



# India's Maritime Security & I2U2: Amidst Rising Chinese Influence in the IOR

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## Abstract

*In October 2021, the Foreign Ministers of India, Israel, UAE, and the US established a formal organization, I2U2. It is a major shift in the direction of the collaboration on trade, climate change action, energy, space, health, transportation, food security, and also maritime security. In India's perspective, the group will facilitate New Delhi's strategic ties with the member-countries and the opportunities to accelerate its presence in the Indian Ocean region, which is currently a key strategic region due to geo-politics and geo-economics. With approximately a share of 19.8% of the water, the Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean, and encircles Asia to the north, Africa to the west, and Australia to the east. From a strategic point of view, this region is important as one-third of the world's population resides here and it contains 25 percent of the landmarks and 40 percent of the world's oil and gas reserve. However, with a rising China in the region with its influence and domination, there obviously have certain obstacles. The paper explores India's role with the I2U2 group, aiming to assess India's maritime strategic opportunities and discusses the prospects of its balanced approach in the region.*

**Keywords:** India, I2U2, maritime security strategy, Indian Ocean region, China.

## Introduction

India's friendly relations with the I2U2 nations, which include Israel, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and United States (US), are based on the civilizational connections. These three nations are extremely important to India from the context of security and geopolitics. India has improved its standing as a powerful military and maritime force in recent years by maintaining its relations with the US. India's stature in the area has improved due to the tacit help from the US. Israel and the UAE are consequently demonstrating a promising amount of interest in fostering security ties with India. This change is indicated by the establishment of the I2U2 multilateral group and growing numbers of high-level political visits between India and the three countries (Upadhyaya, 2019). The Indian Ocean region (IOR) has now become significant due to the increasing power-politics and geo-economics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is the world's third largest ocean, covering nearly 19.8 percent on Earth's surface. This region is very important in economic potential and more generally to the future of humankind (Bateman, 2016). Third of the world's population, 25% of the world's landmarks, and 40% of the world's oil and gas reserves are found in this region, making it crucial from a strategic standpoint. India's national security is heavily reliant on marine security due to its extensive coastline of over 7000 kilometers. India's maritime security plan document

describes traditional and non-traditional security risks emerging in the IOR. Piracy, maritime terrorism, climate change, illicit, unreported, & unregulated fishing, and the illegal importation of weapons and drugs are some of the practical issues arising under the umbrella of marine security challenges (Chatterjee, 2014). Similarly, China's influence and dominance in this region are also challenging India's maritime security. To strengthen the security of coastline areas against seaborne threats, the Government of India has been enforcing the Coastline Security Scheme since 2005. India's significant economic and political ties with nations of Southeast Asia, West Asia, the Gulf, as well as several African nations, have increased its strategic interest in these regions. Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined his vision for an Indo-Pacific region that is free, open, inclusive, and governed by rules during the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018, which was well-received by all participants. Later at the East Asian Summit (EAS) in 2019, Prime Minister Modi also declared publicly the "Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative" for mutually implementing this shared vision (Editor, 2021). In recent years, New Delhi has initiated several steps such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), SAGAR (security and growth for all in the region), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and Project Mausam, etc, towards maritime security in the IOR. However, it is important to note that China's increasing dominance in the area already poses serious problems for India. Hence, I2U2 and India's involvement in the aforementioned setting evaluates India's strategic connections with these nations. The article examines India's strategic possibilities and offers a few options for India to consider in order to strengthen its position in the IOR.

## India and I2U2

I2U2 is a strategic alliance whose main goal is to promote economic cooperation between its four constituent nations of India, Israel, the United States of America, and the UAE. At the International Forum for Economic Cooperation which was held in October 2021, where the foreign ministers of the four countries came together to initiate the formation of the I2U2 group. The four countries were referred to as the Quad at that time (Mohan, 2021). The group's first summit, which took place in July 2022, primarily focused on water, energy, connectivity, space, health, and food security (Tiwary, 2022). Each member state will undoubtedly gain from I2U2 due to geographic ties connecting West Asia to South Asia and the Pacific Ocean. The group allows the US to grow and renew its relationship with the Middle East. However, the UAE strengthens its role in regional geopolitics and strengthens links with the Persian Gulf, a vital maritime route for oil transit (Anwar, 2022). The cooperative arrangement between the UAE and Israel was made possible by the Abraham Accord, which normalized relations between the two nations in August 2020 (Karam, 2021).

In addition, since the Indus civilization, India had better ties with West Asia, as it extended its neighborhood thereby occupying significance in its strategic framework towards the Middle-east region. India had a high reputation with the nations of West Asia. India's outreach strategy to West Asian nations made the US to bring India within the fold of I2U2. India's involvement in the organization is a major game-changer, according to former Israel NSA Major General Yaakov Amidrov, given its position in West Asia. In order to maintain its bilateral connection with West Asian nations, India has, over time, evolved a balanced approach to Middle East geopolitics. Under the I2U2, India boosts its trade relations with Middle-east countries allowing India's deep

engagement with West Asia's geo-economics. India's sizable consumer market and accessibility to production facilities make it a lucrative market for the I2U2 group. The group currently provides India with political, economic, and social benefits, which will aid India in fortifying its ties with the Arab World and Israel (Anwar, 2022).

### **Overall assessment of India's maritime cooperation with the I2U2 group**

India has maintained close strategic relationships with Israel, U.A.E, and US, inspite China's influence in the region. Further, India's partnership with these three countries is crucial in the region, particularly the Indian Ocean region. UAE and US are heavily involved in providing technical support and training to the Indian Navy, which is regarded as a powerful and competent force. In addition to trade, after China and the US, the UAE is currently India's third-largest trading partner at US \$39 billion (Embassy of India, Abu Dhabi, UAE, 2017). Over 2.8 million Indians work and live in the UAE, sending back annually roughly \$ 1.3 billion revenue. In August 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the UAE after 34 years, bringing a new comprehensive and strategic relation between the two countries. Prime Minister Modi's second trip to the UAE in 2018 marked the beginning of a Comprehensive Partnership between the two nations. This was focused on energy, security, and defense cooperation. The scope of defense cooperation expanded for the first time with the visit of the Crown Prince of the Emirates in 2017. In the field of the defense industry and maritime security, a MoU was signed between the two countries. In addition, India and UAE Navy conducted their first bilateral exercise, Gulf Star I in March 2018 (Upadhyaya, 2019). The Indian Navy also participates in training the UAE Navy on naval matters (Kannan, 2014), and Indian Naval ships frequently dock at Abu Dhabi to conduct anti-piracy patrol in the Gulf of Aden (Shabandri, 2013). Additionally, the UAE Navy is a participant in the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and took over as its Chairman in 2010. More recently, in August 2021, the Indian Navy undertook a bilateral exercise 'Zayed Talwar' with the UAE Navy on the coast of Abu Dhabi (*Indian Navy - United Arab Emirates Navy Bilateral Exercise "Zayed Talwar 2021" | Indian Navy, n.d.*).

No sector of defence collaboration, between the US and India, bears more promise than marine cooperation. Regarded in particular through the lens of China's ongoing aggression in the South China Sea, both states are worried about the Chinese naval presence in the IOR. In the Indian Ocean, counter-piracy exercises are actively pursued by both India and the US inspite of the historical barriers that stand in the way of strengthening defence ties between India and the United States. In the *Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean Region*, the two nations lay the groundwork for a basic set of mutual maritime security standards. The bilateral tri-services Malabar naval exercise and agreements like the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016, the renewed Defence Framework Agreement, and the Communications, Compatibility, and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2018 are important landmarks of progress (Thakker, 2019).

Israel's security worries are centered on the air and land. Israel has never been a nation known for its energy exports, but gas resources discovered in Israeli waters are transforming the country's economic landscape, consequently impacting Israel's marine security in the Mediterranean Sea. The first visit by the Indian Navy to the Haifa port in 2012 was important for both India and Israel. The Indian Navy ship INS Trikhand's port visit in 2015 was equally noteworthy. Both fleets engaged in a number of cooperative drills during the visit. On the

other hand, there is also a tremendous opportunity for growth in Israel's trade with the Indian Ocean. According to research by the *Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI)*, "both states share a common threat from Islam, with India concerned that the Pakistani nuclear arsenal may end up in the hands of Islamist terrorists. Israel's concerns about Iran and Pakistan have caused it to become increasingly interested in the Indian Ocean, where India plays a key role. Iran, China, Russia, and India have started influencing the Hormuz Strait, the Suez Canal, and the Bab el-Mandeb straits, possibly as a result of America's disengagement. In the Indian Ocean, both India and Israel have common interests. India's trade with Israel and the west Asia in general may suffer from China's influence in the Indian Ocean. Even while Israel is not directly threatened by China, but China's maritime presence in the Indian Ocean and its strong economic ties to Pakistan and Iran could disrupt India's trade routes and hurt Israel. Israel's strong military would not be able to counter this because there is no reliable naval presence in the Indian Ocean. A potential partnership with India in the Indian Ocean is also significant for Israel because it could provide it a chance to balance Iran, where India has a noticeable presence at the Chabahar port. India's position in Iran is crucial because it will give Indian supply channels influence if the Chinese pose a threat (Bag, 2020).

India has long been recognized as a major regional power with connections to the US, Israel, and the UAE, while many see China as an outsider. The BRI, which focuses on connectivity and trade cooperation stretching from China across Eurasia, and China's developing relations with the West Asian states, particularly the UAE and Israel, are typically considered in the context of each other. It is clear that Chinese investments in this area are anticipated to benefit from the oil-rich Gulf States. Comparatively, China's similar economic investments in South Asian nations with lower credit ratings and greater investment risks, such as Pakistan, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, appear to be motivated more by strategic considerations than by economic ones and are intended to counterbalance India's influence in the region. Additionally, it is expected that China will keep advancing its security relations with the UAE. In the end, China may not have the region's greatest strategic impact, but given American global dominance, it might probably surpass India's level of influence. India must continue its political involvement and bolster its current diplomatic initiatives. The Indian Navy should increase its bilateral naval drills with the Israeli Navy like the US and the UAE. India can suggest formalizing its collaboration with the I2U2 as a group and start joint naval exercises with the I2U2 navies in order to broaden the scope of its activities. A permanent or long-term training center for the I2U2 fleets in the IOR might also be established with India's proactive improvement of its training support to the UAE and Israel.

India has established links with Gulf nations of the western IOR and participates in Quad in the eastern IOR. Additionally, India actively participates in the IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association), an organization that solely promotes prosperity, peace, and stability in the IOR. Additionally, India participates in a number of initiatives, including Project Mausam and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region). India is also increasing its interaction with the East African region, as well as other regional powers. Significantly, marine domain awareness might assist India in keeping up with regional threats in the Indian Ocean. India needs to concentrate on establishing marine cooperation and joint defence manufacturing with I2U2 nations quickly.

## Conclusion

In order to strengthen its alliance system and its position in the Indo-Pacific region, the US and its allies and partners took a number of strategic steps that eventually led to the formation of the I2U2. India's membership in Quad and, more recently, I2U2, indicates India's expanding geopolitical influence at the global level. India has given its chance to strengthen the security connections with I2U2 nations. However, growing China's dominance and economic influence in the IOR poses a significant threat to India. It is needed that India should enhance a sufficient number of cargo ships, vessels, and aircraft carriers in its maritime military power and develop its surveillance system with technologically advanced countries like US and Israel. India could also proactively engage with the strategy of the "necklace of diamonds" to counter China's "string of pearls". Furthermore, India should revitalize its ties with Vietnam, Oman, Indonesia, Japan, Mongolia, Singapore, Seychelles, the Maldives, and all five Central Asian Republics to conduct joint defence exercises.

In managing the Chinese rise and influence towards the eastern IOR, India has an option of Quad, but in the western IOR, India needs security ties and this can be fulfilled by making I2U2 a "politico-security" partnership group. India also could formalize its naval presence and strategic engagement with this group in the western IOR. It is significant that the interests and capabilities of all four countries are complementary to each other. Therefore, the I2U2 group is likely to facilitate greater engagement with the region and maximize its strategic options. However, India should not be too aligned with this group and may adopt a balanced approach to retain its strong relationship with the US and its allies, as well as Iran and Russia in this region. India should also maintain safe distance from regional rivalries. India not only encourages multilateral collaboration with the I2U2, but also needs to continue its diplomatic and political efforts, and step up its bilateral maritime security cooperation.

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