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SECURING INDIA'S MARITIME INTERESTS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN: A STEP TOWARDS VIKSIT BHARAT@2047

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Abstract

India's maritime interests in the Indian Ocean are pivotal to its security, economy, global stature, and strategic concerns, furthering the national interests. Amidst the competitive churn of the Indian Ocean, with various partners having interests in the Indian Ocean Region, including China, the USA, Australia, Japan, and other countries, prioritisation of the Indian Ocean is essential for India. The core argument of this article is that to achieve the goal of Viksit Bharat@2047, it is crucial for India to harness its maritime potential in both economic and strategic spheres, as this will enhance India's capability and image as a maritime power in the region.

Introduction

India's interests in the Indian Ocean encompass its strategic security concerns, capitalising economic interests, and driving its geopolitical influence to be a dominant maritime power in the Indian Ocean Region. India's culture, politics, and history are

closely intertwined with the Indian Ocean.¹ The central argument of this article is that India's vision of Viksit Bharat @2047 is strategically tied to the country's image as a dominant defence power in the region, and securing the country's interests in the IOR serves its national, economic, strategic and geopolitical motives that will shape and secure India's future. India's pre-modern past marks a significant milestone in its naval history. India's secure future lies in reclaiming and outlining a proactive strategy in the Indian Ocean.

Most importantly, from a strategic viewpoint, India's unique geographical location provides the country with a distinctive presence in the Indian Ocean, as suggested by K.N. Panikkar, the name of the Indian Ocean indeed highlights the centrality of India in the Indian Ocean.² The future of India is inherently connected with securing its interests in the IOR, and developing its naval capabilities accordingly, that is adaptive and responsive to the new-age challenges and geopolitical rivalry churning in the Indian Ocean Region".³ The interests in the Indian Ocean gained new vigour and momentum through the SAGAR policy in 2015 after PM Modi hinted at India's more significant role in maintaining peace and prosperity in the Indian Ocean.⁴

India as a Net Security Provider in the Indian Ocean Region

India's security vision for the Indian Ocean Region falls under its goal to act as a Net Security Provider in the region. It encompasses sea control, countering threats in the ocean, such as piracy, terrorism, and other non-traditional threats and risks. India's presence in the Indian Ocean region includes the three-level coastal security which includes the Navy for the International Maritime Boundary Line, the Coast Guard for the Exclusive Economic Zone and the State Coastal Police for the shallow waters. The commissioning of INS Jatayu at the strategic Minicoy Islands strengthens India's positioning in the maritime sphere.⁵ The Defence Minister of India stated in November 2022, at the outset of Samanvay 2022, that "India has emerged as a regional power and net security provider in the Indo-Pacific as its capacity to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to its citizens as well as regional partners has grown in recent years and India is cooperating with multiple partners to ensure economic growth & security in the region while tackling threats such as natural disasters."⁶

The Working Group of the Strategic Studies Network published its report titled 'Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean Region' in 2015, emphasising two key themes.⁷

The first comprises the region's significance as a strategic zone requiring priority attention, and the second is that it lacks an effective regional institution to address the emerging challenges in the region. Hence, it is also an integral part of India's maritime security strategy, applicable to both inner and regional contexts. Regional collaboration enhances interoperability; therefore, cooperative efforts are necessary, calling for an inclusive strategy and a free, open, secure Indian Ocean.⁸ India's maritime security aims to overcome threats arising from and in the sea, as highlighted by Pratinashree Basu.⁹

In 2023, maritime trade was projected to grow by 2.4% and was expected to experience a greater than 2% increase between 2024 and 2028.¹⁰ A strong India aligns with the Indo-Pacific strategy of the USA, as it can guarantee an open and free maritime space in the Indian Ocean Region and balance China's revisionist strategy.¹¹ Shinzo Abe, the prime minister of Japan at the time, argued that "the Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity. A 'broader Asia' that broke away geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form." ¹² The sizeable geographic expanse known as the Indian Ocean welcomes numerous stakeholders and their resources and capacities to solve rising concerns.¹³

Securing and securitising the Indian Ocean is one of the key priorities of India, as counter geo-political rivalries call for a greater role of the Indian Navy in the region. Brewster (2010) writes that in the long term, "India's role in the Indian Ocean will likely be determined (and limited) by the extent to which India's naval expansion plans come to fruition." ¹⁴

India's Economic Stakes in the Indian Ocean: Strengthening the Blue Economy

The vision of Viksit Bharat @2047, which aims for India to become a developed nation, requires a comprehensive approach to national security issues, and maritime security is a crucial component. The Indian economy aims to reach USD 30 trillion by 2047. To reach this level, India must harness the full potential of the blue economy that the Indian Ocean has to offer. According to Niti Aayog, India's exports are expected to increase to USD 8.7 trillion by 2047, as highlighted by Dhruv C. Katoch, who argues that the Indian Ocean will play a pivotal role.¹⁵ Dr S. Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister, Government of India, at the 7th Indian Ocean Conference 2024 in

Perth, Australia, on 09 February 2024, stated that the region of the Indian Ocean had witnessed India's contribution to the world since pre-modern eras.

The merchant marine, marine diplomacy, and increasing marine construction sites are key focus areas of the Blue Oceanic economy. Upgrading and building state-of-the-art port systems that enhance connectivity and drive the coastal economic zones is the key to capitalising on India's sea power. Niti Aayog, while outlining India's blueprint for accelerating the blue economy, highlights the importance of nine coastal states, 2 million square kilometres of India's Exclusive Economic Zone, and an over 11,098 km long coastline, showcasing the potential of the maritime sector and its capitalisation through greater trade that is in tandem with the local marine ecosystem.¹⁶

The modernisation of the navy, increased role and use of technology and India's proactive stance will pave the way forward for free, open, and secure Indian Ocean waters that become a space for economic cooperation and opportunity.

Countering and Collaborating with Major Players in the Indian Ocean

The USA's focus on the Indo-Pacific has intensified. This development is primarily due to the growth of the People's Republic of China. The United States' interests in the Indian Ocean revolve around its strategic Indo-Pacific policy, which emphasises freedom of navigation, countering China's revisionist claims, supporting India through joint exercises such as the Malabar exercises, and promoting naval and economic cooperation. India partners with the USA, within the framework of the QUAD, and collaborates with Japan, Australia, and regional countries such as the Seychelles, Mauritius, and Comoros. The USA also maintains its key facilities at Diego Garcia and closely observes China's presence in the region.

China has adopted a complex and comprehensive strategy involving economic links, diplomacy, technology, and military tactics to increase its influence in the Indian Ocean and erode the notion of a free, secure maritime space that respects each country's sovereignty. China's string of pearls and its interplay of loans and debts highlight a crisis engulfing the Indian Ocean Region and the small developing countries that are under its economic dependence trap. Building and developing a close tie with Southeast Asian countries will help India expand its role in the Indian Ocean region and emerge as a key player. Central, South, and Southeast Asia

countries correspond to a new rise in global growth rate estimates.¹⁷ China's Maritime Silk Road, the sea-based aspect of the Belt and Road Initiative, poses a significant challenge for India. As China makes significant deep dives into the water of the Indian Ocean, it raises concerns for India and also leads to potential militarisation of the Indian Ocean.

Conclusion

India's interests in the Indian Ocean are of paramount importance to its national security and strategic concerns. The Indian Ocean presents both opportunities and challenges. India should accentuate and leverage its strengths, thereby increasing the role of the Indian Navy. From the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine (2015) to the MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) framework of 2025, India's evolution, deeper technological capabilities, and economic robustness in the Indian Ocean have increased manifold. The Indian Way of balancing between various global powers in the age of multipolarity highlights India's unique strength in manoeuvring and navigating the tides of power struggles in the Indian Ocean. Alfred Thayer Mahan famously stated that "whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. The ocean is the key to seven seas. In the twenty-first century, the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters". Indeed, as India will celebrate its hundred years of independence in 2047, its future development and destiny are tied to the Indian Ocean.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is the author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS, the Defence forces or the Government of India. 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.

ENDNOTES

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