

India's "Grand Strategy" for the Indian Ocean: Mahanian Visions

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This article considers how India sees the Indian Ocean, and in particular its drive to make the Indian Ocean, "India's Ocean." Various comparisons and links are made. Firstly there is the role and application of Mahanian tenets of "sea-power," in particular naval projection, control of sea-routes and access to bases. Second is the contrast between the earlier maritime visions of Kavalam Panikkar (1945) and Keshav Vaidya (1949) and the continental mindset evident under Nehru and his successors which saw neglect of India's maritime power. Third is the strategic vision evident since 1998 with the BJP government and maintained by the Congress administration since 2004. This has underpinned India's Naval Chief of Staff Arun Prakash's current eloquence on the possibilities opening up for India in and around the Indian Ocean. Questions of intent (strategic doctrine) and the application of "state power" (spending, bases, ships and equipment, geographical reach) are woven together.

The Indian Ocean must therefore remain truly Indian. (Panikkar, 1945)

Even if we do not rule the waves of all the five oceans of the world, we must at least rule the waves of the Indian Ocean. (Vaidya, 1949)

As the pre-eminent maritime power in the Indian Ocean, we must possess and maintain a capability for sustained operations in our area of interest. (Admiral Arun Prakash, 2005)

In recent years Indian projection in and around the Indian Ocean has been noticeable, and with it the question of how far India is seeking, and succeeding, in making the Indian Ocean, "India's Ocean." This question has involved politicians, naval spokesmen, analysts and the media in India and elsewhere and is at the heart of this study.

As recently as 1996, Kailash Kohli, then Commander of the Western Fleet, was warning “History has taught India two bitter lessons: firstly, that neglect of maritime power can culminate in a cession of sovereignty, and secondly, that it takes decades to revert to being a considerable maritime power after a period of neglect and decline.”¹ Yet a decade later, the Indian Fleet Review of 2006 proudly unfurled the world’s 4th biggest navy (137 ships), showcasing over 50 Naval ships, including an aircraft carrier (with 55 aircraft), submarines and advanced stealth frigates. This two-hour display of the country’s armada was “an emphatic and stylised bout of power projection,” with India’s Navy Chief announcing “we are now poised to take our place” as the “regional power.”² India’s strategic hopes in the Indian Ocean rest most visibly on its maritime forces, its navy. In its own words, “it is vital, not just for India’s security but also for her continued prosperity, that we possess a Navy which will protect the nation’s vast and varied maritime interests,” where “the Navy’s role is to help maintain peace in the Indian Ocean, meet the expectations of our friends and neighbours in times of need, and underpin India’s status as a regional power.”³ It goes without saying that India’s navy is there not just to make an impression on friends and neighbours; it has also been built up to make an impact on rivals and enemies. In the view of India’s present Commander of Naval Staff, Arun Prakash, “as the pre-eminent maritime power in the Indian Ocean, we must possess and maintain a capability for sustained operations in our area of interest.”⁴ The strategic “end” is to be the pre-eminent maritime power in the Indian Ocean, and the “means” to bring about this end is a strong navy that can maintain a capability for sustained operations in and throughout the Indian Ocean.

The strategic background for India is Mahanian-style *seapower* through control and access to key points, be it territorial possession or secure access, bringing with it power projection, the denial of access to rivals, and control of choke points.⁵ In doing so, various Indian commentators have also specifically cited with anticipation the opening quotation, often attributed to Mahan that “whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominated Asia. The ocean is the Key to seven seas. In the 21st century the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters.”⁶ The attribution is actually “fictitious.”⁷ Nevertheless, its sentiments underpin current Indian strategic visions, as does Mahan’s actual emphasis on naval strategy (access points, naval projection, etc.).

The physical background for India is the way that “very few nations in the world geographically dominate an ocean area as India dominates the Indian Ocean,” which leads to the question of how far this geographical preeminence is reflected in the political arena.⁸ India is a littoral state, like many others. However, she alone geographically projects “into” the Ocean, her long triangle wedge-shaped landmass extending some 1500 miles into the Indian Ocean. Her position is literally “pivotal” in the Indian Ocean.⁹ India is effectively “the only

viable link" between the various maritime zones of the Indian Ocean region, i.e. between the Malacca Straits, Andaman Sea, Bay of Bengal, Central Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea and its extensions in the Gulf and Red Sea.¹⁰ As Krishna Pant, Deputy Chairman Planning Commission, summed up, "the mainland Indian peninsula, surrounded by the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, thrusts deep into the Indian Ocean."¹¹ Thus, "our island territories are spread far and wide. . . the peninsula and island territories provide us with a vast, and expanding, "maritime space." Geographically, India lies astride the major Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) in the Indian Ocean, providing it with considerable strategic importance."¹² With a western coastline of around 1400 miles and an eastern coastline of around 2000 miles, India is uniquely positioned to face in both directions, and is thus able to seek to simultaneously control the Arabian Sea to the west and the Bay of Bengal to the east, as well as to look southwards deep into the Indian Ocean. India also has over 1000 islands and atolls, accounting for over 1300 miles of additional coastline. Under the Law of the Sea, India's huge coastline gives her an equally huge Exclusive Economic Zone, EEZ, of around 1.37 million square miles. Around 95 percent of India's external trade passes through the sea. With its 1 billion population, India has undeniable dreams and hopes of Great Power status for the 21st century.¹³ As a rising (Great) Power, India may indeed have hopes of its own hegemonic sphere, its own backyard of power and preeminence, i.e. "India's strategic location, size, and tremendous population have contributed to Indian leader's belief in its greatness, its preeminence in the Indian ocean region."¹⁴ In a word, geo-political destiny beckons.

In one sense, India's view of the Indian Ocean as being its ocean has always been there. Admittedly Gulab Hiranandani (2002), former Vice Chief of Naval Staff, argued, "India does not see that ocean as an "Indian Lake" and has never used that expression."¹⁵ However, there is a well-established tradition in Indian circles that has seen the Indian Ocean as India's ocean. British India dominated the Indian Ocean, and British strategists like Olaf Caroe (1944), on the eve of independence, envisaged a natural and inevitable continuing Indian preeminence, as the "central constellation from which others in the Indian Ocean in the long run are likely to radiate."¹⁶

Kavalam Panikkar, historian and diplomat, was one such oceanic figure.¹⁷ He famously stressed the importance of the Indian Ocean, in *India and the Indian Ocean* (1945), its subtitle, *An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power On Indian History* deliberately evokes Mahan's classic *The Influences of Sea Power Upon History* (1890). At the time, Panikkar was "perhaps the most important Indian exponent of a forward policy aimed at control of the Indian Ocean," leaving his legacy in "the 'blue water' thinking of Indian officers, who in training still [2005] read Panikkar's book."¹⁸ Acknowledging Mahan's argument on "the dominating role that sea power has played in shaping the course of world history,"

Panikkar went on to apply that to India.¹⁹ Thus, at a general level, Panikkar argued that “while to other countries, the Indian Ocean is only one of the important oceanic areas, to India it is the vital sea. . .The Indian Ocean must therefore remain truly Indian,” i.e. India’s ocean.²⁰

Looking back, the past was an inspiration for Panikkar: “to the Indian ocean, then we shall have to run as our ancestors did when they conquered Socotra (Sukhdara) in the Arabian Sea.”²¹ Looking around, the present was one where “Indian interests have extended to the different sides of this Oceanic area. . .Her interests in the Indian Ocean, based as they are on the inescapable facts of geography, have become more important than ever before.”²² Looking ahead, “the future of India will undoubtedly be decided on the sea.”²³ Panikkar argued that an “Oceanic Policy” for India was needed: “a steel ring can be created around India. . .within the area so ringed, a navy can be created strong enough to defend its homewaters, then the waters vital to India’s security and prosperity can be protected. . .with the islands of the Bay of Bengal with Singapore, Mauritius and Socotra, properly quipped and protected and with a navy based on Ceylon security can return to that part of the Indian Ocean which is of supreme importance to India.”²⁴ India’s interests spanned the waves, for “unless, therefore, distant bases like Singapore, Mauritius, Aden and Socotra are firmly held and the naval air arm developed in order to afford sufficient protection to these posts, there will be no security or safety for India.”²⁵ Consequently, there would be “the primary responsibility lying on the Indian Navy to guard the steel ring created by Singapore, Ceylon, Mauritius and Socotra.”²⁶ He also cautioned against the naval policy of a resurgent China. All of these considerations re-emerge for current Indian naval strategy.

Keshav Vaidya also had sweeping maritime hopes in *The Naval Defence of India* (1949), “even if we do not rule the waves of all the five oceans of the world, we must at least rule the waves of the Indian Ocean.”²⁷ His acknowledged inspiration was Mahan’s *Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, and Tunstall’s *Ocean Power Wins* (1944).²⁸ He emphasized that India should aim to be the supreme and undisputed power over the waters of the Indian Ocean, i.e. its *hegemon*: the “Indian Ocean must become an Indian Lake. That is to say India must be the supreme and undisputed power over the waters of the Indian Ocean. . .controlling the waves of that vast mass of water making the Indian Ocean and its two main offshoots, the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal.”²⁹ The “size” of the Indian Navy was to be built up, “developing an invincible navy (at least so far as the Indian Ocean is concerned). . .to defend not only her coast but her distant oceanic frontiers with her own navy.”³⁰ Its distance “range” was also to be increased, as “the points which must be within India’s control are not merely coastal, but oceanic, and far from the coast itself. . .our ocean frontiers are stretched far and wide in all directions,” where his geographical

vistas were similarly wide as Panikkar's had been, for "these ocean frontiers extend as far as Sumatra and Malacca Straits in the east, including all territories within that limit. In the west, India's frontiers extend up to the Cape of Good Hope, Madagascar, Mauritius, Socotra, Aden and the Persian Gulf. In the south, there is the grand expanse of the sea, and India would be required to maintain a constant vigil by means of floating bases and floating castles (like battleships and aircraft carriers) to watch that limitless frontier."³¹ In short, a large bluewater long-range navy was needed.

Consequently, Vaidya argued for the creation of three self-sufficient and fully-fledged fleets to be stationed at the Andamans in the Bay of Bengal, at Trincomalee in Ceylon and at Mauritius deep in the Indian Ocean. Like Panikkar, he advocated a whole ring of Indian naval bases, outside India, spanning the Ocean. To the east, that would specifically mean Singapore, Penang, Mergui peninsular, Rangoon, Akyab, Chittagong, Jaffna and Trincomalee and to the west, Colombo, Karachi (!), Oman, Muscat, Aden, Mombassa, Mozambique, Laurencos Marques, and the Cape of Good Hope. To the south at the various island chains, notably the Maldives, Chagos islands (including Diego Garcia), the Seychelles, Mauritius and Madagascar. Like Panikkar, he also thought that "China... cannot be neglected" as a potential future challenger and rival in the Indian Ocean.³² If India did pursue a path of maritime power, he reckoned that "the Indian Navy will further attain for India a position of the foremost rank amongst the nations of the world in deciding world affairs."³³ Singh could well argue that this was "moins une analyse de l'environnement maritime de l'Inde qu'un plaidoyer pour la construction d'une marine absolument hors de proportion avec les possibilités de l'Inde."³⁴ These possibilities were not to be realized under India's first leader, Jawaharlal Nehru, though they have resurfaced for the 21st century.

In theory, Nehru gave weight to India's potential role in the Indian Ocean as India moved to independence. He argued (1946) for a permanent UN Security Council seat for India, "demanded by her geographical position, by her great potential and by the fact that she is the pivot round which the defence problems of the Middle East, the Indian Ocean and South-east Asia revolve... this dominant position."³⁵ Elsewhere (1946) came his vision of an India as the "center of economic and political activity in the Indian Ocean, in South-east Asia and right up to the Middle East."³⁶ Consequently, Nehru (1948) considered, "anything that happens in the whole Indian Ocean region, affects and is affected by India. It simply cannot help it."³⁷ India's first Chief of Naval Staff, within 10 days of independence, submitted a 10-year plan for naval expansion to bring India "to a position of preeminence and leadership among the nations of South-east Asia."³⁸ Sardar Patel (1948), the "Iron Man" and Deputy Prime Minister, also used maritime language, that "the geographical position and features of India make it inevitable for India to have... a strong navy to guard its long coastline and to

keep a constant vigil on the vast expanse of the sea that surrounds us.”³⁹ These were strong words, from Nehru’s strong man.

However, such Indian Ocean rhetoric was not translated into practice. There was to be no strong Indian navy in Nehru’s India. Instead, economic constraints and other military priorities meant that the Indian Ocean quickly became relegated in India’s strategic horizons and spending plans. Vaidya (1949) could well ask “why this apathy?” towards the Navy.⁴⁰ In part it was a question of public perceptions: “our young men think only of the army and now the airforce, generally the former; but they hardly think about the navy. . .our elders hardly think about the sea.”⁴¹ In part it was the “studied indifference” on the part of the government over the role for the Indian Navy: “we have made no plans for a full-fledged naval defence of India.”⁴² Nehru’s logic in 1950 was, “we have to concentrate more on the other defence arms. The navy should be small but highly trained and capable of expansion when the time comes for it.”⁴³ The time for any significant expansion never really came under Nehru. India was, and remained, weak at sea under Nehru.

India’s strategic orientation remained towards the South Asian landmass, towards Pakistan and then China. India’s navy remained on the margins, focussed on secondary (land support) operations northwards against Pakistan. Under Nehru, India’s navy was the “Cinderella” service, very much the junior branch of the Armed Forces. It was indeed “remarkable how little attention was paid to the Indian Ocean in the two decades following independence. . .India’s defense planning made little provision for oceanic defense. The Indian navy was the most neglected branch of the armed services.”⁴⁴ Moreover the Indian Navy was not even Indian-led, the first decade of independence seeing “British” Chiefs of Naval Staff, i.e. John Hall (1947–48), William Parry (1948–51), Mark Pizey (1951–56), and Stephen Carlill (1956–58). It was only in August 1958, 11 years after independence, that Ram Dass Katari’s appointment brought an “Indian” Chief of Naval Staff for the Indian Navy. India’s purchase in 1957 of the British aircraft carrier, *HMS Hercules*, and recommissioning in 1961 as *INS Vikrant*, was the exception to the general rule of neglect of the Indian Navy. However, within the overall strategic deliberations, there remained a noticeable sidelining of India’s navy and of Indian Ocean maritime horizons. Instead there was continuing emphasis on India’s army and its Himalayan/Hindukush land horizons by its predominantly continental elite. Nehru may have said in 1958 “we cannot afford to be weak at sea,” but that was precisely what she was.⁴⁵

Defence spending figures were telling enough. India’s first three years of independence (1948–1951) saw the navy’s allocation bumping along at 4.7–4.8 percent of India’s defence budget. Under Nehru, it peaked to a still low 10.1 percent share of the defence budget in 1955–57, only to slip back to single figure 9.7 percent in 1957–58, with a further slump to 7.9 percent in

1961–62.⁴⁶ India's naval weakness was evident in the 1960s, suffering "neglect" and being "a troubled period for the navy."⁴⁷ Indeed, naval spending hit an all-time low of 3.4 percent in 1963–64, in the wake of the war with China in 1962. Its role in the 1965 war with Pakistan was passive and ineffectual. The 1965 conflict with Pakistan was a land campaign; the navy failed to take on the Pakistan navy or even to successfully blockade. Instead, it was shown up by a successful Pakistani naval bombardment of Dwakar.

Admittedly, Britain's announcement of its "East of Suez" military withdrawal brought comments from India's then Chief of Naval Staff, Adhar Chatterji (1968), on India's navy assuming "total charge of the Indian ocean."⁴⁸ In Pakistan, warnings were made about India, that "its ambitions to become the dominant naval force in the Indian ocean after Britain's withdrawal from the area have in recent years been, and continue to be a source of anxiety to all of India's small neighbours" (*Dawn*, 2 June 1970). Ravi Kaul (1969) mused about "the projection of power southwards by a militant India;" i.e. "a vacuum of power is forming in the Indian Ocean area," in which "India is most strategically the most favourably situated in the area" and "that our interests demand we assemble sufficient power to fill the vacuum before some other country."⁴⁹ Here, in retrospect, it is significant that Kaul perceived China's "major drive to the shores of the Indian Ocean through South East Asia."⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Kaul recognised that "to fulfil India's requirements for filling the vacuum in the Indian Ocean it shall be necessary to strengthen the Indian fleet... far more rapidly than is currently planned."⁵¹ That was not forthcoming. Instead it was the USA that filled the vacuum left by the British withdrawal from the Indian Ocean, with its central base at Diego Garcia operating since 1973. Conversely, India remained land-focussed with the emphasis on the navy. The Indian Ocean was not a priority area for India, and neither was its navy. Its lowly allocation of 4.9 percent of India's defence budget in 1968 reflected this. The army ruled the roost, with its advocates like Major-General D.K. Palit (1969) denouncing navy expansion and projection into the Indian Ocean as "outmoded Imperial concepts."⁵²

Nevertheless, the 1971 "Bangladesh" conflict with Pakistan saw a greater role played by the Indian navy. India's naval staff was determined not to suffer the humiliation and sidelining of 1965. Successful blockades and bombardments were carried out on both flanks, westwards in the Arabian Sea and eastwards in the Bay of Bengal, with the sea lines of communication between the two wings of Pakistan also being cut. The Soviet Union's "Mahan," Admiral Gorshkov, was particularly struck by India's successful naval missile attacks on Karachi, later praising it in his own classic work *The Sea Power of the State* (1979). These activities by the Indian Navy showed India's key geographical position and projection in the whole region, able to operate in all directions, east, south and west, albeit immediately adjacent to India rather than in terms of long

range projection. Nevertheless, although 1971 saw some of India's naval potential unlocked and applied, her ship building/purchasing remained modest. The navy started the decade allocated only 6.6 percent of India's defence budget in 1969–70, and was still at a low 8.8 percent in 1979–80. For Palmer (1972) India was “still a relatively weak naval power,” only a “localized one” operating in its immediate coastal waters.⁵³ On retiring, former Chief of Naval Staff, Sourendra Kohli's book *Sea Power and the Indian Ocean* (1978) juxtaposed grand Mahanian possibilities against India's modest maritime power. For Larus (1981) the Indian Navy still remained “the neglected service.”⁵⁴ Super-power rivalry in the Indian Ocean was conducted over India's head. As Tellis judged (1985) India may have had clear naval superiority over Pakistan, and there were the Indian “navy's ambitious power projection goals” further afield; but “if the Indian Navy seriously contemplates power projection missions in the Indian Ocean, such a fleet is inadequate. . .it has neither the balance nor the required offensive punch to maintain zones of influence.”⁵⁵ Namboodiri (1986) similarly judged that “India's present and projected naval capability is inadequate” to project power and assistance to the Seychelles, Comoros and Mauritius.⁵⁶ The Indian navy still somewhat languished, enjoying the dubious title (1986) of the “Sick Lady.”⁵⁷

On the other hand, India's alignment with the Soviet Union facilitated some Indian expansion of its fleet in the mid-1980s. From a low share of 8-odd percent of the defence budget in the early 1980s, 1985–86 saw it given 12.5 percent. Moreover, in May 1986, the government purchased *HMS Hermes*, recommissioning her as *INS Viraat* in May 1987. India now had two aircraft carriers, *Vikrant* and *Viraat*, for the first time giving her the ability for simultaneous carrier operations in her western and eastern theatres. Rajiv Gandhi showed a more assertive use of naval power in the following couple of years, Sri Lanka in 1987 and the Maldives in 1988. Here, Tanham (1991) had found that “outside approval of Indian actions in the Maldives and Sri Lanka especially pleased the Indians, since it implies recognition and endorsement of India's peacekeeping role and its status in the region.”⁵⁸ 1988–91 also saw India obtaining a Soviet Charlie-class nuclear submarine from the Soviet Union, recommissioned as *INS Chakra*. A greater sense of India's maritime potential seems to have become more widely felt. For former Chief of Naval Staff, Sourendra Kohli (1989), it was a question of “geopolitical and strategic considerations that necessitate the expansion and modernization of the Indian Navy,” with 1989–90 seeing naval allocation increased to 13.5 percent of the defence budget, and a 25-year Naval Modernisation programme announced in 1990.⁵⁹ As Tanham's (1991) discussions revealed, “gaining recognition of India's status in the region. . .plays a pivotal role in Indian strategic thinking. Indeed external recognition and validation of India's place is almost as important as having that status.”⁶⁰ Thus, “India unquestionably

dominates the Indian Ocean region, but Indians are greatly frustrated by the failure of external powers to acknowledge this fact. While the Indian government showed considerable embarrassment over the international attention to its naval buildup and insisted that it had no offensive designs in the region, some Indians were gratified that outsiders were beginning to pay attention to India's regional status."⁶¹ Perception entwined with power.

However, there were limitations. Though spending figures for the navy were up, it was still a relatively low share of the defence budget. There was still a sense of passiveness, of responding to events, of piecemeal outlooks. As Tanham (1991) correctly pointed out, "no authoritative government statement exists on Indian naval strategy."⁶² India's presence was still weak in the further reaches of the Indian Ocean. Ironically, though, her naval increases had raised fears in other smaller and medium sized states in the region, creating classic "security dilemma dynamics."⁶³ This may well have played a part in China's own expansion of naval forces.⁶⁴ Conversely, Tanham (1991) also noted, "Indian naval advocates especially fear a Chinese naval presence in the area."⁶⁵

India's modest 1980s naval expansion was not sustained; instead, "the eighties established no pattern, they were an aberration" with the 1990s seeing economic turndown and "a major setback to the modernization and expansion plans of the Navy."⁶⁶ Roy-Chaudhury (1996) saw the previous talk of naval modernisation as having been "much-publicised, often exaggerated," overtaken by reduced supplies and spending.⁶⁷ Spending figures, as a percent ratio, drifted downwards again within the defence budget. From its previous modest peak of 13.5 percent in 1989–90, it went down to 12.7 percent in 1990–91 and down again to 11.2 percent in 1992–93. The 25-year naval modernisation programme "ran out of steam" during the 90s; by the mid-90s "India's fleet improvements had long since ceased and the navy's function almost forgotten."⁶⁸ The collapse of the Soviet Union disrupted India's most significant source of equipment and ships. Further stagnation was apparent, as no new warships were commissioned for almost ten years (1988–1997). India's navy was actually shrinking in size and aging, as older ships were decommissioned but not replaced. It was this mid-1990s languishing that prompted Pugh (1996) to argue, "as India has found, it may not be feasible for developing states to sustain a Mahanian momentum."⁶⁹ In terms of its "frigates and destroyers" the figures had peaked but then declined, i.e. 1976 (31), early 1980s (32), 1989 (44), 1995 (40), 1996 (24). The decommissioning of *INS Vikrant* in 1997 reduced her aircraft carrier component back to one, *INS Viraat*. Most of the Soviet *Foxtrot* class submarines were also retired that year.

In the early 1990s, naval figures were concerned and vociferous about this neglect. Chief of Naval Staff, Jayant Nadkarni's sense in 1990 was that "we have failed to look southward...it is necessary for her [India] to also

project a complementary image of military power in the region.”⁷⁰ On the one hand, for Kailash Kohli (1993), Commander of the Western Fleet, “India’s maritime interests extend well beyond her coastal seas and cover the vast reaches of the Indian Ocean.”⁷¹ Yet, though he felt “the opportunities for India to mould the strategic environment in her own favour lie substantially towards the seas and not toward the mountain-barried North,” he acknowledged that public state of awareness lagged behind, that Mahanian-style naval “power projection. . . is not adequately understood by large sections of our countrymen.”⁷² Nevertheless, for the future, “India, therefore, has no choice but to develop the maritime where-withal to ensure the security of her wide-ranging maritime interests. . . our maritime security capabilities have all to be built up.”⁷³ His fellow mariner, Vice-Admiral Chopra (1993), former Vice-Chief of Naval Staff, citing Mahan’s theme of “sea control” lamented how “our mental framework is obsessed with military threats from across our land frontiers” and thereby was missing how “our vast shoreline is a constant reminder of the power, wealth and influence that lie within reach of those who care to use it.”⁷⁴ His remedy was a “clear-cut and assertive maritime policy” by India.⁷⁵ This would enable India as “a predominant regional power. . . to play a greater role in settling geo-political issues of the littoral states.”⁷⁶ The Indian Ocean was where India’s sphere lay: “India’s economic development and international status will however grow in direct proportion to our ability to mould the environment in the troubled sea in the South and not the mountain barrier in the North.”⁷⁷ Former Commander of the Western Fleet, Manohar Awati’s (1993) remedy was equally simple. Invoking “principles of sea-power, described by Admiral A.T. Mahan,” he called for “a policy of Naval expansion,” including geo-cultural links with Mauritius, Reunion, the Seychelles and the Maldives.⁷⁸ For Radhakrishna Tahiliani (1994), former Chief of Naval Staff, “the defence of Indian maritime assets in a vastly extended area of sea is imperative for the prosperity of the nation. This can be ensured only by. . . Indian naval power.”⁷⁹

Admittedly, India’s Ministry of Defence was asserting in 1996–97 that “India has a vital stake too in the security and stability of the littoral and Island States of the Indian Ocean region. India’s maritime security is dependent on its capability to effectively patrol, monitor, and counter illegal activities in this region, be they attempted by national entities or by sub-national groups.”⁸⁰ Unfortunately for India, its “capability to effectively patrol” and enforce in the Indian Ocean had been undermined by a general rundown of naval capacity during the previous decade. As Nadkarni (1996) put it, there was a double bind on India, its defence budget “stagnated for the past six years” and ever increasing shipbuilding/purchasing costs, leading the navy to be “caught in the vice-like jaws of the Graph of Absurdity,” for which “an increase in the defence budget is the inevitable answer.”⁸¹ Tanham (1996) felt that “Indians can visualise a threat from the Chinese navy which has already ventured into the Indian Ocean,” whilst

"Indian naval planners are concerned that people do not appreciate how much time and effort [and finance?] are needed to develop the navy they believe India will need in the 21st century."⁸² Jaswant Singh from the opposition Bharat Janata Party noted at the start of 1998, "today the Indian navy faces a crisis in terms of its rapidly declining force levels. . .repercussions that will extend to at least the next 25 years."⁸³ A naval crisis was apparent as the 21st century beckoned.

Ironically, the election of his Hindu nationalist BJP party to government in March 1998, and its strong defence policies, reversed this neglect. Naval spending increased within an expanding defence budget. Its first budget for 1989–99 gave a 14 percent increase in overall defence spending, within which the navy received a still bigger increase of 17 percent, bringing its overall share of the defence budget up to a new high of 14.5 percent. There was a sense of the key strategic space to be won or lost in the Indian Ocean, to be controlled by India or controlled by others. In this reshaping of India's foreign policy, "Neo-Curzonians" reemphasised India's outward projection, the hub of power around the Indian Ocean, as in the days of Curzon and of British dominance of the Indian Ocean based around its power base of India.⁸⁴ The *Strategic Defence Review: The Maritime Dimension – A Naval Vision* (May 1998), an internal study by the Navy, quickly emphasised naval growth in the strongest terms, feeling that "the Indian Navy must have sufficient maritime power not only to be able to defend and further India's maritime interests, but also to deter a military maritime challenge posed by any littoral nation, or combination of littoral nations of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), and also to be able to significantly raise the threshold of intervention or coercion by extra-regional powers."⁸⁵ The latter was aimed at China in particular. Indeed, "the Indian Navy must be increasingly used to support national diplomatic initiatives in the region and beyond. . .Given the global, military and regional realities that India faces and the enormity of its maritime interests and threats. . .India's maritime strategy should be to consolidate its maritime power over the next 25 years" and thereby establish its preeminence, if not hegemony.⁸⁶

One early sign of maritime renewal was the confrontation with Pakistan in 1999. Land setbacks in Kargil were offset by successful naval deployments against Karachi and the Pakistani coastline. The Indian Navy deployed frigates, destroyers and submarines within striking range of Karachi harbour, through which more than 90 percent of Pakistan's trade, including oil supplies, were being received. The Indian fleet's manoeuvres in the Arabian Sea resulted in Pakistan's fleet being shackled to its immediate coastline. Pakistan considered the Indian Navy about to enforce a quarantine or blockade of Karachi and prevent the supply of oil from the Persian Gulf. Islamabad was not keen to open another front for itself against the Indian military and so chose to withdraw from Kargil. Indian naval projection had been tangible and successful. An assertive Indian naval projection was also noticeable during the 2001–2002 war

scare with Pakistan. More than a dozen warships including the aircraft carrier *INS Viraat* were deployed in an offensive posture, fully armed and carrying out regular patrolling in the Arabian Sea. Five warships from the Eastern Fleet were also rushed to the Arabian Sea to contribute to the naval build up. The Navy was in a high state of alert in the shortest ever time frame. The high operational availability of its material assets i.e. ships, submarines, aircraft, naval support infrastructure was amply demonstrated.

Politicians have been ready to wave maritime flags as a new century opened up. Having become foreign minister in the new BJP government, Jaswant Singh publicly announced in Singapore (June 2000) that “India’s parameters of security concerns clearly extend beyond confines of the convenient albeit questionable geographical definition of South Asia. . .given its size, geographic allocation, trade links and the EEZ, India’s security environment and therefore potential concerns range from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca in the West.”⁸⁷ The next year, when visiting the USA, he was similarly asserting, “for a long time, India has not been seen in its true dimensions. How many people know that Indonesia is only 65 miles from the southernmost Indian island? . . .or that the legal tender of Kuwait till 1938 was the [Indian] rupee? So when we talk about Indonesia. . .or the Gulf, it is because of our interest and our sphere of influence” across the waters.⁸⁸ This was very much the government line, with the Ministry of Defence (2001) similarly announcing, “India’s parameters of security clearly extend well beyond the confines of its conventional geographical land borders. Given its size, location, trade links and extensive Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), India’s security environment extends from the Persian Gulf in the west to the Straits of Malacca in the east. . .to the Equator in the south.”⁸⁹ As Singh noted, this gave “a pan-Indian Ocean perspective to India’s maritime strategy.”⁹⁰ “The Defence Minister, George Fernandes, warned (2001) that “there is need for the Navy to keep the sea lanes free and secure” and went on to note, “India’s strategic space in the seas and oceans around us is rich in minerals like hydrocarbons.”⁹¹ He was also keen to get construction started of a new deep water, long-range naval port at Karwar. By the start of the century India’s growing strength was being noticed by states, in particular its rivals. As the *Beijing Review* noted (2001), “India has further strengthened its control of the Indian Ocean. . .at present, the Indian navy has a complete array of warships and has become the greatest maritime force in the Indian Ocean region.”⁹² Analysts were struck by this naval emphasis. Farrer (2002) talked of “India moving to dominate Indian Ocean” and Raghuvanshi (2003) described the Vajpayee government “20-year programme to become a world power whose influence is felt across the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Gulf, and all of Asia.”⁹³

Military figures joined the politicians in asserting India’s maritime interests. Long-term vision was shown at the start of 2000 by the then Chief of Naval Staff,

Sushil Kumar, that "in my view the continentalist era is over and the next millennium will witness the dawning of a new maritime period. I believe that during the next century India will realise her potential as a full-fledged maritime nation and that India's maritime dimension will decisively shape our country's destiny in the years ahead."⁹⁴ More immediately, he acknowledged at the end of 2000 that "it is only this [BJP] government that has correctly appreciated the role and requirement of maritime power in an age of globalisation. . . India's national interest had been made coterminous with maritime security," and with it the establishment of the Indian Ocean as "India's Ocean."⁹⁵ The previous day he had been asserting, "the Indian Navy will have to be the enabling instrument of the nation in the Indian Ocean. We will have to show that in the maritime dimension India's interests are protected. We are the stabilising force in the region. We are monitoring our interests."⁹⁶ Commodore Ranjit Rai's *Indian Navy in the 21st Century* (2003) started by citing Mahan passages on *Seapower* before concluding, that "geographically India juts into the Indian Ocean and the three functions of its Navy—to be a war fighting force, an effective constabulary policeman in the area as well as contribute to benign and coercive diplomacy in the littoral, has gained relevance and strategic importance."⁹⁷ "Coercive diplomacy" was a striking phrase to use.

Mahan is firmly entrenched as an inspiration for India for the coming century, and his actual (or supposed) words thus cited are considered axiomatic. The South Asia Foundation (2000) judged that "the prophetic observation of Alfred T. Mahan that 'Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominated Asia. The ocean is the Key to seven seas. In the 21st century the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters' it appears are proving to be true."⁹⁸ Commodore Rai's (2001) call was for India "to move into the Indian Ocean. . . this too cannot be wished away as India takes its place in the Indian Ocean—for it was Mahan who said, "Whoever controls the India Ocean controls the world in the 21st century". . . Good or bad, it cannot be wished away and so India must ride the tide well as it is on the rise and it is High Tide time."⁹⁹ Parliament could be told (2003) that "in the 19th century, Admiral Mahan of the United States of America had predicted: 'Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas. In the twenty first century the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters;'" with his current relevance being that "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 our very survival and development we will increasingly depend on oceans, particularly the Indian Ocean in the centuries ahead."¹⁰⁰ Yet again Mahan's supposed prediction was used as a spur to Indian policy orientation and government spending.

Anil Singh's look at *India's Security Concerns in the Indian Ocean Region* (2003) had its opening chapter header also citing "Mahan," that "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. . . this ocean is the key to seven seas in

the 20th century. The destiny of the world will be decided on its water.”¹⁰¹ Singh’s opening chapter repeatedly evoked Mahanian *seapower* strategy as applicable for the Indian Ocean. Gaurang Bhatt (2005) argued “projecting power requires a strong blue water navy as Admiral Mahan first surmised for America more than a century ago. The dominance of the seas by Athens, the Portuguese, Britain and America should teach us the value of being a naval power. . .to project our power. . .[in] the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean.”¹⁰² Arun Prakash (2005), Chief of Naval Staff, considers, “over a century ago, the famous American maritime strategist, Admiral Mahan had stated, ‘Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia.’ He further went on to predict ‘. . .in the 21st century the destiny of the world will be decided upon its waters.’ Today that prediction appears to be coming true.”¹⁰³

Pugh’s “State Naval Power” could come into operation as the state put an expanding economy behind a strong naval programme. A serious building and purchasing programme has reshaped the Indian navy. A brownwater localised fleet is being transformed into a long-range oceanic going bluewater fleet. Consequently, the Indian Navy’s first-ever International Fleet Review in Mumbai (February 2001) was seen as “the Indian Navy’s coming out party.”¹⁰⁴ The large Indian contingent of 55 ships was headed by its aircraft carrier *INS Viraat*, for Chief of Naval Staff, Shushil Kumar, “an opportunity to showcase India’s maritime potential.”¹⁰⁵ Analysts were forthright, for Joseph it was “a stunning show of India’s naval and air power,” for Mazumdar “the underlying message was that India was no longer aspiring to be a regional power, rather it wished to be recognized as THE regional power in the Indian Ocean.”¹⁰⁶ Despite its own absence, and general concerns over India’s burgeoning ambitions and capabilities in the Indian Ocean, China admitted it was a “magnificent” Fleet Review.¹⁰⁷ India’s naval spending increased to a high of 17 percent of the defence budget in 2003. Though older ships are being decommissioned, with some numeric decline, a result of the “lost decade” in construction/purchasing of 1985–96, significant numbers of newer higher quality ships are now coming into the Indian navy, through purchasing from abroad and from India’s own construction industry.

India’s aircraft carrier programme is one potent symbol of India’s presence, “as a priceless tool of power projection,” and as part of “India’s massive naval ambitions.”¹⁰⁸ As Bhullar argued in 1999, which Mahan evoked often, “‘The Indian Ocean is the key to the seven seas; whoever controls it dominates Asia and, in the 21st century, the world’s destiny will be decided on its waters,’ said the famous naval strategist Alfred Mahan. To exercise any control over the Indian Ocean, it is imperative to retain a firm naval presence in the region and for this, we need an effective carrier arm.”¹⁰⁹ In such a vein, *INS Viraat* will be joined by the *Admiral Gorshkov* obtained from Russia in 2004 and under refit for service in 2007/2008 as *INS Vikramaditya*.

Admittedly, one former Chief of Naval Staff, Jayant Nadkarni (2001), considered the *Admiral Gorshkov* as something of a "white elephant."¹¹⁰ However his voice was a minority one. Former Rear-Admiral Raja Menon (2003) considered that "with a GDP larger than the nations of the Indian Ocean littoral combined, an Indian maritime strategy has always been oceanic," within which "the carrier with its high visibility will be an important tool. . .it will seek to impress powers of the Indian Ocean littoral. . .extend India's reach into the Indian Ocean beyond our common coastline and exert force where necessary."¹¹¹ In terms of strategic culture, the purchase of such a powerful aircraft carrier helps "in getting New Delhi out of its traditional continental mindset. India's future lies with South East Asia and in the Indian Ocean."¹¹² Similarly, Kailash Kohli (2003) thought, "Gorshkov will represent a quantum jump for our maritime capability, and will. . .make our navy a force to be reckoned with in the Indian Ocean."¹¹³ The importance of the purchase was widely accepted in the Indian media, typified in Bhattacharyya's *India Must Rule the Waves* (2004) and his stress that "India's carrier force gives the country both its flag and force, to show the former and use the latter, should the need arise. Considered not long ago to be a luxury, the carrier's role as a force-multiplier in a turbulent ocean is now a necessity" for India.¹¹⁴ Analysts like Matthews (2000), despite his cautions over their expense and operational challenges, acknowledged that "the emerging geo-politico-strategic imperatives over the next couple of decades will leave India with no option but to maintain a sustained presence in different parts of the Indian Ocean to safeguard critical interests. It will be impossible to conceive and execute such tasks at great distances from the land without the help of tactical air power at sea. In India's case, aircraft carriers are the best bet for the job" of ensuring India's presence and preeminence in the Indian Ocean.¹¹⁵

Indeed, a three aircraft carrier fleet is envisaged, an indigenously built aircraft carrier to be known as the Air Defence Ship, or ADS, having been approved by the Government in January 2003, with construction work starting in 2005, alongside further speculation about purchasing *HMS Invincible* from the UK.¹¹⁶ As Chief of Naval Staff, Madhvendra Singh (2004) noted, "India should ideally have at least three aircraft carriers. . .This demand has been accepted" by the state.¹¹⁷ His predecessor as Chief of Naval Staff, Shishil Kumar, had explained in 1999, that three new carriers would establish the Indian Navy as a "bluewater Navy, with fleets in the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, and Indian Ocean, on the same lines as the US Pacific, Atlantic, and Mediterranean fleets."¹¹⁸ The strategic comparisons for India were no longer regional rivals like Pakistan, but rather a superpower like the United States, a power with its own hegemonic spheres, to which India could also aspire with regard to the Indian Ocean.

Other aspects of India's power capacity in the Indian Ocean have been significantly increased in the past few years. *INS Brahmaputra*, launched in

April 2003, represents a new Delhi-class missile frigate with major high-technology components manufactured in India. In 2003, the Navy also took delivery from Russia of *INS Talwar* and *INS Trishul*, armed with sophisticated missile systems, followed in 2004 by *INS Tabar*. These three high-tech stealth frigates constitute a task force to be centred on the aircraft carrier *INS Vikramaditya*. 2004 also saw BrahMo cruise missiles Prithvi-III medium range sea to land missiles successfully tested. The *Gorshkov* aircraft carrier deal also included lease purchase of two advanced Russian *Akula* Class Type 971 nuclear-powered submarines and four Tu-22M strategic bomber/maritime strike aircraft. Further ambitious acquisition plans announced by India in December 2005 were seen as a “blueprint for Indian Ocean dominance.”¹¹⁹ Such spending meant official pride in “this new and resurgent Indian navy. . . visible maritime power with a demonstrated ability to operate throughout the nations’ maritime areas of interest,” where “a bright and exciting future can be clearly discerned, stretching from horizon to horizon and merging throughout, into the glory that is India.”¹²⁰

Various elements of India’s defence forces have been strengthened in order to extend India’s geographical reach. In April 2000, the Indian Navy commissioned a 24,000 ton fleet replenishment tanker, the *INS Aditya*. A low profile acquisition, this tanker, which can double as a command platform, is a necessary component for a naval force to operate for long periods of time at sea, i.e. into the Indian Ocean. A “critical advance” was the purchase in 2003 of Il-78 aerial tanker aircraft, New Delhi’s first of the type, which have enabled the deployment of Indian Air force units across the Indian Ocean to South Africa, and indeed out into the Pacific as far as Alaska!¹²¹ Meanwhile with regard again to aircraft carriers, *INS Vikramaditya*’s range of nearly 14,000 nautical miles, in contrast to the 5000 nautical miles range of *Viraat*, will represent “a massive boost in reach” for her aircraft carrier projection.¹²² At the *Daily Excelsior* (Janipura), “clearly the aircraft carrier is a weapons system for those with imperial ambitions, who wish to wage war far away from their mainland” and deep in and across the Indian Ocean.¹²³

Theory (strategy) has underpinned this burgeoning naval expenditure (application and implementation), and vice versa. This was evident in the official 148-page *Indian Maritime Doctrine* (April 2004), a long-term report drafted by the BJP government and re-affirmed by the new Congress government that came into office in May 2004. The *Indian Maritime Doctrine* was a forward looking forceful ambitious document, with its talk of India’s “maritime destiny,” and its “maritime vision” developed in its sections on “Geo-Strategic Imperatives for India” and “India’s Maritime Interest.”¹²⁴ It set the benchmark for India’s current “Mahanian vision.”¹²⁵ It put forward the need for a sea-based nuclear deterrent.¹²⁶ It also revised the naval posture, moving it away from one of coastal protection to a more assertive competitive strategy for dominating the Indian Ocean Region. A

proactive role was envisaged for the Indian navy, enabling it to counter distant emerging threats and protect sea-lanes of communication through and from the Indian Ocean, "an exposition of power projection beyond the Indian shores."¹²⁷ The need to "police" the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean was asserted. In classic Mahan style the *Indian Maritime Doctrine* focussed on the need to control "choke points, important islands and vital trade routes." It was also one in which "navies are characterized by the degree to which they can exercise presence, and the efficacy of a navy is determined by the ability of the political establishment of the state to harness this naval presence in the pursuit of larger national objectives. . . the Indian maritime vision for the first quarter of the 21st century must look at the arc from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca as a legitimate area of interest."¹²⁸ Its scope was wide, envisaging possible "conflict with [an] extra-regional power [i.e. China] and protecting persons of Indian origin [e.g. in Mauritius] and interest abroad." Consequently, naval diplomacy was pinpointed as one of the primary tasks of the Indian Navy during peacetime. It was, in effect, "a sort of mini "Monroe Doctrine," to safeguard India's interests in the Indian Ocean."¹²⁹

Whilst the BJP party lost the 2004 election, its replacement by a Congress-led government under Manohman Singh made no difference to this growing engagement with the Indian Ocean. BJP Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee had told the 2003 Combined Services Conference, "the strategic frontiers of today's India, grown in international stature, have expanded well beyond confines of South Asia. . . Our security environment ranges from the Persian Gulf to Straits of Malacca across the Indian Ocean. . . and South-East Asia. Our strategic thinking has also to extend to these horizons."¹³⁰ In front of that same audience, the new administration under Manohman Singh (October 2004) reiterated the same message, that "our strategic footprint covers the region bounded by the Horn of Africa, West Asia. . . South-East Asia and beyond, to the far reaches of the Indian Ocean. Awareness of this reality should inform and animate our strategic thinking and defence planning."¹³¹ Indeed, India's maritime aspirations were recognised in the *New Army Doctrine* (October 2004) in which "by virtue of her size and strategic location in the Indian Ocean region, India is expected to play her rightful [i.e. leading, naval] role to ensure peace and stability in it."¹³² The following year (October 2005), Manohman Singh was still emphasising that "we also have a vital stake in the security of the sea lanes to our east and west. The Indian Navy therefore must expand its capability to protect these sea lanes."¹³³ Other Indian politicians were equally clear. In the Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee's words (2005), "our strategic location astride the major sea lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean makes us a dominant maritime player in this region."¹³⁴ As the Foreign Minister (February 2006) put it, "geography imparts a unique position to India in the geo-politics of the Asian continent,

with our footprint reaching well beyond South Asia. . .from the Persian Gulf to the straits of Malacca. It is this geopolitical reality.”¹³⁵

Such talk of “footprints” became standard terminology in the Indian Navy, so much that, for example, in 2005 “Indian ships have comprehensively established their footprint in areas of our maritime and strategic interest in the Indian Ocean Region.”¹³⁶ Joint naval exercises took place with the Iranian navy in 2003 following their *Memorandum on Strategic Cooperation*. A 3-week, 6-ship deployment by the Indian navy was carried out in the Gulf during September 2004. Joint naval exercises with the Russian fleet in 2003 and with the French fleet in 2005 took place in the Gulf of Aden. To the southwest, Indian destroyers were deployed in Mozambique to patrol the African summit meeting in 2003, as were destroyers in 2004 to cover the World Economic Forum. 2006 saw a *Memorandum of Understanding* between India and Mozambique committing India to regular patrols of the Mozambique Channel. Madagascar was the scene for India setting up a high tech monitoring station on its northern coastline in 2006.¹³⁷ Indian ships also became a regular feature in Mauritius, with agreement for India to monitor its Exclusive Economic Zone in 2003 and 2005.¹³⁸ Similar arrangements were made with the Seychelles, with their *Memorandum of Understanding* drawn up in 2003, for India to patrol her territorial waters. Combined naval drills with South Africa were carried out in 2005. India’s setting up of a third Antarctica station in February 2006 saw even more extended maritime deployment into the farthest southern reaches of the Indian Ocean. For the anonymous Indian writer of *The Defense of India’s Waters* (2006) “India now needs to look ahead to the Antarctic given. . .that continent’s geostrategic value. . .India will need to aggressively assert its presence in the region. . .more needs to be done. . .on a continent that can influence the military configuration in the south Indian Ocean.”¹³⁹

In the other direction, India’s presence towards Southeast Asia and its *Look East* policy of the 1990s has been strengthened. April 2002 saw Indian ships escorting US shipping through the Malacca Straits, acting as the local “watchdog” for that key entry point into the Indian Ocean.¹⁴⁰ India’s existing naval links with Singapore, operating since 1994, were strengthened with a full Defence Cooperation Treaty in 2003. Indeed, a disquieting development for China has been India’s readiness to take their naval rivalry into China’s own maritime backyard. Consequently, Indian naval units have been sent through the Malacca Straits in order to carry out naval exercises in the South China Seas with Vietnam (2000) and Singapore (2005) and even further east with Japan (2001).¹⁴¹ Indian observers, but not Chinese, attended American-led RIMPAC naval exercises in 2005 and 2006, with a view to probable future participation. Meanwhile, within the Indian Ocean, the tsunami disaster of December 2004 saw wide-ranging and effective deployment by the Indian navy around the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, naval diplomacy that showed India’s capabilities in no

uncertain terms.¹⁴² Such activities were noticed by analysts, i.e. (2004) a "reinvigorated activism" by the Indian Navy, where (2005) "the Indian Navy is proving to be the most forward looking force amongst the three services in extending India's power and diplomacy abroad. . .cruising all over the Indian Ocean and exercising in the middle and far eastern seas and off Cochin simultaneously."¹⁴³

Such simultaneous operations have been facilitated by the way in which India's domestic naval infrastructure has been considerably beefed up. 2005 saw two milestones. In the western quadrant, a new operational naval command *INS Kadamba*, the "Southern Command," was set up at in Karwar. Part of *Operation Seabird*, this "ambitious" plan brings a significant deep water base into sole use by the Indian navy, over 300 miles southwards of Mumbai.¹⁴⁴ Not only does this give greater security from Pakistani operations, but it also enables easier and more immediate Indian operations southwards into the Indian Ocean, being a "big boost" for "India's naval projection."¹⁴⁵ For naval figures like Commodore Vasan, the base, set to be the biggest one of its kind in Asia, was "a dream of any naval planner. . .it would be India's pride and neighbour's envy. . .and is expected to meet the long-term strategic needs of the Indian Navy and the Nation."¹⁴⁶ Previously India's Western Command at Mumbai and its Eastern Command at Vishakhapatnam gave it a window to the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal. Now this Southern Command brings the further reaches of the Indian Ocean more within India's naval framework. Meanwhile, her eastern presence was still further extended by the decision in 2005 to set up a *Far Eastern Naval Command*, FENC, off Port Blair on the Andaman Islands, a move to give the fleet further projection, "to give it 'blue-water' status" as "India bids to rule the waves."¹⁴⁷

Arun Prakash, Chief of Naval Staff is eloquent on India's opportunities. Appointed 31 July 2004, he was soon stressing the importance of the Indian Ocean, with the navy's role being one of "maritime diplomacy," combined with "our robust presence in the region" and "a strong deterrent posture."¹⁴⁸ The wider picture was India's general economic advancement as a Great Power, i.e. "India's growing international stature gives it strategic relevance in the area ranging from the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca."¹⁴⁹

2005 continued this vein of widening horizons for Prakash. In his *The 21st Century Is Going to Be a Maritime Century* (February) he considered, "these developments are extremely important for India due to our reliance on the sea for trade, energy resources and food resources," so that for India, there is the "need to look more seawards than inwards. Such a realisation is especially vital for people at what is called the decision-making, or "Grand-Strategic Level" of security planning. Only then can we stake our claim to be a true maritime power."¹⁵⁰ Interviewed in February, he argued "India's growing international stature gives it strategic relevance in the area ranging from the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca," in which "the initiation of bilateral and multilateral

exercises. . . were not merely military interactions but also contained a certain political message” and in which “the stabilising role of the Indian Navy in the Indian Ocean Region has been acknowledged and recognised by all major and minor navies in the region.”¹⁵¹ India’s leadership role was in effect being put forward.

2005 saw Prakash frequently emphasising this theme of opportunities in the Indian Ocean. For him, in *Emerging India: Security and Foreign Policy Perspectives* (September), “a self-confident and vibrant India looks towards achieving its manifest destiny in the years ahead.”¹⁵² More specifically, there was “the will to project our power overseas. . . to safeguard our emerging vital interests overseas. . . to build adequate sealift and airlift capability to have a credible and sustainable trans-national capability.”¹⁵³ Such areas lay across the waters where the “area of vital interest to us lies in the expanse of the seas; the island nations of the Indian Ocean. Currently, countries like Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles and Comoros are friendly and well disposed to us. However, their security remains fragile, and we cannot afford to have any hostile or inimical power threatening it.”¹⁵⁴

As the autumn came along, Prakash considered “the maritime dimension of the nation’s security paradigm has reached criticality. An economically resurgent India has vast and varied maritime interests” with aircraft carrier strength “capable of exercising sea control in all three dimensions in the distant reaches of the IOR [Indian Ocean region].”¹⁵⁵ Economics lurked in the background in his *Shaping India’s Maritime Strategy* (November) where “we have island territories in the Bay of Bengal as well as the Arabian Sea. We also have friends in the Indian Ocean Region, whose security is our concern. . . we may be compelled to cross the seas to protect our own island territories, or even reach “out of area” to safeguard the interests of our friends. . . as a booming economic power, our growth will be increasingly dependent on trade and on energy availability, and sooner or later on undersea resources. We therefore have substantive maritime interests.”¹⁵⁶ India’s eyes roved over the entire Ocean, for “while the heyday of ‘gunboat diplomacy’ and colonial ‘spheres of influence’ are over, we do believe that whatever happens in the Indian Ocean Region can impact crucially on our security and should be of interest to our maritime forces.”¹⁵⁷ For other states it could seem like India’s version of gunboat diplomacy and of India carving out its own sphere of influence over the Indian Ocean.

Admittedly Prakash added emollient words about friendship, but with an edge of steel to his comments in December at Navy Day 2005 that, “embedded within our war-fighting capabilities, lies the navy’s crucial peacetime role of a powerful ‘instrument of state policy.’ And during the past year this has been the underlying theme of our operations and deployments. Acting in close coordination, and on the advice of the MEA, we have been reaching out to our Indian Ocean neighbourhood.”¹⁵⁸ There was an “ocean ring” to be shaped by India.¹⁵⁹ Such embedding of military with political, i.e. strategic considerations was why the end of the

year saw moves towards a tighter integration of India's naval establishment with its foreign policy machinery. In such a vein, Prakash at his end of year review created a new office at Naval Headquarters, with two directorates dealing with "foreign cooperation, strategic concepts and transformation," or, in a word, "naval diplomacy," the deployment of naval presence to increase state prestige and power.

On their own, such naval sentiments could be dismissed as exaggerated self-serving naval talk, but they were echoed in other circles. The Indian Ocean was India's "rightful domain" in the eyes of Indian strategists.¹⁶⁰ The Indian media was clear, "it is not a mere coincidence that India is the only country to have an ocean named after it. . . Our interests lie in the North Indian Ocean spanning from the Persian Gulf to the Malacca Strait."¹⁶¹ Consequently, "the Indian Ocean area will have to remain secure and tranquil. The main instrument of this stability will be the Indian Navy. The Navy should have the capability to keep this area under surveillance and presence to ensure no interference takes place to our interests. It must be oceanic in character, regional in reach and proactive in approach."¹⁶² The Indian navy was there to make the Indian Ocean India's ocean. Across its reaches "all contacts in all dimensions in this area need to be tracked" by a strong Indian navy.¹⁶³ Srinivasan has been particularly blunt. For him, "*Pax Indica*, certainly, in the Indian Ocean and its littorals. . . this dream is within our grasp."¹⁶⁴ Indeed, "as far as the Indian Ocean is concerned, that is and should be India's sphere of influence, although once again the Chinese are looking to butt in."¹⁶⁵ Quite simply, "India should formulate policies that declare a *Pax Indica* in the Indian Ocean and in the littorals."¹⁶⁶ However, to bring this about "this needs a couple of things. One is a powerful blue-water navy that can project force rapidly anywhere in the region. As things stand, the Indian Navy is indeed the most powerful force in the region, but the Chinese Navy is rapidly modernising itself. The second is an expression of will to take the necessary steps to protect India's interests. . . India needs to do something decisive."¹⁶⁷ For him, the Indian Ocean was India's Ocean, or should be. His focus on Chinese obstruction is marked.

India's strategic build up of naval forces meant that Prakash, in *Shaping India's Maritime Strategy* (2005) was though able to state with some real confidence that "today the IN [Indian Navy] has weapons of formidable range and our naval forces are deployed across vast distances from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal and the farthest reaches of the Indian Ocean."¹⁶⁸ 2006 continued India's build up of naval forces. For *India Defence* such programmes meant that by 2008 "India will be the undisputed military power in the Indian Ocean with a punch and reach never envisaged a few years ago."¹⁶⁹ For Joseph, Assistant Director at the IPCS, "the maritime doctrine of the Indian Navy sets out very clearly that the role of the Indian Navy is not restricted to Indian waters" but

extends across the Indian Ocean, for which “acquisitions like the Scorpene and aircraft carriers will go a long way in assuring a leading role for the Indian Navy in the Indian Ocean.”¹⁷⁰ As of March 2006, Chief of Naval Staff Prakash was proud to announce “currently, the Indian Navy has on order, 27 ships which include fast attack craft, landing ships (tank), frigates, destroyers, submarines and an aircraft carrier; and there are more in the pipeline. . . I doubt if the ship-building industry of any other country can look forward to such an attractive and ‘mouth-watering’ prospect.”¹⁷¹ Such a “mouth watering” building and purchasing programme is why India’s localised brownwater fleet of the earlier decades is finally becoming an ocean-going bluewater fleet. Mohanty (2004) could with reason see the Indian Navy as “coming of age” for the 21st century, and for a rising India.¹⁷² Naval spending having reached over 17 percent of the defence budget is being envisaged to soon reach 20 percent. Consequently, the Indian Navy *Vision Statement* (May 2006) starts by emphasising an Indian naval “force capable of safeguarding our maritime interests on the high seas and projecting combat power across [and around] the littoral,” i.e. Indian Ocean power projection.¹⁷³

2006 saw further strategic additions to India’s naval arsenal. After receiving upgrades, India’s Tu-142M and Il-38 maritime surveillance/antisubmarine warfare aircraft returned to frontline duties in January 2006. Agreement was reached with France in February 2006 for the construction of 6 advanced, state-of-the-art, Scorpene attack submarines to India. May 2006 saw the Indian navy, at the cost of \$665 million, “racing” to purchase three more advanced Talwar-class stealth frigates from Russia, to be armed with supersonic BrahMos cruise, and to join the existing trio.¹⁷⁴ The Navy was also raising three squadrons of Israeli-built Heron II unmanned aerial vehicles, UAVs, and looked set to purchase P3C Orions long range surveillance planes from the United States. The Boeing bid in April 2006 to supply India with eight long range P-8A anti-submarine aircraft, according to their officials, “would provide India with futuristic technology and significantly improved maritime patrol and reconnaissance capability” by 2009, the type of aircraft India would use against Pakistan and China’s submarine presence in the Indian Ocean.¹⁷⁵ The purchase in April 2006 and refit for early 2007 of *USS Trenton*, a Landing Platform Deck, “represents a quantum jump in the Navy’s integral sealift and airlift capabilities” and meets the gap identified by Prakash in September 2005 concerning India’s sealift capacity.¹⁷⁶ July 2006 saw further shopping list announcements for the Navy by Prakash, some 40–50 MiG-29K fighters, 30 long-range maritime patrol (LRMP) aircraft and 10–15 Hawk advanced jet trainers (AJTs).¹⁷⁷

The Indian Ocean beckons then for India’s strategic dreams, an increasingly evident field for Pardesi’s (2005) “Grand Strategy of regional hegemony” pursued by India, “a strategy to dominate the Indian Ocean region” within which India “will be willing to work with extra-regional navies as long as they recognise

India's predominance in the region."¹⁷⁸ India is looking in all points of the compass: "New Delhi is seeking to increase India's profile almost omnidirectionally from India's shores. . .to advance broad economic or security interests, including the 'security' of the various 'gates' to the Indian Ocean," i.e. to leave its "footprints" in the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el Mandeb, the Cape of Good Hope and Mozambique Channel, and the Singapore and Malacca straits.¹⁷⁹ Macro-shifts are on the horizon. As the 21st century starts to unfold, there is increasing talk of the "rise" of India and China within the international system. Here, "over the past few years, India has placed itself on a path to achieve, potentially, the regional influence in the Indian Ocean to which it has aspired," i.e. "India also has become a more palpable presence in key maritime zones" and as such "New Delhi's ascent suggests strongly that the ongoing reordering of the asymmetric relationship between the West and Asia will be centered as much in the Indian Ocean as in East Asia" to the benefit of India.¹⁸⁰ Outsider commentators noted, "India's ambition for ruling the waves in future" whereby "the institution most crucial to its global future. . .is its navy. Indian politicians have been raised on British ideas about the importance of sea power. . .The Indian Navy, or IN, sees itself as the direct heir to the Royal Navy's hegemony in the Indian Ocean, which was once the equivalent of a British lake—and now seems likely to become an Indian one."¹⁸¹ Mahan's vision of an American drive across the Pacific Ocean to make it an "American lake" is echoed a hundred years later for an emerging Indian drive into and across the Indian Ocean to make it an "Indian lake."

How likely is India to achieve this? Only two forces are capable of denying India's drive: the present leading maritime presence of the United States and the rising power of China. In terms of the former, America's 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 is strengthened by its growing security links with India, in which India's leadership position within the Indian Ocean is starting to be conceded by the USA. In such a vein, as "natural allies," Secretary of State Colin Powell 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 endeavor."¹⁸² Post 9/11, US-India cooperation has strengthened still further, in part against perceived Islamic jihadist threats in the region, but also in light of China's growing presence. The American State Department admitted in 2005 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."¹⁸³ Its most immediate implications are with regard to the Indian Ocean. US-India naval exercises continue to strengthen: MALABAR 05 (2005) involving their aircraft carriers in the Arabian Sea showed this. On 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 realization of India's agenda in 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."¹⁸⁴ However, this seems a matter of "time." "Time" over which, as America moves sideways to let India alongside, an ever-strengthening India can hope for gradual leadership in the Indian Ocean to be left to her by the West. Rather, China, is where the competition is likely for India.¹⁸⁵ That is the new "Great Game" to be played out in the Indian Ocean, and for which India's navy is gearing up.¹⁸⁶

To shape the Indian Ocean as India's ocean is India's Grand Strategy for the 21st Century. American naval analysts like Eric Margolis (2005) rightly discern that currently "driving India's naval strategy is the concept that the vast Indian Ocean is its mare nostrum. . .that the entire triangle of the Indian Ocean is their nation's rightful and exclusive sphere of interest."¹⁸⁷ Mahan would have understood this a century ago. In 1945/49 Panikkar and Vaidya talked of India's oceanic destiny needing around 50 years to come into play. This time period has now elapsed, and Vaidya's hopes in 1949 of an "India well on the path to becoming a mighty seapower which she is destined by nature and which alone can ensure national greatness" are perhaps now starting to be realised.¹⁸⁸

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