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# India's Evolving Maritime Posture in the Indian Ocean: Opportunities for the Gulf

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## Executive Summary

- ◇ The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is witnessing the rise of India as a maritime power. With a vital geographic location in South Asia, astride critical sea-lanes, India is gearing to play an important economic and security role in the region.
- ◇ In line with New Delhi's growing power and regional aspiration, the Indian navy has expanded its operations in the Western Indian Ocean, the Middle East and the Gulf, positioning itself as a 'regional security provider'.
- ◇ Notwithstanding conjecture about growing India-China rivalry in the Indian Ocean, the Indian navy's principal objective is the effective policing of the regional commons. India's regional maritime strategy is aimed primarily at building bridges of friendship, improving partner capability and expanding crises response capacity.
- ◇ A pillar of India's maritime strategy is outreach to IOR island states, African rim states and the Gulf countries. Through bilateral exercises, joint patrols, training, capacity building and hydrographic surveys, the navy has sought closer ties with regional maritime forces. In improving its crises-response capabilities, the Indian navy is being careful, however, not to inadvertently menace any regional or extra-regional powers.
- ◇ The navy realises the need for it to be a gentle security stabiliser – a source of positive deterrence and greater regional goods. It is projecting power in ways that reassure regional states, while pushing back against aggressive posturing by extra-regional players. Yet, following clashes between the Indian Army and the Peoples' Liberation Army in Eastern Ladakh in June this year, Indian decision makers worry that the Indian Ocean could become a new front in the India-China rivalry.
- ◇ Apart from detailing India's maritime strategy in the IOR, this Insight lists the challenges and opportunities for the Indian navy in the Gulf region. While the differences in India's and the GCC countries' ties with Pakistan, Iran and China serve as challenges, the analysis identifies enhanced India-Gulf collaboration in the IOR in the following areas – using Indian navy's constabulary experience to deal with soft security issues; using Indian navy's capabilities to share the burden of maintaining regional security in a post-COVID world, which could witness defence budget cuts; joint management of the commons, especially human security challenges; and training regional maritime forces.
- ◇ Such a cooperative arrangement, the Insight concludes, would help the Indian navy create a durable template of maritime cooperation in the Gulf, thus addressing some of the region's concerns in a changing security environment.

## Introduction

For many years following its independence, India's conception of the maritime domain and its security was limited to South Asia and the Eastern Indian Ocean. This sensitive littoral – comprising the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal – was seen as the critical link between India and countries on its periphery, and a sphere of Indian influence.<sup>1</sup>

India strove for political influence and strategic primacy in the wider Indian Ocean, and saw itself as a natural provider of security. But its strategic elites regarded the Western Indian Ocean as a secondary space – a geography viewed mainly through the lens of a distant regionalism. Notwithstanding its substantial economic interests in the Middle East and East Africa, New Delhi didn't quite view the region as being strategically significant.

At the turn of the century, however, the Western Indian Ocean emerged as a prominent theatre of security interest. As India's trade linkages and diaspora interests grew, a space earlier considered politically distant began to figure prominently in New Delhi's mind map. But even as its stakes in Africa and the Middle East were growing, India was still unsure about the exact nature of its security role in the region. With intra-regional rivalries rife, New Delhi hesitated to expand its security presence.

It wasn't until a decade ago that New Delhi began defining its interests in the Western Indian Ocean Region (W-IOR) with greater purpose and clarity. Following increased high-level political engagement with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, India's maritime security cooperation with the region grew significantly. In the years since, the Middle East has become a vital source of energy for India, and home to a large population of Indian workers.<sup>2</sup> The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia are today India's third and fourth-largest trading partners respectively, and the total bilateral trade of the GCC countries with India for the year 2018-19 stood at US\$121.34 billion.<sup>3</sup> Remittances from the region contribute significantly to India's foreign exchange earnings, adding up to US\$ 42 billion in 2018.<sup>4</sup>

The substantive shift in India's West Asian or Middle Eastern diplomacy is a hallmark of the Narendra Modi government. Since coming to office in 2014, Prime Minister Modi has pushed a proactive strategy of partnering with key Gulf countries to attract investments and forge deeper security partnerships.<sup>5</sup> He has visited the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain and Iran, as well as Jordan, Palestine, and Israel. The government's

concerted efforts, first under 'think-West<sup>6</sup>, and later as part of a 'Link and Act West Policy' have brought New Delhi closer to Gulf countries.<sup>7</sup>

The countries in the region too have welcomed closer engagement with New Delhi. Many Gulf governments worry about US commitment to the region and have been anxious to diversify their economic and security partnerships. With its nearly US\$3 trillion economy, India, a leading consumer of energy resources, with a robust defence apparatus, fits into GCC countries' notion of a strategic partner. Consequently, the region's dealings with India on economic and security issues have expanded. New Delhi's keenness to expand naval engagement with the region coincides with the UAE assuming chairmanship of the Indian Ocean Rim Association in 2019 and Abu Dhabi's wider strategy to prioritise maritime security.<sup>8</sup>

This does not detract from the difficulties India has faced in nurturing close relations with Gulf partners. Indian decision makers have been cognisant of the conflicts in the regional littorals and sought to tread a safe path. Yet the overlapping interests of various stakeholders in the Gulf region have been hard for New Delhi to navigate. The geopolitical dialectic has been complicated by growing non-traditional security challenges, with rising instances of drugs and arms trade, human trafficking and illegal fishing.

## Ensuring Regional Prosperity

For a fuller appreciation of India's evolving security posture in the Indian Ocean, it is important to understand New Delhi's strategic stakes in its near and extended neighbourhood. The Asian maritime theatre is an enabler of global value chains as it hosts vital nautical capillaries of commerce that nourish world economies. Of the six major global chokepoints, four lie in this region.<sup>9</sup> Among these, the Straits of Malacca – through which almost a quarter of world trade passes – is the most vital. This main artery of the world economy is important not just for China, but also for economies in East Asia, Europe and the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the Strait of Hormuz is a critical conduit for energy shipments from the Gulf region, and for the flow of Asian workforce, capital and consumer goods to the countries in the region.

The chokepoints dominate more than the commercial and economic lifelines into and out of the rapidly expanding economies of South and East Asia. The global strategic growth and expansion of aspiring powers can be contained and regulated through the mere control on the movements of their naval forces

through these Straits. With more than 150,000 vessels transiting through these narrow waterways every year the destinies of many regional and global economies are dependent on effective maritime security.<sup>11</sup>

There is also the emergence of new trading centres in the region. Growing foreign trade has led to the establishment of many transshipment hubs, even as new roads, rail systems and pipelines traverse Asia from West to East, providing access to the landmass of Eurasia. The pace and scope of infrastructure development has been so dramatic that sometimes new ports have been developed on sites that were earlier little more than fishing harbours such as Gwadar in Pakistan or Hambantota in Sri Lanka.<sup>12</sup>

Increased interest in the Indian Ocean has resulted in a phenomenon of competitive port building. If China has invested heavily in Hambantota and Gwadar, India has taken upon itself to develop Chabahar on

the Southeastern coast of Iran.<sup>13</sup> Similarly the United States is a stakeholder in Duqm, Oman.<sup>14</sup> India, the United Kingdom and China also happen to be the main powerbrokers in the Indian Ocean – constantly looking to influence emerging geopolitical equations in the region.

Preserving influence in the littorals isn't New Delhi's only consideration; Indian decision makers have been keen to enhance trade and connectivity in the Western Indian Ocean. India's myriad maritime pacts with African and Gulf countries have sought to expand trading and transportation linkages along the IOR's northern and western rim. Delhi has invested in the Asia-Africa growth corridor, in a bid to establish economic linkages and industrial networks across the Indian Ocean Western rim.<sup>15</sup> An agreement with the UAE in June 2017, and another with Oman in December 2019, highlights similar imperatives, emphasising maritime transport as an enabler of connectivity and development.<sup>16</sup>

### Indian Naval Ship Visits to Western Indian Ocean (2013-2018)

Year	Countries Visited
2013	Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, Oman
2014	Maldives, Kenya, South Africa, Mauritius, Seychelles, Mozambique, Madagascar
2015	Seychelles, Iran, UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Djibouti, Israel, Turkey
2016	Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, Oman, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa, Mauritius, Maldives, Seychelles, Madagascar
2017	UAE, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Mauritius, Seychelles, Maldives, Morocco, Egypt, Israel, South Africa, Tanzania
2018	Qatar, UAE, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Djibouti, Seychelles, Mauritius, Maldives, Reunion Islands (France), Comoros, Madagascar, Yemen, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa

Source: Compiled from Ministry of Defence Annual Reports (2013-2018)

### Maritime Assistance to Indian Ocean Island States

India's maritime partnerships with the coastal and small island nations in the Indian Ocean Region exemplify the country's robust littoral outreach. The Indian navy has patrolled Mauritius' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) since 2003 and deposes a naval officer to manage the National Coast Guard of Mauritius. India laid the foundation of its naval security cooperation with Mauritius with the gift of the Indian Naval Ship (INS) Amar in 1971<sup>17</sup>.

Since then, it has periodically provided Mauritius with maritime reconnaissance assets – including an

interceptor patrol boat (2001)<sup>18</sup>, three Dornier 228 maritime surveillance aircraft (2004 and 2010), three new Islander aircraft engines (2013), an inshore survey vessel (2013) and even chain of coastal surveillance radar systems (2017).<sup>19</sup> In addition to providing maritime assets and training, the Indian navy also carries out hydrographic surveys, and assists Mauritian Coast Guard ships in EEZ surveillance and joint patrols. In 2017, three years after India exported its first warship to Mauritius,<sup>20</sup> New Delhi announced a US\$500 million line of credit to the Indian Ocean island state. In 2018, the two countries signed a pact to firm up maritime security cooperation in anti-piracy operations, as well as in countering illegal fishing and drug trafficking in the Indian Ocean region.<sup>21</sup>

The Indian Navy and Coast Guard also assist Seychelles in maintaining security by providing maritime surveillance, ocean surveys, training, and maritime military equipment and repair. Since 2005, India has gifted the Seychelles Coast Guard a fast-attack vessel, INS Tarmugli, Do-228 aircraft (3), Chetak helicopters and interceptor boats (3, the latest in 2019).<sup>22</sup> India also installed six coastal surveillance radar systems in Seychelles in 2015 and assisted in aerial and sea patrols in the island nation's EEZs.<sup>23</sup>

New Delhi's strong leadership role in the IORA and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) reinforces its strong security relationships with island states. New Delhi is also helping in the construction of maritime infrastructure in Agalega and Assumption Islands in Mauritius and Seychelles respectively, projects that add a new dimension to India's strategic cooperation with both island states.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, White Shipping Information Exchange agreements with Indian Ocean countries have led to a better picture of commercial traffic in the Indian Ocean Region.<sup>25</sup>

A key enabler of India's maritime initiatives has been Prime Minister Modi's 'Security and Growth for All' (SAGAR) concept. The doctrine emphasises India's security and developmental imperatives in the Gulf region, underscoring Indian stakes in the creation of a stable and prosperous neighbourhood. The Indian navy's proactive engagement with countries in the Indian Ocean region is a display of commitment towards peace and stability, a desire to jointly tackle security challenges in the region.<sup>26</sup> In pursuit of New Delhi's stated objectives, the Indian navy has signed logistics agreements with the United States, France and Oman, furthering its regional outreach.<sup>27</sup> The Indian navy's 2015 maritime strategy document also recognises the need for integrated operations, regional capacity building, training and human security in the Indian Ocean, and the need to create a positive and favourable maritime environment.<sup>28</sup>

Significantly, India sees its security role in the Indian Ocean not only in terms of trade and energy security, but also to guard against the increasing militarisation of the Indian Ocean rim. In South Asia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar have all been acquiring military hardware and platforms, including submarines, to bolster their combat capability.<sup>29</sup> The conflicts in the Middle East have intensified, with greater strengthening of military muscle. On the Horn of Africa there is a scramble for basing facilities, with an injection of huge investments and military assets into the region.<sup>30</sup> Worryingly for Indian observers, China has been an active player in the region, supplying military

equipment to a number of East African states. Beijing has also been eyeing a bigger role in growing Middle East arms trade, prompting New Delhi to take greater interest in maritime security affairs of the region.<sup>31</sup>

## India-Africa Cooperation in the Indian Ocean

India's maritime cooperation in Africa revolves around anti-piracy efforts, military aid, capacity building, and training assistance. The Indian navy has had a broad-based security approach, expanding and diversifying its strategy beyond anti-piracy cooperation and hydrographic surveys to sale of military hardware, logistical support, naval intelligence, joint military exercises, ship visits, and sharing of best practices to build capacity through trainings.<sup>32</sup> The Indian navy has also developed listening posts and monitoring stations in the African littorals, complete with radars and surveillance gear for monitoring maritime communications.

The Indian navy was one of the first countries to commence anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden as early as in October 2008. Since then, an Indian warship has always been deployed in the region. Besides escorting Indian-flagged vessels, the Indian navy has also provided protection to ships of other countries, and no merchant vessel under Indian escort has ever been hijacked.

India's anti-piracy operations have led to significant improvement in bilateral interactions, generating greater interoperability and synergy with regional navies. The approach has been complemented by the Indian navy's 'mission-based-deployments,' as Indian mission-ready ships have sought to secure key maritime 'chokepoints' at the entrances to the Indian Ocean, like Bab-el-Mandeb, Strait of Hormuz, and Mozambique Channel.<sup>33</sup>

The main agenda of the Indian navy's Africa outreach is port visits, hydrographic surveys and naval professional training. Indian warships have made goodwill visits to Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania and South Africa, carrying out joint naval exercises, and Indian survey vessels have conducted surveys for Africa's Indian Ocean Rim countries. Indian naval vessels have also patrolled the Mozambique Channel, and supplied naval equipment to regional maritime forces.<sup>34</sup>

## India and Gulf Maritime Relations

India's outreach to the Middle East is a significant component of the maritime strategy for the Western Indian Ocean, with New Delhi moving to forge close security ties with many Gulf countries. Since, 2012, there has been a considerable expansion in Indian naval interactions in the Gulf region, with a greater number of Indian ship visits to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar. The Indian navy has regularly trained Gulf naval personnel and Indian naval ships consistently deployed on anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden routinely enter regional ports for Operational Turn Around.

The development of maritime ties with the UAE and Saudi Arabia has been a marked feature of India's evolving regional approach. In May 2016, Manohar Parikkar, India's then defence minister visited the UAE and discussed strengthening of military ties and opportunities for joint defence manufacturing. In 2017, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan's visit to New Delhi resulted in the signing of a comprehensive strategic partnership, expanding the scope of defence cooperation.<sup>35</sup> The same year, Indian naval chief, Admiral Sunil Lanba, held extensive talks with the top brass of UAE's defense establishment, exploring ways to bolster the strategic partnership between the two navies. In March 2018, the Indian navy conducted its first bilateral exercise, Gulf Star I, with the UAE navy.<sup>36</sup>

With Saudi Arabia, the trajectory of bilateral military relations has been equally impressive. Two years after New Delhi and Riyadh signed a MoU for defence and security cooperation, Prime Minister Modi's visit to Saudi Arabia in April 2016 yielded another agreement to strengthen maritime security in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean regions. The pact resolved to improve bilateral collaboration in humanitarian assistance and evacuation in natural disasters and conflict situations.

In 2018, during the fourth meeting of the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee in Riyadh, India and Saudi Arabia discussed the possibility of enhancing defence engagement through joint arms production and combined naval exercises. In October 2019, when the two nations held their first-ever joint naval exercise,<sup>37</sup> it coincided with Prime Minister Modi and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman meeting in Riyadh. The two sides agreed to expand cooperation on securing the Indian Ocean waterways and the Gulf region from the threat and dangers that may affect the interests of both countries.<sup>38</sup>

India has also signed Memoranda of Understanding with Bahrain and Qatar to deepen collaboration. Since September 2015, when Indian naval ships visited Manama for joint exercises with the Royal Bahrain Naval Force, naval interactions have grown in scope.<sup>39</sup> In March 2018, New Delhi announced it was considering positioning an Indian naval representative at the USCENTCOM headquarters in Manama.<sup>40</sup> Modernised at a cost of US\$500 million in 2013, the base has infrastructure and training facilities that could prove useful for future Indian naval interactions in the region.

India's defence cooperation with Qatar includes training assistance and visits by ships of the Indian navy and the Indian coastguard, carrying out disaster management, anti-piracy, and counter-terrorism drills. Qatari Emiri Naval Forces attended the Indian Navy's 'International Fleet Review' at Vishakhapatnam in 2016, and a high-level Qatari delegation participated in the Indian Defence Exposition in New Delhi in 2018. India too has been a regular participant at the Doha International Maritime Defence Exhibition, where the Indian navy showcased its latest destroyer, *INS Kolkata*, in 2018. According to media reports, the Indian navy was considering stationing a naval training team in Qatar, but the proposal fell through due to the Gulf-Qatar rift.<sup>41</sup>

India's closest maritime partner in the Gulf remains Oman. While India and Oman entered into a 'strategic partnership' in 2008, naval cooperation has been a regular feature since 1993 in the form of a biennial exercise, *Naseem Al-Bahr*. India has provided naval training and hydrographic support to Oman, while Omani ships have been regular visitors at Indian ports.<sup>42</sup> More significantly, Oman has played a key role in sustaining India's security efforts in the Gulf of Aden by offering berthing and replenishment facilities to naval ships, and hosting a crucial listening post in the Western Indian Ocean.

Under a logistics agreement signed in March 2018, Muscat has provided the Indian navy access to the Port of Duqm, one of Indian Ocean's largest and most strategically located deep-sea ports.<sup>43</sup> India and Oman have agreed to enhance cooperation to strengthen maritime security in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean regions through increased bilateral collaboration for humanitarian assistance and evacuation during natural disasters and conflict situations. In June 2019, as part of an effort to expand its mission based deployments in the Indian Ocean Region, the Indian navy deployed its P-8I long-range maritime surveillance aircraft for anti-piracy sorties from Salalah in Oman to patrol the Gulf of Aden.<sup>44</sup>

India's defence relationships with most other Middle Eastern states have followed a similar pattern. Through defence cooperation agreements and cooperation committees, New Delhi has institutionalised its maritime outreach, offering naval training, sharing best practices and critical domain information. The IONS – of which many Gulf countries are members – has served as an ideal forum for boosting bilateral and multilateral initiatives.<sup>45</sup>

Gulf countries have been eager to deepen political and security ties with India for three reasons. First, the GCC countries appreciate the importance of counter-terror cooperation with New Delhi, and the need to expand and intensify intelligence sharing to jointly tackle international terrorism. Second, the political leaderships recognise Indian diaspora interests and are willing to accommodate them by accepting greater Indian naval presence.<sup>46</sup> Third, and most significant, the oil-rich Gulf countries view India as a major economic partner. With India's growing dependence on the region for energy, there has been a greater acceptance of Indian regional security initiatives. For instance, the Indian navy's 'Operation Sankalp' to assist Indian-flagged ships transiting through the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, wasn't taken amiss by the GCC countries.<sup>47</sup>

## Challenges to Indian Outreach

However, there remain challenges in India's Middle Eastern outreach. The expanding scope of naval interaction in the Gulf region hasn't helped New Delhi raise its regional profile. Many Gulf countries have strong relations with Pakistan, thus backing Islamabad's security policies on many occasions. The Pakistan navy's continuing interactions with Gulf maritime forces limits the latter's cooperation with India.<sup>48</sup> Further, Pakistan's former army chief General Raheel Sharif has been the commander of the 39-country Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, an intergovernmental counter-terror alliance.<sup>49</sup> Such continued closeness with Pakistan has impinged on India's room for geopolitical maneuvering in the region.

As such, Indian participation in regional security has been limited to humanitarian cooperation and crime prevention. While the conflict in Yemen continues, India has been careful about its maritime initiatives, steering clear of disputed areas. Significant differences also exist between India and GCC countries on Iran. There is a sense that India's ongoing engagement with Arab states has not been to the exclusion of a maritime relationship with Tehran, with the Indian navy's continuing to engage

with the latter causing some discomfiture among its GCC partners.

Still, it is the China factor that represents the most significant challenge to India's politico-military strategy in the Western Indian Ocean. In recent years, China has scaled up its engagement in the Middle East, developing relations with Gulf countries on different sides of the regional divide. Beijing has increased its trade with the region, becoming a major import-export partner for countries such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Iran, as well as a growing investor.<sup>50</sup>

Central to China's growing presence in the region is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to create greater connectivity among Asia, Africa and Europe.<sup>51</sup> The Middle East is especially important to the maritime component of the BRI, due to China's dependency on seaborne energy imports from the region and the region's strategic location at the crossroads of three continents.

China's growing regional investments have strategic implications for India. Indian analysts reckon that the construction of ports, logistical hubs, storage facilities and free-trade zones enable greater Chinese soft power projection in the region. Agreements with Middle Eastern countries for increased naval participation in anti-piracy and maritime security missions, and large-scale operations to rescue its nationals, have helped China establish its credentials as a legitimate Indian Ocean power.

What really worries Indian observers is the prospect of multiple Chinese military bases in the Western Indian Ocean. In the aftermath of the recent India-China clash in Eastern Ladakh, there is fear that the Indian Ocean could become a new front in the India-China rivalry. China has already established its first overseas base, in Djibouti, and could also potentially militarise the Pakistani port of Gwadar. Beijing is already an arms exporter to several Middle Eastern and African Indian Ocean rim states, and could in the future look to establish a more permanent presence in the IOR.<sup>52</sup>

Already there is concern in New Delhi over growing People's Liberation Army Navy's submarine visits to the Indian Ocean. Indian observers worry that Chinese submarines have been spending unusually long periods exploring the littorals — gaining familiarity with the regional operating environment, fine-tuning standard operating procedures, and gathering vital hydrological and bathymetric data. China's submarine deployment patterns suggest a desire for dominance over the Indian Ocean's critical sea lines of communication.

Ruefully, growing economic interactions in the Middle East haven't significantly increased India's geopolitical traction in the region. Many regional powers don't see the Indian navy as a serious player in the stormy Gulf. Instead, they consider the United States to be the indispensable security provider. Despite much cooperation with the Indian navy on matters of regional security, capacity building and training, Arab navies prefer to limit their engagement to non-traditional security issues.

## Opportunities for Collaboration

Despite these challenges, India's premier maritime power status in the Indian Ocean does create opportunities for future collaboration with Gulf countries. The Indian navy's unique constabulary experience in the Western Indian Ocean makes it a suitable partner in the fight against transnational crime. Emerging irregular security challenges, such as piracy, drugs/human trafficking, illegal fishing, and maritime terrorism in the Western Indian Ocean could prompt New Delhi to expand its warship deployments and offer greater capacity-building assistance.

In a post-Covid world, another area of cooperation in the Middle East is likely to be regional security management. The coronavirus has impacted regional and global maritime security dynamics negatively. Economies are floundering under the pandemic's onslaught, and socio-economic challenges are intensifying, resulting in the shrinking of national defence budgets. Going forward, military acquisitions and modernisation programmes could face severe cutbacks, with serious long-term security consequences. Shrinking deployment footprints would necessitate greater burden-sharing of littoral security, in which a partnership with the Indian navy could prove to be very useful for Gulf navies.

Cooperative management of the commons could well be an idea whose time has come. Through enhanced interoperability and cooperative engagement, the Indian navy and Gulf navies could share capabilities for the upkeep of 'good order at sea'. Non-combatant evacuation is likely to emerge as another area of cooperation. The Indian navy's largest rescue of Indian expatriates from Indian Ocean countries in May 2020, including the Gulf countries, underscores the importance of evacuation operations.<sup>53</sup> In the post-Covid era, as growing human security challenges lead to a diversion of resources from the frontlines, integrated operations are indeed going to be the key to ensuring a secure littoral.

Equally important is the need to build dynamic security networks between and among Indian Ocean powers. Apart from naval collaboration in anti-piracy duties, the Indian navy has played an important role in supporting and training regional maritime forces. Through greater deployments in the Gulf region and the setting up of information-sharing infrastructure, India could substantially enhance its understanding of regional security challenges. New Delhi could burnish its credentials as a 'net-security provider' and 'early-responder' by signaling a willingness to lead cooperative missions, underscoring its desire to build capacity and collaborative frameworks. Regional maritime powers need to keep pace with the fast-changing littoral environment, and its complex set of challenges, including threats to the environment and good order at sea.

The imperative for India is to explore opportunities for security collaboration in ways that reassure regional powers. The Indian navy would have to position itself as a proactive and responsible player, without threatening the strategic balance of power in the Middle East. Even as it makes a case for 'freedom of navigation' and 'access to critical maritime spaces' in accordance with principles of international law, New Delhi's moves need to be perceived to be enhancing regional security.

Even so, the Indian navy knows it must play the part of a gentle security stabiliser – a source of positive deterrence and greater regional goods – to pushback against aggressive extra-regional presence. This does not necessarily translate into an anti-China stance, but implies posturing meant to impose checks on any aggressive displays of force in the Western Indian Ocean region.

## Conclusion

As it comes into its own, the Indian navy is keen to be seen as a reliable security provider in the Indian Ocean Region. The navy has set an expansive agenda for itself and aspires to be an early and efficient responder to regional crises. India's maritime planners realise that far-seas forays would extend logistics lines and impose other costs. Yet a failure to extend India's naval reach to the Indian Ocean's western rim could forestall India's regional initiatives.

To achieve its security objectives, it is important for New Delhi to cooperate with like-minded stakeholders in the Indian Ocean. Crucially, India must ensure 'balance' in its interactions with African and Middle Eastern countries

and plan naval deployments accordingly. By engaging GCC navies through joint exercises, port calls and training programmes, and assisting in the management of the commons, the Indian navy could create a durable template of maritime security cooperation in the Gulf region. A constructive presence in the region could help New Delhi burnish its credentials as a reliable partner and efficient provider of security goods.

At a time when the Gulf countries are exploring new security options, Indian policy-makers must not let the 'Link-West Policy' be reduced to a mere tagline or an expression of intent. Beyond nominal engagement, New Delhi must move to expand its security role by strengthening its maritime partnerships in the Horn of Africa and the Gulf region. Leadership in the littorals would enable the Indian navy to underline its strategic credentials in the wider Indo-Pacific region, enhancing India's geopolitical influence. In seeking to secure Indian interests in the near and extended neighbourhood, the Indian navy must reassure partners of its commitment to regional stability. This, in turn, would address some of the concerns of the Gulf countries in a changing regional security environment.

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