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DELHI'S STRATEGIC INVESTMENT IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

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Introduction

The Indian Ocean is a critical component of increased global connectivity. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has become a significant arena for power projection over the past few decades due to its status as the location of major Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) and strategic chokepoints for major economies. The shifting power metrics in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) have gotten a lot of attention on the world scene. In formal discussions, the strategic location of the Indian Ocean plays a crucial role in facilitating the transportation of goods and fostering trade ties between the North Atlantic and Asia-Pacific areas. This marine environment is celebrated for its diverse ecosystems and valuable mineral deposits, making it a center of rivalry among nations within the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Nonetheless, the significant security and governance issues confronting this ocean have contributed to an escalating perception of instability and risk in recent decades.

The Indian Ocean is vital to India's geostrategic interests. Certainly, it assumes a crucial role in what is commonly referred to as the "Asian century," a designation attributed to the remarkable expansion of significant Asian economies. Informally, one might liken the Indian Ocean to the focal point of worldwide dynamics. India's strategic geographical placement positions it as a prominent participant in the developing geopolitical context of the Indian Ocean Region. India possesses an extensive coastline covering approximately 7,500 kilometers (Kanodia 2020). Because of its large population and huge energy imports via water systems, the country is extremely reliant on it. The ocean plays a crucial role in facilitating the growth of India's fisheries sector and the export of marine products. India has a strong inclination toward extensive natural resource extraction and an expanding engagement in seabed mining operations. The protection of its extensive coastline and islands takes precedence in India's efforts to ensure effective governance of its maritime territory. India's maritime strategy is a dynamic response to evolving geopolitical needs, carefully crafted to harmonize with its ambitions on the global stage.

Delhi's Strategic Investment in the Indian Ocean

There are two reasons for India to invest in the Indian Ocean: To strengthen its claim of being a region hegemon in South Asia and to prevent the rise of the Chinese influence on the Indian Ocean Region as China is the only obstacle standing in the way of India being a preeminent power in that region. In the aftermath of the Cold War, India has consistently witnessed a revaluation of the Indian Ocean Region's importance. Nevertheless, recent policy adjustments concerning this region and the broader Indo-Pacific indicate a heightened recognition of the ongoing geopolitical changes. During his initial tenure as Prime Minister, Narendra Modi embarked on significant diplomatic visits to three crucial Indian Ocean countries—Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka—in the year 2015. In the subsequent year, he extended his diplomatic outreach to encompass four coastal nations along the Indian Ocean, namely Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, and Kenya (Mishra 2019). The initiatives taken by the state to address its security concerns have reflected India's intentions in the region. Maritime Diplomacy in the past few years has gained momentum in the form of India reaching out to the IOR littoral states.

The country's strategic delimitation of the Indo-Pacific has been aptly extended to include not only India's eastward movement across the Bay of Bengal, beyond the ASEAN nations, but also the western expanse--to the western Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea Island nations, and the eastern shores of Africa (Choudhury and Nayak 2020). The IOR's new vision centers on promoting the region's growth, prosperity, and India's critical economic interests. The Sagarmala project was initiated in 2015 to emphasize port-led development. The main objective of this project is to improve trade and economic growth through the enhancement and modernization of port infrastructure. (Kanodia 2020). The Sagarmala national plan has ambitious objectives to considerably raise the performance of India's logistics industry. The objective of this project is to make the most of India's waterways and coastline to make substantial advancements. Sagarmala's ultimate objective is to reduce the expense of shipping for both local and international trade by efficiently investing in infrastructure.

Path to India's Oceanic Leadership

India has become a hub for regional diplomacy due to its location at the center of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This regional diplomacy is furthered through multiparty initiatives such as BIMSTEC, the BCIM Economic Corridor, the BBIN grouping, and most importantly, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) (Maniyar 2020). India is pursuing numerous prudent approaches to resource exploration and exploitation in the Indian Ocean Region, most of which are unilateral. Moreover, India continues to lead the way in terms of regional security initiatives, with a plethora of partnerships focused on the maritime domain that were established to combat maritime piracy and terrorism. India assumes a substantial position within the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), enjoying support from various nations like the United States, Japan, Germany, France, and Australia. Nonetheless, India's active engagement in crucial sectors such as the economy, defense, maritime affairs, and scientific endeavors remains constrained, lagging behind the contemporary requirements of the twenty-first century. This limitation primarily stems from India's considerable focus on its military initiatives, while other areas are still in the early phases of their development (Maniyar 2020).

Without much international attention, India is making considerable investments in boosting its aviation and naval might in the Indian Ocean. India's expenditure is motivated by two significant factors: the imperative to bolster its vigilance and security in the expansive maritime domain, and an escalating apprehension regarding Chinese encroachments into its strategic sphere. Through these investments, India is actively pursuing measures to safeguard the well-being and territorial integrity of its populace (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2019). Given that China is expanding its presence and operations throughout the IOR, Delhi has begun to re-evaluate its maritime relations and policies. This goal, combined with fending off China's threat on land and at sea, has become a driving factor for India to modernize its maritime infrastructure and utilize the Indian Ocean for its strategic advantage against China. China stands in the way of India becoming a regional hegemon.

The Indian government has taken proactive measures to invest in the strategically located Andaman and Nicobar Islands to address the issue of underdevelopment. To transform the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI) into India's leading maritime center, the government

launched a plan worth 100 billion Indian rupees in 2015 (Patki 2021). The Ministry of Shipping and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands administration sponsored this commendable initiative, showcasing their commitment to progress and development. Prime Minister Narendra Modi made his first visit to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in 2018 and oversaw the launch of several development initiatives in the fields of connectivity, energy, tourism, and other sectors. In 2019, a year after Prime Minister Modi first visited the island, an exclusive Rs 5,650 crore military infrastructure development plan was passed (Singh 2023). The investment will assist India in placing infantry troops, missile batteries, more navy ships, and drones in the Andaman Islands after it has been entirely executed. With partners in the Indian Ocean region, including Mauritius, The Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Oman, India has made notable strides in improving collaborative capacities, investing in ports and jetties such as the construction in the Sittwe Port in Myanmar and the agreement with Mauritius to develop a runway and a jetty (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2022).

China's Growing Influence

In pursuit of increasing its geopolitical influence, Beijing launched the "String of Pearls" initiative. The project involves building ports and maritime infrastructure for civilian purposes along the Indian Ocean's periphery. This has prompted the Indian Navy to take proactive measures to safeguard its interests in the region. China's establishment of a military surveillance facility on Coco Island in Myanmar has improved the country's ability to facilitate the entry of its naval ships into the Indian Ocean region (Nagao 2018). New piers have been built in Djibouti (An African nation situated at the strategic Bab al-Mandeb strait, between the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean.) as a result of China's ambitions to expand its economic and commercial influence in the Indian Ocean region (IOR). Additionally, as a result of this expansion, there are now more Chinese survey, hydrographic, and submarine ships in the vicinity of India's shores. India now has more security concerns as a result.

To enhance understanding, it is worth noting that Chinese submarines choose to navigate through the Malacca, Lombok, and Sunda Straits to access the Indian Ocean. It is pertinent to note that the Sunda Strait is relatively shallow, with an average depth of 50 meters (Panneerselvam 2022). The presence of Chinese Submarines along with Hydrographic Ships has been a regular scene in the

Indian Ocean since 2017. In recent years, China has been focusing on expanding its naval presence in the Indian Ocean, with a particular emphasis on investment in the development of ports in nearby countries. Through the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road initiative, China is making a positive contribution to the region's economic growth, while also providing countries with advanced naval equipment and technology. These efforts are helping to strengthen relationships and promote cooperation between China and its neighbours (Mukherjee 2020). All of these changes have had an impact on India's strategic thinking, which has led to concerns about being surrounded by the region it views as its territory. Chinese survey vessels, such as the Xiang Yang Hong 03, have been performing surveys in the deep-sea areas of the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, and Indonesia's western seas since 2019. These areas are critical for both India's and Australia's submarine activities (Panneerselvam 2022).

To learn more about the water-based environment there, including the hydrography, bathymetric conditions, sea-water temperature, and salinity, China has launched a set of submersible robots into the Indian Ocean. This information may be used for military objectives, such as strengthening Chinese submarine sonar capabilities and Chinese anti-submarine warfare (ASW) equipment's detection capabilities in that region. Beijing's recent activities in the Indian Ocean Region are disrupting the established order and presenting a tangible and immediate danger to India. Indian forces forced a Chinese research vessel to leave the Andaman & Nicobar Islands' exclusive economic zone in September 2019 for operating without permission (Mukherjee 2020). The incident unequivocally exposed the intricacies and challenges of engaging in maritime activities on the open seas. This has prompted India to focus on enhancing its naval capabilities as Chinese vessels are found to be operating very close to India's Exclusive Economic Zone and leveraging the strategic position of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to gain an advantage over China. India and China have been engaged in a rivalry with one another for a while now. Although both sides are reluctant to give up any strategic advantage, they do see the benefits of a cooperative bilateral partnership.

Tussle for the IOR

A Chinese submarine attacking an Indian ballistic missile submarine or Chinese warships disrupting the maritime lines of communication in the case of an emergency are both scenarios made possible by China's growing dominance in the Indian Ocean Region. India's key strategic advantages include its advantageous location in the Indian Ocean, which provides it with a key vantage point, and its comprehensive knowledge of the dynamics of the Indian Ocean Region. Collaborative security efforts are being undertaken by littoral countries and global powers to facilitate free movement through the waters surrounding ANI and counter China's expansionist agenda in the region (Patki 2021). India has taken several proactive measures to enhance communication in remote waters. The country has upgraded its military facilities in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which are located near the Malacca Strait. Additionally, it has developed surveillance outposts in Madagascar and Mauritius and launched a military satellite to improve communication capabilities. In 2016, the Indian Navy hosted an international fleet review, providing an excellent opportunity for over 100 warships from 50 countries to participate and showcase their capabilities. In October 2017, the Indian Navy launched large-scale "mission-based deployments" for the seven missions it is currently engaged in, highlighting its commitment to maintaining peace and stability in the region (Nagao 2018).

India has always recognized the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean and has taken proactive measures to ensure its security. While maintaining a cautious approach towards external actors, India has led efforts to promote greater cooperation in the region by creating two multilateral institutions - the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). These platforms provide an opportunity for nations to come together and address common challenges, fostering a more constructive and collaborative approach towards maritime security (Agarwal 2020). The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is an inclusive forum that seeks to enhance communication and cooperation among the navies of the countries that border the Indian Ocean. It aims to facilitate discussions on important maritime issues in the region. India, with its extensive capabilities and widespread presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), has emerged as a prominent player in the maritime sector and has taken a leading role in the region. A crucial

security priority and essential goal of India's engagement with its allies is to ensure maritime security and unimpeded navigation in the Indian Ocean and the larger Indo-Pacific region.

The Indian Navy stands out among all other navies in the region due to its multi-dimensional capability, ability to operate aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines, and the widest surveillance reach to monitor all the Indian Ocean chokepoints. It boasts the widest range of bilateral and multilateral networks too. As a part of its foreign cooperation initiatives, the Indian Navy currently conducts bilateral naval exercises with 14 navies and coordinates patrols with four. Most of these exercises take place in the Indo-Pacific region (Bisen 2022). In 2017, during the East Asia Summit in Manila, India, Japan, Australia, and the United States participated in fruitful consultative discussions, successfully revitalizing the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue that had been previously abandoned. The renewed dialogue demonstrates the continued commitment of these nations to collaborate and ensure regional security and stability (Mukherjee 2020). India, along with the QUAD alliance, has directed its attention towards the Indian Ocean Region by organizing naval exercises that take place in the vicinity of the Andaman coast. The most recent exercise was conducted in July 2020. A free IOR region is beneficial for all the QUAD members and hence, it has been more important to ensure that China learns to peacefully co-exist in the region without imposing military assertiveness. India views an enhanced QUAD partnership in the Indian Ocean Region as a means of establishing a firm presence in the South China Sea region, with the support of its QUAD allies.

Conclusion

To effectively counter the growing underwater threat posed by China in the Indian Ocean, India must prioritize expanding its capabilities in this domain and re-evaluating its strategy towards undersea warfare. Additionally, India's standing has been bolstered by its two-year non-permanent position in the UN Security Council and the support it received from the US during the Galwan Valley conflict. Now more than ever, it is crucial to take advantage of this assistance and increase logistical collaboration with Southeast Asian and African countries. India must persist in its bilateral, trilateral, or multilateral engagement with democratic nations in the region while focusing on the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and strategic allies. Even if the QUAD alliance is

paused, India should take the lead in upholding the rule-based global order in the Indian Ocean Region.

The expansion of QUAD's influence has the potential to result in India extending its participation to the western Pacific (Maniyar 2020). To establish itself as a leading power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), India must prioritize limiting the increasing strength and aggressiveness of the People's Republic of China. India recognizes that it lags behind China in terms of naval and technological capabilities, and therefore is leveraging the strategic location of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and forging alliances with like-minded nations who share similar apprehensions about China. Meanwhile, India is also heavily investing in enhancing its naval capabilities and maritime infrastructure to be able to stand head-to-head against China.

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