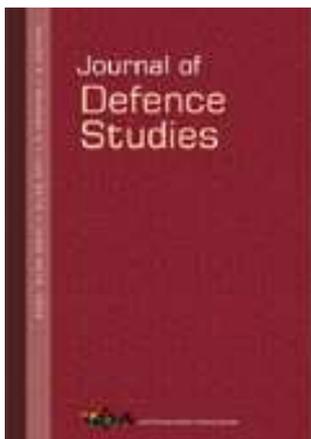


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Zorawar Daulet Singh

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# Foreign Policy and Sea Power

## India's Maritime Role Flux

*Zorawar Daulet Singh\**

*The core argument this article makes is that India's maritime worldview and role conceptions have not only been evolving since the 1950s, but they have also been closely interlinked with how policymakers thought about India's regional identity and the state's economic capacity to release resources towards sea power. Today, there are three maritime role conceptions that are vying for the apex's strategic attention, and they are reflective of a deeper role flux in India's regional identity. While these maritime role conceptions may not be entirely mutually exclusive, each role implies a foreign policy posture, maritime doctrine and a logical force structure. This article will explicate the evolution of these maritime role conceptions; offer reasons for the role flux in recent years; and highlight key, contemporary policy-relevant issues to anchor the debate on the inter-relationship between foreign policy and sea power.*

One of the most fascinating aspects of sea power is how versatile and extensive it can be. It can be an enabler for other forms of power to be effective—the classic gunboat diplomacy. It can isolate and support wartime strategies and tactics on land. It could simply be a means to signal, in quite visible ways, a state's political mood, will or preferences. It can dissuade, deter and in certain asymmetric conditions, perhaps even compel other actors. It is also a highly flexible military instrument where states can react quickly, probe intentions and even retreat, thereby avoiding the costs of rigid security commitments that are associated with other forms of military power. And, since sea power operates largely in

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\* The author is a Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research, Delhi.



the 'commons', it rarely encounters the constraints that other forms of coercive power quickly invite.

These virtues, however, can also be a disadvantage when sea power is not carefully conceived and developed as part of a larger whole, where state identity, interests, capacities, institutions and geopolitical context shape a maritime role. It would be futile to have a conversation on sea power that did not touch upon the state's self-image and the wider foreign policy context and choices at a particular stage in a state's strategic history. Foreign policy and sea power are inextricably linked.<sup>1</sup> Thus, it seems logical enough for us to expect the link to always hold in practice. Yet, in India's case, we do not find this intuitive connection to always hold. Perhaps it is not surprising then that a recent study observed that the Indian debate about its navy's future remains unresolved.<sup>2</sup>

### **Argument**

Maritime power 'is the ability of the nation to use the seas to safeguard and progress its national interests.'<sup>3</sup> Though it is obvious from this definition that a state's foreign policy and its sea power are inextricably linked, it is also apparent that the purposes underlying sea power are by no means straightforward, especially for hybrid powers like India, which have large and persistent continental commitments along with the opportunity of crafting parallel maritime roles. The existential security challenge from a nuclear-armed Pakistan and its proxy war in Kashmir, as well as the concurrent responsibility of preserving a peaceful status quo on a 4056 kilometre (km) unresolved northern border with China, ensures that Indian security managers must make maritime choices in a context of resource competition between different components of military power, while also being cognisant of the reality where the main vectors of geopolitical challenges are likely to be continental for the foreseeable future. In other words, policymakers will find it difficult to sustain a maritime role that becomes detached from India's basic geopolitical setting and strategic environment.

The core argument this article makes is that India's maritime worldview and role conceptions have not only been evolving since the 1950s but they have also been closely interlinked with how policymakers thought about India's regional identity and the state's economic capacity to release resources towards sea power. Over the past two decades, because of a lack of regional role clarity at that grand strategic or political level, we have seen multiple maritime role conceptions emerging in the

strategic discourse. Such a dynamic or flux has complicated India's quest to pursue a sustainable maritime role and ensure that it is consistent with the larger purposes and priorities that drive India's foreign and security policies. Today, there are three maritime role conceptions that are vying for the apex's strategic attention, and they are reflective of a deeper role flux in India's regional identity. While these maritime role conceptions may not be entirely mutually exclusive, each role implies a foreign policy posture, maritime doctrine and a logical force structure. This article will explicate the evolution of these maritime role conceptions; offer reasons for the role flux in recent years; and highlight key, contemporary policy-relevant issues to anchor the debate on the inter-relationship between foreign policy and sea power. Such an exercise might assist policymakers and analysts in thinking more holistically about the trajectory of India's naval modernisation and evaluating different role choices and their linkage with Indian security interests and goals.

#### THE EVOLUTION OF INDIA'S REGIONAL SELF-IMAGE AND MARITIME ROLES DURING THE COLD WAR

The earliest ruminations of independent India's policymakers suggest that they were conscious of the hybrid geopolitical setting, that is, the vast continental space enveloping India's north and north-west and a massive oceanic expanse around India's peninsular south. An early glimpse into India's maritime worldview can be gleaned from Nehru's speeches and telegrams. In an April 1955 Congress parliamentary meeting, Nehru remarked:

For some time past...I felt how people in this great bulk of the north of India are, what might be said, land minded. They are not so conscious of the sea; naturally they are not as the people on the sea coast and the south of India.<sup>4</sup>

Nehru then addressed the question of defence:

You think in terms of army in the north. In terms of defence in the south...more immediately of the sea you think about...There is the land consciousness in the north and the sea consciousness in the south, and we have to be equally conscious of both land and sea apart from the air, which is common to both...the whole conquest of India by the British, and the French and the Portuguese and all that came because we lost on the sea...it is lack of this conception of sea power that has been our undoing often in the past...for a

country like India the sea is most important from the defence point of view and obviously from the trade point of view.<sup>5</sup>

A few months later, Nehru shared his perceptions with his Defence Minister, K.N. Katju. Highlighting how the British had shaped India's geopolitical culture, he noted, 'We have been brought up into thinking of our land frontier during British times and even subsequently and yet India, by virtue of her long coastline, is very much a maritime country.' Referring to the then published K.M. Panikkar's book, *Geographical Factors in Indian History*, Nehru pointed out the existence of both continental and maritime outlooks in India: 'The North has thought in terms of the land frontier; the South in terms of the sea.'<sup>6</sup> He then focused on the balance between different types of military power for India's security:

...not all the land forces can protect us from sea attacks. The Air Force can protect us to some extent but only to a very limited one just near our borders. The sea has no frontiers like the land, which has. India, therefore, has to play an important role in the ocean surrounding her. I do not mean to say that we should presume to control these oceans. That is too big a task. But we should be strong enough to resist the control of any other power.<sup>7</sup>

Nehru even gave his opinion on the navy's force structure:

The Defence of India and the development of our trade...require a certain capacity for sea defence...it is desirable for us to have two kinds of ship in the Navy...the Destroyer type, that is, small fast moving ships which can easily manoeuvre. Cruisers and big ships must be ruled out completely. These Destroyers or Frigates should be the main base of our Navy...An aircraft carrier also...is desirable...It is really a moving airstrip which can be sent anywhere and stationed anywhere. Its mere presence gives strength to the Navy and to our defence position...It gives us certain command over the area where it can reach.<sup>8</sup>

These quasi-theoretical ruminations highlight that India's maritime images are older than contemporary commentaries might have us believe. Yet, as Nehru knew well, India lacked the economic and industrial resources to give effect to this impulse for a maritime role. The navy's share of the defence budget was a mere 4 per cent in the early 1960s.<sup>9</sup> Also, Nehru was not willing to link sea power with India's regional foreign policy. India's expansive Asian identity and foreign

policy under Nehru constrained an exclusivist approach to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Ironically, it would be the continental conflicts of 1962, 1965 and 1971 that would impel Indian strategists to develop the full gamut of military power, with sea power also acquiring its share of attention and resources. In order to henceforth protect the Indian and subcontinental heartland from interference or coercion, a concern about external maritime activities in the Indian Ocean would become a more abiding concern for Delhi.<sup>10</sup>

By the turn of the 1960s, a clearer conception of India's regional identity and aspirations to subcontinental leadership drove the conversation on maritime capabilities. In March 1971, India intervened to assist the Bandaranaike regime in Sri Lanka in resisting a local rebellion. The December 1971 *USS Enterprise* experience dramatically showed the importance of sea-denial strength and the need for a stronger navy as well as a nuclear deterrence option to forestall a repeat attempt at great power coercion.<sup>11</sup> By the 1980s, India's regional role was further sustained and backed by material capabilities to become a 'net security provider' for South Asia.<sup>12</sup> According to one former naval commander, the Indian Navy's missions in the 1980s included: 'to be in a position to assist island republics of the Indian Ocean—notably Mauritius, the Seychelles, Sri Lanka—in case they seek Indian assistance, particularly against threats of subversion.'<sup>13</sup>

In 1983, Indira Gandhi approved an amphibious operation to assist the Mauritian Prime Minister, Anerood Jugnauth, after Delhi feared an attempted coup from a radical opposition leader. Ultimately, after internal contestations between the army and the navy on the viability of the intervention, Delhi decided to use the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) to pursue its goal.<sup>14</sup> In 1986, India undertook its first military intervention in the IOR when the *INS Vindhyagiri* was deployed to help abort a coup in the Seychelles.<sup>15</sup> In November 1988, India deployed its expeditionary forces to Male to rescue President Gayoom, who had appealed for help after the country was taken over by rebels.<sup>16</sup> Again, India demonstrated that it had special interests in the resolution of regional and IOR disputes, and was also able to link foreign policy goals with sea power to secure favourable political dispensations and prevent IOR states from falling into an external power's orbit of influence. Former Foreign Secretary, J.N. Dixit, expressed this regional outlook:

It is an external projection of our influence to tell our neighbours that if, because of your compulsions, of your aberrations, you

pose a threat to us, we are capable of, or we have a political will to project ourselves within your territorial jurisdiction for the limited purpose of bringing you back to the path of detachment and non-alignment.<sup>17</sup>

In sum, India's regional leadership during the latter part of the Cold War period was aimed at establishing a sort of sphere of influence as the southern maritime periphery was perceived as a potential springboard for external powers to undermine India's relative strengths in the subcontinent. The development of Indian naval power and its application sub-served Delhi's regional aspirations, foreign policy and leadership. The ongoing post-Cold War phase would witness Delhi reimagining its regional role, both in terms of how India would relate with its neighbours and with external actors in the maritime vicinity. What may be described as a neoliberal 'open door' foreign policy would not only condition Indian thinking about sea power but would also inadvertently produce a more ambitious set of maritime roles from within the institutional confines of the Indian Navy.

#### POST-COLD WAR ERA: RECEDING AND ESCAPING FROM SOUTHERN ASIA

The end of the Cold War altered India's regional self-image and through the 1990s, India sought to imagine a new regional role. Eschewing a reliance on military or coercive instruments to cultivate a friendly periphery, India projected an alternative posture by articulating a new role as a cooperative and benevolent regional power via the Gujral Doctrine. The Gujral Doctrine was premised on a policy of unilaterally accommodating India's neighbours to lower the levels of threat perception on India's periphery. Eschewing leadership, it aimed at 'building a conflict-free cooperative South Asia' and 'to resolve conflicts' through the 'concepts of common security, equal security and cooperative security between and among the countries of South Asia, its neighbouring regions as well as their individual members.'<sup>18</sup> The doctrine was a precursor to the later concept of a 'peaceful periphery' of the 2000s, when India promoted geo-economic links on a non-reciprocal framework as a potential glue for South Asia and the IOR.

Interestingly, as India's economy and domestic material base were expanding, India was recrafting its IOR maritime role by shedding some of its Indo-centric leadership images. Instead of espousing a special sphere of influence, policymakers now expressed a preference for neoliberal ideas

of interdependence and connectivity. In a 2007 speech, India's Foreign Minister outlined some of the new patterns that were informing India's regional policy:

Amidst the increasing globalisation of South Asian economies and polities, there is no question of India pursuing the outdated idea of an exclusive sphere of influence. India's strong support to the entry of China and Japan into SAARC [South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation] as observers underlines India's commitment to open regionalism in the subcontinent.<sup>19</sup>

The idea of a 'peaceful periphery' was linked to India's changing regional identity: from a power with a self-image of geopolitical leadership to an emerging economy prioritising economic growth and capital accumulation. The very construction of the concept of 'peaceful periphery' exuded a passive posture, as if India was pleading to be left alone to pursue her developmental goals.<sup>20</sup> Policymakers defined Indian interests in minimalist terms, 'Our quest is the transformation of India, nothing less and nothing more.'<sup>21</sup> To be sure, India's new regional identity was not at the expense of its neighbours, but it was 'a positive interest in working together with our neighbours to realize the joint development of South Asia.'<sup>22</sup> Yet, it is pertinent that shaping a 'friendly' periphery did not animate the strategic discourse; the image was simply on a quiescent periphery that did not impose cross-border or spillover costs on India's heartland. Plainly put, it was a 'very selfish policy... avoiding external entanglements'.<sup>23</sup> An unexpressed but abiding belief among the policymaking elite and intelligentsia was that interference in the neighbourhood might detract attention from the strategic priority of India's domestic tasks. It was, therefore,

important to peg our goals and use of power to our immediate and overriding interest in our domestic transformation. In other words, our condition and the state of the world require us not to seek hegemony, or domination, or expansion, or strategic depth. None of these serve our basic interest, even in a defensive sense.<sup>24</sup>

In effect, Indian interests were redefined in very narrow territorial and domestic terms in that India was saying that economic growth required a very benign geopolitical role and avoidance of entanglements and interventions on the subcontinental periphery. And in doing so, India also redefined the way it perceived the external environment. Rather than an area to project influence and establish a geopolitical order, the

periphery became truly peripheral for statecraft. Mehta described this posture as a policy with ‘only one leg’. It was based on the hope that ‘India’s growth engine would somehow become attractive enough for our neighbours to want to join the party...our neighbours do not have to worry about norms. They do not have to worry about India’s capacity to pressure them.’<sup>25</sup>

India’s neoliberal worldview was also reflected in the maritime realm. Moving ‘away from the traditional notions of sea-denial and its diplomatic component of keeping other naval powers out of its neighbourhood’, India ‘began to value cooperation and contact with other navies’.<sup>26</sup> It was reflected in the doctrine and strategy of the Indian Navy.<sup>27</sup> As the historical norm of balancing external influence in the region became muted and was renounced, the logic for anti-access and area-denial capabilities diminished and Indian maritime acquisitions and doctrine began to seek blue-water and out-of-area capabilities.

The contrast with China is stark here. Despite possessing a substantially larger economic and industrial base than India, Chinese sea power is still prioritised towards securing Chinese influence on its maritime periphery and increasing the costs of external intervention in a regional dispute (that is, Taiwan, Korean peninsula, East China Sea, and South China Sea). Sea power, in the Chinese case, is also conceived as a conscious supplement to continental and land-based capabilities. As one Western assessment notes, ‘the Chinese navy’s main purpose is still to protect China from US sea-based strike power.’<sup>28</sup> Another authoritative study finds, ‘China’s new navy relies more on unmanned cruise and ballistic missiles than on manned aircraft, and more on submarines than surface vessels.’<sup>29</sup>

Having eschewed an Indo-centric and subcontinental-centric role where India actively sought to construct and shape regional order on its periphery, India’s maritime role conceptions began to assume new dimensions. A ‘new non-territorial conception of the seas’<sup>30</sup> produced two new role conceptions: responsibility for the ‘maritime commons’;<sup>31</sup> and a China-centric discourse. These are being briefly explicated next because they continue to shape the contemporary conversation on maritime security issues.

### **Securing the ‘Commons’**

A former naval official notes: ‘Like all other law abiding nations, India is particular about the freedom of navigation in the maritime commons.’<sup>32</sup>

Since the mid-2000s, the Indian Navy has been assuming a new role as an active stakeholder in the maritime commons. In fact, it is India's self-image as an emerging economy integrating with the global trading system that has led to a new maritime role conception whereby it has become appropriate to assume responsibilities in meeting non-traditional threats to Asia's geo-economic sea lines of communication (SLOCs). For example, India has undertaken relief operations in the IOR (2004–05) and the Mediterranean Sea (2006) and has engaged in anti-piracy patrols off the Gulf of Aden since 2008; and between 2008 and 2011, the Indian Navy escorted 2,000 merchant ships, of which 80 per cent were foreign owned, underscoring India's new role. The 2009 *Indian Maritime Doctrine* has described this new function as a 'constabulary role', ranging from 'Low intensity maritime operations to maintaining good order at sea.'<sup>33</sup>

A pattern of discourse from the apex level also underscores India's new maritime role conception:

We have an interest in helping to create an enabling international environment. We have an interest in global public goods like a peaceful order, freedom of the seas and open sea-lanes. Over 20 percent of our GDP is now accounted for by our exports and our growth and survival depend on our imports of fertilizer, energy and capital goods...In today's world we must also be ready to contribute within our capacity to the global public goods that are increasingly important to our well being, such as freedom of the seas.<sup>34</sup>

### **China: Threat Role**

Since the second half of the 2000s, India's strategic maritime discourse has evoked a pattern of China-centric maritime role conceptions. There are two aspects to this: one emerges from an expectation of growing Chinese maritime and naval activities in the IOR; and the other links China's rise as a potentially adverse systemic development for the maritime commons, requiring India to assume more open-ended and undefined burdens to uphold the existing United States (US)-led Indo-Pacific maritime security structure.

The first aspect is related to the 'string of pearls' idea that embodies China's perceived interest and expansion of its maritime influence in the IOR. One former naval official opines:

Whether the developmental assistance provided for the Sittwe naval base in Myanmar, Chittagong deep-sea port in Bangladesh,

Hambantota port in Sri Lanka and Pakistan's deep-sea port of Gwadar; were all a part of an encirclement master plan, a string of pearls, is not clear. But, there are ample indicators of increasing Chinese focus towards developing port facilities for various countries in the Indian Ocean. Taken together with the development of the PLA Navy's power projection capability, these may well be the first signs of the evolution of a two ocean strategy.<sup>35</sup>

Another former official believes that China's economic SLOCs extending far into the IOR provide India leverage over China: 'Make no mistake—the next big game is in the Indian Ocean, through which passes 65 per cent of all Chinese trade, particularly hydrocarbons...the Indian Ocean and, particularly, the Malacca Straits are China's jugular.'<sup>36</sup>

Such views are not uncontested. Other maritime analysts dismiss the 'string of pearls' theory 'as purely speculative and over-hyped' as 'China's port development activities' are aimed to ensure its SLOCs are 'net-worked and constantly replenished'.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, a former official at the apex argues:

India's concerns in the north-west Indian Ocean and China's vulnerabilities in the north-east Indian Ocean cannot be solved by military means alone. The issue is not limited just to the Indian Ocean but indeed is one of security of these flows in areas and seas which affect the choke points.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, Chinese maritime activity in the IOR has attracted political attention. In February 2014, for example, India's Foreign Minister stated that Delhi was 'aware that China is involved in the construction of or assistance to infrastructure projects in our neighbourhood'. The minister also stated that China was engaged in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Maldives and Pakistan.<sup>39</sup> There is no doubt about China's growing maritime interests and activity in the IOR littoral. The debate is really around 'whether and to what extent this improved access and infrastructure will translate into basing arrangements and political influence in future'.<sup>40</sup> For only such a scenario can position China as a potential security provider, altering the prevailing equations and balance in the IOR littoral and providing China with an enhanced future ability to project military power in Southern Asia and the IOR littoral.

The second aspect of a China-centric maritime discourse relates to an expansive Indo-Pacific role conception as a new *raison d'être* for

Indian sea power. While it is perhaps a natural impulse of a navy to have a non-territorial and even extra-regional conception, a state's identity and core interests typically anchor and impel the navy to prioritise its roles. As the 2009 maritime doctrine states, 'Navies are meant to fight wherever the nation's interests are threatened. This may be in a sea area adjacent to or even belonging to a third country.'<sup>41</sup> But this axiomatically leads to the question: how are a state's external interests defined? Is there a geopolitical priority between core and peripheral areas, and thus core interests and peripheral interests? According to the 2009 maritime doctrine, the primary 'areas of interests' include the northern Indian Ocean and the 'principal international shipping lanes crossing the IOR and island countries located in their vicinity'. On the other hand, the South China Sea and areas of the western Pacific Ocean are identified as 'secondary areas' of operational interest for the Indian Navy.<sup>42</sup> 'Areas of secondary interest', according to the doctrine, 'will come in where there is a direct connection with areas of primary interest, or where they impinge on the deployment of future maritime forces.'<sup>43</sup> Presumably, the distinction is not simply to outline the navy's own preferences but to signal 'where', broadly, India's political leadership would demonstrate greater resolve and inclination to employ different forms of national and sea power.

In 2012, a retired Naval official opined: 'India has vital maritime interests vested in the South China Sea...A stage may soon be reached wherein deployment of a meaningful presence in the South China Sea would be an imperative rather than an option.'<sup>44</sup> This image of India as a net security provider in the western Pacific is not simply a theoretical rumination. In 2012, the then navy chief also interpreted this framework in the context of ongoing intramural disputes in the South China Sea. In December 2012, coinciding with an India–Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit, Admiral Joshi made a public statement at a press conference:

'It is not that we expect to be in those waters very frequently,' but whenever the situation requires, with the country's interests at stake—for example, 'ONGC Videsh has three oil exploration blocks there'—'we will be required to go there and we are prepared for that.'<sup>45</sup>

He further stated, 'We have to protect our country's economic assets wherever they are, otherwise what is the Navy for?'<sup>46</sup>

One later report has observed, ‘But with the waters far more agitated in India’s immediate vicinity...the question that remains is: how far Delhi is prepared to go to protect its reputation in a region it has often asserted it is the leader of?’<sup>47</sup> Another former naval chief is equally sceptical:

Even if India is about to take a long overdue stand on principles, or adopt an assertive posture vis-a-vis China, a distant location like the South China Sea is hardly an ideal setting to demonstrate India’s maritime or other strengths...At this juncture, it would be imprudent to contemplate sustaining a naval presence some *2,500 nautical miles* from home to bolster OVL’s stake in South China Sea hydrocarbons.<sup>48</sup>

More recently, another former official has questioned this impulse to develop an Indo-Pacific role: ‘The scenario in the South China Sea or around China’s “near seas” is a competition between China and America–Japan. This competition will be decided by technology, anti-carrier strategy and air–sea battle backed by hypersonic aircraft. Indians can contribute very little.’<sup>49</sup>

The above-mentioned example is an extreme manifestation of the China-centric Indo-Pacific role conception, producing an ambitious blue-water power projection image that is in stark contrast to India’s otherwise passive regional IOR identity. This case exemplifies several points. To some extent, the dichotomy between ‘territorial neighbours’, which implies a clear conception of regional geopolitics, and ‘maritime neighbours’, which is an expansive and fluid naval concept, is natural. But when the gap becomes wide, as it did in the 2012 South China Sea case, states usually find themselves struggling to prioritise and define their core security priorities over secondary or peripheral priorities, and therefore are at risk of geopolitical overstretch. The other point that this case arguably shows is that India’s maritime role conception, beginning in the mid-2000s, has become more China driven, rather than emerging from India’s own geopolitical conceptions of itself as a regional power. The section, ‘Policy-relevant Suggestions: Correlating Foreign Policy and Sea Power’, will return to this theme again with a brief discussion on policy-relevant issues.

#### POST 2014: ROLE CLARITY?

At first glance, the Modi government’s early South Asia-centric pronouncements would suggest that policymakers are regrouping

India's regional identity and self-image, which also alters the context for the maritime role flux in the past decade. A perusal of official pronouncements suggests a more regional-centric strategic and maritime discourse. For example, one of the earliest official statements from the Defence Minister, Arun Jaitley, suggested a more territorial-oriented outlook to maritime issues.<sup>50</sup> Also, in June 2014, India's Ministry of Culture launched project 'Mausam', a soft power initiative to demonstrate an IOR outlook, with the official rationale:

Maritime Routes and Cultural Landscapes is to position itself at two levels: at the macro level, it aims to re-connect and re-establish communications between countries of the Indian Ocean world, which would lead to an enhanced understanding of cultural values and concerns; while at the micro level, the focus is on understanding national cultures in their regional maritime milieu.<sup>51</sup>

Policymakers have even invoked Cold War-era norms suggesting a more subcontinental-centric outlook to maritime matters. In December 2014, the National Security Advisor (NSA) remarked at a conference held in Sri Lanka's southern coastal town of Galle that it was important to revisit the 1971 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution on the 'Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace', which had called 'upon great powers not to allow escalation and expansion of military presence in the Indian Ocean'.<sup>52</sup> The immediate context behind the NSA's remarks was probably related to Chinese naval activity, with, ironically, Sri Lanka as one of the littoral states supporting these extra-regional excursions by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). But the NSA was also implicitly concerned about a wider militarisation of India's maritime periphery.<sup>53</sup>

The Prime Minister's IOR tour in March 2015 again suggests a revival of a regional identity linked with a corresponding maritime role conception. Modi's words reflect a clearer regional identity: 'Indian Ocean Region is at the top of our policy priorities. Our vision for Indian Ocean Region is rooted in advancing cooperation in our region; and, to use our capabilities for the benefit of all in our common maritime home.' While asserting that India would do everything to safeguard its 'mainland and islands' and defend its interests, Modi also espoused a role as a net security provider: 'we will deepen our economic and security cooperation with our friends in the region especially our maritime neighbours and island states. We will also continue to build their maritime security

capacities and their economic strength.’ Simultaneously, the Prime Minister reflected on the ‘commons’ aspect of the IOR and growing extra-regional interest in the wider region:

those who live in this region have the primary responsibility for peace, stability and prosperity in the Indian Ocean. But, we recognize that there are other nations around the world, with strong interests and stakes in the region. India is deeply engaged with them. We do this through dialogue, visits, exercises, capacity building and economic partnership.<sup>54</sup>

While the idea of India as a net security provider has been espoused by the apex and the navy earlier, there now appears to be an element of grounding this self-image in a regional geopolitical domain. However, the Indo-Pacific role conception and an expansive and indivisible approach to maritime security have not disappeared from the (non-official) discourse. Recent attempts by the apex at prioritising a regional and maritime role are still contested by role conceptions that had emerged in the last decade.

**POLICY-RELEVANT SUGGESTIONS:  
CORRELATING FOREIGN POLICY AND SEA POWER**

**Geopolitical Core versus Periphery**

Foreign policy and regional identity must be closely correlated with the conception and modernisation of India’s sea power. A former official notes that as an instrument, ‘the Navy has key attributes—access, mobility, reach and versatility. We need to embed these attributes within the larger vision of India’s role in the global arena.’<sup>55</sup> The navy cannot be leading foreign policy in the maritime realm. Indian policymakers need to define their regional interests and maritime interests more clearly. The primary area of interest for the modernisation and application of sea power for the foreseeable future is in the core geopolitical zone of Southern Asia and northern IOR. Interestingly, the 2015 *Indian Maritime Strategy* prioritises the primary areas of interest as the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, Andaman Sea and their littoral regions. The focus appears to be on the western and south-western maritime waters, rather than areas east of the Malacca Straits such as ‘the South and East China Seas, Western Pacific Ocean, and their littoral regions’, which are described as secondary areas of maritime interest.<sup>56</sup>

Here, the apex (Prime Minister's Office [PMO], National Security Council [NSC]), foreign office and navy must institutionally correlate India's regional policies and strategies with a clearer conception of India's varying interests in this core zone with one abiding proposition: India should have a say in the evolution of regional politics and how external powers pursue their complex interests around the northern IOR. This, of course, is not a new role. As the brief, earlier survey of India's regional policy and sea power in the 1970s and 1980s has shown, Delhi has historically striven to ensure that external involvement in the subcontinent does not spill over or clash with India's conception of a stable regional order. For example, China's pursuit of political and strategic relationships with IOR littoral states, particularly those in India's immediate vicinity such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar or Bangladesh, could produce outcomes that alter the political orientation of India's neighbours and produce a more regular forward presence of Chinese naval activity around peninsular India. Shaping external involvement towards largely non-zero-sum relationships (in terms of their impact on India) between India's neighbours and external powers is a key objective for India's regional and neighbourhood foreign policies.<sup>57</sup>

Sea power is one important instrument and component of national power in this process of shaping a regional order. It might even be the ultimate veto that dissuades unfriendly postures from both external powers and India's immediate neighbours. The onus is on the political leadership and apex to spatially anchor and appropriately leverage the naval instrument, which by its strategic culture and historical legacy is inherently 'non-territorial' in its worldview.<sup>58</sup> In terms of capabilities, restoring and expanding India's depleting submarine fleet to acquire a credible anti-access posture in the northern IOR and developing countermeasures to Pakistan's growing sea-denial capabilities in the northern Arabian Sea should constitute a priority in naval modernisation plans.<sup>59</sup>

### **Indian Ocean as a 'Commons' and Maritime Highway**

The IOR hosts the world's most significant, intensive and commercially relevant international shipping lanes (ISLs) connecting West Asia and Europe to the Asia-Pacific. Approximately 100,000 ships transit the Indian Ocean each year and it is the only ocean through which ISLs reach out to the entire world. One-third of the world's bulk cargo and two-thirds of seaborne oil trade flows through the IOR. More than three-fourths

of IOR traffic goes to other regions of the world.<sup>60</sup> Not surprisingly, it is also this basic reality that draws the attention and interests of external major powers to the IOR, given its location at the crossroads of inter-regional maritime connections. The Indian Prime Minister's observation that 'we recognize that there are other nations around the world, with strong interests and stakes in the [Indian Ocean] region' underscores an awareness of the IOR's unique status as a commons.<sup>61</sup> The most recent Indian maritime strategy document has 'accorded increased focus' on the 'safety and security of seaborne trade and energy routes, especially in the IOR, considering their effect on global economies and India's national interests'.<sup>62</sup> It is apparent that Indian policymakers recognise the reality of the IOR as a significant maritime highway.

An important policy-relevant question then is: how should India manage and preserve its own unique geopolitical position and regional interests while also exuding a responsibility in ensuring the integrity of the IOR commons and the reliability of ISLs traversing the large expanse of waters around peninsular India? Indian maritime strategists recognise India's extant and potential leverage on the IOR ISLs, which coincide with strategic energy SLOCs for major Asian powers such as China and Japan. The 2009 maritime doctrine states, 'The confluence of ISLs close to a country's shores...bestows on it a unique strategic leverage, which has to be taken account of by its potential adversaries.'<sup>63</sup> This view suggests that India can exploit geopolitical advantages from its proximity to several inter-regional commercial maritime highways.

Yet, a maritime highway as intensive and multidirectional as the IOR ISLs suggests too many other regions and economic actors depend on these economic lifelines to leave the integrity of these waters to chance or to the sole command of the Indian Navy. This is where enlightened self-interest should impel Indian policymakers to craft a narrative that reflects the extra-regional linkages of the IOR.<sup>64</sup> This requires a multilateral outlook and policy innovations where India must strive for norm-building and responsible and inclusive burden-sharing institutions for the security of these 'commons'. Regional initiatives such as the 'MILAN', evolution of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and emergence of maritime security cooperation as a priority area for the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) are examples where India has taken proactive steps towards shaping a cooperative framework for the IOR commons.<sup>65</sup> India's peninsular location impels it to assume a stabilising role by insulating the 'commons' from traditional geopolitics,

especially given that much of external maritime activity in this space is arguably driven more by SLOC concerns than great power interest in the subcontinent or India's affairs per se.

### **Balancing and Accommodating External Powers in the IOR**

Both in terms of economic and military–technological constraints, maritime preponderance is beyond India's grasp for several decades. As one former naval chief states rather candidly, using 'terms like "global" or "hegemonic" in the context of India's maritime growth', or the notion that India is trying to 'control the Indian Ocean must be seen as mere hyperbole'.<sup>66</sup> Delhi's challenge then becomes preserving India's regional position while partially accommodating external maritime powers in India's oceanic south. While the US Navy is the largest and most potent force in the IOR, China is a potential candidate for an emerging presence. China's economic rise is also producing a commensurate rise in its maritime capacity and sea power.<sup>67</sup> While the full contours and policy-relevant implications of China's evolving maritime and naval capabilities—insofar as they relate to the IOR—are still in flux, Chinese policymakers have been quite clear in prioritising their core geopolitical zone of interest in the western Pacific, where Beijing's resolve and sea power is growing. The notion of China prioritising its core zone is further underscored in light of the US naval 'pivot' to East Asia, suggesting Sino-American maritime competition in the western Pacific as the most probable scenario for the foreseeable future. It is, therefore, not surprising that akin to India's construction of the western Pacific as a secondary area of interest, the Chinese apex and the PLAN similarly view the IOR as a secondary area of interest. In fact, China does not presently possess an exclusive fleet for the IOR and assets are drawn from its three existing fleets for limited missions.

Contrary to the observation of some analysts,<sup>68</sup> the maritime realm between India and China is not a zero-sum theatre where core interests for both countries are at loggerheads.<sup>69</sup> For India to assume a blanket anti-China posture without a dispassionate assessment of the rationale for Chinese maritime activity in the IOR would be counterproductive and produce suboptimal policy choices and strategic outcomes. One such outcome, for example, could be China changing the scale and pace of its naval assistance to Pakistan. Since the PLAN is constrained both by geography and logistical constraints, indirect rather than direct balancing of Indian sea power in the IOR seems the more probable Chinese response

in the scenario of a growing India–China rivalry. Indian policymakers must also recognise that unlike China–US maritime interactions in the western Pacific where vital strategic interests are at stake for both sides leading to structural competition, India–China maritime relations do not have any territorial disputes or clash of core interests in the maritime realm. Neither do India and China have an indirect security dilemma through the involvement of a dependent ally or security partner towards whom either has an enduring strategic commitment. Rather, both sides have overlapping interests in the maritime realm that need to be recognised and managed better.

China has outlined two clear interests in Southern Asia and IOR beyond their traditional continental frontier interests. Chinese reliance on IOR ISLs (the ‘Malacca Dilemma’) is motivating Chinese maritime and naval activity in this region.<sup>70</sup> For example, 85 per cent of China’s oil imports flow through the northern Indian Ocean.<sup>71</sup> In addition, China’s new neighbourhood policy and renewed thrust being given to a geo-economic outreach (that is, the Maritime Silk Route, which is part of the larger ‘Belt and Road’ initiative) is expanding Chinese interests in the IOR littoral. Further, both these interests might not necessarily be exclusive. What precise strategies and combination of means Chinese policymakers will assemble to advance its interests is not yet clear. Ironically, the most significant developments on the Belt and Road project so far have occurred in the ‘continental’ rather than littoral ‘maritime’ areas around the IOR, with the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor emerging as one of the flagship projects for Beijing.

For India, a well-defined regional geopolitical posture with the appropriate force structure and investment in wider maritime capacities (that is, ports, logistics, shipbuilding infrastructure, etc.) can modulate China’s and the neighbourhood’s strategic choices, and arguably make it more costly for Beijing to pursue unilateral or zero-sum means to advance its interests in the IOR. India’s emerging capabilities suggest a regional and local superiority over the Chinese PLAN in the IOR. According to one assessment, ‘In surface combatants, the Indian navy will outnumber the Chinese (Indian Ocean) taskforce 2:1, outnumber the maritime patrol aircraft 2:1, be superior in strategic anti-submarine warfare and satellite communication infrastructure.’<sup>72</sup> Further investment in robust anti-access and sea-denial capabilities must, however, be supplemented with a parallel diplomatic strategy of IOR-wide norm building and a serious bilateral maritime dialogue with China. The perceived integrity

of its IOR SLOCs will play an important part in shaping Chinese threat perceptions and the future scale of expansion of its sea power in the IOR. Although it would be unrealistic to expect China acceding to Indian oversight over its SLOCs, a combination of deterrence and reassurance can influence China's maritime role choices in the northern IOR.

#### CONCLUSION

Over the past six decades, policymakers have allocated a gradual but increasing share of the annual defence budget for the navy. From a share of 4 per cent in 1960, 8 per cent in 1970, 9.7 per cent in 1977, 11 per cent in 1992, to 18 per cent in 2009, the navy is a rising component of India's military quiver. By the mid-2020s, the Indian Navy would probably be able to deploy a 160-ship navy, including three aircraft carriers, 60 major combatants and around 400 aircrafts of different types.<sup>73</sup>

It appears that India's maritime thinking and doctrine is straddling multiple roles: the necessity of subcontinental anti-access thinking to safeguard the traditional identity of Southern Asia as a unitary geopolitical space; the aspiration to assume a more active security role in the Indo-Pacific; and a responsible stakeholder role seeking to assume burden-sharing responsibilities for maintaining the maritime 'commons'. The actual force structure and evolution of the strategic maritime discourse suggests that India is attempting to straddle all three roles (see Appendix Table 1). Indeed, one recent study of India's post-Cold War naval expansion argues, 'the primary mission driving naval modernization is sea-lane security' and HADR capabilities, 'while the need to deter hostile maritime powers does little to explain India's recent naval modernization.'<sup>74</sup> In fact, the weakest leg of the Indian naval force structure is clearly the anti-access capability front (see Appendix Table 2). The contrast with China is interesting. Emerging from a core East Asian regional identity, China is actively developing potent land and sea-based anti-access and area-denial capabilities, and also correlating this modernisation with state geopolitical goals. More recently, China has also embarked on a limited blue-water navy plan underpinned on its indigenous economic, industrial and maritime capacities and correlated to its substantial international economic interests. India, with far fewer material resources, a more limited footprint in economic globalisation and a much weaker indigenous maritime capacity, is seeking to build a more ambitious navy.

The most successful states historically have been those that were able to blend various forms of power and closely correlate these with national goals, material and institutional capacities, and with an acute understanding of their external environment. Do conversations, debates and policy choices on sea power suggest that Indian policymakers and strategic thinkers are operating in this general framework? One of the central themes of this article is that India is not embedding the conversation in that larger whole. Could this be because of institutional reasons? Certainly, it appears that India's naval thinking is occurring in a bottom-up fashion, with little intellectual contribution from the political and bureaucratic actors near the apex.<sup>75</sup> But India's ability to correlate foreign policy and sea power in the past—the 1970s and 1980s—suggests that suboptimal institutional structures do not necessarily inhibit a coherent approach. During that period, the apex had robust authority and command over the system and a clear regional role conception, which provided the macro context for the development of sea power.

Could it be because countervailing environmental pressures to develop a focused maritime role simply are not present in India's case to discipline doctrinal innovation and choices on force structures? Put differently, the maritime realm in India's case does not present a clear definable threat image that one finds in conversations on India's continental realm where the geopolitical pressures are more apparent. What this implies is that the agency for the navy and maritime strategists, to shape worldviews, images, roles and even concrete choices on force structures, is much higher than one finds in other regional powers such as China, Iran and Korea, who confront less benign and more contested maritime threat environments compared to India. For example, if there is one aspect that stands out in the 2009 Indian maritime doctrine, it is the navy expressing it can assume diverse roles but is starving for grand strategic direction or geopolitical focus, which can only come from the political leadership. Arguably, the main reason is the ambiguity and flux in India's regional role—in terms of both defining and prioritising regional interests. Because of a lack of role clarity at that grand strategic level, we have seen multiple maritime role conceptions emerging in the strategic discourse, sometimes with a more expansive geopolitical vision than is warranted by India's material resources and actual regional context.

There appears to be little concern, at least at a popular discourse level, for a logical sequencing of India's sea power and maritime ambitions. The notion of India as a net security provider too is usually espoused

in functional terms—become a stakeholder to share the burden in upholding the maritime commons—rather than embedded in concrete geopolitical terms, where India’s regional interests are clearly defined, and where economic–financial strength and military power—and within that sea power— fit into a coherent means and ends equation. The fact that India has been able to accomplish this correlation between means and ends before suggests that there is no abiding cultural constraint to acquiring equilibrium once again.

Relative to the other two services, gestation periods for enhancing capabilities and signalling changes to force structures are large in the maritime domain, often measured in decades rather than years. Policymakers must, therefore, take a greater interest in correlating India’s overall foreign policy and geostrategy with the evolution of India’s maritime and naval thinking and modernisation plans. Historically, no major land power with persisting continental security obligations has been able to develop an ambitious maritime outlook and capacity. Pressure on resources and strategic attention will make it difficult for India to assume an ambitious hybrid navy with subcontinental, including IOR, responsibilities and the assumption of an Indo-Pacific role.

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## APPENDIX

**Table I** India's Maritime Thinking Straddling Three Roles

<i>Regional Role Type</i>	<i>Regional Geopolitical Posture</i>	<i>Force Structure</i>
Subcontinental-centric leadership role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defence/naval diplomacy, net security provider to buttress friendly or non-aligned regimes.</li> <li>• Political economy initiatives to develop regional linkages between India and IOR neighbours.</li> </ul>	Anti-access and stealth capabilities, limited power projection and expeditionary capabilities.
Indo-Pacific China threat role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unidimensional China-centric IOR and Indo-Pacific posture.</li> </ul>	Hybrid navy with blue-water and sea-denial capabilities.
Responsible stakeholder role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Value-neutral maritime support.</li> <li>• Shared responsibility for 'maritime commons'.</li> <li>• Bilateral and multilateral cooperation to articulate shared norms and promote burden-sharing initiatives.</li> <li>• Open regionalism (inter-regional interdependence).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Combination of multirole capabilities for constabulary and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR).</li> <li>• Smaller, mobile, autonomous and rapid reaction capabilities to confront non-traditional threats to IOR international shipping lanes (ISLs).</li> </ul>

Source: Author.

**Table 2** Indian Navy's Force Structure

<i>Power Projection and Maritime Strike Capabilities</i>	<i>Anti-access (sea-denial) Capabilities</i>	<i>Expeditionary and HADR Capabilities</i>	<i>Maritime Domain Awareness Capabilities</i>
<p><b>Aircraft Carrier:</b>  <i>INS Vikramaditya</i>: 44,570 tonne aircraft carrier                      Aircraft complement:                      20 MiG-29K fighters; 8 Kamov Ka-28/Ka-31 anti-submarine helicopters  <i>INS Vikrant</i>: 40,000 tonne aircraft carrier (under construction)</p>	<p><b>Conventional Submarines:</b>                      13 diesel-electric submarines:                      9 Kilo-class and 4 HDW submarines</p>	<p><b>Large Amphibious Ships:</b>  <i>INS Jalashwa</i></p>	<p><b>Long-range Maritime Patrol Aircraft for ISR:</b>                      8 multi-role P-8i  <b>Short-range Maritime Patrol Aircraft for ISR:</b>                      20 Dornier-228 and 12 fixed-wing UAVs</p>
	<p><b>Nuclear-powered Attack Submarine (SSN):</b>                      1 <i>INS Chakra</i> (Akula-class)</p>	<p><b>Medium Amphibious Ships:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 Kumbhir-class landing ships;</li> <li>• 2 Magar-class landing ships;</li> <li>• 3 Shardul-class landing ships; and</li> <li>• 4 LPDs and 8 LCU</li> </ul>	<p><b>Satellite-based ISR:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System (IRNSS): 7 satellite autonomous navigation system for the Indian military providing coverage extending to 1,500 km around Indian peninsula.</li> <li>• A dedicated military communications satellite GSAT-7 for the Indian Navy.</li> </ul>

<i>Power Projection and Maritime Strike Capabilities</i>	<i>Anti-access (sea-denial) Capabilities</i>	<i>Expeditionary and HADR Capabilities</i>	<i>Maritime Domain Awareness Capabilities</i>
<p><b>Ballistic Nuclear Submarine:</b> <i>INS Arbhant:</i> The estimated size of the SSBN force is projected to be 3–6 submarines. Currently, first vessel has been deployed.</p> <p>Fleet Tankers: INS Shakti and INS Deepak</p>	<p><b>Anti-submarine Warfare (ASW) Ships:</b> 4 Kamorta-class ASW corvettes.</p> <p>Destroyers and Frigates:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6 Talwar-class 'stealth' frigates (4 additional planned);</li> <li>• 5 Rajput-class guided-missile destroyers;</li> <li>• 3 Kolkata-class guided-missile destroyers; and</li> <li>• 4 Visakhapatnam-class guided-missile destroyers (under construction).</li> </ul>		<p><b>Airborne Early Warning and Control Helicopters:</b> 9 Ka-31s</p>
	<p>ASW Aircraft:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8 P-8i with a 1,200 nautical mile radius.</li> <li>• 5 IL-38SD with 6,500 km range.</li> </ul>		
	<p>ASW Helicopters: 14 Ka-28s</p>		

*Source:* Author's research.

*Note:* HDW: Howaldtswerke-Deutsche Werft; ISR: intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; UAVs: unmanned aerial vehicles; LPDs: landing platform docks; LCUs: landing craft utilities.

