

The end of Cold-War and its impact on India's maritime concerns in 1990s and beyond

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ABSTRACT

The period of 1990's marked a turning point in world history as the cold war era came to an abrupt end. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Warsaw Pact began to disintegrate fast.

The strategic atmosphere also underwent a major change in the Indian Ocean region. The United States of America emerged as the sole superpower, as newly emerged Russia was too preoccupied with her own problems and China was also just beginning to develop into a major economic and military power, but had not quite reached there.

During the cold-war, the countries of the Indian ocean region had been subject to the competition and rivalry between the two super powers. The post-Cold War era saw the region becoming less stable, with much rivalry, competition, suspicion and turmoil. Moreover, the maritime security environment in the Indian Ocean also underwent transformation. Because of weak government structures and a limited capacity to control maritime domains, all types of illicit activities began to flourish in many parts of the Indian Ocean.

The end of cold-war was accompanied by an economic upswing specially in India which initiated a process of big ticket economic reforms and liberalisation. China was also making rapid economic strides around the same time. Therefore, a new focus was brought upon the Indian Ocean region as an arena featuring important sea lines of communication SLOCs and maritime trade protection specially in the context of the flow of oil.

This paper would discuss India's maritime concerns in 1990's in the post-cold war era and how it impacted India's foreign relations sometimes bringing in paradigm shift in India's foreign policy.

1. Introduction

The strategic atmosphere of the world in general and that of the Indian Ocean region in particular underwent a major change in the 1990s, the biggest determinant being the disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and the consequent end of the cold-war. The constituent republics of the former USSR became independent and the Warsaw pact or the communist block began to disintegrate fast. In more than one ways, the world politics witnessed the emergence of the United States as the sole super power of the world, as Russia was too preoccupied with its predicament.

During the cold-war, the countries of the Indian ocean region had been subject to the competition and rivalry between the two super powers. The post-Cold War era saw the region becoming less stable, with much rivalry, competition, suspicion and turmoil. Moreover, the maritime security environment in the Indian Ocean also underwent transformation. "Because of weak government structures and a limited capacity to control maritime domains, all types of illicit activities began to flourish in many parts of the Indian Ocean."¹

Don Berlin has identified 4 principal trends in the post-cold war period based on the analysis of the complex maritime security systems in the Indian Ocean region:

- Efforts of the United States and its international partners—India, Australia, Japan, Singapore, UK and Canada to maintain and expand their authority in the

Indian Ocean and achieve key strategic objectives— attempts to hinder the power and influence of countries like China, Iran and Russia; to protect secure access to energy resources and to counter terrorism and other security threats.

- Endeavour by countries such as China, Iran, Pakistan and to some extent Russia to strengthen their positions in the Indian Ocean region to increase their ability to counter the potential threats that may be posed by the US-aligned states.
- The third trend is related to the activities of the littoral states which are concerned with the national or regional maritime security in relation to specific rivals within their own sub-regions. This is evident from the many maritime boundary disputes and jurisdictional claims in the IOR.
- "Another trend is indicated by the efforts of IOR states to manage the large variety of transnational and non-traditional threats they face, including environmental challenges, fishing infringements, smuggling and trafficking, piracy and the security of offshore installations."²

The end of Cold-War was accompanied by an economic upswing specially in India which initiated a process of big ticket economic reforms and liberalisation. China was also making

¹ TD Potgieter, 'THE INDIAN OCEAN: STRATEGIC CONTEXT AND EMINENCE', ISS Paper no.236, Institute of Security Studies, Nairobi, August 2012, p.1.

² IBID, pp.2-3.

rapid economic strides around the same time. Therefore, a new focus was brought upon the Indian Ocean region as an arena featuring important sea lines of communication SLOCs and maritime trade protection specially in the context of the flow of oil. "The focus, therefore, changed to ensuring a secure maritime environment that emphasized control of SLOCs to ensure protection of maritime trade and shipping as well as for exploitation of maritime resources in the region."³ For littorals like India, it also meant "security of infrastructure and other assets in the maritime zones and the littoral related to the extraction, transportation and reception of domestic energy resources."⁴

Emergence of new partnerships in the post Cold-War period

India's strategic concerns also underwent a paradigm shift as a result of these happenings. Former Soviet Union, India's old and most trusted ally was no longer there to support her on international fora and her most dependable source of sophisticated advanced weaponry dried up fast. Russia was virtually under the thumb of United States and was reluctant to honour its commitment to India against her wishes. The case in point is the Russia going back on its commitment on transfer of cryogenic engine technology to India.⁵

India and China also briefly saw convergence of strategic interests in the wake of the break up of Soviet Union and the consequent emergence of the United States as the sole superpower of the world. However, as relations between the two largest democracies of the world namely India and the US began to strengthen, India increasingly recognised the Chinese threat to her security and began building strategic partnerships with the countries of the western block.

China became increasingly more than ever important in the Indian strategic calculus. Due to her rapid economic progress and enhancement in international prestige, China became a strong and potential candidate for a world superpower in the coming years. There had been reports about Chinese intentions to reach the Indian Ocean through Myanmar. She had already opened the centuries old Silk Route, which made her accessible to the coastal areas of Myanmar and there were strong possibilities of China having acquired a trading base on the East Coast of Myanmar. There had been reports about China constructing a military base at Hangyi on the East Coast of Myanmar. Indian Strategic thinkers viewed the Chinese attempts at reaching Indian Ocean with suspicion and their worst fears came true in the coming years. It may well have been the prelude to the Chinese naval presence in the Bay of

Bengal, which could be quite hazardous to the Indian Maritime security in general and the security of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands in particular.

China had long been a well-recognised nuclear power and possessed the capacity to launch nuclear warheads from submarines. It was in this context that R.R. Subramaniam argued for the need for India to go nuclear and explore the option to develop its missile capabilities to pose a counter threat to the Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean.

He further says that in view of the secret understanding between China and Pakistan and the supply of arms and nuclear technology by the former to the latter, India faces a grave threat to her security both on land and at sea. This makes it imperative upon the Indian armed forces to have a nuclear deterrent as well as advanced delivery systems to counter the above-mentioned threats.

As far as India's relations with neighbour countries is concerned, she was further able to build up her strong relationship with south Asian countries except Pakistan. India also forged a closer relationship with the ASEAN countries as a part of the 'Look east' policy of the Indian government.

The early 1990's also witnessed advent of regional interactions such as South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation SAARC and Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation IOR-ARC. However, due to colonial and cold-war legacies these forums could not develop into strong regional bodies.

India's role as a stabiliser in the Indian Ocean region

During the cold-war era, India was seen by the west as a Soviet ally, which restricted the maritime discourse in India. Indian Naval prowess was first recognised in the 1971 war. However, role of India's Navy as a stabilizer in the region was recognized only after the 1988 Maldives operation and operations in Somalia from 1992-94.⁶ "This was also bolstered by certain facts:

- The sine wave curve relation of the US with Pakistan.
- That India had good relations with most of its neighbours and was seen as a powerful ally and stable nation by them.

That India provided assistance only when invited and therefore had no hegemonic interests."

³ Parmar Sarabjeet Singh, *The Maritime Dimension in India's National Strategy* in Princy Marine George and V. Krishnappa (ed), *Grand Strategy for India 2020 and Beyond*, Pentagon Security International, New Delhi, 2012.

⁴ Khurana, Gurpreet, 'The Maritime Dimension of India's Energy Security', *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 31, No. 4, July 2007, p. 585.

⁵ 'How India's cryogenic programme was wrecked', *Russia Beyond* https://www.rbth.com/blogs/2013/12/04/how_indias_cryogenic_programme_was_wrecked_31365

⁶ In November 1988, a coup to overthrow the Maldivian government of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom was thwarted by the intervention of the Indian Armed Forces. The assistance was provided on the request of the Maldivian President. The coup leader and other members were apprehended by an Indian Naval ship on the high seas after a coordinated maritime search for the vessel they were escaping in. In Somalia, the Indian Navy was used extensively to evacuate the Indian Brigade operating under the UN flag there. This was the first instance in the history of the UN that an Asian naval force had been used for such a task.

India's strategy vis-à-vis the United States of America

The end of the Cold War also posed the challenge for India of adapting its strategy to balance between a US-dominated world as well as a multipolar environment. Therefore, India's grand strategy concentrated on two important and seemingly contradictory objectives.

- First she sought to enter into a new partnership with Washington in order to limit the vulnerabilities she saw in a unipolar world dominated by the US,
- The second objective was to promote the construction of a multipolar world with India as one of the poles.⁷

Impact on India's navy

The 1990s saw a major setback to the modernisation and expansion plans of the navy due largely to the disintegration of the erstwhile Soviet Union and insufficient funding for the navy. It disrupted the transfer of spare parts of the sophisticated arms to the navy during the 1990-92 periods. Since the production of arms was distributed throughout the erstwhile Soviet Union, continued supply would no longer depend on a single centre of power, but on a number of new states. The spares' situation became somewhat better in the following years in view of the establishment of direct links with the manufacturing units of the Commonwealth of Independent States the CIS, the modification of procurement procedures to deal with the high rate of inflation and in some cases, the provision of hard currency payments.⁸

The severity of the crisis, however, can be gauged from the extent of dependence on Soviet supplies. In early 1995 25 of the navy's principal combatants, nearly 2/3, were of Soviet origin, as the 15 conventional submarines and 10 surface combatants.⁹ A number of corvettes, missile boats and land-based maritime reconnaissance planes, that is, maritime reconnaissance and ship-based anti-submarine warfare helicopters were also built in the erstwhile Soviet Union. In addition, the missile systems aboard these vessels and the Indian-built Godavari-class frigates and Khukri-class corvettes originate from the erstwhile Soviet Union. Moreover, according to the United Nations register on conventional arms, India did not acquire a single warship from any foreign source in the 1992-95 period.¹⁰ From 1995 to the end of the decade as well not a single warship was transferred from abroad other than an old Leander-class training ship from Britain and a fleet tanker from Russia. Also during those 10 years or so the navy did not commission a single effective principal surface combatant from India or abroad.¹¹

In a marked contrast, Pakistan was the 5th largest recipient of warships in the world and 2nd largest after Indonesia in the

Indian Ocean region in the 1992-95 period according to the United Nations register on arms. 6 of its 7 warships were acquired from the two main sources, Britain and the Netherlands. Although these 6 type-21 frigates were fitted with only 4.5 inch guns at the time of transfer, they were subsequently armed with Harpoon anti-ship missiles to effectively enhance their combat capability. Moreover 4 new type-053 frigates were also expected to be acquired from the China Ship-building Corporation in a joint venture between the two countries.¹²

Meanwhile, in mid 1993 China signed a major arms deal with Russia for 4 and possibly as many as 10 Kilo-class submarines¹³ till early 1996 2 had been received with the remainder to follow soon.

Especially since the early 1990s a consensus was emerging from within a wide variety of political parties for the need to modernise and expand the navy. As early as 1992 for example, an Estimates Committee report in parliament singled out the navy to describe its varied aspects of warfare and the necessity of a comprehensive assessment to determine its force level.¹⁴ Amongst its recommendations for the government the report stated: "defence policy must take a greater note of the emergent threats to the country from air and sea and must be reshaped to safeguard growing economic and maritime interests of the country. For this purpose, greater attention needs to be paid in future plans towards modernisation of the air force and the navy."¹⁵

A year and a half later the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence went further by stating: "keeping in view our maritime obligations, the present size of our navy has been stated to be just adequate. However, sufficient number of modern vessels with commensurate mobility and armament need to be ensured so that the navy can discharge its primary roles of protecting our long coastline and sea lanes."¹⁶

Notwithstanding such popular perceptions, major trends in force levels, budgetary allocations and warship construction programs suggest the opposite that of the low priority for naval modernisation and expansion.¹⁷ The estimated decrease in the number of principal combatants from 1995 was unprecedented in the history of navy since independence.

Moreover, in terms of the total fleet including patrol and coastal combatants and auxiliaries only 26 warships had been commissioned in the 1990-96 period, an average of just 4 every year.¹⁸ This is in marked contrast to the admission of the Ministry of Defence that in order to maintain a fleet of 120 ships

⁷ C. Raja Mohan and Ajai Sahni, 'India's Security Challenges at Home and Abroad', The National Bureau of Asian Research, Special Report #39, May 2012, p. 28.

⁸ The Ministry of Defence, Defence Policy Planning And Management, Standing Committee on Defence, 6th Report, 10th Lok Sabha, 1995-96, 8 March 1996, pp. 32-33.

⁹ Rahul Roy Chaudhuri, 'Indian Navy: Past, Present And Future', Asian Strategic Review, 1995-96, pp. 98.

¹⁰ Rahul Roy Chaudhuri, 'Trends In Major Naval Arms Transfers In The Indian Ocean Region', Strategic Analysis, March 1996, pp. 1700.

¹¹ Op. Cit. P. 1701.

¹² Op. Cit. PP. 1696-99.

¹³ James Fighting Ships, 1996-97, (1996), pp. 116.

¹⁴ Ministry of Defence, 'Defence Forces, Levels, Manpower, Management And Policy', Estimates Committee, 19th Report, 10th Lok Sabha 1992-93, 20 August 1992, pp. 201-04.

¹⁵ Op. Cit. p.59(a).

¹⁶ Ministry of Defence, 'Demands For Grants 1994-95', Standing Committee On Defence, 2nd Report, 10th Lok Sabha 1994-95, April 1994, pp. 9.

¹⁷ Rahul Roy Chaudhuri, 'Indian Navy: Past, Present And Future', Asian Strategic Review, 1995-96, IDSA New Delhi, pp. 98-99.

¹⁸ James Fighting Ships 1996-97, 1995, pp. 287-303.

an average rate of 6 ships per year needed to be sanctioned to meet the replacement program of the navy. More importantly in order "to maintain force levels commensurate with the increased responsibilities and consistent with the threat perceptions, there would be need to commission an average of 8 ships per year to sustain the force levels".¹⁹ In effect therefore, during the first half of the decade only half the number of ships required were commissioned.

Meanwhile since 1988 a major expansion of the Pakistani Navy had been taken place, especially in terms of combat potential, tonnage and manpower strength.²⁰ This led to the doubling of its principal combatants by 1990-91. Its new additions specially in terms of submarines and aerial maritime strike capability, could be expected to pose a major challenge to the Indian Navy. Moreover, the Sino-Russian relationship in terms of conventional submarines was expected to strengthen in the near future.²¹

In 1996 a proposal to induct 4 new submarines was under consideration of the Indian Defence Ministry. Out of these 2 would be imported while 2 others could be indigenously constructed and would enter the service by the turn of the century. The then Minister of State for Defence N.V.M. Somu told the parliament in reply to a question that the acquisition orders of the navy would be the first in the last decade. A defence analyst observed, "it is a sign that the government after years of neglect is taking a fresh look at keeping up the offensive punch of the navy."²²

The US foreign policy in the Indian Ocean region

The end of the cold war and the disintegration of the former Soviet Union resulted in a review of the strategic priorities and responses of the sole superpower, the United States, towards Southern Asia. The rigidity of the cold war had been replaced by a flexibility and turbulence. However, it was evident that Pakistan and the Indian Ocean region, abetting the oil-rich Persian Gulf and leading to the Central Asian region, had received critical attention in the larger US scheme.²³

The passage of the Hank Brown Amendment in the US congress on 21 September 1995 by 55/45 votes, paved the way for the transfer of US \$ 368000000 military package to Pakistan that had been earlier blocked by the Pressler Amendment. The generally upbeat mood in India about the noticeable improvement in the Indo-US relationship received a setback and the sense of dismay was widespread. While the official reaction was muted, public reaction in India was predictably negative and a leading newspaper noted editorially: "the onetime waver of the Pressler Amendment marks a black chapter in what was otherwise, a positive phase in the Indo-US relations."

Yet another observed: "though American officials have tried to appease Indian reaction to this amendment, India still needs to give attention to the US motives behind this move. After all the amendment has come through at a time when Indo-US relations seemed to be heading towards a positive direction."²⁴ As seen from Washington, the Asian region now attained strategic contours along two excess: one Of economic dynamism, resource potential and the other along the nuclear non-proliferation excess. Southern Asia attains a degree of relevance on both counts and the macro view objective is provided by Henry Kissinger, who counted in the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee:

"American interests in Asia go beyond the economic realm. There is a fundamental political interest to prevent the nations of Asia from forming a block inimical to America's purposes, either because of the emergence of a hegemonical power or by ill judged American policies and pressures."²⁵

The strategic atmosphere of the south Asian Subcontinent underwent a drastic change with India conducting 5 nuclear tests from 13 May to 15 May 1998. Pakistan soon followed suit with the similar number of nuclear tests on 29 May 1998. The consequence was the US imposing economic sanctions on both countries. While the economic sanctions did not have a desired impact on India's economy, it told heavily on Pakistan, which sought to reach an understanding with the United States even at the cost of its own sovereignty.

Conclusion

The period of 1990s brought about the end of the Cold-War. This resulted in a paradigm shift in the field of international relations. This scenario played out most significantly in the case of South Asia. Traditional adversaries came closer and became more and more friendly. The growing relationship between India and the US is a case in point. On one hand, India assumed more and more importance in the strategic calculus of USA, and on the other, Pakistan started losing its importance also partly because of its growing proximity with the Jehadi elements all over the world.

During the decade, Indian Navy suffered a lot of depletion in its core strength due to its heavy dependence on the former Soviet Union for weapons and advanced technology. Pakistan was fortunate to have continued to receive military aid from various countries including the US, China, Britain and Netherland which also enhanced its naval power.

In order to meet the challenge resulting from the new strategic atmosphere in the South Asian region in 1990s the Indian navy needed to be strengthened a great deal more. Unfortunately, this was not the case and the Indian navy was passing through its worst state of Depletion of its combat power and strength totally incommensurate with its increased responsibilities. The after-effects of the situation have persisted even in the present century.

¹⁹ Ministry of Defence, 'Demand For Grants', Standing Committee on Defence, 4th Report, 10th Lok Sabha 1995-96, April 1995, pp. 15-16.

²⁰ Lt. Jasjit Singh, 'Wither The Pakistan Navy', Indian Defence Review, January 1991, pp. 132.

²¹ Rahul Roy Chaudhuri, 'Indian Navy: Past, Present And Future', Asian Strategic Review, 1995-96, pp. 106.

²² The Hindu, 19 November 1996, pp. 6.

²³ C. Uday Bhaskar, 'Southern Asia In The Post-Cold War: A Rim land Paradigm', Journal of Indian Ocean Studies, 3:3, July 1996, pp. 1.

²⁴ Op. Cit. P. 2.

²⁵ Op. Cit. PP. 3-4.