



## India's Maritime Diplomacy: Issues And Challenges in 2016

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### ABSTRACT

India's maritime diplomacy is constantly expanding and becoming sophisticated to protect its national interests. Without confining to the Indian Ocean region, India's maritime diplomacy is stretched from the farthest point of the Arabian Sea to the Pacific Ocean. India employs negotiation and multilateral cooperation as the chief tool of maritime diplomacy. The nostalgia of India being an ancient sea power, and the increasing importance of sea routes and sea based resources stimulate India's maritime diplomacy.

### KEYWORDS

India, Maritime Diplomacy, Indian Ocean, South China Sea

### Introduction

In the recent years India has vividly projected its power and might to the international community. With its fast growing economy, huge population, huge landmass and huge army India is anxious for recognition and establishment of its footprint in the international arena. The stable government at the centre after the general election in 2014 has given a unique opportunity to India to consolidate and advance its objectives. Maritime diplomacy is clearly gaining traction as India wakes up from long slumber and realizes its inadequacy towards the ocean.

### Brief History

Geographically India has been surrounded by sea from three sides, east, west and south. Seas had become part and parcel of the people of India since history. The people of peninsular India though were well familiar with seas, the people of northern India were neither oblivious of seas. The Rig Veda, the Jatakas, the Greek and the Roman authors, the early Tamil poems as well as host of archaeological discoveries in India and abroad prove that even before the birth of Christ, the ancient Indians had knowledge of navigation not only on inland waters but also on high seas (Chakravarti 1930: 645). There were ports and harbours along the coast of Tamralipti, Kaviri-pattanam, Bharukaccha and Surparaka and it was practicable to reach there by Ganga river not only from Campa (Bhagalpur) but even from Benara (Ibid.). Sardar K M Panikkar is also of the view that the ancient Indians knew about ship building and use of magnetic compass for navigation (Prakash 2013). Panikkar has also given a fascinating maritime past of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE Mauryan Empire and has also provided evidence of commercial colonization as well as cultural and religious osmosis by sea from India's east coast ports to the south-east Asia (Ibid.). India's dominance in the south-east Asia continued for a long time.

The Sri Vijaya empire which was based in Sumatra controlled the eastern waters since the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD until in 1007 AD, Emperor Rajendra of south Indian Chola dynasty challenged it (Ibid.). The 100 year war subsequently weakened both the empires and so came the decline of the Hindu sea power (Ibid.). Later the south Indian Bahamani and the Vijayanagara Kingdoms could not revive their sea power and with the advances in ship building in the fifteenth century Europe, the sea power passed on to the Europeans (Ibid.).

With its independence in 1947, India always nurtured the ambition of becoming a successful sea power. The British transfer of Diego Garcia, an Indian Ocean atoll to the United States of America in the late 1960's was always seen by Indians as its naval weakness. The historical dominance of the Indian Ocean

by the Indians is therefore recalled to upgrade its naval power.

### Concepts of Maritime Diplomacy

Conceptualizing maritime diplomacy for India is difficult because though the notion of maritime has existed since pre-independence days the idea of maritime diplomacy has not gained emphasis at the foreign policy level. However some people belonging to naval service, diplomats and academicians have tried to prioritise maritime in India's international interactions and formulated the importance of oceans and various issues related to it. Their study sees India as a benign naval power capable of achieving great power status by efficient use of diplomacy.

Maritime diplomacy has been explained by giving emphasis on different core areas like maritime security, blue economy and membership of multilateral forums. Therefore the policy document produced by the Indian Navy in October 2015 defines maritime diplomacy in terms of engagement with different countries to mitigate traditional and non traditional threats (Indian Navy 2015: 84). The engagements will be in form of port visits, personnel exchanges, staff talks and interactions, exercises with foreign navies, maritime assistance, operational interactions and high level maritime interactions (Ibid.).

Former diplomat T P Sreenivasan points towards the importance of vast natural resources lying on the bed of the seas, which in future will become highly demandable (Sreenivasan 2016). He advocates that India must look into the economic aspect of the seas and therefore prepare its diplomat cadre for blue economy (Ibid). Seas not merely preserve mineral resources but also are route for trade. This makes the maritime diplomacy more significant.

India's maritime diplomacy has been well explained by Pradeep Chauhan, a retired Vice Admiral. According to him "India's 'Maritime Diplomacy' is a function of the desire of the nation to preserve, protect and promote her maritime interests" (Chauhan 2015). He specifies that the maritime interests are founded in a single axiom that "India wishes to use the seas for her own purposes while simultaneously preventing others from using them in ways that are to her disadvantage" and define and shape maritime-diplomacy as an instrument of state policy (Ibid.). He further says that maritime diplomacy is not merely about naval power but has a wide spectrum which involves political, economic and military power exerted through use of the sea (Ibid.). He therefore argues that the maritime diplomacy is conducted by the Indian Foreign Service and the Indian Navy (Ibid.).

Diplomacy as it is much complex cannot be left to one or two

organizations. Though the diplomats and the navy play pivotal role in conduct of maritime diplomacy various stakeholders have their role in maritime diplomacy. In this regard the role of Indian private companies, academicians, students, labourers, fishermen and the Indian Diaspora have to be acknowledged. With the increasing use of modern communication technologies and advancement in transportation, people-to-people contact has increased. The significance of Indian Diaspora has increased and the migratory labour force has increased the complexity of maritime diplomacy. Therefore the maritime diplomacy not merely includes security and trade related issues but it has become more humane in its connotations.

Maritime diplomacy therefore can be optimum and egalitarian use of ocean resources, increasing naval capability, providing security through international cooperation and negotiations, and catering to the needs of the Diaspora.

### Importance of the Seas

Traditionally the seas have been a source of livelihood to the people around coastal region. Trade through seas also flourished. In the modern times trade through seas and the advancement in naval warfare capabilities culminated in the emergence of the Europe as a powerful and advanced region of the world. The European nation states slowly but relentlessly colonised almost the entire world. Colonization witnessed excessive use of seas for trade, transportation and migration. The two World Wars were fought significantly by the navies which points towards the strategic significance of the seas. Even during the Cold War era the seas played its role in tilting balance of power between the rival blocs.

In the contemporary times, the maritime diplomacy gained significance in the 1980s with the discovery of manganese nodules and cobalt crusts on the ocean floor (Sreenivasan 2016). The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) which came into existence in 1994 became the 'constitution of the seas' and basis for the legal rights for mining in the open seas (Ibid.). India has always been active in protecting its interest in the seas. In order to keep the Indian Ocean free from great power rivalry, India remained extremely active in the UN Adhoc Committee on the Indian Ocean and proclaimed Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace to the international community (Ibid.). India wanted to keep Indian Ocean under its influence due to traditional and historical reasons and also because it also considered itself as the rightful heir of the British legacy.

With 90 per cent of the global trade carried via oceans and with the integration of India with the global economy, India's dependence on oceans for prosperity and security has increased (Nageshwar 2016). India's total trade through seas stand at 97 per cent with 13 major and 176 minor ports, mostly operating to their full capacity (Prakash 2013). Most of India's hydrocarbon needs are fulfilled by trade through seas. In order to meet India's daily need of 3.1 million barrels of oil at least two VLCCs (Very Large Crude Carriers) unload at the Vadinar terminal in Gujarat every single day of the year (Ibid.). This makes the importance of seas very critical.

India's strategic location places it on an advantageous position with regard to maritime trade routes. The Indian navy patrols vast stretch of the Indian Ocean, protecting the sea routes from pirates and terrorists. As the Strait of Malacca is gaining importance due to its huge volume of trade by the South East Asian Nations and China, India's responsibility to protect and cooperate with the South East Asian nations, and China increases. For this India has to reorient the concept of neighbourhood and give equal importance to the neighbour maritime nations vis-à-vis other neighbours (Nageshwar 2016). This is necessary as the island of Pu Breush, situated near North West of Sumatra is only 92 nautical miles away from Indira Point and Phuket in Thailand is only 273 nautical miles away from Indira Point (Ibid.). The division between South Asia and South East Asia is only artificial with India sharing maritime boundary with Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia and

others (Ibid.). If India begins to give equal importance to maritime neighbours, it will make its maritime diplomacy more vibrant.

As India is an energy scarce nation, most of its energy needs are fulfilled by oil fields situated in the West Asian countries and some in African countries. Thus the Arabian Sea along with the Indian Ocean becomes strategically significant. To protect itself from pirates and terrorists Indian maintains constant vigil and at the same time it has to compete with China, Pakistan and other countries for influence in the region.

From Djibouti to Malacca strait and from Malacca strait to South China Sea, India has to constantly deploy diplomacy to protect its interests. India, therefore to achieve its interests negotiates, cooperates and bargains in the international arena.

### Diplomatic Activities

With the emergence of new maritime flashpoints and entry of various maritime players, maritime diplomacy has gained traction in the global politics. The South China Sea, the Malacca Straits, the Arabian Sea became the topic for discussion with countries like Singapore and Sri Lanka providing platforms for discussion in their security conclaves. Therefore India finds its role increased as the maritime neighbours compete, confront and castigate each other on various issues related to their national interests. India's own security and development gets affected by the political situation in its maritime neighbourhood. The role of India's traditional competitors like China and Pakistan in maritime related issues has forced Indian to employ its diplomatic skills to prevent any loss. Apart from this the Great Powers like the United States and Russia have their own interests in the regions of India's maritime influence. The new issues like piracy and terrorism through seas have adversely affected India in recent times; alarming India on the security threats it faces from the seas. India has therefore multiple issues to tackle on its maritime fronts making its maritime diplomacy ever challenging and multifaceted.

India faces a Herculean challenge in protecting its interests in the South China Sea, where China has claimed almost the entire South China Sea which is being ferociously contested by the countries like Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei. The South China Sea in the present times has become a flaring point with contested claims of different parties. It is fast emerging as a contentious issue between the two powerful countries, namely China and the United States. China has deployed fighter jets and surface to air missile in Woody Island in the South China Sea (Tomlinson 2016). While the United States wants China to end militarization of the contested South China Sea, China on the other hand want the United States patrol to end (Ibid.). India finds itself embroiled in the South China Sea as the contesting parties want India to show its presence and also because the South China Sea has become significant for India. Vietnam has invited India to explore and exploit natural resources within the Southeast Asian 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea on which Vietnam claims sovereign rights (Chaudhury 2016). Vietnam has already allocated oil blocks to India from where India's ONGC Videsh Limited supplies oil to Vietnam (Ibid.).

The South China Sea is strategically important for India as 5 Trillion Dollar of global trade passes through South China Sea annually (Sputnik News 2016) and over 50 per cent of India's trade with the South East Asian and the East Asian Nation passes through it (Chaudhury 2016). India fears that complete dominance of the South China Sea region by China in future will control India's trade route (Ibid.). Therefore India has joined the United States and Japan in voicing concern on China's unilateral moves and at the same time India also supports freedom of navigation in the region (Ibid.). India's collaboration with Vietnam, the United States and Japan is a calculated risk, having potential of antagonising China. To ward off any negative impact on its diplomacy towards China, India also finds methods to cooperate with China. India and China conducted their first 'joint tactical exercise' in Chushul

Moldo area of Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir in which they focused on aspects related to disaster relief and humanitarian operations (NDTV 2016). India's robust trade with China also indicate that India does not want its relationship with China to go on a negative trajectory.

However China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) policy has thrown a challenge for India's maritime diplomacy. OBOR is a policy initiative of Chinese President Xi Jinping which aims to achieve greater economic integration of Asia, Africa and Europe (Livemint 2016). The "road" actually means the maritime route connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the "belt" comprise highways, railways and telecom, oil and gas pipeline project from coastal China to Europe via Central and West Asia (Ibid.). India faces a great dilemma and is undecided whether to cooperate with China on OBOR or float a competing vision altogether or partnership in Japan's initiative called Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI). Similar views are expressed by other experts. India needs to resolve for itself whether OBOR represents a threat or an opportunity (Saran and Passi 2016). In future if China aggressively pushes OBOR, it will force India to respond which will have an impact on India's maritime diplomacy.

India's maritime diplomacy has already expanded. One of India's main players in maritime diplomacy is the Indian Navy. India heavily rely on its navy to fulfil its diplomatic objectives. The Indian navy not only plays a chief role of security provider in the seas but also represent the might of India's naval power. The second International Fleet Review (IFR) at Vizag, held in February 2016 stands testimony to it. In the IFR navies from 50 countries participated with 100 warships (Pubby 2016). By hosting the IFR, India showcased to the world its technical prowess and the importance it attaches to the seas.

More recently the Indian Navy has performed series of humanitarian activities not only generating domestic admiration but also international goodwill. In a diplomatic achievement of major proportion the Indian Navy in April 2015 conducted Operation Rahat and evacuated 4000 Indian and 900 foreign national from war torn Yemen (Chauhan 2015). In the past too similar civilian evacuation was conducted by India navy from Lebanon in 2006 (Operation Sukoon) and from Libya in 2011 (Operation Blossom) (Ibid.). With its military preparedness and humanitarian role, the Indian Navy plays an important role in augmenting India's maritime diplomacy.

To strengthen and expand its maritime diplomacy India launched Forum for India Pacific Cooperation (FIPIC) in November 2014. FIPIC include 14 pacific island nations namely, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu with whom India hopes to strengthen its diplomatic ties by methods of cooperation in fields like climate change, space technology and solar energy. The FIPIC-2 held in 2015 in Jaipur, made further progress in bringing the warm and friendly people of Pacific islands closer to India (Balakrishnan 2015). India's presence in the Pacific island nations will make India an important player in the vast Pacific Ocean.

### Constrains In Maritime Diplomacy

Though India's maritime diplomacy is far stretched and dynamic, it faces several constrains which forces it to cede some ground in its backwaters of Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea to China and the United States. In South China Sea, India has to face the onslaught of China's maritime diplomacy. In the pacific islands India does not have military presence. India is also not present in the Arctic water which despite remaining freezed is fast emerging as a major source of hydrocarbon. India's project Mausam/ Spice Route/ Cotton Route which is an attempt to provide alternative to Chinese Silk Route has proven to be non starter (Livemint 2016). India's old commitment of building port in Chabahar in Iran is moving at snail's pace (Ibid.). India's inability in completing its infrastructure projects and lack of strategy points towards some demerits in India's

approach in conduct of its maritime diplomacy.

Usually India's maritime diplomacy is reactive and its strategic level game-plays are too-little –too-late (Chauhan 2015). Numerous opportunities have been lost, many in critical locations such as Djibouti, Mozambique, Sri Lanka, Qatar and Oman, largely due to the ungainliness and discomfiture India seems to demonstrate when required to play proactive role at the strategic level (Ibid.). Therefore it is necessary that India becomes proactive and does not let opportunities to slip.

Constrains in India's maritime diplomacy has also crept in due to limitations at the structural level. There is no single government agency which has either the span of responsibility or the authority to act as the focal point for India's maritime policies and interests (Prakash 2013). Sixteen different ministries, departments or organizations (including the Indian Navy and the Coast Guard) are involved in ocean related matters and most of the time there is complete lack of coordination between the different organs of the government (Ibid.). The placing of generalist bureaucrats in the position which require specialized maritime knowledge and expertise has also resulted in lack of directions and confusion in certain areas like coastal and port security, traffic management, pollution control, fisheries regulation and anti piracy measures (Ibid.). A change is therefore needed at the structural level to bring in accountability and swiftness in the decision making process.

### Conclusion

With the rapid rise of India's economy and change in geopolitics, seas are fast becoming important. India's maritime diplomacy is rapidly expanding to protect its economic and security interests. In recent times India has made several manoeuvres by conducting joint military exercises, entering multilateral organizations, making negotiations and conducting humanitarian relief missions. The role of India is not limited to Indian Ocean or Arabian Sea but its presence is also felt in the Pacific Ocean. As India's maritime diplomacy expands, its role in the oceans will also increase. The nostalgia of India being an ancient sea power encourages India to expand its maritime diplomacy. With the changing geopolitics and with the South China Sea becoming an international flashpoint, India's maritime diplomacy will become more robust.

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