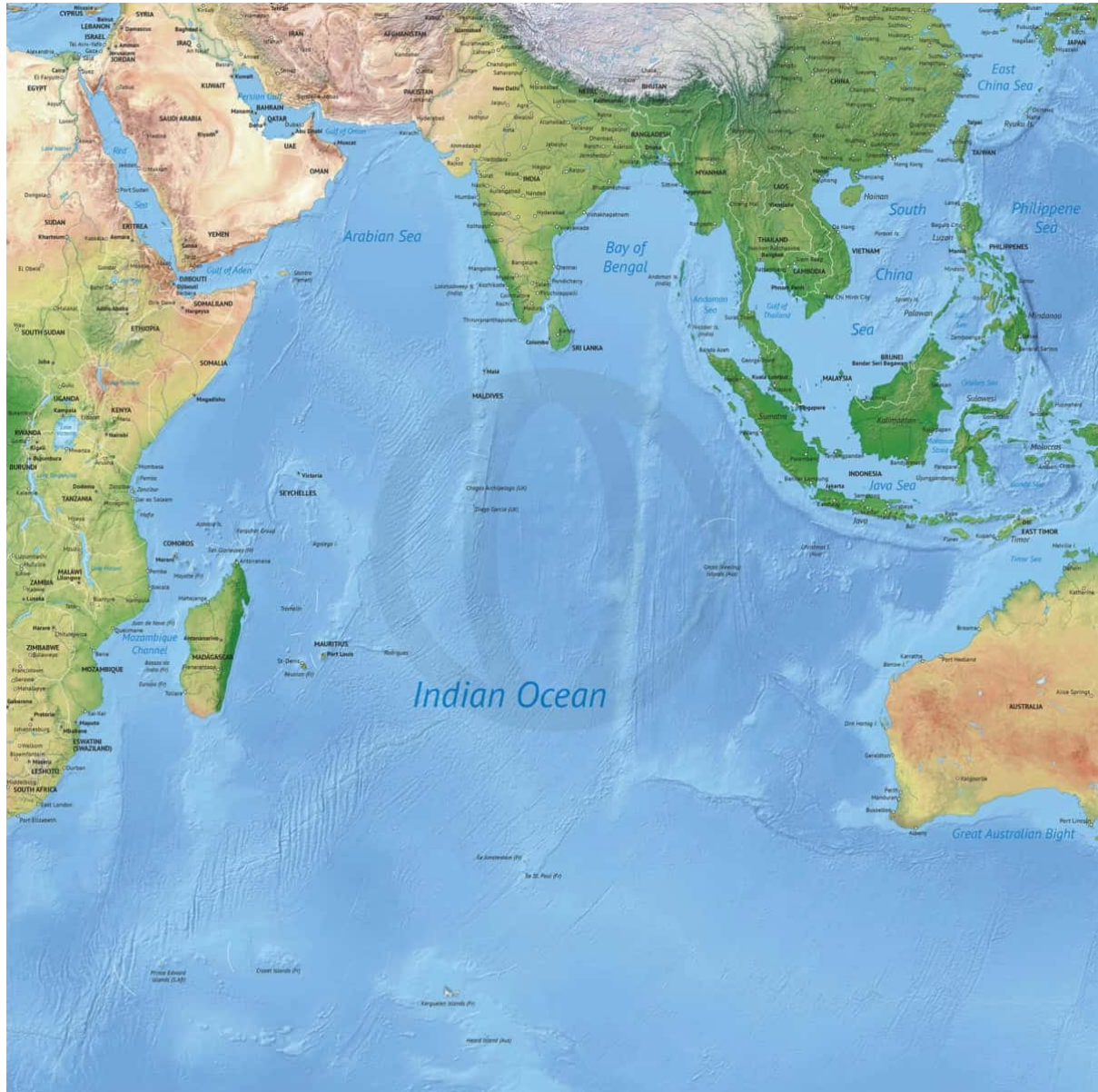


Securing the Maritime Commons

by

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India's Peninsular geography provides a long coastline extending to the Persian Gulf in West Asia and towards South East Asia in the East. Unarguably, this was an impetus to explore the vast waters surrounding the Indian Peninsula because it provides easy access to the maritime domain.



THE INDIAN PENINSULA

India's maritime tradition is the world's oldest, with an unparalleled continuity since the Neolithic Age [9th Millenium BCE]. *Golbai Sasan*, a Neolithic site on the east coast of India in Odisha state, has provided invaluable archaeological evidence of ship-building activities and sea faring forays.

During the *Sindhu-Saraswati era* [3300-1300 BCE], India had developed a mature sea-faring tradition based on maritime trade. The ancient port of *Lothal* in Gujarat, constructed around 2300 BCE, is an outstanding example of maritime infrastructure. It had docks, tidal locks and jetties for ships. [\[Add a photo here - 129 Lothal Royalty-Free Images, Stock Photos & Pictures | Shutterstock\]](#). Sophisticated trade networks and infrastructure linked India with contemporary civilizations in Mesopotamia, Egypt and China.

Vedic era, texts and archaeological evidence suggest early boat-building activities for coastal fishing and commerce. The *Rig Veda* mentions about *Sataritara* or the galley with hundred oars. This sea-faring tradition helped develop cartography and study of monsoon-based sailing, using stars for navigation.

This rich maritime tradition was consolidated during the Mauryan Empire (324–187 BCE) which institutionalized maritime administration by setting up a Department of Waterways and Navigation, headed by the *Navadhyaksha* (Superintendent of Ships) who regulated shipbuilding, sea trade, and port operations. Ancient India's greatest strategic thinker Kautilya, wrote a whole chapter in the *Arthashastra* dedicated to maritime affairs, underlining its strategic importance. In the post-Mauryan period,

Roman records show extensive trade with new ports in southern India. Around 30 inscriptions in Tamil-Brahmi, Sanskrit and Prakrit have been identified inside the rock-cut tombs in Egypt's Valley of the Kings in Luxor, from the 1st and 3rd centuries CE. Indian merchants left graffiti as evidence. Hoards of Roman gold coins have been discovered in various sites in southern India.

The Delhi Sultanate, established by Muslim invaders, maintained limited naval forces, for riverine warfare and coastal operations rather than large-scale oceanic campaigns. The Mughal rulers also continued to maintain a navy primarily for security and support to the territorial military. The focus was inwards for the empire's expansion

During the 13th century CE, India's maritime power and commerce reached a peak during the *Pala* Empire in East India and the *Cholazh* empire in South India. Under the Chola dynasty [9th–13th century CE], large fleets sailed to Sri Lanka, the Maldives and parts of Southeast Asia, including ports in the Srivijaya Empire in Indonesia, spreading Indian religion and cultural influence in South-East Asia.

The advent of the Europeans led to the marginalization of India's maritime control and commerce. Despite British colonial rule, India retained its shipbuilding tradition and continued to build ships. By the 19th century CE, the British monopolized sea-borne commerce, controlling key ports like Bombay (Mumbai) and Calcutta (Kolkata). India became a source for manpower and material. The Royal Indian Marine [1892 CE] and the Royal Indian Navy (1934 CE) developed with Indian sailors manning both Navy and Merchant ships.

Upon gaining Independence in 1947, India inherited a meagre 33 ships and 538 naval officers to protect a coastline of 7,517 kms, 1,280 islands, 14,500 kms of potentially navigable waterways. India's geographical location makes it proximate to major Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean. With limited maritime capabilities, India avoided entanglement in the bipolar world order and promoted the concept of the India Ocean as a Zone of Peace. After independence, India gave priority to coastal defence and integration of the Princely States.

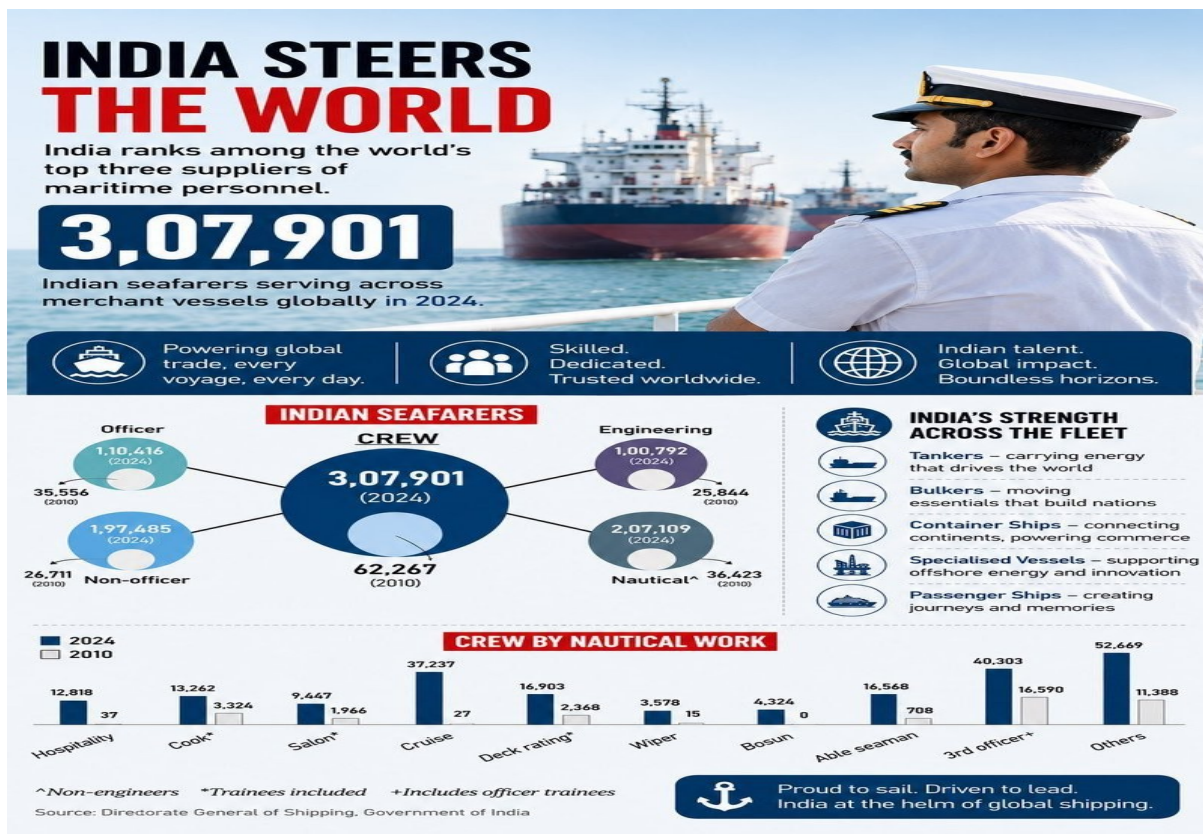
Burdened with land wars in 1948, 1962 and 1965, India was forced to divert resources to the Army and Air Force at the expense of the Navy. India began gradually rebuilding its maritime sector and shipbuilding industry. As India's economy grew, more resources were provided to the Navy and development of ports, vital for maritime commerce and national security.

By the 1990s, the Indian Navy was deployed for UN peace-keeping operations, evacuations of Indian nationals during the war on Iraq and anti-piracy operations in the Arabian Sea. The Navy's blue-water capabilities expanded to support maritime security and international sea-borne commerce, aiming to secure the maritime commons.

Currently, the maritime arena faces a wide array of challenges - climate change threats, cyclones, sea level rise, human security challenges such as illegal migration, trafficking, piracy, illegal fishing, pollution and sea-bed mining.

The strategic overhang of the maritime factor has driven India's maritime strategy, providing security to around 90% of India's sea trade. The ongoing war in Iran has highlighted the effort to weaponization of international shipping channels - Hormuz - in violation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea III [UNCLOS].

Almost one-third of sailors in the global shipping industry are Indians. Some have lost their lives in the indiscriminate attacks on ships transiting the Hormuz and Bab-al-Mandab. Providing security to international shipping will require diplomacy and dialogue and also a more powerful Navy, to shape a more cooperative geopolitical order.



India's indigenous shipbuilding capabilities have been ramped up. India's maritime strategy is focussed on the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) which is critical for global trade flows - two-thirds of the world's oil shipments, one third of its bulk cargo and half of its container traffic. 40 nations are on its littoral having nearly 40% of the world's population. Despite the importance of the maritime commons, there are limited security structures that can police this space. Naval ships are bound by restrictions to act against offending or rogue merchant vessels.

In 2015, India adopted the SAGAR doctrine [Security And Growth for All in the Region]. This strategy seeks to enhance India's role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region [IOR] and a first responder in humanitarian and disaster related assistance. India has gone further from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR (Mutual And Holistic Advancement for Security And Growth Across Regions), which extends the maritime domain from the regional and security approach into economic diplomacy, technological connectivity and environmental sustainability and maritime domain awareness.

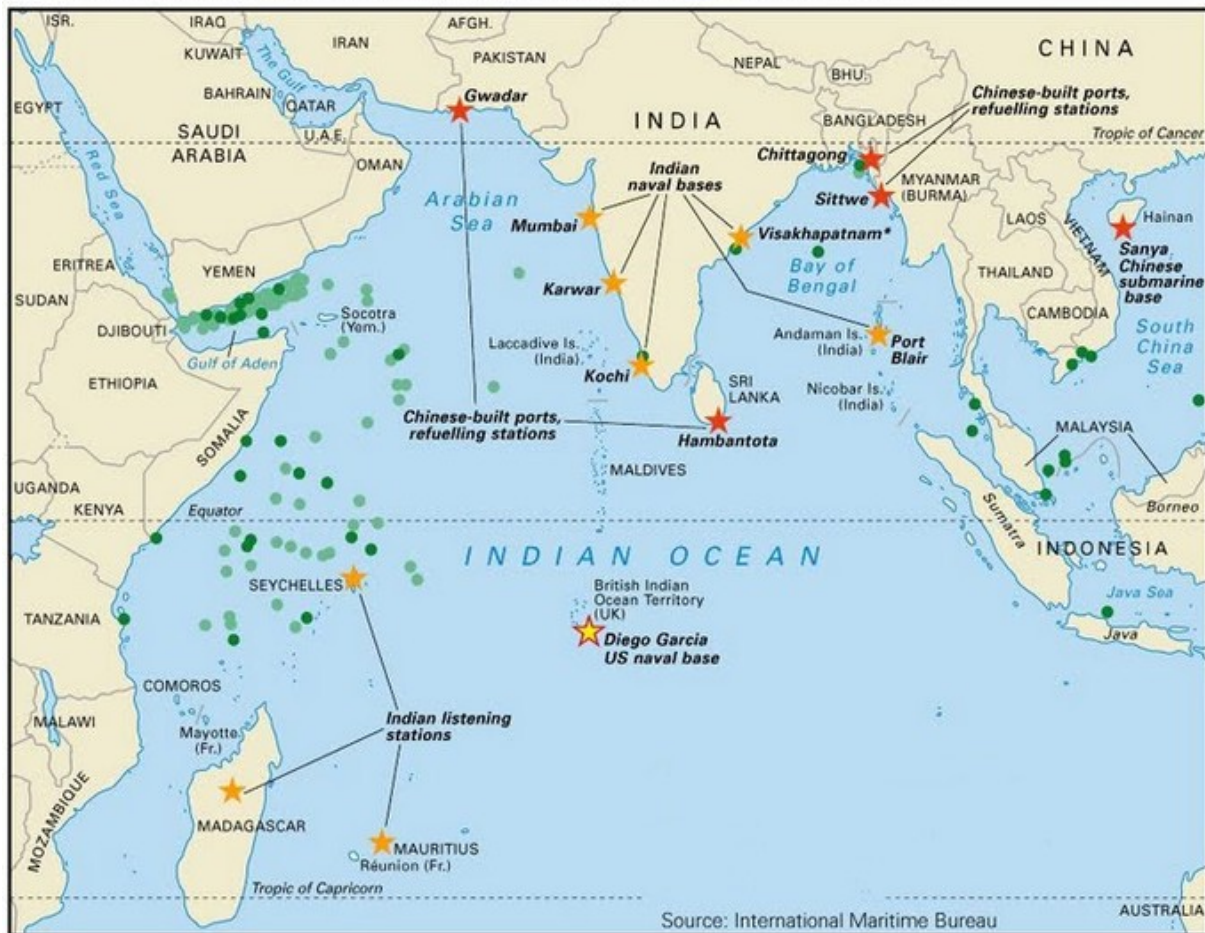
MAHASAGAR aims to support technological connectivity in the Indo-Pacific region, relying on joint Naval exercises, sharing data and encouraging peaceful settlement of maritime disputes. Supporting these policy moves is SAGARMALA which supports port-led development initiative to modernize and build ports and manage the shift to more efficient transport coastal and waterway networks to trigger industrial growth, job creation, and sustainable coastal development.

To enable international and regional cooperation to secure the maritime commons, India organized the 2016 International Fleet Review (48 navies participated) and biennial MILAN exercises (47 nations participated in 2024) to build cooperation and interoperability. The IOR is monitored by the Information Fusion Centre [IFC] and naval operations across several maritime theatres have helped in combatting piracy, providing safe passage to international cargo ships humanitarian operations. 28 partner nations and international organizations have joined India in tracking maritime traffic, piracy, and illegal activities in the IOR.

This strategic shift bolsters maritime security, utilizing the Indian Navy's growing blue water deployments. Joint exercises with different navies for maritime security, like the annual Malabar exercises with QUAD partner countries Australia, Japan and USA are conducted periodically. The Indian Navy has spearheaded maritime diplomacy through capacity building, joint exercises, plurilateral conferences, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) and Search and Rescue (SAR) activities [Tsunami and Earthquake].

Big power competition is increasing in the IOR, requiring greater vigilance on maritime security. To avoid conflict, India has advocated "A free, open, secure and safe Indian Ocean" as a shared goal for securing the maritime commons, as envisaged in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea III [UNCLOS].

GREAT POWER COMPETITION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN



Currently, Despite military strikes, commercial navigation through Hormuz remains closed. Iran has weaponized its geography to disrupt one of the world's most important energy chokepoints, keeping global energy markets under constant pressure and prolonging a worldwide economic shock. Post-Iran war, global power equations will shift decisively to the maritime domain – an interconnected world depends on maritime routes, energy corridors, digital infrastructure and financial systems. Nations would now also attempt to control digital nodes, cable landing stations, undersea cable runs, data centres and satellite networks.

India's comprehensive plan to strengthen its maritime sector was long overdue. India's vast coastline and strategic location in the IOR creates vulnerabilities and exposes it to maritime security threats. India's maritime reforms and modernization drive mark a pivotal step toward achieving Maritime India Vision 2030 and aligning with SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) and Sustainable Development Goals 14

India has tasked its Navy through *Operation Sankalp*, to provide escorts for merchant vessels, conduct maritime surveillance across the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Aden, and protect sea lines of communication [SLOC] vital to India's economy and energy security. India will have to undertake autonomous actions and where ever possible and synchronize actions to secure SLOC. *Operation Sankalp* is focussed on protecting Indian shipping, preserving freedom of navigation for India's supply lines and avoiding any regional involvement. India's policy of strategic autonomy precludes joining any formal coalitions, keeping diplomatic channels active with individual countries in the conflict region.

To upgrade its capacity to secure the maritime commons, India is addressing infrastructure gaps, sustainability challenges, workforce inequities and building a truly blue water Navy, with nuclear deterrence capabilities. India aims to become a global maritime hub and a leading maritime power in the next 2-3 decades, to enable it to play a significant player in ensuring the security of the maritime commons.

[The author, a retired diplomat, served as Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs; earlier he served as India's High Commissioner to Bangladesh and Ambassador to Thailand.]