

# Associate Paper

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## India's Primacy in the Indian Ocean Region: Possibility or Misplaced Priority?

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### Key Points

- The Indian Ocean Region is one of the key foreign policy priorities of the present Indian Government.
- India has the capacity to undertake the role of a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region.
- The growing presence of China in the Indian Ocean Region is viewed with suspicion in India, which has sought to build a collective security framework with other Indian Ocean littoral states.
- India, Australia and the United States can play an important role by co-operating more closely in maintaining a rules-based order in the Indian Ocean Region.

### Summary

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is home to countries of greatly varying population sizes, land areas, territorial seas and GDPs. While globalisation has served as the basis for greater integration, the countries in the Indian Ocean region have not viewed themselves as a cohesive unit. The end of the Cold War certainly de-escalated tensions in the Indian Ocean region, but non-traditional security threats such as piracy, drug trafficking, climate change and the presence of foreign naval bases in the Indian Ocean have kept open the possibility of rapid conflict escalation.

India has always played an important role in the shaping of the Indian Ocean. As a resurgent India seeks to reassert its maritime vision and capability by building a world-class navy and articulating a maritime doctrine<sup>1</sup> that emphasises the role of India as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean, the challenges posed by the Indian Ocean continue to be real and complex.

### Analysis

That the Indian Ocean is of immense importance to India is beyond question. The critical question for India is: does it have the capacity to leverage its new-found economic might and harness the potential that the Indian Ocean presents? India's 1,200 island territories and its huge Exclusive Economic Zone of 2.4 million square kilometres make clear the economic significance of the Indian Ocean to India. The Malacca Strait in the east handles 40 per cent of world trade and the Strait of Hormuz in the west handles 40 per cent of all traded crude oil. It is not hard to imagine the consequences for the global economy if those choke points were indeed choked. The simultaneous importance and vulnerability of the Malacca and Hormuz Straits has been characterised as the Malacca and Hormuz "dilemmas".<sup>2</sup> Thus, given the importance of the region to the entire global economy, having a significant naval presence in the Indian Ocean provides a country with hefty geopolitical weight. Given the fact that its South Asian neighbours (with the exception of Bhutan), are wary of India taking any sort of role as a net security provider in the region, can India really adopt that role?

The effective management of India's Indian Ocean interests requires adroitness and deft skill beyond empty slogans and mere rhetoric. The concerted efforts by Mr Modi are indeed praiseworthy. Questions and issues of capacity building need to be addressed, however.

The Navy has been at the cutting edge of India's engagement with the region, as was evident from its ability to deploy quickly to areas hit by the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. The Indian Navy today is also ready to participate in multinational military operations and already sees itself as being the net security provider in the Indian Ocean. This is reflected in the launch of the updated and revised Indian maritime doctrine, '[Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy](#).' Being a net security provider requires going beyond mere goodwill, diplomacy and capacity building. In that regard, while proclaiming the Indian Navy to be the principal 'security provider' in the IOR, the Indian Maritime Security Strategy also lists the measures taken to achieve that status, [which includes](#) 'balancing against prevailing threats, meeting risks and rising challenges through continuous monitoring, and a containment strategy for non-traditional challenges.'

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<sup>1</sup> 'Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy', Directorate of Strategy, Concepts and Transformation, Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy): New Delhi, October 2015. [https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian\\_Maritime\\_Security\\_Strategy\\_Document\\_25Jan16.pdf](https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Chinese Premier Hu Jintao characterised this as his country's "Malacca Dilemma". See also Daniele Ermito: 'China's maritime strategy and India's security dilemma', *Global Risk Insights*, 23 March 2016. <http://globalriskinsights.com/2016/03/china-maritime-strategy-and-india-security-dilemma/>

In March 2015, Mr Modi unveiled a four-part [framework for the Indian Ocean](#) under the acronym SAGAR, or OCEAN when translated from Hindi, which stands for “Security and Growth for All in the Region”. SAGAR is [New Delhi’s vision](#) for the Indian Ocean region, which is focused on advancing co-operation and using India’s capabilities for the [benefit of the entire region](#) by: ‘defending India’s interests and maritime territory (in particular countering terrorism); deepening economic and security co-operation with maritime neighbours and island states; promoting collective action for peace and security; and seeking a more integrated and co-operative future for sustainable development.’ As noted above, there is, however, some debate as to what the meaning of a net security provider might be in this context. Should the Indian Ocean become India’s Ocean? At the 2009 Shangri-La Dialogue, then US Secretary of Defence [Robert Gates](#) said that the United States looked to India to be a ‘net security provider’, explaining that India had ‘tremendous potential to be a major player in bringing international security and stability in a lot of places.’

Former Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao has aptly summed up the role that India [sees itself playing in the region](#):

While India is seen as a net security provider, we cannot carry the burden of regional security on our shoulders alone. ... The era of gun boat diplomacy is long over. There is no inevitability of conflict. India views the emerging trends with realism – building a sustainable regional security will require a co-operative effort among all regional countries on the one hand and all users of the Indian Ocean. As the main resident power in the Indian Ocean region, we have a vital stake in the evolution of a stable, open, inclusive and balanced security and co-operation architecture in the region with an emphasis on a consensus-based process.

It is, therefore, important for India to consider what the other Indian Ocean states might expect of it. In South Asia at least, India has had varying experiences with its neighbours, which are often seen as playing the “China card” to extract more from, and drive a harder bargain with, New Delhi. India must engage both bilaterally and multilaterally with as many Indian Ocean states as possible to aid in building greater capacity for the region as a whole. Indeed, India is focused on the strategic objective of “co-operative engagement” with the Indian Ocean countries, including with the [United States](#). India has had berthing rights in Oman since 2008, for instance, and, in Maldives, Gan Island has been made available for use by Indian reconnaissance and surveillance aircraft. Madagascar allowed the Indian Navy build and operate a radar monitoring station in 2007.

The Indian Navy’s 15-year modernisation plan – the Long Term Integrated Perspective Plan (2012-27) – envisages strengthening the aircraft carrier force, destroyers and submarines to realise the objectives of being a pre-eminent force in the Indian Ocean Region and of establishing a presence in the South China Sea, the western Pacific and the Mediterranean

Sea.<sup>3</sup> The plan is ambitious but there is more to it than just the acquisition of military hardware as, for example, [Dhruva Jaishankar](#), of Brookings India, has noted:

Although India has long been preoccupied by continental considerations, it has recently begun to re-evaluate its priorities. India's Indian Ocean Region strategy – which is only just taking shape – conforms closely to global priorities for preserving the Ocean as a shared resource: an important channel for trade, a sustainable resource base, and a region secure from heightened military competition, non-state actors, and catastrophic natural disasters. Achieving these objectives will require further investments in capacity, greater transparency and confidence-building measures, and enhanced institutional co-operation.

In the same vein, [Srinath Raghavan says](#) that 'New Delhi's ability to counter Chinese influence in South Asia is not just a function of what China wants to do, but also of what India can do. India needs, above all, to build its credibility in delivering on its promises and intentions.' The ability to deliver can be very well applied to the broader Indian Ocean context, as well.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, lying to the south-west of the Indian mainland and astride the entry to the Malacca Strait, are a vital strategic asset for India. They form the southernmost tip of India and are very close to the south-east Asian countries. The islands provide India with a commanding geostrategic presence that enables it to dominate the Bay of Bengal and the maritime access to South and South-East Asia. Increased sightings of Chinese submarines have been reported close to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and are [viewed with great suspicion](#) in India. Any policy of playing a bigger role in the Indian Ocean must have the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as its centrepiece. The present Indian Government has decided to build on the islands' strengths with a plan to develop port infrastructure and inter-island connectivity under a 10,000 crore rupees (\$1.95 billion) allocation; it remains to be seen, however, whether that money actually materialises into real infrastructure development.

The strategic location of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands can also be of immense potential in future defence and security co-operation between India and Australia. The Indian Navy currently operates the P-8I *Poseidon* maritime patrol aircraft from Port Blair, located in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Australia, with its own territories in the Indian Ocean, also views the presence of the Chinese Navy (PLA-N) with some concern. In a [submission](#) to the 2017 Joint Standing Committee Inquiry into the Strategic Importance of the Indian Ocean Territories, analyst Dr Malcolm Davis suggests reciprocal berthing arrangements for the Indian Navy in the Cocos Islands and for the Royal Australian Navy at Port Blair. Based on the Australian *Defence White Paper 2016*, Davis suggested establishing the Cocos Islands as an operations hub 'for both the RAAF's P-8A and the Indian Navy's P-8I *Poseidon* fleets.' Meanwhile, Future Directions International Visiting Fellow Balaji Chandramohan takes a naval focus to suggest, among other initiatives, the utility of the Andaman and Nicobar

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<sup>3</sup> Kumar, Y., 'Diplomatic Dimensions of Maritime Challenges for India in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century', Pentagon Press: New Delhi, 2015, p. 188

Islands as the location of a future Indian Navy [Far Eastern Fleet](#), one particular advantage of which would be the facilitation of increased co-operation between the Indian, United States and Royal Australian navies.

Thus, there emerges the important question of how the burden of collective security in the Indian Ocean should be shared. The fact is that the present security matrix is underpinned by the security and stability provided by the presence of the United States Navy. In emphasising that the security of the region must be considered in the form of a collective framework, India has positioned itself as the unobtrusive fulcrum in the Indian Ocean and, in line with that position, is [providing defence partnerships](#) to a number of Indian Ocean littoral states. As [PM Modi commented](#):

India is already assuming its responsibilities in securing the Indian Ocean region.... Our goal is to seek a climate of trust and transparency; respect for international maritime rules and norms by all countries; sensitivity to each other's interests; peaceful resolution of maritime security issues; and increase in maritime co-operation.

In unpacking some of the potential ramifications of such a goal, Indian commentator Sunjoy Joshi has noted that:

The United States spends US\$32 billion to US\$72 billion a year in securing the Persian Gulf. There is a perception in the international arena that India and China have been free-riding on the US naval forces both in the Pacific and the Gulf. Therefore, the reluctance of the United States to contribute in the [Indian Ocean] region can lead to vulnerability for two reasons. First, the Indian Navy will need to fill the security void in the Indian Ocean. Second, China will step up its engagements in the region, sparking what could be a veritable securitisation race.<sup>4</sup>

For India to fill this possible security void, it is important that it continues to maintain close co-operation with the navies of all other Indian Ocean littoral states. The Commander of the US Pacific Command, [Admiral Harry Harris](#), stated in January 2017 that:

We work closely with India and improving India's capabilities to do that kind of surveillance ... Chinese submarines are clearly an issue. They are operating in the region .... There is sharing of information regarding Chinese maritime movement in the Indian Ocean.

Admiral Harris thus clearly indicates the perceived shared threat that the increased presence of the Chinese Navy poses to the United States and India. It remains to be seen, of course, what effect the Trump Presidency has on the US naval presence in the Indian Ocean.

Given the existing geopolitical situation, however, it would be safe to say that China is making a non-disruptive entry into the Indian Ocean. Equally, in the Indian Ocean Region,

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<sup>4</sup> Joshi, S., 'The Search for Energy Security: India's Perspective', in *Crux of Asia: China, India and the Emerging Global Order*, Ashley J. Tellis and Sean Mirski (Eds), 2013, pp. 221, 229. <[http://carnegieendowment.org/files/crux\\_of\\_asia.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/crux_of_asia.pdf)>

India has the diplomatic opportunity to prevent the development – or deterioration – of the security environment along the lines of the East or South China Seas. The importance of maintaining a rules-based international order as the global operating system cannot be stressed enough.

The Indian Ocean is witnessing a silent yet significant naval build-up, which features modern and sophisticated naval hardware. Alongside that issue, and the entry into the region of China, the fragility of countries such as Yemen and Somalia brings with it a share of concomitant challenges that policymakers must grapple with. As Nelson Mandela eloquently put it during a visit to India in 1995: ‘The natural urge of the facts of history and geography should broaden itself to include the concept of an Indian Ocean Rim for socio-economic co-operation and other peaceful endeavours.’

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