 1947. Broadlands archives. MS62/MB/1/D/225/29. University of Southampton Special Collections, Mountbatten Papers (<https://archives.soton.ac.uk/records/MS62/MB/1/D/225/29>).
 - 16 Again the excellent work by Elli and Paolini goes much beyond the coverage of this paper into the variety of Panikkar's work, see Elli and Paolini, *Indian National Identity and Foreign Policy, in particular Chapters 2 and 7*.
 - 17 The role of sea power as an important factor in imperialism and sovereignty runs throughout Panikkar's intellectual career from the 1920s, all the way to one of the most well-known works of his lifetime, *Asia and Western Dominance*, published in 1953, where he coined the phrase, "the Vasco de Gama epoch" for the age of Western Imperialism in Asia from 1498 to 1945. *Asia and Western Dominance*, review by F.S.C. Northrop, *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1955): 261.
 - 18 In the decades since Panikkar's writing European maritime empires and their expansion into Asia has received more attention, both in popular works like, Sanjeev Sanyal, *Ocean of*

- Churn: How the Indian Ocean Shaped Human History* (Penguin, 2016); and Roger Crowley, *Conquerors: How Portugal Forged the First Global Empire*, (Farber: London, 2015); and academic ones, Gabriel Paquette, *The European Seaborne Empires: The Thirty Years War to the age of Revolutions* (Yale, New Haven: 2019), and Pius Malekandathil, *Maritime India: Trade, Religion and Policy in the Indian Ocean* (Primus: Delhi, 2010).
- 19 It should be noted the Imperial Japanese conquest of Southeast Asia was joint in nature, with not only naval forces, but ground forces and air assets playing major roles, my thanks to Bill Johnsen on this point.
 - 20 Panikkar, KM, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History*, 9.
 - 21 Panikkar's article, "Strategic Problems of the Indian Ocean," was used as an appendix and distributed during the 1945 Commonwealth Conference.
 - 22 See Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (University of California Press, Berkeley: 1986), on page 14, he gives an overview on European and Ottoman hegemony.
 - 23 Panikkar, KM, *The Strategic Problems of the Indian Ocean*, 9. This point is echoed more recently by David Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Oceans* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2019): 43-50.
 - 24 Panikkar, KM, 7–8.
 - 25 McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought*, 24.
 - 26 Panikkar also raised this in a meeting at Chatham House in 1943, KM Panikkar, "A New Approach to Indian Problems," 25 January 1943 (RIIA Archive), 8/90, p.1.
 - 27 Panikkar, KM, *The Strategic Problems of the Indian Ocean*, 5.
 - 28 Panikkar, KM, 8.
 - 29 Panikkar, KM, *The Future of South-East Asia: An Indian View*, 11–12.
 - 30 Panikkar, KM, 5–6.
 - 31 Panikkar, KM, 3.
 - 32 McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought*, 14–28.
 - 33 Panikkar, KM, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History*, 8.
 - 34 One suspects the emphasis Panikkar gives to the impenetrable defense of the Himalayas was in part to reassure leaders that contrary to previous thinking they should not see threats coming from the north through the passes but instead see the Himalayan Plateau as a shield. Then once this view was internalized, leaders could re-orient themselves towards what he considered the more important vulnerability, the sea. As he wrote, "The view which looks upon Indian history as a continuous series of invasions from the more 'vigorous' people of the north-west through the Khyber pass is essentially a wrong one. 'Properly examined, it will be seen that India is one of the least invaded countries in the world.'" See Panikkar, "The Himalayas and Indian Defence," in particular 80-87.
 - 35 Panikkar, KM, *The Strategic Problems of the Indian Ocean*, 4-5.
 - 36 Panikkar prescribed that a naval strategy was defensive in nature, designed to shield India from attack and to maintain India's SLOCs. Panikkar approvingly quotes Liddell Hart's recent conclusions on the defense being the stronger form of warfare, even in the modern age of air power. See Panikkar, KM, "The Himalayas and Indian Defence," 85.
 - 37 Panikkar, KM, *The Strategic Problems of the Indian Ocean*, 9-10.
 - 38 Panikkar, KM, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History*, 95.

- 39 While Panikkar's thinking about the need to develop India's maritime economy is today associated with his *India and the Indian Ocean* book (see 94-95), it was a long-standing theme in his writings about the need to develop a new Imperial relationship between Britain and India to facilitate India's economic development. For example, in *The New Empire* he called for greater economic integration and cooperation between Britain and India. Britain needed to be open to Indian raw materials and India needed access to British investment, importation of technology, and low tariffs for her materials, "An Imperial autarchy is therefore not merely a desirable policy, but one on which the future of the British Commonwealth depends." *The New Empire: Letters to a Conservative Member of Parliament on the Future of England and India*, 66. See also 51-52 and 62-63.
- 40 Panikkar, KM, *The Future of South-East Asia: An Indian View*, 51.
- 41 Panikkar, KM, *The Strategic Problems of the Indian Ocean*, 10; and "The Himalayas and Indian Defence."
- 42 Panikkar, KM, "The Himalayas and Indian Defence," 85.
- 43 Interestingly, Panikkar had less to say about the biggest technological innovation of his age: nuclear weapons. In large part, this was due to much of Panikkar's writing of this time predating the explosions of 1945. Panikkar's writing is most active in 1943-45 before the nuclear revolution. From this period, only his piece, "The Himalayas and Indian Defence," published in 1947, really deals with nuclear weapons. He generally addresses these as too new to come to major conclusions, but reasons that given they need a delivery system, they can be integrated into general thinking about strengths and limitations of air power. Later Panikkar would devote more time to nuclear weapons in *Problems of Indian Defence*, published in 1960. See Panikkar, "Himalayas and Indian Defence," 87-89.
- 44 In 1947, Panikkar was estimating the range of heavy bombers at 1,000 miles. See Panikkar, KM, "The Himalayas and Indian Defence," 84. In this, Panikkar was interested in the "fuel radius" of air power, similar to Mahan's concerns about naval operations in the age of steam and how far fleets could operate away from coaling stations.
- 45 Panikkar's thinking here is like (and undoubtedly influenced by) his friend Sir Francis Taker, and others in the Viceroy's Study Group set by Sir Olaf Caroe. See, Peter Brobst, "Icarian Geography': Air Power, Closed Space, and British Decolonisation," *Geopolitics*, 9, no. 2 (2004): 426-439.
- 46 Panikkar, KM, "The Himalayas and Indian Defence," 87.
- 47 Panikkar was not alone in his thinking. During the 1940s, he was corresponding with many of the innovative British strategic thinkers of the day, like B. H. Liddell Hart, Francis Taker, and others who were also intrigued by these issues. They sent each other working and published papers and debated the future of warfare and strategy in the immediate postwar period. Letter Panikkar to Liddell Hart, 20 January 1946, (Basil Liddell Hart Papers, Kings College Archives, file 565).
- 48 Panikkar, KM, "The Himalayas and Indian Defence," 84.
- 49 Panikkar, KM, *The Future of South-East Asia: An Indian View*, 111-12.
- 50 It is interesting to note there is no mention of Corbett in Panikkar's writings of this time that I have located.
- 51 Panikkar, KM, "Defense and National Efficiency," 29.
- 52 Panikkar, KM, *The Future of South-East Asia: An Indian View*, 52-53.
- 53 Panikkar, KM, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History*, 98.
- 54 Letter Panikkar to Vellodi, 5 11 1954 (JNSG 309ii).

- 55 For more on Nehru's ambivalence about acquiring carriers until Mountbatten made the case, see Joshi, Yogesh, "Nehru's Navy: India's Tryst with Aircraft Carriers," 17–24.
- 56 Goldrick, *No Easy Answers*, 15-30, and Sarabjeet Parmar, "National Perspectives: India's Maritime Outlook," *Schools of Maritime Thought: Perspectives from Six Nations* (Sea Power Center-Australia, Canberra: 2022) (available: NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES: INDIA'S MARITIME OUTLOOK - National Maritime Foundation (maritimeindia.org).
- 57 "Panikkar to Vellodi." It is important to note that Panikkar here was out of step with Indian Navy planning in the 1950s that called for two carriers. See, Sarabjeet Parmar, "India's Maritime Outlook," National Perspectives, NMF and SPC-A, 15 May 2022 (NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES: INDIA'S MARITIME OUTLOOK - National Maritime Foundation (maritimeindia.org)); and James Golderick, *No Easy Answers: The Development of the Navies of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, 1945-1996* (Lancer, Delhi: 1997), 15-30.
- 58 The Japanese occupation of Burma during the Second World War, for example, facilitated Japanese power projection into the IOR. As a result, Japan occupied the strategic Andaman and Nicobar Islands and raided British bases on Ceylon India would be similarly threatened if another power established control over Burma. Panikkar, KM, *The Future of South-East Asia: An Indian View*, 38–39.
- 59 Panikkar, KM, *The Basis of an Indo-British Treaty*, 35.
- 60 Panikkar, KM, "India's Policy Towards the States of the Indian Ocean Area," 35–36.
- 61 Panikkar, KM, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History*, 86.
- 62 Panikkar, KM, *India and the Indian Ocean*, 85.
- 63 Panikkar, KM, *The Strategic Problems of the Indian Ocean*, 10–11.
- 64 Panikkar, KM, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History*, 87–88.
- 65 Moreover, Panikkar's ideas reflect the importance of the Gulf had for supplying the Soviet Union during the war Panikkar, KM, *The Strategic Problems of the Indian Ocean*, 13–15.
- 66 The best example of his work on this during this period is "The Basis of an Indo-British Treaty," but it is a major thread in his work dating back well before the Second World War. In particular see his *The New Empire: Letters to a Conservative Member of Parliament on the Future of England India* (Martin Hopkinson, London: 1934). Panikkar's network included members of the Round Table movement like Lionel Curtis and Catlin, and much of Panikkar's thinking during this time reflects the movements thinking about a reformed Liberal Commonwealth. In meeting in early 1943 at Chatham House he again promoted an idea of an "Anglo-Indian" cooperation to secure their mutual interests in Asia, Panikkar, "A New Approach to Indian Problems," 2. For more on Curtis and the Roundtable movement's interaction with early Indian diplomats, see Thakur, *India's First Diplomat*, 40–51.
- 67 Letter Liddell Hart to Panikkar, 21 May 1946, King's College Archives, file 9-23-9. Panikkar also gave a lecture to the General Headquarters India (the high command of the British military in India) on 27 October 1945, on "India's Policy Towards States of the Indian Ocean," which was later reprinted as an appendix of *The Basis for an Anglo-British Treaty*.
- 68 Panikkar, KM, *The Future of South-East Asia: An Indian View*, 31-32.
- 69 KM Panikkar, "A New Approach to Indian Problems," p.1; and Panikkar, KM, *The Basis of an Indo-British Treaty*, 9-10.
- 70 During the 1947 Asian Relations conference he was on the working group, "Economic Development and Social Services. In *The Future of South-East Asia*, he laid out an argument

that the colonial nature of Asian economies was one of the major impediments for building up adequate defense strategies. See Gopal, *Asian Relations*, 141; and Panikkar, *The Future of South-East Asia*, 7.

- 71 Panikkar, KM, *The Future of South-East Asia: An Indian View*, 18.
- 72 This was not without precedent. Panikkar was quite impressed by the Bevan plan of sending Indian youth to Britain during the war to get formal education and training in engineering. He felt that post-war something like this plan could be expanded. Panikkar, KM, *The Basis of an Indo-British Treaty*, 9-10.
- 73 Panikkar, KM, "Defense and National Efficiency," 32-34.
- 74 Panikkar, KM, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History*, 98.
- 75 Panikkar, KM, *The Strategic Problems of the Indian Ocean*, 16.
- 76 Wyatt, "India and the United Kingdom: Finding a New Equilibrium," 227-31.
- 77 Panikkar, KM, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History*, 84.
- 78 Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence, *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, 17.
- 79 See Geoffrey Till, *Asia's Naval Expansion: An Arms Race in the Making?* (IISS Adelphi Paper, London: 2012).
- 80 Panikkar, KM, *India and the Indian Ocean*, 98.
- 81 To get an idea of the increasing Indian and US technological and industrial partnership, see the Joint Statement from the United States and India (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/06/22/joint-statement-from-the-united-states-and-india/>)

Disclaimer: The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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