

PAKISTAN AND CHANGING POWER DYNAMICS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

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Prof. Craig Jeffrey Director and CEO of Australia - India Institute, precisely indicated that:

"In terms of global political significance, the Atlantic Ocean can be viewed as the ocean of our grandparents and parents; the Pacific Ocean as the ocean of us and our children; and the Indian Ocean is the ocean of our children and grandchildren".

Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is the third-largest ocean that lies at the crossroads of Africa, Asia, and Australia. It covers approximately 20 % of the total earth & is bounded by 37 states that join and makeup 40 % of the total coastlines of the globe. IO remains a pivot, being the busiest international trade route. Around 80 % of the world's oil trade passes through the seven choke points located in IOR. Any disruption of these chokepoints will cripple the economy of the world, especially of China, Japan, India, ASEAN and South Korea. Since ancient times, the Indian Ocean has been the hub of maritime trade in addition to commercial, and cultural exchanges, unlike the other oceans. IOR is the center of future global politics, as many political pundits say.

The strategic environment in the Indian Ocean is changing fast. In the last few years, we have seen growing strategic rivalry between key states such as China and the US, as they expand their roles in the region. The US has declared India as a net security net provider in IO as per the US Indo-Pacific Studies of 2022 and conducted numerous agreements with India. The US strategy is to bring India to the forefront of IO against China. India has taken the advantage of these agreements by establishing military bases in IO and increasing its influence which is against the policies of China and acquiring western technologies. The other regional players like Saudi Arabia, Israel, UAE, etc. are also competing to build their areas of influence and blocs in the IOR by establishing military bases which are the new beginnings of the IO strategic order in the 21st century. Therefore, IO became a more complex and multipolar region, where several major and middle powers push for influence and position.

The competition among states in the IOR has the following dimensions militarization, economic contests, arms race, and maritime security. An emerging superpower, China, is being viewed strategic competitor as per US

National Security Strategy (NSS) 2022. As China imports 10.26 million barrels (90%) of oil per day, which passes through, pass through vulnerable choke points. The first one is the Strait of Hormuz far distance from China and requires Blue Water Navy to safeguard its trade therefore IO is important for China. China also established its first overseas base at Djibouti which sent an alarm signal to the USs as now the Chinese Navy is patrolling and exercising littoral of IO. China is also building naval muscles to follow the old school of thought which advocates the ocean for keeping a strong Navy to protect its trade and legitimate maritime interests. The Indian Ocean remains the primary objective of the Chinese grand strategy. China has also adopted Economic Diplomacy by investing in poor countries' infrastructure and Chinese influence is rising in littoral countries of IO. Apart from building a naval base, China has invested heavily across Africa both on the eastern rim and on the mainland as well. The prime reason for this is to explore new markets, capitalize on human resources and maintain a presence in the region. According to some estimates, China invested about US\$60 billion in Africa. This huge investment would not only benefit the region but also plays a vital role in global prosperity

The new alliances like AUKUS, QUAD, and I2U2 are to contain China in IO. The competition and the political tensions are growing and, if not handled properly, the possibility of a much larger conflict cannot be ruled out during the first half of the 21st century. India is the largest littoral state of the IOR. Like Pakistan, it also enjoys a geo-strategic position as it has a rim on both the eastern and western sides of the country. India has established 12 major ports and 200 minor ports. India has also initiated a plan called SagarMala to maximize its maritime capability that aims to double the existing number of major ports in the country. Apart from these domestic steps, India is also taking several actions beyond its borders to impose its position in the IOR. One such act is the India-Iran strategic partnership. China has also been busy making inroads in the IOR as it is not only a necessity but also a priority. China has the resources; it also aims to maintain its presence outside the region to ascertain its power.

There has been considerable commentary about China's ambitious BRI of which the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one component. The lynchpin to the success of the CPEC is the Gwadar port. When fully operational the deep-sea port will directly connect the Western provinces of China to the IOR by road and rail. This will not only significantly cut down the travel time but also provide access to significant geostrategic locations.

There are some implications for Pakistan that being a key littoral state of the IOR, it is the responsibility of Pakistan to not only safeguard its interest but also remain out of any potential conflicts. This is not easy due to the political power play in the Indian Ocean. The rivalry between China and India in which the latter is being supported by the US has made Pakistan a party to the conflict. Another implication is the Indian efforts to isolate Pakistan on the global front. The Indian government has made strong ties with the Gulf countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia that have traditionally supported Pakistan in international forums.

Pakistan and China are all-weather strategic cooperative partners. Pakistan must keep balance relations with the US and China and safeguards its own interest. The Indian Ocean is very important due vast reservoir of oil and gas, and the far east economies are dependent upon it. Due to the strategic location of Pakistan, CPEC/ BRI projects can change the dynamics of this region. The ingress of the Israel Navy through I2U2 must be analyzed by the naval planners. Pakistan may enhance its naval capabilities to ensure good governance at sea specially in own AOR.