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Leveraging India's Maritime Diplomacy

*Roby Thomas**

It would have been difficult to visualise the current scenario in Sino-Indian relations just before COVID-19 overtook the world narrative. This was considering the immense political capital poured into the relationship by the Indian government, first at Wuhan in 2017 and then in Mamallapuram in 2019. It might be argued by some that the Doklam incident of 2017 should have been enough for India to wake up and smell the coffee. But then who expected China to be toeing Sun Tzu's lines on war so resolutely at a time when India was busy rejuvenating the term Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam for a more inclusive world order. This has brought India to an inflection point where all options are on the table.

Humble words and increased preparations are signs that enemy is about to advance. Violent language and driving forward as if to the attack are signs that he will retreat.

– Sun Tzu

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written and lots more said about the 'enemy at the doorstep' in the high Himalayas. Like two bulls in a China shop or, in keeping with political correctness, like an elephant and dragon pushing at the shoulders in a severely confined space, the snow-covered 'eye-ball stare down' does not give either side any room for manoeuvre militarily. Though China might have the numbers staked in its favour, the India of

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today is exceptionally capable of holding its own on the northern borders. With trust levels between the two countries having reached their lowest in recent years, it is evident that India's long border with China will be the focus of both the militaries for the foreseeable future.

While all options are being assessed, it is more than evident that the choice of using hard power will always be considered the least savoury, for obvious reasons. It is to offset this very insalubrious possibility that nations expend considerable diplomatic capital to build influence using their soft power credentials. India and China are both civilisational cultures which, over many millennia of churn, have developed their own civilisational and cultural connections with many countries. This historical connection, coupled with the more contemporary economic and military rise of both the countries towards the late twentieth century, has seen each country developing a sphere of influence in its extended neighbourhood. Though both countries have vast land borders and many continental neighbours, it is the global commons, namely, the oceans, that have provided the greatest means to proliferate culture and influence.

India's unique geography, like that of a continental wedge thrust into the Indian Ocean, has given it a dominating influence over the lifelines, namely, the maritime trade routes, that criss-cross the expanse of the Indian Ocean. This unique feature of the Indian Ocean made the renowned historian K.M. Panikkar astutely describe it as the 'landlocked sea' in his treatise, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History*.¹ He strongly advocated India to develop into a sea power of repute, with the reasoning that it provided an overbearing advantage against 'countries whose main line of communications lie on the sea'.² This prediction has come to fruition with the coming of age of the Indian Navy in the late twentieth century and China has been well conscious of this. With a significant portion of China's energy requirements and trade passing close to the Indian Peninsula and onwards through the Malacca Strait, the 'Malacca dilemma' has always been 'live' for China. It is, therefore, not without reason that Beijing has always been keen to offset this disadvantage, by developing 'relations of convenience' with Indian Ocean littorals in India's sphere of influence.

On the other hand, India's sui generis location within the Indian Ocean, coupled with its growing economic and military capabilities in the late twentieth century, has propelled the Indian Navy as a partner of

choice for the Indian Ocean littoral nations. This symbiotic relationship with the navies in an area, described in India's Maritime Security Strategy of 2015 as being India's 'primary areas of interest',³ has been nurtured in large part by the Indian Navy through its dynamic foreign cooperation initiatives, making it the 'first port of call' for many navies in the region. Now, considering China's latest act of perfidy in India's areas of influence, this article argues that India needs to energetically expand the extent of its soft power influence eastwards from Malacca.

Towards this, the article first examines the historical connect of India and China's maritime and cultural influences into each other's areas of maritime interest. It then delves into India's special maritime connect with littoral countries in the region, which has been fortified through robust defence diplomacy and the 'four pillars' under which it is undertaken. The article then postulates extending India's existing sphere of maritime cooperation or soft power influence to partner countries east of Malacca. This is salient in the current circumstances of China's irredentism, which further justifies a rejuvenated 'Act East' policy, along with a need to revise India's maritime areas of strategic interest as defined in India's Maritime Security Strategy of 2015.⁴

INDIA'S ANCIENT MARITIME CONNECTIONS

India's ancient maritime and cultural connections with the countries of Southeast Asia can be traced back many millennia. Indian traders crossed the Bay of Bengal to pursue trade with the land then known as *Suvarna Bhumi*, literally the 'Land of Gold', which comprised of the Southeast states of Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. As the Indian traders used the seasonal monsoons to guide their sailing ships, they required to make stops at ports all along their route in Indochina awaiting favourable winds. These sojourns ensured transfusion of the rich Indian cultural traditions and social, religious and artistic practices, which can be witnessed even today.⁵ The testimony of existence of Indian colonies in the present territory of Indochina was also recorded by the Greek geographer Ptolemy and Chinese historians. Accordingly, large Hindu kingdoms and empires proliferated in Champa (Siam), Cambodia, Java, Sumatra and other areas in Indonesia, with a panoply of Hindu and Buddhist culture, from the fifth to the thirteenth centuries. It was also during this period that the great Hindu naval power, the Srivijaya Empire, had majority control of the strategic Malacca Strait. This Sumatra-based empire is said to have possessed numerous ships

that sailed regularly to India and China. This control briefly passed to the south Indian Chola Kingdom before the arrival of the Arabs in the fourteenth century.⁶ Appropriately, this strong cultural affiliation has ensured a strong affinity of the Southeast Asian nations towards Indian culture and its people.

Even to the west of the Indian Peninsula, the Hindus were sailing the open seas much before the Egyptians and Greeks, who did not know routes till Hippalus discovered the monsoon winds in AD 45. Indian navigators had discovered Socotra (Sukhad-hara) and navigated the Red Sea long before this.⁷ Even the first European to sail across the Arabian Sea, Vasco da Gama in his ship *San Gabriel*, utilised the services of a Hindu sailor to navigate from Malinde in Africa to the Malabar Coast in May 1498.⁸ This was followed by the Portuguese domination of India's maritime history till the end of the sixteenth century followed by the British period till India achieved independence in 1947.⁹

Post-independence, India's international posture has been fundamentally non-military. This is notwithstanding the fact that India has fought a few wars during this period. Having won independence through a non-violent struggle from an imperialist power, India has been philosophically committed to non-violence, which is rooted in its heritage. Indian foreign policy, accordingly, has been essentially based on its reluctance to project power and support military interventions. India, therefore, has mostly called for peaceful resolutions to disputes, opposed the use of force as a tool of international relations and actively supported international disarmament. India's normative political outlook has been to avoid joining military alliances and refuse providing military bases on its soil or sending its troops, or military assets, to take part in overseas coalition operations. India, in the past, has also been seen as limiting in providing military assets to nations with civil unrest, which has inevitably paved the way for other powers to increase their influence in her neighbourhood.¹⁰

Presently, India has one of the largest standing armies in the world, the most powerful navy in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and one of the most capable air forces. India has a credible nuclear deterrence, with proven sea-launched nuclear capability. The Indian Armed Forces have been seen and accepted as the 'first responder' for the numerous natural and man-made disasters that have afflicted the IOR in the last few decades. When supported by firm political resolve, India has also shown military firmness to support the diplomatic effort in avoiding a

larger conflict, like with the Chinese in both Doklam and now Galwan. Therefore, though India may not project military power beyond its shores like the major powers, in the last few decades it has used its armed forces in more subtle ways to support its foreign policy.

CHINESE CHECKERS

China's forays into the IOR were mostly limited to the Zheng He's seven expeditionary voyages from 1405 to 1433. Zheng He (1371–1433), known as the 'three jewelled eunuch', commanded China's early Ming fleet. During this period, he led seven voyages of 60 ships at a time. In these voyages, the Ming fleet visited Indochina, Java, Sumatra, Ceylon, Calicut, Hormuz at the entrance of the Persian Gulf, Aden at the entrance to the Red Sea and the coast of East Africa.¹¹ While Zheng He's fleet was unprecedented, the routes were not. He was following long-established, well-mapped routes of trade between China and the Arabian Peninsula, employed for many centuries prior to his expeditions. After 1433, the Ming emperor forbade private overseas trading and withdrew his ships, putting an end to the saga of voyages. With the passing of Zheng He's era, the reason for the brief Chinese incursions into the Indian Ocean also withered away.¹²

In the early twenty-first century, China resolutely pushed itself to follow Zheng He. The Maritime Silk Road was announced by President Xi Jinping in a speech to Indonesia's Parliament in October 2013, where he pushed forward the agenda of regional economic integration, cooperation, improved connectivity and goodwill, with free trade zones, port infrastructure and connectivity being at the core of the project.¹³ This projected a virtual 'string of pearls' surrounding the Indian Peninsula, with the veiled aim to restrict India's sphere of influence in the IOR. For the smaller IOR littorals, the project was 'an offer you couldn't refuse'. By wooing with soft loans, investments in civilian projects, cheap defence exports and infrastructure projects, communist China made significant inroads in the region.

Chinese largesse in the IOR was focused on large-scale investments in infrastructure projects in various IOR littorals, including most coastal countries of the African continent, and helped create economic and military dependencies. These investments served the Chinese interests well and were seen as building blocks for future development of forward operating bases (FoBs) for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy in the Indian Ocean, as demonstrated by the 'logistics' base in Djibouti and

the naval base at Gwadar, Pakistan. Further, participation in international anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden provided a legitimate reason for Chinese naval ships to deploy continuously in the Indian Ocean from 2008 onwards. Under the garb of protecting own trade and nationals, PLA Navy deployments in the region expanded to include nuclear and conventional submarines, submarine support vessels and ocean research and intelligence gathering ships, several of which made port visits to countries in India's immediate neighbourhood. The IOR was considered pivotal for China's ambitious flagship One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative, especially since 80 per cent of Chinese trade by value transits these seas.

However, progressing into the third decade of the twenty-first century, we can witness the slow crumble of this 'castle in the air' edifice, an unravelling of strings that held the imaginary pearls together. Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka was one of the first to give way in 2015, as a result of the Sri Lanka's immense debt burden. Gwadar Port project, the jewel in the crown, is floundering for want of financially viable outcomes and operational necessities. Maldives was sailing too close to the wind having whipped up bone-crushing debts under its erstwhile President Abdulla Yameen and is now attempting to reverse course, but is still not off the rocks. Africa is also witnessing the start of slow rumblings, where the initial euphoria has been replaced by the revelation of the predatory nature of the Chinese largesse.

Post-COVID-19, as the rest of the world struggles with crippling social and economic fallout of the virus, China seems to be busy 'rocking the boat' in an otherwise fragile geopolitical quagmire. Its ill-timed aggression on all sides has left the mandarins and scholars of international affairs scratching their heads to make sense of its actions. In the Himalayas, at the Galwan Valley, an ill-meaning Chinese tactical action snowballed into a ferocious Indian reaction, which has scarred the bilateral relations and will almost certainly lead to a reset of ties between the two Asian giants. In its annual summit held on 26 June 2020, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) released a statement where it said, 'We reaffirmed that the 1982 UNCLOS is the basis for determining maritime entitlements, sovereign rights, jurisdiction and legitimate interests over maritime zones.'¹⁴ This was one of ASEAN's strongest pushback against China's claims to the disputed waters of South China Sea on vague historical grounds. Even the European leaders' virtual summit with China, held on 22 June 2020,

brought out the frost setting in the relationship, calling for a recalibration in the relationship. This was again a reaction to China's typical predatory economic policies.¹⁵

LEVERAGING MILITARY COOPERATION

Today, the favourable global and regional acceptance of India's benign and reasonable stand in the geopolitical matrix should help India shape a favourable regional environment, through constructive engagement and cooperation, by utilising the strengths and capabilities of all arms of the government effectively. India's efforts on capacity building and capability enhancement in the region can be made more effective and result oriented through articulation of a sustainable action plan, especially in the maritime domain. This can best be done by leveraging the Indian Armed Forces' established capability and professional reputation to provide substance and visibility to the country's strategic vision and policy initiatives. Due to the support of the government, the Indian Armed Forces' presence, visibility and engagement has resulted in many nations eagerly seeking India's assistance/cooperation, as the 'first port of call'. Consequently, the Indian Armed Forces are well positioned to become very suitable coordinators in several capacity building projects in the region, which should now extend to include countries of the Western Pacific Region.

Over the years, the Indian Armed Forces, and primarily the Indian Navy, have been engaging with partner littoral countries under a wide range of cooperative constructs to facilitate a well-rounded umbrella of defence cooperation. The structure for this engagement has been well elucidated in the Indian naval strategic publication of October 2015, under the chapter, 'Strategy for Shaping a Favourable Maritime Environment'.¹⁶ This has been further underlined as 'harnessing the collective military competency' by Admiral Karambir Singh, the Indian Chief of Naval Staff, when he addressed the conclave of defence attaches in October 2019. During the conclave, Singh postulated 'four pillars' or the 'four C's' under which foreign cooperation initiatives are being undertaken: (i) capacity building (provision of military assets and military infrastructure development); (ii) capability enhancement (military training, technical and hydrographic assistance, exclusive economic zone [EEZ] surveillance, etc.); (iii) constructive engagements (military-level talks, military exercises, ship visits, etc.); and (iv) collaborative

efforts (symposiums, constructs, conclaves, etc.).¹⁷ The pillars of defence diplomacy are discussed at length below.

Capacity Building

Towards the first pillar of capacity building, India has been providing military assets from both 'in-use' inventory of the Indian Armed Forces and the newly constructed military platforms to various partner countries, such as Myanmar, Afghanistan, Nepal, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Mauritius. New platforms, such as offshore patrol vessels (OPVs), fast interceptor boats (FIBs), water jet fast attack crafts (WJFACs), Dornier 228 maritime patrol aircraft and Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL)-made advanced light helicopters, have been provided to various friendly foreign countries. Capacity building also includes support in the form of spares, technical maintenance assistance and training of personnel. This has been supplemented by assistance in military infrastructure development.

Capability Enhancement

In the second pillar of capability enhancement, India has become the favoured destination in the South Asian region for professional military training. The Indian Armed Forces provide quality training to a very large number of foreign countries every year, making this the cornerstone of India's cooperative defence diplomacy. Over the years, the Indian Navy alone has trained more than 15,000 foreign personnel from 41 countries.¹⁸ At any given time, there are more than 500–600 international trainees in Indian naval training establishments. This includes ab initio training for foreign naval cadets carried out at the Indian Naval Academy, Ezhimala, from 2015 and specialised training of foreign naval officers and sailors at naval institutions all across India.¹⁹ This is supplemented by training in the niche fields of aviation, submarines and asymmetric warfare to select foreign partners. To offset the enhanced training load, the Indian Armed Forces have been deputing mobile training teams to undertake customised tailor-made training as requested for by foreign militaries.

The Indian Navy also provides hydrography survey assistance to friendly countries in the region, including independent/joint surveys, assistance in demarcation of a littoral nation's continental shelf claims and publishing of navigational charts. Towards enhancing maritime domain awareness (MDA), India has been collaborating with countries of the Indo-Pacific to overcome the porosity which comes with the vast expanse

of maritime borders. This means that illegal activities can sometimes go undetected, despite the best efforts of national maritime enforcement agencies. Accordingly, India has operationalised bilateral maritime information-sharing agreements with 22 countries and one multinational construct, and also established an International Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) at Gurugram in December 2018, which facilitates partner countries to create a virtual network for exchange of information under the international cooperation framework.²⁰

Constructive Engagements

The third pillar of constructive engagements includes structured periodic official interactions between the militaries of partner countries, which are termed as military-level staff talks. This is undertaken by all the three Services with over 15 countries each. It is complemented by separate tri-service talks conducted by, Headquarters, Integrated Defence Staff with partner organisations in Bangladesh, France, Germany, Italy, Maldives, Russia, the United States (US) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).²¹ The Indian Armed Forces also undertake extensive operational deployments, bilateral and multilateral exercises and maritime security operations. These are being continued with an aim to enhance interoperability with other armed forces. The Indian Navy undertakes bilateral naval exercises with 19 countries and participates in about 16 multilateral exercises. The Indian Army participates in bilateral exercises with 25 countries and in 11 multilateral exercises, while the Indian Air Force participates in bilateral exercises with seven countries and five multilateral exercises. The details of exercises are given in Tables 1 and 2.²²

The Indian Navy also undertakes coordinated patrols with four partner navies in the Bay of Bengal to surmount the maritime challenges of human smuggling, trafficking and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing that threatens the marine ecosystem of the region. The partner navies with which India undertakes these patrols include Indonesia since 2002, Thailand since 2005, Myanmar since 2013, and Bangladesh since 2018.²³

Collaborative Efforts

As part of the fourth pillar of defence diplomacy, to thwart the scourge of piracy in the Gulf of Aden, in the Horn of Africa, the Indian Navy has maintained continuous deployment of one warship in the Gulf of Aden since 2008. Till March 2019, the Indian Navy had deployed a

Table I India's Bilateral Military Exercises

<i>Bilateral Military Exercises</i>				
<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Army</i>	<i>Navy</i>	<i>Air Force</i>
1.	Australia	Austrahind	Ausindex	–
2.	Bangladesh	Sampriti	Bongo Sagar	–
3.	China	Hand-In-Hand	–	–
4.	Egypt	Cyclone	–	–
5.	France	Shakthi	Varuna	Garuda
6.	Indonesia	Garuda Shakthi	Smudra Shakthi	–
7.	Japan	Dharma Guardian	Jimex	–
8.	Kazakhstan	Kazind	–	–
		Prabal Dostyk	–	–
9.	Malaysia	Harimau Shakthi	Samudra Laxmana	–
10.	Maldives	Ekuverian	Ekatha	–
11.	Mongolia	Nomadic Elephant	–	–
12.	Myanmar	Imbex	Inmex	–
13.	Nepal	Surya Kiran	–	–
14.	Oman	AL Nagah	Naseem-Al-Bahar	Eastern Bridge
15.	Qatar	–	Zaire Al Badr	–
16.	Russia	Indra	Indra Navy	Aviaindra
17.	Saudi Arabia	To be named	To be named	
18.	Singapore	Bold Kurukshetra	Simbex	Joint Training
		Agni Warrior		
19.	Seychelles	LA'mitye	–	–
20.	Sri Lanka	Mitra Shakthi	Slinex	–
21.	Thailand	Maitree	Not started	Siam Bharat
22.	United Arab Emirates (UAE)	Desert Eagle	Gulf Star	–
23.	United Kingdom (UK)	Ajeya Warrior	Konkan	Indradhanush
24.	US	Yudh Abhyas	Malabar	Cope India
		Vajra Prahar	–	
25.	Uzbekistan	Dustlik	–	–
26.	Vietnam	Vinbax	To be named	–

Source: 'Military Exercises' and *MoD Annual Report* (various years), n. 20.

Table 2 India's Multilateral Military Exercises

<i>Multilateral Military Exercises</i>				
<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Army</i>	<i>Navy</i>	<i>Air Force</i>
1.	African Countries	AFINDEX (conducted by India)	–	–
2.	ASEAN	ADMM + Exercises		–
3.	Australia	–	KAKADU	Pitch Black
			Black Carillion (Submarine escape)	
4.	BIMSTEC countries	Conducted by India	–	–
5.	Bangladesh	–	–	Samvedna
6.	Brazil	–	IBSAMAR (South Africa + Brazil)	–
7.	Indonesia	–	KOMODO (HADR exercise)	–
8.	Israel	–	–	Blue Flag
9.	Japan	–	EOD J2A (Ordnance disposal)	–
10.	Malaysia	–	–	Hope Ex
11.	Mongolia	KHAN QUEST	–	–
12.	Russia	TSENTR	–	–
13.	SCO Countries	Peace Mission Exercise	–	–
14.	Singapore	–	SITMEX (Singapore + Thailand)	–
			MARISEX (IFC – Singapore)	
15.	Sri Lanka	Cormorant Strike	–	–
16.	Thailand	Cobra Gold	–	–
17.	UK	Cambrian Patrol	–	–
18.	US	–	RIMPAC (US INDOPACOM)	Red Flag
			CUTLASS EXPRESS (US AFRICOM)	
			SALVEX (Salvage exercise)	
			SPITTING COBRA (Ordnance disposal)	
			SEACAT (Anti-Piracy exercise)	
19.	IONS Countries	–	Conducted by IWG Chair	–
20.	MILAN	–	Conducted by Indian Navy	–

Source: 'Military Exercises' and *MoD Annual Report* (various years), n. 20.

Note: ADMM: ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting; BIMSTEC: Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation; SCO: Shanghai Cooperation Organisation; IONS: Indian Ocean Naval Symposium; IWG: IONS Working Group.

total of 72 warships, while safely escorting more than 3,440 (including 413 Indian flagged) ships with over 25,062 mariners embarked. This while thwarting 44 confirmed attempts of piracy and apprehending 120 pirates.²⁴ Moreover, in synchronisation with its modified operational philosophy of placing warships on 'mission-based deployments' in the IOR, the Indian Navy has shifted its Gulf of Aden patrol from an 'escort cycle'-based deployment to a 'free patrol' deployment. Considering the reduced threat of piracy in the Gulf of Aden, this offers the navy more flexibility to participate in other activities, such as escorting ships of the World Food Programme, participating in bilateral naval exercises with partner navies in the region and undertaking capacity building/capability enhancement initiatives in its areas of interest.²⁵ As all Indian naval ships on deployment carry adequate number of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) 'Bricks'²⁶, this also enables the Indian Navy to be the first responder for disaster relief requirements in the region.

Also, as part of collaborative efforts, the Indian Navy has been central to the establishment of Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). The IONS, which is both inclusive and voluntary, is a unique maritime initiative of the twenty-first century that was launched in February 2008 by India. This initiative has brought together a total of 32 littoral nations of the IOR, 24 of which are members and eight are observers. It is a cooperative mechanism, which provides a forum for discussion, policy formulation as well as numerous aspects of naval operations. The IONS aims to promote a shared understanding of issues relating to the maritime domain so as to formulate common strategies, strengthen capacities, establish cooperative mechanisms, and develop interoperability in terms of doctrines and procedures to deal with the wide canvas of maritime challenges that plague the IOR littorals.²⁷

Similarly, another initiative undertaken by the Indian Navy was the MILAN maritime exercise. This initiative was started in 1995 to bring together the navies of the regions in a 'sub-regional maritime togetherness', by organising a set of naval interactions that were given the generic name MILAN (a Hindi word for 'meeting'), at Port Blair in the Andaman Islands.²⁸ The MILAN has been held once every two years, in 1997, 1999 and 2003. The 2005 edition, however, was cancelled after the December 2004 tsunami. The event resumed in 2006 (thereby changing the cycle from 'odd' to 'even' years). The exercise was thereafter held in 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2014. It was not held in 2016 due to the conduct of the International Fleet Review in Visakhapatnam. The last one, MILAN

2018, was conducted at Port Blair and saw participation of 30 delegates from 16 countries and 11 ships from eight countries.

SAILING EASTWARDS: POSSIBLE AREAS OF ENGAGEMENT

While India has been pursuing a policy of robust defence cooperation with almost all littoral countries of the IOR, this has been relatively moderate for countries east of the Malacca. This may not have been a conscious decision to start with, but with the advent of the twenty-first century and the rise of both India and China, this seems to have been the case. India's policy has been to try and maintain good neighbourly relations with all the countries. China, in sharp contrast, does not seem to have ever shared the same sentiment. It has not only systematically swung its Maritime Silk Road around the Indian Peninsula but also ensured that it established strategic hubs along the way in India's close vicinity. For example, Kyaukpyu deep-sea port in Myanmar, Hambantota deep-sea port in Sri Lanka, various projects in Maldives, Gwadar sea port in Pakistan and its logistics base in Djibouti. Such Chinese predatory tendencies to needle India have also been matched in recent times on the strategic, political and economic front. However, the latest incident instigated in Galwan in the north seems to have been the proverbial 'last straw' for India. India now needs to scan its options to regain its historical maritime influence east of the Malacca, notwithstanding China's remonstrance. These would include maritime cooperation in those areas and sectors where India can easily ramp-up the existing level of activities.

Operational Engagements

India's engagement with the countries in Southeast Asia underwent a strategic shift towards the end of the twentieth century when India initiated the 'Look East' policy in 1991, later upgraded to the 'Act East' policy in 2014. During this period, India sought to expand its regional markets to take advantage of the opportunities of trade, industrial development and investments with the ASEAN and beyond, and also began expanding its military cooperation initiatives with countries looking for an alternative to the Chinese influence. Therefore, the Indian military's engagement with countries in Southeast Asia achieved a certain salience and maturity by the second decade of the twenty-first century. This engagement was chiefly led by the Indian Navy, indicative in the number of bilateral naval

Table 3 Naval Exercises and Coordinated Patrols

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Name</i>
<i>Naval Exercises</i>		
1.	Singapore	SIMBEX
2.	Vietnam	–
3.	Malaysia	Samudra Lakshmana
4.	Indonesia	Samudra Shakthi
5.	Myanmar	INMEX
6.	Singapore+ Thailand	SITMEX
7.	Multilateral	MILAN
<i>Naval Coordinated Patrols</i>		
8.	Indonesia	–
9.	Thailand	–
10.	Myanmar	–
11.	Bangladesh	–

Source: ‘Military Exercises’ and *MoD Annual Report* (various years), n. 20.

exercises and coordinated patrols that the navy was engaging in with the Southeast Asian navies (see Table 3).

As discussed earlier, continued operational interactions between armed forces are a precursor to improve interoperability, which in turn will improve responses and capabilities for HADR, out-of-area contingencies (OOAC) and military operations other than war (MOOTW), including non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO). This also becomes a necessity when we consider that the Indo-Pacific has been the epicentre for non-traditional maritime threats in the last few decades, including large-scale natural disasters. There is, therefore, a need for India to increase and deepen its traditional operational engagement with the Southeast Asian armed forces, especially the navies.

This would include instituting bilateral naval exercises with South Korea and the Philippines, while upgrading the existing military engagement with ASEAN to include invitations to the annual tri-service HADR exercise conducted by the Indian Armed Forces. India could also seek to deepen both its submarine and anti-submarine cooperation with Indonesia and Australia by increasing the complexity of these two components in the existing bilateral maritime exercises with both countries, as well as looking to institute a trilateral maritime exercise between the three nations. It is also reasonable that India joins the

Malacca Strait Patrol (MSP) as a partner navy with the existing countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore. This would be logical due the close proximity of the southern tip of Andaman and Nicobar Islands to the Malacca Strait, making India a Malacca funnel state, and also because of its ongoing operational engagements with the MSP partner navies.

Furthering Capacity Building

India's capacity building initiatives have spanned many decades. In fact, India has gifted or supplied military platforms like ships, aircraft and vehicles to friendly neighbouring countries, along with associated maintenance, going back many decades. For instance, in April 1973 and July 1974, India gifted two seaward defence boats, *Akshay* and *Ajay*, to Bangladesh, which were inducted into the Bangladesh Navy as *Padma* and *Surma* respectively.²⁹ Thereafter India has gifted 'in-use' maritime assets to Mauritius, Seychelles, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Mozambique. In addition, India has also constructed military assets in Indian defence public sector undertakings (DPSUs) as per specifications and sold the same to partner countries: the Goa Shipyard Ltd (GSL) constructed an OPV, *Barracuda*, for the Mauritius Coast Guard, which was commissioned by Prime Minister Modi during his visit to Mauritius in 2015;³⁰ and two WJFACs were supplied in 2016 and 2017, with the second ship, *Valiant*, being commissioned in Mauritius in August 2017.³¹ Similarly, India supplied two advance OPVs, specifically constructed for the Sri Lankan Navy by the GSL: one, commissioned in 2017, was named *SLNS Sayurala*; and the second, commissioned in 2018, was named *SLNS Sindhurala*.³² In 2017, the Myanmar Navy contracted for Indian-made anti-submarine warfare suit for its Kyan Sitha-class frigates, along with Indian-made torpedoes, as part of a deal worth \$37.9 million.³³

India, therefore, has the capability to offer to Southeast Asian navies such general use assets, like OPVs and WJFACs. These are being constructed by Indian DPSUs at extremely affordable rates compared to the international market. Plus, they are ideal platforms for patrolling of a littoral nation's EEZ and territorial waters. In addition, the Indian Navy is one of the leading proponents of anti-submarine warfare, having operated and hunted submarines in the ever-challenging thermocline of the tropical waters. This gives immense credence to the anti-submarine warfare suits and weapons developed for and used by the Indian Navy, which has now been selected by the Myanmar Navy for their indigenous

frigates. Further, the lethal Brahmos missile, developed jointly by India and Russia, has also been on offer to Southeast Asian countries.³⁴

For a majority of IOR littoral nations, one of the primary security challenges in the maritime domain is the non-traditional threats. These are in the form of terrorism, drugs trafficking, arms smuggling, IUU fishing, human smuggling, natural disasters, etc. To mitigate such challenges, nations require to develop a viable surveillance network, which requires operating and maintaining costly military assets. This is an expensive proposition for any country. To overcome these challenges and plug the gaps in its coastal maritime surveillance, India has set up a chain of Coastal Surveillance Radar System (CSRS) along its entire coast. This network is connected to various regional hubs and centrally to the Information Management Analysis Centre (IMAC) at Gurugram. This has helped in substantially enhancing India's coastal MDA to tackle non-traditional threats from the sea. India has also offered the same solution to its partner littoral nations in the IOR, which is especially viable for archipelagic nations with numerous far-flung islands. Accordingly, India has assisted in setting of a five-station CSRS at Mauritius in 2012, an eight-station CSRS at Seychelles in 2015 and a six-station automatic identification system (AIS) at Sri Lanka.³⁵ India has also installed a 10-station CSRS at Maldives and has inked agreements to install CSRS in Bangladesh and Myanmar in the near future.³⁶ India can offer setting up similar networks for those Southeast Asian countries which are presently struggling with near-coast maritime challenges.

Hydrographic Assistance

The Indian Naval Hydrographic Department (INHD), with extensive experience in state-of-the-art equipment and modern infrastructure, has already assisted a number of countries in the littoral region for surveys under bilateral mechanisms. The INHD extends assistance in many areas, such as: conduct of hydrographic, oceanographic and coastal surveys; hydrographic training; setting up of hydrographic infrastructure; exchange of personnel; production of electronic navigational charts (ENCs); and EEZ/continental shelf surveys for delineation of maritime areas under the provisions of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).³⁷

India signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on defence cooperation with Seychelles in September 2003 and undertook ship-based hydrographic surveys, which enabled Seychelles' claim to its

continental shelf, and also helped publish three navigational charts.³⁸ Likewise, India signed an MoU with Mauritius in October 2005, which catered to hydrographic survey of important ports, harbours and designated sea areas around the Mauritian islands. This resulted in the publication of seven navigational charts and determination of the continental shelf claim of Mauritius.³⁹ India also signed an MoU for cooperation in the field of hydrography with Maldives in June 2019. This resulted in a total of five surveys, including a survey for delineation of the Maldives continental shelf.⁴⁰ On similar lines, the Indian Navy is supremely capable of providing hydrographic assistance and training to Southeast Asian countries on request.

Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)

Every maritime nation feels the need to ensure adequate surveillance with an intention to improve its own MDA. This encompasses identification, monitoring and constant tracking of vessels to prevent any potential threat from the sea from impinging on the coastal and offshore security of the country. In today's interconnected world, security issues in one country have the potential to affect not only its neighbours but the wider region. This is especially true in the maritime domain where porosity and expanse of maritime borders means that illegal activities can sometimes go undetected, despite the best efforts of national maritime enforcement agencies. Towards this, India has signed bilateral maritime white shipping information-sharing agreements with 22 countries and one multinational construct, the Virtual Regional Maritime Traffic Centre, which facilitates 30 other countries to create a virtual network for exchange of information under the international cooperation framework. India is also undertaking capacity building measures with a number of IOR littoral countries, where requested.⁴¹

There was also a need to address the requirement of a dedicated centre for undertaking collation, fusion and dissemination of maritime information data being exchanged with all partners. The growing realisation was that collaborative information sharing at the national and international levels would provide compelling value propositions for all. Accordingly, India took the initiative to establish linkages between various national and multinational networks by launching IFC-IOR in Gurugram in December 2018. The IFC-IOR will ensure situational awareness by collating, analysing and disseminating information related to maritime safety and HADR requirements at sea.⁴² Additionally, towards

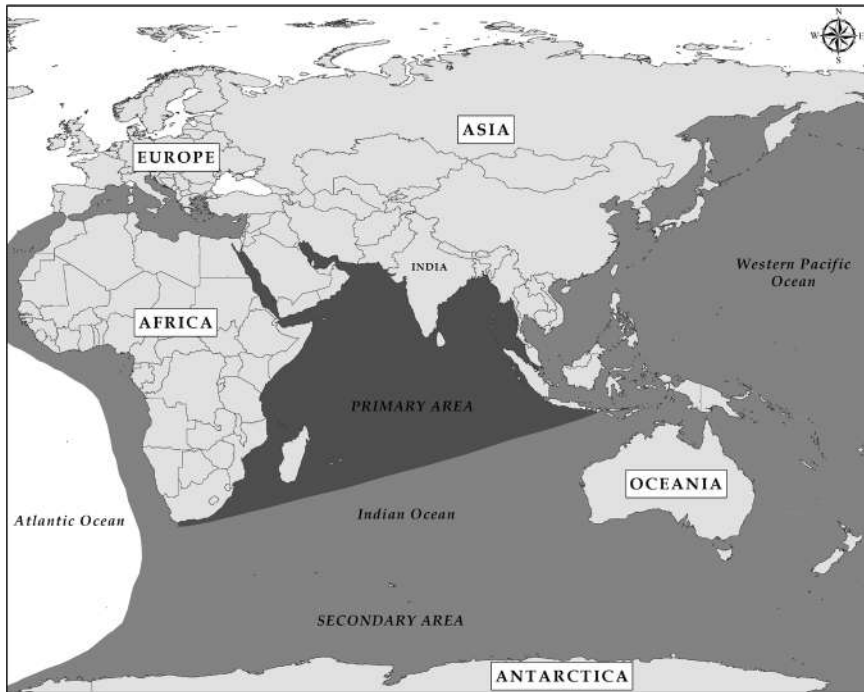


Figure 1 India: Areas of Maritime Interest

Source: Indian Navy, *Ensuring Secure Seas*, n. 3, pp. 34-35.

enhancing capability building, the IFC-IOR would undertake conduct of exercises and training capsules in maritime information collection and sharing and is also likely to host international liaison officers from the partner nations, which should expand to include Southeast Asian littorals in the near future.⁴³

EPILOGUE

The Indian naval strategic publication of October 2015, *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, has categorised India's maritime areas of interest in its chapter, 'Maritime Security: Imperatives and Influences'. It categorises the areas based on the relative degree of impact the areas have on India's maritime interests. The *primary areas of interest* have been defined as areas extending from the east coast of the African continent to the west of the Indonesian archipelago, while the *secondary areas* mainly include the west coast of Africa extending to the Western Pacific (see Figure 1). The document, however, advises that '...as India's

interactions across the world and the effects of globalisation increase, the areas of interest would correspondingly evolve (emphasis mine).⁴⁴ Accordingly, the events at the Line of Actual Control in the union territory of Ladakh in May 2020 have definitely marked an inflection point in India's strategic worldview. This would need appropriate reflection in our strategic literature, which would justify a review of the *areas of strategic influence*, with India's primary areas of interest expanding eastwards to encompass the South China Sea.

This sentiment has been echoed by some American analysts who have reasoned that the Chinese-induced crisis in the Himalayas would have finally encouraged India to tilt in favour of an alliance to check Chinese expansionism. This would justify India aligning with Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy, while playing a 'pre-eminent role' in this largely maritime construct.⁴⁵ Even analysts in China have predicted India's strategic interests moving eastwards. This was highlighted by a Chinese analyst, Zhang Ming, when he reasoned that 'once India commands the Indian Ocean, it will not be satisfied with its position and will continuously seek to extend its influence and its eastward strategy will have a particular impact on China.' He summed up by saying that 'India is perhaps China's most realistic strategic adversary.'⁴⁶

The evolution of Chinese strategic thought and its practical validation seem to closely mirror Sun Tzu's advice on deception, where he said:

All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when we are able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must appear inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near.⁴⁷

This seems to be the principle being followed by the Chinese when we analyse their actions in the maritime domain, both in areas surrounding the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.

Interestingly, the ancient Indian philosopher Kautilya also had pontificated a similar course of action when he expounded three categories of warfare: the operative category being *kootayuddha* (concealed warfare); and the other two categories being of *prakashayuddha* (open warfare) and *tushnimyuddha* (silent warfare).⁴⁸ If we reflect on Kautilya's thought in the current estrangement with China, it would be prudent to surmise that India needs to leverage its substantial soft power credentials of defence diplomacy, particularly naval cooperation, for the long haul. This, as argued in the article, would require an adroit refocusing of our

priority areas of military soft power engagement to ensure that we develop common ground with partner countries bordering the South China Sea.

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