



India's maritime statecraft in the Indian ocean: Strategic implications for indo-pacific geopolitics

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean has become a pivotal maritime region in contemporary international politics, serving as a strategic link between Europe, Middle East, Asia, and Africa, through some of the world's busiest Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). Nearly eighty per cent of global seaborne oil trade transits this ocean, underscoring its importance for international commerce, energy security, and regional stability. Against this backdrop, maritime statecraft has evolved into a key instrument through which states pursue strategic influence, strengthen regional partnerships, and respond to shifting geopolitical realities. This paper examines the evolution of India's maritime statecraft in the Indian Ocean and assesses its strategic implications for the emerging Indo-Pacific geopolitical order. Employing a qualitative research methodology based on government documents, policy reports, and scholarly literature, the study analyses the significant dimensions of India's maritime engagement, including naval modernization, maritime domain awareness, maritime diplomacy, regional connectivity, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), and cooperation through regional and multilateral mechanisms like as the Quad, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), BIMSTEC, and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). The findings suggest that India has developed a comprehensive maritime strategy that integrates security, diplomacy, economic engagement, and institutional cooperation to expand its strategic influence and support a stable and cooperative maritime environment. The analysis further shows that the implementation of this strategy is shaped by intensifying strategic competition, China's expanding maritime activities in the Indian Ocean, technological change, resource limitations, and evolving maritime security challenges. The paper concludes that India's long-term effectiveness as a maritime actor will depend on its ability to strengthen maritime capabilities, improve policy coordination, encourage regional cooperation, and adapt to the rapidly changing strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific. The analysis of these developments advances the existing discourse on Indo-Pacific geopolitics by illustrating the increasing centrality of maritime capabilities and strategic practices in shaping India's regional engagement and its evolving approach to the Indian Ocean.

Keywords: Maritime statecraft, Indian ocean, indo-pacific, maritime security, India's foreign policy

Introduction

The Indian Ocean occupies a central position in the contemporary international system because it brings together economic interdependence, strategic rivalry, and diverse security concerns within a single maritime domain. Its location along major commercial routes, enables the movement of goods, commodities, and energy resources between Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. Several strategically significant maritime chokepoints, including the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, and Strait of Malacca, form essential components of the global network of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) ^[1]. The considerable volume of international trade and energy transportation dependent upon these routes makes the Indian Ocean highly significant for global economic stability. With the Indo-Pacific becoming an increasingly important centre of geopolitical competition, the ocean has acquired a strategic role that extends well beyond its historical function as a trade route. It has consequently emerged as an important theatre in which regional and extra-regional powers pursue competing strategic interests.

India derives considerable strategic significance from its geographical position within this maritime environment. Its extensive coastline of over 7,500 kilometres, an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) covering more than two million square kilometres, and strategically located island territories in both the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal place the

country at the heart of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Maritime routes carry more than 95 per cent of India's merchandise trade in terms of volume and approximately 70 per cent in terms of value, while a substantial proportion of the country's energy requirements are transported through the sea ^[2]. Consequently, maritime security cannot be viewed merely as a specialised sector of national policy. It has become closely associated with India's economic development, energy security, national defence, and external relations. The development of effective maritime capabilities has therefore assumed an increasingly prominent position within India's broader strategic planning.

The growing prominence of the Indo-Pacific has also contributed to a significant transformation in India's perception of maritime security and strategy. The Indo-Pacific is increasingly understood not simply as a geographical expanse but as a strategic arena in which maritime security, international commerce, technological development, connectivity, and regional governance intersect. Strategic rivalry involving major powers such as India, China, the United States, Japan, and Australia has intensified competition for influence across the region, particularly within the Indian Ocean. At the same time, the region provides considerable scope for collaborative responses to shared challenges ^[3]. Within this evolving

strategic setting, the ability of states to exercise influence through maritime means has become an important component of regional leadership and foreign-policy practice.

The concept of maritime statecraft encompasses a considerably broader set of instruments than conventional naval power. It involves the purposeful coordination of diplomatic initiatives, economic resources, institutional mechanisms, technological capabilities, and military assets to advance national interests and influence the development of the regional order. India's approach increasingly reflects this comprehensive conception of maritime strategy. Alongside naval preparedness and defence capabilities, India has expanded diplomatic cooperation, regional connectivity, humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief operations, capacity-building programmes, and institutional partnerships^[4]. Through these interconnected instruments, India seeks not only to secure its own maritime interests but also to contribute to a predictable, inclusive, and rules-based regional environment capable of responding to conventional as well as emerging maritime security challenges.

India's maritime orientation has become more pronounced through a range of policy initiatives and institutional arrangements introduced or strengthened during the past decade. The announcement of the vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) in 2015 provided an important foundation for India's engagement with the Indian Ocean by emphasising shared security, regional development, maritime cooperation, and capacity enhancement. India's maritime outlook was subsequently broadened through the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), launched in 2019^[14], which provides a framework for cooperation across areas such as maritime security, disaster management, and sustainable management of marine resources, connectivity, scientific and technological collaboration, and capacity development^[5]. Complementary initiatives, including the Sagarmala Programme, Maritime India Vision 2030^[6], the Act East Policy, and the Neighbourhood First Policy, have further connected India's maritime objectives with port development, economic integration, regional connectivity, commercial expansion, and strategic partnerships. The Indian Maritime Security Strategy of 2015 and its subsequent updated framework in 2023^[11] further reflect India's efforts to improve maritime domain awareness, strengthen naval preparedness, develop technological capabilities, and deepen regional cooperation^[6]. India's participation in multilateral arrangements such as the Quad, Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), BIMSTEC, Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and Colombo Security Conclave additionally demonstrates its increasing engagement with collective maritime security and regional governance^[7].

Nevertheless, India's maritime ambitions are being pursued amid a rapidly changing and increasingly contested geopolitical environment. China's expanding naval activities, its growing involvement in regional infrastructure, and port-related projects associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have generated new strategic considerations for India and other Indian Ocean states. At the same time, maritime security has expanded beyond conventional military concerns. Piracy, maritime terrorism, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, cyber vulnerabilities, climate-related pressures, and interruptions to international supply chains have introduced additional

dimensions to the governance of the maritime domain^[8]. India's maritime policy therefore faces the complex task of responding to strategic competition while simultaneously maintaining cooperative relationships with regional states. This requires an integrated approach that brings together defence, diplomacy, economic interests, technological resilience, environmental sustainability, and regional cooperation.

Existing scholarship has extensively examined India's naval expansion, maritime security policies, and broader Indo-Pacific strategy. However, comparatively limited attention has been directed towards understanding maritime statecraft as an integrated framework through which India combines diplomatic engagement, defence preparedness, economic connectivity, institutional cooperation, and regional capacity building. The present study addresses this analytical gap by examining the development of India's maritime statecraft in the Indian Ocean and assessing its wider implications for Indo-Pacific geopolitics. It contends that India's gradual movement beyond a predominantly continental strategic outlook towards a more comprehensive maritime orientation has enhanced its ability to participate in and influence the evolving regional security architecture. By analysing the relationship between domestic maritime policies, regional initiatives, institutional partnerships, and changing geopolitical conditions, the study seeks to provide a broader understanding of India's emergence as an increasingly influential maritime actor in the Indo-Pacific.

India's Maritime Statecraft in the Indian Ocean

Maritime statecraft of India has progressively developed into a broad strategic framework that integrates diplomatic engagement, naval capability, economic initiatives, and regional cooperation to advance national interests in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)^[9]. This approach reflects the recognition that maritime influence is no longer determined solely by naval strength but also by a state's ability to build strategic partnerships, promote regional institutions, strengthen connectivity, and contribute to maritime governance. Consequently, India has adopted a multidimensional maritime strategy that combines security objectives with diplomatic outreach, economic engagement, and cooperative regional initiatives.

Maritime diplomacy constitutes one of the principal instruments of India's statecraft in the Indian Ocean. Over the past decade, India has expanded defense and security cooperation with neighboring coastal and island states through bilateral agreements, joint naval exercises, coordinated patrols, hydrographic cooperation, training programmes, and technical assistance. Countries such as Mauritius, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives have become important partners in India's efforts to strengthen maritime security and capacity building. Assistance in developing coastal surveillance systems, improving maritime infrastructure, and enhancing professional training has enabled these countries to improve their maritime capabilities while reinforcing India's role as a reliable and trusted regional security partner^[10]. Such initiatives illustrate India's preference for partnership-based engagement rather than coercive influence in pursuing its maritime objectives.

Strengthening maritime security remains a core priority of India's regional strategy. The Indian Navy has increasingly adopted a proactive operational posture through Mission-

Based Deployments, ensuring a sustained presence across strategically important areas of the Indian Ocean. This operational model enhances maritime surveillance, safeguards vital sea lanes, protects commercial shipping, and enables rapid responses to emerging security contingencies. In parallel, India has invested in modern surveillance technologies, maritime reconnaissance aircraft, satellite-based monitoring systems, unmanned platforms, and integrated coastal security infrastructure to strengthen Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) ^[11]. The establishment of the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) has further improved regional information sharing by facilitating cooperation among partner countries in monitoring maritime activities, addressing illegal maritime practices, and responding to common security challenges.

Economic engagement has become another important dimension of India's maritime strategy. Recognizing the close relationship between maritime connectivity and economic growth, India has launched several initiatives to modernize port infrastructure, improve logistics networks, and enhance regional trade connectivity. The Sagarmala Programme seeks to promote port-led development by integrating ports with industrial corridors, inland transport systems, and coastal economic zones ^[12]. Complementing this initiative, Maritime India Vision 2030 ^[6] provides a long-term roadmap for strengthening port infrastructure, encouraging private investment, improving logistics efficiency, and promoting technological innovation across the maritime sector. India's commitment to the Blue Economy further demonstrates its intention to balance economic development with the sustainable utilization of marine resources ^[13]. Collectively, these initiatives indicate that maritime development has become an important pillar of India's broader economic and strategic policy.

Regional and multilateral cooperation has also become an essential feature of India's maritime statecraft. India actively participates in institutions that facilitate dialogue, confidence-building, and practical cooperation on maritime issues. Through the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), India supports initiatives related to maritime safety, trade facilitation, fisheries management, disaster risk reduction, and sustainable ocean governance. Within BIMSTEC, cooperation has expanded to include coastal security, disaster management, and regional connectivity. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) provides an important platform for interaction among regional navies, encouraging professional exchanges and operational cooperation. Similarly, the Colombo Security Conclave has strengthened collaboration in maritime security, counter-terrorism, cyber security, and humanitarian response. India's participation in the Quad demonstrates its broader strategic effort to support an open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific order, particularly through collaborative initiatives focused on maritime security, emerging and critical technologies, resilient supply networks, and enhanced maritime domain awareness ^[14]. These institutional engagements demonstrate India's preference for collaborative security arrangements that reinforce regional stability while preserving strategic autonomy.

Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) have emerged as another important component of India's maritime engagement. The Indian Navy has repeatedly undertaken relief and evacuation operations in response to

natural disasters, armed conflicts, and public health emergencies across the Indian Ocean. Rapid deployment of humanitarian assistance, medical support, disaster relief supplies, and evacuation missions has strengthened India's reputation as a dependable first responder in the region ^[15]. These operations not only provide immediate humanitarian assistance but also deepen political trust, enhance regional goodwill, and reinforce India's image as a responsible maritime partner committed to collective security and regional resilience.

Beyond material capabilities, India seeks to shape the regional maritime order through its support for internationally accepted legal principles and cooperative governance. India has repeatedly emphasized the importance of upholding the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), safeguarding freedom of navigation, resolving maritime disputes through peaceful means, and complying with applicable principles of international law. Through greater emphasis on dialogue, openness, confidence-building, and adherence to established maritime practices, India seeks to foster a more inclusive, stable, and rules-based maritime order across the Indian Ocean ^[16]. This normative dimension complements its diplomatic and security initiatives by projecting India as a constructive stakeholder committed to maintaining stability and predictability in regional maritime affairs.

Despite significant progress, India's maritime statecraft continues to encounter several structural and strategic challenges. Intensifying geopolitical competition, the expansion of China's maritime presence, resource constraints, technological transformation, and the persistence of both traditional and non-traditional security threats require continuous policy adaptation ^[17]. Addressing these challenges will depend on sustained investment in naval capabilities, stronger institutional coordination, enhanced technological innovation, and deeper cooperation with regional partners. As the strategic landscape of the Indian Ocean continues to evolve, India's maritime statecraft is likely to remain a central instrument for safeguarding national interests, strengthening regional partnerships, and contributing to a secure, stable, and cooperative Indo-Pacific maritime order.

Geopolitical Developments of the Indian Ocean within the Indo-Pacific Framework

The strategic importance of the Indian Ocean has grown markedly with the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a central arena of twenty-first-century geopolitical competition. The contemporary regional order is increasingly influenced by the convergence of economic interdependence, technological advancements, intensifying strategic rivalries, and evolving mechanisms of maritime governance ^[18]. Consequently, the Indian Ocean is no longer viewed solely as a transit route for international trade but as a geopolitical space where influence is exercised through military presence, infrastructure investment, digital connectivity, and institutional engagement. These developments have fundamentally altered regional power dynamics and reshaped the strategic calculations of both regional and extra-regional actors.

One of the most significant drivers of this transformation is the growing competition among major powers for strategic influence across the Indo-Pacific. Rather than being confined to conventional military rivalry, this competition

increasingly extends to infrastructure financing, technology, supply chains, and maritime connectivity. Strategic investments in ports, logistics hubs, industrial corridors, submarine communication cables, and energy infrastructure have become instruments through which states strengthen long-term economic and political influence ^[19]. Consequently, infrastructure development has acquired geopolitical significance, with maritime connectivity emerging as an important dimension of contemporary statecraft.

The Indian Ocean has also become increasingly important in the context of global economic resilience. Around 90 per cent of world merchandise trade by volume is transported by sea, while the region supports some of the busiest international shipping routes. Beyond commercial shipping, the Indian Ocean hosts critical submarine fibre-optic cable networks that carry the overwhelming majority of international digital communications. As global economies become increasingly dependent on digital infrastructure and resilient supply chains, the protection of maritime transportation routes, communication networks, and critical infrastructure has become an essential strategic priority ^[20]. Recent disruptions to international shipping have further demonstrated the vulnerability of global trade to instability in key maritime regions, reinforcing the strategic value of secure and uninterrupted sea lanes.

The security landscape of the Indian Ocean has become increasingly multifaceted as conventional military concerns intersect with a growing range of non-traditional threats. Alongside competition among naval powers, the region faces challenges including maritime terrorism, piracy, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, cyber intrusions against port and maritime infrastructure, transnational criminal networks, and disasters associated with climate change. For coastal and island countries in particular, rising sea levels and increasingly frequent extreme weather events pose serious risks to ports and other maritime infrastructure, marine resources, and the livelihoods of communities dependent on coastal and fisheries-based activities ^[21]. These interconnected challenges require broader approaches to maritime security that integrate defense preparedness with environmental sustainability, technological resilience, disaster management, and economic security.

Institutional engagement has likewise become an increasingly important feature of Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Regional organizations, minilateral partnerships, and issue-based coalitions have assumed a greater role in addressing common maritime concerns and promoting cooperative governance. Rather than creating competing security architectures, these arrangements often complement one another by facilitating dialogue, confidence-building, information sharing, and coordinated responses to shared challenges ^[22]. Their growing importance reflects the recognition that many contemporary maritime issues cannot be effectively addressed through unilateral action alone.

The evolving geopolitical development of the Indian Ocean indicate that regional order is shaped by a complex interaction of strategic competition, economic connectivity, technological change, and institutional cooperation. Military capability remains an important determinant of influence, but it is increasingly complemented by economic partnerships, infrastructure development, digital networks, and effective maritime governance. For India, this changing

environment presents both opportunities to expand regional engagement and challenges that require continuous strategic adaptation. The long-term effectiveness of India's maritime statecraft will therefore depend on its ability to respond to these evolving geopolitical realities while preserving strategic autonomy, strengthening partnerships, rules-based Indo-Pacific order and contributing to a stable, secure nation.

India's Maritime Statecraft and Its Strategic Implications for the Indo-Pacific

India's maritime statecraft has assumed growing strategic significance amid the evolving geopolitical dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. It has evolved beyond a narrow focus on safeguarding maritime interests to become a broader instrument for advancing regional security, economic cooperation, diplomatic engagement, and maritime governance. In an era marked by shifting power equations and growing strategic competition, India's maritime approach contributes to shaping regional interactions through a combination of security initiatives, economic engagement, technological advancement, and diplomatic cooperation ^[23]. Its significance therefore lies not only in protecting national interests but also in influencing the wider strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific. However, the significant implication of India's maritime engagement is its contribution to preserving strategic stability across the Indian Ocean. As geopolitical competition among major powers intensifies, maintaining a balanced regional environment has become increasingly important for preventing conflict and ensuring the uninterrupted use of maritime spaces. India's emphasis on cooperative security, maritime capacity-building and closer engagement with neighboring countries supports a security framework that encourages dialogue, trust, and shared responsibility ^[24]. Such an approach reduces strategic uncertainty and strengthens the ability of regional states to address common security concerns collectively.

India's maritime statecraft also carries important economic implications for the Indo-Pacific. Maritime transport remains the foundation of regional trade, making secure sea routes and efficient logistics essential for sustained economic growth. By promoting maritime connectivity, improving transport networks, and supporting the development of maritime infrastructure, India contributes to stronger commercial linkages across the region ^[25]. These efforts help improve supply chain resilience, facilitate investment, and reduce the economic risks associated with geopolitical disruptions. As economic competitiveness increasingly depends on secure maritime connectivity, India's maritime engagement assumes greater importance in supporting regional prosperity.

Energy security represents another important strategic dimension of India's maritime policy. Many Indo-Pacific economies depend heavily on uninterrupted maritime transportation for energy supplies and other essential commodities. Any disruption to major shipping routes can generate significant economic consequences by increasing transportation costs and creating uncertainty in global energy markets. By contributing to maritime stability and secure navigation, India's maritime initiatives indirectly strengthen regional energy resilience and support the continuity of international trade ^[26]. This demonstrates the

close relationship between maritime security, economic stability, and long-term regional development.

The diplomatic implications of India's maritime statecraft are equally significant. Maritime cooperation has become an effective platform for expanding political dialogue, strengthening strategic trust, and fostering long-term partnerships across the Indo-Pacific. Regular engagement on maritime issues enables India to participate more actively in regional decision-making while encouraging collaborative responses to emerging challenges ^[27]. This sustained diplomatic outreach has enhanced India's profile as a constructive regional actor capable of promoting consensus and facilitating cooperation among countries with diverse strategic interests.

India's maritime approach also contributes to the development of a more effective framework for regional maritime governance. Contemporary challenges such as maritime safety, environmental protection, disaster preparedness, and sustainable management of ocean resources require collective action supported by internationally accepted legal principles. India's continued support for freedom of navigation, peaceful settlement of disputes, and compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) reinforces confidence in international maritime law and encourages responsible state behavior ^[28]. By supporting cooperative governance, India contributes to greater predictability and stability in the regional maritime environment.

Rapid technological change is introducing new dimensions to maritime competition and strategic planning. Advances in artificial intelligence, satellite surveillance, autonomous maritime platforms, cyber security, and digital maritime infrastructure are transforming the way states monitor, protect, and manage maritime spaces ^[29]. These technologies improve situational awareness, strengthen the protection of critical infrastructure, and enable faster responses to emerging challenges. India's continued investment in maritime innovation will therefore play an increasingly important role in enhancing its strategic competitiveness and supporting effective maritime governance in the Indo-Pacific. Taken together, these strategic implications demonstrate that India's maritime statecraft has become an important pillar of its broader Indo-Pacific strategy. Its influence extends beyond conventional security concerns by strengthening economic resilience, supporting cooperative governance, encouraging technological adaptation, and promoting regional stability.

Conclusion

The growing prominence of the Indian Ocean within the Indo-Pacific strategic framework has elevated maritime statecraft to an important component of India's foreign and national security policy. The analysis indicates that India's maritime orientation is no longer confined to the development and deployment of naval capabilities; rather, it incorporates a broader combination of diplomatic initiatives, economic engagements, technological advancement, and institutional cooperation. These interconnected instruments enable India to pursue its interests and strengthen its influence across the regional maritime domain. In the present geopolitical context, effective maritime influence depends increasingly on a state's capacity to coordinate and employ these diverse forms of power in a complementary

manner, rather than depending solely upon conventional military strength.

The findings suggest that India's evolving maritime statecraft has enhanced its ability to navigate the changing strategic conditions of the Indian Ocean while also influencing the broader development of the Indo-Pacific regional order. Through the simultaneous use of security partnerships, economic cooperation, maritime connectivity initiatives, and adherence to established international maritime principles, India has sought to foster a more stable and cooperative regional environment. This multidimensional approach reflects an attempt to reconcile the protection of India's strategic interests with the promotion of an open, predictable, and inclusive maritime order in which the concerns and interests of both regional countries and external stakeholders can be accommodated.

The study further demonstrates that the significance of India's maritime statecraft extends well beyond traditional security considerations. Its influence is increasingly visible in strengthening regional economic resilience, supporting secure supply chains, facilitating energy security, encouraging sustainable use of marine resources, and reinforcing cooperative mechanisms for addressing emerging maritime challenges. These interconnected dimensions indicate that maritime strategy has become an important component of broader regional governance and economic stability, linking national security with long-term regional development. At the same time, the rapidly changing strategic environment presents new challenges that will require continuous policy adaptation. Intensifying geopolitical rivalry, technological disruption, cyber vulnerabilities, climate-related risks, and competition over critical maritime infrastructure are reshaping the character of maritime affairs across the Indo-Pacific. Addressing these challenges will require sustained investment in maritime capabilities, indigenous innovation, digital maritime technologies, institutional coordination, and stronger partnerships with regional and international stakeholders.

This study contributes to contemporary discussions on Indo-Pacific geopolitics by demonstrating that India's maritime statecraft should be understood as an integrated framework that combines security, diplomacy, economic policy, technology, and maritime governance. Such a perspective moves beyond conventional assessments that primarily emphasize naval power and instead highlights the multidimensional character of maritime influence in the twenty-first century.

Looking ahead, the effectiveness of India's maritime strategy will depend on its ability to maintain strategic flexibility while adapting to emerging geopolitical and technological realities. A coherent, forward-looking, and cooperative maritime policy will not only strengthen India's position within the Indian Ocean but also enable it to make a meaningful contribution to a secure, resilient, and sustainable Indo-Pacific order founded on international law, mutual cooperation, and shared prosperity.

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