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Defending India's Interests in the Indian Ocean

Author

Lalit Kapur

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Core 5A, 1st Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003

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Author

Cmde Lalit Kapur (Retd), Senior Fellow, Delhi Policy Group

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(Photographs top to bottom)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaking at the Commissioning of CGS Barracuda in Mauritius on March 12, 2015. Source: MEA

United States and Indian Naval Personnel during Ex Malabar 2018. Source: Twitter Handle of US Embassy, New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivering the Keynote Address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on June 1, 2018. Source: MEA

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Defending India's Interests in the Indian Ocean

by

Lalit Kapur

Speaking at the commissioning ceremony of the India built Coast Guard ship Barracuda at Mauritius on March 12, 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi observed:

"India is becoming more integrated globally. We will be more dependent than before on the ocean and the surrounding regions. We must also assume our responsibility to shape its future. So, Indian Ocean Region is at the top of our policy priorities".

Elucidating further on what was to become his SAGAR outlook, he said:

"Our vision for Indian Ocean Region is rooted in advancing cooperation in our region; and, to use our capabilities for the benefit of all in our common maritime home".

The first element of his vision was:

"We will do everything to safeguard our mainland and islands and defend our interests. Equally, we will work to ensure a safe, secure and stable Indian Ocean Region that delivers us all to the shores of prosperity".

Why has the Indian Ocean assumed such importance for India? What are these interests that must be defended? How severe are the challenges to them, and how prepared is India to deal with these challenges? Who are the potential partners India can count upon, and what is the level of support it can expect from them? What are the areas that must be addressed on priority by Prime Minister Modi's newly re-installed government? These are some of the important questions this analysis seeks to answer.

When the Cold War ended in 1991, the US dominated unipolar world moved to embrace globalisation, creating a complex system of integrated production and supply chains that depend extensively on trans-oceanic corridors and undersea cables for the connectivity required by both the industrial and services economies. This accelerated the Asian economic boom, bringing the Indian Ocean into the heart of the global trading system. Energy from the Persian Gulf, the world's largest source of exportable hydrocarbons, flows out from Indian Ocean rim nations to power the growing economies of India,

China and others who make up the Asian economic miracle. Manufactured products flow across it, connecting industries of South, East and South East Asia with markets in Europe and the Atlantic coast of the Americas. In 2018, the Indian Ocean connected nations with a combined nominal GDP of over \$54 trillion, including 12 of the 16 members of the trillion-dollar club. By 2033,



The World's 20 Largest Economies in 2030. Map created by DPG using mapchart.net

21 of the 25 members of the trillion-dollar club of that time will rely on the Indian Ocean for trade connectivity. In comparison, only 12 such nations will be connected by the Atlantic and 13 by the Pacific. The Atlantic formed the backbone of the global trading system of the past. The

Indian Ocean is effectively taking over that role today, and as Asia continues to grow in the years ahead, the share of global trade it carries will continue to grow. It was the recognition of this reality that led PM Modi to say:

"Today, the world speaks of 21st century driven by the dynamism and the energy of Asia and the Pacific. But, its course will be determined by the tides of the Indian Ocean. This is why the Indian Ocean is at the centre of global attention more than ever before".

If the seas are to be kept safe, secure and free for all, Indian policy makers must provide for the different types of challenges emerging in the maritime domain. These can broadly be divided into three categories. First is the humanitarian or "benign" category, arising from sources beyond human control, where state responsibility is essentially providing succour to those in distress. It includes Search and Rescue, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief, and non-combat evacuation operations. The second category encompasses governance or "constabulary" action to secure maritime transportation routes and nodes against criminals and non-state actors seeking financial or political gain, as well as the enforcement of international law. State responsibility here encompasses deterrent, preventive and punitive actions against such criminal elements or non-state actors. The third category comprises state-backed coercive or military challenges, and state responsibility is to deter or defeat such coercive acts. For much of the unipolar globalised era, the focus in the

Indian Ocean has been humanitarian and governance challenges. Coercive challenges have been present, as in the Mumbai terror attacks of 2008, but these have been largely viewed as India specific and not of global concern. But this era of relative comfort is ending.

A geopolitical 'great game' between different visions of order is brewing not just in the Indo-Pacific as defined by the United States (US) in its National Security Strategy (NSS) 2017, but also in the entire Indian Ocean. This game seeks domination of global trade routes for national benefit. The tools used by players remain the same as in the past: economic, military (both potential instruments of coercion as well as of reassurance) and diplomatic. The major players can be divided into three categories. First come the two superpowers (US and China), who act as poles in themselves and are the prime protagonists. Next come the middle powers, including India, Indonesia, Japan, Russia, Australia, France and the EU, who either aspire to become poles or support one or the other of the two superpowers. These two categories comprise active players. Last come the smaller nations, who are effectively bystanders; they can provide diplomatic and moral support as well as raw materials and replenishment facilities to the players, but lack the heft to play on their own.

India is rapidly transitioning from being a bystander to becoming an active player. But before coming to India's strategic options in this game, it is necessary to understand the interests, objectives, strategy, strengths and limitations of the other key players.

China

Interests and Challenges: Next in importance only to its immediate maritime neighbourhood in the East and South China Seas, the Indian Ocean is vital for China: as an irreplaceable source of energy, as a transportation corridor for its European markets, as a market in its own right, and as a source of its diplomatic support on the world stage. China imported 460 million tonnes of crude and 90 million tonnes of natural gas in 2018, making it the world's largest importer for both. About 80% of this came through the Indian Ocean. Its resource interests in Africa have been extensively documented; these pass through the Indian Ocean on their way to China. The Ocean also carries more than two thirds of China's exports. It is the focus of the Maritime Silk Road, the oceanic part of China's signature Belt and Road Initiative. The attendant investment (and the returns this provides), the markets it develops for China's exports and the employment it provides to the Chinese diaspora are all vital interests. The 35 Indian Ocean rim nations also constitute a significant bloc in the United Nations, one that China seeks to influence decisively. Its only challenge in the

Indian Ocean comes from India, through its dominant geographic position, social and cultural linkages with the peoples of the Indian Ocean rim, and reasonably well-developed maritime capability.



Indian Ocean Sea Lanes and choke points. Source: Indian Maritime Security Strategy, https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf

Objectives and Strategy: China seeks to regain its 'Middle Kingdom' status in a globalised world and revise the global and regional order to suit its purpose. Within the Indian Ocean, it seeks to create and strengthen a dominant maritime position for itself, with the objective of securing its SLOCs and exercising control over Indian Ocean trade, ports and port infrastructure, shipping lines carrying cargo to and from the Indian Ocean, and eventually its ability to influence rimland nations. China has thus far focused on economic tools to attain its objective, but as the experience of the South China Sea shows, it is not averse to deploying military coercion.

MSR investment, including in vanity projects, has created strong constituencies for China in the Malacca Funnel, Bay of Bengal, Central Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Horn of Africa and the East African littoral. China has moved with foresight to hone its ability to use the military tool, changing its doctrinal outlook to provide a thrust to the development and use of maritime power and embarking on the largest warship building and

modernisation programme the world has seen after World War II. It has effectively brought military-ruled Pakistan into its strategic orbit and created a large network of dual use facilities that will provide logistic and maintenance support (through bases in Djibouti and facilities in Pakistan) for forward deployed maritime forces in the Indian Ocean. It has also gained vital operating experience in distant seas through its decade-plus old deployment in the Horn of Africa. A marine expeditionary force of 100,000 personnel backed by extensive high volume sea and air lift capability is being created to secure its expanding interests on the Indian Ocean rim. Chinese fishermen and embarked maritime militia already range through the Indian Ocean. Projecting these trends forward, it is only a matter of time before China expands its presence in the Indian Ocean to include powerful Carrier-based maritime Task Groups accompanied by nuclear attack submarines.

Impediments: China faces three broad impediments to its Indian Ocean strategy. The first is India, long a rival in Asia, with its dominant position in the Indian Ocean, whose force and capabilities are likely to improve substantially in the mid term. The second is the ideological conflict developing between China and the US, with the consequential risk of China's economic jugular being squeezed. It is this factor that raises concerns about China's Malacca Dilemma and efforts to develop alternate routes. It also raises the possibility of a two front maritime threat, from the US in the Western Pacific and India in the Indian Ocean. This potentially limits the force levels that China can deploy in the Indian Ocean. However, China's counter-intervention strategy, including anti-access and area denial components as well as cyber and anti-satellite elements, has already been developed to deter American intervention and preclude attack on Mainland China. It is only a matter of time before the maritime force levels are large enough to spare sufficient forces for the Indian Ocean while managing challenges in the Western Pacific. The third is the pushback to China's "predatory economics" and neo-imperialist policies. In Pakistan, there is considerable disquiet about the economic and strategic implications of China's investment in CPEC and Pakistan's ability to service loans taken for associated projects. In Sri Lanka, China's virtual seizure of control over the strategic Hambantota Port serves as a warning to others. In Maldives, the change of government has at least temporarily checked China's inroads in the Indian Ocean. In Malaysia, the Mahathir government has renegotiated the East Coast Rail Link project due to its high costs.

Prospects: China's leaders have shown the ability to persevere. There is no sign that they will step back and accept anything less than the dominant position in Asia, including in the Indian Ocean. They will thus continue to play the long game, using the multiple tools available to them. India cannot count

on China becoming a benevolent and cooperative actor; it has to effectively counter China's game.

United States

Interests: Unlike China, America's interests in the Indian Ocean are mainly oriented towards security of the maritime transportation system that underpins the globalized world, and the humanitarian and governance challenges that impact on the stability of this system. Strategically, however, the Indian Ocean remains "the other side of the world"; it cannot be considered vital area for America's strategic interests. This becomes evident from the Trump administration's National Security Strategy, which says:

"We will deepen our strategic partnership with India and support its leadership role in Indian Ocean security and throughout the broader region."



United States and Indian Naval Personnel during Ex Malabar 2018

Source: Twitter Handle of US Embassy, New Delhi

The US has never conceded a lead role to another power where its vital interests, which could lead to conflict with another major power, are at stake. Nor is it reasonable to expect that it will risk entanglement in a region not

considered vital. The US cannot, therefore, be counted on to do more than provide diplomatic or materiel support to partners as China's coercive challenge in the Indian Ocean gathers pace. It will also extract an economic and political price for its support.

Strategy: America's changed outlook towards China is a relatively recent phenomenon. US strategy is focused on managing China in the Western Pacific and does not consider the Indian Ocean as a potential theatre of operations. The overt contours of the US's strategic approach became visible in President Trump's speech on a Free and Open Indo Pacific (FOIP) at Da Nang in November 2017. He described the region as "a place where sovereign and independent nations, with diverse cultures and many different dreams, can all prosper side-by-side, and thrive in freedom and peace". Although this vision, as well as its subsequent description in NSS 2017, was inclusive, US actions make it clear that inclusiveness is contingent on China's renouncing many actions that America had tacitly approved over the last two decades and more, but is no longer willing to countenance. The Pentagon's Indo-Pacific Strategy Report of June 2019, which calls out China for seeking "to reorder the region to its advantage by leveraging military modernisation, influence operations and predatory economics to coerce other nations", makes it clear that the strategy is directed towards China. The section on expanding partnerships in the Indian Ocean Region describes the challenges the IOR faces as including "terrorism, transnational crime, trafficking-in-persons, and illicit drugs". It does not encompass coercive challenges. Similarly, it describes the areas of maritime security collaboration with India as encompassing "domain awareness, HA/DR, counter-piracy, counter-terrorism, and other transnational issues". The inescapable conclusion is that as of now, America's focus remains fostering peacetime maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean. The US appears unlikely to act to prevent coercive actions by China in the Indian Ocean, in spite of lessons from China's island building expansion and militarisation of the South China Sea.

Impediments: The primary impediment to the FOIP strategy adopted by the US is concern regarding its obvious focus on China, notwithstanding claims regarding inclusiveness, coupled with its predominant focus on military aspects. There have no doubt been initiatives such as the BUILD Act, ARIA and others designed to promote use of economic tools, but their impact will take time to become visible, if at all they materialise. Meanwhile, America's own predilection to use economic coercion, including through unilateral sanctions, generates substantial regional concerns.

Prospects: Containment of China is likely to prove a difficult prospect, particularly because of the closeness with which the American and Chinese economies are intertwined. Unless either super power pulls back from the developing Cold War, the strategic rivalry between them can be expected to intensify. This trend could delay the ingress of China's maritime power into the Indian Ocean.

Middle Powers

Japan: Japan's interests in the Indian Ocean are essentially commercial, by way of its investments to develop regional infrastructure and regional markets and to secure energy supplies. PM Abe's Confluence of the Seas speech before the Indian Parliament on August 22, 2007 and the subsequent strategic partnership with India did have the underlying intention of balancing China's growing power, particularly at a time when America was still focused on including China into the global system as a "responsible stakeholder" and there was doubt about whether it would live up to its bilateral mutual defence commitments. Limitations have, however, emerged as to what the defence pillar of the India-Japan strategic partnership can deliver. Japan has also moved decisively to reduce its erstwhile hydrocarbon dependency on the Indian Ocean, by progressively eliminating dependence on crude oil (it is projected to obtain only 1% of its total energy requirements from oil by 2030) and diversifying sources of natural gas to within the Pacific. Japan's strategic concerns about American support against China will now be influenced by the fact that the US has moved into a confrontational mode vis-à-vis that country. Japan's strategic thrust towards India and the Indian Ocean can, therefore, be expected to become less intense, dominated more by American concerns than by other regional factors or its own inclination. Nevertheless, Japan's financial strength makes it an attractive partner in the Indian Ocean, albeit mainly for commercial ventures and infrastructure-linked ODA projects. India cannot expect the JMSDF to play a security role in the Indian Ocean, apart from participation in exercises like Malabar where the US is the catalyst.

Indonesia: Indonesia's outlook and strategic approach was, till recently, predicated on maintaining a balance between India and China and developing ASEAN as its main vehicle for cooperative engagement with the external world. Its relations with major powers were conditioned by colonial memories, as also distrust of both Japan and the US. China's assertions in the South China Sea and success in breaking down ASEAN unity has forced Indonesia to look beyond. Indonesian leader Jokowi's Indo-Pacific and Global Maritime Fulcrum visions share considerable commonality with Prime Minister Modi's oceanic vision, particularly with regard to the nature of the regional order they

both espouse. Indonesia seeks to maximise the economic benefits of its location as the maritime hinge between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This cannot, however, happen if the region becomes a super power battleground. Indonesia has also begun looking towards the Indian Ocean as a potential market. However, its lack of maritime power, coupled with an insular outlook, act as impediments to the realisation of its cooperative vision for the Indo-Pacific.

France, UK, EU, Australia and Russia: The interests of these nations in the Indian Ocean have waned, as has their ability to preserve them. UK and France, both erstwhile colonial powers, still retain territories in the Indian Ocean. These territories provide footholds from which American power can operate if and when needed. Indeed, the British territory at Diego Garcia is leased to the US. However, the maritime capability of both the UK and France stands limited by financial constraints. They can largely be expected to follow the US lead, but the distance involved coupled with commitments closer to home mean they have little capacity to play anything more than a supporting role. Similarly, the EU and Russia can presently do little more in the Indian Ocean beyond diplomacy. Australia has a reasonably strong regional presence in the eastern Indian Ocean, but its largest trading partner and economic lifeline is China. Commercial considerations and political influence cultivated with considerable foresight ensure that China has a strong lobby in its favour among all Australian political parties, which will keep the nation ambivalent about China until such time as a direct threat materialises. Australia's island territories in the eastern Indian Ocean could become footholds from which its maritime power can operate. While Australia has started looking towards India and the Indian Ocean, it cannot presently be relied upon to firmly commit to one side or the other.

India

As reflected in the words of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Indian Ocean has become a vital strategic space for India. The Mumbai terror attacks of 2008 exposed severe security limitations and led to the development of a comprehensive coastal security infrastructure, but this takes care only of constabulary challenges and ingress by malign non-state actors. India depends on the Indian Ocean Sea Lines Of Communication (SLOCs) for vital energy imports that are essential to power its growing economy. More than 80% of its energy imports, valued at over \$ 155 billion in 2018, came over these SLOCs. Undersea cables are also vital for India's economy. Nearly 14 million Indian citizens and Persons of Indian Origin live in the nations around the Indian

Ocean rim. The Indian Ocean thus forms India's economic lifeline, as also its only reliable connect with the external world and the Indian diaspora.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivering the Keynote Address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on June 1, 2018. Source: MEA

Interests: In the hitherto globalised environment marked mainly by economic interdependence, India's interests were limited to ensuring peace, security and stability in the Indian Ocean. This, in fact, was at the heart of India's thrust to be seen as a net security provider for the region. The ability to tackle humanitarian and governance challenges is no longer enough; sufficient capability will have to be built by India to tackle coercive traditional challenges that will be posed by China within the mid-term. The lesson India must learn from its own history is that in an environment of growing geopolitical competition, it cannot allow an adversarial great power to gain a major foothold in the Indian Ocean and must develop the ability to counter such an adversary. Not doing so implies that it will only be a matter of time before that external power gains control over India's trade routes, which will likely support a \$ 5 trillion economy by 2025 and possibly a \$ 7 trillion plus economy by 2030, and then moves on to imperil India's independence through the exercise of strategic coercion.

Objectives : The SAGAR vision spelt out by Prime Minister Modi in Mauritius and elaborated upon at the Shangri La Dialogue last year encompassed a free, open and inclusive region, taking into account not just nations within its

geography, but also extra-regional powers who had stakes in it. It sought the evolution of a common rules-based order for the region, based on dialogue (and not coercion), applicable to all and to the global commons, based on sovereignty, territorial integrity and equality of all, irrespective of size or strength. It envisaged equal access for all to the global commons, based on freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce and peaceful settlement of disputes. It sought connectivity initiatives based on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, good governance, transparency, viability and sustainability. He translated this vision into five Ss in Hindi - Sammaan, Samvaad, Sahyog, Shanti and Samridhi. But these objectives – Respect, Dialogue, Cooperation, Peace and Prosperity will not translate into outcomes merely by wishing for them. It would be ideal if the cooperation of all regional nations (including China) could be enlisted towards achieving the stated vision. Statesmanship, however, lies in developing fallback options to ensure that the objectives can be attained even if a revisionist or hegemonic power is not cooperatively inclined. India's guiding objectives must, therefore, not only be to continue working towards the cooperative SAGAR vision, but also to develop the hard power wherewithal to ensure its fruition.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaking at the Commissioning of CGS Barracuda in Mauritius on March 12, 2015. Source: MEA

Past Strategy: India's strategy in the Indian Ocean has so far been defensive, designed towards building up cooperative security mechanisms and strengthening regional capacity to deal with humanitarian and constabulary challenges to maritime security, while maintaining a capability to overcome

coercive challenges from an adversarial regional power. That colonial power had retreated from the Indian Ocean and the world's foremost maritime power, the US, had no colonial interest in it, enabled this strategic approach to become dogma. But as brought out before, a new age has dawned on the Indian Ocean, one in which a strong extra-regional power seeks to establish itself in a dominant role, including by circumscribing India's strategic space. Business as usual will no longer work. The maritime outlook of an India that seeks to become a global pole will have to be reshaped, failing which India's ambitions will be cut to size in the maritime domain just as they were on land in 1962. That is not something India can afford or its decision makers can countenance.

Strengths: Before considering India's strategic options in the Indian Ocean, we must also consider its strategic strengths and limitations. The strengths include:

- The dominant strategic position geography has gifted India, along with island territories at eastern entrances to the Indian Ocean and astride heavily trafficked international SLOCs to the East and West of peninsular India.
- Long cultivated and strong relationships with island nations in the Western Indian Ocean.
- Stable relations with both the US and China, the two contending super powers.
- A benign image, except with implacably hostile neighbours like Pakistan. This makes India more acceptable to Indian Ocean nations than extra-regional powers.
- Civilisational linkages, which add to India's acceptability in the region.
- A nearly 14 million strong Indian diaspora in the Indian Ocean rim, contributing effectively to national growth in the countries they inhabit.
- Prospects for trade and economic relations generated by India's growing economy.
- A reasonably developed Navy with nearly six decades of operational experience across the spectrum of maritime operations.
- The mission deployed posture adopted by the IN since October 2017, which enables India to be the first responder to any regional crisis in the Indian Ocean region and contributes significantly to India's benign image.
- The extended reach provided by logistics agreements with France, the US and other Indian Ocean nations.
- Advanced naval exercises such as Malabar, Varuna, Konkan, Indra, AUSINDEX etc., that India conducts with extra-regional maritime powers and the thrust towards interoperability with them. These exercises

enable India to benchmark itself against the world's advanced navies and test its tactics and doctrine. They should not, however, be seen as signals that these nations will support India when it comes to tackling coercive challenges impacting India's interests in the Indian Ocean, or that China will be deterred due to them. In this regard, State Councillor Wang Yi has described mechanisms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue as a "headline grabbing strategic idea" that will get attention but will soon dissipate, "like the foam on the sea".

- A posture of strategic independence, which ensures that Indian Ocean nations do not think of India as serving the interests of an extra-regional power.



*Indian and Indonesian Ships exercise together during Ex Samudra Shakti.
Source: Indian Navy*

India's strategic limitations, which are legacy issues that have been extensively documented encompass the following:

- An insular and ideologically driven strategic outlook, wherein pursuit of so-called strategic autonomy has become entrenched dogma, rather than a carefully thought out and updated strategy to meet changed needs.
- Absence of a clearly defined national security strategy coupled with uncoordinated functioning of India's line ministries handling foreign affairs, defence and security, which results in different domestic players pulling in different directions.

- Archaic security management structures at the apex level, designed for a different time and age.
- A land-centric security mindset, which prioritises territorial defence over the overwhelming needs of the maritime lifeline and economic future of the nation.
- Limited understanding of the imperatives and challenges of maritime security.
- A sub-par defence research and development infrastructure, which has no doubt delivered in some crucial areas related to strategic deterrence, but on the whole appears incapable of meeting the vastly expanded technological requirements of national defence today.
- A weak industrial base and poorly performing and largely public sector oriented indigenous defence industry, which has proved incapable of meeting India's burgeoning needs and resulted in India remaining among the largest arms importers in the world.
- Tardy rates of domestic defence production and dependence on key foreign sub-systems for even indigenous platforms, which means that ability to recoup losses in conflict will be lower than that of a potential adversary.
- A dysfunctional process driven, non-strategic defence procurement system, which ensures that procurement of even the most essential defence equipment suffers inordinate delays.
- The deliberately cultivated competitive approach of the services towards India's security needs, which makes synergy subject to individual personalities rather than institutionalised mechanisms.
- Limitations in maritime capability, which has long been developed only for regional adversaries and will find itself outmatched against any significantly stronger extra-regional adversary.
- Major weaknesses in key areas of maritime warfare, including in underwater domain awareness, strategic anti-submarine warfare, nuclear propulsion, mine countermeasures etc. Capability in other areas is also determined by financial constraints rather than a logical prioritisation of needs.
- A mindset that considers defence expenditure as unproductive waste, instead of as insurance to ensure a strong, stable and secure India which can also contribute to regional peace and stability.



INS Vikramaditya: Symbol of India's Maritime Power
Source: Indian Navy

As India achieves full spectrum strategic deterrence, open conflict with China is considered unlikely. China's strategy is likely to remain focused on expanding its area of influence in the Indian Ocean (through economic inducement and grey zone coercion to undermine India's regional influence) while diverting India's attention through proxies such as Pakistan. The strategic options of an aspirational but status quo power like India to counter the presence of a revisionist and coercive China in the Indian Ocean can essentially be summarised as follows:

- (a) Establish a defence and security partnership with another external power with significant interests in the Indian Ocean. No such power exists, so this option can mostly be ruled out.
- (b) Build up cooperative security arrangements with a coalition of medium powers having strong interests in the Indian Ocean. There are, however, no regional or extra-regional middle powers with pan-oceanic interests that can be counted on to back India militarily against coercive challenges. Moreover, even if regional nations can somehow be made to band together to provide political and diplomatic support, the collapse of ASEAN cohesion under Chinese pressure does not augur well. This option, therefore, is also of marginal value.

(c) Find accommodation with China. Doing so from a position of relative weakness, however, carries the risk of being gradually overwhelmed. India must aim for mutual accommodation, but only from a position of greater comparative strength, as the Doklam experience showed. Adopting this approach, however, will require the substantial strengthening of India's capability in the maritime domain, which is a time consuming process. Acquiring the requisite strength in the various dimensions of maritime power could take anything from one to two decades.

China has not yet begun to use coercive means, which have long been visible in the East and South China Seas, in the Indian Ocean. Its current focus on the trade war with the US and developments in the South China Sea provide India a window of time which must be utilised productively to enhance its maritime capability.

This, in fact, appears to be the approach India has adopted through its prolonged naval engagement with the US. American maritime military technology is about the best in the world, and India has already deployed it extensively through the acquisition of platforms such as USS Trenton (INS Jalashwa) and P8I Neptune MR ASW aircraft; others in the pipeline or under discussion include MH 60R helicopters, Carrier based fighter aircraft and Sea Guardian UAVs. Joint Working Groups on Carrier Technologies and Naval Systems have also been established under the India-US DTTI. India cannot, however, afford exclusive dependence on the US, as it had on the erstwhile Soviet Union at one stage. It must, therefore, keep its procurement options open while scaling up domestic production capacities.

Furthermore, there are limitations to the type of technologies the US may be willing to provide. Platforms such as nuclear attack submarines are not on offer, forcing India to acquire them on lease from Russia to overcome indigenous construction capacity limitations. The US does not build conventional submarines, which will have to be obtained from other sources. The US is the world's technology leader in anti-submarine warfare, including through seabed-based sensors, but these technologies are also seemingly not on offer to India.

As America's geopolitical rivalry with China and Russia intensifies, the US is seeking to draw India more firmly into its strategic embrace. At the same time, problems are becoming apparent with the coercive approach being adopted by the US through unilateral domestic instruments like CAATSA. It remains uncertain, therefore, whether the US will be willing to share systems that India

requires to counter conventional maritime challenges in the Indian Ocean without strings attached. India's security planners will thus face some difficult choices in times ahead.

India's continental security challenges remain and will demand continued attention. However, the relatively benign environment, which in the past demanded a naval capability mainly for tackling humanitarian and governance challenges, no longer prevails and India will face coercive maritime power challenges from China in the Indian Ocean. To put it in other terms, the continental domain is, from the strategic perspective, the holding domain. The critical strategic domain for the growth of India's economic and military power is maritime, centred around the Indian Ocean.

By enunciating India's strategic objectives by way of SAGAR, putting in place a mission-oriented deployment policy in the Indian Ocean and vastly expanding India's maritime outreach across the Indo-Pacific, Prime Minister Modi has already put in place a maritime vision which is designed to sustain India's future security and prosperity. Building credible naval power and enhancing maritime capability in the Indian Ocean must become a key priority during his second term. This encompasses the following elements:

- Strengthening India's relationships with nations at the gates of the Indian Ocean, as well as at critical choke-points.
- Enhancing India's visibility and influence throughout the Indian Ocean rim, both by way of economic incentives and security cooperation.
- Addressing critical maritime vulnerabilities on priority, including in areas such as Underwater Domain Awareness, strategic anti-submarine warfare, nuclear propulsion, mine countermeasures, ocean surveillance, expeditionary power projection, logistics access arrangements etc.
- Addressing limitations in domestic defence production, defence research and development, higher defence structures, and procurement structures.
- Managing the competing demands and pressures of the two super-powers, China and the US, to maximise the window of time available to India.

Progress in this enhanced maritime capability will be determined by how successfully India's line Ministries – Defence, Finance and External Affairs – are able to deliver coordinated decisions. If India is to attain its aspiration of becoming a pole in a multipolar world, it simply cannot afford to be strategically marginalised in the ocean which bears its name.



Delhi Policy Group
Core 5A, 1st Floor,
India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road
New Delhi - 110003
India

www.delhipolicygroup.org