



Seminar : The Indo-Pacific : what strategy vis-a-vis China ?

Topic : Reaching strategic autonomy in the naval industry: a challenge for India in the context of its strategy for the Indo-Pacific

On 4 August 2021, INS Vikrant, the first Indian-built aircraft carrier, began sea trials¹. The latest flagship of the 'Make in India' initiative has been heralded as a success and a new turning point in India's indigenisation policy.

This launch is in fact part of a continuous desire, although not always followed by real concretisations, for independence on the part of the country since 1947, declined into strategic autonomy in recent years. We shall retain here the definition of the Indian journalist Sreemoy Talukdar who describes it as "the exercise of a choice guided solely by sovereign considerations and interests"². To be credible, this political-diplomatic component must be accompanied by a capability component. Although the maritime domain has historically been underestimated by the Indian subcontinent, the rise of China and the adoption of the Indo-Pacific concept have led to greater consideration of the naval industry. The Navy has military, diplomatic, constabulary and benign roles³ and directly contributes the sovereignty of the state. Having a self-sustaining naval industry, capable of supporting the needs of the Indian Navy under any circumstances, is therefore a key issue for India's strategic autonomy.

India today has the seventh largest fleet in the world in terms of tonnage and "the Indian Navy now has the full spectrum of power for low intensity conflict, conventional warfare and nuclear deterrence"⁴. However, despite the great strides made in recent years, and the success of the concept of strategic autonomy in many parts of the world, the Indian Navy is still much less studied than that of other countries.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the reflection on this subject, by analysing to what extent the naval industry contributes to the Indian strategic autonomy and its broader Indo-Pacific strategy. Despite a long history of seafaring, India's naval domain has been persistently marked by the colonisation and much underestimated (I) until the realisation of the importance of capacities to support its political-diplomatic activism and achieve strategic autonomy (II). While structural difficulties remain in the Indian naval industry, the Indo-Pacific and the power plays within it have led to the evolution of the conception of India's role and the need for a more robust and autonomous naval industry (III).

1 DSI team, "La BITD indienne : des résultats tangibles", *Défense & Sécurité internationale*, n°83 Special Edition (May 2022)

2 Sreemoy Talukdar, "Vladimir Putin in India: As Russian president arrives with S-400 deal, New Delhi's strategic autonomy gets more skin in game", *Firstpost* (05/10/2018)

3 Presentation given by Cdr Anand Kumar on 09/03/2020 during an internship at the National Maritime Foundation (NMF).

4 Joseph Henrotin, "Inde : un géant stratégique entravé ?", *Défense & Sécurité internationale*, n°83 Special Edition (May 2022).

According to Nicolas Péné, "L'Indian Navy : de la défense littorale à la puissance océanique" [The Indian Navy: from coastal defence to ocean power], *Bulletin de l'Association des Géographes Français* (2017) : "It has one aircraft carrier and is building a second, has ten destroyers, sixteen frigates, twenty-four corvettes, one helicopter carrier, thirteen transport and landing ships, ten ocean-going patrol boats, six minehunters. It also has four supply tankers, two deep-sea tugs, a submarine assistance and rescue vessel, a torpedo test recovery vessel, a search and survey vessel, a training vessel, two training and representative sailing vessels and eight scientific research vessels. As far as its submarine fleet is concerned, it has fifteen units. The latest submarine, the INS Arihant, launched in 2014, is the flagship of the fleet, as it is nuclear powered and built in India."

The defence industry, which can be defined as what is designed and produced for the Ministry of Defence, comprises an entire ecosystem (fuels, raw materials, etc). Due to length constraints, we will limit ourselves to armaments and ships as finished products.

As far as sources are concerned, we have tried as much as possible to rely on primary and Indian sources (speeches, official communiqués, the Indian Ministry of Defence website, interviews conducted during an internship at the National Maritime Foundation, etc). However, given the political nature of the subject, the combined use of analytical sources seemed essential.

I- Before the launch of the Indo-Pacific strategy, the maritime domain has been underestimated for a long time in India

1. The representation of the maritime domain in India : imbalance between maritime and land-based imperatives

When people talk about India's lack of historical interest in the maritime domain, the *Kala Pani* is often invoked. However, this ban in the 12th-13th centuries would have concerned only the high castes and intermittent periods. On the contrary, the relationship of the Indian subcontinent with the rest of the world was marked by numerous exchanges, particularly by sea. Travel accounts testifying to these links go back as far as antiquity (with the Greco-Roman Empire or present-day South-East Asia, at the time of the Pallava dynasty for example)⁵. The subcontinent would even have been a crossroads, "feeding the southern networks of the Silk Road [...]"⁶. Thus, despite periods of opening and closing, this is the colonization that particularly closed India and maintained a disinterest for the oceans⁷.

At the same time, this experience of colonization had a lasting impact on the Indian shipbuilding industry. Indeed, indigenous shipbuilding was a key element of India's impressive maritime history, which began with the Harappan civilization around 2500 BC. The Wadia master builders marked the golden age. However, the experience of colonization did not allow this industry to seize the industrial revolution. If the Indian Navy was established in 1612 by the East India Company, the transition from sailing ships to mechanised ships was not made at the time⁸. Because of the important delays accumulated in this field and the other numerous challenges that India had to face at its independence⁹, the country's post-1947 industrial policy has not focused sufficiently on shipbuilding. The context of undefined borders in which India is evolving, both with Pakistan and China, is particularly noteworthy. Even if we can see, for example, that there was a significant naval component in the third Indo-Pakistani war of 1971¹⁰, the majority of attention was focused on land borders.

In terms of perception, despite the increasing resources allocated to the Indian Navy, the maritime domain often remains underrepresented compared to the land. Nevertheless, the Mumbai attacks of November 26, 2008, by Islamists from the Lakshar-e-Taiba marked a turning point: the possibility of threats coming from the sea became a reality. This event left a lasting impression on the minds of the population, the government and the military¹¹. A lot of work remains to be done on maritime

5 Among these travel stories, we can refer in particular to : *Périple de la Mer Érythrée* (ca. 30 after J.-C.). Many archaeological finds also testify to these ancient links.

6 Jean-Luc Racine, "Penser l'Inde émergente : de l'altérité orientaliste au post-postcolonialisme", [halshs-01064362](#) (September 2014)

7 Gurcharan Das, *India Unbound. From independence to the global information age* (2000). The author defends the idea that the colonization has rather led to a closure in terms of economic exchanges, and that liberalization is finally a return to the place that India had in the world before colonization.

8 Ravi Vohra, T. S. V. Ramana, *Shipbuilding in India : Challenges and Strategies*, NMF (2009)

9 Nicolas Blarel, "Inside Out ? Assessing the Domestic Determinants of India's External Behaviour" in Mischa Hansel, Raphaëlle Khan, Méliissa Levaillant, *Theorizing Indian Foreign Policy*, Routledge Editions (2017)

10 Ibid.

11 Himadri Das, "Coastal security in India: twelve years after "26/11"", National Maritime Foundation (01/12/2020)

domain awareness (MDA)¹²: Indians are islanders who ignore who they are, as the current Director General of the National Maritime Foundation (NMF) repeatedly says. A striking recent example is the creation of the Chief of Defence Staff of the Indian Armed Forces (CDS) in 2020, who must necessarily be an Army man.

In fact, India's presence on maritime issues has been primarily existing through the diplomatic-political channel, as part of the representation of a so-called third way. Awareness of the need for capability support for this diplomacy came much later¹³, and a great deal of effort has been directed towards the naval industry in recent years. India is an emerging power: in history, no power has imposed itself without an army and a defense industry¹⁴.

2. A late awareness of a backwardness in the shipbuilding industry : multiple initiatives implemented but mixed results

On 4 March 1961, the INS Vikrant, the first Indian aircraft carrier, entered into service. That same year, a patrol boat was produced in 1961 in Kolkata. From then on, India was considered as a "builder navy". In 1972, the first breakthrough occurred, in Mazagaon Docks, with the building of the Leander class frigate INS Nilgiri¹⁵. The most complex ship designed and built in India to date is the INS Arihant (nuclear powered ballistic missile submarine), which entered service in August 2016. The first sea trials in August 2021 of the INS Vikrant, the first Indian-built aircraft carrier, have also caused a stir¹⁶.

These few highlights for the Indian naval industry are marked by a major trend, which fully contributes to India's search for strategic autonomy: that of indigenization. However, it should be noted that India still relies on imports for about 70% of its military equipment needs, which is a far cry from the objective set in 1995 by A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, head of the Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO), who wanted to increase the indigenization rate from 30% to 70% in 10 years¹⁷. However, as early as 1958, India's awareness of its dependence and backwardness in terms of armaments is present in the creation of the DRDO¹⁸. The naval industry has a crucial place in this dynamic, since it would constitute the basis of a virtuous circle, feeding other industries, creating employment, etc¹⁹. A realization in the 1980's should have led to a major transition from a licence based production to a production based on indigenous design. However, the shipbuilding industry, like Indian industry in general, has been pushed aside in favor of the service sector. Thus, despite the many recommendations and initiatives, few projects are actually implemented. The Indian Navy could not rely on this indigenous industry, and turned to different partners, first and foremost the USSR. At the end of the Cold War, India was 95% dependent on the Soviet Union for conventional submarines and 70% for frigates²⁰. In addition, a decoupling between sea control and power projection clearly took place during this period²¹.

Following the Kargil conflict, "India has set up at least 8 committees/taskforces to look into the various aspects of national defence, including indigenous defence production and self-reliance."²².

12 Himadri Das, "Maritime Domain Awareness in India: shifting paradigms", National Maritime Foundation (30/09/2021)

13 Raju G. C. Thomas, *Indian Security Policy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press (1986)

14 Nicolas Péné, "L'industrie de défense indienne et ses territoires : ambition géostratégique, défi technologique et développement régional", thesis defended on 03/12/2021

15 Ravi Vohra, "Warship-building : demand and capacity", in Ibid.

16 Ibid. 76 % of its value was produced in India.

17 Gilles Boquérat, "Le "Make in India" et la réforme de l'industrie de défense", FRS n°07/2016 (17/02/2016)

18 S. Navaneetha Krishnan, *Prosperous Nation Building Through Shipbuilding*, National Maritime Foundation (2013)

19 Ibid. Page 241

20 Ibid. "The balance tipped strongly in favour of the latter, and the surface force evolved accordingly. Proficiency in land-attack and maritime-security operations reached new heights, while foundational skills in anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and anti surface warfare (ASUW) slowly began to erode"

21 Presentation of Cdr. Mohanty entitled "Distributed lethality" on 15/04/2020 during an internship at the NMF.

22 Official documents declassified in the 2000s, studied at NMF with a researcher during an internship. Among these committees were the Sisodia Committee and the V.K. Mistra Committee. However, once again, most of the recommendations have not been followed. For example, the Rama Rao Committee recommended in 2008 the

The introduction by the Ministry of Defence in 2006 of the concept of "Make in India" in the acquisition process "to ensure indigenous research, design, development and production capabilities to meet the needs of the armed forces within a prescribed time frame by maximizing the potential of Indian industry"²³ has given a political impetus to this indigenization. It also made a clear distinction between self-reliance and self-sufficiency: self-sufficiency (producing everything needed for the armed forces internally) is not appropriate for India, according to Subrahmanyam. Instead of it, he advises self-sufficiency, which he defines as "providing the armed forces with a range of equipment [that] can be sourced from foreign or domestic sources," with operational use and maintenance of the equipment coming back to India so that it does not depend on the context and the goodwill of manufacturers. Co-production and technology transfer have been encouraged in this sense²⁴. The Dhirendra Singh Commission (2015) thus reiterated the importance of such transfers and increasing the absorptive capacity of Indian industry²⁵. The increasing inclusion of the private sector in these initiatives has also enabled new projects.

Finally, "shipbuilding is the sector that, in terms of indigenization, appears to be the most successful. The Navy now claims the ability to design all types of warships (frigates, destroyers, aircraft carriers) in the country's four public shipyards²⁶. [...]. The proportion of local input is constantly increasing. For flotation, it exceeds 90%, it is over 60% for propulsion, but does not exceed 30 to 40% for critical munitions and probes"²⁷. Despite the strong impetus and notable results of recent years, India still has a standard ship unit (SSU) below that of countries at the same level of development²⁸, and is still dependent on a few countries for its shipbuilding industry. The country has long been marked, and remains so, by several decades of "oblivion" of this industry, in parallel with an unchallenged consensus among politicians and defense decision makers on the idea that India should remain a 'regional' defense power and a middle power with a nuclear capability and the ability to project conventional military power, especially at sea. A path dependency whose intrinsic contradiction is now in the process of being resolved²⁹, with the aim of making this consensus a reality, especially through strategic autonomy.

II- The concept of strategic autonomy: a driver and objective of the Indian policy and strategy for which the Indian Navy upgrade is necessary

1. The concept of strategic autonomy : an Indian history

While this paper is not intended to study the genesis and evolution of Indian foreign policy, a quick study of the shift from non-alignment to strategic autonomy and the definition of the latter by Indian officials seems essential.

Following independence in 1947, one major principle has been at the heart of Indian foreign policy : the non-alignment³⁰. After decades of colonization, the idea was for the state not to risk alienation by aligning itself with a power superior to it, and to be able to follow its own priorities.

creation of a specialized university technological training program on defense. Shipbuilding is indeed a technology-intensive activity. But this has not been followed up.

23 India Ministry of Defence, "Defence procurement procedure" (2006). URL : <https://www.mod.gov.in/sites/default/files/dpp2006.pdf>

24 Laxman Kumar Behera, *Indian Defence Industry: Issues of Self-Reliance*, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (2013). The offset policy has been implemented in 2005, so quite late compared to other countries with the same level of development.

Ibid. In 2008 : « Naval Headquarters have recently forwarded a comprehensive report to the gov calling for a multi-pronged strategy to revitalise the Indian shipbuilding industry. ».

25 Ibid.

26 Mumbai (Mazagaon Dock Ltd.), Kolkata (Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers Ltd, Goa (Goa Shipyard Ltd.) and Visakhapatnam (Hindustan Shipyard Ltd).

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Matthew Uttley, Benedict Wilkinson, Armida Van Rij, "A power for the future? Global Britain and the future character of conflict", in *International Affairs* (July 2019) on 'Re-visioning war and the state in the twenty-first century', guest-edited by Tracey German

India even became the leading country in this respect, being the leader of the non-aligned movement. After several swings between the USSR and the United States in particular, and a last attempt to save the principle in 2012 by a group of eminent Indian intellectuals with the publication of a report entitled "Non-alignment 2.0"³¹, the concept of non-alignment was gradually replaced by that of strategic autonomy. New Delhi's rapprochement with Washington, and India's adherence to the Indo-Pacific discourse - which it claims as its own - are among the markers of the gradual change in India's relationship with non-alignment. In November 2013, the transition seemed to be complete, with Foreign Minister Salman Kurshid's statement: "In the past, we had our non-alignment position and more recently, we describe it as our autonomous strategic position."

While some have called this a paradigm shift, others have seen it as a continuity in the country's reaffirmed desire for independence³². Indeed, throughout the twentieth century, strategic autonomy was a constitutive element, a means of non-alignment. The meaning of strategic autonomy began to evolve with the first Indian nuclear tests: strategic autonomy was defined as India's refusal to accept international nuclear restrictions. Since the end of the 2000s, several speeches and official documents have broadened the meaning of strategic autonomy³³. In 2014, the election of the Bharatiya Janata Party government led by Narendra Modi marked a more sustained international activity and a more responsive and determined foreign policy³⁴, and an assertive break with non-alignment, in favor of strategic autonomy³⁵.

Although the concept of strategic autonomy is today at the heart of Indian foreign policy, and faces a relative consensus within Indian authorities, its definition is not so clear. It is described as a "mutation of realism and India's traditional non-alignment posture"³⁶, with a very clear emphasis on self-reliance and independence. India must have the capacity to make decisions without being subject to external pressure, but without being limited by "certain ideological constraints of non-alignment"³⁷. Here we shall retain the definition, already mentioned in the introduction, of the Indian journalist Sreemoy Talukdar³⁸. In this regard, the current foreign minister himself has already put forward the idea of going beyond the goal of strategic autonomy, or making it a means to a new concept: multi-alignment. According to Rajesh Rajagopalan, a professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, "When a country faces serious threats, alignments can actually enhance strategic autonomy."³⁹. The rise of China is indeed not unrelated to this "paradigm shift". However, opinions still differ in New Delhi as to which partnerships would strengthen or weaken this strategic autonomy⁴⁰.

30 Or the "soft balancing" according to T.V. Paul, "How India Will React to the Rise of China : The Soft-Balancing Strategy Reconsidered", *War On the Rocks* (17/092018)

31 Sunil Khilnani, Rajiv Khumar, Pratab Bhanu Mehta, Prakash Menon, Nandan Nilekani, Srinath Raghavan, Shyam Saran, Siddharth Varadarajan, "Non – alignment 2.0 – a foreign and strategic policy for India in the 21st century", Centre for Policy Studies (December 2012)

32 Harsh V. Pant, Julie M. Super, "India's 'non-alignment' conundrum: a twentieth-century policy in a changing world", *International Affairs*, Volume 91, Issue 4 (July 2015)

33 Jeff M. Smith, "Strategic autonomy and U.S.-India relations", *War on the rocks* (06/11/2020)

In a speech in October 2007, Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee stated: "Building strategic autonomy of choice has been the "main task of Indian foreign policy since 1947".

34 Ian Hall, *Modi and the reinvention of Indian foreign policy*, Bristol University Press (2019)

35 Even if this term is resurrected from time to time. See for example the speech given by the External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar during a virtual conference organised by CNBC-TV18 on "Geopolitics of opportunity: as the world rebalances, how should India capitalise?" (20/07/2020) : "Non-alignment is an old concept today, but India will never be a part of an alliance system".

In a more than symbolic gesture, Narendra Modi is the first Indian Prime Minister not to attend the summits of the Non-Aligned Movement in 2017 and 2019. He is also taking up the issue of self-reliance developed by Jawaharlal Nehru, which he is updating in *Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan*.

36 Arun Sahgal and K. P. Vijayalakshmi, "India's Strategic Autonomy Dilemma and the Rapprochement with the United States" [event], Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (20/03/2009)

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Rajesh Rajagopalan, "India's Strategic Choices: China and the Balance of Power in Asia", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (14/09/2017)

Finally, the issue of recognition also seems to underlie this search for strategic autonomy. The theory of recognition developed in social philosophy by Axel Honneth⁴¹ and its application in international relations by Thomas Lindemann⁴² highlight that the fact that states "seek not only security and prosperity, but also the confirmation of a certain identity.". Thomas Lindemann also insists on the importance of roles in the definition of these identities: applied to the Indian naval defense industry, a means for India to achieve or maintain regional supremacy and a role as a "middle power" and net security provider in particular, this theory makes perfect sense.

2. A concept at the heart of the Indian foreign policy : the maritime domain as a case study

Indeed, the strategic autonomy sought by India is very largely associated with the role it wishes to have in the region. Its naval industry is a crucial means to its ambitions.

In fact, it should first be noted that India's maritime strategy may seem rather vague from the outside⁴³, in the sense that the policy has never defined India's maritime interests. According to the current Director General of the NMF, one can nevertheless, on the basis of documents emanating from the government and the actions taken by it, estimate that India wishes to use the seas for her own purposes, while dissuading, deterring and/or preventing others from using them in ways that are to her disadvantage (which is in fact the definition of maritime power). These wishes are the result of six India's maritime interests (unofficial ones): protecting India from the sea-based threats to India's territorial integrity; ensuring stability in India's maritime neighborhood; creating, developing, and sustaining of a "Blue" Economy; ensuring a holistic maritime security; making possible to support, rescue and repatriate members of the Indian Diaspora; obtaining and retaining a regionally favorable geostrategic maritime-position⁴⁴. Recent variations of this strategy include the role of "Net Security Provider"⁴⁵, in the Indian ocean mainly, and the geopolitical doctrine SAGAR ("Security And Growth for All in the Region")⁴⁶, for whom an autonomous and strong naval industry is essential, as a guarantee of credibility.

More broadly, India sees itself as a regional power, with a certain number of obligations that flow from this⁴⁷, and as a "middle power". This role conception, whether from internal or external sources⁴⁸ is the result of perceptions, but also induces expectations. While India has an exclusive economic zone of 2,305,143 km², it considers the entire Indian Ocean as its "natural sphere of operation". With the Indo-Pacific, understood as the 'maritime space comprising the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific' along with littoral states in Asia and east Africa⁴⁹, the maritime zone of strategic interest of India has been further expanded. This Indian conception of the Indo-Pacific has

40 Teresita C. Schaffer, Howard B. Schaffer, *India at the Global High Table : The Quest for Regional Primacy and Strategic Autonomy*, Brookings Institution Press (2016)

41 Axelle Honneth, "La Théorie de la reconnaissance : une esquisse" and "Visibilité et invisibilité : sur l'épistémologie de la " reconnaissance", *Revue du MAUSS* n° 23 (2004)

42 Thomas Lindemann, *Saving the face, Saving the peace, Constructivist Sociology of International Crises*, Thomas Lindemann (2010)

43 As its foreign policy, which has long been blamed for its apparent lack of long term vision. For this, see : Bernhard Beitelmaier-Berini, "Theorising Indian Strategic Culture(s): Taking Stock of a Controversial Debate" in Mischa Hansel, Raphaëlle Khan, Méliissa Levallant, *Theorizing Indian Foreign Policy*, Routledge Editions (2017)

44 Pradeep Chauhan, "India's proposed maritime strategy", National Maritime Foundation (03/02/2020)

45 Anit Mukherjee, "India as a net security provider : concept and impediments", RSIS (August 2014)
Allocation of Manmohan Singh, ex-PM of India (23/05/13) : "... a net provider of security in our immediate region and beyond..."

46 Subhasish Sarangi, "Unpacking SAGAR", USI Center for Strategic Studies and Simulation, n°2 (2019)

47 Gurpreet S. Khurana, "Les enjeux de la stratégie maritime indienne" [interview], *Défense & Sécurité internationale*, n°83 Special Edition (May 2022)

48 Holsti, K. J Holsti, "National role conceptions in the study of foreign policy", *International Studies Quarterly*, 14(3) (1970)

49 Gurpreet S. Khurana, "Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation », *Strategic Analysis* 31(1) (JUNE 2007). For a map of the Indian definition of the Indo-Pacif, see the website of the Indo-Pacific Observatory, CERI.

been accepted by all countries⁵⁰, and the perception of India's role in the region has certainly evolved with it. For example, although opposition to China is not an Indian desire, at least in rhetoric, the strengthening of the Indian navy makes sense in this respect. In any case, given the immense area to be covered, it is clear that the naval industry has a role to play in ensuring a “free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region”.

The naval industry is also at the heart of India's proactive diplomacy in the Indian Ocean⁵¹ and beyond. Indeed, the Indian strategy finds a particular incarnation in the maritime domain, where India pursues a policy based on the development of its naval capabilities, a network of maritime security partnerships and the promotion of multilateralism expressed in particular through the creation of forums⁵². In addition to the regular exercises between the Indian Navy and the navies of partner countries, we can also note the importance of creating and deepening partnerships via arms purchases and sales⁵³. Thus, while the weaknesses of the Indian naval industry allow it to import or co-build ships with the world's major powers, its strengths allow it to develop ties with neighboring countries⁵⁴. Despite the corruption associated with defense contracts and the length of these procurement processes, they do still represent efficient ways to create strong and long-term relationships for India that are essential to the realization of its strategy.

III- The rise of the Indo-Pacific concept : a new impetus to reach strategic autonomy in the naval industry

1. The consequences of the introduction of the Indo-Pacific concept and the rise of China on the Indian shipbuilding industry

The adoption of the Indo-Pacific concept was certainly a turning point. It is worth noting, however, that the change in official Indian documents is mostly from 2014 onwards. While one may wonder if the emphasis on this date is not a communication effect to establish a break between the new Narendra Modi government and previous governments, an acceleration (and not an initiation) of the dynamics in favor of strategic autonomy, especially concerning the naval industry, does seem to have taken place.

In fact, it was Narendra Modi who relaunched the “Make in India” initiative, releasing several arms contracts under negotiation at the start of his term. It was also under his first term that the threshold for FDI in the defense industry was raised and private players were able to gain an increasing share⁵⁵. In addition, the BJP government's Foreign Minister Jayshankar has introduced the concept of plurilateralism⁵⁶, with the stated goal of engaging with the whole world, with India at the center. Finally, there has been a rapprochement between India and the United States in recent years, called the “Modi moment”⁵⁷.

These elements are not without consequences. They have helped shape India's Indo-Pacific strategy as a primarily security-oriented strategy. As a reminder, India was one of the first countries

50 Except China, which does not necessarily welcome India's adoption of a concept considered as American.

51 Méliisa Levaillant, “La politique indo-pacifique de New Delhi, partenaire stratégique de la France”, *Les Champs de Mars*, vol. 30, n° 1 (2018)

52 Marianne Péron-Doise, “La politique maritime de l’Inde : consolider son identité indo-pacifique”, *Hérodote*, vol. 173, n° 2 (2019)

53 During a class at Sciences Po on 21/04/2022 : According to Antoine Bondaz, France limits its relationship with South Korea because the latter does not seek opportunities for arms sales. One can imagine that the opposite works.

54 For example, we can look at the recent arms deals with the Philippines, Thailand and Myanmar. The Philippines was the first country to buy Brahmos ballistic missiles. India and Thailand are conducting joint naval exercises and have their Indo-Thai Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT). Finally, the transfer of the Kilo-Class submarine from India to Myanmar in 2020 has led India to train the Myanmar's submarine corps and provide maintenance for the aircraft.

55 Ibid.

56 S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, HarperCollins India (2020)

57 After Obama's invitation to India in 2015 for Republic day celebrations, the two countries signed a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement in August 2016 (under negotiation since 2004) that resulted in the sale of

to adopt the Indo-Pacific concept, on June 1, 2018 at the Shangri-La Dialogue. Following this, India adopted its diplomatic apparatus, but also its investments in the defense industry. In parallel with the multiplication of partnerships⁵⁸, India has invested massively in the Indian Navy. A primarily security-oriented strategy and the size of the Indo-Pacific zone require a quantitative and qualitative increase in India's naval resources. In a context where the country is at the center of the world's new geopolitical field, the opportunities are as great as the risks of being drawn into alliance games.

Indeed, the concept of the Indo-Pacific, although India denies it most of the time in its official speeches⁵⁹, was also thought of as a way of balancing Chinese rising power⁶⁰. While the so-called "string of pearls" strategy⁶¹ had already been the subject of India's attention since 2005, it was the deployment of Chinese conventional submarines in the Indian Ocean from 2008 that marked a turning point. The announcement in November 2013 of the new Silk Roads, with the development of the maritime section, the elevation of the Sino-Pakistani relationship to the rank of strategic partnership, the deep sea ports and military bases east and west of Malacca straight or the naval cooperation between China and Bangladesh and Burma⁶² have only reinforced India's feeling of threat⁶³. In a context of strong economic dependence, and a very important imbalance between the Indian and Chinese navies⁶⁴, the stakes are high for Indian security (in the broad sense, in its traditional and non-traditional sense). Thus, in unveiling the "Act East Policy", Narendra Modi affirmed that he would be proactive containing China.

All these developments are certainly linked to each other, and have in any case led to a very significant figure: the continuous increase since 2010 of the Indian defense budget, and a 30% increase this year of the Indian Navy's budget (from INR 33,253 crores to INR 47,590 crores)⁶⁵. Despite the devaluation of the rupee against the dollar and the still smaller proportion of this budget in relation to the budget allocated to the army, this evolution should not be underestimated, especially since it would certainly continue in the coming years.



2. A strategic autonomy yet to be achieved : a highly politicized concept and persistent gaps with the reality of the Indian Navy's needs

In view of these threats, and India's central position in the Indo-Pacific, its ambitions for the naval industry and the Navy are indeed high for the coming years. Maritime India Vision 2030 cites several objectives, including "Enhance India's global stature and maritime cooperation" (chapter 8), and the idea of strategic autonomy is omnipresent. In terms of capabilities, India could have a strategic oceanic force of four or five nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines by 2030, and seven in the longer term⁶⁶. Another challenge will be to get India accepted as an exporter and to integrate its industry into the global chain⁶⁷. This would be a way for it to create new partnerships

several U.S. arms to India. Finally, on October 27, 2020, an agreement for intelligence sharing was reached.

58 Ibid. Examples : Quad, mini-lateral groups, joint maneuvers, Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), etc.

59 India has for example shown for several years reluctance to see the evolution of the Quad into a more institutionalized security partnership directed directly against China.

60 Already in 2008, at Republic Day, the Delhi declaration was noted as the first security-oriented communiqué. The signatories (ASEAN countries and India) indicated that they were "looking forward to an early conclusion of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea".

61 Juli A. MacDonald, Amy Donahue, Bethany Danyluk, *Energy Futures in Asia : Final Report*, Booz-Allen & Hamilton (November 2004)

62 i.e., Chinese access to the Bay of Bengal while India is testing its nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines and missiles there.

63 Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix, "L'Indian Navy et la quête de partenaires", *Défense & Sécurité internationale*, n°83 Special Edition (May 2022)

64 Ibid. At the level of submarine forces: on the Chinese side, 6 SNLE, 14 SNA, and 59 diesel submarines (for the moment) vs. 2 SNLE and 16 diesel submarines on the Indian Navy's side.

65 Abhijit Singh, "Defence Budget 2022-23: A mixed bag", Observer Research Foundation (03/02/2022)

66 Ibid.

67 In the words of Narendra Modi at the 2015 Aero India: "While India will not stop importing defense equipment the country would like manufacturers to incorporate India in their global supply chain. India's frugal but sophisticated

but also to reduce production costs. Some developments are already underway: indigenously produced sonars and missiles are already exported⁶⁸.

Despite all these announcements, one should not forget the political dimension of these projects. While public opinion plays a minor role in the design and conduct of Indian policy⁶⁹, the desire to show a positive image of India and its current government surely has an impact on the way these developments are presented by the pro-government press and official communiqués. The "Make in India" initiative for example, while it has seen some great achievements that have received a lot of media attention, it also has its limitations. Several Indian researchers and officers express their doubts about the adequacy of the measures taken and the real needs of the Indian Navy⁷⁰. Moreover, there is not yet an appropriate tool, at least not in the public domain, to measure Indian progress in terms of indigenization, and that the figures put forward by the government are therefore difficult to verify⁷¹.

In addition to this politicization, there are also structural limits to the achievement of strategic autonomy raising questions about "the institutional capacity of the state to conduct foreign policy and the practical back-and-forth between available means and the definition of national interests."⁷². One example is the bureaucratic red tape of the Indian system. The stakeholders in Indian shipbuilding are a lot⁷³, what can lead to duplication and inertia, even more while communication is lacking. Cost-efficiency and the quality of the materials produced are also problems. The accumulated delays are particularly problematic in a technology-intensive field where components quickly become obsolete⁷⁴. The equipments today are exported for "more diplomatic than commercial considerations"⁷⁵ and the Indian armed forces themselves have a preference for imported equipment⁷⁶. Moreover, the Indian naval industry still suffers from a lack of productivity (see above) and capacity. In 2004, of the 27 major Indian shipyards (8 public and 9 private), none was able to build large vessels. Today, the majority of ships for the Indian Navy are built at L&T Shipbuilding Ltd, Chennai. Shipyards are small and dispersed, and an economy of scale is yet to be achieved⁷⁷. Finally, the Indian shipbuilding industry still faces the challenge of sustainability. Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar told Parliament in 2014 that foreign arms procurement between 2009 and 2014 was 40 times greater than Indian arms sales abroad⁷⁸. If we also consider the economic difficulties facing India, and the covid has not helped, and the other sectors of the indian economy requiring investment, we understand that this pace is hardly sustainable. Especially since imports, as important as they are, would not be enough to renew Indian equipment⁷⁹. Thus, it will

manufacturing and engineering services sectors can help reduce costs. India can also be a base for export to third countries, especially because of India's growing defence partnerships in Asia and beyond."

68 Interview conducted with Cdr. Mohanty during an internship at the NMF.

69 Mischa Hansel, "Indian and Liberal International Relation Theory: What Role for Public Opinion?", in Mischa Hansel, Raphaëlle Khan, Méliissa Levaillant, *Theorizing Indian Foreign Policy*, Routledge Editions (2017)

70 Ibid. For example, a discrepancy has been observed between the desire for increased recourse to foreign investment and the reforms implemented.

71 Ibid. Wide variations in estimates put by various groups can be observed.

72 Méliissa Levaillant, "The Contribution of Neo-Institutionalism to the Analysis of India's Diplomacy in the Making", in Mischa Hansel, Raphaëlle Khan, Méliissa Levaillant, *Theorizing Indian Foreign Policy*, Routledge Editions (2017)

73 *Revitalization of Indian shipbuilding industry a strategic imperative*, IHQ MoD(N) (March 2008). They include the following: a dozen government agencies, the Indian Navy, ship owners, shipyards, supply chain actors, Ship Design Organisations, Research and Development Organisations, the Indian classification society and the academia and training institutes.

74 Ibid. Page 30, Table 1.8 : Time and Cost Overrun of CCS Projects. The table emphasizes a 3-4 years delay on average and 30% additional costs on a given shipbuilding project.

75 Ibid.

76 Extract from an interview given anonymously by a member of the research team of the NMF.

77 Ibid.

78 Rajat Pandit, "India's defence imports 40 times its export basket", *The Times of India* (29/11/2014)

79 Despite massive recourse to imports, a report by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) published in January 2010 observed that "50% of Indian weaponry was obsolete, much more than the 30% deemed acceptable by the Ministry of Defence".

surely be complicated for India to modernize, indigenize and increase the capability of its naval forces at the same time, despite its political activism and the progress already made in recent years.

Conclusion

Despite structural weaknesses partly inherited from the past, India has, especially since the 1980s, become aware of the importance of having a capability force to support its diplomatic activism and to give consistency to the role it sees for itself and that others wish it to play today in the Indo-Pacific context. To prevent this second element from taking over, to maintain a voice in the region and to face the growing security threats in the region, the achievement or preservation of its strategic autonomy is essential. The naval industry is a mirror of this objective, and of Indian foreign policy more generally (partnerships reflect "plurilateralism," indigenization reflects the desire for autonomy, etc.), and a means to that end. As the base of the Indian Navy, itself essential to diplomacy and military strength, the naval industry has a crucial role in ensuring India's sovereignty in its actions and decisions.

Today, it is reasonable to ask whether the Indian Navy remains a sub-regional navy as Hervé Couteau-Bégarie described it in 2007⁸⁰. In any case, it remains unquestionably the "leader of the northern Indian Ocean". Indeed, it can carry fire far from its coasts, monitor all types of maritime spaces, control and deny access to its waters. The large number of ships at its disposal allows it to be the only navy, along with that of the United States, to "have such a presence and range of capabilities in the Indian Ocean"⁸¹.

Nevertheless, while Indian media coverage is very laudatory on this subject, as mentioned above, the "western" press and research are still little interested in this subject. All eyes are focused on China and Russia. More research could avoid us projecting onto India our conception of its role, which might indeed not always correspond to its own vision. The Ukrainian crisis has shown once again India's willingness not to align itself with either of the blocs". However, even if the naval industry has made great progress in recent years, we have seen its limits and we can ask ourselves if the country has and will really get in the short or medium term the means of its strategic autonomy.

4608 words (titles included)

80 Hervé Couteau-Bégarie, "Le meilleur des ambassadeurs, théorie et pratique de la diplomatie navale", *Economica* (2007)

81 Ibid.