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## Maritime Power: India and China turn to Mahan<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

A recent Western visitor to a major annual security conclave in Singapore appeared utterly surprised at the extraordinary influence of the American theorist of sea power, Alfred Thayer Mahan. Most western naval analysts do acknowledge the huge influence of Mahan on the evolution of naval thinking across the advanced world from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to its early decades. Most Western analysts also believe that Mahan, once described as the evangelist of sea power, is now *passé*. The sense of absolute military superiority in the United States and the West during the recent decades has tended to reinforce the proposition that the new wave of economic globalisation has made the geopolitics of the kind espoused by Mahan as being largely irrelevant to the ordering of the modern world. No wonder then that the Western observer was recoiling at the “unwelcome” comeback of Mahan’s conceptions of sea power and geopolitics in Asia.<sup>3</sup> The observer argues that while the understanding of sea power and its uses has evolved in the advanced societies since the days of Mahan at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he “is now hugely admired in Asia’s two most populous powers. For China’s strategic planners, securing sea lanes against hostile powers has become perhaps the chief preoccupation. For India’s, it is the growth of China’s presence in its backyard, in and around the Indian Ocean. In both countries Mahan is pressed into service in one planning paper after the next”.<sup>4</sup>

While the West might be surprised at the ‘return’ of Mahan and geopolitics, it would not be wrong to suggest that Mahan never went out of fashion for the modern leaders of China and India, who believed that their nations were destined to play a powerful role in the world and would build the instruments for exercising such a role including the construction of modern navies. If a ‘post-modern’ fascination with transcendental multilateralism, norms and institutions has gripped Western academia and the media, more classical or ‘modern’ notions of power have never been discarded in Asia. From a purely academic perspective, Mahan’s own writings on Asia more than a hundred years ago captured an important element

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<sup>3</sup> Banyan, “Chasing Ghosts”, *The Economist*, 11 June 2009. Available at [http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=13825154](http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story_id=13825154) accessed on 13 June 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

underlying the rise of China and India that so animates the world today – their massive size. Writing of China at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mahan argued that, “It is difficult to contemplate with equanimity such a vast mass as the four hundred millions of China concentrated into one effective political organisation”.<sup>5</sup> Modern nationalism has helped create powerful centralising state institutions out of loose territorial masses in China and India. Once they embarked on rapid economic growth in the final quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was inevitable that their sheer size would accelerate their emergence as great powers with huge military capabilities including powerful modern navies.

As rising powers, it is no surprise that China and India have a profound respect for Mahan’s thinking. As an influential Chinese military analyst wrote, “A recent re-reading of Alfred Mahan’s classic, ‘The Influence of Sea Power upon History’ has led me to the discovery that the rapid self-awareness of the necessity of sea power in China’s society since the 1890s was remarkably similar to what happened in England and Holland in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. When a nation embarks upon a process of shifting from an ‘inward-leaning economy’ to an ‘outward-leaning economy’, the arena of national security concerns begins to move to the oceans. Consequently, people start paying attention to sea power. This is a phenomenon of history that occurs so frequently that it has almost become a rule rather than an exception. Therefore, it is inevitable that such a shift is taking place in today’s China.”<sup>6</sup> We might add that such a trend towards maritime self-awareness is equally evident in India. This paper is an attempt to explore the sources of new maritime orientation in China and India. It begins with a brief review of the powerful and very similar traditions of continentalism that tended to dampen the maritime imperatives in China and India. The paper then looks at the logic of globalisation that is propelling Beijing and Delhi to address their rapidly improving relative positions in the international system and the consequences that flow out of it. The final three sections of the paper look at the impact of Mahan and his conceptions of sea power on India. The paper examines how two important elements of sea power – overseas trade and forward presence – are influencing the strategic maritime thinking in China and India.

### **The Curse of Continentalism**

Nationalists in modern China and India have sought to highlight or ‘invent’ a glorious maritime past to justify the contemporary need for a vigorous maritime strategy and a powerful navy. In India, it was K. M. Panikkar, publicist, amateur historian, administrator and diplomatist who inspired modern Indian thinking about the maritime spaces. Writing on the eve of independence in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Panikkar at once made the case for a strong maritime orientation for India and asserted that it has had a powerful naval tradition and had enjoyed the command of the seas around it until the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He also insisted that the neglect of sea power was at the root of India’s loss of independence, relative decline and global marginalisation.<sup>7</sup> In China, at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the state was leading a massive effort to remember and celebrate of its past maritime traditions. As

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<sup>5</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Problem of Asia: Its Effect Upon International Politics* (Boston: Little Brown, 1900), (republished, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 2003) p. 90. For further discussion, see, J. Michael Robertson, “Alfred Thayer Mahan and the Geopolitics of Asia”, *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 15, No. 4, October 1996, pp. 353-66.

<sup>6</sup> Ni Lexiong, “Sea Power and China’s Development”, *People’s Liberation Daily*, 17 April 2005; translated for United States. China Economic and Security Review Commission, available at <[http://www.uscc.gov/researchpapers/translated\\_articles/2005/05\\_07\\_18\\_Sea\\_Power\\_and\\_Chinas\\_Development.pdf](http://www.uscc.gov/researchpapers/translated_articles/2005/05_07_18_Sea_Power_and_Chinas_Development.pdf)> accessed on 18 June 2009.

<sup>7</sup> K. M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* (London: Macmillan, 1945).

they seek to build a powerful modern navy, China's communist leaders have found great value in marking the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary the great Chinese admiral Zheng He's first of seven epic voyages to the South and West into the Indian Ocean in 2005.<sup>8</sup> These celebrations became an important part of promoting maritime consciousness at home and signalling to the rest of the world that China's rise will be peaceful and non-violent.<sup>9</sup> The Chinese government has also sought to promote the worldwide popularisation of Chinese maritime tradition and how it predated the rise of European maritime dominance.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the perceived need to invent a glorious maritime tradition in China and India, there is widespread agreement within the scholarship of Asia and its history that neither of these great Asian civilisations had emphasised sea power on a consistent basis in the past. The respected historian of China, Wang Gungwu, for example, argues that despite building an impressive navy by the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Imperial China never abandoned the primacy of its continental commitment. "The simple fact was that its really dangerous enemies had always come overland (from the north and the west) and certainly never by sea. As a result, the interplay of overland and maritime concerns has always been unbalanced and most Chinese rulers never took naval power seriously."<sup>11</sup>

If China's quest for sea power was always constrained by its continental security imperatives,<sup>12</sup> the situation was no different in India. To be sure, India has had a long maritime tradition in different parts of its coastline from Gujarat in the West to Kalinga in the east. Peninsular India's maritime contacts with the Mediterranean and the Pacific are widely known. Yet it would be right to say that India's security paradigm was defined through the ages by its Northwest frontiers. Just as China built a great wall to stop the invaders from the North and West, India's major empires had to spend much of their defence planning to cope with security threats from the north-western frontier. Ever since Alexander the Great showed up at India's north-western gates in 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the region between the Indus and the Hindu Kush has remained the main corridor of invasion into the Subcontinent. At the same time, the trans-Indus territories tended to be volatile and were not easily brought under the control of the centralising states in the heartland of the Gangetic Plain. Even the Moguls who came from Central Asia and built a base in Afghanistan before taking charge of India had to constantly ward off interlopers from the north-west as well as put down the rebellious tribesmen between the Indus and the Hindu Kush. Although the Moguls did have widespread maritime contacts, sea power was not their priority and their dynasty was ultimately overwhelmed by the European colonisers who came from the Sea. The roots of the Mogul state's indifference to maritime power are traced by historians Kulke and Rothermund to the principal source of its finances – land revenue.<sup>13</sup> Unlike many other states with maritime orientation, taxing external trade was not of great attraction for the empires in Delhi.

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<sup>8</sup> For a classic modern work on Zheng He, see, Louise Levathe, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> James R Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "Soft Power at Sea: Zheng He and Chinese Maritime Strategy", *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 132, No. 10, October 2006, pp. 34-39.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Gavin Menzies, *1421: The Year Chinese Discovered America* (New York: Perennial, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Wang Gungwu, "The Rise of China", in Ron Huiskin and Meredith Thatcher, eds., *History as Policy* (Canberra: ANU ePress, 2007), p. 62.

<sup>12</sup> For a survey of the continental and maritime traditions in China, see, John K. Fairbank, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 12, Republican China 1912-1949, Part I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1-27.

<sup>13</sup> Herman Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund, *A History of India*, Third Edition (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 197-200.

This takes us to a related point that historian John Perry makes about maritime orientation. “Coastal states, even islands, are not necessarily oriented towards sea-going endeavours. They may be land-bound. This is a matter not of location but of choice. Land bound societies are indifferent to the Ocean; seagoing societies embrace it....Those societies on the sea that transcend the land bound and become seagoing do so as a result of a complex series of cultural decisions and attitudes.”<sup>14</sup> It is not our task here to extend Perry’s powerful analysis of the reasons for China’s lack of interest in the seas towards India. One reason though readily comes to mind. Through the medieval ages, the religious prohibition against upper caste Hindus from travelling overseas must naturally have had a powerful impact on the Indian society becoming one of landlubbers. The historian Jadunath Sarkar points to a more fundamental cultural reason – the defeat and absorption of Buddhism into Hinduism and the consequent dissipation of external contact. “The intimate contact between India and the outer Asiatic world which had been established in the early Buddhist age was lost when the new Hindu society was reorganised and set in rigidity like a concrete structure about the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D., with the result that India again became self-centred and isolated from the moving world beyond her natural barriers”.<sup>15</sup>

It is indeed fascinating that the British who came to India from the sea became obsessed with securing the land frontiers of India in the north-western subcontinent. That the British were largely modelling their own empire on the Mogul concept and the continuity between the two empires in organisation and management is not widely known.<sup>16</sup> Although the British in many ways brought unprecedented internal coherence to India and clearly articulated its geopolitical concerns in a manner that few earlier regimes had done, they too were tied down by continentalism. Panikkar in fact accused the British Raj of neglecting the maritime component of Indian defence. He acknowledged the contributions that British India had made to ‘scientific strategy’, “Durand, Holdich, and Younghusband were protagonists of a regular theory of geopolitics.” Panikkar admitted that these Victorian strategists were “no mean students of the problem”. But they were “essentially landmen”. Panikkar argued that “even Lord Curzon himself thought of the sea only as a frontier, not as a vital territorial area”. He added that his lack of interest in oceanic problems was such that India willingly agreed to part with the administration of Aden, one of the key points for the control of the Oceanic area.”<sup>17</sup>

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was a common refrain of the nationalist leaders in China and India to bemoan the neglect of the sea by the old regimes in Beijing and Delhi and highlight the fact that they were occupied and colonised from the sea by the Europeans. Yet when they took charge of their new nations, neither the Chinese nor Indian leadership was able to apply decisive corrective action. In China during the civil war, “naval capabilities had no role in determining the decisive victory of the Communist Party in 1949”.<sup>18</sup> However, China did face maritime threats from the United States navy in the 1950s and in response Beijing did develop a defensive maritime capability. The Maoist rhetoric on People’s War which led to a downgradation of what is in essence a technology-oriented force, and the territorial conflicts with India and Russia tended to reinforce the continental dimension of

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<sup>14</sup> John Curtis Perry, “Imperial China and the Sea”, in Toshi Yoshihara and James R Holmes, eds., *Asia Looks Seaward: Power and Maritime Strategy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> Jadunath Sarkar, *India Through the Ages* (Calcutta: Orient Longman, 1993), p. 45. Sarkar’s grand survey was published originally in 1928.

<sup>16</sup> Percival Spear, *India, Pakistan and the West* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948).

<sup>17</sup> See Peter John Brobst, *The Future of the Great Game: Sir Olaf Caroe, India’s Independence and the Defense of Asia* (Akron, OH: University of Ohio Press, 2005), pp. 27-28.

<sup>18</sup> Wang Gungwu, op. cit., n. 4.

China's national security strategy.<sup>19</sup> Territorial defence vis-à-vis its neighbours was only one element of the national security challenge that the PRC had to confront. It also had to devote much energy to putting down internal revolts and consolidating its sovereignty over one of the largest territorial expanses that Beijing had ever claimed. This emphasis on China's territoriality inevitably reduced the salience of sea power in the early decades of the PRC.

India's own dilemma was no different. Despite the exhortations on sea power by Panikkar and others, India was compelled to secure its new borders after the great Partition with Pakistan. Worse still, India found itself facing Communist China on its borders with Tibet. India's series of wars with Pakistan (1948-49, 1965 and 1971) and a humiliating military confrontation with China (1962) pushed India's strategic vision to the farthest distance possible from the oceans – to its inner Asian frontiers in the great Himalayas.<sup>20</sup> India too had internal conflicts of its own especially in the northeast, in Jammu and Kashmir, and in the South. The fears of disintegration were acute in post-independence India and overcoming the ravages of Partition, the integration of the princely states, the multitude of political and administrative structures that it had inherited from the British and the clarification of its far flung but undefined territorial boundaries.<sup>21</sup> In India, as in China, the navy was not the priority for the political leadership. As the currently more assertive Indian naval leadership argued recently, “despite the permanence of ‘territorial defence’ in the national mindset, the Indian navy refused to lose hope and believed that a country as large and diverse as India would one day realise that it has substantial maritime interests.”<sup>22</sup>

The many similar concerns in China and India that reduced the urgency of making the long-term commitment to building a credible naval capability were reinforced by the economic strategy the two nations adopted. From the mid-1950s, both China and India began to disconnect themselves from the global economy in the name of communism and socialism. Although there were significant differences in the economic strategies of the two countries, both began to turn inward, emphasising political autarchy and economic self-reliance. As a result, China and India downplayed the importance of engaging the global economy, minimised the necessity of imports and rejected the logic of export-led economic growth that others in Asia were about to successfully embark upon. A deliberate de-globalisation and a de-emphasis on trade and commerce meant there was little scope for a maritime vision. It was only when China and India were less obsessed with territorial defence and embarked on a globalisation, that they rediscovered an expansive approach to maritime strategy.

Deng Xiaoping's reintegration of China into the world economy, his emphasis on good relations with the major powers, and the pursuit of a peaceful environment in the early 1980s created the basis for a reduction of tensions on its borders. As China began to resolve its territorial disputes and improve the internal security conditions, it had greater room for productive consideration of its maritime imperatives. Reinforcing the move away from territorial defence was the new emphasis on economic globalisation. The dramatic and sustained high growth rates since the early 1980s brought into play one of the key elements of

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<sup>19</sup> See Bruce Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon: A History of China's Quest for Sea Power* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1982).

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of Partition and India's early territorial conflicts, see, Graham Chapman, *The Geopolitics of South Asia* (London: Ashgate, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> For an easy grasp of the unformed territoriality of independent India, see the first few chapters of Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi: The History of World's Largest Democracy* (London: Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, *Freedom to use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy* (New Delhi: Ministry of Defence, 2007), p. 15.

maritime power – growing seaborne trade. The situation was similar in India after the launch of its economic reforms in 1991. Although India’s territorial troubles and internal security difficulties continued in recent decades, India’s own naval expansion coincided with an outward looking strategy from the mid-1980s, launched tentatively by the young Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. India’s more purposeful globalisation from the early 1990s generated high growth rates and a sustainable basis for a solid maritime strategy. In a matter of two decades, the landlubbers in Beijing and New Delhi would become enthusiastic exponents of Mahan’s expansive maritime strategic conceptions.

### **The Logic of Globalisation**

Although China and India turned towards economic liberalisation somewhat cautiously amid unending domestic arguments about the dangers of opening up to the outside world, it is quite clear now that the two Asian giants have turned out to be the biggest beneficiaries of the current wave of globalisation. The results have been stunning for China and India as well as the world. From being among the poorest in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, China and India are on their way to becoming two of the world’s largest economies. It is no longer a debate about whether China and India will overtake all the leading European economies and Japan but when. The American investment banking firm Goldman Sachs has given us some projections on when this might happen, during the next couple of decades. In a widely read 2003 report on the theme of economic growth in the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China), Goldman Sachs estimated that China would overtake the United States as the world’s largest economy by 2041.<sup>23</sup> In 2009, in the aftermath of the global economic crisis, Goldman was predicting China might take the number one spot as early as 2027 and India would move up the league to take the third position.<sup>24</sup>

Although the concept of BRIC has acquired some currency, the largest and most consequential part of its collective growth was the development of China and India and, thence that of Asia as a whole. The discussion of Asia’s rise and its implications for regional and global order is now more than two decades old. Nevertheless, there are some important differences in the nature of the debate two decades ago and now. If the predicted shift in the international balance in favour of the East was aspirational for the Asians, it was no more than speculative for those in Europe and North America two decades ago. The West, triumphant after its victory in the Cold War, was in no mood to believe or act on the premise of the rise of Asia. Today, especially after the financial crisis, the idea of a shifting power balance in favour of the East is immediate and tangible. The geographic framework of the perceived change has also evolved during the last two decades. The theme twenty years ago was on the emergence of the Pacific century – the idea of the Pacific involved many of the older powers, including the United States and Japan. The emphasis is now on Asia, marked by the dramatic rise of China and the somewhat slower emergence of India. Three decades of sustained high economic growth rates in China and India’s recent impressive economic performance have made the notion of a transformed world a palpable one.

Two reports during this decade from the United States intelligence community underline the changing Western perceptions as well as the consequential character of the unfolding change

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<sup>23</sup> Dominic Wilson and Roopa Purushottaman, “Dreaming with BRICs: The Path to 2050”, Goldman Sachs, Global Economic Paper, no. 99, October 2003; <http://www2.goldmansachs.com/insight/research/reports/99.pdf> accessed on 10 June 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Marshall, “BRIC Nations: Growth and Risks”, *Reuters Online*, 10 June 2009; available at <<http://www.reuters.com/article/marketsNews/idUSSP31967220090610>> accessed on 11 June 2009.

in the international power distribution in favour of Asia and the non-Western world in general, particularly China and India. The first report released at the end of 2004 argued that West Europe, Japan and Russia were in relative decline and that China and India were rapidly rising in the international system. It went on to offer an important insight into the rise of China and India. For one it suggested that China and India could be powerful long before they are rich by Western standards: “Because of the sheer size of China’s and India’s populations – projected by the United States Census Bureau to be 1.4 billion and almost 1.3 billion respectively by 2020 – their standard of living need not approach Western levels for these countries to become important economic powers.”<sup>25</sup> The Report also suggested that there might be factors other than size, for example, the growing Chinese and Indian investments in advanced technologies that could make the rise of the two Asian giants an enduring shift in the global power balance. Reflecting on the consequences, *Mapping the Global Future* argued that the shift would “render obsolete the old categories of East and West, North and South, aligned and non-aligned, developed and developing. Traditional geographic groupings will increasingly lose salience in international relations...competition for allegiances will be more open, less fixed than in the past”.<sup>26</sup>

The next report of the United States National Intelligence Council four years later was even more dramatic in its delineation of the rise of China and India and the accelerated trends towards a multipolar world. *Global Trends 2025* argued, “In terms of size, speed, and directional flow, the transfer of global wealth and economic power now underway – roughly from West to East – is without precedent in modern history.” It suggested that China would be one of the world’s leading military powers and could be its largest importer of natural resources and the biggest polluter. It also indicated that India will not be too far behind China in these trends and will contribute the emergence of a multipolar world.<sup>27</sup> The global financial crisis that enveloped the entire world at the end of 2008, analysts argue, will only accelerate the trends towards multipolarity and offer significant relative economic and strategic gains for China and India. As outlined by a former Wall Street banker and senior White House official:

The financial and economic crash of 2008, the worst in over 75 years, is a major geopolitical setback for the United States and Europe...Although China, too, has been hurt by the crisis, its economic and financial power has been strengthened relative to those of the West. China’s global influence will thus increase, and Beijing will be able to undertake political and economic initiatives to increase it further...India may also survive the crisis relatively unhurt...But India does not have nearly the wealth or the internal cohesion of China...and (is) not particularly equipped to advance its geopolitical standing.<sup>28</sup>

Various analyses of the financial crisis have tended to emphasise that among the major consequences would be an irreversible shift in the distribution of power towards China and India.

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<sup>25</sup> United States National Intelligence Council, *Mapping the Global Future, 2020* (Washington DC: December 2004).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> United States National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025* (Washington D.C.: November 2008).

<sup>28</sup> Roger C. Altman, “The Great Crash, 2008: Geopolitical Setback for the West”, *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2009.

The financial crisis and the sense of crisis in Western capitalism has reinforced and vindicated the strong strain of Asian triumphalism. Even before the financial crisis was upon us, Kishore Mahbubani was championing the idea of Western incompetence and Asian competence.<sup>29</sup> The argument that ‘Asian values’ were different from, if not superior to, those of the West has indeed been repeatedly articulated throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Asian triumphalism, however, has not gone unquestioned. While Mahbubani frames the debate in terms of Asia versus the West, there are others, like Bill Emmott, who point to the power plays among the Asian powers.<sup>30</sup> Irrespective of the merits of the two arguments, it stands to reason that the rise of China and India would create as many challenges for Asia as it might for the rest of the world. The two ends of the spectrum represented by Mahbubani and Emmott have strong intellectual foundations in International Relations literature. The pessimists suggest that changes in power distribution and the rise of new powers will lead to inexorable conflict. The optimists insist that economic integration would lessen the imperatives for war. The pessimists argue that the unstable balance of power politics are an inevitable consequence while the optimists hope for collective security arrangements amidst the emergence of global and transcendental threats. The optimists bet on the promise of institutions to moderate conflict while the pessimists are resigned to the fact that power politics influence the very formation and functioning of international institutions. As this academic debate goes on, the leaders and policy-makers all across the Indo-Pacific region will be under growing pressure to come to terms with the consequences of the accelerated rise of China and India.

### **Turning to Mahan**

That China and India are the biggest beneficiaries of the recent wave of globalisation is not in doubt. As they move up the economic and political hierarchy in the world, China and India have begun to attach a new importance to maritime policy initiatives. The strategic communities in Beijing and Delhi did not merely turn to the seas but were adapting the expansive conceptions of maritime power pioneered by Mahan, who has been known as the evangelist of sea power. At a time when the western strategic communities were predicting that the logic of globalisation would lead to collective and cooperative security and pointing to the unprecedented promise of international institutions, Chinese and Indian strategic vision remained rooted in the conception of a profound relationship between sea power and national security. Paradoxically, as China and India both embarked on similar emulation of Mahan, they were also bound to run into each other’s maritime aspirations.

The reasons for the Chinese and Indian fascination for Mahan are not difficult to locate. Mahan’s exhortations to the Americans to look outward and turn to the seas came at the end of a prolonged territorial expansion of the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His big ideas on the importance of sea-borne commerce and the control of it through naval power emerged as the United States became the largest industrial nation in the world, but did not have either a global or maritime orientation. Mahan was also urging the United States to shed its isolationism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the traditional reluctance to get involved in the power politics of the old world. As America’s economic sinews grew rapidly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mahan was peering at a larger global role for the United States and saw no reason for America to limit itself to a regional role in the Western hemisphere. Put simply, Mahan’s

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<sup>29</sup> Kishore Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> Bill Emmott, *The Rivals: How the Power Struggle Between China, India and Japan Will Shape Our Next Decade* (London: Allen Lane, 2008).



grand strategic formulations on sea power were very much part of an inevitable reconstruction of the world view of a rapidly rising power. Mahan's emphasis on relating America's expansion of its internal industrial capabilities with the vision of a global role fits in quite naturally with the economic transformation that is taking place in China and India. The logic of globalisation discussed previously has meant that China and India would begin to outgrow the curse of continentalism and adapt Mahan's vision of sea power.

The sneering tone of the West vis-à-vis the Chinese and Indian fascination for geopolitics tells us more about the ethnocentrism in the West and its belief that the dominant view in the West today must necessarily be the prevailing fashion all across the world. Part of the significance of the rise of China and India lies in the fact that such intellectual hegemony of the West is no longer sustainable. Coral Bell for example has argued that the rise of China and India marks the end of many centuries of Western ascendancy over Asia.<sup>31</sup> It is easy for Western analysts to proclaim that geopolitics is dead, since they believe the current rules of the international order are forever and that China and India must prove their fidelity to the current management of the international system. China and India, however, may not want to accept this Western framework for their accommodation into the international system. As China and India recognise the relative improvement in their power position and place emphasis on military capability and geopolitics, Mahan's geopolitics are perhaps more attractive than the theories of Norman Angell and others who suggest that globalisation would inevitably lead to peace.<sup>32</sup> There indeed are many in China and India who share the view on the link between economic integration and peace and call for greater reliance on 'international cooperation' to achieve their national goals. The realists, however, argue that "economic globalisation does not necessarily mean the end of the Hobbesian Era" and conflict among nations. They point to the fact that much of the contemporary forms of international cooperation are "guided by American will and hegemony", and insist that "if the security guarantee of China's life-line at sea once again falls into the hands of the United States, we will give the United States another bargaining chip".<sup>33</sup>

Let us now turn briefly to Mahan's identification of the main pillars of sea power – sea-borne commerce, merchant and naval shipping and forward bases.<sup>34</sup> It is important to note that Mahan's age was also the peak of the colonial era when all the major industrial powers had acquired far flung colonial territories to acquire natural resources as well as markets. The idea of conflict among major powers and the role of sea power in deciding the winners and losers are central to Mahan. The first pillar of sea power according to Mahan is robust domestic industrial production and its export to overseas markets. Mahan believed trade and overseas commerce were central to the prosperity of nations in the new age of industrialisation. This in turn led to the second proposition that disrupting a rival's sea-borne trade would be at the heart of modern warfare. Mahan, therefore, called for the construction of modern navies that were capable of achieving this objective in decisive battles at sea. The idea of acquiring 'command of sea' by concentrating one's naval capabilities was then central to Mahan's conception of sea power. At a moment when the United States navy was still using sail boats,

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<sup>31</sup> Coral Bell, "The End of the Vasco da Gama Era: The Next Landscape of World Politics", *Lowy Institute Paper* No. 21 (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2007).

<sup>32</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the attractions of Mahan in the current Asian strategic environment, see, Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, eds., *Asia Looks Seaward: Power and Maritime Strategy* (London: Praeger, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> Ni Lexiong, op. cit., n.5.

<sup>34</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1890; reprint, New York: Dover, 1987).

Mahan called for the rapid adaptation to steam technologies. He urged the United States to build large armoured battle ships that were capable of producing definitive victories in battle and ousting the naval presence of the adversaries. If protecting the sea lines of communication between the centres of industrial production at home and the markets in far flung territories was central to Mahan, then the third proposition would define itself. It was the need for naval bases and facilities that allowed the navies to protect one's own shipping, deny critical sea lines and choke points to rivals. Mahan insisted that merchant and naval ships of a nation lacking overseas facilities were like "land birds, unable to fly far from their shores".<sup>35</sup> The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen the coming together of all the three elements of sea power for China and India. And in both countries, Mahan has become an inspiration for the naval thinkers.<sup>36</sup> The following is a brief survey of the unfolding evolution in China and India of two of the three elements of sea power identified by Mahan. (The question of naval capabilities and modernisation needs a full scale treatment all of its own and will have to be addressed in a separate paper.)

### **Resource Security and Maritime Power**

The globalisation of the Chinese and Indian economies in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has resulted in a dramatic expansion of their external trade. Once they ended their deliberately chosen economic isolation, China in 1978 and India in 1991, the weight and scope of their integration with the world economy rapidly increased. From deliberately discouraging foreign trade and encouraging import substitution, China and India made exports a key element of their growth strategy and eased the many restrictions on imports. As a consequence, trade saw explosive growth in both countries. China's two way trade in merchandise exploded from US\$115 billion in 1990 to US\$2,174 billion in 2007. In the same period, India's merchandise trade leapt from US\$44 billion in 1990 to US\$381 billion.<sup>37</sup> More important than the absolute figures of trade is the critical role that external commerce has acquired in China and India. Between 1990 and 2007, trade as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product increased from 29.6 to 66.3 percent for China and 13.3 to 33.5 percent for India.<sup>38</sup> Much of the world trade today, as in the time of Mahan, continues to be carried on sea. The sea-borne trade in China and India now hovers above the range of 90 percent of total trade in both countries. Given the size of their economies, their rapid pace of growth, and the expanding international component of their economic activity, protecting sea-borne trade has become a principal justification for the investment in naval power in both India and China. New Delhi for example states that "India's economic resurgence is directly linked to her overseas trade and energy needs, most of which are transported by sea. The Maritime Military Strategy draws a clear linkage between our economic prosperity and our naval capability, which will protect the nation's vast and varied maritime interests."<sup>39</sup> In China, too, the political leadership has become acutely aware of the profound relationship between

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<sup>35</sup> For a good modern summary of Mahan's thought, see, Margaret Tuttle Sprout, "Mahan: Evangelist of Sea Power", in Edward Meade Earle, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943), pp.

<sup>36</sup> See James R. Holmes and Toshi Yashihara, "The Influence of Mahan upon China's Maritime Strategy", *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2005, pp. 23-51; David R Scott, "India's Grand Strategy for the Indian Ocean: Mahanian Visions", *Asia Pacific Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2, November 2006, pp. 97-129.

<sup>37</sup> Figures from Asian Development Bank; calculated from the data available on <[www.adb.org/statistics](http://www.adb.org/statistics)>

<sup>38</sup> Figures from the Asian Development Bank, available at [http://www.adb.org/documents/books/key\\_indicators/2008/xls/RT-4-12.xls](http://www.adb.org/documents/books/key_indicators/2008/xls/RT-4-12.xls) accessed on 19 June 2009.

<sup>39</sup> *Freedom to use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy*, op. cit., n. 21, p. 10.

national economic development in the era of globalisation and sea power, and has constantly affirmed the determination to build a strong and modern navy.<sup>40</sup>

The relationship between sea-borne commerce and naval power has been appreciated by all major nations since the time of Mahan. However, China and India today face an unprecedented imperative that has given an extraordinary edge to the thinking on maritime security in Beijing and Delhi. Put simply, this imperative can be termed as 'resource security'. It involves the massive dependence of China and India on imported resources to feed domestic economic growth and national wellbeing. A vast body of literature dissecting every aspect of energy security in China and India has come out in recent years. This work examines not only the domestic but also external aspects of the rapid expansion of energy consumption in China and India. Our interest here is limited to the question of how the two Asian giants can gain access to energy resources at reasonable prices and ensure their transportation to the consumption centres at home. Since 1993, China has become an importer of hydrocarbons. India has been less fortunate than China in the natural endowment of petroleum resources and has always been a major importer of oil. This problem is no longer limited to energy resources but applies to the full range of mineral resources. As the levels of prosperity increase in China and India, food imports too will be on top of the list of critical imports. Resource security, then, will be the greatest challenge confronting China and India as they continue to develop at a rapid pace. What we have, therefore, are a few simple propositions. Even at relatively modest levels of per capita incomes, China and India would put substantive upward pressure on the availability and utilisation of natural resources around the world. The two Asian giants will be unable to sustain reasonable growth rates and maintain domestic tranquillity without significant import of natural resources from outside their borders.<sup>41</sup>

The massive dependence on imported natural resources is increasingly seen as a major strategic vulnerability in both China and India and addressing it has become a major national security priority in Beijing and New Delhi. Corporations in both countries have received considerable support from their governments in exploring and acquiring resource assets around the world. Chinese and Indian equity investments in oil and mineral resources have rapidly increased since the late 1990s.<sup>42</sup> Acquiring assets abroad is only one part of the challenge of resource security. China and India are increasingly focused on ensuring their reliable transportation to the home markets. The sense of vulnerability to potential disruptions in the supply of natural resources has become an important strategic question. This in turn has led to a new emphasis on naval power to protect the sea lines of communication. The study of how China and India view the intersection of resource security and naval power has emerged as an important field of inquiry in recent years.<sup>43</sup> Some Western analysts argue that the

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<sup>40</sup> For a comprehensive discussion, see, David Lei, "China's New Multi-faceted Maritime Strategy", *Orbis*, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2008, pp. 139-57.

<sup>41</sup> For a general discussion of some of these issues, see, L. Alan Winters and Shahid Yusuf, eds., *Dancing with the Giants: China, India and the Global Economy* (Washington D. C.: The World Bank, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> See for example, Eurasia Group, "China's Overseas Investments in Oil and Gas Production", Paper prepared for the United States.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (New York: Eurasia Group, 2006) available at <[http://www.uscc.gov/researchpapers/2006/oil\\_gas.pdf](http://www.uscc.gov/researchpapers/2006/oil_gas.pdf)> accessed on 16 June 2009; Shebonti Ray Dadwal and Uttam Kumar Sinha, "Equity Oil and India's Energy Security", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 29, No. 3, pp. 521-29.

<sup>43</sup> See for example, Gabriel Collins, Andrew Erickson, Lyle Goldstein, and William Murray, *China's Energy Strategy: The Impact on Beijing's Maritime Policies* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008); See also Gurpreet S. Khurana, "The Maritime Dimension of India's Energy Security", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 31, No. 4, July 2007, pp. 583-601.

concerns of resource security are somewhat hyped up in China and India, and that the two countries should rely on market mechanisms rather than unilateral national solutions. Both Beijing and New Delhi are likely to scoff at such suggestions and point to the special relationship between the Anglo-American powers, who have traditionally dominated the global energy markets; and the House of Saud, which had modulated oil supplies for the world. As argued by a Chinese analyst, “If one day, another nation(s) finds an excuse to embargo China, what can China do? Any substantial blockage of its foreign trade-dependent economy and/or its energy supply could gravely imperil China.” He adds the larger argument that “The history of capitalism and its spread globally have shown that it is often accompanied by cruel competition between nation-states. Those countries that lose out are not necessarily economically or technologically underdeveloped or those with a low culture. Rather, they are most often those nations who forgo the need to apply their national strength to national defence and therefore do not possess sufficient strategic capability.”<sup>44</sup> Most Indian security analysts are likely to agree whole-heartedly with Zhang’s proposition on the centrality of national means for securing national interests.

The Indians would also agree with Zhang’s other propositions: the importance of taking national defence to where the nation’s interests are and the urgent need to look beyond territorial defence. Zhang argues that “Independent of wealth, a guarantee of access to global trade and resources requires sufficient power to defend one’s interest in the trade and resource transportation sea routes. Economic globalisation entails globalisation of the military means for self-defence, because the national defence must go where a nation’s economic interests lie”. Zhang goes on to say, “China’s national security was largely confined to border security because it did not have many global interests. Rather, China’s core concern was one of survival...Today, China’s core national security not only narrowly centres on survival but includes a broader development goal which extends beyond the nation’s territory”.<sup>45</sup> The Indian leaders too have begun a more comprehensive definition of India’s security interests beyond territorial defence. As Prime Minister Manmohan Singh argued in 2006, “India’s transformation over the last few years has also meant that our stakes in the world and our interdependence with the world has increased exponentially. Our lines of communication which need to be protected are today not just the maritime links that carry our foreign trade and vital imports, but include our other forms of connectivity with the world.”<sup>46</sup> This broader definition of national security interests by China and India takes us to the other important element of sea power identified by Mahan – bases along a nation’s main sea lines of communication.

## **Forward Presence**

If the idea of naval bases is central to Mahan’s conception of sea power, the notion of forward military presence has been anathema to the modern Chinese and Indian worldview, at least until recently. For Mahan, the relationship between the home country and its commerce with the colonies in a world of expanding industrial production and global trade was critical. Protecting one’s own lines of communication and developing the capacity to disrupt those of the adversaries was an integral element of Mahan’s conception of sea power. It was logical for Mahan then to underline the significance of acquiring bases all along the

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<sup>44</sup> Zhang Wenmu, “Sea Power and China’s Strategic Choices”, *China Security*, Summer 2006, p. 20; available at <<http://www.wsichina.org/cs3.pdf>> accessed on 19 June 2009.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21.

<sup>46</sup> See his address to Combined Commanders Conference, New Delhi, 18 October 2006; available at <<http://www.pmindia.nic.in/speech/content4print.asp?id=432>> accessed on 16 June 2009.

sea lines of communication between the two entities. The world view of the Chinese and Indian leaders as they led their nations for a renewed engagement with the world could not have been more different from that of Mahan. Having been part of the colonies, the leaders of the two countries saw foreign bases as the very symbol of colonialism and its improved version of imperialism. Given their seemingly absolute commitment to anti-imperialism and the empathy with the anti-colonial struggles of the fellow developing countries, Beijing and Delhi naturally opposed the forward military presence of the great powers, which expanded significantly at the intensification and globalisation of Soviet-American rivalry during the Cold War.<sup>47</sup> As the largest developing nations, China and India became the most vocal opponents of foreign bases as a matter of high ideological principle as well as direct national security concerns about great powers meddling in their neighbourhood.

New Delhi, which founded the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), also helped develop the criteria for the membership of the NAM. These included non-membership of military blocs and non-hosting of foreign bases.<sup>48</sup> Beijing for long campaigned against the withdrawal of foreign military forces from Asia. India has supported similar demands against the so-called “extra-regional” powers in the Indian Ocean. As they campaigned against foreign military presence in Asia and the Indian Ocean, both Beijing and New Delhi also assured both explicitly and implicitly that they had no intention of seeing bases on the territories of other nations. These principles, in some sense, seemed absolutely immutable in the Chinese and Indian world views. Yet before the opposition to foreign military presence congealed into a political axiom, the early maritime thinkers of modern India had no problem in articulating the importance of bases as an integral part of the nation’s long-term naval strategy.<sup>49</sup> But the early talk of forward bases for the Indian navy was entirely academic, as the conditions for outward looking maritime policy were not existent. China, too, which maintained the rhetoric against the United States military bases in Asia largely chose to live with it once its primary threat perceptions began to focus on the Soviet Union.

The context, however, has changed fundamentally in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As they underline the importance of maritime commerce, pursue resource security, seek to protect the nation’s economic lifelines at sea, and recognise their larger global political responsibilities, both China and India are signalling the political will to deploy their navies far from the national shores.<sup>50</sup> This in turn is bound to result in a more intensive consideration of forward military presence and military bases abroad. Although Beijing denies it has any intentions of acquiring foreign bases, its alleged interest in acquiring various military facilities in Myanmar has been an interesting field of academic inquiry in recent years.<sup>51</sup> If the Chinese interest in a forward presence in Myanmar was seen as somewhat unique, its attempts to acquire naval facilities across the Indian Ocean have become a more

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<sup>47</sup> For a fine analysis of the forward basing during the Cold War, see, Robert E. Harkavy, *Bases Abroad: The Global Foreign Military Presence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>48</sup> For a discussion on the criteria, see, A.W. Singham and Shirley Hune, *Non-Alignment in the Age of Alignments* (London: Lawrence Hill, 1986).

<sup>49</sup> See for example, K. M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean*, op. cit. n.1; see also, Keshav B. Vaidya, *The Naval Defence of India* (Bombay: Thacker, 1949.)

<sup>50</sup> See for example, David Lai, “Chinese Military Going Global”, *China Security*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Winter 2009, pp. 3-9; available at <http://www.washingtonobserver.org/pdfs/DavidLai.pdf> accessed on 19 June 2009; for India, see, Rajat Pandit, “Navy steams to foreign shores to build bridges, project power”, *Times of India* (New Delhi), 31 May 2009 available at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/msid-4598351,prtpage-1cms> accessed on 19 June 2009.

<sup>51</sup> For a critical review of the literature, see, Andrew Selth, “Burma, China and the Myth of Military Bases”, *Asian Security*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2007, pp. 279-306.

widely circulated thesis in recent years. Many analysts indeed question the notion of China's quest for a 'string of pearls' in the Indian Ocean and it may be somewhat premature to call China's construction of maritime infrastructural facilities in South Asia and elsewhere as motivated by military considerations.<sup>52</sup> I will take up a more comprehensive review of the issues relating to China's interest in bases and naval facilities in the Indian Ocean in a subsequent paper. For now it is enough to note the emerging debate on the prospects of a Chinese forward military presence. The same, however, also holds true for India. All indications are that India too might be exploring the opportunities for acquiring facilities that will boost its ability to operate far from its national shores.<sup>53</sup>

Whether China and India will eventually acquire military bases or not, it is quite obvious that the new outward maritime orientation is a fundamental structural shift in their world view. Both Beijing and Delhi see a "symbiosis" between becoming a great power and developing a strong naval capability.<sup>54</sup> The Indian strategic community will also see the similarity of the maritime imperatives driving them. Delhi will agree with Ni's thesis that "while our nation's economic structure is completing the epic shift from an inward-leaning to an outward-leaning one, the choice of a sea power strategy has become an urgent task"<sup>55</sup> Once this logic is accepted it will not be difficult to understand the current high priority in China and India of the import natural resources, the focus on a going-out strategy to acquire natural resources, the protection of their nations' economic lifelines on sea, and the prospective search for forward military presence. As they rise in the international system, the strategic behaviour of China and India might look a lot like traditional great powers. Beijing and Delhi have already begun to define their national interests in an expansive way and to develop military capabilities to pursue them around the world. As a consequence, the navies of China and India are being transformed – from forces conceived for coastal defence and denying their neighbouring waters to hostile powers to instruments that can project force far beyond their shores. That large theme can only be treated in detail, separately and in its own right.

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<sup>52</sup> The phrase China's 'string of pearls' first appeared in United States media citing a technical study commissioned by the Pentagon; see, Bill Gertz, "China Builds Up Strategic Sea Lanes", *Washington Times*, 18 January 2005.

<sup>53</sup> See Steven Forsberg, "India Stretches its Sea Legs", *Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute*, vol. 133, No. 3, March 2007, pp. 38-42; see also Sudha Ramachandran, "India's Quiet Sea Power", *Asia Times Online*, 2 August 2007, available at <[http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/IH02Df01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/IH02Df01.html)> accessed on 18 June 2009.

<sup>54</sup> Ni Lexiong, "Sea Power and China's Development", op. cit, n. 5.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.