



India's Maritime Doctrine

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This article is based on **“It is time to reimagine the Indian Ocean”** which was published in The Hindustan Times on 30/03/2021. It talks about the challenges in India's Maritime Doctrine.

Recently, soon after Joe Biden became the president of the US, the new US secretary of defense visited India. The interesting takeaway of this visit was the specific mention to pursue enhanced cooperation between the Indian armed forces and the US maritime forces.

This underlined the strategic importance of India in US foreign policy, especially Indo-Pacific engagements. Since Independence, India has enjoyed an advantageous position in the Indian Ocean, primarily accorded through its geography.

Moreover, the lack of direct competition after the end of the Cold War allowed India to continue with its limited maritime approach while retaining the role of a key Indian Ocean player. However, there are many challenges in India's maritime policy.

Challenges in India's Maritime Doctrine

- **Silos Approach in the Indian Ocean:** India's political class has divided the Indian ocean into many sub-regions.
 - Traditionally, India draws a line with Mauritius and Seychelles as its areas of strategic collaboration in the Indian Ocean.
 - In terms of sub-regions, the priority is in the northern (Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal), and eastern Indian Ocean (the Andaman Sea and Straits of Malacca).
 - Due to this, the western Indian Ocean and the eastern coast of Africa still continue to be in the maritime periphery in India's foreign policy.
- **Lesser Hold on Strategic Chokepoint:** China's first overseas military base was set up in the western Indian Ocean, in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa.
 - Russia too recently acquired a base in Sudan, on the Red Sea coast, between the Suez Canal and Bab-el-Mandeb — a strategic chokepoint in the Indian Ocean.
 - However, beyond the anti-piracy mission, India's presence and maritime engagements with the African coast have been largely ad hoc.

- **Increasing Chinese Assertiveness:** Through the Maritime Silk Road, China engages with littorals and islands across the Ocean.
China has consistently aimed to improve its diplomatic, political, and military engagements in the region from Sri Lanka to Comoros, spanning the Indian Ocean in its entirety.
- **Continental Bias:** India's reorientation toward the maritime domain has not been easy, with generations of foreign and defense service officials focusing and training on continental issues.
Further, the Indian Navy is allotted approximately 14% of the defense budget speaks clearly to the defense establishment's priorities.

Way Forward

- **Synchronizing Foreign & Defense Policies:** With the establishment of the Indian Ocean division in the ministry of external affairs (MEA) in 2016, MEA appears to be undertaking a more active approach.
However, the defense establishment has to match foreign policy engagements.
- **Holistic View of Indian Ocean:** The Indian Ocean as China is emerging as the key competitor to India's interests in the Indian Ocean Region.
Thus, there is a need to view the Indian Ocean as one continuous space and understand regional dynamics better.
- **Collaborating With Important Players:** India should supplement its partnership with the US with a network of multilateral groups with other middle powers, such as the India-Australia-Japan forum and the trilateral dialogue with France and Australia.

Conclusion

While this is not to discount India's continental troubles, seen in recent crises such as Doklam and Ladakh, there is a need to understand the importance of maritime geography and its link to India's strategic interests and growing competition in the region.

Drishti Mains Question

Discuss the major challenges for India in framing a credible Maritime Doctrine.