

MILAN 2018: Geo-Strategic and Geo-Political Context

Yogendra Kumar*

The growing importance of the Indian Ocean region in recent times has in turn meant that most developments taking place in the region ought to be looked at through strategic lens. The reasons are not far to seek. The Indian Ocean is situated at the centre of global trade routes at a time when most of the global trade is seaborne; and, India is situated in close proximity to major shipping lanes with the Andaman and Nicobar Island chain being astride the Ten Degree channel, the Lakshadweep and Minicoy astride the Nine Degree channel, and Indira Point and Indonesia astride the Six Degree channel. The growing geo-strategic significance of the Indian Ocean is, once again, driving changes in the regional balance of power in the current global geopolitical flux. During the Cold War period, the US Navy was the preeminent power in the Indian Ocean after the withdrawal of the British Navy east of Aden in the late 1960s and its leasing out of the Diego Garcia base to US in 1966. In the Cold War's immediate aftermath, the USA's hegemonic status was re-established but, presently, as a result of multiple security factors both 'traditional' and 'non-traditional', the US-led maritime order is under challenge.

Partly because of the USA's shifting priorities and preoccupations elsewhere as well as its role being challenged from both regional and extra-regional powers such as China, these shifting trends are being carefully watched by strategic observers everywhere, including in India. This period is characterised by the growing presence of extra-littoral navies, notably Chinese, as well as by the onshore conflicts spilling over onto the oceanic space and thereby, impacting the existing balance of power. The diminution of the authority of global multilateral organisations, such as the UN, has also spurred the growth of regional organisations which have come into existence in the Indian Ocean region. The changed global trade scenario has also opened the

***The Author**, Ambassador Yogendra Kumar is a former Ambassador to the Philippines (with concurrent accreditation to Palau, Micronesia and the Marshall Islands), to Tajikistan, and was also High Commissioner to Namibia. The author is grateful to Dr. Probal Ghosh for insights in the course of preparing this article.

space for naval diplomacy for shaping a conducive maritime order in the near and medium term. The MILAN exercise series, initiated by India in the early 1990s, is one such initiative.

MILAN Exercise 2018

The latest in the series, MILAN 2018 from 06-13 March 2018, has been held under the theme 'Friendship across the Seas', comprising a diverse mix of professional exercises, seminars, and sporting fixtures. The ships were open for public viewing, including for school children; the public events also featured a formal International City Parade. The theme of the MILAN International Maritime Seminar was, 'In Pursuit of Maritime Good Order: the Need for a Comprehensive Information Sharing Apparatus'. The event concluded with a Multilateral Exercise at sea by all participating ships¹, called MILES 18; it 'involv(ed) working together with our regional partners on a variety of maritime security scenarios.'² The Chief of Naval Staff (CNS), in his interview to DD News Channel, stated that the scope of this exercise includes 'search and rescue and maritime interdiction'.³ Some of the drills at the exercise included weapon firing, search and rescue operations, air defence exercises, cross-deck flying, boarding operations, and medical evacuation.⁴ This year's event was attended by Australia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Mauritius, Myanmar, New Zealand, Oman (first time), Seychelles, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, and Vietnam⁵. Eleven ships⁶ from Australia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand participated in the event, whereas the Indian Navy provided 17 ships. The countries sending delegates without ships were Cambodia, Kenya, Mauritius, New Zealand, Oman, Seychelles, Tanzania, and Vietnam. It also included, as has been a standard practice in this series, a tabletop exercise with the participation of all the Navy representatives.

MILAN, meaning 'meeting' or 'tryst' in Hindi, was first held in 1995; its growth over the last nearly quarter-century reflects the expanding strategic role of the Indian Navy going beyond the Bay of Bengal. A biennial event, it was not held in 2001, 2005 and 2016, because the schedules conflicted with the hosting of the International Fleet Review by the Indian Navy, and the Indian Ocean tsunami (2004). The first 1995 edition was attended by only four countries besides India, which are all located on the Bay of Bengal littoral - namely, Indonesia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. In 1997, Bangladesh and Malaysia joined this group. In 2003, Australia and Myanmar joined⁷ whilst Bangladesh dropped out rejoining in 2006.⁸ In this growing number of

participating countries, Brunei, New Zealand, and Vietnam joined in 2008.⁹ The Philippines joined in 2010.¹⁰ From the existing group, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Vietnam dropped out in 2012; and Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles joined for the first time.¹¹ The new participating countries in MILAN 2014 were Cambodia, Kenya, and Tanzania, bringing the total number, including India, up to 17.¹² In the latest 2018 MILAN series, the initial official number¹³ was 23 participating countries, with the additional countries being Timor-Leste, Mozambique, Oman, Papua New Guinea, and South Africa. However, in the end, in addition to the hosts, 16 countries¹⁴ participated with Oman being the new participant. Amongst the non-participants, six countries declined¹⁵ the invitation - namely, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, Philippines (participant in previous editions), Brunei (participant in previous editions), Mozambique, and the Maldives (participant in previous editions). In the aforementioned, it is evident that there was no increase in the number of participating countries in the 2018 edition in comparison to the 2014 edition.

The MILAN series are hosted by the joint Andaman and Nicobar Command. It invests this Command, the only one of its kind in the Indian armed forces, with a significant strategic salience. Its location at the mouth of the Straits of Malacca and near the entrance into the Bay of Bengal signifies the Indian strategic perspective with regard to the shaping of the maritime order in the Bay of Bengal. It also underscores the involvement of a range of missions including the Navy, the Air Force, and the Army. With its continuously developing infrastructure, the Command carries out patrolling of the Indian Exclusive Economic (EEZ), humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) missions, coordinated patrols (CORPATs) with Thailand and Indonesia, and joint naval exercises (SIMBEX) with Singapore. This Command's force projection capabilities indicate India's considerable strategic interests in the South China Sea. Significantly, the launching of the MILAN series also coincided with India's 'Look East' policy. Not long thereafter, at the first India-ASEAN summit in 2002, the Singapore Prime Minister, Goh Chok Thong, likened¹⁶ India and China to two wings of the ASEAN aircraft, thereby suggesting a balancing regional role for India. The increasing number of participants also shows greater interest amongst the participating countries in India's expanding/growing role in both the Indian Ocean as well as in South-East Asia. As the second most powerful force after the US Navy, the Indian Navy's articulated doctrine of being the 'net security provider' for the Indian Ocean, naturally, serves as one of the reasons for the countries interested in participating. It is noteworthy that all the participating countries are friendly towards India, and are also keen to develop robust bilateral naval and maritime relationship for

their own broader national security objectives. These exercises aim at developing a continuing dialogue between the Indian and the participating navies, and generating a higher comfort level amongst their personnel. Moreover, the process by itself is a major determinant for the maintenance of good order at sea. The common understanding through sharing of experience helps in developing a possible roadmap for cooperation in handling common challenges, such as disaster response procedures and interoperability. In this sense, such practical as well as theoretical exercises fit into the larger picture of development of cooperation amongst the countries of the Indian Ocean littoral and beyond. Thus, especially in the Indian Ocean region, the existing maritime order does not crumble under the battering from multiple challenges but can develop sufficient resilience to cope with them.

Different aspects of MILAN 2018

The Indian Navy has been active in both multilateral and bilateral formats in the IOR. In creating and piecing together the infrastructure of maritime domain awareness (MDA), its aim is to develop a strategic picture of the Indian Ocean vis-à-vis the movement of ships including suspicious ones, which could pose threat to the order at sea. The MILAN 2018 International Maritime Seminar brought together serving naval officers and strategic experts from the participating countries and the senior officers from naval headquarters, New Delhi. The exchange of ideas and papers focused on the challenges faced by the nations as well as on cooperative mechanisms for the fusion and dissemination of information for strengthening maritime order in the Indian Ocean region.¹⁷ India is also developing significant capabilities which include the recently established facility called Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) near Delhi. This is a joint initiative of the Indian Navy, Coast Guard, and Bharat Electronics Ltd. to provide a platform for the aggregation and dissemination of data and databases from various coastal surveillance networks linking 51 naval and Coast Guard stations, located along the coast and on island territories, as well as satellite communication systems.¹⁸ India also offered to host an Information Fusion Centre for strengthening the MDA supplemented by support from IORA member countries.¹⁹ Yet another aspect of cooperation in maritime safety and security is institutionalised cooperative arrangements, such as white shipping agreements in bilateral and multilateral engagements.

Amongst the non-participating countries, there was one absentee country which became the subject of considerable media coverage. Ever since 2012,

Maldives has been a regular participant, including at 2017 Goa Naval Chiefs' Conclave, except in the 2018 edition. The Indian Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral Lanba, confirmed that the Maldives had declined the invitation, adding that it was one of the six countries to do so. On February 27, the Maldives Ambassador in New Delhi attributed the non-participation to 'the current circumstances of the State of Emergency being in effect for those under investigation for serious crimes ... Security personnel are expected to be at a heightened stance of alertness.' He also added that the participation of Maldives naval officers would have been as 'observers', and that the two countries have a 'long history of excellent defence and military cooperation and it is a tradition that we are confident that will endure and continue indefinitely'.²⁰ A *Maldives Times* report²¹ (without a by-line) called it 'easily the biggest snub by the Indian Ocean archipelago,' and speculated that it puts a question mark on the continuance of the Indian Navy detachment in the island where India has gifted a fast attack craft, two helicopters, and has also trained, among others, the chief of the Maldives National defence forces who supports the present President. This rebuff has been seen by several observers as reflecting the recent strain in the bilateral relations between India and the Maldives, especially after the declaration of emergency by the current president in Maldives.

Perhaps indicative of the signs of the times, this naval 'diplomatic' event did cause some ripples elsewhere as well. The Indian newspaper *Economic Times*²² (citing PTI) quoted unnamed officials as saying that the issue of 'China's growing military posturing in the Indo-Pacific region' is expected to figure during the discussions among the participating delegates. This theme was picked up in several media comments as well as in TV interviews. This PTI story also quoted directly the Indian Navy spokesperson Captain D. K. Sharma as saying, 'the interactions during MILAN encompass sharing of views and ideas on maritime good order and enhancing regional cooperation for combating unlawful activities at sea.' He was further quoted as saying that the exercise will provide an opportunity to participating navies to nurture stronger ties in dealing with various security challenges. In an interview on March 1, the Chief of Naval Staff (CNS), in response to a pointed question, stated that '(t) here is no cause for concern' with regard to the presence of PLA Navy ships in the IOR. Besides clarifying that 'At any rate, we monitor their presence', he also said that, through MILAN, the Indian Navy 'aims to provide a platform to facilitate interactions among regional navies across the Indo-Pacific region.'²³ In another, freewheeling interview on March 6,²⁴ he pointed out that while the MILAN exercises are not anti-China, in the event of

Chinese aggressiveness on land, there was always the possibility of the Indian Navy going after China's 'sea jugular' in the Indian Ocean. He also said earlier in this interview that in the Doklam situation, there were deployments of navy maritime patrol aircraft should the Indian Navy's capabilities be requested by the Indian Army.

A news story (26 February 2018) in the Chinese English daily *Global Times*²⁵ referred to this PTI news story, and quoted the Director of the Centre for Asia-Pacific Studies at the Shanghai Institute for International Studies, Zhao Gancheng, as saying,

It has lost its original intention and is more likely to make China into a target, and that is making trouble out of nothing ... it's possible that the conflict between China and India will extend beyond land to the sea.

It also quoted the research fellow at the same Institute, Hu Zhiyong, that

'India is provoking China which will not benefit the development of Sino-Indian relations.'

Multilateral Diplomacy in IOR by the Indian and Other Navies

As has been mentioned in the foregoing paragraphs, the MILAN is not the only instance of Indian Navy-led multilateral diplomatic engagement. Since 2017, the Indian Navy has also initiated the Goa Naval Chiefs' Conclave (GMC 2017) which was attended by the Chiefs of navies/Heads of maritime agencies from India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Maldives, Malaysia, Mauritius, Myanmar, Seychelles, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.²⁶ Its deliberations were aimed at 'Addressing Regional Maritime Challenges' wherein the deliberations were focused on emerging maritime threats. The Conclave also discussed structuring, maritime domain awareness, maritime security architecture, and maritime security challenges in the IOR. Inaugurating the GMC 2017, the Indian Defence Minister stated,

(w)hilst it is good that the compulsions of globalisation have enabled economics to shape transactional relationships between nations, opaqueness in strategic intent and incoherent behaviour by certain nations are preventing these relationships from evolving beyond their transactional nature.

In his remarks, the Chief of Naval Staff stated that there is a perceptible lack of formal arrangements with respect to engagement between the littoral navies of the South and South Eastern IOR, and the concept of GMC has been evolved to bridge this gap and to establish a regional maritime forum

amongst like-minded navies of the region for the apex level dialogue.²⁷

Sri Lanka

Other navies are also engaging in multilateral diplomacy aiming at 'norm setting' in the IOR. Under the patronage of its Ministry of Defence, the Sri Lankan Navy has been organising the International Maritime Conference (the Galle Dialogue) since 2010 at the level of senior navy officers, often heads of the respective navies/coastguards. The 2017 edition was attended by 51 countries, including India, the USA, Pakistan, China, Vietnam, and Russia along with the European Union, UN organisations as well as government/private think tanks.²⁸ The Concept Paper presented by the hosts, focused on the conference theme of 'Greater Maritime Visibility for Enhanced Maritime Security'. It stated that one of the significant challenges today is 'how best each one of us can work in unison to share the "own visible maritime segment" with rest of us to minimise "Maritime Blindness"'.²⁹ At an India-organised conference in Colombo, the incumbent Sri Lankan Prime Minister stated,

Sri Lanka will soon commence exploratory discussions on convening a meeting to deliberate on a stable legal order on freedom of navigation and over flight in the Indian Ocean. Taking such a course of action will enable the littoral states to take the initiative to manage competition and determine our own fate.³⁰

Pakistan

Beginning 2007, the Pakistan Navy conducted the 5th edition of the AMAN series of multilateral naval exercise in February 2017. Thirty seven countries participated, of which nine countries, viz., Australia, China, Indonesia, Turkey, Sri Lanka, the UK, the USA, Japan, and Russia (first time) brought in their naval assets.³¹ Its harbour phase, in addition to the sea phase, included an international maritime conference on the theme, 'Strategic Outlook in the Indian Ocean Region 2030 and Beyond: Evolving Challenges and Strategies'. It had participants from Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, the UK and the USA.³²

USA

Another notable multilateral naval exercise, the International Mine Countermeasures Exercise (IMCMEX), is hosted by the US Naval Forces

Central Command (NAVCENT)/the US 5th Fleet in the Arabian Gulf³³ (or the Persian Gulf), Sea of Oman, Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea. A serial-driven exercise comprising multiple mine countermeasures, maritime security operations, and maritime infrastructure protection, it includes seminars and table-top discussions on various aspects of its mission, including coordination with industry and commercial shipping³⁴. A related multilateral ‘command post’ exercise, led by NAVCENT and involving other partner countries and civilian shipping, is the International Maritime Exercise (IMX). Its aim is for partner countries to ‘promote interoperability, increase readiness in all facets of defensive maritime warfare, and demonstrate resolve in maintaining regional security and stability and protecting the free flow of commerce’. Apart from theoretical discussions, there were field exercises simulating missile attack, mine threats, a mine strike on a naval vessel, and a fast attack craft threat³⁵. Under the auspices of the NAVCENT, a multinational naval partnership - the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) - has been created to counter terrorism and narcotics smuggling; to work with the regional and other partners to improve overall security and stability, to help strengthen the maritime capabilities of regional nations and, when requested, to respond to environmental and humanitarian crises.³⁶ Its three Combined Task Forces, namely, CTF 150 (maritime security operations and counterterrorism), CTF 151 (counter piracy), and CTF 152 (maritime security operations in the Arabian/Persian Gulf), aim to maintain order at sea within a US-backed regional security architecture, and to keep the maritime choke points in the region free - although CTF 152 aims to counterbalance Iran too. Although not a formal alliance, the CMF group aims at developing naval/maritime interoperability amongst ‘like-minded’ countries; the CMF participating countries are: Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Iraq, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Republic of Korea, Kuwait, Malaysia, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Pakistan, Philippines, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, Seychelles, Singapore, Spain, Thailand, Turkey, the UAE, the UK, the USA, and Yemen.

Australia

The Australian Navy, supported by the Australian Air Force, conducts a biennial multilateral maritime ‘Exercise KAKADU’,³⁷ for developing interoperability between nations in the maritime and air domains, and providing training opportunities for maritime security and surveillance. The last exercise, held in September 2016, included 19 ships and submarines, 18 aircraft, and more

than 3000 personnel from 19 countries, including Australia, Canada, Fiji, France, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Tonga, the USA, and Vietnam. These exercises involve ‘a graduated programme of activities leading to high-end warfare exercises’ comprising live fire exercises, submarine detection and deterrence, and aircraft operations.³⁸ In addition, the Royal Australian Navy has also been conducting a biennial Sea Power Conference since 2000.

The Significance of India’s Maritime Diplomacy in ‘Norm Setting’

The expanding circle of countries participating in the MILAN series shows that Indian naval diplomacy relating to ‘norm setting’ encompasses the wider ‘Indo-Pacific’ oceanic space. It also reflects India’s growing role as well as the interest of an increasing number of countries in maintaining naval and maritime links with India. Thus, it is an important component in India’s larger maritime diplomacy which goes beyond ‘norm setting’, and embraces diverse multilateral and bilateral arrangements, hard infrastructure backup, and scenario building capabilities. A noted Australian naval analyst, David Brewster, states:

The (MILAN) exercise series is not primarily intended for practising technical skills, but rather is focused on building confidence and relationships among the military maritime community of participating states. The exercise is an expression of India’s success in demonstrating strategic leadership as it grows as a credible power.³⁹

Many of these capacity building diplomatic engagements are in the ‘soft power’ category, as the MILAN series undoubtedly are; but their objective is also to provide the ‘hard power’ underpinning to address a shared concern about maintenance of order at sea.

On the other hand, the Malabar series of exercises, held jointly between India, the USA, and Japan, project hard power capabilities through interoperability as the exercises alternate between the Bay of Bengal and the western Pacific region. The revival of the ‘Quad’ dialogue, held in Manila in November 2017, between India, the USA, Japan, and Australia, to flesh out a common vision for the ‘Indo-Pacific’ region is noteworthy. Also significant is the growing currency of the expression ‘Indo-Pacific’ in the emerging strategic maritime discourse of the region. The coinage of the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ signifies that objective circumstances have compelled a comprehension

which considers this entire region as a single strategic construct, even though there are widely respected analysts who do not fully subscribe to this assumption. Indian diplomacy in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) with regard to maritime safety and security, and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) both underline that maritime safety and security are now becoming a major concern in which India aims to take the lead in terms of norm setting and, additionally, in norms-enforcing. In this regard, Prime Minister Modi's SAGAR speech in Mauritius reflects a new vision of India in terms of how the maritime order in the Indian Ocean region needs to be shaped.

The Bay of Bengal region is also seeing a higher salience of maritime developments which have the potential for challenging the existing balance of power in this sub-region. In November 2016, Bangladesh acquired two attack submarines (refitted Type 035G-class diesel electric) from China. In May 2017, Thailand has contracted, to purchase three attack submarines (S26T Type) from China, with the declared objective of improving surveillance on the Bay of Bengal littoral to protect its interests; the whole order is expected to be executed in 11 years, with the first vessel delivery expected in six years.⁴⁰ The Chinese footprint is expanding both in terms of its 'Belt-and-Road Initiative' (BRI) as well as in its 'Maritime Silk Route' (MSR) projects in the region. This means that the Bay of Bengal would see the growing presence of extra-littoral countries, including their navies. Hence, it remains important that India should continue with its naval 'soft power' diplomacy as well as its 'hard power' compelling diplomacy wherever unavoidable, to ensure that the balance of power in the Bay of Bengal does not shift negatively for it.

The Way Ahead

Government of India could lead the regional maritime narrative through an effective realization of its SAGAR vision – especially through consolidating its various visions in IORA GNC, IONS etc. This mechanism has the potential to develop into an India-led 'norm setting' diplomatic exercise.⁴¹ Closer involvement of the littorals from the Persian Gulf as well as the Horn of Africa would provide an added potency to this diplomacy. Now, the MILAN series have a new geo-strategic and geopolitical context as India aims to create a resilient maritime system in the Indian Ocean to obviate any negative impacts on the existing favourable balance of power, and to effectively address the 'non-traditional' threats, no less menacing, in the

near to the medium term.

As the foregoing paragraphs show, India alone is not engaged in developing the norms or, to use the now fashionable term, a ‘code of conduct’ for the Indian Ocean. Other quite influential – countries are also engaged in this endeavour. However, India is uniquely placed to provide this leadership of thought in the current circumstances: the SAGAR construct posits an Indian Ocean maritime order which is open, inclusive, and accommodative of the legitimate interests of all stakeholders, regional as well as extra-regional, in the peaceful and ecologically wholesome use of this water body.

Thus, Indian diplomacy, including its naval diplomacy, would need to be proactive to crystallise all elements of the SAGAR construct into an effective programme of action in bilateral and multilateral formats. It would also have to be nuanced enough not to convey, unwittingly, any impression that India might be fuelling a naval rivalry in the IOR and, even, beyond. This author has formed the impression that some countries in the littoral might be thinking that way even if their reasons might not, actually, be what they state them to be. A closer analysis of India’s actions would not bear that out, but a perception management task lies ahead for Indian diplomacy.

In sum, a greater balancing of India’s diplomacy in the current geo-strategic and geo-political context remains its essential desideratum. The MILAN series, of which the latest edition was MILAN 2018, has great potential as an instrument of ‘soft power’ in the Indian efforts for norm setting for the Indian Ocean, which is becoming increasingly critical for our peace as well as economic and technological progress.

Notes :

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- ¹⁴ Official Website of MILAN 2018, Indian Navy, at <https://milan18.org/Participants.php>, accessed 13 April 2018.
- ¹⁵ Admiral Sunil Lanba (CNS), interview to Republic TV, 6 March 2018, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRfTONicDhQ>, accessed 12 March 2018.
- ¹⁶ Ranjit Gupta, “India’s Look East Policy”, in *Indian Foreign Policy: Challenges and Opportunities*, (eds.) Atish Sinha and Madhup Mohta, New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2007, p. 363.
- ¹⁷ “International Maritime Seminar MILAN-2018”, March 2018, Bureau report, *National Defence*, at Nationaldefence.in/breaking-news/international-maritime-seminar-milan-2018/, accessed 7 April 2018.
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