

India's Capability to Become a Prime Regional Actor in the Indian Ocean Region Cannot be Ignored: India's Maritime Strategy

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Abstract: Alfred Mahan emphasized the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean, which plays a crucial role in 21st-century geopolitics. In 2015, the Indian Navy outlined its maritime security strategy, aspiring to be a "net security provider" in the Indo-Pacific, focusing on vital chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca and Bab-el-Mandeb. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's SAGAR doctrine promotes collaborative security and economic growth for regional stakeholders. India's maritime strategy aims to ensure freedom of navigation, counter China's assertive presence, and enhance trade relations while promoting sustainable development. Key objectives include sea control, sea denial, and protecting shipping routes. Despite these ambitions, India faces challenges such as a fragmented approach to the Indian Ocean, limited influence over strategic chokepoints, and a historical continental bias in defense prioritization. Strengthening regional partnerships and adapting to geopolitical changes will be essential for India to solidify its role in the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, Maritime Security, SAGAR Doctrine, Geopolitics, Regional Cooperation

"Whoever controls the Indian Ocean, dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas. In the Twenty – First century, the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters". - - Alfred Mahan.

In 2015, Indian Navy, promulgated 'Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy' showing the shifting contours of India's maritime role, and enunciated and the aspiration to be 'net security provider' and uphold security control of the important chokepoints in the Indo-Pacific and the Asia-Pacific regions, like the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab-el- Mandeb.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi articulated India's Indo-Pacific concept as the SAGAR doctrine — 'Security and Growth for All in the Region', an aspiration that depends on ensuring prosperity for all stakeholder nations, guided by norms and governed by rules, with freedom of navigation. Prime Minister's Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue, 2018 highlighted that the India works towards a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. We support a common rules-based order for the region and believe in sovereignty and territorial integrity and equality of all nations, irrespective of size and strength.

Importance of the Maritime Strategy:

- **Economic importance:** Nearly 50% of India's trade is centered in the Indo-Pacific Region and the Indian Ocean carries 90% of India's trade and its energy sources. India wants to assure freedom of navigation, secure choke points, resolve conflicts peacefully and address nontraditional security threats in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).
- **Geo-political aspirations:** To expand its own presence in the region, especially in Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia and maintain its role as a net security provider.

- **Countering China:** Ensuring that China does not gain a significant strategic foothold in the region.
- **Enhancing Trade and Investment Cooperation:** by encouraging greater flow of goods, services, investment and technology between India and other countries in the region. Promoting sustainable development: In the coming times, climate change is set to adversely affect India. Thus, India favors sustainable development of the region through development of blue economy.
- **Other Interests:** include- Combating marine pollution, Regulating illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing, deep sea mineral exploration and effective disaster risk management.

Objectives

The first of these is 'sea control,' the key concept underpinning all of India's maritime strategy. This defensive mission involves ensuring that Indian and friendly naval forces have the temporary and local command of the ocean necessary to ensure maritime communications, whether for commercial or military purposes.

The second mission is 'sea denial'. Sea denial is an offensive mission that involves degrading the ability of enemy naval forces to operate in a defined maritime space for a limited period of time. At the operational and tactical levels, sea denial may be used to the freedom of action of enemy forces.

The protection and interdiction of sea lines of communication is the third pillar of Indian maritime strategy. Regarding protection, the mission is to ensure the safety and security of Indian shipping by providing escorts, attaining sea control in key areas, and otherwise neutralizing threats to Indian shipping and SLOCs.

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What are we doing for achieving our goals?

Through the SAGAR Cooperation between the economy and security, India hopes to enhance engagement with its maritime neighbours to build their maritime security capacities. This would be accomplished through cooperation, which would include information exchanges, coastal surveillance, infrastructure construction, and capability enhancement. The policy is highly relevant and can be interlinked to India's other maritime initiatives such as the Act East Policy, Project Mausam, Project Sagar mala, Blue Economy etc.

In April 2019, India established a new division for the Indo-Pacific in its Ministry of External Affairs to address the region's growing salience in global discourse. The division converges the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the ASEAN region and the QUAD under one umbrella.

An Oceania division was created in the MEA in September 2020 to bring India's administrative and diplomatic focus on the region stretching from western Pacific (with the Pacific islands) to the Andaman Sea. This is the maritime space where China is trying to maintain its dominance and India is seeking to assert its own relevance.

Due to its strategic position, India's navy is among the first to reach nations requiring humanitarian assistance or medical aid in times of crisis and disasters. Mission Sagar: Indian Navy provided Food Items, COVID related Medicines and Special Ayurvedic Medicines with Medical Assistance Teams to Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar and Comoros. Operation Vanilla: Indian Navy provided humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to Madagascar.

India's efforts to establish cordial relations with littoral states has helped to maintain a positive environment in the Indian Ocean Region. BIMSTEC is serving an important role in this endeavor through its Conclave of Ports initiative.

Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) was initiated by India and is a voluntary initiative that seeks to increase maritime co-operation among navies of the littoral states of the IOR by providing an open and inclusive forum for discussion of regionally relevant maritime issues.

In an effort to boost its presence and visibility, it has constructive engagements in operational terms through major exercises which include Malabar Exercise (United States, Japan and Australia) and Varun (France). We have also signed logistics agreements like LEMOA (USA), ACSA (Japan), RLSA (France), etc. to enhance the reach of our navy. France's Réunion Island, U.S. military facilities in Diego Garcia or Guam, Australia's Cocos (Keeling) Islands and Japan's Okinawa Island along with India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep Islands can provide critical access to key choke points and entry/exit points for the Indian Ocean.

India has signed agreements to develop strategic assets in Indo Pacific like developing and managing the Sabang Port located close to the strategic Malacca Strait. Moreover, India is developing assets in Assumption Island, Agalega, etc.

India has launched its own Indian Ocean Region-Information Fusion Centre (IFC-IOR), which has established linkages with over 18 countries and 15 maritime security agencies.

The Quad appears to be sending a signal to Beijing that they are solidifying around common security concerns, and extending to other issues including secure supply chains and a free and open Indo-Pacific.

India's evolving ties with Australia, with the elevation of the relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the release of India's economic strategy for Australia and vice versa, offers opportunities to create a dependable partnership in the Indo-Pacific.

Challenges in India's Maritime Doctrine

Silos Approach in the Indian Ocean: India's political class has divided the Indian ocean into many sub-regions. Traditionally, India draws a line with Mauritius and Seychelles as its areas of strategic collaboration in the Indian Ocean. In terms of sub-regions, the priority is in the northern (Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal), and eastern Indian Ocean (the Andaman Sea and Straits of Malacca). Due to this, the western Indian Ocean and the eastern coast of Africa still continue to be in the maritime periphery in India's foreign policy.

Lesser Hold on Strategic Chokepoint: China's first overseas military base was set up in the western Indian Ocean, in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. Russia too recently acquired a base in Sudan, on the Red Sea coast, between the Suez Canal and Bab-el-Mandeb — a strategic chokepoint in the Indian Ocean. However, beyond the anti-piracy mission, India's presence and maritime engagements with the African coast have been largely ad hoc.

Increasing Chinese Assertiveness: Through the Maritime Silk Road, China engages with littorals and islands across the Ocean. China has consistently aimed to improve its diplomatic, political, and military engagements in the region from Sri Lanka to Comoros, spanning the Indian Ocean in its entirety.

Continental Bias: India's reorientation toward the maritime domain has not been easy, with generations of foreign and defense service officials focusing and training on continental issues. Further, the Indian Navy is allotted approximately 14% of the defense budget speaks clearly to the defense establishment's priorities.

The Indian Navy has emerged as an indispensable tool of Indian diplomacy in recent years, making it imperative for Indian policy-makers and naval thinkers to think anew about amending the issues in our maritime strategy. Harsh V Pant - India has been defining its presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the Indo-Pacific. With India's economic rise, New Delhi is trying to ensure its maritime strategy is integral to national grand strategy.

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Author Profile

Clodia Saabi Poudia is a dedicated educator in Political Science with a robust academic background and extensive teaching experience. Holding a Master's degree in Political Science from the University of Kerala, where she achieved third rank, and a Bachelor's degree from Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, graduating with first rank, she has consistently demonstrated academic excellence. Currently, she serves as an Academic Counselor at the IGNOU Regional Center and is a mentor and faculty member at www.upschacks.com, Bengaluru, INDIA. Her commitment to fostering understanding in political science and mentoring aspiring students reflects his passion for the field.