



Maritime Power: A Key Driver for India's National Security

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Abstract- India has been a dominant player in the Indian Ocean Region since the age of the Ramayana, when Lord Rama built Ram Setu to reach Sri Lanka. Subsequently, the upcoming kingdoms, viz., the Cholas, used the Indian Ocean for establishing trade and expanding their area of influence beyond the land borders by showcasing prowess in the sea. Later in the 17th century, the most prominent was Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, who laid the foundation stone for the development of a strong Naval force to protect his sovereign authority against the Siddis. He soon realized that, apart from having supremacy on land, it was mandatory to project power in the maritime domain to secure the interests. Europeans (especially France and Britain) were able to develop colonies in the entire Indian Ocean Region due to their mighty Naval forces, which were complemented by a comprehensive maritime strategy. A.T. Mahan, in his two-volume work "The Influence of Sea Power upon History," which was published in 1890 and 1892, discussed how maritime power is essential in becoming a world power by establishing control over the seas. Later, after the two world wars, the USA emerges with a mighty Naval force having the capability to dominate in the economic, political, and military domains of the world and secure its national interests. In the present global scenario, every nation is trying to protect, preserve, and promote its national interest by adopting all possible measures. The traditional state-centric approach to national security has evolved into comprehensive security, encompassing all security aspects. Considering the non-state actors and diversification of threats around us, maritime power becomes an indispensable instrument for the national security framework. For a country like India, which is the epicentre of the Indian Ocean, it becomes a matter of grave importance to have a commanding maritime power that will integrate all the elements of national security. This integration will foster the formulation of a comprehensive national security strategy for India. The pairing of maritime power with national security will be advantageous for the upcoming Integrated Theatre Commands. This paper will analyze the linkage between maritime power and national security, keeping in mind India's geostrategic location in the Indian Ocean Region. Further, it will delve into the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean Region and emphasize the leverages of bracing national security and maritime power in the formulation of a comprehensive national security strategy. The paper will conclude by enunciating the importance of maritime power and national security in the establishment of Integrated Theatre Commands, which is the core aspect of ongoing defence modernization in the country.

Keywords: Maritime Power, National Security Strategy, Indian Ocean Region, Indian Navy, Geopolitics, Defence Reforms.

IOR's Pre- Independence Dynamics and Its Historical Significance - The Indian Ocean, once called the "Eastern Ocean," is the only ocean in the world that is named after a country, i.e., India. Historically, the Indian Ocean is important for India due to its maritime heritage and Naval activities, as mentioned in ancient literary sources and archaeological evidences. Maritime trade and commerce relations of the Indus Valley civilization with Mesopotamia date back to 3000 BC, which marks the beginning of India's Naval history. The dry-dock facility discovered at Lothal (2400 BC), Gujrat, was the world's first facility used for shipbuilding. The first known reference to Varuna, the lord of the sea, is found in the Rig Veda. Even the motto of the Indian Navy, "Sam no Varunah," comes from the Rig Veda. The great Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata mention the ships and navigation via the Indian Ocean. Kautilya's Arthashastra describes Navadhyaksha, who was in charge of ships and headed the department of waterways. Megasthenes, while detailing Chandra Gupta Maurya's military system, mentions a separate force in charge of the Naval battles. The Cholas, the Cheras, and the Pandyas had close maritime commercial ties with South Asia, Southeast Asia, and as far as Japan.

With the decline of Hindu kingdoms, the Arabs dominated the Indian Ocean Region from the 8th to the 13th century by serving as a bridge between East and West. The Mughals dominated India from the 16th to the 18th century and disregarded maritime affairs as they had enough revenue from land-based assets. In this regard, the Arabs controlled all the business in the Indian Ocean Region. Hindustan, the affluent region, caught the eyes of several European nations as they sensed the need to establish a forthright maritime route for developing trade relations. After Vasco Da Gama discovered the sea route between India and the Portuguese, the Portuguese arrival disrupted the tranquility of the Indian Ocean as they formulated the objective to rule the entire Indian Ocean Region. Subsequently, the Dutch, the British, and the French arrived in the region primarily intending to establish trade. These major European powers didn't acknowledge each other's presence, as they were often at loggerheads due to overlapping interests. The Marathas under Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj emerged as a pre-eminent force that resisted the European powers in the region. Shivaji's farsightedness realized that, apart from dominating land, it was necessary to develop a robust Naval force and effective port system at sea to protect his maritime interests. Shivaji was facing the Mughals on land, whereas Europeans and Siddis at sea. He was a strong supporter of forts and constructed Vijay Durg and Sindhu Durg in the coastal states.¹ Shivaji is also known as the *father of the Indian Navy* for his contribution in laying the foundation stone of the modern Naval forces. With Shivaji's death in 1680, the French and the British controlled the entire Indian Ocean, and the downfall of the Naval competency of Indian kingdoms was the prime reason for their enslavement by the Naval powers of the West (Khurana, 2016, p. 2).² The British East India Company led to the formation of the Royal Navy, later named the Royal Indian Navy, which was responsible for the coastal defence and making the whole Indian Ocean a "British lake."

Post-Independence Dynamics- Strategies were formulated for a proportionate fleet with sufficient levels of force that were compatible with India's extensive maritime interests, right after the nation achieved freedom in 1947. However, the Indian Navy proved to be only a semblance of what was intended, and this happened primarily due to British strategic calculations that were inclined towards Pakistan. The political

elites in India had little knowledge about matters related to national security and armed forces. After the debacle of the 1962 war, they understood the perils of a feeble Naval force. Pandit Nehru said these well-known words, emphasizing the Indian Ocean's importance for India:

"The past demonstrated that whoever controls the Indian Ocean would dominate India's freedom and its maritime trade. Amidst this, we ought not to remain vulnerable at sea, and since we are independent, we have emphasized the significance of the sea all over again."

The above-mentioned vision of Pandit Nehru emphasizes the necessity to rekindle Naval power, which is difficult due to meagre resources and the hostile neighbourhood in the face of China and Pakistan (Khurana, 2016, p. 2-3).³

Linkage between Maritime Power and National Security- The past demonstrates that, with a few exceptions, the majority of the rulers in power in India had their sights set on the land borders. The seaborne invasions by imperial nations had a lasting impact that shaped the history of our country. The reality that intruders via the sea, not from the mountain routes, conquered and controlled India should always be ingrained in our consciousness. It ought to affect how we view maritime power in the present and in the years to come (Venkatshamy Krishnappa, 2012, p. 84).⁴

With the traditional state-centric approach to national security, the policymakers formulated our national security doctrine vis-à-vis Pakistan and China, emphasizing the security along the border regions. With the conclusion of WWII, India was ill-prepared, and it didn't develop its Naval power after the gradual waning of British Naval might. This resulted in the superpowers, namely the USA and the USSR, dominating over the Indian Ocean Region during the Cold War and had security implications for India. The 1971 Indo-Pak war was a turning point in India's Naval history, which demonstrated the synergy between the joint operations carried out by the Armed Forces. The navy's utility was proved in aiding the ground campaign throughout the conflict, especially the creative missile-boat strikes and blockade of Karachi port (Khurana, 2016, p. 3).⁵ However, the United States Navy tried to influence the war by stationing its Seventh Fleet, led by aircraft carrier USS Enterprise, in the Bay of Bengal. This exposed us to the Naval blackmail, highlighting our weaknesses and emphasizing the need to revamp the Naval infrastructure. The political class soon realized that elements of maritime power would determine our national security framework and would bolster securing our goals of national interest.

The European powers, especially France and Britain, were able to establish their colonies in the Indian Ocean Region due to their strong Naval presence. The Royal Navy of the British East India Company was the sole reason for its dominance all over the world, it developed the coastal cities into areas of trade and commerce, and their Naval forces protected its maritime interests in the Indian Ocean. In the age of globalization, where nations are economically interdependent, securing economic interests is the prime focus in the changing dynamics of global power politics. India's prestigious geographical position in the IOR and this region serves as a maritime highway for global trade.

Since India's Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) begin and end here, it served as a vital hub due to its extensive coastline, vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), expansion of island territories, fisheries, offshore oil exploration, and designated deep sea ocean mining; (Venkatshamy Krishnappa, 2012, p. 85)⁶ it

becomes a matter of grave concern to secure its maritime economic interests. The land resources have almost reached the saturation point due to increased population and demand, but the oceanic resources present in India's EEZ are yet to be explored. The only way by which India can secure its maritime interest is by linking maritime power as a vital component in the national security framework. If India had possessed efficient maritime power during Operation Pawan (the Indian Peacekeeping mission to Sri Lanka) in 1987 and Operation Cactus (to thwart a coup attempt in the Maldives) in 1988, the overseas operation would have projected to a greater extent.

Maritime Power: An Essential Element in Formulation of Comprehensive National Security Strategy -

A.T. Mahan outlines six fundamental factors that decide a country's maritime power in his two-volume work *"The Influence of Sea Power Upon History"*. The six elements described by Mahan are geographic location, territorial extent, physical conformation encompassing climate and natural production, size of population, people's character, and character of the government (Cottrell, 1981, p. 34).⁷ India is a maritime nation that perfectly fits into Mahan's fundamental factors of geographical (location, territory, and physical conformation) and human (population, character of people and government) aspects. India has a geostrategic location in the Indian Ocean Region with a vast territorial extent complemented by Lakshadweep and Andaman & Nicobar Islands and possesses a resource-full EEZ. India's geographical location is a crucial determinant of its national security strategy and susceptibility even in the nuclear age. India is the world's second-most populous country and the world's youngest and largest democracy, which encompasses a youthful workforce. The degree of factual and analytical understanding of human dynamics as an element of global power dynamics has advanced significantly (Cottrell, 1981, p. 38).⁸ Therefore, by possessing the six indispensable elements as described by Mahan, the Indian-centric definition of maritime power can be stated as:

"The extensive use of oceans and marine resources comprehensively to maintain economic development, along with projection of political and military might to abroad regions that are essential for its national security and economic prosperity."

This emphasizes that to exploit the ocean and its resources for the growth of the economy and to become a maritime power, India should also utilize its political and military influence in overseas areas whenever necessary to secure its maritime and national interests. Hence, India needs to deploy the element of maritime power in the comprehensive national security strategy setup. The security construct has become complex with the emergence of non-state actors. Earlier, our security mechanisms were focused on countering the threats emanating from the land borders. But the terror attack on Mumbai on November 26, 2008, exposed the shortcomings of our national security strategy and policymakers on multiple fronts. The 26/11 attacks were an eye-opener for the leadership of the country, and they highlighted the necessity to include maritime power in the formulation of the comprehensive national security strategy. This attack showcased our vulnerabilities in the internal security domain and a direct threat towards our maritime economic interests. To overcome the challenges, the government focused on overhauling the entire maritime security system by upgrading its operational protocols, marine security framework, and assets. The

Indian Coast Guard was tasked with the responsibility of territorial waters, and the Indian Navy was assigned the comprehensive maritime security role.

With the global order shifting from unipolarity to multipolarity, the USA, China, Russia, France, the European Union, and other nations have shifted their focus to the Indian Ocean Region due to its untapped resources. The increased presence of Chinese Naval forces through its military bases is posing a direct threat to India's maritime interests. To counter the Chinese policy of the string of pearls, India is developing a necklace of diamonds. Further, the Indian Navy is engaged in several bilateral and multilateral exercises to involve Navies of the Indian Ocean Region. The Indian Navy started the regional initiative called the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in 2008 to enhance cooperation in the maritime domain among the Navies of the littoral states, and it consists of Navies of 35 countries (Kaul, 2016, p. 120).⁹ The QUAD grouping, consisting of the USA, Japan, India, and Australia, is aimed at promoting economic cooperation and regional security in the Indo-Pacific region. It is a masterstroke by India to counter the Chinese presence.

Maritime Power and National Security in Defence Modernisation- The first maritime doctrine, titled *"Freedom of Use of Seas: Indian Maritime Military Strategy,"* which was released in 2004, described how India aspires to grow as a regional-level power instead of emphasizing the security environment within the region. The doctrine recognized the Indian Ocean Region as a crucial location for international maritime trade. The changing geopolitical landscape led to the formulation of a new doctrine titled *"Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy,"* which was introduced in 2009. Revising the 2004 doctrine, the policy now focused on securing the Indian Ocean waters along with exploiting them. Additionally, it also addressed our maritime interest in the global shipping lanes into the Pacific region, the North Indian Ocean Region, and choke points in the Indian Ocean. This doctrine specified the Navy's role and the Navy's areas of interest by using more forceful terminology. The remote parts of Australia and Africa were referred to as secondary interests, and waters bordering Indian territory were designated as prime areas of interest. Here the Indian Naval forces were playing the role of a *"constable."* The People's Republic of China's steady ascent and rising meddling in India's areas of control forced India to alter its earlier strategy to counter the issues spurred by China's increasing military might. To thwart China's expanding influence in the Indian Ocean, India revised its 2009 doctrine in 2015 with the clear intent of taking the role of a *"strongman"* in the region. Ever since then, India has solidified its position as a maritime powerhouse in the Indian Ocean Region. The revised Naval doctrine of 2015 was in the wake of the reintegration of a global perspective from the Euro-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, which has directly impacted Indian maritime space socially, politically, and economically. Keeping its maritime economic interests of prime importance, India expanded its area of interest in 2015, which encompasses all the vital sea routes and choke points and distant regions of the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans and Mediterranean Sea. India's role of *constable* has now been transformed into a *net security provider* offering assistance to other nations in the region (Nawaz, 2023).¹⁰ Even the USA and European Union are looking up to India to secure their interests in the region. By pursuing a more independent foreign and defence policy, India outlined strategies to ensure security in the region. This changed the Indian Navy's role, which is

pertinent to ongoing defence modernization in the nation, further emphasizing revamping the maritime power.

The 1971 Indo-Pak war, along with victory, gave us several lessons, the most prominent being the development of effective and efficient Naval forces. The Kargil Review Committee Report submitted in 2000 emphasized the formulation of a new security strategy doctrine keeping the Indian armed forces at the centre, and we are witnessing major developments in the defence sector after 2014. The perfect blend of maritime power and national security will bolster the defence modernisation process. The *Make in India* initiative launched by PM Modi as a part of his *Atmanirbhar Bharat* campaign is boosting the defence sector, where we are manufacturing sophisticated technology domestically. INS Vikrant, the indigenous aircraft carrier, was put into service in 2022. Project 75 Alpha intends to construct six assault submarines with nuclear propulsion, which are also domestically developed with DRDO's assistance. Under Project 75, the Indian Navy is currently constructing Scorpene-class submarines at Mazgaon Dockyard. Project 17A of the Indian Navy is dedicated to advanced stealth frigates, and Project 18 is dedicated to manufacturing sophisticated destroyers. Under Project Varsha, an advanced Naval base near Visakhapatnam will be constructed for the nuclear submarine fleet. To enhance the surveillance and reconnaissance capability, the Navy is increasing the number of UAVs, such as the DRDO's RUSTAM and MQ-9B Sea Guardian drones. To enhance the aerial combat capability of the Navy at sea, the DRDO is developing Twin Engine Deck-Based Fighters (TEDBF) to replace existing MiG-29 Ks (*Ongoing Project / Defence Research and Development Organisation - DRDO, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 2022*)¹¹, and the Navy is planning to procure Naval versions of LCA Tejas and Rafales. A third indigenous aircraft carrier, INS Vishal, is proposed to be inducted by 2030. These aforementioned programs are in line with India's overhauling plan to improve maritime power and security in the Indian Ocean Region, along with acquiring *Atmanirbharta* in defence manufacturing, which will fulfil the goal of making India a \$5 trillion economy. Additionally, defence modernisation by embracing the aspects of maritime power and national security will facilitate the Navy's growth and streamline its capabilities to keep up with operational demands and deter the emerging threats in the age of artificial intelligence and cyber-terrorism. The core of defence reforms is the Integrated Theatre Commands, and the proposed Southern Theatre Command at Thiruvananthapuram will possess the assets of the Army, Navy, and Air Force. The Southern Theatre Command will encompass the whole southern peninsula and the Indian Ocean Region under its area of responsibility. The prime objective of this theatre command will be to safeguard India's extensive maritime interests in the IOR and will keep a hawk-eye on its vast coastline, island territories of Lakshadweep, Andaman & Nicobar, Bay of Bengal, and Arabian Sea regions. The comprehensive maritime power in this domain will assist in defending maritime interests for the protection of vital offshore oil resources, important maritime commercial routes, Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs), and countering maritime threats. The Navy has been playing a crucial role in human assistance and disaster relief operations.

Challenges- IOR accounts for one-third of the world's population residing in 56 countries. The difference in political characteristics of the region and uneven GDP of nations have given rise to small arms

proliferation, terrorism, piracy, drug trafficking, and nuclear proliferation issues. The notorious Golden Triangle also lies near the Strait of Malacca, which poses a direct threat to maritime interests. Regarding India's coastline security, notably that of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the 2008 Mumbai attacks need to serve as a wake-up call. According to senior authorities in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, fishermen from Myanmar who visit the islands to harvest sea cucumbers from beaches have permanently fixed spots around the islands where they conceal their tools, fuel, and replacement parts. Some of these sites have been identified. The fact that these fishermen represent large merchants makes this finding startling. The same places may soon be exploited for more severe crimes, such as acts of terrorism (Kaul, 2016, pp. 138–139).¹²

In general, the Coast Guard and the Marine Police of coastal states must be developed to relieve the Navy of maritime constabulary duties (while retaining the optimal "overlap"). At the same time, Marine Domain Awareness (MDA) must be attained, at least to the extent required for the intended Naval reach, not just to the furthest reaches of India's maritime zones but also beyond (Kaul, 2016, pp. 135).¹³ To overcome such operational issues, strength of the Coast Guard should be enhanced by equipping them with modern technologies such as UAVs, Satellites, and Balloons. The cooperation between the Indian Navy and the Indian Coast Guards will earn dividends.

Countries have been compelled to reroute their shipping routes due to the serious threat posed by the piracy problem. The only method to stop piracy is to tackle its land-based pillars, which are unstable political regimes and their safe havens. This is because the deployment of warships and Naval operations cannot stop piracy. The regional and extra-regional stakeholders will need to work together globally to accomplish this.

There are a few fundamental problems with the current defence modernization that must be resolved. Budgetary restrictions brought on by the nation's "*Gun versus Butter*" debate may make it difficult to overhaul the security mechanism. The political leadership must realize that having a strong and reliable maritime force will support the national security mechanism and safeguard our maritime economic interests. Conventional divergences, asset sharing, and inter-service collaboration are challenges facing the Integrated Theatre Commands. The CDS and the Chiefs of the three services must have an open discussion on this matter (Kaul, 2016, p.135).¹⁴

The Way Forward- Maritime power is becoming more and more important in the modern day due to constant change in the global geopolitical and security landscape. In the age of globalisation, there is neither a permanent friend nor a permanent enemy. Nations are aligning with each other to secure the goals of their national interest because national interest serves as the foundation of the national security strategy. A country like India, should formulate a flexible and futuristic strategy which would engulf the maritime power as its vital component. The majority of Naval operations are directly related to the economic expansion of a state. Naval power has grown more important as economics has taken centre stage in the present globalization tendencies. In this highly interdependent world order, the continued economic growth and prosperity of the people are the most crucial vital interests of the nations. Thus,

Naval forces may be used more frequently to protect the nation's economic and developmental interests abroad, whether or not they are "Maritime" in character.

With the increase in demand, land-based resources have reached the saturation point, and nations have shifted their attention towards the unexplored resources of the Indian Ocean Region, which is a concern for policymakers in India. Due to its geostrategic location in the Indian Ocean Region, India seeks to protect its maritime interests, and this can only be ensured by projecting maritime power along with other elements of national security. As mentioned earlier, it was the Naval force that fulfilled the objectives of the British East India Company and other European powers that came to the Indian Ocean to establish trade. Pandit Nehru has also advocated the development of a maritime power by focusing on the development of Naval forces. The victory over Pakistan during the 1971 war came with the humiliation of Naval blackmail by the USA Navy's Seventh Fleet. With the emergence of non-state actors and the source of threats becoming complex, the traditional state-centric notion of national security has broadened to the maritime domain, which was evident from the 26/11 attacks. This embarked on the important phase of the development of maritime power in ensuring national security. India possesses a vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which has untapped mineral deposits and resources. The interests of major powers and the Chinese military are posing a direct threat to India's maritime interests, and to counter Chinese presence and balance out major powers, India has to blend aspects of maritime power with national security, which will aid in the formulation of a comprehensive national security strategy. To complement this, the Indian Navy has revised its Naval doctrine, which changed its role from a "constable" to a "net security provider" by offensively projecting its foreign and defence policies. This also aligns with the ongoing defence modernization, which is focused on revamping our national security apparatus and preparing armed forces for the future. Various projects have been launched by the government to enhance the Navy's Bluewater capabilities through the induction of the latest weaponry and sophisticated platforms. The Southern Theatre Command (part of the Integrated Theatre Commands) will cover the entire southern peninsula. To thwart Chinese activities, we need the third Indigenous Aircraft Carrier, INS Vishal, at the earliest. The strategic positioning of the aircraft carriers will be as follows: one each in the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal, and the third one around the Sri Lankan tip. The aircraft carriers, equipped with superior air power at sea, will act as a force multiplier of maritime power and complement the comprehensive national security strategy. The ability to project strength abroad will be a requirement for India's Naval forces. At the very least, this will require expanding its essential carrier-borne air force to the Indian Ocean's outermost regions and its land-attacking nuclear submarines to the closest borders of neighbouring seas.

As mentioned by Kautilya in his Mandala theory, our immediate neighbours are our enemies, in our case, like China and Pakistan. India should collaborate with nations like Japan, Vietnam, Taiwan, and other Southeast Asian nations to counter the Chinese presence in the region. In sum, we can state that maritime power has emerged as a crucial component of state power and a currency of influence in international relations because of the growing emphasis on maritime security on a worldwide scale. As a result, it now has

more potential to be utilized as a diplomatic tool, which might have benefits, but obstacles would unavoidably arise along the route.

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