

China and India: Maritime Commonalities and Divergences

*Sarabjeet Singh Parmar and
Saloni Salil**

When a nation embarks upon the process of shifting from an “inward-leaning economy” to an “outward-leaning economy,” the arena of national security concerns begins to move to the oceans. The expanding economies and ever increasing demand for natural resources has rekindled the maritime vision of these growing nations. The rediscovery of a maritime vision leading to increased inroads in the maritime domain by both these nations could be viewed as being based on maritime commonalities. Along with the commonalities there are divergences in strategic thought and approach. These commonalities and divergences could lead ultimately to competition or a conflict where interests clash. This article discusses the issues that could be considered as the raison d’être of these commonalities and divergences.

History

In the early part of the 15th century between 1405 and 1433 the Chinese Fleet under Admiral Zheng He undertook a series of expeditions. Zheng He’s fleet visited Arabia, Brunei, East Africa, India, the Malay Archipelago and Thailand, trading goods along the way. The Ming emperor, Yongle, permitted these voyages with the intent of establishing a Chinese presence, imposing imperial control over trade and also to extend the empire’s trade routes and destinations. Although sea trade had existed between China and the Arabian Peninsula and the Roman Empire during the Han dynasty rule the magnitude of the ships and their advanced design under Zheng He was of an unprecedented nature that invoked the awe of Western nations. These expeditions exposed the world to the maritime capacity and ship building capability of China. The re-emergence of the Chinese traditional policy of isolation ended this short maritime endeavour but left a mark on the historically inclined Chinese mindset that has now been re-ignited.

*Sarabjeet Singh Parmar is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi. Saloni Salil is an Intern also at the IDSA. The views expressed in the paper are of the authors.

India's maritime influence is clearly evident in the existing architectural and cultural heritage of South and South East Asia. Till the 13th century the waters surrounding India were in Indian hands as there was no strong power to challenge this control. The mariners who sailed these waters especially the Arabs were commercial traders who did not have the backing of their governments or rulers and therefore had no national policy of sea control. The arrival of Vasco-da-Gama in 1498 followed by the Dutch, French and British heralded the foreign control of the seas. The Mughal dynasty had a continental outlook and therefore could not counter this maritime influx. The Marathas who although a force to reckon with also could not stem this and thus began the decline of the maritime prowess of India. By the time the British gained supremacy the Indian maritime influence was in sharp decline and was eventually overshadowed by the British.

These gaps due to maritime blindness resulted in India's colonisation and China's century of humiliation. This has possibly remained etched in the minds of the 'Maritime Inclined' and has led to formulation of a maritime vision that has seen both India and China take progressive steps in this arena. The maritime progress of both nations has apparently been guided by the 19th century maritime strategist Alfred Mahan. Mahan had outlined the fundamental elements of sea power¹ to further national objectives specifically: the geographical location of a nation; strength of its merchant fleet and the ship building capacity to sustain it; ports and naval bases with good internal communications; overseas naval bases; industrial capacity to sustain the national economy through overseas trade; the capability to safeguard sea borne trade and other maritime interests. Finally, the maritime outlook of the population have apparently guided the naval modernisation drive, engaging of littoral states and increase in maritime trade capacities in terms of both shipping and port infrastructure.

Geography and Geopolitics

Geographically, India and China both occupy unique positions. Both have long land borders and coastlines, island territories, access to the important waters of the world and topographies that encompass mountains, plains and deserts. This mandates both a continental and a maritime outlook. The waters open outwards and are dotted with choke points and island land masses. The waters off China are dotted with islands that are claimed by various littorals in the region and are therefore considered a tight rope walk for political, diplomatic and maritime manoeuvring.

The geopolitical aspect requires to be viewed in two parts – intra and extra regional. The immediate areas surrounding the two nations could be viewed as

“geopolitically” unstable. There are rising threats due to nuclear proliferation, terrorism and piracy. These threats have arisen due to varying economies, different forms of governance and aspirations of nations and the presence of extra regional powers operating in the area. The relationship with neighbours due to differences on land and at sea has at times resulted in varying degrees of conflicts that have and will always affect stability in the region.

Growing Economies

The opening up of markets and the liberalisation of policies have made India and China, the two Asian giants, the largest growing economies in the world. Both India and China are among the frontrunners of the global economy². Both economies share a dependence on oil which is essentially required for sustaining their steady development and growth. Hence, the Indian Ocean region and South China Sea have gained importance in view of the fact that they are rich in raw materials and resources such as natural gas, coal and most crucially, oil. The Indian Ocean is home to important SLOCs and maritime choke points and a large volume of international long haul of maritime cargo from the Persian Gulf, Africa and Europe transits through this ocean³ most importantly - energy products. This drives the Asian giants towards the Indian Ocean trying to create a sphere of influence and showcasing themselves as the largest consumers. Despite being in a phase of cold peace⁴, India and China, keeping their political differences aside, have managed to economically engage with each other and China is presently one of the largest trading partners of India. Nevertheless, the growing appetite of these growing economies is making them the biggest competitors as well. As they develop both China and India are naturally looking towards global markets for gaining access to resources⁵. While China has been strengthening its bilateral ties with the Indian Ocean littorals India on the other India has also been engaging with its neighbouring countries. Despite this, India’s security environment could be threatened due to China’s growing activities in the Indian Ocean and its construction of ports around India which is perceived by some scholars as an attempt to encircle India. Similarly, China could feel threatened by India’s look east policy, maritime inroads and engagement with nations in the region adjoining China. A competition between the two appears inevitable as they seem to be targeting the same resource-rich regions and seeking strategic advantages by engaging each others neighbours. If this aspect is not addressed it could lead to a conflict of interests and this commonality will become the main area of divergence.

Threat Perceptions

India and China have been eyeing each other with anxiety across the Indian Ocean. As both countries are modernising their navies and extending their strategic

reach from the Malacca Strait to the Gulf of Aden, the growing competition in the Indian Ocean region, the already unstable relations between India and China are leading to further mistrust and suspicion⁶. It is this mistrust and suspicion that has developed and guided threat perceptions.

The Indian Ocean is infected by a number of issues that while aggravating the situation necessitate that India engage in this region. India's threat perceptions in this region have arisen due to a number of factors. Firstly, the economic factor which is one of the reasons for India's rapid engagement in the Indian Ocean. Secondly, the ingress of Chinese influence in this region is making India's security environment vulnerable. Thirdly, the expansion of piracy in India's immediate neighbourhood. Fourthly, the threat of sea borne terrorism targeting mainland India.

The Indian Ocean Region is home to sea lines of communication and major choke points and securing these SLOCs is vital, as any disruption in the SLOCs which are crucial for trade can cause disruption in the economy as well. The disruption of energy flows in particular is a considerable security concern for littoral states, as a majority of their energy lifelines are sea-based. Given the spiralling demand for energy from India, China and Japan, it is inevitable that these countries are sensitive to the security of the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and choke points of the region⁷. This aspect is most critical for India as Indian SLOCs originate and terminate in this region and therefore re-routing of ships through the waters that flow from the choke points like the Gulf of Aden and the Malacca Strait,- an option that can be resorted to by other nations at some cost - is not an option for India.

The potential for China to project maritime power into the Indian Ocean has arguably become India's principal long term source of concern.⁸ China's engagement of nations around India could alter the balance of power, affect India's strategic posture and impinge on its standing as a regional stable power leading to competition and a possible conflict. This unfolding maritime competition with China is an important factor that will drive India's maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean. This aspect has been covered in India's Maritime Military Strategy published by the Indian Navy in 2007⁹ as –"The maritime strategy of a country can be defined as the overall approach of a nation to the oceans around it, with the aim of synergising all aspects related to maritime activities, to maximise national gains". Keeping this in mind India is expanding its naval capabilities and security relationships throughout the Indian Ocean region¹⁰.

The issue of piracy is posing a greater threat. The increase in the number of piracy attacks in mid ocean areas and close to the Indian coast is a grave cause

of concern. Due to the easterly spread of piracy India has also started deploying warships and aircraft in the eastern and north eastern Arabian Sea and in the EEZ of Seychelles, Mauritius and the Maldives¹¹¹ Covered in the speech delivered by the Indian Ambassador to UAE during the counter piracy conference held in UAE in April 2011

China has deployed ships for anti piracy patrols and its ability, in the recent past, to sustain ships at sea for a long period without touching any port is a credible indication of its navy's sustainability at sea.

This region is the cradle of all major religions as also a kaleidoscope of 'isms' such as fundamentalism, tribalism, socialism, communism, Talibanism as also adventurism with a spectrum of political hues ranging from democracy, monarchy to dictatorship¹². Maritime terrorism and the presence of non state actors has been an ever growing cause of concern. The long coast line dictates the strategy that India is evolving to monitor and combat maritime terrorism.

The South China Sea and the waters adjoining it are at the centre of a number of activities resulting from close proximity of landmasses, choke points, maritime territorial disputes and clash of interests. The number of incidences involving maritime forces; over fishing rights; over oil and gas rich areas and claims to various islands are on the rise resulting in deterioration of the security scenario. The Chinese actions in these incidents, which have not been consistent, can be attributable to what they perceive as threats. Firstly, the presence of the US and the Japanese navies in the maritime areas around China and the incapacity of the Chinese Navy to address the counter aspect adequately. Secondly, the capacity of the US and Japanese maritime forces to monitor the maritime areas specifically the SLOCs and choke points and are therefore viewed as a threat to China's maritime trade. Thirdly, the capability and capacity of India to monitor the SLOCs in the Indian Ocean Region and the Malacca Strait.

China's largest strategic concerns are inescapably linked to the economy. China's greatest strength and its greatest vulnerability is the economy, and therefore it forms the core of Chinese policy and strategy. Further, the inability of China to exert its presence in its areas of interest is restricted by its present maritime force level and capabilities as it is facing two technologically superior and experienced maritime forces. The deployment of the USS *Nimitz* and *Independence* carrier battle groups in response to China's 1995-1996 missile tests and military exercises in the Taiwan Strait was a move that China could not counter. Realising that it would take time to develop a capability to counter such a move China is developing asymmetric

means like the ASBM and building a capable sub surface sea denial capability -its submarine arm. In the meantime it has also embarked upon an aircraft carrier programme. The aircraft carriers when inducted and integrated in its operating doctrine will give the Chinese navy a blue water capability. This would aid China in expanding its maritime footprint and address its concerns.

China's efforts to gain a foothold in the Indian Ocean are seen as an attempt to assert itself as a dominant power of Indian Ocean region. China's interests and activities in the Indian Ocean therefore, appear largely to be motivated by its increasingly important supplies of energy that need to transit that region¹³. Among all the SLOCs, the Strait of Malacca, is very vulnerable for if its energy supplies are blocked, its economy could be affected. Although re-routing via the Lombok and Sunda Straits is an alternative it would affect the delivery factor in terms of time and require diverting of naval assets to cover these maritime areas. Chinese naval strategists seem to be particularly concerned that China could have vital oil and gas supplies cut off during times of rising tension or actual war with India or the US¹⁴. The Indian navy and its strategic outpost in Andaman and Nicobar close to Malacca Strait are sources of concern to China that it is disadvantaged in terms of its maritime access to IOR through the Malacca Strait¹⁵. India's engagement with its neighbours and the growing Indo-US and Indo-Japanese strategic partnerships also makes China feel insecure.

Conclusion

China fears India's growth as a pre-eminent maritime power in the Indian Ocean region. India enjoys a geo strategic advantage, which provides it with excellent opportunities of intervention and interdiction.

India is also viewing China's ingress into the Indian Ocean Region with concern. China is reaching out to India's neighbours and establishing strategic partnerships that would upset the strategic balance in the area. The development of ports and other infrastructure in India's neighbourhood gives rise to suspicion about China's long term intent.

It is evident that the divergences in maritime views on the economic front and threat perceptions are due to the prevailing mistrust fuelled by certain actions of China that are in stark contrast to its claims for a peaceful rise. These divergences can be overcome by a holistic approach of healthy competition and cooperation. In the first instance both nations should engage in talks to identify the areas of healthy completion and possible conflict. Secondly, delink the possible maritime conflict issues from other conflict areas and work out a via media for maritime

cooperation. The protection of SLOCs and freedom of navigation is of paramount importance to all maritime nations and this could be a common denominator for maritime cooperation. Anti piracy operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief exercises are the other possible areas of cooperation. This however would require not only consistency in actions but also a connect between actions and statements. 

Notes:

- 1 Ni, Lexiong, "Sea Power and China's Development", available at <http://www.sciso.org/Article/Scholar/stratagem/NiLexiong/200609/217.html>. Accessed on Jun 08, 2011.
- 2 See Mahan, Alfred Thayer, "*The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660 – 1783*", Chapter 1, Natraj Publishers, First Indian Edition, 2003.
- 3 "India vs China Economy", April 20, 2011, see available at <http://business.mapsofindia.com/india-economy/india-vs-china.html>. Accessed on June 09, 2011.
- 4 Sakhuja, Vijay, "Indian Ocean and the Safety of Sea Lines of Communication", *Strategic Analysis*, Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis, Vol. 25, No 5, August 2001.
- 5 Shihai, Sun, "China-Indian Relations in the 21st Century", Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, CASS, available at <http://www.casas-pkucis.org.cn/zuixing/showcontent.asp?id=32>. Accessed on June 08, 2011.
- 6 Rajan, DS, "China vs India in the Global Market- an Indian Perspective", South Asia Analysis Group, available at <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/%5Cpapers43%5Cpaper4247.html>, Accessed on June 10, 2011.
- 7 Townshend, Ashley, "*Sino-Indian Maritime Relations: Managing Mistrust in the Indian Ocean*", Lowy Institute for International Policy, December 2010, pp. 1.
- 8 Ghosh, PK, "Maritime Security Challenges in South Asia and the Indian Ocean: Response Strategies", Available at <http://www.southchinasea.org/docs/ghosh,%20maritime%20security%20challenges%20in%20SAsia%20&%20Indian%20Ocean.pdf>. Accessed on June 13, 2011.
- 9 Brewster, David, "An Indian Sphere of Influence in the Indian Ocean?", *Security Challenges*, 2010, Vol. 6, No 3, pp. 1, available at <http://www.securitychallenges.org.au/ArticlePDFs/vol6no3Brewster.pdf>. Accessed on June 13, 2011.
- 10 *India's Maritime Military Strategy 2007*, pp. 3, available at http://indiannavy.nic.in/maritime_strat.pdf. Accessed on July 02, 2011.
- 11 See note- 10, pp. 2.
- 12 Covered in the speech delivered by the Indian Ambassador to UAE during the counter piracy conference held in UAE in April 2011.
- 13 Roy, Mihir, "Maritime Security in South West Asia", Society for Indian Ocean Studies, available at <http://www.iips.org/Roy-paper.pdf>. Accessed on June 13, 2011.
- 14 Gordon, Sandy, "Strategic Interest of Major Indian Ocean Powers: An Australian Perspective", available at http://ceps.anu.edu.au/publications/pdfs/gordon_strategic_interests_yearbook.pdf. Accessed on June 11, 2011.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Hartley, John, "Differing Perceptions of China's role in the Indian Ocean", *Future Directions International Strategic Analysis Paper*, June 2010, pp.1.