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# India and the Indian Ocean Region: An Appraisal

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## Introduction

The oceans of the world occupy almost three-fourths of the earth's surface and on average, about three-fourths of the global population lives within 150 km of a coastline. The Indian Ocean, which occupies 20 percent of the world's ocean surface, is the third largest body in this huge global water mass. Forty-seven countries have the Indian Ocean on their shores. This ocean includes the Andaman Sea, Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, Flores Sea, Great Australian Bight, Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, Java Sea, Mozambique Channel, Persian Gulf, Red Sea, Savu Sea, Strait of Malacca, and Timor Sea. The islands of significance in this ocean include the Coco Islands, Andaman Islands, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Diego Garcia, Seychelles and Mauritius. The ocean also has major sea ports like Chittagong in Bangladesh; Trincomalee, Colombo and (Hambantota — planned) in Sri Lanka; Freemantle in Western Australia; Vishakhapatnam, Cochin, Karwar in India; Gwadar and Ormara in Pakistan; Port Louis in Mauritius; Port Victoria in Seychelles; and Phuket in Thailand.<sup>1</sup>

The region encompasses not only a wide geographical area but is also an area of strategic relevance for the regional states. Some outside states also have lasting interests in the region. The states within the region have their own quest for economic development. A considerable portion of the global sea lanes is located within this region. The region provides major sea routes connecting West and East Asia, Africa, and with Europe and the America. The maritime routes between ports are used for trade as well as for movement of energy resources. The naval forces of many countries operate in this region. Along with these hectic economic and strategic activities, unfortunately, the

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region is also a hub for various nefarious activities like terrorism, smuggling and drug trafficking.

The Indian Ocean region is of major relevance to the Asian powers, the African states and Australia because events in this region have direct implications for their political, economic and strategic interests. The Indian Ocean is the world's only region and ocean named after a single state — India. Obviously, for India, this region is of immense significance. This paper attempts to analyse the broad contours of India's strategy in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). It attempts to outline India's policies in the region in the backdrop of various geo-strategic challenges faced by it.

## **Backdrop**

As viewed from India's geo-strategic perspective, the Indian Ocean may be subdivided into four major zones: one, the Bay of Bengal region and neighbourhood; two, the Central Indian Ocean region; three, the Arabian Sea and its natural extensions; and four, the West Indian Ocean region.<sup>2</sup> Each region offers India an array of interests as well as challenges.

The Bay of Bengal region constitutes India's own island chain of the Andaman and Nicobar. This region, which is close to the Malacca Strait, offers ample scope for free port, trans-shipment port, ship repair base and offshore bunkering facility for international sea lanes (ISLs). These islands have enormous geo-political and strategic importance<sup>3</sup> due to their close proximity with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) countries. In cognisance of the strategic importance of these islands, the Government of India established the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) on October 8, 2001. This command is being used to observe and oppose military and terrorist activities in the region. Also, the region is important because India's immediate neighbours like Bangladesh and Myanmar are located here and, unfortunately, both these states have an unstable political environment.

The world's deadliest terrorist organisation, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), operates from the Central Indian Ocean region. Island nations of importance to India in this region are Sri Lanka and Maldives. The LTTE problem in Sri Lanka has a direct bearing on India's domestic policies too. Also, the region connects major sea lines of communication (SLOCs) of the Indian Ocean and Indian littoral of the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal<sup>4</sup>. Diego Garcia, which is a part of the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), is strategically located in the Central Indian Ocean. It has been used as a military base by the UK and the USA for many years. India needs to

factor this large scale presence of the US Navy, with major military facilities in the region, into its strategic planning.

India's economic capital Mumbai (Bombay) could actually be said to be an island in the Arabian Sea. India's major oil assets lie in this region. This region extends to the Persian Gulf, Horn of Africa and the neighbourhood. The importance of the region gets further accentuated because of the presence of the Pakistan Navy. The region is of future strategic importance too because of the potential of developing the North-South corridor linking India via Iran to Central Asia and Russia.<sup>5</sup>

The fourth zone of the Indian Ocean is the West Indian Ocean region. It comprises the African littoral and exotic islands like Mauritius, Seychelles and Reunion. India has a limited presence in this zone. The major emphasis is on tourism and Indian Diasporas in these islands have excellent linkages with the homeland. For the last couple of years, China has started showing interest in this region. In February 2007, President Hu Jintao paid an official state visit to Seychelles, along with visits to eight African countries. If China needs a military base in the Indian Ocean, the Seychelles may be a considered choice as it has the best global position for its interests in Africa and the Indian Ocean region<sup>6</sup>. Naturally, Chinese interest in the region becomes a cause of concern of India.

India operates in all these four zones which proffer different challenges. Along with these challenges, India is forced to live with global perceptions such as "India—like other states that are geographically large and also ambitious—believes that its security will be best guaranteed by enlarging its security perimeter and, specifically, achieving a position of influence in the larger region that encompasses the Indian Ocean. New Delhi regards the Indian Ocean as its backyard and deems it both natural and desirable that India function as, eventually, the leader and the predominant influence in this region."<sup>7</sup>

It needs to be underlined that India is not a territorially expansionistic power. It has never shown any interest in encroachment of any other state's borders. It looks at the IOR more as an opportunity to develop its economy. At

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the same, time, being a peninsula, it has large maritime border and needs to remain vigilant. During the sixty years of its existence, India has been forced to fight three and half wars with Pakistan and one war with China. Apart from this historical reality, India needs to factor in other issues like safeguarding its SLOCs, terrorism, sea piracy, smuggling, etc. in its security calculus. All these factors generate concerns for India's security establishment. This has further translated into India making considerable efforts to develop maritime security establishments which essentially include the Indian Navy and Indian Coast Guard. Unfortunately, few view India's legitimate concerns in the correct perspective and, hence, the criticism regarding its investments in the maritime security apparatus as a design to influence the IOR.

### **Threat Identification**

At the beginning of this paper, India's geo-strategic perspective of the region has been discussed giving a macro-view about India's concerns in the region. More specifically, the threats to India (and the Indian Navy) are often reflected as concentric circles, with India as a centre and threats extending outwards<sup>8</sup>. The region in the innermost circle constitutes states (with whom India shares maritime boundaries) and islands in close vicinity. They are Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar and the island states of Sri Lanka and Maldives. The middle circle could be said to constitute the Persian Gulf and Southeast Asian region. The threats that reside in the outermost circle are essentially external powers but when viewed through the prism of maritime boundary, would include China with which India shares only a land border.

Amongst these concentric circles, India encounters both conventional and non-conventional threats. Also, the region is prone to various natural disasters where help from the navy becomes essential. The following paragraphs discuss the various threats in these individual circles.

### **Innermost Concentric Circle**

India-Pakistan relations have seen many upheavals since the birth of the two countries. The threat from Pakistan comes in various forms: historical, ideological and political. The only classical conflict (1971 War) fought by both the navies demonstrated the effectiveness of the Indian Navy, where it effectively blockaded Pakistan's Karachi port. However, geographically, Karachi port is better placed and has India's critical infrastructure (oil assets and major industrial units) within reach.

For the last two decades, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has

provided covert support to terrorist groups active in Kashmir. However, there have been no major occasions of maritime terrorism in the Arabian Sea region. But India understands that Al Qaeda has sympathisers in Pakistan and the Indian Navy needs to factor in the possibility of maritime terrorism into its security calculus.

The capability comparison in respect of the Indian and Pakistani Navies indicates that the Pakistan Navy is roughly half the size of India's in respect of manpower and almost one-fifth in respect of firepower. The Pakistan Navy is trying to possess more of a qualitative advantage than the quantitative. However, looking at the Indian Navy's modernisation drive, it seems unlikely

that Pakistan will be able to catch up. Recently, India has successfully conducted the test for its K-15 submarine launched ballistic missile (SLBM) which is a nuclear capable missile. It is expected that India would have the capability of using an underwater platform for the delivery of nuclear weapons within the coming two years. This would complete India's "nuclear triad". Possession of such capability would place India many notches above the Pakistan Navy.

The major cause of concern in recent times for India has been development of the Gwadar port, Pakistan's first deep port capable of serving all sorts of cargo ships of any size. This port, which has been built with huge Chinese investments, and inaugurated on March 19, 2007, has immense geo-strategic significance. As per India's Naval Chief Admiral Sureesh Mehta, this port has "serious strategic implications for India. Being only 180 nautical miles from the exit of the Strait of Hormuz, Gwadar, being built in Baluchistan coast, would enable Pakistan take control over the world energy jugular and interdiction of Indian tankers."<sup>9</sup>

Bangladesh offers two basic challenges to India; one strategic and the other tactical. At the strategic level, it is feared that Bangladesh could provide a transit point for an invasion into India, say, may be, by China. At the tactical level, particularly during the last few years, Bangladesh has become a safe haven for many Islamic terror groups and there exists a possibility that with or without the knowledge of the Bangladesh government, a few anti-India groups could use a maritime route to undertake terror attacks. In respect of Myanmar, India's major concerns are Chinese interests in the region. Also, insurgency on the Indo-Myanmar

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border is a cause of concern for India, particularly for its northeastern region.

Terrorism in Sri Lanka is an extremely contentious issue for India. For more than two decades, the security and stability of this country has been seriously threatened due to continued violent and separatist ethnic conflict. The LTTE is one of the most ruthless terrorist outfits in the world. The outfit was responsible for the killing of India's ex-Prime Minister Mr. Rajiv Gandhi. India had intervened in the ongoing conflict between Sri Lanka and the LTTE by sending the Indian Peace-keeping Force (IPKF) way back during 1988-90, without much success. The LTTE, in spite of being a terrorist organisation, has considerable strength on the sea. It has not used it against India, but it is not in India's interest to have a non-state maritime rogue power in close proximity. Presently, India is not directly supporting Sri Lanka to handle this threat — the support is through checking the activities in the deep waters and on the coast, and by keeping the authorities informed. The Indian Coast Guard is also helping the Indian Navy in this process. Also, the Indian establishment is of the view that presently the LTTE is not strong enough to sustain its fight against the government for long and that the outfit's naval power has been badly weakened after several losses.<sup>10</sup>

India has excellent relations with the small island country, Maldives, and has helped it in the time of crisis. There was an attempt on November 3, 1988, to overthrow President Gayoom's regime. The Maldives had no army or navy. Indian forces reached the Maldives capital, Male, by air and sea, and ended the takeover bid. However, India needs to ensure that the island state does not come under the influence of any extra-regional power.

## **Middle Concentric Circle**

As seen above, in the first concentric circle, India has considerable security interests. Like any other nation-state, India needs to monitor this region to safeguard its economic and security interests. However, it would be incorrect to conclude that India is interested in policing this region. The word 'policing' depicts Indian policies with an extremely narrow focus. In fact, India is more interested in this region having greater importance from the global economy point of view and would like the region and the port facilities it offers to flourish with business.

On similar lines, India looks at the most important region within this middle concentric circle region: the Malacca Strait. The Malacca Strait is one of the busiest waterways in the world. Booming economies like India and China have much at stake in this region. The Strait of Malacca is the shortest sea route between India, China and Indonesia. More than 50,000 vessels per year transit through this

region. Narrow channels, shallow reefs and slow traffic (more than 900 ships pass through region, which covers the waters around Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia) are the salient features of this region. Unfortunately, the region is also a victim of piracy<sup>11</sup>.

Almost 80 per cent of Japan's energy supply from the West Asian region passes through this narrow zone. For China, this region becomes extremely important because its increasing energy needs are being satisfied by the supply from West Asia only. India's maritime vision<sup>12</sup> for the first quarter of the 21st century, which spans the arc from the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca as a legitimate area of interest, should be viewed in the backdrop of these geo-political and economic realities.

The region has also become a hotbed for terrorism. The October 2002 Bali bombing illustrates the likely threat of terrorism. India is aware that from oil tankers to holiday resorts on the Indian west coast like Goa (which incidentally also has a naval base), anything could be a potential target for the terrorists. The region constitutes a Muslim majority population, particularly in states like Malaysia and Indonesia. Here India understands that it could play a more important role towards engaging these countries than any other power (read the US), if the need arises. Hence, India is trying to engage various powers in the Strait, from the strategic as well as economic perspective.

### **Outer Concentric Circle**

For any state, the countries in its outermost circle may not be much significance when looked at through the strategic prism. However, in the case of India, the outer concentric circle is of great significance because China lies in this zone. India shares land boundaries with China but has no maritime proximities.

Both these ancient civilisations are showing rapid economic progress and their "peaceful rise" is being taken for granted by many in the world. Relations between the countries have become cordial over the years and it appears that India is no longer preoccupied with the thought of the 1962 defeat by the Chinese forces. However, there are still some areas of mutual concern. These concerns, from the Indian point of view, are of two types: first, the unresolved

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boundary dispute between the two states; and, second, China's continuing military support to Pakistan and its efforts to strengthen strategic ties with India's neighbours.

Apart from China, India needs to remain alive to the presence of the US in the region. Post-Cold War, India's relations with the US are showing a gradual progression towards friendliness. Still, India understands that in the great power dynamics, the US could try to engage India mainly to contain China.

Post 9/11, Indo-US relations are on an upswing. Particularly on the nuclear issues, the understanding between these states indicates that a certain amount of maturity is rapidly developing in their relationship. It is hoped that the US would become a security enabler for India in this region. Also, India envisages expanding its economic ties with both China and the US and would like to make favourable use of the IOR towards this.

All these challenges discussed above are 'geography (zone)' specific. The biggest challenge which India could encounter is of natural disasters which is an issue beyond political borders. The entire IOR region is prone to natural disasters. The Indian Navy did a commendable job during the December 2004 tsunami calamity. Apart from the tsunami, the Indian Navy needs to remain prepared to address many other likely disasters in the region like cyclones (hurricanes), floods and earthquakes.

## **Dealing with the Threat**

The global security settings have witnessed an unusual transformation in the past half-decade. The Indian Navy is responding effectively to this transformation. The success of various modern and emerging technologies during the recent the wars has dictated the revolution in military affairs (RMA). The Indian Navy is incorporating various new technologies in its modernisation programme. The navy is responding to the signs of transformation in India's strategic interests from the "ideational paradigm to an interest driven autonomy paradigm".<sup>13</sup>

Since maritime security interests involve all the interests of the state on the seas, the Indian Navy is also looking at its job more holistically. It understands that some threats are of a semi-permanent nature and a few could disappear. Also, new threats could emerge any time (for instance, till 2004, natural disasters were not considered as a 'threat' where a fighting arm of the military architecture would have to invest significantly). Maritime security in totality envelops the state's efforts to counter terrorism at sea, piracy and smuggling, apart from addressing various conventional roles of the navy.

Like for any other navy, platforms will remain a crucial infrastructure for the Indian Navy too. Presently, India has only one aircraft carrier in its inventory. The *Admiral Gorshkov* is expected to join by 2010. Recently, in 2007, an ex US Navy Austin-class amphibious transport dock ship, USS *Trenton*, joined the Indian fleet. Other vessels under construction include the indigenous air defence ship being built in India, to be completed by 2012, the 2,500-tonne anti-submarine warfare corvettes, 6,640-tonne Kolkata class destroyers incorporating stealth technology, and several classes of patrol boats and fast attack craft<sup>14</sup>.

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Also, the navy is looking towards induction of sunrise technologies for the first time. Highly sophisticated early warning systems, both indigenous and imported, are being integrated with suitable platforms. Network-centric operations are being given adequate thrust to integrate various platforms like ships, submarines and aircrafts. The navy is looking at space assets for the purposes of communication. A naval communication satellite is being developed by the Indian Space Research Organisation in collaboration with the Indian Navy, along with a few others<sup>15</sup>.

The 21st century threats are expected to be conventional as well as asymmetric in nature. At the same time, tasks like participating in major disaster relief and operations outside the region demand greater flexibility for the navy, in terms of both strategy and tactics. The Indian Navy did a commendable job during the tsunami operations but the tsunami also exposed a serious void in India's naval capabilities. The Indian Navy suffers from a serious handicap in terms of its capacity for integral sealift and airlift. This demands the necessity of landing platform dock (LPD) type vehicles which could be used for a variety of other contingencies, as well as being an ideal command and control platform<sup>16</sup>. Currently, India has only one LPD, the INS *Jalashwa* L41, which was commissioned during 2007,<sup>17</sup> and the country needs to invest more in this area.

It is also envisaged that for India to play its rightful role, say, by 2025, it would need to invest more towards enhancing its intervention/expeditionary capabilities. The late Gen K Sundarji, former chief of army staff, had often spoken of converting an existing infantry division to an air assault division by about the year 2000. However, it appears that budgetary considerations may have played a role in this idea not being translated into reality. Besides being necessary for out-of-area contingencies, air assault capability is a significant force multiplier in conventional conflict. Experts feel that a force structure constituting about two air assault/rapid reaction divisions, with one

amphibious brigade each and two air assault brigades per division could boost the navy's capabilities<sup>18</sup>.

## Conclusion

Today, there is no major clash between India and any other state in the IOR on any issue. India's security interests are linked to its economic interests in the IOR, and are focussed towards structuring cooperative economic and security mechanisms. In the recent past, the Indian Navy has been involved in building 'maritime bridges' through naval engagements by participating in various naval exercises with other states. The modernisation in the Indian Navy is taking place to match the emerging security needs. For India, the present era is one of transition wherein it is making its presence felt in the IOR because of its economic growth. At the same time, the 'rise' of China also has a maritime dimension. The IOR is important, both for players within the region as well for players outside it. India understands that collective security could be the *mantra* for tomorrow and, hence, is constructively engaging the various regional and external rim players.

## Notes

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