

The Silent War in the Indian Ocean: Who Controls Asia's Sea Lanes?

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Ocean is expected to become a key strategic platform in determining trading patterns in the world, energy security, and the current state of power balance in Asia. This paper will discuss the novice Silent war in the area where the key players, especially India, China, and the United States of America, are struggling to gain dominance over the key sea routes and nautical bottlenecks connecting Asia to the world markets. The discussion examines, the three aspects of the geopolitical, the economic and the military aspects of maritime competition by examining issues of navalization, the development of port infrastructure and new strategic alliances. Based on qualitative research and use of case studies of major chokepoints such as Strait of Hormuz and Strait of Malacca, the study evaluates the impact of who has control in strategic autonomy and regional stability through control of maritime routes. Based on the findings, modern leadership in the Indian Ocean is getting more technologically integrated, networked, and infrastructure-linked than the traditional fleet-based form of warfare and it has critical ramifications on the future strategy of Asia.

Keywords: Indian Ocean; Maritime Security; Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs); Indo-Pacific Strategy; Naval Modernization; Belt and Road INITIATIVE; Maritime Chokepoints; Asian Balance of Power

INTRODUCTION

The Indian Ocean has become one of the most strategically important areas of the 21st century of any sea, acting as a key conduit of trade, energy transit, and geopolitics around the world. The region supports interdependence of economies and strategic rivalry as it hosts close to 80 percent of the world seaborne oil trade, and links East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe with important sea routes. Commercial and energy flows have made the Indian Ocean a battlefield whereby states pursuant to machination of influence not through a face to face encounter but through activities like long-term deployments of fleets of the navy, key strategic investments in ports, maritime infrastructure, and alliances. This competition has been shifting to what is increasingly becoming a silent war, indicating rivalry that is executed under the below-the-line of conflict (Yamazaki, 2018).

The key actors in this maritime competition are regional and extra-regional forces. Being on the north shore of the Indian Ocean, India views maritime security as a means of protecting energy imports and the ability to assert regional leadership. The investments in modernization of the navy, knowledge of the maritime

domain, and the development of the ports are good indicators of the ambition of New Delhi to sustain its presence in the northern Indian Ocean. At the same time, China has been increasing its maritime presence via Belt and Road Initiative, (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), as well as Gwadar, Hambantota, and Djibouti strategic port developments. These efforts echo the ambitions Beijing has to acquire access to its securities authority in the sea-lanes and extended logistical outreach to the geographical (IOR) Indian Ocean Region (Bose, 2009).

Other external players which include the United States are also the ones that influence the maritime balance. The freedom of navigation missions, forward naval presence and alliances with regional states aim at maintaining open sea routes and neutralizing the growing influence of China. Japan, Australia, and France have also tightened their interactions by engaging in shared exercises and enhanced cooperation in the area of sea security, highlighting the internationalization of the dynamics in the Indian Oceans (Kaplan, 2015).

The geographic choke points, Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Malacca, and the Bab el-Mandeb, increase the Geo-stratific value of the region. The dominion or authority on these straight channels directly influences continuity of the trades, passages of power and manoeuvring in the waterways. As a result, competition at sea in the Indian ocean is becoming more characterized by port politics, infrastructure integration, surveillance, and multilateral platforms as opposed to the traditional fleet-based conflict (Berlin, 2006).

The paper discusses the silent war in Indian ocean by discussing the ways in which India, China, the United States and other players aim to control maritime power. It not only considers the geopolitical, economic, and military aspects of the sea-lane rivalry but also examines the significance of ports and choke points to a region and their implication on regional security and shifting Asian balance of power (Holmes et al., 2009).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Professional literature has continuously described the Indian Ocean as an important theatre of maritime strategy and international trade counter security. Analysts point out that the acuity of energy shipments and trade routes in the region makes it pivotal in the calculus of major powers not only in the region but also the world at large. Instead of direct naval conflict, the conflict of the present time is organized in the form of permanent stand, building infrastructure and the formation of alliances. Such a silent war is the manifestation of the change in maritime rivalry in the age of economic interdependence and technological progress (Sakhuja, 2001).

Studies about the Indian maritime position show its twofold aims; ensuring energy life lines and maintaining competitive advantage in the Indian Ocean region in the north. According to the strategy thinkers, the drive towards naval modernization, surveillance systems, and port development projects indicate that India aims at founding the sea lanes as Chinese power grows. The concept of a maritime strategy is therefore approached as being defensive, in which the trade is secured, and as positional in which a balance is preserved in the region (Graham, 2005).

On the contrary, the study of Chinese maritime expansion highlights the issue of maritime energy security and depth. The investments under the BRI framework such as port infrastructure in South Asia and the western Indian Ocean are often seen as attempts to implement lasting access points to the seas. This networked approach is reflected in what has come to be known as the String of Pearls concept, which indicates that the influence of this networked expectation of China at seaside improves power projection and at the same time redefines the regional perceptions of the balance (Graham, 2005).

The US is still a critical outside actor in the works. Analysts place much emphasis on the fact that Washington resorted to naval superiority, the alliance systems, and freedom of navigation operations to secure open sea lanes. Certain activities like partnering with other countries like Japan, Australia and France indicate a wider effort to maintain a rules based order in the seas. This colonized system places the Indian Ocean dynamics in the environment of a wider context of competition over Indo-pacific powers and realignment among Hegemonic alike (Kaplan, 2011).

A Penumbra of choke points is a slogan of geographic scholarship. Strait of Hormuz, Malacca, and Bab el-Mandeb are generally known in the world of maritime geopolitics as leverage nodes. The closeness to such passages increases the capacity of states in terms of controlling trade flows, energy sourcing, and naval motions. Endowment of Port infrastructures and sea bases at these chokepoints are thus regarded as a tool of not only deterrence but in addition influence (Bouchard and Crumplin, 2010).

Although there is substantial academic literature on the topic concerning individual actors, current types of research technology would frequently separate India China rivalry or U.S.-China competition and then leave out the effects they have on the larger sea-lane governance. There is a paucity of research on the convergence of regional and extra-regional approaches to craft a multilayered maritime contest. To tackle this void, a holistic approach must take into account both the implications of naval deployments, the economic connectivity, the technology capability, and the politics of alliances at the same time (Jackson, 2018).

The literature makes Indian ocean a disputed strategic terrain to wield influence through long-term maritime presence, networks of infrastructure and institutional participation. The exercise of control over sea lanes has not only trade and energy implications but also balance of power in the region of Asia. Although previous studies reveal a lot about the strategic action of key players, an amalgamation of both views is necessary to conduct a complete analysis of the forces force behind the quiet Asian order of competition in the 21st century on the sea (Admiral James Stavridis, 2017).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research study is a qualitative, exploratory research design that will focus on the changing silent war in the Indian Ocean and the strategic battle that is going on in the sea lanes of Asia. It uses a case study approach with a focus on India, China, and the United States, including Japan, Australia, and major littoral states as its secondary actors. Such strategic chokepoints as the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Bab-el-Mandeb are discussed as center stage points of maritime power. The data are gathered using purposive sampling of official policy documents, defense white papers, scholarly publications, reports released by think tanks and articles written by credible media outlets. Content analysis is used in the evaluation of the military deployments of the navy, port facilities establishment, and maritime policy statements. A thematic and comparative analysis is used to tell patterns in sea-lane security strategies and formation of alliances. Findings are placed within an overall Asian balance of power through a geopolitical framework. Microsoft Access has drawbacks such as low access to classified information and the fast-changing maritime dynamics.

DISCUSSION

The Indian Ocean has now emerged as a focus of strategic rivalry, with regional and extra-regional powers jostling over critical sea routes that are regarded as carrying most trade and energy flows in Asia. The views of various nations provide insight into the character of this "silent war" and how dominance at sea can be achieved by a mix of ship presence, infrastructure, and alliances and not direct confrontation. The northern Indian Ocean is both a security and economic imperative to India. India aims to protect energy imports,

trade channels, as well as leadership of the region. Programmes like navy modernization, port development, like Chabahar and Vizhinjam and increased sea surveillance reflect Indian interests in projecting power within its immediate local waters. India views the increasing actions of China in strategic ports and a so-called String of Pearls network as a direct threat to its influence in the region, and considers the need to have a powerful and multi-pronged maritime strategy(Singh, 2022).

In the eyes of China, the Indian Ocean is a critical source of energy flow, trade and economic integration throughout the world. Beijing seeks a strategic tangle of ports and infrastructural programs around the region, such as Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Djibouti which increases its power projection and provides assuring transportation routes. The other aspect is the use of strategic alliances with Pakistan and regional powers by China to expand its influence but to try to offset India without hindrance to access to essential sea routes due not only to economic gain but also military (Frankel, 2011).

As a United States point of view, the issue of Indian insecurity and Chinese maritime growth is at the core of U.S. Indo-Pacific policy. The U.S. also carries out freedom-of-navy security measures, combined naval drills, and strategic alliances with India, Japan and Australia, in order to secure open lanes of the sea and guarantee security in the region. Washington sees India as an ally in equalizing the influence of China and ensuring trade routes that are vital to the stability of the global economy(Lintner, 2019).

The Indian Ocean is also seen as a regionally important security and economic tool as perceived by Japan and Australia. The two countries also participate in combined naval drills, maritime security and capacity building measures alongside India to offset the aggressive maritime presence by China. In their participation, the importance of the Indian Ocean to global stability becomes clear, as regional security is synchronized in larger Indo-Pacific academies of strategy(Alpers, 2014).

Russia being an ardent defense partner of India perceives the region based on strategic stability. Moscow supports India in terms of military aid, arms sales, and technical knowledge, which assists in keeping the deterrence and the relations between Moscow and Beijing are healthy. The strategy of Russia is indicative of balancing a fine line, with India, it serves its interests by cooperating in the sphere of maritime strength without offending China(Rumley et al., 2015).

The smaller regional powers like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the Maldives buy into the initiatives of both India and China with infrastructure investments, port development and maritime cooperation determining their alignment. Although they are not direct competitors, their policies affect the Indian Ocean strategic balance and impact the environment within which larger powers operate(Leifer, 1983).

A multidimensional contest of sea lane control in Asia is an inseparable phenomenon. The twin interests of India to secure trade routes and counterbalance China falls with interests of global powerhouses and the regional states. The Indian Ocean is not controlled by direct conflict but through the presence of the navy, infrastructure penetration, strategic alliances and diplomatic involvement. These views interacting show that Maritime supremacy in Asia is a complex, evolving rivalry which has profound security, economic, and overall balance of power consequences in the region.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The discussion of the silent war in the Indian Ocean demonstrates that it is a multidimensional war over the sea and its routes to the strategic locations, in which the power is exerted by means of naval reef, strategic facilities as well as alliances and economic interaction instead of direct war. The paper concludes that the Indian Ocean is becoming a core of both local and international power projection, and India, China and the

United States become the most dominant players that are surrounded by other regional and extra-regional powers.

- **Strategic Response and Position of India.** The maritime policy of India is based on its twofold aims to strategically protect its energy sources and to gain regional power. Its active modes of securing the eastern part of the Indian Ocean can be seen in the development of major ports, modernization of its navy and increased maritime surveillance. India considers the Indian strategy of the String of Pearls and its growing naval aspect as a threat to its lead in the maritime domination. Therefore, India is not only making investments in local naval power but also entering into strategic relationships with the United States, Japan and Australia and also enhancing its presence in the chokepoints to guarantee continuous flow of trade and energy.
- **China's Expanding Influence.** The Chinese approach focuses on the stabilization of the maritime trade routes and the India Ocean power projection. Investments in ports, as Gwadar, Hambantota, and Djibouti, along with naval activities and alliances, enable China to reach extremely far along its coastline. The research concludes that the maritime policy of China does not focus its interests on direct clash, but rather on the formation of a web of intended strategic footholds, which undermine the India hegemony and form regional orientations. The involvement of China in Pakistan strengthens this influence, strengthening the feeling of being surrounded by India and increasing the two-front aspect of maritime issues of India.
- **Engagement in the U.S. and Extra-Regional.** The Indian Ocean has a very important balancing role and is played by the United States. By freedom-of- navigation operations, combined naval drills and strategic alliances with India and the rest of the Indo-Pacific players, the U.S. aims at protecting open sea lanes as well as countering the power of China. The efforts made by Japan and Australia are about the same degree, which involve capacity-building, multilateral maritime security engagements, and presence in strategic areas together. All these are aimed at augmenting deterrence, adding maritime security, and promoting the rules-based order of the Indo-Pacific.
- **Chokepoints and Ports are Important in Strategy.** It is analyzed that the domination of main chokepoints Strait of Malacca, Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb is crucial to the energy protection, merchandise circulation and the display of power. According to the research, port diplomacy, infrastructure building, and maritime monitoring in these chokepoints have turned into important instruments of influence, which serve both strategic and economic purposes. Leadership in these spheres enables states to control access to trade routes, preclude any future threats, and project naval influence in an economical way without necessarily being in a direct military confrontation.
- **Regional Implications.** Smaller regional states, including Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Bangladesh, play a major role in the balance of power in terms of port entry, economic relations, and diplomatic relations. The fact that strategic influence can be either attained or limited by their cooperation or alignment with the major powers shows that the Indian Ocean control is not limited to direct military power but also to economic and diplomatic influence.

CONCLUSION

The Indian Ocean has become an initial point of strategic contention in the 21st century, and the ownership of the sea lanes in Asia has become an essential variable of regional influence, as well as economic stability in the world. This study proves that the Indian Ocean power struggle is a silent war in which the issue of dominance is sought by naval presence, port facilities, alliance formation and economic involvement instead of military conflict. India, China, and the United States become the key players, the regional states

and extra-regional states like Japan, Australia, and Russia shape the overall Strategic situation. The attempts of India to stabilize its maritime periphery, Navy modernization, and enhancement of strategic alliance demonstrate a premeditated strategy of holding its power in the region and guarding its key trade and energy pathways. China, with its activities such as the String of Pearls, is spreading its tentacles in the form of strategic port investments, infrastructure developments and alliances, forming a web of influence that is challenging the maritime supremacy of India. The U.S and its allies have a balancing role, and they engage in freedom-of-Navigation operations, joint exercises, and multilateral initiatives to ensure that the region remains open with sea lanes and that any unilateral claims to control the unilateral regions is discouraged. The paper notes that dominion of the Indian Ocean is largely intertwined with the significant chokepoints, including the Strait of Malacca, Strait of Hormuz, and Bab el-Mandeb, where power could be easily exerted in terms of the triadic approach via naval action, economic activity, and politics. Smaller regional states are also of utmost importance, because their access to ports, economic choices, and alliances can either empower or restrain the power of large powers..

RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the research into the Indian Ocean quiet contest, a number of strategic, diplomatic, and policy-focused suggestions arise to improve maritime safety in India, maintain stability in the sea routes in Asia and contain the relations of power in the region and beyond.

- **Enhance Navy Striking Power and Marine Infrastructure.** India needs to keep on modernizing its navy using sophisticated warships, sub-marines, surveillance drones and high-precision weapons to keep credible deterrence. The strategic port, including the Chabahar and Vizhinjam, and the logistical support bases will increase the operational preparedness and speed in deploying forces throughout the northern and central Indian Ocean.
- **Strengthen Strategic Partners and Multilateral Engagements.** Further strengthening of the strategic partnership with United States, Japan, and Australian along with regional partners related to naval drills and intellectual exchanges as well as capacity building programs can enhance India role in the Indo-Pacific. India should also intensify its participation to multilateral organizations such as Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Quad, to ensure liberty of the ocean.
- **Target Chokepoint Security and Maritime Surveillance.** The capturing of vital maritime chokepoints is mandatory to ensure a continuous supply of trade and energy: Strait of Malacca, Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb. India has to maximize maritime domain awareness through satellite surveillance, unmanned surveillance, and patrolling in cooperation with regional allies to preclude possible threats.
- **Cash in on Port Diplomacy and Regional Influence.** It is time that India proactively seeks to involve smaller states in the region including Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bangladesh in terms of port development, economic aid and coordinating maritime security. The consolidation of regional relationships will have the effect of countering the increasing Chinese role in the Indian Ocean and would add depth to the Indian operations.
- **Investment in Technological Innovation and Research Maritime Security.** The development of advanced naval equipment, technology use, and surveillance by natives will make them less reliant on external forces and have a higher chance of quelling nations that might emerge. Policy and strategy research agencies must be sponsored to examine changing trends in maritime in order to help in long-term strategic planning.

- **Strike a Balance between Military Readiness and Diplomatic Pursuits.** Although India must uphold the naval capability, it must seek places where confidence can be built and engage China and other stakeholders of the region in talks in instances where it is possible and feasible to alleviate chances of escalation. Diplomatic intervention, coupled with plausible deterrents will be able to maintain the stability of the region as well as ensure that the sea lanes are not disrupted.
- **Combine Economic and Strategic Planning.** India needs to be strategic in line with economic efforts including port development and trade agreements. Through economic coercion and military deployment, India will be capable of consolidating its dominance of strategic sea routes, exerting soft power, and staying relevant in the greater Indo-Pacific area.

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