

India's Expanding Maritime Influence in the Indian Ocean Region: India–Oman Strategic Cooperation and Implications for Pakistan

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has become an increasingly important arena of geopolitical competition because of its centrality to global trade, energy transportation, maritime security, and strategic connectivity. India, as the largest littoral state in the northern Indian Ocean, has progressively expanded its maritime capabilities and diplomatic relationships to secure sea lines of communication, protect energy supplies, strengthen regional influence, and respond to the growing presence of extra-regional powers, particularly China. Among India's most important relationships in the western Indian Ocean is its strategic partnership with Oman. Oman's geographical position near the Strait of Hormuz and its access to the Arabian Sea, combined with its ports and traditionally balanced foreign policy, make it particularly valuable to India's maritime strategy. This paper examines India's expanding maritime influence with particular emphasis on India–Oman strategic and defence cooperation and its implications for Pakistan. It argues that India–Oman cooperation enhances India's operational reach and maritime diplomacy in the western Indian Ocean, while also strengthening Oman's maritime-security capabilities. For Pakistan, the development creates strategic challenges but also opportunities for maritime diplomacy, regional cooperation, and economic connectivity.

Keywords: Indian Ocean Region, India, Oman, Pakistan, maritime security, naval diplomacy, Duqm, Arabian Sea, strategic partnership

Introduction

The Indian Ocean is one of the most strategically significant maritime spaces in the contemporary international system. It connects the energy-producing states of the Persian Gulf with the industrial and commercial centres of Asia, while also linking Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Europe. The user-provided research document emphasizes the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean and identifies the Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Malacca, and Bab el-Mandeb as critical chokepoints (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2024).

India has consequently sought to transform itself from predominantly a continental South Asian power into a major maritime power. Its strategy combines naval modernization, maritime diplomacy, logistics arrangements, exercises (Government of India, Ministry of Defence, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c), defence partnerships, and maritime-security cooperation. Oman occupies a distinctive position within this strategy because of its location near the Strait of Hormuz and its access to the Arabian Sea (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2025).

The central research question is: How does expanding India–Oman strategic and maritime cooperation contribute to India’s influence in the Indian Ocean Region, and what are its implications for Pakistan? The paper argues that the partnership increases India’s operational reach and diplomatic influence in the western Indian Ocean, while its implications for Pakistan are more complex than a simple military balance-of-power interpretation.

India’s Maritime Strategy and the Indian Ocean:

India’s economic growth has increased its dependence on maritime commerce and imported energy. The Indian Navy has therefore expanded its role in anti-piracy operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, maritime surveillance, naval exercises, and international maritime-security cooperation. India’s naval diplomacy uses port visits, exercises, training, humanitarian assistance, and defence cooperation to build sustained relationships across the Indian Ocean (Observer Research Foundation, 2017 & 2018).

India’s western Indian Ocean strategy is particularly important because the Arabian Sea provides access to the Gulf, East Africa, the Red Sea, and the wider Middle East. Research by Mishra (2019), Saha and Mishra (2020), Patil (2022), and Taneja (2023) demonstrates the growing importance of India’s western maritime engagement.

India–Oman Strategic Partnership:

India and Oman have maintained diplomatic relations since 1955, and the relationship was upgraded to a strategic partnership in 2008 (Khan, 2024). Defence cooperation has subsequently developed into one of the most important pillars of the relationship. India and Oman conduct exercises involving the army, air force, and navy, while also cooperating in maritime security, training, logistics, defence industry, and information exchange (Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, 2025). The 2024 India–Oman military exercises—Al Najah V, Eastern Bridge, and Naseem Al-Bahr—demonstrated increasing practical interoperability. The India–Oman relationship therefore extends beyond symbolic diplomatic interaction and contributes to operational familiarity between the two countries’ armed forces.

Duqm and India’s Operational Reach:

Duqm is a particularly important component of India’s western Indian Ocean strategy. Omani port access provides logistical and maintenance opportunities that can support sustained Indian naval deployments. Patil (2022) notes that Oman’s access arrangements at Duqm have facilitated India’s long-term naval presence in the western Indian Ocean, while Taneja (2023) describes Duqm as part of India’s effort to develop institutionalized access below the threshold of a conventional overseas military base. Duqm should therefore be understood as an access-based maritime strategy rather than automatically as an Indian foreign military base. Its importance lies in extending operational endurance, supporting maritime-security missions, and increasing India’s strategic flexibility (Mazzucotelli, 2023).

Implications for Pakistan:

Pakistan is particularly sensitive to India’s maritime expansion because the Arabian Sea constitutes Pakistan’s principal maritime strategic environment. India’s growing naval capability

and expanding network of maritime partnerships can increase its operational flexibility in waters of direct importance to Pakistan (Bhutta & Ali, 2023).

The most important implication is the gradual transformation of the regional balance of maritime capability rather than an immediate military threat. Since Pakistan cannot economically replicate India's overall naval scale, it should emphasize maritime domain awareness, sea-denial capabilities, coastal surveillance, maritime aviation, submarines, asymmetric capabilities, naval diplomacy, and regional cooperation (Karim et al., 2023).

India–Oman cooperation should not automatically be interpreted as an anti-Pakistan alliance (Farooq & Qazi, 2023). Oman maintains diversified relationships and a pragmatic foreign policy. Pakistan can therefore preserve diplomatic space by strengthening Pakistan–Oman maritime cooperation, naval exchanges, port visits, training, coast guard cooperation, counter-piracy activities, and maritime trade (Qayyum, 2021).

Gwadar and Regional Connectivity:

India's maritime partnerships also have implications for Pakistan's Gwadar strategy. Pakistan should avoid viewing Gwadar only as a strategic counterweight to Indian facilities. Its long-term value depends on commercial efficiency, hinterland connectivity, security, infrastructure, investment, and integration with Central Asian and regional markets (Khetran, 2014).

Pakistan should therefore combine maritime security with economic connectivity. A commercially effective maritime sector would strengthen Pakistan's strategic position without requiring an unsustainable naval arms race.

The China Factor:

India's maritime expansion must also be understood in the context of China's growing Indian Ocean presence (Karim, 2017). India increasingly views the western Indian Ocean through the wider Indo-Pacific framework. Oman's diversified relations with India, China, the Gulf states, and other external powers demonstrate that Muscat does not view its relationship with India as exclusive (Al-Hajri, & Fulton, 2023).

Pakistan should consequently avoid interpreting every India–Oman development exclusively through a bilateral India–Pakistan framework. The regional maritime environment is increasingly multipolar and involves several major and middle powers.

Policy Recommendations:

- i. Strengthen maritime diplomacy with Oman and Gulf states through naval visits, exercises, training, and maritime-security dialogue.
- ii. Develop an integrated national maritime-security strategy linking naval, coast guard, intelligence, port-security, customs, and civilian institutions.
- iii. Improve maritime domain awareness through coastal radar, patrol aircraft, unmanned systems, satellite surveillance, and information fusion.
- iv. Establish a dedicated Pakistan–Oman maritime-security dialogue.
- v. Increase the commercial and logistical utility of Gwadar through improved connectivity, security, and regulatory efficiency.

- vi. Expand maritime cooperation with GCC states and other Indian Ocean littoral countries.
- vii. Participate actively in inclusive regional maritime-security institutions and forums.
- viii. Avoid an unsustainable platform-for-platform naval arms race and prioritize capabilities that provide high strategic value at sustainable cost.

Conclusion:

India–Oman cooperation is an important component of India’s expanding maritime influence in the western Indian Ocean. The relationship combines defence cooperation, naval exercises, logistics, maritime security, and diplomatic engagement (Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2024). Omani access, particularly around Duqm, gives India additional operational flexibility and supports a sustained maritime presence.

For Pakistan, the development creates strategic pressure in the Arabian Sea but does not require an exclusively military response. Pakistan can protect its interests more effectively by combining maritime capability with diplomacy, maritime domain awareness, economic connectivity, and cooperative regional security. Oman’s pragmatic foreign policy also provides opportunities for Pakistan to maintain and strengthen its own bilateral relationship with Muscat.

The emerging Indian Ocean order is increasingly multipolar. Pakistan’s long-term interests will therefore be better served by becoming a stronger maritime state and a more active participant in regional maritime governance rather than relying solely on bilateral balancing against India.

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