



Securing the Indian Ocean: An analysis of India's strategic vision for maritime security

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean has emerged as a critical centre of global strategic and economic activity due to its importance for international trade, energy transportation, and geopolitical competition. As developments in the region increasingly influence global security dynamics, India has intensified its maritime focus to safeguard national interests, secure vital sea lines of communication, and promote regional stability. This study critically analyses India's maritime security strategy in the Indian Ocean, with particular attention to naval modernization, maritime domain awareness, strategic partnerships, and diplomatic engagement. The research evaluates India's participation in regional and multilateral security frameworks, its defence cooperation with neighbouring states and major powers, and its responses to both traditional and non-traditional maritime threats. Particular emphasis is placed on issues such as piracy, maritime terrorism, illegal trafficking, smuggling, and the growing strategic presence of extra-regional actors in the Indian Ocean. The study also examines India's efforts to strengthen cooperative security arrangements through initiatives aimed at enhancing regional maritime governance and collective security.

The findings suggest that India's maritime strategy is increasingly characterized by the integration of military capabilities, diplomatic initiatives, and multilateral cooperation. This comprehensive approach has improved India's ability to address evolving maritime challenges while enhancing its role as a regional security provider. The study concludes that the effectiveness of India's maritime policy depends not only on naval strength but also on sustained regional collaboration, strategic partnerships, and the ability to adapt to changing geopolitical and security conditions in the Indian Ocean region.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, maritime security, India, naval strategy, regional stability.

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the Indian Ocean has acquired growing strategic importance within the global political and economic landscape. Its location at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East makes it a vital channel for maritime trade and communication. The ocean supports a dense network of shipping routes that carry a substantial portion of the world's commercial goods and energy resources. The transportation of oil and liquefied natural gas through these sea routes is particularly important for many economies that depend heavily on imported energy. As a result, developments in the Indian Ocean have far-reaching implications for international trade, energy security, and regional as well as global stability. ^[1] Beyond its economic importance, the Indian Ocean serves as a key platform for power projection, regional influence, and strategic operations. Over the past few decades, the region has witnessed growing competition among regional powers such as India and China, alongside the increasing engagement of extra-regional actors, including the United States, Japan, and European nations, all of whom seek to secure their strategic and economic interests in this pivotal maritime domain. ^[2] For India, the Indian Ocean is more than an economic corridor; it is a fundamental component of national security, strategic autonomy, and foreign policy. With an extensive coastline stretching over 7,500 kilometres, several critical maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca and the Gulf of Oman, and key strategic ports under its influence, India views the region as essential for safeguarding its maritime borders, ensuring the security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs), and maintaining

freedom of navigation. India faces a spectrum of maritime security challenges, including traditional threats such as territorial disputes, rising naval competition, and power projection by rival states, as well as non-traditional challenges such as piracy, terrorism, illegal trafficking, human smuggling, and the impact of natural disasters on maritime infrastructure. ^[3] These multidimensional threats require a holistic, integrated approach to maritime security that combines operational readiness, diplomatic engagement, and technological innovation. In response to these challenges, India has developed a comprehensive maritime strategy that emphasises naval modernisation, advanced maritime domain awareness, intelligence sharing, and proactive multilateral engagement. Strategic partnerships with regional actors, such as the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius, as well as with extra-regional powers such as the United States, France, and Japan, are integral to this strategy. India's approach to maritime security reflects its ambition to act as a "net security provider" in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), projecting influence while simultaneously safeguarding its national interests. This dual role underscores India's objective of shaping the regional maritime order, deterring conflict, addressing emerging threats, and fostering conditions conducive to sustainable economic growth and regional stability. ^[4] This research paper critically examines India's strategic vision for maritime security in the Indian Ocean by analysing its naval policies, operational practices, multilateral engagements, and strategic partnerships. The study explores how India navigates the complex geopolitical dynamics of the region, manages the growing presence of extra-regional powers,

and addresses the evolving spectrum of traditional and non-traditional maritime security threats. Understanding India's maritime strategy is essential for comprehending the broader security architecture of the Indian Ocean and its implications for regional stability, trade security, and international maritime governance.

Geostrategic Importance of the Indian Ocean Region

The Indian Ocean holds significant geostrategic importance due to its location, economic role, and security implications. Spanning over 70 million square kilometres, it connects the economies of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East while hosting some of the world's busiest maritime trade routes. Its strategic relevance is reinforced by key maritime chokepoints, including the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, the Bab el-Mandeb, and the Sunda and Lombok Straits, which are essential for maintaining uninterrupted sea lines of communication (SLOCs). The region also encompasses strategically important islands and archipelagos, such as the Maldives, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and the Chagos Archipelago, which serve as critical points for maritime surveillance and naval operations.^[5] Economically, the Indian Ocean facilitates the movement of a large share of global energy supplies, including crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG), as well as the transport of bulk commodities and containerized goods, both crucial to global trade. Its resources, including fisheries and untapped offshore minerals, further enhance its economic value. At the same time, the region faces multiple security challenges, such as piracy, maritime terrorism, illicit trafficking, territorial disputes, and increasing naval competition among regional and extra-regional powers. The strategic pursuits of India and China, alongside the presence of extra-regional actors such as the United States, Japan, and European nations, have intensified militarisation and turned the Indian Ocean into a contested space for influence and power projection.^[6] For India, the ocean is not only an economic lifeline but also a central element of national security and foreign policy. By protecting SLOCs, strengthening naval capabilities, and fostering multilateral cooperation, India aims to safeguard its maritime interests, maintain freedom of navigation, and function as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The combination of geographic advantages, economic dependency, security challenges, and competing strategic interests underscores the Indian Ocean's centrality in regional and global calculations, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive maritime strategy, operational preparedness, and proactive diplomacy.^[7]

India's Maritime Interests and Strategic Objectives

India's maritime interests and strategic objectives are shaped by its geographic centrality in the Indian Ocean, its reliance on maritime trade and energy flows, and the evolving regional security environment. These factors underpin India's perception of the Indian Ocean as an interconnected economic and strategic space rather than a collection of isolated maritime zones. Given that a significant proportion of India's trade and energy imports transit through critical sea lines of communication, protecting these routes is a core maritime priority. At the same time, India emphasises the defence of its maritime frontiers, including its extensive coastline and strategically important island territories, while consistently supporting freedom of navigation in accordance with international

maritime law.^[8] This strategic outlook reflects India's dual role of safeguarding national security and contributing to regional stability through initiatives such as maritime domain awareness, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, counter-piracy operations, and cooperative engagement with littoral states. Within this framework, India seeks to function as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region by enhancing collective security and supplying maritime public goods without pursuing dominance. Taken together, this integrated approach highlights India's aim to foster a stable, open, and inclusive Indian Ocean order that serves both its national interests and broader regional well-being.

India's Maritime Strategy and Operational Measures

India's maritime strategy is implemented through a broad range of initiatives designed to strengthen naval effectiveness, improve operational awareness, and support collaborative security across the Indian Ocean Region. A key component of this strategy is ongoing naval modernisation, which includes expanding the surface fleet, inducting more capable submarines and aircraft carriers, and adopting advanced technologies to enhance operational flexibility, deterrence, and force projection. Parallel to capability development, India places significant emphasis on maritime domain awareness by investing in layered surveillance systems, intelligence-sharing arrangements, coastal monitoring infrastructure, and early warning mechanisms that allow for the timely identification of both traditional and emerging threats.^[9] In addition to its conventional defence responsibilities, the Indian Navy is increasingly engaged in non-traditional security roles, including counter-piracy missions, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts, and maritime emergency responses, thereby contributing to regional stability. Furthermore, India strengthens its maritime posture through strategic partnerships and multilateral cooperation under frameworks such as the QUAD, BIMSTEC, and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, which facilitate interoperability, capacity building, and coordinated security efforts.^[10] Collectively, these operational measures underscore India's commitment to fostering a stable, inclusive, and rules-based maritime environment in the Indian Ocean.

Challenges to India's Maritime Security

A combination of immediate operational challenges and broader strategic constraints shapes India's maritime security. Conventional concerns stem from the heightened presence of foreign naval forces in the Indian Ocean, rivalry over strategic influence along major sea routes, and unresolved maritime boundary issues, all of which necessitate sustained vigilance and operational preparedness. Alongside these, non-traditional threats present persistent difficulties, including piracy in major shipping corridors, maritime terrorism, illegal and unregulated fishing, human trafficking, and the trafficking of weapons and narcotics.^[11] These activities place significant demands on naval and coast guard forces and require effective coordination among multiple security agencies. Environmental and climate-related factors, such as increasingly severe cyclones, coastal inundation, and disruptions to port and maritime infrastructure, further strain India's maritime security apparatus by expanding the scope of disaster response and humanitarian missions. In addition,

the expanding footprint of extra-regional powers through naval deployments and logistical facilities has intensified strategic competition in India's maritime neighbourhood.^[12] Addressing these challenges requires India to strike a careful balance between reinforcing its national maritime capabilities and sustaining cooperative security arrangements with regional partners, as long-term stability in the Indian Ocean is closely linked to collaboration, shared awareness, and confidence.

India's Maritime Visions and Strategic Frameworks

India's approach to maritime security and governance in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is shaped by an evolving set of strategic visions and policy frameworks that reflect the country's expanding maritime ambitions and growing responsibilities. Together, these frameworks illustrate a clear shift from a narrowly region-focused security posture to a comprehensive, long-term strategy that integrates national security, economic development, environmental sustainability, and global maritime engagement. This evolution underscores India's increasing recognition of the maritime domain as a critical component of national power, regional stability, and international influence. At the foundation of India's contemporary maritime strategy lies the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine, articulated in 2015. SAGAR provides the normative basis for India's maritime engagement by emphasising collective security, freedom of navigation, respect for international maritime law, and regional cooperation. Through this framework, India positions itself as a stabilising actor in the IOR, committed not only to safeguarding its own sea lines of communication (SLOCs) but also to supporting the maritime security and capacity-building efforts of smaller littoral states. In this sense, SAGAR reflects India's preference for cooperative security arrangements over unilateral dominance. The principles articulated under SAGAR are operationalized through the Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS) 2015, which offers a detailed doctrinal and operational blueprint for India's naval posture.^[13] The IMSS outlines India's maritime threat perceptions and force deployment strategies, addressing both conventional challenges, such as naval competition and territorial disputes—and non-traditional threats, including piracy, maritime terrorism, and illicit trafficking. By prioritising maritime domain awareness, forward naval presence, and expeditionary capabilities, the IMSS enhances India's ability to protect its maritime interests while contributing to regional security and stability. India's maritime outlook expanded further with the launch of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) in 2019, marking a strategic shift toward a broader Indo-Pacific framework. IPOI reflects India's recognition of the interconnected nature of maritime security across regions and promotes cooperative approaches to maritime safety, disaster risk reduction, sustainable resource management, and capacity building.^[14] The initiative reinforces India's commitment to a rules-based maritime order and inclusive regional governance, extending its strategic engagement beyond the immediate geographical boundaries of the Indian Ocean. Building upon these initiatives, the MAHASAGAR Vision (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth across Regions) represents a conceptual expansion of India's maritime strategy. MAHASAGAR broadens the scope of maritime cooperation by linking security objectives

with inclusive economic growth and collaborative governance across interconnected maritime spaces.^[15] This vision aligns India's strategic priorities with broader regional and global stability, reinforcing its role as a provider of public security goods in the maritime domain. India's long-term maritime aspirations are comprehensively articulated in the Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision 2047 (MAKV 2047), which serves as a strategic roadmap for maritime development and security by the centenary of India's independence. MAKV 2047 integrates defence preparedness with economic growth, technological innovation, environmental sustainability, and institutional reform. By linking maritime security with port-led development, resilient infrastructure, and sustainable resource utilisation, the vision seeks to position India as a leading maritime power while ensuring secure trade routes and long-term maritime resilience.^[16] These strategic visions are reinforced by complementary policy initiatives such as the Act East Policy, Neighbourhood First Policy, Sagarmala Programme, and the Blue Economy framework, which collectively enhance maritime connectivity, regional cooperation, and economic integration. Operational mechanisms, such as the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), further strengthen maritime domain awareness and facilitate information sharing, thereby improving India's capacity to respond to emerging maritime security challenges.^[17] Taken together, India's maritime visions and strategic frameworks constitute a coherent and adaptive maritime strategy that balances national security imperatives with regional stability and global engagement. Through the integration of defence capabilities, diplomatic outreach, economic initiatives, and multilateral cooperation, India positions itself as a net security provider and an increasingly influential architect of the evolving maritime order in the Indian Ocean Region and beyond.

Implications for Regional Security and Global Governance

India's maritime strategy has significant implications for both regional security in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the broader framework of global maritime governance. By prioritising the protection of sea lines of communication and maintaining a credible naval presence, India contributes to stability in the IOR by deterring disruptions that could threaten regional trade and energy flows. This strategic posture reinforces trade security and supports freedom of navigation, particularly in critical maritime corridors, thereby benefiting not only India but also the wider international community that depends on the Indian Ocean for global commerce. At the regional level, India's active participation in multilateral forums and cooperative mechanisms strengthens collective security arrangements and promotes adherence to a rules-based maritime order.^[18] Through capacity-building initiatives, information sharing, and coordinated operations, India contributes to the development of an inclusive regional security architecture that accommodates both littoral states and major stakeholders. However, India's expanding role as a maritime security provider also presents challenges, including resource constraints, managing perceptions among smaller regional states, and navigating strategic competition involving extra-regional powers. At the same time, these dynamics offer opportunities for India to enhance its

diplomatic influence, shape regional norms, and play a more prominent role in global maritime governance by aligning national capabilities with cooperative security objectives. ^[19]

Conclusion

India's maritime strategy demonstrates an integrated strategic outlook that places the Indian Ocean at the centre of its security, economic, and regional engagement priorities. By advancing naval capability development, strengthening maritime awareness, and expanding its involvement in both conventional and non-conventional security missions, India has worked to protect critical sea routes, safeguard its maritime interests, and support the maintenance of an orderly and law-based maritime environment. The study shows that this approach combines the enhancement of national maritime power with an emphasis on cooperative security arrangements, reflecting India's intent to play a constructive security role within the Indian Ocean Region. The findings of this research suggest that India's maritime initiatives have contributed to greater stability in the region by reinforcing trade security, supporting navigational freedoms, and enabling collective responses to shared challenges such as piracy, humanitarian crises, and maritime crime. However, the analysis also identifies enduring challenges, including resource constraints, intensifying strategic rivalries, and the expanding involvement of extra-regional actors, all of which add complexity to India's maritime security landscape. These factors necessitate on-going strategic adjustment while maintaining strategic autonomy and confidence among regional partners. From a forward-looking perspective, the research points to the need for continued investment in naval and coast guard capabilities, closer engagement with Indian Ocean littoral states and stronger institutional frameworks for coordination and information exchange. Increased attention to capacity building, environmental and climate-related security concerns, and inclusive multilateral cooperation can further strengthen India's position as a reliable maritime security contributor. By aligning long-term strategic objectives with pragmatic policy initiatives, India is well placed to shape the future security and governance of the Indian Ocean in ways that support both national interests and regional stability.

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