

GUEST COLUMN

Redefining India's Neighbourhood

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There exists a widespread misperception that diplomats do not do much. Nonetheless, there is a need to be aware of the very comprehensive scope of diplomacy in recognising and pursuing India's interest worldwide as a responsible member of the international community while taking care of our national interests. Also, there are many opportunities today for the diplomats that did not exist before. For this, there is a need to delve into the practitioners view. For this purpose, the article is divided into four parts: the first part includes concepts based on geography, secondly, significant features that arise from the geographical realities; thirdly, the issues for India and flowing from that India's policy choices.

To start with the concept based on geography, if one were to pose a question about where India's frontiers lie, the tendency will be to mention the land borders, including our longest land border which incidentally is neither Pakistan nor China, but have Bangladesh. What does not get spoken about is the entire coast line of 7616.6 kilometres (according to the survey of India and the NIO). This is a frontier. It constitutes approximately one third of our external frontiers. And to that extent is a major strategic aspect of India's security. This includes the coast line of the landmass and of our islands which tend to be forgotten, but are now increasingly recognised for their strategic importance. Just off the coast line of Kerala, there are Lakshadweep and Minicoy and in the middle of the Bay of Bengal, nearer to Thailand there is the Andaman and the Nicobar Islands. So, the coast line is a frontier.

The other is the reality of who India's neighbours are. Again, the tendency is to think of our land neighbours or territorial neighbours. Sri Lanka and Maldives are included because they are as proximate as they are. But many of our neighbours are neighbours by both land and sea. India has a tally of eleven neighbours considering land and the maritime boundary. India has land boundaries with Afghanistan, Bhutan, China and Nepal. The common boundaries of land and sea are Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan and at low tide Sri Lanka because one can walk across the Islands at low tide by foot. And we have maritime boundaries with Indonesia, Maldives and Thailand. There is a tendency not to recognise Indonesia and Thailand as our neighbours but the fact is that India has settled maritime boundaries with both of these countries. This makes a major difference to how we view our maritime interests. In addition, the size of India's exclusive economic zone as defined under the law of the seas comprises an area of 2.37 million square kilometres. Therefore, we have landmass and the exclusive economic zone where we have exclusive rights to the resources of the seas whether it is in terms of the continental shelf or the deep sea, though it is something that we are yet to fully exploit but are gradually getting attuned to. Flowing from this hypothesis, geography validates that India is a sea-locked country. We've all heard of landlocked countries. Nepal, Bhutan are landlocked countries. They are India's neighbours and have certain rights. But India is a sea-locked country.

In that, post independence, we do not have access, post-independence, to any countries beyond our territorial neighbours, for a variety of reasons. Historically, we have had long maritime contracts with South-East Asia. The monuments, the language, the cultural ties that exist in countries like Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam demonstrate the depth of the contracts that have existed. The Roman Empire has had contacts with peninsular India. There was a linkage with the Gulf long before oil was discovered which will continue even when the oil runs out. We have had linkages with East Africa, particularly during the colonial times when Indian teachers, railway workers, businessmen went across to Africa. The most memorable example is the great tradition of Mahatma Gandhi developing his strategic methods in South Africa. The sea was used also by the Portuguese, the Dutch, the British, the French, China, not just today but if one is to go by what Chinese historians talk about, Admiral Zheng He even touched Cochin in his perambulation in the Indian Ocean and now the Americans. India has had very strong maritime predations in the past. Some of these mearings were lost during the colonial interregnum because the British, with their strategic perception of the power of the sea, retained control of the Navy. Essentially, this region has seen globalisation, in today's terms, long before it became a buzzword. Therefore, the Indian Ocean, on top where India sits, including the sub areas of the Arabian sea, the Persian Gulf, the Bay of Bengal, the Andaman Sea, the Red sea have vital interests for India both regionally and globally.

The statistics are indicative of how much of the world's container traffic the Indian Ocean deals with (over fifty percent), energy, the number of ships that transit through it every year (over sixty thousand). It also holds forty percent of the world's oil and gas reserves. There exists great diversity in terms of twenty- nine littoral states, six island countries, comprising a third of the world's population. So, it also provides global strategic connectivity through vital choke points and there are vital sub points around its seas and distinctive areas each with certain specific local problems. But if one looks at the Indian Ocean as a whole, a distinctive feature which is unique to India among large countries is that countries like the United States, USSR or the Russia today have the benefit of two coasts and two oceans whereas with the Indian Ocean there is no northern exit as there is for the Atlantic and the Pacific. For this reason, the strategic engagement that India follows has been somewhat different, developing now in recognition of the natural continuum into the Pacific. Hence, the term that is being used much more widely than before but still not accepted by all, is the Indo-Pacific. There is certain logic to it and by its very nature demands that India needs to redefine its own concept of its neighbourhood. Now, the evolution of the thought of the Indo-Pacific is also that, in actual fact, India looked and acted East long before anybody spoke about any policy in that respect. History has shown this on any single visit to almost any country in South East Asia.

Beyond the Land Boundaries – Opportunities and Challenges for India

Now, the features that arise out of these geographical realities is the nature of our coast line and our EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone) that require variegated development and security. Our development interests involve the sustainable development of the fisheries with all the ancillary industries and production that is necessary in terms of boats, technology and processing facilities. Then there is the question of offshore oil and gas. It is not just the Bombay High on which we have ridden now for several decades but also the comparatively undeveloped aspects of

the Godavari Basin and in the Bay of Bengal. And currently in terms of frontier technology, the use of sea bed minerals has been prominent.

Moreover trade has sustained all our coastal states and much of our inland states over the centuries and millennia. The bulk of our trade goes by the sea, approximately ninety percent by volume, seventy percent by value. Oil and gas are also important. So, shipping plays a major role. Our tanker capacities and refining capacities, the nature of our merchant fleet, our ship building capacities, the development of the ports, the equipment, machinery and human resources required for that, supply line by rail and road, supporting industries and our export production and import handling backend into the entire aspect of national development. Our heavy dependence on imported oil and gas is a very major aspect of it regardless of whether we are talking about the Gulf from where we have a major section of our imports or the wider range of sources including Nigeria, Brazil, United States, Russia, Venezuela, Angola and Mozambique.

The full use of India's EEZ is a major aspect that needs to be looked at because for long we have tended to have a coastal mentality. We are aware of the kind of conflicts and tensions that the Indian fishermen faced all along our coasts from deep sea trawlers and the kind of poaching that used to take place from other countries as India did not use its EEZ in terms of maximising the catch. Beyond the natural resources of our coastal and deep-sea waters within our EEZ, there is the involvement of nine of our coastal states in all of these activities and the marine workers who serve on numerous ships all over the world regardless of what flag they are under, whether it is people captured by the Somali pirates or people on cruise ships and so on. It is interesting that a lot of them, quite apart from the coastal states like Kerala, Goa and Maharashtra, come from totally inland and sandy states like Rajasthan. The possible reason for this is the huge employment potential in the marine industry.

There are global commons which go beyond national or regional aspects. At the base of it is the freedom of navigation and the safety of the sea lines of communication. More than that, in today's discussion on climate change there is the aspect of monsoon, tsunami risk and cyclones. Today's discussion on climate change really flows from the growing recognition that there are no boundaries when it comes to discussions of weather and meteorology. The Earth really is something that concerns all of us. Likewise, marine environmental pollution and oil spill on the high seas can affect our coasts as we have seen in so many countries whether it is Alaska or the Malacca Straits or our own coasts. There is also the issue of global warming and the almost automatic ecological and human toll that it would take in terms of migration of populations. So, given India's political, economic and social aspirations, the first aspect is that it has recognised the need to expand the areas of interest and engagement which today happen both at the bilateral, regional and multilateral level. In that sense, it is truism to say that sea is not a divider but a connector. The challenge for India is to develop capacities and programs to aid national development in terms of trade, whole fishing industry, minerals particularly oil and ensuring freedom of navigation. There is a need to rethink about the current discourse with regard to maritime security and a rules-based order.

The other challenge is how do we develop the capacity to secure ourselves and to defend ourselves in the coastline. One of the examples is the Mumbai attacks of 2008. Another challenge is the use and the misuse of the EEZ. The examples are the range the LTTE gave itself during the civil war or more recently, the killing of Kerala

fishermen on the St Antony by the two Italian marines. There are also cases of piracy on the high seas. In Malacca however, because of concerted cooperation, such activities have been brought more or less under control. However, there are concerns in the troubled waters of Somalia and the Gulf of Oman. All of these mean that measures have to be taken at the national, regional and multilateral level to ensure the capacities and security that would ultimately shape the environment for development. India needs to put an end to what used to be a debate whether it should have a brown water or a blue water navy. Brown water implies the focus on merely the continental shelf area; blue water implies being able to range much further beyond our shores. After all today as a few countries operate air craft carriers, these are considered floating idols and provide a kind of defence. There is a debate about their effectiveness and vulnerability but the fact is that India's maritime interests now extend to the IndoPacific. And that means that we need to put in place the resources that are required for an effective coast guard and naval capacities. The other policy outcomes naturally depend on the nature of India's engagement at the bilateral, regional and multilateral levels.

For this, first of all an understanding of how we need to redefine the concept of India's neighbourhood is significant. One needs to make a difference between neighbours and neighbourhood. It is a linear relationship with the neighbours if you have a boundary; a country is a neighbour. Nonetheless, neighbourhood is a special concept. Given our aspirations and economic growth, the kind of services and professionalism that people deliver all over the world including something as far out as in one's mind could be considered Mongolia or Chile, India needs to redefine its mental horizons in terms of its concepts of neighbourhood. At the bilateral level, in terms of our immediate neighbours with whom we share boundaries, we have close links at the political, the economic and social levels (bar Pakistan for reasons that are well known). This is a subset of the totality of bilateral relations with these countries.

It is also worth remembering that historically, India has been a security provider of first choice in the wider Indian Ocean region. Whether it has been Sri Lanka, when Sirimavo Bandaranaike faced an uprising in the early 1971, in the Maldives, Mauritius and Myanmar from the 1950s, Seychelles and Thailand where today we do joint petroleum exploration with the Thai Navy in the Andaman Sea and with Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam and Japan where we have provided resources including for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. India's relationship with the island countries in the Indian Ocean like Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, Sri Lanka and the Maldives emerges from the clarity that India has to sustain friendly relations and not be apologetic about security cooperation. We offer capacity building, equipment, physical support and training including the use of some of our own professionals in building up their capacities. In each case, it is an example of the opportunities for India to share its capacities to establish a comfort level of a kind that would be unthinkable frankly if China were to do the same with its own close neighbours. Despite India starting off at a slow pace with regard to regional and multilateral engagements, today we can see a full-fledged transformation in India's activities, as a development and security partner.

India's Regional Engagement

The preliminary meetings began in the 1980s which led to the first SAARC summit in 1985. However, the concept of South Asia is flawed. We are talking about the

erstwhile area of the British Raj. If we talk about South Asia as areas south of a certain latitude and if we consider India as northern most point end as an example, you would then have to factor in many of the Gulf countries and the whole of South East Asia. If we try to restrict the regional perception of what India's regional interests are, this is not realistic. At the same time, there is a need to acknowledge that India's focus has moved from SAARC to BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation). What started as Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand economic cooperation is now been renamed as the Bay of Bengal initiative which covers countries around the Bay of Bengal and then ASEAN. This is initiated considering the fact that the security architecture for the Indo-Pacific requires the centrality of ASEAN. Alongside, ASEAN forum has expanded into the ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting-Plus Eight, the ASEAN Maritime Forum and the East Asia summit, in all of which India is an active member.

The Indian Ocean Regional Association which started out in a somewhat low- key manner focusing essentially on trade has gained meaning in the recent times. All political leaderships have recognised that it is impossible to discuss trade, development and investment without taking into account security. Similar to the hesitancy in joining hands with ASEAN in the early years, we also stayed away from APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation). But today we are knocking at their doors and at some stage, there is a possibility that they may recognise India as a part of the member countries who had frozen the membership. RCEP began as an off shoot of Obama's initiative of Trans-Pacific Partnership. India had reservations on that partly because of certain hesitancy with regard to open trade.

There is a host of policy issues and strategic decisions that were required. From a very slow start in multilateral engagement, India today has expanded its engagement to all the littoral countries of not just the Indian Ocean but of the Indo-Pacific by which it would mean all of ASEAN, Japan, Korea and Russia as well. The factor in all of course is the rise of China and its growing belligerence. Earlier we used to talk of the Chinese's assertiveness, now it is really a question of belligerence. The fact is that in terms of China's belligerence, it is only India that has deployed forces and has taken casualties in the process. In addition to the multilateral organisations discussed above, there are also the maritime security cooperation networks. And apart from the engagement with the Indian Ocean Regional Association, you also have the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), an initiative of the Indian Navy which has sought to bring in all interested players in a rule-based relationship and that rule base flows from the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to which India a signatory. Most recently, we had the formalisation of the trilateral cooperation between India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. India is a member of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP).

The latest arrival on the scene is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue comprising India, Japan, the United States and Australia. Many questions have been raised to QUAD: what does it represent? Whose interests does it serve?. However, as long as any country is willing to participate in a responsible manner on the basis of a rules based order, it qualifies to join this kind of an organisation. There are different interpretations of what the QUAD represents, whether it is an anti-China grouping, or whether it is a new NATO. The members in the QUAD have different interpretations of what its objectives are but as far as India is concerned, it is important that we refer to two key note speeches that the Indian Prime Minister made. One was in Mauritius,

called the Sagar speech and the other at the Shangri-La Dialogue. In these speeches, the PM emphasised that India seeks to promote an inclusive nature of participation; security cooperation was spelt out while stipulating that there were red lines starting from no unilateral alteration of the status quo. This holds good in terms of what happens at sea and certainly in terms of our territorial security concerns with regard to both Pakistan and China, that holds good on land as well.

Instruments of Cooperation

Now quite apart from the engagement through these different entities, what are the instruments that we use. At the very basic level, you have the exchange of ship visits and quite apart from the fact they are tremendous public relations exercises for India not just for the Indian Navy or for the Indian Coast Guard but for India. It is open to visitors from the host country; we take school children abroad, the sailors come ashore; these are hosted by communities in different parts of the country. It is a tremendous exercise in public engagement. India also exercises jointly with countries which do have coast guards and with the navies both at bilateral level and regional level. There has been a long-standing exercise called Himal that takes place in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. More recently, we have heard of the Malabar in which India and the United States compromised, subsequently joined by Japan and Australia. There are also shared measures for security and for technical expertise. India has great hydrographic capabilities and has done hydrographic surveys with many littoral countries. We share satellite imagery particularly related to disasters, tidal clay and fisheries. For fishing communities, satellite images with regard to where the shores are make a big difference. Maritime rescue has also been important. The operation of this multilateral kind of network provided the first information in the shooting of our fishermen in the St Antony.

India's record in High Availability Disaster Recovery (HADR) has been growing significantly. The best example is the response of India during the tsunami in 2004. There are many other examples as well, not necessarily at sea. For example, in Japan after the Fukushima accident, a team from our National Disaster Authority went across and got training. We have closer relations with some countries than others. The inter-operability agreements that have been signed with the United States, are bouquet of agreements including the General Security of Military Information Agreement of 2002, the Logistics Exchange Agreement of 2016, the Compatibility and Security Agreement of 2018 and most recently the Basic Exchange Cooperation Agreement of 2020. None of these mean that India and the US are allies, however, what is distinctive is that it is a partnership and both countries are learning to handle a partnership.

Sea - The Connector

There are multi-model opportunities here when we consider sea as a connector. There is a trilateral highway that India has worked to develop through Myanmar into Thailand. But at the maritime level, there are two significant opportunities that are waiting to be developed. There is a little neck of land in southern Thailand, known as the Kra isthmus. This leads directly to the six-degree channel in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. At the time when the Panama Canal or the Suez Canal were thought of people have also thought of a canal here in order to bypass the Malacca Strait, as that would reduce shipping time considerably, take one right across the Gulf of

Thailand, the South China Sea into the Pacific Ocean, all of which matter to India because now our trade with Asia is through these routes and also to the west coast of the United States. In this day and age, a canal across southern Thailand would not be acceptable for reasons of cost and the situation across southern Thailand. But a land bridge is certainly conceivable, which again has been talked about; but if you were to put in oil pipelines, road and railways you could then connect Bay of Bengal, South China Sea and Pacific Ocean.

Yet another multi-model connectivity opportunity would be the town of Dawei, what in the early days used to be called Tavoy in Myanmar. This is connectible with the town of Kanchanaburi in Thailand which is connected to the Port of Bangkok by highway it gives the outlet into the Gulf of Thailand, South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean. On a smaller scale, what India is working on with Myanmar is the Kaladan multi-modal project, which involves the development of Sittwe Port and linkages up the Kaladan river into southern Mizoram. This would provide connectivity to most of India's North East states namely, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. The connectivity through the chicken neck is also sometimes erratic, owing to either climatic or local factors and the Kaladan project reduces the time and costs in terms of providing supplies to this part of our country. So, connectivity presents great opportunities. It would reduce costs, improve alternate supply routes and would work in favour of India's economic interests.

Comprehensive Maritime Security Doctrine

A comprehensive maritime security doctrine requires a comprehensive national security doctrine, which does not exist yet for India. The Navy has also made numerous efforts for the same. In 2004, when Admiral Madhvendra Singh was the chief, a draft doctrine was introduced which was a good attempt. However, it was not a national doctrine and the government did not adopt it. So, it stood alone as a naval doctrine. If India has a national security doctrine, it will set down India's intent. We have aspirations of developing into a major power and being a positive member of the international community. Therefore just as we have nuclear doctrine, it is important for a country of India's size and capabilities to state how it will act in certain situations. There are countries that state what is acceptable and what is not. For instance, in our nuclear doctrine, it is stated as to how India should act in the event of certain steps taken by others for a nuclear attack. A comprehensive national security doctrine will help India identify the major challenges to the country's security and allows us to draft policies accordingly (Saran, 2019).

Many drafts have emerged in this regard, however, none of them have been put out in public. Yet an expected one is from the Delhi policy group which held a seminar on this a few years ago. Pertinent questions like what will give India the equilibrium, the stability to achieve our national goals in terms of social, economic and political development need to be incorporated. A significant concern is that security is very often considered as an afterthought and as being mutually exclusive with development. It is necessary to recognise that the most advanced nations have development and technology flowing from their security strengths and capabilities and that includes high-level technology. Security cannot remain as an aspect a country thinks of after Mumbai attacks or 9/11 in the United States. On the contrary, it has to be built into our natural functioning. It has to be intrinsically interlinked with everything and taken into account as part of it. Complementarily, financial

resources have to be sustainably and effectively used. India should never be apologetic about what it needs to defend itself against external enemies.

Conclusion

Therefore, while we talk about maritime issues and maritime security, it is of utmost importance to place them under the larger security framework as all security is holistic. There is a very strong section of our security community which believes we need a separate agency for maritime security. There are numerous problems that need to be sorted out. The question starts with the local policing. We all know that people run from one police station to another due to confusions arising from the grounds of jurisdiction. If there was a murder on either the high tide line or the low tide line of our coast, who is going to deal with it? Is it going to be a maritime agency or the local police? We cannot divide the responsibility. During the time of the LTTE's activities, they used boats to move back and forth not just between Sri Lanka and India but right across the Bay of Bengal to Thailand through which they smuggled kerosene, food supplies and so on. So, when a boat is confiscated, is there a maritime agency to look after or is it customs? Which agency will enter the picture when there is kerosene smuggling or arms smuggling. Here, divided responsibility on security creates problems. The same situation arose in the wake of 9/11 attacks in the United States where the FBI and the CIA did not cooperate. It is true in many cases in India and other countries. Turf battles between security agencies do not serve anybody's interests including those agencies themselves. It is important to reduce or remove the silos, share the information and only then will security be treated in holistic manner. A strong and comprehensive security doctrine supported by a comprehensive maritime security doctrine is the need of the hour to ensure this.

References

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