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# Indian Ocean Diplomacy: Comprehending the Indian Vision Ahead

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# Indian Ocean Diplomacy: Comprehending the Indian Vision Ahead

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## ABSTRACT

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has been a vital juncture in the connectivity for trade, commerce, and shipping. The waters of this region have served as shipping lanes for economic development, as well as a hub for disputes, conflict, and activity in the larger African and Asian plateways. India's approach towards the region can be largely attributed to its geostrategic location, which also further dictates the foundations for its maritime security. This research paper focuses on India's ambitions in the IOR and its geopolitical manoeuvres around the region, including an analysis of US and Chinese activities in the region pre- Trump 2.0 presidency. The argument of the paper lies in the notion that the IOR should not be viewed through the lens of a single economy but rather, the voice and vote of all. This intends to place India, not as a messiah, unlike China, developing focal points in maritime security, domain awareness, littoral state engagement, economic interests, etc., but rather one of their own whose interests in the regions are as significant as their people and their economy. It also showcases facets of India's toolkit, approaches towards the region, and shapes the discourse for India's future ambitions in and around the region.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Indian Ocean, Security,  
IOR, Global South,  
Maritime Security,  
China

## I. Research Methodology

The Research method used in this paper is primarily qualitative in nature. The paper has been divided into halves, the first half providing a description of the region and challenges to its security architecture. The second half of the paper talks about Indian Ocean diplomacy, increasing US- China competition, and an analysis of their activities and interests in the region till 2024. The third part analyses India's perspective in its approach to the region. A limitation of this study has been the inconsistency in picking common timelines. The historical analysis of bilateral relations with India often picks at the former's timeline of independence. Similarly, US and Chinese influence in the region has only been studied till 2024, the end of Joe Biden's presidency.

## II. The Indian Ocean Region: Definition and Importance

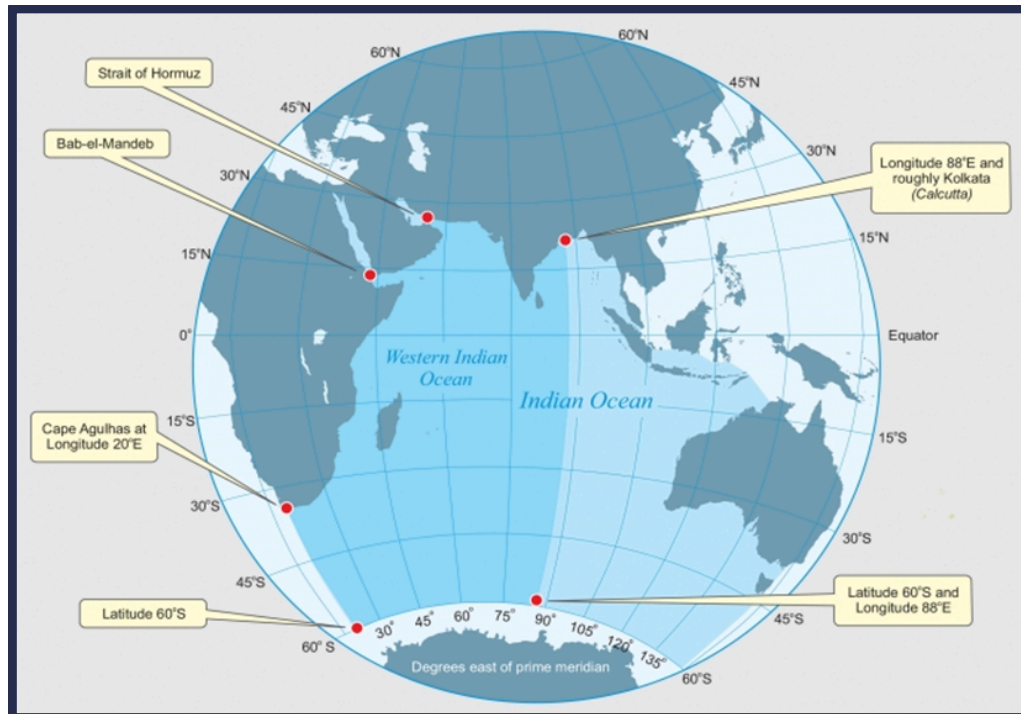
### 1. Definition and Composition

The Indian Ocean Region is an estimated 1/5th of the world's oceanic area, situated between the African continent and the western Indian Ocean. It encompasses the central Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, adjacent to Myanmar, and also covers the eastern Indian Ocean. The waters shoal the Indian subcontinent and move eastwards to Southeast Asia and the Australian Pacific Rim. The region situated at the crossroads of global trade, connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, is also a vital geostrategic location, where almost 90,000 vessels pass per year transporting 9.84 billion tonnes<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, 36 million barrels, corresponding to 40 % of the world's oil supply, also witnesses 64 % of

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the oil trade crossing through the Indian Ocean Region.<sup>2</sup> The Indian Ocean, composed of the eastern and the western Indian Ocean, also includes the Bay of Bengal, the Malacca Strait, and the southern and western waters of Australia and Indonesia. The latter stretches from latitude 60°S, i.e., Cape Agulhas (the southernmost point on the African continent), covering the straits of Hormuz and Bab El Mandeb, to longitude 88°E, running roughly through the Bay of Bengal, down to latitude 60°S.



*Image depicting the composition of the Eastern and Western Indian Ocean*

(Picture taken from: *India and Africa: Maritime Security and India's Strategic Interests in the Western Indian Ocean*; Denis Venter).

## 2.Importance of the Region

The importance of this region is underscored not only by the percentage of global trade that passes through it but also by the abundance of resources it fosters, including fisheries, ocean energy, seabed mining, minerals, and marine tourism. Fishing in the Indian Ocean is also responsible for almost 15 percent of the world's total fishing activity.<sup>3</sup> An interesting feature of this region is the ability of the Littoral Islands to manoeuvre and command the larger land masses to influence trade over the region. These islands significantly shape the security architecture of the region by playing a crucial role along the SLOCs, ensuring access to navies along the waters and the regulation of trade and commerce. The region is thus securitised, including the presence of information channels, and thorough patrolling of these regions is done in order to ensure livelihood and passage of trade from major non - traditional security threats.

Furthermore, the region is viewed as a theatre by peripheral countries, including a nexus of economies that, as of today, encompasses around 1/5th of the international political economy. In addition, shipping lanes and chokepoints are major hubs for non-conventional security threats. Furthermore, marine and ecological tourism that employs a large share of the oceanic population contributes to the littoral GDP of the island nations. Numbers reveal that 2/3rd of global oil shipments and 1/3rd of Bulk

Cargo Transit passing through the region<sup>4</sup>, further indicating that the IOR is rich in hydrocarbon resources like oil and natural gas, fertile fishing grounds along the coastlines, and rare earth materials like polymetallic nodules along its seabed. In addition, the Indian Ocean region is found to contain rare and critical minerals, including nodules of nickel, cobalt, iron, and massive sulphide deposits of manganese, copper, zinc, iron, silver, and gold on the seabed.<sup>5</sup> The Security Architecture in the Indian Ocean Region is currently centred around countries that govern the region, mostly through their naval presence.

### **III. Maritime Security Architecture in the Indian Ocean**

The Maritime security architecture can be analysed through conventional security challenges and non-conventional threats. The security architecture of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is increasingly influenced by countries situated in the core and periphery of the Indian Ocean, patrolling vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs), mostly through their navies, to cater to non - traditional and traditional security challenges. Maritime security being analogous can be defined as it is both multi-dimensional, multi - faceted and involves military and nonmilitary issues<sup>6</sup> Conventional security challenges deal with military security issues involving naval threats and challenges, military competition between major powers, i.e., USA, China, Japan, India, Russia, and competitive claims between China and Southeast Asian countries in the South China Sea. This military competition translates into either expansion or aggression in the foreign policies of nations while conducting it in their best interests. Non-conventional threats are major concerns of narcotics, human trafficking, smuggling syndicates, money laundering networks, piracy, and terrorism at sea that endanger the shipping industry, safe passage of trade, proper extraction of minerals, offshore oil, and, at large, endanger the people employed in the region. Ransoms paid to Somali pirates have been linked to terrorist financing, with proceeds laundered through formal financial channels and Hawala networks.<sup>7</sup> In the past, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam insurgency in Sri Lanka made good on the elaborate smuggling networks that its associates had established regionally and globally.<sup>7</sup>

Military use in dealing with non-conventional maritime threats includes providing energy security, safeguarding port and ship-building facilities, delimiting extended maritime spaces (EEZs), enforcing legal and regulatory mechanisms in maritime zones (maritime management), protecting the maritime environment, preventing pollution, dumping of toxic waste, and securing dual-purpose oceanographic data.<sup>9</sup> The security threats channel a vast array of concerns, also transcending from locally based challenges to global mitigation. The challenges posed need political stability and economic development on the transnational front. Informal arrangements, bilateral efforts, and sub-regional initiatives partly open the door for crucial diplomatic efforts to be at the forefront.

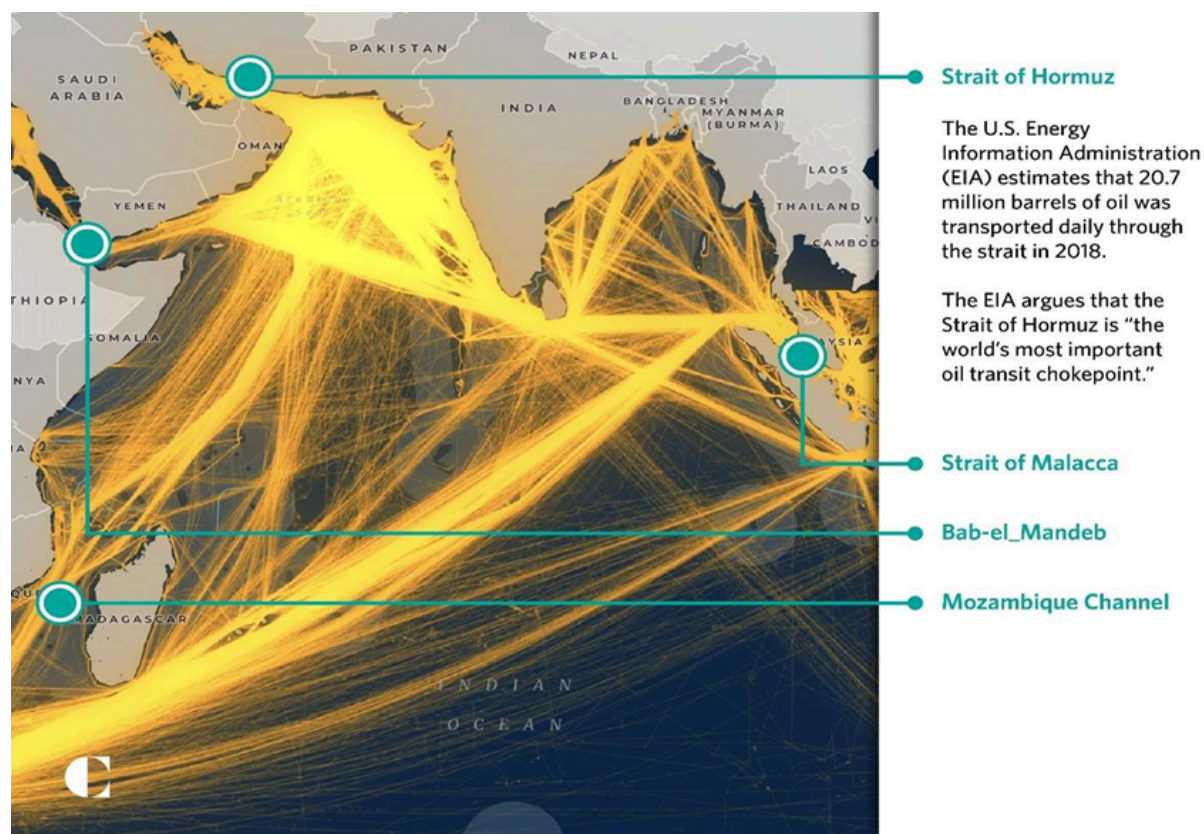
### **IV. Challenges to the Marine Security Architecture**

The Maritime Security Architecture in the region has been perturbed with repeated piracy attempts since the last 50 years, but over time, new threats and challenges have emerged, including illicit fishing, drug trafficking, weapons smuggling, and maritime attacks by terrorist organisations. In the last few years, Houthi forces in Yemen have escalated attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, using drones, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and missiles to strike vessels, creating a critical threat to maritime security.

These threats, largely centred around choke points in the IOR, seem to place a large emphasis on these points as fault points. The Choke Points in the IOR are the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Mozambique Channel. All these chokepoints are located towards the rim of the region and can be best conceptualised as exit gateways for this theatre. Countries bordering the Strait of Hormuz, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, and Iran are all amongst the World's largest oil exporters, making trade supply chains more susceptible to large losses of capital and human strength as well. The Strait of Malacca, on the other hand, witnesses 30 percent of the world's GDP concentrated in South-east Asia. The Bab El Mandeb is the exit point for trade passing through the largely contested Suez Canal

through the coast of Ethiopia onto the Horn of Africa, which also happens to be one of the World's largest piracy-laden regions.

Today, Maritime Security faces challenges from large aspects of pressing environmental issues in land degradation, access to fresh water resources, exploitation of fishing stocks, climate change, illegal disposal of nuclear waste, environmental refugees, and urban expansion and deterioration.<sup>10</sup> In addition, an estimated 25,000 tonnes of washed-out crude oil per day are being dumped into the sea between the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Mozambique Channel, impacting local communities and traditional fishing villages.<sup>11</sup> The greatest security challenge in the Indian Ocean is thus largely ensuring member nations adhere equally and responsibly to all threats. There are numerous regional organisations, and most of the time, they overlap in their efforts. Some of these are also centred on maritime capacity building and technical coordination, such as the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) and the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) mechanism.<sup>12</sup> The two other institutions established by the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC)—the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC) in Madagascar and the Regional Centre for Operational Coordination (RCOC) in Seychelles—jointly constitute the executive arm of the maritime security architecture in the Western Indian Ocean.



Choke points in the Indian Ocean Region

(Source: *Maritime Competition in the Indian Ocean*, Darshana M.Baruah, Carnegie India)

## V. Indian Ocean Diplomacy: Highlighting Indian Ambition

India has been at the helm of the IOR, occupying 40 % of its strategic waters and a key influence in the major littoral islands.<sup>13</sup> India shares a centralised location, provides access to key infrastructural pillars, and its deep-rooted civilizational ties further create a strong diaspora community with many countries in the IOR. It is this cooperation that New Delhi intends to solidify amidst the geopolitical competition within the region. At the Indian Ocean conference on 01 September 2016 at Singapore,

Shri Nitin Gadkari, the then Minister of Road Transport, Highways & Shipping, India, highlighted India's ambition, exclaiming,

*“My government believes that our neighbourhood and the Indian Ocean littoral can be partners in India's growth story to fuel their own economic growth and bring sustainability to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Therefore, beyond the Sagarmala, we are also committed to building infrastructure in another littoral country to create onward connectivity from India. We have established a Special Purpose Vehicle to take up maritime projects overseas. We have also signed a coastal shipping agreement with Bangladesh, and are developing the Chabahar port in Iran, which would act as the gateway to the world, not only for Afghanistan but also for the Central Asian Republics”<sup>14</sup>*

Through this conference, the Minister highlighted New Delhi's aim to sustainably develop the Indian Ocean Region. The Sagarmala Project, launched in 2015, was a strategic initiative launched for port-led development by extensive IT for port modernisation, also promoting coastal economic development. New Delhi regards the IOR as a key strategic region necessary for its diplomatic and military engagements within its strategic proximity and being central to its security interests. India's approach had been fairly limited since the end of the Cold War due to a lack of competition in the region. This can be attributed to the fact that while the region was a front for competition in the Cold War era between the Soviet Union and the USA, the conversations disappeared with the US placing its resources in the Middle East towards the latter part of the 21st Century. This created a vacuum of Power in the region, which was then beginning to be absorbed by India and other powers in the region. Initially, it became a transit route between East Asia and the Middle East and a staging ground for the United States conducting its larger military operations in Afghanistan. Washington further led New Delhi to anchor its defences to emerge as a 'Net Security Provider' in the region, while the latter also grew cautious over increasing eyesight from Beijing.<sup>16</sup> Thereafter, the Indian Navy has prioritised the region and acted as the primary guarantor to anchor major communications alongside tackling non-conventional threats and keeping an eye on warding off any interest from China. China's steep rise in its presence in the region can be understood by its offering capital to small island nations, other aid, and grants for infrastructure projects, as a part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This further led to China securing major access to key maritime routes and strong ties with regional governments in the region.<sup>17</sup> This strategy demands a greater engagement from India to cooperate with these island states in major challenges, including climate change mitigation, climate finance, renewable energy transition, etc., if they're to lead the voice within the region.

India has historically placed greater attention on Sri Lanka and the Maldives, being its closest maritime neighbours, and Mauritius, Seychelles, all of which host a large Indian Diaspora. Indian Ocean Diplomacy, in this regard, seeks to magnify New Delhi's greatest strength in its basket, i.e., increasing its diplomatic footprint by leveraging civilizational connections. This is done through high-level visits and initiatives launched at regular intervals. This mechanism also involves frequent, high-level visits by Indian leaders, including at a ministerial-level engagement, creation of more diplomatic missions, including embassies, consuls, etc., to littoral states and island nations, and strengthening bilateral ties. These inroads aim to enhance cooperation amongst regional partners, valuing input through grouping mechanisms. Initiatives like the Security and Growth for all in the Region (SAGAR) saw the Indian Navy provide medical assistance teams and food relief during the COVID - 19 pandemic and were an attestation of India's continued humanitarian outreach. Later in 2025, at the ten-year anniversary of the SAGAR initiative, PM Modi announced the MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) vision that expands the scope of its predecessor. This now includes referring to the wider Global South in addressing traditional and non-traditional security threats, trade and connectivity for development, capacity-building for maritime states, and thereby locating India as a global South leader.<sup>18</sup> India's role in this region thus extends beyond just increasing its diplomatic footprint to envisaging a greater military might, capacity building, securing SLOCs, etc., that would showcase more responsibility amidst the global south nations. That is perhaps the might for

New Delhi's Olympus trail.

## **VI. Ideals of Indian Ocean Diplomacy: A History of the Geography**

India has undertaken numerous initiatives to foster enhanced cooperation amongst littoral and territorial superpowers, engaging through diplomatic channels over the last decade. These initiatives include high-level visits leading to mutually signed trade agreements, extending lines of credit for infrastructural and economic development, deploying humanitarian aid during times of crisis, etc.

Amongst the earliest diplomatic efforts taken by India lies a 1974 defence agreement where India and Mauritius established efforts of cooperation with India transferring patrol boats, helicopters, and seeking training to the Mauritian Navy and Air Force.<sup>19</sup> Since 2003, the Indian Navy has undertaken periodic patrolling of Mauritian waters, including anti-piracy patrols in 2010.<sup>20</sup> India also finally inaugurated the new Airstrip and St. James Jetty, along with six community development projects at the Agalega Island in Mauritius, enhancing manned and unmanned surveillance activities for India.<sup>21</sup> Seychelles, initially categorised as a pawn between major powers during the Cold War era, asked for assurances from the then Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi.<sup>22</sup> While India didn't provide any assurances in writing, it contributed two helicopters and training to the Seychelles security forces under the leftist former President Albert René's government.<sup>23</sup> In addition, a 2003 defence cooperation agreement signed between the two countries saw the Indian navy providing anti-piracy patrols, thereby bolstering maritime security in the Seychelles EEZ.<sup>24</sup>

Strong diplomatic ties between India and the Maldives date back as early as 1988, when India sent naval forces to support former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom against an attempted coup by Sri Lankan mercenaries. The Maldives currently dominates the Central Indian Ocean as a powerhouse amongst the rest of the littoral islands, with the other being the British Administered Indian Ocean Territory (housing the US air and naval base at Diego Garcia). Later in 2009, India was granted use of the former British naval base at Gan Island (part of the southernmost group of islands in the Maldives lying around 1,000 km south of India and around 700 km north of Diego Garcia)<sup>25</sup> This transfer was also sought with the help of a security agreement that allowed India to station, aircraft and naval vessels at Male in central and at Haa Dhaalu atoll in north Maldives.<sup>26</sup> In return, India built a system of 26 electronic monitoring stations across their archipelago to protect their large EEZ from illegal fishing activities.<sup>27</sup>

Besides, the navy has played a leading role in ensuring that regional security is maintained. In 2007, India set up the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC–IOR), a regional framework aimed to ensure a structural flow of information on white shipping, illegal fishing, drug smuggling, and human trafficking.<sup>28</sup> The Indian Navy has since then acted as a maritime security provider for many East African and Indo-Pacific nations, including Mozambique, by taking responsibility for security during the 2003 African Union (AU) and 2004 World Economic Forum (WEF) summits held in Maputo.<sup>29</sup> The two countries also entered into a defence cooperation agreement that included joint maritime patrols, supply of military equipment, transfer of technology for assembly and repair, supply of aircraft and ships in 2006.<sup>30</sup> The Navy also opened up an electronic monitoring facility in Northern Madagascar.<sup>31</sup>

## **VII. US – China activity analysis in the Indian Ocean till 2024**

New Delhi has generally adopted a pro-Arab foreign policy since the 1980s, yet its ties with the region were regularly strained due to hedging between India and Pakistan. Pakistan had led the combined task force 150 (CTF-150), a multinational coalition naval task force to monitor and top suspect shipping to pursue the "War on Terror" in the Horn of Africa region, a record 12 times.<sup>32</sup> India, being a part of this 34-nation coalition of Combined Maritime Forces, was never given a command of this task force, thereby making its presence in the Gulf largely overshadowed by Pakistan. Over the years, Chinese foreign policy has emphasized increasing its reach across the Indian Ocean after already establishing itself at the epicentre of the competition in the South Pacific Region. In 2017, China -

opened its first overseas military base in the Indian Ocean, in Djibouti, and became the only country with an embassy in each of the six island nations in the region.<sup>33</sup> Beijing has further intended to establish commercial and infrastructural projects in India's backyard, investing in several projects in the Horn of Africa. It has also focused on the revival of the Chinese Maritime Silk Route, through investments in the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka, thereby gaining control of it through debt-trap lending. China has also financed the China - Maldives friendship bridge linking its capital, Malé, to the island of Hulhumale, which was the first sea-crossing bridge for the islands of the Maldives.<sup>34</sup>

Besides, China has also made inroads in the Western Indian Ocean and in African countries, including Nigeria and Angola, and financed two major rail projects - Lagos to Kano and Lagos to Calabar.<sup>35</sup> These infrastructural projects have emerged as a financial burden to these economies, and by provisionally allowing Beijing to gain sovereignty over its interests in these countries, it has enabled further Chinese influence in the region.

India has viewed the Chinese deployment of submarines for its anti-piracy missions in the Horn of Africa and submarine dockings in Sri Lanka as cautious.<sup>36</sup> China, on its part, on further analysis can be said, has however been welcomed in the region as these engagements ensure more quantifiable trade accompanied by additional investment development. While India has been consistently working to extend infrastructural projects, the real deal is not competing with the Chinese in quantifiable credit terms, but rather in its ability to accept the Chinese as a partner in the region. This acceptance ensures cooperation from other nations, such as the US, on other agreements, directly like the LEMOA, to gain logistical support from the many US facilities located throughout the Indo-Pacific.

Washington, on the other hand, supports New Delhi's objective in keeping the IOR safe and secure from Chinese interests. Post the fall of Kabul, Washington has strategically shifted its interests to the epicentre of South-East Asia to counter Beijing's aggression. To ensure that their interests are safe, it becomes imperative for them to look upon India as the most secure partner in establishing a stable dynamic in the region. Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy has not clearly defined its cooperation strategy with India or any other superpower; its purpose is to mitigate any Chinese threat.<sup>37</sup> The United States Navy also currently transits the Indian Ocean and has additional deployments to Japan and the Middle East.<sup>38</sup> Washington today enjoys a more friendly and favourable partnership with New Delhi, and it is only through direct communication that they plan to defend against this Chinese aggression.

### **VIII. Increasing Competition in the Indian Ocean Region: India – China investments in defence and trade**

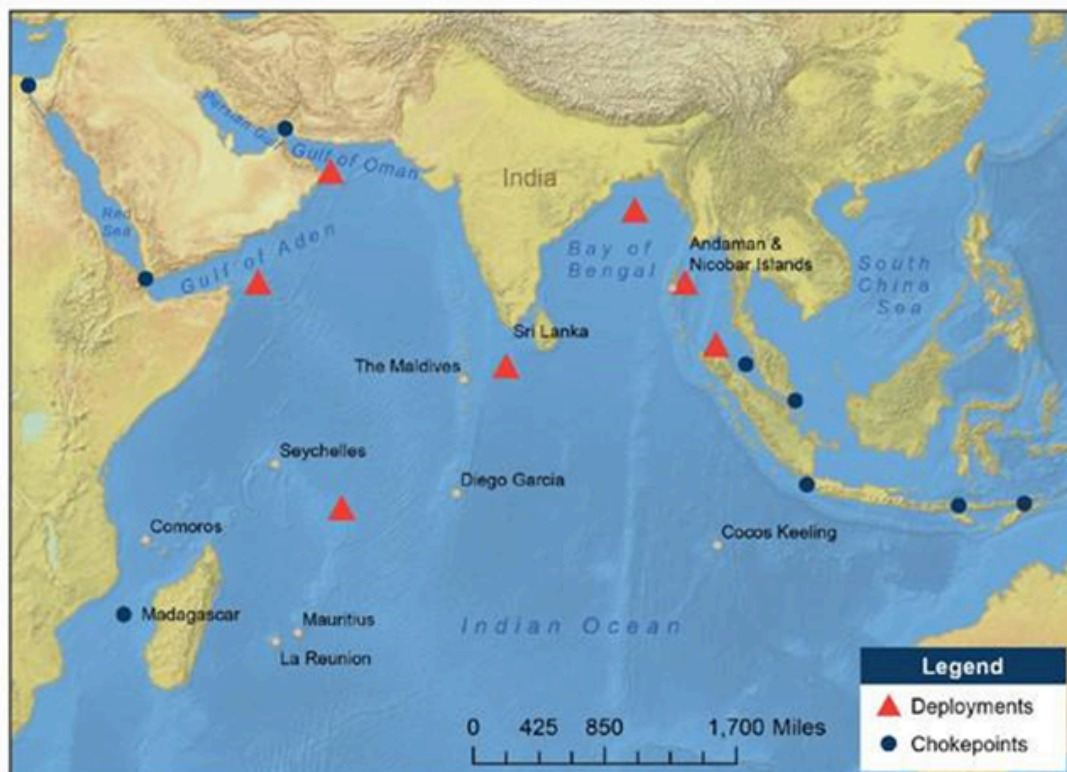
Over the last decade, there has been increasing competition brewing in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), in a quest to gain strategic influence, primarily driven by the rising rivalry between India and China, with the United States and other powers also playing significant roles.<sup>39</sup> This geopolitical, economic, and military contest has led regional states, navigating relationships between India, China, and the US, to maximize their development opportunities. Examples could be seen in the case of Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Indonesia. Sri Lanka, as a central node in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), received massive infrastructure investment, including the Hambantota Port; however, when faced with high-interest debt and the potential for losing control of strategic assets, it sought to diversify by balancing Chinese investments with projects and economic ties from India. Following the suspension of a tripartite agreement (India-Japan-Sri Lanka) for the East Container Terminal in 2021, Sri Lanka approved an Indian-backed proposal to develop the West Container Terminal at the Port of Colombo.<sup>40</sup> In 2022, Sri Lanka signed a deal with India's Lanka IOC (Indian Oil Corporation) to develop oil storage tanks in Trincomalee.<sup>41</sup> Bangladesh has consistently maintained strong ties in connectivity and trade facilitation with India, and with its recent elections in 2026, it will strive to maintain them. The Maldives has often pivoted between allowing Chinese port access and turning to India for financial assistance with successive governments, indicating they look to secure their interests in the region first.<sup>42</sup> Indonesia, using its Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) policy, has attracted financial support for

infrastructure from China (through BRI) while simultaneously engaging with U.S., Japanese, and Indian investment to maintain a "dynamic equilibrium"<sup>43</sup> It had pivoted to Japan for major projects like the Patimban deep-sea port in West Java, to US and India to provide maritime assistance in the Natuna islands.<sup>44</sup>

Chinese pursuits in the Indian Ocean, including military facilities in Djibouti, Gwadar, or the construction of Hambantota Port was carefully studied by India, which responded on its own with the construction of Chabahar Port in Iran and the constant deployment of Navy Patrols around the circumference of the region. In 2021, the Indian Ministry of Defence announced plans to construct 42 new coastal radar stations to strengthen coastal surveillance.<sup>45</sup> Later in 2022, it also announced a National Maritime Domain Awareness (NMDA) project to bolster an integrated intelligence grid that can detect and respond to sea-based threats.<sup>46</sup> India also increased its naval defence budget, with the navy's capital expenditure for purchasing equipment reaching ₹62,545.98 crore, forming roughly 13.75% of the total defence capital outlay.<sup>47</sup> This also influenced India's MoD to integrate new technology, equipment, and advance their navy in an aim to constantly challenge any Chinese advancements in the same timeframe. Meanwhile, India's comparatively better defence relations with the US meant the Ministry of Defence's agreements to procure U.S.-made, armed MQ-9B Sea Guardian drones aim to further enhance India's intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities.<sup>48</sup> The advancement of technological Prowess augmented with integrated cooperation, exhibited by multi-member military exercises, aims to project a shadow of Indian confidence among these actors involved, if the latter are to consider their strategic interests in the region.

## MAP 2

### Indian Navy's Mission-Based Deployment



Indian Navy's Mission-Based Deployment

(Picture taken from: *Maritime Competition in the Indian Ocean*, Darshana M.Baruah)

### **VIII. The Dawn of a New Decade: Post 2010 Indian activities in the IOR**

Since the dawn of the new decade, India has regularly conducted annual exercises with the French navy operating out of Reunion and Djibouti. India has also sponsored the 'IBSA Trilateral Security Dialogue' between India, Brazil, and South Africa, and trilateral naval exercises (IBSAMAR) have been held in 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014 off the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa. Post 2010, New Delhi carved new inroads into this highly competitive region. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit in 2015 to three of the six Indian Ocean islands- Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and Seychelles signalled renewed interest in the islands. Their visit to Sri Lanka came after a gap of 28 years from an Indian Prime Minister.<sup>50</sup> Colombo warmly accepted a customs pact, a credit line for \$300 million, visa-on-arrival for Sri Lankan passport holders, and a \$1.5 billion currency swap agreement, thereby re-announcing New Delhi as a great friend and one of its largest trade partners.<sup>51</sup> The visit to Seychelles was even more iconic as India gifted a Dornier aircraft and signed 4 agreements on cooperation in geography, renewable energy, infrastructure development, and the sale of navigation and electronic navigational charts.<sup>52</sup> PM Modi was also greatly welcomed in Mauritius, and he further signed 5 bilateral agreements extending a \$500 million line of credit, covering areas of ocean economy, cultural cooperation, the import of fresh mangoes from India, sea air transportation in the Agalega Islands, medicine, and homoeopathy.<sup>53</sup> and homoeopathy.<sup>53</sup>

Taking a page out of the Chinese playbook, in 2016, the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, established a new division, the Indian Ocean Division, to organically strengthen its outreach, viewing the entire region as one.<sup>54</sup> India has signed prominent FTA's like the CECPA in 2021 with Mauritius, CECA with Singapore, and Malaysia. Under India's Neighbourhood First policy, India has signed coastal radar systems and stations in collaboration with the Maldives, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, and Seychelles. India has also constantly extended humanitarian aid and international assistance, with notable instances seen in 2017 when India sent 3 Navy ships with supplies to Sri Lanka. Using Multilateral organisations, India has sought to clearly showcase its vision for the Indian Ocean by leading innovation, investment, and cross-cooperation. The Indian Ocean Rim Association has engaged with like-minded countries in the region by establishing a working group on maritime safety and security and holding an annual Indian Ocean Dialogue. India has also spearheaded other initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, and International Solar Alliance. India's recent successes at the G-20 in 2023, Voice of Global South Summit in the same year has illustrated confidence among the region of its close ties and civilisational bonds, drawing more collective good than Beijing's debt agenda. The SAGAR and MAHSAGAR initiatives have described a "clear, high-level articulation of India's vision for the Indian Ocean". The Sagarmala Project, launched by the Ministry of Shipping, has furthered the strategy for port-led development through the use of IT-enabled services in ports. Through participation in other initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative launched in 2019 (A non-treaty-based initiative to manage and, secure the maritime domain based on seven pillars), Colombo Security Conclave, launched in 2020 (A revived regional trilateral security dialogue including India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, Mauritius, and Seychelles), India has initiated major discourses around the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The two major regional groupings in the region, the IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) and the IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium), are aimed at strengthening maritime safety and economic cooperation amongst member states and maritime cooperation and technical exchange among regional navies, respectively. India has also assumed chairmanship of both these organisations in 2026 and would look to strengthen maritime security and promote economic and technical cooperation around the region.

### **IX. Comprehending the Indian vision Ahead**

The Indian Ocean Diplomacy largely places the IOR amongst India's epicentre of power dynamic rather than only viewing it as a theatre of action. Placing the region at the epicentre signifies that the IOR brings multiple focal points for New Delhi, exhibiting different interests in different situations. Focal points include maritime domain awareness, placing India's IFC – IOR centre at the hub of constant monitoring of maritime trafficking, piracy, and criminal activities. Littoral state engagement,

development of key infrastructure to secure energy interests, boosting connectivity, and increased trade are other key focal points. The aggregate of threats distorting these focal points draws upon an epicentre in the IOR, depending upon the focal point, and then demands immediate attention of these epicentres, finally leading to diminishing assets and interests for peripheral actors, which would call for more collective action towards the centre. A clarity in India's defensive engagements becomes important to understand as while India has enhanced its presence in the region, it remains committed to self-reliance. India's military might be also getting acquainted with a greater sense of technological heft, that would help solve to tackle issues of cyber warfare and illicit trade New Delhi also aims to extend engagements with small island nations that may include providing patrol vessels in search and rescue efforts and also extending latest technology enabled devices and equipment to assist in any humanitarian effort that is required.



Image: Visualising the above conceptualization  
(Source: *Made by the author using Napkin AI*)

These would ensure that India maintains a strategic autonomy in the region while also limiting any Chinese inroads in the region. India's diplomatic cooperation in the region extends largely through agreements and trade indices. New Delhi should seek to assist more in providing foreign assistance on tackling issues such as low ranking on key global indices like poverty and hunger, bureaucratic incompetencies in ensuring projects on the ground, and, above all cater to shrinking budgetary allocations.

India should further aim to advance approaches to ecological, environmental, and cultural cooperation between nations within the IOR. There have been efforts like Project Mausam, an initiative of the Ministry of Culture that aimed to explore the multi-faceted Indian Ocean, covering historical and archaeological research in order to visualise the diversity of cultural, commercial, and religious interactions in the Indian Ocean. Shared knowledge systems and ideas spread along these routes further improve India's diplomatic footprint in the region. The current situation in the Indian Ocean remains volatile with numerous security challenges; the key imperative remains to tackle challenges together. A key aspect of the growing Indian influence in the region is also rooted in India's leadership

within organisations and conferences. With India chairing the IORA and IONS, it is a good opportunity to delve into discussions on technology sharing, increasing shared access to climate finance, tackling key challenges on climate change, and increasing defence-based cooperation to tackle other non-traditional security threats. The challenge will, however, remain to actually utilise these discussions to provide meaningful solutions, as member states within this region aren't usually on a common footing due to different perceived interests. India, while presenting itself as a net security provider and first responder, should actively use its voice in advancing the further interests of the littoral states in key multilateral forums. However, India should be cautious in promoting its foreign policy and not exercise a taken-for-granted posture towards the member states, as competition for influence with China in the region intensifies. The 2024 Maldivian spat over Twitter that involved Indian and Chinese diplomats constrained relations between Male and New Delhi.<sup>55</sup> While these relations improved over time, New Delhi must be careful in choosing such situations. An insurgent India faces a largely cautious China at its hindwings, ready to hedge on moments of instability in the region.

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