

India's Maritime Doctrine and the Politics of Strategic Responsibilities in the Indian Ocean Governance Architecture

CHANDAN PANIGRAHI*¹ AND SOMNATH PAL²

¹Assistant Professor and ²Research Associate of ICSSR

¹Department of Political Science, Fakir Mohan University, Balasore (Odisha) India

²Department of Political Science, School of Social Science, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya (A Central University), Bilaspur (Chhattisgarh) India

*Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has emerged as a critical arena of geopolitical, economic, and maritime significance in the 21st century, driven by its role as a major conduit for global trade, energy transportation, and resource distribution. It argues that India's transition from a continental to a maritime-oriented power reflects both material capabilities and normative aspirations. This paper examines the evolving maritime security challenges in the IOR and analyses India's expanding role as a key regional power alongside the development of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IORARC). It highlights how traditional threats such as great power rivalry and militarization intersect with non-traditional challenges including piracy, trafficking, and maritime insecurity. The study underscores India's strategic ambitions, particularly its efforts toward naval modernization, force projection, and the development of a blue water navy, while emphasizing the gap between capability and effective influence. It further explores the importance of open regionalism as a framework for fostering economic cooperation, trade liberalization, and collective security among diverse IOR member states. Through an assessment of institutional mechanisms such as IORARC, the paper evaluates the prospects for enhanced regional collaboration in addressing shared maritime challenges. Ultimately, the paper argues that sustained cooperation, inclusive regional frameworks, and India's balanced approach of strategic autonomy are essential for ensuring stability, security, and sustainable development in the Indian Ocean Region.

Keywords: Indian Ocean Region, Maritime Doctrine, Strategic Responsibility, Regional Governance, SAGAR Doctrine

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to offer a concise appraisal of the current state of the primary maritime security challenges in the IOR and explore the evolution of IORARC (Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation). India is more resourceful than all other regional actors. These resources and advancement in technology has set India in the forefront. To play a bigger role, India needs two things. Such as: political will, capabilities. Capabilities can be divided into 4 categories. Like: military, economy/technology, demography, culture. Most important instrument of state power is Military force. India has recently gone through the military modernization.

But real challenge lies in translating power into influence/projection. India's ambition is also to develop "blue water navy" (Shree, 2026). IORARC is a regional cooperation initiative of the Indian Ocean Rim countries, which was established in Mauritius in March 1997 with the aim of promoting economic and technical cooperation, including expansion of trade and investment. India is one of the founder members of IORARC. The organization is also known as Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) which is a heterogeneous area with a wide diversity of languages, cultures and religions etc (MEA, 2012). Perth communiqué basically charted that IOR-ARC is a multilateral forum and how it aspires to address challenges in the field of development, security, resources,

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environment etc. Indian Ocean is linked to India's destiny by name. India as a responsible power who understands all terms and condition of complex sub-regional geopolitical and geopolitics involved within Indian Ocean. As it is a vital transit route in both Asia and Africa, so the significance has augmented immensely. Currently India is concentrating on three things. Such as: strengthening force projection capabilities, augmenting deterrence, strengthening maritime awareness in Indian Ocean. The paper is divided into three categories: firstly, the historical and strategic importance of the Indian Ocean; secondly, India's role in the Indian Ocean; and thirdly, collaboration among IOR countries. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has become one of the most important strategic maritime regions in the 21st century. It spans over essential sea routes linking Asia, Africa, and other parts of the world as it is a life-blood of international trade, energy transfer and political interaction (ORF, 2026). It is against this background that increasing maritime ambitions of India and the changing role of the Indian Ocean Rim Association as a regional cooperation body (IORARC) have taken center stage in the stability and cooperation of the region.

The role of India in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) can be viewed in terms of competing International Relations paradigms. Realism describes the expansion in the Indian Navy and projection of power to ensure the security of the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) whereas Liberal Institutionalism explains its involvement in multilateralism like Indian Ocean Rim Association. The constructivist views focus on the normative expression of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) by India, in which India presents itself as a responsible stakeholder as opposed to a hegemon. According to scholars, new powers are likely to provide global common good, such as maritime security, disaster relief, and institutional stability. The changing maritime doctrine in India indicates this shift of reactive regional player to a proactive regional player.

Historical and Geostrategic Centrality of the Indian Ocean Region:

Historically it has remained crucial, as most of world's trade and energy routes pass through it. Indian Ocean is extended up to thousand miles which has segregated Arabian ocean and Bay of Bengal. Traditionally Indian Ocean remained in prominence. India claim to be the oldest maritime powers of the world and

third largest ocean in the world. It was the first country in Indian Ocean to possess real war fleets. India is one of the five littoral countries in South Asia which completely rely on Indian Ocean. According to Alfred Mahan "this ocean is the key to the seven seas in the 21st century, the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters" (Mahan, 1987). Historically, Ocean has contributed materially to the movement of the people and ideas, to the extensive trade and to the spread of culture. Role of Indian Ocean has increased immensely in the backdrop of piracy, trouble in failing states, rivalry for dominance as well as resources in Indian Ocean. As Indian Ocean holds great quantity of minerals, oil, and natural gas, outsiders have taken interest in these resources. Indian Ocean symbolises the path for global trade and a ground for International security. It also controls 30 percent of global trade and half of world's container traffic navigation in the sea. Many choke points also exist in Indian Ocean, such as: Straits of Hormuz, Malacca, Bab el Mandeb. And these choke points play an essential role in energy flow and global trade (Baruah, 2023). The globalization has also increased the importance of Indian Ocean. As the population of the developing country has increased, so they want alternate reserve of resources. "There is huge variance of cultures and economies in the Indian Ocean region, there is also a great diversity in governance. Many of the Indian Ocean region's African states possess government that are non-existent, weak or corrupt. Relative to their other African counterparts, South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, Seychelles and Mauritius have the most stable governments" (Luke and O'Loughlin, 2012). Indian Ocean region has evolved over a period of time. During cold war time, it was under the shadow of America and soviet America. 1971 Bangladesh conflict also increased the importance of Indian Ocean. Geopolitical and strategic considerations have necessitated the extension and modernization of the Indian Navy.

End of cold war has created new opportunities as well as challenges for India. Especially after financial crisis in 2008 faced by America and sovereign debt crisis in 2010 faced by E.U., there is distinguished deterioration of power projection of both the powers in the Indian Ocean region. In the broadest sense, rising India is not trying for any dominance in any particular country. Rather it wants to assert itself in South Asia as a regional hegemony. Presently there is deepening contest among member countries to acquire greater shares of the region's fisheries and fresh water resources.

The peace and security of the people of not only the littoral countries but of the entire third world can be ensured, if the Indian Ocean becomes a zone of peace. According to Admiral Nadkarni, "Indian Ocean will grow in importance because of gulf oil, diminishing of land-based resources and the continuing struggle of developing countries for bigger share in the global pie" (The ocean for economic development, 2003). Free Trade Area (FTA) in the Indian Ocean may be a vision too far. But member nations are considering for it. The member countries can discuss as well as debate on establishing free trade. Indian Maritime doctrine focuses on three things. Such as: choke points, important islands and vital trade routes. Many Indian scholars observe that India is destined to be a great sea power in present time. USA secretary of State Colin Powell once stated that India has the potential, to keep the peace in the vast Indian Ocean and its periphery. Now it's up to India, how does it manage to do so?

IOR has almost 80% of the world oil trade which makes it a very important artery of the global economy. It is also of strategic significance with chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz, Malacca Strait and Bab-el-Mandeb increasing its geopolitical influence (Gupta and Soni, 2026). The rise of extra regional powers, especially the Belt and Road Initiative by China has enhanced strategic competition. The geographic centrality of India also gives it an upper hand and a duty to maintain maritime stability. Nonetheless, the threats like piracy, sea terrorism and environmental destruction make governance difficult in the area.

India's Maritime Rise and Strategic Doctrine:

The Indian maritime policy has been changing tremendously, especially following the 2004 tsunami and growing Indo-Pacific debate. SAGAR doctrine is a doctrine that was introduced by Narendra Modi and focuses on cooperative security and economic growth. The modernization of the Indian navy is reflected in the airplane carriers, nuclear submarines and spy equipment which in turn support the ambition of India to be a Net Security Provider (Bhattacharya, 2022). Also, the Indo-Pacific vision of India is compatible with alliances like the Quad, and is independent in its strategies. This dualism represents a compromise of balancing and cooperation.

The IOR has institutions that promote regional cooperation like Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and Bay of Bengal Initiative of Multi-Sectoral Technical and

Economic Cooperation. These platforms facilitate discussions, capacity building and combined drills. But institutional fragmentation and duplicating mandates restrain their effectiveness. The role of India is critical in the rebirth of these structures and inclusive regionalism.

India's Role in Indian Ocean:

The reality is that Indian Ocean is having only the name of India but it is not in the control of India. K.M. Panikkar drew the attention of everyone in India, by focusing on trade and security of Indian Ocean through his works. Indian Ocean is also home to 2.6 billion people (ICWA, 2021). The great power status stimulated India to increase its efforts to expand blue water navy. Many Indian realist scholars have emphasized that India should be accepted as a foremost position in the South Asian strategic environment. According to K.B Vaidya, "India must be supreme and undisputed power over the waters of the Indian Ocean". Theory of naval vacuum was first advanced by him in the Indian Ocean. It stated that with the withdrawal of British naval forces, there exists a vacuum in naval power similar to that which existed off the Chinese mainland before the United States stationed its 7th fleet there (Scott, 2006). India has been generally opposed to the expansion of big power naval presence in the Indian Ocean and also any set up of foreign military bases. But some countries have their own national interest. They have converted their national interest to core interest. With the assistance of both regional and extra regional coalition powers, America has consolidated its naval grip on the region. China's expanded charisma in South Asia which has irritated India. India wants to guard sea lanes for trade, safeguarding the vital energy lifeline. India is using its navy to promote its ambition to achieve great power status. Because India simply cannot allow other competitive power to militaries the Indian Ocean or spread of WMD (weapons of mass destruction). Different nontraditional threats are posing challenges to India.

There are three important choke points exist in Indian Ocean, such as: Hormuz, Malacca, and Bab el Mandeb. It has increased the importance of Indian Ocean simultaneously. India's position is in many ways her destiny. Presently India has assumed greater management role in the Indian Ocean, through various institutions like IOR and IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium). India is much concerned about Indian Ocean for the enormous trade activities which are going in this region. It has

acquired the centre stage after cold war.

Being a significant power, India is supposed to supply regional public goods. It has undertaken anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden, humanitarian aid and disaster relief (HADR), and domain awareness in the sea via the Information Fusion Centre-IOR. India is also involved in combating non-traditional threats like illegal fishing, climate change and marine pollution. These roles strengthen the role of India as a responsible maritime force.

Open Regionalism:

Open regionalism is the right concept adopted by member countries. Trade liberalisation in between member countries has been the aim of Indian Ocean member countries. 2020 has been set as a target to reduce tariffs to zero for all member countries of the IOR-ARC. Recognizing particular areas for economic and technical cooperation has been the strategy. Trade has remained an integral factor in endorsing economic development. Some scholars have opined that Open regionalism is a stepping stone towards an improved multilateral system. And the open regionalism is a multi-dimensional process of regional integration. Because of Open regionalism Indian Ocean has become the principle conveyor belt for the International coal trade also. K.K Kohli argues that “Geo strategically, India’s very geographical location makes her the predominant power in the Indian Ocean region. As the largest country in the region, India has a responsibility to extend support to friendly countries, so that they do not have to seek the aid of extra-regional powers” (Chris, 2015).

As we know that when country becomes more industrialised, both imports and exports will rise and this should lead to even greater dependence on the sea borne flow of goods. By the very size, its area resources, population, scientific and technological skills, India dwarfs all the other littoral powers of the region, by creating apprehensions among some of them about future policies of militarily strong India in relation to their vital interests. India has a coastline of about 7,000 kilometres. India should take benefit of coastline by increasing trade relation with the neighbouring countries. Sea borne trade is one aspect that can be given first preference for the time being. Ocean is called our last frontier and mankind looks towards the sea as its future hope.

One of the Indian Ocean experts rightly pointed out that intention of the big powers to establish bases in the Indian Ocean as a calculated attempt to intimidate the

emerging countries in Africa and Asia and an unwarranted extension of the policy of neo-colonialism and imperialism. Some kind of tussle may arise in near future among emerging nations in IOR and Western powers for overriding concern. In present time, India is trying it’s best to cooperate with all but align with none and assert it’s ability to prevent certain strategies liable to polarize the Indian Ocean. Simultaneously vagueness about the Indian Governments stand on Indian Ocean could not be dismissed anytime soon. Therefore India has to develop a clear cut approach to develop its strategies to develop as a fully fledged maritime nation.

Collaboration between member Countries:

There is no doubt that the end of Cold War facilitated the emergence of new trends like integration as well as emphasizing of economic imperatives. Maritime challenges in present time require International collaboration. The intricacy of maritime hazard and danger created from maritime violence has insisted a new collaborative framework from member countries of IOR. Regardless of potential of this diverse regional grouping, this community has remained latent for a long time now. “In 1995 president Nelson Mandela stated that the natural urge of the facts of history and geography should broaden itself, to include the concept of an Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) for social-economic cooperation and other peaceful endeavours” (IORA). Australia, India, Kenya, Mauritius, Oman, Singapore and African nations originally came together in 1995 in Mauritius. Most of India’s trade is by sea and nearly 90% of its oil arrives by sea. The coalition is also one of the few to bring together the economies from Asia, Mid East and Africa. This heterogeneity underscores the need for assemblage to be highly pluralistic in character in order to accommodate the diversity. “The IOR-ARC was initiated with an objective to promote sustainable growth and balanced development of the region as a whole, with a special emphasis on economic cooperation that would dismantle the barriers to intra regional trade flows of goods and services among the countries. The region is rich in strategic, precious minerals, metals and other natural resources, valuable marine resources, energy for industries and most have embraced globalization as a tool for furthering economic growth and development” (IORA, 2012). Coordination among member countries is done to ensure utmost efficiency. So India’s intention is to cooperate with all but not to align with none. Whenever

we talk about Indian Ocean strategy, China obviously come into the picture. China has done significant investment in order to safeguard its strategic interests. Constructing security in Indian Ocean demands regional cooperation in broadest sense. Achieving security, stability, sustainability has been the primary goal of IOR countries. "USA has a substantial interest in the stability of the Indian Ocean region as a whole. Ensuring open access to the Indian Ocean will require a more integrated approach to the region across military and civilian organizations" (Mishra, 2024).

Member countries are cooperating each other to defeat the challenges faced in the maritime domain. There is manifold insecurity which bothers the Rim countries. All these insecurity arises from piracy, robbery at sea, high-volume drug trafficking etc.

The Way Forward:

The future of Indian Ocean Region is pegged on the capacity of the member states to compromise and strive towards the realization of a common objective. The collaboration in fields like conservation of marine resources, renewable energy, fisheries management, tourism and telecommunication can bring win-win situations to all. Meanwhile, strategic rivalry and geopolitical stress should be considered to avert war. India has a policy of cooperate with everyone and align with no one, which is an indication that it wants to be strategic on its own and also play a role in ensuring stability in the region. With the ever-changing nature of global power relations, the Indian Ocean will be a point of focus of economic and strategic activity. India has a lot of potential to influence the future of this important region by capitalizing on its geographic positioning, enhancing its capacity, and fostering regional collaboration via institutions such as IORARC.

Conclusion:

The Indian Ocean is not merely a geographical location but a dynamic space that unites economies, cultures, and countries. It is going to become increasingly significant in the decades to come. In the case of India, the problem is how to transform its potential into leadership and make sure that the region is open, secure, and inclusive.

By its continued collaboration, foresight and sound application of its potentials, India can be instrumental in making the Indian Ocean a place of peace and prosperity-

not merely to the littoral states but to the world as well. Indian Ocean is the only feasible linkage between marine zones of Indian Ocean region. Maritime connection is made in between Arabian Ocean, Malacca straits, Andaman Sea, Bay of Bengal etc. So member countries have to cooperate each other for their national interests. Convergence should be the goal through monitoring the interests of countries without divergence. Situation seems to be transforming somewhat in present time. The member countries of IOR need not to restrict to the water in terms of their cooperation. The world as a whole stands to benefit if all littoral states in IOR can find common ground in the churning waters of a mighty ocean. There are many areas where member countries can cooperate with win-win situation, such as: marine resources conservation, telecommunications, tourism, fisheries, regional energy cooperation etc. "IOR-ARC countries contributed about ten percent of world exports and about ten percent of world imports during the last decade" (Kalirajan, 2000). In future the share of IOR-ARC will increase substantially in world's trade.

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