Sino-US Strategic Competition in the Indian Ocean Region: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

This article critically examines the intensifying strategic rivalry between the United States and China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Anchored in Realist Security Theory, the study explores the geopolitical, military, and economic dimensions of Sino-US competition, focusing on strategic interests, military posturing, maritime security, and infrastructure-based economic engagements such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Strategy. Employing a qualitative methodology enriched by case studies of key regional nodes Gwadar Port, Djibouti, and Diego Garcia the research evaluates the impact of great power rivalry on regional stability and state autonomy. The paper also reviews policy responses by regional actors and outlines future scenarios, offering policy recommendations for mitigating conflict while maintaining regional balance and sovereignty.

Keywords: *Indian Ocean Region, Sino-US Rivalry, Strategic Competition, Indo-Pacific Strategy, Maritime Security.*

1. Introduction

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has become a crucial area in the ongoing power struggle between the United States and China, two of the most important countries in the world. This region is important because of its major shipping routes, energy force lines, and access to crucial ocean passages. About 30% of the world's trade passes through this region, with the Strait of Hormuz and the Malacca Strait being especially important for moving energy inventories. Over 80% of China's oil painting significances also pass through the IOR, making it very important for China's energy security.

The growing U.S.-China contest in the IOR isn't just about service and political matters. It also includes profitable and institutional areas. China's strong presence at sea, seen in systems like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the "String of Pearls" strategy, aims to grow its influence by investing in important structure in the region, like anchorages in Gwadar, Hambantota, and Chittagong. These systems not only grow China's profitable presence but also increase its control over crucial ocean routes. At the same time, China has also increased its military presence, shown by erecting its first overseas base in Djibouti, which highlights its trouble to challenge U.S. nonmilitary power and control important trade routes.

In response, the United States has tried to keep its lead in the IOR through the

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Indo-Pacific Strategy, which aims to promote a "free and open Indo-Pacific" and to push back against China's rising influence. U.S. enterprises like the Quadrangle (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) and AUKUS (a defense pact between Australia, the UK, and the U.S.) are tools to strengthen indigenous hookups and ensure America stays influential in the region.

This paper takes a critical look at the numerous sides of U.S.-China contest in the IOR. The study goes beyond just the military angle by also looking at profitable, political, and institutional aspects. While utmost studies concentrate on military and profitable contest, this one uses a broader approach that includes institutional balancing and the architecture of non-traditional security pitfalls like pirating, climate change, and energy security. By fastening on indigenous case studies Gwadar, Djibouti, and Diego Garcia this paper examines how great power contest affects stability, sovereignty, and independence of lower countries in the region.

2. Literature Review

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has entered a lot of attention from experimenters in recent times due to its growing significance in world politics. Utmost of the studies talk about the region as a growing stage for power competition between China and the U.S. Scholars have looked at this contest through colorful lenses, such as military buildup, profitable influence, institutional sweats, and non-traditional security enterprises.

A large quantum of work within Realist proposition focuses on the strategic and geopolitical significance of the IOR. Kaplan (2010) calls the Indian Ocean the "pivot of the 21st century," saying that whoever controls this region will have the capability to project global power. Also, Brewster, 2014) explains the strategic requirements that make China and the U.S. expand their presence in the region. These studies show that both powers are trying to cover their interests by controlling important ocean routes and icing freedom of movement at sea.

China's "String of Pearls" plan has entered a lot of attention as a strategy to gain geopolitical power. Pehrson (2006) explains that this plan includes Chinese-funded anchorages and structure from the South China Sea to the Horn of Africa to cover China's ocean trade lines. Scholars like Panda (2017) say this strategy helps China gain access to overseas service and profitable bases, directly challenging the U.S. part. Also, China's BRI is seen as a wider frame where the "String of Pearls" operates. Chaturvedi and Mohanty (2018) point out that BRI harborage systems in Gwadar, Hambantota, and Chittagong serve both profitable and strategic pretensions.

On the other hand, U.S. strategy in the region is guided by its Indo-Pacific Strategy. Mastro (2019) says the U.S. sees the IOR as essential for maintaining a free maritime system and for pushing back against China's rise. The Quad made up of the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia has been studied as an illustration of institutional balancing. According to He (2015), similar alignments are non-military strategies where lower powers mate with bigger ones to fight growing pitfalls.

Some experimenters also study the part of indigenous countries in shaping this contest. Pant and Joshi (2017) argue that India plays an important balancing part

by working with both the U.S. and China to maintain its independence. In the same way, ASEAN and other Indian Ocean nations use hedging strategies, serving from both powers without completely siding with either (Medcalf, 2020).

Piecemeal from traditional security issues, scholars also look at how non-traditional pitfalls are turned into security matters. Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998) developed the idea that pitfalls like climate change, pirating, and energy issues aren't pitfalls by nature but are made to feel so through politics. In the IOR, Sharma and Banerjee (2020) show how both China and the U.S. use these issues to justify military presence and structure building. For illustration, anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden are used to justify larger nonmilitary forces and support bases (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008).

Still, there are gaps in the exploration. While numerous have studied service and profitable contest, lower attention has been given to how institutional sweats and non-traditional security fabrics interact. Also, case studies of places like Djibouti, Gwadar, and Diego Garcia aren't deeply explored in wider theoretical debates. This study aims to fill that gap by giving a full analysis using Realist proposition, institutional balancing, and securitization proposition to offer a better understanding of U.S.-China contest in the IOR.

3. Objectives

1. To critically analyze the institutional and strategic competition between China and the United States in the Indian Ocean Region.
2. To examine how non-traditional security issues are instrumentalized within the broader geopolitical strategies of both powers.
3. To explore the responses and strategies adopted by littoral and regional countries to navigate the evolving security landscape and maintain their sovereignty.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded on Realist Security Theory, which helps explain how countries act in the transnational system. Literalism says that the global system has no central authority, so countries must look after their own security. States are seen as logical actors whose main thing is to gain power to survive in a world full of pitfalls. Grounded on this idea, the IOR is a crucial area where China and the U.S. contend to control ocean lanes, energy routes, and military locales that give them an edge in global politics.

Offensive liberalism, explained by thinkers like John Mearsheimer, says that big powers always try to grow their power and control important areas. For China, the IOR is very important for making sure its energy requirements are met and its trade continues without pitfalls. Controlling important ocean passages like the Strait of Hormuz and the Malacca Strait would allow China to impact global trade and energy flow. For the U.S., keeping its nonmilitary power in the IOR is part of a bigger plan to cover a rules-based global order and to stop any one country especially China from getting too dominant in the region.

While liberalism gives useful insights into the power struggle between the

U.S. and China, it doesn't completely explain all the tools countries use to reach their pretensions. To address this, the study also uses the proposition of institutional balancing. This proposition shows how lower countries shape the strategic terrain through alliances and transnational groups. As He (2015) points out, institutional balancing happens when lower countries make hookups to reduce the influence of important ones. In the IOR, countries like India, Indonesia, and Australia do this by joining forums like the Quad and ASEAN, helping to balance power between China and the U.S.

Securitization proposition (Buzan et al., 1998) is also important here. It says that pitfalls aren't naturally seen as security issues but are made into similar issues through political conversations. In the IOR, both the U.S. and China use this idea to justify their conduct. For illustration, the U.S. sees China's BRI systems as a way to expand Chinese control and reduce other countries' independence. On the other hand, China sees U.S. military conduct, like Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), as pitfalls to its public safety.

By combining Realist Security Theory, institutional balancing, and securitization proposition, this paper uses a strong frame to study U.S.-China contest in the IOR. This multi-angle approach helps explain how both powers use military, profitable, and institutional tools to serve their pretensions, while also showing how indigenous countries try to cover their own independence and strategic pretensions.

5. Factual Environment of Sino-U.S. Maritime Strategy

The Indian Ocean has always been important because it connects the Middle East, Africa, and Asia with Europe and the Americas through major ocean routes. During the Cold War, the United States saw the value of this region and established strong military positions then especially the base on Diego Garcia in the Chagos Archipelago. This base became central to U.S. operations in the Indian Ocean, helping with surveillance, logistics, and projecting power in South Asia and the Persian Gulf (Kaplan, 2010; Pant, 2009).

Even after the Cold War ended, the U.S. continued to pay close attention to this region. That's because the Indian Ocean plays a major part in global energy flow and trade. Guarding ocean lanes especially near chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca remained a crucial priority, as these routes are vital for transporting oil and goods (Brewster, 2014).

Meanwhile, China began changing its naval strategy in the early 2000s. Before, its navy mainly concentrated on guarding its near coastal waters. But with time, China shifted toward expanding its reach far into the seas. This new strategy, called "far-seas protection," showed that China wanted to defend its interests well beyond the Pacific Ocean (Erickson & Goldstein, 2009). The main reason behind this change was China's growing reliance on overseas trade and imported oil. In fact, more than 80% of China's oil comes through the Indian Ocean, making the region extremely important for the country's energy security (Kapoor & Thakkar, 2020).

A crucial moment in China's expansion came in 2017 when it opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti. This base is located at a very strategic point near

the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, allowing China to support anti-piracy operations and expand its naval presence (Downs, et al., 2017). Around the same time, China also launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which involved building ports and infrastructure across the Indian Ocean to strengthen its position through both trade and military support (Chaturvedi & Mohanty, 2018).

So, over time, the Indian Ocean has turned into a crucial area where the U.S. wants to keep its traditional power, and China is working to protect its growing interests. This ongoing interaction between the two powers isn't arbitrary it reflects their long-term strategies for gaining influence at the regional and global levels.

6. Strategic Interests in the Indian Ocean Region

For China, the Indian Ocean is vital because it depends heavily on the ocean routes for energy and trade. As the world's largest importer of oil mostly from the Middle East and Africa China sees it as a national security need to keep these ocean routes safe and open (Holslag, 2009). Through the BRI, especially the Maritime Silk Road, China has built and funded ports like Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Kyaukpyu in Myanmar to secure these routes (Panda, 2017).

At the same time, China has been improving its navy by developing blue-water capabilities and adding aircraft carriers. Experts believe China is doing this to reduce the U.S. grip on the region, gain more control at sea, and create a permanent presence along the Indian Ocean's coasts (Erickson & Strange, 2014).

The U.S. sees itself as a global naval power, and the Indian Ocean is central to that role. It aims to ensure freedom of movement at sea and support international rules. The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy is focused on keeping the region "free and open" to fight China's expanding influence (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019).

To do this, the U.S. relies on its wide network of military bases and partnerships. It has a base in Bahrain, a strong presence in Diego Garcia, and agreements with countries like India and Australia. These allow the U.S. to move forces quickly, monitor the region, and respond to threats especially as China becomes more active (Colley, 2020).

Other countries also have important goals in the Indian Ocean:

- India is right in the center of the region and wants to be seen as the main security provider. It is focused on guarding trade routes, pushing back against Chinese expansion, and increasing its influence through efforts like the SAGAR policy and its role in the Quad (Pant & Joshi, 2017).
- Japan and Australia mostly support the U.S. but also have their own goals. Japan works on building ports and boosting maritime capacity in Asia and the Indian Ocean, while Australia is concerned about keeping the region peaceful and secure (Medcalf, 2020).
- Gulf States like the UAE and Saudi Arabia care mostly about trade, energy, and port development. These countries are often caught in the middle of U.S.-China competition since both powers invest heavily in their infrastructure (Kamrava, 2018).

The interests of all these players make the Indian Ocean Region a complex

and competitive space. There's a blend of cooperation and competition, with countries trying to protect their own goals while also responding to broader global pressures.

6.1 Areas of Competition

The military situation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has become more intense as both China and the United States try to strengthen their positions. China's first overseas military base in Djibouti, set up in 2017, shows a big change in the Chinese Navy's plan—from just guarding its seacoast to operating far out at sea. The base helps China with anti-piracy work, peacekeeping, and guarding trade routes that are important for its energy requirements (Erickson & Strange, 2017). At the same time, China's navy is showing up more frequently with regular visits and operations across the IOR, showing that it plans to stay active there for the long term. In return, the United States still uses its existing service system. The U.S. Fifth Fleet, based in Bahrain, helps it stay ready and active in the region. Diego Garcia, an island run by Britain, is a crucial base for U.S. operations, and military deals with Oman and Qatar give it more freedom to move around (Holmes, 2020).

India also plays an important part in balancing power. Through joint navy drills like the Malabar Exercise with the U.S. and Japan, and growing naval ties with Australia and France, India helps push back against China and Pakistan working together at sea, like at the Gwadar port and during joint naval drills (Miller, 2021).

Freedom of movement at sea is another issue. The U.S. carries out regular operations called Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to challenge China's sea claims, mainly in the South China Sea, but these actions also affect the Indian Ocean. China sees these actions as aggressive and says they go against its rights (O'Rourke, 2021).

At the same time, both countries work on sea security. China and the U.S. both take part in stopping piracy near the Horn of Africa. Also, regional groups like the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) help with talking and working together, though political tensions often make them less effective (Brewster, 2020).

Security in the Indo-Pacific region is changing because of different groups forming. The U.S. supports group efforts like the Quad and AUKUS to push back against China's actions. These groups are built on shared ideas like democracy, sea safety, and working together on technology (White House, 2021).

On the other hand, China is building strong ties with countries near the Indian Ocean. It has made deals with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Iran to get access and influence. China also puts money into building ports and other things, often including security corridors, which mixes business help with military goals (Faridi, 2024).

On the economic side, the race is between China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and U.S.-led plans. China's BRI projects like ports in Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Chittagong (Bangladesh) create trade routes that are useful for business and the military. Some people think these projects put countries in debt and give China more control (Hurley, et al., 2018).

To respond, the U.S. and its partners started programs like the Blue Dot Network, Build Back Better World (B3W), and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). These aim to give better, clearer, and more responsible options for building infrastructure, based on democratic values (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

7. Implications for Regional Stability

The growing U.S.-China competition in the IOR affects peace in the region. Building up military power near important sea routes like the Strait of Hormuz and Malacca Strait raises the chances of accidents or wrong decisions.

Middle powers like India and ASEAN countries face hard choices. They get economic help from China but also support the U.S. to keep sea laws and balance power. This mix makes it harder for them to act freely (Singh, 2020).

Also, when countries make ports that can be used for both trade and military, it creates mistrust and espionage. As countries try to stay safe, there aren't enough regional ways to stop conflict or build trust.

Gwadar Port (Pakistan): Gwadar is part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and is crucial for China's energy plans. It is close to the Strait of Hormuz and gives China an important position in Indian Ocean trade routes (Sial, 2014).

Djibouti: Djibouti has both U.S. and Chinese military bases, showing how both countries compete in the same place. Their closeness causes tension in how they work and interact (War on the Rocks, 2017).

Diego Garcia: This U.S. base is a crucial place to quickly send forces across the Indian Ocean. It links military operations from East Africa to the South China Sea and is central to U.S. naval power (Holmes, 2020).

8. Policy Responses from Regional States

India has built up its naval strength and made deals with Seychelles, Mauritius, and Oman. It is active in the Quad and is upgrading its naval bases, especially in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Mohan, 2021).

Most ASEAN countries try to stay in the middle working with China for business but also backing the U.S. to protect sea laws. This approach helps them stay independent during big power competition (Acharya, 2019).

Pakistan is getting closer to China through CPEC and joint naval drills. At the same time, it keeps some ties with the U.S. through working together on terrorism and holding security talks, trying to manage both relationships (Small, 2015).

9. Future Trajectories and Scenarios

The growing contest between China and the United States in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) could shape different possible futures. These depend on how indigenous countries act, what the major powers want, and the overall pressure in the transnational system. Below are three possible directions the situation could take:

In this script, the IOR could become divided between two major power blocs China and the United States. With both countries adding their military strength and structuring stronger alliances like Australia, United Kingdom, United States

(AUKUS), Quadrilateral Security Dialogue: United States, Japan, India, and Australia (QUAD), or China's ties with Pakistan and Iran, the region could see a serious arms race. Important ocean routes such as the Strait of Hormuz and Malacca might become more militarized, adding the chances of accidents or conflict. Lower indigenous countries may find themselves pressured to choose sides, which would reduce their capability to make independent decisions and increase geopolitical pressures (Kaplan, 2010; Mearsheimer, 2014).

A second possibility is a balanced system led by active middle powers such as India, Indonesia, Gulf countries, and ASEAN. These nations may push for indigenous cooperation and repel becoming tools in great power competition. However, if associations like Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) are strengthened, they could help reduce pressures and promote peaceful collaboration. This future would reflect a more inclusive security model where indigenous actors have a bigger say in managing the Indian Ocean's affairs (He, 2015).

The most hopeful script imagines China and the U.S. working together on shared problems like pirating, climate change, and maritime terrorism. This would involve common activities like patrolling, open communication, and better rules for building infrastructure. While this path is difficult due to current pressures, major global problems like supply chain breakdowns or natural disasters could push both countries to cooperate in some areas of non-traditional security (Buzan et al., 1998; Dutton, 2011).

10. Results and Findings

- The Indian Ocean is becoming a crucial area for global power struggles, especially between China and the United States.
- Their competition involves not just military presence, but also profitable systems, alliances, and influence over indigenous institutions.
- China has invested heavily in infrastructure through its BRI, while the U.S. is promoting alternatives like B3W and IPEF.
- Regional countries like India, ASEAN members, and the Gulf countries are trying to cover their independence by balancing between the two powers.
- There's a real threat that the region could become more militarized, especially around crucial ocean routes.
- At the same time, there are openings for cooperation if countries concentrate on shared pitfalls and indigenous partnerships.

11. Conclusion

The Indian Ocean Region has become one of the main battlefields for U.S.-China competition in today's world. This paper has explored how this contest is growing not only in military terms but also through profitable influence, alliances, and indigenous tactfulness. A Realist view shows that both powers are trying to cover their interests and help the other from gaining dominance.

However, the future of the region does not have to be full of conflict. Regional countries, working together and using existing institutions, can help produce a more

peaceful and balanced terrain. The conduct of China and the U.S. will remain important, but the decisions made by indigenous actors will also play a big part in shaping what happens next.

12. Recommendations

1. Countries in the Indian Ocean should form or strengthen a security platform conceivably using Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) or Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) to discuss common challenges, build trust, and help conflicts. Things like joint details and maritime codes of conduct should be encouraged.
2. Middle powers need to improve their own processions, share intelligence, and develop strong economies. This will reduce their dependence on outside powers and cover them from political or economic pressure.
3. Instead of focusing on competing with China's BRI, the U.S. and its partners should work on systems that add value to the region. Programs like Build Back Better World (B3W) and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) should be designed to support development in a fair and inclusive way.
4. There should be international rules and reviews for port-building and investments—maybe under the World Bank or United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). This would make such systems more open and reduce the threat of them being used for military purposes.

At the end of the day, the strategic future of the Indian Ocean hinges not only on the conduct of Beijing and Washington but equally on the collective choices of regional states and institutions. Constructive engagement, normative clarity, and inclusive governance mechanisms will be essential to avoid a destabilizing zero-sum game and to ensure that the IOR remains a zone of peace, prosperity, and maritime cooperation.

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