

Rising Geostrategic Competition in The Indian Ocean

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The Indian Ocean is the world's third-largest ocean, covering about 20% of the Earth's water surface. It connects the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Australia, making it an indispensable artery of global commerce.

Every day, over 80% of global maritime oil trade passes through the Indian Ocean, with vital chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, which is located along the west coast of peninsular Malaysia where I come from, and the Bab-el-Mandeb, controlling the flow of energy and goods between the East and West. These routes are the lifeblood of the global economy, with billions of dollars of trade, oil, and energy supplies dependent on the security and openness of these sea lanes. In my view, Indian ocean is in fact geostrategically the most important body of water on earth

The Indian Ocean is also home to around 2.7 billion people living in 25 littoral countries. As of 2023, the combined GDP of the Indian Ocean littoral countries is estimated to exceed \$9 trillion USD or approximately 10% of the global GDP, comprising both developed economies like Australia and emerging markets such as India and Indonesia.

These littoral countries, from India and Sri Lanka to Kenya, South Africa, and Indonesia, rely heavily on the ocean for their livelihoods, particularly in sectors such as fishing, tourism, and trade. The region's geopolitical significance, however, goes far beyond its economic value—it is a theater of strategic power projection and competition.

At the heart of this geostrategic competition are several key players, each with distinct interests and ambitions in the Indian Ocean region.

India which is historically the dominant power in the Indian Ocean, views the region as its natural sphere of influence. With its extensive coastline, strategic location, and historical maritime traditions, India has in recent years sought to counter China's growing presence through its own initiatives, including the "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR) policy. India's naval strategy emphasizes maintaining a robust military presence, developing strategic partnerships with regional countries, and enhancing maritime

security cooperation through multilateral forums like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located near the Strait of Malacca, offer a strategic advantage in monitoring and controlling the flow of maritime traffic through this vital chokepoint. Furthermore, India has expanded its naval capabilities and deepened defense ties with countries such as the United States, Australia, Japan, and France, aiming to create a counterweight to China's influence. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), involving India, the U.S., Japan, and Australia, is a significant element of India's efforts to shape the security architecture in the Indo-Pacific.

On the other hand, China's rise as a global power has been felt most acutely in its growing presence in the Indian Ocean. Through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has sought to secure its energy supply lines, expand its trade routes, and extend its geopolitical influence across the Indian Ocean Rim.

China's key projects including the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, and investments in ports in Djibouti, Myanmar, and the Maldives, have positioned China as a dominant player in the region. India perceives this network of ports, bases, and infrastructure investments, which stretches from the South China Sea to East Africa, as

part of China's strategy to encircle and restrict India's access to the Indian Ocean. India views this "String of Pearls" as emblematic of China's ambition to dominate the Indian Ocean.

Although these Chinese projects are primarily commercial, India and the United States view these ports as having dual-use capabilities, encompassing significant military and strategic dimensions. For instance, China's military base in Djibouti, strategically positioned near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, is seen by the U.S. and India as evidence of Beijing's intent to project naval power well beyond its immediate neighborhood.

The United States, as a global maritime power, has long maintained a significant military and strategic presence in the Indian Ocean. The U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, based in Bahrain, plays a critical role in ensuring the security of key sea lanes in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. Additionally, the U.S. maintains a strategic military base in Diego Garcia, an atoll located in the heart of the Indian Ocean. This base is central to American military operations in the region, enabling power projection and rapid response to crises in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia.

For the U.S. and its allies, the Indian Ocean is not just a trade route but a critical part of the Indo-Pacific region, which has

become the focus of their strategic realignment. The increasing convergence of interests among the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia, through forums like the Quad, reflects a shared desire to maintain a “free and open Indo-Pacific,” countering China’s increasing influence in the region.

Beyond India, the U.S. and China, several regional and middle powers also have vested interests in the Indian Ocean. Australia, France, Japan, and the United Kingdom have established naval footprints and are actively engaged in promoting maritime security, counterterrorism, and anti-piracy operations. France, with its territories like Réunion and Mayotte in the Indian Ocean, and Australia, with its proximity to Southeast Asia, are particularly concerned about the stability and security of the region.

One of the key drivers of geostrategic competition in the Indian Ocean is the control of its strategic chokepoints. As I have highlighted above, these narrow waterways are crucial for global energy and trade flows, and their security—or insecurity—has profound implications for the world economy.

The Strait of Hormuz, located between the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, is vital for the global oil supply, with around 20% of the world’s oil passing through it daily. The U.S., Iran, and regional actors constantly jostle for influence over this strategic waterway.

The Strait of Malacca, which is a narrow strait between the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian island of Sumatra, is one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. It is critical for China's energy imports and trade with the Middle East and Africa, making it a focal point of both Chinese and Indian naval strategies.

The Bab-el-Mandeb, which is situated between Yemen and the Horn of Africa, is a chokepoint that controls access to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, making it essential for Europe-Asia trade. The instability in Yemen and the presence of foreign military bases in Djibouti have made this region a hotspot for geopolitical maneuvering.

The competition for control over these strategic chokepoints has raised concerns about the potential for conflicts, blockades, or disruptions that could cripple global trade. As such, ensuring maritime security, combating piracy, and maintaining freedom of navigation have become priorities for the international community.

The Indian Ocean is not merely a body of water—it is a battleground of competing visions, ambitions, and strategies. The geostrategic competition we see today will shape the future of global power dynamics, economic security, and regional stability. It cannot be overstated that how we

navigate this complex landscape will determine whether the Indian Ocean remains a zone of peaceful cooperation or becomes a theater of conflict and tension.

The challenges are immense, but so are the opportunities. By fostering dialogue, strengthening multilateral institutions, and promoting sustainable development, the nations of the Indian Ocean Rim—and the global powers involved—can work together to ensure that this ocean remains a source of prosperity and stability for all.