



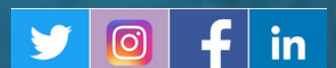
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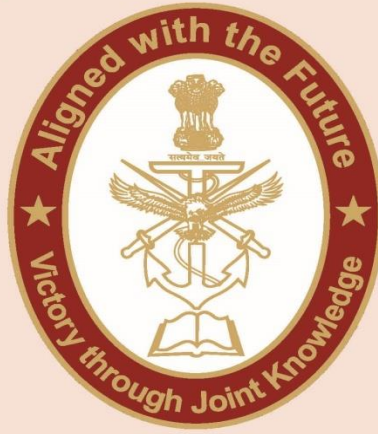
IMAGINING INDIA IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

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“Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia. This ocean will be the key to the seven seas in the 21st Century. The destiny of the world will be decided on its waters.”

These were the words rightly said by the US Navy Admiral Alfred T Mahan in 1897. The creator of the Seapower theory always imagined seas to be a common good, or as he called it, “great commons.” He believed the seas to be the crucial facilitator of the free flow of goods through effective supply chains with the strong presence of military forces (Katoch 2020).

Historically, the oceans have always been a facilitator for trade, the bonhomie between nations and an opportunity to showcase the military might and prowess of individual nations. A strong navy was considered essential for any kingdom that wished to spread its wings and create an influence beyond its coast. The expected effect was not just in terms of trade and diplomatic ties but through extensive travels and interactions between kingdoms created a melting pot of cultures, religions, people, heritage and civilisations.

The Indian Ocean was no different. The Indian Ocean is not only a pivotal hub for its trade routes and the resources it offers but also for its geo-strategic positioning on the world map stretching from the Mozambique channel in the west to Malacca Strait in the east to creating engagements with West Asia, as well as providing the fastest trading route from China to Europe.

Indian Ocean Region

The high seas of the Indian Ocean, beyond the territorial waters of many of the rising economies, are heavily contested for that exact reason. It is surrounded by countries with huge populations, competing developing economies and energy-rich countries. The amalgamation of the countries and their interactions between Africa in the West, Asia in the North and Australia in the East, the Indian ocean creates the theatre of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as we know it today.

The Indian Ocean Region comprises 28 countries, out of which 21 countries are part of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Seven of the 28 countries across the three continents are not a part of the IORA. These are Brunei, Cambodia, the Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan, Timor-Leste and Vietnam.

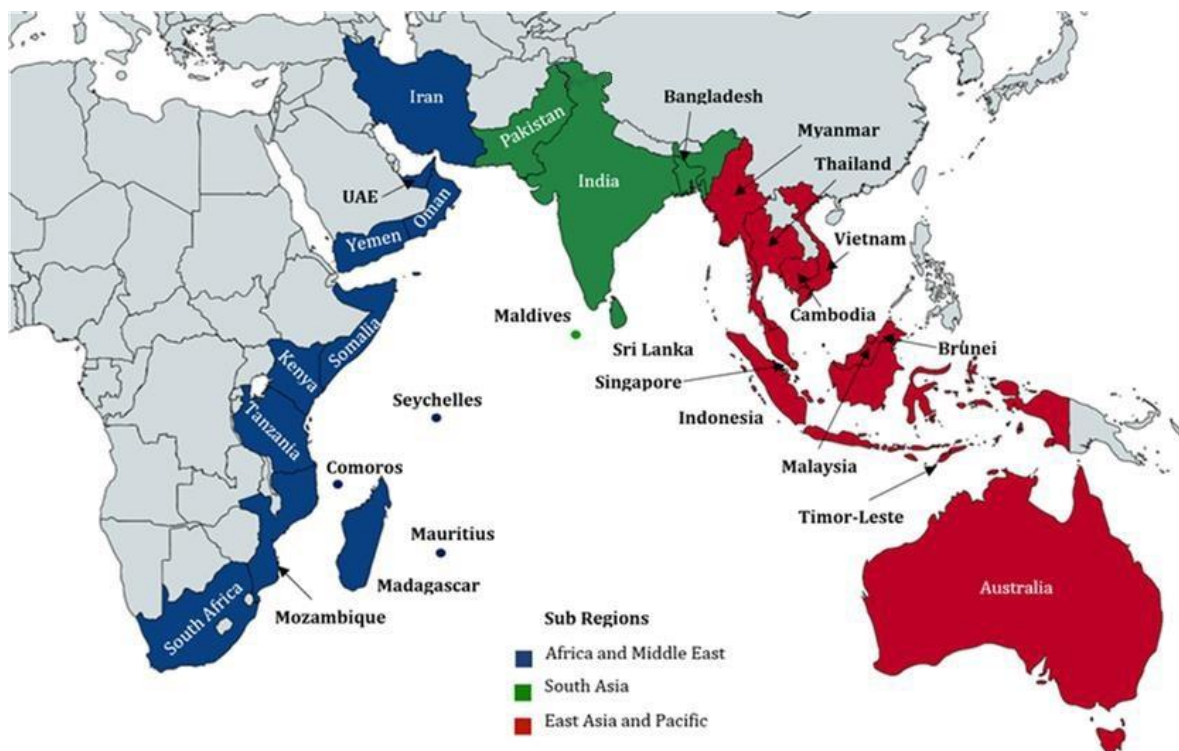


Figure 1 India and the Indian Ocean Region

These countries today account for 17.5% of the world's landmass and 35% of the world's total population (2.6 billion), according to 2017 figures (Kannangara, Collins, and Waidyatilake 2018).

In terms of crucial trade routes, around 80% of the global oil trade through sea traverses through the crucial chokepoints in the Indian Ocean. This accounts for almost 1/5th of global energy trade (Jeffery 2019).

The Indian Ocean is surrounded by countries with huge oil reserves and holds a vast untapped energy resource within the ocean, estimated between four to 4.5 billion barrels of oil, according to geological and seismic surveys (Ngugi, 2022). The littoral states of IOR possess three quarters of global oil reserves, iron and tin, while 65 per cent of these reserves are controlled by only ten of these littoral states. (Karasik, 2022) The Indian Ocean has heavy seaborne trade traffic and three vital chokepoints that can hinder growth and economic activities worldwide. These bottleneck trade routes are – the Malacca strait (connecting Southeast Asia and Pacific to the IOR), the Strait of Hormuz (connecting Persian Gulf to IOR), and the Bab-el-Mandeb strait (connecting Red Sea to IOR). These chokepoints and strategic placement of the Indian Ocean leads to a greater power struggle to achieve a certain amount of hegemonic control over this theatre.

Western presence in the IOR

Indian Ocean Region is surrounded by the world's fastest-growing economies and a few of the largest navies in the world. IOR not only has a powerful presence of the littoral states but also of the Western navies. Cold War between the United States (US) and the Soviet Union proved to turn Indian Ocean Region into a primary theatre of military confrontation and power rivalry. However, in the post cold war world order, IOR was primarily utilised by western powers like the US and the NATO grouping for military operations, like the ones conducted in Afghanistan, Libya and Iraq. The US has primarily been present in the region through its military base in Diego Garcia, a military facility of the UK but leased to the US (Twyman-Ghoshal 2022).

Another prominent player in the Indian Ocean is France. The French Armed Forces in the Southern Indian Ocean Zone (FAZSOI) has a permanent military presence in La Réunion and Mayotte and conducts diplomatic engagements and military exercises

there. Owing to their significant Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), these two countries become direct stakeholders in the IOR and would be considered the Indian Ocean neighbouring countries (étrangères 2020).

India in the IOR

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has been of immense strategic significance for India in terms of regional cooperation, diplomatic engagement and military theatre. Owing to the vast coastline of 7,516.6 km, in contrast to the 5422.6 km of the mainland, India's security concerns and threat perception from the coast are undeniable. Throughout its history, India has been the looming protective and commanding figure in the Indian Ocean Region. However, in more recent history, India took a backseat in terms of Indian Ocean dominance due to a lack of competition and confrontation. It became a facilitator of trade, given its strategic positioning in terms of seafaring trade and economic engagement.

Economic defence capability: According to a report by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), India has the third highest military spending in the world. It spent 2.7 per cent of the total GDP and 3.6 per cent of the global spending (Béraud-Sudreau et al. 2022). The first place was held by the United States and the second by China (SIPRI 2022). India spent 76.6 billion USD in 2021, which was up by 0.9 percent from 2020 and 33 per cent from 2012.

There has been a heavy push for the ***Atmanirbhar Bharat*** (self-reliant India) mission as well, with 68% of the total defence budget earmarked for indigenously produced ammunition and arms. Indian budget for defence for 2022-23 had a prominent focus on domestic military capacities. It furthered the mission of Atmanirbhar Bharat, with 17.57 per cent of the defence budget allocated to Research and Development (Rawat, 2022). In the financial year 2021-22, 16.31 per cent of the total defence budget was allocated to the Indian Navy (revenue and capital), standing at 56 thousand crore INR. Whereas in the financial year 2022-23, this share was increased to 18.94 per cent, which stood at 73 thousand crore INR, for the Indian Navy. Therefore, there has been a jump of 2.63% in the allocation of funds for the Indian Navy.

Indian Naval Capability: India presently has 150 ships and submarines and has the vision to become a 170-ship navy by 2027, according to the Navy's Maritime Capability Perspective Plan (MCP) (MoD, 2023). Marine power is projected with the Carrier Battle Groups (CBG), for which the Aircraft carrier is the central entity (Thakker, 2018). India already has two commissioned carriers, the INS Vikramaditya and the second INS Vikrant, which is our indigenously developed aircraft carrier. Now India is looking for its third aircraft carrier INS Vishal for its Blue Water Navy. India has also chalked out a plan to procure approximately 57 carrier-based fighter jets in addition to modernising its submarine fleet with a new Arihant class of nuclear-powered attack vessels. (Nanda, 2022).

India's progress on building its unmanned capability with L&T's Adanya Autonomous Unmanned Vehicle (AUV), which is five meters long and has an endurance of eight hours and can be launched from the torpedo tube of a submarine, would add to the capability of Indian Navy for IOR security along with DRDO's Underwater Launched Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (ULUAV) which will predominately be for ISR operations, Real-Time Tracking, Beach reconnaissance, Special Operations and enhance marine dominance (Siddiqui, 2022).

Initiatives:

SAGAR - India's vision and geographical framework for Maritime cooperation is enshrined in the document Security and Growth of All in the Region (SAGAR) released by Hon'ble Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The initiative includes countries like Mauritius, Maldives, Madagascar, Comoros and Seychelles, which would strengthen India's stand as a Net security provider.

The formulation of the Blue Economy Policy by the Ministry of Earth Sciences for the sustenance and maintenance of ocean and coastal resources will strengthen India's structured capability in the IOR (Gujjar, 2021).

Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) – It is a voluntary initiative for a series of biennial meetings and interactions between littoral states of IOR. It is a forum to increase maritime cooperation and security and maintain friendly relations. The initiative includes a flow of information between the navies and formulating solutions for the common challenges in the IOR.

Information Fusion Centre (IFC-IOR) – Indian Ocean faces a plethora of challenges like piracy, trafficking, unregulated fishing, poaching, maritime terrorism etc. To address these challenges, the Government of India established IFC-IOR in 2018 to ensure safety and security in the maritime domain of the IOR by creating a maritime security-related information-sharing hub through the cooperation of the littoral states.

India as a ‘Preferred Security Partner’ – Alternate terminology

India has never undermined the importance of the Indian Ocean Region. One of the key features of India’s engagement in the region has been that of a non-traditional security provider. This feature of India is distinct from all other ‘net security providers’ in other regions. Net security provider is often seen from the lens of military and defence perspective. Rather, India should put itself across as the ‘Preferred Security Partner’. India’s former President Ram Nath Kovind, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, in February 2022, used the term ‘Preferred Security Partner’ for the Indian Navy after the Fleet Review and inspecting over 60 ships and submarines. He further elaborated, “A large part of global trade flows through the Indian Ocean region. A significant portion of our trade and energy needs is met through the oceans. The safety of the seas and the maritime commons, therefore, remains a critical requirement. The Indian Navy’s constant vigil and prompt response to incidents and untiring efforts have been highly successful in this regard. Prompt and effective deployment of the Indian Navy in the times of crisis has underscored India’s vision of being the preferred security partner and first responder in the Indian Ocean region” (Express 2022).

Net Security Provider

India has an undeniable commanding naval presence in the IOR and might be perfectly suited for the ‘Net Security Provider’ title. India’s priorities in the region also coincide with the larger interests of the other players in the ocean.

Despite the alternate terminologies presented, ‘net security provider’ is still the preferred terminology of the government and the military forces. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, during a multi-agency Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) exercise ‘Samanvay 2022’ in Agra, said, “India has emerged as a regional

power and net security provider in the Indo-Pacific with its capacity to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to its own citizens as well as regional partners.” (Tribune, 2022)

India has five shared interests relating to the IOR:

- (i) Preserving freedom of navigation for commercial shipping,
- (ii) Sustainably and equitably harnessing the Indian Ocean’s natural resources,
- (iii) Establishing protocols for enhancing disaster prevention and relief as well as search and rescue operations,
- (iv) Countering piracy, terrorism, smuggling, and illegal weapons proliferation, and
- (v) Managing international naval competition. (Jaishankar 2016)

Analysis

Historically, in pursuit of its own interests, India has ensured that it never interferes with the sovereignty of any state. However, that was possible due to the largely peaceful seas apart from the non-traditional threats like piracy, terrorism, drug trafficking etc, in the IOR. In the current state of affairs of the world, there are significant challenges that may lead to a higher possibility of confrontation and strategic control aspirations of other players in IOR. According to the Indian Maritime Security Strategy, over 90 per cent of India’s international trade by volume and over 70% by value is carried via the Indian Ocean (Navy 2015). Given India’s approximately 7500 km long coastline and over two million square kilometres of Exclusive Economic Zone, the need for securitisation of IOR is extremely high. Piracy, human trafficking, smuggling and illegal fishing-related issues present a significant challenge to India. One of India’s worst terrorist attacks, the Mumbai attacks of 2008, was realised due to the sea route chartered by the terrorists to enter the country. Therefore, it is pertinent that India actively prepares itself to take up the role of net security provider in the region.

Over the past few decades, significant confrontations and naval skirmishes have emerged in the Indo-Pacific region, owing to the growing aspirations of the Chinese Navy. The current Chief of Army Staff, General Manoj Pande, said that China wants to replace the United States as a global net security provider (PTI, 2023).

The Chinese Navy is estimated to consist of 348 ships and submarines by the US Congressional Research Service in 2021 (CSIS 2018). New indigenously developed

ships are being commissioned at a startling rate by the Chinese. It is estimated that between 2017 and 2019, China produced more naval vessels than Australia, Japan, the United Kingdom, France and India combined (ET 2021). The track record of China in the South China Sea is an alarm for caution for the littoral states of IOR. The strategic placement and careful investment in the ports of Gwadar, Hambantota and Djibouti to overcome the existential threat of the chokepoints in the IOR is the natural progression of action for China. China's *String of Pearls* and *Maritime Silk Route* are two prominent strategies that substantiate the claims of Chinese control aspirations in the IOR. With the US's shifting focus and diversification of its forces to the larger Indo-Pacific and various other fronts, the power vacuum in IOR is undeniably open for grabs for whoever shows the initiative and the naval might to take hold of the region. It is evident that India must step up to the challenge of making its space in the Indian Ocean. However, there are significant hurdles in terms of resources, policy and operational lacunas that need to be streamlined to achieve the larger objective.

Financial backing and government budget: India is a country with a substantial population and limited resources. In such circumstances, despite being a huge market and a thriving economy, India struggles to have deep pockets like other contenders in the IOR. Due to monetary constraints and weak financial backing, the indigenous development and procurement of naval capabilities affect the supply and demand realities to make India the net security provider of the IOR in the truest sense.

Strategy formulation: Despite having one of the biggest defence forces in the world and holding a strategically important position in the IOR, India does not have a National Defence Policy. This not only makes India's objectives and initiatives vague to friends and foes alike but also projects a myopic view of the Indian defence forces. The use of the net security provider without a coherent IOR strategy will only create distrust and lack of action, despite the intent, amongst the littoral states, forcing their tilt towards the other contenders in the region with clearer objectives. Creating a coherent strategy will not only ensure goodwill and clarity but also help streamline the civil-military relationship in terms of policy objectives and strategy formulation in the IOR.

Strategic autonomy: Post-independence, India has been guided by strategic autonomy at the core of its foreign policy. Strategic autonomy is defined as the ability of a state to pursue its national interests and adopt its preferred foreign policy without

depending heavily on other foreign states. In an interconnected world, India has managed to adhere to this value. However, a premature assumption of the responsibility of being the net security provider of the IOR will inevitably affect the larger strategic autonomy objectives of India. Due to strained resources and limited naval capability, India will have to acquire support and assistance from other states to cooperate and navigate the challenges of the Indian Ocean. A possible confrontation might impact the overarching foreign policy of India.

Conclusion

IOR is a strategically located region with great untapped potential in terms of material resources and power. India and the littoral states have immediate stakes in the region. It is a region surrounded by most countries from the Global South and has a limited western presence. Approaching a region away from the West with western values of conventional hegemonic control over others with brutish terminologies, as suggested by the West, will betray the values of engagement India holds. IOR must not be securitised in a western fashion of security but rather opt for a more effective engagement with the stakeholders of the region.

India has impressive naval capabilities and is certainly growing by the day. India must step up to be the net security provider in the region as there is a great power vacuum emerging in the IOR. India can definitely pass the bar for becoming the region's 'Net Security Provider'. However, the question remains: Is India quite ready to take up the challenge on the ground? Commanding one of the mightiest navies in the region, it definitely comes with a lot of responsibility. Any attempts to securitise the IOR by other players will directly affect the threat perception of India and will require policy and military action to secure our interests. India must work on creating a framework and a blueprint to act if need be in the vast IOR. There are significant challenges and lacunas between the perceived position and the existing capability of our reach in the IOR. India is certainly a net security provider of the IOR. However, it must streamline and synchronise the intent with the action to become the most effective force in the region, taking full advantage of its strategic placement and global power positioning in the world. IOR is a free and open region which must move forward with inclusivity and multilateral effort.

DISCLAIMER

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