

# Strategic Importance of Indian Ocean: in India's Perspective



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## Abstract

Indian Ocean is called the key to seven seas and its importance has increased all the more in 21st century because almost 90% part of the world trading reaches through sea routes. Almost 97% trade of India depends on sea. There are 48 complete independent nations in regional countries in Indian Ocean. Among them 38 countries, are coastal and remaining 12 countries are surrounded by lands in which 1/3 population of the world resides. America imports 40% of raw material from these countries. 75% Iron, 35% Coal, 90% Bauxite, Zink and Rubber come from these countries. The main reason of increasing interest of world power countries is the availability of Geo-strategic location, trading sea routes, treasure of minerals and energy resources. Its importance for India is more then any other nations.

**Keywords:** Indian Ocean, Geo-Strategic, Strategic, Sea routes, Sea Trade, Energy, Resources, Indian Interest, Importance.

## Introduction

### “One who has conquered water, is powerful”- Bhagwad Gita

With rapidly changing conditions occurring worldwide the geo-strategic and geo-political importance of the Indian Ocean is constantly gaining importance. It is the third largest ocean in the world which extends from Kanyakumari, India to the south pole, Antarctica. It covers 14.65 per cent of the earth's total surface area. Its deepest point is 7725 meters deep located at Diamantina Deep. There are 5 straits in the Indian Ocean<sup>(1)</sup>. The waterways are denser and more in number compared to any other ocean. There are extremely important trading and strategic waterways connecting Europe, America, central-east South Asia, Pacific regions in the Indian Ocean.

The Indian Ocean is important to India not only from security point of view, but is also a crossroad for it through which it can see world politics passing through. From the start, big powers have tried to gain control of this region through strategic activities. Developed countries have started incorporating highly advanced technology at their navy headquarters keeping in mind economic, political and strategic interests. It is a danger signal for not only India and other South Asian countries but for the entire Asian continent. Maritime Power analyst Alfred Mahon had remarked- “Whoever gains complete control over the Indian Ocean will gain dominance over Asia. It is the key to the seven seas. The fate of the world in the 21st century lies in its water<sup>(2)</sup>.” Similarly David Smith had said “The country which establishes complete control over the Indian ocean will govern the Persian Gulf and the country which governs the Persian Gulf will control the fate of the world<sup>(3)</sup>”.

The reason for the obsession of big powers with the Indian Ocean is due to their economic, political, strategic and geographical interests leading to completion among themselves to establish power in this region which can create a serious problem in maintaining peace in this region.

## Geographic Position

The Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean in the world and it is spread over an area which is 10,400 km long and 1600 km wide. It is spread over between 30 degree latitude to 40 degree latitude and from 20 degree longitude to 115 degree longitude. The regional geographic expanse of the Indian Ocean is as follows- In the north- Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, Persian Gulf, in the south-up to Antarctica, in the west- up to Africa's east coast, in the east- Indonesia and the west coast of Australia.

The Indian Ocean regional countries are composed of 48 independent nations. Out of these 36 are coastal countries. These countries are home to one fourth of the world's population. The Indian Ocean can be divided into 2 main regions- East and west region. The division of the boundary along the central part of Indian Ocean can be done on basis of submerged regions. Due to the positioning and expanse of

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these regions several islands have been created which are extremely important from geographic and political point of view.

#### **Main Islands in the Indian Ocean<sup>(4)</sup>**

The islands present in the Indian Ocean are extremely important from geo-strategic point of view. With the help of these islands various European countries used to put pressure and looked after many Asian and African countries.

In the east zone Andaman and Nicobar (In the Bay of Bengal) as well as Cocos and Christmas islands (Near Java), In the west zone Madagascar (along south east coast of Africa), Lakshadweep, Mauritius, Brittany, Sussels, Emirates, Al-Dawa, Karkuhar. In the south Sri Lanka, Maldives, St. Paul islands are situated. In the central zone, Cagos and Diego Garcia islands.

#### **Historical Role of Indian Ocean**

From ancient economic and cultural point of view, the Indian Ocean was far more superior compared to other oceans. From ancient times the Indian Ocean had started trade and cultural exchanges through waterways which was more compared to Atlantic and Pacific Ocean. From 1200 AD to 1433 AD the Indian Ocean was known as the "Chinese Lake"<sup>(5)</sup>. In 1600 AD The East India Company had started transportation in the Indian Ocean for trade operations. For the protection of the important waterway "Malakka" in the eastern part of Indian Ocean, the British established "Singapore" in 1824 AD<sup>(6)</sup>. In this way most of the regions of Indian Ocean and coastal countries came into the control of the British by 1905 AD. The whole of the Indian Ocean was converted to the "British Lake" and it was under complete control of the British Royal Navy<sup>(7)</sup>.

By 1960 AD most of the colonies had achieved independence. Taking into consideration its economic position, Britain decided to step away from the Indian Ocean (up to the eastern part of Suez canal). By 1967 AD the British Royal Navy had abandoned the entire Indian Ocean. From the start of English dominance to 1964 AD, Britain possessed complete power over the Indian Ocean. The British empire was spread over from Singapore to the Cape of Good hope, so it was natural that in order to sustain its empire, the British stationed its navy in the Indian Ocean.

The beginning of the present situation happened after the incidents which occurred after the second world war. After the second world war Britain ceased to exist as a superpower of the first class. It became difficult to sustain its colonies. Due to the rising rebellions in its colonies and its own falling economy, Britain was forced to give independence to its colonies. Due to various economic and political reasons, the labour party decided to reduce the military forces across the Suez canal in 1964 AD. Due to this decision by Britain, America got an opportunity to come into this region. And so the Americans followed a rule that it would go to the place which was abandoned by Britain.

It started when Britain offered a portion of the Chagos group of islands named Diego Garcia islands to America on lease up to 2016 in an illegal manner. In 1965 AD there was a bilateral agreement between

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Britain and America regarding Diego Garcia according to which America took on the responsibility of developing it as a centre for its communications equipment. In order to save the local population from difficulties, they were transferred to Mauritius and the construction of a large military airport was started.

As a result in 1965 American submarine (Polaris) also came into this region<sup>(8)</sup>. This decision by America started the struggle among international powers to establish supremacy over the Indian Ocean. After the British left India (1947) the Americans took the advantage of the absence of power in the Indian ocean and slowly starts developing its navy in that region by 1967. By 1968 Russian Navy fleets were also present in the Indian Ocean. Both the superpowers were competing against each other for the establishment of Navy headquarters and other facilities and for bringing the coastal nations towards their side. As a result the entire Indian ocean came under the effect of the cold war. This tense situation existed up to 1991 after which the dissolution of the Soviet union took place.

#### **Strategic importance of Indian Ocean for India**

From India's security point of view the maritime interests are of great importance and utility. The Indian Ocean provides a natural dispute free boundary for India. In the future the Oceanic region will be useful to fulfill the growing demands of the Indian population. China is constantly expanding its political and navy operations in the Bay of Bengal region of the Indian Ocean. In the Bay of Bengal region of the Indian Ocean Andaman and Nicobar islands are located and Lakshadweep islands are situated in the Arabian Sea.

From national security point of view the vast oceanic region is of special importance. From national security point of view, Indian maritime interests have special importance as well as contribution. These are some of the maritime interests- Energy, Food and Mineral resources, Oceanic trading waterways, protection of coastal areas.

#### **Energy**

Even today the main commodity for energy is oil. India is not self sufficient in this area. India can satisfy only its 70% demand by itself. Every year India invests 60000 crore rupees for this operation. India has 22 offshore rigs<sup>(9)</sup>. The second most important source of energy is natural gas. There is no availability in India for this. The main producers of Natural gas are Persian gulf and central Asian countries. These regions are located close to India. India has also talked to Iran about the import of natural gas. Iran has agreed to pay 60% of the cost of laying a 3 billion dollar project gas pipeline layout starting from its southern region to India passing through Pakistan. Iran had also stated that it can supply the cheapest natural gas to India. This gas pipeline is to be laid from Assayulleh in Iran to Delhi in India passing through Baluchistan province in Pakistan<sup>(10)</sup>. The biggest problem in this case is the opposing stand of Pakistan against India. Energy plays the main role in improving the economy and the standard of living for any country. India is the sixth largest energy producing nation in the world. Right now the energy production in India is half that of

China. In the coming 10 years the energy import of India would increase by 2 times. If India develops its renewable energy sources then the dependence on the import of oil would reduce. In order to accomplish this we have to tap the resources of the coastal region.

#### **Food and Mineral Resources**

The Oceanic region is the main source of food and mineral resources. There are nine coastal states in India-Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Goa, Maharashtra and 4 union territories-Andaman and Nicobar islands, Lakshadweep islands, Daman and Diu, Pondicherry, the main profession of the population in these places is fishing. The Indian Ocean is very important from fisheries point of view. The continental shelf as well as exclusive economic zones are full of these minerals- Alginates, Calcium, Gypsum and oil. Right now these resources are untapped but in the future there is high

#### **Maritime Trading Waterways**

From ancient times, maritime trading activities have remained the major component for development. Maritime trading waterways are the arteries of the body of national development. Because of this one of the main responsibilities of the navy is to keep the maritime trading waterways open at the time of war as well as during peace. Even today 97 percent of India's trade (import and export) is through waterways.

India has created a "unified command" at Andaman and Nicobar islands by integrating the army, air force navy and coast guard. The headquarters of the "unified command" are stationed at Port Blair. This is a strategic command. The main responsibility of this command is the protection of the regional waterways (Malakka waterways) and protection against pirates so that trading vessels can pass through fully protected. It is also handled with the additional responsibility of watching over the 750 km long stretch in which the Andaman and Nicobar islands are spread across.

#### **Protection of the Coastal Regions**

The Indian Navy had played an important role in the Indo Pak wars of 1965 and 1971. During the Kargil war the Indian Navy was ready to face any situation. The Indian navy was stationed near the gulf front to effect the complete blockade of Pakistan's territorial water in case it was required. During this time India's aircraft carrier vessel, 'Virat' was fully functional. The navy's amphibious units were moved from Andaman and Nicobar islands to the Arabian Sea. The amphibious units were moved towards the Arabian Sea from Andaman and Nicobar islands. After seeing all these preparations no one from the Pakistani waters dared to make a rash move<sup>(11)</sup>.

China is constantly increasing its navy operations in the Bay of Bengal. China is busy in the modernization and expansion of its navy on large scale. The navy operations carried out by America and its ally nations are increasing day by day. Pakistan is also busy in strengthening its ports and navy. Assistance for this work is being offered by America and China. In the future the navy will play an important role in providing national security to India.

According to former chief vice admiral of the navy, O.P. Bansal, In the present scenario, the role of Indian Navy has become utmost important because of the illegal activities like emigration carried out by India's neighboring countries.

According to Indian Navy chief admiral Madhavendra Singh, the Indian navy is completely ready to face any challenge thrown by Pakistan in the Arabian Sea. All the fighter vessels have the capability to become active within 8 hours in case of any emergency and have the capacity to cover 500 miles.

#### **Indian Interests in the Gulf Region is as Follows<sup>(12)</sup>**

Economic and trading interests, of which main concern is on supply of oil, availability of natural gas in the future, protection of maritime trading waterways, control over the assistance provided by these countries to religious and terrorist groups, the protection of the Indian nationals employed in these countries (3.8 million), control over the illegal trade of drugs and small weapons, arrangements for Indian Muslims to go on pilgrimage tours to these countries. India satisfies a large section of its demand of crude oil by importing it from the oil producing countries in the gulf region. The consumption of oil is increasing every year. Other regions producing crude oil like Siberia, Central Asia, South China Sea, East China Sea are situated far away from India. Only the Persian Gulf region is situated near to the west coast of India. Although there is oil production off the west coast of India at 'Bombay High', it is not enough. In addition to this, India has to import 66% of its demand from foreign countries.<sup>(13)</sup>

The second biggest source of energy is natural gas. It is available in large quantities in Gulf countries and Central Asian countries. India has held talks and agreements with Iran and Oman regarding the procurement of natural gas.

In the cold war era India had always advocated that the Indian Ocean should be kept free from naval and atomic warfare by the superpower nations. Due to various political, military and strategic reasons, it did not happen so in the cold war era. Unfortunately, even after the cold war era, many outside nations have increased their naval presence in this region and there is no possibility of retreating from this region. In this case there is only one option remaining which is to expand the navy in such a manner that during dangerous situations, no other country can affect the Indian national interests. At the same time it is also important to develop regional assistance.

#### **Economic and strategic importance of the Indian Ocean**

From economic point of view, the position of the Indian Ocean is very important, because raw materials are abundant in the countries of this region. Out of this raw materials necessary for strategic purpose are also available.

Coastal countries of the Indian Ocean are rich in raw cotton, jute, tea, rubber, tin, copper, gold, diamond, iron ore, Uranium, manganese, Chromium, Antimony and other mineral resources. The presence of abundant raw material in the shelf region of the Indian Ocean holds special importance to big nations.

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America imports 40 different types of raw materials from these countries. 75 % iron, 35 % coal, 90 % zinc, bauxite and rubber in Japan come from these countries.

90 % of the world trade reaches different countries through maritime trade routes. 97% of India's trade is dependent upon waterways. Mineral resources on land are slowly getting depleted. In the future, the world would have to tap the water resources (food products) and mineral resources on and under the surface of water.

According to American study, Indian Ocean came after the Mediterranean in terms of Maritime trade.

Today this world is in third position in view of maritime trade operations. This ocean has strategic importance as well as importance in trade, because this ocean covers approximately two thirds of the maritime trade routes of the world. half of the containerships and one third of the total large trading vessels in the world pass through the Indian Ocean. There are three international sea routes to reach the Indian ocean from Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean (Cape of Good Hope, Suez canal, Red Sea, Malakka strait and Singapore waterways). These sea routes have great strategic importance.

Apart from these three waterways, Hormuz strait located in North of the Indian Ocean is of special economic and strategic importance. Hormuz sea route links the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea. 5000 oil tankers carrying 800 million tonnes of crude oil pass through this route every year. 40% of the oil produced by the Gulf countries pass through this route. Around 60% of the world's oil is located in the Persian Gulf.

The Indian Ocean regional countries are composed of 48 independent nations. Out of these 36 are coastal countries. The remaining 12 countries are surrounded by land. These countries have to rely on their neighboring countries for port facilities for their import and export activities. India provides the facilities of the Haldia port for its two land surrounded neighboring countries, Nepal and Bhutan.

The most sensitive region in the Indian Ocean coastline is the Persian Gulf. The population in this region is less compared to other regions. The national income of these countries is quite high because of oil. This is the reason that there is a large amount of weapons import in this region. The biggest importer of weapons, Saudi Arabia is located in this region. Because of oil, the Indian Ocean has great strategic and economic importance. The stoppage of oil supply means the destruction of industrial and military operations in Japan, West Europe and other countries.

According to an estimate if an underwater pipeline at a depth of 3.5km would be laid between Oman and India, then the total expenditure would come around 7 billion dollars. If this project is completed then its benefits could be enjoyed by the South East Asian countries including Myanmar.<sup>(14)</sup>

The northern region of the Indian Ocean is divided into 2 parts by the Indian Peninsula namely Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal. The three regions located in the north-Arabian Sea, Red sea and

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Persian Gulf is of great strategic and economic importance.

Even today there are some islands which are claimed by Europe's two countries France and Britain. Reunion, Amsterdam, St. Paul, Kerguelen and Crozet islands are controlled by France. Out of these Reunion islands is the most important. This is the main headquarters of the French Navy. This island is quite large and productive. From here the entire Indian Ocean can be monitored. In the cold war era, the French used to keep an eye on the operations of the Soviet Union's navy.

Diego Garcia In the shape of a horseshoe, the Diego Garcia Island is 13km long and 4km wide and is located 1130km south of Kanyakumari at the center of the Indian Ocean. In 1974, Britain gave permission to America to establish a strategic headquarters. This island has great strategic importance in the Indian Ocean.

#### **Designation**

Apart from the expanse of navy, the following points should be considered for the development and security of India.

Develop technology in such a way that maximum oceanic resources could be utilized.

Free trading zones should be developed at Indian island groups based on the Singapore and Hong Kong model. This will help in the development of trade and tourism in that region. With this the nation can gain foreign exchange as well as employment. This won't have a bad effect on the Indian society, economy and industry as these island groups are located quite far away from the Indian mainland. Every year thousands of ships (trading and military) pass through the Malakka international sea route located near Andaman and Nicobar islands. Therefore ship building, repairing and salvage of old ships industries can be developed at this place. From this region, the nation can gain limitless foreign exchange and employment.

The increase in Regional cooperation is needed in the Indian Ocean region through the help of various associations. In this way the role of outside powers can be limited and regional differences can be sorted out in a peaceful manner.

All the countries in the Indian Ocean region should keep in mind that their mutual and regional differences should be sorted out without taking the help of bigger nations. The need for greater development and expansion of the Indian Navy has become important because of the increase in the presence and naval activities of outside powers. India should deploy information and monitoring satellites into space with the help of which continuous surveillance of the whole Indian Ocean region is possible. This surveillance duty is extremely important from point of view of Indian national security. With this, India can manage its exclusive economic zones in a much better way.

#### **Conclusion**

In short it can be said that the Indian Ocean is the main source for Indian national security as well as development just like before. Keeping in mind India's history, geographical position and challenges, it is important that the Indian navy maintain its

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regional superiority and develop itself in such a way that it can perform independently in far deeper waters during dangerous situations. The Indian government's naval policies and strategic projects are marching in this direction. Only the Indian Navy has the capacity to play a strategic role for the coastal countries in the Indian Ocean. India's strategic role as well as effect in Asia in the 21st century is increasing rapidly. It is important to have a robust navy in order to maintain the security of maritime interests.

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