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India in the Indo-Pacific: New Delhi's Theater of Opportunity

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Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
IOR	Indian Ocean Region
IFC-IOR	Information Fusion Center-India Ocean Region
IMAC	Information Management and Analysis Center
MDA	Maritime Domain Awareness
MEA	Ministry of External Affairs
MBDs	Mission Based Deployments
PSIDS	Pacific Islands Developing States
SLOCs	Sea lines of communication

Summary

Throughout history, the maritime domain has been a crucial space in establishing new and emerging powers shaping regional dynamics and the larger security architecture. The great power competition today is no different. As India and Australia recently recognized, “many of the future challenges are likely to occur in, and emanate from, the maritime domain” underlining the reemergence of the maritime space as the theater for geopolitical competition.¹ The rise of China across the Indian and Pacific Oceans challenges the security umbrella established at the end of Second World War and strengthened after the end of the Cold War. The emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a new geographic space—bringing together the Indian and the Pacific Oceans—represents the new strategic reality of the twenty-first century.

India’s role in the Indo-Pacific is considered crucial by countries such as Australia, Japan, and the United States. However, despite New Delhi’s presence in the Indian Ocean, maritime security has actually remained outside of India’s strategic interests, concerns, and thinking, due to its continental threats. The Indo-Pacific therefore is a new domain in India’s foreign policy engagements, representing a shift in New Delhi’s strategic environment—expanding its threats solely from its continental borders to its maritime space. As Canberra, Paris, Tokyo, and Washington, DC continue to support and promote a stronger Indian role in the Indo-Pacific, this paper highlights New Delhi’s perceptions, challenges, and opportunities in the region.

The article identifies three specific elements of India’s Indo-Pacific approach. First, it underlines the Indo-Pacific as an opportunity to expand its footprint across the region while facing significant capacity and capital constraints. Second, it places partnerships at the core of India’s Indo-Pacific interests. While collaborations with bigger powers such as Australia, France, Japan, and the United States have provided a greater platform for New Delhi to expand its diplomatic footprint, its relationship with island nations will shape India’s role in the Indo-Pacific. Due to the geographic proximity of the island states—both Maldives and Sri Lanka, and to a greater extent Mauritius and Seychelles—to India, their foreign policy choices will have a direct impact on New Delhi’s security environment. Finally, although the Indo-Pacific presents new opportunities to India’s great power ambitions, India’s priorities and significant investments will remain in the Indian Ocean. In examining these three elements of India’s Indo-Pacific policy, the paper sheds further light into its new geopolitical challenges and strategic dilemmas while deliberating emerging opportunities and options to address its developing threats and challenges.

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific places significant importance on India by highlighting the country as a key player in the twenty-first century. As countries like Australia, Japan, and the United States began to define the Indo-Pacific as the new theater for strategic competition, New Delhi came to assume a central role in their respective policies. The rise of China and its expanding economic, political, and military engagements, from Europe and Africa to Asia and the Pacific, were shifting the strategic realities for Canberra, Tokyo, and Washington, DC. India's own approach toward the Indo-Pacific is shaped by a new strategic environment coinciding with the rise of China, particularly in the Indian Ocean region and South Asia. While priorities and capabilities remain different, Beijing's expanding presence across the Indo-Pacific presents a common strategic challenge for Canberra, New Delhi, Tokyo, and Washington. As India began to face these challenges in the Indian Ocean and South Asia, New Delhi adopted an Indo-Pacific strategy to manage a rising China in the region while strengthening partnerships to address a new security environment. In doing so India had to find a balance between its emerging geopolitical competition with China and its renewed partnerships with the West. New Delhi's Indo-Pacific strategy therefore emerged as an opportunity to expand its presence while leveraging partnerships to address its capacity constraints in securing its strategic interests.

In the post–Cold War era, the absence of strategic competition in the Indian Ocean allowed New Delhi to not only play a prominent role but also ensure a favorable and secure Indian Ocean for its strategic interests. The emergence of China as an additional and perhaps an alternative security provider compelled India to review its foreign policy choices under the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. China's economic growth, combined with its military modernization, continues to widen the strategic and capacity gap with India. As a result, Beijing is able to offer substantial economic projects and military assistance in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. Yet if Beijing was able to make inroads in India's immediate neighborhood, it was because New Delhi created an environment conducive to doing so. Faced with new geopolitical challenges in its area of strategic influence, the Indo-Pacific—as promoted by Australia, Japan, and the United States, and with considerable importance placed on India—presented an unexpected opportunity for India to play an increased role.

In tracing India's Indo-Pacific discussion, this paper underlines three key points shaping New Delhi's new foreign policy approach. First, the Indo-Pacific is a theater of opportunity for India that allows New Delhi to leverage partnerships to address a new strategic and security environment. These partnerships form the core of India's Indo-Pacific policy, allowing New Delhi to significantly expand its strategic and diplomatic footprint through collaborative initiatives. Second, while New Delhi's partnerships with Western powers help India address its capability gaps and is an important aspect of its Indo-Pacific approach, island nations and smaller littoral states have played a bigger role in

shaping India's new security environment. Increasing collaborations between China and island states such as Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka threaten India's assumed role of a security provider driving the Sino-Indian competition in the maritime domain. The importance of these islands' geographic location, long forgotten in post-Cold War geopolitics, have reemerged in New Delhi's strategic thinking. This also marks the emergence of maritime security in India's strategic collaborations, an aspect otherwise dominated by threats from its continental borders. Third, despite expanding collaborations across the Indo-Pacific, the Indian Ocean is and will remain the primary theater for New Delhi's strategic interests. While India will continue to increase its global engagements, New Delhi will invest its resources and capital primarily to elevate its strategic advantages in the Indian Ocean and South Asia.

This paper maps India's approach to the Indo-Pacific by examining the country's role, priorities, and challenges in the region. The paper begins with India's geopolitical challenges in accepting and defining its own Indo-Pacific vision, and underlines the shift in New Delhi's foreign policy approach influenced by a changing security environment. The rise of China and its expanding collaborations in India's neighborhood have raised considerable concerns for New Delhi's political calculations. The recognition of a new player in its area of strategic interest and an unfolding Sino-Indian competition have led to a revision in India's foreign policy interactions. Faced with new geopolitical challenges, New Delhi has quickly realized that it lacks resources and capacity to respond to a new security environment. New Delhi understands the potential of partnerships in addressing these challenges through shared visions and goals.

The second section of the paper highlights the role of partnerships in India's Indo-Pacific outreach. Partnerships offer a new set of options to New Delhi's geopolitical and strategic challenges. Thus, the Indian government has begun to renew old partnerships and build new ones. This second section captures India's foreign policy shift in the Indo-Pacific through partnerships and diplomatic outreach beyond its immediate areas of interests. The Indo-Pacific has emerged as an opportunity to expand and support India's diplomatic and strategic profile. Yet as India has expanded its diplomatic and political outreach across the Indo-Pacific, it lacks economic and military resources to match its growing vision.

The third section of the paper reviews India's military capabilities and efforts in supporting its foreign policy approach and underscores the Indian Ocean as a priority area in New Delhi's Indo-Pacific vision. While India continues to expand its political and diplomatic outreach across the Indo-Pacific, its efforts in the Indian Ocean reflect New Delhi's key priorities and challenges in a new strategic environment.

The conclusion of the paper highlights the need for issue-based partnerships as a way forward to operationalize the Indo-Pacific construct. While India and its partners have established common

strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific, the difference in priorities and immediate neighborhood demand an issue-based partnership modeled on a burden sharing framework. The task at hand now is to realize the Indo-Pacific vision through actionable efforts and practical collaborations.

Geopolitical Challenges

In the early stages of its Indo-Pacific discourse, India's primary challenge was defining and laying out New Delhi's approach to the new construct. While New Delhi today has become a key pillar of the Indo-Pacific architecture, it initially struggled to define the concept within its political framework as Australia, Japan, and the United States announced their visions and strategies. New Delhi eventually embraced the concept and put forward its own vision through Modi's speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018.

Prior to the 2018 speech, as Canberra, Tokyo, and Washington continued to highlight New Delhi's role in the Indo-Pacific, India cautiously explored the costs and benefits in the region. At the time a key challenge for New Delhi was finding the right balance—between the United States and its allies on one side and China on the other. India's concern was that it must not be perceived as a member of a containment strategy led by the West. At the same time, India was faced with the need for a new strategy as a response to a rising China in its neighborhood.

It is relatively accepted today (primarily among Western nations) that the Indo-Pacific has no set strategy to contain China, the containment concept has largely been driven by China's rise and its aggressive expansion.² Along with the other Indo-Pacific nations, India realized a need to balance a rising China and also play a leading role in the region.³ While New Delhi was gradually realizing the need to manage its biggest neighbor, it did not want to be perceived as jumping on the bandwagon with the West. Moreover, there were differences in perspectives and definitions of the region as a whole. Although New Delhi was positioning itself to take on a more visible and expanded security role, its priority was the immediate Indian Ocean region. Yet as China continued to take an aggressive stance on the South China Sea issue, Southeast Asia—a theater second to the Indian Ocean in New Delhi's strategic mapping—emerged as the key hotspot of Indo-Pacific conversations among Australia, Japan, and the United States. While India's Act East Asia Policy increased its collaborations with its partners in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), there was little enthusiasm from New Delhi to expand its presence beyond diplomatic and possible commercial engagements. Moreover, New Delhi's bilateral engagements have been stronger with certain countries, such as Singapore and Vietnam, than with others—for example, Brunei or the Philippines. This approach led many to question India's stance on the Indo-Pacific and what strategic role, if any, it would be willing to play.⁴

As a region, the Indo-Pacific provided a platform with which to push back against any unilateral actions attempting to change or create alternative norms and customs. This provided New Delhi with a foundation for its balancing strategy toward Beijing. The increasing relevance of the concept emerges from the rise of a new power and the need to push back against unilateral actions by one nation. As such, countries came together to lend support and credibility to a rules-based order with an underlying intent for a balancing strategy vis-à-vis China. While the definition of rules-based order is a matter of debate in itself—in particular, between the developed and developing world—there is a larger agreement on the need to follow and respect established norms and traditions.⁵ The primary driving factor is perhaps the common challenge to strategic interests posed by China's resistance to the accepted rules and norms in the international order. Given that the changes to the current established norms are primarily driven by Beijing's actions, accepting the Indo-Pacific as a new geographic space also created an expectation to strongly and vocally oppose Beijing's unilateral actions. This expectation was no different for India.⁶ India's dilemma appeared because New Delhi did not want to be a part of a strategy to contain China, even though Beijing's rise and initiatives were set to undermine New Delhi's role in its neighborhood and change its security environment. Despite continued support from key players in the region, New Delhi was conscious of its implications on India's relationship with China, a neighbor it had gone to war with in 1962.⁷

As India continued to debate the role and value of the Indo-Pacific as a region, it was extremely cautious of its engagements and the use of the region's name. While the Indo-Pacific as a whole presented a new set of opportunities and a platform to raise India's security profile, India was equally wary of being seen as part of a Western nation-led coalition to push back against China. In retrospect, India's goal was clear: to use the Indo-Pacific as a tool to advance its strategic interests and respond to a changing security environment. For New Delhi, the Indo-Pacific offers choices that strengthen its strategic position. India's Indo-Pacific concept had to be a balancing strategy dictating a careful consideration of its political and diplomatic collaborations and the scope of such engagements. In fact, New Delhi's use of the region's name itself was limited until Modi's speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018. Prior to the dialogue, India was conscious of where it used the name, and with whom, measuring its response and messaging to Beijing and the world. Japan was the first country with which India began to discuss the Indo-Pacific as a region.

In January 2015 New Delhi and Washington recognized the growing importance of the maritime domain and issued a joint vision for the "Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean region."⁸ The vision statement highlights the importance of the Indian Ocean, marking it as a separate theater from the Asia-Pacific. It also underlines the priority areas for both nations: the Asia-Pacific was a priority for the United States, and the Indian Ocean for India. Moreover, neither New Delhi nor Washington were actively pursuing an Indo-Pacific vision at the time. In December of that year, however, New Delhi signed a vision statement with Japan recognizing for the first time the Indo-Pacific as a region that included the Indian Ocean.⁹ Incidentally, the 2015 joint vision statement between New Delhi

and Tokyo predates Japan’s own vision statement (released in August 2016) on the Indo-Pacific. More important, Modi and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe shared a common vision for the Indo-Pacific and pushed their respective administrations to pursue close collaborations with each other. While both Tokyo’s and Washington’s Indo-Pacific visions placed considerable importance on managing a rising China, New Delhi at that time was much more comfortable, politically and strategically, collaborating with Tokyo.

While India’s decision to collaborate with Japan on the Indo-Pacific underlines the political and strategic trust between New Delhi and Tokyo, its distinction between the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean with Washington reflected otherwise. This, of course, reflects sentiments and perspectives of that time, as New Delhi and Washington began to closely collaborate on Indo-Pacific issues in the following years. Yet this change in India’s approach toward the United States is a combination, among other diplomatic efforts, of changes in U.S. policy toward India, as well as New Delhi’s own changing neighborhood and security environment as ushered in by an expanding Chinese presence and growing collaborations.

Timeline: Key Statements and Documents on the Indo-Pacific

Date	Country	Publication
May 3, 2013	Australia	Australia releases its Defense White Paper identifying the Indo-Pacific as the new theater and highlights the strategic shift to the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Rim.
September 7, 2013	China	Chinese president Xi Jinping announces the One Belt One Road project (now the Belt and Road Initiative [BRI]).
December 12, 2015	India and Japan	India and Japan issue the first joint statement on the Indo-Pacific and the world.
October 10, 2015	India	The Indian Navy releases the Indian maritime security strategy , identifying the shift to the Indo-Pacific.
August 27, 2016	Japan	Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe presents the Indo-Pacific vision at the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development.
April 2017	Japan	Japan launches its report on free and open Indo-Pacific strategy.
December 2017	United States	The United States identifies the Indo-Pacific as the new theater in its national security strategy .
May 30, 2018	United States	The United States renames the U.S. Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command.
June 1, 2018	India	Modi presents India’s Indo-Pacific vision at the Shangri-La Dialogue.
June 22, 2019	ASEAN	ASEAN releases a document on its outlook on the Indo-Pacific.
June 2019	France	France releases its strategy on the Indo-Pacific.

NOTE: Australia, Japan, and the United States have continued to update their Indo-Pacific visions and strategies.

China in India's Neighborhood

India's steps toward joining an Indo-Pacific world were very much a result of its strategic location. There was a change in its immediate neighborhood and its security environment, and this change—almost unilaterally brought about by China's increasing presence—threatened New Delhi's position as a primary regional power and security provider. This is not to say, however, that China imposed its initiatives and collaborations in India's neighborhood. China was able to gradually increase its presence in South Asia and across the Indian Ocean because other countries in the region welcomed it. Many of India's neighbors such as Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka viewed India's presence as dominant while overlooking their concerns and challenges. The lack of strategic competition in the region helped India establish itself as the primary security provider for many of these countries. China's initiatives offered an alternative to New Delhi's role as the dominant security player in South Asia and the Indian Ocean.

Over the years Asia has seen an increasing need for better infrastructure and connectivity models.¹⁰ China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013, aims to address the lack of infrastructure in Asia and beyond. Given the scope and capital associated with the project, Chinese investments quickly became lucrative opportunities for infrastructure projects in India's neighborhood. The lack of alternatives that could fulfill the increasing demand for infrastructure led to many welcoming Beijing's investments. The BRI eventually increased Chinese engagements and invariably its presence in the Indian Ocean region and across South Asia dramatically. Moreover, it provided an opportunity for Beijing to expand its presence in the region through strategic collaborations such as developing maritime infrastructure in Maldives and Sri Lanka. While New Delhi initially watched these developments with concern, it was not until 2017 that it took a firm stand against the BRI.¹¹ Before 2017 India's primary opposition was to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a section of the BRI that runs through the disputed territory of Kashmir. The underlying concern, however, was of the strategic implications of BRI in India's neighborhood and the wider Indian Ocean.¹² In 2016, External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, then foreign secretary, cautioned against the rising possibility of using connectivity projects to shape foreign policy choices.¹³ Eventually it was in response to China's invitation to the inaugural Belt and Road Forum in 2017 that New Delhi publicly highlighted its concerns regarding the BRI. In New Delhi's view, "Connectivity initiatives must be based on universally recognized international norms, good governance, rule of law, openness, transparency and equality. Connectivity initiatives must follow principles of financial responsibility to avoid projects that would create unsustainable debt burden for communities."¹⁴ The statement to a great extent clarified New Delhi's view of the BRI—that it undermines the rule of law, is neither open nor transparent, and engages in irresponsible financing, creating debt burdens for communities. On CPEC, India's position was clear in noting that "no country can accept a project that ignores its core concerns on sovereignty and territorial integrity."¹⁵

By the end of 2017, India's concern about unsustainable debts to finance ambitious projects culminated in an economic and strategic challenge when the Sri Lankan government leased its Hambantota Port to China for ninety-nine years (as part of a debt-to-equity swap).¹⁶ The port, located in southern Sri Lanka, was built with Chinese financial assistance. As Colombo struggled to repay the loan, it leased the port to Beijing, drawing concerns over new Chinese ports in the Indian Ocean. A Chinese port in Sri Lanka, with its underlying potential for military use, brings Beijing uncomfortably close to India's maritime neighborhood. While Beijing continued to expand its collaborations across the Indian Ocean, developments in Maldives and Sri Lanka carried significant implications given their geographic proximity to India.¹⁷ Additionally, these island states are in close proximity to key sea lines of communication (SLOCs) critical for the movement of goods and people in times of both peace and conflict. It proved particularly difficult, with governments in both Maldives and Sri Lanka taking a visibly anti-India and pro-China stance. Concerns over prospective dual use of any port in Sri Lanka led to a heightened awareness in India of all Chinese infrastructure projects across the Indian Ocean and South Asia. The Sri Lankan government of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa (who served as president from 2005–2015) grew increasingly close to China, especially between 2013 and 2015. Further, in 2014 a Chinese submarine docked in Colombo, raising concerns in New Delhi. As India raised the issues with its Sri Lankan counterparts, another submarine and a warship docked in Colombo the following month.¹⁸ This was one of the first instances of a Chinese submarine making a port call close to Indian territorial waters. The Hambantota Port agreement was also signed under Rajapaksa's presidency and located in his home constituency. The strategic implications of Chinese submarines in Colombo were significant in highlighting Beijing's options for increasing its military presence, as well as Sri Lanka's willingness to provide such a platform.

Similarly, ties between India and Maldives deteriorated significantly under former Maldivian president Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, who led Malé to develop close ties with Beijing. In 2012 the Maldivian government canceled a \$511 million international airport expansion contract with India-based GMR Group.¹⁹ The contract was later given to a Chinese company for \$800 million.²⁰ As of 2018, Malé reportedly owed Beijing \$1.4 billion in loans for projects finalized under Yameen.²¹ The India-Maldives relationship gradually began normalizing, however, after a political crisis in 2018 that saw Maldivian opposition leader and former president Mohamed Nasheed's party come to power and pledge to investigate all Chinese investments and loans, anticipating that debt to China might actually be as high as \$3 billion.²² Acknowledging the challenging period under Yameen, the Indian embassy in Malé notes that "except for a brief period between February 2012 to November 2018, relations have been close, cordial, and multi-dimensional."²³

Neighboring countries such as Maldives and Sri Lanka carry another significant implication in New Delhi's strategic competition with Beijing: their geography as islands near key trading routes in the Indian Ocean. Moreover, these islands provide access to key choke points and help expand and sustain naval presence across vast maritime domains.

Island nations have long played a critical role in maritime strategy and naval warfare. Colonial powers such as France, the Netherlands, Portugal, and the UK used islands as military assets to secure trading routes and establish dominance in key theaters. In contemporary history, Hawaii, Okinawa, and other islands in the South Pacific played decisive roles in the Second World War. As the Indian Ocean regains its importance in geopolitics, islands will again resume their importance in shaping great power competition. Yet, as opposed to their historical status as colonial outposts, islands in the twenty-first century are sovereign nations with their own strategic priorities. Today island nations' governments, from Antananarivo to Colombo, can significantly alter the security environment with their foreign policy choices. Therefore, hostile governments in Maldives or Sri Lanka can complicate and challenge India's strategic and security priorities in the Indian Ocean.

These developments created a new set of geopolitical challenges for India. While New Delhi was concerned about getting caught between Beijing and Washington as regards Indo-Pacific relations, its neighbors were now in a similar position in an unraveling Sino-Indian competition. Additionally, India was for the first time forced to reexamine its relationships and take notice of its continental and maritime neighbors' deep-rooted discontent with New Delhi. The absence of an alternative situated India as the primary security provider for and strategic partner to most of its smaller neighbors like Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka. This also allowed New Delhi to grow complacent in its role in the Indian Ocean, ignoring its maritime domain. For instance, when Modi visited Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka in 2015, it was the first visit by an Indian head of government in over two decades. While India had traditionally understood the importance of these islands, its strategic role had entered a phase of inertia. It was not until China began to shift the security contours in the Indian Ocean that New Delhi looked toward its neighboring island states. While New Delhi's long-standing bilateral relationship with island nations should have been an advantage, it proved otherwise. Decades of ignoring these island nations now saw New Delhi overstretching its historical and cultural ties. It failed to understand and address challenges as the islands perceived them. New Delhi's initiatives were thought to be one-sided and aimed at strengthening its own interests rather than addressing the issues regionwide.

As the Indo-Pacific concept increasingly became a strategic asset and India began to respond to its new security environment, New Delhi continued to struggle to present a clear vision for the future. In both the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia, smaller nations and littorals wanted to avoid choosing sides in the Sino-Indian or China-U.S. competitions that were brewing. Many of these nations, and India's long-term partners, viewed the Indo-Pacific as a challenge to China's rise.²⁴ For India's neighbors, the rise of China brought new opportunities, projects, and economic initiatives. While this provided a fresh alternative to countries from Maldives to Nepal, it threatened to undermine India's strategic interests. If India had the potential to be the balancing power in Southeast Asia against an assertive China, then China was already emerging as the balancing power in the Indian Ocean

against a dominant India. New Delhi now had the difficult task of competing with Beijing to maintain its role in the Indian Ocean while reinvesting and strengthening its ties with the island states.

Following the changes in its relationship with the island nations, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) began taking steps to correct its shortcomings in island diplomacy. Beginning with a structural change, in 2016 India created a new division within the MEA, called the Indian Ocean Region Division (IOR), which brings together the island nations of Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka for better coordination of initiatives and policy in the Indian Ocean. The division marked a shift in India's foreign policy approach, acknowledging the importance of the maritime domain in its foreign policy engagements. Prior to the creation of the IOR Division, Maldives and Sri Lanka were part of the South Asia neighborhood while Mauritius and Seychelles were under the Africa Division.

The IOR Division is a much-needed effort to view the island states through a maritime prism as opposed to a continental South Asian one. Although New Delhi was gradually making changes in its foreign policy engagements, the larger bureaucratic structure was trained to view the government's strategic and security challenges from a continental perspective given its past border disputes and wars with China and Pakistan. The maritime domain is significantly new in India's strategic thinking and driven by the leadership at the top. It is no surprise that despite creating the IOR Division in the MEA, New Delhi failed to view the region as a whole. While India placed Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka under the IOR umbrella, it left out the western islands of Comoros and Madagascar, the only two other islands in the Indian Ocean, until December 2019, which reflects India's tendency to be reactive in its approach rather than to have a coherent, vision-oriented framework.²⁵ This, of course, continues to change and develop within New Delhi's foreign policy discussions.

While both Maldives and Sri Lanka now have a much warmer relationship with India, the political shift in Malé and Colombo was a loud wake-up call for India. New Delhi found itself in need of a better relationship with its island neighbors, as well as challenged to offer better alternatives to Beijing-led initiatives.

As India examined its options in the wake of a dramatically altered neighborhood led by an increasing Chinese presence, the potential of maritime partnerships became clear in India's choices. By 2018 the Indo-Pacific had provided excellent opportunities for New Delhi to reemerge as a key security player aimed at securing its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. At this point the government finally took steps to provide a vision statement for the Indo-Pacific, as presented in Modi's keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018.²⁶ As India announced its Indo-Pacific vision, partnerships became the central pillar of New Delhi's strategy in realizing this vision.

Partnerships as a Central Pillar of India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Modi's 2018 Shangri-La address provided a framework for India's Indo-Pacific priorities, as well as its concerns and challenges. The speech confirmed India's geographic definition of the Indo-Pacific as being "from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas," providing a broad physical boundary for its initiatives. While Modi put forward many elements of India's Indo-Pacific vision, four key points stood out. First, at the core of the speech was the importance of partnerships and the benefit of collaborations. Modi's speech weaved together the importance of partnerships in India's Indo-Pacific approach, explaining its shift from isolation to active engagements in its recent foreign policy outreach. Second, while it was important for New Delhi to put forward its willingness to work with its partners and recognize the value of strategic partnerships, it was equally important to distance itself from any kind of groupings or "alliances of containment."²⁷ This was a particularly important message for India's smaller neighbors and partners concerned about getting caught between a Sino-Indian or Chinese-U.S. geopolitical rivalry. For the middle powers and smaller nations, New Delhi perhaps wished to position itself as the lead player in stabilizing a hostile environment through cooperation and innovative solutions in an era of new great power competition. Third, India acknowledged the emergence of a new security architecture through "shifts in global power" and as "foundations of the global order appear shaken."²⁸ That new order should be free, open, and inclusive, with strong values and principles that respect law, dialogues, rules, customs, and norms. New Delhi's emphasis on these very principles was also the foundation of its expanding partnerships in the region, signaling that while it accepted the emergence of a new order, it supported one that is based on rules and norms. Fourth, India extended its support to regional architecture and groupings as one of the pillars of the new order. New Delhi placed ASEAN at the heart of its Indo-Pacific vision, pushing forward its own preference for a multipolar world. In New Delhi's view, if architecture of the world order was changing, India must be one of the founding pillars of that new architecture. The Indo-Pacific provided the platform for New Delhi to pursue its global strategic ambitions.

While India has been discussing the Indo-Pacific actively since 2015, it has been slow in incorporating a vision of it into its policy framework. Until the speech at Shangri-La, India's approach was more in terms of shared ideas and interests, outlining the possibilities of an Indo-Pacific theater. There was little clarity in terms of its policy outlook or framework. By March 2020 India's Indo-Pacific vision had a clear framework and priority as a theater for opportunities. As is noted by the MEA, "Through the Indo-Pacific construct, India envisages a greater role for itself in the wider region."²⁹ This lies at the heart of India's interests and priorities in the region.

While India may have been able to provide a better policy direction on the Indo-Pacific after 2018, partnerships have played a pivotal role right from the beginning. It was through increasing collaborations and new partnerships that India was able to expand its presence in an effort to increase its role

in the wider region. Australia, France, Japan, and the United States emerged as New Delhi's natural partners and became the pillars of India's Indo-Pacific partnerships. New Delhi then extended its collaborations to other key players, including the continent of Africa; the nations of Indonesia, Oman, and Singapore; and organizations like ASEAN and the European Union. An emerging group of critical partnerships are those that India has with island communities across the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Ocean, and reaching as far as the Caribbean. India's management of its relationships with Iran, Russia, and the United Arab Emirates will to a great extent shape both its own priorities and the larger security architecture. While China remains a key player in ushering in this new architecture, Beijing's ambitions undermine New Delhi's strategic interests. As such, managing Sino-Indian competition will be at the forefront of India's strategic challenges.

Indo-Pacific Initiatives

India's initial Indo-Pacific initiatives centered around infrastructure collaborations with Japan. This was a direct response toward providing an alternative to Chinese-led initiatives across the region. In 2015 Japan announced its Partnership for Quality Infrastructure initiative to promote sustainable, quality, financially responsible infrastructure versus a "cheap, but shoddy" method (the latter referring to Chinese projects).³⁰ In 2016 New Delhi and Tokyo underlined the potential and need to connect Asia with Africa thorough the Indian Ocean region.³¹ The idea later culminated in the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, an initiative largely seen as a direct counter to China's Maritime Silk Road—the maritime component of the BRI. New Delhi and Tokyo share mutual concerns as China has emerged as a key competitor in infrastructure development across the Indo-Pacific.³² From Southeast Asia to the Indian Ocean, Beijing's initiatives were set to undermine both New Delhi's and Tokyo's positions in the region. Building on the trust in the political system between India and Japan and their increasingly converging interests, the two countries, under Modi and Abe, looked to offer alternatives in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia.³³ If Tokyo was a key economic partner for nations in the region, New Delhi played a strategic role in providing security to many in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. The lack of any strategic or historical baggage led to India and Japan consistently announcing a range of initiatives aimed at addressing the new security challenges in the region. The initiatives include, among others, a port in the southern city of Chabahar, Iran, a terminal in Sri Lanka, and possible infrastructure collaborations in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kenya, and Vietnam. At the bilateral level, Tokyo is perhaps the leading player in infrastructure investments in India, including those of its northeastern border and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Both northeastern India and these islands have traditionally been politically sensitive regions with limited access to the international community and businesses.³⁴

Led by Abe's administration, India and Japan were perhaps the initial countries discussing collaborations in the Indo-Pacific, recognizing shared interests and challenges with the rise of China. Both

New Delhi and Tokyo emerged and remain key partners in each other's Indo-Pacific visions. Despite strategic and political agreement, however, India and Japan have struggled to operationalize many of the initiatives. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor has yet to realize any projects, and despite a vision document in 2017 outlining the priority areas and sectors, there has been no substantial development.³⁵ Similarly, many of the announced projects and initiatives remain in an exploratory mode, with only limited progress in deliverables. While the India-Japan relationship reflects unmatched strategic trust, it has primarily been due to a warm political relationship, as well as the lack of any strategic mistrust. On economic collaborations, however, the relationship can essentially be defined with Japan as the donor and India as the recipient. As the two countries move toward a new collaborative relationship, the lack of experience in joint economic projects and rigid bureaucracies in both New Delhi and Tokyo have created significant challenges leading to coordination delays at the operational level. Additionally, New Delhi cannot match Tokyo's expertise or capital in infrastructure development. This asymmetry in technical and economic capabilities to offer alternatives has also delayed implementing identified projects. The failure to realize concrete Indo-Pacific deliverables despite an early start has underlined the need to better understand each other's priorities and challenges in the region. While slow progress on deliverables has not undermined the positive growth of the relationship, there are signs of exasperation on both sides. For India, however, Japan is and will remain a key partner in the Indo-Pacific. As the MEA notes, "Japan became the only country with which India has an Annual Summit as well as 2+2 Ministerial mechanism when the inaugural India Japan 2+2 Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting was held in November 2019."³⁶ Yet to realize the potential of the relationship there must be better understanding and coordination at the working level on both sides. The compatibility must now trickle down from the leadership at the top to the working level below.

New Delhi's infrastructure partnership with Tokyo was an immediate reaction to Beijing's increased initiatives in the region and an entry point into the Indo-Pacific conversation. But India gradually began to also utilize the Indo-Pacific umbrella as a means to expand its own presence. India's diplomatic outreach under the Indo-Pacific far exceeds any of its prior global engagements. One of the initial measures taken by Modi's government was to send high-level delegations to visit key countries across the globe. These historical visits led to a reinvigoration of India's bilateral ties in a changing security environment. Going beyond its continental and island neighborhood, India began extending and increasing its engagements with Africa and Europe, as well as the Arctic, Caribbean, and Pacific regions.

While India has had a longstanding relationship with Europe, it has largely been dominated by trade. While strategic and military collaborations have been limited to France and the UK at a bilateral level, a new security environment and strategic challenges have led to an increased interest in Brussels, London, and New Delhi on the potential of the Europe-India relationship. The European

Union and India have a shared interest in maintaining a rules-based order and supporting the importance and role of regional institutions such as ASEAN and the Indian Ocean Rim Association. Going beyond the shared foundational interests, both Brussels and New Delhi have made efforts to expand their trade-dominated ties to include wider political, strategic, and geoeconomic interests. The key areas of interest between the two governments began with infrastructure development and maritime security. In December 2018 Brussels adopted a strategy to streamline the effort to “strengthen cooperation and the partnership” with New Delhi.³⁷ The strategy underlines the shifts in European thinking and recognizes New Delhi as an important player in its broader geopolitical interests.³⁸ Similarly, under the Indo-Pacific approach New Delhi has made significant efforts in reconnecting with European nations, both through the European Union and bilaterally.³⁹ Yet the Europe-India relationship has largely remained an avenue for strategic coordination, with few deliverables. A strong relationship with Europe offers New Delhi new partners and resources with which to address its strategic concerns. While central and eastern European nations, in particular—with the notable exception of the Czech Republic—continue to deepen their economic ties with Beijing, and especially with the BRI, Brussels is wary of unilateral actions disregarding the established rules and norms around infrastructure development and financing. As such, New Delhi has found a partner in supporting its bid to increase its own strategic profile in a new multipolar world.

Similarly, India has also placed considerable effort on its Africa outreach. As the Sino-Indian competition continues in the Indian Ocean, the African coastline on the western Indian Ocean has become a key strategic destination. While New Delhi’s presence in the western Indian Ocean and Africa have been traditionally weak, its current approach aims to renew old partnerships and establish new ones. As regards the maritime domain, the Indian Navy is increasing its footprint in the western Indian Ocean through capacity building and humanitarian assistance initiatives. With the presence of key choke points, from the Mozambique Channel in the south to the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait in the north, the African coastline and its islands are set to play a significant role in shaping the new power dynamics of the Indian Ocean. To highlight the importance of the region, New Delhi has not only made historical visits to the region but announced the opening of eighteen new missions in Africa to strengthen its political and strategic interests in the region.⁴⁰ In a parallel effort, the Indian government has also been stepping up its engagement with the Arab Gulf nations—especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.⁴¹ Apart from energy interests, the strategic location of the countries with regard to maritime security makes the Gulf region a key area of interest.

A new shift in New Delhi’s strategic thinking has been the importance of island nations in India’s Indo-Pacific vision. As mentioned earlier, island nations, long ignored and pushed to the periphery of big power engagements, are beginning to reclaim their role in maritime security. The Indo-Pacific provides an excellent initiative for increased collaborations with strategic islands located near critical choke points and geographies beyond the Indian Ocean. Although the efforts are slow and at times

ad hoc, New Delhi has attempted to build up its diplomatic and strategic presence across islands in the Indo-Pacific. While the Indian Ocean islands hold significant place in India's strategic profile, New Delhi has also reached out to the Pacific region and, most recently, the Caribbean islands. New Delhi held two summits of the Forum for India–Pacific Islands Cooperation in 2014 and 2015; the third summit is scheduled for 2020. In 2019, capturing the importance of international organizations, New Delhi met for the first time with the Pacific Islands Developing States (PSIDS) on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly announcing a grant of \$1 million to members of PSIDS for high-impact projects of their choice.⁴² Additionally, New Delhi also offered a concessional line of credit of \$150 million to Pacific Island countries for projects in solar power, in other renewable energy sources, and related to climate change. India also used the opportunity to hold its first ever meeting with Caribbean Community leaders.⁴³ New Delhi's interactions with the Pacific and the Caribbean at the prime minister level is aimed at signaling the importance of the regions' geography and their roles in a new emerging architecture. Moreover, India's outreach to the island nations is an effort to establish itself as a leader by providing solutions and initiatives to address their security concerns. Such an approach helps New Delhi establish a positive relationship with nations and increase its own presence and diplomatic outreach. India's island diplomacy is, however, new and requires better understanding and streamlined efforts going beyond cultural ties and diplomatic outreach. Nevertheless, the recognition of the islands' geographical importance underlines the shift in New Delhi's strategic interests and ambitions in the Indo-Pacific.

Simultaneously, India increased the frequency of its collaborations with its key partners—Australia, France, Japan, and the United States—in the Indo-Pacific. Alongside this increase in diplomatic outreach to new regions, New Delhi was coordinating with its friends and partners to identify new initiatives and challenges across the Indo-Pacific. France and India came together to launch the International Solar Alliance in an effort to promote renewable energy, fight climate change, and reduce the cost of solar energy.⁴⁴ Similarly, supporting New Delhi's proposal for disaster-resilient infrastructure, Australia, Japan, and the United States became founding members of the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure in 2019.⁴⁵ In pursuing such issue specific collaborations, New Delhi can perhaps borrow from its experience with the so-called tsunami core group in 2004, initiated by Washington, in which Australia, India, Japan, and the United States came together to coordinate relief efforts in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia.⁴⁶ As India continues to explore new collaborations with its partners, it stands to gain from similar function-driven initiatives in the Indo-Pacific. These initiatives, supported by the key players of the Indo-Pacific, shape New Delhi's image as a leader, thus lending credibility and substance to its efforts.

Bilaterally, India continues to engage with its key partners at the highest level as regards the number of exchanges and annual dialogues. New Delhi hosts annual 2+2 Dialogues with Australia, Japan,

and the United States and has an annual defense dialogue with France. Additionally, there are a number of annual exchanges at the working level on a variety of topics, ranging from counterterrorism, cybersecurity, and space to science and technology. Leaders of these five nations consistently meet on the sidelines of international forums and summits across the globe. India also hosts maritime security dialogues with key partners to discuss regional and global security issues, holding annual Maritime Security Dialogues with Australia, the European Union, France, Japan, Myanmar, the United States, and Vietnam in 2019.⁴⁷ New Delhi is also looking to address nontraditional security threats and promote sustainable developments through initiatives for a blue economy and ocean development. These initiatives are crucial in addressing security threats faced by island nations and littorals across the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, there are trilateral meetings, such as those of India, Japan, and the United States, and of Australia, India, and Indonesia, as well as quadrilateral ones. Ministerial-level leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States met for the first time as the Quadrilateral Group, or Quad, in 2019.⁴⁸ Members of the Quad have also met at the senior official level since 2017. Although the vision and purpose of the Quad remains unclear, the political willingness to come together and discuss issues of global and regional interest underlines the convergence in strategic interests and shared challenges among its members. At a bilateral level, New Delhi's relationship with these partners focuses on leveraging resources and capacity to address its own challenges and capability gaps. India's objectives with its primary partners is to coordinate and better address common challenges and threats, providing a platform to offer solutions and initiatives and presenting itself in a leadership role. Through its Indo-Pacific initiatives, along with partnering with nations to secure its strategic interests, New Delhi is now actively presenting collaborative initiatives to address regional challenges, such as infrastructure development and nontraditional threats, among others. At a broader level, these partnerships help India secure strategic interests, offer options to mitigate its own capacity challenges, and lend credibility toward its role and profile as a world leader in the wider geopolitical competition.

Despite its global engagements and enthusiastic collaborations, New Delhi's primary area of concern remains the Indian Ocean. Fundamental and structural changes in the region threaten all aspects of India's security, as well its global vision and initiatives. At a time of crisis, India will focus all of its resources and energy in securing the Indian Ocean, which provides the foundation for its global leadership role. The changing security environment in the Indian Ocean also requires a change in India's military and security response. Therefore it is no surprise that much of New Delhi's actionable efforts are focused on the IOR. As India continues to expand its diplomatic and political presence across the Indo-Pacific, New Delhi will invest its limited capital and resources in the Indian Ocean. Similar to its foreign policy, India will leverage Indo-Pacific initiatives to bridge its capability gaps in the IOR.

Military Strategy

If India's MEA is leading New Delhi's diplomatic efforts, the Indian Navy is leading the military effort in realizing India's Indo-Pacific vision. The navy considers the IOR its area of responsibility and home theater.⁴⁹ While New Delhi has always carefully watched Chinese military engagements and presence in the IOR, the Indian Navy maintains an advantage in the theater. India's geographic position in the IOR naturally provides the navy with an added advantage. The navy prides itself as the first responder for humanitarian crises across the region due to its access through the IOR—in comparison to Beijing, which is geographically distant. The absence of Chinese naval bases in the Indian Ocean (with the exception of its logistics facility in Djibouti) has long been considered a challenge for Beijing's ability to maintain and, more important, sustain its military presence in the Indian Ocean. This in turn has proved advantageous for New Delhi. Combined with the lack of operational experience in the IOR and limited presence, the Indian Navy is confident of its superiority in this time of strategic conflict with Beijing. China's Malacca Dilemma, which Beijing has been systematically reducing, is India's operational strength.⁵⁰ Yet with a meager allocation of 15 percent of India's military budget, the navy has limited capacity and resources to strengthen its efforts.⁵¹ As such, India's maritime partnerships provide an excellent opportunity to further address some of the nation's military challenges.⁵²

In the maritime domain, the Indian Navy has taken a twofold approach in its Indo-Pacific initiative. The first part of the approach is to create Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) across the Indian Ocean. MDA is an initiative that aims to provide information on all developments and movements across the Indian Ocean, helping to create trends and identify challenges to better inform policy and military choices. Awareness and correct information shape a clear and required set of actions to secure India's strategic interests. The second part of the approach is to expand and maintain India's naval presence to maximize its outreach and visibility and to increase operational experience across the domain. If MDA creates a picture that identifies threats and challenges, presence allows the navy to respond and shape new developments.

Maritime Domain Awareness

As Beijing steadily increases its engagements and presence across the IOR, the Indian Navy has also scaled up its presence, preparedness, and missions. Although New Delhi remains certain that Beijing is far from threatening India's military presence, there is no doubt about Beijing's intentions of positioning itself as a security provider in the Indian Ocean region. The Chinese naval facility in Djibouti, the submarine docking in Sri Lanka, assistance in the Maldives water crisis, submarine deployments, trainings with Bangladesh, and, most recently, China's oceanographic data mapping of the IOR are some of the developments that could potentially undermine India's geographic advan-

tages in the region and point to an increasingly expeditionary concept in Chinese naval thinking and operations.⁵³ As a result, the Indian Navy has prioritized MDA as a critical component and a priority area in its IOR strategy. In order to better prepare and understand emerging trends and challenges, the Indian Navy must be aware of all developments across the IOR. This requires creating an MDA picture that captures all movements across the IOR. The 2015 maritime security strategy document defines MDA as “being cognizant of the position and intentions of all actors, whether own, hostile or neutral, and in all dimensions—on, over and under the seas.” Through the MDA initiative the Indian Navy aims to create a reliable and “broader strategic situational awareness” of all developments in the IOR through “intelligence, conduct of surveillance and reconnaissance in all dimensions (space, air, surface, underwater and electronic), and analytical review of the same.” Additionally, the navy must also be cognizant of “actions by potential adversaries to develop MDA in [India’s] areas of interest, including during peace time.”⁵⁴ While the navy’s area of interest is defined by New Delhi’s economic and political interests, the priority lies in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Navy must first address its MDA challenges in the IOR before expanding to other theaters. As the navy considers the entire Indian Ocean as its area of primary interest, developing MDA capabilities across the IOR is a significantly massive initiative. An attempt to monitor movements across all domains in the vast Indian Ocean requires considerable energy, resources, capital, and expertise. The wide scope of such initiatives dictates the need for collaborations and partnerships to realize an effective and reliable MDA picture. No one country can independently generate MDA over large areas beyond its immediate waters, and India is no different.

As a response to the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, India initiated a national MDA project and launched the Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) in 2014.⁵⁵ Jointly managed by the Indian Navy and Coast Guard, it is the nodal center of the National Command Control Communications and Intelligence Network. The center generates India’s coastal MDA picture by fusing information it receives from various sources, including Automatic Identification System sensors and radar (both space based and land based), among others. The center then links its fifty-one naval and coast guard stations to provide information and surveillance over its entire coastline, along with its outlying islands, in real time, twenty-four hours a day.

While the IMAC provides a coherent picture of India’s coast, New Delhi quickly realized the need for better awareness beyond its immediate waters and across the IOR. At the regional level, if India wants to emerge as a net security provider, it must lead the efforts in addressing common threats and challenges. Nontraditional security threats and natural disasters are some of the key concerns threatening maritime security across the IOR. Much like national MDA, regional MDA also begins with information sharing. Through initiatives and projects, India has begun making efforts to strengthen its regional MDA capabilities. Some of these initiatives include white shipping agreements and coastal surveillance radar chains on IOR islands. In an effort to increase MDA capabilities across the

IOR, New Delhi has also installed a network of coastal surveillance radar across Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka to help the island nations better secure their vast exclusive economic zones.⁵⁶ Additionally, India has helped Bangladesh and Myanmar install coastal radars in the Bay of Bengal. Through white shipping agreements, India also receives the data from these radar networks across the Indian Ocean.

The white shipping agreement allows New Delhi to exchange data on commercial traffic, and this helps create a better picture of movements and vessels at sea.⁵⁷ India has thus far operationalized its white shipping agreements with seventeen countries and is actively pursuing similar agreements with others.⁵⁸ Yet while collecting data and information is a crucial step in creating an MDA picture, there remains the herculean task of fusing large data sets originating from multiple sources to create one reliable picture of actionable information. To that end, India inaugurated the Information Fusion Center for the India Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in December 2018.⁵⁹ The center aims to provide regional MDA by “building a common coherent maritime situation picture and acting as a maritime information hub for the region.”⁶⁰ Speaking at the inauguration of the IFC-IOR, India’s Finance and Corporate Affairs Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, then defense minister, underscored the center’s objective in “keeping the global commons safe and democratically available.” From a maritime perspective, the center is envisioned to support India’s “capability building in the region, coordination of incident response and disaster relief, and in time, also share submarine safety information.”⁶¹ The IFC-IOR aims to provide a holistic picture of the entire Indian Ocean rather than viewing it through subregions; this is a platform to operationalize the navy’s vision to be a net security provider. Equipped with indigenously built software, the IFC-IOR provides and facilitates exchange of information among countries in the IOR to create a common MDA picture on a real-time basis. The center coordinates and facilitates exchange of information with its partner nations and stakeholders on incidents of piracy, illegal fishing, drug smuggling, human trafficking, maritime terrorism, environmental hazards, and natural disasters, among other things. The expansive database on commercial and shipping vessels allows identification of illegal vessels across the IOR. India has also invited a number of countries to post liaison officers at the center as their points of contact between India and its partners. Australia, France, Japan, the UK, and the United States were among the first to respond to New Delhi’s invitation in a show of support toward India’s role as a leading player in the Indian Ocean.⁶² While Australia, Japan, the UK, and the United States have yet to send their international liaison officers to the IFC-IOR, France has done so.⁶³ The stationing of such officers at the center aims to reduce logistical and bureaucratic processes in the dissemination of information.

The IFC-IOR has an analytical focus to help connect the dots by monitoring developments. Through its analysis, the center aims to provide information and highlight trends and incidents that might potentially trigger a crisis. While the IMAC is the national MDA center, the IFC-IOR is the international center for the collation and sharing of information with its friends and partner nations. Both IMAC and the IFC-IOR at the national and international levels aim to create predictive analysis to

aid in India's MDA capabilities. A reliable MDA will allow for better preparedness and address challenges and risks before they appear. If fusing large sets of data to create one reliable picture is a challenge, the need to disseminate that information in real time makes that challenge far more complex. While New Delhi is leading the effort in providing a regional MDA hub for the Indian Ocean, it must collaborate with its key partners to further strengthen its capabilities. MDA efforts of this scale and scope are very new to India's diplomatic and military efforts, but India's key partners have considerable experience and expertise in information sharing and MDA capabilities through their alliances and agreements, such as the Five Eyes alliance. Through its Indo-Pacific partnerships New Delhi can learn from these experiences and gain technical knowledge for secure and effective data collection and dissemination. As the IFC-IOR continues to grow, India must be able to provide secure communications and manage larger networks and data sets to provide a real time and effective MDA picture.

To place things in perspective, the IFC-IOR is only one component of the required MDA picture for military purposes. The MDA primarily covers commercial shipping and fishing vessels. There is an addition of gray shipping (via the military) and dark shipping (via vessels that purposely hide their identity) at the surface level. A much more challenging aspect of MDA is tracking movements below the surface. Underwater MDA consists of all movements at the subsurface level. The biggest challenge for underwater MDA is the complexity and costs related to detection and surveillance of submarines. Without underwater MDA, India's awareness is limited and the MDA picture incomplete. It is no surprise that both MDA and antisubmarine warfare claim priority designations in India's maritime strategy. The Indian Navy, in partnership especially with France and the United States, is focusing on exchange of intelligence, creating MDA, and antisubmarine warfare. The increasing complexity in India's bilateral naval exercises with its key partners in the recent past aims to address New Delhi's MDA challenges. MDA is and will remain New Delhi's priority area in strengthening its capabilities in the IOR in a growing Sino-Indian maritime competition.

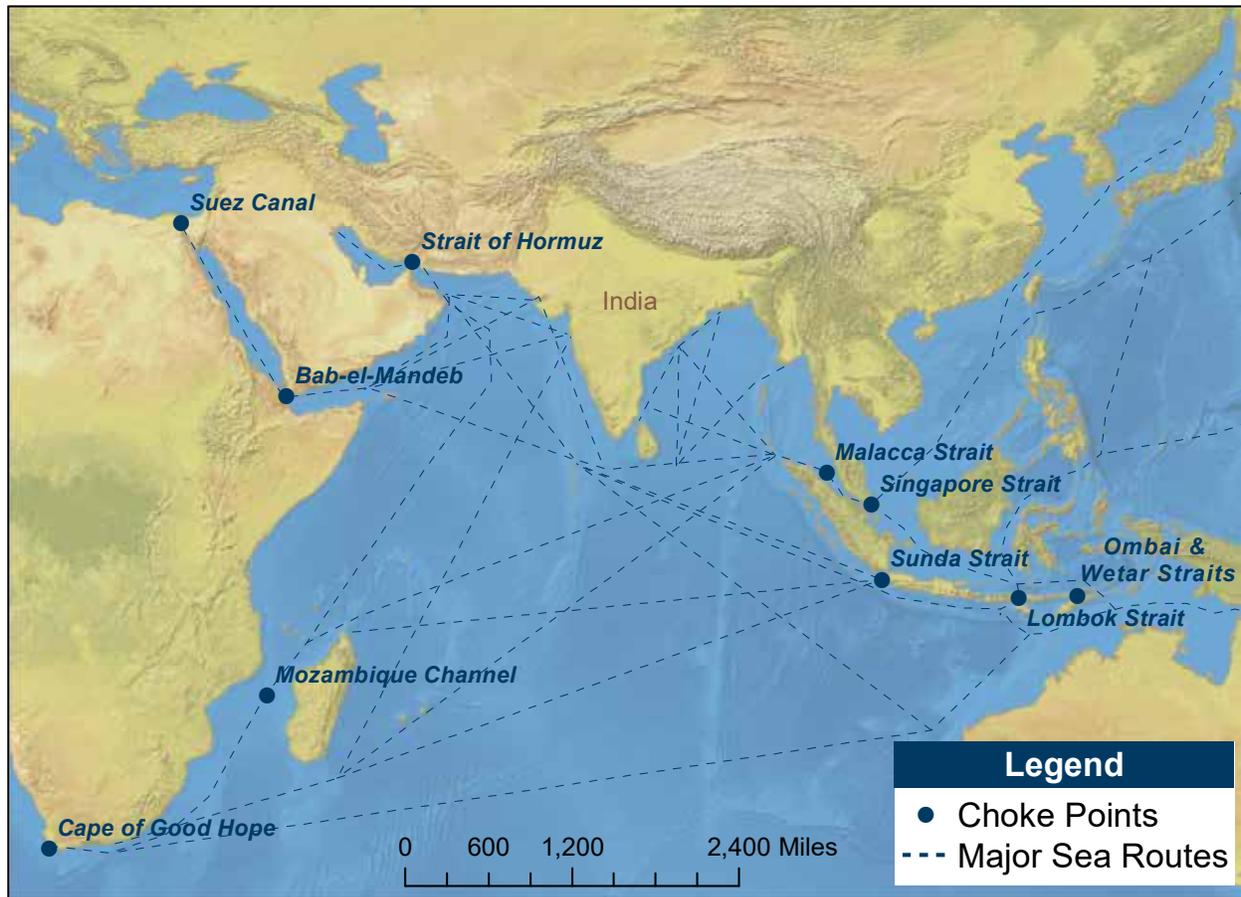
Naval Presence

As India continues to develop its MDA capabilities, its presence in the region and its role in securing key SLOCs have assumed greater importance. The navy places significant emphasis on the choke points facilitating entry to and exit from the Indian Ocean. Surveillance and presence across SLOCs are also critical for submarine detection, as it is far more challenging to detect a submarine in open seas. On SLOC protection, the navy notes, "In times of heightened readiness or conflict, for conduct of maritime operations, SLOCs would acquire increased importance, both for India and the adversary, necessitating measures for protection and interdiction respectively."⁶⁴ In order to respond to any crisis or generate awareness, the Indian Navy needs to be present across key choke points and critical subregions of the IOR (see map 1). In an effort to boost its presence and visibility, the Indian Navy launched its Mission Based Deployments (MBDs) in 2017.⁶⁵ Through the MBDs the Indian Navy

aims to be present across the IOR by deploying ships and aircrafts in seven key locations (see map 2). This is in addition to other missions and naval deployments in the IOR. These MBDs strengthen India’s ability to conduct missions responding to both traditional and nontraditional security threats. The presence of ships in key areas also allows India quick access and the ability to respond to humanitarian crises far from its shores. For example, the MBD allowed the Indian Navy to respond quickly and swiftly to flood-hit Madagascar and a cyclone in Mozambique.⁶⁶ For decades India has positioned itself as the first responder to humanitarian crises in the IOR, and the navy believes these deployments allow India to more rapidly act. The MBD allows New Delhi “to increase its visibility, create domain awareness, and respond to threats and challenges quickly.”⁶⁷ It also strengthens India’s role as a net security provider.

MAP 1

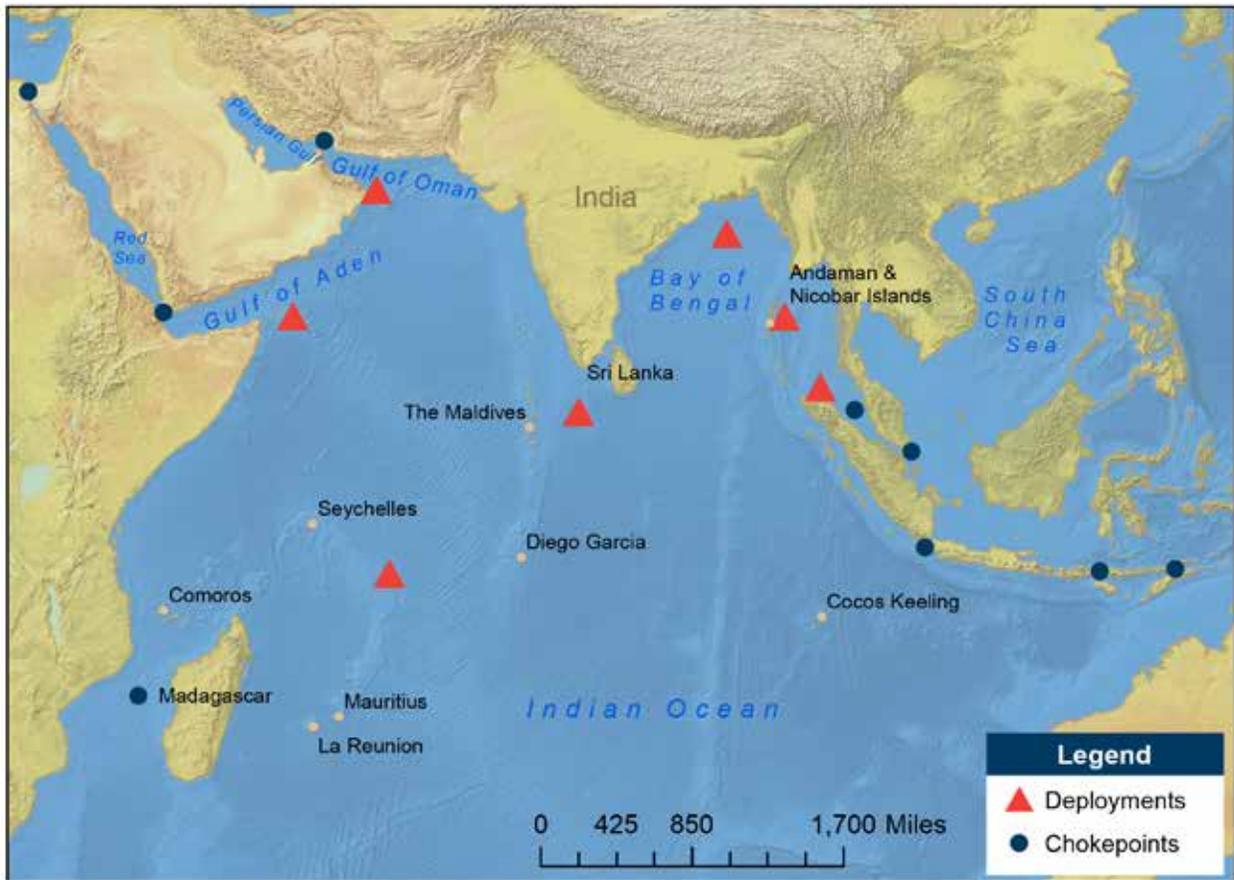
Key Choke Points in the Indian Ocean



SOURCE: Directorate of Strategy, Concepts, and Transformation, Integrated Headquarters, “Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy,” Naval Strategic Publication 1.2, Indian Navy, October 2015, https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf; based on maps from Natural Earth, <https://www.naturalearthdata.com/downloads/50m-raster-data/50m-natural-earth-1/>.

MAP 2

Indian Navy's Mission-Based Deployment



SOURCE: Directorate of Strategy, Concepts, and Transformation, Integrated Headquarters, "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy," Naval Strategic Publication 1.2, Indian Navy, October 2015, https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf; Press Information Bureau, "Year End Review—2019 Ministry of Defense," Government of India Ministry of Defense, December 27, 2019, <http://pibarchive.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=196160>; Sujan Dutta, "Indian Navy Informs Government About the Fleet's Reoriented Mission Pattern," New Indian Express, April 1, 2018, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2018/apr/01/indian-navy-informs-government-about-the-fleets-reoriented-mission-pattern-1795404.html>; based on maps from Natural Earth, <https://www.naturalearthdata.com/downloads/50m-raster-data/50m-natural-earth-1/>.

But the lack of India's overseas military bases creates a fundamental and logistical challenge in New Delhi's ability to sustain continued presence under its MBD. While India is better placed to maintain a regular presence in the eastern and northern Indian Ocean, it faces logistical challenges in the southern and western Indian Ocean. These challenges can, however, be overcome by easy access to military facilities held by India's friends and partners. This was, perhaps, one of the reasons why India overcame its political hesitation to sign logistics exchange agreements with its partners. Although these agreements exist on a case-to-case basis and do not allow for open access to each other's facilities, they considerably reduce bureaucratic and logistical challenges. In effect, a logistical exchange

agreement widens the possibility of accessing each other's facilities should there be political will to do so. Such collaborations can considerably assist in New Delhi's need to sustain and undertake long deployments, including those for MDA purposes. India initially signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement with the United States, which was followed by an agreement with France.⁶⁸ Today New Delhi has similar agreements with Australia, Singapore, and South Korea and is looking to finalize agreements with Japan and the UK. An example of opportunities provided by logistical exchange agreements is the deployment of India's P-8I maritime reconnaissance aircraft to France's Réunion, an island in the Indian Ocean.⁶⁹ India's ability to operate its P-8I from Réunion significantly increases New Delhi's ability to monitor, surveil, and maintain presence in the western Indian Ocean. As such, France became the first country to conduct joint patrols with India (as opposed to coordinated patrols) using Réunion as the base for exercises in the southern Indian Ocean.⁷⁰ Similarly, should there be the political will to do so, India's logistical facilities agreement with the United States could potentially provide an opportunity to access U.S. military facilities in Diego Garcia or Guam, thereby boosting India's presence and MDA capabilities. Successful agreements with Australia and Japan can potentially provide access to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and Okinawa, respectively. For its part, India must allow for MDA collaborations from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Together these island territories provide critical access and reach key choke points and entry and exit points for the Indian Ocean. New Delhi, in collaboration with its Indo-Pacific partners, must utilize the potential of island territories in the IOR to extend its reach, sustain its presence, and generate better MDA.⁷¹ Given that these island territories provide access to critical choke points, it also allows for better monitoring of subsurface movements. As India continues to increase the level of complexity in its annual naval exercises with the Australia, France, Japan, and the United States, there is value in regular exchanges on antisubmarine warfare and P-8I deployments. While it will require political will to open up and utilize each other's strategic military facilities, India, the United States, and other nations must realize the underlying potential of islands in maritime collaborations, especially in a new and evolving security environment.

For example, India and the United States can use their own P-8 aircrafts to fly between the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Diego Garcia in the IOR during naval exercises. Similarly, Australia and India can use the same model to fly their respective P-8's between these islands and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands.⁷² Apart from supporting P-8I deployments, the strategic island territories also strengthen New Delhi's MDA capabilities, as well as presenting a sustained presence across the IOR. India must remember that China can overcome its geographical disadvantages by acquiring operational experience and logistics facilities in the IOR. Given Beijing's expansive defense budget and capital surplus, China will be able to rapidly increase its logistical facilities should the need arise. This will help China sustain its operations and deploy its navy across the Indian Ocean. The addition of subsurface and air components to Chinese surface ships in the IOR will further challenge India's security and prominence in the IOR. India must take steps to create deterrence and increase the costs

for Beijing if the latter chooses to engage in a strategic maritime competition and confrontation. While India might not have the necessary resources to respond to Chinese expansions in the IOR, it can utilize its maritime partnerships to address some of its resource constraints. The strategic use of island territories is one such step.

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific construct has provided an opportunity for India to maximize its strategic interests while responding to changes in the security environment. Despite political enthusiasm between New Delhi and its partners, however, the pace of implementation and the road map to realizing the Indo-Pacific vision remains limited. As the key partners move forward, countries must acknowledge and accept that their Indo-Pacific visions will never align completely with each other. New Delhi and its partners must continue to underline the broader and foundational principles of democracy, rule of law, and other shared interests while focusing on issue-based partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, New Delhi must explore new partnerships based on shared interest. While interactions have been low, India should now look to other nontraditional players with great potential, such as Canada, New Zealand, and Norway to address shared interests in the Indo-Pacific.

For realistic and effective collaborations to take place, there is a need to acknowledge and recognize the difference in priorities, theaters, and regional dynamics for each of India's Indo-Pacific partners. For example, within the Indo-Pacific, Australia's and Japan's priorities lie in the Pacific, while France is focused primarily on the western Indian Ocean. While the Indian Ocean is important for the United States, its own engagements and presence have been limited in comparison to the Pacific. Although the United States has the necessary foothold in the region through its bases in Bahrain and Diego Garcia, they have been far more critical for U.S. engagements in the Middle East rather than the Indian Ocean itself. The Indian Ocean is a secondary area of concern for Australia and Japan, while the Pacific Ocean is a secondary area of concern for India. Given the different areas of priorities, each nation will have a different political appetite and available resources for the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Indo-Pacific priorities will depend on national interest shaped by the immediate neighborhood and threat perception for all nations. Therefore, a successful Indo-Pacific collaboration does not lie in a convergence of policies but through coordinated and issue-based partnerships framed by a model of burden sharing. Effective coordination based on converging strategic interests and principles is the best way forward in operationalizing an Indo-Pacific partnership.

While the Indo-Pacific may have been a necessary construct as a response to a changing world order, it has structurally altered India's foreign policy priorities and engagements. India's partnerships today are built on converging strategic interests and a new security environment. New Delhi's current

initiative and changes are a reflection of a shift in India's foreign policy rather than a continuation of its reaction to a rising China. As such, the Indo-Pacific is now a theater of opportunity to increase India's profile and role globally. As New Delhi continues to move forward with its Indo-Pacific initiatives, it will face further geopolitical challenges, balancing its old and new partnerships. As countries in Southeast Asia and smaller island nations continue to navigate within the Chinese-U.S. competition, India will also be faced with complex and challenging questions. Far more often than not, India will perhaps find itself in a position of having to balance its relationship with new strategic partners such as the United States and old friends like Russia. Similarly, New Delhi's strategic interests might appear in contrast with its traditional positions on nonalignment and other Cold War-era policies. But India's current geopolitical environment, and its threats and challenges, are different from those of the past. New Delhi will continue to leverage its partnerships to address those threats and challenges while recognizing its capacity constraints. India must be willing to implement its Indo-Pacific vision and continue taking steps that cater to the role it envisions for itself. The Indo-Pacific will continue to provide New Delhi an opportunity to raise its profile and secure its strategic interests, but the government must be open to new ideas and frameworks such as a burden-sharing model centered on issue-based partnerships. Such an approach will allow India to maximize its limited resources and capacities to better prepare for a new security environment. Going forward, India's actions and deliverables in the Indo-Pacific will lay the foundation for its role in a new global security architecture.

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