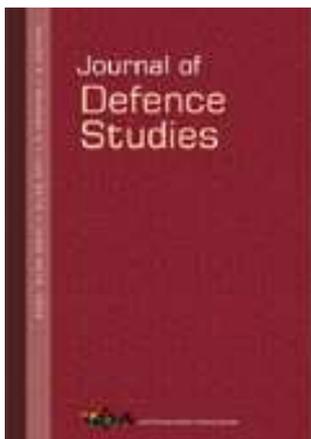


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## An Indian Maritime Strategy for an Era of Geopolitical Uncertainty

*Abhijit Singh\**

The fractious nature of maritime relations in the Asia-Pacific region is a recognisable feature of international geopolitics today. Following China's massive reclamation and 'island-building' project in the South China Sea recently, many Pacific states have moved to bolster their maritime postures. While Japan has sought legislative amendments to liberate its maritime posture from post-war passivism, Vietnam and the Philippines have been building stronger navies aimed at countering China's hostile moves in the South China Sea. Meanwhile, Indonesia has sought to renew its capabilities as a maritime power through a new 'maritime axis' strategy, while Australia has boldly advocated an 'Indo-Pacific' framework for joint security endeavours and the creation of 'middle-power coalitions'. In the interim, Russia has updated its maritime doctrine, announcing its military partnership with China as the cornerstone of its naval strategy in the Pacific.

These developments have occurred against the backdrop of a strengthened United States (US) maritime posture in the Pacific theatre. Through a revised maritime strategy document ('Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Sea-power') and a new doctrine of operations, Washington has sought to provide new vigour to its 'Pivot to Asia' doctrine—all with the express objective of preserving American access and dominance in the Asia-Pacific.

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In India, efforts continue apace to review the existing 'Indian Maritime Military Strategy' (2007).<sup>1</sup> The document has been a source of useful operational guidance, but now needs a holistic makeover to keep pace with the demands of a fast-changing maritime environment. The nautical landscape today is marked by a complex set of challenges concerning not just sovereign interests but also threats to human security and 'good order at sea'. Some of these, indeed, find mention in the existing maritime strategy document. What makes present-day challenges unique, however, is the fact that the state of geopolitical power play in maritime Asia imposes restrictions in the way joint security measures are employed in tackling particular threats.

More crucially, there are policy predicaments that confront Indian maritime planners, adversely impacting the planning process. The first one has to do with the supposed lack of operational specificity in India's maritime documents in dealing with aggressive opponents. In an insightful article in *The National Interest* recently, James Holmes, a Professor at the US Naval War College, observed that the problem with India's maritime strategy was the absence of a real 'enemy'.<sup>2</sup> If the Indian Navy could officially acknowledge an adversary, he noted, it would impart greater focus and purpose to the naval deterrence efforts in the Indian Ocean. More significant, Holmes points out, is the need for New Delhi to display greater resolve in using its impressive maritime might—doing more to convince its prime competitors that it is prepared to make good on its deterrent threats. For good measure, Indian naval planners, he cautions, must be wary of their penchant for 'building ships for shipbuilding's sake'—an activity which has inherent benefits in peacetime operations but only limited use in conflict (when nations need more than impressive navies to impose national will).

The issues raised are revealing of a credibility deficit that has marked India's naval plans in recent years. Many independent analysts perceive Indian maritime strategy as being highly utilitarian in approach—meant expressly to advance the interests of the Indian Navy, which foreign observers see as 'a status quo force inhabiting a largely tranquil space'.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, there is a strong impression that India's maritime policy documents are meant principally to resolve peacetime crises, albeit in a way that preserves the Indian Navy's interests and regional standing in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)—the primary theatre of Indian naval operations. As a corollary, critics aver, Indian maritime documents avoid a discussion of specific exigencies involving real adversaries.

#### DEALING WITH THE CHINA CHALLENGE

Admittedly, some of the criticism of India's maritime planning process appears to be valid. In its basic approach to maritime security, Indian maritime thought does seem to have an essential peacetime orientation, characterised by an institutional emphasis on constabulary and benign missions. That is not, by itself, a negative attribute, but it does reflect a key shortcoming in the maritime strategy: the inability to deal with strategic exigencies triggered by extra-regional naval forces in the Indian Ocean, particularly the intended and inadvertent consequences of China's strategic expansion in the IOR.

For a majority of India's strategic elite, the use of military force to blunt China's strategic challenge in the IOR is a deeply problematic proposition.<sup>4</sup> The way the policy establishment sees it, a purposeful Indian maritime strategy must account for a worst-case scenario vis-à-vis China, but shouldn't exaggerate India's strategic challenges—especially the threat posed by Chinese maritime presence in the IOR. In that respect, the existing military maritime strategy (2007) does appear to strike a judicious balance.

Yet, the document also acknowledges the possibility of greater foreign naval activity in India's neighbourhood, revealing an underlying anxiety concerning potential Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean.<sup>5</sup> Its prescriptions, in fact, reveal a deeper dilemma confronting maritime policymakers in the early years of the previous decade. As New Delhi's political relations and economic engagement with Beijing improved during the 2000s, maritime planners struggled with the issue of Chinese naval activity in India's near-seas. Their driving imperative was to identify China as a potential strategic competitor but in doing so, they could not afford to sound unduly alarmist. With the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) still not activity involved in maritime patrols in the IOR, it then seemed prudent to naval strategy writers to understate the China threat.

Over the past decade, however, the PLAN's footprint in the Indian Ocean has grown significantly and now also comprises submarine visits. During the last two years, there have been at least three Chinese undersea deployments of both conventional and nuclear attack submarines in the IOR. Significantly for India, the quality of PLAN ships deployed for anti-piracy activities too has been improving overtime. In August 2015, the Chinese Navy deployed the twenty-first escort task force in the Gulf of Aden, comprising two Type 054A guided-missile frigates, equipped with

advanced weapons like the YJ-83 anti-ships missiles. It has not escaped the attention of maritime planners that there has been a concomitant emphasis by the PLAN on expeditionary operations and island break-out exercises, indicating a desire for strategic dominance in littoral Asia.<sup>6</sup>

The fear among China-sceptics in New Delhi is that Beijing's Silk Route Project could soon transform maritime civilian infrastructure in the IOR into Chinese surveillance posts and protected havens for military assets. The trigger for this concern is the docking of a PLAN submarine, which created suspicion in the minds of Indian observers about the possibility of Chinese military enclaves in the Indian Ocean. To add to Indian anxieties, there have been unconfirmed reports of a potential PLAN base in Marao Island in the Maldives and a Pakistani offer for a Chinese naval outpost in Gwadar. While these fears may seem exaggerated, there is no denying the fact that China's first military base in Djibouti has initiated a shift in the strategic balance of the IOR. India's military strategists, therefore, may find the logic of an access and denial strategy too compelling to disregard.

Despite the imperatives imposed by growing Chinese presence in the IOR, however, Indian maritime planners are likely to remain as constrained now as in the mid-2000s decade. Then, as now, Indian maritime strategy writers find themselves bound by a policy brief that demands conservatism in articulating maritime policy vis-à-vis China. Consequently, maritime military strategy continues to be held hostage to political considerations, devolving on maritime planners the need to treat politically contentious topics with caution. An additional reason for the soft approach vis-à-vis China is likely to be the emerging narrative of nascent Sino-India maritime cooperation, particularly with regard to combating Somali piracy. China optimists point to the improved texture of India-China maritime interaction, resulting in a visit by INS Shivalik to Qingdao in 2014 for a multilateral naval exercise, and an invitation to the PLAN for participation in the International Fleet Review at Visakhapatnam in early 2016. In light of the foregoing, maritime strategy framers might feel constrained to play down the Chinese threat.

#### ADVANCING THE CAUSE OF DETERRENCE

On the issue of strategic deterrence (including both nuclear and non-nuclear options), Indian maritime strategy is likely to be more purposeful. Indian analysts have been worried about Chinese naval presence in the

subcontinental littorals, particularly PLAN submarine visits to Colombo and Karachi. For many Indian maritime planners, the troubled nature of the India–China political relationship enjoins upon the Indian Navy an obligation to take a qualified position on strategic deterrence—even if it needs to balance India’s security concerns with Chinese economic interests in the IOR. The problem that strategy writers might face is that strategic nuance on deterrence options does not often sit well with maritime practitioners, who are accustomed to seeing firm lines on the operational slate and neatly outlined policy positions.

Nowhere is this more applicable than in the articulation of naval nuclear policy. Pakistan’s efforts to nuclearise its naval arsenal have been increasingly evident. Following India’s development of a sea-based deterrent—Arihant—Islamabad has pushed for strategic parity in the maritime realm. Since 2012, it has embarked on a series of measures that suggest a move towards naval nuclearisation. First, a Naval Strategic Forces Command was set up in May 2012 to oversee the development of a naval nuclear deterrent. This was followed by tests to validate a submarine-launched variant of the Hatf-7 (Babur) cruise missile and attempts to miniaturise warheads.<sup>7</sup> Then, in late-2014 it was reported that Pakistan was planning to build two types of submarines (Projects S-26 and S-30) with Chinese assistance at a submarine construction facility at Ormara, West of Karanchi. The more disquieting development, however, has been Pakistan’s initiative to procure eight conventional submarines from China (reportedly the Type 41 Yuan class). If the deal with Beijing is concluded as planned, it would make the Pakistan Navy the most conventionally capable force in South Asia, with the potential to match India’s strategic sway in the Indian Ocean.

Meanwhile, China’s advances in developing a naval deterrence capability have equally serious ramifications for India. While the PLAN is close to operationalising the submarine-launched ballistic missile JL-2, recent tests of supersonic cruise missile YJ-18 has raised the possibility that Chinese SSNs and Yuan-class submarines deployed in the Indian Ocean could soon possess land attack capability.<sup>8</sup> Indian anxieties are heightened by the new Chinese military strategy white paper released in May 2015, which describes strategic forces as a crucial component in Beijing’s military strategy and China’s nuclear force as a strategic asset for safeguarding sovereignty. The document stresses the PLA Second Artillery Force’s (PLASAF) emphasis on both conventional and nuclear missiles, even for precision long-range strikes.

More crucially for Indian planners, the PLAN's recent activities in the Indian Ocean, suggests a strengthening China-Pakistan axis. Over the past year, Beijing has expanded its assistance to Islamabad's naval modernization program. Besides the Yuan class submarines deal, China is said to be in talks with Pakistan for the sale of four improved F-22P frigates equipped with enhanced sensors and weaponry and six Type-022 Houbei stealth catamaran missile boats – meant to play an important role in littoral scenarios. Following two deployments of Chinese nuclear submarines in the IOR since 2013, there is also the possibility that China could soon resort to regular SSN patrols in the IOR – not only for 'surveillance' and 'presence' operations but also to deploy a stealthy stand-off capability targeting India. As it establishes a stronger footprint in the subcontinental littorals, the PLAN's need for the Pakistan Navy to be a regional collaborator is likely to grow stronger.

#### ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR ISLANDS AS A STRATEGIC HUB

Another aspect that is bound to generate debate in the framing of India's military maritime strategy is the planned upgradation of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI) into a strategic garrison. Since October 2001, when New Delhi established a new Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) in the local capital Port Blair, the islands have occupied a marginal position in India's strategic consciousness. However, as India's first and only joint tri-service command, the ANC is increasingly seen as the focal point for Indian engagement with regional navies in South-East Asia. This includes biannual coordinated patrols with the navies of Thailand and Indonesia, the annual SIMBEX maritime exercises with Singapore and the biennial Milan multilateral naval exercises.

Recent reports suggest that India is keen to upgrade the ANI into a strategic outpost to improve its eastern Indian Ocean defences.<sup>9</sup> An early indication of this aspiration appeared in 2013 with the commissioning of the INS Dweepakshak, but more evidence of this has been provided by the recent announcement of Maritime Infrastructure Perspective Plan–2025 aimed at developing India's island territories. Not surprisingly, Indian maritime circles are abuzz with the possibility that the ANI could soon be turned into a strategic fulcrum of India's maritime ambitions.<sup>10</sup> In an interaction with the media recently, India's Naval Chief, Admiral Robin Dhowan, offered confirmation by stating that a 'big plan' is underway to progressively bolster the ANI by developing force levels and maritime infrastructure.<sup>11</sup>

The military makeover of the ANI also points to the possibility that the perimeter of India's maritime vision may remain confined to the Indian Ocean. Following Prime Minister Modi's successful visit to Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka in March 2015, there has been speculation of an emerging Indian Ocean doctrine that would prioritise New Delhi's maritime relations with smaller island states in the Indian Ocean. This reportedly includes taking ownership of the Indian Ocean's security effort, as also joint maritime development and blue-ocean economy projects. The ANI, proponents point out, could play a key role in orchestration of the regional security and developmental efforts.

Within India's wider maritime community, however, opinion on developing the far-eastern Islands seems divided. One school favours the development of advanced military facilities for regional surveillance and power projection. But another section seems opposed to using the islands for strategic purposes, arguing that any employment other than for cooperative security might be construed as interference in the security affairs of South-East Asia. Indeed, the ANC's primary usage so far has been to highlight benign outreach in the maritime neighbourhood. Upgrading the existing facilities to enable surveillance and distant-seas operations could negate the existing consensus on using the facilities for benign operations and greater regional good. Besides, there are no guarantees that the investment in upgrading the facilities will be wellworth the resources and efforts spent.

Then, there are questions about the operational character of the upgraded facilities in the ANI. Will strategic uses of the new bases be limited to naval and surveillance operations? Or will functional parameters be expanded to also allow airforce operations—in which case, the new maritime strategy will need to factor in joint operations. There are also concerns that too much emphasis on upgrading the facilities may not find favour with all South-East Asian states, particularly those situated near the Malacca Straits, who might perceive the move to be a reversal of India's cooperative maritime posture.

#### **BENIGN OPERATIONS AND MARITIME SIGNALLING**

An important factor guiding maritime policymaking is the promotional element of maritime strategy. Apart from providing operational guidance to naval commanders, India's maritime strategy also has a political purpose in that it is meant to shape the perceptions of foreign policymakers and

maritime analysts. The IN does this through benign operations that convey a desire for maritime bridge-building and cooperative endeavors with other navies. But there is also an element of geopolitical signaling in such engagements that helps not only in the development of operational synergies, but also serves as a potent symbol for cautioning potential adversaries. Since navies feel compelled to avoid provocative language, maritime strategy framers opt for a nuanced narrative—with largely temperate articulation, and just enough ‘sting’ to warn a supposed adversary.

The problem that India’s maritime strategy writers might face, however, is that while the Indian Navy’s crises response capacity has improved overtime, its distant-seas capabilities still remain underdeveloped. More crucially, the force has not internalised the concept of ‘power projection’ as a doctrinal imperative which raises questions about its commitment to strategic security in the Pacific. In the main, the Indian Navy’s basic approach to maritime security remains premised on a concept of cooperative operations that privilege benign outreach and collaborative policing missions.

To be sure, the benign turn has played a significant part in the projection of the Indian Navy as a regional security provider. One of the highlights for the Indian Navy in 2015 has been Operation Rahat, a massive evacuation exercise involving the rescue of nearly 4,000 non-combatants from Yemen, where Saudi-led air campaign against Houthi rebels had left scores dead and injured. This evacuation, as many others in recent years from Lebanon and Libya highlights the critical importance of benign operations in the geopolitically fragile Asian littorals. More importantly, the Indian Navy’s involvement in humanitarian and evacuation operations also signals its indispensable role in cooperative missions, underlining its ideology of ‘building bridges of friendship’ for regional peace.

Meanwhile, the navy has sought to promote its non-combat roles to underscore its comparative advantage as a diplomatic instrument for New Delhi. Even so, the emphasis on the benign and constabulary role has tended to detract from the military function, preventing the development of an active-defence strategy in the Indian Ocean. More significantly, it has resulted in a conceptual swing from earlier notions of traditional naval influence in the IOR to soft power missions and collective operations. The benign rationale, in effect, has led to the erosion of the notion of strategic power projection.

### COASTAL SECURITY

The best example of India's omnidirectional approach to maritime security is the response to coastal security challenges. Following the 26/11 attacks on Mumbai, coastal security has been at the very top of the Indian government's maritime security agenda. However, it is not just physical patrolling, but also the technical effort that has been noteworthy. Increased surveillance measures to secure India's vast coastline have led to the creation of a multilayered arrangement, comprising a complex chain of coastal radars, automatic identification system (AIS) and long-range identification and tracking systems (LRIT) for tracking movement of civilian shipping—all feeding into the National Command Control Communication Intelligence Network (NC3IN), a data grid meant to ensure gap-less surveillance along the coastline. Increasingly, the Indian Navy's resources and energies are being spent in raising situational awareness in the near-seas.

To a degree, the emphasis on coastal security is justified by the threat of sea-borne terrorism. It is noteworthy that al Qaida's attempted hijacking of the Pakistan Navy frigate, *Zulfiqar*, in Karachi last year was the most audacious terror plot of the past decade.<sup>12</sup> The plan to hijack naval frigates with the assistance of radicalised members of the Pakistan Navy and use them to launch attacks on American and Indian naval ships did not come to pass because of the alertness of local security forces. But it did remind New Delhi of the strategic utility of terror for Pakistan.

Needless to say, the desire to avoid another Mumbai-type incident has led to an extensive focus on sanitising the coastline. However, with a significant part of the Indian Navy's peacetime mandate constituting coastal defence, strategic missions seem to have taken a backseat. There is a growing sense that the IN's recent overseas engagements have been more in the nature of diplomatic initiatives and have lacked a clear strategic motive. This, in turn, has affected the navy's ability to effectively leverage maritime presence for strategic purposes. In the absence of concerted focus on strategic security, India has neither been unable to project substantive power nor position itself as a key player in the wider security dynamic of maritime-Asia.

Nonetheless, coastal security is likely to dominate India's maritime security agenda in the future. The new maritime strategy can be expected to delve in greater detail and depth on the coastguard's role in maritime territorial defence, the integration of other agencies such as the marine

police, the customs and fisheries in specific coastal plans and the larger coordination of the coastal security effort.

#### **THE INDIAN NAVY AS AN ECONOMIC ACTOR**

A unique characteristic of the current maritime strategy is its emphasis on the 'economic' security of India. From the outset, the document positions the Indian Navy as a prime instrument for securing India's trade and energy security. The accent on securing the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in the IOR, however, detracts from the Indian Navy's larger role in defending India's strategic equities in the wider Asia-Pacific littorals. India's developing trade and energy interests in the southern Indian Ocean and western Pacific call for a robust pan-regional maritime strategy. But New Delhi has been wary of getting enmeshed in the Pacific's contentious maritime disputes and continues to subscribe to a balanced form of multilateral engagement.

Analysts contend India's collegial approach to maritime security is the result of a missing strategic dialectic in the IOR—a space where the Indian Navy's status remains undisputed and unchallenged. Not only has the Indian Navy been the most powerful navy in South Asia, it is also a principal security provider in the central Indian Ocean. In the absence of a serious competitor, it has had the luxury of focusing on humanitarian relief and irregular threats.

The strategic scenario in the IOR, however, is changing with growing Chinese interest in the region. As the PLAN deploys more ships and submarines to the Indian Ocean in coming years, the Indian Navy is being compelled to improve its deterrence capability. There is a view that India must focus its efforts in the IOR, using the ANI to project substantive power. However, in light of the fact that defensive deterrence will be hard to implement and sustain, the Indian Navy might need to quietly expand its operations in the wider Indo-Pacific region, opening up an alternate theatre of operations, marking presence in spaces considered vulnerable to Chinese naval power.

#### **TOWARDS AN INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY**

For India, non-traditional security challenges comprise an important part of the 'Indo-Pacific' policy formulation. The Asian littorals have been witnessing a proliferation of 'rogue' or criminal non-state actors. The rise in armed robberies in the South China Sea has been accompanied by

growing instances of drug trafficking and illegal fishing. The most potent reminder of the front-line role that a regionally dominant force must play in defending against non-traditional security threats was provided by two recent incidents: the MH 370 rescue effort in March 2014, and the operation to save 700 Bangladeshi boatpeople by Myanmar Navy in the Bay of Bengal in June 2015. Ironically, regional politics played a part in both events, even though both endeavours were fundamentally humanitarian in nature.

With both climate and crime likely to worsen in the coming years, the Indian Navy is well suited to play a larger security role in the wider Asia-Pacific. Yet, the core factor driving Indian maritime planners in their quest for a comprehensive maritime strategy must be the balance-of-strategic-power in the Indo-Pacific littorals. Contrary to the belief that increased economic interdependence has the potential to create a peaceful regional order, the experience of South-East Asia and East Asia has shown that in the new world, economic engagement and strategic conflict can comfortably co-exist. China growing maritime ambition, however, puts pressure on India to adopt a more proactive approach in Asian littorals. While the Indian Navy's recent engagements have grown, maritime interaction will need to attain a higher level of operational synergy with partner maritime forces in the western Pacific. Stand-alone exercises will need to be elevated to strategic engagements, even as operations are lifted from the lower end of the engagement spectrum by including elements of strategic security, presence operations and maritime power projection.

#### **A COMPREHENSIVE MARITIME DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY**

For Asia's maritime powers, military modernisation has little meaning unless it is complemented with robust maritime growth, including the healthy development of civilian capabilities. China's simultaneous modernisation of PLAN and the civil maritime sector in recent years illustrates that real development takes place when naval combat capabilities are complimented by a strong infrastructural and civilian maritime component. Maritime infrastructure development, however, remains a sore point in India's emerging strategy. Despite its best efforts, the Indian Navy's indigenisation programme still remains an unfulfilled agenda. While India's civilian shipbuilding has languished in recent years—accounting for less than 1 per cent of world's total ship-construction activity—a grossly inadequate port-handling capacity and

a lack of direct shipping links with major markets has raised questions about India's ability to develop a thriving maritime economy.

These inadequacies render urgent the need for a marine economic plan to buttress a geopolitical strategy. With the central government's emphasis on blue energy projects, maritime developmental schemes as a means of domestic growth and nautical outreach might find a mention in the new maritime strategy. Alongside a discussion of India's naval infrastructure plans, it may be a good idea for the new military maritime strategy to address a few key elements of the National Maritime Agenda, 2010–2020, outlining measures to create port capacity, improve port performance and increase tonnage under the Indian flag. This will give India's maritime plans a composite strategic character.

In conclusion, the perception that India is a proactive member of the maritime community provides the basis for raising the Indian Navy's strategic profile. India may have successfully remedied its pre-modern continental mindset, but a drift in maritime policy from the tenets of hard-power projection will potentially constrain New Delhi's room for geopolitical manoeuvre. While India's pro-maritime orientation has marked a new stage in its appreciation of its maritime character, there is need for a comprehensive strategy to clearly articulate India's broader political and strategic considerations in the development of its maritime power.

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