

4. Maritime Policy– International Relation

India's maritime policy– how it has evolved and what lies ahead India's maritime policy is a product of its deep-rooted historical legacy and its critical geographical position in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). As highlighted in 'The Routledge Handbook of Maritime India', the evolution of this policy traces back to ancient civilizations and dynastic trade routes, leading up to modern geopolitical strategies like the Indo-Pacific vision and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region).

1. Maritime History of India

India possesses a rich maritime heritage spanning over five millennia, characterized by trade, exploration, and naval defence.

Ancient Era (Indus Valley Civilisation)– Dates back to 3000 BC. Established maritime trade links with Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq).

The Southern Dynasties (Cholas, Cheras, Pandyas)

1. Developed strong naval fleets in peninsular India.
2. Extensive trade networks reached Sumatra, Java, the Malay Peninsula, and China.
3. The Cholas, in particular, are noted for their naval expeditions and influence in Southeast Asia.

Indo–Arab Maritime Trade– By the 8th Century AD, Arab traders arrived in large numbers. West Asia became a vital node connecting Europe, Southeast Asia, and India.

European Advent

1. 1498– Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama arrived at Calicut.
2. This discovery opened a direct sea route from Europe to India, altering global trade dynamics.

The Maratha Navy

Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj is credited as the "Father of the Indian Navy" for recognizing the strategic need for a strong naval force.

Defensive Strategy– Built coastal forts like Vijaydurg and Sindhudurg to counter the Siddis and Portuguese.

Strength– grew to over 500 ships, successfully resisting British and Portuguese dominance for over 40 years.

Post–Independence Milestones

26 January 1950– The Royal Indian Navy was renamed the Indian Navy as India became a Republic.

22 April 1958– Vice Admiral R.D. Katari took charge as the first Indian Chief of Naval Staff.

2. India's Maritime Zone & Geography

India's maritime domain encompasses vast boundaries and strategic waters essential for its sovereignty and economy.

Coastline– Stretches over 11,000 km (including island territories).

Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

1. Extent– Covers approximately one-fifth of the world's total ocean area.
2. Rank– Third largest ocean in the world.
3. Boundaries
 - a. North– Iran, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh.
 - b. East– Malay Peninsula, Sunda Islands (Indonesia), Australia.
 - c. South– Southern Ocean.
 - d. West– Africa, Arabian Peninsula.

3. Significance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

The IOR is a global strategic theatre due to its role in energy flow, trade, and geopolitics.

Geostrategic Importance– Acts as a bridge between the East and West. A central theatre for power competition involving India, China, and the U.S. Home to critical Maritime Chokepoints

- a. Strait of Hormuz
- b. Bab-el-Mandeb
- c. Malacca Strait
- d. Lombok Strait

Economic Hub

1. Handles nearly 50% of global container traffic.
2. Facilitates 80% of global seaborne oil trade.

Energy Security

1. Serves as the lifeline for energy flows from West Asia to East Asia.
2. Critical for energy-dependent nations like India, China, Japan, and South Korea.

Blue Economy Potential

1. Rich in resources- Fisheries, Seabed minerals (Polymetallic Nodules), and Tourism.
2. High potential for Renewable Energy generation.

4. Security Challenges in the IOR

The region faces diverse traditional and non-traditional threats that necessitate robust maritime security.

Chinese Expansionism

1. Naval Presence- Increased deployment of naval vessels and submarines (both nuclear and conventional).
2. Surveillance- Deployment of research vessels to gather sensitive oceanographic data for military utility (submarine warfare).
3. "String of Pearls"- Strategic port development in littoral states (e.g., Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Djibouti) encircling India.

Non-Traditional Threats

1. **Piracy**- Persistent hotspots near the Horn of Africa and the Malacca Strait.
2. **Trafficking**- Arms smuggling and human trafficking networks exploiting porous maritime borders.
3. **Terrorism**- Use of sea routes for terror attacks (e.g., 26/11 Mumbai attacks).
4. **IUU Fishing**- Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated fishing depleting resources.

Governance Issues- Fragmented maritime governance among littoral states. Lack of capacity for surveillance and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR).

5. Government Initiatives & Policy Response

India has launched comprehensive strategies to modernize its maritime infrastructure and assert its role as a "Net Security Provider."

Sagarmala Programme

Objective- Port-led development leveraging the coastline and navigable waterways.

Focus Areas- Port modernization, coastal berth construction, rail/road connectivity, fishing harbours, and cruise terminals.

Maritime India Vision 2030 (MIV 2030)

Goal- To make India a top 10 shipbuilding nation.

Vision- Create a world-class, sustainable maritime ecosystem.

MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth for All in the Region)- reflects India's strategic rebranding and outreach to maritime neighbors.

Maritime Development Fund

Corpus- ₹25,000 crore.

Purpose- Long-term financing to modernize ports and encourage private investment in shipping.

Sagarmanthan Dialogue- An annual strategic dialogue to position India as a global thought leader on maritime issues.

Naval Modernisation- Commissioning of indigenous platforms like INS Vikrant (Aircraft Carrier) and INS Visakhapatnam (Destroyer). Focus on Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and power projection.

Conclusion

India's maritime strategy has evolved from a historical legacy of trade to a modern security imperative. Through initiatives like the Act East Policy and the Indo-Pacific Vision, India aims to counter militarization in the IOR while fostering a stable, rule-based maritime order essential for its goal of becoming a developed nation (Viksit Bharat) by 2047.

Source- <https://www.thehindu.com/education/indias-maritime-policy-how-it-has-evolved-and-what-lies-ahead/article70497701.ece>