



## INDIA'S EVOLVING MARITIME STRATEGY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN: BALANCING SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT

**Abhishek<sup>1</sup> and Govind Gaurav<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar & <sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor  
Department of Political Science,

C.M.P. Degree College, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, India  
Email: abhishek.tripathi0807@gmail.com; govindgaurav.in@gmail.com

### Abstract

The transforming geostrategic landscape and regional dynamics of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) have intensified the role and relevance of the Indian Ocean in global politics. Moreover, the increasing Chinese footprint in the region and its rising strategic clout across small littoral countries have created significant security concerns for India and other stakeholders. As a determining power in the region, India's maritime strategies hold immense weight in preserving the region's peace, stability and security. Consequently, India is revising its maritime strategies to cope with the changing landscape. Therefore, this paper aims to examine India's aspiration to maintain its preeminence in "India's Ocean" amid these challenges. It explores the threats posed by China's growing presence, particularly its "String of Pearls" strategy. Finally, the paper investigates India's evolving maritime strategies, including the Necklace of Diamonds, SAGAR initiative, naval modernisation, and enhanced regional partnerships, designed to counter the changing strategic landscape and ensure a free, open, and inclusive Indian Ocean.

**Key Words:** Indian Ocean, India, China, Maritime Strategy, Necklace of Diamonds, SAGAR

### Introduction

The Indian Ocean, a vast maritime expanse, serves as the bedrock of economic activities, connecting continents and fostering economic independence. This strategic waterbody is increasingly becoming a focal point for economic development and security considerations, as well as crucial for global trade. It has the major passages such as the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Bab El-Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz, etc., for the transportation of oil and goods (Singh et al, 2023: 132-135). Consequently, an estimated 80% of the world's crude oil is transported through these waters, along with approximately 9.84 billion tons of cargo annually. This highlights the significance of Indian Ocean rim countries and the thriving trade industry in the region, with collectively reporting a total trade value of USD 6.17 trillion in 2020. Moreover, it is rich in resources, boasting approximately three-quarters of the world's known tin, oil, and iron ore reserves (Baruah et al, 2023). Beyond the (above) given matrix, the importance of the Indian Ocean is delineated by a US Navy flag officer, geo-strategist, and historian, Alfred T. Mahan, "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean, dominates Asia. The ocean is key to seven seas. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the destiny of the world will be decided in these waters" (Scott, 2006; Kumar, 2019).

Since, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is emerging as a kingpin to decide the destiny of the world and have enough resources to fulfil substantial needs of the powers, the rising power China has been knocking at the doors for the last two to three decades mainly after the USSR's disintegration to fill the vacuum and the America's offshore balancing policy also helped it to expand in the region (Mukherjee, 2020; Paul,

2019). It is noteworthy that China's nearly 80 per cent of imported crude oil supply passes via the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca. This underscores the region's significant potential due to its abundant natural resources, further solidifying its importance. Hence, to protect its trade hassle-free and give two-front challenges, China also introduced various policies and initiatives to secure national interest, which can be seen in "Revealed Chinese Grand Strategy for the Indian Ocean Region" (Singh et al, 2023: 86-89). Since China wishes to establish itself as a great power in Asia and is intending to safeguard its sea lanes for critical energy requirements (Gaud, 2023: 9-10). It certainly poses a challenge to India, which has a 7500 km long coastline, a 2.4 million square kilometres of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), 1200 islands and historical ties to the Indian Ocean (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015).

Since India is a significant player in the Indian Ocean region and has vested interests and aspirations to emerge as a determining power, its freedom of navigation and the security of sea lanes are important. Thus, India seems to be vigilant in introducing a more resilient maritime strategy that could protect its border and ignite the ambition to position itself as a blue maritime power. The initiation of policy documents like "Freedom to Use Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy" in 2007 and "Ensuring Secure Seas: India's Maritime Security Strategy," in 2015 to secure its territory, trade/commerce and offshore security of goods and people of India (Limaye, 2017) are some examples of strategic postures of Government of India to fulfil this objective.

Hence, the paper explores not only the importance of the Indian Ocean for India, which is termed "India's Ocean" but also analyses the rising role of India as a net security provider and kingpin of peace, stability and freedom of navigation in the region. It also deals with Chinese intrusions and incursions in the region, which have been posing a challenge for India. Moreover, it discusses and investigates India's maritime policies and posture in the region to counter such challenges.

### **Indian Ocean as India's Ocean**

The "M" shaped Indian Ocean is the third-largest ocean in the world. It is surrounded by the African, Asian, and Australian continents (Gaud, 2023: 41). It consists of nine major choke points, which include the Lombok Strait, the Strait of Malacca, and Sunda on the eastern side. The Hormuz, Suez Canal, and Red Sea Corridor are on the western side, while the Cape of Good Hope form the southwestern side. Due to these narrow land outlets to other continents, Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) and Chokepoints are important in the region (Gaud, 2023: 4-5). For this reason, it is critical for international trade, which handles nearly 30% of containerised cargo. Furthermore, the region boasts significant energy resources, accounting for almost 42% of the world's lifted crude oil and products and holds more than half of the world's verified oil and gas reserves (Ahmad, 2024). In terms of contribution to the world, this region has given shelter to roughly 35% of the world's population. Additionally, this is also aimed to become a major economic region, contributing an estimated 22% to global GDP by 2025 (Padmanabhan, 2018).

After a small overview of the Indian Ocean and its multi-dimensional importance, the paper elucidates what makes the Indian Ocean as India's Ocean and why, along with India's aspirations entangled with it. In response to these questions, which are multifaceted and can be categorised into three sections, first, their location in terms of geopolitical and geoeconomics, second, India's growing role as a first responder to any incident and a net security provider, and third, India is playing a vigorous role in combating sea piracy.

The IOR is the single example of maritime space in the world named after a country, India. This geographically advantageous position grants it a dominant influence here. India is in the central position between the eastern and western extents of the Indian Ocean, enabling it to position its maritime sea power in both directions more easily than other countries. This strategic edge makes the IOR crucial in shaping India's diverse interests across geopolitical, geostrategic, and geo-economic domains (Singh et al, 2023: 134). Showing its symbiotic relations with India, Nirupama Rao the then Foreign Secretary, expressed this opportunity in these words, "India and the Indian Ocean are inseparable. In the midst of the third largest ocean in the world, India's location is in many ways her destiny" (Scott, 2015: 576). As she emphasises the destiny of India is in connection with the Indian Ocean, which consists of a 7,500 km long coastline starting from the Gulf of Africa to the Strait of Malacca Encompassing the Bay of Bengal, Arabian Sea, Andaman Sea and the Red Sea serves as the maritime lifeline of India's trade, security, and

connectivity with the rest of the world. With this longest coastline of the Indian Ocean, India also enjoys the second-largest position (1,629,607 square kilometres) after Australia in terms of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Baruah et al, 2023). Furthermore, it serves as India's external and energy trades: 80% & 90% respectively pass through the Indian Ocean and carry 95% of India's trade by volume and 68% by value (Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, 2023).

Some additional leverage is also given by a United Nations body, the International Seabed Authority to India which holds two contracts (One agreement was signed on March 25, 2002, extended in 2017, and will expire on March 24, 2027. Another agreement was signed on September 26, 2016, and will expire on September 25, 2031.) for exploration of the Central Indian Ocean Basin (CIOB) and the Indian Ocean Ridge for valuable minerals. These mineral deposits, called polymetallic nodules (PMNs), are rich in iron and manganese hydroxide, with estimates suggesting there are 380 million tonnes to be found. Beyond PMNs, the exploration rights allow India to mine other resources like copper, nickel, and cobalt from the CIOB seabed (Press Bureau of India, 26 June (PIB, 2017; International Seabed Authority, 2023).

Although the Indian Ocean is critical for moving India's growth engine, which former ambassador K.M. Panikkar previously highlighted in his famous book "India and the Indian Ocean" (1951) and said that "while to other countries, the Indian Ocean is only one of the important oceanic areas, to India it is the vital sea. Her lifelines are concentrated in that area. Her future is dependent on the freedom of that vast water surface. No industrial growth, no stable political structure is possible for her unless the Indian Ocean is free and her own shore fully protected." Further, he argued for a strong naval power, "India's security lies on the Indian Ocean: that without a well-considered and effective naval policy, India's position in the world will be weak, dependent on others and her freedom at the mercy of any country capable of controlling the Indian Ocean" (Agnihotri, 2023).

Therefore, India's future is dependent on the strength it is able to develop gradually as a naval power (Garza, 2014). However, the Indian government disregarded his advice about the need for the Indian Ocean for India's maritime security and sovereignty. If we investigate the past the importance of the Indian Ocean for India mainly started only after the invasion of the Europeans through the sea route because previously India considered the threat only from the north and northwest (Gaud,2023: 45). This mindset of neglect or ignorance levies heavy costs for the country and this trend continues to deteriorate the country's national security, integrity, and sovereignty. Even after gaining independence, the Indian navy remained relatively unnoticed and underappreciated during the administrations of Nehru (1947-63) and Indira Gandhi (1966-77, 1980-84) (Scott, 2015: 574). However, following the LPG reforms in 1991, India began to liberalise its economy. Under the leadership of P.V. Narasimha Rao, the country adopted the "Look East" policy and later, in 1997, the "Neighbourhood First" policy under the leadership of I.K. Gujral. These policies played a significant role in India's efforts to expand its focus beyond its territorial boundaries (Scott, 2015: 575).

In the wake of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Indian Ocean is seen as a geographical opportunity for India. Then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2004 expressed that "our strategic footprints cover to the far reaches of the Indian Ocean. Awareness of this reality should inform and animate our strategic thinking and defence planning" (Scott, 2015: 575). Further, Prime Minister Narendra Modi reiterated in a speech in 2015 that "the Indian Ocean Region is at the top of our policy priorities" (Jaishankar, 2016). After winning his first term in 2014, he invited all the South Asia Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries to his swearing-in ceremony, and again, after a significant victory in the 2019 general elections, he selected the Maldives and Sri Lanka as his first official visit abroad for this term to strengthen India's position in the Indian Ocean. These choices highlight India's foreign policy focus in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) (Gaud, 2023: 46). For instance, on February 29, 2024, Prime Minister Modi emphasised the importance of security cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). As a demonstration, he and Pravind Jugnauth, the Mauritian counterpart, together unveiled six development projects and a new airstrip and jetty supported by India at Agalega Island, Mauritius (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). Many more examples can be added that highlight India's foreign policy priorities in the IOR.

Against this backdrop, India assumes the increased role as a net security provider, which is directly linked to securing national interest along with the common security of more than one country in the region,

while addressing common causes such as piracy, responding to disasters, capacity building, military assistance, and military diplomacy (Mukherjee, 2014). Apart from this, being a responsible and military might power in the region, India is actively portraying itself as a key player in providing security. This position is discussed in India's revised maritime military strategy 2015 titled, 'Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy' (IMSS, 2015) which defines the concept as, "the state of actual security available in an area, upon balancing prevailing threats, inherent risks and rising challenges in the maritime environment, against the ability to monitor, contain and counter all of these". This highlighted India's strategic position and responsibility for regional stability. Taking on this role is becoming increasingly crucial. The global landscape is complex, with economic uncertainties and potential conflicts. However, India's strong economic growth positions it well to fulfil this security obligation (Kumar, 2019).

The defence minister, Rajnath Singh, further reiterated this at the multi-agency Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) exercise 'Samanvay 2022, that in recent years India has emerged as a regional power and net security provider as well as improved its ability to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to its citizens and regional partners. Further, he asserted that under SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) proposed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India is working with several partners to ensure economic growth and security in the region, while also countering threats such as natural disasters. He expressed, "We have strengthened multilateral partnerships through engagement via regional mechanisms. This has improved interoperability, enabling faster response in crisis situations" (PIB, 2022). Through all these highlighted positions and commitment to the Indian Navy as the first responder to disasters, gained confidence among the small coastal countries for its position as a net security provider.

Gaining an increased role, the Indian Navy also plays a crucial role in combating sea piracy in the expansive Indian Ocean. Being a dominant naval force in the region, India has significantly increased its presence in the region. Recently, in December 2023, it introduced a new operation called Operation Sankalp. This operation has seen more than 5,000 personnel and 20 ships being deployed, successfully preventing numerous pirate attacks. Notably, in March 2024, elite MARCOS commandos intervened swiftly to thwart Somali pirates from hijacking the MV Ruen, a Bulgarian commercial ship (Kumar, 2024).

Beyond combating piracy, the Indian Navy has also been instrumental in saving lives. A testament to this is the successful rescue of 23 Pakistani crew members from a hijacked Iranian fishing vessel in April. Moreover, their continuous presence has been pivotal in ensuring the security of trade routes and facilitating the safe passage of essential commodities such as fertilisers, crude oil, and finished products across the Indian Ocean. Through vigilant patrolling and resolute actions, the Indian Navy is playing a critical role in upholding maritime security and stability in the region (Deccan Herald, 2024).

However, the growing presence of China as an extra-regional player creates challenges to India's position and dominance. Hence, this presence in the region creates competition, confrontation, and sometimes even collision-like situations because of its growing ambitions for the region. Previously for China, the IOR was not part of its strategic thinking because it assumed major threats from Japan, so its area of interest was the South China Sea. But now, things have changed drastically, its priorities have changed and China considers its presence in IOR as a matter of subsistence.

### **China's Strategic Presence in the Indian Ocean**

In the context of historical connection to the Indian Ocean China had simply no record of sailing before the 11<sup>th</sup> century, but in the 14<sup>th</sup> century Zheng He, the great admiral of the Ming dynasty with his seven voyages, entered the Ocean (Medcalf, 2020:41-43). Despite this early presence, there is a lack of evidence indicating Chinese presence/activity in the Indian Ocean between Zheng He and the Economic reforms led by Deng Xiaoping. However, after opting for economic reforms in 1978, China started its attention towards the Indian Ocean. This shift coincides with a booming industrial sector fuelled by a liberalized economy. That led to surging demand for energy and raw materials necessitating secure trade routes and regional stability for China's continued growth. This objective of security and stability has led to a more assertive Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean. It showcases importance of the Indian Ocean for China's national security and economic prosperity which is intricately linked to China's trade, investments, energy

resources, and territorial integrity, making its security a vital component of China's overall development strategy.

To fulfil its aspirations and requirements, China has increased its strategic presence and influence in the Indian Ocean since the beginning of the twenty-first century. It has deployed submarines, intelligence ships, and research vessels, which suggest its long-term plans in the region. China's focus has primarily been on economic and commercial ventures and increased naval activities to intensify its engagement in the IOR. However, this rise in Chinese involvement has raised concerns among analysts in America and India about potential military advantages China could gain through tactics like Development/aid financing, which is popularly called "debt-trap diplomacy." India has been compelled to take a more active role in addressing its strategic concerns due to China's growing presence in the region (Singh et al, 2023: 86-89). These Chinese efforts aim to strengthen their presence and power in the Indian Ocean region, especially in India's neighbouring countries and key littoral states, which fuelled the perception of an encirclement policy of China, often referred to as "String of Pearls" (Khurana, 2008:1-2).

China's increasing influence in India's neighbouring countries and the small coastal nations of the Indian Ocean has transformed the regional security landscape, challenging India's longstanding position as the dominant power and security provider. China has been gradually expanding its strategic presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, as countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, Maldives, and Sri Lanka have started to view India's dominance as neglectful of their concerns and challenges. Previously, India held a dominant position in the region as the primary security provider without facing significant challenges due to the absence of any other dominant players. However, China has changed this dynamic. Through initiatives like the Maritime Silk Road, and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has been collaborating with India's neighbours and meeting the growing infrastructure needs in South Asia, bolstering its influence in the region. It has positioned itself as an alternative to India for these countries, offering weapons, development grants, soft loans, lines of credit, and infrastructure development loans, while disregarding the norms and standards of various international organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Official Development Assistance (ODA), and Moody's (Sarangi, 2022: 43-62).

### **India's Responses to the Chinese Presence**

India has implemented several strategies to strengthen its position in neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Seychelles, and Djibouti as a response to China's influence in the region. Over the past eight years, India has provided approximately USD 8 billion in four lines of credit for infrastructure development across various sectors in Bangladesh. These sectors encompass roads, railways, shipping, and ports. Notable projects include the Akhaura-Agartala Cross Border Rail Link, the 1320-megawatt Maitree Super Thermal Power Plant, and the Khulna-Mongla Port Rail line (Business Post, 2024). Furthermore, a sub-regional initiative known as Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal (BBIN) has been proposed to enhance economic cooperation and connectivity among these four countries (Pal, 2023). Moreover, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, formed in 1997, includes seven member states—Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and India—to foster economic growth and social progress.

India and Myanmar have strengthened their bilateral relations by participating in regional groups such as BIMSTEC and Mekong-Ganga Cooperation. This has given India greater access to ASEAN countries, thereby enhancing the significance of its Act East Policy. Recognising the importance of this partnership, India has extended grant-in-aid assistance of almost Rs 4000 crore to support various projects. These projects include the Multi-Modal Kaladan project, the trilateral highway project, which establishes an East-West corridor connecting India's Northeast with Myanmar and Thailand, as well as the Rhi-Tiddim road. Most recently, in April 2024, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs approved a proposal by India Ports Global, a state-owned company, to oversee operations at the Sittwe Port in Myanmar (Consulate General of India, 2017).

The relationship between Sri Lanka and India is deep-rooted and has proven to be mutually beneficial over the years. India has emerged as Sri Lanka's largest trading partner, with the bilateral trade between

the two countries exceeding USD 5.45 billion in 2021. In addition to trade, India's investments in Sri Lanka have surpassed USD 1.7 billion since 2005, encompassing key sectors such as tourism, manufacturing, and telecommunications, thereby playing a significant role in bolstering Sri Lanka's economy.

The India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement, established in 2000, has played a pivotal role in fostering trade and has been instrumental in driving the growth of over 60% of Sri Lankan exports. Moreover, India has actively contributed to Sri Lanka's development, with a focus on infrastructure, education, and cultural exchange. During Sri Lanka's recent economic challenges, India has worked in close collaboration with international institutions to provide support for debt restructuring, further solidifying the relationship between the two countries. Notably, the security cooperation between India and Sri Lanka is robust, with regular joint military exercises conducted between their navies, reflecting a commitment to ensuring regional stability and security (High Commission of India, 2024).

India has been making efforts to strengthen its presence on Seychelles' Assumption Island to protect important Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) and to counter China's base in Djibouti. However, these efforts faced obstacles after a new government took office in Seychelles in 2020 (Hardy, 2022).

Djibouti, a small country located at the entrance of the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, holds immense strategic significance due to its proximity to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. India has been focusing on enhancing its military presence in several nations, and Djibouti is one of them. In addition to Djibouti, India has expanded its military cooperation with countries such as Ethiopia, Mozambique, Ivory Coast, the Philippines, Armenia, and Poland. This move aligns with India's efforts to strengthen its partnerships and extend its influence in various regions (Hardy, 2022).

Apart from these India's efforts, to balance all mentioned and non-mentioned Chinese influences, incursion and assertive presence through its String of Pearls, Maritime Silk Road and Belt and Road Initiative in the IOR and other parts of the globe, India has adopted three distinct approaches:

- (i) External Balancing: through alliance-building creation with like-minded countries in IOR and the rest of the world such as Neighbourhood First Policy, Quad, Quad Plus, IORARC, Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, Project Mausam, Project SAGAR, India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region, Act East Policy, India ASEAN AOIP\_IPOI Cooperation, India- ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, etc.
- (ii) Internal Balancing: Increasing capacity, Military modernisation, and critical infrastructure building through Sagar Mala, Operation Sankalp, Sukoon and Rahat, Coastal Security Exercise 'Malta Abhiyaan' at Kolkata.
- (iii) Limited Hard Balancing which combines both: to give a better response to the Chinese presence in India's neighbourhood and IOR. India is also making close contact with the countries in the South Sea region like Vietnam, Philippines, Japan, Mongolia, Singapore, and ASEAN countries to counter China (Khan, 2023).

### **Justification for India's New Maritime Strategy**

India's previous edition of Maritime Military Strategy was focused on only safeguarding its territorial water with limited capacity and vision, to play any impactful role which is given by the region. But there are ample such factors available to introduce a new maritime strategy document that is given here:

First, Chinese presence in its neighbouring and small island countries filled up with China's infrastructure investment and developmental aid and encircled through its string of pearls policy. To save its interest in the region and keep the Indian Ocean free and open.

Second, the vision, ambitions and aspirations have changed in terms of vision it has to become a blue maritime water power, ambition to safeguard the region from any atrocities and prevent any extra-regional from interfering in the internal matters and impacting their peaceful environment and in terms of aspiration India wanted to provide impactful a net security provider, protect this region from traditional and traditional security threats like proliferation of nuclear weapons and it's crucial technology prevent smuggling any kind of people, goods and animals protect the region from dumping of sea waste as well as to tackle arising Chinese presence.

Third, the absolute majority government established in India was full of confidence in the government, and people had the aspiration to put India as the leader of the world. It can be said that on the global stage, India and Indians should be treated with great respect. Fourth, India is the largest receiver of remittances from abroad, especially from Gulf countries, and this region is prone to sea piracy, so it is necessary to introduce a maritime strategy that can protect India and its people beyond its territory and can secure India's interests abroad. Fifth, India's growth trajectory is such that it may become 3<sup>rd</sup> largest economy in the next 5 five years, given the assumption of the World Economic Forum (2024).

The above-given reasons and the justification given below by the Indian Navy for a new maritime strategy are enough to introduce a new maritime strategy. The Indian Navy had given two justifications for issuing a revised maritime strategy. First, the rising complexity of threats where the differences between traditional and non-traditional risks are increasingly fading, so the demand for a maritime security framework that is both holistic and unified is needed. Second, in order to provide freedom to use the seas for India's national interests, it is necessary to ensure that the seas remain secure (Limaye,2017). Following the Pakistan-origin terrorist attacks on Mumbai on November 26, 2008, India has shifted its policy from "Freedom to use the Sea" to "Ensuring Secure Seas" (IMSS, 2015). This revised 'Ensuring Secure Sea: India Maritime Security Strategy- 2015' gave increased focus to these areas, firstly, "the safety and security of seaborne trade and energy, secondly, the importance of maintaining freedom of navigation and strengthening the international legal regime at sea, particularly the United Nation Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and thirdly, the considerable scope and value in understanding cooperation and coordination between various navies, to counter common threats at sea...(because) there is potential for simultaneous cooperation even amidst competition, which can be promoted through maritime efforts and is a focus area in the revised strategy" (IMSS, 2015).

This change in the Indian Navy's approach towards maritime diplomacy signalled a readiness to play a broader role in the Indo-Pacific region. This shift is characterised by a reduced emphasis on traditional war-fighting capabilities and a newfound emphasis on becoming a "net provider of security," aimed at fostering a conducive maritime environment. The document also indicates a willingness to engage in ad hoc cooperation beyond United Nations missions. Additionally, it highlights the integration of the Indian Navy's benign, constabulary, and diplomatic functions into its overarching strategies. This renewed security strategy identifies areas in IOR according to the priorities and classifies them into primary and secondary, as given in Table-1:

**Table-1.** Geography of India's Maritime Missions

Primary Area of Interest	Secondary Areas of Interest
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>India's maritime domain encompasses its vast coastline and island territories, extending outward to include internal waters, territorial seas, the contiguous zone, exclusive economic zone and the continental shelf.</li> <li>It encompasses the water of the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, and Andaman Sea along with their respective littoral states.</li> <li>The Persian Gulf and its coastal regions are important for two main reasons: they are the primary provider of oil and gas to the United States, and they host a massive community of over seven million Indian expatriates.</li> <li>The Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, Red Sea, and coastal regions.</li> <li>IOR island countries therein and the East Coast of Africa coastal regions and the South-West Indian Ocean.</li> <li>The major choke points and across the Indian Ocean, including the Eight/Nine-degree channel; six-degree Channel, Straits Hormuz, Malacca, Bab-el-Mandeb Singapore, Sunda, and Lombok; etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The South-East Indian Ocean, including sea routes to the Pacific Ocean and coastal regions in the vicinity.</li> <li>Western Pacific Oceans, and their coastal regions, South and East China Seas.</li> <li>Southern Indian Ocean Region, including Antarctica.</li> <li>the West Coast of Africa, and their coastal regions, the Mediterranean Sea,</li> <li>Other areas of national interest based on consideration of the Indian diaspora, overseas investments, and political relations.</li> </ul>

**Source:** (Limaye, 2017; Indian Navy, 2015)

## India's Strategic Partnerships and Initiatives in the IOR

As discussed above, the correlative relationship between India and the Indian Ocean, holds great strategic significance for India, encompassing its protection and economic well-being. India has fostered strategic partnerships with key regional players to protect its interests and encourage regional stability. These partnerships encompass various areas of cooperation, including maritime security, defence collaboration, and economic development initiatives. India collaborates with like-minded countries the United States, Japan, and Australia, forming the core of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). This grouping focuses on maritime security cooperation, counter-terrorism efforts, and encouraging a free and open Indo-Pacific. Beyond the QUAD, India has established strong bilateral ties with regional players like France. This partnership strengthens maritime domain awareness and facilitates joint naval exercises to deter piracy and ensure freedom of navigation (Bharti et al, 2023).

Furthermore, India recognizes the strategic importance of island nations scattered across the IOR. It has cultivated close partnerships with countries like Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and Seychelles, providing them with patrol vessels, coastal radar systems, and training for their security forces. These partnerships contribute to regional maritime security and enhance India's influence in the IOR (Kumar, 2020).

India's strategic partnerships extend beyond security. It leverages its economic clout to foster regional development through initiatives like the 'Security and Growth for All in the Region' (SAGAR). SAGAR vision on capacity building, infrastructure development, and blue economy initiatives in IOR nations. These economic partnerships create a shared stake in regional stability and prosperity, strengthening India's strategic position in the IOR (Lukaszuk, 2025). Despite these robust partnerships, India faces challenges. The growing influence of China in the IOR necessitates a balancing act, and ensuring regional consensus on security issues can be complex (Singh, 2023). Moving forward, India must continue to deepen its existing partnerships, forge new collaborations, and effectively utilize economic statecraft to solidify its position as a leading security provider and economic partner in the IOR.

To cope with and counter the growing Chinese presence in IOR and other regions, where it hampers India's interests, the government of India has been pursuing various strategic moves in order to protect the national interest. These are;

### 1. Necklace of Diamonds

"Necklace of Diamonds" was termed by then Foreign Secretary Lalit Mansingh in 2011 to describe India's answer to China's "String of Pearls" strategy. Through this move, India is outreaching its naval bases and making better relations with strategically located coastal countries to counter China's assertiveness. India is making its bases in such a way to prevent India from China's encirclement, as follows:

**( i ) Changi Naval Base, Singapore:** India and Singapore signed an agreement in 2018 to give access to this base to the Indian Navy, which can use this base for refuelling, sailing and rearming in the South China Sea.

**( ii ) Sabang Port, Indonesia:** In 2018, India got entrance to the Malacca Strait, which is situated at the right of this choke point and through this, many Chinese trade and crude oil passes, and India's presence can control Chinese activities.

**( iii ) Duqm Port, Oman:** In 2018, India got military access to this port, which is situated on the southeastern seaboard of Oman.

**( iv ) Assumption Island, Seychelles:** In 2015, India and Seychelles signed an agreement for a naval facility, which will provide strategic military access and mitigate China's expanding influence.

**( v ) Chabahar Port, Iran:** In 2016, to gain easy access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, India signed an agreement with Iran for the construction of a port (Javaid,2020).

### 2. SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)

SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) was initiated by India in 2015 with the primary aim of addressing regional challenges such as providing humanitarian aid to neighbouring maritime nations and

combating non-state threats like piracy in the Indian Ocean. The aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, recurring earthquakes, the looming danger of rising sea levels, and water shortages in the Maldives underscore the significance of this endeavour. India's broader objective is to establish itself as the principal regional power in the Indian Ocean, capable of delivering humanitarian assistance and ensuring security across the entire region. Additionally, SAGAR is designed to complement India's Act East Policy, Sagar Mala Project, and Project Mausam. Under this mission, India dispatched INS Kesari to give COVID-19-related assistance to the coastal nations of Mauritius, Maldives, Madagascar, Comoros, and Seychelles. The ship returned on 28th June 2020 after travelling 7500 nautical miles over 55 days (Goud, 2023: 62-63; Bhal,2024).

### **3. Sagar Mala Programme**

The Sagar Mala programme is the pivotal programme under the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, which promotes port-led development in the country (Ministry of Shipping, 2020). The core vision of this programme is to reduce the logistics costs of import, export, and domestic trade through minimal infrastructure investment. This programme is focused on strengthening India's coastal economy, wherein, along with the modernisation of old ports, new ones are being built. We believe that our Ports are gateways to development. By April 2024, the initiative had outlined a total of 839 projects, which represent a massive infrastructure investment of Rs 5.8 lakh crore. As of April 2024, around 839 projects have been identified with an estimated infrastructure investment of Rs 5.8 Lakh crore. (Ministry of Finance, 2024; Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, 2023). Even though the programme faces various challenges, including timely investment mobilisation and budgetary support, environmental concerns, conflict between the centre and state, etc.

### **4. Act East Policy**

Given the significance of India in the region for its crucial position also attached to the responsibility for ensuring peace, security, and stability here. This to some extent, has already been understood by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, causing it to reshape India's 'Look East Policy' into 'Act East Policy.' At the ASEAN-India summit in Myanmar in November 2014, he expressed a clear message about prioritising engagement with Southeast Asia and said, "I also assure you that there will be major improvement in our trade policy and environment...at the earliest" (Kaul, 2016; Singh et al, 2023: 93).

### **5. Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC)**

The IOR-ARC, launched in Mauritius in 1997, was created to serve as a platform for regional cooperation aiming to drive economic growth through trade, investment, and regional cooperation initiatives, and technical exchange (Indian Ocean Rim Association, 2024). India is a founding member of IOR-ARC. This region is recognised for its rich diversity in language, religion, and culture and is associated with India's destiny by name. The countries in the region differ in terms of size, area, and economic strength. Currently, IOR-ARC comprises 20 member countries, and its principal governing body is the Council of Ministers at the level of Foreign Ministers (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015).

### **6. Quad and Quad Plus**

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, commonly known as the Quad. It works as an informal strategic partnership between four key nations: India, Japan, Australia and the United States. It was proposed by Shinzo Abe in 2007 but then fell into dormancy for nearly a decade and was resurrected in 2017, reflecting changing attitudes in the region towards China's growing influence. to promote a free, open, prosperous, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. The Quad is known as a grouping of maritime democracies and is sustained through regular meetings, summits, information sharing, and joint military exercises among its member countries.

The Quad's main goal is to maintain the strategic maritime routes in the Indo-Pacific free from hard or soft influence. It also aims to diminish Chinese dominance in the region, establish a rules-based world order, ensure freedom of navigation, and encourage a liberalised trading system. Additionally, the grouping intends to give alternative debt financing or development grants for nations in the Indo-Pacific region (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015). The Quad leaders are discussing various recent world issues,

including connectivity, infrastructure, maritime security, humanitarian assistance, cybersecurity, critical emerging technologies, disaster relief, climate change, pandemics, and education. Additionally, the Quad Plus is an extension of the Quad, involving additional countries interested in a free and open Indo-Pacific. South Korea, New Zealand, and Vietnam have participated in Quad Plus discussions on specific issues (Rajagopalan, 2020).

## 7. The Malabar Exercise

The Malabar series of exercises commenced in 1992 as an annual bilateral naval drill between the United States and India. Later, Japan participated in naval exercises in 2015, and the Australian Navy also participated in Malabar 2020. It will enhance synergy, interoperability, and cooperation between the navies of the four countries. The exercise emphasises the alignment of countries' perspectives on maritime issues and their collective dedication to an open and inclusive Indo-Pacific, as well as a rule-based international order (PIB, 2021).

## Conclusion

The Indian Ocean is crucial in many ways for India and the rest of the world. Since India is a determining power in the Indian Ocean region, its maritime strategies and initiatives have a huge weight in maintaining the region's peace, stability, and security. India's clearly defined intentions and careful actions to protect the sea lanes from traditional and non-traditional security threats elucidate its potential to become the kingpin of the region. In addition, India's efforts to protect and prevent this region from any kind of atrocities by actively involving in 'Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief' (HADR) operations through its well-designed maritime security strategy signal its readiness to play a broader role in the region and world at large. India's strategic and policy initiatives in the region in the last decades, particularly, Project SAGAR, Sagar Mala, Project Mausam, Act East Policy, Quad and Quad plus, Malabar exercises, etc., demonstrated its aspirations and commitments to become a net security provider in the region. It emphasises a greater role of India in shaping the political, economic and security architecture of the region through deeper engagement and economic integration with the multilateral and regional institutions. Against the backdrop of the challenges posed by China in the region, India has also been promoting security dialogues and cooperation with all major stakeholders in the region to strengthen security partnerships while crafting a new maritime security framework and a rule-based order in the region. However, the success of India's maritime security strategy will be tested with time and its needs perseverance and patience to cope and counter with the changing strategic landscape of the Indian Ocean region.

**Acknowledgement:** *The authors express their gratitude to the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi, for its kind support for this research.*

## References

- Agnihotri, Kamlesh (2023), "Congruence between India's and Republic of Korea's Maritime Strategies: Portends for Synergistic Collaboration in the Indo-Pacific", *Korea Institute of Maritime Strategy Website*, available at: [https://www.academia.edu/112593091/Congruence\\_between\\_Indias\\_and\\_Republic\\_of\\_Koreas\\_Maritime\\_Strategies\\_Portends\\_for\\_Synergistic\\_Collaboration\\_in\\_the\\_Indo\\_Pacific?uc-sb-sw=35127666](https://www.academia.edu/112593091/Congruence_between_Indias_and_Republic_of_Koreas_Maritime_Strategies_Portends_for_Synergistic_Collaboration_in_the_Indo_Pacific?uc-sb-sw=35127666), site accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> April 2024.
- Ahmad, Talmiz (2024), "Indian Ocean: By the numbers", *Frontline*, 7 March, available at: <https://frontline.thehindu.com/world-affairs/indian-ocean-region-by-the-numbers-vital-hub-for-global-commerce-strategic-chokepoints-vast-oil-reserves/article67891133.ece> Site accessed on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2024.
- Baruah, M., Darshana, Labh, Nitya, and Greely, Jessica (2023), "Mapping the Indian Ocean Region", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, India. Available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/06/mapping-the-indian-ocean-region?lang=en>, Site accessed on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2024.
- Bhal, Ipsha, (2024), India's Maritime Security: Relevance of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) in Achieving India's Blue Water Ambitions, *Phadke Journal of Strategic Studies*, Thoothukudi, Available at: <https://pjss.viyug.org.in/2024/02/14/indias-maritime-security-ipsha-bhalsagar/>, Site accessed on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2024.
- Bharti, M. S. and Singh, A. (2023) "India and France bilateral partnership for advancing strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific region: Special reference to the Indo-French strategic partnership", *Cogent Social Sciences*, Vol.9, No.1. available at: doi: 10.1080/23311886.2023.2215561, site accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2024.

Consulate General of India (2024) "India-Myanmar Relations", available at: <https://www.cgimandalay.gov.in/page/india-myanmar-relations/>, site accessed 15 May 2024.

Deccan Herald (2024), "Indian Navy frees hijacked Iranian fishing vessel, 23 Pakistani crew members rescued", 30 March, available at: <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/indian-navy-frees-hijacked-iranian-fishing-vessel-23-pakistani-crew-members-rescued-2958361>, site accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2024.

Garza, Andrew de la (2014), "Command of the Coast: The Mughal Navy and Regional Strategy," *World History Connected*, available at: [https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/12.1/forum\\_delagarza.html](https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/12.1/forum_delagarza.html), site accessed on 22<sup>th</sup> April 2024.

Goud, Sidda, R. (2023), *China in the Indian Ocean Region: India's Security Challenges*, Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi.

Hardy, Dennis (2022), "Will India Try Again for a Military Base in Seychelles?", *The Diplomat*, 26<sup>th</sup> July, available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/will-india-try-again-for-a-military-base-in-seychelles/>, site accessed 10 May 2024.

High Commission of India (2024) "Economic & Trade Engagement", available at: [https://hccolombo.gov.in/Economic\\_Trade\\_Engagement](https://hccolombo.gov.in/Economic_Trade_Engagement), site accessed 10 May 2024.

IMSS (2015), "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy", *Indian Navy, Naval Strategic Publication (NSP) 1.2*, October 2015, Available at: <https://bharatshakti.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Indian-Maritime-Security-Strategy-Documents-25Jan16.pdf> site accessed on 12 March 2024

Indian Ocean Rim Association, (2024), History of IORA, IORA Secretariat, Ebene, Available at: <https://www.iora.int/en/about/about-iora/history>, site accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> April 2024.

Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy), *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy* (New Delhi: Directorate of Strategy, Concepts and Transformation, 2015), 12.

International Seabed Authority (2023), "The Government of India Submits Two Applications for Approval of Plans of Work for Seabed Exploration in the Indian Ocean", available at: <https://www.isa.org/im/news/the-government-of-india-submits-two-applications-for-approval-of-plans-of-work-for-seabed-exploration-in-the-indian-ocean>, site accessed on 26<sup>th</sup> April 2024.

Jaishankar, Dhruva (2016), "Indian Ocean region: A pivot for India's growth", *Brookings*, Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/indian-ocean-region-a-pivot-for-indias-growth/>, site accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> April 2024.

Javaid, Arfa, (2020), What is Necklace of Diamonds Strategy?, Jagran Josh, New Delhi, Available at: <https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/necklace-of-diamond-strategy-1592404137-1> site accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> April 2024.

Kaul, Man Mohini, (2016), *India's Look East to Act East Policy Tracking the Opportunity and Challenges in the Indo-Pacific*, Pentagon Press, New Delhi.

Khan, Ahmad, Tanveer (2023), "Limited Hard Balancing: Explaining India's Counter Response to Chinese Encirclement", *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 9-108, available at: <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3371481/limited-hard-balancing-explaining-indias-counter-response-to-chinese-encircleme/>, site accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2024.

Khurana, Gurpreet S. (2008), "China's 'String of Pearls' in the Indian Ocean and Its Security Implications", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 32, Issue 1, pp-1-39

Kumar, Dhiraj (2019), "Indian Ocean Region (IOR): India as a Net Security Provider- The Way Ahead", *Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, Vol. CXLIX, No. 616, available at: <https://www.usiofindia.org/publication-journal/indian-ocean-region-ior-india-as-a-net-security-provider-the-way-ahead.html>, site accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2024.

Kumar, Hari, R. (2024), "Will ensure IOR is free, safe: Navy chief amid pirate strikes", *Times of India*, 24 March, available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/will-ensure-ior-is-free-safe-navy-chief-amid-pirate-strikes/articleshow/108739046.cms>, site accessed on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2024.

Kumar, R. (2020), "India's Strategic Interests and Partnership with Island States of Africa in the Western Indian Ocean Region", *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, Vol.7, No.2, pp.227-243 available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347797020938996>, site accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2024.

Limaye, Satu (2017), "Weighted West, Focused on the Indian Ocean and Cooperating across the Indo-Pacific: The Indian Navy's New Maritime Strategy, Capabilities, and Diplomacy", *CNA Analysis & Solutions* pp.1-55. Available at: [https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA\\_Files/pdf/drm-2016-u-013939-final2.pdf](https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/drm-2016-u-013939-final2.pdf), site accessed on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2024.

- Łukaszuk, Tomasz, (2025), *India's Role in the Indian Ocean Region in the 21st Century: Maritime Governance Perspective*, Routledge, New Delhi.
- Medcalf, Rory (2020), *Indo-Pacific Empire China, America, and the Contest for the World's Pivotal Region*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.
- Ministry of External Affairs (2015), *Speeches and Statements*, 20 March, available at: <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24994>, site accessed on 25 May 2024.
- Ministry of External Affairs (2024), "IORARC: Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation", available at: <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/IORARC.pdf>, site accessed 15<sup>th</sup> May 2024.
- Ministry of Finance, (2024), *Economic Survey 2023-24*, Government of India, New Delhi, Available at: <https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/economicsurvey/> site accessed on 25 May 2024.
- Ministry of Shipping, (2020), *Sagarmala Programme*, Press Information Bureau, New Delhi, Available at: <https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=200158&reg=3&lang=2> site accessed 25<sup>th</sup> April 2024.
- Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways (2023), "*Shipping Annual Report 2023*" available at: <https://shipmin.gov.in/sites/default/files/Shipping%20Annual%20Report%20English%20compressed.pdf>, site accessed 25<sup>th</sup> April 2024.
- Mukherjee, R. (2020), "Chaos as opportunity: the United States and world order in India's grand strategy", *Contemporary Politics*, 26(4), pp. 420-438. doi: 10.1080/13569775.2020.1777040. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13569775.2020.1777040>, site accessed on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2024.
- Padmanabhan, Vishnu (2018), "Can Indian Ocean region power global growth?", *Mint*, 12 October, available at: <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/45UFVgOHcXYfK36vALLrCN/Can-Indian-Ocean-regionpower-globalgrowth.html>, site accessed on 27<sup>th</sup> March 2024.
- Pal, Parthaprati (2023), "Intra-BBIN trade: Opportunities and challenges", *Observer Research Foundation*, 11<sup>th</sup> May, available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/intra-bbin-trade-opportunities-and-challenges>, site accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2024.
- Paul, J. (2019), "US and India: Emerging offshore balancing in Asia", *India Review*, 18(3), pp. 221-242. doi: 10.1080/14736489.2019.1616258, available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14736489.2019.1616258>, site accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2024.
- PIB (2017), "India's Exclusive Rights to Explore Polymetallic Nodules from Central Indian Ocean Seabed Basin Extended by Five Years", available at: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1500266> site accessed on 25 April 2024.
- PIB (2021), "Malabar Naval Exercises", 08 February, available at: <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1696140>, site accessed on 25 May 2024.
- PIB (2022), "Press Release: Specific Documents", pdf, Available at: <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2022/apr/doc202242246601.pdf>, site accessed 10<sup>th</sup> May 2024.
- Rajagopalan, Rajeswari, (2020), *Towards a Quad-Plus Arrangement?*, Perth USAsia Centre, Perth, Available at: <https://perthusasia.edu.au/research-and-insights/publications/towards-a-quad-plus-arrangement/> site accessed 10<sup>th</sup> May 2024.
- Sarangi, Subhasish (2022), *Maritime corridors in the Indo-Pacific: Geopolitical Implications for India*, Pentagon Press, New Delhi.
- Scott, David (2006), "India's Grand Strategy for the Indian Ocean: Mahanian Vision", *Asia-Pacific Review*, vol.13, No.2, pp. 97-129. Available at <https://d-scott.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/india-mahanianvisions.pdf>. Site accessed on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2024.
- Scott, David (2015), "The Indian Ocean as India's Ocean", in Malone, M., David, Mohan, Raja, C., Raghavan, Srinath (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 573-587.
- Singh, Bawa, et.al. (2023), *New Great Game in the Indo-Pacific Rediscovering India's Pragmatism and Paradoxes*, Routledge, New York.
- The Business Post (2024), "India actively boosts Bangladesh's infrastructure, economy", 23 February, available at: <https://businesspostbd.com/economy/india-actively-boosts-bangladeshs-infrastructure-economy> site accessed 10 May 2024.
- World Economic Forum (2024), "How India can seize its moment to become the world's third-largest economy", Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/01/how-india-can-seize-its-moment-to-become-the-world-s-third-largest-economy/>, accessed on 26<sup>th</sup> March 2024.