

## **India's Maritime Security Strategy in the Indian Ocean Region: An Analysis**

Sinu Kunjumon

Research Scholar, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2024.v09i10.016 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2024.v09i10.016>

Received: 20 August 2024 / Accepted: 30 September 2024 / Published: 15 October 2024

### **ABSTRACT**

*In the Indian Ocean region, India faces a complex and evolving maritime security environment, with threats ranging from piracy, terrorism, illegal fishing, drug trafficking, and environmental degradation, to great power rivalry. Given its extensive maritime borders with the Indian Ocean, it is critical for the country to manage maritime security challenges in this space. To address those challenges India focuses on restructuring its age-old maritime strategies and policies concerning the IOR. Modernizing and expanding the Indian Navy, improving diplomatic connections and interactions with Indian Ocean littoral states, promoting the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace, and adopting a posture of strategic autonomy are among the recently enacted policies and strategies. Despite its best efforts, India's maritime strategy falls short of providing a comprehensive plan to equip the country to confront the unprecedented challenges emanating from the Indian Ocean region.*

**Keywords:** India, Indian Ocean, Maritime Strategy, Security

### **INTRODUCTION**

*“Whoever controls the Indian Ocean, dominates Asia. The Ocean is a key to seven seas. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the destiny of the world will be decided by its waters”*

*-US Admiral Alfred Mahan*

The Indian Ocean is the world's third largest Ocean after the Pacific and Atlantic Ocean and it is also the richest ocean in the world because of its geostrategic location. Indian Ocean resembles an inverted 'W', which connects the major regions of the world like the African coast, South West Asia, East Asia, and North Asia. It also connects the 'seven choke points of the Indian Ocean' through different waterways and is also linked with thirty-eight states of the world. It always remains the busiest trading route worldwide and countries like – Australia, Indonesia, India, and South Africa are dominated by maximum coastlines in the ocean. This region has

always been attracted by foreign powers since the historic period. The trading system in the Indian Ocean region was started by the Britishers and Portuguese people; through the Suez Canal, the Britishers entered India and established their dominance in India as well as in the whole of Asia. This region has both political and economic importance because, as a region, it provides the scope for markets and offers a pivot position to control the whole of Asia.

At present, the Indian Ocean is on the strategic radar of great powers, with its abundance of mineral resources and fisheries and also as it remains the hub for global trade and oil routes as well as it consists of major choke points of the world trade sea route system. As it so, it turned out to be an arena of geopolitical rivalry among world powers and regional states. In today's age of increasing global integration, security in the Indian-Ocean Region (IOR) has become more problematic and complex given the persistent threats to the smooth flow of trade and commerce which demands freedom of navigation and security of sea lanes. As IOR became a major attraction point to superpower competitors like China and the USA, India is the nation trying to balance both of them in terms of protecting its national interests. About its geostrategic location in the Indian Ocean region, there is no doubt that India has an important role to play in this region, even though it faces a range of territorial insecurities. India as a land mass is covered by water on its three sides, East, West, and South. The Indian Ocean falls into the Southern region of India. A look into India's foreign policy shows that it always addressed the security of the northern and western borders of the country. During the post-independence period, India faced many problems from its northern and western borders that made the Government of India fully focused on the land boundaries of the country and didn't pay attention to the maritime policy of India. During the time of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, looked towards India's region, but this was a focus of India's immediate land neighbors Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. In this context, Scott argued that 'Indira's doctrine focused on India taking a leading position in South Asia underlined with land power projection capabilities of the country'. As per this Scott stated that, "The Indian Ocean represented geography of threat for India".

The Indian Ocean has become the topmost priority of India's foreign policy and as a 'resurgent maritime nation', it has various interests in it, ranging from energy security, economic growth, and protecting sea lanes to its maritime ambition to be a leader in framing the security architecture in the IOR. The notion behind the increasing priority for the Indian Ocean Region in foreign policy is that Indian maritime borders pose many threats to it. The Mumbai terror attacks in November 2008 that emanated from across the maritime border was a case in point. So, given the overwhelming security challenges from diverse resources, including adversarial neighbors and non-state actors such as pirates, maritime terrorists, and armed robbers, India has to adopt a maritime strategy to address these security concerns it. Even though India's military and

economic capabilities growing, as a maritime nation, it still couldn't able to explore its potential as the same.

This article focuses on the 'maritime security concerns' of India in the Indian Ocean Region. Along with this, as a rising power, it analyses the role of India in providing security in the IOR and how far it succeeded in providing it, by assessing its maritime strategy in the IOR concerning its maritime neighborhood.

### **THE CONCEPT OF MARITIME STRATEGY**

Maritime strategy can be defined as 'the principles which govern a war in which sea is the substantial factor'.<sup>i</sup> Maritime strategy is all about the sea and management of maritime assets in the best possible fashion, which brings riches and honor to the state that learns and applies these skills. The political, economic, and technological environments have a direct bearing on the maritime strategy of a nation.<sup>ii</sup> Sea power is broadly defined to include all relevant aspects of national power, both civil and military. A strategy to enhance national sea power accordingly promotes and coordinates all aspects of maritime activity, both civil and military to optimize the use of available resources. It may be said that maritime strategy is the conviction of a nation to put to use its political, social, economic, and maritime assets to promote its maritime interests.<sup>iii</sup> Thus, maritime strategy determines the development and regulation of elements of sea power.

Maritime strategy is important for a nation if it aspires to be a regional power or superpower in the international system, especially in an era of geopolitics. In such a context, an analysis of India's maritime strategy is important as it is a maritime nation, having a strategic position in the Indian Ocean Region and also it is a well-acknowledged fact that India plays a crucial role in shaping the geo-political, economic, and security environment in the IOR and beyond. India's Indian Ocean security policy, as well as its perceptions regarding its capabilities as a maritime nation, was molded by factors that include historical and societal factors, its maritime geography, decisions by policymakers, etc. All these factors shaped India to have a feeble policy as well as a lack of perspective regarding its maritime strategy towards the Indian Ocean Region. Such a defect of India paved the way for the entry of extra-regional players into the IOR along with threats to its security in the region.

The reasons behind the need for a maritime strategy for India include increased forays by other nations like China in the Indian Ocean and littoral nations undermining its hitherto unhindered influence in the region; China's OBOR initiative and String of Pearl's theory to encircle India; the continued threat of piracy, disasters, tsunamis in the region; huge reserves of mineral-rich seabed in the IOR leading to conflicts over its control; terrorist attacks like 26/11; porous coastal regions which lead to smuggling and drug peddling; critical installations like nuclear projects

along its coast; current developments like USA's pivot to Asia, a string of pearls, Russia coming close to Indian ocean by signing Gas pipelines agreements with china and Pakistan; arrests of India fishermen by Pak, Srilankan coast guards, etc.<sup>iv</sup> All these security concerns posed by the Indian Ocean Region to India pinpoints the drawbacks of India's maritime strategy towards the region. To address and resolve all these issues of security, India needs a well-accomplished and inclusive maritime strategy towards the IOR.

The fact is that India's maritime mindset started changing in the 1970s following its war with Pakistan (1971); however, a more visible change in its strategic thinking and maritime national strategy was set in motion in the 1990s.<sup>v</sup> This resulted in a major shift in India's Indian Ocean policy and national maritime strategy, as a blue-water navy became contingent on the globalizing Indian economy. India came out of the box as an idealist to be a realist and also started looking not only into the security of land boundaries but also a sight towards the security concerns posed by the Indian Ocean. India started to learn that, simply being a maritime nation didn't bring anything to the country, it had to go beyond its waters, it had to align with its littoral countries to curb the security threats, it had to be present across its waters through outreach, naval exercises, etc. in short, it began to understand the need for a Maritime Strategy towards the Indian Ocean Region.

### **MARITIME SECURITY CONCERNS OF INDIA IN THE IOR**

India's maritime security concerns stem from the threats, largely in the primary area of interest of the Indian Ocean, which have a direct bearing on India's maritime interests.<sup>vi</sup> While most of these threats also have a bearing on the other stakeholders in the region, the impact on India will be greater considering India is 'already assuming her responsibilities in securing the Indian Ocean region. Maritime security concerns of India in the Indian Ocean Region are both multi-dimensional and multifaceted.<sup>vii</sup> It involves both military and non-military issues. These include naval threats and challenges (military security issues), arms trafficking, and narco-terrorism as well as piracy (non-military security issues) along with shipping, fishing, seabed minerals and offshore oil and natural gas resources, the vulnerability of sea lanes of communications (SLOCs) and illegal immigration. Moreover, maritime security concerns also include environmental protection, nuclear issues, ballistic missile defense, and maritime management as the seas are indivisible.

Threats to SLOCs The post-Cold War era has heralded a socio-politico-strategic shift in thought. Globalization, specifically economics, today dominates strategic considerations.<sup>viii</sup> This has led to enhanced maritime security concerns since most regional trade is sea-borne. The threat of disruption of Sea Lines of Communication SLOCs is foremost in the minds of the naval strategists of the world in general and of India in particular.

The Indian Ocean is home to many choke points, such as the Straits of Hormuz, the Straits of Malacca, Lombok, and the Sunda Straits. Any disruption in traffic flow through these points can have disastrous consequences. The disruption of energy flows in particular is a considerable security concern for littoral states including India. At current levels of consumption, the oil import dependence of India is expected to reach 91.6% by 2020.<sup>ix</sup> For India, with nearly 89% of its oil imports arriving by sea, the SLOCs must be secure.<sup>x</sup> This security angle is enhanced many fold, since most of the oil originates in West Asia, and the SLOCs pass through areas under the influence of India's adversary, Pakistan. Added to this is the political turbulence of areas in West Asia that often hold hostage the supply of oil from the region. In the past, supplies from this region have been disrupted on at least seven different occasions, all of which were due to political causes and were not market-driven. The security of the Sea Lines of Communication SLOCs is an emotive issue for the rising economic powerhouses of Asia. The economic development of a state is closely linked to its trade and energy supply. Since most of the trade between the Indian Ocean littorals and the South Asian states is seaborne, SLOCs form the lifeline of these countries. Thus the prospects for seaborne trade are set to rise dramatically. Unfortunately, along with this rise in traffic, the variety and intensity of threats, including piracy, maritime terrorism, drug trafficking, gun-running, human smuggling, pollution, accidents, and inter-state conflicts, are also expected to rise dramatically.

The SLOCs in the IOR have been susceptible to disruption by a variety of traditional and non-traditional threats over the years. However, India's increasing dependence on the seas for its trade may necessitate intervention to protect these SLOCs from such threats. The cooperation of other states in the region as well as from those outside the region is required to ensure the security of these SLOCs in this huge ocean space, pioneered by India.

The Indian Ocean littoral, regrettably, has been witness to large areas of political instability in the recent past. The current situation in Yemen is one such instability. The rebels of the Free Aceh Movement in Indonesia have often targeted vessels carrying natural resource commodities such as oil, tin, and aluminum, off the coast of Sumatra.<sup>xi</sup> Instability in Somalia for the past two decades gave birth to the world's biggest piracy threat. The Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s was another occasion when the vital oil trade was severely affected and required a concerted effort from several countries to limit the damage.<sup>xii</sup> India has an intrinsic stake in the stability of the northern IOR and its immediate neighborhood since instability in these regions has a cascading effect on India itself. The past has seen political disturbance in littoral states like Sri Lanka and Myanmar spilling over to India through the sea route. Indian maritime security forces then had to conduct dedicated operations to combat this menace, like the Indian intervention in the Maldives in 1988 to foil a coup d'état.

Piracy has risen as a major headache for the world in general and Asian countries in particular. According to the International Maritime Organization Annual Report 2002, the Malacca Straits, South China Sea, and Indian Ocean are the areas that have been most affected by piracy.<sup>xiii</sup> Recently, piracy-related incidents seem to have spilled over from these two areas into the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. Indeed, the center of gravity of piracy has been gradually shifting to the waters around India and there has recently been a confrontation between the Indian agencies such as the Indian Navy and the coastguard, and the pirates from Somalia. There also seems to be a distinct change in the type of piracy that is occurring. Earlier acts were of the type termed 'Asian Piracy' that often involved mere stealing of valuables from ships with a negligible amount of associated violence. However, recent cases in the region have displayed a dramatic increase in brazen violence. As most of the trade in India takes place through seas, any blockade of SLOCs by pirates or terrorists can have serious repercussions. Transportation of oil, which is so important for the booming economy of India, takes place through high seas and any disruption of its supply can have serious implications for the Indian economy and security.

Another problem of great concern is the rapid spread of small arms especially in the Indian Ocean region due to the volatile political situation in many countries of the region as well as the secessionist movements going on in these countries. The situation has assumed alarming proportions in the post-Cold War period and the consequent withdrawal of the former Soviet forces from Afghanistan.<sup>xiv</sup> The funding link between terrorist groups and narcotics trafficking is well known. The nexus between the two has led to the term narco-terrorism. Small arms and drug trafficking can be destabilizing influences both on national and international levels. Small arms intimidate the governments and many of them are forced to adopt draconian measures resulting in the subversion of democratic values and institutions. Further small arms nurture domestic criminal gangs which erode or confront the power of the state. India's vulnerability increased from the growing narcotics trade across borders, bringing with it a host of social and political problems. India is caught between the three largest heroin and opium producers in the world such as the countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Myanmar, resulting in conflicts on her borders adjoining major drug production and transporting areas.<sup>xv</sup>

The Indian Ocean Region is regrettably home to the world's most notorious areas of drug production, the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle. The transnational networks established by the drug smugglers also serve as conduits for other destabilizing activities like gunrunning and human trafficking. The interdictions of the Indian Coast Guard in the past few years reveal a rising trend of this nefarious activity. Political disturbance and oppression further add to this already hazardous mix with the ensuing cascading effects manifesting themselves in India's internal security.



Maritime security has assumed a new dimension in the post-9/11 era with the rapid rise in international terrorism.<sup>xvi</sup> Sea routes are being increasingly used by terrorists to escape high vigilance on land and penetrate countries like India with long and often not-so-well-protected coastlines. With the increase in international trade in recent years use of large and small container ships has grown manifold. The importance of container security to maritime terrorism is only now being realized; with a dramatic increase in large and small container transport by sea, the problem has grown, as these sealed containers often pass through ports without undergoing thorough checking and are capable of containing anything from human terrorist cargo to arms and ammunition. Several terrorist organizations in and around the Indian Ocean are known to possess merchant fleets of various types. The former Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), for example, had an entire flotilla engaged in dubious maritime trade.

The Indian Ocean has had relatively few incidents of maritime terrorism but the potential exists. The al-Qaeda attack on the French tanker, the Limburg, off Yemen, in October 2002, was one such.<sup>xvii</sup> India's huge coastline and thriving maritime commercial community along its coast with nearly 200,000 fishing boats and a fishermen population of 4 million make the job of monitoring maritime activity an unenviable task. The ability of adversarial interests to exploit this vast maritime activity for launching attacks on land is therefore quite high, as was witnessed in the 26/11 terrorist acts at Mumbai.<sup>xviii</sup> The attempted hijacking of a Pakistan Navy frigate Zulfiqar, in Sep 2014, by the al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) for possibly carrying out attacks against US Navy ships added a new dimension to this threat.<sup>xix</sup> The ramifications of such incidents on the Indian state have already been witnessed and the potential for further damage exists, especially in the present frayed geo-political conditions of the sub-continent. India has put in place a comprehensive monitoring and reaction mechanism to deal with such threats, which has prevented any more events like the one in Mumbai in 2008.

***“bases are going to be the name of the game in the Indian Ocean, and that game is going to be pretty attractive”-***

***C. Raja Mohan, Director, Carnegie India.<sup>xx</sup>***

The Indian Ocean has always been witness to the military presence of outside powers right from the advent of the Portuguese in the 15th century till the present day, especially during the time of the Cold War.<sup>xxi</sup> During the Cold War time, the Indian Ocean became the theatre of, The US and USSR competed for political influence in the IOR by gaining access to naval deployments and eventually bases in the IOR. So the IOR always remains a realm of Superpower rivalry. While the colonial incursions were rooted in commercial interests, the current extra-regional military presence is intended to further the strategic interests of various nations.

The ongoing international naval effort while critical to curbing the menace of piracy has also benefited nations in terms of operational intelligence gained and an expanded military maritime footprint. In the name of curbing terrorism and piracy in the region, global powers from outside of the region strengthened their positions in the region. The way to deepen the presence of these powers in the region is through the establishment of military bases in the Indian Ocean. The United States operates in the region through a naval support facility- Diego Garcia on UK-leased territory in the central Indian Ocean, while France maintains a presence in the region from Reunion, its Indian Ocean island outpost.<sup>xxii</sup> Australia has a modern naval force operating in the ocean, and the UK's announcement of reviving its maritime presence in Bahrain needs to be seen in this light. While UK's decision to reopen its naval base in Manama, Bahrain is a cause for worry mainly because it further implies the militarisation of the Indian Ocean. Most of these forces displayed a long-term perspective about their operations in the region with a consistent and compelling rationale for maintaining presence.

### **Indian Ocean as a source of competition; escalating China - India rivalry;**

The Indian Ocean is the world's third-largest body of water and has become a growing area of competition between China and India. The two regional powers that move to exert influence in the ocean include deep-water port development in littoral states and military patrols. Such a conflicted stand between the two regional powers endangers the stability of the region which is critical for global trade flows. China and India are dependent on energy resources transported via secure sea lanes in the Indian Ocean to fuel their economies. As they are in a run to fuel their economies, their dependency on the safe transport of resources will likely connect in the region. Competition between Beijing and New Delhi is not necessarily overt, but each country is seeking to strengthen ties with smaller regional states to secure their respective security and economic interests.

Through the One Belt, One Road plan china has deep-rooted its ties with the regional states including the influx of Chinese capital into construction projects in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.<sup>xxiii</sup> As part of counter-piracy operations launched in 2009, Beijing became active in the region. It has also undertaken efforts to modernize its military particularly its naval deployment capabilities to protect its overseas interests. All these actions from the side of China to establish a persistent presence in the Indian Ocean concern India, as India believes that Beijing's intention of making maritime power central is to achieve Chinese dominance in Asia. Even though India is also reinforcing its regional maritime presence in the IOR, not as much as China does. In fact, to an extent, India wasn't able to deepen and strengthen its ties with its maritime neighbors in the region.



The military and economic presence of China in the region questions the strategy of India towards the Indian Ocean. It nailed the security of India in the region.

Thus the Indian Ocean remains a hub of major military activity, primarily because of its strategic positioning on the map that resulted in a majority of the world sea traffic, both in terms of energy trade and goods shipping, passing through its waters. It became an area inherently given to competition and rivalry, which poses a security threat to the Indian state as it is centrally positioned in the Indian Ocean Region. The presence and control of global powers in the region through militarisation ultimately call into question the ‘zone of peace status’ of the Indian Ocean.

IUU fishing is a major problem for marine communities around the world and governments of coastal states are severely challenged in enforcing international and national maritime laws to control this activity. A World Wildlife Fund report on illegal fishing has found that 87 percent of the fish stocks surveyed in the Western and Eastern Indian Ocean were experiencing high levels of IUU fishing.<sup>xxiv</sup> Many ASEAN countries have also faced this problem, especially from Chinese fishing vessels. The Indian Ocean has also seen such activity in the recent past with an NGO, Sea Shepherd, reporting a fleet of IUU fishing vessels, south of the Andaman, in March 2016. Indian maritime zones have not witnessed many incidents of IUU fishing though there have been unconfirmed reports of fishing trawlers, mainly from Bangladesh and Taiwan, illegally entering India’s territorial waters in the Bay of Bengal.

In the Indian context, due to the seriousness of the problem between Gujarati fishers and Pakistani fishers, a hotline was set up between the Pak Maritime Security Agency(MSA) and the Indian Coast Guard. This has certainly helped in resolving such issues as crossing into each other’s territory and consequent apprehension. However, the problems are most acute in the respect of Tamilnadu who have a Hobson’s choice in Palk Bay. The fishermen of both countries Srilanka and India were arrested by the coast guard for violating the International Maritime Boundary Limit (IMBL), regularly. Even though both these countries are engaged in amicably tackling the issue, a permanent solution has not yet been put forward. Anyway, the IUU fishing issue remains a concern of the Indian security system to date, as it revolves around the livelihood of fishermen of the state as well as of other countries.

Environmental issues such as sea level rise, desertification, and the submergence of islands have contributed to the environmentally driven migration of millions and created a new set of migrants “environmental refugees”. With a rise in environmental refugees, concomitant problems such as health issues, competition for scarce resources, and social and ethnic tensions will surface. This is important while examining the strategic environment of the Indian Ocean because all these issues directly or indirectly have an impact on the security system either internally or externally of India in the region.

## **CHANGING DYNAMICS OF INDIA'S MARITIME STRATEGY**

India – the maritime nation is in a phase of evolving its maritime strategy. As part of this evolution, its perceptions, policies, projects, initiatives, and alliances addressing the Indian Ocean region are under a series of modifications, subtractions, and additions ranging from a change in the territorial conception of the sea to non-territorial up to its call for strategic autonomy in the region. It is no longer a country silent towards the security challenges in the region but has become an active player in the region by taking steps to build a security architecture in the region. India has charted the path of becoming an “influential” and “responsible” leader in the Indian Ocean region.<sup>xxv</sup> It's all part of India's basic national interest, survival, and its aspiration to be a power in the international system.

### **A Non-Territorial Conception of Sea**

The first and foremost reason behind the stating, India's maritime strategy is evolving is that, the changes in the perceptions of India regarding the Indian Ocean region; a change from an inward look of considering India as the sole player of the Indian Ocean to an outward look of accepting the role and importance of other littoral states and extra-regional players in the region.

During the last two and half decades, India's views on the Indian Ocean have become broader as it moved beyond a territorial understanding of the sea. There are a couple of factors responsible for this. First is the change in India's strategy of growth from import substitution to export-driven that has substantially enhanced the value of the Indian Ocean in India's strategy of economic growth. The Indian Ocean has become not only a medium of trade but also a medium for importing its hydrocarbon energy needs. Change in India's economic policy in 1991 brought the Indian Ocean from the periphery to the center of its strategy of economic growth.<sup>xxvi</sup> Second, the end of the Cold War removed the Cold War constraints of New Delhi's Indian Ocean policy. Instead of opposing the presence of external players including the US in the Indian Ocean, New Delhi has been engaging Washington in the Indian Ocean through the MALABAR naval exercises since 1992.<sup>xxvii</sup> India has also been cultivating other stakeholders such as the UK, France, and Russia through bilateral naval exercises in the Indian Ocean. Third, as an emerging power and rising naval actor, New Delhi has taken a broader view of its naval responsibilities to pursue its national interests. As an emerging power, New Delhi has become more concerned about the global commons, such as keeping the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) open and free for international trade, and has changed its naval strategy accordingly.<sup>xxviii</sup> Thereby India has already made a shift in its approach from securing territorial water to securing the maritime commons such as SLOCs. Fourth, the evolving geopolitics of the Indian Ocean has been driving India deep into the Indian Ocean, like China's overarching policies in the region.

Fifth, New Delhi's interests in the Indian Ocean have been expanding from deterring hostile powers operating against it, to maintaining SLOCs for general trade and particularly for energy supplies, and to projecting India's presence and powers that have already brought New Delhi into competition with Beijing.<sup>xxix</sup>

### **Evolving Naval Doctrine**

India's Indian Ocean Policy suffered from the absence of naval doctrine during the Cold War era, and it has been filling this gap by adopting successive naval strategies and doctrines since the 1990s. For instance, the Indian Navy adopted a substantive doctrinal document in the form of a Maritime Military Strategy (MMS-1998) to realize its maritime objectives. India's Maritime Doctrine of 2004,<sup>xxx</sup> India's Maritime Military Strategy (2007),<sup>xxxi</sup> and India's Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS-2015) have been significant milestones. The IMMS – 2007 was an overall plan to move from the current position to a desired goal that can be defined as an overall approach of the state to its oceanic surroundings.

India's maritime strategy defines its role in its maritime areas of interest to deal with threats. To ward off threats the IMMS-2007 looks forward to the period 2007–2022 in which it has spelled out India's current naval strategy and has also been a document of insight and rationale for the resurgence of its maritime military power.<sup>xxxii</sup> Second, it has identified "power projection" as a feature of India's naval diplomacy.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Third, India's MMS uses the geographical advantages available to India by adopting an ocean-centric approach to its strategy, rather than a coast-centric one. Fourth, with an emphasis on the Indian Ocean, IMMS 2007 also stressed the strategy for force build-up as it has been required to play multiple roles in the IOR. In peacetime, the Indian Navy has played multiple roles ranging from enabling deterrence to a diplomatic role, a police role, and a strategy role.

Further, the IMSS-2015 superseded IMMS-2007, titled 'Ensuring Secure Seas, Freedom to Use the Seas'.<sup>xxxiv</sup> IMSS-2015 also addresses India's response to non-traditional threats emanating at and from the sea to its maritime domain, territory, and national interests. It expands India's maritime areas of interest southwards and westwards by bringing the southwest Indian Ocean and the Red Sea within its "primary area of interest", and the western coast of Africa, the Mediterranean Sea, and other areas of interest within its "secondary area of interest".<sup>xxxv</sup> The IMSS-2015 has emphasized the substantive augmentation of the capabilities of the Indian navy for exercising deterrence, projecting maritime power, providing maritime security, and safeguarding India's maritime interests.<sup>xxxvi</sup> All these doctrines point towards India's desire to come up with a maritime strategy in the IOR trying to address all the threats posed by the Indian Ocean, to fulfill its maritime interests, ambitions, etc. along the region.

### **Enhancing Naval Presence**

The Indian navy is increasing its presence in the Indian Ocean with a permanent deployment of over a dozen ships, including on important sea routes, amid China's growing naval presence in the region. Around 12 to 15 naval ships are being deployed at strategic points along sea lanes from the Strait of Malacca to the Bay of Bengal and Sunda Strait for “greater presence and visibility”.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Ships are being deployed around the island nations of Mauritius, Seychelles, and Madagascar. The deployment, under which ships will be on permanent patrol as opposed to going on short missions, aims to help countries in the Indian Ocean Region to counter threats like piracy as well as offer humanitarian aid and disaster relief.

New Delhi unsettled by the thought of Beijing dominating its backyard, is responding in kind like, by securing its access to naval facilities in the Middle Eastern state through a visit to Oman by PM in January 2018; the first step towards a greater Indian naval presence in the Persian Gulf, signing a 20-year pact with the Seychelles to build an airstrip and a jetty for its navy, a pact with Singapore to boost India’s access to that country’s Changi naval base etc.<sup>xxxviii</sup> India has been involved in building up its naval and air bases in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which sit at one end of the Malacca Strait. These arrangements for access and maintenance of the Navy along the Indian Ocean region indicate the outreach of India to deep-rooted its presence and reinstating it as a prominent player in the IOR.

### **Naval Diplomacy**

India has been using sea-going naval units to radiate the state’s soft power through goodwill visits by warships to foreign ports and the hosting of warships at Indian ports, besides conducting joint operations against poachers and pirates.<sup>xxxix</sup> The Indian Navy has also been conducting naval exercises as a part of its diplomatic function. While such exercises were essential to familiarise the Indian navy with the seas that were earlier foreign to it, they have enabled joint operations in these waters and thereby facilitated the process of strengthening political ties with littoral states and extra-regional powers in the Indian Ocean. Naval exercises have proved quite useful in bridging communication and capabilities gaps with various countries. Since the 1990s, the Indian navy has been at the forefront of cooperative engagement at both bilateral and multilateral levels, and naval diplomacy has emerged as an integral part of New Delhi’s maritime strategy.

The Indian Navy has been conducting bilateral and multilateral naval exercises regularly. Multilateral MILAN exercises have been conducted nine times since 1995.<sup>xl</sup> Its main objective has been to promote India’s naval cooperation with the friendly navies from South East Asia (SEA) and Asia-Pacific (AP). India has also been engaging several SEA countries, especially

Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, in bilateral naval exercises.<sup>xli</sup> Further, the Indian navy has been conducting bilateral naval exercises with extra-regional powers in the Indian Ocean, such as Konkan with the UK since 2004; Indra with Russia from 2003 onward; Varuna with France, a resident power in the middle southern Indian Ocean, initiated in 2001; and MALABAR with the US since 1992.<sup>xlii</sup> Occasionally, the MALABAR naval exercises became trilateral with the participation of Japan. India and South Africa conducted combined bilateral naval drills off the South African Coast in June 2005, which merged into the trilateral biannual IBSAMAR naval exercises amongst Indian, South African, and Brazilian navies conducted in 2008, 2014, 2016, and 2018.<sup>xliii</sup> The naval exercises and diplomatic relations of India with other countries despite its troubles with Indian Ocean diplomacy pinpoint India's evolving Indian Ocean Maritime strategy.

### **India as a Security Provider**

Notwithstanding multiple challenges, the country was well positioned to become a net provider of security and stability in the IOR and beyond, and its increasing outreach to the smaller Indian Ocean littoral states, in west Asia, Africa, Southeast Asia, and South Asian littoral. Its presence is vital for the security of SLOCs in the Indian Ocean. The success of the Indian Naval Symposium and the MILAN exercises underscores the Indian Navy's robust involvement in regional maritime security, even as Indian policymakers have sought to contribute vigorously to regional multilateral forums such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

New Delhi has been striving hard for political and strategic primacy and saw itself as a natural provider of security in the IOR. As part of its "Act East Policy", (AEP), India has focused on building stronger linkages with centers of economic growth in the region and deepened political and security ties with them, including with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries.<sup>xliv</sup> Keeping in view its AEP, India has been trying to obtain membership in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Initiatives like BIMSTEC, IORA, IONS, etc. emerged under the leadership of India legitimizing its role as a security provider of the region and showing its interest in building a security architecture in the Indian Ocean Region for curbing the threats posed by the Indian Ocean.

### **India's Call for Strategic Autonomy**

India's historical aversion to alliance-building had led its political establishment to avoid entering into any comprehensive strategic partnership, but, New Delhi is no longer reluctant about taking larger responsibility for securing the IOR and promoting a regional mechanism for collective security and economic integration.<sup>xlv</sup> The most crucial initiative was the welcoming of the USA's policy to Rebalance to Asia (RTA).

The Indian government aims to promote maritime multilateralism in the IOR, moving away from isolation is a tendency of the Cold War, but it still has strong reservations about who gets to play a role in the IOR. Thus, two regional institutions of the IOR – the IORA and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) – do not include Pakistan and China.

To improve its maritime capabilities, effectiveness, and presence in the IOR, India has launched two projects: Sagarmala on March 25, 2015, with an inward orientation; and the Mausam project, with an outward orientation.<sup>xlvi</sup> The Sagarmala project aims to develop infrastructure to improve and increase the performance and effectiveness of existing ports from their present under-performance level to the optimum level by modernizing and improving infrastructure around ports. It has three interrelated and interdependent dimensions: first, supporting port-driven development with proactive policy measures; second, modernizing and upgrading the port infrastructure; and, third, developing integrated transport infrastructure to connect the ports/coast to the hinterland. The Sagarmala project is primarily confined to infrastructure creation in Indian ports; however, given the contested nature of the maritime domain of the IOR, it has the potential to expand into a regional undertaking. Project Mausam is another policy initiative, launched by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, on June 20, 2014, at the 38th World Heritage Session in Doha, Qatar, wherein India has been harping on its historical and economic linkages with the littorals of the IOR that have outward orientation and strategic intent.<sup>xlvii</sup> India has been using cultural, geographical, and historical linkages with the littoral states of IOR to counter China's MSR project. Project Mausam is at a nascent stage, but it has the potential to construct India's Indian Ocean World that would stretch from East Africa to Southeast Asia by improving its maritime presence there.

Further, India and Japan issued a vision document for the construction of the Asia–Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), it proposes four key elements that leverage the strengths of India and Japan: enhancing capacity and skills; building quality infrastructure, and connecting institutions; development and cooperation projects in health, farming, manufacturing and disaster management; and people-to-people partnership.<sup>xlviii</sup> However, the AAGC seems to be a win-win project in terms of the greater synergy amongst Japan's technology and capital, India's strong network, and experiences in Africa, but much will depend on how this project unfolds and how much time it takes to generate critical mass.

India's changing economic context, the geopolitics of the IOR, and India's aspiration to be a power of consequence, followed by its expanding maritime interest, resulted in a major shift in New Delhi's conception of the Indian Ocean from territorial to non-territorial, and of naval strategy from coast-centric to ocean-centric.<sup>xlix</sup> Accordingly, India has changed its strategy to protect its interests in the IOR; however, one element of continuity in its Indian Ocean policy is its principled opposition to the presence of extra-regional powers in the Indian Ocean.



Understanding the logic of realism, New Delhi knows that it cannot do much about its presence; therefore, it has been engaging it in bilateral or multilateral naval exercises since the 1990s as a pragmatic necessity. India has been consistently improving its reach in the IOR by modernizing and expanding its naval infrastructure, and also through naval diplomacy, but still, New Delhi needs a lot to do more on this count.

Many aspects impede India from propagating a fully flourished maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean region. To develop an inclusive and grown-up maritime strategy in India, it is necessary to understand the gap between its potentialities and ambitions in the maritime domain.<sup>1</sup> India has been described as a status-inconsistent power because there are differences between its perceptions of its achievements and its ascribed international status. India's strategic thinking has a perception that India has been unfairly denied its proper international status although it possesses certain great power capabilities. Along with this, India's ambitions in the Indian Ocean will be subject to both internal and external constraints; the most external constraint is the predominance of US military predominance in the IOR and also the troubled relationships with China and Pakistan. India's maritime diplomacy also seems to have failed to develop strong and cooperative relations with the middle powers such as Indonesia, South Africa, and Australia, though New Delhi has been successful in developing security relationships with smaller littoral countries in the region. This failure may be because of India's ego standing in the way of conceding to a regional power its self-asserted claims to regional status. An internal constraint that India faces in its ability to project power and influence is its devotion to strategic autonomy. India has a culture of 'strategic restraint' that makes it cautious and restrained in its strategic behavior.<sup>ii</sup> At the same time, this behavior of India has helped it to develop a benign image in the region.

Despite all these drawbacks of India's maritime strategic thinking, the analysis elucidates that, India's maritime strategy is evolving through a series of actions from its side to leaving its footprints across the waters of the Indian Ocean; thus it proves that the concerned hypothesis is wrong in that sense. India is urged to develop a stretchable, conventional, inclusive, and comprehensive maritime strategy considering all its maritime neighborhoods, maritime threats, and maritime interests in the Indian Ocean Region. For the time being, India's maritime strategy would be consensual, drawing in as many countries of the region into a mutual security framework. For this, India would emphasize its historical 'Cultural' and 'Civilizational' presence rather than projecting any territorial ambition and hegemonic intent.<sup>iii</sup> While being mindful of its security, it will take a cautious approach at least for the time being when India is trying to carve an enabling environment for its rise as a major global player in the future.

## **A COMPREHENSIVE MARITIME STRATEGY**

In the era of geopolitics entangled with power struggles worldwide what India needs is not a mere maritime strategy, as it has been an aspirant of Super Power status since its independence, it should need a comprehensive maritime strategy. As a maritime power, military modernization has little meaning unless it is complemented by robust maritime growth, including the healthy development of civilian capabilities. The real development of strategy takes place when naval combat capabilities are complimented by a strong infrastructural and civilian maritime component.<sup>liii</sup> Maritime infrastructure development however remains a sore point in India's emerging strategy of maritime India.

There are many inadequacies in India's maritime strategy development, the Indian Navy's indigenisation program remains an unfulfilled agenda, India's civilian shipbuilding has decreased in recent years, inadequate port handling capacity and a lack of direct ship links with major markets have raised questions about India's ability to develop a thriving maritime economy. These inadequacies render the urgent need for a marine economic plan to buttresses a geopolitical maritime strategy for India.

Even though India's maritime strategy is evolving in various ways ranging from its change in perceptions toward the Indian Ocean considering it as non-territorial up to a call for strategic autonomy, in the context of overwhelming security threats posed by the Indian Ocean Region and also because of the increase in strategic importance of Indian Ocean in geopolitics, India need a comprehensive maritime strategy. India's maritime strategy towards IOR should be inclusive, consented and concerned with its maritime neighborhood, should project India as a net security provider in the region capable of curbing the security threats ranging from threats to SLOCs to maritime terrorism posed by the IOR by developing a security architecture in the region, should challenge and restrain the extra-regional military presence in the region through deepening its ties with maritime littoral countries, should be able to give India the title of regional power of IOR and also a Super Power status, above all, India's maritime strategy should be comprehensive, reflecting the Indian Ocean as India's ocean which is the lifeline of its survival in the geopolitical world.

## **CONCLUSION**

In India's quest for maritime power, its strategic location in the Indian Ocean and peninsular configuration are its major assets. It should utilize these assets as a strength for developing a comprehensive maritime strategy for the region, even though it is evolving. All these changing contours of India's Indian Ocean policy and perspective transformations with clarity and inclusiveness regarding its maritime strategy in the IOR can be considered a positive sign of

India's evolution as a global power with a comprehensive maritime strategy towards the Indian Ocean Region for mitigating all the security concerns posed by the ocean.

## References

---

- <sup>i</sup> Andy Young, "Maritime Strategy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," Academia, 12 March 2019 <[https://www.academia.edu/6280775/Maritime Strategy in the 21st century A beginner's guide](https://www.academia.edu/6280775/Maritime_Strategy_in_the_21st_century_A_beginner's_guide)>
- <sup>ii</sup> Azhar Ahmad, "Maritime Power and Strategy," NDU Journal 2014, 15 March 2019 <<https://www.ndu.edu.pk.pdf>>
- <sup>iii</sup> Azhar Ahmad, "Maritime Power and Strategy,".4
- <sup>iv</sup> Sandeep Kumar Shukla, "Coastal-Maritime Security of India," Unacademy, 21 May 2017, 15 March 2019 <<https://unacademy.com/lesson/coastal-maritime-security-of-india>>
- <sup>v</sup> Baljit Singh Mann, "Changing Dynamics of India's Indian Ocean Policy," Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India 2017, 02 January 2018, 12 March 2019 <<https://www.tandfonline.com>>
- <sup>vi</sup> Arun Prakash, "Maritime Security of India: Future Challenges," Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 26 November 2013, 26 February 2019 <<https://www.idsa.in/keyspeeches/Maritimesecurityofindiafuturechallenges>>
- <sup>vii</sup> Mihir Roy, "Maritime security in South Asia," Society for Indian Ocean Studies, 29 June 2018, 27 February 2019 <<https://www.reaserchgate.net>>
- <sup>viii</sup> Gopal Suri, "India's Maritime Security Concerns and the Indian Ocean Region," Indian Foreign Affairs Journal, 3 July 2016, 12 January 2019 <<https://www.tandfonline.com>>
- <sup>ix</sup> Gopal Suri, "India's Maritime Security Concerns and the Indian Ocean Region,".242
- <sup>x</sup> "India and the Indian Ocean: A Briefing," Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 11 April 2016, 28 February 2019 <<https://www.idsa.in/idsanews/india-and-the-indian-ocean-skundu>>

- <sup>xi</sup> Barana Waidyatilake, "Indian Ocean Region: Can New Delhi Guarantee Regional Stability?", Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, 23 August 2017, 28 February 2019 <<https://www.ipcs.org>>
- <sup>xii</sup> Barana Waidyatilake, "Indian Ocean Region: Can New Delhi Guarantee Regional Stability?".<sup>5</sup>
- <sup>xiii</sup> "Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships," International Maritime Organization Report, July 2002, 06 March 2019 <<http://www.imo.org>>
- <sup>xiv</sup> Sarabjeet Singh Parmar, "Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean- An Indian Perspective," ResearchGate, January 2014, 06 March 2019 <<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260042117>>
- <sup>xv</sup> "Maritime Challenges for India; How should India Tackle Them?" Shodhganga, 24 December 2014, 07 March 2019 <<http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in>>
- <sup>xvi</sup> C. Uday Bhaskar, "India's Maritime Security Challenges," East-West Center Publications, 7 May 2013, 07 March 2019 <<https://www.eastwestcenter.org/events/indias-maritime-security-challenges>>
- <sup>xvii</sup> Abhijit Singh, "Changing Face of Maritime Terrorism," Observer Research Foundation, 3 March 2017, 07 March 2019 <<https://www.orfonline.org/research/changing-face-of-maritime-terrorism>>
- <sup>xviii</sup> "India's Maritime Security and Strategy: Issues and Challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," Shodhganga, 07 March 2019 <<http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in>>
- <sup>xix</sup> "India's Maritime Security and Strategy: Issues and Challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,". 111
- <sup>xx</sup> Quoted by Eleanor Albert, "Competition in the Indian Ocean," Council on Foreign Relations, 19 May 2016, 08 March 2019 <<https://www.cfr.org/background/competition-indian-ocean>>
- <sup>xxi</sup> Eleanor Albert, "Competition in the Indian Ocean,".4

<sup>xxii</sup> Abhijit Singh, "An Indian Strategy for an Era of Geopolitical Uncertainty," Journal of Defence Studies, 4 October 2015, 08 March 2019 <<https://www.idsa.in/journalofdefencestudies>>

<sup>xxiii</sup> G M Hiranandani, "External Naval Presence in Indian Ocean," Indian Defence Review, 27 May 2018, 08 March 2019 <<https://indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/external-naval-presence-in-indian-ocean>>

<sup>xxiv</sup> Ganapathy Pramod, "Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Marine Fish Catches in the Indian Exclusive Zone," ResearchGate, 17 January 2014, 08 March 2019 <<https://www.researchgate.net/publications/238790315>>

<sup>xxv</sup> Arunima Gupta, "India's Island Diplomacy: Building an Indian Ocean Security Architecture," The Diplomat, 30 August 2018, 15 March 2019 <<https://the-diplomat.com/2018/08/indias-island-diplomacy-building-an-indian-ocean-security-architecture>>

<sup>xxvi</sup> Baljit Singh Mann, "Changing Dynamics of India's Indian Ocean Policy," Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India 2017, 02 January 2018, 12 March 2019 <<https://www.tandfonline.com>>

<sup>xxvii</sup> Baljit Singh Mann, "Changing Dynamics of India's Indian Ocean Policy," 29

<sup>xxviii</sup> Baljit Singh Mann, "Changing Dynamics of India's Indian Ocean Policy," 30

<sup>xxix</sup> Gopal Suri, "India's Maritime Security Concerns and the Indian Ocean Region," India's Foreign Affairs Journal Vol.11. No.3, July-November 2016, 238-252, 5 March 2019 <<https://www.associationdiplomats.org>>

<sup>xxx</sup> "Indian Maritime Doctrine 2004," Ministry of Defence(Navy), Government of India, New Delhi, 29 April 2004, 16 March 2019 <<https://www.indiannavy.nic.in>>

<sup>xxxi</sup> "Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy (2007)," Ministry of Defence(Navy), Government of India, New Delhi, 25 January 2016, 16 March 2019 <<https://www.indiannavy.nic.in>>

<sup>xxxii</sup> "Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy (2007)," 37

- xxxiii "Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy (2007)," .38
- xxxiv "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy 2015," Ministry of Defence(Navy), Government of India, New Delhi, October 2015, 16 March 2019 <<https://www.indiannavy.nic.in>>
- xxxv "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy 2015,".16
- xxxvi "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy 2015,".17
- xxxvii Nirmala Ganapathy, "India increases its presence in Indian Ocean, with an eye on China," The Straits Times, 8 November 2017, 10 March 2019 <<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia>>
- xxxviii David Brewster, "Indian Ocean Base race: India Responds," The Interpreter-India Defence and Security, 15 February 2018, 16 March 2019 <<https://www.lowyinstitute.org>>
- xxxix Abhijit Singh, "India's Naval Diplomacy," Observer Research Foundation, 28 July 2017, 16 March 2019 <<https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-naval-diplomacy>>
- xl David Scott, "India's Aspirations and Strategy for the Indian Ocean -Securing the Waves," The Journal of Strategic Studies Vol.36, No.4, December 2013, 15 March 2019 <<https://www.tandfonline.com>>
- xli Ibid.
- xlii "Malabar naval exercise to feature largest warships of India, US, Japan," Economic Times, 12 July 2018, 16 March 2019 <<https://www.economictimes.com/news/defense/59479171.cms>>
- xliii Dean Wingrin, "Navy gains double benefits from Exercise IBSAMAR," Defence Web, 08 October 2018, 16 March 2019 <<https://www.defenceweb.co.za/sea/sea-sea/navy-gains-double-benefits-from-exercise-ibsamar/amp>>
- xliv Udai Bhanu Singh, "Significance of India's Act East Policy and Engagement with ASEAN," Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 04 December 2018, 17



March 2019 <<https://idsa.in/backgrounder/significance-india-act-east-policy-engagement-with-asean-ubsingh-041218>>

<sup>xliv</sup> Iskander Rehman, "India's fitful quest for sea power," India Review 2017, Vol.16, No.2, 02 June 2017, 16 March 2019 <<https://www.tandfonline.com>>

<sup>xlvi</sup> Gurpreet S. Khurana, "India's Maritime Strategy: context and Subtext," Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India, 19 April 2017, 16 March 2019 <<https://www.tandfonline.com>>

<sup>xlvi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Abhijit Singh, "An Indian Maritime Strategy for an Era of Geopolitical Uncertainty," Journal of Defence Studies, Vol.9 No.4, October – November 2015, 16 March 2019 <<http://www.idsa.in/jds/9-4-2015-AnIndianMaritimeStrategy>>

<sup>xliv</sup> Abhijit Singh, "An Indian Maritime Strategy for an Era of Geopolitical Uncertainty,".5

<sup>i</sup> "India's evolving maritime Strategy," Observer Research Foundation, 15 March 2019 <<https://www.orfonline.org/research/indias-evolving-maritime-strategy>>

<sup>li</sup> Chinmoyee Das, "Changing contours of India's Ocean strategy, 2004-2015," Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs, 24 April 2018, 17 March 2019 <<https://www.tandfonline.com>>

<sup>lii</sup> Smruti S. Pattanaik, "Indian Ocean in the emerging geo-strategic context: examining India's relations with its maritime South Asian neighbours," Journal of Indian Ocean Region, 20 October 2016, 17 March 2019 <<https://www.tandfonline.com>>

<sup>liii</sup> "Analysis: India's Evolving Maritime Security Strategy and Force Posture," Defencyclopedia, 20 March 2016, 12 March 2019 <<https://defencyclopedia.com>>