

Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty First Century

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James R. Holmes, Andrew C. Winner and Toshi Yoshihara, Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty First Century, London, Routledge, 2009.

Construed as expanding rings of expanding circles, India's maritime environs exhibit varying degrees of complexity and competitiveness. Each successive ring bears its own characteristics, opportunities, challenges and distinctive nuances. As India looks farther offshore, beyond its coastal or near-seas environment, it will encounter actors and forces that will neither bend wholly to its will nor reflexively push back. Contingency and context will thus characterise India's interactions with fellow maritime powers. Under such circumstances, subtlety and prudence at sea will be at a premium for Indian strategists (p.168).

James R. Holmes, Andrew C. Winner and Toshi Yoshihara's new book titled 'Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty First Century' is an extension of James Homes and Toshi Yoshihara's previous works 'China's Naval Ambitions in the Indian Ocean' (The Journal of Strategic Studies Vol. 1, No. 3 June, 2008) and 'Chinese Naval Strategy in the Twenty First Century: The Turn to Mahan' (Routledge, London, 2008).

Divided in ten short but precise subsections, the book starts with noted naval historian Paul Kennedy's argument, made in one of his opinion pieces and published in International Herald Tribune. Kennedy argues that just as China renounced the sea, Europe stepped into the age of sea voyage. He considers this as one of the prime reasons why Europe ascended to glory and colonised countries across the globe.

Taking cues from this; James Homes, Andrew C. Winner and Toshi Yoshihara argue that India should be included in China's category, since India too turned its back to sea around that time.

The authors seem right in saying this, as India under the Ghulam, Khalji, Sultanate and Moghul empires did not give sea prowess its due. If one digs the issue deeper, it is not difficult to find out the reasons for this. Ghulams, Turks,

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Tartars and Moghuls came from the places which focussed a little too much on the land capability and Territorial Army as compared to anything else.

Much before the Ghulams stepped in; Hindu religious texts too had banned religious Hindus from going overseas. The reason was the fear that increasing number of Indian philosophers (both Hindu and Buddhists) went to Arabian countries and other places; something which was considered 'brain drain' at that juncture of history.

One possibly cannot overlook the fact that Rajendra Chola had grandiose plans for maritime prowess. In fact, India's influence in South East Asian region, particularly in the present Indo-China is a result of consistent expeditions made by the Chola and Pallava empires. Even in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Shivaji's Commander Kanhoji Angre and King of Mysore Tipu Sultan paid much attention to the coastal security and strengthened their naval capabilities, which is quite appreciable considering their flashy presence in the history of India.

To substantiate their arguments, authors quote India's ex Chief of Naval Staff Admiral (Retd.) Arun Prakash who is of the opinion that Post 1947 India has overlooked the importance of naval capability in making of its military strategy.

Admiral Prakash argues, "Regrettably, in India's case, we have historically suffered from an intellectual vacuum as far as strategic thinking is concerned, and that is why, after sixty years as a sovereign republic, we lack a clearly articulated statement of national aims and objectives. This is a cultural handicap which has not just deprived us of a healthy tradition of strategic debate and discourse, but also had a deleterious impact on internal security as well as foreign policy issues at the national level."

Further, in the second chapter, authors write, "It is a feat of nation building that India must replicate to enfold the seas in Indians' idea of their nation. This will demand constant attention and management on the part of Indian government". Indeed, India has not paid due attention to its maritime past. How many Indian universities, for example, run courses on India's naval past or have chapters on Cholas', Tipu's or Shivaji's navy is the question worth pondering.

The question the authors are asking and proposing to answer is that since India and China are turning towards the sea, are they destined to reconfigure the international system, the way it was done in the nineteenth century by Japan, Germany and America? The main purpose of the authors is to estimate how various external stimuli may push Indian maritime strategy this way or that.

Building this line of argument further, in the third chapter, the authors opine

that strategic thinkers in Beijing and New Delhi have turned to maritime history for insight into how rising great powers make and execute maritime strategy, “Like China, India sees certain diplomatic, economic and military interests at stake in Asian 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 geo-political aspiration of Indian people. Some 90 per cent of world trade, measured by bulk, travels by sea. A sizable share of that must traverse narrow seas in India's geographical neighbourhood, notably the straits of Hormuz, Malacca, and Bab el-Mandeb (p. 37).”

However, they quickly connect India's maritime strategy with that of United States (US) in order to find similarities between the two.

India, for long has been pushing its own 'Munroe Doctrine' in the Indian Ocean. Intellectual nimbleness, geographically 'isolated' strategic units, sense of entitlement and maritime component of pre-eminence are some of the points of similarity between the US and Indian maritime thinking. However, as is evident from India's policies and actions, it is a case 'Sui Generis' as there are a multitude of differences in Indian maritime policy and implementation vis-à-vis US.

Hugely influenced by Alfred Thayer Mahan, the authors in the fourth chapter analyse and question India's maritime doctrine and sea strategy. Citing an example to explain India's sea strategy authors write, “While the Indian navy usually describes INS Jalaswa, the former USS Trenton, as a platform for disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, its original purpose was to support opposed amphibious landings. Countries rarely forego military capability they find useful in supporting national security objectives, even if it worries neighbours. Most often, a state's increase in military capability is couched in defensive terms or depicted in a non-aggressive policy context. Such is the case with India, which has consistently stated, with considerable justice, as our explanation of Indian strategic culture suggested that its core national values include peaceful existence (p. 67).”

India's decision of not supporting former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's idea of 'Arc of Democracy' can be seen in this context. India has always been cautious that its increasing naval capability is not seen as a threat by any intra or extra regional power. India's Chief of Naval Staff Sureesh Mehta's statement that India neither has capability or intention to match China is just another example of how keenly India is working to project its benevolent image while it is strengthening its capability.¹ Authors also admit the fact that India, at the moment, lacks the power projection forces and lift potential to execute significant joint operations outside its immediate neighbourhood.

Devoting the fifth chapter on India's conventional naval capabilities, the authors examine India's current naval strength and further analyse its future. The tools used here are obvious; budgetary underpinnings, policy drivers and the coordination among various heads of policy making. Here, one may be a bit bogged down by the facts as it looks like sheer assembling of figures which do not seem to break fresh grounds.

As authors themselves admit, the sixth chapter is highly speculative and tries to gaze at India's nuclear powered naval capability. The authors have rightly pointed toward the issue, as India is struggling since long with civilian control of nuclear weapons. Integrating Indian civilian and military authorities has now become a big issue in India and requires urgent attention. This is important especially in the context of India's military readiness; to which swift and precise command and control are key elements.


Presently, it is quite trendy to include the Indo-US nuclear deal in the writing on India's foreign and security policy and authors are no exception to it. They could not resist the temptation to discuss the nuclear deal (however, they quickly got out of it later in the chapter), which now seems to be reaching nowhere. Obama administration does not seem to be doing anything about it as they have their priorities fixed on Afghan-Pak region and bringing Pakistan back in. The authors rightly argue that it is a bit too early for India and the US to be dreamy eyed about 'natural partner' or anything of that sort. India cannot afford to think of being US's 'deputy' in the region. For the US, as long as the war in Afghanistan and troubled areas in Pakistan is going on, it is a remote possibility, even though the two democracies keep paying lip service to 'strategic partnership'.

Authors try to explain China's involvement in the Indian Ocean in the chapter titled, 'China turns to the Indian Ocean'. The argument here is, "China is pursuing sea-power measured by the Mahanian indices of commerce, bases and ships and it is building up a powerful navy with dispatch. But tremendous uncertainty pervades analyses of China's evolving sea power. Will Beijing pursue a purely defensive naval strategy, sheltering within its coastal waters, as many prognoses maintain? Or will massive naval build up lead to competition for supremacy in the broad pacific, as other, equally capable analysts predict? We argue that China will neither hew closely to its defensive posture nor seek to directly challenge US naval supremacy in the Pacific (p. 128)."

The authors argue that it is precisely China's prolonged material weakness along the sea lanes that could allow Washington and New Delhi to forge a near-term maritime partnership with Beijing. Cooperation in areas like disaster relief, maritime domain awareness and counterterrorism could lay the groundwork for a more durable partnership in maritime Asia, alleviating the concerns about sea lane security that could deflect China in a more ominous

direction. Considering the stakes, it would be worth the effort US and Indian leaders would expend in negotiating such a partnership (p. 149).

China's intriguing transformation is, however, a factor that might stop India and the US in joining hand in future. One of the reasons for this is its increasing assertiveness quite evident during the 60th anniversary of PLA. Other regional powers such as Japan, Australia, Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand and South Korea (dealt with in the penultimate chapter) are wary of Chinese intentions and increasing naval capabilities. Australia, for example, in its 2009 Defence White Paper states, "the speed of China's military build-up has the potential to cause regional concerns if it is not carefully explained." Contrastingly, the 2000 White Paper stated, "China, as the country with the fastest growing security influence in the region, is an increasingly important strategic interlocutor for Australia. The Government places a high priority on working with China to deepen and develop our dialogue on strategic issues."²

The last chapter with an interesting caption, 'Nehru's Logic, Kautilya's Grammar?' reasserts what has been said before in the book. Their prognosis is that Indians still look to Ashoka, Gandhi and Nehru for inspiration and that these philosophers and historical traditions supply the logic for Indian maritime policy. A strictly defensive model of Monroe Doctrine confirms to this logic and will persist absent a compelling external threat. Events and trends in the region thus will set the grammar or the ways and means by which New Delhi pursues its aims at sea. Evidently, their conclusions have nothing substantial to offer, as the book is a bit too futuristic. Though it dwells deep into the historical details of India's strategic thinking, it does not give the reason why India renounced the sea. Additionally, since the book eventually indicates towards a zero-sum game in Asia in terms of competition for resources and dominance over the region, it partially fails to carve out a niche for itself. Nonetheless, it contributes to the existing literature on India's naval strategy within the limitations mentioned above. 

Notes

1. Available at <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/dont-have-capability-or-intention-to-match-china-force-for-force-navy-chief/500573/>.
2. Australia's Defence White Paper 2009, available at www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/.