

Strategic Planning and Management of India's Defence and Economic Presence in the Indian Ocean Region

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ABSTRACT

India's strategic management of naval and air power in the Indian Ocean region reflects a dynamic blend of deterrence, power projection, and regional cooperation. As maritime challenges intensify, India's expanding carrier fleet, advanced submarines, and aerial surveillance assets enhance operational depth. Coupled with multilateral engagements and indigenous defence initiatives, this approach reinforces regional stability. Moreover, with the inclusion of two oceans and increasing strategic presence of Indo-Pacific, India hinges on a multi-dimensional approach integrating security, economic diplomacy and regional partnerships. This study delves into the evolution of India's strategic planning and management in the Indian Ocean region reflecting a dynamic interplay of historical legacies, geopolitical imperatives, and evolving security and economic priorities. This study delves into the evolution of India's strategic planning and management in the Indian Ocean region reflecting a dynamic interplay of historical legacies and evolving security and economic priorities. It explores the intersection of military strategy, management approach and economic diplomacy, highlighting India's air and naval capabilities in securing its strategic interests. Furthermore, despite growing partnerships through Quad, Asean, and IORA, challenges persist, for instance, China's strategic assertiveness, infrastructure gaps and the logistical constraints. However, leveraging indigenous defence production, multilateral engagements, and emerging technologies presents opportunities for India as well.

Keywords: Security, Indian Ocean Region, Indo-Pacific, Indian Air Force, Power Projection

Introduction

India's strategic importance in the Indian Ocean Region is embedded in its extensive coastline, strategically located ports, and its location along significant maritime routes. The Indian Ocean facilitates international trade and commerce through critical chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca, Strait of Hormuz, and Bab-al-Mandeb. India is strategically placed in the Indian Ocean Region with various major ports such as Mumbai, Chennai, Vishakhapatnam and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. These ports serve as both naval and commercial hubs, thereby facilitating India's ability to monitor and operate maritime traffic. India has expanded its maritime connectivity by investing in infrastructural initiatives and projects such as *Sagarmala* (Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, India) Chabahar port in Iran, Sabang Port in Indonesia. The Indian Ocean Region is strategically and geopolitically critical due to its geographic location. Additionally, the presence of major powers such as the United States, European Union, China has made this region extremely significant because of intense strategic competition. This calls for India to develop a robust maritime strategy to protect and promote its own national interests and strengthen regional stability when major world powers are vying for further influence in the region.

One of the significant developments in the IOR is the evolution of the Indo-Pacific Framework which focuses on the interconnectedness and interdependence of the Indian and the Pacific Ocean. This development represents a terminological shift from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific. While the Asia-Pacific included only that part of Asia which was in the Pacific Ocean, the Indo-Pacific Ocean meant 'an integrated theatre' that combined India Ocean and

the Pacific Ocean. Asia-Pacific was primarily an economic conception which incorporated markets that experienced rapid economic growth and the Indo-Pacific on the other hand is a maritime space which is still evolving as a concept (Singh n.d.). It is primarily seen as US' containment strategy to counter China's rising assertiveness in the region (Heiduk and Wacker 2020).

The Indo-Pacific concept has been adopted by major nations such as the United States, Japan, India, Australia, and South Korea. The primary objective is to promote a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific based on the rule of law to ensure maritime security and economic cooperation. For instance, the US has articulated its perspective on the region through its "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" Strategy and Japan through its "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision". Republic of South Korea recently released their "Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Strategy" (MoFA, ROK, 2022) which underscored 'inclusiveness, trust and reciprocity' as the principles of cooperation in the region. It was in 2019 that ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) nations adopted the 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific' (AOIP) which outlines the Indo-Pacific as an interconnected region which is based on the principles of ASEAN centrality, dialogue, cooperation, development and prosperity for all (ASEAN 2019). Although, a few nations such as India have not released the official policy document but the term 'Indo-Pacific' is mentioned in the official documents time and again.

India's strategy for the Indo-Pacific is outlined in its Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) initiative, launched in 2015 which aims to promote maritime cooperation and sustainable use of oceans in the region by strengthening its strategic alliances, engaging in capacity-building programs and participating in multi-lateral forums. The Belt and Road initiative (BRI) of China and its increasing presence in the Indo-Pacific through investments in infrastructure and military bases such as Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Gwadar in Pakistan and Djibouti have raised concerns among nations across the world including India, therefore, Indo-Pacific has emerged as strategic pivot to counter Chinese influence.

The central argument of the paper asserts that India's strategic imperatives in the IOR are essential components of its broader Indo-Pacific strategy. India aims to utilise its geographical position and strengthen its maritime capabilities in order to establish influence and securing interests in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). In the face of increasing geopolitical competition and strategic re-alignments, this paper will demonstrate how India's changing position in the IOR is consistent with its goal of an inclusive, free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific leading to the paper's primary objective which is to explore India's strategic role in IOR and how it shapes India's Indo-Pacific framework. Following this objective, three key questions have been answered: how has India's historical engagement in the IOR shaped its current strategic imperatives? What are the primary economic, security, and diplomatic interests that are driving its maritime strategy in the Indo-Pacific? How does India's adherence to the Indo-Pacific expand its regional and global influence?

To achieve these answers, the paper will initially provide a historical backdrop of India's engagement in the IOR, analysing how past experiences have contributed to current strategy. It will then analyse India's existing maritime strategy i.e. 'Ensuring Secure Seas', with specific emphasis on naval capabilities, infrastructure development and strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. Further it will delve into the conceptual framework of the Indo-Pacific, highlighting India's vision and initiatives within its broader context. Finally, it will assess the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for India, providing policy recommendations and identifying areas for future research.

Historical Context and Evolution

From prehistoric times, the Indian Ocean has served as a central arena for maritime commerce and cultural exchange. India's strategic positioning with its expansive coastline has made it a pivotal player in the nautical networks of Indian Ocean. In the pre-colonial era, a thriving maritime route linking civilisations present in Africa, West Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia existed. The coastal cities like Masulipatnam, Calicut, and Surat were important trade hubs, enabling the commerce of goods such as spices, textiles, and gemstones (Ray 2016). The Chola dynasty, which reigned from 9th century to 13th century, was notable for its maritime prowess, undertaking naval expeditions that spread its influence to Southeast Asia. They forged trade links with the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, and Java, facilitating the dissemination of Indian culture and religion (Sastri 2008). During this period, India's supremacy was underscored in regional maritime trade and its capability to exert influence throughout the Indian Ocean.

The arrival of European Colonial powers in the late 15th century ushered a transformative phase in history of Indian Ocean. The Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British competed for control over rich trade routes and vital ports. After taking control of Goa in 1510, the Portuguese became first Europeans to establish a foothold in the region, capturing significant dominance over spice trade (Boxer 1969). However, it was the British who eventually emerged as dominant colonial power in the region. The British East India Company systematically extended its dominion across the Indian subcontinent and the Indian Ocean. By the 19th century, the British effectively established a colonial empire, mainly dependent on maritime supremacy. Indian Ports like Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta became a crucial node in the British imperial network, enabling the flow of resources, troops, and goods between British, India and other colonies (Marshall 1977). India's maritime activities were included into the wider British strategy throughout the colonial period. The Indian shipyards produced vessels exclusively for the British navy, while Indian seafarers and labourers were essential to the maritime workforce. However, the indigenous practices of shipbuilding and trade were weakened because colonial policies favoured British economic interests. The British Royal Navy's dominance in the Indian Ocean guaranteed the safety of trade routes and protection to colonial interests, with India playing a subservient yet an essential role in this maritime order. (Chatterjee 2019). While the pre-colonial period witnessed India as a central hub for trade and cultural exchange, with thriving coastal cities of Surat and Calicut, contributing to a foundational role in regional commerce and politics (Alpers 2021), the colonial era, on the other hand, dominated by British, took advantage of India's strategic location. This led to the development of critical maritime infrastructure and routes in the Indian Ocean (Chatterjee 2019).

The post-independence period, India aimed to reclaim its position in the Indian Ocean and to assert its sovereignty and strategic autonomy, and the Indian navy which came into being in 1950, was envisioned as a contemporary and capable force that could defend the nation's vast coastline and maritime interests. India's first maritime policy was influenced by the principles of coastal defence, protection of trade routes, and maintaining regional peace (Mukherjee 2021). The vision of non-alignment and peaceful coexistence as given by Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru were the guiding steps of India's early maritime policies. The British had invaded India's coastal borders with a strong navy presence and then moved on to the heartland. Hence, Nehru highlighted the importance of a strong navy to safeguard national interests and support India's foreign policy objectives. The commissioning of INS Vikrant, India's first aircraft carrier, in 1961 marked a significant milestone in the modernisation of the Indian Navy (Pant 2019). After gaining independence, India's maritime focused on recovering and enhancing its maritime capacities. This involved the construction of coastal defence which was greatly influenced by the dynamics of the Cold War (Mukherjee 2021).

In the 1960s and 1970s, India's approach towards the Indian Ocean was only to address the emerging security challenges in the neighbouring region. The 1971 India-Pakistan war underlined the importance of naval supremacy, as the navy successfully enforce a blockade on the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). This victory highlighted the navy's role in attaining national security objectives and demonstrated India's growing capabilities in the maritime sphere (Prakash 2010). In the subsequent decades, India prioritised the expansion of its naval infrastructure and improved its operational capabilities. The establishment of naval bases, like Karwar, and procurement of modern vessels and submarines reflected India's commitment to uphold itself as a strong maritime deterrent in the Indian Ocean. India's maritime policy also included initiatives to enhance maritime domain awareness, such as the development of surveillance systems and establishment of Information Management and Analysis Centre (Chellaney 2017).

Further, the Cold War period significantly influenced India's priorities in the IOR. India aimed to adhere to the principle of non-alignment and safeguard its national interests during this period of increased militarisation and strategic competitiveness between the US and the erstwhile USSR (Ganguly 2019). The growing influence of the United States in the IOR (for instance, its base in Diego Garcia) and its partnership with Pakistan was strategic challenge for India and as a result India sought to strengthen its naval capabilities and strategic partnerships to counter any external influence in the IOR (Singh 2020). In order to balance superpower rivalries and maintain stability in the region India pushed the Indian Ocean as a 'Zone of Peace'. It was on 16th December 1971 that thirteen Afro-Asian non-aligned states proposed this declaration at the United Nation General Assembly which called a halt to any further militarisation by major powers in the Indian Ocean and eliminate 'all bases, military installation and logistical supply facilities, the disposition of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction and any manifestation of great power military presence in the Indian Ocean' (UNGA Resolution 2832, 1971). Although the initiative did not garner popular support but it demonstrated India's proactive approach to regional security (Pant 2019). Similarly,

the Indian Ocean Rim Association was established on 7 March 1997 and its vision originated during Nelson Mandela's visit to India in 1995. It sought to promote socio-economic cooperation in IOR (IORA, n.d.) and reflected India's strategic objective for this region (Bhaskar 2016).

This region till date remains vital for India's trade and energy security, with substantial amounts of imports and exports transiting through the ocean (UNCTAD 2020). Additionally, India's adoption of Indo-Pacific has strengthened its regional and global influence especially since it aligns with India's vision of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific (Scott 2018). India's efforts to push for bilateral and multilateral initiatives have led to facilitating of joint naval exercises such as JIMEX, RIMPAC, MALABAR, MILAN, SHAKTI, capacity building in terms of operability and sharing of intelligence, leading India to significantly improve its maritime capabilities (MEA 2021). A few instances of it are India navy carrying out coordinated patrols, presenting hydrographic maps to partner countries to manage and explore marine resources, sharing logistics and setting up coastal radar installation for enhancing domain awareness (Kumar 2019).

The Indo-Pacific faces a multifaceted array of challenges, particularly with the assertive rise of China vis-à-vis the development of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, its 'debt trap diplomacy' and its renewed tensions with Taiwan. However, the Indo-Pacific present numerous opportunities to enhance regional connectivity, engage in blue economy initiatives and prioritise the sustainable use of ocean resources

Indo-Pacific Framework

The Indo-Pacific concept has emerged as a significant geopolitical framework underlining the interconnectedness of the Indian and Pacific oceans, spanning from Eastern Africa to the western Americas. This concept reflects a deliberate change from traditional Asia-Pacific towards a more inclusive and regional construct encompassing vast maritime regions (Scott 2018). The framework emphasises free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific which is based on the principles of rules-based international order, freedom of navigation and overflight, and ensuring peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international law, the United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea (UNCLOS) (Watanabe 2019). The Indo-Pacific extends beyond geographical boundaries and incorporates strategic, economic and security dimensions. It is a crucial region for global trade and investment as it is home to some of the world's largest and fastest growing economies and major trade routes. It aims to address evolving power dynamics and rise of new regional players and involves collaborative efforts among countries to combat piracy, terrorism, and other trans-national threats (Chaturvedy 2020).

Initiatives such as BRI of China and Asia-Africa growth corridor (AAGC) by India and Japan indicate the strategic competition in building infrastructure and economic integration within the region. Additionally, environmental and sustainability concerns are also integral to the Indo-Pacific agenda (Panda 2018). It involves several key players with distinct strategic interests that influence the dynamics of the region. For instance, the US, China, India, Japan, and Australia are among the most prominent actors who are pursuing their national interests in the region. The United States promotes the Indo-Pacific as a countermeasure to China's influence, stressing on freedom of navigation, open markets, and robust security partnerships with its allies (US Department of State 2019). On the other hand, China aims to expand its economic and strategic footprint through BRI and financial investments. Despite the concerns over its assertive actions and military presence in the South China Sea, China engages in infrastructure projects to enhance the connectivity in the region (Cheng 2019). Japan's advocacy of a 'FOIP' is consistent with its strategic apprehensions about China's ascent and economic dependence on maritime trade routes. Japan has formed alliances with the US, India, and ASEAN countries to maintain a rules-based order (Watanabe 2019). Australia's strategy underlines regional security cooperation, economic engagement, and development aligning closely to Japan and the US (Medcalf 2020).

'India's Indo-Pacific Vision' was laid in Prime Minister Modi's Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue held in Singapore in 2018 wherein he iterated that Indo-Pacific was a 'natural region' which was home to multifarious opportunities and vast potential. He added that India's understanding of the Indo-Pacific was positive which was based on the principles of inclusiveness, 'openness and ASEAN centrality and unity' (PIB 2018). India's vision aligns with its foreign policy objectives of strategic autonomy, regional leadership, and a rules-based international order (Mukherjee 2021). One of the major initiatives which encapsulates the vision is SAGAR, emphasising sustainably growing economies, regional collaborations and security throughout the region (MEA 2017). India's understanding

of Indo-Pacific also underlines the significance of multilateralism, through active engagements in regional forums such as ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and IORA. These platforms promote dialogue, cooperation and collective action on the Indo-Pacific vision, hence, reinforcing India's commitment (Pant 2019). The Indian Navy's "Ensuring secure Seas: India's Maritime Security" document highlights the necessity of robust and competent navy, as it would help to guarantee unhindered movement of ships and ensures security (Indian Navy 2015). In similar patterns the Indo-Pacific framework is reflected in India's strategic partnerships and diplomatic visits. For instance, Quadrilateral Dialogue (Quad) is a significant manifestation of its Indo-Pacific strategy. The Quad serves as a platform for strategic dialogue and cooperation, the joint statements from Quad meetings reaffirm the commitment of member countries towards the Indo-Pacific, aligning it to India's vision of the strategic region (Quad Joint Statement 2021). In the recent Quad Foreign Ministers meeting 2024, the member countries expressed their concern over Russia-Ukraine conflict, North Korea's ballistic missile launches, humanitarian situation in the Rakhine state of Myanmar, Israel-Hamas conflict in addition to 'open, secure, stable, accessible and peaceful cyberspace', humanitarian assistance and contribution to space-related efforts (MEA, India 2024). India's engagement with ASEAN is another cornerstone of its Indo-Pacific strategy, with Act East policy, the aim is to strengthen economic, cultural, and strategic ties with Southeast Asian nations (MEA 2017).

India in the Indo-Pacific

India's geopolitical strategy is substantially dependent on its partnerships and strategic alliances in the Indo-Pacific region, which plays a significant role in expanding its influence. India's Indo-Pacific Strategy is centred on the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which is a group comprising Australia, Japan, India, and the US. The Quad strives to uphold a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific that adheres to the principles of international laws, freedom of navigation, and security of sea lanes of communication (Scott 2018).

India's Indo-Pacific strategy also hinges on its strategic partnership with the US which is further strengthened by agreements such as LEMOA (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement), COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement), and BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement) which facilitate closer military collaborations and access to cutting-edge technologies (Ganguly 2019). Another important partner for is Japan and both nations have participated in a number of bilateral and multi-lateral projects. One of the recent examples is that of Joint Military Exercise 'DHARMA GUARDIAN' conducted from 25th February to 9th March 2024 (MoD 2024a). Moreover, both nations recently signed an agreement on the exchange of notes for a JICA loan of 300bn for the Mumbai-Ahmedabad high-speed railway project (Kumar 2023). Additionally, India also engages in strategic partnerships with Australia, particularly through Quad which is evident through joint exercises such as AUSTRAHIND, launched in 2022, which aims to promote interoperability while undertaking multi-domain operations in urban and semi-urban terrain on peacekeeping operations (Singh 2023). Another instance of this strategic partnership is the Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (MLSA), signed in 2020, which allows reciprocal access to military bases in both nations. In fact, Australia recently launched its national defence strategy which termed India as its 'top-tier security partner' and stated that tangible cooperation between both nations contributes to maintaining the stability of the Indo-Pacific (Laskar 2024).

One of the core principles of India's Indo-Pacific policy is 'ASEAN centrality' and therefore, it engages in strategic partnership with ASEAN nations as well. India has boosted its economic, cultural, and strategic ties with SE Asian countries primarily with its 'Look East' and 'Act East' policies. India's continuous participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asia Summit augments India's influence in the Indo-Pacific as it offers avenues for communication and cooperation on matters of regional security. In September 2023, PM Modi participated in the 20th ASEAN-India Summit and 18th East Asia Summit wherein he presented a 12-point proposal for strengthening India-ASEAN ties which vary from establishing a multi-modal corridor that connects South-East Asia-India-West Asia-Europe to an ASEAN-India fund for Digital Future (MEA 2023). All these initiatives demonstrate India's forthcoming strategy wherein on one hand it aims for a stable Indo-Pacific which is based on a rules-based order and it intends to position itself as a regional power with substantial influence.

Maritime Strategy and Naval Capabilities

The maritime strategy of India is based on free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific wherein the main goal is to ensure security of sea lines of communication to protect India's national interests. For this, India has been modernising its navy and a recent instance of it is the commissioning of INS Vikrant in 2022. It is the 'largest ship built in the maritime

history of India' and the first indigenous aircraft carrier (PIB India, 2022). Another major milestone is the commissioning of INS Vagir under Indian Navy's Project 75. It is the fifth stealth Scorpene class Submarine with 'long range guided torpedoes', 'anti-ship missiles', and 'state of art SONAR' (MoD 2023). Additionally, India also engages in maritime exercise to strengthen regional security and promote maritime governance. For instance, the JIMEX 2024 showcased their skills at both harbour and sea in order to enhance their interoperability in the 'surface, sub-surface and air domains' ("Japan India Maritime Exercise" 2024). Raksha Mantri, Shri Rajnath Singh at the opening ceremony of the 12th edition of the MILAN Exercises in 2024 put forth India's resolve to the 'First Responder and the Preferred Security Partner in the Indian Ocean Region'. In addition to this he reiterated that India's understanding of peace does not merely mean absence of conflict but rather incorporated 'security, justice and cooperation' (MoD 2024).

Furthermore, Indian Navy's modernisation efforts also include converting the warships' propulsion systems from steam to diesel and the conversion for INS Beas which is a Brahmaputra-class frigate began in April 2024 and is expected to take approximately two years to complete (Dutta 2024). Another initiative is the commissioning of the first squadron of the newly inducted MH-60R Seahawk, an anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare platform. This is yet another step towards modernisation especially in light of China's aggressive assertions in the Indian Ocean Region ("MH 60R SEAHAWKS" 2024). In addition to this, the Ministry of Defence recently signed a Rs. 2890 crore contract with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited for the midlife upgrade of the Dornier patrol aircraft of the Indian Navy which would enhance the operational capability of the Indian Navy by incorporating maritime surveillance, electronic intelligence, development of maritime domain awareness along with secondary roles of 'search and rescue, casualty evacuation and communication thinking' ("MoD signs 2890" 2024). With such efforts, India continues to play a fundamental role in shaping the maritime landscape of the Indo-Pacific through forming strategic partnerships and actively engaging in multilateral forms. India's consistent commitment to enhancing its naval capacity underscores its efforts to free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific.

India's Air Power in the Region: Management and Strategic Evolution

The increasing militarisation in the Indian Ocean region and China's rising assertiveness have pushed India to boost its aerial dominance in the region and evolve to a power that can rapidly respond to emerging threats. In IOR, India's air power projection has been defensive and reactive, with emphasis on coastal surveillance and protection of maritime boundaries. India relied heavily on aerial patrols and ground-based defences because of lack of blue water strategy for the Indian Ocean Region. It was in the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War that importance of sustained aerial presence over maritime routes was emphasised as it helped India to secure the Bay of Bengal and deter any external interference from US Seventh fleet (Kesnur et al., 2021). Furthermore, with the gradual increase in the presence of extra-regional powers such as China and the US in 1980s and 1990s, India focused on upgrading its airborne surveillance capabilities with the induction of I-38 and Tu-142 which helped India monitor enemy movements and track surface vessels and submarines in Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal (Pandey, n.a.). India's air power projection went further with the acquisition of aircraft carriers such as INS Viraat and INS Vikrant. (Pandey, n.a. (a))

The twenty-first century marked a shift in global landscape specifically in the IOR with the increasing naval presence of China's People's Liberation Army Navy, to which India responded with operationalising air field in Car Nicobar, Campbell Bay and Agatti in Lakshadweep (Lok Sabha 2023). Additionally, India also worked on modernising its maritime air power by integrating cutting-edge aerial platform. For instance, the induction of P-8I Poseidon provided India with the ability to deter any hostile incursions in the IOR (Mahajan, 2024). Similarly, MiG-29K aboard INS Vikramaditya ensures Indian Navy's ability to conduct carrier-based operations. The development and induction of INS Vikrant, India's second indigenous aircraft carrier in 2022 expands India's ability to conduct blue-water operations (Peri 2024). India is also trying to acquire HALE drones such as Sea Guardian from the US to monitor and secure strategic sea lanes ("MQ-9B drones will provide", 2024).

Another significant factor in India's Air power modernisation is not just technological transformation rather its evolving management strategies in response to the emerging threats in the IOR. The adoption of efficacious management strategies such as cross-functional collaboration and agile frameworks affect India's role in the IOR positively. Historically, the Indian Air Force relied heavily on foreign imports which were characterised by Soviet-designed platforms such as MiG-21, MiG-27 and Su-30MKI during the Cold War period (Salerno-Garthwaite, 2023). This led India to be dependent on external suppliers but with an effort to create a robust indigenous defence manufacturing ecosystem under its *Atmanirbhar* Initiative, India is working on tackling these limitations. For

instance, acquisition of advance weaponry such as Rafale jets, five S-400 missile squadrons (Arif, 2021); a push for indigenous development such as LCA Tejas and commissioning of INS Arihant strengthen India's deterrence. In fact, digital transformation has also shaped India's air power management as integration of AI and real time analytics reduce downtime, anticipate mechanical failures and result in operational readiness.

Furthermore, public-private partnership (PPP) also helps bridge the gap between bureaucratic constraints and commercial efficiency as this collaboration has led to innovative project management. In the near future, India Air Power management should likely focus on AI-driven warfare, UAVs and swarm drone technology in addition to the decentralised decision-making structures in order to enhance operational effectiveness. It is pertinent to realise that the security landscape in Indian Ocean Region is rapidly evolving and its role as a responsible maritime power will depend on its ability to leverage air power as a strategic tool.

Economic and Developmental Initiatives

India's regional strategy is significantly influenced by its developmental initiatives such as SAGAR initiative which prioritised a collaborative approach to foster sustainable economic growth and enhancing maritime connectivity. The Sagarmala programme was primarily aimed at modernising ports, facilitating connectivity, coastal community development and it comprises around 839 projects which would require the projected investment of approximately Rs. 5.8 lakh crore. These projects are being implemented using array of financing mechanisms such as grants in assistance and public-private partnerships. India has implemented numerous initiatives under SAGAR, the details of which are in the following table.

Pillar	Completed		Under Implementation		Under Development		Total	
	No. of Projects	Project Cost (Rs.Cr.)	No. of Projects	Project Cost (Rs.Cr.)	No. of Projects	Project Cost (Rs.Cr.)	No. of Projects	Project Cost (Rs.Cr.)
Port Modernization	98	32,066	62	75,650	74	1,82,652	234	2,91,622
Port Connectivity	91	57,997	57	68,010	131	80,366	279	2,06,363
Port Led Industrialization	9	45,865	3	9,247	2	775	14	55,887
Coastal Community Development	21	1,559	32	6,166	28	3,847	81	11,573
Coastal Shipping and IWT	43	2,956	63	4,665	125	6,980	231	14,601
Total	262	1,40,443	217	1,63,738	360	2,74,620	839	5,79,562

Source – Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways. Government of India.

The Sagarmala programme has already achieved substantial progress, wherein a total of 262 projects have been completed under the five pillars of the project which costed approximately Rs. 1.4 lakh crore. Overall, Sagarmala is a comprehensive and ambitious initiative aimed at enhancing India's maritime capabilities and infrastructure by driving economic growth along India's coastline. Although India opted out of regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership in 2019 owing to apprehensions over adverse effects it would have over local sectors, India still maintains its commitment to trade with RCEP countries on bilateral and multilateral levels. In December 2022, the India-Australia Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement came into force which sought to remove tariffs on substantial amount of traded goods to enhance trade between nations (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia 2022). Additionally, India-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (MoFA Japan 2023) which was signed in 2023 and India-ASEAN Trade and Investment Work Plan 2021-2025 (ASEAN 2023) further highlight India's proactive and efforts to safeguard its economic interests.

Another such developmental initiative is the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) which was launched in 2021 by India, Japan and Australia to enhance the resilience of supply chains, especially in the Indo-Pacific region in light of Covid-19 pandemic and apprehensions over dependence on China. This primary goal to expand supply chains options were to provide resources to infrastructure development and improve digital trade facilitations. It is through initiatives such as India-Japan Industrial Competitiveness Partnership (IJICP) in 2023 and the Australia-India Critical Minerals Investment Partnership (CIP), launched in 2022 that India can ensure the stability of its supply chains and posit itself as a significant player in the Indo-Pacific.

Furthermore, Humanitarian assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Efforts are the foundation of India's strategic soft power in the Indo-Pacific cemented on the principle of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' which means 'world in one family'. These efforts include disaster prevention, providing amenities, and airlift and sealift operations during natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, storms etc. In 2023, India emerged as a leader in HADR through numerous operations such as the Operation Dost in Türkiye earthquake (2023), Operation Karuna in Cyclone Sitrang (2023) in Myanmar, Operation Kaveri after the overthrow of the Sudanese government in 2021 and continued humanitarian assistance in the form of shipment of food items and medicines in Afghanistan and Ukraine (Times of India 2024). Therefore, India's HADR efforts respond swiftly to natural disasters and address conflict zones as well.

India's continued focus on infrastructure development through programs such as Project Seabird and capacity building along with disaster response has bolstered India's role in the IOR. India has now emerged as the 'the first responder and preferred security partner' in the region ("Raksha Mantri Shree Rajnath Singh" 2024). In addition to this, India's active participation in the multilateral forums like the Quad, IORA and ARF has positioned it as a significant HADR contributor in the region. A recent instance is that of Exercise Tiger Triumph 2024 which was a bilateral tri-service HADR Amphibious Exercise between India and the US ("Ex Tiger Triumph" 2024). India's contribution to HADR efforts in the Indo-Pacific and the world in general has improved its disposition in the Indo-Pacific and the global stage. It has enhanced its influence and promoted it as a reliable partner in times of crisis. It has helped India to use HADR efforts as its soft power through operations such as vaccine Maitri and above all it has enhanced regional stability and reaffirmed India's commitment to a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific.

Challenges and Opportunities

India's position in the Indo-Pacific is characterised by complex geopolitical dynamics especially with respect to the meteoric rise of China in the form of its increased military presence in the region and establishment of military bases such as the Djibouti. This assertiveness poses a crucial challenge to India's strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific (Cheng 2019). Additionally, China's increasing strategic foothold in the Indo-Pacific is characterised by its aggressive territorial claims in the South China Sea, its expansion through initiatives such as Belt and Road Initiative and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. China's increased presence in India's immediate neighbourhood in the form of 'String of Pearls' undermines India's influence but most importantly the presence of US in the Indo-Pacific and its rivalry with China pushes India to maintain a balance between forming strategic partnerships with the US and simultaneously protecting its strategic autonomy in the region.

Another challenge for India is to ensure maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region, however, India is faced with piracy and terrorism, especially in the Mozambique Channel and Bab el Mandab that require comprehensive maritime security measures and international cooperation. Furthermore, India's security initiatives are also complicated by non-traditional threats such as illegal fishing, human trafficking, and environmental degradation in the form of oil spills and marine pollution. Substantial challenge is also presented by economic and trade barriers in the region. India's trade imbalance with China exacerbates its economic vulnerabilities. In 2023, the bilateral trade between India and China reached \$136.2 billion but despite the immense trade volume, the trade deficit exceeded \$99 billion ("India's growing trade" 2024). Therefore, it is high time that India emphasises strategic measures to address this deficit by focusing on trade diversification and sustainable economic growth.

It is also important to understand that India's capability to traverse the intricate geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific also depends on its internal and external impediments. Its foreign policy effectiveness is significantly influenced by domestic political stability and economic robustness. India's political structure is such that it sometimes might lead to policy fragmentation or delays since the decision-making processes in India are impeded by the necessity for consensus among diverse political actors and are impacted by shifts in government priorities (Mitra, 2017). Simultaneously, the strategic capabilities of India are also influenced by its growth trajectory and resource allocation. While it is true that India has become one of the fastest-growing economies it still has to deal with resource constraints, income inequality, poverty, etc. Although India's defence budget has steadily increased over the years from Rs 4.71 lakh crore in 2020 to Rs. 6.21 lakh crore in 2024 (Sagar 2024) it struggles in healthcare and infrastructure. Therefore, for India to maintain its strategic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region efficient resource management is essential.

Furthermore, India's strategic environment is influenced by conflicts in its immediate neighbourhood. Recently there has been a significant shift in the insurgency and infiltration activities from the Kashmir region to the

Jammu region of J&K. Such instances of terror require significant military and security investment in the form of intensified military deployments. India's resources are being strained by security concerns such as the skirmishes on the Indo-Chinese border. India's relations with China are a blend of competition and cooperation. While persistent border disputes and standoffs call for robust defence preparedness, on the other hand, the economic interdependence with China necessitates meticulous balancing to efficaciously manage both (Cheng, 2019). Thus, to establish itself as a regional power, India must balance its domestic security priorities and its regional aspirations. Lastly, India's dependence on oil exports for its energy requirements makes it susceptible to disruptions caused by regional conflicts in West Asia. India's strategic calculus in the Indo-Pacific is predicated on the security of maritime routes. In order to tackle such challenges and ensure an uninterrupted supply of energy, India should work on enhancing its naval capabilities and work on its diplomatic endeavours.

Despite the challenges, the Indo-Pacific framework offers India a various opportunities and positions India to expand its influence and ensure its economic growth as well. First, is to strengthen regional partnerships such as Quad to coordinate on disaster response, regional security by facilitating joint exercises and intelligence sharing. India can also address shared security challenges by prioritising capacity building initiatives such as technology transfers etc. Second, India's developing nations with ASEAN nations since the implementation of Act East Policy could boost cultural exchanges, trade, and investment within the two regions. India's prospects in the Indo-Pacific are also predicated on its ability to adjust to changes in the strategic landscape which can be worked upon by bolstering naval capabilities and enhancing maritime domain awareness. It is crucial to integrate and incorporate cutting-edge technologies such as unmanned systems to strengthen India's operational readiness and strategic deterrence.

Conclusion

This paper elucidates India's strategic evolution in the Indo-Pacific from the Cholas until the twenty-first century and the Indian Ocean Region has served as a crucial conduit for exchange of culture and trade. During the colonial period, the British constructed significant infrastructure to further its own interests and soon after independence, India prioritised the revival of maritime legacy and asserted its strategic autonomy wherein the Indian Navy served as a critical instrument. While India has always considered the Indian Ocean Region as its primary area of interest, a shift towards the Indo-Pacific framework has been seen in recent years. India's strategic outlook corresponds to the concept of the Indo-Pacific framework which emphasises a maritime order which is 'free, open and inclusive' and bases on the rule of law. Even countries like the US, Japan, Australia and ASEAN nations align with India's vision of regional stability. Initiatives such as SAGAR and highlight India's commitment to enhancing regional connectivity. Strategic alliances such as Quad have bolstered India's role in the Indo-Pacific.

In order to further solidify India's influence in the Indo-Pacific, India should implement the subsequent strategies. First, is to improve maritime domain awareness by investing in sophisticated surveillance and intelligence capabilities. India should collaborate with its key partners on technologies such as artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities and unmanned systems. Second, is to strengthen its naval capabilities as it will improve India's power projection and induction of surface combatants and submarines would work as a credible maritime deterrent. Third, is to deepen strategic partnerships with like-minded countries and promote regional connectivity as this would help India position itself as a counter to Chinese assertiveness in the region. Fourth, India should also focus on countering piracy, terrorism and trafficking. Lastly, modern management strategies should be the focus of India's air power modernisation and its growing strategic influence in the Indo-Pacific.

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