

Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean: Energy Crisis and Choke Points

PANKAJ SINGH¹ AND NIRAJ KUMAR SINGH^{*2}

¹Assistant Professor and ²Sr. Assistant Professor

¹Department of Geography, DAV Degree College, Lucknow (U.P.) India

²P.G. Department of Geography, Magadh University, Bodh Gaya (Bihar) India

*Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

The Indian Ocean spans approximately 70.56 million square kilometers and serves as the world's most critical maritime corridor for global energy trade, carrying nearly 40 percent of the world's petroleum annually. This paper examines the structural interlinkage between recurring world energy crises and the strategic chokepoints regulating oil supply routes—principally the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, Strait of Malacca, and the Cape of Good Hope bypass. Drawing on historical evidence from the 1973 Arab oil embargo to the 2023–24 Houthi Red Sea campaign, the paper argues that chokepoint vulnerability is a permanent structural feature of the global energy order. It further analyses competing great-power strategies—American, Chinese, and Indian—in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and concludes with policy recommendations for energy security and multilateral maritime governance.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, Geopolitics, Energy Security, Chokepoints, Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, Strait of Malacca, Oil Supply Routes, Maritime Security, QUAD, Belt and Road Initiative

INTRODUCTION

The Indian Ocean has been described as the “highway of empire” and the “Indo-Pacific strategic arc,” a designation underscoring its centrality in both historical trade and contemporary global power. The ocean links the energy-producing nations of the Persian Gulf and the Horn of Africa to the energy-consuming economies of East and South Asia. It is, in the most literal sense, the circulatory system of industrial civilization (Kaplan, 2012).

The concept of the energy crisis has recurred in global political discourse since 1973, when OAPEC deployed the “oil weapon” against Western nations during the Yom Kippur War. That episode revealed the degree to which modern economies were hostage to the uninterrupted flow of petroleum through narrow, contestable maritime passages (Akins, 1973). The volume of oil transported by sea has since grown from under 20 million barrels per day (bpd) in 1973 to over 61 million bpd by 2023.

Chokepoints—narrow straits and channels through which this ocean-borne energy must pass—represent points of maximum strategic sensitivity. The Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Malacca together constitute what analysts call the “triple chokepoint problem” of global energy security (Mandil, 2017). Disruption at any one of these nodes sends shockwaves across the entire global economic system. This paper offers a systematic examination of these interlinkages through historical analysis, chokepoint geography, great-power competition, and policy prescription.

Historical Background:

Long before the age of petroleum, the Indian Ocean sustained the world's most extensive pre-modern trading network. Arab, Persian, Indian, Malay, and Chinese merchants navigated its waters for centuries, exploiting the predictable rhythm of the monsoon winds. The entrance of Portuguese naval power in 1498 inaugurated the first systematic attempt to impose maritime hegemony

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over the Indian Ocean through control of strategic nodes—Hormuz, Goa, Malacca, and Mozambique.

British maritime supremacy, consolidated between the late eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, created the institutional infrastructure upon which modern chokepoint politics rests. The 1869 opening of the Suez Canal rendered the Red Sea–Bab-el-Mandeb corridor one of the world’s most strategically vital passages (Headrick, 1988). The discovery of oil in Persia in 1908 and across the Arabian Peninsula thereafter transformed the Indian Ocean’s strategic significance fundamentally. British strategists explicitly framed defence of Persian Gulf oil export routes as the core of imperial security.

The 1968 British withdrawal “East of Suez” created a vacuum both superpowers moved to fill. The United States established Diego Garcia as a major naval base in 1971. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979) and the Iranian Revolution prompted President Carter’s landmark 1980 declaration that any outside attempt to control the Persian Gulf would be “repelled by any means necessary, including military force”—the Carter Doctrine, which remains operative American policy today (Brzezinski, 1983).

Anatomy of the Chokepoints:

Strait of Hormuz:

The Strait of Hormuz, connecting the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman, is at its narrowest approximately 34 kilometres wide with navigable channels of only three kilometres in each direction. Through this passage transited approximately 20.5 million bpd in 2022—roughly 21 per cent of global petroleum consumption and over 30 per cent of all seaborne oil trade. Any sustained closure would remove the combined exports of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, the UAE, Bahrain, and Qatar from the world market. Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy maintains fast-attack craft, anti-ship missiles, and minelaying assets specifically designed for area-denial operations within the strait. The September 2019 Abqaiq-Khuras attacks—removing 5.7 million bpd from Saudi output—demonstrated the precision of modern asymmetric energy warfare (EIA, 2023).

Bab-el-Mandeb:

The “Gate of Grief,” approximately 29 kilometres wide, links the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden. Approximately 8.8 million bpd transited it in 2023 (World Energy Outlook, 2023). The Houthi missile and drone campaign

commencing November 2023 compelled over 60 major shipping companies—including Maersk, Hapag-Lloyd, and BP—to divert vessels around the Cape of Good Hope, adding 10,000 kilometres and 10–14 days to Asia–Europe voyages. Insurance premiums for Red Sea transits increased by over 1,000 per cent in early 2024 (Lloyd’s List Intelligence, 2024).

Strait of Malacca:

Stretching 900 kilometres between the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra, the Strait of Malacca carries over 80 per cent of Japan’s and South Korea’s oil imports and over 60 per cent of China’s crude oil imports. At its narrowest, the Phillips Channel near Singapore measures only 2.8 kilometres (Singapore: MPA, 2023). China’s profound anxiety—what President Hu Jintao termed the “Malacca Dilemma” in 2003—has driven Beijing’s construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Gwadar deep-water port, and Kyaukpyu (Myanmar) as alternative energy transit routes bypassing Malacca (Zha, 2015).

Cape of Good Hope Route:

Though not a chokepoint in the classic sense, the Cape route is the primary bypass when the Red Sea–Suez corridor is disrupted. The March 2021 grounding of the container vessel *Ever Given* blocked approximately \$9.6 billion in daily trade for six days and diverted over 400 vessels around the Cape, illustrating vividly how disruption at one node cascades across the entire global logistics chain (UNCTAD, 2021).

The Energy Crisis–Chokepoint Nexus:

The 1973 OPEC oil embargo—lasting October 1973 to March 1974—tripling the oil price and demonstrating that energy supply was a sovereign weapon of enormous potency. Its effectiveness derived directly from the geographic concentration of production in the Persian Gulf and the inescapable necessity of maritime transit through Indian Ocean chokepoints (Yergin, 1991). The IEA, established in 1974 as a direct institutional response, embodies the new understanding of energy as national security.

The Iran-Iraq “Tanker War” (1984–88) brought chokepoint disruption from theory to practice—over 450 ships were attacked, prompting the United States to reflag Kuwaiti tankers and deploy naval escorts (Operation Earnest Will, 1987), establishing a precedent of direct

American military intervention to keep Hormuz open (Naval Institute Press, 2007). Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait threatened to place 40 per cent of world oil reserves under a single hostile state, precipitating the Gulf War.

The 2019–2024 period has witnessed a remarkable concentration of chokepoint-linked energy crises: the Abqaiq-Khuras attacks (2019); the near-war US–Iran clash following Soleimani's assassination (2020); the Ever Given blockage (2021); the Russia-Ukraine war's European energy disruption—which dramatically increased Middle Eastern LNG transit through the IOR; and the Houthi Red Sea campaign (2023–24). Global LNG trade volumes rose approximately 6 per cent in 2023, the Indian Ocean serving as the principal transit corridor.

Great Power Competition in the Indian Ocean: *United States*

American strategic engagement in the IOR has been anchored by three imperatives: protecting Persian Gulf oil supply, maintaining freedom of navigation, and preventing hostile hegemony over the rimland. The US Fifth Fleet (Bahrain) and bases at Diego Garcia, Camp Lemonnier (Djibouti), and Al Udeid (Qatar) constitute the material infrastructure of American maritime dominance (Till, 2013). However, the “shale revolution,” the “pivot to Asia,” and China's naval rise have collectively constrained American primacy. The 2024 Operation Prosperity Guardian—the US-led coalition against Houthi attacks—was notable for the reluctance of several key allies to formally join, suggesting the limits of American coalition leadership in the contemporary IOR.

China's String of Pearls and BRI:

China imports approximately 75 per cent of its oil consumption, the majority through Indian Ocean chokepoints. Beijing's multi-layered Indian Ocean strategy encompasses the Belt and Road Initiative's Maritime Silk Road, port investments across the littoral, and a gradually expanding naval presence (Collins and Murray, 2008). The “String of Pearls”—key nodes at Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka, leased 2017), Chittagong (Bangladesh), and Djibouti (China's first overseas military base, 2017)—describes a network of Chinese-supported facilities from the South China Sea to the Arabian Sea. By 2024, China had commissioned its third carrier, the Fujian, equipped with electromagnetic

catapults, significantly enhancing PLAN power-projection in the IOR.

India: SAGAR Doctrine

India occupies a unique position—the only major power whose territory is genuinely rimland, with a coastline of 7,500 kilometres and an EEZ of 2.37 million square kilometres. Approximately 77 per cent of India's trade by value is seaborne. Prime Minister Modi's 2015 SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine frames India as the preferred “net security provider” of the IOR. This has been operationalised through the Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) at Gurugram (2018) and White Shipping Agreements with over 20 nations.

Quad Framework and India's Energy Security:

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), comprising the US, India, Japan, and Australia, has emerged as the most significant multilateral maritime security framework in the contemporary IOR. Revived in 2017, QUAD has developed from informal strategic conversation into structured naval interoperability through the Malabar exercise—now including all four members (Madan, 2017). However, India's commitment to “strategic autonomy” limits QUAD's evolution into a formal collective defence arrangement analogous to NATO.

India is the world's third-largest oil consumer, importing over 80 per cent of its crude requirements, the majority from the Persian Gulf through Hormuz. Post-2022, India significantly increased Russian crude imports—rising to over 35 per cent of Indian oil imports by 2023—enhancing energy cost competitiveness while complicating Western partner relations. India's International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) through Iran and the Chabahar Port project represent efforts to develop multimodal energy transit infrastructure reducing chokepoint dependence.

Non-Traditional Security Threats:

Somali piracy at its 2008–2012 peak cost the global shipping industry an estimated \$7 billion annually. Its suppression through EU Operation Atalanta, NATO Operation Ocean Shield, and Combined Task Force 151 demonstrated the value of cooperative international naval action against non-state maritime threats.

The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (2021) projects

Indian Ocean sea-level rise of 0.3–1.0 metres by 2100, threatening low-lying island states, delta-region port infrastructure, and naval basing arrangements. Additionally, the Indian Ocean contains over 400 submarine communications cables carrying approximately 99 per cent of global international data traffic. The 2022 Nord Stream sabotage in the Baltic Sea drew attention to the acute vulnerability of undersea energy and communications infrastructure in contested maritime regions.

Policy Recommendations:

First, Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) must be expanded. India's IFC-IOR represents a promising institutional nucleus, but gaps in sensor coverage and data-sharing limit its effectiveness. Its partner network should be extended to all major IOR littoral states, with a transparent rules-based data-sharing protocol.

Second, energy diversification and infrastructure resilience are essential. The IEA's Net Zero by 2050 Roadmap projects global oil demand falling to 24 million bpd (from 100+ million bpd in 2023), which would substantially reduce chokepoint vulnerability over the long term. Near-term measures include expanding strategic petroleum reserves across import-dependent Asian economies, developing alternative pipeline routes, and investing in domestic refinery and storage capacity.

Third, inclusive multilateral governance is needed. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) provides economic cooperation architecture but lacks security governance capacity. This paper recommends developing an Indian Ocean Maritime Security Dialogue (IOMSD)—open to all major stakeholders including China and the US—to provide a standing multilateral forum for confidence-building, incident prevention, and chokepoint crisis management (Brewster, 2015).

Conclusion:

The Indian Ocean is not merely a geographic space but a geopolitical system defined by the interlocking logics of energy dependence, chokepoint geography, great-power competition, and state vulnerability. The structural interlinkage between the world energy system and the Indian Ocean's strategic chokepoints is permanent, not contingent—it will persist as long as the world's principal energy sources are concentrated in the Persian Gulf and transported by sea to the consuming economies of Asia and Europe.

The historical record demonstrates that chokepoint disruptions—whether caused by state actors, non-state groups, or natural events—reliably produce energy market shocks with cascading global economic consequences. The 1973 embargo, the Tanker War, the 2019 Abqaiq attacks, the Ever Given grounding, and the 2023–24 Houthi campaign constitute a pattern that must be addressed with policy urgency proportionate to the stakes involved.

The rise of China as an Indian Ocean power, India's emergence as a net security provider, and the relative constraint on American primacy define the current transitional moment in IOR geopolitical history. The challenge for regional and global governance is to manage this transition in ways that preserve the open, rules-based maritime order upon which global prosperity depends—through institutions, norms, and shared interests rather than the dangerous logic of exclusive hegemony and reciprocal blockade. The answer to this challenge will largely determine the trajectory of global energy security in the twenty-first century.

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