Vol. XXIII pp. 1-20

THE STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INDIAN OCEAN FOR INDIA'S SECURITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: AN OVERVIEW

Sanjukta Banerji Bhattacharya

"Whoever controls the Indian Ocean controls Asia. The ocean is the key to the seven seas. In the twenty-first century, the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters"-this much-cited quotation has often been attributed to Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, but it is doubtful whether this is correct. Mahan, however, did write, "Whoever rules the waves rules the world", in his very impactful book, The Influence of Sea Power upon History(published in two volumes in 1890 and 1892), in which he argued that sea power was the key to military and economic expansion. Over a century has passed since the book was published and the world has changed in more ways than one with the introduction of air power, space power, digital technology, and Artificial Intelligence (AI), which work in tandem with ground forces, uniting strategies, adding to security but also the level of destruction. At the same time, the oceans remain the main lanes of communication for trade and commerce, with most heavy cargo including petroleum and natural gas being carried by ships, making 'ruling the waves' and securing ocean waters as important now as it was in the 1890s.Although Mahan was not the person who predicted that 'the destiny of the world' would be decided on the waters of the Indian Ocean (IOR) in the twenty-first century, the geostrategic significance of

the Indian Ocean Region and its neighbourhood is such that the United States (US) has coined the term 'Indo-Pacific' to cover an expanded region extending over both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, which would imply that whoever controls the Indo-Pacific, controls most of the world.

While post-Renaissance and the invention of the compass, sea power became very important for European powers that had long coastlines like Spain and Portugal or were island nations like England, Indian states or mainland empires had never focused on sea power although ships and boats of different types existed from at least 5000 years back as testified by the magnificent port of Lothal on the Gujarat coast dating back to the Indus Valley civilization, which, given the magnitude and finesse of the port, speaks of a thriving trade across the Indian Ocean. Sorghum, pearl millet, finger millet, cowpea and hyacinth bean, all African crops, found their way to Gujarat around 4000 years back in the late Harappan period, while black pepper and sesame, which are native to India, arrived in Egypt around the same time (Boivin, Crowther, Pendergast and Fuller, 2014, pp 547-581). One may wonder why coastal kingdoms or powerful empires like that of Asoka or the Mughals never focused on building viable navies. The answer perhaps lies in the fact that till the advent of the Portuguese, although India had been invaded time and again throughout its history, armies had come across the difficult terrain of the Northwest over the Hindukush mountain ranges, or infiltrated across the jungles of the Northeast, but never over the Arabian Sea or the Bay of Bengal. The Europeans, on the other hand, had developed large ocean-going vessels capable of sailing over thousands of miles from the late 1400s and had further invented firearms that could be used in sea battles as well fired from the sea onto land sites, which were far superior to the canons owned by Indian rulers which were short range and could not hit ships that were offshore moving targets. The Europeans began to trickle in during the reign of the Great Mughals, who suffered from a kind of 'sea

blindness'. They had large outsized land armies but a navy that was worth little and no match against the steady inflow of Europeans who set up trading posts which developed into diwanis, and as Britannia began to rule the seas, they also began to rule most of the littoral states around the Indian Ocean.

Today, in a shifting kaleidoscope of power and power play, the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean can only be ignored at the cost of India's security. The present paper will first discuss why the Indian Ocean is important for India's security and economic interests; it will then analyse challenges and threats to the region including the presence of other major powers like China, and finally, it will examine India's naval capabilities and diplomatic and security relations with Indian Ocean littoral states in its bid to remain dominant in its region.

I

In the current geopolitical context, it may not be possible for any one country to control the entire expanse of the Indian Ocean the way that colonial powers like the Portuguese, French and British did during various stages of colonial history, but the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean region has magnified since those days, especially over the past couple of decades following the rise of China and its obvious intent to dominate not only its region but its wider neighbourhood, which includes the IOR and its choke points. In the years following Independence, India focused on nation-building and the immediate economic and security issues within its borders. As there was no dominant power in the region controlling the seas, the ocean was split into the continental sub-regions of Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. The island nations also grouped themselves into these sub-regions, dividing the Indian Ocean primarily into the eastern Indian Ocean and the western Indian Ocean. But India now views the Indian Ocean as one

continuous region from Africa's eastern coast to Australia's western coast. In 2016, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) set up a new division, the Indian Ocean division, to look at the region as one theatre. Madagascar and Comoros which had not then been included in this division were added in 2019. While India's initiatives will be discussed later, it may be emphasized that the IOR is gradually gaining strategic space in political conversations in New Delhi.

Is the Indian Ocean becoming important because of India's threat perceptions, especially after the sea-borne terrorist attack on Mumbai in 2008? While this is one reason for added concern, it is important to explain the growing realization of the significance of the maritime domain. India is geographically located at the Ocean's centre, and has over 7,500 kilometres of coastline; it is the region's most populous country and in a sense, its geopolitical underpinning because it is located at the crossroads of international commerce and is the connecting point between the global trade of the North Atlantic and the Asia-Pacific. It has been reported that around 80 per cent of the world's maritime oil and 9.84 billion tons of cargo pass through the Indian Ocean region annually. In 2020, the Indian Ocean Rim reported $6.17 trillion in total trade (Baruah, Labh, Greely, 2023). The IOR is also critical for its movement of hydrocarbons and natural gas; about 65 per cent of the world's known oil reserves belong to 10 of the IOR littoral states. About 80 per cent of India's and China's oil imports move through the Indian Ocean, while for Japan, the figure is above 90 per cent (Weber, 2019). What makes it imperative to cite these figures here is that three of the world's most important choke points are in the Indian Ocean: (1) the Malacca strait between Malaysia, Singapore and the Indonesian island of Sumatra, which connects Southeast Asia and the western Pacific to the Indian Ocean; (2) the Strait of Hormuz, which is the only sea passage connecting the Persian Gulf to the wider Indian Ocean; (3) the Bab-el-Mandeb strait between Eritrea and Djibouti in the Horn of Africa and Yemen on the Arabian

Peninsula. There is also the Mozambique Channel between Madagascar and Mozambique, which is a key trading route for goods transiting the Cape of Good Hope to the Middle East and Asia. Choke points are narrow routes providing passage from one region to another and any country that controls a choke point can cut off access to other seas, causing immense sea traffic jams and huge commercial losses. Here, it is also imperative to mention the Sea Lanes/Lines of Communication (SLOCs), which are commercial trading routes in peacetime, also giving access to resources in distant places via ocean routes, but which pass through choke points and are vulnerable in times of both war and peace due to long-existing threats like piracy, and emerging ones like international terrorism in addition to disputes between states and other geopolitical problems, where the rules of a rule-based-order are flouted regularly.

The IOR is also gaining importance for its resources; this ocean is easier to explore than the depths of the Atlantic or the Pacific and modern techniques have yielded a wealth of natural resources in the Indian Ocean. Nodules containing nickel, cobalt and iron, and massive sulphide deposits of manganese, copper, iron, zinc, silver, and gold have been found in sizeable quantities on the sea bed. The Indian Ocean coastal sediments are important sources of titanium, zirconium, tin, zinc, and copper. Rare earth elements are also present although their extraction is not always commercially feasible. Further, Indian Ocean region economies accounted for 35.5 per cent of global iron production and 17.8 per cent of world gold production in 2017. Moreover, 40 per cent of the world's offshore oil production takes place in the Indian Ocean basin. The main energy resources present in the Indian Ocean are petroleum and gas hydrates.The Indian Ocean holds 16.8 per cent of the world's proven oil reserves and 27.9 per cent of proven natural gas reserves. Also important are thorium deposits in the placer sands off the Malabar

Coast which could be used for producing nuclear energy. Similarly, the placers of Thailand, Australia and the Indo-China region contain precious heavy metals that are critical for the electronics and semiconductor industries.India received exclusive rights to explore polymetallic nodules in the Central Indian Ocean basin in 1987. Since then, it has explored four million square miles and established two mine sites. In July 2011, China too, was awarded the right to explore a 10,000 km2 polymetallic sulphide ore deposit in the Indian Ocean.

Perhaps one of the most significant assets of the Indian Ocean today is its living assets: fish and marine animals. While global trends show a decrease in fish capture since 1996, the IOR has reported a continuous increase in fish capture since the 1950s and was responsible for 28 per cent of the world's fish catch in 2016. This has increased fish exports from IOR littorals; for instance, Indonesia and India accounted for around 4.5 per cent of global frozen fish exports in 2017. Aquaculture, that is, raising fish in captivity, has also increased in the IOR. Improvements in technology have made it possible to also have deep-sea aquaculture.The Indian Ocean possesses some of the few remaining underexploited fish stocks in the world; some analysts feel that it will come under enormous pressure in the future as the next frontier of the global fisheries market (Michel, Fuller & Dolan, 2012; 103-112).

In the past few decades, the IOR has gained geopolitical and economic importance as the volume of shipping, especially cargo ships, has increased, minerals are being explored and excavated, offshore oil is being extracted and fish capture and aquaculture have become thriving industries. Earlier, the Indian Ocean, unlike the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans that acted as barriers between states, was a peaceful connector of the East and west with no known important battles being fought on its waters. But in the emerging geostrategic structure, the very 'connector'

status of the Indian Ocean has opened it to many threats and challenges, not the least being the ambition of rising powers to control the seas, the SLOCs and the choke points to control Asia if not the Indo-Pacific.

II

Before discussing conventional security threats from state and non-state actors, it is imperative to first mention some serious non-conventional threats to the Ocean, because these may have serious implications for the well-being of the littoral states. A 2009 World Bank study on vulnerability to storm-surge disasters found that five out of 10 countries with the greatest percentage of coastal population at risk, five out of the 10 countries with the highest percentage of coastal GDP at risk, six of the 10 countries with the highest proportion of coastal urban areas, and 21 of the 50 most vulnerable major cities at risk lie around the Indian Ocean (Davis, Balls, 2022: p. 17). The environmental risks to the Ocean include habitat destruction, biodiversity loss, land and marine pollution, and overfishing, to mention a few. States throughout the region face numerous economic, social, political, cultural, and human vulnerabilities and are at risk. Apart from the depletion of mangroves, coastal reefs and wetlands, there are threats to marine life from destructive fishing practices, as well as billions of litres of sewage and industrial waste polluting the waters. Scientists have found that in parts of the Indian Ocean oxygen levels are declining, threatening fish stocks, and so-called 'dead zones' have been identified where there is not enough oxygen to sustain marine life. Further, there is the serious challenge of climate change. The Indian Ocean is the fastest warming ocean and the expected impacts include rising sea levels, increasing sea surface temperatures, acidification of waters, stronger tropical cyclones, and larger storm surges, and this in turn, could affect food security and the economy derived from marine life. It also makes the littoral states vulnerable to environmental

disasters like the tsunami of 2004 that killed around 228,000 people. What is required to meet these challenges is a governance mechanism with uniform regulations, standards and guidelines applicable to all nations which implies a coherent regional arrangement and enforcement mechanisms, something that is only cosmetic at present.

There is also a strong security dimension to the threats facing the IOR, which includes piracy, smuggling and illegal trafficking. For India, which has a coastline of 7517 kilometres (including the coasts of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the Lakshwadeep Islands), the security challenge came horribly to the fore during the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks which were perpetrated by terrorists arriving by sea. For a few decades after Independence, India looked inward since the state was a nation-in-being and much was needed to make it into the 'emerging' power that other states currently claim India to be. During the Cold War, the Ocean was a major theatre of competition between the Soviet Union and the United States, but this phase ended following the end of the Cold War. While the US presence continued through its presence in the military base of Diego Garcia, its focus was largely on the Persian Gulf leaving the Indian Ocean largely segmented with some powers having sway in specific areas. Because of history shaping geopolitics, the influence of great powers in the region remains complex. For instance, while the United States continues to maintain a military base on the island of Diego Garcia in the Chagos Archipelago, the sovereignty of the island, an overseas territory of the United Kingdom (UK)which it leased from Port Louis during its independence, is disputed by Mauritius, with the UN General Assembly adopting a resolution in favour of Mauritius in 2019. And while India is a key partner of the US in the IOR today, it supports Mauritius on grounds of decolonization and non-alignment. Further, France has an important security role

in the western Indian Ocean; through its overseas region of Reunion, France is a member of the Indian Ocean Commission, the only forum that brings together the French-speaking islands of the region.

Both France and India however, never really filled the security gap left by America's limited engagement in the IOR following the end of the Cold War, and now over the past decade and a half, new competitors are slowly but surely, easing into the region. The Maritime Silk Road under Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provided a platform for China to collaborate on economic and military issues with the island states and littoral countries of the Indian Ocean. It set up its first overseas military facility in Djibouti in 2017, becoming the fourth player after the US, Japan and France to have a military base near one of the most important choke points on the Indian Ocean. It is also the only country that has diplomatic missions in all the six major island nations of the western and southern Indian Ocean: Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar and Comoros, something that India, France, the UK or the US do not have. Russia too has entered the competition for power in the region: it has set up a new naval base in Sudan for twenty-five years, which will give it strategic access to the Red Sea and by extension to Bab-el-Mandeb, one of the key choke points in the Indian Ocean. Saudi Arabia and Turkey are also strengthening their economic and diplomatic ties with the islands of the Indian Ocean, which could lead to new power dynamics (Baruah, 2021).

However, it is China's increasing presence especially that of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) that is of major concern to India and its new partners in the region. Its footprints are also increasing in the IOR littoral states; it has invested in the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and developed Pakistan's Gwadar Port as a part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)' which

is of special concern to India because the so-called corridor runs through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK). It has financed the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, linking Malé to the island of Hulhumale and Hulhule, the first sea-crossing bridge for the Maldives which could play a vital role in the island nation's long-term economic development. The Maldives has also leased an uninhabited island, FeydhooFinolhu, to a Chinese enterprise for 50 years at a price of around $4 million with plans to develop infrastructure for tourism. Beijing recently hosted a China-Indian Ocean Region Forum on Development Cooperation with the joint collaboration of the people's government of Yunan province and its chief foreign aid agency, the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), pointing toward the institutionalization of Beijing's role in the IOR and its littoral areas (Tambi, 2023). On the African coast, huge Chinese investments have been madefor building railroads and infrastructure development. Here, it is necessary to mention China's 'string of pearls' strategy, a term first coined by Booz Allen, who predicted that China would boost its naval presence in the IOR through building infrastructures in friendly states, in a report entitled 'Energy Futures of Asia' (Ashraf, 2017: p. 169). The strategy focuses on increasing China's military, economic, political and diplomatic clout in the IOR; as mentioned earlier, China has invested in building and strengthening seaports in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Maldives and Pakistan and has a naval presence in Djibouti. These 'pearls' are interlocked and strategically intertwined with each other, and there is no doubt that China is emerging as a sea power, strong enough to challenge India's desire for dominance in its neighbourhood, that is, the IOR.

III

Given the IOR's increasing geostrategic and geo-economic importance, the Indian Ocean has become even more critical for India's diplomatic, military,

and regional engagements. Historically, the Indian Ocean has been a crucial theatre of interest for New Delhi since it constitutes both India's immediate and extended neighbourhood and therefore, a secure and stable Indian Ocean is essential for New Delhi's security environment. However, even after the end of the Cold War and the withdrawal of US-Soviet competition in the Indian Ocean, India's engagement and understanding of the ocean and its importance remained fairly limited, perhaps due to 'strategic inertia' as one commentator has described it (Baruah D.M., 2022). It was the then US Secretary of State, Robert Gates, who suggested that India be the 'net security provider' in the IOR during his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2009. By this time the US was engaged in Afghanistan and the Middle East and wanted a responsible democratic country that was also a neighbourhood big power, and which had furthermore signed a nuclear deal with the US the previous year, to be in charge, rather than leaving the ocean to become segmented among antagonistic forces including pirates and terrorists. The phrase 'net security provider' was repeated in the 2010 US Quadrennial Defense Review Report, which argued that 'as its military capabilities grow, India will contribute to Asia as a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond' (Mukherjee, 2014: p. 1), thus showcasing America's recognition of the ocean's importance as well as that of engaging India in securing its own interests in the IOR. The term 'net security provider' implies enhancing mutual security in the region by addressing common security concerns and encompasses activities on the part of the 'security provider' like capacity building,military diplomacy, military assistance and even direct deployment of military forces to stabilize a situation. With China's growing presence in the region, India too, has shown more interest in developing its naval as well as diplomatic capacities, but whether it is enough remains to be seen since its land borders have ever-present threats and the focus is more on its challenged northern and north-western and north-eastern frontiers.

However, as India liberalized in the 1990s and its economy became more interlinked with international trade and investment resulting in an economic growth spurt, there was growing realization of its extended neighbourhood. The Indian Ocean Rim Initiative (IORI) was launched during Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's tenure, which later mutated into the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), with a focus on sustainable development and regional economic cooperation. The IORA, with its headquarters in Mauritius, has identified six areas of cooperation, namely, maritime security, trade and investment facilitation, fisheries management, disaster risk reduction, academic and scientific cooperation and tourism and cultural exchange. This agenda has helped to define India's parameters of its emerging 'Blue Economy' concept, which stretches far beyond a country's coastal economy to engulf fishery development, boat and shipbuilding, marine biotechnology, maritime renewable energy, deep sea mining, ocean disaster management, to mention a few. What it implies is coordinated sustainable development of the IOR, providing employment and livelihood to people across the littoral, which would promote India's diplomatic relations with the island and coastal states and provide conventional security through non-conventional means. India's growing acknowledgement of the centrality of the Indian Ocean to India's development and security can be gauged from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2018 - "The Indian Ocean has shaped much of India's history. It now holds the key to our future. The ocean carries 90% of India's trade and our energy sources. It is also the lifeline of global commerce. The Indian Ocean connects regions of diverse cultures and different levels of peace and prosperity. It also now bears ships of major powers. Both raise concerns of stability and contest" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018). He spoke of India's deeper economic and defence cooperation with states in the Indo-Pacific region (the concept of the Indo-Pacific coming more to the forefront than just the IOR), the Free Trade

Agreement with ASEAN and Thailand and the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements with Singapore, Japan and South Korea and various maritime exercises in collaboration with other countries like Malabar, Milan and RIMPAC (the last in the Pacific). Mentioning that today's challenges are multi-focal and cannot be handled by any country alone, the Prime Minister introduced the concept of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), which is a geo-economic construct that balances maritime security with economic development, implying that any maritime strategy and doctrine for the Indian Ocean must balance the security and developmental interests of all countries in the region (Baru, 2023: pp. 13-19). In policy circles, these issues add up to what has been called Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), which underlines an effective understanding of the maritime environment and what could affect its security, economy, and ecosystem.

The importance of conventional maritime security cannot be overemphasized in the IOR given China's naval presence and overtures to island states and littoral countries. One of the main objectives outlined in the Indian Navy's 2015 Maritime Security Strategy ('Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy') is shaping 'a favourable and positive maritime environment, for enhancing net security in India's areas of maritime interest'. Although the document does not specify whether it will be a 'net security provider' or how, it is the first time that a naval strategy report mentions the term 'Indo-Pacific', and further, confidently outlines its intent to be more proactive in the region, be it through the Joint Strategic Vision with the United States, Japan's inclusion in the Malabar exercises, new bilateral exercises with Japan, Indonesia, and Australia, or re-engaging with the island nations of the IOR and the South Pacific (ORF, 2015).

As part of its revamped strategy, India has modernized facilities in the Andaman Islands and at a base in Campbell Bay in the Nicobar Islands. In 2019, an infrastructure development plan worth Rs. 56.5 billion aimed at allowing additional warships, aircraft, troops, and drones to be stationed in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands was finalized. On January 24, 2019, the Indian Navy commissioned the new naval station INS Kohassa in the Bay of Bengal islands. Further, to involve other littorals and island states in ensuring security, India has recently undertaken infrastructure development projects with dual-use logistics facilities in Mauritius and Seychelles. In 2015, India and Mauritius signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to improve air and sea facilities at Agaléga Island (Mauritius), which it is currently upgrading. With Seychelles, India has agreed to develop infrastructure on Assumption Island. India has also helped Victoria with ocean mapping to protect Seychelles' exclusive economic zone and has donated aircraft and launched a radar project (Ghosh, 2020: pp. 146-150). India has signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with the US, which would enable India to gain logistical support from the many US facilities located throughout the Indo-Pacific freeing it from setting up expensive logistical hardware and software all over the Indian Ocean. However, it has also bolstered its capacity-building efforts in the region; India has set up coastal radar systems and stations in collaboration with Maldives, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, and Seychelles. India has also offered similar assistance to Myanmar and Bangladesh for better maritime domain awareness. India is also a part of several bilateral and multilateral military exercises in the Indian Ocean apart from patrolling it on its own.

India also seeks to maximize its maritime partnerships in the region through collaborations creating platforms and initiatives to address key challenges of the region. To face the challenges of increasingly frequent cyclones and other natural

disasters resulting from climate change, India in collaboration with countries like France and Australia has announced initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, International Solar Alliance, etc. In response to the long COVID-19 pandemic, India launched "Mission Sagar" sending emergency medicines, and food, along with medical assistance teams to its Indian Ocean neighbours - Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, and Comoros. The Indian Navy now has developed into an effective 'first responder' and is quick to respond to humanitarian emergencies in the IOR, offering Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). The Indian Navy has also been strengthening its capabilities and those of neighbouring states in data gathering and sharing. It set up the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in 2007, the first regional framework aimed at structuring information sharing on white shipping and addressing threats such as illegal fishing, drug smuggling and human trafficking (Baruah, 2022). India is also a part of the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue initiative that aims to offer an integrated maritime domain awareness picture to its members so they can fully monitor the IOR. It is also a member of the Colombo Security Conclave, a grouping that intends to coordinate security cooperation and capacity building in South Asia and the Indian Ocean.

For all this, the Indian Navy needs to build its capabilities and capacity. After a long hiatus, the largest increase in the defence budget went to the Navy in 2022, with an increase of 45 per cent for buying equipment. In 2021, the Indian Ministry of Defence announced that it would establish forty-two new coastal radar stations to strengthen coastal surveillance. In December 2022, the government approved a major National Maritime Domain Awareness (NMDA) project to create an integrated intelligence grid that can detect and respond to sea-based threats in

real-time. The Indian Navy's recent exercises demonstrate its improved capabilities. In March 2023, the Indian Navy completed a four-month-long Theatre Level Operational Readiness Exercise (TROPEX) in the Indian Ocean to practice coastal defence, amphibious actions, and weapons testing; this included around 70 naval ships, six submarines, and over 75 aircraft. In June 2023, the navy showcased a twin-carrier operation exercise in the Arabian Sea involving the integration of two aircraft carriers with a diverse fleet of ships, and submarines, and the coordinated deployment of over 35 aircraft. In March 2023, the Indian Navy tested ship-launched Brahmos supersonic missiles and carried out successful precision strikes. The Ministry of Defence has also signed an agreement with the US to acquire armed MQ-9B Sea Guardian drones to enhance India's intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities (Miller and Harris, 2023).

IV

Over the last five to ten years, India has used both bilateral and multilateral diplomatic approaches to extend its footprint in the IOR as a dominant player; further, with the growing awareness of the Indian Ocean as its enlarged security zone, it is strengthening the Indian Navy's capacity to perform within and outside its immediate seas in a multitude of tasks including rescue missions, disaster management, anti-piracy operations etc, apart from being battle-ready. But is this enough to make India the 'net security provider' in the IOR or the prevailing power in the Indian Ocean? Given China's ambitions in the Indian Ocean and the willingness of some littoral states and island nations to partner with China, firstly, because of its huge economic investments in the region and secondly, as an alternative to India, the US, or France to reduce security dependence on any one country, India needs to draw up long-term strategic plans for its maritime domain. While partnering with the US, Australia and Japan is a step forward, it must be

understood that neither Australia nor Japan has much of a presence in the Indian Ocean and America's focus is more on the Pacific than on the Indian Ocean. The US Department of Defense divides its Indian Ocean responsibilities under INDOPACOM, CENTCOM and AFRICOM, with India falling under INDOPACOM, which relates to the American concept of the Indo-Pacific region; thus there is little conversation between India and the US on the western part of the ocean which falls under AFRICOM. However, the western Indian Ocean is of vital interest to India, which now sees the entire Indian Ocean as one zone. While there are cooperative arrangements with France, especially about the western Indian Ocean, India needs to engage more with other countries interested in the region including the European Union (EU) as an entity which can aid in the sustainable development of the littoral states and island nations. The harsh reality is that security and prosperity for all in the region are imperative for India's own political and economic security. For this, a strong navy is essential but, given technological advancements, information gathering, quick response mechanisms, state-of-the-art hardware and software etc are essential to make India's maritime presence more effective. Further, to counter China's hard and soft diplomacy, India also needs to gear up its diplomatic engagement with its maritime neighbours, that is, focusing on its 'Neighbourhood First' policy not just on paper, but prioritising its neighbourhood on the ground. And since the ocean is vast and technologies have advanced beyond the capacity of any single country to be the sole 'security provider' in the Indian Ocean where high-level competitors have operated in the past and new ones are entering the fray in the present, more engagement and understandings withlike-minded partners are essential to maintain the law of the seas in the Indian Ocean.

References:

1. Ashraf, J. (2017), "String of Pearls and China's Emerging Strategic Culture", *Strategic Studies,* vol. 37 no. 4, Winter, pp. 166-181.

2. Baru, S (2023), "Indian Ocean: From Sea Power to Ocean Prosperity", (Keynote Address, web-based international seminar), Indian Council of World Affairs, ed., *India and the Island States in the Indian Ocean: Evolving Geopolitics and Security Perspectives*, New Delhi, available at https://www.icwa.in/pdfs/IndiaIslandStatesIndianOcean.pdf, accessed on November 13, 2023.

3. Baruah D.M.., Labh N, Greely J (2023), "Mapping the Indian Ocean Region", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 15, available at https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/06/15/mapping-indian-ocean-region-pub-89971#:~:text = Economics %2 0a nd % 20 Trade &t ext = Around % 2080 %2 0 percent % 20 of% 20the, the% 20Indian %20 Ocean% 20region %20annually. Accessed on November 1, 2023.

4. Baruah, D.M. (2022), "Maritime Competition in the Indian Ocean", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Mission, May 12, available at https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/05/12/maritime-competition-in-indian-ocean-pub-87093, accessed on November 7, 2023.

5. Baruah D.M., 92021), "What is Happening in the Indian Ocean?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 03, available at https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/03/03/what-is-happening-in-indian-ocean-pub-83948, accessed on November 1, 2023.

6. Boivin N, Crowther A, Pendergast M.E., Fuller D.Q. (2014), "Indian Ocean Food Globalization and Africa", *African Archaeological Review,* 31 (4), DOI: 10.1007/s10437-014-9173-4, available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/278400421_ Indian_ Ocean_ Food_ Globalisation_ and_Africa, accessed on November 1, 2023.

7. Davis A.E., Balls J.N. (2022), *The Indian Ocean Region in the 21st Century: Geopolitical, Economic and Environmental Ties,* Australia India Institute, University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. Available at https://aii.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/indian-ocean-report.pdf, accessed on November 3, 2023.

8. Ghosh, P., (2020), "India's Indian Ocean Region Strategy", *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs,* Fall, available at https://media.defense.gov/2020/Aug/31/2002488089/-1/-1/1/GHOSH.PDF, accessed on November 15, 2023.

9. Michel D, Fuller H, Dolan L (2012), "Natural Resources in the Indian Ocean: Fisheries and Minerals", in Michel D. and Sticklor R., *Indian Ocean Rising: Maritime Security and Policy Challenges,* eds., Stimson, Washington, D.C., available at https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/IOR_chapter7_1.pdf, accessed on November 3, 2023.

10. Miller, M.C. and Harris, C. (2023), "India's Efforts to Strengthen Indian Ocean Security", Council on Foreign Affairs, Blog Post, July 18, available at https://www.cfr.org/blog/indias-efforts-strengthen-indian-ocean-security, accessed on November 17, 2923.

11. Ministry of External Affairs, Media Centre, Government of India (2018), Prime Minister's Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue, June 1, available at https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018, accessed on November 7, 2023.

12. Mukherjee, A. (2014), "India as a Net Security Provider: Concept and Impediments", S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Policy Brief, August, available at https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/PB_140903_India-Net-Security.pdf, accessed on November 13, 2023.

13. Observer Research Foundation (ORF) (2015), "India's Evolving Maritime Strategy", Commentaries, December 14, available at https://www.orfonline.org/research/indias-evolving-maritime-strategy/, accessed on November 13, 2023.

14. Tambi, R. (2023), "India's Ambitions in the Indian Ocean Region", *South Asian Voices,* Stimson, January 23, available at https://southasianvoices.org/indias-ambitions-in-the-indian-ocean-region/, accessed on November 7, 2023.

15. Weber J (2019), "China's Expansion in the Indian Ocean Calls for European Engagement", The Mercatur Institute for China Studies (MERICS), Comment, October 11, available at https://merics.org/en/comment/chinas-expansion-indian-ocean-calls-european-engagement, accessed on October 31, 2023.