

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Opinion – IOR First: Why India’s Indo-Pacific Ambitions Depend on Regional Primacy

<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/10/03/opinion-ior-first-why-indias-indo-pacific-ambitions-depend-on-regional-primacy/>

BIYON SONY JOSEPH, OCT 3 2025

In the past decade, India’s strategic vocabulary has undergone a remarkable shift. Once firmly rooted in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), New Delhi now speaks fluently of the Indo-Pacific, a vast maritime space linking Africa’s eastern coast to the western Pacific. This linguistic expansion reflects India’s rising ambition and the geopolitical realities of a world shaped by the rise of China, the intensifying US–China rivalry, and the strategic convergence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Yet, beneath the rhetorical shift lies a more complex question: has India truly evolved into an Indo-Pacific power, or is its engagement beyond the IOR still more symbolic than substantive? The answer lies in recognising a central truth: India’s ability to become a consequential Indo-Pacific actor depends fundamentally on the strength, depth, and leadership it can first demonstrate in the IOR.

There is no denying that India has broadened its strategic horizons. Its participation in the Quad, growing ties with ASEAN and the Pacific Island nations, and a more active diplomatic presence east of Malacca all point to a more ambitious maritime vision. Although India outlined its vision for the Indo-Pacific in Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018, it has yet to articulate a coherent strategy that aligns its military posture, diplomatic engagements, and economic outreach. Policies such as Act East have deepened India’s presence in Southeast Asia, and initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) have signalled intent, but they still lack a comprehensive maritime framework. In short, India’s Indo-Pacific engagement remains a patchwork of ambitions rather than a unified strategic design.

If India’s Indo-Pacific vision feels incomplete, it is because its foundation remains uneven. The Indian Ocean is not just another geographic zone for India; it is its geopolitical centre of gravity. Over 90 percent of India’s trade by volume and most of its energy imports traverse these waters. Its island territories, from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to Lakshadweep, give it strategic depth, while historic ties with littoral states in Africa, the Gulf, and South Asia provide crucial diplomatic leverage. This centrality is reflected in where India’s power projection is most visible. It has enhanced naval deployments, built coastal surveillance networks, and strengthened partnerships with island nations like Mauritius, Seychelles, and Maldives. Together, these steps signal India’s aspiration to act as the region’s net security provider and a central pillar of maritime stability.

A recent Parliamentary Committee on External Affairs report, *Evaluation of India’s Indian Ocean Strategy*, reinforces this point. It describes the IOR as India’s “strategic lifeline” and calls for more structured engagement with the region, including deeper partnerships with all 35 littoral states, greater clarity in initiatives such as SAGAR and MAHASAGAR, and better inter-ministerial coordination. Importantly, it argues that countering China’s expanding influence through infrastructure, basing, and political leverage requires sustained Indian leadership. These recommendations highlight what many strategists have long argued: the Indo-Pacific ambition is only as strong as the IOR foundation beneath it.

The urgency of consolidating India’s IOR leadership becomes clearer when viewed against China’s expanding maritime footprint. Beijing’s investments in ports and dual-use infrastructure, from Gwadar to Hambantota and Djibouti, have steadily increased its influence across the region. The parliamentary committee report also flags the need to counter this growing Chinese presence, underscoring that unchecked influence could undermine India’s

Opinion – IOR First: Why India's Indo-Pacific Ambitions Depend on Regional Primacy

Written by Biyon Sony Joseph

strategic space and weaken its traditional advantages. Without a more robust Indian presence, these projects risk eroding New Delhi's sphere of influence and constraining its strategic choices. But competition with China need not define India's IOR policy. The region also offers an opportunity to build coalitions based on trust, historical ties, and shared interests. Enhanced security cooperation, infrastructure partnerships, and capacity-building initiatives with smaller littoral states can position India as a preferred partner, an outcome that will naturally enhance its credibility in broader Indo-Pacific frameworks.

India's Indo-Pacific rhetoric has raised expectations, but fulfilling them requires moving from aspiration to execution. The IOR offers a logical starting point for this transition. A coherent Indian Ocean strategy that integrates defence, diplomacy, development, and trade would not only strengthen India's immediate maritime posture but also create the institutional, logistical, and diplomatic base needed for power projection further east. Moreover, leadership in the IOR lends legitimacy to India's broader Indo-Pacific role. Influence in distant waters is far more credible when backed by uncontested primacy in one's own maritime neighbourhood. A secure and strategically integrated Indian Ocean presence is not just desirable; it is indispensable for any serious Indo-Pacific ambition.

India's embrace of the Indo-Pacific narrative marks a necessary evolution in its foreign policy thinking. But ambition untethered from strategy risks becoming hollow. At present, India remains, above all, an Indian Ocean power, deeply influential in its immediate maritime sphere but still building the capacities needed to project power across the Indo-Pacific. The lesson is clear: the path to the Indo-Pacific runs through the IOR. Strengthen that foundation through leadership, strategy, and sustained engagement, and India will not only remain relevant in the Indo-Pacific conversation but emerge as a shaping force in regional order and governance.

About the author:

Biyon Sony Joseph is currently an Assistant Professor of Political Science at St. Thomas College (Autonomous), Palai, Kerala, India. He was also a Network for Advanced Study of China Fellow (2024-2025) at the Takshashila Institution where he studied the influence of the Communist Party of China on the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in the area of political economy. His primary research interests include India's engagements in the Indo-Pacific, maritime security and paradiplomacy.