



Securing the Indian Ocean: Maritime security cooperation among India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius (2000–2020)

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean region is one of the world's strategically important maritime regions due to its trade routes, energy transportation, and geopolitical significance. From 2000 to 2020, there were many challenges and issues faced by this region, including piracy, international terrorism, illegal fishing, and trafficking, increased need for regional co-operation among India, the Maldives, Sri-Lanka, and Mauritius.

Research methodology: This study uses a qualitative research methodology based on secondary sources, including books, academic journals, government reports, and policy documents. A comparative and analytical approach is applied to examine bilateral and multilateral maritime initiatives, naval cooperation, intelligence sharing, and regional security frameworks during 2000-2020.

Results: The findings show that maritime cooperation among these countries improved regional security and strengthened maritime governance. India played a major role through naval training, surveillance assistance, joint exercises, and capacity-building programs. Collaborative efforts successfully addressed threats such as piracy, smuggling, and maritime terrorism while enhancing trust and coordination among regional partners.

Keywords: Indian Ocean Region, Maritime Security, Regional Cooperation, India, Maldives

Introduction

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has increasingly emerged as a significant center for both geopolitical competition and maritime cooperation in the 21st century. This area encompasses some of the most critical shipping routes globally, which are vital for enabling international trade and the movement of energy resources. These pathways are interconnected with the maritime zones of various small but strategically important island nations, such as the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius. India plays a central role in this context, having established itself as a regional power supported by a diverse history, cultural ties, and economic relationships with these island nations (Bateman, 2011) ^[1]. Moreover, India is driven by a growing commitment to protect the essential waters of the Indian Ocean. The period from 2000 to 2020 ^[5] witnessed significant transformations in maritime security throughout South Asia and the western Indian Ocean. The rise in threats, including piracy, various forms of illicit trafficking, vulnerabilities heightened by climate change, and the increasing maritime ambitions of external powers, particularly China, necessitated a thorough re-evaluation of national and regional security strategies. For the smaller island nations, these evolving circumstances underscored the urgent necessity for improved cooperation and strategic partnerships with reliable allies. In response, India has actively sought to present itself as a supportive security provider, significantly enhancing its naval diplomacy, providing surveillance support, and engaging in numerous capacity-building efforts. (Malik, 2012) ^[7]. India has initiated the creation and fostering of multilateral frameworks designed to promote regional security collaboration. Key projects include the India, Maldives, Sri Lanka trilateral dialogue and the Colombo Security Conclave, which later expanded to involve Mauritius. These

platforms are essential for information exchange, joint training exercises, and collaborative maritime operations, thereby strengthening the collective security of the member states. (Doyle, T. 2016) ^[4].

Objectives of the study

1. To know about the challenges and issues faced by these countries in both bilateral and multilateral contexts.
2. To investigate the evolving landscape of maritime security cooperation among India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius over the two decades from 2000 to 2020^[5].

Research Questions

1. What are the main maritime security challenges faced by each of these countries?
2. How has India interacted with these nations in both bilateral and multilateral contexts to create effective cooperative frameworks tailored to their specific security needs?
3. How have larger geopolitical trends, particularly the escalating competition between India and China, impacted the maritime security strategies adopted by these island nations?

By employing both regional and comparative methods, this paper seeks to deepen our understanding of the influence exercised by small states, India's strategic maritime diplomacy, and the collaborative initiatives aimed at enhancing security in the Indian Ocean. Through this investigation, we aspire to clarify the complex interactions between local ambitions and international rivalries that shape the maritime environment in this vital region. (Pant, 2018) ^[11]

Literature Review

The literature on maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has expanded significantly over the past two decades, reflecting the growing importance of this strategic maritime space in global geopolitics. Scholars and policy analysts have examined the region through multiple lenses: geopolitical competition, regional cooperation, small state behaviour, and India's strategic posture. This review synthesizes key themes from the existing literature and identifies gaps that this study seeks to address.

1. Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

Maritime security in the IOR encompasses a wide range of traditional and non-traditional threats, including piracy, terrorism, illegal fishing, human trafficking, climate change, and maritime boundary disputes. Argue that maritime security in the region has evolved beyond state-centric naval strategies to include multilateral collaboration and maritime governance. (Bueger and Edmunds 2017) ^[3] Similarly, emphasizes the need for cooperative maritime security frameworks, particularly among smaller littoral states that are disproportionately affected by these threats. (Bateman 2011) ^[1]

2. India as a Maritime Power

India's growing engagement in the Indian Ocean has been extensively analyzed. Scholars such as Brewster (2014) and Mohan (2006) ^[2, 9] emphasize India's ambition to emerge as a "net security provider" in the region. India's policies including the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine and the expansion of bilateral naval partnerships demonstrate its strategic interest in ensuring freedom of navigation and regional stability. Brewster (2014) ^[2] notes that India's naval diplomacy with countries like the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius serves both strategic and symbolic purposes, reinforcing India's leadership role in the IOR. (Brewster, 2014) ^[2]

3. Small Island States and Maritime Strategy: The strategic agency of small island states such as the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius has gained scholarly attention in recent years. These states have leveraged their geopolitical positions to attract security and economic partnerships, navigating between major powers like India and China. (Rao, 2010) ^[13] A mix of internal security needs, environmental vulnerabilities, and external pressures often shapes their maritime strategies. Mauritius, for instance, has been highlighted for its proactive maritime diplomacy and participation in multilateral naval exercises. Sri Lanka's role as a maritime hub has been examined in the context of port politics and the China-India rivalry, particularly concerning the Hambantota Port deal (Kaplan, 2010) ^[6]. Meanwhile, the Maldives has been studied for its strategic dependence on India and its brief pivot towards China during political transitions (Pant, 2018) ^[11].

4. Regional Cooperation Frameworks

Several studies have examined regional initiatives aimed at fostering maritime security. The India-Maldives-Sri Lanka trilateral security dialogue, initiated in 2011^[1], is often cited as a significant regional mechanism. Analysts from the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) have traced the evolution of this framework into the Colombo Security

Conclave (CSC), which later included Mauritius and Bangladesh (ORF, 2021; IDSA, 2020). These studies underscore the benefits of information sharing, coordinated patrols, and capacity-building efforts, while also noting the challenges of strategic asymmetry and domestic political instability. The Information Fusion Centre Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), established by India in 2018^[11], is also discussed in literature as a key mechanism for enhancing maritime domain awareness through real-time data sharing among Indian Ocean littoral states (Menon, 2019) ^[8].

5. China's Influence and the India-China Rivalry

The expanding presence of China in the Indian Ocean through port development, submarine patrols, and diplomatic outreach has raised concerns about strategic competition. Scholars such as Malik (2012) and Pant & Joshi (2017) ^[7, 12] argue that China's maritime strategy, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has complicated India's security calculus. This is particularly evident in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, where China's infrastructure investments have been interpreted as attempts to gain strategic leverage. (Joshi, 2017) ^[12]

Theoretical Framework

To analyze the evolution and nature of maritime security cooperation among India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius between 2000 and 2020^[5], this study draws on two interrelated theoretical perspectives: Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Small State Theory. These frameworks provide a conceptual foundation for understanding both the structural dynamics of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the agency of smaller states within

Regional complex Theory: Developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003), RSCT argues that security is regionally clustered, with geographically proximate states forming "security complexes" based on patterns of amity, enmity, interdependence, and shared threats. The Indian Ocean, with its overlapping geopolitical interests, maritime chokepoints, and rising security concerns, exemplifies such a complex. RSCT helps situate the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius not as isolated actors, but as integral parts of a regional security architecture in which their proximity to India and the strategic sea lanes compels cooperative behavior. India, as a regional power, plays a central role in shaping the norms and security structures of this complex. Initiatives such as the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC) and the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) are efforts to institutionalize regional security collaboration. RSCT allows us to frame these developments as part of a broader effort to create a stable sub-regional security complex led by India in response to both internal vulnerabilities (e.g., piracy, terrorism, illegal fishing) and external strategic threats (e.g., China's expanding influence). (Bueger & Edmunds, 2017) ^[3]

Small State Theory: This Theory provides insight into the behavior and strategies of countries like the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius. While these nations may lack material capabilities compared to regional powers, they possess strategic relevance due to their geographic positioning, Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), and port infrastructure. Scholars such as Hey (2003) and Thorhallsson (2018) argue that small states often respond to

security challenges through bandwagoning, hedging, or multi-alignment strategies to preserve autonomy while maximizing benefits. In the Indian Ocean context, these states have adopted strategies of alignment with India often through capacity-building partnerships and naval cooperation while at times engaging with China for infrastructure or economic support. This balancing act is evident in Sri Lanka's port politics, the Maldives' fluctuating diplomatic stance between India and China, and Mauritius' participation in multilateral maritime frameworks. Small State Theory also highlights the importance of soft balancing using diplomacy, multilateralism, and legal instruments (e.g., maritime law, UNCLOS) rather than direct military confrontation. Through participation in India-led initiatives and regional dialogues, these countries assert agency and influence despite asymmetries in power. (ORF, 2021)

Integrative use of Theories: By combining RSCT and Small State Theory, this study captures both the regional structural forces shaping maritime cooperation and the individual strategies of smaller actors. RSCT explains the macro-level imperative for cooperative security in the Indian Ocean, while Small State Theory facilitates a nuanced understanding of how island states navigate their security interests amid great power rivalry. This theoretical framework will be used to interpret the motives, mechanisms, and outcomes of maritime security cooperation among India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius, with a focus on how regional security imperatives and small state strategies intersect and evolve.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-case study approach to examine maritime security cooperation among India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius from 2000 to 2020^[5]. Given the geopolitical complexities and evolving nature of maritime threats in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), a qualitative methodology enables a nuanced exploration of strategic motivations, policy developments, and regional dynamics that quantitative data alone cannot fully capture.

Research Approach: The research is structured as a comparative case study, focusing on three small island states (Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius) and their bilateral and multilateral maritime security engagements with India. This approach enables an in-depth analysis of regional maritime security dimensions, strategic partnerships, cooperation mechanisms, and the impact of external superpowers and geopolitical developments in the Indian Ocean regions.

Data Collection: The research uses both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include official government reports, maritime agreements, joint statements, policy documents, and speeches by political and naval leaders. Secondary sources consist of academic journals, books, think tank reports, and media articles related to Indian Ocean geopolitics and maritime security. This methodology aims to provide a grounded, context-sensitive understanding of how India and its maritime neighbours have constructed a regional security order in the Indian Ocean and how their cooperation has evolved in response to emerging challenges.

Comparative Analysis

This section provides a comprehensive examination of the maritime security strategies and cooperative engagements of the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius with India, emphasizing how each nation's distinct geostrategic situations and security priorities influenced their collaborative efforts between 2000 and 2020. Moreover, it assesses the larger strategic dynamics shaping these relationships, particularly the increasing presence and influence of China within the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). (Menon, 2019)^[8] The Maldives, strategically positioned in the Indian Ocean, occupies a critical location along essential sea lanes that facilitate international trade and maritime navigation. Although relatively small, the Maldives boasts an extensive Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) covering over 900,000 square kilometers, granting it significant maritime importance. However, the nation faces considerable challenges due to its porous maritime borders and the absence of a standing navy, making it heavily reliant on regional partnerships for effective maritime domain awareness (MDA) and coastal surveillance. (IDSA, 2020) Key security threats include illegal fishing and drug trafficking, rising sea levels and environmental degradation, and concerns regarding terrorism and radicalization. To address these challenges, India has played a pivotal role in enhancing the Maldives' maritime capabilities through initiatives such as providing patrol vessels, coastal radar systems, and comprehensive naval training programs. Additionally, India and the Maldives engage in joint naval exercises, exemplified by the biennial DOSTI trilateral naval exercise, which strengthens military ties among India, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka. India's strategic support extends to infrastructure development, such as the establishment of a coastal radar system and the Composite Training Centre for the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF). Following a shift towards China under President Abdulla Yameen (2013–2018), the Maldives under President Ibrahim Solih has re-established strong ties with India, reaffirming New Delhi's role as a key security ally. (Pant, 2018)^[11] Sri Lanka occupies a vital geographic position along major international shipping routes, attracting interest from regional and global naval powers, particularly due to its deep-water ports like Colombo and Hambantota. The maritime security environment in Sri Lanka is characterized by significant challenges, including smuggling and human trafficking, particularly exacerbated during the civil war; the need for post-war naval modernization; and various political and economic vulnerabilities stemming from dependence on foreign debt and external influence. Against this backdrop, India and Sri Lanka have actively collaborated on maritime security initiatives. As a co-founder of the India-Maldives-Sri Lanka security dialogue in 2011^[11], Sri Lanka has participated in discussions aimed at bolstering regional maritime security. India has supplied advanced radar systems and training programs to enhance the Sri Lanka Navy's MDA directly. Collaborative anti-piracy and rescue operations conducted in the Arabian Sea and southern IOR further highlight the effectiveness of their maritime initiatives. However, China's involvement in strategic projects, such as the lease of Hambantota Port in 2017^[12] and developments at the Colombo Port City, has raised security concerns in India, prompting New Delhi to increase diplomatic and security engagements with Sri Lanka. (Rao, 2010)^[13] Mauritius serves as a critical

gateway in the southwest Indian Ocean and plays an essential role in regional maritime governance despite lacking a standing military. The nation exercises control over a vast EEZ, enhancing its significance as a bridge between India and Africa. Mauritius faces various maritime security challenges, including illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, which threatens local economies and food security; piracy risks near the Mozambique Channel; and environmental degradation due to climate change. India has emerged as the principal provider of defense support, offering crucial resources for coast guard patrols and hydrographic surveys to Mauritius. The establishment of a Coastal Surveillance Radar System (CSRS) on the island.

Agreements for naval access at the Agalega Islands have significantly advanced India's strategic positioning in the region. (Kaplan, 2010) [6]. Additionally, India has contributed to building the National Coast Guard headquarters and provided funding for patrol boats and aircraft. The collaboration between India and Mauritius extends to legal diplomacy, with both nations cooperating within frameworks like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) to promote stability and security in the Indian Ocean region, thereby highlighting the importance of their partnership in addressing shared maritime security challenges.

Comparative Analysis

Aspect	Maldives	Sri Lanka	Mauritius
Strategic Role	Central Indian Ocean chokepoint	Maritime hub, gateway to the Bay of Bengal	Gateway to the southwest Indian Ocean
Key Threats	Piracy, terrorism, sea-level rise	Arms smuggling, strategic balancing	IUU fishing, piracy, and environmental issues
Security Dependence	High (in India)	Moderate (balancing with China)	High (India is the primary defense partner)
India's Engagement Style	Capacity-building, radar coverage	Strategic dialogue, port diplomacy	Infrastructure, training, base access
China's Role	Strong during 2013–2018	Significant via port infrastructure	Limited but growing economic interest

Discussion and Analysis

The maritime security cooperation between India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius from 2000 to 2020 [5] reveals a nuanced interplay of regional strategic imperatives, small-state security needs, and India's evolving maritime doctrine. This section analyzes how these dynamics manifested over time and their broader implications for regional security in the Indian Ocean.

India's Strategic Maritime Outreach: From Reactive to Proactive

India's maritime engagement with its island neighbours significantly evolved over the two decades studied. In the early 2000s, cooperation was largely reactive and episodic, centered on bilateral naval visits, capacity building, and humanitarian assistance. However, growing threats such as terrorism (post-26/11 Mumbai attacks), piracy off Somalia, and China's increasing presence under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) catalyzed a strategic pivot in Indian foreign policy. The SAGAR doctrine (Security and Growth for All in the Region), introduced in 2015 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, signified a shift toward regional leadership, emphasizing inclusive maritime governance, stability, and infrastructure development. India's outreach was not merely strategic but also normative, aiming to shape rules of engagement, maritime norms, and regional security architectures. (IDSA, 2020)

Small State Behaviour

Navigating Between Powers: The Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius each demonstrated agency in pursuing maritime partnerships based on national interest and strategic calculus. The Maldives, with limited security capacity, largely aligned with India, though it briefly leaned toward China during President Yameen's term. This period illustrated the fragility of India's influence when domestic politics align against it. Sri Lanka played the role of a balancer, accommodating India for security and cultural reasons while also accepting Chinese investment for economic development, particularly evident in the Hambantota Port deal, which India viewed with strategic

concern. Mauritius remained the most consistently aligned with India, seeing New Delhi not just as a security provider but also as a developmental and diasporic partner. India's strategic use of soft power in Mauritius complemented its hard security measures. These behaviours reflect key themes from Small State Theory: strategic hedging, bandwagoning, and multilateral balancing. (Doyle, 2011)

Trilateral and Multilateral Cooperation: Emerging Institutional Depth

The institutionalization of cooperation via the India-Maldives-Sri Lanka trilateral dialogue and its evolution into the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC) in 2020 signified a qualitative leap in maritime coordination.

Key Achievements Included

China's Expanding Role: The growing influence of China in the Indian Ocean through port investments, infrastructure diplomacy, and naval port calls acted as a catalyst for India to deepen engagement with its maritime neighbours. China's strategic footholds in Hambantota (Sri Lanka) and concerns over debt diplomacy in the Maldives heightened India's perception of encirclement, sometimes referred to as the "string of pearls." (Pant, 2018) [11]

India responded with

Increased defense aid and infrastructure funding to offset Chinese economic incentives. A focus on shared values, regional identity, and cultural ties, especially with Mauritius and the Maldives. Establishing itself as a net security provider, offering training, platforms, and support rather than conditional loans. While India's approach is less transactional than China's, it faces the challenge of capacity asymmetry China can often offer larger investments more quickly, making India's leadership dependent on long-term trust and regional legitimacy.

The Role of Maritime Threats in Shaping Cooperation:

The threat landscape from piracy off the Horn of Africa to illegal fishing, climate change, and transnational crime created a shared sense of vulnerability among these island

states. India leveraged these shared concerns to promote collective action, offering surveillance systems, hydrographic surveys, and disaster relief operations. This highlights the process of “securitization” (Buzan & Wæver), where non-traditional threats were framed as existential challenges requiring regional cooperation. India positioned itself as a provider of both hard security (naval platforms, joint patrols) and soft security (capacity building, environmental monitoring). (Bateman2011)

Regional Security Complex in Practice: Using the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), we can understand the IOR as a layered

Security system with India at the core, surrounded by dependent but strategic small states. The Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius are not passive actors; they shape the contours of this complex by their choices to cooperate, hedge, or resist alignment. The increasing convergence among these countries around India-led frameworks suggests an emerging sub-regional maritime order, where India provides leadership but must continually adapt to political shifts, economic demands, and the influence of external actors like China, the U.S., and France. (Brewster, 2014)^[2]

Summary of Key Analytical Points

Analytical Dimension	Key Insight
India's Role	Transition from bilateral actor to regional maritime leader
Island States' Strategy	Varied alignment behaviors: dependency (Maldives), balancing (Sri Lanka), deep partnership (Mauritius)
China's Influence	Triggered India's deeper and faster strategic engagement
Institutional Cooperation	Shift from ad hoc collaboration to structured regional security frameworks
Maritime Threats	Served as a unifying challenge to justify security cooperation

Limitations of the study

- Timeframe 2000–2020; this 20-year period covers significant geopolitical shifts, including the post-9/11 security environment, the rise of China, and India's transition to a more proactive maritime policy.
- India and three Indian Ocean Island states, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius.
- The study does not extensively analyze East African maritime states or larger Indo-Pacific frameworks beyond the scope of the four countries unless directly relevant.
- Some primary sources, especially internal strategy documents and defence assessments, may be classified or unavailable.
- The dynamic nature of maritime diplomacy post-2020 may introduce new developments not covered in this timeframe.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Between 2000 and 2020, India's maritime security partnerships with the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius evolved from informal interactions to a more structured framework of regional cooperation. This change reflects India's shift from a cautious foreign policy to a proactive maritime strategy focused on the Indian Ocean as a crucial area for security and commerce. Despite their different domestic situations, these island nations collaborated to address shared threats like illegal fishing, piracy, and climate vulnerabilities. India's efforts, including joint exercises and engagement through platforms like the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC), have established it as a key regional security player. However, India's maritime diplomacy faces challenges from China's growing influence via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), necessitating enhanced maritime capabilities and sustained diplomatic engagement. To solidify its regional role, India should expand maritime cooperation beyond the CSC, addressing areas such as cyber security and environmental protection, and include more countries. Long-term partnerships should integrate security assistance with economic cooperation, especially in blue economy development and climate resilience. For the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius, maintaining autonomy while engaging multiple partners is crucial. Strengthening indigenous maritime capabilities and

leadership roles within regional organizations will enhance their positions. Promoting inclusive norms and a code of conduct for Indian Ocean navigation will also foster cooperation. Ultimately, the future of the Indian Ocean will be shaped by the choices of regional powers and smaller states, with India's inclusive maritime leadership being vital for regional stability.

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