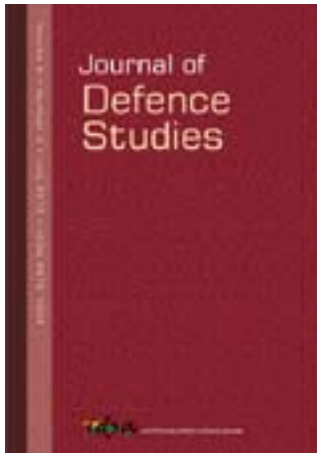


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India's Geostrategy and China Mackinder versus Mahan?

*Zorawar Daulet Singh**

Two recent events exemplify India's geopolitical dilemma. In early April 2013, it was reported that Chinese submarines had been conducting forays in the Indian Ocean that were apparently picked up by US Navy sonar.¹ A few weeks later, there was a Chinese intrusion in the western sector where a platoon of Chinese troops entered the Depsang Valley area of eastern Ladakh.² While the status quo ante was peacefully attained, the Ladakh incident is a vivid reminder of the abiding implications of an unresolved Himalayan dispute. Collectively, what both these events also evoke is a deeper contestation in India's geostrategy vis-à-vis China. India's geostrategy is being contested by Mackinder and Mahanian images, and some of India's strategic ambivalence can be traced to the lack of a well-defined geopolitical image to ground this debate.

THE MAHANIAN DELUSION

A Mahanian solution to the China challenge is that India can overcome some of its continental disadvantages vis-à-vis China by posing a nuisance to China's sea lines of communication (SLOCs), or even involving itself in East Asian disputes. The underlying logic stems from the idea of horizontal escalation where asymmetry in one theatre can be sought to be overcome by escalating the conflict to a wider geographical domain. In

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sum, if China pursues adventurism in the mountains, India can respond on the high seas.

While conceptually intuitive, linkage requires equivalence in that Beijing must value the integrity of its SLOCs enough to change its calculus on the mountains. Naval blockades are also complicated operations and the time horizon for success, to the point that China would find its resource security threatened, would be significantly longer than a swift and limited continental operation pursued to permanently change the Line of Actual Control (LAC) or for punitive reasons. China's growing Strategic Petroleum Reserve, though intended to offset market disruptions, will also be an asset in such a situation. Finally, China's pursuit of new Eurasian lines of communication, both with growing energy linkages with Russia and connectivity through Central Asia, indicate a potential declining dependence on Indian Ocean SLOCs, at least for some strategic resources.³ Clearly, China must perceive the game similarly, and there is nothing to suggest it does other than the Indian maritime strategist's preference for such a game. Plainly put, a 'core interest' cannot be secured by peripheral horizontal actions.

DEALING WITH CONTINENTAL PRESSURE

How can India deter serious conventional pressure from being applied on its frontiers? There is no alternative to deterrence capabilities in the continental realm where India's core interests (territorial integrity, in this case) can be pressured. Perhaps, a more systematic way to developing deterrence options is through a two-fold process.

First, strengthening India's frontier tripwires at key passes across the LAC by enhancing logistics, heavy-lift capabilities, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities to increase the ability to move forces forward toward vulnerable mountain passes. This would raise some costs for China. To be sure, there are inherent geographical limits to how efficient and flexible the logistics chain can become and India can never match China's advantages that involve a relatively flexible approach to border management, given the advantages of flat Tibetan terrain. But India is not even remotely close to reaching the viable limits of what would constitute a modicum of modern logistics and ISR network within a constrained topography.

One report, based on official assessments states, 'on the Indian side, many of the roads stop 60 to 80 km before the LAC, thus affecting

troop deployment and forward presence.⁴ Despite an official decision to enhance the connectivity of border regions in all three sectors of the India-China border, 'as of 2010, only nine of the 72 (planned) roads have been completed.'⁵ Some of the reasons, mainly related to bureaucratic inertia, coordination and severe capacity constraints in the Border Roads Organisation, are known but remain unaddressed.⁶

It could be argued that the absence of modern logistics and a connectivity network may have inadvertently led to an over-emphasis on forward patrolling of disputed posts on the LAC. In other words, the prevailing approach to border management is a quick fix to compensate for the decades-old structural problems in the rear: such as infrastructure, logistical chain, technology-based ISR, etc. If some of these measures, including monitoring capabilities, were strengthened, border management would be transformed. In the absence of a serious transformation of the rear logistical network leading upto the mountains, India would always remain hostage to a situation where a Chinese fait accompli on a disputed pocket on the LAC will leave costly options for Delhi.

Second, rather than escalation in peripheral domains, the ability to vertically and horizontally escalate the levels of violence is an important element of enhancing deterrence. China is logistically capable of amassing a large volume of forces and firepower to any sector at short notice.⁷ To deter such a blitzkrieg scenario, India can signal capabilities and a doctrine that enables it to degrade targets deep inside Tibet and in a domain that China truly values—its continental heartland in eastern China.

This implies that India requires stand-off deterrent systems—such as longer range missiles and greater reach in air power. Some of these capabilities already exist but they have not been directed toward deterrence objectives by a central policy-maker. Consequently, the services—Army and Air Force in this case—have been left to indulge their parochial preferences that preclude a joint land-air doctrine. The Army remains wedded to a manpower-intensive approach to deterrence and the Air Force is content with accumulating ad hoc capabilities without contributing to a stable deterrence posture. It is puzzling, for example, that India is pursuing out-of-area expeditionary capabilities without first addressing the heavy lift transport requirements for its core security needs or the absence of a modern air-defence network.

Perhaps it was from such a fragmented assessment that a widely read policy document in 2012 argued to promote asymmetric deterrence by preparing to 'trigger an effective insurgency in the areas occupied by

Chinese forces' in the event of an invasion!⁸ China is not even remotely going to oblige the Indian strategist's plans for a protracted war near the foothills. In fact, it can be argued that a manpower-dominated modernization approach to frontier defence rather than enhancing deterrence might inadvertently undermine it by sending the wrong signal to Beijing, and, simultaneously, delude the Indian political and military leadership that an 'active defence' type posture is coming into being.⁹

PEACETIME CHALLENGES AND LIMITED WAR

The China challenge on the frontiers should be clearly de-constructed. In the absence of an unresolved boundary, one challenge is to ensure the disputed LAC zone does not widen because of China's logistic ability to pursue an activist peacetime patrolling posture. This can only be dealt with by the alluded focus on logistics and monitoring capabilities along with a streamlined approach to border management. Further, since India holds the lower ground, it should also leverage confidence-building measures (CBMs) and jointly negotiate new norms to constrain some of China's flexibility and superior patrolling capabilities. If leveraged prudently, CBMs can assist in the management of a stable status quo.

Furthermore, there is the classic scenario of a limited conflict ensuing from a deterioration in bilateral relations. This goes to the heart of a viable deterrence strategy based on the geopolitical nature of the Himalayan battlefield. A deterrence-by-denial strategy is a flawed approach in a nuclear world. In fact, asymmetry can be turned to India's advantage. Instead of relying on a flexible response strategy, which plays to China's strengths, given its superior logistics and geostrategic advantages of the higher ground, India's doctrine should be based on deterrence-by-punishment. It is futile and expensive to prepare to engage China at all levels in the entire spectrum of violence. If there is one lesson from the India-Pakistan dyad this is it. The conventionally weaker actor can negate asymmetry by politically leveraging its strategic capabilities and doctrine. A credible and thoughtfully signaled nuclear doctrine correlated to a joint theatre-wide conventional doctrine will enable India to stave off a scenario of Chinese adventurism.

WHOSE DOCTRINE IS IT ANYWAY?

The key point is that the appropriate military doctrine is emerging from institutional inertia rather than through a carefully debated plan. If the

goal is to create deterrence under high-tech conventional and nuclear conditions, then investing in manpower to engage in a hypothetical battle in Tibet is a sub-optimal strategy that would exacerbate the India-China security dilemma without increasing India's security on the frontier. Given China's geostrategic and logistical advantages an active defence posture by India is simply not credible.

A deterrence-by-punishment strategy combined with robust holding capabilities is preferable to pursuing the illusion of an active defence doctrine. Such a strategy requires stand-off precision long-range systems, space-based domain awareness, fourth and fifth generational air power capabilities, and a modern air-defence network (currently almost entirely provided by the IAF). Again, some of the underlying ingredients are already scattered across the services but have not been honed toward joint doctrinal goals.

The heart of the problem is not the dearth of strategic thought but the diversity of strategic perceptions and doctrines that are vying for individual relevance, and even primacy. While the Mahanians belittle the continentalists for clinging to outdated geopolitical images, the continentalists have struggled to internalise the implications of a post-nuclear high-technological environment, where deterrence must be the principal purpose of military strategy. The military dimensions of grand strategy cannot be additive where different stakeholders—in this case the services—suggest autonomous means to confront the same threats or even reconstruct threats to suit the means and the strategist's task being to add these doctrines up!

Strategy is not about throwing money into a bottomless pit but dynamically and creatively honing the most appropriate instruments toward threats the way they are likely to appear based on the opponent's political goals and military doctrine, and not how and where they should appear. India's political elite must accept the lion's share of the blame since it is apathy at that level that has condoned the bottom-up and fragmented approach to strategy with no central planner willing to set the terms of the agenda.

**INDIA'S PRIORITY: CONTINENTAL CHINA
OR MARITIME CHINA?**

India should focus more on continental China rather than maritime China; and it is the balance of power and influence on the subcontinental

periphery that needs constant strategic attention. China's lines of communication to South Asia emanate from continental China. The corridor to Central Asia, trans-Karakoram linkages through Pakistan or the corridor through Myanmar are all part of a continental geostrategy by China to secure its peripheral regions and integrate its neighbours. The extension and further potential of these lines of communication into the northern Indian Ocean—Bay of Bengal or the Arabian Sea—cannot be tapped without Indian strategic acquiescence and cooperation.

The maritime realm between India and China, contrary to the observation of some analysts¹⁰, is not a zero-sum theatre where 'core' interests for both countries are at stake. The geopolitical reality is that China's SLOCs traverse near Indian naval deployments, with more than 85 per cent of Chinese oil imports flowing through Indian Ocean sea lanes. Similarly, more than 50 per cent of India's trade now goes through the Malacca and Singapore Straits. Rather than becoming a source of contention this should form the basis of an accommodative maritime relationship.

In an interdependent international political economy the idea of unilateral security over SLOCs is illogical. The 'Indo-Pacific' commons fell under the sway of a single superpower under unique historical conditions that are not likely to prevail indefinitely. While it is premature to pre-judge the evolution of the 'Indo-Pacific' maritime system, it cannot but be a collective endeavour where no single power can be excluded from the management of the commons. Within that logic, it is probable that different regional powers will assume greater burdens in their geopolitical peripheries. But as long as inter-regional commerce and resource exchanges underpin the global economy the commons cannot become a closed security system. The Anglo-German maritime rivalry attests to the futility of a zero-sum contest. That rivalry produced an uncontrollable arms race that shattered British maritime dominance and, ultimately, Germany's own pretensions to European hegemony.

In fact, the evolution of military technology underscores that Mahanian ideas are nearly obsolete. The historical Mahanian logic of offensive sea control—'defined as the ability to use the seas in defiance of the will of others'¹¹—via large surface fleets is passé. The original Mahanian prescriptions of sea control were derived from a specific historical, industrial and technological context that no longer prevails given the evolution of the military-technological environment. Continental-based extended-

range missile forces; fourth and fifth generation aerospace capabilities; undersea capabilities like attack submarines; land, air and space-based ISR and targeting capabilities; anti-satellite weapons (ASAT) and cyber capabilities make the idea of sea-control a deeply contested concept. Actually, sea denial along with limited power-projection capabilities is perhaps the most that contemporary rising powers can realistically aspire to. The maritime force structure of tomorrow is likely to trend towards disaggregated and less vulnerable platforms rather than concentrated firepower in large carrier-based fleets.

It would be more appropriate to describe Chinese military strategy as an 'anti-naval' regional sea denial approach than a quest for global maritime power.¹² Land-based systems play an integral part in shaping China's naval modernization, that is, not emulating the large surface fleets in the Anglo-American tradition. As one Western assessment notes, 'the Chinese navy's main purpose is still to protect China from US sea-based strike power.'¹³ As an authoritative US study finds, 'China's new navy relies more on unmanned cruise and ballistic missiles than on manned aircraft, and more on submarines than surface vessels.'¹⁴ Given this, it is ironic then that some in India's strategic discourse invoke the Mahanian image of China's lone aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, as a symbol and guide for China's maritime strategy.¹⁵ Blue water projection beyond regional seas is of secondary priority for Beijing. The core objective of Chinese strategy for the foreseeable future is on sea denial focused on the Western Pacific and the US Navy.

The US Navy recognises that it can no longer operate unhindered in the maritime peripheries of several regional powers, and much of US strategic discourse is animated by the asymmetric anti-access challenge ranging from regions such as West Asia to the Korean Peninsula.¹⁶ Such disruptive technologies are here to stay, and as these capabilities are fielded by the Eurasian Rimland powers, the Mahanian conversation will be radically altered in coming years.

In sum, while continental states such as India and China can raise the operating costs for other maritime powers—including each other—in their respective regions, they cannot unilaterally acquire the sea control necessary to secure blue water SLOCs, which are the lifelines for their economies. Therein lies the logic of competition and cooperation. Self-help strategies can co-exist with cooperative burden-sharing norms to enable stability of the wider commons.

**TAMING THE MAHANIAN FOR A CONTINENTAL-FIRST
GEOSTRATEGY**

The irony is that Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean littoral has not emerged because the PLA Navy is perceived as a security provider, but because China's economic and military-technical assistance has ensured a political space for China. India's maritime instrument can only be one of an ensemble of means to restore Indian influence. Insofar as Indian influence in East Asia is concerned, emulating China's own practices is more viable than premature maritime forays into theatres where India would confront the brunt of Chinese firepower. For example, Indian influence is advanced more by buttressing Vietnam's own capability to asymmetrically balance an assertive China than a direct footprint in the South China Sea.

The Mahanians have been urging India to discard its continental images and envisage a maritime role for India to become a 'net security provider' in other regions. The analysis thus far would suggest this is not a prudent strategy for India. Given the extraordinary investment and lead-time for a naval modernization, it is vital that Indian strategists get this right.

The Mahanians in some respects do reflect the wider changes in India's economic and diplomatic profile that have dispersed Indian interests across the globe. It is true that a globalizing India has an economic and cultural footprint in several continents and India's institutions should reflect this. But it is by no means clear whether the maritime instrument, often projected as a potential guarantor of India's expanding global interests, should be leading this process. And it is certainly not evident that India should pursue an extra-regional role before having produced a modicum of security and influence in its own region where Indian regional aspirations remain deeply contested.

For the foreseeable future, India's 'core interests' would remain continental and must be pursued via a continental-first geostrategy. A maritime role closely linked to enhancing Indian deterrence and influence in the sub-continental realm seems more in tune not only with India's national challenges but also with the geostrategic direction of pressures that keep recurring.

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