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Session II: Maritime Ambitions and Maritime Security

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Maritime Ambitions and Maritime Security: India

INTRODUCTION

As India rises as a great power it is realigning its political and security interests beyond South Asia to fit its widening economic and diplomatic activities. A modernized and capable naval force supports the expansion of India's reach into the Indian Ocean region, with which it has deep historical, commercial and security linkages. This new naval posture is bolstered by an ambitious warship procurement and construction programme that projects an expanded aircraft carrier and nuclear-powered submarine-focused multi-dimensional force into the next decade and beyond.

Yet, major shortcomings and challenges remain. The Indian navy's force levels and combat capabilities fall far short of its perceived requirements, with significant deficiencies. The navy's perspective towards China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean region – arguably its key strategic challenge - is hardening, but in the absence of sufficient resources.

MARITIME AMBITIONS

Notwithstanding India's global aspirations since Independence in 1947, it did not have the economic or military attributes to match it. As a result, much of its diplomacy towards the Indian Ocean during the Cold War years focused on the non-aligned group's rhetoric to make it a "Zone of Peace" after the British withdrawal 'east of Suez' in the late 1960s. In the early 1990s the Indian navy resumed bilateral exercises with Western and South-east Asian navies, after a gap of nearly 25 years. Towards the end of the decade it unwisely attempted to raise concerns over a perceived 'vacuum' in the Indian Ocean, to be filled by itself or the Chinese or Japanese navies.ⁱ But, the Indian government did not concur with either assessment.

It was only in the early part of the last decade that the government and the navy began to share similar perspectives on naval diplomacy in the Indian Ocean. As a result, the Indian Navy's 2004 Maritime Doctrine confidently stated that "The Indian maritime vision for the first quarter of the 21st century must look at the arc from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca as a legitimate area of interest".ⁱⁱ Last year, the Navy's new Maritime Doctrine went further by making a distinction between "primary" and "secondary" areas of maritime interest. The former included traditional perspectives such as India's maritime zones, the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, although somewhat controversially, the Cape of Good Hope and the Mozambique channel as well. But, its focus on "secondary

areas” of maritime interest was far more significant, including the “South China Sea, other areas of West Pacific Ocean and friendly littoral countries located herein”, along with “other areas of national interest based on considerations of diaspora and overseas investments”ⁱⁱⁱ, although none of this was elaborated upon.

But, the Indian government appeared more circumspect. The March 2010 annual report of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs fails to reflect such areas of maritime interests or the navy’s new focus on the South China Sea. The annual report of the Ministry of Defence the following month also remains silent over the maritime doctrine though it acknowledges India as a “maritime as well as a continental entity”^{iv} while noting its strategic geographical location in the Indian Ocean.

India’s most extensive and regular forms of naval & maritime cooperation take place with Southeast Asia, which are now largely institutionalised. These include joint training, a multinational gathering of warships, joint bilateral naval exercises, coordinated and joint patrols, and in April-September 2002 the escort of 24 US-flagged high-value vessels through the Strait of Malacca-Singapore in support of the U.S.-led ‘war on terror’. In West Asia and the Gulf, a new area of focus for Indian naval diplomacy, it includes anti-piracy missions off the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden, and bilateral naval exercises. In a significant development, the Indian navy conceived and organized the first Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), a meeting of navy chiefs of the Indian Ocean region; the second meeting was organized by the UAE earlier this year.

FUTURE NAVY

The Indian navy today is a medium-sized blue-water naval force, perhaps the 6th or 7th largest in the world, with 36 principal combatants – including submarines, an aircraft carrier, destroyers and frigates – and over 100 other warships. It prides itself on being the largest navy indigenous to the Indian Ocean. The Indian navy’s \$4.73 billion budget for 2010 accounts for nearly 15% of the defence budget. Nearly half these funds are for the modernisation and acquisition of naval forces, including naval aviation and submarines.

Current shipbuilding and procurement programs plan to expand the fleet to 46-50 principal combatants in 2020 along with additional patrol and coastal combatants. With India’s major arms purchases projected to triple over the next five years to more than US \$35 billion, the navy’s share could account for over half this expenditure.

India’s new naval posture includes the expansion of carrier-based air power to ensure 1-2 aircraft carriers with modern combat aircraft operational at all times. The Indian navy prides itself on operating an aircraft carrier continuously for over 40 years. With the prospective commissioning of the refurbished ex-Russian

carrier Admiral Gorshkov, renamed Vikramaditya, in late 2012/early 2013, along with the first of two locally built aircraft carriers two/three years later, it is expected to maintain a two-carrier force for the first time in 15 years, followed by the third carrier in 2018-19.

In addition, it looks with great excitement towards the prospect for the first time in twenty years of an ex-Russian nuclear-powered submarine (Akula II-class) Chakra, expected later this year/early next year. This will be followed by the deployment of the first of reportedly two or three locally-built Arihant-class nuclear-armed missile boats, the first of which was launched in July 2009 with commissioning two-three years later, and made India the sixth country to build a nuclear-powered submarine. The acquisition of technologically-sophisticated “stealth” warships and the augmentation of shore-based training facilities are additional key attributes. In tandem with the Indian air force’s recent and projected aircraft acquisitions for airborne surveillance, mid-air refueling and special operations tasks, along with specialized troops of the army, India’s reach into the Indian Ocean is being greatly enhanced.

SHORTFALLS & SHORTCOMINGS

Yet, serious time delays in the navy’s acquisition programme remain, along with severe cost over-runs. The refurbishment of the carrier *Admiral Gorshkov* is taking place amidst considerable price escalations and delay in delivery. The planned mid-2008 delivery costing \$1.5 billion has been delayed by nearly five years and the price nearly doubled, leading to an uncharacteristic public Indian complaint to Russia. In a significant report the Comptroller & Auditor General of India (CAG) in August 2009 noted the severe ageing of the naval aviation wing. In a significant indictment it stated that “availability of aircraft was a mere 26% of asset strength on account of the high number of aircraft undergoing repair/overhaul and sluggish progress in acquisition programme”.^v It went on to add that more than half the navy’s carrier-borne Sea Harrier combat aircraft were lost due to accidents, the Tu-142 long-range maritime surveillance aircraft had outlived its total technical life (extended from 20 to 25 years), and the anti-submarine Ka-25, Ka-28, Sea King 42-A and Sea King 42-B helicopters had all gone several years beyond their shelf life.^{vi} The naval version of India’s locally designed Light Combat Aircraft (LCA (N)) was also rolled out in Bangalore on 6 July 2010, nearly three years behind schedule.

Another key concern is the ageing of India’s submarine force due to delayed decision-making and bureaucratic inefficiencies. This has reduced operational availability of India’s submarine fleet to half, and will shrink the number of diesel-electric boats from 16 to eight or nine by 2012 and possibly to as few as four or five by 2015. The first of six *Scorpena* submarines, French-supplied but

Indian-built, which was to be commissioned in late 2012 has been delayed by three years due to “initial teething problems, absorption of technology and augmentation of Mazagon Dockyard Limited (MDL) purchased material” according to Indian defence minister A.K. Antony.^{vii} He further added that this “delay in scheduled delivery of submarines is likely to have an impact on the envisaged force level”.^{viii} On 7 September 2010, the navy issued for the second time a Request for Information (RfI) for an additional six diesel-electric submarines (Project 75I) for an estimated US \$10.72, which makes it one of the largest prospective arms deal for India^{ix}, but will be too late to halt the steep decline in the navy’s submarine fleet.

Considerable delays also continue to take place in India’s warship construction program, with high cost overruns. The new Project 17 class “stealth” frigate *Shivalik* built at Mazagon Dockyards Ltd. (MDL) in Mumbai was commissioned on 29 April 2010, seven years after launch; the second and third ships of this class are yet to be commissioned after launch five and six years ago. The keel of the second Project 15A Kolkata-class destroyer, also built at MDL, was laid in October 2005 but only launched in September 2009, with commissioning expected to take place only in mid-2011.

STRATEGIC CHALLENGE - CHINA

The key strategic challenge for the Indian navy is the Chinese navy (the People’s Liberation Army Navy). India and China are still negotiating longstanding territorial disputes along the 4,000 kms Line of Actual Control (LAC), the de facto border between the two countries. India remains suspicious of Chinese activities in Myanmar (where it is helping to develop ports and pipelines), Pakistan (where it is thought to be developing refuelling facilities for Chinese warships at the recently commissioned Chinese-built Gwadar port on the Makran coast in Baluchistan), and in China’s Tibet Autonomous Region (where it is substantially upgrading military-related infrastructure).

China is seen as transforming its navy into a potent blue-water force and is apparently renewing attempts to build its first aircraft carrier. India’s former naval chief has expressed concern over a new strategic base for Chinese nuclear submarines at the southern tip of Hainan Island in the South China Sea. India perceives these activities as an attempt by China to gain permanent access to the Indian Ocean for the first time, and to encircle India strategically.

While the Indian navy now regularly exercises and trains with Southeast Asian navies, the Chinese navy further builds its relations with the Pakistan navy. The tendency for each to be excluded from the international engagements of the other has raised concerns over an emerging naval rivalry in the Indian Ocean. In September 2007 the Indian navy participated in the largest multilateral naval

exercise in the Bay of Bengal with the U.S., Australia and Japan, along with Singapore. This 'quadrilateral' exercise involved three aircraft carriers (two of which were nuclear-powered), a nuclear submarine, several frigates and destroyers and over three dozen fighter aircraft. China was deliberately excluded. The Indian navy also carried out a trilateral joint exercise with the US and Japan along the Pacific coast of East Asia in April 2007. This followed the annual *Malabar* series of exercises with the US Navy, held off Japan for the first time.

But, China formally expressed concern over the activities in the Indian Ocean of this 'quadrilateral' grouping of democratic states and the prospective defence and strategic relationship between India and the US – all seen in Beijing as efforts to contain China.

At the same time, both India and China are attempting to develop a bilateral defence relationship, although this is currently suspended. This is due to the recent refusal by China of a visa to the Indian general commanding troops in Jammu & Kashmir, representing a pro-Pakistan shift in China's position towards India's control over the territory, which is disputed by Pakistan.

In April 2004, the Indian Maritime Doctrine perceived "attempts by China to strategically encircle India" and commented adversely on "China's vigorous exertions that tend to spill over into our maritime zone".^x India's Maritime Strategy three years later was relatively low-key. It simply noted that the Chinese navy was on the path to becoming a blue water force and that it had an ambitious modernization programme "along with attempts to gain a strategic toe-hold in the Indian Ocean Rim".^{xi} Speaking at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London in June 2007, the then Indian naval chief Admiral Sureesh Mehta indicated that whereas the Indian navy did not perceive the Chinese navy in confrontational terms, it appeared to see it in competitive terms. But, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the latest maritime doctrine published in August 2009 makes no mention of the Chinese navy other than, of course, to include for the first time, a reference to the South China Sea as a "secondary" maritime area of interest for the Indian navy.

Nonetheless, an increased Chinese naval presence and activities in the Indian Ocean have been countered by bilateral Indian naval exercises with Singapore and Vietnam in the South China Sea. The Indian navy also plans to strengthen its fleet on the eastern front, including the basing of an aircraft carrier in the Bay of Bengal in the next five years, while the Indian air force plans to deploy two squadrons of Sukhoi-30MKI fighters at Tezpur air base in eastern India, adjacent to China, for the first time.

Notwithstanding growing bilateral trade and commercial links, New Delhi's perspective towards Beijing is shifting to view China as a key security "challenge and priority" – a sentiment voiced by the Indian Foreign Minister in November 2008. In an uncharacteristic outburst Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh

in September 2010 stated that India should prepare to deal with “a new Chinese assertiveness” and desire for a foothold in South Asia, even though both governments subsequently downplayed these remarks.^{xii}

INDIA-U.S. NAVAL COOPERATION

Meanwhile, in light of their close post-December 2004 tsunami coordination, relations between the Indian and American navies have improved considerably. Following the conclusion of the ten-year bilateral defence cooperation framework agreement of 28 June 2005, India significantly agreed to take part in multilateral military operations with the US “when it is in their common interest”. The following year both countries “agreed to the conclusion of a Maritime Cooperation Framework to enhance security in the maritime domain, to prevent piracy and other transnational crimes at sea, carry out search and rescue operations, combat marine pollution, respond to natural disasters, address emergent threats and enhance cooperative capabilities, including through logistics support”. After the long-awaited India–U.S. nuclear deal on 10 October 2008, the two countries’ security and military links are expected to deepen. In December 2008, the Indian navy ordered eight P-8i maritime surveillance aircraft from Boeing, which at US \$2.1 billion is the largest arms order, to date, from the U.S.

CONCLUSION

As India’s strategic focus expands beyond its immediate South Asian neighbourhood to encompass the Indian Ocean region, the Indian navy is eminently suited to support the country’s foreign policy objectives in the area. Its priorities could include countering the expansion of Chinese naval influence in the Indian Ocean as well as combating piracy off the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden. But, to carry out these tasks it needs to build sufficient and capable forces which is still lacking.

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