



India and the Indo-Pacific: Responses to China's Maritime Expansion

Harsh Raj ¹, Prof. Ramakrushna Pradhan ²

¹ Research Scholar, Harsh Raj, Department of Political Science, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur (Chhattisgarh)

² Dean, School of studies of Social Sciences and Head of Department, Department of Political Science, Guru Ghasidas

Abstract:

The Indo-Pacific region has increasingly become the focal point of strategic and economic rivalry in the 21st century, primarily due to China's expansive and forceful naval stance. This strategic environment has triggered a reassessment of regional security policies, with India emerging as a key player in balancing the evolving power dynamics. As China continues to enhance its maritime strength, construct artificial islands, and press territorial claims in disputed waters such as the South China Sea, concerns have intensified regarding the undermining of the international rules-based order and unimpeded maritime access in the Indo-Pacific.

India's response to China's maritime expansion is characterized by an integrated approach involving military modernization, strategic alliances, and multilateral engagement. The Indian Navy has undergone significant upgrades, marked by the induction of advanced warships, submarines, and surveillance systems aimed at enhancing naval situational awareness and operational readiness. This upgrade initiative aligns with India's vision of securing its maritime interests, particularly across the critical sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) that are vital for its trade and energy supplies.

Geopolitically, India has deepened its two-party and multilateral partnerships with strategic allies through frameworks such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) involving the United States, Japan, and Australia. These partnerships underscore a collective resolve to ensure an unrestricted, transparent, and collaborative Indo-Pacific. India has also actively participated in maritime drills like Malabar, which serve as platforms to enhance operational coordination and project shared defense posture against unilateral maritime actions.

Additionally, India's Act East Policy and programs such as SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) reflect its commitment to transnational linkage, security, and cooperative development. Through capability enhancement programs and maritime cooperation with Southeast Asian, Pacific, and African coastal states, India aims to strengthen regional resilience against aggressive sea tactics

Citation: Raj, H. ., & Pradhan , . R. . (2025). India and the Indo-Pacific: Responses to China's Maritime Expansion. *American Journal of Social and Humanitarian Research*, 6(5), 1060-1071. Retrieved from <https://globalresearchnetwork.us/index.php/ajshr/article/view/3635>

Received: 05 Mar 2025

Revised: 28 Apr 2025

Accepted: 20 Apr 2025

Published: 30 May 2025



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-4.0 International License (CC - BY 4.0)

This paper explores the geopolitical imperatives behind India's strategic posture and analyzes how its responses to China's maritime expansion are shaping regional dynamics. It further investigates the effectiveness and sustainability of India's Indo-Pacific policy amidst shifting alliances, economic interdependencies, and emerging non-traditional security threats.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, China's maritime expansion, Indian Navy, strategic partnerships, maritime security, regional geopolitics.

1. Introduction:

The Indo-Pacific region, which spans the Indian and Pacific Oceans, has emerged as the geostrategic and economic fulcrum of the 21st century. It contributes over 60 percent of global GDP, hosts nearly two-thirds of the world's population, and encompasses some of the most heavily trafficked maritime corridors—such as the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea—which function as vital conduits for international trade and energy transportation (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). The region's prominence has been further underscored by intensifying strategic competition among major powers, particularly between the United States and China, as well as the increasing strategic activism of regional stakeholders like India.

China's expansive maritime claims—most notably its “Nine-Dash Line” assertion in the South China Sea—have precipitated considerable geopolitical tensions. Through extensive land reclamation, the construction of artificial islands, and the militarization of disputed maritime zones, China has sought to entrench its influence and consolidate de facto control over critical sea areas. In the Indian Ocean, Beijing's expanding naval footprint—evidenced by the establishment of its first overseas military facility in Djibouti and recurrent submarine deployments near India's maritime periphery—has heightened security concerns in New Delhi and other regional capitals (Cordesman & Colley, CSIS, 2021).

Positioned at the strategic crossroads of the Indo-Pacific, India has articulated and operationalized a multidimensional maritime strategy aimed at safeguarding regional stability and preserving a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based maritime order. India's Indo-Pacific framework emphasizes adherence to international legal norms—particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)—freedom of navigation, and the peaceful resolution of disputes (MEA, 2021). The SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine encapsulates India's vision of fostering regional maritime security and sustainable development through both autonomous initiatives and collaborative engagement with like-minded regional and extra-regional actors.

As noted by Drishti IAS (2024), India perceives China's maritime ascendancy not only as a strategic challenge but also as an impetus for deeper strategic convergence with partners such as the United States, Japan, Australia, and the member states of ASEAN. This evolving alignment is exemplified by India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), joint maritime exercises such as Malabar, and bilateral logistics support agreements—all aimed at enhancing deterrence, improving interoperability, and strengthening the collective maritime security architecture.

India's evolving Indo-Pacific policy reflects both a calibrated response to China's assertive maritime posture and a forward-looking articulation of its role as a net security provider in the region. This study seeks to critically examine how India navigates the complex maritime dynamics of the Indo-Pacific while balancing strategic competition with avenues for constructive cooperation.

2. China's Maritime Expansion: A Strategic Overview

China's maritime expansion has emerged as a central pillar of its grand strategy aimed at projecting power and safeguarding its economic and security interests across the Indo-Pacific. This expansion is rooted in military modernization, strategic infrastructure development, and sustained naval deployments, which have raised concerns among neighboring states and global powers.

2.1 Expansion of Naval Capabilities

China's naval modernization has become a central pillar of its broader strategy to expand strategic influence across the Indo-Pacific and safeguard its maritime interests. The enlargement of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) constitutes a notable transformation in global naval power structures, as China seeks to evolve from a traditionally littoral defense force into a blue-water navy capable of long-range, sustained operations beyond its immediate maritime periphery.

As of 2024, the PLAN has surpassed the United States Navy in terms of total combatant vessels, with an estimated fleet of approximately 370 ships, projected to increase to 435 by 2030 (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). This force includes a growing inventory of destroyers, frigates, corvettes, ballistic missile submarines, and aircraft carriers, thereby enhancing China's capacity to exercise persistent naval presence well beyond its coastal waters.

According to the U.S. Congressional Research Service (2023), China is developing a multi-layered maritime force structure that encompasses both near-seas defense (primarily within the East and South China Seas) and far-seas power projection (extending into the Indian Ocean and beyond). This strategic orientation is encapsulated in the doctrine of "Far Sea Defense," which aims to broaden the operational scope of the PLAN to protect China's overseas interests and critical maritime trade corridors (Oxford Political Review, 2022). Among the most consequential advancements in Chinese naval capabilities is its aircraft carrier program. The PLAN has commissioned two carriers—Liaoning and Shandong—with a third, the Fujian, nearing operational readiness. The Fujian represents China's most advanced carrier platform to date, incorporating electromagnetic catapult launch systems, thereby approximating the capabilities of U.S. Navy supercarriers (Defense News, 2023). Submarine force development has also been prioritized. China currently fields both nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) and nuclear/diesel-electric attack submarines (SSNs/SSKs). According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS, 2023), these vessels are being upgraded with enhanced stealth features, extended operational range, and greater offensive capabilities, including anti-ship and land-attack missile systems.

Technological innovation has been integral to the PLAN's modernization agenda. China is increasingly integrating artificial intelligence, unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs), and satellite-based surveillance systems to enhance maritime domain awareness and increase the lethality and survivability of its naval assets (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2023).

This expansion is undergirded by China's unparalleled shipbuilding capacity, currently the largest globally. Chinese shipyards are producing advanced naval platforms at a rate unmatched by any other country, supported by a centralized economic model and robust defense expenditure.

The increasing scale and sophistication of the PLAN underscore China's ambition to contest the prevailing maritime order and project power across strategic maritime theaters, particularly the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean. This trajectory has elicited growing concern among Indo-Pacific states and catalyzed strategic adjustments by key

regional actors, notably India, Japan, and the United States.

2.2 Infrastructure Development

China's maritime strategy is substantially reinforced by a concurrent emphasis on infrastructure development, particularly in coastal and overseas port installations. This infrastructure expansion constitutes a pivotal element of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), notably its maritime dimension—the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road—which seeks to augment China's trade connectivity, strategic footprint, and logistical reach throughout the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

A central and politically salient project under this framework is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), regarded as a flagship component of the BRI. CPEC establishes a direct linkage between China's western Xinjiang region and Pakistan's Gwadar Port, thereby affording Beijing maritime access to the Arabian Sea while circumventing the strategically vulnerable Malacca Strait—a long-standing chokepoint for Chinese seaborne commerce (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2022). The Gwadar Port, developed and operated primarily by Chinese state-owned enterprises, possesses both commercial viability and latent military utility, enabling dual-purpose logistics functions and potential naval deployment.

In South Asia, the magnitude and geographical positioning of China's port-related investments have elicited significant geostrategic apprehension. A prominent example is the 2017 leasing of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port to China Merchants Port Holdings for 99 years, following Colombo's debt servicing difficulties. Although officially designated as a commercial facility, its control by a Chinese entity has provoked speculation regarding its possible militarization, reinforcing the notion of a "String of Pearls" strategy—China's systematic establishment of maritime nodes stretching from the South China Sea to the Horn of Africa (India Shipping News, 2023; Brewster, 2019).

Similar port development projects have materialized in the Maldives (Feydhoo Finolhu), Myanmar (Kyaukpyu), Bangladesh (Payra and Chittagong), and Djibouti—the latter hosting China's first overseas military installation (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2023). These ports are often designed with dual-use capabilities, rendering them capable of accommodating both commercial and military operations. China's prioritization of extensive berthing infrastructure, logistical facilities, and supply depots enables these installations to function as forward-operating bases in the event of regional contingencies.

The financing mechanisms of these projects—typically via concessional lending from Chinese financial institutions—can foster debt dependency, thereby granting Beijing strategic leverage over host nations. This expanding network of maritime infrastructure not only bolsters China's supply chain resilience but also extends its power projection capabilities deep into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

India and other Indo-Pacific stakeholders increasingly interpret this infrastructure proliferation as a strategic intrusion into their traditional zones of influence. Consequently, alternative regional initiatives such as the India-Japan Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) and the U.S.-sponsored Blue Dot Network have been proposed. These platforms seek to promote transparent, inclusive, and rules-based infrastructure development, offering a counter-narrative to China's BRI (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023).

2.3 Strategic Military Deployments

A central pillar of China's maritime expansion strategy is the deliberate positioning of military assets throughout the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and Indian Ocean Region (IOR). These force postures are intended to fulfill multiple objectives: reinforcing sovereignty claims, deterring potential adversaries,

safeguarding maritime commerce, and facilitating extended power projection.

South China Sea Militarization

Among the most prominent manifestations of China's regional military strategy is the fortification and weaponization of artificial islands in the South China Sea. The People's Republic of China has constructed and militarized several land features in the Spratly and Paracel Islands—most notably Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef. These fortified outposts are furnished with airstrips, radar arrays, missile systems, and port facilities capable of accommodating large naval vessels (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). This infrastructure enables China to sustain a continuous operational presence in the region and to reinforce its sweeping "Nine-Dash Line" maritime claims—assertions that were invalidated by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in 2016 (The Hague Ruling, PCA, 2016).

Naval Patrols and Submarine Deployments in the Indian Ocean

China has notably intensified its naval activities in the Indian Ocean, a maritime domain vital to its energy import routes and commercial flows. PLAN submarines and surveillance vessels have been observed conducting anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and performing hydrographic mapping near India's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The Indian Navy has vigilantly tracked these maneuvers, interpreting them as part of Beijing's broader objective to acquire regional operational acumen and establish a durable logistical presence (India Ministry of Defence, 2023).

Notably, these activities include the deployment of nuclear-powered and diesel-electric submarines—an escalation with considerable strategic ramifications. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS, 2023), such persistent naval presence is aligned with China's ambition to develop comprehensive sea control capabilities across the IOR.

Overseas Military Bases and Dual-Use Facilities

To support extended naval operations, China has begun establishing permanent overseas military outposts and infrastructure with both civilian and military functionalities. The most salient example is its military base in Djibouti—operational since 2017—situated adjacent to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a strategically vital maritime corridor linking the Red Sea with the Indian Ocean. This facility serves as a logistics and resupply hub for the PLA Navy and symbolizes China's expanding extra-regional footprint (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2023).

Beyond Djibouti, other Chinese-funded ports—such as Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Kyaukpyu in Myanmar—while nominally commercial in purpose, are regarded by defense analysts as possessing latent military utility, particularly in times of geopolitical crisis. This perception is grounded in the ports' infrastructure design, berthing capacity, and long-term concessionary agreements (Brewster, 2020).

Joint Exercises and Strategic Messaging

Furthermore, China has escalated its participation in multilateral naval maneuvers with partner states such as Russia and Iran, thereby signaling both operational reach and political alignment. The "Maritime Security Belt" trilateral exercise held in 2023 in the Gulf of Oman exemplifies China's ambition to assert its role as a maritime power of global stature (Reuters, 2023). These activities serve dual functions: enhancing force readiness and delivering deliberate strategic communications to regional and global audiences.

3. India's Strategic Responses

3.1 Naval Modernization

India has considerably intensified the modernization of its naval capabilities in response to the expanding maritime footprint and strategic assertiveness of China in the Indo-Pacific. The Indian Navy's modernization blueprint is centered on establishing credible deterrence, augmenting maritime domain awareness (MDA), and safeguarding critical sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This comprehensive initiative encompasses the induction of domestically constructed aircraft carriers, the enhancement of its submarine arsenal, and the procurement of advanced surveillance and reconnaissance platforms.

Indigenous Aircraft Carriers: Augmenting Force Projection

A major milestone in India's naval transformation is the induction of INS Vikrant, the nation's first domestically produced aircraft carrier, commissioned in 2022. With a displacement exceeding 40,000 tons, INS Vikrant complements INS Vikramaditya, thereby providing India with a dual-carrier capability that significantly bolsters its capacity to project maritime power across the IOR (AP News, 2022). These platforms are configured to operate MiG-29K combat aircraft, Kamov helicopters, and are expected to accommodate next-generation platforms such as the naval variant of the HAL TEDBF (Twin Engine Deck-Based Fighter).

India's strategic trajectory includes the development of a third, more advanced aircraft carrier—INS Vishal—anticipated to feature technologies such as the Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System (EMALS), aligning Indian naval aviation capabilities more closely with those of leading global maritime powers like the United States.

Submarine Force Enhancement: Reinforcing Strategic Deterrence

India's submarine modernization initiative aims to consolidate both conventional and nuclear deterrence within the maritime domain. The operationalization of the Arihant-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) marks a pivotal achievement, completing India's nuclear triad and ensuring a credible second-strike capability (Indo-Pacific Studies Center, 2023). INS Arihant and its successor, INS Arighat, constitute a critical component of India's strategic deterrent posture under the sea.

Simultaneously, India is expanding its conventional submarine fleet through Project-75 and Project-75(I). The former has delivered Kalvari-class Scorpene submarines, while the latter envisages the domestic production of advanced submarines equipped with air-independent propulsion (AIP) systems, under the government's 'Make in India' initiative to promote indigenous defense manufacturing.

Advanced Surveillance Platforms: Enhancing Maritime Domain Awareness

India's maritime surveillance infrastructure has significantly improved with the acquisition of P-8I Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft from the United States. Outfitted with sophisticated long-range sensors, anti-submarine warfare (ASW) payloads, and reconnaissance systems, these platforms enable India to monitor expansive maritime zones and effectively track hostile underwater assets (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2023).

In parallel, India has leased and is advancing procurement of MQ-9B SeaGuardian unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)—high-endurance drones capable of sustained intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations across vital stretches of the Indo-Pacific (E-International Relations, 2023). These assets facilitate real-time intelligence gathering and operational coordination with strategic partners such as the United States, Japan, and Australia through collaborative mechanisms like the Quadrilateral Security

Dialogue (QUAD) and the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR).

Furthermore, India is integrating space-based systems, including dedicated communication and surveillance satellites such as GSAT-7A and the forthcoming GSAT-7R, to provide the Indian Navy with enhanced connectivity, real-time situational awareness, and precision targeting capabilities.

Maritime Domain Awareness: A Strategic Pillar in India's Indo-Pacific Posture

A fundamental element of India's strategic countermeasures to China's expanding maritime footprint is the fortification of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). In light of China's increasing naval operations and the proliferation of dual-use maritime infrastructure across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), India has prioritized the development of advanced surveillance technologies, unmanned aerial systems, and space-based reconnaissance assets to facilitate early threat identification and continuous situational monitoring across expansive maritime zones.

P-8I Poseidon Maritime Patrol Aircraft

India's induction of the P-8I Poseidon, a specialized variant of the U.S. Navy's P-8A, has substantially transformed its maritime reconnaissance architecture. Operated by the Indian Navy, the P-8I is outfitted with multi-mode radar systems, electronic support measures (ESM), and anti-submarine warfare (ASW) armaments including torpedoes and Harpoon anti-ship missiles. These aircraft are capable of operating at high altitudes while delivering long-range surveillance and precision engagement capabilities (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2023).

As of 2024, India has commissioned 12 P-8I units, strategically deployed at INS Rajali (Tamil Nadu) and INS Hansa (Goa), facilitating comprehensive coverage of both eastern and western seabords. These platforms play a pivotal role in tracking Chinese undersea and surface assets traversing strategic maritime chokepoints such as the Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok Straits.

MQ-9B SeaGuardian Unmanned Aerial Systems

Complementing manned aerial platforms, India has also integrated unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to ensure persistent surveillance over high-priority maritime domains. The MQ-9B SeaGuardian, developed by General Atomics, is a High-Altitude Long-Endurance (HALE) drone capable of over 40 hours of continuous flight. It is equipped with a suite of multi-sensor ISR capabilities, including synthetic aperture radar (SAR) and maritime surveillance radar.

Since 2020, India has leased two MQ-9B drones from the United States and is in the process of acquiring an additional 31 units across its military branches. The Indian Navy operates these UAVs primarily from INS Rajali, with a focus on monitoring maritime activity near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and broader IOR. These platforms augment India's capacity to identify foreign naval movements, map commercial and military maritime traffic, and share real-time data with strategic partners through collaborative mechanisms such as the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) initiative under the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) (E-International Relations, 2023).

Space-Based and Coastal Surveillance Infrastructure

India has also advanced its satellite-enabled maritime surveillance capabilities to complement airborne and unmanned platforms. Dedicated satellites such as GSAT-7 (Rukmini) and GSAT-7A provide secure real-time communication links and network-centric operational support to naval assets, thereby improving the effectiveness of joint and integrated maritime operations.

Moreover, the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), based in Gurugram, functions as a regional MDA coordination hub. It integrates data from coastal radar chains, space-based sensors, and international partners to deliver a comprehensive maritime picture. The center currently maintains operational linkages with over 20 countries and multinational entities, enabling proactive responses to maritime security challenges, including illegal fishing, piracy, and unusual vessel behavior (Ministry of Defence, 2023).

3.2 Strategic Alliances: Advancing Cooperative Security in the Indo-Pacific

India has progressively strengthened strategic alliances to reinforce its geostrategic posture in the Indo-Pacific and to counterbalance China's expanding maritime footprint. These alliances—bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral—augment India's regional access, enhance operational interoperability, facilitate intelligence exchange, and foster collective deterrence. At the core of this strategic engagement is India's unwavering commitment to a Free, Open, Inclusive, and Rules-Based Indo-Pacific order.

The QUAD: Strategic Alignment with Democratic Partners

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)—comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia—has become a linchpin of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. Initially conceived in 2007 and revitalized in 2017, the QUAD focuses on maritime security cooperation, infrastructure resilience, and technological integration.

The QUAD's Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) initiative, unveiled in 2022, enables real-time monitoring of non-compliant maritime traffic (e.g., vessels deactivating automatic identification systems) and bolsters maritime situational awareness. This initiative substantively supports India's surveillance capabilities and acts as a deterrent against illicit maritime activities, particularly involving unauthorized Chinese vessels (White House Indo-Pacific Strategy, 2022).

Bilateral Defense Frameworks: Advancing Interoperability

India has entered into multiple defense and logistics pacts to facilitate naval cooperation and base access with key regional stakeholders:

- The India-U.S. Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) provides reciprocal access to military facilities for refuelling, replenishment, and maintenance.
- The India-Australia Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (MLSA) strengthens joint maritime deployments and logistical support across the Indian and Pacific Oceans.
- With Japan, India undertakes JIMEX naval drills and coordinates through the Ministerial-Level "2+2 Dialogue", enhancing strategic alignment.

These agreements enable Indian naval assets to utilize critical bases such as Diego Garcia, Darwin (Australia), Djibouti, and Guam, thereby extending India's operational reach and force projection capacity in the Indo-Pacific (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2023).

Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and the SAGAR Doctrine

India also engages with smaller littoral states through regional maritime forums like the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and its doctrinal framework Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). These initiatives promote confidence-building, capacity development, and regional maritime leadership.

IONS, encompassing over 30 participating countries, advances naval interoperability, humanitarian coordination, and counter-piracy efforts. Under SAGAR, India has conducted Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations in countries such as the Maldives, Mozambique, and Mauritius, thereby reinforcing its stature as a reliable security partner (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2023).

3.3 Regional Initiatives: Projecting Maritime Leadership in the Indian Ocean and Beyond

To complement bilateral and multilateral collaborations, India has spearheaded and supported several regional initiatives aimed at institutionalizing maritime security, economic integration, and geopolitical stability throughout the Indo-Pacific. These programs not only project India's normative influence but also serve as strategic counterweights to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its expanding regional footprint.

SAGAR: India's Maritime Doctrine for the Indian Ocean

Introduced in 2015, the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine articulates India's strategic vision for the Indian Ocean. It prioritizes maritime capability enhancement, navigational safety, environmental stewardship, and sustainable development in coordination with Indian Ocean littoral nations.

Through SAGAR, India has provided patrol vessels, coastal radar systems, and technical training to countries such as the Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius. During environmental disasters and health emergencies, India has delivered substantial HADR support, including during Cyclone Idai (Mozambique, 2020) and the COVID-19 pandemic, bolstering India's profile as a benevolent regional actor (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023).

Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)

India plays an active and constructive role in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), a 23-member intergovernmental organization promoting maritime safety, trade integration, and the blue economy.

India has supported IORA-led initiatives focusing on search-and-rescue coordination, anti-piracy patrols, and marine ecological preservation, further establishing its credentials as a net maritime security provider. IORA reinforces India's SAGAR framework by advocating for an inclusive maritime order where all states—regardless of size—have equitable access to oceanic resources (IORA Secretariat, 2023).

Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR)

Launched in 2018 and based in Gurugram, the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) functions as a regional maritime data-sharing nexus. The center partners with over 20 nations and international organizations, facilitating real-time intelligence exchange on maritime threats such as unauthorized fishing, piracy, and suspicious vessel activity.

Through IFC-IOR, India has significantly enhanced maritime transparency and surveillance, particularly aiding smaller nations lacking robust MDA capabilities. Operated as a non-military platform, the center enables wide-ranging cooperation, including with ASEAN and African states, thus broadening India's strategic outreach (Ministry of Defence, 2023).

Act East Policy and BIMSTEC Engagement

India's Act East Policy, operationalized through mechanisms such as BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), extends India's maritime influence beyond South Asia into Southeast Asia. Strategic infrastructure ventures like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and bilateral coastal shipping agreements with Thailand and Myanmar promote regional interconnectivity and maritime resilience.

These endeavours serve as geo-economic counterbalances to China's BRI ventures,

particularly in the Bay of Bengal, where Chinese-funded infrastructure in Myanmar and Bangladesh seeks to expand Beijing's maritime leverage (Observer Research Foundation, 2023).

4. Conclusion:

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the principal theatre for great power rivalry, with China's maritime assertiveness presenting substantial challenges to the regional equilibrium and the rules-based international order. China's approach—characterized by the rapid modernization of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), expansive infrastructure development under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the deployment of dual-use military-capable infrastructure—has enabled it to project strategic influence well beyond its immediate geographical vicinity, extending deep into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). These dynamics have elicited growing apprehension among regional stakeholders, particularly India, whose strategic location and economic stakes position it as a central actor in the Indo-Pacific.

India's response has been comprehensive and proactive. Acknowledging the geostrategic imperatives of maritime security, India has substantially modernized its naval assets, exemplified by the indigenously constructed aircraft carrier INS Vikrant, the expansion of its nuclear and conventional submarine capabilities, and the integration of cutting-edge surveillance platforms such as the P-8I Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft and MQ-9B SeaGuardian unmanned aerial vehicles. These measures reinforce India's blue-water navy aspirations and enhance its strategic deterrence posture in a region increasingly marked by Chinese assertiveness.

In addition to augmenting its military capabilities, India has intensified its strategic alignments. Through initiatives like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), bilateral defense and logistical accords, and joint naval exercises such as Malabar, India is cultivating deeper ties with ideologically aligned democratic nations to uphold freedom of navigation, safeguard critical maritime trade routes, and reinforce adherence to international maritime law. These alliances facilitate interoperability, enable real-time intelligence cooperation, and bolster collective preparedness in addressing emerging maritime challenges.

Equally important are India's regional engagement mechanisms, which underscore its commitment to inclusive development and collaborative security architecture. The SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) framework, active participation in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), operations of the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), and involvement in BIMSTEC exemplify India's role as a net security contributor and a regional stabilizer. These initiatives amplify Indian influence, foster regional cohesion, and offer a transparent and sustainable alternative to China's often opaque and financially burdensome engagement strategies.

In conclusion, India's strategy blends hard power capabilities, geostrategic diplomacy, and regional stewardship. Rather than pursuing direct confrontation with China, India endeavors to shape a maritime security environment that dissuades coercion, protects national sovereignty, and supports a resilient and inclusive regional order. As the Indo-Pacific continues to undergo strategic transformation, India's policies will play a pivotal role in not only balancing China's ascendancy but also in upholding the foundational principles of peace, shared prosperity, and multilateral cooperation.

Reference:

1. Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India. (2023). *India's Indo-Pacific Strategy*. Retrieved from <https://www.mea.gov.in>

2. Cordesman, A.H., & Colley, G. (2021). *Chinese Strategy and Military Modernization in the South China Sea*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).
3. Drishti IAS. (2024). *India's Maritime Strategy in the Indo-Pacific*. Retrieved from <https://www.drishtiias.com>
4. United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). (1982)
5. U.S. Department of Defense. (2023). *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023*.
6. Congressional Research Service. (2023). *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities*.
7. Oxford Political Review. (2022). *Far Sea Defense and the Future of Chinese Naval Power*.
8. Defense News. (2023). *Fujian: China's Third Aircraft Carrier and Its Strategic Significance*.
9. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). (2023). *The Military Balance 2023*.
10. Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. (2023). *China's Naval Expansion and Indo-Pacific Geostrategy*. Retrieved from <https://www.asiapacific.ca>
11. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China. (2022). *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Overview*. Retrieved from <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn>
12. India Shipping News. (2023). *China's Port Projects in South Asia: Strategic Intent or Economic Cooperation?* Retrieved from <https://indiashippingnews.com>
13. Brewster, D. (2019). *The String of Pearls and India's Strategic Dilemma*. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 15(1).
14. Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. (2023). *Maritime Infrastructure and Chinese Strategic Expansion*. Retrieved from <https://www.asiapacific.ca>
15. Council on Foreign Relations. (2023). *Belt and Road Initiative: Chinese Infrastructure Strategy and Global Response*. Retrieved from <https://www.cfr.org>
16. U.S. Department of Defense. (2023). *Annual Report on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*.
17. Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA). (2016). *The South China Sea Arbitration (The Philippines v. China)*.
18. India Ministry of Defence. (2023). *White Paper on Indian Maritime Security*.
19. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). (2023). *The Military Balance 2023*.
20. Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. (2023). *China's Military Presence in the Indian Ocean and Beyond*. Retrieved from <https://www.asiapacific.ca>
21. Brewster, D. (2020). *China's Indian Ocean Strategy: The Role of Overseas Bases*. *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*.
22. Reuters. (2023). *China Joins Iran and Russia in Naval Drills*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com>
23. AP News. (2022). *India Commissions First Indigenous Aircraft Carrier INS Vikrant*. Retrieved from <https://apnews.com>
24. Indo-Pacific Studies Center. (2023). *India's Nuclear Submarine Program and Strategic Balance in the IOR*.
25. Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. (2023). *India's Naval Modernization and the Indo-Pacific Order*. Retrieved from <https://www.asiapacific.ca>
26. E-International Relations. (2023). *The Role of MQ-9B SeaGuardian Drones in India's Maritime Strategy*. Retrieved from <https://www.e-ir.info>
27. Indian Ministry of Defence. (2023). *Indian Navy Modernization Vision 2030*.
28. U.S. Department of Defense. (2023). *Enhancing Maritime Domain Awareness in the Indo-Pacific*.
29. AP News. (2022). *India launches first indigenous aircraft carrier INS Vikrant*. Retrieved from: <https://apnews.com>
30. Ministry of Defence, India. (2023). *Make in India in Defence: INS Vikrant as a Flagship Project*. Retrieved from: <https://mod.gov.in>

31. Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. (2023). *India's Maritime Power in the Indo-Pacific Era*. Retrieved from: <https://www.asiapacific.ca>
32. GlobalSecurity.org. (2023). *INS Vishal: India's Next-Generation Aircraft Carrier*. Retrieved from: <https://www.globalsecurity.org>
33. The Indo-Pacific Studies Center. (2023). *India's Undersea Deterrent: Arihant-Class SSBNs and Strategic Balance*.
34. Ministry of Defence, India. (2023). *Project-75 and Beyond: Strengthening Conventional Undersea Capabilities*. Retrieved from: <https://mod.gov.in>
35. Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. (2023). *India's Response to Chinese Submarine Activity in the Indian Ocean*. Retrieved from: <https://www.asiapacific.ca>
36. Naval News. (2024). *INS Arighat Nearing Completion: India's Second SSBN Ready for Trials*. Retrieved from: <https://www.navalnews.com>
37. GlobalSecurity.org. (2023). *Project-75(I): The Future of India's Conventional Submarine Fleet*. Retrieved from: <https://www.globalsecurity.org>
38. Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. (2023). *India's P-8I Patrol Aircraft: Enhancing Surveillance in the Indo-Pacific*. Retrieved from: <https://www.asiapacific.ca>
39. E-International Relations. (2023). *MQ-9B SeaGuardian Drones and India's Naval Strategy*. Retrieved from: <https://www.e-ir.info>
40. Ministry of Defence, India. (2023). *Enhancing Maritime Domain Awareness: Role of IFC-IOR and Satellite Assets*. Retrieved from: <https://mod.gov.in>
41. General Atomics. (2023). *MQ-9B SeaGuardian Specifications*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ga-asi.com>
42. The Diplomat. (2023). *How India Tracks Chinese Vessels in the Indian Ocean*. Retrieved from: <https://thediplomat.com>
43. White House. (2022). *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*. Retrieved from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov>
44. Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. (2023). *India's Defense Agreements and Maritime Access in the Indo-Pacific*.
45. Ministry of External Affairs, India. (2023). *India's SAGAR Vision and Regional Leadership*. Retrieved from: <https://mea.gov.in>
46. Observer Research Foundation. (2023). *India and the Quad: Strategic Realignment in the Indo-Pacific*. Retrieved from: <https://www.orfonline.org>
47. Ministry of External Affairs, India. (2023). *India's SAGAR Vision and Indian Ocean Outreach*. Retrieved from: <https://mea.gov.in>
48. IORA Secretariat. (2023). *Indian Ocean Rim Association: Strategic Projects and Maritime Cooperation*. Retrieved from: <https://iora.int>
49. Ministry of Defence, India. (2023). *IFC-IOR: A Hub for Regional Maritime Surveillance*. Retrieved from: <https://mod.gov.in>
50. Observer Research Foundation. (2023). *India's Act East Policy: Maritime Pillars and Regional Balance*. Retrieved from: <https://www.orfonline.org>