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Modi and the Indian Ocean: Restoring India's Sphere of Influence

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For nearly half a century, India's political approach to the Indian Ocean seemed a well-defined one. It was defined in the wake of the decision in the late-1960s by Great Britain to withdraw its forces from the east of Suez. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has now stepped forward to outline a bold and different framework during his visit to Seychelles and Mauritius in March 2015. The context and the assumptions of Modi's Indian Ocean policy are fundamentally different from those that guided Delhi from the late-1960s. Confronted with a definitive moment in the history of Indian Ocean quite early on in her tenure as Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi had rejected the notion of a 'power vacuum' in the Indian Ocean, expressed concern at new great power rivalry in the littoral and asked all major powers to withdraw from the Indian Ocean. She also supported the proposal for the creation of a zone of peace in the littoral and was reluctant to offer security support to other nations.² This approach fitted with India's self-perception as a nonaligned and Third World state. It also

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² For a comprehensive discussion see Selig Harrison and K. Subrahmanyam, Eds., *Super Power Rivalry in the Indian Ocean: Indian and American Views* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

complemented India's economic policy of self-reliance and the deliberate choice to dissociate Delhi from the policies of the British Raj, which was the principal security provider for nearly two centuries in the Indian Ocean.

The context which gave rise to this policy began to change in the 1990s as India embarked on a policy of economic globalisation and began to look for renewed links to the people and markets of the Indian Ocean. India ended its military isolationism and began to step up military exchanges with a large number of countries. It also looked beyond the idea of a zone of peace to promote regional cooperation. The idea that Delhi must reclaim its historic sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean seemed to gain ground in the Indian strategic discourse. This new enthusiasm was reflected at the policy level by expanded security and economic cooperation with the major powers as well as key regional actors since the end of the Cold War.³

These initiatives, however, did not add up to a vigorous national strategy. India's approach seemed to be weighed down by lack of coherence, political ambivalence, and above all the persistence of a continentalist mind-set in Delhi's security establishment. Despite India's growing economic reliance on the seas over the last quarter of a century and a series of minor maritime initiatives by a number of government agencies, the top political leadership never had the time or inclination to lay out a clear set of goals in regard to the Indian Ocean and the maritime domains beyond. Delhi had much else on its mind, including the troubles with China and Pakistan and its large and contested land frontiers. But China, like India, was long consumed by its continentalist obsessions. For nearly a decade though, the top leaders of the Chinese Communist Party had made it their business to wake up the nation to its historic maritime destiny at hand and have invested massive resources into building a blue water navy.⁴ The CCP leadership never lost an opportunity to tell the world of China's 'maritime rights' and assert them vigorously much to the discomfiture of its neighbours in East Asia. More recently it has proclaimed a grand vision to build a maritime silk road between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans. President Xi Jinping has put his full political weight behind the proposal.⁵

³ See for example, David Scott, "India's 'grand strategy' for the Indian Ocean: Mahanian Visions", *Asia Pacific Review*; David Brewster, "An Indian Sphere of Influence in the Indian Ocean?" *Security Challenges*, Vol. 6 No. 3, July 2010, pp.1-20.

⁴ See James R Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan* (New York: Routledge, 2008)

⁵ See John Wong and Lye Liang Fook, "Reviving the Ancient Silk Route: China's New Diplomatic Initiative", *East Asian Policy*, Vol. 6, No. 3, July-Sept 2014, pp. 5-15.

China's rising profile in the Indian Ocean, however, compelled Delhi to factor in the implications of Beijing's presence in this theatre for its own maritime security.⁶ The previous United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government took a number of new initiatives on the Indian Ocean. It sought to inject renewed dynamism into the moribund Indian Ocean Rim Association that was set up in the 1990s to promote regional cooperation in the littoral.⁷ The UPA years also saw India launch the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium that brings together all the naval chiefs in the littoral for professional exchanges and engagement to promote maritime security. Delhi also initiated a trilateral security arrangement, coordinated at the level of national security advisers, between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives in 2011 to expand maritime security cooperation in a range of areas.⁸ All these initiatives were indeed significant. Yet, as in so many areas, the UPA government did not have the energy to pursue them with urgency or purpose. It is that gap between good ideas and their implementation that Modi's visit to the Indian Ocean islands has promised to plug.

The visit provided an opportunity for Modi to signal to its international partners in the littoral as well as the bureaucratic establishment in Delhi that engaging the Indian Ocean littoral is at the "top of our policy priorities".⁹ The internal messaging was important given the insufficient coordination between the foreign and defence ministries as well as lack of support from the finance and commerce ministries for the pursuit of Delhi's proclaimed objectives in the Indian Ocean. In his remarks at the commissioning of the Indian-made offshore patrol vessel *Barracuda* at Port Louis, Mauritius, Modi laid out a comprehensive framework for India's maritime engagement in the Indian Ocean littoral. Modi's five-fold framework begins with the affirmation that Delhi will do everything to secure India's mainland and island territories and defend its maritime interests. Since the terror attack on Mumbai at the end of November 2008, Delhi has been acutely conscious of the potential terrorist attacks coming via the sea. At the same Delhi has also been deeply aware of the growing strategic significance of the Indian Ocean in global politics. While the primary focus is on India's own interests, Modi said, Delhi will "will work to ensure a safe, secure and stable Indian Ocean Region that delivers us all to the shores of prosperity".

⁶ For a comprehensive discussion, see C. Raja Mohan, *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indian Ocean* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁷ C. Raja Mohan, "Ocean's Nineteen", *Indian Express*, November 12, 2012.

⁸ P.K. Ghosh, "Maritime Security Trilateralism: India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 38, No. 3, May 2014, pp.283-88.

⁹ "Prime Minister's Remarks at the Commissioning of Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) Barracuda in Mauritius", March 12, 2015; available at < <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24912/Prime+Ministers+Remarks+at+the+Commissioning+of+Offshore+Patrol+Vessel+OPV+Barracuda+in+Mauritius+March+12+2015>>

The second dimension of Modi's framework is about deepening security cooperation with India's "friends in the region especially our maritime neighbours and island states". India has long had close security partnerships with both Seychelles and Mauritius; Modi now wants to elevate it to a higher level. In Seychelles, Modi announced the gift of a second Dornier aircraft for maritime monitoring of the island's vast exclusive economic zone and signed an agreement for conducting a hydrographic survey of its waters. Modi also launched a coastal surveillance radar project in Seychelles.¹⁰ The radar project is said to be part of Delhi's ambitious project to build a network of radars across the island states in the Indian Ocean to promote maritime domain awareness in the littoral. It calls for the establishment of eight surveillance radars in Mauritius, eight in Seychelles, six in Sri Lanka and ten in Maldives. They will be linked to fifty odd sites on the Indian coast and, in turn, will be linked to an integrated analysis centre near Delhi".¹¹ In Mauritius, the commissioning of the *Barracuda* marked India's commitment to maritime capacity building of the small island republics. During his visit to the islands Modi announced important agreements to develop infrastructure for connectivity in the Assumption Island (Seychelles) and Aga Lega (Mauritius). These agreements are likely to strengthen the defence capabilities of the two republics and give India a valuable foothold at critical locations in South Western Indian Ocean.¹²

The third level of Modi's framework relates to building multilateral cooperative maritime security in the Indian Ocean. Modi said India will help strengthen regional mechanisms in combatting terrorism and piracy and responding to natural disasters. He expressed the hope that Mauritius, Seychelles and other countries will join the trilateral security initiative it already has with Maldives and Sri Lanka. This sets the stage for very productive multilateral maritime security cooperation in the littoral with India at the core. According to some analysts, India's access to strategic facilities in Seychelles and Mauritius marks a major departure from its traditional opposition to foreign military bases.¹³ Although calling these arrangements 'bases' might be premature, they point to future possibilities for an expanded Indian strategic footprint in the littoral.

Sustainable economic development for all, Modi said, is the fourth element of India's maritime policy. In Seychelles, Modi announced the setting up a joint working group to expand cooperation

¹⁰ "Prime Minister's Media Statement during his visit to Seychelles", March 11, 2015; available at < <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24895/Prime+Ministers+media+statement+during+his+visit+to+Seychelles+March+11+2015>>

¹¹ Manoj Joshi, "Modi's faultless foreign policy", Mid-Day, March 17, 2015.

¹² "India to develop two islands in the Indian Ocean", *Times of India*, March 11, 2015.

¹³ David Brewster, "Modi builds India's Sphere of Influence in the Indian Ocean", *The Lowy Interpreter*, March 17, 2015, available at < <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/03/17/Modi-builds-Indias-sphere-of-influence-in-the-Indian-Ocean.aspx?COLLCC=3539920745&>>

on “blue economy” that “will increase our understanding of marine ecology and resources. We will improve our ability to harness new possibilities of the ocean in a sustainable and balanced manner”.¹⁴ In Mauritius he declared that the “blue chakra or wheel in India’s national flag represents the potential of Blue Revolution or the Ocean Economy. That is how central the ocean economy is to us”. Modi also demonstrated considerable sensitivity to climate change concerns of the islands; this in turn is part of a major shift in India’s approach to climate change that the PM has sought to engineer in the last few months. “For those who live by the ocean, climate change is not an issue of debate but a serious threat to existence. We must assume leadership in our region and call for a more concerted and fair global action to address the challenge of climate change”.

Finally, Modi has discarded the long-standing Indian self-perception as a ‘lone ranger’ in the Indian Ocean. For decades India made no secret of its reluctance to cooperate with other major powers in the Indian Ocean. Delhi constantly sought to differentiate between its legitimate role as a ‘native’ power and the intrusive presence of ‘extra-regional’ powers. Political opposition to the presence of extra-regional powers was central to India’s articulation of Indian Ocean policy during the 1970s and 1980s and has lingered on since the 1990s. This opposition that was once focused on the Western powers, whose presence is seen as a residual legacy of the colonial era, has easily been extended to China in the Indian strategic discourse on the Indian Ocean in recent years. Modi, however, broke from this tradition to present a new and more sophisticated approach. While insisting that ‘those who live in the region have the primary responsibility for peace, stability and prosperity in the Indian Ocean’, Modi recognised that ‘there are other nations around the world, with strong interests and stakes in the region’. Modi declared that ‘India is deeply engaged with other powers’. ‘We do this through dialogue, visits, exercises, capacity building and economic partnership’.

The indirect reference here is quite clearly to the United States, which had replaced Great Britain as the dominant power in the Indian Ocean during the 1970s. India of course had been a major critic of American naval presence in the Indian Ocean. This yielded place to a steady expansion of naval and military engagement with Washington since the 1990s. The military cooperation between the two got a major boost with the signing of a ten-year defence framework agreement in June 2005. But the UPA government seemed to get cold feet in taking this agreement to its logical conclusion. The concerns about the domestic political implications of appearing too close to America and

¹⁴ See n.10

apprehensions about Chinese reaction seemed to pull Delhi back from substantive security cooperation with the United States in the Indian Ocean.

Modi has made a decisive break from the strategic ambivalence of the UPA government. During the recent visit of US President Barack Obama to India, Modi announced the renewal of the defence framework agreement for another ten years. To the surprise of everyone, the two leaders signed a broad framework for expanding cooperation in the Indian Ocean and the Asia Pacific.¹⁵ Declaring that India and the United States are “important drivers of regional and global growth”, Modi and Obama affirmed that “from Africa to East Asia, we will build on our partnership to support sustainable, inclusive development, and increased regional connectivity by collaborating with other interested partners”. They added that “regional prosperity depends on security. We affirm the importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea”.

In Mauritius, Modi reinforced this framework when he declared that “our goal is to seek a climate of trust and transparency; respect for international maritime rules and norms by all countries; sensitivity to each other’s interests; peaceful resolution of maritime issues; and increase in maritime cooperation”.¹⁶ That Modi’s implied criticism of China and the warmth towards America was reaffirmed in Mauritius that is not too far from Diego Garcia, where the US has a major military presence, underlines the consequential shift in India’s worldview.¹⁷ While signalling a new approach to America, Modi has left the door open for China. In fact the openness towards the US might improve Delhi’s strategic bargaining position with Beijing.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that Modi has embarked on a more ambitious foreign policy in the Indian Ocean. He is determined to build on India’s natural geographic advantages in the littoral. Modi’s India is no longer hesitant about taking a larger responsibility for securing the Indian Ocean and promoting regional mechanisms for collective security and economic integration. It is confident enough to collaborate with the United States in self-interest and engage China on maritime issues

¹⁵ “U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region”, New Delhi, January 25, 2015, available at < <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/us-india-joint-strategic-vision-asia-pacific-and-indian-ocean-region>>

¹⁶ See n. 9.

¹⁷ Diego Garcia and Mauritius are part of the Chagos Archipelago. Britain took control of the island at the time of granting independence to Mauritius in 1965. As it began to withdraw from east of Suez, Britain signed an agreement with the United States that allowed Washington to develop it as a major military facility in the Indian Ocean. For a discussion of the history and contemporary relevance of Diego Garcia, see Andrew S. Erickson, Walter C. Ladwig III and Justin D. Mikolay, “Diego Garcia and the United States’ Emerging Indian Ocean Strategy”, *Asian Security*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2010, pp. 214-237.

with greater self-assurance. Yet it is important to remember that Modi's vision is only the first step towards rejuvenating Delhi's Indian Ocean strategy. Modi's policy will face the familiar test of implementation where Delhi has had multiple problems in the past.

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