Churning of the Indian ocean

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India's reluctance to employ military force and on-and-off ties with the US could stall plans to make it the predominant power in the Indian Ocean

Book: India's Ocean: The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership
David Brewster
Routledge
Rs 426, PP228

The Indian Ocean may be one of the smaller ones of the species, but as David Brewster and others point out, it has been a unified strategic space only rarely in its history and when it has, it has been due to external powers.

"The rise of India as a major economic and military power now has the potential to change the entire character of the Indian Ocean," he writes.

"If India is successful in its ambitions, for the first time in its history, a littoral state will be the predominant power."
New Delhi has often talked about this being "India's Ocean". Yet, its previous attempts to do so- for example, plans to build a 300-ship navy in the 1960s- have flopped. Even now, this goal is distant. But India is clearly trying again and Brewster evaluates how much progress it has made in each of the ocean's quadrants.

India is experiencing great difficulty in bringing together the right combination of diplomacy, military ties and economic relations in the western Indian Ocean. South Africa's outsized economic relations with China have made it a difficult partner to work with. Kenya, on the other hand, is happy with its long-standing US alliance. The Persian Gulf is even trickier.

India's dependence on the Gulf for energy and remittances is almost inversely proportionate to its influence with the regional countries. India is in a better position on the eastern side of the ocean where it has a "benign" image among the Southeast Asian countries and Australia. But again, it is not the number one external friend with anyone. Both China and the US are seen as more important to these countries.

"Only Myanmar represents a contested strategic space in this region," he argues, but India is not even among the top five trading partners of Yangon.

Brewster dredges up many of the quirky, forgotten interactions that India has had with its oceanic neighbours in the recent past. Much of this still echoes contemporary events. Thus, Iran under the Shah "sought to develop a partnership with India as the dominant power in South Asia," including an association of littoral states that may resemble what could develop if Iran re-emerges as the Gulf's hegemon.

"Iran represents a natural strategic partner that could unlock India's regional role."

India's present attempts to control events in the Indian Ocean island states is part of a long-standing pattern of interference going back to Indira Gandhi's sending of warships to Seychelles and toppling governments in Mauritius.

Some past events will hopefully not be repeated. Indonesia's claims on the Andamans meant that, when the 1965 war broke out, most of the Indian navy was arraigned against Indonesia. Jawaharlal Nehru rebuffed Singapore's invitation for India to take over the historic British role of policing Southeast Asia. Then, there is India's assistance to Uganda's brutal Idi Amin when he rebuilt his air force after the Entebbe raid.

The book underestimates some of India's oceanic relationships like Oman, its Antarctic presence, and how ambitious and important are New Delhi's attempts to militarily integrate Sri Lanka and the Maldives with its own navy. It doesn't catch that India's weak Gulf presence is because of its own inhibitions against choosing sides in that region's sectarian-cum-ethnic divisions.

Brewster believes Indian op-ed writers overestimate the Chinese threat in the Indian Ocean. He's right - but Indian policy-makers do not. They have been clear that Beijing is tomorrow's concern and that the "string of pearls" to quote one, "is a poor murder weapon".
Brewster feels the country's reluctance to employ military force, its obsession with "strategic autonomy", its thin relations with mid-level littoral powers, and on-and-off ties with the US will stall plans to make India's Ocean a reality.

"There is a good chance that India will continue along at its own civilisational pace without any overarching or coordinated strategic plan, seeking to expand its power and influence here and there on an ad hoc basis, as and when opportunities present themselves."

The good thing is that, unlike in the past, this will depend on decisions India makes and less on external forces beyond its control.