



ASPEN INSTITUTE INDIA

Maritime Power: Key to India's Security Interests

VICE ADMIRAL **PREMVIR DAS** (RETD.)

Policy Paper

Nº1

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ASPEN INSTITUTE INDIA

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Foreword

Aspen Institute India (AII) promotes values-based leadership, open dialogue and cross-sector outreach by engaging the civil society, government, private sector, and other key stakeholders on issues related to India's development. It invites industrial, economic, financial, political, social and cultural leaders to discuss these issues in settings that encourage frank and open dialogue. The Institute focuses on the most important problems and challenges facing society, the business community and the individual in India.

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While each is distinctive with a unique set of goals, they all share the ultimate aim of promoting awareness, dialogue, and action on issues essential for a just and prosperous Indian society.

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This is the first policy paper to be published by Aspen Institute India.

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Preamble

1.

In the first fifty years of its existence as a free country, India's prime concerns lay in preserving its territorial integrity, both against nation state adversaries as also quite widespread insurgency in its border states. Military preparedness was tied to the threat from the west and the east; counter insurgency also became, de facto, a military responsibility. In Defence planning, the focus was on threats that could be posed across the land borders and the need to protect them. The 1962 conflict with China, in which we lost several thousand square kilometers of our land territory, added to this mindset. Things have changed greatly since then. India is much better prepared and more confident to cope with military threats to its frontiers, direct or otherwise. The global environment is also not supportive of nation state conflicts. In consequence, these fears have diminished considerably even if they have not disappeared. In the northeast and in Jammu and Kashmir the situation is far changed and, even if there are spurts of violence, especially in the latter, our ability to deal with them has increased greatly. In short, it would be fair to say that India no longer feels seriously threatened as far as the sanctity of its land borders is concerned.

2.

In this same time, and especially in the last ten to fifteen years, economic growth has begun to occupy a much more central place in India's national power. Just as it has been the focus of China's rise as a major Asian power in the last thirty years, sustained growth of its economy over the next several years is critical to India's emergence as a credible power. There are many constituents of such growth but two essential ingredients are security of energy and trade. As the economy grows, so will these two, on the contrary, if these are hindered in any way, there will be adverse effects on that growth. Both are almost entirely dependent on our ability to ensure their safe movement at sea. Therefore, as India grows economically, maritime security concerns will become increasingly important. This is quite aside from the preparedness that must be maintained to deter threats at sea from possible nation state adversaries. A clear recognition that sea power is an integral part of the country's national interests is, therefore, imperative.

Global Security Environment

3.

By 2025, three of the four largest economies, will be Asian – China, India and Japan. The Asean group of countries will not be far behind and those of Central Asia, given their present and potential resources of oil and gas, will grow in importance even as those of the Middle East remain major suppliers of energy. In East Asia, conflicting claims on ownership of island territories and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), between China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei are potential points of conflict and instability. It is inevitable that China's postures will become even more assertive as it enhances its sea power and seeks a dominating position in Asia. On a different note, most of the problem states, often referred to as 'rogue, failing or failed' by the Americans are Asian entities be they North Korea and Iran-for their nuclear geopolitics-or Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan for internal instability; the last is recognized globally as the epicenter of terrorism. The continent is also home to 70% of all terrorist activity worldwide mainly comprising fundamental Islamic organizations. Three of four largest land armies in the world are in Asia, as are four of eight known nuclear weapons states, not counting Israel; if the number is to increase, it will, almost certainly, be an Asian entity. At least in one country, Pakistan, there is a real possibility that non state actors might be able to gain access to some nuclear capability. Proliferation of nuclear weapons technology between China, Pakistan, North Korea, and Iran, all Asian entities, is well known. Finally, there are energy resources which provide sustenance to several major industrial powers, in Asia and beyond. This is an amazingly complex brew, much of it in the maritime domain, and it is not surprising that Asia-Pacific is now the focus of global concerns.

4.

The USA is an important player in the region. It has been so for long with substantial political and economic interests and it is unlikely that this position will change anytime soon. Despite all its economic travails and domestic compulsions, the US economy is larger than that of the next four countries put together. America's annual defence expenditure exceeds that of all other countries put together and its military

power can not be matched for several decades. Its technology and soft power is unequalled and no rivals are visible on the scene. Therefore, those who hold the view that China might soon become the dominant power in the region, might well take another look; the USA will continue to be the major player in the Asia-Pacific in the foreseeable future and nations, like ours, will be wise to take this fact into account while shaping their strategies.

5.

India, itself, is on the road to becoming a major Asian power. With sustained economic growth of 9% per annum, its GDP will overtake that of Japan by 2025 or so making it the third largest global economy. It has one of the largest Armies in the world and its Navy and Air Force rank among the top six. It is a nuclear weapon state. The demographics of its large population, and its democratic ethos, add value to its overall power and its rise is not seen as threatening by others. Geography has also been kind to India. With long coast lines on both sides, open access to the sea and outlying island territories, the country sits astride the important North Indian Ocean shipping routes through which much of the Gulf oil destined to the Pacific must transit. There are many weaknesses still to be overcome but these will slowly diminish as the economy grows. Its position, in the increasingly maritime Asia-Pacific geopolitics, can not be underestimated.



The Indian Ocean Littoral

6.

If Asia-Pacific is the focus of the emerging security environment, the importance of the Indian Ocean (IO) theatre becomes apparent. With energy life-lines of both China and Japan clearly tied to the Gulf, the IO needs to be viewed strategically along with the adjunct channels of the South East Asian archipelago and the South China Sea. Almost all the elements mentioned earlier are littorals of this water space. Nearly half of global seaborne energy trade moves across its waters which host some of the most traveled sea

routes. Several countries have vital energy interests in the region, the USA, Japan, China and France, being some of them. There are resources in the seabed, still to be explored. Not surprisingly, the IO is a theatre of considerable strategic importance.



7.

At the same time, there are vulnerabilities. All exits and entries out and into the IO pass through very restricted waters; the Gulf of Hormuz, Gulf of Aden and the Mozambique Channel in the western part of the IO and the Malacca, Sunda and Lombok Straits in the South East Asia archipelago fall in this category. Pirates, of even limited means, operating from shore sanctuaries, are able to attack the hapless ships and rob or hijack them with relative ease as was being done in the Malacca Strait until a few years ago and is being seen off Somalia in the last two years. Politically, most of the littoral states are ridden with ethnic, sectarian and religious dissensions, quite a few are authoritarian and some, especially in the Gulf, dependent on single product economies viz. energy resources, all weaknesses which can result in regional instability.

India's Interests in Asia Pacific & the IO

8.

India's interests are strategic and proximate. As one of the two largest countries in the region, and geographically located as it is, India has responsibilities in ensuring security of the commons, as well as legitimate concerns. In the globalized world of today, East Asia, South Asia, South East Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East can not, any more, be treated as compartments exclusive of one another. India, in particular, is impacted by developments in any of these sub regions. While, its traditional security concerns center mainly on China and Pakistan with the possibility of military conflict with one or both being at the core, developments which will retard its economic growth or impinge upon internal security and stability are no less important. Tranquility, in its immediate neighbourhood, and even beyond, is an essential prerequisite to the latter. There have been tensions of essentially transitory nature with Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and even while none of them can be regarded as potential threats militarily, they do, even if indirectly, have a bearing on our concerns. India must also take note of the presence of external powers and their military forces in the IO which has its own impact on the geopolitics of the region. The island nations of Mauritius and Seychelles, sitting astride the southern entries to the northern IO, are equally important to our strategic concerns. For India, long a country with a continental mindset, the sea is now acquiring larger dimensions.

9.

There is a more proximate dimension to India's security interests which is acquiring significance. The first of these is energy security which involves not just identifying sources but equally, its safe movement and handling. The country imports 70% of its oil and gas annually and this figure will rise to over 80% in the next ten years. The number of tankers carrying these supplies to our ports is likely to increase from 4000 odd today to nearly 7500 by 2020. Safe movement of the ships at sea and speedy discharge of their cargoes in ports is vital. India also has offshore oil exploration and exploitation platforms on either coast spread across 50000 square kilometers and it is likely that this area may double in the next decade; platforms in these waters which process oil and gas are very valuable assets which need to be safe-

guarded. A related concern is the security of seaborne trade. The country's imports and exports have reached \$ 500 billion already and may well touch \$ 2 trillion by 2020. Almost all of this trade moves by sea, through the shipping routes and narrow channels mentioned earlier. Any adverse effect on the safe movement of this trade will impact on economic growth.

10.

India shares maritime boundaries not just with three South Asian neighbours but also with three nations of South East Asia-Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia; there is close proximity with a fourth, Malaysia. This has its own complexities in terms of poaching or other criminal activity e.g. illegal movement of people. Smuggling of narcotics is another worrisome reality as it funds terrorism through procurement of illicit arms from the resources so generated. This, as is well know, was the methodology used by the LTTE terrorism in Sri Lanka to get arms and ammunition until neutralized, when the movement petered out. Terrorist organizations located across its western border have carried out some remarkably successful attacks at sea, one of them being Al Qaeda attack on the American destroyer, USS Cole, in Aden, and on oil terminals and supporting vessels off the Basra offshore in Iraq. Explosives used in the 1993 bomb blasts in Mumbai were smuggled in by sea from Pakistan and landed at fishing villages on the western coast. The climax, of course, came with the very daring raid launched by sea on high profile targets in Mumbai on 26th November 2008. Admittedly, planning for the mission and training, as also its command and control, was coordinated by the Pakistan establishment viz. military and intelligence, but actual execution was carried out by terrorists of the Lashkar, one of the prominent groups in that country and known to be allied to the Al Qaeda. Such asymmetric attacks in which the initiative always rests with the attacker pose a very serious threat as their impact is widespread, at very little cost.

11.

Finally, there are the Asean and Gulf regions. Bilateral trade between the former and India crossed \$ 40 billion in 2009 and is expected to reach \$ 100 billion by 2015. As for the Gulf countries, they are not only the largest suppliers of energy but are also home to nearly four million Indian workers who sent back \$16 billion in remittances to their home country last year. Both regions, separated by the Arabian Sea on one

side and the Bay of Bengal on the other are, therefore, of great importance and instability in either will be detrimental to India's interests. In the same way, tensions resulting from disputes in the South China Sea would be of concern to India which also has energy exploration and sharing interests in Vietnam. In short, India's maritime interests stretch from the Gulf on one side to the Southeast Asian waters and beyond; southwards they extend to the island nations of Mauritius and Seychelles. Its sea power must ensure that these are safeguarded.



Traditional Threats

12.

Pakistan and China have been in military conflict with India, the former as many as four times, and are the two countries which could pose a future military threat to India; no others are on the horizon. Even with these two, the probability that any of them may want to go to war is not high; however, it can not be ruled out. Pakistan might well find a short and sharp conflict advantageous in overall terms as this might serve to unite a country fast fragmenting under sectarian and ethnic pressures complemented by burgeoning fundamental Islamist forces. The fact that war with India may be disastrous for Pakistan might be overlooked by its military leadership just as it did in 1971, losing half of its territory, and, in a different way, in 1999. Till such time as the Army remains in control in Pakistan, in particular of India related policy, this possibility must be considered real even though the 'modus operandi' of asymmetric operations launched through non state actors, is seen to be more economical with little risk of retaliation. This notwithstanding, the Pak Army continues to seethe with its defeat in 1971 leading to the division of the country and irrational conduct can not be ruled out. It is, therefore, essential that India maintain a convincing military deterrent against Pakistan. At sea, our naval power is superior and needs to remain so; it must also be able to act in support of the war on land. Indian naval ships can already hit targets quite deep in the hinterland with missiles fired from sea and increasing the range of these weapons will enhance this

capability. High states of preparedness to cope with terrorist threats, at and from the sea, are a 'non sequitur'.

13.

China falls in a different category. Its reasons for initiating military operations against India, if that happens, will be largely strategic, to teach India a lesson, as it were, and to establish its unchallenged dominance in Asia. It already has possession of that part of India it claims its own in the western and central sectors of the boundary. In the eastern region, it has laid claim to Arunachal Pradesh and this could well be the excuse that might be used to initiate any future military conflict. It has built, and is building road and rail infrastructure right across the border which will facilitate speedy movement of troops and logistics; airfields have also been expanded. Events in Tibet following the demise of Dalai Lama might also create some tension. Nevertheless, in the last decade, relations with China have been the most tranquil ever and not just on the boundary. Bilateral trade between the two countries is crossing \$ 60 billion and rising- even if skewed to China's advantage- making it India's largest trading partner. While it is necessary, for both sides, particularly China, to rectify the mismatches in this trade, its rapidly continuing growth is a positive in the relationship. The two countries interact at many multilateral forums e.g. BASIC, BRIC, EAS and at Climate Change and WTO negotiations. China has also not made much fuss over tests of our Agni missiles which are clearly not Pakistan related. Meetings between leaders of the two countries have been positive. The two militaries have also exercised together in a small way and there have been exchange of high level visits and by warships to ports. This engagement needs to be enhanced; maritime cooperation is the easiest and least problematic and will contribute in toning down the suspicion and deficit of trust that plagues relations between the two countries. A structured mechanism can be put in place to institutionalize the interface. Both countries have mutual concerns in ensuring the safety of sea lanes in the expanded IO space and can work together towards this objective.

14.

At the same time, there are many areas of discord. China's military assistance to Pakistan- add to that, agreement to build two nuclear reactors despite that being contrary to the stipulations of the Nuclear Suppliers Group- its reported presence

in the Gilgit region of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir and its continuing involvement in India's immediate neighbourhood, send a disturbing signal. There have also been a series of actions in recent times which were clearly unfriendly. Issuing of stapled visas to residents of Jammu and Kashmir, differentiating them from other Indian citizens, was one of these; denial of a normal visa to a very senior official of the Armed Forces another. Other examples can be cited and these can not be just glossed over. Still, China is a country that India needs to engage. One is a major Asian power already and the other on the way to becoming one; both will have to be key players in any Asian security architecture. Some 'Ups and Downs' have, therefore, to be taken in stride recognizing that competitiveness and occasional tension in this complex relationship are inevitable. So, a positive but watchful stratagem is necessary. Militarily, India's armed forces need not try to match China gun-for-gun but they must recognize the capabilities that the Chinese can bring to bear against them and build their own strengths that will be sufficiently dissuasive. In recent years, India has allowed its military preparedness to weaken and actions must be taken urgently to rectify the inadequacies.

15.

At sea, China is modernizing its naval forces by building ships and submarines at a fast rate and induction of an aircraft carrier in the next few years, to be reinforced by another by 2020, is likely. The urge to have and exploit maritime power consistent with its growing stature is visible, as witnessed recently in East Asian waters; it may also seek a more comprehensive presence in the IO. However, while the first is clearly feasible, sustained deployment and credible operations far from home is not easily achieved. For this, availability of permanent military bases, from where ships, surveillance and fighter aircraft can operate along with comprehensive repairs and logistics infrastructure that are needed to support them, are essential. China is building ports in three South Asian countries and there are apprehensions that one or more of these might be made available by the hosts to the Chinese for use as such military bases. This will not be easy, even if the possibility can not be ruled out, as nations are not comfortable having foreign military forces and associated infrastructure on their soil; they have also to take into account the concerns of other countries, littoral as well as extra-regional. This notwithstanding, we must engage closely with those who are uncomfortable with foreign military bases in the

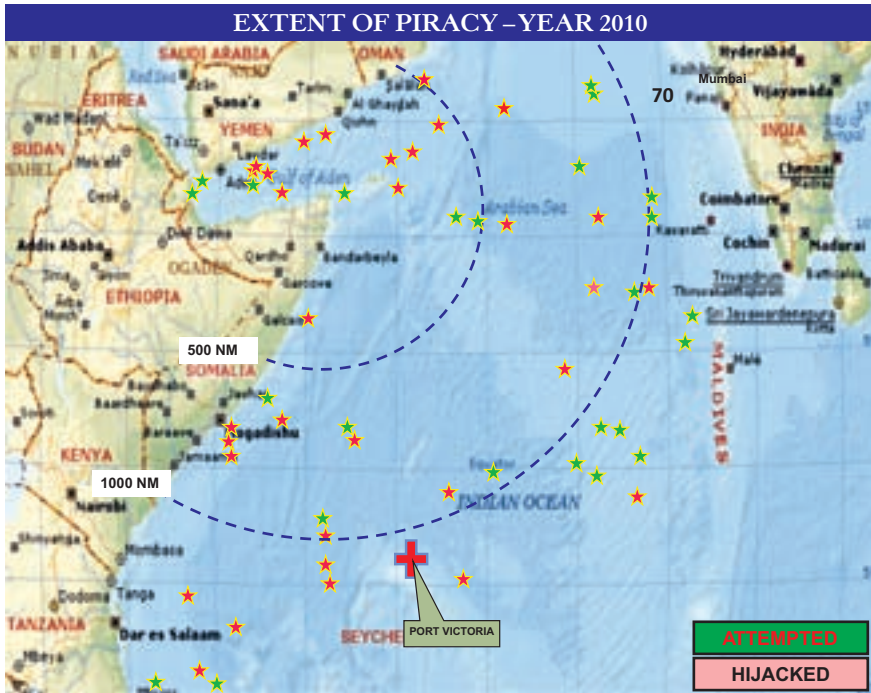
IO littoral. India is also not without its own influence in some of the neighbouring countries and this must be used to prevent that eventuality. The continued deployment of a Chinese naval flotilla in the Gulf of Aden, ostensibly to counter piracy in that region, may well be a precursor to its desire for a more comprehensive presence in the IO. India must be watchful of the developing situation and ensure that its own capabilities at sea keep pace with it.



Non Traditional Areas of Concern

16.

With economic growth being a vital national interest and security of energy and trade being its two prime ingredients, safety of the IO commons has become critical. Piracy and maritime terrorism have become increasingly threatening to safe movement at sea in recent years and quite apart from safeguarding its own interests against both, India, as the largest and most capable regional maritime power, also has a responsibility in ensuring freedom of movement at sea. As highlighted earlier, entries and exits to and from the IO are dominated by restricted channels where pirates can operate with relative ease. As many as 70,000 vessels transit the Malacca Strait annually; another 30,000 pass through the Gulf of Aden. Piracy requires sanctuaries ashore from where the pirates can make their swift raids. Coastal villages in Indonesia provided them with these bases and with police authorities being either supportive or ineffective, piracy flourished in the Malacca Strait. It is only after deterrent measures against the criminals were taken ashore that piracy could be controlled. Cooperative measures between the littoral countries viz. Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Thailand in surveillance of the waters have also contributed in neutralizing piracy. India carries out patrols in the approaches to the Malacca Strait in coordination with Indonesia and Thailand and similar arrangements with Malaysia are being worked out. Nearly \$ 200 billion of our overseas trade passes through these waters and this figure will rise to more than \$ 800 billion in the next decade which is why safety of movement in this very important water space is so important to India.



17.

Similar measures are needed to eradicate threats by pirates off the East Africa coast and in the Gulf of Aden. The waters off Somalia have now become the piracy center of the world. Dozens of ships, many quite big, have been seized, anchored off the Somali coast and demands for millions of dollars made (and often paid), for release of the vessels and their crew. Lack of governmental authority and widespread lawlessness has allowed this activity to continue unabated. Faced with this threat to the safety of the commons, several countries, under the aegis of the Americans, formed Task Force (TF) 151 to patrol the affected waters. Another group of European navies also came together for the same purpose. India deployed its warships in November 2008 when a merchant vessel with a predominantly Indian crew was hijacked; they quickly sank a pirate craft and captured another. At least one ship has remained on patrol since then coordinating its work with that of TF 151. Soon thereafter, China deputed ships, ostensibly to escort its merchantmen in the Gulf, but in passing, to proclaim its legitimacy as an IO player. Clearly, patrolling by so many high cost warships on a perma-

ment basis is neither feasible nor even productive; incidents of pirate attacks this year have exceeded those in 2009 and most recently, \$ 3 million have reportedly been paid for release of a hijacked South Korean vessel. The menace can not be eradicated unless law and order are enforced in the coastal regions of Somalia with UN mandates if necessary.

18.

The world of merchant shipping is truly transnational. Ships are owned in one country but registered in another. Crews are mostly from many countries and the vessels carry cargoes to dozens of ports. In this scenario, 'stand alone' capabilities are only of limited use and cooperation is essential. India has made an early beginning and has concluded agreements with many countries to facilitate the required interaction. These are to promote cooperation in the non-traditional threat environment where the adversaries are pirates, terrorists, smugglers and the like. Without mutual trust and confidence which facilitate sharing of information, these new threats cannot be tackled. Parting with intelligence is not easy even between agencies in one's own country and building trust through ship visits, interaction of personnel, joint exercises and patrols is essential. In the IO region, India must play the lead role in promoting regional cooperation at sea. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) for Heads of Navies, initiated by India in 2008, and followed by Oman in 2010, is a step in that direction. It also hosts Milan, a biennial gathering of ships from nations eastwards of India, which has been attracting increased participation at each successive meeting. Safety of the commons in the IO and its adjoining waters is, therefore, a major security concern. Cooperation with countries which have similar interests, the USA being foremost, must, therefore, be a prong of our maritime strategy.

19.

Apart from issues like piracy and maritime terrorism, there are others such as illegal poaching for fish in our waters that are not less important. Effective surveillance and patrolling of the EEZ and coastal approaches and ports by maritime forces is, therefore, necessary. To this list should be added capabilities to respond to natural disasters such as the Tsunami of December 2004 and oil spills, accidental or deliberate. Furthermore, in all of these, India's maritime forces must also be able to provide assistance to other littoral nations.

India's Maritime Power

20.

As stated earlier, as the premier maritime force in the region, India has both security concerns at sea and responsibility to ensure safe movement across the shipping routes of the IO which needs both capabilities and cooperative interfaces with others. While the Indian Navy is, undoubtedly, the largest littoral sea power, the numbers of its seagoing platforms has stagnated, even declined in some categories, over the last several years even as those of China have continued to increase rapidly. There are many reasons that have led to this unhappy state of affairs including unjustifiable delays in decision making; inadequate capacities in public sector shipyards has also been, and are, a serious constraint. Until recently, all orders for building of warships have been restricted to defence yards only which are not only overstretched but also suffer from inefficiencies endemic to government undertakings. It is essential that the private sector be brought into play. No doubt, competences required in constructing warships are more complex than those needed for building merchant vessels but a beginning has to be made. Recent measures to farm out some orders to private shipyards are, therefore, a step in the right direction. These yards will need full support from the Navy in terms of close interaction and provision of supervisory personnel on the ground.

21.

It is also desirable to selectively follow a 'buy-make' approach in which one or two platforms are purchased outright from a foreign shipyard and the rest four or five of that type built in our own; this will enable faster induction of technology in the yards and of new ships and submarines in the Navy. Routinely ordering all of them to be built locally, on the plea of fostering "self reliance", is a shortsighted measure; it must be realized that older ships have to be scrapped even as new ones are brought in. The challenge is to ensure that the latter process is faster which will never happen unless the suggested measure is put in place. Furthermore, the buy-make approach will promote, and not hinder, indigenous capabilities, and quicker. In this context, recent decisions to build seven new frigates and six submarines in three defence shipyards will, contrary to the exaggerated claims that have been made, have no impact on the

force levels of 2020 as none of them will materialize in that time frame, leaving these platforms at the same numbers as today.



Merchant Marine & Ports

22.

There is a mistaken belief that Navies and Coast Guards alone comprise maritime power. A country's merchant marine and its ports are equally important elements of its strength at sea. In the last three decades, India's merchant shipping has grown to just 11 million tons from 7 million tons in 1980; in this same period, China, beginning from the same threshold, has built a fleet of over 80 million tons. From five shipyards until ten years ago, their number has gone up to just seven in India even as China has more than ten times that number. Less than one fifth of our overseas trade is carried in Indian vessels. Similarly, in a country endowed with long coast lines on either side, we have just 13 major ports. These are very disturbing statistics. With India's economy, and consequently, trade growing at the rate that they are, these numbers need to be speedily enhanced. Until recently, this sector was not open to the private sector; happily this self-defeating approach has now been reversed. Measures are also necessary to encourage private sector shipbuilding through suitable incentives so that merchant shipping tonnage doubles to at least 25 million tons in the next ten years.



Conclusion

23.

India's security interests, in the changing environment, stretch across a broad spectrum which covers geo-strategic considerations arising from the country's size and

location, its energy and trade security, traditional threats posed by nation state adversaries, and those that are of a different but equally threatening kind. We have to ensure that we can safeguard our interests across this wide spread. To this menu should be added the ability to respond to natural disasters which visit the IO region more often than they do elsewhere. A mix of capabilities, essentially maritime, is needed, ocean going as well as coastal, supported by a comprehensive and networked information, intelligence and command and control mechanisms. Ability of these systems to withstand sophisticated levels of hostile cyber warfare is equally important. To this list should be added a vibrant merchant marine served by ports that are both quantitatively and qualitatively capable of coping with the escalating need. Finally, to answer the challenges and responsibilities arising from the developing scenario, it is imperative that the nation's diplomacy and its maritime strategies function in sync with each other. A holistic approach is essential if India's sea power is first, built to the required level, and then, exploited consistent with the nation's security interests.



About the Author



Vice Admiral P S Das retired from the Indian Navy in 1998 as Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Naval Command. During his naval career he commanded several ships and held important staff positions as Command Operations and Plans Officer at Western Naval Command and Director of Naval Policy and Plans at Naval Headquarters. His assignments in Flag rank included Chief of Staff at Eastern Naval Command, command of the Eastern Fleet, Fortress Commander Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Director General Defence Planning Staff.

After retirement, Admiral Das was nominated by the government as member of a Task Force to review Higher Defence Management and almost all its recommendations have been implemented. He is a well know commentator on issues of national and international security and has more than 200 published articles and papers to his credit and is a guest speaker at all War Colleges of the Indian Armed Forces and the National Defence College. He is a member of well recognized Track II strategic dialogues with the USA, China, Japan, Russia and Singapore. He serves on the Executive Council of the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses and has been on the Management Board of the United Service Institution, two of the most respected Think Tanks in India in the fields of Strategy and Security. He is a Distinguished Fellow of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies and has also served as member of the National Security Advisory Board in the office of the Prime Minister.



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