

Contemporary dynamics and the future of the Indian Ocean

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ABSTRACT: The Indian Ocean has emerged as a critical maritime space in the Asia Pacific region given its highly volatile geopolitical, geostrategic, security and economic significance. The potential sea lines of communication and safe passage through chokepoints in the Indian Ocean have become major strategic concerns for both regional and extra-regional powers. With the Post-Cold War period at an end, the Indian Ocean has entered a stage where both regional and extra-regional powers are competing for the security of energy, trade and commerce in the Persian Gulf, Middle East and Africa. Given the mounting energy demand by regional powers such as India, China, Japan, Australia and extra-regional powers like US, France, the UK and the countries in East Asia and South East Asia, the sea lines of communication and choke points of the region have become highly security sensitive. In more recent years, the role of India and the involvement of the US against the rising presence of China have combined to give rise to a new power competition targeting the most significant littoral states in the Indian Ocean, and including its small states. The evolving situation has fashioned a new power configuration between the US, China and India in the Indian Ocean. In this turbulent context, the present study seeks to analyze the contemporary dynamics and future of the Indian Ocean from political, economic and security as well as middle and small littoral states' perspectives.

Keywords: China, choke-points, extra-regional powers, geopolitics, geostrategy, India, Indian Ocean regionalism, sea lines of communication, small states, United States

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Introduction

The Indian Ocean, the third largest ocean in the world, is perhaps the most significant of all the oceans in the contemporary era. It is surrounded by land on three sides and the southern part of the ocean links up with both the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. Furthermore, the Indian Ocean embraces the Middle East and Gulf, the Red Sea and African Horn, East Africa and Sub-Sahara, South Asia and Southeast Asia. Access to the Indian Ocean can only be had through critical chokepoints: the Strait of Malacca, Strait of Hormuz Bab el Mandeb, Cape of Good Hope, Sunda Strait and Lombok Strait. While considering the importance of chokepoints, Panikkar (1944, pp. 7-8) points out that, “the whole Ocean area is strategically of the greatest importance as it is the highway of European nations to India, the Far East, Australia, Africa and now even Antarctica.” It also consists of several small island states and territories with a geopolitical and geostrategic significance to global politics and strategies. They include the Chagos Islands, the Scattered Islands, Madagascar, Seychelles, Reunion Island, Maldives, Mauritius, Comoros and Sri Lanka.

In addition, the geopolitical and geostrategic significance of the Indian Ocean provides potential sea lines of communication between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and has become a pivotal zone for the transit of natural resources including petroleum and gas. The world's most important oil and gas routes navigate the Indian Ocean from the Persian Gulf to various

destinations around the world. As a result of its geopolitical and geostrategic significance, the Indian Ocean was often subject to great power competition. Considering the growing importance of the Indian Ocean, Khurana (2007, pp. 139-153) has analyzed the involvement of East Asian and American nations, particularly China and the USA, in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) which has led to the concept of the Indo-Pacific, which envisages the Indian and western Pacific Oceans forming a single maritime biogeographic and strategic realm.

In addition to non-traditional security challenges such as piracy, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, drug trafficking, unregulated migration and the presence of extremist groups, the Indian Ocean is now witnessing major strategic developments of and by regional and extra-regional powers. The Indian Ocean has become highly significant to power-plays in terms of security, strategy and economics, and is becoming a critical maritime zone. For these reasons, Walker (2008) defined the Indian Ocean as a “nexus of the 21st century”.

A new geopolitical and geostrategic order has emerged in the Indian Ocean. Newly emerged power players like India and China, combined with the continuous presence of the United States of America (US) as global hegemon, have made it a pivotal zone of maritime politics. More importantly, by decreasing the power gap between the US and China, the former is no longer the undisputed power in the Indian Ocean, as compared to the Cold War period. But the USA, China and India are all seeking to influence the balance of power in the IOR. In the prevailing triangular dynamics, China is at work to counter US dominance/hegemony; the US seeks to curtail China’s expansion; while India attempts (with the help of the US) to counter China’s moves towards becoming more powerful in the area.

In this context, the present research analyzes the dynamics and consequences of the increase of the naval presence of great powers in the middle and small littoral states of the Indian Ocean. Moreover, this study examines responses of the middle and small littoral states towards the naval presence of great powers in their region.

Research methodology

The predominant mode of data collection for this article has involved the perusal of secondary sources including books, journals, articles in print and visual media, government reports, documents and other official and academic publications. These secondary sources serve as the base for an understanding of the Indian Ocean and its geopolitical and geostrategic implications; they also help to develop a theoretical framework for the study. The data has been interpreted using descriptive and analytical methodology, keeping in mind the geo-political and geo-strategical aspects of the Indian Ocean.

The descriptive aspect of the present research is dependent on describing and explaining the nature, significance and presence of various regional and extra-regional powers in the Indian Ocean. At the analytical level, the present research has applied the insights offered by what has come to be known as a ‘critical’ perspective in geopolitics.

A conceptualization of the existing literature

In the fields of geopolitics and geostrategy, the foregoing discussion suggests that the Indian Ocean is a highly attractive and productive research field. There is no shortage of theory-oriented studies on the Indian Ocean in general. Various studies shed light on the IOR and examine the significance of the Indian Ocean towards achieving the short and long-term national interests of regional and extra-regional powers. Most of them analyze expansionism, imperialism, and opportunistic practices of both ambitious European powers and others external to the Indian Ocean.

In this broader background, there have been attempts to frame different theories and concepts concerning sea power and safety measures, broadly classified into two schools: the Blue-Water school and the Continental school.

Blue-Water School and Continental School

The leading naval thinkers of the blue-water school are Alfred T. Mahan and Julian Corbett. This school has been very influential on the development of modern naval strategy and naval construction. Mahan is known as the father of modern naval studies. For Mahan, acquisition and control of the sea's communications could be obtained only in a decisive and clear-cut victory (Gough, 2008, p. 56). In contrast, Corbett insisted that the objective of naval warfare must always be to secure the command of the sea or/and to prevent the enemy from securing it, either directly or indirectly (Grove, 1990. p. 12; O'Lavin, 2009, p. 1).

On the other hand, the main contributors to the Continental school are Raoul Castex and Wolfgang Wegener. Castex's ideas on naval strategy are methodical, broader and more universal when compared to Wegener's, whose main focus was on the unfavourable geostrategic position of Germany at sea. Therefore, his ideas have been considered too narrow.

The application of classical theories by the above schools to analyze the current dynamics in the Indian Ocean has become a general pattern in academia. In the same vein, Kaplan (2010) states that the interests and influence of China, India and the US have started to overlap and intersect. In the 21st century, the IOR has assumed an added significance with the emergence of big regional powers like China and India. Therefore, the Indian Ocean is bound to become a pivot in international conflicts and power dynamics in the 21st century.

Geopolitical aspects

When looking at the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean, contributors examine cooperation and competition among both regional and extra-regional powers in terms of the geopolitical significance of the major chokepoints in the Indian Ocean. This focus stretches their attention from the Strait of Hormuz to the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb and Strait of Malacca. Moreover, this aspect includes dealing with the relationship of middle and small littoral states with the US and explores their attitude towards China's growing power in the Indian Ocean. The geopolitical focus is also helpful to better understand the fluctuating power dynamics in the Indian Ocean. This aspect also widely analyses the theoretical framework of the power vacuum as well as the threat to perceptions and capabilities to meet traditional and non-traditional threats to the Indian Ocean's states and territories. In short, this aspect has covered the political significance of the Indian Ocean for both regional and extra-regional power players.

Geostrategic implications

In addition to the geopolitical aspect, the geostrategic implications of the Indian Ocean have been examined by academia. This aspect deals with the geostrategic significance of the Indian Ocean for achieving the national interests of both western and non-western nations. Therefore, maritime natural resources, blue economic policy and maritime infrastructures including sea lines of communication and port infrastructure in the Indian Ocean have been interesting areas of this aspect. According to leading scholars, the prime geostrategic characteristic of the Indian Ocean is that it is an area of communication, not just for countries within the IOR, but also other nations.

Specifically, most scholars have discussed the importance of the Indian Ocean geopolitically and geo-strategically. As per this aspect, global powers are trying to dominate

this ocean either by establishing military bases or by investing in the construction of ports and other offshore initiatives of the middle and small littoral states in the Indian Ocean. Also, this Ocean is a resource-rich region that has yet to gain world attention. Given these considerations, this aspect emphasizes the significance of the Indian Ocean for both military and civilian purposes.

Traditional and non-traditional issues

In addition, a substantive number of scholars deal with the traditional and non-traditional issues of the Indian Ocean. Maritime policy and governance challenges are driving regional and extra-regional power players to focus increasing attention on Indian Ocean issues within a complex traditional and non-traditional framework (Michel & Sticklor, 2012, p. 12). Furthermore, some scholars evaluate the diversity of sources of non-traditional safety and security challenges that afflict the Indian Ocean, ranging from environmental issues, armed pillaging at sea, maritime terrorism, piracy, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and illicit trafficking including human trafficking, irregular movement of persons and drug trafficking.

Balance of power

Considering the balance of power system in the Indian Ocean, Garver (2002, pp. 1-61) argues that the strategic triangle of China, India and the US has created a new pattern of interaction among the three powers after the end of the Cold War. More importantly, he has highlighted the role of China in the Indian Ocean as one substantial factor in the emergence of the Indo-US alliance.

Most of the existing literature has emphasized that the increasing presence of regional and extra-regional powers is making the Indian Ocean vulnerable to global and regional power competition. Furthermore, scholars analyze the competition among regional and extra-regional powers over the geopolitical and geostrategic significance of littoral states in the Indian Ocean. After all, most littoral states in the Indian Ocean are small and vulnerable to the naval presence and interests of regional and extra-regional power players, including military assistance and port development. But research has not focused much on both dynamics and consequences of the increase of great powers' presence in and on the middle and small littoral states of the Indian Ocean as well as their responses towards these great powers.

Global powers and current dynamics in the Indian Ocean

Historically, the Indian Ocean has been an active theatre for both regional and extra regional powers in terms of sea voyages for economic, trade, energy, military and cultural exchanges, people-to-people contacts and colonial domination. In the context of contemporary great power competition, the Indian Ocean remains a critical battleground for maritime trade, security and geopolitics.

Given this geopolitical and geostrategic significance, the current competition in the IOR has given rise to various regional and extra-regional power play. China has gained a strong foothold in the Indian Ocean, replacing the previously unrivalled influence of the US. The growing manifestation of China in this ocean has challenged the predominant role of India as the regional power. Furthermore, China is enhancing its military bases, naval bases, listening ports, commercial ports, refueling stations and support facilities, while keeping very close and cordial relationships with the strategic middle and small littoral states in the Indian Ocean such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Maldives, Malaysia and Indonesia. At the same time,

India and the US are continuing their counterbalancing approach through enhancing their naval capacity with support from Japan, Australia, South Korea and some of the littoral states in the IOR. The Indian Ocean has become the centre of gravity for twenty-first-century power politics (Jash, 2015, p. 262).

The presence of the United States of America in the Indian Ocean

In the post-Cold War, new geostrategic concerns of regional and extra-regional powers have appeared in the Indian Ocean. As Kaplan (2010) has highlighted, the US was the first extra-regional power to realise the importance of the Indian Ocean in terms of trade and energy supply guarantees.

The geopolitical and geostrategic interests of the US in the Indian Ocean interlink with its security interests in other important areas. US strategy in the Indian Ocean is understood to also be in support of broader US strategic objectives. Apart from global security preparations, strategic interests of the US in the Indian Ocean associate with supplementary objectives like safeguarding the sea lanes of communications, ensuring access to protect oil supplies from the Middle East, and guaranteeing the security of friendly states.

Since 1966, the US has been considered the most influential player in the Indian Ocean with its military bases placed strategically at Diego Garcia, Djibouti, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar. Similar to the Cold War period, the US is following a 'Forward Deployment' maritime policy, making its presence among the middle and small littoral states of the Indian Ocean. Specifically, the US is developing roads, setting up fuel depots, constructing runways, airports and attempting overall to build a robust military foothold in the Indian Ocean. In 2016, the decision was taken to extend the lease over the US military base on Diego Garcia for another 20 years (Mills, 2021, p. 5).

US naval interests in the Indian Ocean are divided into three joint commands: the Pacific Command (PACOM), Central Command (CENTCOM), and Africa Command (AFRICOM) (Winner and Dombrowski, 2014, pp. 1-22). The CENTCOM situated in Bahrain in the Persian Gulf has supported counterterrorism operations (Fernando, 2015) and monitors some 6.5 million square kilometers of area including the Arabian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, North Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea (Central Command, 2022).

In the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf, the central location of the US is Bahrain where the US has established two airbases and the Naval Forces Central Command, and is the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet. Since the Gulf War, the US is operating three military camps and an airbase with around 15,000 US personnel in Kuwait. Oman has granted the US the use of four airfields and two ports with preoperational capability. Further, in 2019, Oman granted the US Navy and the air force access to its airbases. In the Persian Gulf, the US has established its biggest airbase with its service personnel at Al Udeid in Qatar. Clearly, the US maintains considerable military forces in the areas of the oil-rich Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.

In addition to the numerous semi-permanent military bases that exist like Manda Bay in Kenya, a US naval expeditionary base, Camp Lemonnier, was set up in Djibouti in 2003; it has become the only permanent US military base in the Horn of Africa. Djibouti has gained prominence in the growing strategic rivalry between China and the West in an increasingly bipolar world order (Jean-Pierre, 2019, p. 12). The base would be expanded from 97 acres to nearly 500 acres (Campbell, 2020, pp. 73-115) at a cost of US\$240 million. The growing US military deployment in Djibouti over the past two decades has served as a hub to project US military power in the Horn of Africa and the Gulf for offensive purposes (Sun & Zoubir, 2016, p. 120).

Further, since 2009, the US has been operating unarmed drones from Seychelles International Airport on Mahé Island. According to US officials, drone operations are focused

on counter-piracy missions and surveillance (Whitlock & Miller, 2011). In the African region, the US has established military bases in Somalia and has been developing an extensive armed drone program since 2002.

Map 1: US Military Bases and support facilities in the Indian Ocean.



Source: Author

In the post-cold war context, the US response is mainly dictated by China's engagement in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, the US is explicit in its policy of power balance towards the IOR and greater cooperation with India. According to its broad 'Asia Pivot' strategy, the US has emphasized modernization and strengthening its alliances and partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region, beefing up its security ties with the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam and others, while regional US arms sales have increased (Turner, 2020, p. 21). In this context, Shearer and Green (2012, pp. 186-187) have identified three imperatives for the US in the Indian Ocean. The first is to sustain the critical commercial highways through the ocean, maintaining defence in-depth to keep critical chokepoints open. The second is to sanitise the region against broader geostrategic competition and rivalry in Asia. The third is to prevent regional crises from emerging. The paramount concerns for the US are the security of the Sea Lanes of Communications in the Indian Ocean. Moreover, the US has given special attention towards addressing, and preferably eradicating, non-traditional security issues: piracy; drug, human and arms trafficking; illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing; and terrorism in the Indian Ocean.

China in the Indian Ocean

China's overall national strategy in the Indian Ocean can be traced back to 544-496 BC. In this regard, 'The Art of War', by Sun Tzu (544-496 BC), is considered a masterpiece of the present strategies of China in the Indian Ocean.

Furthermore, the modern geostrategy of China is a combination of the 'three worlds theory' of Mao Zedong's and Deng Xiaoping's 'North-South and East-West' analysis. The 'three worlds theory' introduced by Mao Zedong in the Cold War political context has categorized the US and the Soviet Union as belonging to the 'First World'. For him, Japan, Europe and Canada belong to the 'Second World', and that the rest of the world make up the 'third world'. As per this analysis, Mao Zedong has highlighted that China should cooperate with the 'third world' to avoid domination of the 'first world'. In addition to Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, one of the first generations of Chinese Communist Party leaders and a paramount leader of China after the death of Mao Zedong, believed that international security depended on relations between nations in the East and West. Moreover, in conjunction with his

economic reform ideology of the post-Mao years, Xiaoping emphasized that the ‘economic development of China’ depended on relations between nations in the North and South.

After the Cold War, China has assumed a more active presence in the IOR. In 2013, an authoritative Chinese think-tank introduced a comprehensive policy document; “Blue Book on the Indian Ocean” highlighting the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean for the short-term and long-term national interests of China, and in the context of the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (Attri & Mulleris, 2018). It also laid out how China’s maritime imperatives in the Indian Ocean are strongly motivated by trade, commerce and natural resources, including energy considerations.

More significantly, China’s strategic interests in the Indian Ocean reflect its economic dependence on the sea lanes of the same Indian Ocean for the import of energy and other non-oil resources from the Middle East and Africa, and the export of its industrial goods by sea. These strategic priorities and specific interests in the IOR are highlighted in China’s defence White Paper, *China’s military strategy*, published in 2015 (Speed & Len, 2016, p. 8).

China is gradually expanding its presence in the Indian Ocean in relation to both economic and military activity. In more recent years, with its substantial dependence on seaborne trade, commerce and energy resources, China has given more priority to trade, commerce and energy security from the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Aden to the South China Sea especially concerning chokepoints such as the Straits of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb and Malacca (Duchatel, 2011, pp. 3-5). Therefore, when compared with the US and India, China could be regarded as applying a ‘soft power’ diplomatic policy towards the coastal nations in the Indian Ocean to enhance and secure its existential maritime imperatives.

From the geopolitical and geostrategic points of view, China is well aware of the US’s power position and India’s short-term and long-term ambitions in the region. Therefore, it could be said that China is accordingly pursuing a soft power approach, avoiding any offensive engagement with either the US or India. Through this soft power approach, meanwhile, China is gradually gaining a greater strategic space in cooperating with the middle and small littoral states in the Indian Ocean. It is clear that China is developing strategic naval ports across the middle and small littoral states in the Indian Ocean such as Pakistan (Gwadar, located at the entrance to the Gulf of Oman), Bangladesh (Sondaia) Myanmar (Sittwe), Sri Lanka (Hambantota Port & Colombo City Port) and Africa (Djibouti), to counter hostility with/from the US and India as well as to fulfil its trade, commerce and energy interests (Bhavani, 2015, pp. 191-192). Moreover, in 2017, China and Mauritius announced a new strategic partnership that included port access and much more in the same vein (Fanell, 2019, p. 30). In 2015, China’s state media described Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), Chittagong (Bangladesh), Colombo (Sri Lanka), Aden (Yemen), and ports in the Maldives as potential industrial hubs to support the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) military operations (Thorne and Spevack, 2017, p. 24).

Table 1: Chinese naval bases, ports and refueling stations in the Indian Ocean.

Port	Country
Port of Gwadar	Pakistan
Colombo Harbour	Sri Lanka
Doraleh Multipurpose Port	Djibouti
Port of Chittagong	Bangladesh
Hambantota Port	Sri Lanka

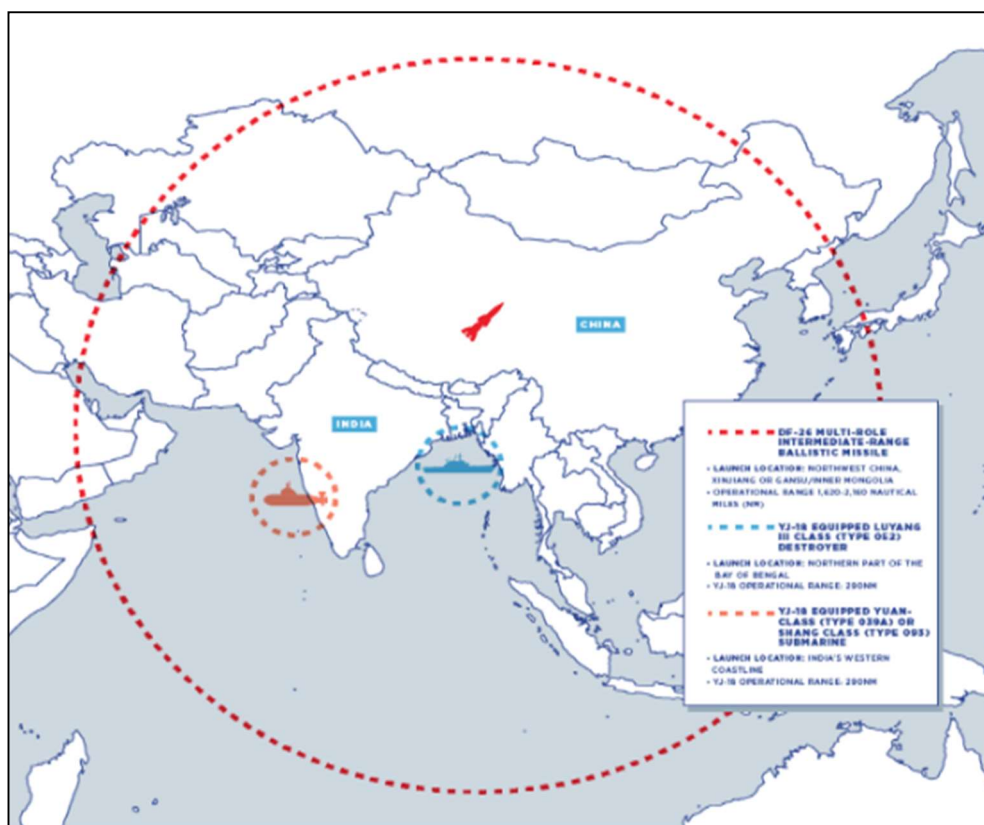
Kuantan Port	Malaysia
Kyaukpyu Deep Sea Port	Myanmar
Sonadia Port	Bangladesh
Port Klang	Malaysia
Al Duqm Port & Drydock	Oman
Malacca Gateway Port	Malaysia
Lamu port	Kenya
Bagamoyo Port	Tanzania

Source: Compiled by the author.

Facilities at Hambantota, Gwadar and Kyaukpyu are not yet being used by the PLAN (Fanell, 2019, p. 26). But some experts have suggested that China might use these bases in the future for its military purposes as well if the need arises, as has been the case with Djibouti in the Horn of Africa region which China has turned into a permanent military base since 2017. While the 2019 Defence White Paper of China has emphasized that China never seeks hegemony, expansion or spheres of influence, its actions indicate otherwise (China's National Defense in the New Era, 2019, pp. 7-8)

Furthermore, China's military base in Djibouti is located immediately southwest of the Doraleh Multipurpose Port and the PLAN is reported to have exclusive access to a dedicated berth in that port (Melvin, 2019, p. 4). The military involvement of China in Djibouti makes the relationship different from the rest of its bilateral relationships across the middle and small littoral states in the Indian Ocean. For some analysts, Djibouti plays a key role in China's vision of a maritime sea route, and serves as a major plank of its Belt and Road Initiative (Dutton, Kardon & Kennedy, 2020, p. 8). Since 1994, the Great Coco Island in Myanmar, located at a crucial point in the traffic routes between the Bay of Bengal and the Strait of Malacca, has been occupied by the Chinese and has a Chinese electronic intelligence installation for monitoring Indian naval and missile launch facilities in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. This is the context in which the Chinese military is constructing its base on Coco Island in the Alexandra Channel. All Chinese naval bases, ports and refueling stations in the Indian Ocean lie along major Sea Lines of Communications in the Indian Ocean that are significant to Chinese national interests. In this broader context, these naval bases are prime strategic assets of China.

Map 2: China's missile coverage in the Indian Ocean region.



Source: Kliman, Rehman, Lee & Fitt (2019, p. 30).

In addition, China is developing geopolitical and geostrategic economic corridors with and along the littoral states in the Indian Ocean, such as the China-Pakistan and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridors. In more recent years, China and Pakistan have been engaged in developing Gwadar as a deep-water port in the Arabian Sea that is capable of handling millions of tons of cargo per year. In addition, a Gwadar-Kashgar oil pipeline is planned to carry up to one million barrels of oil per day to China. Moreover, the Myanmar-China Crude Pipeline project was officially put into operation in 2017; this links Kunming in China's Yunnan province to the Bay of Bengal, terminating at a new deep-water port at Kyaukpyu. China's strategic purpose in developing these pipelines is to mitigate its dependence on seaborne imported oil and gas via the Strait of Malacca, which is a critical shipping waterway that links the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean from both geopolitical and geostrategic perspectives (Sharan & Thiher, 2011, pp. 3-8). In these respects, China's massive investment in building deep-water ports across the middle and small littoral states of the IOR is meant to cut its transportation costs and risks between the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca. It also reflects China's long-term strategy, focused on the safety of passage in times of crisis if Malacca, Lombok and Sunda are closed by any dominant power.

The role of India in the Indian Ocean

With its central strategic position, India plays a deterministic role in the Indian Ocean. In the 1940s, Panikkar (1944, p. 80), India's most famous geopolitical scientist and geo-strategist, argued that,

while to other countries, the Indian Ocean is only one of the important oceanic areas, to India, it is a vital sea. Her lifelines are concentrated in that area; her freedom is dependent on the freedom of this water surface. No industrial development, no commercial growth, no stable political structure is possible for her unless her shores are protected.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the protection of Sea Lanes of Communications is fundamental for India to maintain and preserve stability, given its substantial dependence on maritime commerce and trade, as well as to monitor and check the naval activity of extra-regional powers and have oversight on non-traditional security issues in the IOR. Several Indian geopolitical scientists and geo-strategists have highlighted that the security perimeter of India should be extended from the Strait of Malacca to the Strait of Hormuz; as well as from the coast of Africa up to the western shores of Australia. Strategic experts opine that India, a major player in the Indian Ocean, can improve its relations with its neighbouring countries, potentially countering China's 'string of pearls'. Apart from its comprehensive 'Look East Policy', India is improving its relations with China's south-eastern neighbouring littoral states. For instance, the bilateral Chabahar Port project between India and Iran counters Chinese's expanding influence in the Indian Ocean (Hughes, 2016). But, the prevailing unstable political situation of Afghanistan and China's relationship with the Taliban might not allow India to build up direct connectivity with energy-rich Central Asia via the strategic Port of Chabahar in Iran. Furthermore, in cooperation with its maritime doctrine, India emphasizes the importance of the Arabian Sea, including the Persian Gulf, and highlights growing attention to challenges and opportunities.

India's long-term strategic concern in the Indian Ocean arises from China's growing presence across the region, through economic engagement, the construction of ports and pipelines, and the increasing capacity and deployment of the Chinese Navy (Speed & Len, 2016, p. 8). Considering the growing influences of China among middle and small littoral states in the South Asian sub-continent, India is enhancing its strategic ties with states like Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bangladesh. Notably, India has taken several measures to develop relations with the Maldives through the 'privileged partnership' development policy of 2006. Moreover, both nations are developing a crucial bilateral action on defence cooperation. Considering the Chinese maritime strategies adopted since 2009, India responded by announcing the establishment of a new naval base and listening post in the Maldives. Due to Chinese economic dominance in Sri Lanka, India has taken several steps to focus on the development of infrastructure megaprojects in the eastern and northern provinces of that island state. India is also planning to build Trincomalee Port and has already signed an agreement to develop the West Container Terminal of Colombo port in Sri Lanka to counter Hambantota Port and the Colombo Port City sponsored by China (Berlin, 2006). In addition, considering its geopolitical and geostrategic significance, India also signed a memorandum of understanding for the improvement in sea and air transportation facilities on Agalega Island, Mauritius, in 2015. According to the India Ministry of External Affairs, this MoU provides for the setting up and upgrade of infrastructure for improving sea and air connectivity among the outer islands of Mauritius in order to improve the condition of the inhabitants of this remote island. These facilities will also enhance the capabilities of the Mauritian Defence Forces in safeguarding their interests in the outer islands. The opposition political parties of Mauritius criticized that this project will facilitate both air and surface maritime patrols in the southwest Indian Ocean and serve as an intelligence post for India. In responding to international reports and domestic

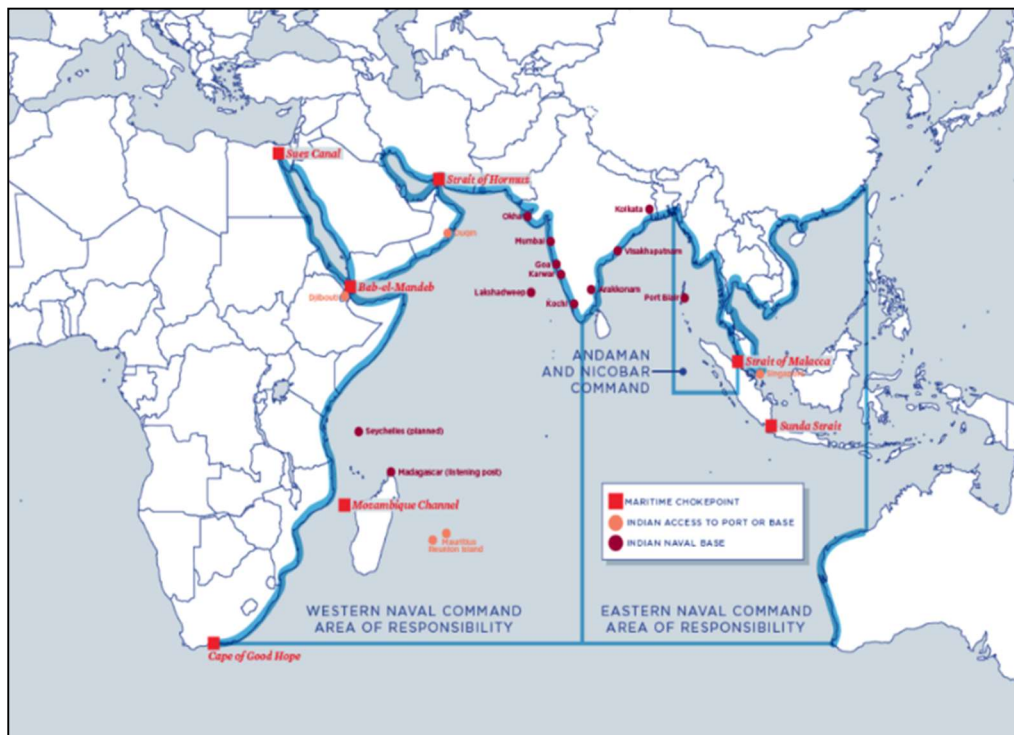
opponents, the Government of Mauritius denies reports that it has allowed India to build a military base on Agalega island. In addition, during his visit to India in 2017, the Prime Minister of Mauritius signed an agreement with India titled ‘Maritime Security within the Framework of Project Agalega’; details about the agreement are however not available (Schoettli, 2018, p. 4).

India signed another defence agreement with Mauritius in 2021. It is believed that, as per the provisions of this agreement, India has entered into a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement (CECPA) with Mauritius. It will provide a timely boost for the revival of economies post-Covid-19 and also enable Indian investors to use Mauritius as a launch-pad for business expansion into continental Africa helping the prospect of Mauritius emerging as a ‘hub of Africa’ (www.indiatoday.in).

In 2015, India and Seychelles signed a defence pact for a joint project in Assumption Island to build a naval base to counter China’s ‘String of Pearls’ strategy. However, the agreement was never implemented over sovereignty, international concerns and environmental issues.

Under the provision of the 2008 Indo-Oman defence agreement, India has already established its first listening post at Ras al Hadd in the Persian Gulf and berthing rights at Muscat naval base (Javaid, 2021). India is expressing its deep concerns over the port involvements of China in its neighbourhood, as with Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Burma.

Map 3: Indian Navy Defence Organization in the Indian Ocean Region.



Source: Kliman, Rehman, Lee & Fitt, (2019, p. 6).

It is true that India’s relations with the states on Africa’s Indian Ocean coast are still limited. But India is expanding its ties with some of the states in the Horn of Africa, South Africa, Tanzania, the Mozambique and especially with the African island states, including Mauritius and Seychelles. India has also just concluded significant naval manoeuvres in the

Gulf of Aden, featuring drills with allied Task Force-Horn of Africa units and a port call in Djibouti (Berlin, 2006, p. 14).

India sees its role in the Indian Ocean not only in terms of trade, commerce and energy security but also as a provider of maritime surveillance technology, anti-piracy efforts, ocean surveys, plus capacity building and maritime military equipment for the middle and small littoral states of the IOR. Specifically, India's navy is working with South Africa, Mozambique and other East African coastal states, as well as with island states such as Sri Lanka, Mauritius, the Maldives and Seychelles (Lea, 2014, pp. 28-43).

In addition to bilateral relations, India is enhancing its multilateral relations with sub-regional organizations, such as the Bangladesh India Malaysia Sri Lanka Thailand-Economic Cooperation, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association.

Key security considerations on the part of India have given more priority towards eliminating the domination of extra-regional powers like the US and China in the Indian Ocean. In addition, the protection of sea-lanes of trade, commerce and energy resources includes joint monitoring; conducting joint exercises and exchanges are some of the key agreements between the US and India. India's bilateral engagements with the US are a work in progress. However, as a result of the post-cold war advancement, India believes that the presence of the US in the Indian Ocean to counter China's domination and terrorism has created a wider strategic space for itself to manoeuvre. Even though India and the US have initiated a new Strategic Partnership Agreement since 2006, along with a separate Maritime Security Cooperation Agreement in the same year, India is not a member of the US's security umbrella. However, the overall maritime "strategic partnership" between the US and India has focused on an enhanced bilateral relationship in Indian Ocean affairs. It shows that both the US and India are keen to cooperate in determining the future of the Indian Ocean.

Responses of small states

The strategic significance of Mauritius, Seychelles, Maldives and Sri Lanka has grown in the eyes of the US, China and India as they compete for influence and dominance in the Indian Ocean Region. The presence of these large powers has changed the dynamics in the IOR and are impacting the policies of its small states. In response, most small states are expected to either seek balance or bandwagon with a powerful country in order to avoid being absorbed or overwhelmed by another. In addition, when there is no imminent danger from power play, small states in the IOR have understood that either balancing or bandwagoning with any one of the power players is less desirable. The main concerns of most of small littoral states are issues that affect them directly, rather than the geopolitical and strategic competition amongst major powers in the region. However, small states have realized that each power player in the IOR is seeking to strengthen ties with them to secure their particular security and economic interests.

In the given context, none of the small states in the IOR are vocal critics or antagonists to the behavior of large powers in the region. They are, meanwhile, continuously and competitively developing bilateral cooperation with each power player in areas such as trade, socio-culture and infrastructure development. Aware of the palpable transnational security issues in their own very large exclusive economic zones, a few small states have drawn up cooperation agendas with power players in the IOR that cover within their purview joint efforts in anti-piracy operations, enhanced EEZ surveillance and monitoring to prevent intrusions by potential economic offenders indulging in illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, poaching, drug and human trafficking.

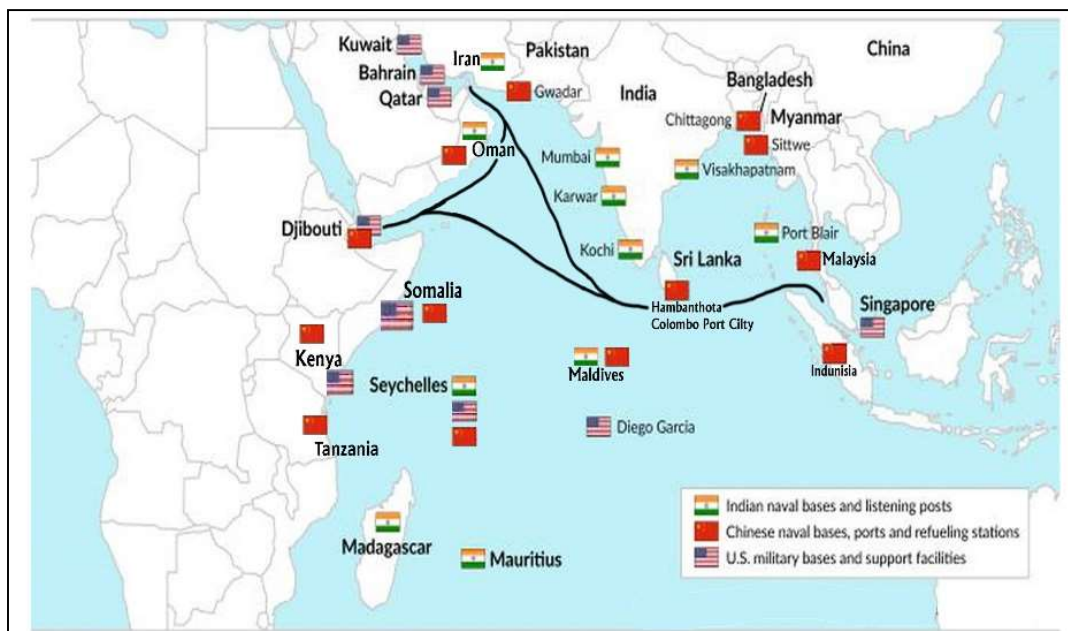
The viewpoints of the small states towards maritime security cooperation and development collaboration significantly differ from the interests and ambitions of power players in the IOR. Some small states seem to be hedging against power player's rising power

by building their defence capabilities and partnerships; others apply more accommodative strategies with power players; or else employ a mix of both.

Conclusion

In the 21st century, the Indian Ocean looms with its complex and compelling geopolitical and geostrategic significance, shifting it away from a unipolar domain of influence and into a region of big power competition. As a result, the Indian Ocean has entered a critical phase where major regional and extra-regional power players are competing for supremacy on the high seas. In the contemporary context of power competition in the Indian Ocean, the US and India work together to minimize China's expansion; while China is busy in its efforts to counter US dominance. These three countries have already established a massive and complex network of military, intelligence sharing and communications infrastructure with other powers to boast a substantive maritime role in the contemporary Indian Ocean.

Map 4: Presence of regional and extra-regional powers in the middle and small littoral states of the Indian Ocean.



Source: Compiled by the author.

The US, China and India seek to enhance their naval capacity in the Indian Ocean, with the direct and indirect commitment and engagement of its middle and small littoral states. Specifically, these three large states are more sensitive regarding the safekeeping of the Sea Lanes of Communications and safe passage through the most critical chokepoints in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, the US, China and India are competitively enhancing their military bases, naval bases, listening ports, commercial ports, refueling stations and support facilities in the middle and small littoral states of the Indian Ocean. With the emergence of a complex and competitive regional order, the small states adjacent to the strategically located choke points in the Indian Ocean are tremendously vulnerable to regional and extra-regional powers.

With their geopolitical and geostrategic significance, the behaviour of middle and small littoral states such as Malaysia, Oman, Iran, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Somalia, Bahrain, Qatar,

Kuwait, Djibouti, Comoros, Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles may be a predominant factor in shaping the future security of the Indian Ocean. But, as discussed, the increase of naval bases, port capacity and refueling stations in the middle and small littoral states of the Indian Ocean by regional and extra-regional powers has created critical consequences. Thus, middle and small littoral states are among the most vulnerable of all environments to the regional and extra-regional power competition in and of the Indian Ocean. The existing triangular dynamics among the US, China and India and their interplay with middle and small littoral states is likely to be significant in shaping the strategic atmosphere of the Indian Ocean for many years to come.

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