

Changing Contours of India's Strategic Environment and Outlook: 1870-2020

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Introduction

Since 1870, when the United Service Institution (USI) of India was established 'for the furtherance of interest and knowledge in the art, science and literature of national security', India's strategic environment and outlook has undergone significant changes. This article looks at some of the major changes that have occurred during the past 150 years in terms of India's strategic outlook.

Between 1870 and August 1947, India's strategic environment was viewed within the framework of British imperial interests. From August 1947 till today, this strategic environment is an integral component of independent India's ongoing process of nation-building, with its own priorities and interests. Two major contours emerged in India's strategic environment over this period. One was the maritime domain for protecting and projecting India's strategic interests. The second was the demarcation of India's land frontiers and its impact on the territorial integrity, security and prosperity of India.

The Maritime Domain

The contours of India's strategic environment over the past 150 years have been deeply influenced by the construction of the Suez Canal in 1869. The two chokepoints of the Indian Ocean, at the Bab al-Mandab/Gulf of Aden and the Straits of Malacca, have played a significant role in this process. From the 1970s, a third chokepoint at the Straits of Hormuz has acquired a salience with the emergence of the Gulf oil economies whose exports of energy meet the bulk of contemporary India's energy security needs.¹

The newly opened Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), that traversed India's maritime domain², required protection from piracy in the Red Sea. This resulted in the fortification of the port of Aden in 1839, using British Indian military resources. Increased commercial shipping along the Indian Ocean SLOC necessitated a more robust deployment of naval assets. Aden was transformed into a major strategic hub. Its significance increased when the first submarine telegraphic cable connecting Aden with the outside world became functional in 1870.³ Closer to India, the Gulf Region became part of India's strategic environment in 1892, with the signing of 'Exclusive Arrangements' between British India and the local Arab Rulers. These treaties "made it obligatory for the Trucial Sheikhs not to enter into agreement or correspondence with any power other than the British Government. In return, the British assumed the responsibility of defending the emirates from foreign aggressions".⁴

As part of British India's strategic interests, port settlements were established along the littoral of the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf. Infrastructural support for bunkering of naval and commercial ships, and ancillary economic activities, developed with the participation of Indian traders and workers. The discovery and exploitation of oil in Iran (1911), Iraq, Bahrain (1932) and Saudi Arabia (1938)⁵ made this region strategically important. The significance of these ports and SLOC were emphasised during times of conflict, including the two World Wars during which Indian troops were deployed in Egypt/West Asia, Mesopotamia and Persia. The use of the Indian Rupee in several Gulf States till 1970 illustrated the close linkage between India's strategic interests and the region.⁶ In the eastern Indian Ocean, British Indian resources were deployed in securing the SLOC from India to the Straits of Malacca. Even after the declaration of the Straits Settlements as a Crown Colony administered directly by London in 1867,⁷ this region retained its importance for India's strategic environment.

This maritime domain played a critical role in the victory of India as part of the Allied armies during the Second World War, which made her a founder-member of the United Nations (UN) in 1945. The end of the Second World War and the independence of

India saw the Indian Navy taking on the erstwhile role of the Royal Navy in securing the SLOC of the Indian Ocean. In 1958, India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru said, "Now that we are free, we have once again realised the importance of the sea. We cannot afford to be weak at sea".⁸ In 1982, India became a State Party to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), making it the applicable international law for India's maritime domain. When signing the Treaty, India clarified that it understood that "the provisions of the Convention do not authorise other states to carry out in the exclusive economic zone and on the continental shelf, military exercises or manoeuvres, in particular those involving the use of weapons or explosives, without the consent of the coastal state".⁹

Today, international trade transported along these SLOC accounts for 40% of India's GDP. Over 8 million Indian nationals live and work in the oil economies of the Gulf States, remitting about \$40 billion annually into the Indian economy. Piracy continues to be the primary threat in the western Indian Ocean¹⁰ Region, disrupting and escalating costs of India's international trade. Over the past decade, Indian naval vessels have participated actively in a UN Security Council authorised operation to counter the threat of piracy from the Somali coast through active international cooperation.¹¹

India's strategic environment underwent a qualitative change following the articulation of India's maritime strategic framework under the 'Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)' policy in March 2015. Its five pillars include India's commitment to secure the SLOC; her willingness to contribute to overall maritime security in the region; collective action to respond to maritime challenges; the linkage between maritime security and the Blue Economy of the Indian Ocean; and partnership with countries outside the Indian Ocean Region in a peaceful manner based on international maritime rules and norms.¹²

Since 2019, India's SAGAR framework has been integrated into a holistic 'Indo-Pacific' strategic framework.¹³ The establishment of an International Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region in India, at Gurugram, has become a vibrant platform to implement SAGAR's vision of international cooperation

to collectively respond to threats to the western Indo-Pacific Region.¹⁴ India's proposal for an Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative in November 2019¹⁵ carried forward the strategic framework of engagement with ASEAN and Australia within a holistic Indo-Pacific framework.

The outlook for India's strategic environment in the maritime domain continues to be dominated by the need to secure the freedom of navigation along the four major SLOC of the Indo-Pacific. Threats to the security of these SLOC emanate from piracy and terrorism, as well as the increasingly assertive naval presence of communist China¹⁶ in the Indo-Pacific. Agreements with Indian Ocean partner countries for joint stationing of Indian naval assets to respond to such threats is an integral part of India's strategic outlook today. An emerging dimension to India's strategic environment in the Indian Ocean is the fact that most of the critical international infrastructure for the digital communications used in Digital India is carried by fibre-optic cables along these SLOC.¹⁷ This will become more pronounced as India prioritises the use of cyber technologies for her security and prosperity, requiring increased international cooperation with other countries around the Indian Ocean, and her strategic partners.

India's Land Borders

When the USI was founded, the primary strategic focus of British India was on the expansionist role of the Russian Empire into Asia. Russia annexed Central Asia in 1865. British India's response, including through military campaigns, influenced India's strategic environment until 1947.¹⁸ After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the emergence of Central Asia and Afghanistan as a pivotal strategic space, India has initiated a new strategic engagement with this broad region.¹⁹

Currently, India's strategic environment in her immediate neighborhood is dominated by two specific issues. These are her unresolved boundary issues with China and Pakistan.

On 03 July 1914, British India and Tibet signed the Simla Convention that resulted in the McMahon Line separating Tibet from India. Chinese authorities participating at the meeting did not

sign the convention because they objected to Article 9 which demarcated the border between Inner and Outer Tibet. The annexation of Tibet by communist China, in October 1950, transformed India's frontier with Tibet into the India-China frontier. In 1959, communist China re-opened the Simla Convention's legal status on the grounds that it had not been agreed to by the Chinese "central government".²⁰

The 1962 India-China war froze normal relations between the two countries until 1988. Attempts to resolve, and clarify, the India-China boundary followed the signing of an Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control on the India-China Border Areas, signed in 1993 during the then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's visit. A Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation was issued during then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to China in 2003, which established a Special Representatives (SR) mechanism to explore the framework of a boundary settlement. Despite almost two dozen rounds of talks so far, the SR mechanism has not succeeded in resolving the boundary issue.²¹

India's strategic environment in her immediate neighbourhood became complicated following the partition of India in August 1947, which resulted in new international borders to the west and east of India. Armed aggression by Pakistan, in Jammu and Kashmir, from October 1947 led to instability along India's western border, and generated India's complaint to the UN Security Council on 01 January 1948 on the violation of her territorial integrity.

The UN Security Council failed to vacate Pakistan's aggression in Jammu and Kashmir.²² China occupied about 38,000 sq km of Indian Territory in Jammu and Kashmir in the 1950s. On 02 March 1963, Pakistan illegally ceded 5180 sq km of Indian Territory in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir to China.²³

In July 1972, the Simla Agreement between India and Pakistan committed both sides to resolve outstanding issues including over Jammu and Kashmir bilaterally.²⁴ The Treaty was registered under the UN Charter, allowing it to be "invoked before any organ of the United Nations".²⁵ Since 1990, Pakistan has

sought to renege from its legal obligation under this Treaty and attempted to internationalise the Jammu and Kashmir issue.²⁶ It has also openly resorted to the use of cross-border terrorism as an instrument of state policy to destabilise India.²⁷ This has led to a hiatus in the bilateral dialogue between India and Pakistan, including on regional connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Since 2016, India has taken the initiative to counter this strategic bottleneck by entering a tripartite connectivity project with Iran and Afghanistan using the port of Chabahar in Iran.²⁸ The future of this initiative will depend on the impact of the policies of the major powers on Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

In August 2019, China used Pakistan's attempts to re-open its obligations under the 1972 Simla Agreement by convening a closed-door meeting of the UN Security Council on 'The India-Pakistan Question'. The last time the Security Council had discussed this issue had been during the Bangladesh War in December 1971.²⁹ The meeting did not issue any report or press statement. China followed this up with another informal meeting on the same topic in the UN Security Council in January 2020, again without obtaining any decision or press statement from the Council.³⁰ This activism by China is expected to continue in the near future, posing a challenge for India's strategic diplomacy.

On her eastern flank, India has brought clarity to her land and maritime borders with Bangladesh. The Land Boundary Protocol of 1974 was implemented with the exchanges of enclaves in both countries and completed by 01 August 2015.³¹ Bangladesh took her dispute with India over her maritime boundary, in the Bay of Bengal, to the Permanent Court of Arbitration under UNCLOS. The award of the Court giving 76% of the disputed area to Bangladesh and 23% to India was accepted and implemented by India in July 2014.³²

This one act underscored India's commitment to the international rule of law in the maritime domain of the Indo-Pacific, and stood out in stark contrast with communist China's rejection of the unanimous award in favour of the Philippines in July 2016 by the Permanent Court of Arbitration on a dispute over the South China Sea initiated by the Philippines.³³ India's action also demonstrated her credibility as a partner in international

cooperation projects designed to integrate India with South-East Asia's ASEAN group of nations as part of India's 'Act East' policy articulated in November 2014.³⁴

Strategic Outlook for India

India's strategic environment today is driven by prioritisation of her security and economic interests. Transformation of India requires her to strategize her international relationships for eradicating poverty, generating employment, increasing manufacturing, acquiring technologies, setting international norms, and expanding her role in the global political and economic spheres.

India's strategic outlook must respond to the rapid changes in international relations to achieve her strategic objectives. During the past decade, the rise of assertive unilateralism by the major powers has posed a challenge to the principle of international cooperation, which has guided India's international engagement for more than a century.³⁵

The global landscape facing India as an elected member of the UN Security Council for 2021-22 and as the incoming Chair of the G-20 in 2022 requires her to have strategic flexibility. Her primary strategic challenge will come from an increasingly militarily assertive communist China, aligned with Pakistan. The strategic framework of the 'Indo-Pacific', as presently conceptualised, including through the Quad³⁶, will have to integrate both the maritime and land domains of India's strategic environment to become an effective strategy to counter the threat from China, aligned with Pakistan. India must respond to this challenge through an imaginative use of her carefully cultivated network of significant "strategic partnerships"³⁷ to transform her into a major global power of the 21st century.

Endnotes

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