



India's Maritime Security Challenges and Opportunities with Special Reference to the Indian Ocean

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ABSTRACT

The development of any nation also brings many challenges. A country like India, which is continuously developing in all sectors like economy, security, society, and politics, also attracts many threats towards her. One such challenge is the maritime threat. Attacks like the Mumbai blast of 1993 and the terrorist attack of 2008 have shown that maritime security should be at the core of India's security concerns. The other challenges that India faces are piracy, counterfeiting, human trafficking, drug trafficking, illegal migration, and many more illicit activities. No doubt, other than challenges, there are a lot of opportunities in the maritime sector, such as free trade, cheap transfer of goods, a blue economy, the construction of ports, the development of military bases, and the use of islands. India is a country full of both challenges and opportunities. India shares its maritime boundary with seven countries that must be checked and secured continuously because land boundaries can be fenced easily. However, the case of maritime borders is different. India's strong presence in the Indian Ocean, Indo-Pacific region, and South China Sea area is full of opportunities and challenges from China's domineering presence. In order to counter

China and secure its maritime interest, India needs an integrated policy that will help it fully develop its maritime sector. The prolonged maritime boundary of India, which is more than 7500 km, is a boon for her. History shows ancient traces of maritime trade between the Indian subcontinent and other regions. It is also clear that whenever India neglected its maritime routes, it suffered significantly, much as it did during colonial rule. Maritime trade is still the backbone of India's economic growth, and most of the goods are transferred from one place to another through sea routes. In this sense, the security of the maritime route seems to be an important issue for India's security policy.

Introduction: Surrounded by the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea with a vast coastline of more than 7500 km containing more than 270 islands, IOR is a strong base for India. India's relationship with IOR is not new. As history clearly states, whenever India neglected this vast, important area, it suffered by losing its sovereignty, which can be seen during colonial rule. KM Panikkar once said, "It is the geographical position of India that changes the character of the Indian Ocean."¹ Maritime trade, which was an important factor for India's overall development from the historical period, is still considered a milestone for its economic growth. Today, IOR matters more than ever because it is considered among the world's fastest-growing regions. India's strategic presence at the head of the Indian Ocean makes it strategically dominant and allows it to connect with both the eastern and western end. The Indian Ocean is the third largest oceanic body in the world, which provides a long trade route for many powerful nations; a dominant position in this oceanic area will help India strategically and economically. Beaches around this reason attract tourists from all over the world. The significance of the Indian Ocean for India is more than we think in all sectors like trade, tourism, cultural exchanges, investments, military bases, and many more.

Importance of the Indian Ocean for India: The vast region of the Indian Ocean is significant for India in many aspects, like the exchange of goods, climate stability, management of many disasters, influence on significant powers, energy security, and many more. Regarding oceanic routes, IOR provides a strong base for India's trade. Sea routes are significant because India performs most of its trade through oceanic

¹ KM Panikkar, 'India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea power on Indian History'

routes, and securing sea lines of communication is necessary for a developing country like India with a growing economy; maintaining sea routes is a must because oceanic routes are cheaper than airways and roadways. This is the only ocean in the world named after our nation. Another field in which the Indian Ocean is important for India is the oil trade because this route will help us fulfill our growing energy demands. With the growing economy, India's interests are also increasing, and IOR will provide a strong platform to exchange thoughts, ideas, architecture, things, culture, and art with different nations. Overall, we can say that this ocean environment in the Indian sub-continent makes this area powerful and attractive for superpowers.

India's Maritime Threats and Opportunities in the Indian Ocean: The strategic importance of the Indian Ocean makes this area vulnerable to many security issues like smuggling, piracy, counterfeiting, human trafficking, drug trafficking, terrorist activities, and illegal migration. Piracy in the Horn of Africa, the Gulf of Aden, and the Strait of Malacca are of great concern in the Indian Ocean Region.² There are many more issues other than these threats. Some threats hit directly and indirectly, but security from all challenges is important to secure Indian borders. As per most foreign policy experts, India's strong presence in IOR is mandatory to counter China's growing influence in terms of String of Pearls policy. Strong partnerships with nations like Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles will significantly help. The stable maritime region provides a stable and peaceful maritime environment that is safe from oceanic challenges. Traditional and non-traditional security threats are two main parts of maritime challenges. Non-traditional security challenges are more threatening.

In order to counter these challenges, India's security strategy has three main pillars. First, it is important to maintain stability in the region to provide a stable maritime environment free from all kinds of threats and ensure all safety in the IOR. Second is securing this region by strengthening military capabilities and maintaining naval power, which will help in solving challenges like piracy, illegal migration, and trafficking, which is a serious threat to India's strategic location. Third is the maintenance of peace in IOR, which will help in the flawless growth of this particular area and ensure the maintenance of economic dominance, which will help increase economic stability through growth in trade and investment on a large scale. This approach has been mentioned in the third constituent strategy determining a fruitful and positive maritime atmosphere as charted in the Indian Navy's 2015 strategy

² <https://sprf.in/indias-maritime-security-operations-what-does-india-gain/#:~:text=Due%20to%20its%20strategic%20significance,concern%20in%20the%20Indian%20Ocean>

document, Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS 2015).³ Despite all the security challenges, there are many opportunities in this region, like important islands and beaches for tourism, hot water to keep Indian submarines, rich in oil and gases, exploration of oil from this area will help in economic growth, an extensive EEZ will provide many more opportunities like scientific knowledge, gems, minerals, fisheries, promotion of blue economy like a good source of renewable energy, biotechnology in the marine sector. These important economic sectors make this region worthwhile for India and other superpowers. This area is also a biodiversity hotspot that contains large species of flora and fauna and has much potential in terms of minerals, oils, fisheries, and maritime species. Overall, we can say that despite many challenges, there are many opportunities in this region, which make IOR very interesting and eye-catching for powerful nations. Deep interests of superpowers in this region concern India's security, but a peaceful and secure region will surely help maintain India's maritime interests. For India's economic growth, maintaining maritime development is essential; IOR can become a milestone. India's central theme is to provide security and growth in this region to enhance cooperative moves through friendly nations with the help of many exercises in this area by shaping a sustainable and suitable maritime environment for the nations of IOR with the help of the SAGAR initiative.⁴

Choke Points: Many choke points provide access to the Indian Ocean through the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the southern point of IOR. These choke points are critical for safeguarding India's maritime interests. The equal distance from these points gives India a unique position in maintaining peace and security in this region. Many examples of wars show that this region's security is important. The Iran-Iraq war of 1980 shows that India's energy security was at risk through the Strait of Hormuz. The Gulf of Aden and the Bab-el-Mandeb area are equally critical for India's energy security. Sometimes, due to war, these choke points become highly affected, directly creating problems for trade and the economy. Terrorists attack, and wars directly disturb India's energy source. Thus, for flawless economic growth of the Indian economy, security and maintenance of these choke points are important. Past incidents show that these points are vulnerable to maritime threats. India plays a crucial role in maintaining peace and stability by improving the Sea Lines of Communication.

³ Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy) New Delhi, "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS 2015)", October 2015, pp. 81.

⁴ Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy) New Delhi, "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS 2015)", October 2015, pp. 11.

Regional Safety Architecture of IOR: India has always performed a supportive approach in this area through many initiatives. One among them is PM Narendra Modi's visualization of SAGAR- Security and Growth for All in the Region.⁵ There are many more security arrangements for safeguarding this region, like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which was started in 1997 for intra-regional growth, security, and collaboration. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium was launched in 2008 to establish naval cooperation among the littoral countries of IOR for the Asia-Pacific region. ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was started to ensure capacity-building. All initiatives India started for the security of IOR are insufficient because many threatening challenges need more initiatives. The growing influence of China and the interests of many significant powers can disrupt the regional security structure of this region. The weakness of littoral states creates more challenges for India in ensuring the safety of this region as a strong position holder in IOR. The collaborative approach and initiatives India has started in this area will serve India's economic and security interests and help other littoral states maintain their position. The complex area of IOR needs a very integrated and collaborative approach for overall development. In the current scenario, the maintenance of the artificial intelligence system will help enhance security agencies' operational capability, which will increase the regional security structure.

Conclusion: One important saying in world history, "Who will rule over the sea will rule over the world," is valid for the area of the Indian Ocean. After analyzing every aspect of this IOR, it can be clearly stated that this region is important for India, littoral nations, and superpowers. Despite all the traditional and non-traditional security challenges, many opportunities in this region make IOR strategically and economically important. Indian Ocean is the world's third largest ocean, containing many important trade routes. With time, India has undoubtedly improved its strategy towards this region, but there is still a long route to travel. Many unexplored areas in this region need to be focused on. This region is significant for countering China and ensuring its economic benefits for India's growth and development. All significant powers are interested in IOR due to its strategic location. India's strategic presence at the head of the Indian Ocean makes her very powerful in the maritime field. IOR development should be ensured for India's maritime growth, providing a strong base for overall development.

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⁵ PM Modi's Speech Commissioning of Mauritius CG Ship Barracuda, 12 March 2015.



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