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# CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

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## An Emerging Strategic Triangle?

*James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara*

**T**he Asian seas today are witnessing an intriguing historical anomaly—the simultaneous rises of two homegrown maritime powers against the backdrop of U.S. dominion over the global commons. The drivers behind this apparent irregularity in the Asian regional order are, of course, China and India. Their aspirations for great-power status and, above all, their quests for energy security have compelled both Beijing and New Delhi to redirect their gazes from land to the seas. While Chinese and Indian maritime interests are a natural outgrowth of impressive economic growth and the attendant appetite for energy resources, their simultaneous entries into the nautical realm also portend worrisome trends.

### PROSPECTS FOR A STRATEGIC TRIANGLE

At present, some strategists in both capitals speak and write in terms that anticipate rivalry with each other. Given that commercial shipping must traverse the same oceanic routes to reach Indian and Chinese ports, mutual fears persist that the bodies of water stretching from the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea could be held hostage in the event of crisis or conflict.<sup>1</sup> Such insecurities similarly animated naval competition in the past when major powers depended on a common nautical space. Moreover, lingering questions over the sustainability of American primacy on the high seas have heightened concerns about the U.S. Navy's ability to guarantee maritime stability, a state of affairs that has long been taken for granted.

It is within this more fluid context that the Indian Ocean has assumed greater prominence. Unfortunately, much of the recent discourse has focused on future Chinese naval ambitions in the Indian Ocean and on potential U.S. responses

to such a new presence. In other words, the novelty, as it currently stands, of the Indian Ocean stems from expected encounters between extraregional powers. But such a narrow analytical approach assumes that the region will remain an inanimate object perpetually vulnerable to outside manipulation. Also, more importantly, it overlooks the possible interactions arising from the intervention of India, the dominant regional power. Indeed, omitting the potential role that India might play in any capacity would risk misreading the future of the Indian Ocean region.

There is, therefore, an urgent need to bring India more completely into the picture as a full participant, if not a major arbiter, in the region's maritime future. In order to add depth to the existing literature, this article assesses the longer-term maritime trajectory of the Indian Ocean region by examining the triangular dynamics among the United States, China, and India. To be sure, the aspirational nature of Chinese and Indian nautical ambitions and capabilities at the moment precludes attempts at discerning potential outcomes or supplying concrete policy prescriptions. Nevertheless, exploring the basic foundations for cooperation or competition among the three powers could provide hints at how Beijing, Washington, and New Delhi can actively preclude rivalry and promote collaboration in the Indian Ocean.

As a first step in this endeavor, this article examines a key ingredient in the expected emergence of a "strategic triangle"—the prospects of Indian sea power. While no one has rigorously defined this international-relations metaphor, scholars typically use it to convey a strategic interplay of interests among three nation-states. In this initial foray, we employ the term fairly loosely, using it to describe a pattern of cooperation and competition among the United States, China, and India. It is our contention that Indian Ocean stability will hinge largely on how India manages its maritime rise. On the one hand, if a robust Indian maritime presence were to fail to materialize, New Delhi would essentially be forced to surrender its interests in regional waters, leaving a strategic vacuum to the United States and China. On the other hand, if powerful Indian naval forces were one day to be used for exclusionary purposes, the region would almost certainly become an arena for naval competition. Either undesirable outcome would be shaped in part by how India views its own maritime prerogatives and by how Washington and Beijing weigh the probabilities of India's nautical success or failure in the Indian Ocean.

If all three parties foresee a muscular Indian naval policy, then, a more martial environment in the Indian Ocean will likely take shape. But if the three powers view India and each other with equanimity, the prospects for cooperation will brighten considerably. Capturing the perspectives of the three powers on India's maritime ambitions is thus a critical analytical starting point.

To provide a comprehensive overview of each capital's estimate of future Indian maritime power, this article gauges the current literature and forecasts in India, the United States, and China on Indian maritime strategy, doctrine, and capabilities. It then concludes with an analysis of how certain changes in the maritime geometry in the Indian Ocean might be conducive to either cooperation or competition.

### INDIA'S SELF-ASSESSMENT

While Indian maritime strategists are not ardent followers of Alfred Thayer Mahan, they do use him to underscore the importance of the Indian Ocean. A Mahan quotation (albeit of doubtful provenance) commonly appears in official and academic discussions of Indian naval power, including the newly published *Maritime Military Strategy*.<sup>2</sup> That is, as an official Indian press release declared in 2002, "Mahan, the renowned naval strategist and scholar[,] had said over a century ago[,] 'whosoever controls the Indian Ocean, dominates Asia. In the 21st century, the destiny of the world will be decided upon its waters.'"<sup>3</sup> Rear Admiral R. Chopra, then the head of sea training for the Indian Navy, offered a somewhat less bellicose-sounding but equally evocative version of the quotation at a seminar on maritime history: "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean controls Asia. This ocean is the key to the Seven Seas."<sup>4</sup>

Quibbles over history aside, India clearly sees certain diplomatic, economic, and military interests at stake in Indian Ocean waters. In particular, shipments of Middle East oil, natural gas, and raw materials are crucial to India's effort to build up economic strength commensurate with the needs and geopolitical aspirations of the Indian people. Some 90 percent of world trade, measured by bulk, travels by sea. A sizable share of that total must traverse narrow seas in India's geographic neighborhood, notably the straits at Hormuz, Malacca, and Bab el Mandeb. Shipping is at its most vulnerable in such confined waterways.

Strategists in New Delhi couch their appraisals of India's maritime surroundings in intensely geopolitical terms—jarringly so for Westerners accustomed to the notion that economic globalization has rendered power politics and armed conflict passé. The Indian economy has grown at a rapid clip—albeit not as rapidly as China's—allowing an increasingly confident Indian government to yoke hard power, measured in ships, aircraft, and weapons systems, to a foreign policy aimed at primacy in the Indian Ocean region.<sup>5</sup> If intervention in regional disputes or the internal affairs of South Asian states is necessary, imply Indian leaders, India should do the intervening rather than allow outsiders any pretext for doing so.

Any doctrine aimed at regional preeminence will have a strong seafaring component. In 2004, accordingly, New Delhi issued its first public analysis of the

nation's oceanic environs and of how to cope with challenges there. Straightforwardly titled *Indian Maritime Doctrine*, the document describes India's maritime strategy largely as a function of economic development and prosperity:

India's primary maritime interest is to assure national security. This is not restricted to just guarding the coastline and island territories, but also extends to safeguarding our interests in the [exclusive economic zone] as well as protecting our trade. This creates an environment that is conducive to rapid economic growth of the country. Since trade is the lifeblood of India, keeping our SLOCs [sea lines of communication] open in times of peace, tension or hostilities is a primary national maritime interest.<sup>6</sup>

The trade conveyed by the sea-lanes traversing the Indian Ocean ranks first among the "strategic realities" that the framers of the *Indian Maritime Doctrine* discern. Roughly forty merchantmen pass through India's "waters of interest" every day. An estimated \$200 billion worth of oil transits the Strait of Hormuz annually, while some \$60 billion transits the Strait of Malacca en route to China, Japan, and other East Asian countries reliant on energy imports.<sup>7</sup>

India's geographic location and conformation rank next in New Delhi's hierarchy of strategic realities. Notes the *Indian Maritime Doctrine*, "India sits astride . . . major commercial routes and energy lifelines" crisscrossing the Indian Ocean region. Outlying Indian possessions such as the Andaman and Nicobar islands sit athwart the approaches to the Strait of Malacca, while the Persian Gulf is near India's western coastline, conferring a measure of influence over vital sea communications to and from what amounts to a bay in the Indian Ocean. While geography may not be destiny, the document states bluntly that "by virtue of our geography, we are . . . in a position to greatly influence the movement/security of shipping along the SLOCs in the [Indian Ocean Region] provided we have the maritime power to do so. Control of the choke points could be useful as a bargaining chip in the international power game, where the currency of military power remains a stark reality."<sup>8</sup>

The *Indian Maritime Doctrine* prophesies a depletion of world energy resources that will make the prospect of outside military involvement in India's geographic environs even more acute than it already is. The dependence of modern economies on the Gulf region and Central Asia "has already invited the presence of extra-regional powers and the accompanying Command, Control, Surveillance and Intelligence network. The security implications for us are all too obvious." Sizable deposits of other resources—uranium, tin, gold, diamonds—around the Indian Ocean littoral only accentuate the factors beckoning the attention of outside maritime powers to the region.<sup>9</sup>

Indian leaders, then, take a somber view of the international security environment. In the “polycentric world order” New Delhi sees taking shape, economics is “the major determinant of a nation’s power.” While “India holds great promise,” owing to its size, location, and economic acumen, its “emergence as an economic power will undoubtedly be resisted by the existing economic powers, leading to conflicts based on economic factors.” The likelihood that competitors will “deny access to technology and other industrial inputs,” combined with “the shift in global maritime focus from the Atlantic-Pacific combine to the Pacific–Indian Ocean region,” will only heighten the attention major powers pay to the seas.<sup>10</sup>

A buildup of Indian maritime power represents the only prudent response to strategic conditions that are at once promising and worrisome in economic terms. Maritime threats fall into two broad categories, in the Indians’ reckoning. First, judging from official pronouncements such as the maritime doctrine and the newly published *Maritime Military Strategy*, New Delhi is acutely conscious that such nontraditional threats as seagoing terrorism, weapons proliferation, or piracy could disrupt vital sea-lanes. Cleansing Asian waters of these universal scourges has become a matter of real and growing concern.<sup>11</sup>

Second, Indians are wary not only of banditry and unlawful trafficking but also of rival navies. While Indian strategists exude growing confidence, increasingly looking beyond perennial nemesis Pakistan, they remain mindful of the Pakistani naval challenge, a permanent feature of Indian Ocean strategic affairs. Over the longer term, a Chinese naval buildup in the Indian Ocean, perhaps centered on Beijing’s much-discussed “string of pearls,” would represent cause for concern.<sup>12</sup> This is the most likely quarter from which a threat to Indian maritime security could emanate over the long term, once China resolves the Taiwan question to its satisfaction and is free to redirect its attention to important interests in other regions—such as free passage for commercial shipping through the Indian Ocean region.

But Indians remain acutely conscious that the U.S. Navy rules the waves in Asia, as it has since World War II. Despite closer maritime ties with the United States, Indian officials bridle at memories of the Seventh Fleet’s intervention in the Bay of Bengal during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war. They also remain ambivalent about the American military presence on Diego Garcia, which they see as an American beachhead in the Indian Ocean region. Observes one Indian scholar, Diego Garcia and the Bengal naval deployment have “seeped into Indians’ cultural memory—even among those who know nothing about the sea.”<sup>13</sup> Whatever the prospects for a U.S.-Indian strategic partnership, such memories will give rise to a measure of wariness in bilateral ties. On balance, the factors impinging on Indian and U.S. strategic calculations will make for some form of partnership—but perhaps not the grand alliance American leaders seem to assume. Even

partnership is not a sure thing, however, and sustaining it will require painstaking work on both sides.

### HISTORICAL MODELS FOR INDIAN SEA POWER

The challenges it perceives as it surveys India's surroundings and the novelty of Indian pursuit of sea power have induced New Delhi to consult Western history. That Indians would look to American rather than European history for guidance, however, may come as a surprise. Given their skepticism toward American maritime supremacy—the residue of Cold War ideological competition, as well as a product of geopolitical calculations—nineteenth-century American history represents an unlikely source for lessons to inform the efforts of Indians to amass maritime power.

There is a theoretical dimension to India's maritime turn as well. Many scholars of "realist" leanings assume that the sort of balance-of-power politics practiced in nineteenth-century Europe will prevail in Asia as the rises of China and India reorder regional politics.<sup>14</sup> If so, the coming years will see Asian statesmen jockeying for geopolitical advantage in the manner of a Bismarck or Talleyrand. There is merit to objections to the notion that strategic triangles and similar metaphors are artifacts of nineteenth-century thinking, and many Indians and Chinese think in geopolitical terms reminiscent of that age. Other scholars deny that European-style realpolitik is universal, predicting instead a revival of Asia's hierarchical, China-centric past.<sup>15</sup> Chinese diplomats have skillfully encouraged such notions, hinting that a maritime order presided over by a capable, benevolent China—and excluding predatory Western sea powers such as America—would benefit all Asian peoples, now as in bygone centuries.<sup>16</sup>

Indians more commonly look for insight to a third model—the Monroe Doctrine, the nineteenth-century American policy declaration that purported to place the New World off limits to new European territorial acquisitions or to any extension of the European political system to American states not already under Europe's control. James Monroe and John Quincy Adams (the architects of the Monroe Doctrine), Grover Cleveland and Richard Olney (who viewed the doctrine as a virtual warrant for U.S. rule of the Americas), and Theodore Roosevelt (who gave the doctrine a forceful twist of his own) may exercise as much influence in Asia—particularly South Asia—as any figure from European or Asian history.

Soon after independence, Indian statesmen and pundits took to citing the Monroe Doctrine as a model for Indian foreign policy. It is not entirely clear why Indians adopted a Western paradigm for their pursuit of regional preeminence rather than some indigenous model suited to South Asian conditions. India's tradition of nonalignment surely played some role in this, however. For one thing,

Monroe and Adams announced their doctrine in an era when American nations were throwing off colonial rule, while India's security doctrine had its origins in the post-World War II era of decolonization. Thus the United States of Monroe's day, like newly independent India, positioned itself as the leader of a bloc of nations within a geographically circumscribed region, resisting undue political influence—or worse—from external great powers. This imparts some resonance to Monroe's principles despite the passage of time and the obvious dissimilarities between American and Indian histories and traditions.

Thus the diplomatic context was apt—especially since Indian statesmen intent on effective “strategic communications” designed their policy pronouncements to appeal to not only domestic but also Western audiences. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's speech justifying the use of force to evict Portugal from the coastal enclave of Goa is worth quoting at length:

Even some time after the United States had established itself as a strong power, there was the fear of interference by European powers in the American continents, and this led to the famous declaration by President Monroe of the United States [that] any interference by a European country would be an interference with the American political system. I submit that . . . the Portuguese retention of Goa is a continuing interference with the political system established in India today. I shall go a step further and say that any interference by any other power would also be an interference with the political system of India today. . . . It may be that we are weak and we cannot prevent that interference. But the fact is that *any attempt by a foreign power to interfere in any way with India is a thing which India cannot tolerate, and which, subject to her strength, she will oppose. That is the broad doctrine I lay down.*<sup>17</sup>

Parsing Nehru's bracing words, the following themes emerge. First, while a European power's presence in South Asia precipitated his foreign-policy doctrine, he forbade *any* outside power to take any action in the region that New Delhi might construe as imperiling the Indian political system. This was a sweeping injunction indeed. Second, he acknowledged the realities of power but seemingly contemplated enforcing his doctrine with new vigor as Indian power waxed, making new means and options available. Third, Nehru asked no one's permission to pursue such a doctrine. While this doctrine would not qualify as international law, then, it was a policy statement to which New Delhi would give effect as national means permitted. India did expel Portugal from Goa in 1961—affixing an exclamation point to Nehru's words.

Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi were especially assertive about enforcing India's security doctrine.<sup>18</sup> From 1983 to 1990, for example, New Delhi applied political and military pressure in an effort to bring about an end to the Sri Lankan civil war. It deployed Indian troops to the embattled island,

waging a bitter counterinsurgent campaign—in large part because Indian leaders feared that the United States would involve itself in the dispute, in the process obtaining a new geostrategic foothold at Trincomalee, along India’s southern flank. One commentator in *India Today* interpreted New Delhi’s politico-military efforts as “a repetition of the Monroe Doctrine, a forcible statement that any external forces prejudicial to India’s interests cannot be allowed to swim in regional waters.”<sup>19</sup>

India’s security doctrine also manifested itself in 1988, when Indian forces intervened in a coup in the Maldives, and in an 1989–90 trade dispute with Nepal. A Western scholar, Devin Hagerty, sums up Indian security doctrine thus:

The essence of this formulation is that India strongly opposes outside intervention in the domestic affairs of other South Asian nations, especially by outside powers whose goals are perceived to be inimical to Indian interests. Therefore, no South Asian government should ask for outside assistance from any country; rather, if a South Asian nation genuinely needs external assistance, it should seek it from India. A failure to do so will be considered anti-Indian.<sup>20</sup>

This flurry of activity subsided after the Cold War, as the strategic environment appeared to improve and New Delhi embarked on an ambitious program of economic liberalization and reform. Even so, influential pundits—even those who dispute the notion of a consistent Indian security doctrine—continue to speak in these terms.

Indeed, they seemingly take the concept of an Indian Monroe Doctrine for granted. C. Raja Mohan, to name one leading pundit, routinely uses this terminology, matter-of-factly titling one op-ed column “Beyond India’s Monroe Doctrine” and in another exclaiming that “China just tore up India’s Monroe Doctrine.”<sup>21</sup> Speaking at the U.S. Naval War College in November 2007, Rear Admiral Chopra vouchsafed that India should “emulate America’s nineteenth-century rise” to sea power. As India’s naval capabilities mature, matching ambitious ends with vibrant means, its need to cooperate with outside sea powers will diminish. Declared Chopra, New Delhi might then see fit to enforce “its own Monroe Doctrine” in the region.<sup>22</sup> The doctrine has entered into India’s vocabulary of foreign relations and maritime strategy. Again, using nineteenth-century American history as a proxy, we can discern three possible maritime futures for India:

“**Monroe.**” Indian statesmen animated by Monroe’s principles as originally understood would take advantage of the maritime security furnished by a dominant navy (Great Britain’s Royal Navy then, the U.S. Navy now), dedicating most of their nation’s resources and energies to internal development. Limited efforts at suppressing piracy, terrorism, and weapons trafficking—the latter-day

equivalents to the slave trade, a scourge the U.S. and Royal navies worked together to suppress—would be admissible under these principles, as would disaster relief and other humanitarian operations intended to amass goodwill and lay the groundwork for more assertive diplomatic ventures in the future. This modest reading of the Monroe Doctrine would not forbid informal cooperation with the U.S. Navy, today's equivalent to the Royal Navy of Monroe's day.

**“Cleveland/Olney.”** In 1895, President Grover Cleveland's secretary of state, Richard Olney, informed Great Britain that the American “fiat is law” throughout the Western Hemisphere, by virtue of not only American enlightenment but also physical might—the republic's capacity to make good on Monroe's precepts.<sup>23</sup> This hypermuscular vision of the Monroe Doctrine would impel aspirants to sea power to avow openly their desire to dominate surrounding waters and littoral regions. From a geographic standpoint, the Cleveland/Olney model would urge them to make good on their claims to regional supremacy, employing naval forces to project power throughout vast areas. No international dispute would be off limits that national leaders deemed a threat to their interests, and they would evince a standoffish attitude toward proposals for cooperation with external naval powers.

**“Roosevelt.”** Theodore Roosevelt took a preventive view of the Monroe Doctrine, framing “an international police power” that justified American intervention in the affairs of weak American states when it appeared that Europeans might use naval force to collect debts owed their lenders—and, in the process, wrest naval stations from states along sea-lanes vital to U.S. shipping. TR's interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine, as expressed in his 1904 “corollary” to it, called for a defensive posture: Monroe's principles applied when vital national interests were at stake, and the would-be dominant power could advance its good-government ideals. These principles would apply, however, within circumscribed regions of vital interest and be implemented with circumspection, using minimal force, and that in concert with other tools of national power. Cooperation with outside powers with no likely desire or capacity to infringe on the hegemon's interests would be acceptable.<sup>24</sup>

What form such a doctrine will assume, and how vigorously New Delhi prosecutes it, will depend on such factors as Indian history and traditions, the natures and magnitudes of the security challenges Indians perceive in the Indian Ocean, the vagaries of domestic politics, and the Indian Navy's ability to make more than fitful progress toward fielding potent naval weapon systems.<sup>25</sup> India will pursue its doctrine according to its needs and capabilities—just as each generation of

Americans reinterpreted the Monroe Doctrine to suit its own needs and material power.

### AMERICAN VIEWS OF INDIAN SEA POWER

Curiously, given the importance they attach to the burgeoning U.S.-Indian relationship and their concerted efforts to forge a seagoing partnership, American policy makers and maritime strategists have paid scant attention to the evolution of Indian sea power or the motives and aspirations prompting New Delhi's seaward turn. One small example: the Pentagon publishes no Indian counterpart to its annual report *The Military Power of the People's Republic of China*, despite the growth of Indian power and ambition. To the contrary: American diplomats speak in glowing terms of a "natural strategic partnership" between "the world's biggest" and "the world's oldest" democracies, while the U.S. military has reached out to the Indian military on the tactical and operational levels—through, for example, the sixteen-year-old MALABAR series of combined maritime exercises.<sup>26</sup> Few in Washington have devoted much energy to what lies between high diplomacy and hands-on military-to-military cooperation, to analyzing the maritime component of Indian grand strategy.

True, the recently published U.S. Maritime Strategy, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, proclaims that "credible combat power will be continuously postured in the Western Pacific and the Arabian Gulf/Indian Ocean," but its rationale for doing so is purely functional in nature: guarding American interests, assuring allies, deterring competitors, and so forth.<sup>27</sup> The multinational context for this pronouncement—how Washington ought to manage relations with regional maritime powers, such as India, on which the success of a cooperative maritime strategy ineluctably depends—is left unexplained. Why New Delhi has rebuffed such seemingly uncontroversial U.S.-led ventures as the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a primarily maritime effort to combat the traffic in materiel related to weapons of mass destruction, and Task Force 150, the multinational naval squadron monitoring for terrorists fleeing Afghanistan, will remain a mystery to American officials absent this larger context.<sup>28</sup>

Why the apparent complacency toward India on the part of U.S. officials? Several possible explanations come to mind. For one thing, the United States does not see India as a threat. The Clinton and Bush administrations have enlisted New Delhi in a "Concert of Democracies," and, as mentioned before, they view India as a natural strategic partner or ally. For another, other matters have dominated the bilateral relationship in recent years. The Bush administration lifted the sanctions imposed after the 1998 Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests and negotiated an agreement providing for transfers of American nuclear technology to the Indian commercial nuclear sector in exchange for partial international

supervision of Indian nuclear facilities. Legislative approval of this “123” agreement remains uncertain, in large part because of questions as to whether new Indian nuclear tests would terminate the accord.<sup>29</sup> Maritime cooperation has been subsumed in other issues. Also, and more to the point, India has been slow to publish a maritime strategy that American analysts can study. Its *Maritime Doctrine* appeared in 2004, but a full-fledged maritime military strategy appeared only in 2007—meaning that India watchers in the United States have had little time to parse its meaning and its implications for U.S.-Indian collaboration at sea, let alone to publish and debate their findings.

For now, absent significant policy attention, any maritime-strategic partnership will take place on the functional level, with “naval diplomacy” filling the void left by policy makers. How Washington will grapple with Indian skepticism toward the PSI and other enterprises remains to be seen. If New Delhi does indeed embark on a Monroe Doctrine—especially one of the more militant variants identified above—political supervision of U.S. naval diplomacy will be at a premium for Washington. Should the nuclear deal falter in Congress, for example, will that further affront the sensibilities of Indians intent on regional primacy? If so, with what impact on American mariners’ efforts to negotiate a good working relationship at sea? The opportunity to craft a close strategic partnership with New Delhi could be a short-lived one as Indian power grows, especially if Indian leaders take an ominous view of their nation’s geopolitical surroundings or if irritants to U.S.-Indian relations begin to accumulate.

#### CHINESE VIEWS OF INDIAN SEA POWER

If American analysts seem blasé about the intentions and capabilities of their prospective strategic partner, many Chinese analysts depict the basic motives behind India’s maritime ambitions in starkly geopolitical terms. Indeed, their assumptions and arguments are unmistakably Mahanian. Zhang Ming of *Modern Ships* asserts, “The Indian subcontinent is akin to a massive triangle reaching into the heart of the Indian Ocean, benefiting any from there who seeks to control the Indian Ocean.”<sup>30</sup> In an article casting suspicion on Indian naval intentions, the author states, “Geostrategically speaking, the Indian Ocean is a link of communication and oil transportation between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans and India is just like a giant and never-sinking aircraft carrier and the most important strategic point guarding the Indian Ocean.”<sup>31</sup> The reference to an unsinkable aircraft carrier was clearly meant to trigger an emotional reaction, given that for many Chinese the phrase is most closely associated with Taiwan.

Intriguingly, some have invoked Mahanian language, wrongly attributed to Mahan himself, to describe the value of the Indian Ocean to New Delhi. One Chinese commentator quotes (without citation) Mahan as asserting, “Whoever

controls the Indian Ocean will dominate India and the coastal states of the Indian Ocean as well as control the massive area between the Mediterranean and the Pacific Ocean.”<sup>32</sup> In a more expansive reformulation, two articles cite Mahan as declaring, “Whoever controls the Indian Ocean controls Asia. The Indian Ocean is the gateway to the world’s seven seas. The destiny of the world in the 21st century will be determined by the Indian Ocean.”<sup>33</sup> (As noted before, a very similar, and likewise apocryphal, Mahan quotation has made the rounds in India—even finding its way into the official *Maritime Military Strategy*.) Faulty attribution notwithstanding, the Chinese are clearly drawn to Mahanian notions of sea power when forecasting how India will approach its maritime environs.

Zhao Bole, a professor of South Asian studies at Sichuan University, places these claims in a more concrete geopolitical context. Argues Zhao, four key geostrategic factors have underwritten India’s rise. First, India and its surrounding areas boast a wealth of natural resources. Second, India is by far the most powerful country in the Indian Ocean region. Third, the physical distance separating the United States from India affords New Delhi ample geopolitical space for maneuver. Fourth, India borders economically dynamic regions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states and China. Zhao quotes Nehru and K. M. Panikkar to prove that Indian politicians and strategists have long recognized these geopolitical advantages and that they have consistently evinced the belief that India’s destiny is inextricably tied to the Indian Ocean.<sup>34</sup> However, due to India’s insistence on taking a third way during the Cold War superpower competition, New Delhi was content to focus on its own subcontinental affairs.

In the 1990s, though, Zhao argues, India sought to shake off its nonaligned posture by increasing its geopolitical activism in Southeast Asia under the guise of its “Look East” policy. According to Zhao Gancheng, New Delhi leveraged its unique geographic position to make Southeast Asia—an intensely maritime theater—a “breakthrough point” (突破口), particularly in the economic realm. In the twenty-first century, Zhao argues, the Look East policy has assumed significant strategic dimensions, suggesting that India has entered a new phase intimately tied to its great-power ambitions. While acknowledging that the underlying strategic logic pushing India beyond the subcontinent is compelling, Zhao worries that Indian prominence among the ASEAN states could tempt the United States to view India as a potential counterweight to China.<sup>35</sup>

To Chinese observers, these broader geopolitical forces seem to conform to the more outward-looking Indian maritime strategy on exhibit in recent years, and they tend to confirm Chinese suspicions of an expansive and ambitious pattern to India’s naval outlook. Zhang Xiaolin and Qu Yutao divide the evolution of Indian maritime strategy, particularly with regard to its geographic scope, into three distinct phases:

- Offshore defense (近海防御) (from independence to the late 1960s)
- Area control (区域控制) (from the early 1970s to the early 1990s)
- Open-ocean extension (远海延伸) (from the mid-1990s to the present).<sup>36</sup>

During the first stage, the navy was confined to the east and west coasts of India and parts of the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal in support of ground and air operations ashore. The second phase called for a far more assertive control of the Indian Ocean. Indian strategists, in this view, divided the Indian Ocean into three concentric rings of operational control. First, India needed to impose “complete or absolute control” over three hundred nautical miles of water out from India’s coastline to defend the homeland, the exclusive economic zone, and offshore islands. Second, the navy had to exert “moderate control” over an ocean belt extending some three to six hundred nautical miles from Indian coasts in order to secure its sea lines of communications and provide situational awareness. Finally, the navy needed to exercise “soft control,” power projection and deterrent capabilities, beyond seven hundred nautical miles from Indian shores.<sup>37</sup>

Chinese analysts differ over the extent of Indian naval ambitions in the twenty-first century. But they concur that India will not restrict its seafaring endeavors to the Indian Ocean indefinitely. Most discern a clear transition from a combination of offshore defense and area control to a blue-water offensive posture. One commentator postulates that India will develop the capacity to prevent and implement its own naval blockades against the choke points at Suez, Hormuz, and Malacca.<sup>38</sup> Unsurprisingly, the prospect that India might seek to blockade Malacca against China has attracted substantial attention. One Chinese analyst, using language that would have been instantly recognizable to Mahan, describes the 244 islands that constitute the Andaman-Nicobar archipelago as a “metal chain” (铁链) that could lock tight the western exit of the Malacca Strait.<sup>39</sup> Zhang Ming further argues that “once India commands the Indian Ocean, it will not be satisfied with its position and will continuously seek to extend its influence, and its eastward strategy will have a particular impact on China.”<sup>40</sup> The author concludes that “India is perhaps China’s most realistic strategic adversary.”<sup>41</sup>

While they pay considerable attention to the potential Indian threat to the Malacca Strait, Chinese observers also believe the Indian sea services are intent on

- Achieving sea control from the northern Arabian Sea to the South China Sea
- Developing the ability to conduct SLOC defense and combat operations in the areas above
- Maintaining absolute superiority over all littoral states in the Indian Ocean

- Building the capacity for strategic deterrence against outside naval powers<sup>42</sup>
- Amassing long-range power-projection capabilities sufficient to reach and control an enemy's coastal waters in times of conflict
- Fielding a credible, sea-based, second-strike retaliatory nuclear capability
- Developing the overall capacity to “enter east” (东进) into the South China Sea and the Pacific, “exit west” (西出) through the Red Sea and Suez Canal into the Mediterranean, and “go south” (南下) toward the Cape of Good Hope and the Atlantic.<sup>43</sup>

Clearly, the Chinese foresee the emergence of a far more forward-leaning Indian Navy that in time could make its presence felt in China's own littoral realm. Moreover, the Chinese uniformly believe that New Delhi has embarked on an ambitious modernization program to achieve these sweeping aims. Interestingly, some have pointed to America's apparent lack of alarm at India's already powerful navy. This quietude, they say, stands in sharp contrast to incessant U.S. concerns over the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), representing a blatant double standard.<sup>44</sup> In any event, China's assessments of Indian capabilities and its emerging body of work tracking India's technological and doctrinal advances are indeed impressive. For instance, *Modern Navy*, the PLAN's monthly periodical, published a ten-month series on the Indian Navy beginning in November 2005. Subjects of the articles ranged widely, from platforms and weaponry to basing and port infrastructure.<sup>45</sup> Not surprisingly, given the decades-long debate within China surrounding its own carrier acquisition plans, India's aircraft carriers have attracted by far the most attention.<sup>46</sup>

A number of Chinese analysts, however, hold far less alarming, if not sanguine, views of India's rise. The former Chinese ambassador to India, Cheng Ruisheng, argues that policy makers in Beijing and New Delhi have increasingly abandoned their antiquated, zero-sum security outlooks. Indeed, Cheng exudes confidence that improving U.S.-Indian ties and Sino-Indian relations are not mutually exclusive, and thus he holds out hope for a balanced and stable strategic triangle in the region.<sup>47</sup> Some Chinese speculate that India's burgeoning friendships with a variety of extraregional powers, including the United States and Japan, are designed to widen India's room for maneuver in an increasingly multipolar world without forcing it to choose sides. As Yang Hui asserts, “India's actions smack of ‘fence-sitting.’ This is a new version of non-alignment.”<sup>48</sup> On balance, then, strategic continuity might prevail over the potentially destabilizing forces of change.

Even those projecting major changes in the regional configuration of power seem confident that India's rise will neither upend stability nor lead automatically to strategic advantages for New Delhi. To be sure, a small minority in China

believes that an increased Indian presence in the Indian Ocean would generate great-power “contradictions” that could in time lead New Delhi to displace the United States as the regional hegemon, consistent with more forceful conceptions of an Indian Monroe Doctrine.<sup>49</sup> But a far more common view maintains that growing Indian sea power will likely compel Washington and other powers in Asia to challenge or counterbalance New Delhi’s position in the Indian Ocean region.<sup>50</sup> Structural constraints will tend to act against Indian efforts to wield influence beyond the Indian Ocean. Zhao Gancheng, for example, argues that China’s firmly established position in Southeast Asia and India’s relative unfamiliarity with the region will prevent New Delhi from reaping maximum gains from its Look East policy.<sup>51</sup>

On the strictly military and technological levels, some Chinese analysts believe that Indian naval aspirations have far outstripped the nation’s concrete capacity to fulfill them. Noting that increases in the defense budget have consistently outpaced the annual growth rate of India’s gross domestic product, Li Yonghua of *Naval and Merchant Ships* derides India’s ambition for an oceangoing naval fleet as a “python swallowing an elephant” (蟒蛇吞象).<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Zhang Ming identifies three major deficiencies that cast doubt on India’s ability to develop a fleet for blue-water combat missions. First, India’s current comprehensive national power simply cannot sustain a “global navy” and the panoply of capabilities that such a force demands. Second, India’s long-standing dependence on foreign technology and relatively backward industrial base will severely retard advances in indigenous programs—especially plans for domestically built next-generation aircraft carriers. Finally, existing Indian Navy surface combatants are unequal in both quantitative and qualitative terms to the demands of long-range fleet operations. In particular, insufficiently robust air-defense constitutes the “most fatal problem” for future Indian carrier task forces.<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, key aspects of Zhang’s critique apply equally to the PLAN today.

This brief survey of Chinese perspectives suggests that definitive conclusions about the future of Indian sea power would be premature. On the one hand, evocative uses of Mahanian language and worst-case extrapolations of Indian maritime ambitions certainly represent a sizable geopolitically minded school of thought in China. On the other, the Chinese acknowledge that India may not be able to surmount for years to come the geopolitical and technological constraints it confronts. Such mixed feelings further suggest that Sino-Indian maritime competition in the Indian Ocean or the South China Sea is not fated. Neither side has the credible capacity—yet—to reach into the other’s nautical backyard. At the same time, the broader geostrategic climate at the moment favors cooperation. There should be ample time—until either side acquires naval forces able to influence events beyond its own maritime domain, and as long as New Delhi’s and

Beijing's extraregional aims remain largely aspirational—to shape mutual threat perceptions through cooperative efforts.

### AN UNCERTAIN GEOMETRY

This initial inquiry into the maritime geometry of the Indian Ocean region suggests that conditions are auspicious for shaping a mutually beneficial maritime relationship among India, China, and the United States. For now, New Delhi seems at once sanguine about its maritime surroundings and conscious that it lacks the wherewithal to make good on a muscular Monroe Doctrine. While in principle India asserts regional primacy, much as James Monroe's America did, it remains content to work with the predominant naval power, the United States, in the cause of maritime security in South Asia. If nothing else, this is a matter of expediency.

It is worth noting, however, that there is little prospect that India will join the United States to contain Chinese ambitions in the Indian Ocean as Japan joined the United States to contain Soviet ambitions. India's independent streak, codified in its policy of nonalignment, predisposes New Delhi against such an arrangement. Nor does India resemble Cold War-era Japan, dependent on an outside power to defend it against an immediate, nearby threat to maritime security, and indeed national survival. The geographic conformation of Japan's threat environment significantly heightened the urgency of a highly alert strategic posture. The Japanese archipelago closely envelops Vladivostok, home to the Soviet Union's Pacific Fleet and the base from which commerce-raiding cruisers had harassed Japanese trade and military logistics during the Russo-Japanese War. Tokyo had to develop the capacity to monitor Soviet hunter-killer submarines lurking in the Sea of Japan and to repel a massive amphibious invasion against Hokkaido. India, by contrast, enjoys two great oceanic buffers—the eastern Indian Ocean and the South China Sea—vis-à-vis China. As a simple illustration, several thousand nautical miles separate the fleet headquarters of China's South Sea Fleet, located in Zhanjiang, Guangdong Province, from Vishakhapatnam, the eastern naval command of the Indian Navy. Geography alone, then, constitutes a major disincentive for New Delhi to enlist prematurely in an anti-China coalition.

For its part, Washington has not yet dedicated serious attention and energy to analyzing the future of Indian sea power or the likely configuration of great-power relations in the Indian Ocean. It remains hopeful that a durable strategic partnership with New Delhi will take shape. Should the three sea powers manage to draw in other powers with little interest in infringing on India's Monroe Doctrine or capacity to do so—say, Australia, an Indian Ocean nation in its own right, or Japan, which depends on Indian Ocean sea-lanes for energy security—the regional geometry could become quite complex. But the participation of such

powers might also reduce the propensity for competition among the three vertices of the Sino-Indian-U.S. triangle. A wider arrangement, then, warrants study in American strategic circles.

Also, as we have seen, China views India's maritime rise with equanimity for now, doubting both New Delhi's capacity and its will to pose a threat to Chinese interests in the region. American hopes and Chinese complacency may not add up to an era of good feelings in South Asia, but they may form the basis for cooperative relations in the near to middle term.

But this inquiry also suggests that the opportunity to fashion a tripartite sea-going entente may not endure for long. If India succeeds in building powerful naval forces, it may—like Cleveland's or Roosevelt's America—set out to make the Indian Ocean an Indian preserve in fact as well as in principle. If so, China would be apt to take a more wary view of Indian naval ambitions, which would seem to menace Chinese economic, energy, and security interests in South Asia. Its hopes for a strategic partnership dashed, the United States might reevaluate its assumptions about the viability of a consortium of English-speaking democracies. This too would work against a cooperative strategic triangle.

Maritime security cooperation, then, is by no means foreordained. A host of wild cards could impel New Delhi toward a more forceful security doctrine. Should, say, the United States use the Indian Ocean or the Persian Gulf to stage strikes against Iranian nuclear sites, New Delhi might see the need to expand its regional primacy at America's expense. A failure of the U.S.-Indian civilian nuclear cooperation accord would have an unpredictable, if indirect, impact on the bilateral relationship, fraying Indian patience and potentially loosening this "side" of the strategic triangle. Similarly, if China began deploying ballistic-missile submarines to the Indian Ocean, India might redouble its maritime efforts, working assiduously on antisubmarine warfare and its own undersea nuclear deterrent. Competition, not cooperation, could come to characterize the strategic triangle—perhaps giving rise to some other, less benign regional geometry.

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#### NOTES

- The views voiced here are the authors' alone.
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  2. Government of India, *Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy* (New Delhi: Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence Navy], May 2007).
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  4. R. Chopra, "A Seminar on Maritime History," *Sainik Samachar* 49, no. 4 (16–28 February 2002), available at [mod.nic.in/samachar/html/ch15.htm](http://mod.nic.in/samachar/html/ch15.htm).

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6. Government of India, *Indian Maritime Doctrine*, INBR 8 (New Delhi: Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence [Navy], 25 April 2004), p. 63.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 63–64.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 65–67.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Case in point: an opinion piece by a former chief of the Indian Navy—see Arun Prakash, "China's Naval Gazers," *Indian Express*, 5 September 2007, available at [www.indianexpress.com/story/214471.\\_.html](http://www.indianexpress.com/story/214471._.html).
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15. David C. Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks," *International Security* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2003), pp. 57–85; David C. Kang, "Hierarchy in Asian International Relations: 1300–1900," *Asian Security* 1, no. 1 (January 2005), pp. 53–79; Chen Jian, *The China Challenge for the Twenty-first Century* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1998), pp. 4–8.
16. See James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "Soft Power at Sea: Zheng He and Chinese Naval Strategy," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 132, no. 10 (October 2006), pp. 34–38.
17. Jawaharlal Nehru, *India's Foreign Policy: Selected Speeches, September 1946–April 1961* (Delhi: Government of India, 1961), pp. 113–15 [our emphasis].
18. Indeed, Indian and foreign commentators use "Indira Doctrine" or "Rajiv Doctrine" interchangeably with "India's Monroe Doctrine." Devin T. Hagerty, "India's Regional Security Doctrine," *Asian Survey* 31, no. 4 (April 1991), p. 352.
19. Dilip Bobb, "Cautious Optimism," *India Today*, 31 August 1987, p. 69. See also Hagerty, "India's Regional Security Doctrine," pp. 351–63.
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