



India's Maritime Moment: A Chance to Turn Plans into Indo-Pacific Leadership

Annette Bradford and John Bradford



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SYNOPSIS

India has laid the foundations for important initiatives to lead the next steps in maritime security cooperation across the Indo-Pacific. At this time of high risk and great need, such expansion of India's leadership would be very positive for the region's maritime domain. The extent of the financial and political backing applied will make all the difference.

COMMENTARY

As the most powerful maritime power in the Indian Ocean, India has transitioned from the role of the region's [net security provider](#) to one it terms as [Preferred Security Partner or First Responder](#). Under [the guiding strategic framework for India's outlook towards the Indian Ocean](#) – [SAGAR](#) (Security and Growth for All in the Region), upgraded to [MAHASAGAR](#) (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) in 2025 – India has actively led maritime security capacity development among the states of the Indian Ocean region (IOR).

However, despite the aspirations expressed in official statements and long-standing national policies such as the [Act East Policy](#) and [Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative](#), India's role as a maritime leader beyond the IOR has been relatively limited. Now, India has set the stage to assume a bigger role in the wider region's maritime security. This would be exceptionally useful as multinational efforts in this area have largely stalled, while the challenges, ranging from expansive illegal fishing and rising rates of piracy and sea robbery to the grey-zone military tactics being employed by nations engaged in strategic competition, [have intensified](#).

Based on diplomatic spadework, planning efforts and material resources already invested, three key Indian initiatives are poised to mature in 2025: the Maritime

Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific (MAITRI) announced in 2024 within the India-Australia-Japan-United States Quad framework; the regional maritime security centre of excellence (RMSC) to be established under the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI); and the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), which is due for expansion. Each represents a distinct but complementary vector for India to lead the advancement of regional maritime security cooperation. However, questions remain regarding the willingness of India and its key partners to find the policy priority and national resources to bring these concepts to life and maximise their potential.

MAITRI – Revitalising the Quad’s Maritime Security Agenda

At the highest levels of government, a clear avenue for India to provide regional maritime security leadership will be through the Quad. Maritime security was one of the [first areas](#) of cooperation under the Quad, but so far, its most significant maritime security activity has been the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) initiative [launched in 2022](#).

While IPMDA projects have undoubtedly enabled the development of expanded [Maritime Domain Awareness](#) (MDA) capabilities by regional states, the initiative has failed to develop the synergistic impacts that proponents have heralded. In practice, the Quad nations have defaulted to a basic arrangement where each focuses its capacity-building energy on partners in a particular sub-region (India, the IOR; Australia, the Pacific; and Japan and the United States, Southeast Asia) and labels those activities as IPMDA. While it is positive that members are sharing their experiences and plans, it is hard to see how exactly regional MDA capacity would be different if there were no IPMDA and only member initiatives.

The Quad has also promised to coordinate the four nations’ maritime security training activities. The idea appears to be that, by ensuring their activities are either compatible, integrated, or, at least, deconflicted, the Quad can multiply the impacts of the four members’ efforts. It is a good idea, but efforts have yet to coalesce into desired outcomes.

Deconfliction efforts are in place but rarely transcend the stovepipes that connect policymakers’ strategic intent with deckplate-level implementation work. Discussions in the Quad’s Maritime Working Group are poorly connected with the coordination efforts that take place at the practical level, such as among embassy officials and training course leaders.

Recipient forces report that training from different Quad members often lacks complementarity and in some cases, overlaps or even conflicts. There has yet to be an example of capacity-building activity delivered by an integrated Quad effort.

Showing the initiative to simultaneously plus-up IPMDA and enhance the impact of Quad maritime security capacity-building activities, the Quad announced the MAITRI at its [2024 Summit in Delaware](#). MAITRI (meaning friendship in Sanskrit) will be an Indian-led initiative to enable Quad partners “to maximize tools provided through the IPMDA and other Quad partner initiatives, to monitor and secure their waters, enforce their laws, and deter unlawful behavior”. At the July 2025 Quad ministerial meeting,

India confirmed the initiative remains on track, affirming that the first MAITRI symposium would be held by the end of the year.

The MAITRI symposium could simply be a skills training event improving utilisation of IPMDA investment. However, if properly empowered, MAITRI could harmonise Quad maritime capacity-building activities. The symposium would be the ideal venue for taking stock of current capability-building efforts, laying the roadmap for expanding compatibility, and creating the preconditions necessary for integrated action. Yet, with the year more than half over, the exact plan remains unclear. Sceptics rightly worry that the MAITRI symposium might end up being little different from the dozens of other conferences that have been organised over the past two decades, where experts assemble to discuss the problems and make recommendations, but the states take limited action to address the issues.

Establishing a Regional Maritime Security Centre of Excellence

A second avenue for Indian leadership lies in the creation of an Indo-Pacific RMSC that would serve as a hub for innovation, knowledge sharing and standardisation, thereby helping to improve the efficiency and performance of practitioners region-wide. Officials from the United Kingdom and India have discussed the RMSC as a key deliverable of the IPOI's Maritime Security Pillar, which they co-chair.

At the governments' behest, King's College London and India's National Maritime Foundation have conducted studies to establish a vision for the RMSC's form and functionality. Office space has been earmarked in Delhi, and potential leaders have been identified by name. All that remains is for the governments to assign resources and formally launch the centre.

The plan is ambitious, yet practical. Regional maritime security would benefit greatly from a hub for knowledge and action that collects and exchanges national good practices and analysis. [Similar proposals have been previously mooted](#) without receiving pushback or actionable support from the relevant governments. However, the longer the project remains poised for sail rather than under way steaming ahead, the more one must wonder about the scope of national commitment. An under-resourced RMSC will have minimal effect on a maritime security space already awash with small-to-medium-scale research programmes and under-coordinated training courses.

Scaling Up the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR)

The [IFC-IOR](#), located in a Delhi suburb, is a third avenue where investments already made set the stage for greater leadership. With liaison officers from 14 nations assembled adjacent to the nodal activity that fuses India's national maritime information – the Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) – the IFC-IOR is already the [focal point for MDA information and analysis in the IOR](#).

IFC-IOR leaders report that it has a long waitlist for liaison officers from additional nations that wish to contribute, but until now, physical space constraints in the building have been a bottleneck. When a major expansion is completed in the next month or

so, we may see the IFC-IOR grow considerably in terms of reputation, scope and capacity.



The Indian Navy's Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC).
Image source: Headquarters-Integrated Defence Staff.

The IFC-IOR will also gain expanded relevance when it becomes the connective nexus for the new National Maritime Information Sharing Centres (NMISCs) that India is helping to establish in the [Western IOR](#) and East African coastal states. The first NMISC is expected to open in Mauritius in 2026. These centres will allow countries to monitor their waters more effectively and plug into a broader information-sharing network, building local capacity while reinforcing regional cooperation. While the strengthened MDA network's impact will be most significant in the IOR, it can become the cornerstone of wider Indo-Pacific information-sharing arrangements and a model for network expansion.

Strategic Outlook

India has completed the planning and established the frameworks for important next steps that could yield tangible capacity to coastal states and the region at large. With the stage set, now comes the hard part: implementation. If these initiatives linger on as unexecuted ideas and move into action without the resources to make a real impact, hard-earned opportunities will be unfulfilled.

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