

Contemporary Geopolitical Drivers behind India's NSP Ambition in the Indian Ocean Region

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ABSTRACT

India's ambition as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has emerged as a central pillar of its contemporary maritime strategy. This article examines the contemporary geopolitical drivers that underpin this ambition. It argues that India's role as a net security provider is less a reflection of an altruistic security provision and more a strategic reaction fuelled by geopolitical drivers that intensify regional power competition in the IOR. It analyses key geopolitical developments in the IOR that shape the security environment of India. It also contributes to the literature on geopolitics in the IOR and maritime security by highlighting the causal link between external geopolitical drivers and the strategic self-positioning of India. Process tracing and discourse analysis methods of qualitative research are used. A hypothesis is formulated and tested from a theoretical framework of neoclassical realism: geopolitical drivers that intensify regional power competition in the Indian Ocean Region increase India's ambition to position itself as a net security provider. Deductive reasoning is processed to draw an inference.

Keywords: Geopolitical drivers; regional power competition; net security provider; Indian Ocean Region

1. INTRODUCTION

India's ambition to position itself as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is evident from the language of the current official Indian Maritime Doctrine 2025 (IMD-2025). These ambitions are articulated visibly in the strategic doctrines of India, which emphasize regional stability, maritime security cooperation, and responsibility towards the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The center of gravity of the international maritime environment is now the Indo-Pacific region, which is cemented by the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). It is the pathway of a major part of the global energy and also a theatre of geopolitical tension, vulnerabilities, and various security risks.

The Indian maritime stance, after 1947, has been assertive in nature by the non-aligning foreign policy approach and border disputes with its neighbors. A sequence of transformative events like the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami and the 2008 Mumbai seaborne terrorist attack ignited a reorientation at the core. These events served as catalysts for the shift because the Indian Navy proved its capability by

conducting the large-scale Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations during these incidents.

This strategic change is formally evident in the language of the Indian policy of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). SAGAR was first described by the Honorable Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015. It is the doctrinal manifestation of India to position itself as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), indicating that India produces more in terms of regional security than it absorbs.

This article examines some contemporary geopolitical drivers that underpin the ambition of India to position itself as a net security provider. It argues that India's role as a net security provider is less a reflection of an altruistic security provision and more a strategic reaction fuelled by geopolitical drivers that intensify regional power competition in the IOR. It analyses key geopolitical developments in the IOR that shape the security environment of India. It also contributes to the literature on geopolitics in the IOR and maritime security by highlighting the causal link between external geopolitical drivers and the strategic self-positioning of India. Process tracing and discourse analysis methods of qualitative research are used. A hypothesis is formulated and tested from a theoretical framework of neoclassical realism: geopolitical drivers that intensify regional power competition in the Indian Ocean Region increase India's ambition to position itself as a net security provider. Deductive reasoning is processed to draw an inference.

The main research question of this article is: "How do the external geopolitical drivers, that intensify the regional power competition in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), increase India's ambition to position itself as a net security provider?" To answer the question, a bulk of literature is reviewed. But the existing literature often treats India's growing role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as either a benign contributor to regional stability or a natural outcome of India's rising power. This perspective is less important than the reality of the extent to which India's ambition is shaped by external geopolitical drivers that intensify regional power competition in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Consequently, there remains a gap of causal analysis to explain how external geopolitical pressures influence India's strategic self-positioning as a net security provider, rather than this role emerging from an altruistic security provision or normative security commitments.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Kaplan (2010) discusses the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). He explains how the ocean affects global power, especially for the United States. His book also highlights trade, security, and regional influence. Pant (2016) provides an overview of India's foreign policy. She explains India's approach to international relations. The book also shows India's interests in security, economy, and diplomacy. Berlin (2015) studies the role of the Indian Navy during the 2004 tsunami. He shows how the navy helped in rescue and disaster relief. The article also emphasizes the navy's importance beyond warfare.

Ladwig (2009) examines India's goal to be a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). He explains how India wants to help maintain regional stability. The article shows how the U.S. views India's growing security role. It also highlights India's military, diplomacy, and strategic ambitions. Rose (1998) introduces the theory of neoclassical realism in foreign policy. He explains how both international pressures and domestic factors shape a country's actions. The article links theory to real-world decisions. It also helps to understand why states behave differently even in similar global situations.

Brewster (2010) examines India's influence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). He explores India's naval and strategic ambitions. The article looks at India's efforts to balance the regional powers. It also highlights the challenges that India faces in expanding its reach in the ocean. Author (2015) explains China's military plans for the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The paper highlights China's naval expansion and far seas operations. It also shows how China wants to protect its trade and strategic interests. McBride (2023) discusses China's Belt and Road Initiative. He explains how China invests in infrastructure across Asia and Africa. The article also shows China's growing influence in global trade and regional politics.

Kalim et al. (2023) analyze the geopolitical importance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). They discuss how regional and global powers influence trade, security, and politics. Mengal and Mirza (2022) examine the Sino-Indian competition in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). They focus on strategies like the "String of Pearls" and India's "Necklace of Diamonds." The article also shows the growing rivalry in the region. ORCA Asia (n.d.) explains China's presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). It highlights China's trade routes, naval expansion, and strategic goals.

Polity Prober (2025) explains the role of QUAD in India's strategy. It shows how India uses QUAD to balance China's growing power in the Indo-Pacific. The article highlights cooperation in security, technology, and infrastructure. It also explains that QUAD is not a formal alliance, which allows India to keep its strategic independence. Dutta (2025) discusses India's growing role in the Indo-Pacific. He explains how India is strengthening its maritime power. The article highlights India's role in QUAD and regional security. It shows how India is shaping the regional order while balancing China's influence. Sisodia and Seth (2025) explain the importance of the QUAD alliance. They discuss its role in regional security and geopolitics. The article highlights the cooperation among member states in defense and economic areas. It also examines the future challenges and possible direction of the alliance.

Gul, Asghar, and Khalid (2021) discuss Pakistan's shift from geopolitics to geoeconomics. They explain how economic growth and regional connectivity are becoming more important in national security. Khan (2019) focuses on Pakistan's maritime doctrine. The article highlights the importance of sea power and maritime security. It shows how Pakistan is paying more attention to the Indian Ocean and its strategic interests. Farooq and Qazi (2023) examine Pakistan's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. They discuss the maritime security challenges such as regional rivalry and sea lane protection. The article highlights the importance of naval capacity and regional cooperation. It shows how maritime security is central to Pakistan's long-term strategy.

Iqbal and Khan (2025) discuss Pakistan's strategic position. They explain the balance between security challenges and economic opportunities. The article highlights regional competition and internal policy responses. Pant (2012) examines India's policy towards Afghanistan. He explains how India's role has changed over time. The study shows its regional and global impact, especially on security and diplomacy.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A hypothesis is formulated: geopolitical drivers that intensify regional power competition in the Indian Ocean Region increase India's ambition to position itself as a net security provider. To test this hypothesis, a theoretical framework from the insights of neoclassical realism is applied. Neoclassical realism is a theory of international relations. It is also an approach to foreign policy analysis. Initially it was coined by Gideon G. Rose in 1998. It explains the foreign policy of a state by combining structural realism and classical realism, studying the structure of the international system and the domestic structure of the state respectively.

Anarchy, distribution of relative power, and prevalence of uncertainty are parts of the structure of the international system, while state-society relations, the nature of the domestic political system, its leaders, perceptions and misperceptions, extractive mobilization, strategic culture, and so on are parts of the domestic structure of the state. So, this theory argues that systemic pressures are filtered through these internal variables that lead to varied responses to similar international situations. It also bridges the gap between structural realism (neorealism) and foreign policy analysis by suggesting that states are not just automatic responders to global pressures but interpreters of their environment, whose actions depend upon their unique internal makeup and how leaders perceive threats and opportunities.

4. GEOPOLITICAL DRIVERS BEHIND INDIA'S NSP AMBITION

India's ambition to position itself as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is shaped by a convergence of some contemporary geopolitical drivers that are intensifying regional power competition. The foremost among these drivers is China's expanding maritime footprint through ports development, naval deployments, and the Maritime Silk Road, which challenges India's traditional perception towards the Indian Ocean as its natural sphere of influence, and the Quad provides multilateral legitimacy for leadership. Regionally, Gwadar's strategic role, Pakistan's naval posture, and partnership with China constrain India and fuel its ambition. Additional pressures like rapprochement with Afghanistan, shifting alignments in Bangladesh, and Iran-Pakistan dynamics further shape India's outlook. Together, these drivers heighten the threat perceptions. Consequently, they push India to institutionalize its influence through the NSP narrative, reframing power competition as responsible regional leadership.

4.1 Containing China's Expanding Maritime Footprint

India's ambition as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) faces security challenges from China's maritime expansion. Chinese investment in South Asia is widely seen as a dual-use of infrastructure with potential military applications. The ports like Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka possess strategic depth that can support submarines, surveillance, and naval operations.

The evolution of China's maritime strategy has been from a defensive to an expansive blue-water orientation. It began with the Near Coast Defense doctrine in the 1980s. Then, it shifted to Near Seas Control in 2004 by extending its ambitions to the First Island Chain. After this, the Defense White Papers (2010–2013) emphasized overseas logistics, creation of a blue-water navy, and missions to protect Chinese interests abroad. In 2015, China adopted a two-tiered strategy of "offshore waters defense and open seas protection." It was marking a decisive turn toward sustained global maritime power projection.

China launched its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. The BRI seeks to connect East Asia with Europe through extensive infrastructure development, including ports, railways, pipelines, and Special Economic Zones (SEZ). The BRI extends China's economic and strategic reach across key regions.

Expanding port investments in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) are widely seen as a part of China's broader "String of Pearls" strategy — a concept that was first articulated in Booz Allen's report of 2005. This approach seeks to enhance China's economic, political, and diplomatic influence across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Each "pearl" represents a critical point of access, for example, Chinese-funded ports in Chittagong (Bangladesh), Sittwe and Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Gwadar (Pakistan). Collectively, these projects are considered as a strategic encirclement of India that is posing challenges to its maritime interests and regional influence.

In response to China's "String of Pearls" strategy, India has adopted a counter-strategy, which is known as the "Necklace of Diamonds." This approach was first articulated in 2011, which focuses on strengthening diplomatic ties and strategic partnership with key Indian Ocean littoral states. This approach also focuses on investing in critical ports and infrastructure to secure sea lanes and trade routes. A major example is the 2024 ten-year agreement of India with Iran to develop the Chabahar Port. The Chabahar Port enables New Delhi to access Central Asia and Afghan markets. Through this strategy, India seeks to counter China's maritime expansion and safeguard its regional interests.

***Map** — This map represents the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The map illustrates Chinese-operated or Chinese-linked ports, logistics support bases, and suspected military outposts across the Indian Ocean Region.*

4.2 Multilateral Legitimization through the Quad

The Quad has evolved into a flexible strategic platform that addresses security, infrastructure, supply chains, and governance in the Indo-Pacific Region since its revival of 2017. India's role in the Quad has shifted from caution to active engagement, particularly after the Doklam Standoff and Galwan Clashes. These incidents highlighted the need for collective balance against China. The Quad aligns well with India's preference for strategic autonomy and multi-alignment that enhance its capacity to manage asymmetric threats and shape a multipolar regional order. It strengthens India's ability to advance its vision for a free and inclusive region.

The Quad has emerged as central to maritime security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. India has adopted a measured but assertive strategy by positioning itself as a net security provider through initiatives like SAGAR. Operational security cooperation enhances interoperability, maritime domain awareness, and collective readiness against unlawful activities. By hosting the Quad Ports of the Future Conference, India is signaling its transition from a regional actor to a key architect of maritime order and infrastructure in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The Quad Ports of the Future Conference was a landmark event hosted by India in Mumbai in October 2025. It officially launched a new partnership to build resilient, future-ready Indo-Pacific ports through collaboration, investment, and sharing best practices in technology, security, and sustainability, bringing together the Quad nations (US, India, Japan, Australia) and other Indo-Pacific partners.

Military cooperation is a core pillar of the Quad's strategic agenda. It is visible through the Malabar Naval Exercises that have evolved from bilateral drills into multilateral exercises. Those involved all four members, enhancing interoperability, trust, and maritime security. In addition to naval cooperation, the Quad has expanded its cybersecurity, defense technology, and intelligence sharing. Its strategic scope is now being extended to emerging domains like AI, 5G, and digital infrastructure. All the Quad's members aim to set secure, open, and inclusive technological standards and reduce dependence on China.

4.3 Pakistan as a Structural Maritime Constraint

The first Maritime Doctrine of Pakistan, Preserving Freedom of Seas, was first launched on December 20, 2018. A ceremony was held on the conclusion of a nine-day maritime security workshop, "MARSEW." The Honorable President of Pakistan, Dr. Arif Alvi, was the primary guest. Every year, MARSEW is held at the Pakistan Navy War College (PNWC), under the sponsorship of the Pakistan Navy (PN). It brings together participants from public and private sectors, as well as lawmakers and media, to debate issues related to maritime security and economy.

Pakistan's maritime perspective, which was long shaped by a degree of maritime blindness, has evolved significantly with the articulation of the Maritime Doctrine of Pakistan (MDP): Preserving Freedom of

Seas. The doctrine seeks to enhance national awareness of Pakistan's maritime economy and security environment while positioning the Pakistan Navy as the principal guardian of maritime borders and sea lines of communication. Framed within a comprehensive national security perspective, the MDP emphasizes cooperative and autonomous naval operations, lessons drawn from historical conflicts, and preparedness across the full spectrum of peace, crisis, and war. It highlights emerging challenges in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), including the growing presence of regional and extra-regional naval forces, advanced weapon systems, and strategic competition around vital energy routes. The doctrine also underscores the strategic importance of CPEC and Gwadar Port, assigning the Navy a central role in protecting maritime infrastructure and commercial activity. Collectively, the MDP reflects Pakistan's intent to strengthen its maritime posture and deterrence capabilities in a nuclearized Indian Ocean Region (IOR), thereby adding complexity to the regional security environment.

Pakistan's strategic importance in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) stems from its advantageous geographical location and extensive coastline of approximately 1,046 kilometers along the Arabian Sea. Pakistan is positioned at the crossroads of South Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Pakistan enjoys proximity to vital maritime trade routes by linking the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, and the Greater Indian Ocean Region. This location provides Pakistan access to key global energy and commerce corridors. The deep-water port of Gwadar, located near the entrance of the Persian Gulf, further enhances Pakistan's strategic value by serving as a potential hub for trade, energy transportation, and regional connectivity.

Pakistan's position in the Indo-Pacific is shaped by its geography, particularly its access to the Arabian Sea and the strategic Gwadar Port. The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) forms a core element of this posture, enabling China's access to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) through the Gwadar Port and enhancing Pakistan's strategic leverage. By adopting a pragmatic approach, Pakistan maintains strong economic ties with China while also seeking engagement with other major economic actors, including the United States and Japan, to diversify its partnerships. Its participation in regional frameworks such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) further positions Pakistan as an active stakeholder in regional economic connectivity, trade, and cooperation within the broader Indo-Pacific Region.

4.4 Afghanistan as a Variable of Strategic Depth

India-Afghanistan relations have evolved through shifting geopolitical contexts but have consistently reflected India's strategic interest in regional stability and balance vis-à-vis Pakistan. Historically these are rooted in cultural ties. India's engagement deepened after 2001 through a largely civilian-led strategy focused on development assistance, infrastructure building, and institutional capacity-building, positioning Afghanistan as a key element of India's extended neighborhood. As India's regional capabilities expanded, Afghanistan became emblematic of its broader ambition to shape its external environment through soft power, connectivity projects, and strategic partnerships. However, the resurgence of the Taliban, Pakistan's growing influence, and Western disengagement gradually marginalized India's role, exposing Indian personnel and projects to security threats. In response, India recalibrated its approach by strengthening political and security cooperation with Kabul, culminating in the 2011 Strategic Partnership Agreement that included training and capacity-building for the Afghan security forces. Overall, Afghanistan has functioned as a variable of strategic depth for India — linking continental security concerns with broader regional ambitions and reinforcing India's pursuit of a proactive role in shaping stability across its wider strategic periphery.

India's re-engagement with Afghanistan after 2023 reflects a shift toward strategic pragmatism driven by evolving regional geopolitics. Following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, New Delhi initially

adopted a cautious posture, but the growing concerns over Pakistan’s influence, the expanding Chinese outreach, and the risk of Afghanistan becoming a hub for anti-India militancy prompted a recalibration. By reopening its embassy with a limited diplomatic presence and engaging directly with Taliban officials — without formal recognition — India seeks to protect over USD 3 billion in legacy investments, secure counter-terrorism assurances, and preserve strategic access to Central Asia through connectivity projects such as the Chabahar Port. This renewed engagement underscores Afghanistan’s role as a variable of strategic depth: setbacks on the continental front incentivize India to strengthen its maritime posture and regional leadership, reinforcing its ambition to act as a Net Security Provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) while balancing an adversarial influence across both the land and sea domains.

Table 1. India-Afghanistan relations: A historical snapshot.

Period	Nature of Relations	Key Highlights & Policy
Pre-1979	Warm and Non-Aligned	Strong cultural ties; India seen as a key development partner.
1979–1989	Pro-Soviet Engagement	India did not condemn the Soviet invasion; maintained ties with the Kabul government.
1996–2001	Hostile (No Recognition)	India supported the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance; IC-814 hijacking.
2001–2021	Deep Development Partnership	Soft-power strategy: \$3B+ in infrastructure (Salma Dam, Parliament) and human capital.
Post-2021	Pragmatic & Calibrated	Engagement without endorsement; humanitarian aid; embassy reopened.

4.5 Bangladesh and Shifting Alignments in the Bay of Bengal

The Bay of Bengal has re-emerged as a critical arena of power, sovereignty, and strategic competition in the contemporary Indo-Pacific Region. Historically it was a conduit of trade, empire, and ideas. The Bay today links Bangladesh directly to the wider Indian Ocean Region and global maritime routes, making it both a lifeline and a strategic frontier. Increasing naval presence, overlapping EEZs, and major initiatives such as China’s Belt and Road and the “String of Pearls” have transformed the Bay into a zone where economic opportunity intersects with geopolitical rivalry. For Bangladesh, this has required a careful balancing strategy — maintaining relations with China, India, and the extra-regional powers while preserving sovereign autonomy — exemplified by its maritime boundary settlements with India and Myanmar through international law. Maritime power in the Bay now extends beyond military force to include diplomacy, legal regimes, connectivity, and environmental governance, reinforcing the Bay of Bengal’s role as a central theatre of regional strategy and shifting alignments.

Bangladesh’s policymakers and experts argue that the shifting Indo-Pacific power dynamics have elevated the Bay of Bengal into a strategic fulcrum, requiring Dhaka to assert strategic autonomy rather than to remain a passive transit space. Speaking at the Bay of Bengal Conversation (BoBC) 2025, Foreign Adviser Mr. Touhid Hossain stressed that Bangladesh will chart an independent course amid the global realignments, engaging the major and middle powers on the basis of sovereign equality and tangible national benefit. Economists Mr. Rehman Sobhan and Mr. Debapriya Bhattacharya highlighted the structural shift of global economic power towards Asia, warning that continued dependence on Western markets and reform-resistant domestic coalitions could undermine Bangladesh’s long-term interests. Together, these perspectives underscore a growing consensus that Bangladesh must pursue diversified economic partnerships, active maritime diplomacy, and sustained political-economic reform to shape — rather than be shaped by — the evolving geopolitics of the Bay of Bengal.

Mr. Kamal Sikder, who is a UK data scientist, journalist, and TV presenter, argues in his article that the recent political change in Bangladesh and the shifting Indo-Pacific geopolitics have weakened India's traditional influence over Dhaka. It contends that Bangladesh's strategic location in the Bay of Bengal has increased its importance to great-power competition, particularly between the United States and China, while India's role as a regional intermediary for Western interests is declining. Developments such as Japan's involvement in the Matarbari deep-sea port, the growing U.S. interest in Bangladesh's maritime facilities, and Dhaka's emphasis on sovereignty and non-alignment are presented as evidence of Bangladesh's pursuit of greater strategic autonomy. Against this backdrop, India's strong reaction to the political changes in Bangladesh is interpreted as reflecting its concern over losing leverage, as Washington increasingly engages Bangladesh directly rather than relying on New Delhi as its primary partner in South Asia.

Mr. Shrutikar Abhijit argues that since the fall of the Awami League and the rise of the Yunus-led interim administration, Bangladesh's military posture has begun to drift away from India and revive older strategic patterns rooted in pre-1991 and even pre-1971 military culture. It highlights the renewed defence engagement with Pakistan, expanding cooperation with Turkey and Azerbaijan, and symbolic moves such as the Pakistani naval presence in Chattogram as indicators of this shift. From an Indian perspective, these developments complicate the security along the eastern flank, the Bay of Bengal, and the Northeast, particularly given China's role in Myanmar and the growing U.S. activity in the region. The article concludes that India faces a more uncertain and contested eastern theatre and must respond through calibrated military preparedness, maritime presence, economic leverage, and reinforcement of historical and societal ties with Bangladesh.

4.6 Iran–Pakistan Rapprochement and Connectivity Rivalries

Iran and Pakistan are moving to deepen their economic and connectivity cooperation by linking the Chabahar and Gwadar ports, aiming to boost bilateral trade, modernize transit infrastructure, and position both ports as complementary regional hubs rather than rivals. Recent meetings between Iranian and Pakistani officials and business leaders emphasized developing overland and maritime corridors, easing customs and visa processes, expanding border crossings, and targeting \$10 billion in annual trade. Tehran highlighted Iran's role as a gateway to Eurasia and Pakistan's access to South and Southeast Asia, while both sides framed connectivity as a response to the "corridor wars" and supply-chain disruptions. Cooperation under frameworks such as the BRI, ECO, and projects like the Islamabad–Tehran–Istanbul freight train underscores a shared effort to integrate regional trade networks despite ongoing bureaucratic and logistical challenges.

Gwadar and Chabahar, often termed the "sister ports" due to their close proximity and shared hinterlands, are geographically suited for cooperation, yet geopolitics has pushed them toward rivalry. Gwadar, developed under China's CPEC framework, serves Beijing's strategic aim of securing direct access to the Arabian Sea, bypassing the Malacca chokepoints and expanding China's trade reach towards West Asia, Africa, and Central Asia. In contrast, Chabahar functions as Iran's eastern maritime gateway and a critical pillar of India's connectivity strategy, enabling access to Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Eurasia while bypassing Pakistan and anchoring India's role in the INSTC. Great-power competition — particularly the U.S.-China rivalry, the U.S. sanctions on Iran, and Washington's preference for India as a counterweight to China — has reinforced competitive rather than complementary outcomes. As a result, despite the economic logic favoring cooperation, the Gwadar–Chabahar dynamics remain shaped primarily by strategic contestation and by competing regional visions rather than shared commercial integration.

Mr. Muhammad Kumail Mehdi argues in his article that Iran and Pakistan are recalibrating their relationship through a pragmatic hedging strategy shaped by shared geography, security threats, and connectivity interests in an increasingly multipolar order. Rather than formal alignment, both states seek controlled cooperation — especially on counterterrorism, border management, and trade — while preserving strategic autonomy amid sanctions, regional conflicts, and great-power rivalries. Episodes such as the early-2024 cross-border strikes followed by rapid de-escalation illustrate this risk-management approach. Institutions like the SCO and BRICS provide flexible platforms for engagement, while economic initiatives, particularly the potential complementarity of Gwadar and Chabahar, offer avenues for cooperation despite India's role in Chabahar. Overall, the piece concludes that selective cooperation and insulation mechanisms allow Tehran and Islamabad to reduce vulnerability and manage volatility without deep entanglement.

5. PAKISTAN AT THE HELM OF A NEW MARITIME STRATEGY: A WAY FORWARD

Pakistan stands at a strategic crossroads in a rapidly changing geopolitical order where old alignments are being fractured and new ones are emerging. The twin ports — Gwadar and Chabahar — often cast in a narrative of regional rivalry, are actually opportunities to reframe Pakistan as a regional connector rather than a divider. Now the question is not whether Islamabad should react to the Indian initiatives like Act East, Net Security Provider, BIMSTEC, QUAD, or SAGAR — but how Pakistan can turn its geography into a policy advantage in a world where the global power dynamics are unstable, multipolar, and transactional. India's Act East and Net Security Provider policies, supported by partnerships like BIMSTEC and the QUAD, are clearly aiming to expand its footprint beyond South Asia. New Delhi's ambition ties economic outreach with strategic networks across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), but the strategic environment has undergone a seismic shift.

The once cold US policy towards Pakistan has warmed, with renewed high-level engagement and an expressed willingness to invest in Pakistan's economy. China remains the most consequential partner, building out Gwadar and associated infrastructure that anchor the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Iran, historically closer to India through Chabahar, is recalibrating relations with Islamabad — seeing Pakistan as not just a neighbour but a strategic economic and transit partner.

This realignment offers leverage to Pakistan rather than making it a pawn in the great-power competition: to position itself as a bridge between the East and the West, the North and the South.

It is time to shed the simplistic zero-sum narratives about Gwadar and Chabahar. The latest joint committee between Pakistan and Iran on a broader trade framework — with explicit interest in linked maritime cooperation — signals a practical pivot towards regional trade and transit integration. Islamabad should pursue synergistic port cooperation rather than viewing Chabahar through a competitive lens. A broader corridor link through Gwadar and Chabahar could connect South Asia directly to Central Asia, the Caucasus, and even Europe. The amplified trade routes with Iran and Afghanistan could offer Pakistan a chance to become a continental hub — not just a coastal actor.

Pakistan should actively harness diplomatic and economic cooperation with Iran, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, and broader Muslim world partners. Already, the expanded ferry links between Gwadar and the Gulf ports — including Iraq — are laying the groundwork to enhance people-to-people and trade connections. Beyond economics, this alignment leverages cultural and historical affinities. Mutual interests in stability, energy security, and connectivity can deepen Pakistan's strategic relevance in West Asia.

Pakistan's approach should be rooted in an inclusive regionalism — one that transcends the security bloc frameworks it currently champions. Pakistan does not need at this time to run a parallel bloc to counter BIMSTEC or the QUAD; it needs to integrate with the emerging Eurasian connectivity architectures that are less India-centric and more economically pragmatic. In practical terms, this involves the following priorities: operationalize and expand port connectivity by advancing the technical and operational linkages between Gwadar, Chabahar, and beyond; strengthen economic corridors by aligning Pakistan's identified trade corridors with the Iranian, Central Asian, and GCC networks; institutionalize maritime cooperation by establishing a permanent maritime cooperation council with Iran and the Gulf partners; and leverage US engagement without overdependence by balancing ties with Washington with a sovereign economic strategy.

Pakistan's geography is its strategic capital. In a world where alliances are fluid and policy flexibility is at a premium, Islamabad's greatest strength will be its ability to connect, not confront. Gwadar and Chabahar — rather than symbols of regional competition — could mark the foundation of a new era of integration spanning South, Central, and West Asia. This is Pakistan's moment to craft not just a response to India's IOR policy — but to lead a pragmatic, cooperative, and commercially grounded maritime vision fit for the 21st century.

6. CONCLUSION

If we take the discussed six geopolitical drivers together, these reveal that India's net security provider picture is not a benign one for regional responsibility, but a strategically constructed response to a competitive geopolitical environment in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The expanding footprints of China in the Indian Ocean Region have altered the balance of power in ways that directly challenge the traditional sphere of influence of India. This regional pressure is increased due to the enduring role of Pakistan as a structural constraint, which is limiting the strategic depth of India on its western flank. Simultaneously, the instability and political flux in Afghanistan continue to shape the security calculus of India, due to the landward vulnerabilities to the maritime ambitions. On the eastern side, the pursuit of strategic autonomy and the diversified partnership of Bangladesh have weakened the assumptions of an automatic regional alignment, compelling India to assert leadership in the Bay of Bengal. Finally, the gradual rapprochement between Iran and Pakistan threatens to dilute the access, influence, and leverage of India across the Northern Indian Ocean Region. In this context, India's self-positioning as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region functions less as an altruistic guarantor for regional order and stability and more as a strategic response — a framework through which India seeks to preserve strategic relevance. Through the perspectives of a neoclassical realist, it is inferred that these external geopolitical drivers interact with the threat perceptions and strategic discourse of India to produce an assertive maritime role. This role is reactive, competitive, and deeply embedded in regional power politics rather than a normative security provision.

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analysis, literature review, writing, and reviewing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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