

Great Power Rivalry in the Indian Ocean and its impact on Pakistan

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Abstract

Over the past 20 years, the Indian Ocean's (IO) strategic maritime environment has seen significant change. As a result of defense and security measures, regional emphasis has abruptly switched from territorial to maritime borders, having a significant impact on transnational ties. This study addresses the historical context of the strategic maritime environment of the Indian Ocean as well as evolving patterns of the US, China, and Indian presence as main competitors. The US is using its counterbalancing policy against China by improving its relations with India in the Indian Ocean. China through its Belt and Road Initiative and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, envisions a "Common Future, Common Growth" agenda. The Asia-Pacific rebalancing is replaced by the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. Iran's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean are connected to its strategic need to use oil diplomacy to break out of its "geopolitical isolation" because of US rivalry. The European Union observes from the side lobes the political and strategic events in the Indian Ocean. Pakistan has a tremendous geostrategic advantage due to its presence at the entrance to energy highways, especially in light of China's BRI and its centrepiece CPEC. This study analyses the struggle for hegemony in the Indian Ocean and offers Pakistan policy recommendations.

Keywords: US, China, Indo-Pacific, Maritime Power, Security, CPEC, Pakistan

Introduction:

A US naval strategist, Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, once remarked, “Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas in the twenty-first century, the destiny of the world will be decided in these waters.”

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR), which stretches from the western coast of Australia and the northern Strait of Malacca to the western Mozambique Channel, is a geographical region that contains more than 30% of the world's water SLOCs. A vital maritime route connecting Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas is the southern Indian Ocean, which contains the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. In addition, China's naval might is directly impacted by the Strait of Malacca's role as a naval choke point, and there has been a resurgence of interest in the sea lanes as a possible arena for competition and cooperation. IOR is a very secure region of Great Power competition that supports maritime trade, transports more than half of the world's oil at sea, and has 23 of the top 100 container ports in the world.

The Straits of Hormuz, the Malacca Strait, and Bab el-Mandeb are three crucial choke points along the IOR, a crucial maritime path. Due to the enormous amounts of commerce that travel through them, these choke spots are of utmost strategic importance in both the geographic and economic domains. Due to its intrinsic geographic significance, IOR has long been seen as the hinterland of great power competition and global geopolitics. Its supremacy was unavoidable for obvious reasons due to its geographic importance as well as its commercial and economic relevance. IOR is a crucial geostrategic region that connects the Middle East's energy-rich countries with Asia's thriving economies.

Due to the presence of conventional and nuclear ships from the main powers and nuclear-armed nations like Pakistan, China, and India, the Indian Ocean Region, which was previously considered a "neglected ocean" has now become the center of political, strategic, and economic operations. Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs) and the deployment of fleet missile submarines are crucial for preserving the balance of power in the area and enabling second-strike capabilities. In order to safeguard its important regional interests, the US built a naval station at Diego Garcia in the IOR. The new "Asia Pivot" policy of the US has important ramifications. The IOR's strategic balance has naturally alarmed Pakistan and China due to Indo-US collaboration in the region. Along with that, with the pacts of QUAD, LEMOA, and COMCASA, the rivalry between China has grown more intense. Significant strategic ramifications result from this rivalry for the United States, China, and certainly India and Pakistan.

China's Rise and IOR

The rise of Chinese maritime influence in the Indian Ocean is seen as a challenge by traditional IOR strategic powers. Many academics believe that Beijing wants to rule the IOR. For that purpose, China's Military Strategy, a 2015 military white paper, supports the idea that China has strategic interests in the Indian Ocean Region as a maritime power. It asserts that it has begun to expand its duties from "offshore waters' defence" to "open seas protection" for the first time. This is seen by rival governments in the IOR as proof that China has interests that go well beyond the South China Sea. It involves trade routes and access to the natural resources of the Middle East and Africa, on which China greatly depends.

China first entered the Indian Ocean in the late 1980s, when it started carrying out plans to create a blue-water navy. This development has long-term ramifications for IOR even while it is primarily concerned with safeguarding China's interests in the Western Pacific Ocean, particularly the Taiwan Strait. The "String of Pearls" tactic is what China used to get over the strategic constraints in the IOR. Since a few years ago, China has been establishing political ties and business interests in the IOR, including cordial ties with Pakistan and strong political and economic ties with Burma, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

Since 2008, the Chinese navy has been increasing its presence in the Indian Ocean, first with the deployment of nuclear and conventional submarines and later with anti-piracy missions. China's full-fledged incursion into the Indian Ocean area in 2015, which includes multibillion-dollar investments, political power, and a military presence along the maritime Silk Road, significantly changed regional dynamics. China has also generously contributed to the building of the Gwadar deep-sea port on Pakistan's Balochistan coast as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It's important to observe that Moscow doesn't seem very concerned about China's increased intercontinental missile production, strategic anti-missile defence, or better naval capabilities.

Thus, by cooperating with China in these areas, Russia benefits much economically while losing little in terms of security, making life difficult for the United States, and strengthening its relationship with a crucial ally. Naturally, this marks a huge paradigm change in IOR politics.

United States' aspiration to Rebalance Asia

The United States is considered as being at risk from any substantial changes to the security architecture of the Asia-Pacific region. The centre of gravity for U.S. foreign policy, national security, and economic interests is shifting towards Asia, the Obama administration said in 2011. As a result, the U.S. presence in the Asia-Pacific region will be increased and intensified. The U.S. made this disclosure in reaction to rising Chinese influence in the maritime lanes. Later, the United States would "pivot" or "rebalance" toward Asia as a result of this action. In response to China's growing supremacy, it aims to restrict it.

The U.S.-India defence partnership may allow India to obtain long-range patrol aircraft, drones, maritime helicopters, aircraft carrier technology, and anti-submarine equipment. According to India, all of this is necessary to combat Chinese outposts that have been constructed in Djibouti, Pakistan, and Myanmar.

Russian Interest in South Asia and it's return:

Russia's "Return to South Asia" comprises fostering ties with both India and Pakistan. Recently, Russia and Pakistan have taken a number of actions to improve their bilateral ties. Their corporate relations and military collaboration have lately improved. The key area of Pakistan and Russian relations is defence. The third order, on the other hand, deals with ties between Russia and India, where both sides have decided to expand their collaboration. Russia is assisting India's military capabilities by exporting air and naval defence systems. India now has access to Central Asia because to Russia. India places more importance on the 1400-kilometer energy corridor that would run from Russia across Central Asia. The Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, and Caspian Sea

are all connected to Russia and northern Europe via the Iranian port of Chabahar, which is under Indian control.

India and Russia both want to rely less on the US and China for important regional challenges. Even while the United States encourages India to deepen their military alliance through initiatives like the Quad, Russia's current strategic relations with China are not long-term secure.

The third tier is not driven by animosity toward any one country. It is a reflection of the region's multipolar, rule-based, mutually beneficial geopolitical reality. The third tale, which is being framed by both Russia and India, explains how Russia has responded to the residual effects of Sino-US competition. If such an order would still be applicable in the future would depend on the strategic requirement for Indo-Russian cooperation vs the U.S. pull.

Similarly, when we look into the strategic interest Russia has started observing in Pakistan is directly linked to Pakistan's geostrategic position and its vital role in the regional strategic environment. In the sake of maintaining the balance of power during this, Russia now most likely recognizes Pakistan's justifiable need for defense. In the beginning, the Russian position used to be that India was the best source of hegemonic stability in South Asia. This pragmatic shift likely resulted from the knowledge that Pakistan, which is nuclear-armed, would steadfastly reject India's hegemony and that China would continue to guarantee Pakistan's security by maintaining an adequate conventional and nuclear deterrent to counterbalance India. In this scenario, India and Pakistan are supposed to indulge themselves in an arms race, and Russia doesn't want to fall behind. However, Pakistan is looking for State-of-the-art military weapons to buy from Russia but on affordable prices.

Putin proposed a "Greater Eurasia Partnership" in 2016, which would include the EAEU members, China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and the Commonwealth countries, as a further step toward regional connectivity. Because the BRI and the EAEU have the same goal of unifying Eurasia through overland commerce and infrastructure, Moscow and Beijing have inked agreements since 2015 indicating collaboration and regional integration. According to researcher Andrew Korybko, Pakistan is the "zipper of Pan Eurasian Integration" spanning South, Central, and West Asia in order to realise the Russian geo-economic goal of a "Greater Eurasia."

As ambassador to Pakistan at the time, Alexey Devoc reportedly stated that Russia "strongly supported" the CPEC and that Moscow and Islamabad had explored combining the EAEU with the CPEC. The Pakistani government has also consented to give Russia access to the Gwadar Port. The Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, and Persian Gulf are now accessible to Russia and Central Asia. Additionally, in the case of a blockade, the port serves as a backup trading route.

The crisis in Ukraine has widened rifts between the US and its allies and Russia and its supporters. Pakistan, though, managed to preserve a precarious equilibrium in the developing conflict. Islamabad voiced its worry for the humanitarian situation in Ukraine but refrained from criticizing Russia. In light of this, Pakistan refrained from casting a vote in favour of the resolution passed by the U.N. General Assembly denouncing Russia's invasion of its neighbour and upholding its "Neutrality."

Pakistan has been struggling with rising energy needs, mostly for gas and oil, as well as an expanding current account imbalance brought on by oil payments. A Pakistani delegation led by State Minister for Petroleum

Musadik Malik traveled to Moscow the previous month in November to conduct negotiations with Russian authorities. Pakistan would pay discounted prices to Russia for its crude oil, gasoline, and diesel. Moreover, Russia is also extended an invitation to Islamabad to start discussions on long-term liquefied natural gas contracts for the years 2025 and 2026.

Pakistan's expanding residential and industrial energy needs have prompted Russia to agree to supply Pakistan with oil at a reduced price. In this regard, Pakistan has adopted a wise approach by developing better relations with Russia for the fulfillment of its energy demand. Although, Building stronger bilateral connections with Russia was formerly difficult for Pakistan, however, in the age of strategic and economic cooperation and intricate interconnectedness, Pakistan must not avoid rapprochement with Russia.

Pakistan's Strategic Position

Pakistan, one of the main littoral states of IOR, has a 990 km long coastline that borders the Arabian Sea. Its Exclusive Economic Zone contains the majority of its maritime economic resources. Because of its Western coast's proximity to the Gulf, it is strategically significant for offering the quickest, most reliable, and secure sea access to Afghanistan, the Western Province of China, East Asia, and other landlocked countries in Europe and the Pacific via Gwadar Port. The Indian Ocean has much more relevance for Pakistan as a result of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and CPEC. Additionally, the Gwadar Port offers the convenience of serving as a centre for the oil and gas pipelines that connect Central Asia to warm waters via the Karakoram Highway and Afghanistan. If the CPEC projects succeed, Pakistan is poised to emerge as a significant maritime power and a regional economic centre.

Additionally, a large portion of Pakistan's marine trade roughly 95% is dependent on IOR. All of its supply of petroleum, oil, and lubricants come from the Arabian Sea. Because there aren't many land-based communications channels in the eastern hemisphere, the sea is receiving more attention. Pakistan is expected to have a significant influence on the connectivity to the Indian Ocean. For both states, Pakistan's dual function as a bridge and a facilitator of China's participation in the seas is essential.

Dimensions of Pakistan's Indian Ocean Strategic Presence

The contours of Pakistan's strategic presence Indian Ocean interior As the centre of the Indian Ocean, Pakistan is a crucial coastal state because more than 95% of its trade is conducted by the sea using its ports of Karachi, Qasim, and Gwadar. Additionally, Pakistan uses its 290,000 sq km Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf for fishing, excavation, inspection, and nautical research. More than 15 million barrels of crude oil are carried daily across the Persian Gulf via the shores of Pakistan from the Gulf States. Pakistan is also the quickest and most direct route to China, Central Asian nations, and Afghanistan. Through which it is clear evidence of the significance of Pakistan's marine Economy potential as well as its military and strategy for the region.

After realizing the importance of maritime operations and their part in national security, Pakistan recently changed the name of the Ministry of Ports and Shipping to the Ministry of Maritime Affairs. After seeing Pakistan's potential to prosper by extending its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) from 100 to 200 nautical miles from the starting point, the Pakistani government approved the Maritimes Zones Act (MZA) in 1976. The UNCLCS (UN Commission for Limits of the Continental Shelf) was given jurisdiction over Pakistan's 2015

expansion of its continental shelf to 350 nautical miles, however as time goes on, the importance of MZA is diminishing because the government was unable to make irregular changes to the statute.

Even though the 1982 United Nations Law of Sea Convention (UNLOSC) was approved, in 1997, the laziness of not incorporating it into our regional legislation led to a significant loss of several global benefits, such as the benefit of sharing and marketable privileges, which severely harmed the Pakistani marine economy. In addition, Pakistan's ability to realise its full nautical potential has been hindered by a shortage of oceanographers and "blue jobs," as well as a lack of facilities for conducting maritime searches. MZA has to be reviewed and revised in accordance with international law and the Pakistan Maritime Security Agency Act 1994 should be assimilated into one comprehensive statute to allow it to expand its area of control at sea.

Pakistan's Geostrategic Significance: A Potential to become a transit economy:

The Cold War and the years that followed it both fundamentally altered the dynamics of global politics. But the primary actor in the international system is still a state because all the activities of world politics and affairs revolve around the state. To ensure its survival and security a state enhances influence and control over its neighbors and region through economic activities and military equipment. Today these activities and measures are creating a highly complicated situation. The new trends of economic activities, mutual trade, and access to resources like coal, oil, gas, and coal as well as to control geo-economic instruments are being introduced.

The physical entrance into a certain region or state is referred to as routes, which are both topographical and tactical concepts. Domestic growth impacts

by routes or in areas of security and development. Routes are also a key instrument for revealing the qualitative relationships between the states and for providing open doors to greater economic efficiency, safety, rural growth, and access to urban or international markets. Having easy access to the market is the most important of all these benefits since, without it, a state cannot maintain its economic and commercial events.

The boundaries of Pakistan, particularly the province of Baluchistan, have historically been crucial for gaining control of influence, pursuing development, and attracting attention from the globe. In the contemporary world, the position of Gawadar is highly appealing to regional and global powers who are interested in the South, West, and Asia from a strategic and economic standpoint. Gawadar lies at the entrance to the Persian Gulf in the south and is adjacent to the Chinese region of Xinjiang in the north. The proximity of its harbor to the Hormuz Strait, a route for nearly 17 million barrels of oil per day, makes it the ideal location between three important regions: South Asia, the Persian Gulf (rich in oil), and Central Asia (resource-rich in oil and gas), which further increases its strategic value.

Moreover, powerful states like China, the United States, Russia, and rest of the regional actors are willing in extending economic dominance in this region due to its terrestrial and strategic value. Gwadar stands out in the global maritime scene as an alternative to Dubai (beyond the Strait of Hormuz's choke point and shallow seas), due to its closeness to important SLOCs and its importance to the new great game as a member of the so-called String of Pearls.

China is Pakistan's main partner in commerce, investment, and defense relations. CPEC, the centerpiece project of China's larger Belt and Road Initiative, is being vigorously pursued as it moves forward with economic

projects in the area. China has an alternative for the Strait of Malacca because of Gwadar, which shows that all the participating nations may benefit strategically from using the coastlines of Gwadar and Makran owing to the access to the coastline that can provide economic and strategic goals in the region. It can increase access across the Hormuz Straits and the northern Indian Ocean, enabling admission to marine channels for China.

Furthermore, in comparison to Iran (4500 km) and Turkey (5000 km), Pakistan gives the CARs the quickest land route (2600 km via Afghanistan) to the Arabian Sea for trade. Additionally, the CPEC route has been operating since 2004. In this regard, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have had a quadrilateral trade agreement in place. It also extends to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. TKPI (Termez, Kabul, Peshawar, Islamabad) is a project that has been considered to be an alternative project of TAPI. This project is 750 km long to reach Islamabad which is almost half of the TAPI project which is 1700km.

The majority of Afghan trade, which includes everyday necessities and critical foods, passes through Pakistan. After the US and NATO withdrawal, Pakistan would unavoidably need help throughout the reconstruction and rehabilitation phase of Afghanistan. Pakistan practically continues to be the most practical choice for regional connection with Afghanistan, notwithstanding Indian investment or desire for alternatives like the Chahbahar Port of Iran.

In addition to that, the geopolitical interests of the main countries converge in Pakistan. Two Muslim and two non-Muslim states are positioned on either side of a vast body of water. It is situated between three nuclear-armed states and also possesses nuclear weapons of its own. Due to its geostrategic and geopolitical significance, it has been and continues to be the focus of the

desires of the great powers. According to academics, the benefits of 21st-century economic progress are being felt throughout the Asian continent. The Asian continent may benefit from this evolution in terms of both affluence and the scope of power. However, some academics also assert that political instability and personal vendettas are promoted by economic development slogans. Political unrest results from economic growth because it disturbs regional and international power dynamics.

Stephen Cohen rightly stated that Pakistan's geography has been its greatest benefit. Owing to the fact that Pakistan can gain extreme economic benefits by utilizing its geographic location intelligently, however, Pakistan is facing internal and external security issues that give rise to a less productive economic environment for neighborhood states and superpowers. The government's role to deal with internal stability issues related to terrorism and insurgency, specifically in Baluchistan and in the north of Pakistan, is crucial. Furthermore, without comprehensive planning and infrastructure for international trade and transportation, it is almost impossible to achieve the benefits of our transit routes. On international level, Pakistan, being a littoral state, must develop positive relations with the rest of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean. Rigorous efforts to meet international Maritime standards will further top our efforts in becoming a transit economy.

Conclusion

The fleets of several nations, notably Pakistan, Australia, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Bangladesh, South Africa, Iran, and Singapore, made up the IOR navies. Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Malaysia, and India. French and American naval stations were also present. As part of the "Aman Exercises," the navies of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Oman worked

together to combat the threat of both local and international terrorism as well as piracy.

Investigations of a number of financiers, intermediaries, insurance firms, pirates, middlemen, or security organisations that allegedly benefitted from piracy were warranted. Around US\$238 million in ransom was paid to Somali pirates in 2010, with US\$95 million (or 40%) going to receivers outside of Somalia. The elimination of piracy was impossible without regional support.

Since the Indian Ocean has a significant influence on Pakistan's development and prosperity, it is impossible to ignore any developments in this region. As a result, Pakistan, which is more concerned with continental issues than maritime ones, must pay close attention to the Indian Ocean. The growth of the Navy is of essential importance to Pakistan; thus it is time to highlight marine concerns. To do this, think tank conferences must take Pakistan's security and economic interests in the Indian Ocean into consideration.

Even while several significant regional and global powers see China's assistance in developing Gwadar as part of a strategy to create "strings of pearls," as a commercial port, it offers China significant economic advantages. Instead of operating the trade to the Western parts of China through the Strait of Malacca on the Dubai-Shanghai-Urumqi course, which involves travelling 14,500 kilometres, China will be able to save 22 days of marine travel time and a sizable amount of freight costs by taking the Dubai-Gwadar-Urumqi route, which is about 3500 kilometres long. Pakistan is mostly concerned with maintaining stability and safety in the North Arabian Sea, which is a worry for its neighbour.

However, Pakistan is cognizant of the dangers that exist beyond international borders and has consistently participated actively in Counter-Piracy Task

Force-151 Combined Task Force-150. These kinds of cross-continental partnerships have been quite important in this area. Pakistan, the sixth most populated nation, may soon need to look to the oceans to provide food security for an expanding population and economic growth. It is very necessary to be aware of the "Century of Oceans." People must understand the delicate nature of the issue, the necessity to establish norms, develop technical capacity, and strengthen regional companies.

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