

## **Geo-strategic Dimension of India's Foreign Policy in Indian Ocean: Opportunities and Challenge in 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Indian Ocean has strategic location. This is the only Ocean in the world which names after a country. India is emerging as economic and military power in 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the present context, India is hungry for the energy which is needed to boost economic growth. In 2015, India unveiled its strategic vision for the Indian Ocean as Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). It is increasing recognition and cooperation of maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region. India's Maritime Doctrine was adopted in 2004 which attempted to define the maritime seascape and identify the contours of maritime strategy while defining the role of the navy in maritime India. This research paper has made an attempt to discuss Geo-strategic dimension of India's foreign policy with reference to Indian Ocean in 21<sup>st</sup> Century. There are various issues (both opportunities and challenges) related to Indian Ocean such as geo-strategic dimension of Indian Ocean, choke points, emergence of India as economic power, Indian Maritime Doctrine and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) have been discussed. India and China want to control Indian Ocean. China is influencing countries in Indian Ocean Region via its infrastructure development which is a big concern for India.

**Key Words :** Geo-strategy, India, Foreign Policy, Indian Ocean, Opportunity, Challenges, 21<sup>st</sup> Century

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Indian Ocean, with an area of 68.56 million sq km, is the third largest body of water in the world and covers about 20% of the earth's surface. The Indian Ocean is separated from the Atlantic Ocean by the meridian of 20° east and from the Pacific by the meridian of 147° east. The Northern limit of the Indian Ocean is the Persian Gulf, Africa forms the western wall, while Malaysia, Myanmar, and the insular continuations of Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Australia form the eastern wall. The Asian Continent forms a roof over the Indian Ocean northern extent, and distinguishes it from the Pacific and Atlantic, which lie from the north to south like great highways. The great peninsular landmasses, jutting out for a thousand miles, characterises the Indian Ocean and lends it its name (Ministry of Defence (Navy), 2009).

As the third largest ocean woven together by trade routes, commands control of major sea-lanes carrying

half of the world's container ships, one third of the world's bulk cargo traffic and two thirds of the world's oil shipments, the Indian Ocean remains an important lifeline to international trade and transport. Home to nearly 2.7 billion people, Member States whose shores are washed by the ocean are rich in cultural diversity and richness in languages, religions, traditions, arts and cuisines (Attri, 2020). India's policy on maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is based on the approach of SAGAR- Security And Growth for All in the Region. The vision of SAGAR has been articulated by the Prime Minister of India as follow: "*Our vision for the Indian Ocean Region is rooted in advancing cooperation in our region and to use our capabilities for the benefit of all in our common maritime home*" (Sarangi, 2019).

This research paper has been divided into different headings. There are certain elements of change such as technological change, energy demands, economic growth, trades, security and putting 'India first' approach are key elements which decides foreign policy in 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Indian Ocean Rim Association (AORA) has been discussed to explore its importance in the Indian Ocean Region. Indian Maritime Doctrine has been discussed and its significance in the present environment to secure the region becomes utmost important. There are some key factors such as China, USA, Japan and many other coastal countries in the Indian Ocean region play very strategic role in the Indian Ocean. China's role in the Indian Ocean has been discussed along with future prospects for India to counter China in the region.

### **Objectives and research method:**

There are two main objectives of this research paper which are following:

1. To understand the Geo-strategic dimension of India Ocean.
2. To understand elements of change in India's foreign policy in 21<sup>st</sup> Century with special reference to Indian Ocean.

This research is descriptive as well as exploratory in nature. It has made an attempt to describe certain concepts such as Geo-strategy, Indian Foreign policy and Indian Ocean. The existing literatures available in form of books, journal, periodicals, government reports, and newspaper articles have been used to describe various concepts and India's foreign policy in 21<sup>st</sup> Century in context of Indian Ocean Region.

### **Geo-strategic Dimension of Indian Ocean:**

The Indian Ocean littoral which spans South Asia, West Asia, Australia, and Eastern and South Africa, is home to 2.7 billion people. It is one of the world's youngest regions - the average age of Indian Ocean littoral is under 30. The region is rich in natural resources, has critical fish stocks, and is home to some of the world's fastest growing economies. 40 per cent of the world's offshore oil production comes from the Indian Ocean. 80 per cent of the world's oil shipments travel through its waters, with the region at the heart of connections that extend on to the Middle East, Africa, East Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Aside from economic connections, environmental threats, including rising levels of pollution and climate change, increasingly tie the future prosperity of Indian Ocean states together (Davis and Balls, 2019).

Indian Ocean Region has following features: Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is rich in natural resources. Around 40% of the world's offshore oil production of almost 15% of the world's total fishing take place in the Indian Ocean

basin. Poly Metallic Nodules (PMNs) containing nickel, cobalt, and iron, and massive sulphide deposits of manganese, copper, iron, zinc, silver, and gold present in sizeable quantities on the seabed. Indian Ocean coastal sediments are also important sources of titanium, zirconium, tin, zinc, and various rare earth elements (Blue Economy Report, 2018). IOR is third-largest of world's oceanic divisions. It is rapidly expanding its economic activity in the region. It is home to one-third of world's population.

The ocean itself gives the area a physical identity and coherence. Extending northward from Antarctica, it is bounded by eastern Africa to the west, southern Asia to the north, and Indonesia and Australia to the east. The Ocean, third largest in the world, covers about 28 million square miles and includes the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, and the Bay of Bengal in its northern reaches. They vary considerably in terms of their areas, populations and levels of economic development. They may also be divided into a number of sub-regions (Australasia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia and Eastern and Southern Africa), each with their own regional groupings (such as ASEAN, SAARC, GCC and SADC, to name a few). Despite such diversity and differences, these countries are bound together by the Indian Ocean (IORA, 2021). The Indian Ocean region nevertheless has a distinct history, economic geography, and set of cultural ties, environmental story, and regional security architecture.

Trade, in turn, led to migration between the Persian Gulf, the East Coast of Africa, to Melaka in present-day Malaysia. With the movement of people also came the movement of ideas and religions. India's position in the Indian Ocean meant that it has long been central to these migrations. At the turn of the first millennium, the Chola Empire, centred on present day Tamil Nadu, had great influence around the Bay of Bengal and South East Asia. The Chola had profound influence on the artistic styles of South East Asia.

As Sunil Amrith has demonstrated, the Bay of Bengal has a particular history within these networks. It played a long historical role as the thoroughfare between India and China. Indic scripts travelled to South East Asia around the 1st to 5th century. Major Hindu temples, many in the South Indian and Chola style, can be found today in Myanmar, Indonesia, Cambodia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The timeframe for Islam coming to South East Asia is uncertain. It likely began in the 9th century

and was spread gradually over centuries (Davis and Balls, 2019).

Some historians have come to see the Indian Ocean as 'ground zero' for globalization. The arrival of Europeans in the Indian Ocean in the 1400s was the beginning of a major transformation. The Portuguese rounded the Cape of Good Hope after 1497. The Dutch and the English East India Companies emerged in the early 1600s. Still, from the 1500s onward, the Indian Ocean was part of a deeply heterogeneous global system, with an exceptionally diverse set of actors – including states, empires, and sprawling corporate entities (Davis and Balls, 2019).

The present emergence of the Indian Ocean as a geo-strategic region is really an emergence or, perhaps more accurately, a continuation of past patterns. The current superpower rivalry in the area is, in a sense, business as usual. Only the players have changed (Dowdy, & Trood, 1983). The geographic dimension of Indian Ocean has its significance in the region. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century due to acceleration in trade, energy demands, export and import of goods across the world, the Indian Ocean becomes very significant and various choke points became strategically significant.

#### **Choke Points in the Indian Ocean Region:**

The Indian Ocean is distinguished by a land rim on three sides, with maritime access to the region only possible through a few narrow gateways or choke points. The choking of any one of these could cause disruption of seaborne trade, and volatility in oil and commodity prices, leading to upheavals in the global economy. To the East, the Straits of Malacca, Sunda and Lombok connect the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean. The Malacca Strait is the primary route, through which more than 70,000 vessels transit annually. To the west, the busiest shipping lane passes through the Strait of Hormuz, which connects the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean.

These narrow straits/waterways constituting entry/exit choke points of IOR are critical for international trade and commerce. These primary choke points are: - 1. The Suez Canal. 2. The Strait of Hormuz. 3. Bab-el-Mandeb. 4. Mozambique Channel. The Cape of Good Hope. 5. The Straits of Malacca and Singapore. 6. The Sunda Strait. 7. The Lombok Strait. 8. Ombai and Water Straits name (Ministry of Defence (Navy), 2009). Geographically speaking, Indian Ocean is a strategic location for international trading route of oil and gas,

especially through the Strait of Malacca and Straits of Hormuz (Fatima and Jamshed, 2015).

#### **India's foreign policy in 21<sup>st</sup> Century:**

India's foreign policy has been shaped over period of time. India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru were driven by two principal goals. The retention of strategic autonomy in the pursuit of foreign policy to safeguard national interests and the determination to make a major impact on the course of post-World War. Two international relations defined by the Cold War rivalry between the United States of America (US) led Western bloc and the Soviet Union led Eastern bloc (Bhattacharya, 2018).

The fundamental instrument chosen by Nehru to pursue foreign policy goals was non-alignment, which was meant to perform the essential functions of ensuring autonomy of policy and giving the country a significant voice in international relations as the heir to a great civilizational heritage. India's policymakers had to contend with the monumental transformation in the world order following the end of the Cold War while determining and reorienting foreign policy in the new era. Developments included the US as the sole superpower, the evolution of trading blocs such as the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement, the emergence of the European Union and the formation of organisations like the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Bhattacharya, 2018).

Changes in the world scenario coincided with the dramatic turnaround in India's economic and developmental strategy with the initiation of liberalisation and the adoption of a structural adjustment programme in the early 1990s. In the post-cold war era, India policy makers combined elements of both continuity and change. There is general consensus that an analysis of India's foreign policy in the twenty-first century must take into account the dramatic transformation in the country's profile in the last two decades in terms of elements of power.

20<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> Century are characterised with globalization of trade, communication and culture. In this phase rapid developments took place in the world. During both the world wars and cold war, major concentration had remained on the Southern part of the world or in other words the Indian Ocean region mainly because these states were held as colonies by the imperial powers due to the natural resources that were present in this Region (Fatima and Jamshed 2020).

Geo-strategic significance of Indian Ocean would rise further and strengthen because, its littoral states possess more than two thirds of the world's oil reserve, and roughly 35 per cent of the world's gas reserves, 60 per cent of uranium, 40 per cent of gold and 80 per cent of all diamond deposits (Michel *et al.*, 2012).

### **Emergence of India's power in and Indian Ocean:**

The Indian Ocean is very important for India for economic growth. The Indian Ocean is located within the intersection of global trade that connects the international economy of Northern Atlantic and Asia-Pacific, in which almost 90,000 ships convey 9.14 billion tons annually (Jaishankar, 2016).

India's steady and rapid economic growth over the past three decades has augmented its capacity to build hard power capability with military expenditure rising by approximately 350 per cent in nominal terms between 1999 and 2009, including purchases of high-end systems. Nominal expenditure rose from roughly \$10.5 billion in 1999 to \$36.6 billion in 2009 to about \$52.2 billion in 2017 (Bhattacharya, 2018). The scarcity of lines of land communication with the rest of the world has also resulted in increased importance being attached to ocean access and in particular to the strategic choke points where the Indian Ocean is joined to or adjacent to other large bodies of water.

In an effort to diversify sources for arms procurement and reduce dependence on Russia, India has started purchasing American weapon systems as well. It is not interested in just a buyer-seller relationship but prefers a more comprehensive one that includes technology transfer and joint production. India's purchase of American military equipment is expected to touch \$100 billion by 2022 with \$10 billion being spent on homeland security (Bhattacharya, 2018). The cultural geography of the Indian Ocean also contributes to regional coherence. As A.P.S. Bindra writes, 'millenniums before Columbus traversed the Atlantic ... and before Magellan circled the globe, the Indian Ocean had become a ... cultural highway (Dowdy and Trood, 1983).

In South Asia, the unique centrality of India has conferred on the region its common identity and image with shared bonds of culture, ethnicity, language, religion and other civilizational connections. Despite the commonalities, India's centrality has spawned a negative image in the perceptions of neighbours and it is mainly seen as a hegemon bent upon imposing its supremacy on

the region (Bhattacharya, 2018). In Africa, India has identified middle range and regionally dominant countries such as Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa to expand its network, which would consolidate ties in the areas of trade, technology transfer and military cooperation on reciprocal, bilateral and multilateral basis (Ibid). Indian Ocean area is rich in resources and having strategic location, it provides considerable economic diversity, various aspects of economic life lend a measure of support to the notion of emerging geostrategic region. There are three factors which makes different countries to come together: 1. the similar economic profiles of many of the states of the area; 2. the movements toward sub-regional economic co-operation; and 3. the trend toward expansion of intra-region (Dowdy, & Trood, 1983).

India and Indians are central to the story of the Indian Ocean. It is not accidental that this ocean is named for India. Geographically, the Indian sub-continent is at the heart of the ocean. Economically and culturally, people from South Asia have had important roles through its history. For example, peoples on India's west coast have long been connected to the Middle East and East Africa, while present day Tamil Nadu has a large diaspora in South East Asia (Davis and Balls, 2019). For centuries, goods, plants, religion, language, and culture have been spread through the region. Spices, silk, and textiles were commonly traded around the Indian Ocean region prior to colonization. Global trading networks centred on the Indian Ocean enabled textiles originating from Gujarat to be sold around the African coast, down to Indonesia, and, perhaps, even the Northern coast of Australia (Ibid).

Recently, India's Chief of Defence Staff (CoDS) remarked "*the world is witnessing a race for strategic bases in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and it is only going to gain momentum in the times to come*" (The Economics Times, 2020). The increasing strategic salience and coherence of the Indian Ocean region is supported by at least three factors: a proliferation of regional strategic linkages; the Indian Ocean policies of external powers; and the collective indigenous responses to external intrusion (Dowdy and Trood, 1983).

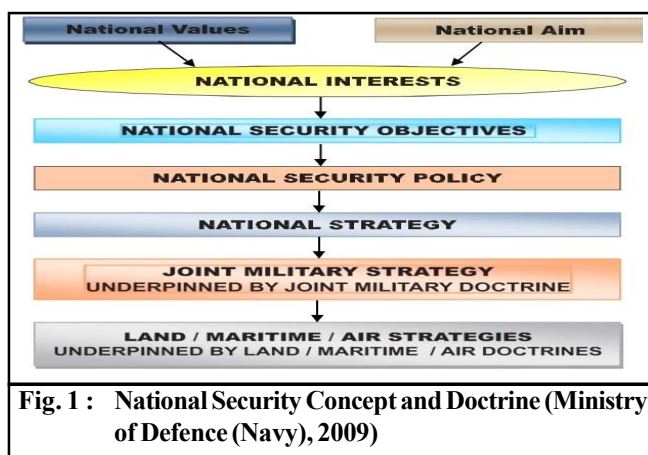
### **Indian Maritime Doctrine (IMD):**

The word 'doctrine' has originated from the Latin word 'doctrina', which implies "a code of beliefs" or "a body of teachings". Doctrine flows from 'concepts'. A concept is an innovative, but tentative idea to solve a problem based upon inferences drawn from observed

facts (Ministry of Defence (Navy), 2009). The Indian Ocean is dominated by two immense bays, the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. Indian Ocean is also an idea. Maritime doctrine is generally shaped by sea power (Agastia and Perwita, 2016). Referring to the Indian Navy document, “*Maritime is a blanket word, together with everything that’s connected to the seas. The Indian Maritime doctrine, however, deals specifically with the ideas and principles of employment of India’s armed service power*” (Ministry of Defence (Navy), 2009).

Indian Maritime Doctrine; a document which was published in 2004 and revised in 2009. This publication is aimed to express the Navy’s maritime strategic outlook, outline the framework of its service, and contribute overall steerage for its progression as a counter force (Ministry of Defence (Navy), 2009). The maritime interest, as seen through the prism of the navy, fall short in defining the constituents for an emerging maritime power- India. The states its interest under following headings: 1. Economic security, 2. Trade, 3. Oil and Natural Gas, 4. Onshore Assets, 5. Offshore Assets in the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), 6. Seabed resources, and 7. Military Concern (Ministry of Defence (Navy), 2004).

Indian Ocean are located at the strategic location, India conducts its political activities in the region with collaboration and cooperation with surrounding states with objectives of securing the strategic area of the ocean. The coordination of maritime security between Mauritius, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Seychelles and India, originated in 2011 by means of a “trilateral India Sri Lanka-Maldives arrangement” (Ghosh, 2014).



**Fig. 1 : National Security Concept and Doctrine (Ministry of Defence (Navy), 2009)**

Based on Indian National Security Concepts and Doctrines, the combination of National Values and

National Aim creates National Interests and it shapes the National Objectives then impacts the National Security Policy making (Perwita, 2020). ‘Maritime’ is an all-encompassing word, including everything that is connected to the seas. The Indian Maritime Doctrine, however, deals specifically with the concepts and principles of employment of India’s naval power. According to some analysts, has been described as a growing military rivalry between China and India that might lead to the increased tension between the major power in IOR (Samaranayake, 2017).

**Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA):**

The US has been the dominant naval power in the Indian Ocean since the collapse of the USSR. The US has used this supremacy to ensure that its trade routes and energy supplies have not been disrupted. It also used the Ocean to launch military interventions, including in Kuwait, Iraq, and Somalia. It did not, however, seek to build a particularly strong or formalised regional order. There are some signs that this might be changing. With the fall of apartheid in South Africa, the region saw its first significant attempt at the creation of an intergovernmental organisation, with the formation of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), today known as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) (Davis and Balls, 2019).

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is a dynamic inter-governmental organisation aimed at strengthening regional cooperation and sustainable development within the Indian Ocean region through its 23 Member States and 9 Dialogue Partners. The major priorities and focus areas include: fisheries management, blue economy, women’s economic empowerment, maritime safety and security etc. The members include Australia, Bangladesh, Comoros, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, Seychelles, Singapore, Somalia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, Maldives and Yemen (Luke, 2014).

The United States has been the primary naval power in the Indian Ocean since the end of World War Two. Although it is still the most significant naval power in the Indian Ocean today, it is no longer as dominant as it once was. The US military, with its size and ability to deploy rapidly, clearly remains a crucial actor in the region. Justin Hastings has argued that while the US has identified the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean littoral states,

and on specific naval choke points, it has viewed the Indian Ocean itself as being on the periphery of more important regions, rather than part of its core interests. He notes that, although the US might dominate the ocean in terms of its naval capacity, it does so as an afterthought (Davis and Balls, 2019).

In order to make IORA more viable to deal with emerging issues in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), there is need to expansion of the membership to other adjoining countries in the region. It can achieve more tangible outcome in coming decades. Pradeep Chauhanas, Director of National Maritime Foundation in New Delhi, expressed that India's strategic space within its own geographical area has been constricted and emphasized the high possibility of India-China conflict as China starts to develop bases in the Indian Ocean (Pasricha, 2018).

### **China and Indian Ocean:**

China's spectacular GDP growth over the last 30 years has led it to take a far more prominent role in world affairs. It has recently developed blue water navy capacities, enabling it to expand its presence in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean as China is emerging as the key competitor to India's interests in the Indian Ocean Region. China's first overseas military base was set up in the western Indian Ocean, in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. China's primary goals in the Indian Ocean are to protect shipping and its energy requirements. It is also seeking influence more generally, however. In particular, China is seeking the construction of new trade routes through its BRI. In order to achieve its goals, China requires the logistical assistance of local states, which it currently receives from Pakistan, Oman and Seychelles. With this, it has intensified its ties with states like Sri Lanka and the Maldives, and has built its first ever foreign military base in Djibouti. This base will be used to support China's anti-piracy operations in the Arabian Sea (Davis and Balls, 2019).

China through its Maritime Silk Road, engaging with littorals and islands across the Ocean. China has consistently aimed to improve its diplomatic, political, and military engagements in the region from Sri Lanka to Comoros, spanning the Indian Ocean in its entirety. The Chinese government has already adopted a "string of pearls" strategy for the Indian Ocean, which consists of setting up a series of ports in friendly countries along the oceans northern seaboard. It is building a large naval base and listening post in Gwadar, Pakistan, fuelling station

on the southern coast of Sri-Lanka; and a container facility with extensive naval and commercial access in Chitagong, Bangladesh. Beijing operates surveillance facility deep in the Bay of Bengal (Kaplan, 2009).

### **Future Prospects:**

If we are to take seriously the importance of the Indian Ocean to the world's future, we have to ask if the ocean's ecosystems can survive the intertwined challenges of infrastructure development, increased trade, and geopolitical contestation. Future analyses of the Indian Ocean need to take in not only geopolitics, trade and infrastructure, but how increased activities might affect the historical, cultural and environmental oceanic systems that define it (Davis and Balls, 2019). Indian Ocean is going to be more significant in coming future due to energy demand by different countries. Global energy needs are expected to rise by 45 per cent between 2006 and 2030, and almost half of the growth in demand will come from India and China (Kaplan, 2009).

It is a mission which is being promoted by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi while launching a programme SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) in 2015, unveiled its strategic vision in for the Indian Ocean. India seeks to deepen its economic and security cooperation with its maritime neighbours and assist in building their maritime security capabilities (Sarangi 2019). India has extended its cooperation through exchange of information, coastal surveillance, building of infrastructure and strengthening their capabilities while safeguarding its national interest.

India's foreign policy along with the SAGAR policy is making great difference in the region. SAGAR provides a mechanism for India to expand strategic partnership with other IOR littorals in Asia and Africa. Foreign policy like Act East Policy making an impact in the region along with other initiatives like Project Sagar-mala and Project Mausam. India's maritime, resurgence, as maritime issues are now centre of India's foreign policy. With the establishing of the Indian Ocean division in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in 2016, MEA appears to be undertaking a more active approach. However, the defence establishment has to match foreign policy engagement.

### **Conclusion:**

India is emerging as global power in term of trade, economic growth, and security in the Indian Ocean region,

relationship with the neighbours become very crucial. It can be stated that India can establish itself as a regional power in the Indian Ocean. India must focus on the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), to promote sustainable growth and balanced development in the region. IORA platform can be used to promote blue economy in the region. India's consultative, democratic and equitable leadership can help achieve the security and sustainable growth to all in the region.

The Indian Ocean is having opportunities in term of blue economy, food security, trade, security, the competition to dominate in the ocean is also very high. This force the India to pay more attention to the Indian Ocean. As China is trying hard to establish its dominancy in the ocean, India needs to make a counter approach and balance the region with more proactive cooperation with countries in the region. For the time being the Indian navy should focus on operations that would project its role as security providers and collaboration with regional countries. India needs to make more proactive role in IORA, cultural ties with the countries, economic cooperation, technology and maritime security with countries in the Indian Ocean Region.

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