

Indian Ocean Region (IOR) : India as a Net Security Provider- The Way Ahead

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Abstract

The strategic importance of IOR is ever increasing to the world order in general and Indian sub-continent in particular. India's central position in IOR lends it immense advantages but at the same time presents far greater challenges. A secure IOR is key to ensuring security of India's national interests. It is, therefore, essential for her to assume the role of a net security provider in the region.

The threat mosaic of IOR ranges from conventional challenges in the form of growing presence of People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) as well as impetus given by Pakistan Navy (PN) towards bolstering their submarine arsenal. Both these challenges have the ability to adversely effect India's existing role in IOR. The challenges are further augmented by shift in the United States (US) policy to 'America First' under its current leadership. To add to the worries are the perennial unconventional challenges like piracy, human trafficking, illegal fishing etc. Having taken cognisance of the threat spectrum, there is a need for a coherent IOR strategy by India if it aims to achieve the status of a net security provider in the region. The backbone of a coherent IOR strategy should include implementation of structural reforms like formulation of a National Defence Policy and appointment of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). Further, adequate thrust needs to be provided towards capability enhancement of IOR nations as also to militarily

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develop Andaman, Nicobar and Lakshadweep Islands so as to increase India's strategic reach and provide her the capability to enforce a maritime exclusion zone in IOR in the event of a conflict with China. Finally, a fresh stimulus needs to be given to indigenisation in developing military hardware to reduce the existing naval capability asymmetry vis-à-vis PLAN.

India's genuine intent to act as a net security provider in IOR needs to be backed by a clearly spelt out strategy and a well-defined capability development roadmap. This would lend credibility to her aforementioned intent and secure her maritime, and national interests.

"Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. The ocean is key to the seven seas. In the 21st century, the destiny of the world will be decided in these waters."

- Alfred T Mahan

Introduction

The IOR broadly defines areas consisting of littoral states of the Indian Ocean. Marked by a glaring cultural, social, political and economic diversity, IOR comprises a number of sub-regions, such as Australia, South East Asia, South Asia, Horn of Africa and the Southern and Eastern Africa. The IOR littorals house more than one-third of world's population. In addition, more than half of the global seaborne trade and commerce passes through the Indian Ocean out of which, almost 70 per cent goes to countries external to the region. The IOR littoral states are rich in producing various raw materials, primarily oil, which are key to development of major manufacturing industries of developed as well as developing nations. Complementary to this is the enormous seabed resources possessed by IOR comprising oil and natural gas reserves, minerals and abundance of fishes. The presence of major maritime choke points and Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs) in the IOR lends it a strategic importance of gigantic magnitude.

Geo-Strategic Importance of IOR to India

India's central position in the IOR gives her an immense advantage and at the same time presents far greater challenges. Looking through the prism of optimism, however, a pragmatic maritime approach could well convert these challenges into opportunities which would help India achieve her quest for becoming a global power.

India has a coastline of over 7500 km, a total of over 1200 Islands and about two million square km of EEZ.¹ Nearly 80 per cent of India's crude oil requirement is imported, which are mostly routed through the sea.² Taking into account the total oil imports by sea, offshore oil production and petroleum exports, the country's cumulative 'sea dependence' for oil is estimated to be about 93 per cent.³ Today, almost 95 per cent of India's trade by volume and 68 per cent of trade by value are routed via the Indian Ocean.⁴ Any impediment to flow of commercial traffic would have disastrous ramifications on her economic objectives. Secondly, India depends heavily on Indian Ocean resources with her fishing and aquaculture industries being a major source of export as well as providing employment to more than 14 million people.⁵ Militarily, the presence of such long coastline makes India vulnerable to potential threats emerging from the sea. One of the worst terrorist attacks on India in recent memory – the 2008 Mumbai attack – was perpetrated by terrorists arriving by sea. The presence of non-traditional threats like piracy, smuggling, illegal fishing and human trafficking also present major challenges and hence, a secure Indian Ocean is key to securing India's national interests.

Net Security Provider: To Be or Not to Be

The concept of 'Net Security Provider' has hitherto been ambiguous and subjected to varied interpretations. During the Naval Commanders' Conference, held in New Delhi on 26 October 2015, the then Indian Defence Minister Shri Manohar Parikar released India's revised maritime-military strategy titled, '**Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy' (IMSS-2015)**'. This document defines the concept as, "...the state of actual security available in an area, upon balancing prevailing threats, inherent risks and rising challenges in the maritime environment, against the ability to monitor, contain and counter all of these".⁶

The first instance of the term expressed in an international forum was at 2009 edition of "Shangri La Dialogue", wherein

Mr Robert Gates, who was then the Defence Secretary of United States, expressed, *"We look to India to be a partner and net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond..."*⁷ This was repeated in the 2010 edition of the "Quadrennial Defense Review" of the USA, which stated, "...as its military capabilities grow, India will contribute to Asia as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean and beyond".⁸ However, the intent was unequivocally declared by the erstwhile Indian Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, on 23 May 2013 while addressing a gathering after laying the foundation stone of the Indian National Defence University (INDU) in Gurgaon. He said, *"...We live in a difficult neighbourhood, which holds the full range of conventional, strategic and non-traditional challenges....We have also sought to assume our responsibility for stability in the Indian Ocean Region. We are well positioned, therefore, to become a net provider of security in our immediate region and beyond"*.⁹ The acceptance of this role, as net security provider, has now become a strategic obligation rather than a matter of choice. Amidst a turbulent global economic environment marred by industrial recession in European block and a looming threat of trade wars between China and US, India is amongst the very few nations which has been able to register an almost sustained rate of economic growth. India has been acknowledged as the emerging global power in the international arena. This acknowledgement brings with itself, a commensurate level of international responsibility. However, considering the perceptible void in the existing capability, the ongoing internal debate echoes in the remarks made by India's former National Security Advisor, Mr Shiv Shankar Menon, when he said, *"There is a demand that India be a net provider of security and we need to take a call on that"*.¹⁰

IOR Threat Mosaic: From Indian Prism

India has been fortunate to have experienced largely peaceful seas for past several decades. The threats were mostly non-traditional like piracy, drug trafficking, IUU (Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated) fishing and human trafficking to name a few. However, the growing realisation of importance of IOR by the littoral states has brought the seas in the epicentre of a strategic churn. As a result, the foundations for bilateral and multilateral relationship between various nations, based exclusively on mutual maritime interest, have been progressively witnessed over the last decade.

A quick scan over the IOR brings forth challenges of varied dimensions from India's perspective. Critical of these are as under:-

(a) **Growing PLAN Presence.** The stupendous growth in the military might of China over last three decades and her recently acquired penchant for power projection much beyond its territorial boundaries, has emerged as the greatest challenge for the IOR. The ever increasing naval assets of PLAN, mostly indigenous, has a well thought out purpose. As per analysts, PLAN is likely to have six aircraft carriers in the near future. It doesn't require a brilliant mind to guess that these carriers are not being built for stationing them in Chinese ports. Indian Ocean will surely be the destination for a few of these carriers in due course. The strategic relevance of ports like Gwadar, Hambantota, Djibouti to name a few, needs no elaboration. It is a matter of 'when' and not 'if' that these ports would be employed by China for flexing her military muscles in her attempt to negate the unipolar global dominance by US. The complete disregard to International Maritime Laws displayed by China in her handling of South China Sea (SCS) and the inability of the major global powers to coerce China on the issue, doesn't auger well for the IOR in general and India in particular, in the foreseeable future. The hidden military agenda encapsulated in the 'String of Pearls' and '21st century Maritime Silk Route (MSR)', is glaringly apparent and stands out as the biggest strategic challenge facing India.

(b) **Modernisation of Pakistan Navy (PN).** PN has embarked upon a rapid modernisation process with thrust on Undersea Warfare. Garnering assistance from Turkey and her all-weather friend China, PN is gradually building up its submarine arsenal. Further, it is also in the process of acquiring Frigates, Missile Fast Attack Crafts and Patrol Vessels of various tonnage and capability from these nations. The activation of Gwadar port, to allow perennial PLAN presence, in the very near future would open up new avenues of threat in India's backyard.

(c) **Shifting US Policy.** US policies, under Trump administration, have seen stark deviation from her erstwhile policies on Indo-Pacific Region (IPR). Trump's vociferous

support of 'America First Policy' has forced the think-tanks to brainstorm on the possibilities of US downsizing its global footprints of expeditionary forces. The US decision to reconsider the quantum of financing to NATO Forces further strengthens this possibility. If implemented by US, this would leave a vacuum in the IOR, which China would be more than obliged to fill. Consequently, for India, this would greatly increase the scope of maritime conflict with China, singly or collusively with Pakistan.

(d) **Non-traditional Threats.** The challenges from non-state forces to include, piracy, maritime terrorism, drug trafficking, illicit weapons trafficking, illegal migrants, poaching etc. as well as, vagaries of climate change falls within the ambit of non-traditional threat spectrum of conflict. The frequency of resurgence and occurrence of such threats are very high and hence require immediate attention. Response prioritisation and asset allocation shift in favour of such non-traditional challenges, thus necessitating maintenance of a pragmatic balance vis-à-vis conventional threats.

Impediments to India Becoming a Net Security Provider

A thorough analysis of the above threats call for a multidimensional approach to address the existing as well as emerging threats to India's maritime security. Since the time of formally expressing India's intent to be a net security provider in the IOR, number of positive developments have taken us closer to realising that intent. Having said so, a lot remains to be done before India can be branded so, in the global arena. A few prominent impediments towards this end state are as under:-

(a) **Resource Availability vs Requirement.** The inglorious status of India as the second most populated country in the world puts enormous strain on the finite resources which the nation can muster in the present era of global economic downtrend. Intents cannot be materialised into reality without a robust financial backing. The myriad of tasks envisaged in achieving the status of net security provider calls for manifold increase in existing military hardware. With the shrinking allocation of defence budget as per cent of GDP, it would take more than a few decades before India could offer viable force friction to PLAN in IOR.

(b) **Existing Civil-Military Relationship.** The ambiguous civil-military relationship existing in India not only manifests itself in serious differences and lack of clarity over strategy formulation but also over undistorted execution of formulated policies. There have been numerous instances of missing out on strategic gains due to differing views of various ministries as well as between civil and military leadership. The growing differences in perception of India's relationship with Seychelles, Maldives and Sri Lanka (to a certain extent), are examples of such mishandling.

(c) **Nascent Jointmanship.** Turf war between three Services has not helped the vision of jointmanship required for India achieving the status of net security provider. Token gesture of creating Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) might bring sense of false integration to a few, but true jointmanship would not be realised till all the anomalies in the appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) at the apex level are dealt with.

(d) **Non-alignment Policy.** India has ideologically followed the principle of military non-alignment with any super power so as to retain its strategic autonomy. However, considering the humongous capability gap vis-à-vis India's arch rival in IOR, China, it is a matter of time before India decides to either partner militarily with US or accept to be a subservient state of China.

(e) **Past Experience of Overseas Deployment.** The recipe of net security provider does encompass 'Overseas Deployment' as a vital ingredient. There have been two major instances of India projecting her military power overseas. The first one, codenamed OP CACTUS, in island nation of Maldives was a resounding success. However, the Indian armed forces involvement in Sri Lanka, as part of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), did not achieve the expected results and it put India off from further overseas adventures, except under the United Nation (UN) umbrella. The haunting memory of experiences in Sri Lanka continues to have a dragging effect on any thought process involving overseas deployment.

(f) **Cumbersome Acquisition and Procurement Processes.** Though the Indian Navy (IN) has far surpassed

the other two Services in terms of capability development through indigenisation, much more needs to be achieved to balance the supply-demand equilibrium. Defence Procurement Procedure (DPP)-2016 has addressed various lacunas and has streamlined the Capital Acquisition process to a great extent but the technological gap in the indigenous defence industries, coupled with inadequate participation by private industries, has dragged the defence modernisation process. This in turn has impeded capability development commensurate with the requirement for IN to project itself as net security provider.

(g) **Primacy of Land Operations.** India has been persistently focused on dealing with its land boundary with China and Pakistan, and her full-fledged participation in ongoing proxy war. This has lent a myopic vision to the Indian strategists who fail to lay adequate emphasis on dealing with situations arising outside its immediate neighbourhood. Hence, in spite of a clear understanding of the seemingly dormant threats in IOR, a clear laid down strategy on role of India as a net security provider in IOR has not emerged.

Way Forward

The hitherto fore analysis clearly brings out that India has miles to go before it achieves the status of net security provider in the IOR. Having said that, the silver lining is that the first step in terms of showing the strategic intent has been taken and due deliberation is being carried out progressively towards realisation of this intent. Towards this end, the following aspects merit attention:-

(a) **Higher Defence Organisation.** The quest for appointment of a CDS dates back to setting up of HQ IDS and has its roots in recommendations of Kargil Review Committee set up immediately after the 1999 conflict. HQ IDS has been created to enhance jointness and build synergy amongst the armed forces, to include Long Term Perspective Planning (LTPP), capital acquisition, joint doctrine etc. However, even after almost two decades, the appointment of CDS looks a distant probability. Lack of consensus amongst the three Services, coupled with reluctance on part of the bureaucrats to part with power are some of the reasons for the same. The first essential for donning the responsibility of

a net security provider is to have a single point military advice by appointing a CDS. Needless to say, CDS should have full operational power rather than mere advisory role. This would enable coherent application of strategic thoughts vis-à-vis a myopic threat assessment by individual Services, which is the case at present. In addition, it would also facilitate establishing clearly defined priorities of defence acquisitions and an assured budget for the same, which are pre-requisites for strategic planning. This would be a single most important factor towards capability development commensurate with the role of a net security provider.

(b) **Formulation of a National Defence Policy.** It is a miraculous paradox that India, a growing regional power and an aspirant global power, doesn't have a National Defence Policy. The present mechanism of dealing with national security threats on a case-to-case' basis is an ad-hocism of bewildering magnitude. A well-articulated national defence policy, encompassing existing and future threats and India's stated response to it, would add a key dimension to her strategic deterrence. It would also help streamline various defence priorities which are foggy, at best, in the present form. An assertive defence policy would inspire confidence, not only within India but also amongst the small littoral nations of IOR who would then acknowledge her intent, desire and capability to become a net security provider in the region.

(c) **Coherent IOR Strategy.** India needs to formulate and adhere to a coherent IOR strategy involving complementary intents and actions in dealing with IOR nations rather than piecemeal strategy on stand-alone basis with each IOR nation. This would help her in exerting positive influence over these nations and help the smaller nations overcome any potential inhibition towards gauging India through the prism of 'Big Brother' syndrome. The policy so far, with specific reference to relationship with Sri Lanka, Maldives and Mauritius, has been at times ambiguous. Lack of clear coherent policy has led to perceptible tilt of these nations towards China. The erstwhile 'String of Pearls' and ongoing 'Belt and Road Initiative' of China has identified some nations as its key elements. Towards this, the Chinese strategists have succeeded, to a great extent, in gaining upper hand by

entangling them in their 'Soft Loan' policy. A further tilt of these nations towards China would vitally threaten the Indian interests in IOR. Hence, it is imperative for India to engage these nations so as to favourably shape relationship. Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and naval exercise MILAN have been a few welcome steps by India in manifesting a coherent strategic intent. This has been further augmented by initiatives like Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), project MAUSAM and the proposed Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, as well as increased participation of Indian Navy in bilateral / multilateral naval exercises and CORPAT (Coordinated Patrol) with Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar and Bangladesh. However, much still remains to be done by India in assuming the role of a net security provider. In view of her reluctance to enter into a direct military alliance with any nation, India should take the lead in non-traditional challenges in the IOR, to include combating the menace of piracy, smuggling, human trafficking, illegal fishing and the likes. This, in addition to positively shaping the maritime environment of the IOR, would also bolster her image as a potent net security provider of the Region.

(d) **Development of Andaman, Nicobar and Lakshadweep Islands.** The world miraculously watched the Chinese expertise in dredging and creating small islets. These islets fit into the strategic plan of PLAN as static aircraft carriers and have greatly enhanced her reach and capability and, to a great extent, its ability to alter the balance of power in IOR in the near future. However, in the Indian context, the policy makers have failed to capitalise on similar advantage provided on platter to us by geography itself. The Andaman, Nicobar and the Lakshadweep Islands strategic importance which does not need deliberation, more so, in case of the former, because of its location close to the entrance of the strategic Malacca Strait. Though, the importance has been realised, the existing capability remains suited for constabulary role, at best. It is imperative for India to develop these capabilities by bolstering defence infrastructure in these islands. It has the potential to counter PLAN naval assets entry into IOR and enforce a maritime exclusion zone in the event of a conflict with China. These islands can tilt the strategic advantage in India's favour

if suitably upgraded with anti-access and area-denial (A2AD) weapons. Developing such infrastructure would also send a strong message to China as well as IOR nations regarding India's seriousness in asserting its maritime role in IOR. The Lakshadweep Islands have similar importance in the Arabian Sea region, besides their economic advantages accrued out of EEZ extracts. Thus, infrastructure up gradation in these islands and their development as a potent military base would be amongst the first steps needed for an assertive Indian Ocean policy.

(e) **Capability Enhancement of IOR Nations.** The Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) episode in Sri Lanka has put off the military alliance option by India, at least for the time being. Notwithstanding that, a thrust on capability enhancement of IOR nations, particularly their respective navies, would accrue immense benefit for the entire IOR. India is already involved in training of naval personnel from various IOR nations as part of exchange programmes. Further, India has also been supplying naval assets to countries like Mauritius, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Seychelles. These steps need to be actively pursued with an incremental thrust to make these nations self-sufficient in terms of security. This, in turn, would surely shape the maritime environment of IOR to India's strategic advantage.

(f) **Capability Development and Technical Upgradation.** When it comes to indigenisation, the IN has gone way ahead vis-à-vis other two Services i.e. army and air force. However, the acquisition process has not been free of bureaucratic red tapism and this has resulted in delayed, and in some cases, failure to fructify key acquisitions. A LTPP encompassing a holistic threat assessment and commensurate capability development is the first step towards a clear roadmap of capability development. The 'Make in India' initiative, coupled with a revised DPP- 2016, has breathed fresh air to otherwise gloomy acquisition process. Further, the enhancement of foreign direct investment (FDI) limits in defence has opened up yet another avenue to bolster the indigenisation by facilitating foreign participation in defence manufacturing. These optimistic steps need to be supplemented by incentivising the participation of industries and other Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). In addition, matching

technology upgradation needs to be carried out in all military dimensions, including cyber and space domains. The role of Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) in development of *Rukmini*, the first military communication satellite for the Indian defence forces, with the Indian Navy being the primary user, and Independent Regional Navigation Satellite System (IRNSS) is nothing short of an outstanding achievement. These have greatly enhanced the maritime domain awareness necessary for exerting a substantial influence over the IOR. While much has been achieved by the Indian Navy in its pursuit of indigenisation, it is time that a new thrust on technology upgradation be embarked upon to achieve the goal of self-reliance. The first step towards this has already been taken by Indian Navy when it released Indian Naval Indigenisation Plan: 2015-2030, a guideline document to enunciate the need for developing various advanced systems for its platforms. This would provide an unambiguous indigenisation roadmap to the industry. This step needs to be augmented by achieving Transfer of Technology (ToT) agreements with other advanced navies to progress the capability development. India should leverage its strategic partnership, primarily with countries like US and Japan, to achieve these ToT.

Conclusion

Indian core values of mutual respect and peaceful co-existence generate immense goodwill and inspire confidence in the entire IOR. The smaller nations of the IOR have recognised the genuine intent of Indian Navy in ensuring freedom of navigation and use of global waters as per existing International Laws. However, this intent needs to be firmly backed by a matching capability and a clearly spelt out strategy. In the absence of the same, it would be a matter of 'when' and not 'if' India would find itself struggling to secure its own maritime (and in turn, national) interests. Thus, India needs to make a choice of aiming to become a net security provider of the IOR, as the developments on the PLAN front have made it a strategic imperative rather than a military choice.

Endnotes

¹Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS-2015), p. 17.

²<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/Indian-ocean-region-a-pvt-for-india-s-growth/> accessed on 12 Aug 2018.

- ³ Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS-2015). p. 25.
- ⁴ Annual Report (2015-16), Ministry of Shipping, Govt of India, p. 4.
- ⁵ <http://www.nfdb.gov.in/about-indian-fisheries.html>. accessed on 17 Aug 2018.
- ⁶ Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS-2015). p. 80.
- ⁷ <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri%20la%20dialogue/archive/shangri-la-dialogue-220999ea/first-planery-session-5080/dr-robert-gates-6609>. accessed on 21 Aug 2018.
- ⁸ US Dept of Def, Quadrennial Defense Review Report, February 2010. p. 60. accessed on 21 Aug 2018.
- ⁹ <http://pmindia.nic.in/speech-details.php?nodeid=1316>. accessed on 20 Aug 2018
- ¹⁰ http://www.business-standards.com/article/news-ians/india-needs-to-decide-on-net-security-provider-role-nsa-114021201648_1.html. accessed on 24 Aug 2018.