

# Indo-Pacific Geopolitics and the Indian Ocean: Strategic Convergence and Competition between India and China

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolving geopolitical dynamics of the Indian Ocean within the broader Indo-Pacific framework, with special focus on China's growing influence and India's strategic response. The Indian Ocean has emerged as a vital region due to its strategic sea lanes, energy routes, and increasing global trade flows. Both India and China depend heavily on maritime security for their economic growth and energy supplies. As China expands its economic and naval presence through port development, naval modernization, and the Belt and Road Initiative, the strategic environment of the region is undergoing significant change. Chinese investments in ports such as Gwadar and Hambantota, along with regular naval deployments and the establishment of a military base in Djibouti, indicate a long-term maritime strategy. India views these developments with caution because the Indian Ocean has traditionally been central to its national security and regional influence. In response, India has strengthened its naval capabilities, enhanced maritime surveillance, and developed strategic partnerships with countries such as the United States, Japan, and Australia under the Quad framework. Through its SAGAR vision, India promotes regional cooperation, maritime security, and sustainable development for smaller Indian Ocean states. The study argues that India-China interactions in the Indian Ocean reflect both convergence and competition. While both countries share interests in secure sea lanes and regional stability, strategic mistrust and balancing behavior shape their policies. Direct military conflict remains unlikely due to economic interdependence and global trade considerations. Overall, the Indian Ocean has become a key arena of cautious strategic rivalry, where cooperation and competition coexist within a shifting balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region.

**Keywords:** Indian Ocean Region, Indo-Pacific Geopolitics, China's Maritime Expansion, India's Geostrategic Interests, Maritime Security and Strategic Competition

## INTRODUCTION

The Indian Ocean Region has emerged as one of the most strategically significant geopolitical spaces in the twenty-first century. It connects the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Australia through vital sea lanes of communication. Nearly two-thirds of global oil shipments and a large proportion of global trade pass through the Indian Ocean (Kaplan, 2010). This maritime space links the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Malacca, which are among the most important chokepoints in the world economy. Because of this connectivity, the Indian Ocean has

become central to global energy security and international commerce. Historically, the Indian Ocean was dominated by colonial powers, particularly Britain. During the Cold War, it became a zone of superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. After the Cold War, however, the region experienced a relative decline in strategic attention. This situation changed rapidly in the early twenty-first century with the rise of China and the economic growth of India. The growing dependence of Asian economies on Middle Eastern energy and African resources increased the strategic value of maritime routes (Brewster, 2014). The emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical concept has further enhanced the

**How to cite this Article:** Rawat, Rikender (2025). Indo-Pacific Geopolitics and the Indian Ocean: Strategic Convergence and Competition between India and China. *Internat. J. Appl. Soc. Sci.*, 12 (11 & 12) : 1079-1086.

importance of the Indian Ocean. The Indo-Pacific links the Indian and Pacific Oceans into a single strategic system (Medcalf, 2020). This concept reflects the growing integration of trade, security, and political relations across these maritime spaces. It also reflects concerns about China's expanding influence. As a result, the Indian Ocean is no longer seen as a secondary theatre. It is now a central arena of strategic convergence and competition between major powers, especially India and China.

The strategic importance of the Indian Ocean can be understood through classical and contemporary geopolitical theories. Alfred Thayer Mahan argued that sea power determines global power (Mahan, 1890). According to Mahan, nations that control sea routes, naval bases, and maritime commerce gain strategic advantage. His theory remains relevant in analyzing China's naval modernization and India's maritime ambitions. Nicholas Spykman's Rimland theory also emphasized the importance of coastal regions surrounding Eurasia (Spykman, 1942). The Indian Ocean littoral forms a critical part of this Rimland. Control or influence over this region provides access to both continental and maritime domains. Modern structural realism provides additional insight. Waltz (1979) argued that the anarchic international system compels states to seek security through power accumulation. States balance against rising powers to maintain equilibrium. Walt (1987) further argued that states balance against threats, not just power. China's growing naval presence and port development projects in the Indian Ocean are perceived by India as potential threats. This perception influences India's strategic partnerships and defense modernization. Power transition theory also helps explain the dynamics of India-China competition. When a rising power challenges existing regional hierarchies, strategic tension increases (Allison, 2017). China's economic and military rise has altered the balance of power in Asia. India, as a regional power, seeks to prevent strategic marginalization. Therefore, competition in the Indian Ocean reflects broader structural changes in global power distribution.

China's economic transformation has significantly increased its dependence on maritime trade. Approximately 80 percent of China's oil imports pass through the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca (Kaplan, 2010). This dependence has generated what Chinese strategists call the "Malacca Dilemma." To reduce vulnerability, China has invested heavily in naval

modernization and overseas infrastructure. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013, represents a major component of China's global strategy. The Maritime Silk Road component focuses on port development and connectivity across the Indian Ocean (Rolland, 2017). Chinese-funded ports such as Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and facilities in Djibouti have attracted global attention. Some analysts describe this network as a "String of Pearls" strategy aimed at encircling India (Pehrson, 2006). However, other scholars argue that many of these projects are commercially motivated rather than purely military (Blanchard, 2018). Nevertheless, China's establishment of its first overseas military base in Djibouti indicates a shift toward sustained naval presence. China has also expanded anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden and increased submarine deployments in the Indian Ocean (Erickson, 2013). China's naval modernization includes aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, and advanced destroyers. These developments reflect its aspiration to become a blue-water navy capable of operating far from its shores. Such expansion has strategic implications for India, which historically viewed the Indian Ocean as its primary sphere of influence (Brewster, 2014). India's maritime outlook has evolved significantly in the past two decades. Traditionally, India's strategic focus was continental, particularly regarding Pakistan and China along its land borders. However, growing Chinese maritime presence has encouraged India to adopt a more proactive naval strategy (Mohan, 2012).

India's "Act East Policy" and its SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision emphasize regional cooperation and maritime security. India has strengthened naval partnerships with the United States, Japan, and Australia through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). These partnerships aim to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific (Pant, 2019). India has also expanded naval modernization programs, including aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, and surveillance capabilities. Additionally, India has developed strategic infrastructure in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which are located near the Strait of Malacca. This location provides India with strategic leverage in monitoring maritime traffic. Despite competition, India and China maintain significant economic ties. Bilateral trade remains substantial. Therefore, India's strategy combines balancing with selective engagement (Saran, 2018). India seeks to prevent Chinese dominance while avoiding direct

confrontation.

The Indo-Pacific concept has reshaped strategic discourse. It recognizes that security in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean is interconnected. Medcalf (2020) argues that the Indo-Pacific reflects shared interests among democratic maritime powers. The concept emphasizes freedom of navigation, rule of law, and respect for sovereignty. The United States, Japan, Australia, and India support this framework. However, China views it with suspicion, seeing it as a containment strategy. Therefore, the Indo-Pacific has become both a cooperative and competitive framework. The Indian Ocean lies at the center of this system. It connects East Asia's manufacturing hubs with Middle Eastern energy suppliers. As global power shifts toward Asia, maritime routes gain greater importance. Thus, competition in the Indian Ocean reflects broader Indo-Pacific dynamics. India and China share certain common interests in the Indian Ocean. Both rely on stable sea lanes for trade and energy imports. Both participate in anti-piracy operations and regional forums. These shared interests create limited strategic convergence. However, structural competition dominates the relationship. China's port development and naval expansion raise concerns in India about encirclement and strategic marginalization. India's participation in the Quad raises concerns in China about containment. The interaction between convergence and competition creates a complex strategic environment. It is neither purely cooperative nor openly confrontational. Instead, it reflects cautious rivalry within an interconnected economic system.

### Literature review:

The intellectual roots of Indo-Pacific geopolitics lie in classical geopolitical thought. Alfred Thayer Mahan's seminal work *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (1890) established the foundational proposition that maritime supremacy determines global political dominance. Mahan argued that control over sea lines of communication (SLOCs), naval strength, and overseas bases are critical determinants of state power. His ideas remain deeply embedded in contemporary analyses of China's naval modernization and India's maritime doctrine. Nicholas Spykman (1942), through his Rimland Theory, emphasized that control over coastal fringes of Eurasia determines global influence. The Indian Ocean littoral, according to this perspective, represents a strategic pivot connecting Europe, the Middle East, Africa,

and East Asia. These classical frameworks continue to inform modern maritime security strategies. Structural realism further provides analytical grounding. Waltz (1979) argued that the anarchic international system compels states to pursue power balancing. Walt (1987) refined this through Balance of Threat Theory, suggesting that states balance against perceived threats rather than power alone. These theories are frequently applied to interpret India's strategic alignment with Quad partners in response to China's growing maritime presence. Power transition theory also informs Indo-Pacific scholarship. Allison (2017) argues that rivalry between rising and established powers often produces structural tensions, a concept widely invoked in discussions of U.S.–China competition and its spillover effects in the Indian Ocean.

The Indo-Pacific concept gained prominence in strategic discourse in the early 21st century. Medcalf (2020) defines the Indo-Pacific as a single strategic system linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans through trade, security networks, and power projection. He argues that the term reflects a geopolitical response to China's assertiveness. Malik (2019) emphasizes that India's Indo-Pacific vision is normative and inclusive, advocating a "free, open, and inclusive" regional order. In contrast, Pant (2019) interprets the Indo-Pacific as India's balancing framework designed to offset China's maritime expansion. Feigenbaum (2018) suggests that connectivity initiatives have become instruments of geopolitical influence, transforming economic corridors into strategic tools. This aligns with Rolland's (2017) argument that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a grand strategy designed to reshape Eurasian geopolitics.

China's maritime rise has attracted extensive scholarly attention. Kaplan (2010) describes the Indian Ocean as the new "center stage" of global power politics, driven by China's dependence on Middle Eastern energy supplies. Erickson (2013) documents China's rapid naval modernization, highlighting its transition toward blue-water capabilities. Holmes and Yoshihara (2008) interpret Chinese naval doctrine through a Mahanian framework, suggesting long-term ambitions for sea control. Pehrson (2006) popularized the "String of Pearls" thesis, arguing that Chinese-funded ports across the Indian Ocean—from Gwadar to Hambantota—represent strategic nodes. However, Blanchard (2018) challenges the purely militaristic interpretation, suggesting that many projects are commercially motivated. Hillman (2020) critiques BRI projects for creating economic dependencies, while

Baruah (2020) specifically analyzes how China's expanding presence in the Indian Ocean affects India's security calculations. India's maritime outlook has evolved significantly. Mohan (2012) argues that India is transitioning from continental preoccupation to maritime strategic activism. Brewster (2014) contends that India seeks to establish itself as the primary security provider in the Indian Ocean Region. Pant (2019) highlights India's engagement with the Quad as part of a broader balancing strategy. Madan (2020) demonstrates how China's assertiveness has indirectly strengthened U.S.–India strategic ties. Saran (2018), however, cautions that India seeks strategic autonomy rather than rigid alignment. Chellaney (2017) warns that unresolved structural tensions may intensify maritime rivalry. These works suggest that India's Indo-Pacific engagement reflects both defensive balancing and normative order-building. Maritime security scholarship emphasizes sea lane protection, anti-piracy operations, and naval cooperation. Le Miere (2014) underscores the importance of cooperative security mechanisms in managing maritime disputes. Bateman (2016) argues that multilateral governance remains weak in the Indian Ocean, increasing the risk of rivalry. SIPRI (2023) reports show rising military expenditure in Asia, reinforcing concerns about naval arms competition.

### Research Objectives:

1. To analyze the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean within the broader Indo-Pacific geopolitical framework.
2. To examine the nature and extent of China's maritime expansion and India's strategic response in the Indian Ocean Region.
3. To evaluate whether India–China interactions in the Indian Ocean reflect strategic convergence, competition, or a combination of both.

### Research Questions:

1. How does the Indo-Pacific framework redefine the geopolitical importance of the Indian Ocean Region?
2. In what ways has China's expanding maritime presence influenced India's foreign and security policy in the Indian Ocean?
3. Does the evolving India–China relationship in the Indian Ocean represent balancing behavior, cooperative engagement, or strategic rivalry?

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical research design to examine the evolving geopolitical dynamics between India and China in the Indian Ocean Region within the broader Indo-Pacific framework. The research problem focuses on strategic competition, maritime security, and regional power balancing, which require interpretation of political intentions, strategic behavior, and policy developments rather than numerical measurement. Therefore, the study relies primarily on secondary sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, official policy documents, defense white papers, and strategic reports from reputed institutions. The historical method is used to trace the evolution of the Indian Ocean's geopolitical importance from colonial maritime trade routes and Cold War naval rivalry to post-Cold War globalization and the contemporary Indo-Pacific construct. This approach helps situate current India–China competition within long-term structural changes in global power politics. By examining earlier naval doctrines, trade networks, and strategic alignments, the study identifies enduring patterns such as the centrality of sea lanes and chokepoints, as well as new developments including China's maritime expansion and India's growing naval activism. The historical perspective demonstrates that present tensions are not sudden but rooted in deeper geopolitical transformations linked to shifts in economic power, energy dependence, and strategic mobility across the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

In addition to historical analysis, the research employs the case study method and policy analysis method to provide a focused and systematic understanding of contemporary strategic interaction. The case study approach examines specific examples such as China's development of Gwadar and Hambantota ports, its naval facility in Djibouti, and India's Andaman and Nicobar Command and participation in the Quad framework. These cases illustrate how broader strategic objectives are implemented in practice and allow comparison of maritime expansion, naval modernization, and regional partnerships. Through these examples, the study assesses patterns of strategic asymmetry, balancing behavior, and influence projection in the Indian Ocean Region. The policy analysis method complements this approach by examining official documents including India's Maritime Security Strategy, SAGAR vision, Act

East Policy, and China's Defense White Papers and Belt and Road Initiative statements. By analyzing recurring themes such as freedom of navigation, blue-water naval capability, strategic autonomy, and peaceful development, the study interprets how each country conceptualizes security and regional order. Together, these three methods—historical analysis, case study examination, and policy analysis—provide a coherent and integrated framework. The historical method explains structural roots, the case studies reveal practical implementation, and policy analysis clarifies declared intentions and perceptions. This combination strengthens the analytical depth of the study and enables a comprehensive understanding of both strategic convergence and competition between India and China in the Indian Ocean within the evolving Indo-Pacific geopolitical landscape.

## DISCUSSION

The Indian Ocean has become one of the most important regions in global politics. Its importance comes mainly from geography, trade routes, energy flows, and military presence. The ocean connects Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Australia. It links the Pacific Ocean with Europe and the Atlantic through key maritime chokepoints. These chokepoints include the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Malacca. A very large share of the world's oil and trade moves through these routes. Because of this, the Indian Ocean plays a major role in the global economy. Many countries depend on these sea lanes for their energy supplies. Oil from the Middle East travels through the Indian Ocean to reach Asian countries such as China, India, Japan, and South Korea. Manufactured goods from East Asia also pass through the Indian Ocean on their way to Europe and Africa. If these routes are blocked or disrupted, global trade would suffer serious damage. This makes the region extremely sensitive and strategically important. The importance of the Indian Ocean is not new. In the past, European colonial powers controlled most of the trade routes in this region. Britain, in particular, used its naval power to dominate maritime trade. During the Cold War, the Indian Ocean became an area of competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. Both powers built naval facilities and sought influence in regional states. After the Cold War, attention shifted temporarily to other regions. However, the rapid rise of Asian economies brought the Indian

Ocean back into focus.

In the twenty-first century, the concept of the Indo-Pacific has changed how the Indian Ocean is understood. Earlier, policymakers used the term "Asia-Pacific." This term mainly focused on East Asia and the Pacific Ocean. The new term "Indo-Pacific" recognizes that the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean are connected in terms of trade, security, and political influence. This shift shows that India has become more important in regional politics. It also reflects the growing competition between major powers in maritime Asia. The Indo-Pacific framework views the Indian Ocean as part of a larger strategic system. It highlights the movement of goods, energy, and naval forces across both oceans. This concept is supported by countries such as India, the United States, Japan, and Australia. They promote the idea of a "free and open Indo-Pacific," which emphasizes freedom of navigation, respect for international law, and peaceful resolution of disputes. The Indian Ocean lies at the center of this framework. Another reason for the region's importance is its natural resources. The Indian Ocean contains oil, gas, fisheries, and seabed minerals. Many coastal countries depend on these resources for economic growth. As technology improves, exploration of offshore energy and deep-sea minerals is increasing. This adds another layer of strategic value. Military presence is also increasing in the Indian Ocean. Several countries have naval bases and facilities in the region. The United States maintains bases in Bahrain and Diego Garcia. China has established a base in Djibouti. India has expanded its infrastructure in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. These developments show that the Indian Ocean is becoming more militarized. Small island states and coastal countries also play an important role. Countries such as Sri Lanka, Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius are strategically located along major sea routes. Major Powers seek friendly relations with these states for access and influence. Therefore, the Indian Ocean is not only about large powers but also about regional diplomacy and competition for partnerships.

China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean is closely connected to its rapid economic rise over the last four decades. As China became one of the world's largest manufacturing hubs, its dependence on global trade increased sharply. It imports vast quantities of crude oil and natural gas, especially from the Middle East and Africa, and exports manufactured goods to markets in Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Most of this trade

moves through sea routes. Because of this heavy reliance on maritime trade, the security of sea lanes has become a core national interest for China. Any disruption in maritime routes would directly affect its economy, energy security, and domestic stability. A key strategic concern for China is the vulnerability of the Strait of Malacca. This narrow sea passage between Malaysia and Indonesia is one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. A significant portion of China's oil imports passes through this route. Chinese policymakers fear that in a time of conflict or crisis, rival powers could block or control this strait, cutting off energy supplies. This fear is often referred to as the "Malacca Dilemma." To address this vulnerability, China has adopted a multi-layered strategy that includes naval modernization, diversification of energy routes, and development of overseas ports and infrastructure. One of the most important components of China's strategy is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013. The BRI includes a maritime component known as the Maritime Silk Road. Through this initiative, China has financed and constructed ports, industrial parks, and infrastructure projects across the Indian Ocean region. Major examples include Gwadar Port in Pakistan and Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka. China has also invested in port facilities in Myanmar, Kenya, Tanzania, and other coastal states. Officially, China presents these projects as economic partnerships aimed at improving connectivity, trade, and regional development. Many host countries have welcomed Chinese investments because they provide much-needed infrastructure and financial resources.

However, these projects have also generated strategic concerns, particularly in India and some Western countries. Critics argue that while these ports are currently commercial, they could potentially serve dual purposes in the future. Ports developed with Chinese funding could provide logistical support to Chinese naval vessels, including refueling and maintenance facilities. This strategic interpretation is often described as the "String of Pearls" theory, which suggests that China is creating a network of strategic points around the Indian Ocean. Although China denies any military intent behind these projects, the possibility of future strategic use remains a subject of debate. In addition to port development, China has significantly modernized its navy. Over the past two decades, it has built advanced destroyers, frigates, nuclear-powered submarines, and aircraft carriers. The People's Liberation Army Navy

(PLAN) has expanded its operational reach beyond the Western Pacific into the Indian Ocean. Since 2008, Chinese naval vessels have participated in anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden. These missions have provided operational experience and justified a regular Chinese naval presence in the region. In 2017, China established its first overseas military base in Djibouti, located near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. This marked a historic shift in China's military policy, as it had traditionally avoided permanent overseas bases. The Djibouti base supports anti-piracy operations and peacekeeping missions, but it also enhances China's ability to project power in the western Indian Ocean. India views these developments with caution and concern. Historically, India has considered the Indian Ocean as its primary sphere of strategic interest. Due to its geographical location, India occupies a central position in the ocean, with a long coastline and island territories. The Indian Ocean is vital for India's trade and energy imports. Therefore, any increase in external military presence, especially by a neighbouring rival like China, is perceived as a potential strategic challenge.

China's investments in ports near India's maritime boundaries and the growing presence of Chinese submarines and naval ships in the region have influenced India's strategic thinking. India fears that Chinese infrastructure projects in neighbouring countries could reduce India's regional influence and create strategic encirclement. As a result, India has taken several measured but firm steps to strengthen its position. First, India has invested in modernizing its navy. It operates aircraft carriers, nuclear-powered submarines, and advanced missile systems. India has also improved its maritime surveillance capabilities through satellite systems, radar networks, and cooperation with friendly countries. Naval exercises such as the Malabar exercise have become more regular and sophisticated. These exercises enhance interoperability with partners and signal India's commitment to maritime security. Second, India has strengthened strategic partnerships. It works closely with the United States, Japan, and Australia under the framework of the Quad. Although the Quad is not a formal military alliance, it focuses on promoting a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. Through joint exercises, technology cooperation, and diplomatic coordination, India aims to balance China's growing influence. India has also expanded defense cooperation with France, Indonesia, Vietnam, and other regional

actors. India's strategic vision is also reflected in its SAGAR policy, which stands for Security and Growth for All in the Region. This approach emphasizes cooperation, capacity building, disaster relief, and economic development for Indian Ocean states. India provides patrol vessels, training programs, and humanitarian assistance to smaller island nations such as Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles. By supporting regional partners, India seeks to build trust and strengthen its role as a responsible maritime power. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands play a crucial strategic role in India's response. These islands are located near the Strait of Malacca, one of the most important global chokepoints. By improving infrastructure, airfields, and naval facilities in these islands, India enhances its ability to monitor shipping traffic and maintain a strategic presence. This geographic advantage provides India with leverage in the broader Indo-Pacific context. Despite growing competition, India and China remain economically interconnected. Bilateral trade continues at significant levels, even though trade imbalances and political tensions exist. Both countries understand the high costs of open military conflict. As a result, their rivalry in the Indian Ocean is characterized by strategic signaling, cautious competition, and indirect balancing rather than direct confrontation.

The relationship between India and China in the Indian Ocean is complex and layered. It cannot be described as purely cooperative or openly hostile. Instead, it reflects a mixture of shared interests and strategic rivalry. Both countries depend heavily on maritime trade for their economic growth. A large portion of their energy imports and export goods move through sea routes across the Indian Ocean. Because of this shared dependence, both India and China support the principle of secure sea lanes and freedom of navigation. They have participated in anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden and have contributed to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations in the region. In multilateral forums such as the East Asia Summit and the Indian Ocean Rim Association, both countries express support for regional stability and economic development. At the broader level of global governance, India and China sometimes cooperate on issues like climate change, development financing, and reform of international institutions. These areas of convergence show that the two countries recognize certain common interests in maintaining order and preventing instability in the maritime domain.

However, alongside these areas of cooperation, strategic competition has become increasingly visible. China's growing naval presence and port investments across the Indian Ocean are viewed by India as altering the traditional balance of power in a region where India has long held a central geographic and strategic position. Projects such as port development in Sri Lanka and Pakistan raise concerns in India about possible future military use, even if they are currently presented as commercial ventures. On the other hand, China views India's closer strategic partnerships with the United States, Japan, and Australia—especially within the Quad framework—as attempts to limit or counter China's influence in the Indo-Pacific. These mutual suspicions create a climate of mistrust. Competition also unfolds through economic diplomacy and development assistance. Both countries seek influence in smaller Indian Ocean states such as Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Seychelles by funding infrastructure projects, offering financial aid, and strengthening political ties. This competition is generally peaceful and conducted through economic and diplomatic tools rather than military confrontation, but it is clearly strategic in intent. Despite rising tensions, direct military conflict in the Indian Ocean remains unlikely because both countries are deeply integrated into global trade networks and understand the severe economic and political costs of war. As a result, their interaction in the region is best described as cautious balancing—each side expanding its influence and capabilities while carefully avoiding actions that could trigger open conflict.

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