

Geopolitical Dynamics In The Indian Ocean Region: Investigating The Landscape Of Emerging Great Game Through The Lens Of Realism

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Abstract:

Geopolitical Dynamics in the Indian Ocean Region: This study examines the evolving landscape in the Indian Ocean, marked by an emerging great game among major powers. In an era of shaping geostrategic realignments, the Indian Ocean Region has presented itself as the theater of intense and complex power competition among status quo and emerging powers. The intricate security calculus of the region has diverse dimensions propelled by the intersecting interests of key players like the United States, China, Russia, India, and other regional actors.

The Indian Ocean's geostrategic location, economic potential, and proximity to energy sources have made it a focal point for global players. The region faces a tug-of-war-like situation with revisionist states like China and Russia asserting their influence and the status quo west led by the United States seeking to maintain the balance. The strategic competition will not only decide the hierarchy of regional order but will also greatly impact the architect of the world order. In this context, smaller states in the Indian Ocean Region are caught between conflicting interests, thus presenting complex challenges. Realism serves as the primary theoretical lens, shedding light on power struggles, competition, and self-interest among states. By analyzing Realism within the scope of this evolving landscape, the study aims to comprehend the implications of these geopolitical dynamics for the key players, emerging alliances, and the evolving world order.

Keywords: Indian Ocean Region, Geopolitical, World Order, Great Game, Realism, Security Calculus, Strategic Competition, Strategic Environment Scan, Militarization of the Region, Net Security.

Introduction

The Indian Ocean is the third largest water body after the Pacific & Atlantic oceans. Stretched over 70.5 million square kilometers, it covers almost 14% of the earth and 20% of water surfaces, respectively (Pidwirny, 2021). Its geostrategic location, enormous economic potential, proximity to incipient global powers, and extensive stated interests of extra-regional actors make it unique. Eurasia's evolving power politics matrix is simmering and waiting for the boiling point. As part of the revisionist bloc, China and Russia are bugling pulverization of the prevalent world order. On the other hand, the West still needs to be ready to reconcile with the new adjustment plan. The rising political temperature has put this region in peril, where covert and overt diplomatic maneuvers among crucial players make the abstract mosaic clearer. These players constitute different strategic triangles to equate the balance of each other. However, these efforts to balance are further compounding the imbalance. Like the Cold War era, great powers are aligning themselves with like-minded states, while options for smaller states to stay neutral are marginal.

In this tug of war, one can easily differentiate two contesting wills: China asserting its emerging role in global politics. At the same time, the status quo West still needs to be ready to cede space, leading the world in concert with the United States since the end of the Cold War. However, in the last decade, the dynamics of global politics have changed drastically, where the omnipotent stature of the United States has been impugned. Russia invaded Ukraine, and China has started emphatically sounding its claims over Taiwan. Nonetheless, to be assertive in its claims, China will have to articulate its military options besides other politico-

economic options in IOR and the South China Sea, which will not be digestible to the US and its allies, including regional actors like India and Japan. These decussating motives have brought the region under the world's sharp focus. On the one hand, the theories are finding their relevance to the emerging trends, while on the other hand, practitioners or policymakers of key global players are realigning and redefining their strategies. The ground has been leveled to craft new alliances, where the United States and its allies in the hub-and-spook model are pursuing to counter rising and aspiring China, which is also ready with its deck of cards.

The research attempts to parse the emerging great game amongst key global players with divergent interests under the fog of distrust between the partners and competitors. In addition, unlike any other playground of the previous conflicts, IOR, being a nuclearized zone, has a different complexion with fatal consequences for the world. Juxtaposed with the changed dynamics of global politics where new vital players like China have emerged, the players may go all the way to pursue their designs. It is a now-or-never situation for both sides, where whoever blinks first would lose its status and stature. The stakes are so high; that is why bets are even higher.

Moreover, this paper has been written to find out the contesting interests of key global players in IOR and the potential of this tussle to convert into a conflict, thus underlining its implications to alter the world order, which is already under challenge. In this endeavor, realist theory has been applied to the scenario to draw different competing perspectives. The research has been carried out primarily using a qualitative approach. However, the need for more literature and any study specifically applying different IR theories to practical conflict situations in the region remains challenging. Nonetheless, the research is based on available secondary resources and its evaluation.

Indian Ocean Region: An Explanatory Study

This section sets the stage to evaluate the geostrategic significance and economic potential of the Indian Ocean, which makes it inimitable for everyone around and beyond. The region has all the attributes that interest global players contesting for the future world power arrangement.

Geography

This rich water body extends in the north up to the Indian subcontinent, in the West to Africa, in the east to Australia, and towards the south to the Antarctic Ocean. It is considered the most complex sea, containing marginal seas, important choke points in the form of straits, connecting lakes through bays, and extensive archipelagoes. Fifty-one coastal and landlocked states depend on this ocean, of which twenty-six are considered Indian Ocean Rim states, five Red Sea states, thirteen landlocked states, and several smaller and bigger islands. In the extreme north, the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf are connected with the Indian Ocean through the most significant choke point- the Strait of Hormuz, while the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea are connected through another choke point – Bab al Mandab. The two other critical choke points are the Strait of Malacca (between Indonesia and Malaysia) and the Suez Canal (under Egypt's control). These bottlenecks offer themselves as levers for exploitation and the source of any contest or conflict.

Important Statistics and Potentials

Though it is the third largest water body, it connects the most populous areas of the world, constituting 35% dependence of the global population (Kannangara, Collins, & Waidytilake, 2018) and contributing 11% of the world's GDP. It hosts twenty-three out of the hundred world's top ports (Kannangara, Collins, & Waidytilake, 2018). The region counts 13% of global trade and 28% of the world's fish capture. The region has enormous offshore and seabed natural resources reservoirs: 16.8% of global oil reserves, 28% of proven gas reserves, 36% of global iron production, 80% of diamond reserves, and 60% of the world's Uranium reserves (Kannangara, Collins, & Waidytilake, 2018).

In addition to its rich reservoirs of natural resources, it is the shortest and busiest trade route between the east and the West, where over 100,000 ships transit through the narrow Strait of Malacca alone annually (Calamur, 2017). It is also an oil & gas highway, where more than two-thirds of the world's seaborne oil is transported through the Indian Ocean (Odiambo, 2020). With China leading the manufacturing industry, followed by India, Japan, and other

such states, the region becomes highly significant for consumer markets of the West, Middle East, and Africa. Where the Indian Ocean has emerged as the center of economic activities on the one hand, it has made it vulnerable to multiple threats on the other. The threats and challenges like Heroin trafficking, piracy incidents, which have reduced considerably in the past few years, environmental degradation, depletion of marine resources, and lack of regional maritime security architecture are a source of concern for everyone.

Geostrategic Significance

The Indian Ocean achieved eminence, especially during the Colonialization Period when Western powers prefinance this region for their interests. The Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, and Japan tried their luck to singularly dominate this region. However, none could succeed until the 18th century when the British Empire subjugated the region as a single omnipotent force through their strong naval force. Later, in the Cold War era, the USSR and the United States replaced Great Britain, setting off an arms race primarily for power projection. During this period, the former Soviet Union, on the one hand, ordained the Asian Collective Security Plan among states of South and South East Asia (Horelick, 1974), and the United States, on the other hand, was busy chalking out anti-communism bloc in and around the Indian Ocean. The last 50 years have been instrumental, wherein the region's geopolitical, security and economic landscape has been under constant transformation. The fundamental variation was the nuclearization of the region; India initiated its program in 1974, followed by Pakistan. In addition, the Regime Change in Iran through the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the USSR invasion of Afghanistan in pursuance of its Grand Design in 1979, the Carter Doctrine, and the later US-led misadventure in Afghanistan in 2001 have changed the security paradigm and calculus of the area, forever. The present situation of uneasy peace is highly volatile and unpredictable. To forecast the possible scenarios, one needs to view the significance of the Indian Ocean from different perspectives:

Geostrategic Location: The area is surrounded by emerging global powers like China and Russia on its fringes or in close vicinity clubbed principally in the anti-west bloc, India claiming the stature of regional power contested by Pakistan, a nuclear aspiring Iran, a fearful Japan of Chinese expansion and perpetually haunting Afghanistan. The continuing turbulence in the region's socio-political environment, entangled with perpetual issues in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria, to name a few, makes the situation more complex. The diplomatic crosswires are so complex and intertwined that smaller states find significantly fewer options to exercise neutrality in case of any showdown between regional and extra-regional players.

Economic Potential: To start with, it was the discovery of vast oil reservoirs in the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf that increased the preeminence of oil over coal for energy-hungry great powers. Later, the East and the West got attracted towards energy-rich landlocked Central Asian states for which the Indian Ocean offers the shortest and cheapest connectivity route. Moreover, the increasing interests of great powers in claiming their rights to exploration in Arctic virgin land is yet another contentious issue. Lastly, this region constitutes the highest migrant labor for the West. Global binaries are emerging in search of economic and military primacy in Asia in general and the Indian Ocean in particular.

Historiography of the Great Games: A Descriptive Analysis

To draw lineages of any of the past great games with the emerging one, this research will briefly discuss the great games of the 19th and 20th centuries in this section.

The Great Game (of 19th Century): The 19th century witnessed a clash of interests between the British and the Russian Empires over Afghanistan and surrounding Central & South Asian territories like Turkistan and its consequences for Persia, British India, and Tibet (Andreyev, 2001, pp. 163-180). The Soviet Union's military expansions in Central Asia caused Russophobia among policymakers in Great Britain that after annexing these states, USSR would venture for

British India primarily to get access to warm waters – the Indian Ocean (Raza, 2021). The British campaign was orchestrated around three cardinal points: firstly, to gain control of the Emirate of Afghanistan and make it a protectorate. Secondly, to support Persian Empire to stand against the Soviet Union's onslaught. Thirdly, to support the Khanate of Khiva and Emirate of Bukhara to check further ingress of the USSR towards Afghanistan and Tibet. This campaign was crafted to achieve two geostrategic aims: Firstly, to secure Afghanistan as a buffer zone between Russia and British India (Raza, 2021). Secondly, to protect British sea trade routes in the Indian Ocean. Besides Central Asian states, which faced the Soviet Union's expansionist design, Afghanistan remained the playground for British military imperialist expeditions. Two Anglo-Afghan and two Anglo-Sikh wars were fought from 1838 to 1878 from the British side, and the annexation of the Khanate of Kokand by the USSR remained a significant military contest (Raza, 2021). However, during this period, the leading players though identified the Indian Ocean and region around it as vital for their strategic interests, did not face each other directly but continued expanding within their areas of interest. The IOR remained as an indirect playground where Russia seemed to be aspiring for access while the Britain was contesting for denial.

New Great Game (20th & 21st Centuries): The playground remains almost the same for the new great game – Eurasia & IOR. While China, the USA, India, Pakistan, and Iran entered the equation as new independent players, the past players remain relevant in specific contexts. However, the context of the contest is almost the same: control or access to rich energy sources in Central Asia and influence the balance of power in the waters of the Indian Ocean for own interests. The former USSR invasion of Afghanistan under the pretext of Warm Waters Theory, the US-led Post 9/11 Global War on Terror in Afghanistan, Chinese oil diplomacy, and the recent Russo-Ukraine war are important signposts towards the new great game which is being played in this region once again.

Intersecting Interests of Great Powers

Status Quo USA: The United States is endeavoring to stay alive as the most significant strategic player in the region, steering its world dominance. It was humbled when it left Afghanistan in haste, yet it cannot afford to leave IOR for apparent geopolitical and economic interests. Indian Ocean is a central location in US designs to counter rising China, resurgent Russia, nuclear Pakistan, and challenging Iran. It also offers a unique strategic position to safeguard its interests and the interests of its close allies like Japan, India, and the West. In a nutshell, the United States aims at energy securitization to articulate alternatives to Russian energy sources, especially in the wake of the Russo-Ukraine war, democratization of the region, containing Russia and China and checking nuclear Pakistan and antagonist Iran.

Revisionist China: The rising China appears to be the sole player to contest the existing US-architected world order. Though China in the past had been focusing on consolidating its economic base, recently, it has started overtly asserting its claims to be the only meaningful player in the region. Besides counterbalancing the USA and India, China would desire to keep this region out of conflict to meet its energy requirements uninterrupted. However, while claiming its rising dominance, it would go to any extent if some regional or extra-regional forces tried to alter the balance of power in the region.

Resurging Russia: Russia waited long to resuscitate its economic base and reclaim its relevance in global power politics. The recent Russo-Ukraine conflict is a test case for the West if they can arrest the initiative, which otherwise would seriously impact the complexion of global order.

Ambitious India: Aligned with the United States' stance, India would aim at power projection and image building as a regional player, counterbalancing China while not annoying it beyond an acceptable limit. It is already pursuing the policy to increase its influence across IOR through trade, investment, and naval diplomacy. On the other hand, like China and unlike extra-regional actors, India would also like IOR to be stable, thus assuring the uninterrupted supply of energy to sustain its economy.

IOR – The Playground for the Emerging Great Game

Militarization by USA: To pursue its stated national policy interests of ensuring the freedom of navigation, undertaking maritime security operations, and monitoring and deterring Chinese Military deployments, the United States has positioned its 5th Fleet part of US Naval Force Central Command at Diego Garcia. This platform was used as a launch pad in the 1st Gulf War in 1991 and against Afghanistan in 2001 till ISAF's military deployment in Afghanistan. This naval base lies precisely in the mid of the Indian Ocean, thus offering flexibility all around.

Militarization by China: China's primary focus had been on the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea, but recently it has re-orientated itself towards the Indian Ocean. Maintaining the second-largest navy in the world, China has a military and non-military presence at multiple points across the Indian Ocean. In the Eastern Indian Ocean, it has signatures at Djibouti, Yemen, Oman, Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique; in the Western Indian Ocean, at Gwadar-Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar; and in Central South Ocean at Seychelles and Madagascar (Kumar, 2020). The significant developments include building a base at Djibouti, the contract of Colombo Port City (Sivaram, 2016), and the rights to operate Gwadar Port for economic purposes for the next forty years since 2015.

Militarization by India: India claims the Indian Ocean to be India's Ocean. India endeavors to assert its acclaimed role in the region through its ally- the USA. As a power projection initiative, India has deployed two anti-submarine warfare aircraft at Andaman & Nicobar Islands (Gady, 2016) in addition to the deployment of a nuclear submarine at Arihant.

Strategic Environment Scan:

Overall Environment: In the Indian Ocean, one can find multiple strategic triangles and alliances in play, complementing or intersecting each other. The grand

strategic triangle of Russia- China- USA has the contesting interests of all the players. In contrast, other strategic structures or alliances, less Indo-Abrahamic Alliance, have a marginal impact on the overall strategic environment of IOR. This makes the Indian Ocean a complex web of competing regional and extra-regional interest-based setups. At best, the situation can be discerned as most unpredictable, volatile, vulnerable, and intricate, where a gamut of overt and covert threats is at play.

USA: The United States would aim to continue asserting its role in IOR until it is partially relieved by the Indo-Abrahamic alliance to take care of the Indo-Pacific. In such an arrangement, the USA would bet on India in countering China and cowing Pakistan into submission. For the very same reason, India has been granted the status of Net Security Provider by the United States (Ullah & Hayat, 2021). However, the resurgence of Russia through the overt display of military power in Ukraine has altered the equation to a great degree. The United States' past policies of Pivot to Asia and Rebalancing to Asia, primarily aimed at the encirclement of China, will have to be modified in the ongoing Russo-Ukraine war. Though the United States has declared Indo Pacific region as a geopolitical and geo-economic space for US interests (Heiduk, 2020), the dominance of the Indian Ocean is a prerequisite to achieving that objective.

China: China appears to be the sole contestant to challenge US maritime supremacy architecture in IOR. Rising China has been focusing on its economic growth and stability with special attention to CPEC – the flagship project of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative. Where OBOR can be termed an economic connectivity and outreach maneuver by China, the hidden objectives are far more than this simple. By laying different projects under OBOR, connecting east to west and north to south, China would amplify the dependence of connected states, thus increasing their stakes. However, like India, the states that feel left out would not favor such an arrangement. Staying cognizant of the United States' China containment policy or Indo-Abraham alliance, China has intensified its engagement with

countries still not clubbed in by the USA or who share common antipathy against the United States. The last summit of SCO, where Russia and China, besides a few others, agreed to increase the share of national currencies in trade (Garewal, Ghazanfar Ali; Farwa, Ume, 2022), is a landmark achievement to challenge the existing world order. In addition, two recent significant developments which will significantly impact future maritime order in the Indian Ocean are: firstly, the China-Iran multi-billion dollars agreement to develop oil facilities in Iran (Fassihi & Myres, 2021) as a result of which India had to face expulsion from Chahbahar. Secondly, Xi Jinping's recent visit to Saudi Arabia and signing of unprecedented 34 contracts (AbdulJadayel & Omar, 2022).

Doom's Day Scenario: In case of tensions between Iran and Israel around the Strait of Hormuz, Pakistan will be entangled due to Gwadar's close proximity, thus exerting a pull-on China. In another case, the IOR will become a battleground for a major global conflict if China, Pakistan, Iran, and Russia club into an alliance as a counterbalance to the Indo-Abraham alliance. In addition, the recent unveiling of blueprint of India-Middle East- Europe Economic Corridor (IMER) during G-20 Summit in India, has further added to strategic polarization in Indian Ocean Region.

Russia: Russian invasion of Ukraine is a clear manifestation of its future alignment – to challenge the world order and acclaim its lost status in world politics. This war has the potential to prove itself as a catalyst to shape the future outlook of the balance of power in IOR as well as across the globe.

India: Its "Look East Policy" has been reconceptualized into "Act East Policy" (Haokip, 2011), but still, its maritime strategy seems to be aligned with most of the extra-regional forces in IOR: to fight against fundamentalism and safety of Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs). In principle, India supports the US-led world order in IOR but would confine its actions to providing net security within the range of its operational capabilities. In the short term, India would aim at deterrence and conflict avoidance with China in IOR or the

Himalayas. However, if the Indo-Abraham alliance gets operationalized, India may become the backbone of the western architect in IOR to contest China. Nonetheless, it would be difficult for India or others in this alliance to match China and its maritime stature.

Pakistan: Pakistan, being the only Islamic nuclear state and apparently more aligned with the Chinese stance, is not easily digestible to the West. Where it would like to maximize the economic potentials of CPEC, secure its SLOCs, and exploration of EEZ, it faces enormous challenges. Significant ones are: firstly, the maritime border with India is still undecided. Secondly, the enhanced role of India as a US ally, member of multiple bilateral, trilateral, and quad arrangements, and net security provider status enhance Pakistan's vulnerability. Thirdly, the abrupt exit of the US-led ISAF from Afghanistan has further compounded Pakistan's security problems, amplifying serious threats to CPEC. Fourthly, it would be challenging for Pakistan to choose China against the USA in any conflict. Finally, any spike in US-Iran or Israel-Iran tensions would directly impinge the northern Arabian Sea, thus hurting Pakistan's interests.

Crystalizing the Situation in IOR through the Lens of Realism

IOR is emerging as a future playground for the great game where regional and extra-regional players are lining up in clusters of mutually benefiting cooperations against competing clusters. The region is already militarized by different key players with intersecting interests, causing global ripples. In the succeeding paragraphs, the emerging landscape of competition in IOR has been analyzed using the Realism lens, the most dominant theoretical framework in such situations.

The fulcrum of realists' viewpoint around the situation in IOR is the balance of power strategy, offering a rationale for other states to club in an alliance to equate the balance against China. In regional power calculus, no state alone can counterbalance China. Nonetheless, with enhanced patronage of the United States and assurances of other partners roped in multiple security and cooperative agreements like Israel, Japan, and Australia, India can be

groomed to counterbalance China. Potential alliances beyond the US hub-and-spokes system, either in the form of the Indo-Abraham alliance, IMER, or any other newer version, can enjoy strategic rationale. However, though India is rising, it would hesitate to go solo as a frontline state against China soon. This seems only possible if the US also orientates itself towards the Indian Ocean, giving it precedence over the Asia Pacific. The other concern would be whether the US, in this kind of arrangement, sacrifices its leadership role to anyone else, for that matter, to India.

The collective balancing architect against China would only be possible if member states consider it a Common Threat, which is lacking in the present case. To corroborate the balancing strategy, either the US will have to ordain a strategic consensus among key players around IOR, or China will have to act incessantly in a way where it is regarded as a common threat. However, mini-lateralism among like-minded states or militarized IOR by the US and its allies can provoke China to unmask its composure.

Conclusion

The prevailing environment in IOR can be best termed as a reflection of an uneasy peace with simmering undercurrents. The area hosts the intersecting interests of the key players and has the potential to sabotage the peace not only in this region but also in spreading it across. The contesting interests of these states, if translated into a conflict, would undoubtedly hurt the existing political world order in either way, which is already challenged and is under duress. The new Cold War is now in play where revisionist states like China and Russia have already defied the acceptance of Western condescending attitudes in world politics.

In the emerging contest in IOR, both sides, China and the United States, will have to think through the prisms of rationality vs. practicality and between capabilities vs. intent. It would enhance the chances of conflict avoidance but, at the same time, keep both sides ready for the worst. However, so far, the attempts from both sides, especially by the United States, to alienate China in the region would set a downward spiral in motion, where arresting it later would be difficult. Most importantly, all players must understand

that, unlike the past playgrounds, IOR is a nuclearized zone, and its implications in case of any conflict would be fatal for all.

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