



Strategic Security Analysis

India's Strategic Intent and Military Partnerships in the Indian Ocean Region

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Key points

- Due to the importance India attaches to potential threats to its maritime security, its diplomacy has increasingly focused on the Indian Ocean region (IOR) and it has increased cooperation with Indian Ocean states.
- In the last five years India has also established security partnerships with major IOR strategic stakeholders such as France and the United States.
- India has increasingly invested in providing military training, weapons support and disaster relief assistance to “like-minded” states in the IOR.
- Due to the potential risks of escalation to nuclear-weapons use should conflict occur with other countries in the region such as China and Pakistan, it would be in India's interests to promote more confidence- and security-building measures such as missile test-launch notifications and agreements to prevent incidents at sea.

About the authors

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There has been a year-on-year increase in the number of Chinese vessels observed in the IOR.

Introduction

India has been developing its maritime strategy in the IOR¹ and is building alliances with “like-minded” IOR nation states as part of that process. A statement made by the Indian minister of state for defence, Shripad Naik, to the upper house of the Parliament summarises the country’s approach to the region:

The [Indian] government pursues cooperation initiatives with friendly foreign countries, including in [the] Indian Ocean Region, through structured interactions like Staff Talks [and] Empowered Steering Group[s]. The areas of cooperation include capacity building, marine domain awareness, training, hydrography, technical assistance, [and] operational exercise[s].²

India’s military approach to the Indian Ocean has increasingly extended into the realms of strengthening diplomatic and defence ties and holding naval exercises with relevant stakeholders, including strengthening its surveillance capabilities. These developments are aimed at responding to the growing Chinese military presence in the IOR since 2008, particularly the fully operational Chinese base in Djibouti and Chinese naval expansion in the region. There has been a year-on-year increase in the number of Chinese vessels observed in the IOR. According to the head of the Indian Navy, Admiral Karambir Singh, “at any point in time there are three to four Chinese research vessels conducting operations such as oceanographic deep-sea mining and a total of about eight Chinese ships including anti-piracy escort vessels in the Indian Ocean”.³ These ships – including non-military vessels – could be capable of undertaking covert surveillance activities.

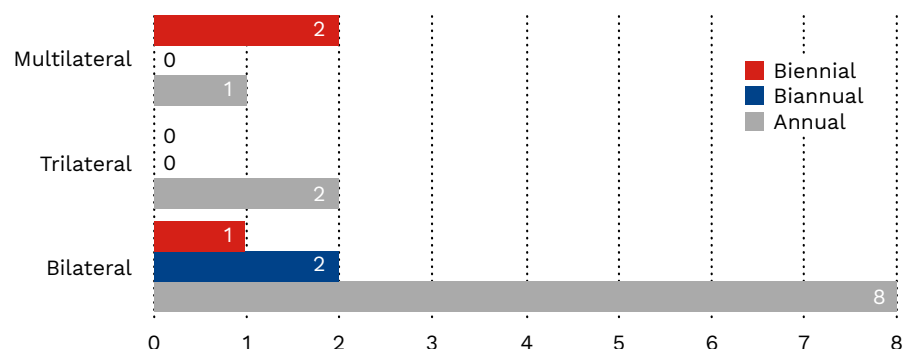
The evolution of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium showcases the country's strategic intent in the region.

India's strategic intent in the IOR

India has made the IOR one of its strategic priorities and is building carefully targeted military partnerships with Indian Ocean states such as the so-called Vanilla Islands nations (Seychelles, Madagascar, Reunion, Mauritius, Comoros and Mayotte), and with important IOR strategic military stakeholders such as France and the United States. In 2015 India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, issued the "Security and Growth for All" framework as a commitment to maintaining freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific zone and an extension of the Indian government's "Act East Policy". The evolution of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) – an inclusive and voluntary initiative of 24 member and eight observer nations in the IOR founded by India in 2008 – showcases the country's strategic intent in the region, and, with its pillars of maritime cooperation and enhanced regional security focus, reflects India's ambition to proactively engage with and lead the geopolitical forces at play in the IOR. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), an inter-governmental organisation with 22 member states and nine dialogue partners established in 1997, advocates maritime security cooperation as a top priority of its agenda. The establishment of the IORA Maritime Safety and Security (MSS) Working Group in 2018 and the development of an MSS Work Plan based on a blueprint drawn up by India serve as indicators of the country's strategic intent to drive the safety and security of the IOR and influence IORA member states to support its maritime security agenda.⁴

The Indian Navy's maritime security strategy document first published in 2007 was entitled "Freedom to Use the Seas".⁵ This was revised to "Ensuring Secure Seas" in 2016,⁶ when the 2007 document was updated to incorporate the rise in the types and intensity of threats from both traditional and non-traditional sources and to serve India's national interests in terms of the country's freedom to use the seas.⁷ This shift in security strategy and the emphasis on India's national interests derive from an underlying fear about the growing risks associated with the increase in outside actors in the Indian Ocean – currently mainly China – and thus more concretely pursue India's maritime security interests in the IOR. The Indian Navy currently participates in a total of 15 naval military exercises (bilateral, trilateral and multilateral) with partner countries in the Indo-Pacific Region. Once every five years the president of India also conducts an "International Fleet Review" to which the navies of like-minded nation states are invited.⁸ Currently India has no bilateral or trilateral cooperation arrangements with the Pakistani and Chinese navies, but has strategic partnerships with international military actors operating in the Indian Ocean such as France and the United States.

Figure 1: Indian naval exercises, 2017-2018



Source: Compiled by the authors from various sources

The proclaimed aim of the IFC-IOR is “to secure the global commons for a peaceful, stable and prosperous region towards the well-being of all”.

India launched the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in December 2018 to boost regional maritime awareness, create a common operating procedure for processing radar and sensor data collected by participating countries, and facilitate the dissemination of such data to partners and IORA members. The proclaimed aim of the IFC-IOR is “to secure the global commons for a peaceful, stable and prosperous region towards the well-being of all”.⁹ The IFC-IOR will undertake exercises and training in the collection and sharing of maritime information. In addition, India is developing 32 coastal surveillance radar stations in Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Seychelles and Maldives, all of which will feed data to the IFC-IOR. Under Phase I of this process, six of these radar stations have been set up in Sri Lanka, eight in Mauritius, one in Seychelles and three in Maldives. Work on Phase II started in Maldives in April 2018.¹⁰ These radar stations, each with a range of 50 km, are capable of operating 24 hours a day in all weather conditions.¹¹ India is also developing two strategic island assets as part of its maritime security strategy: one in Seychelles (the island of Assumption) and another in Mauritius (Agalega). These initiatives reflect India’s keen desire to extend its military influence and presence in the western and southern IOR.

India-France Indian Ocean strategic partnership

India and France became strategic partners in 1998, but in recent years maritime security cooperation between the two countries has become the main focus of this partnership. They established a “Maritime Dialogue” in 2015 and are advancing cooperation in hydrography and marine cartography¹² as part of concrete steps to firm up their strategic partnership in the western Indian Ocean. India and France have also signed an agreement on the provision of reciprocal logistics support that will enhance cooperation between their armed forces, including the two navies, and includes annual naval warfare exercises and joint training activities to combat maritime terrorism. The two countries have formalised the development and launch of ten low-earth-orbit satellites that will continuously provide maritime surveillance and enhance maritime security, and they will jointly operate the satellites to monitor ships in the Indian Ocean. This will constitute the first space-based system in the world capable of tracking ships continuously.

In 2020 France appointed a liaison officer at the IFC-IOR. France and India intend to coordinate their activities through the IORA and, together with interested states, undertake a joint project to reinforce assets designed to combat piracy and all kinds of illegal maritime trafficking in the southern Indian Ocean. France has also expressed its intention to work in concert with India at the IONS, over which it will preside from 2020 to 2022.¹³

India is collaborating with the French Indian Ocean department of Reunion Island to develop the island’s economy, tourism, research and defence capacity, and security. India also signed the White Shipping Agreement with France in 2017 and is keen to focus on an overarching developmental model comprising port development, the blue-water economy, trade, connectivity, tourism, skills development and the hospitality industry in the resource-rich western IOR.¹⁴

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India's military engagement with Indian Ocean littoral states: Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Seychelles and Maldives

In the last five years India has been upgrading its military engagement with Indian Ocean littoral states across the whole spectrum of the IOR's maritime security architecture.

The Indian naval partnership with **Sri Lanka** is significant. In terms of the 2015 Sri Lanka offshore patrol vessel (OPV) contract for two OPVs, India delivered the second OPV to the Sri Lankan Navy in March 2018,¹⁵ while in August 2015 it donated the former Indian Coast Guard ship *Virah* to Sri Lanka. And during the visit of Indian national security advisor Ajit Doval to Sri Lanka in January 2020, India pledged a US\$50 million security assistance package to Sri Lanka to help it purchase equipment for its security forces.¹⁶

India and **Maldives** had a difficult diplomatic relationship during the regime of President Abdulla Yameen (2013–2018), when Maldives started moving closer to China. But relations have normalised after President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih took office in November 2018, and now India is promoting several measures to improve defence cooperation with Maldives. Most important is the agreement on the leasing of a Dornier aircraft that Maldives will use for maritime surveillance; this agreement is in its final stages. In December 2019 India handed over a fast interceptor craft to the Maldivian Coast Guard,¹⁷ while in 2013 it gave two advanced light helicopters to Maldives for medical search and air-sea rescue operations. India is working with Maldives to set up coastal radar stations (see above), with two stations already functional and a third to be linked to the IFC-IOR in early 2020.

India had donated two patrol vessels to **Seychelles**: the *Tarmugli* in 2006 and the *Tarasa* in 2014. During Prime Minister Modi's visit to Seychelles in 2015, India handed over a second Dornier maritime patrol aircraft and delivered a 1,300-tonne patrol vessel, the *Barracuda*, as part of joint India-Seychelles efforts to advance maritime security in the region. India has access to six coastal surveillance radar systems across Seychelles and is helping to upgrade port infrastructure on Assumption Island as part of a US\$500 million agreement. India wishes to use the island as one of its forward Indian Ocean military bases, but the deal has faced opposition in Seychelles and its implementation is far from certain.

India's defence cooperation with **Mauritius** includes training Mauritian police personnel, establishing coastal surveillance systems, patrolling the Mauritian exclusive economic zone, deterring piracy, carrying out hydrographic surveys, and preventing illegal fishing in the area. In 2018 it was confirmed that India would construct military facilities on the Mauritian archipelago of Agalega, consisting of an extended airfield runway and new port facilities.¹⁸ In August 2017 India supplied a second water-jet fast patrol vessel to Mauritius, which was built under the supervision of the Indian Navy.¹⁹ In March 2015 India delivered the first warship it had ever exported: an OPV to Mauritius, built at a total cost of US\$58.5 million, for which India extended a loan of US\$48.5 million.²⁰ In March 2016 India handed over ten fast interceptor boats to the Mauritian National Coast Guard at a total cost of US\$6 million. India has access to eight coastal surveillance radar systems across Mauritius that feed data to the IFC-IOR.

In January 2020, India pledged a US\$50 million security assistance package to Sri Lanka to help it purchase equipment for its security forces.

India's partnership with Comoros, Madagascar and the United States (Diego Garcia)

India and **Comoros** are enhancing their maritime defence ties as part of a cooperative security architecture in the Indian Ocean. India will donate US\$2 million to Comoros for the procurement of high-speed interceptor boats.²¹

India's first foreign listening post was set up in northern **Madagascar** in 2007 to track shipping movements in the Indian Ocean and listen in on maritime communications. India has recently appointed a defence attaché to its embassy in Madagascar and signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the country to establish a framework to strengthen the existing bilateral relationship through the promotion of cooperative defence activities. The MoU is aimed at building Madagascar's defence capacity and training Malagasy defence personnel. In October 2019 four Indian naval ships visited the northern port city of Antsiranana (also known as Diego Suarez), and India used the visit to hold discussions with Madagascar on further intensifying defence cooperation between the two countries. In December 2019 an Indian Coast Guard ship, the *Vikram*, also paid a goodwill visit to Madagascar.

India signed a logistics exchange memorandum of agreement with the **United States** in August 2016,²² which facilitates each country's access to the other's military facilities for refuelling and replenishment purposes. The agreement is expected to include the US naval base at Diego Garcia, although no Indian vessels have so far made use of the facility. In addition, the United States also has a drone operations facility on the island of Victoria in Seychelles.

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India's recent IOR-focused strategic developments

In November 2018 India launched a high-throughput communication satellite, the GSAT-29, that was said to carry a unique high-resolution camera capable of tracking “enemy ships” in the Indian Ocean. This camera is referred to as Geo-Eye, and is expected to support strategic surveillance. The Indian Air Force is also in the process of commissioning a squadron of Sukhoi-30MKI fighter jets especially modified to carry the 2.5 tonne air-launched supersonic BrahMos cruise missile. This squadron will primarily be tasked with a maritime strike and surveillance role in the IOR involving keeping a “strategic eye” on the region and carrying out “long-range precision strikes” against hostile targets in all-weather conditions.

In February 2018 India and **Oman** reached an agreement in terms of which Oman would provide the Indian Navy with logistical support at the port of Duqm.²³ The agreement significantly enhances the ability of the Indian Navy to operate in the western Indian Ocean.

The Indian Navy is operating the Poseidon-8I long-range maritime patrol aircraft to monitor traffic in Indian Ocean sea lanes, as well as movements of submarines and warships in the IOR. The navy has been testing its nuclear-capable K-4 submarine-launched ballistic missile with a strike range of 3,500 km, which will equip India's nuclear-powered submarines. The navy is currently operating two new Scorpene and 13 older conventional submarines, together with one nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (INS *Arihant*) and one nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN) (INS *Chakra*). Four more Scorpene submarines will be delivered by 2021-2022, and India is to receive a second SSN on a ten-year lease from Russia under a US\$3 billion deal.²⁴ India's Cabinet Committee on Security also approved the procurement of 24 MH-60R Seahawk multirole helicopters from the United States for the Indian Navy at a cost of US\$2.4 billion, just ahead of President Trump's February 2020 visit to India.²⁵

In January 2020 the Indian Defence Ministry gave the green light to two Indian companies to construct six new stealth submarines in partnership with five foreign submarine builders. The project, called P75I, will build the six new submarines in India. The Indian Navy intends to use the submarines for missions such as area surveillance, intelligence gathering, anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface-ship warfare and mine-laying operations.²⁶ India is also in the final stages of floating a request for proposal to build 111 naval utility helicopters. This is one of the Indian Navy's priority projects to acquire helicopters to undertake search and rescue missions, casualty evacuation missions, low-intensity maritime operations and anti-shiping torpedo attacks.

India is also investing in the building of a deep-water port at Sittwe in **Myanmar**, and discussions are at an advanced stage to set up a coastal surveillance radar station in that country.

Finally, India is partnering with **Japan** to develop a deep-water port in Sri Lanka: the three countries will be jointly building the East Container Terminal for the port of Colombo.²⁷ India and Japan have an established maritime affairs dialogue and unveiled the Indo-Pacific Oceans initiative in November 2019. The shelving of a possible contract with China to build the Matarbari deep-water port for **Bangladesh** and the latter's decision to give the contract to Japan is indicative of the effect of India's influential diplomacy and Bangladesh's support for India and Indo-Japanese good relations.²⁸

Acquiring 111 Naval Utility Helicopters is one of the Indian Navy's priority projects to undertake search and rescue missions, casualty evacuation missions, low-intensity maritime operations and anti-shiping torpedo attacks.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

India's multipronged military engagement with nation states in the Indian Ocean reflects its desire to be the dominant force in the IOR and strengthen the region's maritime security architecture. India is currently extending its naval capabilities by forming military alliances, but may be exceeding its capacity in this regard. Currently, the Indian Navy is in an expansionist phase, but would require a decade more and considerable additional expenditure for it to operate at its optimal fleet capacity. Its current submarine requirements are for 18 diesel-electric submarines, six nuclear-powered attack submarines and four nuclear-powered submarines armed with nuclear-tipped missiles, but its operational capacities are not even half that. In addition, India cannot compete with Chinese naval expansion: in 2020 the People's Liberation Army Navy will have 73 attack submarines, 30 modern guided-missile destroyers, and a mix of 92 frigates and corvettes,²⁹ and in December 2019 commissioned its first indigenously built aircraft carrier, the *Shandong* (Type 002). The Indian Navy has a quarter of this capacity, operating one aircraft carrier, 17 attack submarines, and 32 frigates and corvettes. Thus, India's strategic military outlook in the IOR would be boosted in the next decade if the country strengthens its strategic agenda by implementing the "Security and Growth for All" ethos and keeping Indian Navy expansion and operational plans at manageable and realistic levels.

The following points are of relevance in this regard:

1. India's integration of its coastal radar systems with those of its allies through the IFC would enable the Indian Navy and its like-minded naval partners to respond to any natural disasters in the IOR and help to protect the region's littoral states against any unforeseen threats such as piracy, human trafficking and dangers to shipping (e.g. ships in need of assistance). The civil defence of the Indian Ocean is the first step in creating a maritime security architecture for the IOR.
2. India's geographic footprint in the Indian Ocean makes it a natural first responder to any distress signals in the IOR. The country's deepening strategic alliance partnerships with France, the United States and Japan offer a form of security cover in the Indo-Pacific that will deter any violation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.
3. The regional security of the IOR cannot be assured by India alone and requires a multilateral effort, and institutions such as the IORA and IONS can play a constructive role in mobilising a process whereby cooperation supersedes tension/conflict. The Indian Navy and India's good relationships with like-minded Indian Ocean nation states could facilitate the coordination of a framework for designing an Indian Ocean maritime security architecture.
4. Because of the high risk of escalation to nuclear-weapons use from a conventional conflict in a region where several nuclear-armed powers are competing (China, France, India, Pakistan, Russia and the United States), there is a clear need for all forms of nuclear risk reduction measures (military-to-military communications, confidence- and security-building measures such as missile test-launch notifications and agreements to prevent incidents at sea, etc.).³⁰

The Indian Navy is in an expansionist phase, but would require a decade more and considerable additional expenditure for it to operate at its optimal fleet capacity.

Map 1: India's Indian Ocean strategic footprint



Endnotes

1. The Indian Ocean region is bounded in the west by East Africa, in the north by India, in the east by South-east Asia and Australia, and in the south by the Southern Ocean and Antarctica.
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