ESSAY

India’s evolving role as the ‘net security provider’ of the Indian Ocean region [version 2; peer review: 2 approved with reservations]

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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\(^1\) 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 concern the most are the military threats which underline the basic duty of the state to protect its citizens.\(^2\) 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.\(^3\) Back in 2013 the then Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh had claimed similar role for India in the region.\(^4\) 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.”\(^5\)

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

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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.

Kenneth Waltz said, “The character of international system depends upon the number of great states that exist, the capabilities with which they are endowed, the ambitions they may entertain and the nature of relations among them.” Indeed, the international system is run by the inter-state relations of the great powers mainly while the small and medium powers are either spectators or pawns. India, since emerged as a sovereign state, attempted to challenge this norm, mainly in her neighbourhood. Initial character of India’s foreign policy reflected the notion of liberal internationalism emphasizing on establishment of peace and peaceful settlement of disputes like in Indochina (today’s Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) as well as recognition of right to self determination reflected through India’s fight for decolonisation of Afro-Asian countries. However, India’s policy towards her immediate neighbourhood mirrored a defensive realist approach which seeks to maintain status quo. This approach was visible both in conducting her relations with her overland neighbours and, as we will see in the following paragraphs, co-existing with the Royal Navy in the Indian Ocean maritime zone. In fact sovereign India never attempted to overhaul the system founded and established by the British colonial rulers in the Indian sub-continent and its neighbourhood but only re-enacted it in the post-partitioned South Asia. However, the international environment is not static and keeps on altering with time. John Mearsheimer’s realist theory projects international system as anarchic with states never certain about other states’ intentions and thus tend to maximize their powers to survive. India’s IOR policy, as we will see, turns from defensive realist to offensive realist asserting her dominance in the maritime zone, augmenting not combative but diplomatic power.

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.” The 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. He attached sustenance of India’s freedom to her active role in the IOR as a security provider.

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)...

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8 Kenneth N. Waltz, Realism and International Politics, New York, Routledge, 2008, p. 123
8 Ibid, p.18
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. 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

17 ibid, p.85
18 ibid, p.85
19 ibid, p.90
20 ibid, p.90
21 ibid, p.91
22 Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s Foreign Policy: Selected Speeches, September 1946-April 1960, New Delhi, The Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt of India, 1961, p.22
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. 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. 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. 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.” 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.” 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. 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. 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, 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 hiccups 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

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26 ibid, p.23

27 ibid, p.24

28 ibid, p.24

29 cited in ibid, p.24

30 ibid, p.25

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31 ibid, p.24


33 *The Hindu* (Madras), July 23, 1963, p.1


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 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 Pak dictator General Yahya Khan’s insistence.

The entry of the US carrier in India’s maritime vicinity triggered huge uproar in India taking already existent 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

37 ibid
40 cited in ibid, p.315
41 ibid p.315
42 ibid, p.314
‘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.46

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.47 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.”48 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 1982.49 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.”50 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.51 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.52 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.53 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.54 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.55 India’s final external military expedition was in Sri Lanka (Operation Pawan) between 1987 and 1990 to neutralize the Tamil militant outfit of Sri Lanka’s Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Unfortunately, the mission turned into a fiasco with the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) being withdrawn after losing 1,155 men and the Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi, whose government launched the operation, later being assassinated in a suicide attack in 1991.56

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.....”57 In 1986 India even set up a satellite tracking station in Mauritius.58 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

46 ibid
47 Cited in Jenny Edkins, ‘Poststructuralism’, p.18
49 ibid’, p.1
50 ibid, p.2
52 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_Navy_s_secret_operation_in_the_Seychelles (accessed on 25.10.2021), p.58
53 ibid, p.59
54 ibid, p.61
55 For details of the operation see Sushant Singh, Mission Overseas: During Operations by Indian Military, New Delhi, Jagannurt Books, 2017, pp.13–76
56 For the details of the operation see ibid, pp.79–148.
57 cited in Brewster, Commodore Ranjit Rai (rtd), Flowers are Blooming, p.60.
58 ‘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
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.”

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. 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. 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 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 marine 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

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60 ibid, p.2

61 ibid, p.2

The growth of 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 tranquility 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 theIOR 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, 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 maritime 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 realism 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 seas, 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 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

65 ibid
66 ibid
67 Jenny Edkins, Poststructuralism, p. 18
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 leading 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?

Speaking at London’s King’s College seminar, Zhou Pu, a senior fellow at China’s Tsinghua University’s Centre for International Security and Strategy, prophesied that China’s naval activities in the Indian Ocean will increase ‘in frequency.’ He even warned that if New Delhi views the Indian Ocean as the “Great Ocean for Hindus” or India as the “Net Security Provider” for the Indian Ocean, friction and even violence between the two sides are likely. This statement underlines the fact that although a distant threat, China is a future 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.’ This is basically 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...

73 Ensuring Secure Seas, p.8
75 Ibid
78 Subhadeep Bhattacharya, ‘Countering China: India’s Pacific Predicament’ Stosunki Międzynarodowe International Relations nr2 (t.56) 2020, p.22
79 Ibid, p.21
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.80 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.81 India is claiming herself as the ‘net security provider’ of and a ‘reliable partner’ in the IOR.82

It is a fact that during President Xi’s decade old tenure China has built world’s largest navy and revamped world’s biggest standing army. Such initiatives have sent ripples around China’s neighbourhood forcing the neighbours rush to keep pace with the Asian giant.83 On the other hand the Galwan episode84 has galvanized the Sino-India relations which since late 1980s were gradually reset (following the 1962 Chinese invasion of Indian borders along the Himalayas and subsequent decades of coldness in relations) into a ‘workable decent relationship’, to quote the Indian foreign minister.85

India has blamed China for disregarding the border agreements with India and underlined it was not directed towards any country. Presumably, none, including Japan, was ready to rankle China at that time. In fact, no defence role was considered for Quad in its first meeting. Australia wanted to limit the initiative to trade and culture while the Indian prime minister Dr. Manmohan Singh emphasized that Quad carries ‘no security implications’.86 In fact, Australia, India and USA were eager to assure China that Quad did not imply ‘axis of democracies’.87 So, phase 1 pursued ‘hide your power, bide your time’ strategy. The time came soon. Along with growing assertive territorial claim against Japan in the East China Sea since 2010 China’s pernicious strategic design transcended her immediate maritime boundary acquiring Australia’s Darwin port on 99-years’ lease in 2015 and opening a military base in Djibouti, Africa in 2017.

India’s association with US-led Quad had been intermittent in character. Given the traditional ‘non-aligned’ approach of her foreign policy, India found it difficult to ally smoothly with the US-led strategic manoeuvre like Quad, more because the other partners of the grouping are traditional US allies. Indian establishment has been wary about any US initiative because throughout the major part of the Cold War period Indian policy makers had viewed US actions with askance. This apparent anti-US mentality has its origin in the

80 ibid, p.23
85 Transcript of Interview of External Affairs Minister at India Today Conclave, 2021 (October 8, 2021), Media Center, Ministry of External Affairs, Govt of India, October 9, 2021., https://www.mea.gov.in/interviews.htm?dl/34366_Transcript_of_Interview_of_External_Affairs_Minister_at_India_Today__Conclave_2021_October_08_2021 (accessed on 06.10.22)
88 Ibid
US-China rapprochement in the 1970s. A secret report of India’s External Affairs Ministry of the time clearly stated that Sino-US working relationship “is likely to work to our detriment...”92 Subsequently, USA was being viewed no less than an enemy of India by the policymakers in New Delhi. India for long could not come out of this allergy against USA. And there was consistent political pressure, especially from the left parties, which restricted any strategic business with the sole super power.93 Therefore, India initially was hesitant entangling with the Quad scheme. This was also to do with India’s consistent foreign policy to refrain from associating with any particular power equations and promote multilateral set up, especially in Asia. The officers in New Delhi are inclined to balance powers and create a multipolar Asia and do not endorse US goal to remain pre-eminent in East Asia.94

However, there was keen interest among some of the Quad members to associate India with this covert anti-China mission in the Indo-Pacific region. When Japanese premier late Shinzo Abe visited India in 2007, he addressed the Indian Parliament emphasizing on the necessity of cooperation between the two countries. Referring to India as a maritime state, he said,

“...both India and Japan have vital interests in the security of sea lanes. It goes without saying that the sea lanes to which I refer are the shipping routes that are the most critical for the world economy.....The question of what Japan and India should do cooperatively in the area of security in the years to come is one that the officials in charge of diplomacy and defence in our countries must consider jointly. I would like to put that before Prime Minister (Manmohan) Singh for his consideration.”95

Clearly, this was a direct appeal to India to join the emerging maritime geopolitics in a new maritime avatar. The Japanese prime minister directly appealed India to join Japan along with United States and Australia as part of ‘broader Asia’, an open and transparent network ‘spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean’.96 This was an effort on the part of the Japanese leader to pull India into the emerging maritime geostategic manoeuvre.

Although not so directly, the United States had also hinted her desire to see India involved in USA’s grand design to engage with East Asia. Addressing the Indian Parliament in 2010, then US President Barack Obama said,

“More broadly, India and the United States can partner in Asia. Today, the United States is once again playing a leadership role in Asia — strengthening old alliances; deepening relationships, as we are doing with China; and we’re reengaging with regional organizations like ASEAN and joining the East Asia summit — organizations in which India is also a partner. Like your neighbors in Southeast Asia, we want India not only to “look East,” we want India to “engage East” — because it will increase the security and prosperity of all our nations.”97

It was only Australia who initially was the odd man out. While visiting Beijing in 2008 Australian foreign minister Stephen Smith assured Chinese leadership that his country will pull out of Quad and also was quoted saying that Australia wants to keep India out from such initiative.98 In fact then Kevin Rudd government was in a mission to defuse tension between Australia’s major defence ally USA and her major trading partner China and even proposed for an Asia Pacific Community for the purpose which was shot down by USA.99 However, change in the mood in Canberra was sensed with the advent of new government under Julia Gillard. The Joint Statement issued on the occasion of the visit of the Australian premier to India in 2012 said,

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The direct mention of Quad, however, was conspicuously absent. It is noteworthy here that Australia remained aloof of the trilateral naval exercise Malabar among India, USA and Japan since Prime Minister John Howard’s time after China issued diplomatic demarche in 2007 to the Malabar participants.101 However, during Gillard’s time Australia ramped up defence cooperation with USA. Under Gilliau’s government military cooperation between the US and Australia was upgraded to a new level as outlined by the 2007 Canberra Defense Blueprint.102

The Quad initiative finally took off with India shedding off her initial hesitation following her growing friction with China since 2014. Like others, India encountered growing Chinese challenges like in South Asia through ostentatious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) connectivity mission (unveiled in May 2017) challenging India’s sovereignty over Pak-Occupied Kashmir (PoK) as part of China-Pak Economic Corridor (CPEC, since 2013), blocking Indian initiative to sanction terrorist Hafeez Sayeed via UN Security Council since 2010 and also India’s entry in Nuclear Suppliers’ Group apart from growingly nibbling Indian territory at the Sino-India border. The Doklam clash of 2017 gave a jolt to India-China relations when the Indian Army and the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) scuffled following the destruction of the Indian bunkers by the PLA on the Indian side of the border in Sikkim in June 2017. On the other hand, India was actively knitting her ‘counter China’ strategy by bidding to resist the Chinese BRI with Asia-Africa connectivity initiative with Japan since 2016103, pledging with USA to promote stability across Indo-Pacific region104 and underlining cooperation for peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific with Australia.105 In a way the field was getting prepared for a formal unveiling of Quad which, for India, was most likely propelled by the Doklam episode. India joined USA, Japan and Australia in November 2017 in Manila in a quadrilateral security cooperation dialogue (soon to be informally named Quad) which the Indian foreign ministry described as consultations over converging vision on common interests in the Indo-Pacific region.106

By associating with Quad India has availed herself with an opportunity to play a constructive role in the IOR in association with other players. However, given her traditional non-aligned and non-militaristic foreign policy mode India was cautious not to display Quad as a combative force. Thus when China charged Quad as ‘Indo-Pacific NATO’107 India dismissed any perception likening Quad with the US-led North Atlantic combative defence force.108 This eagerness not to project Quad as a combative force underlines the latent uneasiness in the Indian establishment regarding the future role of Quad. Noteworthy, the other two partners of Quad, Japan and Australia, are traditional US defence allies when India is not. Even being part of the Quad India is keen to exercise her autonomous foreign policy. Thus, India conducted week long military drill hosted by Russia in September 2022 which China also participated in. Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary expressed serious concern regarding the exercise.109 India’s autonomous foreign policy exercise was also exhibited in her policy towards Russo-Ukraine war where India refrained from chastising Moscow despite US pressure and even kept on buying Russian oil notwithstanding US displeasure.

India certainly will not want Quad to be a NATO-like combative force but a cooperative platform of like minded countries who would thwart any Chinese dominance in the region through non-combative mode like fighting the Covid pandemic with supply of vaccines.110 In fact India is inclined to project any Indo-Pacific initiative, including Quad, as a non-military collaborative initiative to counter the non-militaristic Chinese design like vaccine supply, infrastructural investments and economic assistance to expand influence in the region. The decision of the Quad to counter China’s illegal fishing in the Indo-Pacific by using satellite technology


103 India-Japan Joint Statement during visit of Prime Minister to Japan, November 11, 2016, Media Center, Ministry of External Affairs, Govt of India, https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/27599/IndiaJapan+Joint+Statement+during+the+visit+of+Prime+Minister+to+Japan (accessed on 22.09.22)


105 India-Australia Joint Statement during State visit of Prime Minister of Australia to India, April 10, 2017, Media Center, Ministry of External Affairs, Govt of India, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28367/ IndiaAustralia+Joint+Statement+during+the+State+visit+of+Prime+Minister+of+Australia+to+India (accessed on 22.09.22)


111 ‘Quad meeting; Jaishankar underlines shared vision for free and open Indo-Pacific’, The Hindu Times, Feb 11, 2022, https://www.thehindu.com/reviews/2022/02/11/stories20220211045315.htm (accessed on 22.09.22)
to track illegal fishing in the Indian Ocean and South Pacific Ocean under Quad maritime security initiative underline the non-combative mode of Quad to counter the ‘China threat.’ The promulgation of Guidelines for the ‘Quad Partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) in the Indo-Pacific’ following the Quad foreign ministers’ meeting in New York on 23rd September 2022 also highlight the non-combative collaborative character of the grouping. The guidelines include coordination in disaster relief operations in the region, in crisis-response or post-crisis review phases of disaster response. There was no mention of China or even any combative approach in the guidelines.

India seems still cautious in framing her Quad policy in order to avoid any direct confrontation with China which might impact her security along the Himalayan border. Despite being aware of the knavish character and covetous mode of China’s border policy, India still wants to de-escalate the tension along the border through dialogue. India has been conducting talks with China at the military level since the Galwan episode and these talks yielded results when China agreed on disengagement in the area of Gogra Hot-Spring (PP-15) in eastern Ladakh which was conducted between 8th and 12th September, 2022. China also agreed to cease forward locations deployment in the region. Thus, India will opt for non-combative mode of Quad in order to keep the dialogue option open with China. At the same time she wants to keep the pressure on her giant Asian neighbour by aligning with the powerful China-wary countries with interest in the Indo-Pacific region which is equally vital for China.

However, USA sees the border conflict at the Himalaya as posing ‘two front problem’ for China who is busy with her maritime expansion mission, as was narrated by US Navy Chief Admiral Mike Gilday. It implies India can be helpful in opening a second front at the Himalayan border to distract Chinese concentration on the Pacific during the time of conflict. Such a strategic plan was also rolled out by former Pentagon official Elbridge Colby who said that India could draw China’s attention to the Himalayan border helping the US and Japan during the local battle over Taiwan even if she is unable to contribute directly to the war. Therefore, to Quad members, conflict at the Himalayan border can be a strategic help but probably at India’s cost. India has her own limitations aligning with any anti-China front and since the prime physical threat from China emanates from the land border, India might not agree to tinker with the border situation. If Quad members like USA or/and Japan think in this direction then it will not help India since it will not be prudent for India to promote the Quad’s maritime strategy at the cost of her stable land border. Thus India wants a non-combative Quad to avoid rankling China.

**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 hotbed 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.). QUAD, 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


113 Ibid


116 Ibid

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.118

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.

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The article aims to understand India's role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The author claims that unlike the recent renditions on India's role in the IOR, New Delhi has been actively contributing to the public good of securing the Indian Ocean since early 1970s. Taking an approach of linear historiography, the article demonstrates the evolution of India's security role in the Indian Ocean through the Cold War and the in the Post-Cold War period.

The article, however, given its reliance on secondary sources, does not challenge the conventional historical narrative of India's engagement with the great powers in the region. It would be valuable to acknowledge the challenges to this conventional narrative. The evolution of India's role in the northern Indian Ocean during the Cold War consisted of three distinct strategies. First, until late 1960s when US turned to China to balance the Soviet Union, New Delhi mainly bandwagoned with the Western naval powers in the Indian Ocean. Nehru declined to sign on to the commonwealth security pact with the British after India's independence, but the presence of friendly great powers – primarily the British and then the US – ensured India that threats from maritime domain will not materialize. A close reading of Panikkar would easily ascertain such a bandwagoning strategy where this famous maritime strategist openly canvassed with cooperative security with the Western naval powers. Military technologists such as PMS Blackett, whom Nehru involved extensively in deciding India's military expansion, suggested to keep India's Navy limited to coastal defence and depend upon Western naval powers in the Indian Ocean. Nehru declined to sign on to the commonwealth security pact with the British after India's independence, but the presence of friendly great powers – primarily the British and then the US – ensured India that threats from maritime domain will not materialize. A close reading of Panikkar would easily ascertain such a bandwagoning strategy where this famous maritime strategist openly canvassed with cooperative security with the Western naval powers. Military technologists such as PMS Blackett, whom Nehru involved extensively in deciding India's military expansion, suggested to keep India's Navy limited to coastal defence and depend upon Western Naval powers to tilt the balance of power in the IOR in India's favour. Post-1962 war with China, the US decision to establish an Indian Ocean Task Force (IOTF) in 1963 and British withdrawal from Suez, India believed that US would take upon the role of security guarantor from the British. India did not oppose the presence of great powers in the region, as it helped balancing China. Archival documents in the Indian archives show how India privately supported the taking over of Diego Garcia by the US and also how its undermined the Non-aligned agenda on Indian Ocean Zone of Peace (IOZP).

Only when the Americans, under Nixon and Kissinger, decided to abandon their post-1962 commitments that India decided to oppose American naval presence in the Indian Ocean and cozy up with the Soviets. The period beginning in 1970s, therefore, was one where India aimed to
balance the Western great powers through Soviet help but also through diplomacy. India started vehemently supporting the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace but only to limit the presence of great powers. The Indian strategy was to use IOZP to constrain the great powers while allowing its naval buildup to continue unabated. Therefore, when smaller regional powers such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka called for naval arms limitation among littoral countries, New Delhi opposed such any such linkages with naval arms control between the US and the Soviet Union. India's balancing diplomacy vis-à-vis the US naval presence also manifested in its new-found opposition to Diego Garcia and its approach to the third Law of the Seas Conference. The last phase of India's approach to the Indian Ocean region began in early 1980s as a response to rapid militarization of the Persian Gulf and the Western Indian Ocean by the Americans after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. India's response was highly forceful, as the author has noted but rather than a strategic logic, it was largely driven by the political ambitions of India's leadership primarily Rajiv Gandhi and the relatively benign fiscal position India found itself in the 1980s because of positive economic growth. The Americans, in the later half of the 1980s, also welcomed India's greater engagement in the region as they started viewing New Delhi as a collaborative partner in the Indian Ocean security. Washington therefore either remained neutral or encouraged India's interventions in Sri Lanka, Maldives and the Mauritius. New Delhi, too, believed that cooperation in the Indian Ocean region was one possible strategy to start a closer security relationship with the US. However, it was primarily possible because both sides acknowledged the diminishing role of the Soviet Union in their foreign policy priorities. In all, recent historiography has shown, why and how India was a net security consumer rather than a net security provider in the Indian Ocean region. The article however does not engage with such historical work. A list of my own relevant publications in this area are listed in the references, the author may find this as a useful starting point for addressing these concerns.

Even in the contemporary scenario, it is important to acknowledge that Indian Ocean remains a secondary arena for India as far as its security requirements are concerned, compared to the continental threats from the North and the West. Of course, the legend of being a net security provider in the IOR helps India's status and influence and it also helps to create diplomatic synergies with the Quad countries, but it is a strategic tool to further India's diplomatic and security interests rather than a strategic policy. The threat from the north will keep New Delhi away from ever realizing its full potential as a security actor in the Indian Ocean and rightly so. Naval power can be leveraged for influencing conflicts but the finality of victory and defeat is always tested on territory. India's leverage on the Indian Ocean and its role and status as a security actor in the Indian Ocean cannot influence the conflict with China on the Himalayas. The structural logic of India's security environment does not allow India to be a great naval power as is the case with Western democracies such as Britain and the US. Indian decisionmakers, notwithstanding Panikkar's oft-cited appeals, understand this dynamic very well.

Overall, the article provides a nice overview of India's role as a net security provider in the IOR. However, it would have been wonderful if the author would have explored how India's role and the perception of its role as a net security provider among the Quad countries and in the IOR is a strategy to achieve its immediate and long-term security interests across its northern borders. A brief discussion of the points outlined above would allow this essay to reach the standard required to pass peer review.

References:
Yogesh Joshi, "The Imperative of Political Navigation: India's strategy in the Indian Ocean and the
Logic of Indo-US strategic partnership," *US Naval War College Review*, Summer 2022, Vol. 75, No. 3 (Forthcoming)


**References**


**Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?**

No

**Is the work clearly and cogently presented?**

Partly

**Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?**

Partly

**Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?**

No

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Reviewer Expertise:** International Security, Indian Ocean History, Indian Foreign Policy, Nuclear Non-proliferation, Nuclear Strategy

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 01 August 2022
This paper methodically documents the history of India's Indian Ocean policy since independence in 1947. The author has systematically traced the landmark events and initiatives in the evolution of India's Indian Ocean strategy, which will be of value to the students of Indian foreign policy and maritime security.

However, I believe that the article will benefit from a more coherent theoretical introduction. The author’s principal argument seems to be that the Indian policy continues to be guided by offensive realist concerns despite a more collaborative turn since the early 1990s. This collaborative turn was initially a function of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dismal economic position India found itself in at the end of the Cold War. Later, China's rise and growing naval forays into the Indian Ocean have forced India to deepen the collaborative efforts in its maritime security policies.

While the author makes references to realism and its two other variants – defensive and offensive realism – the article lacks an overarching theoretical framework. Instead, the theory comes out in dribs and drabs. I would recommend that the author add a paragraph or two at the beginning to outline the theoretical underpinnings of his argument in line with the realist explanations offered in the rest of the article.

Having said that, this is a fairly solid paper that marshals a lot of relevant information to develop an interesting argument.

Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?
Yes

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?
Partly

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: International relations in the Indo-Pacific region; Chinese foreign policy; India's international relations; Sino-Indian relations; Australia-Asia relations; Indian Ocean security.
I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.