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SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION



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Introduction

The Indian Ocean region is growing in strategic importance and perceived by many as the emerging center of gravity in the strategic world. In the words attributed to the maritime strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan: "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia, the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters". This is particularly true in the context of the struggle for gaining maritime influence in the region. The activity in the Indian Ocean region is defined by extensive trade, energy transfers and a spectrum

that ranges from political turbulence on one end, to threats from piracy, terrorism and transnational crime on the other. The region has become ripe for geostrategic competition due to the presence of mutually distrustful littorals, which have prevented the creation of overall security architecture, despite similar priorities and a common interest in maritime operations. Multilateral forums, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), formed in March 1997, have an economic agenda and are presently widely considered



waning. The fate of numerous regional or sub-groupings is better in some cases as they cater exclusively to regional aspirations. China has been making increased forays into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in the interests of energy security and trade. Spiraling demand for energy from India, China and Japan has led to an inevitable and enhanced sensitivity around the security of the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) and of choke points which dot the entrances of the Indian Ocean. Indian Ocean is surrounded by some of the poorest, most troubled countries in the world. It confronts enormous issues of poverty and food and water scarcity. Unfortunately, the food and security-building mechanisms in the Indian Ocean region are inadequate and show little prospect of improvement.

Geopolitics

Geography. The Indian Ocean is bounded on the north by Asia, including India on which the ocean is named, on the west by Africa and on the east by Indonesia and Australia. It extends southward to its intersection with the Southern Ocean, also referred to as the Antarctic Ocean. The western extremity of the Indian Ocean is outlined from the Atlantic Ocean in two places—at the Suez Canal, and at the meridian running south from Cape Agulhas in South Africa. At its easternmost extremity, the Indian Ocean touches the Pacific Ocean at the 147°E meridian, running south from South East Cape on Tasmania to 60°S latitude. Travel across the Indian Ocean and passage from its

waters into neighboring seas is both facilitated and potentially constrained by chokepoints. The key chokepoints in the IOR are the Mozambique Channel, the Bab el Mandeb, the Strait of Hormuz, the Malacca Straits, the Sunda Strait, and the Lombok Strait. Indian Ocean covers 20% of earth and ranked as the third largest water coverage of the world. Indian Ocean Region comprises 38 littoral states, 24 Ocean territories and 17 landlocked countries. It is home for the 1/3rd of the world's population and world's fastest growing economies co-exist with some of the poorest.

Regional Politics. For most of the 20th century, the region's role and importance were mostly overshadowed, considered subsidiary to super power rivalries largely enacted elsewhere and across other oceans. Today, however, the IOR has risen to the forefront of world geopolitics. Propelled by the world's continuing reliance on Persian Gulf hydrocarbon resources, the growing significance of the Indian Ocean's sea lanes of communication and chokepoints, as well as the turbulent regional socio-political environment, and the rise of China and India as global powers, the region is increasingly considered an area of crucial geostrategic importance. The regional politics is characterized by volatility due to rising ambitions and desire to be counted amongst the world leaders. Much of region's politics continues to be shaped by outside (that is to say, non littoral powers) poverty and underdevelopment persist, local regional conflicts continue, issues

of nuclear proliferation remain on the regional political agenda and structures of regional and sub-regional cooperation have struggled to prosper. In addition new issues have emerged to compound the many challenges faced by regional actors, whether government or non-government – Islamic sponsored terrorism, piracy, the excessive exploitation of natural resources and growing incidents of transnational crime. It was a reflection of the range and depth of the complex security, economic and social issues that continue to define the Indian Ocean as a key global strategic arena that in 2009 led Robert Kaplan to argue in a highly regarded analysis that the region will be centre stage for the security challenges of the twenty-first century. As a key regional power India cannot help but be affected by these challenges.

Sino-Indian Equation. The Chinese engine of growth has a great appetite for energy as its own oil resources are insufficient leading to dependence on overseas imports. China has acquired oil assets mostly in Africa and Persian Gulf which are mostly transported by sea via Indian Ocean. To protect their SLOC they have created focal points in Indian Ocean in countries including Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Maldives, Bangladesh, Myanmar etc which is also interpreted as “String of Pearls”. India on the other hand possesses the most powerful maritime force among littoral states and is very much concerned regarding this intrusion. Both China and India are major powers with nuclear arsenals. Both have aspirations over the

maritime domain. Hence IOR is facing the risks of growing strategic competition, particularly between China and India and geo-political differences are becoming very evident between the rising Asian powers. Both India and China feel that they are being strategically contained by the other. India aspires to dominate the region by enlarging its security perimeter. In the expansive views of some Indian strategic thinkers, this extends “from the Strait of Malacca to the Strait of Hormuz and from the coast of Africa to the western shores of Australia” (Berlin 2010, p. 55). Indian strategists generally have opposed the presence of great powers in the Indian Ocean, which they privately consider “India’s lake’. Meanwhile China, whose interests in the region are far from recent (Trood, 1985) is strongly cultivating its regional economic and strategic links in the IOR, including the establishment of a support network for possible naval operations. In Beijing’s view, China’s strategic situation would be seriously impaired should India achieve the goal of enlarging its security perimeter and achieving a position of dominance in the IOR (Berlin 2010, p. 61).

At present, the United States dominates the IOR strategically and militarily. Its principal concerns are maintaining the security of its oil supplies from the Middle East and countering terrorism and Muslim extremism. Potentially the United States has the leverage to act as a broker between India and China should their bilateral relationship deteriorate. Yet the future will almost certainly see



a decline in American influence in the region as the United States struggles to maintain its defense presence in the face of growing economic constraints, as well as its legitimacy among the people of the region, many of whom are Muslim. As Kaplan has argued (2010, p. 278), the plain truth is “the gradual loss of the Indian and western Pacific oceans as veritable American military lakes”.

Conflicts and Political stability. The IOR now features more prominently in the geopolitical interests and commercial calculations of extra-regional powers such as the US, the European Union nations, Japan, China, regional states and non-state actors. The regional developments now echo far beyond the Indian Ocean’s shores. Overall, the IOR represents the most politically troubled and potentially combustible area of the world. The Indian Ocean is an area of conflict. Some conflicts are internal and remain localized, but others are of global significance and are prone to foreign, political and military interference. According to a recent analysis of global conflicts by the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, altogether 42% of world conflicts can be associated with Indian Ocean countries. From India’s perspective many of the key strategic trends in the Indian Ocean region are disconcerting. The region is becoming both more militarized and more-nuclearised as was the case 25 years ago, although in contemporary times largely for concerns over energy security, extra-regional powers are seeking to

maintain and extend their presence in the region which, as in the past, is greatly complicating the overall regional strategic outlook.

Maritime Security Challenges in IOR

Non-Traditional Security Threats. While traditional security risks are evident in the IOR with the tensions and conflict in the Middle East and Indian sub-continent, the region also faces extensive non-traditional security threats. These include climate change and possible rising sea levels, transnational crimes (particularly piracy, drug and arms trafficking, and people smuggling), food shortages, disease and famine, IUU fishing, and maritime natural hazards, such as tsunamis, cyclones and floods. All these threats have a significant maritime dimension and pose major risks to the IOR littorals.

Piracy. Piracy in the Gulf of Aden and Horn of Africa and Strait of Malacca has presented a major transnational threat in the region. Pirate attacks, which had been rising for years have begun to drop in last few years due to work of multinational and independent naval task forces. The adoption of best-management practices by ships and the use of private security contractors on board have also helped. In addition, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia’s agreement to combat piracy on their end of the Indian Ocean has also contributed to security. Piracy is generally under control, but the need still exists to monitor it.

Maritime terrorism. Maritime terrorism also poses a potentially serious danger to the region. The security establishments are on high alert to tackle the newest frontier of terror - Maritime Terrorism. The terrorist attack in Mumbai in November 2008 showed the risks of terrorist attack from the sea if coastal waters are not secure. Attacks on offshore facilities have occurred in the past. Three offshore Iraqi oil terminals were attacked in the Persian Gulf in 2003 by explosive-laden speedboats. Although there has been little in the way of seaborne terrorist attacks in the IOR over the past decade, extremist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda have expressed a continuing interest in closing down strategic maritime chokepoints, such as the Bab al-Mandeb that separates Yemen from Djibouti. Lashkar-e-Toiba, (LeT) is planning to use the sea-route to infiltrate and attack India's oil assets in Bombay High, sabotage ports and target high value assets such as the atomic power plants located on the coast.

Protection of SLOCs. In many countries in the world, the increasing reliance on imported oil and natural gas to fuel its economic expansion has led the governments to view the Indian Ocean as a maritime territory to dominate and police. The dependence on the security of the Indian Ocean, combined with its need to monitor, makes their navies compelled to reach out deep into the Indian Ocean, far beyond its own littoral to enable more expansive maritime domain awareness in IOR. China is in the midst of several ambitious projects to expand its naval

power projection capabilities well beyond its littoral, and indeed well beyond the South China Sea. Aside from the clear worry to India and other Asian states, the evolution of China's maritime power, or what Beijing has labeled its "Far Sea Defense" is also of increasing concern to the US. Presently Task groups belonging to USA, Japan, Russia and UK are continuously present in IOR to enhance their Maritime Domain Awareness in their SLOCs.

Ownership of Seabed Minerals. The rich fishery resources and biodiversity, oil, gas and many types of minerals such as gold, tin, uranium, cobalt, nickel, aluminum and cadmium, makes the Indian Ocean a vital contributor to the economic growth of its littoral nations. The coastal state has the sovereign right to manage, exploit, and protect mineral and living resources up to 200 nautical miles offshore. Countries are now very much keen to extend their EEZs to manipulate these resources. Polymetallic nodules and polymetallic massive sulphides are the two mineral resources of primary interest to developers in the Indian Ocean. Only 2-3 percent of the global sea floor has been properly mapped, and extremely small fraction has been scientifically investigated. The economic and political effects of seabed mining along with its environmental impact constitute a major challenge for the region.

Narcotics Trafficking. Such is the geopolitical setting of the region that World's two most illicit opium producing



areas- Golden Triangle mainly in Myanmar and northern Thailand and Golden Crescent in Afghanistan and Pakistan, are in the Indian Ocean Region. Myanmar's heroin shipments pass through neighboring Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, China and India. The ocean has emerged as an important transit route for the dispatch of large consignments of narcotics to the Western world as also to the Far East. India's northeastern states of Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya and Mizoram serve as an important and easy route for drug carrying couriers. Three types of illicit narcotics dominate trafficking in the Indian Ocean; heroin, opiates, Ganja and cannabis. The Sea conveyance of narcotics is substantial. The flows of greatest concern are the Afghan heroin trafficking to Europe via the Arabian Sea. India is vulnerable as a transit port for these illicit traffickers and is particularly affected by the trafficking of Ganja.

Small Arms and Light Weapons Trafficking. Flows of illicit weapons and ammunition in this region follow the familiar logic of supply and demand, moving from source to areas of conflict, where they can fuel insurgency or to a lesser extent, terrorist activity. The linkages of greatest concern are flows of small arms and light weapons (SALW) from Iran to Yemen and onwards to the Eastern Mediterranean via the Suez Canal, and between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. The insurgent groups in ASEAN region are also relying on the illicit trafficking of arms through IOR.

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing. The increasing sophistication of fishing systems has allowed modern fishing vessels and fleets to enter a fishery and quickly harvest available resources before moving on to other grounds. This situation has left many countries offshore resources vulnerable to illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, with major economic losses. IUU fishing has proven even more problematic for fisheries that straddle the EEZ and the high seas, or fisheries that migrate across national boundaries. Increased demand and the depletion of fish stocks elsewhere in the world have led to more fishing in the Indian Ocean and an increasing presence of fishing vessels from outside of the region. The involvement of these vessels is facilitated largely because there is no effective regime for regional fisheries management. The Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) is ineffective as a regional fisheries management organization.

Environmental Stresses. Environmental stresses including pollution increasingly threaten Indian Ocean biodiversity and marine life. By one estimate, some 40-trillion liters of sewage and 4 trillion liters of industrial effluents enter the region's coastal waters each year. It has also been alleged that several foreign companies taking advantage of the lawlessness in Somalia, dumped their radioactive and toxic waste containers along the troubled coast. These later broke following the 2004 tsunami to spill and wash the contents ashore. To top, in

2012 a record breaking number of 365 toxic laden ships were sent for breaking by European ship-owners to the beaches of South Asia including India. Leaving these issues unaddressed will not only cut through the region's economy in future but may trigger widespread security problems leading to impairment of freedom of the seas.

Natural Calamities. A majority of planets natural disasters, unfortunately, happen to strike the Indian Ocean region. The Tsunami of 2004 vividly demonstrated the level of suffering that could result from a mega disaster, and the scale of humanitarian aid and disaster relief that such scenarios would demand. All military forces specially Navies and Air Forces in the region are bound to help nations in face of disasters. For example during the recent earth quake in Nepal many air force planes flew with aids including Indian Air. Indian Navy provided assistance to Maldives in number of occasions in the past providing drinking water and aids.

Nuclear Proliferation. Contrary to being a nuclear free zone, the Indian Ocean is becoming a "nuclear ocean" given the increasing number of regional nuclear weapons on land, as well as the indeterminate number on and under the ocean at any time with nuke Submarines and ships. Arguably, the regional nuclear proliferation can be seen both as a security threat and also a guarantor of peace.

India's Challenge in the IOR¹

¹ India's challenge in the Indian Ocean Region
- Harsh V Pant

For India, which sits astride the Indian Ocean as its pre-eminent power, this is clearly an important phase in the evolution of its thinking on the region. The present government has been giving Indian Ocean due attention with the policy of "reviving the Indian Ocean as a geopolitical concept." Indian PM has visited not only Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka but also several East African nations along the Indian Ocean littoral. Inviting Seychelles and Mauritius to join the existing maritime security cooperation arrangement among India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka in 2015, PM had underlined that New Delhi seeks "a future for Indian Ocean that lives up to the name of SAGAR — Security and Growth for All in the Region." India has clearly outlined a set of goals which included seeking "a climate of trust and transparency; respect for international maritime rules and norms by all countries; sensitivity to each other's interests; peaceful resolution of maritime security issues; and increase in maritime cooperation." Interestingly, India's Indian Ocean outreach is happening at a time when New Delhi is also trying to make a case about its centrality in the wider Indo-Pacific, a concept which situates India at the very heart of the changing geopolitical transitions in the region. India has been keen to underscore that it is not merely an Indian Ocean and South Asian power but one which has the capacity and increasingly the intent to shape the wider strategic realities in the region. India's self-defined strategic interests now straddle the wider Indo-Pacific, stretching



from established framework in the Indian Ocean, to its expanding interests in the South China Sea, and indeed into the South/West Pacific. And this understanding of Indian strategic reach is now being widely accepted. The US has welcomed this growing footprint but other major powers have also responded positively. The re-emergence of Quad, involving the US, Japan, Australia and India is also a reflection of this growing consensus. The crisis in the Maldives has indicated India's position in the Indian Ocean is being challenged in ways that are both new and unprecedented. Merely stating the intent is no longer enough. China is challenging India in the Indian Ocean region in ways few would have anticipated even a few years back. And India's credibility to emerge as a net security provider in the region is on the line. While India's commitment to shape the future of the Indian Ocean region is a welcome shift in New Delhi's traditionally diffident posturing, India's ability to deliver on the ground is being scrutinized even more carefully now, both by the resident and extra regional powers. It is for New Delhi to live up to the expectations it has generated.

Analysis of India's Security Concerns in IOR²

In view of the overwhelming security challenges from diverse sources, including adversarial neighbors and non-state

actors such as pirates, maritime terrorists and armed robbers, India needs to adopt a more structured and holistic approach to address them at global and regional levels. For that, it will need to craft a long-term strategy not only to modernize, update and strengthen its naval sinews but also to plug loopholes in its decision-making on defense procurement and policy implementation. India's security concerns in the Indian Ocean demand the pursuit of a long-term maritime policy in close strategic co-operation with major powers such as the United States, Japan and Australia, and its maritime neighborhood.

After the end of the Cold War, the new centers of powers such as China sought to flex their maritime muscles in the Indian Ocean. For instance, China has been feverishly engaged in modernizing its navy and expanding its naval arm in the Indian Ocean to assert its influence over the IOR states, which is frequently antithetical to the geopolitical and geostrategic interests of India, the United States and Japan.

If viewed from a historical perspective, India's non-aligned policy during the Cold War era was opposed to the superpower rivalry in the Indian Ocean. That was grounded in its perception and belief that the geopolitical contest between the two superpowers in the Indian Ocean constituted a potential threat to the freedom, sovereignty, economic independence and political stability of the littoral states of the IOR. But, given its burgeoning economy and its role as an emerging global power, India is faced with

² India's Security Concerns in the Indian Ocean Region: A Critical Analysis- Professor B.M. Jain

multiple challenges in the Indian Ocean in the twenty-first century. It is important to bear in mind that 90 per cent of India's trade volumes and 90 per cent of its oil imports pass through the sea routes of the Indian Ocean. Further, since India is on the path of integrating its economy globally, it faces an onerous task to protect its long coastline of 7,500 kilometers from the potential threat of non-state actors. The Mumbai terror attacks in November 2008 that emanated from across the maritime border are a case in point. Since then, India has undertaken several measures to augment the security of its coastal cities, and to protect its offshore oil and gas installations.

Way Ahead

Future Requirements and Actions by India to Counter China³. In the face of the challenges to India's myriad security interests, it is not sufficient just to conduct joint naval exercises with various regional partners, including the United States. India must realize that its naval capabilities are much weaker than those of China. First, India needs to further elevate, strengthen and deepen its security co-operation with regional partners such as Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius, as well as the United States, Japan and Australia, to protect its core security interests in the Indian Ocean.

Second, India needs to develop hard and soft power resources to ensure its

maritime security and to be able to deal with any contingent situation that might arise from any future Sino-US conflict in the South China Sea. Moreover, India must expand its strategic foothold in multilateral for a and organizations. Today, with the exponential development of modern weaponry, unprecedented communications technology and vast intelligence resources, maritime threats have amplified. For India, the IOR is a "nerve centre" for its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs).

Third, any quadripartite partnership of India, Japan, the United States and Australia should not be exclusively focused on isolating China as some kind of pariah state. Rather, China must be engaged as a co-operative partner in the process of negotiations to resolve mutual differences in the spirit of protecting the global commons.

Fourth, if it is to meet the challenges – either real or perceived – posed by China to its maritime interests in the Indian Ocean Region, India will be required to develop a multipronged strategy of maintaining an active and agile presence in the IOR by integrating its army, air force and navy in fuller co-operation and co-ordination with the central and state governments.

Fifth, India's focus should be on the security of SLOCs and resource management. Finally, India will be required to undertake defense infrastructure projects in the Indian Ocean as an effective counterweight to China's much-hyped strategic encirclement of India through the so-called "string of pearls" doctrine.

³ India's Security Concerns in the Indian Ocean Region: A Critical Analysis- Professor B.M. Jain



Effective Maritime Governance. Good order at sea is crucial in making the Indian Ocean Region safe. Regional cooperation in enforcing effective maritime governance is a responsibility of all Indian Ocean Region states. Enhanced cooperation between various organizations at national level will be of immense value. Even though the borders of land and sea areas are well defined and monitored, maritime borders are generally provides less restrictions allowing free access without an effective mechanism for surveillance and proper investigation/inquiry. Limitations in visibility in the maritime domain create a challenging situation. Strong regulations and effective monitoring is a key aspect in this regard.

Real Time Intelligence Sharing. In spite of agreements on sharing information and intelligence on various subject matters, there is an inherent reluctance to share much important and valued real time intelligence among the regional states. On the other hand, we see an advanced information/intelligence sharing network among the pirates as well as terrorist networks. When we all are challenged with maritime security concerns that affect the whole Indian Ocean Region, importance of sharing valued information remain crucial.

Maritime Domain Awareness. In order to have a better view of the Indian Ocean Region, regional cooperation in maritime domain awareness is another key area. This will immensely assist the countries to share and be aware of the activities

not only in one's interested area, but of the whole region. Having the knowledge and awareness of the broader maritime picture will be of immense help in arriving at critical decisions.

Soft Power Geopolitics. Since the introduction of "Soft Power" concept by Joseph S. Nye of Harvard University to describe the ability to attract and choose rather than coerce, use force or give money as a means of persuasion. It has gradually developed into a tool which is being used by many countries in the present geopolitical context. In making the future way ahead, "Soft Power" will remain as one key area where we need to look at emerging issues not only in the Indian Ocean Region but in a global perspective too.

Regional Integration. Out of the above areas that have been mentioned till now as tools to address challenges in our region, effective "Regional Integration" can be sighted as the most important pillar in finding solutions. One country can be more powerful in terms of military, wealth or in size, but unless that country is a strong link in the regional integration process, the economic survival of that country is questionable. The regional integration need to focus on building up a cooperative security dialogue and effective apparatus.

Marine Scientific Research. The Indian Ocean has several unique characteristics. Unlike the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, it is enclosed on three sides by land masses. As a consequence, oceanic currents in

the Indian Ocean reverse during the year in a way that does not occur in the other major oceans. The strong through-flow of water from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean through the Indonesian archipelago is another factor which has a strong impact on oceanographic conditions in the latter ocean. Unfortunately however, the thorough marine scientific research to analyze these factors fully and to assess their implications is not available. The Indian Ocean is the most under-researched of all the world's oceans. Political differences have inhibited marine scientific research in the past. There is a close link between oceanographic conditions and regional weather patterns. Better oceanographic knowledge would markedly improve climate research with benefits for all IOR countries, including providing the ability to predict severe weather events, such as cyclones and periods of drought. With better oceanographic knowledge of the Indian Ocean, it would be possible to predict the disastrous floods thus providing the opportunity for better preparations to be made in advance to mitigate the consequences of appalling natural disasters. Improving marine scientific research in the region is essentially a cooperative activity and there is much scope for action in this regard.

Conclusion

India and China will remain strategic rivals due to their competing energy and security interests in the Indian Ocean Region. By logical extension, India will need to

improve its maritime infrastructure and upgrade its naval capabilities. Mere drum beating under the Act East Policy will not be enough to deliver the goods since India is faced with divergent maritime threats and challenges of a vast scale, magnitude and intensity to its maritime borders. It cannot protect those maritime borders and ensure its energy security without the co-operation of, and intelligence sharing with, regional partners. But co-operative security mechanisms cannot be developed unless there is a convergence of perceptions on common regional security interests among regional and extra-regional powers. The time has come for India to build sturdy and stable partnerships with other liberal democratic states, in particular the United States, Japan and Australia. At the same time, it must be borne in mind that any partnership is not exclusively directed against China, for the latter is already a global power with a global reach in every domain. It would thus be a chimera to contain China; rather, China needs to be more fully co-opted into the evolving global and regional security architecture. Achieving that will better serve the common interests of all states, including China, in a co-operative security mechanism.

The focus should be to increase maritime co-operation among navies of littoral states of the Indian Ocean region, by providing an open and inclusive forum for discussion of regionally relevant maritime issues. The endeavor should be to generate a flow of information between naval professionals resulting in common



understanding and agreements. Regional forums are excellent attempts to promote peace and harmony in the region by mutual discussions, understandings and exchange of ideas. Collaboration between the navies is crucial in order to effectively advance their shared commitment to maritime and sea-lane security. Use of collaborative efforts rather than individual effort is going to be the key for success in encountering these nontraditional challenges in IOR. Solution must also be found in a collaborative manner by deepening partnership between all tri forces, countries and regions and finally the entire globe. In ever evolving world, the mission of the Navy has become harmoniously more complex and composite than ever before. Indian Ocean theatre was the key stage for many issues in the history of mankind and it will remain same in future as well. So the concepts of Maritime strategies should also progress according to the development of new encounters.

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New Challenges for Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean – An Australian Perspective
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India's challenge in the Indian Ocean Region
- Harsh V Pant

India's Security Concerns in the Indian Ocean Region: A Critical Analysis- Professor B.M. Jain

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