

Conflict or Cooperation? Assessing Security Architectures and Power Dynamics in the Indian Ocean

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Abstract: *This paper examines the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as a potential area for international cooperation or as a source of international tension. In the twenty-first century, IOR has become the focal point of geostrategic struggle. The overlap of global and regional interests from rival states triggers both conflict and cooperation. The Indian Ocean, which encompasses a few of the busiest trade routes, energy transfer avenues, and critical chokepoints, is key to international economy and sea lanes security. (Smith, 2020). Simultaneously, the area witnesses increasing naval presence in form of rising maritime rivalries, particularly military confrontations between India and China alongside evolving regional security structures. Through multi-systemic exploration of military-strategic regional alliances, security architectures, and tension-prone areas, this research rests on the hypothesis that the Indian Ocean is an evolving contested geopolitical theater rather than a collaborative zone. Upon further investigation it was found that while concealed wars, conflict of interest, and imbalanced world order prevail over the region, the prospects for international cooperation and counter-strategic policies to oppose prevailing competition provide equilibrium, thus subverting conflict to alliance. The area is certainly sensitive to strategic conflict, however, undermining anger with multilaterals could lead to fostering peace, making this understanding critical when formulating sea policies and maintaining stability. (World Bank, 2019)*

Keywords: Indian Ocean Region (IOR), Maritime security, Geo-strategic rivalry, Naval power, Sea lanes, Indo-Pacific, Security architecture, Regional diplomacy

I. INTRODUCTION

India sits north of the Indian Ocean, which is bounded by Indonesia, Australia, and Africa. The Indian Ocean contains some of the most well-known chokepoints, including the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the Strait of Malacca, and the Strait of Hormuz, which are critical to the transportation of crude oil. In contemporary world, the Indian Ocean has expanded to have around 80 percent of the oil maritime distribution and has enabled onshore military shipment of goods which has dramatically increased its strategic prominence. The region has become a top focus of the world in regard to seeking control of maritime assets.

With powers like India, Pakistan, and Iran, along with external players including China, the United States, Japan, and France, the Indian Ocean has recently been subject to dramatic geopolitical activity. India's Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision is in competition with China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), commonly termed as the "String of Pearls" by experts because of the development of strategic ports throughout the IOR. Simultaneously, the United States remains anchored by means of Indo-Pacific Policy and the base at Diego Garcia, maintaining a formidable presence, recently argued to be a part of emerging anti-China regime. This synthesis of interests has intensified discussions on whether the Indian Ocean is heading towards actual armed confrontation or is likely to develop as a region of multilateral collaboration (Doe & Johnson, 2018).

Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this research is to analyze the Indian Ocean's political conflicts, security frameworks, and region-specific strategies. It poses one primary question: Are the politics of power conflict becoming more salient in the Indian Ocean, or is there potential for it to evolve into a cooperative maritime domain? The paper will emphasize on the region's geo-political importance, the major players, and the security frameworks which IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association), IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium) and others are creating, and the potential flashpoints that may lead to conflict, disrupt peaceful coexistence, and destabilize the equilibrium within the Indian Ocean basin.

This paper approaches the issue from a qualitative perspective, informed by secondary sources from academic texts, policy papers and reports from strategic think-tanks, and official government publications, combining geopolitical perspectives with contemporary policy critique. This paper is structured in six parts: It begins with outlining the Indian Ocean's geopolitical significance – for both the regions within its shores and for extra-regional powers. In the second part, it profiles key actors and their specific motivations. Third, it assesses existing security frameworks. Fourth, it identifies critical conflict drivers. Fifth, it delineates prospects for cooperation. Finally, it presents principal conclusions and

policy recommendations.

Table 1: Major Strategic Chokepoints in Indian Ocean and their significance

Chokepoint	Controlling Countries
Hormuz Strait	Iran, Oman, UAE
Bab el-Mandeb	Yemen, Djibouti, Eritrea
Malacca Strait	Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore

II. THE INDIAN OCEAN'S STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

In terms of world geopolitics, the Indian Ocean is significant because it facilitates international trade, the transport of energy, and military operations. With an area of around 70 million square kilometers, the Ocean combines Asia, Africa, and Australia, acting as a marine link between the most densely populated countries and some of the healthiest resource regions. With the dependence on maritime trade increasing and competition for resources growing exponentially, its geo-economic and geo-strategical significance in the 21st century has grown sharper.

Since the Indian Ocean handles almost 80% of the global oil traffic, it is one of the most important regions; particularly in terms of energy transportation. This is especially relevant for economies like India, China, and Japan (Kaplan, 2010). The Hormuz Strait, Bab el-Mandeb, and Malacca Strait are the main chokepoints in the ocean along with their counterparts. These points of passage are essential to the economy and also aid global trade. The Strait of Hormuz serves as a major chokepoint delivering close to 20 million barrels of oil a day. They supply almost a third of the sponsored oil shipments around the globe (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2021). Strategically these passages are of huge significance because they can alter global economic matters if interrupted to the sea.

The Indian Ocean is also an expanding theatre of naval activity. Fifth Fleet of United States is stationed in Bahrain while having a strategically located base in Diego Garcia, which allows American influence across the region as South Asia and East Africa. India as a net security provider has increased naval patrols, Andaman & Nicobar Island strategic base, and is increasing relations with isle countries such as Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius (Pant, 2016). China, on the other hand, has expanded its network with ports and facilities including the first overseas military station in Djibouti and strategically investing in Pakistan's Gwadar Port forming what analysts are calling the "String of Pearls" (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008).

Increased militarization is shown in joint naval exercises conducted like Malabar exercise containing India, United States, Japan, Australia or Exercise Cutlass Express led by the US and other regional partners. These subsidiaries demonstrate the importance of the Indian Ocean to the architecture of global security and the need for intervention from the outside.

The Indian Ocean also serves as a hub for international communication cables, which constitute another dimension of its strategic value, albeit often underappreciated. The cables that support the internet system serve as a backbone for digital traffic throughout the world. Their vulnerability to neglect or disruption has added an additional cyber element to maritime security, increasing worries about hybrid warfare and the protection of fundamental facilities (Panda, 2020).

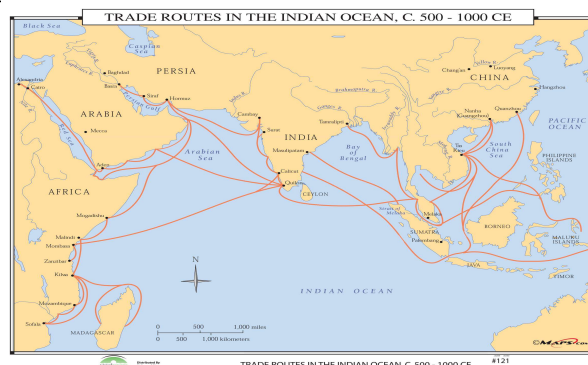


Figure 1: Indian Ocean Trade Routes, around 500–1000 CE (Source: 1.Brewster, D. (2014). *India's Ocean: The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership*. Routledge.

The Indian Ocean is essential for trade & geostrategic factors, but it also offers rich underlying natural deposits, including minerals, oil, gas, and marine biodiversity. Offshore hydrocarbon reserves in regions like Mozambique, Myanmar, and Indonesia are becoming more attractive to global investors. Increased complexity in regional maritime politics is also being fueled by the prospects of deep sea mining and disputes over Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs).

Fundamentally, the Indian Ocean is much more than a waterway; it is a zone of dynamic economic, political, and military activity. Indian Ocean's continuous geo-strategic relevance and importance for global security and economy highlighted the need for strong governance and active diplomacy to address conflicting interests in the region. (Panda, 2020).

III. REGIONAL AND GLOBAL ACTORS

Regional and extra-regional authorities have placed their focus on the Indian Ocean due to its rich resources, which support competitive power projection. India is the epicenter of this geo-strategic rivalry considering the unique advantage it possesses geographically in the region. Through the SAGAR doctrine, India has focused on cooperative maritime security enhanced with further naval presence in the region, and subsidized capacity-building to smaller or lesser economically developed bordering states. India has also strengthened the partnerships and alliances at sea with countries; Japan, the United States, & Australia, regularly exercising advanced naval operations under the Quad and other multilateral agreements. China's influence in the Indian Ocean has grown significantly in contemporary times, fuelled by the Belt and Road Initiative and the setting up of strategic trade routes and energy imports from the Middle East and Africa. The construction of port infrastructural facilities in China-occupied regions like Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Kyaukpyu (Myanmar) has led to the maritime strategy being termed "String of Pearls". Combined with the growth of blue-water navy capabilities, these developments, also accompanied by the increasing needs to sustain and manage the first overseas military post in Djibouti, reveal an unwavering intent to further establish chronic regional dominance. Consequently, India has been viewing these developments as strategic encirclement.

In the Indian Ocean, the United States holds a significant military and diplomatic presence. The Indo-Pacific Strategy aims to maintain free passage through seas, control

the growth of China, and strengthen relationships with friendly nations. The U.S. also counters partnered hostilities by placing significant military assets within the area, like the base on Diego Garcia and Fifth Fleet stationed in the Gulf. These partnerships with India, Australia and Japan through Quad allow them to further escalate their shared interests which establish counterbalance against globalization.

The Indian Ocean's dynamics are influenced by a few more players outside the triangle formed by the United States, China, and India. France, for instance, has overseas territories such as Réunion and Mayotte which enables France to retain considerable naval power and partake in some security operations in the region. Japan has expanded its security presence through the provision of maritime capacity-building aid to IOR countries and its role in the Quad. Concerned with the stability of the region as well as maritime trade, Australia has also stepped up defense relations with India and Southeast Asian countries. The United Kingdom, despite its diminished relative influence, still retains naval assets in Bahrain and the wider Gulf region.

Also actively trying to incorporate themselves in some capacity into the region are Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Gulf countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Iran enjoys considerable strategic advantage due to its control of the Strait of Hormuz and Pakistan's modernizing navy and growing closer ties with China owing to China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) further complicate the region. Further, the Indian Ocean has smaller island countries such as the Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles which, even with limited military capability, are increasingly sought after by larger powers due to their advantageous strategic locations (Kaplan, 2010)..

The constellation of actors with overlapping interests and competing strategies creates a complex security landscape in the Indian Ocean. Some states pursue cooperative approaches to maritime governance and collective security, while others engage in strategic hedging and unilateral power projection. As a result, the Indian Ocean is a contested and dynamic region marked by competition and collaboration in a fragile equilibrium. (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2021).

IV. EXISTING SECURITY ARCHITECTURES AND ALLIANCES

A variety of cooperative mechanisms aimed at increasing stability, improving maritime domain awareness, and even managing potential flashpoints have emerged in response to the evolving strategic interest and maritime tensions in the Indian Ocean. These cooperative mechanisms differ in terms of formality, inclusiveness, and effectiveness as a result of the diverse range of interests held by regional as well as extra-regional actors.

One of the most important multilateral initiatives in IORA, which was established in 1997 to pursue economic cooperation and enhance maritime safety among the bordering states. It covers 23 member states and 10 dialogue partners. IORA has slowly adapted to try and address some chronic non-traditional security issues like piracy, terrorism, and even humanitarian disasters. However, despite the lack of a formal security alliance structure, IORA's strong emphasis on dialogue and consensus has allowed them to create a strong platform aimed at fostering confidence-building

among a wide range of stakeholders. Because of its limited ability to enforce policy and the differing priorities held by state members, IORA is highly constrained. (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008).

The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), which was established by the Indian Navy in 2008 with the intention of promoting naval cooperation among the Indian Ocean's littoral states, is a further significant institution.. It boosts confidence-building among isolated navies through promotion of best practices and joint exercises. Though IONS has improved transparency and maritime situational awareness, it, like the other, lacks legally binding provisions and suffers from discontinuity due to rotational leadership.

Besides these formal arrangements, various other bilateral and Mini lateral initiatives have emerged. The Quad, which consists of the US, India, Japan, and Australia, is becoming more active in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific geographical region. The Quad supports a rules-based order for maritime conduct, including freedom of navigation and security of vital maritime routes, even if it is not a formal alliance. Coordinated disaster response efforts and combined naval exercises like Malabar serve to emphasize the Quad's strategic significance. (Kaplan, 2010; Subramanian, 2017).

ASEAN, along with its frameworks such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), highlight Indian Ocean security issues through dialogue and collaboration with other external actors. While ASEAN's primary geopolitics centers on the Western Pacific and the South China Sea, its conversations with India and endorsement for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) indicates willingness towards regional stability.

Other neighboring countries have also developed bilateral initiatives aimed at information-sharing and maritime security. India has ratified over 20 White Shipping Agreements to raise awareness of the maritime world. In order to manage the collected data as well as the surveillance data from partner nations, it has also located the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in Gurugram. Meanwhile, China's approach has been more focused on infrastructure through its Maritime Silk Road initiative to build ports and logistics hubs which are often supplemented by security partnerships with the host countries. (Bhattacharyya, 2021)

In spite of the progress made, the security structure of the Indian Ocean is still disjointed and mostly reactive. Most frameworks are voluntary without sufficient enforcement and are constrained by political rivalry. The divergence in strategic priorities among major powers weakens a cooperative, collective defense system. Furthermore, many of the smaller coastal states, while participating on paper, do not have the resources or influence to meaningfully participate in setting the agenda.

The existence of these diverse initiatives is indicative of both the need and the challenge posed by cooperative security in a region characterized by deep-seated strategic rivalries. These mechanisms offer a certain level of coordination and transparency but still fall short of crisis prevention or interruption of major power competition. Moving forward, the challenge is the undermining of institutional trust among hostile parties, while requiring more powerful regional organizations to inclusively alter Indian Ocean security governance.

Fig 2. illustrates the proportion of global oil trade that passes via important chokepoints: the Bab el-Mandeb, Malacca, & Hormuz Straits.

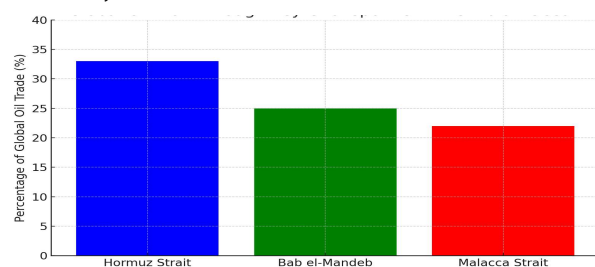


Figure 2: Indian Ocean chokepoints are strategic artery for global oil flow

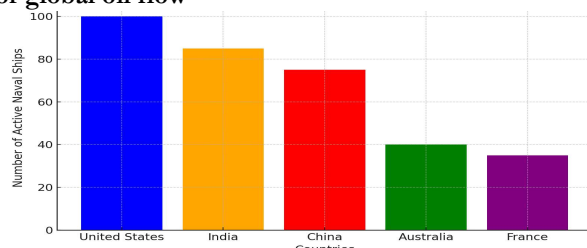


Figure 3: The Indian Ocean's Naval Presence (Approx. Active Ships)

Fig. 3 illustrates the approximate number of active naval ships of key countries.

V. CONCLUSION

The Indian Ocean Region is currently seeing a convergence of territorial disputes, economic priorities, and Geostrategic interest. An intricate mixture of cooperation & conflict continues to influence the region's security structure, as both local and international forces vie for supremacy. Identifying multilaterals and confidence-building measures as forums indicative of cooperation suggests that several challenges are underlying in the Indian Ocean; however, these challenges exist within frameworks governed by strategic suspicion, uncooperative relations, and inequality. Coupled with these structural problems are other nontraditional issues that undermine the stability of the region, including escalating military aggression, unresolved conflicts, fragile shipping chokepoints, climate change, and piracy.

Turning obstacles into advantages, the region could capitalize on opportunities deriving from cooperative engagement, particularly in addressing safety concerns for advertised sea lines, piracy, disaster response, and climate policies. Such concerns could be used to foster trust among rival states. The IORA and IONS, alongside agreements at the bilateral level, showcase existing dialogue on an even higher strategic level, yet reforms aimed at expanding participation and redefining objectives are essential to strengthen these multilaterals' capacities. The IFC-IOR serves as an example of how information-sharing initiatives can bolster domain awareness concerning the regional maritime.

To promote enduring peace and stability, it is crucial to bolster inclusive, rule-based regional governance. This involves closing the strategic divide caused by India, China, and the United States as they attempt to reach and sustain dialogue, while empowering smaller littoral states with greater agency and resources to participate in shaping regional security. Setting legally binding conduct protocols for naval

encounters, capacity building for resource-poor naval forces and formalized disaster-relief coordination can enhance resilience. Furthermore, addressing the underlying sources of insecurity such as economic stagnation and environmental degradation should be part of the larger security strategy framework.

As two dominant powers escalate their competitive impulses, the future of the Indian Ocean will also greatly depend on their enthusiasm for cooperative mechanisms crucial for collective stability. Transforming the Indian Ocean from a contested zone into a shared area necessitates a multifaceted approach focused on peace, prosperity, sustainable development, and an encompassing vision of conventional and non-conventional security.

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