

Maritime Security And Geo-Politics In The Indian Ocean Region

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) holds prominence due to its strategic importance as a major hub for global trade, connecting Asia with other regions. The region itself is experiencing a transformation from being a trade route to a nexus for economic, environmental, and security issues. Major stakeholders, including extra-regional states like the EU, the United States, and major Asian countries, have increased their attention toward the IOR. However, the region faces various challenges such as territorial disputes, terrorism, piracy, and geopolitical tensions. This article analyzes the strategic context of the IOR and the need for cooperation among regional and extra-regional states to transform the region into a peaceful hub for economic and security development. The article examines the current geopolitical situation of the IOR as well as issues related to maritime security, energy security, environmental security, and the competition among the powerful players like the United States, China, and India to influence the region. Succinctly, the article insinuates the requisite need of cooperation among stakeholders indispensable to address security and other challenges and ensure the safe passage of energy trade and overall regional stability.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Maritime security, Indian Ocean Region, Energy Security, Regional Actors.

Introduction

"Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas in the twenty-first century, the destiny of the world will be decided in these waters."

Alfred Thayer Mahan

By connecting Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is regarded as a significant juncture of commercial hub and global trade. A few of the strategic chokepoints, ranging from the Malacca Strait to the Strait of Hormuz, are existent in between the IOR waterways. In recent times, much changes have been witnessed in the IOR, as

the region is transforming from being a mere passage route for international maritime trade to a global nexus for economic, environmental and human issues (Singhal, 2015). Extra-regional states like the European Union (EU) member states, coupled with the United States and major Asian countries like South Korea, Japan and China, have increased attention towards the IOR. Moreover, some regional states in general and principally India are transitioning to establish improved security capacity, keeping in view that the region is contending with a number of security issues, including intermittent territorial disputes, terrorism, piracy, and geopolitical tensions. When it comes to territorial confrontation in particular, they entail the South

China Sea and the Doklam Plateau that have become the subjects of dispute between India and China (Azmi, 2017).

However, China has stepped up through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which has significantly contributed to the economic growth of the area. The Gwadar port in Pakistan and the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka are two of the developed initiatives that are a part of the BRI. Besides, the United States is another significant IOR player, specifically in term of promoting security and preserving regional stability. Along with these major players, the IOR has now become a cohort of important stakeholders, including Maldives, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, in addition to establishment of some regional alliances like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Economic and Technical Cooperation as well as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). How the region will gradually develop and gain significance is dependent on these stakeholders, as the IOR continues to gain attention and prominence within and outside the territory (Jemberg, 2022). While maritime issues like piracy and trafficking are prevalent in various parts of the region, the daunting challenge is political instability of the states within this region, which has given rise to non-conventional security challenges including maritime terrorism. These issues are particularly owing to paucity of any comprehensive multilateral agreements on maritime security, which may potentially accentuate the risk of safe passage for energy trade.

Thus, keeping in view these perspectives, this research article attempts to analyze the strategic context of the IOR that poses significant challenges, and the requirement of inevitable cooperation between regional and extra-regional states to eventually transform the region from a major bone of contention to a peaceful hub for economic and security development.

Problem Statement

The current state of the Indian Ocean region encompasses an array of factors, predominantly, the abundance of natural resources, various choke points with the unique geography and the escalation of non-conventional threats. Due to a lack of pertinent maritime capacity among these regional states regarding management of maritime affairs, these issues are getting exacerbated (Baruah, 2016). In this context, the rise of China has a major contributor to maritime security of the IOR is, though a significant geopolitical development, the implications of its rise on the Sino-Indian balance of power might soar its relations with India. Competing for regional hegemonic influence, the confrontation between these two countries in terms of influencing the geopolitics of the IOR presents umpteen security challenge (Bueger & Stockbruegger, 2022).

Furthermore, with combined coastlines of all littoral states including Australian, European, West and East Asian regions, various chokepoints make it complex to control shipping and make trade convenient for regional and extra-regional states. It is the world's third largest ocean, after the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and is home to an estimated 2.7 billion people, which make the compendium of almost forty percent of the entire global population. Besides, the sea lines of communication, which are important for transportation of tonnage of goods, the integrity of the region is indispensable. According to Van der Putten et al., (2014), the extended sea lines of communication of the Indian Ocean presents some strategic vulnerabilities due to intermittent blockage of maritime trade from India and extra-regional states. This factor has developed more concerns about the maritime security of the IOR that underpins rising balance of power dynamics.

Littoral countries surrounding the Indian Ocean, including Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bhutan, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, and others, play a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of the region. The influence of these littoral countries in the IOR, their involvement in current geopolitics,

and their experiences with maritime security issues cannot be denied. Sri Lanka, with its strategic location along major sea routes, serves as a critical maritime hub connecting the East and West. Its ports, particularly the Colombo Port City, attract investments and contribute to regional trade and economic development (Upadhyaya, 2018). Sri Lanka actively engages in diplomatic relations with both regional and global powers, promoting its interests and shaping regional dynamics. Additionally, as a low-lying archipelago, the Maldives is vulnerable to the direct impacts of climate change, such as rising sea levels, making it imperative for the country to prioritize maritime security to protect its territorial integrity and exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

Another source of insecurity pertains to an increase of hostility between the two naval powers, i.e. China and India. As Iyer et al., (2021) noted, the great power rivalry, though not regarded as a proximate security threat in the region, is a menacing more than the acts of piracy of terrorism. Tensions between these two states have existed for more than sixty years, or particularly since the Sino-Indian War of 1962. Being a close partner of Pakistan, China has traditionally had a troubled relationship with India. This unceasing rivalry between these two states has become a potential area of concern for other littoral states, which are vying of resolving maritime issues with a view to witnessing safe transportation of goods. To infer, the rise and subsequent prevalence of the economic power provides both India and China with a capacity to influence the maritime domain. Importantly, by boasting a strong security profile in the IOR, other littoral countries have made an instrumental partnership with China along the coastlines spanning South Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

Literature Review

IOR Maritime Security: Attributes and Threats

In the aftermath of the Cold War, many newly independent Asian and African states have become a subject of increasing hostility in the region, while the region was still becoming less stable with regional turmoil and suspicion between the great powers. When it comes to the maritime security environment, it has also undergone great transformation. Owing to a limited capacity and weak government structures to manage maritime domains, illicit activities started thriving in many IOR parts (Potgieter, 2012). As a consequence, escalating militarization within the region has further affected its maritime security, in addition to the involvement of non-traditional security threats.

In terms of military aspects, Corder (2014) identified a number of principal trends vis-à-vis the complex maritime security mechanism. First and foremost, the efforts the United States, along with its international partners including India, Japan, Australia, and the United Kingdom (UK) has expanded and maintained their influence over the IOR and, as a result, accomplished significant strategic objectives. These entails efforts to limit or impede the influence of China, Russia and Iran, protection of secure energy source access and, importantly, to counter terrorism and threats related to maritime security. Another trend is the consistent undertaking of countries like China, Iran, Russia, and even Pakistan, to further consolidate their position in the region in order to increase their capacity to counter its rival alliance led by the US. The third dominant trend is the endeavor by of other littoral states, including Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, and Singapore, which are wary of regional maritime security with reference to specific rivals attested by maritime boundary disputes and jurisdictional claims over the region (Upadhyaya, 2018).

Energy Security and the IOR

Oil and gas are both critical to modern world development, as is energy security. It is a domain where economic and industrial progress is inevitable. In this regard, both India and China are vying for sustainable rate of economic growth in the region with a view to improving lives of the common populace. Moreover, their economic expansion is driving accentuating demand for global energy. To contain or even bridle world energy use, the risk of costs and supply pressures, along with degradation of the environment, would not persuade these two countries to curtail regional economic growth (Shahid, 2021). The US in particular has emphasized on controlling or even possible securing the oil resources located in the Persian Gulf. If history is any witness, concerns about asymmetrical states on shipping and energy sources are a very real issue that requires cooperation among the involved IOR states.

To India, its core foreign policy approach is the energy security which it has apparently adopted as a prolonged strategy for the procurement of energy products from its allies and across the world. The country's energy security approach also entails protection of offshore platforms for ships' security transporting gas and oil to India. Much focus is also emphasized on good cooperation between its navy, maritime police and related agencies. It is of the view that accentuating maritime threats and energy drive by non-state actors has escalated security concerns of the Indian Government (Chellaney, 2010). In this regard, its increasing rivalry with China can be evident in the context of IOR and other littoral states that have pronounced concerns about consistent Chinese presence in the region. It appears that the flow of trade and energy is the foremost concern of China; however, its shenanigans do have some sort of implications for other countries witnessing persistent economic growth like India. China is also leaving no stone unturned to exert its economic and political influence over the Asian

and African regions as billions of dollars has been invested in oil, electricity generation, transportation, and infrastructure. Importantly, its offer of military assistance in sharp resemblance to economic aid with an aim to attaining as much influence in the IOR (Singhal, 2015).

Japan and South Korea, although geographically located outside the Indian Ocean, maintain significant interests in the region. Both countries have strong economic ties with the littoral countries, investing in infrastructure projects and fostering trade relationships. They actively participate in regional security mechanisms, engaging in capacity-building efforts to enhance maritime security and stability (Bahua, 2021). Energy security is a major concern for Japan and South Korea, as they heavily depend on energy imports from the Middle East, necessitating their active involvement in securing vital sea routes.

Environmental Security

Perhaps the most detrimental threat to the collective interests of IOR States is posed by those security risks which are particularly non-traditional in nature, such as the adverse impacts of climate change, ocean resource exploitation and environmental insecurity. The degree to which the inevitable phenomenon of climate change is the consequence of both anthropogenic and natural factors continues to be debated. These risks encompass increase water stress, reduced level of agricultural productivity and increased risks of human health. Those countries which are lying on the IOR islands, such as Maldives, are likely to be more affected as sea levels continue to rise (Mishra & Sen, 2022). Besides, soil erosion, storm surge, inundation, and other coastal hazards might threaten both infrastructure and human settlements, which will consequently impact livelihood of communities.

Hitherto, it has been seen that impertinent emphasis is placed on ensuring environmental security in the IOR, which is

getting exacerbated with the gradual, if not instant, degradation of the environment. Moreover, exploitation of ocean resources is another threat to the future of all regional countries and their people. In recent past, rising sea temperatures in the Indian Ocean are rapidly rising than in any other Ocean, while more intense weather patterns will have negative impact on the ecology and natural systems (Baruah, 2020). Unfortunately, no country has made an effort to look beyond proximate, conventional security issues like that of energy, and to make efforts towards environmental and resource management to ward of human security issues in the long run. Many IOR countries have very scant level of capacity to adopt, respond to and mitigate to what are largely non-controversial and shared challenges, and are particularly vulnerable to environmental security (Len, 2022). So far, meagre efforts have been witnessed in term so cooperative regional response and collectively action to contain the dangerous implications of climate change in the IOR, which will eventually place significant maritime security at the brink of disintegration.

Tripartite Competition in the Indian Ocean

As the Admiral (Retd) of the US Navy 'James Starvidis' termed the Indian Ocean as the 'Sea of Future', he was of the view that the ocean had capacity to provide central trade routes to the global trade by connecting energy from one continent to the other. In political terms, being the third largest ocean of the world, the Indian Ocean presents a pivotal threat of military dominance and strategic contest. Major regional and extra-regional states like China, India, the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, and France are independently operating blue water navies having distinct reach (Jemberg, 2022). There are other aspirants of blue water to, such as Australia, having limited regional reach. In absolute terms, the ocean itself acts as a critical juncture to project power, establish riches and protect security and economic interest and, at the same

time, influence global politics over the IOR. All these states have notable stakes in the ongoing geopolitics and geo-economics of the region. The economic and strategic contest leading to power politics between China and the US transformed to this very ocean.

In particular, the US-China rivalry transitioned from the trade war and rippled from the Pacific to Indian oceans. On the other hand, the rivalry between India and China and India with Pakistan require a mediator. Projects like China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is a flagship project of the BRI, are also in danger due to intense power politics in the region. The three powers, i.e. the US, China and India, accounting for almost fifty percent of the entire world economy, is seeking dominance in the Indian Ocean. Each has their own geostrategic lens to assess its role in power politics (Azmi, 2017). As far as China is concerned, it propels its commitment of 'Common growth Common future' policy through economic engagements like the BRI and Maritime Silk Road. Also, it has been investing consistently in Asia and Africa to further showcase the important of regional connectivity. On the other hand, the US, with India and Western alliance being its strategic partner, look towards China's connectivity and economic strides with suspicion and ambiguity. It is due to this reason that the US is continuing with its Indo-Pacific Strategy, which somehow has showed positive implications in terms of Asia-Pacific rebalance (Iyer et al., 2021). India, with its military maritime strategy, claims to be the 'net security provider' having competing fleet and exhaustive nuclear triad. The country pursues its agenda of 'security and growth for all' (Shahid, 2021).

The presence of the US in the IOR has its roots that can be traced back to its fight in Afghanistan and the Middle East in order to maintain its regional hegemony; however, as noted by Rodrigo (2021), Iran is the country which requires more focus when it comes to the vulnerability of the IOR. Its strategic interests in

the ocean can be identified through its strategic compulsion to contest its protracted isolation from geopolitics, as well as to garner some sort of weight both in the Asian and world politics (Singhal, 2015). One important component of Iran's strategic interests is its diplomacy for employing its energy resources by merging economic interests with larger strategic objectives, which can be evinced in its recent endeavor of taking across the Atlantic Ocean in the US backyard. At least for the US, it appears to be a puzzle as both Iran and India enjoy amicable relations, while their ideological perspectives in the Indian Ocean also resemble.

Furthermore, the European Union have keen interest on witnessing the strategic developments in the IOR from side lobes. Nonetheless, any regional instability, political chaos in the region will spill over to global turmoil and situation of maritime security. All this will adversely affect the EU trade with the regional actors of the Indian Ocean. Therefore, it is likely that being an ally of the US, the EU would remain in its stand-by position to side the US, as estimation of its recent position warrants.

Understanding Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean Region

At present, IOR is at the pinnacle of instability and under combustion of conflict. In spite of having the conventional sphere of influence over the across the region, it has become a contesting ground of regional and extra-regional powers. Though the anticipation for military conflicts has remained lower, escalated rhetoric and activities have somehow endangered the regional stability, which may lead to military conflicts in the foreseeable future. When considering the strategic environment of the IOR, it can be articulated in three phrases: strategic alliance, strategic competition and strategic dilemma (Len, 2022). When strategic competition places contention for influence and power among major powers, it subsequently establishes alliance between smaller and dominant powers on the

basis of consensual motives. As a result, strategic convergences materialize between some major powers against others. This ensues strategic dilemma of less powerful countries as they become compelled to opt for between the existent major powers. Power players always strive for adopting different strategies based on their vested interests as well as to accomplish strategic interests. Thus, given the present geopolitical situation of the IOR, these convergences and dilemmas have created a new dynamic situation in the region.

When it comes to the US, although it does not occupy much when considering residential rights of the IOR, its strategic influence on regional security dynamics, together with its bonhomie with India, has remained a significant concern for rival powers. As per Bueger et al., (2020), the USA interest over the Indian Ocean Region is merely its efforts to alleviate, if not completely eliminate, the rising prowess of China. Keeping in view China's prevalent strong economy in the world, the US has a keen interest in the conflict-free, freedom of navigation (FON) IOR to which it vies for maintaining its influence through regional allies.

In addition to it, the hostility between China and India further aggravates the volatile situation of the IOR. Both countries are dependent on energy sources that are transported via the SLOC (Sea Line of Communication) in order for their economies to run smoothly. While China's BRI project boasts of building trade routes between China and other countries in the Europe, Central Asia and other littoral countries (Aswani, 2017). On the other hand, India has also embarked on the multi-million-dollar project to develop its ports along the western and eastern coasts, while it has commenced the 'Growth Corridor' project with Japan to connect Africa with Asia by using Indian influence and Japanese technology in the region (Brewster, 2017).

The current geopolitics in the Indian Ocean Region involve competition among major powers. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has expanded its influence in the IOR, raising concerns among littoral countries and other major powers (Azmi, 2017). This has resulted in competition and strategic recalibration among different actors. Countries such as the United States, India, Japan, and Australia have developed Indo-Pacific strategies to maintain a balance of power and protect their interests in the region.

Methodology

The research method in this article is based on descriptive, qualitative analysis for which extensive library study was accessed to. In addition, considering the theoretical nature of the research, 'content analysis' as a qualitative analysis tool was applied by accessing relevant literature on geopolitics and maritime security of the Indian Ocean Region. Other sources include government reports, researches from the officials of organization including International Maritime Research, International Maritime Organization, Nautical Institute, and others. Besides, since this is an argument-based research, details related to combined exercises, military influence and naval acquisition were also taken from the studies carried out by previous authors on the subject matter. On the whole, discourse analysis and observations of geopolitical perspectives and maritime security risks provided with descriptive and interpretive findings.

Discussion

From the above articulation on geopolitics and maritime security of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), it can be interpreted that the region occupies a significant junction of global trade, connecting Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. In recent times, the region has undergone significant changes, transforming from a mere passage route for maritime trade to a hub for economic, environmental, and security issues.

Major players including China, the US and regional states like India are increasingly focusing on the IOR. There is no denying the fact that the current IOR situation is laden with various security challenges, including territorial disputes, terrorism, environmental insecurity, and geopolitical tensions. Territorial confrontations in particular have become subjects of dispute between India and China. Projects like the Gwadar port and Hambantota port in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, respectively, have contributed to the economic growth of the region through BRI. The United States also plays a significant role in promoting security and regional stability.

The IOR includes important stakeholders such as Maldives, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and regional alliances like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Economic and Technical Cooperation and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). However, there is a lack of comprehensive multilateral agreements on maritime security, which poses a risk to the safe passage of energy trade. When looking at the current environment in the IOR, it is characterized by abundant natural resources, strategic chokepoints, and non-conventional threats. China's rise as a major player in maritime security poses implications for the Sino-Indian balance of power and presents security challenges. The complex geography of the IOR, with its numerous chokepoints and extensive coastlines, makes controlling shipping and ensuring convenient trade a complex task. Energy security is a crucial aspect for India and China, as both countries seek economic growth and have increasing energy demands (Brewster, 2017). The US has emphasized controlling oil resources in the Persian Gulf. Concerns about asymmetrical threats to shipping and energy sources require cooperation among IOR states. Environmental security is another significant challenge, with climate change, ocean resource exploitation, and environmental degradation posing risks to the region. The IOR countries have limited capacity

to address these challenges and are vulnerable to environmental security threats.

The tripolar competition between the United States, China, and India for dominance in the Indian Ocean is shaping the geopolitics of the region. Each country has its own strategic objectives and seeks to influence the IOR. The presence of the US in the IOR is linked to its regional hegemony, while Iran's strategic interests in the ocean are driven by geopolitical and economic considerations. The European Union also has a keen interest in the region due to its trade relationships. Until recent times, the geopolitical situation in the IOR is characterized by instability, conflict, and strategic competition. In this context, through strategic alliances have emerged, dilemmas among the powerful players including the US and India have emerged, which is further changing the dynamics of the region.

Other inter-regional rivalries, such as the one between Pakistan and India, further exacerbates geopolitical situation of Pakistan. Contest for naval prowess, coupled with cross-border tensions and nuclear race provide both these countries with the 'no-negotiation phenomenon'. To infer, an arc of instability in the IOR surrounded by issues like territorial disputes, historical mistrust and ideological disparities, along with other factors like terrorism, human trafficking and competition for influence have collectively complication the geopolitics of the IOR (Van der Putten et al., 2014). This makes the compendium of the current geopolitical situation of the region that has become an epicenter of 'deep troubles' which require cooperation and consensus building among the powers within and outside the region.

Conclusion

The discussion in this article focused on the strategic value of the Indian Ocean Region, characteristics and threats emanated from maritime security, potential remedies, and international and regional collaboration. Nations inhabiting the region are eager to promote vibrant

marine commercial and economic activities at sea, as these are critical to economic security of all. In the same vein, they work to defend their marine domains from risks drawn out from the oceans, specifically involving increasing military presence, fleet acquisitions, terrorism, and environmental degradation. It can be deduced from the above comprehensive discussion on maritime security and geopolitics of the Indian Ocean Region cooperation is indispensable, since all regional and extra-regional actors benefit from maritime activity and. Despite the fact that the Indian Ocean region is undergoing significant economic progress and development, security issues frequently control the agendas of its members. Multinational coalitions led by the United States have been or are involved in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Given the region's marine security difficulties that have the potential to affect the global economy, energy security, and SLOCs, they have emerged as major worldwide concerns. Many extra-regional states have an interest in Indian Ocean maritime security and have deployed forces there. Importantly, there is an obvious need for a system that maintains maritime security capacity-building by including both regional and extra-regional states. Lest, the Indian Ocean will face choppy seas in terms of marine security.

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