RNI No. DELENG/2020/79244 ISSN 2347-1522
Vol. VI Issue No. 2 March-April 2025

India Foundation Journal

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India Foundation Journal

Vol. VI
Issue No. 2

March-April 2025

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Printed on behalf of India Foundation

Printed at Pearl Printers, C-105, Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-1, New Delhi-110020

Published at India Foundation, 4th Floor, Core 4-B, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi-110003

RNI No.- DELENG/2020/79244
ISSN 2347-1522

Annual Subscription - Rs.3000/-
Single copy - Rs.500/-

For advertising details contact
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With a team of dedicated professionals based at its office in New Delhi, the Foundation works with partners and associates both in India and overseas to further its stated objectives.

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The India Foundation Journal is led by an Editorial Board of eminent scholars and leaders from various spheres of Indian public life. The bi-monthly journal covers a wide range of issues pertinent to the national interest, mainly focusing on international relations, national security, legal and constitutional issues and other issues of social, religious and political significance. The journal seeks articles from scholars with the intent of creating a significant body of knowledge with a nationalist perspective and establish a recognised forum for debates involving academicians and policymakers.

India's Maritime Imperative: Navigating Towards Viksit Bharat

Dhruv C Katoch*

When India achieved independence in 1947, its land and resources had been ravaged by over two centuries of colonial rule, severely impeding its economic development. India's share of global GDP, which stood at about 23 per cent in 1700 CE, had declined to approximately three per cent by 1950. Poverty was widespread; literacy levels were abysmally low at around 12 per cent, agricultural output was barely at the subsistence level, and the industrial base was frail. Since then, the nation has made significant strides in its development paradigm. Today, India is self-sufficient in food grains, the industrial base is strong, and literacy levels are above 77 per cent. India is currently the world's fifth-largest economy (USD 4.27 trillion) by GDP, behind the USA (30.34 trillion), China (19.53 trillion), Germany (4.92 trillion), and Japan (4.27 trillion).[1] The last decade has specifically been a period of economic growth, where India has emerged in the top five rankings from being earlier a part of the fragile five.

Nevertheless, India still has a considerable journey ahead to become a developed economy. India's GDP per capita at the end of 2024, at USD 2,940, is abysmally low, ranking 141 globally. As of now, the developed countries have a significantly higher level of per capita GDP. India is far behind the USA (USD 89,680), Canada (USD 55,890), Germany (USD 57,910), the United Kingdom (USD 54,280), France (USD 49,530), Italy (USD 41,710), and Japan (USD 35,610). It is also well behind China (USD 13,870) and Brazil (USD 10,820).[2]

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision for India to become a developed nation by 2047 encompasses economic growth, technological upgrades, infrastructure development, social empowerment, and sustainability. In May 2020, he stressed building a self-reliant India—Atmanirbhar Bharat—as a foundational step towards becoming a Viksit Bharat (developed nation). By 2022, the Government of India had explicitly set the goal of a "Viksit Bharat" by 2047. In December 2023, the 'Viksit Bharat @2047: Voice of Youth' initiative was launched to actively involve the youth in shaping the nation's future. The Union Budget 2025 was again focussed on 'Viksit Bharat @2047', emphasising agriculture, MSMEs, investments and exports to accelerate India's journey. This would be accompanied by transformative reforms in the financial sector, regulatory policies, taxation, power, urban development and mining.

If India is to become a developed country by 2047, its economy must grow to USD 30 trillion, with a per capita income of USD 18,000. According to the Economic Survey 2024-25, 8% growth at constant prices is needed for the next two decades to reach the 'Viksit Bharat' goal by 2047. This ambitious target requires nurturing an

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entrepreneurial environment within the country, creating a favourable regulatory environment and decentralised governance, and stressing innovation and technology to boost the manufacturing sector.[3]

Approximately 95 per cent of India's international trade by volume and 70 per cent by value is conducted via sea transport.[4] To transform India into a USD 30 trillion economy, manufacturing must receive a substantial boost for domestic consumption and exports. Trade flows are hence set to increase exponentially from current levels. Consequently, seaborne trade will be a crucial factor in India's ascent. India thus has a vital interest in ensuring the safety and security of the Oceans in line with Vision SAGAR—Security And Growth for All in the Region. The maritime sector is thus the key to India's quest to become a developed nation.

Maritime India Vision 2030

Geography has placed India central to the Indian Ocean. Its strategic location, economic interests, naval power, and historical ties with all littoral states make it a key player in the region. India's SAGAR doctrine seeks to maintain regional security and stability. The country sees itself as a net security provider and first responder in natural calamities.

In February 2021, the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways released its vision document—the Maritime India Vision (MIV) 2030.[5] This 300-page document serves as a blueprint for sector stakeholders to work towards growing the Indian maritime sector and making it globally competitive. Recognising that India's maritime sector plays a crucial role in its overall trade and growth, MIV 2030 has identified over 150 initiatives across 10 themes, covering all facets of the maritime sector. It looks into developing port infrastructure to include inland water transport, enhancing logistic efficiency through technology and innovation, strengthening the policy and institutional framework to support all stakeholders, and enhancing India's global share in shipbuilding, repair and recycling. The document provides a comprehensive framework for the holistic development of India's maritime sector. The Ministry's Sagarmanthan Portal monitors and evaluates the outcomes of MIV 2030 and offers comprehensive visibility and transparency into the progress made in various fields.

To emphasise the maritime sector's importance, the Union Budget for 2025 introduced a Maritime Development Fund (MDF) of Rs. 25,000 crore (USD2.87 billion) to promote infrastructure and competitiveness within the maritime industry. In addition, shipbuilders have been offered easier access to infrastructure credit and customs duty exemptions for raw materials and parts. The aim is to enhance India's maritime capability through fleet expansion and support to the shipbuilding ecosystem to reduce reliance on foreign shipping companies. At present, Indian vessels comprise just 2.6 percent of the global fleet. According to a report prepared by the Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO), "a 25% [market] share by an Indian shipping line can save USD 50 billion a year and will also reduce arm-twisting by foreign shipping lines on medium and small businesses."[6] The government will likely set up a dedicated container shipping line to prevent local shippers from being over-dependent on

foreign-flagged carriers. The new entity is expected to be named Bharat Container Line.[7] This initiative demonstrates India's long-term vision to become a major player in the maritime sector.

While India ramps up its maritime capability through MIV 2030, it must also be cognizant of other challenges that could threaten free and open navigation in the Indian Ocean. These challenges pertain to geopolitical rivalries, maritime security threats, and the impact of climate change.

Geopolitical Rivalries

India and the countries in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) are concerned about China's growing military and economic reach in the IOR. Even smaller countries that leverage the Sino-Indian rivalry to gain an advantage are now concerned, as their freedom of manoeuvre to navigate China's growing influence is shrinking. For India, China's blue-water ambitions remain a matter of concern. China's 2015 defence white paper lists eight strategic tasks for the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Two of these are to safeguard China's security and interests in new domains and the security of China's overseas interests. It calls upon the PLA Navy (PLAN) to shift its focus from "offshore waters defence" to the combination of "offshore waters defence" with "open seas protection" and build a combined, multi-functional and efficient marine combat force structure.[8] The defence documents of 2017 and 2019 also emphasise the role of the PLA in protecting Chinese citizens and properties overseas.

Presently, China has limited capability to carry out strategic tasks in the Indian Ocean despite rapidly developing its naval fleet and deploying many such assets there. However, China has developed a string of ports—Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Chittagong in Bangladesh, and Kyaukpyu in Myanmar—sometimes referred to as the 'String of Pearls'—which provide China with significant strategic and economic influence. China's military base in Djibouti, established in 2017, is strategically positioned at a choke point between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. From here, the PLAN has carried out anti-piracy missions, marking the first time the PLAN has conducted an operational mission in the Western Indian Ocean.

India is concerned about the growing Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean and, more specifically, in its immediate vicinity, as evidenced by the presence of Chinese naval vessels in Sri Lanka's coastal waters and the sale of Chinese submarines and naval platforms to Bangladesh. The China-Pakistan nexus is also a matter of concern to India, especially given the strategic nature of that cooperation, which also extends to the maritime domain. Pakistan has promoted China's growing interests in the Indian Ocean and received economic, technological and military assistance in return, forcing India to expand its naval power and align with like-minded states.

The Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS-2015), released by the Indian Navy in 2015, articulates the significance of the Indian Ocean for India's security and aims to establish substantial control and influence to counter the rise in Chinese activity. For India, the entire Indian Ocean—from the East coast of Africa to the Strait of Malacca—is its priority area. India sees itself as a first

responder in the region as well as a net provider of security for its friends and partners. The Red Sea, too, falls within India's primary area of interest, and the western coast of Africa, the Mediterranean Sea and other areas of national interest based on considerations of the Indian diaspora, overseas investments and political reasons within its secondary area of interest.

Over the past decade, India has invested heavily in the region through foreign policy engagements and a strategic approach to the maritime domain. India's USD 100 million line of credit to Mauritius for security and military spending in 2021 underlines this trend, as does the 2022 memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Sri Lanka to establish a Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre as part of India's SAGAR initiative.

In terms of numbers, China vastly outnumbers India in the naval platforms it can bring to a contest. However, most of China's fleet is reserved for a war in the western Pacific, close to its home ports. What it can bring to a conflict in the Indian Ocean is perhaps less than one-third of the Chinese navy's overall vessels. The PLAN's emerging carrier battle groups are also not yet ready for engagements with capable adversaries and perhaps require at least a decade to conduct effective combat missions. In addition, any Chinese flotilla in the Indian Ocean would depend on at-sea replenishment as they lack naval bases in the region. While the Chinese Navy is building supply ships such as the Type 901, these are not a substitute for safe and friendly ports of call. These challenges for China are a critical asset for India.

Another challenge for China is that in the event of hostilities with India, India's tri-service Andaman and Nicobar Command is strategically located to guard the choke points between the Indonesian archipelago and the Indian Ocean. In addition, Beijing lacks reliable air cover for operations in the Indian Ocean. Despite the progress made by China in carrier-based aviation, it is still years away from achieving a level of competence where it could compete head-to-head with India in India's backyard.

India's geography gives it a strategic advantage in effectively deploying naval power in the Western and Eastern Indian Oceans. This is India's backyard. Its resident naval power is further enhanced by naval cooperation with friendly countries. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), an informal strategic forum comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, has, as one of its prime objectives, to work for a free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. Under successive US administrations, the Quad has become a crucial regional security platform, gaining traction in response to Beijing's increasing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific.[9]

China's geographical challenge in the Indian Ocean arguably prevents it from engaging India in a high-intensity naval conflict. China's lack of ports and bases to resupply a major conflict poses a challenge that India can capitalise on.[10] However, conflict prevention would require an Indian naval presence in the Indian Ocean, strong enough to deter war. That is why India must invest in a strong Navy.

Maritime Security Threats

Maritime security threats in the Indian Ocean that are of significant concern arise from piracy and illicit trafficking. Curbing these threats is crucial for India, given that its economic growth heavily

relies on sea-borne trade. The threat of piracy mainly stems from the waters off Somalia. In addition, Houthi rebels in South Yemen now pose a significant security risk to risk to shipping in the Red Sea. The increasing proximity of piracy to India's western seaboard amplifies the urgency of addressing this threat.

Drug trafficking remains a lucrative revenue stream for criminal and terrorist organisations. Seaborne smuggling routes are used by an intricate network of transnational actors to destabilise littoral nations, posing a threat to regional stability. India is a prime target.

In response, the Indian Navy has been at the forefront of combating maritime piracy and drug trafficking in the region. It works closely with naval forces and coalition partners in the Gulf of Aden to safeguard these crucial trade routes. India's former Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Sunil Lanba, stated that operations targeting these networks are inherently intelligence-driven, requiring close cooperation between maritime forces and agencies such as the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB). He stressed the importance of timely and actionable intelligence in addressing these concerns, especially the need for the Indian Navy to collaborate among multiple stakeholders, like the Coast Guard, Marine Police, and Customs authorities.[11]

An international success story was Operation Crimson Barracuda—a Canadian-led Combined Task Force (CTF) 150 of the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), to counter narcotics smugglers in the Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman in April 2024. In this operation, units from the Indian Navy, Royal Navy, U.S. Coast Guard, and U.S. Navy seized approximately 4,917 kg of narcotics, including two seizures in one day. INS Talwar, an Indian Navy frigate, seized 453 kilograms of Meth and 487 kilograms of heroin in this operation, marking the first seizure by the Indian Navy since becoming a CMF member in November 2023.[12]

The Indian Navy's dramatic rescue of a commercial ship from pirates off Somalia's coast and around 2,600 km from the Indian coast also showcased Indian naval capability in addressing the threats from piracy. On March 16, 2024, INS Kolkatta seized MV Ruen, a former Maltese-flagged bulk carrier, which had been taken over by Somali pirates. In this operation, 17 hostages were rescued, and 35 armed pirates were taken into custody.[13]

Economic and Trade Vulnerabilities

The shipping routes in the Indian Oceans serve most of the world's container and energy traffic. Three choke points, the Strait of Hormuz, the Malacca Strait, and the Bab-el-Mandeb, through which this traffic passes can severely disrupt global trade. While the Gulf has been in a state of conflict for a long time, it has fortunately not led to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz or the Bab-el-Mandeb. Any disruption in energy supplies can be catastrophic for the region, especially for India, China and Japan, which rely heavily on energy imports from the Gulf. This highlights the need for regional cooperation and diplomacy to obviate such an occurrence.

For the Indian Ocean Region, Institutions like the IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) and its adjunct - IOR-Arc (Indian Ocean Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation) promote regional

cooperation and economic growth. The 23-member IORA grouping includes countries across the Indian Ocean rim—Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Oceania. IORA focuses on trade, investment, and the blue economy (sustainable use of ocean resources). While such institutions are helpful, they lack enforcement power.

The Quad is committed to stability in the Indo-Pacific. It aims to promote regional security and economic cooperation. It supports a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and seeks to counter China's growing influence through collaborative efforts between its member countries. It also focuses on maritime security, climate change, and emerging technologies but is not a security organisation. However, as India has carried out naval exercises with all the Quad countries bilaterally and as a grouping, all the ingredients of being able to operate in a security grouping are already in place.

Conclusion

The Indian Ocean is India's lifeline to becoming a developed country by 2047. Maritime trade holds the key to the country's 'Viksit Bharat' dream. Ensuring the safety and security of sea lines of communication will hence be a priority task for India, necessitating a strong naval capability to protect its maritime interests. India, the US, and the littoral states in the IOR must cooperate to ensure stability in this crucial maritime zone.

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Potential Cooperation, Competition and Conflict in the Indian Ocean: 2025-2050

Anil Chopra*

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the Indian Ocean (IO) has been a relative oasis of peace compared to the Atlantic, Pacific, and Mediterranean, on whose waters armed conflicts have been incessant over the last five hundred years. The IO was far removed from the wars that plagued Europe and America ever since the emergence of the competitive nation-state in the West, well before Westphalia, in the 15th century. Moreover, Asian powers, except for the short-lived exploits of Zheng He, were conspicuous by their disinterest in maritime exploration and sea power, resulting in little internecine conflict in Asian waters. Unlike the other two major oceans, the IO is also landlocked to the north, allowing for trade across land routes between Europe and Asia, including the famous Silk Road through Central Asia. This further diminished the impetus for armed conflict in the IO since antiquity.

Consequently, the Indian Ocean has always been a stable trading waterway—a highway to prosperity, free from belligerent states waging war, with ships having to contend only with pirates and robbers. By hugging the coast and harnessing the monsoon winds, ancient mariners from the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) traded with even the distant Roman Empire via the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. *Thus, it is fitting that the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean have become the world's most critical maritime routes for trade and energy shipments and are likely to remain so from 2025 to 2050.* The prosperity and security of many nations depend on continued peace and stability in these waters—including India, which imports 80% of its energy requirements via these routes.

As a downside for the IOR, the placid, halcyon environment in the IO over centuries led to stasis insofar as naval warfighting platforms and weaponry were concerned, and neither India nor others in Asia could resist the maritime onslaught of colonial powers. Aside from a few minor battles and incidents, the IO remained largely quiet throughout the centuries of colonisation and even during the world wars of the 20th century.

THE 21st CENTURY

Since the turn of the millennium, however, multiple intersecting strategic and geo-economic

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developments now threaten the age-old stability of the IO and its littoral. Following the onset of globalisation and international supply chains after the end of the Cold War, the IO has gained considerable prominence on the global stage. Increasing maritime trade, the challenge from China, the ongoing relevance of West Asian oil, the competition for resources and markets, and the promising economic and investment potential of India, Africa, and Central Asia have all significantly highlighted the importance of the IO sea lanes, attracting the attention of various global and extra-regional powers, as well as pirates, terrorists, poachers, and criminals.

Moreover, the economies and energy security of numerous East Asian nations, including China and Japan, rely on the stability and viability of Indian Ocean shipping lanes. Aside from the US, which is self-sufficient in its energy needs, many Western countries also import oil from the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region. The conflict between Israel and Iran, with the latter utilising Arab proxies, creates strategic dilemmas for various powers. China's assertiveness in the South China Sea (SCS) and Western Pacific (WP) has met significant resistance from the US and its allies. This rivalry is likely to extend to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), as the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA(N)), now the world's largest navy, flexes its muscles west of Malacca. *For all these reasons, the strategic and economic interests and objectives of a wide array of powers, both extra-regional and those integral to the IOR, will likely clash in the second quarter of the 21st century.*

Promoting cooperation through diplomacy, soft power, and institutional frameworks such as IORA and IONS is essential to prevent these competitive interests from escalating into conflict. However, such mechanisms do not, and cannot, deter the initiation of violence or force by any nation or group determined to pursue such actions. Conventional deterrence must be grounded in achieving a balance of hard power. This lesson is often overlooked, as is evident from the current disarray in European capitals. Those who believe that a nuclear umbrella can avert conventional conflict are destined to find themselves rudely surprised and humiliated repeatedly. The emergence of AI, space, cyber, and quantum technologies will likely render conventional warfare more viable and facilitate clearer and more decisive outcomes through multi-domain operations.

This writer contends that only India can achieve a conventional balance of power in the IO. No other nation from Suez to Malacca has the size, economy, geography, and military potential to do so. Extra-regional powers, such as the United States, have many other concerns outside the IOR and, while maintaining forces in the region, cannot entirely guarantee a power balance. **India can.**

Therefore, New Delhi must be resolute in building the requisite naval war-fighting capabilities and capacities and not be diverted from this task through engineered incidents on the land borders or by those who proclaim that military power is irrelevant in our high-tech age. National security has many facets and components, but only conventional deterrence can ensure peace and cooperation in the IO over the next quarter-century, within which New Delhi and

Beijing are simultaneously aiming to realise Viksit Bharat (2047) and the China Dream (2049), respectively.

THE DICTATES, PERILS AND GIFTS OF MARITIME GEOGRAPHY

Few would argue against the proposition that geography is indeed destiny for nations and peoples. This is even more pronounced in maritime geography. Therefore, when considering future possibilities in the IOR, it would be appropriate to begin by looking at its geography. It is unique in many ways and will majorly impact those attempting to cooperate, compete, or fight within its boundaries.

Clearly, nations with access to the sea possess a significant advantage regarding trade and potential prosperity. The ocean also provides security for those countries fortunate enough to have open seaboards in multiple directions, such as the UK, India, and Australia – they can deploy naval forces with ease and relative stealth. Conversely, even powerful nations with only limited access to the sea struggle to project force and sustain military operations beyond their borders, as has been historically evidenced by successive rulers of Germany.

The ocean, however, is a double-edged sword. Although the sea is the greatest highway for trade and transportation, it is also a road for naval power to exploit globally. Great powers past and present, including the US, the USSR, Britain, Spain, and now China, have fully internalised this fact. Naval power can create a barrier across this highway, but naval weakness is an invitation to attack along the highway.

Unlike the Atlantic and the Pacific, the Indian Ocean is landlocked to the north. Access to this body of water is only possible through a limited number of narrow straits to the east and west, such as Bab el Mandeb from the Red Sea and a few from the Pacific, including the famous Malacca Straits. These narrow approaches serve as "choke points" for shipping. Both warships and merchant vessels are highly vulnerable when passing through these choke points, as their freedom of movement is restricted, making them easy targets for surface, subsurface, and aerial assets positioned nearby.

In effect, the Indian Ocean is difficult to ingress or egress, even in peacetime. Under combat conditions, in today's transparent battle space, it would be very difficult to effect safe passage, send reinforcements into the ocean, or return to home waters from outside the Indian Ocean. ***One might even characterise the Indian Ocean as a 'trap' for any hostile warships present at the onset of hostilities.*** The only significant fleet of warships that is entirely at home in the Indian Ocean is that of the Indian Navy, which possesses six major bases and island territories to deploy from and return to after operational missions, providing a considerable advantage in operational logistics, re-arming, and repairs for any damage incurred from action.

The US Navy possesses considerable experience operating in distant seas, supported by extensive networks of bases, allies, and maritime domain awareness (MDA). In contrast, the PLA(N) would operate far from its home waters without any secure naval base in the Indian Ocean other than Karachi. This situation makes it

exceedingly vulnerable, given the extended lines of communication and the hostile passage to which its units would be exposed. Conversely, the geography of the Indian Ocean Region is exceptionally advantageous to India, whose protruding peninsula divides the Indian Ocean into the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, providing easy access to both.

In summary, the maritime geography of the Indian Ocean places Beijing at a distinct disadvantage in the event of any armed conflict, even though it enables considerable power projection through the deployment of the PLA(N) and other maritime assets during peacetime and crises for grey zone and influence operations. *One could further argue that the realities of geography incentivise Beijing to maintain peace from 2025 to 2050, particularly given that the stability of the Indian Ocean sea lanes is crucial for the Chinese economy.*

THE DRIVERS OF POTENTIAL CONFLICT: 2025-2050

There are undoubtedly many internecine quarrels, disputes, and competitions within the boundaries of the Indian Ocean that could translate into conflict over the next quarter-century. However, conflict is more likely to be instigated by the actions and designs of extra-regional powers, both directly and indirectly, by sowing discord among the littoral states. The historical experience of external domination informs the unease in the region regarding the increasing Chinese presence in the IOR, alongside renewed great power rivalry and likely India-China tensions. A broad examination of some factors may help understand the drivers and prevent competition from degenerating into conflict.

Chinese Dependencies, Vulnerabilities and Ambitions.

It is undeniable that the Chinese economy relies heavily on the IOR for energy and mineral resources, essential markets for its surplus manufacturing, and strategic investments through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for leverage, influence, and connectivity in a region that is often seeking funding and benefactors. Any significant disruption of energy shipments, large-scale closures of markets to Chinese products, or restrictions on Chinese investments would severely impact its economy. In other words, Beijing is vulnerable to developments in the IOR, which could hinder or threaten its economic objectives, thus leaving it little choice but to seek influence and leverage through various means, including the potential use of military force. Such a force would secure trade and investments while simultaneously projecting power and underlying threats. *If China can maintain its economic strength and internal political stability, it is reasonable to conclude that military force would be deployed and enhanced to address IOR dependency and vulnerability up to 2050.*

There is a second, larger objective that makes it imperative for Beijing to increase its military presence in the Indian Ocean. As China seeks great power status, it becomes essential for Beijing to deploy naval power globally. Maritime geography in the Western Pacific is once again unfavourable to China, with the First and Second island chains hindering its forces from breaking

out into the Pacific, where it must also confront considerable US might even if it does so. *Thus, the only way for Beijing to project maritime power is westward, towards the Mediterranean and the Atlantic; this can only be achieved by using the Indian Ocean as a launchpad.*

The China Dream more or less demands an increase in maritime presence and capability in the IOR. The period from 2025 to 2050 will, therefore, almost certainly witness a much greater Chinese naval deployment in the Indian Ocean, with the twin purposes of securing its economic lifelines and projecting power westward beyond the constraining confines of the China seas. A substantially increased PLAN presence would, of course, be a concern to many nations, but principally to the United States and India. It could also heighten the possibility of conflict due to brinkmanship or miscalculation.

Great Power Rivalry

The United States has formally designated the People's Republic of China as a strategic competitor and adversary, viewing it much as it did the USSR half a century ago. A change in approach by the second Trump administration through engagement and deal-making would not detract from this formulation. A major Chinese military move in the Indian Ocean would almost certainly be perceived by Washington as a challenge to its long-standing great power status and influence. On the other hand, the United States can ill afford to maintain a substantial military presence in the Indian Ocean, given its concerns in the Atlantic and Pacific. Nevertheless, it would likely keep its assets and force levels with the 5th Fleet in Bahrain and at Diego Garcia, addressing increased Chinese activity and stepping up operational tempo as required.

The overall US strategic stance may, however, be moderated by its increasing isolationism and polarised domestic concerns. To this end, it could reach some form of P2 accommodation and a sphere of influence arrangement with Beijing in the near future. Such an approach would, however, encourage China to be more belligerent in pursuing its objectives in the IOR, to the detriment of India. It would be prudent to conclude that great power rivalry in the Indian Ocean would continue over the next quarter-century, but its direction and intensity would be shaped by the many major strategic shifts driven by the second Trump administration. Suffice it to say that this is yet another reason for India to enhance both the capability and capacity of its military forces in the IOR.

India-China Dynamics

The simultaneous rise of India and China over the past few decades, along with the unresolved land border issue, has led to both competition and tension between the two major Asian powers as they strive to holistically develop and regain a position in the world order commensurate with their size and population. *The Middle Kingdom's ancient propensity for suzerainty over peripheral vassal states and its attempts to apply this concept to contemporary times is challenged by New Delhi, much to the consternation of Beijing, which does not appreciate the possibility of a near-peer competitor in Asia.*

Suffice it to say that by maintaining an active land border through sporadic incidents of cartographic aggression, China seeks to keep India on the back foot and, more importantly, divert its focus from the ocean. This apparent strategy aims to hinder the growth of the Indian Navy into an even more potent force, which could disrupt Chinese trade and energy lifelines and seriously threaten PLAN units deployed in the Indian Ocean in the event of a maritime conflict. Beijing is well aware that a powerful Indian Navy would be capable of compelling Beijing to moderate any overtly offensive behaviour at the northern borders, lest skirmishes spiral out of control and ignite a major armed conflict involving air and maritime forces.

From an Indian perspective, Chinese naval activity in the Indian Ocean constitutes a constant threat that must always be considered. The Indian Navy must be capable of preventing attacks on the Indian peninsula, which is populated with industrial and commercial centres, from long-range land attacks by warships operating (legitimately) deep in the high seas. Furthermore, Beijing's strategies in India's immediate neighbourhood to the east and west, as well as in the island nations of the Indian Ocean, could precipitate conflict.

From 2025 to 2050, the likelihood of conflict in the Indian Ocean and even in the Himalayas would significantly diminish if New Delhi capitalised on India's maritime geography and strategic position in the Indian Ocean by developing a Navy capable of deterring any unwarranted actions stemming from the increasing force levels of the PLA in the Indian Ocean. ***Any imbalance could invite military misadventure or the acceptance of Chinese dominance.***

Regional Instability.

Many states along the Indian Ocean littoral are either unstable, on the verge of becoming failed states or engaged in internecine ethnic and religious conflicts with their neighbours. The instability and ongoing warfare generated by these nations can undoubtedly spill over into the surrounding waters and threaten the trade and security of those not involved in their belligerent ambitions.

The instability in West Asia is paramount among these concerns, as the disputes between Israel on the one hand and Iran and its Arab proxies on the other immediately impact shipping transiting through the region, as well as the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. This also threatens oil flow from the Persian Gulf to many parts of the world. Recent events and the actions of the second Trump administration may well lead to a cessation of hostilities. Still, the potential for an outburst of violence will remain ever present unless the Abrahamic Accords expand to include Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states and if Tehran's ambitions are resolved.

The volatile AFPAK region, along with Somalia and the Horn of Africa (HOA), could also be sources of maritime instability. The Chinese presence in Gwadar and along the Makaran coast, coupled with the escalating violence from the Baluchistan resistance, could destabilise the critical maritime approaches to the straits of Hormuz. Although the ships of the Combined Maritime Force may be able to address activities by non-state actors, any increase in Chinese force levels in this

area would fall outside the scope of maritime security constructs, as would any increase from European forces.

The tensions between India and Pakistan, provoked by the incessant support of terrorism by Islamabad, represent another source of potential conflict in the IOR. Pakistan's economy is in dire straits, and unless there is a significant political change, the current establishment is likely to drive the country towards being a failed state. Islamabad's relationship with China will also likely come under strain in the next quarter-century unless the Pakistani government grants free rein to Beijing, allowing its territory and ports to become military bases for China's anticipated military expansion into the IOR. The Western Indian Ocean, in general, and the Arabian Sea, in particular, are thus quite primed for the outbreak of maritime crises, and a mixture of diplomacy and deterrence will be required to maintain peace.

The developments in Bangladesh and Myanmar (I would like to coin **BANMAR** as an acronym) in recent times are transforming the previously placid waters of the Bay of Bengal into a region of tension, particularly due to China's involvement in arming and supporting various factions in these two countries, as well as providing military hardware. Beijing is seeking naval and military bases in **BANMAR,** with Kyaukpyu in Myanmar as the leading candidate.

Finally, developments in the island nations of the Indian Ocean, including Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Seychelles, and others, may further exacerbate maritime tensions as they seek to leverage major powers against one another to extract maximum economic benefit. Over the next 25 years, we will likely witness increasing pressure on the ruling elites, alongside incentives for infrastructure assistance. Many of these island nations are situated in close proximity to India, which has the potential to incite discord.

Maritime Security: Good Order at Sea

The phrase "maritime security" has come to encompass all non-traditional threats emerging at sea, including those posed by terrorists, pirates, criminals, and other non-state actors. Common concerns of all nations, such as the safety of internet cables, disaster relief, and ensuring the passage of choke points, fall within the remit of maritime security. The framework for cooperation on maritime security is well advanced, and there is increasing collaboration between constabulary forces, such as coastguards and marine/port police.

As a consequence of this cooperation, incidences of piracy and terrorism have decreased, and there is every reason to be optimistic that this possible source of disagreements about maritime boundaries, jurisdiction, and so on will also be peacefully resolved. Maritime security, therefore, remains one area where continued cooperation between all stakeholders promises to be a success over the next quarter century.

Resources and Geo-economic Competition

The same cannot be said for resource competition. The scramble for the ocean's living and non-living resources will lead to an increase in Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing. Fishing fleets and poachers are likely to persistently encroach on the EEZs of coastal states, potentially

becoming a source of conflict in the foreseeable future. The provisions of UNCLOS are at risk of being overlooked by smaller nations, following the example set by the larger powers.

Proliferation of Advanced Armaments And Platforms

Weapon and platform technology now allows most state and non-state actors to procure platforms such as autonomous combat drones and inexpensive surface-to-surface missiles in large numbers, as witnessed by the Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. On the other hand, defence against these relatively inexpensive offensive products requires highly expensive state-of-the-art defensive systems. *There is undoubtedly an arms race and naval buildup occurring right across the IOR, and this is always a possible cause of conflict due to bravado and miscalculation.*

THE DRIVERS OF POTENTIAL COOPERATION 2025-2050

It is axiomatic that all forms of cooperation reduce the likelihood of conflict. Taking cognisance of this postulation, the nations of the IOR littoral have made considerable efforts to create avenues for cooperation and communication in order to enhance both the prosperity and security of the region as a whole. Despite such endeavours, a host of factors, including the vast geographical spread of the region and the divergence of interests, have resulted in only incremental progress until recent times. It is difficult to synergise the objectives of distant nations stretching from the coast of Africa in the west to ASEAN states in the east.

India is not only geographically central in the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean but also pivotal in fostering cooperation in the IOR. Over the past decade, it has initiated numerous efforts towards this goal. Prime Minister Modi's articulation of "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR) in 2015, shortly after being elected, followed by the establishment of the Indian Ocean Conference in 2016, has focused the countries of the region on recognising their shared and common interest in the security and prosperity of the IO. There is every reason to believe that such cooperation among the littoral states will strengthen during 2025-2050.

Platforms for Cooperation

In addition to the **Indian Ocean Conference** at the ministerial level, the region has a plethora of other forums to address challenges and opportunities and to forge a common vision regarding shared interests ranging from maritime security to climate change. Prominent among these are the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), whose agendas encompass the entire gamut of developmental, social, security, and economic issues.

Established in 1997, IORA has steadily evolved into a significant platform for matters related to ocean management, including maritime safety and security, the facilitation of trade and investment, the management of fisheries and disaster risk, tourism and cultural exchanges, and cooperation in relevant science and technology ventures. Its efforts are consistently reducing the incidence of

piracy, terrorism, illegal trafficking, IUU fishing, and unlawful exploitation of marine resources. Its initiatives in addressing these challenges have been complemented by other initiatives, such as the Combined Maritime Force operating in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO). There is every reason to expect that these organisations will grow in strength and capability over the next quarter century.

Conceived in 2008, IONS promotes interaction and discussions among the navies of Indian Ocean littoral states by providing a forum to address maritime security issues and strengthen friendships among the member navies. It is complemented by the MILAN gathering of naval ships and delegations, which is predominantly hosted by India, mostly in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Indo-Pacific Oceanic Initiatives.

The last decade has also witnessed the emergence of numerous initiatives that encompass the Indo-Pacific as a whole while also holding significant relevance in the Indian Ocean. The Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) articulate shared objectives of ensuring that the vast ocean spaces remain free for navigation, trade, and sustainable development through adherence to international law. They also aim to build capacity and share resources concerning connectivity projects, manage disasters, preserve maritime ecology and marine resources, and address the harmful effects of climate change.

Maritime Security Cooperation

Stability in the Indian Ocean region is also advanced by a number of groupings that address non-traditional maritime security issues. The previously mentioned 46-nation Combined Maritime Force, operating in the western Indian Ocean since 2001, has contributed significantly towards this goal. Other groupings along the East Coast of Africa and in the Horn of Africa, such as EURNAVFOR, have also played a role in reducing terrorism, piracy, and criminal activities. Furthermore, a considerable number of bilateral and multilateral naval exercises, including those between France and India, as well as Exercise Malabar, conducted by the navies of the four QUAD nations, contribute to security and stability across the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean. Smaller sub-regional clusters, like the five-nation Colombo Security Dialogue in the South Asian context, also enhance stability.

Trade Cooperation

Lastly, many groupings to enhance trade, such as I2U2, GCC, and BIMSTEC, along with their associated connectivities like IMEC and IMTT, have also taken root in the IOR and are likely to be major drivers of cooperation and stability.

CONCLUSION

A crystal ball is often opaque, but it is somewhat translucent in the case of the IOR. To begin with, a parallel increase in cooperation and militarisation of the IOR can be confidently predicted, suggesting a higher potential for conflict. Conversely, competition could also lead to cooperation among members of opposing sides.

What is also almost certain is that there will be a substantial increase in the profile and visibility

of PRC military assets in general and of the unit PLA(N) in particular in the IOR. This will be propelled by many imperatives from Beijing's perspective, including the protection of its trade and energy source shipments, as well as pursuing its great power ambitions further West, for which it would be compelled to use the Indian Ocean as a springboard. This would be the natural strategic course for what is now the world's largest navy in terms of numbers. In sum, the projection of Chinese power into the Indian Ocean is inevitable unless there is major social or political upheaval or economic distress. *In such a scenario, only an equitable balance of power with adequate hard deterrence could keep the peace and prevent undue domination by an extra-regional power.*

It must be understood that warships are highly flexible instruments of state policy, both in peace and during a crisis. Warships can threaten, reassure, coax, cajole, influence, and deter simply by their very appearance on the horizon. They can be deployed for extended periods in areas of interest with minimal replenishment and without crossing international borders or airspace. They can also be withdrawn overnight without the stigma of retreat.

A strong Indian naval presence would be necessary to counter undue pressure exerted by these age-old attributes of naval power from a potential adversary. Sufficient naval strength could also exploit the vulnerabilities of extra-regional powers and spring the Indian Ocean trap. This possibility would undoubtedly deter any military misadventures on the part of belligerent powers.

What remains unclear in the crystal ball are the contours of great power competition in the IOR over the next quarter-century. While there will undoubtedly be technological and economic competition between the US and China in the foreseeable future, accommodation may occur by refraining from a strong military posture in their respective spheres of influence; this remains within the realm of possibility. *Again, the only antidote for preventing conflict or dominance in such cases would be an Indian military capability over the vast expanses of the Indian Ocean.*

Since the end of the Cold War, the world order has seen much diplomatic activity, hedging, and mushrooming of bilateral and multilateral strategic relationships to secure peace. Despite this, the last few years have seen armed conflict break out in both Europe and Asia. ***Nations that wish to safeguard their strategic autonomy have little recourse but to build military capacity and capability. Europe today is in an unenviable position because of ignoring this dictum.***

In conclusion, it should be abundantly clear that New Delhi would greatly benefit from having a robust, technologically advanced, and multifaceted Navy to maintain peace and further its interests in the Indian Ocean and ensure stability in the IOR.

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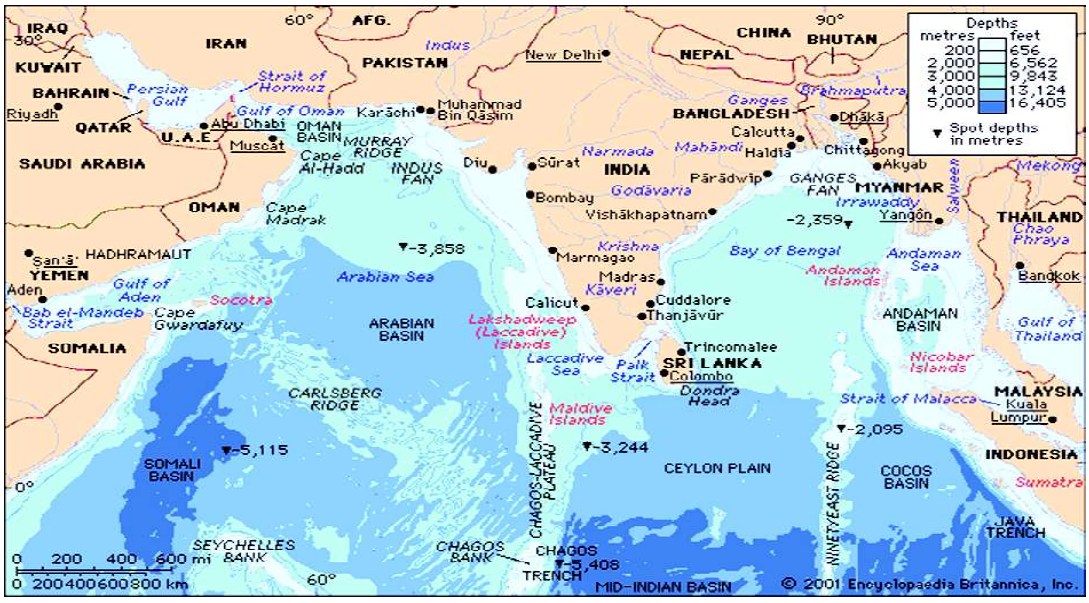
The Andaman and Nicobar Islands: A Pivotal Role in Securing Sea Lines of Communications

P. K. Roy*

Separated by over 1,300 km from the mainland, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands have long been considered a potential strategic outpost for India. However, their true strategic importance has only recently come into focus. This paper analyses the significance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands for India and the current status of developmental activities to maximise their potential.

Fifty percent of the Indian Ocean basin lies and islands. It is the seventh largest country in the world, with land boundaries of over 15000 km. India shares maritime borders with five countries. Its total coastline is 7,516 km long, comprising 5,422 km for the mainland, 132 km for the Lakshadweep Islands, and 1,962 km for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The Indian peninsula extends 1,980 km into the Indian Ocean.



(Pic Encyclopaedia Britannica)

Geography and Its Impact on India's National Strategy

Geography studies the Earth's surface, physical features, location, size and shape, natural resources, and climate. It significantly influences a nation's strategy across its political, economic, security, and diplomatic spheres. The unique character of the geographical entity of India includes vast expanses of land, snow-covered mountains, plains, deserts, an extended coastline,

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within a 1,500 km radius of India, a fact that has strategic implications. India possesses 1,197 islands in the Indian Ocean, which include 836 islands, islets, and rocky outcrops in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands—31 of these are inhabited—and 23 in Lakshadweep, with 10 being inhabited. Additionally, there are 447 islands off the western coast and 151 islands off the eastern coast. The extensive coastline affords India significant strategic access to vital sea routes, enabling monitoring and controlling of major chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca while ensuring freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region. It also facilitates strategic engagements with its Southeast Asian neighbours through the Act East Policy to counter China's influence and foster closer ties with Middle Eastern nations for energy security on the western front. These diverse geographical features have shaped India's defence policies, economic development, and international relations.

Geography, therefore, is highly significant in international relations and plays a vital role in shaping world order. It serves multiple functions, such as establishing sovereignty, maintaining peace and security, facilitating effective governance, and allowing a country to exert global influence in shaping foreign policy, defence strategies, and control over natural resources.[1]

Current Global Order

The current global order is fragile and transforming at a remarkable pace. It is becoming more complex and dangerous than ever. Ever-changing geopolitical dynamics, economic realignments, and emerging challenges mark this landscape. The geopolitical churn in the Indian Ocean Region has escalated to a feverish pitch. Four major evolving geopolitical dynamics currently reshaping the global order include the following:

- Transition from a unipolar world dominated by the US to a multipolar world in which China, Russia, the EU, and regional powers play significant roles.
- The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine is resulting in sanctions and geopolitical tensions.
- The Israel-Palestine conflict is causing realignments in the Middle East.
- The strategic competition between the US and China makes the Indo-Pacific region a geopolitical and economic centre of gravity.

These geopolitical developments hinder the world's ability to establish a stable, inclusive, and peaceful global order that could promote inclusive growth and collaboratively tackle shared threats such as climate change.

The Indo-Pacific Region

The Indo-Pacific region refers to the vast geographic area extending from the east coast of Africa to the western coast of the Americas, encompassing the Indian Ocean and the western and central Pacific Ocean, including the seas and straits that connect them. The term "Indo-Pacific" has gained prominence in recent years, particularly in geopolitical discussions and regional security strategies. It is home to major economies, including China, India, Japan, the ASEAN nations, and Australia. The region is home to 65% of the world's population and accounts for 63% of the world's GDP. Additionally, 40% of global trade passes

(Pic Courtesy - https://redlanternanalytica.com/india-in-the-indo-pacific-strategic-significance-and-geopolitical-dynamics/)

through the South China Sea[2]. It is fast developing into the world's centre of gravity.

Major challenges faced by the region include the complex power dynamics stemming from economic difficulties, environmental issues, and non-traditional security threats. China's rapid economic and military growth, maritime disputes in the South China Sea, and competing interests of the US, China, and regional powers are creating a shift in global attention towards the Indo-Pacific. Amongst the major powers, the US, China, India, the UK, and Australia all have a naval presence in the region. Over the years, several alliances and regional organisations have been established to counter the ever-expanding Chinese influence in the area. Some of the most significant are the QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue - US, India, Japan, and Australia), ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), and RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership). The US, India, Japan, and Australia advocate for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP).

In relation to India in the Indo-Pacific, China's increasing influence has led it to engage with various friendly nations and emerging partners pragmatically. Its approach in the Indo-Pacific is built upon four pillars:

- Collaboration to address shared concerns.
- Avoid 'alliances of containment' - do not compel others to choose sides.
- Embrace evolution rather than revolution in regional order.
- Recognising regional institutions and groupings as a crucial foundation for the future order.[3]

In the 21st century, the Indo-Pacific has become a pivotal region in the changing world order. Here, economic interdependence coexists with

geopolitical tensions. The region's stability will depend on how major powers manage competition and cooperation.

Indian Ocean Region

The vast geographical region of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) extends from the west coast of Africa to Antarctica in the south and the Southeast Asian Region in the east. It connects the Persian Gulf, the Suez Canal, and the Strait of Malacca, establishing itself as a crucial maritime highway for international trade. The Indian Ocean has three main choke points: the Strait of Malacca in the east and the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb in the west. The blockage of any of these would disrupt seaborne trade and lead to uncontrolled volatility in oil and commodity prices, resulting in upheavals in the global economy. In this strategically significant region of the IOR, India is situated at the tri-junction of Western, Southern, and Southeast Asia. It enjoys strategic centrality, dominating the IOR and its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), making it the largest stakeholder in the region[4]. "India is at the crossroads of the Indian Ocean…We will be more dependent than before on the ocean and surrounding regions. We must also assume our responsibility to shape its future," Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared in a speech in Mauritius in 2015.[5] Today, the IOR remains vital to the security and stability of shipping lanes and trade routes, representing over one-third of the world's bulk cargo traffic and two-thirds of the world's oil shipments, thereby ensuring global access to food, precious metals, and energy resources.[6]

China's Malacca Dilemma, a term coined in 2003 by then President Hu Jintao, signifies the potential factors that could impede its economic development by restricting oil imports. The strategic position of the Strait of Malacca, located between the Sumatra Islands and the Malay Peninsula, with Singapore to its east, could be easily obstructed by rival nations of China, impacting the transportation of 80 per cent of its oil imports trade.[7] Despite the increasing power of China and its endeavours to secure military access and bases, gain support from partner countries, establish alternative routes, and enhance its naval capabilities, the Malacca Dilemma persists in a hypothetical wartime scenario.[8] China's 'Malacca Dilemma' also centres on the United States expanding its military presence

in China's periphery, particularly in the Indian Ocean Region, and developing closer relations with countries like India, which reinforce US naval capabilities to exert complete control over China's access to Indian Ocean sea lanes. Over the years, such assessments have become a critical trigger for China's naval expansion initiatives.[9] In the face of these perceived threats, China feels isolated and targeted. It is pursuing alternative supply routes around Malacca through overland infrastructure projects that connect inland Chinese cities to ports in Pakistan and Myanmar. However, despite these diversification attempts, China will remain dependent on the Strait of Malacca in the short term.

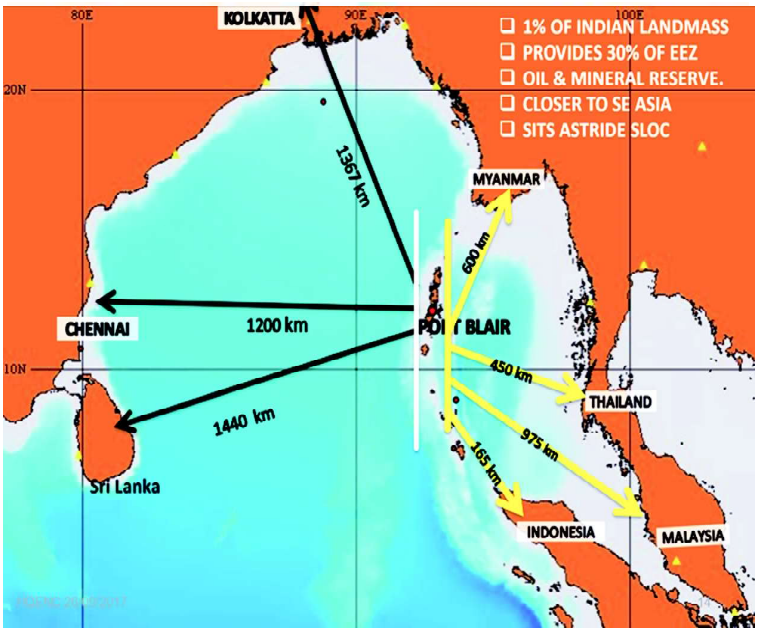
An economically and militarily buoyant China is therefore looking beyond its regional influence to enhance its presence in the Indian Ocean Region and further afield through these strategic choke points. It is leveraging its economic and military power, along with the advantages that come with them, to achieve its security and strategic goals in the IOR. A significant threat in the Indian Ocean region is the rapidly growing importance of the Indian Ocean in Chinese security policies, which view this area as part of their intended sphere of influence.

Aside from SLOC dependency, China has also attempted to project power 'in' and 'from' the Indian Ocean. The expanse of China's maritime silk route (as a component of the Belt and Road Initiative) and its strategic implications, its search for overseas military bases with Djibouti as one, its interest in protecting supply lines for commercial and military interests to Africa, West Asia and beyond, the movements of submarines, and the modernisation of its navy with warships capable of operating in the Indian Ocean – all contribute to significant unease in India-China relations. The emergence of China, not only as an economic power but also as a military power, disrupting maritime equations and the balance of power, is the dominant narrative of the 21st century. China views the Indian Ocean Region as its arena of strategic dominance, where its economic relationships are intended to be articulated based upon military power projection. However, the concern that causes India to be wary of China's Indian Ocean aspirations lies in the intentions, as well as the means and methods that China employs to establish its 'presence' in this expanse of the Asiatic lifeline.

Within the context of the deteriorating maritime situation in the Asia-Pacific region—mainly due to tensions in the South China Sea, the power play between the US and China, and the growing Chinese maritime capabilities—conditions of heightened insecurity among the region's littorals could arise over time. From the Indian perspective, Chinese attempts to dominate the maritime space in the Indian Ocean Region through increasing forays, establishing base facilities, and courting the IOR littorals for operational turnaround facilities could eventually pose a challenge to India's island territories near the straits. However, the choke points near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands make these islands sentinels or gateways to this oceanic highway and resource-rich area, as they sit astride the SLOCs.

Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Their Locations

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are an archipelagic chain of 836 islands, islets, and rocky outcrops, of which only 31 are inhabited. They extend over 720 km in the southeastern Bay of Bengal. This chain of islands is oriented geographically in a north-south direction and is divided into two main groups, namely the Andaman and Nicobar groups. The Northern Group of Islands (NGI) and the Southern Group of Islands (SGI) are separated by the Ten Degree Channel, which is 80 nautical miles wide. The Southern Group is further divided into three main groups: Carnicobar (CARNIC), the Nancowry Group, and Great Nicobar Islands (GNI). A coastline of 1,692 km grants these islands an Exclusive Economic Zone of 663,629 square kilometres and a terrestrial land area of 8,249 square kilometres. Thus, despite these islands constituting less than 1% of the mainland landmass, they provide over 30% of India's Exclusive Economic Zone, presenting tremendous potential for mining undersea resources, which are crucial to the nation's economy.



Indira Point in GNI overlooks the crucial Six Degree Channel, the SLOC for all significant maritime activity. Its northernmost tip, i.e., the Landfall Islands, is only 40 km from the Coco Islands (Myanmar). Indira Point, formerly known as Pygmalion Point, located at the southern tip, is about 165 km from Indonesia. The islands lie approximately 450 km northwest of Phuket in Thailand and 975 km northwest of Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. Essentially, the Andaman Islands are closer to these littoral countries than the Indian mainland. Their location astride the strategic SLOCs leading to the Malacca Straits provides India with a strategic overview of the shipping traffic in the IOR.

Strategic Significance of Andaman and Nicobar Islands

As the sole archipelago in the Bay, striding important Sea Lines of Communication and overlooking the Malacca Strait, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are of utmost importance for India's strategic interests.[10] Situated closer to Southeast Asian countries, these islands extend India's security perimeter eastwards, providing

exceptional defence in depth. Positioned astride the strategic SLOCs leading to the Malacca Strait, they also offer India a strategic vantage point over the shipping traffic in the Indian Ocean Region, facilitating Indian dominance not only over the Bay of Bengal but also over the Six and Ten-Degree Channel, as well as the entry and exit to the Malacca Strait. The capacity to monitor Chinese maritime activity in the Indian Ocean Region through these islands allows India to gather valuable information regarding the nature and intent of Chinese forces. By using these islands as the maritime pivot, the Indian Navy can counter any incursions by the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLA(N)) surface combatants, aircraft carriers, or strategic submarines (SSNs/SSBNs) entering the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). These islands enhance India's strategic frontiers and make them a valuable asset for India to extend its "Act East Policy." Their proximity to Southeast Asian countries could be exploited to facilitate fruitful engagements with them and foster friendly relations.[11]

Current Status of Developmental Activities

Following the Kargil Conflict in 1999, based on the recommendations of the Kargil Review Committee, the Group of Ministers approved the establishment of an integrated command in May 2001. Consequently, the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC), the first and only unified operational command, was raised in October 2001. The ultimate aim of establishing this command was to promote jointmanship among the services within the unique operational environment of these islands. The role of the ANC encompasses the "Defence of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands," including its waters, airspace, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and the protection of future offshore installations when they are established.[12] The ANC has continuously extended its Defence Diplomacy through coordinated patrol exercises (CORPATs) with nearly all its neighbouring countries on a biannual basis, resulting in excellent synergy with the littoral navies. Over the past 24 years, the command has expanded in terms of assets and manpower, thus enhancing its capability. However, progress has been modest compared to the roles and tasks allotted to it.

In recent years, the realisation of the strategic potential of these islands and the increased national interest in strengthening ties with Southeast Asia have prompted the current government to seek a strategy that would rationalise strategic and economic growth with environmental protection to ensure "all-round national development."[13] By utilising the Act East Policy, India is focusing on the holistic development of these islands through a combination of strategic investments and increasing military strength in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Development projects include modernised airfields, expanded jetties, enhanced logistics and storage facilities, upgraded troop accommodations, and advanced surveillance assets. India aims for these islands to serve as a force multiplier in the larger Indo-Pacific region. Strengthening defence infrastructure on the islands would send a strong message that India intends to remain the leading player in the Indian Ocean.

The ambitious Great Nicobar Island project, situated at the southernmost tip of Indian territory

and just 80 nautical miles from the northernmost island of Indonesia, is now awaiting final Cabinet approval following the receipt of all necessary environmental clearances. Estimated to cost 1 lakh crore over two phases, the project comprises four main components: the development of an International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT) at Galathea Bay, a greenfield international airport, an integrated township, and a gas and solar-based power plant on the island. The vision for the ICTT is to position the island as a key player in the regional and global maritime economy of cargo transshipment. Moreover, the Andaman and Nicobar administration has signed a 30-year Memorandum of Understanding with Cochin Shipyard Ltd (CSL) to upgrade ship and boat repair yards within the island territories. Once operational, these yards will save shipping companies a costly trip to Chennai, Visakhapatnam, or Kolkata for repairs.[14]

Conclusion

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands' geographical location, straddling the Malacca Strait's choke point and lying over 1200 km from the mainland while stretching over 750 km from north to south, makes them a valuable geopolitical asset. They play a crucial role in the region's maritime competition of the 21st century. These islands hold the potential for development to further India's rising economic, political, and military interests in the Asia-Pacific, especially as China becomes increasingly active in the Indian Ocean Region. Enhancing their considerable economic and military potential can add strategic weight to India's posture, and the deterrence value that these islands can provide will be significant.[15] The current focus, therefore, is on enhancing the surveillance and deterrence value of these islands through various infrastructure development, positioning military assets on the islands, enhancing communication and establishing a comprehensive economic and military engagement with the littorals. India's strategic development of these islands is not just a defensive measure but a clear message of resolve in safeguarding its maritime interests and regional stability.

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India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor: Powering Energy Transition Through Electricity Interconnection

Jagjeet Singh Sareen*

Introduction

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), launched by India at the G20 Summit in September 2023[1], marks a transformative initiative for trade, infrastructure, and energy cooperation across Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. An MOU on IMEC was signed by India, the US, Saudi Arabia, UAE, European Union, Italy, France and Germany. The IMEC comprises of an Eastern Corridor connecting India to the Gulf region and a Northern Corridor connecting the Gulf region to Europe. The IMEC envisions greater connectivity through rail, ports, and digital infrastructure. However, one of its most critical but underexplored opportunities lies in energy transition—specifically, the interconnection of electricity grids between India and the Middle East. By leveraging clean energy resources and enhancing cross-border electricity trade, India and the Middle East nations can foster a low-carbon economic future while securing energy supplies and boosting economic competitiveness.

The Strategic Case for Electricity Interconnection

1. Abundant Renewable Energy Resources

India and the Middle East collectively hold some of the world's richest renewable energy resources. India has an ambitious non-fossil fuels capacity target of 500 GW by 2030[2], primarily driven by solar and wind power. The Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, has also embarked on large-scale investments in solar energy, exemplified by projects like the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park in Dubai and the Neom Green Hydrogen Project in Saudi Arabia. Grid interconnection would enable efficient utilization of these resources by allowing power to flow where and when it is needed, reducing curtailment and optimizing capacity utilization.

The One Sun One World One Grid (OSOWOG) initiative, launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Glasgow Climate COP26[3], aligns closely with this vision. OSOWOG seeks to create a globally interconnected solar power grid, allowing renewable electricity to be shared across continents. Integrating IMEC with OSOWOG could strengthen energy trade, promote sustainable energy distribution, and enhance resilience against climate change-induced disruptions. According to OSOWOG feasibility studies[4], India-Middle East electricity interconnection could drive significant cost savings by tapping into the region's high solar energy potential, reducing dependency on fossil fuels, and creating a more balanced power supply across peak demand period.

2. Economic Potential of OSOWOG in India-Middle East Electricity Trade

OSOWOG aims to unlock substantial

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economic benefits through electricity interconnections. The economic rationale for linking India and the Middle East lies in:

- **Lower Cost of Renewable Energy**: The Middle East has some of the world's lowest solar energy production costs, often below $0.02 per kWh. By integrating with India's grid, surplus solar power can be exported to meet India's growing electricity demand, reducing the need for expensive coal-based generation.
- **Energy Security and Market Stability**: India currently imports over 85% of its crude oil needs. Electricity interconnection through OSOWOG and IMEC could help reduce reliance on fossil fuel imports while stabilizing energy prices by providing a diversified energy mix.
- **Investment in Infrastructure**: The feasibility phase of OSOWOG conducted by EDF, France and TERI, India, highlights that regional grid integration between India and the Middle East could drive investments exceeding $100 billion in transmission infrastructure, energy storage, and renewable energy capacity expansion.
- **Climate Mitigation and Carbon Reduction**: The power sector contributes nearly 40% of global CO2 emissions. By enabling large-scale renewable electricity trade, OSOWOG could reduce annual CO2 emissions by an estimated 1.5 billion metric tons across connected regions.

3. Enhancing Energy Security and Resilience

Energy security is a shared priority for India and the Gulf nations. India remains heavily dependent on fossil fuel imports, while Middle Eastern countries seek economic diversification away from hydrocarbon exports. An interconnected electricity grid can serve as a stabilizing force, ensuring energy supply reliability while reducing reliance on expensive and volatile fossil fuel markets. This integration would also support grid flexibility, enabling demand-side management and efficient power balancing. Additionally, OSOWOG's proposed policy frameworks focus on enabling financial models that encourage private sector participation and long-term sustainability of interregional power grids.

Learning from Global Grid Interconnection Examples

Global experience[5] suggests that regional electricity trade and integration have significant economic, security, and environmental benefits. Key examples include:

- **European Internal Energy Market (ENTSO-E)**: The European interconnected grid system has reduced electricity costs by €5 billion annually while ensuring supply stability.
- **Pan-Arab Electricity Market (PAEM)**: Estimated cost savings of $107–196 billion between 2018–2035 due to reduced reserve costs and fuel expenditures.
- **Southern African Power Pool (SAPP)**: A coordinated integration plan saved $34 billion in investments and $3 billion in operational costs compared to uncoordinated national approaches.
- **Xlinks Morocco-UK Power Project**: A submarine HVDC transmission system is set to supply the UK with low-cost Moroccan solar energy, demonstrating the viability of long-distance renewable energy trade.

The successful integration of these projects highlights the feasibility of India-Middle East electricity interconnection under OSOWOG,

leveraging a mix of regional cooperation, regulatory harmonization, and infrastructure investments.

Technical & Economic Feasibility of India-Middle East Grid Interconnection

1. Existing Cross-Border Electricity Infrastructure

The concept of electricity interconnection is not new. The Gulf Cooperation Council Interconnection Authority (GCCIA)[6] has already established a power grid linking Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman. Similarly, India has strong interconnections with its neighbors, including Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. Extending these frameworks to facilitate India-Middle East electricity trade is a logical next step.

The OSOWOG framework could provide a global blueprint for structuring these interconnections, allowing Middle Eastern and Indian grids to synchronize and trade electricity more effectively.

2. Transmission Technologies and Infrastructure

High-voltage direct current (HVDC) transmission systems, which allow efficient long-distance electricity transfer with minimal losses, could play a key role in linking India and the Gulf. Submarine HVDC cables, similar to the proposed Xlinks Morocco-UK Power Project, offer a viable solution for transmitting renewable energy across the Arabian Sea. Given recent advancements in energy storage and grid management technologies, such interconnections are becoming increasingly feasible both technically and economically. The recently launched Manufacturing Mission by the Government of India[7] focusing on cleantech manufacturing such as solar, high voltage direct current transmission lines and other components. Inter-regional electricity interconnector could offer demand boost to cleantech manufacturing industry in India.

3. Economic Viability and Investment Landscape

Investments in electricity interconnections can be justified by multiple economic benefits, including reduced generation costs, enhanced reliability, and improved energy trade dynamics. Institutions like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB), and sovereign wealth funds from the Gulf could play a role in financing such projects. Additionally, multilateral agreements under IMEC could include provisions for energy cooperation, facilitating regulatory alignment and tariff structures.

Policy and Geopolitical Considerations

1. Regional and Bilateral Agreements

India and the UAE have already signed agreements[8] to collaborate on renewable energy projects, including grid integration. A structured policy framework within IMEC could formalize these commitments, enabling clearer investment and regulatory pathways. The International Solar Alliance (ISA)[9], founded by India, could also facilitate cross-border electricity trade by harmonizing standards and promoting regional cooperation. The ISA is actively progressing towards its vision, leveraging intergovernmental support to overcome challenges. With support from the World Bank, a consortium led by France's EDF and TRI is conducting technical studies for pilot interconnections. Progress has been made in India and globally, with collaborations extending to Sri Lanka, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Singapore. A

regulatory framework for inter-regional connections is anticipated soon. ISA is actively engaging in intergovernmental discussions to pave the way for successful OSOWOG implementation.

OSOWOG and IMEC could serve as a diplomatic and technical framework for enabling these partnerships, ensuring that investments in energy interconnections align with broader global climate commitments.

2. Addressing Geopolitical Risks

While IMEC presents a promising framework for energy connectivity, geopolitical complexities must be managed carefully. Stability in the Middle East is crucial for the success of any long-term infrastructure investments. Engaging neutral platforms such as the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA)[10] of the World Bank Group could help de-risk investments and create trust-based mechanisms for grid management.

Conclusion

The IMEC offers a historic opportunity to redefine energy cooperation through cross-border electricity interconnection. By integrating power grids, India and the Gulf nations can unlock a new era of sustainable growth, energy security, and industrial decarbonization. Strategic investments in grid infrastructure, supported by enabling policies and regional cooperation, will be critical to realizing this vision. In a world racing toward net-zero emissions, leveraging IMEC for clean energy trade and aligning it with OSOWOG can position India and the Middle East as global leaders in the energy transition. Such mega projects will also boost demand for cleantech manufacturing in India under the Manufacturing Mission.

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The Ascendant Global South: Evolution, Issues, and Promise

Parth Seth*

The end of the Cold War heralded a brief age of unipolarity with the United States as the sole superpower. After nearly five centuries of Cold War between the US and Soviet Union, or between the forces of liberal capitalism and communism, the Soviet disintegration spelled for some analysts the "end of history."[1] Events since 1991 have, unsurprisingly, confirmed otherwise. Unipolarity in the international system has been supplanted by multipolarity as the nucleus of power began to shift away from Western Europe and North America.

Power is no more merely gauged by military personnel, arms and ammunition, though their importance in the anarchic international system is abiding. Power has come to be defined in terms of control over supply chains, research and development in frontier technologies, norm-making, and cultural influence. Consequently, the notion of the Global South has attained salience, as countries that had heretofore been subjected to imperial domination have become economic powerhouses, specialising in distinct spheres of economic activity and benefitting from the forces of globalisation. Today, the Global South hosts 85%[2] of the world's population, 42% of global GDP,[3] and over 60% of foreign direct investment inflows. Countries such as India, Indonesia, and Brazil are regional leaders, while China[4], the world's largest trading power, is locked in competition with the US for economic and political influence. Whereas institutions are yet to reform to adequately register these changes, the Global South has ceased to be a norm-taker, instead founding institutions steeped in its issues and geopolitical realities, and, instead of taking norms handed down by the West, reflecting the latter's concerns. The Indo-Pacific region,[5] in particular, sits at the heart of the Global South, home to over 60% if global maritime trade and half of the world's GDP, and several maritime choke-points like the Bab el-Mandab and the Straits of Malacca.

The Global South: Origins

The Global South has, today, assumed agency: it is no longer the site of great power competition. However, the notion is framed from a sense of inadequacy and a history of colonial domination and resource extraction by the industrialised Global North. When Carl Oglesby utilised the concept in

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the context of the Vietnam War, he saw the war from the prism of continued imperial domination. The North-South dichotomy was accentuated by the drawing of the Brandt Line,[6] neatly dividing the world into industrialised and developing/under-developed halves.

In the immediate aftermath of decolonisation and the beginning of the Cold War, the shared experience of exploitation and the resultant poverty served as a strong organising principle for the countries of the Global South that wished to create an alternative to the ideological and geopolitical rivalry between the US and USSR. Leaders of anti-colonial struggles, who eventually became founding figures of their postcolonial nation-states, convened under the banner of anti-imperial solidarity during the Bandung, Asian Relations, and Afro-Asian Conferences, eventually founding the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961. Besides the NAM, the G77 and the demand for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) accentuated the normative weight of the Global South. Undeniably, these experiments were critical in securing financial and technological assistance from both the superpowers, but the balance was, at best, tenuous: economic and technological aid came with conditionalities, and despite their moralism, members of the NAM had to make strategic and pragmatic calculations at odds with their professed beliefs,[7] often relying on the support of one superpower or the other.

With the passage of time, it was thus inevitable for the bonds of solidarity to loosen. The countries of the Global South share an experience of colonisation and challenges of human security but little else. They are incredibly diverse[8] in their geography, political cultures and systems, nature of economy, availability of resources, and other socio-cultural identities like religion and ethnicity. The rate of adoption of new technologies and innovation is not uniform across the Global South, implying that some countries have benefitted more from the opportunities of economic growth and integration with the world economy than others. Distinctive levels of prosperity translate into distinctive national interests and state capacities[9] to mobilise and exhibit power. Resultantly, the Global South is fragmented, with a few emerging market economies, also influential powers in their respective regions, possessing a relatively higher influence in agenda-shaping than the smaller economies of the Least Developed Countries (LDC)[10] that are in an unprecedented debt crisis[11] and, consequently, unable to play a decisive role in norm-making. In addition to the economic gulf within the Global South, there are active geopolitical, territorial, and internecine disputes, and wars between developing countries are far more common.

Pragmatism and Nuance

This should not discourage proponents of South-South cooperation, however. Despite what divides them, their challenges continue to unite them. In fact, although the origin of the term "Global South" is in reference to the Global North, particularly in what the latter possesses that the Global South does not, it will not be an overstatement to treat it as an empowering term with which countries wish to get associated. Unlike

the pessimism and inadequacy that it conjured in the past, the Global South today stands for pragmatism, innovation, and promise. The stance of these countries during recent crises such as the Israel-Gaza War, Russia-Ukraine War, or the pandemic indicate that they pursue a pragmatic but not value-agnostic foreign policy. For instance, India condemned the terrorist attack in Israel on October 7, 2023[12] while supporting a two-state solution and immediate ceasefire, supporting 10 of the 13 resolutions in the UN General Assembly introduced by Palestine. India is Israel's second-largest trade partner in Asia, and the two constitute the I2U2 with the US and UAE. Similarly, whereas it condemned Russia's violation of Ukrainian territory as an affront to national sovereignty, Brazil has not joined the West's call to shun Russia, instead calling for a ceasefire, and welcomed the Russian Foreign Minister during a high-profile visit in 2023. Russia is a major supplier of fertilisers[13] to an agriculture-dominated economy.

This underscores the Global South's independent course in its international relations and its defence of the rules-based international order. Its rhetoric and discourses are ensconced in the lexicon of international law and institutionalism. There have been calls for reforms in the policies of global governance for better representation of the people they affect. India and South Africa, for instance, were joined by other members of the World Trade Organisation from the Global South like Kenya, Eswatini, and Pakistan to waive TRIPS obligations[14] on COVID-19 vaccines for sharing the technical and scientific know-how in combatting the pandemic.

Countries in the Indo-Pacific, particularly the small island developing states (SIDS) have raised advocacy and awareness around issues of climate change and just, equitable transition that negotiates the need to cut emissions with their unique development challenges. Countries like the Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius, which face existential crises from the climate emergency, have raised advocacy and awareness around mitigation and adaptation based on the principles of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities.[15] At the Conferences of Parties at Sharm El Sheikh, the Global South, particularly, the vulnerable states in the Indo-Pacific, came together on a common platform provided by the G77, led by Pakistan and supported by China, and secured the Loss and Damage Fund for the losses incurred by developing states due to extreme climate events. The demand for compensations from the Global North—which, according to historical data on emissions, are responsible for over 90% excess global emissions and over 50% of the damage sustained by developing countries due to climate-related events—was raised as far back as the 1990s. It took constant pursuit and cataclysmic climate events in the Indo-Pacific, viz. the floods in Pakistan in 2022, drought in China, and heat-waves in South Asia, for the vulnerable states to secure this funding.

The Global South is, as its record shows, not a disruptor. Developing countries try to reform international institutions from within, reposing faith in their utility and the values of multilateralism. This is demonstrated by the voices for reforming the UN Security Council, the voting rights in the

International Monetary Fund, and the issues encompassed by the World Trade Organisation and multilateral development banks. But they have engaged with other multilateral and minilateral forums too, depending on their national interests, especially when the procedures and pre-occupations of the US-led order have been too indifferent, reinforcing their pragmatist streak, coupled with enshrining the values crucial to the Global South. These forums have cropped up in their regional milieux, deeply embedded in the issues faced by the countries of the region. China's regional forum diplomacy, evinced in the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), among others, is an attempt at socialising the developing countries irate with the methods of the Global North to a China-centric world order.[16] China-led multilateral development banks are among the fastest-growing, providing an alternative and flexible medium of accessing development finance to plug infrastructure gaps.

To conclude, the notion of the Global South, as examined in this article, has undergone consequential shifts since the term gained currency in the context of decolonisation. From a position of inadequacy relative to the Global North, these countries have acquired agency and confidence to assert their demands and influence in regional and international affairs. Politics in the world, and the Indo-Pacific in particular, is being shaped by middle and small powers in the Global South. Whereas the concept is not inclusive of the economic, political, and cultural diversity of these countries, it unites them despite these differences to advocate for a just, rules-based international order. These countries have dexterously utilised multilateral and minilateral platforms to give tangible shape to their policy positions and have gone on to join and introduce new institutions when the existing ones seemed to have ceased to perform their role. The Global South is faced with a myriad challenges, notably climate change, supply chain disruptions, and an unjust international financial architecture. But now, unlike in the past, these countries seem to have the tools of pragmatic, interest-driven (but value-based) foreign policy to weather them and improve the living standards of their citizens.

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Navigating Legal Frontiers: Combating Cyber Piracy in the 21st Century

Yashawardhana*

I. Introduction

Piracy has been a longstanding threat to maritime trade, evolving from physical attacks on merchant vessels to sophisticated cyberattacks on shipping infrastructure. The Indian Ocean, historically a critical maritime corridor, has witnessed both traditional piracy and its digital counterpart. While naval efforts have mitigated physical threats, cyber piracy remains an emerging challenge with far-reaching implications.

Modern maritime operations rely on digital technology, making them vulnerable to cyberattacks. From hacking into Automated Identification Systems[1] (AIS) to GPS spoofing and ransomware attacks on shipping companies, cyber piracy disrupts trade and compromises security. The Indian Ocean region, home to major maritime players such as India, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia, is particularly susceptible. Cybercriminals—often state-backed or linked to criminal syndicates—exploit digital vulnerabilities for economic gain or geopolitical leverage. Given the region's importance to global commerce, securing its digital infrastructure is as crucial as protecting its physical waters.

II. Legal Challenges in Addressing Maritime Cyber Piracy

International maritime law primarily deals with physical piracy. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) defines piracy under Article 101[2] as "any illegal acts of violence or detention committed for private ends on the high seas." This definition, however, does not encompass cyberattacks, making it difficult to prosecute digital piracy under existing legal frameworks. The International Maritime Organization (IMO) has taken steps to address cybersecurity threats through various guidelines. IMO Resolution MSC.428(98) (2017)[3] mandates shipowners to incorporate cybersecurity risk management into safety management systems. The International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code (2004)[4] provides security protocols but lacks specificity on cyber threats. The Budapest Convention on Cybercrime (2001)[5] provides a broad legal framework for prosecuting cybercriminals but lacks maritime-specific provisions. Without clear international legal instruments addressing cyber piracy, prosecution

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remains difficult, leaving digital vulnerabilities in maritime trade exposed.

India has recognized the cyber threat to its maritime sector and has initiated several legal mechanisms to address it. The Information Technology Act, 2000 (IT Act) is the primary cyber law in India, which penalizes hacking under Section 66[6], identity theft under Section 66C[7], and cyber terrorism under Section 66F[8]. However, it does not have specific provisions related to maritime cyber piracy. The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) 2023 under Section 61[9] and Section 316[10] discuss about criminal conspiracy and cheating which can be applied on cyber piracy cases.

The Admiralty (Jurisdiction and Settlement of Maritime Claims) Act, 2017[11] primarily deals with physical maritime disputes but could potentially be extended to cover digital maritime breaches through judicial interpretation. The National Cyber Security Policy, 2013[12] provides a framework for cybersecurity but lacks maritime-specific provisions. There is currently no direct legal provision in Indian law that criminalizes cyber piracy in the maritime domain, creating a gap that could be exploited by attackers.

While there are no landmark cases directly addressing maritime cyber piracy, some precedents in related cybercrime cases in India offer insights. The case of *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* (2015)[13] struck down Section 66A of the IT Act, clarifying that laws on cyber threats need to be precise and narrowly defined. *Anvar P.V. v. P.K. Basheer* (2014)[14] established the importance of electronic evidence, which could be relevant for prosecuting cyber pirates. *Sony Sambandam v. State of Tamil Nadu* (2020)[15] highlighted liability in cyber fraud cases, potentially relevant for shipping companies seeking damages.

III. Analysis of the Situation: Strengthening Cybersecurity in the Indian Ocean

The complexity of cyber threats in the maritime industry has grown with the adoption of smart shipping and automated logistics. Some of the most concerning cyber threats include GPS spoofing[16], AIS manipulation, ransomware attacks, and cyberattacks on ports. Ships rely on GPS and AIS for navigation, and cyber pirates can manipulate these systems, leading vessels off-course or disguising pirate vessels as legitimate ones. In 2019, Iranian tankers were suspected of using AIS spoofing to evade U.S. sanctions. Ransomware attacks on shipping companies have also demonstrated the financial risks involved. In 2017, Maersk, the world's largest shipping company, was hit by the NotPetya[17] ransomware, disrupting operations and causing losses of $300 million. Indian ports have not been immune either. In 2021[18], Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust (JNPT) faced a cyberattack that disrupted cargo handling. Given the economic impact of such incidents, cyber piracy is not just a technical issue but a national security concern. A disrupted maritime supply chain can affect energy imports, trade, and even military logistics.

The Indian Ocean region is particularly susceptible to these threats due to its high volume of trade and strategic importance. It is critical for countries, especially India, to recognize that cyber

piracy is more than just a criminal issue; it is a real geopolitical menace. The rise of state-sponsored cyber warfare has added another dimension to this threat. For instance, cyberattacks on maritime networks could be used as a tool of economic coercion or as a prelude to military action. While major naval powers such as the United States and China have invested heavily in cyber defence for their maritime infrastructure, Indian Ocean nations must urgently develop similar capabilities. This necessitates drafting better laws that directly address maritime cyber piracy. Amending existing laws, such as the IT Act and the Admiralty Act, to include provisions on cyber threats at sea would be a significant step forward. Regional cooperation among Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) member states could also lead to a more coordinated approach to cybersecurity, including intelligence sharing and joint cyber patrols.

India and other Indian Ocean nations must update their legal frameworks to address cyber piracy effectively. Some proposed reforms include amending the IT Act to introduce specific provisions for maritime cyber piracy, with penalties proportionate to the economic and security damage caused. Indian courts should recognize cyber piracy as part of maritime law, allowing affected parties to seek redress under the Admiralty Jurisdiction. Regional legal cooperation should also be established through organizations like IORA and BIMSTEC to handle cross-border cyber piracy cases. Cybersecurity in maritime infrastructure must be enhanced through AI-based threat detection, blockchain for cargo tracking, and ethical hacking audits. International collaboration is also essential. India, through its Indo-Pacific strategy, has been increasing maritime cooperation. The QUAD's Indo-Pacific Cybersecurity Initiative can help in intelligence sharing on maritime cyber threats. The Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), based in Gurugram, can be expanded to focus more on cyber threats. Joint naval exercises such as MILAN and Malabar should incorporate cybersecurity training to prepare for potential digital threats in maritime operations.

IV. Conclusion

The shift from traditional piracy to cyber piracy presents new challenges for maritime security in the Indian Ocean. While existing laws and frameworks provide some protection, there is an urgent need for more robust legal provisions, regional cooperation, and advanced technological measures. As trade and geopolitics become increasingly digitized, securing maritime cyber infrastructure is no longer an option—it is a necessity. The Indian Ocean, a historical theatre of naval dominance, must now also become a leader in cybersecurity, ensuring that the region remains both economically vibrant and digitally secure.

Ultimately, the fight against cyber piracy is not just about protecting ships and ports—it is about securing the global economy. The Indian Ocean must transition from being a vulnerable digital battleground to a leader in maritime cybersecurity. Only then can it maintain its status as a thriving hub of global commerce in the digital age.

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Voyage to New Horizons of Maritime Partnership

Curtain Raiser Address

Ram Madhav*

Indian Ocean is a natural region. It is home to more than three dozen nations. From the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca, this vast expanse of water is the world's third-largest ocean covering over 74 million square kilometres. The strategic location of the Ocean is transforming it rapidly to become the world's largest trade route by volume, connecting major economies from the North Atlantic to Indo-pacific. Over 70% of the world's container trade and 80% of the energy trade passes through the sea-lines of this region.

For India, the Indian Ocean is the lifeline. 80 per cent of its external trade and 90 per cent of the energy trade happens through these ocean lines. The Indian Ocean, the only ocean to be named after a country, is not just a maritime geography but a civilisation. Over millennia, its waves reached the shores of many countries carrying India's cultural and civilisational imprint and created a vast sphere of Indic civilisational influence. It took several decades before the governments in India realised the natural goodwill that India enjoys in this region and started taking proactive steps to strengthen its maritime presence.

Admiral Alfred T. Mahan, an influential American strategist and a confidant of President Theodore Roosevelt, wrote more than a century ago that "whoever attains maritime supremacy in the Indian Ocean would be a prominent player on the international scene". Long before Admiral Mahan's advice, Hayreddin Barbarossa, an admiral in the Ottoman Navy, was famously quoted as telling emperor Suleiman that "he who rules on the sea will shortly rule on the land also".

India was a leading economic power in the world in the first millennium. Its economic decline coincided with the decline in naval power. The British, who conquered India by the 18th century, were well-known seafarers. But they never bothered to build a strong blue-water capability for India during their two-century rule. The Royal Indian Navy that they established in the early 19th century was small and inconsequential for a country of India's size. This lack of attention to the seas, sadly, continued after Independence too, with the governments giving greater priority to land-based warfare, completely neglecting the oceans and their potential for the country. The result was that in areas like shipbuilding and naval vessels, India remained a laggard power in the last seven decades.

A renowned diplomat K M Panikkar, who served as India's ambassador to China and France, was the first to alert India's leadership about the importance of the Indian Ocean for its future. "So far as India is concerned, it should be remembered that the peninsular character of the country and the essential dependence of its trade on maritime traffic give the sea a preponderant influence on its

*Dr. Ram Madhav is the President of India Foundation.

destiny," he argued in his book "India and the Indian Ocean" (1945). Panikkar's book is an important reference material for the officers of the Indian Navy along with that of Mahan's.

Keshav Vaidya, a contemporary of Panikkar, was also a strong advocate of blue water naval projection for independent India. In his book, "The Naval Defence of India", Vaidya passionately argued in 1949 that India's strategic needs meant "developing an invincible navy… to defend not only her coast but her distant oceanic frontiers with her own navy… the points which must be within India's control are not merely coastal, but oceanic, and far from the coast itself… our ocean frontiers are stretched far and wide in all directions".

The Indian Ocean region has emerged as the axis of global power. It is here that the economies of scale, and the fastest growing new economies exist. The US and the UK, with the Diego Garcia base, and France, with Reunion Island, are already active in the region. China, too, joined them, investing heavily in spreading its influence. It built many assets in the Western Indian Ocean, such as the bases in Djibouti and Gwadar, and developed extensive influence over many leaders in Africa.

India, under Prime Minister Modi, nurtured the ambition of rising as an influential blue-water power and also the voice of the Global South. Befitting its current stature as a major regional power, India is serious about its critical role as a net peace provider in the Indian Ocean region. Towards that end, the Indian government has proclaimed an ambitious SAGAR Initiative - Security And Growth for All In the Region - in 2015.

Indian Ocean region is a crowded space today with vessels of all major countries crisscrossing its waters over the surface as well as under the sea. Important next generation communication networks proliferate in the Indian Ocean through undersea cables managed traditionally by the European companies, but also of late erected by the Chinese communications behemoth, Huawei. The region faces challenges like piracy, sea-born terrorism, climate challenges, human and contraband trafficking, illegal and unregulated fishing, arms running, poaching, and humanitarian challenges like evacuations and disaster relief. The region is home to some security hotspots in the Middle East, West Asia and North Africa.

It may be worthwhile to remember that when Mahan advised Roosevelt about the importance of the Indian Ocean, the Ocean used to be described as "the British lake", a colonial asset. Mahan's comments should caution all countries in the Indian Ocean Region that the supremacy over the region must remain in their hands only and they alone should be the masters of the region, which was aptly described by Sri Lanka at the NAM Summit in Lusaka, Zambia, in 1970 as the "Zone of Peace".

In 1957, European Economic Community was created with the stated objective of "creating a strong economic partnership to foster growth and stability" and "enhancing European political and economic integration". 35 years later, it became the European Union, which has today emerged as an influential global voice.

Can an "Indian Ocean Community" be envisioned? And should it take another 35 years to move towards an "Indian Ocean Union"?

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Voyage to New Horizons of Maritime Partnership

Welcome Address

Sayyid Badr Albusaidi*

Your Excellencies, Dear Friends, I am honoured to welcome you to the Sultanate of Oman. We are delighted to host this 8th edition of the Indian Ocean Conference in Muscat. I thank the India Foundation for organising this event, supported by the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, as well as all the hardworking teams that have made it happen. I thank every one of you. Our theme, "Voyage to New Horizons of Maritime Partnership," compels us to reflect on a shared maritime past, confront present challenges, and chart a course for the future.

Your presence here today reflects a shared principle: the Indian Ocean is not merely a body of water. It serves as a lifeline for economies, a channel of exchange, a source of connection, and a passage for friendship. Today, we have a responsibility to progress on matters such as marine stewardship, freedom of shipping, and tackling coastal communities' climate challenges.

This conference is also an opportunity to explore the broader potential of our ocean. Oman's economic vision pivots on aligning economic progress with conservation in sectors such as the blue economy, port infrastructure, and logistics. I hope this conference will enable us to develop shared strategies that are both mutually beneficial and sustainable. Our partnership extends far beyond maritime matters; it encompasses the energy transition, technology, our vision of the South, and much more.

The policy of the Sultanate of Oman emphasises commonalities. "We choose to focus on shared ambitions and view our diversity as a source of strength. "Oman prioritises inclusive dialogue, multilateralism, and non-interference. Oman encourages others to make similar choices. "Choose to trust. Choose to lead by example. And choose to listen and engage constructively and respectfully."With mutual respect and constructive engagement, we can understand and accommodate different perspectives, build on each other's strengths, and benefit from our partners' expertise. This 'Friend to all' approach helps us resolve shared problems in a judicious, inclusive, and sustainable way.

History proves this. Oman has been a seafaring nation for millennia. For our ancestors, the ocean was a channel for trade and cultural exchange, and this remains true today. Each community offered different skills, commodities, and insights. Through maritime partnerships, we collectively reaped the rewards of this diversity. To facilitate exchange on this level, the world needed dialogue to set the terms, cooperation to enforce them, and trust in partners' goodwill.

Thus, the law of the sea was born. The

**H.E. Sayyid Badr Albusaidi is the Foreign Minister of Oman.*

Byzantines developed maritime customs and legal principles as early as the 7th century, setting the stage for global cooperation on the seas. A thousand years later, in the early 17th century, Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius addressed sovereignty claims over the oceans in his publication 'Mare Liberium': the Free Sea. He asserted that the seas should remain open to all. In the following centuries, this idea evolved into a universal principle, laying the groundwork for robust international maritime law and fostering increased prosperity from the growth of trade.

By the mid-20th century, shared maritime concerns such as resource exploitation and shared opportunities like technology encouraged greater partnership. Almost all states recognised that they lacked the naval capacity to operate globally at all times. To combat piracy, illegal fishing, and transnational crime, they needed partnerships. This necessity led UN member states to establish the Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Your presence here today reflects the understanding that this partnership is the best way to safeguard our seas. "Maritime security, freedom of navigation, and justice cannot be ensured through antagonism, military force, and supremacist policies where the rights of some come at the expense of others. Through partnership, the South can make its voice heard. We can collaborate on operational security. Additionally, we can listen to those actors destabilising our seas, understand their motives, and address issues at their root.

Just as we have chosen to view the Indian Ocean not as a barrier but as a bridge, Oman regards all parties as friends with whom we share far more in common than in differences. The Sultanate of Oman is committed to fostering an inclusive Indian Ocean—one that ensures all nations, both South and North, have an equitable stake in the security and prosperity of these waters.

There are challenges. Not everyone shares our emphasis on peaceful engagement. However, as we launch the 8th Indian Ocean Conference, we must urge all to lead by example. We must not be carried by currents of antagonism. Partnership must be our anchor. Let us strengthen the multilateral platforms that promote collaboration, capacity building, and shared responsibility.

Excellencies, dear friends, we are here because of our similarities and differences. Our histories were all shaped by the same ocean. We may have adapted differently to its changing tides, but today, it is a source of security, stability, and prosperity for us all. This conference is an opportunity for our similarities to bond us further and for our differences to complement each other as we collectively navigate towards new horizons of partnership and a brighter future.

Thank you.

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Voyage to New Horizons of Maritime Partnership

Special Remarks

Vivian Balakrishnan*

Ladies and Gentlemen, First, I apologize for not being able to join you in person; however, I am here live virtually. It is an honour and a privilege to address all of you at the Eighth Indian Ocean Conference. I would like to extend my deepest appreciation to my good friend and stalwart, Minister Sayyid Badr, for hosting this conference, as well as to Dr. Ram Madhav from the India Foundation, who has been an indefatigable spirit behind this conference, and, of course, to the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. Thank you all for co-organising this.

The theme of today's conference is "Voyage to New Horizons of Maritime Partnership. " For millennia- and here, I will echo Minister Sayyid Badr- the Indian Ocean has served as a vital economic lifeline, a cultural bridge, and a conduit for essential commerce. From the ancient maritime Spice Route to some of today's busiest shipping lanes, like the Strait of Malacca, the Indian Ocean has fostered not just the movement of physical goods but also the exchange of knowledge and ideas that have shaped our shared history.

The Indian Ocean today connects the major engines of the international economy from the North Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development estimates that over 80 percent of global trade, by volume and over 70 percent by value, is transported by sea. A substantial portion of this flows through the Indian Ocean, including about 80 percent of the world's maritime oil trade and 9.48 billion tonnes of cargo.

It is worth recollecting that despite modern connectivity options like air travel and high-speed rail, maritime shipping remains the most cost-efficient way of transporting vast quantities of cargo across our globe. An average container ship that traverses the Suez Canal today can carry about 18,000 TEUs, or 20-foot equivalent units. If we were to unload every single container from this ship and place it onto a train, that train would stretch for more than 100 kilometres.

There is no substitute for the economies of scale offered by maritime shipping. However, this is premised on the continued openness and sustainability of the oceans and seas.

Our world has indeed become more dangerous. Hot wars continue to smoulder in the Middle East, Africa, and Ukraine. There is a risk of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, as well as precision and AI-guided systems becoming increasingly lethal and potent in the future. Today, we all recognise that even non-state actors can interdict vital lanes of communication.

At the same time, the liberal world order- the multilateral system that we have taken for granted over many decades- is now severely eroding. There has been a global pushback against free trade and economic integration. This means that many

*H.E. Vivian Balakrishnan is the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Singapore.

countries are adopting more protectionist and nationalistic positions. We have also witnessed blatant violations of international law and the UN Charter. In these times, for all the countries represented at this conference, we must reaffirm our collective commitment to international law and a rules-based world order.

The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, or UNCLOS, provides that essential legal framework that ensures freedom of navigation and equitable access to maritime resources as a right and not by the grace of any resident superpower.

The principles enshrined in UNCLOS enable global maritime trade to flourish, as vessels can freely traverse national jurisdictions and international waterways. For instance, a ship departing from Singapore can freely sail through the Strait of Malacca, cross international waters in the Indian Ocean, and navigate through territorial seas to visit Mumbai or Salalah without seeking permission, paying rentals, or even seeking licence fees. That is what freedom of navigation means, and it is guaranteed under UNCLOS.

For small trading economies like Singapore and Oman, the open and unimpeded flow of maritime trade is absolutely essential. Just last year, the Port of Singapore set a new record, handling over 40 million TEUs. This figure is just for Singapore. If you were to line up all the containers processed through Singapore last year, they would stretch more than six and a half times around the earth's equator. That is not a small number.

For all of us here, including both littoral and landlocked states that benefit from this essential maritime shipping, UNCLOS and, by extension, a rules-based world order are essential. There is some reason to be optimistic. Given the times, the June 2023 consensus adoption of the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement is a remarkable victory for international law.

Singapore is proud to have played its part in this global effort. Our Ambassador Rena Lee's leadership as President of the Intergovernmental Conference helped bring the BBNJ Agreement to fruition. This agreement, which aims to conserve and sustainably use marine biodiversity in the high seas, has direct implications for the Indian Ocean, which is currently threatened by climate change and global warming.

This brings me to my next point: the need to protect our shared heritage and our oceans. Sea surface temperatures in the Indian Ocean have risen by an average of one degree Celsius, and you don't need to be in the Maldives or Mauritius to witness the widespread coral bleaching and loss of seagrass. The seas have become rougher, and extreme weather events like cyclones have increased in frequency. Key shipping routes are being disrupted, and at the current rate of warming, the Indian Ocean is projected to face near-permanent marine heatwaves. With the BBNJ Agreement, Marine Protected Areas can be created in international waters. We believe this safeguards critical habitats and marine ecosystems that serve as essential carbon sinks, which is another important factor in addressing global warming.

We must also invest in the sustainable development of the maritime industry. The International Maritime Organization aims to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by

2050. Today, shipping accounts for nearly three percent of global greenhouse gas emissions.

In Singapore, we are taking steps to reduce our maritime emissions. We have revised our Maritime Singapore Green Initiative to offer incentives for ships that adopt cleaner technologies and sustainable fuels. Additionally, we are enhancing port productivity and sustainability through new technologies like smart grids.

Our Global Centre for Maritime Decarbonisation completed its final trial of biofuels, which reduced emissions by 28 percent compared to conventional fuels. To innovate new solutions, we have also established a Centre of Excellence in Maritime Energy and Sustainable Development.

We have established six bilateral Green and Digital Shipping Corridors to support the decarbonisation of the maritime industry and enhance efficiencies through digitalisation. I have taken some pains to enumerate these because we want to appeal to new partners, especially from the Indian Ocean, to join us in this essential enterprise for the future.

So, let me conclude by saying that in an era of increasing geopolitical uncertainty and environmental challenges, we all need to work together to uphold a stable, rules-based maritime order and pursue sustainable solutions that safeguard our shared ocean, the Indian Ocean, for future generations.

This conference is an important opportunity for us to exchange ideas, forge new collaborations, and reaffirm our collective commitment to these goals. I look forward to the constructive discussions ahead and to charting a course for a more secure and sustainable future for all of us in the Indian Ocean.

Thank you all very much.

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Voyage to New Horizons of Maritime Partnership

Keynote Address

S. Jaishankar*

Excellency, distinguished delegates, dear friends, It is a great pleasure to share my thoughts at the 8th Indian Ocean Conference on our voyage to new horizons of maritime partnership. Let me express my gratitude and appreciation to the Government of the Sultanate of Oman, especially to my brother, FM Badr Albusaidi, the organisers, India Foundation and RSIS, and to Ram Madhav ji, who has been the driving force behind the conference for many years.

We meet at a time when there is considerable churn in world affairs. At this juncture, an open and constructive exchange of views is especially beneficial. I am confident that all of us will find great value in the discussions we will hold over the next two days. Changes in the global order may be expressed through new ideas and concepts.

But they are also reflected in the evolving landscape. The Indian Ocean region is no exception to this rule. This matters not just to us as inhabitants of this community, but also, given our salience in so many dimensions, to other regions and nations as well. After all, as we heard from previous speakers, the Indian Ocean is indeed a global lifeline. Its production, consumption, contribution, and connectivity are central to how the world functions today.

At both ends of the ocean, this churn is at its sharpest today. In the Middle East/West Asia, there is a serious conflict underway with the potential for further escalation and complication. At the same time, longstanding issues are being revisited, sometimes with a radically different approach. Its maritime consequences are visible in significant disruptions to global shipping, incurring substantial costs to our economies. Questions arise regarding our ability and willingness to respond, as well as the partnerships relevant to that task.

At the other end, the Indo-Pacific has been witnessing deeper tensions and sharper contestations. The scenario is intrinsically maritime in nature, involving respect for and observance of international law. Other concerns exist, some related and some autonomous. Stronger assertions of interests are one issue, and concern about unilateral changes to the status quo is another. From India's own experience, we can say that adhering to agreements and understandings is a central element to ensuring stability and predictability.

The region in between is where most of us come from, consisting of littoral states or island nations in the Indian Ocean. Each country has its own individual challenges; however, there are general trends worth noting. Many of these trends are developmental in nature and, in one way or another, impact maritime behaviour. Like other parts of the Global South, Indian Ocean nations also face resource constraints and economic headwinds. Many of them are struggling to meet their Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In

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several cases, debt is a significant concern. Some of this debt arises from stresses in the international economy, while in other cases, it stems from imprudent borrowing and unviable projects.

Another common issue is rebuilding connectivity in the region after decades of colonial-era disruption. To make this a truly shared endeavor, it is vital to ensure that connectivity initiatives are consultative and transparent, not unilateral and opaque. Yet another widespread concern is the challenge faced by Indian Ocean states to monitor their EEZ and secure their fishing interests. Nor can they be impervious to illegal trafficking of various kinds and the spectre of terrorism. Each of these dimensions – and certainly their cumulative impact – has strong maritime implications. Our journey to new horizons must necessarily focus on addressing these challenges.

How is India contributing to these endeavours? Clearly, by rapidly strengthening its capabilities and forging partnerships with nearby and distant Indian Ocean neighbours. Additionally, by shouldering responsibilities, stepping up in times of trouble, and offering leadership when necessary. Allow me to emphasise this by providing ten relevant examples:

Stabilising economies and societies under stress is certainly among the most important priorities. As the impact of COVID and conflict unfolded, India became a source of vaccines, medicines, food, fuel, and fertiliser for many countries. Its most significant commitment was to Sri Lanka – a financial package of USD 4 billion intended to stabilise its economy, which had fallen into crisis.

Two, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMTT). Another significant example is the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). India is clearly the common element among them. IMEC and INSTC feature explicit maritime segments, while the IMTT offers a land link between India and the Pacific.

Three, we have increasingly been active in a First Responder mode in the Indian Ocean region. This includes the conflict in Yemen, natural disasters in Mozambique, Sri Lanka, or Myanmar, the earthquake in Nepal and Turkey, and a water crisis in the Maldives. Off the coasts of Mauritius and Sri Lanka, India has responded to significant oil spills.

Four, recognising that an institutional response is required for disaster situations, India has actively encouraged plurilateral cooperation. The most notable is the Quad initiative, which encourages interoperability and cooperation for such contingencies. Similarly, the ReCAAP centre in Singapore, to which India contributes, helps address the challenge of piracy.

Five, in a world of increasing traditional and non-traditional threats in the maritime domain, it is essential to have a common operating picture and shared platforms. The International Fusion Centre, located outside Delhi, aims to accomplish this. By establishing coastal surveillance radars and partnering on White Shipping agreements, maritime traffic becomes safer and more secure for our collective benefit.

Six, it is unfortunately not just enough to prepare or even prevent. Extreme situations sometimes require a robust countering, including the deployment of naval forces. For over a year now, India has been doing just that in the Northern Arabian Sea and

Gulf of Aden. Today, we are witnessing some improvement in maritime safety and security as a result of these coordinated efforts.

Seven, training and equipping other navies and coastguards is a natural extension of this approach. India collaborates with a range of countries, from Vietnam to Mauritius and Mozambique to Sri Lanka.

Eight, ensuring trusted communication in a digital era is a crucial national security objective for many of us. This task is too big for most individual nations to attempt. Therefore, participating in consortiums is an inevitable outcome. Both as government and as a vendor, India is contributing its fair share and more in this regard. PM Modi's just-concluded visit to the US highlighted this particular dimension.

Nine, in a globalized world, there is a growing realization that distance cannot justify agnosticism on matters crucial to global welfare. As a result, the Indo-Pacific is experiencing activity from both resident and non-resident powers. Harmonizing these powers is a challenge that India, in particular, is well positioned to address. It enjoys the confidence of the Global South as well as the credentials to engage with major powers. We strive to ensure that agendas alien to our ethos and outlook are not imposed in the region, while equally encouraging respect for UNCLOS in both spirit and letter.

Finally, India has been energetic in building institutions in the Indian Ocean region. We have the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), whose current Secretary-General is a senior Indian diplomat, and BIMSTEC, whose SG is here today. We look forward to the BIMSTEC Summit soon. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is a productive conclave of naval representatives. Additionally, the Colombo Security Conclave and the India Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative are also held. Of course, the Indian Ocean Conference brings together many stakeholders at various levels.

Ladies and gentlemen, our voyage to new horizons is best undertaken as a coordinated flotilla in the Indian Ocean. We are understandably a diverse group in terms of history, geography, development, politics, and culture. However, what unites us is a shared commitment to the well-being of the Indian Ocean region. In this volatile and uncertain era, we seek stability and security as our foundation. Beyond that, we have ambitions and aspirations that we strive to achieve. They will be more easily attained when we look out for one another, complement our strengths, and coordinate our policies. I assure you all that India will be at the forefront of these endeavours. Thank you for your attention.

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Ministers' Address: Voyage to New Horizons of Maritime Partnership

Seyyed Abbas Araghchi*

Today, we have gathered in a land that has been recognized for centuries as a bridge between the East and the West, connecting great civilizations and nations near and far. Oman, our gracious host, has long been not only an economic actor but also a symbol of interaction, dialogue, and constructive diplomacy in the Indian Ocean region. At the heart of global developments, this region continues to play a decisive role in shaping the future of international economy.

Throughout history, the sea has been more of a gateway for civilizational connectivity than a geographical boundary. For thousands of years, the Indian Ocean has not only been a body of water but a vital highway for trade, cultural exchange, and civilizational development. This route has linked merchants from the coasts of India to Africa, from the islands of Indonesia to the Persian Gulf, and from Iran to the Red Sea. In an era when overland routes were long and perilous, this ocean would connect emerging economies and create new opportunities.

Today, however, the world is undergoing fundamental shifts. The rapid pace of economic and technological developments, the reliance of nations on new trade routes, and the need for regional security and cooperation have become more critical than ever. In such circumstances, traditional routes and old patterns of trade alone should no longer suffice. We ought to design a future where the Indian Ocean is not just a transit route but a hub of strategic and economic cooperation. This is the philosophy behind the theme of this year's conference, "Voyage to New Horizons of Maritime Partnership." The theme is not a mere slogan; rather, it reflects a historical necessity for all countries in the region.

Recognizing these developments, the Islamic Republic of Iran has placed "maritime-oriented" policy at the forefront of its strategic development. A country with over 5,800 kilometers of coastline –4,900 kilometers of which stretch across the south along this vast ocean– cannot remain indifferent to its future. Developing a maritime-based economy is not just an option for Iran; it is an imperative. We are convinced that that our coasts are not merely natural borders but gateways connecting Iran to the global economy. Therefore, the 14th Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has formulated a comprehensive and operational plan for the development of ports, maritime transportation, and the establishment of a regional supply chain.

In this context, the Makran coast holds a special place. These shores, whose natural and economic potential had been overlooked for centuries, have now become a national development priority. The "Lost Paradise" of Makran must transform into the future economic hub of Iran and the region. Based on this strategy,

**His Excellency Seyyed Abbas Araghchi is the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran.*

the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has identified four key objectives for the development of this region:

First, strengthening native and local economies, creating sustainable employment for communities residing these areas, and supporting small and medium-sized industries that can play a role in the regional supply chain;

Second, developing energy infrastructure with a focus on renewable energy. We are convinced that the economy of the future depends on sustainable and clean energy. Investing in new energy technologies and reducing reliance on fossil fuels is not only environmentally essential but from an economic standpoint shall encourage regional competitiveness;

Third, completing international transit corridors and strengthening transportation routes. Establishing a network of rail, road, and maritime routes that connect Iran to other countries in the region and beyond is a key pillar of our maritime-oriented policy; and

Fourth, wooing domestic and foreign investment as the driving force behind economic development. No economy can grow without sustainable investment, and we welcome all countries that wish to contribute to the development of this region.

All that being said, none of these plans can be realized without lasting security. Maritime security is now more critical than ever for the global economy. Alongside its economic and trade roles, the Islamic Republic of Iran also bears the responsibility of ensuring maritime security. The Iranian Navy, in cooperation with regional countries, has consistently played a part in anti-piracy operations, combating drug trafficking and organized crime, and ensuring navigational security. We believe that maritime security should not be used as a lever for pressure or influence by extra-regional powers; rather it should be the outcome of cooperation among regional nations.

At the same time, no country can single-handedly advance on its path to economic development. Regional cooperation is key to shared progress. Through its membership in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), Iran emphasizes its commitment to multilateralism and economic and security cooperation in the region.

Yet and still, there remains a significant challenge: certain extra-regional powers seek to exploit political, economic, and security gaps in the region, undermining natural cooperation among regional countries. We cannot allow the geopolitical rivalries of global powers to determine the future of this region. Decisions about the destiny of the Indian Ocean must be made by the countries of this region and shall serve the interests of their peoples.

In conclusion, I am pleased that the conference is held in our friendly and brotherly country, Oman –a nation that has always been a symbol of interaction, dialogue, and constructive diplomacy in the region. We believe that only through cooperation and mutual trust can we build a sustainable future for the peoples of this region. I hope this conference marks the beginning of a new chapter in maritime and regional cooperation, a chapter in which cooperation replaces division, and development replaces debilitating rivalries.

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Ministers' Address: Voyage to New Horizons of Maritime Partnership

Vijitha Herath*

The Indian Ocean Conference which began in Singapore in 2016, has voyaged through Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Maldives, UAE, Bangladesh, and Australia, and now reached Oman.

I commend the India Foundation for this visionary and critical initiative that was launched in 2016, and for steering it with exceptional commitment through the years. In partnership with governments and a range of stakeholders, the India Foundation has created a platform for all stakeholders to gather regularly to engage in a dynamic exchange of ideas and collaborative action, reinforcing our shared commitment to the prosperity of the Indian Ocean Region. By fostering such visionary dialogue, the India Foundation not only strengthens regional cooperation but also ignites innovative pathways for sustainable growth, security, and resilience across the Indian Ocean Region

It is the Indian Ocean that first brought Oman and Sri Lanka together centuries ago. In ancient times, traders from Oman sailed to my country which was then known in this part of the world as Serendib. Our two countries were both active hubs for trade along the ancient Silk Route. This laid a firm a foundation for our bilateral relations that exist today, encompassing trade, investment, cultural exchange and people-to-people connections. The cultural impact of this ancient connection is such that a particular sweet derived from Omani Halva that Sri Lankans call "Muscat" is a favourite among many in my country even today.

The theme of this Plenary - "Voyage of New Horizons of Maritime Partnership" - is of particular significance to us in Sri Lanka. To our minds, the Port of Colombo is an excellent manifestation of new horizons in maritime partnerships. Developed in partnership with key regional partners, today, the Port of Colombo which is strategically placed in close proximity to the world's busiest shipping routes, is a hub that services and connects the Far East with Europe, Africa, and the eastern coasts of the American continents. Rated as one of the best-performing ports in the world today, it is expected to reach greater heights with the state of the art Colombo West International Terminal that is expected to become operational early this year.

Our region's prosperity and the world's future prosperity lies in successful partnerships of this nature, and Sri Lanka remains committed to strengthening maritime connectivity through port development, logistics, and maritime services, enhancing its position as a key hub in the Indian Ocean.

Oceans serve as the lifelines of international trade, carrying over 80% of global trade volume and underpinning economic interdependence. Yet, the maritime domain extends far beyond commerce—it is a critical nexus for environmental

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sustainability, cultural exchange, and geopolitical stability. In this dynamic landscape, freedom of navigation stands as a cornerstone of international law, ensuring the unimpeded, secure movement of vessels across global waters. Upholding this principle is not just a legal duty but a strategic necessity—one that preserves stability, strengthens economic resilience, and reinforces the rules-based maritime order essential for sustainable global prosperity.

However, the global maritime landscape is fraught with challenges some of which affect the Indian Ocean as well. This includes, among others, maritime crimes and territorial disputes, rising sea levels, ocean acidification, and extreme weather and marine pollution. All these challenges urge collaboration and partnership to find solutions. For example, tackling marine pollution requires better waste management and recycling. Similarly, rising sea levels and climate related issues require better climate data, resilience, and adaptation measures. As a key shipping route, the Indian Ocean traffic must explore adopting cleaner fuels and cut emissions to balance growth with conservation.

All these issues necessitate a collective approach rooted in mutual respect, cooperation, and adherence to international norms.

Sri Lanka's vision for the Indian Ocean is one of shared destiny—where nations rise above rivalry to protect freedom of navigation and foster stable and sustainable prosperity based on cooperation, and find peaceful solutions to all issues.

The economic benefits of maritime partnerships within the Indian Ocean Region are vast, yet their full potential remains underutilized. From sustainable fisheries and tourism to maritime trade and energy resources, the ocean presents significant opportunities for growth and development. Realizing these benefits demands collaborative efforts to foster sustainable practices, protect marine ecosystems, and ensure the equitable distribution of resources.

Regional security is intrinsically linked to the stability of the Indian Ocean. It is essential that we strengthen regional security architectures, enhance maritime domain awareness, and promote joint exercises and capacity-building initiatives. By doing so, we can create a resilient maritime environment that deters threats and fosters peace.

The complexity of maritime challenges necessitates a collective response. Networking between countries and agencies is essential to build trust, share best practices, and coordinate responses to common threats. Enhanced information sharing and communication channels can significantly improve our ability to detect, deter, and respond to maritime threats.

As a strategically located island nation, and developing Indian Ocean littoral state, Sri Lanka seeks to harness the ocean's economic potential while benefiting from Asia's rising prosperity.

We are committed to playing a proactive role in regional maritime affairs, advocating for peaceful coexistence and mutual respect among Indian Ocean nations.

We will engage with all stakeholders within and beyond the Indian Ocean Region on initiatives that promote peace, security, and stability in the Indian Ocean Region.

We recognize the importance of networking between countries and agencies to address common challenges and seize opportunities.

Enhanced information sharing and cooperative mechanisms are crucial for effective maritime governance. Therefore, as the current Chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) we reiterate the significance of fostering partnerships with regional and international stakeholders, and aim to contribute to collective efforts in ensuring maritime security, environmental sustainability, and economic prosperity.

Sri Lanka is committed to the BBNJ Agreement on conserving marine biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction. Given the Indian Ocean Region's strategic and ecological significance, this treaty ensures equitable access to marine resources while strengthening regional cooperation on sustainable ocean governance. Sri Lanka looks forward to leveraging this framework to enhance capacity-building, research, and technology transfer, reinforcing its commitment to protecting the high seas for future generations.

By leveraging technology and intelligence-sharing, we can strengthen our collective response to regional challenges. South-South Cooperation offers a pathway to enhance trade, infrastructure, and shared development, fostering economic growth through the exchange of technology, knowledge, and best practices. Such collaboration may be strengthened through existing regional frameworks like IORA, IONS, BIMSTEC, and the IOC, ensuring a unified and strategic approach to regional progress.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that Sri Lanka stands ready to collaborate with all stakeholders in working towards realising the vision of a secure, stable, sustainable, and prosperous Indian Ocean Region for the benefit of all.

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Ministers' Address: Amplifying the Voice of Global South

Arzu Rana Deuba*

It is my distinct honour and privilege to address the Eighth Indian Ocean Conference being held in this historic and beautiful city of Muscat. I would like to convey warm greetings from the people of Nepal. I would like to thank the Government of the Sultanate of Oman, the India Foundation and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore for organizing this conference.

The main theme of this conference 'Voyage to New Horizons of Maritime Partnership' holds special significance for Nepal as a landlocked country. All of us present in this room are convinced that maritime partnership increases connectivity which is a key conduit for inclusive and sustainable growth of humanity.

I really appreciate the organizers of this conference for inviting me here and for giving me the forum to speak on the subject of 'Amplifying the Voice of the Global South'.

The Global South represents a large percentage of humanity without whose progress, the gains made by the developed world are also jeopardized. As we deliberate on 'Amplifying the Voice of the Global South,' let us recognize that the Global South is key to building a more just, fair, and inclusive world.

Stronger South-South cooperation and collaboration is required to strengthen our collective resolve and resilience to overcome the challenges brought about by inequality, poverty, the growing debt crisis, social unrest and conflict, the digital divide and climate change. These pressing challenges of our times disproportionately impact the Global South, -with higher stakes for least developed, landlocked and small island countries - where limited resources and capacities exacerbate vulnerabilities.

South- South cooperation is regarded as an important development cooperation modality that address these challenges which transcend borders and impact inter-connected geographical areas. South- South cooperation could thus enable countries to leverage existing assets for mutually beneficial efforts as well as share home-grown solutions for collective gains and strengthen solidarity around emerging trends that could influence the prospects and development pathways of the region as a whole.

South-South and Triangular cooperation have been recognized as effective strategies to address immediate, short and long-term gains to get back on track the Sustainable Development Goals as envisioned by the agreements made at the Summit of the Future during the 79th Session of the UNGA in September, 2024.

Thus, I believe, this discussion being held today is on track to meeting the goals set out by the

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Summit of the Future. Further, the strategy of South- South cooperation has also been recognized as key in accelerating efforts to meet all existing international commitments and work towards concrete steps to respond to emerging challenges and opportunities which was the aim of the Summit of the Future.

Though the existing forums created by the member countries of the LDCs, LLDCs and SIDs possess critical strengths, such as abundant natural resources, youth, strategic locations, untapped markets and innovations in sustainable technologies, there still exists dearth of synergy and strategy to tap the potentials of these precious resources. I am hopeful that this dearth of synergy and strategy will be overcome in the coming days by the Pact of the Future which was adopted by World Leaders at the UNGA 79th Session.

The Pact for the Future is regarded as a bold step forward for international cooperation that aims to create a world that is more equitable, sustainable, and prepared for the challenges of the coming decades. As we all know, these important documents also included a Global Digital Compact (GDC) and a Declaration on Future Generations (DFG). These documents are now regarded as the key guidelines for the future of the humanity. Thus, this discussion today, comes at an opportune moment as these pacts have been agreed to globally and are required to be taken forward.

I am especially hopeful as the UN Office for South-South Cooperation reports that the pact would "lay the foundations for a sustainable, just, and peaceful global order – for all peoples and nations". More importantly, the Pact of the Future highlights the importance of South-South and Triangular cooperation in areas such as digital inclusion, AI Governance and building capacities in science, technology and innovations.

I feel the roadmap for the future is pretty clear. We have had almost global consensus on the way forward for the future of humanity and identified synergies and strategies required therein. I would like to reiterate that the Global-South represents the majority of humanity and if we are going to leave no one behind and we do not want to be left behind, we must pull- up our socks, girdle our loins and be serious about organizing around our identified agendas by devoting time and resources to bring together more frequently to the sit around the table the concerned stakeholders in order to achieve our common goals.

In this very spirit, Nepal is hosting 'Sagarmatha Sambaad', a permanent global dialogue forum to discuss pressing issues of regional and global importance. The first edition, to be held in Kathmandu from 16 to 18 May 2025, will revolve around the theme of 'Climate Change, Mountains, and the Future of Humanity.' We hope to bring together the affected communities, scientists, mountaineers, world leaders to deliberate and to commit to mitigating the impacts of climate change on mountains and glaciers. I would like to invite you all to participate in this dialogue.

To unleash the full potential of the Global South, we must prioritize:

- Reviewing of required policies for improving South-South Cooperation Strengthening regional integration and fostering mutual learning;

- Ensuring fair and equitable access to financial resources;
- Reforming global governance and financial institutions to ensure the voice and representation of Global South;
- Advocacy for the fulfillment of commitments by the developed countries; Promoting equitable sharing and management of natural resources;
- Improving connectivity by expanding regional networking through road, air and sea; Advancing capacity building through the transfer of knowledge, skills, and technology;

In conclusion, I would like to stress upon the importance of listening to women and youth in amplifying the voices of the South. This is our time to rise and act: let's build a legacy of progress that will inspire generations ahead.

In an interconnected world, our progress hinges on our shared vision and united action. Nepal remains steadfast in its commitment to expanding the 'New Horizons' for the Global South for sustainable and inclusive development.

I once again extend my heartfelt gratitude to the organizers for providing this important platform. Together, let us build a future of peace, progress, and prosperity for the Indian Ocean region and beyond.

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Ministers' Address: Indian Ocean Economic Conclave

MIYAJI Takuma*

On behalf of the Government of Japan, I would like to commend you for hosting this Indian Ocean Conference. Oman actively hosts international conferences and is attracting global attention as a leading venue for meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions, or 'MICE'. And I would also like to extend my gratitude to the India Foundation, the Government of Oman, and the Government of India for inviting Japan to participate in this important gathering. The theme of this session is the "Economic Conclave". In that context, I am reminded of the following line. "The different streams, having their sources in different places, all mingle their water in the sea."These are the words of Swamy Vivekananda, a prominent Indian religious leader. They are the same words used in 2007, when the then Prime Minister of Japan, Abe Shinzo, began his address to the Indian Parliament entitled "Confluence of the Two Seas". He stated that it was our responsibility to see the Pacific Ocean, which Japan faces, and the Indian Ocean as one. And to cooperate with like- minded countries in pursuit of freedom and prosperity in the region.

For more than 17 years since that speech, the connections between the Indian Ocean, which links Asia and Africa and is a vital maritime transportation route, and the Pacific Ocean, have grown stronger. Our common goal, of viewing the entire region as a large economic zone and pursuing prosperity together, has endured.

However, compared to that time, we have entered an era in which cooperation and division are becoming more intertwined. Compound crises such as geopolitical competition and global challenges, including climate change, are rising. They are also intensifying in the Indian Ocean region, and the more vulnerable states in particular/ are feeling the impact. As an island nation, Japan has achieved its economic development by benefiting from free trade since the modern era.

That is why I can say with confidence that the goal we have consistently pursued- a free and fair order that overcomes divisions- is an essential precondition for bringing quality growth and prosperity to the Indo-Pacific region. Such prosperity should not be monopolistic, and all countries around the Indo-Pacific must be able to share equally in the fruits of growth across this vast economic zone, or else the region risks becoming even more divided.

The underlying idea of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, or FOIP, is not to exclude anyone or impose specific values, but rather to ensure the rule of law and lead the international community towards cooperation rather than division and confrontation. I would like to emphasize that this foundational vision of FOIP, which has been developed over almost two decades and has incorporated various voices from the international

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community, is crucial for the prosperity of the region.

To put this vision into practice, in March 2023 Japan announced a new plan for FOIP, which sets out four pillars of cooperation. They are, (i) Principles for Peace and Rules for Prosperity, (ii) Addressing Challenges in an Indo-Pacific Way, (iii) Multi-layered Connectivity, (iv) Extending Efforts for Security and Safe Use of the "Sea" and the "Air". Today, I would like to highlight the following three initiatives to which Japan attaches particular importance, and call for cooperation with you all.

First is to promote maintaining and strengthening a free and fair rule-based international economic order. Free trade and investment are the foundations of economic prosperity. At the same time, new challenges such as supply chain disruption and economic coercion are emerging. Working with our allies and like-minded partners, Japan will encourage efforts to protect a free and fair international economic order while helping to strengthen resilience and mitigate risks to economic security. The Dialogue on Economic Security, including Strategic Trade and Technology, which we held for the first time with India last year, is one such initiative.

In addition, to address challenges such as opaque and unfair development finance, we will also work to comply with existing international rules and standards and provide support to countries that need it. Second, to protect the free oceans, it is essential to strengthen maritime law enforcement capabilities and efforts for maritime security. Under Official Security Assistance, or OSA, a new cooperation framework launched in 2023, Japan has decided to provide equipment and other items to the armed forces of seven countries to improve their security capabilities.In the effort of maritime security, we are proud partners with Oman, which holds a strategically important position and appreciates deeply the importance of safeguarding the free ocean. The safe navigation of sea-lanes, in which both countries have worked closely together, is indeed one of the key initiatives for the realization of FOIP.

Third, connectivity. This large economic zone from Asia to the Middle East and Africa has vast potential, but to flourish, the region needs to be connected in a multi-layered manner. To this end, in Africa, for example, Japan is contributing to the promotion of trade throughout the region through the development of the Port of Mombasa, a logistics hub in East Africa. We hope that the port of Duqm, which Oman is focusing on, will also become a key hub.

Furthermore, Japan will host the Japan-India-Africa Business Forum this month, the outcome of which we hope will lead to TICAD 9, to be held in Yokohama this August.

Distinguished Guests,

Let us together aspire for a free, open, and interconnected prosperity based on the rule of law. Japan will continue to deepen cooperation with countries around the Indian Ocean on cross-regional issues and contribute to the region's growth.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.

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Valedictory Address

Ranil Wickremesinghe*

Your Excellencies, Honourable Delegates and Friends. We are meeting in Muscat, close to one of the most geostrategic sea lanes of communication, the Straits of Hormuz, for the 8th edition of the Indian Ocean Conference. I must thank the Government of Oman for the hospitality afforded to all of us.

Oman and Sri Lanka were part of the Indian Ocean civilisation that my colleague referred to a short while ago. The Omani Navy defeated the Portuguese Navy. Of course, Sri Lanka did not have a Navy. We defeated them on land. We had an armoured corps: elephants wearing leather armour. The gunners and artillery were from India, and there were also Rajput warriors. In return, we built a kovil for them—the Barandi Kovil. This is how the old Indian Ocean civilisation functioned.

Once again, I thank the India Foundation for bringing us together. I value your efforts in deepening maritime partnership and highlighting the importance of the Indian Ocean. I have been given the last word of the day. I will also be the devil's advocate. What I wanted to say has already been said, and I will just add to it.

The land-centric perspectives of the Indian Ocean, which overlook its role as a connector, have hindered our ability to establish a comprehensive regional architecture. What have we genuinely accomplished over the past three decades? Very little, in comparison to others. For millennia, the political, economic, and cultural connections and interactions of the Indian Ocean states dominated the known world. The de-industrialization of India, the disruption of Indian Ocean maritime trade, and the establishment of European colonies two centuries ago have obscured our understanding of the Indian Ocean's potential. Europeans sought to take control of the Indies, which sometimes required them to cross the Atlantic Ocean, leading to the discovery of the Americas. Reflecting on this, I believe, like President Trump, that the two American continents should pay an annual fee to Asia. If not for us, they might never have been discovered!

We are now witnessing seismic geopolitical power shifts toward the Indian Ocean. Asia's economic dynamism has been viewed as a key to U.S. prosperity, leading to a shift in focus toward Asia – beginning with President Clinton, followed by President George W. Bush, and then-President Barack Obama's Pivot to Asia. However, there is more to this story.

Take the famous PricewaterhouseCoopers Report of 2017 titled 'The World in 2050'. Of the 30 top global economies, India, Indonesia and nine other countries—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, Iran, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Thailand, South Africa, and Australia—will be from the Indian

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Ocean Region. That is a big number. We are still a large group, even if two or three are left out. Of the 30 global economies, 11 will be in this region. This is a trend we have seen. A trend has been maintained. India will rank second, and Indonesia will rank fourth. China is projected to rank first in 2050, and it is using the BRI to establish two outlets in the Indian Ocean: Gwadar and Myanmar.

Japanese investments are already in Thailand and Vietnam, and they will next enter India and Bangladesh. Australia is planning to become a Renewable Energy Superpower. Saudi Arabia is also rising, but that doesn't end there. Post-2050, East Africa has the potential to be connected to the Atlantic Ocean. This is what this world will be.

The Western Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal will emerge as booming economic subregions. The Makran coast, with Chabahar and Gwadar connecting Central Asia to India and the Gulf, respectively, along with the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), a proposed trade route linking India and Europe. All Oman has to do is sit back and collect the rent. You need not have to do anything else, Minister!

Then, there is the Bay of Bengal. On one side, we will have the Western Chinese Economy; Chongqing will have an outlet to the Bay of Bengal through Myanmar. India's connectivity projects will also come through Myanmar and Thailand. This is not all that we have. The Minister referred to global maritime shipping, which Minister Jaishankar also mentioned. Most shipping will come through here, and half the crude oil will pass through here.

Look at the numbers - if I am not mistaken, about 30% of oil is now being refined in this area. Additionally, some of the busiest ports in the world are located here. Furthermore, 50% of the proven global reserves of oil and natural gas are present in this ocean. Consider our undersea natural resources; we don't know what we have. For instance, India and Sri Lanka need to discuss the cobalt reserves in this ocean. This is for the long term – I am talking about 2050.

In the short term, the recent World Economic Outlook by the IMF states that over the next two years, global growth will be driven by Asia. This is what is happening. Let us not think piecemeal; let us not think small. As Dr. Madhav said in the morning, it doesn't matter, even if we aim a bit higher. There are also fundamental changes taking place in the strategic environment. It marks the end of US predominance. In my view, which you may not agree with, there has been an underestimation of China and Russia. President Biden relied too much on the West and NATO to lead the world. Look at the sanctions on Russia; BRICS did not support them, and Russia is still functioning. The Western sanctions have proven ineffective. What we have today is a congested space and a fragmentation of global power.

What is the future? I cannot tell you today because we will have to see what the Trump Administration decides and what fundamental changes will occur in the US's global role. There are also others. You have formed the BRICS, which

is here to stay. I don't think President Trump's plans to move the BRICS will succeed.

There is rapid growth in the Chinese economy and a corresponding increase in its military, which has led to China's global power projections. China believes it can challenge U.S. exceptionalism. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) exemplifies this ambition. China is contesting U.S. naval supremacy in part of the Pacific Ocean while expanding into the Indian Ocean through the BRI. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank is available for funding.

You already see how important the Indian Ocean is. What we have not realized is that for over four decades, Japan has provided economic assistance to all Indian Ocean countries through the ADB and JBIC. It has also taken a political role. Certainly, in our country, they were first involved in peace talks with the LTTE. Recently, when I was President, they established the Commission for Truth, Unity, and Reconciliation. They do this very silently.

In the Indian Ocean, we have France, the Indian Ocean Commission's four pillars, and the island states. Sri Lanka must adopt the mentality of being an island state - not just South Asia; we must engage with the Indian Ocean Commission. The Colombo Conclave and the Indian Ocean Commission need to collaborate. These are important issues that we must address to become economically and politically significant. From South Africa to Australia, many of us share the commonality of once being part of the British Empire and colonies. We possess similar political institutions, judicial systems, and administrative structures that have fostered this commonality. Unfortunately, Britain appears to be diminishing its presence in the Commonwealth.

Should we in the Indian Ocean consider a Regional CHOGM like we did in the 1980s? Of course, outside there is the ICC and cricket. Everyone seems to be playing cricket and bringing all of us together. In this context, Prime Minister Abe of Japan spoke of the 'Confluence of Two Seas' to the Indian Lok Sabha. We have the formation of the Quad. In my view, we became the backwater in the original Indo-Pacific concept. There was not even an agreement on the boundaries of the Indian Ocean. It was the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific that highlighted the distinct nature of the Indian Ocean. This was again taken up when Sri Lanka called a Track 1.5 Conference.

Defining the Future of the Indian Ocean.

Finally, the Quad endorsed the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. In this emerging global scenario, the littoral states must address issues related to the Indian Ocean and its development as a distinct region, including unity, governance, and the influence of external players. Firstly, we must consider the role of India. By 2050, it will be the second or third largest power- whichever it is, it will undoubtedly be the largest power in the Indian Ocean Region. We have to acknowledge

this. The Indian Navy is projected to be the third largest navy, following the US and China's PLA.

How can we further develop India's current role in maritime governance with the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and the Colombo Conclave? The Colombo Conclave Secretariat needs to be strengthened. That is why I said we should try to link up with the Indian Ocean Commission and the French.

India has assumed the role of Net Security Provider. It began offering assistance during the tsunami, then during Covid, and ultimately during the bankruptcy crisis in Sri Lanka. I could revitalize the economy when I was confident of having USD 4.5 billion as a fallback in case of a crisis, if nothing else comes through. The Net Security Provider's role has expanded from disaster response to encompass economic support and health initiatives.

India's role with other countries is significant. Whether we like it or not, India is set to be the predominant player in the Indian Ocean. That is the reality. We have to collaborate. The issue of Freedom of Navigation and undersea cables, which Minister Jaishankar mentioned this morning, is critical. Sri Lanka has been pressing hard on the matter of undersea cables, emphasizing the management of energy and our undersea resources. What has become crucial are the hydrographic surveys; their potential for military and civil use, and who should receive the commercial benefits from these hydrographic studies.

Climate change, as mentioned earlier in the panel discussion, is a significant issue for Sri Lanka and all countries in the region. The US is pulling out of the Paris Climate Change Agreement. Perhaps we in the Indian Ocean should take responsibility for climate change extending down to the Antarctic. The disaster management and our approach to fisheries resources need consideration.

Finally, Dr. Madhav referred to what he called "heteropolar" economic arrangements among these Indian Ocean countries. We must move toward economic cooperation and integration. How do we progress? How will the global economy be affected by the Trump administration's policies? As a region, we need to think of ourselves. I was listening to the minister discuss its potential. Hon. Minister, you know better than I do what the figures for 2050 would be. We must consider all of this because the Trump administration aims to reduce US trade imbalances, which will lead to a decrease in our trade surpluses with the US. There will also be an impact on how the US interacts with Japan, China, and Korea, and that will affect all of us here.

In terms of the Indian Ocean economy, we have only just begun. Unlike East Asia, the demographic factors of South Asia and West Asia will serve as assets for us, yet neither India nor any of the other countries have pursued expansion in investments, infrastructure, manufacturing, or technology. Consider the economic growth that could be stimulated in the region. We must acknowledge that many littoral countries, including

Indonesia, South Africa, and Saudi Arabia, are members of the BRI. It will continue to have an impact in the Indian Ocean.

In 2050, the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean will depend on the relations between India and China, which will be both competitive and cooperative. We will have to see how it works out in the future. That's an important issue. When you go back to the old days, as the Minister said, it was the Indian and Chinese economies that dominated the whole Region.

I have two concerns regarding the role of UK assets in AUKUS in the Indian Ocean. We are located in the Indian Ocean, yet they have not even had the courtesy to inform us about the treaty and the UK's involvement. Furthermore, from Sri Lanka's perspective and that of many nations, we do not want any conflict in the Pacific Ocean to affect the Indian Ocean. We prefer to remain free of such issues. As far as we are concerned, we have not encountered major problems at sea among ourselves.

The US has a role in the Indian Ocean. What should it be? I can't comment until the US decides. We have to accept that they are in Diego Garcia. They should be able to pay a bit more for the island. I would have even gone for 25 Billion, but that's a matter for the governments concerned.

We should go to BRICS - Kazan Declaration of 2023. The emergence of new centres of power is crucial for a more balanced multipolar world order. The Indian Ocean Region must be one of these centres of global power. We need to adopt a multi-aligned stance. The key states: India, South Africa, Australia, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia - all five are members of the G20. Four of them are part of BRICS, while two belong to the Quad. Multi-alignment in the Indian Ocean could support world peace, as none of us desire war. We all agree that the countries of the Indian Ocean should commit to UNCLOS and uphold a rules-based order where no country dominates and none is dominated.

We have a task. The IORA Ministers Council meeting in Bengaluru in 2011 decided that the Indian Ocean is part of our collective destiny and that developing a holistic vision is essential for coping with the challenges of the 21st Century. Even after 14 years, we haven't done that. Let us start now.

We need a summit of the littoral states' heads of government. We must call for this summit to discuss several issues:

(i) The Indian Ocean as a center of global power;

(ii) the relationship among IORA, IONS, the Colombo Conclave, the Indian Ocean Commission, BIMSTEC, SAARC, etc. and

(iii) I listened to the request for us to emulate the European Union; however, I am uncertain if we are prepared to take that step. Certainly, I believe a first step would be the establishment of a Secretariat.

The Geopolitical Cartographer to which I belong is proposing a central Secretariat for joint

planning and action for an Indian Ocean community. This is what we need. India, as the incoming Chairman of IORA, together with South Africa, Indonesia, Australia, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Kenya, can summon this Summit Meeting of the leaders. We must go back to the drawing board and become a center of global power where we all participate in the decision-making. Talking about piecemeal action will not suffice. The world is changing quickly, and if we do not adapt, there will be very little for us to discuss.

I may have offended some in my speech, but we have to talk directly. Let us get to the crux of it: Where is the Indian Ocean Region going to be in 2050? This India Foundation Conference was a good opportunity to start. You will have your views tomorrow. Let us try to arrange a Summit of the Leaders so that we will know what our future is.

Thank you.

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