

## REVIEW ARTICLE

# India's Strategy in Indian Ocean Region and Changing Contours in its Ocean Policy

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**ABSTRACT**

Indian Ocean is the world's third largest ocean, the only one bearing a country's name. It extends about Seventy five kms and consists of vital sea lanes and some of the Asia's largest flourishing economies in its rim. It is bounded by Japan and Australia in the East, Africa in the west and Asia in the north and Antarctica in the south. The Indian Ocean alone comprises of about twenty percent of earth's water surface and numerous scattered small islands like Comoros, Seychelles, Maldives, Mauritius, Coco's, Diego Garcia, Lakshadweep, Andaman & Nicobar and bigger islands like Sri Lanka and Madagascar which are strategically bigger players. The connectivity to extra regional countries and access to the Indian ocean can only be possible through the seven major maritime choke points - Strait of Malacca, the Cape of Good Hope, Bab-el-Mandeb, Strait of Hormuz, the Suez canal, the Sunda strait and the Lombok strait. India has a considerable Geo-strategic interest in Indian Ocean, India's interest in that the presence of the extra-regional forces is minimized so that Indian Ocean littoral countries can pursue their developmental programmes in a co-operative regional framework. In order to safeguard the maritime interests, to build geo-strategic potential in the region, India has to develop into major maritime power in the region.

**KEYWORDS**

• Connectivity • Development • Economy • Geo-strategic and Maritime

**INTRODUCTION****India's Importance in Indian Ocean:**

Indian Ocean region is a major medium for global trade, source of mineral resources and

trawling. As India is the densely populated country in the region and as a Geo-political keystone, today the region matters more than before. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his talk in 2015 which was conducted

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in Mauritius, declared that “India is at the crossroads of the Indian ocean and the region is at the top of our policy priorities” The Indian ocean predetermines the footprint of India’s culture with diversified religions, customs, traditions, and goods widening from India to African, West Asia and Asia’s southeastward countries.

India for trade and commerce is heavily dependent on sea, for instance nearly 95 percentage of trade happens through Indian ocean. India’s maritime exports such as fishing, aqua culture industries, mineral resource extraction growing its importance in the engagement with Indian Ocean. Apart from trade, India’s maritime growth there were strong security dimensions which includes smuggling, illegal fishing, human trafficking, piracy, terrorism, proliferation of weapons are major concerns which proves a major threat to India’s trade and commerce. Despite these concerns, remarkably active role of India in the region through several humanitarian, disaster management and mitigation operations which had been focusing on saving and helping the Indian citizens as well as citizens of many other countries from conflicted zones are under process (Brewster, D, 2015)

India’s strategy in the Indian Ocean region which is changing contours for strengthening its position in the region through its policy formulations. Recently, India’s policy priorities have began to re-evaluate from continental considerations towards its ocean policy in achieving its objectives. This will require its investments in enhanced international co-operation, confidence building measures greater transparency and trade, further investments in capacity in the region.

Indian Ocean is important strategically for three reasons:

- i. It’s Geo-strategically location which is at the junction of global trade through which it connects the major international economic routes of North Atlantic and Asia-Pacific;
- ii. It’s vast drainage basin which is home to huge population by creating opportunities which accounts for high rates of growth economically around Indian Ocean Rim countries; and
- iii. Indian Ocean is abundant in its raw materials, fishing, aquaculture industries,

mineral deposits with nodules consisting of cobalt, nickel, ferrous and on the sea bed containing sizeable quantities of manganese, copper zinc, gold etc., which has grown its world’s trade creating challenges of security, exploitation of minerals, increasing commercial interest at an alarming rate.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

**David Scott’s article (2013):** *India’s Aspirations and Strategy for the Indian Ocean - Securing the Waves* In this article he focuses upon high aspirations which include strategic discourse, pre-eminence leadership as enunciated by strategic thinkers and politicians. He also discusses six fold strategies for securing India’s own position against growing influence of China which poses a challenge in the Indian Ocean.

**Dhruva Jaishankar’s article (2016):** *Indian Ocean region: A pivot for India’s growth*

In this paper the author assessed Indian Ocean’s important to India. He even discussed about challenges to security, India’s shared interests and its dynamic role in humanitarian aid, assistance, and disaster management and rescue operations.

**Jan Hornat’s article (2014):** *The power triangle in the Indian Ocean: China, India and the United States* In this article the author presented the interaction between three major participants which poses security challenges to Asia’s future. He emphasized on the emergence of balance of power system and its implications in the Indian Ocean with contrary to Organski’s ‘power transition theory’.

**Smruti S. pattnaik’s article (2016):** *Indian Ocean in the emerging geo-strategic context: examining India’s relations with its maritime South Asian neighbors* in this article the author scrutinizes the progress of India’s approach to the growing China’s presence in the Indian Ocean. The author even discusses India’s policies, strategies and the future tools towards South Asian maritime littorals and their responses towards the emerging geopolitical context.

**Arnab Dasgupta’s paper:** *India’s strategy in the Indian Ocean region: A critical aspect of India’s energy security* in this paper the author identifies the India’s strategic imperatives and the critical aspect of India’s energy security

and the of Indian Ocean maritimesupplies in the region.

**Koh Swee Lean Collin's article (2018):** *China-India rivalry at sea: Capability, trends and challenges* In this paper the author focuses on features of Sino-Indian rivalry, maritime dimensions, naval buildups and deployments in the Indian Ocean region. This article also discusses the challenges being posed by China through its active deployment, infrastructure development through building ports and naval bases by encircling India through 'string of pearls' and its role in expanding blue water naval capabilities.

**Balijit Singh Mann's article (2018):** *Changing dynamics of India's Indian Ocean policy*

In this journal the author substantiates four hypothesis which explains the changing dynamics of India's ocean policy under which the change in conception of sea, and shift in its strategy of economic development.

**Gurpeet S. khurana's article (2017):** *India's Maritime Strategy: Context and Subtext* In this article the author analyses the salient changes in Maritime strategic outlook of India and its crucial role in shaping the geopolitics, economic and security strategy promulgated by Indian navy.

**Vivek Mishra's article (2019):** *India-US maritime cooperation: Crossing the Rubicon* In this article analyses the various steps in maritime collaboration between United States and India and seeks to emphasize the rationale of such cooperation between the two countries and justifies the maritime cooperation, bilateral cooperation and analyses the Chinese presence in the region, non- traditional threats, domain awareness and balance of power.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Security as a multidimensional concept covers all types of threats that are posed to the states by non-state actors or by enemy states. For every country security is the top most priority in its policy making. In the policy framing process, the security concerns include border security, economic security and human security. Among all these territorial security holds the major importance.

Since from Independence, security has become a very sensitive issue for India, especially from its bordering countries. India

has been facing the strategical issues in the Indian ocean region because Indian policy makers have not paid much attention towards Indian maritime perspectives and towards Indian ocean. Major problems to India in Indian Ocean region is caused by super power nations and China. The main cause of insecurity to India is China's expansionist policy i.e, string of pearls and by this China has been expanding its influence in the region and establishing relations with the littoral countries to counter their India's influence in the region. By this India's concerns towards its maritime security and naval strategy has been increasing in present times (K.M. Pannikkar, 1951)

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

Unlike the major two oceans i.e., the Pacific and the Atlantic, Indian Ocean is different in many ways. The Geo-strategy of Indian Ocean region says one of the important determinants is that the whole Indian Ocean's littoral is covered by developing countries except Australia and South Africa. By this it says that Indian Ocean is the only ocean where non littoral countries have a strong military presence than that of littoral countries. As such super power nations to fulfill their interests in the region have increased the rivalry among them. This situation poses harm to India's maritime security and raises the concerns in the region. The study is an attempt to examine the India's foreign policy viewpoint towards the Indian Ocean and to study the impact of rivalries among the nations on Indian policies. The study will also provide a new outlook to how India has to strengthen its naval strategy in positioning itself in the region by countering the power triangle countries.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To study India's aspirations and the changing contours of Indian Ocean strategy.
- To analyse the rising influence of non-littoral countries in the region and India's response towards their strategies.
- To examine the India's relation with littoral countries in the region of Indian Ocean in order to strengthen its position.
- To assess the contribution of connectivity of major choke points in perspectives of trade, energy and security in the region.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How could India strengthen its power among the rising influences of dominant powers in the region
- How could India accomplish its maritime and naval strategy by changing contours towards its ocean policy

## METHODOLOGY

The present study has been done with the using of both historical and contemporary sources. The present work is mainly descriptive using both primary and secondary sources which include newspaper reports, reviews of books, articles in journals and extensively from web sources.

## HYPOTHESIS

The hypothesis of the study is to analyse the India's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean region through its ocean policy. In recent past New Delhi began to engage with major powers and littoral countries to pursue its policy of engagement to strengthen its security, maritime safety and sustainable development and to promote geopolitical interests and the economy in the Indian Ocean. Thus the importance and priorities of Indian ocean indicates a close alignment among the world interests.

It is vitally important to be noted that the four factors which influenced India's approach towards its maritime South Asian neighbors:

1. It is important to maintain the internal stability with the neighboring states as an insurance against involvement of external powers.
2. India would endeavor to establish mutually advantageous economic relations with its neighbors in order to prevent the defence cooperation with the extra-territorial powers which have high ambitions in the Indian ocean
3. India would take the advantage of its historical socio-cultural affinity to establish enduring strategic ties and to shape the architecture of security in the Indian ocean region.
4. Terrorism and the radicalism in the region defines the another aspect of New Delhi's relations with South Asian maritime countries.

## CHANGING INDIA'S PERSPECTIVES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

In the post cold war era, the close collaboration between India-USA was a reality, even though India did not reconcile US's existence in the Diego Garcia. Some of the global issues which dominate the prospect of India are strategic thinking. India is different from other countries of the world like, India's security is defined by the Indian ocean in terms of energy, trade and economic well-being. The external appearance in the south Asian maritime region would directly infringe on its security (Scott, D. 2013), The core of India's security in the Indian ocean region is formed by smaller countries like Sri Lanka, Seychelles, Mauritius and Maldives. India's concerns regarding presence of China and investments in the strategic ports that makes India's discern goes much beyond securing China's energy supply line. China's determination to obtain the blue water capacity, naval modernization and its growing strategic presence is viewed from the perspective of its rivalry with Japan and USA and its insecurity developed towards India-USA relations. However India's perspectives towards China's presence are seen as the strategic balancing of China by constructing and developing infrastructure of ports around it.

Some argues that "India's strategy in Indian ocean region seems to indemnify for continental inadequacies by taking action against China's interest in any border conflict in the Indian Ocean region". The motivations apart from the securing 'sea lane of communication and uninterrupted energy supply, extraction of mineral resources in other countries are necessary for India to strengthen its position in the Indian Ocean. Moreover China's southern strategy is influenced by its strategic rivalry with USA and its development towards Indo-pacific region and South China Sea which aspires at boosting its position in Indian ocean region which would have immediate effect on India's maritime strategy in Indian ocean region. India's potential to emerge as a strategic rival to China is seen as an opportunity by USA to partner with India to counter China. Thus India has been striving to strengthen its position by establishing close relations with its neighbors which includes joint naval exercises, developing maritime infrastructure, providing economic assistance, humanitarian aid and a

fresh approach by bilateral partnership with South Asian countries (Collin, K. S. , 2018),

### **NEW DELHI'S APPROACH TOWARDS SOUTH ASIAN MARITIME LITTORALS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION**

India's strategic location and its geographical advantage retain its regional supremacy and its considerations as an inhabitant power in the Indian Ocean region. China have injected new dynamics into the strategy of Indian Ocean through its rise and naval expansion in the region while India continues to be restrained to exert its naval position and aware of its necessity of maintaining naval dominance. India has reiterated that it wants a shared sphere of interactive development and cooperation rather than it was often misunderstood as it wants to be an exclusive sphere of influence. Chinese intentions of aggressive posture which was coupled with its strategy by the announcement of Maritime Silk Route and by construction of ports at Chittagong, Gwadar, and Hambantota raised the apprehensions to India. Therefore India's resolution was to counter the china's presence and strategic consequences through multilateral and bilateral naval initiatives with other South Asian neighbors.

India has been following a five-point approach towards its maritime South Asian neighbors namely: firstly by strengthening their maritime capacity through joint bilateral and multilateral exercises; second joint patrol against illegal activities such as terrorism, smuggling, piracy and illicit trafficking; third providing humanitarian assistance and economic aid; fourth by framing common goals and taking steps to formulate them as a part of substantial security agenda; and fifth by expanding its partnership in blue economy. India's maritime strategy was expanded into a broader strategy to shape its security order by establishing enduring economy and political cooperation which is mutually beneficial. In a cooperative framework India includes South Asian neighboring countries as regional stakeholders excluding Pakistan which is considered as a contender. India has influenced them not to engage with any external powers as that they would create direct impact on India's safety in the Indian Ocean region. India had expanded its policies apart from engaging in joint naval exercises, but has been involving

in capacity building, for example India has been conducting MILAN naval exercises in which 17 countries were participants of the Indian Ocean region (Khurana, G. S, 2008),

The maritime delimitation disputes between India and its neighbors are now settled by UNCLOS. As a result global governance mechanisms came into place, to implement the international standards in preventing exploitation and in preservation of maritime resources, to secure sea lanes of communication and to govern the seas. Some of the examples of maritime disputes which were settled through international arbitration where India's maritime dispute with Bangladesh was settled, the Sri Lanka dispute with Gulf of Mannar was settled and its disputed maritime boundary was settled when India ceded its claims to Sri Lanka regarding Kachchivu islands unilaterally. The real issue is of fishermen in the traditional fishing zones and the real question is how to overcome the trust deficit from its South Asian neighbors, to explore maritime resources jointly and how to implement a comprehensive security framework in the region.

### **INDIA'S MUTUAL ENGAGEMENTS WITH SOUTH ASIAN NEIGHBORS**

#### **(a) With Mauritius and Seychelles:**

Under Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's potentiality the greater focus was shifted towards Indian Ocean. For maritime use India undertook to develop Islands of Mauritius called Agalega islands and Seychelles islands named Assumption islands. Through successful engagement, sharing intelligence and to build a close collaborations was managed by India. To develop Seychelles' maritime capability, India had setup the Coastal Surveillance Radar Station'. To assist in patrolling the vast Exclusive Economic Zones, the Indian Navy has been deploying ships to Mauritius biannually since 2009.

#### **(b) With Sri Lanka and Maldives:**

India, Sri Lanka and Maldives trilateral maritime cooperation focuses on capacity building improving capability, creating domain awareness, sharing information and tracking illegal activities in the sea. The trilateral coast guard exercise took place between these three countries in 2014 on anti-

piracy cooperation, humanitarian assistance and to control maritime pollution. Though Chinese presence remains the matter of concern, Maldives has announced 'India first policy'. India was feeling insecurity with the increasing ties between Sri Lanka and China. However India is making its efforts to fulfill the gap of mistrust and aspires to be a major dominant player. India provides military drilling to Sri Lanka's armed forces, in counter insurgency activities and is engaged in various infrastructure developmental activities. It even provided patrol ships and engages in several military exercises which aim at developing interoperability (Mann, B. S. , 2017),

#### **(c) Bangladesh and Myanmar:**

India has excellent bilateral ties with Bangladesh and Myanmar. The maritime boundary dispute between Bangladesh and Myanmar was settled in 2014 and allow them to explore maritime resources and their EEZ. India mainly focuses on infrastructure development which includes development of ports and waterways in both the countries. India is deepening its military ties, by proving joint training courses to Bangladeshi army, civil servants and for its border forces.

#### **(d) The balancing game and reaction of South Asian littorals towards India's naval strategy:**

As India's south Asian neighbors try to stabilize the relations with India and China, and have diversified responses to these initiatives. The fact that Bangladesh shares frontier with only India but not with China and the government has engaged with both China and India. Bangladesh has favored not to take steps that would have implications on India's safety and security. Bangladesh is trying to develop close security ties through maintaining military level relations by conducting joint drilling and naval exercises.

Myanmar will equalize its relations with both India and China as it shares border with both the countries. In order to maintain close engagement with India, Myanmar has been developing close defence ties and developed cooperation against terrorists and insurgents. Though the unresolved ethnic problems between India and Sri Lanka would continue to show an impact on their bilateral relations. India helped Sri Lanka during the last phase of the war through intelligence sharing, supply of radars, and joint naval patrolling

by two countries which has cemented the ties. To balance with China, Sri Lanka would take up to engage with China as it is doing traditionally. All these South Asian neighbors maritime strategy and defence strategy aims at maximizing their benefit by leveraging India and China. India in order to win their confidence on mutual beneficial relationship, India's strategy should aim at working on mutual security issues and in helping them strengthening their defence forces. So that the strategic balance remains in favour of India in the Indian Ocean region

## **CONCLUSION**

The power rivalry would compel India to pay more attention towards Indian ocean to become a dominant country in the ocean. India's role in Indian ocean cannot be seen in isolation and will be shaped within the security construct of Indo-Pacific. For time being India's strategy should draw the littoral countries of the IOR into mutual security framework and its maritime strategy should be consensual. Rather than projecting any territorial intent and hegemonic ambition, India would emphasize on its historical, civilization and cultural presence. When India is carving to rise as a major global player in Indian Ocean region, it should be mindful of its security and for a time being it should take cautious approach for enabling environment for its rise (Singh, S., 2018)

#### **(a) Changing Contours of India's Polices in Conception of Sea:**

The couple of factors responsible for India's views on Indian ocean to move farther from territorial understanding of sea:

- India's approach towards economic growth changed India's economic policy. Which brought the Indian ocean from the periphery to the core in its strategy of economic growth in 1991. Mainly by changing its growth from import substitution to export driven which has substantially enhanced the value of Indian Ocean in its economic growth.
- By the end of cold war the constraints has been excluded from Indian ocean policy which made India rather than opposing the presence of external presence in Indian ocean, India started engaging with the external countries through multilateral

and bilateral exercises including US. One such example in since 1992 India has been engaging with US through Malabar naval exercise (V. Pant, H, 2013)

- As a developing and rising naval actor, India to pursue its national interests had an extensive view of its naval responsibilities and felt anxious about the global commons and changed its naval strategy accordingly such as opening up its sea lines of communication for free and fair global market.
- The interests in Indian ocean in projecting India's presence and power, had been enlarged in deterring its confrontational powers had brought India into competition with rising dominance of China. China's maritime objectives in Indian ocean is driven by infrastructure development by building ports, by its policy of connectivity through Indian ocean littoral states. Thus India feels insecure with Chinese rising dominance in Indian Ocean (Uthaya Suriyan R, 2024).

To sum up India's aspirations to become a major power in Indian Ocean region, it has to face challenges and apprehensions raised by regional rivalries in the region. One of the major concerns in the Indian Ocean region is the growing Chinese supremacy through its OBOR or maritime silk route initiative, a multidimensional route and 'string of pearls' which encircles India by developing ports poses insecurity to India. Though India has a robust naval doctrine, and allocated maritime budget and collaborations with US and its maritime South Asian neighbors it requires a well established institutional mechanism and pragmatic change in its ocean policy is necessary. India's maritime policy should go beyond Act East policy and bilateral, multilateral naval agreements. Here SAGAR (security and growth for all in the region) can be considered as one of magnificent policy of Indian Ocean region by which there are chances of fulfilling India's objectives in the Indian Ocean region.

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