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INDIAN MARITIME ASPIRATIONS IN A THEATERISED ENVIRONMENT BY CMDE ANIL JAI SINGH (RETD)

ORGANIZED BY CENJOWS
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In the Indian context, the debate on theaterisation is about reorganisation of our single service-oriented command into integrated theatre commands while simultaneously promoting jointness through integrated training, logistics and other support functions. This is a work-in-progress. The changes need to address all micro and macro issues before implementation. While some issues may remain, they would be ironed out with time. For India, such pending issues should be as few as possible because of the threat India faces from its two neighbours. These neighbours would be watching our reorganisation very closely to exploit any vulnerability that may arise during this transition.

The concept of theatre commands was initiated by the US who began their process as early as 1949 and gave their seal of approval with the Goldwater Nicholson Act in 1986. This concept has since then been adopted by UK, Turkey and China. While the basic template is that of the US, each nation has adapted it to their own requirement with the very requirement and relevance being debated by all. However, with growing economic constraints, countries are required to optimise available resources to get the maximum out of what is available.

To discuss the 'Indian Maritime Aspirations in a Theatrised Environment', the discussion will be limited to *What constitutes a maritime theatre?*, *What are India's security imperatives and aspirations?* and *Is this possible to meet with theaterisation?*

What constitutes a maritime theatre? – Unlike land borders, sea has no borders. Land borders divide while seas unite. Even in the 12 mile territorial water, foreign warships and submarines can take 'innocent passage'. Neutrality of oceans has been enshrined in the principle of *Mare Liberum* of 1602 which has underpinned all legislations pertaining to governance of oceans including UNCLOS. This has allowed high seas to be declared a global common and international maritime trade to flourish. The first attempt in regulating high seas is the recent treaty of Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) in Jun 2023 to protect sensitive marine ecosystem from impact of human activities. Limits of the maritime theatre are hence **not** determined by laws but by capability and capacity of a nation to secure its interests. Accordingly, India too has to define the extent of its maritime theatre.

What are India's security imperatives and aspirations? – Since India is a maritime nation, three things stand out – Oceans on three sides, India's vantage position and the strategically significant choke points on both Eastern and Western seaboard. The IOR has more than 60% of the global population and generated 2/3rd of global GDP making the region critical for global economics. This has forced nations across the

world to focus on the IOR and articulate their own Indo-Pacific strategies to ensure safety of their trade in the region. Since most of these nations do not have the military might to protect their trade physically here, they need to depend on like-minded nations such as India to provide the required security. As India grows to be a 30 trillion economy by 2047 its maritime trade will also increase and hence need for a safe and secure passage across seas. With maritime connectivity being improved through SAGARMALA the importance of coastal regions has increased. The 2.2 million sq km of EEZ of India will become a precious resource and a challenge as other nations will have tendencies to encroach and exploit it. Added to this is the ever growing impact of climate change on the 250 million people living on the coasts of India. Yet another challenge here is the rise of China. While China has so far steered clear of the Indian Navy in the IOR, it is likely to change in the next decade with China following the Mahanian approach of dominance in the maritime domain. Unfortunately, to become a maritime power, China has to flex its maritime muscles and have access to the Atlantic Ocean. Both of these are not possible without accessing the Indian Ocean. For India to influence the outcome of what happens here, India will need to develop capacities and capabilities. With China likely to deploy a dedicated carrier battle group and SSNs in the IOR, India's dominance in this region will be challenged. Added to this, China's support for AIP propelled submarines of Pakistan and submarine base of Bangladesh will put additional pressure on the Indian Navy. It would not be a surprise if China was to shift one of its theatre commands into the IOR as what the US does. For India, the Indian Navy takes its role of ensuring a rule based order at sea very seriously. They have been at the forefront in tackling Somali piracy and have become first responders and preferred security partner in the region.

Is this possible to meet with theaterisation? – With theaterisation, these maritime aspirations will continue to be maintained. However, theaterisation has its own challenges and it is best to see how it can be implemented to achieve national security. After Kargil, it was expected that the CDS will be appointed in 2001 but it did not happen. What happened instead was the formation of the Andaman and Nicobar Command as a tri-services command which invited criticism from the maritime neighbours. It was seen as an effort of military expansion after India's Kargil victory and these neighbours felt threatened. Presently, the Indian Navy operates under Western and Eastern Command, both of which are important for ensuring the interest of India. With all these coming under a single theatre, it would allow greater flexibility to the Commander to deploy his resources across the length and breadth of the IOR and hence optimise available resources. As India is the only resident maritime power in this region, its role is even more critical. Since such a security envelope cannot be established alone, especially for such a large oceanic space, India has collaborated with other maritime nations of the region under SAGAR for all maritime security activities in this region. This requires a judicious deployment of resources which will be better done with theaterisation.