

# Strategic Analysis Paper

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## Examining Sino-Indian Maritime Competition, Part I

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### Key Points

- The re-emergence of China and India has forced a re-evaluation of geo-strategic paradigms.
- Their growth has led to competition between the two states. It has also led to the growth and modernisation of their respective navies.
- This modernisation, each claims, is to protect their economies, but each, however, remains suspicious of the other's strategic motivations.

### Summary

To protect their growing economies, China and India have securitised their sea-borne trade routes by enhancing their naval prowess, which act enhances their seapower. This enhancement, however, causes each other concern by making each suspicious of the other's intention. Thus, they further strengthen their navies, leading to a cycle of enhanced naval power and growing suspicion.

For strategic reasons – sometimes referred to as the logic of their growth – China and India deploy – or plan to deploy – their navies near each other's maritime borders. China is creating strategic relationships with littoral states in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and India does likewise, with the same states and others in the East and South China Seas. This leads each to further debate the other's intentions to understand how those may impact upon

their own interests. What remains unclear to the independent observer, however, is whether the intention of both countries in developing their navies is defensive or if each has an underlying agenda for its naval enhancement.

This study, therefore, will examine the reasons for the enhancement of Chinese and Indian naval capability, to determine if these are benign or otherwise.

## Introduction

The second half of the Twentieth Century witnessed the re-emergence of China and India as major players on the world stage. The two countries share many commonalities, both being populous Asian powers with contiguous territory, both ancient, once economically powerful civilisations. India was colonised and Chinese territory governed by foreign powers; importantly, both states were reduced to penury by their colonisers, leaving them with ambivalent perceptions of the West. These commonalities led India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, to publicly aspire to a joint leadership with China to create an Asian revival.<sup>1</sup> India and China, he felt, could be leaders in Asia without impinging upon the other; China and India could accommodate each other's growth and aspirations.

The growth of both states, however, led to competition between them, markedly in the maritime dimension, which is the subject of this paper. It examines the reasons for the modernisation of the Chinese and Indian navies and asks if power projection is a means to their goal of hegemony. It asks:

1. Why are China and India upgrading and modernising their navies?
2. Are their maritime strategies defensive or offensive? If offensive, are India and China striving to be regional hegemonies?

In answering these questions this paper will show that both states seek regional hegemony. Their actions are those of rising powers who wish to project their power. It will show that both states are modernising their navies to protect their economic interests but also use their naval might to project their influence regionally. In turn, the ability to project influence impacts upon their foreign policy, as Booth notes.<sup>2</sup>

The emergence of China and India as major powers has forced a re-thinking of geopolitical boundaries. The West previously saw little connection between the regions of Asia,<sup>3</sup> opposing late nineteenth and early twentieth century geo-strategists. The American admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan,<sup>4</sup> arguably the doyen of seapower studies, noted the interconnectedness of Europe and Asia and the implications of Japan's economic development, India's political awakening and China's latent force.<sup>5</sup> He argued that within the region extending from Asia Minor to Korea, 'are to be found ... the most decisive natural features, and also ... political divisions the unsettled character of which renders the problem of Asia in the present day at once perplexing and imminent.'<sup>6</sup>

Mahan's British successor, Halford Mackinder, extended Mahan's observation by defining Eurasia – the area comprising Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia - as a "pivot", the domination of which would allow the domination of Asia.<sup>7</sup> The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia's subsequent bids to regain its influence in Central Asia and China's actions in acquiring the hydro-carbon resources available there via the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation reinforced the idea of Eurasia.

Ahead of his time, in the 1940s, Nicholas Spykman, the Dutch-American geo-strategist, wrote of China and India becoming future major powers.<sup>8</sup> Both countries turned inwards in the mid-1950s, degrading their international economic relations. Their re-emergence and growth, coupled with East Asia's growth in the early 1990s, saw the Indo-Pacific emerge as a geo-strategic entity. As Medcalfe observes,

[The] Indo-Pacific, or Indo-Pacific Asia, is the best available shorthand for an emerging Asian maritime strategic system that encompasses both the Pacific and Indian Oceans, defined in large part by the geographically expanding interests and reach of China and India and the continued strategic role and presence of the US.<sup>9</sup>

China and India had different reasons for their re-emergence. The United States sought closer relations with China in 1972 in order to create a new front in the West's battle against the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, market forces enabled the Chinese economy to become the world's second-largest. India, though, found itself in trouble in 1991 when its foreign currency reserves dwindled to three weeks' worth of imports.<sup>11</sup> Fiscal reform and commercial re-engagement with the world enabled rapid economic growth, making its economy the third-largest in Asia today.<sup>12</sup>

China and India now seek to protect their economies.<sup>13</sup> Bull's anarchical theory<sup>14</sup> recognises that states must rely upon themselves to survive, so must develop the military capacity to protect their commerce.<sup>15</sup> Thus, China and India enhance their militaries. Their military growth, however, has led to suspicions by each of the other's intentions.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, their growth makes regional states view the competition between them with concern.<sup>17</sup>

Competing economies are not the sole or main reason for the less-than-cordial relations between the two states. India views China through the lens of the Sino-Indian War of 1962.<sup>18</sup> In late October 1962, Chinese troops invaded India's north-east territory, routing the Indian army. Though it lasted only a month, the war etched itself into India's psyche, colouring all future relations with China. Hence, when China acquired nuclear weapons, India embarked upon its own nuclear programme comparatively soon after; when China began to modernise its military, India upgraded its own. China, for its part, sees India as a potential economic and military rival in Asia. While they claim to have cordial relations, they often portray each other as an adversary.<sup>19</sup> This stance extends into the political and commercial spheres; they compete internationally for energy resources and try to balance each other by developing political, economic and military relations regionally. Effectively, they have moved from accommodation to competition.

Having secured most of its land borders, China has turned its attention seawards. The world's largest exporter, it cannot afford any disruption of its sea-borne trade. Simultaneously, it is a net importer of energy products, sixty per cent being imported by sea. This energy fuels the factories manufacturing the goods to be exported. If China's economy is to survive, it must securitise its sea lines of communication (SLOCs), the maritime routes by which energy is shipped into China's ports. To do this, it requires naval capacity, armed ships capable of plying the routes tankers and other cargo-bearing ships take to ensure their safety. But China's actions in the East and South China Seas and the Indian Ocean are not purely defensive. Consequently, India has enhanced its navy, extending the competition for security and influence with China into the maritime dimension.

This paper will assert, though, that India's reaction is not completely defensive, either. It also has a vested agenda in developing its naval capacity. Both India and China seek to acquire enhanced seapower.

This examination will comprise four sections. The first will examine seapower, its components, and why it is perceived as an offensive instrument. This analysis will provide the theoretical underpinnings of the following examinations of China's and India's maritime strategies, which follow in the second and third sections respectively. The second section will analyse why China is placing as much emphasis on its naval growth as it is and its application of that growth to its situation in the Western Pacific region. It will also examine China's perceptions of, and maritime activities and policies in, the IOR. By doing so, it will determine if China's naval ambitions are defensive in nature or offensive. The third section will similarly examine India's naval modernisation, its naval policies and activities in the IOR and the western Pacific. It will determine if India's emphasis on its naval development is a response to China's or part of its independent desire to acquire regional hegemony. Essentially, it will ask if India's maritime activities and policies in these two regions demonstrate a defensive or offensive motivation. The concluding section will summarise the preceding ones and provide the determination of this study.

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#### Notes

1. See, for instance, Holslag, J., *China + India: Prospects for Peace*, Columbia University Press: New York, 2010, p. 2.
2. Booth, K., *Navies and Foreign Policy*, Holmes & Meier Publishers: New York, 1979.
3. Mohan, C. Raja, *Samudra Mantan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Asia Pacific*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, DC, 2012, p. 212.

4. Admiral Mahan is widely recognised as the father of naval strategy. His written works have arguably had more influence on seapower strategies than those of any other individual. Some indication of the regard in which he is held may be seen in the description of USSR Admiral Sergey Gorshkov as the “Russian Mahan” and the Chinese Admiral Liu as the “Chinese Mahan”. No analysis of seapower will be complete without taking Mahan’s theories into account.
5. Mahan, A. T., *The Problem of Asia: Its Effect upon International Politics*, Transaction Publishers: London, 2003.
6. Mahan, *op. cit.*, p. 66.
7. Mackinder, H., “The Geographical Pivot of History”, *Geographical Journal*, Vol. 23, No 4, (April 1904), pp. 421-37.
8. Spykman, Nicholas J., *The Geography of the Peace*, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1944
9. Medcalfe, Rory, “Indo-Pacific: What’s In A Name?”, *The Interpreter*, 16 August 2012.
10. Kissinger, Henry, *On China*, Penguin Books: New York, 2012, pp. 236-74.
11. See, for instance, Smith, David, *The Dragon and the Elephant: China, India and the New World Order*, Profile Books: London, 2007, pp. 67-9; also Kovel, Joel, “Passage in India”, *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, Vol. 13, Issue 4 (2002), pp. 103-20.
12. Sakhuja, V., *Asian Maritime Power in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Strategic Transactions*, ISEAS Publishing: Singapore, 2011, p. 126; also Harris, J., “Emerging Third World powers: China, India and Brazil”, *Race & Class*, Vol. 46, No 3, 2005, pp. 7-27.
13. Mearsheimer, J., *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, W.W. Norton & Co.: New York, 2003; a fuller treatment of this theory is dealt with in the next section.
14. Bull, H., *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, Columbia University Press: New York, 2012.
15. This also goes to the core of Mahan’s understanding of the need for navies. See Mahan, A.T., *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783*, Dover Publications: New York, 1988.
16. Mearsheimer’s theory will be discussed in more detail in Section 1, which examines the theoretical underpinnings of seapower.
17. Bateman, S., & Ho, J., *Southeast Asia and the Rise of Chinese and Indian Naval power*, Routledge, Oxon, 2010.
18. See, among others, Maxwell, N., *India’s China War*, Jonathan Cape Ltd: London, 1970; Garver, J.W., *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century*, University of Washington Press: Washington DC, 2010. The topic itself will be dealt with in more detail later.
19. *Ibid.*

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