

India's Maritime Diplomacy: Emergent Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract: India's maritime diplomacy has emerged as a crucial component of its foreign policy, driven by its growing economic and military capabilities. The country's strategic location in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has made it a vital player in regional maritime security and consequently, India's maritime diplomacy focuses on building partnerships, promoting regional cooperation, and enhancing maritime security in the IOR. Through its maritime diplomacy, India aims to promote a stable and secure Indian Ocean region, while advancing its own strategic interests. The country's naval diplomacy has shifted from being a 'Net Security Provider' to a 'Preferred Security Partner,' allowing it to build stronger relationships with regional nations. Through its maritime diplomacy, India seeks to promote a rules-based international order, ensure the security of its maritime interests, and foster cooperation with its maritime neighbours. This paper explores India's maritime diplomacy, examining its historical evolution, key policies, strategic objectives, and challenges; highlighting India's initiatives and efforts in maritime security, naval diplomacy, and regional collaborations.

Keywords: Maritime, geo-strategic, navy, Indian Ocean, doctrine, strategic autonomy

Introduction

India's geographical positioning along the Indian Ocean has historically rendered it a maritime nation with deep-rooted maritime traditions. In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, maritime diplomacy has become central to India's foreign policy, especially given the rising importance of the Indian Ocean as a global trade hub and strategic arena (Brewster, 2021). This paper explores the evolution, strategies, and significance of India's maritime diplomacy, analyzing its role in regional stability, security, and economic development. India's maritime diplomacy is driven by the country's growing recognition of the Indian Ocean's significance in its economic, strategic, and security interests (Pant, 2018). The Indian Ocean region (IOR) is crucial for India's prosperity, with maritime connectivity, ocean management, and ocean governance being key factors (Kapoor, 2015). India's maritime diplomacy seeks to promote its national interests while contributing to regional stability and cooperation among nations in the IOR (Mohan, 2012). The country's Security and Growth for all in the Region (SAGAR) vision, introduced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015, highlights India's commitment to ensuring security and stability in the region.

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SAGAR posits the security of the IOR as a collective responsibility of littoral countries, emphasizing transparency, mutual trust, and a rules-based international order (Rajagopalan, 2017).

The Indian Navy plays a significant role in India's maritime diplomacy, engaging in various activities to build partnerships and foster cooperation with regional navies (Scott, 2012). These efforts include bilateral and multilateral naval exercises, capacity building, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations (Brewster, 2014). For instance, the Indian Navy has participated in the Malabar Exercise with the United States and Japan, and the Milan Exercise with multiple IOR nations (Pant, 2018). India's maritime diplomacy is also focused on building relationships with regional partners and enhancing maritime security cooperation (Mohan, 2012). The country has been assisting island nations like Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius by providing aerial and maritime vessels for better surveillance of their territorial waters (Brewster, 2014). Additionally, India has offered custom-made ships and patrol boats to its maritime allies and partners (Rajagopalan, 2017). India's maritime diplomacy has several key dimensions, including Exercise Milan, a multilateral naval exercise that brings together navies from around 50 countries to enhance maritime cooperation and security. The country has also established the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), a multilateral facility for information sharing and dissemination to enhance maritime domain awareness.

Evolution and growth of Maritime Diplomacy in India

India's maritime diplomacy has a rich and complex history, shaped by various factors including colonial legacy, geopolitical dynamics, and economic transformations. India's engagement with maritime affairs dates back to ancient times, with maritime trade routes connecting India with Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and beyond (Misra & Muni, 2010). Under colonial rule, maritime diplomacy was primarily driven by British interests. Post-independence, India sought to redefine its maritime strategy, balancing regional security concerns with pursuit of maritime sovereignty (Harshe, 2018). In the Cold War period, India's maritime focus shifted towards safeguarding its maritime borders and asserting regional influence. The 2000s marked a turning point with increased recognition of the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean, leading to formalized policies such as the Indian Maritime Doctrine (India Maritime Doctrine, 2004).

During the British colonial era, India's maritime strategy was primarily driven by colonial interests, with a focus on protecting trade routes and maintaining control over the Indian Ocean (Panikkar, 1945). Early thinkers like K.M. Panikkar emphasized the need for India to develop its own naval capabilities to secure its interests in the region. His works highlight the importance of maritime power in shaping India's foreign



policy and security (Panikkar, 1945). After independence in 1947, India faced significant challenges in establishing a strong naval force, with an initial focus on continental security and limited naval expansion (Thomas, 2012). However, the launch of INS Vikrant, India's first indigenously built aircraft carrier, marked a significant step in enhancing naval capabilities (Baruah, 2017). This development demonstrated India's commitment to building its naval power and securing its maritime interests. Further, the economic reforms of 1991 transformed India's maritime outlook, expanding its maritime interests and trade significantly (Mohan, 2012). India began to engage more with its neighborhood and revived ancient maritime connections, both political and commercial. This shift in focus towards the maritime domain was driven by the recognition of the Indian Ocean's strategic importance for India's economic and security interests.

In recent years, India's maritime diplomacy has become more proactive, with initiatives like SAGAR emphasizing regional cooperation and security (Modi, 2015). The country has expanded its naval diplomacy efforts, including multilateral exercises like the Malabar Exercise with the US, Japan, and Australia (Pant, 2018). India has also focused on capacity building and humanitarian assistance in the region, solidifying its position as a 'Preferred Security Partner' and 'First Responder' (Rajagopalan, 2017). The Indian Maritime Strategy (2007) and the Maritime India Vision 2030 are key documents that outline India's maritime vision and objectives (Indian Navy, 2007; Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, 2021). These documents highlight the importance of maritime security, cooperation, and sustainable development in the Indian Ocean region. India's maritime diplomacy has evolved significantly over the years, shaped by historical events, geopolitical dynamics, and economic transformations. From its colonial legacy to its current proactive stance, India's maritime diplomacy continues to play a crucial role in shaping its foreign policy and security interests.

India's Maritime Diplomacy- a politico-strategic context

India's maritime diplomacy is shaped by its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean region (IOR), which is critical for the country's economic, security, and geopolitical aspirations. The IOR is a vital conduit for global trade, with over 80% of India's trade by volume and 95% by value passing through these waters (Kapoor, 2015). Given the region's significance, India's maritime diplomacy seeks to promote its national interests while contributing to regional stability and cooperation among nations in the IOR (Mohan, 2012). The strategic context of India's maritime diplomacy is influenced by the growing presence of China in the IOR, which has raised concerns about Beijing's intentions and its impact on regional security (Pant, 2018). The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is a geopolitically vital area where global powers like the US, China, and



India navigate competing interests (Chinoy, 2019). China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has a significant maritime component, with the development of ports and infrastructure in the IOR, which India perceives as a challenge to its regional influence (Brewster, 2014). In response, India has sought to strengthen its maritime partnerships with regional countries, including the United States, Japan, and Australia, through initiatives like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) (Rajagopalan, 2017).

India's maritime diplomacy is also driven by its commitment to ensuring the security of its sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and protecting its maritime interests (Scott, 2012). The country has been actively engaged in promoting regional cooperation and security through various multilateral forums, including the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) (Mohan, 2012). These initiatives reflect India's efforts to promote a stable and secure IOR, which is critical for its economic and security interests. It could therefore be inferred that the strategic context of India's maritime diplomacy is shaped by its interests in the IOR, the growing presence of China, and its commitment to regional security and cooperation. India's maritime diplomacy seeks to promote its national interests while contributing to regional stability, which is critical for its economic and security aspirations.

Policy Framework of India's Maritime Diplomacy

India's maritime policy framework is a comprehensive approach that seeks to promote the country's maritime interests and security in the Indian Ocean region (IOR). The framework is guided by the country's maritime doctrine, which emphasizes the importance of maritime security, cooperation, and sustainable development (Indian Navy, 2007). At the heart of India's maritime policy framework is the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) initiative which seeks to promote collective cooperation for natural disasters, search and rescue, and regional integration through blue economy promotion (Rajagopalan, 2017). This initiative reflects India's commitment to ensuring the security and stability of the IOR, which is critical for its economic and security interests. India's maritime policy framework also emphasizes the importance of maritime security cooperation with regional countries. The country has been actively engaged in promoting regional cooperation and security through various multilateral forums (Mohan, 2012). These initiatives demonstrate India's efforts to promote a stable and secure IOR, which is essential for its economic and security aspirations. India's maritime policy framework is a comprehensive approach that seeks to promote the country's maritime interests and security in the IOR. The framework is guided by the country's maritime doctrine and emphasizes the importance of maritime security, cooperation, and sustainable development. The key policy framework of India's Maritime Policy include:-

SAGAR: Launched in 2015, SAGAR underscores India's commitment to regional security, economic connectivity, and environmental sustainability (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015). SAGAR, which stands for Security and Growth for All in the Region, is India's policy or doctrine of maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean region. Announced by PM Narendra Modi on March 12, 2015, it aims to enhance cooperation in the region, leveraging India's central location and capabilities for the benefit of all nations in the Indian Ocean Region. This initiative focuses on several key areas, including security, capacity building, collective action, sustainable development, and maritime engagement. It seeks to promote regional stability, safeguard maritime territories, and facilitate economic trade and cooperation. By doing so, India aims to counter challenges such as piracy, terrorism, and natural disasters, while also promoting sustainable development and blue economy opportunities. The SAGAR vision is crucial in the context of the Indian Ocean region, where China's growing influence through initiatives like the 21st Century Maritime Silk Route and the String of Pearls strategy has raised concerns. India's SAGAR initiative is designed to promote a rules-based international order, ensure the security of its maritime interests, and foster cooperation with its maritime neighbours.

Indian Maritime Doctrine (2004): This provides guidelines for maritime strategy, emphasizing Indian interests, naval modernization, and regional cooperation. The Indian Maritime Doctrine (2004) is a policy document that outlines India's maritime strategy and vision for the Indian Ocean region. It emphasizes the importance of the sea lines of communication and the need to protect India's maritime interests, including its shipping, trade, and energy security (Indian Navy, 2004). The doctrine highlights the role of the Indian Navy in safeguarding these interests and promoting regional stability, while also addressing emerging challenges such as piracy, terrorism, and environmental degradation (Indian Navy, 2004). By providing a framework for India's maritime security policy, the doctrine guides the development of the Indian Navy's capabilities and operations to ensure the security of India's maritime domain. The Indian Maritime Doctrine (2004) serves as a foundational document outlining India's maritime strategy and vision for the Indian Ocean region. This doctrine underscores the significance of safeguarding India's maritime interests, including its shipping, trade, and energy security, which are crucial for the nation's economic growth and development (Indian Navy, 2004). It highlights the pivotal role of the Indian Navy in protecting these interests and promoting regional stability. By emphasizing the importance of a secure maritime environment, the doctrine addresses emerging challenges such as piracy, terrorism, and environmental degradation, which pose significant threats to India's maritime security (Indian Navy, 2004). Furthermore, the Indian Maritime Doctrine provides a comprehensive framework for India's maritime security policy, guiding the development of the Indian Navy's capabilities and operations. It outlines the navy's primary



objectives, including ensuring the safety of sea lines of communication, protecting offshore assets, and providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (Indian Navy, 2004).

Maritime India Vision 2030: The Maritime India Vision 2030 is another key component of India's maritime policy framework (Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, 2021) which aims to refurbish the maritime sector with over 150 initiatives across ports, shipping, and waterways. The vision emphasizes the importance of sustainable development, technological innovation, and private sector participation in promoting India's maritime growth (Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, 2021). This is a comprehensive and ambitious initiative aimed at transforming India's maritime sector into a global leader. This vision outlines a roadmap for the development of India's ports, shipping, and waterways, with a focus on enhancing efficiency, sustainability, and competitiveness. The Maritime India Vision 2030 is built around several key themes, including port infrastructure development, logistics efficiency, shipbuilding and repair, inland waterways, sustainability, and global cooperation. The vision aims to promote India's maritime sector by investing in infrastructure development, encouraging private investment, and fostering innovation and technology.

One of the primary objectives of the Maritime India Vision 2030 is to increase India's port capacity and efficiency. This will be achieved through the development of new ports and the modernization of existing ones. The vision also aims to improve logistics efficiency by reducing turnaround times, increasing the use of technology, and promoting multimodal transportation. The Maritime India Vision 2030 also places a strong emphasis on sustainability and environmental protection. The vision aims to promote the use of clean energy, reduce carbon emissions, and encourage sustainable practices in the maritime sector. Furthermore, the Maritime India Vision 2030 seeks to promote India's maritime sector globally. This will be achieved through increased cooperation with other countries, participation in international maritime organizations, and the development of India's shipbuilding and repair industry. Overall, the Maritime India Vision 2030 is a comprehensive and ambitious initiative that aims to transform India's maritime sector into a global leader. By investing in infrastructure development, promoting sustainability, and fostering innovation and technology, the vision aims to promote India's economic growth and development and can help India become a major player in the global maritime industry, enhancing its economic growth, and improving the lives of its citizens. The vision's focus on sustainability and environmental protection will also contribute to an eco-friendlier and more responsible maritime sector.



India's Role in the Indian Ocean Region

The Indian Ocean region (IOR) is a vital component of India's strategic environment, with the country being a major maritime power in the region. India's role in the IOR is shaped by its geographical location, economic interests, and security concerns. The country's presence in the IOR is driven by its desire to ensure the security of its sea lines of communication (SLOCs), protect its maritime trade, and promote regional stability. India's maritime strategy emphasizes the importance of a secure and stable IOR, and the country has taken several steps to enhance its maritime capabilities. The development of its naval forces, the establishment of coastal surveillance systems, and the expansion of its maritime infrastructure are some of the key initiatives that India has undertaken to strengthen its maritime security. India's naval forces are equipped with state-of-the-art technology and are capable of undertaking a range of tasks, including anti-piracy operations, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief. India has also been actively engaged in promoting regional cooperation and security through various initiatives. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is a key platform for regional cooperation, and India has been playing a leading role in promoting the organization's objectives. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is another important initiative that brings together navies from the region to discuss maritime security issues and promote cooperation. India's participation in these initiatives demonstrates its commitment to promoting regional stability and security.

India's role in the IOR is also shaped by its relationships with other countries in the region. The country has been strengthening its maritime partnerships with countries such as the United States, Japan, and Australia. These partnerships are critical to promoting regional stability and security, and India has been working closely with its partners to enhance maritime cooperation and security. The Malabar exercises, which are held annually between India and the United States, with participation from Japan and Australia, are a key example of India's commitment to promoting maritime cooperation. India's role in the IOR is significant, as it seeks to balance its economic and security interests with its commitment to promoting regional stability and cooperation. By playing a proactive role in the region, India aims to ensure the security of its maritime interests and promote a stable and prosperous IOR. The country's maritime strategy is guided by the principles of SAGAR which emphasizes the importance of collective cooperation and security in the region.

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD): An alliance involving the US, Japan, Australia, and India, aimed at maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific (Mohan & Raghavan, 2020). The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is a strategic forum comprising four countries: the United States, Japan, India, and Australia. Its primary objective is to promote a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region, ensuring stability and



security through cooperation and dialogue. The Quad was initially formed in 2007 but remained dormant for several years. It was revived in 2017, reflecting the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific region in the global strategic landscape. The Quad is an informal strategic partnership, with no permanent decision-making body or secretariat. The Quad's focus areas include maritime security, infrastructure development, health security, climate change, critical technologies, cyber security, and space cooperation. These areas reflect the Quad's commitment to promoting regional stability and security, as well as addressing common challenges facing the Indo-Pacific region. The Quad's significance lies in its ability to promote a rules-based international order and stability in the Indo-Pacific. By fostering cooperation and dialogue among its member countries, the Quad helps to deter aggression and promote a free and open region. The Quad's efforts also contribute to countering China's growing assertiveness in the region, promoting a balance of power that supports regional stability.

Malabar Exercise: A trilateral military exercise with the US and Japan, emphasizing maritime interoperability. The Malabar Exercises are a multilateral naval war gaming exercise that originated in 1992 as a bilateral exercise between India and the United States. Over the years, it has evolved to include Japan and Australia, making it a quadrilateral exercise. The exercise aims to enhance interoperability, foster mutual understanding, and address shared maritime challenges in the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific region. The Malabar Exercises have undergone significant changes since their inception. From a bilateral exercise between India and the US, it expanded to include Japan in 2007, and later Australia rejoined in 2020, making it a quadrilateral exercise. This expansion reflects the growing importance of maritime cooperation among these nations. The exercises are significant as they enhance maritime security, deter conflict, and promote a rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific region. By participating in the Malabar Exercises, India, the US, Japan, and Australia demonstrate their commitment to regional stability and security.

Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS): The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is a multilateral maritime security initiative that brings together navies from the Indian Ocean region to promote cooperation, understanding, and stability. Established in 2008, IONS has grown to include 35 member countries from the Indian Ocean region, providing a platform for navies to engage in dialogue and cooperation on maritime security issues (IONS, n.d.). IONS aims to foster a collaborative and cooperative approach to maritime security in the Indian Ocean region, addressing common challenges such as piracy, terrorism, and natural disasters. The symposium provides a forum for member countries to share best practices, exchange ideas, and develop common approaches to maritime security (Rajagopalan, 2017). India seeks to be a dominant maritime power in the Indian Ocean, working to secure its maritime interests and

foster regional stability. India's proactive approach includes military presence, economic partnerships, and diplomatic initiatives aimed at preserving freedom of navigation and access to vital sea lanes (Chinoy, 2019). The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), established in 2008, exemplifies regional cooperation, providing a platform for navies of littoral states to collaborate on security concerns like piracy and maritime disaster response (Mohan & Raghavan, 2020).

India's Maritime Diplomacy – a path fraught with challenges

India's maritime diplomacy plays a crucial role in promoting its national interests in the Indian Ocean region. However, several challenges hinder the effective implementation of its maritime strategy. These challenges can be broadly categorized into traditional and non-traditional security threats, with piracy and maritime terrorism being among the most significant (Kapoor, 2015). Piracy in the Gulf of Aden and other parts of the Indian Ocean region disrupts trade and threatens the safety of seafarers. Despite the Indian Navy's active involvement in anti-piracy operations, the threat persists (Scott, 2012). Maritime terrorism also poses a significant challenge, with terrorist groups seeking to exploit the maritime domain to carry out attacks (Pant, 2018). The threat of terrorism is particularly concerning given the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean region, with its busy shipping lanes and critical infrastructure. Environmental issues, including climate change, also impact India's maritime diplomacy. Rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and ocean pollution threaten coastal infrastructure, disrupt shipping routes, and impact coastal communities (Mohan, 2012). The effects of climate change are particularly pronounced in the Indian Ocean region, where many countries are vulnerable to its impacts. India must address these challenges through a comprehensive approach that combines environmental sustainability with maritime security.

Geopolitical rivalries in the Indian Ocean region also complicate India's maritime strategy. The growing presence of China in the region, through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), poses a significant challenge to India's maritime interests (Brewster, 2014). China's increasing military presence and infrastructure development in the region have raised concerns about its intentions and impact on regional stability (Rajagopalan, 2017). China's 'String of Pearls' strategy and the development of its blue-water navy have introduced a new dimension to India's maritime strategy. China's initiatives like the construction of port facilities in Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Djibouti threaten India's regional influence (Chinoy, 2019). These developments induce a strategic recalibration in India, emphasizing strengthening naval capabilities, regional alliances, and maritime security frameworks. India's maritime diplomacy must navigate these complexities to ensure that its interests are protected and its influence in the region is maintained. Furthermore, India needs to strengthen maritime security cooperation



with regional countries to address common challenges and promote regional stability. India must work closely with its regional partners to develop a shared understanding of the challenges facing the region and to promote a coordinated response to these challenges. India must adopt a comprehensive approach that combines military readiness with diplomatic efforts and environmental sustainability. By fostering cooperation and dialogue among regional countries, India can promote a rules-based international order and ensure the security of its maritime interests (Rajagopalan, 2017).

Conclusion

India's maritime diplomacy is a vital component of its broader strategic framework. It reflects evolving security needs, economic ambitions, and regional influence aspirations. While facing challenges from regional rivals and infrastructural limitations, India's investments in naval modernization, regional partnerships, and diplomatic initiatives aim to safeguard its maritime interests and promote stability in the Indian Ocean. As geostrategic dynamics shift with China's rise and other global powers' interests in the Indo-Pacific, India's emphasis on maritime diplomacy will invariably become more pronounced to secure its national security and economic growth.

It however remains to be seen that the success of India's maritime diplomacy will depend on its ability to navigate the complexities of the region, including the growing naval assertiveness of China, the dynamics of QUAD and the evolving security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region. By adopting a comprehensive strategy that combines military readiness with diplomatic efforts and economic cooperation, India can effectively address these challenges and promote its national interests. India's maritime diplomacy will also play a critical role in promoting regional cooperation, sustainable development, and the protection of its maritime interests. As India continues to grow and assert its influence in the Indian Ocean region, its maritime diplomacy will be crucial in shaping its future as a major power. By prioritizing its maritime interests, promoting regional stability, and fostering cooperation with other countries, India can ensure a secure and prosperous future for itself and the region. Ultimately, India's maritime diplomacy will be a key determinant of its success in the Indian Ocean region, and its ability to navigate the complexities of the region will be critical in promoting its national interests and ensuring the security of its maritime domain. As the region continues to evolve, India's maritime diplomacy will play a vital role in shaping the future of the Indian Ocean region and promoting a more stable and secure world. In retrospect, India's strategy in dealing with maritime challenges and China's naval assertiveness should be comprehensive and multi-faceted. By combining military readiness with diplomatic efforts and economic cooperation, India can ensure the security of its maritime interests and promote a more stable and secure region. The success of

India's maritime strategy will depend on its ability to navigate the complexities of the region and promote a rules-based international order.

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