

## The Indo-Pacific as a Maritime Security Complex: India's Strategic Role and Regional Power Dynamics

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### Abstract

This study explores India's evolving maritime security strategy in the Indo-Pacific by viewing the region as a maritime security complex shaped through layered and overlapping strategic relationships, conceptualized here as a "maritime mandala." The idea reflects concentric circles of engagement stretching from India's immediate neighbourhood to the wider Indo-Pacific. The study places India's maritime strategy within the larger context of shifting regional power dynamics, especially the rise of China and the recalibration of the United States' strategic posture in Asia.

The paper examines how India's transition from the Look East Policy to the more assertive Act East Policy widened its strategic outreach across Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the broader Indo-Pacific. It also investigates India's growing partnerships with ASEAN member states, Japan, Australia, France, and the United States, with particular attention to bilateral, trilateral, and minilateral arrangements such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). These engagements are analysed in relation to maritime security, freedom of navigation, and the protection of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs).

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach based primarily on secondary sources, including academic scholarship, maritime doctrines, policy papers, and official government statements. Through this framework, the paper evaluates India's strategic instruments, including naval modernization, defence diplomacy, maritime domain awareness initiatives, and joint military exercises.

The findings suggest that India's maritime strategy has substantially strengthened its role within the Indo-Pacific security architecture. Expanded naval capabilities, multilateral exercises, and cooperative capacity-building initiatives have enhanced India's strategic visibility and reinforced its image as a credible net security provider. At the same time, several structural constraints remain significant. Resource limitations, institutional challenges, and the intensifying strategic rivalry between the United States and China continue to shape and at times limit India's strategic autonomy.

The study concludes that the concept of a maritime mandala offers a useful analytical lens for understanding India's layered strategic engagements across the Indo-Pacific. India's approach, rooted in strategic autonomy, partnership-building, and support for a free, open,



and inclusive maritime order, represents a sustainable strategy for balancing China's growing influence while contributing to regional stability and a rules-based international system.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, maritime security, India, maritime mandala, strategic autonomy, QUAD, China, naval diplomacy, regional security architecture

### **Introduction**

Over the last two decades, the term “Indo-Pacific” has moved from a relatively obscure geopolitical expression to one of the most important concepts in contemporary international relations. It reflects the growing strategic and economic interconnectedness of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, now increasingly viewed as a single geopolitical theatre. Although the term itself can be traced back to the German geopolitical thinker Karl Haushofer in the 1920s through his work *Indopazifischen Raum* (Haushofer, 2013), and later appeared in the writings of Indian historian Kalidas Nag during the 1940s (Ganguly, 2024), it gained widespread strategic significance only in the twenty-first century.

A major turning point came in 2007 when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe addressed the Indian Parliament and described the Indo-Pacific as the “confluence of the two seas.” Abe’s vision framed the Indian and Pacific Oceans as an integrated strategic space capable of promoting “freedom and prosperity” across Asia (Abe, 2007). His articulation coincided with wider transformations in the international system, particularly the relative decline of Western dominance and the simultaneous rise of Asian powers. In that changing environment, earlier frameworks such as the “Asia-Pacific” appeared increasingly insufficient for explaining emerging geopolitical realities (Basu, 2021).

The twenty-first century is often described as the maritime century, and the Indo-Pacific has emerged at the centre of global trade, strategic competition, and maritime security challenges (Brewster, 2021). The region contains some of the world’s busiest and most strategically important Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), through which the majority of global trade and energy supplies pass. As a result, maritime space is no longer viewed merely as a commercial route; it has become a critical arena for power projection, strategic competition, and economic interdependence (Kumar, 2024).

Geographically, the Indo-Pacific stretches from the eastern coast of Africa to the western shores of the Americas, encompassing major chokepoints and maritime corridors essential to global commerce (Choong, 2019; Bhattacharya & Eadon, 2021; Scott, 2020). More importantly, however, the area of Indo-Pacific not only represents topographic importance but also a dynamic strategic setup that is shaped by competing national interests, shifting alliances, and evolving regional security architectures.

India’s maritime strategy must be understood within this wider geopolitical and historical setting. For much of its post-independence history, India’s security outlook remained heavily continental in orientation. Territorial disputes and land-based threats, particularly from China and Pakistan, dominated strategic thinking. Maritime concerns, although not absent, remained secondary.

Yet the roots of India's maritime consciousness extend much further back. During the colonial period, European powers, especially Britain, relied on naval superiority to establish and sustain imperial control over the Indian Ocean region (Sen, 2023). After, the end of colonial rule, India continued a relatively careful maritime posture, shaped by its commitment to non-alignment, limited naval capabilities, and pressing continental security concerns.

The 1971 Indo-Pakistan War marked an important turning point in this trajectory. India's naval operations against Karachi demonstrated, perhaps for the first time after independence, the strategic utility of sea power in achieving broader national objectives (Sen, 2023). After that time, maritime strategy has gradually progressed from a marginal issue into a core component of India's national security framework.

In recent years, India's maritime engagement has expanded significantly in both scale and ambition. This transformation has been closely linked to China's emergence as a major maritime power and its growing presence across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). China's approach is largely state-driven and infrastructure-centric, reflected in initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the development of dual-use ports and logistical centers at strategically important locations. These projects are designed not only to secure China's maritime trade routes but also to expand its geopolitical influence and potentially reshape the regional security architecture in its favour (Goud & Mookherjee, 2015).

India, by contrast, has pursued a more cooperative and partnership-oriented approach. Instead of depending upon the monetary advantages, New Delhi has focused on institutional partnerships, developmental assistance, and capacity-building initiatives. Programmes such as Mission SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) highlight India's emphasis on humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and cooperative maritime governance.

India's increasing engagement with ASEAN states, Japan, Australia, France, and the United States, whether through bilateral partnerships or multilateral platforms such as the QUAD, reflects its broader effort to support a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific order.

These differing approaches reveal deeper contrasts in strategic orientation. China's model tends to emphasize hierarchical influence, economic dependency, and sustained military presence. India's strategy, on the other hand, seeks to preserve strategic autonomy while promoting cooperative security arrangements. In practical terms, India has adopted a policy of calibrated alignment: strengthening partnerships where necessary while avoiding rigid alliance commitments.

This study conceptualizes India's layered maritime engagement through the framework of a "Maritime Mandala." The concept represents concentric circles of strategic interaction, extending from India's immediate Indian Ocean neighbourhood to its wider Indo-Pacific partnerships. The framework helps explain the flexibility and multidimensional character of India's maritime strategy, which combines deterrence, diplomacy, cooperation, and capacity-building.

India's growing maritime role is also visible in its operational activities, including anti-piracy missions, protection of SLOCs, naval deployments near the Malacca Strait, and participation in regional institutions such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum. The transition from the Look East Policy to the more proactive Act East Policy reflects a broader strategic shift toward deeper economic, political, and security engagement with Southeast Asia (Pant, 2013; Huisken, 2010).

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, maritime security has assumed even greater strategic significance. Naval power is now increasingly linked with economic growth, connectivity, and India's broader aspiration for global influence (Avram, 2014). As India continues to modernize its navy and expand its strategic partnerships, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a crucial arena for safeguarding national interests and contributing to regional stability.

Against this backdrop, the present study critically examines the Indo-Pacific as a maritime security complex and evaluates India's strategic role within it. By situating India's maritime policy within the wider context of regional power competition and cooperation, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how emerging powers navigate increasingly interconnected maritime environments.

### **Research Methodology**

The current study adopts a qualitative and analytical research design to examine India's maritime security strategy in the Indo-Pacific, with particular emphasis on strategic evolution, regional partnerships, and emerging security challenges. Given the complexity of maritime geopolitics and shifting regional power equations, the study primarily relies on interpretative and explanatory methods to analyse patterns of strategic behaviour, policy transformation, and regional security interactions.

To ensure both depth and reliability, the research draws upon a broad range of primary, secondary, and tertiary sources.

### **Sources of Data**

**1. Primary Sources:** Where relevant, the study makes use of:

- Official policy documents, including maritime doctrines and white papers
- Government statements, speeches, and diplomatic communications
- Reports issued by defence ministries and international organizations

**2. Secondary Sources:** The larger part of the analysis is based on:

- Academic books and scholarly monographs
- Reputed journal articles
- Governmental policies and institutional reports

**3. Tertiary Sources:** Additional information has been collected from:

- Reputable academic databases such as Scopus-indexed journals
- Institutional publications and think-tank reports
- Verified digital archives and online sources

### **Methods of Analysis**



The collected material has been analysed through multiple qualitative methods, including:

- Content analysis for interpreting policy documents, strategic doctrines, and official narratives
- Comparative analysis to examine India's maritime strategy in relation to China and the United States
- Thematic analysis to identify recurring trends in maritime cooperation, regional alignments, and security challenges

### **Analytical Framework**

The study is guided by a combination of theoretical perspectives, including:

- Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)
- The Balance of Power framework
- Strategic Autonomy as a core principle of India's foreign policy

### **Review of Literature**

The evolving geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific, especially the rise of China and India's changing strategic posture, has attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years. Existing literature presents a wide range of perspectives on Sino-Indian rivalry, maritime competition, and the broader transformation of regional power dynamics. This section critically examines major scholarly contributions in order to situate the present study within the wider academic discourse.

One of the most influential works on Sino-Indian relations is Garver's *Protracted Contest* (2001), which conceptualizes the relationship between India and China as a long-term structural rivalry shaped by competing national interests and regional ambitions. Garver argues that both countries have historically searched for what he describes as a "mutually acceptable accommodation," yet neither has been fully willing to concede strategic space to the other. He identifies two possible trajectories: either China recognizes India's supremacy in South Asia, or India gradually accommodates China's enlarging regional influence. While the analysis remains foundational, it arguably underestimated India's later maritime transformation and its growing strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

Subsequent scholarship revisited Garver's framework in light of contemporary developments, particularly China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its expanding maritime footprint. Scholars such as Ali (2025) and Tramballi and Talbot (2020) highlight the intensification of Sino-Indian competition across critical strategic locations in the Indian Ocean, ranging from Gwadar in Pakistan to Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. Their analyses suggest that the rivalry between the two Asian powers has moved beyond continental boundaries and increasingly entered the maritime domain, making the Indo-Pacific a central arena of strategic contestation.

Lyle J. Goldstein (2015) offers a somewhat different perspective centred on conflict mitigation and strategic accommodation. In *Meeting China Halfway*, he places Sino-Indian tensions within the larger context of U.S.-China rivalry and argues in favour of cooperative

mechanisms aimed at reducing escalation. Goldstein identifies India's acquisition of advanced maritime surveillance platforms, such as the P-8I aircraft, as one factor contributing to Chinese strategic anxieties. Although his proposals for confidence-building measures, including transparency initiatives and territorial compromise, provide useful insights, critics often regard them as overly idealistic given the realities of contemporary geopolitics.

Debates surrounding China's maritime strategy have further enriched the literature. Brewster (2017) interprets the "String of Pearls" strategy not simply as a policy of encirclement, but as China's pragmatic attempt to secure vulnerable sea lines of communication. In contrast, scholars such as Kaplan (2015) and Ibanez et al. (2020) argue that China's expanding network of ports and dual-use infrastructure carries clear strategic implications and represents a form of maritime encirclement that has prompted counterbalancing responses, particularly from India.

India's maritime strategy itself has been widely examined by scholars. Brewster (2014) emphasizes the centrality of the Indian Ocean to India's geopolitical identity and strategic ambitions. He argues that India increasingly perceives China's growing naval presence, especially submarine deployments in the Indian Ocean Region since 2013, as a direct challenge to its regional influence. Similarly, Malik (2022) highlights India's concerns over the security of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), which remain essential for the country's economic stability and energy security.

Another important theme in the literature concerns economic statecraft and infrastructure diplomacy. Scholars such as Blanchard and Flint (2017) and Singh et al. (2018) contend that China's BRI enhances Beijing's geopolitical leverage by creating networks of economic dependence while simultaneously enabling potential military access through dual-use facilities. In response, Lidarev and Pant (2022) underline India's counterbalancing efforts, including the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and the expansion of strategic partnerships with countries such as France, Japan, and Australia.

More recent studies have also revisited the continental dimension of Sino-Indian rivalry. Writing in the aftermath of the Galwan Valley clash, Raghavan (2020) argues that earlier proposals advocating territorial compromise have become increasingly unrealistic due to the severe erosion of trust between the two countries. This development reinforces the broader argument that Sino-Indian competition is no longer limited to disputed land borders; instead, it has evolved within a multidimensional rivalry encompassing maritime strategy, market control, and global alignments.

### **Synthesis of Literature**

Taken together, the existing body of literature demonstrates a clear transition in Sino-Indian relations from a primarily continental rivalry to a far more complex and multidimensional strategic contest extending into the maritime sphere. Earlier scholarship focused heavily on territorial disputes and bilateral tensions, whereas contemporary studies place greater

emphasis on maritime security, infrastructure development, strategic partnerships, and regional power competition.

Despite these valuable contributions, there remains a noticeable lack of integrated analysis that situates India's maritime strategy within a broader Indo-Pacific security framework through conceptual approaches such as the maritime security complex or the maritime mandala. This gap in the literature highlights both the relevance and originality of the present study.

## **Results and Discussion**

Since the early 2000s, India's expanding economic reach and rising strategic profile have significantly reshaped the way it engages with the Indo-Pacific. Growing trade networks and deeper connectivity with Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Pacific created a pressing great maritime presence. As a result, naval modernization and strategic outreach began to accelerate at an unprecedented pace.

India's transition from the Look East Policy (LEP) to the more assertive Act East Policy (AEP) marked a major turning point in this evolution. Muni (2013) explains this shift in two broad phases. The first phase focused largely on economic integration and institutional engagement with ASEAN. The second moved well beyond economics, bringing defence diplomacy, maritime cooperation, and strategic partnerships with powers such as the United States, Japan, Australia, Russia, and South Korea into sharper focus.

India's maritime orientation became increasingly visible through its active participation in multilateral naval exercises. The 2007 Malabar Exercise, involving the United States, Japan, Australia, and Singapore, was particularly significant (Prabhakar & Lawrence, 2014). More than a routine military drill, it symbolized India's gradual movement away from a largely continental security outlook toward a broader maritime strategy with Indo-Pacific dimensions.

## **1. India's Maritime Strategic Relations with the "Intermediate" Neighbourhood**

### **1.1 India-Singapore Security Cooperation**

India and Singapore have steadily built one of the most consistent maritime partnerships in Southeast Asia, anchored in the 2003 Defence Cooperation Agreement. Over time, exercises such as SIMBEX have improved interoperability, operational coordination, and naval familiarity between the two countries. India's deployment of major naval assets, including INS Viraat and guided missile destroyers during SIMBEX exercises, demonstrated its ability to project power into the South China Sea (Brewster, 2013).

The partnership acquired additional strategic depth with the 2018 logistics agreement, which granted the Indian Navy access to Singapore's Changi Naval Base. This considerably enhanced India's operational reach across the Indo-Pacific (Ministry of Defence Singapore, 2018).

Military cooperation has also been reinforced by strong economic ties. The Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) deepened commercial interdependence and added another layer to the strategic relationship. Singapore's participation in multilateral initiatives such as the Malabar exercises further reflected its recognition of India as an important Indo-Pacific security actor.

### **1.2 India-Malaysia Security Cooperation**

India's defence engagement with Malaysia reflects its broader role as a regional capacity builder. Cooperation extends across naval exercises like MILAN, bilateral military exercises such as *Harimau Shakti*, defence exhibitions including LIMA, and a range of technical training programmes.

India has also assisted Malaysia in areas such as submarine operations, pilot training, and the maintenance of Russian-origin defence equipment (Jha, 2011; Prabhakar & Lawrence, 2014). These interactions highlight India's growing importance as a reliable maritime and defence partner in Southeast Asia while simultaneously strengthening regional security capabilities.

### **1.3 India-Indonesia Security Cooperation**

India and Indonesia share deep historical maritime linkages that have gradually evolved into a strategic partnership. Formal cooperation expanded after the 2001 Defence Cooperation Agreement and now includes coordinated patrols, naval exchanges, and strategic dialogue on maritime security issues, particularly around the Natuna Islands.

Both countries have expressed common concerns regarding freedom of navigation and the security of the Indian Ocean region, especially near the strategically important Malacca Strait. Through institutional mechanisms such as the India-Indonesia Joint Commission, the two sides have also coordinated their positions on issues linked to the South China Sea. Their cooperation reflects a shared commitment to preserving regional stability and maintaining a rules-based maritime order.

### **1.4 India-Vietnam Security Cooperation**

India's relationship with Vietnam has emerged as one of its strongest strategic partnerships in Southeast Asia. Beginning with the 1994 Defence Agreement, bilateral ties have steadily expanded through naval cooperation, defence technology transfers, and military training initiatives.

India's access to Cam Ranh Bay and its support in submarine training and missile systems underscore its role in strengthening Vietnam's maritime capabilities (Brewster, 2017). This partnership has acquired additional significance against the backdrop of China's increasingly assertive posture in the South China Sea. For India, Vietnam represents both a strategic partner and a key pillar in its broader Indo-Pacific engagement.

## **2. India's Maritime Strategic Relations with the "Extended" Neighbourhood**

### **2.1 India-Australia Security Cooperation**

India-Australia relations have undergone a remarkable transformation, especially since the 2009 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (Ali, 2025). Naval exercises, QUAD

participation, and collaboration in areas such as maritime domain awareness (MDA), humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), and counter-piracy operations reflect growing strategic convergence between the two countries.

This partnership is driven largely by shared concerns over maritime security and China's expanding naval presence in the Indo-Pacific (Brewster, 2014). The 2020 Mutual Logistics Support Agreement further strengthened interoperability and operational coordination between the two militaries (Ministry of External Affairs, 2020a).

### **2.2 India-South Korea Security Cooperation**

India's engagement with South Korea extends into defence technology, shipbuilding, cyber cooperation, and nuclear security. South Korea's advanced industrial and technological capabilities complement India's naval modernization efforts, particularly in shipbuilding and maritime infrastructure development (Yoon, 2014).

The relationship gained new momentum after the 2015 "Special Strategic Partnership." Defence cooperation now includes naval exchanges, cyber-security initiatives, and projects such as the K9 Vajra-T artillery programme (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). Increasingly, both countries view technological collaboration and maritime cooperation as essential for ensuring regional stability and supporting a multipolar Indo-Pacific order (Patgiri & Gogoi, 2026). Emerging collaboration in space and satellite technologies has further expanded the strategic scope of the partnership.

### **2.3 India-Japan Security Cooperation**

India and Japan have developed a comprehensive strategic partnership rooted in shared democratic values and common concerns regarding maritime security. The 2008 Joint Declaration significantly elevated bilateral cooperation by expanding defence collaboration, naval exercises such as JIMEX, and coast guard coordination.

An important milestone came with the signing of the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) in 2020, which enabled reciprocal logistical support between the armed forces of both countries and strengthened operational coordination across the Indo-Pacific (Ministry of External Affairs, 2020b).

Cooperation has also widened through the QUAD framework, supply-chain resilience initiatives, cybersecurity collaboration, and joint exercises. Japan's support for India's integration into broader strategic and technological frameworks has added further depth to the relationship.

### **2.4 India-United States Security Cooperation**

India-U.S. defence cooperation has increasingly become one of the central pillars of Indo-Pacific security architecture. The partnership now revolves around interoperability, intelligence-sharing, defence technology, and maritime security. Foundational agreements such as LEMOA (2016), COMCASA (2018), and BECA (2020) substantially improved operational coordination and intelligence-sharing between the two countries (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025).

Defence trade has expanded dramatically, rising from negligible levels in 2008 to more than \$25 billion by 2025 (Vivekananda International Foundation, 2025). Recent cooperation includes the MQ-9B drone agreement, co-production of GE-F414 jet engines for Tejas Mk-II aircraft, and Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness initiatives (U.S. Department of Defence, 2024; Ministry of External Affairs, 2025).

Pant and Joshi (2024) argue that the India-U.S. relationship has gradually evolved from a transactional partnership into a broader strategic alignment aimed at preserving a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific order.

### **2.5 India–France Security Cooperation**

India-France security cooperation has become an increasingly important element of the Indo-Pacific strategic framework. Shared concerns regarding maritime security, freedom of navigation, and regional stability have driven closer defence engagement between the two countries.

The relationship has deepened through initiatives such as the Varuna naval exercises, the Scorpene submarine project, and the Rafale fighter aircraft programme (Ahmed, 2025). In April 2025, India and France signed an intergovernmental agreement worth nearly ₹63,000 crore for the procurement of 26 Rafale-M fighter jets for the Indian Navy, marking a major advancement in bilateral defence ties (Dassault Aviation, 2025).

Beyond defence acquisitions, both countries have strengthened cooperation in maritime domain awareness, defence technology, and Indian Ocean coordination, reflecting growing strategic convergence and a shared commitment to maintaining a rules-based Indo-Pacific order (Press Information Bureau, 2025).

### **Analytical Discussion**

The findings point to several major trends shaping India's maritime strategy in the Indo-Pacific.

#### **1. Maritime Reorientation and Strategic Competition**

India's gradual shift from a continental security orientation toward a maritime strategy reflects the growing importance of sea power in contemporary geopolitics. Control of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) and maritime chokepoints has become central to national power and strategic influence (Kaplan, 2015; Mearsheimer, 2003). Much of this reorientation is closely linked to China's expanding naval capabilities and infrastructural outreach across the Indo-Pacific.

#### **2. Partnerships and Multilateral Architectures**

India's increasing dependence on bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral partnerships, particularly with QUAD members and ASEAN states, demonstrates its preference for flexible security arrangements over formal alliances (Lidarev & Pant, 2022). These partnerships improve interoperability, facilitate information-sharing, and strengthen strategic signalling, while still allowing India to preserve its long-standing commitment to strategic autonomy.

#### **3. China's Dual-Use Infrastructure and Strategic Implications**

China's development of dual-use infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has altered the strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific. Ports and logistics facilities presented as commercial projects may also possess significant military utility, complicating India's maritime calculations (Blanchard & Flint, 2017; Fravel, 2019). India's response has involved strengthening regional partnerships, enhancing maritime domain awareness, and increasing its own strategic presence across the Indian Ocean and beyond.

#### **4. Non-Traditional Security and Maritime Governance**

India's emphasis on non-traditional maritime security issues, including HADR operations, anti-piracy missions, and maritime capacity-building, has enhanced its credibility as a net security provider. These activities not only build trust with littoral states but also reinforce India's normative leadership within the Indo-Pacific (Brewster, 2014; Malik, 2022).

#### **Policy Recommendations**

1. **Institutionalize Maritime Partnerships:** Strengthen logistics-sharing arrangements, intelligence cooperation, and naval coordination mechanisms while maintaining strategic autonomy.
2. **Enhance Indigenous Naval Capabilities:** Invest more heavily in domestic shipbuilding, maintenance facilities, and defence manufacturing to reduce external dependence.
3. **Expand Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA):** Develop integrated surveillance systems and share MDA capabilities with regional partners as a collective security resource.
4. **Prioritize Non-Traditional Security Cooperation:** Institutionalize cooperation in HADR, anti-piracy operations, and coastal security to build long-term trust and influence.
5. **Develop Dual-Use Maritime Infrastructure:** Create strategically located logistics nodes through partnerships and public-private models to sustain long-range naval deployments.
6. **Strengthen Crisis Management Mechanisms:** Establish communication channels and confidence-building measures, especially with China, to minimize escalation risks.
7. **Promote Defence Technology Collaboration:** Expand co-production and technology-transfer agreements with strategic partners to strengthen India's maritime capabilities.
8. **Advance Normative Maritime Leadership:** Continue advocating for a rules-based maritime order grounded in international law, particularly UNCLOS, while strengthening engagement with regional institutions.

#### **Conclusion**

India's maritime transformation in the early twenty-first century reflects a deliberate and sustained strategic recalibration shaped by changing geopolitical realities in the Indo-Pacific. This shift has been driven by several interconnected developments: the expansion of India's economic engagement with East and Southeast Asia, the growing strategic importance of

securing Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), and the intensifying competition generated by China's expanding maritime presence.

As a consequence, India has gradually moved beyond its traditional continental focus and adopted a far more outward-looking maritime strategy extending across the Indian Ocean Region and into the wider Indo-Pacific.

The study shows that India's maritime approach is multidimensional. It combines diplomacy, defence cooperation, naval modernization, and capacity-building initiatives in a carefully balanced framework. Through bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral partnerships, India has strengthened both its strategic presence and its contribution to regional stability. The transition from the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy, together with initiatives such as SAGAR and participation in the QUAD, reflects India's larger commitment to a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific order.

India's role as a regional security provider operates on two levels. Operationally, the country has expanded its naval footprint through patrols, escort missions, joint exercises, and maritime surveillance activities. Normatively, it has promoted cooperative security through humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), maritime capacity-building, and support for a rules-based order rooted in international law. This combination has strengthened India's credibility among littoral states, particularly across the Indian Ocean Region.

At the same time, the study identifies several structural and strategic constraints. China's expanding naval capabilities and its growing network of dual-use infrastructure continue to pose long-term challenges. India also faces internal limitations, including gaps in naval capacity, logistical infrastructure, and defence-industrial capability. Added to this are the geopolitical sensitivities of partner states and the broader complexities of great-power competition, all of which shape the limits of India's strategic engagements.

Within this context, the concept of a Maritime Mandala offers a useful framework for understanding India's layered and flexible approach to regional engagement. By balancing strategic autonomy with selective partnerships, India seeks to navigate Indo-Pacific geopolitics without becoming tied to rigid alliance systems.

For India to sustain and expand its maritime role, however, episodic initiatives won't be enough. Long-term institutional frameworks for cooperation are essential. This means strengthening indigenous maritime capabilities, improving maritime domain awareness, deepening defence-industrial collaboration, and consolidating partnerships with both regional and extra-regional actors. Equally important is India's continued commitment to normative leadership through support for freedom of navigation, inclusive regional governance, and a rules-based maritime order.

Ultimately, India's evolving maritime strategy reflects both opportunity and limitation. The country has made substantial progress in establishing itself as a credible maritime actor, yet its long-term effectiveness will depend on how successfully it aligns strategic ambition with institutional capacity while adapting to the rapidly changing dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. In that sense, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how emerging powers navigate

complex maritime environments and influence regional security architectures in an era of intensifying geopolitical competition.

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