Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-first Century

**James R. Holmes,
Andrew C. Winner and
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This is the first academic study of India's emerging maritime strategy, and offers a systematic analysis of the interplay between Western military thought and Indian maritime traditions.

By a quirk of historical fate, Europe embarked on its Age of Discovery just as the main Asian powers were renouncing the sea, ushering in centuries of Western dominance. In the twenty-first century, however, Asian states are once again resuming a naval focus, with both China and India dedicating some of their new found wealth to building powerful navies and coast guards, and drawing up maritime strategies to govern the use of these forces. The United States, like the British Empire before it, is attempting to manage these rising sea powers while preserving its maritime primacy.

This book probes how India looks at the sea, what kind of strategy and seagoing forces New Delhi may craft in the coming years, and how Indian leaders may use these forces. It examines the material dimension, but its major premise is that navies represent a physical expression of a society's history, philosophical traditions, and culture. This book, then, ventures a comprehensive appraisal of Indian maritime strategy.

This book will be of interest to students of sea power, strategic studies, Indian politics and Asian studies in general.

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1   Everything old is new again

Naval historian Paul Kennedy calls attention to a curious disjunction between Western and Asian thought about the sea. Or rather, he unearths the latest in a series of coincidences and discontinuities involving Western and Asian sea power. Fifteenth-century China provided the setting for one such quirk of fate. The Ming Dynasty dismantled Adm. Zheng He's "treasure fleet," the world's most formidable navy, after the fleet had completed seven triumphal voyages of diplomacy, trade, and exploration in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Some combination of imperial succession, factional strife at court, and nomadic threats along the northern frontier of the empire prompted this conscious reversal of China's maritime fortunes.[1] The Dragon Throne ordained an end to seafaring pursuits, ultimately outlawing the construction of oceangoing vessels.

Kennedy might have added that India had likewise abandoned the sea, and it did so a century before Zheng He's day. In an effort to halt the outflow of human capital, Hindu rulers forbade their subjects to sail beyond the immediate environs of the subcontinent. Retired Indian Adm. Rakesh Chopra declares that by the fourteenth century:

> Quasi-religious orders prohibited Indians from making voyages overseas ostensibly to stem the brain drain of Indian mathematicians and philosophers migrating to Baghdad, the silicon valley of the times. Seaborne trade passed into the hands of the Arabs…. Shipping was scrapped except for coastal forces to police adjoining seas and suppress piracy.[2]

By happenstance, Europe launched into its Age of Discovery just as Asia renounced the sea. Vasco da Gama dropped anchor in the Indian seaport of Calicut scant decades, the blink of an eye in historical terms, after the final cruise of the Ming treasure fleet.[3] Unopposed by Asian battle fleets, European mariners – Portuguese, Dutch, French, British – opened up new vistas for commerce, cultural interchange, and conquest among the ancient societies populating the Pacific and Indian Ocean basins. Asian sea powers relinquished regional seaways to outsiders, ushering in an era of Western dominance that lasted well into the twentieth century.[4]

If one accident of maritime history opened the era of Western dominance in Asia, another closed it. "Was it just a coincidence," asks Kennedy, "that the new

but fast-growing states of Germany, Japan, Italy, and the United States 'came of age' at the same time, after 1870 or so?"[5] Great Britain's Royal Navy ruled the waves for much of the nineteenth century, only to see its margin of dominance dwindle with the rise of industrious, sea-power-minded challengers. Unable to sustain its vaunted "Two-Power Rule," which mandated keeping up a Royal Navy bigger than the combined fleets of its next two most powerful rivals, Britain struck diplomatic bargains with two of the new contenders, the United States and Japan. These arrangements allowed the Royal Navy to pull back from Asian and American waters, concentrating on the third contender, Imperial Germany, whose shipwrights were bolting together a High Seas Fleet across the North Sea.[6] Unlike the Ming emperors, the British did not turn their backs on the sea. They sought to gracefully manage their relative decline vis-à-vis two rival sea powers while husbanding resources for eventual conflict with the third.[7]

And today? Paul Kennedy detects another historical oddity. The Asian nations are gaining new stature in international affairs owing to swift industrial and economic growth. New Delhi and Beijing are dedicating some of their newfound wealth to powerful navies and coast guards, and drawing up maritime strategies to govern the use of these forces. At the same time, America's "unipolar moment" of unrivaled diplomatic, economic, and military supremacy is evidently nearing its end.[8] It is an open question how long the United States can sustain its naval primacy in Asia as unchecked shipbuilding costs drive down the size of its fleet. One pundit, Robert Kaplan, wonders whether the United States, like Great Britain before it, is now trying to manage its "elegant decline" as the world's leading sea power. Europe, meanwhile, seems to have lost interest in naval power altogether, allowing navies that once bestrode the world's oceanic thoroughfares to atrophy.

Are India and China, like nineteenth-century Japan, Germany, and America, destined to reconfigure the international system, including its nautical component? In this book we probe how Indians look at the sea, considering what kind of maritime strategy and forces New Delhi may craft in the coming years and to what ends Indian leaders will deploy these forces. We analyze the material component of Indian maritime strategy in some detail, examining quantifiable evidence such as weapons systems, infrastructure, and doctrine and strategy statements. Our major premise, however, is that navies represent a physical expression of strategic thought, and thus indirectly of a society's political and strategic culture. History, ingrained habits and attitudes, and philosophical traditions determine how a nation-state's leadership will use military might and the other implements of national power, and for what purposes. While necessary, then, the standard approach to net assessment is insufficient to let outsiders fully appreciate how the Indian maritime establishment transacts business and how it may evolve in the coming years and decades.

In a very real sense, this book represents a foray into the "lessons of history" – that is, an effort to determine how a foreign people and their leaders interpret and apply insights from their own experience, absorb insights from external sources, and deploy the ships, aircraft, and submarines comprising their seagoing forces under different circumstances. This is not a static inquiry, for maritime South Asia

is not a region at equilibrium. Indeed, one of our main purposes is to estimate how various external stimuli may push Indian maritime strategy this way or that. By anticipating possible futures for Indian sea power, outsiders can react more wisely to it, fashioning effective strategies of their own. As the Chinese theorist Sun Tzu observed, knowledge of oneself and prospective competitors is central to wise strategy.

Forethought by all parties interested in Indian Ocean affairs can help the region navigate the historical discontinuity revealed by Paul Kennedy, improving prospects for regional tranquility and prosperity. It is important at the outset to offer some qualifications and caveats about this mode of study. These disclaimers relate in part to the nature of history as a predictor of future events and a guide to policy and strategy, and in part to India's distinctive society and strategic culture. First, history is an inexact indicator at best of how the future will unfold. With apologies to George Santayana, neither those who learn from history nor those who ignore it will repeat history. As the American humorist Mark Twain reportedly quipped, "History doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes." Quite so. Historians rightly balk at generalizing from past to future because they discern intricacies that can never be replicated. Innumerable factors interpose themselves, sending events off along unforeseeable tangents.

In a similar bleak vein, military historian Michael Howard pronounces some understanding of past events "indispensable," but he too scoffs at the notion that historical inquiry can reveal fixed laws of human events.[9] Hypotheses about historical causation "may illuminate our judgment, but they can never take its place." Howard takes social scientists to task for this. In his view, they

> Often and understandably lose patience with historians who are reluctant to translate [historical insight] into precise recommendations or formulate from it general laws, and themselves seek to provide more direct techniques of guidance.... But in formulating laws that will be either predictive or normative social scientists have been no more successful than historians; for the number of variables is so incalculable, the data so incomplete.[10]

In some cases, new data about events come to light over time, demanding that accepted interpretations be rethought. In others, so many data are available that analysts "have to be rigorously selective … to make any sense of it at all." But assigning priorities to historical evidence – using some pieces of data, ranking them against one another, discarding others – can itself bias the overall judgment, for the analyst is part of the process. While historians strive for objective distance from their subject, says Howard, "we know we cannot find it, and I am afraid we mistrust those of our colleagues in the social sciences who believe that they can."[11] He warns scholars and practical statesmen not to extrapolate too confidently from incomplete or faulty evidence.

Second, history is difficult to grasp. If empathizing with one's contemporaries is difficult, it is even more so when engaging with past events, personalities, and societies. Michael Howard, accordingly, urges students of history to consider the

past "a foreign country," displaying its own matrix of beliefs, traditions, and cultural idiosyncrasies.[12] This applies to the recent past of one's own society and to societies from the distant past alike. Gaining entry to that "foreign country" is a daunting task. This especially true of India, a civilization within a nation-state whose history spans millennia, which is heir to cultural attributes and philosophical traditions that coexist uneasily, and which – paradoxically – is a relative newcomer to republican self-government.

Third, history is influential. Historian Jacob Burckhardt once joked – or was he joking? – that only "Barbarians and modern American men of culture live without consciousness of history."[13] For him, historical consciousness constitutes a source of identity. Without it, there is little to bind together groups and societies. In an impassioned plea on behalf of studying antiquity, he insists that modern Westerners consider themselves "the true descendants" of classical Greeks and Romans, "because their soul has passed over into us; their work, their mission, and their destiny live on in us."[14] If so – and Burckhardt's reflections find solid grounding in contemporary literature on national identity and culture – then studying one's own origins and the origins of potential international competitors and partners is an inescapable analytical task.

And finally, history is interactive. According to Burckhardt, the perpetual interplay, or "reciprocal action" as he terms it, of culture, society, religion, and state shapes history. Culture is a determinant of state and religion; religion and state are determinants of culture. Authoritarian regimes like the Roman Empire wield unusual power to advance, retard, or otherwise remake culture. Liberal regimes like classical Athens permit considerable individual liberty, but in a sense they demand more of ordinary citizens, expecting them to take a direct hand in politics. And so on. For Burckhardt, culture refers to the spontaneous activity of a people. Its "action" on state and society "is one of perpetual modification and disintegration," limited only by national leaders' efforts to press culture "into their service" and enfold it "within their aims."[15] Contrary to Western assumptions – Burckhardt inveighed against Hegel's philosophy of inexorable progress – history does not progress in linear fashion toward some final, presumably more perfect end state.[16]

This applies to the sea as well. Maritime theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan lists the indices of great sea powers, positing that "national character" is among them. He implies that some peoples exhibit an innate propensity for seaborne enterprises, others apply their energies ashore, and others find themselves torn between the terrestrial and nautical domains. While Mahan does not develop this idea fully, he suggests that culture is immutable, rooted in such basic motives as the desire for material gain.[17] Historian Peter Padfield takes issue with him on this point, declaring that geography, not inborn cultural traits, shapes a people's will to the sea.[18] The resource-poor British Isles drove Britons to the sea in search of prosperity. Commercial ventures gave rise to a mercantile class that in turn fashioned governing arrangements convivial to maritime commerce and trade. Padfield goes further, declaring that the qualities bred by seafaring culture – liberty chief among them – have helped sea powers prevail in every major trial of arms against land powers.[19] Unlike Great Britain, France had continental affairs to attend to and land frontiers

to guard. Despite the skill and élan of French mariners and shipwrights, France was never able to command the sea for long.

A few nations like the United States, the Soviet Union, and now contemporary China and India find their strategic gaze divided between land and sea, uncertain where to put the weight of their energies and resources. Mahan deprecates claims that a nation-state can rank as both a great land power and a great sea power. Judging by one important counterexample, the postwar United States, this remains an open question. It is being put to the test in China and India, continental powers that have long been absent from Asian waters but are now returning, emboldened by economic growth. Beijing and New Delhi are amassing commercial and naval fleets, overseas naval stations, and international commerce – "in a word, sea power," as Mahan puts it – with aplomb.[20]

Revisiting history informs contemporary judgment about maritime matters, then, but so many variables intersect that the only safe conclusion is the one drawn by Prussian strategic theorist Carl von Clausewitz – that "endless" complexity typifies competitive international endeavors, defying the analytical gifts even of "a Newton or an Euler."[21] With all of this in mind, we offer three postulates about Indian maritime policy and strategy:

- *New Delhi has plenty to draw on*. Indian history and culture offer a fund of historical precedents and philosophical precepts to guide Indians' strategy-making efforts. With this wealth of insights to draw on, political leaders and mariners will likely display an impressive measure of intellectual flexibility and agility as they prosecute their maritime strategy.
- *Prediction is impossible*. Not only must New Delhi synthesize coherent strategy from a multitude of strategic traditions, but India's predominantly land-bound past cannot be mapped directly to its maritime present. Historical parallels are too inexact to forecast India's seagoing future with confidence.
- *Historical analogies are not a straitjacket*. Indian leaders realize that the past, however rich, makes an uncertain guide to the present. They will not apply lessons of the past mechanically. Instead, they will use the past to refine their judgment, helping them grapple with the countless factors likely to complicate Indian Ocean affairs.

Our effort at comprehension is eminently worthwhile, then, but any findings will be imprecise. How Indians view their maritime surroundings and make policy and strategy to cope with those surroundings represents a topic that is at once of academic and policy importance – both for New Delhi and for other maritime powers entertaining ambitions in the Indian Ocean.

2 The logic of Indian maritime identity

Prussian strategic theorist Carl von Clausewitz observed that war's "grammar … may be its own, but not its logic."[1] By this, Clausewitz meant that war, the pursuit of national policy with the admixture of martial means, differed from other international interactions by virtue of its coercive nature, the impassioned environment, and a host of other factors. But war is not – or should not be – waged for its own sake. Politics gives warfare its logic, or its principles and purposes, while grammar refers to the ways and means for realizing a nation-state's political aims at sea.[2] We use this insight as an organizing device for our inquiry into Indian naval strategy. This chapter and the next examine India's "maritime identity" and "strategic culture," which will shape Indians' propensity for seafaring pursuits – giving Indian sea power its logic – while ensuing chapters probe the grammar governing New Delhi's efforts to attain the ends that Indians see as worth attaining.

Does India have a usable maritime past?

A nation-state needs a grand historical narrative to lend direction to and generate support for an assertive naval strategy. The need for such a strategy is increasingly clear to many Indian officials and pundits. Impelled by its vision of itself as a beneficent world power, its sense of external threat, and its real and growing dependence on foreign supplies of oil, natural gas, and other commodities – supplies transported predominantly by sea, originating in the nearby Persian Gulf and Horn of Africa – India has turned its strategic gaze to the seas. As it does so, it is worth asking whether India boasts what historian Henry Steele Commager calls a "usable past" sufficient to justify an ambitious, costly maritime and naval strategy to the landward-looking, exceedingly diverse Indian populace. Adm. Arun Prakash, a recently retired Indian chief of navy staff (now the head of the National Maritime Foundation) maintains that India indeed possesses a "composite cultural heritage" that provides "powerful glue" to bind together the nation, but he admits that the subcontinent's position at the juncture of Hindu, Islamic, and Sinic civilization warrants special attention.[3]

Commager recounts how early Americans, starting anew in the Western Hemisphere, went about creating a historical narrative of their own. They crafted

a heroic past, deliberately stimulating an American nationalism to bind the new republic together. And they did so with dispatch. "Nothing," writes Commager, "is more impressive than the speed and the lavishness with which Americans provided themselves with a usable past" that manifested itself in history, legends, and heroes, not to mention cultural artifacts such as paintings and patriotic ballads.[4] Adds E. H. Carr, this was a "unique event – the first occasion in history when men deliberately and consciously molded themselves into a nation, and then consciously and deliberately set out to mold other men into it."[5] It is a feat of nation building that India must replicate to enfold the seas in Indians' idea of their nation. This will demand constant attention and management on the part of Indian governments.

America's newfound, partly manufactured history and traditions left an indelible stamp on the nation's "identity," which three scholars define straightforwardly enough as its "basic character."[6] Whether the founding generation and its immediate successors intended it or not, the traits thus imparted served both international and domestic purposes, giving foreign peoples a glimpse into how the United States would conduct its affairs. Some of the central characteristics of the new republic included a reflexive dread of secular or religious tyranny, exemplified by suspicion of standing armies and a determination to constrain individual power centers; a belief that the nation possessed a special destiny, separate from that of Europe; and a conviction that the United States should shun political entanglements with the European powers that might encourage factional division and strife at home while embroiling the republic in wars inimical to its interests.[7]

The "great rule of conduct" spelled out in George Washington's famous Farewell Address urged Americans to abstain from great-power intrigues, which had at most "a very remote relation" to their interests. After the United States had consolidated its hold on North America and pursued internal development, proclaimed Washington, it would have the liberty to "choose peace or war, as our interest, guided by justice, shall counsel."[8] This all conveyed a dislike of foreign adventures while keeping open the option of an assertive foreign policy should US interests, geopolitical circumstances, and national power warrant.[9]

Despite the changes the nation underwent in ensuing decades, the image of America as a self-denying great power, generally reluctant to indulge in territorial aggrandizement or military dominion, endured into the twentieth century. It endured despite the "great aberration," to borrow Samuel Flagg Bemis's term for the spasm of US territorial acquisitions that followed the Spanish–American War.[10] To be sure, burgeoning power and Americans' sometimes high-handed attitudes grated on sentiments overseas, particularly among the United States' neighbors in Latin America.[11] Still, the image of a great power mostly free of land hunger outlived the end of the Cold War. Confounding realist predictions, no alliance or coalition has yet emerged to oppose American hegemony, even though Washington's handling of foreign policy sometimes rankles with allies and erstwhile adversaries alike.

While America possesses the means to pose a threat, its lack of any apparent deep-seated proclivity for doing so helps explain the world's muted response to

American preeminence. In short, America's identity bore – and bears – the imprint of its usable history, cultural markers, and traditions. This not only united the American people but signaled to foreign countries that, by the standards of past great powers, their republic had little zeal for power politics or territorial aggrandizement.[12] The new nation-state's identity created certain expectations about American behavior that reduced the consternation the United States' own nineteenth-century rise to great power aroused in foreign capitals. Unsurprisingly, American statesmen across the political spectrum have gone out of their way to preserve this distinctive national character.[13]

Can Indian statesmen perform a similar feat, constructing a maritime identity from India's maritime past? Whether Indian history provides New Delhi with a usable maritime past remains to be seen. As it follows its own trajectory to great sea power, New Delhi will attempt to use India's past to realign the nation's identity with today's exigencies. How effectively the Indian leadership fashions a seagoing culture, and what form that culture takes, will provide outside observers a glimpse of how India will fit into the Asian maritime order and how much success it will derive from its nautical ventures.

A cacophony – or a smorgasbord – of influences on Indian strategic thought

Like China, India is a self-contained civilization with a long, variegated past to inform present strategy. Accordingly, China furnishes a useful point of reference for analysis of Indian strategic culture. The differences are as striking as any similarities between these two rising Asian maritime powers. For a closed, authoritarian society, China allows wide latitude for strategic debate. Indeed, one of the main challenges when appraising Chinese military and naval affairs is processing the wealth of open-source documents available through such US government sources as the Open Source Center or scholarly outlets such as the World Security Institute's journal *China Security*. While there is a profusion of schools of thought on foreign policy and national security, Chinese analysts draw on a common core of strategic traditions and are frank about stating the historical and theoretical precedents they use to reach their findings.

India, a freewheeling, liberal democratic nation-state, makes an odd contrast with China in this regard. Stephen Cohen observes that, in India, "the most sensitive security issues are freely and abundantly discussed. If holding a rich variety of complex theories about peace and war is a mark of a great state, then India more than amply meets this criterion." Yet Cohen rightly adds that India can be "a remarkably opaque state" on foreign and security policy.[14] Relative to China, references to strategic theory and historical precedent are rare in Indian official and scholarly communications. This may bespeak a certain reticence about military and naval matters, or it may mean that Indians are mulling over and digesting countless lessons from their varied, exceedingly complex past. It also means that interpreting Indian maritime strategic culture

is in large part an exercise in speculation, if nonetheless an exercise worth undertaking.

Notes George Tanham in his seminal RAND essay on *Indian Strategic Thought* – an essay frequently quoted by Indian scholars and officials, even today – "Indian elites show little evidence of having thought coherently and systematically about national strategy," although he also allows that "this situation may now be changing."[15] (Tanham wrote in the early 1990s.) He further observes:

> Few writings offer coherent, articulated beliefs or a clear set of operating principles for Indian strategy. Rather, one finds a complex mix of writings, commentaries, and speeches, as well as certain actions that cast some light on Indian strategy. The lacunae and ambiguities seem compatible with a culture that encompasses and accommodates readily to complexity and contradiction. They also seem more confusing to Westerners than to Indians, who accept the complexities and contradictions as part of life.[16]

Adm. Prakash, writing in the context of India's 2007 *Maritime Military Strategy*, agrees:

> Regrettably, in India's case, we have historically suffered from an intellectual vacuum as far as strategic thinking is concerned, and that is why, after sixty years as a sovereign republic, we lack a clearly articulated statement of national aims and objectives. This is a cultural handicap which has not just deprived us of a healthy tradition of strategic debate and discourse, but also had a deleterious impact on internal security as well as foreign policy issues at the national level.[17]

We concur with Tanham and Prakash for the most part, but two additional, closely related observations seem to be in order. First, it is possible to put a more positive gloss on the apparent incoherence of Indian strategic thinking. Indian leaders confront no counterpart to the Taiwan impasse that compels quick action on their part. They can absorb and apply the lessons of the past at leisure. It could be more luxury than curse, consequently, if many traditions inform their strategy-making efforts and help them communicate their strategy to key audiences – officials, ordinary citizens – in readily intelligible language. Unlike authoritarian China, where public opinion is more tractable, the leadership in India must communicate effectively with ordinary citizens, or at least with the segment of the populace that pays regular attention to strategic matters.

Second, India is the beneficiary of a largely benign maritime strategic environment. For now, at least, the United States remains the guardian of maritime security in Asia, while China has only begun to establish a presence in the Indian Ocean region. Indians can use this strategic holiday to continue their "discovery," analysis, and interpretation of their past – devising policy and strategy that best suits their national needs and interests.[18]

Whither Indian strategic culture?

But will New Delhi use India's usable past to good effect? Political and strategic dexterity will be at a premium as New Delhi attempts to design and execute a viable naval strategy for India, an exclusively continental power during the centuries since the era of Hindu maritime supremacy. The Indian strategic leadership needs to orient the Indian people, government, and armed forces seaward – to quote Clausewitz, holding these three elements in balance "like an object suspended between three magnets."[19] Of these, managing popular sentiments promises to be the hardest task for Indian statesmen and strategists, considering the land-bound attitudes, habits, and traditions that inform Indians' outlook on strategic affairs. Indian leaders must also pursue sea power in a manner that does not unduly alarm smaller neighbors or instigate competition with external powers whose economic vitality depends on free passage through the sea lines of communication, or SLOCs, that traverse the Indian Ocean.

A few theoretical observations are in order to clarify these matters. What is identity in international affairs, how does it function, and to what extent is it susceptible to conscious manipulation by decision-makers? We mingle concepts from the literature on identity freely with those taken from the literature on strategic culture, as indeed do the contributors to Peter J. Katzenstein's well-known volume *The Culture of National Security*.[20] These authors differ on certain points, at times bitterly, but even discordant views enliven analyses of identity and culture. Strategic debates can help Asian sea powers project possible futures for their region, foresee variables likely to influence these futures in one direction or another, and devise strategy to improve their nations' prospects amid changing strategic conditions.

Scholars of strategic culture agree on the most elemental point – that "the security environments in which states are embedded are in part cultural and institutional, rather than just material."[21] Thus their observations make a useful analytical prism through which to evaluate Indian maritime identity.[22] The first such observation: that nation-states have distinctive identities and play certain roles in the international system. This insight represents a sharp break with international-relations scholars' habitual reliance on material, quantifiable factors to account for the behavior of states.[23] The makeup of a nation-state and the associated society, then, derives not only from external factors but from the traditions, attitudes, and habits of mind that are fundamental to how a society conducts its affairs. Ideas count.

Second, a nation-state's identity is a complex thing, made up of a mélange of ideas and traditions – intellectual and emotional factors that at times may coexist uneasily or even contradict one another. And identity is not immutable, even though many strategic-culture theorists imply that each nation-state has a more or less static "core" strategic culture that is highly resistant to change. A more supple view is in order. As Commager's notion of a *usable* past implies, elites may put history, traditions, and symbols to work, serving their own ends while inscribing their own ideas on the nation-state's character and the role it is perceived to play in

the international system. Observes Iain Johnston, "Traditions are constantly rede-
fined and reinterpreted by successive generations of elites with a political interest
in highlighting or downplaying particular traditions."[24] Johnston also points out
that the complex interplay of geography, culture, and strategic experience can give
rise to multiple strategic cultures. If so, certain traits eclipse others at certain times
in a society's history, depending on circumstances.[25] In effect this offers elites
adept at public diplomacy a menu of options, helping them draw out cultural
characteristics that align with their chosen political objectives, policies, and grand
strategy. Contemporary social science, then, is consistent with Jacob Burckhardt's
claims regarding the "reciprocal action" among state, society, and culture, related
in Chapter 1.

Third, as ruling elites manipulate identity and culture, they generate expecta-
tions about how the nation-state will conduct itself in domestic and international
settings. In part this is because culture, though not entirely intractable, changes
more slowly than political conditions do – giving a nation-state's behavior a
measure of predictability. This view finds support in the work of Charles
Kupchan, who observes that elites can use language that resonates with the pop-
ulace to create popular support for particular strategic choices.[26] Kupchan finds
that both status quo and revisionist powers are prone to imprudent, "self-defeat-
ing behavior" toward prospective rivals – that is, to pursuing their interests in an
overly cooperative or an overly competitive manner.[27] In large part, he says, this
is because elites tend to rouse public demands they cannot fulfill – for prestige
and influence on the part of rising powers, for preservation of existing preroga-
tives on the part of established powers.[28]

Kupchan defines strategic culture more narrowly than did Jack Snyder, who
coined the term in the 1970s, defining it as "the body of attitudes and beliefs that
guides and circumscribes thought on strategic questions, influences the way stra-
tegic issues are formulated, and sets the vocabulary and perceptual parameters
of strategic debate."[29] For Kupchan, strategic culture is "the realm of national
identity and national self-image," consisting of:

> Images and symbols that shape how a polity understands its relationship
> between metropolitan security and empire, conceives of its position in the
> international hierarchy, and perceives the nature and scope of the nation's
> external ambition. These images and symbols at once *mold public attitudes
> and become institutionalized and routinized in the structure and process of
> decision making*.... Inasmuch as strategic culture shapes the boundaries of
> politically legitimate behavior in the realm of foreign policy and affects how
> elites conceive of the national interest and set strategic priorities, it plays a
> *crucial role in shaping grand strategy* (our emphasis).[30]

This definition supplies the crucial link between the abstract concepts of identity
and culture and the concrete behavior of elites and governmental institutions.
Kupchan finds the influence of culture especially pronounced in times of change.
When elites are "faced with the need to make immediate, discrete policy choices

to respond to changes in the external environment," such as shifts in the international distribution of power and influence, they are typically "guided in their allocation of military and economic resources by strategic beliefs and domestic political forces."[31]

In short, as members of the larger society, members of the elite are influenced by the prevailing strategic culture; they use concepts derived from that culture to shape public attitudes; and they find themselves working within the constraints of strategic culture – constraints they themselves help create through their advocacy on behalf of a distinctive vision of the nation-state's basic character, or identity. Argues Colin Gray, a member of the founding generation of strategic-culture theorists, culture permeates ideas and behavior, providing "context" for strategy-making at all levels:

> Strategic culture should be approached both as a shaping context for behavior and itself as a constituent of that behavior … both [people and institutions] have internalized strategic culture and in part construct, interpret, and amend that culture. In other words, the strategic cultural context for strategic behavior includes the human strategic actors and their institutions which "make culture" by interpreting what they discern…. Strategic culture is not only "out there," also it is within us; we, our institutions, and our behavior, are the context.[32]

Hence strategic culture has a circular quality to it. Expectations flowing from national identity, traditions, and habits of mind allow ruling elites to set the terms of national discourse, but past expectations entrenched in public attitudes and institutions fetter elites' strategic options. It clearly takes effort for a nation-state's leadership to press identity and culture into the service of grand strategy. Traits anchored deeply in history, tradition, and the national psyche might not be as plastic as Charles Kupchan and like-minded scholars aver. Indeed, Kupchan himself attributes self-defeating behavior on the part of rising and established empires to elites' inability to modify strategic culture quickly enough to keep pace with change in the international system, managing the expectations they themselves have raised. Culture, then, is at once pliable and intractable.

Fourth, identity and strategic culture thus can make a useful adjunct to grand strategy – if deftly managed. These traits hint at how the nation-state will conduct its domestic and foreign affairs, creating expectations that support elites' political objectives and strategy. This applies to routine diplomacy, just as it did for Henry Steele Commager's founding Americans, who wittingly or unwittingly telegraphed the nature of the country they had founded, molding expectations in foreign capitals. Consider Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power," which refers to the cultural attributes, ideas, and policies that render a nation attractive to other peoples and countries, creating an atmosphere of goodwill that helps its leaders muster support for their foreign policy enterprises.[33] Popular discourse tends to reduce soft power to McDonald's and Hollywood, but America's open, democratic society and the associated benefits furnish the nation a major reservoir of soft power.[34]

Similarly, as the historic dominant power in the Indian Ocean region, with philosophical and religious traditions dating from antiquity, and with its economic and military power on the upswing, India enjoys sizable soft power reserves of its own.[35] If India can convince fellow nation-states it has historically played a beneficent role in the international system and still hews to its self-denying traditions, it can cement its stewardship over political, economic, and military affairs in its geographic environs. It can also forestall the Chinese geostrategic encirclement that Indians have always feared.[36] Its prospects for diplomatic or military success will brighten.

In short, acting in concert with the principles, beliefs, and traditions perceived to comprise their nation-state's strategic culture lends credence to ruling elites' statements of purpose. If they can show that they have adhered to principle or have behaved in a certain manner in past interactions, then their words today will carry that much more weight. And if they issue a public commitment to take this or that action – holding themselves accountable to constituents steeped in the society's identity and culture – they can tap into an especially powerful, culturally informed variant of Thomas Schelling's "commitment tactic."[37] If leaders bind themselves publicly, then seem to relent on principle or go against the nation-state's basic character, they risk discrediting themselves in the eyes of the domestic populace and foreign diplomats and soldiers. Wise statesmen use their usable past with great care.

Does India's mental map encompass the sea?

As Peter Padfield points out in his treatise on *Maritime Supremacy and the Opening of the Western Mind*, political geography, like history and the rhetorical uses that are made of it, plays a defining part in strategic culture. Starting in the 1970s, at roughly the same time Jack Snyder began formulating his cultural approach, diplomatic historian Alan K. Henrikson superimposed a geographic layer on the study of strategic culture. Though Henrikson does not use the strategic-culture lexicon, which originated not with historians but with political scientists, his concept of "mental maps" nonetheless supplies scholars a novel way to appraise how statesmen and soldiers see, interpret, and act on their political and strategic surroundings.[38] It is especially useful for an investigation like this one, which explores how a foreign society modifies its perspective on its geographic environs and adapts its grand strategy accordingly.

Henrikson ventures to improve on political-science analyses that regard geography as a given in politics – a fixed, immutable set of parameters within which diplomatic and military action takes place. In particular, he takes issue with the oversimplified world depicted in political maps. While political action bears "some relation to the neatly segmented, multicolored world of the standard political map," decisions "are taken in the more amorphous, nuanced world of the mental map."[39] The term refers to

An ordered but continually adapting structure of the mind – alternatively conceivable as a process – by reference to which a person acquires, codes,

stores, recalls, reorganizes, and applies, in thought or action, information about his or her large-scale geographic environment, in part or its entirety.[40]

Mental maps of varying scales may nest within each other hierarchically, starting with one's local setting and expanding to the regional and ultimately the global level. Indians, for example, conceive of the world in terms of concentric circles (of which more later).[41] Henrikson does not specifically allow that people might divide their mental maps at the juncture between land and sea – between mental maps and mental nautical charts, as it were – but this seems a logical extension of his concept of nested mental maps. Nation-states seldom manage to fuse the maritime and terrestrial components, developing a holistic view of their strategic geography. A maritime society tends to slight the terrestrial features of its geographic neighborhood. Absent maritime consciousness, conversely, a continental society's mental map remains incomplete, in effect containing "blank" areas in place of the seas.

Indian sea-power thinkers commonly convey this myopia through biophysical metaphors. Chitrapu Uday Bhaskar, a retired Indian Navy commodore, chides India for being uniquely "maritime-blind" throughout much of its history.[42] Adds Adm. Prakash, "For many years, Indians have deluded themselves into believing that India is a continental power," notwithstanding its status as "a thriving and dynamic entity" until the thirteenth century.[43] Prakash connects this landward focus to historical forgetfulness among the Indian populace. "One of the reasons for our 'maritime blindness,'" he says, is "that as a nation we have been indifferent to the reading as well as writing of history." Recording the history of the region fell to Westerners by default, but "nowhere in any Western historical account does one find even a passing account of the seafaring skills of ancient Indians." Only the writings of K. M. Panikkar, "the lone Indian voice in this arena," have begun to redress this collective amnesia.[44]

Since Panikkar's day, laments Prakash, "no Indian researcher has been willing to don this doughty historian's onerous mantle." The challenge before India is to "map its maritime heritage," fusing the landward and seaward dimensions into a comprehensive mental map of the Indian Ocean region. In short, Indian maritime scholars and officials must redouble their historical efforts, fashioning a "grand narrative" despite their lack of the "nautical expertise" needed to evaluate evidence from India's seagoing past.[45] Henrikson calls attention to the work of Harold and Margaret Tuttle Sprout, who postulated that both subjective and objective elements comprised the operating environment for decision-making. Under ideal circumstances, the "psycho-milieu," or the decision-maker's subjective perception of conditions, would be perfectly congruent with the "operational milieu," the objective parameters of the situation. However, notes Henrikson, "no single mind – which, strictly speaking, is the only unit of consciousness to which a mental map can attach – can encompass all that is humanly known of the global environment. Individual persons have blind spots, sometimes astonishing ones."[46]

While a group of people can aggregate their perceptions of strategic conditions, helping correct for individual shortcomings, this is not foolproof. Societies,

organizations, and groups have their own, perhaps errant interpretations of the environment. On the whole, says Henrikson, corporate knowledge and perceptions tend to improve the accuracy of mental maps. Still,

> If humankind as a whole has a fairly accurate, even improving, appreciation of its earthly situation, *particular* societies and groups in them may not. It is still less certain that *individuals*, even highly educated and well-informed ones, have mental maps that are optimally efficient guidelines to external reality (emphasis original).[47]

Wittingly or unwittingly, groups or institutions may substitute their views for those of individuals whose mental maps depart from the collective wisdom. For a nation-state like India, whose interests increasingly involve the sea, aligning the operational milieu of the Indian Ocean basin with the psycho-milieu of political and military leaders and ordinary citizens will help determine the fate of Indian naval strategy.

In short, the concept of the mental map implies a dynamic, interactive relationship between people and their geographic surroundings:

> The mental-map approach makes possible a greater appreciation of the historical dimension of geographical space. A mental map is as much a *temporal* cross-section as a *spatial* one. At any moment, an individual's mental map is a composite – of past experience, present observation, and future expectation. Memory and imagination inform it as well as current realities (emphasis original).[48]

Geography, then, does not simply define certain static parameters within which human interactions occur. People bring their own perceptions, perceptions shaped by history and culture, to bear on diplomatic and strategic matters. Examining historical and philosophical stimuli on the Indian mental map thus will set the stage for this inquiry into India's nascent maritime strategy.

Buddhism, Gandhism, and India's soft power ethos

As we shall see, India's rich, textured history is short on episodes to instill pride in Indian sea power, but Indian civilization is long on the "power of attraction" on which Joseph Nye premises his theory of soft power.[49] This cultural allure arises from the ideals, policies, and basic traits that set one society apart from another. New Delhi is acutely aware of soft power and determined to preserve it as India rises to great power. Writing in the context of Indo–Southeast Asian relations, one Indian analyst enjoins India to "consistently demonstrate its commitment to the Southeast Asian region with which it has civilizational and historical connections."[50] Despite the intrinsic attractiveness of Indian culture, soft power takes maintenance on the part of Indian emissaries. In the maritime setting, accordingly, Indian naval officials take pains to dissociate their nation

from the imperialist era, disavowing any desire to bully fellow Indian Ocean nations. "'Gunboat diplomacy' used to be considered one of the less pleasant coercive tactics used by colonial powers," notes Adm. Prakash, but he claims that today "maritime diplomacy obviously has no such connotation because navies are now being increasingly used to build bridges, to foster mutual trust and confidence, to create partnerships through interoperability and to render assistance, if required."[51] Banishing the abusive connotations associated with imperial navies that once ruled Asian waters is a central element in Indian maritime strategy.

On balance, the prospects for Indian soft power in Asia are promising. Much has been made of China's painstaking efforts to amass soft power, manifest in the Confucius Institutes now located at universities around the world and, in the maritime realm, in Chinese diplomats' use of Zheng He to portray China as an intrinsically nonthreatening sea power. (Far from endorsing China's version of events, some Indian sea-power specialists maintain that China is following "in Cheng Ho's [Zheng He's] footsteps" by adopting a "creeping maritime strategy" in the Indian Ocean. They clearly do not share the heroic view of China's ancient mariner, seeing him instead as an outsider who projected Chinese power into South Asia at an early date.[52]) But China is not the only Asian nation-state coterminous with a venerable civilization, and its leaders are not the only ones who can marshal sizable reserves of soft power. Indeed, writing long before Nye coined the term, Lucian W. Pye drew a startling contrast between the attractiveness of Chinese and Indian civilization:

> Not only did India introduce Buddhism to Tibet, Central Asia, China, Japan, and Southeast Asia, but its Hindu and Mogul cultures introduced the concepts of god-kings and sultanates which shaped the traditional systems of Southeast Asia. Although Sinic culture has had an impressive impact on Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, *it has come in a poor second to the Indian culture in attracting other peoples* (our emphasis).[53]

According to Pye, then, New Delhi possesses a strategic advantage owing to policies and cultural attributes of centuries' standing. Pacifism is one of these. A complete investigation of Indian nonviolence is well beyond the scope of this inquiry. Aside from the teachings of Gandhi, the historical figure most closely connected with nonviolent resistance, this strain in Indian political and strategic culture finds inspiration in Buddhism and, ultimately, in the example of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka, who ruled a vast empire on the subcontinent over two millennia ago.

Ashoka was heir to the empire founded by his grandfather Chandragupta with the counsel of Kautilya, the author of the *Arthashastra*, or manual of statecraft (profiled below). Scholars generally rank Ashoka's reign as a golden age in Indian history. He recoiled at the bloody measures needed to subdue the neighboring kingdom of Kalinga. The emperor foreswore violent conquest, turning to Buddhism and vowing to extend Mauryan rule only through *dharma*, or right