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India's evolving role as the ‘net security provider’ of the Indian Ocean region [version 1; peer review: awaiting peer review]

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Abstract

The unveiling of the Indo-Pacific strategy by USA has clubbed the two separate worlds-The Pacific and the Indian Ocean region- together, mingling the geopolitics of the two regions. This is done in the context of the growing maritime role of China along with her growing naval potentials. On the other hand, India, considered an important partner of the Indo-Pacific geopolitics, is lately taking extra care about her maritime interests in her immediate maritime neighbourhood, the Indian Ocean region (IOR). This activeness can be credited to the ‘Chinese intrusion’ in the Indian maritime neighbourhood. The role of India as the ‘net security provider’ of the IOR is resurfacing in the strategic corridors of New Delhi in the context of India’s unveiling of the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) mission and her growing active role in the bilateral as well as multilateral maritime relations. In this context it becomes imperative to analyse the character of India’s Indian Ocean policy in retrospect in order to construe India’s potentials and preferences in the current Indo-Pacific geopolitics where she is undoubtedly an important player. India has been playing the role of net security provider of the IOR for quite some time now. Initially taking a non-combative defensive approach to the issue throughout the 1960s, India gradually turned assertive in the 1980s to safeguard her interests in the maritime zone. India, who inherited the baton from the British, was in two minds over how to maintain the dominance. Shedding off defensive mood, she turned assertive later to safeguard her interest in the IOR against ‘external intrusion’. After the Cold War, India shifted to collaborative approach without compromising with her prime Indian Ocean policy motto to maintain her pre-eminence in the region.

Keywords

net security provider, Indian Ocean Region, India, maritime strategy, diplomacy, influence
Introduction

The question of security is integral to the international relations theory where the conventional concept of security has the state as the main referent. Barry Buzan, while taking holistic approach towards security concept, argues that the obvious threats that causes concern the most are the military threats which underline the basic duty of the state to protect its citizens. There is another dimension to the security concept which is the regional security. This concept highlights the fact that a group of states’ primary security concerns are linked together sufficiently. Such concerns require collective action. However, the conventional viewpoint about collective action focuses on the role of a hegemon who can provide security to the weaker components, while the later deliberations assume that hegemony is not essential to realization of collective actions. India’s aspired role as ‘net security provider’ of the Indian Ocean region (IOR) turned from dominant hegemonic to benign cooperative with time.

Addressing the United Nations (UN) Security Council under India’s month-long presidency in August 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi reiterated India’s role as the ‘net security provider’ of the IOR. Back in 2013 the then Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh had claimed similar role for India in the region. Thus India has been promoting herself as a maritime security guarantor of the neighbourhood for almost a decade now. However, India’s activeness in the maritime domain is intriguing given her traditional land-oriented strategic outlook. Historically sea never posed any threat to India. Even the mighty sea-force of the nineteenth century, the British, had to develop a land-oriented defence strategy for their Indian empire against the Russians and to lesser extent the Chinese. After the power transfer in 1947, India inherited this land-based defence strategy with the emergence of arch-rival Pakistan since 1947 and following the Chinese invasion from across the Himalayas in 1962. Therefore, the Indian Army has quite logically absorbed the maximum of the defence allocations with the navy left behind as a ‘Cinderella force’ (denoting that Indian Navy has been subject to remiss treatment). But with time the decision makers in New Delhi realized the growing importance of India’s maritime neighbourhood and have gradually developed specific strategies for the IOR in the form of Indian Ocean naval symposium, Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), Colombo Security Conclave and the latest being Indo-Pacific division in the External Affairs Ministry of the Indian government. It appears that India’s vigour in its maritime neighbourhood is a recent development and that her sense of responsibility towards the region as a ‘security provider’ is also a recent realization. Given the conventional land-oriented defence policy of New Delhi, this conclusion is natural. Such a conclusion, however, triggers question whether India contemplated any role as ‘security provider’ in the IOR before. David Brewster opined in an article that; “In the coming years, India’s greatest strategic challenge in the Indian Ocean region may not be the development of power projection but the quality of the strategic relationships that it can build in the region. The extents to which India will be recognised as a regional leader depend on these relationships.”

India has attempted to play the role of security provider in the IOR since 1970s which has undergone through several stages. Given her geographical location at the centre of the maritime body it was unlikely for India to remain indifferent to the maritime geopolitics for long. However, with India’s land-oriented security priority, it would be interesting to learn the method of such maritime involvement. Initially taking a non-combative defensive approach to the issue throughout the 1960s, India gradually turned assertive in the 1980s to safeguard her interests in the maritime zone. The aim of the article here is to evaluate India’s role as ‘net security provider’ of the IOR, if any, in the context of her diplomatic history since 1947.

Why the Indian ocean?

Even being a ‘continental power’, India’s central location in the IOR has made the maritime zone and the prosperity and security of India integral to each other. From India’s perspective, the accessibility of the Indian Ocean to the large fleets of the world’s powerful states, the large Islamic populations settled all around the Indian Ocean, the oil wealth of the Gulf region, and the importance of the key straits of the region all have deep impact on India’s physical as well as economic security. Therefore, maintaining influence over this maritime zone is vital for India’s survival. In 2003, then Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said that “India’s security environment ranges from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca across the Indian Ocean…”

K.M. Panikkar’s vision of India in the IOR

The need for India to be the security guarantor of the IOR can be well understood in reference to K.M. Panikkar’s celebrated book ‘India and the Indian Ocean’, first published in 1945. The significance of the book lies in the fact that the author here underlined the economic and strategic importance of IOR to India; “Her (India) national interests have been mainly on the Indian Ocean over which her vast trade, has for most part, found its way to the marts of the world all through history.”


2 Marianne Stone, Security According to Buzan: A Comprehensive Security Analysis, Security Discussion Papers Series 1, Columbia University, School of International Public Affairs, New York, USA, 2009, p.4


strategic importance of the maritime zone to India is underlined by Panikkar as; “A true appreciation of Indian historical forces will show beyond doubt, that whoever controls the Indian Ocean has India at his mercy.”

Panikkar can be termed as the Indian Mahan who, like the American naval strategist Alfred Mahan, gave immense importance to the sea control asserting that “The future of India will undoubtedly be decided on the sea.” He also said, “It is indissolubly connected with the developments in the Indian Ocean.” Panikkar insists the future Indian administration to focus on the IOR without relying on the British naval protection (as the sole ‘net security provider’ of the maritime region until 1967) and learn to shoulder the responsibility in the IOR to safeguard Indian freedom.

The navy played a significant role in last world war at the dusk of which Panikkar was writing his book. The Second World War (WWII) showed the command of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) in the IOR whose seizure of the Andaman Nicobar Islands of India, following the occupation of the Southeast Asian region, gave Tokyo command of the eastern Bay of Bengal. The fall of Singapore to the Japanese forced the British Royal Navy to shift its base to Ceylon (modern day Sri Lanka) but the gradual expansion of the Japanese to the IOR in 1942 had jittered the British, who feared their ability to control sea communications in the Indian Ocean was under threat.

Panikkar was writing his book in the context of this episode. Thus, referring to the security of the Indian Ocean as important for ultimate prosperity of India he opined, “The bare facts of the last war have proved this beyond doubt.” Panikkar related the security of the Indian Ocean to India’s ultimate prosperity:

“No industrial development, no commercial growth, no stable political structure is possible for her (India) unless the Indian Ocean is free and her own shores fully protected.”

The strategic importance of the Indian Ocean to India in respect to threats to India was highlighted by Panikkar referring to the naval muscle flexing of Japan in the just concluded war expressing concern that “challenge may come more easily from the East than from the West.” In the context of the Japanese intrusion in the IOR during the war in 1942, Panikkar said that the security of the Indian Ocean, which existed for over 150 years (1784–1941), “has been completely shattered by events of the last few years.” Given the Japanese rise during the war, Panikkar focused on the impending threat from the Pacific region; “Today Pacific is as important as the Atlantic.”

Panikkar’s book can thus be considered as the earliest document on the ‘Indo-Pacific’ geo-strategy where he was focusing on the strategic security of India in the Indian Ocean keeping the developments in the Pacific in mind. He was urging the Indian administration to “stand forth and shoulder the responsibility of peace and security of the Indian Ocean” to safeguard her freedom.

India as ‘security provider’ of IOR during the cold war

The end of the British rule in the Indian subcontinent expedited the winding up of the British presence in the IOR through the East of Suez policy in 1967 under which the British decided to withdraw military bases from Southeast Asia. By then Britain transferred power to Ceylon (1948), Kenya (1963), and the Maldives (1965) while Malaysia and Singapore were also freed of British rule by 1965. Logically, India was a natural choice to replace Britain in the IOR being the largest country with largest navy in the region. In fact, Indian leadership has always considered India as central to the IOR, both geographically as well as geo-politically. India’s first premier Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru underlined this fact as:

“Look at the map. If you have to consider any question affecting the Middle East, India inevitably comes into the picture. If you have to consider any question concerning South-East Asia, you cannot do so without India.”

Indeed, the Indian Ocean has always occupied a central position of India’s maritime strategic thought since 1967. Yet, India could not take the central role in the region immediately. As David Brewster clarifies, “After independence in 1947, India saw itself in a leadership role in the Indian Ocean, but was severely constrained by its lack of economic and military power.” Firstly, the land oriented external (Pakistan and China) and internal security threats (insurgencies) since 1947 absorbed India’s military spending on land-oriented security. Secondly, the presence of the British Royal Navy in the Indian Ocean kept presumably New Delhi in a nonchalant mode. Finally, the international situation in the IOR till the end of the 1960s did not raise much concern in Indian strategic mind seemingly due to presence of a familiar naval force in the neighbourhood.

Besides, power transition theory argues the need for a ‘dissatisfied rising power’ (dissatisfied with the hierarchical international
power structure) expediting the power transition did not match with India. India, traditionally being a status quo power, had no problem with the British Royal Navy’s presence in the region. Therefore, India did not aspire to replace the British in the IOR even after transfer of power in 1947 since she could neither afford to do so nor had any urge. Actually, the continued presence of the British Royal Navy did not trigger any ‘security dilemma’ (term used in realist thought) for India after 1947 and thus there was no need to alter the situation. On the contrary, with maritime zone secured, India could concentrate on her security threat emanating from across the land borders, at least until the 1960s.

**USA ‘intrusion’ in the IOR**

It is argued that power transition theory has concentrated more on violent means of the power transition like war and less on the peaceful means. Scholars propagating the peaceful means of transition of power argue that peaceful transition is possible if the dominant and the emerging power agree on the arrangement and the legitimacy of the international order.21 The USA (the emerged dominant power since the WWII) agreed with Britain on the emerging post-war international order where the Soviet threat was hovering around. Britain and the USA agreed to counter this ‘evil force’. With the waning of the British power, London found in USA a natural partner who could take up its baton to safeguard the interest of the ‘free capitalist world system’.

The reason for this dependence on USA, apart from shared economic outlook, was the rapid advancement of American naval potentials. Within decades since the last world war scientific achievements in nuclear propulsion and submarine launched ballistic missile (SLBM) preparations led to necessary perfection and sophistication. The USA went ahead with the programme of nuclear propulsion for surface vessels and submarines and experimented with guided missiles fired from naval vessels. By 1954, the US Navy had a few cruisers and destroyers with surface guided missiles. The USA also had Talos anti-aircraft missile with a range of 65 miles and could carry a nuclear warhead. The first nuclear-powered submarine, the Nautilus, was ready by 1955. During the first half of the 1960s, USA achieved leadership in three systems: nuclear propulsion, guided missiles and submerged-launching of the missiles.22 Thus, the USA, by 1960, was much further ahead in naval modernisation when the Soviets were yet to start their naval modernisation programme.

With this naval modernisation, the USA embarked on global naval expeditions with ‘Operation Sea Orbit’ in 1964 where three nuclear-powered surface vessels, Enterprise, Long Beach, and Bainbridge started a long cruise of 30,000 miles on 31st July 1964 from the Mediterranean to USA circling Africa, touching Karachi (Pakistan) while crossing the Indian Ocean to proceed to Australia, and then reaching Norfolk in the USA after 57 days.23 Meanwhile the USA decided to send a part of her Seventh Fleet operating in the Pacific to the Indian Ocean, as was reported in December 1963, to confront China. It was also decided around November 1963 that a separate Indian Ocean Command would be formed.24 Thus, gradually the British were moving out of the scene making the place for the Americans. In other words, power in the IOR was getting transferred from the British Royal Navy to the US Navy in a peaceful manner. The best articulation of this geopolitical reality was the leasing out of British Diego Garcia of the Chagos Archipelago of the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) to the Americans in 1971 to construct a naval base which ultimately came up in 1977.

**India’s policy towards USA ‘intrusion’**

India’s initial reaction to the USS fleet’s entry in the IOR was not much confrontational. On the contrary, addressing the Indian Parliament’s Lower House Lok Sabha on 19th December 1963 Prime Minister Nehru implied his government’s endorsement of the US entry in India’s maritime neighbourhood; “All that we need to say today is that outside the territorial waters of India, the Ocean is naturally open to them (USA) as to the naval vessels of any other country.”25 When asked whether India would protest to the USA, the premier laconically said, “If the thing is obviously to our detriment, we protest. If it is not, we do not.”26 Even when the US task force ‘Concord Squadron’ was cruising in the Indian Ocean in April 1964, Nehru expressed his regret over presence of ships armed with nuclear weapons in the Indian Ocean but refused to lodge a protest but assured that India would not allow the ships to enter India’s territorial waters.27 It is obvious that Nehru was well aware of India’s limitation in confronting a mighty naval power like USA given her weak naval prowess but that Indian government did not consider this ‘US intrusion’ as any threat cannot be ruled out either. Besides, presumably India was not in mood to confront the USA who, along with other Western powers, was a major help to India confronting the Chinese invasion in 1962. In fact, during the conflict, a part of the USA Seventh Fleet was ordered to sail to Bay of Bengal but before it could cross Malacca Straits the conflict ended and it was called back.28 Actually, India, till the 1960s, was not considering playing the role of security guarantor in the IOR given firstly her naval weakness and thus secondly her preference for diplomatic manoeuvre to handle any unpleasant situation.

Although nonchalant regarding threats from the sea, Indonesia, a maritime neighbour in the east, did send ripples in the strategic deliberations of India once. During the 1965 Indo-Pak war,

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23 ibid, p.23
24 ibid, p.24
25 ibid, p.24
26 ibid, p.24
27 ibid, p.25
28 ibid, p.24
Indonesia offered help to Pakistan and the Indonesian Navy Chief Admiral Martadinata even proposed to Air Marshal M. Asghar Khan of Pakistan that Indonesia could occupy Andaman and Nicobar Islands of India located in the Indian Ocean-Bay of Bengal region for Pakistan. Earlier, the Indonesian Navy had changed the name of the Indian Ocean to ‘Indonesian Ocean’ in July 1963 “in accordance with the wishes of President Soekarno” which posed no threat but carried immense political connotations for India.

Initially India relied on diplomacy to manage the politics of the IOR, choosing not to be confrontational in any situation. In fact, this was in national interest of India. India’s prime security threat was land oriented. Compared to that, these hiccupcs in the sea were minor disturbances. Paying attention to these sea-borne issues would have stymied India’s land-oriented security deliberations regarding Pakistan and China, which would have been detrimental to India’s national security. In a way this Indian Ocean policy of India in the 1960s can be viewed through a defensive realism theory prism which encourages the state to support the status quo as against expansionist policy which is rarely mandated. In fact, India in 1971 was inclined to combat the militarization of the maritime zone through diplomatic means via the UN. In the ministerial meeting of the non-aligned countries at New York in September 1971 it was decided that a proposal should be put forward at the United Nations’ 26th Session to declare Indian Ocean as zone of peace, as was resolved in the Lusaka Non-Aligned Summit Resolution of 1970. The proposal was put forward by Sri Lanka. Indian representative at the UN General Assembly supported the Sri Lankan initiative. India had reason to be concerned because, along with the USA, the Soviet Union was also getting active in the IOR in the late 1960s. Soviet interest in the eastern waters was reflected in their strategic publication Military Strategy of 1967 which mentioned Soviet interest in South and Southeast Asia, and that Soviets were looking for new facilities for Russian naval vessels along the shores of the IOR. In February 1968 the Soviet Naval Chief, Admiral Gorshkov, visited the Indian naval establishments in Bombay (Mumbai) and Visakhapatnam while in the following month a Soviet flotilla called at a number of ports in India, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Somalia, and South Yemen. India’s concern for stability in the Indian Ocean region emanates from her concern for an unhindered petroleum supply from the littorals of the maritime zone-the Persian Gulf, West Asia, Northeast Africa, and Indonesia-who together hold about three-fourths of the known oil deposits of the world.

### India’s IOR security concern since 1971

The 1970s saw a change coming in India’s Indian Ocean security outlook as a result of change in India’s relations with the West. By the early 1970s, major developments such as the rapport between the USA and China, the US support to Pakistan during Indo-Pak war of 1971, and gradual closeness between India and the Soviet Union had an impact on India’s Indo-US relations. Also, India’s concern over Britain’s arms supply to South Africa (whose internal apartheid policy India had protested against) was iterated clearly by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at the Lusaka Conference of Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) held in September 1970. India suspected such arms supply would encourage South Africa to annex other territories and would threaten South Africa’s neighbours and the IOR. She underlined that NAM countries (including India) would like the Indian Ocean to be an area of peace and cooperation. She also objected to military bases of outside powers in the region which, she said, would create tension and great power rivalry, “We would like the Indian Ocean to be an area of peace and cooperation. Military bases of outside powers will create tension and great power rivalry.”

India’s relaxed approach towards her maritime neighbourhood was galvanized during the 1971 war with Pakistan. The war marked a deep scar in India-US relations. But more importantly the entry of the USS Enterprise, a Seventh Fleet carrier group with atomic-powered bluff, in the Bay of Bengal on December 15, 1971, a day before Pakistan had surrendered to India, had shaken the strategic outlook of India towards the IOR at its root. It is worth mentioning here that then US President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger were thoroughly against India’s Pakistan policy. Indian military commanders, although rightly doubted the USA’s intention to open war against India, however feared that the Seventh Fleet could break India’s blockade of Pakistan by coming between the Indian Navy and the land. Vice Admiral N. Krishnan who was leading India’s eastern fleet during the war feared that the Enterprise would do this in Chittagong. Ultimately, the Seventh Fleet did not do anything but that its mere presence had sent ripples in the Indian government was clear from the statement of none other than the Prime Minister herself; “Naturally if the Americans had fired a shot, if the Seventh Fleet had done something more than sit there in Bay of Bengal...yes, the Third World would have exploded.” India’s political leadership was, nonetheless, sure that the USA would not attack India given

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30 *The Hindu* (Madras), July 23, 1963, p.1
34 ibid
37 cited in ibid, p.315
the assurance New Delhi received from Moscow’s ambassador that the Soviet fleet in the Indian Ocean would not allow the United States to intervene. In fact, President Nixon was also not in favour of any naval combat with India either despite Pakistan dictator General Yahya Khan’s insistence.

The entry of the US carrier in India’s maritime vicinity triggered huge uproar in India taking already existing anti-Americanism to a new height. The newspapers were hollering against the ‘intrusion’ while opposition parties in the Indian Parliament insisted that the Indira Gandhi government must denounce the USA. But more than all these, the entry of USS Enterprise in the Bay of Bengal exposed the vulnerability of India’s maritime security in the IOR and boosted suspicion regarding the presence of big powers (USA in this case) in the region. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) secret report of 1972 underlined that the Seventh Fleet’s entry in the Indian maritime zone had exposed, according to the mood in India, the USA’s complicity with Pakistan against India which would hinder improving relations with USA “for some time to come.” However, the Enterprise was not the only reason which forced India to look to her maritime security interests. According to another CIA secret report of 1988 India was concerned about impending entry of ‘outside powers’ in the IOR since UK’s withdrawal decision in 1971. The subsequent events of the Arab oil imbroglio, the Iranian Islamic revolution, and the Iran-Iraq war had increased strategic importance of IOR to the ‘outside powers’ triggering instability in the region. India’s effort to thwart such a scenario through diplomatic means like supporting the UN Indian Ocean Zone of Peace proposal having failed, India, the report informed, was pursuing naval and other military modernization and expansion programmes to improve (in the USA's opinion) India’s regional position.

India’s security provider role in 1980s

In the subsequent years India’s Indian Ocean policy would shift from a defensive mode to an offensive one unveiling her offensive ‘security provider’ role. John Mearsheimer’s realist theory argues that states must maximise their relative power since the international system is anarchic in character and survival is the prime goal of states who cannot be sure of other states’ intentions. India had now embarked on a similar mission of naval modernisation given the growing possibility of instability in the IOR compounded by the experience during the war of 1971. India was now actively engaging in the IOR as security guarantor against “external intrusion” to extend her pre-eminence in the region. According the 1988 CIA report Indian officers interpreted the USS Enterprise episode “as a form of interference India would challenge in future.” The report further intimated the Indian government’s plan to defend India’s offshore territories of Andaman, the Nicobar Islands, and Lakshadweep especially following the ‘undefended’ Falkland Islands conflict between Argentina and Britain in 1982. The 1988 CIA report read that “India’s prime regional goal is to assert its pre-eminence over other Indian Ocean countries-those along the littoral and island states.” This underlines India’s assertive or offensive realist approach to the IOR in the post-1970 era, especially in the 1980s. In 1983 India was almost on the verge of undertaking an operation, ‘Operation Lal Dora’ (which ultimately did not materialise due to differences over the execution of the operation between the army and navy) to end the political crisis in Mauritius which resulted into communal clashes endangering ethnic Indians there. Instead, India undertook a successful diplomatic mission to settle the crisis in Mauritius by enthroning pro-India Anerood Jugnauth, who previously had requested for India’s military assistance to thwart any coup, to presidency. India in 1986 had secretly intervened in Seychelles to salvage the regime of President Albert René from a series of attempted coups. Seychelles was in the radar of both the USA and the Soviet Union, the former already had a small satellite tracking station there and was willing to establish a base reducing over-dependence on Diego Garcia while Moscow wanted to evict USA to have its naval base in the country. To beset the coups, René turned to India calling her ‘the awkward grandfather of the region’ although India initially declined to commit any intervention but continued with its defence assistance to the tiny Indian Ocean country. In 1986, being informed about an impending coup, India undertook an operation codenamed ‘Flowers are Blooming’ with the INS Vindhyagiri anchored in Port Victoria for 12 days and quashed the attempted coup. India’s expedition in Maldives (Operation Cactus, 1988) was meant to rescue the Gayoom regime from a coup (as requested by the Maldivian President Mamoon Abdul Gayoom) staged by Tamil militant mercenaries from Sri Lanka. India’s final external

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42 ibid. p.1
43 ibid.
44 Cited in Jenny Edkins, ‘Poststructuralism’, p.18
46 ibid’, p.1
47 ibid, p.2
49 David Brewster, Commodore Ranjit Rai (rtd), Flowers are Blooming: Story of the Indian Navy’s Secret Operation in Seychelles, https://www.academia.edu/7698363/Flowers_Are_Blooming_the_story_of_the_India_Navys_secret_operation_in_the_Seychelles (accessed on 23.10.2021), p.58
50 ibid, p.59
51 ibid, p.61
52 For details of the operation see Sushant Singh, Mission Overseas: During Operations by Indian Military, New Delhi, Juggernaut Books, 2017, pp.13–76
India’s Indian Ocean missions of the 1980s highlight India’s assertive realist approach to safeguard her interests in the maritime zone. India was already on a mission to establish herself as the ‘net security provider’ of the IOR to keep the region within her sphere of influence. During this time India was also stretching her strategic and diplomatic tentacles in the Indian Ocean region and was diverting from India’s long opposition to military interventions outside of South Asia. Former Indian Navy Chief Admiral RH Tahiliani commented at the time: “We must take the responsibility that size imposes on us, without having any hegemonistic aspirations. Coming to the help of a small neighbour is a responsibility…. ”54 In 1986 India even set up a satellite tracking station in Mauritius.55 Also New Delhi’s concern was Mauritius drifting away from Indian influence sphere to either US or Soviet camp. Indian involvement in Sri Lanka was directly linked to India’s internal Tamil politics as well as maintaining influence over the island country. Besides, it is worthy to note that leaders of the small Indian Ocean countries had relied on India as a saviour and considered her a major player in the regional affairs. Initially inclining towards non-assertive diplomatic posture in the 1960s, India gradually undertook an offensive realist approach in the 1980s to safeguard her maritime neighbourhood interests which were well displayed in her aforementioned naval and diplomatic missions in the Indian Ocean countries. The 1988 CIA report highlights India’s growing involvement in the IOR in the 1980s stating: “In our judgement, New Delhi over the last few years has been assuming a more paternalistic role toward Indian Ocean states and trying to cultivate their support for its regional policies. India is becoming more involved in the affairs of these countries by expanding diplomatic ties and increasing commerce, security training and ship visits. We believe New Delhi hopes its expanded presence will help counter, if not supplant, foreign involvement in the region.”56

The report clearly underlines the Indian Ocean policy of India was to thwart any ‘foreign intruder’ from entering in the maritime zone and instead establishing herself as the ‘net security provider’ of the region. The provision in the India-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987 gave India veto power against foreign ship visits and communication facilities in Sri Lanka.57 This provision highlights India’s strategic objective to keep the IOR free of any foreign interference in the concluding decade of the Cold War era. This was India’s assertive diplomatic move to safeguard her interest in the region against the power rivalry of the Cold War period ensuring her influence in the IOR. India’s aforementioned missions in the Indian Ocean countries strengthened India’s defence and diplomatic relations with them.

**India as security provider in the post-Cold War era**

Since the end of the Cold War in 1992 changes came in India’s Indian Ocean policy with India adopting a collaborative outlook towards the maritime zone altering her previous ‘exclude the foreign intruders’ approach. This was well depicted in the conduct of first ever Malabar naval exercise with USA in 1992 between the Indian Navy and the US Navy in the Indian Ocean, off the Malabar coast of India. It is worthy to note here that the end of Cold War power tussle had also established the USA as the sole superpower with an omni-presence all over the world. On the other hand, India lost a major strategic ally in the demise of the Soviet Union and thus had to reconstruct her foreign policy accordingly. India’s approach towards the USA was undergoing encouraging changes since Rajiv Gandhi became prime minister in 1984 which was later reflected in India’s permission to allow US military aircraft to refuel at Bombay’s international airport en route from the Pacific to the Persian Gulf during the first Gulf war of 1990. This, although done secretly, was disclosed later which triggered a huge uproar in India.58 In 1995 India inaugurated the Milan biennial naval exercise with Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and Sri Lanka with Bangladesh and Malaysia joining in 1997. These exercises underlined the collaborative approach of India’s Indian Ocean policy in the 1990s. Indeed, it was a departure from the offensive realist approach that India undertook during the 1980s with the possibility of a power tussle disappearing with the end of Cold War but, at the same time, pursuing the policy to secure regional interest through collaborative means. Apparently, it was an idealist approach of collective security through collaboration in place of assertive or offensive realist approaches of domination. With the chronic economic crisis in the early 1990s at home, India altered her net security provider policy from assertive to a collaborative mechanism. The collaborative mood of India was reflected in the foundation of Indian Ocean Rim Association in 1997 to encourage socio-economic cooperation among the regional countries.

**Net security guarantor in the new millennium**

By the dawn of the new millennium, India was emerging as a major player in the Asian economic platform following

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53 For the details of the operation see ibid, pp.79–148.
54 cited in Brewster, Commodore Ranjit Rai (rtd), *Flowers are Blooming*, p.60.
55 ‘India’s Navy and its Indian Ocean Strategy: Pursuing Regional Predominance, An Intelligence Assessment’, Project Number NESA 1188 88, NESA 88-10036, June 1988, Directorate of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, p.4
56 ibid, p.2
57 ibid, p.2
economic liberalisation since 1991 and here the maritime zone played the most important role. As India’s commercial contacts with the world increased, the IOR also gained importance in the strategic deliberations of India. Such deliberations were less combative and more collaborative in character as reflected in the unveiling of Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in 2008 by India. Inaugurated with the Maldives and Bangladesh, the group expanded with the inclusion of countries from across the maritime zone, from Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Mozambique, and South Africa in the west to Singapore, Thailand and Timor Leste in the east in 2014. Currently it has 24 members.

The growing emphasis on economic potentials of the maritime neighbourhood to Indian decision makers was reflected in the national maritime policy since 2004. It emphasised harnessing the maritime potential of the country while the National Maritime Development Programme (envisaged by India’s Shipping Ministry in 2005) rolled out a detailed action plan for marine sector development to sustain economic growth. Some 276 projects were undertaken under this programme between 2005 and 2012 including construction/upgradation of berths, deepening of channels, rail/road connectivity projects, equipment upgrades/modernisation schemes, and other related schemes for the creation of backup facilities. All were meant to boost India’s maritime economic capacity in tandem with India’s economic growth. For this tranquil IOR was needed since commercial activities can only be performed in a conflict free zone. Thus, peace and tranquillity are very essential in the Indian Ocean region for India’s commercial interest because more than ninety per cent of India’s trade is maritime in character. The IONS had been a facilitator in this requirement; such collaborative outlook was the result of India’s growing maritime economic activities in the new century.

On the other hand, the Indian Navy continued with its activities in the region such as with the 2008 beaching operations in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, naval exercises with Singapore (SIMBEX) and France (VARUNA), overseas deployment in the Gulf of Aden, South Indian Ocean, and Malacca Straits, and providing assistance to cyclone-hit Myanmar. These activities of the navy are meant to support India’s policy towards these regional countries. These activities were part of India’s naval diplomacy which is part of India’s larger foreign policy goal facilitating closer relations with the maritime neighbours. Apart from this the naval exercises like Malabar and Milan continued which kept the Indian navy’s combative mood alive.

**Strategic outlook of the Indian Ocean policy**

The fact that India is a maritime nation as well as a land power took time to be construed, although India’s activities during the 1980s in the IOR reflected her naval potential and diplomatic skill. India’s growing economic activities enhanced her maritime outlook since the 1990s. Located astride vital shipping lanes, India occupies a dominant maritime position in the IOR. No regional organisation here can exclude India. Therefore, India is present and active in many regional organisations of the IOR like the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and lately Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (colloquially called QUAD, is a grouping of USA, India, Japan, and Australia). However, there was no initiative for formulation of a national maritime strategy for long. The Indian Navy, on its own, came up with a strategic vision in 2006 whose declassified version was titled ‘Freedom to Use the Seas: India’s Maritime Military Strategy’. In 2009 the Indian Navy published the Indian Maritime Doctrine which gave the detailed account of the Indian navy’s maritime strategic outlook. It read:

“The Indian Maritime Doctrine focuses on the application of naval power across the spectrum of conflict, including war, less than war situations and peace. It reflects on the concepts, characteristics and context for employment of combat power at and from the sea. It is aimed at evoking a common understanding amongst all stakeholders in the development and employment of India’s military power, so as to unite their actions in support of India’s national interests and national security objectives.”

The doctrine here reflects a combative offensive realist mood to safeguard India’s national interest and security in this maritime region. In his forward note to the doctrine, India’s then Navy Chief Admiral Suresh Mehta also clarified that, “As the country (India) advances on the path of socio-economic growth, India cannot afford to be complacent about the emerging security environment and related security challenges, particularly in the IOR and in our extended neighbourhood.” It implied the need for India to be self-reliant in safeguarding her maritime economic interests. Such a mood reflects the offensive structural realist theory which emphasizes on the maximisation of the relative power of the state in the uncertain international environment.

However, the fact that India still wanted to pursue a collaborative strategy in the IOR was underlined in the promulgation of the SAGAR maritime doctrine. Denoting the Hindi term for sea, SAGAR stands for ‘Security and Growth for All in the Region’. The doctrine was unveiled first by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015 while visiting the Indian Ocean countries articulating India’s emerging Indian Ocean strategy. The doctrine is meant to seek a climate of trust and transparency; respect for international maritime rules and norms by all

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63 ibid

64 Jenny Edkins, *Poststructuralism*, p.18
countries; sensitivity to each other’s interests; peaceful resolution of maritime issues; and increase in maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean region. The Prime Minister very rightly acknowledged that, “India is becoming more integrated globally. We will be more dependent than before on the ocean and the surrounding regions.” It is worth mentioning here that back in 2011 India’s then Defence Minister A.K. Antony said that the Indian Navy has been mandated to be the ‘net security provider’ to island nations of the IOR. This underlined the latent offensive realist mood of India’s IOR strategy.

Nevertheless, India embarked on active diplomatic mission to ensure her influence in the regional politics of the Indian Ocean. Prime Minister Modi’s visit to the Indian Ocean countries of Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka in 2015 reflected the emerging Indian Ocean diplomatic vision in India’s strategic circle. The editorial of ‘The Hindu’ newspaper wrote:

“Prime Minister Narendra Modi has used his visits to Seychelles and Mauritius — besides Sri Lanka — to enunciate a proactive vision of India’s interests and responsibilities in this sensitive region. It is indeed the clearest expression yet by an Indian leader of what the Indian Ocean and the region around it mean for Delhi.”

India’s gradual formulation of a distinct Indian Ocean strategy was underlined in 2014 when she hosted the third National Security Adviser (NSA) level meeting between India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives on March 6, 2014, in New Delhi which was attended by Mauritius and Seychelles. This underlined India’s aspiring active role as a security provider of the IOR more assertively in the emerging geopolitics. This was further established with the formation of the Colombo Security Conclave with Sri Lanka and Maldives in 2021 to discuss security of the IOR. The conclave was attended by Mauritius, Bangladesh, and Seychelles as observers. The NSA Trilateral Meeting of India, Sri Lanka, and Maldives have now been taking place since 2011 and was renamed as the Colombo Security Conclave with a Secretariat in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo. Here it is worth mentioning that this is not first such regional collaborative framework. During the early period of the Cold War era, India along with Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Indonesia, Burma (Myanmar), and Pakistan founded a group called the Colombo Powers following a conference in Colombo on April 28, 1954, with an objective of regional collaborations by regional countries, independent of external powers’ interference, an initiative that unfortunately got overshadowed by Cold War politics. Today, India is again heading such initiative through which she intends to maintain her influence in the Indian Ocean regional geopolitics, especially with the growing ‘intrusion’ of China. The cooperative frameworks are meant to promote the ‘net security provider’ role of India in her maritime neighbourhood.

**Net security provider against Chinese expansionist design?**

Although a distant threat, China has the potential to be a challenger to Indian aspirations in the IOR. Like India, China’s economy also depends on the free sea lanes of the maritime zone. China’s heavy dependence on an oil supply from the Gulf make the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean vital for Beijing, along with her seaborne trade. Indian policy makers have been concerned about the alleged ‘string of pearls’ under which China is developing seaports around India, from Pakistan to Myanmar via Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. On the other hand, the growing ‘intrusion’ of Chinese vessels undertaking operations and survey of the Indian Ocean seabed, close to the Indian waters, have jittered strategic thinkers in India. Conversely, China’s anxiety about India’s Colombo Security Conclave manoeuvre was reflected in the ‘Global Times’ in the following lines: “As a regional power, India can guarantee the interests and security of smaller countries around it in some ways. But by wooing these countries into certain mechanisms, India is also forcing them to take sides, something that many of these countries are trying to avoid.” Clearly, China is apprehensive about India’s Indian Ocean strategy. This unease was further enhanced with the gradual development of the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy.

The Indo-Pacific mission is a geopolitical game to thwart the expansion of China, both territorial and influential. The 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategic Report of the U.S. Department of Defense reads that Indo-Pacific region spans ‘from west coast of the United States to western shores of India.’

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70 ‘Ensuring Secure Seas, p.8


73 Subhadeep Bhattacharya, ‘Countering China: India’s Pacific Predicament’ Stosunki Międzynarodowe International Relations nr2 (t.56) 2020, p.22
a responsibility-sharing mission of the USA to contain the expansionist design of China in the Pacific and the IOR taking the China-wary countries of the region on board. India is considered a major help in this mission given her centrally located position in the IOR. India’s Ministry of External Affairs also established a new Division for the Indo-Pacific in April 2019 to help consolidate India’s vision of the Indo-Pacific across Government of India. However, India’s priority lies with the Indian Ocean more than on the Pacific to counter any Chinese diabolical scheme. Following the tension with China in the post-Galwan clash in 2020 in the Himalayas, India deployed large number of frontline vessels in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands near Malacca Straits to send a clear message to China, according to top defence sources of the country. Also, the naval focus is expected to have only in the IOR which can be accomplished by a combination of smaller ships, submarines, good information, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) and missile systems. That India’s priority lies with the Indian Ocean was implied by Ram Nath Kovind, the President of India and the Commander-in-Chief of the three services, when he said that the prompt and effective deployment of the Navy in the time of crisis has underscored the country’s vision of being the ‘preferred security partner’ and ‘first responder’ in the Indian Ocean region. India is claiming herself as the ‘net security provider’ of and a ‘reliable partner’ in the IOR.

Conclusion
India has been playing a security providing role in the IOR since the 1970s. This role has undergone several stages. Initially taking a non-combative defensive approach to the issue throughout the 1960s, India gradually turned assertive in the 1980s to safeguard her interests in the maritime zone. India by then was influencing the smaller countries of the region through military and political assistance to establish her dominance over the maritime region. This was to thwart the external (or US) influence in the region at the cost of her own. Such aggressive approach receded with the end of the Cold War although the Indian aspiration to remain the most pre-eminent in the IOR remained unaltered. Today, with the growing challenges of Chinese intrusion and the fast-changing geopolitics of the region with US-led Indo-Pacific geo-strategy, IOR is turning into a hotspot of geopolitical game. India, still with a land-oriented defence priority, is pursuing an assertive realist approach to thwart the Chinese challenge in the IOR through active collaboration with like-minded countries (through regional organisations) as well as combative preparation (through naval exercises, acquiring and manufacturing aircraft carriers, destroyers, armed drones etc.). QAUD, IONS, IOR-AC, and the Colombo Security Conclave all underline a collaborative mode of India to maintain her pre-eminence in the IOR given her weak naval potentials and land-oriented security compulsions.

Nevertheless, the Indian government has increased its navy’s share in the budget allocation for the financial year 2022–23 by 44 per cent with the motto to strengthen the navy. This increase is aimed at buying new platforms and improving operational and strategic infrastructure in order to build a credible maritime force. Besides, India is set to commission her first indigenously made aircraft carrier Vikrant (another carrier Russian-made Admiral Gorshkov, renamed INS Vikramaditya, is already in operation) in 2022 which is currently undergoing sea trials. Indeed, if India wants to play the dual role of emerging as a reliable partner of the Indo-Pacific geopolitical game as well as a ‘net security provider’ in the IOR amidst China’s rise, investing in her navy is sine qua non. Actually, both the missions are intertwined. Indo-Pacific geopolitics is aimed against Chinese expansion which requires formidable contribution of the partners, both physical as well as diplomatic. China is growingly considered as a potential naval threat to the ‘free maritime world’ of the Pacific (East and South China Sea) and the IOR (China-financed ports in the region). Mere diplomacy is not enough to counter this challenge without supportive naval might. India is gradually acknowledging this condition. The increased budgetary allocation for the navy is attributed to concerns about China.

India’s current Indian Ocean policy is to emerge as a reliable ‘net security provider’ in the IOR by augmenting her naval potentials and promoting maritime diplomacy hand in hand. At the same time India wants to be part of the growing Indo-Pacific geopolitical structure in the maritime zone, of which QUAD is a part, aligning with other China-wary countries with vested interests in the IOR. Such alliances would certainly act as a pressure point for China by creating an alternative to the Chinese economic-strategic mission of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, it would be interesting to see what policy India adopts in case the Indo-Pacific geopolitics takes a confrontational turn in future vis-à-vis China in the IOR.

Data availability
All data underlying the results are available as part of the article and no additional source data are required.

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