

MARITIME STRATEGY OF INDIA AND CHINA: INFLUENCE OF ALFRED THAYER MAHAN

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Introduction

Alfred Thayer Mahan interpreted the sea as a “great common,” a medium through which commerce and military force could flow freely. Sir Julian Corbett depicted the ocean as a thoroughfare, an element critical to national life. Recently, MIT professor Barry Posen projected the concept of the commons skyward, to incorporate the skies, space and even cyberspace. The moot question is how will emerging powers approach these expanses, which lie beyond the jurisdiction of any nation-state? The seas of Asia today are witnessing an intriguing historical anomaly - the concurrent rise of two indigenous maritime powers against the backdrop of US dominion over the global commons. Driven by the Thucydidean trinity of fear, interest and honour, China and India are the main catalysts transforming the Asian regional order.

The aspirations of both India and China to world power status and their mutual quest for energy security have impelled these two continental powers to reorient their gaze from landward to seaward. Chinese and Indian maritime interests are the result of impressive economic growth, the desire of more affluent citizenries for consumer goods, and the hunger of domestic industry for energy resources.

Alfred Thayer Mahan and Naval Strategy

For Mahan, “Command of the Sea” meant overbearing power on the sea, which drives the enemy’s flag from it, or, allows it to appear only as a fugitive, and which by controlling the great common, closes the highways by which commerce moves to and fro from the enemy’s shores.”¹ Foreign commerce, Mahan argued, is necessary to assure America’s economic vitality. Overseas military bases are therefore necessary to support commerce. A battle fleet is required to defend the bases and flow of trade – trade that in turn furnished the tariff revenue necessary to fund the navy. Mahan implied that powerful battle fleets should be used to crush

¹ Mahan, Alfred Thayer, “*The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783.*” (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1890: reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1987), pp. 138

the navies of rival maritime nations and wrest away control of strategic waterways, thus assuring the dominant power access to the sea lanes and the commerce they conveyed. For him, command of the sea was bound inextricably with commercial, geographic and military considerations.

According to Mahan, commerce thrives by peace and suffers by war. Thus, peace is the superior interest of great seafaring nations. For him the navy was simply the logical outgrowth of peaceful maritime commerce.² Forward bases were necessary to permit warships to operate “forward,” strategically placed along the sea lines of communication. Naval power, economic health and geographic expansion fused under the rubric of “sea power”. Mahan’s appeal to economics resonates powerfully in today’s India, which is preoccupied with economic development and increasingly reliant on seaborne commerce for oil and other commodities. One analyst of Mahanian theory notes, “central to the theory of sea power was expectation of conflict. When a nation’s prosperity depends on shipborne commerce and the amount of trade available is limited, then competition follows, and that leads to a naval contest to protect the trade.”³ The influence of Mahan, the proponent of sea power, is felt on the current ambitious plans of China and India to build powerful navies. Some scholars have gone to the extent of suggesting that modern Chinese and Indian leadership have turned to Mahan to justify naval modernisation.⁴ The relevance of Mahan on Chinese and Indian thinking is less about his doctrine on decisive naval battles on high seas and more about the relationship between a rising power with global interests and its maritime strategy.

Mahan’s emphasis on relating America’s expansion of its internal industrialisation with the vision of a global role fits in quite naturally with the economic transformation that is underway today in China and India. The changed internal economic environment of Beijing and New Delhi and their rapid globalisation since the end of the twentieth century could be seen as the principal source of new navalism in both the countries. A Chinese writer says, “when a nation embarks upon a process of shifting from an ‘inward-leaning economy’ to an ‘outward-leaning economy,’ the arena of national security concerns begins to

²*ibid*, pp. 26

³George W. Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: The United States Navy, 1890-1990*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, pp.12

⁴Janes R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, “The influence of Mahan upon China’s Maritime Strategy,” *Comparative Strategy*, Vol – 24, no. 1 (2005): pp. 23-51
Development.pdf.

move to the oceans. Consequently, people start paying attention to sea power. This is a phenomenon of history that occurs so frequently that it has almost become a rule rather than an exception. Therefore, it is inevitable that such a shift is taking place in today's China."⁵ Much of world trade today, as during Mahan's time, continues to be carried by sea. The seaborne trade in China and India at present is above the range of 90 percent of total trade in both countries. Given the extent of their economies, rapid pace of growth, and the expanding international component of their economic activity, protecting seaborne trade has become an important justification for both Chinese and Indian investments in modernisation of their naval forces.

India's Maritime Military Strategy published by Ministry of Defence, Government of India, draws a clear linkage between "our economic prosperity and our naval capability, which will protect the nation's vast and varied maritime interests."⁶ Similarly, in China too, the political leadership has become acutely aware of the profound relationship between national economic development in the era of globalisation and sea power, and it has constantly affirmed the determination to build a strong and modern navy.⁷ However, before globalisation took root, other factors also facilitated naval modernisation of the two Asian giants. The American decision to despatch aircraft carriers into the Taiwan Strait to counter Beijing's intimidation of Taiwan in 1996 could have acted as a major political spur to the Chinese leadership in developing the capabilities to limit future American misadventure. Maritime territorial disputes with its Asian neighbours catalysed the modernisation of the Chinese Navy. While India has its share of maritime territorial disputes, the need to protect a large Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), as also and its far flung island territories in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and Lakshadweep Islands, has been an important motivation behind India's naval modernisation. US deployment of its aircraft carrier USS Enterprise to the Indian Ocean during India's war with Pakistan in 1971 is often cited in New Delhi as a landmark event that underlined India's need for a powerful navy.⁸

⁵Ni Lexiong, "Sea Power and China's Development", *Peoples Liberation Daily*, April 17, 2005; Translated for US China Economic and Security Review Commission, www.Usk.gov/researchpapers/translated_articles/2005/05_07_18_Sea_Power_and_Chinas_

⁶Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, *Freedom to use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy* (New Delhi: Ministry of Defence, 2007), p. 10.

⁷David Lei, "China's New Multi-Faceted Maritime Strategy", *Orbis*, vol 52, no. 1 (Winter 2008): pp. 139-57.

⁸Ashley Tellis, "India's Naval Expansion: Reflections on History and Strategy", *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 185-219.

For Alfred Mahan, the relationship between home country and its commerce with the colonies in a world of industrialisation and global trade was critical. The most integral element of Mahan's concept of sea power is the protection of one's own lines of communication and developing the capacity to disrupt those of adversaries. It was quite logical for Mahan to underline the significance of acquiring bases all along the sea lines of communication between the two entities. Emerging from alien domination, the leaders of India and China saw foreign bases as the very symbols of imperialism and neocolonialism. Given their commitment to anti-imperialism and the empathy with the anti-colonial struggles of their fellow developing countries, Beijing and New Delhi opposed the forward military presence of great powers which expanded significantly at the intensification and global expansion of Soviet-American rivalry during the Cold War.⁹ Being the largest developing nations, China and India became the most vocal opponents of foreign bases as a matter of high ideological principle as well as direct national security concerns about great-power meddling in their neighbourhood.

However, early maritime thinkers of modern India had articulated the importance of bases as an integral part of the nation's long term naval strategy. But the talk of forward bases for the Indian Navy was mostly academic. China also maintained its rhetoric against US military bases in Asia but largely chose to live with it once its primary threat perceptions began to focus on the Soviet Union. The context has also witnessed a fundamental shift in the early years of the twenty-first century. As they underline the importance of maritime commerce, pursue resource security, seek to protect their nation's economic lifelines at sea and recognise their larger global political responsibilities, both India and China are signalling the political will to deploy their navies far from the national shores.¹⁰ This results in a more intensive consideration of forward military presence and military bases abroad. Quite naturally, Beijing denies it has any intention of acquiring foreign bases but her action of acquiring various military facilities in Myanmar has become an interesting field of academic inquiry. Added to this, Beijing's attempts to acquire naval facilities across the Indian Ocean have become a more widely circulated thesis in recent years. The theory of "String of Pearls" in the Indian Ocean by China describes her construction of maritime infrastructural facilities in

⁹For an analysis of forward basing during the Cold War, see Robert E. Harkavy, *Bases Abroad: The Global Foreign Military presence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹⁰Rajat Pandit, "Navy Steams To Foreign Shores To Build Bridges, Project Power." *Times of India*, May 31, 2009, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/msid-4598351,prtpage-1.cms>.

South Asia and elsewhere with military considerations.¹¹ The same holds true for India too. Indications are that India might be exploring opportunities for acquiring facilities that would boost its ability to operate far from its national shores.”¹²

The actions of China and India reflect the new outward maritime orientation of both countries symbolising a structural shift in their worldviews. Intellectuals in Beijing appreciate a “symbiosis” between becoming a great power and developing a strong naval capability.¹³ Similar is the tone in India’s intellectual circles as well. New Delhi would agree with Ni Lexiong’s thesis that “while our nation’s economic structure is completing the epic shift from an inward leaning to an outward leaning one, the choice of a sea power strategy has become an urgent task.”¹⁴ In accepting this logic, it will not be difficult to understand the present high priority accorded in China and India to a strategy focused on protection of their nation’s economic lifelines through sea, and the prospective search for a forward military presence. As a result, the navies of China and India are being transformed from forces conceived for coastal defence and denying their neighbouring waters to hostile powers to instruments that can project force far beyond their shores.

Indo-Pacific Imbroglia

The seas of the Western Pacific and India Ocean are being seen as a single integrated geopolitical theatre christened as “Indo-Pacific”. It is appreciated that unlike in the post-war years when the western world put different regions of Asia into separate boxes and assumed there was little connection between them, the geopolitical theorists at the dawn of the twentieth century saw Asia as an integrated region. Alfred Mahan saw the geopolitical interconnections between Europe and Asia and speculated on the implications of Japan’s rapid economic development, the political awakening in India, and the immense latent force of China. His argument was that a broad stretch of Asia between the 30th and 40th

¹¹The phrase China’s “String of Pearls” first appeared in US media citing a technical study commissioned by the Pentagon; see Bill Gertz, “China builds up strategic Sea Lanes”, *Washington Times*, January 18, 2005.

¹²Steven Forsberg, “India Stretches Its Sea Legs”, *Proceedings of the US Naval Institute*, Vol. 133, No. 3 (March 2007): pp 38-42. See also Sudha Ramachandran, “India’s Quiet Sea Power”, *Asia Times Online*, August 2, 2007, www.atimes.com/atimes/South-Asia/IHOLDfol.html.

¹³Ni Lexiong, “Sea Power and China’s Development”, *People’s Liberation Daily*, April 17, 2005; Translated for US China Economic and Security Review Commission, available at www.uscc.gov/researchpapers/translated-articles/2005/05_07_18_Sea_Power_and_China_Development.pdf.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

parallels stretching from Asia Minor in the West to the Korean peninsula in the East was the “debatable” and “debated” ground.¹⁵ Within this region, Mahan states, “are to be found ... the most decisive natural features, and also... political divisions the unsettled character of which renders the problem of Asia in the present day at once perplexing and imminent.”¹⁶ And the fact remains that many of the security challenges of the world in the early twenty-first century are rooted in the Asian region identified by Mahan. Once Africa is added to Mahan’s debatable and debated grounds in Asia, then the picture of Indo-Pacific of our times becomes clear. Mahan’s obsession with expanding Russian power, and its search for the seas in all direction in Asia, prompted his successors to coin the geopolitical conception of “Eurasia” and the perpetual struggle between “sea power” and “land power.” Halford Mackinder defined the competition between the “pivot” area that included Russia, Europe and Central Asia and rest of the “marginal” regions around the Eurasian landmass. Whoever controlled the pivot area, Mackinder concluded, would dominate Asia.¹⁷ While Mackinder laid emphasis on importance of land power, Nicholas Spykman argued that a coalition of maritime powers can defeat those dominant in the heartland by controlling the marginal regions in Eurasia.¹⁸ From there the visualization of an enduring geopolitical tension between the “heartland” and “rimland” in Eurasia emerged.

The rise of the USA as a superpower at the turn of the twentieth century, and its unique capacity to dominate both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, helped sustain the strategic imagery of Eurasia and the role of the Unified States as the headmaster among the many powers of that vast geographic space. The concept of a heartland in Eurasia gained ground after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the contest among the major powers for influence in the newly independent republics in Central Asia. Russia’s attempts to reclaim its influence in the so-called “near abroad” in the first decade of the twenty-first century, its collaboration with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in Central Asia, and Beijing’s promotion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) have also added to the general importance of the notion of Eurasia. But the notion of Eurasia’s centrality on our

¹⁵ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Problem of Asia: Its Effects on International Politics* (Boston: Little Brown, 1900). For a recent reissue with an introduction by Francis P Sempa, Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Problem of Asia: Its effects on International Politics* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2003).

¹⁶ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Problem of Asia: Its Effects upon International Politics (Revised Edition)* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2003), pp 66.

¹⁷ Halford Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History”, *Geographical Journal*, Vol 23, No. 4 (April 1904): pp 421-437.

¹⁸ Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1944).

geopolitical understanding of the world may not necessarily survive the rise of China and India and their growing maritime abilities.

India's "General Strategy" for the Indian Ocean

Alfred Mahan had made a prophetic observation that whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia and this ocean is the key to seven seas. He further highlighted that in the 21st Century, the destiny of the world would be decided on its waters. It appears that this is proving to be true¹⁹ as the Indian Ocean is assuming importance in shaping the world order. Not only from the strategic point of view but also from the point of view of survival and development, India will have to increasingly depend on the oceans, particularly the Indian Ocean in the centuries that lay ahead.

Now the moot question is: how likely is India to achieve this? Only two forces can challenge India's drive— the present leading maritime presence of the United States and the rising power of China. So far as America is concerned, its presence is likely to scale down as it focuses more on the Pacific, and with it Sino-American naval rivalry. America's growing focus on the Pacific Ocean is strengthened by its growing security links with India, in which the leadership position of India within Indian Ocean is starting to be aided by the USA. In such a context, as "natural allies", US Secretary of State Colin Powell had publicly stated "India has the potential to keep the peace in the vast Indian Ocean and its periphery. We need to work harder and more consistently to assist India in this endeavour."²⁰ Post 9/11, US-India rapprochement has strengthened further, in part against perceived Islamist Jihadist threats in the region, but also in light of China's growing presence. The American State Department admitted in 2005 that the "US goal is to help India become a major world power in the 21st Century. We understand fully the implications, including military implications, of that statement."²¹ Its most immediate manifestation is the Malabar series of exercises between the two navies involving their aircraft carriers in the Arabian Sea. For India's part, the relationship with the United States is intended to enhance and magnify India's own power, and it constitutes perhaps the most important measure that is intended, inter alia, to promote the realisation of India's agenda in

¹⁹ South Asia Foundation, review K Kumar, *Indian Ocean as a zone of peace: Problems and Prospects* (2000). <http://www.southasiafoundation.org/saf/safdic/bookdetail.asp>.

²⁰ Colin Powell "US looks to its allies for stability in Asia and the Pacific" *International Herald Tribune*, 27 January 2001.

²¹ "US to make India a World Power", *Washington Post*, 30 March 2005.

the Indian Ocean, a leadership position; but in which “America’s raw power in the region has made it imperative that New Delhi, if it is to achieve its own regional goals, court the United States – at least for some time.”²² However, this seems a matter of time, over which, as America moves sideways to let India alongside, an ever strengthening India can assume leadership role in the Indian Ocean. However, India is likely to face stiff competition from China.²³ This is the new “Great Game” that would be played out in the Indian Ocean, keenly watched by the world, and for which the Indian Navy is geared up.

The People’s Liberation Army - Navy in the IOR

While the People’s Republic of China has fostered new multilateral and bilateral relations, it has simultaneously undergone a process of military modernisation with a particular focus on naval development.²⁴ The PLAN has pushed the PRC leadership towards developing a true blue-water fleet, one capable of projecting China’s strategic influence beyond its immediate coastal geography.²⁵ The factor responsible for this emphasis on fleet development is, most importantly, the near uniform belief in the PLA’s Senior Leadership that the US is the PRC’s greatest threat and is attempting to encircle and contain China.²⁶ The PLA thus views expanded naval capabilities as critical to its defence in any likely near-term future conflicts (particularly Taiwan, but also several other island locations in the East and South China Sea). From a geostrategic perspective, in combination with PLAN modernisation, it seems highly likely that China will engage in a permanent naval presence in IOR in the near future. Primarily, this presence will function to protect Chinese energy and trade interests, but at the same time compete with US and Indian power.²⁷ Further, the very fact that China has moderately, but steadily, reoriented from its traditional status as a continental

²² D Berlin, “India in the Indian Ocean,” *Naval War College Review*, 59.2, 2006, pp 66.

²³ R Rai, “Will Indian and Chinese Maritime Interests Clash in the Indian Ocean in the years Ahead”?, *India Defence consultants*, 29 Jul 05, <http://www.indiadefence.com/maritimeclash.html>.

²⁴ James B. Zientek, “China and India : The struggle for Regional maritime supremacy in the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean” *Monterey, CA : Master’s Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2005 pp. 51-52.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Shambaugh, “China’s Military views the world,” pp.61-67-76. Shambaugh also reports that the PLA leadership recently started to include India as a threatening state that is seeking regional hegemony in South Asia and dominance over the Indian Ocean. However, it is clear that the primary reason for the PLA’s modernisation push is the United States.

²⁷ Cole, “The Great Wall at Sea,” pp. 171-172.

land power to an increased emphasis on maritime capabilities indicates that it is in the process of expanding its geopolitical influence outward.²⁸

Conclusion

Chinese activity in the IOR is indicative of a revisionist state with the goal of undermining US policy; similarly the encirclement of India is evident through all sides of Chinese development. This is true not only in the PRC's response to increased US presence in the region, but also in the fact that China is rapidly developing ties to an area that is certain to be an absolutely vital geopolitical region in the near future. To put it differently, there are two sides to the PRC's IOR development: as a counterweight to the US regional presence in the short term, and as a means of fuelling China's sustained growth to challenge US's systematic dominance in the medium or long term. It should be safely concluded that revisionist China will continue to rapidly expand its presence and exert ever-greater influence in the IOR for the foreseeable future. It would therefore be interesting to observe how a resurgent India under the new government will evolve its policy – strategy calculus and forge ahead to remain dominant as well as relevant to be the net-security provider in the Indian Ocean Region.



About the Author



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²⁸Robert S. Ross, “The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-first century”, *International Security*, vol. 23, no. 4 (Spring 1999), pp 103.