



India's INS Vikrant aircraft carrier. Photo Credit: India Navy, Wikipedia Commons

The Indian Navy: A Resident Power In Indian Ocean And Rising Leader In Indo-Pacific – Analysis

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The Indian Navy stands at the crossroads of a transformative era, where global power dynamics and maritime security imperatives converge in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the Indo-Pacific.

As a resident power in the IOR and an emerging leader in the broader maritime domain, the Navy reflects India's strategic aspirations to ensure a stable, rules-based maritime order. Against the backdrop of Cold War 2.0 and an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific, the Indian Navy is crafting a new legacy—one that blends operational capability with diplomatic finesse to address complex 21st-century challenges.

From Coastal Defense to Strategic Power: The Indian Navy's Evolution Historical Roots and Geopolitical Awakening

India's maritime heritage is intertwined with its history of trade and cultural exchange. Yet, it was the post-independence era that catalyzed a shift from viewing the ocean as a commercial artery to recognizing its strategic potential. Early investments in naval infrastructure laid the groundwork for a force that would eventually evolve into a blue-water navy capable of influencing events far beyond India's shores.

The Emergence of SAGAR and Regional Ambitions

The turning point in India's maritime strategy came with the introduction of *Security and Growth for All in the Region* (SAGAR) in 2015. This policy articulated a vision for an inclusive and cooperative approach to maritime security, positioning India as a stabilizing force in the IOR. SAGAR encapsulates India's role as a net-security provider and emphasizes economic growth and collective prosperity in the region.

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Building Regional Leadership Through Multilateralism

The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)

India has adeptly used platforms like the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) to solidify its role as a regional leader. Bringing together littoral states, IONS addresses shared challenges such as piracy, climate change, and illegal fishing, fostering an environment of trust and collective action. This approach highlights India's commitment to building partnerships rather than hierarchies.

Operational Excellence: Cementing the Role of Net-Security Provider

Defending Maritime Lanes

The Indian Navy's operational successes demonstrate its ability to counter both traditional and non-traditional threats. Notable missions include:

- **Counter-Piracy Operations:** In January 2024, the Navy's elite MARCOS thwarted the hijacking of the MV *Leela Norfolk* in the North Arabian Sea. Similarly, the interception of the Iranian vessel *Iman* and the rescue of 17 crew members from Somali pirates spotlighted its proficiency in high-stakes operations.
- **Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR):** From its response to the 2004 tsunami to delivering water to the Maldives during its 2014 water crisis, all the way to its medical assistance during the pandemic, the Navy has repeatedly proven its role as a force for good, enhancing India's diplomatic and humanitarian reputation.

First-Responder in Regional Crises

India's readiness to act as a first responder in regional emergencies solidifies its role as a dependable partner. Deployments such as the 2024 mobilization of 20 ships and 5,000 personnel to counter maritime threats highlight the Navy's capability to respond swiftly and effectively while fostering goodwill among neighboring nations.

Expanding Horizons: The Indian Navy in the Indo-Pacific

Naval Diplomacy: Building Bridges and Projecting Power

India's pivot to the Indo-Pacific reflects its recognition of this region as the fulcrum of global power. The Navy's goodwill visits and joint exercises have emerged as critical tools in shaping perceptions and forging partnerships:

In 2024, the Eastern Fleet's visits to Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines signalled India's intent to deepen ties with Southeast Asia. These visits often coincide with heightened regional tensions, demonstrating India's commitment to ensuring stability while subtly countering China's assertive manoeuvres.

Strengthening Alliances Through Multilateral Exercises

Participation in multilateral exercises like Malabar, alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia, exemplifies India's commitment to collaborative security. Such exercises enhance

operational interoperability while reinforcing India's image as a key player in the Indo-Pacific security architecture.

Navigating the Complexity of Great Power Competition

Countering China's Expanding Influence

China's maritime strategies, from its *String of Pearls* initiative to its militarization of the South China Sea, present a significant challenge to India's maritime interests. The Indian Navy's response is multifaceted:

Modernization: The induction of INS *Vikrant*, India's indigenously built aircraft carrier, and Project 75I to expand the submarine fleet highlight India's focus on bolstering its capabilities.

Strategic Alignments: Partnerships with nations like France, Australia, and Japan reflect a deliberate strategy to counterbalance China's regional influence.

Balancing Relations Amid U.S.-China Rivalry

As a cornerstone of the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy, India enjoys strengthened ties with Washington. However, its emphasis on strategic autonomy necessitates a careful balancing act, ensuring that partnerships with the U.S. do not compromise its broader diplomatic relationships, including with China.

Harnessing Opportunities for Leadership

Leveraging Technology for Maritime Superiority

To maintain its operational edge, the Navy is investing in advanced technologies such as AI-driven surveillance systems and unmanned underwater vehicles. Collaborations with technologically advanced naval powers offer avenues for capacity-building and innovation.

Economic Diplomacy and Connectivity

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Initiatives like the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) exemplify the convergence of India's strategic and economic objectives. As an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the AAGC reinforces India's commitment to fostering inclusive regional development.

Conclusion: Charting India's Maritime Destiny

The Indian Navy's evolution from a coastal defense force to a proactive player in the Indo-Pacific shows India's strategic resolve in an era of shifting global power. As the IOR and Indo-Pacific become central to 21st-century geopolitics, India's maritime strategy reflects a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities ahead.

By balancing ambition with pragmatism, the Navy is positioning itself to be a force that defends India's maritime interests and contributes to global stability. Whether through its role as a net-security provider in the IOR or its proactive engagement in the Indo-Pacific, the Indian Navy embodies a vision of cooperation, innovation, and resilience.

As great power competition intensifies and the Indo-Pacific's importance grows, the question remains: Can India sustain its momentum and emerge as a decisive maritime leader? The coming years will reveal the extent of India's maritime rise—and its implications for the global order.

Source: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/19112024-the-indian-navy-a-resident-power-in-indian-ocean-and-rising-leader-in-indo-pacific-analysis/>