

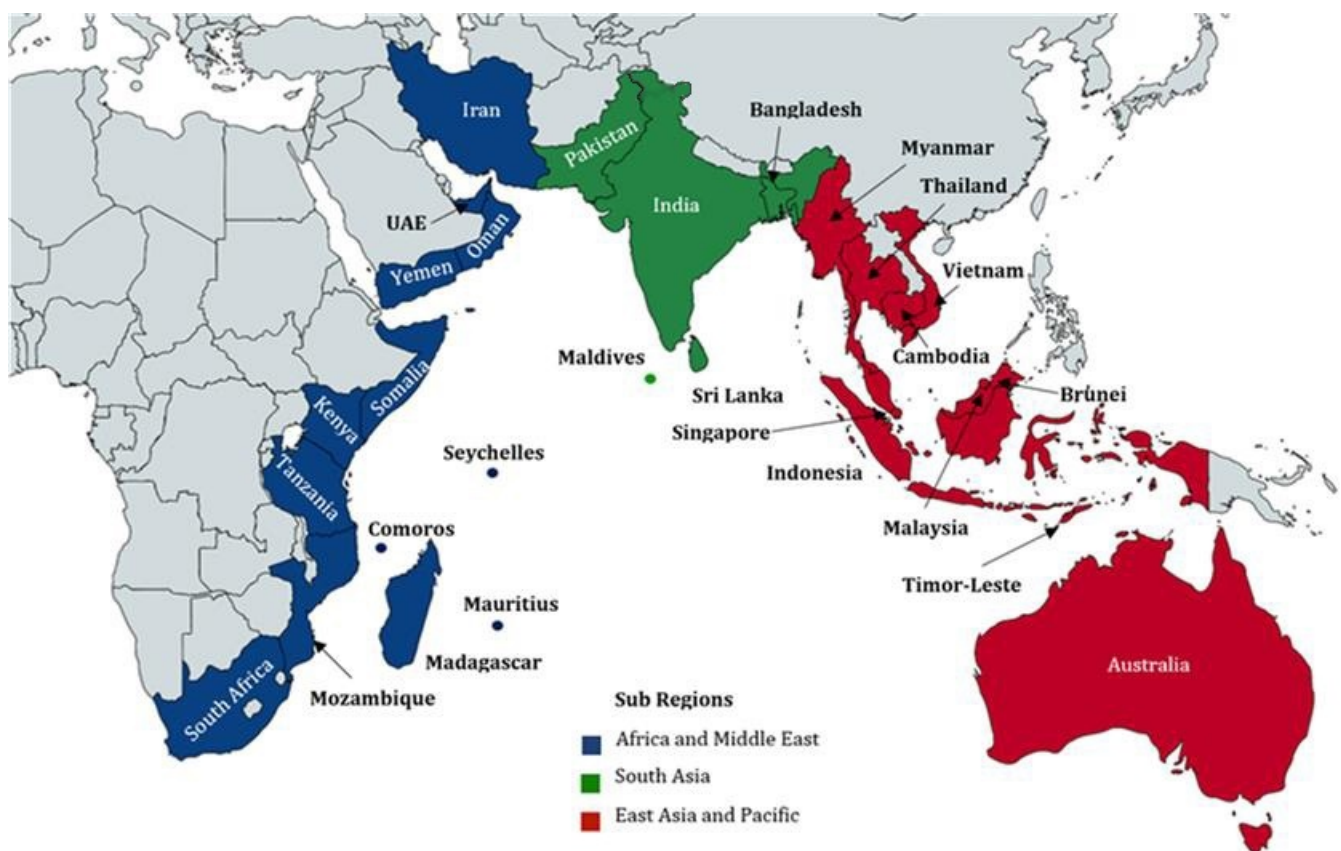
India's Increasing Influence in the Indian Ocean Region

written by Maheen Tanveer | December 27, 2022



Introduction

India sits in the middle of the Indian Ocean. It defines the region as “extending from African littoral to Southeast Asia”. With the world’s geopolitics shifting towards the Indian Ocean, India has also started stretching its maritime muscles in the Indian Ocean. India has considered the Indian Ocean as its traditional sphere of influence and aspires to achieve regional power status. However, the rise of China and its increasing footprints in the Indian Ocean has alarmed India. Beijing’s initiatives and power projection in the region threaten India’s maritime interests and power aspirations. Moreover, India wants the US presence in the region but to a limited point. An increased presence would tarnish India’s status in the region as a ‘net security provider’ and the ‘preferred security partner’. It is also concerned that increased US presence in the region could shrink India’s sphere of influence in the neighbourhood.



Significance of the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean has gained strategic importance as world politics has shifted towards Asia in all aspects. As it connects three continents, the Indian Ocean is a maritime bridge for trade. It connects energy-rich states of the Middle East and North Africa with the consumer and energy-deficient states of East Asia. The region comprises geo-strategically important sea arteries namely, the Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Malacca, and the Horn of Africa. These are Sea Lines of Communication, which ensure the smooth functioning of

global trade. Politically, the Indian Ocean region has the presence of emerging power and major powers like the USA and China. The importance of this region is immense for the world powers to establish or maintain their global power status at large.

India's Maritime Power

India has historically been unable to project its power in the Indian Ocean because of economic insufficiency and domestic political division marked by several separatist movements. In recent years, however, India has embarked on the path of economic development and has emerged among the world's top 10 economic powers. India and China both are the biggest crude oil importers and depend heavily upon the Indian Ocean for trade. India feels threatened by the Chinese developments in the Indian Ocean Region and regards it as the 'strategic encirclement of India'. To counter Beijing's influence India has adopted many policies and strategies.



India's Act East Policy

In 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi changed India's Look East Policy to Act East Policy. The vision underlying this policy is Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). The SAGAR initiative is part of India's greater proactive foreign policy. It is a strategic move to protect its national interest in the Indian Ocean Region. Under this policy, India has entered into various regional agreements, multilateral and multilateral agreements. It has become part of various regional forums such as ASEAN, Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, Asia

Cooperation Dialogue, and Indian Ocean Rim Association. In terms of trade connectivity, India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project are the major initiatives taken by India. Moreover, India has enhanced strategic and economic cooperation with East Asian nations such as Vietnam, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.

Made In India

Indian policy is to increase its military, air, and naval enhancement along with technological development as a goal towards indigenization and promoting “Made in India”. India has already started exporting its weapons to other Middle Eastern and African states. It also wants to overcome its trade deficit with China and has banned several Chinese company’s access to its market. Moreover, to counter increased Chinese investments, India and Japan have launched Asia-Africa Corridor to facilitate access to African states as far as in the East Asian region.

India’s Changing Naval Posture

India has changed its strategic orientation from a ‘brown water navy’ to an expanding ‘blue-water power projection capability. Under this initiative, many new projects are launched to make India a blue-water navy by 2030. Under this policy, India aims to become a Net Security Provider in the Indian Ocean Region.

Indian Defense Involvement in the Indian Ocean

Moreover, under the Made in India Policy, India is also modernizing its navy and is taking several initiatives in the Indian Ocean Region. These include upgrading the Indian Navy, building ports in many island nations in the region, conducting bilateral and multilateral military exercises, building coastal radar networks and strengthening relations with Island nations in the region.

Conclusion

The Indian Ocean is the future of world politics. Since India became the 6th largest country in the globe, bypassing France, it has inevitably started to establish itself in the region. Chinese interest in the region expresses a concern for India. Moreover, considering the geostrategic and geoeconomic significance of the region, the US has been keen to maintain its presence in the Indian Ocean. Previously, it was in the form of Obama’s ‘Pivot to Asia’ or “Rebalancing Strategy” and now it is the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy”. All this has raised security concerns for India. Keeping this in context, India is expanding its maritime power in the Indian Ocean to secure its interest and maintain regional dominance.