



Changing Dynamics of India's Indian Ocean Policy

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ABSTRACT

This paper elucidates the changing dynamics of India's Indian Ocean Policy that substantiates four hypotheses. First, India's maritime mindset has changed from a territorial to a non-territorial conception of the sea due to change in its strategy of economic development. Second, the evolving geopolitics of the Indian Ocean and India's power projection aspirations have been driving New Delhi deep into the Indian Ocean. Third, the Chinese attempts to penetrate into the India Ocean through its client states such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Myanmar, etc., and its One Belt One Road (OBOR) or Maritime Silk Route (MSR) initiatives, have been posing a real-time maritime security challenge to India's Indian Ocean strategy. Fourth, the US policy of Rebalance to Asia (RTA) has been providing geopolitical opportunity as well as challenge to India's power projection drive in the Indian Ocean.

KEYWORDS

Territorial and non-territorial conceptions of the sea; ensuring a secure sea; strategic autonomy; naval diplomacy and geopolitics of the Indian Ocean

1. Introduction

India was historically conscious of its maritime security concerns, as stated by the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru in March 1958, that “whichever power controls the Indian Ocean has India's sea borne trade at its mercy apart from its independence”.¹ Maritime issues, however, did not catch the attention of policymakers and strategic thinkers as India was preoccupied with continental security threats. The predominant mindset that shaped India's national security strategy was to view the Indian Ocean primarily from the perspective of elementary maritime security needs, which were to secure its territorial waters and island territories. The Indian Ocean was not a high priority on India's foreign policy agenda; hence, the Indian navy remained relatively neglected in the national security calculus. One of the critical elements of India's maritime strategic thinking has been the opposition to the presence of extra-regional powers in the Indian Ocean.

India's maritime mindset started changing in the 1970s following its war with Pakistan (1971); however, a more visible change in its strategic thinking and maritime national strategy was set in motion in the 1990s. This resulted in a major shift in India's Indian Ocean policy and national security strategy, as a blue-water navy became contingent to the globalising Indian economy. India's former Prime Ministers Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh, and the present Prime Minister Narendra Modi, have repeatedly pointed out the expanding geographic domain of India's maritime national interests. The phrases from “Aden to Malacca” or “the Suez to the South China Sea” (SCS) were

re-injected into the national security discourse.² Accordingly, New Delhi has changed its maritime strategy and increased the navy's share of resources in the defence budget, besides focusing on naval diplomacy to realise its maritime aspirations and national interest at large. In this paper, an attempt is made to understand the changing dynamics of India's Indian Ocean policy. Further, India's changing policy perspective on the Indian Ocean and its maritime strategy thereof are the major issues addressed herein.

2. Securing the Territorial Water: A Primary Concern

During the Cold War period, India's perspective on the Indian Ocean was primarily territorial. Territorial here means securing the territorial waters and island territories. Its prime concerns were to assert sovereignty over territorial waters and island territories and stake claims over the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) for resources, apart from advocating the demilitarisation of the high sea of the Indian Ocean. The latter became manifest when India supported Sri Lanka's proposal to declare the Indian Ocean a Zone of Peace (IOZP). As a developing nation, India was only concerned with its elementary maritime security needs, due to four major constraints. First, India's national security strategy was preoccupied with continental considerations as the threats to its security were emanating from its land borders with Pakistan, China and Myanmar rather than from maritime boundaries. Second, due to India's import substitution model of growth, the Indian Ocean had limited utility in its overall strategy of economic growth during the Cold War period. Third, New Delhi had neither the aspiration nor the resources and capability to make its presence felt beyond its territorial waters and island territories. Fourth, the power structure prevailing in the Indian Ocean was not conducive to the expansion of India's naval reach because the US succeeded the UK as a dominant power in the Indian Ocean during the Cold War. New Delhi was not sailing well with Washington at that time.

3. Changing Dynamics: A Non-Territorial Conception of the Sea

During the last two and half decades, India's views on the Indian Ocean have become broader as it moved beyond a territorial understanding of the sea. There are a couple of factors responsible for this. First is the change in India's strategy of growth from import substitution to export driven that has substantially enhanced the value of the Indian Ocean in India's strategy of economic growth. The Indian Ocean has become not only a medium of trade but also a medium for importing its hydrocarbon energy needs. Change in India's economic policy in 1991 brought the Indian Ocean from the periphery to the centre in its strategy of economic growth. Second, the end of the Cold War removed the Cold War constraints of New Delhi's Indian Ocean policy. Instead of opposing the presence of external players including the US in the Indian Ocean, New Delhi has been engaging Washington in the Indian Ocean through the MALABAR naval exercises since 1992. India has also been cultivating other stakeholders such as the UK, France and Russia through bilateral naval exercises in the Indian Ocean. Third, as an emerging power and rising naval actor, New Delhi has taken a broader view of its naval responsibilities to pursue its national interests. As an emerging power, New Delhi has become more concerned about the global commons, such as keeping the sea lines of communication

(SLOCs) open and free for international trade, and has changed its naval strategy accordingly. Thereby India has already made a shift in its approach from securing territorial water to securing the maritime commons such as SLOCs. Fourth, evolving geopolitics of the Indian Ocean has been driving India deep into the Indian Ocean. Beijing not only is asserting its territorial claims in the SCS but has declared that these waters connect the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean that forms its “core national interest”. China’s maritime objectives in shipbuilding and port construction around the Indian Ocean are driven by commercial interests, but it is reasonable to assume that the large investments could later evolve or be adapted for military purposes.³ China’s policy of connecting with Indian Ocean littoral states by participating in maritime infrastructure development such as of ports explains the pattern of its behaviour in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Beijing could leverage its informal strategic alliances with different states to check India’s rise and monitor maritime activities carried out by its maritime competitors.⁴ China finds it difficult to accept India as an equal power in Asia and is working assiduously to confine India to the backwaters of the Indian Ocean as a subaltern state.⁵ India is uncomfortable with China’s growing footprint in the Indian Ocean but has no intention of jeopardising its delicate relationship with China, or precipitating their ties into irreversibly and overtly hostile territory.⁶ New Delhi has been engaging Washington in the Indian Ocean since 1992, but India’s location as a main resident nation of the Indian Ocean inevitably leads it to view the Indian Ocean differently from Washington, notwithstanding that they have a convergence of interests to check Beijing’s assertiveness in the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific regions. Fifth, New Delhi’s interests in the Indian Ocean have been expanding from deterring hostile powers operating against it, to maintaining SLOCs for general trade and particularly for energy supplies, and to projecting India’s presence and powers⁷ that have already brought New Delhi into competition with Beijing.

4. From Freedom to Use the Seas to Ensuring Secure Seas: Evolving a Naval Doctrine

India’s Indian Ocean Policy suffered from the absence of naval doctrine during the Cold War era, and it has been filling this gap by adopting successive naval strategies and doctrines since the 1990s. For instance, the Indian navy adopted a substantive doctrinal document in the form of a Maritime Military Strategy (MMS-1998) to realise its maritime objectives. India’s Maritime Doctrine of 2004,⁸ India’s Maritime Military Strategy⁹ and India’s Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS-2015) have been significant milestones. The IMMS-2007 was an overall plan to move from the current position to a desired goal that can be defined as an overall approach of the state to its oceanic surroundings. India’s maritime strategy defines its role in its maritime areas of interest to deal with threats, whether real or perceived. To ward off threats the IMMS-2007 looks forward to the period 2007–2022 in which it has spelled out India’s current naval strategy, and has also been a document of insight and rationale for the resurgence of its maritime military power.¹⁰ Second, it has identified “power projection” as a feature of India’s naval diplomacy, and specifically mentioned Alfred T. Mahan’s sea power framework.¹¹ Third, India’s MMS uses the geographical advantages available to India by adopting an ocean-centric approach to its strategy, rather than a coast-centric one.¹² Fourth, with an emphasis on the Indian Ocean, IMMS-2007 also stressed the strategy for force buildup as it has been required to play multiple

roles in the IOR. In peacetime, the Indian navy has played multiple roles ranging from enabling deterrence to a diplomatic role, a constabulary role, and a benign strategy role.¹³ India has expanded its naval presence from the Mozambique Channel to the SCS. It has been establishing naval staging posts and listening stations in the island nations of Madagascar, Mauritius and the Seychelles, as well as a military relationship with them precisely in order to counter China's own very active military cooperation with these states.¹⁴ There is a visible shift in India's naval strategy from coastal defence to making India's maritime presence felt throughout the IOR by strengthening its maritime domain awareness, strengthening its deterrence ability by augmenting its naval capabilities.

Further, the IMSS-2015, titled *Ensuring Secure Seas*, superseded IMMS-2007 which was titled *Freedom to Use the Seas*. It has designated the Indian navy as the nodal agency responsible for overall maritime security, including coastal and offshore security.¹⁵ IMSS-2015 also addresses India's response to non-traditional threats emanating at and from the sea to its maritime domain, territory and national interests. It expands India's maritime areas of interest southwards and westwards by bringing the southwest Indian Ocean and Red Sea within its "primary area of interest", and the western coast of Africa, the Mediterranean Sea and other areas of interest within its "secondary area of interest".¹⁶ It includes two additional chokepoints: the Mozambique Channel and Ombai-Water Straits which are strategically located at the far end of the southwestern and southeastern Indian Ocean.¹⁷ The IMSS-2015 has emphasised the substantive augmentation of the capabilities of the Indian navy for exercising deterrence, projecting maritime power, providing maritime security and safeguarding India's maritime interests.

5. Enhancing Naval Presence

K.M. Panikkar articulated that the peninsular character of India makes it dependent on the Indian Ocean. The significant dependence of India's trade on maritime traffic gives the sea a substantial influence on its destiny.¹⁸ He further writes that

a navy is not meant for the defence of the coast because that can be defended from the land. Major objective of navy is to secure control of an area of sea, thus preventing enemy ships from approaching the coast or interfering with trade and commerce.¹⁹

To pursue this, India inaugurated a naval facility in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in 2001. The strategic location of this archipelago, at the crossroads between the Bay of Bengal and Southeast Asia, was a major reason why this new facility was elevated to an inter-services base housing Air Force and Army personnel apart from the naval forces, in 2005. To the West, India chose the archipelago of Lakshadweep, close to the Arabian Sea, to host a naval base, primarily for coastal surveillance,²⁰ and thereby enhancing India's naval presence beyond its territorial waters.

India is also well positioned in the Northern Indian Ocean, sitting astride the east-west shipping routes, and able to mount surveillance over them at several points stretching from its Lakshadweep Islands in the west to the Nicobar Islands in the east. This locational advantage provides several advantages in terms of easy deployment and sustenance of naval forces, from the Gulf Coast in the west to the Strait of Malacca in the east, thereby providing a potential maritime capability which no other navy in the region can have.²¹ Naval cooperation between Vietnam and India remains a focus, with the

former granting the latter access to the port of Nha Trang, situated close to the strategically significant naval base at Cam Ranh Bay. Further, India and Malaysia have decided to work together to secure the Malacca Straits, and Malaysia has requested India's help in protecting the straits from emerging non-traditional security threats in the region. China's claim over the Spratly Islands remains a source of anxiety for Malaysia.²²

In order to overcome the absence of forward naval bases, the Indian navy has been able to make port calls in Singapore, Vietnam and other countries. This was complemented by the expansion of the Andaman and Nicobar command with the establishment of the "Naval Air Station" in Campbell Bay (INS *Baaz*) on July 31, 2012, which is perceived as India's "window into East and Southeast Asia".²³ India still has to travel a long distance to become a credible maritime power in the emerging Asia-Pacific security architecture. S.D. Muni argues that

India is still new in the field of maritime and military diplomacy ... India's naval reach and capability to share a greater security burden with the East Asian neighbours would get a boost when its proposed "amphibious warfare base" is fully established at Andaman and Nicobar Islands by 2020.²⁴

6. Naval Diplomacy

India has been using seagoing naval units to radiate the state's soft power through goodwill visits by warships to foreign ports and the hosting of warships at Indian ports, besides conducting joint operations against poachers and pirates. The Indian navy has also been conducting naval exercises as a part of its diplomatic function. While such exercises were essential to familiarise the Indian navy with the seas that were earlier foreign to it, they have enabled joint operations in these waters and thereby facilitated the process of strengthening political ties with littoral states and extra-regional powers in the Indian Ocean. Naval exercises have proved quite useful in bridging communication and capabilities gaps with various countries.

Since the 1990s, the Indian navy has been at the forefront of cooperative engagement at both bilateral and multilateral levels, and naval diplomacy has emerged as an integral part of New Delhi's maritime strategy. In 2012, the Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Verma articulated that "given our geographical position, our natural paradigm is to architect the stability of our region via maritime routes".²⁵ The Indian navy's engagements with the littoral states of the Indian Ocean and extra-regional powers in the IOR have been expanded substantially. The Indian navy has been conducting bilateral and multilateral naval exercises regularly. Multilateral MILAN exercises have been conducted nine times since 1995. The ninth edition, in which 17 nations participated, was inaugurated at Port Blair on February 4, 2014. Its main objective has been to promote India's naval cooperation with the friendly navies from Southeast Asia (SEA) and Asia-Pacific (AP). India has also been engaging several SEA countries, especially Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, in bilateral naval exercises. Further, the Indian navy has been conducting bilateral naval exercises with extra-regional powers in the Indian Ocean, such as Konkan with UK since 2004; Indra with Russia from 2003 onward; Varuna with France, a resident power in the middle southern Indian Ocean, initiated in 2001; and MALABAR with the US since 1992. Occasionally, the MALABAR naval exercises became trilateral with the

participation of Japan. Since 2013, the US, India and Japan have conducted the MALABAR naval exercises together, showcasing how yet another trilateral security cooperation that spans the Asia-Pacific Region²⁶ has been emerging. From July 10 to 17, 2017, the Indian, US and Japanese navies conducted the 21st Edition of MALABAR Naval Exercise – 2017 in the Bay of Bengal, which aimed at developing deeper military ties amongst the three navies.²⁷

India and South Africa conducted combined bilateral naval drills off the South African Coast in June 2005, which merged into the trilateral biannual IBSAMAR naval exercises amongst India, South African and Brazilian navies conducted in 2008, 2010 and 2012.²⁸ The fourth edition was conducted at Cape Town Harbour on November 7, 2014, and the fifth edition was conducted on India's west coast with the harbour phase conducted at Goa from February 19 to 29, 2016. It aims at increasing interoperability and promoting shared maritime security understanding amongst these three navies of emerging countries from three continents. The scope of IBSAMAR has steadily expanded and it has matured into a complex trilateral naval exercise.

7. India as a Security Provider

Notwithstanding multiple challenges, the country was well positioned to become a net provider of security and stability in the IOR and beyond,²⁹ and its increasing outreach to the smaller Indian Ocean littoral states, in west Asia, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the South Asian littoral, further exhibits this. Its presence is vital for the security of SLOCs in the Indian Ocean. The success of the Indian Naval Symposium and the MILAN exercises underscores the Indian navy's robust involvement in regional maritime security, even as Indian policymakers have sought to contribute vigorously in regional multilateral forums such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).³⁰ New Delhi has been striving hard for political and strategic primacy, and saw itself as a natural provider of security in the IOR. Meanwhile, its political elites came to regard the Asia-Pacific as a strategic adjunct – a geographical space viewed mainly through the lens of a distant regionalism.³¹

David Brewster, in his book titled *India as an Asia Pacific Power* (2012), stated that India's failure to create a peaceful and stable security environment in the South Asian region has the potential to adversely affect its credibility as a security provider in Asia.³² In another book titled *India's Ocean: The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership* (2014), Brewster argued that developing a cooperative relationship with France in the domain of Indian Ocean would help India to develop close security with Mozambique on the African side of the channel. He highlighted the significance of East and Southern Africa in New Delhi's strategic agenda for the Indian Ocean. India is ardent about involving South Africa in a pan-Indian Ocean security architecture. Brewster contends that this announcement is a manifestation of former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's declaration that henceforth India should be seen as a "net security provider to the region" and should be seen as an Indian attempt to create its own "string of pearls".³³ Present National Democratic Alliance (NDA) dispensation under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has started placing more emphasis on the Indian Ocean as it has revived the idea of India as a "net security provider".

Recently, the US, India and Japan agreed to work together to maintain maritime security through greater collaboration due to the growing convergence of their interests in the

Indo-Pacific region. In this regard, they convened a meeting at New York on September 30, 2015, which was attended by India's External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj; Fumio Kishida, the Foreign Minister of Japan; and the US Secretary of State, John Kerry. While addressing this meeting, Swaraj stated that the Asia-Pacific as well as the IOR is strategic for India due to its security and economic interests. The SLOCs in the Asia-Pacific region are the lifeline of India's trade and commercial externalities. She noted that as part of its "Act East Policy", (AEP), India has focused on building stronger linkages with centres of economic growth in the region and deepened political and security ties with them, including with Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries.³⁴ Keeping in view its AEP, India has been trying to obtain membership in Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). The significance of the joint declaration of a trilateral meeting for New Delhi is that despite Beijing's sensitivities, India has stood up to be counted. China's rise as a major power has inevitably brought India and the US close to each other because Washington has been viewing New Delhi as something of a counterweight, together with countries such as Japan and Australia. New Delhi has to balance this with one-sided dialogue with China; however, Modi-led NDA dispensation has already changed the signposts from being a balancing power to becoming a leading power.³⁵ A critical issue confronting New Delhi and Washington is how they would be able to check China in the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific regions without annoying it. Their strategic posturing would build up pressure on China to behave, but how long that would work remains to be seen.

8. Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean and India's Dilemma of Strategic Autonomy

India has welcomed the US policy of Rebalance to Asia (RTA) but has been very cautious about publically embracing this new policy initiative, because it remains wary of provoking Beijing in the light of the widening gap in its economic and military capabilities vis-à-vis China, besides the ongoing border disputes.³⁶ Further, India's historical aversion to alliance-building has led its political establishment to avoid entering into any comprehensive strategic partnership, despite US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta's description of India as a "linchpin" of Washington's rebalance strategy.³⁷ While responding to that, then Indian Defence Minister A.K. Antony cautioned that the multi-lateral security architecture in the Asia-Pacific has to be strengthened at a "pace comfortable to all countries concerned".³⁸ It is argued that the present NDA dispensation has made a departure from the ambivalence of United Progressive Alliance (UPA) dispensation that was witnessed during the visit of the US President to India (2015), when Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Barack Obama announced the renewal of their defence framework agreement, and signed a broad framework agreement for expanding cooperation in the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific regions. It appears that New Delhi is no longer reluctant about taking larger responsibility for securing the IOR and promoting a regional mechanism for collective security and economic integration. The most crucial initiative of the RTA was the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), but US President Donald Trump signed an executive order to withdraw from the negotiating process of TPP on January 23, 2017, which has put the US policy of RTA in jeopardy. Notwithstanding this, the preponderance of US maritime power is irresistible and China's eyes are on India's growing power in the region.³⁹

In order to counter the US policy RTA, Chinese President Xi's ambitious One Belt One Road (OBOR) vision or his Maritime Silk Route (MSR) was formally launched on May 14–15, 2017, at a summit in Beijing. It aims to promote the connectivity of Asian, European and African continents and their adjacent seas, to establish and strengthen partnerships among the countries along the Belt and Road, to set up multidimensional, multitiered and composite connectivity networks, and to realise diversified, independent, balanced and sustainable development in these countries. In this initiative, the “Belt” refers to physical roads and overland transport, while the “Road” actually refers to maritime routes.⁴⁰ The former consists of three major sets of connections aiming to connect the PRC to Russia and the Baltic nations of Europe through Central Asia and Russia; passing through Central Asia to link China with West Asia, the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean nations; and establishing transport connectivity between China and Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean.⁴¹ It appears to be an ambitious initiative of China but most of the corridors figured in the OBOR project include contested terrain. For example, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has already become a bone of contention between China and India. Due to this, India stayed away from the launch of the OBOR initiative in Beijing on May 14–15, 2017, as it includes a road being built through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), which is still considered part of Indian Territory in the vocabulary of international law.

However, India needs to consolidate its position in the strategic and economic theatres of the IOR by either moderating or curtailing the PRC's assertion, but the million-dollar question is whether New Delhi can do that on its own. India's strategic community has recognised that the US strategy of RTA presents a geopolitical opportunity for India, as C. Raja Mohan argued that the rebalance could compel China “to be more reasonable towards India because China begins to focus on the US military challenge from the east”.⁴² For instance, following a categorical US commitment to back India's case for APEC membership, China has indicated that it will not be an obstacle on this score.⁴³ But this opportunity is also accompanied by a geopolitical challenge that amounts to further straining of the already strained relations with China on the one hand, and reflecting on India's urge for strategic autonomy on the other.

The Indian government aims to promote maritime multilateralism in the IOR, moving away from isolationist tendencies of the Cold War, but it still has strong reservations about who gets to play a role in the IOR. Thus, two regional institutions of the IOR – the IORA and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) – do not include Pakistan and China. China is included in the IORA in the capacity of a dialogue partner, and India does not wish for China to move beyond this role. India is also reluctant about increasing the mandate of IORA beyond economic and social objectives, and has no inclination towards its development as a regional security forum.⁴⁴ In order to improve its maritime capabilities, effectiveness and presence in the IOR, India has launched two projects: Sagarmala on March 25, 2015, with an inward orientation; and the Mausam project, with an outward orientation. The Sagarmala project aims to develop infrastructure to improve and increase the performance and effectiveness of existing ports from their present under-performance level to the optimum level by modernising and improving infrastructure around ports. It has three interrelated and interdependent dimensions: first, supporting port-driven development with proactive policy measures; second, modernising and upgrading the port infrastructure; and, third, developing integrated transport

infrastructure in order to connect the ports/coast to the hinterland.⁴⁵ The Sagarmala project is primarily confined to infrastructure creation in Indian ports; however, given the contested nature of the maritime domain of the IOR, it has the potential to expand into a regional undertaking. Project Mausam is another policy initiative, launched by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, on June 20, 2014, at the 38th World Heritage Session at Doha, Qatar,⁴⁶ wherein India has been harping on its historical and economic linkages with the littorals of the IOR that have outward orientation and strategic intent. India has been using cultural, geographical and historical linkages with the littoral states of IOR to counter China's MSR project. Project Mausam is at a nascent stage, but it has the potential to construct India's Indian Ocean World that would stretch from East Africa to Southeast Asia by improving its maritime presence there. India has been using soft power by focusing on capacity-building. Further, India and Japan issued a vision document for the construction of the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), which was presented to the African Development Bank's board of governors at their annual meeting held on May 24, 2017, at Gandhinagar in Gujarat, India.⁴⁷ In contrast to the OBOR project, the AAGC is conceived as more open and inclusive. The AAGC proposes four key elements that leverage the strengths of India and Japan: enhancing capacity and skills; building quality infrastructure and connecting institutions; development and cooperation projects in health, farming, manufacturing and disaster management; and people-to-people partnership.⁴⁸ However, the AAGC seems to be a win-win project in terms of the greater synergy amongst Japan's technology and capital, India's strong network and experiences in Africa, but much will depend on how this project unfolds and how much time it takes to generate critical mass.

9. Conclusion

To sum up, it can be stated that, initially, India's concerns regarding the Indian Ocean were confined to the security of its territorial waters and island territories – as continental security was the core concern and maritime security was a peripheral concern in its national security strategy. India's changing economic context, the geopolitics of the IOR and India's aspiration to be a power of consequence, followed by its expanding maritime interest, resulted in a major shift in New Delhi's conception of the Indian Ocean from territorial to non-territorial, and of naval strategy from coast-centric to ocean-centric. Accordingly, India has changed its strategy to protect its interests in the IOR; however, one element of continuity in its Indian Ocean policy is its principled opposition to the presence of extra-regional powers in the Indian Ocean. Understanding the logic of realism, New Delhi knows that it cannot do much about their presence; therefore, it has been engaging them in bilateral or multilateral naval exercises since the 1990s as a pragmatic necessity. India has been consistently improving its reach in the IOR by modernising and expanding its naval infrastructure, and also through naval diplomacy, but still New Delhi needs lot to do more on this count. Another issue bothering New Delhi has been the evolving geopolitics in the Indian Ocean. India's conscious decision to be neither part of the US RTA strategy nor part of China's OBOR initiative again reflects New Delhi's strong urge for strategic autonomy. However, during the visit of President Barack Obama to India, a statement was issued regarding their joint strategic vision for Asia-Pacific and India Ocean regions which implies that New Delhi and Washington

had reached a consensus on the need to counter Beijing's assertive handling of conflicting regional territorial claims. It appears to be a departure from India's stated position during the UPA dispensation. How far it will be materialised on the ground has yet to be seen, because this position is contrary to New Delhi's historical aversion to alliance-building and its urge for multilateral security architecture in the Asia-Pacific. India firmly believes that the primary responsibility to maintain peace and stability in the IOR lies with its littoral states. India's strategic community believes that India's joint strategy with the US to counter Beijing in the IOR provides geopolitical opportunity, but this also poses a real-time challenge because it has the potential to dwarf India's status as an emerging power, besides compromising its most cherished national interest of strategic autonomy. How New Delhi will negotiate with this opportunity as well as this challenge depends upon the political acumen and strategic thinking of the leadership at the helm of affairs, and the behaviour of the PRC and US in the IOR, apart from the augmentation of its naval capabilities.

Notes

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