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India and Australia: Maritime Partners in the Indo-Pacific

As East Asia struggles to cope with the growing challenges to maritime security in the Western Pacific—including changes in great power balance, the intensification of maritime disputes, and fundamental disagreements on the interpretation of the Law of the Sea—three new imperatives are redefining the geopolitics of the region.

One is the growing recognition that the security problems in the East Asian waters must be addressed within the broader framework of the Indo-Pacific. The second is a weakening of the United States which has been the principal security provider in the Indian and Pacific Oceans for many decades. The third is a consequential change in India's maritime orientation—from being a lone ranger to a partner eager to build maritime coalitions.

Taken together these three trend lines open the space for Delhi and Canberra to consult more intensively on maritime issues and develop a framework for security cooperation in the increasingly turbulent waters of Asia.

Traditionally the Pacific and Indian Oceans have been viewed as two different and self-contained worlds. A number of developments have begun to compel a more integrated view of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. East Asia's high growth path has generated stronger economic links with resource rich West Asia and Africa.

Unlike many East Asian countries that have relied on the United States for the maintenance of order in Asia's high seas, China is building independent blue water naval capabilities to secure its expanding interests in the Indian Ocean.

Beijing is also developing transport corridors and building oil pipelines from the Indian Ocean to Western and South-western China. It is actively constructing strategic maritime infrastructure in the Indian Ocean.

Meanwhile, as India's trade and economic relations with East Asia acquire greater weight, New Delhi's 'Look East' policy has acquired a distinct naval dimension.

The traditional clear distinctions, then, between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific are beginning to blur. While Indo-Pacific will always have distinct sub-regions, each with its own unique security problems, the rise of China and India has given it a definitive geopolitical character.

If the emergence of new powers in the East is part of an unfolding structural change in the international system, so is the relative decline of the United States that has acquired some speed amidst the economic and financial crisis that has enveloped the world since 2007.

Questions have inevitably arisen about the sustainability and credibility of the U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific region. Washington now faces real challenges in keeping its shrinking financial and military resources in alignment with commitments in the Indo-Pacific.

To be sure, the United States will remain the most powerful military force in Asia for a long time to come. Nevertheless, its forward presence in the Indo-Pacific is coming under stress amidst the proliferation of advanced military capabilities in the littoral and the adoption of asymmetric strategies by its competitors, most notably China and Iran.

Washington has repeatedly reaffirmed that it will remain a 'resident power' in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean, and the Obama Administration has matched the rhetoric with an intense diplomatic focus on Asia in the last two years.

The United States is reorganizing its military disposition in the Indo-Pacific for greater effectiveness, recasting its military doctrine to address such new challenges as access denial, reordering its security partnerships.

Strengthening its traditional alliances with Japan and Australia and building new security partnerships with countries like India are now central to the new U.S. strategy that involves a measure of burden-sharing. Delhi's changing maritime orientation provides a perfect foil to the changing U.S. approach to the Indo-Pacific.

India was at the centre of Great Britain's security strategy in the Indian Ocean from the late 18th to mid 20th centuries. The Indian people provided much needed resources for the maintenance of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region by the British Raj.

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After independence and the partition of the Subcontinent in 1947, India was preoccupied in defending its new land borders with Pakistan and China. An inward economic orientation and the foreign policy of non-alignment made India's 'sea-blindness' more acute.

Throughout the Cold War India adopted a policy of military isolationism and demanded that great powers vacate the Indian Ocean and let the developing countries of the littoral region define a security system of their own.

Delhi's impractical approach to the Indian Ocean began to change in the 1990s as India started to open its economy and reconnect with its Indian Ocean neighbours and major maritime powers of the world.

As India became a trading nation, like China before it, it was inevitable that Delhi's national security policy would acquire a new maritime focus. The new reliance on the sea for importing ever-growing quantities of energy and mineral resources, and for exporting its products to widely dispersed global markets, meant India would naturally turn towards building a blue water navy.

Equally significant has been the changing Indian attitudes towards international maritime cooperation. After the end of the Cold War, Delhi shed its military isolationism as well as opposition to foreign military presence in the Indian Ocean.

India began to emphasize naval engagement and maritime cooperation with all major powers, especially the United States. India also focused on a revitalization of its historic maritime links with the smaller island states of the Indian Ocean and a re-engagement with major regional actors in a bilateral as well as a multilateral framework.

Discarding its traditional reservation against military actions outside the United Nations framework, India began to participate in coalition operations, most notably in the relief efforts that followed the Indian Ocean Tsunami at the end of 2004.

India has also cautiously stepped up multilateral naval exercises involving the United States and its Asian allies. This, however, does not mean India has either abandoned its goal of strategic autonomy or discarded the principle of an independent foreign policy.

What Delhi has done is to inject these old mantras with a measure of pragmatism that focuses on developing cooperative approaches to maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. With a growing economy and expanding naval capabilities, India is more self-assured in the way it thinks about the ocean spaces around it.

India's security perimeter was defined in the past as stretching from the Aden to Malacca. India is now looking beyond the Strait of Malacca to include the South China Sea in its national security calculus.

Delhi's determination to deepen its naval partnership with Hanoi, commitment to pursue oil exploration in Vietnam's waters in the face of Chinese opposition, strong support for the peaceful resolution of the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and an emphasis on the freedom of navigation in the Western Pacific have drawn much attention in East Asia.

India's new interest in the Pacific has often been conflated with China's rising profile in the Indian Ocean. India has no desire to confront China in the Western Pacific nor prevent it from establishing a presence in the Indian Ocean.

What India seeks is an Indo-Pacific order that ensures that Asia's maritime commons are open and accessible to all and are not territorialized in the name of either nationalism or historical claim.

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India and Australia are both trading nations and have inherited the Anglo-Saxon tradition of common law and a maritime orientation. They also share the values of entrepreneurial capitalism and political pluralism.

Unlike in the Cold War, when Delhi and Canberra disagreed, often violently, on the Indian Ocean, they now have a common interest in promoting stability and security in the Indo-Pacific in concert with others.

India and Australia have already declared their intent to develop maritime security cooperation. The rapid evolution of the geopolitical dynamic in the Indo-Pacific, however, demands that Delhi and Canberra translate that quickly into decisive policy actions.

India and Australia must step up their consultation and coordination in such existing forums as the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

The IOR-ARC, which brings together 18 countries of the littoral, aims at deepening economic cooperation in the Indian Ocean region, but has been moribund. Delhi, which holds the current chairmanship and Canberra, which takes charge next, have an opportunity to inject some vigour and purposefulness into the IOR-ARC over the next few years.

The IONS is a more recent Indian initiative that brings together the Chiefs of Naval Staffs from the littoral for professional exchanges and cooperation on issues relating to maritime security.

In the end the Indian Ocean region is too vast and diverse to lend itself to a single over-arching institutional framework in the near term. Instead of obsessing with an architectural design for the Indian Ocean, the region could build upon the ideas of the Australian foreign minister Kevin Rudd for 'incremental advance' through 'functional cooperation'.

Central to the creation of a pan-regional identity in the Indian Ocean is an active and enduring collaboration between India, Australia and other like-minded countries in the littoral.

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