

## **India, Indian Ocean Strategic and Energy Security**

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The level of energy trade that swims across Indian Ocean is massive. While the ocean is far smaller than the Pacific and the Atlantic in its geographical spread, yet about 36 million barrels per day or about 40% of the global oil supply accounting for about 64% of oil trade use this stretch of water. Consequently, the Ocean has become the biggest challenge for maritime security and global sea trade. Securing energy security in this environment means ensuring that the energy lines are kept safe so that the onshore fuel dependent sectors can make long-term plans for investment. This would also depend on how well an economy builds up its navy and shipping power to address these challenges. This paper tries to look into the questions such as, How deep is the Indian commitment to this massive combination of opportunities and threats at her shores? How strong is the policy level and financial commitment to make inroads in the most significant geo-strategic change happening in the world economy?

### **Introduction**

The Indian Ocean is an important aspect of greater world connectivity. The changing metrics of power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has drawn major attention on the

international stage. The geographical location of the ocean makes it crucial for the movements of goods and trade links between the North-Atlantic and Asia-Pacific. It has a rich flora, fauna, and minerals and is as a result, a hotbed for competition among the IOR countries. The immense security and governance concerns of the Indian Ocean has made it more turbulent and risky over the past few decades.

The Indian Ocean is of great geostrategic importance for India. India's placing gives it a chance to play an important role in the changing geopolitical scenario of the Indian Ocean Region. India has over 7,500 kilometers of coastline along the ocean. The country is highly dependent on it due to its massive population and high energy imports through the water channels. The ocean is also pivotal for the development of its fisheries and aquatic exports. Massive extraction of natural resources and increasing involvement in seabed mining has been a core interest of India. Both the security of its coastline and its islands are important in India's maritime governance endeavours.

### **Evolution of India's Maritime Policy**

India has been a dormant player in the Indian Ocean for a very long period. It is only in recent years that India has adopted a more responsive and pragmatic maritime strategy in relation to the contemporary geopolitical realities of the region. The Maritime Strategy released by the Indian Navy in 2015 "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy", provides a renewed focus on India's Maritime Security needs in the Indian Ocean Region.

The shift to a proactive foreign policy under the current NDA (National Democratic Alliance) government has brought in a new dawn for India's conduct in the Indian Ocean region. The initiatives taken by the state to safeguard its security concerns have been reflective of India's motives in the region. New Delhi has made it clear that its agenda in the Indian Ocean Region is

inclusive and sustainable in nature. India's foreign diplomacy, in general, has also gained momentum under Prime Minister Modi. Maritime diplomacy in the last five years has become more operational given the major engagement with IOR littoral states. According to Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan, India's Maritime diplomacy epitomizes the promotion, pursuit, preservation, and protection of India's maritime interests.

India's maritime development shall complement its economic development. The renewed vision in the IOR has been focused on the growth and prosperity of the region and the promotion of India's vital national economic interests. The Sagarmala *project* was initiated to emphasise port-led development. This project aimed to build a robust port infrastructure and modernise them due to their importance in trade and economic development.

India along with many members of the Indian Ocean Rim Association strives to achieve sustainable use of the Indian Ocean resources. Moreover, the concept of Blue Economy has drawn attention in areas of ocean energy, deep-sea mining, and marine biotechnology. This is thoroughly backed up by Blue Diplomacy. India is actively engaging itself in Blue Diplomacy to harness the available perks from maritime development.

India has been more vocal about free and fair maritime navigation in recent years. It has also stressed the need to adhere to the international maritime standards in the Indian Ocean. Indian Ocean Region is a bed for major security challenges. For India to assert its dominance, it needs to counter these security threats and gain the confidence of the littoral states. The rising presence of China in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean has recently attracted New Delhi's attention. Non-traditional security threats like terrorism and piracy are the primary focus areas of India's maritime policy in the Indian Ocean. After the Mumbai terror attacks, the Indian government realised its shortcomings in its naval security. Piracy at the hands of non-state actors

is very concerning due to the consequent security issue as major Indian trade happens via sea routes.

### **Regional Cooperation**

Indian Government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made a clear stance on India's priority in actively participating in the issues concerning the Indian Ocean Region. PM Modi's vision for India in the Indian Ocean Region first became clear through his *SAGAR Initiative*– Security And Growth for All in the Region- aimed at safeguarding maritime interests of its mainland and islands. During his visit to Mauritius in 2016, he first introduced the SAGAR mission while addressing all IOR littoral states. It promotes cooperation among the state actors and creates an environment of peace and stability. It represents a nexus of maritime cooperation, naval security along with economic development. It also brings out the importance of Coast Guard agencies of the littoral states to counter-piracy actions by non-state actors. Another crucial element of this initiative is to enhance collaboration in trade, tourism, and infrastructure while keeping in view the climate change problems and thus promote sustainable development of the region.

Modi's SAGAR initiative is a part of his greater proactive foreign policy. A highly strategic move to guard India's national interests. India enhancing its relations and bilateral ties with the IOR littoral states is a great step towards achieving maritime peace and cooperation. The ambition to become a prime decision-maker of the area compels India to develop friendly ties with its marine neighbors. As an integral part of its Neighbourhood First Policy, SAGAR policy works through the channels of regional organizations like BIMSTEC, ASEAN, IORA.

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is the predominant organization that brings together the Indian Ocean states to a common platform to promote maritime safety. The SAGAR

initiative emphasizes the role of IORA as a facilitator of trade and fisheries management. It shall further promote tourism and cultural exchanges and shape the notion of the Blue economy. India has made some improvements in the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief area in the IOR. Indian Navy has projected itself as the first responder in the area with regards to its rescue operations and naval assistance missions.

The aspect of collaborative development comes into play along the lines of comprehensive maritime diplomacy. PM's diplomatic visits to Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka in March 2015 amplified the implementation of the SAGAR initiative. It was projected that New Delhi is willing to create a transparent maritime environment via its leadership in capacity building and capability enhancement programs. Other top-tier diplomatic visits by the President Mr. Ram Nath Kovind to Mauritius, Madagascar, and Djibouti further aim to strengthen naval cooperation. Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and India-Sri Lanka-Maldives trilateral agreement are also important in this context.

India's target to become a Net Security Provider in IOR has officially started when India exported the first 'Made in India' warship to Mauritius. India has also sought to build Coastal Surveillance Networks in Seychelles, Maldives, Mauritius, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. While India already has good defense and security relations with Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles, it wants to expand its reach to other countries in South-East Asia and Africa. India has made extensive efforts to promote its 'Act East' Policy. It considers ASEAN countries as a crucial stepping stone for promoting regional cooperation. India's neglect of the region has been economically costly. However, its renewed engagement with the East Asian countries will not only promote Asian solidarity but also enhance economic and marine ties. ASEAN-India Maritime Transport Agreement has been in talks to develop direct shipping routes between India

and Vietnam. With growing sourness in the relations between China and some East Asian countries in the South China Sea, presenting India with a chance to intermediate and promote maritime cooperation.

New Delhi is also vigilant of China's growing penetration in the IOR which postulates a security threat for India. As a counter-act to China's 'String of Pearls' strategy, India is actively engaging with Iran for its Chabahar port project. This can provide leverage in the Gulf trade, primarily for its massive energy import from the region. Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) is in progress to enhance port connectivity.

### **The Way Forward**

India is a natural, prime actor in the Indian Ocean due to its geostrategic placement. India has the capability to emerge as a major regional power in the Indian Ocean Region and influence the future trajectory of maritime stability in the region. It has the potential to create a free trade movement in the region with the support of other littoral states which will eventually help small states to access larger markets. It has an advantage in providing humanitarian relief to the region and encouraging the active involvement of the Indian Navy in disaster management operations.

However, India should rethink its conduct in the region in terms of resource extraction. The vast availability of minerals and other natural resources is an asset to economic development in the IOR. However, mindful and sustainable extraction is crucial here. With India's massive energy requirements, there is an urgent call for reassessing its policies regarding the same. Additionally, it is also imperative to focus on budgetary issues. India's maritime development plans are constrained by its lack of budget. It is increasingly collaborating with some middle-powers and developed countries to assist India in infrastructural development in the region.

The SAGAR doctrine has not been able to fill the power vacuum of the IOR but has influenced the maritime governance of the IOR. In times ahead, India should work pragmatically to improve its maritime focus and effectively harness the benefits it lays out.

The future of India's maritime governance seems promising but the current situation signals room for improvement. While the world is still in throes of the pandemic, India must assert its solid standing in the IOR through comprehensive maritime engagement. But with size comes responsibility and with the unprecedented situation, India needs to come out as a harbinger of international and regional maritime cooperation via a pragmatic approach towards the oceans. The security of the Indian Ocean Region is downright critical and exerts pressure on the policymakers to formulate concrete and result-oriented maritime policies to seek a responsible and inclusive solution.

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