

## **NMF Commentary** **Jul 27, 2010**



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### **Will India rise to its Maritime Challenge?**

Comment on C. Raja Mohan's eminent person's lecture on 'India and the Changing Geo-politics of the Indian Ocean.'

*Matthew Myers*

In the fourth National Maritime Foundation-sponsored Eminent Persons Lecture, renowned security commentator C. Raja Mohan presented a picture of a changing maritime world and of India's changing place within it. NMF Chairman and former Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Arun Prakash (ret'd) opened the lecture by remarking how a country's strategic culture shapes its possibilities for acquiring and maintaining sea power. In India, from Independence through the 1980s, the Navy failed to convince the public of its value. Since then, the advent of globalization has done for Indian sea power what Alfred Thayer Mahan's writings did for America's at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Two decades of rapid economic growth in India, and three decades of rapid growth in neighbouring China, has put the Indian Ocean region back in the centre of the geostrategic map. The *Pax Americana* that seemed inevitable at the end of the cold war is less of a certainty today, with China's rising naval power making itself felt from the Philippine Sea to the shores of east Africa. As India continues to expand its economy through international trade (now worth as much as 35% of GDP), future growth will depend on unimpeded access to the sea. This is India's "maritime imperative". Dr. Mohan emphasized that India cannot afford to withdraw inward and fall back on the old platitudes of "strategic autonomy" and "collective security", as she did after Britain announced its withdrawal east of the Suez in 1967.

The Indian Ocean today is as vital as it ever has been to global trade and prosperity, with the world's largest petroleum producers on its western shores and the world's largest petroleum consumers to its east. There was little chance in the 1970s that the great powers would assent to the proposed Indian Ocean Zone of Peace, which India so enthusiastically endorsed. Today, there is even less chance that the waters which lap so many failed and failing states and which have been a thoroughfare for violent religious extremism and for the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction can long endure a power vacuum. China has already shown itself willing to step in, funding port construction at Hambantota, Gwadar, Sittwe, and Chittagong, and maintaining a three-ship task force in the Gulf of Aden. New Delhi should not respond to these moves by returning to its cold war era rhetoric against 'extra-regional' navies operating in the Indian Ocean. The logic of 'regional' versus 'extra-regional' can easily be turned against India, as Malaysia and Indonesia demonstrated when India claimed a stake in securing the Strait of Malacca. India's global interests call for a free but regulated global commons, not narrow and exclusivist interpretations of maritime sovereignty.

Today, India stands poised to play a leading role in the Indian Ocean. Doing so will require not only a significant investment in the Indian Navy, but a wholesale realignment of India's strategic culture which has, for the better part of a millennium, prioritized the defence of the northwest land border above all else. A blue water navy capable of power projection is a flexible strategic tool, yet it requires diplomatic investment in forward bases and friendly ports in addition to the financial and human investment in hulls and crews. Recent initiatives to provide security assistance to India's maritime neighbours – such as the Seychelles, Mauritius, and the Maldives – and to contribute to multinational anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden are steps in the right direction. What has yet to change is the underlying policy framework: naval expansion and security assistance programs remain ad hoc, and 'power projection' is still a pejorative phrase in New Delhi.

The strategic vision of India as the anchor for stability in the Indian Ocean has a long history, which can be traced through Sardar K. M. Pannikar back to Lord Curzon, a full century ago. The end of the British Empire foreclosed Curzon's dream, as the aftermath of Partition did Pannikar's. One could argue that India remains an underdeveloped nation, ill-able to afford nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers. Such a view is short-sighted. India may not be a wealthy country, in per-capita terms, but her success in international commerce

over the past two decades has brought her to the point where a strong navy, backed by confident and consistent diplomacy and policy, is a necessity for future growth. Dr. Mohan closed by exhorting India's policy makers to build a bold and innovative naval strategy upon the growing consensus that the time has come for India to realize her maritime destiny.

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