

## Geo-Political Dimensions of the Indian Ocean Region in the 21st Century: A Critical Analysis

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### Abstract

*With the start of twenty first century, Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has gained immense geopolitical and geo-economic importance. Having warm water throughout the year, this region is not only ideal for international trade but also contributes to the ecosystem while balancing the regional climate. Geographically, it is in the middle of world waters, thus an attraction for all the regional and global powers. Its geopolitical significance multiplies due to the globally recognized corridor for two thirds of oil and one third of cargo shipments. It is also significant for industrial nations like China, the US, and India, which heavily imports oil through this region. Recent naval-military expansion by China and India in the region increased its geo-political and strategic significance. Such developments have also intensified the power competition. China's establishment of Maritime Silk Route and subsequently the so called "String of Pearls" strategy has impacts on the geo-politics of IOR. Furthermore, to protect its geo-political and economic interests in the region, China has started modernizing its navy. The increased hostility has multiplied the naval military activities like exercises, deployment of troops, vessels, and missile testing by all major powers. The research finds that the region in power transition where the US no more has superiority. Emerging powers particularly, China and India have intensified their involvement by not only investing in the naval military buildup but also negotiating with the littoral states to make sound and reliable partnership with them. All these developments presents both challenges and opportunities to Pakistan. It depends upon Islamabad, how it manages its priorities but it's also clear that Pakistan's geo-political, strategic, and economic interests coincide with the Chinese camp.*

**Key words:** Geo-politics, Indian Ocean region, US, China, India, Pakistan, Strategic Competition.

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## Introduction

The Indian Ocean region (IOR), which spans over Southeast Asia, Australia, Eastern and Southern Africa, and West Asia, is considered the world's youngest region (Davis & Balls, 2020). It has an estimated population of 2.7 billion and boasts the fastest-growing economies in the region, making it a key commercial hub for trade activities (Baruah, 2021). Moreover, its sea lines of communications in the Indian ocean region are responsible for almost 40% of the world's offshore oil production and 80% of the world's oil shipment, making it a vital area for global trade (Lee & Horner, 2014). The economic connections between the IOR and other regions such as East Asia, the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and America have contributed to its growth and prosperity, providing promising projections for the future.

The Indian Ocean region has emerged a site of geopolitical competition due to its geo-strategic significance where India has more influential role to play while other major powers like China, the United States, and Pakistan also seek to protect their interests in the region. The Indian Ocean is a fundamental shipping route for oil transportation, originating from the Middle East, particularly Persian Gulf to the rest of the world. The control of this shipping route by a single state would have devastating consequences for regional and global geo-politics and geo-economics, making it a matter of utmost concern. The emergence of maritime powers in the region has drawn considerable geopolitical attention to the Indian Ocean over the last few decades. The notion of Warm Waters and Sea Lines of Communication has diverted major powers' critical focus towards the Indian Ocean, as they recognize the strategic importance of the region for their interests (Till, 2007)

The U.S. has taken the advantage of its navigational freedom in the Indian Ocean for security and commercial goals. On the other hand, China holds a strategic edge in the Indian Ocean region by constructing the distinguished maritime Silk Road and acquiring port basing rights. Though its developments are restricted to the Bay of Bengal and Strait of Malacca, yet, Pakistan's Gwadar Port, and its presence in Myanmar, offer the most economical and practical alternatives to China for its trade activities. Additionally, China has made substantial investments in modernizing its maritime force to enhance its naval capabilities, strengthen its maritime security and expand its navy's reach and influence in the region (O'Rourke, 2010).

India, with its unique geographical location, holds a noticeable advantage in the Indian Ocean region. With 12 major and 200 minor ports located along the east and west coasts as well as islands under its control, New Delhi has further enhanced its importance as a key regional player (*Ports Wing / Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways*, n.d.). India's heavy dependence on Sea Lines of Communications signifies its efforts towards expanding its maritime capabilities in the Indian Ocean Region. However, India's strategic collaborations towards its western neighbor are always hampered by the existing territorial disputes and the close relationship between Pakistan and China. All major powers in the region understand the protection and safety of Sea Lines of Communications and Strategic Choke Points to smooth flow of commercial activities. The Indian Ocean region is exemplified by historical mistrust, which has led to mutual suspicion and evolving geopolitical dynamics among regional and global powers. India's focus is to expand its economic and military strength to reinforce its status as a major power in the Indian Ocean region.

China's expanding maritime activities in the Indian Ocean region has had a considerable implication on the geopolitical dynamics of the region and has raised security concerns for both India and the United States. As a result, India and the US have always had apprehensions towards China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The policies of the United States during Donald Trump's era towards China further aggravated this hostility, turning the Indian Ocean into a battlefield for proxy competition between these states. Subsequently, China, the UN and India have recalibrated their maritime strategies to exert greater influence to protect their interests in the India region. This article attempts to analyze the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean in the 21st century while highlighting the role of India, China, the United States and Pakistan, in safeguarding their interests in the region.

### **The Notion of Warm Waters and Indian Ocean**

Indian Ocean is unique because of its steadily warm surface temperature of 28°C, which is known as the "heat engine" of the globe (Deckker, 2016). Unlike many other oceans, especially Arctic Ocean, the Indian Ocean remains warm and navigable throughout the year. The warm waters facilitate the region as a crucial hub for uninterrupted flow of commercial activities and in this context, Gwadar port of Pakistan appears a significant development to monitor SLOCs. Warm water ports provide a means for states to extend their reach beyond borders and guarantee smooth trade activities. The significance of warm waters has evolved over time, from its traditional association with maritime warfare, to exploitation of natural resources and protection of sea lines

of communications (Dixit, 2017). The Indian Ocean provides a strategic advantage to major powers seeking to exert their influence, with major powers such as Britain, France, the USA, India, and China using the region for power projection. China is in a dire need of warm water ports as to its own ports including Ying Kou, Jinzhou, Hulu Dao, Dandong, Qinhuangdao, Tangshan, Weifang, and Dinging on the northern border freeze during winter and halt all commercial activities for more than half a year. However, the security of these ports remains a major concern for China (Chauhan, 2020).

Presently, China is following in Russia's footsteps by seeking warm water ports to advance its geo-strategic interests in the region. Isaiah Bowman, an advisor to Woodrow Wilson, once stated that no state can be denied access to the sea and this principle equally applies to India, China, and the USA, in the Indian Ocean region. The slogans "Reaching out to the Far East" and "Reach the Persian Gulf" reflect the significance of developing warm water ports around the Indian Ocean region to advance the national interests of the key actors (Shabbir et al., 2019). The regional and global actors' active involvement in the Indian Ocean region's affair demonstrate the urgency to ensure and safeguard sea lines of communications in the Indian Ocean for their economic growth (Morrison, 2020). However, the importance of Gwadar and many other warm water ports in the Indian Ocean can play crucial role to protect and monitor maritime activities to promote economic growth and ensure safety of SLOCs.

The Indian Ocean is an important waterway for international trade and shipping, connecting Asia, the Middle East, and Africa with Europe and the Americas. The warm waters and favorable sea conditions make it easier for ships to navigate the ocean, reducing travel times and costs. The Indian Ocean is home to a rich diversity of marine life, including fish, crustaceans, and other seafood. These resources support the fishing industry, providing food and livelihoods for millions of people in the region. The warm waters of the Indian Ocean are a major attraction for tourists, especially for those seeking beaches, water sports, and other recreational activities. Countries like Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles rely heavily on tourism for their economies (Kothari & Wilkinson, 2013). The Indian Ocean plays a key role in the global climate system, acting as a heat reservoir that helps to regulate global temperatures. The warming of the Indian Ocean due to climate change can have significant impacts on regional weather patterns, sea levels, and marine ecosystems. The Indian Ocean is becoming increasingly important for regional and global security,

as it is home to critical energy shipping lanes and vulnerable maritime chokepoints. The warm waters and favorable sea conditions make it easier for pirates and other security threats to operate in the region, highlighting the importance of maintaining a strong naval presence (Koh, 2018).

Sea lines of communication (SLOCs) provide the backbone of international trade and commerce, making them vital for economic growth and development. According to a report by the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS), over 90 percent of global trade by volume is shipped through the oceans. This includes essential commodities like oil, gas, food, and goods that fuel global supply chains (*International Chamber of Shipping – Shaping the Future of Shipping*, n.d.). SLOCs also ensures energy security, as a sizable portion of the world's energy supplies is transported by sea, particularly to regions that lack their own production capacity (Vnkataraman, 2019). Additionally, maritime trade routes are critical for facilitating international cooperation and promoting political stability, as trade can create incentives for peace and cooperation between nations (Chowdhury, 2018). There is a sizeable investment, both by governments and private enterprises which help to ensure that shipping remains a safe and efficient means of transporting goods globally. Therefore, there is no doubt that the stability and security of sea lines of communications are crucial for the continued growth and prosperity of the global economy (Dixit, 2017).

### **Geo-Strategic Interests of Key Players in the Indian Ocean**

During the Cold War, world powers, the US and former USSR, focused on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans as their battle grounds, but the significance of the Indian Ocean has now attracted the attention of emerging economies of China, India and the sole superpower, United States. The evolving geopolitical landscape has made the Indian Ocean a pivotal location, gaining the interests of major players. The US seeks to counter China's growing influence and has thrown its weight behind India due to its sizeable economic growth. However, India and China are engaged in a power struggle in the Indian Ocean region, each pursuing to safeguard its own interests and gain a strategic advantage (Shah, 2022).

### **India's Ambitions in the Indian Ocean Region**

India is one of the largest littoral states that occupies 7500 kilometers of coastline consisting of major and 200 minor seaports (*Ports Wing / Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways*, n.d.). These mega oceanic foundations reflect India's objectives for the long run (Owais, 2020). New

Delhi's aggressive role in the Indian Ocean is visible through its dominating patterns. However, India has gained full support from the US as in 2013 the United States termed Pacific region to “Indo-Pacific” in order to highlight the geo-significance of India as a main regional state to maneuver maritime affairs in the Indian Ocean (Latif & Zia, 2022). Giving greater role in the Indian Ocean by the United States to India is aimed at rebalancing it with China because by helping India in its naval modernizations, India can have capacity to monitor and maneuver the Strait of Malacca. The US and India working together on the same agenda, therefore, developing ties with littoral states near choke points are part of the game. India putting all these efforts to limit China in the South China Sea and its movement in the Indian Ocean (Tahir & Ejaz, 2020).

However, for the implementation of supremacy in IOR, India is working on its Naval modernization. India values its geographical status in IOR as a peninsula that increases its importance. Naval Tactician Alfred Thayer Mahan's Doctrine 1880s says:

Let us not shrink from pitting a broad self-interest against the narrow self-interest to which some would restrict us.... Let us start with the fundamental truth, warranted by history, that the control of the seas, and especially along the great lines drawn by national interest or national commerce, is the chief among the merely material elements in the power and prosperity of nations. It is so because the sea is the world's great medium of circulation ... (Mahan, 1898).

For achieving maximum control over IOR, India has enhanced naval finances from 11 percent to 18 percent for the ‘Blue Water’ program that is to fulfil the desire and security maximization to influence the littoral states (Katyal, 2014). The real rising threat for India and the US in Asia is rapid Sino-economic empowerment and the US is backing India's naval strength since the Bush administration for containing China's influence in IOR (Owais, 2020). Controlling the Indian Ocean by India is not a new phenomenon, rather its ‘Look East’ policy in 1990 of the Narsimha Rao regime is a chain event that suggests developing ties in the East to enhance strategic goals, Naval competence for economy and trade and deplete China's influence in East Asia (Shabbir et al., 2020).

The strengthening of India's relations with Iran is notable due to Iran's strategic location contiguous to the Strait of Hormuz, through which 30 percent of the global oil trade passes. To secure international funding for such a critical asset, Iran has faced challenges and even sanctions from

the West in the past. India, a long-standing buyer of Iranian oil, has developed a deliberate partnership with Iran to construct the Chabahar Port. This collaboration will benefit India to grow its strategic influence in the region, but the success of this plan is dependent on durable peace and stability of Afghanistan. Furthermore, India's strategic alliance with the US has always protected it to secure a waiver from US sanctions on oil imports from Iran. (Hassan, 2019).

India extending its ties with Iran and its reach in the Strait of Hormuz for oil trade is purposely. Its further plans are not just to view the mobility of the Chinese containers but to give a halt to Chinese consignments for the maximum period. This Indian strategy is entirely dependent on the deployment of the Indian Naval force in IOR. However, the Duqm port in Oman has been taken over by India covertly for military vessels overhauling and supply. The significance can be judged through this that the port makes the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea at hand for India (Hassan, 2019).

### **US interest in Indian Ocean**

By the end of World War II, the US had naval supremacy in the Indian Ocean, but today, it no longer holds that level of superiority. The region is currently going through a major transformation due to a challenging political climate and a competition between China and India, as both countries contending for influence in the Indian Ocean. Interestingly, the US is also becoming increasingly involved in the region's geopolitics. While China's main concern is to ensure uninterrupted energy and trade flows in the Indian Ocean, whereas India is skeptical about China's political and economic activities in Africa, where it has invested profoundly in industries such as oil, mining, infrastructure, telecommunication, and electricity generation (Berlin, 2010). These investments are aimed at securing access to essential raw materials and advancing China's policy objectives, at the same time conflictual and incompatible with the security interests of both the US and India (Fatima & Jamshed, 2020).

The United States gives importance to both the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and Eurasia to pursue its priorities in a manner that prevents any state or alliance from challenging or becoming a hegemon over its interests. The expansion of trade and business in IOR consequently has augmented strategic implications as the geo-economic wave in Asia is visible worldwide (Vaughn, 2018). However, the growing economic and military capabilities of China are causing hostility, and conflict in the Indian Ocean, which is the only globally recognized corridor for two-thirds of



oil and one-third of cargo shipments. Additionally, this corridor facilitates 80 percent of Chinese, 90 percent of Japanese, and 90 percent of South Korean oil trade (Medcalf, 2018).

Under the National Security Strategy (NSS) of 2017, the Trump administration announced that "great power competition has returned," with special reference to the Indo-Pacific region concerning China. The United States aims to safeguard this region from any potential hegemon that could pose a threat to its safety. To prevent the supremacy of any other state, the US has evolved many strategies which include building good diplomatic and security relations with its coalition partners, encouraging a command and control-based culture for regional security, working towards the safety of its power resources, supporting diplomatic choke points and freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific, and conducting anti-terrorist operations in the region (Vaughn, 2018). The US also works to discourage the spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction and anti-state players in the region and does not support the escalation of Pakistan and India for disturbances in sovereignty and business. Furthermore, the US encourages collaboration with states that share common interests, such as shared values, legal provisions, civil and religious liberties, and democracy. In addition, the US collaborates with India, China, and other littoral states for international settings concerning climate and piracy threats (Vaughn, 2018). AUKUS defense pact among Australia, UK and the US and QUAD agreement among Australia, India, Japan and the US are also assumed against China's active involvement in the IOR.

### **China's Interest in Indian Ocean**

Since the start of the century, China has been expanding its presence from the South China Sea to the Indian Pacific region under its 'two oceans' policy. This policy has two main reasons: firstly, to ensure presence to distant oceans for strategic interests, and secondly, to establish the Maritime Silk Road in the current millennium to ensure smooth flow of commercial activities (Shabbir et al., 2020). As the largest consumer of energy, China always prioritizes to guarantee uninterrupted supply of energy to its growing industries which is imperative for its economic growth. In order to reduce any mishaps in the Sea Lines of Communications in the Indian Ocean, China is taking significant measures to avoid any future confrontation. The Blue Book highlights China's efforts to protect itself against potential hazards from other countries. Beijing perceives such liabilities as a substantial threat to its interests in the Indian Ocean. To enhance its trade with Africa and the



Middle East, China is increasing its naval strength, particularly at the choke points in the Indian Ocean (Latif, & Zia, 2022).

China dispenses its naval military in Indo-Pacific and changes its policy to Ocean-centric to avoid discontinuation of energy supply. China has launched Haiku, a cruise missile destroyer, for countering piracy. In July 2017 India carried out naval exercises with US and Japan at the Bay of Bengal and China in response routed its monitoring warships for surveillance. The current Chinese move of marine presence in the Indian Ocean interprets its maritime hold to equalize Indian hold over land. Consequently, China led a fire exercise in western waters in August 2017, where they trailed and tested Changchun, Jinzhou and replenishment ship Chaozhou. Furthermore, the official statement was given about these tests that were demonstrated to assess the assault against emerging adversary vessels. However, the official statement did not label the opponent, but it was assumed an Indian Marine force. The inauguration of the 'Logistic Facility' at Djibouti augmented China furthermore for showcasing maritime exercises (Shabbir et al., 2020).

China has installed its naval military in the Indo-Pacific region and has adopted an Ocean-centric policy to ensure a continuous supply of energy shipped from Middle East and Africa. To address piracy issues in the Indian Ocean region, China is actively participating in anti-piracy efforts in the region through various means, including deploying naval vessels and conducting joint exercises with other countries. Moreover, China has launched its latest a guided missile destroyer named Haiku and frigate in the fleet of naval ships participating in anti-piracy operations Somalian coast and the Gulf of Aden in the Arabia Sea and the Indian Ocean (The Economic Times, April 04, 2019). In July 2017, India also speeded up its naval exercises with the US and Japan in the Bay of Bengal, and China responded by sending its monitoring warships for surveillance. This move by China to establish its marine presence in the Indian Ocean is seen as an attempt to match India's hold over land. Consequently, in August 2017, China conducted a fire exercise in the western waters, testing Changchun, Jingzhou, and the replenishment ship Chaozhou. Although the official statement claimed that these tests were aimed at assessing the assault against emerging adversary vessels, the opponent was not named, but it was assumed to be an Indian Marine force. Additionally, China's launch of the 'Logistic Facility' in Djibouti has increased its capability to demonstrate its maritime exercises (Shabbir et al., 2020).

China is not exclusively concentrating on increasing its military presence but is also undertaking to establish constructive relations with the coastal states in the Indian Ocean region. China is expanding its ties with countries in East Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Most of these states are buyers of arms and several states are having Chinese investments for the development of the port for instance Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. China's commercial shipping agencies and ports have active engagement in the Indian Ocean as well as activities related to fishing, oil and gas are also actively visible (Paul van der Putten, 2014).

### **Pakistan's Apprehensions in Indian Ocean**

Pakistan's coastline spans 150 kilometers and it relies immensely on its commercial and trade activities as a major means of transportation in the Indian Ocean. The port in Karachi is crucial for importing oil and other goods, supplying over 90% of Pakistan's needs, but it perceives threats from its eastern neighbor, India. However, keeping in view the maximum utilization of seaports, Pakistan has not defined its concerns regarding naval influence as it should be assumed. Pakistan's serious concerns are India-centric as the Indian war menace can damage the economy. This hysteria can affect the maritime as well as diplomatic stature of Pakistan in the region. Indian naval capacity in comparison with Pakistan is unequal which is the calculated gain of India. Pakistan enjoyed the period till the 1990s of sovereign naval benefit before the US sanctions, during that period India gained second strike capability that hindered the balance in the Indian Ocean (Khan, 2016).

The changes in strategic perception in the international sphere usually within the local environment associate the countries at diverse grades. Advantageously Pakistan occupies a lucrative location in the Indian Ocean that engages and undulates countless modifications in regional surroundings. Pakistan's strategic location connects it to Central Asia and the Middle East, and such junction offers both prospects and challenges to Pakistan. The Indian Ocean attracts international politics, but the current dynamics of regional politics are swiftly changing. Therefore, international involvement is noticeable. Political and economic swings in the region have cast comprehensive effects. However, the inciting supremacy struggle between China and the US is a vital source of politics that cannot be denied (Ahmed, 2021).

Indian interest in Chabahar port is temporary because it is challenging for its interest to maintain for a longer period as this project is for eyeing China and Pakistan's engagement. Gwadar port

possesses its significance India accepts as Indian Naval Chief admitted in 2008 that significant power sea lanes in the Persian Gulf would regulate Gwadar port tactically. Pakistan and China collaborated in the construction of Gwadar Port and the Pak-China Economic Corridor. It has profound implications because it serves as the counter strategy against a possible blockade of Karachi port by India (Fatima & Jamshed, 2020).

India's interest in the Chabahar port is transitory because it is difficult for them to sustain their engagement for an extended period. Indian Naval Chief recognized the Strategic significance of Gwadar port of Pakistan as it regulates sea lanes of communication in the Persian Gulf. The collaboration between Pakistan and China in constructing the Gwadar Port and the Pak-China Economic Corridor has potential benefits. It serves as a countermeasure to the vulnerable port of Karachi which was blocked by Indian Navy in 1971 under its 'Operation Trident' and 'Operation Python'. Gwadar port can facilitate smooth flow of all commercial activities during war as it is away from the reach of Indian Navy (Fatima & Jamshed, 2020).

## Conclusion

The Indian Ocean region holds immense significance, but its power dynamics are constantly evolving. The major actors in the region are experiencing considerable shifts, and there is steady escalation of tension in the Indian Ocean region. The struggle for power and influence in the region poses a challenging factor in the current paradigm, with India and China competing for control over the sea lanes of communication. This competition not only serves the interests of U.S to use India as a counter balancing factor against China. As China expands its routes and access through land and water, it creates a real challenge to maintain the importance of the Indian Ocean alone. The choke points are under US control, and the US is backing India to monitor China's activities in the region. The US and India are working to cooperate with other littoral states, but those states are also collaborating with China. Pakistan on the other hand has aligned itself with China to maintain its strategic existence in the region. Whereas India has established itself as a maritime power influencer with special support from the US for its image building. With its weaker economic standing, Pakistan has had little chance to counter or participate in power politics. However, the projects with China make Pakistan capable of reducing Indian influence in the Indian Ocean.

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