

***India's Ocean: The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership.***  
By David Brewster. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014. Hardcover:  
228pp.

Is the Indian Ocean India's Ocean? If not, will it inevitably become so? To advance its national interests in the Indian Ocean, will India replace its current "mish mash" of ideas, instincts and prejudices? Or, as the author of *India's Ocean: The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership* suspects, will India "continue along at its own civilizational pace without any overarching or coordinated strategic plan, seeking to expand its power and influence here and there on an *ad hoc* basis, as and when opportunities present themselves?" (p. 206).

After decades in the shadows, the Indian Ocean has recently attracted renewed attention. Initially, governments, pundits and scholars often exaggerated both rivalry between India and China in the Indian Ocean and the improvement in relations between India and the United States. The high water mark of speculation about great power rivalry was probably reached with Robert Kaplan's 2009 "Center Stage for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Power Plays in the Indian Ocean", though popular but unsupportable myths such as a Chinese "string of pearls" (naval facilities) across the Indian Ocean live on.

It is with regret that David Brewster's new book was not available a few years ago. The book has three strengths. First, Brewster provides a sophisticated analysis of the drivers and constraints on Indian policies, as New Delhi slowly and hesitantly tries to increase its influence. Second, the book is comprehensive. Because individual chapters address specific parts of the Indian Ocean, this book serves as a primer on India's interests and policies in distinct parts of the Indian Ocean, from maritime South Asia to Australia. The reader, therefore, can compare India's reach in different areas. Sweeping generalizations are thus minimized. Third, the chapter on the United States demonstrates an excellent understanding of the opportunities and challenges in aligning US and Indian policies in the Indian Ocean.

An underlying problem in India's approach is a tendency to see international relations as hierarchical. Indian elites assume their country is a global power destined to dominate the Indian Ocean and expect recognition of India's self-ascribed status and self-described benign intentions not in the future, but now. However, India is often

quite hesitant to act and reluctant to work with others. Brewster identifies several problems that flow from apparent disconnects within the Indian mindset and between India and other states. These include: a gap between India's rhetoric and capabilities; an insistence on "strategic autonomy" when India can best advance its security interests in cooperation with others; an instinct to seek the exclusion of other major powers such as the United States and China — without regard to the costs and benefits to India — from the Indian Ocean; and good ties with smaller, more dependent countries but weak and awkward relationships with middle powers, such as Australia and South Africa, along the Indian Ocean littoral. Consequently, India is positioned as a natural "centre of gravity" in the Indian Ocean, but it has a long way to go — both in terms of power and policy development — before it achieves the regional dominance, albeit for benign or other reasons, to which it believes it is entitled.

Brewster's discussion of the problems aligning Indian and US policies in the Indian Ocean is also on the mark. As the United States has "rebalanced" to Asia, it has sought to construct a modern security partnership with India and looked to India to fill security vacuums in the Indian Ocean. However, many in India continue to fear that cooperation with the United States will somehow entrap India as a dependent in the partnership. Thus, as Brewster notes, "India's objective of strategic autonomy will likely constrain or delay the growth of Indian strategic influence in the Indian Ocean" (p. 179).

Of particular interest to readers of *Contemporary Southeast Asia* is Brewster's take on India–Southeast Asia relations in the Indian Ocean and along its littoral, subsumed in his "The Northeast Indian Ocean" chapter. Brewster argues that India is not only dominant in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, but is also widely seen, on balance, as a benign security provider. Predominance in these waters fulfills several Indian goals: defence of India against threats arriving through Southeast Asia; defence against maritime disorder; a window on Southeast Asia itself; and, less convincingly, a bargaining chip in dealing with China.

With regard to Southeast Asia, he correctly notes, "India's moves have been slow and hesitant ... If India is to build a major strategic role in the region it will need to prove itself a key partner to these key (Southeast Asian) states. This will require a much greater and consistent commitment to the entire region than has been evident over the last decade or so" (p. 142). That said, India's cautious and

unambitious approach also has benefits. Although it is true that New Delhi has only tried haphazardly to construct security links to most states in archipelagic Southeast Asia, at least Singapore has acted as a “strategic anchor” in the region for India since the early 1990s. Moreover, New Delhi curbed its ambitions when littoral states along the Straits of Malacca made it clear that they did not need or want Indian interference in this strategic passageway. And, despite unending handwringing, India recognizes that Myanmar is more a buffer state between it and China than a contested strategic space.

A substantial literature about security issues in the Indian Ocean, of uneven quality, has been published in the past half-decade. Brewster is making a name for himself by providing solid, well-researched material and convincing arguments. *India's Ocean: The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership* now joins the handful of books on the subject that are required reading for those interested in the Indian Ocean.

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