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Naval Diplomacy and India's Maritime Doctrine: Continuity and Change in Indian Ocean

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Abstract— *The Indian Ocean has consistently played a crucial role in shaping India's strategic outlook since independence. For a long time India's strategic thinking and security approach overlooked the full significance of the Indian Ocean, largely because New Delhi was more concerned about the land based continental threats and security challenges. The situation begins to change after 1991, when India shifted towards an outward looking economy policy and Indian Ocean started gaining strategic importance. This paper examines India's Maritime Doctrine and Naval Diplomacy in the contemporary and future strategic environment with elements of continuity and change. The study uses qualitative dominant mixed approach, combining doctoral analysis, case studies, secondary data and follows the Eclectic theoretical framework drawing on Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism. The paper help us to know how India uses Naval diplomacy as a measure to radiate soft power and as well as how India's Maritime Doctrine help India to assert its hard power based upon the military strategy. Paper argues that India's role of net security provider in Indian Ocean Region IOR is still evolving from SAGAR initiatives to MAHASAGAR, and the Maritime Doctrine formalizes the No War No Peace framework as a response to grey zone tactics and hybrid warfare. It also identifies a gap in the literature on the reception of India's Naval Diplomacy by smaller Indian Ocean States and on the integration of Emerging Disruptive Technology EDT into maritime strategy*

Keywords— ***Naval Diplomacy, Maritime Doctrine, Maritime Domain Awareness, SAGAR, MAHASAGAR.***

I. INTRODUCTION

The Indian Ocean has consistently played a crucial role in shaping India's strategic outlook since independence. Over time, Indian strategic thought has often regarded this oceanic space as a natural sphere of influence, highlighting the importance of India assuming a more proactive and responsible role within the region. With 90% of India's trade passing through the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and its pivotal geographic position, the maritime domain has become central to India's security. For a long time, India's strategic thinking and security approach overlooked the full significance of the Indian Ocean. This was largely because New Delhi was more concerned with land based continental security challenges. In its early years, India focused heavily on consolidating its territory and followed an inward looking economic model. Because of this, the maritime and naval domains were seen only as important for meeting basic security needs. The situation began to change after 1991, when India shifted towards an outward looking economic policy. As the country opened up and integrated with the global economy, the Indian Ocean started gaining real strategic importance, with increasing trade passing through key Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). India could no longer afford to overlook its maritime environment, and it began to strengthen its naval and maritime capabilities.

In recent times, it is a known fact that seas are no longer secondary theaters where continental conflicts spill over.

recent developments in the Strait of Hormuz underline this. Global order is marked by increasing fragmentation, and the oceans are becoming the first arena where strategic intent is flexed, signaled and even contested. Many regional small countries in the Indian Ocean are confident of India's role towards Asia's security and the stability of world trade, and India's articulation of its maritime doctrine is the medium of this communication. The status of the net security provider is evolving. The perception of India has shifted from a vocal advocate of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace to an assertive Guardian under recent government policies, reflecting a change from the continental mindset to a dominant actor in maritime affairs. Calling India the net security provider of the Indian Ocean is recognized as a description of its functional role , rather than a claim of sovereignty over the waters. Several IOR nations, including Mauritius, Maldives, Seychelles, Madagascar and Mozambique, look to India as the first responder, reinforcing its role as a regional provider.

Another shift was India's 'move from a purely coastal defence mindset to a broader ocean centric approach. This means not focusing only on protecting the coastline, but also on expanding India's ' presence and influence across the wider Indian Ocean region. The Indian Navy helps India radiate its soft power through diplomacy such as goodwill operations, naval symposiums, and bilateral and multilateral exercises like Malabar. The deployment of assets for relief and anti-piracy operations in the wake of the Indian Ocean Tsunami and cyclones reflects India's notion of commitment towards naval diplomacy as a means to communicate its interests. India's active membership in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) reflects that the Indian Navy is not just a war fighting force but a key diplomatic actor in capacity building and strategic coherence, supporting the quest for interoperability and for a free, open and rule based maritime order. India uses its naval diplomacy to build trust, enhance maritime domain awareness and project soft power, especially in the IOR where India projects itself as a Security Provider.

India's area of maritime interest revolves around its Exclusive Economic Zones, including the northern Indian Ocean up to the Persian Gulf, and the choke points in the International Shipping Lanes (ISLs), that is, predefined, regularly used and efficient maritime routes where large commercial vessels flow. India possesses a vast coastline of 7500 km and about 2 million square km of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Around 80 percent of the crude oil supply is imported by sea, and any disturbance in sea lanes of transportation will change the course of India's ' trajectory towards becoming Viksit Bharat. About 95% of India's trade by volume and 68% of its trade by value are routed via the Indian Ocean. India's pivotal role in the Indian Ocean Region gives it a great advantage, but with great advantages, challenges go hand in hand. With a well crafted Maritime Doctrine and effective Naval Diplomacy, these challenges may be converted into opportunities through which India's stance as guardian gets secured, recognized and tested.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Study by Prof. Baljit Singh Mann (2018), published in Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India, analyses the transformation of India's ' policy in the Indian Ocean with the changing geopolitical environment. The paper highlights a gradual shift in India's maritime thinking from a limited territorial outlook to a broader strategic approach driven by economic and global engagements. S.D. Muni (2019) argues that India is no longer a passive observer in maritime diplomacy, rather its naval reach acts as a catalyst for shared security in East Asia. The operational shift is further grounded in the vision of Admiral Nirmal Verma (2012), who articulated that India's ' natural paradigm, given its geography, is to architect the stability of the region through its maritime routes.

In a comprehensive analysis published in the Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs, Baljit Singh and Neetika Verma (2015) explore the evolving trajectory of India. They conclude that India's naval outreach is no longer just about coastal defence, but is an ambitious effort to create a Pan-Indian Ocean security architecture. By integrating India's maritime doctrine with its naval diplomacy, India seeks to establish itself as the natural hegemon and stabilizer of the IOR, effectively bridging the gap between East Africa, Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific. David Brewster (2014) provides a critical perspective on India's 'aspirations for regional leadership. Brewster contends that while India seeks strategic primacy in the South Asian region, its credibility depends on its ability to foster a stable security environment. He highlights India's proactive engagement with nations like France and Mozambique to secure the African side of the Indian Ocean, suggesting that India must be viewed as a net security provider In a summary of the Indian Maritime Doctrine NSP 1.1, the transition of the Indian Navy from a purely reactive force to a proactive instrument of national policy is noted. The doctrine frames maritime power not just as a tool for combat, but as a multi-dimensional safeguard for the nation's economic engine. As highlighted in the Indian Maritime Doctrine 2025 (IMD 2025), formally designated as NSP 1.1, India is increasingly viewing the Indian and Pacific Oceans as a

singular, integrated maritime theatre. This shift is prompted by the relocation of global trade hubs and the intensification of great power competition. C. Raja Mohan (2015) explores the evolution of New Delhi's 'naval strategy and diplomacy within the context of Asian security. He observes that India’s recent focus on its naval profile appears to be a significant departure from its historical strategic identity. For decades, the nation was characterized by a rigid adherence to non-alignment and an intense preoccupation with territorial threats along its contested land borders with Pakistan and China. Mohan highlights a pivotal shift in India's 'external engagement. By integrating military diplomacy into the foreign policy framework, India has successfully bolstered its reputation as a net security provider in the IOR. In India’s role in the Indian Ocean Region, Łukaszuk (2025) explores how India has transitioned into a pivotal normative power within the maritime domain. The author argues that India's in'fluence is rooted in its unique geography, specifically the cross road position of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which grants it critical oversight of the entry points to the Strait of Malacca.

III. RESEARCH GAP

This research seeks to bridge gaps between India’s maritime doctrine and naval diplomacy while evaluating its effectiveness in shaping regional maritime dynamics in the Indian Ocean. The literature discusses India’s aspiration to be a guardian, but it does not explore the internal economic and bureaucratic constraints that hinder the actualization of this role, nor the extent to which budgetary constraints and domestic defence procurement delays limit India's 'ability to fulfil a Pan Indian Ocean Security Architecture. Most of the literature focuses on high intensity kinetic conflicts, but there is a lack of specific frameworks on how the Indian Navy should respond to non kinetic or sub conventional threats without escalating to full scale war. The research question therefore arises: how can India's 'Maritime Doctrine and Naval Diplomacy be adopted to provide a specific legal and operational response to grey zone tactics in the IOR without triggering a traditional military reaction? There is also a tension between India's role as a regional leader and hegemon and the sovereignty of smaller IOR nations such as the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Mauritius. The literature focuses on India’s perspective only, but more stress should be given to what these small states feel. The reception of India’s Naval Diplomacy should be studied in a brief and non biased manner. Finally, the literature mostly focuses on the shift from a land centric to a sea centric policy, and does not fully integrate the impact of Emerging Disruptive Technologies (EDTs), such as AI driven underwater drones or satellite based maritime awareness.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

he study follows an Eclectic Approach within the broader field of International Relations to examine India’s Maritime and Naval Diplomacy in a balanced way. Since maritime issues today are complex and cannot be fully explained through a single theory, this research combines multiple perspectives to get a clearer understanding. It mainly uses Realism to analyse aspects related to power, security and strategic competition in the Indian Ocean. At the same time, ideas from Liberalism are used to understand India's efforts towards cooperation, partnership and participation in regional maritime initiatives. In addition, elements of Constructivism help in exploring how India’s maritime thinking is influenced by its strategic culture, historical experiences and evolving global role. By bringing together these approaches, the study aims to provide a more complete and realistic understanding of India's 'maritime policy and behaviour.

V. EVOLUTION OF INDIA'S 'NAVAL DIPLOMACY AND MARITIME DOCTRINE

India's ' strategic thinking has been shaped by what is often described as sea blindness, which limited the role given to a maritime power. However, the doctrine revolves around a balanced naval capability ranging from coastal defence to blue water power projection. It is essentially about protecting India’s vast coast, securing sea lines of communication and ensuring stability in the Indian Ocean Region. Naval diplomacy complements this by using the navy as a tool of foreign policy. Through joint exercises, port visits, providing relief and logistics to other countries, humanitarian missions and cooperation dialogues like QUAD, India wants to build trust, strengthen partnerships and enhance its strategic influence without direct conflict. India’s Maritime Doctrine in contemporary times reflects a significant evolutionary milestone in India’s naval philosophy, as the doctrine formalizes the No War No Peace (NWNP) operational framework. This is a strategic response to the proliferation of grey zone tactics and hybrid warfare that blur the traditional boundaries of conflict. The doctrine also pitches for Multi Domain Operations (MDO), which mandates the synchronized integration of the land, sea, air, space, cyber and cognitive domains to secure maritime superiority, along with the adoption of AI, the necessity of jointness and integration across the armed forces to achieve operational synergy. The Indian Navy performs an important role through

Presence and Surveillance Missions (PSM). Forward presence is used, and it is defined as the concept which empowers combined naval exercises with other major powers, and which frames the most effective way of strategic deterrence. The Forward Presence concept comes under Constructive Maritime Engagement (CME), and Malabar exercises are an example of it. Another way in which India's maritime doctrine conveys deterrence is nuclear deterrence, as the sea based leg of the nuclear triad is essential, with nuclear powered submarines like INS Arihant. India also actively involves itself in Technical Military Assistance (TMA), which also comes under CME. India supports other countries by providing technical assistance and hardware, including capacity building initiatives, and gifts naval patrol vessels to Seychelles and Maldives. Another domain is Low Intensity Maritime Operations (LIMO), which maintains stability and order at sea. These operations address threats such as illegal fishing, piracy and the trafficking of arms and narcotic substances. It also involves conducting anti-terrorism operations, either independently or in coordination with other nations. The Indian Navy has consistently contributed to maintaining maritime order and is highly specialized in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, working alongside multinational forces. These operations require greater emphasis on peacetime procedures such as Visit, Board, Search and Seizure (VBSS). Maritime terrorism will remain a significant concern in the Indian Ocean Region.

To meet the objectives of India " pitch for the right of freedom of navigation, its maritime doctrine supports the traditional principle of Mare Liberum (freedom of the sea)

VI. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative dominant mixed approach. It combines doctrinal analysis, case studies and secondary data, and uses a combination of descriptive, analytical and exploratory approaches. The study follows an exploratory research design to examine India's' evolving maritime role in the Indian Ocean. The study is primarily applied in nature, as it seeks to analyse India's 'maritime doctrine and naval diplomacy. The study adopts a triangulation approach to enhance the reliability and depth of analysis. It combines multiple data sources including official policy documents, academic literature and internal strategic reports. Additionally, the research engages with diverse theoretical perspectives and regional viewpoints to ensure a balanced and comprehensive understanding. Triangulation helps to prevent theoretical bias and improves the credibility and validity of the research. The overall research design is qualitative dominant, primarily analytical, exploratory and interpretative in nature, with limited quantitative support from government and think tank references. The research is mainly based on secondary data, with scope for selective primary inputs in the form of expert opinions. The study relies on library research focusing mainly on earlier works about maritime doctrine and naval diplomacy, and adopts historical and comparative analysis. The research methods include conceptual analysis, critical analysis, thematic analysis, case study method and doctrinal analysis.

VII. DISCUSSION, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

7.1 From SAGAR to MAHASAGAR

India's maritime cooperation is strengthened by the approach of SAGAR, Security and Growth for All in the Region. The primary element of SAGAR revolves around safeguarding the mainland, the islands and the interests of the region, and securing and stabilizing the Indian Ocean Region, while refining capabilities for those caught in distress on the seas. Another element is deepening economic and security cooperation with friends in the region, especially marine neighbour and island states, leading to collective action and a deeper mutual understanding on maritime challenges. SAGAR is now being conceptualized as MAHASAGAR. The idea of MAHASAGAR reflects a more expansive and evolving strategic perspective rather than being confined to the Indian Ocean. This approach extends India's maritime engagement to the wider Indo-Pacific and beyond. It incorporates a more comprehensive understanding of maritime security, including issues such as sustainable development, blue economy initiatives and emerging non-traditional threats like climate change and maritime cyber risks. MAHASAGAR also places greater emphasis on multilateral cooperation, particularly through frameworks like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, thereby aligning India's maritime strategy with global and regional partners. While SAGAR represents a cooperative and regionally focused policy aimed at ensuring stability in the Indian Ocean, MAHASAGAR signals a more proactive and globally aligned maritime posture. This evolution highlights India's transformation from a regional security provider into a key stakeholder in the larger Indo-Pacific strategic environment.

7.2 Continuity in Doctrine, Change in Diplomacy

The continuity lies in the core principles: protecting the coast, securing sea lines of communication and ensuring stability in the Indian Ocean Region, along with the traditional principle of Mare Liberum. The change lies in the widening of the instruments, through which naval

diplomacy, multilateral exercises, capacity building and the NWNP framework extend India's ' role from a reactive force to a proactive instrument of national policy.

7.3 Strategic Coherence and Multilateral Platforms

In the contemporary instability of wars and conflicts, India should develop a unified and coherent maritime strategy that seamlessly integrates its Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific policies, because these regions are to be recognized as a single strategic space, as all face the same common challenges, particularly in maritime security. In light of increasing Chinese assertiveness, it is very important for India to play the role of a stabilizing force by strengthening cooperation through key multilateral platforms like QUAD, IORA and ASEAN. Sagarmala, a flagship initiative of the Government of India, focuses on improving port connectivity, developing inland waterways and supporting industrial growth, and with the launch of Sagarmala 2.0 there is a renewed push to strengthen India's maritime competitiveness. India is about to take up the chairmanship of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) during 2025-2027, which presents an important opportunity to address emerging non-traditional threats such as illegal, unreported fishing, drug trafficking via sea routes and piracy.

7.4 Environmental Sustainability and Green MAHASAGAR

In view of the ecological vulnerability and economic potential of the Indian Ocean Region, environmental sustainability must be integrated into India's maritime strategy. There is a need for greater cooperation on maritime conservation, climate change and the sustainable use of ocean resources. For this, the concept of Green MAHASAGAR is to be advanced, so that focused joint efforts with littoral states can be made for the maritime ecosystem. India holds the potential to lead and create a climate conscious and economically inclusive maritime future for the region.

7.5 Limits of the Role

Despite this shift, certain challenges continue to exist, including a persistent land focused security approach and relatively lower investment in the Indian Navy. Even so, the growing reach and role of the Indian Navy suggest that India is steadily positioning itself as a net security provider in the region. The advantage of the Indian Ocean position is accompanied by challenges, and the research keeps the question open whether India's role is accepted, contested or evolving among the smaller states.

VIII. EXPECTED OUTCOME OF THE RESEARCH

The expected outcome of this research is to delineate India's transition from a regional net security provider to a proactive preferred security partner within the region. By analysing the current maritime doctrines, the study demonstrates that India's guardianship is no longer defined solely by naval tonnage, but by its role as a force multiplier through Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). The study also helps to conclude how India's naval diplomacy balances strategic autonomy with multilateral alignment, such as QUAD, to maintain a rule based order against assertive regional powers. Furthermore, the research projects a future strategic environment where India's guardianship must evolve to counter grey zone warfare and protect the blue economy, that is, a shift towards capacity building in littoral nations and positioning the Indian Navy as the leading force in responding to emerging non-conventional challenges such as climate change and maritime terrorism.

IX. CONCLUSION

The study proceeds on the understanding that India's rise as a credible regional power and a potential net security provider of the Indian Ocean depends on its ability to move beyond its traditionally continental strategic outlook. The Indian Ocean has moved from a space that was overlooked to a central element of India's strategic thinking, and India's maritime doctrine and naval diplomacy reflect this transformation. The Maritime Doctrine provides a comprehensive road map for maintaining stability and sovereignty in the Indian Ocean Region, while naval diplomacy uses the navy as a tool of foreign policy to build trust without direct conflict. The evolution from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR, the formalization of the No War No Peace framework and the pursuit of Multi Domain Operations show both continuity and change in India's maritime posture. The research argues that India's ability to secure the Indian Ocean is a fundamental prerequisite for its rise as a global economic powerhouse, and that this may provide a policy road map for Viksit Bharat 2047. The study therefore makes an analytical contribution towards understanding India's maritime outlook and offers insights that may be useful for policymakers, scholars and strategic analysts.

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