



## EDITORIAL: INDIAN EXPRESS

**GENERAL STUDIES 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATION**

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**TOPIC:** Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests.

### India must act as a unifier in the Indian Ocean Region

#### K M Panikkar's Vision of the Indian Ocean

- K M Panikkar highlighted the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean to India in his 1945 essay.
- He emphasized the creation of an Indian Ocean identity, which has been largely overlooked by Indian society and governance, except for the Indian Navy.
- The Indian Ocean is central to India's strategic and geopolitical interests, but this perspective is not fully integrated into India's foreign and security policy.

#### Lack of Security Architecture and Regional Institutions in the IOR

- The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) lacks effective forums and institutions to address security and development challenges.
- Attempts to create cooperative frameworks (e.g., IORA, SAARC, BIMSTEC) have failed due to political issues.
- The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is an exception with some success.
- The rise of the "Indo-Pacific" framework has diverted focus from the Indian Ocean.

#### The Rise of the Indian Ocean Conference (IOC) and SAGAR Strategy

- The Indian Ocean Conference (IOC), initiated in 2016, has become a significant platform for regional dialogue.
- The IOC aligns with India's "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR) initiative, which focuses on maritime security and economic prosperity.
- At the 8th IOC edition, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar highlighted challenges like the Middle East conflict, Houthi threats, and South China Sea tensions.
- India's role as a stabilizing force in the region was emphasized through examples of proactive maritime contributions.

#### Maritime Diplomacy and the Role of the Indian Navy

- Maritime diplomacy supports India's foreign policy objectives, with the Indian Navy playing a strategic role.
- The Indian Navy's 2007 Maritime Strategy emphasized using warships to support foreign policy.



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- Maritime diplomacy enables India to engage with regional partners through humanitarian aid, joint exercises, and security cooperation.
- The Navy's response to the 2004 tsunami demonstrated India's power projection and humanitarian assistance capabilities.

## Challenges in Integrating Military Power into Foreign Policy

- India has been criticized for underutilizing military power in its foreign policy.
- Critics argue that India's global aspirations require more than just soft power elements like "yoga and Bollywood."
- A more assertive approach using naval power is needed to secure India's strategic interests.
- Bureaucratic inertia and lack of coordination between the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) have hindered military deployment for strategic purposes.
- A fully funded program for security and humanitarian assistance would strengthen India's maritime influence.

## Strengthening Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)

- A key component of India's maritime strategy is developing robust Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) capabilities.
- Real-time monitoring and information sharing with IOR nations like Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka help safeguard maritime traffic and protect economic zones.
- The Indian Navy's patrols reinforce its role as a security guarantor in the region, enabling swift responses to emerging threats.

## Conclusion

Maritime diplomacy is crucial to India's strategic posture in the evolving geopolitical landscape. It offers India a strategic tool to influence events, prevent conflict, and project power. Realizing the full potential of maritime diplomacy requires better coordination between the Navy, diplomatic corps, and political leadership. A comprehensive national security strategy that integrates maritime capabilities with foreign policy objectives will enhance India's standing as a major maritime power. India must adopt a "whole of government" approach to improve coordination and address gaps in naval capabilities.

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