

INDIA'S BLUE WATER AMBITIONS: A VISION OF SEA POWER AND SUSTAINABLE OCEAN

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ABSTRACT

India's geographical location at the epicentre of Indian Ocean gives it a strategic edge. A bulk amount of India's trade, nearly 90% passes via sea routes which directly proportionate maritime security to national development. This paper presents analytical study of *how India as an emerging Maritime power could dynamically and efficiently wield the strategic location of Indian Ocean to become a sustainable maritime power? It further analyses the global trend of maritime order, focusing on Sustainable Ocean Governance, development in the arena of Blue Economy as well as Sea Lines of Communication.* The study examines India's unique maritime strategy within a broader focus of Indo-Pacific framework, where the external growing influence of China and its motive to captivate the vital chokepoints has been a prop of regional disruptions. Again, the paper highlights India's initiatives such as *SAGARMALA Programme*, efforts to *modernize the naval capabilities, Blue Economy developments and paving an inclusive path for holistic development under the SAGAR vision.* Moreover, aligning the SDGs have also been critically assessed. The research points out a gap between India's strategic intent and enduring enforcement, specifically balancing the environmental sustainability along with portrayal of hard power diplomacy. Hence it shows that India's establishment as a sustained maritime power needs regional cooperation, innovative technological support, good governance and most importantly a balanced competition in the region. Here the paper focuses to bridge the existing gaps by highlighting a structure connoting maritime sea power with a sustainable development of the ocean that keeps intact the stability and affluency of the region.

Keywords: India, Indian Ocean, Sustainable Ocean governance, Blue Economy, SAGARMALA Programme, SAGAR vision, China, Sea Lines of Communication.

INTRODUCTION

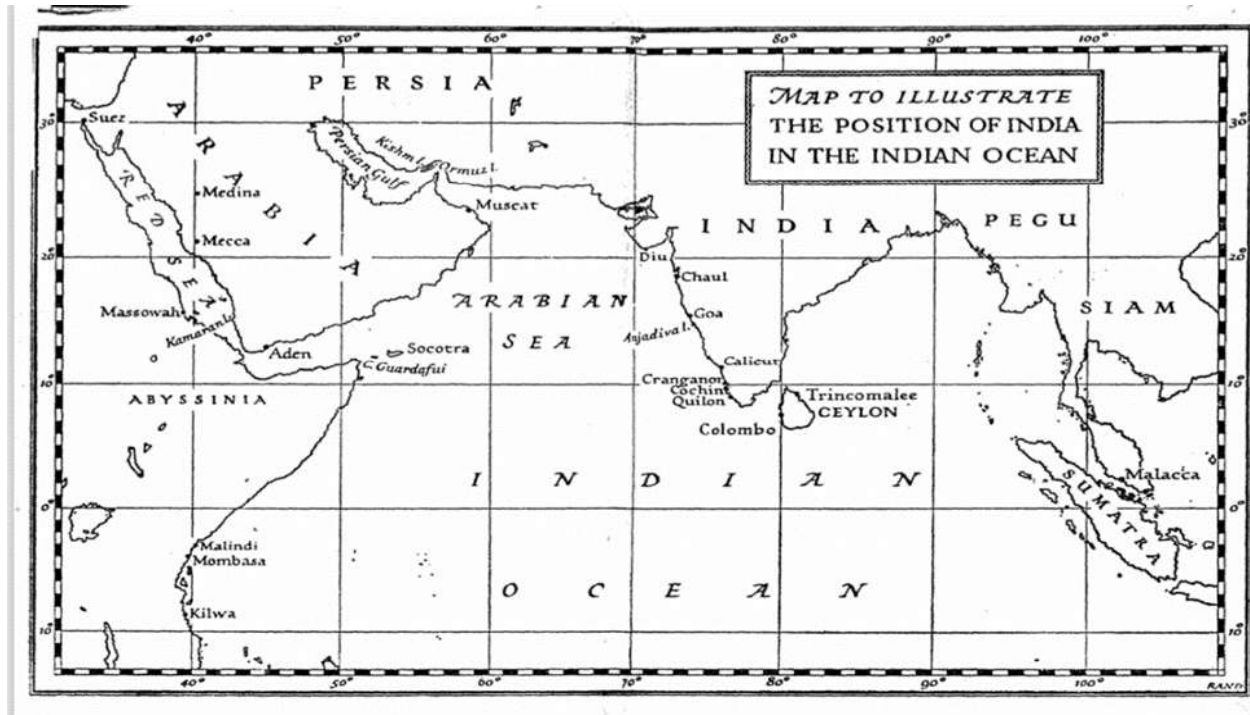
India's 11,098 km long coastline demarcates its rich maritime geography and the country being peninsular, its maritime growth is rooted in geographical depiction, historical linkages to trade, culture and economic alterations. If we trace back to the history of maritime domain, we could find *UK* and *USA* respectively gained a leverage as an established maritime power, the world as well as India has revived their willingness to sail in this arena. Counting on Alfred Thayer Mahan's work- "*The Influence of Sea Power over History*", he states "Who dominates the sea dominates the world."

A timeline-based analysis of India's maritime evolution reflects a transition from peripheral utility to strategic centrality. In the Pre-Independence era, the Indian ocean region was immensely under the utility of the British Empire and more specifically to European Naval Power and India acted as a strategic unit to facilitate their connectivity with Asia, Africa and Europe in a broader aspect, further serving as a bridge to pave a ground for trade and military network in cost of own interests.

In the post-Independence era, with an ongoing turmoil within the country itself that was still to bear-up with the partition, border disputes and wars, the focus centred to the land-based security rather than an immense focus on Maritime regime. Talking about the cold war politics and superpower divides, the Indian Ocean showed an exceptional significance, but India's economic limitations and restraints are the phenomenon restricting its blue water ambitions.

Tapping on to the 1991 reforms and further counting on the recent developments as well we can have a blueprint of a paradigm shift which is seaward and states a sharp transitional approach from India's end. Keeping up with the ongoing globalisation as well as a need to expand the trading base, maritime security gained profound importance. From the point of focus on the Indo-Pacific framework there arises a struggle in means of geopolitical tension with the growing Chinese influence in the region that poses threat via Belt and Road Initiatives, and certain other port development led competitions. India worked on it with Naval modernization, SAGARMALA programme, developments in the blue economy sector and SAGAR doctrine, which aims for a sustainable maritime power depiction.

Hence the analysis above provides with an idea of how India is prominently paving a way forward sustaining from the colonial marginalisation to consolidating its ground in era of reforms to finally grasping a hold on sustainability of its maritime vision in the competitive 21st century.



Source: Book- India and The Indian Ocean by K.M Panikkar

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Indian Ocean Rising: Maritime Security and Policy Challenges, published by Henry L. Stimson Centre (2012), explores how the Indian Ocean is re-emerging as a key arena of global politics and trade. It discusses growing economic interdependence, rising naval competition, and non-traditional threats like piracy and trafficking. The volume argues that managing these complex maritime and security challenges will require stronger regional cooperation and adaptive policy frameworks in the decades ahead.
2. Maritime Forces in Pursuit of National Security: Policy Imperatives for India by G. S. Khurana (2008), examines the evolving role of India's maritime forces in securing national interests amid changing regional and global dynamics. It emphasizes how India's naval strategy, maritime infrastructure, and defence policies must adapt to challenges like sea-lane security, terrorism, and regional competition.

3. Observer Research Foundation's article "Indian Ocean Chokepoints: Is China Still Vulnerable?" by Kumar and Vellore (2025), argues that despite nearly two decades of efforts to diversify its energy and trade routes, China remains heavily dependent on Indian Ocean chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca, leaving it strategically exposed. The authors explain how alternative passages and overland corridors offer only partial relief, keeping Beijing's maritime links vulnerable to disruption.
4. *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* by S. Jaishankar (2022), outlines a pragmatic foreign policy rooted in strategic autonomy, capacity-building, and balance creation. He advocates flexible, interest-based partnerships, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, while strengthening national capabilities. His framework explains India's calibrated approach toward China, maritime deterrence, and cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region.
5. *India and The Indian Ocean* by K.M Panikkar (1945) and Geostrata article- "Alfred Thayer Mahan and Supremacy of Naval Power" by Diva Zalani (2024), while reviewing the sources it was found that the major research gap in the theoretical perspectives of Alfred Mahan and K.M Panikkar exists in considering maritime security and ocean governance as well as sustainability in a separate spectrum. Those have always prioritised naval capabilities, sea dominance and power struggles, again environmental sustainability puts up a lens of conservation without addressing security.

Hence this paper bridges the gap by arguing the fact of geopolitical stability and environmental sustainability to be mutually working parameters.

METHODOLOGY

The paper has applied an inductive approach, primarily adopting a *qualitative- analytical framework* that is based on *Secondary data analysis*. The study was purely based on *secondary sources of data available and extensive literature survey* was done. The secondary data was collected from various reports, books, governments' official statements and websites used for the study.

Again, an evaluation based on *comparative policies*, a code of thematic vision and finally an *instance- based analysis* has been approached for the paper that tries to evaluate India's Maritime

approach whether it's an integrated or fragmented one. Further examining and interpreting the secondary data to provide *policy-based solutions*.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How India as an emerging Maritime power could dynamically and efficiently wield the strategic location of the Indian Ocean to become a sustainable maritime power?

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Here the approach of the paper lies in interpreting Mahan and Panikkar in a new lens of contemporary India, where an expansion of classical sea power aspect of the theory to a long term sustainable maritime vision of India.

If we take into consideration Mahan's core arguments that India as a case, fit in a way of-

- Securing the sea lanes to demarcate global dominance, controlling the SLOCs in Indian Ocean.
- Modernising the Naval capacity to get an edge over the trade expansion activities and India pursues it as a hard power diplomacy.
- A strong strategical grasp on the chokepoints as Hormuz and Malacca are bases of importance to maritime expansion in the region.

India's Maritime vision through the lens of K.M Panikkar-

- He talks about the consciousness of regional maritime domain and puts emphasis on restricting external influence such as China in the Indian Ocean region.
- This also stress the fact of focusing to the geography and that too the Indian Ocean is a blessing for India because of its '*landlocked*' nature to the country.
- Again, India aligns its approach of maritime growth in a way that connects the idea of continuity rooted in tradition and considering the territorial diplomacy.

Here we suggest for a *third perspective* led initiative where India is adhering to Mahan's Systemic Logic of Sea Dominance and Panikkar's Geographical and Civilizational parameters but also adding to another dimension of *Sustainable Ocean Development*.

We tried to bridge the gap between the geopolitical struggle and the art of ocean governance through a *proposal of futuristic strategy-centred structure for India to sustain in the Indian Ocean Region*.

This integrates

- Ecological protection
- Blue Economy
- SDG 14- Life Below Water

THIRD PERSPECTIVE: SUSTAINABLE OCEAN DEVELOPMENT:

This section of the paper provides with a different dimension and a lens to analyse the foundational conception of sea power that needs to be reviewed in a distinct means for the 21st century. The civilizational basis of sea power as stated by Mahan and Panikkar though remains intact in essence of understanding maritime strategy but broadening the horizon to interpret the domain is a need of the era. The parameters solely be the Naval capability and territorial maritime security can't withstand the emerging geopolitical challenges, hence Sustainable Ocean Development measures are of need. The arising struggle in the region is also influenced by exploitation of maritime resources, climate change and blue economy factor.

SUSTAINABLE OCEAN GOVERNANCE: For India, core notion of this centre around the balance of economic growth with maintenance of ecological sphere by involving Blue Economy, regional cooperation, infrastructural innovations and engaging with local and coastal communities. India in its approach doesn't portrays Indian ocean only as a strategic domain of competition but also a shared space of ecological and economic developments. Again, the idea of SDGs that talks about a holistic development to be achieved, specifically focusing on the SDG 14 (Life Below water) needs attention to protect the region as well as to maintain an affluent & sustainable condition overall.

INITIATIVES BY INDIA

India's maritime strategy has evolved from a historically land-centric outlook to a comprehensive, rules-based approach, drawing on civilizational seafaring traditions and modern initiatives such

as SAGAR, MAHASAGAR, and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative to position India as a net security provider and maritime hub.

India faces challenges from China's expanding IOR presence, capability gaps, climate risks, and underwater domain vulnerabilities. Hence to keep pace with such issues-

1. Flagship Programmes

a) Sagarmala Programme: Port-Led Development Model (2015)

Through modernisation, mechanisation, and computerisation, the Sagarmala Program seeks to develop comprehensive port infrastructure along the coast. With little infrastructure investment, the Sagarmala Programme aims to lower logistics costs for both domestic and EXIM (Export-Import) trade. By 2025, Sagarmala is expected to generate 10 million new jobs and increase India's merchandise exports to USD 110 billion.

Though it has a comprehensive aim, but its environmental and economic ingredients are prescriptive rather than enforceable.



Source- Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways

b) Maritime India Vision 2030: Strategic Roadmap (MIV 2030)

It functions as a blueprint to ensure the coordinated and rapid development of India's maritime industry across the decade that follows. The primary objective is to promote India into the global

maritime industry. It lists more than 150 projects in ten categories that address every aspect of the Indian maritime industry.

Implementation challenges and financial boundations limits Its effectiveness.



c) Maritime Amrit kaal vision 2047

India is increasingly set to meet its trade demands and emerge as a maritime leader by focusing on green technologies and digital innovation. The Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision 2047, a long-term plan for India's maritime revival by establishing green corridors, implementing green hydrogen bunkering at major ports, and encouraging the use of methanol-fueled vessels, is advancing sustainable maritime operations. It projects India's ascent to become one of the world's leading maritime and shipbuilding powers by the centenary of independence, outlining more than 300 concrete initiatives.

The Indian government has tried to develop its maritime industry by implementing significant financial and environmental initiatives in recent Union Budgets. By 2030, with the help of Maritime Development Fund (MDF) the goal is to become more self-sufficient and less dependent on foreign ships. In addition, the Shipbuilding Financial Assistance policy (SBFAP 2.0) has increased funding to help Indian shipyards compete internationally and place India among the top five shipbuilding nations by 2047. On the green side, the government's Green Tug Transition Programme (GTTP) is working to swap out old harbour tugs for cleaner, more eco-friendly models,

aiming to cut emissions and push for cleaner ports. Then there's the Coastal Cargo Promotion Scheme, which nudges freight movement from land to waterways to save on logistics costs and reduce carbon footprints. All these moves will turn India into a strong, competitive maritime player on the world stage.

It's forward-heading but uncertain due to dependency on technological feasibility and financial viability.

India's maritime policies are strong enough in the intent, but execution is fragmented.

GAPS AND CHALLENGES IN INDIA'S MARITIME POWER DEVELOPMENT

There exist major hurdles to India's maritime power development. An aging fleet, financial constraints, and the slow pace of non-military shipbuilding are among these obstacles. In

+ addition, India lacks a small percentage of the world's shipping line, shy littoral surveillance technologies, and shy interagency collaboration. Furthermore, China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) poses a serious strategic threat to India.

- Underdeveloped Inland Waterways and Connectivity Gaps- India's inland water transport is in a state of disuse, and the lack of connectivity to the ports is also affecting the development of water transport.
- Insufficient and Inefficient Infrastructure- The structure of India is another factor which affects the effectiveness of the anchorages. Large ships cannot be accommodated by non-major anchorage due to the lack of equipment. India has no other option but to rely on the transshipment facilities of its neighbouring countries. At present, the foreign anchorage handles 75% of the weight of India, resulting in a loss of \$200-\$220 million for India every time.
- Maritime Security and Geopolitical Challenges- India's strategic location makes it vulnerable to a range of maritime security threats, including piracy, drug trafficking, and illegal fishing. The government's Project 75-I for indigenous submarine construction has faced delays and India's warship construction takes 85 months, while Japan takes 27 and France 46.

- **Environmental Impact and Sustainability Challenges-** The major environmental impact of ports and shipping activities undermines the importance of sustainability and green shipping. Despite the efforts of initiatives such as the Harit Sagar Green Port Guidelines, which are geared towards the reduction of emissions, India faces several challenges in adopting sustainable practices. Green technologies are costly, and there are concerns over the cost implications for small businesses.
- **Fleet Ageing and Lack of Shipbuilding Capacity-** India's fleet is aging, with 39.1% of the vessels about 20 years old. It has impacts for efficiency, safety, and environmental sustainability. India's share of the global shipbuilding industry is less than 1% far behind China, South Korea, and Japan.
- **Insufficient Skilled Workforce and Gender Inequity-** India is suffering from a manpower crisis, particularly in terms of the digitalization and smart ports. There are no experts in the use of emerging technologies such as block chain, IoT, and AI. The 2021 Women in Maritime survey found that fewer than 2% of seafarers in India are women.

ECOLOGICAL REALITY AND BLUE ECONOMY COVERAGE

Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is not only a region that experiences power struggle but is also an ecologically vulnerable zone. The region faces wide range of traditional and non-traditional set of threats ranging from climate change, IUU fishing, piracy and so on.

- **BRIEFING: IUU FISHING-** One of the most pressing non-traditional security threats in IOR is the IUU fishing that stands for Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing. It denotes to fishing activities that violates the national and international laws and standards, the catches remain unreported to the concerned authority. As per the survey of FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization), about a million tonnes of fish are picked illegally every year from the zone. Thus, leading to economic loss as well as indicating a weak governance and depleting marine resource.

ILLEGAL, UNREPORTED and UNREGULATED FISHING



ILLEGAL FISHING

- No authorisation
- Goes against conservation and management of Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs)
- Goes against national laws or international obligations



UNREPORTED FISHING

- Not reported
- Reporting contravenes international, RFMO or national laws and regulations

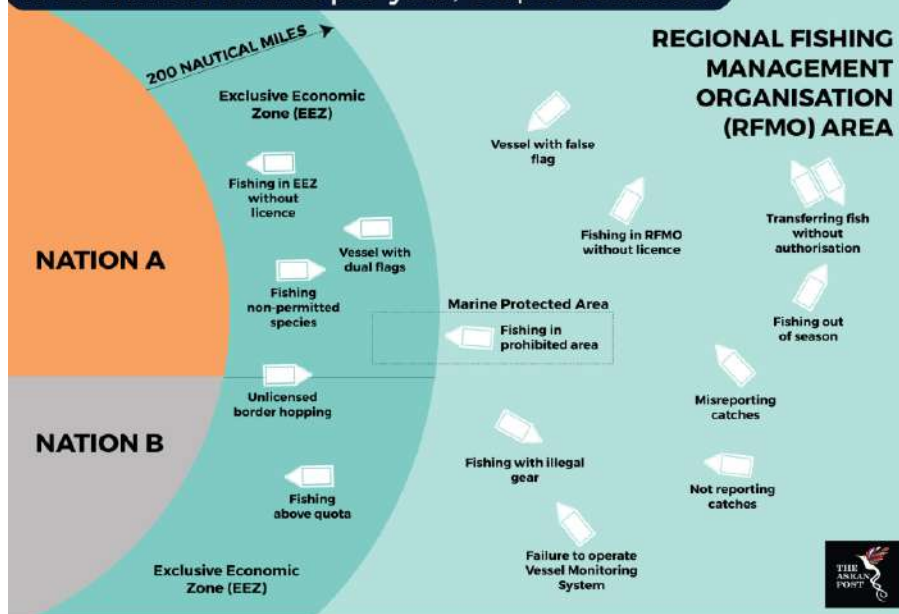


UNREGULATED FISHING

- Fishing vessel has no nationality
- Fishing activities jeopardise fish stocks

IUU FISHING AROUND THE WORLD

11-26 million tonnes per year, US\$10-23 billion



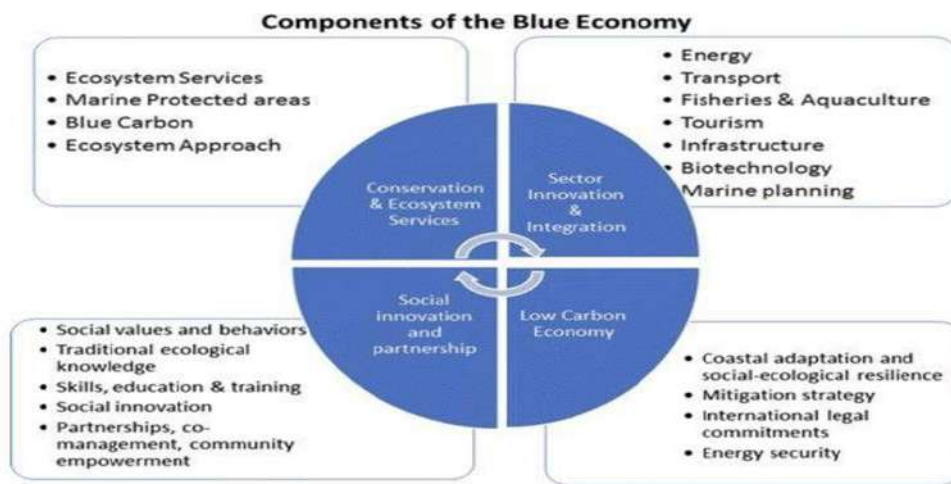
Source- The Asean Post

There has been a lack of coordination between the national authorities and Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs), intensifying the prevalent loophole.

The conventional method of fisheries management is obsolete and to keep pace with emerging non-traditional threats, a long-term sustainable plan under the Blue Economy initiative has been undertaken by India. This approach includes a framework of economic growth, environmental stability and social inclusivity.

- BLUE ECONOMY LENS- The consensual factor regarding blue economy is its subscription to Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 14) talks about the ‘Life below water’, building blue economy, we need to put sustainability at core and its of cross-sectoral implications. Hence it reflects multi-dimensionality. Contextually taking IOR, multidimensionality becomes more crucial due to region’s strategic location.

The Four different theoretical lens of blue economy (Voyer et al. 2018) are- Ocean being natural capital, livelihoods, sound business and a driver of innovation. If we dive deeper into these aspects or pillars of Blue Economy and further integrate the same to the IOR:



Source: researchgate.net

1. CONSERVATION & ECOSYSTEM: The IOR holds a significant ecological base, coral reefs of Maldives and Seychelles, Sundarbans has mangrove forests, and a highly fertile fishery zone.

But the region also faces issues of over-fishing, coral bleaching and pollution. Taking into consideration the large population along the coasts, maritime security is the core to maintain ecological balance.

Further, Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), BOBLME initiative and the network of marine protected area shows how economic stability and ecological balance are intertwined.

2. **SECTOR INNOVATION & INTEGRATION-** The region acts as a busiest lane where almost 80% of global sea related oil trade passes and crucial SLOCs connect the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

The sector development includes- Fisheries, Ports and shipping, Offshore energy, Tourism and Coastal Infrastructure. Though there lie infrastructural gaps, leading to obsolete port facilities and depleting ecological resources, hence resisting sustainable ocean governance. Innovation in areas such as modernising the ports, smart port developments, tracking of fisheries under digital procedures and structured coastal management can be a pathway of economic stability with maintenance of ecosystem.

India took up projects such as SAGARMALA Program, certain port-led development with an aim of strengthening economic base alongside aligning to the sustainable standards.

3. **LOW-CARBON MARITIME TRANSITION:** With rising sea levels, cyclone prone Bay of Bengal, ocean warming and acidification there has been an ecological disturbance. Hence to combat such the Low-carbon maritime transition includes- green ports, renewable energy usage at ports, sustainable waste management procedures and so on.

The strength of this pillar lies in connecting climate security with maritime power shaping.

4. **SOCIAL INNOVATION & PARTNERSHIPS:** A large population along the coast heavily depends on fisheries and marine resources for their livelihoods. The necessity for social innovation is-

- Protecting vulnerable fishers from IUU fishing and industrial traps.
- Processing of the fishes to be at check
- Secure humankind from the threats of climate change.

For regional cooperation, capacity building the platforms such as BIMSTEC and IORA provides opportunities of shared and value-oriented governance and facilitates equitable ocean development. Adhering to four components of Blue Economy to IOR it provides an idea that all the three concepts of sustainability, security and strategic innovation are interlinked. Further, strengthening our argument stating of a Third Perspective which stands by the fact of incorporating Ecological protection and Sustainability alongside naval capacity building and sea dominance.

- How the concept of SDG 14 aligns with Blue Economy?

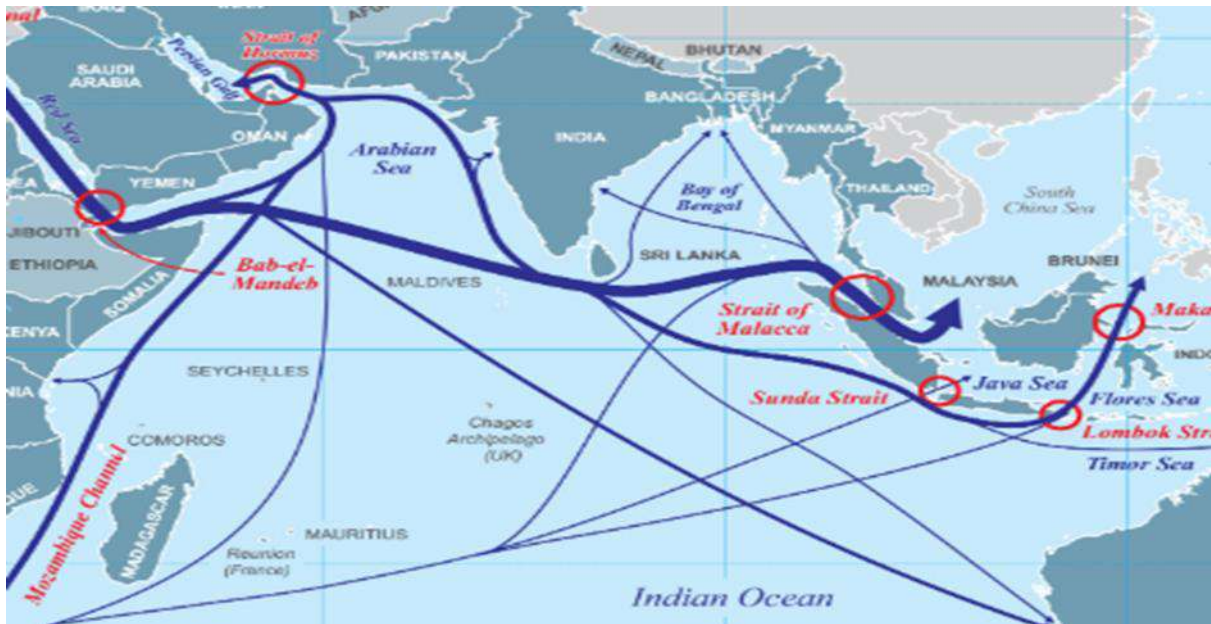
The region faces an issue of overfishing, fish stock depletion along with a lack of development in least developed countries. Hence, Blue Economy promotes structured fisheries management, digital assessment of fisheries stocks, prevention of IUU fishing and an improvement in trading patterns.

The sustainable fishery governance directly aligns with SDG 14 and initiates to make a shift from exploitory means to a productive regulation. Further the SDG 14 standardizes conservation, and Blue Economy implements it through developmental plannings. Pollution control, plastic management and decarbonization are central to the initiative. To be precise the *SDG 14 acts as a multilayered goal while B.E is a diplomatic governance move*. Working parallelly both the concepts aim for an ecological balance, social inclusivity, economic viability and strategic stability.

CHOKEPOINTS AND CHALLENGES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

The Indian Ocean region was neglected in the 20th century. Considered rather inferior during the superpower rivalries and remained mostly overshadowed as the confrontations were happening across other oceans, it was finally recognized as a strategically important zone in the 21st century. There are several reasons behind the Indian Ocean being significant for world geopolitics. The world is continuously relying on the Persian Gulf to meet their energy requirements. Data suggests that almost 42 percent of the global trade passes through its sea lanes of communication, making the Indian Ocean a critical maritime passage. At the same time the rise of China and India as global superpowers make this region essential.

The Indian Ocean Region is bounded by various states from the continents of Africa, Asia and Oceania. It consists of various critical chokepoints which are crucial for facilitating trade, leading to the growing significance of the Indian Ocean's sea lanes of communication (SLOCs). (Map 1)



Map 1: Chokepoints and Sea-lines in the Indian Ocean, Source: Chintan Foundation

Owing to the greater significance of the Indian Ocean, in the 21st century, the attention of the states is being drawn towards maritime zones. Major powers have come to pay greater attention to their naval capabilities, thereby increasing the potential of conflict at sea.

India being one of the surging global powers, the ocean that bears its name is no longer merely a vast coastal line for defence but also the primary gateway for its emergence as a maritime power. Reports from the Press Information Bureau suggest that nearly 95 percent of India's trade by volume and 70 percent by value moves through maritime routes. Therefore, India's dependence on the Indian Ocean for energy security and economic survival is nearly absolute. India to translate its strategic location in the Indian Ocean has propelled the SAGAR (Security And Growth for All in the Region) doctrine as a comprehensive growth mechanism to promote sustainable development of the Indian Ocean Region. The ocean deals with a multitude of security threats from both state and non-state actors.

China has posed itself as a major threat to India's vision of becoming a maritime power. China, from the early 21st century, has tried to establish itself as a dominant power in Asia at both land and sea. Beijing has given the Indian Ocean a greater significance through its strategy to establish its global influence. Reports suggest that in 2024, China's energy imports accounted for \$390 billion, out of which nearly 80 percent of it worth \$312 billion comes through Malacca strait highlighting China's vulnerability at the Malacca chokepoint. In 2003, Beijing labelled this as the Malacca Dilemma and has itself acknowledged this exposure.

To overcome this strategic dilemma, China has been working on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), sometimes referred to as the new silk route. From China's point of view, India considers itself as the natural successor of British Imperialism and therefore has the right over the Indian Ocean. China's plan of action therefore through BRI is to build the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), connecting Gwadar port to Xinjiang province. Through CPEC, China will have access to both Europe and the Middle East and The Arabian Sea.

China has also been providing financial assistance to Myanmar to build a port connecting Yunnan Province with Kyaukphu in Myanmar and having direct access to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. Similarly, China's String of Pearls strategy for military and commercial maritime activity includes a chain of ports spanning across the Indian ocean (Map 2). This strategy indicates China's increasing physical naval and strategic presence in the Indian Ocean.



Map 2- String Of Pearls, Source: Kootneeti

It is to be noted that China's increased presence in the Indian ocean region directly or indirectly affects India's security and sovereignty, Gwadar having the greatest potential to knock India's security. India is heavily dependent on the Indian Ocean for its trade and energy imports. Therefore, any vulnerabilities and security challenges on maritime chokepoints by the state actors makes India also unguarded towards these attacks. To counter China's string of pearls strategy, India has formed the Necklace of Diamond to strengthen its maritime security and its relations with the neighbourhood (Map 3).

The India-Middle East-Economic Corridor (IMEC) was announced by India during the G20 summit in 2023 with an objective of enhancing and improving connectivity between India, Arabian

Gulf and Europe. It would also be a sustainable alternative to the traditional shipping routes which have remained vulnerable due to various reasons.



Map 3- Necklace Of Diamond, Source: Kootneeti

A secondary challenge comes from the Middle East itself. Türkiye does not accept the UNCLOS-3 Treaty and is guided by its Blue Homeland Doctrine for its foreign policy which emphasises on having an ambitious maritime outlook. If any collusion is to happen between China and Pakistan aided by the growing threat from an expanding Türkiye navy—a backdoor collusion that was witnessed during Operation Sindoor—could pose a challenge to India from both the East and the West side of the Indian Ocean.

Even if India is not directly involved in a conflict, its trade can be threatened. For example, the recent escalation involving the US, Israel and Iran, a vital maritime chokepoint, the Strait of Hormuz, has been jeopardized, through which a large share of India's trade takes place, which will be disrupted, and India's economy may take a big hit if the duration of this war extends more than expected.

Having clear strategies to counter each other through the String of Pearls and the Necklace of Diamond, both China and India have been facing difficulties in carrying out their policies. China has been searching for alternatives to counter its Malacca dilemma. Three alternative straits—the Sunda strait, the Lombok strait and the Ombai Wetar strait—can work instead of the Malacca strait

but all three are burdened under the problems of being narrow for large ships, time consuming and remaining exposed to US and allied naval dominance. The CPEC is also collapsing under the weight of geography and political insurgency. The port of Gwadar is conflict prone with local hostilities towards China. Similarly, Myanmar has been dealing with the civil war and there have been complaints from the former of interference in the national security by China.

On the other hand, India also has limited economic capacity as compared to China's vast investments to sustain its projects. This has stalled India's development of the Chahbahar port. The IMEC is also severely impacted due to the Israel-Gaza Conflict.

Due to its strategic importance, the Indian Ocean region, apart from state actors, also faces challenges from various non-state actors. One of the most prominent is the sea piracy and robbery which has become rampant off the coast of Somalia and Gulf of Aden. Security risks and threats to the marine environment have been increasing off the Nigerian coast due to piracy, which primarily targets oil rig support vessels and tankers. The sea lines in the Eastern and Western Indian Ocean are highly insecure due to trafficking of illicit narcotics, weapons, and human trafficking with India being exposed from both sides through the Golden Crescent (Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan) and the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos).

Most of the sea lanes in the Indian Ocean are more vulnerable due to the limited channel width and shallowness of the waterways. This often leads ships to cruise at slow speed, often being vulnerable to attacks from pirates, navigational and safety hazards, leading to maritime accidents. The island countries of India— the Lakshadweep island and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands— are also vulnerable to low-intensity threats. As mentioned in the book *Maritime Forces in Pursuit of National Security: Policy Imperatives for India* by G. S. Khurana, “In February 2007, the Indian Naval Chief warned that some uninhabited islands could become terror-hubs and ‘launch pads’ for terrorists trying to infiltrate the Indian mainland”. Al Qaeda has also, time and again, shown interest in closing the strategic maritime chokepoints.

Another major non-state actor that could threaten the safe passage of trade in the Indian Ocean is its vulnerability to climate change, pollution and environmental stresses. Climate change can impact coastal regions due to rising sea levels and threatening livelihood. Agriculture runoffs, sewage and invasive species can also impact marine biodiversity and fisheries.

PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

The China Challenge- as discussed in the paper earlier, both China and India are facing challenges to keep up with their present maritime strategies. Therefore, instead of looking away from each other, it becomes crucial for both countries to advance strategic cooperation through capacity building, bilateral exercises, and confidence-building measures for sustainable growth of the sea lanes in the Indian Ocean Region. As the External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar expressed in his book 'The India Way', India should focus on strengthening of capability, creation of balances and encouragement of cooperation keeping in mind that it would be logical for India to work with those who value its influence, advocate a larger role for it and are comfortable with its activities. In this context, he also talks about 'selective engagement framework'.

Multilateral partnerships- Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), India's strategy for Indo-Pacific is multilateral and is reflective of regional stability and collective security. India with the help of Australia, Japan and the US should aim to counterbalance China and prevent any foreseeable threat from Türkiye and Pakistan in the Indo-Pacific Region with an objective to support a free, open and resilient Indo-Pacific Region through diplomacy, information sharing and military exercises.

The piracy, robbery, smuggling and marine terrorism issue- since India positions itself as a regional security coordinator, it can globalize monitoring control of AI-integrated Synthetic Aperture Radar (SARS) to combat challenges of piracy, robbery and smuggling.

The climate change issue- aligning maritime security efforts with sustainable development goals, India should integrate SDG 13 and 14 through regulating marine tourism, promoting sustainable fisheries and capacity building of local communities. Traditional knowledge and practices of the local population should be preserved to focus on sustainable development of the coastal region. India should focus on preventive measures to tackle the environmental challenges rather than doing fixtures through curative measures. India should promote SAGAR doctrine as a normative framework, which will contribute to Maritime Domain Awareness.

THEORETICAL INTEGRATION

Our study has found that with the rising importance of the Indian Ocean in the 21st century, India and China have both entered into a power struggle to become a maritime superpower, and as the Indian Ocean is bounded by various continents, it faces threats from both state and non-state actors due to the growing importance of the SLOCs in the region. As India realises the potential of its vast coastline in the Indian Ocean as a gateway to becoming a global power, it has started to utilise its strategic location for the sustainable and comprehensive development of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), but this vision of India has been hindered by China's ambitions to establish its dominance in the region through its policies and initiatives such as BRI and String Of Pearls. India attempted to counterbalance China's strategies through its own initiatives like the Necklace of Diamonds and IMEC. Türkiye's Blue Homeland Doctrine and potential China-Pakistan collusion is India's one of the major maritime concerns. China's Malacca dilemma, i.e., overdependence on the Malacca Strait; CPEC and Gwadar instability due to political turmoil and financial constraints; and India's limitations at Chabahar port and IMEC due to geopolitical disruptions, reflect strategic limitations. Meanwhile, piracy off the coast of Somalia and Nigeria, Golden Crescent–Golden Triangle trafficking, chokepoint vulnerabilities, island insecurity, and climate change are some of the challenges from non-state actors that threaten Indian Ocean trade and stability.

Consistent with the book *Maritime Forces in Pursuit of National Security: Policy Imperatives for India* by Khurana, our study has found that it is essential for countries to cooperate to protect SLOCs. Our policy imperatives provide for India to play the role of a 'Net Security Provider' for small island nations in the Indian Ocean. For better security in the Indian Ocean Region, it becomes crucial for India and China to cooperate rather than confront for safe passage of trade in the Indian Ocean. To control any single power dominance in the region, QUAD can provide a counterbalance. Similarly, to deal with rogue non-state actors, the nations can come together for advanced intelligence sharing to counter any extreme attacks on the sea.

Both Alfred Mahan and K.M. Panikkar highlighted the importance of maritime power, but with special emphasis not only on naval power but also a combination of other factors like geography, commerce, diplomacy and strategic restraint. India's approach towards China seeking selective cooperation follows Mahan's doctrine where strength, alliances and stability shape maritime doctrine. Similarly, India's policy of strengthening its own maritime capabilities while remaining open to cooperation aligns with Panikkar's being a stabilizing force rather than a revisionist one. Mahan also strongly advocated alliances among maritime powers to preserve SLOC's security;

therefore, India's engagement with QUAD reflects not letting single power dominance in the IOR. Mahan recognized the importance of commerce as the foundation of sea power; therefore, India's future initiatives can help in dealing with non-state actors. Panikkar's coastal-centric security vision is reflected in our solution of India being a maritime net security provider.

Panikkar writes that India's future is tied to the well-being of its coastal societies; therefore, the solution of sustainable fisheries and maritime tourism reflects Panikkar's idea of human and environmental security.

India's promotion of the SAGAR doctrine also reflects Mahan's idea of strategic influence through capability and maritime regional cooperation, along with Panikkar's vision of regional leadership and non-coercive security.

In line with S. Jaishankar's vision mentioned in his book *The India Way*, the policy implications call for calibrated cooperation, confidence-building initiatives, and institutionalized India-China maritime dialogue. Indo-Pacific deterrence will be improved while maintaining strategic autonomy, where QUAD will be strengthened through interoperability, logistics agreements, and maritime technology sharing. Predictive governance against piracy and marine terrorism shall be made possible by expanding AI-integrated Synthetic Aperture Radar, Maritime Domain Awareness, and legal reforms. By incorporating SDGs 13 and 14 into the SAGAR Doctrine, India will position itself as a responsible, technologically advanced, sustainability-focused maritime power in the Indian Ocean Region, institutionalizing Blue Economy principles, climate resilience, sustainable fisheries, and community-based coastal governance.

LIMITATIONS

- Due to time limitations, the study could not extend its scope to include long term trends and more in-depth primary data collection.
- While using the secondary data, the outdated data was not fully reflective of the recent geopolitical developments.
- Due to greater instability in West Asia, we were unable to encapsulate the essence of recent developments in the global scenario.

FUTURE RESEARCH

1. Till now whatever research is done is focused on the western Indian Ocean but we should also we now should focus on increasing trade and maritime activities in the Eastern Indian Ocean. Further research can be done on how to increase maritime activities in the Eastern Indian Ocean.
2. Future research can explore the ways to increase strategic partnership between India and China to expand the strategic importance of the Eastern Indian Ocean.
3. Apart from the Ecological and Sustainable development perspectives that we have suggested as a Third Perspective adding to the research, we think the unexplored capability of Indian Ocean should be upheld with possibilities of forming naval bases, executing naval exercises, even the contribution of Naval force over the region should be under more light. Further, the joint exercises of the three fronts- Navy, Army and Airforce should find a common ground of working in IOR.
4. We also think a separate study on the Coastal Community; local population should be conducted in understanding the pathway of India's growth as a Maritime power. Also, the traditional knowledge, guidance and to analyse the pattern of Sea Calendar must be taken into consideration.

CONCLUSION

The paper has been directed in a way that aims to provide a lens that facilitates a solution-based approach, by finding the existing gaps as well as paved paths for bridging them. Here, the central question of the research has been answered in a way that indicates India's capability to transmit its strategic location in the IOR by integrating the civilisational methods used respectively by Mahan and K.M Panikkar alongside a new pillar of sustainability and ocean governance. To keep pace with changing dynamics, to be a dominant sea power, India needs to be strategically autonomous and have a blend of hard power and soft power diplomacy in its approach.

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