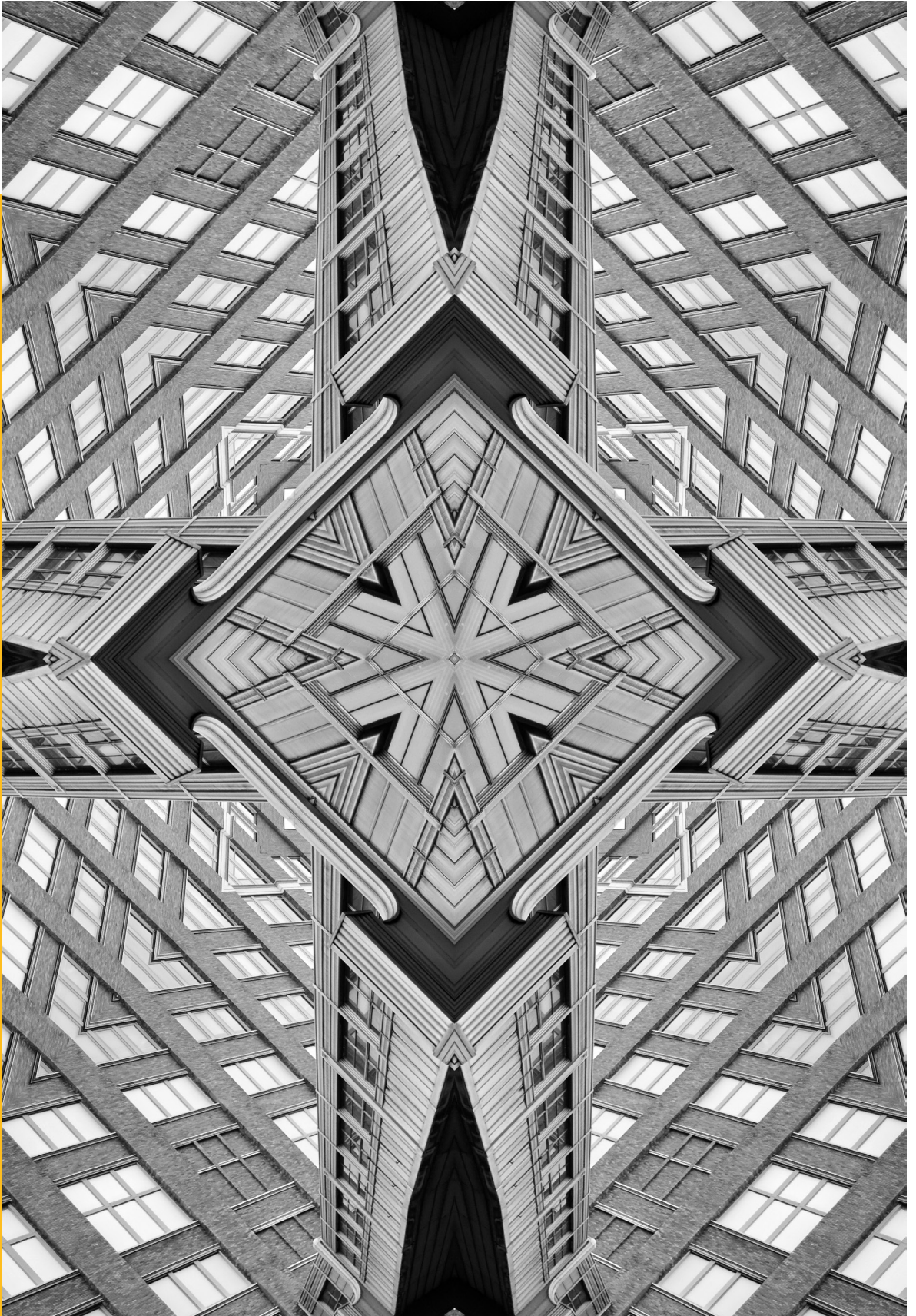


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Maritime India: The Quest for a Steadfast Identity

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Abstract

India's geography lends itself favourably to the cultivation and expansion of maritime ties. Yet, for much of the country's contemporary history, the country has overlooked these opportunities. As the world reengages with its vast ocean spaces, India too, has become more willing and capable of participating in the maritime domain. This paper outlines the evolution of the country's maritime outlook as it shifts its largely continental-oriented focus to one in which maritime engagements are vital to foreign policy. The paper accounts for the advances in New Delhi's strategic and diplomatic capacity, the attendant impediments, roadblocks, and imperatives. It argues that going forward, India's maritime role will shape, and in turn will be shaped, by developments in the Indo-Pacific.

India's maritime geography is rich: it has a 7,517-km-long coast line, where lie nine coastal states that are home to a number of ports that handle some 1,400 million tonnes of cargo ever year.¹ India being peninsular, its maritime linkages have historically involved trade, religion, and culture; these early associations, however, were severed over time. Especially after independence, the focus of India's foreign outreach had become almost entirely continental. The liberalisation reforms of the 1990s can be regarded as an inflection point for India's priorities: it accorded greater attention to port development and made its maritime position an important part of the national agenda. In more recent years, since 2014, the focus on maritime capacity development and outreach has grown manifold with national policies being dedicated to the development of the maritime sector.

While policy directives and naval engagements began to take shape and expand in the early 1990s, it was only in the latter half of the last decade that the conversation around these linkages gained prominence. Today there is a greater range and number of stakeholders engaging in the discourse around maritime geopolitics, commerce, infrastructure, ecology, and defence.

This paper argues that the shift in India's maritime outlook has been simultaneous to, and in many respects accelerated by the strategic imperatives posed by developments in the Indo-Pacific region. To continue with its maritime transformation, however, India needs to address existing and emerging impediments. The transformation in India's maritime identity calls for a thorough approach that will involve maritime infrastructure, and capacity development in terms of creating a maritime security framework across the length and breadth of this vast expanse of ocean to combat any traditional, non-traditional, transnational or sub-conventional security challenge. It will also involve nurturing its leadership of Blue Economy and other initiatives. This paper focuses on India's foreign policy and naval outreach.

Fait Accompli: From Geography to Strategy

India's peninsular geography divides the Indian Ocean into eastern and western halves. This influences the country's policy approaches, strategic calculations, and naval positioning on both sides of the peninsula.² It was in the 1940s that eminent historian K.M. Panikkar wrote about the peninsular shape of India being the defining feature which differentiates the Indian Ocean from the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans, with the continent of Asia serving as a land roof for this ocean expanse. Calling the Indian Ocean a 'landlocked sea', he underscored its importance for the country and advocated the development of requisite maritime power to harness attendant opportunities and wield leverage in times of crisis.³ In his writings, Panikkar concurs with the Mahanian axiom – "Whoever rules the waves, rules the world"— observing, "A true appreciation of Indian historical forces will show beyond doubt, that whoever control the Indian Ocean has India at his mercy." He also writes, "...the sea routes available to India from her ports from Kandla to Calcutta, take her easily to all parts of the world."⁴

With the reforms beginning from the early 1990s and as India became a trading nation, the country's maritime interests grew exponentially.⁵ New Delhi began to engage more with its neighbourhood and increasingly realised the significance of reviving ancient maritime connections – both political and commercial. Indeed, India's current maritime imperative can be compared with that of the US at the turn of the 20th century when the latter became an industrial power and turned to the sea for global markets and exercising its maritime capabilities; there is China too, which at the beginning of the 21st century emerged as the workshop of the world and declared its maritime destiny, to develop a blue water navy and affirm what it considered its maritime rights.⁶

Fait Accompli: From Geography to Strategy

Post-Independence and Pre-1991 Reforms

The Indian Navy which was created under the British rule was cognisant of seaborne perils after the Second World War, resulting in naval plans being largely military-oriented. The overall goal was to safeguard shipping on the high seas, to ensure supplies can leave and reach India, and to prevent any enemy landing on Indian shores.⁷ The first plan included the acquisition of two light fleet carriers, three cruisers, eight destroyers, four submarines, and a number of smaller ships. However, this plan was never implemented due to the overarching priority of continental concerns.^a

To be sure, then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru acknowledged the significance of the maritime sector and stressed the need to have a certain capacity of sea defence to aid overall defence and trade development.^{b,8} At that time, however, India lacked the economic and industrial resources to fully realise a strong maritime presence. Nehru was not willing to link sea power with India's regional foreign policy.⁹ In fact, after the war in 1962 with China, there was a reduction in the naval budget and the navy had less role in the 1965 conflict. It was from the 1960s that acquisitions from the then USSR helped in the force accretion of the navy. The Navy then went on to play a decisive role in the 1971 war;¹⁰ the INS Vindhyagiri was deployed in the Seychelles to help abort a coup in 1986 (amounting to its first military intervention in the IOR); and the navy helped rescue President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom from Male in 1988.¹¹ Here, one can see foreign policy goals being linked with sea power as India asserted its role through the resolution of regional disputes in the IOR.

a India's land borders with both Pakistan to the west and China to the east have been witness to protracted instability in the post-independence period with incursions, insurgencies and periodic wars necessitating more priority than the country's maritime frontiers.

b In a note to his Defence Minister, he stated, 'We have been brought up into thinking of our land frontier during British times and even subsequently and yet India, by virtue of her long coastline, is very much a maritime country.'

Fait Accompli: From Geography to Strategy

Post-1991 Reforms

As the economy opened up in the 1990s, India acquired the resources it needed to support maritime growth. There emerged new possibilities of developing economic and industrial resources, particularly, the security of Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs), maritime trade protection, and security infrastructure and other assets in the maritime zones.¹² India also transitioned to enhancing its leadership role in South Asia and the IOR by aiming for common, equal and cooperative security in the region.. Indeed, cooperative and inclusive security has remained a constant approach on India's part, as witnessed in the current administration's SAGAR policy or Security and Growth for All in the Region. This outlook is also in keeping with New Delhi's call to strengthen regional institutional mechanisms such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

Current Era

The past decade has witnessed a greater policy emphasis on maritime matters, translating significantly into diplomatic outreach in the neighbourhood and also in the wider Indian Ocean region. The belief and understanding that the country's locational advantage needs to be leveraged both in terms of developing maritime connections as well as the augmentation of security networks is now perhaps rooted more firmly than ever before. New Delhi has become gradually mindful about providing public goods in the maritime sphere and has assisted smaller littoral nations in managing their exclusive economic zones and in natural disasters while cultivating special relationships with key partners across the IOR.¹³ Together with the SAGAR initiative, the Maritime Vision 2030 is the latest iteration of the government's maritime development roadmap. The document outlines a 10-year blueprint for refurbishing the maritime sector and comprises over 150 initiatives across ports, shipping and waterways aimed at policy enhancements for augmenting efficiency and boosting growth.¹⁴

Fait Accompli: From Geography to Strategy

It is a key vision document for maritime enhancing infrastructure and services, and its objectives link directly with the expansion of the country's envisioned overall maritime role.

The changes in maritime policy have occurred across a range of sectors, from infrastructure to foreign policy outreach to the strengthening of maritime defence collaborations. The strategy is informed by four key elements:¹⁵ historical and societal factors; maritime geography; political geography; and the China factor. A significant driver of the turn towards the sea is the fact that the country's economic interests are increasingly intertwined with the maritime sphere.¹⁶ Over the years, the contribution of maritime trade to the country's GDP has shown consistent growth, and there has also been a diffusion of distinctions between 'flag, owner, crew and cargo'.¹⁷ Moreover, the role of the navy in protecting seaborne trade has become more multifaceted. The protection of commercial shipping carried out via 'foreign bottoms'—the country's substantial sea-faring community working in foreign flagged vessels—^c for instance, also assumes importance besides the protection of trade passing through key chokepoints from threats such as piracy.^{d,18} In this regard, escorting commercial ships through critical lanes such as the Gulf of Aden and Strait of Malacca; anti-piracy operations and responding to calls from ships in distress, comprise some of the Navy's activities with respect to ensuring unhindered maritime trade.

New Delhi's maritime strategy therefore aims to deal with threats arising both 'in' or 'from' the sea; preservation of stability in the country's maritime neighbourhood; provision of support succour and extrication options to Indian diaspora; the creation, development and maintenance of a 'blue economy'; and the establishment and retention of a regionally favourable geostrategic maritime position.¹⁹ This vision, while comprehensive and omni-directional, inevitably becomes more challenging in terms of implementation.

c Indian nationals comprise 6-7% of the world's sea-farers the bulk of maritime trade is carried out via foreign vessels.

d 'Chokepoints' in maritime parlance refers to narrow channels of water connecting the high seas, through which trade routes pass and which therefore also assume strategic significance during times of conflict.

Boosting strategic capacity

The advancement of India's maritime capability spurred renewed efforts towards naval development especially since the mid-1990s when the country embarked on a program for the development of a Blue Water navy and naval expenditure was considerably increased.²⁰ The naval budget grew by 5 percent in 2000-2005 and by 10 percent from 2005-2008, with a simultaneous increase in the navy's share of the annual defence budget. The additional resources contributed to improvements in the navy's force structure and sea control capabilities.²¹

During this period, India aimed at selective control of the Indian Ocean through naval presence in the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean, and the Bay of Bengal, alongside an expansion of the Coast Guard for policing activities supplementary to that of the navy. In parallel, New Delhi has also focused on enhancing security partnerships from the western Indian Ocean to the east with an emphasis on chokepoints to the Indian Ocean from southern Africa, the Arabian peninsula (Mozambique channel, Strait of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandab) to the west, and the Indonesian archipelago (Straits of Malacca, Lombok and Sunda) to the east.²²

Over the years, the Indian Navy has gradually built on its engagements with littorals of the Southeast Asian region with whom it seeks to nurture well-rounded defence cooperation. This has been elucidated as "harnessing the collective military competency" in the 2015 naval doctrine – *Ensuring Secure Seas*.²³ In 2019, the then Chief of Naval Staff outlined the four pillars of India's foreign engagements: (i) capacity building (provision of military assets and military infrastructure development); (ii) capability enhancement (military training, technical and hydrographic assistance, exclusive economic zone [EEZ] surveillance); (iii) constructive engagements (military level talks, military exercises, ship visits); and (iv) collaborative efforts (symposiums, constructs, conclaves).²⁴

Employing Maritime Power

Two key naval strategy documents – *Freedom to Use the Seas* released in 2007 and *Ensuring Secure Seas* in 2015 – have been vital in giving shape to the country’s envisioned role, its capacities and most importantly, its identified areas of interest.^e In an attempt to update India’s maritime military policy, the 2007 report was prescient enough to dedicate generous space to Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), Security of Energy, and even foreign policy initiatives in the IOR. These formed the renewed aspects of the report; the rest of it is focused on the military aspect of the Navy. There is also continued emphasis on regional involvement for non-military issues and using partnerships for better results: “In order to overcome the menace of terrorism, drugs, arms and human trafficking, concerted regional initiatives would be desirable. The Indian Navy has invested in partnerships to map the activities of terrorist organisations in the IOR.”²⁵

Shifting Focus from Euro-Atlantic to Indo-Pacific

In 2015, the Indian Navy released a new strategy document called, ‘Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy.’ The objective was to increase maritime cooperation and coordination and provide a framework for synergising actions in the maritime domain with all stakeholders.²⁶ It identified three developments that affect India’s maritime security. First, the shift in paradigm from a *Euro-Atlantic* focus to an *Indo-Pacific* one, and the repositioning of global economic and military power towards Asia resulting in significant political, economic and social changes in the Indian Ocean Region and impacting India’s maritime environment in tangible ways.²⁷ Second, the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai that necessitated a re-evaluation of the country’s coastal and offshore security. Third, the growing recognition of maritime security in national progress which contributed to the creation of a broad and more accommodative strategy.

e The very titles of the two reports are indicative of the Indian Navy’s transformation—from acknowledging the need for freedom to use maritime spaces, to a more active role in terms of warranting the safety of seas for uninterrupted maritime interactions.

Employing Maritime Power

The 2015 report formally acknowledged the concept of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ and its implications for the Indian Ocean. Prior to this, India, as well as other stakeholders such as the United States, Japan, and Indonesia, had preferred to use the term ‘Asia-Pacific’.²⁸ At the time, while India tried to keep up with globalisation, its focus was still on the Indian Ocean and its maritime boundaries. This report signalled that India was finally acknowledging that developments beyond the immediate IOR hugely impact its maritime security framework. The areas that attained new interest were the Red Sea, the Gulf of Oman, the Gulf of Aden and their littoral regions, Southwest Indian Ocean, and the East Coast of Africa littoral regions.²⁹

Led by the navy, India’s military engagements with countries in Southeast Asia reached maturity by the second decade of the 21st century. They comprised bilateral naval exercises, coordinated patrols, and submarine and anti-submarine cooperation with countries such as South Korea, Australia, and those of ASEAN. These activities are aimed at the enhancement of interoperability, which in turn contribute to the improvement of responses and capabilities for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), out-of-area contingencies (OOAC) and military operations other than war (MOOTW), including non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO).³⁰

“Led by the navy, India’s military engagements with countries in Southeast Asia reached maturity by the second decade of the 21st century.”

Expansion of Diplomatic Reach

In a marked shift from its earlier format of engagements via naval visits for military diplomacy, training, and assistance, the Indian Navy in recent years has expanded its presence and operational reach through ‘mission-based deployments’ (Figure 1) involving the deployment of mission ready ships and aircraft along critical sea lanes.³¹ The Gulf of Aden, the northern Arabian Sea, the waters around Lakshadweep and the Maldives, the EEZs of Seychelles and Mauritius, the northern Bay of Bengal, the waters around Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and the Straits of Malacca southwards have been identified as seven zones for year-round patrols by 15 warships and reconnaissance aircraft.³² India’s operational reach towards the east has expanded to include Southeast Asia, South China Sea, and the Western Pacific, with ships being deployed for two-month periods and scheduled to participate in naval exercises such as SIMBEX, AUS-INDEX and MALABAR.³³ Towards the west, naval vessels participate in exercises with Greece, France, Spain, Egypt and Israel.³⁴

**Figure 1:
India’s Mission-Based-
Deployments Across the Indian
Ocean Region**



Source: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2018/apr/01/indian-navy-informs-government-about-the-fleets-reoriented-mission-pattern-1795404.html>

Expansion of Diplomatic Reach

There is also a renewed interest to engage more with other navies through port visits, bilateral interactions, training initiatives, operational exercises, and technical support arrangements. Overseas Deployment (OSDs) were seen intrinsic to this goal and the Navy held that it would continue to send its forces on OSDs “to gather operational experience and environmental knowledge, undertake military exercises, demonstrate reach and sustenance, exercise freedom of navigation, pursue maritime engagements, and showcase the nation and the navy.”³⁵ MILAN, Indian Navy’s 1995 initiative of having biennial meeting of regional navies, was seen as a forum for improving operational interaction between navies in the region. Increasing from five navies in 1995 to 17 navies in 2014 is telling of its progress in cooperation. Another platform that got the attention it deserved was the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), under the similar theme of increasing regional cooperation. IONS was established in 2008 as a regional forum for navies of the Indian Ocean and is significant to the region’s sea-based diplomacy.

A vital aspect of India’s strategic engagements with its maritime neighbourhood has been the development and augmentation of the country’s own maritime domain awareness and also enabling the same for other IOR littorals. MDA is regarded as critical requisite for ensuring maritime security and maintaining strategic advantage by deterring inroads by adversaries.³⁶ New Delhi has expanded its surveillance footprint across Maldives, Myanmar, and Bangladesh; Mauritius, the Seychelles and Sri Lanka via radar stations and enabling reciprocal cooperation by stationing liaison officers from these countries at India’s Information Fusion Centre.³⁷ New Delhi is also aiming to facilitate real-time sharing of maritime information via military satellite. Besides surveillance to monitor potential maritime threats, combatting regional transnational crime is another objective or the enhancement of MDA.

These steps are intended to enable region-wide maritime safety through effective monitoring and information exchange. The Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) in India is also expected to be integrated with the Information Fusion Centre at

Expansion of Diplomatic Reach

Singapore and the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Center in Madagascar, making way for a pan-Indian Ocean MDA operational framework. The establishment of the Information Fusion Centre for the IOR has been a significant step towards the collation, fusion and dissemination of maritime safety information.³⁸ Additionally, New Delhi's maritime engagement with its neighbourhood has also been bolstered through the country's Ministry of Earth Sciences which has been developing the capacities of partner countries in operational oceanography, forecasting extreme weather events, and helping in climate change proofing of their vital infrastructure.³⁹ New Delhi has already signed bilateral maritime white-shipping agreements with 22 countries and another with the Virtual Regional Maritime Traffic Centre.^f

Simultaneously, key stakeholders of the region have sought to bolster the role of the Indian Navy and have recognised its significance as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean region. For instance, the US National Security Strategy document (December 2017) acknowledges that the role played by the Indian Navy has been limited in scope and underlines its potential in mitigating equilibrium threats across the Indian Ocean space.⁴⁰ The country's foreign policy outreach towards the eastern Indian Ocean space has been led by the 'Look East', and later refurbished 'Act East' policies. The latter is a structured reflection of the securitisation of India's eastward engagement⁴¹ and a natural convergence of the country's growing capabilities, obligations and aspirations.

Multilateral efforts have included strengthening the IORA charter missions, boosting interoperability, and HADR in collaboration with the IONS, revamping the BIMTEC, and maintaining active cooperation programmes with island countries of the region. India has also been actively engaged in participating in and sustaining dialogue partnership with platforms like the Gulf Cooperation

^f It is a multinational construct which has facilitated the creation of virtual networks for the sharing of information among 30 countries.

Expansion of Diplomatic Reach

Council, the African Union, East Asia Community, and the Southern African Development Community, ASEAN, and mini-lateral and trilateral platforms in the eastern Indian Ocean. Alongside organising the Malabar, Milan and other naval exercises, both the Navy and Coast Guard have been expanding and conducting consultation mechanisms, coordinated patrols, monitoring of illegal activities, evacuation operations, training and transfer of naval platforms, and providing assistance to neighbouring countries in the enhancement of their own maritime domain awareness.

India's Indo-Pacific outreach also creates an opportunity to expand its diplomatic footprint and leverage partnerships to address a new strategic and security environment.⁴² The partnership aspect of the Indo-Pacific outlook can be attributed to the desire for building cohesive groupings or alliances. India has been keen to play a key role in the Indo-Pacific region and is engaged in multiple partnerships in the form of "frequent high-level visits; strong defence cooperation, which includes training, ship visits, joint coordinated patrols, defence sales and defence supplies, close security cooperation, comprehensive economic engagement, regular dialogues on education and skill development and cultural cooperation."⁴³ The MEA has made it clear that "through the Indo-Pacific construct, India envisages a greater role for itself in the wider region."⁴⁴

Recently, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad, comprising India, Australia, Japan and the US, has garnered greater attention as opposition from China has also heightened. The Quad was an informal strategic dialogue but after an official shared vision shared by India and Australia⁴⁵ in June 2020, the minilateral finally started taking concrete shape. Their first official leaders' meeting took place in March 2021 which led to the release of the first official statement affirming joint commitment towards promoting a free, open, rules-based order, rooted in international law and advancing security and prosperity and counter threats to both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Support for rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values, and territorial

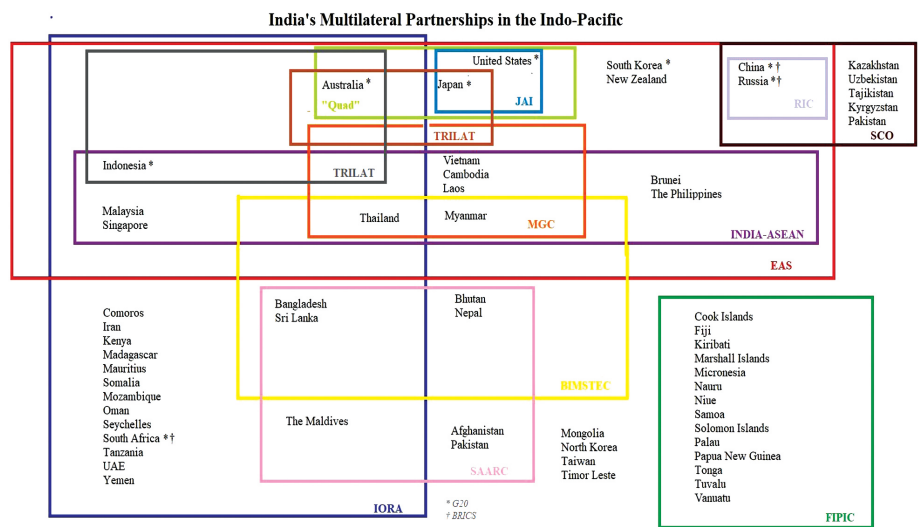
Expansion of Diplomatic Reach

integrity remain core areas of understanding for the Quad members.⁴⁶ At the first in-person Leaders' Summit of the Quad in Washington in September 2021, the partners underscored the need to advance practical cooperation and increase collaboration in sectors of global or regional significance including but not limited to cybersecurity, climate action, and emerging technologies.⁴⁷ As a minilateral platform, the Quad is part of the development towards functional and agenda-based cooperation that aims to be overtly de-linked from strategic calculations pertaining to China.

To be sure, though, geostrategic imperatives continue to be a key driver for their formation. The birth of the trilateral AUKUS defense pact for instance, between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States in September 2021, evoked mixed responses. On the one hand, it has resulted in apprehensions regarding further securitisation of the waters in the region; on the other, observers are cognisant of Australia's need to reinforce deterrence against China. The agreement also offers New Delhi the opportunity to seek France's assistance with nuclear submarines.⁴⁸ The Indo-Pacific currently houses a number of such platforms, and in many of these, India is a key partner. The country's Presidency of the UN Security Council in August 2021 offered a crucial opportunity to set the foundational agenda for global maritime cooperation as India chaired the first ever High-Level Open Debate on 'Enhancing Maritime Security – A Case for International Cooperation.' For the first time in the UNSC's history, maritime security was identified as a single-point agenda and it was an acknowledgement of India's enhanced willingness, and capability, to participate.⁴⁹

Expansion of Diplomatic Reach

**Figure 2:
India's Engagements in the
Indo-Pacific**



Source: <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Acting-East-India-in-the-INDO-PACIFIC-without-cutmark.pdf>

Impediments and Imperatives

There are both operational and policy-related challenges for the country as it looks to engage more deeply and more comprehensively in the maritime domain. While its peninsular geography offers advantages, the same can be a source of vulnerability and constrain the navy's ability to monitor or influence events in the vast east-west expanse of the ocean space, leading to difficulties in striking a balance between 'blue-water' and 'brown-water' responsibilities.⁵⁰ For instance, mission-based deployments may overstretch the navy's functioning abilities and prove to be unsustainable and ineffective as credible deterrents. It is also contended that despite the rise in 'operational tempo', the country's maritime deployments do not reflect an active naval projection strategy especially, further east, being confined largely to the role of a constabulary.⁵¹ To address these challenges, it is imperative to cultivate reliable and reciprocal diplomatic and strategic partnerships alongside – as far as practicable – domestic capacity enhancement as well as capacity building with small, middle and major powers.

Perhaps the most challenging yet promising aspect of India's maritime engagement is presented by the Indo-Pacific itself which has been shaped significantly by the China factor and continues to be. China's inroads into the Indian Ocean began over a decade ago through active political engagements and long-term port investments.⁵² These activities were aimed at expanding Beijing's footprint to ensure both commercial and naval influence along the breadth of the ocean space. Beginning with what is also referred to as the 'flag-following-trade' policy, China's security presence in the Indian Ocean and its activities in the wider Pacific have transformed into semi-military alliances, dual-use port facilities, stationing of non-combat troops initially abroad, Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) missions, and arms transfers to the region.⁵³ The demands and benefits of interconnectedness, together with the challenges posed by uncertainties and ambiguities with reference to China, have led to a "competition continuum"⁵⁴ or in other words, a perpetually tenuous situation at times just shy of overt conflict.

Impediments and Imperatives

New Delhi's strategic vision should also comprise waters beyond the IOR in terms of operational reach. This is especially pertinent in the context of the rising salience of the Indo-Pacific region and the networks of partnerships taking shape. The advent of multilateral platforms for issue-based collaboration in the Indo-Pacific offers a unique opportunity for India to join hands with like-minded countries with which it can pool resources for the achievement of common goals. Indeed, countries such as the US, UK, Australia, Japan and recently, the EU perceive India as a natural partner in their expanding involvement in the region. This complements India's own ambitions of seeking to build a greater degree of strategic engagement with the region. The Quad, for instance, which has gained momentum over the past couple years, is witnessing a more proactive role on the part of New Delhi. While the China challenge will continue to shape interactions among countries, it is vital to identify functional areas of cooperation which are de-linked from apprehensions concerning China; this is where trilateral or multilateral platforms have the scope to play a constructive role in order to sustain the new partnerships being forged.

India should also make efforts for collaboration with other non-conventional players with great potential, such as Canada, New Zealand, and Norway.⁵⁵ A number of strategies will be necessary in the years to come: the establishment of requisite institutional and physical infrastructure for constructive engagement, the cultivation of strategic trust, reforming institutional insufficiencies, and collaborating towards the mitigation of system destabilisation threats⁵⁶ such as climate change.

Finally, a key roadblock with regards to India's navy is the persistent low budgetary allocation over the years. In the decades after independence, besieged by continental challenges as mentioned earlier, India lost touch with the maritime space as the navy was not high on the political priority list. This is because all wars or security

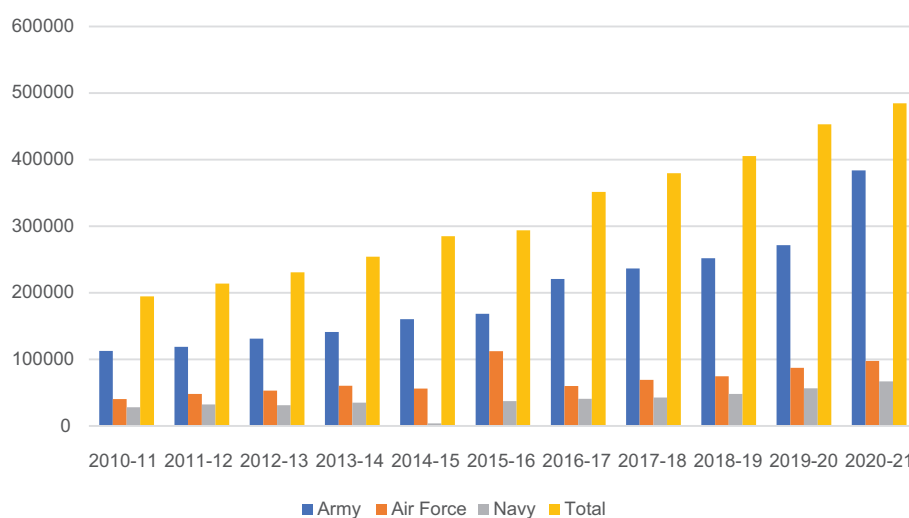
Impediments and Imperatives

threats were land-based. Indeed, in the 1965 war with Pakistan, the navy was not permitted to participate and it came to be perceived largely as a “Cinderella service”^g and was granted low budgetary allowances. Indeed, New Delhi’s reorientation towards the necessities of reviving its maritime linkages has not been plain-sailing, given that successive generations of foreign and defence service personnel have been focused and trained on continental matters.⁵⁷ While the last couple of decades have witnessed an increase in the naval budget, the service has historically received less than a quarter of the defence budget—this clearly indicates the low priority accorded to the maritime domain (Figure 3). Despite the gradual rise in the naval budget together with the acquisition and development of resources as well as diversification of strategic interests, the navy still falls far short of its required funds. The 2021-22 budgetary allocations have seen a rise in total capital outlay for the Navy from that in 2020-21, but not a significant one.⁵⁸ This fuels the opinion that New Delhi continues to suffer from a characteristic degree of “sea blindness”.

Even as the indigenisation of warship construction began decades ago in the early 1970s, with the commissioning of the INS Nilgiri in 1972, and subsequent plans for augmenting force levels, insufficient naval budget coupled with capacity constraints in Indian shipyards have also impacted the navy’s force levels. Increased interactions in the maritime space together with tense geopolitical circumstances demand an enhancement in naval capabilities. Without the allocation of requisite funds, however, the country’s maritime capacity will remain limited.

^g Referred to services which typically receive less funding in comparison to other services in the same sector.

**Figure 3:
India's Defence Expenditure
2010-21 (in INR crore)**



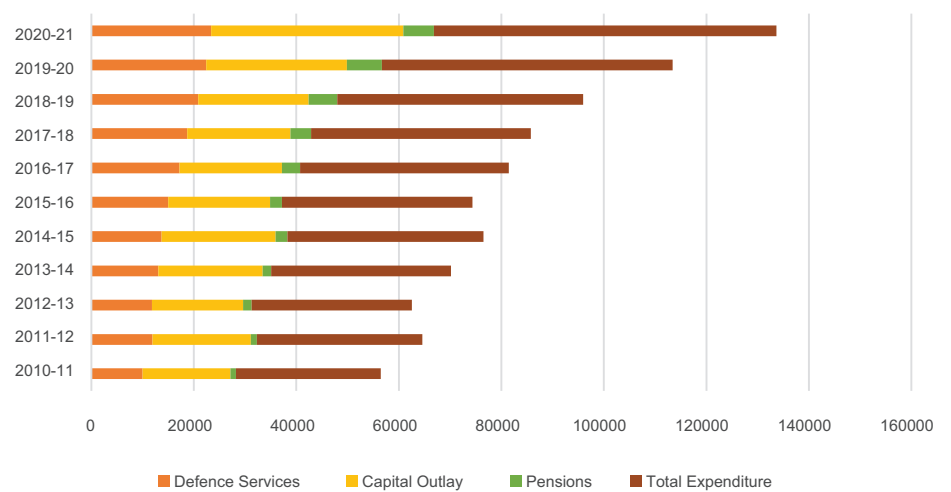
Source: Union Budget of All Years.

*Note: 2020-21 includes (RE) Revised Estimates.

*The expenditure on Army, Navy and Air Force includes: Defence services, capital outlay and pensions.

This approach can be attributed to the fact that land threats constitute an omnipresent danger and thus warrant priority; the air force comes a close second because of the necessity of air support in any land-based confrontation. As the navy does not directly have a role in continental threats, it has been accorded the least attention among the three forces.⁵⁹ At the same time, however, it is imperative to note that capital expenditure for the armed forces is the lowest among the three forces (2020-21) and has in fact been declining over the past decade. The budget sanctioned for the navy is central to the achievement of maritime security objectives as financial resources are key to modernisation, operational sustenance, research, and capability enhancement (Figure 4). If the country must make up for the years of inattention to the navy, defence collaboration must deepen in tandem with the expansion of diplomatic and strategic engagements.

**Figure 4:
Indian Navy's Expenditure
(in INR Crores)**



Source: Union-Budget of All Years.

*Note: 2020-21, includes (RE) Revised Estimates.

Besides these factors, considering that the bulk of India's trading by volume as well as value is conducted via maritime transport, the country is also undertaking measures to boost its shipping industry and maritime trade through both private sector- and government-led investments and initiatives. Some of these measures include⁶⁰ the alignment of governance models of key ports with international best practices, revised and investor-friendly Model Concession Agreements, and innovations in technological applications. It is expected that service providers such as operation and maintenance, pilotage and harbouring and marine assets such as barges and dredgers would benefit from the same.⁶¹ Issues such as long turnaround times for cargo movement still plague the country's ports and would require not only infrastructural improvements but also optimisation of operational management. Investments to bridge gaps in funding and upgrading of existing systems and infrastructure are urgently required to boost the country's maritime trade potential.

The Future of Maritime Engagements

While India continues to display a greater willingness to participate in matters maritime, there is also an assessment that the country's threats have been and are likely to continue to play out at its land borders from China or Pakistan and therefore, capacity and efforts invested in developing overland defence should weigh more. This belief stems from the fact that India's land borders span more than 7,500 km and geographical realities dictate the development and maintenance of a strong terrestrial armed forces, particularly considering that the country has rarely been able to recover lost ground due to border incursions.⁶²

As discussed earlier in this paper, until the turn of the millennium maritime threats or maritime competition had assumed less prominence. In the absence of any such impending scenario, it is not unnatural for Delhi to have overlooked engagements in the maritime domain. By comparison, the country's land borders have been restive and requiring immediate attention.⁶³ Eventually, as the Indo-Pacific construct started gaining prominence, there were initial apprehensions about the Indo-Pacific project being a treaty-based alliance instead of it being an identification of the unfolding challenges and potential prospects in a geography that directly or indirectly connects almost the rest of the world. While the first factor continues to hold sway, the second has not only proven to be unfounded, it has also transitioned into a geographical space which is increasingly solidifying existing cooperation mechanisms and simultaneously creating new networks of engagement.

Whether continental challenges outweigh maritime ones continues to be a matter of debate despite the country's expanding maritime engagements. What is incontrovertible is that the maritime space is set to witness an expansion in the country's role in diverse forms. The belief that an expansion in the country's strategic influence can only take shape in the maritime domain is based on an estimation of the tactical limitations that characterise its land boundaries and which,


The Future of Maritime Engagements

by comparison, are absent in the country's oceanic neighbourhood. India's former Secretary, Rajiv Sikri observed that: "If India aspires to be a great power, then the only direction in which India's strategic influence can spread is across the seas. In every other direction there are formidable constraints."⁶⁴

The country's immediate continental neighbourhood attests to this fact given that the country's northwest, north and north-north eastern geographies as well as political relationships are complicated and fractured at best. Meanwhile, the Indian Ocean Region presents a prospective template in which New Delhi continues to be an important player. India is also opting for asymmetrical responses to the conflicts, marking its land borders by utilising the ocean space which comprises of naval positioning towards the creation of deterrence. For instance, after the Galwan valley clash and repeated incidents on the Ladakh border, India chose to include the maritime sphere as it responded China's aggressions on its northern land borders.

The reason for this is that on the border, the best outcome that can be achieved is a stalemate but, on the ocean, India has a distinct advantage over China as it controls one of the largest navies and sits astride a vast expanse of waterways which are crucial for China's energy supply and trade.⁶⁵ Moreover, the extensive maritime links that the country has fostered over the years across littorals of the western and eastern Indian Ocean space, together with its strategic links with the US, Japan and Australia, provide New Delhi with a responsive geographical terrain and diplomatic network. The same cannot be reasoned about China. The employment of the ocean space in this form of asymmetrical response is a dynamic approach and one that conveys that reticence no longer characterises the country's foreign engagements.

The Future of Maritime Engagements

Going forward, the country's maritime approach looks poised to be cultivated and strengthened further. While India's naval capabilities are likely to remain limited to the Indian Ocean region, in terms of diplomacy, the country has in recent years expanded its access and network beyond the immediate IOR as discussed earlier. With respect to maritime engagements, therefore, New Delhi will in all likelihood be following a two-pronged approach deploying and strengthening naval abilities in the IOR space and expanding foreign policy-related outreach beyond the latter. Concurrently, it is also probable that the country will bring into play naval resources in conjunction with its force posture capabilities whether threats arise from land or the sea. 

“On the ocean, India has a distinct advantage over China as it controls one of the largest navies and sits astride a vast expanse of waterways that are crucial for China's energy supply and trade.”

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