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### India's Aspirations and Strategy for the Indian Ocean - Securing the Waves?

David Scott <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Brunel University, Uxbridge, UK

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# India's Aspirations and Strategy for the Indian Ocean – Securing the Waves?

DAVID SCOTT

Brunel University, Uxbridge, UK

**ABSTRACT** India has increasingly high aspirations in the Indian Ocean, as enunciated by politicians, naval figures and the wider elite. These aspirations, its strategic discourse, are of pre-eminence and leadership. India's maritime strategy for such a self-confessed diplomatic, constabulary and benign role is primarily naval-focused; a sixfold strategy of increasing its naval spending, strengthening its infrastructure, increasing its naval capabilities, active maritime diplomacy, exercising in the Indian Ocean and keeping open the choke points. Through such strategy, and soft balancing with the United States, India hopes to secure its own position against a perceived growing Chinese challenge in the Indian Ocean.

**KEY WORDS:** India, Indian Ocean, Navy, Seapower, Strategy

Strategy . . . is an overall plan to move from the present situation to a desired goal . . . The Maritime Strategy of a country can be defined as the overall approach of a nation to the oceans around it . . . to maximise national gains . . . Being a nation with vital maritime interests, India's Maritime Strategy defines the country's role in its maritime area of interest . . . for a strategy, the start point is invariably a threat, whether real or perceived.

*India's Maritime Military Strategy, 2007*

The Indian Ocean as India's ocean? A play on words but one that is the heart of this article in terms of considering India's aspirations and its strategies to meet any such Indian Ocean aspirations. The argument of this article is twofold and, despite caveats, simple. First, it argues that the Indian Navy has clear-enough aspirations for the Indian Ocean which are being supported by the government. Second, it argues that various successful strategies designed to further these aspirations mean that India is gaining a sought-after position of some eminence in the Indian Ocean. Consequently, the structure of the article is similarly

twofold. First, it sets out to pinpoint what India's aspirations actually are; through closely following, contextualising and evaluating the strategic discourse circulating in India with regard to the Indian Ocean. Second, it pinpoints and assesses India's strategy for realising such aspirations in the Indian Ocean; including examining whether India is effectively matching political and strategic goals with maritime resources in the form of acquisition and deployment of appropriate assets (ships and naval aircraft) and creation of infrastructure, as well as considering India's interactions in the Indian Ocean with local and extra-regional powers.

### India's Aspirations

One general characteristic, and potential shortcoming for India, is that at the national level it does not have any relevant government White Paper, nor any official national security document, nor combined services doctrine that set forth aspirations, objectives and grand strategic direction. Hence Pant's position that 'the Indian navy's attempt to come up with its own strategy and doctrine, though welcome in many respects, has little meaning in the absence of a national security strategy from the Indian government'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, there is a wider debate over whether India has a sense of Grand Strategy at all.

This was something broached in 1992 by George Tanham, who argued that India's history and cultural traits had generated a 'lacunae in strategy and planning'.<sup>2</sup> However, since 1992 there have been authoritative Navy statements on its naval strategy, intermittent government announcements, subordinate service-level deliberations, and ongoing wider commentary in think tanks like the National Maritime Foundation. There may indeed not be a National Security Strategy, the National Security Council set up in 1998 remains notional rather than substantive, and integration between the military services remains extremely limited. Nevertheless, this article argues that there is a significant meaningful degree of lower Service-level naval strategy for the Indian Ocean backed up by the government, in which a degree of consensus is noticeable over India's aspirations in the Indian Ocean, even though questions remain over the effectiveness and impact of the strategy to realise such aspirations.

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<sup>1</sup>Harsh Pant, 'India in the Indian Ocean: Growing Mismatch between Ambitions and Capabilities', *Pacific Affairs* 82/2 (Summer 2009), 279. Also Arun Prakash, 'Strategic Policy-making and the Indian System', *Maritime Studies* 5/2 (Winter 2010), 22–31. Also Iskander Rehman, 'India's Aspirational Naval Doctrine', in Harsh Pant (ed.), *The Rise of the Indian Navy* (Farnham: Ashgate 2012).

<sup>2</sup>George Tanham, *Indian Strategic Thought* (Washington DC: RAND 1992), 50.

Indian expectations are underpinned by geopolitical considerations in which one recurring contextual feature in Indian discourse among naval and government figures is to stress the territorial advantages enjoyed by India in the Indian Ocean Region. As the former Chief of Naval Staff (2004–06) and subsequent Chairman of the National Maritime Foundation (2008–12) Arun Prakash put it, India has the opportunity and challenge ‘to leverage her geographical advantage’ through appropriate strategies.<sup>3</sup> These geopolitical advantages for India are partly of length of coastline; 7,516.6 km, made up of the mainland (5,422.6 km), the 27 Lakshadweep Islands (132 km), and the 572 Andaman and Nicobar islands (1,962 km). They are partly of location; India being situated in the middle of the northern Indian Ocean, looking both westwards across the Arabian Sea and eastwards across the Bay of Bengal. They are partly of extension, with a long Indian peninsula jutting over 2,000 km further southwards into the Indian Ocean reaches.

### *Government Discourse*

India officially recognises what it now calls the ‘strategic imperatives’ of India’s international relations; or the ‘marine imperatives of India foreign policy’.<sup>4</sup> In the past decade, successive Prime Ministers across the political divide have pushed for an increased focus on the Indian Ocean, somewhat neglected under Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. In such a vein, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee told the 2003 Combined Services Conference that ‘our security environment ranges from the Persian Gulf to Straits of Malacca across the Indian Ocean... Our strategic thinking has also to extend to these horizons.’<sup>5</sup> In front of that same audience, the new Congress Party Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reiterated a similar message the following year; that ‘our strategic footprint covers... to the far reaches of the Indian Ocean. Awareness

<sup>3</sup>Arun Prakash, ‘The Rationale and Implications of India’s Growing Maritime Power’, in Michael Kugelman (ed.), *India’s Contemporary Security Challenges* (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars 2011), 80.

<sup>4</sup>Shiv Shankar Menon (Foreign Secretary), ‘Maritime Imperatives of Indian Foreign Policy’, *Maritime Affairs* 5/2 (Winter 2009), 15; Pranab Mukherjee (Minister for External Affairs), ‘International Relations and Maritime Affairs – Strategic Imperatives’, 30 June 2007, <<http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530112961>>.

<sup>5</sup>Atal Vajpayee, cited in Subash Kapila, ‘India Defines her Strategic Frontiers’, *SAAG Paper* 832 (4 Nov. 2003), <[www.saag.org/papers9/paper832.html](http://www.saag.org/papers9/paper832.html)>; also Subhash Kapila, ‘Indian Ocean: Strategic Imperatives for India to keep it Indian’, *SAAG Paper* 5242 (4 Oct. 2012), <<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/1002>>.

of this reality should inform and animate our strategic thinking and defence planning.<sup>6</sup> Any hegemonic ambitions are repeatedly denied by the government. Yet strong undertones are discernible from the key government officials. In 2009, the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stressed that 'there can thus be no doubt that the Indian Navy must be the most important maritime power in this region'.<sup>7</sup> The following year, the Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao in her 2010 speech to the National Maritime Foundation, argued that 'as the main resident power in the Indian Ocean region... India is well poised to play a leadership role' with regard to maritime security in the region.<sup>8</sup> In turn, the Defence Minister A.K. Antony told the 2012 Naval Chiefs Conference that 'India's strategic location in the Indian Ocean and the professional capability of our Navy bestows upon us a natural ability to play a leading role in ensuring peace and stability in the Indian Ocean Region'.<sup>9</sup>

### *Naval Discourse*

Tanham may have noted in 1992 that 'no authoritative statement exists on Indian naval strategy'.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently though, this particular lacunae has been filled by substantive doctrinal publications by the Navy in the shape of *Maritime Military Strategy for India 1989–2014* (1998), *Indian Maritime Doctrine* (2004), and *India's Maritime Military Strategy* (2007). The Navy's *Maritime Capability Perspective Plan* formulated in 2005 represents more detailed planning. It is ambitious in envisaging a 160-ship navy; including 90 front-line combat platforms spread between aircraft carriers, destroyers, frigates

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<sup>6</sup>Manmohan Singh, 'PM's Address at the Combined Commander's Conference', 24 Oct. 2004, <<http://pmindia.nic.in/speech/content.asp?id%437>>. Also, David Scott, 'Indian "Footprints" in the Indian Ocean: Power Projection for the 21st Century', *Indian Ocean Survey* 2/2 (2006), 1–26.

<sup>7</sup>Manmohan Singh, 'PM Inaugurates Naval Academy at Ezhimala', 8 Jan. 2009, <<http://pmindia.nic.in/speech-details.php?nodeid=751>>.

<sup>8</sup>Nirupama Rao, 'India as a Consensual Stakeholder in the Indian Ocean: Policy Contours', 19 Nov. 2010, <[http://www.maritimeindia.org/sites/all/files/pdf/FS\\_speech\\_at\\_NMF\\_Nov2010.pdf](http://www.maritimeindia.org/sites/all/files/pdf/FS_speech_at_NMF_Nov2010.pdf)>. Also 'the Indian Navy (IN) has been playing a maritime leadership role in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) due to its multi-dimensional capabilities and active presence in the region', Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 2011–2012* (New Delhi: Ministry of Defence 2012), 34.

<sup>9</sup>Cited in Ministry of Defence, 'Indian Navy's Plan "IOR" Operations Demonstrate Reach of India's Maritime Diplomacy', 13 June 2012, <<http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=84863>>.

<sup>10</sup>Tanham, *Indian Strategic Thought*, 67.

and corvettes. Of course, this depends on government financing for its realisation.

Whereas the 1998 *Maritime Military Strategy for India 1989–2014* had a limited framework of defensive limited coastal ‘sea-denial’, the 2004 *Indian Maritime Doctrine* moved to a more assertive competitive strategy for projecting power deeper into and across the Indian Ocean. The *Indian Maritime Doctrine* was a forceful ambitious document, with its talk of India’s ‘maritime destiny’, and with its ‘maritime vision’; in which a proactive policing role was envisaged for the Indian Navy, enabling it to counter distant emerging threats, protect sea-lanes of communication through and from the Indian Ocean. It was also clear about ‘attempts by China to strategically encircle India’ and ‘China’s exertions that tend to spill over into our maritime zone’ in the Indian Ocean.<sup>11</sup>

The 2007 *India’s Maritime Military Strategy*, a large 147-page document, looks forward to the period 2007–22. It indicates India’s current naval strategy, and was described by its authors as ‘an insight and the rationale for the resurgence of India’s maritime military power’.<sup>12</sup> It identifies ‘power projection’ as a feature of India’s naval diplomacy and specifically mentions Alfred T. Mahan’s seapower framework.<sup>13</sup> It concludes by summarising that ‘the professed strategy clearly is premised on deterrence with offensive undertones’.<sup>14</sup> India’s ability to project power deep into the Indian Ocean is seen as reflecting its geographical position; ‘India is singularly blessed in terms of maritime geography ...’. The *Maritime Military Strategy* exploits these geographical advantages available to India by adopting an oceanic approach to its strategy, rather than a coastal one.<sup>15</sup> The areas of ‘primary’ strategic interest are defined as the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, the India Ocean island states, the Persian Gulf, the principal International Shipping Lanes (ISLs) across the Indian Ocean, and the choke points leading to and from the Indian Ocean.

Within this primarily Indian Ocean focus, *India’s Maritime Military Strategy* talks of a ‘Strategy for Force buildup’. This is envisaged in peacetime as enabling a ‘Strategy for Enabling Deterrence’, a ‘Strategy for Diplomatic Role’, a ‘Strategy for Constabulary Role’, and ‘Strategy for Benign Role’ – though without an order of ranking. It also envisages

<sup>11</sup>*Indian Maritime Doctrine* (New Delhi: Integrated Headquarters. Ministry of Defence (Navy) 2004), 54, 71.

<sup>12</sup>*India’s Maritime Military Strategy* (New Delhi: Integrated Headquarters. Ministry of Defence (Navy) 2007), 129.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 10–11.

a 'Strategy for Employment in Conflict'. In other words, spending allocations on the Navy for the purpose of fostering peacetime maintenance of order on India's terms, or if need be successful prosecution of war.<sup>16</sup>

To carry out these roles, *India's Maritime Military Strategy* calls for 'reach, multiplied by sustainability' for Indian forces in the Indian Ocean.<sup>17</sup> Regional superiority is envisaged; 'to widen the gap between the capabilities of the Indian Navy and other regional maritime forces in the IOR [Indian Ocean Region]'.<sup>18</sup> In a reference to Pakistan, and increasingly China, it stresses 'a critical need to wean the littoral states of our immediate neighbourhood away from the increasingly pervasive influence of states hostile to Indian interests'.<sup>19</sup> The evaluation of outside actors in the Indian Ocean is upbeat, for the most part; 'the strategic objectives of a majority of extra-regional navies are broadly coincident with India's own strategic interests'.<sup>20</sup> However, its noting of strategic compatibility with the 'majority' of extra-regional navies leaves the 'minority' unidentified (as does its talk of 'incursions by powers inimical to India's national interests') but pointed to in the following aside that 'the Chinese Navy is set on the path to becoming a blue water force . . . along with the attempts to gain strategic toe-hold in the IOR [Indian Ocean Region]'.<sup>21</sup> This reflects the document's basic point that 'for a strategy, the start point is invariably a threat'.<sup>22</sup>

### *Specific Goals*

One general goal is that India wants to keep the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) open, in order to maintain trade flows. India's rise in the international system is driven by its economic rise, which needs ever bigger imports of energy to keep it going. Consequently, at the sub-state level, *piracy disruption* of the flow of trade and energy along the sea-lanes is something that India is concerned about. Such disruption is faced in the Strait of Malacca and in the Gulf of Aden, which has in turn spread back into the Arabian Sea and waters off the Seychelles and Maldives in the western Indian Ocean. A second security concern is *jihadist infiltration*, heightened since '26/11' when the attackers came into Mumbai across the sea from

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 71.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 49.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 117.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 41.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 41, 83.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 76.

Pakistan.<sup>23</sup> Potential jihadist infiltration of India's island territories, especially the Lakshadweep islands, is also coupled with concerns on Islamist destabilisation of the Maldives and Seychelles.

At the state level, a third security concern for India remains *Pakistani competition*. Of course, traditional land issues like Kashmir and the missile arms race continue to dominate Indian strategic analysis of Pakistan. Nevertheless; on the maritime front, Pakistan's navy (its submarine strength) clouds India's local pre-eminence, there remain concerns over Pakistan setting up links with the governments of the Maldives and Sri Lanka, and there remain concerns over Pakistan sponsorship of jihadist groups slipping into India across the intervening waters. Furthermore, India remains concerned over Pakistan's military links with China, in particular with worries over Gwadar's role as a friendly naval base for the Chinese Navy operating in the Indian Ocean, and thereby outflanking India.

This points to India's fourth security concern, *China's growing presence* in the Indian Ocean. There is a palpable Indian sense of emerging 'encirclement' by China through the appearance of the Chinese Navy in the Indian Ocean and through worries for India of facilities being set up for China in the Indian Ocean via proxy allies like Pakistan, sympathetic states like Myanmar, and vulnerable island states like the Seychelles. China is not readily acquiescing in any Indian sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean.<sup>24</sup> With regard to China, India seeks to maintain (and not lose) its privileged diplomatic-security links with Indian Ocean states and it seeks to maintain clear military superiority over the Chinese Navy in the Indian Ocean Region. As Raja Menon put it; 'just because we cannot [globally] compete with China does not mean we do not defend our interests in the Indian Ocean where we want naval supremacy'.<sup>25</sup>

### India's Strategy

In order to realise such aspirations of pre-eminence in the Indian Ocean and to meet these four specific security concerns surrounding piracy disruption, jihadist infiltration, Pakistani competition, and China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean; India has a sixfold strategy This

<sup>23</sup>Seshadri Vasan, 'Maritime Dimensions of the Mumbai Terrorist Attacks on 27th November 2008', *SAAG Paper* 2957 (3 Dec. 2008), <<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/%5Cpapers30%5Cpaper2957.html>>.

<sup>24</sup>Toshi Yoshihara, 'Chinese Views of India in the Indian Ocean: A Geopolitical Perspective', *Strategic Analysis* 36/3 (May 2012), 489–500.

<sup>25</sup>Menon cited in Pratap Chakravarty, 'India Seeks Indian Ocean Supremacy with Warship Research', *AFP*, 5 Jan. 2011.

sixfold strategy by India is, first, increasing its naval spending. Second, strengthening its infrastructure presence. Third, increasing its naval capabilities. Fourth, active maritime diplomacy, including increased deployments of these naval assets around the Indian Ocean. Fifth, exercising in the Indian Ocean; unilaterally or bilaterally, trilaterally and multilaterally with other actors. Sixth, keeping open the choke points in and out of the Indian Ocean; in part through its own unilateral deployments, and in part through cooperation with other relevant choke point countries. To each of these six aspects of strategy we can turn.

### *Spending*

Spending allocations are of course the necessary financial requirement to achieve greater capabilities, but are also in themselves a matter of strategy; of governments deciding through budgetary allocations what to emphasise and develop, as well as what at times to de-emphasise and neglect.

Defence spending figures have been telling for what was long dubbed the *Cinderella Service*, subject to 'the dictates of its meagre budget' under Nehru and Indira Gandhi, and often attracting lowly 3–8 per cent shares of the military budget.<sup>26</sup> The arrival of the Hindu nationalist BJP government in March 1998, and its strong defence policies, reversed this neglect. Naval spending increased both in absolute and budget share terms within an expanding defence budget. The budget for 1998–99 gave the Navy a new high of 14.5 per cent. Under the Singh administration, naval spending as a share of the defence budget crept up further; with the Navy allocated 17.3 per cent for 2005–06 and 2006–07, and 18.26 for 2007–08. Hence, a sense in 2009 that 'surging defence budgets have [finally] provided the Indian Navy more resources to pursue the goals set forth in its 2007 Maritime Military Strategy'.<sup>27</sup> Admittedly, this naval share receded under the impact of the global recession, but in the wake of India's recovery, India's defence budget figures for 2012–13 were noticeable for their renewed naval push. The Navy's allocation, primarily driven by spending on assets modernisation, was 12,548.02 Rs crore (around \$7.8 billion). This gave the Indian Navy an all-time high of 19 per cent share of the defence budget.

Moreover, in local terms India's military spending now being channelled into naval purposes is significantly greater than naval spending by all other Indian Ocean states. In contrast to India's

<sup>26</sup>Stephen Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta, *Arming Without Aiming: India's Military Modernization* (Washington: Brookings Institution 2010), 89.

<sup>27</sup>James Holmes, Andrew Winner and Toshi Yoshihara, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge 2009), 82.

allocation of around \$7.8 billion to its navy; India's main local competitor Pakistan allocated a much lower \$562 million for its 2012–13 defence budget. We can also look at the 2011 top-15 figures for 'military expenditure' (a wider definition than just budget allocations) compiled by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute expenditure, and adjusted for Price Purchase Parity (PPP). In the Indian Ocean, India's figure of \$112 billion were significantly higher than the next regional figures of \$58.8 billion for Saudi Arabia and \$16.6 billion for Australia.<sup>28</sup>

However, in comparison to the other extra-regional actors like the US and China India's spending strategy is perhaps less impressive. From SIPRI we find a PPP-adjusted military expenditure figure for 2011 of \$711 billion for the US and \$228 billion for China. Whereas China's military expenditure figure for 2002–11 increased by 170 per cent, India's increased by a lower 59 per cent. Consequently the 2012–13 defence budget increases of 18 per cent on India's part merely reduced the India-China expenditure gap to some degree rather than establishing any Indian superiority. Both India and China may be spending around two per cent of GDP on their military, in comparison to the United States' 4.7 per cent; but China's GDP is around triple the size of India's, thereby enabling still greater relative military spending. To catch up with Chinese military expenditure, India either needs to increase its economic growth rate over China's, or increase its own GDP share allocated for defence.

A significant compensatory feature for India in the Indian Ocean is that it enjoys local geographic advantages of closeness, concentration of forces and prioritisation that magnify the impact of increased financial spending. In immediate strategic terms, increased spending allocations for the Indian Navy is enabling further infrastructure construction and asset manufacture-purchase, to which we can turn.

### *Infrastructure*

India's geographic advantages in the Indian Ocean are being taken advantage of in India's naval infrastructure programmes on the mainland (its Western, Eastern and Southern Commands), the Lakshadweep islands, and the Andaman and Nicobar islands.

The Western Command, based at Mumbai, focuses on the Arabian Sea. A significant shift has been Project Seabird, the construction of a specially-dedicated naval base INS Kadamba, near Karwar in Karnataka. The first phase of construction of the base was completed in May 2005, giving a base spread over an area of 45 square km with

<sup>28</sup>'The 15 Major Spender Countries in 2011', SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, <<http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/resultoutput/15majorspenders>>.

23 km of coastline frontage. Development of Phase II of INS Kadamba began in 2011, and will double its existing facilities. After INS Kadamba's completion, the Indian Navy will be able to base 27 major warships there against 11 at present. INS Kadamba's more southerly location enables easier deployments into the south-western Indian Ocean, as well as the Arabian Sea. Naval requests in July 2012 for facilities in Gujarat, at Gandhinagar, were seen as enabling a closer watch on the Strait of Hormuz choke point to and from the Gulf.<sup>29</sup> This would point towards the intention of Indian Navy to upgrade other Western Command assets in Gujarat at Bedi Port, Okha and Porbandar airport.

The Eastern Command, based at Vishakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh, focuses on the Bay of Bengal, and is being built up.<sup>30</sup> In 2005, the Eastern Command had 30 warships under its wing; by 2011 it had reached 50 and still growing. Its established bases at Vishakhapatnam and Kolkata are being supplemented by the announcement in 2010 of new naval bases being set up under the Eastern Command at Paradip (Orissa) and Tuticorin (Tamil Nadu) Tuticorn looks southwards as well as eastwards. The Eastern Command has air stations at Dega and Rajali, INS Rajali deploying reconnaissance aircraft at the longest airstrip in Asia. The Eastern Command has a naval air station, INS Parundu at Uchipuli, which is more southerly based; upgraded in 2009 to accommodate larger aircraft for operations in the Bay of Bengal and northern Indian Ocean.

With regard to the Lakshadweep islands, a significant decision was taken in April 2012 to set up a full blown naval base, INS Dweepprakshak, on Kavaratti island. This would be under the Southern Command at Kochi. Once fully operational, INS Dweepprakshak will have new aircraft, warships and helicopters operating there.

With regard to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, this is an archipelago of 572 islands; separated from the Indian mainland by around 1,300 km of sea, but separated from Sumatra and the entrance to the Malacca Strait chokepoint by only 160 km. Government figures like Shyam Saran pointed out how the islands give India 'geopolitical advantage' and 'vantage position' in the Eastern Indian Ocean; while Chief of Naval Staff Verma noted how the islands offer a 'vital geo-strategic advantage' and a 'commanding presence'.<sup>31</sup> Saran also noted

<sup>29</sup>Anand McNair, 'Gujarat helps push India's maritime military strategy', *Times of India*, 7 July 2012.

<sup>30</sup>Sudha Ramachandran, 'Indian Navy pumps up eastern muscle', *Asia Times*, 20 Aug. 2011.

<sup>31</sup>Shyam Saran, 'India's Foreign Policy and the Andaman & Nicobar Islands', 5 Sept. 2009, <[http://www.maritimeindia.org/sites/all/files/pdf/Shyam\\_Saran\\_Address.pdf](http://www.maritimeindia.org/sites/all/files/pdf/Shyam_Saran_Address.pdf)>;

that 'our control over these islands, strategically placed as they are, help us manage China's rise and protect our turf as it were'.<sup>32</sup>

India's position and use of the archipelago chain has been strengthened in recent years. Though badly damaged in the 2004 tsunami, facilities were quickly rebuilt in the archipelago as a matter of priority. Plans for further expansion and strengthening were announced in June 2011 for both the naval (Diglipur, Kamorta, Campbell Bay, Port Blair, Car Nicobar) and air force (Shibpur and Car Nicobar) units based in the islands. The islands are due to become a major amphibious warfare hub through the setting up of full-fledged training facilities and the basing there of an integrated sea-and-land fighting unit for operations in the Indian Ocean and its littoral. At Campbell Bay, on the southerly tip of the archipelago and 300 km closer to the Malacca Strait than the Car Nicobar base, INS Baaz was opened for naval air arm operations in August 2012, with immediate plans for a 10,000-foot-long runway that would allow fighter operations.

A further development has been the appearance of Indian facilities outside India in the Indian Ocean Region. India has enjoyed berthing rights in Oman since 2008. In the Maldives, since 2009 the old British air base on Gan island has been available for use by Indian reconnaissance and surveillance aircraft.<sup>33</sup> Madagascar let the Indian Navy build and start operating a radar monitoring station in 2007. Use of Mauritius' North and South Agalega Islands has been pursued by the Indian Navy; islands which are located closer to India than Mauritius, include airstrip facilities, and could serve as a mirror in the central Indian Ocean to the US presence at Diego Garcia.<sup>34</sup> Such increasing infrastructure facilities go hand in hand with increasing capabilities, in the shape of the construction and purchase of assets.

### *Capabilities*

India's capabilities form an essential part of planning and implementation; any 'maritime military strategy is intimately related with the creation of maritime capabilities'.<sup>35</sup> India is moving from foreign

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Nirmal Verma, 'CNS Address on the Occasion of Commissioning of INS Baaz', 31 July 2012, <<http://indiannavy.nic.in/print/1432>>.

<sup>32</sup>Saran, 'India's Foreign Policy and the Andaman & Nicobar Islands'.

<sup>33</sup>Balaji Chandramohan, 'India, Maldives and the Indian Ocean', *IDS Comment*, 13 Oct. 2009.

<sup>34</sup>'Mauritius offers India 2 islands in effort to preserve tax treaty', *Times of India*, 6 July 2012.

<sup>35</sup>Holmes *et al.*, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-First Century*, 82.

purchasing to indigenous production. However, given the downturn in purchase and construction in the 1980s/1990s, the Indian Navy is actually facing some short term contraction, amid its longer-term hopes for expansion. Hence Pant's judgement in 2009 of India facing 'a 'growing mismatch between ambitions and capabilities' in the Indian Ocean.<sup>36</sup>

The result is that there will be some dip before the Navy expands; but with progressive modernisation of assets increasingly working their way through, and generating longer-term expansion; in Verma's summation in 2012, how 'over the past three years the Indian Navy has made very significant progress towards capability accretion and this, is as intended to be, in consonance with a conceived vision and plan'.<sup>37</sup> The pace of purchasing and construction has been accelerating, particularly with government approval in April 2012 of the five-year Defence Plan for 2012–17 and the Long-Term Integrated Perspective Plan (LTIPP) for 2012–27. Under these plans, strategic in nature, the Indian Navy is aiming to induct more than 90 fighting platforms in another ten years. In contrast to Cohen and Dasgupta's sense in *Arming Without Aiming: India's Military Modernization*, this article argues that already the arrival of such purchases and indigenously-produced surface and air platforms is feeding into the capability and reach of the Indian Navy in the Indian Ocean, and reflects Indian aims of greater sway in the Indian Ocean. Admittedly, India's submarine programme has been hesitant; but this military arm serves more for sea-denial and nuclear deterrence purposes, and is not a feature needed for effective Indian Ocean sea-control operations.<sup>38</sup>

Above water, an unexciting but significant addition to the Indian Navy was the commissioning in January 2011 of a new oil replenishment tanker INS *Shakti*, based at Vishakhapatnam (Eastern Command). INS *Shakti*'s arrival was welcomed by Chief of Naval Staff Verma for 'her ability to sustain our forces far away from our coasts in consonance with India's maritime interests and across the entire reach

<sup>36</sup>Pant, 'India in the Indian Ocean', 279.

<sup>37</sup>Nirmal Verma, 'Farewell Press Conference by Outgoing CNS', 7 Aug. 2012, <<http://indiannavy.nic.in/cns-speeches/farewell-press-conference-outgoing-cns>>.

<sup>38</sup>Six *Scorpene* advanced diesel submarines are being built, amid delays, for commissioning during 2015–2018. The nuclear-powered attack submarine, INS *Chakra* was delivered on a 10-year lease from Russia to the Indian Navy in April 2012. The indigenously-produced relatively small nuclear submarine INS *Arihant* is due for entry in 2013. Work on a second submarine (INS *Aridhman*) started in 2011, with launch envisaged for end-2012. In 2012, work was also started on a third such indigenous nuclear submarine.

of our strategic footprint' in the Indian Ocean.<sup>39</sup> *Shakti's* sister-ship INS *Deepak* was commissioned in October 2011, based at Karwar (Western Command).

The arrival in 2007 of INS *Jalashwa*, the ex-USS *Trenton* purchased from the United States for \$48.44 million, added powerful amphibious landing capacity to the Indian Navy. INS *Jalashwa* gives the Indian Navy strategic sealift capabilities for the Indian Ocean littorals and island states; being capable of transporting four landing craft, six helicopters and a battalion of 1,000 fully-armed soldiers or a squadron of tanks over large distances. A systematic expansion of India's Indian Ocean-centred amphibious capacity has taken place over the decade. Orders placed for three landing ships in 2002 came to fruition with the commissioning of INS *Shardul* (2007), INS *Kesari* (2008) and INS *Airavat* (2009). These are 125 metre long ships that can carry 10 main battle tanks, 11 combat trucks and 500 soldiers. In September 2011 the Cabinet Committee on Security cleared the road for ordering eight amphibious assault vessels, to be built in Kolkata for delivery by 2014, probably to be based at the Andaman and Nicobar Command. Further orders were placed in November 2011 by India's Defence Acquisition Council for the purchasing of four large amphibious ships, comparable in size to INS *Jalashwa*, Multi-Role Support Vessels complete with helicopter decks. These will be linked up to the three existing Army amphibious brigades, almost 10,000 soldiers in total; one currently based in South India (for deployment down into the Indian Ocean), another in West India (for deployment around the Arabian Sea), and another on the Andaman and Nicobar islands (for deployment around the Bay of Bengal and Strait of Malacca choke point).

Fast new modern warships are entering into service with the Indian Navy in increasing numbers, and are tailor made for Indian Ocean maritime diplomacy as well as potential conflict. Admittedly, the past decade has seen completion dates subject to delays from original estimates, though government spending plans announced in 2011 and 2012 started fast tracking such programmes.

Project-17 Indian-built stealth frigates were commissioned in April 2010 (INS *Shivalik*), August 2011 (INS *Satpura*) and July 2012 (INS *Sahyadri*); seen by the government as furthering India's 'blue water navy' profile to 'promote peace and stability in the Indian Ocean Region'.<sup>40</sup> Their successful construction led to Project 17-A orders for

<sup>39</sup>Nirmal Verma, 'Address by Chief of the Naval Staff', 1 Oct. 2011, <[http://indian.navy.nic.in/CNSSpeeches/CNSSpeech\\_01-10-11\\_Commissioning\\_of\\_INS\\_Shakti.pdf](http://indian.navy.nic.in/CNSSpeeches/CNSSpeech_01-10-11_Commissioning_of_INS_Shakti.pdf).>

<sup>40</sup>Defence Minister Antony quoted in 'Shivalik Frigates Strengthen the Blue Water Navy', 24 July 2012, <<http://pib.nic.in/newsite/efeatures.aspx?relid=85491>>. Also

seven more further enhanced *Shivalik*-class stealth frigates. These were approved by the Defence Acquisition Council in June 2009, with funding approved by the government in October 2011, and firm orders placed in July 2012. Four will be built at Mumbai by Mazagon Dock Ltd (MDL) and three will be built at Kolkata by Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers (GRSE). Delivery of the seven vessels to the Indian Navy is envisaged as starting in 2017, with the remaining six being delivered every successive year through to 2022. Some time slippage is likely, but completion is nevertheless to be expected reasonably efficiently as the docks are being converted to using modern modular manufacturing techniques.

Simultaneously, Project 11356 *Talwar*-class stealth frigates have been built in Russia for India. The initial three frigates (INS *Talwar*, INS *Trishul* and INS *Tabar*) were commissioned in 2003 and 2004, to be followed with three further enhanced versions equipped with Brahmos missiles in the shape of INS *Teg* (commissioned April 2012), INS *Tarkash* (scheduled commissioning November 2012) and INS *Tikand* (expected commissioning mid-2013). The inductment of INS *Teg* was greeted by Indian comments that it had 'been built to meet the specific command and control needs of the Navy'; and as such was being based with the Southern Command at Kochi as 'a dominant force multiplier', with an operating range of 4,500 nautical miles deep into the Indian Ocean.<sup>41</sup> Such stealth frigates are highly flexible assets, able to be used for aircraft carrier group formations and general naval diplomacy in the Indian Ocean.

Even more powerful warships are joining the Indian Navy. Under Project 15A, started in 2003, INS *Kolkata*, *Kochi* and *Chennai* are finally set to join the fleet in 2013, 2014 and 2015 as multi-role destroyers, with sea combat and land attack capabilities. They provide significant combat firepower and deterrence capabilities for Indian Ocean operations. Also on order, under Project 15B, are four more *Kolkata*-class destroyers; complete with LR-SAM, Brahmos cruise missile and helicopter hangar already used on the Project 15A ships. Approval in principle was given in 2009, the necessary funding contract was concluded in January 2011, and construction started by end-2012. The first Project 15B destroyer is due for delivery in 2018 and the other three at one-year intervals.

Aircraft carriers represent an obvious asset mechanism in the Indian Ocean, with their associated battle groups able to project power far and

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Rajat Pandit, 'India to boost 'blue-water' warfare punch with two new stealth frigates', *Times of India*, 25 May 2011.

<sup>41</sup>'Navy inducts stealth frigate INS *Teg*', *The Hindu*, 28 April 2012. Also Rajat Pandit, 'Navy packs a punch with stealth frigate INS *Teg*', *Times of India*, 27 April 2012.

wide within the region. INS *Viraat* was extensively upgraded in 2009 (following one in 2000), thereby extending her service through to 2020. She will be supplemented by the handing over of aircraft carrier INS *Vikramaditya* (the refurbished Soviet *Gorshkov* carrier) in Fall 2013, following her sea trials over the summer. This has been a problematic saga subject to delays and costing overruns but finally settled. This acquisition generates a two-water Arabian Sea/Bay of Bengal capability for India. Meanwhile, India's indigenously developed aircraft carrier, INS *Vikrant*, was floated out of dock in December 2011, and is due for entry into service in 2017. This will finally give the Navy the three-aircraft carrier capability it has long sought, and will enable deployments further south into the further reaches of the Indian Ocean. A larger indigenously designed aircraft carrier, INS *Vishal*, is envisaged, to then replace INS *Viraat*. Admittedly, something of a race is emerging with China's own future aircraft-carrier building programme, but such Chinese aircraft carrier assets are likely to be deployed into the West Pacific and South China Sea rather than the Indian Ocean. In contrast, India's aircraft carrier capability is tailor-made for concentration, and local superiority, in the Indian Ocean.

India's naval air arm is being strengthened in various ways. Part of its inventory is for aircraft carrier deployment. The successful test flight in April 2012 of a naval variant (NP-1) of the indigenous Tejas Light Combat Aircraft (LCA), was described by Vijay Saraswat, the scientific adviser to the Defence Minister as being 'a complete marine force multiplier that will give unique battle punch to the naval aviation arm of the 21st century to fulfil the national dream of blue waters'.<sup>42</sup> The LCA (NP-2) single seat fighter will replace India's older Sea Harrier units and is being lined up for use on India's aircraft carriers, alongside 45 MiG-29K and MiG-KUBs naval variant fighters purchased from Russia under orders placed in 2004 and 2010, and of which the first wave have been arriving since 2009.

India's naval air arm is not just expanding its fighter component, it is already expanding its surveillance capacities, specifically and primarily with the Indian Ocean in mind. The setting up in April 2012 of an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) squadron at the INS Parundu naval station on the Tamil Nadu coastline, extends India's surveillance capacity in the Bay of Bengal and northern Indian Ocean. Anil Chopra, the then Eastern Naval Command Commander-in-Chief, reckoned that as a result of UAV capability, 'the operation reach, sustenance and relevance of the [naval station] base will increase exponentially'.<sup>43</sup> Finally, the first Boeing P-8I 'Neptune' (a specially modified P-8A

<sup>42</sup>Cited in 'India Test Flies Naval Variant of LCA', *IANS*, 27 April 2012.

<sup>43</sup>Cited in 'Indian Navy Commissions Third UAV Squadron', *UPI*, 12 April 2012.

Poseidon) long range maritime reconnaissance aircraft, following successful test flights in September 2011, was due for handover to the Indian Navy in May 2013. Under the original agreement made in January 2009, and then increased in 2012, this initial delivery was to be followed by another 11 similar planes by 2020. This provides much greater long range surveillance capacity for India across the entire Indian Ocean; hence the plans to base them at INS Rajali in Tamil Nadu. Still higher surveillance capabilities were introduced with India's launch of its first military satellite in geostationary orbit in June 2012. India is one of only five countries with such capabilities (alongside the USA, Russia, Japan and to some extent China), deployed to provide monitoring of the Indian Ocean and ongoing communications for the Indian Navy.

### *Naval Diplomacy*

Although the Indian Navy is a fighting machine it is also a diplomatic machine. As Chief of Naval Staff Verma explained in summer 2012; 'the Indian Navy has been at the forefront of bilateral and multilateral cooperative engagements and diplomacy is a critical component of our maritime strategy. Given our geographical position our natural paradigm is to architect the stability of our region'.<sup>44</sup> In turn, the Indian government has recognised that 'our ability to shape our maritime security environment will require the development of a credible naval presence... As a diplomatic instrument, the Navy has key attributes - access, mobility, reach and versatility.'<sup>45</sup> To unpack the language being deployed, Verma's talk of 'architect' and Rao's talk of 'to shape' have undertones of leadership and pre-eminence.

India's naval diplomacy consists of various elements involving personnel and assets. At the personnel level is India's training of naval officers of other countries, sending its own naval officers (from Chief of Naval Staff downwards) on routine trips to these countries, and regular exchanges at the officer's level. Under agreements with Oman (1973), United Arab Emirates (2003) and Qatar (2008) highly effective naval training is given to those particular Gulf choke point states. At the assets level are varied cooperative examples which include transfer of military equipment (Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius), manning of military installations (Maldives), the hydrological explorations carried

<sup>44</sup>Verma, 'Metamorphosis of Matters Maritime – An Indian Perspective', 25 June 2012, <<http://www.indiannavy.nic.in/cns-speeches/cns-addresses-iiss-united-kingdom-metamorphosis-matters-maritime-indian-perspective>>.

<sup>45</sup>Rao, 'Maritime Dimensions of India's Foreign Policy', 28 July 2011, <<http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530117885>>.

out on behalf of Indian Ocean micro-island states, patrolling of sensitive straits with local agreement (Mozambique), patrolling of Exclusive Economic Zones (Maldives, Seychelles, Mauritius) and humanitarian assistance provided by the Indian Navy. The most obvious example of such humanitarian operations was the Indian Navy deployment of 27 warships and over 5,000 personnel to assist the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Indonesia in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. The Indian Navy was also deployed to assist Bangladesh in the wake of Cyclone Sidr (2007), and Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis (2009). In terms of effectiveness, this is the most widespread programme in the Indian Ocean Region, and much bigger than China's.

The final assets aspect of maritime diplomacy employed by India is its general naval deployments. These deployments have become well-established means of showing the flag throughout the whole region. Such deployments are recognised in India as a highly visible way of reinforcing India's position in the Indian Ocean.<sup>46</sup> In such a vein, the naval deployments in 2012, eastwards through the Bay of Bengal and Strait of Malacca, and westwards to the Gulf of Aden, Red Sea, Seychelles, Mauritius and the East African rim were officially flagged as how 'Indian Navy's Pan 'IOR' Operations Demonstrate Reach of India's Maritime Diplomacy'; in which 'such long range deployments, covering the IOR... bear testimony to the blue water capabilities and operational readiness of the Indian Navy'.<sup>47</sup> The Indian Navy is forthright in extolling the strategic benefits of such deployments in the Indian Ocean; 'the ships have projected a brilliant picture of a militarily strong, vibrant and confident India' and 'have comprehensively established their footprint in areas of our maritime and strategic interest within the Indian Ocean Region'.<sup>48</sup>

### *Exercises*

The Indian Navy is able to use its increased naval capabilities to carry out an increasing number of naval exercises of increasing strength. Some of these are unilateral, notably the annual substantive 'Tropex'

<sup>46</sup>Now, a pan-Indian ocean operation for the Navy', *The Hindu*, 14 June 2012; 'Navy spreading its wings far and wide with warship deployments', *Times of India*, 14 June 2012.

<sup>47</sup>Ministry of Defence, 'Indian Navy's Pan 'IOR' Operations Demonstrate Reach of India's Maritime Diplomacy', 13 June 2012, <<http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?reled=84863>>.

<sup>48</sup>Indian Navy, 'Reaching out to Maritime Neighbours' (2005) 1-2, <<http://indiannavy.nic.in>>.

exercise. Hence the Navy description that 'Tropex 2012' involved 'two completely networked fleets, widely dispersed across seas in the Indian Ocean' with over 40 ships, as well as submarines and aircraft; 'new platforms . . . being tested and tried to optimise the net combat power of the fleets'.<sup>49</sup> In addition there are a range of bilateral, trilateral and multilateral exercises set up by India; of importance either symbolically, politically, strategically or operationally.

One set of exercises are with local smaller states, symbolic rather than substantive operations. Into this category come the 'Ind-Indo Corpat' exercises between the Indian and Indonesia navies which have been held since 1994, the India-Thailand Coordinated Patrol ('Ind-Thai Corpat') exercise in the Andaman Sea set up in 2006, and the joint naval exercises carried out with the Malaysian Navy in 2008 and 2010. Others are more substantive, with important strategic and operational implications for the Indian Navy. In the east, joint 'Simbex' exercises, of growing strength and substance with important strategic implications for presence and choke point control, have been held between India and Singapore since 1993, with Singapore providing friendly berthing facilities for the Indian Navy as it leaves and enters the Indian Ocean. A significant gap in Indian Ocean exercises has been between India and Australia, although agreement in principle was made in 2012 for them to be held in future.

In the west, the India-Oman 'Thammar Al Tayyib' joint exercises have been a regular naval feature since 2003, substantive operations around the Ormuz Strait choke point. In the south, joint naval exercises with the Sri Lanka Navy codenamed 'Slinex-II', which had last run in 2005, were restarted in 2009 and 2011, in the wake of raised concerns in India about Sri Lanka drifting into China's sphere. Bilateral India-Maldives 'Dosti' exercises, symbolic rather than substantive given the meagre size of the Maldivian Navy, have been running since 1991, and became trilateral with the participation of Sri Lanka in 2012. Joint anti-piracy patrols were started between India and Mauritius in 2010 and repeated thereafter, not substantive in numbers but significant for its operational reach deep down into the Indian Ocean. Still further south, significant strategic exercises have been carried out with South Africa, a choke point gateway. India and South Africa conducted combined naval drills off the South African coast in June 2005. These bilateral arrangements have merged into the trilateral biannual 'Ibsamar' naval

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<sup>49</sup>Indian Navy, 'Exercise TROPEx 12 - Defence Minister Visits Visakhapatnam to Witness Joint Exercise of Navy and Air Force', Press Release, 9 Feb. 2012, <<http://www.indiannavy.nic.in/press-release/exercise-tropex-12-defence-minister-visits-visakhapatnam-witness-joint-exercise-navy-a>>. Also 'Tropex showcases naval might', *Times of India*, 9 Feb. 2012.

exercises between the Indian, South African and Brazilian navies in 2008, 2010 and 2012. Local multilateral exercises have long been held by India, organised from Port Blair, under the 'Milan' format since 1995. By 2012, the 'Milan' exercise had grown to involve a wide swathe of Indian Ocean actors in the shape of Mauritius, Seychelles, Maldives, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Australia; as well as some still further east like Brunei, Vietnam, and the Philippines. 'Milan' is essentially a political statement and networking exercise, showing India's ability to take an active and leading role towards other Indian Ocean states.

Another set of exercises are with various significant outside powers. 'Konkan' annual exercises were started with the UK in 2005, generally (except for 2009) held in the Indian Ocean. The 'Indra' exercises with the Russian Navy, initiated in 2003 were carried out in the Indian Ocean in 2003, 2006, and 2009. The 'Varuna' exercises with France, a resident power in the middle-southern Indian Ocean, were initiated in 2001. Apart from 'Varuna 2009', these normally take place in the Indian Ocean, and are operations of political-symbolic importance rather than military-substantive significance. The most significant bilateral exercises for India in the Indian Ocean are the 'Malabar' exercises with the United States, some years conducted in the Arabian Sea and other years in the Bay of Bengal. They send powerful annual political signals and involve particularly substantive units on both sides. These commenced in 1992, were suspended in 1998–2001 in the wake of India's nuclear testing; but resumed in 2002. Since 2002 they have been shown growing strength (aircraft carriers for example from both sides) and progression from simple Search and Rescue Exercise (SAREX) cooperation to substantive anti-submarine drills and war-game inter-operation ability.

### *Choke Points*

Within *India's Maritime Military Strategy*, India's 'primary' area of strategic interest specifically include 'the choke points leading to and from the Indian Ocean – principally the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb and the Cape of Good Hope'.<sup>50</sup> India's choke point strategy was simply put by Chief of Navy Staff Verma; 'these vital choke points need to be kept open... both through deterrence and cooperative maritime security measures'.<sup>51</sup> This is

<sup>50</sup>*India's Maritime Military Strategy* 59.

<sup>51</sup>Nirmal Verma, 'Maritime Strategy for an Emerging India', 17 March 2011, <[http://indiannavy.nic.in/CNSSpeeches/CNSSpeech\\_17-03-11\\_DSSCWellington.pdf](http://indiannavy.nic.in/CNSSpeeches/CNSSpeech_17-03-11_DSSCWellington.pdf)>.

achieved through India's active deployment to these waters in cooperation with choke point states.

With regard to the Strait of Malacca, India's own position at the Nicobar and Andaman Islands gives it immediate access and potential choke point control of the northern approaches to the Strait. India's general convergence with the United States both reflected but also was further facilitated by the agreement in 2002 for the Indian Navy to escort American shipping through the Strait enabling US patrol vessels to be redeployed for Indian Ocean-based operations over Iraq and Afghanistan. Equally noticeable has been India's assuaging of the local Strait states Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore; including joint exercises and friendly deployments in the Strait area with them. India's own regular ongoing deployments into the South China Sea, which have been maintained since 2000, also bring India down the Strait.

With regard to the Strait of Hormuz, India has developed close military links with Oman, which sits directly on the Strait. Since 2003, India has entered into defence agreements with Oman dealing with training, maritime security cooperation and joint exercises. The Indian Air Force uses the Thumrait air base for transit purposes and Oman has offered the Indian Navy berthing facilities in support of anti-piracy patrols. Substantial goodwill visits through the Strait of Hormuz into the Gulf have been made by the Indian Navy since 1999 on a regular basis; rightly interpreted by Chinese sources as Indian 'efforts to use its navy to project power' outside its own immediate coastal waters.<sup>52</sup> In 2008 India also entered into a security agreement with Qatar, just inside the Gulf; involving maritime security, intelligence sharing, and a degree of Indian commitment to maintaining Qatar's position in any future situation. The US military presence in the Gulf and through the Hormuz choke point is still much greater than India's, but this is not to India's detriment, given the strategic convergence between the two countries in the Indian Ocean and beyond.

With regard to the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, the Indian Navy deploys to it as a regular part of its strategic outreach up into the Red Sea and beyond. India keeps a vigilant eye on this strategic choke point. Typical of India's long-range reconnaissance prowess was the way in February 2006 that a new Chinese destroyer and accompanying oil tanker emerging from the Red Sea via the Bab Al-Mandab Strait were quickly detected, tracked and photographed by a Tupolev-142M maritime patrol aircraft, flying out from the Goa naval airbase, a sighting over 1,400 miles away from the Indian mainland. Indian naval visits to Djibouti have been maintained; in 2002 (twice), 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, and 2009. Joint exercises with other nations like France (2005,

<sup>52</sup>'India Deploys Warships in Gulf Region', *Xinhua*, 2 Sept. 2004.

2007) and Russia (2009) in the Gulf of Aden has also brought the Indian Navy out into these choke point waters. The dispatch of the aircraft carrier INS *Viraat* to the Gulf of Aden in August-September 2009 was for 'power projection' reasons.<sup>53</sup> In the face of piracy attacks off the Somali coast, a continuing Indian warship presence in the Gulf of Aden, after some hesitation, was established in October 2008, alongside a range of other concerned countries.

Finally, with regard to the Cape of Good Hope, India has cultivated military cooperation with the resident power South Africa. This was signalled with their Defence Cooperation Agreement in 2000. In 2004, Indian Mirage 2000 fighters were deployed from north-central India and flew, aided by newly acquired Ilyushin-78 aerial tankers, to South Africa for combined exercises. India and South Africa conducted combined naval drills off the South African coast in June 2005. Such was India's interest and capability that November 2005 saw an Indian Tupolev-142F long-range reconnaissance plane tracking a Chinese cargo ship carrying two Kilo-class submarines; the Indian plane following the Chinese ship as it traversed the Indian Ocean from the Cape of Good Hope back to China. Such bilateral activities between India and South Africa have been overlaid by the trilateral IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa) format, with naval exercises carried out off the coast of South Africa in 2008, 2010 and 2012.

These Indian activities around all the main choke points do not establish unilateral control by India, but they do establish an ability and readiness to help keep them open. In the case of the Malacca Strait it also gives India the ability to block (China's so-called 'Malacca Dilemma') easy Chinese access to the Indian Ocean.

### Extra-Regional Actors

India's interactions with Brazil through the IBSA mechanism is not particularly a sign of Brazil coming into the Indian Ocean. However, there are a range of extra-regional actors present in the Indian Ocean. How do they affect India's aspirations? Pant, for one, argues:

Despite the fact that some in India would like their nation to achieve preponderance in the Indian Ocean region, it remains an unrealistic aspiration as other major powers have significant stakes in the region and so will continue to operate and shape its strategic environment.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup>Naval officials cited in 'INS *Viraat*'s "power projection" trip to Gulf likely', *The Hindu*, 3 March 2009.

<sup>54</sup>Pant, 'India in the Indian Ocean', 297.

That is true, yet what of those other major outside powers Britain, France, Russia, China, and the United States? Neither Britain, Russia nor France is really able to 'shape' the Indian Ocean. Britain's role is marginal, while Russia's presence is spasmodic, and India has friendly relations with both of them; including 'Konkan' Indian Ocean exercises with the UK and 'Indra' Indian Ocean exercises with Russia. France, with its Overseas Department presence on Mayotte and Reunion as well as uninhabited islands like Kerguelen in the southern Indian Ocean, is a resident power, but its naval presence is secondary rather than primary; and India has close defence acquisitions (*Scorpene*-class submarines) and Indian Ocean exercise ('Varuna') links with France. France's position in the Indian Ocean will not strengthen, it will if anything decline.

The biggest Great Power challenge to India in the Indian Ocean is a growing Chinese presence.<sup>55</sup> In strategic terms China is interested in the Indian Ocean for geoeconomic (energy security) and geopolitical (restraining India) purposes.<sup>56</sup> The former brings some convergence with India; indeed trilateral India-China-Japanese anti-piracy coordination was announced for the Gulf of Aden in 2012, even as India and Japan moved closer together on China-centric balancing elsewhere in Asia. Countering China is an important part of India's strategy. The then Chief of Naval Staff (2006–09, and subsequent Chairman of the National Maritime Foundation 2012–) Sureesh Mehta summed up the situation in 2009; 'on the military front, our strategy to deal with China must include reducing the military gap and countering the growing Chinese footprint in the Indian Ocean Region'.<sup>57</sup> His successor as Chief of Naval Staff (2009–12) Nirmal Verma similarly argued that 'China is establishing footholds all over the IOR [Indian Ocean region]... this is not something that we can stop but our strategy certainly needs to factor in these developments'.<sup>58</sup> India's strategy to minimise and control the Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean region is to reduce the military gap through 'internal balancing' (naval build-up), and countering the Chinese presence through 'external balancing'

<sup>55</sup>Arun Prakash, 'China's Maritime Challenge in the Indian Ocean', *Maritime Studies* 7/1 (2011) 1–16; Swaran Singh, 'China's Forays into the Indian Ocean: Strategic Implications for India', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 7/2 (2011), 235–48.

<sup>56</sup>Yoshihara, 'Chinese Views of India in the Indian Ocean: A Geopolitical Perspective', 489–500.

<sup>57</sup>Sureesh Mehta, 'India's National Security Challenges', 10 Aug. 2009, <[http://maritimeindia.org/sites/all/files/pdf/CNS\\_Lec\\_at\\_Habitat.pdf](http://maritimeindia.org/sites/all/files/pdf/CNS_Lec_at_Habitat.pdf)>.

<sup>58</sup>Nirmal Verma, 'India's Maritime Orientation and Contribution of Navy', 19 March 2010, <<http://indiannavy.nic.in/cns-speeches/address-dssc-wellington-indias-maritime-orientation-and-contribution-navy>>.

(with the US) combined with maritime diplomacy (with the littoral and island states). Here, India can use its own geopolitical advantages; in which, as Pant noted, 'given the immense geographical advantages that India enjoys in the Indian Ocean, China will have great difficulty in rivalling India in the Indian Ocean'.<sup>59</sup> Despite China's larger naval spending and naval forces, India can concentrate its forces in the Indian Ocean far more than China can, giving India likely continuing regional superiority there over China. China's emerging so-called 'string of pearls' presence in the Indian Ocean potentially encircles India; yet India in turn lies across such extended lines, and is able to cut them fairly easily, given what Iskander Rehman considered as 'India's enduring tactical advantage'.<sup>60</sup> India's setting up of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in 2008 and blocking Chinese participation in it, is a further institutional mechanism for countering Chinese influence and magnifying India's influence.

China is not the biggest Great Power in the Indian Ocean for India to concern itself with. Instead, the power that can still 'shape' Indian Ocean events is the United States; given its military presence in Bahrain, Diego Garcia, and Western Australia. However, the US has been accepting a growing Indian role in the Indian Ocean. In 2008 the then US Secretary of the Navy, Donald Winter, welcomed India 'taking up the responsibility to ensure security in this part of the world'.<sup>61</sup> The US Quadrennial Defense Review talked in 2010 of India's emerging role as a 'net provider of security in the Indian Ocean'.<sup>62</sup> As one Pentagon-commissioned report explained in 2012:

There is broad consensus within Washington and Delhi that each depends on the other to sustain a favourable strategic equilibrium as Chinese power rises... increased Indian capabilities... particularly with respect to the Indian Navy's capacity to provide security in the Indian Ocean, are in US interests.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup>Harsh Pant, 'China's Naval Expansion in the Indian Ocean and India-China Rivalry', *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 18-4-10 (3 May 2010), <[http://www.japanfocus.org/-Harsh\\_V\\_-Pant/3353](http://www.japanfocus.org/-Harsh_V_-Pant/3353)>.

<sup>60</sup>See Rehman, 'China's String of Pearls and India's Enduring Tactical Advantage', *IDS Comment*, 8 June 2010.

<sup>61</sup>Donald Winter, cited in Sandeep Dikship, 'No strings attached to sales of ship', *The Hindu*, 29 March 2008.

<sup>62</sup>*Quadrennial Defense Review* (Washington DC: Department of Defense 2010), 65.

<sup>63</sup>*US Force Posture Strategy in the Asia Pacific Region* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies 2012), 38.

Hence Kaplan's sense that 'the task of the US Navy will therefore be to quietly leverage the sea power of its closest allies – India in the Indian Ocean... to set limits on China's expansion'.<sup>64</sup>

Conversely, India now sees the US military presence as a stabilising factor in an otherwise fragile region. This is a change from the 1980s, when the US arrival in the region, and its setting up at Diego Garcia in particular, was seen by New Delhi as unhelpful and detrimental to Indian interests. Admittedly India's sensitivity over its own *strategic autonomy* has stopped it from too close an embrace of the United States, for example failing to conclude a formal logistics support agreement with Washington. Nevertheless, both India and the United States have shared interests in the Indian Ocean over curtailing piracy, stopping jihadist destabilisation, and containing China's advances. Precisely because 'China shakes up the maritime balance in the Indian Ocean' the United States and India are drawing closer together in response, with India in effect soft balancing with Washington against China as part of its wider hedging strategy.<sup>65</sup>

## Conclusions

If we stand back, how far has India's strategy of increasing naval spending, purchase-construction of more capabilities, increased deployments of such capabilities, actively exercising with other actors, and keeping the choke points open brought India closer to its aspirations of security, pre-eminence, and leadership? Certainly there have been, and remain, ongoing structural problems, accurately pinpointed by Prakash and Pant among others. Procurement gridlocks, purchasing (the *Gorshkov* aircraft carrier saga for one) and construction cost overruns (the *Scorpene* submarines for another), intra-services rivalries, corruption, and some continuing hesitancy over overtly deploying naval power are still evident for

<sup>64</sup>Robert Kaplan, 'Center Stage for the 21st Century: Power Plays in the Indian Ocean', *Foreign Affairs* 88/2 (March–April 2009), 24.

<sup>65</sup>Harsh Pant, 'China Shakes up the Maritime Balance in the Indian Ocean', *Strategic Analysis* 36/3 (2012), 364–8. Also, James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, 'China and the United States in the Indian Ocean: An Emerging Strategic Triangle?', *Naval War College Review* 61/3 (Summer 2008), 41–60; Rajat Pandit, 'India, US official discuss China's growing clout in Indian Ocean', *Times of India*, 15 May 2009; C. Uday Bhaskar and Kamlesh Agnihotri, *Security Challenges Along the Indian Ocean Littoral: Indian and US Perspectives* (New Delhi: Matrix Publishers 2011); David Scott, 'The 'Indo-Pacific' – New Regional Formulations and New Maritime Frameworks for US-India Strategic Convergence', *Asia-Pacific Review* 19/2 (Nov. 2012), 85–109.

India.<sup>66</sup> Uncertainties over how to handle China in the Indian Ocean, and elsewhere, are also evident. Moreover, government financial cutbacks or a collapse of US-India strategic convergence could reverse India's growing naval role in the Indian Ocean.

Nevertheless, this article does not agree with Prakash's general comment in 2010 that that 'for far too long we have been dogged by a lack of doctrinal clarity, diffidence and self-imposed constraints regarding deployment of force beyond our borders'.<sup>67</sup> This may well be applicable to land security issues along the Himalayas, but it does not seem applicable to the Navy and the Indian Ocean. Here the Indian Navy has doctrinal clarity, is active, and has been evident in projecting its force through deployments far and wide across the Indian Ocean. This article also does not agree with Prakash's comment in August 2012 that 'for 65 years, we have been unable to formulate a maritime vision. There is lack of cohesion and coordination in maritime policies.'<sup>68</sup> The counter-evidence to this is the vision shown in the *Indian Maritime Doctrine* (2004) which Prakash had penned a foreword to as Chief of Naval Staff, which was further developed by the *Indian Maritime Military Strategy* (2007), and cohesive Indian Ocean-centric policies pursued by the government and navy.

Consequently, this article does not accept that Cohen and Dasgupta's general point that 'India's military modernization has lacked political direction and has suffered from weak prospective planning, individual service-centred doctrines, and a disconnect between strategic objectives and the pursuit of technology' is particularly applicable to the Indian Navy in the Indian Ocean.<sup>69</sup> Instead, despite the lack of integration between the various Services, and despite the lack of formal national-level strategic doctrine, this article finds that India's naval strategy for the Indian Ocean has enough political (including financial) support, has sufficient planning, is clear in its own service doctrine, and is pursuing asset development, acquisition, construction and deployment of suitable technology which are appropriate for its strategic objectives in the Indian Ocean. Certainly, India could do more, as critics have shown. Nevertheless, this article finds that India is doing enough to ensure a significant degree of Indian eminence in the Indian Ocean. India's role is growing. There is already a significant degree of substance

<sup>66</sup>Also Ashok Sawhney, 'Indian Naval Effectiveness for National Growth', *RSIS Working Papers* 197 (7 May 2010), <[www.rsis.edu.sg/publications/WorkingPapers/WP197.pdf](http://www.rsis.edu.sg/publications/WorkingPapers/WP197.pdf)>.

<sup>67</sup>Arun Prakash, 'Navy for the Future', *Force* (Dec. 2010), 14.

<sup>68</sup>'Maritime policy lacks strategic thinking: former Navy Chief', *Hindustan Times*, 8 Aug. 2012.

<sup>69</sup>Cohen and Dasgupta, *Arming Without Aiming: India's Military Modernization*, xii.

behind India's Indian Ocean rhetoric. Appropriate strategies are being implemented to meet India's maritime aspirations and security concerns.

### Note on Contributor

**David Scott** is a lecturer in Asia-Pacific international relations at Brunel University, Uxbridge, UK.

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