

## INDIA'S AGGRESSIVE MARITIME AMBITIONS: ANALYSING NAVAL EXPANSION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



Source: *Medium*



Source: *the Diplomat*

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR), encompassing approximately 20% of the Earth's oceanic expanse, is the smallest yet most complex among the three primary oceans. IOR is a critical maritime region that connects continents of Africa, Asia, and Australia. Surrounded by 38 states and spanning over 6,200 miles encompassing approximately 80% of worldwide trade, the IOR holds crucial importance in global geoeconomics and geopolitics.<sup>1</sup> In IOR, India, being the largest littoral state, seeks to project major-power status by focusing on objectives such as obtaining energy security supplies, ensuring security through sea resources, maintaining the safety of sea and land routes, and facilitating unrestricted marine trade. Due to the increasing competition between China and India in the IOR, defence priorities of India have distinctly shifted towards the Indian Ocean (IO). India's first maritime strategy for the region, "Freedom for Use of Seas", was published in 2004;<sup>2</sup> but it is more aggressive towards sea deployments. These continuous deployments pose considerable challenges to neighbouring littoral governments, indicating a contradiction in India's maritime policy which

<sup>1</sup> "Harnessing Opportunities and Overcoming Challenges: Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean Region," *Strategic Analysis*, July 4, 2015, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09700161.2015.1047229>.

<sup>2</sup> SANCHALY BHATTACHARYA, "India's Maritime Strategy - Enhancing Deployability and Interoperability," *THE GEOSTRATA*, February 21, 2024, <https://www.thegeostrata.com/post/india-s-maritime-strategy>.

**guarantees freedom for all. The Indian Prime Minister, in his address at the Commissioning of Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) Barracuda in Mauritius on March 12, 2015, stated that "IO is at the center of global attention more than ever before, and India is also growing global stakes and presence in the Ocean."<sup>3</sup>. This demonstrates India's endeavours to establish regional security alliances, enhance naval capabilities, and pursue strategic objectives in IOR.**

India has made notable changes in its maritime strategic environment to establish itself as a regional power and counter China. At the same time, there are both conventional and unconventional security issues, as well as concerns that any disruption in maritime trade could have a significant impact on regional and global stability.<sup>4</sup> India is strengthening its naval capabilities by significantly increasing the deployment of nuclear submarines and naval weaponry, aiming to establish its dominance in the IOR. Indian ambitions include gaining access to the latest and most advanced modern technologies, re-organizing its armed forces into theatre commands, and preserving its competitive advantage in nuclear and missile programs. India's collaboration with the United States has had a significant influence on maritime security and unrestricted movement of ships in the IOR. The developments in the IOR are part of a calibrated approach, inter alia, driven by Hindutva ideology,<sup>5</sup> a desire for enhanced relative power, and a fixation about 'counterbalancing' China. Major details of India's naval expansion and maritime strategy are further elaborated below:

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- <sup>3</sup> "Prime Minister's Remarks at the Commissioning of Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) Barracuda in Mauritius (March 12, 2015)," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, accessed September 2, 2024, <https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24912/prime+ministers+remarks+at+the+commissioning+of+offshore+patrol+vessel+opv+barracuda+in+mauritius+march+12+2015>.
  - <sup>4</sup> Muhammad Asim Ismail et al., "A Survey of Indian Ocean Region Maritime Security: Technological Advancements and Innovative Solutions," in *2021 International Conference on Frontiers of Information Technology (FIT)* (2021 International Conference on Frontiers of Information Technology (FIT), Islamabad, Pakistan: IEEE, 2021), 66–71, <https://doi.org/10.1109/FIT53504.2021.00022>.
  - <sup>5</sup> Harsh V. Pant, "Sino-Indian Maritime Ambitions Collide in the Indian Ocean," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 1, no. 2 (August 1, 2014): 187–201, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347797014536640>.

ASPECT	Detail
<b>Role</b>	Net Security Provider; aims to emerge as a significant player in the IOR
<b>Coastline</b>	7,500 kilometres
<b>Ports</b>	12 major ports, 217 non-major and minor ports
<b>Military Budget (2024-2025)</b>	\$78 billion
<b>Naval Aspirations</b>	Acquisition of 170 vessels, including:
	i. Two nuclear-powered; Arihant-class submarines
	ii. Two aircraft carriers. a) INS Vikramaditya and the b) INS Vikrant. ;
	iii. Substantial naval force
<b>Planned Military Bases by 2047</b>	11 military bases around the IOR to support production of military equipment

Source: Data compiled by the author.

India's expansion of its naval power and maritime buildup revolves around its assumed role as 'Net Security Provider', which has raised concerns for the region's stability and security.<sup>6</sup> Under this newly assumed role, India wants to emerge as a significant player in the IOR, and asserting its dominance could threaten the sovereignty of other nations in the region. As noted above, India's maritime capabilities include a 7,500-kilometer coastline, 12 major ports, 217 non-major and minor ports, and a robust banking and maritime insurance system.<sup>7</sup> India boasts the third-largest military apparatus in the world, with an estimated defence budget of \$78 billion for 2024–2025. India's naval aspirations encompass the acquisition of 170 vessels, including two Arihant class nuclear-powered submarines, two aircraft carriers namely “INS Vikramaditya and the INS Vikrant”, and a substantial naval force.<sup>8</sup> On August 29, 2024, the Indian Navy has also commissioned its second Arihant-class

6 S. Jindal, “India Should Develop Its Naval Power in View of Growing Potential Security Concerns Connected to China’s Non-Transparent Intentions in the Indian Ocean Region,” 2017, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/India-Should-Develop-Its-Naval-Power-in-View-of-to-Jindal/edfd65967b21cb45d96f667b95d2b64f951b55f2>.

7 S. Dr. Gigig, R. Aishwariya, “The Challenges Faced by Marine Industry in Logistics,” *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Business and Government* 26, no. 02 (February 2, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.47750/cibg.2020.26.02.076>.

8 David Scott, “India’s Drive for a ‘Blue Water’ Navy,” *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, 2008, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/India%E2%80%99s-Drive-for-a-%E2%80%98Blue-Water%E2%80%99-Navy-Scott/44dc246e3966298c62b042bf6bff4c98275ed9b4>.

nuclear submarine, INS Arighaat.<sup>9</sup> By 2047, India plans to build 11 military bases around the IOR which will help them to produce their own military equipment.<sup>10</sup>

The strategic priorities of India encompass economic progress, maritime domain awareness, information domain dominance, capacity building, and diplomacy. India's coastal search and rescue (SAR) and surveillance network expands to include island nations in the IOR, utilising radars to provide extensive coverage. As outlined in its maritime strategy, its five goals are to become a major power, project military power in the Asia-Pacific region, maintain autonomy, promote cultural values globally, and invest heavily in the IOR while developing strong political, economic, and military ties.<sup>11</sup> Fuelled by India's expanding naval capabilities, the militarization of the IOR threatens to escalate tensions and rivalries between regional and extra-regional powers. India is expanding its naval strength by collaborating with QUAD and AUKUS.<sup>12</sup> It is imperative to consider the broader implications of proliferation for strategic stability, particularly considering the evolving landscape. India's nuclear submarine program is predominantly reliant on indigenous development as well as collaborative efforts. India manufactures some of the nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), such as the Arihant-class submarines.<sup>13</sup>

Indian naval nuclear developments and their implications for South Asian stability highlight the need for measures ensuring global peace and security. While one nuclear-armed country in South Asia confronts challenges and continues to maintain strategic stability, another nuclear power in the region possesses unrestricted military capabilities and is intensifying its cooperation with the QUAD and AUKUS. The growing disparity in capacities within the IOR presents a challenge for neighbouring states, as they must assess if their capabilities are sufficient for deterrence. India's development of ballistic missile defence, multiple independent re-entry vehicle (MIRVs), anti-satellite weapons, advanced space-based early warning and surveillance capabilities, and nuclear-capable cruise missiles with supersonic and hypersonic capabilities create a sense of invulnerability<sup>14</sup>. India's

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<sup>9</sup> Amrita Nayak Dutta, "INS Arighaat: India's Second Nuclear Sub," *The Indian Express* (blog), August 31, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/indias-second-nuclear-sub-9542283/>.

<sup>10</sup> "India Arms for the Future: Wider Strategic Horizons Broaden Defence Procurements," *Strategic Comments* 15, no. 1 (February 1, 2009): 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13567880902820250>.

<sup>11</sup> Gurpreet S. Khurana, "India's Maritime Strategy: Context and Subtext," *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India*, January 2, 2017, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09733159.2017.1309747>.

<sup>12</sup> David Brewster, "An Indian Sphere of Influence in the Indian Ocean," *Security Challenges*, 2010, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/An-Indian-sphere-of-influence-in-the-Indian-Ocean-Brewster/aef1f7fdce41ec2b65cd18eb19a25b4499ca81e7>.

<sup>13</sup> K. G. Ramkumar and Prakash Panneerselvam, "Indian Navy's Submarine Development Programme: A Critical Assessment," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 10, no. 3 (December 1, 2023): 395–416, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970231207258>.

<sup>14</sup> Gulshan Bibi and Brice Tseen Fu Lee, "RAMIFICATIONS OF INDIA'S NAVAL BUILD-UP IN NUCLEAR REALMS," *Margalla Papers* 27, no. 2 (December 31, 2023): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.54690/margallapapers.27.2.171>.

nuclear doctrine advocates an approach of credible minimum deterrence. However, their submarine capabilities have progressed in a manner that contradicts their claimed minimalistic approach. The Indian navy can deploy over few dozen nuclear warheads, ready for immediate use, showing how they are shifting from minimal deterrence to more intensified approach of advanced weaponization, which will undermine the strategic stability of South Asian region. The operational mechanics of **Ballistic Missile Submarines** (SSBNs) entail intricate and high-stakes decision-making procedures. The potential for an arms race in the IOR not only exacerbates regional tensions but also has global security implications. Such tensions have far-reaching implications that could also affect international trade routes and maritime security.<sup>15</sup> Considering its strategic stability, non-traditional challenges, and the interests of regional and small powers, the IOR presents distinctive security challenges. The IOR lacks a regional security mechanism to handle disputes arising from competing political interests, disagreements over political matters, and power struggles. The growing partnership between the United States and India, alongside their China containment policy, has resulted in Pakistan's exclusion from relevant multi-stakeholder forums and IO Policymaking in Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)<sup>16</sup>. In the IOR, Pakistan's alignment with China, particularly through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has entangled it in the broader Indo-Chinese rivalry, indicating a potential arms race in the region. India's maritime ambitions have had an impact on neighbouring countries, including Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, China, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives.<sup>17</sup>

To safeguard its interests and ensure the timely operationalization of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), particularly its maritime component, Pakistan must enhance its maritime power and engage with both regional and extra-regional forces. Pakistan may also consider logistical agreements with the Chinese Navy to maintain strategic balance in the IOR following sea-nuclearization. Pakistan's maritime interests are critical because of their geoeconomic and geostrategic importance. Because of its proximity to sea lines of communication and involvement in global economic activity, Pakistan must maintain a secure and safe maritime environment. Pakistan has lacked a uniform national maritime policy for the past 76 years. A National Maritime Policy was formulated in 2002. However, the policy had to undergo various changes after the 18th amendment for which Pakistan Navy was tasked to devise a new policy in 2011, that has been waiting cabinet

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<sup>15</sup> Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, "India's Development of Sea-Based Nuclear Capabilities: Implications for Pakistan," *Strategic Studies* 38, no. 1 (April 27, 2018): 34–47, <https://doi.org/10.53532/ss.038.01.00160>.

<sup>16</sup> Zaki Khalid, "Pakistan's Fatal Exclusion from Indian Ocean Policymaking," *Research Society of International Law | RSIL* (blog), August 15, 2023, <https://rsilpak.org/2023/pakistans-fatal-exclusion-from-indian-ocean-policy-making/>.

<sup>17</sup> Bibi and Lee, "RAMIFICATIONS OF INDIA'S NAVAL BUILD-UP IN NUCLEAR REALMS."

approval for the past decade.<sup>18</sup> So, Pakistan needs to focus and work on its national maritime policy to counter India's aggressive approach in IOR. Also, the implementation of arms control measures is crucial in addressing the maritime security challenges between India and Pakistan. This can be achieved by leveraging the "an-incidents-at-sea (INCSEA)-agreement"<sup>19</sup> like agreements of the Cold War era, which include confidence-building measures on sea-based initiatives, protocols, and crisis management. These measures could help prevent naval incidents and reduce the risk of accidental confrontation, thereby contributing to a secure IO maritime environment.

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<sup>18</sup> Khuram Iqbal, Muneeb Salman, and Tahir Abbas Sial, "Major Power Competition in the Indian Ocean and Doctrinal Development in Pakistan," *Comparative Strategy* 42, no. 4 (July 4, 2023): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2023.2238522>.

<sup>19</sup> Web Mechanix, "An Incidents at Sea Agreement for South Asia • Stimson Center," *Stimson Center* (blog), June 14, 2012, <https://www.stimson.org/2012/an-incidents-at-sea-agreement-for-south-asia/>.