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## Shaping a Security Architecture for the Indian Ocean

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# Shaping a Security Architecture for the Indian Ocean

by

Lalit Kapur and Hemant Krishan Singh

As the global weight of the Indo-Pacific rises, another geopolitical “great game”, centred this time on the maritime space abutting Asia, has come into play. The outcome can determine the balance of influence and power over the world’s most dynamic region. The main players are the United States (US) and China, two ideologically opposed great powers; one democratic, one authoritarian; one located on the other side of the globe from India, the other sharing a long and disputed land border with it; both competing to dominate the region and shape its future. India, too, is a significant player in this unfolding saga, along with other nations big and small, bordering the Indo-Pacific.

The Indo-Pacific is primarily a maritime region, connecting the thriving economies of its rimland. Integrating it necessitates putting in place structures that can provide the foundations of security and address the variety of challenges in the maritime commons. These may be seen in three baskets of increasingly greater complexity. On the lower end is the humanitarian (HA/DR) basket, entailing provision of relief to those in distress on the seas, evacuation of diasporas from strife torn areas, and assistance to people impacted by natural disasters. Next is the governance or ‘constabulary’ basket, whose focus is enforcement of international law in the ‘free’ seas and securing maritime transportation routes against predators seeking illicit financial or political gain. Most complex is the coercive (or traditional security) basket, including grey zone assertions or military action by nation states to alter the status quo in their favour.

For the purposes of this paper, the Indo-Pacific has been divided into four distinct regions: East Asia and the East China Sea; South East Asia and the South China Sea; the Southern Pacific, including Australia and Oceania; and the Indian Ocean. Prominent players have differing levels of interest in these four regions, as summarised in Table 1. Priority 1 describes regions that the player considers the vital focus of its strategic outlook; Priority 2 comprises important but not vital regions; and Priority 3 defines regions considered relatively less important by the player concerned. As is evident from the table, the primary interests of the major maritime democracies are divergent, brought together to some extent by US alliances in East Asia. China alone appears to have strategic interests in virtually all sub-regions, which it is seeking to align through the

strategically driven Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and ambitious plans for PLA (N) expansion.

**Table 1: Areas of Interest of Indo-Pacific powers**

Player	East China Sea	South China Sea	Southern Pacific	Indian Ocean
ASEAN	Priority 2	Priority 1	Priority 3	Priority 3
Australia	Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 1	Priority 3
China	Priority 1	Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 1
France	Priority 3	Priority 2	Priority 1	Priority 1
India	Priority 3	Priority 2	Priority 3	Priority 1
Japan	Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 3	Priority 3
USA	Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 1	Priority 3

The Indo-Pacific's sheer size, the number of players, the spread of technology and the varied nature of maritime challenges makes the burden of maintaining comprehensive security and stability throughout the region unsustainable for any one nation. DPG Policy Paper Vol. IV, Issue 15<sup>1</sup> had explored India's interests and challenges in the Indian Ocean against the backdrop of the interests, objectives, limitations and strategies of key Indo-Pacific players. This paper seeks to explore the architecture required to realise India's emerging vision for the Indian Ocean, as a subset of the Indo-Pacific, under the following heads:

- The balance of power model.
- The dialogue and cooperation focused model.
- Existing institutions in the Indian Ocean.
- Shaping structures to realise India's Indian Ocean vision.

### The Balance of Power Model

The post-WWII era saw the emergence of two different types of structures designed to maintain a stable peace and deter revisionism. The UN Security Council provided a forum for dialogue on international peace and security,

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads\\_dpg/publication\\_file/defending-indias-interests-in-the-indian-ocean-1165.pdf](https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/defending-indias-interests-in-the-indian-ocean-1165.pdf)



with veto power ensuring that no substantive resolution impacting adversely on the core interests of the five permanent members could be adopted by that body. But dialogue alone was not considered enough. Alliances such as NATO and the Warsaw Pact were created, whose objective was maintaining a balance of power and thus deterring unilateral coercive action by either of the Cold War adversaries. These structures also sufficed to cater for the limited governance and humanitarian challenges of the pre-UNCLOS era.

The Southern Pacific and East Asia have both relied on balance of power based security constructs. Their focus is ensuring strategic stability, which means maintaining the capability to deter coercion and to act if deterrence fails. Tackling governance and humanitarian challenges is a subsidiary function, well within alliance capabilities. The core by way of military muscle and associated expenditure is provided by the US, in the form of a 'forward-deployed presence' designed to act as a trip-wire, coupled with maintenance of a large and advanced military capability. The stability so created has provided the foundation for the economic prosperity of key US alliance members in East Asia, as well as the region at large.



*Exercise Malabar in the Pacific Ocean, September 26 – October 4, 2019.*

*Source: US PACOM*

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence of a unipolar world, coupled with delusions of incorporating China as a 'responsible stakeholder' in a US-led order, resulted in a prolonged state of strategic myopia, wherein the impact of the surge in China's economic and military power on strategic stability was deliberately downplayed by both the US and its allies in pursuit of

economic benefit. In this benign and welcoming environment, China grew at an unprecedented pace, with its GDP (in current US Dollars) multiplying nearly 38 times, from US\$ 360.858 billion in 1990 to US\$ 13.608 trillion in 2018<sup>2</sup>. China's military spending (in constant 2017 USD) also increased, from just above \$ 21 billion in 1990 to over \$ 239 billion in 2018<sup>3</sup>. China has increasingly displayed its revisionist intent, using economic and grey zone coercion and salami-slicing tactics, which have already led to change of the status quo in the South China Sea and substantial coercive pressure in the East China Sea. China has also put in place the foundations of an infrastructure to permit a similar campaign to be pursued in the Indian Ocean, including military facilities in Djibouti and potentially Gwadar.



*The inaugural India-US joint tri-services HADR Exercise codenamed 'Tiger Triumph' in the Bay of Bengal, November 13-21, 2019. Source: IndianNavy/ Twitter*

Balance of power structures in East Asia and the Southern Pacific retain the military heft to resist such coercion, although the strength of the US alliance has been weakened due to the strong economic linkages, even dependencies, that its regional members like Japan and Australia have developed with China. While the balance of power model has undoubtedly provided strategic stability,

<sup>2</sup><https://data.worldbank.org/>

<sup>3</sup>SIPRI Military Expenditure Database in constant 2017 US Dollars

<https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932018%20in%20constant%20%282017%29%20USD%20%28pdf%29.pdf>



it has also resulted in the smaller partners effectively becoming US security dependencies, unable to shape their own policy. Even though the alliance leader (the US) acknowledges that geopolitical competition has begun in earnest<sup>4</sup>, its published strategy to deal with the strategic challenge (the FOIP) still lacks the underlying resources to implement it<sup>5</sup>. In fact, NDAA 2020<sup>6</sup> has only recently tasked the INDOPACOM Commander to submit to the Congressional defense committees “a report containing the independent assessment of the Commander with respect to the activities and resources required, for fiscal years 2022 through 2026, to achieve the implementation of the National Defense Strategy for the Indo-Pacific and the maintenance or restoration of the comparative military advantage of the United States with respect to China”. The absence of resources, coupled with President Trump’s ‘America First’ policy and propensity for unilateral action without regard to the needs of allies, combine to create doubts about the cohesion of the alliance. The partners are, nevertheless, accustomed to US leadership and conscious that they lack the capacity to independently balance a revanchist China. They have few options other than continuing with the alliance.

### The Dialogue and Cooperation centric Model

While the balance of power model rose in the heyday of geopolitical competition, the ASEAN-centric, dialogue and cooperation focused model gathered momentum in the unipolar era, when coercive challenges from nation states had faded and China was still ‘hiding its power and biding its time’. Its apex level is the East Asia Summit (EAS), created in 2005 as a “forum for dialogue on broad strategic, political and economic issues of common interest and concern with the aim of promoting peace, stability and economic prosperity in East Asia”<sup>7</sup>. Though East Asia focused, it includes key Indo-Pacific players such as the US, Australia and India amongst its members, binding them to ASEAN-centrality and the consensus driven ASEAN way of dealing with regional security concerns. Its focus is on “fostering strategic dialogue and promoting cooperation in political and security issues to ensure that our

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<sup>4</sup> President Trump’s National Security Strategy of 2017 explicitly states, “A geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of a world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific Region”.

<sup>5</sup> Ashley Townsend and Brendan Thomas-Noone, “Averting Crisis: American Strategy, Military Spending and Collective Defence in the Indo-Pacific,” <https://www.ussc.edu.au/analysis/averting-crisis-american-strategy-military-spending-and-collective-defence-in-the-indo-pacific>

<sup>6</sup> Section 1253 of NDAA 2020 refers

<sup>7</sup> Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the East Asia Summit, December 14, 2005, [https://asean.org/?static\\_post=kuala-lumpur-declaration-on-the-east-asia-summit-kuala-lumpur-14-december-2005](https://asean.org/?static_post=kuala-lumpur-declaration-on-the-east-asia-summit-kuala-lumpur-14-december-2005)

countries can live at peace with one another and with the world at large in a just, democratic and harmonious environment”<sup>8</sup>. ASEAN itself, however, increasingly lacks the cohesion to present a united front to China or the capacity to deter its creeping coercion. The EAS has, therefore, become a constrained forum where there is modest dialogue on pressing regional security issues and little effective action to prevent revisionist challenges to the existing order. That suits China perfectly, as it deals with ASEAN countries and other regional players bilaterally.



*14th East Asia Summit held in Bangkok, Thailand on November 4, 2019. Source: pmindia.gov.in*

Subsidiary ASEAN-centric structures focus on cooperative and consensus-based action to address concerns regarding humanitarian and governance challenges. Two ministerial level structures are of particular relevance: the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), involving Foreign Ministers of member nations; and the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus, at the level of Defence Ministers. They last met on August 02, 2019 and November 18, 2019 respectively. Perusal of the Chairman’s statement following the ARF meeting and the Joint Statement following ADMM+ confirms that their security focus is limited to soft security issues coupled with anodyne aspirations concerning hot spots where coercive action is visible, such as the Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea. Whether earnest aspirations alone will suffice to eventually solve these vexed issues remains a matter of opinion, not least in the midst of rampant strategic competition.

The ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP), with its four objectives, 15 principles and four areas of cooperation (including maritime), reflects ASEAN’s continuing soft security focus. The unipolar era has, however, passed. The contours of China’s grand strategy are increasingly visible including to ASEAN, even if member nations collectively fail to acknowledge this or are simply resigned to the reality. Indo-Pacific players (including ASEAN) continue to buy

<sup>8</sup>Ibid

time through dialogue and appeasement in order to avoid conflict, in the hope they can eventually 'socialise' China and gain its adherence to a rules-based order. Negotiations over the South China Sea Code of Conduct reflect this approach.

China on its part has three primary objectives: gaining a veto over South East Asian states' military relationships with extra-regional powers; establishing its control over the South China Sea and its resources; and replacing current international dispute resolution mechanisms with those that answer to China. These objectives impact directly on the interests of extra-regional powers who have been excluded from negotiations and cannot realistically be expected to accept the outcome. Moreover, China's South China Sea assertions in the last few months alone directly impact the interests of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Vietnam. How long the governments of these key ASEAN members will politically be able to submit to China's coercion remains to be seen, but given divergent national interests and domestic realities, they are unlikely to make common cause.



*The sea phase of the 26th Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX) in the South China Sea, May 19-22, 2019. Source: @ng\_eng\_hen/Twitter*

The reality is that ASEAN's strategic options are severely handicapped by the almost total absence of military deterrence and collective security arrangements to provide the requisite muscle, as well as the fragility of its political cohesion. China has seized and exploited the opportunity, effectively acquiring veto power over EAS decisions in the process; rolling back its gains is not practicable. ASEAN centrality drives the regional agenda based more on fears of becoming involved in great power conflict than on remaining true to ASEAN's founding principles. Total reliance on dialogue without the creation of requisite deterrence structures enables exploitation of ASEAN's strategic



weakness. Given the criticality of the South China Sea to the global maritime transportation system, other stakeholders cannot ignore China's egregious disregard for international law. ASEAN-centred mechanisms still serve multiple useful purposes, providing the EAS as a summit-level dialogue forum for strengthening regional cooperation on soft security challenges. The reality, however, is that if dialogue alone were enough to prevent coercion by a revisionist power, the history of the world would have to be rewritten.

### Existing Indian Ocean Security Structures

As the inheritor of the British Raj which had made the Indian Ocean a British lake, India's early priority should have been to put in place a regional architecture for the ocean that bears its name. An ideological aversion towards power politics and idealistic embrace of internationalist, anti-imperialist solidarity stood in the way of such considerations for decades. India did eventually take the lead in founding the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which began discussing security cooperation in 2011 by identifying maritime safety and security, fisheries management and disaster risk reduction amongst its six priority areas to enable sustained growth and balanced development. The Jakarta Concord of March 7, 2017 (following the only summit level meeting of Indian Ocean countries in recent times) formulated an action plan for these priority areas. The predominant focus was soft security cooperation (search and rescue, safety of shipping, trans-boundary challenges such as piracy and armed robbery at sea, terrorism, trafficking in people, drugs, wildlife, crimes in the fisheries sector, environmental crimes, and disaster risk management in the region). The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) has been mandated to develop the cooperative structures for this purpose.



*19th meeting of the IORA Council of Ministers held on November 7, 2019 in Abu Dhabi, UAE. Source: IORA*

IORA's membership is, however, limited (15 of the 37 countries on the Indian Ocean rim are not members). It has no subsidiary security body, nor does its mandate encompass strategic stability. Its decisions require consensus among all members "present and voting". Member countries, with a few exceptions, lack the capacity, capability or interest to play a meaningful maritime role even in their own maritime zones, leave alone in the vast Indian Ocean. So while the IORA action plan does include "ensuring that countries in the region can exercise freedom of navigation and overflight in accordance with international law, including UNCLOS, as constitution for the oceans", this objective cannot be realised merely through calls for dialogue in an increasingly contested environment in which China is aggressively expanding its influence. For at least the foreseeable future, IORA will have its hands full with generating capabilities for cooperation to tackle humanitarian and governance challenges in the Indian Ocean. Expecting this soft cooperative regionalism to deal with the growing prospect of coercive challenges is a highly unlikely prospect.

### Shaping Structures for India's Indian Ocean Vision

For India, the Indian Ocean is "not just the natural arena for its influence and of overriding security consequence, but also where India can really make a difference"<sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, how little strategic attention India has paid to the Indian Ocean is evident from the fact that it was not until March 2015 that India unveiled SAGAR<sup>10</sup>, its first integrated vision for the Indian Ocean. SAGAR's stated goal is a community where "trust and transparency; respect for international maritime rules and norms by all countries; sensitivity to each other's interests; peaceful resolution of maritime issues; and increase in maritime cooperation"<sup>11</sup> prevail. Its key elements include:

- Safeguarding our mainland and islands, defending our interests, ensuring a safe, secure and stable Indian Ocean, and making our capability available to others for common good.
- Deepening economic and security cooperation with our maritime neighbours and strengthening their capacities.
- Collective action and cooperation to advance peace and security and respond to emergencies.
- An integrated and cooperative approach towards sustainable development.

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<sup>9</sup>Excerpted from Keynote Speech by EAM at Indian Ocean Conference, Maldives, September 03, 2019

<sup>10</sup> During PM's speech at the commissioning of MNS Barracuda, March 12, 2015, see <http://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/erecontent.aspx?relid=116881>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

- Acceptance of primary responsibility for peace, stability and prosperity by those who live in the region, while keeping in mind interests of extra-regional stakeholders.

The SAGAR vision involves dealing with not just the actions of the Indian Ocean rim nations who by and large lack maritime capability, but also the “ambitions of China, the interests of India, the re-emergence of Japan, the confidence of Australia and the awareness of ASEAN<sup>12</sup>”, among others. In the emerging era of renewed geopolitical competition, placing exclusive trust in a consensus driven, dialogue-based structure to deal with coercive challenges to come would be strategic naiveté. India’s maritime challenges in the Indian Ocean, particularly from China and its proxies (predominantly Pakistan), will only grow over time. India will need to nurture two distinct but complementary constructs in the Indian Ocean.

The first must be designed to build the maritime capacity of the region, working cooperatively to overcome humanitarian and governance challenges and provide the foundation for creating “the safe, secure and stable Indian Ocean region that delivers us all to the shores of prosperity”<sup>13</sup>. This structure must be built on IORA by creating a web of subsidiary mechanisms, as ASEAN has done so successfully, to provide a measure of cooperative security in the maritime domain.



*The 17<sup>th</sup> edition of the Indo-French joint naval exercise VARUNA, May 2019. Source: Indian Navy/ Twitter*

<sup>12</sup> Excerpted from Keynote Speech by EAM at Indian Ocean Conference, Maldives, September 03, 2019

<sup>13</sup> Excerpted from speech by PM while unveiling the SAGAR vision at the commissioning of Barracuda at Mauritius, March 12, 2015



But IORA will never have the capability to fulfil the parallel need to maintain geopolitical stability in the Indian Ocean in the face of great power coercion. Even India, the nation with the Indian Ocean's largest economy and military, lacks this autonomous capability. The requisite capacity (and associated technology) can be leveraged only with the world's leading maritime powers, whose current strategic interest in the Indian Ocean is limited only to ensuring the safety and security of SLOCs. Nor can India abdicate responsibility for such geopolitical stability to the US, which has itself conceded the leadership role in Indian Ocean security to India<sup>14</sup>. India will, therefore, have to build its own hard power maritime capabilities, indigenously and through external technology aggregation, while seeking to draw strategic partners with convergent interests into the Indian Ocean, to shape balance of power structures that can provide for long term strategic stability.



*INS Sunayna in the Persian Gulf, June 20, 2019. Source: Indian Navy/ Twitter*

Fortunately, stepping stones towards such structures already exist, by way of India's burgeoning maritime security cooperation with the US, Japan, Australia, France, the UK, Indonesia and Singapore, among others. Domain awareness structures being established for dealing with governance challenges also serve the dual purpose of being able to monitor emerging coercive security challenges, particularly once India's underwater domain awareness capability has been adequately strengthened. The Indian Navy's mission deployed posture needs to be maintained, as it provides an Indian Ocean wide presence to prevent fait accompli situations. Logistics support and communications interoperability agreements provide the base on which a coordinated response to coercion becomes possible, while high-profile exercises such as MALABAR, VARUNA, JIMEX, KONKAN, AUSINDEX and SIMBEX help both in strengthening deterrence as well as honing the Indian Navy's tactical prowess.

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<sup>14</sup> National Security Strategy of the United States of America, December 2017, P 50

The structure for ensuring strategic stability can thus be created fairly quickly, given the requisite political will on India's part. This inevitably calls for deepening India's strategic partnerships with the Quad countries (and others) and could also entail stronger mutual commitments. Are our policy-makers truly ready to overcome the hesitations of history?

## Conclusion

History has time and again disproved the liberal assumption that diplomacy, dialogue and established norms alone are enough to transcend power politics and find a solution to even the most intractable problems. The reality is that counting on an authoritarian regime to abjure coercion is as myopic today as the dream of absorbing it into the global system as a responsible stakeholder has proved in the past.

With UNCLOS effectively having extended national resource rights deep into the seas and the prospect of undersea mineral wealth giving rise to a global 'gold rush', a new era of coercion, this time in the hitherto free and open seas, appears inevitable. The development of deep sea mining technology will extend this into the oceanic space. A revisionist power does not need to conquer another's territory to have its way in mare liberum. It will suffice to teach any potential opponent a "lesson", as was done to India in 1962, setting back its confidence, international standing and ability to oppose revanchist designs by several decades. Defending India's interests in the Indian Ocean will, therefore, require not just the cooperative visions of SAGAR, the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative and IORA, but also the capability to withstand coercion, both economic and military, from those harbouring different notions of world order than our own. Resisting such coercion will necessitate military partnerships with like-minded states that possess the requisite capacity, and mutually reinforcing security constructs designed to collectively address coercive challenges in the seas.

That said, an India aspiring to a role on the global stage cannot leave it to others to do the heavy lifting; it will have to take on its fair share (and more) of the burden, since the Indian Ocean is India's priority interest in the Indo-Pacific.

India's security policy in the Indian Ocean faces the challenge of finding a balance between the nation's predominant instincts favouring dialogue and cooperation on the one hand, and the need to strengthen its ability to stand up to great power coercion on the other. The more accommodating and less resolute India is, the more likely it becomes that its prized values of strategic independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, the equality of nations, the rule of law and freedom of navigation will be marginalised by a rising authoritarian

power with hegemonic intent, acting to circumscribe India's strategic space in conjunction with regional proxies.

India will, therefore, have to accept the limitations of the existing multilateral cooperative constructs in the region and work to create the balance of power required to ensure strategic stability. This necessitates a structural shift in outlook, from defending territory and strategic autonomy to defending regional balance through enhanced strategic partnerships. As the US experience over the past decade of trying to rebalance towards Asia has proved, overcoming vested interests to shift strategic focus is easier said than done in a democracy. India faces a similar dilemma, with continuing aspirations of standalone power being juxtaposed alongside shrinking resources for military capacity building that severely constrain its ability to exert greater influence and underpin net security in the Indian Ocean.

To make Prime Minister Narendra Modi's SAGAR vision a reality, India needs to shape a corresponding, multi-layered Indian Ocean security architecture that incorporates cooperative mechanisms as well as robust balance of power considerations.

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