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Debating India's Maritime Security and Regional Strategy toward China

The Hague ruling in July 2016 on the South China Sea has served to sharpen the debate among India's political and strategic elite on how to assess China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean region and India's own optimal maritime strategy in the Indo-Pacific. Indian maritime security discourse has been in noticeable churn since the 2011 US rebalance policy, accentuated by China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative in 2013. Increasingly, India is being pressed to spell out its maritime thinking in strategic terms, going against historical practice. Three competing narratives are evident encompassing what may be termed Nationalist, Realist and Globalist worldviews.

A Nationalist view is highly suspicious of the outside world, does not trust alliances, and seeks strategic independence through the country's own military capabilities. A Realist outlook too sees the outside world as hostile, but more manageable, especially through balancing, security alliances and hard-nosed bargaining even if it means having to tradeoff some element of strategic autonomy. Realists see merit in both power and prudence and are pragmatic cost-benefit maximizers. Setting the rules of the international game with other great powers is especially valued by Realists. Globalists abhor military instruments and strongly believe in the power of economic integration,

globalization and multilateralism to build a country's strength as well as abate the potential for conflict by raising the cost of conflict.

One area of growing convergence across the spectrum is the perception of China as a threat in the Indian Ocean. On the level of the threat, and strategies to meet it, there is less agreement.

The maritime Nationalists view China's MSR as highly threatening and a masked military attempt to contain India to South Asia and challenge it in its own backyard. They see a looming double threat from China—on land from the trans Himalayan China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and on sea from Beijing's push for naval bases or port access all the way from Myanmar to Djibouti, along with the planned sale to Pakistan of 8 submarines, doubling Islamabad's force. They want to dramatically speed up Indian naval modernization, lament the accidents and project delays hampering Indian efforts, and want the Andaman and Nicobar base capabilities to be significantly enhanced to fully take advantage of its extremely favorable location at the mouth of the Malacca Straits. Politically, they believe in internal balancing and keeping equidistance from the US and other great powers like Russia, and they argue against any alliance-type embrace of the former as implied by the recent Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) which they see as a big mistake.

Instead, they call for India and regional powers to militarily coalesce to counter China in the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific. India's plans to sell Indo-Russian Brahmos short range, supersonic cruise missiles, which can be launched from ships, aircraft or land (a first sale for India), is seen by Nationalists as a powerful regional deterrent to China. They find the combination of US reluctance to forcefully contest Chinese claims in the South China Sea and domestic critics calling on American allies to do more as signs of US unreliability. Besides, they worry that Washington might even make a deal with Beijing in the future, leaving regional states high and dry.

Indian maritime Realists also want greater military teeth to India's 'Act East' policy introduced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014 but, in stark contrast to Nationalists, they want to do this in conjunction with the US, the biggest naval power in Asia. Seeing convergent

India-US maritime concerns in the Indo-Pacific and India's power asymmetry with China, Realists find great value in decisively tilting toward the US as the best balancing strategy. They have been increasingly arguing for this since mid-2000s and see LEMOA as long overdue. They would point to India's hard negotiations with Washington to ensure that LEMOA was specifically tailored to suit India's idea of strategic autonomy—unlike other countries with the logistics agreement, there is no presumption of support for American military operations. Realists are the only group strongly open to sharing the costs of sea lanes protection in the Indian Ocean and beyond or becoming a so-called net security provider, something the US has called on India to do. They see it as India's responsibility rather than something forced to accept as a burden. Some Realists are open to joint patrols with the US in the Indian Ocean and even the South China Sea, a step so far not acceptable to Indian decision makers.

Whereas Nationalists and Realists define regional security in military terms, for Globalists, Asian regional security is best assured through economic integration or interdependence. At this juncture, the key for Globalists is to avoid the kind of naval military competition between India and China that would overwhelm prospects for regional maritime and economic cooperation. The Indian Ocean has been relatively peaceful, and Globalists want a strategy that ensures it stays that way. They tend to see the MSR originating from China's surplus domestic capacity and need for capital export to stimulate a slowing Chinese economy rather than from a grand military strategy. They would point to the political pushback that China has gotten over the last two years from Indian Ocean littoral states like Myanmar and Sri Lanka that are eager for Chinese funds but not undue Chinese influence or undesirable contract terms.

Given the MSR's emphasis on connectivity and infrastructure, a good question for them is how India can leverage the MSR for India's own acute needs and integrate more effectively into the global supply chain, as well as implement Prime Minister Modi's "Blue Economy" projects. Regionally, India seeks to boost its trade with ASEAN from \$80 billion currently to \$200 billion by 2022. A huge hurdle is the lack of cheap and viable connectivity to Southeast Asia, something that keeps India-ASEAN trade to one-fifth of China-ASEAN trade. The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor with its promise of transforming

India's poor northeast region is supported by even by some Realists.

For now, the center of gravity in India's debates is blended Realist/Globalist, with economics the leading edge of strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific. To this end, India's 2015 Maritime Security Strategy states that "the 'Look East' policy has now been transformed into the 'Act East' policy, to expand India's engagement and relations to its East, across the Indo-Pacific, with emphasis on economic and security cooperation." But under the Modi government, there is a much greater chance that Indian priorities could flip if China is unwilling to show greater transparency and imagination to convince India that the MSR is not a threat but an opportunity, as Beijing claims. This means doing more than exhorting visiting Indian parliamentarians to get India to join the MSR or warning them that the US is not trustworthy.

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The Sigur Center's Rising Powers Initiative examines how domestic political debates and identity issues affect international relations in Asia. The Rising Powers Initiative acknowledges support from the MacArthur Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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