

# Changing Roles of Navies in the Contemporary World Order with Specific Reference to the Indian Navy

Sureesh Mehta\*

## A Historical Perspective

### Sea Power in History

All through history, 'great power' status of nations has been associated with possession of strong navies. The ancient Greeks coined the term *thalassocracy* meaning "rule of the sea" to describe a state with primarily maritime realms, or naval supremacy of the state. Ancient Crete is credited with being the first *thalassocracy* which dominated the shores of the Aegean Sea with its strong naval forces. Athens, Carthage and Rome were other pre-eminent *thalassocracies* of this era.

In the age of exploration and colonisation, the broadest application of Sea Power was seen along with emergence of remarkable *thalassocracies*. Anchored in their European territories, several nations established colonial empires held together by naval supremacy. The establishment of the Portuguese Empire was soon followed by the Spanish, Dutch and eventually, the British, whose immense landed possessions were held together by the greatest navy of its time. When Britain lost its mastery at sea, in World War I and World War II, albeit to a fraternal ally, the United States, the British Empire was a bubble that burst as decisively as did that of Athens in the Peloponnesian War (430-404 BC). If this hypothesis of centrality of naval power in great power status of nations sounds too Mahanian, let us view the relevance of Sea Power in geopolitics through the lens of a continental power theorist.

### Mackinder's Heartland Theory

Sir Halford Mackinder, the great geopolitical theorist, who postulated that history was a cyclic struggle between land-based and sea-based powers. His often quoted dictum of continental determinism is expressed as Eastern Europe was the key to the Heartland (or pivot area), which in turn commanded the World-Island. The power, which ruled the World-Island, ruled the World. Mackinder intended this epigram as

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\*Admiral Sureesh Mehta, PVSM, AVSM, ADC is Chief of Naval Staff and Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee. This is the text of his speech delivered as part of the National Security Lecture Series at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses on August 13, 2008.

a prediction and as policy guidance for the Allied negotiators at the Versailles Conference. Nevertheless, his prophecies were often cited in strategic discussions during the Cold War era as well.

However, what people did fail to notice was the fact that the United States, which was, of course, a continental power, had also developed into a maritime power. Even the Soviet Union invested heavily in the Soviet Navy during the Cold War in the global competition for supremacy, despite geographical limitations in terms of warm water ports. One analysis of the Cold War dynamics attributes maritime preponderance of the USA as a major factor in deciding the Cold War in its favour. This reinforces the historic fact that continental powers have fared poorly against maritime powers. No nation that aspires for greatness can neglect the maritime dimension. The United States, Russia, France, Britain and Japan, have all developed maritime infrastructure and have large and technologically advanced navies. China, through its intensive investment in maritime platforms and infrastructure, is developing powerful maritime forces with global power projection capability.

### The Rise and Fall of Indian Sea Power

What about Indian Sea Power? Ancient India enjoyed active trade links with Africa, Arabia and Mesopotamia; the empires of ancient Persia, Greece, Rome and China; and a number of kingdoms in South-East Asia. Then – as now – the wide-ranging nature of this seaborne trade required the assurance of a high degree of maritime security. Indeed, up to the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, several Indian kingdoms – especially those in the peninsula, like the Cholas, Cheras, Pallavas and Pandyas – possessed significant sea-going navies of their own. In fact, we cannot contest the historical surmise that India never lost her independence till she lost the command of the seas to the Portuguese in the first decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The continental mindset of Indian rulers was shaped by their experience of invasions which came from landward. However, such invasions and conquests led either to transient political changes or to the foundation of new dynasties, which in a very short time were assimilated by the resilient fabric of India's culture. While dominance over the Indian Ocean passed from the Portuguese to the British, the Mughals remained oblivious of the importance of sea-power to the empire. Consequently, India's maritime capabilities, and what existed of its naval power, could not prevent India's subjugation by the British.

History has taught India two bitter lessons: *firstly*, that neglect of maritime power led

to loss of sovereignty, and *secondly*, that it takes many decades to restore maritime power after a period of neglect and decline.

## Geo-Strategic Significance of the Seas

### India's Continental Focus

Regrettably even after independence, we did not quite grow out of our continental focus for many generations – thanks mainly to the developments in our terrestrial neighbourhood. It is only in the more recent past that our policy makers have fully comprehended the strategic the significance of Sea Power and its relation to broader strategic, diplomatic and national security objectives, and it has not been easy to get over our “Sea Blindness”.

### Growing Significance of the Littoral

The proclamation of Hugo Grotius recognising oceans being *Mare Liberum* or Free Seas, was reinforced by United Nations through recognition of the oceans as 'common heritage of mankind' and freedom of navigation on the high seas as a fundamental principle of maritime law. Unlike every inch of land which is owned by one nation or another, the seas in their natural state, are free of political control. The geo-strategic significance of Sea Power emerges from the fact that 70 per cent of the earth's surface is covered by the sea and over 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the world's population lives within 100 miles of it. Over 150 of the 192 member states of the UN are coastal states. Since the 1970s, all of them have extended their jurisdiction out to sea - in many cases, as much as 200Nm and some beyond that. Most human maritime activity is confined to within 100Nm of the coastal zones. This means that a very large proportion of the world's economic, industrial and political activity is carried out in this swath of land and sea extending about 300Nm. This is often referred to as the littoral, and that is where the navies of the major maritime powers are focusing today. It is noteworthy that in all of the recent major conflicts - Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq - the major interventions have not been over land, but from the littoral.

As I just mentioned, in recent years, there has been a perceptible realisation of the importance of the seas, as a medium for resource exploitation and transportation. There is a surge in the economic activities all around our coastline in terms of infrastructure, Special Economic Zones, industrial activities and offshore exploration. There is also a discernible shift in the centre of economic growth from the continental heartland to the 'littoral', and we can assume that as a natural progression of this rather welcome development, India will outgrow its continental mindset and develop a robust maritime outlook.

## India's Maritime Interests

### Strategic Location

Having established the geo-strategic significance of the seas, let us review our intrinsic maritime interests and resultant need for a strong navy. We are strategically located in a warm water ocean, astride the major shipping lanes from the Persian Gulf to the Malacca Strait. A long coastline studded with deep-water ports, a well-endowed EEZ, a rich hinterland and island territories on both seaboard completes this fortunate picture. Our dependence on the sea for food, energy and minerals will grow exponentially in the coming years and this will necessitate a quantum increase in efforts to ensure the security of our maritime assets.

### Choke Points

Hemmed in by the landmass of Asia to its north, Africa to its west and South East Asia and Australia to its East, the Indian Ocean is virtually a land-locked ocean. Access to this ocean is controlled by several choke points, through which shipping has to necessarily pass. These vital choke points need to be kept open at all times to keep both our economy as well as the global economy running smoothly.

### Energy Security

**Oil Flows and Trade Routes:** Coming next to Energy Security, since the IOR is contiguous to one of the major oil producing regions of the world – the Persian Gulf – the energy lifelines of the world as also major trade routes also pass through this region. As a result of rapidly developing economies, the Asia-Pacific region's share of world energy consumption will rise from the present 20 per cent to 31 per cent in 2020 with 80 per cent of this requirement being sourced from the Persian Gulf. Today about 50 super-tankers traverse the sea-lanes between the Lakshadweep and Andaman Islands. This figure is expected to reach 150-200 by 2020.

**Security of Energy Flows:** India's annual oil consumption is expected to rise to 150 million tons by 2020, with the country likely to be the world's single largest importer of oil by 2050. Global energy interests also translate into the permanent and increasing presence of extra regional navies in the Indian Ocean in general and the Arabian Sea in particular. Ensuring unhindered flow of oil from this region will be a major maritime pre-occupation, especially in times of conflict. However, we must also factor possible coercive influence of these extra-regional maritime forces in our security calculus.

## Overseas Trade

A quick look at our Overseas Trade shows that reforms in the past decade have resulted in a liberalised Indian economy, integrated with, and increasingly interdependent on other world economies. India is now projected to become the fifth largest economy in the world by 2020 and the second largest by 2050. The sheer volume of trade carried over the oceans and the inter-dependencies that exists amongst nations, enormously enhances the stakes in the security of this trade. The pressure for countries to cooperate in the maritime military domain to ensure smooth flow of energy and commerce on the high seas will grow even further, and will require us to focus our energies in this direction in the coming years.

## Securing our Maritime Interests

As a mature and responsible maritime power, India has a clear self-interest in what happens in her geo-strategic maritime areas of interest. At its most fundamental level, this 'self-interest' finds expression in the statement of our core national interest as derived from the Constitution of India, namely to assure the economic, material and the spiritual well-being of the 'People of India'. Naturally, this core national interest requires the assurance of security in every form. Consequently, the maritime security of India and its environs is central to the functioning of the Indian Navy.

## Globalisation and the Changing Roles of the Indian Navy

After that historical backdrop, a broad-brush treatment of the geo-strategic importance of the seas and a quick review of our maritime interests, it is time to examine whether traditional naval roles have undergone any significant change in recent years. The two most defining features of the modern world are increasing inter-dependence brought about by globalisation and the shift in the patterns of conflict from conventional to sub-conventional methods.

## Sea Power in Peace and War

To understand the linkage between sea power and globalisation, one must first unlearn the popular characterisation that sea power is exclusively about war at sea. The term sea power is a much broader concept that entails at least four elements: *the control of international trade and commerce; the usage and control of ocean resources; the operations of navies in war; and the use of navies and maritime economic power as instruments of diplomacy, deterrence, and political influence in times of peace.* Unlike the concepts of land power or air power, which are generally defined only in military terms, sea power can never be quite separated from its geo-economic purposes.

## Roles of the Navy

### Traditional Roles

The wider function of the span of naval operations could be described by a triad of naval roles which are:

- The Combat and Military Role, which is projection of power by the exercising control over the oceans in times of peace and conflict.
- The Diplomatic or Foreign Policy role, which implies projection of national influence through wide range of options; ranging from benign activities like humanitarian aid and cooperative regional engagements to coercive presence.
- The Constabulary and Policing roles of the navies include protection of national sovereignty and ocean resource governance.
- With changes in the political and geo-strategic environment, a particular role assumes pre-eminence. The inherent versatility of naval forces allows them to be utilised as an instrument of state policy in different roles under different circumstances. Warships can easily change their posture, undertake several tasks concurrently, and be rapidly available for re-tasking, the role of the Indian Navy in the resolution of the threat to the Maldivian Government in 1988 being a case in point.

### The Benign Role

In more recent times, the benign role of the navy has assumed not only greater importance but also international acceptance as it addresses humanitarian aspects. The Indian Navy's role in providing timely succour to Indonesia and Sri Lanka, despite our preoccupation with relief operations in Andaman and Nicobar, in Tsunami is well documented. Humanitarian and Disaster Relief capability of the Indian Navy was again evident during the recent cyclone Nargis. In fact, providing a responsive and effective Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief throughout the Indian Ocean Region remains a core focus area for the Indian Navy, considering that 70 per cent of the world's natural disasters occur in the Indian Ocean Region.

### Pre-eminence of the Military Role

Today, the reduced possibilities of conventional conflict wars have re-focussed navies to operate more in the sub-conventional spectrum and Operations Other Than War. However, political situations change rapidly, faster than the rate at which a

navy can re-orientate itself and therefore the military capability needs to remain honed. Further, since preservation of sovereign integrity will always remain the prime political imperative, it is understood that the military role is therefore the *raison d'être* of any naval force.

### Sea Power and Economic Power

Historically, there has been a visible linkage between sea power and economic power. Sea power is a facilitator of economic power, and the quest for economic power is, in turn, a motivator for the development of sea power. In that sense, we could conclude that the historical impact of the sea in the pursuit of wealth and the development of a global economy has been as a facilitator or driver of globalisation.

The maritime world can also be seen as a primary facilitator of globalisation, because it is the medium over which 90 per cent of world trade is transported and this open it is hard to see how globalisation could begin at all. The economic benefits of the increased commerce resulting from globalisation, also drives the growth of strong navies, to safeguard and protect seaborne trade and commerce at extended ranges.

It has been observed that developed economies appear to have benefited more from globalisation than the lesser developed ones. Likewise, those nations who have maintained powerful navies and efficient shipping systems would have leveraged the maritime dimension to maximum economic benefit.

### The Potential for Conflict

#### Competing Interests

Globalisation has also led to a belief that inter-state conflicts are unlikely in the current era, primarily due to economic interdependence and reduction in misperceptions due to enhanced cultural interaction. On the other hand, continued growth may create increasing competition for resources, which is likely to encourage nations to exert wider claims of sovereignty over greater expanses of ocean, waterways, and natural resources—potentially resulting in conflict. Whilst the probability of war between major countries may appear to be low, it cannot be ignored entirely, especially in the IOR where the security situation is indeed fragile. National security policies therefore, cannot depend on globalisation but rather rely on traditional means of deterrence and defence. Where conflict threatens our national interests, a strong navy can deter the ambitions of aggressors, assure friends and allies, gain and maintain access, and protect our citizens while working to maintain order at sea.

## Trans-national Crime

As an unintended implication, globalisation and its accompanying technical diffusion have also permitted highly diverse trans-national networks, or groups, to expand in influence and lethality, which directly impact maritime security. Maritime terrorism and piracy are today, the most potent threats to international maritime trade. Complicating the maritime threat picture is growing speculation that a tactical nexus could emerge between piracy and terrorism.

## The Fragile Peace in the IOR

Within the Indian Ocean Region, the threat of 'intra-State' as well as 'inter-State' conflict remains a grim reality. The region is also subject to a variety of security threats that are short of State-on-State conflict, but these also present an equal if not greater threat to peace and stability. On the military level, conflicts exist along the all-important ISLs: from the Bab-el-Mandeb and the Straits of Hormuz, along the coastline of South Asia, to the Straits of Malacca and – by way of geographical extension – to the South China Sea. Piracy is rampant and terrorist organisations often operate in the poorly policed regions.

## Opportunities for Maritime Cooperation

And yet, if the problems of holistic security are enormous, so are the opportunities. Globalisation imperatives have given impetus for concerted and cooperative effort of maritime forces in securing the maritime highways. Cooperative efforts of the littoral countries of the Malacca Strait has led to a dramatic decrease in incidents of piracy and armed robbery. On the Western flank of the region, the efforts of the multi-national 'Task Force 150' are underway to keep maritime crime in check. Similarly deserving of praise are Australia's, South Africa's and India's efforts towards capacity-building and capability-enhancement. An increasing number of navies around the world, including the Indian Navy views 'Constructive Engagement' as the answer to common maritime challenges.

At the intellectual level as well as a stepping stone towards functionalising our maritime security framework, the Indian Navy has taken the initiative to encourage and focus the process of 'Constructive Engagement' amongst the littoral States of the Indian Ocean Region, the Indian Navy has, this year itself, taken initiative to set-up an inclusive and consultative regional forum 'Indian Ocean Naval Symposium'. This regional maritime cooperation initiative has received overwhelming support from regional navies.



## Suggested Strategic Correctives

Today, the geo-strategic significance of India as a stabilising power in the IOR is globally accepted and there is a distinct realisation that India is destined to play a larger global role in the years ahead. It is also true that within the country, maritime security issues do not get the importance that they deserve in our national thinking in view of more compelling challenges elsewhere and therefore, attention on matters pertaining to this important segment tends to get concentrated during periods of crisis.

### Attitude towards Defence Expenditure

There are three shortcomings in our system, which have a bearing on this issue. The *first* of these is our ambivalent attitude towards defence expenditure, which has led to fluctuating budgets and uncertainty in the force planning process. Our current defence budget being less than 2 per cent of GDP is indicative of the prevalent ambivalence. Our fundamental quest for a better quality of life for our citizens remains irrefutable. However, the argument between guns and butter is not simply a zero-sum game. In order to facilitate growth and development of our citizens, we need to create a secure environment for our country. And a secure environment will be achieved only when it is abundantly clear that we are a strong, confident nation with a surplus of security assets and the resolve to act in our national interest.

### The Need for Strategic Vision

The *second* factor is the need to develop a more focussed strategic vision. The need to take a long- term view of national security is absolutely necessary to enable coordinated reactions to emerging threats and realities. This needs some strengthening.

In the current geopolitical scenario, national security interests transcend the commonly perceived boundaries of military security issues and the military, more so the Navy has to focus on diplomatic and benign roles in peacetime to further these interests. A well-orchestrated use of the Navy to further the nation's foreign policy should never be perceived as the Navy 'overstepping' into the foreign policy domain. The Navy should in fact, be seen as a potent tool of foreign policy, as it indeed is. The requirement of a holistic approach to national security mandates greater integration of Service Headquarters with MoD and MEA. In addition, the role of strategic think tanks in providing vital intellectual inputs to institutional thought process cannot be over- emphasised.

## Coordination of Maritime Security

And the *third* shortcoming relates to coordination of maritime security. In so far as maritime security issues are concerned, we currently have a plethora of organisations handling policies and enforcement measures. A formal mechanism for coordination among the multiple users of the sea would enable effective and time-critical coordination among varied maritime related ministries and departments. Creation of "an apex body for management of maritime affairs" is long overdue, despite the obvious benefits of creating such an organization.

## Conclusion

I conclude by reiterating the ocean's centrality in shaping destinies of nation states, as also the continued strategic relevance of navies as a potent instrument of national power. We can ill afford to ignore the lessons of history and contemporary strategic imperatives, because doing so could severely limit the space for political, diplomatic and military manoeuvre. Navies are, and would continue to remain, a compelling instrument that can be leveraged to great advantage by any government in power, not only to protect but also to further national interests and alter perceptions. A good defence and foreign policy must, therefore, leverage the power of the Indian Navy to its best advantage. The Navy on its part must retain the capability at all times to operate across the spectrum of conflict which will enable performance of security tasks from peacetime, through low-intensity and sub-conventional conflict to conventional conflict and if need be, even under a nuclear overhang. 