

Changing Security Environment in Indian Ocean: Decoding the Indian Strategy

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As a conflict zone for power and supremacy, history cannot exclude the oceans. During the early phases of modern history, oceans were the zones of intense contestation where most of the conflicts among major and aspiring powers played out. The contestations played the most significant role in shaping both history and civilisation. It would not be farfetched to say that the modern history of the world is also, in a way, the history of oceans. The tussles for power, resources, land, and people were mostly fought over the seas and oceans, as these were the only modes of communication and transportation linking distant countries and continents. Though the Indian Ocean, covering the expanse from East Africa to the Indian subcontinent and Australia, has always been the theatre of human interactions, it caught global attention only in 1498 when the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama arrived at Calicut (now Kozhikode) after a successful sea voyage. This opened the first all water trade route between Europe and Asia. Since then, it became a part of the global trading system as more and more European powers came forward to trade with India and other countries of Southeast Asia using this route. Also, till then, under the complete control of India, it turned into an active conflict zone, with established European powers vying with each other for greater control over the ocean and the littoral countries. The opening of the Indian Ocean as one of the most lucrative trade routes in the 15th century made it the most contentious and volatile of all the oceanic zones. This continues even today.

The intensification of the process of globalisation in the last two decades of the 20th century led to the growth of trade transactions between countries, most of which took place through the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean, thus increasing its importance manifold. Also, the emergence of several of Asian countries as strong economic performers led to increased activities in

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the maritime zone of the ocean. Today, it is economically the most vital of all regions, the busiest, and strategically the most significant trade corridor, carrying almost two-thirds of global oil shipments and a third of bulk cargo. The economic potential and vitality of the region have also, in fact, contributed to it being the most volatile and troublesome of all the regions in the world. Among the littoral states, are not only the fastest growing economies of the world but also have the strongest militaries and naval capabilities. As the key players exert power to gain maximum — and sometimes exclusive — control over the seas and crucial chokepoints, conflicts and fault lines come to the fore. The contestation for supremacy, power, and resources among the dominant actors in the region — Australia, China, Japan, the USA and, of late, India — makes the Indian Ocean region the most dangerous conflict zone in the world. It has, in recent years, emerged as the geo-political and geo-economic nerve centre of the world, holding the key to global security. History has certainly not come to an end; it is rather unfolding in the form a bitter and protracted geo-political rivalry in the newest theatre: the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

The Contestation

As the third largest of world's oceanic divisions, the IOR covers around one-fifth of the total ocean area that is bounded by Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, India's coastal waters, and the Bay of Bengal near Myanmar and Indonesia. It connects the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, with the broader Asian continent to the east and to Europe in the west.¹ The Indian Ocean is one of the most critical water routes in the world in that it contains crucial strategic chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Malacca, and the Mandeb Strait. More than 50 percent of global maritime oil trade moves through these checkpoints. Moreover, the IOR is considered as one of the richest reservoirs of energy, mineral and maritime resources where around 40 percent of the world's offshore petroleum is produced.² The enormous economic significance of the region has made it the hotbed of conflict and contestation, especially between India and China while the USA remains the vigilant watchdog trying to maintain the status-quo.

India and China - the most rapidly rising global powers - are competitors as they vie with each other for capital, resources, technology, and connectivity. Moving fast on the path of modernisation, both are heavily dependent on energy resources - transported through sea lanes of the Indian Ocean - to sustain their economic growth and infrastructural development. While China

and India are the second and third largest importers of oil in the world, India is set to overtake Japan as the world's third-largest energy consumer, behind China and the USA. Both import around 80 percent of their energy, mostly oil, from the Middle East and North Africa, followed by East Asia and the Pacific.³ Thus, the need to secure the transport/trade routes of the Indian Ocean is more profound for India and China than for any other country. The need for security, coupled with a sense of anxiety to have better access to resources and economic connectivity with other countries, have made India and China consider each other as competitors rather than collaborators.

In recent years, both India and China, pursuing the twin goals of security and connectivity, have undertaken several policy initiatives to establish regional networks and infrastructure to expedite the processes of resource generation, mobilisation, and economic modernisation. Under the Xi Jinping regime, China has initiated grand and ambitious projects such as the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and the One Belt and One Road (OBOR) that entail huge investments to establish multiple lines of communication, linking different regions of Asia, and connect China with Europe, Africa and Southeast Asia. These humungous projects envision the development of a wide array of assets, including ports, roads, railways, airports, power plants, oil and gas pipelines and refineries, and Free Trade Zones, etc., as well as a supporting IT, telecom and financial infrastructure across regions and the continents of Asia and Europe.⁴

However, these projects, being aggressively pushed by the Xi government, cannot be seen merely as economic initiatives as China would like the world to believe. They are, rather, part of an overall Chinese grand strategy to establish its predominance in the IOR, initiate a Sino-centric regional order, challenge US supremacy, and undermine India's growing strategic clout. Not buying the Chinese rationale, India is constrained to believe that through these massive capital-intensive projects, China wants to augment its military-strategic capabilities in the IOR that might pose a serious threat to its security in the future. India is deeply concerned about the build-up of Chinese commercial and military facilities in and around the IOR under the disguise of 'economic connectivity' through MSR and OBOR. India's concerns stem from China's increasing presence in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea as it is developing ports in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan.

The Conflicts

The contestations in the Indian Ocean are not merely over resources or over the control of sea-lanes/waterways. It is also about the projection of power

and the assertion of supremacy by principal actors who are insistent upon establishing such a geo-politico-strategic order that would serve their strategic interests the most, to the disadvantage of others. The tussles, mostly in the economic realm, have now been catapulted into serious geo-political conflicts affecting peace, stability, and order in the IOR. Apart from intense competition between India and China, there are also other inter-state conflicts in the region which have been simmering for a long time. While China has maritime disputes in the East China Sea with Japan, it claims over 90 percent of the South China Sea (SCS) as its territorial waters. This is being strongly contested by Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan who seek equal rights to explore the natural and maritime resources in the seas. These claims and counter claims have vitiated the atmosphere in the region. As the principal player in the region, China should have been more accommodative and flexible with regard to the maritime interests of the smaller countries, its adamant stance along with its refusal to cede any space to its neighbours have precipitated the situation, thus affecting the peace and stability not only of the maritime region but of entire Asia. Again, in the Korean peninsula, the nuclear-armed North Korea, led by its impulsive leader, is a cause for concern not only for the USA and its ally South Korea, but for others as well.

The main driver of the geo-strategic shift - leading to conflicts and contestations - is China, which, during the last five years, has been obstinately expanding its territory pushing the border deep into the international waters of the SCS. It has solidified its territorial claims in the region by establishing military installations on artificially constructed reefs, and by creating artificial islands in and around the SCS. With the installation of sophisticated weapon systems and advanced military facilities, China's control over the region is almost total and absolute. This dispute is not an isolated case of China pushing hard to have its way, but rather part of an overall strategy to validate its growing power, capabilities, and its intent to protect its 'interests and sovereignty' at any cost.

Establishing firm control over the SCS, China has moved swiftly to build a string of influence - both military and political - in the Indian Ocean region. Adopting a carrot and stick approach, it has made deep inroads into countries surrounding the Indian Ocean, like Pakistan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Maldives, by launching huge infrastructural projects under different initiatives, including the OBOR. China's large economic projects in the Indian Ocean, which consist mostly of ports, roads and airports, are being referred to as 'a string of pearls' stretching from the South China Sea to Pakistan. This has allowed it to increase its presence along the region's key sea lines of

communications - or SLOCs - while guaranteeing access to developing markets and international trade.

To challenge US dominance, China has established its first overseas military base in Djibouti in which it has positioned about 1,000 troops, though it can house up to 10,000. While it has acquired the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka (along with 15,000 acres of land around it on 99 years lease), China is moving towards establishing a new naval base next to Pakistan's China-controlled Gwadar port. The operationalisation of this port will create a combined Pakistan-China maritime border, thereby fusing two of India's most pressing strategic challenges into one. There are also reports of a Chinese military base planned in nearby Jiwani, and another in Bangladesh. Through these projects, China's military will embed in India's backyard, with strategic access to the Bay of Bengal. China has also taken control of several islands in the Maldives, where it is set to build a marine observatory that will provide subsurface data supporting the deployment of nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) and nuclear-powered ballistic missile subs (SSBNs) in the Indian Ocean. China's policies and actions, especially during the Xi regime, have upended South Asia's balance of power that has been dominated by India since the nineteenth century.

In his recently published book *The Costliest Pearl: China's Struggle for India's Ocean* (2019), Bertil Lintner, an expert on the region, writes that he is apprehensive about the emergence of a 'Cold War'-like scenario in the Indian Ocean.

...if an armed conflict emerges from either a 'misstep' or a more calculated provocation, it is likely to occur in the Indian Ocean where control over shipping lanes is more important than elsewhere, where divergent interests compete and overlap — and where China's ambitions for regional supremacy are the strongest. Investment and geopolitical power plays will determine in what direction the Indian Ocean nations and territories are headed.⁵

The American Response

The USA has been the most dominant power in the IOR. Its "interests are inextricably linked with Asia's economic, security and political order."⁶ There has been both uncertainty and anxiety among allies and friends as to how far the USA would go in containing China's power in the IOR after Donald Trump assumed office in 2017. During the initial days, President Trump maintained silence over Chinese activities in SCS, focussing mostly on immigration, free

trade, terrorism, and North Korea. The abandonment of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the repudiation of Barack Obama's 'pivot' or 'rebalance' to Asia, and his praise of Chinese President Xi Jinping during a summit (at his Mar-a-Lago resort) in early April 2017 did not help assuage the concerns of allies and partners.

However, with the entry of some well-known 'hawks' into the Trump Administration towards the end of 2017, US strategy towards the region and China has undergone a major transformation. The change in the American attitude was reflected in important policy documents, such as the *National Security Strategy 2017*, the *National Defense Strategy 2018*, *Nuclear Posture Review 2018*, and the *Missile Defense Review 2019*, all of which clearly portray China as a "strategic competitor".⁷ The 'Unclassified summary of the National Defense Strategy' declared that "inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in US national security, and many have turned to the classic concept of great-power rivals to describe the new reality".⁸ "After being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century," the National Security Strategy concluded that "great power competition [has] returned."⁹

At the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Da Nang, Vietnam, on 10 November 2017, President Trump emphasised initiating a "free and open Indo-Pacific", and mentioned 'territorial expansion' as one of the key security challenges in his speech - obviously referring to Chinese activities in the SCS. This speech signalled the USA's intention to challenge China, and counter its activities that are in violation of international laws and norms.

To carry out the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy as outlined by Trump, the US Navy has increased the frequency of its "freedom-of-navigation operations" (FONOPs) in the region.¹⁰ This strategy aims to strengthen security partnerships with regional states, broaden participation in US-led joint exercises, and reinvigorate the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with Australia, India, and Japan. Under this strategy, the USA has enhanced its military assistance to Taiwan, greatly annoying China. In 2018, the USA promulgated 'The Asia Reassurance Initiative Act', which sought to reassure Asian allies of full US support in case of any security exigency. According to the act, "the US will reaffirm security commitments to its allies in the Asia-Pacific region, including Japan, South Korea and Australia, and spend US\$ 1.5 billion annually for five years to improve its regional presence."¹¹ It also intends to revitalise its security partnerships with Southeast Asian countries who feel threatened due to growing Chinese assertions in the region.

Apart from modernising its naval assets and developing new weapons systems, the USA has stepped up security cooperation with regional allies and partners, including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, Singapore, and India. Also, “it is conducting an international diplomatic and intelligence campaign to counter China’s cyber-attacks, traditional espionage and intellectual property theft. This campaign includes efforts to contain the global reach of Chinese telecom companies [like] Huawei and ZTE Corp.”¹²

For the Trump Administration, the Indo-Pacific is the priority ‘theatre’, which would not be allowed to be dominated by one single power. It has been very vocal in calling for a free and open Indo-Pacific, and in deriding China for its obtrusive policies and actions in the region. The USA is keen to work closely with India to maintain ‘strategic stability’ in the Indo-Pacific, and establish a rule-based order that would be equally beneficial for all stakeholders.

Strategic Options for India

The evolving geo-political situation in the IOR presents both challenges and opportunities for India that is seeking greater economic engagement with ASEAN countries, especially in the maritime sphere, through mutually beneficial partnerships and collaborative projects. While the South East Asian countries, along with the USA, Japan, and Australia, look towards India to play a proactive role in maintaining security in the Indo-Pacific, it has to contend with an obdurate China that views any Indian initiative in the region, economic or strategic, with suspicion. While India has remained mostly flaccid to growing Chinese activities in the IOR, it no longer wants to remain a passive player. It now intends to become one of the ‘principal’ actors in the region by vigorously pursuing its political, economic, and security interests vis-à-vis China.

Under the Modi Government, India has adopted a pragmatic strategy that entails active participation in the debate on the SCS and the revival of maritime linkages with countries like Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s call for an ‘open, inclusive, democratic and transparent Indo-Pacific region’ during the Shangri-la Dialogue in 2018,¹³ and India’s strenuous effort to augment maritime connectivity with immediate and extended neighbours through initiatives like ‘Sagarmala’ could be seen as a part of this strategy. ‘Act East’ may very soon evolve into ‘Act Indo-Pacific’, thus signalling India’s intent to play a major role in the region.¹⁴

With the relative decline in US influence and its perceived lesser engagement with the region, India is expected to play a proactive role in maintaining stability and security in the region. Since India's north-eastern region is being recognised as the 'corridor to South East Asia', integration with neighbouring countries like Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Thailand should be facilitated through fast construction of transportation networks which would contribute to sustained peace and development. As India deepens its ties and employs pragmatic diplomacy to increase its influence in South-East Asia, the repercussions in India-China relations are inevitable. However, if India manages to maintain its relations with both China and the ASEAN countries on parallel tracks without frictions between the two, and make all stakeholders agree to a common agenda of peace and development, the 'Asian Century' would reach its zenith. To make this happen, India has adopted a multi-prong strategy.

Greater Engagement with its Extended Neighbourhood

India has been striving hard to enhance its presence in the Indian Ocean region and beyond. The Modi government is making great efforts to revitalise India's relations with countries in the extended neighbourhood, especially the ASEAN countries under 'Act East' to expand its sphere of influence. India's growing ties with Japan, the defence agreement with Vietnam (which includes the sale of advance helicopters and spares for MIG fighters), and the move towards developing a close military relationship with Singapore reflect a dynamic shift in India's approach towards the power politics in the region. The focus on maritime issues is evident from the increase in maritime exchanges led by the Indian Navy with countries such as Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, and Japan. India's trade in this region is growing rapidly, with several overseas investments being directed towards the East. India has Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements with Japan, South Korea, and Singapore; and Free Trade Agreements with the ASEAN and Thailand. Despite domestic economic concerns, India is actively engaged in the process of negotiation with ASEAN for instituting the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership sooner than later. After his victory for a second term, Prime Minister Narendra Modi chose to visit the Maldives followed by Sri Lanka, thus underlying the importance of these countries for India's evolving maritime strategy.

Building Maritime Partnerships with Key Players

To counter China's increasing maritime assertiveness, India has entered into maritime partnerships with key players who can help in maintaining a strategic balance in Indo-Pacific region.

After holding first maritime security dialogue in 2016, India and the USA signed a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), a crucial agreement that allows the two navies to access each other's logistics facilities on a reciprocal basis. A pact allowing deployments from each other's naval facilities was signed with Singapore in 2017.¹⁵ In 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi finalised an agreement for a new base in Seychelles, and negotiated military access to naval facilities at Oman's port and airfields.¹⁶ India also signed a strategic pact with France, which allowed the opening up of their respective naval bases to each other's warships across the Indian Ocean. This deal grants the Indian navy access to strategically important French ports - including the one in Djibouti.¹⁷

Strategic Initiatives

India has been assiduously making efforts to institute small yet significant tactical initiatives, both in the ideational sphere as well as in the politico-economic-strategic sphere. In March 2015, Prime Minister Modi put forward the concept of 'SAGAR' (Security and Growth for All in the Region), a maritime initiative aimed at enhancing a range of capacities, and fostering greater cooperation among the littoral countries.

In recent times, many dialogues have been conducted between India and other countries - like the 2+2 dialogues with the USA, Japan, and Australia; the trilateral dialogues between India-Japan and the USA; between India-Japan-Australia (JAI); between Russia-India-China, between India-Australia-Indonesia; and the Quadrilateral meetings between India, Japan, Australia, and the USA. The strategic engagement between India and Australia have developed over the recent past, with increased military-to-military contact, the *Ausindex* naval and *Australia Hind* army exercises, and the Australian participation in India's *Milan* exercise, regular port visits, and staff talks.¹⁸ The signing of the Shared Vision Statement of the India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific during Prime Minister's Modi's first visit to Indonesia in May 2018 is notable. The invitation to the 2018 Indian Republic Day celebrations - extended to the leaders of all ten ASEAN countries - underscored the significance of India's Act East policy. In April 2019, India

set up an Indo-Pacific wing in the Ministry of External Affairs. The division will integrate the IORA, the ASEAN region, and the Quad to the Indo-Pacific table. It is also significant to note that a new air base, INS Kohassa, has been commissioned in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands by the Indian Navy in January 2019 to expand operational presence in the Indian Ocean.¹⁹

Strengthening the Quad

There is deepening of understanding between India, USA, Japan, and Australia in terms of information and intelligence exchanges, personnel interactions, and interoperable equipment. The institutionalisation of the 'Quad', once just a dialogue mechanism, as a multilateral politico-security framework might pave the way for greater understanding, and a collaboration with important countries like Vietnam, Indonesia, and South Korea as well as with smaller countries.

Pragmatic Engagement with China

India cannot afford to adopt a direct confrontational stance against China, it being the most dominant power and principal player in the IOR. Rather, it has to calibrate its moves very cautiously in order to secure its economic and maritime interests. As India, encouraged by the South-East Asian countries and Japan, moves forward to expand its presence in the geo-economic and geo-political space at the confluence of the two major oceans, China sees the move as a direct threat to its natural claims and sovereignty. India faces a real challenge: how to maintain its strategic leverage in the South China Sea region and its growing relations with the South East Asian countries and, at the same time, not antagonise China or invite any major diplomatic row with it over the dispute. Much will depend on how India meets this challenge. India would do well to maintain its strategic independence and not join any 'alliance' provoking or antagonising China.

Strategic Narrative

India needs to build a grand strategic narrative of its own to counter China's aggressive diplomacy. It has the geographic, demographic, economic, military, and ideological wherewithal to be a stabilising player in the region. From New Delhi's perspective, the consolidation of a Sino-centric regional order in the IOR would surely be detrimental, affecting its economic and strategic interests

in the region and beyond. While it may hope to play the role of a swing state between the two super powers, India's strategic imperatives compel it to work for balancing against China in the IOR. India's 'SAGAR' and America's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' can merge to become a grand strategic narrative, defining the politico-security order in the Indo-Pacific and ushering in new opportunities.

The rapidly changing power alignments in the IOR augur well for India. In case the differences between China and countries like Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines continue to widen, or the US rebalancing does not progress well, the regional balance of power would need to be preserved collectively. In this India will have key contribution. The Southeast Asian countries, perturbed by China's assertiveness in the seas and its policy of territorial aggrandisement, look towards India as the 'balancer' of power in Asia. Under Narendra Modi, a leader willing to act, India is emerging as a crucial player in the strategic power play in the region. New Delhi's ability to evolve necessary strategic imagination and adopt suitable strategy will be crucial for India to face the emerging challenges in the twenty-first century. India cannot afford to remain non-committal on crucial strategic issues and challenges confronting the IOR, and has to be more pragmatic and assertive. The reorientation of policies and approach towards security and diplomacy has started taking shape under Prime Minister Modi. But it is going to be a long journey.

Notes :

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- ² Ibid
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- ¹⁶ Dipanjan Roy Choudhury, “India and Seychelles agree on naval base at Assumption Island”, *The Economic Times*, 13 July 2018.
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