



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

DPG POLICY BRIEF

India, China and the Indian Ocean: Reading the Tea Leaves and Preventing Coercion

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Chinese Heavy Vehicles Pulling Out of Pangong Tso, February 11, 2021. Source: Hindustan Times

INS Khanderi, India's second Kalvari-Class Submarine, at sea, Source: PTI

The USS Nimitz and INS Vikramaditya Task Groups in the Arabian Sea During Exercise Malabar 2020. Source: Indian Navy

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India, China and the Indian Ocean: Reading the Tea Leaves and Preventing Coercion

by
Lalit Kapur

The key lessons identified by the External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar, while introspecting about India's foreign policy at the [4th Ram Nath Goenka Lecture](#) in November 2019 included the need for risk taking and reading the global tea leaves right. Both were put to the test when China attempted to grab territory across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Eastern Ladakh and present India with a fait accompli, which had led to a tense confrontation between the PLA and the Indian Army from April 2020 onwards. The beginning of [synchronised disengagement](#) at Pangong Tso, one of the areas of this confrontation, and the [statement by](#) India's Defence Minister Shri Rajnath Singh in this regard, indicates that India has read the Chinese tea leaves right. It has in response executed a carefully calibrated strategy, standing firm militarily while imposing political and economic costs, controlling the media narrative, and exercising patience in carrying out a hard-nosed military-led dialogue. This strategic coherence has gone a long way in negating China's military transgression. Points of friction remain, including at Depsang and Hot Springs, but there is now a possibility that these too will be addressed through dialogue.



Chinese Heavy Vehicles Pulling Out of Pangong Tso, February 11, 2021. Source: Hindustan Times

The development marks a significant change in India's outlook. The record of India's policy-makers in reading the Chinese tea leaves till now has not inspired confidence. In July 1949, months before Mao Tse-tung proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), [Nehru wrote](#) to Mrs. Vijalakshmi Pandit (then India's Ambassador to the US): "As a realist, one has to recognize that Communists control the greater part of China and may, before long, control the whole of that country. In broader interest of international peace, it is not desirable that we should do anything that would make cultivation of normal friendly relations with the new China difficult, if not impossible". The implicit acceptance of the need to placate China resulted in a mistaken two-track policy of deferring to and accommodating the PRC in the hope of gaining its friendship, while seeking to "socialise" it into the world.

Thus, India led in becoming the first non-socialist country in the world to [recognise the](#) PRC. Nehru then set out to convince the free world that "China could be an [international partner](#) and thus reduce Cold War tensions". He directed Mrs. Pandit to rebuff a discreet August 1950 move by the US State Department to unseat the PRC as a permanent member of the UNSC and put India in its place, because "it would be a [clear affront to China](#) and would mean some kind of break between us". When China invaded and occupied Tibet, India not only acquiesced in the occupation, but even agreed to [rice being transported](#) through India to feed the PRC's occupation army in Tibet. Nehru then insisted on inviting the PRC to the 1954 Bandung Conference over the objections of the UK and US, but patronised Chou En-lai to an extent that the latter subsequently described Nehru as "[arrogant](#)". When the Aksai Chin dispute cropped up, India adopted the disastrous '[forward policy](#)', a complete misreading of the tea leaves which led to the 1962 conflict. Following the [restoration of ambassador-level relations](#) in August 1976, India agreed to set aside the border question and let its guard down in the belief that China could be trusted to honour multiple agreements evolved over the course of time. At each stage, the idea of developing countervailing power did not receive adequate attention.

To be fair, India was not alone in misreading China and believing that the dragon could be socialised. Much the same happened with the United States (US), leading to the belief that China could be incorporated into the world as a [responsible stakeholder](#). Western Europe, Japan and Australia followed the US lead, developing deep economic linkages with China. Even ASEAN, created to resist communist expansion, followed the same path and still harbours the belief that neo-imperialist China can be socialised.

The consequences of this misreading of tea leaves remained unseen so long as China lacked confidence in its ability to project power. The situation today is, however, different. [China will surpass the US](#) as the world's largest economy at market exchange rates before the end of this decade. [Its military modernisation](#) is proceeding ahead of schedule. It has already [overtaken the US](#) in shipbuilding, land-based ballistic and cruise missiles, and integrated air defence systems. Technologically, China intends to dominate and [set global standards](#) in all areas relevant to its geopolitical ambitions, including telecommunications and artificial intelligence, by 2035. It has gained overwhelming dominance over its periphery and visible success in imposing its will on its maritime neighbourhood.

These developments, coupled with perceptions of a decline in US power, feed into China's confidence, assertiveness and leverage in dealing with other existing and emerging powers. Having experienced that the international response to its militarisation and territorial expansion in the South China Sea, complete disregard of commitments under UNCLOS, violation of treaty commitments in Hong Kong, disregard of human rights in Xinjiang and Tibet, grey zone coercion in Taiwan and the East China Sea, and economic coercion in Australia and South Korea, among others, has been tepid and fragmented while the attractions of its market continue to entice groupings such as the EU and ASEAN, [China will conclude](#) that its methods have paid off. The recent experience with India will be viewed as an aberration, highlighting that the costs of attempting to coerce India on land could be unacceptably high and forcing China to turn to other options and domains to keep India in check.

Delivering the [keynote address](#) at the 13th All India Conference of China Studies in January 2021, External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar identified mutual respect, mutual sensitivity and mutual interest as the three determinants of the future of the India-China relationship. He also set out eight broad propositions to stabilise the relationship, including adherence to past agreements in their entirety; strict observance and respect for the LAC; maintenance of peace and tranquillity in border areas; recognition that a multi-polar Asia is an essential constituent of a multi-polar world; reciprocity in relationships; pursuit of aspirations by both with sensitivity; management of divergences and disputes; and taking the long view. Predictably, China's spokesman [dismissed the hyphenation](#) between the relationship and the border issue by saying that the latter should not be linked with overall bilateral relations.

China's growing economic and military power will remain a reality for the foreseeable future, bringing it into conflict with India's aspirations for a greater role in Asia and the world, more so as China is unlikely to accept a multipolar

Asia. In dealing with a country whose policies are [driven by balance of power](#) considerations, mutual respect and peace and tranquillity are not objectives that can be realised merely by wishing or pleading for them. They necessitate continued reading of the tea leaves right and strengthening instruments of power, particularly in domains where India could face superior Chinese power.



INS Khanderi, India's second Kalvari-Class Submarine, at sea
Source: PTI

[China's military strategy](#) formally states, "The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests". It also [identifies](#) safeguarding China's security and interests in new domains and the security of China's overseas interests as core strategic tasks for China's armed forces. The disparity between China's and India's maritime force levels, taking into account only ocean-going ships, can be seen in table below. It is this disparity and China's interests in the Indian Ocean that must guide the correct reading of Chinese tea leaves and the corresponding development of instruments of national power.

Table 1: Ocean-Going Warship Capabilities: India and China

Ship type	PLA (N)			IN	Remarks
	Current	Projection		Current	
		2030	2040		
SSBN	4	8	10	1	7 indigenous boats planned, timeline unknown.
SSN	6	14	16	1	INS Chakra will be replaced by a Russian Akula class by 2025. 6 indigenous boats planned, timeline unknown
Modern conventional submarines	47	46	46	14(+4)	All Kalvari class will become available in next two years. 10 boats of Shishumar & Sindhughosh class are already over 30 years old. Successor not yet identified.
Aircraft carriers	2	5	6	1 (+1)	INS Vikrant will commission shortly.
Destroyers and larger	41	60	80	10	Four remaining Rajput class will be replaced by four Visakhapatnam class by 2025.
Frigates & Corvettes	102	135	140	36	Seven Nilgiri Class and Four Talwar class to be inducted by 2026.
Total	232	268	298	68	Only ocean going ships included

Spelling out the raison d'être of the Indian Navy, [India's Maritime Security Strategy](#) states: "Whereas preventing war and conflict is the primary purpose, the Indian Navy must play a decisive role in bringing them to an early and favourable conclusion, should they be thrust on the nation or become inevitable. All its capability development measures and operational plans will be guided by this core consideration". Thus, India's maritime security objectives are identified as deterring conflict and coercion; winning quickly if

forced to fight; shaping a favourable maritime environment in areas of maritime interest; protecting coastal and offshore assets against seaborne threats; and maintaining the capability to meet India's maritime security requirements.

It is for good reason that deterrence precedes winning the fight as the core reason for the existence of the Indian Navy. The costs of conflict will always be greater than those of deterrence. Preventing conflict must, therefore, always remain the primary objective, and the nation's military power must be structured to fulfil that overriding consideration. India's planners occasionally appear to lose sight of this reality when reading the tea leaves and allocating resources. Having articulated its first integrated ocean strategy ([SAGAR](#)) in 2015, India is still debating the shape of the navy it needs based on a competition for scarce funds between the services, rather than on the growing challenges to its ocean objectives and what is needed to counter them. While India's Navy Chief says that the Indian Navy will officially write to the government on the [pressing need to have a third aircraft carrier](#) to enhance its maritime capabilities", its [Chief of Defence Staff talks of](#) the use of island territories and submarines as alternatives. Others [write of countering](#) Chinese coercion in the Himalayas by [taking the conflict to the oceans](#), or of [prioritising a denial strategy](#) in the Indian Ocean at the expense of sea control.



The USS Nimitz and INS Vikramaditya Task Groups in the Arabian Sea During Exercise Malabar 2020. Source: Indian Navy

There is no denying that India has major advantages conferred by geography in the Indian Ocean, but unless these are buttressed by a well-thought out and suitably resourced strategy, India will fall behind in ensuring that the future of the region is shaped by accommodation and not coercion. Planners must discard the continental mindset and realise that ocean strategy is not about security of territory: an invasion of India's mainland territory from the sea in the foreseeable future is unlikely, though an attempt to seize some unguarded islands cannot be ruled out. For a geographically satiated India which does not aspire to territorial expansion, ocean strategy must be driven by interests in the surrounding oceanic no-man's land. Primary among them is the provision of the public goods of security of transportation for commercial purposes, as well as the provision of reassurance to the region by displaying the ability to back up friends across the seas, including through military means. Deterrence must thus be structured to secure both maritime transportation and influence.

An adversary can be deterred by holding out the threat of either punishment or denial. Advocates of taking the battle to the oceans evidently seek deterrence by holding out a punitive threat. The credibility of punitive deterrence against Pakistan's sub-conventional strategy on land continues to be extensively debated. How a strategy of punishment could possibly deter China's patented grey zone coercion without escalating into a destructive conflict bears thinking about. More important, usage of a punitive strategy in the international oceanic space would inevitably paint India as an aggressor, with unacceptable diplomatic consequences. It is thus this author's conclusion that seeking to deter China by holding out the threat of punishment in the Indian Ocean is a non-starter.

The other option is deterrence by denial, which essentially means denying China the ability to achieve its objectives in the Indian Ocean. Advocates of deterrence by denial must assess the efficacy of a denial strategy in three pertinent areas: ensuring the ability to use the seas for our own purposes, influencing friends by providing reassurance, and countering China's known methods.

Can a denial strategy ensure our own ability to use the seas, including by providing necessary protection for vital energy imports and trade? As has been brought out by this author [elsewhere](#), conventional submarines lack the speed required, while land-based aircraft lack the staying power. Experience has proved submarines may excel at disrupting trade (at least till suitable countermeasures are evolved), but cannot protect it. Land-based airpower is usable for strike tasks, but of relatively little use for protective ones, especially over oceanic distances. India's continued usage of the sea is predicated on

being able to effectively counter air, surface and sub-surface threats. This necessitates the ability to control the seas, which requires continuous availability of sea-based air power which in turn can only be provided by aircraft carriers. They need not be large ones – that is a separate debate – but they are an inescapable need. India needs two operational carriers in times of conflict, one each in the Western and Eastern Indian Ocean".



INS Kiltan Delivering Humanitarian Aid at Sihanoukville, December 29, 2020
Source: Indian Navy

To reassure less secure neighbours and help maintain influence in a coercive environment, the necessity is of a quickly available presence. The nation states of the Indian Ocean are understandably chary about an ubiquitous military presence in their territory. They are, nevertheless, vulnerable to coercion resulting in a *fait accompli*, which could be extremely difficult to roll back. This necessitates a sustained presence to deter a coercively inclined adversary. Submarines and land-based aircraft are not effective platforms for this purpose: one cannot afford the visibility required, while the other lacks the staying power. Surface ships, deployed outside a nation's territorial waters but available just over the horizon provide the required answer.

When dealing with grey zone coercion at sea, submarines and aircraft serve limited purpose. The situation is analogous to that in Ladakh, where the possible threat of an Indian air strike did not deter China from its attempted land grab. Besides, given China's massive shipbuilding programme and Indian Ocean interests, it is only a matter of time before a PLA (N) carrier task group is

in the Indian Ocean as a powerful backstop to fishing, research and other vessels which actually carry out grey zone coercion. Those advocating the structuring of the Indian Navy to focus on submarines and the use of land-based air power to deny China its objectives don't explain how submarines or striking aircraft will find, let alone stop, such coercive forces. They fail to take into account the fact that a fully equipped Chinese aircraft carrier task group is by far the best defence against attacking (Indian) submarines or strike aircraft.



Indian Naval Warships at Sea during Exercise TROPEX, February 2021
Source: Indian Navy

India's strategy to deal with grey zone coercion in the Indian Ocean will inevitably have to be structured around a balanced force. Protective and conventional deterrent tasks will have to be primarily carried out by a composite carrier task group, while surface forces will be required to show presence and provide the military element of reassurance to Indian Ocean partners. Other components of influence, including economic, technical, capacity building etc. will have to be strengthened. Sub-conventional strength will have to be beefed up to deter grey zone coercion, while strengthening naval capability all round.

But before any strategy is formulated, there is need to revisit some long-held assumptions that have guided India's defence planning.

The first is that India's primary threat is Pakistan; that China can somehow be socialised or managed. Recent developments indicate that this assumption is

being discarded. The corollary, however, is that short-term, ad-hoc defence policies that sufficed for Pakistan will not work against China. A holistic, long-term approach that commits resources for long-lead time ship construction / acquisition will be required.

A second assumption is that the nature of conflict will primarily be continental, with the maritime domain remaining peripheral. This assumption may have been valid so long as the primary adversary was seen as Pakistan and its attempt to grab Kashmir, and the Chinese challenge was limited to the continental domain. But with China focusing on "open seas protection"; undertaking the [most ambitious warship building programme of the century](#), including multiple aircraft carriers and nuclear attack submarines; establishing a permanent Indian Ocean presence and operationalising a base in Djibouti and possibly in Gwadar/Jiwani; and acquiring numerous dual use staging posts and replenishment facilities in Indian Ocean ports through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India must face the reality that China is well on its way to acquiring the ability to hold hostage the transportation of energy and trade flows critical for India's economic development.

India can no longer afford to neglect the possibility of prolonged coercion, including an undeclared blockade, being brought to bear on it in the maritime domain. There are indicators that India's political decision-makers have grasped this danger, but the debate is still bogged down on the desired shape of the future navy instead of forging ahead with strategies to deal with this development.

A third assumption is that any conflict or confrontation will be of short duration. This was valid when all that was needed was to outlast the materiel resources of Pakistan. A risen China brings to bear a completely different scale of resources. India will be forced to rethink its reserves of ammunition, fuel, oil and lubricants and other essential imported materiel necessary for fighting effectively, as well as its operating tempo, tactics and strategy, in order to be prepared for a protracted standoff. This also means reducing dependence on external sources for sensors, weapons and ammunition. Support for an "Atmanirbhar Bharat" appears driven by this realisation.

A fourth assumption, more speculative, is that the US will come to India's aid in the event of any coercive Chinese challenge in the Indian Ocean. It is noteworthy that in the Falklands, the assistance the US provided to the UK, a treaty ally, was critical but limited to intelligence support and materiel. Allies such as the Philippines and Japan continue to be concerned about whether the US will comply with its treaty commitments. Whether the US will risk

entanglement in potential conflict resulting from Chinese grey zone coercion in the Indian Ocean remains a matter of reading the US tea leaves. While any concrete help would be welcome, it would be prudent for India to plan on the basis that what could be expected is intelligence (ISR and MDA), diplomatic support and technological/ materiel help to strengthen India's maritime capability.



Aircraft Carrier Liaoning at Sea in the Western Pacific
Source: Global Times

[Article 355 of India's Constitution](#) explicitly states: "It shall be the duty of the Union to protect every State against external aggression and internal disturbance and to ensure that the Government of every State is carried out in accordance with the provisions of this Constitution". Successive governments have consistently placed this constitutional requirement on the back burner and prioritised other areas at the expense of guarding against external aggression, except in times of emergency. This ad hoc approach will no longer suffice. Protection in an anarchic world where a great power neighbour has developed a penchant for inflicting punishment if its wishes are not complied with cannot remain limited to [reading of the tea leaves right](#), as articulated by the External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar. The Indian government must make a long term commitment towards a comprehensive strategy, backed by resources, to fulfil this constitutional obligation.



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