



Admiral (Retd) VS Shekhawat, PVSM, AVSM, VrC

HISTORY IS SELDOM A TRUE CHRONICLE OF PAST events. Nations generally interpret history to make their own appear nobler, grander, more glorious or altogether different from current interpretations of it and trivialise that of traditional adversaries. New research and facts entail revising settled beliefs, sometimes painfully. It was commonly accepted in Europe at one time that the earth was flat! Indians always knew that the earth was round. But they were slightly in error in believing that it was poised on the horns of a bull, and the shaking of its head, presumably to keep off the flies, was what caused earthquakes! Even the most objective academics bring to the writing and interpretation of history, the limitations of their own intellectual or imaginative capacity and personal and cultural experiences. Revision of history *per se*, is not objectionable if new facts require it.

Enquiry into maritime history begins with events on land and then proceeds through coastal settlements, excavation of artifacts, popular accounts and beliefs co-related with ancient

records, shipwrecks and their cargoes. Complicating nuances of history written by colonising power come into play when we attempt to piece together the maritime history of the Indian sub-continent and neighbouring countries.

EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE OF HISTORY

Due to global European colonisation, most of the extant historical accounts are from a European, more particularly in India, English perspective. Records of competing seapowers, such as the Portuguese or the French, though available to



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historians, are given less weightage and prominence due to, among other things, language considerations and the desire to glorify the role and contribution of the invading or colonising victor and downplay that of the defeated or colonised.

EUROPEAN SEA BATTLES

The primary battles at sea in the nearly five hundred years of colonisation were essentially between European sea powers in European waters. Warfare elsewhere was mostly secondary to, and in extension of hostilities in Europe until relatively modern times when Japanese sea power began to rise in the Pacific and challenged the United States. Major defeat at sea of a belligerent in the European theatre, usually sealed his fate in far distant lands as well, dependent as colonial powers were on their control of the seas for acquiring and retaining their colonies.

ANCIENT TRADE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

The nature of seafaring differed considerably in each of the main ocean areas. Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries lived at the subsistence level, with harsh economic and social conditions and limited tradable resources, to change only with the acquisition of colonies and later, the coming of the industrial revolution in the late 19th century. Basic activities like agriculture and forestry were the main occupations of the settled populations and though seafaring had developed, there was little to offer by way of trade overseas. And trade with whom? America was still to be discovered by Europe. Overland contacts and accounts of travelers suggested enticing opportunities for riches from oriental lands if a sea route could be found. Conditions were right to mount exploratory expeditions. These were to lead to the openings to

America, Africa and finally to India and also to the race for colonies by the English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch and smaller seapowers. Even little Belgium came to possess huge colonies in central Africa!

In the Indian Ocean, by contrast, the use of the seas from times immemorial was almost entirely for trade. Later, Buddhist monks and Muslim preachers carried their religious message along with the traders, as did the Christian missionaries. But, despite vast seaborne trading activity ranging from China in the east to Africa, Arabia and the Mediterranean lands in the west, no dominant sea power existed or controlled the oceans, nor was there impetus to do so, until the arrival of the Europeans. The great historical empires of India and China were self-sufficient and rich within themselves and no necessity was felt to adventure overseas for resources and colonies. Such Indian and Chinese colonies as came about in south-east Asia were mostly settlers in the wake of religion or trade. This applied too to the Arab sailors in their *dhow*s, who worked closely with the merchants of Gujarat and the Malabar Coast.

CHINESE EXPLORATIONS AND INDIAN TRADING COMMUNITIES

New research is bringing out details of extensive voyaging by the Chinese Zheng Ho in the Pacific and the Indian Oceans in the early 15th century and the presence of settled communities of Indian traders in SE and East Asia, and the Gulf. Both coasts of India also had resident Mediterranean Jews, Arabs, Chinese and others, being partners in trade and interacting amicably to mutual benefit. Coins and artifacts with Greek and Roman inscriptions continue to be found, even on the east coast. It is widely accepted that the pilot who guided Vasco da Gama to India was Gujarati or Arab. Perhaps he was an



Arab settled in Gujarat, as the monsoon winds usually determined where merchants and sailors lived ashore over many months awaiting favourable weather to return home with their cargoes.

Zheng Ho's ships far exceeded in size and numbers, those of Columbus when he set out for, as he supposed, India, and there are claims that the Chinese discovered America across the Pacific much before the Europeans ventured there. Records of Indian sailing expeditions are on a less grand scale, but the culture and place names in South-east Asia testify to numerous and large Indian settlement there.

THE LAST HUNDRED YEARS

Global power equations have seen many upheavals over years, the most recent following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. To understand present strategic arrangements and impulses of new players such as India, Brazil etc. to power, it is perhaps sufficient to consider the events which have shaped world affairs over the last hundred years or so and which continue to cast their shadow over Indian strategic perceptions.

Apart from the two World Wars, these include the Cold War, the rise of China, the proclaimed and enforced monopoly on nuclear weapons by the five permanent members of the Security Council, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and very significantly, the Sept. 11, 2001 terror attack on the continental United States; significantly, because it posed a threat to global United States interests in a manner it could not address by the usual method of applying overwhelming military force and which obliged it to reassess its threat response options in a holistic way.

DECOLONISATION

The post-war process of de-colonisation which began with the independence and partition of India, brought forth numerous newly, independent nations in Asia and Africa. It also resulted in the phased withdrawal of the British Royal Navy from bases around the Indian Ocean, leaving it for the first time in nearly two centuries without a dominant sea power. After the mid-1950s, the Indian Ocean was no longer a "British Lake".

CHINA

The emergence of communist China in 1950 and its subsequent phenomenal economic growth is altering the balance of political, economic and military power in Asia and the world. India retains bitter memories of the 1962 border conflict with China, and its role in nuclear weapons proliferation to Pakistan, and between them to North Korea, Iran and Libya. Many Chinese actions, such as attempts to acquire a maritime presence in

Myanmar, have strategic implications for India's security. At the same time, both countries are conscious of centuries old fruitful contacts and peaceful exchanges between two great civilisations and are trying to normalise relations and increase economic cooperation. Together with the maturing of ASEAN, there is now a new mood of economic cooperation and growth in Asia.

AFGHANISTAN WAR – 1980s

The Afghanistan War gave a tremendous boost to Pakistan and US-Pakistan military relations – yet again! Generous US aid flowed, including naval vessels, P-3 Orion aircraft and weaponry unconnected with the Afghan war. The war, through a series of complicated events, eventually led to the re-unification of Germany and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It also planted the seeds of terrorism against the USA and in a twist of strategic irony, the entry of US troops in Afghanistan to fight the old Soviet enemy, the Taliban! Which raises the question – is there any room for morality in international affairs or are they to be conducted solely on the basis of perceived, short term national self-interest, as myopically seen through the eyes of self-serving politicians or military dictators?

NEW WORLD ORDER

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attack against the United States, symbolised in the collapsing twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York, has brought about the most far-reaching recast of US foreign policy since the Cold War. The western alliance system, led by the United States, is again trying to re-order global power structures in a New World Order, much as was done in 1945 at the end of the Second World War on the basis of "Victors' Spoils" and in preparation for the looming Cold War. It is being shaped to take into account new economic realities and the accompanying shift in political power in international affairs. War no longer remains an option for developed countries except against weak and undeveloped ones. Prosperity in Europe and America and increasingly in South-east Asia has in any case reduced the desire and necessity to fight for territory and resources. Economic competition is the new battlefield and cooperative prosperity the direction, to the extent feasible.

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USA-INDIA – NEW STRATEGIC MOVES

Re-evaluation of US strategic concerns following “9/11” has changed US attitudes towards India, which it now describes as a strategic partner, not least because of its growing economy and stable democracy. It is also related to India’s geographic situation astride Indian Ocean trade routes and maturing naval and technological capability.

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PAST US-INDIA ESTRANGEMENT

There is a long history of estrangement between the USA and India and a residue of mutual suspicion and hesitancy. How successful will be the attempts at rapprochement and how durable? The USA has comfortable strategic understandings only with countries having cultural commonalities like the UK, Canada, Australia or New Zealand, namely cultures rooted in the “mother country”, England.

South Africa was part of this group until the white racist regime yielded power with the end of apartheid. Others, like South American, west Asian or Pakistani dictators have enjoyed favour from time to time, so long as they served US purposes. Japan has had a long term treaty relationship due to its usefulness against the Soviet Union and now to counter China. India would do well to remember that all US international relations, as indeed of all countries accustomed to power, are based on hard self-interest without the sentimentality to which India is prone.

“TREATIES. . . LIKE YOUNG GIRLS AND FLOWERS. . .”

The USA now has no strategic equals, nor is it institutionally accustomed to dealing with other nations on an equal basis, despite public posture of democracy and freedom. India needs to welcome US initiatives for better strategic understanding, without having any illusions about their, depth, content or durability. This applies equally to new initiatives with China, Iran or Saudi Arabia. All the lessons of history suggest that India approach the shaping of a new world order with traditional caution and circumspection, without exaggerated expectations and mindful of not sacrificing its independence of action for uncertain gains; whether from the nuclear agreement with the USA or the oil-gas dialogue with Iran. Both have a reputation for unilateral, arbitrary action, but the USA at least has a liberal democratic tradition, not always evident in its international dealings. Iran on the other hand, is often seen acting on the whims of clerics and religious hardliners and engaging in avoidable confrontations. Any agreement, whether



with the USA or Iran, should be without illusions. As Charles De Gaulle had observed - "Treaties are like young girls and flowers - they last while they last"! The same applies to strategic understandings.

SAUDI VISIT

The recently concluded visit of the Saudi monarch to India, the first in fifty years, has significance beyond energy supplies. It signals the reaching out of the leadership of the Islamic world towards a moderate, secular country with the second largest Muslim population in the world, in order to alter its own international image of religious intolerance. It will have a positive effect on India's relations with Muslim countries, long hostage to Pakistani demands on the wider community to keep India at arms length.

LIMITATIONS OF MILITARY POWER

Asymmetrical threats like terrorism place limits on the effectiveness of conventional military power. The new strategic moves on the world stage will, therefore, have substantial political and economic content. This is evident in the attention being paid to the BRIC countries - Brazil, Russia, India and China, whose vast territories, populations, natural resources and booming economies are expected to make them formidable trading competitors. Military power will always remain important but its application will be increasingly constrained and circumscribed by economic linkages and consequences. The prosperity and interdependence of the developed countries precludes warfare amongst themselves, and the increasing success of the European Union and ASEAN cooperative models points the way to future international relations.

INDIA AND THE SECURITY COUNCIL

In such a situation, how important is it for India to push its claim to a Security Council seat? There are "No midwives at the birth of great Powers." They have to be "self-born"; existing powers will always try to keep out new comers until they can no longer do so. This has been the case with the present P-5; each was opposed as it grew in economic and military strength, the last to be



acknowledged being China. Now it seems to be India's turn. It would be well advised to quietly work towards its economic development and putting its domestic house in order, which is in a nightmarish mess because of administrative failures. Meanwhile, it can remain ready to take up an uncomfortable chair at the high table as and when it is invited!

TRADE AND ECONOMY

India's economic growth will greatly increase trade and over ninety percent of it will traverse the high seas. This will demand huge investments in port infrastructure, ships and shipbuilding, EEZ exploitation and search for assured energy supplies over the long term. This is already leading to a more pragmatic and proactive foreign policy including energy cooperation initiatives towards Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Central Asian states, Russia, China and as far afield as Sakhalin and Nigeria. The proposed civil nuclear cooperation agreement with the USA is part of this same energy security policy but in a much larger strategic framework. Despite years of western pressures, India has in any case made nuclear power a key ingredient of its energy policy, an argument increasingly being advanced by western countries for themselves to guard against oil blackmail by producer states.

MARITIME SCENE IN INDIA

NEGLECT OF INVESTMENT IN MARITIME SECTOR

India followed an incomprehensible maritime investment policy for decades, bearing the stamp of



a landlocked accountant bureaucracy. Entrepreneurship was stifled in the shipping industry. Ports were allowed to decay and wallow in inefficiencies. Shipbuilding remained stunted due to taxation policies. Coastal shipping was destroyed due to lack of incentives. According to the Economic Times (Jan 9, 2006), 102 shipping companies together own barely 699 vessels with a gross tonnage of only seven million tonnes, a figure which has scarcely grown over years. The share of Indian shipping in our own trade also continues to stagnate at below 30%, which should be nearer 50%.

It was not entirely a negative picture however. Offshore exploration resulted in Bombay High and other discoveries. Fisheries kept growing due to initiatives by the coastal states. The National Institute of Oceanography was set up at Goa and a permanent research station in Antarctica. Claim was established as a pioneer investor for seabed mining rights under UNCLOS. The Indian Navy kept designing and building complex warships in increasingly confident, public sector shipyards. Small private workshops grew to become competent ship repairers and builders of small vessels. An ancillary industry came up, along with the growth of engineering capabilities for general applications. And to keep all these activities going, young professionals appeared, many emerging in their hundreds out of maritime training institutes to man foreign flag ships from Hong Kong to Norway.

NEW MARITIME INITIATIVES

The Indian State, with its new *mantra* of liberalisation and globalisation has rediscovered the importance of the sea and awakened from its slumber. A “National Maritime Development Programme” is awaiting Cabinet approval. It envisages an investment of Rs. 60,000 crores in ports by the year 2012 and Rs. 40,000 crores in

shipping by 2025. Someone is at least thinking beyond next year’s budget! The Sethusamudram seaway project between Sri Lanka and southern India to shorten the distance for smaller vessels between the east and west coast is being executed. Ship owners have been freed from the bureaucratic stranglehold of the Ministry for acquiring and disposing off ships and are benefiting from tax reforms. Shipping protocol has been renewed with Pakistan and maritime boundary disputes, though not resolved, are being addressed.

GROWING TRADE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

International trade has a huge maritime component due to economics and sheer volume. This will increase, especially so in the Asia-Pacific region as the dynamic economies of Japan, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, ASEAN and India, add to shipping in the Indian Ocean, already teeming with oil and gas tankers needed to fuel these economies. Sooner, rather than later Africa will contribute more to this trade, and Indian trade openings to South America around the Cape of Good Hope will see a surge in traffic in the southern Indian Ocean and across the southern Atlantic.

Along with trade will come new vulnerabilities, demanding increased vigilance and larger and more capable naval forces ready to deploy rapidly,

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independently or in concert with other navies. Since the USA is the end destination of so much of global trade, its concerns for safety from sea-based terrorist attack, especially through container cargo, have to be taken into account by its trading partners. India has already done so, in its own interests too, by enforcing an agreed Container Security Initiative (CSI) for surveillance at designated ports in India.

Less readily acceptable is the US-proposed Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), designed to detect and intercept transportation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) by sea through cooperative maritime effort of participating navies. India is uncomfortable with the legal implications of high seas search of suspicious vessels without



the authority of an international agreement under United Nations auspices.

Terrorism at sea and a related scourge from ancient times, piracy, can be checked only with the cooperative effort of all seafaring nations. The Indian Navy and Coast Guard have achieved notable successes in intercepting hijacked merchant vessels and apprehending the pirates. The Malacca Straits and adjoining seas are a favoured area for pirate activities. In a positive development, sixteen countries, including India, Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand, have signed a Regional Cooperation Agreement to combat piracy. A centre will be set up in Singapore and the Coast Guard will be the implementing agency in the case of India.

MARINE ENVIRONMENT ISSUES

The marine environment has already become a live issue because of oil spills and plastics proliferation. Rise in ocean temperatures as a function of global warming has caused ice fields in

Antarctica to melt at an unprecedented rate and the prospect of the Arctic Ocean becoming relatively ice-free for year-round navigation, has soured relations between Canada and the USA as they stake claims to new territorial waters or assert freedom of high seas passage, respectively. The effect of rise in sea levels on low island countries such as the Maldives will be devastating, and only a little less so for the heavily populated coastal areas of all littorals.

Claims to extended Continental Shelf under UNCLOS have also to be submitted by 2009, supported by voluminous hydrographic data. In the case of India-Pakistan and India-Bangladesh, this is complicated by unresolved maritime boundaries. Ideally an agreed joint claim would be the least expensive and most satisfactory proposal. With a new mood of positively approaching the Sir Creek boundary dispute, it is possible to hope for a similar approach to the maritime boundary; it be noted, however, that procedures under UNCLOS provide for this being addressed without awaiting the outcome of the Sir Creek negotiations, a formulation not acceptable to Pakistan for political, rather than practical reasons.

NATURAL DISASTERS

Because of climate change natural disasters such as the 2004 Tsunami, are expected to become more common. Nature's fury was also visited upon the US Gulf coast in a series of destructive hurricanes in 2005, the worst being "Katrina", which ravaged New Orleans. In the case of the Indian Ocean Tsunami, the Indian Navy and Coast Guard provided immediate relief, both to its own island territories as well as to affected neighbouring countries. More than 40 ships were deployed within 24 hours, to Sri Lanka and Indonesia, the worst affected, apart from Tamil Nadu.

MARITIME THREATS

India has long faced military threats, economic pressures and technology denial regimes due to its independent policies and has emerged the stronger for it. With improvement in relations with China and Pakistan, direct military threats may have receded across the land frontiers, but clandestine warfare continues across the Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal frontiers, each with its own special characteristics, but with the common inspiration of Pakistani intelligence agencies. India will no doubt cope with threats in the neighbourhood as it has done in the past. It is the future security situation at sea which demands attention, as developing maritime forces and responses must work in at least a 25 year time horizon, in the short term.

Unlike threats to national security from landwards, which always emanate from neighbours, threats from the sea are difficult to

predict and prepare for because of the nature, reach, flexibility and mobility of naval forces. Only well analysed experiences of maritime history evaluated by strategic professionals, can yield the lessons, which can be a guide to raising and maintaining naval forces sufficient to safeguard its interest at sea on a durable basis. These will have to be financially supported by informed political leadership and a strong economy, without which there is no defence capability. An inimical distant naval power, if it gains access to bases in the Indian Ocean, can rapidly alter the strategic balance against Indian interests, even if it does not have the resources of a superpower. History has shown that nations having substantial interests in the seas need to have capability to protect them against threats which may seem nebulous in tranquil times. Times change, as do national interests. Threat perceptions, therefore, need to be kept up to date.

SECURITY OF ENERGY SUPPLIES

Assured energy supplies at affordable cost remain a primary concern for all major oil consuming countries. Japan, China and India are in the forefront of consumption. For the foreseeable future no alternate source of energy can replace fossil fuels and, therefore, securing of those supplies remains a high priority. Most countries in the Asia-Pacific region are highly vulnerable to disruption in oil supplies from the Gulf. Cooperative arrangements for ensuring the safety of oil supplies

will require to be pursued. As all the tanker traffic from the Gulf to Japan and China passes close to Indian shores and through the Malacca Straits choke point, it is natural for India to be involved in measures to promote regional energy security. The USA and Japan, once chary of allowing India any important role at sea, are now eager to see it assume enhanced responsibilities. Sooner or later it will have to do so by developing good understanding and strong economic and political relations with countries of the Indian Ocean region and important non-littoral powers like the USA, China, Japan and other maritime users such as France and Britain.

DEFENCE RELATIONSHIPS AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY

India is presently one of the largest importers of arms in the world, mainly because its own manufacturing capacity is inadequate. It had no industry worth the name at Independence and all

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its defence equipment came from Britain. Having been at the receiving end of western sanctions for long, meeting its defence requirements, whenever financial resources permitted, has always been precarious, and suppliers have not hesitated to deny spare parts whenever India's international stance

or actions did not meet with their approval. This situation continues, the latest example being the proposed transfer of Islander aircraft by the Indian Navy to Myanmar and UK threats to deny spares, something it has done often in the past. Many US and EU sanctions and technology denials remain in place. In such circumstances, how advisable is it for India to enter into arrangements for procurement of P-3/P-8 maritime reconnaissance aircraft from the USA? Or "Scorpene" submarines from France? The short answer is that we have limited choices and will have to "lump it" for

some more time and try to ensure that whatever is contracted is least restrictive of our sovereignty.

In the civil sector, India is self-sufficient in almost everything it needs and has overcome pressures that have been exerted. Not so in matters of defence.

It is therefore imperative that self-reliance in weapons and equipment across the whole range be given the highest priority. One reason that China is able to have greater freedom in its foreign policy is that it has taken care to manufacture almost all its defence needs in-country. If it wishes to transfer a ship, missile system or even nuclear know-how to some other country, it is able to do so, right or wrong. Defence self-sufficiency is therefore a matter of urgent necessity in attaining true sovereignty in national decision-making.

INDIA IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

Geographically, no country dominates any ocean area as completely as does India particularly the northern Indian Ocean and its vital sea routes. Over centuries, this has been only for trade, until the coming of the Europeans introduced the element of hostilities in otherwise tranquil seas. But the nature of the world has changed. India is now one country, though split at partition, which it was not in the 15th century. It has the second largest population, great natural resources and growing economy and trade.

The future prosperity of India is inextricably linked with its overseas trade. This will demand enormous growth in all activities connected with the sea. It will also increase its vulnerabilities, requiring the creation and maintenance of naval forces sufficient to protect its interests far from its own shores. West Asia and the Gulf region remain volatile, attracting the permanent presence of



powerful navies. The rise of China, its expanding economic footprint and its strategic linkages with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan and others have to be taken note of, even while working towards peaceful cooperation in the political and economic fields.

NAVAL FORCES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

Naval vessels of many nations, including non-littorals, legitimately sail the Indian Ocean. The US Navy maintains a major base at Diego Garcia, which India has opposed from time to time, and smaller ones in the Gulf. Together with the US Navy, ships of European navies deploy for long periods as part of NATO standing force supporting the US-led war in Iraq and anti-terrorism patrols along the Makran coast, in which Pakistan too is included. A substantial US naval presence in the Indian Ocean is a reality in the foreseeable future, as it has been in the past.

In the Pacific, Chinese sea power is rising rapidly. Its merchant fleet is probably the largest in the world, built in its own shipyards. It has a large, modernising navy with a submarine fleet which includes nuclear-propelled and nuclear and ICBM capable. Newer warships regularly enter service. Interest is focusing on aircraft carrier capability. The former Soviet “Kuznetsov” class carrier “Varyag”, seventy percent complete when purchased from Ukraine where it was laid up, is believed to have been re-painted in Chinese markings. It is thought it may be used in a training role until China is ready to fully enter carrier-borne naval aviation.

Whatever the details, Chinese intent to become a major naval power is clear. It will then be ready for a role beyond the western Pacific into the Indian Ocean, if it's perceived strategic interests require. It has sought and operates communications facilities in Myanmar and has a deep, secretive and enduring military relationship, including nuclear transfers, with Pakistan. It is also completely financing and building the new port of Gwadar on the Makran coast.

Acquiring a base facility in Pakistan would merely require two signatures on a piece of paper if their, common interests so dictated. Both countries have fought wars and made common cause against India from time to time. Prudence requires that India take note of and plan for the rise of Chinese sea power, its future role in the Indian Ocean and the possible alliances it may enter into which may threaten India's security.

SEA POWER

Sea power is the *totality* of a nation's relationship with the sea. It includes the full range of activities from shipbuilding, fleet ownership, fisheries, exploration and a robust defence capability. Building a navy is the task of generations, requires a vision of a hundred years and a practical working time horizon of fifty. Who knows what the world will be like, fifty years from now? Who friend and who foe? India should, therefore, plan its maritime defence on the basis of the extent of its anticipated usage of the seas, which will grow exponentially. It may aspire to become a global economic power, but its military ambitions should be more modest, both for its own sake and for that of peace in the world. It will be enough for it to have land and air forces capable of ensuring defence against major aggression and maritime forces of sufficient capability, size and type, to deploy in any part of the Indian Ocean on a sustained basis and be able to influence maritime situations favourably. This would require substantial accretions to the Indian war fleet.

Indian foreign policy should endeavour to make recourse to war unnecessary, and naval capability should ensure that even a powerful adversary at sea will be deterred from adventuring against Indian maritime interests in the region.

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