

India's External Outreach in the Maritime Context

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The systemic constraints on India's foreign policy stemmed from the onset of the Cold War, which virtually coincided with India's independence in 1947. Interestingly enough, neither the Soviet Union nor the United States evinced any great interest in India at the onset of the Cold War. The United States was virtually ignorant about India and had few cultural, strategic or economic links with the nascent nation.² Consequently, in the immediate aftermath of India's independence it paid scant attention to India. Simultaneously, the Soviet Union did not attach any strategic significance to India.³ This mutual lack of interest actually worked to India's advantage as it gave the country considerable room for maneuver. However, at a regional level, the distribution of power placed India at a disadvantage. The other major regional state, the People's Republic of China (PRC) posed a significant security threat to India one, which it chose to ignore at its own peril.⁴

India's external environment remains complex and challenging. We are living in a world in transition, not just in geo-political terms, but also in geo-economic terms – covering trade, financial flows, financial trends, demographic changes and participation in a globalized economy. Globalization comes with its concurrent global threats terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, piracy and other threats to maritime security, environmental challenges, threats to space and cyber security, and access to water, among others. It is hard to distinguish between traditional and non-traditional threats to security, just as the lines are getting blurred between threats.

From the time of independence to the border conflict with the PRC, three key features characterized India's foreign policy. First, India played a significant role in multilateral institutions and particularly in United Nations peacekeeping operations. Second, it also emerged as a critical proponent of the nonaligned movement. Third, as a leader of the nonaligned movement it also made a significant contribution toward the process of decolonization.

Indian foreign policy has an outward orientation, which, overlaps with security, land, and a maritime dimensions which is difficult to ignore. For Peninsular India, the lure of the sea around it has moulded and set the course of the history of the people who inhabit it. The ocean also brought traders and colonizers. Our vantage location with the Indian Ocean literally at our feet became in those early times, also a source of vulnerability, laying bare our unpreparedness to face external threat.

India is naturally a maritime nation- a coastline of over 7500 kms; the Lakshwadweep and the Andaman and Nicobar chains stretch over 1200 islands, with southernmost tip just 90 nautical miles from Indonesia and the northern most tip less than 10 nautical miles from Myanmar. Our EEZ is more than 2.5 million square Kms. The mining

areas of over 150,000 sq Kms allotted to India under UNCLOS are about 2000 kms from our southernmost tip. We have significant interests in Antarctica as well. India has an inseparable bond with the Indian Ocean region that are not merely geographical but of deeper civilizational significance. Historical, cultural economic and political linkages have been forged between India and the Indian Ocean littorals and beyond that span over millennia.

India is almost an island as far as trade is concerned. In the absence of good regional land connectivity, the bulk of our trade is seaborne. India's global mercantile trade has grown phenomenally and now constitutes 41 percentage of our GDP. 77 percentage of our trade by value, and over 90 percent by volume is carried by sea. India is now projected to become the fourth largest economy in the world by 2020, after China, Japan and the US. Our dependence on sea borne trade is expected to expand exponentially. The maritime dimension is also vital for our energy security. India's oil consumption is expected to rise to 245 million tons annually by 2020, with the country likely to be the world's single largest importer of oil by 2050. Its economic growth would continue to be critically depended upon unhindered flow of oil. The sea borne terrorist attacks on Mumbai- 26/11, focused the need for strengthening maritime and coastal security against threats from sea. Clandestine proliferation networks also use seaways for proliferation activities. It follows that India's foreign policy has to focus on these critical aspects for our national development and security.

India has a friendly and productive bilateral relations with almost all the states in the Indian Ocean region. It's bilateral relations with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mauritius, Maldives, Myanmar, Seychelles, Oman, Mozambique South Africa and others facilitate access to a wide swathe of the Indian Ocean. Maritime Security is an important dimension of our relations with ASEAN countries, in particular Singapore and Vietnam. Many of these are territorial neighbours but all are our maritime neighbours. India als has historical and civilizational ties with many of these countries. Some of these countries have large Indian communities. The broad spectrum of ties with these countries has a strong economic and socio-cultural dimension.

The Indian Navy has contributed towards expanding the diplomatic engagement in the region and beyond. An active Indian naval presence is welcomed in many waters, near and far from India's shores. In cooperation with the Indian Navy, India is looking at ways of long-term engagement with many of these countries in capacity building including training assistance, refit of ships joint exercises, coordinated patrols, supply of hardware and product support. It is also prepared to assist countries to conduct EEZ surveillance.

Maritime Security is emerging as an important element of dialogue for architecture with various countries, including with the United States. This includes periodic bilateral exercises, information exchanges through maritime domain awareness,

sharing of best practices in areas such as search and rescue, maritime safety, pollution control; maritime law enforcement that could cover counter narcotics and counter piracy, training, exercises and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and exchange of views on promoting regional security architecture that enhances maritime security.

In addition to bilateral interactions, India has actively engaged with almost all regional bodies that either are based in or border the Indian Ocean region- ranging from SAARC, BIMSTEC, EAS, ARF, ASEAN, GCC, SADC to the AU.

India's aim is to build a web of cooperative relations that brings together all the stakeholders based on mutual interest and benefit. India's 'soft power' attributes give us an advantage that few countries have.

India has been actively pursuing its Act East Policy under the new government. India's Look East policy was initiated under the Narasimha Rao Government in the early 1990s amid a worsening domestic economic and political situation. The geopolitical tensions leading up to the 1991 Gulf War deeply affected India's economy, bringing about economic recession and an acute balance-of-payments crisis by mid-1991. This crisis drove India to search for economic opportunities in more dynamic parts of Asia. In addition, the Look East policy was driven by three specific factors. The collapse of the Soviet Union created a strategic and economic vacuum for India, and the end of Cold War bipolarity reduced the relevance of India's non-aligned stance. Second, China's opening just over a decade earlier prompted India to reach out to Southeast Asia to avoid falling into a subordinate political and economic role in the region. India was also driven by a desire to develop and stabilize its fragile Northeastern states, which were in the midst of insurgency. As four of the Northeastern states share a 1643 km long land border with Myanmar, they are critical to overland connectivity with Southeast Asia. These factors, combined with the Gulf Crisis, put the need to diversify India's energy sources and economic partnerships into sharp focus. India needed to integrate into the global economy, and the dynamism of India's eastern neighbours made Southeast Asia an attractive place to start. Two decades on, engagement with the Asia-Pacific has become an integral component of Indian foreign policy with bipartisan support. It expanded to include Australia and East Asia, as well as broader economic and security issues. Look East has thus developed into a multi-pronged strategy involving many institutional mechanisms at multilateral and bilateral levels, economic links, and defence engagements. India's trade with North and Southeast Asia now represents about a quarter of the total trade; outweighing that with the United States and the European Union. China has become India's top trading partner, with bilateral trade growing from roughly \$US 7 billion in 2003-2004, to \$US 65 billion in 2013-2014. In the same period, two-way trade with ASEAN member states has grown from approximately \$US 13 billion to \$US 74 billion, making India's trade with the region as a whole even more significant than

with China. The present government is giving a robust thrust to the Act East policy with an emphasis on the maritime dimension.

There has also been an enhanced outlook towards the look west policy, forging good ties with these countries too. India's diplomatic engagement with the ASEAN, the ARF has recognized that maritime security is an indispensable and fundamental condition for the welfare and economic security of the region. India is supportive of international and regional cooperative efforts in this regard. We are already working with ASEAN and other ASEAN Regional Forum members to ensure security of sea-lanes against threats posed by piracy and other transnational crimes, and to build capacity in the field of maritime security. Maritime security issues are one of the core focus areas of our navy in bilateral and multilateral interactions with other navies. The South China Sea is an important shipping route. India supports the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) was launched in February 2008 as a cooperative maritime security initiative following a meeting of Chiefs of Navy of nearly all littoral States of Indian Ocean in New Delhi. The Charter of Business of IONS is to provide a framework to promote shared understanding of maritime issues facing the littoral States of the Indian Ocean region; enhance regional maritime security and stability; establish and promote variety of cooperative mechanisms and develop inter-operability in terms of doctrines, procedures etc. IONS, an inclusive and consultative regional forum provides a platform for all IOR littoral navies to periodically and regularly discuss issues that bear upon regional maritime security.

India's neighbourhood policy particularly with maritime neighbours. Issues like coastal security consolidation and fisheries cooperation are also very much within the domain of its foreign policy mandate. The salience of creating a fisheries management policy in the Palk Straits and the Gulf of Mannar through cooperation between India and Sri Lanka is an important step. This involves close coordination with the Navy, the Coast Guard, and the State Governments concerned. The issue of maritime boundary delimitation with our neighbours is also dealt with. Competing demands for natural resources, including energy sources, can come into play. The challenge is to find solutions that are mutually acceptable. Conserving and protecting precious marine biology and the oceanic environment through cooperation between littoral states is another important aspect of this maritime dimension. The effects of global warming and climate change on sea levels can have critical human security related repercussions on low-lying countries, and the small island developing states. All this falls within the ambit of foreign policy concern.

The development of port and harbour infrastructure both on our coastline in order to improve our global trade turnover cannot be divorced from the steps being taken in our neighbourhood to develop ports or modernize them with foreign assistance.

The naval outreach and capability of a number of countries has been growing in the Indian Ocean region. India's capability to be infrastructure builders in our immediate neighbourhood and region needs to be enhanced significantly. The naval cooperation in the neighbourhood needs further stepping up. Capacity building, training, equipment and vessel supply are all areas that need further attention. With the region, India to build a common vision of maritime security, conflict prevention, the unhindered passage of trade, counter terrorism and piracy, disaster prevention and humanitarian relief, and the peaceful settlement of disputes, in a balanced and inclusive manner that safeguards these regional and global commons.

References

¹ The author is former Chief of Naval Staff of the Indian Navy and currently the Chairman, National Maritime Foundation (NMF), New Delhi. The views expressed by the author are personal and bear no relation to the official policy of India and the Foundation.

² On this subject, see the Robert McMahon, *The Cold War on the Periphery: The United States, India, and Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

³ Robert Donaldson, *Soviet Policy Toward India: Ideology and Strategy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

⁴ On the security threat from China that culminated in the Sino-Indian border war of 1962 see John Garver, *Protracted Conflict; Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001).