

From Mahanian to Corbettian: The Projection of India's Contemporary Naval Strategy in Response to China's Presence in the Indian Ocean Region

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Abstract

This paper examines the shift in India's naval strategy from Mahanian to Corbettian principles in response to China's growing maritime presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). While India historically followed Mahan's focus on decisive battles and maritime dominance, the increasing assertiveness of China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) necessitated a strategic pivot. Adopting Corbett's emphasis on political objectives, the Indian Navy now prioritizes sea control, sea denial, the protection of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), and maritime diplomacy. This transition reflects India's need for a more pragmatic, politically driven approach to safeguard its strategic interests in the face of China's maritime ambitions.

Keywords: India's naval strategy, Mahanian and Corbettian principles, Indian Ocean Region (IOR), sea control and denial, maritime diplomacy

Abstrak

Tulisan ini mengkaji pergeseran dalam strategi angkatan laut India dari prinsip Mahanian ke prinsip Corbettian sebagai respons terhadap meningkatnya kehadiran maritim Tiongkok di Kawasan Samudra Hindia (IOR). Meskipun India secara historis mengikuti fokus Mahan pada pertempuran yang menentukan dan dominasi maritim, semakin meningkatnya ketegasan Angkatan Laut Tentara Pembebasan Rakyat Tiongkok (PLAN) mengharuskan perubahan strategi. Mengadopsi penekanan Corbett pada tujuan politik, Angkatan Laut India kini memprioritaskan kontrol laut, penolakan laut, perlindungan Jalur Komunikasi Laut (SLOCs), dan diplomasi maritim. Pergeseran ini mencerminkan kebutuhan India akan pendekatan yang lebih pragmatis dan berbasis politik untuk melindungi kepentingan strategisnya di tengah ambisi maritim Tiongkok.

Kata kunci: Strategi angkatan laut India, Prinsip Mahanian dan Corbettian, Kawasan Samudra Hindia (IOR), Kontrol dan penolakan laut, Diplomasi maritim

INTRODUCTION

"At sea the main conception is avoiding decisive action by strategical or tactical activity, so as to keep our fleet in being till the situation develops in our favour" (Corbett, 1988). Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, a U.S. Navy officer and historian, is widely recognized as the father of modern maritime strategy. His influential works, including *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783* and *The Influence of Sea Power Upon the French Revolution and Empire 1793-1812*, made him one of the most significant figures of the 19th century (Rath, 2014). Mahan emphasized that maritime strategy is crucial not only during times of war but also in peacetime, and should be a central component of foreign policy due to its critical role in enhancing a nation's overall naval strength. From India's independence in 1947 until the early 2000s, India's naval strategy, particularly that of the Indian Navy, was largely shaped and influenced by Mahan's theories.

According to Mahan, great powers have crucial maritime interests that must be defended against potential rivals and enemies (Mahan in Armstrong, 2013). He believed that in the case of the United States, these interests were global in scope, and thus the U.S. Navy must dominate the world's oceans. This could only be achieved by defeating the enemy's major naval forces in a decisive battle at sea (Mahan in Armstrong, 2013). Mahan's focus on maritime concentration and what he termed 'offensive defense' was key to achieving 'command of the sea', which he argued was the ultimate objective of the



naval strategy of great powers (Mahan in Armstrong, 2013). Decisive fleet actions, particularly large-scale naval battles, were at the core of Mahan's vision. His works have profoundly influenced naval theorists and national strategists worldwide, including those in China, Germany, and India.

While India's naval strategy has never viewed maritime interests as global, it has nonetheless internalized several key elements of Mahanian thought. Since its independence, dominating the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has been seen as central to India's national security. For much of this period, Pakistan served as India's primary geopolitical rival, and thus India's naval strategy focused on achieving Mahanian-style 'command of the sea' in the IOR, primarily by defeating the Pakistan Navy in one or two decisive actions. However, in recent years, Mahan's logic and the derivative strategies of the Indian Navy seem increasingly mismatched with India's current objectives and the evolving threat perceptions in the IOR. The growing presence of China in the region, with its assertive policies, has emerged as a major threat to India's security. Moreover, China now boasts one of the largest maritime fleets in the world, with a much greater naval power than Pakistan, which has long been the primary focus of India's foreign policy.

This shift in geopolitical dynamics has prompted India to embrace a different naval theorist, the British naval historian Sir Julian Corbett. This paper will explore the transition from Mahanian to Corbettian dominance in India's naval strategy in the contemporary era. Specifically, it will address: *Why has there been a shift from Mahanian to Corbettian thinking in India's naval strategy, particularly with regard to China in the IOR? To what extent are Sir Julian Corbett's ideas reflected in the Indian Navy's strategy in countering China's growing presence in the region?*

The paper argues that the strategic reality of Sino-Indian relations makes it unlikely that the Indian Navy could decisively defeat China's naval fleet in the IOR through a single battle. Unlike India's previous strategy against Pakistan, the Indian Navy's contemporary strategy avoids what Mahan termed a decisive battle to achieve command of the sea. Instead, India has formulated a Corbettian approach that takes into account political realities, the nature of the threats, and the political objectives at stake. As such, Corbettian thinking is now reflected in India's naval strategy in the IOR, focusing on efforts such as: (1) sea control, (2) sea denial, (3) the protection and interdiction of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), and (4) maritime diplomacy.

METHOD

This research employs library research to collect data and information. To ensure data validity, the researcher will examine the sources and compare them with others. The literature utilized in this study includes official documents from institutions and organizations, electronic databases, and mass media coverage. Data analysis will be carried out using qualitative research methods, focusing on critical interpretation of social phenomena related to the case study. The approach for understanding the case study involves connecting theoretical concepts to observable indicators. In essence, this study seeks to bridge theory with evidence. Secondary data sources, such as government documents, interview transcripts, official government speeches, books, journals, articles, newspapers, working papers, position papers, and publications from reputable think tanks and institutions, are used for this research. The qualitative analysis techniques employed in this study involve the researcher's interpretation of the collected data to support the argument and address the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The Sino-Indian Imbroglia: The Presence of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in the Indian Ocean Region

The complex dynamics of Sino-Indian relations are deeply rooted in historical tensions, particularly the Sino-Indian War of 1962, which laid the foundation for decades of rivalry between the two nations. Both India and China have continuously vied for influence and control over what they perceive as their respective spheres of influence, often referred to as their 'backyards.' This geopolitical struggle has evolved significantly over time, expanding from territorial disputes on land to the

competition for maritime dominance, particularly in the strategically critical Indian Ocean Region (IOR). According to Jan Hornat (2016), India's policy toward the IOR has been diametrically opposed to China's ambitions, with India seeking to safeguard its maritime interests and establish itself as the principal provider of regional maritime security and power. The overlapping interests between these two great powers in the IOR have amplified the potential for military conflict, particularly in the maritime domain, which is central to the global flow of trade, energy, and geopolitical influence.

China's growing naval presence in the Indian Ocean has been a response to the shifting global balance of power, and this is evident in the development of its 'blue-water fleet.' As China seeks to extend its strategic influence beyond its immediate territorial waters, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has become a critical component of Beijing's foreign policy objectives. The geographic proximity and modernization of the PLAN suggest a growing likelihood that China will establish a permanent naval presence in the IOR. This presence is seen not only as a means of safeguarding China's energy routes and maritime trade but also as a strategic countermeasure to India's influence in the region and a challenge to the maritime hegemony of the United States.

Gurpreet Khurana (2016) emphasizes the direct impact of China's military presence on India's national security, particularly by introducing a maritime element into India's broader military strategy concerning China. Both nations, due to their historical border disputes, have struggled to build political trust, with India viewing China's increasing presence in the IOR as part of a broader effort to encircle India. This perception is further compounded by the strategic moves China has made in the region, such as the deployment of PLAN submarines and the militarization of its 'String of Pearls' initiative—a network of strategic ports and infrastructure projects that extend from the Chinese mainland to the Indian Ocean. According to James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara (2013), these developments have not only militarized China's relationship with India but also disrupted India's 'Look East' policy, a strategy aimed at increasing India's economic and strategic engagement with Southeast Asia.

The potential for conflict in the Indian Ocean between China and India is not confined to naval competition alone but has broader implications for continental stability as well. Given the historical precedent of border clashes between the two countries, there is a palpable risk that a maritime conflict could spill over into land-based military engagements. The increasing militarization of the IOR by China, paired with its efforts to secure maritime trade routes and military footholds, positions the region as a flashpoint for Sino-Indian tensions. As China continues to expand its naval capabilities, especially through the establishment of forward military bases along the Indian Ocean's critical maritime corridors, India's strategic calculus is being forced to adapt. This shift is pushing India to reevaluate its own naval posture, both in terms of capabilities and in how it perceives its regional security environment.

The Sino-Indian maritime rivalry in the Indian Ocean is emblematic of a larger geopolitical struggle for influence in one of the world's most strategically significant regions. As China and India continue to bolster their naval forces, the region's security dynamics are increasingly defined by their maritime competition, which could have far-reaching consequences for regional and global stability. The rise of China as a naval power in the Indian Ocean, particularly through the expansion of the PLAN and its associated strategies, presents a direct challenge to India's maritime dominance and signals a broader shift in the power structures of the IOR. Both nations must navigate these tensions carefully, balancing their national security priorities with the need for regional cooperation and stability.

Maritime Interests and Contemporary Threat Perception in India

India's maritime interests and contemporary threat perceptions are shaped by both traditional and non-traditional threats, with a particular focus on China as a key challenge in the Indian Ocean region. The country's maritime strategy, as outlined in its official documents, increasingly adopts a Corbettian approach to maritime security, contrasting with the Mahanian focus on "command of the seas." This shift reflects two primary objectives: (1) protecting India's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and (2) ensuring the security of India's sea trade routes. Threats to these interests range from non-traditional issues like terrorism, piracy, and unregulated economic activities to traditional threats posed by militarily capable nations, particularly China.

Although India's official documents do not explicitly mention China, the subtext is clear—China represents the primary maritime threat in the contemporary era. The increasing power and ambition of



China in the region, especially through its expanding naval capabilities, have raised concerns in India. The core maritime interests for India include its territorial waters, the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea, and the southwestern Indian Ocean. A key concern for India is China's growing ability to control strategic chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, and others critical to India's sea lanes. The Indian Navy views China's naval activities, including its deployment of submarines and combat vessels, as a direct threat to India's access to these vital maritime routes, which are crucial for the country's national development and economic interests.

The primary maritime threat posed by China is its increasing ability to deny India access to essential sea routes. As China strengthens its position in the Indian Ocean, India faces the risk of losing control over these vital routes, especially as China increases its naval presence and cultivates strategic partnerships with Indian Ocean Rim countries. These partnerships allow China to expand its influence and potentially reshape the balance of power in the region, undermining India's maritime security and its broader regional aspirations. The prospect of China transforming economic relationships into strategic military alliances in the Indian Ocean could lead to a significant shift in the regional power structure, making it harder for India to maintain its strategic autonomy.

For India, the stakes are high, as the country continues to depend on the Indian Ocean for trade and resource development. Any strategic shift that allows China greater freedom to operate in these waters would be detrimental to India's maritime interests, both in terms of security and economic prosperity. In response, India has been moving towards a more flexible and adaptive maritime strategy, one that aligns more closely with Corbett's emphasis on protecting vital sea lanes and working within the complex geopolitical landscape of the contemporary world. This approach includes strengthening its own naval capabilities, building strategic alliances with other countries in the region, and ensuring the security of crucial chokepoints to maintain its maritime security and protect its interests in the Indian Ocean.

India's recognition of China as its primary maritime threat is thus not only a matter of military concern but also a strategic recalibration of how India engages with the Indian Ocean region. The shift towards Corbettian thought in maritime strategy reflects the changing nature of global power dynamics, where the focus is on protecting national interests through a combination of military presence, diplomacy, and strategic partnerships. This evolution in India's maritime strategy underscores the need for a nuanced approach to security in an increasingly complex and contested region.

Discussion

The Relevance of Corbettian Thought in the Sino-Indian Political Reality in the Indian Ocean

A prominent thinker in naval strategy theory is Sir Julian Corbett, a British historian and naval strategist often considered the antithesis of Alfred Thayer Mahan. While Mahan's work is renowned for emphasizing "victory on the sea," Corbett focused on "victory from the sea." Although Corbett agreed with Mahan that the object of naval warfare should always be, directly or indirectly, to secure command of the sea or prevent the enemy from securing it, he argued that a nation's grand strategy cannot be solely understood through naval operations (Corbett, 1988). Corbett contended that when formulating strategies for conventional warfare, a state must carefully consider the role of its fleet in relation to its army, as victory cannot be decided by naval action alone (Corbett, 1988). This argument stems from Corbett's view that: "*Since men live upon the land and not upon the sea, great issues between nations at war have always been decided...by what your army can do against your enemy's territory*" (Corbett, 1988).

Ultimately, Corbett critiqued Mahan by asserting that the notion of "the object of our battlefleet is to seek out and destroy that of the enemy" was insufficient, as the navy could not engage conventional ground forces (Corbett, 1988). While Corbett agreed with Mahan on the necessity of controlling vital sea lanes for military and commercial purposes, he did not support Mahan's view that naval strategy was about achieving "total command of the seas" by destroying the enemy's fleet in one or two decisive battles. Drawing heavily from Clausewitz's ideas, Corbett believed that the most fundamental principle shaping all strategy was political superiority. Hence, Corbett argued that what he called "maritime strategy" should always be shaped by the objectives, goals, and nature of the threat at hand. Corbett (1988) argued that in certain situations, a nation's maritime strategy might involve bringing the enemy's main battle fleet into a decisive battle and destroying it, as Mahan suggested. However, in other situations, the strategy might focus on achieving temporary and local control of the sea, enforcing

blockades, defending the homeland, disrupting the enemy's Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), or protecting trade from raiders (Corbett, 1988). Corbett also emphasized the need for strong diplomacy, designed to maximize one's own freedom of action while limiting the opponent's freedom. According to Corbett, this approach would depend on the political goals pursued and the political realities at the time. In the context of contemporary Indian politics and naval leadership, Corbett's ideas have found significant relevance. While the Pakistan Navy is often pushed out of the Indian Ocean by India's naval forces, the same cannot be said for China's presence. In comparison, the PLAN (People's Liberation Army Navy) is far larger and, in many respects, more capable than India's naval forces. China's naval infrastructure in the Indian Ocean, along with its growing investments in naval power projection capabilities, indicates that China is better positioned than India to dominate the Indian Ocean. The following is a comparison of naval military capabilities between China and India:







NAVY	255,000	58,350
 Submarines	71	16
 Destroyers	13	10
 Frigates	65	12
 Amphibious	239	17
 Combat aircraft	311	26
 Marines	10,000*	1,200*

Figure 1. China and India Naval Power Comparison. Red: China - Orange: India
 Source: Global Fire Power, 2017

Parameters	India	China
GFP Rank	3	4
Armed Manpower	1.3 Million	1.6 Million
Defense Budget	\$ 51 Billion	\$ 161.7 Billion
Total Aircraft	2102	2955
Tank Strength	4426	6457
Total Naval Assets	295	714
Serviceable Airports	346	507
Major Ports	7	15
Road Coverage (KM)	33,20,410	3860800
Rail Coverage (KM)	63,974	86,000
Waterway Coverage (KM)	14,500	1,10,000
Shared Borders (KM)	13,888	22,457
Square Land Area	32,87,263	95,96,961

Figure 2. China and India Military Power Comparison 2017
 Source: Global Fire Power, 2017

The analysis of the comparison reveals that China has a significantly higher defense budget, amounting to \$161.7 billion, compared to India's \$51 billion. This indicates that China's defense budget is more than three times that of India (Global Fire Power, 2017). Based on the two tables, it is evident that China holds supremacy in terms of weaponry and manpower. While the infrastructure comparison between the two countries appears nearly equal, especially in terms of railway and road networks, China still holds an advantage in its ownership of naval ports spread across strategically important regions (Global Fire Power, 2017).

In summary, this strategic reality shows that the Indian Navy is unlikely to be able to sweep the Chinese Navy from the Indian Ocean in a single decisive battle. Therefore, India cannot expect to achieve "command of the seas" in the near future. This evolving realization, stemming from the new



realities faced by India in the contemporary era, leads to the emergence of a new phase in the projection of India's naval strategy, which aligns more closely with Corbettian thought. This does not mean that Corbett has entirely replaced Mahan in India's maritime strategy, nor does it imply that Corbettian ideas have never influenced the Indian Navy since independence. In fact, the Indian Navy inherited many Corbettian ideas from the Royal Navy at the time of independence, and these ideas continued to shape India's naval thinking in the decades that followed. However, during that period, Mahanian thought remained the dominant framework influencing India's maritime strategy.

Nevertheless, in the contemporary era, with India's perception of threats and the prevailing real-politic situation, the Indian Navy has increasingly adopted and implemented Corbettian strategies, particularly in response to China's presence in the Indian Ocean region. This shift reflects a more pragmatic and adaptable approach, one that acknowledges the need for flexibility in naval operations, particularly as India faces challenges in balancing its maritime objectives with the overwhelming power of China's military capabilities.

India's Naval Strategy in the Context of China's Presence in the Indian Ocean

"A power too weak to win command by offensive operations may yet succeed in holding the command in dispute by assuming a general defensive attitude" (Corbett, 1988). Walter Ledwig (2012) suggests that India's naval expansion revolves around three key elements: (1) preventing intrusion by conflicting powers; (2) power projection based on India's interests; and (3) protection of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). In alignment with India's naval strategy, Corbett's ideas challenge the belief that an enemy fleet is always the center of gravity in naval operations. Corbett also rejects the notion of decisive battle as the primary method of warfare (Corbett, 1988). Instead, Corbett emphasizes the denial of SLOCs as a valid strategy that weaker powers may employ to disrupt an adversary's maritime operations (Corbett, 1988). To address perceived threats to India's maritime interests, the Indian Navy has adopted four main strategies, all aimed at countering China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean in a Corbettian framework.

The first strategy is sea control – a fundamental concept underpinning India's maritime strategy. This defensive mission seeks to ensure that the Indian Navy has temporary, localized control of maritime areas to guarantee secure maritime communication, both for commercial and military purposes. The Indian Maritime Doctrine defines sea control as: *"A condition where one is able to use a defined sea area, for a defined period of time, for one's own purposes and at the same time deny its use to the adversary"* (Indian Maritime Doctrine, n.d.). Sea control encompasses control of surface and undersea areas, airspace above these areas, and the electromagnetic environment in the Indian Ocean. Sea control is not an end in itself but rather an enabler that grants freedom of action to those who possess it while denying it to adversaries. While the concept of sea control shares similarities with Mahan and Corbett's theories, it is emphasized that sea control in this context is not permanent but temporary, reflecting Corbett's belief that the sea is not susceptible to ownership (Corbett, 1988). Therefore, sea control transcends the 'physical destruction of the enemy' and focuses more on ensuring freedom of passage on the sea (Corbett, 1988).

The second strategy is sea denial, a Corbettian naval strategy aimed at denying an enemy the ability to use the sea without necessarily attempting to control it for one's own use (Corbett, 1988). This concept is complementary to sea control and not mutually exclusive. Corbett clarifies: *"The two concepts: sea control and sea denial are not mutually opposing, but whereas the object of sea control is to use the sea for oneself, the object of sea denial seeks to deny the enemy effective use of the sea"* (Corbett, 1988). Sea denial is a less ambitious strategy than sea control, often employed by weaker powers since it requires fewer resources (Corbett, 1988). India should prioritize sea denial strategies in the Indian Ocean to 'fortify its defense' and prevent or disrupt China's potential aggressions. This approach is considered more effective and reliable compared to strategies of punishment, which rely on retaliation after an attack. India's geographic advantage in the Indian Ocean provides a unique leverage, but rather than using it to initiate conflict, the sea denial strategy focuses on limiting China's coercive actions in the region through military and political obstacles. India could also enhance its sea-denial capabilities by expanding its stock of long-range precision missiles, thereby impeding China's prospects for direct military intervention. While sea denial in the Indian Ocean may not resolve the India-China tensions, it offers a pragmatic path to building political influence and military power in the region. This Corbettian strategy provides India with the strategic leverage needed to deter or counter coercive actions in the Indian Ocean.

The third pillar of India's naval strategy is the protection and denial of maritime communication lines. The mission here is to ensure the safety and security of Indian shipments by providing escorts, establishing sea control in key areas, and neutralizing threats to Indian shipments and SLOCs. Conversely, India's maritime strategy also targets the use of maritime routes by enemies to carry out operational plans and sustain their war efforts. This strategy aims to obstruct enemy SLOCs outside ports, at critical points, and on the high seas. Since 2017, India has deployed 15 warships on missions to highly strategic areas such as the Strait of Malacca, the Andaman Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Arabian Sea (Latham, 2021). Reflecting Mahanian influence, many of these ships are optimized for sea control missions, or even for command of the seas. However, India has increasingly emphasized the acquisition and deployment of sea denial platforms such as submarines and shore-based anti-ship missiles (Latham, 2021). Additionally, India has secured access to supporting facilities with partners like Oman, Madagascar, Mauritius, and Singapore. Collectively, these initiatives can be viewed as India's 'Metal Chain' or 'Iron Curtain' against China's 'String of Pearls.'

Finally, India's naval strategy emphasizes the crucial role of diplomacy in securing national maritime interests. Corbett (1988) stressed the importance of diplomatic strategy in supporting broader national policy, particularly in naval strategy. Reflecting this logic, India has pursued maritime diplomacy to counter China's influence in the Indian Ocean and its expanding geopolitical footprint. In this context, India has deepened defense relationships not only with the U.S. but also with France, Australia, and Japan.

The Quad is evolving into Quad-Plus, which will include South Korea, Vietnam, and New Zealand. India has also signed two significant military pacts with Australia: the Australia-India Mutual Logistic Support Arrangement and the Defence Science and Technology Implementing Arrangement, which are seen as steps towards strengthening maritime defense ties in the Indo-Pacific (Latham, 2021). Furthermore, India has bolstered its strategic position in the Indian Ocean through two new trilateral maritime security arrangements: the India-France-Australia Trilateral Dialogue held in September 2020, focusing on enhancing economic and geostrategic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific while implicitly addressing the growing Chinese threat in the region. The second minilateral initiative is the planned meeting of the foreign ministers of India, Indonesia, and Australia to foster improved maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean.

India's approach to maritime strategy reflects a sophisticated, multi-faceted defense and diplomatic framework aimed at countering China's maritime ambitions in the Indian Ocean. By combining sea control, sea denial, maritime protection, and strategic diplomacy, India is positioning itself as a dominant force in the region, ready to secure its interests and thwart adversarial influence.

CLOSING

India has transitioned from a Mahanian naval strategy, focused on decisive battles, to a more pragmatic and politically driven Corbettian approach, prompted by China's growing dominance in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This shift reflects the Indian Navy's recognition of the limitations of direct confrontation with a superior Chinese naval force and the need for a more adaptable and nuanced strategy.

The contemporary strategy of the Indian Navy is built on four key pillars: sea control, sea denial, the protection of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), and maritime diplomacy. Sea control ensures temporary access to strategically vital maritime areas, while sea denial aims to restrict China's ability to exploit these areas for its strategic advantage. The protection of SLOCs safeguards India's critical trade routes, and maritime diplomacy enhances India's partnerships with regional and global powers to counterbalance China's influence.

India's strategy emphasizes defensive and deterrent measures over offensive actions, avoiding direct naval engagement with China. This approach leverages India's geographic advantages and reinforces its position through diplomatic initiatives, such as trilateral partnerships with France and Australia and multilateral cooperation within frameworks like the Quad. These efforts strengthen India's regional presence and create strategic obstacles for China.



In conclusion, India's naval strategy in the Indian Ocean reflects an effective adaptation of Corbettian thought. By prioritizing political and strategic leverage over military dominance, India not only addresses the maritime threat posed by China but also enhances its regional influence through coordinated diplomatic and military efforts. This pragmatic approach ensures India's security interests while fostering regional stability.

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