

An Indian sail to navigate the maritime environment

India's leadership in the debate on maritime security has boosted its standing as a key player in the shared commons



SUJAN R. CHINOI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's address on August 9 (<https://bit.ly/2VSH6Sz>) at the UNSC High-Level Open Debate on "Enhancing Maritime Security: A Case For International Cooperation", convened by India, was both timely and apt. He described the oceans as a common heritage for humankind and a lifeline for the future of the planet. In urging the global community to develop a common framework to deal with contemporary challenges, including maritime disputes and natural disasters, he outlined a far-sighted vision rooted in India's culture, history and geography.

Maritime traditions

With a long coastline and large island chains spread-eagled across the Indian Ocean, India has a natural seaward orientation, with key sea lanes of communication coursing through its surrounding seas.

India has ancient maritime traditions. In the 15th century, Vasco de Gama was piloted to the west coast of India from Zanzibar by a Gujarati seaman. Long before that, India's ancient mariners were trading with the old world. The very word navigation is derived from the Sanskrit word "navgath".

In enunciating five principles,

Mr. Modi linked free and open trade to India's civilisational ethos. His words were a reminder of India's maritime trade with Mesopotamia 4,500 years ago. Lothal was a key maritime centre of the Indus Valley civilisation.

The Prime Minister's home State, Gujarat, has one of India's oldest maritime histories. Kutch and Kathiawar as well as the Malabar coast enjoyed ancient links to Africa. A ship built indigenously and manned by a local crew voyaged to England and back in the time of Rao Godji II (1760-1778) of Kutch. Buddhism and Hinduism spread to South-east Asia by the maritime route. Even Islam took the maritime route from India to South-east Asia.

Mr. Modi reiterated the relevance of SAGAR (Security And Growth For All In The Region). He urged the international community to develop a cooperative and inclusive framework for maritime security, so essential for unimpeded trade and commerce. Ninety per cent of global trade is conducted on the high seas, for the simple reason that it continues to be the most cost effective mode of transport.

Disruption of sea lanes of communication has global repercussions. The blockage in the Suez Canal earlier this year interrupted the flow of trade worth billions of dollars. In 1956, great powers intervened militarily when Egypt nationalised this key waterway. Today, a naval blockade at any choke-point in the Indo-Pacific could prove catastrophic.



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Freedom of navigation and unimpeded commerce are key to the spread of prosperity. Critical supply chains depend on the concept of *mare liberum* (open seas). The neo-colonial concept of *mare clausum* (closed seas) in the South China Sea is anathema to the future of the global economy.

Dispute settlement

The Prime Minister advocated peaceful settlement of maritime disputes on the basis of international law. This idea is rooted in India's values of peace and non-violence. India's acceptance of the award by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2014 paved the way for India and Bangladesh to put aside their maritime dispute and forge even closer ties. This should be an example to others in the region. In 2016, China summarily rejected the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling in favour of the Philippines.

Today, natural disasters and maritime threats posed by non-state actors have grown exponentially. Mr. Modi called upon the global community to rally together to deal effectively with the ravages of cyclones, tsunami and maritime pollution. India's role as 'first res-

ponder' in the Indian Ocean, whether in thwarting piracy or providing relief after the Boxing Day tsunami in 2004, is well-documented. The Indian Air Force airlifted 30 tonnes of relief material to Mauritius in August 2020 to contain an oil spill that threatened to engulf the island nation's pristine coast.

The Indian Coast Guard's operational reach and capability has vastly improved in dealing with environmental hazards and piracy. The election, on August 5, of the Director General of Indian Coast Guard as the executive director of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) Information Sharing Centre, Singapore, is an endorsement of India's contributions. India now has white shipping agreements with several countries. The Indian Navy's state-of-the-art Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) based in Gurugram hosts officers from the United States, Japan, France, Australia and the United Kingdom. The Indian Navy regularly offers a large number of training slots to friendly countries.

Environmental concerns

Mr. Modi's remarks underscored the importance of preserving the maritime environment and its resources. The oceans remain our lifeline. Yet, they have been overwhelmed by plastic waste which chokes all forms of marine life. This, in turn, poisons the entire food chain and imperils the lives

of millions.

Development of connectivity and infrastructure were also outlined as a major priority. There are heightened concerns today over China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India stands for openness and transparency in the execution of projects, based on local priorities, with in-built fiscal viability and environmental sustainability. The U.S., Japan and Australia are also promoting better standards for global infrastructure through the Blue Dot Network.

Primacy of UNCLOS

As President of the UN Security Council for the month of August, India's leadership in the debate on maritime security, that too at the level of the Prime Minister, has strengthened its credentials as a key stakeholder in the maritime commons. The Presidential Statement issued on the occasion highlights the commitment of the UN Security Council to international law. More relevantly, it emphasises the importance of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea as the legal framework governing all maritime activity.

India's natural interests stretch across both the Indian and Pacific Oceans as reflected in its inclusive Indo-Pacific vision. No doubt, India's initiative will further the prospects for a stable and enduring maritime environment.

Sujan R. Chinoi, a former Ambassador, is currently DG, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi. The views expressed are personal