Strengthening Delhi's Strategic Partnerships in the Indian Ocean

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INTRODUCTION

The Indian Ocean region (IOR) is a critical juncture of the wider Indo-Pacific. It is one of the most crucial trade corridors that links the Middle East, Europe, Africa, South Asia, and Southeast and Northeast Asia. As outlined by the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Indian Ocean is "[h]ome to nearly 2.7 billion people … carrying half of the world's container ships, one third of the world's bulk cargo traffic, and two thirds of the world's oil shipments."[1] After the Cold War, the Indian Ocean remained relatively peaceful, with minimal geopolitical competition. India and the United States have been the primary actors in the theater and largely accepted each other's presence and operations. After the Cold War, Washington welcomed a greater Indian role, with then–U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates encouraging India to be a "net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond."[2] However, as China continues to expand its presence and deepen its engagements across the Indo-Pacific, there is a new geopolitical competition emerging in the Indian Ocean. While India perceives a growing Chinese presence as competition to its strategic and security role in the IOR, Beijing is determined to stake its claim and emerge as a key player in the IOR. This ambition feeds into China's larger objective of becoming a global maritime power.

India has a vital interest in the Indian Ocean, and as one of the IOR's most prominent resident naval powers, its role in the IOR has been critical to maintaining peace and security. As China continues to expand its engagements and presence across the IOR, Delhi is beginning to review its maritime engagements and policies.[3] Much of Delhi's advantage is rooted in geography and operational experience, whereas it suffers from serious capacity constraints. Should China manage to find the means and ways to sustain itself in the region and gain experience operating there, it will be able to quickly overcome India's advantages. Given that neither India nor China is looking to engage in a military conflict to establish dominance, strategic signaling, positioning, power projection, and enhanced operational capabilities will be key to enabling India to maintain a favorable position in the IOR in the next decade or so.

As India continues to modernize its military, engaging with key partners will strengthen its ability to address emerging threats and China's expanding presence in the IOR. This paper first explores India's current approach to IOR chokepoints and how Delhi can leverage strategic partnerships to shore up its advantages in the IOR. It then identifies presence, maritime domain awareness, strategic

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[1] Indian Ocean Rim Association, "About IORA," iora.int, www.iora.int/en/about/about-iora.

[2] Robert Gates, "America's security role in the Asia–Pacific" (Shangri-la Dialogue, Singapore, May 30, 2009), https://archive.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1357

[3] For a brief summary of China's deepening engagements in the IOR, see David Brewster, "China's New Network of Indian Ocean Bases," The Lowy Interpreter, The Lowry Institute, January 2018, www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/chinas-new-network-indian-ocean-bases, and Darshana M. Baruah, "India in Maritime Asia," in *Realising the Indo-Pacific: Tasks for India's Regional Integration*, ed. Gorden Flake et al. (Perth: Perth USAsia Centre at The University of Western Australia, June 2017).

collaborations, innovation, and nontraditional threats as the key areas where India can maximize its maritime partnerships to prepare for, deter, and respond to a more assertive China in the IOR.

INDIA'S CURRENT APPROACH

The Indian Navy places great importance on the Indian Ocean's many maritime chokepoints. These are among the most strategically valuable chokepoints in the world, as they are crucial for access and transit to critical markets, partners, and regions. The Indian Navy lists the following chokepoints as its primary areas of interest, which highlights the need to control and deny these access points to an adversary in times of a conflict.[4]

- Malacca and Singapore Straits: link the IOR to the South and East China Seas and the Western Pacific.
- Indonesian straits of Sunda, Lombok, and Ombai Wetar serve as alternate routes to the Indian Ocean from the Pacific Ocean and an especially critical route for submarines, which can transit submerged and undetected.
- Strait of Hormuz: connects the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman in the Middle East to the Arabian Sea, opening to the Indian Ocean.
- Bab-el-Mandeb: connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden, opening to the IOR.
- Suez Canal: connects Europe to Asia via the IOR.
- Mozambique Channel: serves as an alternate route to the Suez Canal as well as for vessels transiting the Cape of Good Hope to Asia, Australia, and beyond. It is also strategically important for access and presence in the waters off the eastern coast of Africa.
- Cape of Good Hope: serves as a traditional shipping route that is still used by large vessels unable to transit the Suez Canal.

The Indian Navy lists "presence" as a key element of its defense strategy. The Indian Navy's 2015 *Maritime Security Strategy* (*MSS*) states, "In times of heightened readiness or conflict, for conduct of maritime operations, sea lines of communication (SLOCs) would acquire increased importance, both for India and the adversary, necessitating measures for protection and interdiction respectively."[5] In times of conflict, SLOC protection is a critical mission to ensure continuity in military reach, national trade and insulate the economy from the direct consequences of war. During peacetime, Indian naval presence along these SLOCs and international shipping lanes is an important contribution to greater regional stability. To protect these strategic foci and deploy effective A2/AD during conflicts, the Indian Navy must be able to maintain its presence across key chokepoints and be aware of all developments in and around the SLOCs. While not all of the chokepoints are geographically close to Indian maritime assets, to exert credible influence, the Indian Navy needs to maintain its presence across key chokepoint in the IOR at all times.

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[4] Indian Navy, "Ensuring Secure Seas: India's Maritime Security Strategy," October 2015, https://web.archive.org/web/20190213081137/https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf.
[5] Indian Navy, "Ensuring Secure Seas," 29.

Following the 2015 *MSS*, the Indian Navy began executing mission-based deployment (MBD) in mid-2017 with an aim to increase visibility and presence across the IOR.[6] The MBD concept deploys mission-ready ships at seven key locations in the IOR, overseeing all entry and exit points in the region. As per the operational deployment, an Indian naval ship is always present near the Straits of Malacca, in the north Bay of Bengal and Andaman chain of islands, between North Andaman and South Nicobar, near the Strait of Hormuz and north Arabian Sea, near the Gulf of Aden connecting the Bab-el-Mandeb, in the South Indian Ocean between Maldives and Sri Lanka, and in the Southwest Indian Ocean off Mauritius and Seychelles.[7] Such deployments allow Delhi to increase its visibility, create domain awareness, and respond to threats and challenges quickly. MBD also strengthens India's role as a net security provider.

While MBD has allowed the Indian Navy to increase its presence, sustainability is also critical for effective deterrence and signaling. Given the pace of geopolitical developments in the IOR, India will feel the need to increase and sustain its presence across the IOR within the next decade or so. The scope and mandate for MBD is vast. Being constantly present across key chokepoints in the IOR requires considerable resources and investments. Although the Indian Navy has been able to maintain a presence across the identified areas in the IOR, it must also be able to sustain this presence while carrying out operations and missions it has envisioned in its MBD policy. India can leverage its maritime partnerships to bolster its presence, operations, and engagements across the key checkpoints. India's official foreign policy does not allow overseas bases, although its Navy requires access to logistics facilities closer to its area of operations to effectively carry out missions. Logistics facilities strengthen the Navy's ability to deliver its objectives and protect its strategic goals. These facilities are also essential for sustaining the air accompaniment required to bolster the navy's ability to respond to threats as well as gain maritime awareness. Logistics facilities in the vicinity of these chokepoints will become crucial for the Indian Navy.

STRENGTHENING INDIA'S PARTNERSHIPS FOR A MORE SUSTAINABLE PRESENCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

India must look to its strategic partners for the logistical support and access points necessary for sustained presence and operational capacity to advance India's strategic goals in the IOR. In return, as a net security provider, India can take the lead in maintaining a rules-based order addressing common challenges and securing overlapping interests of a more-distant France, Japan, and Australia, and an over-extended America. Now that India has signed logistics exchange agreements with France and the United States, it must find ways to sign similar agreements with other strategic partners in the region such as Australia and the United Kingdom and to maximize opportunities to boost its presence and create advantages in the IOR.

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[6] Press Information Bureau, "New Mission-Based Deployment concept to result in greater presence and visibility in IOR – Admiral Sunil Lanba, CNS," Government of India, Ministry of Defence, October 2017, http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=171983.

[7] Sujan Dutta, "Indian Navy informs government about the fleet's reoriented mission pattern," *The New Indian Express*, April 2018, www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2018/apr/01/indian-navy-informs-government-about-the-fleets-reoriented-mission-pattern-1795404.html.

As the geopolitical competition with China continues to intensify within the IOR, Delhi will require access to partners' military logistics facilities to sustain a naval presence across key parts of this vast geography. Delhi draws a distinction between overseas bases (which it does not allow on principle) and logistics facilities (which it would be open to sharing or establishing).[8] While India irons out the mainly political- and capital-related challenges in setting up new logistics facilities, it can certainly gain from leveraging the facilities of its international partners.

France is a key partner for operations along the western Indian Ocean and the eastern coast of Africa. With its overseas territory of La Reunion and military presence in Djibouti and Abu Dhabi, Paris provides access to three key chokepoints.[9] While India's access to French bases in Djibouti and Abu Dhabi will require the additional consent of the host nations, the French overseas region of La Reunion already provides strategic access over the southwest Indian Ocean and the Mozambique Channel. Deploying India's maritime reconnaissance aircraft and P-8Is from France's base in La Reunion would help the Indian Navy boost its presence in the western Indian Ocean and the eastern coast of Africa, currently a weak point in India's presence and operations.

Similarly, the United States has a presence in Bahrain and Diego Garcia—strategic points in the IOR. If India is able to gain access to these facilities through its partners, it can conduct critical surveillance, monitoring, and reconnaissance missions through its P-8I engagements. Strategic islands such as the Andaman and Nicobar chain and Diego Garcia provide significant advantages to the Indian and U.S. Navies. The two countries can leverage their mutual use of the P-8 to strengthen their partnership through mutually agreed access to these facilities. While both sides' political will to open up these strategic islands to one another might be low, Washington and Delhi stand to benefit significantly, especially in bolstering maritime domain awareness (MDA) capabilities. India and the United States perhaps could use the opportunity of the Malabar exercises, an annual U.S.-India-Japan military exercise, to fly their respective P-8s between Andaman and Nicobar Island, Diego Garcia and possibly Okinawa. Such exercises will not only demonstrate the significance of collaborative MDA missions, but also provide the opportunity to build trust and deepen such strategic collaborations.

India should also look to make a logistics agreement with Japan. While Tokyo has a limited presence in the IOR, an agreement between India and Japan would strengthen each other's presence beyond their current maritime peripheries. An agreement with India would allow Japan to strengthen its humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and allow for increased general operational capacity in the IOR should Tokyo wish to deepen its engagements there. Similarly, Tokyo could provide for a more sustained Indian presence in the East and South China Sea. Moreover, a logistics agreement between Tokyo and Delhi could allow for Indian missions in the Taiwan strait through Okinawa—an opportunity to cause further maritime dilemmas for Beijing.

Similarly, a logistical agreement with Australia could prove beneficial for India, given their presence in the Southern Indian Ocean. Through its possession of the Cocos Keeling Islands, Australia can

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[8] C. Raja Mohan, "As Beijing races ahead in quest for a military footprint, Delhi has some catching up to do," *The Indian Express*, May 7, 2019, https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-china-military-foreign-military-bases-us-5713727.

[9] Namely, the Mozambique Channel, Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz.

provide access to the Indonesian straits, overseeing the waterways linking the Pacific to the Indian Ocean. France and Australia also share a maritime boundary in the Southern Indian Ocean which could provide opportunities for strategic collaborations between Paris, Canberra, and Delhi in the Indian Ocean region.

While engaging with major powers to leverage their presence in the IOR, India must also place an emphasis on working with smaller island partners such as Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, and Comoros, and on maintaining ties with neighboring Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Despite being smaller, these islands nations sit critically across key SLOCs. Engagement and collaborations with island nations will be critical for the Indian Navy in shaping a favorable maritime environment in the Indian Ocean. Equally important would be engagements with strategic partners such as Indonesia, Singapore, and Myanmar in creating a friendly maritime environment in India's neighborhood.

INDIA'S WAY FORWARD

Although initially slow to act, Delhi has been able to quickly revise its policies and renew its engagements and presence in the IOR. One of the critical changes in India's maritime engagements has been realization of the importance of partnerships. As India picks up its pace, primarily in response to the rise of China in its neighborhood, it must leverage its partnerships to address new and emerging challenges to shape a maritime environment that is conducive to its strategic interests. MDA, intelligence sharing, the use of technology in the maritime domain, and proactively addressing nontraditional threats are the key areas that will shape India's broader role in the Indo-Pacific and its ability to influence a changing security architecture.

1. Maritime Domain Awareness

MDA has become a critical element of India's naval thinking on both deterrence and conflict strategies, and this section discusses how, looking forward, India's naval advantages hinges on its ability to develop and leverage more robust MDA and intelligence sharing agreements. The Indian Navy defines MDA as a "need for situational awareness at sea, and is used in the modern sense as an all-encompassing concept. It involves being cognizant of the position and intentions of all actors, whether own, hostile or neutral, and in all dimensions—on, over, and under the seas."[10] The ability to monitor the IOR's entry and exit points would lend the Indian Navy and its partners the advantage of being aware of all movements, especially those of sub-surface vessels, and allow their respective navies to reposition, deploy, and respond to emerging threats or challenges.

But MDA requires a vast mandate that is difficult for a country to achieve alone. Even the U.S. Navy relies on its partners and allies for effective MDA. Alone, it is impossible to monitor all aspects of vast spaces. However, through engagements with partners and strategic collaborations, MDA becomes a critical tool in conflict and deterrence strategies.[11] India can significantly improve

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[10] Indian Navy, "Ensuring Secure Seas: India's Maritime Security Strategy."

[11] MDA is generated via a number of ways from ships, to radars, surveillance patrols and satellites, to name a few. The ability to track and monitor submarines will be the key area in MDA in the next few years. It is not hard to track surface vessels, but tracking submarines is particularly challenging, especially in open seas.

its MDA through three key mechanisms: strategic positioning, access to partners' facilities, and more robust intelligence sharing agreements.

First, an Indian presence at key locations such as the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, La Reunion, and Cocos Keeling would allow for effective monitoring and surveillance of key chokepoints. This presence is crucial in India's quest to remain a leading power in the IOR. Although India does carry out patrolling and monitoring missions, it is fairly limited overall and strongest in the northern and eastern Indian Ocean and along the Straits of Malacca. To extend and strengthen its maritime influence, Delhi must be able to operate in a similar manner across all the key chokepoints it considers crucial.

Second, India must also be able to leverage its partners' facilities to strengthen its MDA. For instance, through its strategic partnerships, India could one day deploy its P-8Is—the navy's formidable platform for anti-submarine warfare; anti-surface warfare; and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR)—between La-Reunion (France), Diego Garcia (U.S./UK), Andaman and Nicobar (India), Cocos Keeling (Australia), and Okinawa (Japan). Maritime patrols could be conducted from Djibouti to Duqum (Oman) and Abu Dhabi (UAE), provided India has access to partner facilities. Such engagements would allow Delhi to signal intent, show force and presence, and generate MDA over a large area covering key sub-regions and critical chokepoints.

Third, while India has signed several white shipping agreements—or information network protocol that allows two countries' navies to share information and monitor movements at sea of commercial maritime traffic—there is a need to strengthen intelligence sharing with key Indian partners. Such intelligence sharing will allow India to respond appropriately to PLA incursions in its neighborhood and develop policies to address emerging threats and challenges in the maritime domain.

Intelligence sharing through MDA partnerships based on a burden sharing model between India and its partners is India's best bet to maximize its strategic partnerships in the IOR. Currently, Delhi has limited agreements allowing for the sharing of sensitive and classified information. Although India might exchange such information on an ad hoc basis, the need for formal arrangements will emerge rather quickly. India must work to finding ways to exchange such information with the Five Eyes intelligence sharing pact, France, and Japan. India should also work with the United States to place a liaison officer at the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) in Hawaii; such an arrangement could support better understanding of opportunities for deeper strategic collaboration. Australia, France, and Japan already have military representatives at various levels throughout INDOPACOM. An Indian Naval officer would allow for closer interactions and understanding of missions and operations of its partners in the IOR and the wider Indo-Pacific. The liaison position would also facilitate a better understanding and more efficient implementation of necessary platforms and mechanisms to strengthen maritime partnerships.

Finally, India could also couple maritime MDA with space-based MDA partnerships in which countries like Japan and France can play leading roles. The importance of satellites as an additional source of MDA has increased in the recent past. Given the vast areas that need to be covered by MDA, satellites can play a critical role in addressing information gaps. India continues to discuss such collaborations with its partners that have expertise in this domain. In 2018, India and France signed an

agreement to jointly launch satellites for MDA in the IOR.

2. Information Fusion

In addition to more comprehensive intelligence sharing partnerships, effective MDA requires collating the data collected to present a reliable, real-time picture, otherwise known as information fusion. This requires information fusion centers—multilateral or interagency maritime data information sharing hubs—to extract relevant data from thousands of sources into one coherent picture based on real-time movements and developments across the area. As India continues to build out the Information Fusion Center-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR)[12] it launched in 2018, it must work out the modalities of sharing information with partner countries and using the available data. Many of India's partners are also part of groupings such as the Five Eyes and can share critical lessons on operations, data dissemination, and technical know-how with the Indian Navy. Additionally, Delhi must work with the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC) hosted in Madagascar and the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) in Singapore. Together with the IFC-IOR, these three centers can effectively cover the IOR. Information sharing through fusion centers and white shipping agreements would also allow for experiences and build trust on intelligence sharing.

3. Technological Innovation

While presence, training, exercises, and MDA are the more pressing and visible areas for growth in India's maritime partnerships, there is a need for collaboration and investments in research and innovation. Technology in the maritime domain—whether artificial intelligence, robotics, unmanned underwater vehicles, big data analytics, or surveillance capabilities, investment and collaborations on defense technology, research, and innovation—will be a critical component for maritime defense. For instance, MDA requires fusing several large data sets to create one operating picture. Experience and practices developed in other fields of big data analytics, from businesses to local governments, can be applied to the maritime domain as well.[13] Similarly, the use of technology in surveillance and monitoring will boost MDA efforts.

The United States, Japan, France, Canada, and Singapore, as leaders in research and innovation in emerging technologies, could partner with India in applying these technologies to the maritime domain. India already collaborates with most of these countries on science and technology, and it must now explores the application and viability of some of this work to the maritime domain. Engaging with nations beyond the traditional IOR actors could be useful. Canada has made significant efforts in using new technology to address security concerns in the maritime domain to research and conduct surveillance missions in the difficult terrains of the Arctic and Antarctic. It might be worth exploring and borrowing from Canada's experience using technology to access and conduct missions

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[12] Press Information Bureau, "Raksha Mantri Inaugurates Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR)," Government of India, Ministry of Defence, December 2018, http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=186757.

[13] Andre Dupuis and Maria Rey, "Leveraging Technology Trends for Maritime Domain Awareness," Vanguard, March 2018, https://vanguardcanada.com/2018/03/12/leveraging-technology-trends-for-maritime-domain-awareness/.

in complex situations.

4. Non-traditional Threats

India can also apply its technological collaboration in the maritime domain to non-traditional security challenges. Most littoral and small states near critical chokepoints and strategic access ways in the IOR are primarily concerned about non-traditional threats.[14] Countries from Mauritius to Madagascar grapple with the inability to protect and monitor their coastal waters, which leads to illegal fishing and negatively affects their economies. Additional challenges include drug smuggling, human trafficking, and natural disasters. Innovation and technological developments for effective monitoring of fish stocks, combating illegal fishing, advancing the blue economy, and fielding disaster warning systems are top priorities for many IOR states.

India should place equal importance on non-traditional security challenges and become a leader in providing solutions to the region. For example, it can partner with Japan to build infrastructure and provide training for effective response to natural disasters. Similarly, Delhi's global initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure provide excellent opportunities and frameworks for substantial collaborations with islands states addressing their security concerns. In its effort to address non-traditional threats, Delhi must also leverage its partnership with the European Union, which is already engaged with a number of capacity building initiatives in the region—including blue economy development—and looking to collaborate with Delhi in the Indian Ocean.[15]

For India, it is not enough to engage islands with strategic potential only for access and traditional security collaborations. To keep these critical chokepoints and waterways stable, open, and free, Delhi must understand and acknowledge the security threats these nations face. Indeed, island nations in the IOR are more likely to cooperate with India strategically if New Delhi also addresses their security needs, which are distinct from great-power competition.

CONCLUSION

As Beijing continues to pursue its great power ambitions, India-China competition will increase across the IOR. To secure its own strategic interests and sustain a key role in the IOR, India will have to maintain its geographic advantages in the maritime domain. An increased and sustained presence in the IOR accompanied by effective MDA will boost Delhi's ability to address new security challenges in the region and provide a security framework for the IOR. Given Beijing's rapid

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[14] Small island nations have always been at the forefront of non-traditional security threats such as climate change and illegal fishing. They also advocate the use of blue economy to address economic challenges and for sustainable development as changes in the ocean directly affect their livelihood and economy. See United Nations Development Programme, "Small Island nations at the frontline of climate action," September 2017, www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/news-centre/news/2017/09/18/small-island-nations-at-the-frontline-of-climate-action-.html.

[15] The European Union through its initiatives such as CRIMARIO and MASE is engaging with the island states of the Western Indian Ocean to strengthen Maritime security. For further information, please see, European Union External Action, "Program to Promote Regional Maritime Security (MASE)," August 18, 2016, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/8407/program-promote-regional-maritime-security-mase_en; and "CRIMARIO: CMR Wider Indian Ocean 2015/2019," https://criticalmaritimeroutes.eu/projects/crimario.

progress in its maritime capacity and capability, India should leverage its partnerships while developing its own capabilities to maintain a favorable maritime environment as well as its advantages in the IOR.