

STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF INDIAN OCEAN REGION FOR PAKISTAN

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Alfred Thayer Mahan, a famous American Military Strategist, once stated: “whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia, the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters.” Indian Ocean is world’s third largest ocean, which covers approximately 20 percent of the total earth and is bounded by 38 states with 40 percent of the world’s coastlines. The ocean is bounded by Asia in the North, Africa in the West, and Australia in the East. The remarkable amount of oil production from the Persian Gulf to the outside world increases its strategic importance. Oil and other important commodities are shipped from the gulf to the rest of the world through traditional Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean, which usually are formations of some strategically important choke points i.e., the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

Indian Ocean is the focus of attention nowadays because of its trade activities, connectivity, regional conflicts, and competition for supremacy by great powers. It is usually known as the pivotal strategic theatre as it has rising interests, competition of naval fleets, and the presence of extra-regional state and non-state actors. Having said this, the United States (US), China, and India are the key competitors over it. On one hand, the US is a major player having India as its strategic ally and is employing its counterbalancing strategy against China in the region. On the other hand, China’s biggest development, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is helping China use the policy of ‘Common future Common growth’ involving 21st century Maritime Silk Road. This in turn amounts to a prevailing *Thucydides Trap* in which the US has been caught, thereby marking a continuous struggle to gain control over one another.

Pakistan is one of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean and enjoys great geostrategic advantages as it is the gateway to energy highways and have a superior strategic orientation with respect to the Strait of Hormuz. Among the 38 states of the Indian Ocean, Pakistan is one of those that have contributed significantly to the matters of global politico-strategic concern. Moreover, Pakistan maintains a formidable navy in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), which contributes to seaward defense, naval diplomacy and maritime security. Pakistan Navy is a big proponent of regional harmony and promotes maritime cooperation (AMAN exercises bear testimony to this fact). In this regard, the Pakistan Navy has also been part of coalitions e.g., CTF 150 and

151. In the policies being coined by different countries, the significance of Pakistan may not be ruled out.

The economic progress of Pakistan through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Project, termed as the flagship project of BRI, has been considerably improved due to the increasing trade opportunities of East Asian, West Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and European countries with Pakistan. In essence, almost 95 percent of Pakistan's trade comes through its sea-based. Hence, it is vital for Pakistan to protect its interests in the Indian Ocean. However, Pakistan is facing various challenges such as, despite being a primary littoral state in the IOR, it is not a member of key multilateral settings in the region i.e. the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Moreover, much of the regional symposiums and forums go without Pakistan being a participant. The role of India in the region is further fanning the flame in this regard. India's investment in Chabahar port increased the security concerns for Pakistan as it now has access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, which is in return disturbing Pakistan's strategic position. Chabahar Port is in proximity to the Gwadar Port that is a crucial point of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is challenging Pakistan's strategic importance in the region.

To overcome these challenges and protect its national interests in the region, Pakistan is striving to balance its relationship with China and the US. However, Pakistan is also being challenged by great power competition, which is likely to proliferate polarization in the region. With a change in security situation of IOR, it becomes crucial for Pakistan to develop a comprehensive security strategy. Although Pakistan does not seem isolated on the issues concerning Indian Ocean, rather it is fully consolidated with many littoral states and extra-regional power, there is a need on part of Pakistan to work on multilateralism in IOR so that a particular major power cannot influence the regional politics and security, thereby imposing challenges on the weak littoral states.

Subsequently, it is proposed that Pakistan should intimate its intention of joining the IORA and should propose the idea of de-nuclearization of Indian Ocean in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) as a first step to integrate the Indian Ocean region. In addition, Pakistan needs to manipulate its strengths by creating strategic treaties, which in result account for significant contribution to regional security. By adopting a thorough and dynamic approach to regional security, Pakistan can successfully counterbalance rising threats of military, economy, and geography from different state and non-state actors and declare itself as a reliable stakeholder / player in the IOR. Lastly, Pakistan needs to be pro-active on its 'Vision East Asia' and develop a "Go East" policy to be more vibrant in its policy toward the Indian Ocean.