

SYNOPSIS

INDIA'S MARITIME STRATEGY AND COMMERCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION IN THE POST-LIBERALISATION ERA: A STUDY IN CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

A Synopsis of the thesis submitted to Jadavpur University, West Bengal for the
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Introduction

This study will attempt an estimate of the domestic as well as global and regional factors that shaped India's foreign policy shift from a primarily continental approach to one in which maritime engagements have been accorded a key place in terms of foreign policy outreach and also the augmentation of domestic maritime capabilities. In mapping and understanding this shift, the study focuses on foreign policy outreach and naval capabilities in the Indian Ocean Region since the post-economic liberalization period. The study will also explore the ways in which such a foreign policy shift impacted and was impacted by commercial interactions in this maritime space. Given that the eastern Indian Ocean Region is made up of aspiring economies that are also assuming political presence, the scope of the study will be limited to this part of the Ocean. While a lot of literature exists in the form of commentaries and articles, there is a lack of in-depth organized research on this subject, especially from India's standpoint.

Context and Premise

The Indian Ocean Region is increasingly gaining salience as its strategic and geo-political significance becomes acknowledged. It is a strategic maritime space and is witness to the play of geo-political ambitions, interests, and imperatives of the many actors that are part of it. While the rise of Asia has been a topic of much deliberation over the past few decades, it is now that the presence of this rise is being felt stronger than ever not only within the region but also worldwide.

Although the 20th century saw nations focus more on continental rather than maritime power, throughout history, maritime prowess has been an important measure of a country's

strength. It was in 1893 when Alfred Mahan indicated the possibility of a struggle for power in the Asia-Pacific region in the wake of an increasingly assertive China. The importance of this ocean space was further emphasized by Nicholas Spykman in 1944 who considered the region to be the “circumferential maritime highway”¹ which links the whole area together in terms of sea power.

Maritime trade and maritime connectivity have been one of the oldest forms of cross-cultural and cross-civilisational interactions and the Indian Ocean waterways have been used as a primary medium of trade and have provided the impetus for the growth of maritime enterprises for densely populated littoral countries like, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Indonesia. As the Indian Ocean’s role as a conduit of vital resources grows, so does the propensity for regional powers to exert their influence in this arena. The Indian Ocean is of vital strategic, economic and maritime importance as the Andaman Sea and the Malacca Straits link South and Southeast Asia. Since major actors are largely dependent on Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs) for their energy supply, the protection of those routes and competition over other resources has assumed considerable strategic significance. This involves many stakeholders and consequently, the risks of competition have been heightened. In this regard, India’s role and its own ambitions have undergone a major transformation.

Robert Kaplan, in his work on the examination of the prevailing geopolitical dynamics and the possible future of the Indian Ocean - *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*² observes that – “India stands dramatically at the commanding centre of the Indian Ocean, near to where the US and China and headed for a tryst with

¹ Spykman, Nicholas J. “Geography and Foreign Policy, I.” *The American Political Science Review* 32, no. 1 (February 1938): 28–50. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1949029>

² Kaplan, Robert D. *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*. New York: Random House, 2010

destiny. Just as America is evolving into a new kind of two-ocean navy – the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, rather than the Pacific and the Atlantic – China... may also be evolving into a two-ocean navy – the Pacific and the Indian Ocean, too. The Indian Ocean joined to the western Pacific would truly be at the strategic heart of the world.”

Regional dynamics have posed a number of issues ranging from apprehensions regarding a rising and increasingly assertive China, to bolstering maritime and energy connectivity across the Indo-Pacific. On its part, India has been willing to take up a more prominent role and has made considerable efforts as a provider of ‘public goods’ to Southeast Asian states along with bilateral naval meetings and exercises, energy exploration collaborations and encouragement of freedom of navigation³. However, we have seen that since the turn of the millennium, India’s policy towards the Indian Ocean has transformed from an isolationist approach to one of engagement⁴ with an attempt to keep the Ocean free from military expansion by both littoral states and great powers while at the same time trying to harness the ocean’s strategic benefits to its advantage. The development of naval capability to project power into the main choke points in the Indian Ocean has been important in this regard.⁵ In an earlier work⁶ Scott examines the continental outlook that characterized Nehru and his successors and the subsequent strategic vision which came to the fore from the late 1990s and has been more or less continued since then.

The Indian Ocean comprises the busiest and most significant shipping route in the world and is home to a rich reservoir of minerals, oil and gas, fisheries and marine life. It has

³ Scott, David. “India's Aspirations and Strategy for the Indian Ocean – Securing the Waves?”, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 36:4 (February 2013), 484-511, doi: 10.1080/01402390.2012.728134

⁴ Mohan, C. Raja. “India and the Balance of Power”, *Foreign Affairs*, July 1, 2006, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2006-07-01/india-and-balance-power>

⁵ Panikkar, K.M. *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History*. New York: Macmillan Company. 1945

⁶ Scott, David. “India’s “Grand Strategy” for the Indian Ocean: Mahanian Visions.” *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2, (November 2006), pp. 97-129

been little more than a couple decades that the requirement of a maritime focus and a maritime outreach was realized by the Indian government. However, this realization has been an incremental one with a gradual shift from acknowledgement and rhetoric to a more tangible assertion of maritime capability. The new Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS 2015) report titled “Ensuring Secure Seas,” is the first instance of the government’s acknowledgment of the Indo-Pacific as an unassailable part of its maritime strategy.⁷ Countries in the west, especially the U.S have been actively involved in maritime affairs since the cold war and post-cold war period while the Indian engagement is fairly new.

The characteristic and nature of the ocean space itself is also prudent to consider in this regard as it is this fluid space which has allowed interactions to flourish in both historical and contemporary times. Martin Lewis in his work – ‘Dividing the Ocean Sea’⁸ notes that “new conceptions of sea space differed in accordance with changing intellectual fashions and therefore an examination of hydrography can help us see the world afresh and discover new connections obscured by conventional geographic divisions.” Talking about the issue of nomenclature of maritime spaces he says: “the changing names assigned to the (more or less) same bodies of water. Although naming is seemingly the least complex issue at hand, it can have significant political and ideological ramifications; the demise of the “Ethiopian Ocean” in the nineteenth century, for example, perhaps reflects the denigration of Africa that occurred with the rise of racist pseudoscience.” Indeed, the term – ‘Indo-Pacific’ was born out of apprehensions regarding Beijing’s rising presence and influence in these waters.⁹ While historical research on the Indian Ocean Region has delved into the interaction and

⁷ Indian Navy. "Ensuring secure seas: Indian maritime security strategy." Naval Strategic Publication (NSP) 1, no. 2 (2015): 32.

https://indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf

⁸ Lewis, Martin W. "Dividing the ocean sea." *Geographical Review* 89, no. 2 (1999): 188-214.

⁹ Kuo, Mercy A. "The origin of ‘Indo-Pacific’ as geopolitical construct." *The Diplomat*, January 25 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/the-origin-of-indo-pacific-as-geopolitical-construct/>

resulting changes in fortune of maritime exchanges, recent literature in the domain of international relations has most often been confined to a strategic approach. In today's intersected and interdependent world, commercial exchanges form the fulcrum. Consequently, commercial exchanges have a significant impact on maritime politics and geopolitical dynamics.

Maritime shipping routes are comprised of what is referred to as maritime chokepoints (Dots), Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) and natural ocean resources (Stocks). And the most crucial 'dot' in the eastern Indian Ocean is the Strait of Malacca through which all trade bound for China and the Far East have to pass along the east-west SLOC. The Strait of Malacca is fundamental to China's imports of energy and is also therefore central to Beijing's area of influence in the region. Together with this, the competing claims over sovereignty that also characterize these waters, a sense of apprehension regarding Beijing's advances and long-term motives has grown among the littoral countries. Another vital aspect that has contributed to the unease is what is known as the 'debt trap diplomacy.'

In other words, China's attempts to position itself in host countries like Sri Lanka through large-scale infrastructural investment which the host country is eventually unable to pay; following which China takes control of said projects in the host country/countries. This has provided further reason for countries in South and Southeast Asia to perceive India as a more reliable option in the efforts towards maintaining freedom of the seas and the preservation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), of which India is a supporter.

Signed in 1982, the UNCLOS, also referred to as the Law of the Sea Convention or the Law of the Sea Treaty, established the rules in accordance with which states can interact

with regard to matters maritime. It is important to note that in a dispute in 2016 over territorial sovereignty between the Philippines and China, the latter disregarded the verdict delivered by the International Court of Justice which ruled in favour of Manila. This is an important case in point as it indicates the license with which Beijing has been conducting itself in the maritime domain.

Corbett and Winebrake¹⁰ discuss the “symbiotic relationship between globalization and maritime shipping, whereby globalization has increased the demands for maritime shipping, while maritime shipping has more fully enabled globalization” and observe that the “global goods movement is a critical element in the global freight transportation system that includes ocean and coastal routes, inland waterways, railways, roads and air freight.” And this is precisely why economic exchanges, which have formed a very fundamental and unassailable part of global functioning, have had a vital bearing upon the sustenance of nation states and therefore on maritime politics.

Consequently, the smooth functioning of commerce coupled with a degree of control over the resources and their acquisition has been a key driver of countries, especially those with growing economies. And this driver has had a big influence on regional as well as global political relations. Sanjaya Baru writes – “the intellectual roots of geo-economics are embedded in seventeenth-century European, largely French, mercantilism. The military pursuit of markets, resources and bullion intended to allow a country to export more and import less, and to buy cheap and sell dear, preceded the advent of modern economics based on ideas of free trade and laissez-faire....The rise of China and indeed of other emerging economies both in Asia and elsewhere denotes a structural shift in the locus of growth in the

¹⁰ Corbett, James J., and James Winebrake. "The impacts of globalisation on international maritime transport activity." *Global forum on transport and environment in a globalising world*, vol. 31, p. 31. 2008.

world economy, one that has already had, and will continue to generate, geopolitical consequences, along with political risks and opportunities.”¹¹

Commerce has a vital role in the preservation of the security of the maritime space as a connectivity pathway.¹² In his work titled - *Scholars and the Sea: A Historiography of the Indian Ocean*, Prange discusses the different ‘periodizations’ which reflect the primary themes of scholarly focus on the Indian Ocean and emphasizes the utility of network studies as a new approach in considering the interconnections that span the Indian Ocean. He observes that – “The study of networks has underpinned new attempts at defining the Indian Ocean world-system, but also thrown up its own set of core-periphery questions. Within networks, cores are often defined in terms of origins, be it of a kinship group, religious movement or trade good. However, as the network expands and evolves, its centre of gravity may shift.”

While any direct large-scale clash or conflict may not occur in the near future in the Indian Ocean region, there are several reasons for these waters to be restive. As a common resource, keeping the oceans from becoming a sovereignty frontier is of common interest for littorals and major powers alike. While much literature exists on the geo-strategic dynamics of the region, there are gaps in the understanding of the significance of commerce on the strategic contour of maritime politics, especially from India’s standpoint.

In this respect, India’s enhanced maritime role has been welcomed by littoral countries. India has gradually been expanding its maritime outreach and naval diplomacy with Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Singapore, among others including deepening military and bilateral ties with Japan and the U.S. The perception regarding India is favourable – that

¹¹ Baru, Sanjaya. "Geo-economics and Strategy." *Survival* 54, no. 3 (2012): 47-58.

¹² Prange, Sebastian R. "Scholars and the sea: A historiography of the Indian Ocean." *History Compass* 6, no. 5 (2008): 1382-1393.

India's actions and motives are non-threatening and in keeping with the rules and interests of the global maritime order.

Steinberg, in 2013, wrote that the maritime space is characterised by either under-theorisation or over-theorisation. While a section of work on the subject looks at political and economic connections, they tend to discount the sea as an individual component of study altogether. Another section of work highlights the sea as a 'site for challenging modernist notions of identity and treat the ocean as a metaphor.' Steinberg argues that 'the ocean must be engaged as a material space characterized by movement and reformation.' Here, Steinberg cites the work of Arif Dirlik (cited in P. Steinberg) who said: "The material basis [of the Pacific rim] is defined best not by physical geography but by relationships (economic, social, political, military, and cultural) that are concretely historical . . . [by] motions of people, commodities, and capital.' And therefore, the ocean region thus comes to be seen as a series of (terrestrial) points linked by connections, not the actual (oceanic) space of connections."

This thesis hypothesizes that the change in India's maritime perspective from a continental oriented focus to one that comprises an active component of maritime engagement and outreach, has occurred concurrently with, and in many ways, been expedited by the strategic and commercial dynamics that have impacted the Indo-Pacific region. In the context of maritime involvements, it is highly probable that New Delhi will adopt a dual approach. This approach involves enhancing and fortifying naval capabilities in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) on the one hand; while also extending foreign policy-related initiatives beyond the IOR on the other.

Scope of the research and research questions

The research scope involves analyzing how economic engagements and activities in the Indian Ocean Region impact the geo-strategic interests of India and other littoral

countries. This includes assessing maritime trade, the growth of the maritime industry, and related services. The study also considers the roles of governments, businesses, and stakeholders, taking into account factors like geopolitical rivalries, security concerns, and environmental sustainability. To achieve this, a multidisciplinary approach is required, drawing from geography, political science, economics, and international relations. The research aims to provide insights into the changing dynamics of the Indian Ocean Region, informing policies for sustainable economic growth while addressing the geo-strategic interests of key stakeholders.

Several additional considerations are essential, including historical and cultural context, the impact of resource exploitation, infrastructure development, security challenges, and the role of regional governance and institutions. These factors collectively influence the geo-strategic landscape of India and other littoral countries in the Indian Ocean Region.

This study delves into the fundamental factors that have influenced India's approach to the maritime domain. It seeks to understand how India's unique geographical location and the geopolitical dynamics of the region have shaped its maritime policy and the interplay between India's expanding trade and commercial relations with its eastern and southeastern neighbors and its maritime policy. The study will explore how economic ties and commercial interactions have influenced India's strategic thinking in the Indian Ocean Region and identify the multifaceted factors that have led to India's foreign policy shift from a continental-centric approach to one that places a strong emphasis on the maritime domain and the enhancement of maritime capabilities. In doing so, this study encompasses both domestic and international influences, including political, economic, and security considerations.

In the context of the premise of this study, this thesis would seek to answer the following three research questions –

1. What is the role of geography and geopolitics in India's maritime policy?
2. How has the expansion of trade and commercial relations of India with her eastern and southeastern neighbours impacted the country's maritime policy?
3. What factors have shaped the shift in India's foreign policy from an entirely continental approach to one that acknowledges and accords significant to the maritime domain and to the augmentation of maritime capabilities?

Methodology

This dissertation explores the impact of economic changes on India's maritime geostrategy during the post-liberalization era. It uses discourse analysis to investigate the interplay between language, power, and geopolitical narratives in shaping India's maritime policies. The research methodology involves collecting diverse textual sources, analyzing government policies, examining documents from major powers in the Indo-Pacific region, and reviewing secondary literature. It also aims to uncover power dynamics and contextualize language use within the broader socio-political and economic context.

The study seeks to contribute to understanding how economic interests influence India's maritime policies, regional alignments, and security considerations. It will shed light on the ideologies, power dynamics, and geopolitical implications embedded in discursive formations related to India's post-liberalization maritime activities. Ultimately, discourse analysis serves as a robust methodology for examining the complexities of India's maritime geostrategy in this period.

Sources

Sources for this study will comprise three elements -

- (a) Primary documents of the government of India including policy documents and other

related documents: This involves a detailed examination of official government policies and related documents, such as white papers, strategy documents, and reports, in order to identify key trends and patterns in India's maritime and naval policies over time.

(b) Primary documents from other major powers: In addition to analyzing Indian government policies, the methodology also involves an analysis of primary documents from other major powers in the Indo-Pacific region, such as the United States, China, Japan, and Australia. This could include government policies and statements, as well as official reports and strategic documents.

(c) Secondary documents: The final component of the sources includes secondary documents, such as books, articles, and commentaries written by scholars and analysts working on maritime politics.

Chapters

This dissertation comprises five chapters including an introductory chapter which establishes the research context, and a concluding chapter, which addresses the research questions.

The second chapter titled *From Geography to Geopolitics: Understanding India's Place*, traces the geographical advantages of the country's peninsular landscape that lends itself favourably to the cultivation and expansion of maritime ties. However, it remained overlooked for much of the country's recent history. As the world decidedly reengages with and acknowledges the advantages and opportunities offered by the ocean space, India too has emerged as a country both willing and capable to participate in the maritime domain. This chapter provides an overview of the evolution in the country's maritime outlook as it transforms from a largely continental-oriented focus to one in which maritime engagements

form a vital component of foreign policy outreach. In doing so, the chapter accounts for the advances in New Delhi's strategic and diplomatic capacity, the attendant impediments and imperatives with respect to the same, and contends that going forward, India's maritime role is set to shape and also be shaped by developments in the Indo-Pacific.

As a peninsular nation, trade, religion and culture formed pillars of the country's maritime linkages in the past resulting in a vibrant history of maritime associations which nonetheless were severed over time. Especially after independence, the focus of foreign outreach was almost entirely continental. The reforms of 1991 can be regarded as an inflection point for India's priorities with port development being accorded attention and the country's maritime position becoming an important part of the national agenda. Since 2014, the focus on maritime capacity development and outreach has grown manifold with national policies being dedicated to the development of the maritime sector.

While policy directives and naval engagements began to steadily take shape and expand since the early 1990s, the maritime conversation around them has become perceptibly visible and gained prominence largely over the latter half of the last decade. This has undoubtedly contributed to the raising of the maritime outlook of the country as increasingly a greater range and number of stakeholders engage in dialogue around maritime geopolitics, commerce, infrastructure, ecology, and defence.

This chapter explores the factors that contributed to the modification of the 'Asia-Pacific' narrative to that of the 'Indo-Pacific' and the factors that shaped New Delhi's Indo-Pacific Strategy and its key components including its commitment to the promotion of a peaceful and stable regional order through economic and security partnerships, the development of infrastructure and connectivity, and the promotion of a rules-based order.

The third chapter titled *Networks of Trade Flows: Mapping Trade Networks in the Indian Ocean Region*, maps the growth in commercial interactions between India and the countries and regions with which trade is conducted across the Indian Ocean. It studies the historical roots of strong maritime linkages across the eastern Indian Ocean Region and draws a parallel with the contemporary period which is witnessing a resumption of the earlier networks in the context of a fast-changing geopolitical landscape in the region. In *Geo-economics and Strategy*, Sanjay Baru¹³ discusses the role of geo-economics in determining geo-strategic directions adopted by countries and the notion – “that ‘trade follows the flag’ (that the projection of national power has economic consequences) and that ‘the flag follows trade’ (that there are geopolitical consequences of essentially economic phenomena).” Much of the engagement among countries in the Indo-Pacific region over the last decade especially, has been shaped by economic factors which have in turn been influenced by geopolitical and geostrategic considerations.

This chapter traces India’s Maritime links dating back to roughly the third millennium BCE starting with the Indus Valley civilization which was the first in the region to establish maritime trade with Mesopotamia. The civilization's ships were the earliest known examples of ocean-going vessels in the Indian Ocean, and they paved the way for the development of trade networks between the Indian subcontinent and other regions. India's maritime policy during both the Mauryan Empire and the Chola Dynasty was characterized by a strong focus on trade and naval power, as well as a desire to establish cultural exchange with other regions. The Chola navy was one of the most advanced naval forces of its time, and its ships were equipped with what were then advanced technologies such as grappling hooks and fire arrows. From the ancient historical period, the chapter travels through the major historical

13 Sanjaya Baru, *Geo-economics and Strategy*, Survival: Global Politics and Strategy, Taylor and Francis, 18 May 2012

maritime moments for the sub-continent to the contemporary period, in which the Indian Ocean witnesses the transport of a major proportion of the world's trade since it hosts the most important trade route connecting the Far East with Europe. In the last few decades, India has had year-round deployments and acquired maritime surveillance aircrafts specifically for furthering its interests in the Indo-Pacific. The main aim of this policy is to focus on strengthening relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Pacific Rim islands. In addition, the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative as a part of the SAGAR mission was specifically aimed to facilitate regional cooperation with India's maritime neighbours.

In chapter four, titled *Assessing the Interface Between Commerce and Strategy in the Evolution of India's Maritime Role*, India's entry into the Indo-Pacific region and is traced with the argument that going forward, despite attendant impediments, the Indo-Pacific is likely to witness an expansion in India's maritime participation.

Interest and emphasis on the advancement of maritime capability resulted in a renewed effort on naval development especially since the mid-1990s when the country embarked upon a major program for the development of a Blue Water navy with considerable increase in naval expenditure.¹⁴ The naval budget grew from 5% during 2000-2005 and at 10% from 2005-2008 with a simultaneous increase in the navy's share of the annual defence budget which contributed to changes in the navy's force structure and sea control capabilities. The chapter examines two key naval documents that have contributed to the shaping of the country's maritime strategy - Freedom to Use the Seas, published in 2007 and Ensuring

¹⁴ David Brewster, "An Indian Sphere of Influence in the Indian Ocean?", *Security Challenges*, Volume 6, No. 3, 2010, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26459796>

Secure Seas, published in 2015. Both these documents have been vital in giving shape to the country's envisioned role, its capacities and most importantly its identified areas of interest.

This chapter studies the marked shift from New Delhi's earlier format of engagements via naval visits for military diplomacy, training, and assistance, to the expansion of the navy's presence and operational reach through 'mission-based deployments' involving the deployment of mission-ready ships and aircraft along critical sea lanes. A vital aspect of India's strategic engagements with its maritime neighbourhood has been the development and augmentation of the country's own maritime domain awareness and also enabling the same for other IOR littorals. The country's foreign policy outreach towards the eastern Indian Ocean space has been led by the Look East and later refurbished Act East policies. And while there has generally been a certain degree of ambiguity regarding the operational aspects or scope of the Act East, the policy initiative is a structured reflection of the securitization of India's eastward engagement¹⁵ and a natural convergence of the country's growing capabilities, obligations and aspirations. India's Indo-Pacific outreach also created an opportunity to expand its diplomatic footprint and leverage partnerships to address a new strategic and security environment.

The fifth and final chapter contends that India's geopolitical outreach in the Indo-Pacific region in the post-liberalization era has been shaped by its growing economic and strategic interests, as well as its desire to maintain regional stability and peace. India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific region has been characterized by a multidimensional approach, which includes strengthening economic ties, enhancing defense cooperation, and promoting regional integration. With global interactions having become increasingly complex

¹⁵ Dhruva Jaishankar, "Acting East: India in the Indo-Pacific," *Brookings India Impact Series* 102019-02 (2019), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Acting-East-India-in-the-INDO-PACIFIC-without-cutmark.pdf>

and multifaceted, geostrategy and geoeconomics have both become a part of the larger umbrella of geopolitics.

As India aspires to deepen its participation in the maritime domain, both strategic-operational and also strategic-policy-related challenges remain. Nevertheless, New Delhi is poised to adopt a two-pronged approach with respect to its maritime engagements - deploying and strengthening naval abilities in the IOR space; and expanding foreign policy-related outreach beyond the IOR. Consequently, commercial interactions have impinged on the geo-political and geo-strategic interests of India and the immediate maritime region while simultaneously, security and strategic considerations have in turn shaped economic orientations.

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