



India's Maritime Awakening: Strategic Engagement and Security Diplomacy in the Indian Ocean Region

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ABSTRACT

India's developing maritime policy in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) represents a significant shift in its geopolitical ambitions, grounded on economic expansion and enhanced global integration. Since the 1990s, India has adopted a collaborative and realism strategy for marine security, acknowledging the strategic and economic significance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Initiatives like the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the National Maritime Development Programme, and the formulation of comprehensive maritime doctrines illustrate India's dedication to fostering stability and collaboration within its maritime vicinity. The execution of the "SAGAR" policy reinforced India's objective of inclusive regional development and security, positioning the nation as a proactive maritime participant. Through enhanced diplomatic relations, strategic alliances, and naval drills with its maritime neighbors, India seeks to establish itself as a net security



provider in the area. This transition underscores India's increasing dependence on maritime resources for commerce, security, and global cooperation, marking a pivotal moment in its foreign policy and defense strategy.

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Introduction:

Security is a fundamental component of international relations theory, with the state as the principal referent. Barry Buzan contends that military threats are fundamental in a holistic security policy, highlighting the state's obligation to safeguard its inhabitants. Buzan and Hansen (2010) Another aspect of security is regional security, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of governmental security issues and requires a unified response. Subsequent arguments indicate that hegemony is not essential for collective activities; yet, the traditional conception of collective action emphasizes a hegemon offering protection to subordinate units. India's role as a Net Security Provider has transitioned from a hegemonic power to a cooperative organization over time. (Stone, 2009)

In August 2021, Prime Minister Modi reiterated India's role as a security guarantor in the Indian Ocean region (IOR). The Hindu India's marine endeavors are captivating owing to their non-aggressive character, despite a predominantly land-focused strategic outlook. The British Empire need a land-based defense against China and Russia. Subsequent to India's independence, the nation implemented a terrestrial defense strategy in reaction to the Chinese incursion into the Himalayas in 1962. The Indian Army's predominant allotment of defense funding renders the navy a 'Cinderella force'. Several examples of New Delhi's endeavors in the Indian Ocean Region encompass the Colombo Security Conclave, the Indian Ocean Naval Conference, Mission SAGAR, and the Indo-Pacific Division, among others. Recent developments in India's maritime neighborhood raise concerns about its status as a 'Security Provider' in the Indian Ocean area. Brewster, 2013.

Since 1970, India has adopted a preventive defense posture to secure the International Ocean Region. During the 1980s, India's position as a Net Security Provider became increasingly significant. India possesses almost 7,500 kilometers of coastline, establishing it as a pivotal entity in marine security. Its energy security and economic success are fundamentally dependent on three critical Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean. The routes encompass the 'Bab al-Mandab,' which facilitates the majority of Asia's international trade with Europe and America; the 'Strait of



Hormuz,' which supplies energy to India, ASEAN, and East Asia; and the 'Straits of Malacca,' which enable trade with East Asia, ASEAN, the Far East of Russia, and the United States. The Indian Ocean enables 75 percent of worldwide maritime trade and constitutes 50 percent of the world's daily oil consumption. In the 1970s, India adopted a non-aggressive defensive posture in the International Ocean Region; but, from the 1980s, it asserted its net security stance.

The diplomatic history of 1947 is examined. Kenneth Waltz asserts that the number of large states, together with their capabilities, goals, and relationships, shapes the international order. (Waltz, 2008)

Minor and intermediate powers either observe or engage, while big states dominate international politics. India challenged this regulation in its vicinity. India first pursued liberal internationalism and a peace accord like to those established in Indo-China. As a manifestation of defensive realism, it maintained the Royal Navy's status quo in the Indian Ocean, honoring British post-colonial arrangements in South Asia. John Mearsheimer's realism thesis asserts that governments augment their survival capabilities in dynamic international contexts. India's strategy in the Indian Ocean Region shifts from a defensive posture to an assertive realism, prioritizing maritime supremacy. Elman, 2007 India's strategic location in the epicenter of the Indian Ocean makes its security and maritime domain crucial. The accessibility of this marine region to the world's most powerful nations, large fleets, Gulf States, and Islamic countries considerably impacts India's economy and geography. Therefore, India must maintain its dominance in this maritime area.

India's Strategic Outlook on the Indian Ocean Region:

The foundational basis for India's maritime strategy may be attributed to K.M. Panikkar's influential article, "India and the Indian Ocean," which delineated India's comprehension of its maritime domain. Panikkar underscored the significant economic and geopolitical importance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) to India, asserting that the nation's historical affluence has been irrevocably connected to trade and commercial pathways across this vast marine expanse. He stated that India's geopolitical destiny is intricately connected to the Indian Ocean Region, implying that mastery over these waterways equates to hegemonic supremacy over the Indian subcontinent. He warned that, without such supervision, India's security and sovereignty would be tenuous in the postcolonial context.



Subsequent to the capture of the Andaman Nicobar Islands, the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) established dominance over the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), profoundly impacting World War II. The British Royal Navy transferred its base to Ceylon; nonetheless, Japanese advance in the Indian Ocean Region in 1942 jeopardized their supremacy over communications in the Indian Ocean. Colin, 1942 In his book, Panikkar underscored India's national accomplishment by emphasizing the significance of the Indian Ocean's security, arguing that without a liberated and safe Indian Ocean, industrial and commercial development, together with a stable political structure, would be unachievable. Panikkar underscored potential threats as a vital strategic asset for India in the Indian Ocean. He openly cited Japan's naval might throughout the war and the imminent threat posed by the Pacific area. The book likely offers the inaugural examination of the geopolitical policy regarding the Indo-Pacific, in which the author explicitly evaluates India's security strategy in the Indian Ocean and its advancements in the Pacific region. He implored the Indian government to provide stability and uphold peace in the Indian Ocean to protect India's sovereignty. (Panikkar, 1951)

India's Evolving Security Role in the Indian Ocean Region During the Cold War:

The Cold War period signified a pivotal shift in the strategic dynamics of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), especially following the decline of British influence during the Suez crisis and Britain's eventual exit from east of the Suez in 1967. Britain created a power vacuum in the area by relinquishing control of several colonies, including Singapore and Malaysia in 1965, as well as Kenya, the Maldives, and Ceylon. Due to India's large geographic expanse and naval capabilities, it was perceived as the most probable successor to assume a stabilizing role in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The Indian leadership acknowledged the nation's strategic significance and geographic position in regional security, reinforcing the conviction that India was the optimal choice to address this void.

Despite these instances, India had a significant potential to assert dominance in the maritime domain of the Indian Ocean Region; nevertheless, its post-independence economy and inadequate military capabilities pose substantial obstacles. Since 1947, India's defense objectives have been significantly shaped by terrestrial considerations stemming from external threats, including border conflicts with Pakistan and China, as well as internal security issues. Consequently, the Indian government persisted in allocating the majority of defense resources to the army, thereby postponing navy modernization and maritime expansion. This strategic stance reflected New Delhi's longstanding emphasis on continental over marine threats.

Furthermore, India's response to the British Royal Navy's activities in the Indian Ocean was predominantly quiet throughout this period. This seeming indifference may have resulted from familiarity with the British naval presence or a deficiency of urgent maritime threats. Consequently, Indian strategic thought in the 1960s was simply differentiated from the broader Indian Ocean Region setting. Power transition theory posits that India does not qualify as a 'dissatisfied emerging power'—a nation poised to disrupt the current international order. India seems satisfied to concentrate on safeguarding its territorial limits, showing minimal inclination to assume the marine responsibilities once held by the British. (Brewster, 2013)

Strategic Expansion of the U.S. in the Indian Ocean Region:

Power transition theory states that conflicts and changes in global power occur at the same time. However, other academics contend that peaceful power transitions are feasible provided developing and dominating nations agree on the international order. Following the loss of British imperial power in the IOR, the UK saw the US as a good ally to support the principles of a "free capitalist world order." The US might now inherit maritime power in the IOR thanks to the UK's geopolitical choice. Through a number of technological innovations, such as nuclear propulsion and submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) systems, the United States' Navy overtook that of the Soviet Union by the early 1960s. The US had developed underwater and surface-guided missile systems by 1954, and these advancements played a major role in the historic 1964 Operation Sea Orbit, which featured three nuclear-powered ships, including the USS "Long Beach" and USS "Bainbridge." The world gained a clear understanding of the US's increasing naval might in the IOR following this development, as well as the peaceful transfer of IOR command from the British Royal Navy to US naval forces.

India's Policy Approach Toward the U.S. Naval Presence:

India first reacted coldly to the US naval entrance into the Indian Ocean region under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. India did not initially see this development as a direct danger to its sovereignty or security because of its low naval capability at the time, and Nehru did not protest to the deployment of nuclear-powered American boats in the region. India's diplomatic aspirations and naval limits in the 1960s postponed any forceful posture toward becoming a regional security supplier, as Singh (1978) points out. However, regional events quickly forced India to reevaluate its maritime policy. India experienced strategic concerns as a result of Indonesia's involvement in the Indo-Pak War of 1965 and Indonesian Navy Chief Admiral Martadinata's proposal to Pakistan to seize the Bay of



Bengal and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. This anti-Indian regional convergence highlighted the necessity for a more assertive maritime strategy.

India sought to designate the IOR as a "Zone of peace" through international diplomatic channels, but the US and USSR both expanded their presence in the area, undermining this goal owing to cold war politics. High-profile Soviet naval expeditions, such as Admiral Gorshkov's trips to Visakhapatnam and Bombay, heightened regional rivalry even further. Because of its reliance on continuous energy supplies from West Asia, Northeast Africa, the Persian Gulf, and Southeast Asia, India had a strong desire for maritime security. The safe flow of essential resources as well as India's sovereignty were at danger due to the expanding overseas military presence.

Transformations in India's Strategic Thinking during the 1970s:

In the 1970s India's marine security saw a significant change as a result of significant events including the growing US-China alliance, US military assistance to Pakistan during the 1971 war, and Pakistan's improving relations with the USSR. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi denounced Britain's military shipments to apartheid South Africa during the 1970 Lusaka Non-Aligned Movement conference, citing the threat to regional security as the reason.

After 1971, India's marine security strategy quickly improved in the wake of the fight with Pakistan. Tensions in the region arose when the US launched the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier "USS Enterprise" to the Bay of Bengal in December 1971, raising fears among Indian military personnel that it might jeopardize India's blockade efforts against Pakistan. This episode demonstrated unequivocally how the US and Pakistan's alignment led to the turning point in Indo-US relations.

India was more concerned about the influx of "foreign forces" into its maritime region after Britain's total withdrawal from the IOR by 1971. Events like the Iran-Iraq conflict, the world oil crisis, and the Iranian Islamic Revolution exacerbate these anxieties by causing strategic instability in the IOR. India attempted, via global measures, to make the Indian Ocean a Zone of Peace, but was unable to address the region's growing militarization. In order to resist foreign influence and maintain maritime stability, India then started modernizing its fleet and extending its marine infrastructure, making it a more powerful role in the IOR. (NESA, 1988). In order to develop its marine infrastructure, promote the expansion of the maritime industry, and enhance the blue economy's economic prospects, India's Ministry of Shipping initiated the National marine Development Programme (NMDP) in 2005. Sakuja (2012) reports that the program finished 276 projects between 2005 and 2012 that addressed the construction of additional berths, the deepening of navigation channels, the improvement of road and



rail links, the transformation of port equipment, and the establishment of essential support services. These initiatives demonstrate India's desire to enhance its marine sector, which accounts for over 90% of its total commerce volume. In order to foster regional collaboration and assist India's goals for economic expansion in the twenty-first century, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) platform was essential.

During the 2008 cyclonic crisis in Myanmar, India's prompt response—which included operations from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and coordinated efforts with partners like Singapore through SIMBEX exercises and France through VARUNA drills in the Malacca Straits and Gulf of Aden—exemplified this commitment (PIB, 2015). These interactions demonstrate the Indian Navy's strategic and humanitarian involvement in local affairs. Major naval drills like Milan and Malabar strengthened India's relations with its coastal neighbors. This demonstrates the Indian Navy's expanding regional influence and diplomatic involvement. This stance supports India's participation in the IOR as a proactive, accountable, and cooperative player.

New Era Security Concerns and India's Maritime Strategic Response:

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR), a developing economic force, has been integral to India's geopolitical policy since the early 1990s. Due to global economic interconnectivity, India's IOR is an important commercial and energy corridor in the twenty-first century. Given the aforementioned circumstances, India's strategy for regional security in the IOR changed from one of defense to proactive collaboration.

The Indian Navy's command founded the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in 2008. The Maldives and Bangladesh founded this group at first, but in 2014 it grew to include 24 more countries, including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, South Africa, Singapore, Mozambique, and Thailand. It represents a significant turning point in India's marine diplomacy. This platform's primary goal was to promote naval cooperation among IOR nations. This growth is a reflection of India's increasing impact on IOR.

After 2004, India's marine policy broadened and placed a strong focus on the economic potential of its maritime neighbors. The Indian government launched the National marine Development Programme in 2005 with the goal of developing the marine industry and infrastructure. This effort saw the completion of 276 projects between 2005 and 2012. It covers the development of vital linkages, such as road and rail links, port expansion, and facility refurbishment. Following this move, India's marine commerce now accounts for over 90% of its overall trade, which is a significant accomplishment for the country.



India consistently advocates for a conflict-free IOR in order to further its strategic development and expansion. India took part in many operations in the Malacca Straits, Gulf of Aden, and South Indian Ocean region, as well as joint naval exercises including SIMBEX with Singapore and VARUNA with France, in order to foster regional stability and collaboration. India demonstrated its growing marine capabilities with the aforementioned naval drills as well as a number of humanitarian endeavors, such as the 2008 cyclone relief effort in Myanmar. Furthermore, the Indian Navy's cooperative ties with its neighbors cemented its dominance in the Indian Ocean region.

Strategic Aspects of India's Indian Ocean Policy:

India's attitude to the Indian Ocean was first underestimated, but from the 1980s, a major shift and transformation took place as a result of improved diplomatic and nautical capabilities. India's economy flourished with the LPG reform in 1991, strengthening its Indo-Pacific perspective and gaining control over vital commercial shipping lanes, indicating its pivotal position in regional geopolitics. Despite India's growing influence in the area, the country did not have a defined marine strategy until 2006. The strategic vision, "Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy," is part of the 2009 publication of India's Maritime Doctrine. This vision outlined India's strategy for protecting its national interests and maritime security. To further demonstrate its commitment to the security of the Indian Ocean area, India's defense minister, A.K. Antony, offered Indian Ocean island governments a position as a "net security provider" in 2011. India also developed the "Security and Growth for All in the area" (SAGAR) program to promote regional collaboration. Prime Minister Modi's 2015 trips to Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and the Seychelles carried on India's tradition of assertive IOR diplomacy.

Conclusion:

India has been actively involved in protecting the Indian Ocean region since the 1970s. It started out as a defensive stance in the 1960s, but by enhancing its military and political clout to influence the regional order in the 1980s, it demonstrated that it was a more active and potent participant. Despite China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region, India pledged to remain the main regional force in the IOR. The Indo-Pacific region is a crucial hotspot due to changes in the geopolitical environment and China's increasing influence in recent years. India has demonstrated its awareness of possible dangers by increasing its cooperation with friendly governments through regional organizations and naval drills. India has likewise managed to maintain a robust naval presence while balancing its land-based defense goals. With the goal of growing its fleet and maritime infrastructure, India dramatically raised its naval budget by 44% for the fiscal years 2022–2023 in response to these geopolitical issues. The



commissioning of the domestic aircraft carrier "Vikrant" significantly expanded India's naval capability, and ongoing sea trials demonstrate the country's increasing naval might. Being a significant player in the Indo-Pacific, India's function as a "net security provider" would be crucial in deciding how IOR develops in the future. India's policy of bolstering its naval capabilities and improving marine diplomacy is well-positioned to offset China's expanding presence in the area, especially given the growing significance of the QUAD and other alliances.

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