

HCSS Security

In a State of Flux: Maritime Order in the Indian Ocean

Richard Ghiasy

A vital global trade and energy conduit is threatened by increased competition for security and influence. The situation calls for careful and patient diplomacy, not the formation of rival camps and a rush to embrace military options.

While many fixate on the South China Sea, the vast Indian Ocean region (IOR), stretching from East Africa to South East Asia, and down to Australia, has become a tense multipolar security space. HCSS flagged this development in the IOR in 2010.¹ Since then, developments have accelerated. Foreign military facilities and naval forces are proliferating around the Arabian Peninsula. Take tiny Djibouti on the Horn of Africa—it is continental Africa's third smallest country and hosts nine foreign military facilities, with a tenth, Saudi Arabia's, in the works. In the Northeast of the IOR, naval exercises are increasing in frequency, including in the Bay of Bengal.

Simultaneously, the U.S. Navy's role as the primary security provider in the Indian Ocean, including for the safe passage of global trade and energy, has eroded. Consequently, the security dynamics and maritime order of the region are in a state of flux. The timing is not ideal. The vast IOR is home to 32 littorals, numerous emerging markets, and about one-third of the world's population.² The region is enjoying rapid economic growth and rapid urbanization, but is also particularly vulnerable to climate change and is a prime candidate for conflict over scarce resources. The IOR is a crucial trade and energy conduit, as it is located between the North Atlantic and the Asia-Pacific regions, which encompass key ports and economic zones. International sea lanes crisscross the IOR's northern stretches.

Hence, a long list of countries are seeking a foothold in the region. The most prominent of these is China.³ The People's Liberation Army Navy must either increase its presence to be able to protect China's substantial imports and exports that traverse the Indian Ocean, or rely on the U.S. Navy to do so – a prospect it does not relish. The U.S. Navy surveys and controls so-called choke points in the IOR. These are narrow channels along widely used global sea lanes, such as the Strait of Hormuz, and the Strait of Malacca on the eastern end of the Indian Ocean. The Strait of Hormuz is only 21 miles wide at its narrowest point and is the primary channel through which regional oil is shipped to the world's oceans. China fears a scenario in which the U.S. Navy would

¹ See Sweijjs, T., Cleven, W., Levi, M., Tabak, J., Spear, Z. and de Jonge, J.

'The Maritime Future of the Indian Ocean: Putting the G back into Great Power Politics.' Future Issue N° 13 | 09 | 10. 2010. Available on: https://www.hcss.nl/sites/default/files/files/reports/HCSS_FI-13_09_10_Indian_Ocean.pdf

² Jeffrey, C., 'Why the Indian Ocean Region Might Soon Play a Lead Role in World Affairs', The Conversation,

<https://theconversation.com/why-the-indian-ocean-region-might-soon-play-a-lead-role-in-world-affairs-100663>, 14 January 2019.

³ Brewster, D., 'Silk Roads and Strings of Pearls: The Strategic Geography of China's New Pathways in the Indian Ocean,' *Geopolitics*, vol. 22, no. 2, (30 August 2016), pp. 271–72.

rapidly block these straits and attempt to expand naval capacity and security cooperation with regional states.

It will be some time before China can project a significant degree of naval power in the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, in reaction to China's long-term goal of expanding its presence in the region, a security alliance comprised of the U.S., Japan, Australia, and a number of European nations is emerging. In particular, France and the U.K. aim to increase their military commitments to the IOR and Pacific. Both countries have territories in these waters. Simultaneously, the U.S. and Japan are attempting to merge the Pacific and the Indian Ocean into a single security theatre in their planning. The result is an intensification of competition between the major powers.

China's rise is not the only factor behind the growing complexity in the IOR's maritime order. New Delhi aims to become a key security provider in the region: India views the IOR as its natural sphere of influence and access to the Indian Ocean is crucial to Indian national security. In addition, smaller regional powers, particularly in the Middle East and the Gulf, harbor ambitions in the IOR. They aim to expand their areas of influence, notably along the East Africa littoral and the Red Sea. These powers include, but are not limited to, Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Farther east, Pakistan is anxious about arch-rival India's naval aspirations.

The result of this geopolitical ferment is a process of intensifying militarization of the region, with several notable consequences. There is increased competition through proxies. This includes small island states such as the Maldives and the Seychelles, where India and China have been vying for political influence.⁴ Such security competition by proxy across the region is likely to increase. To further complicate matters, the security of the IOR is the target of competing connectivity initiatives. The most ambitious is China's Belt and Road Initiative. However, Japan, India, the E.U. and the U.S. have connectivity visions for the wider region as well. These initiatives are diversifying the transit routes in the region by improving connectivity with the Eurasian landmass.

Such initiatives bring many benefits, but they also increase interaction in and between different terrestrial and maritime security spaces. One example is landlocked and poorly-connected Central Asia. Central Asia is gradually gaining increased access to the Indian Ocean through the BRI, but more actors add to the complexity of IOR security – a region that lacks a developed and inclusive regional security architecture. Furthermore, the region's dialogue mechanisms for conflict prevention are underdeveloped and most of its primary actors distrust each other. The bitter relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a noteworthy example.

⁴ Stratfor, 'Wary of China, India Shares its Largesse with Neighbors', <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/india-china-aid-neighbors-nepal-bhutan-sri-lanka-maldives-bangladesh-seychelles>, 24 April 2018.

Despite the increasing strategic significance of the IOR, the prospect of protracted armed conflict in this region between the navies of India and China, or the U.S. and its allies with China, remains small. All of these actors have an interest in maintaining a flourishing seaborne trade system. Nevertheless, one miscalculation or skirmish could set off a chain of events that could escalate into a major conflict and involve many stakeholders. The 2019 incident, in which the U.S. blamed Iran for attacking oil tankers, is one such case. Another example is China's strengthening of the navies of Bangladesh and Myanmar, which is causing anxiety in India. These are unstable situations. Developments in the region merit more attention and call for careful and patient diplomacy—not the formation of rival camps and a rush to embrace military options.

Richard Ghiasy is a Subject Matter Expert at HCSS.