
An Indian Sphere of Influence in the Indian Ocean?

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India has an expansive maritime strategy. Driven by great power aspirations and by strategic rivalry with China, India is expanding its naval capabilities and security relationships throughout the Indian Ocean region. India has paid significant attention to developing relationships at the key points of entry into the Indian Ocean—the Malacca Strait, the Persian Gulf and southern Africa. The purpose of this article is to examine India's maritime ambitions and relationships in the Indian Ocean and ask whether this may presage an extended Indian sphere of influence in the region.

This article will consider India's strategic ambitions in the Indian Ocean. It will commence with an overview of the growth of maritime perspectives in Indian strategic thinking and the expansion of India's naval capabilities against a backdrop of Sino-Indian strategic rivalry. It will review some of India's key security relationships in the Indian Ocean and then consider the potential for the development of an Indian sphere of interest across the Indian Ocean region. What might this mean for littoral and other states as India emerges as a major regional power?

The Maritime Dimension in Indian Strategic Thinking

Among the changes in Indian strategic thinking in recent years has been a partial reorientation in India's strategic outlook towards the maritime dimension. Indian strategic thinking has traditionally had a continental outlook. For thousands of years military threats to India have been perceived as coming primarily from India's north-west. This was reinforced by India's experience in the twentieth century, when any direct military threats to India—from Japan, Pakistan and China—were land-based. The continuing threats on India's western and northern borders and from domestic insurgencies has led to the Indian Army holding an indisputedly dominant position within the Indian military establishment.

However, there is a developing view among some Indian strategists of India as a maritime power—that India's peninsular character and geographic position gives the Indian Ocean a preponderant influence over India's destiny. Some Indian leaders have drawn a close connection between India's maritime ambitions and its destiny as a great power. As former Indian Foreign Minister, Pranab Mukherjee, commented,

after nearly a millennia of inward and landward focus, we are once again turning our gaze outwards and seawards, which is the natural direction of view for a nation seeking to re-establish itself, not simply as a continental power, but even more so as a maritime power, *and consequently as one that is of significance on the world stage* (emphasis added).¹

One could also argue that any significant geographic expansion of Indian influence can only take place in the maritime domain. As Rajiv Sikri, a former Secretary in the India's Foreign Ministry, commented: "If India aspires to be a great power, then the only direction in which India's strategic influence can spread is across the seas. In every other direction there are formidable constraints."²

India's standing as the most populous state in the Indian Ocean region and its central position in the northern Indian Ocean have long contributed to beliefs about India's destiny to control its eponymous ocean. According to some there is now a well established tradition among the Indian strategic community that the Indian Ocean is, or should be, "India's Ocean". Many in the Indian Navy see it as destined to become the predominant maritime security provider in a region stretching from the Red Sea to Singapore and having a significant security role in areas beyond.³ According to one observer:

New Delhi regards the Indian Ocean as its backyard and deems it both natural and desirable that India function as, eventually, the leader and the predominant influence in this region—the world's only region and ocean named after a single state. This is what the United States set out to do in North America and the Western Hemisphere at an early stage in America's "rise to power".⁴

Many Indian maritime strategists see predominance in the Indian Ocean as potentially also delivering significant influence in East Asia. Alfred Thayer Mahan, the nineteenth century American naval strategist, is frequently cited by Indian strategic thinkers, including a statement (incorrectly) attributed to Mahan that: "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. In the 21st century, the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters."

Increased enthusiasm for maritime power has been accompanied by an expansion in India's naval capabilities. During the Cold War, India's ability to pursue its maritime ambitions was severely constrained and for decades following independence the Indian Navy was known as the "Cinderella" of the Indian armed forces. However, since the mid-1990s, India has

¹ Pranab Mukherjee, Speech for the Admiral A. K. Chatterjee Memorial Lecture, Kolkata, 30 June 2007.

² Rajiv Sikri, *Challenge and Strategy: Rethinking India's Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Sage, 2009), p. 250.

³ David Scott, 'India's "Grand Strategy" for the Indian Ocean: Mahanian Visions', *Asia-Pacific Review*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2006), p. 99.

⁴ Donald L. Berlin, 'India in the Indian Ocean', *Naval War College Review*, vol. 59, no. 2 (Spring 2006), p. 60.

embarked on a major program to develop a “Blue Water” navy involving significant increases in naval expenditure. India’s armed forces budget grew at an annual rate of 5% from 2001 to 2005 and at around 10% from 2005 to 2008. As the same time, the navy’s share of the increasing defence budget has risen from 11% in 1992/93 to 18% in 2008/09. Increased capital expenditure has encouraged plans for significant changes in the Indian Navy’s force structure, with an emphasis on sea control capabilities. Plans announced in 2008 call for a fleet of over 160 ships by 2022, including three aircraft carriers and 60 major combatant ships, as well as almost 400 naval aircraft. According to Admiral Arun Prakash, the former Indian Chief of Naval Staff, India aims to exercise selective sea control of the Indian Ocean through task forces built around three aircraft carriers that will form the core of separate fleets in the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea.⁵ The rapidly expanding Indian Coast Guard may also play an important complementary role to the Indian Navy, particularly in circumstances where there are reasons to emphasise policing functions over the military dimension.

In conjunction with an expansion in naval capabilities, over the last decade or so India has been quietly expanding its influence throughout the Indian Ocean. The Indian Navy has been active in developing security relationships that are intended to enhance India’s ability to project power and restrict China’s ability to develop security relationships in the region. Given that the Indian Ocean is in many ways an enclosed sea, the Indian Navy has given particular focus to the “choke points” at entrances to the ocean around southern Africa (including the Mozambique Channel), the Arabian peninsula (including the Strait of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb) and the straits connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans through the Indonesian archipelago (the Malacca, Sunda and Lombok straits). According to the Indian Navy’s 2004 Maritime Doctrine, “Control of the choke points could be useful as a bargaining chip in the international power game, where the currency of military power remains a stark reality.”⁶ The Indian Navy has also sought to institutionalise itself as the leading Indian Ocean power through such initiatives as sponsoring the multilateral Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, to which the navies of all Indian Ocean littoral states have been invited by India.⁷

⁵ For general discussions of India’s maritime strategy and capabilities, see G. V. C. Naidu, *The Indian navy and Southeast Asia* (New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2000); James R. Holmes, Andrew C. Winner and Toshi Yoshihara, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Routledge, 2009); and Leszek Buzsynski, ‘Emerging Naval Rivalry in East Asia and the Indian Ocean: Implications for Australia’, *Security Challenges*, vol. 5 no. 3 (2009), pp. 73-93.

⁶ India, Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy), *Indian Maritime Doctrine* (2004), p. 64.

⁷ Including France (which India recognises as a littoral state by virtue of its colonial territories), but not Britain or the United States (notwithstanding their presence in the British Indian Ocean Territory) nor China.

India's naval ambitions have not been without critics. Given the long-standing lack of co-ordination in strategic planning in New Delhi, the Indian Navy's activist role in the Indian Ocean has often been ahead of the views within the other armed services and the government. There is long running tension between the Indian Navy and Foreign Ministry over the navy's assertive regional policy, including over the 2008 decision to participate in anti-piracy operations off Somalia.⁸ According to some, the Foreign Ministry repeatedly turned down requests from the Indian Navy to conduct naval interceptions. It is not clear to what extent these tensions merely reflect bureaucratic caution or a more fundamental disagreement over the Indian Navy's regional strategy. Others are sceptical about the ability of India to transform itself from a continental to a maritime power. Sahni, for example, warns that the Soviet Union's failed attempts to become a naval power in the 1970s and 1980s should act as "a cautionary tale for India's Mahanian navalists ... [and] a grim warning of what happens to a continental state that harbours overly grandiose maritime ambitions".⁹

Over the last decade or more the United States has actively encouraged India's strategic ambitions in the region. In March 2005, the Bush administration announced that it would "help India become a major world power in the 21st century", adding that "We understand fully the implications, including the military implications, of that statement."¹⁰ The United States has focused on assisting in the expansion of India's power projection capabilities and its role as a security provider in the Indian Ocean. As US Secretary of the Navy, Donald Winter commented in 2008, the United States welcomed India "taking up the responsibility to ensure security in this part of the world".¹¹ The United States has given particular encouragement to India's naval presence in the northeast Indian Ocean, including in the development of facilities at India's Andaman Island naval base at the western end of the Malacca Strait. Much of this reflects a desire by the United States to see India grow as a regional balancing factor against China.¹²

The role of the United States in encouraging the development of India as a regional naval power in the Indian Ocean has been compared with Britain's

⁸ Sandeep Unnithan, 'The Hijack Dilemma', *India Today*, 17 October 2008; 'Lack of Consensus holding back Anti-piracy Policy', *Thaindian News*, 20 November 2008.

⁹ Varun Sahni, 'India's Security Challenges out to 2000', paper presented at the Australia-India Security Roundtable, Canberra, 11-12 April 2005.

¹⁰ Office of Spokesman, US Department of State, 'Background Briefing by Administration Officials on U.S.-South Asia Relations', Washington DC, 25 March 2005.

¹¹ Sandeep Dikshit, 'No Strings Attached to Sale of Ships', *The Hindu*, 29 March 2008.

¹² The US also seems to have been happy to feed Indian apprehensions about China's designs in the Indian Ocean. For example, a joke by a Chinese naval officer to his US counterpart that China should take responsibility for maritime security in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean was dutifully reported to the Indian press by Admiral Keating of the US Pacific Command. See Manu Pubby, 'China Proposed Division of Pacific, Indian Ocean Regions, we Declined: US Admiral', *Indian Express*, 15 May 2009.

strategy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when it found itself challenged by the growth of German naval power. Britain then forged partnerships with emerging naval powers, the United States in the western hemisphere and Japan in the Pacific, allowing them a measure of regional hegemony, while Britain concentrated its resources in the North Atlantic against Germany.¹³ This analogy, while far from perfect, does capture some of the factors present in US thinking, particularly its perceptions of the growing maritime threat presented by China.

China's "String of Pearls" in the Indian Ocean

Naval competition with China has been an important factor in driving India's strategic ambitions in the Indian Ocean. While the Indian Navy's immediate objectives involve countering Pakistan and enforcing control over India's exclusive economic zone, the potential for China to project naval power into the Indian Ocean has arguably become its principal long term source of concern.

In the mid-1980s, China began implementing plans to build a blue-water navy. Although focused on protecting China's interests in the western Pacific Ocean, in particular the Taiwan Strait, this development also has long term implications for India. China's naval capabilities now exceed India's by a considerable margin in both quantitative and qualitative terms. However, its ability to project power into the Indian Ocean is severely limited by the distance from ports in southern China and its lack of logistical support in the Indian Ocean, as well as China's need to deploy to the Indian Ocean through choke points, principally the Strait of Malacca.

China's perceived attempts to overcome these strategic limitations in the Indian Ocean region have been called its "String of Pearls" strategy.¹⁴ China has been developing political relationships and commercial interests in the Indian Ocean region for some years, including its *de facto* alliance with Pakistan and good political and economic relations with Burma, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. According to Indian reports, China has been involved in the development of military-related facilities in the region, including the Chinese constructed port at Gwadar in Pakistan and communications facilities in Burma's Coco islands in the Andaman Sea (both of which, it has been claimed, include Chinese signals intelligence facilities).¹⁵ Chinese interests have also been involved in the development of several commercial port facilities, including in Burma, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and there are oft repeated claims that China might have secured naval access rights as part

¹³ Holmes et al, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-first Century*, Ch. 3.

¹⁴ The term was first used in a 2005 report titled 'Energy Futures in Asia' prepared for the US Secretary of Defense by the private consultants, Booz-Allen-Hamilton.

¹⁵ Brahma Chellaney, 'Assessing India's Reactions to China's "Peaceful Development" Doctrine', *NBR Analysis*, vol. 18, no. 5 (April 2008).

of these developments.¹⁶ Indian analysts are also concerned about China's naval contribution to anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden and recent suggestions by a senior Chinese naval official for the establishment of a permanent base in area to support Chinese ships.¹⁷

Some analysts are sceptical of Indian claims about China's intentions in the northern Indian Ocean, particularly assertions of a Chinese naval presence in Burma and the Andaman Sea.¹⁸ Many claims about Chinese "ports" or "bases" appear to be exaggerated or groundless. China has been involved in the construction of the Pakistani commercial and naval port of Gwadar and in the upgrading of Burmese naval facilities. However, other allegations about "Chinese bases" appear to be merely based on Chinese involvement in the development of commercial port infrastructure. In addition, China has taken few steps in acquiring a military power projection capacity that could reach into the Indian Ocean region. The Chinese navy has no historical traditions of projecting power beyond coastal waters. It has built no aircraft carriers and has no intercontinental bombers. It has only a very small fleet of in-flight refuelling and airborne command and control aircraft and has only a relatively small number of blue water naval combatant vessels.¹⁹ While China may well desire to have the capability to project military power into the Indian Ocean region, it would seem that it will be a long while before such any capabilities come to fruition.²⁰

Despite these questions about China's intentions and capabilities, the String of Pearls theory is widely followed in New Delhi, in some quarters almost to the point of obsession. China's relationships in the Indian Ocean region are often not perceived in the Indian security community as being a legitimate reflection of Chinese commercial interests in the region or its strategic interests in protecting its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) across the Indian Ocean. Instead, many perceive China's regional relationships as being directed against India—either as a plan of maritime "encirclement" of India or otherwise intended to keep India strategically preoccupied in South Asia. Others who acknowledge China's interests in SLOC security argue that China is "overstepping" the mark in developing influence in the Indian Ocean region, creating a security dilemma for India. Although few suggest

¹⁶ Ramtanu Maitra, 'India Bids to Rule the Waves', *Asia Times*, 19 October 2005; Sudha Ramachandran, 'China Moves into India's Back Yard', *Asia Times*, 13 March 2007.

¹⁷ 'China Mulling Naval Base in Gulf of Aden: Admiral', *Agence-France Presse*, 29 December 2009.

¹⁸ See for example, Andrew Selth, 'Chinese Military Bases in Burma: The Explosion of a Myth', Regional Outlook Paper no. 10 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2007); and You Ji, 'Dealing with the Malacca Dilemma: China's Effort to Protect its Energy Supply', *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 31, no. 3 (May 2007), pp. 467-89.

¹⁹ David Shambaugh, 'The evolving security order in Asia', in Alyssa Ayres and C. Raja Mohan, *Power Realignments in Asia: China, India and the United States* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009), p.148.

²⁰ For a useful discussion of Chinese debates about China's role in Indian Ocean security, see Holmes et al, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-first Century*, ch. 8.

that any Chinese threat to India is likely to be primarily seaborne, many in New Delhi see at least a significant risk that India and China will, as the former Indian Chief of Naval Staff called it, “compete and even clash in the same strategic space”.²¹ A recent suggestion by the junior Defence Minister, Pallam Raju, that India might “assist” China in providing maritime security to Chinese ships in the Indian Ocean²² involves an important acknowledgement that China has legitimate security concerns in the Indian Ocean. The recently appointed Indian National Security Advisor, Shiv Shankar Menon, has also proposed a cooperative security arrangement among major Asian powers (including the United States), encompassing the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific.²³ Given the broader context of Sino-Indian strategic rivalry it seems unlikely that China would be prepared to rely on India for its maritime security needs in the Indian Ocean region, certainly outside of a multilateral arrangement.

India has responded to China’s perceived Indian Ocean strategy in several ways. First, as noted above, it is expanding its own power projection capabilities. Second, it has sought to pre-empt the development by China of security relationships in the Indian Ocean through the development of India’s own relationships in the region. Third, India is seeking to develop a security presence in and around the Malacca Strait as part of a wider emphasis on maritime choke points.

India’s Pearls in the Indian Ocean

Over the last decade or so, India has developed good security relationships with many states throughout the Indian Ocean, with particular focus on the maritime choke points of the Mozambique Channel in the southwest Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf in the northwest and the Malacca Strait in the northeast. India is also developing a security presence in the central Indian Ocean astride the east-west SLOCs across the Indian Ocean.

SOUTHWEST INDIAN OCEAN

The southwestern Indian Ocean forms the gateway between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.

India’s security relationships in the region are anchored by its close relationship with Mauritius, the island territory that lies around 900km to the east of Madagascar. India has long-standing and close political, economic and security associations with Mauritius. Some 70% of the Mauritian population is of Indian ethnic origin and for several decades Mauritius has acted as the primary gateway for international investment into India

²¹ Arun Prakash, ‘India’s Maritime Strategy’, *Indian Defence Review*, vol. 137, no. 568 (April-June 2007), pp. 157-76.

²² ‘India’s Surprising but Welcome Message’, *People’s Daily*, 23 February 2010.

²³ Shiv Shankar Menon, “Maritime Imperatives of Indian Foreign Policy,” Speech to the National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi, 11 September, 2009.

(originating from the United States, Europe and elsewhere), largely due to favourable tax arrangements.²⁴ Former Mauritian Prime Minister Paul Berenger described the bilateral relationship as “umbilical and sacred” and security relations as “intense”.²⁵ The current President Anerood Jugnauth describes the connection in terms of “blood relations”.²⁶

The Mauritian elite see India in largely benign terms and appear to have accepted India as having a special role in Mauritian security. Cooperation is formalised in a 1974 defence agreement under which India has transferred patrol boats and helicopters to Mauritius (including the supply of a patrol vessel in 2010) and provides training to Mauritian personnel and officers for the Mauritian National Coast Guard and Police Helicopter Squadron (effectively the Mauritian navy and air force). Since 2003, the Indian Navy has also provided maritime security through periodic patrols of Mauritian waters including anti-piracy patrols in 2010.²⁷ India also backs Mauritius’ territorial claims to Diego Garcia which was separated from Mauritian administration in the 1960s.²⁸

Mauritian political leaders have publicly indicated on several occasions that India would be permitted to establish naval facilities on Mauritius if it so wished²⁹ and there are claims that India already operates a signals intelligence station.³⁰ In 2006 and 2007 there were reports of discussions between the Mauritian and Indian governments over the long term lease to the Indian government of the Agalega islands (which lie between the island of Mauritius and the Seychelles), ostensibly for tourism.³¹ It has been speculated that India’s intention was to upgrade the Agalega airstrip to service Indian manned and unmanned surveillance aircraft.³² Discussions over the proposal reportedly ended due to political sensitivities concerning the local creole population (contemplating, perhaps, the complaints of the

²⁴ Between April 2000 and January 2010, Mauritius was the largest source of foreign direct investment in India, comprising 43% of total investment, with the second largest investment source being Singapore: Indian Ministry of Commerce and Industry, <http://dipp.nic.in/fdi_statistics/india_FDI_January2010.pdf> [Accessed 18 May 2010].

²⁵ Amit Baruah, ‘India-Mauritius Ties “Umbilical and Sacred”’, *The Hindu*, 22 November 2003; ‘Indo-Mauritius Joint Statement on Conclusion of PM Dr.Manmohan Singh State Visit’, *The Hindu*, 2 April 2005.

²⁶ ‘India-Mauritius Ties more than Diplomatic: Jugnauth’, *The Hindu*, 3 December 2009.

²⁷ Sudha Ramachandran ‘India’s Quiet Sea Power’, *Asia Times*, 2 August 2007; ‘Indian Ship to Patrol Seychelles, Mauritius’, *Deccan Chronicle*, 24 November 2009.

²⁸ Neena Vyas, ‘India Will back Mauritius on Diego Garcia: Narayanan’, *The Hindu*, 11 March 2001.

²⁹ Selig S. Harrison and K. Subrahmanyam (eds), *Superpower Rivalry in the Indian Ocean: Indian and American Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 263.

³⁰ ‘Indian Navy Activates Listening Post, Monitoring Station in Madagascar, Indian Ocean’, *India Defence*, 7 July 2007, <<http://www.india-defence.com/reports-3453>> [Accessed 18 May 2010].

³¹ Sidhartha, ‘India Acquiring Global Footprint’, *Times of India*, 25 November 2006; Sidhartha, ‘India Eyes Island in the Sun’, *Times of India*, 25 November 2006.

³² Steven J. Forsberg, ‘India Stretches its Sea Legs’, *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, vol. 133, no. 3 (March 2007), p. 38-42.

Diego Garcians who were dispossessed from their islands following a deal between the British and Mauritian governments).

India also has growing security relationships with Madagascar, Mozambique and the Seychelles, littoral states in and around the crucial Mozambique channel, the SLOC used by shipping transiting the Cape of Good Hope. The security of the Seychelles was highly contested during the latter half of the Cold War as the United States and the Soviet Union competed to maintain or establish a security presence there. At the same time, India was seen by the Seychelles as a benign regional protector. In the early 1980s, Seychelles' leftist President Albert Rene sought commitments from Indira Gandhi to intervene in the case of an attempted coup. Although Gandhi declined to provide public commitments, India did contribute two helicopters and training to the Seychelles security forces.³³ The Indian Navy has assisted with maritime security in the Seychelles EEZ under a 2003 defence cooperation agreement under which it provided anti-piracy patrols in early 2010.³⁴ In 2005 India gifted a patrol boat to the Seychelles—reportedly in a hurried effort to pre-empt offers of Chinese assistance.³⁵ In July 2007 the Indian Navy opened an electronic monitoring facility in northern Madagascar at the head of the Mozambique Channel³⁶ and reportedly has also been granted “limited” berthing rights in Madagascar for Indian naval vessels.³⁷ The Indian Navy has also acted as a maritime security provider for Mozambique, including taking responsibility for maritime security during the 2003 African Union and 2004 World Economic Forum summits held in Maputo.³⁸ In 2006, India and Mozambique entered a defence cooperation agreement that envisages joint maritime patrols, supply of military equipment, training and technology transfer in repairing and assembling military vehicles, aircraft and ships.³⁹

India's maritime security relationships in the southwestern Indian Ocean are also buttressed by growing maritime security relations with France and South Africa. Since 2001 the Indian Navy has conducted annual exercises with the French navy, which operates out of Reunion and Djibouti. India has also sponsored the “IBSA” trilateral security dialogue among India, Brazil and South Africa, pursuant to which trilateral naval exercises have been held in 2008 and 2010 off the Cape of Good Hope. Further south, India also has

³³ Harrison and Subrahmanyam, *Superpower Rivalry in the Indian Ocean*, p. 263.

³⁴ The United States also provides anti-piracy maritime surveillance through unmanned aerial vehicles stationed in the Seychelles.

³⁵ Sudha Ramachandran, 'India's Quiet Sea Power', *Asia Times*, 2 August 2007.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Manu Pubby, 'India Activates First Listening Post on Foreign Soil: Radars in Madagascar', *Indian Express*, 18 July 2007.

³⁸ Ramachandran, 'India's Quiet Sea Power'.

³⁹ 'India, Mozambique Sign MoU in Defense Cooperation', *Peoples Daily Online*, 7 March 2006; Sudha Ramachandran 'India's Quiet Sea Power' *Asia Times*, 2 August 2007

a growing presence in Antarctica, with one active research station and a second due to open in 2012.

While some might see India as holding a strong security role in the southwest Indian Ocean, there are fears in New Delhi that China might undermine or pre-empt Indian's relationships. According to the former Indian Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Prakash, India "cannot afford to have any hostile or inimical power threatening the island states in this region".⁴⁰ Political and economic relations between China and Mauritius and Seychelles are closely watched by New Delhi⁴¹ and it has been claimed that a so-called Chinese "thrust" towards these states presages Sino-naval rivalry in the western Indian Ocean.⁴² While China may develop better economic and political interests in the area, it seems unlikely that it would be able to dislodge India as the dominant security provider to Mauritius and there are no indications at present that it would be able to seriously challenge India's maritime security role elsewhere in the southwest Indian Ocean.

NORTHWEST INDIAN OCEAN

India historically exercised a special political and economic role in the northwest Indian Ocean. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, British India was the dominant economic, political and military force in the region. The Trucial States (now United Arab Emirates) and Aden (now Yemen) were administered from British India and British Indian Army garrisons were stationed throughout the Persian Gulf until 1947. India's influence in the region diminished significantly following independence. Although India generally adopted a pro-Arab foreign policy, its ties in the region were regularly strained as a result of the India-Pakistan conflict. Pakistan's close political, economic and military ties with many states continue to this day.⁴³ Some argue that the ability of India to extend its security presence in the northwest Indian Ocean has also been constrained by US predominance in the Gulf, leaving little room for India to develop its own relationships, and that the United States has not encouraged an increased Indian security presence there. This perception is reinforced by the fact that the US military relationship with India is the responsibility of US Pacific Command, based in Hawaii, while the US security presence in the northwest Indian Ocean is administered by the US Central Command (which also has responsibility for the US military relationship with Pakistan).

⁴⁰ Arun Prakash, 'Security and Foreign Policy Imperatives of an Emerging India', p. 7.

⁴¹ Including an announced \$700 million investment by China in a special economic zone in Mauritius. James Lamont, 'Beijing Edges aside Delhi to Woo Mauritius as Africa Hub', *Financial Times*, 26 January 2010.

⁴² C. Raja Mohan, 'Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Western Indian Ocean', *ISAS Insights*, no. 52 (24 February 2009).

⁴³ Pakistani military personnel have key roles in the armed forces of Saudi Arabia and many Gulf states.

Despite these constraints, India is developing security relations in the region, particularly with Qatar (which sits inside the Persian Gulf), and Oman (which sits on the Strait of Hormuz at the head of the Persian Gulf). They may see India as partially balancing their security relationships with the United States. Since 2003, India has entered into several defence agreements with Oman dealing with training, maritime security cooperation and joint exercises.⁴⁴ The Indian Air Force uses the Thumrait air base for transit purposes and Oman has offered the Indian Navy berthing facilities in support of anti-piracy patrols.⁴⁵ In 2008 India also entered into a security agreement with Qatar which, according to some reports, includes Indian security guarantees. The agreement, which was reportedly entered following “persistent” efforts of Qatar, deals among other things with maritime security and intelligence sharing. One Indian official commented that, “The agreement is just short of stationing troops (in the region)”,⁴⁶ while another was reported as commenting that “We will go to the rescue of Qatar if Qatar requires it, in whatever form it takes.”⁴⁷ The Indian Navy has also sought to play an active role in Somali-based piracy and since October 2008 has one or two vessels in anti-piracy patrols off Somalia. India’s contribution has been made separately from the US-sponsored Combined Task Forces 150 and 151, in which Pakistan has played an active role.⁴⁸

CENTRAL INDIAN OCEAN

The two island chains that dominate the central Indian Ocean are the British-administered Indian Ocean Territory (which hosts the US air and naval base on Diego Garcia) and the Maldives. These island chains run north-south, astride the major east-west SLOCs between East Asia and the Middle East.

India has long regarded the Maldives as falling within its South Asian sphere of influence. In 1988, with the apparent blessing of the United States and Britain, India sent troops and naval forces to the Maldives to support President Gayoom in an attempted coup by Sri Lankan mercenaries. Since that time, India has supplied the Maldivian armed forces with equipment and training and the Indian Navy has provided maritime security. In August 2009, a security agreement was formalised that will significantly enhance India’s capabilities in the central Indian Ocean. India has been granted use of the former British naval and air base on Gan Island, part of the southernmost group of islands in the Maldives (lying around 1,000 km south of India and around 700 km north of Diego Garcia). India is reportedly

⁴⁴ Saurav Jha, ‘India Strengthens Military in Gulf’, *UPI Asia.com*, 3 November 2009; ‘India to Sell Small Arms to Oman’, *India Defence*, 6 April 2010.

⁴⁵ Sandeep Dikshit, ‘India, Oman still Studying Undersea Pipeline’, *The Hindu*, 30 October 2009.

⁴⁶ ‘India, Qatar Ink Defence Pact’, *The Financial Times*, 11 November 2008.

⁴⁷ ‘India: PM Vows to Defend Tiny Qatar “if Needed”’, *ADN Kronos International*, 12 November 2008, <<http://www.adnkronos.com/AKI/English/Security/?id=3.0.2702807567>>; ‘India, Qatar to Ramp Defence, Economic, Energy Ties (Roundup, Combining Different Series)’, *Thaindian News*, 10 November 2008.

⁴⁸ As at April 2010, Pakistan has led CTF 150 on four occasions.

planning to base Dornier aircraft and helicopters at Gan, although it is unclear to what extent the Indian Navy will establish a permanent presence at the associated Gan naval facilities. India also reportedly plans to station aircraft and naval vessels at Male in the central Maldives and at Haa Dhalu Atoll in the north.⁴⁹ As part of the agreement, India is also building a system of 26 electronic monitoring facilities across the Maldives archipelago. According to the Maldivian President, the installations are to protect the Maldives' large EEZ from illegal fishing.⁵⁰

NORTHEAST INDIAN OCEAN

India has placed considerable emphasis on developing a security presence in the northeast Indian Ocean. There are several dimensions to this: first, India's direct security presence in the Andaman Sea, second, its bilateral security relationships in the region and third, its aspirations to gain a security role in the Malacca Strait. While India aspires to play a significant security role in Southeast Asia it has given particular focus to the Malacca Strait, the key maritime choke point between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

India's Andaman and Nicobar islands, which run north-south through the Andaman Sea form a natural base for projecting power into the Strait and beyond into the South China Sea. In the mid-1990s, India commenced development of military facilities in the Andaman Islands for a new tri-service Andaman & Nicobar Command. This chain of bases now includes extensive port facilities to service elements of the Indian Eastern Fleet and several bases for surveillance and strike aircraft. The operational radius of aircraft based there encompasses the Malacca Strait and large portions of the South China Sea.⁵¹ The Andaman Islands have particular significance for the security of the Strait and have been described by one Chinese naval writer as constituting a "metal chain" that could lock the western end of the Strait tight.⁵²

India's security relationships in the region are anchored by Singapore. During colonial times Singapore effectively acted as the eastern anchor to British India's political and security sphere. On gaining independence in 1965, Singapore courted India to act as its "natural" security provider, including requests for the stationing of Indian naval vessels. However India, under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, declined any security role in the region. With the end of the Cold War India renewed its links with Singapore, which now acts as India's primary economic, political and security partner in

⁴⁹ Sujan Dutta, 'Indian Navy eyes Maldives—Counter to China's 'String of Pearls' Plan', *The Telegraph* (India), 20 August 2009.

⁵⁰ Balaji Chandramohan, 'India, Maldives and the Indian Ocean', *IDSA Comment*, 13 October 2009.

⁵¹ A. K. Dhar, 'Indian Air Force Carries out Exercise from Andaman Islands Base', *Press Trust of India*, 15 April 2005.

⁵² Zhang Ming, 'The Malacca Dilemma and the Chinese Navy's Strategic Choices', *Modern Ships*, no. 274 (October 2006), p. 23.

Southeast Asia. Singapore sees India as having an important security role in the region, acting as a balance to other extra-regional powers, including China, the United States and Japan.⁵³ India and Singapore conduct extensive security cooperation, including broad-based security dialogues, joint exercises, intelligence sharing and cooperation in defence technology. The two have conducted annual bilateral naval exercises since 1993 and now stage annual large-scale exercises between all three armed services. In a first for India, Singapore has been granted long term use of Indian facilities to conduct air and army training. It has been reported that there is an arrangement allowing for “frequent visits” of Indian naval vessels to Singapore’s Changi Naval Base, and the development of an Indian naval logistical presence in Singapore seems not beyond the realms of possibility.⁵⁴

India has also been developing its security relationship with Indonesia, although more slowly. While Indonesia has been very supportive of India developing its political and economic links with ASEAN states over the last two decades, it is only in recent years that the relationship has developed a security element.⁵⁵ A Defence Cooperation Agreement was signed in 2001. In 2002 concerns about the potential use of the Andaman Sea as a communication route with extremist groups in the region (including claimed links between Jihadist terrorists and Aceh separatists) led to the commencement of biannual “coordinated” naval patrols between the Indian and Indonesian navies in the Six-Degree Channel at the northern entrance to the Malacca Strait. These patrols comprise Indian and Indonesian vessels and aircraft, co-ordinated out of India’s Joint Operations Command in the Andaman Islands. In recent years India has been pressing Indonesia to extend naval cooperation into the Strait itself.

The Strait of Malacca, which represents a key choke point between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, forms a focus of India’s maritime security ambitions in the northeast Indian Ocean. Arguably, the potential to exercise a significant degree of control over shipping movements through the Strait is a prerequisite of effective control of the eastern Indian Ocean. Some have argued that for India the Strait represents a rough counterpart to the importance of the Panama Canal to the United States in terms of its ability to maintain regional hegemony.⁵⁶ Others place it as the mid-point in an “arc of

⁵³ See generally, David Brewster, ‘India’s Security Partnership with Singapore’, *The Pacific Review*, vol. 22, no. 5 (December 2009), pp. 597-618.

⁵⁴ C. Raja Mohan, ‘India’s Geopolitics and Southeast Asian Security’ in Daljit Singh and Tin Maung Maung (eds), *Southeast Asian Affairs 2008* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), p. 53.

⁵⁵ See generally, David Brewster, ‘The Evolving Security Relationship between India and Indonesia’ *Asian Survey* (forthcoming).

⁵⁶ Holmes *et al*, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-first Century*, p.154.

rivalry” between India and China stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Sea of Japan.⁵⁷

The Malacca Strait is one of the world’s busiest waterways, with over 62,000 ship movements in 2006. It is the key trade route between East Asia and Europe, carrying an estimated one third of global trade and the bulk of energy supplies from the Middle East to East Asia (including an estimated 70-80% of China’s energy imports and 90% of Japan’s).⁵⁸ The Strait is considered to be particularly prone to piracy and terrorist attacks. In the early years of last decade there were widely-held concerns about the level of sea-robbery of ships transiting the Strait, although reported cases of sea robbery in the Malacca Strait and surrounding areas have fallen significantly in recent years due to improved land policing, improved economic conditions and the end of the insurgency in Indonesia’s Aceh province. Since 2001, politically motivated piracy or terrorism has also been of concern, although no such attacks have eventuated. The Strait is largely within the territorial waters of Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia, with the latter two states in particular being highly sensitive to the presence of any “external” maritime security providers in the Strait.

In the wake of September 2001, at the invitation of the United States, India took a security role inside the Strait through the provision of naval escorts for high value commercial traffic, as part of the U.S.-led Operation *Enduring Freedom*. Since then, India has been careful to position itself as a benign security provider in the Strait, and to ensure that any naval presence was seen as “non-intrusive, cooperative and benign” by the littoral states.⁵⁹ According to one Indian naval officer: “Our role [in the Malacca Strait] is being perceived as that of a responsible nation, which can create a balance in the region. Also, everyone realises that India has no ambitions of hegemony.”⁶⁰ India has regularly pressured littoral states over the last decade to take an active security role in the Strait and in June 2006 the Indian Defence Minister Mukherjee reaffirmed India’s offers to provide assistance.⁶¹ However, India’s official justification for its interest in the Strait—that is, securing the Strait from threats of piracy and terrorism—holds little water. Not only are these primarily policing rather than military issues, the reported statistics in recent years clearly demonstrate that there is no crisis requiring external intervention.⁶² It is evident that India’s interest in the

⁵⁷ Gurpreet S. Khurana, ‘China-India Maritime Rivalry’, *Indian Defence Review*, vol. 23, no. 4 (2009).

⁵⁸ Ian Storey, ‘Securing Southeast Asia’s Sea Lanes: A Work in Progress’, *Asia Policy*, no. 6 (July 2008), pp. 95-127.

⁵⁹ *Asia Times*, 19 October 2005.

⁶⁰ Gurpreet S Khurana, ‘Safeguarding the Malacca Straits’, *IDS Comment*, 5 January 2005.

⁶¹ Government of India press release, 3 June 2006, <www.pib.nic.in> [Accessed 18 May 2010].

⁶² According to official figures, cases of piracy and sea robbery within the Straits of Malacca and Singapore peaked at some 38 reported cases in 2004, falling in recent years to 9 reported cases in 2009. *Annual Report 2009* (Singapore: ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, 2009).

Strait is primarily motivated by a desire to enhance its role as the leading maritime security provider in the Indian Ocean and potentially control access to the Indian Ocean. However, the littoral states (and in particular, Malaysia) have resisted giving India a formal security role in the Strait, either on a bilateral basis or in the various cooperative security arrangements that have been put in place (including the MALSINDO coordinated naval patrols, the ReCAAP information sharing centre, and the so-called Cooperative Mechanism). It remains to be seen whether there are circumstances in which the littoral states would agree to India's requests for a direct security role in the Strait.

An Indian Sphere of Influence in the Indian Ocean?

To what extent should India's maritime security relationships in the Indian Ocean be seen as the beginnings of an Indian sphere of influence in the region?

Discussions of an Indian sphere of influence beyond South Asia are sometimes identified with Lord Curzon, the British Viceroy who advocated the adoption of a "Forward Policy" to secure India at the beginning of the twentieth century. Curzon's so-called Forward School argued that India's security demanded control of the maritime routes and key ports en route to India (including Aden and Singapore) and the creation of territorial buffers to insulate direct contact with other empires (including Afghanistan in the west, Tibet in the north and Siam in the east) and for British India to take an active role in managing the affairs of the buffer zones.

In many ways the policies of the British Raj represented a significant departure from Indian traditions which had little history of territorial expansion or military or political adventure beyond the limits of the subcontinent. Tanham's study of India's strategic culture in the early 1990s characterized Indian strategic thinking as being "defensive" and having a "lack of an expansionist military tradition".⁶³ Certainly, any affirmation of an Indian security sphere beyond South Asia largely ceased following independence. After 1947, India effectively withdrew to the Indian subcontinent and asserted what has been called "India's Monroe Doctrine" according to which India would not permit any intervention by any "external" power in India's immediate neighbours in South Asia and related islands. While India's attempts to exclude other powers from South Asia had only limited success, India's Monroe Doctrine was used to justify military interventions in Sri Lanka and Maldives in the 1980s.⁶⁴

⁶³ George Tanham, 'Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay', in George K. Tanham, Kanti P. Bajpai and Amitabh Mattoo (eds), *Securing India: Strategic Thought and Practice in an Emerging Power* (New Delhi: Manhora, 1996), p. 73.

⁶⁴ James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, 'India's 'Monroe Doctrine' and Asia's Maritime Future', *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 32, no. 6 (November 2008), pp. 997-1011.

Since the end of the Cold War there has been a revival in discussion in India about a “natural” sphere of influence extending well beyond South Asia. This is related to a desire to move beyond India’s traditional strategic preoccupations in South Asia and re-engage with its extended neighbourhood—to rectify what Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh called India’s unnecessary acceptance of “the post-Partition limits geography imposed on policy”.⁶⁵ Even before India’s independence, K. M. Panikkar, India’s most famous maritime strategist, argued that the Indian Ocean must remain “truly Indian”, advocating the creation of a “steel ring” around India through the establishment of forward naval bases in Singapore, Mauritius, Yemen (Socatra) and Sri Lanka.⁶⁶ From the turn of this century the Indian Ministry of Defence began describing India’s *security environment* as extending from the Persian Gulf in the west, to the Straits of Malacca in the east,⁶⁷ an area which Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh called India’s *sphere of influence*⁶⁸ and the current Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has somewhat more diplomatically called India’s *strategic footprint*.⁶⁹

While there is clearly an aspiration in New Delhi to develop an expanded Indian strategic space, it is not at all clear what this might mean in practice. There is little doubt that India’s approach to spreading its influence in the region differs significantly from Lord Curzon’s and it seems unlikely even in the long term that India will regain the regional hegemony exerted by British India. However, short of hegemony, India could express regional dominance through the development of a more hierarchical regional order or seeking to exclude other powers from the region.

To date, the Indian Navy has taken a cooperative approach in developing security relationships, an approach that has been relatively successful. The failure of India to project military power beyond the limits of South Asia during the Cold War has placed India in good stead in much of the Indian Ocean region. India has a noticeable lack of historical baggage in many of its dealings in the region, with the exception of the Islamic factor arising from the Pakistan conflict. India is often perceived as essentially a benign power and not a would-be hegemon, in contrast with other external powers such as the United States. While India is not in a position to exert significant power through military predominance or ideological means, it may be able to do so as a provider of public goods. This is certainly the current approach of the Indian Navy, which emphasises its ability to provide maritime policing, anti-piracy and anti-terrorism functions. However, there are sometimes also

⁶⁵ C. Raja Mohan, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Shaping of India’s New Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 205.

⁶⁶ K. M. Panikkar, *The Future of Southeast Asia: An Indian View*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943), pp. 100-1.

⁶⁷ Ministry of Defence, Annual Report 2000-2001.

⁶⁸ Chidanand Rajghatta, ‘Singhing Bush’s Praise’, *Times of India*, 13 April 2001.

⁶⁹ ‘PM’s Address at the Combined Commander’s Conference’, 24 October 2004.

noticeable overtones of hierarchy in India's dealings with the region, particularly in India's overt opposition to regional relationships with China.

In the longer term, India's role in the Indian Ocean will likely be determined (and limited) by the extent to which India's naval expansion plans come to fruition. Drawing on the experience of the United States in the Western Hemisphere in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Holmes identifies three basic roles which the Indian Navy could play: first, a "free-rider" navy, in which the Indian Navy can play a growing role in maritime policing and humanitarian functions while the United States continues to play a dominant role; second, a "constable" navy, in which the Indian Navy would, sparingly and with tact, intervene in littoral states to advance a common interest of South Asian states; and third, a "strong-man" navy where it sought to establish hegemony in the Indian Ocean and had the capability of mounting forward defence beyond the Indian Ocean.⁷⁰ Holmes concludes that the ambitions represented by the Indian Navy's expansion program in the coming decades would give it the capability to act somewhere between a "free-rider" navy and a "constable" navy.

It should be noted that the potential for an Indian sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean are also subject to some important caveats: although India has ambitions to expand its strategic space in the Indian Ocean, there are real questions as to whether these aspirations will be achieved. India has a long history of its strategic ambitions surpassing its capabilities, of strategic goals and military expansion plans going unfulfilled. The planned expansion of India's naval capabilities is some decades away from being achieved and is highly contingent on India's economic development. India's security partners in the Indian Ocean (with the possible exception of the Maldives) will likely maintain other important security relationships and will not easily grant an exclusive security role for India. Most importantly, the United States has every reason to maintain a major regional security presence, particularly in the northwest Indian Ocean.

Nevertheless, India's aspirations to expand its strategic space in the Indian Ocean region are clearly related to its broader ambitions to be recognised as a great power, ambitions that may if anything grow in coming years. Certainly many would see a sphere of influence as a natural appurtenance of great power status. One study of India's regional plans concluded that:

a rising India will try to establish regional hegemony in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region ... just like all the other rising powers have since Napoleonic times, with the long term goal of achieving great power status on an Asian and perhaps even global scale.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Holmes et al, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-first Century*, pp. 50-2.

⁷¹ M. Pardesi, *Deducing India's Grand Strategy of Regional Hegemony from Historical and Conceptual Perspectives* (Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2005), p. 55.

From a geopolitical perspective, spheres of influence are seen as a normal part of ordering the international system. According to Cohen: “

spheres of influence are essential to the preservation of national and regional expression ... the alternative is either a monolithic world system or utter chaos”.⁷²

The key feature of a sphere of influence is not just the ability to project power, but an acknowledgement of a hierarchical relationship in which the great power provides security to lesser powers in return for an acknowledgement of a leadership role.

China also provides good defensive reasons for the development of a sphere of influence. Many Indian strategists see China's political and security relationships in South Asia and its putative String of Pearls strategy as part of a cohesive policy of “encirclement” or “containment” of India that justifies the development of a “defensive” sphere of influence by India. As Admiral Prakash, commented:

The appropriate counter to China's encirclement of India is to build our own relations, particularly in our neighbourhood, on the basis of our national interests and magnanimity towards smaller neighbours.⁷³

As it expands its influence in the Indian Ocean region India also has had to accept the continuing role of the United States in the region. The United States, particularly with its base at Diego Garcia and its naval facilities in Singapore and the Gulf, seems likely to remain the predominant naval power in the Indian Ocean region for many years to come. However there are indications that the United States is willing to cede—and indeed encourage—a major regional naval role for India, particularly in the northeast Indian Ocean. For its part, India's willingness to cooperate with the United States in achieving its ambitions is not as paradoxical as it may seem. As the former US Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, once conceded, the United States in developing its sphere of influence in the Western hemisphere in the nineteenth century relied on Britain, the then superpower, to enforce the Monroe Doctrine until the United States was sufficiently strong to do so itself.⁷⁴ Similarly, India may have good reason to cooperate with the United States while it builds its national power. However, with the exception of the United States, India will likely wish to cooperate with extra-regional navies in the Indian Ocean only as long as they recognize India's leading regional role.⁷⁵ The apparent willingness of Japan to recognize India's role

⁷² Saul Cohen, *Geography and Politics in a World Divided* (2nd edn) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. viii.

⁷³ Admiral Arun Prakash, 'China and the Indian Ocean Region', *Indian Defence Review*, vol. 21 no. 4 (October – December 2006), p. 11.

⁷⁴ Dean G. Acheson, *A Democrat Looks at his Party* (New York: Harper, 1955), p. 64.

⁷⁵ Pardesi, *Deducing India's Grand Strategy of Regional Hegemony from Historical and Conceptual Perspectives*, p. 53.

as the “leading” maritime security provider west of the Malacca Strait forms a not insignificant element in the developing India-Japan security relationship.⁷⁶

How Australia fits in this picture is a not entirely clear. Australia’s naval power ranks second only to India among the littoral states. There is no suggestion that India is seeking to expand its strategic space into southeast Indian Ocean and there is little reason for it to do so. The junction of the Southern and Indian Oceans is not a choke point, nor is there any prospect that India might act as a security provider to Australia. Nevertheless, Australia is keen to form a cooperative security relationship with India. Australia’s 2009 Defence White Paper flagged the “strong mutual interest” of Australia and India in enhancing maritime security cooperation, commenting that, “As India extends its reach and influence into areas of shared strategic interest, we will need to strengthen our defence relationship and our understanding of Indian strategic thinking”.⁷⁷ This captures well Australia’s desire to strengthen the relationship—as well as a degree of hesitancy about India’s strategic objectives. In November 2009, Australia and India concluded a joint security declaration, providing a framework for increased cooperation, particularly on small “s” security issues such as such as in maritime policing (piracy and maritime terrorism, illegal fishing, people trafficking etc), disaster management and anti-terrorism and there seem good prospects for closer security relations in coming years.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, questions remain as to how the security relationship might develop in the long term. While Australia has a generally benign strategic view of India, there is potential for a divergence of interests in some circumstances, including, for example, if India’s strategic partnership with the United States stalls or if India sought to exclude other interested states from a role in Indian Ocean security.⁷⁹

Conclusion

Maritime strategy is playing an ever greater role in Indian strategic thinking. As India reaches for great power status, it is increasingly turning to the Indian Ocean as a means to expand its strategic space. Although it currently operates in cooperation with the United States, India has long-term aspirations towards attaining naval predominance throughout much of the Indian Ocean.

⁷⁶ See generally, David Brewster, ‘The India—Japan Security Declaration: an enduring security partnership?’ *Asian Security*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2010), pp. 95-120.

⁷⁷ Australian Government, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), p. 96.

⁷⁸ See generally, David Brewster, ‘The Australia—India Security Declaration: The Quadrilateral redux?’, *Security Challenges*, vol. 6, no. 1 (Autumn 2010), pp. 1-9.

⁷⁹ Sam Bateman and Anthony Bergin, *Our Western Front: Australia and the Indian Ocean* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2010), pp. 19-20.

In conjunction with an expansion of India's naval capabilities, there has been a significant extension of India's maritime security relationships throughout the region. Much of the emphasis has been in developing relationships with small states at or near the key points of entry into the Indian Ocean (including, Mauritius, Seychelles, Oman, Qatar and Singapore). Arguably, the extreme asymmetries in size have made the development of such relationships relatively easy—there is no question of competition or rivalry for example. Some of these states have long seen India as a benign security provider and have maritime policing needs that India can usefully fulfil. In some cases, India may not only be a cooperative security provider, but may also effectively act as a security guarantor, as is arguably the case with Mauritius and the Maldives.

In coming years India will also need to better develop cooperative security relationships with the larger littoral states, including South Africa, Indonesia and Australia. There is much scope for security cooperation between them, particularly in the maritime dimension. However, the implications of India's strategic ambitions in the Indian Ocean still need to be worked through. To what extent, for example, might India expect implicit acknowledgement of a leadership role in Indian Ocean security and/or support in any attempts to exclude China from the region? A challenge for New Delhi in coming years will be to maintain perceptions of India as a benign and non-hegemonic power in the Indian Ocean region as it moves towards achieving major power status.

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