

Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean: China's Growing Influence and India's Geostrategic Interests

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has emerged as the central maritime theatre of twenty-first century geopolitics. Carrying nearly two-thirds of global oil shipments and a substantial proportion of international trade, the region connects Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia in a dense web of economic interdependence. China's rapid rise and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly the Maritime Silk Road, have significantly transformed the strategic landscape of the Indian Ocean. Simultaneously, India's geostrategic location and growing maritime capabilities have positioned it as a pivotal actor in shaping regional order. This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the historical evolution, strategic transformation, maritime infrastructure diplomacy, naval modernization, and alliance politics shaping India-China relations in the Indian Ocean. Employing qualitative and analytical methodologies grounded in balance of power theory and maritime security frameworks, the study examines the implications of China's expanding port network, overseas military logistics, and energy security strategies for India's national security. The findings suggest that the Indian Ocean is undergoing a structural shift toward competitive multipolarity, where economic interdependence coexists with strategic rivalry. The paper argues that the evolving Indo-Pacific architecture reflects a broader realignment of maritime geopolitics in which India seeks to maintain strategic autonomy while engaging in selective balancing.

Keywords: Indian Ocean Region, India-China Relations, Maritime Security, Belt and Road Initiative

INTRODUCTION

The rise of China as a major global power in the 21st century has significantly reshaped international relations. Through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), formerly known as One Belt One Road (OBOR), China has expanded its economic and strategic footprint across Asia, Africa, and Europe (Mayivagan, 2017; Chaudhari, 2015). Simultaneously, India, owing to its central geographical location in the Indian Ocean, seeks to maintain strategic primacy in the region (Kondapalli, 2015). Historically, the Indian Ocean has been a major trade corridor since the ancient Silk Route era (Hofmeyr, 2010). During colonial times, European powers—particularly Britain—dominated the region, leading to its

characterization as the “British Lake” (Alford, 1980). After World War II and during the Cold War, the region became strategically important to both the United States and the Soviet Union (Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2003; House, 1984). In the post-Cold War and post-9/11 era, renewed strategic interest in the Indian Ocean has intensified due to energy security, maritime trade, and geopolitical competition (Dikshit, 2017; Flint, 2006). The increasing Chinese presence in ports such as Gwadar, Hambantota, and Djibouti has heightened concerns in India regarding maritime encirclement and strategic vulnerability (Bhaskar, 2010; Hyung, 2002).

Historically, the Indian Ocean has functioned as both a conduit of civilizational exchange and a theatre of imperial rivalry. Ancient maritime trade networks

connected the Roman Empire with the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, facilitating not only commerce but also cultural and intellectual interactions (Hofmeyr, 2010). During the colonial era, European powers—particularly Britain—established dominance over Indian Ocean trade routes, leading to its description as a “British Lake” (Alford, 1980). Sea power became synonymous with imperial authority, as control over maritime routes enabled the consolidation of overseas territories and economic extraction. Following the decline of colonial empires after World War II, the region retained its strategic significance during the Cold War. The establishment of military installations such as Diego Garcia and the deployment of Soviet naval forces transformed the Indian Ocean into a superpower theatre (Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2003; House, 1984). The bipolar rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union reinforced the ocean’s geopolitical salience, demonstrating that maritime spaces are not peripheral but central to global strategic calculations.

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) occupies a pivotal position in contemporary geopolitics, linking the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia through vital sea lanes of communication. The rise of China as a major global power in the twenty-first century has intensified strategic competition in this maritime domain. China’s rapid economic growth and export-driven development have expanded its global footprint, culminating in large-scale connectivity initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly its Maritime Silk Route component (Flint, 2006; Chaudhari, 2015). These initiatives aim to enhance trade corridors, infrastructure networks, and port access across Asia and Africa (Mayivagan, 2017). Classical and contemporary geopolitical scholarship underscores that geography fundamentally shapes the distribution of power and strategic behavior (Gyorgy, 1944; Cohen, 2015). In this context, the Indian Ocean’s centrality to global commerce—carrying a substantial proportion of the world’s oil shipments and maritime trade—renders it a strategic arena where economic influence and naval capability intersect (Dikshit, 2017). As globalization deepens interdependence, maritime security and control over chokepoints have become critical determinants of national power.

In the post-Cold War and post-9/11 era, the Indian Ocean has witnessed renewed strategic attention driven by energy security, maritime commerce, and the emergence of Asian powers (Chaturvedi, 1998). China’s

economic transformation since the late 1970s has dramatically increased its reliance on imported hydrocarbons, much of which transits through the Strait of Malacca (Hyung, 2002). This vulnerability—often termed the “Malacca Dilemma”—has motivated China to diversify its maritime access and logistical infrastructure (Chaudhari, 2015). Investments in port facilities at Gwadar, Hambantota, Kyaukpyu, and Djibouti represent efforts to secure supply chains and enhance strategic depth (Kondapalli, 2015; Mayivagan, 2017). While officially framed as commercial and developmental ventures, these projects possess dual-use potential, raising concerns about military projection and strategic encirclement (Bhaskar, 2010; Indurthy, 2016). For India, whose geographical location places it at the center of the Indian Ocean, these developments are viewed through a realist lens emphasizing balance of power and maritime security. India’s maritime doctrine prioritizes sea control, sea denial, and the safeguarding of sea lines of communication to preserve its strategic autonomy (Dikshit, 2017).

India’s response has involved diplomatic, economic, and strategic initiatives designed to reinforce its role in the Indo-Pacific order. Through the Act East Policy, India has sought deeper engagement with Southeast Asia to enhance connectivity and strategic convergence (Devare, 2006). The articulation of the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine reflects India’s commitment to cooperative security and regional stability (Andrews, 2016). Participation in multilateral arrangements such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) further indicates a strategic alignment aimed at maintaining a rules-based maritime order (Panda, 2013). The evolving Indo-Pacific construct integrates the Indian and Pacific Oceans into a unified geopolitical space, reflecting shifting power dynamics and the diffusion of strategic competition beyond traditional regional boundaries (Dodds, 2007). Nevertheless, India–China relations remain characterized by competitive coexistence rather than inevitable confrontation, as economic interdependence persists despite geopolitical tensions (Indurthy, 2016). Smaller littoral states navigate between major powers to maximize developmental gains while preserving sovereignty (Chaturvedi, 1998). Thus, the Indian Ocean Region today represents a complex strategic geography where history, economic interdependence, maritime security, and balance-of-power politics converge to shape the contours of the

emerging global order.

Literature review:

Theories of geopolitics have played an important role in understanding political power and its connection with geography. These theories explain how political ideologies and geographical location influence state behavior. Many scholars argue that expansion has always been central to geopolitics. Powerful states often try to control strategic locations because such areas provide military, economic, and political advantages. In this study, different geopolitical approaches are used to understand the importance of the Indian Ocean. The significance of the Indian Ocean is widely recognized, especially in the age of globalization. Today, maritime trade in resources, communication, and international interaction has increased rapidly. As a result, the Indian Ocean has become a key space of global economic and strategic activity.

In recent years, new developments have further increased the importance of the region. There is growing competition for power between the United States and China. The Obama administration introduced the “rebalance” or “pivot to Asia” strategy, which later contributed to the idea of the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the “Maritime Silk Road” initiative under the Belt and Road Initiative. Apart from traditional power rivalry, the region also faces non-traditional security challenges such as piracy and natural disasters. In this context, China sending submarines to Sri Lanka should not be seen as surprising. For India, as a resident power in the region, these developments create both challenges and opportunities. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has shown greater interest in the Indian Ocean, reflected in high-level visits and the commissioning of new naval vessels during the early period of his government (Kondapalli, 2015). At present, India and China are competitors rather than close partners. Both countries aim to expand their regional and global influence, although China currently has greater economic and military power. China has invested heavily in developing the deep-sea port at Gwadar in Pakistan’s Baluchistan province. This port supports China’s ambition to develop a blue-water navy and strengthen its power projection in the Indian Ocean. It also helps China secure oil and gas supplies from the Persian Gulf. In addition, China has sought access to ports and facilities in countries such as the Maldives and Seychelles. China has also improved connectivity through

Myanmar by upgrading the Stilwell Road and linking it to Yunnan province, gaining access to the port of Sittwe in the Bay of Bengal. Through partnerships with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, China aims to protect its sea lines of communication, through which it imports a large portion of its oil from the Middle East and Africa. At the same time, these relationships may limit India’s influence in the Indian Ocean. This strategy is often referred to as the “String of Pearls” (Indurthy, 2016).

The growing presence of major powers in the Indian Ocean has also raised concerns about peace and stability. The deployment of sea power by powerful states has become more common in recent decades, which may increase tensions in the region (Alford, 1980). Many littoral states of the Indian Ocean feel concerned about this militarization. Although the nature of sea power has changed since the time of scholars like Mackinder and Mahan, it remains flexible, visible, and influential (House, 1984). Critical geopolitics offers another perspective. It questions how environmental security issues are defined and used in political discussions. While environmental challenges in the Indian Ocean are real, different countries and social groups view them differently. Understanding ecological threats requires examining how knowledge about environmental degradation and sustainable development is produced and used for political purposes (Chaturvedi, 1998). In 2008, India hosted the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, bringing together naval chiefs from the region. This initiative highlighted the Indian Navy’s growing role in foreign and security policy. It also showed India’s interest in promoting multilateral cooperation in maritime security. Unlike earlier periods when India was suspicious of foreign navies in the region, it now shows willingness to cooperate. However, it remains uncertain whether India can successfully lead a genuine multilateral maritime framework. Historically, India has sought a dominant role in the Indian Ocean, but limited economic and military capabilities restricted its ambitions. As India’s capabilities grow, its regional ambitions are also increasing. At the same time, India is trying to respond to the challenges created by China’s expanding presence in the region (Pant, 2009). Today, both India and China are major economic powers with growing global influence. Their competition is clearly visible in the Indian Ocean, where both countries seek greater control over maritime routes and strategic spaces.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine the strategic and geopolitical significance of the Indian Ocean Region.
2. To evaluate the implications of China's growing presence for India's national security and foreign policy.
3. To assess the impact of maritime competition on India–China bilateral relations.

Research Questions:

1. Why has the Indian Ocean Region become strategically significant in contemporary geopolitics?
2. To what extent does China's growing presence in the region pose strategic challenges to India?
3. How is the evolving power competition in the Indian Ocean reshaping India–China bilateral relations?

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in descriptive, comparative, and content analytical approaches in order to systematically examine the evolving geopolitics of the Indian Ocean and the strategic interaction between India and China. The descriptive method is employed to trace the historical evolution and strategic transformation of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This approach enables a chronological reconstruction of maritime geopolitics, beginning from ancient trade networks and colonial domination to Cold War militarization and contemporary Indo-Pacific realignments. Through descriptive analysis, the study explains how structural shifts—such as decolonization, globalization, energy interdependence, and China's rise—have progressively reshaped the strategic salience of the region. It also contextualizes key developments such as the emergence of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), expansion of port infrastructure, naval modernization, and India's maritime doctrines. By presenting these developments in a structured narrative, the descriptive method establishes the empirical foundation necessary for deeper theoretical interpretation.

The comparative method is used to systematically evaluate the maritime strategies of India and China. Rather than examining each country in isolation, the study compares their strategic doctrines, naval capabilities, alliance networks, infrastructure investments, and

geopolitical objectives. For instance, China's Maritime Silk Road and overseas port development are assessed alongside India's Act East Policy, SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), and participation in multilateral frameworks such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. The comparative approach highlights similarities—such as both states' dependence on sea lines of communication—and differences, particularly in strategic posture, alliance orientation, and power projection capability. This method allows for identification of patterns of strategic balancing, competition, and selective cooperation. By juxtaposing the two strategies, the study clarifies whether the interaction represents zero-sum rivalry, defensive balancing, or competitive coexistence.

Content analysis method involves systematic examination of primary strategic documents, including defence white papers, maritime security strategies, policy statements, and official speeches. Chinese defence white papers emphasizing “open seas protection” and India's maritime security doctrines are analysed to interpret declared intentions and evolving strategic priorities. Content analysis enables the researcher to identify recurring themes such as energy security, freedom of navigation, regional connectivity, and strategic autonomy. By analysing language, emphasis, and conceptual framing within official documents, the study assesses how both states construct maritime threats and justify policy responses. This method strengthens the analytical rigor of the research by grounding interpretations in documented policy evidence rather than speculative assumptions.

The theoretical framework guiding the study integrates Balance of Power Theory, Maritime Security Theory, and the Indo-Pacific Geopolitical Framework. Balance of Power Theory explains how the rise of China as a maritime power generates counterbalancing behaviour by India and other regional actors. As China expands its naval presence and port access across the Indian Ocean, India responds through strategic partnerships and military modernization, reflecting classical balancing dynamics. Maritime Security Theory provides insight into the protection of sea lines of communication, chokepoint control, and naval deterrence as central components of national security in maritime regions. Given that both India and China rely heavily on ocean-borne trade and energy imports, maritime vulnerability becomes a core strategic concern. Finally,

the Indo-Pacific Geopolitical Framework conceptualizes the Indian and Pacific Oceans as a single strategic continuum, redefining regional alignments and institutional cooperation. Together, these theoretical lenses provide a multidimensional understanding of the evolving maritime competition shaping the Indian Ocean Region.

DISCUSSION

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has emerged as one of the most strategically significant maritime spaces in contemporary geopolitics. Its geopolitical centrality derives from geography, resources, trade connectivity, and its role in global power transitions. Stretching from the eastern coast of Africa to the western shores of Australia, and linking the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean connects some of the most economically dynamic and politically sensitive regions of the world. Nearly one-third of the global population resides in its littoral states, and the region carries approximately two-thirds of global oil shipments and a substantial proportion of containerized trade. The strategic sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) passing through chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Malacca make the region indispensable for global energy security and international commerce. Any disruption in these maritime corridors would have immediate consequences for global markets, making the Indian Ocean not merely a regional maritime space but a pillar of the global economic system. Historically, the Indian Ocean has been central to trade networks and imperial competition. From ancient maritime trade routes linking Rome, India, and Southeast Asia to European colonial domination by Portugal, the Netherlands, France, and Britain, control of the Indian Ocean has long translated into economic and political power. During the Cold War, the region gained renewed prominence as the United States and the Soviet Union expanded naval presence to secure influence. The establishment of military facilities such as Diego Garcia reinforced the strategic logic that maritime dominance ensures geopolitical leverage. In the contemporary era, globalization and interdependence have further elevated the Indian Ocean's importance. Rising Asian economies—particularly China and India—depend heavily on maritime trade for energy imports, industrial raw materials, and export markets. Consequently, maritime security in the Indian Ocean has become directly linked to national

economic stability and state power.

China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean represents one of the most significant geopolitical developments of the twenty-first century. China's economic transformation has dramatically increased its reliance on maritime trade routes, especially for energy imports from the Middle East and Africa. Over 80 percent of China's oil imports transit through the Strait of Malacca, creating strategic vulnerability often described as the "Malacca Dilemma." In response, China has pursued a strategy of diversifying trade routes and strengthening maritime infrastructure through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly its Maritime Silk Road component. Investments in ports such as Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, and Djibouti in the Horn of Africa reflect a broader attempt to secure logistical access and ensure uninterrupted trade flows. Officially, China frames these initiatives as development-oriented infrastructure partnerships promoting connectivity and economic growth. However, from India's perspective, these developments raise concerns regarding potential dual-use facilities capable of supporting naval operations. The establishment of China's first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017 marked a symbolic shift from a traditionally continental military posture to an outward-looking maritime strategy. Chinese naval deployments in anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden and submarine patrols in the Indian Ocean further signal expanding operational reach. While these activities may be justified under the rubric of maritime security and protection of overseas interests, they nonetheless alter the regional balance of power. For India, China's expanding footprint in the Indian Ocean has direct implications for national security and foreign policy. India's geography places it at the center of the Indian Ocean, with a coastline extending over 7,500 kilometers and island territories such as the Andaman and Nicobar Islands positioned near the Strait of Malacca. Approximately ninety percent of India's trade by volume is sea-borne, and a significant proportion of its energy imports originate in the Gulf region. Thus, maritime security is not optional but foundational to India's economic growth and strategic autonomy. The perception that Chinese-supported ports encircle the Indian subcontinent has generated debate within Indian strategic circles about possible encirclement or "strategic squeeze." Even if these facilities are primarily commercial, their strategic proximity to India's maritime approaches

heightens sensitivity. In response, India has recalibrated its foreign and defense policies to strengthen maritime capabilities and strategic partnerships. The Act East Policy has intensified engagement with Southeast Asian countries, while India has expanded naval exercises and defense cooperation with the United States, Japan, and Australia. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue reflects a broader convergence among Indo-Pacific democracies seeking to preserve a rules-based maritime order. India has also articulated the SAGAR doctrine, emphasizing cooperative security and regional stability. Naval modernization, expansion of maritime domain awareness systems, and increased surveillance capacity demonstrate India's determination to maintain credible deterrence in its surrounding waters. These policy adjustments illustrate how China's presence influences India's strategic behavior, reinforcing balancing dynamics consistent with classical balance of power theory.

Maritime competition in the Indian Ocean also affects India–China bilateral relations more broadly. Although the two countries share extensive economic ties and participate in multilateral forums such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, strategic distrust persists. Border tensions along the Line of Actual Control, including standoffs in Doklam and Ladakh, intersect with maritime concerns to create a multidimensional rivalry. The maritime domain adds a new layer to traditional continental disputes. For China, India's growing cooperation with the United States and participation in the Indo-Pacific framework may appear as containment. For India, China's infrastructure investments in neighboring countries may signal attempts to erode India's traditional sphere of influence. Despite these tensions, the relationship is characterized not by open confrontation but by competitive coexistence. Economic interdependence tempers escalation, and both states remain cautious of triggering direct military conflict. Instead, competition unfolds through infrastructure diplomacy, strategic signaling, naval presence, and alliance-building. Smaller littoral states often leverage this rivalry to attract investment from both sides while maintaining strategic autonomy. The Indian Ocean thus becomes a theatre of influence rather than overt conflict. The broader Indo-Pacific construct further shapes the dynamics of maritime competition. By linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans into a single strategic space, the Indo-Pacific framework expands the scope of geopolitical alignment. It reflects recognition that developments in

the South China Sea and the Western Pacific directly affect the Indian Ocean. This conceptual shift underscores the interdependence of maritime theaters and reinforces the strategic importance of coalition-building. At the same time, it increases China's perception of encirclement, potentially intensifying rivalry.

Conclusion:

The strategic and geopolitical significance of the Indian Ocean Region lies in its centrality to global trade, energy security, and power projection. China's expanding presence in the region reflects both economic imperatives and strategic ambition, reshaping regional balance. For India, these developments necessitate policy recalibration to safeguard national security and preserve strategic autonomy. Maritime competition has become an integral component of India–China relations, adding complexity to an already sensitive bilateral relationship. While rivalry appears likely to persist, the future stability of the region will depend on crisis management mechanisms, confidence-building measures, and adherence to international maritime norms. The Indian Ocean will continue to shape the evolving architecture of global geopolitics in the decades ahead.

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