



CENTRE FOR
JOINT WARFARE
STUDIES

GL/17/25

INDIA'S QUEST AS A POWER OF RELEVANCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

BY

MAJ GEN DR RAJAN KOCHHAR, VSM (RETD)

ORGANISED BY CENJOWS
22 MAY 2025

INDIA'S QUEST AS A POWER OF RELEVANCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

REGION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

BY MAJ GEN DR RAJAN KOCHHAR, VSM (RETD)

ORGANISED BY CENJOWS ON 22 MAY 2025

A Nation's influence in world geopolitics is directly related to its Comprehensive National Power (CNP). In broad terms, CNP is a measure of your capability and relevance to shape world opinion. Therefore, any discourse on the relevance of India to shape events must relate to its CNP. Today, India's emergence as a key pivot in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) relates much to its strategic position and strategic interests in this region. As global attention manifests itself towards maritime spaces for trade, energy and security, India faces dual imperatives of expanding its influence while countering emerging threats, particularly from China.

Geostrategic Importance of IOR

The IOR accounts for two-thirds of global shipments and one-third of bulk cargo trade. India has a great advantage of a vast coastline of 7517 square km with an additional 197 islands, accounting for an additional 2094 km. Therefore, India dominates and has strategic access to major Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) and is in a position to influence the maritime dynamics of the region.

India's Naval Capability

India possesses the fourth-largest Navy in the world and is capable of long-term deployments and power projection beyond its shores. This involves deployment of warships, submarines and aircraft in strategic locations for prolonged periods to conduct surveillance, deter threats and address contingencies. The Indian Navy has its presence in seven key areas of IOR, notably amongst these being, Andaman Nicobar Islands, Sabang Port, Assumption Islands and Chahbahar Port. Indian Navy has always been a first responder in IOR and therefore qualifies as a Net Security Provider of the region.

Opportunities for India in IOR

India has assumed the leadership role in regional forums such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association, Indian Naval Symposium and has successfully projected its SAGAR doctrine to 24 littoral nations in the IOR. There is also a great emerging opportunity and potential for blue ocean development, such as fisheries, deep sea mining, renewable energy and marine bio-technology. India also needs to further enhance its soft power through strategic partnerships such as QUAD, ASEAN and other multi-lateral forums. The opportunity to develop technological and infrastructure expansion of strategic ports through the SAGARMALA initiative needs to be given more emphasis. There is also a case to upgrade the scope and reach of the Information Fusion Centre at Gurgaon, as it would enhance our maritime domain awareness with the use of satellites and space communication.

Challenges to India's Maritime Aspirations

The biggest challenge to India's maritime influence in the IOR is the Chinese maritime expansion. The PLA Navy has started to flex its muscle in the IOR and has, at any given time, eight to ten vessels operating in this region. There is also for us to improve our capacity and resource constraints to augment the fleet of ships, submarines and aircraft carriers for the Indian Navy. The present capital budget allocation falls short of expectations.

Policy Recommendations

In light of the above, the following policy recommendations are made: -

- Enhance Maritime Domain Awareness by expansion of networks like the Information Fusion Centre.
- Strengthen island diplomacy, especially related to Mauritius, Maldives and Seychelles.
- Invest in Naval modernisation.
- Integrate maritime strategy with national policy. There is a need to align Sagarmala and Blue Economy with our strategic goals.
- Need to exploit the Indo-Middle East Economic Corridor to cater for alternate and faster supply chain routes, giving greater impetus to our export orientation.

Conclusion

India's quest for maritime influence in the IOR is both urgent and achievable. By aligning its strategic objectives with economic and diplomatic instruments, India can not only safeguard its national interests but also present a robust alternative to hegemonic powers. A decisive, well-funded, and coordinated maritime policy is vital to ensuring peace and prosperity in the Indian Ocean Region.