

# India - A Net Provider of Security in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) - A Roadmap\*

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*"India's location at the very centre of the Indian Ocean has linked us with cultures, shaped our maritime trade routes, and influenced our strategic thought".<sup>1</sup>*

-Ms Sushma Swaraj

## Introduction

Throughout history, India has been at the centre of the IOR spreading commerce, culture, religion and ideas via the seas. By virtue of geography India is *destined* to be maritime nation and a sea power having open access to the world's oceans. The IOR also provides India strategic depth from the South much like the Himalayas in the North. However, a changing world order in the past two decades with the rise of China and the relative decline of the United States (US) led global order has upset India's strategic space in the IOR. India is rapidly losing its manoeuvre space and must reverse this trend in the next decade before China becomes the foremost power in the region. By 2025, India must become a Net Provider of Security in the IOR by leveraging its geographical advantage, and military engagement with littoral states as well as world powers in order to reclaim its position of eminence in the region and secure its maritime interests.

This article lays out the roadmap for India to achieve the goal of becoming a Net Provider of Security in the IOR in six sections. The first section explains India's interests in the IOR. The second section defines India as a Net Provider of Security in the region. The third section elucidates the role of the armed forces in India's goal of becoming a Net Provider of Security. The fourth section presents the contours of India's Defence Diplomacy in this endeavour. The fifth section evaluates the efficacy of a domestic defence industry under the "Make in India" initiative and its relevance for India as a security provider. The last section

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describes the nuances of capability building for Out of Area Contingencies (OOAC) in the IOR.

### **India's Interests**

Though the IOR is bounded by landmass on three sides, India dominates the region due to its strategic location.<sup>2</sup> The IOR comprises of 38 littoral states<sup>3</sup> and the Indian Ocean, which is the world's third largest ocean.<sup>4</sup> The Indian subcontinent, Africa, the Arabian and Malay Peninsulas, Indonesia and Australia, bound the IOR with its southern boundary being at 60<sup>th</sup> parallel south. Within this geography, the Indian Peninsula is the most dominating feature as it projects south allowing maritime access throughout the IOR. India's island territories further accentuate its access in the region. Due to its strategic location, India overlooks strategic Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs) in the IOR that link its security and prosperity inextricably to the seas.<sup>5</sup>

India's maritime interests in the IOR involve maritime security and access to the oceans. The country needs to defend an extensive coastline of 7500 kilometres and an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of a resource-rich 2.4 million square kilometres. Moreover, unhindered access to the oceans for trade is a vital security interest and is essential for national development. 90 per cent of India's trade by volume and 90 per cent of its energy supplies come from seaborne traffic.<sup>6</sup>

The SLOCs in IOR carry almost half of the world's container shipments, one-third of the world's bulk cargo traffic and two-third of the world's oil and energy shipments.<sup>8</sup> These SLOCs also negotiate several Choke Points in the IOR where they are vulnerable to interference.<sup>9</sup> Any disruption would have an adverse cascading effect on the world economy and global order. Therefore, the need to secure SLOCs in IOR from traditional and non-traditional threats introduces global vested interests in the region that affect India's maritime security calculus.<sup>10</sup> Adding complexity is the presence of more than half of the world's conflicts<sup>11</sup> and 40 per cent of world population within the IOR.<sup>12</sup> Shift of significant economic and military resources of major powers, most noticeably the United States (US), from the *Euro-Atlantic* to the *Indo-Pacific* also underline the global need for security in IOR.<sup>13</sup>

Growing Chinese presence in the IOR has reduced India's influence in the region in the past two decades.<sup>14</sup> In fact, India *was the* security provider before the entry of China. China's actions to secure its SLOCs by increased naval presence and construction of dual-use ports in littoral states have denuded India's preeminence in the IOR that was informally codified as the "Indira Doctrine".<sup>15</sup> This doctrine made smaller littoral states in the IOR a part of India's "sphere of influence" for maritime security. Today, these states are also caught in China's debt-trap giving China greater control over their sovereignty, which could potentially turn them into vassal states. A strengthened Chinese presence in the IOR has reduced India's ability to interdict China's SLOCs, which has traditionally deterred China in case of a confrontation on India's northern borders.<sup>16</sup>

### **Understanding India as a Net Provider of Security in the IOR**

*"India has to be a net security provider to island nations in the IOR as most of the major SLOCs are located along our island territories. This bestows on us the ability to be a potent and stabilizing force in the region."*<sup>17</sup>

- A. K. Antony

India's interests are best ensured when India is perceived as a Net Provider of Security in the IOR. Countering the influence of China and combatting non-traditional security threats can accomplish this goal. Security assistance from India must again become the primary option for countries looking to secure their interests in IOR. Forming cooperative partnerships across diplomatic, economic, informational and military domains with littoral states will bolster strength in the region. For this, India must leverage its image as a "benign power"<sup>18</sup> while developing requisite military capabilities. To achieve this, India must continue to refine its security-centric role in the IOR. As a Net Provider of Security in the IOR, India would be able to ensure the supremacy of its interests and reestablish itself as the security partner of choice.

India has increased diplomatic, informational and economic engagement with littoral states in the IOR. Initiatives like Security And Growth For All (SAGAR), Sagarmala Project and impetus on strengthening existing multilateral forums like Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation

(BIMSTEC), Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), reflect the importance given to the region in India's "neighbourhood first" policy. Sushma Swaraj, India's External Affairs Minister rightly stated, "Our vision for the IOR is to preserve its organic unity while advancing cooperation."<sup>19</sup>

At the national level, the National Security Council (NSC) has the leadership role in achieving synchronization and synergy of all instruments of national power. Working directly under the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), the NSC has the authority in matters concerning national security and must prudently integrate efforts of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) with those of Intelligence Agencies, Ministry of External Affairs and Ministry of Finance. The NSC must also be the driver of convergence of diplomatic, informational and economic initiatives with military actions directed in the IOR.

### **Role of the Indian Armed Forces**

Indian Armed Forces have a role as the security provider in the IOR. The Joint Publication Indian Armed Forces 2017 and India's Maritime Security Strategy 2015 describe India's security interests as seeking constructive engagement and shaping a conducive maritime environment. In this endeavour, the role of the Armed Forces will be defined by threat perception in the region and their ability to achieve synergy of effort at the Service level and with other instruments of national power.

### **Threats in the IOR**

Though India's rivals are traditional threats to India's maritime security, all these nations need a stable IOR. China and Pakistan have a history of aggression against India and their collusion is a major cause for concern.<sup>20</sup> Western powers under US leadership also have a heavy presence in the Region. The strategic competition between the US and China in the Region could easily embroil India. Interestingly though, in spite of geopolitical competition in the IOR, lines between cooperation, competition and conflict are blurred.<sup>21</sup> Since all nations need a stable IOR, they are forced to cooperate through multilateral mechanisms to ensure security of SLOCs.

Non-traditional threats in the region are Maritime Terrorism, Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea, Unregulated Activities at Sea, and Climate Change and Natural Disasters.<sup>22</sup> Maritime terrorism coupled with fundamentalism has emerged as a major threat with reports of Islamic radicalisation in Maldives.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, piracy is a threat to SLOCs that can only be combatted by multinational cooperation. Smuggling and illegal fishing, if left unchecked, have the potential to destabilise economies and ecosystems, respectively. A mix of natural disasters and instability in the littoral states in the Region also necessitate Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) and Non-Combat Evacuation Operations (NEO). It is evident that non-traditional threats are rampant in the region necessitating a focused approach in dealing with them.

### **A Key Imperative: Force Restructuring**

The capability of the armed forces to project military power in the IOR is limited and this creates a serious “credibility-gap” for a security provider. The forces lack an expeditionary capability to secure India’s interests against traditional threats in the region beyond immediate self-defence because India’s military focus remains on immediate threats on the land borders. However, developing a capability to operate and project power freely in the IOR is vital to become a net security provider.

Indian Armed Forces need military reforms that make them a “joint” force with synergy in all domains of warfare by exploiting the strengths of each Service. The force restructuring must lead to formation of three joint commands, create a credible amphibious warfare capability and lead to a change in the strategic mindset of armed forces officers.

India needs joint commands on both, the West and East coasts in addition to the Tri-Services Andaman and Nicobar Command. These commands must be capable of executing maritime operations with the Army and Air Force operations in support of the Navy. These commands must comprise of Combined Task Forces with components from all three Services plus the Indian Coast Guard. The creation of three joint commands along India’s maritime boundaries will strongly signal India’s intent in the Region.

Joint commands must have a capability-based representation from all Services. The Indian Army (IA) must provide the amphibious

capability to hold ground and conduct counter terrorist operations on littoral islands. The Indian Air Force (IAF) must provide air defence cover and strategic bombing capability from land-based airfields while Naval carrier based air operations must have the capability to operate away from territorial waters. The sister Services must also provide domain expertise in Electronic Warfare, space and cyberspace operations to assist naval operations. Existing capabilities of the Army and Air Force in the Indian Peninsula need to be integrated under joint commands.

### **Amphibious Capability to Enable Sea Control**

India needs to bolster its amphibious capability to be able to secure choke points and islands along SLOCs in order to be a deterrent against other powers in the Region. This must be under the aegis of joint commands and leverage capabilities of all three Services. An amphibious capability is essential for projecting power away from the home territory and for exercising sea control by establishing hold over distant littoral islands.<sup>24</sup>

A better amphibious capability is also vital for tackling non-traditional threats. This capability is frequently utilized during HADR, NEO and other Low Intensity Maritime Operations. The Indian Navy and Air Force already have significant sealift and airlift capabilities that need to be synergized for such operations. India has exercised these capabilities periodically to assist littoral countries when required as well as to mitigate sufferings due to natural disasters.

### **Strategic Mindset of Officers**

India's goal to become a security provider will require a change in the strategic mindset of armed forces officers. An obsession with China and Pakistan restricts the officers' worldview in terms of India's strategic space. For this to change, officers must study and understand other countries to expand their perception of India's security interests. This must be done through reforms in Professional Military Education (PME) wherein they pursue "Area Specialization" in IOR countries from the beginning of their careers.

### **Contours of Defence Diplomacy in India's Context**

The MoD defines *Defence Diplomacy* as exchange of high level defence related visits, dialogue on security challenges and port



calls; and *Defence Cooperation* as activities covered by training exchanges, combined exercises, and sourcing, development, production and marketing of defence equipment and other forms of cooperation.<sup>25</sup> India's military engagement with littoral states must reinforce their militaries and signal strong bilateral relations and partnerships utilising both diplomacy and cooperation. Increased capacity building and improved security partnerships form important contours of India's defence diplomacy.

### **Capacity Building**

Capacity building of Friendly Foreign Countries (FFC) amongst littoral states is the strength of India's defence diplomacy. Increasing assistance in training, greater military cooperation, cross-attachment of personnel and joint exercises, must augment India's efforts.

Training of personnel from FFC in India is cost effective and the additional numbers of students can be easily accommodated by training institutions in India. In addition, Indian Armed Force's Training Teams must be established in these nations to increase the host nations' capabilities for tackling non-traditional threats. Similarly, increasing military assistance by supplying weapons and equipment to counter non-traditional threats is within Indian capability as these systems are being manufactured in India.

Cross-attachment of Indian Armed Forces officers with host nation forces and vice versa will strengthen India's credibility and trustworthiness. This practice is followed in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization countries and has increased interoperability manifold for them. Moreover, this would result in increased understanding of the region's issues and Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA).

Multilateral engagement with all stakeholders in the region's security through joint exercises must be increased as part of Defence Diplomacy. Apart from the IN, the IA and IAF should also conduct these exercises. Being the largest resident power in the IOR, India regularly conducts large-scale international exercises like Milan, and takes part in numerous others. 16 countries took part in Milan 2018<sup>26</sup> and such exercises boost international security cooperation. There is tremendous scope for conducting joint service international exercises that include foreign partners as well as all three Services across the spectrum of military operations in the IOR.

### **Security Partnerships**

Non-traditional threats affect littoral states in the IOR more visibly than traditional threats. This is an opportunity for India to partner with these states and in turn increasing its legitimate presence in the IOR. By forming bilateral as well as multilateral security partnerships with littoral states, India can conduct joint operations to benefit the Region.

India must form Joint Task Forces with the armed forces of littoral states under the aegis of multilateral organisations like the IORA. These Task Forces must follow the structure of the anti-piracy task forces formed in the Gulf of Aden. Having international representation with equity for each nation will enormously benefit India and increase its MDA, while keeping other major powers like China out of the region.

### **Efficacy of Building Defence Industry under Make In India Initiative**

India is the largest arms importer in the world importing 60 per cent of its acquisitions and this dependence is not healthy.<sup>27</sup> As a regional security provider, India should not operate weapon systems developed abroad. India pays dearly for these imports whereas ideally, the money spent on acquisitions should be invested in indigenous Research and Development (R&D) and domestic defence industry.<sup>28</sup> It is vital to curb imports by building a viable defence industry under the Make In India Initiative and attain the status of a net exporter of arms.

### **Case For A Strong Domestic Defence Industry**

India has access to technology, skilled manpower, infrastructure and private sector participation to develop a strong domestic defence industry. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is an example of indigenous development of cutting-edge and dual-use technology that is being leveraged by India's missile programme. Moreover, infrastructure is available with increased private sector participation, foreign collaboration and well-established Defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSU).

The potential for domestic defence industry has also increased with ease of doing business, improved defence procurement procedures and increased Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).<sup>29</sup> These



facts present a strong case for a viable indigenous defence industry in India.

### **Challenges**

Enormous challenges exist for India to become a net-exporter of arms because of lethargic DPSUs, absence of a spirit of innovation and a lack of institutional motivation in the production of arms for the armed forces. In spite of huge investments in DPSUs, the country has not been able to produce a viable domestic defence industry under a socialist model of governance.

Moreover, India spends only US \$ 62 billion on R&D whereas China spends US \$ 372 billion.<sup>30</sup> This is a huge gap that needs to be reduced. For this, the DPSUs need to be energized by privatisation of large and unproductive ordnance factories in a phased manner and the resources freed up need to be invested in R&D.

### **Restructuring The Defence Industry - The Way Forward**

The private and public sectors need to share the burden by dividing responsibilities into production for the private sector and R&D for DPSUs.<sup>31</sup> Co-production through strategic partnership leverages the motivation of the private sector with the infrastructure of the public sector.<sup>32</sup> To build its own advanced defence systems, large-scale indigenous innovation in defence technology would be required. While small companies can innovate, they typically do not have access to funds for setting up large-scale production plant. Therefore, for now, the government should offer to produce advance weapon systems indigenously developed in India.

In order to enable indigenous innovation, the model of the United States Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) must be studied. DARPA is responsible for development of emerging technologies for use by the United States military. It accomplishes this goal, in part, by funding research projects in organisations of all sizes - from startups, universities, to large multinationals. Its most visible technological success is the Internet itself.

India must enable its vast technologically skilled workforce access to funds for innovation in defence technology. An Indian organisation on the lines of DARPA could fund and coordinate

indigenous innovation in the defence industry across startups, government institutions, and large corporations.

The armed forces also need to take a lead in indigenisation and must play a bigger role. The IN has led the way by establishing the Naval Design Bureau (NDB) for an in-house design capability and does not have to depend on DPSUs for R&D.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, naval shipyards are headed by serving naval officers. From inception, the Navy retains full control over all activities and is able to produce much better results.<sup>34</sup> The other two Services must also follow suit. The army has recently established the Army Design Bureau (ADB) and must emphasise on its success.<sup>35</sup>

### **Capacity Building for OOAC**

OOAC are military missions conducted beyond India's borders to include humanitarian assistance and military assistance either sought by friendly nations or offered by India in combating security related issues and in disaster relief. The contingencies also cover protection of India's national interests and diaspora.<sup>36</sup>

In the Indian context, OOAC operations can be broadly classified into Peacekeeping operations, HADR operations and Military operations. Peacekeeping operations can be under the United Nations. HADR can comprise either unilateral or multilateral NEO or disaster relief operations. Military operations too can be under unilateral, bilateral or multilateral arrangements.<sup>37</sup>

### **Need for OOAC Capability**

India's ability to unilaterally execute OOAC operations to secure its interests will determine its credibility as a net security provider. It is a key measure of a nation's self-confidence, and a non-threatening assertion of its military capability and national will to pursue its interests. This capability is also reassuring for smaller littoral states in the Region. Coupled with a prudent foreign policy, it will discourage outside powers from gaining influence in the garb of aiding nations in distress. Moreover, it reinforces a sense of confidence amongst the Indian diaspora and businesses that are flourishing in the region and are an important source of foreign remittances. Such a capability also ensures the protection of Indian investments in the Region.

### **Synergy for OOAC**

India's capabilities to execute OOAC must be augmented by achieving synergy between various instruments of national power. The execution has often been disjointed as seen during Operations Pawan and Cactus. Not only is synergy required between the Services but also at the NSC and Ministry level to coordinate these operations. In the past decade, India has successfully conducted only NEO operations like operation Raahat in Yemen<sup>38</sup> but the country needs to be capable for operations on a much larger scale for a traditional conflict.

At the national level, there is a requirement for structures under the NSC that enable synergy during OOAC. The MoD must establish an OOAC Directorate under the Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff while the MEA must establish an Emergency Division.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the NSC must also ensure the success of information operations and perception management of domestic, host country's and international audiences.

### **Capacity Building**

A credible lift capability is vital for OOAC operations and must be augmented by unity of effort amongst the armed forces. The IN and the IAF are capable of lifting a limited amount of men and material into conflict zones beyond India's boundaries. This must be strengthened by increasing the air and sealift capability of these Services and synergy of existing capabilities through joint structures.

A responsive logistics support system is essential during OOAC and must focus on prepositioned stocks and advanced points for debarkation for air and sealift. Accordingly there is a need for advanced expeditionary bases stocked with prepositioned stores for OOAC. These must be built on the Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshadweep Island chains. India also needs one island on lease from Mauritius or Seychelles in the southern Indian Ocean for this purpose. These bases will increase sustenance for OOAC operations in the IOR manifold.

IA needs amphibious capability to ensure success of OOAC in a scenario when serious resistance is encountered from rival state/non-state actors or natural disasters of unmanageable proportions. This capability is essential in OOAC operations in the

interiors of larger islands that cannot be supported from the sea. In the absence of a Marine Corps, the IA's amphibious capability needs to be doubled with a corresponding increase in dedicated sealift capability.

### **Conclusion**

India must reverse the trend of outside powers like China creeping into the IOR by the middle of the next decade. This is a strategic "window of opportunity" for India as the global order is still in a flux with rebalancing of power between the US and its allies on one side and China and Russia on the other. The IOR is effectively India's "backyard" and must remain so, enabled by an intense and constructive military engagement with littoral states and world powers. In securing its own interests in the region, India also secures the stability of the existing world order, which is crucial for India's growth and development. The most effective way to achieve this desired end state is to become a Net Provider of Security in the Indian Ocean Region.

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>4</sup> Katarzyna Kaszubska, "Indian Ocean," Observer Research Foundation, 06 Jan 2017 <https://www.orfonline.org/research/indian-ocean>. Accessed on 15 September 2018.

<sup>5</sup> NSP 1.2, op.cit 2 p. i

<sup>6</sup> Sushma Swaraj, op.cit, 1

<sup>7</sup> Sushma Swaraj. op.cit 1

<sup>8</sup> NSP 1.2, op.cit. 2 p. 18, Map 2.1

<sup>9</sup> NSP 1.2, op.cit. 2 p. iii

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<sup>18</sup> Sushma Swaraj, op.cit. 1

<sup>19</sup> NSP 1.2, op.cit. 2 p. 37

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> NSP 1.2, op.cit. 2 p. 37-43

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Rolls-Royce, op.cit, 27

<sup>32</sup> Dalip Bhardway, op.cit. 26

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> "Make in India: Charter of Army Design Bureau," Indian Army [https://indianarmy.nic.in/Makeinindia/Site/Form\\_Template/frmTempSimpleMII.aspx?MnId-9toi18B+YLwjRizLbVWahA—&ParentID=3A/mr3SSpVPuUcsr5cqOww==](https://indianarmy.nic.in/Makeinindia/Site/Form_Template/frmTempSimpleMII.aspx?MnId-9toi18B+YLwjRizLbVWahA—&ParentID=3A/mr3SSpVPuUcsr5cqOww==) Accessed on 15 September 2018.

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