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Regional Outlook

A 'RULES-BASED' MARITIME ORDER IN THE
INDO-PACIFIC: ALIGNING THE BUILDING BLOCKS

Abhijit Singh

Griffith Asia Institute



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1. Introduction

A 'rules-based order' constitutes the foundation of a fair and transparent international maritime trading and security system. The subject of growing deliberation and discussion among Asia's strategic elite, rules-based maritime security has come to be regarded by analysts and policymakers as a prerequisite for maritime trade and commerce, and a crucial factor in the formulation of national security policy.

The rules-based system has also gained currency in the official discourse as it has acquired the salience of a rhetorical touchstone or conceptual lens through which policy planners view relationships between the principal littoral states in the Asia-Pacific, popularly referred to as the Indo-Pacific in Indian maritime circles. Increasingly, the template of rules-based security is used to generate a working consensus around clearly defined standards of acceptable behavior in the regional littorals.

At the heart of these discussions are questions about how Asian countries perceive their stakes in a rules-based international system; how states might like to see rules, norms, and principles emerge in Asia and serve their interests in a contested geopolitical environment. In the twenty-first century, Asian states have come to acquire prominence in the international order and to exert influence in matters of global security and economic development. As Asia assumes greater significance within the international system, it becomes more important for states to exchange views and ideas on how governance systems should be organised. This is especially true as China emerges as a powerful actor, with a maritime posture that appears to violate norms and principles of acceptable behavior.

For many, however, the usefulness of a rules-based maritime order in assessing Asia's strategic environment is still an open question. A section of the Asian strategic community is unsure about the motives underlying the push for a rules-based order and its supposed benefits. Others wonder how such

2. Conceptual Underpinnings

By its very definition, a 'rules-based' order denotes a baseline level of predictability, or patterned regularity around reasonable principles of behavior meant to reduce the possibility of conflict, despite the inherent structural anarchy of the international system composed of independent, sovereign states. More substantively, it implies accord on basic norms and standards that would exercise restraint in state conduct. The concept suggests the existence of not only a system but also "a society" of states whose members share "a sense of common interests in the elementary goals of social life; rules prescribing behavior that sustains these goals; and institutions that help to make these rules effective".²

In theory, a rules-based order is an instrument of multilateralism that facilitates a common fight against natural disasters and non-state actors. Its purpose is to establish a certain level of

3. India and the Indo-Pacific

India's strategic elite view the 'global system of rules' in the maritime commons as being inherently tied to the concept of the Indo-Pacific, rooted in a structural power shift underway in the global maritime system. The integrated maritime space rimming the Asian continent emphasises the rise of India and China as principal economic and military actors, with a growing ability to transcend their respective regions amid a worsening geopolitical environment. In this, Indian analysts stress the importance of the Eastern Indian Ocean as a bridge linking together the littoral regions of Asia, a sharp reminder to regional powers that the burdens of development and security in the Indian Ocean s

4. The Indo-Pacific and Economics

It is in the economic realm that India's political leadership unconditionally accepts the role of the Indo-Pacific. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has often referred to India's Indo-Pacific stakes as a way of underlining his government's developmental tasks. At the Raisina dialogue in New Delhi, Modi stressed his Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) principles.

A 'RulesBased' Marit

6.

A final disability of the rulesbased order is its lack of enforcement ability, leading to a type of cooperation that involves the mere provisioning of order security goods. Since there is no transcendental impartial authority that can enforce rules in a consistent fashion, states know they must rely only on themselves for their own security.²² This awareness leads states to look for ways in which they can work with each other for purely lawenforcement purposes. This also advances the view that the current system of tactical maritime engagement is the natural order of things, and that as long as all sides can come together to prevent crimes and -flaps at sea, all conflict can be effectively resolved.

7. The Indian Navy and t

8. A Collaborative Security Regime in Maritime Asia

For maritime forces, the business end of a rules-based order is the provisioning of hard maritime security, achievable only through greater interoperability, communications, maritime domain awareness. Cooperation in these areas has the potential to transform regional maritime operations by implementing a plan for the provisioning of lower and higher order goods. The best way to achieve strategic collaboration is to raise the complexity of naval exercises, and keep under active surveillance the littoral spaces of the Indo-Pacific region. Multinational exercises in the region presently suffer from a number of distinct drawbacks.²⁷ Apart from the political sensitivities of individual states, there are problems of equipment incompatibility, diverse operational and communications procedures, all of which limit the effectiveness of maritime military drills. In contrast, bilateral settings seem better suited to developing specific skills and sophistication of operations, but do not prepare navies for multilateral operations in complex security settings.

An ideal approach would be to have both bilateral and multilateral training by simply doing more of both types of exercises. Maritime forces need to continue devoting resources to maintenance, national training objectives, and multilateral operations in the face of growing threats in their respective neighbourhoods. The idea is to be more effective and efficient with fewer resources.

For India, the importance of joint operational drills in the Eastern Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific cannot be overstated. Combat exercises in sensitive theatres can train naval personnel to respond appropriately in high-pressure situations. As US Pacific Command Admiral Harry Harris pointed out at the Raisina dialogue in New Delhi recently: 'India and the US (and other partner states) needed to sharpen their teeth together in order to uphold the rules-based international order.'²⁸ It is an apt metaphor for preparing together to face a contingency in the regional seas, not least because it emphasises expertise in defending the global maritime order. As Admiral Harris suggested, any side that does not appreciate the importance of enforcing rules does not get to enjoy the fruits of a collaborative rules-based system.

Equally important as issues of sovereignty in the contested seas, are matters of maritime governance, particularly the management of fish stocks, protection of the maritime environment, and food and water security. Emphasising traditional security issues, the rules-based order must not detract from other larger irregular threats for which there should be specific norms of conduct. Needless to say, a maritime operational plan must also cater to the need to tackle non-traditional threats in the Indian Ocean.

For India, the maritime imperative has never been clearer. Accepting a rules-based model of maritime security would entail greater operational engagement in maritime Asia. India's 'neighbourhood first' and 'act east' policies will need to expand their focus beyond the marginal confines of the South Asian commons. As a vital building block of the rules-based order in Asia, the Indian navy will need to align its priorities with partner navies and expand its strategic presence across the Indo

Most importantly, the Indian Navy will need a new doctrinal framework that would give the military security function as much emphasis as the benign and constabulary role, presently soaking up most of its operational energy. The key would be to enhance its strategic capabilities to enable a credible distant presence.

A network of maritime partnerships in the Indo-Pacific has the potential to provide substantive security in the regional littorals. The rules-based architecture will provide the Indian Navy with the opportunity and the tools to redefine its strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific and to maintain a favourable balance of power in Asia.

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