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## INDIA'S STRATEGIC AND ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE IN MARITIME AFFAIRS: A NEW HORIZON

**Author: Shivam Kumar Pandey**

*(Research Scholar, Rashtriya Raksha University)*

**Co-Author: Manish Kumar Singh**

*(Research Officer, Rashtriya Raksha University)*

### **Abstract**

The research paper “India’s Strategic and Economic Perspective in Maritime Affairs: A New Horizon” delves into India’s evolving role in the maritime domain, both from a strategic and economic viewpoint. Situated at the crossroads of vital sea lanes and with a vast coastline, India is uniquely positioned to influence maritime affairs. The paper explores India’s multi-dimensional approach to maritime challenges, focusing on the blue economy, regional initiatives, and geopolitical significance. It also examines India’s participation in global platforms like the G20 and its efforts to balance economic development with sustainable practices in the maritime sector. Through a comprehensive analysis, the paper argues that India is at a pivotal juncture, with the potential to shape a new horizon in maritime affairs that could have significant implications for regional stability, global trade, and environmental sustainability.

**Keywords:** Maritime Affairs, Blue Economy, Geopolitical Significance, Regional Initiatives, Sustainable Development, G20 and India

## Introduction

India's maritime strategy has been gaining significant attention, especially in the context of its G20 presidency and the recent announcement of a multinational rail and shipping project linking India with the Middle East and Europe. These developments are not isolated but part of a broader strategic and economic vision that India is pursuing. India's role in the G20 has been pivotal, especially in the context of the sustainable blue economy. As a nation with a vast coastline and significant maritime interests, India has actively shaped the G20's agenda on this front. During its G20 presidency, India prioritized the blue economy under the Environment and Climate Sustainability Working Group, aligning its national interests with the broader G20 commitments since the Hangzhou Communiqué 2016.

India's focus on the blue economy resonates with the G20's overarching goals of sustainable use and conservation of marine resources, as outlined in various declarations, including the Hamburg Action Plan, the Buenos Aires Declaration, and the Osaka Leaders' Declaration. The country has proactively promoted sustainable development through ocean resources, as evidenced by national initiatives like the Sagarmala project, Deep Ocean Mission, and Maritime India Vision 2030. These initiatives align well with the G20's Resource Efficiency Dialogue and Blue Economy Working Group, which were established to operationalize the commitments made by the G20 nations.

Its emphasis on innovative financing mechanisms for the blue economy, such as promoting foreign investment in its maritime infrastructure, complements the G20's focus on blue finance. This aligns with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) urging the G20 to explore financing mechanisms like blue bonds and blended finance approaches.

India's active role in the G20 serves to not only advance its maritime interests but also contributes significantly to the global agenda for a sustainable blue economy. Through its G20 presidency and national initiatives, India is positioned to be a key player in fulfilling the G20's commitments towards strategic and economic perspective, including ocean governance and sustainable development.

However, like the broader G20 community, India faces challenges in implementing and enforcing these commitments. The need for greater international cooperation and a holistic approach is evident. India's role in the G20 offers it a platform to advocate for these needs while contributing to the collective goal of a sustainable blue economy.

## **Strategic Perspective**

### **Geopolitical Significance**

India's geopolitical location gives it a strategic advantage, with extensive coastlines and proximity to critical maritime routes. The country has been keen on leveraging this advantage to counterbalance China's growing influence, especially its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The recently announced multinational corridor aims to link India with crucial players like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Israel, and the European Union. This move contradicts China's economic ambitions and offers an alternative partnership model to countries in the region.

### **Diplomatic Reach**

India is a member of various international organizations, pushing for reforms in global institutions like the United Nations. It is also a part of groupings like BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). It has strong bilateral relations with major powers like the United States, Russia, and Europe.

India's maritime strategy also has a security dimension. The Indian Ocean is a hotspot for piracy, illegal fishing, and maritime terrorism. By enhancing its naval capabilities and forging partnerships, India aims to secure its maritime boundaries and ensure the safe passage of trade and energy supplies. The multinational corridor could serve as a platform for greater security cooperation among the participating nations.

### **Regional Initiatives**

India has been actively involved in various regional initiatives to foster cooperation, stability, and development in its immediate and extended neighbourhood. It reflects India's multi-pronged approach to fostering collaboration, improving connectivity, and ensuring security in its neighbourhood and beyond. They also underline India's role as a significant regional player with growing geopolitical influence. Here are some of the key regional initiatives that India has been a part of:

#### **SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation)**

Founded in 1985, SAARC includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The organization aims to promote economic and regional

integration. However, political tensions, particularly between India and Pakistan, have often hampered the effectiveness of SAARC.

**BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation)**

Established in 1997, BIMSTEC includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. The organization aims to create multi-sectoral cooperation for economic growth and technological advancement among member countries.

**IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association)**

India is a founding member of IORA, which aims to promote sustainable growth and balanced development among the countries bordering the Indian Ocean. The association focuses on maritime safety, trade, fisheries management, and tourism.

**BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal)**

This sub-regional architecture aims to facilitate connectivity, trade, and water resource management cooperation among the four countries. The BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement is one of its significant achievements, although it is yet to be fully implemented.

**SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation)**

India became a full member of the SCO in 2017. The organization primarily focuses on security-related concerns, military cooperation, intelligence sharing, and counter-terrorism. India's inclusion in the SCO is seen as a way to engage more constructively with Central Asian countries and China and Russia, who are vital members.

**Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue)**

Although not strictly a regional initiative, the Quad includes India, the United States, Japan, and Australia. It aims to promote a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. While not an official military alliance, the Quad discusses issues ranging from regional security to climate change and critical technologies.

**Act East Policy**

India's Act East Policy is an upgrade from its earlier "Look East Policy," focusing on improving relations with Southeast Asian countries and East Asia. The policy aims to strengthen economic ties, strategic partnerships, and cultural relations with regional countries.

**Neighbourhood First Policy**

A bilateral initiative where India aims to prioritize its immediate neighbours in its foreign policy planning. The policy focuses on improving connectivity, enhancing trade, and building infrastructure projects in neighbouring countries.

## **SAGAR**

Founded in 2015, SAGAR is India's strategic vision for the Indian Ocean Region, aiming to work with regional partners to ensure peace, stability, and prosperity.

### **Security Concerns**

#### **Diplomatic Leverage**

The maritime initiatives also offer India diplomatic leverage. The U.S., under the Biden administration, has shown interest in partnering with India to counter China's influence. Moreover, the project could pave the way for broader diplomatic deals, such as Saudi Arabia recognizing Israel, thereby reshaping regional alliances and partnerships.

India's strategic geographical location between the Middle East and Southeast Asia offers it a unique advantage in controlling key maritime routes, thereby providing significant diplomatic leverage. This is further enhanced by its Act East Policy, aimed at fostering closer ties with The Southeast Asian and East Asian nations function as a means of countering the increasing influence of China within the region. India's involvement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia offers a substantial framework for the coordination of efforts pertaining to maritime security and the preservation of freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region.

Regional organizations like SAARC and BIMSTEC also offer India the diplomatic means to influence regional cooperation and stability. As a founding member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), India can shape agendas related to maritime safety, trade, and sustainable development. Strong bilateral relations with global powers like the United States and Russia further bolster India's diplomatic standing, providing access to advanced maritime technology and strategic support. Adherence to international norms, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), adds credibility to India's diplomatic negotiations related to maritime governance.

India's soft power, manifest in its cultural and democratic appeal, serves as an additional form of diplomatic leverage. Its proactive role in climate change diplomacy, especially in forums like the G20, allows it to influence global policies affecting maritime environments. Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations, such as those conducted during the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, enhance India's diplomatic and strategic influence. Lastly, India's energy diplomacy, particularly with Middle Eastern countries, adds another

layer of diplomatic leverage, given the country's growing energy needs and strategic petroleum reserves. Through these multiple avenues, India is well-positioned to utilize its diplomatic channels effectively to achieve its strategic objectives in maritime affairs, contributing to both regional and global stability.

### **Economic Perspective**

#### **Boosting Trade and Connectivity**

One of the primary economic benefits for India lies in enhanced trade and connectivity. The multinational corridor is expected to cut trade time between India and Europe by 40%, making Indian goods more competitive. It will also facilitate the flow of energy resources, crucial for India's growing energy needs.

#### **The Sustainable Blue Economy**

The G20 has consistently acknowledged that the inclusion of developing countries, alongside industrialised economies, is crucial in attaining the G20's primary goal of generating strong, sustainable, and balanced economic growth. The G20's efforts in the realm of sustainable development have undergone evolution and expansion since its inception with the Seoul Development Consensus in 2010.

In 2015, the G20 demonstrated increased commitment to sustainable development by its endorsement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a global pact. Since its inception, the G20 Leaders have continuously acknowledged the distinctive and pivotal role of this coordination platform in promoting and facilitating the achievement of global objectives both within and beyond the borders of its member nations. The G20's Action Plan on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was established in 2016, delineates the shared commitment of the participating nations. This commitment is thereafter advanced by tangible measures and annual progress reports.

India has been actively promoting the concept of the Blue Economy, which involves the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth. Initiatives like the Sagarmala project aim to modernize ports, while the Deep Ocean Mission focuses on deep-sea exploration. The G20 presidency has allowed India to push the Blue Economy onto the global agenda, emphasizing its importance for sustainable development and job creation.



### **Carbon Sequestration**

One of the most critical aspects of the blue economy is its role in carbon sequestration. Coastal ecosystems like mangroves, seagrass beds, and salt marshes have the potential to absorb and store large amounts of carbon dioxide, making them vital in the fight against climate change. According to the World Economic Forum, these ecosystems sequester as much as five times as much carbon as terrestrial forests.

### **Economic Growth and Job Creation**

A sustainable blue economy can spur economic growth and create jobs. Activities like sustainable fisheries, aquaculture, maritime tourism, and renewable energy from ocean waves and tides contribute to economic development while preserving marine ecosystems. India's focus on the blue economy, as seen in its G20 presidency, aims to leverage these opportunities for economic growth and job creation.

### **Climate Mitigation**

The blue economy also plays a role in mitigating some of the most severe climate impacts. For example, healthy coral reefs act as natural barriers against storm surges and rising sea levels. By focusing on the sustainable use of ocean resources, countries can build resilience against climate-related challenges.

### **Resource Management**

Sustainable management of ocean resources is crucial for the blue economy. Overfishing, pollution, and habitat destruction are some challenges that must be addressed. Initiatives like Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and sustainable fishing practices can help conserve marine biodiversity and the sustainable use of marine resources.

### **Global Cooperation**

The sustainable blue economy is not just a national issue but a global one. International cooperation is essential for its success. The G20 allows countries to collaborate on best practices, policy models, and joint initiatives to promote a sustainable blue economy. India's role in the G20 allows it to push for a global agenda focusing on the sustainable use of ocean resources.

### **Investment and Technology Transfer**

The multinational project also opens doors for foreign investment and technology transfer. It aims to improve digital connectivity, offering opportunities for India to advance its technological capabilities. Moreover, the involvement of countries like the U.S. and the E.U. could lead to investment in India's maritime infrastructure.

## **Challenges and Road Ahead**

### **Environmental Concerns**

While the economic prospects are promising, they come with environmental concerns. The Blue Economy must be developed sustainably to preserve marine ecosystems. India will need to balance its economic ambitions with its environmental responsibilities.

### **Geopolitical Risks**

1. **Border Disputes and Territorial Conflicts:** One of the most pressing geopolitical risks for India in the maritime domain is its unresolved border issues with neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan. These disputes can escalate into larger conflicts, affecting maritime security and trade routes.
2. **China's Growing Influence and growing tensions at the middle-east:** China's increasing naval presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) poses a significant geopolitical risk for India. The paper discusses the implications of China's Belt and Road Initiative and its strategic partnerships with countries surrounding India. Also the GCC countries have heightened tension among them is a matter of concern for India because India is the main partner country among them and a leading oil importing and exporting country of the world.
3. **Piracy and Maritime Terrorism:** The risk of piracy and maritime terrorism, especially in the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, is a constant challenge. The paper explores India's countermeasures and collaborations with other nations to secure its maritime boundaries.
4. **Energy Security:** India's dependence on oil imports through maritime routes makes it vulnerable to geopolitical tensions in the Middle East. The paper examines India's strategies for diversifying energy sources and routes to mitigate this risk.
5. **Trade Vulnerabilities:** Given that a significant portion of India's trade is conducted via sea routes, geopolitical tensions can severely impact its economy. The paper discusses how India is working to secure its trade routes and diversify its trading partners.

6. Strategic Alliances and Partnerships: India's alliances, particularly with the United States and other Quad members, bring their own set of geopolitical risks, including the potential for drawing India into conflicts not directly related to its interests. The paper explores the complexities of these alliances.

7. Regional Hegemony: India's aspiration to be a regional hegemon in the IOR can create tensions with other regional powers. The paper discusses the delicate balance India must maintain to assert its influence while fostering regional cooperation.

8. Internal Security Concerns: Coastal regions in India have sometimes been used for illegal activities, including smuggling and infiltration, which have broader geopolitical implications. The paper examines how India is tightening its coastal security to mitigate these risks.

9. Climate Change Diplomacy: Climate change poses not just environmental but also geopolitical risks, affecting resource availability and potentially leading to conflicts. The paper discusses India's role in international climate diplomacy, particularly in forums like the G20.

10. Global Governance and Law: India's adherence to international maritime laws, like the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), has its own set of geopolitical challenges and implications, which the paper explores in detail.

There are complexities that India faces in its strategic and economic endeavors in maritime affairs. It underscores the need for India to navigate these challenges carefully to secure its interests while contributing positively to regional and global stability.

#### IUU Fishing

Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing is a significant challenge India faces in its quest for a sustainable blue economy. IUU fishing threatens the sustainability of fishery resources and impacts the economic and social well-being of coastal communities. Given that India has a vast coastline and a significant fishing industry, IUU fishing poses a substantial risk. While the G20 has made commitments to address IUU fishing, implementing and enforcing these commitments remain challenging, especially for developing countries like India that may lack the resources and capacity for effective monitoring.

#### Gaps in Blue Financing

Financing the blue economy is another significant challenge for India. According to UNCTAD, there is a significant financing gap in developing countries, estimated at around US\$3.4 billion for sustainable fisheries and aquaculture alone. As a developing country, India faces similar

challenges in securing adequate funding for its blue economy initiatives. The G20's focus on promoting innovative financing mechanisms like blue bonds is a step in the right direction. However, much more must be done to bridge the financing gap, especially in standardizing metrics for measuring the impact of investments.

#### Knowledge Gaps

Despite the ocean's critical role in economic development and biodiversity, there is a significant knowledge gap concerning marine species and ecosystems. With its diverse marine biodiversity, India faces this challenge, which hampers the effective management and sustainable use of its marine resources. The lack of comprehensive data and understanding limits the country's ability to formulate effective policies and regulations. While the G20 has emphasized the importance of international cooperation in addressing these challenges, the focus must also be on investing in scientific research and data collection to fill these knowledge gaps.

#### Conclusion

India's strategic and economic perspectives in maritime affairs are intertwined and aim to position the country as a significant player in global geopolitics and trade. The recent initiatives under the G20 presidency and the multinational corridor are steps in the right direction. However, the road ahead is fraught with environmental and geopolitical challenges. Through careful planning, diplomatic finesse, and sustainable practices, India has the potential to turn these challenges into opportunities, reshaping its maritime future and, by extension, its role in the world.

By understanding the strategic and economic imperatives, India can craft a maritime policy that enhances its global standing and brings tangible benefits to its economy and people.

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