

In the British period, these objectives were assured by a forward defence policy on the frontiers of India and by total British dominance of the Indian Ocean. In the same way that the British played the "Great Game" with the Russians to win dominance of the subcontinent, modern India continues to manipulate regional tensions in order to deflect direct threats to its position and to secure its authority in the region. To this end, military strength has overshadowed diplomacy in New Delhi's effort to promote its national interests.

India has sought to control its reluctant neighbours in a series of conflicts -- some major, as with Pakistan in 1948, 1965 and 1971, and some minor, like Goa (1961) and Sikkim (1975). India's willingness to use military force in support of its regional policy continued in the 1980s, most notably in the Siachin glacier dispute¹ with Pakistan and with interventions in Sri Lanka and the Maldives in 1987 and 1988. In other cases, and on occasion after military force has established New Delhi's interest in a preferred outcome, treaties, accords and exchanges of letters with its neighbours have given a semblance of legality to India's dominant position in South Asia. Still, one key aspect of subcontinental defence has changed since colonial times. Whereas Great Britain secured its interests in India by pursuing a de facto sea-control strategy in the Indian Ocean, India has neither the authority over the littoral states enjoyed by the British, nor access to the key naval bases at Aden, Simonstown and Singapore -- the entrance points to the ocean. More importantly, British maritime primacy in the Indian Ocean was never really challenged. India faces a far different situation today.

The superpowers maintain permanent naval deployments in the Indian Ocean and many lesser external and regional maritime powers are also active in the region. There has been an ongoing debate between India and the extra-regional powers, most notably the United States, over the legitimacy of their "presence" in the Indian Ocean. This sometimes acrimonious dispute has its origins in the earliest days of independent India and has encompassed Indian activity in the Non-Aligned Movement, through New Delhi's support for the Indian Ocean as a Zone

¹ India and Pakistan have been engaged in hostilities on the 20,000 foot Siachin glacier since 1984 -- the world's highest battlefield. Casualties on Siachin number in the hundreds, due largely to the altitude and accidents, not military action.