

Associate Paper

4 April 2017

India's Security Concerns in the Indian Ocean Region: A Critical Analysis

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Key Points

- India's Indian Ocean policy is centred on providing security and political stability to its "maritime neighbourhood", which includes the Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles and Sri Lanka, in the face of China's expanding naval and strategic activities in the Indian Ocean.
- India has not learnt any lesson from the Mumbai terror attacks by way of undertaking efficacious measures to deal with future instances of maritime terrorism.
- India must craft a long-term strategy not only to modernise, update and strengthen its naval resources but also to plug loopholes in its decision-making on defence procurement and policy implementation.
- India needs to reverse the perceptions of it as a regional hegemon through policy and actions that encourage the strategic co-operation of its neighbours and help to balance China's increasing strategic influence in the Indian Ocean region.

Summary

The Indian Ocean has always been, and will remain, on the strategic radar of great powers. Given its strategic location with abundant oil, mineral resources and fisheries, and being a hub of vast seaborne global trade and oil routes, it has turned out to be an arena of

geopolitical rivalry among world powers and regional states.¹ In today's age of increasing global economic integration, security in the Indian Ocean region (IOR) has become more problematic and complex given the persistent threats to the smooth flow of trade and commerce which demands freedom of navigation and security of sea lanes.

Insofar as India is concerned, as a "resurgent maritime nation," it has myriad interests in the Indian Ocean, ranging from energy security, economic growth, safety of the sea lanes to its maritime ambition to play a leading role in shaping the security architecture in the IOR.² With its growing military and economic capabilities, India is poised to develop its blue economy to ensure inclusive growth and job creation. Intertwined with its national interests, its maritime strategy is centred on providing security and political stability to its "maritime neighbourhood" such as the Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka in the face of China's expanding naval and strategic activities in the region. By this reasoning, China's presence entails a direct negative impact on India's energy and security interests, and also undermines its role as a preeminent power in the region.

Analysis

In view of the overwhelming security challenges from diverse sources, including adversarial neighbours and non-state actors such as pirates, maritime terrorists and armed robbers, India needs to adopt a more structured and holistic approach to address them at global and regional levels. For that, it will need to craft a long-term strategy not only to modernise, update and strengthen its naval sinews but also to plug loopholes in its decision-making on defence procurement and policy implementation. India's security concerns in the Indian Ocean demand the pursuit of a long-term maritime policy in close strategic co-operation with major powers such as the United States, Japan and Australia, and its maritime neighbourhood.

After the end of the Cold War, the new centres of powers such as China sought to flex their maritime muscles in the Indian Ocean. For instance, China has been feverishly engaged in modernising its navy and expanding its naval arm in the Indian Ocean to assert its influence over the IOR states, which is frequently antithetical to the geopolitical and geostrategic interests of India, the United States and Japan.

If viewed from a historical perspective, India's non-aligned policy during the Cold War era was opposed to the superpower rivalry in the Indian Ocean. That was grounded in its perception and belief that the geopolitical contest between the two superpowers in the Indian Ocean constituted a potential threat to the freedom, sovereignty, economic independence and political stability of the littoral states of the IOR. But, given its burgeoning economy and its role as an emerging global power, India is faced with multiple challenges in the Indian Ocean in the twenty-first century. It is important to bear in mind that 90 per cent of India's trade volumes and 90 per cent of its oil imports pass through the sea routes of the

¹ Alpers, E.A., *The Indian Ocean in World History*, New York: Oxford University Press (2013).

² See David Brewster, *India's Ocean: The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership*, London: Routledge (2014).

Indian Ocean. Further, since India is on the path of integrating its economy globally, it faces an onerous task to protect its long coastline of 7,500 kilometres from the potential threat of non-state actors. The Mumbai terror attacks in November 2008 that emanated from across the maritime border are a case in point. Since then, India has undertaken several measures to augment the security of its coastal cities, and to protect its offshore oil and gas installations.

India's China Anxiety: Clash of Interests

In a new wave of “Asian regionalism”, China has emerged as an assertive and influential actor to reshape Asian economic and security architecture. Over the past one decade or so, China has emerged as India’s arch rival in the Indian Ocean. Without exaggeration, China has already established its strategic beachhead in the region. This is manifest from China’s development of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, Marao port in the Maldives, Chittagong port in Bangladesh, and its operational control over Pakistan’s Gwadar port, which will help China to encounter the Indian Navy directly. Not only that, but China’s PLA-Navy also docked its nuclear submarine in Colombo in 2014, causing security anxiety to India. These instances reinforce China’s intention to scuttle India’s role and influence in the region. In Indian perceptions, China’s objective is to establish a permanent naval base in the Indian Ocean, which might one day be used to jeopardise India’s energy security, economic and trade interests.³

It must be underlined that China has already established strong strategic ties with Sri Lanka and the Maldives with a focussed motivation to dilute India’s preeminent role and influence over those countries. Towards that end, China launched the Maritime Silk Road project in India’s backyard, of which Maldives and Sri Lanka are the partners. Not only this, Chinese military élites are also reportedly engaged in working out a roadmap to set up a naval base in the Maldives, although that is denied by the Maldivian Government.

In order to rejuvenate its ties with Sri Lanka and the Maldives, China conducted joint military exercises with Sri Lanka in June-July 2015 that were in addition to the docking of two nuclear submarines at Colombo the previous year. India protested over the presence of the nuclear submarines in its backyard but it did not cut any ice with the Beijing leadership. In real political terms, China’s game plan is centred on keeping a close surveillance over India’s strategic assets and its naval activities offshore the Indian Ocean. It was also reported that ‘Chinese nuclear submarines carried out patrols in the Bay of Bengal. The possible presence of Chinese nuclear missiles so close to its coastline was a matter of utmost concern to India’s nuclear deterrence.’⁴ Undoubtedly, such sensitive strategic activities are seen to constitute a serious threat to India’s national security interests, which might further erode India’s role as a security and stability provider to the region. The Modi Government, therefore, appears to be serious about helping the Indian Ocean littoral states with their “capability enhancements”.

³ For more on this see, Col. Saji Abraham, *China's Role in the Indian Ocean: Its Implications on India's National Security*, New Delhi: Vij Books (2015).

⁴ Gupta, S., ‘Indian Ocean - Checkmating China’, 22 June 2015. <<http://drsunilgupta.com/indian-ocean-checkmating-china/>>

Modi's "Act East" Policy

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has attempted to redefine India's Indian Ocean policy to articulate India's interests in a much broader framework of seeking 'a more integrated and co-operative future' to ensure peace, security and sustainable development for all. Towards that goal, the Modi Government has launched a new approach to 'reach out to all friendly nations' to renew and deepen strategic partnerships in the Indian Ocean Region. Modi is the first Indian prime minister to have undertaken such a record number of foreign visits which injected a new energy and dynamism into the hitherto moribund maritime diplomacy of India. This resulted in the successful conclusion of the LEMOA agreement between India and the United States in 2016 permitting the use of each other's bases, something quite unimaginable in the Cold War era.⁵

Further, Modi gave a new nomenclature to the earlier Look East Policy (1992) by announcing the "Act East" policy. The choice of name was perhaps not without sarcasm and may imply that his predecessor UPA Government suffered from passivity and policy paralysis, resulting in a failure to address effectively the warnings from China about India's maritime engagement with South-East Asia. He undertook a flurry of visits to ASEAN countries to convince their heads of state and government that India was committed to helping maintain peace and security in the Indian Ocean rim states. He gave enough hints that India might be a solid hedge against China's increasing geopolitical influence in the region and was reflected in India's joint naval exercises with ASEAN member countries such as Singapore and Indonesia. In addition, India and Vietnam signed two MoUs on bilateral defence and coast guard co-operation in 2015. As part of the agreement, two Indian two warships visited Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam in 2016 and two other vessels INS *Sahyadri* and INS *Shakti*, visited Subic Bay in the Philippines. Under the Act East Policy, the Modi Government has boosted the morale of Indian Navy and expanded its strategic footprint [beyond South Asia](#).

Undoubtedly, India's recent maritime engagements with those South-East Asian states imparted a new sense of confidence among the Indian people that their country was capable of defending its maritime security interests against potential threats from its adversaries. In particular, with the induction into the Navy of the aircraft carrier INS *Vikramaditya* and ballistic missile submarines, India has recalibrated its maritime security policy to better safeguard its various security and economic interests in the IOR. Maritime security policy under the Modi Government was articulated in the 2015 document titled *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*.

More pertinently, Prime Minister Modi has endeavoured as never before to inject a new vigour and momentum into India's neighbourhood maritime policy, by realising the new geostrategic reality that China was consolidating its maritime presence in the littoral states of the Indian Ocean. In response to that expansion, Modi visited Seychelles and Mauritius in March 2015 and stressed the imperative for comprehensive defence and maritime security co-operation with the island states. During his call on the Seychelles, he concluded five

⁵ Jain, B.M., *India-US Relations in the Age of Uncertainty: An Uneasy Courtship*, London and New York: Routledge (2016).

agreements with the Seychellois Government covering renewable energy, infrastructure development and hydrographic surveys. More important was the agreement pertaining to the lease of Assumption Island for the development of its infrastructure. This will enable India to keep a close vigil over any Chinese warships in the area. Apart from these agreements, Modi inaugurated the Coastal Surveillance Radar System to enhance India's maritime capabilities. Further, India has plans to set up more Coastal Surveillance Radar Systems in Mauritius, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Highlighting India's push for regional integration, Modi said: 'We also hope that Seychelles will soon be a [full partner](#) in the maritime security co-operation between India, Maldives and Sri Lanka.'

Future Requirements and Actions

In the face of the challenges to India's myriad security interests, it is not sufficient just to conduct joint naval exercises with various regional partners, including the United States. India must realise that its naval capabilities are much weaker than those of China. The latter possesses four nuclear ballistic missile submarines, while India has one nuclear attack submarine, the *Akula*-class INS *Chakra*. Moreover, INS *Arihant*, India's nuclear ballistic missile submarine, has still to undergo several more ballistic missile tests. Hence, the 2015 decision of the Modi Government to upgrade the country's naval arm with the giving of a green light to the indigenous construction of six nuclear-powered submarines.

In addition, India has signed an agreement with a Russian ship builder at a cost of 5,000 crore rupees (\$1 billion) to refit its old *Kilo*-class submarines, including leasing a world-class nuclear attack submarine from Russia to improve the depleted naval fleet. The Indian defence establishment has also given a green light to the construction of 24 submarines by 2045 (or thereabouts). From the United States, India needs the high-tech *Guardian* (the maritime variant of the MQ-9 *Reaper*) drones that were formerly known as *Predator B*, for maritime surveillance in the Indian Ocean. In a new dispensation from the Trump Administration, Democrat Senator Mark Warner and his Republican colleague Dan Sullivan [supported the sale](#) of *Guardian* drones to India in their speech at the Wilson Centre on 2 March 2017.

But some big claims have been made by the Modi Government about India's defence preparedness, implying that India is fully capable of meeting any maritime challenge stemming from any source. On the contrary, Modi's hyperbolic rhetoric and verbal assurances to the nation are bereft of concrete policy actions. For instance, India has not undertaken appropriate measures to improve and strengthen its naval capabilities to counter maritime terrorism and piracy, in light of the Mumbai terror attacks. A host of pragmatic measures are needed.

First, India needs to further elevate, strengthen and deepen its security co-operation with regional partners such as Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius, as well as the United States, Japan and Australia, to protect its core security interests in the Indian Ocean.

Second, India needs to develop hard and soft power resources to ensure its maritime security and to be able to deal with any contingent situation that might arise from any future Sino-US conflict in the South China Sea. Moreover, India must expand its strategic foothold

in multilateral fora and organisations. Today, with the exponential development of modern weaponry, unprecedented communications technology and vast intelligence resources, maritime threats have amplified. For India, the IOR is a “nerve centre” for its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs).

Third, any quadripartite partnership of India, Japan, the United States and Australia should not be exclusively focussed on isolating China as some kind of pariah state. Rather, China must be engaged as a co-operative partner in the process of negotiations to resolve mutual differences in the spirit of protecting the global commons.

Fourth, if it is to meet the challenges – either real or perceived – posed by China to its maritime interests in the Indian Ocean Region, India will be required to develop a multipronged strategy of maintaining an active and agile presence in the IOR by integrating its army, air force and navy in fuller co-operation and co-ordination with the central and state governments.

Fifth, India’s focus should be on the security of SLOCs and resource management. Finally, India will be required to undertake defence infrastructure projects in the Indian Ocean as an effective counterweight to China’s much-hyped strategic encirclement of India through the so-called “string of pearls” doctrine.

Conclusion

India and China will remain strategic rivals due to their competing energy and security interests in the Indian Ocean Region. By logical extension, India will need to improve its maritime infrastructure and upgrade its naval capabilities. Mere drum beating under the Act East Policy will not be enough to deliver the goods since India is faced with divergent maritime threats and challenges of a vast scale, magnitude and intensity to its maritime borders. It cannot protect those maritime borders and ensure its energy security without the co-operation of, and intelligence sharing with, regional partners. But co-operative security mechanisms cannot be developed unless there is a convergence of perceptions on common regional security interests among regional and extra-regional powers. The time has come for India to build sturdy and stable partnerships with other liberal democratic states, in particular the United States, Japan and Australia. At the same time, it must be borne in mind that any partnership is not exclusively directed against China, for the latter is already a global power with a global reach in every domain. It would thus be a chimera to contain China; rather, China needs to be more fully co-opted into the evolving global and regional security architecture. Achieving that will better serve the common interests of all states, including China, in a co-operative security mechanism.

More importantly, India needs to shed off the dominant-dependent psyche that it suffers from. It must treat its South Asian neighbours on an equal footing with due respect to each partner in a co-operative security order. The fact is that India is still perceived as a regional hegemon. Unless this perception is reversed through policy behaviour and action, India will not be able to seek the strategic co-operation of its neighbours to balance China’s increasing strategic influence in the IOR.

In a broader context, if India is unable to liberate itself from the deeply entrenched psyche of keeping itself at a distance and to press ahead with forging strong strategic partnerships with Pacific states, an Indo-Pacific common security order cannot be a reality. The time has come for India to revise its old political shibboleths and psychological inhibitions.

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Professor Jain has authored and edited more than twenty books. His recent books include *India-US Relations in the Age of Uncertainty* (Routledge, 2016), *Global Power: India's Foreign Policy* (Lexington Books, 2008 and 2009), *India in the New South Asia* (IB Tauris, London, 2010), *Conflict and Peace in South Asia*, ed. (Emerald Publishing, London, 2008), and his forthcoming book, *China's Soft Power Diplomacy in South Asia: Myth or Reality?* (Lexington Books, northern summer 2017). Professor Jain has published nearly one hundred research papers, of which 40 are in peer reviewed international journals, such as *Pacific Affairs*, *The Round Table*, *Strategic Analysis*, *Journal of Asian Studies* and *China Report*. His biography has been featured in Marquis *Who's Who in the World*, 33rd edition (2016) and he has been Editor-in-Chief of the *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* since 1988.

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