

## MARITIME DIMENSION OF INDIA'S 'LOOK EAST POLICY'

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### ABSTRACT

India in its Indian Ocean's Maritime Strategy conducts intensive naval engagements with navies of the United States, France, Britain and Russia. India's shift from being a lone ranger has also involved greater naval co-operation with major regional actors in the Indian Ocean and beyond South African waters to the South China and from Gulf of Aden to Oceania. From last more than a decade India maintained the military cooperation with East Asia. The engagement was carried due to stiffened maritime competition with other actors and to counter the Chinese encirclement of India. India's maritime activism although is multi vector but the activism has caught China with in the 'Malacca Dilemma'. South China Sea is central to India's Look East policy which envisions deepening Political, military and economic links with ASEAN countries.

**KEYWORDS:** Maritime Dimension of India's 'Look East Policy', 'Malacca Dilemma'

### INTRODUCTION

Despite, India enjoys a geographical advantage with its reach and location (Ravi 1998: 22-28).<sup>1</sup> Commodore R. S. Vasan (Retd) says, 'India is concerned about the advances of China, which appears to be encircling India'. It is notable that India is a powerful country in South Asia, which has geographically a huge land area. Since its eastern, southern, and western borders are bounded by the Indian Ocean, it has also been experiencing threats from other countries. The futuristic notion that ocean is the key to seven seas and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters necessitates the fact that India should increase its maritime security and sea power (David 2006: 99).

#### India's Maritime Strategy

It is important to examine here briefly the history of the evolution of Indian Naval power. The first Prime Minister of the Independent India Jawaharlal Nehru introduced the 'Cinderella' service of the Indian Navy. During this period the Indian Navy was very weak and was under a British Admiral. It is worthy to note that the Indian Navy was not even Indian – led during the first decade of independence, having 'British' Chiefs of Naval Staff, i. e. *John Hall* (1947 – 48), *William Parry* (1948 – 51), *Mark Pizey* (1951 – 56) and *Stephen Carlill* (1956 – 58). It was 11 years after independence that with Ram Dass Katari's appointment, India brought an 'Indian' Chief of Naval Staff for the Indian Navy (*ibid* 102). Only after 1958 the Indian Navy evolved as a truly 'Indian' one. In 1958, Nehru said that 'we cannot afford to be weak at sea'. The allocation of funds for the navy from the defense expenditure has been: 1947-58, 4.7-4.8 percent: 1955-57, 9.7 percent, and 1962 – 63, 3.4 percent. This increased in 1980 to 12.5 percent, in 1990 to 13.5 percent and in 2000 to 17 percent. This increase, when compared with China and US, is a pittance.

Indian Naval Officers as well as Naval research scholars maintain that the Indian Navy should follow the approach of Alfred Mahan. Mahan's Indian Maritime Doctrine focused on the need to control 'choke points, important

islands, and vital trade routes' (David 113). The BJP –I government not only attempted to secure the naval power of the Indian Navy argument it also took measures for control of trade that was in and around the Indian Ocean; this made efforts to dominate and control the Indian Ocean. BJP Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had told the 2003 Combined Services Conference, 'the strategic frontiers of today's India has grown in international stature and has expanded beyond the confines of South Asia. Our security environment ranges from Persian Gulf to Straits of Malacca across the Indian Ocean, and South-East Asia. Our strategic thinking has also to extend to these horizons'. We can observe Manmohan Singh's government following the same policy. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh further emphasized: 'we also have a vital stake in the security of the sea lanes to our east and west. The Indian navy therefore must expand its capability to protect these sea lanes'. India has formulated its maritime security policies in accordance with the 'Mahanian Vision', and is proceeding on the same lines.

India, thus, has made necessary effort from 1998 to expand the maritime bases and its infra-structure facilities. Priority is given to the 'project of sea bird' that commenced in 1998 with these objectives. An MOU was signed with the State government of Karnataka and the 'Karwar' maritime base was established at a cost of 25 million. This base will have a watchful eye on the Arabian Sea. This base is only 900NM from Pakistan's maritime base at Karachi and therefore it will play a vital role in Indian Naval Security. The following was stated by Admiral Oscar Stanley Dawson (Retd) about this maritime base and sea port. 'Karwar is a golden opportunity to exploit. No other place on the western or eastern sea boards is as valuable as it is half a mile into the sea and the water depth is there. Besides Karwar's hilly terrain will provide excellent camouflage to ground installations and pends cut on the rock face could conceal submarines. The extent of the land available in and around Karwar will enable the Navy to disperse its forces, a crucial necessity in times of any attack'. At Mumbai we cannot do that. Mumbai has outgrown its utility.<sup>2</sup> On the 31<sup>st</sup> of May 2005, at the opening ceremony of the naval base, the then Defense Minister Pranab Mukherjee stated, 'Karwar has become India's third operational naval base, after Mumbai and Vishakapatnam. It is valuable for its location and also for its ability to transcend the fundamental capacity and security limitations of other two naval bases (David 2006: 98).

It will function as a strategic naval base in the south of the Indian Ocean and also will be operating as the attack unit of the Sea Bird division of Kadamba Southern Command (Defense Industry Daily 2012). The Ministry of Defense is involved in its extensive expansion. The project has been divided into stages as phase I, II, A, B, and funds and planning has been accordingly allocated. The project will be completed by 2017-18. Similarly, the Blair naval base under control of the Far Eastern Naval Command (FENC), that is established closer to the Malacca Straights in the Andaman Nicobar islands, is vital for Indian naval security. This penetrates Bay of Bengal and Malacca Straits and brings them under the control of the Indian Navy.

India has decided to construct at Campbell Bay a naval air station. This will be the 'forward operating base' and will be an observation point that will have a watchful eye on the Bay of Bengal and Malacca Straights. This is to serve with functions of operating Gavier aircraft, including refueling, maintenance and repair operations (Abhijit 2012). India is proceeding with the establishment of a naval base in the Lakshadweep Islands. India, which has begun its operations in the INS Dweeprakshak, is involved in controlling sea piracy. This naval base will therefore be utilized for this purpose. In 2012 alone India has prevented nearly 100 sea piracy efforts. This task is carried on by the Karwar division, which is based on Lakshadweep Islands (Daniel 2012: 1-14). The Indian standing committee on defense in April 2012 presented the following short term plan of the Indian Navy to the parliament:

- Augment airborne maritime surveillance, strike, anti-submarine warfare and air defense capability through induction of shore based air craft integral hellos carrier based aircraft, space based AIS and UAVS, along with suitable weapons and sensors.
- Develop ASW capability through induction of suitable platforms weapons and sensors.
- Build adequate standoff capability for sea life and expansionary operations to achieve desired power projections, force levels, influence events a shore and undertake military operations other than war.
- Induct assets and develop suitable infrastructure the augment forces available for low intensity maritime operations, protection of off-shore assets and coastal security framework.
- Induct force multipliers like satellite based global communication, reconnaissance and network enabled platforms to achieve Battle- space dominance capability and perform centric operations.
- Induct state-of –the-art equipment and specialized platform for Special Forces to enhance niche capability to conduct maritime intervention operation and other envisaged roles.
- Develop support infrastructure in island territories to support the planned force levels as well as support infrastructure for ship/submarines/aircraft at ports and air bases (Manjiri 2012).

### **Look East Policy and India's Maritime Strategy**

India's Look East Policy imposes a cautious approach on India's part expectably in her relations with the South East-Asia countries. Earlier, then the Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's government focused mostly on bilateral relations between India and the countries of the region as part of New Delhi's engagement with Southeast Asian neighbors through diplomacy of proclamation (Ghoshal 2013: 02). Apart from bilateral, multilateral interactions by the political, economic, and commercial level have assumed critical salience in its engagement with the South-East Asia region. For the last ten years, India has maintained military cooperation with South-East Asia, and as to maritime activities in South China Sea.

Presently India is moving towards the 'South China sea', which is the sea area in the eastern part of the Indian Ocean. Like China attempting to encircle India, we could observe India too is attempting to encircle China. The 'Look East Policy' shows the increased presence of the Navy in that area as the four Indian Navy ships Rana, Shivalik, Karmukh and Shakti, under the command of Rear Admiral P. Ajith Kumar, flag officer commanding Eastern fleet, are on an operational deployment to the South China Sea and North West Pacific (Manjiri 2012 : 225).

India is taking further initiatives to hold joint military exercises with the countries in this area and also enhance the political, economic, and military relationship with these countries. As an extension of this development a joint military exercise 'Jimex – 12' was recently conducted with Japan (ibid 225). India, together with Russia, is involved in the improvement of the military structure in Tajikistan. Notably, it has granted aid to construct the Farkhor and Agni air bases and has offered help in the planning of a military hospital (Daniel 2012: 03). In accordance with a military treaty that was made with Mongolia in 2001, the placing of radar systems, able to monitor Chinese missiles tests, and holding bilateral military exercises since 2004, were considered paramount (ibid 05). Similarly the India-Singapore military treaty, signed in 2003, helped increase naval co-operation between the two countries. This led to the increased co-operation of the three armed forces and importantly conducting of the joint naval exercise 'SIMBEX' in the Bay of Bengal and in the 'South China Sea' area (ibid 04). The close relationship between India and Singapore is a threat to China. This has made China to

be caught within the phenomenon of 'Malacca Dilemma' which it has been conjuring about Malacca Straits.

The military co-operation treaty between India and Vietnam since 1994 and the consequent conduct of joint naval exercises and military training has increased significantly the presence of India in the 'South China Sea' area (*ibid* 09). Further, Hanoi has also recently granted the Indian Navy basing rights at the 'NhaTrang' port, providing a foothold in the South China Sea and intensifying Chinese fears, demonstrated by July 22, 2011. India has several interests at stake in the South China Sea. Indian trade contributes to the massive amount of shipping that traverses these waters (half the world's merchant fleet sales through the South China Sea every year), and thus India has an interest in maintaining its ships' free right of movement in what it views as international waters. There are also energy interests at stake, as India's Oil and Natural Gas Corp (ONGC) has a joint oil exploration venture off the coast of Vietnam, an asset that India would be willing to dispatch ships to defend, if a much-publicized statement by Indian Navy Chief Admiral D.K Joshi is to be believed. And finally, the South China Sea is central to India's 'Look East' policy, which envisions deepening political, military, and economic links with the ASEAN countries (Zachary 2013: 12).

In the mean time India did not fail to establish close relationship with countries that were on the brim of the Indian Ocean. Joint naval exercises took place with the Iranian navy in 2003, following the Memorandum on Strategic Co-operation. For three weeks, six ships deployment by the Indian navy was carried out in Gulf during September 2004. Joint naval exercises with Russian fleet in 2003 and with the French fleet in 2005 took place in the Gulf of Aden. To the Southwest, Indian destroyers were deployed in Mozambique to patrol the African summit meeting in 2003, as were destroyers in 2004 to cover the World Economic Forum in 2006, which saw a Memorandum of Understanding between India and Mozambique, committing India to regular patrols of the Mozambique Channel. Madagascar was the scene for India setting up a high tech monitoring station on its northern coastline in 2006. Indian ships also became a regular presence in Mauritius, with the agreement for India to monitor its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in 2003 and 2005. Similar arrangements were made with the Seychelles, with their Memorandum of Understanding drawn up in 2003, for India to patrol her territorial waters. Combined naval drills with South Africa were carried out in 2005. India's setting up of a third Antarctica station in February 2006; saw even more extended maritime deployment into the farthest southern reaches of Indian Ocean (David Scott 2006: 114). India decided to structure it's Navy with a long term plan. From this point of view it has paid attention to two basic factors (Manjiri 2012: 224).

- The traditional blue water operational capability and
- A plan to effectively counter threats closer to the coast.

Though, out of these two the second aspect should be given importance, India has prioritized both these factors. It is moving towards Panikkar and Vaidya's perception that India's defense depends upon the waves of the Indian Ocean. It is an irony that these ideas put forward as early as in 1945, were taken into consideration only in 2010, taking an unduly long gestation period of 65 years. This clearly establishes the prolonged weakness of the ruling elite of India. Nevertheless, India has at last awakened and it is extremely important that this process should become total and complete.

India, while having increased its naval bases and attack units, did not fail to develop the ammunition and weaponry capability required for the navy to be a force to be reckoned with. Until now, India largely had warships, attack ships, and tanks that were of Russian make. Recently India has begun to produce these by importing necessary raw materials from other countries. Accordingly, the Naval Head Office has notified that it requires 50 modernized warships

(ibid 228). Also, they have informed that these could be produced in India itself and the initial preparation for the production has already begun. In keeping with this initiative, Indian ship building unit has already constructed two ships INS Shivalk, and INS Satpura. The Public Sector 'Mazgoan Docks Limited' was joined to this venture. Indian authorities have given priority to locally manufacturing ships that are required for the navy in the five years to come (ibid 228).

India's conventional diesel powered submarine fleet, with Russian built Nerpa-152 akula ii class nuclear submarine, the submarine arm has got a major boost and has Boeing P-8 long range maritime reconnaissance (ibid). Indian Navy has included anti – ship missiles, particularly 'Brahmos' long range anti – ship missiles, as its powerful weapon. Of these, the ASCM is manufactured based on US technology (James 2012: 28-31). The INS Viraat, which was scheduled for decommissioning in 2010, is one of the future carriers and is of 44500 tons capacity. The Soviet – built Admiral Gorshkov, now INS Vikramaditya is to be delivered in 2018. The refitted ship will carry at least sixteen MIG – 29 Ks and six to eight Ka – 31 anti - submarine and airborne early warning helicopters. Further, India has the option of acquiring at current prices for up to five years, another thirty (30) MIG – 29 Ks, which is a substantial increase in capability over the Harriers currently on the Viraat. The Vikramaditya's range of nearly fourteen thousand nautical miles, five thousand of Viraat should represent a massive boost in reach (Donald 2006: 79).

Russian products, as well as those nuclear missiles that have been manufactured with the help of Russia, have been added to the Indian navy. It is noteworthy to observe that the two-hundred kilo ton nuclear warheads and the already existing Brahmos cruise missile have been added to the navy's capability (ibid). Likewise, many more missiles and further short as well as long range missiles have been added to the navy's capability. The Indian maritime strategy has evolved to face the threat from China. Establishing friendly relationship with neighboring countries in and bordering the Indian Ocean has given a forward momentum to India. India has commenced friendly relations with Myanmar, which was closer to China. The visit of Hon. Defense Minister A. K. Anthony to Myanmar was a significant event (Lalit 2011: 1-15). Following this, the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit in the April, 2012 and the subsequent joint naval exercises followed by close commercial and economic co-operation has brought both countries much closer (Vijay 2012 & 2013: 42). The visit of Barack Obama, the President of United States, to Myanmar and friendly relations between India and the U.S. has caused concern to China. It is good to note the views expressed by Chinese researchers on India's 'Look East policy'. Several years ago during Bush administration in Washington, US made a major move to view India as a military ally against the emerging Chinese presence in Asia. India calls its 'Look East policy' in real terms, despite all claims to the contrary as a look at China's military policy (William 2012).

India in its Indian Ocean's Maritime Strategy conducts intensive naval engagements with navies of the United States, France, Britain, and Russia. India's shift from being a lone ranger has also involved greater naval co-operation with major regional actors in the Indian Ocean and beyond South African waters to the South China and from Gulf of Aden to Oceania. India has naval exchanges with all the major regional actors in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean. This has led to the Indian Ocean becoming a battle ground for India – US and China. In this, we could observe India and US jointly working against China. Indian scholars have attempted to present in the following manner the approaches India should take:

- Establish an International Accordance in the Indian Ocean and thereby should control all activities in the Indian Ocean and conduct trade activities.
- Expand the Naval superiority in the South China Sea area.

- i. Establish across its (India's) land area within the Andaman – Nicobar Islands, a naval power that could prevent any onslaught on India from that area.
- ii. Adopt a naval maritime superiority that could defeat China's 'String of Pearls' approach by establishing naval bases that are capable of facing any threat (Iskander 2010: 31-35) .

Through these means it is believed that China's activities could be curtailed and the Indian Ocean could be brought within the control of the India. At the same time, it is proposed that India should strengthen its diplomatic relationship with the U.S. and increase its relationship with the neighboring countries in the Indian Ocean (ibid 33). Examining India's maritime strategy with Sri Lanka at the close of the research will serve a good purpose. India and Sri Lanka have, in 2012, signed a maritime security treaty. In this, sharing of information related to tsunami, sea transport and sharing of early warning measures were agreed upon. It was also agreed to evolve statutes that will be against the policy that prevails in the EEZ area (Indian Ocean watch 2012: 05). It was also decided that joint naval exercises be conducted, joint naval training be carried out and help detect ships that cause oil slick in the shores of these countries. This treaty enabled India to establish a close relationship with these countries. Though this treaty, in terms of co-operation, was not legally binding yet, the fact that it made it possible for these countries to come together and establish close relationship between them, itself is worthwhile. India participating in the *Galle Dialogue 2011*, a maritime security conference held in Sri Lanka, recognized issues pertaining to the Indian Ocean, such as piracy, terrorism, human smuggling, drug trafficking, illegal unregulated unreported fishing and illegal waste disposal that were raised by the defense secretary of Sri Lanka (Indian Ocean Watch 2013: 05). This was a diplomatic move that brought India closer to Sri Lanka. The initial strategy of India towards Sri Lanka, according to professor Patrick Mendis, a US diplomat, who by birth is a Sri Lankan, is:

- Sethusamudram Shipping Canal Project: and
- Trincomalee harbor project (Patric 2012: 04).

In both these areas there hasn't been much progress. It is noteworthy to observe that in relation to the Trincomalee harbor there hasn't been a clear progress in terms of the objectives stipulated in the Rajiv-Jayawedna agreement, which was made in 1987. It is understood that in recent times a director of the Chinese Intelligence unit MSS has made a visit to the Trincomalee harbor and has examined it and also has made an observational tour of the China Bay coastal area. Today Hambantotta has gained importance succeeding Colombo and Trincomalee. Sethu Samudram Ship Canal Project is in an abandoned state. For its progress, more than political reasons, the speed of the water flow from Bay of Bengal stands as a barrier. At this point of time there hasn't been any technology that can be utilized to eliminate this barrier. Thus, India is pushed into a position that it cannot utilize both these strategies in relation to Sri Lanka.

Finally, what has caused much tension in relation to Indo – Sri Lanka relation in terms of diplomacy related to sea is the frequent attacks on Tamil Nadu fisherman by the Sri Lanka Navy. A situation has arisen, where it is perceived by the Tamil Nadu Government, that the Central Government, by virtue of the 1974 agreement, handed over the Kachchathivu Island to the Sri Lankan government, much against the wishes of the Tamil Nadu government and the wishes of the Tamil Nadu fishermen. Till December 2012 nearly 2000 fisherman and 645 fishing boats have been attacked by the Sri Lankan Navy. Further, boats have been destroyed and fishing nets have been also damaged severely. Though many fishermen have been released, the continued practice of fishermen being arrested and put in prison seems to continue to strain the relationship between India and Sri Lanka. The Sri Lanka Navy complains that Indian fishermen poach in the territorial

waters of Sri Lanka and some are involved in smuggling of goods. Consequently, both countries have contrary views in relation to this issue. Therefore, it is essential that the conflict related to the sea between India and Sri Lanka is resolved.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Conceived in the early 1970s, project Sea Bird is meant to give the Indian Navy an integrated base to locate its operational fleet on commissioning, INS Sea Bird the Navy's base for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and beyond, will be the biggest naval base on this side of the Suez.

<sup>2</sup> In mid – 1984, Prime minister Indira Gandhi gave her approval to the project in principal. A framework paper, which was ready in September 1984, called for initiating work on the project.

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