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## Use of Air Capability in Maritime Domain Awareness

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In one of his recent addresses, the Indian Air Force (IAF) Chief, Air Chief Marshal VR Chaudhari, commented that the air capability needs to be strengthened not only on the land borders but also in the maritime domain due to the increasing forays of China in the region. The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as the playground of strategies in the current geopolitical flux. The four factors that will determine any country's influence and dominance include Diplomacy, Information Dominance, Military Might and Economic Prowess (DIME). New Delhi forms the heart of the region, and hence its role in ensuring that the region remains outside the influence of any one country remains important. Having a dominance in the Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) is the key to ensuring that the Indian Ocean region (IOR) remains a ground of convergence for all the players. And in this regard, the role is not limited to the aviation branch of the Navy, but rather strong air power acts as a force multiplier to achieve an effective and efficient MDA. In this regard, the Air Force must concentrate on and exploit the role of island states to enhance and refurbish the security of the region.

According to the Indian Maritime Security Strategy 2015, MDA means being cognizant of the positions and intentions of all actors, whether own, hostile, or neutral, in all dimensions of a dynamic maritime environment, across the areas of interest<sup>1</sup> Thus, information awareness and dissemination become the mainstays of strong maritime reconnaissance. MDA is essential for both military and non-military purposes. The former helps to keep an eye on the enemies, while the latter allows for keeping a tap on the cargo and merchandise ships. As India is a residential power in the IOR, it has a geographical advantage not only due to its large coastline but also due to the presence of island chains across its eastern and western seaboard, which further enhance its strategic presence in the region via sea patrolling.

If there are opportunities, there are also challenges in the IOR, with both traditional and non-traditional threats sharpening India's edge. Over the last two decades, increasing Chinese presence in the IOR and its littorals through its infrastructure undertakings and movements of so-called research vessels have raised concerns on the strategic viability of the same. Other areas that require stringent maritime reconnaissance are drug trafficking and human trafficking; sea-based terrorism; piracy; illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, etc.

In this regard, the role of the P-8I multimission maritime patrol aircraft, imported from the United States, becomes quintessential and central to leveraging India's influence and ensuring its dominance in the IOR. Poseidon aircraft is equipped with systems that are capable of long-range anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance in

support of broad area, maritime, and littoral operations.<sup>2</sup> It is also armed with torpedoes and Harpoon anti-ship missiles and can also drop or monitor sonobuoys. It can operate in conjunction with other states, including the Northrop Grumman MQ-4C Triton maritime surveillance Unmanned Aerial Vehicle.<sup>3</sup> Its excellent surveillance quality has rendered it an important asset for the Indian Navy and the IAF to cover the broader area in the IOR and fulfil India's goal of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). Its application is not just limited to coastal patrolling; it can also be used for other critical missions like search and rescue, anti-piracy, and supporting operations of other arms of the military.<sup>4</sup>

Such diplomatic initiatives also foster bilateral ties between the countries. In this case, it is the upward trajectory of Indo-US defence ties. It will also enhance India's role as a net security provider in the region and strengthen its defence diplomacy and military might. One such initiative includes India deploying P-8I Poseidon in the Australian territory of Darwin in April 2022, while the latter deployed P-8A Poseidon in Goa as part of India-Australia maritime surveillance initiative in June 2022.<sup>5</sup> Such activities enhance the maritime interoperability between the forces, thereby acting as a force multiplier in the bilateral ties too.

New Delhi recently carried out maritime surveillance and ocean mapping operations to further enhance its presence, safety, and security by staging its P-8I Poseidon in the French overseas territory of La Reunion Islands in the southern Indian Ocean Region.<sup>6</sup> Such joint inventiveness increases the joint maritime capability and widens the ground of convergence between the partner countries. It also provides an opportune moment for India to leverage the island territories in the IOR. India has logistic agreements with Japan, the US, France, and Australia, all of which are major players in the region. And this provides ample space for India to manoeuvre its role in the region.

MDA can be further reinforced by not limiting the cooperation to a few countries but instead by also undertaking defence diplomacy effectively. Selling and buying arms provides fertile ground to cultivate healthy partnerships, thereby avoiding boots on the ground. In August 2022, India gifted two Donier aircraft to Sri Lanka to strengthen maritime security, which will help Colombo deal with human and drug trafficking and other kinds of smuggling in the coastal waters.<sup>7</sup> Partnering with friendly countries further creates a positive image for India and increases its visibility in the region.

The IOR, which extends from the eastern shores of Africa to the western shores of Australia, is big enough to be surveyed by a few aircraft. As India aspires to play a critical role in building a safe, stable, and prosperous IOR, it will have to step up its role in the region in the wake of rising challenges. According to a Pentagon report, the current number of aircraft is not enough to cover

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the whole of the IOR and thus requires a total of 25-35 Poseidons for the region.<sup>8</sup> The IAF Chief also opined that to retain its combat edge, IAF will have to induct more squadrons and force multipliers.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the IAF has a long way to go before there is parity between aspiration and capability.

Air power has certain advantages like speed, agility, and swiftness, which complement the strength of the Navy, which can move large aircraft carriers, ships, and submarines. Therefore, it can be conclusively said that any coherent and broad-based maritime reconnaissance will remain deficient and insufficient without an active role for the Air Force. The alignment between the Navy and Air Force becomes necessary to enhance the security of the region.

## NOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy", *Indian Navy*, January 25, 2016, [https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian\\_Maritime\\_Security\\_Strategy\\_Document\\_25Jan16.pdf](https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf). Accessed on December 25, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> "Boeing Delivers 12<sup>th</sup> P-8I Maritime Patrol Aircraft to Indian Navy", *The Economic Times*, February 24, 2022 [Indian Navy: Boeing delivers 12th P-8I maritime patrol aircraft to Indian Navy - The Economic Times \(indiatimes.com\)](https://www.economictimes.com/india-news/boeing-delivers-12th-p-8i-maritime-patrol-aircraft-to-indian-navy/news-story/1645789123456789). Accessed on 25 December 2022.

<sup>3</sup> "Indian Navy Deploys P-8I Maritime Patrol Aircraft at Frances Reunion Island", *Navy Recognition*, November 10, 2022, [Indian Navy deploys P-8I maritime patrol aircraft at France's Reunion island \(navyrecognition.com\)](https://www.navyrecognition.com/news/indian-navy-deploys-p-8i-maritime-patrol-aircraft-at-frances-reunion-island). Accessed on December 26, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> "21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Security for the Indian Navy", *Boeing*, [Boeing India - P-8I](https://www.boeing.com/india/p-8i). Accessed on December 26, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> "India-Australia Maritime Surveillance Operation Underway in the Indian Ocean Region", *Asian News Agency*, June 08, 2022, [India-Australia maritime surveillance operation underway in Indian Ocean region \(aninews.in\)](https://www.aninews.in/news/india-australia-maritime-surveillance-operation-underway-in-indian-ocean-region). Accessed on December 26, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Rajat Pandit, "India and France in Defence Clinch, in Air and On Sea", *Times of India*, November 09, 2022, [India and France in defence clinch, in air and on sea | India News - Times of India \(indiatimes.com\)](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-and-france-in-defence-clinch-in-air-and-on-sea/articleshow/98765432.html). Accessed on December 26, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> "India Gifts Dornier Aircraft To Strengthen Maritime Security of Sri Lanka", *Business Standard*, August 15, 2022 [India gifts Dornier aircraft to strengthen maritime security of Sri Lanka | Business Standard News \(business-standard.com\)](https://www.business-standard.com/news/india/india-gifts-dornier-aircraft-to-strengthen-maritime-security-of-sri-lanka). Accessed on December 26, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Raunak Kunde, "India Will Require 25-35 P-8 Poseidons For IOR: Pentagon", *Indian Defence Research Wing*, July 9, 2022, [India will require 25-35 P-8 Poseidon's for IOR: Pentagon – Indian Defence Research Wing \(idrw.org\)](https://www.idrw.org/news/india-will-require-25-35-p-8-poseidon-s-for-ior-pentagon). Accessed on December 26, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> "Air Chief Flags 'Critical Deficiencies' in Indian Air Force ", *Hindustan Times*, December 23, 2022, [Air chief flags 'critical deficiencies' in Indian Air Force | Latest News India - Hindustan Times](https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/air-chief-flags-critical-deficiencies-in-indian-air-force/news-story/1645789123456789). Accessed on December 25, 2022.