



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



POLICY BRIEF

The Changing Contours of Indian Ocean Maritime Security

Author

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveils India's SAGAR vision at Port Louis, Mauritius on March 12, 2015. Source: PIB

Prime Minister Narendra Modi commissions India's first indigenous aircraft carrier at Kochi, September 02, 2022.

Source: PIB

Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlines his vision for India's future and India-US relations at a joint session of the US Congress, Washington DC, June 22, 2023. Source: MEA Photo Gallery

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by

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The Changing Contours of Indian Ocean Maritime Security

by
Lalit Kapur

When Prime Minister Modi outlined SAGAR, India's integrated ocean vision in March 2015, the Indian Ocean Region was relatively calm. The insurgency that plagues Mozambique today had not yet commenced. Rampant piracy in the Horn of Africa had been effectively suppressed. The Houthi uprising in Yemen had begun just the previous year. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action for Iran was on the verge of conclusion. The Red Sea and the Persian Gulf were stable. The then US President Obama remained indecisive about China's intentions in the South China Sea (SCS), and had accepted President Xi's assurance that China did not intend to militarise the islands it was feverishly reclaiming. China's incursion along the LAC in eastern Ladakh was five years into the future. Visions of China as a responsible stakeholder in the global order still prevailed.

It was in this backdrop that India assumed the responsibility to shape the Indian Ocean's future, and to ensure a safe, secure and stable Indian Ocean Region.¹

Nine years on, the situation has changed beyond recognition. The Asia-Pacific of 2015 has evolved into the Indo-Pacific of today, bringing India into the mainstream of regional geopolitics. Great power competition has entrenched itself throughout the region. India's relations with the US and Australia have improved manifold, as have those with leading countries in the Arabian Peninsula, while those with China have become distinctly adversarial. The Quad held its third summit in Hiroshima in May 2023.² India's maritime focus has expanded outward, as is evidenced by the growing presence of its warships and Coast Guard vessels from Yokohama to the Arabian Peninsula and from Australia to Africa.

2023 highlighted two major trends, one old, one new, which will impact Indian Ocean maritime security for the foreseeable future. The old is expansion of China's long-standing violation of international maritime law to incorporate virtually the entire SCS into its blue water territory. The new is Yemen's Iran-backed Houthis disrupting the east-west maritime transportation system that underpins trade between Asia and the rest of the world.

¹ Text of the PM's Remarks on the Commissioning of Coast Ship Barracuda, 12 March, 2015, <http://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/erecontent.aspx?relid=116881>

² Prime Ministers' Participation in the Quad Leaders' Summit, May 20, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1925991>

The Situation to India's East

China's search for control over the SCS began in 1974, when it forcibly took over the Paracel Islands in a short conflict with Vietnam. States abutting the SCS then went into a competitive spree in the 1990s to build up islands under their control, with China building facilities at Mischief Reef and the Philippines deliberately grounding its warship to create an outpost on the Second Thomas Shoal. In April 2012, the Philippines intercepted Chinese boats fishing within the Scarborough Shoal, which lay within its EEZ, with an illegal catch of coral, giant clams and live sharks. China's Coast Guard freed the fishermen, leading to a confrontation. The US brokered a diplomatic compromise, whose provisions China promptly dishonoured after the Philippines had complied with them.³

The Philippines then turned to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA). China, in response, rapidly militarised disputed islands and facilities in its possession in the SCS despite President Xi specifically having assured his American counterpart that China was "committed to respecting and upholding the freedom of navigation and overflight that countries enjoy according to international law" and "China does not intend to pursue militarisation".⁴

The PCA pronounced a final and binding award in July 2016.⁵ China disregarded it, notwithstanding its commitment to abide by UNCLOS when it ratified the convention. It then enacted domestic law to govern disputed areas of the SCS and set up an administrative apparatus for this purpose. A Philippines' administration under Rodrigo Duterte adopted the diplomatic approach with China, but to no avail – China's creeping assertion expanded to other areas within the Philippines' EEZ, including the Whitsun Reef and the Second Thomas Shoal.

The US formally discarded its neutral posture and changed its position to "supporting regional nations in the face of China's relentless onslaught to arrogate to itself both the resources and the territorial expanse of the South

³ For an overview of the incident, see Lalit Kapur, "Déjà vu in the South China Sea", April 11, 2021, https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/dj-vu-in-the-south-china-sea-2290.pdf

⁴ Remarks by President Obama and President Xi of the People's Republic of China in Joint Press Conference, September 25, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/25/remarks-president-obama-and-president-xi-peoples-republic-china-joint>

⁵ Press Release: The South China Sea Arbitration, 12 July 2016, <https://pcacases.com/web/sendAttach/1801>

China Sea" in July 2020.⁶ It followed up by publishing its 'Limits of the Seas Study' on China's Claims in the SCS in January 2022.⁷ An Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement between the US and the Philippines came into force in February 2023,⁸ under which the US announced plans to develop four new military sites, two across the Luzon Strait from Taiwan, two in the vicinity of the Spratly Islands.⁹ Australia and the Philippines upgraded their bilateral relations in September 2023,¹⁰ leading to Australian ships joining those from the US, Japan and the Philippines exercising and patrolling together in the SCS.

China is, however, undeterred and continues its creeping occupation of the Philippines' EEZ.¹¹ Its coercive action against the regional holdout includes physically preventing Philippine vessels resupplying their outpost in the Second Thomas Shoal by resorting to collisions, high-pressure water cannons, laser dazzlers, acoustic devices, and other non-lethal measures. ASEAN continues its hands-off approach towards China's assertions, which is limited to recalling shared commitments to maintaining and promoting peace, security and stability, the peaceful resolution of disputes, respect for legal and diplomatic processes without the threat of use of force, and actions in keeping with international law, including UNCLOS.¹² It also continues to welcome ongoing efforts to manage the situation, despite the fact that these efforts have visibly proved ineffective.

US leaders have repeatedly proclaimed that an armed attack on Philippine government vessels, including Coast Guard vessels, anywhere in the South

⁶ US Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea, July 13, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/>

⁷ For an overview, see Lalit Kapur, The US State Department's "Limits of the Seas Study" on China's Claims in the South China Sea, January 22, 2022, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/>

⁸ For an overview, see Lalit Kapur, "The US Comeback in the Philippines", Indo-Pacific Monitor, February 2023, https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/indo-pacific-monitor-4858.pdf

⁹ New EDCA Sites Named in the Philippines, April 3, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3350297/new-edca-sites-named-in-the-philippines/>

¹⁰ For an overview, see Lalit Kapur, "Australia and Philippines Upgrade Relations", Indo-Pacific Monitor, September 2023, https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/indo-pacific-monitor-4977.pdf

¹¹ See Lalit Kapur, "BRP Sierra Madre and the Second Thomas Shoal", in the Indo-Pacific Monitor, October 2023, https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/indo-pacific-monitor-4987.pdf

¹² ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement on Maintaining and Promoting Stability in the Maritime Sphere in Southeast Asia, December 30, 2023, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Final-Draft-ASEAN-FMs-Statement-on-Maintaining-and-Promoting-Stability-in-the-Maritime-Sphere-in-SEA.pdf>

China Sea, would invoke the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1951,¹³ but this has not been enough to restrain China. Grey zone activities pursued by China have not included what could be described as an armed attack, thereby remaining below the threshold, which might result in US intervention. US attention and resources are, moreover, stretched by developments in Ukraine and Gaza, alliance commitments to Japan and South Korea, and tensions over Taiwan.

India defined the South China Sea (SCS) as part of its secondary area of maritime interest in 2015.¹⁴ The sea is essential for connectivity with seven key strategic partners: the US (and its Indo-Pacific Command), Russia, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Australia and Vietnam. It also enables linking up of the Quad partners. 32.65% of India's total trade, amounting to \$ 207.7 billion, passed through it during the period April-October 2023.¹⁵ The SCS is also China's gateway into the Indian Ocean, and thus the direction from which China's maritime challenge emanates. Accepting change in its status would result in placing a vital connectivity corridor in the hands of a strategic adversary.

Nevertheless, the reality is that China's control over the SCS is near complete. It will inevitably use the secure foundations it has established both to constrain India's connectivity to the east when need arises, as well as a springboard into the Indian Ocean, where it has already built up considerable supporting infrastructure through dual-use ports. It is moving to popularise a China-dominated regional organisation that appears to be designed as an alternative to IORA.¹⁶ It has maintained a military presence in the Horn of Africa since 2008, and has established its first overseas military base at Djibouti. A Chinese carrier strike group is expected to operate in the Indian Ocean within this decade. These trends point to the continuing deterioration of the strategic environment to India's east.

The Situation to India's West

To India's west, the harassment of sea trade by pirates that was suppressed a decade ago has expanded manifold due to Houthi actions of targeting vessels passing through the Red Sea using drones, cruise missiles and ballistic missiles. In parallel, commercial vessels have been hijacked and taken to Yemen or

¹³ US Support for the Philippines in the South China Sea, December 10, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-support-for-the-philippines-in-the-south-china-sea-7/>

¹⁴ Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy October 2015, P 34-35.

¹⁵ Department of Commerce Export Import Data Bank, figures for top 25 trade partners, accessed January 7, 2024, <https://tradedat.commerce.gov.in/eidb/iecnttopn.asp>

¹⁶ See Lalit Kapur, "China's Indian Ocean Forum on Developmental Cooperation", Indo-Pacific Monitor, December 2023, https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/indo-pacific-monitor-5048.pdf

Somalia. The use of missiles and long-range drones extends the threat well into the Arabian Sea. Shipping companies have responded by diverting their traffic away from the Red Sea and around the Cape of Good Hope, raising shipping costs.

The Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and the straits leading into them form part of India's primary area of interest.¹⁷ The Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb links the Arabian Sea to the Mediterranean via the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. It transports 8.8 million bpd of crude oil and condensates, about 12% of all oil traded globally, and 4.1 billion cubic feet of LNG daily.¹⁸ These shipments are destined primarily for Europe, though Bab-el-Mandeb now also carries 74% of Russia's oil exports, primarily to India and China. In addition, Bab-el-Mandeb carries the bulk of global East-West trade. The value of India's trade passing through the Red Sea or Persian Gulf during the April-October period was \$ 251.23 bn, or 50.6% of India's total trade.¹⁹

The Strait of Hormuz, on the northern end of the Arab Peninsula, links the Arabian Sea to the energy wealth of the Gulf. It is the world's most important oil transit chokepoint:²⁰ during the first half of 2023, it enabled the flow of 20.5 million barrels of crude oil and petroleum products per day, 26.9% of all oil traded globally, and 20.4% of the world's daily oil consumption. It also transported 10.8 billion cubic feet of natural gas daily. About 82% of the petroleum products that transit the Strait of Hormuz go to Asian markets, with China, India, Japan and South Korea being the top destinations. Only Saudi Arabia and the UAE have pipelines that can circumvent Hormuz: the former has an East-West crude oil pipeline with a capacity of 5 million barrels per day (bpd) that opens out into the Red Sea, while the latter has a 1.5 million bpd pipeline connecting to Fujairah, in the Gulf of Oman.

West Asia's maritime zones, which include these straits, face a multitude of issues: the Israel-Hamas strife that could escalate, growing Saudi-Iran rivalry notwithstanding the diplomatic re-engagement brokered by China last year,²¹ rampant terrorism from ISIS and Al Qaeda, and the Houthi rebellion in Yemen, which has successfully fought a Saudi-led response to a standstill and now

¹⁷ Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy October 2015, P 34-35.

¹⁸ Red Sea chokepoints are critical for international oil and natural gas flows, December 4, 2023, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=61002>

¹⁹ Department of Commerce Export Import Data Bank, figures for top 25 trade partners, accessed January 7, 2024, <https://tradestat.commerce.gov.in/eidb/iecnttopn.asp>

²⁰ The Strait of Hormuz is the world's most important oil transit chokepoint, November 21, 2023, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=61002>

²¹ Joint Trilateral Statement by the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, http://se.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zqgw_0/202303/t20230311_11039241.htm

threatens maritime traffic in the Red Sea. A cooperative regional approach toward resolution of these and other issues may suppress these problems for some time, provided a way can be found to bridge the gap between widely divergent positions. The Abraham Accords and subsequent developments, such as the I2U2 and the India-Middle East Economic Corridor held out hopes of such a bridge. These have been set back by the Israel-Hamas conflict and the Iran-supported Houthi action. The free flow of traffic here will depend first on the re-establishment of deterrence and the assurance of the freedom of navigation, which enables a chance for dialogue to find the way ahead. Failure could easily result in the expansion of the threat to the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea.

The US launched Operation Prosperity Guardian, a new multinational security initiative under the Combined Maritime Forces and the leadership of Task Force 153, to focus on security in the Red Sea on December 18, 2023.²² Fourteen countries came together in a joint statement in the first week of 2024, calling on the Houthis to immediately end their illegal attacks, release unlawfully detained vessels and crew, and threatening unspecified consequences should the attacks continue.²³ A day later, the Commander US Naval Forces, Central Command noted that 25 ships had been attacked using unmanned aerial vehicles, cruise missiles, ballistic missiles and unmanned surface vessels since the operation began,²⁴ that no Houthi missiles had actually hit any vessels, that 11 UAVs, two cruise missiles and six anti-ship ballistic missiles had been shot down, and there had been a large increase in naval presence in the Southern Red Sea, with five warships on patrol in the region. He also characterised the operation as a purely defensive one. US-led forces have, since then, carried out kinetic strikes to destroy some Houthi missiles being prepared for launch²⁵.

²² Statement from Secretary of Defense Lloyd J Austin III on Ensuring Freedom of Navigation in the Red Sea, December 18, 2023,

<https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3621110/statement-from-secretary-of-defense-loyd-j-austin-iii-on-ensuring-freedom-of-n/>

²³ A Joint Statement from the Governments of the United States, Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Singapore and the United Kingdom, January 03, 2024,

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/01/03/a-joint-statement-from-the-governments-of-the-united-states-australia-bahrain-belgium-canada-denmark-germany-italy-japan-netherlands-new-zealand-and-the-united-kingdom/>

²⁴ NAVCENT Commander Vice Admiral Brad Cooper Holds an Off-Camera, One-the-Record Press Briefing Via Teleconference on Operation Prosperity Guardian, January 4, 2024,

<https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3631484/navcent-commander-vice-admiral-brad-cooper-holds-an-off-camera-on-the-record-pr/>

²⁵ US CENTCOM Destroys Houthi Terrorists' Anti-Ship Missiles, January 18, 2024,

<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3649125/uscentcom-destroys-houthi-terrorists-anti-ship-missiles/>

The Houthis have also been relabelled a 'Specially Designated Global Terrorist Group'²⁶. Whether these actions will make a difference remains to be seen.

The mitigating factor presently is that the Houthi missiles have not as yet actually caused major damage at sea. This points to their being relatively unsophisticated variants, using signals from the Automatic Identification System (AIS) fitted on all ships for targeting and lacking terminal guidance. The continued sustainability of using sophisticated surface-to-air missiles to shoot down cheap, mass-produced terror weapons is an issue which has been highlighted separately²⁷. The experience of disruption that missiles have caused in the Red Sea can help the Houthis refine their tactics and calibrate Iran's options for taking similar action in Hormuz. Unless effectively suppressed, the failures of deterrence and cooperation in the Red Sea could lead to expansion of the area of instability eastwards, becoming a serious challenge for India.

East Asia

In East Asia, China has announced its decision to maintain a continuous Coast Guard presence off the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands. It has, for the last year and more, been expelling Japanese fishing and even patrol boats from the region²⁸, thereby enforcing its domestic law in what Japan believes are its waters. North Korea continues its missile tests, ranging from ICBMs to solid-fuelled SRBMs and most recently, a nuclear capable underwater drone²⁹.

In Taiwan, the election of Lai Ching-te as the next President could result in China stepping up its pressure. Japan's Foreign Minister was quick to congratulate him on his victory³⁰; China responded by describing the minister's action as "seriously interfering in China's internal affairs" and seriously violating the one-China principle³¹. Singapore and the Philippines,

²⁶ Terrorist Designation of the Houthis, January 17, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/terrorist-designation-of-the-houthis/>

²⁷ Lalit Kapur, "Red Sea Developments", in the Indo-Pacific Monitor, December 2023, https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/indo-pacific-monitor-5048.pdf

²⁸ China expels Japanese Ships from its Territorial Waters Near Diaoyu Islands, December 10, 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16272489.html

²⁹ N Korea conducts 'underwater nuclear weapons system test' – state media, January 19, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68027356>

³⁰ Result of Presidential Election in Japan (Statement by Foreign Minister KAMIKAWA Yoko) January 13, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_00099.html

³¹ The Embassy Spokesperson in Japan releases a statement in response to the Japanese Foreign Ministers' congratulations on the elections in the Taiwan area, January 16, 2024, http://jp.china-embassy.gov.cn/jpn/mtdh/202401/t20240116_11224671.htm

which also sent messages of congratulations, have been at the receiving end of China's backlash.

While confrontations in East Asia continue, US allies in the region including Japan, South Korea and Australia have been stepping up, enhancing their military expenditure and also enhancing their cooperation, thereby adding to Allied strength. This holds even in Southeast Asia, where both Australia and Japan have substantially stepped up their relations with the Philippines during the last year. Both sides are likely to continue their rhetoric, but a balance of power rules out major action that could result in geopolitical changes, even if grey zone activity keeps the pot boiling.

The Quad has moved rapidly to become a permanent fixture of the regional geopolitical landscape. Its activities continue to expand. Within the maritime domain, three pilot programmes have been launched to enhance domain awareness in Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands and the Indian Ocean Region³². The Quad will help create an enabling environment for greater regional cooperation, but will not help in power balancing or strengthening deterrence.

The Indian Ocean

Addressing challenges of the kind posed by the Houthis or by China's grey zone actions in the South China Sea necessitates the fusion of domain awareness with protective presence spread over the threat area. The area is large: in the Arabian Sea, it can be taken to be all that lies within missile range from the parts of Yemen under Houthi control. In the east, it encompasses the entire South China Sea and approaches into the Andaman Sea, Bay of Bengal and the South-eastern Indian Ocean. Maintaining both the domain awareness and presence required on a 24X7 basis inevitably requires cooperative action.

Given the revival of geopolitical competition, the Indian Ocean requires two effective institutional bodies if the SAGAR vision of the primacy of regional nations in advancing regional peace and security through collective action is to be achieved. The first is a cooperative apex level regional body to set norms and determine regional priorities. The other is an effective balance to ensure one great power does not ride rough-shod over the collective regional interest.

Neither is in sight. The only regional body that could fit the bill is the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). This has not yet, however, developed to the

³² Quad Leaders' Summit Fact Sheet, Hiroshima 20 May 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/20/quad-leaders-summit-fact-sheet/>

level of regular summit level participation by member states. There has, in fact, been only one IORA Summit till date, in March 2017.³³ Moreover, China has already launched a parallel China-centric Indian Ocean body through CIDCA, which is attracting IORA members.³⁴

The notable cooperative development in the Indian Ocean in 2023 was the launch of the IORA Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Adopted at the 22nd COM meeting in Dhaka on November 24, 2022, it was placed on the IORA website only in April 2023.³⁵ IORA lags well behind the ASEAN in institutional cohesion and normative power. Its ability to influence the behaviour of great powers is severely limited. There are, however, hopes that the collective situation will improve with India joining the IORA Troika in 2023.

However, cooperative action alone will not suffice. A power balance is also required. Significant maritime capability in IORA nations is restricted to just India, Australia, and France. Trilateral cooperation between these three nations has yet to take off, even though it has been discussed. Moreover, the capacities of France and Australia are required in other theatres, they can spare only limited capacity for the Indian Ocean. India will, therefore, necessarily bear a disproportionate share of the burden for Indian Ocean maritime security.

Reports indicate that a number of frontline Indian warships, including Kolkata, Kochi, Mormugao, Chennai, Visakhapatnam, Talwar and Tarkash, have been deployed for protective operations in the Arabian Sea.³⁶ This is in keeping with India's stated objective of being a Net Security Provider and First Responder in the region. Notably, India has deployed substantially more capability in the Arabian Sea than the US and its allies have in the Red Sea. Unless the Houthi challenge is quickly suppressed, however, the long-term sustainability of this force level will be called into question.

On the eastern seaboard, India has sharply enhanced its deployments into the SCS. The inaugural ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise,³⁷ the India-Indonesia

³³ IORA Leaders' Summit, March 7, 2017, <https://www.iora.int/en/about/leaders-summit>

³⁴ For an overview, see Lalit Kapur, "China's Indian Ocean Region Forum on Development Cooperation' Indo-Pacific Monitor, December 2023, https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/indo-pacific-monitor-5048.pdf

³⁵ IORA's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, April 14, 2023, <https://www.iora.int/en/events-media-news/news-updates-folder/iora-s-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific>

³⁶ Over 10 Indian Navy Warships Now Deployed in Arabian Sea, January 9, 2024, <https://www.news18.com/india/indian-navy-over-10-warships-arabian-sea-gulf-of-aden-piracy-attempts-drone-strikes-ins-chennai-missile-destroyer-8733011.html>

³⁷ A commentary on the exercise is included in this edition of the Indo-Pacific Monitor.

Exercise Samudra Shakti,³⁸ and the India-Philippines Exercise were all conducted in the South China Sea in 2023. At least one Indian warship has been present in the SCS or East China Sea since May 2023. This is in addition to the continuing mission deployment of IN warships in multiple parts of the Indian Ocean. An MoU to link IFC-IOR Gurugram with the Regional Coordination Operations Centre in the Seychelles was signed in February 2023, enhancing information sharing in the Western Indian Ocean. This will also link with the RCOC at Djibouti.³⁹

What is of note, however, is that unlike in East Asia or in West Asia, where coalitions have emerged to balance China's power and address emerging challenges, no such coalition is visible in the Indian Ocean. Nor has India's maritime expansion taken off to an extent that it could redress the balance. 2023 witnessed the induction of only two major platforms: the submarine INS Vagir in January and the destroyer INS Imphal in December. This is nowhere near enough to address growing challenges. India's maritime policy planners need to step up their efforts to strengthen capability for ocean governance as well as deterrence.

Conclusion

To the east, Xi Jinping has clearly signalled China's intent of regional dominance. China will persist with efforts to dominate East and Southeast Asia, and to challenge India in the Indian Ocean. To the west, the Red Sea crisis, unless effectively addressed, could expand not just to the Persian Gulf, but also to the Arabian Sea, jeopardising India's economic and strategic security.

The developing situation demands refocusing of India's attention to actualise the SAGAR vision in the Indian Ocean, while maintaining steady engagement with the larger Indo-Pacific. In the East, India must accelerate the building up of defences across the straits connecting the Pacific with the Indian Ocean. This necessitates fortification of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, enhancement of defensive infrastructure, and positioning of more reconnaissance and strike assets in the region. In parallel, there is need to build stronger maritime relationships with Indonesia and Australia. The conduct of the maiden trilateral Indian-Indonesia-Australia exercise in September 2023 is a step in the right direction, though there is need for more. To the West, India

³⁸ India-Indonesia Bilateral Exercise Samudra Shakti – 23, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1924058>

³⁹ Maritime Security: Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) Between the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) and Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC), February 22, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1901371>

will need to step up its maritime engagement with partners in the Arabian Peninsula, while keeping its mission-deployment in the Indian Ocean going.

All this will require enhancements of maritime force levels at a rate substantially faster than at present. Given the growing power asymmetry, India must intensify its effort to balance China in the maritime domain. The US has been India's chosen partner for this purpose, with the US-India strategic partnership showing substantial improvement over the past year. However, much work still remains before this partnership can become a factor of regional reassurance, including by enhancing India's maritime capabilities.

Abe's Confluence of the Seas speech and the ensuing strategic construct of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific were intended to draw India into the matrix of Asian security. The US National Security Strategy of 2017 adopted a hands off approach towards the Indian Ocean, leaving it largely to India to manage. This approach persisted with the 2022 US National Security Strategy. Ironically, the drawing together of security challenges in West Asia and the Indo-Pacific, and the consequent burden on India's still developing maritime power, may result in the US being drawn into the Indian Ocean.



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