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Russia's Strategic  
Forays in the  
Indian Ocean Region

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# *Russia's Strategic Forays in the Indian Ocean Region*

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## ***Abstract***

*The Indian Ocean has emerged as a crucial arena for great power relations. While China's growing footprints in the Indian Ocean has received significant attention, this paper turns attention to Russia's increasing military presence in the area. It examines how Russia's actions, such as its base expansions, port engagements and naval operations, affect India's regional policy and weigh the opportunities and challenges it poses.*

**Keywords:** Geo-politics, Indian Ocean Region, Russia, Myanmar, India Strategic Competition.

## **Introduction**

Man has sought security, or at least a semblance of security, through numerous defensive barriers throughout history, including the famous Maginot Line (Varma, 1967). While these boundaries have been breached and invaded, the ocean waters have served as the 'royal way' for trade, journeys, and naval might. Historically, the Indian Ocean has played a pivotal role in global trade and world politics, and in today's climate, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has evolved into a critical area for nations to bolster their military and economic might.

The IOR is highly significant for several distinct reasons. It has a 1500-year history of high sea trade and human interaction, making it a prominent name in maritime history. Bounded by land on three sides, it connects the Suez Canal to the Strait of Malacca, earning the name 'Great Connector' (Rodrigo, 2021). Unlike the 'open-ended' Pacific or Atlantic, it is restricted by key choke points viz. the Bab-el-Mandeb linking the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, the Strait of Hormuz connecting the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean, and the Malacca Strait, a gateway between the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

The Indian Ocean is critical to the global geopolitical scene, and its significance extends far beyond its rank as the world's third-biggest ocean. In order to safeguard their interests in the region, powers like the United States, France, the United Kingdom, China, and India are engaged in an intense struggle and rivalry.

Every year, nearly 90,000 ships carrying 80% of the world's maritime oil and 9.84 trillion tonnes of cargo pass through the Indian Ocean and its choke points en route to destinations across Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas. It is worth emphasising that the Indian Ocean basin is rich in natural resources, accounting for 40% of the world's offshore oil

output. The region also has extensive fisheries, which provide a crucial supply of nutrition for millions of people who live along its coast.

A secure Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is essential to India's core interests due to its extensive coastline and the large population residing along it. India is a crucial regional player that actively works to advance security and economic success due to its advantageous location along the Indian Ocean Rim. As a regional power dedicated to the safety and prosperity of the Indian Ocean basin, India—dubbed "the inevitable centrifugal force" in the area—plays a special role. In line with this history, Russia's current measures reflect a reinforced plan to leverage its long-standing partnerships to increase its influence in the IOR.

### **Russia's Forays in the Indian Ocean**

One essential aspect of generating interest and commitment in a region is showing one's physical presence. In the highly strategic and potentially volatile area, Russia has begun to display its capability to operate and sustain itself in the Indian Ocean. In an attempt to establish a foothold in the IOR and project the perception of being a 'global power', Russia has started building cordial relations with the littoral countries in India's backyard, especially the Western Indian Ocean (WIO). This is evidenced by the recent joint exercises and naval drills, thus allowing the Russians to dive deeper into the Indian Ocean (Siow, 2023).

### **Key Alliances and Naval Activities**

The Russia-Ukraine war and continued aggression towards Ukraine resulted in the country facing political, economic, and diplomatic sanctions from Western nations and becoming increasingly isolated from European and South Asian politics. In a bid to foster partnerships and bilateral naval ties with South Asian economies, Russia conducted its maiden joint exercise with Myanmar, known as the Myanmar-Russia Maritime Security Exercise (MARUMEX). The exercise commenced at the Thilawa Port of Yangon on 05 November 2023, featuring two Russian anti-submarine warships of the Russian Pacific Fleet viz. *Admiral Panteleyev* and *Admiral Tributs*, with a frigate and a corvette from Myanmar's navy also participating (Myanmar News Agency, 2023).

While Russia terms these naval drills as "the first Russia-Myanmar naval exercise in modern history" and seeks to diversify its associations in the IOR, such collaborations present a promising potential to establish a presence in the IOR without causing any friction with India (Bhatt, 2023). Furthermore, the provision of Russian equipment to Myanmar exhibits and reinforces partnership between the two nations.

From 2021 to 2022, Russia supplied Myanmar's military with arms and equipment valued at USD 276 million, in contrast to China's provision of armaments worth USD 156 million (Storey, 2023). During this period, Russian entities transferred USD 406 million worth of defence supplies to Myanmar, including two Su-30 fighter jets, helicopter gunships, armoured vehicles, artillery and other military, solidifying Russia's position as Myanmar's primary armament supplier (Litner, 2024). In comparison, China ranked second, with defence supplies totalling USD 267 million.

In its determined pursuit of influence within the IOR and to deepen bilateral ties with South Asian countries, Russia docked the same warships at Chittagong Port in Bangladesh just days after MARUMEX, marking what it described as a "huge milestone for Russia-Bangladesh relations" (Reporter, 2023).

From October 22-24, 2024, Russian Pacific Fleets viz. corvettes *Gromky*, *Rezky*, and "Hero of Russia" *Aldar Tsydenzhapov*, as well as support vessel *Pechenga*, docked at the port of Thilawa in Myanmar in preparation for a joint maritime security exercise in north Andaman Sea. In August 2024, Russian warships, including the missile cruiser *Varyag* and the frigate *Marshal Shaposhnikov* were docked at Kochi during their long-distance mission (Chan, 2023).

### **The Sudan Naval Base Agreement**

In a significant advancement of its naval strategy in the IOR and with its ambitions toward the Western Indian Ocean (WIO), Russia reached an agreement with Sudan's military leadership in February 2023 to establish a naval logistical support centre in Port Sudan on the Red Sea—a move widely seen as a precursor to securing a permanent naval base (Express and Star, 2023). Under the terms of the agreement, Russia will be able to dock upto four naval ships, including nuclear powered ones, for a minimum of 25 years (Express and Star, 2023). Prominent Sudanese analyst Osman Al Mirghany noted, "The army is in desperate need of weapons, ammunition and spare parts for its Russian-made warplanes" (Hendawi et al., 2024). Hence, the terms of the agreement, which includes Russian military hardware and weaponry in return for Sudan's approval to construct the facility, have been presented as a way to advance regional peace and stability. However, there has been suspicion over assertions claiming that the base is "not aimed at any third party" and excludes other nations with vested interests. This includes foreign military bases of the United States, France, China, Italy, and Japan in Djibouti.

Historically, Sudan has had close ties with China and initially extended the offer to Russia in 2017 as a countermeasure to growing US influence in the region. This partnership

between Russia and Sudan aligns Moscow's policies with Iran's in the region. Iran has long had a good relationship with Sudan, with Tehran supplying drones to the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) (Karr, 2024).

Russia's long-term goal is to establish itself as a significant player in the Indian Ocean and show the West that even with a backdrop of war, it can mount a challenge and that it has friends in the region and is not isolated. It seeks to build solid relationships with the states along the coast and deepen its business ties. By doing this, it intends to lessen its dependency on conventional partners and significantly diversify its economy. In order to facilitate coordinated operations and boost strategic might, it also seeks to enhance integration with the navy of coastal governments in the Indian Ocean.

It is evident that Putin is driven to revive the Russian military's might to its former glory prior to the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. Russia is swiftly making strides in the Indian Ocean through tri-national naval exercises, including the Maritime Security Belt 2023 (military exercise) with Iran and China (Mastro, 2020).

### **Enhancing India's Maritime Security and Force Projection**

The IOR is a critical region that frequently faces disputes and tensions, and India sees its security vital for preventing the IOR from being militarised. The idea of India as a desirable security ally in the IOR has recently garnered popularity, and its advancements in the WIO have also significantly increased. With the formation of strategically advantageous partnerships with nations along the east coast of Africa, India's geopolitical posture changed. This was proven by the naval station created in the Agaléga Islands of Mauritius, upgrading the connections with Tanzania as a solidified strategic alliance and striking logistical agreements with the US and France.

Additionally, India strengthened its naval presence by sending more than ten frontline warships with marine commandos to the region — extending from the north and central Arabian Sea to the Gulf of Aden (N.A., 2024). These enhanced maritime security endeavours are intended to dissuade piracy and drone attacks. India conducts these operations alone, with no cooperation in the US-led multinational 'Operation Prosperity Guardian', which was initiated in the Red Sea in December 2023, shortly after Houthi rebels in Yemen targeted civilian and military ships following the Israel-Hamas conflict in October 2023.

Critical sea channels of communication are in danger due to rising drone attacks and piracy against commercial vessels, which has caused freight prices to rise substantially. The

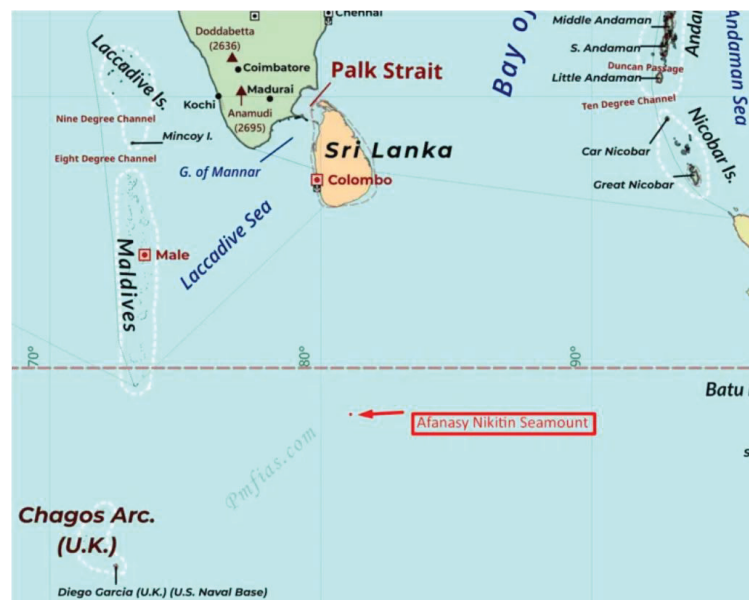


Indian Navy is continuing to be present in the Arabian Sea in order to support marine security and aid in stabilising the situation. Additionally, P-81 long-range maritime patrol aircraft and unarmed MQ-9B Sea Guardian drones regularly fly Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) missions (Chauhan, 2024). There is also continuous sharing of information and coordination with all friendly foreign navies.

Reiterating on the IOR being prone to natural disasters, India has emerged as a first responder to such calamities and offered assistance through various means promoting security and stability. India's exemplary efforts in Human Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) was noted during Operation Maitri, Operation Dost, hence, reflecting India's readiness and willingness to reach out and help wherever possible.

India seeks to safeguard its geoeconomic interests by securing vital energy sources and venturing into the vast potential of the ocean floor. On 18 January 2024, India submitted two applications to the International Seabed Authority (ISA) seeking approval to explore the international seabed area of the Indian Ocean. The first application is for the exploration of polymetallic sulphides (metals like copper and zinc) in the Carlsberg Ridge of the Indian Ocean Ridge. The second application seeks to explore cobalt-rich ferromanganese crusts (used in steel production) of the Afanasy Nikitin Seamount (ANS) in the Central Indian Ocean (News, 2024).

### **Location of Afanasy Nikitin Seamount**



Source: <https://www.pmfias.com/india-applies-for-mining-in-indian-ocean/>

If approved, these unexplored energy sources and mineral deposits could provide India with the right of pre-emption, meeting the domestic demand for nickel and cobalt minerals.

India's mineral supply from the ocean bed is now being monitored and accessed through the Samudrayaan Project and schemes such as the Deep Ocean Mission (DOM) and the Ocean-Services, Modelling, Application, Resources and Technology (O-SMART) (Khanna, 2023). With the recognition of its ability to be a security provider in the area, India is quickly becoming a major participant in the IOR.

India, to solidify its hold in the IOR, has developed two strategies called SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and the Necklace of Diamonds. Although these strategies are effective, India still needs to fully integrate its Necklace of Diamonds to achieve its military and security objectives in the IOR. India must maintain a military presence at its ports and be well-equipped to combat potential security threats or invasions. India's naval policy relies heavily on ports such as Duqm in Oman, Changi Naval Base in Singapore, and significant partners in Seychelles, Vietnam, Japan, Iran, and Mongolia.

India has strategically positioned its bases and partnerships around China to create a "necklace" in the IOR. These efforts are intended to reduce any obstacles caused by China's expansionist goal.

## **Conclusion**

Russia's expanding participation in the IOR was highlighted by the 2024 MILAN exercise, which was split into two phases the Sea Phase and the Harbour Phase and involved 50 countries. This involvement is believed to be crucial for securitising the sea from Australia to Africa's east coast. India and Russia's growing maritime cooperation was proven in July 2024 when the Indian Navy's *INS Tabar* visited St. Petersburg in conjunction with the 328th Russian Navy Day celebration (PIB, 2024). The visit was highlighted by the Maritime Partnership Exercise (MPE), which enhanced the two fleets' interoperability and synergy through naval drills like communication exercises, replenishment at sea, and search and rescue (SAR) operations (PIB, 2024).

India's maritime policy depends on growing its footprint in the IOR. India can improve its understanding of important maritime issues like domain awareness, piracy, and anti-submarine warfare by participating in joint exercises, port visits, and diplomatic endeavours. In order to create a multipolar Asia and maintain regional stability, these alliances must be strengthened.

These steps, which include concerted military and diplomatic efforts, will protect regional stability and peace while enhancing India's influence in the IOR.

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## About the Author

Diksha Jain is a dedicated scholar in Defence and Strategic Studies, with a strong academic foundation in International Relations. She completed her master's degree in Defence and Strategic Studies, focusing on areas such as maritime security and the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean Region. Prior to this, she earned her bachelor's degree in International Relations, where she developed a comprehensive understanding of global politics and regional dynamics.

As a Research Assistant at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), Diksha explores critical issues related to defence strategy and maritime security. Her work focuses on the Indian Ocean Region, examining its geopolitical challenges and their implications for regional stability.



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