CHAPTER II
MARITIME GEOGRAPHY AND GEO-STRATEGY

Maritime power and geography are closely linked to each other and are vital determinants in a country’s march towards becoming a maritime power. Geographical features such as seas, straits, choke points and offshore islands determine the maritime power of a state. Besides, these physical features also determine the sea-lanes that serve as the umbilical cord of the economic vitality of a nation. This chapter highlights the relevance and importance of geography in the formulation of maritime strategy. The chapter also examines the geographical settings of India and China and highlights how these have impacted on the growth of their maritime power.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section highlights the relationship between geography and maritime power. It establishes link between maritime geographical features and SLOCs that have direct bearing on the maritime power of a state. The second section analyses UNCLOS III and establishes a relationship between the nautical regime of the EEZ and maritime power. The third and the fourth sections analyse the maritime geographical features of India and China. The last section highlights the maritime geography of the Asia Pacific region and argues that maritime geography impacts economic and security dimensions of the region.

THE MATRIX OF GEOGRAPHY AND MARITIME POWER

From ancient times, states have developed maritime strategy based on geography. Geography is the fulcrum on which maritime operations are planned. Geographical features such as islands, straits, reef, corals and indented coastlines
play an important part in the development of war plans at sea. Even economists and politicians highlight geography in their discussions as it helps them to understand and appreciate strategic relationships and requirements. To an economist, the shortest route, low transportation cost and timely delivery of cargo are some of the factors that play a dominant role in developing maritime economic strategy. To a politician it is the state of relations with countries located in the maritime area of interest that will help develop a strategy for the growth of maritime power. When the military examines maritime power, the geographical location of friends and adversaries as also the geography that has to be traversed to get to the assistance of the other is vital. It is beyond doubt that it is the appreciation of geography and its effects on maritime power that will determine the strategy.

A geo-strategic region can be defined as a space that encompasses a state’s perceived political, economic and military interests. These interests are important enough for a state to use all possible means available to it to protect its national interests. Geo-strategic regions vary in size, numbers, and location and primarily depend upon the interests (global or regional) of a nation state. The geographical setting determines, to a large extent, the boundaries of a geo-strategic region. In the case of a state with global interests, there may be more than one geo-strategic region. The United States, which is a global power, has interests in both the Indian and the Pacific Ocean and considers these oceans as geo-strategically important. Similarly, the Persian Gulf is important to both India and China for their energy requirements, and therefore these countries have developed close diplomatic relations with several countries in the region. On the other hand, for a state with only local interests, the geo-strategic region may only be its territorial sea or the
EEZ. Such states exercise their influence in their areas of interest. For instance, Fiji, a small island state, considers its EEZ as its area of geo-strategic interests and has a smaller navy to safeguard its maritime and national interests. States that need to influence events far beyond their EEZ establish more extended geo-strategic boundaries depending upon their perceived interests. They build naval forces that can traverse long distances to safeguard national interests. Britain, with its interests in Hong Kong (before 1997), had maintained a permanent naval presence in the area. Straits and choke points can also be considered as part of a geo-strategic region. However small in size, they are of equal strategic importance to the state that controls them. For Singapore and Indonesia, the Straits of Malacca are important enough to consider undertaking regular patrolling of the area.

Similarly, SLOCs are geo-strategic regions. A SLOC is a route taken by a ship to transit from point A to B. In maritime terms, it should be short, economical and safe for transporting cargo. SLOCs serve as the umbilical cords of a state’s economy. They are the arteries of a region’s economy. During times of peace, SLOCs serve as commercial trade routes, but during a war these routes are considered strategic ways. SLOCs vary in length depending on the geography in terms of landmass, choke points, reefs and the location of the ports and harbours. There is an important link between SLOCs and geography in the construction of any SLOC strategy. For instance, the Japanese national interest demands that SLOCs be safeguarded out to 1000 nautical miles from the shore and Tokyo has accordingly defined this area as its geo-strategic region. It is evident that states that intend to exercise influence far beyond their shores, establish several geo-strategic regions through which their respective shipping would transit during hostilities and peace.
UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE LAW OF THE SEA
(UNCLOS)

In 1949, an international law commission was constituted under the United Nations to study national boundaries at sea and formulate laws of the seas. After a seven-year study (1949-56), eighty-six states met in Geneva for the Law of the Sea conference to discuss four draft conventions relating to sea boundaries developed by the commission. These form the basis of the existing principles of the law of the sea. The convention deals with:

(a) The Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone.
(b) The High Seas.
(c) Fishing and Conservation of Living Resources of the High Seas.
(d) The Continental Shelf.

These conventions had drawbacks and were considered inadequate for the demarcation of boundaries. Therefore, in 1960, a second UN conference on the Law of Sea was convened to look into fishing rights and the breadth of the territorial sea problems. Arvid Pardo, Malta’s ambassador to the UN, called on the UN to address these concerns:

(a) Reserve all non-territorial seabed resources as the common heritage of mankind.
(b) Establish international control on the use of the seabed.

---

2 Ibid., p.17.
The seabed to be proclaimed as the common heritage of mankind and the UN General Assembly should call for a third LOS conference.³

The UN General Assembly did indeed call for the third Law of the Sea conference. The third Law of the Sea convention was put to vote on April 30, 1982. One hundred and thirty states, including India and China, voted yes, four states were against the convention (US, Israel, Turkey and Venezuela) and 17 states abstained. The 1982 UNCLOS III establishes a comprehensive framework for the regulation and management of the ocean space.⁴ The convention consists of 320 articles and nine annexes and covers a broad spectrum of issues relating to regulation of navigation, marine protection, and scientific research and seabed mining.

The salient features (Figure 5 and 6) of the convention are:

(a) The drawing of base lines.

(b) A 12 nautical miles territorial sea.

(c) Unimpeded transit passage through international straits.

(d) An EEZ extending up to 200 nautical miles.

(e) Continental shelf regime and rights to manage living and non-living resources of the continental shelf to a minimum of 200 nautical miles.

(f) Concept of archipelagic waters and regulatory power over the ocean for archipelagic states.⁵


⁵ Ibid., p.ix.
UNCLOSE III Regime

Figure 5

Continental Shelf

Figure 6
EEZ: An Element of Maritime Power

As the traditional raw material sources on land are depleted due to overexploitation, resources from the sea have attracted great interest throughout the world. The pressure of population growth and food shortages has forced mankind to look towards the sea to meet the growing demand. Sea-based resources are being exploited to meet the ever-growing demand. As a matter of fact, the seas have become the last reservoir of resources. Sea based resources can be divided into at least four categories:

(a) Hydrocarbon like oil and gas.
(b) Food (fish, plankton, salt, seaweed).
(c) Metals (manganese, copper, gold, coal, tin, etc).
(d) Other resources (sand, gravel, calcium and poly-metallic sulphides).

Presently, hydrocarbons are by far the highest value marine resources. The commercial value of the global production of oil and gas at sea has been increasing with states engaged in extensive oil explorations in the seas. Most oil exploration activities are being conducted in the EEZs. These zones therefore have emerged as the most valuable assets.

Similarly, the sea is an important source for food. But due to excessive fishing activity it is fast depleting. Interestingly, there is nine times as much vegetation in the sea as cultivated on land. Sea plants have found their use in the daily diets of many people. These plants are also a source of potent organic fertilizer and are used in pharmaceuticals and cosmetics. Scientific research has also shown that many plants may contain vegetable oils and vegetable proteins.

---

Oysters, shrimp, mussels and prawns continue to meet the growing demand of seafood as a vitamin supplement.

The seabed also contains a variety of metals e.g. manganese, nickel and bromine. These are smaller in quantity but high in value. There are placer deposits of gold, platinum, zircon and titanium. These are detritus minerals that are washed ashore through rivers.  

Therefore, resources, both living and non-living within the Exclusive Economic Zone, are large. Technology is being fast developed to exploit to meet the growing demand. Taken as a whole, the quantity of materials available from the sea is gigantic and all contribute to the maritime power of a state. This power requires constant attention, bringing additional responsibilities of protection, preservation and judicious exploitation of resources on states.

**India and the Law of the Sea**

Article I of the Constitution of India defines its territory but there is no mention of territorial waters. However, during the debates in the Constituent Assembly, on the subject matter of what is now Article 297 of the Constitution, references were made for the first time to the concept of India’s territorial waters. By virtue of this article “all lands, minerals and other things of value underlying the ocean within the territorial waters or the continental shelf of India shall vest in, and be held for the purpose of the Union”.  

---


India's contribution to the process of codification and development of law of the sea has been noteworthy. It actively participated in the Geneva Conference of 1958 and the 1982 Law of the Sea conference and contributed significantly in the matter of fixing the limit of the territorial sea, retaining the concept of contiguous zone and determining the limits of the continental shelf, issues relating to pollution control, and scientific research on the continental shelf and the EEZ.

India voiced its concern on the inadequacy of the three-mile rule of territorial waters during the Geneva Conference of 1958 and had argued for twelve-mile territorial limit. During the deliberations on the limits of territorial waters, it prevented a US-Canadian proposal, which ignored the right of the coastal state to require prior notification and authorization from foreign war ships when they transited through its waters. The issue was controversial and was objected to during the Geneva Conferences of 1958 and 1960 by several countries particularly the US and Britain. In response, India did not ratify the Law of the Sea Convention of 1958 relating to Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone. However, by 1967 India had unilaterally adopted a twelve-mile territorial water limit and this encouraged several other countries to follow suit.

With the passage of time and a realization that its (Indian) warships would also face inconvenience due to time consuming prior clearances and authorisations for innocent passage, it wanted UNCLOS III to adopt a rule wherein only a notification was necessary. This resulted in confusion, and now state practice varies on the issue of warships.

---

As regards contiguous zones, India adopted a 12-mile contiguous zone in 1956 on a unilateral basis. The issue was raised in UNCLOS III and it was argued that, with the new regime of twelve-mile territorial sea and a 200-mile exclusive economic zone, the twelve mile contiguous zone had become irrelevant. A consensus emerged on a twenty-four mile contiguous zone limit. India declared five maritime zones and are identified in the Maritime Zones Act, 1976. They are: (a) the territorial Sea, (b) the historic waters, (c) the contiguous zone, and (d) the exclusive economic zone.

During the second UN Conference on the Law of the Sea, 1960, the Indian delegation put forward a proposal to extend the territorial waters out to 12 miles against the existing 3-mile regime. The Indian arguments were based on the belief that a wider coastal sea meant wider zones of security.\(^\text{10}\) It also meant widening the area of peace and reducing the area of high seas that became a battlefield.

Both the 1958 Geneva Convention on the Law of the Sea and UNCLOS III do not contain any provisions on historic waters. These are left to be decided mutually between parties and governed by international law. Both India (under Section 8 of India’s Maritime Zone Act, 1976) and Sri Lanka (under Section 9 of Sri Lanka’s Maritime Zone Law, 1976) have specified the limits of their historic waters in the Palk Strait, Palk Bay and Gulf of Manaar.\(^\text{11}\)

In 1956, India adopted a 12 miles contiguous zone for the purposes of customs and sanitary regulations. New Delhi was silent on the issue of security rights of a coastal state but advocated a separate fishery zone of twelve miles beyond a territorial sea of twelve miles. However this was not accepted.\(^\text{12}\)

---

\(^\text{10}\) Ibid., p.49.
\(^\text{11}\) Seervai, op.cit., pp.66-68.
\(^\text{12}\) Puri, op.cit., p.103.
India’s rights and jurisdiction in its exclusive economic zone are enshrined in Section 7(4) of the Maritime Zone’s Act and goes well beyond the 1982 UNCLOS III and declares any designated area in its exclusive economic zone and make provisions necessary for the safety and security of resources, environment, artificial structure, customs and fiscal matters.\textsuperscript{13} India signed the 1982 UNCLOS III in December 1982 and ratified it on June 29, 1995.

**China and the Law of the Sea**

The realization that interests extend far beyond national borders led the Chinese leadership to appreciate the un-exploited maritime frontiers. In accordance with international regulations, the Chinese territorial waters were limited to 3 nautical miles from the coast.

On September 4, 1958, at the height of Jinmen crises, China declared that its territorial waters extended to 12 nautical miles.\textsuperscript{14} Interestingly, at the time of the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, China proclaimed three maritime security

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p.206.

\textsuperscript{14} Choon-ho-Park, “China and Maritime Jurisdiction: Some Boundary Issues”, in Choon-ho-Park and Jae Kyu Park (eds.), *The Law of the Sea: Problems From the East Asian Perspective* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1987), p. 284. The Chinese reaction was in response to the US support to Taiwan to defend Quemoy and Matsu, two islands belonging to Mainland China and in occupation of the national forces. The decision to unilaterally extend the territorial waters was further complicated by the fact that instead of establishing baselines from the low-water mark on the mainland coast, an international practice, the Chinese authorities declared territorial waters of 12 nautical miles baseline established by connecting the outermost islands along the coast. The US navy had followed the three-mile territorial water regime with utmost care and never ventured into Chinese territorial waters. The belief that the unilateral declaration of territorial waters would automatically keep the US navy outside 12 nautical miles and provide the defence in depth suffered major setbacks.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. The US ignored Chinese concerns and the warnings but Chinese continued to challenge the US naval vessels.
zones "in the interest of defence security and military needs". In 1963, China opposed the "right of innocent passage" of vessels in its territorial waters, and by 1964 it formally declared the ten-mile strait between Hainan and Mainland China as territorial waters. Foreign merchant vessels were thus required to take prior permission of the Chinese authorities before transiting through the strait, and warships were forbidden to enter the area.

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1969) had its impact on Chinese articulations on the Law of Sea. Maritime legal matters took a back seat and Chinese remained preoccupied with domestic problems. By 1970, Chinese statements on matters related to maritime jurisdiction became more pronounced. Most countries had extended their respective territorial waters out to 12 nautical miles as against the international stipulation of 3 nautical miles. Several Latin American countries declared their territorial claims extending to 200 nautical miles and this move was opposed by both the US and the USSR but not opposed by China. Interestingly, Beijing refrained from declaring a similar territorial zone for itself. The Chinese clarified their position by noting that each county's claim was

15 Ibid., pp. 256-257. Maritime Warning Zone comprises an area encompassing Yalu River estuary and the eastern end of Shandong Peninsula. This area reaches far beyond the 12 nautical mile territorial waters proclaimed by China. The Japanese fishing vessels required prior permission of the Chinese government to enter the area. Military Navigation Zone is located south east of Shanghai. It is marked on the basis of a hypothetical baseline. This area spills out marginally outside the 12 nautical mile territorial waters. Japanese fishing vessels were not permitted in the area for any activity. Military Operation Zone is located north of Taiwan and lay centered around the 29-degree north latitude. The area was not defined clearly in terms of spatial dimensions because "the Chinese notification given to the Japanese negotiators in 1955 did not indicate the eastern limit; by a state council decree of July, 1957, the northern limit of the zone has been moved southward to the current 27th northern latitude". The Japanese fishing vessels could enter the area at their own risk.

16 Anil Joseph Chandy, "Doctrinal Changes, Fleet Modernisation and New Maritime Roles of the Chinese Navy: Implications for Asia Pacific Security"; Master of Philosophy Dissertation, Centre for International Politics,
to be determined "on the basis of equality and reciprocity" and that each country's claim was to be based upon coastal conformation, the width of the continental shelf and coastal resources.

In 1971, China formally joined the United Nations. It made known its views on issues relating to maritime sovereignty during various forums and conferences leading up to the United Nations Conference on Law of the Sea in 1973. There were two important features of their articulations. First, China sought to project itself as the champion of Third World claims. Secondly, it sought to maintain flexibility concerning the position it would take and even restricted itself to announcing general principles. During these conferences the issue relating to EEZ became very important. In 1974, China clarified its position by noting:

We hold that to define the territorial sea and scope of national jurisdiction is the sovereign right of each country and brooks no dictation from one or two superpowers. Coastal states are entitled to reasonably define their territorial seas of an appropriate breadth and, beyond it, their exclusive economic or fishery zones of appropriate limits in the light of their specific natural conditions and the need of their national economic development and national security.17

It is evident that the Chinese were constantly aware of their national security interests and economic wealth at sea. They maintained flexibility in their claims but in practice they could be very rigid when their own interests were jeopardised e.g. in the South China Sea. The Chinese agreed to the provision of free passage of international shipping through territorial waters but continued to protest against similar provisions for warships. Finally, China signed the UNCLOS

---

III in December 1982 at Montego Bay, Jamaica.\textsuperscript{18} According to Choon-ho Park, a renowned UNCLOS expert, the Chinese signed the document “without even defining what exactly the Third World position was, as if something like that existed”.\textsuperscript{19}

On February 25, 1992, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress adopted The Law on the Sea and Contiguous Zone of People’s Republic of China, and on 15 May 1996, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress ratified the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea.\textsuperscript{20} These provide the legal basis for exercising sovereignty over Chinese territorial seas and jurisdictions over the adjacent zones and safeguarding national maritime rights and interests.

**INDIA’S MARITIME GEOGRAPHY**

Geographically, India is a maritime state. It has island territories off its eastern and western coast. There are important straits and choke points that connect important sea-lanes. It is surrounded by world’s third largest ocean, the Indian Ocean. India occupies a dominant position in the rim formed by the states whose shores are washed by its waters. India lies between latitude 9 to 37 degrees north and longitude 68 to 76 degrees east and has a coastline of 7,500 km including the Lakshadweep group of islands in the Arabian Sea on the western seaboard and the Andaman and Nicobar group of Islands in the Bay of Bengal/Andaman Sea on the eastern seaboard. The Indian peninsula juts out for almost 1000 nautical miles thereby providing it an extended sea frontage. Most of India’s neighbours are

\textsuperscript{18} Park, op.cit., p.255.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Kondapalli, op.cit., p.255.
maritime states. In the West, it shares maritime boundary with Pakistan, South with Sri Lanka and in the East with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia. These do not have very long coastlines or large EEZs towards India. The region has some important seas, straits, choke points and island groups. Another feature of India’s maritime geography is the shipping lane that transits through Indian waters and serves as the umbilical cord for the Asia Pacific and west coast of the United States.

The northern Indian Ocean is home to important seas: the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea (Figure 7). India is located between the two large water bodies of Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal. The Arabian Sea is the largest of the Indian Ocean seas and covers an area of 3.86 million square kilometers. Its waters wash the shores of East Africa, part of the Persian Gulf, Pakistan, and the Indian subcontinent. Similarly, the Bay of Bengal is the second largest sea in the northern Indian Ocean and covers an area of 2.17 million square kilometers. Its waters wash the shores of the Indian subcontinent, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, and Thailand.

The Andaman Sea occupies 0.56 million square kilometers and surrounds the Andaman and Nicobar group of islands. The Andaman and Nicobar islands comprise 667 islands and islets and stretch along a 900-kilometer axis from north to south. The islands are 250 kilometers from Myanmar (the closest Myanmar territory is only 45 kilometers), 500 kilometers from Thailand and 1300 kilometers from mainland India. The Lakshadweep and the Minicoy islands groups abound in reefs, islets, shoals and are referred to as danger grounds by mariners. For safety of navigation, maritime shipping steers well clear of the islands.
Seas Around India

Figure 7

Choke Points

Figure 8
There are some important waterways around India that have both economic and military importance. These are: the Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Malacca, Ten Degree Channel and two hypothetical choke points between the Lakshdweep Islands and mainland India and Indira Point in the Nicobar Islands and the western edge of Sumatra Island (Figure 8). Some of these are not choke points per se but are fairly wide and can be termed high seas strategic passageways where the bulk of merchant traffic funnels in/out. The region's important sea-lanes, which serve as the umbilical cord of the economies of several Asia Pacific and European countries, pass through these strategic choke points. They carry critical energy resources from the Persian Gulf as also provide economical maritime transport routes.

The Strait of Hormuz is one of the world's most strategic choke points. It is fairly deep (vessels of 1,60,000 dwt (dead weight tonnage) can pass through this channel) and about half of the world's traded oil passes through this strait. Nearly half of the 28 ships that enter the Arabian Gulf each day are tankers. Interestingly, almost every operational tanker of the world transits through this strait some time or the other during the year.\textsuperscript{21} The maritime trade transiting the Strait of Hormuz represents nearly 17% of the world's trade by volume and about 3% by value. In 1994, 32.8 million barrels per day of traded petroleum transited the strait.\textsuperscript{22}

The principal sea-lane connecting the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean passes through the Indian Ocean. The sea-lane runs towards the west to pass through the Suez Canal. One of its arteries runs towards the south to round the Cape of Good Hope. In the east, it passes through the Malacca Strait before joining


\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p.11.
the sea-lane that transits through the South China Sea with the Paracel and Spratly group of islands on either side. There are other tributaries of the main shipping lane that join the Sunda Strait, Lombok Strait, and the Makassar Strait. The southern straits of the Indonesian archipelago therefore serve as important choke points for the shipping traffic heading towards the Pacific Ocean.

THE MARITIME GEOGRAPHY OF CHINA

Geographically, China is a maritime state. It is located in the maritime area of the Asia Pacific region. Most of the states, from Japan in the North, the Philippines in the East, to Indonesia in the South, are either islands or archipelagos. Indonesia alone comprises 13,600 islands across a swath of 3000 nautical miles. China has, around it, some important seas, straits, choke points and island groups and lies astride the shipping lane that serves as the umbilical cord for the region’s economic vitality.

With 9.6 million square kilometers of land, China is endowed with a long coastline of 6000 nautical miles on the mainland. Its deeply indented coastline is fringed with some 3500 islands including Taiwan. There are also a large number of island territories in distant waters. These geographical conditions generate an additional coastline of 5000 nautical miles.

Though blessed with a long coastline, China does not border an ocean except east of Taiwan where the waters of the Pacific Ocean wash its shores. However, small enclosed and semi-enclosed seas bind China. These are: the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and South China Sea. China’s maritime area of

---

23 Park, op.cit., p.282. The Yellow Sea is approximately 400,000 square kilometers. It is studded with several important island groups and is shallow. The average depth is about 55 meters and does not exceed 125 meters at the deepest point. The East China Sea is larger than the Yellow Sea and has an area
interest is home to some other important seas that impinge on its maritime interests. These are: the Sea of Japan, Sea of Okhotsh, and Java Sea. The important island groups of the region are Spratly, Paracel, Palawan, Natuna, Senkaku, Okinawa, Liancourt Rocks, Pescadores and the Kurile (Figure 9).

The Spratly Island group comprise a multitude of reefs, shoals, cays and rocks. Some of them are barely above water during high tide. These pose dangers to navigation, and the maritime traffic transiting the area stay clear of the islands for safety. The Paracels lie to the northwest of South China Sea and only a few are inhabited. These too, like the Spratly, are reefs and rocks and comprise some 130 barren islets, the largest being Woody Island that is 1 sq km in area. The Senkaku Islands comprise of a total of seven volcanic rocks, the largest being 4 km long and 1.5 km wide. These are uninhabited and are dangerous to navigation. With the exception of one island, Sekibi Sho, which is 48 nautical miles (nm) to the east of the main group, they are a compact group.

---

24 Ibid.

The Kurile group of islands comprise of three main islands: Etorofu, Kunashiri and Shikotan, together with a cluster of smaller features, with a combined area of just under 5000 sq km. They are located on the southern end of the Kurile Island chain and immediately North of Japan’s Hokkaido Island.

The Chinese area of maritime interest is home to some important waterways that have both economic and military importance (Figure 10). These are: the Malacca Strait, Sunda Strait, Lombok Strait, Ombai Wetter Strait, Makassar Strait, Torres Strait, and Taiwan Strait. The Malacca Strait is the main waterway that connects the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. The strait is 600 nautical miles (nm) long, varying in width from 300 nm in the west to 3 nm in its most constricted point. It is relatively shallow and vessels of up to 65 feet draught are permitted passage.26 The Sunda Strait is another alternate to Malacca Strait. It is 50 nm long and is considered unsafe for navigation by large vessels because it is shallow and dangerous.27 The route saves only 150 nm as compared to transit from the Lombok Strait but is not popular among mariners. The Lombok Strait is wide and deep. The minimum width is 11.5 nm with depths greater than 15 meters in most places, which allows safe passage for Very Large Crude Carriers (VLCCs) intending transit to the Philippines, Japan or the west coast of North America. The Makassar Strait lies between Kalimanthan and Sulawasi. It is 600 nm long and has a navigable width of 11 nm.28 It is fairly deep and offers safe navigation by VLCCs. The Sea of Okhotsh has important waterways through the Kurile group of

27 Ibid., p.3.
islands. There is also a hypothetical choke point between Sabah on Borneo and the southern tip of Vietnam. It is not a choke point per se but can be termed as a high seas strategic passageway. It is fairly wide, and shipping traffic transits through this keeping well clear of the Spratly group of islands.

The principal sea-lane connecting South East Asia and North East Asia passes through the South China Sea. The sea-lane further continues towards the west coast of North America. The sea-lane passes through the South China Sea with the Paracel and Spratly group of islands on either side before joining the Malacca Strait. There are other tributaries of the main shipping lane, which join from the Sunda Strait, Lombok Strait, Makassar Strait and the Taiwan Strait, as also North China, North and South Koreas, Japan and the east coast of Russia.

As noted earlier, the southern straits of the Indonesian archipelago and the islands in South China Sea serve as important choke points to the shipping traffic in the region. A large volume of international maritime traffic funnels in and out and nearly 200 ships pass through the Strait of Malacca everyday.  

**GEO-STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION**

In recent times, a large majority of the Asia-Pacific countries have witnessed an economic boom. They have adopted liberal economic policies and opened their markets to integrate with the regional and world economy. This has resulted in an unprecedented increase in regional trade both for raw materials and finished goods. However, the regional rail and road networks are inadequate for the accelerating hinterland trade. Consequently, the seas have assumed an

---

29 Ibid., p.4. For instance, in 1993 over half a trillion dollars of sea-borne trade passed through these key choke points. This US $ 568 billion trade accounted for over 15% of all the worlds cross border trade and does not include trade within the region.
unequalled importance for regional trade. Regional states have intensified their shipping activity to support their economic vitality. The predominant interest of these states is to ensure an uninterrupted flow of energy to fuel their growing economies as well as unhindered access to sources of raw materials and markets for their products.

The enhanced economic dynamism in the Asia-Pacific region is essentially based on maritime activity. There is an increased sensitivity to the safety of SLOCs through the strategic choke points in South East Asia and the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf for energy requirements.

The geo-strategic and economic realities in the region are complex, particularly for the United States, Japan, China, Korea, Taiwan and the South East Asian countries. These states seek an enhanced role in the region for the safety and security of their long and often vulnerable sea lines of communications. In the event of such a situation leading to the closure of the strategic choke points, maritime traffic would have to sail farther south of Australia, placing increasing demands on vessel capacity, higher costs of transportation and loss of time.

The reverberations of the economic boom in the Asia Pacific region have been noticeable in the Indian Ocean too. The bulk of the raw materials, markets and above all energy requirements for the economic boom in the Asia Pacific region must be fulfilled from the Indian Ocean states. The Indian Ocean region is not free from security concerns. The eight-year Iran-Iraq war produced 543 attacks on ships with approximately 200 merchant sailors killed. More than 80 ships sank or were declared beyond repair leading to a monetary loss of more than $2 billion in direct losses to cargo and hulls.\(^{30}\) This caused world wide insurance rates to

\(^{30}\) Ibid., p.64.
increase by 200 percent, hike of oil prices from US $13 to US $31 per barrel, and $US 200 billion was the net loss to the world economy.\(^{31}\)

Notwithstanding the prospects of newer and attractive sources of energy, the reliance on Gulf oil will continue for quite sometime and the bulk of this oil must transit through the Strait of Hormuz and the SLOCs of the Indian Ocean. The real importance of the region is that it continues to be a theatre of strategic interactions between major global, political and economic powers and the regional states.

Because of its geographical location and economic importance, the Indian Ocean has always been an area of high importance in the strategic thinking of the Chinese. Although China is very well endowed with natural resources, it became a net importer of oil in 1994 and began to rely on Persian Gulf oil reserves for part of its energy requirements. Besides, a large volume of Chinese long-haul maritime cargo transits through the Indian Ocean and the strategic choke points in South East Asia. The freedom of navigation through the South East Asian SLOCs is therefore of both economic and strategic significance for China. The first closure of the Suez Canal in 1956 provides an historical example of how SLOC closure affects the cost of transportation. Ships had to transit the Cape of Good Hope.\(^{32}\)

Although tanker supply and capacity have increased since then, the event is a stark reminder of what might happen if the South East Asian SLOCs are not open for unimpeded and safe passage. A large proportion of Chinese trade is with the South East Asian states.\(^{33}\)

\(^{31}\) Ibid.

\(^{32}\) Noer, op.cit., p.40.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., p.25.
is going to or coming from China. China has a large mercantile marine, and in 1994, its ships made 2096 voyages through the choke points of the Spratly Islands.34

By its geographic location, the Indian peninsula dominates the SLOCs from the Persian Gulf before they round off south of Dundra Head in Sri Lanka. Further, this SLOC passes close to the Indian islands of Andaman and Nicobar before entering the Malacca Strait. The mercantile traffic transiting the Malacca Strait passes close to the Indian area of maritime interest and therefore any unforeseen contingency or development in the Malacca Strait has security implications for India.

In any evaluation of geo-strategy the importance of sea frontage cannot be overlooked. This constant of geography facilitates a lively exchange of goods and ideas. As noted earlier, India occupies a dominant position between the large water masses of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, thereby offering a vantage location overlooking the maritime activity in the region. Historically, great navigators like Cheng Ho from China in 1405 AD, and in 1498 AD, Vasco De Gama from Portugal, have frequented Indian waters. India offered an important transit point for distant voyages both towards the east and the west. According to KM Pannikar, the noted Indian historian:

So far as India is concerned it should be remembered that the peninsular character of the country and maritime traffic gives the sea a preponderant influence to its destiny. India's strategic location astride the main trade route between Europe and the Far East via the Suez and Malacca Strait acts as a catalyst from a favourable maritime entrain.35

---

34 Ibid.

By its very location, India is approximately half way between the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca. Both these choke points have the potential to become major flashpoints. There are alternates to the Strait of Malacca, but there are no other routes to transport the Persian Gulf oil other than through pipelines over land that have their own vulnerabilities. Therefore, any contingency in the Strait of Hormuz has direct implications for the region.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has attempted to highlight the relevance and importance of geography in the formulation of any strategy for building a nation's maritime power. It is evident that maritime power and geography are closely linked to each other and are vital determinants in a country's march towards becoming a maritime power. Also geographical features like the size and type of coastline seas, location of offshore island territories and the size of EEZs are important components that shape maritime power. Besides, the adjacent seas, location of choke points, length of sea-lanes and the geography they have to traverse will shape the strategy a country adopts for building its maritime power.

Both India and China are endowed with favourable maritime geography: both have a long indented coastline with natural harbours and a large EEZ. India, by virtue of its geography, lies close to the Persian Gulf, the main source of energy, thus lowering the vulnerability of its energy sea-lanes. For China, the sea lane from the Persian Gulf to Mainland China must pass through the Indian Ocean, the choke points of Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok, thereby resulting in a high degree of vulnerability.
Both India and China also have offshore island territories that result in large EEZs under UNCLOS. These are rich in marine resources, living and non-living. This sea wealth has placed added demands on the two countries to invest in marine resource exploitation as also to build maritime forces to safeguard national maritime interests.