



## Reconceptualising India's Strategic Sphere of Influence in the IOR: A Case for a 21st-Century Indian Monroe Doctrine

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## Key Takeaways

- In International relations, a sphere of influence is a region within which one country claims certain exclusive rights based on its economic and military power.
- Curzon's so-called Forward Policy demanded control of maritime routes and key ports en route to India, including Aden and Singapore.
- In short, after 1947, India's unwritten regional security doctrine for South Asia and the Indian Ocean region was based on denying external powers a regional foothold in India's immediate neighbourhood and the Indian Ocean with military force if necessary.
- For India, the Indian Ocean region is strategically vital because roughly 80 per cent of its crude oil and 95 per cent of its trade (by volume) are transported via seas and oceans.
- The spread of China's influence through its maritime Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has forced India to take the threat of encirclement by China in the Indian Ocean region seriously.
- Since 2017, the Indian Navy has begun to deploy permanently in several identified zones around the Indian Ocean, with vessels shortening their periods of maintenance and time in port.
- In 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine, which aimed to make India a net security provider in the Indian Ocean region.
- As an emerging Great Power, India needs a Monroe-like doctrine that openly declares the Indian Ocean region as its legitimate sphere of influence.

## The Concept of Sphere of Influence

In International relations, a sphere of influence is a region within which one country claims certain exclusive rights based on its economic and military power. It was widely assumed that spheres of

influence as a concept in international relations had come to an end with the Cold War when the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact collapsed in 1991. However, the idea of spheres of influence has regained its prominence in the 21st century amidst the geopolitical challenge posed by other powers like China and

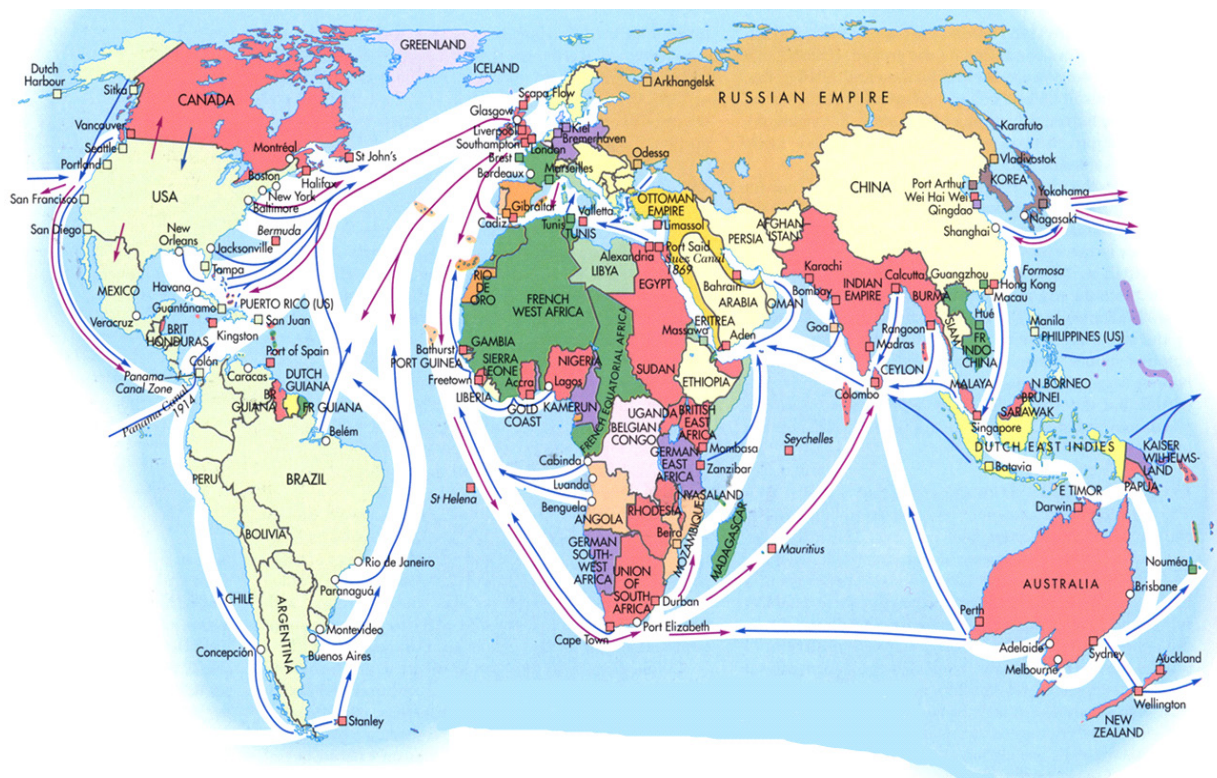
Russia to the United States's dominance as the world's only Superpower, which can exercise its hegemony globally unchallenged.

## Colonial Roots of India's Maritime Sphere

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Lord Curzon, who was the British Viceroy of India from 1899- 1905, advocated the adoption of a Forward Policy to secure British colonial rule in India against Britain's imperial rivals such as

United Arab Emirates) and Aden (now Yemen) were administered by the British colonial government of India, and British Indian army garrisons were stationed throughout the Persian Gulf until 1947.

Curzon's Forward Policy also advocated the creation of territorial buffer zones to insulate direct contact with other empires (including Afghanistan in the west, Tibet in the north and Thailand in the east) and for the British colonial government in India to take an active role in managing the affairs of these buffer zones.



Russia. Curzon's so-called Forward Policy demanded control of maritime routes and key ports en route to India, including Aden and Singapore. Curzon's Forward Policy of establishing a sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean was possible as during the 19th and early 20th centuries, Britain was the dominant economic, political and military power in the region. The Trucial States (now the

In many ways, the British colonial government in India represented a significant departure from Indian traditions which had little history of territorial expansion or military or political adventures beyond the limits of the Indian subcontinent. Any attempts to establish an Indian sphere of influence beyond South Asia ceased following the independence and partition of India in 1947.

After independence despite India's preoccupations with domestic economic development and its primarily land-based territorial disputes with Pakistan and China Indian Prime Ministers such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi articulated an unwritten regional security doctrine which emphasized that India would not permit any intervention by any external power in India's immediate neighbours in South Asia and island nations in the Indian Ocean.

In short, after 1947, India's unwritten regional security doctrine for South Asia and the Indian Ocean region was based on denying external powers a regional foothold in India's immediate neighbourhood and the Indian Ocean with military force if necessary. India's attempts to exclude other powers from South Asia and the Indian Ocean had little success, as the navies of both the United States and the Soviet Union had a significant presence in the Indian Ocean region during the Cold War. However, this unwritten regional security doctrine was used by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to justify India's military interventions in Sri Lanka and the Maldives in the 1980s.

### **China's Growing Influence in the IOR**

The Indian Ocean region is generally understood to encompass the land and ocean territory that stretches from the Strait of Malacca in the east to the Mozambique Channel in the west and includes the Arabian sea, the Bay of Bengal, the Gulf of Aden, the Persian Gulf, the Red sea, and 33 littoral countries with a combined population of about 2.9 billion.

For India, the Indian Ocean region is strategically vital because roughly 80 per cent of its crude oil and 95 per cent of its trade (by volume) are transported via seas and oceans. The increase in Chinese infrastructure investments, ports, and military installations in the area has heightened India's sense of insecurity and underscored the close link between traditional security imperatives and economic interests tied to maritime trade routes.

For years, India's land-based border conflicts with Pakistan and China led the Indian government to prioritise developing the capabilities of the Indian army and Air Force while somewhat neglecting the development of the Indian Navy's capabilities. However, the prioritisation of India's defence objectives has been underway for nearly a decade, mainly in response to China's expanding presence and influence in the Indian Ocean region. This includes a network of naval bases and commercial facilities that China has built to connect its mainland to Port Sudan.

The spread of China's influence through its maritime Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has forced India to take the threat of encirclement by China in the Indian Ocean region seriously. For example, five of India's six South Asian neighbours have joined the BRI – Bangladesh, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. All of these, except Nepal, are Indian Ocean states. China has also invested in infrastructure projects and sought to use ports in Bangladesh, the Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

## Strategic competition in the Indian Ocean Region



INDIAN PRESENCE/INFLUENCE



CHINESE PRESENCE/INFLUENCE

While China's use of these ports may be for commercial purposes, the possibility that they could be used for military purposes is perceived by the Indian government as a potential threat to India's national security. India's threat perceptions about China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean region were further heightened with the establishment of a Chinese military base in 2017 in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa.

### India's Response to China's Influence in the IOR

In response to China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean region, India has increased naval deployments, built civilian ports and naval infrastructure on Indian

and partner territory, increased maritime domain awareness efforts, provided military support, stepped up at regional institutions, and increased coordination with partner countries. Since 2017, the Indian Navy has begun to deploy permanently in several identified zones around the Indian Ocean, with vessels shortening their periods of maintenance and time in port. These include regions from the Gulf of Aden to the west to the Strait of Malacca in the east, where the Indian navy attempts to have at least one surface vessel, submarine or aircraft deployed at any given time. Moreover, the Indian Navy now operates at a higher state of readiness, with weapons and relief supplies. This has proved useful in contingencies such as anti-piracy

operations and humanitarian disasters.

Bilateral agreements for logistics, as with the United States, France, and Australia, and the establishment of operational turnaround points in arrangements with countries such as Oman and Indonesia, have helped to extend the Indian Navy's operational reach. In part, India has benefited from greater maritime domain awareness, the ability to track civilian, military and non-state vessels at sea. This includes surveillance through coastal radar networks extending across the Bay of Bengal and into the central Indian Ocean, as well as satellite capabilities.

Indian Ocean region.

While China has been investing in port infrastructure throughout the Indian Ocean region, India has invested in a parallel architecture, including civilian ports in Sittwe in Myanmar and a container port at Chabahar in Iran. It has also invested in maritime infrastructure in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Mauritius, while in other cases, it has worked to ensure greater transparency and access to Chinese-financed facilities to reduce security concerns.



The Indian Navy's Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) at Gurgaon (Source: @HQ\_IDS\_India on X)

To integrate that information, India established an information fusion centre in Gurugram called the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC- IOR), which hosts liaison officers from friendly partner countries. Several bilateral 'white shipping agreements have helped India to facilitate information sharing with partner countries in the

## **SAGAR - A Net Security Provider in the IOR**

In 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine, which aimed to make India a net security provider in the Indian Ocean region. As part of the SAGAR doctrine, India has

tried to deepen its partnerships with Indian Ocean Island states like Mauritius and Seychelles, supplying both with coastguard equipment (including aircraft and patrol vessels), patrolling their waters using ships and naval aircraft, and involving them in coast guard and maritime domain awareness efforts. Using its newfound capabilities, partners and deployment patterns, India has also been playing a more active role in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief operations (HADR) all around the Indian Ocean. Recent HADR operations undertaken by the Indian Navy have extended to Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Yemen, Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Maldives, and East Africa.

India has also tried to lead regional institution-building at the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and increase naval transparency and goodwill through the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). In 2019, India also announced an Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) with seven pillars to facilitate international cooperation in several domains.

In February 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated an airstrip, a jetty, and six developmental projects, all completed with India's assistance, on the strategically significant Agalega Island of Mauritius, which has been experiencing incursions from Chinese warships. In April 2014, India's Ministry of External Affairs approved the proposal by India Ports Global, an Indian state-owned company, to run the operations of the Sittwe Port in Myanmar, also built with India's assistance. Additionally, India also inaugurated a new naval base, INS Jatayu, on Minicoy Island in its strategically critical union territory of Lakshadweep, off the coast of Kerala in the Laccadive Sea, now the nearest major military installation to the Maldives.

These initiatives, when taken together, are significant. But they still might not be enough to limit China's influence in the Indian Ocean region. These initiatives also seem similar to India's previous unwritten regional security doctrine during the Cold War period, which was unsuccessful at limiting the presence



## SECURITY AND GROWTH FOR ALL IN THE REGION



of external powers in the Indian Ocean region. Hence, there is a need for the Indian government to have an official regional doctrine that openly declares the Indian Ocean region to be India's exclusive sphere of influence.

## The Need for an Indian 'Monroe Doctrine'

On December 2, 1823, James Monroe, the fifth president of the United States, sent his annual message to the US Congress outlining his policy priorities and agenda. Buried in President Monroe's text was a foreign policy statement that would have profound repercussions for more than a century to come. It was a simple declaration: "The American continents are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonisation by any European powers". Today, it is remembered as the Monroe Doctrine.

By issuing the Monroe Doctrine, President

Monroe essentially signalled to Europe that the age of its imperialism, at least in the Americas, was over, nor would the United States allow North America to become a playground for European powers in the way that Africa and Asia had become. Fairly or not, it made the United States the dominant power in the region of the Americas despite attempts by European powers to intervene in the Americas for example Spain sought to take advantage of the American Civil War to reconquer the Dominican Republic, but evacuated the country a year later when the United States defeated the Confederacy.

There are parallels between the United States' rise in the 19th century and India's rise as a regional, if not global, power today in the 21st century. Just as hostile powers fantasised about constraining the United States in its neighbourhood in the 19th century, today India finds itself in a similar situation with China's increasing influence in the Indian Ocean region.



As an emerging Great Power, India needs a Monroe-like doctrine that openly declares the Indian Ocean region as its legitimate sphere of influence. India today is the fifth largest economy in the world, and is soon to become the third largest after the United States and China. It is also a nuclear weapons state and the fourth largest military power after the United States, China and Russia. Politically, India is the world's largest democracy with a 1.4 billion strong population and is fast emerging as the leader of the Global South, as demonstrated clearly during the 2023 G-20 Summit held in New Delhi.

## Core Objectives of India's Sphere of Influence Policy

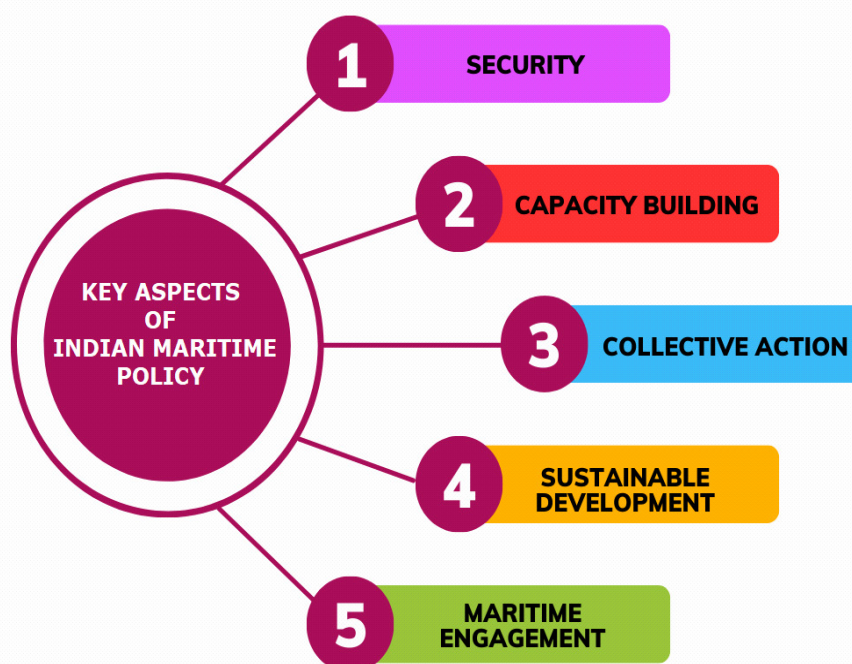
India must therefore robustly defend its core security interests in the Indian Ocean region and prevent the sovereign spaces provided by smaller neighbours from being used for anti-India activities. To do this effectively, India must enunciate the core objectives of its sphere of influence policy in the Indian Ocean region. India's sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean region must incorporate three core objectives:

- First, India ought to make it clear to everyone that it considers the Indian Ocean region to be solely under India's sphere of influence. In this space, any development

that the Indian government considers to be anti-India or harmful to India's interests will not be tolerated, and India would be justified in taking any actions (including military action) it deems fit to rectify the situation.

- Second, India should make it clear to its smaller Indian Ocean neighbours that it is willing to work with all political parties and factions in these states without prejudice, provided they understand and accept that the Indian Ocean region is under India's sphere of influence.
- Thirdly India should also make it clear that it will provide any economic, financial, political, military and other assistance to the Indian Ocean countries if requested to do so by their respective governments.

These three core objectives should be formally stated in an Indian Monroe Doctrine.



Neighbouring states and critics alike may see an Indian Monroe Doctrine as an expression of India's hegemonic behaviour towards smaller neighbours. But all Great Powers are hegemonic to some extent, especially in their sphere of influence. For example, China's expansion of its sphere of influence in the South China Sea and East China Sea has increased the friction between China and other nations such as Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Vietnam and Indonesia. Another example is Russia's military actions in Ukraine since February 2022, which clearly show that Russia considers Ukraine to be within a Russian sphere of influence where the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) are not welcome.

To ensure the effective implementation of an Indian Monroe Doctrine, India should also be preparing for sea denial, and not just sea control. Sea control entails ensuring dominance in maritime territories; sea denial is a tactic to neutralise an adversary's war-waging capabilities by preventing them from accessing critical areas. This will require much greater investments by the Indian Navy in its submarine fleet and in developing infrastructure on the Indian coast and its offshore islands (such as the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep).

Another measure to ensure the effective implementation of an Indian Monroe Doctrine would be for the Indian navy to establish a Far Eastern Theatre Command based in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands which would be responsible for conducting naval diplomacy and joint naval exercises

with countries such as Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines who have concerns about China's aggressive territorial ambitions in the South China Sea and East China Sea. India is already supplying military equipment to Vietnam and the Philippines. India has also sold Brahmos missiles to the Philippines and is currently in negotiations with Vietnam and Indonesia over the sale of Brahmos missiles. However, to exert greater pressure on China to accept India's status as the dominant power in the Indian Ocean region, India must seek to acquire bases for the Indian navy in Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines. If Indian naval bases are established in these three countries, it would create security concerns for China as these countries fall within what China perceives to be its sphere of influence in East Asia and Southeast Asia. This would require the Indian government to make greater investments in the Indian Navy and smart allocations within the naval budget.

## Conclusion

India, in its diplomatic negotiations with China, should not only seek to resolve the land border dispute but should also expand the scope of negotiations to include reaching an agreement that would define India and China's respective spheres of influence. This would require the Indian government to shift from a defensive mindset to a more offensive one when it comes to conducting diplomatic negotiations with China. It is in this context that an Indian Monroe Doctrine would greatly help India to negotiate with China more confidently about China's growing encroachments

into what India perceives to be its sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean region. An Indian Monroe Doctrine, which is formally written and publicly announced, would also greatly help to

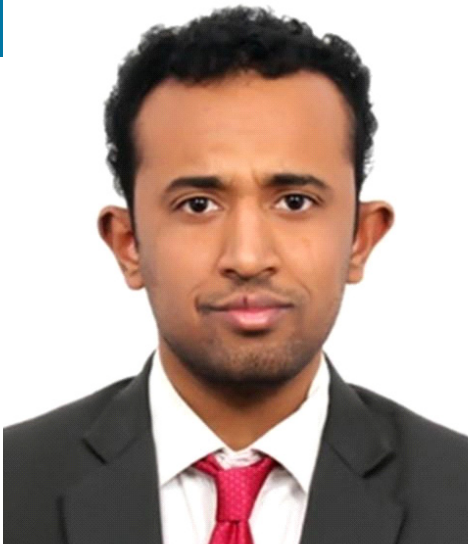
guide the Indian government's strategic priorities in the Indian Ocean region, irrespective of which political party is elected to form the government.

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Published in 2025 by

SamvadaWorld

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