

Defense News Conclave

Stories of U.S. - India Defense Partnership

India's Maritime Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

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India's stakes in the Indian Ocean as a prominent naval power have been impacted by growing Chinese influences, leading India to review its maritime engagement and visions. India endeavours to overcome its capacity constraints in regional engagements, through geographical advantages and operational experience by enhancing its regional footprint.

In addition, the Indo-Pacific presents new opportunities to India's power ambitions, allowing India to extend its influence beyond the region and affirming India's position as a net security provider and protector of maritime commons.

This Briefing Paper discusses India's strategic relations with island nations and like-minded countries within and beyond the region and outlines strategic initiatives to enhance maritime engagements.

Significance of the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific region is the focal point of global geopolitical and geostrategic ambitions, and it is a construct centered on the interconnectedness and interdependence of oceans. This [region](#) at the confluence of oceans is home to more than half of the world's population and accounts for 62 per cent of the world's gross domestic product (GDP) and 46 per cent of maritime trade.

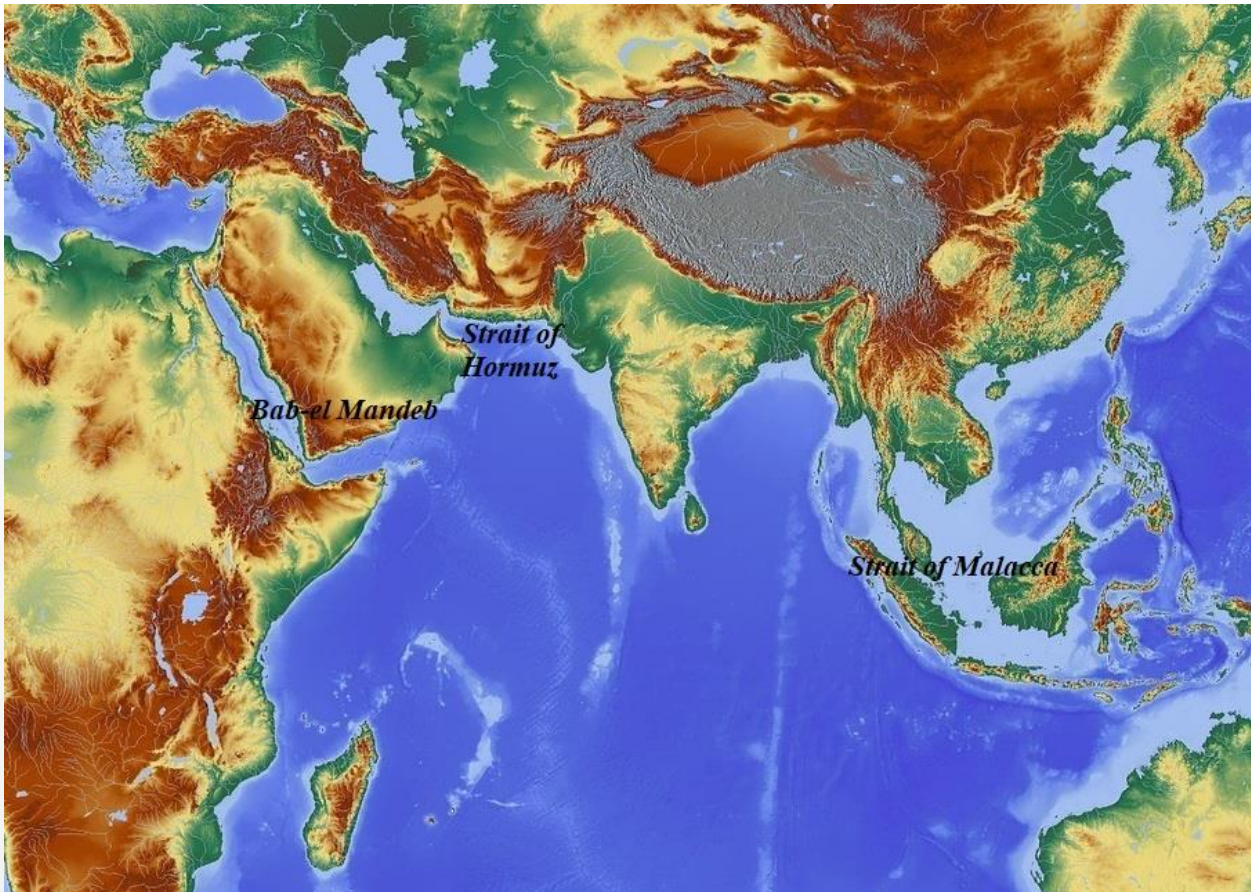
[Around 80 per cent of the world's](#) maritime oil trade passes through here. The region is projected to be the most significant contributor to global growth over the next 30 years. Countries in the region are expected to account for two-thirds of global energy demand growth between now and 2040.

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is a vital sea lane with choke points such as the Strait of Hormuz, Malacca, and Bab-el Mandeb. These choke points are crucial as global trade and energy flow through

them, and a firm hold in this region would allow countries to secure and control these trade flows. The littorals and small island developing states also play a significant role in the region's security dynamics by allowing reach and sustenance to the navies of the regional and extra-regional powers for patrolling and protecting sea lines of communication (SLOCs).

These imperatives of being a part of the regional security architecture and ensuring supply chain protection have influenced the regional and extra-regional powers to revise their strategic orientations. These strategic configurations have shifted global attention from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific. The former represents Asian countries in the Pacific Ocean region, formulated primarily from an economic perspective. At the same time, the latter has evolved as a strategic and economic domain associated with maritime security and cooperation.

Figure: 1 Choke Points in Indian Ocean



Source [STRAFASIA](#)

This region is already a cluster of global economies which mould the current geopolitical trajectories. Several countries from and beyond the region are developing policies around the Indo-Pacific. One of the prime reasons for this is the expansionist actions of China in the region. Their disruptive manoeuvres have altered the global political and economic stability and threatened the global supply chains and trade flows through this region.

Consequently, the Indo-Pacific has become the focal point of strategic alliances around which countries are reorienting their policies to address these challenges to the region's safety, security, and stability.

Chinese Threats in the Region

Historically, the Indian Ocean region was [characterised as a sea of troubles](#) plagued by traditional and non-traditional security threats, which were essential drivers for expanding and forming regional alliances. The hurdles to building cooperation for traditional challenges were diversity, absence of common interests, and security problems. However, the assertiveness of China has changed the perception of the region. China's economic, political and military expansion in the Indo-Pacific has drawn resistance from within and beyond the region. Its coercive foreign policy, predatory economic policy, rampant militarisation and territorial expansion, and aggressive maritime

posturing have created apprehensions and destabilised the region.

China has been spreading its influence in the region with a broader political and economic framework for a new Sino-centric Indo-Pacific. It uses financial instruments, penalties, and implied military threats to persuade [other states to comply with its agenda](#).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the central strategic apparatus that embraces colonial-era practices for [systematically acquiring land](#) for strategic reasons. The continuing military advancement of China and its desire to be the regional hegemon prior to global dominance poses a security threat to nations in the Indo-Pacific region. It invests in a broad range of weapons and military programmes for power projection, modernises and updates its nuclear forces, constructs overseas military bases, and employs an [array of anti-access/area denial](#) (A2/AD) capabilities to deny freedom of movement in the maritime domain.

Simultaneously, China asserts control over disputed territories in the region through low-level coercion, oscillating between peaceful relations and overt hostilities. China has also been [demanding to halt](#) drilling and other activities and conducting seabed surveys in regional countries' exclusive economic zones.

China's diplomatic and strategic engagements to contain India in the region are already visible and have been debated over the years. China's strategic alliances in geo-strategic choke points and suspicious infrastructure developmental activities near Indian land substantiate claims of Chinese expansionism. In addition, China's military deployments, [patrolling with nuclear submarines](#), and its missile and other technological capabilities pose challenges to India's stakes in the Indian Ocean region and threaten India's mainland security.

India in the Indian Ocean Region

India's Maritime Vision

Maritime security has traditionally not been an important aspect of Indian foreign policy. Historically, India pursued a [continental approach](#) in foreign policy by inclined toward advisories from behind the land borders. Priorities lay in continental threats and competition. In comparison, competition for the Indian Ocean rarely occurred, leading to maritime security being relegated to the margins.

When the Indian Navy submitted a plan for India's preeminent role in the Indian Ocean region [within ten days of independence](#), Prime Minister [Nehru](#) considered India's potential role in the Indian ocean and remarked that *"anything that happens in the whole Indian Ocean region affects and affected by India."* However, such strategic visions were not translated into practice and remained only as a conceptual element of the Navy.

[The economic constraints and military](#) prioritisation of the South Asian landmass pushed the Indian Ocean to the background in India's strategic horizons. The Indian Navy began to be considered as the '[Cinderella force](#)' of armed forces. While attention remained excessively focused on the continental sphere, the Indian Navy remained steadfast in its commitment to spreading and maintaining its strategic position and influence in the region. These efforts are now being seen as



the cornerstones of India’s strategic revamp in the region.

Now, however, the emergence of China in the region and its economic advancement, combined with military modernisation, has compelled India to reorient its foreign policy towards maritime engagements with increased urgency.

Indian Navy’s Strategic Outreach Efforts

Over the years, the Indian leadership failed to acknowledge the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean fully. This could have resulted from an absence of overt power rivalries or India’s excessive reliance on its geographical advantage.

Nevertheless, the Indian Navy early on recognised the significance of the region for the prosperity of India and its extended neighbourhood.

The Indian Navy has established itself as a critical player in the region by being a first responder and net security provider. [Experts have observed that](#) the Indian Navy always seemed ahead of foreign policy. Rather than naval activities being guided by foreign policy, initiatives in the maritime domain influenced the contours of Indian foreign policy. This is still evident in how the Indian Navy has been initiating efforts to promote maritime cooperation with small island states in the Indian Ocean region from the western Indian Ocean to the east, securing sea lines of communication and addressing transnational challenges.

In 2008, led by efforts of the Navy, [India launched the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium](#) as a cooperative maritime security initiative that convenes all the naval chiefs in the littoral states for professional exchanges and engagement. It also [initiated trilateral security arrangements](#) with border-sharing island countries.

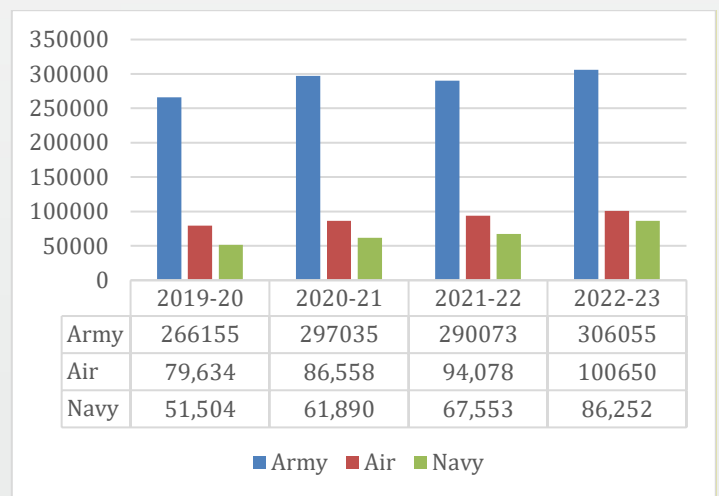
The [Indian Navy executes maritime cooperation broadly by four methods](#): constructive engagements such as high-level visits, port visits, and joint exercises; collaborative efforts such as coordinated patrols, conclaves, and other arrangements; capacity building, such as military infrastructure; and

capability enhancement such as military training and technical assistance.

The Navy has developed vital strategic documents on maritime security, including Freedom to Use the Seas (2007) and [Ensuring Secure Seas](#) (2015). These documents outline the country’s maritime vision by emphasising areas of interest in the Indian Ocean region (IOR). These maritime doctrines stress the significance of strengthening strategic partnerships in the IOR in parallel with updating naval defense capabilities and capacities.

Despite this, the Indian leadership generally remained apathetic towards the naval forces. The Indian Navy continues to receive relatively lower budgetary allocations (Table 1), thus affecting the operational preparedness of the Navy. However, the 2022-23 budget has witnessed a significant switch in the government’s approach toward naval concerns. Though the naval budget is only 16 per cent ([86,252 crores](#)) of the overall defense budget, the capital budget of the Navy has been enhanced by an enormous [44.53 per cent \(46,323 crores\)](#).

Table: 1: Defense Budget Allocations



Sources: [PRS India](#)

Maritime Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

India is realigning its strategic approach by shifting its focus from the continental and maritime spheres. For ease, this realignment prioritises Indo-

MARITIME INDIA VISION 2030



Pacific into two; the first consists of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, which has been the primary area of interest for the Indian Navy over the years.

The second portion extends to the South China Sea and Pacific coast of the Americas. India sees the Indo-Pacific as a platform for converging strategies with the other western powers, particularly the US. India expects US support in pursuing common objectives of securing a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific region. The US, for its part, sees India's potential in the Indian Ocean and beyond as a multiplying factor that could help it further enhance its strategic interests in the region.

India's Maritime Engagements in the Region

Since 2015, Indian ocean diplomacy has acquired a new vigour. At the highest levels, political intent and commitment to strengthening India's strategic influence and partnership in the IOR. During the Indian Prime Minister's [trip](#) to India's [neighbouring island](#) nations, he enunciated the new Indian approach to littoral states in the region - Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR).

This coherent [framework discusses](#) security and safeguarding of the mainland and islands, capacity building by emphasising economic and security cooperation, collective action to maintain peace and security, sustainable development with integrated and enhanced collaboration, and maritime engagement with external powers to secure peace in the region. The SAGAR vision intends to be a [consultative, democratic, and equitable](#) leadership in the region.

Indian diplomats are well-aware of the need to step up strategic interactions in maritime affairs, including engaging with island nations, to counter China and ensure free and open SLOCs. For this, India has had to reexamine the nature of its strategic engagements, address the discontents of its maritime neighbours, and unwind the strategic inertia in Indian engagements towards the region. The new diplomatic initiatives have thus taken the shape of frequent high-level visits, military diplomacy, port visits, close security cooperation, capacity building, and greater economic engagement.

India has undertaken various projects to gain the support of strategically significant island nations, particularly near the major choke points and SLOCs, such as the developmental project in [Mauritius](#), Duqm port [Oman](#), and Sabang port [Indonesia](#).

The government has restructured the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). An [Indian Ocean Division](#) has been created to prioritise relationships with island nations (and strengthen outreach in the IOR). The island nations, including Comoros, Madagascar, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, and Indian Ocean Region, will now be dealt with by this Division.

In 2019, the MEA set up an Indo-Pacific wing that integrated more actors, following which the ministry established an Oceania Division (Australia, New Zealand, and Pacific Island Countries). The net result is the inclusion of islands from different regions (from the African Union to Asia and the

Pacific) within a single, coherent framework. Besides, India has adopted a neighbourhood-first policy to underline India's commitment to its extended neighbourhood and regional security. India's immediate assistance to its neighbours during the pandemic through mission Sagar-II and vaccine diplomacy reaffirm this commitment.

Similarly, India has been reshaping its influence and engagement with the relevant regional organisations in the last few years. India has used these as platforms for engaging with regional partners on various strategic matters. India bolstered its role in organisations such as the [Indian Ocean Rim Association](#) (IORA) and Indian Ocean Dialogue. India has also worked to enhance the position of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) as an effective forum for a stable, rules-based maritime order in the IOR. Its mandate has been extended to [include maritime exercises](#) to enhance the interoperability among member navies.

In 2019, India launched the [Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative](#) (IPOI) to promote practical cooperation by drawing on existing regional architectures. This initiative is considered an extension of India's Act East Policy. It is intended to generate greater coordination with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries to create a sustainable and peaceful order in the region.

As IPOI is an open, inclusive, and non-treaty-based global initiative, it is expected to be a [bridge between ASEAN and its dialogue partners](#) (US,



Japan) in devising a shared vision for an inclusive Indo-Pacific. In addition, the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) [granted observer status to India](#), which would support India's activities in the western Indian Ocean Region. India also strives to create Trilateral Cooperation on Maritime Security (TCMS), in configurations such as India-Maldives-Sri Lanka to address shared maritime security threats and challenges and enhance security through cooperative measures.

Strategic Outreach beyond the Region

While India began moulding its strategy towards the Indian Ocean and Pacific region, countries from beyond the region repeatedly reaffirmed their willingness to be involved in its geopolitics and geo-economics, placing Indian interests at its heart. The core reasons for India's reluctance to be part of it were concerns about joining a perceived anti-China coalition and its impact on the strategically significant island nations.

India tried projecting a balanced position, though it had to deal with an increasingly belligerent Chinese stance towards the region. Eventually, [in 2018, at the Shangri-La dialogue](#), India unequivocally stated its interest in expanding its engagements with like-minded states beyond the region to address rising challenges and bolster security. India realised the importance of assistance from external powers to balance China and have a more substantial role in the region.

However, India's signaling prioritised that the Indo-Pacific was neither a strategy nor an exclusive club but a natural region with freedom of navigation and overflight. In addition, India clarified that its Indo-Pacific approach was consistent with ASEAN unity and centrality for possible economic engagements, [rather than divisive or dismissive](#).

Overall, India's vision remains to strengthen regional harmony. These messages are intended for the strategically vital littoral states in the region who do not want to be made to choose sides in the China-India-US power rivalry. Thus, while India

wishes to expand its reach into the Indo-Pacific theatre, at the same time, it also seeks to revive its earlier footprint in the Indian Ocean region.

These extended strategic engagements in the Indo-Pacific have created opportunities and a platform to advance India's strategic interests and resolve capability flaws. This approach is for the [pursuit of collaborations](#) and partnerships and strategic outreach to the broader region. Geographically, Indo-Pacific is a too vast theatre, where countries have limited boundaries created by them in line with their strategic interest. For India, Indo-Pacific begins from the east coast of Africa and ends on the American west coast. In this broad region, synchronising everyone's interest and reaching a unified view is a tall order, and countries will place their national priorities over unified interests.

The Indo-Pacific is a priority theatre, and it runs through mutual collaboration between parties on their convergence of interests. As discussed above, the element of the convergence in the region is a recognition of the threat from the assertiveness of China.

India has begun to find growing convergences on interests in the Indo-Pacific policies of European countries and the US. [India's strategy emerged as an opportunity](#) to expand its presence while leveraging partnerships to address its capacity constraints in securing its interests. Naval expansion is an essential instrument for India for maritime power projection across the IOR. The willingness of powerful Euro-American navies to collaborate with India in the Indo-Pacific framework provides a unique opportunity for India to enhance its regional influence and cooperate in raising naval capabilities.

In addition, India is also stretching its influence into Pacific Small Island Development states. India has recognised this as an opportunity to spread its hold in the Caribbean through [financial grants](#) and [high-level visits](#).

Indo-Pacific Partnerships

France, the European Union, Australia, Japan, and the US emerged as the pillars of Indo-Pacific partnerships. The US and India are on a path of increasing convergence on their strategies in the Indo-Pacific region. The Trump Administration had [highlighted the critical goals](#) of the Indo-Pacific strategy to include strengthening India's maritime capability to counter Chinese influence.

The recently introduced [Indo-Pacific Strategy of the US](#) also supports India's continued rise and regional leadership for a stable South Asia. The US sees India as the lynchpin of the Indo-Pacific strategy, as a vanguard to counter China's activities in the IOR. Both countries recognised the extent of Chinese belligerence and the necessity to operate together to strengthen the region's security architecture.

To this end, they signed the [US-India Joint Strategic Vision Statement for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region in 2015](#), emphasising the development of closer maritime ties with concerted efforts by both sides to expand engagement and interoperability. To strengthen their partnership, they have also signed all foundational agreements.

Moreover, India and the US have launched a [Defense Technology and Trade Initiative](#) (DTTI), and the US has recognised India as a [Major Defense Partner](#). These enable technology sharing in India and allow the exploration of possibilities of co-development and co-production.

India was later elevated to [Tier I of the Strategic Trade Authorization](#) (STA) license that will simplify exchanges of advanced and sensitive technologies. These defense agreements with the US would help India procure more advanced defense technologies for effective power projection and enhance its role as a regional net security provider.

India and US both realise that regional groupings are an imperative for regional stability, and cooperation through ASEAN and Quad are promoted in both their approaches. The US also

wants to incorporate its European allies into this security architecture for more regional stability. It is believed that the crowding of external powers in the region would benefit India in the short term.

France considers the Indo-Pacific as [the heart](#) of an evolving multipolar order. France and India believe in strategic autonomy, and France is the [only non-neighbouring](#) country with which India conducts coordinated patrols. Both countries encourage cooperation in Indo-Pacific strategic affairs, which take the shape of exercises, exchanges, and joint endeavours.

In 2021, India joined the French-led La Perouse Naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal region for the first time. Moreover, the [French technology transfer](#) for building six Scorpene-class submarines and procuring Rafale aircraft reinforces the partnership. Indo-French ties also extend to strengthening maritime domain awareness (MDA) and extending mutual logistical support. France's strategic influences in the western Indian Ocean region enhanced India's MDA capabilities and helped secure observer status in the Indian Ocean Commission.

Both countries have [agreed on reciprocal logistics support](#) for their armed forces. These would allow the Indian Navy to access the overseas territories of France in the southern Indian Ocean - La Reunion, Mayotte, and the military base in Djibouti. Access to these strategically significant locations would help India expand its reach and sustenance overseas and mission-based deployment. The growing partnership with France also leverages India to build similar partnerships with the larger EU bloc.

Japan coined the Indo-Pacific theatre concept in 2007, and it was also India's initial partner of India in Indo-Pacific initiatives. [Both countries](#) have been fostering efforts toward shared security in the region through ministerial dialogue and joint exercises since the [2008 joint declaration on security cooperation](#). They have enhanced

exchanges in expanding MDA and [mutual logistics support](#) in the Indo-Pacific for maritime security.

In 2018, both countries signed an agreement for [Deeper Cooperation](#) between the Indian Navy and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force. In 2016, India and Japan announced the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor to enhance connectivity in India and other Indo-Pacific regions, including African nations, but this framework is now [uncertain](#). In 2017, India and Japan established the [Act East Forum](#) (AEF) to develop the Northeast Indian region and promote connectivity between this region and southeast Asia.

Similarly, India has bolstered cooperation with Australia on non-traditional security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. Both countries have committed to working together within relevant regional organisations and frameworks, including ASEAN, Quad and IPOI. They work together to deepen defense cooperation and increase military interoperability by enhancing the scope and complexity of their military exercises and engagement activities.

Towards this end, both nations signed the [Mutual Logistics Support Agreement](#), enhancing interoperability and ensuring logistics support. The participation of Australia in the Malabar Naval exercises denotes the growing coordination in the Indo-Pacific between like-minded nations.

India's Strategic Outreach Initiatives

Net Security Provider (NSP)

Theoretically, [NSP means](#) a nation that is not only capable enough to address the hindrances in its security but also that of its neighbouring countries and beyond. The [US has described](#) India as NSP in the region in their various Indo-Pacific Strategy documents. However, India still faces some institutional and structural constraints for performing the role of NSP in the region.

Strategic alliances with the US and other Western powers are expected to assist India in

overcoming these constraints. India and the US are deepening cooperation for an [integrated deterrence](#) in cyber, space and emerging and critical technologies. In India, the SAGAR concept reaffirms the NSP vision of India. India is committed to expanding bilateral engagements with Indian Ocean Region littoral states involving a nexus of maritime cooperation, naval security, and economic development.

Maintaining peace and stability in the region is vital for India and other like-minded countries to pursue developmental aspirations. As a reliable partner, India is poised to take up the role of a net security provider. India is well-equipped to perform this role through the presence and rapid response, capacity building and capability enhancement, maritime security operation, and strategic communications.

India employs naval activities to cement this vital strategic position in the region. [For instance](#), in the last two years, Indian naval ships have sailed 40,000 nautical miles carrying food, medicines, and weapons to Indian Ocean countries. More Indian warships are patrolling the region than ever before. India also released a disaster management plan to build disaster resilience in the Indo-Pacific through sustained regional partnerships.

Regional Naval Deployments

Protecting SLOCs is significant for India to ensure greater regional stability and continuity of trade and resource supplies. To protect SLOCs, the Indian Navy must maintain its presence on international sea lines and be aware of all developments in and around this. Since the choke points of SLOCs are not near Indian naval bases, the Indian Navy enhanced its Mission-Based Deployment (MBDs). [For instance](#), India has permanently deployed warships at five choke points in the Indian Ocean, stretching from the Gulf of Aden in the west to the Malacca Strait in the east.

Such deployment assists in spreading the influence across the Indian Ocean Region and

allows it to increase its visibility, create domain awareness, and immediate response to threats and challenges. India facilitates security for several countries' exclusive economic zones and maintains agreements with littoral states for port calls and logistics sharing to enhance its patrolling area for maritime security. Recently, a Shivalik class stealth frigate of the Indian Navy was sailing along [the side of the contested South China Sea](#) to assist the Philippines in reinforcing their presence in the region.

The Overseas Deployment (OSDs) of navies have become intrinsic to doctrine. The Navy conducts overseas deployment to enhance military cooperation with friendly countries through bilateral exercises and port visits. Recently, Indian Naval forces arrived in [Jeddah](#) as a part of an overseas deployment. These OSDs aid the Indian Navy in enhancing its ocean awareness and operational capability, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, demonstrating military capabilities, and exercising freedom of navigation and maritime engagements.

However, when India sails far from home to maintain a regular presence in the different regions of the Indian Ocean, it could face logistical challenges. These could be overcome by accessing regional partners and allies' military and refurbishment facilities. For that, the logistics support agreement India has signed with countries around the region, such as the US, Australia, France, Japan, [Singapore](#), and [Vietnam](#), would



allow using bases of those nations for repair and replenishment.

Capacity Building

Traditional bilateral engagements for strategic outreach like developmental assistance and peace building focus on current capacity-building efforts. Indian engagement with IOR littoral states has endeavoured to build capacities to tackle maritime security threats and contribute to sustainable economic development while [fostering](#) jointness. The Navy conducts training and naval exercises with littoral states, strengthening their skill sets and capabilities while enhancing mutual relations.

The Milan Naval Exercise incepted by India with four countries has extended to the participation of 40 countries. India has regularly allowed [line of credit-based developmental projects](#) for maritime capacity building, [gifted](#) Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs), Fast-Interceptor Boats (FIBs), and Dornier Do-228 surveillance aircraft and [constructed](#) communication and surveillance technologies for western and eastern Indian Ocean littorals.

Maritime Connectivity

Another ambitious regional program is on maritime connectivity, which is integral for maritime trade, shipping, and transport. India aims to revitalise maritime infrastructure under its [Sagarmala project](#). In parallel, India collaborates with other countries on constructing and modernising ports at strategic locations for mutual benefits, such as the [Chabahar port](#) in Iran, [Duqm port](#) in Oman, [Sittwe port](#) in Myanmar, and [Aceh-Andaman](#) Connectivity with Indonesia. These inter and intra-national connectivity endeavours would enhance the opportunities for blue economy initiatives.

Disaster Management

The IOR is vulnerable to natural disasters. The eastern IOR experiences not only disasters are originating there but also those attracted from other

areas due to its geographic structure, especially cyclones. Therefore, an effective mechanism to address humanitarian crises and natural disasters is perhaps the most visible element of the Indian Ocean security strategy.

In recent years, India has promptly responded to its neighbourhood's humanitarian crisis, whether manmade or natural. Indian Coast Guard actively executes Search and Rescue (SAR) Missions in the extended region and coordinates Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres (MRCCs) in [Mumbai, Chennai, and Port Blair](#), covering the entire region.

Besides, recently India [signed a pact with Sri Lanka](#) to set up MRCCs in their ports to improve maritime disaster management capabilities. The Overseas Deployment of the Indian Navy helps it be the first responder in natural and manmade disasters in the geographically distant western Indian Ocean Region, such as response to cyclones in [Mozambique and the Wakashio oil spill over in Mauritius](#).

In addition, India is facilitating a platform for these states to share best emergency response practices, improve existing emergency preparedness and strengthen regional response mechanisms. It also supports initiatives to conduct risk assessments through [regional architectures](#) like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and ASEAN.

Maritime Domain Awareness

Another significant objective of India's maritime engagement with the regional states is to develop and increase MDA. Indian Navy considers MDA as an all-encompassing term that involves being cognizant of the position and intentions of all actors in the region. It is crucial for the information, decision, and action cycle. India's mission-based and overseas deployment and naval engagement with littoral states enhance India's MDA capacity.

Moreover, India is implementing a Coastal Surveillance Radar System (CSRS) project to enhance international MDA. [India's initiatives for](#)

[MDA are motivated](#) not only for strategic considerations but also as a collaborative tool for littorals to mitigate transnational crimes. These neighbourhood synergies allow India to expand its CSRS project and maritime surveillance technologies by installing radars in other Indian ocean states (Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka). More countries are joining [this network](#).

In addition, India collects information and intelligence through White Shipping Information Exchange (WSIE) agreements with friendly foreign countries. It also establishes a constellation of satellites in the Indian Ocean Region, linking all maritime agencies, coastal states, and union territories into one network and pooling data through interfaces with various data sources.

However, it is difficult for India to achieve MDA alone because of the difficulties in observing the vast ocean region. [Strategic positioning, accessing facilities of strategic partners and intelligence sharing](#) can enhance the MDA capabilities through strategic engagements. India's strategic informal alliance, the Quad, recently announced the creation of the [Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness](#), intended to track illegal Chinese activities in the region. As part of this, Quad is looking [to collect data from](#) the US-based advanced Radio Frequency company, HawkEye360 and [process and distribute it through](#) the US Navy's SeaVision platform to countries across the region. In addition, discussions are happening between [India and the US](#) on Underwater Domain Awareness capabilities.

Moreover, India emphasises the importance of regional organisations for gathering and sharing information. For instance, the observer status in the IOC would facilitate India to improve MDA in the western Indian Ocean since IOC has demonstrated leadership in this domain. Likewise, in 2018, India launched the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) to collate, combine and disseminate information from the Indian Ocean Region.

India coordinates with [various major regional information fusion centres](#), including RMIFC-Madagascar and IFC-Singapore. It has established linkages with regional countries and maritime security agencies and collects information from strategic partners, WSIE agreements, and CSRS. All these sources are synergistic and could effectively cover the Indo-Pacific region. This centre is thus expected to function as a regional donor of [maritime information for the region](#). IFC-IOR-led initiatives are essential to the Navy's vision to be a regional net security provider.

Conclusion

Over the years, India has been pursuing regional strategic and diplomatic interests through the engagements of the Indian Navy with the Indian Ocean states. The ambitions of China and interventions of extra-regional powers have changed the Indian approach towards IOR. India recognised the significance of high-level official engagements in the IOR to secure a favourable maritime environment.

Driven to ensure regional stability and prosperity, India promulgated the Act East Policy, SAGAR, IPOI, and other policies focusing on regional coordination. Subsequently, India extended its strategic engagements to the Indo-Pacific to bridge capacity gaps and establish its position as a net security provider in the region. India's partnerships with the US and other western powers, and close ties with ASEAN countries offer opportunities to counterbalance China's geo-economic and political assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific.

Differences in countries' respective priorities characterise partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. Each nation has different political dilemmas and appetites. The prevailing threat perception in the region and security concerns among countries strengthens partnerships by addressing security concerns in a shared manner.

Way Forward

However, the Indo-Pacific is also a theatre of opportunities. It assists India in addressing the emerging geopolitical challenges and threats unfamiliar earlier. Also, it enables a balanced relationship between strategic partners.

These partnerships facilitate securing strategic interests and sustaining India's regional naval deployments. In addition, Indo-Pacific partnerships could assist India in enhancing its naval capabilities through defense and logistics agreements, external intelligence, and foreign procurement, which would lead to enhanced power projection and sea deterrence to counter an aggressive China.

However, India is still in dire need of a national Naval strategy, and the country currently only has a naval maritime strategy as a vision document. There would be significant advances in strategic thought if India could formulate a national maritime or Naval strategy, aggregating various policies and initiatives.

It would guide the country to achieve its stated geo-economic goals in the maritime domain, streamline budget allocations and requirements, and ensure a coherent Indian position on maritime issues. It would ultimately enhance India's maritime stature in the region and resolve the capacity and capability constraints in the maritime environment.