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INDIA'S STRATEGIC ROLE IN THE WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN: CONVERGENCE OF INTEREST WITH THE LITTORAL NATIONS

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Introduction

The Indian Ocean has emerged as a critical juncture for trade, commerce, and transit routes for energy from West Asia. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR), which is located at the crossroads of Africa, Asia, and Australia, is home to several littoral nations and middle-power countries including countries in Africa, some small island countries like Mauritius and Seychelles and India. The geostrategic importance of the region is that having critical choke points like the Strait of Malacca, Bab-el Mandeb, Strait of Hormuz, and so on, the region is highly vulnerable to maritime piracy, changing power dynamics, international conflicts, and so on, urging the immediate attention of securing the region. Being a natural power in IOR, India's role in securing the region with its naval presence is crucial for its national interest. Currently, India's main objective in the IOR is to 'secure' the Sea Line of Communications (SLOCs), which are laden with piracy threats in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea¹.

In March 2024, India's intervention in the piracy incident in the IOR, and the rescuing of 23 Pakistani nationals is an interesting development, against the backdrop of the downfall in India-Pakistan ties in recent times². Earlier this year, the Indian Navy, in

coordination with Seychelles and Sri Lanka, rescued a hijacked Sri Lankan fishing vessel³. Since December 2023, there have been more than 15 such incidents in the IOR, where the Indian Navy played a crucial role as a 'first responder' and '*preferred partner*' to deal with the security environment of the region⁴.

Lieutenant Colonel Dhiraj Kumar opined that the positive gesture has already reaffirmed India's suitability as the '*preferred security partner*' in the region, upgrading India's stature as a crisis-mitigator and promoting cooperation among the neighbouring countries⁵. In the transition from an '*inward-looking*' approach to an '*outward-looking*' strategy, India's current vision in the IOR is three folded: strengthening the commitment to support the neighbouring countries, providing full assistance in terms of humanitarian aid and capacity-building in the maritime front to the littoral countries, and preventing any hegemonic dominance in the region, especially in the context of China's growing presence in the backyard of the region⁶.

In recent years, India's evolving approach to perceiving the 'primary interest' area in IOR has changed India's outlook towards the region⁷. The extension of India's primary interest region in 2015 Indian Naval strategic document has provided to set the stage for India's changing maritime outlook for a broader region.

In 2015, the Indian Navy redefined its 'sphere of interest' from the Mozambique Channel to the Ombai-Wetar Straits in the South-eastern IOR, superseding the earlier maritime policy of India⁸, contrary to the Indian Navy's 2007 document, titled "*Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy*", which defined only from the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca, as its 'primary area of interest'⁹. In this article, the focus will be on the western Indian Ocean region (WIOR), due to the region's peculiar geographical positioning and a crucial link for India's energy security.

The WIOR encompasses the coastal nations including the countries like Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa, Madagascar, Comoros, Mauritius and Seychelles. In third article, the researcher will investigate that how India's naval strategy and military presence in the Western Indian Ocean Region influenced regional security dynamics and taking up the case studies of two coastal nation Seychelles and Mauritius, important for their strategic locations, how effective India's diplomatic efforts to foster the partnerships with these countries.

India's Naval Strategy and Regional Security

Applying Sun Tzu's dictum of "knowing the enemy" relevant, the section will discuss India's naval presence vis-a-vis China in the region¹⁰. The Chinese presence in the WIOR has been considerably increased in recent years. Beijing is proportionately dependent on this region for its energy resources and international trade¹¹. On the one hand, China's expanding naval presence in the region is an alarming signal, on the other, its collusiveness with Pakistan in extending the friendship in the maritime domain is also a cause for New Delhi's concern¹². In the context of China's maritime deployability, China has a sustained presence with nearly 6 to 8 warships¹³.

Apart from that, research and fishing vessels such as *Xiang Yang Hong 01* and *Xiang Yang Hong 03* can also create an alarming situation in the region¹⁴. While research activities in international waters are not prohibited under UNCLOS, the ethical use of the data can be questioned¹⁵. As reported in *The Hindu*, the general area of deployment of China's research vessel is around 90 degrees east ridge and southwest Indian ridge¹⁶. Last year, China delivered two Type 054A/P multi-role frigates to Pakistan¹⁷. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has already one of the largest naval presences in the IOR, with totally possessing 50 diesel-electric and 10 nuclear submarines¹⁸. As stated by officially, the 75th anniversary of the PLAN is undergoing huge transformation, to make a strategic force with incorporating the 'new era' arms with nuclear and conventional weapons¹⁹. China's Navy aims for the far east and far west areas through its 'String of Pearls' Strategy. China also promised to deliver eight Yuan-class diesel-electric submarines with air-independent propulsion, by 2028, for enduring greater underwater navigation²⁰.

The scenario of Indian has been largely in the transitioning phase, but with the substantiate contributions in the region. India has been actively involved in anti-piracy operations, particularly in the Gulf of Aden. India's naval ships regularly escort the merchant vessels and conduct patrols, contributing to the overall security of the major SLoCs. India's involvement in the region has helped to secure the crucial maritime trade routes, enhancing regional stability. By ensuring the security of the vital maritime routes, India supports the uninterrupted flow of trade and energy resources, contributing to the economic stability of the region. Indian Navy has 132 warships with 140 aircraft and 130 helicopters vis-a-vis China's 300 warships and submarines²¹. Considering the constraint in budgetary allocations and older warships slated to retire,

the Indian Navy presently has 35 warships and 11 submarines positioning in the critical areas of the IOR²². While the Indian Navy's anti-piracy efforts since 2020 have enormously enhanced its stature as the '*preferred security partner*' in the region, China's sustained presence is also an undeniable fact as a strategic competitor.

As reported by the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery (ReCAAP), there were more than 95 incidents of piracy in Asia, only in 2020²³. In 2023, India's operations through deploying INS Chennai against the backdrop of the ship, MV Lila Norfolk, off the Somalian Coast, enhanced India's credibility as a '*preferred security partner*' in the maritime domain²⁴. The Indian Navy's '*Mission-based deployment approach*' has enhanced the naval presence across the region. In this way, New Delhi enables quick responses to emerging traditional and non-traditional challenges. The widening of India's primary interest area and its persistent footprint across the region, including the chokepoints in the Indian Ocean, New Delhi has been playing a pivotal role in securing the region.

Interestingly, the requirements from the evolving security challenges facing the WIOR remain unabated, India's maritime outlook has considerably changed from a '*territorial*' to a '*non-territorial*' conception of the sea, which reaffirms India's increasing footprint in the open seas. In January 2023, the Indian Navy commissioned a new Kaveri-class Scorpion²⁵ submarine, INS Vagir, indigenously built in Mumbai²⁶. This is the fifth of the submarines in the Kaveri class that have been inducted into the Indian Navy. Commissioning these state-of-the-art submarines is crucial to augment the Indian Navy's presence in the WIOR, in particular, and it will help to modernise Indian naval equipment. It will also secure India's maritime interests in the region²⁷.

Strategic partnerships- Case Studies of Mauritius and Seychelles

Indian Navy has four major roles- military, diplomatic, constabulary, and benign. Indian Navy's role beyond its deployment also reached to provide humanitarian aid and quick responses in any type of crisis in the region. The title of '*first responder*' has been pondered by the Indian Navy to actively oversee the '*Maritime Area of Interest*' (MAI) in the WIOR. While on one side, the concept of mission-based deployment has organised the deployment of the Indian Navy in the region, on the other, India's growing stature has been helping to facilitate the partnership with the countries of the global south especially the littoral nations to enhance its naval capability in terms of presence and surveillance missions (PSM)²⁸. By capitalising on the long history of bilateral trust, India

has successfully built strategic relationships with countries like Mauritius and Seychelles.

With a strong presence of the Indian diaspora, Mauritius has always preferred India as a 'key security partner' in its periphery²⁹. By helping to develop the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and providing financial support through the Lines of Credits (LoC), Indian has solidified its maritime security cooperation with Mauritius. The LoC, India has given Mauritius has largely been used to purchase equipment such as offshore patrol vehicles, water jet fast attack craft and the others required for the maritime security. India's efforts to take the Agalega islands, a strategically important, in a long-term lease, illustrates India's commitment to bolster the surveillance capabilities in the WIOR³⁰. Over the years, India has become a key security partner of Mauritius. The finalisation of the Agalega islands, for an Indian outpost in the periphery of WIOR, has significantly improved India's capability to brew the surveillance system to deal with the non-traditional maritime security threats³¹.

China has been countering India's influence in Mauritius by enhancing its economic and strategic footprint. In contrast to India's focus on the security cooperation, China is focusing on the infrastructural projects, and huge economic investments. This is a subset of China's large vision of extending influence over the IOR. In 2022, nearly 105 million USD of FDIs came from China to Mauritius, and this expected to increase by 8% in 2023³². Recently, China and Mauritius also signed the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which is expected to have a huge surge in exports from both the side³³. India's proactive engagement vis-à-vis China's strong foothold in Mauritius caters the bilateral relations between India and Mauritius. In 2015, when the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the islands, the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed to enhance the cooperation regarding the ocean economy and air transport facilities in Agalega³⁴. In 2017, Mauritian Prime Minister Pravin Kumar Jugnauth during his visit to India, signed 4 agreements, including one on maritime security³⁵. This further boosts India's maritime engagement in the region. These efforts coupled with the ongoing diplomatic exchanges has positioned India to strengthened the maritime cooperation with Mauritius.

India has strategically leveraged its historical ties with Seychelles to enhance its influence in WIOR. With the help of Indian Navy, Seychelles could thwart the attempted

coup against President Rene in 1986, which demonstrates India's commitment to ensure the stability in the country. The subsequent bilateral cooperation agreement in 2003, the Indian Navy has been empowered to policing the EEZ of Seychelles³⁶. This has strengthened India's Naval presence in the region. In 2015, the visit of the Indian PM to the nation, the first in 34 years, signifies the strategic importance, and signed four agreements including one on developing facilities on Assumption Island, granting India a crucial foothold in a region of strategical importance³⁷. In 2016, the Indian Coast Guard's first Interceptor Boat C-405 was gifted to Seychelles to deepen the defence cooperation³⁸. Interestingly, India's attempt to ramp up the cooperation in IOR countries, Seychelles has been received the *Dornier aircraft*, handed over by India, contributing the closer defence partnerships between the two countries³⁹. In response to India's initiatives in Seychelles, China has made strategic steps like in form of infrastructural development projects and strategic engagements to expand its footprint.

The case studies of Mauritius and Seychelles underscore India's strategic partnerships with the small island countries in the WIOR. Indian Navy plays a multifaceted role in the region, which enables India's place as an important player for these countries. While, some scholars anxious about the increasing investment of China on the islands and capitulation of the extended financial aid might hinder the close ties with India, but India's proactive approach is evidenced by the continuous engagement in these small island nations have placed India into a comparatively advantageous position. Through these strategic partnerships and close ties, the strong presence of Indian Navy can be a decisive factor to counter China's 'String of Pearls' strategy. The close partnerships do not only serve India's strategic interest but also the contribute to the regional stability and security in the Western Indian Ocean.

Challenges of India's Maritime Presence in Western Indian Ocean Region

Resource constraints

India has a significant budget constraint to invest in maintaining naval presence in the vast region. Indian Navy's share in the budget significantly declines from 18% in 2012 to 13% in 2019-20⁴⁰. There is an acute mismatch between the ambitions to control the sea and the current capabilities of Indian Navy. India's underutilization of tri-services in the crucial islands like Lakshadweep, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which overlooks the important straits in the region.

Logistical challenges

Continuing the operations in a vast WIOR poses logistical challenges including the need for replenishment, maintenance and infrastructure, that will support the logistical requirements of the Indian Navy. Moreover, the changing regional dynamics, due to the difference in the strategic priorities, has made difficult to establish bases to ensure the seamless supply chains across the region. The slow progress in building Chabahar port, as a strategic priority of India, limits Indian naval presence in the WIOR.

Slow pace of modernization

Keeping pace with technological advancements, Indian Navy requires complete modernization, which is crucial for maritime security. Currently, India's focus on the state-of-the-art technology for maritime surveillance and domain awareness, that includes the UAVs and aircraft for patrolling⁴¹. The network of coastal radar stations helps to monitor the entire region. However, these needs periodic maintenance and time-to-time upgradation to strengthen India's ability secure its maritime interest.

Environmental and climate challenges

Climate change and environmental degradation have been becoming a prevalent issue in maritime operations. Rising sea levels, frequent storms and other challenges related to climate change impacts the naval infrastructure significantly. Environmental challenges have been seen as a major non-conventional threat in the region. With the high level of warming, it has been estimated that there are more likely to continue in rising sea levels, resulting in severe coastal erosion, including the vulnerabilities of the small island nations⁴². In 2021, the report of IPCC highlighted the potential disasters that the IOR might have to face in the coming decades⁴³.

Recommendations For Enhancing India's Influence and Security Posture in the WIOR

- New Delhi has significantly boosted its surveillance capabilities to monitor the maritime activities in the WIOR. However, considering Indian Ocean, particularly WIOR, as a vital region for global trade and energy security, India needs to further expand its regional reach and strengthened its presence over the coastal countries in Africa and small littoral countries in the region. India can foster partnerships as a part of collective interest in the WIOR and should develop the

comprehensive and inclusive approach to maritime security. This will benefit both India and its regional partners and will contribute to global maritime security as a whole.

- The establishment of a robust information-sharing network across the region is the need of the hour. In 2023, New Delhi has conducted the “Maritime Information Sharing Workshop”, was hosted by the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), marked a new milestone in highlighting the importance of timely-information for quick response⁴⁴. The IFC-IOR, launched in 2018, stands as a testament to India’s commitment to ensure the maritime safety and security with a collective approach. While New Delhi has a strategic upper hand for its long historical relationships with the littoral nations, to deal with the non-traditional threats such as maritime piracy, IUU fishing, and others, the tracking of maritime traffic is critical. Based on the collected information of IFC-IOR, New Delhi needs to create the wide database for anticipating the potential threats.
- New Delhi should actively invest in initiatives related to developing the blue economy including fisheries, marine resources, and tourism. China has already invested heavily in the EEZ of the littoral countries like Mauritius⁴⁵. China is also planning to build a logistics and services hub in the region, which is understandably to protect China’s strategic interests⁴⁶. The growing convergence of Beijing with these small littoral countries can be a threatening factor to dilute New Delhi’s traditional influence in the WIOR. Hence, India needs to adopt a proactive approach to deepen its strategic partnerships with the nations in the region.
- While there are regional forums such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), New Delhi’s engagement should be increased by forging security and economic agreements with the member countries. India also can increase it number of offered training and capacity-building programs for the maritime forces of the littoral nations of the region, which, in turn, will provide an edge to New Delhi’s position in the region.

Conclusion

India's naval presence and capability in the WIOR is quite appreciable. For the last few years, New Delhi has been involved in countering several non-traditional security threats in the region. In Arthashastra, Kautilya has talked about three kinds of warfare, where he emphasised on 'Concealed warfare' and 'Silent warfare', rather than going for 'Open warfare', to avoid devastation. If this thought can be put in the current estrangement with China, it would be pertinent to say that India is using its military power to get soft power credentials and trustworthiness in the region. While New Delhi's engagement and defence cooperation with the Mauritius and Seychelles are very reliable, India needs to redefine the maritime interest involving soft power engagement to develop a common ground with the partner countries bordering the western Indian Ocean.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

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