

# India's Maritime Concerns and Strategies

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## Preamble

India's interests at sea are not something 'stand alone' but an essential ingredient of the totality of its security environment. These maritime concerns and strategies should, therefore, be viewed holistically, in conjunction with the entire gamut of the nation's interests. Further, unlike land frontiers, which are more defined and quantifiable and have to be 'protected' or defended, maritime interests have a larger connotation, requiring them to be safeguarded and enhanced. This important difference between sanctity of territorial integrity, and consolidation of maritime interests, needs to be recognized, especially by nations whose fortunes are closely tied to the seas.

## The Emerging Security Environment

The global security environment has shifted from Europe and is focused on the Asia-Pacific generally, and in Asia, in particular. It is, therefore, not surprising that we have a swathe of American military presence stretching from Turkey in the west to Japan in the east, and including the CAR, in addition to formidable capabilities which can be brought to bear from the sea. This situation is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. The Indian Ocean is one of the major theatres of Asia-Pacific. The strategic imperatives of America, to have a dominating presence in Asia, to exert influence over its energy assets, to ensure safe movement of commerce and to counter radical Islamic terrorism, are inextricably linked to this vast stretch of water. The countries of concern are littorals of this space, the major terrorist movements originate from here and safe movement of energy requires the sea-lanes to be made secure. It is in this overall context that India has to look at the maritime dimensions of its security.

## The Indian Ocean

Nearly half of the entire seaborne commerce of the world

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moves across the waters of the Indian Ocean with as much as 20 per cent of this commerce, or \$ 500 billion, in the form of oil and gas of which, more than half is shipped eastwards through the sea lanes of South-East Asia. Consequently, countries outside these waters have a natural interest in the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean region. For example, 70 per cent of Japan's needs of oil are met from the Gulf, and South Korea is equally dependent on imports from this region. The USA also imports 20 per cent of its energy needs from here. France imports half of its energy needs from this region and China has now become a major importer of Gulf oil, overtaking Japan. These requirements, of China in particular, will increase in the years to come. Thus, the entire Asia-Pacific is, and will, remain critically dependent on the energy resources of the region and on the safety of their movement. As much as 65 per cent of the world's discovered oil reserves and 35 per cent of its gas are located in this region, which accounts for 40 per cent of global oil production annually. These are very important and critical assets. There are also resources below the sea that are still to be discovered. These existing and potential resources and the competitive energy environment that they are likely to create, lend great strategic significance to the Indian Ocean region.

At the same time, the region suffers from serious vulnerabilities. The sea lanes entering and exiting from these waters pass through several narrow passages e.g. the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Aden, Suez Canal, the Strait of Malacca etc, creating 'choke points', literally, making it possible for rogue states and non-state actors to interdict or disrupt shipping, thus, jeopardizing the safety of cargoes moving across the important east-west trade routes. Last year, more than half of all piracy at sea, worldwide, took place in the Malacca Straits and surrounding waters. With some 60,000 ships transiting the Strait annually, effects of consequent disruption in the trade chain on the economic growth of most major economies are not difficult to visualise. Furthermore, most littorals have been nation states for less than fifty years, and religious, ethnic and societal discords plague many of them. The fact that several are ruled by authoritarian regimes and are dependent on 'single product' economies, especially in the Gulf region, adds to their domestic and political fragility.

On the one hand, therefore, the Indian Ocean region is of great strategic significance and one in which major countries



external to it have a stake. On the other, most of its littorals have potentially unstable societies that can suffer destabilisation, economically and politically. As the largest country in the region, and one with important economic and technological growth imperatives, India has, at the same time, to be seen as a credible, stabilising influence and also be able to safeguard its own interests from regional turmoil and instabilities.

### India's Concerns

India has some specific concerns in the Indian Ocean. As many as 4.2 million Indian citizens work in the Gulf countries, contributing over \$ 12 billion to the Indian economy annually. Our interests require that their work environment remains stable and their contributions are not affected in any adverse manner. All Gulf littorals are Islamic countries with which India's own very large muslim population has many interfaces. These include, in a positive sense, religious interaction as in the '*Haj*' pilgrimage but also activities inimical to our interests such as the funding of 'madararasas' and fundamentalist organisations in India, some of which fuel terrorism. Another vital concern is India's own dependence on oil imports from the Gulf. Over 70 per cent of India's annual oil consumption comes from this region and the figure is likely to go up from 100 million tons last year to 300 million tons by 2020, making it the third largest importer after the USA and China but ahead of Japan. Any stoppage or interdiction of this oil will have crippling impact on the country's economic growth. It is equally important that our offshore oil assets, spread over an area of over 48,000 square kilometres and likely to double in the next two decades, are protected from attacks or encroachments by hostile elements. The same holds true for the nearly 8,000 odd tankers that will be coming to Indian ports in 2020. Almost 95 per cent of India's overseas trade moves through the medium of the sea. From \$ 210 billion last year, this figure is likely to cross \$ 400 billion in 2010 and exceed \$ 1 trillion by 2020, constituting over 40 per cent of the country's GDP. Of this, about half, or \$ 500 billion, would be moving through the waters of the South East Asian region, matching existing US seaborne trade through the area. Safety of these sea-lanes, the coastal offshore areas, and of our ports through which this trade moves is, therefore, critical to our national interests. It would require just one ship scuttled at



the entrance to put any of several major ports out of business for many months and determined terrorists cannot be unaware of this vulnerability.

India shares maritime boundaries, not just with three of its South Asian neighbours, but shares the Andaman Sea in the Bay of Bengal with four countries of the ASEAN viz. Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. While boundaries have been delineated with most of them, there are, inevitably, irritants of poaching, smuggling and illegal movement of arms. Arms have been taken across to the East Coast of Sri Lanka for use of the LTTE terrorists from the Thai coast through the Andaman group of islands. Similarly, they have been known to be taken up the coast through Myanmar and on to our north eastern states. Another serious concern concerns the narcotics trade which is inextricably linked to the arms trade and, therefore, to terrorism. India is located in the middle of two major narcotics centres of the world, centering on Myanmar in the East and Afghanistan in the West. We hear a lot about seizures made at airports and on land but one seldom gets to hear of transportation by sea, which is infinitely easier and permits large quantities to be shipped. Two years ago, a Japanese vessel, masquerading under a false name and flag, was routinely investigated in an Indian port and found to have been engaged in the smuggling of narcotics and arms. There must be many other vessel carriers which have not been caught. Finally, as highlighted earlier, India's interface with the Asia-Pacific region is crucial to its economic growth. Stability in the countries with which we trade, and their prosperity, is, therefore, in India's interest. Safe movement of seaborne commerce is essential to this relationship.

### **Maritime Terrorism**

Many people tend to mistake piracy at sea for maritime terrorism. The former has existed for as long as men have sailed the seas and largely covers robbery, petty or big, often with the connivance of the crew. In recent years, it has become more violent with sophisticated arms being used and crews taken hostage for ransom. The situation is disturbing but will not, unlike terrorism, affect the security of nation states. But piracy, which leads to hijacking of ships, falls under a different and much more serious category. Ships thus taken over can be used for clandestine trade after disposal of original cargoes or for smuggling of drugs



and arms, and even people. It is organised crime, because these activities are not executable without a vast network. It is also transnational. Ships belong to one country, are registered in another, crewed by people from several others and carry cargoes bound for destinations around the world. So, the security of regional waters is important, not just for those littoral to it but also for those well beyond. Vessels pirated or hijacked in one area can pose a menace much farther away. So far, we have seen Al Qaeda attacks on the USS Cole in Aden, on a French oil tanker off Yemen, on offshore oil terminals and tankers at Basra, and the sinking of super ferries by the Abu Sayyaf group in the Phillipines. A planned attack on naval facilities in Singapore by the *Jemaah Islamia* was narrowly averted. The ultimate terrorism, on par with the 11 September 2001 attack, can be the sinking of hijacked ships in busy channels or at the entrances of major ports to bring their activities to a standstill for many months. This may appear very far-fetched but who could have visualised that commercial airliners would be used as veritable bombs until this actually happened. Ships are easier to hijack and will cause damage beyond that inflicted on 11 September 2001. Countries cannot cope with maritime terrorism by themselves. It will also not help to be able to react when the damage has already been done. Proactive and preventive capabilities are essential. There is need for information sharing, for effective and stringent laws, for suitable organisations and capabilities and for coordination and cooperation at the national and regional levels. All of this calls for close engagement at every level with countries around us, external to the region and littoral to it. Maritime power has to play the lead role in such interfaces.

### **The External Stakeholders**

The USA, as has been mentioned earlier, is a major player in the Indian Ocean. Not only does it have vital strategic interests in this region, but has \$ 600 billion overseas trade transiting through the Malacca Straits. It also deploys considerable maritime power to support and safeguard them. India shares some of these interests, in particular, those pertaining to the fight against terrorism, proliferation of WMD and the safety of seaborne commerce. The Indian Navy has been carrying out joint exercises with the US Navy for about a decade and their scope has been increasing to facilitate the desired level of interfaces between both navies. This



positive relationship extends to India's maritime relations with countries such as the UK, France, Australia, South Africa etc. India and Russia also have a strong relationship in military cooperation flowing from shared interests. The Indian Navy has quite a large number of ships, submarines and weapon systems of Russian origin but it is only now that it has embarked on joint exercises with the Russian Navy. This is likely to become a regular feature of the relationship since Russia also depends heavily on the sea routes of the Indian Ocean for its trade and is concerned about their safety. There is need for such engagements as they add to confidence and mutual trust. The level of maritime cooperation between India and Japan is also increasing slowly. These relationships are not military alliances but designed to facilitate greater understanding at sea during times of peace.

### **Neighbourhood**

As far as the littoral countries are concerned, both in the Gulf and in the ASEAN region and in the immediate neighbourhood, India has important economic, political and security interests, and naval interactions with these countries through ship visits, exchange of personnel and joint exercises, enhance them. The Gulf region is not only critical for its oil and gas but also for other inputs to our economy, while the Malacca and Singapore Straits are among the world's most important shipping routes. As highlighted earlier, more than \$ 500 billion of India's overseas trade will pass through these waters in the next fifteen years. The gathering of ships hosted by the Navy every two years, under the name **Milan**, has begun to attract participation from many regional navies. Such cooperative programmes, which build trust and confidence, must be encouraged. Ships of the Indian Navy have assisted Sri Lanka in times of natural disaster and other difficult times. In Maldives, it was only the timely intervention of our naval and airborne forces that saved the legitimate government from being overthrown. Most recently, both these countries and Indonesia have seen immediate response from Indian maritime forces during the Tsunami disaster even as India, itself, suffered great loss of life and devastation. Indian ships have carried out patrols of the Exclusive Economic Zone of Mauritius at that country's request and ensured offshore and coastal security for the African summit conference in Mozambique last year. Joint patrols with the Indonesian Navy are being carried



out and the same cooperative interaction has now been initiated with the Thai Navy.

Relations with Pakistan continue to move in 'ups and downs'. At this moment, the environment is one of relative tranquility but this could change quickly. The reasons why this is so need not be elaborated and it would be enough to say that it is quite unlikely that this scenario will change radically in the foreseeable future, given the contradictions and compulsions in Pakistan's ruling establishment. Therefore, the Indian Navy, like its sister Services, has to be prepared to cope with any military eventualities. The main strength of the Pakistan Navy lies in its submarines and aircraft equipped with anti-ship missiles, but broadly speaking, India enjoys the required superiority in maritime power which is sufficiently dissuasive and this superiority must be maintained. The terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir - and even elsewhere in India - supported from Pakistan, is continuing, and we must have the necessary capabilities, military and diplomatic, to cope with it and also to bring pressure to bear on Pakistan from the international community. Probability of a military conflict between the two countries is not high so long as India maintains the required superiority. Pakistan is developing the port of Gwadar on the mouth of the Straits of Hormuz which needs to be factored into our security calculations, given that India's oil lifeline can easily be threatened by hostile elements, both state and non-state, operating out of Gwadar.

## China

As far as China is concerned, India's relations with that country have fluctuated, but in the emerging world order, things have begun to change. Both countries realise that economic and technological growth, are the real keys to power, and that any military confrontation can only act to the disadvantage of both. India is aware that China is going to be one of the two largest economies in the world by 2020 just as China realises that India, its existing GDP of just under \$ 800 billion growing at seven to eight per cent per annum, is, itself, poised to become a major economic power in the same time frame. Strategically, both China and India are very important ingredients of the Asian chessboard along with the USA. Bilateral trade between the two countries has jumped from a few hundred million dollars a decade ago to nearly



\$ 19 billion last year. It is likely to exceed \$ 50 billion by 2010, possibly making China our largest trading partner. During his visit to India in April 2005, Chinese Premier Weng Jia Bao spoke of a qualitatively enhanced relationship of strategic value between the two countries. So, there has been a visible improvement in Sino-Indian interfaces. Cooperation between the two militaries has also been initiated. A MOU for Defence Cooperation was concluded by the two Defence Ministers in June 2006, and Indian and PLA Navy ships have exercised together at sea. There has also been exchange of high level military visits. Both China and India are members of the maritime security groups in the Asean Regional Forum (ARF) and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP). Such engagements must be further enhanced. At the same time, ground realities also need to be recognised. The long pending boundary issues are still to be resolved. There is also the perception, in India, that China's involvement in India's neighbourhood is not sensitive to our security concerns. Its naval modernisation has already made it possible for the PLA Navy to deploy at long distances. Availability of port facilities in Myanmar and Pakistan will give it an Indian Ocean capability that it does not presently have. In short, while India does not view China as a threat, or even as a rival, the implications of its maritime postures have to be noted.

### **The Littoral Domain**

Littoral operations have assumed importance in the context of threats posed by non-state actors. Piracy and other illegal acts at sea, hijacking of ships and maritime terrorism come under this category. These, generally, take place in coastal waters or narrow channels, are executed quite quickly, and cannot be countered without a tightly integrated system of surveillance and response, networked for operations in real time. Even more important, given the transnational nature of such crimes and the differing approaches and capabilities of littoral nations, it will be very difficult to cope with the crimes unless there is close cooperation and coordination amongst the littorals and stakeholder countries. Much more trust and confidence in multilateral cooperation will be needed. With future threats arising more from non-traditional sources rather than from conventional military conflict between nations, these are the issues which merit more serious consideration.



## India's Maritime Strategy

In this background of increasing interests and concerns at sea, India's maritime philosophy is three-pronged, in which capability and cooperation must be the prime ingredients. Essentially, we must:

- (a) Have capabilities at sea which will facilitate engagement with countries with whom we share common concerns, be seen as reassuring by those around us and, at the same time, act as a credible deterrence to present and potential adversaries.
- (b) Create a cooperative maritime environment in the region, providing help and assistance as needed.
- (c) Develop mechanisms to cope with maritime terrorism, at sea, and in our ports and harbours.

## Conclusion

In the emerging security environment, the North Indian Ocean region has acquired strategic and security dimensions which India just cannot ignore. It has important maritime interests which stretch from the Gulf region in the West to the coast of South-East Asia in the East. Non traditional threats are becoming increasingly potent and the sea lanes of communication, critical to India's energy security and economic growth, are beginning to get threatened. The littoral is becoming the new domain of maritime operations. All together, the environment requires capabilities at sea that can safeguard our interests through a maritime strategy- mix which encompasses engagement, cooperation, reassurance and deterrence.