

# India's Rising Influence in the south Asia: Strategic Imperatives of the Indian Ocean

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**Abstract-** This Paper examines India's evolving role in south Asia and its strategic significance in the Indian Ocean region, particularly under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership. It analyzes India's assertive regional strategy, emphasizing diplomatic engagement, economic integration, and maritime security initiatives. The study highlights India's growing influence in South Asia amid the pandemic-induced economic challenges, evident through increased partnerships and favorable political shifts in neighboring countries. Additionally, it underscores the economic importance of the Indian Ocean, focusing on its role as a vital maritime corridor and energy heartland.

Despite Challenges such as resource constraints, India's Navy demonstrates proactive efforts to enhance maritime capabilities through security partnerships and indigenous defense initiatives. The paper concludes by emphasizing India's commitment to advancing national maritime interests and countering China's expanding influence in the Indo-Pacific region, thus positioning itself as a key player in regional stability and development.

**Keywords:** India's influence, Economic partner, Neighborhood policy, Regional Approach, Diplomatic engagement, String of pearls, Global economic and Maritime Activity.

## India's quest for regional Hegemony

India's influence in South Asia has become increasingly significant, bringing with it substantial geo-strategic and geo-economic responsibilities. The region has faced formidable challenges in the wake of the post-pandemic economic downturn, with Sri Lanka notably driven into bankruptcy. In this scenario, India has emerged as a crucial economic lifeline for its neighbor.

While Pakistan grapples with a multitude of issues including economic decline, energy crises, internal strife, and natural disasters, political shifts in countries like Nepal, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka have led to the rise of more pro-India leadership. Bangladesh, under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed, has also remained steadfast in its support for India. These changes are partly attributed to domestic political transformations, such as the defeat of Abdulla Yameen's government in the Maldives in 2018 and the similar fate that befell Nepalese Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli three years later.

Nepal's close economic ties with India, where one in five Nepali citizens work, underscore the interdependence between the two nations. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "neighborhood first policy" further aims to solidify India's dominance in South Asia, creating an environment conducive to assuming regional and global leadership roles. The presence of other South Asian leaders at Modi's inaugural ceremony symbolizes India's growing desire for re-engagement with the region.

India, under Prime Minister Modi's leadership, has made strides in asserting its position as a leader in South Asia, garnering acceptance from neighboring countries, excluding Pakistan. However, there is a growing realization even within Pakistan of the importance of maintaining positive relations with India while safeguarding core national interests. This shifting dynamic reflects the evolving landscape of South Asian geopolitics, with India poised to play a central role in shaping the region's future.

Additionally, political changes in countries like Nepal, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka have resulted in more leadership that is favorable towards India. With ongoing challenges in the Region, there is a growing recognition across South Asia of the importance of maintaining positive relations with India, while still protecting each country's core interests. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's focus on prioritizing neighboring countries through the "neighborhood first policy" underscores India's commitment to strengthening its leadership position in the region, with the attendance of other South Asian leaders at his inaugural ceremony signaling a desire for increased engagement.

This trend reflects a broader acknowledgment of India's leadership role in South Asia, even if not universally accepted by all countries in the region. India's standing in South Asia has undergone significant transformation, particularly under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, who has adopted a regional approach towards diplomatic engagement. This strategic shift was evident in Modi's early visits to neighboring countries, beginning with Bhutan and Nepal, signifying India's commitment to strengthening ties within the region.

The subsequent high-level engagements, including multiple visits to Nepal in 2014, underscored the historic peak in Nepal-India relations at that time. One of the key elements of Modi's regional strategy has been to create tangible grounds for smaller neighbors to naturally look towards India. This has involved initiatives aimed at enhancing connectivity, trade, and investment with countries like Bangladesh and Nepal. Efforts have included the development of road and rail corridors, power grids, and the facilitation of trade through smart passes for container traffic. While the realization of these projects has faced challenges, there is a discernible positive trajectory in regional cooperation. India's proactive stance in assisting neighboring countries during times of crisis has further reinforced its leadership role in South Asia. Notably, India's support for Sri Lanka through emergency relief packages, including the shipment of fuel, food, fertilizer, and medicine, underscored its commitment to regional stability and cooperation.

### **Diplomatic Engagement**

Diplomatic engagements have also played a crucial role in India's regional strategy. Meetings between Indian and Nepalese leaders, as well as discussions with Bangladesh on trade agreements and potential arms purchases, demonstrate India's adept handling of bilateral issues. This skillful diplomacy has allowed India to manage trivial disputes and maintain manageable levels of tension, thereby providing greater leverage and diplomatic space within the region.

In the overall construct, India's strategic approach towards South Asia under Prime Minister Modi's leadership has resulted in a more assertive and influential role for India in the region. By prioritizing regional cooperation, fostering economic integration, and leveraging diplomatic engagements, India aims to consolidate its position as a key player in South Asia, with implications for regional stability and development.

### **Indian Ocean the Hub of the Economy**

The Indian Ocean undeniably stands as the linchpin of global economic maritime activity in the 21st century. This vast expanse of water not only serves as a crucial conduit for international trade but also holds immense strategic significance in shaping the trajectory of the global economy. The resurgence of Asia, particularly the rapid economic growth of countries like China and India, has precipitated a profound shift in global attention from the West to the East, with the Indian Ocean region at the epicenter of this transition.

One of the primary factors underpinning the economic importance of the Indian Ocean is its abundant reserves of oil and minerals. These resources have positioned the region as an energy heartland, playing a pivotal role in both the supply and demand dynamics of the global energy market. The strategic significance of this cannot be overstated, as energy remains the lifeblood of modern economies, driving industrial production, transportation, and overall economic growth. The concentration of oil and mineral wealth in the Indian Ocean region has thus gradually shifted the center of gravity of global economic activity towards Asia.

Moreover, the Indian Ocean serves as a vital maritime corridor, connecting the resource-rich countries of the Middle East and Africa with the burgeoning consumer markets of Asia. This intersection of maritime trade routes has facilitated the seamless flow of goods and commodities, thereby catalyzing economic integration and interdependence among nations. Over two-thirds of global oil shipments traverse the Indian Ocean, making it a critical artery for the global energy trade. Notably, more than eighty percent of China's and Japan's oil imports are routed through this region, underscoring its indispensable role in sustaining the economic growth of major Asian economies.

The strategic geographical location of the Indian Ocean region further enhances its significance in the global economic landscape. Serving as a gateway between the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Ocean, and the Mediterranean Sea, it forms a crucial link in the interconnected network of global trade routes. The maritime chokepoints in this region, such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca, exert considerable influence over the movement of goods and commodities, making them focal points of geopolitical contention and strategic maneuvering.

The assertion that control over the Indian Ocean holds the potential for India to exert significant influence eastward, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, is a widely recognized strategic perspective within India's maritime community. This perspective is grounded in the understanding that maritime dominance offers unique advantages in projecting

power and safeguarding national interests, particularly in light of China's assertive maritime strategy, often referred to as the 'String of Pearls'.

However, the translation of this strategic vision into actionable initiatives has been hindered by various challenges, primarily stemming from resource constraints and institutional priorities. India's defense budget allocation has historically favored the army over the navy and coast guard, reflecting a traditional emphasis on land-based security concerns. As a result, the development and modernization of naval capabilities have faced delays and limitations due to budgetary constraints and bureaucratic inefficiencies.

Despite these challenges, the Indian Navy has demonstrated proactive efforts to overcome institutional hurdles and enhance its maritime capabilities. One notable approach has been the cultivation of security partnerships with both regional and extra-regional countries. By fostering cooperative arrangements and joint exercises, India aims to strengthen its maritime presence and interoperability with partner navies, thereby augmenting its capacity to project power and ensure maritime security in the Indian Ocean region.

### **Maritime Strategy**

India's engagement with regional partners serves the dual purpose of countering China's efforts to expand its influence in the region. By bolstering security cooperation and maritime domain awareness among regional states, India seeks to mitigate the potential strategic encroachments posed by China's maritime initiatives, such as the development of port facilities along key sea lanes and naval deployments in the Indian Ocean.

In essence, while India's aspirations to become a maritime power have been tempered by institutional constraints and resource limitations, the Indian Navy's proactive engagement with regional partners underscores its commitment to advancing national maritime interests. Through collaborative security efforts and diplomatic initiatives, India seeks to assert its presence in the Indian Ocean and counterbalance China's expanding maritime footprint, thereby safeguarding its strategic interests in the broader Indo-Pacific region.

The 'Make in India' initiative represents a crucial step towards achieving the modernization goals of the Indian Navy by leveraging indigenous capabilities and fostering self-reliance in defense production. Through this initiative, the government has embarked on several major maritime projects aimed at enhancing India's naval capabilities and transitioning it into a blue-water navy by 2030. The emphasis on indigenous production not only accelerates the modernization process but also promotes self-sufficiency in military technology, thereby reducing dependence on foreign suppliers. By nurturing domestic defense industries and fostering innovation, the 'Make in India' initiative contributes to India's broader goal of achieving strategic autonomy and enhancing its maritime security posture.

The indigenization program aligns with India's ambition to bolster maritime domain awareness, power projection, and sea control capabilities. By developing indigenous naval platforms and technologies, India can effectively address evolving security challenges in the maritime domain and assert its presence as a credible maritime power in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Maritime Security Strategy, published in 2016, underscores the Indian Navy's evolution into a multi-dimensional force equipped with a diverse array of ships, submarines, aircraft, and robust satellite communication systems. This transformation reflects the Navy's commitment to adapt to changing geopolitical dynamics and safeguard India's maritime interests effectively.

### **Conclusion**

India's strategic approach towards South Asia and its maritime ambitions in the Indian Ocean region underscore its emergence as a significant regional and global player. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, India has pursued a proactive foreign policy, prioritizing regional cooperation, economic integration, and maritime security. Through initiatives such as the "neighborhood first policy" and the 'Make in India' initiative, India aims to strengthen its leadership position in South Asia and enhance its maritime capabilities to safeguard its strategic interests in the broader Indo-Pacific region.

Challenges such as resource constraints and institutional priorities, India's commitment to bolstering regional partnerships, advancing indigenous defense production, and enhancing maritime domain awareness demonstrates its resolve to assert its influence in the Indian Ocean. As the global economic and strategic center of gravity continues to shift towards Asia, India's assertive stance in both regional diplomacy and maritime security will have far-reaching implications for regional stability, economic development, and the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

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