

Balancing the Seas: India's Response to Geopolitical Shifts in the Indian Ocean Region

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is of great importance to India, as nearly 90% of its trade by volume passes through the ocean. Therefore, ensuring maritime order and ocean security is crucial for India. The increasing geopolitical competition in the IOR, driven by China's rise and its growing relations in South Asia and Southeast Asia, threatens India's maritime security and ambition to be a regional hegemon. India is deepening its relations with the US and Southeast Asian states through its 'Act East' policy to counter China's expansion. To address this challenge, India is engaging politically, economically, and militarily by expanding trade, building infrastructure, conducting naval exercises, and establishing linkages with other states in the region. This paper utilizes the Sea Power theory of Alfred Thayer Mahan and the balance of power theory to better understand maritime order and security in the IOR. The research methodology employs qualitative research, using primary data from interviews with academics, official documents and reports, and secondary data from books, journals, and reports.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, Maritime Order, China's rise, geopolitical competition, South Asia, Indo-Pacific, ASEAN

Introduction

The twenty-first century, known as the 'century of seas', increasingly recognizes the importance of maritime security and stability for states. In terms of Indian maritime security strategy, India has been working to bridge the historical policy gap in its maritime domain, which has been dominated by continental thinking in its strategic culture since the beginning of the twenty-first century. The evolving maritime regional order is the key factor driving the evolution of India's maritime security approach. Additionally, the 2008 Mumbai attacks led to the reconstruction of traditional maritime security mechanisms and responses. This resulted in a paradigm shift in the naval security apparatus, focusing more on surveillance, intelligence gathering, and information sharing among stakeholders to enable an efficient response to new situations (PIB, 2022) As a result, the Indian Navy has taken

responsibility for all aspects of maritime security, including offshore and coast-based security.

The growing reach of China in the region through its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is overshadowing India's traditional role in the IOR and eroding its standing. China has invested substantial resources into infrastructure and development projects in South Asian countries like Pakistan and Sri Lanka, deepening its relations and increasing its influence. These developments represent a significant challenge to India's maritime security in the Indian Ocean (IO) and are contributing to a dilution of its regional influence. India is increasingly cautious of China's ambitious military modernization efforts, including its stated goal of rivaling any other modern military by 2035, as well as its aspirations to emerge as the world's foremost superpower by 2050. Therefore, in this changing geostrategic environment, India must prioritize its naval security. A robust Indian maritime strategy is crucial for ensuring geopolitical stability and advancing geoeconomics, which in turn strengthens overall defense (Singh, 2022).

India has shifted its focus from the IOR to the Indio-Pacific region (IPR) as China continues to grow its influence and emphasize naval modernization and expansion, as outlined in its 2015 maritime security strategy. China has its reasons for expanding its naval presence in the IO. The 'Malacca dilemma' is a term used to describe potential causes that could hinder China's economic expansion by restricting oil imports. The Malacca Strait, located between the Sumatra Islands and the Malay Peninsula, with Singapore to the east, is a vital chokepoint through which approximately 80% of Chinese exports transit (Mudunuri, 2020). Following the emergence of the Malacca dilemma, China redirected its efforts to build its naval force. The creation of the 'String of Pearls' aims to broaden China's regional hegemony through coordinated efforts to improve port accessibility, modernize the armed forces, and foster deeper bilateral connections with trading partners (Jose, 2020).

To counter the threat from China, India has been strengthening its relations with the US, and focusing on policies such as 'Neighborhood First' and 'Act East' to deepen its relations with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, and Bhutan. India has also signed agreements and invested in the Maldives and Indonesia to maintain its maritime security and increase its presence in the region. Moreover, India has been engaging with Japan, Vietnam, Singapore, and Australia under various initiatives to contain the threat of China in IOR.

Literature review

In the contemporary world of politics, maritime security has become a core issue. In terms of Indian maritime security, India has a rich marine tradition. There are numerous pieces of literature available on the topic of India's maritime security, for instance, Gopal (2021) in his article explains the nature of Indian maritime security and says that the Indian navy is

characterized as 'freedom from threats at or from the sea'. Even though India has its maritime security strategies which provide strategic directions to the Indian navy to achieve its goals, they still lack a framework for maritime security. However, since the Mumbai attacks in 2008, a major shift has been seen in the maritime security of India in terms of modernization, but the navy's greater act is still required in the development of national oceanic culture. Furthermore, Roy-Chaudhury (1999) in the research article elaborates on the maritime domain of India and claims that after independence, the security perceptions are more prominent on land security as compared to the sea. He explains the dominant historical legacy of the landward mindset. However, later the changes in the global and regional dynamics, highlight the maritime importance as well as challenges. Moreover, the sea is equally important for economic, political as well as in military trends. The presence and influence of the Indian navy are required to contain the traditional and non-tradition security issues in the IOR as this area become a major challenge for Indian security.

Baruah (2015) focuses on the maritime shift in the Indian strategy from 'using to securing' the IPR. India realized the change in geopolitical circumstances in the IOR and beyond the region and its strategic implications for India. In 2015, India's maritime security strategy was concerned with the security gaps and emphasized the development of security architecture in the naval domain, defining the emerging and ongoing threats as well as highlighting the strategic theatres of this region.

While strategy document also emphasizes regional naval collaboration and joint strategic visions with strategic allies. As far as the IPR is concerned, India accepts the importance of this region for the geographic extension and influence of the Indian navy. The author claims that the region has evolved into a geostrategic battleground for major countries, primarily the United States and China which provides a space for India to gain its greater status in this region. While Michel & Sticklor (2022) in their book emphasized the importance of the IOR. They claim that although the strategic ocean theatre was concerned primarily with the Atlantic and Pacific during the Cold War, however, China's economic growth and India's gradual progress to oppose China make this region increasingly important. The authors also analyze the Militarization of the IO that created a security dilemma among the states. The maritime security of IOR is dependent on naval forces' engagements, their disputes, and other traditional and non-traditional security threats. All states struggled to command the sea under the reflection of the Mahanian naval geopolitical theory. Moreover, Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, India has boosted its military strength in the region and executed maritime diplomacy to fulfill their national interests. A power competition makes this region more vulnerable in which India needs more expensive maritime domain awareness to survive in this geostrategic theatre. Similarly, the point of multi-polarization and strategic competition in the IOR is also

highlighted by Zhu (2018) in his book who said that this contestation between states is because of resource scarcity and authority influence that deepened the security risk. However, a major shift occurred after the US's Asia-Pacific rebalance strategy that imbalanced the security pattern of the whole region. While strategy extension particularly, in China, India, and the US is leading toward the inevitable clash and instability of the region. India has consistently responded to IO as India's ocean and now strengthening its footprint in the Indo-Pacific. While, on the other hand, China as a non-Indian ocean state, pays much attention to IOR because of its economic need and covers its strategic as well as military aims. However, strategic deterrence between India and China is based on mutual suspicion that makes their co-existence more complex in the region.

Panda & Basu (2018) also analyze the competition between the three major actors; China, India, and Japan. A complex relationship between these powers helps them to increase their geopolitical influence. China under its Grand strategy of BRI acted as a leader of Globalization under its 'New Era' and 'New Power' vision. While India perceives Japan as its 'Special Partner' against China. Japan working on a free and open Indo-Pacific to maintain regional order. Indian approach toward the IP is based on 'Engagement and Arrangement' with the agenda of a blue economy, containing China's win-win approach and playing a pro-active strategy in the region while India is working on its 'Neighborhood First' and 'Act East policies' with stronger maritime doctrine.

Theoretical Framework

In this research article, the Sea Power theory by Alfred Thayer Mahan and the theory of Balance of Power is utilized to gain a better understanding of the topic. India's strategic thinking is influenced by Mahan's vision of sea power. Mahan's ideas fall under the realist school of thinking and the tradition has its roots in Thucydides and produced notable modern thinkers like Henry Kissinger and Hans Morgenthau (Maurer, 2022).

Mahan described the Indian Ocean's importance by saying in 1897 "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia. This ocean will be the key to the seven seas in the 21st Century. The destiny of the world will be decided on its waters" (Katoch, 2020). He emphasized the command of the sea and considered the term 'Command of the Sea' to be a domineering force on the sea that prevents it from flying the enemy's flag or allows it to appear merely as a fugitive. This force shuts down the roadways used by commerce to travel to and from the enemy's beaches by controlling the enormous great common. Mahan argued that international trade is essential to maintaining economic vitality. Therefore, to support business, there must be military bases abroad. To protect the commerce routes and supply lines, a war fleet is required. Mahan suggested that the best way to ensure the dominating power had access to the trade and shipping corridors they

carried, was to destroy the warships of other maritime powers and seize control of key waterways. For him, the control of the sea was entwined with political, military, and economic concerns (Rath, 2005). Mahan linked the navy to prosperity and economic expansion. Mahan believed that the navy merely followed the natural course of peaceful maritime trade. The concept of 'sea power' combined the naval will, economic strength, and geographic expansion. In modern India, which is focused on economic development and increasingly dependent on seaborne trade for oil and other commodities, Mahan's economic arguments have a strong resonance. Mahan, a supporter of sea power, had an impact on India's ambitious plans to develop a potent navy. Several scholars have even gone so far as to say that Mahan has been used as a justification for naval modernization by contemporary Chinese and Indian leadership. In addition, the primary cause of new navalism in India could be attributed to the altered economic climate in New Delhi and its rapid globalization since the turn of the century (Rath, 2005).

The Concept of Balance of Power

The concept of balance of power is one of the most contested philosophical and policy themes in world politics. Balance of power theory is one of the most fundamental paradigms for understanding international relations. Traditionally, the idea of balance of power has been used as an explanation for the behavior of states in an unsafe environment (Dzung, 2000). The theory of balance of power outlines how states behave in the international system. Each state is concerned about its security and existence because the global structure is anarchic. The dynamic equilibrium of two behaviors: aggression and resistance between relatively stronger and relatively weaker countries is referred to as the balance of power. When it comes to power, the state's priority is survival, and power is the state's lifeline to survival. Power is the sole tool available to ensure a state's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and autonomy. Power is utilized not only to protect one's borders but also to expand them. A state can only be satisfied if it has greater authority than another state. The concept of balance of power is considered to have a lengthy history. Thucydides was the one who argued that Sparta's decision to start the Peloponnesian War was prompted by Athens' growing power. According to him, "There would not have been a motivation for war if the balance of power had not changed" (Underwood & Paul, 2020). The basic goal of preserving the balance of power is stability and equilibrium by making sure that the desires of any one power or group of powers are restrained by the joint efforts of others. The military is an essential, but not the only tool in the balance of power, and the power traits are not solely associated with military strength. To increase a nation's power, economic growth must coexist with military strength, as history demonstrates (Naidu, 2001). Although India is a rising power, it must make difficult strategic decisions. In normal conditions, the country's strong economic growth might give it more influence over its external environment, but China's even more dramatic progress casts a

shadow over India's ascent. Excluding its aggressive actions or the South China Sea claims, China's rise will be a concern for India since it increases the likelihood that China will dominate its neighbors, including India, and extend well beyond its current borders. China is increasing its influence throughout South Asia and primarily forging a solid alliance with Pakistan to encircle India. To maintain this equilibrium, India, on the other side, forms a strategic relationship with the US.

The India's Maritime Strategies and Pattern

India's maritime security faces serious threats from China to the east, Pakistan to the west, and other non-traditional threats. The US is the only dominant maritime power, but China is challenging its supremacy. Chinese President Xi Jinping aims for China to have a military capability to compete with any modern military by 2035 and to become the world's leading superpower by 2050. In this changing geostrategic environment, India must prioritize its naval security. A strong Indian maritime strategy is crucial for ensuring geopolitical stability and advancing geoeconomics, which in turn strengthens overall defense (Singh, 2022). With China's growing presence in the IOR, India's maritime strategy has shifted, focusing on the IPR and emphasizing naval modernization and expansion as outlined in the 2015 maritime security strategy.

Indian Maritime Security Strategy

Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS) was published on October 26, 2015, by Indian Defence Minister Shri Manohar Parrikar. It replaces India's Maritime-Military Strategic (IMMS-2007) document. Two major components make up the updated strategy. First due to the blurring of conventional and non-conventional security challenges, and the increase in the sources, varieties, and levels of threats, a new approach has been adopted that focuses on a seamless and comprehensive maritime security. Second, to ensure the 'freedom to use the seas' it is considered essential to maintain the security of the seas. The extended perspective, as indicated by the title, also considers the Indian Navy's expanded mandate, which includes the charge of entire maritime security, including coastal and offshore security (Indian Navy. Directorate of Strategy, 2015). The Indian Navy's IMSS-2015 strategy document is the first after the 26/11 Mumbai attacks. The Navy's initial articulation of doctrine in 2004, known as 'the Indian Maritime Doctrine,' was revised in 2009, and India's maritime interests have been confined to the IP region, with its primary domain largely covering the northern IOR (Khurana, 2015).

Geo-Political Competition in the IOR

The United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) believes that 'Oceans are the common heritage of mankind' (Flagship Report: World in Transition, 2013) and the maritime domain consists of "All areas and things of, on, under, relating to, adjacent to, or bordering on a sea, ocean, or other navigable waterways including all maritime-related activities, infrastructure,

people, cargo, and vessels and other conveyances” (Ramsay, 2014). States, therefore, vie for competition and cooperation. These opposing and competing strategic interests in the seas are based on a variety of factors, including the use of the oceans, their limits of jurisdiction, the desire for dominance, the exploration of resources, long-distance navigation, political goals, financial goals, naval safety, the military use of the oceans, and more. According to Alfred T. Mahan, who is credited for inspiring India's maritime strategic thinking, the history of sea power demonstrates its unquestionable and significant influence on the strength of nation-states. He also claims that conflicts and economic competition on the oceans primarily led to armed conflicts. As a result, the control of the sea is and always has been a great factor in the history of world power (Shahid, 2021).

The Rise of China and Its Expansion

China's contestations in the IOR began when Chinese President Hu Jintao highlighted China's 'Malacca dilemma' in 2003. It is a term that is used to describe the potential causes that could hinder China's economic expansion by choking oil imports. The vital position of the Malacca Strait falls between the Sumatra Islands and the Malay Peninsula, with Singapore to the east, and approximately 80% of Chinese exports transit through this waterway (Mudunuri, 2020).

Figure 4.3: Oil Flow Route from the Middle East to China



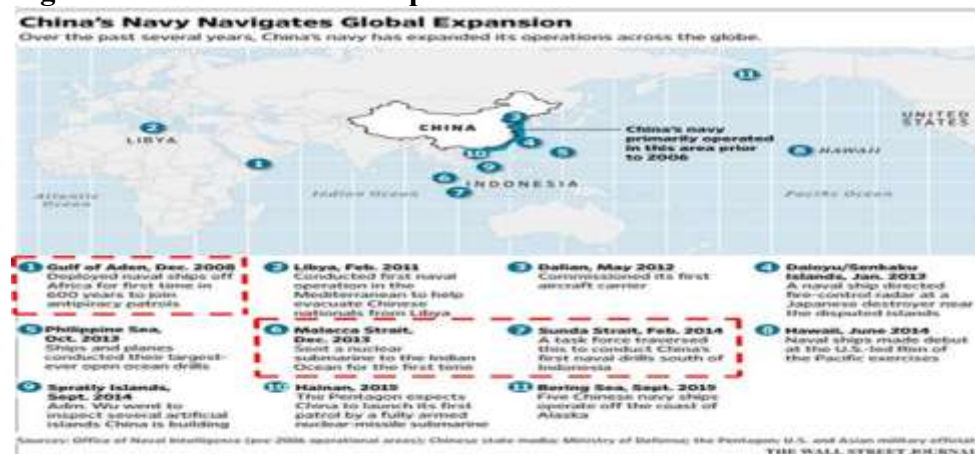
Mudunuri, Navya. (2020). *Oil Flow Route from the Middle East to China* [<https://diplomatist.com>]

Following the beginning of the Malacca dilemma, China refocused its efforts on building its naval force. The creation of the String of Pearls broadens China's regional hegemony through coordinated efforts to improve port accessibility, modernize the armed forces, and foster deeper bilateral connections with trading partners. The term 'String of Pearls' was first used in a document titled 'Energy Futures in Asia' in 2005, and it refers to the creation of networks of infrastructure in littoral states ranging from the South China Sea to the Middle East. In pursuit of a comprehensive, long-term plan,

China has incrementally expanded its influence in the surrounding region by investing in infrastructure projects and offering economic assistance. This approach has succeeded in drawing several coastal nations into China's sphere of influence, particularly close to India. Under the BRI, also referred to as the "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) strategy, there is a heightened focus on advancing the string of pearls along the Maritime Silk Route (Jose, 2020). The Chinese endeavor to preserve these SLOs, as well as their increased naval presence, poses a direct threat to India (Rajagopalan, 2021). The Chinese maritime plan for an all-encompassing approach under OBOR includes controlling the Hormoz strait by the imminent navy presence at Gwadar after functionalizing CPEC in full swing and resolving the Malacca conundrum by its presence at Hambantota port. People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is now expanding its operational zone from the South China Sea in the Yellow Sea to the western IO in the Persian Gulf. The US's strong presence in East Asia and the West Pacific could exacerbate tension between the US and China if the latter tries to annex Taiwan.

To understand the threat China poses to India, it is important to explore respective naval capabilities. According to Cordesman and Kleiber, "China has the greatest navy in terms of size with 730 combat vessels, followed by Russia with 598 and North Korea with 519. The USA ranks fourth with 484 naval warships". (Wisevoter, 2023). It is almost five times larger than the Indian Navy (IN) in terms of number of troops and nearly twice the size of the IN in terms of primary combat ships. "China has both quantitative and qualitative superiority over the Indian Navy. The People's Liberation Army Navy has 355 ships in its fleet" (Shelbourne, 2021). The 355 figure includes major surface combatants, submarines, aircraft carriers, ocean-going amphibious ships, mine warfare ships, and fleet auxiliaries. This amount excludes 85 patrol combatants and vessels carrying anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs). The annual report by Congress shows the Chinese Navy's expanding intentions to operate with more adaptable platforms beyond the IPR (Shelbourne, 2021).

Figure 4.4: China's Naval Expansion From 2008 to 2015



Perwita & Rivanda. (2020). *China's Naval Expansion From 2008 to 2015* [<https://ijpss.unram.ac.id>]

China's Encirclement Policy

India's political and economic development is dependent on a safe, secure, and peaceful environment, and as C. Raja Mohan argues "No country can establish itself as a credible power in the neighborhood or the world, without rooting hegemony in its region" (Khan, 2023) The ability of India to preserve its backyard will be critical to achieving the aim of becoming one of Asia's top players. In recent years, Washington has labeled China as its greatest strategic competitor escalating tensions and threatening to create a security crisis in South Asia. In the past few years, geopolitical leanings have appeared to cement into opposing blocs, with the strategic partnership between the United States and India on one side, and the all-weather China-Pakistan friendship on the other. Border security between Indochina and counterterrorism cooperation between the US and Pakistan have traditionally balanced geopolitical rivalries. However, with the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in 2021 and continued Chinese intrusions into Indian territory along the Line of Actual Control, the rivalry between the US-China and India-Pakistan appears to be intensifying. (Naeem, 2023). With the rise of China and the start of the BRI, India has steadily lost control over its other neighboring states. China has embarked on an extensive westward expansion, motivated by aspirations for leadership across Asia. China has historically maintained normal relations with the region, but towards the beginning of the century, Beijing's connections with South Asia began to swiftly grow and deepen, in keeping with the country's broader efforts to 'go global' (Report: USIP China-South Asia Senior Study Group, 2020). China has expanded its influence in South Asia by implementing various infrastructure projects and enhancing connectivity through sea, road, and rail networks as part of the BRI. Except for Bhutan, all of India's South Asian neighbors are now participants in the BRI. Since 2018, China has poured more than US\$150 billion into the economies of Bangladesh, Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan (Donnellon-May, 2023). At present, China stands as the primary foreign investor in the Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. This has caused concern in India, as it feels that China is surrounding it with its String of Pearl policy, similar to China's concerns about the 'Malacca Dilemma'. India is particularly wary of China's strong strategic partnership with Pakistan, which has deepened in recent years, largely due to the CPEC. With the presence of the Chinese military in Pakistan, China now effectively borders India on its northern, eastern, and western fronts. This not only increases the possibility of a 'two-front' war but also positions China to play a role in Kashmir and the region (Ranade, 2021). China recently delivered its most modern warship, the PNS Tughril, to Pakistan. The delivery signifies a

significant enhancement of Pakistan's naval capabilities and is expected to contribute to maintaining a balance of power in the IOR. This development reflects the deepening strategic partnership between China and Pakistan and is anticipated to have broader implications for regional security dynamics. (Marjani, 2021). During an interview with the author, Professor of International Relations at the University of Sargodha Dr. Rashid Ahmad Khan said:

“The evolving geopolitics of the Indian Ocean will witness further strengthening of Sino-Pakistan military relations as a counterweight to expanding US-India strategic relationship. However, China is looking much beyond, and it is in favor of Pak-India normalization to neutralize the growing influence of the United States in South Asia. After securing diplomatic success in the Middle East, China may try to facilitate the process of normalization of relations between Pakistan and India”.

Indian response to the Chinese encirclement

To counter the threat emanating from China, India has been deepening its relations with the US, focusing on policies like ‘neighborhood first’ to strengthen its relations with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, and Bhutan. India is also signing agreements and investing in Maldives and Indonesia to maintain its maritime security and increase its presence in the region. Moreover, India has also been engaging with Japan, Vietnam, Singapore, and Australia under various initiatives to contain the threat of China on the high seas.

The mutual concern regarding the rise of China has opened up opportunities for cooperation between the US and India. Both countries are now working under the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and have signed various agreements. The “Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean Region” signifies the maritime cooperation between the US and India (Singh, 2021). The Chinese engagement with Myanmar through the refurbishment of its naval stations at Hainggyi and Coco Islands is causing concern. There are reports that Beijing has built a signal intelligence station near the Coco Islands, which raises India's concerns about its security. This is due to China's ability to monitor India's maritime activities in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and its missile launches off the coast of Orissa. China's involvement, post-BRI, has also raised questions about India's standing in the region. To counter Chinese influence, New Delhi's strategy involves minimal hard balancing, given the power disparity. This strategy includes modest military expansion and informal alliances, such as strategic partnerships that allow for joint projects and resource sharing, but

not coordinated military actions or pre-emptive warfare. Prime Minister Modi has emphasized the concept of 'neighborhood first' to strengthen ties with neighboring countries. In his first term, Modi visited Bhutan and Nepal, aiming to develop closer bilateral connections and promote the idea of trans-Himalayan regionalism.

Bangladesh, strategically located at the head of the Bay of Bengal, is a key area of interest for India, China, and the US. India has historically held influence over Bangladesh since its independence in 1971, while China's involvement, primarily through the BRI, began in 2013. Despite China's significant trade and investment in Bangladesh, it has not been able to impact Bangladeshi politics and security as much as India has. India, facing resource constraints and growing anti-Indian sentiment in Bangladesh, has struggled to counter China's influence. India has sought support from other influential players such as Russia and Japan. For instance, when Bangladesh rejected a Russian ship due to US sanctions, India allowed the ship to enter its port despite penalties. India is also using Japanese capabilities to compete with China in Bangladesh's infrastructure development. Japan, with its dominance in the infrastructure industry, is working on projects such as the deep-sea port of Matarbari and other initiatives that aim to counter China's influence in the region (Anwar, 2023). Moreover, India has established the Coastal Surveillance Radar System and signed a Technical Agreement on Sharing White Shipping Information with the Maldives to strengthen its maritime partnership. India has also committed to engage in coordinated patrolling and aerial surveillance with the Maldives. (Khan, 2023).

Modi also wants to establish a more long-lasting relationship with Sri Lanka that won't be dependent on changes in Sri Lanka's political leadership or the nature of the Beijing-Colombo relations. The Rajapaksa administration in Sri Lanka had decided to bolster its ties with China at a substantial strategic cost to India (Tourangbam, 2019). However, after a decade of losing ground to China, India has increased its presence in Sri Lanka by assisting Colombo economically. (Balachandran, 2022). SLINEX 2023, an India-Sri Lanka maritime exercise, was held in Colombo to strengthen their maritime relationship in the IPR (Madan, 2021). However, the Nordic Institute of Stability Studies (NISS), a Copenhagen-based think tank, argues that India's 'Neighborhood First Policy' has been unable to move in a significant manner because of Modi's combative stance and mounting Chinese pressure that has prevented the nation from making alliances in the region. Muhammad Athar Javed, director-general of the NISS, viewed that "Due to India's patronizing attitude towards smaller neighbors such as Nepal, Maldives, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, New Delhi is now grappling with multilayered diplomatic challenges with SAARC member states" (TRTWorld, 2020).

Despite ongoing efforts to enhance defense cooperation in the IOR, India has faced challenges in significantly improving its relations. One example of this is the joint naval exercise SIMBEX, which took place in the South

China Sea between India and Singapore in 2017. Additionally, the India-Indonesia naval drill known as 'Coordinated Patrol' (CORPAT) has been conducted in the IO of the Southeast Asian archipelago every two years since 2002. Furthermore, India has been consistently deploying naval training ships to various Southeast Asian nations as part of its efforts to maintain strategic alliances in the region (Paul, 2018). Moreover, New Delhi has been attempting to reinforce subregional cooperation through initiatives like the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) under PM Modi's 'Neighborhood First' policy in the aftermaths of Doklam standoff with China (Yhome, 2017). India has also been trying to deepen its relations with the Southeast Asian nations (ASEAN) through various initiatives. These efforts include the Delhi-Hanoi Rail Link, the Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project in Myanmar, and the trilateral highway project that will connect India's northeast region with Myanmar and Thailand. However, each has encountered logistical or financial difficulties. India has not been able to complete projects at the same rate as China. Washington's economic assistance can help create a favorable regional environment for India and boost its capacity to balance China. The US would benefit more from assisting India-based regional integration than from just pursuing military trade and integration. Japan has already benefited from the opportunity by providing \$350 million in loans for the remodeling of Highway 40 and Highway 54 in India's northeast. Japan and India have developed a unique connection over the past 10 years as a result of their increased mutual collaboration and relationship (Hui & Hussain, 2021). Japan and India have agreed to work together on IPDMA (Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness) inside the QUAD framework. Additionally, India and Japan signed an ASCS (Acquisition and Cross-Servicing) agreement a few years ago. Both countries have also been involved in the annual Malabar exercises with other allies under this framework.

In a significant shift from India's previous policy of reluctant maritime diplomacy to one of proactive diplomacy, India and Indonesia have agreed to work together to create a vital port at Sabang, which is located near the Strait of Malacca on the tip of Sumatra Island (Rajagopalan, 2018). Furthermore, India's relations with Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore have also been deepened. Vietnam and Japan expressed that they are "prepared to collaborate with India to establish diplomatic and security relations in response to the danger of Chinese maritime expansion because they are engaged in marine disputes with China in South China and East China Seas" (Report, The Economic Times, 2018). In addition, a bilateral agreement was inked between India and Singapore in 2017. According to the terms of the agreement, the Singaporean government gave the Indian

navy permission to utilize the Changi naval facility for logistical support and ship refueling.

Australia is one of only two countries, along with Indonesia, that are naturally part of the IO theatre and the Indo-Pacific. It is a top concern for Australia, and collaboration with the Quad partners is required. The growing connections between Australia and India within the Quad framework have recently attracted major Australian attention to many strategic Indian Ocean Region (IOR) problems (Kardon, 2023). The bilateral relations between India and Australia have undergone a tremendous change and received a substantial boost in the previous five years due to their common concerns, desires, and objectives of maintaining a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based IPR. To counter the Chinese threat, both nations sought to broaden their alliances, particularly in the economic realm and also in the areas of defense, clean energy, and crucial and reliable supply networks. In addition, India and Australia inked the Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA) in December 2022. ECTA's status is currently being upgraded to that of a Comprehensive Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement (Australia-India Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement, n.d.).

Conclusion

Before 2008, Indian security mainly focused on the land borders with its neighbors. However, the emphasis on maritime security shifted due to the Mumbai attacks, which breached Indian security through the Indian Ocean. Another reason for this shift was the growing presence of China in the Indian Ocean and its strengthening relations with Indian Ocean states. China has made significant investments in Pakistan and Sri Lanka and has engaged with other South Asian countries such as Maldives, Bangladesh, and Myanmar through its large-scale projects and initiatives. In response to China's growing presence in the IO, India has sought to deepen its relations with neighboring states and those in Southeast Asia. Despite its investments, agreements, and bilateral and multilateral alliances, India is unable to overshadow China's influence in the IOR. India needs to increase its investments and expedite its existing projects to compete with China in the region. China's ability to swiftly complete its promising projects has attracted countries, so India needs to enhance its efforts to establish a secure maritime order in the IO.

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