

India's Indian Ocean Region Strategy: The Transformation and The New Normal

BV Manikumar^{1*}, Prof. Peteti Premanandam², Dr. T. Naga Raju³

^{1*}Research Scholar (Part-Time), Dept. of Political Science and Public Administration, Andhra University

²Head, Dept. of Political Science and Public Administration, Andhra University

³Faculty, Dept. of Political Science and Public Administration, Andhra University

Abstract

India's maritime outlook in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has evolved from a largely Asian outlook to multi-dimensional strategy that integrates security, trade and global projection. The policy currently reflects an ideal mix of diplomacy, blue-economy growth, and modern naval capability. With the region assuming renewed global significance due to strategic competition, India's current approach demonstrates increasing assertiveness and vision. The study traces India's maritime evolution, the systematic transformation of its strategic posture, the influence of China and other regional players, and the interplay of technology and geopolitics shaping the future. As India attains de-facto veto-holding status as a global actor, its Indian Ocean policy embodies both national ambition and regional responsibility. This paper concludes by recommending greater institutional integration, innovation, and collective security frameworks for a stable Indo-Pacific.

Key Words: India's Indian Ocean Strategy; Maritime Geo politics; Quadrilateral Security Dialogue; Economic Diplomacy; Multilateralism; Great Power Relations; Indo Pacific Oceans Initiative; Regional Cooperation; India China Relations; Emerging Powers; Global South; Strategic Partnerships; International Relations of India.

Introduction

The Indian Ocean, has re-emerged as the nucleus of twenty first century geopolitics. Nearly 95 per cent of India's trade by volume and 70 per cent by value traverses its waters. The sea lines of communication (SLOCs) connecting the Persian Gulf, Africa, and Southeast Asia are crucial lifelines for energy and commerce. India's strategic geography centrally located within the ocean has endowed it with both opportunity and obligation. The growing presence of external powers such as China and the United States, alongside regional instability, piracy, and resource competition, has compelled India to realign its posture.

Need for the Study

This study arises from the imperative necessity to reassess India's approach in light of rapid geopolitical and technological developments. The Indian Ocean is now a contested space shaped by power rivalries and maritime trade. India's policy documents "The 2015 Indian Maritime Security Strategy" and "The 2022 Maritime Vision 2030" reflect the growing recognition of maritime imperatives in national security. However, the change in the region demands constant review. Examining India's evolving ocean strategy enables policymakers to understand how a once inward-looking continental power has transitioned into an emerging veto capable stakeholder in global governance, influencing the stability of sea routes, regional connectivity, and collective maritime security.

Objectives Scope and Limitations

The primary objective of the study is to analyze the historical and strategic trajectory of India's maritime outlook and its current transformation within the Indian Ocean system. The study explores India's policy evolution, institutional frameworks, security doctrines, partnerships, and technological adaptation. It also investigates external influences particularly Chinese maritime expansion and India's responses within regional and multilateral institutions.

The scope encompasses the post-independence period to date, integrating diplomatic, military, and economic dimensions. It also brings out the influence of very recent September 2025 Mediterranean episode and May 2025 Op Sindhoor.

Limitations include the dynamic nature of maritime geopolitics, restricted access to classified naval data, and the evolving definitions of the Indo Pacific order, which may render certain assessments provisional as time elapses.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and analytical research framework to examine the evolution and transformation of India's maritime strategy. A mixed method approach combining descriptive, analytical, and interpretive methods has been adopted. A trend analysis approach has been employed to identify the key drivers of change i.e technological innovation, regional competition, institutional reforms and global governance frameworks.

Primary sources include official documents such as the Indian Maritime Doctrine (2009), Maritime Security Strategy (2015), and Vision 2030, as well as reports by the Ministry of External Affairs, the Indian Navy, and think tanks like Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses (IDSA), Observer Research Foundation (ORF), and Carnegie India. Statements and policy speeches by Indian leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi's articulation of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and Indo Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), have been analyzed to understand the conceptual underpinnings of India's contemporary maritime outlook.

Secondary sources include academic books and recent international reports. Comparative frameworks are employed to interpolate India's maritime conduct with those of other key actors China, the United States, and regional middle powers allowing interpretation of India's strategic choices in the broader Indo Pacific context.

Historical Evolution of Indian Strategy

The Indus Valley ports of Lothal and Dholavira and the ancient trade networks of the Cholas and Mauryas, whose fleets connected East Africa, Arabia, and Southeast Asia are the original traces of Indian maritime history. During the colonial period, the British control over Indian ports and shipbuilding transformed India into a subordinate link within global maritime commerce. Post 1947, India's maritime orientation remained secondary to continental security concerns, particularly the conflicts with Pakistan and China.

The Indian Navy's early missions were defensive and limited to coastal protection. The turning point came in the 1970s when India's intervention in the Bangladesh Liberation War highlighted the significance of maritime control. The establishment of the Andaman and Nicobar Command, India's only tri service command, symbolized strategic realization of India's island geography. The 1983 Naval Expansion Plan, the 1988 Maldives intervention (Operation Cactus) and the nuclear tests of 1998 each contributed to transforming maritime thinking. By the early twenty first century, India adopted the vision of being a "security provider" in the region articulated by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and reinforced by successive governments.

Strategic Transformation in the 21st Century

The 21st century marks the decisive phase in India's maritime shift from a continental reactive defense posture to a forward looking, multidimensional strategy that integrates economic, diplomatic, and security imperatives. This transformation has been driven by four converging dynamics: economic globalization, regional power realignments, technological advancements and India's own evolution as an emerging power seeking to shape the international order rather than simply adapting to it.

At the dawn of the millennium, India's economic reforms had begun to fructify, and the country's trade, was expanding rapidly. This created a compelling need to secure the sea lanes of communication that connect India to markets in the Middle East, Africa and East Asia. India recognized that non-traditional maritime threats such as piracy, terrorism, and trafficking posed as much danger to its economy as conventional naval threats.

The 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, in which militants infiltrated India through the sea, were a turning point. They exposed gaps in coastal security and led to a reorganization of India's maritime surveillance. The establishment of the National Command, Control, Communication, and Intelligence (NC3I) network, the Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) at Gurgaon, and the creation of joint coastal police stations marked a new era of maritime vigilance. The event catalyzed the integration of multiple agencies Navy, Coast Guard, marine police, customs, and port authorities under a unified framework, reflecting India's pragmatic approach to homeland maritime defense.

The Indian Maritime Doctrine (2009) and the Indian Maritime Security Strategy (2015) articulated a more expansive vision of maritime power, emphasizing the Navy's role in deterrence, diplomacy, and disaster management. These documents framed the Indian Navy as an instrument of state policy capable of shaping outcomes across peacetime and crisis.

Naval modernization became a national priority. India expanded its indigenous shipbuilding capacity, focusing on self-reliance through the Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) initiative. The Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited (MDL), Goa Shipyard, and Cochin Shipyard Limited spearheaded the construction of advanced destroyers, frigates, and submarines. The commissioning of the indigenously built aircraft carrier INS Vikrant in 2022 marked a symbolic and strategic milestone, reaffirming India's ambition to operate as a true blue water navy capable of sustained operations in distant waters.

The Indian Navy's operational philosophy also evolved towards greater flexibility and global engagement. Deployment patterns became more dynamic, with mission based deployments ensuring continuous presence in critical maritime chokepoints such as the Gulf of Aden, Malacca Strait, and Mozambique Channel. India's Mission SAGAR (2020–2023) demonstrated its capacity for humanitarian diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, delivering medical aid, food supplies, and vaccines to countries across the warm waters from Maldives to Mauritius and Seychelles. This initiative reinforced India's soft power positioning it as a dependable partner in regional crisis management.

India deepened its strategic partnerships to enhance maritime interoperability and deterrence. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), revived in 2017, has been instrumental in strengthening India's role in the Indo Pacific. The QUAD's agenda extends beyond security to encompass critical technologies, supply chain resilience, and maritime domain awareness. India's cooperation with the United States, Japan, and Australia in the MALABAR naval exercises has

significantly enhanced operational coordination. Similarly, bilateral partnerships with France, the United Kingdom, Singapore, and Indonesia have expanded India's maritime reach.

In the western Indian Ocean, India has increased collaboration with Gulf states, East African nations, and the island countries of the Indian Ocean Commission. The establishment of logistics agreements with the United States Logistics Exchange Memorandum Of Agreement (LEMOA), France Reciprocal Logistics Support Agreement, Australia, allows Indian naval vessels access to ports and bases across strategic locations, ensuring operational reach from the Red Sea to the Pacific. The creation of an Indian Navy base at Duqm (Oman) and the radar network expansion through the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) illustrate India's focus on cooperative security.

The Navy's adoption of unmanned systems, artificial intelligence (AI) based surveillance, and satellite enabled communication has enhanced real time maritime domain awareness. The Indian Space Research Organization plays a vital role in supporting naval operations through satellite constellations that monitor vessel movements and coastal activities. Simultaneously, the integration of private industry and defense startups under the Innovation for Defence Excellence (iDEX) initiative has accelerated innovation in naval design, cyber security, and undersea warfare systems.

India's strategic thinking now embraces the idea of the Indo Pacific as a link between the Indian and Pacific Oceans through shared security and economic frameworks. The articulation of the Indo Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) in 2019 reaffirmed India's commitment to an open, inclusive, and rules based order. The IPOI's pillars: maritime ecology, maritime resources, disaster risk reduction, science and technology, and capacity building reflect India's preference for developmental and cooperative security. This approach distinguishes India's maritime strategy from those of great power rivals by aligning it with global governance principles.

India's strategic transformation has also been marked by institutional reforms. The creation of the post of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) in 2020 and the establishment of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) have enhanced tri service coordination, including maritime synergy. The ongoing development of a Maritime Theatre Command aims to integrate naval and air operations more effectively. Moreover, India's Ministry of External Affairs has strengthened its Indian Ocean Division, coordinating with the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Shipping to ensure coherence between foreign and maritime policies.

The Indian Ocean has emerged as the epicenter of global strategic competition, with China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) expanding its presence under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the "String of Pearls" network of ports and bases. The United States, France, Japan, and Australia have also intensified their engagement in the region, viewing India as a natural counterbalance and partner in maintaining maritime stability.

India's response has been both pragmatic and assertive. Rather than mirroring China's model of base building, India emphasizes partnerships, transparency, and capacity building assistance. Its initiatives such as the Neighborhood First policy and SAGAR have provided smaller states with alternatives to debt heavy Chinese infrastructure projects. Through joint hydrography missions, training programs, and patrols, India seeks to create a cooperative ecosystem that enhances trust and shared security.

Economically, India's maritime transformation is closely tied to its aspirations for global leadership. The Maritime India Vision 2030 and the Sagarmala project aim to modernize ports, enhance logistics connectivity, and attract investment in shipbuilding and offshore resources. Together, they underscore India's view of the ocean as a source of both prosperity and power.

India's strategic transformation in the 21st century reflects a synthesis of ambition and adaptability. It represents the convergence of defense modernization, economic expansion, and diplomatic activism. By embracing both hard and soft elements of maritime power, India has positioned itself as a credible stakeholder in shaping the emerging global stage.

Transformation of Late

Since 2014, India's maritime policy has undergone qualitative transformation. Under the Security and Growth for All in the Region, announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015, India seeks to build cooperative and inclusive regional architecture. The 2015 Maritime Security Strategy expanded India's operational range from the Malacca Strait to the eastern coast of Africa. Naval modernization has accelerated with the commissioning of indigenous aircraft carriers such as INS Vikrant, nuclear powered submarines, and enhanced surveillance capabilities through coastal radar networks. India's outreach to island nations Mauritius, Seychelles, Maldives, Sri Lanka and of late Chago Islands has intensified through defense assistance, joint patrols, and economic projects.

The QUAD partnership (India, Japan, Australia, and the United States) embodies India's willingness to engage in multilateral frameworks to uphold freedom of navigation and a rules-based order.

India's emergence as a veto capable actor strengthens its moral and strategic influence. India's growing diplomatic leverage, technological self-reliance, and economic size allow it to influence on regional matters, shaping outcomes through consensus building and coalition leadership.

Chinese Influence

China's growing footprint in the Indian Ocean has been the primary external driver of India's maritime recalibration. The "String of Pearls" network comprising Chinese financed ports in Gwadar, Hambantota, Djibouti, and potentially in Myanmar illustrates Beijing's pursuit of logistical and dual use facilities. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Maritime Silk Road have deepened China's economic penetration into the IOR. From India's perspective, the increasing presence of Chinese naval vessels, submarines, and research ships poses strategic challenges. In response, India has enhanced maritime domain awareness (MDA) through the Information Fusion Centre Indian Ocean Region at Gurugram, strengthened trilateral partnerships with France and Australia, and deepened coordination with the United States under the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement. While India continues to engage China diplomatically, its Indian Ocean policy now emphasizes deterrence, resilience, and partnership diversification to prevent strategic encirclement.

Other Key Players in the Ocean

Beyond China, multiple actors influence the Indian Ocean order. The United States maintains a major base at Diego Garcia and leads freedom of navigation operations ensuring open SLOCs. France, through its territories in Réunion and Mayotte, is a resident power emphasizing multilateral governance. Japan's Free and Open Indo Pacific Vision complements India's SAGAR objectives, while Australia, Indonesia, and the Gulf states play increasingly active roles in maritime connectivity and resource management. Regional organizations the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) serve as cooperative platforms where India's leadership is prominent. African littoral states such as Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique are gaining importance as India extends its developmental diplomacy and blue economy initiatives westward.

Technology and Modern Trends

Technological transformation has become central to India's ocean strategy. The Indian Navy's shift toward indigenization under the Aatmanirbhar Bharat framework emphasizes domestic shipbuilding, missile systems, and unmanned vehicles. The integration of artificial intelligence in maritime surveillance, satellite-based tracking, and cyber defense systems has improved situational awareness. Blue economy projects, encompassing sustainable fisheries, seabed mining, and offshore energy exploration, are integral to India's Maritime Vision 2030. Collaborations in green shipping and ocean data management indicate India's commitment to sustainability. Simultaneously, the digitization of ports, coastal community empowerment, and marine environmental protection are redefining India's maritime development agenda. The Indian Ocean's strategic significance as a hub for undersea data cables adds a cyber-dimension to India's security calculus, necessitating resilient technological infrastructure.

Prominent Shift in Op Sindhoor

With Operation Sindhoor, India's maritime strategy has undergone a decisive shift to a proactive, deterrence oriented, and power projection approach. The swift and coordinated naval deployment during the operation demonstrated India's ability to translate maritime capability into strategic coercion, signaling that the Indian Navy is now a key instrument of national deterrence, not just coastal defense. This transformation integrates India's naval readiness with its foreign policy goals under the doctrines of SAGAR, reinforcing its role as a "net security provider" in the region. The operation also underscored India's intent to dominate the Arabian Sea, deter hostile moves from Pakistan and China, and secure its sea lines of communication. As a result, maritime power has become a central pillar of India's strategic calculus linking defense, diplomacy, and industrial self-reliance into a coherent vision of blue water capability and Indo Pacific influence. India's maritime strategy has taken a clear pivot into the Eastern Mediterranean in direct response to growing friction with Turkey Ankara's decision to deploy a warship to Karachi during Operation Sindhoor and provide overt support to Pakistan. As part of this strategic reorientation, the Indian Navy sent its stealth frigate INS Trikand on a deployment culminating in port calls in Cyprus and participation alongside the Hellenic Navy in their first bilateral exercise (13–18 Sept 2025) in the Mediterranean Sea. This shift reflects a broader recalibration: India is moving from reactive deployments within the Indian Ocean Region to proactive, alliance based forward presence in distant waterways, aimed at not just protecting sea lines but also contesting regional power projection by adversaries like Turkey.

Challenges

India faces several challenges. The Indian Navy's share in the defence budget remains below expectations, affecting long term capability building. China's financial and infrastructural dominance through the BRI outpaces India's development outreach in many smaller littoral states. The non traditional threats of sea piracy, illegal fishing, climate change, and maritime terrorism continue to test regional cooperation. Institutional overlap among IORA, IONS, and other mechanisms leads to dilution of focus. India must navigate the delicate balance between strategic autonomy and alliance politics; over alignment with any one bloc could compromise its independent voice. Lastly, domestic shipbuilding industries require deeper private sector participation and innovation to compete globally.

Way Forward

The way forward lies in consolidating India's dual identity as both a resident power and a responsible global stakeholder. The Indian Ocean must be envisioned as a space of shared prosperity rather than rivalry. By 2030, India aims to operate as a "preferred security partner" and principal guardian of regional stability. Integration of coastal infrastructure under the Sagarmala Project, enhancement of the Blue Economy policy, and alignment with climate resilient maritime initiatives will create a comprehensive approach. India's leadership of G20 2023 and its growing voice in the United Nations system symbolize its maturing diplomatic confidence. Collaboration with likeminded powers, sustained innovation, and adherence to international law will ensure that India's Indian Ocean strategy becomes a model of inclusive growth, collective security, and sustainable development.

Recommendations

To consolidate its leadership, India should strengthen the coherence between national maritime strategies and foreign policy goals. A dedicated National Maritime Commission could coordinate inter-ministerial functions across defence, shipping, fisheries, and external affairs. Expanding naval presence through forward operating bases in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Mauritius, and Oman would enhance India's reach. Investment in autonomous maritime systems, green propulsion technologies, and ocean research is critical. India must also deepen cooperation with Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and African coastal states through blue economy partnerships, scholarships, and digital connectivity. At the multilateral level, sustained advocacy for UNSC reform and expansion of India's role in global maritime governance will reinforce its veto capable authority. Enhancing the credibility of the QUAD and promoting inclusive frameworks like IORA ensure that India's strategy remains cooperative rather than confrontational. Educational and cultural diplomacy reviving the shared maritime heritage of the Indian Ocean civilizations can complement hard power initiatives with enduring soft power.

Conclusion

India's Indian Ocean strategy embodies an evolutionary synthesis of history, geography, and aspiration. From ancient maritime traditions to contemporary blue economy visions, India has reclaimed its maritime identity as both protector and partner in a dynamic region. The transformation from a reactive to a proactive power, underpinned by indigenous capability and multilateral engagement, reflects India's ascent in global affairs. While challenges persist particularly the Chinese factor, resource constraints and institutional overlaps India's coherent vision through SAGAR and Maritime Vision 2030 provides strategic direction. As global power centers shift toward the Indo Pacific, India's stewardship of the Indian Ocean will increasingly define regional stability. Its emerging veto power status, moral legitimacy, and strategic centrality collectively signify a new phase of maritime leadership rooted in cooperation, sustainability and resilience.

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