



## **Indian Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean: A Study of 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

*Mahammad Ali*

PG Student, University of Kalyani

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### **ABSTRACT**

Maritime security, a crucial aspect of national security, is gaining prominence in international relations. Major actors are incorporating it into their mandates due to the evolving nature of security threats in the maritime domain. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is a vital global arena with significant trade and energy routes, making it strategically significant. It faces a mix of traditional and non-traditional security challenges. The IOR's economic importance is evident, with initiatives like China's Belt and Road Initiative reshaping the region's economic landscape. This paper aims to comprehensively analyze the significance of the IOR in terms of its geostrategic, geopolitical, economic, and diplomatic importance while exploring challenges and opportunities. It delves into India's maritime legacy, its evolving role in the IOR, and factors like China's influence, regional dynamics, multilateral diplomacy, energy security, and non-traditional security threats. The paper seeks to offer actionable strategies to enhance maritime security in the Indian Ocean, with a focus on India's role in addressing these challenges.

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### **Introduction**

India, positioned as a maritime state, boasts an extensive coastline spanning over 7500 km, accompanied by 274 islands strategically located between the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, at the forefront of the Indian Ocean. The Indian sub-continent protrudes nearly 1000 km into the northern reaches of the Indian Ocean, effectively dividing the region into two distinct sub-regions. As aptly stated by KM Panikkar, the geographical placement of India plays a pivotal role in shaping the character of the Indian Ocean, establishing a symbiotic relationship. Historical evidence underscores the significance of India's connection with the Indian Ocean, revealing that neglecting this vast water body has historically led to a loss of sovereignty, particularly evident during the colonial era. Dating back to the 9th century BCE, the Indian Ocean has played a crucial role in facilitating India's foreign trade, a legacy that persists today. Despite shifts in the geographical patterns of India's trade, maritime trade remains the cornerstone of India's economy. Recognizing that a significant portion of commodities must be transported by sea, maritime security assumes a paramount role in India's strategic considerations for national development (Suri, 2016). The Indian government views the Indian Ocean as a pivotal strategic and economic theater, crucial for its diplomatic, military, and regional engagements. Historically, this ocean has held significant importance for India, serving as both India's immediate and extended neighborhood, thereby potentially impacting its security environment. Consequently, a secure and stable Indian Ocean is paramount to India's overall security. India, recognizing its strategic position in the Indian Ocean, sees itself as a key regional and security player. However, the region confronts numerous traditional and non-traditional safety and security challenges, encompassing piracy, armed robberies at sea, terrorism, human trafficking, irregular movement of persons, drugs trafficking, illicit trafficking in wildlife, trafficking of weapons, and crimes in the fisheries sector. All these at perspective in the face of increasing maritime threats, how has India adapted its naval capabilities and strategic posture to ensure the security and stability of the Indian Ocean region? As China expands its influence in the Indian Ocean through initiatives like the Belt and Road, how does India navigate the geopolitics and balance its interests in the region? (Braruah, 2022). The Indian Ocean is so important that is necessary to know its historical context. India's maritime legacy traces its origins back to the ancient Indus Valley Civilization, evolving into a vital trade hub in the heart of the Indian Ocean. From the 3rd century BCE to the 6th century CE, empires like the Mauryans and Guptas expanded their economic influence through maritime trade, advancing shipbuilding techniques, and utilizing monsoon winds for commerce. This influence extended into Southeast Asia, leaving a lasting impact on cultures, religions, and languages. The rise of regional powers, such as the Cholas, transformed the Indian Ocean's geopolitical dynamics as empires waned (Chaudhuri, 1985). In the 15th century, European colonial powers, notably the Portuguese, disrupted established trade routes with Vasco da Gama's voyage in 1498, affecting India's maritime security and sovereignty. The Mughals and Marathas endeavored to counter European expansion by reinforcing coastal defenses. Later, the Dutch, English, and French emulated the Portuguese, further solidifying their naval dominance in India (Panikkar, 1953). During the 17th century, the British East India Company's expansion in India laid the foundation for British supremacy in the Indian Ocean, establishing key naval bases in places like Bombay and Calcutta. The Indian Rebellion of 1857 led to the transfer of administrative control from the East India Company to the British Crown, with British naval assets playing a pivotal role in maintaining order and securing trade routes (Roy, 2009). Post-independence in 1947, India established its Navy in 1950 to assert its maritime sovereignty. The 1971 Indo-Pak War resulted in the birth of Bangladesh and underscored India's maritime security concerns. In the contemporary era, India faces a spectrum of maritime challenges, including piracy, terrorism, territorial disputes, and the assurance of unhindered maritime transit in the Indian Ocean. The 21st century sees India actively working to modernize its naval capabilities, establish strategic alliances, and engage in maritime diplomacy (Mohan, 2012).

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) holds paramount importance due to its strategic geographical location, rich natural resources, and pivotal role in global trade. Furthermore, it boasts a diverse cultural landscape encompassing various religions and reflecting varying levels of economic development. Established in 1995, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) originally aimed to foster economic cooperation among the nations bordering the Indian Ocean; however, recent developments have seen a pronounced shift towards addressing security concerns, including maritime crimes and responsible oceanic resource management. In 2011, during the 11th meeting of the IORA Council of Ministers, member countries collectively recognized the significance of "Maritime Safety and Security," emphasizing heightened vigilance, information sharing, and the formulation of relevant regulations. Singapore, a key player in this context, gains prominence due to its strategic location at the convergence of the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean, heavily reliant on maritime routes for communication and strategically positioned at the Malacca Strait. This academic paper's purpose is to provide an exhaustive analysis of the perspectives held by diverse stakeholders within IORA and to propose actionable strategies for enhancing the safety of the Indian Ocean for both vessels and individuals navigating its waters (Ghosh, 2020). Modi's visit to the Indian Ocean islands in 2015 aimed to strengthen India's diplomatic ties with important maritime neighbors in the Indian Ocean region, emphasizing the historical ties, people-to-people connections, economic cooperation, and maritime security cooperation with these neighboring nations. These visits underscore the positive outcomes and the elevation of cooperation between India and these countries in the Indian Ocean region (MEA, Mar 10, 2015). Additionally, INS Kesari's deployment to the Indian Ocean region on 'Mission Sagar,' returning to India in June 2020 after traveling over 7,500 nautical miles over 55 days, was a significant endeavor. Launched in May 2020, Mission Sagar was India's initiative to deliver COVID-19-related assistance to countries in the Indian Ocean region. INS Kesari successively visited Maldives, Mauritius, Madagascar, Comoros, and Seychelles, providing essential food items, medicines, and Ayurvedic medicines, and deploying Medical Assistance Teams (MAT) to Mauritius and Comoros as part of this mission. Mission SAGAR represents a major milestone in India's engagement with countries in the Indian Ocean Region, aligning with the Prime Minister's vision of 'SAGAR - Security and Growth for All in the Region.' The Ministry of External Affairs expresses deep appreciation for the assistance and solidarity of the respective host Governments of the Republic of Maldives, the Republic of Mauritius, the Republic of Madagascar, the Union of the Comoros, and the Republic of Seychelles for their warm reception and logistical support to the Mission (MEA, July 01, 2020).

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### Importance of Indian Ocean for India

**Geostrategic importance:** The Indian Ocean, situated at the confluence of Africa, Asia, and Australia, serves as a pivotal geopolitical arena with a network of littorals assuming critical roles in the region's security and strategic dynamics. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) functions as a vital maritime corridor, featuring strategic choke points, such as the Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Malacca, and Bab-el Mandeb, through which substantial trade flows. These choke points are susceptible to piracy, international disputes, political unrest, and accidents, prompting both regional and external powers to exert influence to safeguard their interests. Islands within the Indian Ocean wield significant influence, facilitating the security architecture of the IOR by granting naval forces access to sea lines of communication (SLOCs) for continual presence and security maintenance, especially during peacetime and conflict. The Indian Ocean, an epicenter for the transport of Middle Eastern oil, attracts external powers seeking to fortify their positions and demonstrate their prowess. Emphasizing the domain of "security dynamics" in the IOR, the Persian Gulf, in the northern Indian Ocean, assumes a paramount role in India's security strategy, focused on protecting SLOCs vulnerable to piracy threats in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. India's naval presence in the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf, along with the establishment of the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), underscores its commitment to maritime security (Ghosh, 2020). Meanwhile, the United States places great significance on the Indian Ocean due to its strategic interests, including maintaining engagement, military readiness, and naval operations. Key locations such as Diego Garcia and Western Australia are vital for supporting the U.S. fleet, ensuring defense capabilities, and safeguarding crucial sea routes. Collaborative efforts among major maritime powers, including the United States, Japan, Australia, and India, deter unilateral power plays, foster regional security, and address challenges like piracy and terrorism. The U.S. acknowledges three primary geostrategic interests in the Indian Ocean: secure maritime passage, managing great power competition in Asia, and protecting critical maritime chokepoints. The Indian Ocean's historical role as a key trade route, connecting East and West, underscores its significance as an international trade highway, particularly given the region's vast oil reserves in the Middle East. As India and China's influence grows, the global spotlight intensifies on the Indian Ocean, including its smaller seas like the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea, which are integral to shipping and trade, linking to the broader Indian Ocean and its significant maritime trade routes (Shabbir, Bashir, and Saleem 2019).

**Geopolitics importance:** The United States has maintained naval dominance in the Indian Ocean post-USSR's collapse, safeguarding trade routes and energy supply lines while utilizing the region for military interventions (e.g., Kuwait, Iraq, Somalia). Recent developments, including the formation of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), suggest a potential shift towards establishing a more structured regional order. Presently, two pivotal geopolitical shifts are unfolding: heightened Chinese presence and the conceptual amalgamation of the Indian Ocean into the broader 'Indo-Pacific' framework, primarily as a response to China's ascent. Given the Indian Ocean's vital role in global trade, particularly in oil transport, strategic chokepoints like Bab el Mandeb, the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, the southern Suez Canal, and the Lombok Strait hold significant geopolitical and geoeconomic significance. (Balls, 2020). The eminent Indian strategist Chanakya had said, "By being alert, you can keep an eye on every movement of the enemy..." these words aptly signify the role of Andaman and Nicobar Command, in the current geo-political scenario. India presently confronts a multitude of pressing issues necessitating strategic attention. Challenges stemming from the repercussions of the global pandemic, evolving dynamics in Afghanistan, diplomatic intricacies with Pakistan, territorial disputes with China, and the volatile situations within the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions collectively exert a profound influence on India's geopolitical, economic, and political stability, as well as its security apparatus. Furthermore, the ramifications of these challenges on India's international standing cannot be underestimated, underscoring the paramount importance of adeptly managing these circumstances. India's ability to do so, however, is hindered by resource constraints, making the task particularly formidable. While India has undertaken various measures to bolster its economic resilience and address multifaceted challenges, there remains a considerable need for additional

efforts to ensure its continued relevance within the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). It is within this context that the Andaman and Nicobar Command assumes a pivotal role. Before delving into a comprehensive examination of the Andaman Nicobar Command's significance, it is imperative to provide a succinct overview of the prevailing geopolitical dynamics within the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean Regions. These regions undeniably constitute vital arenas in safeguarding India's security interests and economic prosperity. Of particular concern are the clandestine maneuvers undertaken by China, which pose an unsettling and imminent threat to India's interests in these regions (Deshmukh, 2021).

**Economic Importance:** Over the preceding thirty years, the coastal areas surrounding the Indian Ocean, encompassing Australia, South East Asia, India, the Middle East, East Africa, and Southern Africa, have borne witness to a remarkable upswing in economic prosperity. This phenomenon has manifested in a significant upsurge in intra-regional trade activities, consistently surpassing global economic trends. Between 2000 and the global financial crisis of 2009, the Indian Ocean region experienced an impressive annual trade volume growth rate of 9.4%, albeit decelerating to 4.8% from 2011 to 2017. At the onset of the 21st century, the economic landscape within the Indian Ocean vicinity is undergoing a profound transformation attributed to contemporary geoeconomic dynamics. China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has injected fundamental capital investments into the Indian Ocean region, with the primary objective of reshaping its economic topography. In response to this development, India, Japan, along several African nations, have initiated the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) aimed at contesting China's BRI through strategic infrastructure investments. The future outcomes of this competition remain uncertain. Australia, while somewhat detached from these initiatives, stands to be influenced by their potential to reshape trade dynamics in the Indian Ocean. Projections from the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute indicate that the Indian Ocean economy is expected to make up 20% of the worldwide GDP by 2025, almost doubling its per capita GDP. Nevertheless, several impediments threaten this growth, including prolonged border compliance checks and varying port infrastructure quality across the region. China's BRI endeavors to address these infrastructure deficiencies through ambitious projects such as the Kyanukpyu Deep Sea Port in Myanmar, the Payra Deep Sea Port in Bangladesh, and the recently completed Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka. Additionally, high tariffs in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia may hinder trade expansion, making the outcome of free trade agreements a crucial determinant of the region's economic prospects (Balls, 2020). Moreover, India recognizes the vast potential of the blue economy, covering fisheries, aquaculture, tourism, and marine biotechnology. These sectors' sustainable growth relies on a secure maritime environment, necessitating investments in maritime infrastructure. India's maritime strategy under Prime Minister Modi emphasizes leveraging coastal and marine resources for economic development. (Basu, 2021). Sustainable economic development, a core aspect of Modi's Indian Ocean policy, involves promoting the "blue economy" to use ocean resources for economic growth, job creation, and environmental sustainability in the region. During a visit to Seychelles, Modi initiated a joint working group to enhance cooperation in the blue economy, fostering responsible and environmentally friendly economic development. Sustainable economic development is integral to India's broader strategy, contributing to the well-being of Indian Ocean littoral states while ensuring the responsible and sustainable use of natural resources in the region (Mohan, June 18, 2015).

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## Challenges of Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean

In the complex realm of Indian Ocean maritime security, a myriad of challenges and interwoven issues demand the attention of policymakers. The region's increasing global trade importance and reliance on the movement of natural resources have given rise to intricate supply chains and heightened interconnectivity via maritime routes. This has, in turn, brought forth issues like piracy and territorial disputes, all while global environmental concerns exert significant governance pressures. Maritime policymakers are tasked with assessing naval power capabilities, understanding private shipping practices, navigating international legal frameworks, and formulating coastal state development strategies. Simultaneously, they must enhance governance capacities and combat piracy, a persistent threat. Furthermore, littoral states' efforts to expand their maritime jurisdiction can lead to adversarial consequences for military and civilian interests if not diplomatically and operationally managed. The United States non-participation in the Law of the Sea Convention carries potential risks, especially given the assertive policies of countries like China and India in expanding their jurisdiction. The surge in offshore surveying and drilling activities may require deploying private maritime security personnel to counter piracy syndicates, potentially curbing their hijacking capabilities (Michel and Sticklor, 2012). Sri Lanka's strategic position in the Indian Ocean exposes it to transnational criminal enterprises, including narcotics transportation, arms trade, and human smuggling, posing a multifaceted challenge to maritime safety and security. The menace of maritime piracy looms large, particularly in the High-Risk Area near Sri Lanka, jeopardizing vital Sea Lines of Communication and the global maritime trade network. Illegal fishing activities by South Indian fishermen, often linked to illicit drug trafficking, further imperil Sri Lanka's marine resources. Rising global temperatures and sea levels threaten coastal regions, with the Sethusamudram Shipping Canal Project introducing economic and environmental concerns for Sri Lanka. The presence of nuclear powers in the Indian Ocean, such as India's nuclear reactors near Sri Lanka, raises security concerns due to the potential for accidents or incidents with direct repercussions on Sri Lanka (Nurula, 2016). To address these challenges, the Indian government actively promotes maritime cooperation with regional partners through its Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision. The Indian Navy plays a crucial role in this endeavor, deploying ships and aircraft in the Indian Ocean Region to enhance maritime security and respond to contingencies. They facilitate missions to Friendly Foreign Countries, transshipping relief materials, COVID supplies, and food assistance. This commitment extends to various aspects, including training, technical support, hydrography, and maritime security operations. The Indian Navy maintains a year-round presence in key regions, ensuring Maritime Domain Awareness and addressing military challenges, Navy-to-Navy Foreign Cooperation initiatives, and contingencies like piracy and trafficking. Their recent deployments have exemplified their dedication to maritime security and international cooperation, delivering essential aid and relief to those in need (PIB, Mar 21, 2022).

Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, an Indian diplomat and politician, delves into the challenges posed by China's rapid rise in economic and military prowess. Examining the implications for India's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean, Jaishankar particularly focuses on maritime security concerns amid China's

expanding naval presence in the region. The narrative explores India's intricate relationships with neighboring nations and regional powers, shedding light on diplomatic interactions that resonate in its maritime security strategy. Jaishankar delves into India's participation in multilateral institutions, emphasizing maritime security, with a specific reference to the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and regional security dialogues. Addressing energy security, the author highlights the interplay between India's energy imperatives and the security of vital sea lanes in the Indian Ocean through which a significant portion of its imports traverse. Additionally, Jaishankar delves into non-traditional security threats in the maritime sphere, including piracy, maritime terrorism, and ecological challenges. His work anticipates shedding light on India's proactive measures to counter these threats, underscoring the commitment to safeguarding maritime security (Jaishankar, 2022). At the 23rd Council of Ministers Meeting of IORA, Jaishankar emphasized India's commitment as the Vice-Chair for 2023-25, outlining key challenges and pledging collaboration to strengthen safety, security, and the Blue Economy in the Indian Ocean, in line with a multilateral rules-based international order and the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (The Hindu, Oct 11, 2023).

The strategic importance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANIs) in the Indian Ocean, particularly in countering China, cannot be overstated. Since Prime Minister Modi's visit in 2018, the islands have witnessed a surge in development activities, ranging from infrastructure projects to military bases, under the NITI Aayog's Holistic Development Program. The archipelago's proximity to the 'Strait of Malacca,' a crucial chokepoint, allows India to effectively counter China's 'String of Pearls' strategy. The islands dominate key maritime routes, including the Six Degree and Ten Degree channels, crucial for over 60,000 commercial ships annually. With nearly 70,000 ships passing through the 'Strait of Malacca,' the world's busiest trade route, the ANIs become pivotal. This development provides India with a significant advantage in controlling critical sea lanes. Moreover, given China's heavy reliance on Indian Ocean sea lanes for oil imports, the potential to choke China at the Malacca Strait presents a potent economic lever for India. While China has sought alternative routes, such as the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, the ANIs remain a crucial element in India's strategy to check China's influence in the region. The development of a naval base in the ANIs not only enhances India's strategic position but also serves as a hub for humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and extended military influence in the Indo-Pacific region. However, challenges include China's substantial maritime force, potential escalation on the land border, and the geopolitical implications of strategic competition between major powers. Careful consideration is needed to balance military expenditures, ensure efficient resource allocation, and leverage India's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region while addressing the challenges posed by a formidable adversary like China (TOI, Mar 22, 2023). To counter China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean region (IOR), India has implemented a versatile and multifaceted strategy. This approach involves bolstering regional partnerships, acknowledging the interconnectedness of the Indian and Pacific Oceans through the Indo-Pacific concept, and enhancing regional capabilities. India's policy, Security and Growth For All in the Region (SAGAR), underscores its dedication to upgrading relations, fostering economic growth, and maintaining stability in the IOR, avoiding a bipolar contest with China by allowing multiple stakeholders. Trilateral partnerships, such as India-Australia-Indonesia and India-Japan-France, contribute to capacity-building and support for regional countries, with military exercises signaling India's commitment to engaging partners in the region. Furthermore, India focuses on strengthening domestic capabilities, improving maritime infrastructure, and strategically positioning the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Challenges include environmental concerns and the necessity for comprehensive planning to address regional and domestic sensitivities (Financial Express, July 3, 2023). Meanwhile, at the 6th Indian Ocean Conference in Dhaka, Indian Foreign Minister S Jaishankar emphasized the paramount importance of improving connectivity in the region, stressing collective efforts, respecting sovereignty, and highlighting the long-term perspective needed for cooperation. The conference addressed distinctive challenges and pathways for progress, emphasizing adherence to law and norms for stability and highlighting concerns about unsustainable debt, maritime security, climate action, and counter-terrorism initiatives as essential components of regional cooperation (The Indian Express, May 13, 2023). The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is actively reinforcing its identity, with a recent Council of Ministers meeting in Colombo emphasizing 'Reinforcing Indian Ocean Identity.' The 23-nation grouping, spanning various regions, has seen increased interest, highlighting its significance in promoting regional stability (Hider, October 15, 2023).

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## Conclusion

In conclusion, India's maritime legacy, rooted in the ancient Indus Valley Civilization, has evolved into a crucial aspect of its geopolitical, economic, and security interests. From ancient trade routes to European colonial disruptions, the Indian Ocean has been central to India's historical narrative. Post-independence, India established its Navy in 1950, recognizing the importance of maritime sovereignty. Today, the Indian Ocean holds geostrategic and geopolitical significance, with challenges such as piracy, terrorism, and territorial disputes. India actively works to modernize its naval capabilities, form strategic alliances, and engage in maritime diplomacy. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands play a pivotal role in countering challenges, particularly China's influence. The economic importance of the Indian Ocean region is underscored by the growth in intra-regional trade and initiatives like China's Belt and Road Initiative. Challenges in maritime security, including piracy and territorial disputes, necessitate comprehensive strategies. India's multifaceted approach involves regional partnerships, strengthening domestic capabilities, and positioning strategically. The Indian Ocean's evolving dynamics demand adept management to ensure India's continued relevance and security in the region.

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