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SECURING THE MARITIME ENVIRONMENT

INDIAN NAVY'S FASTTRACK QUEST FOR RAFALE-M JETS AND AIRCRAFT CARRIER



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GEOPOLITICS OF SECURING THE MARITIME ENVIRONMENT

Geopolitics, influenced by history and modern challenges, emphasizes the crucial link between maritime power and global strategies. China's assertiveness in the South China Sea underscores this dynamic, while alliances like the Quad and AUKUS exemplify the need for strategic cohesion in securing maritime interests amidst changing global dynamics.

Understanding Geopolitics: A New Slant

The term 'geopolitics' has historically been employed in reference to a nation's interests and stratagems adopted to secure them. This understanding is subjective; for it does not account for the full significance

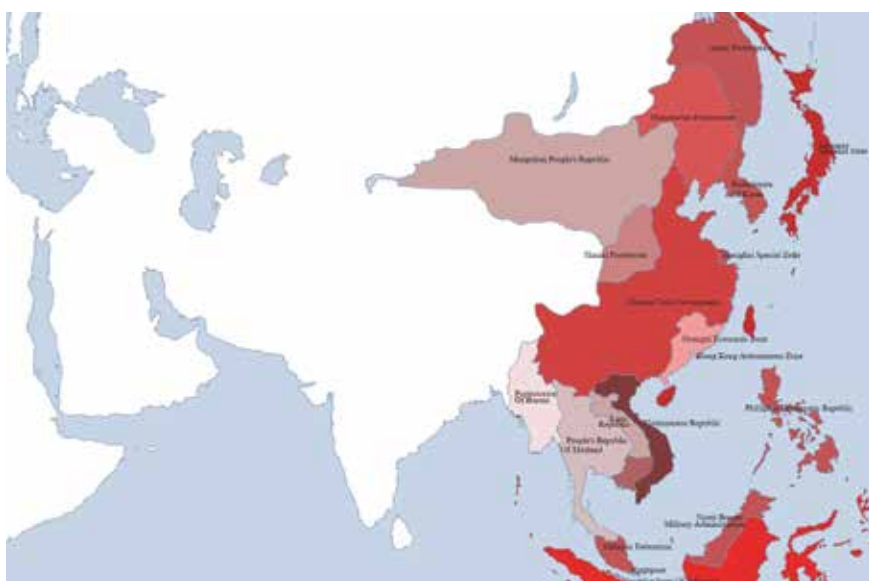
of the term and even bears negative connotations. In the run-up to the Second World War, both Germany and Japan's expansionist policies were justified using the 'geopolitical' argument garbed in bizarre concepts of Lebensraum and the Greater East Co-prosperity Sphere. More recently

In the post-war era, America saw in its strategic doctrine of 'Containment' an instrument that assured its geopolitical dominance in world affairs.

In the 21st century, geopolitics aims at explaining how geography can impact politics and how states try to mitigate these effects. Geography, in other words, contributes to defining the boundaries of what is possible to achieve in international relations along with economic and security advantages that may be leveraged. China In its South China Sea policy has shown just how 'creatively' this can be achieved.

Integration of Maritime Power with Geopolitics: Survey of the Domain

Thucydides, in the 4th century Bce, chronicled events of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 Bce). Aggressive moves by Athens to establish an empire and control the geopolitics of the Mediterranean



Members of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere; territory controlled at maximum height.



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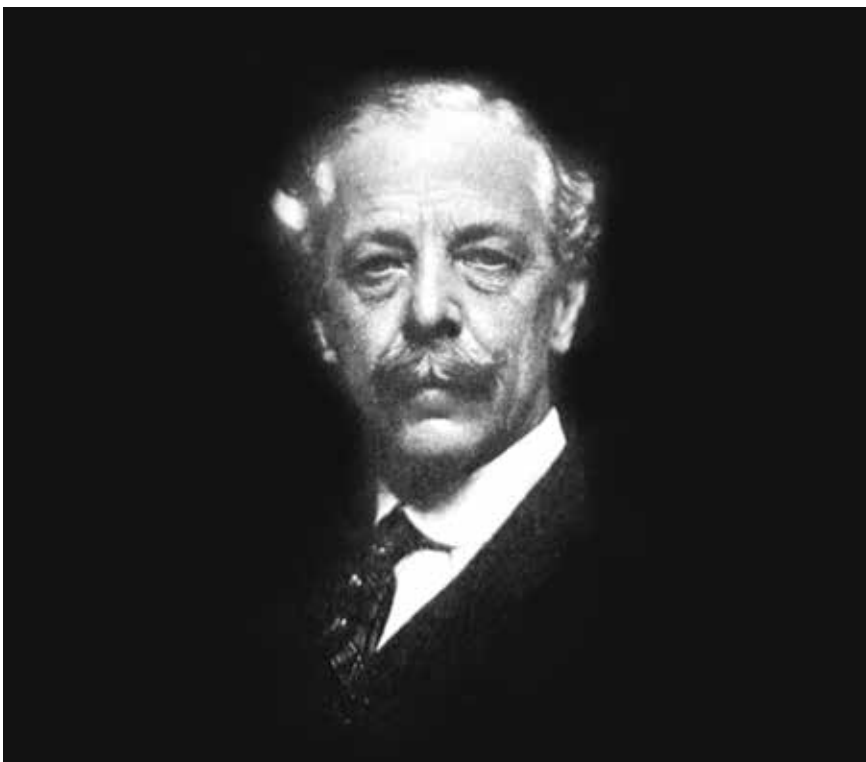
caused fear in Sparta and provoked war. The conflict bears so many similarities to wars waged through the ages across both the maritime and continental dimensions that it offers lessons to this day. Athens forged maritime alliances, while Sparta led a coalition of continental powers. The years of fighting depleted manpower and financial

resources on both sides. Eventually, the Spartans destroyed the Athenian fleet, leading to capitulation of an exhausted Athens. Three significant lessons emerge:

- Wars of attrition between balanced alliances do not yield spectacular victories, rather, exhaustion and a blurring

of lines between victor and vanquished.

- Maritime superiority by itself does not win a war that is fought for influence over land.
- Wars stimulated by overconfidence leave much to chance.



Julian S. Corbett.

Towards the end of the 19th century it was thinkers like Mahan and Julian Corbett who set ablaze the maritime spirit of the new century. They saw the maritime domain as a medium through which a nation could not just project power, but also control the strategic direction of any conflict. In *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, Mahan analysed the use of British naval forces to demonstrate that nations that exercised control of important parts of the maritime domain, dominate history. More specifically, it was the effect of sea power upon wealth and prosperity of nations that moulded the course of history and gave to Britain the heft to achieve global pre-eminence. Mahan's significance was twofold: first, in the realm of grand strategy he asserted that power came from integration of maritime activities with geopolitics and colonial-economics. Second, command and

decision making in war from a position of naval superiority gives to the advocate both a logistical highway and a flexible 'avenue of approach and exit'. He emphasized that sea power was about commercial use of the domain in peace and its control in war; about profits and power projection. Mahan's theory remains persuasive, in part, to this day.

Corbett, on the other hand, believed naval influence on the maritime domain to be a part of national policy which had sway over the non-military elements of state power. He saw the fleet not merely as an instrument of control but as an accompaniment to assuring the "act of passage on the sea." It was from this critical tenet that concepts of Sea Denial, Sea Control and Power Projection evolved. Perhaps his abiding legacy to contemporary maritime thought was the idea that "freedom of the seas was an irreducible factor" for the sea was not territory for conquest; nor the oceans defensible. What it constituted was a substantial determinant in the growth of a nation and prosecution of war (Corbett Julian, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, Longmans, 1911).

Language of War

Within an international system that hovers between order and anarchy, differentiated pace of growth among states engenders rivalry over resources, technology, commerce and markets. Realists of the early 20th century, such as Halford Mackinder and Friedrich Ratzel suggested how power may transcend geographic realities making the threat of armed conflict a general reality. At the same time, abstractions of national honour, prestige and other national interests that often separate the state from its citizenry are at odds with the violence of, as Clausewitz phrased it, the "Language" of War. In this fray experience of wars of



INS Rana of the Indian Navy's Western Fleet leads the passing exercise formation, behind the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan.

The term '**geopolitics**' has **historically** been **employed** in reference to a **nation's interests** and **stratagems** adopted to **secure** them

the second half of the twentieth century suggests that people faced with the "language" of war, prevail. Add to this the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction with their intrinsic menace of ending political purpose and we have the coming of indirect, relatively scaled down version of conventional wars albeit with high destructive potential fought in the penumbral shadows of a nuclear holocaust.

Rise and Fall of Powers: A Familiar Cadence

There is empirical evidence to suggest that the global economic crisis of the 1930s that in part set

off the Second World War was responsible for thrusting the US into astonishingly favourable strategic circumstances. This situation not only triggered the Cold War but ultimately in the late 1980s, forced the melt-down of the Soviet Union and set into motion another 'fall and rise' in the global power structure. The characteristics of the economic crisis of the thirties rings a cadence now familiar to contemporary conditions – discontent as the basis that govern international economic systems, protectionism, unfair trade practices, one-sided competition, restricted access to resources, creation of proprietary mercantile



Combined operations of INS Vikramaditya and INS Vikrant.

routes and nationalistic policies; all in contradiction to the demands of an increasingly globalised world. Ironically they also characterize ‘Strategic Competitiveness’. And as long as it transpires within an international order that is influenced by uneven growth and shrinking natural resources; the quest for power will invariably be linked to the generation of military capabilities that can secure domination.

The Fragility of Power-Balances in the International System

The ultimate reality of the international system is the place that power enjoys in the scheme of assuring stability in relations between nations. Uncertainty in relations queers the pitch, in view of the expanded space for forces that can disrupt the status quo. For example, China has unambiguously articulated three canons that make for its strategic objective of ‘Rejuvenation’; revision of the

existing order, sustained growth at any cost and by any means and regional pre-eminence. In the absence of a security oriented cooperative impulse, the problem with such sweeping strategies is its blindness to recognize that, we are in fact dealing with diverse regions, fast depleting resources and sea spaces that are the busiest of all the “vast commons”. The reluctance for collaboration on mutually acceptable terms makes the potential for friction high and the only consideration that could bring about change is the ability to attain a strategic posture that serves to deter and stabilize. Availability of full-spectrum military forces becomes central to any power equation and in consequence provides the foundation for order.

So, in our assessment of current geopolitics we note, the extinction of the “Cold War” was a temporary hiatus that after three decades has morphed the communist bloc to an

autocratic and nationalistic faction comprising China and Russia that seek revision of world order on its terms. This refrain brings them in direct conflict with believers of unrestricted economic activity. At the same time the vision of unrestricted global economic activity has proven so fragile and subject to the many nuances of politics that, power deficient nations are left out.

The Challenge of China

Since inception in 1949, China’s strategic focus has shifted from ‘revolution-survival-recovery’ to an emphasis on ‘rejuvenation’. Both internal and external factors have shaped this vision. Internally the “century of humiliation” has given primacy to regime survival as the leading strategic goal, while rejuvenation expresses a quest for pre-eminence in world affairs on China’s terms. And thus, externally it has led to tensions over its revisionist and expansionist policies that have characterized its rise.

Militarily securing China's overseas interests has increasingly become a part of its strategy, as articulated in their 2019 Chinese defence white paper. In the South China Sea Beijing is threatening control all within what it calls its "9 Dash Line", which in 2016, the International Court of Arbitration at the Hague had unequivocally rejected.

The enigma of 'the China-approach' is that, having greatly benefitted from international systems, it has deliberately undermined the very same system by not fully supporting its governing elements; whether WTO, UN, IMF or the World Bank. Past complacency about Beijing's predatory economic, military and ideological intentions have today crystallised to a danger that is real and may trigger an avoidable conflict. Even without war, tensions in the Indo-Pacific, along India's northern borders and the slow weaning away from dependency on supply chains emanating from China have caused huge economic costs and deepened the chasm between the two blocs. An assessment of not just China's strengths, but also of its vulnerabilities is, therefore of direct strategic consequence.

China, after four decades of military modernisation, has transformed to a formidable offensive force. With 2 million personnel and an annual budget of \$225bn, it has the world's biggest army, air force, navy and a vast missile force. By 2030 it could have 1,000 nuclear warheads. China believes it will have the capacity to invade Taiwan by 2027, at a time when their power projection ability extends to the Second Island Chain. Within the Tokyo-Guam-Philippines-Western New Guinea chain, China believes its strategic Anti-Access Area Denial (A2/AD) forces will be in a position to impede the movement of enemy forces while compelling them to operate further

away from this protective Chain. It is strategies such as A2/AD that continue to intimidate global order by threats of control of the South China Sea.

China's military has evolved from its roots in Soviet doctrines to a modern war machine capable (by its own assessment) of combined operations under conditions of intense cyber and information warfare. In philosophy, there has also been a shift from "Mass to Precision". Recruitment is, however, hard ever since the one-child policy was enforced (1980-2016) and dazzling growth made the military a not so attractive career proposition. The PLA struggles to hire skilled technical manpower

to man their modern platforms, maintain high-tech equipment and fight a technological war. And to top it all they are woefully lacking in combat experience. Although China has made scientific leaps, from hypersonic missiles to stealth fighters, its military-industrial complex trails behind in areas such as metallurgy, engines, design abilities and still relies on foreign fundamental research. Embargoes on semiconductors and components have made it harder to catch up with global scientific frontiers. Despite Mr Xi's endless purges, corruption appears to be pervasive. It may explain why General Li Shang Fu was sacked as China's defence minister this year after only a few months in the job.

In the **21st century, geopolitics** aims at explaining how **geography** can impact politics and how states try to **mitigate** these effects



The 9-dash line is claimed to denote China's exclusive territory, brushing aside 12-km territorial waters and 200-km EEZ claims by other littoral states.



China's economic slowdown.

China's military infirmities exist alongside its deepening economic woes. A property crunch and the Communist Party's growing hostility towards the private sector and foreign capital are impeding growth. China's GDP will drop to 3.5% by 2028, projects the IMF. Investment by multinational firms into China has currently turned negative for the first time since records began in 1998, suggesting foreign companies are not reinvesting their profits in China, and rather they are moving money out of the country. China's \$18trn economy has slowed, perhaps irreversibly.

Behind China's military and economic stutter lies a third, and deeper problem - an autocratic dominance of a system that no longer allows serious internal policy debate. Economists and technocrats have been side lined in favour of party loyalists. Given Premier Xi's style of functioning there is real danger of strategic miscalculations;

for, China is challenging not just today's economic orthodoxy, but the world's political and security framework as well without bringing about a change within her own political morphology.

Defining Strategic Space and Intent

With uncertainty driving geopolitical dynamics, the first imperative for India is to bring about policy coherence between strategic space and security interests. It begins by defining the geographical contours within which a strategy can be developed to contend with challenges identified. The broad parameters of this definition must factor in the regions from where trade originates, logistic supply chains traverse, energy lines run, sea lines of communication span, narrows therein and potential allies with who mutuality exists. In this context the sea space encompassing the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific provides the canvas within

which our strategic interests will play out. This Oceanic body is dominated by ten important choke points and narrows. In essence the theatre gives to global trade efficient maritime routes that power the region's growth. It accounts for over 70% of global trade, 60% of energy flow and is home to more than 50% of the world's population; it also provides the context within which Indian maritime strategy must operate with the intent of assuring order, deterring upheavals and promoting mutuality. While our logistic chains traverse areas outside the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific these will need to be secured through partnerships, diplomacy and cooperative security measures.

Strategic Competitiveness

The phrase "Strategic Competitiveness" mentioned earlier, first made its appearance in the 2018 National Defence Strategy of the USA . The document identified the revisionist states of China and

Russia as strategic competitors. China for using “predatory economics” to intimidate lesser endowed nations while militarizing and persisting with its illegal claims in the South China Sea; and Russia as an “autocratic nationalistic state that eschewed the economic, diplomatic, and security aspirations of its erstwhile bloc”.

Strategic competitiveness has become one of the central preoccupations of governments. National wealth and economic prosperity are to some extent inherited but, in the main, created by the innovativeness of people. In this milieu the role played by the individual nation and partnerships in international relations have become more rather than less critical. Yet for all the writing on the topic, there is no theory nor is there an accepted definition of the term. It is amply clear that competitiveness amongst states develop when the existing status-quo is challenged, or indeed when a state

or an alliance contests an emerging challenge. The tools of the contest are the combined “comprehensive national power” of one or more states pitted against the other.

Contestant Groupings

Ironically, Beijing’s recent White Paper titled “National Defence in a New Era” outlined its territorial ambitions in the South and East China Seas, Yellow Sea, Taiwan and Ladakh. It has warned regional powers of its willingness to use force and use it first if its ambitions are threatened. On cue, in response to China’s aggressive manoeuvres; the formation of a trilateral alliance between Australia, UK and the US (AUKUS) and the continuing Strategic Security Dialogue between Japan, Australia, India and the US (Quad) have made it amply clear that “countering China’s assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific” is number one priority. AUKUS’s mission is complemented by the Quad; the latter presenting a new security architecture that combines

both military and economic prowess amongst nations that share a common vision of a free and rule-based order. The resolve to strategic confrontation against revisionism is thus emphasised. Such a visible demonstration of collective resolve is, perhaps, the only way to dampen Beijing’s aggressive expansionism, for through the waters of the Indo-Pacific over 70% of China’s energy flow and 60% of trade ply. It is China’s “growth-jugular” and it is here that like-minded states must develop strategies that potentially signal the ability to stymie Xi’s dream of “rejuvenation.”

That these initiatives have made China “edgy” is clear from their declarations that “China will certainly punish Australia with no mercy”. Fearing forced unification, Taiwan is tightening its ties to the U.S.; Japan, is engaged in its largest military build-up since the Cold War; India is readying forces along its borders, developing strategies to occlude vital sea lanes in the Indian Ocean and has engaged partnerships that threaten China’s vulnerabilities; Australia is opening up its northern coast to U.S. forces. France, Germany, and the UK are sending warships into the Indo-Pacific to assert their rights. Clearly, nations have become less enthused by China’s market and more worried about its disturbing intent.

Challenges in the Maritime Domain

China’s rising comprehensive power has generated an internal impulse to military growth and an external push for unilateral expansionism in the South and East China Seas and its extended regions of economic interests. It has developed strategies that target the maritime domain to assure a favourable outcome to what it perceives to be a ‘strategic competition’ for resources and control of the seaways.



The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) has established its prominence as a notable geopolitical and economic construct. Composed of the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, the QUAD represents a coalition of like-minded democracies united by their shared commitment to addressing regional security and geopolitical challenges in the Indo-Pacific.



China's A2/AD bubble in the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean.

The **conflict bears** so many similarities to **wars waged** through the ages across both the **maritime** and **continental dimensions** that it offers lessons to this day

The consequences of China activating artifices such as the Anti-Access and Area Denial strategy, unilateral Air Defence Identification Zones and geo-political manoeuvres to collar sources of raw materials, ports of dispatch and control of routes euphemistically called the maritime silk route and the establishing the String of Pearls in the Indian Ocean Region are clear to see. Debt traps that have been set by China to inveigle some of the hapless littorals of the Indian Ocean of their maritime facilities are symptomatic

of a new form of colonial adventure. The paradoxical effects of China's contrivances are to undermine its own strategic standing, hasten counter balancing alignments and urge a global logic of cooperative politics over imperial strategies.

The Maritime Environment: Considerations

In today's context there emerges an all-encompassing concept of what is implied by "securing the maritime environment" and how it brings to play the comprehensive national

power of a State particularly to forge partnerships and be willing to back consensual policies with military power. The safety and economic security of the nation depends upon the secure use of the near and far oceans in times of peace, tensions and during conflict. In order to develop a Strategy to secure the domain the need is to persistently integrate and synchronize existing means. Challenges in the maritime environment are centred on the following three considerations:

- Domain awareness through maritime Intelligence Integration.
- Operational Threat Response founded on wide area coordination strategies.
- Maritime Commerce Security Plan.

The quest for strategic leverage in domain is founded on an oceanic vision backed by the development of a posture that characterizes our resolve to fulfil the quest. Inspiration may take the form of a policy declaration in relation to a geographic region such as the 'Act East Policy', the 'India Africa Forum Summit', alliances and partnerships; or indeed the emergence of a power that threatens to revise the status-quo. Policy provides a frame of reference that not only has wide-ranging application but will remain central for purposes of force planning to develop posture.

Current membership of the original ten ASEAN grouping plus 6 is symptomatic of the shifting centre of gravity of geopolitics to the East. From a security angle, the inclusion of India, USA, Russia, Japan and South Korea in addition to China provides the rationale for strategic equilibrium. India and China along with ASEAN are set to become the world's largest economic bloc. The grouping is expected to account for about 27 per cent of Global GDP. The buoyancy of the Indo-ASEAN relationship is backed by surging trade figures which is slated to hit USD 100 billion in the current year. With such burgeoning stakes strategic rebalancing in the region comes as a natural consequence. The expansion of the ASEAN and the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum are suggestive of the littoral's aspirations to counter balance the looming presence of China. Having thus brought about a modicum of coherence between security dynamics, strategic space and growth, we have the makings of a template to contend with the challenges that are present particularly the emerging unrelenting thrust by China for an exceptionable proprietary mercantile empire stretching across the region.

Force Planning to Secure the Maritime Environment

A fourfold classification of maritime forces has dominated contemporary naval thought. The grouping is largely functional and task oriented. It comprises of aircraft carriers, denial forces (including surface, air and sub-surface strike units), escorts and surveillance elements. Auxiliaries including logistic and other support ships and tenders

provide distant and indirect support. While the ready availability of out-of-area bases, intelligence and strike elements become an imperative when devising cooperative operations. In addition current thought has given strategic nuclear forces a restraining role to define and demarcate the limits within which conventional forces operate.

The make-up of the fleet must

Mahan's significance was twofold: first, in the **realm of grand strategy** he **asserted that power** came from integration of **maritime activities** with geopolitics and **colonial-economics**



Always a delight to meet ASEAN leaders. The ASEAN-India Summit is testament to our shared vision and collaboration for a better future. We look forward to working together in futuristic sectors which will enhance human progress.



Joe Biden, America's president, accompanied by Anthony Albanese and Rishi Sunak, the prime ministers of Australia and Britain respectively, gathered in front of the USS Missouri, a Virginia-class nuclear-powered attack submarine in San Diego, California. The three leaders announced a plan for the implementation of AUKUS, a pact the three countries signed in September 2021.

logically be a material and technological articulation of strategic concepts that prevail. India has for long aspired to attain a strategic maritime posture that would permit control and make safe oceanic spaces that serve to promote its national interests. And in times of hostility, influence the course of conflict. Partnerships such as the QUAD and the AUKUS provide the much needed basis for domain awareness, wide area strategic response and control mechanisms.

In this perspective, the fundamental obligation in times of tensions is therefore to activate means to first deter and if deterrence fails, to seize and exercise control over the 'strategic space' (it must come as no surprise that China develops forces necessary to realize its A2/

AD policy). Pursuing this line of argument, it is the Aircraft Carrier Group and its intrinsic air power assisted by strike, surveillance and denial forces that sea control and security of control can be achieved. It is here that the true impact of the Aircraft Carrier is felt. Control and security of control is the relationship that operationally links all maritime forces with the Aircraft Carrier. In the absence of the latter, naval operations are reduced to a series of denial actions limited in time, space and restricted to littoral waters with little impact on the progress of operations on land. It is also for this reason that the Indian aircraft carrier programme today envisages a minimum force level of three Fleet Carriers at all times in order to meet the diverse tasks that the Navy may be charged with across

geographically separated areas of interest under circumstances of change and uncertainty.

To Navigate the Crisis Ridden Stream

Bismarck suggested that great powers travel on the "Stream of Time" which they can neither create nor direct but upon which they can "steer with more or less skill". How they emerge from that voyage depends to a large degree upon the wisdom of leadership. Bismarck's sombre thoughts lead us back to our fundamental inquiry – whether the quest to secure the maritime environment lies in the turbulence of the 'Stream of Time' is a moot question, but how India navigates the crisis ridden stream is what leadership will have to contend with. **DSA**