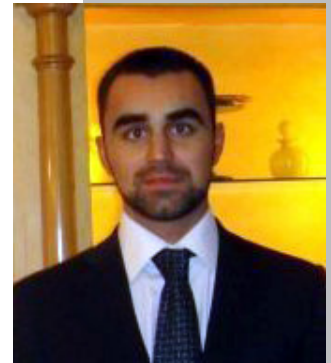




## An Ocean at The Intersection of Two Emerging Maritime Narratives

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### Summary

This issue brief delves into the pragmatic motivations undergirding India and China's "will to the sea", before examining on a more conceptual level how New Delhi and Beijing have drawn on the old in order to buttress the new, most notably through the crafting of two maritime narratives. National narratives are a complex medium through which nations engage not only their own citizens and interest groups, but also the wider world. More than a simple exercise in public diplomacy, the weaving of a narrative pulls on a nation's deepest sense of purpose; unravelling history and geography as much as it sews them together. This paper draws attention to the different wisps and strands of bygone eras which have been collected, dusted, and woven into a larger narrative - as well as those which have been wilfully discarded. On both sides of the Himalayas, complex and millenarian histories are subjected to highly selective readings, which differ nevertheless substantially in their approach. Beijing's maritime narrative, while more developed than that promoted by New Delhi, is also more monistic and state-driven. India's pluralistic, amorphous approach is more incremental and syncretic, but also less easily exploitable. Formed of a tongue-like peninsula which lolls deep into the heart of this century's central lake, India's rarefied geography is a stronger sign of its oceanic destiny than any narrative could ever hope to be. China, with its vast lumpen landmass squatting at the eastern periphery of the Eurasian hemisphere, bound and locked by tight island chains and narrow waterways, will never reap the advantages conferred by India's formidable centrality. The harsh logic of geography will remain Beijing's major naval challenge, however much its growing fleet pushes, heaves and thrusts its way into the deep blue. Nevertheless, until New Delhi's strategic community aligns its mental map with its nation's natural contours, its promised oceanic destiny will remain forever a shimmering horizon, rather than a satisfying present. Such a process of conceptual alignment will require the forging of a maritime narrative which draws both on history's great tides, and on those who have successfully navigated them.

## Introduction

Throughout much of known history, the Indian Ocean was a major thoroughfare for global commerce. Outside observers, however, have traditionally viewed the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans as the primary loci of strategic import. This mindset is the legacy of decades of naval planning, from WWII to the end of the Cold War, which focused on a series of threats emanating almost exclusively from these two oceanic arenas.



Today, however, things have radically changed. The Indian Ocean, which forms the world's third largest body of water, has reemerged as a major hub of maritime trade, with more than half of the world's container traffic, and 70 per cent of the world's total traffic in petroleum products, passing from its entry point, the Strait of Hormuz, to its congested exit, the Strait of Malacca. Already troubled by the growing problem of piracy and non-state actors off the Gulf of Aden and the Strait of Hormuz, ripples of great power rivalry threaten to disturb the waters, as Asia's two rising powers, India and China, bolster their naval strength and enhance their already significant blue-water capabilities. Large civilizational powers on a continental scale, both nations' martial histories have largely been land-driven. Their decision to wade out into the wine-dark sea is therefore intriguing.

This issue brief will briefly delve into the pragmatic motivations undergirding both countries' "*will to the sea*", before examining on a more conceptual level how New Delhi and Beijing have drawn on the old in order to buttress the new, most notably through the crafting of two maritime narratives. National narratives are a complex medium through which nations engage not only their own citizens and interest groups, but also the wider world. More than a simple exercise in public diplomacy, the weaving of a narrative pulls on a nation's deepest sense of purpose; unravelling history and geography as much as it sews them together. This paper draws attention to the different wisps and strands of bygone eras which have been collected, dusted, and woven into a larger narrative - as well as those which have been wilfully discarded. On both sides of the Himalayas, complex and millenarian histories are subjected to highly selective readings, which differ nevertheless substantially in their approach. Beijing's maritime narrative, while more developed than that promoted by New Delhi, is also more monistic and state-driven. India's pluralistic, amorphous approach is more incremental and syncretic, but also less easily exploitable. Formed of a tongue-like peninsula which lolls deep into the heart of this century's central lake, India's rarefied geography is a stronger sign of its oceanic destiny than any narrative could ever hope to be. China, with its vast lumpen landmass squatting at the eastern periphery of the Eurasian hemisphere, bound and locked by tight

island chains and narrow waterways, will never reap the advantages conferred by India's formidable centrality. The harsh logic of geography will remain Beijing's major naval challenge, however much its growing fleet pushes, heaves and thrusts its way into the deep blue. Nevertheless, until New Delhi's strategic community aligns its mental map with its nation's natural contours, its promised oceanic destiny will remain forever a shimmering horizon, rather than a satisfying present. Such a process of conceptual alignment will require the forging of a maritime narrative which draws both on history's great tides, and on those who have successfully navigated them.

## I) Two Land Powers Look out to Sea

As Asia gradually becomes the world's main hub for maritime trade, its two rising powers, India and China, are taking to the seas, bolstering their already significant blue-water capabilities. India, which already boasts Asia's sole aircraft carrier battle group, plans to field a fleet of 140-145 vessels, centred on two new carrier battle groups, over the next decade. In July 2009, the Indian Navy launched its first indigenous nuclear submarine, which is expected to be commissioned in 2012.

The Chinese Navy, which is already said to comprise at least 260 ships, including more than 75 principal combatants and 60 submarines, is engaged in a process of unremitting expansion.

At its current rate of induction, the PLAN may soon be able to deploy a larger submarine flotilla than the US Navy. Beijing has also perfected the world's first anti-ship ballistic missile and, most recently, officially unveiled its first conventionally powered aircraft carrier.

This shared focus on maritime power is intriguing, as both countries' histories are largely continental in nature, barring certain notable exceptions. Some war theorists such as Colin Gray look on the simultaneous development of land and sea power as something of a historical aberration, venturing, for example, that:

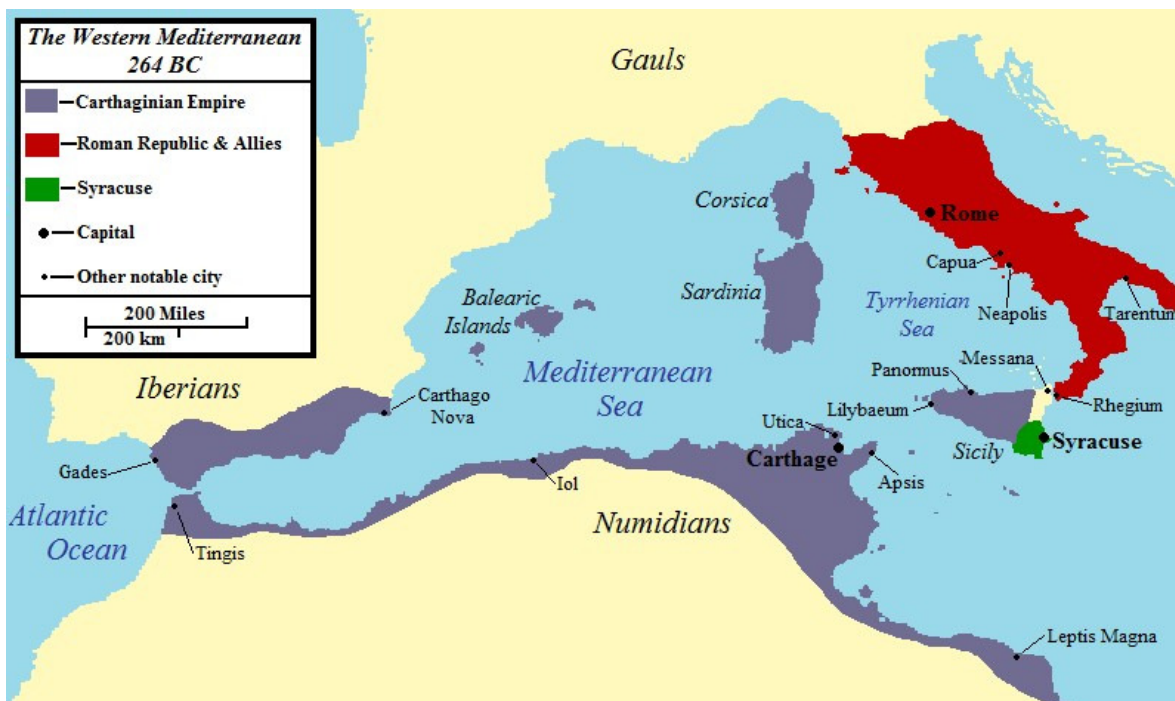
*"For reasons best summarized as geopolitical, polities traditionally were stronger either on land or on sea; very few were preeminent in both domains. History reveals the recurring strategic problem of how land power and superior sea power struggled to find ways to translate their geographically specialized advantage into a war-winning advantage. From Athens and Sparta through Rome and Carthage, (...) all the way to Britain and Napoleonic France, there was a pattern of struggle between land-based tigers and sea-confined sharks." <sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Colin Gray, *Another Bloody Century-Future Warfare*, Phoenix, 2005, p. 46.

As such, their parallel quest for simultaneous pre-eminence on both land and sea can be construed as something of a novelty. Even the United States, it could be argued, was above all a maritime power before it developed a full-spectrum capability.

There are nevertheless some examples which negate Gray's clear-cut dichotomy. Imperial Rome is one example. It is true that prior to the Punic Wars Rome was a continental power, whose martial prowess was almost solely land-based, with a small supporting fleet which was more of a glorified coast guard than anything else. Once Rome was drawn into the wider region through its growing rivalry with Carthage, however, it was compelled to become a naval power. In an interesting parallel to more modern eras, technology theft enabled Rome to leapfrog from continental power to serious naval contender by allegedly using an abandoned Phoenician warship as a prototype for its future fleet. Even after the Carthaginians has been brutally ground into the dust after the third Punic War in 146 BC, Roman ships continued to protect their "Mare Nostrum" against the rampant piracy which threatened Imperial trade. Rome's transition from continental to full-spectrum power provides an interesting historical precedent.<sup>2</sup> Such an evolution was prompted by an acute rise in threat perceptions in the Roman Senate and by the progressive emergence of a bipolar security architecture in the Mediterranean, which was then the epicentre of Western geopolitics.



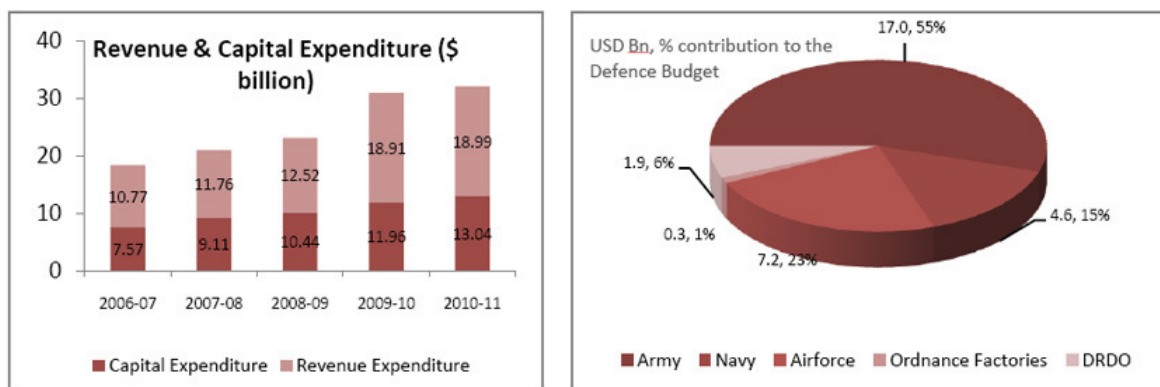
<sup>2</sup> For an excellent study of Rome and the emergence of its navy as a separate part of the military, see Michael Pitassi, *The Navies of Rome*, Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2009.

Neither India nor China are currently confronted with such existentially vivid threat perceptions, nor are they ensnared in a bipolar rivalry. Whether the second half of this century will lead to a similar equation in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea between the two Asian behemoths, is an open question.

### India's Himalayan Corset

Historically, India's maritime vision has been somewhat stifled by the mental barrier or corset of the Himalayas whose frozen passes, throughout Indian history, would be anxiously scrutinized by the people of the Gangetic plains for Central Asian invaders. India's martial history is largely a land-driven one, that is until the arrival of the Europeans in the modern era. The arrival of the British on Indian shores, with their traditional emphasis on sea power, explains why the strategic conceptualization of a blue-water navy has been present in India since independence. After a series of brutal frontier conflicts, however, in which navies played at best a secondary role, India's main priorities were to strengthen its land borders, and build up its army and air force, which were the primary actors in the event of a conflict with China or Pakistan. Once more the Himalayas loomed large, and the Indian Navy, no longer considered as strategically relevant, was relegated to the backseat, its share in the defence budget even plummeting at one stage to a dismal 3 per cent.<sup>3</sup>

Under the tenures of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, the Navy spasmodically regained impetus, but it has only really been over the past fifteen years that India's political leadership has actively endorsed an ambitious blue-water role. Nevertheless, to this day the Navy's share of the defence budget remains considerably lower than that of the Army or the Air Force, and even the most optimistic predictions for its future allocation doubt that it will surpass 20 per cent in coming years. This serves as a depressing reminder of the dogged resilience of continentalism in Indian strategic thinking.



<sup>3</sup> Interview with Vice Admiral Premvir Dass, October 2009, retrievable at <http://indiangeopolitics.blogspot.com/2009/11/indias-naval-ambitions-interview-of.html>

## China's Continental Shackles

Beijing's current naval build-up suggests a much greater revolution in terms of strategic thought. China's history has largely been defined by the struggle between the sedentary peoples of the fertile river basins and the nomadic peoples of the steppe.

And, unlike India, modern China's first naval force structure was that of a coastal defence force, before adapting to revolve around a strategy of "*offshore active defence*" after the mid-1980s.<sup>4</sup> It is only over the past decade that Chinese policy makers have decided to tack to the blue waters.

So why are both nations looking out to sea? One example frequently quoted, particularly in reference to China, is that of Wilhelmine Germany, a traditional land power determined to wade out to sea in order to offset Britain's then crushing naval dominance. There are evidently major geographical and historical differences which serve to dissociate both nations' naval orientations, but as Mark Twain once quipped, "*History may not repeat itself, but it sometimes rhymes.*" And this is something Chinese naval thinkers, as well as their Indian counterparts, would agree upon, frequently drawing on figures such as Alfred Thayer Mahan or the German Vice Admiral Wolfgang Wegener, much as one would rummage around in a box of useful tools, in order to find the best possible utensil in the oft delicate crafting of a maritime vision. Vice Admiral Wegener, for example, viewed sea power as being the end result not only of fleet enhancement and geographical positioning, but also as a manifestation of a nation's "*strategic will to the sea*".<sup>5</sup> In the case of both India and China, highly pragmatic motivations born out of the convergence of global economic trends and geopolitical evolutions under gird their "*strategic will to the sea*".

In India's case one could posit the following overarching reasons:

- Globalization and the growth of maritime trade which has provided India with a more outward and seaward looking orientation.
- The impact of maritime terrorism along India's vulnerable 7,500 km coastline.
- Concerns due to China's rise and forays into the Indian Ocean.
- Availability of funding due to steady GDP growth.

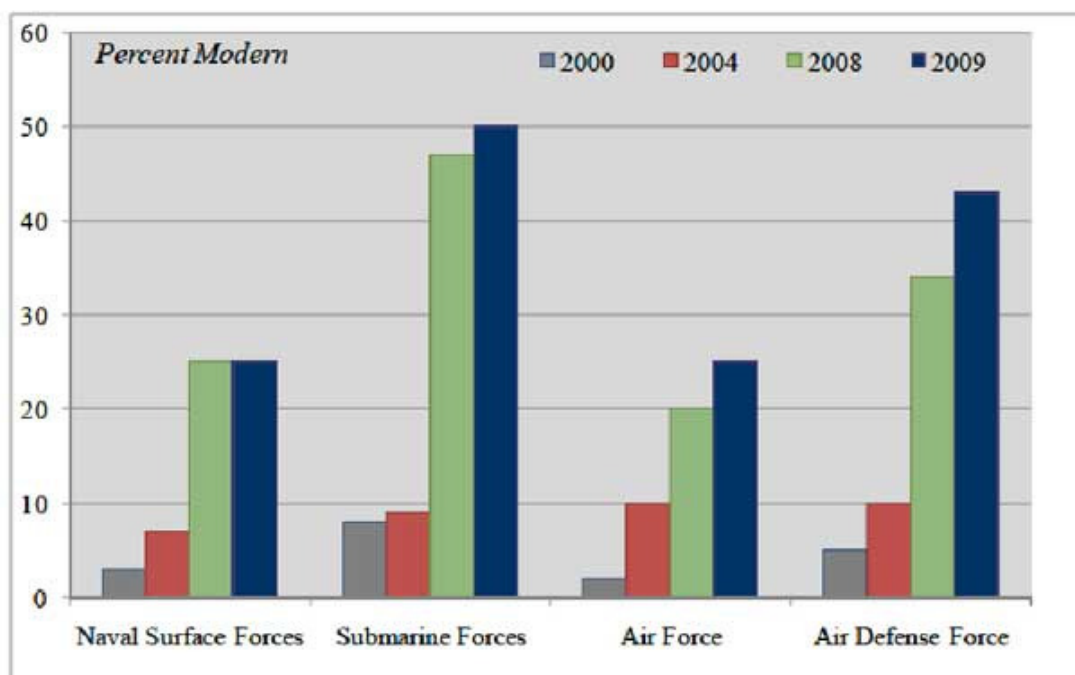
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<sup>4</sup> For an excellent summary of the evolution of Chinese naval thinking since the Maoist era, see Nan Li, "The Evolution of Chinese Naval Strategy and Capabilities: From Near Coast and Near Seas to Far Seas," *Asian Security Journal*, vol. 5 no. 2, 2009, pp.144-69.

<sup>5</sup> For a fascinating analysis of the Imperial German precedent to Chinese Sea power, see Jim Holmes & Toshi Yoshihara, "History Rhymes: The German Precedent for Chinese Seapower," *Orbis*, Winter 2010, vol. 54, no. 1.

For China one could say the following:

- The absence of a traditional overland security threat (the nomadic hordes to the north during much of Imperial Chinese history, the Soviet Army during the second half of the Cold War), which means that Beijing can now redirect its attention towards the sea.
- A tremendous leap in economic growth and foreign trade, which has compelled China to look seaward, and has provided it with the necessary funds to engage in a massive overhaul of its fleets.
- Last but not least, the security of China's seaborne energy supplies has become a major priority for Chinese decision-makers. In January 2010, Directors of China's four major energy research centres all declared that the ratio of China's dependence on foreign oil has exceeded the warning line of 50 per cent in 2009,<sup>6</sup> which means that oil imports have replaced domestic oil output to meet the majority of China's oil consumption.



*Select PLA Modernization Areas, 2000–2009. This graphic compares the share of modern operational systems within the PLA in 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2009.*

<sup>6</sup> See Oystein Tsunjo, "Hedging against Oil Dependency, New Perspectives on China's Energy Security Policy," *International Relations*, March 2010 vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 25-45.

## II) Drawing on the Old to Buttress the New: the Forging of Two Maritime Narratives

Both nations, however, as they turn seawards, and however pragmatic the reasons for doing so, need to construct a new form of maritime narrative, which draws on the richer moments in their maritime history in order to justify and strengthen their plunging into the deep waters. Whereas India's efforts have not been as conscious or as savvy as those of Beijing, it, like its trans-Himalayan neighbour, has begun to draw on its past, in order to find meaning for the present. And like China, India seeks to project the image of a benevolent sea power, which views the maritime expanses as a medium for trade and diplomacy rather than pure power projection and conflict.

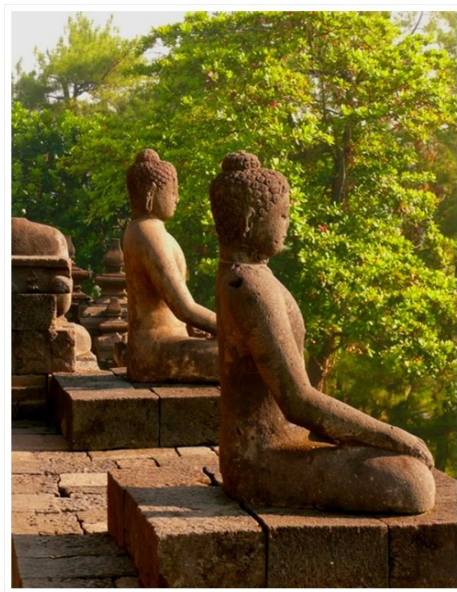
It has therefore become necessary to not only focus on both nations' naval strategies, but also on the maritime narratives which, strand by strand, weave the fabric of their strategic vision. And while the historical events and periods at the core of these narratives are in large part genuine in nature, it becomes rapidly apparent that any narrative, by nature, is selective by what it chooses to showcase, omit or gloss over.

### A) India's 'soft power narrative'

India has arguably a far richer maritime history than that of China. But it is only recently that Indian strategists and thinkers have been making a concerted effort to rediscover their past. Whereas Chinese efforts are blatant and even government sponsored, India's are more incremental and gradual. It would seem, however, that a form of Indian 'soft power narrative' is beginning to take form and crystallize.

#### - *Ashokan Pacifism and the Buddhist Legacy*

The Emperor Ashoka, of the Mauryan Dynasty, is widely acknowledged in India as one of the most enlightened rulers the subcontinent has ever known, along with Akbar the Great much later during the Mughal Era. Ashoka ruled over the entirety of the subcontinent over two thousand years ago. Having inherited vast tracts of land from the bloody campaigns of his grandfather Chandragupta, he chose to extend Mauryan rule through the Buddhist concept of 'dharma' or exemplary conduct. This was accomplished in large part through the dispatch of high-profile Buddhist missionaries such as his daughter Sangamitra, to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Some in India's strategic community have advanced the Ashokan notion of dharma as a form





of pre-modern Indian soft power, and point to India's long-standing history as both a birthplace of ideas and of peaceful cultural diffusion. Whereas China invaded and occupied Vietnam for more than a thousand years, India spread Buddhism and the Hindu concept of sacred kingship to Southeast Asia not by sword and flame, but via trade and itinerant missionaries. The fact that ancient India never engaged in long-term occupation or widespread forcible conversion in Southeast Asia is

not without significance. The peaceful propagation of Buddhism is a multi-millennia old bond that India shares with the rest of the Asian continent that acts as a testament to the power of its civilizational pull.

#### - *The Age of Hindu Maritime Supremacy*

Indeed, one tends to forget how interconnected the ancient world was, and that India, by virtue of its centrality in the Indian Ocean, was the hub of maritime trade between the western and eastern hemispheres. The monsoon trade winds were already used by the early people of the subcontinent more than 3000 years ago, enabling merchants to travel from India's west coast during the northeastern monsoon period (November to March), to return from Africa and the Middle East with the onset of the southwestern monsoon (April to September). Roman and Greek traders sailed along the Indian coast in search of precious spices, along what Pliny the elder called 'the cinnamon route'. Many of Africa's staple foods such as rice, sugar and coconuts arrived in the dhows of Indian sailors, who also supposedly initiated the Egyptians into the secrets of cotton cultivation and fabrication.<sup>7</sup> Until they were displaced by Arab merchants during the Middle Ages, Hindu seafarers from the Indian subcontinent's western and southern seaboard formed one of the greatest maritime trading communities in the world. Certain pre-eminent figures in India's strategic community such as the Former Head of the Navy Arun Prakash have urged India to draw on this period to show that "*In consonance with India's ancient maritime tradition*" (...) *the Indian Navy will be a force for peace, friendship and goodwill, which will reach out to extend a helping hand wherever needed in our maritime neighbourhood.*"<sup>8</sup>

#### **B) Zheng He and the benign Sino-Centric Order**

China, like India, seeks to be viewed as a benevolent maritime power, and to use history as a tool to emit reassuring predictions of its future behaviour. Unlike India, however, the

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<sup>7</sup> See Sugata Bose's history of the Indian Ocean, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Arun Prakash "Maritime Challenges," *Indian Defense Review*, vol. 21, no. 1, January 2006, pp. 49-52.

process has not been incremental and organic but proactively pursued by the central government.

Zheng He, the Ming Dynasty eunuch admiral who plied the waters of Asia and beyond with a gargantuan fleet composed of hundreds of ships with more than 28,000 crewmen, officials, marines and soldiers, has become a central figure in the regime's public diplomacy. Much attention is drawn by Chinese officials to the fact that this vast armada was never used as a tool of imperial conquest, and that it solely engaged in voyages of discovery and trade. It is therefore presented as not only a sign of Chinese technological superiority over the Europeans of the time in terms of shipbuilding etc., but also as a sign of moral superiority. Zheng He's travels are shown to be indicative of the fundamentally benign nature of the Sino-centric system at the heart of Asian diplomacy and trade throughout much of known history. The underlying message is that China's current naval build-up is but an avatar of this peaceful and glorious period in Asian naval history.

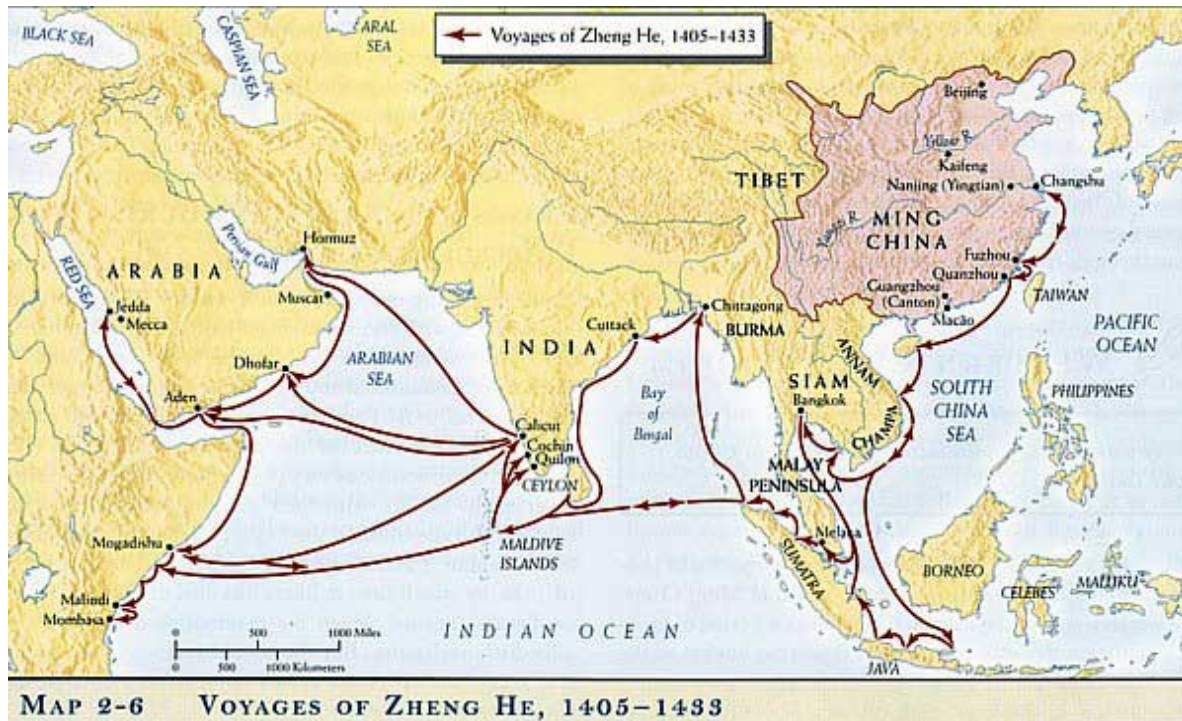
The mariner's odyssey has also been used to validate a growing Chinese presence throughout Asia and beyond. Indeed, every year it would seem as though the hardy eunuch had in fact discovered another land, whether it be in some of the more fanciful claims, Australia, or even America. In an example of how the Admiral is regularly conjured up in Chinese official discourse, Hu Jintao has cited his name in speeches in countries ranging from South Africa to Australia.

After hearing of an old Kenyan folk tale which claimed that some Chinese survivors from a shipwrecked vessel of the Treasure Fleet had swum ashore and married local African women, the Chinese government promptly dispatched a team of archaeologists to recover the shipwreck, and a team of scientists which took DNA swabs of the Swahili families living along the coast.<sup>9</sup> Surprisingly enough, it would seem as though many of the locals did present evidence of some Chinese ancestry, and some Chinese coins were recently found. This was subsequently broadcast all over Chinese news networks. Chinese officials claimed that this was a sign of China's centuries-old relationship with Africa, based on harmony and mutual trade. A 19 year old Kenyan woman was flown over to China to study traditional Chinese medicine at the expense of the government.

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<sup>9</sup> Xan Rice, "Chinese Archaeologists' African Quest for Sunken Ship of Ming Admiral," *The Guardian*, July 25, 2010, retrievable at : <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jul/25/kenya-china>.

These announcements came at a time when criticism is rising in Africa and the West regarding China's growing presence in the continent.



### III) History's Cunning Passages

The poet and author T.S Eliot once wrote that "History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors."<sup>10</sup>

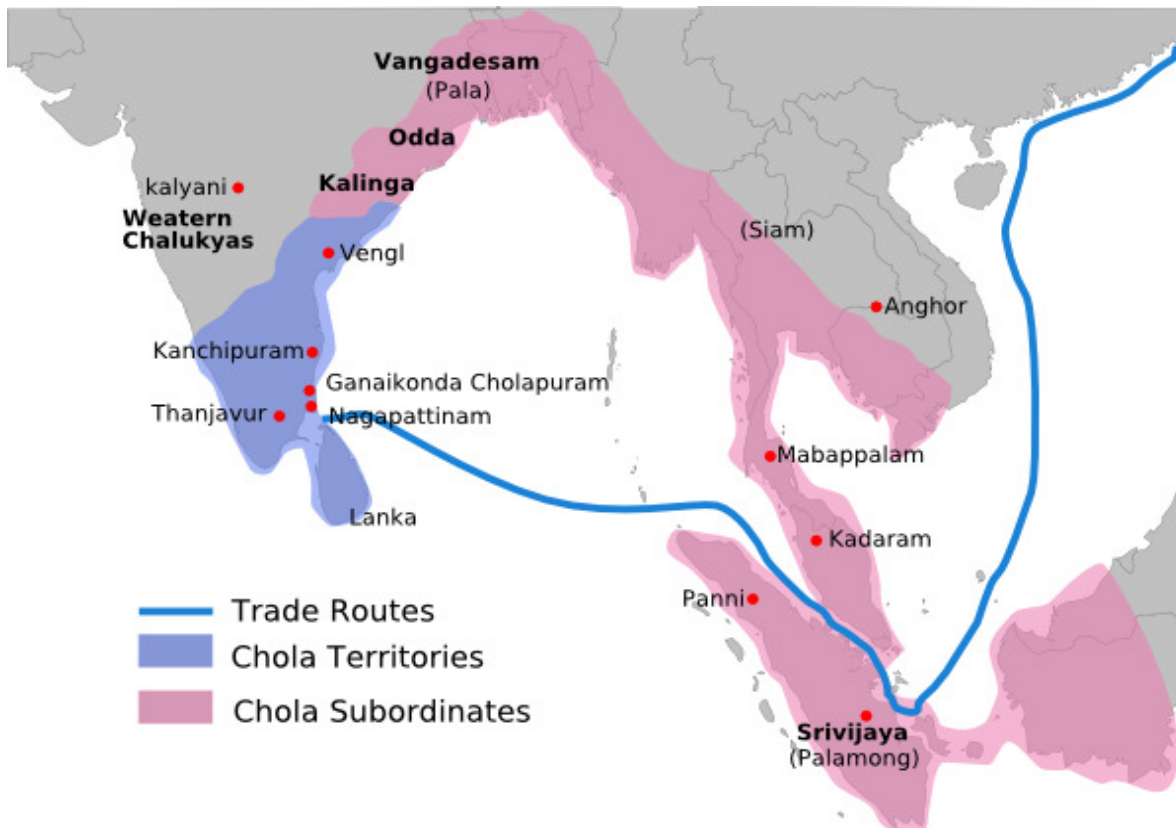
It can be tempting for a nation to construct a bold, linear narrative that arches through the maze of history, providing a clear, solid bridge for its aspirations. Unfortunately, narratives can always only be selective in nature, and thus somewhat imperfect.

#### a) The Chola Era Maritime Trade Wars

Ashokan pacifism and the era of Hindu maritime trade supremacy provide attractive frameworks in the construction of an Indian maritime narrative revolving around soft power. There are however other periods in the subcontinent's history, little explored until now, which do seem to indicate that maritime power could also be used for aggressive purposes, and not just for the peaceful ones so often mentioned. A prime example would be that of the maritime trade wars between the Chola Empire, which held sway over

<sup>10</sup> T. S. Eliot, 1920 *Gerontion*. In *the Waste Land, Prufrock and Other Poems*, Courier Dover Publications, 1998.

much of Southern India, Sri Lanka and the Lakdashweep islands in the Arabian Sea, and the Sri Vijaya Kingdom, which lay nestled on the Malacca Straits, in the 11th century.<sup>11</sup>



Recent studies by Indian historians show that in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Sri Vijaya kings were accused by their Chola neighbours of strangulating trade towards China, demanding massive levies of over 20,000 dinars before allowing merchant ships to pass on through the straits towards China. Enraged by what he considered tantamount to economic imperialism, the Chola King Rajendra Cholavada the First assembled a small armada composed of a hodgepodge of merchant vessels, catamarans, and dhows, filled them up with thousands of soldiers and took over control of the sea lanes of communication by soundly defeating the Sri Vijaya armies.

This little known episode of Indian history would indicate that maritime power was not only trade-oriented, but could also be exerted in a more predatory manner. It also reveals the enduring power of geography. Then, just as now, control of the Malacca Straits ensured control over the sea lanes of communication and over trade in and out of Asia.

<sup>11</sup> See the excellent and pioneering study *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia*, edited by Hermann Kulke, K. Kesavapany, and Vijay Sakhuja, Nalanda-Srivijaya Centre of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, December 2009.

## b) The Darker Side to the Zheng He Narrative

The treasure fleets were not simply crammed with jovial merchants enjoying a series of leisure cruises around Asia. The massive ships, which carried thousands of Chinese soldiers and marines, were awe-inspiring floating symbols of Ming sovereignty. The tributary system embodied by the trade they brought to the coastal communities they encountered throughout Asia was at the heart of a highly hierarchical Sino-centric system. Even in the days of the late Qing dynasty, several hundred years later, the Chinese Imperial Court had no foreign ministry but a Tribute Reception Department.<sup>12</sup>

Conveniently left out of the historically sanctioned narrative is the fact that Zheng He's expeditions were not only economic and pacifist in nature, as it is claimed, but were also a political extension of the Imperial tributary system. When a ruler, such as the Sri Lankan king Alakeswara, refused to pay tribute and thus recognize himself as the Chinese Emperor's vassal, he was promptly deposed and ferried back to the Imperial Court in chains. This Ming-era poem relates the Chinese marines' intervention in Sri Lanka in highly politically incorrect terms:

*"Straight away their dens and hideouts we ravaged,  
And made captive their entire country, bringing back to our august capital their women,  
children, families and retainers, leaving not one,  
Cleaning out in a single sweep those noxious pests, as if winnowing chaff from grain...  
These insignificant worms, deserving to die ten thousand times over, trembling in fear...Did  
not even merit the punishment of heaven. Thus the august emperor spared their lives.  
And they humbly kowtowed, making crude sounds, and praising the sage-like virtue of  
the Imperial Ming ruler."<sup>13</sup>*

## c) The Yuan Dynasty's Maritime Imperialism

The great glory days of the treasure fleets were in fact remarkably short-lived, as they only lasted from 1405 to 1433 before the Imperial court ordered the fleet's destruction in order to focus once more on perceived continental threats. There is another rich period in China's maritime history, however, that is perhaps just as significant as that of Zheng He, and more long lasting, but which has not been incorporated into the nation's maritime narrative.

<sup>12</sup> For an enthralling account of China's relations with the outside world throughout history, see Julia Lovell, *The Great Wall: China Against the World, 1000BC-2000AD*, Grove Press, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Translation of a Chinese Ming-era poem celebrating the intervention of Zheng He's marines in Sri Lanka's civil war in *When China Ruled the Seas, The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne 1405-1433*, Louise Levathes, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 114.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a China divided between northern and southern dynasties was overrun by the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan. After the destruction of the north, Genghis Khan's successors, his nephews Mongke and Khubilai, launched a massive campaign against the Song Chinese in the South. Whereas before the horse-borne, lightning fast cavalry archers of the Mongols had had little difficulty in defeating their enemies, they soon found that the muddy, river-threaded terrain of Southern China made them lose their comparative advantage. In the face of continued Song resistance, the Mongols, ever a pragmatic people when it came to bloody destruction, adapted by co-opting Chinese and Korean engineers to build ships to engage in riverine and maritime warfare against their enemies. Once the Song had been subjugated at last, Khubilai Khan the ruler of the newly formed Yuan Dynasty, decided to use his newly acquired naval expertise to launch a massive amphibious invasion of Japan. In 1274 and 1281 two huge naval armadas were set afloat to attack Japan, and both, due to Japanese tenacity, raging epidemics and terrible weather conditions were repulsed. To give an idea of the size of these armadas, the one launched in 1281 comprised 3,500 ships, with more than 6,700 Korean sailors, and close to 100,000 Chinese and Mongol troops.<sup>14</sup> Barring the major allied operations during WWII, this constitutes the largest amphibious undertaking in history.



And yet, it bears little mention in China's sanctioned maritime narrative. This is undoubtedly due to its starkly imperialistic nature. Chinese historians will argue that the relatively short-lived Yuan Dynasty (it lasted only a century) was not Chinese, but Mongolian, and does not fit in neatly with today's Han-dominated Chinese government's discourse. But then the Qing dynasty, whose early days are being celebrated once more, was of Manchu descent, and the great Zheng He himself, ironically, was a Hui Muslim of Mongolian origin. All this points once more to a selective reading of the nation's maritime history.

<sup>14</sup> See Stephen Turnbull, *The Mongol Invasions of Japan: 1274 and 1281*, Osprey Publishing, 2010.

#### IV) Monism, Pluralism, and the Issue of Identification

After having been detailed the various omissions that pockmark both nations' maritime narratives, it may seem necessary to question both their utility and their actual purpose. One of India's most passionate advocates of the rehistoricization of the nation's sea power, the former Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Arun Prakash, has gently rebuked Western approaches to India's seeming quest for a maritime narrative, by observing that such observations are not "*entirely valid in an Indian context.*" In his opinion, *an (Indian) grand maritime narrative already exists and does not need to be invented.*"<sup>15</sup> The distinguished officer's assertions may seem at first glance somewhat paradoxical, as he has been at the vanguard of the Indian strategic community's tentative efforts to redefine the subcontinent's maritime past.<sup>16</sup> In reality, what the Admiral is alluding to is less the need for a maritime narrative, which he fully recognizes, than the differing ways in which it can come to be shaped. Western India hands, he implies, risk skidding over treacherous ground if they strive to gauge India's historical mindset or strategic culture in their traditional fashion.

The great British philosopher Isaiah Berlin famously distinguished between monistic and pluralistic approaches to intellectual constructs, whether they be historical, philosophical, or even artistic. Drawing on atypical animal metaphors, Berlin quotes the classical Greek poet Archilochus's verse, "*The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.*" According to him, "hedgehog-like" thinkers possess "*a central vision, one system more or less coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think, and feel a single universal, organizing principle.*" This is in contrast to "fox-like" thinkers, who recoil from unitary intellectual formulations and "*seize upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and approaches for what they are in themselves, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from any one, unchanging, all-embracing... unitary inner vision.*"<sup>17</sup> If one were to apply Berlin's monist/pluralist distinction, India's approach to its maritime past - more amorphous, syncretic and incremental, would be that of the fox, while China's, with its rigorously vetted state-sponsored narrative, would be that of a hedgehog. China's monism has the advantage of clarity, but is not without peril, and as the "*cunning passages*" in its narrative yawn ever wider, it risks falling into the pit of its own historical contradictions. A prime example of this would be its apparent recent decision to name its

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<sup>15</sup> Both quotes from Arun Prakash, "The Rationale and Implications of India's Growing Maritime Power," in *India's Contemporary Security Challenges*, a Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Volume edited by Michael Kugelman, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, his highly informative collection of writings on naval matters, *From the Crow's Nest: A Compendium of Writings on Maritime and Other Issues*, Lancer Publishers, Delhi, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History*, (first published in 1953) Ivan R. Dee Publishing, Chicago, 1993 edition, pp. 4-5.

first Aircraft Carrier *Shi Lang*, after an admiral of the early Qing Dynasty who invaded Taiwan in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This not-so-subtle historical reminder serves only to belie the soft power narrative so energetically deployed over the past few years. India, on the other hand, can reap the reward of its more amorphous maritime narrative, which, safely wreathed in the mists of time, leaves but a smooth sweeping surface with few nooks and crannies for the budding historian to cling onto.

For India's maritime proponents, however, India's oceanic past is amorphous only through its self-evidence. As the same Admiral Prakash says, "*One need only spend a few days in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, or Cambodia to be struck by the depth and permeation of these countries by Indian culture, architecture, and even dietary habits. This could have taken place only over centuries of intense maritime interaction.*"<sup>18</sup> Similarly, George Tanham, in his seminal essay on Indian strategic culture, noted that India felt a degree of "*pride over the extent of India's cultural influence in Southeast Asia*"<sup>19</sup> and viewed to a certain degree the region as being part of a wider Indian civilizational sphere.

Acknowledging that India has a less linear and more multilayered perception of its maritime history and that this seafaring past has had much impact on its periphery, does not, however, detract from the fact that India, unlike China, is in dire need of what the American historian Henry Steele Commager once termed a "*usable past*", or John Stuart Mill called a nation's binding "*community of recollections*".<sup>20</sup> A maritime history without figureheads or identifiable narratives is like a giant creaking stage bereft of characters, with all the haunting melancholy of Giovanni Piranesi's famous engravings, but none of the vitality and optimism befitting a growing naval power such as India. Would modern visitors to Delphi, after having clambered up the rocky hills, and paused, out of breath, to gaze out at the dark silver-flecked sea of olive groves stretching out before them, feel the same sense of wonder without the knowledge that thousands of years earlier, at the same spot, a nervous young Macedonian prince had contemplated the same spectacular vista before going to consult the Delphic Oracle? Would flocks of sun-scorched tourists still spend hours milling and meandering around the crumbling ruins of the Roman Forum, if the names and deeds of the great men who once bustled along those busy streets had seeped into oblivion through the cracked cobblestones?

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<sup>18</sup> Arun Prakash, "The Rationale and Implications of India's Growing Maritime Power," in *India's Contemporary Security Challenges*, a Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Volume edited by Michael Kugelman, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> George K. Tanham, *Indian Strategic Thought, An Interpretive Essay*, RAND International Security and Defense Strategy Program, Santa Monica, 1992, p. 40.

<sup>20</sup> See Henry Steele Commager, "The Search for a Usable Past," *American Heritage*, February 1965, retrievable at <http://www.americanheritage.com/content/search-usable-past>.





Professor Jim Holmes of the US Naval War College is correct in stating that “*appeals to abstractions and generalities like culture and cuisine don’t inspire, however much they enlighten.*”<sup>21</sup> India’s maritime past is in desperate need of a face, rather than just an appealing silhouette.

Post-colonial India has displayed a reasonable degree of success in resuscitating some of the great Emperors of the past, such as Ashoka or Akbar. Ashoka’s three-headed lion and dharma wheel have even been incorporated into the Republic of India’s official iconography. Both Ashoka and Akbar were, however, northern rulers who ruled over vast continental expanses. The tropical, sea-faring lands of the Dravidian south, divided from much of the rest of India by language, snaking rivers and lush forests, have not received the historical attention they deserve. Some enlightened naval analysts such as Vijay Sakhuja<sup>22</sup> have, through their path clearing work alongside renowned Indian

<sup>21</sup> See James R. Holmes’s excellent article “India’s Once & Future Sea Power,” *The Diplomat*, April 28, 2011, retrievable at <http://the-diplomat.com/flashpoints-blog/2011/04/28/india-s-once-future-sea-power/>.

<sup>22</sup> See the fascinating chapter entitled “Rajendra Cholaveda I and his Naval Expedition to SE Asia: A Nautical Perspective”, by Vijay & Sangeeta Sakhuja, in *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia*.

historians, begun to shed light on the great Indian South's maritime history. But it is only once India's Delhi-based strategic elite tear their gaze away from the Himalayas and undertake the effort to rediscover the southern subcontinent's maritime legacy that a strong, sustainable, narrative will emerge. For the time being, however, Delhi's mental map is simply not aligned with its peninsular geography.

### **Conclusion: Intersecting Maritime Narratives: Overlapping Spheres of Influence?**

While both nations' maritime narratives are highly selective and imperfect in nature, they do provide an insight into both nations' mental maps, and thus into their perceived justifiable areas of interest and spheres of influence.

By focusing on both nations' historical narratives, one can clearly see that their perceived spheres of maritime influence overlap. Whereas in past centuries both civilizations, while aware of each other, were separated by buffer zones, whether it be on land via Tibet, or by sea through Southeast Asia, their long shared and unresolved land border and their growing and more wide ranging navies mean that for the first time in history they are shoulder to shoulder, breathing heavily down each others' necks. This uncomfortable proximity was eloquently framed for the first time in 1912, by Archibald Rose, the British Consul stationed in Yunnan, who awoke a sleepy Northeastern Frontier Agency to the fact that with the flight of the then Dalai Lama from Lhasa in 1910, "*we were brought to a sudden realization that India has acquired a Chinese neighbour along the whole stretch of that 3000 miles of frontier*", and that the "*Chinese colossus has moved in its extremities, its farthestmost limbs, when the heart seemed to be failing and the centre of all its activities in Peking was overburdened with troubles from within and from without, and seemed for the moment numbed and almost broken.*"<sup>23</sup>

History has since shown that China's desire to extend its presence along the high plateaus and dark woods skirting the Indian sphere was not simply the effect of an ailing nation's twitching its extremities in its final death throes, but rather the first signs of an immutable reshaping of the region's geopolitical space. As the Asian hemisphere shrinks in size with both nations expanding, and as their maritime mental maps increasingly overlap, will the result be greater rivalry? This is something which is for the future, and maybe also for both nations' naval planners - or narrators - to decide.

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<sup>23</sup> Archibald Rose, "Chinese Frontiers of India," *The Geographical Journal*, Royal Geographical Society, January 15, 1912, No. III, March 1912.