
FREEDOM OF NAVIGATION & MARITIME SECURITY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the evolving nature of maritime security and strategic competition in the Indian Ocean, focusing on the changing effects of China's BRI and its "string of pearls" strategy on regional power structures and freedom of navigation management. China's approach, marked by extensive port development along the Indian Ocean coasts, not only disrupts India's longstanding preference but also introduces new problems regarding the safety, openness, and legal governance of important sea lanes. Through developing civilian and dual-use infrastructure in places such as Gwadar, Hambantota, and other nodes, China is reshaping physical and controlling realities, potentially extending its influence into strategic chokepoints and contesting the established regional order. In response to these changes, the US and its cooperating navies have strengthened their Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs). These operations challenge maritime claims, particularly those that break the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and repeat the importance of global commons and open sea rights. The growing power of FONOPs in the context of the Indo-Pacific strategic change has supported the connection of power politics with legal frameworks. Through such activities, the US and its partners seek both to maintain stability and to signal opposition to any moves that might threaten smooth navigation or regional legal standards.

Beyond the interaction between China and the US, the research explores the role of middle powers and regional players, such as Japan, Australia, and ASEAN member states, in shaping a multipolar maritime balance. These actors engage to form a big picture of strategic changes, ranging from multilateral partnerships such as the Quad to make-do coalitions, bilateral agreements, and joint naval exercises. Such networks are crucial for protection against uncertainty, balancing larger powers' ambitions, and asserting alternative interpretations of sovereignty and navigational rights. This study finds that contemporary strategic disputes in the Indian Ocean is not simply about the projection of naval power or economic influence but is deeply involved with international and regional legal disputes. The increase

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in Chinese ports and connectivity projects is met with a same strong response from competing powers, each trying to shape the future of maritime governance and freedom of navigation aligning with their national interests and legal visions. Regional players, by making new partnerships and adopting flexible strategies, show actions that both complicates and improves the multipolar balance. By combining developments in infrastructure, international law, and security partnerships, the research offers a proper account of how strategic competition and collaboration are redefining the maritime space. The Indian Ocean emerges as a model of global maritime disputes, where the interaction of power, law, and diplomacy will determine the future stability, access, and legal architecture of one of the world's most critical regions.

Keywords: Freedom of Navigation, Indian Ocean, Maritime Security, UNCLOS, Quad, India, Indo-Pacific, Regional Cooperation, Maritime Law, Sea Lines of Communication, SAGAR, Belt & Road initiative, SLOCs.

Introduction

The Indian Ocean, the world's third-largest ocean, is the nexus for global maritime trade, facilitating approximately 80% of global maritime oil shipments and an enormous volume of container traffic essential to international commerce². Its strategic sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) traverse pivotal choke points, including the Straits of Hormuz, Malacca, and Bab-el-Mandeb, making its peace and stability central not only to littoral states but to global powers reliant on uninterrupted maritime trade. Freedom of navigation, the unimpeded right of vessels to transit these waters under international law, is foundational to this stability.³

However, the Indian Ocean maritime space faces complex geopolitical and legal challenges⁴. Competing sovereignty claims, evolving maritime strategies, rising non-traditional security threats (piracy, maritime terrorism, trafficking), and the assertive postures of regional and extra-regional powers engender multifaceted tensions. This paper through authentic research explores these changes, focusing on India's evolving maritime posture, legal frameworks such as UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea), and the strategic role in shaping freedom of navigation and maritime security in the Indian Ocean. By establishing a network of civilian and dual-use ports in places like Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri

² Dr. Patrick Bratton, India and Freedom of Navigation: Maritime Power and Control of the Sea, Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs, Jan-Feb 2023.

³ Government of India, commitment towards freedom of Navigation, PIB 2023.

⁴ Tanvi Maden, India is not sitting on the geopolitical fence, war on the rocks, 2021.

Lanka, China is significantly reshaping the physical and strategic positions of the region, extending its influence over key maritime chokepoints. These shifts have triggered responses from other major powers, particularly the United States and its allies, who have increased Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to contest maritime claims deemed excessive and to reaffirm the principles of open sea rights under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The increased importance of FONOPs in the context of broader Indo-Pacific strategic realignments highlights the intersection between power politics and evolving international legal norms.

Beyond this bilateral interaction, the paper explores the critical roles of middle powers and regional actors, such as Japan, Australia, and ASEAN countries, in shaping a multipolar maritime order. These players engage through a variety of strategic arrangements, from multilateral coalitions like the Quad to bilateral agreements and joint naval exercises, aiming to manage uncertainty, balance competing ambitions, and assert alternate conceptions of sovereignty and navigation rights. In essence, the Indian Ocean emerges as a model of global maritime dispute, where the interaction of power, law, and diplomacy will critically determine the region's future stability, accessibility, and legal order.

Historical Background and Legal Frameworks

Historically, the control of the seas has been a central face of imperial power struggles, particularly in strategically critical regions such as the Indian Ocean basin. From ancient times through the colonial period, dominant maritime powers sought naval superiority as a means to show influence over trade routes, customs revenues, and regional geopolitics. Early imperial powers such as the Portuguese in the 15th and 16th centuries established power through naval expeditions and the creation of secure ports to control key maritime chokepoints. Later, the British Empire extended this legacy, using its powerful navy to maintain authority over the Indian Ocean and safeguard its territorial trading interests. In the 20th century, the United States joined these ranks as a significant maritime power seeking to protect its strategic and economic interests in the region. These powers often try to gain control by enforcing what was known as a “mare clausum” or “closed sea” policy⁵, wherein certain areas of the sea were treated as exclusive maritime zones subject to restricted access. This approach was characterized by

⁵ O’Connell, D.P. *The International Law of the Sea*. Oxford University Press, 1982.

claims of power over specific sea lanes and ports, limiting foreign naval and commercial presence through legal and military means.

In opposition to the *mare clausum* doctrine, the principle of “*mare liberum*”⁶, or “freedom of the seas,” emerged as a foundational concept of modern international maritime law. This principle was promoted by legal scholars such as Hugo Grotius, a Dutch jurist in the early 17th century, who argued that the sea was international territory belonging to no single nation and that all states should have the right to navigate and trade freely across it. Grotius’ treatise *Mare Liberum*, published in 1609, was written in defence of Dutch maritime trade ambitions and challenged Portuguese and Spanish claims to exclusive maritime authority. His groundbreaking ideas laid the conceptual groundwork for global maritime freedoms and trade liberalization, advocating that the ocean, unlike land, was limitless and naturally common to all humanity. This legal philosophy became critical in shaping evolving norms in maritime governance and remains central to contemporary ideas globally.

The codification of these principles into binding international law resulted in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)⁷, adopted in 1982 after years of negotiation among coastal and maritime states. UNCLOS established clear legal frameworks outlining territorial seas (up to 12 nautical miles from a state’s baseline), exclusive economic zones⁸ (EEZs, extending up to 200 nautical miles), and rights such as innocent passage and transit passage through straits⁹. It balances coastal state powers and resource rights with principles of freedom of navigation on the high seas. The Convention also includes provisions for the protection of the marine environment, dispute resolution mechanisms, and regulations governing the continental shelf, seabed mining, and the use of ocean resources. UNCLOS today is widely regarded as the “constitution for the oceans,” and it has been ratified by over 160 countries, reflecting broad international consensus on maritime law and ocean governance.

India ratified UNCLOS in 1995 and incorporated many of its provisions into national maritime law. However, India’s approach retains some distinctive elements reflecting its historical strategic posture and security concerns. Unlike some states that afford automatic innocent

⁶ Grotius, Hugo. *Mare Liberum*, 1609.

⁷ United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), 1982.

⁸ The Territorial Waters, Continental Shelf, Exclusive Economic Zone and Other Maritime Zones Act, 1976, Government of India; Iskander Rehman, *India, China, and Differing Conceptions of the Maritime Order*, Brookings Institution, 2017.

⁹ United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), 1982.

passage to foreign warships through territorial waters, India requires prior notification or consent from foreign warships intending to enter its territorial sea. This fine position reflects continuing elements of mare clausum within its national maritime doctrine, emphasizing control and security over key maritime approaches in the Indian Ocean¹⁰. India's maritime policy thus seeks to balance bonds to international maritime norms with protection of its sovereign interests, especially given the Indian Ocean's status as a critical channel for global trade and energy supplies. The comparison of mare clausum practices with UNCLOS rules shows the complex give & take of legal frameworks, historical legacy, and contemporary geopolitical realities shaping regional maritime governance and understanding of freedom of navigation.

Contemporary Maritime Security Challenges in the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean is increasingly regarded as one of the world's most critical and go-for maritime spaces, facing a wide range of security challenges that demand fast and cooperative responses from regional and global stakeholders. These challenges are best understood through the dual prism of traditional and non-traditional threats.

▪ Traditional Security Challenges:

Traditional maritime security threats in the Indian Ocean revolve around inter-state rivalries, naval build-ups, and territorial disputes. India, for instance, is engaged in ongoing disputes such as those with Pakistan over the Sir Creek region and maritime boundaries with Bangladesh. There is also a larger geopolitical contest with China, especially as Beijing's Maritime Silk Road initiative expands its logistical and military influence through strategic port developments in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and East Africa. This "String of Pearls" strategy is widely believed to be part of China's plan to surround India and secure important trade routes¹¹, raising concern about the future balance of power in the region. The militarization of strategically important points and the increasing nuclearization of the Indian Ocean add further problems to the security part, as both regional powers and extra-regional actors try to protect energy supplies and maintain access to key shipping routes.

¹⁰ Government of India. "The Territorial Waters, Continental Shelf, Exclusive Economic Zone and Other Maritime Zones Act," 1976.

¹¹ Rehman, Iskander. India, China, and Differing Conceptions of the Maritime Order. Brookings Institution, 2017.

- **Non-Traditional Threats:**

Non-traditional security threats are equally important for freedom of navigation & maritime concept. Piracy remains a constant problem, particularly in the Gulf of Aden, the Horn of Africa, and stretching into the wider Indian Ocean. Multinational naval task forces and improved practices by shipping companies have led to a important reduction in pirate attacks over the last decade, still the threat remains, simply shifting geographically and adapting in form. Maritime terrorism is another concern; the vast coastline and open maritime borders of Indian Ocean states can be exploited by non-state actors for attacks, smuggling, and infiltration.

Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing¹² is not just an environmental issue but a major security threat. The consumption of marine resources weakens food security and the livelihoods of coastal communities, while IUU fishing is often linked with organized crime¹³, including drug and human trafficking. Recent years have witnessed the expansion of distant-water fishing groups, especially from China, worsening regional tensions and resource competition. Many of these vessels are reportedly used as extras for surveillance and intelligence-gathering, serving geostrategic objectives beyond fishing. Coastal states are forced to invest heavily in monitoring technologies, international partnerships, and new enforcement mechanisms to address these floating security risks.

- **Environmental and Climate Concerns:**

Overlaying these challenges is the shadow of environmental degradation and climate change. Rising sea levels, frequent cyclones, and marine pollution carry the potential to destroy vulnerable coastal infrastructure, increase humanitarian emergencies, and further destabilize regions already burdened by poverty and weak governance. Coastal erosion, loss of fisheries, and habitat destruction are fundamentally linked to national and regional security¹⁴.

¹² Casarini, Nicola. "Maritime Security and Freedom of Navigation from the South China Sea and Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: Potential and Limits of EU-India Cooperation." Istituto Affari Internazionali Working Paper, December 2016.

¹³ International Maritime Organization. "Annual Report on Acts of Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships," 2002.

¹⁴ Premarathna, P.K.B. Isuru. "Maritime Security Challenges in the Indian Ocean: Special Reference to Sri Lanka." International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS), Volume 5, Issue 1, January 2021.

▪ Policy Approaches and Regional Responses:

Recognizing the multi-dimensional nature of these threats, Indian Ocean states have tried a combination of national and cooperative responses. India, for example, has expanded naval deployments, invested in advanced surveillance networks, and developed joint frameworks for information-sharing and coordinated patrols with neighbouring countries. Efforts to improve maritime domain awareness utilizing satellites, AI systems, and coastal tracking have been particularly important in addressing piracy¹⁵, IUU fishing, and trafficking. However, the pure scale of the maritime domain and the range of actors involved mean that only integrated and sustained regional cooperation can successfully address these security challenges.

India's Maritime Strategy and Freedom of Navigation

India's maritime strategy has transformed significantly, shifting from a traditionally continental focus to overall oceanic vision, positioning the country as a blue-water navy and a key regional security player¹⁶. This transformation supports agendas like SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and its successor MAHASAGAR, which advocate for full regional cooperation, maritime commons handling, and the safeguarding of strategic sea lanes of communication (SLOCs)¹⁷. These rules have placed a strong pressure on capacity-building, disaster management, sustainable development, and blue economy initiatives, demonstrating India's commitment to regional stability, not just for its own security but for the collective security and prosperity of the region.

The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) further illustrates India's driven approach. Announced in 2019, IPOI aims to foster partnerships built on free trade, responsible marine resource management, and strong infrastructure among like-minded Indo-Pacific countries. This initiative extends the central principles of SAGAR to a broader region, including ASEAN and other stakeholders and promoting decentralisation, rules-based order, and inclusivity in maritime affairs. India's model within the IPOI focuses on democratic governance of commons

¹⁵ Col. Arvinder Singh, "Security Challenges in the Indian Ocean Region," Centre for Joint Warfare Studies (CENJOWS). This analysis covers militarization, great power competition (especially India-China), and non-traditional threats such as piracy and IUU fishing.

¹⁶ Kunjumon, Sinu. "India's Maritime Security Strategy in the Indian Ocean Region: An Analysis." International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research (IJSSER), Volume 09, Issue 10, October 2024.

¹⁷ Chauhan, Vice Admiral Pradeep. "Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific - A Contemporary Perspective." Maritime India Foundation, June 2025.

and sustainable, mutually beneficial security and wealth creation.

India's pursuit of maritime security is reinforced by its leadership and participation in multilateral frameworks such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), BIMSTEC, and the Quad¹⁸. The IONS, for example, is a platform that brings together navies of the Indian Ocean coastal states to share information and coordinate on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, counter-piracy, capacity building, and maritime safety. These platforms cement India's role as a bridge between diverse regional actors and enhance collective resilience against non-traditional security threats.

Operationalizing these strategic doctrines, India has boosted permanent naval deployments, increased naval diplomacy, and conducted regular joint exercises with partners like the United States, Japan, and Australia, all while continuing to stress respect for sovereignty and cautious strategic autonomy. Enhancing Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), via satellite surveillance¹⁹, information fusion centres, and cooperation with regional navies, remains a key pillar for early detection and checking of maritime threats.

India's policy on freedom of navigation is realistic: while committed to safeguarding global commons and upholding international maritime law, India also insists on sovereignty over its territorial waters and exclusive economic zones, balancing openness with strong legal claims based on its domestic legislative framework and historical practice. As incidents like U.S. freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in India's EEZ have shown, India navigates the fine line between upholding international rights and protecting national interests²⁰.

Through a blend of doctrine, diplomacy, operational enhancements, and legal advocacy, India shows itself as a security provider and responsible maritime actor. The general goal is to ensure that the Indian Ocean remains open, peaceful, and secure, reinforcing the vision that India's and the region's prosperity are deeply connected with freedom of navigation, stability, and collaborative growth²¹.

¹⁸ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. "Prime Minister Narendra Modi Unveils MAHASAGAR Vision," March 2025.

¹⁹ Maden, Tanvi. "India is not Sitting on the Geopolitical Fence." War on the Rocks, October 2021.

²⁰ Prakash, Arun. "Maritime Security of India: Future Challenges." Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, November 2013.

²¹ SAGAR to MAHASAGR: India's Cautious Maritime Strategy Continues - ISAS NUS.

Great Power Dynamics and Regional Security

China's maritime expansion, show-caused by its Belt and Road Initiative and "string of pearls" strategy of port development, has transformed the strategic landscape of the Indian Ocean region. Through investments in ports such as Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and others along major sea lines, China has established a network that gives it growing influence over critical maritime chokepoints. This activity undermines India's traditional primacy in the neighbourhood and raises concerns over potential restrictions to freedom of navigation²², as these Chinese-controlled or influenced infrastructure projects could be used for both commercial and military use in times of crisis or conflict.

The United States and its allies have responded to these developments by stepping up Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), actively challenging what they think as excessive maritime claims, particularly in contested waters like the South China Sea and parts of the Indo-Pacific²³. These operations serve dual purposes: reinforcing international legal standards such as those defined under UNCLOS, and signalling to regional actors a commitment to maintaining open and secure sea lanes. The frequency and visibility of FONOPs have increased in recent years, reflecting the seriousness with which the Indo-Pacific strategic realignment is viewed by global naval powers.

Beyond the major powers, middle powers and regional actors - such as Australia, Japan, ASEAN nations²⁴, and even smaller Indian Ocean states have sought greater agency through a network of various alignments and security partnerships. These range from multilateral groupings like the Quad to bilateral defence agreements and joint naval exercises. Such engagements are crucial in maintaining a multipolar maritime system, balancing larger powers' ambitions and protecting local idea of sovereignty and navigational rights²⁵. The result is a dynamic, disputed maritime environment characterized by competitive legal claims, infrastructure, and multi-level security cooperation, where strategic competition increasingly collides with questions of international law and freedom of navigation.

²² Pejsova, Eva. "Scrambling for the Indian Ocean." European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) Briefs, February 2016.

²³ Roy-Chaudhury, Rahul and de Estrada, Kate Sullivan. "India US FONOPS: Oceans Apart." Survival, February-March 2022.

²⁴ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. "The Wilmington Declaration: Joint Statement from the Leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States." September 2024.

²⁵ Brewster, David. "Indian Strategic Thinking about the Indian Ocean." India Review, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2015.

Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) and Legal Disputes

Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) play a crucial role in shaping contemporary maritime practices, particularly in strategically sensitive regions such as the Indian Ocean. These operations generally involve naval movements aimed at actively contesting what are thought to be extreme maritime claims made by coastal states. The practice directly underscores the fundamental tension rooted in modern maritime governance: the delicate balance between the authority of sovereign jurisdiction by individual states and the global commons principle promoted in international law, in which all states are guaranteed navigation rights across important sea lanes.

In the Indian Ocean, India represents the complexity of this activity. As a major regional power, India both conducts FONOPs to reinforce freedom of navigation and, at times, resists similar operations by demanding prior notification or permission of foreign warships moving in waters near its coasts²⁶. This dual stance reflects a broader legal and diplomatic challenge, whereby states seek to protect their idea of strategic interests and resource entitlements while remaining cooperative with global norms and international legal frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

UNCLOS, in this context, provides important mechanisms for the resolution of maritime boundary and resource disputes. Its dispute settlement provisions, which include tribunals and arbitration panels, have become increasingly significant amid rising fights over exclusive economic zones, territorial waters, and related rights. A key illustration of the working of these frameworks is India's acceptance of the 2014 Bangladesh maritime boundary tribunal ruling²⁷ - a landmark decision that settled protracted bilateral disputes regarding overlapping claims. India's voluntary compliance with the ruling affirmed the insistence that navigation freedoms and peaceful dispute settlement remain central to international maritime relations.

Balancing respect for sovereignty with navigation freedoms requires continued diplomatic and legal engagement at multiple levels. States must navigate not only the immediate practicalities of national interest, such as defence imperatives and economic access but also their obligations under international law and the need for regional stability. This involves regular consultations,

²⁶ Ministry of Defence, Government of India. "Operation SINDOOR: India's Strategic Clarity and Calculated Force," Press Release, May 2025.

²⁷ United Nations. "Bangladesh v. India Maritime Boundary Dispute Tribunal Award," 2014.

transparent notification processes, and, most importantly, recourse to neutral dispute resolution mechanisms when claims overlap or legal interpretations differ.

As the strategic climate in the Indian Ocean continues to evolve, the interaction between FONOPs, national sovereignty, and international law will shape the future of maritime governance. Heightened operations by global powers²⁸ combined with the stance of regional actors like India reveal the importance for reviewed protocols, enhanced multilateral cooperation, and institutionalized channels for conflict resolution. Ultimately, these measures are essential to harmonize national interests with universal navigation rights, ensuring secure, stable, and accessible maritime commons for all.

Future Prospects and Policy Recommendations

Future prospects for the Indian Ocean maritime platform emphasize the critical need to sustain freedom of navigation and enhance maritime security through cooperative, inclusive regional mechanisms that balance respect for national sovereignty which is related to global legal norms. Ensuring a secure maritime environment requires a multidimensional approach addressing not only traditional state-centric threats but also the growing challenge of non-traditional risks such as piracy, terrorism, and illicit trafficking.

Central to this cooperative framework is intelligence sharing among regional states and international partners. By coordinating information flow, states can detect and respond more effectively to maritime threats, particularly those that go beyond national boundaries and impact multiple countries. These efforts aim to enhance surveillance, improve rapid response capabilities, and foster support among diverse maritime forces, creating a security posture that can read and neutralize new threats.

Another important dimension involves strengthening legal frameworks to govern maritime disputes and manage critical infrastructure such as ports and shipping lanes²⁹. This includes enhancing dispute resolution mechanisms under international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which provides mechanisms for peaceful settlement of conflicts related to maritime boundaries, resource rights, and navigational freedoms. By making these legal structures strong, regional actors can end conflict

²⁸ Rahul Roy-Chaudhury and Kate Sullivan de Estrada, India US FONOPS: Oceans Apart, Survival, Feb 2022.

²⁹ Indian Navy. "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy," October 2015.

escalation and contribute to strong maritime governance, thereby safeguarding economic security rooted in maritime trade.

Infrastructure development aimed at supporting maritime trade further supports economic stability in the region. Investments in port management enhance logistical efficiency promote resilience against disruptions³⁰, whether from geopolitical tensions or natural disasters. This infrastructure facilitates smoother movement of goods, strengthens supply chains, and builds broader economic development opportunities for coastal states. Aligned with these security and economic objectives is the importance of environmental handling. Positive measures addressing marine environmental protection and sustainable development goals are essential in preserving the health of the Indian Ocean ecosystem³¹. Pollution control, conservation of marine biodiversity, and climate change adaptation strategies lowering degradation risks that could compromise the long-term possibility of maritime resources and trade routes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Indian Ocean has emerged as a critical area for maritime security and strategic competition, shaped by China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative and its "string of pearls" maritime strategy. China's expansive port developments and infrastructure investments have disrupted the established regional order, challenging India's traditional dominance and raising complex issues regarding authority, freedom of navigation, and international maritime governance. The increased naval activities and Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) conducted by the United States and allied powers lowers the global stakes involved and the nature of power politics and international legal frameworks. Moreover, the involvement of middle powers and regional actors adds layers of problems to a multipolar maritime environment marked by overlapping claims and competing legal interpretations.

This evolving balance of power demands clear diplomatic and security arrangements, supported by fast and fair legal dispute resolution mechanisms like those under UNCLOS, to maintain maritime stability and uphold the principles of open seas. Sustaining freedom of navigation and securing maritime trade routes also require enhanced regional cooperation against traditional and non-traditional maritime threats through intelligence sharing, coordinated patrols, and capacity-building initiatives. Additionally, adding environmental

³⁰ Census and Economic Reports from Ministry of Shipping India and other relevant government sources.

³¹ United States Department of Defence. "Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States." Joint Publication 1.

concerns into maritime governance is non-negotiable for long-term regional security and sustainable development.

Ultimately, the Indian Ocean's future lies in the ability of regional and global actors to connect national interests with shared commitments to legal norms and inclusive security frameworks. By building cooperation, strengthening legal institutions, and balancing power outcomes, the region can ensure a stable, open, and sustainable maritime domain, important not only for the prosperity of Indian Ocean coastal states but for global economic and strategic stability. Indian Ocean is a model of contemporary maritime dispute, where law, diplomacy, and strategic competition will shape the international order of the 21st century. Maintaining balance in this important maritime space will be essential for peace, security, and the continued free flow of commerce across one of the world's most significant maritime routes.