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Harnessing Indian Sea Power Post-Galwan: Considerations of Time, Space and Force

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ABSTRACT Due to the persistent adversarial nature of the Sino-Indian border environment, and because China is now a *de facto* maritime neighbour as well, India needs to examine its options of leveraging sea power. This brief analyses some fundamentals of sea control and sea denial, and examines some misconceptions about these. By using factors of time, force and space, the brief argues that while maritime economic warfare (explained as counter-value operations) against China is necessary, it is unlikely to produce the quick results and consequent overall impact on a conflict. In suggesting options, the brief recommends vigorous counter-force maritime operations in the early stages and then enhancing counter-value operations. It also outlines certain mid- and long-term options for leveraging sea power especially in the South China Sea.

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A CONFLICT "GALWANISED"?

That the skirmish in mid-June this year between the Indian Army and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) turned bloody is well-known. It is also likely that the PLA suffered heavy casualties, and perhaps more facts would emerge in the coming days. Analysts are not ruling out the possibility of more encounters involving greater firepower on both sides. As always, however, it may be more important to think about China's strategic intent, and India's options, than the tactical details that are centrestage in current conversations. This brief looks at the options and constraints for both India and China of being "maritime neighbours".

Here are some initial considerations. First, China is a significant continental and maritime adversary for India across the DIME (diplomatic, informational, military and informational) spectrum.[1] So is India for China. Both nations are users of the Indian and Western Pacific oceans and of most of the seas within. Second, the contiguous, difficult, disturbed and contested border will remain a live issue for a long time, and likely continue to be the reason for a larger conflict. As pointed out by an analyst, "the CBM [confidence-building measures] regime... of 1993 is dead."[2] Third, in case of a Sino-Indian conflict that escalates into the maritime domain, China will have great advantage in the Western Pacific. India will have to overcome such inadequacy not only in the long run, but even in the near-term.[3] China, for its part, has assiduously strengthened its maritime-strategic position across the Indian Ocean region (IOR). It may not have the leverage or the effective superiority of the Indian Navy, but the quantitative-qualitative relationships are difficult to assess in any comparison of forces.

Since 1962, this is the closest India has come to the possibility of a larger, more complex conflict. While it is true that India is not the India of 1962 and the armed forces have come a long way, the PLA of 2020 has also come a long way from the winter of '62; indeed, China has come an even longer way across the global canvas.

From ministerial announcements it seems that India's armed forces are conducting deployments and orientations as necessary.[4] In the wake of the Galwan clash, the governing assessments and the consequent framing of possible courses of action from the national strategic to the military-operational levels can rightly be made only by those in charge. While conflict is neither inevitable nor desirable for either side, readiness in all domains is necessary. Both sides can take a few tactical setbacks in stride, but a well-crafted strategy incorporates the adversary's game plan and dynamically orients to destabilise strategy. Ultimately, war is about achieving one's political objectives and foiling the adversary's. The military price required for attaining such victory may often turn out to be high.

FUNDAMENTALS MATTER

There are more specific, larger issues in the maritime dimension of a conflict between the '*Vasuki*' (a giant serpent in Hindu Buddhist

mythology) and the 'Dragon'.[5]

Both India and China are users of the sea, and both have an overarching need to establish sea control, albeit in different degrees. "Sea control denotes a condition where one is able to use a defined maritime space (in three dimensions), for a specific period of time, for one's own purpose, whilst simultaneously denying it to the adversary."[6] Space, time and force are all factors that apply here. Varying levels of sea control are necessary for protecting one's own trade in the international shipping lanes (ISLs), and for naval and joint operations involving power projection, strike warfare, and overall protection of the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs). Sea denial is adequate when one side may not need to use the sea, qualified in time and space for one's own purposes of protection of trade or for naval operations. However, denying the enemy its use is operationally and strategically beneficial and sea denial is the tasking required for forces assigned.

Chinese trade would, desirably, need to ply through much of the Indo-Pacific. Within the IOR, their need for sea control would be thwarted by the Indian Navy and other instruments like shore-based aviation and missiles. Similarly, India would need to have control over the seas to different extents depending on the circumstances. This is a requirement not only in the IOR, but in the Western Pacific littoral as well. India's growing maritime trade, and offshore energy investments would, in theory, require the country to protect them.[7] In practice, safeguarding India's trade and assets in the East and South China Seas (ECS/SCS) could be problematic in the near term and requires mid-term resolution, at the minimum. Assets that India deploys in a conflict would need to fight in an environment where the impact of PLA Navy and shore-based fighting instruments could be intense and IN's vulnerabilities would be great.

In the Second World War, for instance, Germany mounted a sustained sea denial campaign across the North Atlantic using mainly its submarines, shore-based bombers, and patrol aircraft, and to a lesser extent even "pocket" battleships like the *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz* (in the Norwegian and Northern waters).[8] Germany had no "use" of the Atlantic for trade. The Allies, on the other hand, required sea control because they needed these oceans and seas for trade and military communications, including convoys for the USSR. In the Mediterranean, however, Germany needed sea control for its military operations in North Africa and for supporting Italy. So did the Allies, initially Great Britain and then America. The time, force and space factors for control and denial dynamically changed as the situations ebbed and flowed from the belligerents' point of view.

In the Pacific theatre during the same war, the US' initial need was to organise a sea denial campaign in the Japanese and East Asian littoral. This was done through intrepid submarine deployments, long-range aviation, and smaller craft. As the campaign advanced towards the home islands of Japan, the tasks changed to sea control because US naval and military operations needed their own lines of communications. Sea denial

continued as a sub-set, having already been considered successful in the choke-hold on Japan for import of resources as well as attacks on naval SLOCS.

Today, across the Indo-Pacific, sea control requirements would dominate in time and space, and exclusively sea denial tasks much less so, except in areas close to an adversary's coast. Despite the clear distinction between sea control and sea denial, scholars and sometimes even military officers err in the nuanced differences and interdependencies of sea control and denial. Sea denial is not even "at the operational level an end in itself."[9] Neither is it "inherently defensive" at the strategic level.[10] Germany had strategic purposes in its sea denial campaign for economic strangulation and prevention of military supplies from North America to the UK; it nearly succeeded. For the allies, the time and force requirements for defending their SLOCs could not be used for offensive operations against Germany as well as Japan, nor to transfer more assets into the Mediterranean. Yet, both sea denial and sea control required navies and air power to be tactically offensive as well. The same could be said for the (mainly) submarine-led offensive on Japan to deny it resources and the possibility of reasonably safe SLOCs to the areas it had conquered. Importantly, at the strategic level, such campaigns were inherently offensive and not defensive.

A further misunderstanding is to think in terms of a Navy prioritised for sea denial *or* for sea control. Small nations with relatively small navies (Singapore, Sri Lanka or Peru, as examples) may need sea control in limited areas because they need to use the sea. Australia, a continent-size island-nation, has a big dependence on the sea for its prosperity and security. A key necessity is significant maritime capability for sea control. None of these countries would be able to protect their trade globally, or even regionally, but may need to do so in their littorals and beyond them, mainly on their own. If necessary at greater distances, coalition partners or allies would be a great help. In essence, this would be the key need for maritime cooperation to ensure freedom of trade and a certain level of security for naval operations on a cooperative basis for and on the global commons.

A consequential misconception is which types of platforms "do" sea control and which do "sea denial."[11] In many pockets, seafarers included, it is thought that submarines are for sea denial, and carriers and surface ships, especially aircraft carriers are for sea control. This was probably never true nor a clear-cut delineation. Carriers and surface ships were and ought to be used for sea denial as necessary. Likewise, submarines have become far more capable of being part of a sea control mission framework; for shore-strikes with long-range precision weapons and for power projection in direct and supporting roles as well as for acting in fairly close support of surface fleet operations as well as in ASW. Part of this capability comes through their being linked with command and control networks in or almost in real time. Submarines that are reported to be "missing" from their bases could be deployed at great distances and through their oxymoronic

"covert presence" exert significant influence on an adversary's concerns, deployments and ASW effort.[12] The PLA appreciates this well.[13] Thus, in India- China maritime clashes, sea control and denial would not be any different from the fundamentals that govern them in conflict.

NAVAL PRESENCE

Naval presence (i.e. the forward deployment of some assets in areas of interest or close to an adversary's littoral and their areas of interests) has both utility and limitations.[14] It has contextual value towards deterrence and for coercive diplomacy, though not as much as is often assumed. Presence in peacetime is different from the tasks of sea control or sea denial which are wartime tasks when one or both sides go to "battle stations." A group of surface ships off an enemy's coast showing the flag robustly may be quite effective if asymmetry exists. This is when the adversary is not a peer but much weaker, especially at countering the pressure that this force could exert.

On the other hand, presence may suddenly be problematic off a peer adversary's coast in the sudden chance of a shooting war being imminent, or finding one's units within the enemy's capability to effectively deliver ordnance on target. This is the dilemma the US Navy is wrestling with even for its powerful carrier battle groups. They may be a potentially powerful force for presence short of a shooting war, but their ability to fight in conditions of conflict will dynamically interact with what China could throw at them.

This is not a new development in naval warfare; the challenges have always been there both for a deployed Navy and a defender of its littoral. China's sea power has been developed to exercise intense attack/ counter-attack capability within the China Seas and even up to the second island chain. This used to be called the Chinese Anti-Access/ Area Denial (A2/AD) concept.[15] A2/AD is essentially Chinese sea control with sea denial inherent out to significant ranges. The PLA would not only use its deployed ships and submarines, but its land-based aviation, missiles, intelligence/ surveillance reconnaissance (ISR) capacity and even the islands it has created for itself in the SCS. This does not mean that China and the PLA is bound to prevail in war; merely that it would be a tough fight for all belligerents.

Of course, if one side has chosen to go to war, it could leverage presence via deployments in a manner where it can strike early and strike hard. As in several other missions, submarines would prove to be useful platforms. Although they take time to deploy and in some straits cannot remain dived, they can be deadly in their offensive deployment areas off an enemy's coast or in their areas of interest, especially where other types of units could initially be at some disadvantage.

Although "presence" is specifically thought of as leverage in a naval sense, in essence it is similar to forward army deployments and patrolling, or a small number of aircraft in readiness at forward air bases. They can be quite useful for keeping an eye, reacting to provocations and quick tactical response.

In some cases, they can be inadequate and vulnerable if the adversary strikes hard and suddenly. For naval assets deployed far away, challenges do exist even if there are opportunities that could be exploited. In sum, time and space are important resources that presence demands, but there may be limits to what actual force may be wielded when circumstances change from peace, to high tension and conflict.

ECONOMIC WARFARE

Historically, navies were first raised by states to protect their own trade from pirates.[16] Protecting one's own commerce on oceanic highways and disrupting an enemy's trade remain major tasks for sea power's application. Yet, a few misconceptions persist in the general discourse about the impact of economic strangulation of an adversary through choking of their trade that moves along changed SLOCs. These are that, first, this is the best lever that Indian sea power has; and, second, trade is China's jugular.[17] While of themselves these may be true, there are limitations in the context of time, force and space.

First, interdicting an enemy's shipping—ship by important ship—would be necessary from the beginning of a conflict.[18] It is not something that can be done in conditions of peace. Likewise, the enemy would likely be doing something similar to one's own trade. As a corollary, studies have shown that maritime trade warfare has *always* taken long to gain traction and begin the strangulation process.[19]

Second, due to information and understanding of "white shipping"[20] as well as the global information sharing that is now available, more efficient targeting is possible to some extent at least in the opening days of a conflict. Of course, white-shipping information may reduce substantially in conflict. Thereafter, it is possible that cyber-warfare, legal and political-diplomatic complications might constrain options for the extent of SLOC interdiction. The complex nature of the constituents of international trade in terms of flag state, ownership, charter nation—but also of crew composition, cargo destinations, financiers, insurance and subsequent outcomes—all need to be factored in while waging economic warfare.

Third, there is too much to target. A reality often not considered adequately by navies is that the numbers of merchant ships have grown manifold from about 12,000 ships totaling 57 million DWT in 1939 to about 90,000 ships carrying of 1.75 billion DWT in 2016.[21] This puts heavy demands on operational and tactical factors of space, time and force. Further, sea-borne trade itself has gone up. For instance, in 1980, trade was about 3,800 MT; in 2016, it was over 10,000 MT (million tonnes loaded).[22]

Fourth, forces required in terms of ships and submarines (aided by aircraft), that could stop, board, commandeer or sink an adversary's ships in the Second World War are much lower today than were available then. The US had almost 6,700 ships in that war, with far fewer merchant ships that were serving Germany and Japan to attack

and sink. Moreover, this was in a war where unrestricted trade warfare was largely the order of the day. Today, the USN is far short of its target of 355 ships. In contrast, as of 2018, China had 2,112 merchant ships and an addition of 2,185 registered in Hong Kong.[23]

Fifth, "choking" if it happens, is slow. The eventual economic strangulation of Germany in the First World War created a significant influence on German politics, society and wartime decision-making especially from 1917. This happened through careful preparation by the Royal Navy and a good measure of what would today be called a 'whole-of-government' approach.[24] It is counted as among the fastest "choking" campaigns that started taking hold only after nearly 18 months of little effect. World War II historian Nicholas Lambert writes, "Corbett could agree with Mahan that economic pressure was unlikely to produce decisive results quickly."[25]

Sixth, that economic pressure on a nation or coalition takes long should come as no surprise. There are no quick fixes, as a fairly recent study on maritime economic warfare points out, and success is not pre-ordained.[26] Even beyond the realm of conflict, where pain can be inflicted by the use of violence, peacetime measures of economic sanctions, sea or even air blockades by some other name and even "trade wars" (as between Washington and Beijing) all take months and years to show effect.[a] The measures are at times double-edged in outcomes and the second-order consequences sometimes harmful and troublesome to the initiating nation's interests.

Seventh, a problem in the discourse—to which navies may be contributing to—is that quick results through consequences are assumed *a priori*. [27]Indeed, "loss-of-face" is not a uniquely Chinese characteristic; or that it would lead to predictable consequences and deployment of overwhelming force.[28]

Nations and societies have repeatedly shown tremendous resilience in adapting to economic and physical deprivation, especially in war. The impact of sea power through strangulation of trade, or of air power through general or even widespread precision bombing has always taken longer than the *a prioiri* optimism of its effects. As the strategist, the late Colin Gray pointed out, "The theory of strategic air power is only flawed if one elects to identify it strictly with the overstated claims of some classical writers on air power."[29] The general stoicism which nations and societies have shown in the

a US President Trump's start of a trade war with China has not really succeeded as much as his administration said it would. He imposed tariffs, banned some imports, tightened intellectual property regulations, exerted diplomatic pressure on preventing currency manipulation, etc. For example, see, Philip H. Gordon, " What Should come After Trump's Failed china Policy, Commentary , 06 July 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/07/what-should-come-after-trumps-failed-china-policy/

face of the global health crisis and economic mayhem due to the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates that human, governmental and societal morale is higher than can be easily appreciated; that adversity can consolidate resolve and even enhance morale. As in war, it takes a lot of time, force and space for an adversary or adverse circumstances to change that. Therefore, the seven inferences of maritime economic warfare remain important while considering options.

INDIA'S OPTIONS

In case the window of opportunity for attaining Indian political and military-strategic objectives is envisioned to be relatively small in terms of time, it may be helpful to begin by weighing options between counter-value (CV) and counter-force (CF) tasks.[30] By its nature, land power is predominantly structured and deployed for CF missions to achieve operational and strategic objectives, while air power and sea power do both.[31] Land power becomes critical in CV in terms of overwhelming an adversary's cities and their "heartland", but they are achieved by overcoming CF objectives.

Briefly, CV missions are designed to degrade an enemy's war-waging potential; CF for the more direct and immediate war-making potential. "CV and CF are usually simultaneous and complimentary, except under asymmetry wherein (that side's) air power and sea power are largely unchallenged, CF could be a sequel to CV. In a Sino-Pak (peer level) scenario, this would rarely obtain for India."[32] (In this brief, only a scenario of a possible conflict with China is examined. A two-front war wherein Pakistan also weighs in with China merits a separate examination.) Determining the variable weights on a daily basis between CV and CF is best done by those in charge of strategic planning, operational execution and tactical fighting. Here, this brief only makes some broad inferences which could be relevant for the possibility of escalation in the current "*Galwanic*" environment, but may remain important for the mid- term as well:

First, by prioritising and positioning for CF, the Indian Navy and other instruments would impact on the maritime space in a more effective way to create military pressure at a higher pace in consonance with the momentum of the air-land battle in the zone of conflict. Escalatory dynamics have to be leveraged and the benefits of faster attainment of one's own political objectives, or foiling an enemy's appreciated political objectives could be outlined to the national leadership. More effective use and the threat of further use of air power and sea power, could, in some cases have de-escalatory benefits for India. However, there are no easy or set-piece situations and answers in these choices. The enemy always has a strategy too, combined probably with equally clever stratagem as well.

Second, CF application in the Chinese littoral is not currently easy. The Chinese navy deploys its submarines in the IOR frequently and for significant durations.[33] One cannot second-guess what the IN may be doing in this matter, but advantages and

impact would be similar. Moreover, there can really be no perfect submarine force level for this to happen. Few platforms would impact on tying down an adversary's forces, and ASW resources over relatively large spaces and large slices of time than submarines.

Third, at the operational and tactical levels of warfare, India should plan its mission well. Indian sea power can ensure this to a great extent in many parts of the IOR since time, space and force considerations favour the country. There are no assurances, however, and China has already invested in improving its force, time, space constraints via potentially credible base support; politico-diplomatic influence in some nations; and ever increasing operational-tactical ISR as well as long-range precision ordnance capabilities delivered by non-naval instruments.

Finally, robust response and raw courage are vital. Yet, at the same time, there is value in carrying a gun to a knife fight, as the Americanism preaches. In warfare at sea, a comment by naval officer and historian, Admiral Goldrick, while examining the poor performance of the Royal Navy in WW I in contrast to WW II, remains important: "The Battle of the River Plate, the Altmark Incident, and the first and second Battles of Narvik were only the start of a record of calculated aggression, and a sustained demonstration that strategic defence requires tactical offensiveness to be truly effective, and which warmed the hearts of the most discontented from the previous conflict."[34] Warfare at sea at the tactical level is not going to be easy nor light in casualties. The IN demonstrated its skill and daring in 1971, as such the last time when India's sailors were in an active war, where opportunities and threats at sea were considerable. Action at sea for CF is likely to occur with suddenness and violence as it always has, but the virtue of tactical offensiveness cannot be overstated.

MID- AND LONG-TERM OPTIONS

The areas where Indian sea power could progress to become more future-ready are described elsewhere by this author.[35] A few points are highlighted here:

First, friends, coalition partners, places and bases would be vital for the efficiency with which *Varuna's* trident could be deployed across peace and conflict not only for India but for friends and partners for mutually beneficial order at sea. In conflict, the advantages are obvious but ensuring that it is so requires effective statecraft.

Second, at a minimum, and perhaps even in the nearer term, the Quad or an expanded Quad, needs to transform itself into a credible multi-domain militarily capable arrangement. It could progress to some kind of an economic bloc, aid giver, and infrastructure management agency. Its real value would be in building pressure on China, not so much in imitating it.

Finally, in terms of a naval transformation, "future-readiness" will require far greater indigenisation, different instruments, better multi-domain integration and joint war-

fighting outputs. Surely, current hardware would need to be used creatively and boldly, but force structuring should emerge from the linkages of strategy with force planning. Consequently, force acquisition, which is process-driven, becomes much simpler.

A recent media report seemed to suggest that a high-level committee has advised the government to "Use Indian Navy to Pile Pressure on China".[36] It has a few excellent recommendations for the medium term. However, on two issues, the pointers do not seem to rest on the rationale of what sea control and sea denial really are. For instance, the quoted point of "aggressively impose sea denial in the Indian Ocean" seems to suggest this as an option when a state of conflict does not yet exist.[37] As also explained, India's need is for sea control in most parts of the oceans including in the Western Pacific, difficult as it seems presently. Sea denial is inherent in sea control. Neither should the Indian Navy look at these through the inaccurate lens of tying either of these to say carriers for sea control and submarines for sea denial. The second pointer relates to China's dependence on the sea lanes in the IOR (which is correct, of course). To reiterate, the media report phrases this as "threaten Chinese shipping in the Indian Ocean."[38]

Certainly, interdiction of an adversary's shipping would be carried out even while recognising that it is a costly and slow process. Further, it is a measure that can be put into place only in conflict. Certainly it is available as an option, to even escalate a tense border stand-off into a wider conflict but there would be better, more sudden and far more effective options to escalate and gain rapid operational and strategic advantage using air power and land power in conjunction for counter-force operations. To reiterate—sea control and sea denial are wartime missions in declared or undeclared conflicts just as active maritime economic warfare would be.

Simultaneously, the Navy would strike out on its own initial CF tasks to substantially degrade PLA Navy ships and submarines in the IOR. Seizure of their merchant ships would also commence but India should be careful not to over-interpret its immediate impact. Time, space and force factors would always be relevant. At the same time, China would do what it might have planned for its own CV and CF tasks. In the Western Pacific, India would have CV setbacks and the mid- and long-term recommendations need serious consideration. Options exist for both belligerents to reroute/ halt/ postpone ship transits; and to convoy one's own ships.

It is likely that naval budget allocations have declined significantly in the past few years because, unwittingly, naval leadership as well as analysts may have made the difficult tasks of the application of sea power look easy. In an atmosphere where "irrational exuberance"[39] brings some relief, it might be that the confidence given to policymakers that economic warfare may be the quick answer and most effective strategic linchpin, has resulted in lesser funds for the Navy. If anything, the Indian Navy needs much better fiscal support to become far more effective in power-projection, sea

control and sea denial. This would give it the range of options to use its several tools across these missions when conflict is nigh and at the minimum, the Indo-Pacific is the canvas for fighting the fight. There is some danger, otherwise of the Indo-Pacific being yet another somewhat empty term, especially at the most critical time. At other times, strong sea power, when combined with the other domains in joint warfighting contributes to deterrence itself.

One could end by quoting Mahan from his 1890 book that set him on the road to strategic fame. It still seems to ring true:

"There was an impression largely held by French officers of that day, and yet more widely spread in the United States now, of the efficacy of commerce-destroying as a main reliance in war, especially when directed against a commercial country like Great Britain. It is doubtless a most important secondary operation of naval war, and it is not likely to be abandoned till war itself shall cease; but regarded as a primary and fundamental measure, sufficient in itself to crush an enemy, it is probably a delusion, and a most dangerous delusion, when presented in the fascinating garb of cheapness…"[40]

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

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7 Vijay Gokhale, *Indian Express*,

8 The impact of these expensive battleships was marginal at best especially due to the money, steel and time they consumed in building, and the very large crews they required. After the *Bismark's* loss in the North Atlantic , Tirpitz was deployed with excessive caution and eventually sunk in its haven.

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10 White, 101.

11 Suyash Desai, " India's Approach to the Indian Ocean: From Sea Control to Sea Denial", *The Diplomat*, March 09, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/indias-approach-to-the-indian-ocean-region-from-sea-control-to-sea-denial/. Also see, *Economic Times*, Dec 03, 2018 "Navy Looking at Inducting 56 Warships and Submarines", https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/navy-looking-at-inducting-56-warships-and-submarines-admiral-lanba/articleshow/66917971.cms

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