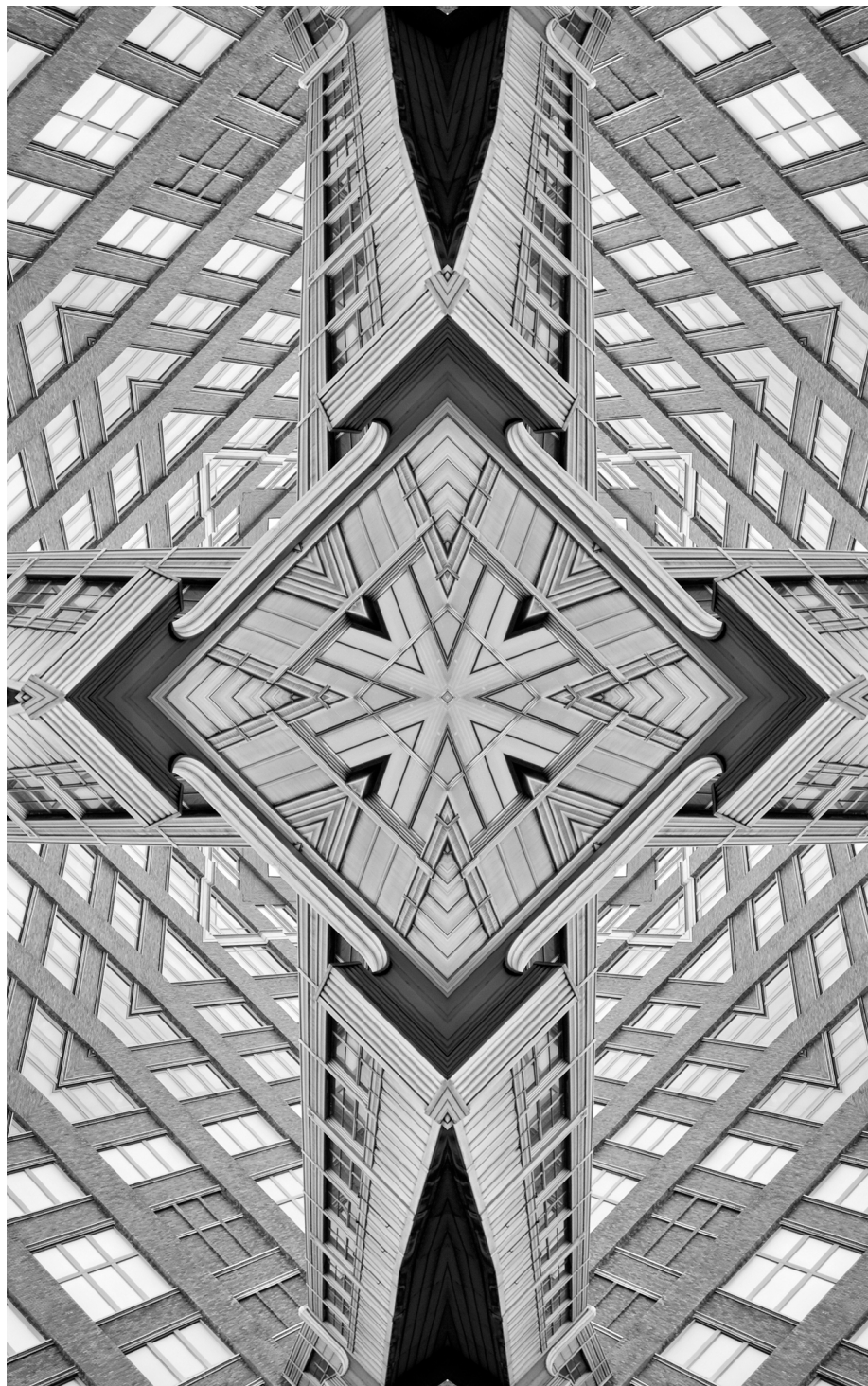


Issue Brief

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Advancing India's Maritime Interests Through Naval Diplomacy

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Abstract

Naval diplomacy has emerged as a pillar of India's external engagements. While conventionally regarded as a military arm, the navy is increasingly assuming a greater role as a diplomatic actor. This brief underlines three trends in India's naval diplomacy in the Indian Ocean, shaped by its broader political outlook in the region. First, there has been a normative shift in how India views the role of the navy. Second, India's bilateral engagements with its maritime neighbours are expanding, especially during times of crisis. Third, there is a marked effort in deploying the navy to engage with stakeholders on specific issues in multilateral and minilateral forums.

The maritime domain, and the Indian Ocean in particular, has emerged as a critical frontier for India's foreign policy outreach.¹ This is underpinned by three factors: maritime connectivity, which has emerged as a key driver of prosperity; ocean management, vital to sustainable living; and ocean governance, which helps in power projection.² Countries in the Indian Ocean region have diverse economic, security, and political capabilities.³ For India, as the largest economy and the principal security actor in the region,⁴ the security and stability of the Indian Ocean is necessary to ensure its own strategic interests.⁵ In this context, given the vast differential in the capabilities of various navies in the Indian Ocean, naval diplomacy has assumed a vital role.

Historically, navies have been deployed as a country's security arm. However, navies are increasingly moving beyond protecting the maritime interests of a state⁶ and assuming a political role through naval diplomacy. Naval diplomacy can also be considered part of defence diplomacy, wherein countries seek to advance diplomatic ties through security engagements, including weapons delivery, enhanced training and interoperability, and investments in capacity building.⁷

Ken Booth, in his work *Navies and Foreign Policy*, argued that navies fulfil a role in three domains: military, diplomacy, and policing.⁸ In the military role, the navy assumes a deterrent or combatant role in the seas. As a diplomatic actor, the navy is often deployed by countries to engage in political or diplomatic activities, such as to foster cooperation with other navies and enhance collaboration through increasing interoperability. This enables a nation to build synergy in key areas of common interest. The policing role of the navy, meanwhile, involves engaging in ocean governance and management activities. Sea patrolling by navies and coast guards is often used to maintain order and enhance maritime governance. Navies also play an essential role during peacetime, such as in taking part in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) efforts in the aftermath of sea-borne calamities. During the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, for example, the Indian Navy was a pillar in India's search and rescue operations.⁹

In more recent years, India's emergence as a maritime power—with its naval capabilities far exceeding those of other navies in the Indian Ocean—has enhanced the role of the Indian Navy. As India builds on its maritime strength and the maritime domain increasingly informs its foreign and security policies, the Indian Navy is becoming involved in New Delhi's external engagements.¹⁰

Unlike other maritime theatres, such as the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean is not marked by any direct naval conflict,¹¹ and therefore the combatant role of the Indian Navy has been minimal. To manage competition with China and contain its presence in the region, the Indian Navy has engaged with other littoral countries, such as Vietnam, Mozambique, and the Philippines, for capacity building, providing assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic, and HADR efforts during natural disasters.

India's interests and engagements in the Indian Ocean are anchored in its ambition to become a comprehensive maritime power¹² in the region. India's maritime interests in the Indian Ocean emerge from its strategic location in the region; any maritime security challenge in the Indian Ocean will likely impact India's security calculus. Furthermore, India seeks to emerge as a preferred security partner by leading maritime security efforts in the region.

The challenges that India continues to face from China have so far not resulted in a direct naval confrontation. Instead, the contest between India and China has centred around the projection of political influence. In this context, India employs naval diplomacy as a key instrument for pursuing its objectives in the region.

This brief traces three trends in India's naval diplomacy. First, there is a normative shift in how India views the role of the navy—from being a “net security provider”^a to a “preferred security partner”^b—with the aim of positioning itself as an equal stakeholder in the security of the region. Second, India's bilateral engagements with its maritime neighbours have expanded, especially during crises, bolstering its naval diplomacy. Third, there appears to be a marked effort in deploying the navy to engage with multiple stakeholders on specific issues in multilateral and minilateral forums.

a The term “net security provider” was first used by former United States Secretary of Defense at the Shangri La Dialogue in 2009, where he stated that Washington viewed India as a “net provider of security in the Indian Ocean”. See: https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/PB_140903_India-Net-Security.pdf

b The term “preferred security partner” first appeared during India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's address at the Naval Commander's Conference in 2019. See: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2019/Oct/22/navy-capable-of-thwarting-threat-from-enemy-rajnath-singh-2051300.html>

A Normative Reorientation

India's naval diplomacy in the Indian Ocean is shaped by its broader political outlook in the region. The Indian Ocean security architecture continues to face challenges from increasing naval advancements by China,¹³ which threaten freedom of navigation and sea lines of communication; rising piracy; maritime terrorism; human and drug trafficking; illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing; and climate-change-induced environmental challenges that include rising sea levels.¹⁴ These issues not only pose a challenge to the interests and sovereignty of Indian Ocean littoral states but also adversely impact the lives and livelihoods of people who are dependent on the oceans for their living.

Given the emergent complexities in the Indian Ocean, India's positioning as a net security provider, which reflects its leadership bid to ensure security and stability in the Indian Ocean,¹⁵ merits attention. In 2013, then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh affirmed the country's interests in ensuring security and stability in the Indian Ocean, given the complex challenges posed by geopolitical contestations in its neighbourhood.¹⁶ This was the first expression of India's willingness to play the role of a provider of net security in its immediate neighbourhood and beyond. In subsequent years, India's diplomatic outreach in the Indian Ocean was pegged on efforts to ensure security and stability in the region. In 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi introduced the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision,^c which has continued to undergird India's strategic engagement in the Indian Ocean region.¹⁷

However, there appears to be a normative transition in India's positioning of itself as a security actor in the Indian Ocean. The concept of 'net security provider' appears to run the risk of reinforcing a client-patron dynamic in India's outreach to the Indian Ocean littoral states. This has resulted in the Indian Navy rearticulating its role in the region to that of a "preferred security partner" or "first-responder".¹⁸ The shift highlights India's commitment to a shared regional space in the Indian Ocean and allows it to emerge as a trusted security partner.

^c Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) was proposed by Prime Minister Modi to illustrate India's vision for anchoring its outreach and cooperation in the Indian Ocean. Through this vision, India has sought to provide a strategic framework for its engagements in the region as a crucial partner.

Expanding Bilateral Engagement Through Naval Diplomacy

India is increasingly deploying its navy to expand its bilateral geopolitical engagements. India's maritime ambition hinges on expanding its political influence in its maritime environment. Therefore, engagements with littoral states in the Indian Ocean and even the Indo-Pacific are crucial. In this context, deploying the navy is critical.

The Indian Navy's peacetime engagements with its regional counterparts include activities to build synergies and enhance cooperation. This has also gained salience in light of India's efforts to expand its regional outlook and foster cooperation with maritime nations that are otherwise geographically distant.

Three key strategies are evident in India's efforts to enhance cooperation through naval diplomacy. First, the Indian Navy has engaged with counterparts in bilateral and multilateral naval exercises to strengthen ties by increasing cooperation and interoperability. Second, India is aiming to invest in the capacity building of its naval counterparts, including through information sharing and dissemination. Third, the Indian Navy has been proactive in HADR operations and aiding other countries during crises, thereby generating political goodwill.

Bilateral naval exercises have been key to facilitating exchanges between like-minded navies. These exercises are anchored on common challenges and shared interests and are vital to increasing interoperability and boosting synergy among the navies. India hosts bilateral naval exercises with a number of countries in its immediate maritime neighbourhood and beyond. For example, in its immediate maritime periphery, India hosts the SLINEX exercise¹⁹ with Sri Lanka and Exercise Bongosagar²⁰ with Bangladesh. India also hosts a trilateral exercise, Dosti, involving the coast guards of Sri Lanka and Maldives.²¹ India has also expanded its engagements with partner countries that are outside of its own neighbourhood. For example, India hosts JIMEX with Japan,²² Exercise Varuna with France,²³ and the Naseem-Al-Bahr exercise with Oman.²⁴ Some bilateral naval exercises conducted by India are presented in Table 1.

Expanding Bilateral Engagement Through Naval Diplomacy

Table 1: India's Bilateral Naval Diplomacy Engagements

Exercise	Partner Country	Nature
AUSINDEX	Australia	Biennial maritime exercise
Exercise Kakadu	Australia	Biennial exercise supported by the Royal Australian Air-Force
India-Bangladesh CORPAT	Bangladesh	Annual Coordinated Patrol
Exercise Bongosagar	Bangladesh	Bilateral naval exercise
Exercise Varuna	France	Bilateral naval exercise to enhance interoperability
IND-INDO CORPAT	Indonesia	Annual Coordinated Patrol
Exercise Samudra Shakti	Indonesia	Bilateral naval exercise
JIMEX	Japan	Bilateral naval exercise with harbour and sea phases
Exercise Samudra Laksamana	Malaysia	Bilateral naval exercise with harbour and sea phases
Exercise Ekatha	Maldives	Annual exercise to enhance interoperability in diving and special operations
Naseem-Al-Bahr	Oman	Bilateral naval exercise with harbour and sea phases
Za'ir Al Bahr	Qatar	Bilateral naval exercise with harbour and sea phases
Exercise Indra Navy	Russia	Bilateral naval exercise to develop common understanding and procedures for maritime security operations
SIMBEX	Singapore	Bilateral naval exercise with harbour and sea phases

Expanding Bilateral Engagement Through Naval Diplomacy

Exercise	Partner Country	Nature
SLINEX	Sri Lanka	Bilateral naval exercise for a safe and rules-based maritime domain
India-Thailand CORPAT	Thailand	Annual Coordinated Patrol
India-UAE Bilateral Naval Maritime Partnership Exercise	UAE	Bilateral naval exercise to enhance interoperability and synergy.
Konkan Maritime Exercise	United Kingdom	Bilateral maritime exercise as part of tri-service exercise Konkan Shakti
IN-VPN Bilateral Exercise	Vietnam	Annual bilateral exercise

Source: Author's own, using various open sources.

As the largest navy in the region and the fifth largest naval force globally,²⁵ the Indian Navy has sought to enhance cooperation with regional partners by investing in capacity building. New strategies to enhance maritime security preparedness have resulted in new dimensions of capacity building. Given the urgency for Indian Ocean littoral states to buttress their maritime security preparedness,^d India assists regional navies in building their maritime capabilities. For example, India commissioned the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Sri Lanka in July 2024 to assist in intelligence-gathering and monitoring efforts.²⁶ In July 2023, India also gifted *INS Kirpan* to Vietnam²⁷ and, in November 2024, two Fast Interceptor Crafts to Mozambique.²⁸

India has also been a notable actor in HADR activities at sea. With the Indian Ocean remaining vulnerable to challenges posed by compounding climate crises, the Indian Navy has sought to enhance India's goodwill and credibility by providing assistance in disaster relief operations,²⁹ such as during natural disasters and critical crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

^d Maritime security challenges often present existential risks for littoral states. Given that littoral states are dependent on the oceans for trade, connectivity, and human and food security, maritime security preparedness is crucial. In the Indian Ocean, rising sea levels, natural calamities, piracy, and maritime terrorism pose direct critical risks for the growth and prosperity of regional littoral countries.

Multi-Stakeholder Arrangements in Naval Diplomacy

India has also used its navy as an architect and proponent in multi-stakeholder arrangements. The complex nature of maritime security challenges necessitates regional or issue-based collective approaches for mitigation. Maritime security challenges impact the regional geopolitical landscape. Therefore, multilateral and minilateral forums have emerged, comprising navies that seek to enhance cooperation and synergy to enhance security preparedness at sea.

Table 2: India's Multistakeholder Naval Diplomacy

Exercise	Partners	Nature
Malabar Naval Exercise	United States, Japan, Australia	Coordinated maritime exercise across the Indo-Pacific
India-ASEAN Maritime Exercise	Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)	Joint maritime exercise between India and ASEAN member states
India-EU Joint Naval Exercise	European Union (EU)	Joint maritime exercise between India and EU member states
Exercise Milan	Indo-Pacific Littoral States	Indian Navy's flagship maritime exercise with participation from around 50 countries
IONS Working Group Exercise	Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)	Joint maritime exercise among IONS member-states on maritime security issues

Source: Author's own, using various open sources.

Multi-Stakeholder Arrangements in Naval Diplomacy

Other examples of the Indian Navy's multilateral engagements are India's engagement with the Quad, the Malabar exercises, Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR).

Through the Malabar Naval Exercise, India has sought to advance naval diplomacy to signal political intent in the Indian Ocean and the broader Indo-Pacific. Originally a bilateral maritime exercise between India and the United States (US) established in 1992, the exercise evolved into a multinational maritime exercise involving the Quad countries, with occasional participation from Singapore and Canada. In 2007, Australia withdrew from the Malabar Naval Exercise on account of its own geopolitical compulsions following from its robust economic engagement with China.³⁰ Australia rejoined the exercise in 2020, following the revival of the Quad in 2017.³¹

The Indian Navy has also catalysed the framing of a regional approach to mitigate common maritime security challenges in the Indian Ocean, notably through IONS.³² The group, conceived by India in 2008, is a conclave of the chiefs of navies of Indian Ocean countries. Through this forum, the navy acts as a diplomatic instrument in enhancing engagement and synergy with regional counterparts and framing collective strategies to mitigate maritime security challenges through deliberating on pathways to enhance maritime cooperation. Its key role in introducing IONS³³ and its status as a regional naval power makes the Indian Navy's diplomatic capabilities vital to ensuring that the forum remains operational.

In an era of advancing technological capabilities, maritime security preparedness appears to be undergoing a transition. New frontiers are emerging, with states looking to cooperate on enhancing their efforts towards maritime security. Information sharing and dissemination have become critical modes of strengthening the cooperation towards maritime security efforts, especially considering the imminent non-traditional security challenges emerging from the maritime domain. Maritime domain awareness is one such frontier in maritime security preparedness. Against this backdrop, in 2018, the Indian Navy launched the IFC-IOR, based in the National Capital Region,³⁴ a multilateral facility for information gathering, exchange, and sharing with partner countries. The IFC-IOR has inducted International Liaison Officers from 12 countries, who are mandated to foster continued communication and collaboration enabling better correlation, compressed information cycles, and timely inputs. The Indian Navy is the nodal arm for enhancing cooperation in this domain, indicating the growing impact of India's efforts in expanding its outreach through naval diplomacy.

Multi-Stakeholder Arrangements in Naval Diplomacy

Another notable exercise is Exercise Milan, the Indian Navy's flagship multilateral naval exercise.³⁵ Initiated in 1995 with Indonesia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Thailand as the four partner countries, the exercise has expanded, with participation from 50 navies in its latest iteration in 2024.³⁶ Through this forum, the Indian Navy has sought to catalyse efforts to foster cooperation in maritime safety and security and expand its diplomatic outreach by strengthening understanding and exchanging best practices with like-minded navies. Such efforts are key opportunities for India to increase synergy and interoperability towards safeguarding a free and open order in the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

Naval diplomacy has emerged as an important instrument for India to advance its interests in the Indian Ocean and beyond. Crafting a strategy to enhance naval diplomacy is also necessary given the complex challenges and competition that India continues to face in the Indian Ocean, including managing competition with China. India's continued efforts to emerge as a leading power in the region are underlined by the proactive engagement of its navy to navigate the complex challenges and shared interests in its maritime environment.

India's efforts reflect three key trends. First, India's maritime outlook appears to be shifting; instead of projecting itself as a net security provider, it is assuming the role of a preferred security partner, shedding the client-patron dynamic in its engagements with littoral neighbours. Second, India is expanding its collaborations with partner countries through bilateral interaction among navies, operationalised by a three-pronged strategy of bilateral naval exercises, investment in capacity building, and proactive engagement in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Third, the Indian Navy has continued to engage with partner countries through multi-stakeholder engagement in multilateral and minilateral platforms to mitigate common challenges and shared interests. 

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