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FROM NET SECURITY PROVIDER TO PREFERRED SECURITY PARTNER: INDIA'S EVOLVING STRATEGIC NARRATIVE

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Introduction

As South Asia and broader Indo-Pacific regions emerge as a theatre of conflict, the understanding of 'security' is being redefined. In the last ten years, India has represented itself as a 'Net Security Provider', highlighting its increasing capacity and desire to maintain regional equilibrium, especially in the maritime space.¹ Although evolving geostrategic dynamics and context-specific issues have led to a strategic narrative turn, New Delhi is now reshaping its identity as a 'Preferred Security Partner', as a collaborative, responsible and reliable player that interacts with its regional partners through recognition of each other's sovereignty and common interests, instead of unilateral actions.²

This transition demonstrates an advancement of New Delhi's geostrategic orientation, from exercising power to promoting cooperation grounded in mutual security interests. This development is not merely rhetorical but structural, as India strengthens defence partnerships, advances visibility across the maritime domain awareness and fosters multilateral regional initiatives.³ As emerging and small nations in the region engage

with significant power competitions, India's reframing identity as a trustworthy and cooperative actor could construct a stable and rules-based security framework.⁴

Origins of the 'Net Security Provider' Narrative

The framing of India as a 'Net Security Provider' in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) started to attract geostrategic attention, particularly after the US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates (Shangri-La Dialogue, 2009)⁵ stated, "we look to India to be a partner and net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond",⁶ urging it to assume a more active role in regional security architecture. This acknowledgement from an external actor aligned with New Delhi's strategic maritime vision, clearly outlined in the Indian Maritime Security Strategy (2015), titled 'Ensuring Secure Seas'. The document outlined New Delhi's maritime strategic outlook as oriented towards regional stability through several significant components like securing maritime trade routes, peaceful settlement of disputes by maintaining freedom of navigation under UNCLOS, joint efforts to address natural disasters and threats from non-state actors, especially in the Indian Ocean Region.⁷

In terms of operations, New Delhi has exemplified this role through a sequence of impactful naval engagements. Its long-standing counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since 2008,⁸ and recent example involving the INS Kolkata evacuating seventeen crew members from 35 pirates (March 2024), working jointly with the Indian Air Force⁹, demonstrating its role in safeguarding merchant vessels for commercial shipping and curbing acts of piracy. On request from the Republic of Mozambique, in the context of Cyclone IDAI (March, 2019), three Indian Naval ships were promptly redirected to the port city of Beira (under Humanitarian Assistance Disaster Relief, HADR), rescuing more than 192 people from the cyclone affected regions, provided healthcare support to 1381 people and food aid to approximately 700 people, highlighting India's support operations capacity and role as a responsible global actor.¹⁰ This assistance and India's participation in joint naval exercises, including Milan, Samudra Shakti and Malabar, solidified the understanding of India as a credible 'first responder' and a significant country in maintaining stability in naval operational events.

Besides the operational missions, New Delhi broadened its security collaboration through defence diplomacy. It provided coastal surveillance radar stations, coast

guard ships, million security assistance packages and also involved in conducting professional training programs for island nations like Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius.¹¹ Additionally, it has also initiated institutional frameworks like the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in 2008¹² and promotes multilateral forums, like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (1997), to foster shared maritime security architecture.¹³

Why the Shift Was Needed?

While these initiatives echoed New Delhi's increasing maritime influence in the IOR and broadened the Indo-Pacific region, they also highlighted its challenges. Smaller island states, particularly of the IOR like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, sometimes perceive this concept as a continuation of New Delhi's long-standing dominance rooted in 'mistrust' and 'lack of communication' instead of a mutually advantageous security framework.¹⁴

The atmosphere of geopolitics has also evolved rapidly over the past decade. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has substantially changed regional power structures.¹⁵ It should be noted that many countries of IORA, like the Maldives and Sri Lanka, are current members of BRI, and Beijing has obtained entry to build core infrastructures like Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka¹⁶, \$200 million China-Maldives Friendship Bridge¹⁷ And the Padma Bridge Rail Link in Bangladesh.¹⁸ Its growing military influence in the region, including the PLA Navy (People's Liberation Army Navy)'s support base in Djibouti and regular naval patrols in the Indian Ocean region, has raised concerns about India's role as a significant net security provider.¹⁹ Also, at the same time, external actors like Japan, Russia, the United States, and France have gradually broadened their scope and increased their geostrategic influence, providing enhanced security cooperation and economic collaboration to the small island nations of IOR.²⁰

Additionally, with the shifting landscape of security dynamics, the characteristics of regional threats have experienced a gradual change. According to Carnegie Endowment (2023),²¹ conventional strategic outreach proved inadequate to deal with non-traditional security threats like climate security (Bay of Bengal region estimates more than 80% of all lives lost due to cyclones); drug smuggling (transshipment hub for drugs 190 million dollar yearly); unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing (16-34% of illegal fish catch) and piracy (7-billion-dollar and 12 billion dollar in losses in global

economy yearly).²² The IOR is estimated to have the highest population density globally by the year 2030, putting the number at 340 million in coastal risk-prone areas.²³ These intricate transregional threats required collective, collaborative frameworks, not unilateral actions. Therefore, India acknowledged the necessity of reframing its narrative, transitioning from acting as 'provider' to becoming a 'Preferred Security Partner', which forges mutual and collaborative security frameworks, recognizes regional sovereignty, and promotes broad-based outcomes.

India as a Preferred Security Partner: A New Narrative

The phrase, 'Preferred Security Partner' started gaining traction in India's geostrategic discourse around the early 2020s, especially after the speech of then Indian President Ram Nath Kovind on the sidelines of the President's Colour to INS Valsura at Gujarat, 2022.²⁴ He stated, "*Indian Navy Over the Years Has Emerged as a Combat Ready, Credible and Cohesive Force, and is the 'Preferred Security Partner' in The Indian Ocean Region*"²⁵. This new narrative highlighted the role of the Indian Navy as a trustworthy, efficient and integrated force that the regional maritime neighbourhood places confidence in for maritime security cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region.²⁶ As geostrategic competitions in the IOR are proliferating, New Delhi has framed its position as a non-coercive, trusted actor providing security cooperation without any political prerequisites.

India's 'Preferred Security Partner' approach is rooted in fundamental values. Upholding national sovereignty and respecting another country's sovereignty is pivotal to maintain stability in the region. New Delhi's military partnerships are extended without any coercive conditionalities, differentiating from external actors like Beijing, often viewed as interest-driven and calculative.²⁷ Secondly, New Delhi prioritizes responsive and need-based support. To substantiate this point, we can refer to the speech of then Chief Admiral R Hari Kumar (2022), stating, "*The Indian Navy is seeking to be the preferred security partner for all the smaller countries in the region*"²⁸.

For example, INS SUNAYNA (IOS SAGAR) under the Indian Navy's initiative of Indian Ocean Ship Sagar was long deployed in the Southwest Indian Ocean Region, where the jointly operated by personnel from nine Indian Ocean Region Navies made port visits to ports like Port Louis and Port Victoria.²⁹ The crew of IOS Sagar meaningfully

cooperated with the navies of the IOR region, like the Mauritius Police Force and the Seychelles, conducting capacity-building initiatives, collaborative yoga initiatives, and highlighting India's vision of 'One Ocean One Mission'.³⁰ According to the press statement released by Ministry of Defence (2025), The mission of INS SUNAYNA (IOS SAGAR) reflected the Indian Navy's dedicated role as, 'First Responder' and 'Preferred Security Partner' aligned with the Government of India's long-term vision of MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security Across the Region).³¹

Multiple countries have begun to increasingly recognize New Delhi's shifting security posture in appreciative terms. Firstly, Mauritius, for example, draws upon India to provide defence assets and hydrographic surveys and supports the creation of a National Maritime Information Sharing Centre to strengthen maritime domain awareness (MDA).³² Prime Minister Ramgoolam of Mauritius expressed his gratitude to Prime Minister Modi during Mauritius' 57th National Day celebrations, stating, "*India has emerged as a significant security provider for Mauritius*"³³ recognizing New Delhi's support in refurbishing Coast Guard Ships Victory and Barracuda. Secondly, Mozambique has acknowledged India's unwavering support in maritime cooperation. Recently, New Delhi gifted two Fast Interceptor Crafts to the Mozambique Navy, assisting the nation in its naval assets. Casimiro Augusto Mueio, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of National Defence, Mozambique, had received the crafts on behalf of the government, expressing gratitude to India.³⁴ Indian High Commissioner Robert Shetkintong stated, "*Our cooperation in the defence sector underscored India's commitment to be a security partner for Mozambique*",³⁵ highlighting India's image as a reliable maritime nation in the IOR. These examples highlight a wider regional recognition of New Delhi's as a 'Preferred Security Partner' as a reliable capacity-building partner, positioning it as a favoured choice for countries looking for collaborative partnerships in maritime security in the IOR.

Strategic Gains from This Shift

New Delhi's reframing as a 'Preferred Security Partner' has culminated in a noticeable rise in bilateral and multilateral security cooperation efforts throughout the IOR. According to the reports of The International Institute for Strategic Studies (2024), in the year 2023, the Indian Navy notably increased port visits to 51, especially in Indian and Pacific Ocean small island nations, in comparison with 32 in 2022.³⁶ In the same

year, 2023, the Indian Navy participated in joint naval exercises with various nations, starting from Vietnam to the Maldives, Australia to the USA, highlighting the broader engagement focus of New Delhi's Asia-Pacific defence partnerships.³⁷ Additionally, New Delhi through IFC-IOR, is increasing its maritime cooperation with the other nations of the region to strengthen maritime domain awareness and information sharing.³⁸ The initiative is in line with New Delhi's SAGAR doctrine, locating it as a platform for shared security architecture in the IOR. By bringing together Liaison Officers from 12 partner countries, the initiatives promote shared confidence and coordinated operations,³⁹ underlining New Delhi's increasing role as a reliable partner to counter non-traditional maritime challenges. This emphasizes that nations are increasingly willing to work with India, allowing a more equitable cooperation grounded in confidence and common objectives.

Also, New Delhi's shifting narrative substantiates its role as a prime stauncher of the Global South, focusing on equality, transparency and international cooperation. In multilateral organizations like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)⁴⁰ and The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), New Delhi, develops frameworks emphasizing equitable development and collaborative security architecture.⁴¹ According to the reports of The International Institute for Strategic Studies (2024), considering the small defence budget of the littoral states of IOR, New Delhi has, from time to time, exported defence assets, in the form of donations and Indian defence assets at no cost, which include offshore-patrol vessels, technologically advanced aircraft and Dornier-228 naval patrol aircraft.⁴² India's Defence Budget has also offered lines of credit to island nations like Mauritius (US\$100m), Bangladesh (US\$500m) and Sri Lanka (US\$150 million),⁴³ highlighting its cooperative engagements instead of a threat-based strategy with the nations of the IOR.

Moreover, New Delhi's model provides a straightforward approach that prioritizes sovereign integrity over Beijing's increasingly ambiguous security posture under the BRI framework.⁴⁴ In the year 2024, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, speaking at the bi-annual Naval Commanders' Conference, mentioned that "India is now seen as a preferred security partner in the Indian Ocean region. Whenever need be, we will ensure security in the region",⁴⁵ building trust through naval assistance. Also, in 2024, India conducted the 12th edition of the Indian Navy's flagship multilateral naval

exercise, MILAN, which was referred to as India's most extensive maritime exercise in history, where 50 nations participated in the exercise and also incorporated both aircraft carriers INS Vikrant and INS Vikramaditya, making the event more successful.⁴⁶ While Beijing's logistical defence support base in Djibouti highlights its growing military build-up in the IOR,⁴⁷ New Delhi has opted for soft power techniques, including HADR missions and capacity-building partnerships, to strengthen regional alliances.⁴⁸ This approach enhances New Delhi's impact and legitimacy, portraying it as an accountable maritime nation engaged in a holistic maritime security framework.

The way Forward for India

India's aspiration to be widely considered as 'Preferred Security Partner' relies on New Delhi's maintaining consistency between its narratives and policy approaches. Any signs of client-patron dynamic in New Delhi's engagements to the small nations,⁴⁹ may weaken trust and undermine the conscientiously maintained identity of a co-operative nation. Balancing this shift also demands institutional commitment and diplomatic initiatives over the course of successive political regimes which comes to power. Also, India should increase the outreach of training programs, joined-patrol operations, and capacity-building initiatives which demands economic assistance to the small island states of IOR which could promote New Delhi's position as an equal stakeholder in the realm of security in the IOR.

India must meticulously take care of a complex geopolitical space where external actors like China, the United Kingdom and Japan are continuously broadening their footprints by strengthening relations through security and economic collaborations with the small island nations of IOR.⁵⁰ Each significant power puts forward its distinctive approach to engagements, be it infrastructure-driven, strategic alliances, or oriented around positional dominance, which can obstruct India's endeavours to distinguish itself.⁵¹ New Delhi's difficulties lie in expressing a unique, distinctive approach rooted in transparency, the principle of non-intervention and regional equity, and maintaining distance from major-power geopolitical competitions. Maintaining this balance and stability will be significant in preserving small island countries' trust and ensuring that New Delhi's model remains reliable and approachable.

Conclusion

India's repositioning from 'Net Security Provider' to a 'Preferred Security Partner' highlights a deliberate strategic realignment in light of regional complexities and evolving geopolitical landscape in the IOR and the broader Indo-Pacific. Instead of imposing power unilaterally, New Delhi is now promoting a collaborative model of security framework, rooted in shared interest, respect for strategic autonomy and collective responsibility. This model connects well particularly with littoral island countries and the broader Global South, providing a comprehensive alternative to a transactional security pact. Suppose New Delhi sustains its alignment with this narrative with reliable assurances and continuous engagement. In that case, it must strengthen its geostrategic relevance and play a constructive role in a more equitable and secure IOR and broader Indo-Pacific order.

DISCLAIMER

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