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Author: Raghvendra Kumar
(National Maritime Foundation, India)

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Developing an Integrated National Maritime Security Strategy: An Indian Perspective

Background

India's maritime environment, interests and geo-strategic imperatives hugely determine the national maritime security strategy orientation. Appreciating the distinct characteristics and varied facets of the maritime domain is critical to developing and expanding [India's maritime outlook](#). The vast expanse of the Indian Ocean contains immense resources that, when tapped sustainably, will provide a means to achieve desired ends of growth and societal development. The absence of a cohesive regional security framework and [blurring of lines between traditional and non-traditional threats](#) pose a challenge to all nation-states of the region. While considerable attention and resources have been devoted to tackling land-based threats in the region, similar efforts to address security challenges in the maritime domain have been [overlooked in most of the regional, local and national strategic plans and policies](#).

The Indian Strategic Culture in Context

India's maritime strategic thinking supports the development and expansion of its maritime outlook. The strategic underpinnings of the Indian civilisational state, having a rich maritime tradition which is deeply embedded in its history, culture, economy and politics, [predate the Westphalian nation-state system](#). India's maritime heritage and linkages continue to inspire and influence its customs and practices. Strategic culture provides a reference point, direction and purpose that guide nation-states in shaping current practices. India's maritime strategic culture is rooted in the history and experiences of the state itself, which shapes the perceived roles and responsibilities of the civil-military agencies of the state. The harsh lesson of ignoring the maritime domain resulted in the colonial subjugation of India under British rule for more than two centuries. Post-independent India has, therefore, attempted to re-emphasise the importance of the maritime domain for India's success as it is highly dependent on the "Freedom to use the Seas" for its economic and societal well-being.

In [The India Way](#), S. Jaishankar, India's Minister of External Affairs, spells out India's strategic outlook. He says when "India's own capabilities strengthen, it has greater freedom than in the past to organize its rise... Much of the strategy would revolve around creating a more favourable landscape. That must be achieved through the India Way." Against this backdrop, we can argue that [five Hindi words](#) starting with "S" - सम्मान (Sammaan = Respect), सम्वाद (Samvaad = Dialogue) सहयोग (Sahayoag = Cooperation) शांति (Shaanthi = Peace) and समृद्धि (Samridhdhhi = Prosperity) postulated by PM Modi, drive India's grand strategic thought. India, therefore, is committed by its maritime policy of [SAGAR](#) (Security and Growth for All in the Region), which aims to build

capabilities and improve maritime security in the maritime neighbourhood, as a secure and stable region is in India's interest.

Indian Maritime Environment and Strategy in Perspective

India's maritime geography has shaped much of its historical linkages and continues to impart deep character to its global engagements. India has a vast coastline extending to more than 7,500 km, with more than 1,200 islands and a large Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of about two million sq. km. The anticipated addition of approximately 1.2 million sq. km of continental shelf would make [India's total seabed area almost equal to the land mass](#). Therefore, maritime domain awareness is a vital step in bolstering maritime security and securing the maritime dependence of nations. It serves as an important marker for the need for devising strategies to not only secure the maritime domain but also sustainably harness its economic potential.

The current global geopolitical environment is undergoing a "[rebalancing](#)", and India's central position in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), astride the main International Shipping Lanes (ISLs), accords it with distinct advantages and places most choke points of the IOR almost equidistant from India. Therefore, India is well positioned to influence the maritime space and promote and safeguard its national maritime interests across the IOR. At the same time, India's vast coastline and maritime zones require significant resources and [investments to ensure their security](#). The growth of Piracy and the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks have blurred the line between traditional and non-traditional threats in the region and emphasised India's mandate to provide security and ensure stability in the region. Alongside the Indo-Pacific debate and its political, military, and economic dynamics, the protection and preservation of the core maritime interests of India have become fundamental drivers of India's national maritime security strategy. This '[interests-based approach](#)' underpins India's maritime strategy, "wherein India recognises (like others in the region also do) — that the geo-economic goals and non-geo-economic goals which the country seeks to achieve in this century are increasingly dependent on the maritime domain."

National Interests and Maritime Strategy

With significant [Indian investments](#) and [residents abroad](#), India's marine economic activities have continued to expand from seaborne trade, shipping, and fisheries to the imports of crude and liquefied hydrocarbons, exports of reprocessed goods, offshore development, and international economic alliances, to name a few. The expansion of India's deep sea mining areas, maintenance of its scientific research outposts in Antarctica, and trade and energy security are all reliant on its sea lines of communication (SLOCs). This has enhanced the significance of sea routes, international commerce, and freedom of navigation to India and flagged credible [security of its SLOCs](#). Therefore, India's dependence on the oceans is the primary reason for developing the Indian Maritime Security Strategy 2015.

India's maritime security strategy is aimed at safeguarding the national maritime interests at all [times](#). "Today, our maritime interests are [directly linked](#) to India's economy and security, and to the well-being of our people". The characteristics of India's maritime environment, by virtue of it being situated at the junction of major International Shipping Lanes, create a favourable condition for [foreign trade](#) (90% by volume and 77% by value), energy flow (60-65% of crude oil from [West Asia](#) reach our shores annually) and food security. Ensuring the safety and freedom to use the seas is a major strategic maritime imperative that has a detrimental role in the formulation of India's maritime strategy in pursuit of its national interests. Therefore, India's national interests emanating from the Constitution of India (Preamble and the Directive Principles of State Policy) are expressed as the "desired end state," which is to assure the [economic, material and societal well-being of the people of India](#). It is centred around the preservation and protection of India's core values that shape [India's principal maritime interests](#), which are:

- Protect India's sovereignty and territorial integrity against threats in the maritime environment.
- Promote safety and security of Indian citizens, shipping, fishing, trade, energy supply, assets and resources in the maritime domain.
- Pursue peace, stability and security in [India's maritime zones](#), maritime neighbourhood and other areas of maritime interest.
- Preserve and project other national interests in the maritime dimension.

These aforementioned objectives underpin the Indian maritime security strategy of “[Ensuring Secure Seas](#)” through a coordinated and cooperative framework that accounts for the vast spectrum of security threats and challenges India faces. It aims to harness various instruments and tools of national power as well as the different arms of the union and state government in implementing and executing this strategy. The IMSS 2015 encompasses five constituent strategies that aim to promote, protect and preserve the principle maritime interest of India. Therefore, coordination and synchronisation of individual strategies and efforts of different agencies is a key aspect of maintaining and strengthening maritime security.

Conscious of the challenge the maritime domain entails for India’s security, the Indian government has been striving to enhance and expand the maritime security architecture that allows the seamless flow of information and smooth coordination between the different authorities and agencies involved in the maritime sector. [In this regard, the Indian government has taken several measures to strengthen coastal, offshore and maritime security.](#) These steps entail increasing the capacity and capability of maritime security agencies to monitor and patrol the nation’s maritime zones; improving coastal and offshore surveillance; establishing mechanisms for inter-agency coordination; regulating the activities in India’s maritime zones; and identifying and integrating the stakeholders for effective implementation and execution of Indian strategies. These measures are in resonance with the Government of India’s maritime policy vision of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and the Maritime Security Strategy to strengthen its position as the “Preferred Security Partner” and “First Responder” in India’s extended maritime neighbourhood.

The [appointment](#) of the National Maritime Security Coordinator (NMSC) as the nodal point for all matters related to maritime security in November 2021 by the Cabinet Committee on Security is one such step that emphasises the importance the government is paying to the maritime domain. The NMSC will be part of the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS), [which deals in all the matters that have a bearing on national security](#) and will report to the National Security Adviser (NSA) in the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO). The NMSC’s primary function would be inter-agency coordination and integration of relevant inputs in the formulation of national security policies related to the maritime domain and synchronise governments’ efforts in harnessing the blue economic potential of our oceans.

Some pointers for South Africa on maritime security strategy endeavours

Like India, South Africa’s ‘maritime vision’ is also driven by the maritime character imparted to it by its vast coastline and the “[sea-land](#)” area. This, in turn, also shapes much of South Africa’s ‘[strategic guidance to transformation](#)’ to give expression to the country as a ‘maritime nation’. Its role and position in and beyond the African continent, alongside its maritime dependence, flags the importance of developing an “Integrated National Maritime Security Strategy” (INMSS). Formulating and executing an INMSS serve to safeguard overall national security interests and build awareness and confidence for a stable and prosperous neighbourhood. As “context” lies at the heart of any security discourse, in the case of South Africa context is its “maritime character”. The geographic contextualisation of security help in investigating the prospects and challenges the country must deal with, as the imperatives of being a coastal state, South Africa is hugely dependent on the maritime domain for its national development and security. Therefore, an INMSS for South Africa is a critical intervention as to how as a nation, it will organise and use its national capabilities to identify, assess and address maritime security issues within and beyond its maritime zones.

However, the challenges are many. South Africa’s INMSS model must reinforce the nation’s strengths and counter weaknesses to guide the strategy. [The ability of strategic thinkers and policy-shapers to differentiate between ‘capacity,’](#) i.e. tangible resources-implying material wherewithal such as ships, aircraft, submarines, etc. and [‘capability,’](#) i.e. intangible resources— implying organisation-skills; physical and mental (cognitive) training and skill-development, legal acumen, etc. is critical. Without capacity and capability alignments in addition to proper training and skills aspirations, an INMSS to secure South Africa’s maritime interests will be rendered inefficient.

The identification and integration of maritime stakeholders within the broader framework of the INMSS are key. Any strategy needs to respond to the needs and interests of the people at large by way of inclusiveness and responsiveness to the various stakeholders. Demarcating and including key maritime stakeholders in the planning and implementation process fosters a “whole of society” character that will amplify its acceptability, even if the first iteration strategy is imperfect in some respects.

Any lack of political will must be countered in the early stages of formulation. Lack of or limited coordination among various arms of the government will seriously hamper the process. Therefore, a synergy between different arms of government is a critical imperative. Further, the various strands of a maritime security strategy like “[Blue Economy](#)”, “[Holistic Maritime Security](#)”, etc., must rest upon a domestic and international legal framework. The domestic legal frameworks must be rigorously [reconciled with internationally ratified ones and be followed in letter and spirit](#). Any lack of consistency and balance between domestic and internationally ratified laws becomes a critical challenge for any maritime security strategy to succeed. States often fail to integrate the two, thus hampering the legal finish to any security discourse. Lastly, security is not limited to territorial integrity and defence but has several dimensions, of which the military is just one. The likes of [economic security, food security, environmental security, and cyber security](#) are now the primary beneficiaries of any maritime security strategy worth its salt.

Conclusion

India’s maritime security strategy is informed by history, strategic culture, and a government commitment to secure and if necessary, defend its maritime interests. As a result, India’s approach to maritime security shows a cogent line of decisions and developments to align its national, maritime and security interests. Decision-makers marry history and culture with contemporary security developments and structure its decision-making bureaucracy to facilitate formulation and execution of its maritime security decisions. In this manner, India keeps the country’s maritime security strategy in step with developments in its vast ocean landscapes.

South Africa can draw upon the above Indian experiences in four ways. First, to dedicate time, knowledge, and resources to put forward a first iteration of an INMSS. Second, design a set of oversight bodies to steer the strategy through its design, implementation and future updates. Third, build smart sets of capabilities and capacities dedicated to securing South Africa’s maritime interests and fourthly, bring South Africa’s maritime interests under one roof to mitigate the resource-sapping and scattered nature of this economic, environmental and human security landscape.

Further reading:

- Indian Maritime Doctrine - 2015 Version, Indian Navy, Ministry of Defence, Government of India.
- Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy, 2015, Indian Navy, Ministry of Defence, Government of India.
- ‘Maritime India Vision 2030’, 2021, Ministry of Ports, Shipping & Waterways, Government of India, New Delhi.

Raghvendra Kumar is an Associate Fellow at National Maritime Foundation (NMF), New Delhi, India.

Email: amgs1.nmf@gmail.com