

***THE MARITIME DIMENSION OF INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY:
MANAGING STRATEGIC COMPETITION WITH CHINA IN THE INDO-
PACIFIC***

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Abstract

The 21st century is the Asia century, more specifically the Indo-Pacific century to rewrite the role of countries like China, India and other ASEAN countries in the Indian ocean region which has become the hub of global trade. In this regard, India's role and its own ambitions have undergone a major transformation from an isolationist approach to engagement with the aim to keep it free from military expansion and at same time use it for its own strategic benefit to counter the increasingly assertive naval presence and economic influence of China in the region.

In response India has shifted its foreign policy to emphasise strategic partnership, multilateralism, capacity building initiatives including SAGAR, ACT EAST policy, QUAD cooperation and enhanced naval diplomacy. Meanwhile China, facing geographical constraints in easily accessing the Indian Ocean region, started using measures like debt-trap diplomacy to make its foothold strong in the region.

India's importance in the Asia-Pacific region has grown more significantly with the introduction of the US 'Indo-Pacific Strategy,' which promotes a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific.' This strategy positions India as a key strategic ally of the United States in the region. This progress has given a boost to India's strategic goals to become a key player in the Indian

Ocean Region (IOR) and the wider Asia-Pacific area. India is actively focusing on developing and upgrading its navy to become a strong maritime force, to function as a 'Blue Water' Navy. Its partnership with the United States and its role as a 'net security provider' have further supported its ambitions in the region.

India's involvement in the Asia-Pacific region is clearly driven by strategic goals of 'Extended Neighbourhood' and 'Indo-Pacific' — highlighting the country's desire to establish, preserve, and protect its interests in areas beyond South Asia. These concepts provide a comprehensive overview of India's strategic approach, its position, and the factors that shape its role within the broader regional and global context. This study also examines India's attempts to maintain a hard yet diplomatic stance while fostering regional cooperation in infrastructure, security, and the economy. By examining these initiatives, the article seeks to demonstrate how India's position as a major actor in the Indo-Pacific region is evolving and how this development impacts regional and international stability. India is concerned with safeguarding its marine trade routes due to its extensive coastline and strategic location at the meeting point of the Pacific and Indian oceans.

The study is an attempt to analyze the dynamics of China's involvement in the Indian ocean region and the possible concerns for India and India's preparedness in response to such moves by China.

Keywords:

Indo-Pacific, Indian Ocean Region (IOR), India's Maritime Foreign Policy, China's Naval Expansion, Strategic Competition, SAGAR, Act East Policy, QUAD, Indo-Pacific Strategy, Maritime Security, Blue Water Navy, Net Security Provider, Belt and Road Initiative

Introduction

As South Asia borders the Indian Ocean, its strategic importance has increased manifold turning it to a theatre of power politics in recent years, with significant implications for the regional and international order. Structurally, India has been central to this region in various domains, including geography, politics and economy and has enjoyed a huge influence on the peripheral countries. China is South Asia's largest neighbour and shares land borders with a number of states in the region. With its rise, it has turned far more attentive to its South Asian neighbourhood, moving beyond economic and development engagements to strategic and security ones.

Initiatives like the grand Belt and Road project (BRI) and China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) have considerably brought China much closer to the South Asian states, altering the existing economic, political, social and strategic outlook of the region. The south Asia policy of China is mostly India centric resulting in security, economic and diplomatic ties with the neighbouring countries of India.

At another level China has a grand vision of developing territorial access to the IOR through initiatives like the belt and road project. Beijing launched the multi-billion dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project in 2014. The aim of the project is to connect China's western region, Xinjiang province with Pakistan's Gwadar port. The CPEC will provide China with an alternative trade route to escape the Malacca Dilemma. The oil from the Gulf region can directly be shifted via Gwadar to China. The port will provide the Chinese navy access to the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, and the wider Indian Ocean.

CPEC also has an ideological dimension of extending a state-led development model. If this strategy is successful, China will transform the regional order in which it will play a leading role in Asia. China is a rising global power in the maritime sphere. China has alleviated its global position as the world's second-largest defense-spending nation and the third-largest arms exporter.

A key part of India's strategy in the Indo-Pacific region is the SAGAR doctrine, which stands for Security and Growth for All in the Region. Introduced in 2015, SAGAR marks a change in India's approach to maritime issues, progressing from taking a defensive stance earlier to a more active and collaborative one today. The goal is to ensure the shared maritime areas important for global trade and security to be free from aggressive militarisation.

The doctrine is based on five main areas: (1) improving maritime security (2) developing economic and infrastructure ties (3) supporting capacity building (4) promoting sustainable development and (5) reducing risks from disasters.

SAGAR views the Indo-Pacific as a competitive area but also as a space where countries can work together. It allows India to take a leading role in promoting security cooperation while still maintaining its own strategic independence. This perspective supports India's growing efforts in providing humanitarian aid and disaster relief, helping build naval capabilities in island countries, and engaging in naval diplomacy through visits to ports and joint patrols.

The SAGAR doctrine is in a way soft power diplomacy by representing India as a responsible and peaceful actor in the maritime world. In contrast to China's assertive actions

in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. By doing this, India can present itself as a country that promotes norms, cooperation, and non-threatening approach to rule based maritime order also considering the interests of regional partners like ASEAN, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and the Maldives.

Since most of these countries are smaller than India so India suffers from what Serge Desilva Ranasinghe a defence and security analyst who's also Indian ocean specialist calls "kautilian dictum" which means the smaller countries that are surrounded by bigger countries naturally try to balance out the equation by establishing closer relations with distant but larger power and in this case China seems to be the viable option for the neighbouring countries of India.

Strategic analysts and policy makers in India have perceived Chinese presence in Indian immediate neighbourhoods as a design to suffocate India in what is popularly known as the string of pearls policy of china. The mounting demand of the energy for the big powers of Asia like India, Japan and China and other powers such as the USA, Australia and other South east Asian have made the sea line of communication (sloc's) and other choke points extremely security sensitive.

China's foreign policy has incorporated maritime domain as a particular area of interest after the Chinese communist party general secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that as land and marine power China possesses extreme interest in the ocean. (Ribao, 2013). The shift of focus towards naval domain is due to exponential economic rise, energy security, territorial maritime dispute, and external powers interference around China's neighbourhood which is perceived as a threat by China.

Maritime wars are primary international issues that have worsened the global governments tension. For example, one of the most intense naval conflicts of the twenty-first century in the South China sea happened in the INDO PACIFIC region.

Literature review

The assertive maritime strategy of China in the Indo pacific region and south china sea has become the focal point of tension in geopolitics Academic scholars like Kaplan (2016) argue that China is ambitiously working to establish naval dominance to secure trade routes and extend strategic influence. The "String of Pearls" thesis, discussed by Cordesman (2019), provides valuable insight regarding China's growing network of ports from Myanmar to Djibouti as a means of encircling India. There is global consensus that China's maritime rise is a direct threat to alter the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

In 2012, Raja Mohan, in his comprehensive book, *Samudra Manthan*, analysed the consequences of the growth of India and China in the twenty-first century in the “world’s maritime spaces,” the Indian and Pacific Oceans. He began his analysis in the late twentieth century period, when the two countries, driven by growing trade and seeking raw materials, turned their focus to naval expansion.

Brewster in 2016 observed that India, due to its geographical proximity, deems itself a natural leader and perceives the presence of extra-regional naval powers, particularly China, as illegitimate and enjoys exclusive rights in the Indian Ocean. India has covertly harboured ambitions to emerge as a dominant power in 10 and perceives it as “India’s ocean” and its backyard. It is exclusively a region and ocean named after a single state. Literature on the Indian Ocean describes India’s approach in the Indian ocean as defensive due to the state’s colonial experience to justify the elimination of extra-regional from the Indian ocean, labelled as “India’s Monroe Doctrine”. On the other hand, scholars believe that China is making huge investments with the objective of sheltering the sea routes and chokepoints across the Indian ocean to fulfil its interests for its growing population.

The Indian ocean has emerged as a core of great power rivalry due to varied powers vying for domination, which has been a recurring feature of global politics. Yassen, et al in 2016 and pant in 2009 has emphasised that The Indian Ocean region is a host to four key chokepoints, the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca, the Suez Canal and Bab-el Mandeb connecting East Asia, Africa, the Middle East with the Americas and Europe. Historically the US has remained the key player in the region. Currently, India attempts to establish its predominance, but its limited material capabilities have constrained India from fully responding to China’s ascending capabilities in the Indian Ocean.

China’s Defense White Paper indicates the doctrinal shift from ‘near-seas defense’ to far-seas protection’ to sustain operations and project powers in distant maritime regions, not limited to immediate perimeters or littoral waters and support its overseas interests (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2019, July 24).

The doctrine shift is operationalised through Beijing’s development of Kyaukpyu Port in Myanmar on the Bay of Bengal under the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) is a bilateral venture under BRI. China’s military base in Djibouti, along with development of major ports initiatives in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Malaysia, and Cambodia, are developed under Maritime Silk Road-an oceanic leg of BRI positioned at Indian Ocean.

Malik 2018 has implied that the Chinese activities have compelled the Indian Navy to unearth a three-pronged strategy that is to strengthen its control in the Indian Ocean through forward bases in Seychelles, Mauritius, Maldives, Iran, Madagascar and Oman. Enhance interoperability through joint naval drills in the South and East China Seas, agreed on a logistics exchange agreement with the US, France and Singapore which reflects its naval expansion ambitions, and promoting “Project SAGAR”, an alternate vision to China’s Maritime silk road aimed at reviving India’s ancient trade channels and cultural bonds with the 10 littorals.

India’s strategic outlook is articulated in the Indian Maritime Security Strategy, India’s primary areas of maritime interest include not just littoral waters (immediate seas) but farther 10 regions that are significant for India’s trade, energy and strategic SLOCs such as “the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, Andaman Sea, and their littoral regions; the Persian Gulf and its littoral, the Gulf of Oman and Aden, Red Sea; South-West Indian Ocean, including IOR island states therein and East Coast of Africa littoral regions...” (Indian navy 2015). The secondary areas of interest incorporate India’s strategic maritime strategy which stretches beyond the Indian Ocean to incorporate parts of the South-East Indian Ocean (towards the Pacific), the South and East China Seas, the Western Pacific, and even the Southern Indian Ocean down to Antarctica.

The bilateral security agreements reinforce the US-India strategic partnership in the Indian Ocean. Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement with the US enables logistical support, reciprocal access to bases, extending India’s operational reach (Muneer, 2016).

The research uses multi-disciplinary methods to get valuable insights from fields of geography, political science, economics, and international relations. The research provides evidence about the evolving dynamics of the Indian Ocean Region which can lead to informed policy decisions aimed at establishing a meaningful strategic presence of India in the region while also taking into account the need to promote sustainable and consistent economic growth.

While existing literature explores India’s diplomatic stand on China’s naval expansion, relatively few works examine how India actively manages competition with China not only through diplomatic channels but also through the military preparedness to become net security provider in the Indian ocean region. This study aims to bridge these gaps by examining India’s maritime modernisation plan particularly in relation to initiatives and investment made in the maritime sector.

Research methodology

This research incorporates qualitative and analytical study of the maritime dimension of India foreign policy. Data is collected primarily from analysis of documentary research, reviewing the official government publications, understanding the publicly available maritime doctrine of the Indian Navy and secondary academic literature. The analysis of above mentioned sources is used to understand India's strategic priorities in the Indo-Pacific regions.

This study requires a descriptive and analytical research framework. Qualitative study is suitable for this topic because it requires policy analysis and interpretations rather than numerical measurement as the primary research method. Qualitative methods would ensure in-depth understanding of India's maritime strategy.

Data is collected after examining publicly available official documents, published literature, and digital records of investment in the maritime sector on the Government portals. The collected data is analysed to understand government initiatives, strategic priorities and objectives foreign policy.

The focal point of research is analysing the prime issue of maritime security, naval modernisation plans, regional cooperation's and Indo pacific strategy to manage strategic competition with China.

Objective and significance of the study

- This research examines the changing maritime dynamics of the Indian Ocean region due to expansion of China's naval footprint and its implications on India's national interests. It analyses India's foreign policy and maritime strategy in order to maintain balance of power in Indian Ocean regions with respect to China.
- To examine China's maritime strategy in respect to military-economic development and its implications on India's evolving maritime doctrine.
- It analyses India's bilateral relations with various regional players. And evaluate security corporations in the Indian Ocean region.
- It aims to assess the investment done to modernise the Naval forces and the strategic plan of India to counter assertive China in the Indian Ocean region.

Research Questions

Q1: What are the strategic maritime issues faced by India from the evolving security environment in the Indo pacific region?

Q2: What are the maritime investments done by India to manage its strategic competition with China in the Indo pacific.

Q3: In general, what is India's approach to maritime security and regional cooperation to maintain peace and stability in the Indo pacific region.

Hypothesis

Ho: The naval expansion of China in the Indian Ocean region presents several complex challenges to India.

H1: India, with tacit support from the United States, is asserting its leadership in the Indian Ocean region with a national vision to emerge as the region's "net security provider."

H2: India has established bilateral security arrangements with most Indian Ocean states in wake of growing Chinese aggression in the Indian Ocean region.

Indian ocean region: a hub of global strategic and economic interests

Maritime trade and the ability to connect by sea have long been key ways for different cultures and civilizations to interact. The Indian Ocean has historically served as a major channel for trade. This region holds large reserves of important materials that are essential to the global economy. These include bauxite, chromite, coal, copper, diamonds, gold, iron ore, natural gas, nickel, oil, phosphates, tin, titanium, tungsten, uranium, and zinc.

India continues to expand its military partnership with its maritime neighbours. For example, it signed a \$50-million deal with Maldives in 2021 to support the country's coast guard development and other security infrastructure projects. India depends greatly on the Indian Ocean for both commercial and non-commercial activities such as shipping, energy imports, trade, tourism, and fishing. The Indian Navy considers the entire Indian Ocean, stretching from the eastern coast of Africa to the Andaman Sea, as a key area of focus.

This supports its claim as a first responder and as a provider of security to its allies and partners in the region. India maintains strong partnerships with coastal and island nations in the region. For instance, in 2021, India provided a \$100 million credit line to Mauritius for its security and military expenditures. India is also a major economic force in the Indian Ocean, exporting to eighteen out of the thirty-three countries in the region and importing from several others, including Australia, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

India continues to build and expand its military cooperation with its maritime neighbours. For example, in 2021, India signed a \$50 million agreement with the Maldives to assist in the development of the country's coast guard and other security infrastructure. Small islands frequently call themselves "big ocean states" since they have jurisdiction over areas where the sea area much exceeds the land area. For instance, the Maldives' oceanic exclusive economic zone (EEZ) spans over 900,000 square kilometres, despite the country's total land size being only 300 square kilometres. Ocean-related concerns are important national objectives for many countries. Their overall progress, economic growth, and development are intimately related to the sustainable management of their EEZs.

The Indian Ocean includes three major choke points: The Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb. This paper also includes the Mozambique Channel as a choke point due to the potential for trade disruptions along this route. Every day, more than 36 million barrels of oil—about 40 percent of the world's total oil production—pass through these choke points. It is estimated that nearly 90,000 ships carrying a total of 9.84 billion tons of cargo travel through the Indian Ocean and its choke points each year, heading to destinations in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

The Indo-Pacific's strategic significance lies not only in its economic centrality but also in the intensifying geopolitical rivalries that traverse it, particularly between a rising China and a recalibrating United States, as well as the strategic responses of middle powers such as Japan, Australia, and increasingly, India. In addition to the strategic actions of middle powers like Japan, Australia, and increasingly India, these tensions are particularly apparent between a rising China and a United States that is changing its tactics.

Compared to the earlier Asia-Pacific paradigm, the concept of the Indo-Pacific as a single geopolitical region represents a shift. This change demonstrates an increased emphasis on maritime security and the growing significance of the Indian Ocean in global power dynamics. As China continues to expand its military footprint through artificial island-building, coercive diplomacy, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), regional actors have recalibrated their strategic outlooks.

In this changing time India is in a unique position to influence the future regional order because of India's maritime location, demographic dividend and adherence to international protocol. India is committed to solve the emerging challenges through comprehensive strategy.

Apart from the traditional military capacity building initiatives India is focusing infrastructure programmes, joint exercises and maritime domain awareness. The Information

Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), located in Gurugram, primarily works on real time data sharing, surveillance capabilities, helping India and its Allies to protect shared maritime commons. To ensure regional stability and reduce external interference India has engaged with island states such as Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius by signing defence agreements, capacity building programs, and infrastructural development projects

To enhance regional connectivity and to cater interest of regional players the Sagarmala initiative of government of India which is a port led development strategy and investment in transnational connectivity projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project proves India's commitment to link north eastern region with the Bay of Bengal. India's vision of the Indian ocean as a driving force behind regional integration and development rather than just a maritime route demonstrates its commitment to comprehensive connectivity.

The Indian Ocean is of great strategic importance, largely because of the main sea routes and key choke points that pass through it. One of these is the Cape of Good Hope route, which goes around the southern tip of Africa. Another is the Suez Canal – Red Sea route, which provides the shortest path from Europe through the Mediterranean to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. The Suez Canal plays a vital role in the trade network of the Indian Ocean.

The Strait of Hormuz connects the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman to the Arabian Sea. This strait is of immense strategic value because it is the only route through which oil from countries like Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and most of the United Arab Emirates can be transported.

The Straits of Malacca link the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean. It is the shortest sea route between the Middle East and East Asia, helping to cut down on the time and cost of shipping goods between Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. About 60% of the world's maritime trade passes through this area, and it is a key source of oil supply for major Asian economies like the People's Republic of China and Japan.

The importance of these sea routes and choke points in meeting the energy demand of developing economies, maintaining stability and security and demilitarisation is essential in the Indian Ocean. Most of the countries in this region, except for Australia, are part of the Global South facing various threats to their internal and external security which makes this region more prone to conflict and vulnerable to instability. Strategic assertiveness of China in the Indian Ocean Region

The foremost concern of the contemporary time for the Chinese leadership is to gain access to strategic resources in the maritime domain and to protect Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC's) through which these vital resources are transported to sustain the pace of economic growth and overall development of the nation. As evident from the sources that China's economy is heavily dependent on energy imports out of which a larger share of imports arrives through the seas.

The ever-increasing demand for imported energy resources and their shipment through maritime routes, for the sustenance of a fast-growing economy, has invoked China to design a plan of a New "Maritime Silk Road". The obvious aim of this project is to develop a network of maritime and land infrastructure for overseas trade and commerce. The fundamental aim is to develop central Chinese provinces and shape China's regional periphery by exercising economic, political and military influence.

String of pearls strategy

The way the String of Pearls is presented suggests that China is increasing its influence in global politics by rigorously working to secure access to ports and airfields, expanding and upgrading its military, and nurturing stronger relationships with trade partners. The Chinese government states that its growing naval strategy is peaceful and is meant only to protect trade in the region. However, some countries like India argue that China's actions are causing a security concern between China and India in the Indian Ocean.

The major pearls in this strategy which are commonly cited locations are Hainan Island which is the naval base in China, which serves as the plan's starting point, and the Gwadar port, which is a crucial component of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The port of Chittagong, which China views as a commercial venture in the marine industry, and the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka, which it obtained through debt trap diplomacy.

And in order to reduce reliance on the strait of Malacca China's influence on Kyaukpyu port and for surveillance Coco Island of Myanmar is under the influence of China. Djibouti naval base in horn of Africa is the first overseas military base. And ongoing negotiations regarding the port of Sudan can provide China naval access in the south china sea in future.

China has influence over Kyaukpyu Port, as an effort to reduce reliance on strait of Malacca and Coco Island in Myanmar for surveillance purposes. The Djibouti naval facility in the Horn of Africa is the first military installation abroad. Additionally, China may eventually

get naval access to the South China Sea through continuing negotiations over the port of Sudan.

One road one belt initiative

One Belt refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt, a grid of overland corridors being established by China under its “Go West” Policy (Brown, 2015). In essence, the belt is all about commercial connectivity, which China suggests that its neighbours should build a transportation pathway. This is also called the New Silk Road plan. “One Road” refers to the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road.” This joins China’s shoreline with Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Gulf and the east coast of Africa. One Road proposal is envisioned to build hard and soft maritime infrastructure all over the Indo-Pacific which include new ports, high speed railways, highways, pipelines, industrial parks and special economic zones around them.

Figure 1



One Belt, One Road routes.

Note. Source: China's Belt and Road Initiative, by Drishti IAS, 2025, <https://www.drishtiiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/china-s-belt-and-road-initiative>

Naval Modernization of China

China's naval modernisation plan involves weapon acquisition programs including anti-ship ballistic missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs), surface-to-air missiles, aircraft carriers, manned and unmanned aircraft. Its naval modernization also includes developments and improvements in maintenance and logistics, education and training, and exercises.

China's naval strategy is to project power in the Indian Ocean and involves the process of building bases around India like in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Maldives and Myanmar generally termed as "String of Pearls Strategy." These 'pearls' are to help build strategic ties with several countries along the sea lanes from the Middle East to the South China Sea to protect China's energy interests and security objectives.

China's Sanya naval base, an underground nuclear submarine base, is only 1200 nautical miles from the strategic Malacca Strait and is the closest naval base to India. China has also planned to restrict the movement of the Indian Navy in the Arabian Sea with the help of Gwadar port in Pakistan.

China is also planning to develop a submarine base at Marao in Maldives to counter the Indian navy's southern command. It has invested millions of dollars in the construction of Hambantota port and Colombo south terminal in Sri Lanka to use its bunkering facilities for the 15 submarines and warships. It has also established surveillance capabilities at the Great Coco Islands in Myanmar with two helipads and storage facility for weapons.

India's maritime strategy in response to China's military expansion

Some of the world's most critical shipping lanes, energy transportation routes, and strategic choke points are located in the Indian Ocean region. Due to Geopolitical, economic, and security considerations the Indian Ocean is at the top of India's foreign policy priorities. India has engaged in numerous defense cooperation agreements with smaller states in the region, such as the Maldives, Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka. These agreements enable India to establish port access, participate in joint maritime patrols, and collaborate on anti-piracy efforts. India is also actively engaged in various regional organizations multilaterally such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. Additionally, taking part in various maritime drills would highlight India's commitment to regional stability while fostering interconnectivity.

The Indian Ocean is the third-largest oceanic division in the world so the Evaluation of India's Indian Ocean Strategy by The Standing Committee on External Affairs Chaired by

Dr. Shashi Tharoor presented its report on August 11, 2025. That includes certain Key observations and recommendations which are as follows:

Creating a unified Indian Ocean strategy: India's strategies for the Indian ocean region include SAGAR (Security and Growth for All), and MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions).

Strengthening partnerships with littoral states: The Committee recommended that a comprehensive strategic engagement plan that is flexible and caters the need of each country's priorities be formulated for India's engagement with each littoral country. It also recommended developing a broad policy layout that aligns India's policies for the Indian ocean and Indo-Pacific regions.

Bilateral and multilateral diplomacy: India should actively participate and engage with various stakeholders and regional players in various multilateral groups of the region. These include the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), BIMSTEC, and the Quad. The Committee observed that India's fragmented approach has not fully utilised these platforms to advance its interests.

Security threats: The Committee noted several traditional and non traditional security threats in the Indian ocean region, including the growing influence of China, piracy, and narcotics trafficking. The Committee observed that current efforts are insufficient to address these issues therefore. It recommended: (i) enhancing awareness of the maritime environment by integrating advanced technologies, (ii) upgrading naval capabilities, (iii) intelligence sharing and joint patrolling, and (iv) strengthening India's coastal surveillance infrastructure.

Establishing an inter-ministerial task force: To address coordination gaps and to efficiently allocate and utilise resources the committee recommended creating a task force involving key Ministries. The Committee also recommended creating a centralised coordination mechanism under the Ministry of External Affairs.

To counter China's "String of Pearls" strategy, India has been advancing what many analysts call the "Necklace of Diamonds." Although New Delhi has never formally acknowledged this as an official foreign-policy doctrine, it also has not dismissed the idea that these initiatives collectively serve to create a strategic, 360-degree counterbalance to China's expanding influence.

An important illustration of this strategy is India's decision to extend Mongolia, a nation that shares a lengthy border with China, a \$1billion credit line. Despite having large oil reserves Mongolia lacks sophisticated refining technology. The goal of India's aid is to boost Mongolia's energy infrastructure by assisting in developing its refining capabilities. Building

close ties with Mongolia is in line with a larger plan to create strategic outposts all around China, creating the so-called “Necklace of Diamonds.”

The Necklace of Diamonds strategy also includes countries such as Japan, which maintains important defence and security agreements with India. Together in collaboration of modern technology and marine domain awareness, both nations regularly conduct joint naval exercises in the Indo-Pacific.

The ASEAN trio—Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia is another important group of marine allies for India. These nations play a significant role in expanding India’s influence and presence in the larger Indo-Pacific region. In order to increase its strategic depth and security network across the Indian Ocean India has attempted to extend its maritime outreach beyond southeast Asia to nations like Oman, Iran and Seychelles.

The Sagarmala Programme is the flagship project of The Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways which was introduced in March 2015 with the goal of transforming India’s marine sector. India has enormous potential for port-led economic growth because of its 7,500 km coastline, 14,500 km of potentially navigable waterways, and key strategic location on important international trade routes. A fundamental component of the marine Amrit Kaal Vision 2047 (MAKV) is the Sagarmala Programme which is the driving force behind India’s aspiration to become a world leader in the maritime sector. Building on Maritime India Vision 2030, MAKV sets ambitious goals to place India in the top five shipbuilding countries by 2047.

For India to build a climate of trust and foster strong economic ties with its neighbouring countries investing and supporting the development of maritime infrastructure in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), particularly in countries such as Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Oman, and Iran is important to position itself as a potential regional player. Considering the presence of China in the Indian ocean region which is way ahead of India as a major investor in many of the countries located in India’s nearby waters and key maritime areas SAGAR is programme becomes vital for both national and regional security.

Sagarmala Project – Components

- Port modernisation includes increasing the capacity of existing ports and enhancing their efficiency, as well as the construction of new ports.

- Development of logistics parks, inland water transport, coastal shipping, upgrading of road and rail lines, and establishing new road and rail links are all examples of port connectivity.
- Industrial clusters, coastal employment zones (CEZ), maritime clusters, smart industrial port towns, and port-based special economic zones (SEZ) are all examples of port-led industrialization.
- Coastal community development includes the creation of fishing ports and fish processing plants, as well as coastal tourist initiatives and community skill development.
- Coastal shipping and inland river transportation is both ecologically favourable modes of freight delivery.

Figure 2



Components of the Sagarmala Programme.

Note. Source: Introduction to Sagarmala Programme, by Sagarmala Programme, Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, n.d., <https://sagarmala.gov.in/about-sagarmala/introduction>.

In essence, Sagarmala turns India's vast coastline into an engine for economic growth, connecting it better to the world, fostering domestic industry, and securing its maritime future. Enhancing Strategic Footprint through a strong maritime infrastructure and efficient port system bolster India's strategic presence and influence in the crucial Indian Ocean Region.

India's maritime modernisation: Investment and initiatives post 2014.

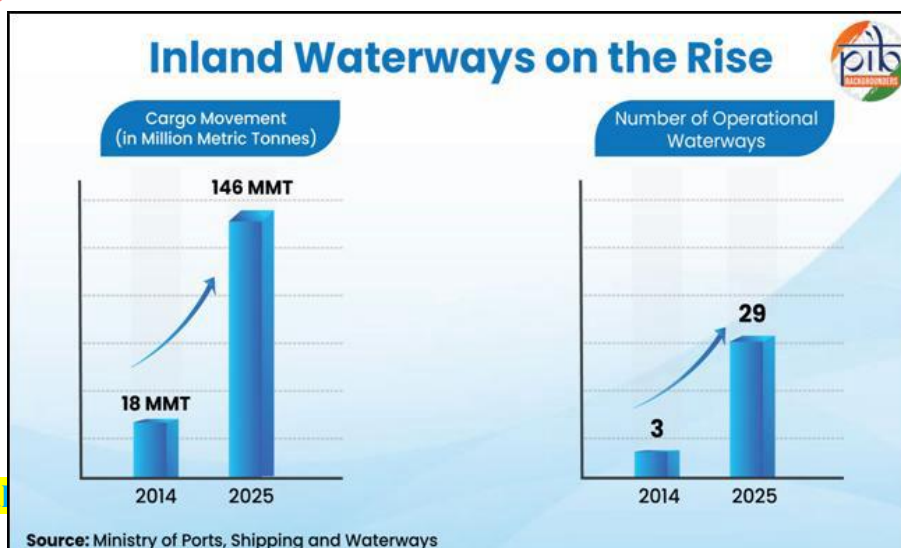
Since 2014, India has undertaken extensive maritime modernization through significant investment and key initiatives focused on indigenization, infrastructure development, and policy reforms, guided by the Maritime India Vision 2030 and Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision 2047.

India's substantial financial commitments toward developing a world-class maritime ecosystem have accelerated modernisation across the maritime sector. The Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision 2047 and the Maritime India Vision 2030 form the bedrock of these initiatives. The government has placed great deal of emphasis on funding shipbuilding projects as part of this effort, and a total amount of ₹69,725 crore has been approved to boost the domestic shipbuilding industry.

The Union Budget for FY 2025–26 has allocated ₹1,03,548 crore to the Indian Navy, reflecting the country's focus on strengthening maritime security and improving its naval capabilities. In line with the "Aatmanirbhar Bharat" initiative, the Navy has made a strong push towards producing equipment locally. Crucial developments include the indigenous aircraft carrier INS Vikrant and advanced guided-missile destroyers like INS Visakhapatnam, which are important for modernizing the Indian Navy.

With that the budget supports the growth of the maritime sector through various capacity expansion projects. Port cargo handling capacity has nearly doubled since 2014, Sagarmala Programme is the flagship initiative focused on port-led development, with 272 projects worth ₹1.41 lakh crore completed to improve infrastructure and logistics efficiency.

Five key bills were passed in 2025, including the Indian Ports Act, 2025, to replace outdated laws so as to bring the maritime sector on equal footing with global standards. Through these wide-ranging investments and initiatives, India is positioning itself as key global maritime power, aiming to be among the top five shipbuilding nations by 2047.

Figure 3

Inland waterways cargo movement and operational waterways (2014–2025).

Note. Source: Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways/PIB infographic on inland waterways, Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, Government of India.

Analysis and discussion

The foundation pillar of India's maritime strategy is multilateralism and regional stability that is achieved through platforms such as the QUAD. Whereas China is aggressively projecting its naval power to secure the "maritime silk route". This contrast explains why INDIA considers China as a strategic player who can disturb peace in the Indo-Pacific rather than a mere economic competitor. China's military expansion and debt trap diplomacy in the Indian ocean littoral justifies India's move to strengthen its ties with Southeast Asian nations and undertake capacity building measures in the maritime sector. The 21st-century security environment in the Indian Ocean region presents several complex challenges to India as the presence of two powerful nations of Asia i.e China and India leading to direct maritime competition in the sphere of Sea lines of communication (SLOCs), Naval power initiatives, influence over island states and most crucially maritime connectivity and infrastructure.

In 2025, India officially submitted an application to join the Malacca Strait Patrol, a security cooperation mechanism comprising Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, with the implicit objective of asserting control over the Malacca Strait, a critical route for the burgeoning energy supply required by China's rapidly expanding economy which is considered as India's way to counter the new maritime silk road of China

China's primary goal is to create maritime dominance in order to safeguard sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and guarantee the continuous flow of energy and essential resources for its economic growth. China is modernising its navy in order to offset the presence of the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific, prevent them from conducting naval drills close to the South China Sea, and prevent India from becoming the net security provider.

India's territorial integrity and sovereignty are directly threatened by China's debt trap diplomacy with nations like Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and other African nations to increase trade connectivity, secure ports and resources, and establish a global presence near the Indian Ocean.

As a result, India is pursuing what political analysts refer to as the “Necklace of diamond strategy” and making significant investments in the maritime sector with focus on enhancing India’s naval capabilities by equipping its warships with cutting-edge technologies. And using a well-known plan centred on port led development under the Sagar Mala program to fiercely compete with China in the commercial sector.

Conclusion

A country like India, whose strategic culture believes in the concept of “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam”—the belief that the world is one family aims to have mutual participation of all Indo-Pacific littorals. India advocates non-aggression for maintaining peace, stability, and security in the Indo-Pacific region.

But increasingly assertiveness of China has pushed India to enhance its engagement in the Indo pacific by strengthening defence ties with countries like Japan, Australia, and the United Nations through joint military exercises, defence technology transfers and joint surveillance in the region.

New Delhi is firmly pursuing a diverse strategy like enhancing connectivity in the region through development of infrastructure projects such as India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project. And using diplomacy as a tool to develop strategic partnership with neighbouring nations to ensure a prominent maritime presence.

The Indian government strongly believes in rules based maritime order rather than confrontational rivalry. Indian foreign policy follows the dual strategy of DETERRENCE through capacity building and partnerships and SELECTIVE COOPERATION with Beijing where interest aligns.

The shift in China’s foreign policy related to maritime domain has changed the strategic landscape of the Indian ocean and brought the Indo pacific region as the centre of power competition. India aims to maintain the balance of power for its own national interest and for preserving its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

As china increases its naval footprint in the Indo pacific region to maintain the equilibrium India has no choice but to invest heavily in the maritime domain to manage strategic competition with China and the success depends on consistent naval capacity building measures, meaningful engagement with regional and other powers and the diplomatic and political competence of Indian leadership to put forward India’s candidature as a Net security provider in the Indo pacific region.

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