

INDIA'S MARITIME SECURITY STRATEGIES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN SINCE 2014

Het Ram Thakur

Assistant Professor, HPURC, Dharamshala (H.P.U)

Ram pal

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla

ABSTRACT:

India's maritime strategy has undergone a significant transformation after 2014 under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In which India emphasizes its Strategic, economic and security interests in the region. This Paper explores how India's maritime strategy has evolved since 2014 under the various key initiatives introduced by the government, including SAGAR, Act East Policy, Indo-Pacific strategy, Quad and Naval modernisation shaped India's outlook towards the Indian Ocean. The study also discusses how India seeks the status of a maritime power and net security provider in the Indian Ocean by enhancing maritime domain awareness and collaborations with bilateral as well as multilateral partnerships. The study assesses how the rise of China as an economic and military power in the region challenges India's ambition of becoming a maritime power in the Indian Ocean. Under the leadership of PM Modi, India has given priority to naval capabilities, strategic infrastructure in the Indian Ocean. In response to China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean through the string of pearls policy and the Belt and Road (BRI) Initiative, India is constantly striving to enhance and strengthen its multilateral ties. The study highlights how India is aiming to become a maritime power through multilateral engagements.

Keywords: Maritime Security, Indian Ocean, BRI, Quad, SAGAR, Indo-Pacific, Act East Policy.

INTRODUCTION

India has emerged as a regional power in the Indian Ocean on account of its geographical and geostrategic proximity with a 7500km long coastline and more than 1200 islands. Its special Exclusive Economic Zone spans across the region, covering 2.4 million Square Kilometres. The India's 70% of global trade passes through the Indian Ocean and approximately 90% of India's oil and trade passes through Sea line of communication in major chokepoints like strait of Hormuz which is entry gate to Persian gulf for oil imports, Bab- El Mandeb which connects Indian Ocean with Red Sea, Suez Canal and Mediterranean Sea, strait of Malacca is small water line which connects Indian Ocean with Pacific Ocean, these trade routes are the economic lifeline of India's National development and economic growth (**Pattanaik, 2016 pp. 1-6**).

The 21st century is considered the century of Asia, where maritime security is an important challenge for every country. In the era of globalization, the world is interconnected through global trade, economy, energy needs, people-to-people exchange, technological sharing and information sharing. Therefore, a robust maritime strategy is crucial for global peace, prosperity, and stability in the Indian Ocean. (**Kawai, M. (2018)**).

Khan & Ali (2024), note that "since the start of the 21st century, the world has witnessed several major terrorist attacks. These include the attack on the Indian Parliament in 2000, the 2008 Mumbai attacks that killed about 166 people and injured nearly 300, the

Pathankot airbase attack in 2016, the Uri attack in 2016 and the Pulwama attack in 2019” (pp. 1–4). In July 2025, at the BRICS Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that “Terrorism is a major threat to humanity. He stated that India follows a policy of zero tolerance toward terrorism and rejects any double standards in dealing with it. Modi added that there is no room for hypocrisy on this issue, India strongly opposes terrorism as well as those who support it” (The Hindu, 2025).

After independence, India paid little attention to the maritime domain because its focus was on resolving border disputes with neighboring countries. A major priority of India’s foreign policy was to protect its territory, especially against Pakistan over the Kashmir issue. Another important concern was the Cold War, which began after World War II, when the United States and the USSR emerged as superpowers following the decline of imperial powers such as Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Japan. The world became divided between the Western bloc, led by the United States, and the Eastern bloc, led by the USSR. India’s experience of colonial rule made it cautious about joining these rival camps. Facing internal challenges like illiteracy, poverty and unemployment, India chose to adopt a policy of strategic autonomy in its foreign relations. (Zajaczkowski, 2015, pp. 4-6).

India’s foreign policy was based on international peace and cooperation through various foreign policy initiatives like the Pancha Sheel Agreement of 1954, Non-alignment policy (NAM), decolonization, and strong support for disarmament policy. Under the leadership of Lal Bahadur Shastri and India’s first woman PM, Indira Gandhi, both adopted a realist approach from an idealistic approach during their tenure. With the end of the Cold War rivalry, India has recognized the significance of the private sector to boost its domestic economy. Consequently, India adopted Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization (LPG). The architect of this policy was Indian economist and former Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, who had prepared a draft for new economic reforms under Narasimha Rao's leadership from 1991((Singh, 2018, pp. 1-4).

Traditional and Non-traditional maritime security threats: Implications for India’s maritime interests.

According to various political scientists, the Asian continent is the main epicentre of global power politics, geopolitical rivalry, economic competition and strategic significance due to rising power, including India, China, Japan, South Korea, and Australia. The region is important for China’s energy needs, including Oil exports, due to greater dependence on major Sea Lines of communication from the South China Sea to the Horn of Africa. China’s 80% oil exports pass through the Straits of Malacca because of China’s assertiveness policy towards the South China Sea, which makes the region full of troubles and more vulnerable. This reflects the Malacca Dilemma for China’s Sea lanes of communications in the Pacific region, which aspires China to secure crucial Sea Lines of Communication through the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), which was started in 2013 under the leadership of XI Jinping. (Goh, E. (2021).

China built roads, railway lines and ports in India’s neighbouring countries in South Asia, like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Hambantota ports in Sri Lanka, under the “String of Pearls” policy. The string of pearls is the geostrategic policy that aims to secure China’s maritime interests through a network of ports and military bases. This chain stretches from the South China Sea into the Indian Ocean. China’s control over crucial chokepoints will disrupt India’s traditional naval supremacy in the Indian region (Butt & Siddiqui 2021, pp. 1-

4). Since 2014, PM Modi has been holding power and he began to focus on India's neighbouring countries and he invited all SAARC members to his swearing ceremony with the neighbourhood first policy. Under the neighbourhood policy, India must build trust with Myanmar and Bangladesh. Multilateral engagement and cooperation could be essential components for combating security challenges (Chatterjee, 2014, p.1).

Famous Indian diplomat KM Panikkar noted that "it is the geographical position of India that changes the character of the Indian Ocean". India has a long history of foreign trade with recorded evidence dating back to the 9th century BCE. Therefore, we can highlight that Maritime trade is still the backbone of India's maritime security. To prevent maritime security challenges, India has conducted anti-piracy operations along with strong maritime naval power in the region. Recently, transnational networks such as drug smugglers have become the main threats in the Indian Ocean, such as the Sea Lines of Communication in areas like the southern Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, western Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal, and the Andaman & Nicobar Islands" (Suri, 2016, p.1).

INDIA'S MARITIME STRATEGIES UNDER THE MODI ERA, AFTER 2014

The present geopolitics is changing because of a global power shift from Eurocentric to the Asian continent due to rising powers like India, China, Japan, Australia and Southeast Asian Countries, which are challenging the global power structure. In geopolitical terms, it could be explored to show that the Indian Ocean is strategically crucial for global maritime security. It is the world's third-largest water body and the region is rich in natural resources and home to 40% of the world's offshore petroleum. The region is also being considered as home to some of the emerging economies. The region accounts for two-thirds of the world's maritime trade of oil, 50% of the world's container traffic and one-third of the world's seaborne ships (Deb & Dutta, 2023, p.1).

While addressing the commissioning ceremony of three frontline Naval platforms, including INS Surat, INS Nilgiri and INS Vaghsheer at the Naval Dockyard in 2025, Mumbai, PM has highlighted that India never supported an expansionist policy in its foreign policy. We need to emphasize the protection of territorial waters, freedom of navigation, inclusiveness of the region and securing Sea Lines of Communication, which is important for economic progress and global energy security. While addressing the commissioning of three naval warships in Mumbai, PM Modi said, "India operates with the spirit of development, not expansionism". We have always supported an open, secure, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific. Further, he said, "India is becoming a major maritime power and is being recognised as a reliable and responsible partner. "We should become a global partner in securing the sea from drugs, weapons and terrorism and make it safe and prosperous. India is becoming a major maritime power and is being recognised as a reliable and responsible partner (The Economic Times, 2025).

Alfred Thayer Mahan, a naval strategist and author of *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, highlighted that national prosperity and power depended on control of the world's searoutes, "whoever rules the waves rules the world," further he identifies the six principles to become naval power including the national power, maritime preparedness, strong Naval bases, natural resources, territory, population and character of people are necessary components of maritime power. (Mahan, 1890p.1).

According to the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (1982), every country has the right to make laws over the Territorial waters, which far away 12 nautical miles from the baseline, regulate and use resources over the sea from the baseline. On the other hand, the Exclusive Economic Zone extends 200 nautical miles from the country's coastline and the

country has the full right to maximize and exploit physical resources such as fishing, gas and other features of these conventions. The continental shelf refers to 350 nautical miles and the High Sea, which is beyond national jurisdiction over the Sea, in this region. (Ahmed, 2017).

SECURITY AND GROWTH FOR ALL IN THE REGION (SAGAR) INITIATIVE

Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), Initiative is the maritime and diplomatic strategy that aims to protect India's maritime security to enhance maritime cooperation among littoral states. The purpose of this strategic vision is to provide accessibility for India in the Indian Ocean, through which India can engage with various countries, like Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles are crucial to counter China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean. (Singh, 2025). The SAGAR initiative was launched by Indian PM Narendra Modi during his visit to the Maldives in 2015. During this visit, India-built offshore naval patrol vessel, Barracuda, for the Mauritian Coast Guard, which Modi unveiled the SAGAR concept, which would be used by India to protect India's Exclusive Economic Zone through the Mauritian Coast Guard? However, there is no official document released by Indian government regards to SAGAR initiatives, the key objectives of this initiative are to maintain national security, to safeguard India's maritime security, economic cooperation and collective approach towards Indian Ocean, under this initiative India striving to build maritime capability and enhancing its influence by providing military equipment for littoral states such as Maldives Seychelles, Sri Lanka Mauritius since 2015, further India is trying to engage with multilateral regional Institution like Indian Ocean Rim Association which is group of 23 countries to establish for regional security, cooperation and economic growth in the region by stabilising peace, stability, prosperity in Indian Ocean (Deb & Dutta, 2023, pp. 1-8)

INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY

The Act East Policy is the diplomatic initiative that aims to enhance economic, political, cultural and strategic ties with the Asia Pacific countries in the area of trade, connectivity, people-to-people exchange and cultural ties. This initiative acts as a bridge between India and the Southeast Asian countries. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries are very concerned about China's influence in South China, which is a key factor to boost their political, economic and security ties with India to prevent China's rise in the entire Indo-Pacific region. The Act East Policy is an important development in India's foreign policy in 21st century under Modi Era. the evolution of this initiative was started since 1990, in 1996 India adopted Look East policy under PM Narsimha Rao to strengthen bilateral towards South East Asian Countries under the backdrop of disintegration of USSR, India's economic liberalization, the Gulf War and the rise of China in Asia Played crucial role to prepare a favourable atmosphere for starting this, Policy. Further, his successor, Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998-2004), played an important role in strengthening and institutionalizing ties with South-east and East Asia to make India a regional power. (Haque, M. S. 2024).

During Dr Manmohan's, as Finance Minister in 1990, as PM India, India became a Dialogue partner of ASEAN and signed the Free Trade Agreement. Under his leadership, India promoted the Kaladan Multimodal Project to boost ties with ASEAN member countries. (Garge, 2017, pp. 1-4). The 'Act East' was first suggested by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on her visit to Chennai in July 2011, he felicitated India to play an active role and assert itself as a regional security provider in Southeast Asia. Prime Minister Modi during Obama administration, India renewed defence agreement 2005 to 2015 both countries released joint statement regarding strategic vision in the end of January 2015 for regional peace and prosperity, PM Modi officially announced that India's Look East policy upgraded into Act East policy on

the auspicious occasion of his first participation to the India-Asean and East Asia Summits of November 2014 in Myanmar. (Saint-Mézard, I.2016).

Under the Act East policy, India has introduced various maritime projects like the Kaladan multicultural model transport project (KMMTP), which connects Kolkata port to Sittwe Ports (Myanmar). India is highly dependent on the Siliguri Corridor's narrow way to connect the Northeastern states of India and China's claim regarding the Doklam issue creates a "Chicken's neck dilemma" for India's national security. The infrastructure project provides an alternative route for India by sea to reach accessibility in Southeast Asia. China's growing presence in the Indo-Pacific region through the "Belt and Road Initiative" does impact India's strategic, economic and political interests in Southeast Asia and the entire Indo-Pacific due to India's geographical position. (Saint-Mazard, 2016, p. 17).

INDIA'S MILITARY PREPAREDNESS AND NAVAL MODERNISATION

Military power and naval modernisation are a broader part of Modi's maritime strategy after 2014. Under his leadership, India has expanded its naval presence to assert a stronger presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The Modi government has emphasized the modernization of the Indian Navy and broader military capabilities. (Agnihotri, 2015). The government has recognised the importance of maritime power to protect its interests in the maritime domain through multilateral and bilateral military exercises. The government has been striving for indigenization of India's Défense industry through technological advancement. The INS Vikrant India's first indigenous aircraft carrier shows the world that India has emerged as a maritime power under the leadership of PM Modi (Pant, 2012, pp. 1-3).

The Modi administration has given priority to key strategic locations to build infrastructure development in critical areas such as the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which acts as a bridge to protect India's Sea lanes of Communications from the west coast of Australia to the east coast of Africa. On the other hand, India has enhanced Maritime domain awareness through coastal radar networks, satellite integration and cooperation with partner navies through logistics and information-sharing agreements. In alignment with the "Act East" policy, India is striving to expand naval diplomacy by conducting joint exercises such as MALABAR between under genesis of Quad countries (Rehman, 2012). India's defence manufacturing industry is an important pillar of India's Military power. It emphasizes the manufacturing, development and maintenance of various land-based defence systems, equipment and infrastructure. India's defence system is playing a pivotal role in safeguarding the National sovereignty and territorial integrity of India. From tanks and artillery to combat vehicles and border infrastructure, the defence land industry is responsible for producing the tools and technology that empower India's armed forces on land. Importantly, the emphasis on "Atmanirbhar Bharat", self-reliant India, has pushed for greater private sector participation in naval shipbuilding and Défense manufacturing. (Dhamija, S. (2025).

India's military and naval modernization have become a core element of its maritime strategy under the leadership of Modi. These all transformations are the efforts of not only to secure India's coastline and sea lanes but also to assert its status as a regional in the Indian Ocean (Yadav, 2025, p. 1). As the debate arises around the world that India is going to become a superpower country as soon as possible in the near future geopolitics around the world. After the decline of the USSR in 1991, India started to assert its political and military image in South Asia. India's fourth-highest expenditure on Military in the world and its huge defence production prove its naval rise in the global arena. The Indian Navy has gradually become an imperative tool of Indian maritime strategy in recent years. It has been the history of India to give priority to the maritime dimension, which is a vital element of security. The

rise of India as an economic power in the global arena gives direction to bring back India as a global hub of science, technology, and the Knowledge. (Pant, H. V. Ed. 2016, p. 14).

THROUGH THE QUADRILATERAL SECURITY DIALOGUE (QUAD)

The Quad is a group of four like-minded countries, composed of the United States, India, Australia, and Japan, that is a strategic partnership focused on upholding an international order, strengthening strategic cooperation, promoting multilateralism and boosting economic growth, which is the key partnership of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue to ensure peace, prosperity and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. The Quad had come into existence after 2017 during Trump administration, even though the Quad has been active since 2007, with the “confluence of two Seas proposed by Shinzo Abe, due to high pressure from China, Australia withdrew in 2008, and P.M. Kevin Rudd took a more amiably approach towards China because of economic concerns, and the group was discontinued until 2017. After Trump became President of the United States, he emphasized the Indo-Pacific strategy to sustain its strategic interests and counter China’s assertive behaviour in the region. (Naftaliyev, S. 2024p.1).

The China’s increasing expansionist approach in the Indo pacific region have given security challenges to international rule based order through Belt and Road initiatives (BRI) and String of pearls in the South China and Indian Ocean, through it China is continuing constructing ports and railways connectivity in India’s neighbouring countries including Gwadar ports in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, this expansion has given several security concerns for regional security architecture.(Pradhan, S.Kp.1)

Quad has provided a platform for India to play a significant role in addressing maritime security concerns in the Indo-Pacific region by cooperation in the areas of maritime security, science, technology, defence, and economic ties with each other. This platform provides leverage for India beyond its security, such as Climate Change, natural disasters, and maritime terrorism. The Indian Ocean and the Pacific region are two separate regions on the world map. The terminology for the two regions being used is the Indo-Pacific, which has become a part of India’s foreign policy. Previously, the Asia Pacific concept was used to define the region. The Asia-Pacific came into existence after the post-Cold War era on account of economic integration with security. The Asia Pacific stretches from East Asia countries to South-east Asia countries, excluding India and the Indian Ocean. Historically, the Asia Pacific term was used to refer to economic ties with ASEAN countries, Japan, and China. (Rai, A. (2018). The rise of two Asia giants, India as politically and economically significant, prompted India to explore a regional partnership with like-minded countries comprising the United States, India, Japan and Australia, establishing the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). The Quad becomes a crucial platform for India to protect maritime interests and security, on which India’s global trade passes through the Indian Ocean on account of its long Coastline (Pelaggi & Termine, 2023, pp. 1-4).

The Quad as a diplomatic platform emerged since its revival during the Trump administration was a reaction against China’s concerns as an assertive state in Asia. At the Quad Summit in 2024, all Quad countries made a milestone decision by starting the initiative, the Quad Ports of the Future partnership. The main purpose of this initiative is to reshape the regional strategic and economic architecture. India’s role is important; India will host the inaugural regional ports and transportation conference in Mumbai in 2025. Quad’s members also announced ‘The Quad at Sea observer Mission’ 5G deployment, which aims to reduce dependence on China in the telecommunications field. (Gupta, 2024, pp. 1-3).

The Indian Ocean is emerging as a battleground for Asian giants India and China. The geo-strategic relevance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is being constructed in the eastern sector of the Indian Ocean under the Modi government (Chakravarty, I., 2025, p. 1). The Andaman Nicobar Islands are located over 1200 km in India's eastern part, which is the entrance gate of the Malacca Strait and acts as a bridge to connect the Indian Ocean. The island provides an opportunity for India to enhance its political, diplomatic, economic, and strategic relations with Southeast Asian Countries and connect it through the northeast states of India. (Roy, P.K., & Cawasji, A., 2017, p. 1).

India's maritime strategy under the Modi era shows a Geopolitical shift in India's outlook towards the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Moving beyond a traditionally self-oriented outlook, India has adopted a proactive, outward-facing maritime doctrine intended to secure its national interests, emphasizing regional stability and extending itself as an important maritime power. This change is driven by the growing strategic significance of the Indian Ocean, which serves as a vital bridge for global trade and energy supplies and is increasingly contested by regional and extra-regional powers. Under Prime Minister Modi's leadership, India has focused on the concept of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), signalling its commitment to a cooperative and inclusive regional maritime order. (Padmaja, G. 2015)

Simultaneously, India has strengthened its naval capabilities through modernization, indigenization and enhanced operational readiness. The development of strategic infrastructure, such as in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and expanded maritime domain awareness through bilateral and multilateral partnerships, especially with Quad countries, have further reinforced India's strategic depth in the IOR. Moreover, India has successfully integrated maritime diplomacy into its foreign policy through port development, humanitarian assistance, capacity building and maritime security cooperation with IOR littoral states. These efforts not only counterbalance China's growing presence in the region but also position India as a credible net security provider. In conclusion, India's maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean under the Modi government reflects a blend of assertive Defence, strategic diplomacy, and regional cooperation. It addresses both traditional and non-traditional security threats while aligning with India's broader Indo-Pacific vision. As India continues to rise on the global stage, its maritime posture will remain central to securing its interests and shaping the future of the Indian Ocean region. (Hashim, Zulkifli, & Forbes, 2023, p.1- 7).

CONCLUSION:

India's maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a significant shift from a past self-oriented policy towards an outward policy. Under the Modi era, India's foreign policy has become more multidimensional and assertive, due to which the Modi government has restarted India's maritime strategy by consolidating strategic, economic, and security strategies with the Quad countries to strengthen India's national interests and project itself as a maritime power across the Indian Ocean. It is observed by several research scholars that the IOR is central to India's geopolitical interests and to ensure freedom of navigation by adopting the Act East Policy, Indo-Pacific strategy and military exercises with the Quad and other South East countries to address maritime concerns in the Indian Ocean, which has become a crucial factor of India's multidimensional maritime strategy under Modi's Leadership. New Delhi has enhanced efforts to boost naval capabilities, maritime domain awareness, and strengthen strategic partnerships with these countries. The Modi era is the articulation of the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine in 2015, which aims to underscore India's commitment towards regional stability, capacity building and collective security. The SAGAR has facili-

tated deeper collaboration with ASEAN countries and promoted a rules-based maritime order. India's increasing interest in enhancing naval modernization, indigenous defence production, and conducting multilateral naval exercises reflects its intention to grow as a net security provider in the IOR. The growing Influence of China in the Indian Ocean, shaping regional security in the Indo-Pacific region, through which all Quad Members will be enabled to give leverage to each member country in technology, defence, security and economic growth

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