

India's Maritime Strategy in the Indian Ocean: Liminal Power or Emerging Maritime Hegemon?

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Abstract

India's growing maritime capabilities, as articulated through the evolution from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR policy, represent a significant shift in its regional and global strategy. This article analyses India's evolving naval posture, with a particular focus on its mission-based deployments (MBDs), port diplomacy, and efforts to expand its strategic influence across the Indian Ocean region. The study attempts to address the question, whether India's maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean, marked by the evolving naval doctrines, is sufficient to transition India from a liminal power to a maritime hegemon, or will internal constraints and efforts to preserve strategic autonomy continue to limit its regional dominance in the face of growing challenges from China, and what will be the implications for Pakistan with shifting balance of power in waters. Applying the Neoclassical Realist framework, the paper analyses India's naval posture, port diplomacy, and regional influence. The findings suggest that while India is positioning itself toward maritime hegemony, its internal limitations temper this rise, keeping it in a liminal state for the foreseeable future. The study also infers the strategic implications of India's maritime posture for Pakistan's security and the evolving regional balance of power in the dynamics of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), underscoring the growing importance of maritime security and regional stability.

Keywords: Indian Ocean Region (IOR), Maritime Strategy, Liminal Power, Neoclassical Realism, Geopolitical Balance.

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Introduction

The contestation over India's grand strategy in the 21st century revolves around a fundamental strategic question: is India a liminal power — a state on the cusp of great-power status yet restrained by structural and domestic limitations, or is it evolving into a maritime hegemon in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)? This debate is not merely semantic; it goes to the heart of India's strategic identity and its capacity to shape the emerging Asia-Pacific order.

C. Raja Mohan has long argued that India must transcend its historically continental orientation and reassert primacy in the maritime space, it once dominated, echoing K. M. Panikkar's notion of the Indian Ocean as "India's Ocean."¹ Former Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao advances the liminality thesis, depicting India as neither fully integrated into any alliance system nor wholly detached, but strategically positioned to straddle the divide between great-power blocs. In contrast, Ashley J. Tellis critiques what he terms India's "great-power delusions," arguing that New Delhi's reluctance to enter formal security arrangements, despite rising systemic threats, undermines its ability to convert potential into influence.² Meanwhile, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar articulates an alternative vision of "multi-alignment," in which India exploits geopolitical contradictions to enhance its autonomy rather than align exclusively with any single pole.³

The Indian Ocean is crucible for this strategic ambiguity. It is both India's immediate security perimetre and the theatre where China's expanding naval presence challenges its dominance. India's maritime engagements, ranging from the SAGAR to MAHASAGAR doctrine and mission-based deployments to port diplomacy and minilateral frameworks like the Quad, signal an aspiration to lead regional order-building. Yet these initiatives coexist with persistent constraints such as budgetary limitations,

¹ Anit Mukherjee and C. Raja Mohan, *India's Naval Strategy and Asian Security* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2015).

² Ashley J. Tellis, "India's Naval Expansion: Reflections on History and Strategy," *Comparative Strategy* 6, no. 2 (January 1987): 185-219, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495938708402711>.

³ Piotr Pietrzak, "The Jaishankar Doctrine and India's Transition From Nonalignment to Multialignment," in *Advances in Public Policy and Administration*, ed., Piotr Pietrzak (IGI Global, 2024), 215-56, <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-2877-4.ch009>.

technological dependencies, and the political premium placed on strategic independence. India is perceiving growing influence of China as a threat to its strategic interests in IOR, making it difficult to exercise influence in this part of the world. Although the maritime emergence of India is often presented as an individual endeavour, the multifaceted nature of power relations within the region, particularly with Pakistan's attempts, backed by China, to balance Indian influence, is also a major limitation.

This article interrogates India's maritime strategy through the lens of Neoclassical Realism, assessing how systemic pressures interact with unit-level variables to produce a calibrated, and sometimes ambivalent, maritime posture. By examining India's material capabilities, doctrinal choices, and diplomatic alignments, the study seeks to determine whether New Delhi is merely managing its liminality or actively engineering its transformation into the pre-eminent maritime power in the IOR. The stakes are high as India's choices will shape not only its own strategic trajectory but also the broader balance of power across the Asia-Pacific region.

Literature Review: Great Powers and Liminality

Classical great power theory in International Relations has traditionally defined great powers by their material capabilities and global power projection. While this criterion perfectly explains the established powers, but potentially fails to capture states like India, where strategic constraints, particularly the institutional capacity, non-alignment, and political autonomy, coexist with immense material capabilities, complicating the path towards the status of a great power.

Realist scholars like John Mearsheimer posit that rising states will seek regional hegemony and military dominance commensurate with their growing power.⁴ Yet India's hegemonic ambitions do not fit classical realist assumptions, as, despite the material potential, Delhi has not yet reached the textbook status of a typical regional hegemon due to institutional barriers and an inclination towards strategic autonomy. However, these frameworks are potentially inadequate owing to India's ambiguous power status, where incredible potentials (large population, nuclear weapons, economic size)

⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer, 1st edn (S.I.: Academic Internet Publishers (AIPI), 2009).

coexist with strategic limitations (political autonomy, non-alignment). It directs to the theoretical gap, highlighting classical realism's limited approach in explaining the current power status of Indian foreign policy. India's example puts the classical realist paradigm to the test, and it implies that a more integrated approach is necessary to understand the tension between systemic pressures and domestic political constraints, making neoclassical realism — an indispensable choice.

Some analysts argue India as a “middle power” or “near great power,” noting that its behaviour and influence have not yet matched the expectations set by its capabilities.⁵ However, this characterisation of a middle power or near great power overlooks the dual nature of India's strategic posture — its rising potential tempered by institutional and political constraints, making neoclassical realism — a fitting choice. The classical power projection theories offer a limited scope in explaining the persistent gap between India's capabilities and its influence, where India's liminality — caught between aspirations and constraints — calls for an analytical framework that can deal with both the external systemic strains and domestic political factors. Thus, Neoclassical Realism is an astute account, as it fills this gap by accounting for how internal political culture, strategic autonomy, and external systemic forces converge to shape her strategic behaviour.

The notion of India as a ‘liminal power’ encapsulates this ambiguity. Liminality refers to an in-between stage of transition, where India is both ‘rising and restrained, global and grounded,’ fundamentally a power on the threshold.⁶ This understanding of power dynamics underscores a key research gap: existing theories fail to fully capture the unique dual status of India in the region, where Neo-classical Realism integrates the external pressures and internal constraints, offering an astute understanding of a liminal power — India and her maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean Region. This concept contrasts with classical great-power narratives by suggesting that India occupies a grey zone; it is too big to be a mere regional player yet too institutionally constrained to dictate the global order. Indeed,

⁵ Charalampos Efstathopoulos, “Reinterpreting India's Rise through the Middle Power Prism,” *Asian Journal of Political Science* 19, no. 1 (April 2011): 74-95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2011.568246>.

⁶ P. Venkateswar Rao, *India's Naval Diplomacy: Contours and Constraints* (S.l.: Routledge, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003289272>.

classical realist expectations have met India's idiosyncratic reality. For decades after independence, India shied away from maritime power projection, constrained by a developing economy and a tradition of non-alignment. Even as its capabilities expanded in recent years, India's approach remained marked by what Raja Mohan calls 'political ambivalence' and a lack of strategic coherence in the Indian Ocean.⁷ It exposes a critical research gap and leads to Neo-classical Realism as an integrating theoretical framework between systemic pressures and internal domestic constraints in this unique case study of India.

Existing literature overlooks the reciprocal relationship between India's and Pakistan's strategic decisions owing to the presence of China and the strategically unique relations of the two with China in the Indian Ocean. As Pakistan increasingly relies on China becomes strategic, covertly participating in the power politics of the region, with the freedom of action of India being affected. The Neo-classical Realism is deemed crucial to explaining not only the Indian action but also why the balancing approach of Pakistan in the region makes the Indian goals in the maritime arena more difficult and complex.⁸

The result, according to some scholars, is a persistent gap between India's great power aspirations and its accomplishments, a gap Tellis attributes to India's unwillingness to abandon 'hoary shibboleths' like non-alignment and forge stronger alliances. On the other hand, proponents of the liminal power idea argue that India's very in-betweenness can be an asset. By hovering between alliances and autonomy, India maximises its strategic options and maintains flexibility in a fluid multipolar world.⁹ The gap makes a suitable theoretical framework imperative, considering both external systemic pressures and internal political constraints in coexistence, uniquely addressed by Neo-classical Realism, setting a stage for analysing India's maritime strategy through a robust theoretical lens and concrete policy choice.

⁷ Rao, *India's Naval Diplomacy*.

⁸ Muhammad Askari and Mudassar Iqbal, "Pakistan's Response to Indian Naval Strategic Vision," *South Asian Studies* 38 (June 2023): 21-36.

⁹ Surendra Kumar Yadawa, "India's Strategic Choices in the Multipolar World," *Brazilian Journal of Strategy & International Relations* 13, no. 25 (September 2024), <https://doi.org/10.22456/2238-6912.135588>

Conceptual Framework: A Neo-classical Realist Lens

To evaluate whether India is evolving into a maritime hegemon or remaining a constrained liminal actor, this article adopts a Neo-classical Realist framework. Neo-classical Realism provides a useful theoretical prism by linking systemic pressures with unit-level factors.¹⁰ Unlike Structural Realism, which treats states as black boxes reacting directly to the international distribution of power, Neo-classical Realism “incorporates domestic factors to explain states’ foreign and security policies.”¹¹ Systemic stimuli (such as the rise of China or U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy) are filtered through domestic variables, leadership perceptions, institutional capacity, political culture, and state power extraction abilities, to produce actual foreign policy outcomes. In the Indian case, this means that India’s response to the external strategic environment is heavily mediated by its internal imperatives of strategic autonomy, historical non-alignment and resource constraints.

This framework is an especially good fit because India’s grand strategy embodies a tension between external pressures and internal preferences.¹² Systemic Realism alone might predict that faced with a powerful rival (China), India would balance by bandwagoning with the United States (U.S.) in a tight alliance. In reality, India’s policy reflects a more calibrated approach. It seeks to “extract as much gains from as many ties as possible” rather than accept exclusive blocs.¹³ Neo-classical Realism explains this by pointing to state-level factors, e.g., India’s domestic political consensus valuing independence and its leaders’ belief in multipolarity. These factors act as intervening variables that cause India to pursue a multi-aligned balancing strategy (what Jaishankar terms multi-alignment) instead of joining an alliance outright. Furthermore, India’s state capacity (economic

¹⁰ Nicholas Kitchen, “Systemic Pressures and Domestic Ideas: A Neoclassical Realist Model of Grand Strategy Formation,” *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 1 (January 2010): 117-43, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210509990532>.

¹¹ Gustav Meibauer, “Neorealism, Neoclassical Realism and the Problem(s) of History,” *International Relations* 37, no. 2 (June 2023): 348-69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178211033943>

¹² Suzelle M Thomas, “India’s Grand Strategy: Ambitions and Capacity” (Naval Postgraduate School, 2019).

¹³ Cyrus Ghosh, *The Paradigm Shift of India from Non-Alignment to All-Alignment Post 2014: A Case Study of Indian Foreign Policy*, ResearchGate 2025, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.12327.66720>.

and military institutions) and threat perceptions shape how far it can project power.

Neo-classical Realism also provides an analysis of the internal limitations in Pakistan, such as economic limitations, institutional limitations, and overdependence on China in modernising its naval forces. These limitations inform how Pakistan reacts to the maritime strategy of India by placing it in a strategic relationship with China, which restricts the autonomy of Pakistan in defining maritime security and foreign policy, offering a unique perspective that both states can be deemed liminal but to different degrees, owing to the different strategic influence of China's presence in the region. Adopting a Neoclassical Realist lens thus allows us to account for both systemic pressures (the Asia-Pacific power shifts compelling India seaward) and unit-level constraints (India's domestic politics, strategic culture, and resource base) in assessing New Delhi's maritime strategy. The sections below apply this framework to India's policies in the IOR.

India's Maritime Posture in the Indian Ocean Region

After decades of continental preoccupation, India has increasingly turned to the seas, unveiling a more assertive maritime posture in the IOR. This shift is evident in several dimensions of policy including rapid naval modernisation, the articulation of a regional maritime doctrine (SAGAR), the adoption of mission-based deployments and vigorous "port diplomacy" across the littorals.

Indian Naval Modernisation

India's naval capabilities have expanded significantly in pursuit of a blue-water status, albeit not at the pace of China's naval build-up. The Indian Navy now operates two aircraft carriers (including the indigenous INS Vikrant commissioned in 2022) and is planning for two more in the coming years.¹⁴ It has inducted nuclear-propelled submarines (including the

¹⁴ Kamlesh K Agnihotri, "The Vikrant Aircraft Carrier Reborn: Indian Navy's "Atmanirbharata" Endeavour Comes of Age," *National Maritime Foundation*,

Arihant-class SSBN for a sea-based nuclear deterrent) and a range of modern surface combatants. The India Navy's force-level goals aim for between 170 and 175 ships by 2035.¹⁵ New acquisitions like carrier-capable Rafale-M fighters and advanced frigates are intended to bolster power projection and network-centric warfare capacity.¹⁶ Although India's naval expansion faces budgetary and bureaucratic constraints, the fleet grew from 25 major surface combatants in 2014 to only 29 by 2024, the qualitative improvements are geared toward ensuring India can dominate its immediate waters.¹⁷ This steady modernisation underwrites India's ambition to be the pre-eminent naval power in the Indian Ocean, able to secure key sea lanes and choke points in the face of rising competition.

SAGAR and MAHASAGAR – Strategic Evolution in India's Maritime Doctrine

India's maritime strategy has undergone a significant transformation from the 2015 SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)¹⁸ doctrine to the 2025 MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) initiative. Under SAGAR's ethos, India has extended coastal surveillance radar networks to states like Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Maldives and Seychelles, provided naval patrol support to Mozambique and Mauritius, and supplied critical aid (such as a US\$4

September 2, 2022, <https://maritimeindia.org/the-vikrant-aircraft-carrier-reborn-indian-navys-atmanirbharata-endeavour-comes-of-age/>

¹⁵ Rakesh Krishnan Simha, "India's Navy: Countering China, A Strategic Evolution," *Raksha Anirveda*, December 3, 2023, <https://raksha-anirveda.com/indiast-navy-countering-china-a-strategic-evolution/>

¹⁶ MJ Augustine Vinod, "Rafale-M: A Decade Ahead Of Chinese Naval Jets," Indian Navy's Marine Fighters To Be Real "Game Changers,"" *South Asia Journal*, July 15, 2024, <https://southasiajournal.net/rafaele-m-a-decade-ahead-of-chinese-naval-jets-indian-navys-marine-fighters-to-be-real-game-changers/>

¹⁷ Priyanka Patel Sameer Patil, and Arun Vishwanathan, "India's Quest for Defence Indigenisation: A Case Study of the Indian Navy," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 10, no. 3 (December 2023): 364-94, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970231207255>

¹⁸ Jivanta Schöttli, "Security and Growth for All in the Indian Ocean – Maritime Governance and India's Foreign Policy," *India Review* 18, no. 5 (October 2019): 568-81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2019.1703366>

billion credit to stabilise Sri Lanka’s economy in 2022).¹⁹ While SAGAR focuses on regional cooperation within the IOR, MAHASAGAR expands India’s maritime vision to encompass the broader Global South, including Africa’s eastern littoral states. This strategic shift reflects India’s response to Beijing’s growing influence in the region and its intent to assert itself as a responsible maritime power.

The MAHASAGAR initiative aims to enhance India’s maritime capabilities, consolidate economic and security cooperation with regional states, and promote sustainable development. It seeks to address non-traditional threats such as climate-induced disasters and foster capacity building in maritime states. Through MAHASAGAR, India presents herself as a preferred security partner and first responder in the region. Strategically, it serves as a countermeasure to China’s BRI that significantly expanded China’s presence in IOR through infrastructure investments and partnerships. New Delhi’s approach under MAHASAGAR emphasises transparent development, respect for sovereignty, and mutual benefits, compared with Beijing’s debt-driven model.²⁰ This strategic divergence aims to offer an alternative to countries in the Global South, promoting rules-based order and regional stability. India has conducted naval drills with states like Mauritius and Seychelles to enhance interoperability and foster trust among neighbouring states. Initiatives like the Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) facilitate maritime domain awareness (MDA) and information sharing, strengthening collective security efforts.

Evolution from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR doctrine thus frames India’s hegemonic aspirations in benign terms where India seeks primacy in its surrounding waters not through domination, but through providing security as a public good and fostering Security and Growth for All.

¹⁹ Viraj Solanki, “India Steps up Defence and Security Engagement with Its Island Neighbours,” *IISS*, April 23, 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/04/india-steps-up-defence-and-security-engagement-with-its-island-neighbours/>

²⁰ Amar Singh, *India in Indo-Pacific: From SAGAR to Mahasagar*, 6, no. 5 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.2021-11278686>.

Mission Based Deployments

A concrete change in India's naval operating posture came in 2017 with the launch of Mission Based Deployments (MBD).²¹ Under the MBD concept, the Indian Navy maintains year-round deployments of mission-ready warships at critical choke points and sea lanes throughout the Indian Ocean. These forward-deployed units are tasked with maritime domain awareness (MDA), patrolling key "ingress and egress routes" of the IOR, and responding to contingencies. The impetus for MBD was the increasing forays of Chinese naval units (including submarines) into the Indian Ocean under the pretext of anti-piracy patrols.²² Indian "mission deployers" now continuously patrol areas such as the Persian Gulf/Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden, central Indian Ocean, Strait of Malacca approaches, Bay of Bengal, and the waters around the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. According to Indian naval officials, these deployments are explicitly designed to shadow and monitor Chinese warships entering the Indian Ocean.²³ However, MBD has stretched the Navy's resources; Indian experts admit it strains hull availability and maintenance as a limited fleet is spread thin. Still, mission-based deployments mark a proactive leap in India's maritime strategy, moving from occasional patrols to a near-permanent presence that befits a would-be hegemon intent on deterring rival influence in its backyard. While India's MBDs are aimed at ensuring regional stability, Pakistan, given its reliance on the Arabian Sea for energy and trade routes, views these developments with caution, particularly as Indian forces increasingly patrol critical maritime pathways in proximity to Pakistan's coastal assets.

²¹ Nishant Rajeev, "India's Expanding Naval Presence in the Indo-Pacific," *RSIS*, February 18, 2025, <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip25013-indias-expanding-naval-presence-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

²² David Brewster, "India and China at Sea: A Contest of Status and Legitimacy in the Indian Ocean," *Asia Policy* 22, no. 1 (2016): 4–10, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2016.0030>.

²³ Prashant Hosur Suhas and Christopher K. Colley, "It's Still the Indian Ocean: Parsing Sino-Indian Naval Competition Where It Counts," *War on the Rocks*, May 7, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/05/its-still-the-indian-ocean-parsing-sino-indian-naval-competition-where-it-counts/>

Port Diplomacy and Strategic Access

India has coupled its naval outreach with an energetic campaign of port diplomacy to establish footholds and access points across the Asia-Pacific littorals. This can be seen as a direct response to China's "string of pearls" — the network of ports and bases Beijing has cultivated from Gwadar to Hambantota.²⁴ India is investing in and obtaining access to strategic ports in a manner that extends its operational reach and counters Chinese encirclement. India's growing presence in ports like Chabahar is seen as a counterbalance to China's efforts in Gwadar, Pakistan, which has been positioned strategically along key maritime trade routes. A prominent example is Chabahar port in Iran, where India has committed around US\$500 million and recently signed a 10-year agreement to develop and operate the port.²⁵ Chabahar provides India — a vital transit route to Afghanistan and Central Asia bypassing Pakistan, and sits just across the Gulf from China's Gwadar port in Pakistan, affording India a monitoring post near the Strait of Hormuz.

In Oman, India has secured military access to the port of Duqm for logistics and refuelling, cementing an Indian naval foothold on the Arabian Sea rim.²⁶ Further east, India is collaborating with Indonesia to develop the port of Sabang in Aceh, only 90 nautical miles from the entrance of the Malacca Strait; an India-Indonesia joint feasibility study for Sabang's expansion was completed in 2023 despite challenges of connectivity construction.²⁷ Access to Sabang would enable the Indian

²⁴ Rishi D V, "The String of Pearls," SSRN Scholarly Paper no. 4249023 (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, June 10, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4249023>.

²⁵ Mohammad Salami, "Despite a Recent India-Iran Agreement, Challenges Loom for Chabahar Port," *Stimson Center*, July 9, 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/despite-a-recent-india-iran-agreement-challenges-loom-for-chabahar-port/>

²⁶ Muddassir Quamar, 'Locating Oman in India's Strategic Engagements with the Gulf', *Middle East Institute*, June 19, 2018, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/locating-oman-indias-strategic-engagements-gulf>.

²⁷ Awani Irewati, "The Challenges of Constructing the Connectivity between Indonesia and Malaysia in the Malacca Strait," *Journal of Indonesian Social Sciences and Humanities* 10, no. 1 (June 2020): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.14203/jissh.v10i1.159>

Navy to more easily plug the primary gateway between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Similarly, India built and operationalised Sittwe port in Myanmar (as part of the Kaladan multimodal corridor) to extend its influence into the Bay of Bengal and Southeast Asia. On the African littoral, New Delhi has deepened defence ties with island states like Madagascar and Seychelles (including an agreement, since stalled, to develop Seychelles' Assumption Island as a naval facility). Perhaps most significantly, India is developing dual-use facilities on Agalega Island (leased from Mauritius) constructing an airstrip and port infrastructure that will bolster Indian surveillance over the Southwest Indian Ocean and Mozambique Channel.²⁸ This flurry of port investments and access agreements has been dubbed India's "necklace of diamonds" strategy, intended to counterbalance China's pearls by ensuring India's navy has reliable waypoints and partnerships across the Indian Ocean's vast expanse.²⁹ In aggregate, these efforts speak to a grand strategy that is increasingly maritime in orientation. India is positioning itself as the central actor in the IOR through enhanced naval power, a cooperative security doctrine, active patrolling of regional commons, and a lattice of coastal infrastructure tying the region to Indian influence.

Minilateralism and Quad: Balancing China in the Asia-Pacific

India's grand strategy has also taken a multilateral turn in recent years, favouring minilateral coalitions to supplement its national capacity.³⁰ Foremost among these is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with the U.S. , Japan, and Australia, a partnership aimed at preserving a free and open Asia-Pacific, and most importantly leveraging partnerships to

²⁸ Mukesh Kumar, "Lakshadweep and Agalega: Implications of India's Naval Dominance," *South Asian Voices*, April 15, 2024, <https://southasianvoices.org/sec-m-in-r-lakshadweep-agalega-04-15-2024/>.

²⁹ Sumanta Bhattacharya et al., "Can India's Necklace of Diamonds Strategy Defeat the China's String of Pearls.," *International Journal of Recent Advances in Multidisciplinary Topics* 2, no. 11 (July 2022): 2582–7839.

³⁰ Poornima Vijaya, "Signaling in Minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific: The Cases of Quad and AUKUS (2017-2022)," *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs, Institute for Research and European Studies - Bitola* 10, no. 3 (2024): 131–48, <https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA24103131v>.

constrain China's rise at sea, while stopping short of formal alliances that would compromise strategic autonomy.³¹ In practice, the Quad provides India a force multiplier in the maritime domain. The four navies regularly convene for the annual Exercise Malabar, which in recent iterations has included complex antisubmarine warfare drills and carrier operations, signalling combined strength.³² Through these activities, India gains support in upholding the regional order against coercive behaviour, for instance, joint statements emphasising freedom of navigation and opposing "attempts to change the status quo" implicitly counter China's maritime claims.

Crucially, however, India has steered the Quad's evolution in a way that assuages its own concerns about entanglement. New Delhi has resisted any move to turn the Quad into a formalised military alliance or Asian NATO.³³ The U.S. attempts to have the Quad take on overt collective security roles are a hard sell with India, which seeks to avoid being part of any multilateral grouping that resembles a security alliance. Indian diplomats insist the Quad remain a diplomatic and coordinating platform i.e., alignment of policies rather than a binding defence pact.³⁴ In effect, India uses the Quad to balance without alliances, gaining the strategic heft of the U.S. and allied involvement in the Indian Ocean while maintaining decision-making autonomy. The other Quad members, for their part, have accepted India's preferences; the grouping emphasises non-military cooperation (from vaccine delivery to supply-chain resilience) and retains flexibility, which suits India's liminal approach.

Beyond the Quad, India has pursued other minilateral arrangements as hedges against Chinese dominance. These include trilateral security

³¹ Tayyaba Jaffery and Muhammad Shoaib Pervez, "Conceptualising a Heterarchical Regional Security Complex: The Case of the QUAD," *The International Spectator* 59, no. 4 (October 2024): 78–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2024.2371589>.

³² Ash Rossiter, Yee-Kuang Heng, and Brendon J. Cannon, "Looking under the Hood of Joint Naval Exercises: Motives and Perceived Benefits for Japan," *The Pacific Review* 38, no. 1 (January 2025): 147–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2024.2366791>.

³³ Brendon J. Cannon and Ash Rossiter, "Locating the Quad: Informality, Institutional Flexibility, and Future Alignment in the Indo-Pacific," *International Politics (Hague, Netherlands)*, March 12, 2022, 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-022-00383-y>.

³⁴ Aparna Pande, "Will India Join a Military Alliance with the Quad?," *POLITICS, GIS Reports*, November 29, 2024, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/india-quad/>.

dialogues such as India-Japan-U.S. and India-Australia-Japan, as well as emerging forums like the India-France-Australia trilateral focused on maritime security. India is also a founding member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), which convene regional states to discuss cooperative security.³⁵ While such broader groupings are often slow-moving, they reinforce India's image as a leader of the regional architecture. Notably, New Delhi has even engaged with extra-regional navies, for example, conducting bilateral naval exercises with almost all the ASEAN countries and welcoming European powers (France, UK) for joint drills in the Indian Ocean.³⁶ The cumulative effect of this networking is to constrain China's freedom of manoeuvre. Surrounded by a constellation of partnerships and presence, Beijing faces an India that is not isolated but embedded in a supportive network of like-minded maritime democracies. In sum, minilateralism, typified by the Quad is a key pillar of India's grand strategy, enabling it to punch above its weight in balancing China without the commitments of formal alliances.

India's MAHASAGAR strategy strengthens these objectives by enhancing India's leadership role in the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific regions. By expanding its cooperative maritime engagements beyond just security, it promotes environmental sustainability, economic partnerships, and strategic infrastructure development, which are critical in building an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. This strategic alignment enables India to assert its maritime influence while maintaining its strategic autonomy — ultimately shaping a more secure, prosperous, and inclusive regional maritime order.

Constraints and Trade-offs: Autonomy vs Alliance Dilemmas

Despite its grand ambitions, India's trajectory as a would-be maritime hegemon is moderated by enduring constraints and strategic trade-offs. Foremost among these is the tension between India's desire for strategic

³⁵ Zaki Khalid, "A Historical Analysis of IORA: Building a Case for Pakistan's Membership," *CSCR*, September 2022.

³⁶ Mukesh Shankar Bharti and Akshithaa Singh, "India and France Bilateral Partnership for Advancing Strategic Autonomy in the Indo-Pacific Region: Special Reference to the Indo-French Strategic Partnership," *Cogent Social Sciences* 9, no. 1 (December 2023): 2215561, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2023.2215561>.

autonomy and the pressures of alliance politics. India's post-independence ethos of non-alignment runs deep in its strategic culture, yet is now rebranded to multi-alignment or strategic autonomy. Even as external threats drive India closer to the U.S., Indian policymakers remain wary of any entanglement that would limit independent decision making.³⁷ This has manifested in hard choices; for instance, India proceeded to purchase the Russian S-400 air defence system in 2018 despite the U.S. sanctions threats, underscoring that it will not compromise autonomy under pressure.³⁸ A more recent instance of this balancing act occurred during the Trump administration when India faced the U.S. sanctions due to its continued purchase of Russian oil, despite the U.S.'s push for reducing Russia's economic influence. Amidst the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the U.S. attempt to curb Russian economic influence yet India's oil purchase from Russia is directed towards India's strategic calculus. The U.S. refrained from applying direct sanctions on India under the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) but imposed indirect pressure by applying sanctions on Russian oil companies Rosneft and Lukoil (which directly import to India).³⁹ It marks India's complex balancing act between its energy security and asserting autonomy in foreign policy, resisting the U.S. coercion in favour of pragmatic national interests. However, these indirect sanctions created a significant diplomatic friction between India and the U.S. as India continued to procure oil from Russia to ensure energy security amidst rising global prices. The situation highlighted India's struggle to maintain its energy needs and autonomy in decision-making, despite growing U.S. pressure to sever ties with Russia. It also underscored India's commitment to non-interference in its foreign policy, which prioritises national interest over geopolitical alignments.⁴⁰

³⁷ Sudhanshu Tripathi, *India's Foreign Policy Dilemma over Non-Alignment 2.0* (B1/I-1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area, Mathura Road New Delhi 110 044: SAGE Publications Pvt. Ltd, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9789353885809>.

³⁸ Shaza Arif, "India's Acquisition of the S-400 Air Defense System: Implications and Options for Pakistan," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 25 August 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af/JIPA/Display/Article/2743750/indias-acquisition-of-the-s-400-air-defense-system-implications-and-options-for/>.

³⁹ Vrinda Sahai, *The Impact of U.S. Sanctions and Tariffs on India's Russian Oil Imports* (Carnegie India, 2025).

⁴⁰ Maheen Shafeeq, "India's Strategic Autonomy and the US-India Strategic Partnership: Implications on Pakistan," *Journal of Security & Strategic Analyses* 11, no. 1 (July 2025): 05–28, <https://doi.org/10.57169/jssa.0011.01.0344>.

The flipside of India's stance on autonomy is that avoiding alliances can dilute the deterrence credibility of India's balancing efforts. Some Western strategists argue that without a formal alliance commitment, India's ability to deter a powerful adversary like China is weakened by uncertainty. Indeed, Tellis contends that India's aversion to an alliance with the U.S. is short-sighted, implying it leaves potential military power on the table.⁴¹ Indian analysts counter that flexibility is worth the cost, as Dhruva Jaishankar notes, India prefers to be an ally in a traditional sense, an independent and autonomous partner" rather than a treaty-bound dependent.

This debate has real implications for defence preparedness and technology access. Clinging to autonomy means India must largely self-finance its military modernisation and build indigenous defence industry, a slow process. On the other hand, closer alignment with the U.S. and its allies has already begun to yield benefits like intelligence sharing, advanced drones, and co-development of critical technologies, for example, a 2023 pact for joint jet engine production with the U.S.⁴² Yet these transfers often come with strings attached and expectations of strategic alignment. New Delhi faces a trade-off, like greater openness to partnership could accelerate India's naval and technological prowess (e.g. inclusion in initiatives like AUKUS or a deepened Quad could eventually open doors to cutting-edge undersea warfare tech), but it might also erode India's freedom to chart an independent course or engage rivals diplomatically. The credibility of India's deterrence posture in the Indian Ocean may thus hinge on how it navigates this fine line, leveraging partnerships enough to boost capability and scare off adversaries, but not so much as to lose the "non-aligned" sheen that has domestic political resonance.

Another constraint is resource and capacity limitations within India. Despite being the world's fifth-largest economy, India's per capita resources and defence budget remain far smaller than those of China or the U.S. This creates a strain in simultaneously modernising the military, investing in infrastructure, and providing public goods. Scholars like Rajesh Basrur have documented how India's domestic political dynamics

⁴¹ Dhruva Jaishankar, "The Nimble Power," *ORF America*, July 30, 2025, <https://orfamerica.org/newresearch/indias-grand-strategy>.

⁴² Chunhao Lou, "U.S.-India Defense Cooperation: Progress, Motivation and Constraints," *China International Strategy Review* 6, no. 2 (November 8, 2024): 305-18, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-024-00167-4>

(bureaucratic inefficiencies, inter-service rivalries, and political hesitancy) can produce “policy drift” that hampers the execution of grand strategy.⁴³ For instance, while India announces grand initiatives for the Asia-Pacific, implementation often lags: promised investments in neighbouring states or regional institutions (SAARC, IORA) sometimes stall due to institutional incapacity or shifting political attention. Such inconsistencies can undercut India’s reliability as a proclaimed security provider. These constraints temper India’s hegemonic ambitions, they suggest that India, for all its grand strategy rhetoric, must continually make hard choices about where to allocate finite resources and how far to stretch without assured backups from allies.

In essence, India’s rise in the Indian Ocean is a story of balancing acts, balancing between the U.S. and Russia to retain multiple strategic partnerships, balancing between investing in continental defence versus maritime power projection, and balancing between the pursuit of power and the principles of autonomy.

The other limitation that largely influences the maritime strategy of India is the limitation in resources and capacity, which should be managed in tandem with its maritime ambitions in the region. India, in spite of increasing economic strength, is limited by its defence budgetary constraints and technological gaps in perpetual naval modernisation. This is aggravated by the institutional inefficiencies and inter-service tensions that drag the realisation of a coherent grand strategy in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).⁴⁴ These domestic inhibitions essentially cripple the capability of India to exercise power wholly within its maritime territory and sustain its desires of pre-eminence, and compel India to exercise wise trade-offs between autonomy and external alliances.

The issue is reflected in the dynamic relationship between India and the U.S. and Russia. Although the fact that India recently bought the S-400 missile system from Russia, and further demonstrates its willingness to achieve strategic autonomy, it also created diplomatic tension, especially with the U.S., which has placed indirect sanctions on the

⁴³ Rajesh M. Basrur, *Subcontinental Drift: Domestic Politics and India’s Foreign Policy*, 1st ed, South Asia in World Affairs Ser (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2023).

⁴⁴ Basrur, *Subcontinental Drift*, 48.

interests of Russian oil companies, such as Rosneft and Lukoil.⁴⁵ These actions expose India's tension between securing energy security while having strategic autonomy in decision-making, underscoring the limitations imposed by its geopolitical balancing act.

Meanwhile, the rise of maritime influence of India has gradually defined the response strategy of Pakistan which has been refined by the strategic alliance with China, especially under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Gwadar Port. Gwadar is not only an economic and energy-related centre but also a possible naval base that will augment the capacity of Pakistan to exert influence and balance the increased dominance in the IOR by India. The fact that Gwadar is located close to the important maritime routes of India has a vulnerable aspect that requires an increased level of security and military readiness to protect the SLOCs.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, such strategic dependence on China in terms of military and infrastructural assistance also notes a concession by Pakistan. Although the partnership can have direct benefits, especially in the matter of navy modernisation and economic growth, it may pose a threat to the independence of Pakistan as it becomes more dependent on the Chinese interests in the region. This reliance on China, therefore, comes at a price to the freedom of action taken by Pakistan just as the balancing act between independence and strategic cooperation to India.

In this regard, India and Pakistan are both in a liminal position in the IOR. India would like to establish itself as a maritime hegemon, but the reality of its resources as well as the competing needs of autonomy and alliance restrain it. On the same note, the extent to which Pakistan tries to balance itself with India is limited by the domestic constraints and reliance on foreign aid through China. The final issue for both countries is to find the correct balance of autonomy, regionalism, and the strategic relationship that defines their behaviors. In the case of India, this dilemma will decide whether it can convincingly develop maritime power in the IOR or it will continue to be a liminal power, incapable of achieving its strategic ambition. Likewise, the skill at managing trade-offs evaluated

⁴⁵ Aparna Pande, "Will India Join a Military Alliance with the Quad?," *POLITICS, GIS Reports*, November 29, 2024, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/india-quad/>.

⁴⁶ Faiza Farid, "Necessity of Maritime Security in Gwadar Port Complex," *Polaris – Journal of Maritime Research* 2, no. 1 (December 2020): 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.53963/pjmr.2020.005.2>.

between strategic independence and alignment with the outside world will determine how far Pakistan will go in the region and how well it can defend its maritime interests in the face of Indian ascendancy.

Policy Implications and Future Scenarios

Looking ahead, India's strategic choices will determine whether it solidifies itself as an autonomous regional balancer or tilts into a closer alignment as a quasi-allied partner of the West. In the trajectory to become an autonomous balancer, India continues to chart an independent course, investing heavily in its own comprehensive national power while engaging in issue-based coalitions. It would mean India doubles down on initiatives like SAGAR and the Indian Ocean Rim Association to build an India-centric regional order, while maintaining engagement with forums like BRICS and SCO to hedge against over-reliance on the West.⁴⁷ As an autonomous balancer, India might incrementally increase security cooperation with the U.S.-Japan-Australia bloc but stop short of any alliance or permanent foreign basing on its soil. This path banks on India's ability to become a pole in a multipolar order, leveraging its "liminality" as a bridge between the East and West. The strategic payoff would be maximal flexibility, India could, for instance, mediate between great powers, champion the Global South (as it did by bringing the African Union into the G20 in 2023)⁴⁸, and avoid antagonising any single power unnecessarily. The risk, however, is that without firm alignments, India might face a mightier China essentially alone in a crisis; questions would persist about whether India's deterrence is sufficiently credible to dissuade China's aggression if the U.S. remains non-committal.

In an alternate scenario, worsening security threats, say a severe border war with China or aggression in the maritime domain, could push India into a tighter strategic embrace with the U.S. and its allies. Already, India is

⁴⁷ Tanveer Ahmad Khan, "Limited Hard Balancing: Explaining India's Counter Response to Chinese Encirclement," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, April 24, 2023, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3371481/limited-hard-balancing-explaining-indias-counter-response-to-chinese-encirclement/>.

⁴⁸ Chido Munyati, "The African Union Has Been Made a Permanent Member of the G20 – What Does It Mean for the Continent?," *World Economic Forum*, September 14, 2023, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/09/african-union-g20-world-leaders/>.

inching into quasi-alliance territory with foundational defence agreements (LEMOA, COMCASA, BECA) signed with Washington and growing interoperability exercises.⁴⁹ A future scenario could see India becoming a de facto, major non-NATO ally, or part of a new Asia-Pacific security architecture. Closer alignment could unlock more advanced U.S. weaponry and joint operational planning, dramatically enhancing India's military capability. It might also bring extended nuclear deterrence assurances or a division of labour where, for example, the Indian Navy takes lead in the northern Indian Ocean while allied navies handle the South China Sea contingencies.⁵⁰ Such a partnership could cement India's status as a linchpin of the Asia-Pacific security, a clear maritime hegemon in the Indian Ocean under the broader umbrella of the U.S. power. However, this would entail a fundamental shift in India's identity, raising concerns about sovereignty and provoking sharper reactions from China, and perhaps Russia as well. Domestically, it could be seen as abandoning the cherished doctrine of non-alignment, which might carry political costs.

Perhaps the most likely future lies between these poles, where India stays as an aligned autonomous power. In practice, this means India continues to avoid formal alliances but increasingly coordinates with the U.S. and partners on shared threats, effectively aligning on strategic objectives while preserving freedom of action. There is evidence where India is participating in minilateral groupings (Quad, a potential Indo-Pacific maritime coalition), signed defence tech agreements with the West, and deepens intelligence-sharing, all hallmarks of alignment, yet it also maintains ties with Russia, engages China diplomatically when needed, and keeps its options open.⁵¹ This flexible posture could allow India to play an autonomous role regionally, while relying on a loose coalition to deter high-end threats like China and possibly Pakistan. In the long term, as India's power grows (projections of a US\$10 trillion economy by 2040, with a blue-water navy to match), it may no longer need to choose, it can be a pole on its own terms.⁵² But for the coming decade, selective alignment, essentially pursuing strategic autonomy

⁴⁹ Muhammad Ali Baig and Alyan Waheed, "Lemoa, Comcasa, and Beca in India's Foreign Calculus," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, July 22, 2022.

⁵⁰ Nishant Rajeev, *India's Expanding Naval Presence in the Indo-Pacific*, February 18, 2025.

⁵¹ Sarah Tzinieris, Rishika Chauhan, and Eirini Athanasiadou, "India's A La Carte Minilateralism: AUKUS and the Quad," *The Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (October 2023): 21–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2023.2285540>.

⁵² Tzinieris, Chauhan, and Athanasiadou, "India's A La Carte Minilateralism," 45.

within a U.S.-friendly camp might maximise India's advantages. It aligns with Jaishankar's dictum that India will "engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia" all at once.⁵³ The implication is that India will neither bandwagon fully nor balance alone, but attempt a sophisticated mix of both.

For policymakers in New Delhi, each path carries implications for deterrence credibility, military planning, and diplomatic freedom. If India remains non-aligned, it must invest more in indigenous capabilities and possibly nuclear deterrence to compensate for lack of external help. If it aligns too closely, it must prepare for potential entrapment in others conflicts and loss of neutrality in forums like the UN. The ongoing U.S.-China rivalry and uncertainty in Washington e.g. the return of an "America First" presidency, also factor into India's calculus. A diminished U.S. global role would push India to be more self-reliant and multipolar, conversely, a robust U.S. containment strategy against China could pull India into a tighter coalition by necessity.

Ultimately, India's future posture will be determined by its ability to manage the liminality that currently defines it, the interim stage between emerging power and established power. As Rao observes, India's threshold position provides space, autonomy enables intent. How India uses that space to shape an Indian Ocean order in the next decade will reveal whether it graduates from liminal status to a maritime hegemon in its own right, or finds comfort in a middle position indefinitely.

Conclusion

India's grand strategy in the Indian Ocean today is characterised by ambitious outreach tempered by cautious restraint, a blend befitting a state often described as a liminal power at the cusp of great-power status. On one hand, India has clearly shed much of its old diffidence, it is projecting naval power deeper into Asia-Pacific waters, fortifying its influence through port-building and partnerships, and vocally positioning itself as the guardian of a free and stable Indian Ocean. These are the hallmarks of an emerging maritime hegemon, intent on making the Indian Ocean "India's Ocean" in

⁵³ Tzinieris, Chauhan, and Athanasiadou, "India's A La Carte Multilateralism," 39.

effect if not in name. On the other hand, India remains constrained by the imperatives of strategic autonomy and internal limitations. It calibrates every move, joining coalitions like the Quad but stopping short of alliances, arming itself but avoiding provocations, thus appearing hesitant to fully embrace the mantle of great power. India's naval expansion in the Indian Ocean presents both opportunities and challenges for Pakistan. While India's desire to lead regional order-building may create new avenues for maritime cooperation, it could also drive Pakistan to seek deeper engagement with China and Iran as counterweights in the Indian Ocean.

In resolving the question posed, liminal power or emerging hegemon, the evidence suggests India is in transition, exhibiting traits of both. It is a liminal maritime power that aspires to hegemonic influence in its region but has not fully attained it yet. India's grand strategy has set the direction toward regional dominance, yet its insistence on independent strategic decision making and the reality of power asymmetry with China mean that India's rise will likely be gradual and cautious. Rather than a headlong rush to hegemony, India's path is one of incremental ascendancy. In the coming years, as India's capabilities grow and if it can marshal domestic consensus, we may see the liminal state transform into a more unequivocal leading power of the Indian Ocean. But for now, India's grand strategy will continue to walk the tightrope between ambition and caution, an approach that reflects both the promise and the limits of its liminal greatness.

For Pakistan, India's evolving maritime strategy presents a complex mix of opportunities and challenges. As India seeks to assert its regional dominance, Pakistan may find itself compelled to recalibrate its naval strategy, investing further in asymmetric capabilities and strengthening its naval partnerships with China and other regional actors. Pakistan's security calculus, particularly in relation to Gwadar Port and the broader strategic environment of the Indian Ocean, will be shaped by India's ongoing transition from a liminal power to a potential maritime hegemon. This evolving dynamic may push Pakistan to enhance its deterrence capabilities while pursuing strategic autonomy to mitigate India's growing influence. Ultimately, Pakistan's response will be pivotal in shaping its position in the IOR as it navigates the emerging power shifts in the region.